**A Fantastic Wreck**

by **13ways**

**Summary**

Prince Louis William Tomlinson, heir to the Kingdom of Doncaster, has arrived in Rome to make an important announcement— his betrothal to Princess Eleanor of Anesidora, whom he barely knows. His grandfather, King William, lies gravely ill, and the country’s fate is in his hands.

What harm could it possibly be to leave the embassy for one day? Prince Louis has never fallen in love, mainly because he has a secret that cannot be disclosed. He’s never even had a proper kiss.

When he bumps into a journalist named Harry Styles, their mutual attraction is undeniable. But Harry, too, has a secret.

A Roman Holiday AU

**Notes**

The story refers to the mythologies of Pandora, Apollo, and Dionysus. Along the way, there
are references to Persephone, Hades, Orpheus, and Pinocchio—the puppet who becomes a real boy. I give this love song to the band that gave me my life back.

Please correct any grammatical or factual errors [here](https://example.com). I’d love to hear from you! You can now read a Russian translation of A Fantastic Wreck [here](https://example.com) courtesy of the fabulous loueh_tommoo.
I want to taste tears
I want to free the beast
   From its cage
Mad like my aging soul
I want to make it all
I want to make it all
   Worth something
Worth the guillotine
   On my head

I'm a fantastic wreck
Wrecking everyone around me
I'm a fantastic wreck
And if I'm a little bit deranged
   Would you not
   Estrange me
   Or change me
And if I can write your name
   Can I be
   Angry
   And nasty
And if nothing else can change me
   And I am just this way
Then— would you love me?

I want to tease skin
I want to lace wings from all the faults
   In my name
Walking heavy on a crystal life
I want to make myself
I want to make myself
   Worth something
Worth the thoughts that run through my head

I'm a fantastic wreck
Wrecking everyone around me
I'm a fantastic wreck
And if I'm a little bit deranged
   Would you not
   Estrange me
   Or change me
And if I can write your name
   Can I be
Angry
And nasty
And if nothing else can change me
And I am just this way
Then— would you love me?

Would you love me?
Would you love me?
Would you love me?
Would you love me?

Would you love me?
Would you love me?
Would you love me?
Would you love me?

Would you love me?
Would you love me?
Would you love me?
Would you love me?

Montaigne, *I'm a Fantastic Wreck*

CHAPTER 1

I don't want to be adored
Don't want to be first in line
Or make myself heard

Keane, *Hamburg Song*

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Like a bolt out of the blue
Fate steps in and sees you through

*When You Wish Upon a Star*
*From Walt Disney’s Pinocchio*

•
A convoy of black limousines lined the Bayerstrasse, their engines purring along the southern border of the Munich Hauptbahnhof. The night sky was an Atlantic blue, inked darker through the limos’ tinted windows. The filtered streetlights could almost be the torches of distant fortresses. The sun had released its last sparks an hour ago. It lay behind the scrim of the horizon, a cold grenade.

A figure sat quietly smoking in the third car, forearm resting on a window, a wisp of smoke curling skyward. The arm was sheathed in a bespoke wool and cashmere suit, suitable for the northern climate but too warm for the Mediterranean air for which it was headed. A crisp, starched white cuff, with gold cufflinks—embossed with the royal insignia—was visible at the wrist. One fingernail, on the ring finger, had been bitten to the quick, the cuticle scarred and bloody. The fingers flicked the cigarette with practiced ease, elegant and swift. They drummed a silent tune against the car door.

The tall, imposing figure of a man exited from the second car and walked back to the third car. Joseph Gates’ shoes clicked against the pavement. His hair was thick and grey, slicked neatly to his right side. His face had the granite cut of ancient Roman senators. He stood at attention outside the open window.

“Mr. Gates,” a male voice issued from inside the car. The voice rang with a crisp edge.

“Your Royal Highness,” Gates replied, bowing slightly.

“Is it time?”

“Nearly, Your Highness,” he said. “The carriages have been inspected. Our boys are stationed outside.”

The Prince pulled deeply on the last puff of cigarette and sighed. This goodwill trip was a PR jaunt designed to show empathy toward commoners, and to solidify ties with his country’s allies.

He had just finished a six-city tour through Stockholm, Oslo, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Berlin, and Munich. To give an illusion of humility, he had had to forgo his private jet, limousines, and yachts. Instead, the royal crew was traveling en masse, security detail and all, by night train. A royal convoy of carriages had been provided by the prince’s own team, and would be pulled by the Bundesbahn engines tonight.

In fact, the expense far exceeded what it would have been to fly in his private jet—pilot, stewardess, masseuse, chef, and minder included. The travel was slow and cumbersome. His schedule had to be coordinated with the trains of these large cities, and the hours dragged by while the carriages were transferred, inspected and re-inspected by security. The train carriages, connected end to end, felt like prison on wheels, with their darkly tinted windows just above street level. Most of their traveling took place at night.

The loud, rhythmic clanking of the train and the mournful nocturnal whistling unnerved him. Even the shush of air moving through the vent ducts was haunting. Although they would cross the Alps, through the picturesque Brenner Pass, Prince Louis would once again miss seeing the mountains.

Reality, for His Royal Highness, Prince Louis William Tomlinson, would always be experienced through a dense filter, in the darkness.

Louis marveled at the gullibility of the public, and the extravagant means the royal PR machine
went to shape his image.

But then, it wasn't just any image. Prince Louis, age 24, was heir-apparent to the Kingdom of Doncaster. Both parents had passed away suddenly when he was 15, victims of an overseas airplane crash. His grandfather, His Majesty King William, had presided over the kingdom for nearly forty years.

Louis was being readied to be the next king. The people of Doncaster had been anticipating, since he was fifteen, for him to step into the role.

His every action was public, every utterance recorded, every scratch of the nose and unzipped pair of pants and unfortunate haircut, tabloid fodder. He lived like an exotic beetle observed through a thick, soundproof cage.

Long ago, Louis had been trained to stand, to walk, to speak, to smile and laugh politely in conversation, to engage in lively verbal exchanges while giving away no personal details. Even the way his hands were placed casually, one palm flat against his lower abdomen and the other down at his side, was an act of calculated decorum.

His image was one of sweetness and decency, intelligence and compassion. His role as the heir apparent gave cover to his younger siblings, five sisters and one brother; it gave them room to breathe and grow. In fact, his oldest sibling, Princess Charlotte, was allowed to attend school in London, to study art history and couture. They were allowed patches of individual personality and human privacy, because Prince Louis was not. It was of utmost importance that the Prince’s life was immaculate.

“Your Highness,” Gates said, “Owen and the security team will escort you to the carriage. Your train is waiting for you.”

“Are we going now?”

“Not quite yet,” Gates said carefully, clearing his throat. “A press gaggle has been assembled to take photos before we board.”

Louis glanced away. “Only photos.” Unconsciously, he straightened the folds of his suit. “Am I facing some questions as well?”

“They've been given a list of permissible topics, Highness,” Gates answered. “Obviously, given the upcoming press conference in Rome—”

“They’re going to ask about Princess Eleanor.” Louis stared back at Gates coldly. “I understand.” A tone of faint annoyance crept into his voice.

Gates cleared his throat. “Undoubtedly, Your Highness. The pending trade agreements with Anesidora will be the most serious topic on our agenda.”

Louis snapped, “Which I will, of course, convey in the best possible light.”

“If Your Highness permits.”

“It’s the whole point to this elaborate charade. To sell the trade deal.”

“Ehem,” Gates demurred. “I have no doubt Your Highness will surpass all expectations. I trust Doncaster’s brightest future in your most capable hands.”
Gates bowed his head and quietly sighed. Being the Prince’s private secretary was a duty he was bound to serve. He was good at his job, a seasoned professional who had worked with the Prince for fourteen years. He had guided Louis through his rebellious years at Emmanuel College in Cambridge, rescuing him from dubious friends and situations, like the May Day when he arrived just in time to prevent a most unfortunate tattoo. He hired discreet personal guards to shadow Louis through every activity, even the most personal. Louis’ privacy was a matter of national security.

Louis’ life was a national emblem. He had to be kept pristine. There was no question about that.

Louis made a slight gesture with his wrist, and Gates opened the car door for him to step out. His figure was impeccable, not a wrinkle visible on either his face or the tailored suit. The shirt’s collar was unbuttoned. A few stray amber chest hairs peeked through. The modest cut of the trousers nevertheless showed a curved figure, nipped in at the waist, with lean, toned legs. He wore a Cartier watch on his left wrist. A thin, gold strand hung around his neck. A charm rested at the bottom of the chain, in the shape of a small treasure chest. Almost invisible was the engraved Greek letters on the bottom of the chest, spelling ελπίδα—ELPITHA— hope.

“Alright, Gates. Let’s go.” Louis brushed his hands together, and then followed his bodyguards, Owen and his men, as they led him toward the station.

Just then, a handsome man, about Louis’ age, stepped out from the car behind him. He was slightly taller than Louis, and wore a tailored dark navy wool jacket over a white shirt, with matching trousers. His hair was brushed into a loose, bronze wave on top, clipped short on the sides. His golden brown eyes were alert to their surroundings. He glanced quickly toward Louis, and then did a slow sweep, taking in every person around them.

“Mr. Payne.” Joseph Gates approached him. “How are we this evening?”

“Joseph.” They exchanged handshakes. “I thought the Munich press was nice to us, didn’t you?” Liam said, adjusting his cufflinks. “I have to admit, I was glad the New York Times and Reuters weren’t there.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“They’ve been covering the Anesidora angle pretty harshly. Cornered us in Berlin with climate change questions— d’you remember that?”


“I thought climate change was already talked to death at Zurich last year? The Americans balked at the new proposals, taking a little steam off for us.”

“Hmm.” They started walking toward the station, just behind the Prince. “Talked to death, maybe, but not yet resolved,” Gates said. “Frankly, it’s absurd to harangue the Prince, as if he would change his opinion to please them.”

There was no luggage. The Prince travelled with a fully stocked caravan of carriages. Liam kept his eyes sharp, calculating each movement in the periphery, assessing every passing pedestrian and motorist.

“They expect a small country like Doncaster to follow the same climate mandates as Britain and France,” Liam said. “It’s unrealistic. There are reasons we didn't sign the Kyoto protocol.”

“The press can’t understand, Mr. Payne. Or if they do, they don’t care,” Gates said in a somber voice. “They spend more time on frivolous headlines than on the complexity of economies for
small, invisible nations like Doncaster. They’re more interested in viewership and gossip.”

“We don’t have a reliable energy source, for one thing,” Liam pushed on. “Our resources are barely sufficient to function.”

“A problem we may solve shortly,” Gates replied, exchanging a knowing glance with Liam. “If His Royal Highness cooperates.”

“He will,” Liam insisted. “Joseph, you must admit he’s been fantastic. Commoners love him. He’s charismatic—polite, witty, smart. Absolutely flawless.”

“No one is flawless, Liam,” Gates tsked. “Human nature being what it is. But the mere appearance of flawlessness will suffice.”

“My dear Joseph,” Liam turned quietly, “I’d be careful with words like those, if I were you.”

Gates was a servant. A powerful man, yes, but still a servant. That kind of criticism toward the Prince flirted with disloyalty.

“Liam.” Gates put a hand on his arm. “You know how important this meeting in Rome is. It took our diplomats months to set it up. Princess Eleanor may not be His Highness’s favorite person, but she’s been handpicked for him. She’s perfectly young and healthy.”

“Healthy!” Liam said wryly. “That’s a low bar for marriage, isn’t it? That she’s not dying?”

“You sneer, Liam, but the British are very good at it,” Gates said. “Diversion. Geopolitics. A headliner. Or, in this case,” he lowered his voice, “a royal marriage for the consolidation of power. Diplomacy really isn’t that hard, when you have photogenic people like—”

“Like the Princess,” Liam finished, staring at the Louis’ back. “And our Prince. The hope of a nation.”

They waited as Louis squared his shoulders, ready to go in.

They entered through a rear door of the Hauptbahnhof, where their contact was waiting. Gates walked quickly to exchange greetings, and then ushered the Prince and his entourage through a private corridor to the waiting train.

Liam leaned his head closer to Gates. “By the way, how is King William? Is there any word?”

Gates whispered in a low voice, “Grim. Last I checked, his status remained tenuous.”

“Has he regained consciousness at all?”

Gates shook his head curtly. “Mr, Payne,” he said, “we mustn’t delude ourselves. Our time is running short. The King’s condition is precarious, and it may only be a matter of weeks, or more likely, days. It would be extremely helpful for our Prince be on his best behavior.”

Liam turned sharply toward Gates, both of them wary and grave. Then his attention was diverted again as the press began to assemble and talk amongst themselves, and the photo op began.

A press corps of a dozen or so reporters and photographers was waiting for the Prince to board. The walk had been cleared and cordoned off. A small elevated platform waited by the train, with a podium and a microphone.

“Good evening,” Louis addressed the crowd. His face, with its acute angles and planes, was
classically handsome, but also guarded and impenetrable. Camera flashes went off in rapid sequence. Louis’ voice was steady, practiced and trained, both elegantly charming and noncommittal. “I would like to extend gratitude to the people of Munich, who have been so gracious in hosting our brief visit. I’m sad to have to leave this beautiful city. Let’s start with a few questions. Yes.” He pointed to a male reporter near the front.

“Your Royal Highness,” the reporter said. “You’ve travelled to the capitals of several countries in the last two weeks. Can you tell us, which one is your favorite?”

Louis laughed politely, shaking his head. “I know it seems unbelievable,” he said, diplomatically, “but I really don’t have a favorite. Every city I’ve been to has been more than welcoming. Each one has been uniquely beautiful. The people have been warm and friendly everywhere. We’ve been so spoiled.”

Besides, he hadn’t had a chance to step out of the diplomatic compounds at all, other than to visit hospitals and war memorials. An eternal fire, a bronze man on a rearing horse, pillars of marble and cement— memorials were all the same. The wreaths that one laid were similar, too— grand flower arrangements, meaningless to Louis, placed with solemnity for bygone heroes.

Every flower Louis had ever experienced in his young life was like this: at the peak of their aesthetic appeal, perfect and immortal. His palaces were filled with them. Consequently, the flower arrangements blended into the background and became invisible to him. He couldn’t name a single species, and he couldn’t care less.

“You, sir, in the grey,” Louis said, pointing to a man with a hand raised.

“Your Highness has just finished a goodwill tour of the Sudan” the reporter said. “Does Your Royal Highness not feel that there are better ways to raise aid for needy countries?”

“Good question!” Louis smiled charmingly. “Yes, we have just returned from a week in the Sudan, visiting orphanages for children displaced by the civil war. Doncaster is aware that its place of relative privilege comes with a global responsibility. I am happy to promote aid in any way I can.”

The man seemed to have a follow-up question, but Louis scanned over him to the next reporter.

“Yes, ma’am, in the back,” Louis pointed to a middle-aged woman with glasses.

“Ehrenvolle Grüße, ihre königliche Hoheit,” she said in a high-pitched voice. “Your Highness, we have heard rumors of an important announcement to be made in Rome. Without giving it away, could you please give a hint on what it’s about?” She beamed at him. “We’re all dying of curiosity, you know.”

Louis hoped that no one saw the grimace that passed on his face.

“Rome!” he said, righting himself with a polite smile. “It’s always been a happy place for us. I certainly don’t want to ruin any surprises!”

“Might it have to do with Princess Eleanor?” she pushed encouragingly.

Louis laughed. “The Princess has always been a lovely friend to Doncaster. I shall be happy if she also happens to be in Rome.”

“The rumor is that she will be, Your Highness. Surely, your both being in Rome is more than a coincidence, and the Princess is more than a friend. Would you care to elaborate?”

“We have a good relationship,” Louis said, shutting her down. “Thank you.”
A man next to her, in uncharacteristically long, flowing black hair, spoke up without asking. With a prickly awareness, Louis recognized the Reuters insignia on his press pass.

“Your Highness,” he said, in an American accent, “in light of the trade agreements pending between the two countries, would you characterize your ties to Princess Eleanor as being strategic to Doncaster’s economic interests?”

Louis glared at the reporter who had broken interview etiquette. The question wasn’t on the approved list. He had spoken up without being addressed. That was simply not done. What was his deal, anyway? The question asked, Louis could not simply ignore it.

The reporter stared up from his notes, his eyes challenging, equally determined.

“What is your name, sir?” Louis softly interrogated, his gaze glacier-like.

“Steve Aoki,” he replied. He held up his press pass, the insolent prick. “Reuters News Agency.” Louis looked at him from head to toe. Aoki returned his steady glare, unfazed.

“Mr. Aoki, Doncaster and Anesidora are neighboring countries,” Louis said in a clipped voice. “Naturally, I expect our national interests to be closely aligned.”

“But they’ve not always been, Your Highness,” Aoki pressed. “Isn’t that right? In fact, they have historically been at odds. I’d even say that conflict between the two countries is the norm, not the exception. And now, with Anesidora’s dominance in nuclear energy and rare minerals, and its build-up of nuclear power, isn't Doncaster even more dependent on its goodwill?”

“Mr. Aoki— have I got your name right?” Louis smiled icily. “We are working together to strengthen our mutual interests, and to raise our standings internationally. Thank you. That is all for tonight, ladies and gentlemen,” Louis glanced toward Joseph Gates and Liam Payne. “You have all been so gracious,” he said in a neutral, clipped tone. “We have a train to catch. Good-night, everyone.”

He turned and stepped down from the podium, ignoring the stirs of reporters wanting more. They always wanted more. There was never an end. Their cacophony was like a gaggle of bickering geese. Louis turned his back on them, and they ceased to exist for him. The world receded.

Louis entered the carriage of the train. It had been designed to his specifications. The room was spare, with leather sofas and chairs and a large coffee table. A few shelves, filled with literature, lined the walls. On one of the empty shelves was a snow globe, made of crystal. Inside was a single Italian toy woodcarver’s cottage, painted in greens and blues, the opalescent snow collecting at its steps.

Once he crossed the doorway, Louis let his shoulders drop, took off his jacket and tossed it to Liam, who caught it deftly in one hand.

Joseph Gates hovered at the door.

“We should be leaving in a few minutes, Your Highness,” he said. “Do you think you’ll need anything else?”

“Can I run away?” Louis asked mirthlessly. He turned to meet Gates’s impassive gaze. “I'm kidding, Joseph. Payno’s here. I'll be fine.”

“As you wish.” Gates coughed, keeping his eyes on the ground. “Good night, then. We’ll meet in the morning.”
“You know I’ll be here,” Louis sang half-heartedly.

Gates bowed his head curtly and left the room. The atmosphere relaxed. Louis took a deep breath and exhaled. He stretched his arms behind him, spreading his hands widely.

"My Prince," Liam scolded mildly.

"What?" Louis snarled. "What did I do?"

“You need sleep,” Liam said. Louis looked at him, ready to spar. “You look tired, Your Highness. I’ll bring your milk and medicines.”

“Liam,” the Prince said sternly, “I've told you a million times. When we’re alone, call me Louis.”

Liam’s face showed a mixture of amusement and pain. “Your Highness—”

“I insist, Payno. Let's not get into it again.”

They stared at each other for a few seconds before breaking into grins.

“As you wish.”

Still standing, Louis yawned, the back of a hand covering his mouth. He was obviously exhausted, but his eyes were rimmed in darkness, the mark of insomnia. “Payno, do you think I’ll ever fall asleep without pills?”

“You’ve had a stressful week,” Liam answered. “Dr. Bonnachoven gave exact instructions. No skipping medication days until the tour’s done.” He made a sympathetic grimace.

“I don’t like it. The pills make me feel… bad,” Louis said. He ran a hand through his hair. “I swear I'm having more nightmares. I just can't remember any of them.”

“Yeah?”

“Hmm.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.” Liam’s expression was tender. “The doctor did say it might take a couple of weeks to get used to them.”

He gestured for Louis to enter the carriage and sit down. Louis plopped into one of the leather couches in the room, swinging horizontally so that his feet were resting on the armrest.

“The doctor thought the medicines might cut down on the nightmares,” Liam said. “It’s not working, I guess?”

“I can’t remember any of them, to tell you the truth,” said Louis. “Just remember darkness. Terrible, vast darkness, the kind that swallows you whole. And being scared. Paralyzed. Not able to run away.” He glanced sideways at Liam. “What a big baby, huh?”

“I imagine it must be terrifying,” Liam said.

Louis closed his eyes. “I don’t even want to go to sleep, honestly.”

“Well,” Liam deliberated. He hung up Louis’ jacket in a closet, crossed the room, and sat down on the chair opposite Louis. “That’s not a good solution. We have a whole day of travel, a day of rest, and then another day before the conference. You could use the down time. Your Highness has
been in the public eye every day since we started. Once we get to Italy, the sunshine might do you some good.”

The train shuddered, then lurched slowly forward. The lights inside flashed on and off. The landscape outside drifted by.

Louis swung one arm over his eyes. “Will I actually get to see the sun this time?” Liam grimaced as Louis continued, “I’ve done some reading about it. Big yellow thing in the sky, bright. Round-ish?” He waved his hands. “Fireball. Power of the whole solar system. Been around for ages, from what I’ve read.”

“Oh golly.” Liam said. “We’re a bit cynical.”

“Do you blame me?” Louis rejoined. “That’s my life, mate. I am scheduled to go to the toilet at 7:26 AM, and my shit will pinch off at precisely 7:35. At 7:36 a robot will wipe my arse with eight sheets of royal toilet paper. After two squirts of the bidet at 31 degrees Celsius and a towel off, away we go.”

Liam sighed and stood up. It was already 9:49 PM. He’d better hurry. After all, Dr. Bonnachoven had given explicit instructions. Louis had had insomnia for so long that he was beginning to act erratic, and the doctor had said it was very important to stick to the schedule. Liam didn’t want to find out what would happen if he didn’t follow instructions to the letter. Before the medicine, purple bruises were beginning to bloom under Louis’s eyes. He could be found at odd hours of the night, wandering through the palace. And now, in eleven minutes, he would take the required dose. He would. There was no question about that.

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Outside, Steve Aoki stood near a steel pillar of the train station, jotting down his final impressions before filing his story.

What story, though? The prince basically dodged all the questions. He was media-trained within a nanometer of his perfectly manicured life.

Steve sighed. His piece would get buried; it was as good as writing on a blog no one reads. *Sic transit modern journalism.* He scrolled down his contact list to text his friend.

*you there, harry?*

He waited for a few seconds, and then the reply flashed on screen.

*where are you steven*

*munich. hauptbahnhof junket. if you can even call it that. just got done*
whatcha doing?
royalty, man. was a dud, total waste of time

the prince, what’s his name—
louis, future king of doncaster

right. did you get to ask any questions?
ha! a few...

ask about anesidora?

tried to, man. but the bastard basically dodged everything

slick, huh?
slicker than the exxon valdez, if you know what i mean

Steve waited for the dots on the phone to hold still, feeling Harry’s commiseration through the inanimate handheld device.

good media training, the royals. tight as swiss vaults

haha. wouldn’t know. never seen one

swiss vaults? nothing to write home about, trust me

you know i drove down from berlin? took me six hours. a fucking waste of petrol

After a pause of a minute or so, Steve saw the next line.

what was he like?
guarded. on edge. the guy’s like an ice box on the outside, but

but what?
like unexploded landmines inside, you know?

ooo, you make it sound so enticing. can’t wait

Steve could almost hear Harry’s disgruntled sigh. He nodded his head in agreement.

right, you’re supposed to interview him huh?

don’t fucking remind me, steven

gotta kiss that royal ass harry. i don’t envy you, man. where are you again? rome? florence?

i’m in rome

good times! well, good luck trying to get anything out of his royal tight ass. it’s worse than pulling teeth
couldn't get an exclusive, unfortunately. Harry texted back. will have to try my best at the embassy junket

oh shit. sorry about that

Steve knew how it was to get attention in a crowd of reporters. It was part of the reason he kept his hair long, to be noticed. Once he had their attention, he worked his questions in. Every veteran reporter had their own tricks.

no loss probably

yeah

Steve thought for a second. hey who's your tog?

nialler

Steve nodded. Niall Horan was a thoroughly professional photojournalist, had been around the block a few times.

good man. loved his piece on the vatican scuffle

niall's alright

fantastic reflexes, that irish

hey btw. i don't even know what he looks like

niall?

no, the fucking pope, steven. i mean the prince. Louis whatshisface

google him. Steve texted. he's a handsome man. compact

as in, he's a shrimp?

no, no

a troll?

google him harry. think you'll be pleasantly surprised.

can't be bothered. he could look like shit for all i care, just need a few quotes on record, preferably on the trade deal

fyi, he doesn't look like shit

no?

not remotely

i couldn't care less steve

he's quite the looker
mmm. so tell me, what is he really like

like a devil. a clever devil

The dots on Steve’s phone hovered for a few minutes, and then disappeared. Steve shut it off. Harry was the best, but he was going to have to work for this one. Steve didn't envy him one bit.

*****

Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté,
Lux, calme et volupté.*

Louis glanced at the paper he held, mouthing the words. His tutor had assigned the poem to memorize and recite, but he had waited until the last minute, as usual. He found memorization tedious. At best, he would spout it to some important bureaucrat who would praise him. Louis was surrounded by people like that. No one sincerely thought he was clever. No one ever really heard what he said, nor cared. He could recite nursery rhymes or gangster rap and no one would know the difference.

The palace was abuzz because of the birth of his youngest siblings, fraternal twins Doris and Ernest. Louis had just turned thirteen. He already had four younger sisters, and knew how it would go. There would be two weeks of uninterrupted rest for his mother, Her Royal Highness Johannah, the Princess of Doncaster. There would be celebrations for the citizens. Then would come the christening with its pomp and circumstance. Louis could escape then, to be alone.

As he lulled around the study, Louis heard the door open and someone walk in. The door closed imperceptibly. Light, irregular footsteps came quietly upon him. Louis continued reciting the poem from his cheat sheet, distracted.

A pair of soft hands blindfolded him.

“Marius.” Louis could recognize his smell anywhere.

“Louis!”

Louis turned around. The other boy was thin and pale. Straight strands of white blond hair streamed down from his scalp like flaxen corn silk. His eyes were heavily lidded, giving them a hooded look. Light, opalescent blue irises shone beneath. Louis always thought he looked like a forest elf; all he needed were the pointy ears. He was a year older and a few inches taller than Louis.

“What are we doing today?” Louis asked.
“You’re studying.”

“Oh, this stupid thing,” Louis said, tossing the paper on the chair beside him. “It’s not important. Just my French homework.”

“What is it?”

“L’Invitation au voyage. It’s so boring. I’m bored, bored, bored. Show me something fun.”

“How about— let’s take your homework with us. You can study there.”

“Where?”

Marius took Louis’s hand.

“Come on.”

“Marius, tell me where you’re taking me!” Louis half-laughed.

“It’s a picnic!”

Louis’ eyes opened in curiosity. It was February, still in the midst of winter. The grounds were frozen. There was not a glimpse of life outside. Louis imagined biting down on frozen bread, drinking icy chunks of lemonade, holding a cup with his mittens.

“You’re daft, Mar. Have you been outside? Even the stables are a million degrees below zero.” Marius’s father was the head groomsman of the royal stallions.

“Don’t worry,” Marius said. He smiled mysteriously, his lips thinned into pale lines. “I have it all ready, as long as you’re up for an adventure.”

Louis raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. Of course he was up for an adventure. But his tutorial was in an hour, and soon Mr. Gates would come looking for him.

“Allons-y, mon copain,” Louis said.

He folded the poem in quarters and stuffed it in the pocket of his trousers. Marius gave his hand a squeeze, and they ran through the study, down the corridors of the Great Hall, past the library and various grand parlors, past tea rooms and armor rooms and the Great Dining Hall displaying hundreds of coats of arms, past the smoking room immediately adjacent to it, past the music rooms overlooking the formal gardens, to the southwestern arm of the enormous structure, the southernmost point of the palace.

The further they receded from the front of the palace, the quieter the corridors became. No one was around. They were watched only by the long-dead eyes of dukes and baronesses on the walls. Their footsteps clicked through the stone floors of the hallways, muffled by thick layers of carpeting in between.

Marius opened the door to the conservatory. A dazzle of colors burst through.

Louis couldn't believe his eyes.

In the middle of the conservatory was a dressing table with theater makeup, creams and colors in an extraordinary selection. And all around, dozens of costumes, in a variety of sizes, hung in their flamboyant splendor.

A makeshift stage had been set up to one side, with thick, dark crimson velvet curtains held back to reveal a stage floor.

On a small table on the opposite side of the room, a picnic feast had been set up, with plates and cups, cakes, biscuits, finger sandwiches, and bottles of soda. Linen napkins and silverware lay by the plates.


“I thought we could use some fun,” Marius said. “Winters are so dull. I asked Leonora—do you know her?—she’s in charge of the royal garments. She dug these costumes up from storage—they sit there for ages, waiting for costume balls.”

“But they’re gorgeous.”

“None of them have ever been worn. Poor things,” Marius said. “They were all boxed up in storage. There’s tons more, actually.”

“I mean it,” Louis turned to him. “How did you know? This is perfect.”

Louis walked over to the costumes. They had been made by the royal seamstresses, once upon a time, and were each unique, one-of-a-kind. He touched the silks and velvet ribbons, the linens and sequins and foam-stuffed shoes.

“Oh which one will you pick?”

“Hmmm. It’s so hard to choose,” Louis said. “They’re all so incredible.”

Louis thumbed through each costume. The vivid colors formed a fine chaos. Besides the clothing, there were hats and gloves, swords and wands, boots, scarfs, capes. It was every carnival of Louis’s life gathered in one place.

He finally settled on a Greek toga, white charmeuse silk trimmed with gold, and a golden laurel crown. Louis and Marius had recently read a book of Greek mythology together. Louis took off his jumper and trousers, tugged on the leggings and fastened the toga with a gold clip to the left shoulder. He arranged the laurel crown carefully on top of his head, its leaves pointed skyward. His bare skin was pale and fine.

Louis stood before Marius, arms splayed open for admiration. He looked as if he could soar away, if only he had wings.

“Who are you supposed to be?” Marius tapped his chin, amused.

“Guess.”

“Hercules,” Marius said.

“Ugh,” Louis said. “No. Try again.”

Marius held his chin in one hand and contemplated.
“Eros,” he decided. “God of love.”

“No!” Louis rolled his eyes. He rearranged himself, striking a heroic pose. “Come on now. Guess again.”

Marius took his shoulders and gently spun him around, Louis’s tinkling laughter trailing his body.


“Dionysus! Are you bonkers?” Louis continued to laugh. “No. Look at my crown.” Louis tipped his chin upward, and sighed. “I’m Apollo, the sun god. But I could also be Perseus, slayer of the Medusa.” He held up an air sword in one hand, the other hand holding the invisible head of the Medusa.

“Oh, a hero!” Marius said. “Of course you are. Maybe even Prometheus!”

“Stealer of fire,” Louis said. “Perfect! And you, Mar. Who do you want to be?”

“Well, if you’re Prometheus,” said Marius, his voice drifting down, “I guess I could be Pandora, the most curious girl in the world.”

Louis’ lips parted with a thin breath. He hadn’t expected Marius to say that. Something shifted inside him, or began to open, like a chrysalis. It wasn’t an entirely peaceful feeling.

Meanwhile, Marius began to shrug off his clothing. His body was thin and pale, taut with small muscles. Wandering through the costumes in only his pants, Marius wrapped fabrics around himself, auditing them by feel, finally selecting a simple white costume, hanging alone. He turned his back to Louis to put on the nearly diaphanous dress— and he definitely picked a dress, not a toga. Chiffon and damask silk drifted down from an empire waist, elegantly trimmed in creamy satin.

When he turned around, the static of the fabric had repelled his hairs from the nape of the neck. Electricity blew his hair around his face like dandelion wisps.

For a moment, Louis stared wordlessly. Then he blinked.

“You look almost,” Louis whispered, “like a girl.”

The light streaming through the conservatory windows framed Marius with a corona of brilliance and shadows. His face was nearly in the dark. The sunshine around his head burned like a white fire.

“Do you like it?” Marius said. “Watch this.”

Marius sat down at the dressing table. He picked up a jar and carefully smeared the color into his face. His complexion turned pinkish peach, a shade warmer than his pale birth color. He bit his lips to plump them, and then opened another jar and dabbed the cherry red right in the middle. He opened yet another tube and drew out a curled applicator to brush his eyelashes out, thickening and darkening them. Louis watched, entranced.

“What do you think?” Mag asked.

“It's—amazing,” Louis said. “You’re beautiful.”

Marius was otherworldly. He looked like nothing and no one else Louis had ever seen, less like a
curious girl, and more like a mythical creature—combining both the human and the divine, like Psyche atop the sacrificial cliff.

“Would you like to try, Your Highness?”

“No, no,” Louis demurred. “No, I shouldn't... I don’t think so.”

He stared at his companion in a state of paralyzed wonder. Marius stood up, towering over Louis. He swayed as if to an unheard music. He raised his hands above his head and stretched, a languorous dance, his torso long, pale, and gaunt as winter aspen, the ruffled bodice of the dress puckered and empty.

Marius smiled down at him. Louis sat rooted to the spot, unable to look away. Then, as if it lifted by a phantom arm, Louis’s hand reached out and touched the left side of the dress, caressed the fabric between his fingers, and pulled it away from the torso, stretching it. His other hand swung around to touch the back of the dress, pulling Marius’s legs closer. Marius sank into his embrace.

It felt right. Louis couldn’t explain or understand it. But it was as if this was where he was meant to be. He felt complete; he was no longer alone.

The conservatory door opened. Both boys quickly and reflexively turned their heads toward the door. There, Mr. Gates stood silently watching, his body a dark silhouette. Louis abruptly dropped his hands and backed away.

“Your Highness,” Gates enunciated, finally. “Your French tutor, Monsieur Acheron, is waiting in the atrium. Shall we go?”

“Joseph,” Louis said in a high, thin voice. The laurel crown came off. Louis tucked it behind his back. “Hi! I wasn’t— We were just playing.”

“I see that.” Gates hesitated ever so subtly. “I shall wait for you in the study, Your Highness.”

Gates bowed, and then exited and closed the door.

Without looking at Marius, Louis rapidly shrugged off the toga and yanked on his jumper and trousers. His heel not quite in his right shoe, he started to stumble away anyway, not looking to see where he was going.

“Your Highness,” Marius called to him. Louis could not watch his face, the colorful makeup underscoring the pallor beneath.

“Thanks, Mar,” Louis answered, not turning around. “This was great. Sorry we didn't get to the picnic. Catch you later, huh?”

Marius stood with his hands awkwardly at his side. He watched as Louis hurried away with one foot barely in his trainer, the right trouser leg caught in the heel.

“Louis,” he said, his voice damp. “Louis, please!”

Louis did not reply. He walked briskly through the door.

He shut the door closed behind him. Mr. Gates was gone. Louis’s heart rabbited in its cage. Louis rested his back on the door for a moment, his vision dark and head swimming. He hopped on his feet, fixed his shoe and then walked quickly down the corridor. He hoped the tremor of his body would not be noticeable by the time he got to the French tutor.
The sheet of poetry crinkled in his trouser pocket.

\[ Aimer à loisir \\
Aimer et mourir \\
Au pays qui te ressemble. \]

*To love at will, to love and die, in a country like you.* The lines rang like a seashell in Louis’s ear. He felt as if he were sliding off a precipice.

One early morning a week later, when Louis went down to the kitchen to look for Marius, he wasn’t there. Elaine, one of the kitchen’s prep chefs, told Louis that Marius’ father had been promoted. The stable chief was now in charge of the royal race horses at the national stables, two hours away. His entire family had moved. They would never come back.

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Liam Payne would never not be amused by the image of Prince Louis in trackies running around the small courtyard, his fists clenched in front of his chest, feet shuffling half-heartedly.

The embassy grounds in Rome were rather confined. The courtyard was barely larger than half a basketball court, ringed on its sides by hedges and trees. Louis held small weights in his hands, occasionally swinging them out in front of him and to the sides at shoulder level, to the barks of his trainer.

Once in a while, Louis would shout out, “I’m doing it, you sadistic bastard!”

Liam bit back a laugh.

He sat in the half-sun, the warm, fragrant summer breeze blowing around him, rustling the newspaper in his hands.

Liam Payne loved Rome. For one thing, there was nothing quite like the Italian sun, more brilliant than all the stars in the night. Compared to the anemic northern skies, Italy was a honeyed dream.

The big event was still a couple of days away. It was good to stop for a while, to catch their breath.

The Doncaster embassy in Rome was old-fashioned, roomy and spare, housed in a sixteenth century palazzo near the Villa Borghese. Despite its age and grandeur, it felt light, modern. Air and sunlight cascaded into the courtyard. The antique walls and beams were offset with minimalist contemporary furniture, in elegant leather, glass, and steel.
A sweaty Louis plopped down in the lounge chair next to Liam, one foot on the ground and the other splayed out in front of him. He cast the weights to the ground, then wiped his forehead with a towel. He grabbed the bottled water in front of him and swigged.

“Check out this headline, Your Highness.” Liam showed him the newspaper. “Prince Louis Arrives in Rome in Darkest Hours. They made you sound like a Messiah or something!”

From low in his chair, Louis lifted an eyebrow. “Excuse me, Liam. Am I not?”

“Haha, forgive me, sir!” Liam’s face folded with mirth. “Should we inform the Vatican?”

“They’ll find out soon enough.” Louis unlaced his shoes and threw them to the ground. He reached for the pack of cigarettes on the table in front of Liam, lit one and took a drag. “They’re always the last ones to know, aren’t they?”

Liam shook his head in exasperation.

“Your Highness,” Liam said. “When in Rome, shall we try to do as the Romans do? At least be nice to them.”

“I change for no one, Liam. I am allowed to be me when I’m alone.” Louis rested his cigarette on the ashtray, took another sip of water, then poured a dollop into the palm of his hand and splashed it around his sweaty face, slicking his hair back. “And I told you. It’s Louis.”

“Your High—”


Liam genuinely looked pained. “Fine.”

Louis reared his head back happily. “I’m serious! It’s not a request. One more time and I’ll have to make him spank you.”

Liam glanced at the personal trainer, who waited patiently at the periphery of the courtyard, out of earshot. The trainer, a thin, wiry man in a royal blue tracksuit, politely averted his gaze, pretending to see nothing.

“All right then,” Liam said, sotto voce, “Louis. You’re impossible, you know. It’s totally against protocol, if anyone overhears. My arse would be on the line.”

“It’s my choice, Liam,” Louis said. He took a drag and flicked the ashes to the ground. “I got your back. I’m the Prince, aren’t I? I’d like to have one person near me to treat me like a friend. Or pretend to, anyway. Someone who isn’t family. And I respect you, Payne. You’re a decent sort.”

“Thank you, Your—” Liam cleared his throat. “I mean, Louis.”

“That’s right,” Louis replied, smiling and pointing his cigarette at Liam. “You’re getting it now.”

Liam caught Louis’s sly glance. “So. Besides the 11 AM photo op, you have a free day tomorrow,” Liam said. “Is there anything you’d like to do?”

“Is it just a photo op?”

“For the most part,” Liam scanned the papers. “The Italians know you’re here. There might be a reporter or two, but they know this is just a formality.”
“Has Eleanor arrived?”

Liam spotted the twitch in Louis’ cheek.

“Why?” He turned toward Louis. “She’ll be here soon enough. Did you have something in mind?” He added hopefully, “You want me to set up a sightseeing tour with her or what?”

“Yeah, right.” Louis flicked his cigarette ashes. “You know I’d love that.”

“An intimate amble through St. Peter’s Basilica, just the two of you. Eating gelato sweetly from each other’s spoons, on the Spanish Steps. Just like a real couple on The Bachelor.”

Louis leaned over to smack Liam’s bicep, ashes falling from the cigarette.

“Don’t make me sick,” he said. “No thanks.”

Liam dodged him easily, laughing. “Louis, this is serious. For real.”

“I know,” Louis said, taking a long drag on his cigarette. “I know, Payno. You don’t have to tell me.”

“Sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry!” Louis flicker ashes to the ground. “For Christ’s sakes, I know the whole drill. I’m supposed to be King and marry Eleanor. We’re going to knock out a couple of little Doncaster princes for the future…” Liam winced, but Louis continued, “And then we’ll have our respective lovers, and never see each other again, except for weddings and funerals.” He slumped down in his chair and drank more water. “Thank God for small mercies.”


“Oh, trust me,” Louis laughed sardonically. “They won’t.”

“How can you be so sure? You haven’t seen Eleanor for ages. You hardly even know her.”

"Because I know."

Liam folded the paper. Louis stared straight ahead, his fingers rapidly flicking the cigarette. Ashes fell into the ground in quick succession. Louis puffed on the cigarette, then looked away and vehemently expelled the smoke, blowing skyward. His silence was amplified by the twittering birds around them, carried on the gentle breeze.

“Louis?” Liam said. “I’m sorry. Have I said something wrong?”

Louis stood up and circled behind Liam, pausing to take a long drag on his cigarette, and then returned to the table. His eyes were dark, his face unreadable. He put both hands on the table.

“Liam, what do you think about love?”

Liam was taken aback by the question. “I don't know,” he stammered. “What do I think about love?”

Louis said impatiently, “Yes, what do you think? Have you ever been in love?”

Liam shrunk into his shoulders and shrugged self-consciously. “As in romantically?”
“No, Liam,” Louis said. “I’m asking about your dog Wolfie.” He scowled. “Of course romantically, you dolt.”

Liam straightened up. “I mean, yes. I— uh, I have had a few experiences.” His ears pinked as though he were being interrogated for state secrets. Having a conversation about intimacy was definitely one thing Liam never expected with the Prince of Doncaster. Was there a protocol for this?

“Well? What’s it feel like?” Louis demanded, as Liam watched him curiously. Louis’ brows were arched with hopefulness, his lips open slightly.

“It makes one feel… special? Like someone sees the real you, for the first time.” Liam’s eyes softened. “You don’t have to pretend.”

“You feel honest,” Louis prompted.

“Yes,” Liam answered. “Even if it’s temporary, you feel more honest and true than you have ever felt. Than you will ever allow yourself to feel, under ordinary circumstances. You feel seen and heard. Understood. Real.”

Briefly, anger and sadness flickered across Louis’ face, before he covered it again with absolute control.

“It must be nice?” he asked tentatively.

“It’s the best,” Liam said. Watching Louis closely, he added, “But Your Highness, you could have that.”

After a moment, Louis answered quietly, “No. That’s not an option for me.”

Liam looked up into Louis’s face. Something about the steely, cold tone of Louis’s voice frightened him, as if a door was being closed.

“You’ve never been in love, Louis? You’re the most eligible bachelor of Doncaster!”

“That’s meaningless, as you know,” Louis said with a shrug. “The truth is I don’t know anybody. And I won’t. Not in private. No one knows me. No one sees me. I’ve never even had a proper kiss.”

“You’re joking me!” Liam blurted out without thinking. He recoiled in embarrassment. “Oh golly. Sorry.”

Louis laughed. “Stop saying sorry! It’s fine, mate. I would have reacted the same way.” He picked up the cigarette and took a pull, puffing out the smoke in a tight stream.

“But… no one? No kisses? Ever? What about from your cousins, or friends at school?”

“Cousins.” Louis rolled his eyes. One hand picked up the lighter and flicked it on and off. “Are you even serious right now? You think incest counts? I’m talking about a true love’s kiss, Payno, not a drunken spit swap at some sweaty undergrad gig.”

Liam cleared his throat vigorously. “So, like—”

“For your information,” Louis raised his eyebrows. “I’ve had tongue action. Maybe even below-the-waist action,” Louis sighed dreamily, “which was nice, by the way. Very nice. I enjoyed.”
Liam exaggeratedly shielded his eyes. “I’m afraid that is a tad bit too much information, Your Highness.”

“But not a true love’s kiss,” Louis went on, his voice tight with regret. “And I probably never will, by the looks of it.”

Liam looked up at Louis, who suddenly looked much younger than his twenty-four years, a man of enormous privilege who could never be allowed out of his gilded cage. Touching Louis’ arm, Liam’s face softened.

“My Prince.”

Louis kept toying with the cigarette stub in the ashtray.

Liam continued, “Life is long, Louis. You're too young to give up.”

“Maybe,” Louis said enigmatically. “Mainte fleur épanche à regret / Son parfum doux comme un secret.* Do you know it?”

Liam shook his head no.

“It means love is a bunch of poisoned flowers,” Louis looked toward the garden walls. “Sweetness comes with pain. Nothing is given freely. A bitter moral, but realistic.” Louis put the lighter down and stood up, rapping the table twice in quick succession and ending the discussion. “Anyway, what’s our agenda for today, Mr. Payne?”

“Well. Alright,” Liam opened his binder. He glanced at his watch. “Let’s see. Your workout was supposed to have lasted another thirty minutes.”

“Haha!” Louis grinned cheekily. He looked over to his trainer and waved a hand. “What a shame. Thank you, love! You're dismissed!” The trainer shook his head, bowed, and left. Louis mischievously shook out his arms, then flexed his biceps and triceps with smug satisfaction.

“Done. Next?”

“A late lunch this afternoon with the Presidente del Consiglio— at 14:30.”

“What time is it now?”

“It's— ” Liam consulted his watch again, “nearly noontime.”

“Go on, then. After lunch.”

“Let’s see. We have a cocktail reception at the opera house immediately after, followed by an attendance of La Traviata. And then, of course, your yoga and milk, and in bed by midnight.”

“Opera?” Louis rolled his eyes. “You’re killing me, Payne. Tell me we can skip it.”

“You have V.I.P. box seats, Your Highness, and the Italian press corps will cover it. It would be noticed if you don’t show.” Liam watched Louis’ grimace deepen. “Perhaps we can leave early. After all, you need to get your rest, right?”

Louis groaned. “Balls.”

“Go on. Take a bath,” Liam said. “I’ll have Arthur draw it for you. Have a nice nap. You’ll feel right as rain after.”
Louis grabbed his lighter and cigarettes. “God willing I might drown before the opera starts.”

“Stop that,” Liam said. “I’ll fetch you before the luncheon. Does that please you?”

Louis walked away, raising his arm in a mute salute and dismissing Liam with a practiced wave. Liam watched his back recede. He didn’t know whether to feel charm, pity, or irritation.

Royals. Liam swore they were the oddest animals in the zoo. Still, he couldn’t help but be endeared to this one.


How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

From *Leda and the Swan*, by William Butler Yeats

Louis relaxed in the scalding water, a mountain of bubbles piled onto his chest. Arthur has scented the water with rosemary and freesia. Sweat and humidity beaded on his face. His fingers were pruned and the scabs on the dry cuticles had lifted away. He shifted his tired legs. The water swirled around them, cushioning the movement, adding to their weight and inertia.

He hadn't realized that he was so tired. In fact, he was in a zone between falling asleep and becoming awake, in the incoherent moment when one was too tired to close one’s eyes, and the surroundings seemed both to expand further away and to pulse closer. He tapped the water lightly, flicking away the fine bubbles closest to him.

Was it the press conference tomorrow that weighed him down? The days of poor sleep catching up with him? His eyelids flickered heavily.

He wanted a cigarette, but the pack was in the bedroom, and he wasn't about to get out of the bath
to get it. If he yelled loudly enough, maybe Liam would come running, but Louis was too comfortable and lazy.

There was absolutely no one around. He was in the royal suite, designated only for the Doncaster royal family. Since King William never traveled anymore, the suite was almost never in use. Nevertheless, it was kept in pristine condition. There was not a speck of dust in sight.

Like the rest of the embassy, the rooms had enormously tall ceilings, and ornate, Corinthian molding. Unlike the rest of the embassy, the royal suite was decorated like the palace back home, with hand-carved furniture in exotic, burled woods. A luxurious bed was on one side of the room. A generous walnut desk and mahogany dressers were on the other side. The walls were a muted ivory color, and the ceiling was painted to resemble a blue sky, with wisps of clouds in trompe l’oeil. Antiques of various provenances filled the niches.

On the other side of the room was a sitting area with sofas, chairs, and ottomans. Twin bookshelves flanked a fireplace. Tapered candlesticks anchored both ends of the mantle. A painting of the Princess Johannah, aged sixteen, hung in between. She smiled sweetly from the frame, her hands holding a bouquet of white lilies.

The private en suite was a world away from the rest of the embassy. The closest sound was the muted horns of the Roman cars and buses from outside the windows, one story down, a wash of traffic noises sounding like a distant wind.

Louis’s hands rested on his chest.

The street sounds lulled him to close his eyes. His hands drifted into the water.

The sound of laughter seeped through the mist. He was in the woods. There were sounds of people running.

Shadows, branches breaking.

A herd of deer ran to his right, their galloping, fleet-footed shapes blurring in the darkness. They ran as if spooked, or being chased, silently and swiftly, with purpose. More than five or six. The smallest in the back, struggling to keep up. A doe in the rear. They ran past, their hoofs striking the earth like dull castanets. Louis smelled their excitement and fear. They faded into the woods.

Then darkness, distant sounds.

Louis put his hand out to touch the trees next to him. They felt like velvet. His fingers brushed the top of a tall bush, with white, wild flowers. The flowers crumbled to the ground. He put his hand up to his face. The flowers smelled like candy, sweet and fragrant, but also heady and sensual.

The sound of voices advanced. They were singing. Louis began swiftly walking, but they came too fast. He ran into the darkness. They came after him in pursuit. He heard feet running, the cracks of branches breaking, the steady push of a relentless creature in the dark.

Louis scrambled to the edge of a vast, opaque lake. The surface was a dark, indistinct hue. Below was a pool of deep green. On all sides, the woods surrounded the lake, which extended into the black horizon. The voices came behind him, fast and wild. He looked back and saw a crowd gathering, advancing upon him. Panicked, he turned back toward the lake.

He knelt down on the ground at the edge of the lake. The water was as still as a mirror. The sound of singing and shouting was now loud enough to cause ripples in the lake.
Louis’s heart pounded in his ears. His necklace, with its gold charm, dangled over the water.

He closed his eyes.

Warm hands cupped his face. He opened his eyes in surprise. A pair of arms had reached through the water. All he could see was the deep, emerald, wet green of the long arms.

The arms pulled him into the water.

Louis did not feel wet. He was alive and breathing under water. He went deeper, inexorably pulled, sound and light fading away.

In the darkness, he felt a hand caress his face, and another behind his neck to pull him close.

Lips touched his own. The taste of pomegranate was inside his mouth. The kiss was sensual and warm. Louis stirred, being pulled in slowly, waking to the kiss.

They descended deeper. Louis thought he was falling toward the center of the earth. It seemed to grow lighter.

The lips parted his own, and a tongue darted out to taste him. Louis felt helpless. His body became alert, awake. His belly warmed in anticipation.

Hands grasped him and pushed him down. He felt entangled and enthralled, unable to resist or protest.

A body pressed against him, male, muscular, stiff. Louis’s heart leaped; his thighs pressed together. His head tipped back, or was being tipped back. A warm palm held the back of his head and lightly pulled his hair. A breath circled his jaw, settling just behind his ear to suck the skin in. Involuntarily, Louis groaned.

He was being kissed, on the neck, behind his ear, on his lips. He pushed his hip forward, feeling the friction and losing himself. He felt hands grab his own, and cup it around his tensing erection. The hand strayed down to brush his testicles, stroking them and cupping them, teasing the space behind. Then it gripped his hand and began tight, fast strokes. It wanted. It craved. It possessed him.

Louis held his breath, then began breathing in short, irregular bursts. He could feel how wet he was, how intensely stimulated. He howled quietly, making small, inhuman noises of pleasure and pain. He was being pulled onto a precipice. It took him, muscular and relentless, and he was helpless to resist. He felt as if he was being slowly pulled apart. The tension coiled at the base of his hand.

“No, no,” Louis protested. “Please. No.”

The body pushed against him and rutted up once, twice. Simultaneously, Louis felt the coil release, and there was an explosion of pain and pleasure as he moaned aloud. He was flying. His orgasm lasting for minutes, he seemed to respond to the slightest touch. A flicker to his body, and he spurted forth, wetting the world, coating everything around him.

It felt incredibly freeing.

“Don’t,” he moaned. “Please, please. Don’t.”

Louis woke suddenly. The bath had turned lukewarm. The room was quiet and still, and the sun
was still bright outside. His hands were on his groin. He was still half hard. The water was murky near his hands. He looked around quickly—there was no one here. Thank God.

Louis wanted to sleep for a hundred years.

Slowly, he got out of the tub and pulled the drain. Still naked and dripping, he walked to the bed and threw himself on top of the covers, on his back. His hair soaked into the pillows. The heat in his groin slowly melted away. The droplets on his body cooled.

Louis stared up at the ceiling. He listened to his heartbeat calm down. He tried not to dwell on the lingering emotion of the dream.

He didn't have to say it. He knew.

It was fear. It had always been fear.

It wasn't that he was afraid to be king, or that he was afraid of romance, responsibility, marriage, even sex. Louis was trained for media scrutiny. He had been in front of crowds his entire life, and heir-apparent since age fifteen. He could push down personal grief, suppress his need to cry, put on a stoic face. He could knock out a smile with no pain at all. He knew what it felt like to stand in front of thousands, to make a statement that wasn't from the heart, to say prudent and expedient things even though they felt like the biggest lies in the world.

He knew that Doncaster was his special duty. He was supposed to place it above everything else: God, family, himself.

He was okay with all of that.

He wasn't even afraid to be with Eleanor. He’d known her for ages. She was a human being, just like him. Maybe she also felt compelled by circumstance. She also had her responsibilities. He had no sympathy for her, nor animosity, really. He didn't feel anything for her. They were both cogs.

What he truly feared was himself.

He was a twenty-four-year-old man who did not know himself. And it seemed almost too late. His grandfather’s illness had pushed the dilemma to the forefront.

And the most terrifying thing was, there was a Louis inside. He could sense him in there. Behind the bespoke clothing, the polite façade, the measured and diplomatic words, there was a Louis ready to wreak havoc, the real Louis. He was there, waiting to spring upon the world. He had the power to tear down a future king, an entire kingdom.

He was the running deer. He was the advancing, maddened crowd.

Louis wasn't afraid of this terrifying creature. No, indeed not.

Rather, Louis was afraid he would like him. That he would like him too much. That he had waited his entire life to uncage this creature because it was the purest, most honest form of himself, that once he found this Louis, he could never let him go. That the chaos unleashed upon the world could not be caged again. He was afraid to open the door.

Louis stared at the ceiling, breathing shallowly. In his chest, he felt a mixture of terror and elation. His mind was again between waking and sleeping, his fatigue so deep that it felt hallucinatory.

The painted clouds formed odd patterns on the ceiling. One of the spaces between the clouds was
like the silhouette of a fairy, a blue fairy. Her wand darted into the cloud where sunlight sparkled through. In Louis’s state of mind, her wand seemed to point at him, the sparks flying toward him, their secret message going straight to his heart.

Louis played with his necklace and the small charm that had fallen to one side. He had worn it for so long that the corners of the box, being pure gold, had become rounded. He rubbed the inscription on the bottom like a mantra.

*Hope* was the last thing in the box. The thing left behind.

His most fervent wish was also his most terrifying fear. Louis thumbed his necklace nervously. There wasn't much time. Not much time at all to become a real man.

*The French poetry in this chapter is from the great work *Fleurs du Mal*, by Charles Baudelaire.*
Their car slowly nosed forward through the morning crowd. It was May 2015. Harry was supposed to meet his contact at 10:30 AM, outside el-Fishawi coffee house. They were at the Khan el-Khalili bazaar, in Cairo.

In the wake of the 2011 Revolution, Egyptian state brutality was resurgent. There were reports of young people—students, activists, protesters—being rounded up by state security forces and “disappeared,” tortured for months at a time, or killed. There were stories that children as young as 14 and 15 had been sexually assaulted, tortured and battered in secret detention.

Harry’s contact came through an underground network of anti-government protesters. “Atef” was a young man in his early twenties. One day, he had followed Harry after he left the Reuters news offices in Cairo, and approached Harry while he was waiting for lunch at a nearby cafe. Atef’s name and photograph had been run through an international criminal and terrorist database. He had no records. He was an unknown.

Harry worked with his photographer and videographer, an Italian named Mattia Moscardi. Moscardi was a free agent on assignment for Reuters. He and Harry got along because both were addicted to Egyptian coffee, heavily saturated with sugar. And, while Mattia was not fluent in English, he did speak some Arabic. He could translate for Harry, who was bilingual in Italian and English.

They had been working together for four months. Harry was very fond of Mattia. His skills were top notch. He had the best instincts, for both photography and survival. Mattia had been in the business for almost twenty years. His wife and three young children lived in a small town near Florence, Italy.

Harry’s mother Anne had married a fellow Briton, a businessman named Robin Twist who had lived as an expatriate first in Rome, and now in Naples. Consequently, Harry had spent a large part of his young adulthood in Italy and learned Italian.

Their driver Abdul had been nervous about this potential meeting. Several reporters had been injured during the recent unrest. Drivers and photographers had been sent home with serious injuries, including foreigners. There were incidents of journalists being kidnapped, too—again, including the American and European press corps in Cairo. The crowds could become inflamed and unpredictable in a few seconds. To make matters worse, the driver had two foreign passengers with press passes, one of whom had a huge assortment of expensive video and camera equipment. They stood out like a sore thumb.

“Mr. Styles,” the driver said, in his Arabic-accented English. “You know this contact?”
“His name is Atef Mohamed,” Harry answered. “He checked out with us. He’s got a clean profile, at least as far as the Reuters background data scans can tell. We’re meeting in a public place, in mid-day. I don't have serious concerns. Do you?”

The driver shook his head imperceptibly. “Maybe it’s not my place to say. Something feels wrong.”

Harry rubbed his cheeks; he hadn’t shaved for days. It was easy to get lazy abroad. The stubbles prickedled. “I’ll be careful. You know I will. Just stay within eye contact with me, Abdul, will ya?”

“Il tuo uomo ci porta in un altro posto?” Mattia asked Harry. *Is the contact taking us to a second location?*

Harry replied, "Non mi ha fatto sapere niente.” *He hadn't said anything about it.*

“Non avere peli sulla lingua.” *Is it on the table though?*

“I don’t know,” Harry answered.

Harry had tried hard in the last few weeks to locate one living witness who was willing to go on record after being in state detention. There had been a few leads from Amnesty International, but so far no luck. He needed someone to substantiate the claims of state brutality, and needed them to provide names and dates. Without a witness, all he had were second and third-hand reports, from friends and relatives.

Atef Mohamed had offered a potential witness, someone he was unwilling to reveal, but whose story was consistent in the timeline of disappearances, who provided convincing and realistic details and could name the people involved in his capture. These interviews would substantiate the connections to the current government.

The car stopped in front of a large marketplace, the entrance milling with people. Egyptians mingled with tourists. The atmosphere was busy but not frenetic, the usual bustle of late morning shopping.

“There,” Abdul gestured. “You see? Through that narrow entrance. Go down about half a block. There will be tables outside; you’ll see them easily. That's el-Fishawi’s.” He glanced back at Harry and Mattia. “I think this is as close as I can get.”

“Thanks, Abdul,” Harry said. “Try to stay around here if you can, yeah? You have my number. Call me if you see anything suspicious.”

“Be careful, Mr. Styles,” the driver nodded. “Mr. Moscardi. I have a not-good feeling.”

Harry braced himself. “Keep the car running.”

Harry and Mattia stepped out of the car with Mattia’s equipment hanging from his shoulder bag. Harry carried his leather binder with a legal pad and pens. Pepper spray was tucked in his trouser pocket. They made their way toward the café quickly.

Approaching the café, Harry saw masses of empty tables outside, just like Abdul said, chairs pushed together to make room on the sidewalk. Shoppers walked by with bags of fresh produce. Sometimes they had to step into the narrow street that was barely wide enough for a car. A few men smoked and chatted, gesticulating with their hands and occasionally raising their voices.

Harry did not see Atef after a quick search outside the café. He decided to head in for a look. Tipping his chin, he signaled to Mattia that he was going in.
“Devo venire, Harry?” Mattia asked. Should I come?

Harry said, “Non lo so.” I’m not sure. “I’ll have a quick look around and come find you.”

“Fine. I’ll wait here.”

Harry went into the café. His eyes adjusted to the dimmer light. Inside, various crowds of people were seated at the tables with small glass jars of black coffee in front of them. Several groups were speaking heatedly and animatedly, voices rising and falling like dominoes. Failing to locate Atef after a quick scan, Harry decided to take a stroll around the room.

He was startled when an Egyptian man appeared in front of him. Dressed in a thin, black, collared shirt, the man was evidently a waiter. He held an empty tray by his side and touched Harry on the arm.

“May I help you, sir?” he said in Arabic.

“No, thank you,” Harry replied in English. “I’m trying to find a friend.”

“As you wish,” the man said, to Harry’s mild surprise, also in English.

As the man walked away, Harry stared after him, unease crackling in his mind. A lot of locals spoke a few English phrases. But a waiter? Out of the blue? He decided to look for Atef more expeditiously. As he had only met with him once, Harry wasn’t sure whether he could identify him. If they didn’t find him soon, they were out of there.

Harry was about to leave when he heard a burst of loud shouting erupting outside. It sounded like a mad fight. He made his way out, expecting to see Mattia near the door, but instead came upon a scene of utter chaos.

Men in uniform, with pistols drawn, were yelling at civilians. A military jeep was in the narrow alley, knocking over store displays and tables. He heard a shot fired into the air. People pushed each other, running in panic. Some people fell into the streets.

Harry ducked his head and surveyed the area. Mattia was nowhere to be seen. The jeep was blocking his way back to their car, and the soldiers were angrily barking out orders. From the few Arabic words that Harry knew, he heard the words, “Move! Go! Go!”

Down the street, Harry could see the billowing vapors of tear gas. He pushed his collar up to cover his nose and mouth on instinct, squinting his eyes. Harry looked to see whether anyone was behind him, and then retreated to the café, seeking a way out through the back.

In the meantime, the café had erupted in confusion. People were rushing in every direction. Some gathered near the windows to see what was happening. The voices grew louder, more fearful and indistinct, like a swarm of hornets.

Harry found a small door on the side of the café leading to another part of the street. He opened it slowly, peeking out. The soldiers were further up the street from this entrance. It was quieter here, downstream from most of the confusion. Harry could see the way clear to his car, and Abdul. The priority was to get himself and his companions out of there, pronto.

He slipped out the door, looking around for his Italian companion’s tall frame, his brown shirt, light brown hair, and black equipment bag. Eventually, Harry spotted him standing at the corner. He was also frantically scanning the area, trying to find Harry and inching toward their car.
Harry ran out to the street.

“Mattia!” he called. “Sono qui! Over here!”

Harry pushed through the chaotic masses toward his photographer. Finally catching his attention, Harry gestured for Mattia to move toward their car.

They both started bolting. In the rush, Harry lost eye contact with Mattia, but he was nearly there and pushed ahead with a journalistic instinct for survival. He could glimpse Abdul fretting anxiously in the driver’s seat, windows rolled up, leaning deeply forward with both hands madly tapping on the steering wheel.

The crowd’s chaotic, adrenaline-fueled shouts surrounded Harry as it surged forward.

Like a display of fireworks, he heard the shots before he saw the soldiers. Instinctively, Harry ducked and rushed the last few steps toward the car.

Mattia hadn’t made it there yet. He wasn’t anywhere to be seen. Harry turned toward the direction he was coming from, trying to see him in the overwhelming chaos. His hands raised over his head, Harry crouched next to the car.

“Bloody hell!” he shouted. “Mattia! Mattia!”

“Mr. Styles!” Abdul rolled down the window. He shouted to Harry, crouching below. “Where is Mr. Moscardi?”

“He was coming this way. Didn’t you see him?”

Abdul shook his head anxiously.

“ Damn it.”

Then Harry saw Mattia. He was about twenty meters away, trapped behind a large group of men. They were facing the soldiers and jeeps, standing and shouting belligerently. Mattia was trying to push his way out, his face pale with fear and determination. Harry’s vision blurred. As Mattia came to the edge of the crowd, a fusillade of shots rang out. The crowd scrambled outward from the center. Harry’s heart clenched as Mattia vanished from view.

“Abdul! Over there!” Harry pointed toward the crowd. They both ducked as more shots rang into the sky.

The crowd scattered rapidly. The noise was furious and overwhelming; Harry could taste the metallic scrim of smoke in the air. The soldiers were rolling past, moving with a clamorous roar. A whiff of tear gas drifted through the air, causing Harry to cough violently. He couldn’t hear himself. Everywhere people were shouting and screaming.

“Get in, Mr. Styles!”

Abdul forced the car through the short distance, his face frozen with grimness. The crowd ran past them in every direction. It was almost impossible to pass through, impossible to see.

When they finally managed to inch through, Harry located, after some searching, the long, lanky form of Mattia tousled on the ground. A few people stood around him, and a few were crouched next to him. His body was splayed with a leg bent acutely at the knee. Harry flung the car door open and ran out.
“Mattia!” He rushed toward his friend, parting the crowd. “Non ti muovere!” Don’t move. I’m here!

The photographer lay still. In a protective way, his right arm shielded his photography equipment, his fingers tightly gripping the thick nylon strap.

Harry realized, with a sick feeling of panic, that there was blood seeping slowly from Mattia’s back.

“Harry,” Mattia said softly. He opened his eyes. “Me l’ha messo in culo.” I’m fucked.

“No. You’re going to be okay,” Harry replied in Italian. He looked around for an ambulance. “Mattia, hang tight. Couple of minutes. We’re going to hospital. We’ll get you some help. Breathe for me.”

“Harry, let’s go to Italy,” Mattia said. “Fuck this, man. Let’s go home. I’ll take you to the best restaurant in Florence. The pesto, it’s divine. It’s better than anything on earth.” His raised his hand, and Harry grasped it, holding it tightly.

“Mattia, non dire sciocchezze,” Harry said. Don’t talk nonsense. He realized Mattia’s face was ashen and pale, his hand clammy. "I'm right here, pal. Stay with me. Don’t talk shit, my friend. You’ll be alright. I’m right here. Breathe, breathe.”

Harry wished he could force Mattia to take a deep breath, to stretch his chest open and gulp the air in. The blood was flowing steadily, brighter than he thought it possible. He wanted Mattia to wear his healthy brown tan again, to have his reassuring, sweaty arm hairs brush against him, to laugh his shy, deep laughter.

“Give a hug to my little ones,” Mattia said, his breaths drawn out quickly and shallow. “Will you, Harry? When you get back? Prometillo. Tell them about me.” Promise me.

“Prometto. Prometto,” Harry said, in a voice he was sure Mattia could hear. “I’m taking you home. We’re going home.”

Harry squeezed Mattia’s hand and waited until his breathing slowed to nothing. The crowd gathered with the murmur of desert wind. When the ambulance finally came, Mattia’s hand still felt warm.

Months later, after Harry got back to Italy, he did visit Mattia’s family. They lived in a small town just outside of Florence. One warm afternoon, Harry waited for the children to come home from school. He hugged each one of them, two girls and a brown-haired boy. And he did eat at the best restaurant in Florence, the place that, according to Mattia’s wife, they always went to for celebrations.

The pesto was, indeed, fantastic.

*****
“Can we drop the yoga tonight?” Louis squealed. The tailored shoulders on his suit stood up as crisply as his chest sagged. “Please? The opera was a killer. Twelve hours of screaming ladies and a short man. It was bloody punitive.”

Walking into his bedroom, Louis unknotted his tie and handed it to Liam, who trailed behind.

“It was barely three hours, Your Highness,” Liam said, looking toward Joseph Gates. “But it is getting late.” Louis shrug off his suit jacket and flung it into Liam’s waiting arms.

Gates glanced at his watch. “Dr. Bonnachoven gave instructions—”


Gates looked on impassively.

“It isn't the right thing for me, Your Highness,” he said, “but rather for you. You have a big day tomorrow, and you’ve had a full evening.” Gates took two steps toward Louis. “Dr. Bonnachoven insisted that yoga would relax you. Then it is followed by warm milk, for your digestion, and then medication.”

“Can’t we skip it?” Louis said with an edge. “Just for one night. I’m so beat.” Louis saw the two men exchange skeptical looks. “I really am. I’m going to sleep like a baby tonight. In fact, I'll ring for you if I have a nightmare, I swear.” He yawned, blinking his eyes slowly for effect.

Gates hesitated.

“We may skip the yoga,” he finally said. “But I don’t think it’s wise to disrupt the routine too much. Tomorrow is of utmost importance.” He noted Louis’s grimace as he turned his face away, rolling his eyes. “I will have Owen send in your milk and medicines.”

“Make sure he brings my teddy, too,” Louis added. “And sing me a lullaby. And bring a clean nappy. Tomorrow’s an important day for the baby.” He winked wickedly to Joseph's impassive face.

Gates returned Louis’ challenging look, then bowed and turned to walk away. Louis and Liam silently watched his back as he disappeared through the bedroom door and closed it quietly behind himself.

“Louis,” Liam admonished. He shook his head with an air of reproof.

“What?”

“You know what.”

“He’s like the secret police, always checking up on me,” Louis retorted. “He’s creepy. I don’t like that.”

Louis flopped onto his bed, legs dangling over the edge and staring angrily at Liam. He was in a
mood, and would be difficult tonight.

“He’s only doing his job,” Liam tilted his head. "And he's good at it. You have to admit that."

“I don’t care,” Louis said. He plopped back in his bed and put his hands behind his head. “I don’t want to take the damn medication anymore. I’m not sick.” Louis swung his legs. “In fact, I want to go out. Want to dance.”

“Yes,” Liam laughed. “Don’t we all!”

There was a knock at the door. Liam crossed the room to answer it. A tall, middle-aged man, with broad shoulders and a military haircut, came in, followed by a smaller, stony-faced man, holding a crystal glass of milk and a porcelain saucer.

“Owen!” Louis called to him. “Right on time. You must have been eavesdropping.”

“Your Highness,” the man in the military haircut stoically replied, bowing deeply. “Mr. Gates informs me that there will be no yoga tonight?”

“You heard right,” Louis said, sitting up. “No downward facing dog, hahaha. You'll have to find some other amusement.” He nodded at the other man. “Arthur, how are you?”

“I'm well, Your Royal Highness. Thank you for asking.”

They watched as Arthur set the milk and saucer, with a small pill inside, on the nightstand next to the bed. He proceeded to the dresser on the far wall and opened the third drawer, taking out powder-blue pajamas. They were in a luxurious, matte silk fabric, with white satin piping around the borders. The pajama shirt had mother-of-pearl inlaid buttons down the front, and a patched pocket over the left breast embroidered with the initials LWT and the royal crest, in golden thread. It was one of thirty pairs that the Prince owned, all made to his measurements.

Louis stood up. The man named Owen cleared his throat.

“Would Your Royal Highness require anything else tonight?”

“I'm zonked, Owen. Time to hit the sack.”

Owen stood impassively, his hands clasped in front of him, still as a statue.

“Owen, it’s fine,” Louis waved a hand. “Payno can fetch anything I need. You’re dismissed.” He locked his blue eyes on his security guard.

Owen’s pale eyes remained equally expressionless. “Mr. Gates did say—”

“What did he say?”

“Mr. Gates asked me to stay until you’ve had your medicine, Your Royal Highness,” Owen stated. He stood stolidly while Louis took in this information.

Louis’s head swayed the smallest amount from side to side. Meanwhile, Arthur approached and set his pajamas on the bed.

Angrily, Louis walked over to the nightstand, snatched up the pill, and made a movement to fling it toward his mouth. Instead of holding it back in his palm, as he usually did, the pill slipped and went into his mouth. It was too late. Louis gulped it down with a swig of rich whole milk.
As Owen solemnly watched, Louis opened his hand to show that he actually did take it.

“Happy?”

Owen bowed without showing emotion. “Good night, Your Highness.” He turned and left the room, shutting the door quietly.

Louis stood up. Without exchanging a word, Arthur came to him, began unbuttoning his shirt and taking off his cufflinks. Arthur unclasped the tropical wool trousers, unzipped them, and slipped them off Louis’s legs as Louis went through the motions. The older man moved silently and elegantly, accustomed to this choreography. Their partnership was one of fluid, bored efficiency. Arthur picked up the pajama shirt as Louis extended his arm reflexively to put his arm in.

“Arthur,” Louis said contemplatively, “D’you ever get tired of putting pajamas on me?”

“Your Highness,” Arthur replied. “It is and has always been my mortal privilege. I absolutely live for it. It is the climax of my evenings.”

“Ooo, sass-ball,” Louis said, threading his arms through the sleeves to point finger guns at him.

“Is there something not up to standard? I can fetch another pair if Your Highness desires.”

“No, everything’s fine.” Louis turned so Arthur could do up the mother-of-pearl buttons. “Fine, fine. They’re all the same anyway. That’s just it. They’re too perfect— d’yknow what I mean?” He patted the pajamas, smoothing down the fabric over his abdomen. “Such a bloody royal thing. It’s like wearing a prison uniform.”

Arthur continued working without flinching. “The same pajama makers have been making them since His Majesty King William was a young man. They are four generations of the finest royal tailors, toiling away in their dungeons.”

“Making prison uniforms.”

“As long as it pleases Your Royal Highness,” Arthur said in his subdued voice. “Please lift your right leg, sir.”

Louis did as he was told and slipped his leg into the satin trousers, supporting his hands on Arthur’s stooped shoulders.

“What do you wear to sleep, Arthur?”

“A pair of beige cotton pajamas, sir.”

“Beige!” Louis repeated. “How boring! I would have pegged you for pink polka-dots man. Business in the streets, party in the sheets, you know what I mean?” Louis waited for Arthur’s stoic acknowledgement, then turned toward Liam. “How about you, Payno?”

“I don’t know, Your Highness,” Liam blushed savagely. “Boxers, I guess? A tee shirt?”

“See!” Louis turned to Arthur. “That’s what I’m talking about.” He put his other leg into the pajama bottoms. The fabric swirled elegantly around him. “Arthur, did you know that some people sleep in nothing at all?”

“How adventurous,” Arthur replied without emotion. “It would leave one rather vulnerable, one would imagine.”
“I bet they have good dreams,” Louis continued. “Sexy dreams. Porno dreams, even. Bet they dream about—”

Liam cleared his throat loudly.

“Well, thank you, Arthur!” he barked. Liam turned toward the door and took a few steps.

“If there’s nothing else His Royal Highness requires?” Arthur said impassively.

“I’m alright,” Louis glanced mischievously at Liam. “Snug as a bug in a rug. No porno dreams for me tonight.”

Arthur glanced up at Liam, and then, bowing deeply, retreated toward the door. He closed it quietly behind himself. After Arthur left, the suite settled with a magical, dark silence.

Liam turned to look at Louis with affection.

“Behave yourself,” he said. “Do you want some company to fall asleep to?”

“I’ll be alright, Liam,” Louis answered. His voice sounded giddy. “You go to bed. Tomorrow’s the big day.”

He climbed to standing on the large bed and began bouncing on it lightly. “Honestly, I don’t know what’s come over me. I don’t feel sleepy at all.” Small pillows jiggled at the head of the bed, falling off the duvet one by one.

Liam stood by the edge of the bed, anxiously listening to the royal bedsprings bounce up and down. He was a parent whose child wouldn’t leave the playground, who was running around with a pair of scissors and manic energy, trying to tear apart every piece of playground equipment. There was nothing he could do but wait it out.

Louis jumped a few more times, and then, noticing Liam’s pained expression, abruptly stopped.

“You want to take a turn, Liam?”

Liam rubbed his brows once more. “No, I do not.” He uttered a barely perceptible sigh. “Thank you, Your Royal Highness.”

Louis was bouncing lightly on his toes again. The silky fabric of the pajamas trailed around him, gliding over his curves. Finally, he sat on the edge of the bed, hands flat on either side of him.

“Liam.” Louis’ hair was tousled wildly about his flushed face, his fluid pajamas askew. He took fast, shallow breaths. “Can I ask you something? Do you believe in ghosts?”

When Liam realized that Louis was actually asking a question, he replied, “Yeah, I suppose they could.”

“D’you really think so?” Louis flicked his head toward the outer walls. “Out there somewhere, right now.”
Liam chuckled. “Old emperors chucking coins into the Trevi Fountain.”

“Having a laugh at the tourists,” Louis said. “Or being a tourist. Just another ordinary person, in an old Hawaiian shirt or something.”

“In disguise.”

“Mmhm.”

Liam studied Louis’ thin, handsome face. It was the face of a captive animal with an impossible longing.

“It’s late,” Liam said. “Shall we sleep?” He removed the remaining tufted pillows from the top of the bed, and gently pulled the duvet back, exposing the pristine white sheets underneath.

Louis breathed out slowly, deflating air from his chest.

“I guess.”

“Please try, Your Highness. A little sleep may do wonders.”

Louis got into bed, and waited until Liam pulled the cover up to his chest. Awkwardly, Liam patted the edge of the bed, taking care not to touch Louis.

“You’re a good person, Payno,” Louis exhaled. His raspy voice came out in small, warm puffs. “Have I ever told you?”

“I am aware of it. Good night, dear Louis.”

“Good night, Liam.”

*****

Was this what it felt like before? To be wasted?

The room seemed to dilate and contract. Louis’ body felt slammed to his bed, bolted in the dark.

Murky white swirls advanced and receded from the painted ceiling. The clouds looked like bruised plums in the sky.

Louis closed his eyes. The embassy was in a quiet, residential area, but Rome was always humming. Every few minutes, the soft staccato of spoken Italian or the rumble of a motorbike engine would drift through the windows.

Wasn’t he supposed to feel sleepy by now? It must have been at least thirty minutes since Liam
turned off the lights. Louis turned on his side, pulled the covers around him, and tried to relax. He used the yoga trick of counting backward from thirty while slowly exhaling, first in English, then French, followed by ancient Greek and German. He tried to visualize that golden glow within, the precious box that held all his secrets locked and safe.

Of course, his golden box was made of electrons and nerves and Louis’ carefully censored desires and memories. It was safely inside him and would never be revealed. From time to time, it threatened to open, shapeshifting into the size and sounds of a young boy, his laughter high and wild and hair flaxen like corn silk.

The more Louis thought about it, the more irked and awake he felt. He wasn’t anywhere close to feeling sleepy. Abruptly, Louis opened his eyes. They had adjusted to the darkness. From across the room, he saw the slash of moonlight coming from the slit in the French doors.

Louis knew that security was just down the hall, and cameras were monitoring his bedroom door. Nevertheless, he got out of bed and puttered to the French doors, looking out onto the courtyard. In the moonlight, the trees and shrubbery were cast into dark relief. The grounds were completely empty, like his soul.

Louis felt like a fake nothing who would soon be dressed for the media. A small, insignificant puppet with a hollow core. A pawn.

Suddenly he wanted so badly to get out of his pajamas. He hated all of the pajamas, sitting in the drawers waiting for Arthur to pick them out. Louis impulsively unbuttoned his pajama top, slipped his arms out, and dropped the shirt to the floor. His skin prickled from the exposure to the air conditioning. He took off his pajama bottoms, too, and then picked both pieces and crossed to the room to the dresser, where he stuffed them into a drawer. Opening another drawer, he saw the carefully folded exercise clothing inside, the high quality t-shirts and track pants that he was allowed to wear only for working out.

He picked out a black pair and put them on.

Right away, he felt better, more real. Maybe he could blend in on the street, he thought. He could bump into Caesar’s ghost and they could share a gelato near the Colosseum. They could watch ordinary people drink wine and have dinner. They could trade jokes about the moon, about asinine state agendas and secret rendezvous.

Louis put his head down and considered. Could it be the medicine? He was jittery and restless, the exact opposite of what the pill was supposed to do. Louis marched to his bed, intending to get in, but then pulled the covers over his pillow and briskly stepped back.

An idea began to form, as gently as a bud breaking out of a seed.

He wasn’t going to to get back in bed. He wasn’t going to do anything he was supposed to do. Louis felt his abdomen grip painfully tight, his left foot curl at the instep.

It was crazy, this idea. Crazy and nice.

How would he even make it out of the embassy? Wheels turned in his mind. He had to act quickly, before he lost his nerve.

In the darkness, Louis felt for his pajama in the dresser drawer, then went to the adjoining ensuite, running the water as hot as possible. He soaked a hand towel and whipped his pajama under the faucet, wetting it. Once the towel was scalding hot, he wrung it out and hurried back to the
bedroom while the it was still steaming.

The camera monitoring the entrance was mounted near the fireplace, pointed toward the door. In the shadowy half-light, Louis dragged the chair over and held the towel up to steam the camera, just enough to fog the lens. When it was adequately blurry, he draped the towel over the camera to cover it completely. He knew it would eventually be noticed, but it would buy him a few minutes.

From his dresser, Louis grabbed a random heap of clothing and hurried back to bunch them under the bed covering, the way he had seen it in American movies, molding them into an approximately sleeping human shape.

Then he opened the door to the room and casually walked out with his wet pajama top in his hands.

A young security agent sat in a chair at the end of the hallway, texting on his phone. He glanced up just in time to see Louis walking toward him. He bolted straight up and shoved the phone into his trouser pocket.

“Your Highness,” he stammered loudly. He stood up awkwardly with his hand still in the pocket, trying to bow to the Prince and push the phone down at the same time.

“At ease,” Louis smiled. He put on his kindest face. “How are you, lad?”

“I’m grand, thanks,” the agent said. “And Your Royal Highness?”

“Oh, I’m good. Listen, would you do me a favor?”

The agent stood stiffly, a strand of hair falling into his face. He did not fix it. He appeared even younger than Louis.

“Of course, Your Royal Highness.”

Louis held out his pajamas. “I was a little clumsy, and got these wet while I was washing up.” The agent was watching with large, round eyes. “I’m afraid I can’t sleep in anything else. I wonder whether I could toss them in the dryer for a minute?”

“Would you like me to— ” The agent moved toward Louis with his hands out, “I can ring someone to come get it, Your Highness.”

“No, no,” Louis reassured. “This is so minor, lad. It’s not worth bothering anyone about it. Could you— maybe— point me to the laundry room? I’ll just toss it in the dryer for a few minutes. I’m sure that’s all it takes.”

The agent’s face wrinkled like a worried pug. Louis watched him actually wring his hands.

“It isn’t really— the protocol,” the agent replied. “Don’t you have any other… I mean… I’m not supposed to leave or let— ”

“Oh no,” Louis raised his hands, palms up. “No, no. Hey, I understand. I don’t want to get you in trouble. You do your job. I just wanted a dry shirt without bothering anyone. This happens to be my favorite pair of pajamas, but nevermind.”

His words had the intended effect. The agent already looked guilt-ridden, ready to step up to help.

“Maybe I could run it to laundry,” the agent answered. He looked behind him, as if hoping for a
solution. “Or— um…”

Louis continued, “No, it’s okay, lad. I’ll just sleep in this wet thing; it’s not even that wet. It’s fine. I’m good. I’m sure I won’t catch pneumonia or even the slightest cough, not that tomorrow is an important day or anything. Good-night.”

As Louis expected, as soon as he started walking away, the agent blurted, “Your Highness!”

Louis stopped in his tracks, a wisp of a smile on his lips. He bit his cheek to stop it.

“I’ll— um— I can show you where the laundry room is,” the agent said. “It’s just down the hallway a bit. I think no one’s there now. If you’ll just— come right out when you’re done…”

“Really?” Louis opened his blue eyes widely. “Well, that would be amazing. You sure?”

“Ye— yes,” the agent said. “It’s this way.”

They walked through several dark, wide hallways, with walls in cream-colored plaster and marble floors. Then they descended dark stairs to the ground floor and followed some more hallways, until they entered a spacious room with a large, wheeled laundry bin in the corner for bedding and towels, and three commercial sets of washer and dryer machines.

“Would you like me to do it, Your Highness? I’m sure I can figure it out in a few minutes,” the agent said.

Louis saw damp perspiration on the agent’s forehead, near his hairline. He didn’t even feel that sorry.

“Oh no,” Louis lied. “We have these exact same— uh— drying things— machines, whatever, in Doncaster. Makes me feel right at home.”

“It would be my pleasure.” The agent chewed on a lip.

“Look, you’ve been very helpful.” Louis leaned closer to him. “Thank you. I’ll sleep much better tonight.”

The agent bowed and left. In case he came back, Louis opened a dryer door and stuffed his shirt in, pretending to figure how the blasted thing worked. He couldn’t care less about the million and one electronic buttons on it.

As soon as all was quiet, Louis opened the door to the laundry room and began tiptoeing out. He was halfway down the hall when he heard footsteps approaching. They were slow but business-like, someone who was on a mission.

What now? Who worked at this time of night? Louis exhaled impatiently.

Louis had to choose what to do, and quickly. He ran quietly back to the laundry room. Seeing no closet to hide in, Louis spotted two large laundry bins in the corner. He climbed into one of them, setting the metal wheels squeaking, and quickly covered himself with sheets and towels. He curled into fetal position, hoping the bedsheets were sufficiently wrinkled to conceal his shape.

To his surprise, Louis heard the door open. Loud, shuffling footsteps— trainers, maybe— entered the room briskly, marched noisily around, and then approached his bin. With a jerk, he felt the bin move. He was being pulled away.
He hushed his breathing. The bin bumped and creaked as it crossed the room and through the door. A second bin, presumably a replacement, was pushed into the corner in its place. Then the person began pulling his bin again, down a hallway, through tight turns and right-angled corners, the metallic wheels making high-pitched squeaks.

Eventually it slowed to a stop. Louis heard a distinctly different quality of sounds in the background, still quiet, but with a bass hum of traffic noises, the mixture of motor roars and muted horns like a shushing forest. He felt stifled in the bin but dared not move. A second set of footsteps approached, and then a voice called out.

“Giulio.”

Louis froze suddenly at the familiar, confident tone, knowing exactly who it was.

“Yes, Mr. Gates.”

“Warm weather tonight,” Louis heard Gates say. “Isn’t it?”

“It’s been going up and down,” Giulio answered stoically. “Crazy this year, we’ve had lots of rain. Hope summer decides to stay.”

Louis felt something touch the rumpled fabric in the bin above him, patting it down. His eyes stayed focused on the blurry white shadows around him. Despite himself, his body shook slightly. He felt as if his heartbeat were thunderbolts, broadcasting to Gates.

“You got your work cut out for you,” Gates said. “That’s a lot of laundry there. A tall heap.”

“Yes, sir,” Giulio replied. “We’ll take care of it, sir. I enjoy it.”


“Buona serata.”

After Gates’ footsteps receded, the bin began moving again. Louis felt a rough bump as it was pushed over a ledge and rolled into an echo-filled, metallic floor. He bit his lips to keep from grunting with the rough jostling. Then the footsteps stomped away, and a thunderous clang shut the door.

Louis heard a dim, low-pitched engine noise, then felt thrumming motion around him. He was probably in the back of a laundry truck.

A few minutes later, Louis shook the laundry off his body and awkwardly scrambled out of the bin, trying to balance himself. He was indeed in the back of a delivery truck, surrounded by large containers of used sheets, towels, and assorted embassy uniforms. The rear door to the truck was halfway open, on the top. Through this opening, Louis saw the truck rumble down the dark street, pulling away from the exterior of the embassy and picking up speed.

Louis exhaled slowly, watching the brick sidewalks recede. Air came out of him as lightly as champagne bubbles.

He was out!

The truck sped along the streets, coming closer to city center. As many times as Louis had been in Rome, he had never truly been a tourist, and had never seen the streets in the nighttime, naked and unadorned.
The reds and pinks seemed brighter to him; the shadows, darker. The smells of summer— the juniper and rosemary bushes, the whiff of garlic and dust and trash— seemed more pungent.

As the truck travelled into the narrower city blocks, it began to slow down for frequent traffic stops. Louis saw more people strolling in the streets. Numerous bars and restaurants were still open, their incandescent lights like fireflies.

Still more people were just now coming out to find their dinners. The reflections of street lamps flashed by from opaque windows.

The night was so pretty, Louis thought. Like a fairytale.

Louis held on tight to the back of the truck, awestruck by every mundane detail: the crooked pavement, the laughter of pedestrians, the distant clink of wine glasses.

As the truck paused again at a traffic light, he clambered out of the truck and jumped off, landing on one leg and falling to his side. A few passersby eyed him in a funny way. Louis quickly hopped upright and brushed off his pants, then ran toward the sidewalk.

The bluish glow made his thin frame look like a forest sprite. He checked out his surroundings as the truck pulled noisily away.

Louis was alone. In the great old city of Rome.

A horse-drawn carriage was clip-clopping toward him, the bells on the harness jingling pleasantly. The driver chatted amiably in Italian with the young couple on the carriage seat. His eyes veered from the road from time to time, but the horse was an experienced mare. Steadily and slowly, she ambled along on autopilot.

As the carriage rounded the corner, Louis impulsively hopped on to sit on a bench on the back bumper. His arms gripped the seat to steady himself as they rattled along.

It was a beautiful night, slightly cool, the smell of trees mixing with the familiar, strong scent of horse. From time to time, Louis noticed people gathering near old-fashioned spigots on the sidewalk, filling water bottles or simply cupping their hands to drink from them. The water ran clear and dark. Other people were strolling hand-in-hand, or gesticulating with both hands as they conducted conversations. Cars swerved around the carriage, only slowing down at the red traffic lights, and then rocketing ahead as soon as they saw no one at the intersection.

Rome, his Rome, was alive with possibilities— chaotic and in technicolor.

They passed a flower stall that was just closing. The shopkeeper, an elderly woman with a scarf loosely tied around her neck, made eye contact with Louis. Her face came to life.

“Ciao bello, dov’è il tuo innamorata? Perché sei fuori da solo?” Hi handsome, where is your sweetheart? Because you’re out all alone?

She shouted and waved at him, and Louis started, wondering whether he would be kicked off the carriage for trespassing. The next second, she was throwing a flower at him—a single, long-stemmed red rose.

He barely caught the flower by the petals, bruising them. A few petals fluttered to the ground. The flower was overripe, its blossom nearly unraveling, the intense fragrance verging on degeneration. Louis realized it was the one of the only imperfect flowers he had ever held in his hands. His face fell into the rose, and he breathed in its velvety softness, barely protected by thorns that had worn
limp through water and contact. The imperfect rose unlocked something in him, a possibility of change.

He hopped off the carriage. At twenty-four-years-old, Prince Louis found himself astray at a dark intersection, with no straight road in sight. The teasing sounds of talk and laughter drifted from across the way.

An aqua Vespa motor scooter zoomed past, surprising him. Louis heard the rider shout something indistinct as they clattered away. He watched it vanish, then slowly made his way to the sidewalk.

It felt strange for people not to move out of the way for him. It was oddly exhilarating to be yelled at, to have strangers throw things at him. It felt extraordinarily ordinary. Louis breathed in the boundless Roman air, feeling dizzy with possibility.

In fact, he did actually feel a little dizzy. He stepped onto the cobbled walkway but missed the step, stumbling forward. Where did the ground go? He must have misjudged. Louis shook his head, trying to clear his eyes. Bloody hell. What was happening? Everything seemed dimmer, blurrier. His feet became entangled in each other. He tried to walk forward, but the ground swam ahead. Louis made his way to a bench, grabbed the back and fell into it. One hand tentatively held on to his rose while trying to grip the bench. He was on a wobbly piece of driftwood, floating to sea, and feeling drowsier and drowsier.

Louis closed his eyes for a second. The street noises around him sounded like mermaids singing. In the darkness, a sliver of his dream crept back. He was sinking into the earth as a crowd pursued him. A hand reached out of the water. Fear, curiosity, anticipation.

A warm embrace. A force pulling him down. Safety and chaos, intertwined.

Louis was so tired. His will to resist sank layer by layer, until he was taken into the darkness.

•••••

Once in a while, two people meet
Seemingly for no reason, they just pass on the street
Suddenly, thunder showers everywhere
Who can explain the thunder and rain?
But there's something in the air

The Pretenders, Don't Get Me Wrong
“Harry!” Adam yelled from the living room, raising his arm in a casual wave. “You’re right on time! Come on in, pull up a chair. Niall’s just got here too.”

“Niall Horan’s here?” Harry shouted back, his front teeth showing through his smile. “I thought you stopped letting in riff raffs?”

He hung his jacket on a peg by the door and looked into the warmly lit flat. The others were just settling down, bringing their drinks and food to the poker table. The men belonged to a small group of freelance and full-time expatriate journalists and photographers stationed in Rome—an American, a couple of Brits, and an Irishman.

Niall’s brogue pierced through the noise. “Hazza! We got your drink right here.”

Harry pushed up the long-sleeves on his henley as he joined them. He had on faded black jeans and a battered pair of brown leather boots, way past their prime. As usual, his feet pointed slightly inward, in a funny pigeon-toed way. His sister always teased that he looked as if he were about to take off in a triple toe loop.

“Irish,” Harry said, coming around to his seat. “Thought I wouldn’t see your ugly mug till tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah? What’s tomorrow?” Mitch tossed back a handful of mixed nuts. Mitch Rowland was in news, a staff writer for the Washington Post—a position that Harry looked on with some envy.

“We’re interviewing some crazy rich royals, Mitchie,” Harry said. “It’s the kind of gritty, minute-by-minute, world-changing news old Harry Styles is in charge of these days.”

He plopped down in his usual spot, next to Niall. Adam Prendergast, one of the English freelancers in Rome, handed Harry a whiskey on ice, his usual drink.

“Harry and I are covering the Prince of Doncaster,” Niall answered. “Delegation just came into town. They’re giving a big press conference tomorrow, at the Doncaster embassy.”

“Oh yeah?” Adam said. He settled on Harry’s other side. “Near the Borghese, isn’t it? Nice building, if I remember it correctly. Anything good?”

Niall grinned. “We’re supposed to be getting an important announcement or something.” He checked with Harry. “They’ve been teasing it for a few weeks now.”

“No announcement, maybe,” Harry said, looking up from his drink.

“Sounds intriguing.” Adam rubbed his hands together. His face crinkled into a sly smile. “You lads care to share?”

Harry paused. “Well, we think one’s going to be the nuclear deal between Doncaster and Anesidora.”

“Impending deal, you mean,” Niall corrected. “It’s not done yet.”

Mitch glanced at Harry out of his peripheral vision and began shuffling a deck of cards, his hands making a colorful blur.

“Anesidora?” he asked. “Wasn’t there a story recently…”

“…the Russian thing,” Adam interjected. “Wasn’t it? Anesidora’s consumption of Russian oil
dropped way down after they developed their own nuclear power. It was quite a disruption. Caused quite a diplomatic kerfuffle, if I recall.”

“Hmm,” Mitch pondered. “That’s an important alliance then.”

“It is,” Harry answered. “Big alliance for both countries. You’ll never guess the second announcement.”

Mitch thought for a moment. “Is it related to the first one?”

“Oh yeah. Kind of seals the deal, in a way. With a royal kiss.”


“Yes. We’re probably getting a wedding announcement,” Harry said. “The Prince is expected to get engaged to the Princess of Anesidora, Eleanor.”

Mitch shuffled the cards reflectively. “What’s the matter with countries these days? They can’t just sign treaties like normal people?”

“Doncaster isn’t taking any chances,” Harry said. “The King's health is fragile. You’d know if you read my gossip columns, Mitch.”

“Oh,” Adam’s face lit up, putting the two together. “Yeah, I heard something through the news grapevines. The King’s on his deathbed or something, right?”

“Exactly.” Harry tipped his drink toward him. “Anesidora has a monopoly in earth elements too, especially neodymium— they lead the world market. Bet Doncaster wouldn’t mind a share of that.”

“A royal wedding ensures that they’ll always be good,” Niall said. He set a bowl of nuts down between him and Harry, and began picking out his favorites, the pistachios. Noticing him, Harry dug them out of Niall’s hand and started tossing them in his mouth. Niall slapped at him. “Stop it, Hazza! Get your own.”

Harry grinned.

“Hmm.” Adam started to distribute the piles of betting chips for tonight’s poker game. “There’s one thing I don’t get. Enlighten me for a minute, Harry. I understand why Doncaster would go for this deal. What’s in it for Eleanor though?”

Mitch shuffled the cards expertly, and began dealing them out in front of the small piles of chips. “Gentlemen, I’m assuming we go with the usual? Texas hold ‘em, dealer on the button, no wilds.”

The guys growled their agreement. Niall cleared the table of food, and got up for another beer. Each man squared up their chips into neat piles.

“Stability,” Harry said, answering Adam. “An end to border conflicts. Access to Doncaster’s alliance with the West.” He tossed back his drink and set it behind him. “A power redistribution.”

“Sounds like it could be a pretty good story,” Mitch said tentatively, finishing the deal and setting the cards in front of him. He glanced quickly at Harry.

Harry's scorn was immediate. “No offense, Mitchell, but are you fucking kidding me?”
“What? H, a royal wedding’s always a headliner,” Mitch answered. “Add to it the political intrigue —

“You could make it into a real piece,” Adam finished encouragingly. “He’s right, Harry.”

“You know what my old editor used to say?” Mitch went on. “A story’s only as good— ”

“— as the reporter,” Harry finished. "I’ve heard that." He became quiet all of a sudden, his mood turning darker. “Been around a while, Mitch.” Everyone watched Harry quietly, afraid to make a move. “The story’s good, unless the reporter isn’t up to it.”

The air had turned few degrees chillier; the men all felt it. Mitch stayed silent, and Adam glanced at Harry sympathetically.

“Come on, Harry.” Adam nudged him. “You know you’re good. You’re easily one of the best English journos in Rome.”

He watched Harry intently, as Niall plopped down and put a fresh beer on the table. Niall’s thumb stopped midway opening his beer. He looked from one to the other, sensing the awkwardness in the air.

Adam went on. “You’re going through a rough patch, that’s all. Everyone has those. It’s not a big deal.”

They held their breaths as if they were counting down a hand grenade. Without meeting their eyes, Harry tapped the table diffidently with his fingers. Then, on reflex, he snuck a peek at his cards, shielding them with his left hand. His face belied nothing.

“No,” he exhaled softly. “Everyone doesn’t. Not like me.”

The table stayed quiet. Harry jiggled his knee up and down, but no one dared move.

“You’ll get back there,” Adam said finally. “Go on. Give yourself a break. It just takes a bit more time.”

Still looking down, Harry muttered to himself, “Not sure about that. It’s been three years, Adam.”

“Everyone has their own timetable, lad.”

Studying Harry, Mitch forcefully cleared his throat. “Dudes, are we playing cards or jerking off? You opening, Adam?”

Adam quickly directed his focus back to cards. “Yeah, yeah. Let me look at my cards. Stop pressuring me, alright? I’m an old man.”

The betting began, and they played through the night, the usual penny ante poker game that always ended with the pot going to the host at the end of the night.

Harry’s mood improved steadily with each whiskey. As the night went on, his wit became sharper. The betting would get more aggressive and he became more entertaining. It was one of the perks of playing poker with Harry; he played smart, to the end. Unlike Niall, Harry didn’t have a tell, not even when he was drunk. He was loose playing a real hand, and loose when he was bluffing. Consequently, the men knew never to play the river with Harry. He was the Cheshire Cat— he’d take them for a ride. It was a good thing, therefore, that they didn’t play for real money.
Around midnight, Niall checked the time on his phone, and then tapped the table, clearing his bets.

“I’m out, lovers,” he said. “How about you, Haz? You coming with?”

Harry sipped the last of his whiskey, which was excellent, a blended malt that a friend had shipped Adam from Scotland. He looked longingly at his glass, and then reluctantly set it down.

“Yeah, we should go. Thanks for the evening, boys,” he said, standing up. “It was brilliant, as usual.” His hand touched the table for balance.

“Thanks for coming,” Mitch said. “We’ll do it again soon. You two get some beauty sleep. Big day tomorrow, yeah?”

“You know it,” Niall said. He walked toward the foyer and retrieved a light jacket hanging on the wall. “I can never get enough sleep.”

“Not enough to make any difference, Irish,” Harry said, swaying slightly. “You’re too damn ugly.”

Niall chortled. “God, you’re a disgraceful drunk.”

“I’m fine,” Harry said, “Neil.” He threaded an arm precariously through a sleeve. “’M completely fine.”

“Stay safe, guys,” Adam called.

“Ciao, Adam.”

”See ya, Mitch.”

They said their farewells to the host, then walked out together and parted outside, bidding each other good night.

As Niall left him, a warm breeze ruffled Harry’s hair. He pushed it out of his face and brushed the longer strands back, only to look up and see someone sitting on the park bench directly across the street, under the streetlight.

It didn’t seem to be anyone Harry knew, except—it was odd to see someone out so late at night, sitting alone and so still. In fact, the person was so stone-still that Harry half-wondered whether he might be dead. Harry shook his head and fuzzily rubbed an eye, trying to gather his faculties. From this distance, the person seemed to be young—about the same age as himself—and dressed in casual but tailored clothing. His hair was conservatively cut, and he was clean-shaven.

So, not a street person then.

Harry walked closer, keeping his eyes on the man, who remained immobile. A few cars sped across the street between them. When the traffic was clear, Harry jogged across and slowly approached him.

The man’s eyes remained closed. He seemed to be unaware of his surroundings. His dark brown fringe cascaded into his eyelids, which were laced with long, thick lashes.

In fact, on closer examination he was simply gorgeous. Harry watched him intently, transfixed. The man’s lips pouted slightly as he slept, in contrast to the sharpness of his high, angular cheekbones. His complexion was supple and clear. His hands were open, palms up, in his lap. His body was lean, and his fitted shirt showed well-defined, sensuous curves. He was wearing track
pants cut close to the thighs, the toned muscles accentuated by the night’s shadows. The sleeping beauty must be in his early twenties, Harry guessed.

Harry shook himself out of reverie. The whiskey he’d had still dragged on his reflexes, flushing his neck pink. He tapped the man on the shoulder.

“Svegliati! Questo non è un letto,” he said. *Wake up! This isn’t a bed.*

The guy didn’t budge. His chest rose and fell steadily as he slept on. Regardless of why he was there, Harry felt like he needed to go home. He obviously didn’t belong on a public bench; he was too young and too well-dressed. Harry felt oddly protective of him, maybe because he appeared utterly isolated and so young. Harry tapped him again, and when that didn’t produce a result, patted him lightly on the cheek. His skin was soft, chilly.

No response.

Not too sober himself, Harry sat down to figure things out. He rested his arm on the back of the park bench. His pulse thudded in his temple. He swiped a rough palm over his face, trying to wipe off the alcohol’s flush.

Other than the slight ruffling of the man’s hair, he was completely immobile. What’s worse, he was barely wearing anything for a night like this. Harry could see his entire torso, the muscles slim and curvaceous under the thin clothes. Without thinking about it too much, Harry took off his own jacket and leaned it on the man. He detected a light scent of flowers as he got closer. Was it cologne? Anyway, the guy smelled good.

Still no response.

“Hey,” Harry tried louder, in English. “Mate, you’re loitering.”

He sat closer, nudging him sideways. It was a bit like trying to wake a sleeping penguin; the guy was all snuggled down. Harry knocked the man’s chin, gently. Then he did it again, a bit rougher. Finally, the man groaned and opened his eyes.

“Wh—” He blinked twice, scrunching his nose, confusion settling over his face. “Where am I?” Even in the darkness, his eyes were electric blue, like gemstones in the night. He stared blankly at Harry. British? Maybe. He definitely sounded upper class. Schooling abroad, most likely, with a trace of an unplaceable accent. “Take me back at once, you ruffian. Where have you brought me?”

“Relax, mate.” Harry backed off. The lights made the man’s face glow like a cinema star. “I saw you from across the street. You alright?”

The man was taking in his surroundings, suddenly realizing he had a stranger’s jacket on. He seemed surprisingly comfortable with it. His chin dipped, nudging the fabric. His eyes swept around slowly. Then, finding the situation satisfactory, he snuggled down into the jacket, scrunching his shoulders as if it belonged to him. His self-confidence had an imperial air.

“I’m—” He blinked drowsily, his words coming out slowly, with a raspy edge. “I’m lost.”

“Yeah?” A breeze ruffled the man’s hair and he flipped it away. His cheekbones stood out like small apples. Harry raised an eyebrow. “So it seems. Who are you? What’s your name?”

“You may address me as Your—” he stopped. “My name’s… uh… you may call me Pemberley.” He turned toward Harry and collected himself. “I’m Louis Pemberley. Yes, exactly. Louis Pemberley. That is my name indeed. Who are you?”

“That is my name,” Louis protested, embarrassed. “You can believe it or not, but it is. Now tell me your name at once.”

“Demanding, aren’t we?” Harry laughed again. He nudged Louis. “You know, Pemberley, you could stand to be a little nicer. ‘Please’ and ‘thank you’ wouldn’t kill you. Since you are wearing my jacket.”

Louis jumped, letting the jacket fall from his shoulders. However, exposed to the night air, he quickly pulled it back up and tucked his hands inside. “Thank you for the jacket.”

“You’re welcome.”

Pushing himself up, Harry ambled to the street to scan for a taxi. A few cars hummed by, but the street was not well-travelled and the traffic was light. Louis followed his movement from under the jacket, his shoulders scrunched and chin tucked down.

“I’m going to call a car service.” Harry jogged back. It was a bit chilly; he felt it. “Usually I’d try to walk home, but I’m not up for it tonight. Want me to get one for you?”

Louis did not reply. He seemed to be in a trance, staring ahead into space. Harry waited a few more seconds, wondering whether he was alright, then began tapping his information into his mobile phone.

“Suit yourself then. And Pemberley, I’m going to need my jacket back. If you don’t mind.” He held out his hand expectantly, and indicated with his eyes.

“Oh!” Louis snapped his head up. “Right, yes, of course.” He shrugged it off, showing a delicate collarbone. Harry saw him quickly shiver. “It’s nice, your jacket. It smells good. Like pudding.”

“Pudding?”

“Like a nice cake.” Louis wrinkled his nose innocently. “Vanilla? Sugar? You know, the spongy kind. At home we have it with tea.” Louis smiled with satisfaction.

Something about Louis’ voice caught Harry’s ear. He had been trained in elocution, definitely; his consonants were precise and elegant. But there was also a wild and adventurous edge to him, a combination of purity and curiosity. It was hard to pin down. What he said about a stranger’s jacket was also odd— guileless and too intimate, as if Louis hadn’t ever had a normal human conversation. He was like an alien imitating humans. It could also be that Harry was imagining things; his head wasn’t the clearest.

As Louis leaned over, a thin, gold chain slinked down, dangling a small charm. Louis tucked his necklace inside and brushed a fringe away. The shadows from his eyelashes fanned his cheeks. The alcohol must be playing tricks on Harry, because Louis looked magical. Harry noticed how pale Louis’ skin looked— ghostly silver in the blue light, missing any tan lines. The entire expanse of skin, from neck to chest, was pale cream. They were in the middle of an Italian summer, yet Louis was seemed to be a luminous creature from a cave, never exposed to sunlight.

Harry walked toward the curb, standing nonchalantly with his back to Louis, waiting for his car to come. He could feel Louis just sitting there, the mystery of him. Finally, he couldn’t stand it anymore and turned around.
“Pemberley,” Harry was surprised to see Louis staring at his back. “Are you absolutely sure you
don’t need a ride?”

“Why?” Louis’ voice was high and clear, with a hint of a foreign accent, not Dutch, not German.
“Do you care?”

“Why are you being so difficult?” The whiskey was evaporating from Harry’s body, taking the its
warmth into the atmosphere. Harry shivered. Louis’ arms appeared even more bare and small in
his thin shirt, his skin glowing in the cool night.

“Can you please just tell me,” Harry repeated. Louis didn’t have an ounce of fat, did he? He
seemed to shrink down into himself. “Do you need a ride or not? Yes, or no? The car’s going to be
here any minute.”

Just then, a tiny, burgundy car pulled up to the curb, its license plate matching the car Harry had
called. He turned back toward Louis, who quickly looked away.

“Harry?” The driver called out the window, then double-checked his phone.

“Sì.” With a gnawing ambivalence, Harry opened the car door, standing indecisively at the curb.

“I’m Tomaso.” The driver looked down at his mobile, then squinted at him. “Harry Styles,
correct?”

Harry scooted into the car’s warm, dry interior. He glanced back at Louis, who seemed to be
watching him as well, his face in the shadows. Harry continued in Italian. “That’s me. You have
my address?”

“Sì, sì.” The driver started the engine but stayed idling. He was maybe in his late thirties, with a
black wool cap pulled over thinning hair. Harry saw his gnarled knuckles tap the address of his flat
into a mobile GPS system. After that, the driver fussed with the radio dials and played with the car
windows, but was in no hurry to shift into drive. They sat there quietly, waiting.

After a pause, Harry asked, “Tomaso, we can go.”

The driver gestured toward Louis, who was pretending to study something far away. “No? We’re
waiting for that one, aren’t we?”

Harry said curtly, “No, we’re not.”

“He’s not your friend?”

Harry scorned. “No. Lui è un’ oca.” He’s flighty. “He wants to stay, he said.”

“Un cane in chiesa?” Tomaso gruffly said. Crazy dog in a church?


The driver put his chin in one hand, studying Louis. He glared back at Harry, and then made an
awkward noise with his mouth, and crumpled his face.

“Looks pretty cold out there, Harry,” Tomaso said as Harry fidgeted. “The little one’s freezing. He
doesn’t belong here, no? There’s no predicting what will happen to him. You should get him.”

“But we’re not together,” Harry protested half-heartedly. “He doesn’t belong with me. I don’t even
know him, really.”
“That’s funny, because he seems to know you,” Tomaso said. Indeed, Louis was staring straight in their direction. “Look.”

Meanwhile, Louis pretended to scan the street for an imaginary best friend who would never show up. The driver was right. Louis was a bit off the beaten path. He was definitely unusual. And yet... he looked lost and vulnerable. There was something about him that tugged at Harry.

Tomaso urged, “You can’t abandon him, Harry Styles.”

Harry sighed. He stared out the car window at Louis, who was now glancing at them nonchalantly. “You think I should go get him?”

“You know what my grandmother says,” Tomaso said. “You can never go wrong by doing the right thing.”

Reluctantly, Harry threw open the car door and saw Louis’ head twist toward him, then insouciantly turn away. Did he actually turn his nose up? The little snob. The thought of Mitch or Adam looking outside, and watching him trying to wrangle a stranger into a car, irritated Harry immensely.

He walked up to Louis, who had curled both feet under himself. He had tucked his hands under too, looking as snug as a muffin. He probably was cold, damn it. What an impossibly, infuriatingly adorable person.

“Come on,” Harry said to him. “The driver wants to take you home.”

Louis tilted his head and squinted. “The driver wants to?”

“He says it’s dangerous to be out here alone,” Harry lied. Louis’ eyes bore into Harry’s, who quickly looked away. “He says it’s not a safe area.”

“And what do you think?” Louis asked.

Harry blew on his lips. “Listen, Pemberley. It’s cold out here. I’m cold. You’re freezing. Can we please go now?” Harry ran a hand through his hair and dragged out the strands. He could honestly pull them all out. “You’re irritating the driver, you big baby.”

“Did you just call me a baby?”

“No?” Harry was incredulous. “No!”

“I’m not,” Louis said. “I’m a grown man. I can take care of myself. I don’t even know your name. Why should I trust you?”

Harry took a deep breath and slowly exhaled through his mouth. Louis sat there on the park bench as if ruling from a throne. Harry was doing him a favor, and he was the one acting like a fucking emperor. Harry had to admit, though, Louis looked amazing, his blue eyes blazing and mouth a little tart, a little haughty. Alright. Louis was hot as hell. He was probably used to people running circles around him.

“Fine,” Harry conceded. “I’m Harry Styles.” Somehow Louis, a stranger, compelled him to do this. He extended an arm, palm out, pointing in the direction of the car. “Nice to meet you. Are we good?”

“Harry Styles. Sounds fake, if you ask me?”
“Look who’s talking, Louis Pemberley,” Harry said. “Make up your mind, Your Majesty. We don’t have all day.”

“It’s actually Your Royal Highness,” Louis said, standing up. “But you’re forgiven.” Harry’s lip snarled, but he was in no mood to argue, happy to be moving at last.

Louis began walking regally toward the street, at an even, leisurely pace as if he were used to walking in front of large crowds. Right in front of the car, Louis stopped dead as if hitting an invisible barrier. Harry, following him too closely, walked right into his back. They paused there: Louis hesitating, Harry confused.

Tomaso rolled down the passenger’s side window and yelled to Harry, “Apri la porta per lui!” Open the door for him!

Louis looked to Harry, who glared back in disbelief at Louis’ perfectly good, obviously unbroken arms. As Harry’s mouth parted to protest, Louis stepped forward, quickly opening the car door, and slid across the back seat.

“È carino!” He’s cute! Tomaso called to Harry again. “Good decision, Harry.”

“What did he say?” Louis asked.

“I don’t care,” Harry retorted back to Tomaso, in Italian. “He’s a fucking menace.”

Tomaso turned to smile at Louis and gestured with his thumb toward Harry, “He’s handsome, eh?” he said in English. Louis rolled his eyes and turned to look out his side of the window.

Harry got in after Louis, spreading his legs so he took up all of his side of the space, and a little bit of Louis’ side. Louis’ legs were closed, well-behaved. He rested his elbow on the seat beside him, looking at home as if he got chauffeured all the time. His chin rested demurely on his knuckles. Somehow this annoyed Harry even more.

Tomaso put the car into drive, and began cruising down the narrow, winding Roman streets. It hummed with a soothing vibration.

Harry couldn’t help noticing how close Louis’ knee was to his, the starting point of the straight, narrow line to his muscular thighs, his gently curved waist, the swell of a generous, toned hip. He smelled nice too, soft and delicate. His hand was curled on the seat, right next to Harry’s thigh. Harry moved it away, the heat rising from his leg.

He cleared his throat. “What’s your address, pal?”

“So what did the driver say?” Louis insisted.

“Nothing,” Harry brushed him off. “He just wanted to know where to drop you off.”

“Really?” Louis smiled. “Sounds like a bit more. Is that what carino means?”

Harry stared at him. “Do you speak Italian?”

“French,” Louis said. “But it’s not that hard, Harry Styles.” His hand reached up to stifle a yawn. “Romance languages, you know, all related. My French tutor used to say—” He hesitated. “Never mind.”

Harry watched Louis, his eyelids beginning to droop, face soft and sleepy. “You alright?”
Louis’ hands twirled in his lap, and he blinked several times. “Hmm. Actually, I’m tired.”

Feeling repentant, Harry retracted his legs to give Louis some space. “Let’s get you home then.” Louis was gazing out the window with an unfocused expression. “Where are you staying?”

“Oh,” Louis shrugged. “Well. I guess I’m not sure.”

Harry sat up. “What?”

“Yeah. I don’t know,” Louis answered sweetly. Harry wrinkled his brows in confusion. “I usually have people transporting me. Wherever I am, people bring me home, tuck me in bed, then I go to sleep. It’s not that deep, really. I can’t pay attention to the irrelevant stuff. Come to think of it, I guess I don’t have any money?” Louis shrugged. “I’ll have to owe you. I’m sorry, Harry. I’m not usually involved in the day-to-day details.”

“You don’t know where you live?” Harry repeated incredulously. “That’s a pretty fucking crucial detail.”

Louis nodded sleepily.

“Then we have a problem,” Harry said. “Louis, listen.” Louis leaned against him, his weight sinking down. “Do we need to go to the police station or—”

“Can I wear your jacket, Harry?” Louis cut him off, his voice raspy with fatigue. He was sinking back, chewing on the inside of his cheeks. His eyes closed halfway, tuning everything out. He said dreamily, “Please? I like it. It’s warm; smells really good. You can work out the rest. I’m cold.”

Harry’s suspicious feelings about Louis deepened. As a journalist, he was detecting all sorts of bad vibes on how Louis ended there on the park bench. Even though Louis was good-looking and posh, there were still many ways he could be involved in something that Harry wanted no part of. Harry ought to extricate himself while he still could, and he would.

Harry leaned forward and signaled the driver. “Tomaso? Stop the car.”

Tomaso said, “Something wrong?”

“Pull the car over,” Harry insisted. “Please.”

The car swiftly drove past tall Roman Renaissance churches. The shadows of angels and saints looked down with their implacable faces, from their enormous, darkened doors. With credit to Tomaso, he continued driving impassively.

“Harry?” Louis said, his voice as soft as dust. “Everything good? Gosh, I’m so tired.” The soft and polite way he asked touched something in Harry. Louis was way more trusting than he should be; he was almost foolish. Harry’s feelings wavered as Louis seemed to be on the verge of nodding off. “Do you mind if I lean on you? I feel… mm. It… must be the…”

Without waiting for permission, Louis dropped his head onto Harry’s shoulder, his words becoming indistinct. It was not an intimate moment; Louis was sinking into the realm of oblivion, his whole right side leaning heavily against Harry, his chin balancing precariously on Harry’s arm. Tomaso glanced in the rearview mirror, but decided to keep on driving.

Harry pushed back slightly, shifting their weight.

“Louis,” he said. “Hey.”
“Mm,” Louis mumbled, apropos of nothing. “What?”

Harry rearranged them so Louis wasn’t leaning on him quite as much, but it was like shifting a bag of bricks or sand. Louis’ hair whipped into his face, and yes, it smelled good too.

Louis continued talking. “You prob’ly guessed. I am the… I’ve… never ever…”

“What? What have you never?”

“D’you know…” Louis murmured.

It was as if an animal had been tranquilized and fell on Harry with all his dead weight. One bad bump in the road could snap Louis’ neck, Harry thought, and he wouldn’t even know it.

Tomaso glanced at the rearview mirror, but since everything was quiet, he continued driving.

“Do I know… what?” Harry nudged, trying to piece together what Louis was mumbling. “Louis. Talk to me.”

Louis shifted closer. He reached around with one arm and pulled Harry tighter to himself, settling his head right into the crook of Harry’s chest.

“Mmm…” Louis sighed, “… you’re… nice.”

Harry startled, not sure what to do. He nudged Louis a bit harder.

Louis slurred, mostly unconscious. He gave a soft giggle. “D’you wanna know something funny? I’ve never… had… ” He drifted off with a purr.

Harry fixed Louis’ fringe so it was out of his face. Louis was snuggled right into his chest, holding onto him like a piece of driftwood in a storm.

“Like,” Louis sighed, “… a real kiss. Never had one? Ha... isn’t it a lark.” Louis ended with a giggle and a soft snore.

Harry inhaled deeply. Louis leaned heavily into him, one hand tightly gripping his jacket sleeve. Harry pulled him off, watching Louis sway in place, and then decidedly swung his arm around Louis’ shoulders so he wouldn’t fall off. He adjusted his body so Louis’ chin rested more securely against his own chest.

Louis snuggled right in. His hair was sweaty and smelled flowery and expensive, the feathery strands on top tickling Harry’s chin. They were light and soft.

“Lui è veramente provocante, eh,” Tomaso said, glancing back in the rearview mirror. He’s a real flirt. “So where are we going, Harry?”

Harry was concentrating so hard that he jumped at the driver’s voice. Meanwhile, Louis’ grip on his jacket had loosened, his body relaxed. His face lay against Harry’s chest with a look of utter contentment. His lips opened just the slightest amount as his breaths evened out.

Harry sighed, defeated. “Take us home.”
Twenty minutes later, Harry was working to unlock the door to his flat. Louis swayed gently next to him, his chin tucked into Harry’s shoulder, eyes barely open.

The door unstuck as Harry gave it a shove, opening inward. Harry stepped in and beckoned Louis to follow.

He flicked on the lights. His flat was a studio in the attic of a Roman penzione, three stories up, with a small bathroom just big enough to stick in a clawfoot porcelain bathtub, and a kitchenette in the corner for heating up leftovers. The bed took up whatever space wasn’t occupied by an upholstered sofa and a large, antique maple desk, with a patina like an old Stradivarius, on which Harry had his laptop computer, framed photos of his family, and other personal memorabilia. It was a bachelor pad.

“Nice place,” Louis said, slowly waking up. “I like it. Is this the servant’s quarters?”

“No, sleeping beauty.” Harry glanced back at his guest. He hung up his jacket on a peg by the door, then ran his hands through his less than clean hair, smoothing his face. He dropped his wallet and keys in a dish on his desk. “This is where I live. I know it doesn’t look like much, but it’s home.”

“Well, it’s cozy!” Louis said. “Very efficient. I approve.”

“Thank goodness,” Harry said sardonically.

Louis chuckled. “I’m sorry about the servant comment. I didn’t mean anything by it. I’ve just never been in a place quite like this.” He sat on the bed, running his hand over the cotton bedspread. “It’s an interesting set up, in its own humble way, isn’t it? Can you show me to the other rooms now?”

“This is it, Princess.” Harry opened a closet door and bent over to take some bed sheets out of a trunk. “Studio. We can’t all live like millionaires, can we?”

Louis looked embarrassed. “That’s not your fault. It just wasn’t your destiny.”

“Thanks for the life lesson, Socrates,” Harry raised an eyebrow. “If you have no place to go tonight, you’re welcome to stay here. One night, that’s all. In the morning we can go to the police
station and get you sorted."


Harry grunted, bringing sheets over to the sofa and unraveling them, making up a bed. “Nope, I’m tired. Hope you feel comfortable enough. I’ve got to go to sleep myself. Big day tomorrow.”

“Oh?” Louis asked lightly. “What’s on our agenda?”

“My agenda, and it’s none of your business,” Harry replied, fluffing up the sheets to spread them flat. He pointed toward the head of the bed. “Throw me a pillow, will ya?”

Louis tossed it over. “You keep many secrets, Harry Styles. If that is in fact your name.”

Harry frowned, and then chuckled. “Takes one to know one, doesn’t it? Now I have to get some sleep, if I’m going to avoid a hangover.” He puffed out a slow, deep breath. “It’s probably unavoidable anyway. Tomorrow’s gonna be long and boring, and I’d like to do it without a splitting headache. So that means you have to sleep too.”

“Rats.”

“I’ll get an extra blanket for you. Do you need a jumper or something?”

“Oh!” Louis shook his head. “You don’t have to do that.” He leaned back, patting the blankets on the bed. “This is fine for me. I get cold easily, but the bed looks cozy enough. I’m sure I’ll be alright. Thank you for the offer. And Harry,” he winked coquettishly. “I’ve always wanted to try sleeping in the nude anyway.”

Harry laughed out loud. “Oh no, you don’t!” He laughed again, prompting Louis to laugh with him, although he didn’t know what he was laughing at. “You’re not sleeping in the nude. You’ll be on the sofa, darling. The bed is mine.” He went to the closet and dug out an old, faded black Kinks t-shirt, throwing it to Louis, who caught it in surprise. “And, as long as you’re sleeping in my sheets, you’re not going commando.”

“Commando? What’s that?”

“Means sleeping in the buff,” Harry said, laughing again. “Nuts out. Odd bits jiggling about.” His hands made a little jiggling motion near his groin, then stopped abruptly when he saw Louis’ face. “That’s not a problem for me, Romeo, but usually not on a first date.”

Louis swallowed, frowning innocently. “Are we on a date?”

Without answering right away, Harry walked over to stand in front of Louis, his lips slightly higher than Louis’ so they almost touched the tip of Louis’ nose. He noticed Louis tipping up on his toes a little to compensate. This was so adorable that for a second, Harry lost his train of thought. Finally he rustled up some composure.

“Would you like it to be a date?” Harry asked.

“N... no...” Louis blushed fiercely. “I didn’t... I wasn’t...”

Harry wrapped both of Louis’ hands in his larger ones in between their chests. Louis’ hands were cold and dry. Unconsciously, Harry’s thumb rubbed them to warm them up.

“Sorry, darling,” he said, flirting back. “I can’t tonight.” He squeezed both of Louis’ hands, and
then let go of them and bopped the tip of his nose. “I’ve really got a full day tomorrow. Gotta get up early. Remember, no funny business.” He looked down. “Nuts in please.”

Louis pushed his lower lip out in a pout. “You’re no fun.”

Harry stepped away and chuckled. He turned around, peeling off his shirt in one fluid motion, tossing his boots to the walls, and unzipping his jeans. When he turned back quickly to check, Louis was still standing in the same place, staring at his back with a dazed look on his face.

“Yes?” Harry asked.

Louis looked up, startled, and laughed nervously. “Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s nothing.” Louis began, and then stopped. “It’s just that I have someone undress me for bed, at home. Arthur— he’s my— he… never mind.”

“You have someone named Arthur undress you?” Harry asked, smirking. “Is he your sex slave or something?”

“No!”

“I don’t think I want to hear about your kinks tonight, Princess,” Harry teased. “It sounds very naughty, and I’m into it, but right now, what happens in that enormous house of yours can stay in the house.”

“That’s not what happens!” Louis protested.

“Arthur,” Harry said seriously. “A real sex servant. Where is the sense of decency in youths these days.”

“He’s not a sex servant!” Louis was screeching. “I don’t know what that is, is that a thing? Are you joking with me? Oh God, forget it. It’s just a tradition in our family, but never mind. Sounds so dirty when you say it.”

“Mm,” Harry raised an eyebrow, making fun of him and getting into bed. “You sure have an interesting ‘family.’ I’d love to hear about it someday, but it’s too late, and I’m, like, too wasted. Can you hit the lights, Princess?”

Louis grumpily walked over and turned off the light switch, then felt his way back to the sofa. He plopped into it, hands by his side, and then sat still, his feelings confused.

Harry pulled the covers up to his chest, laughter sinking away, trying not to think about Louis. It was disconcerting to have him sitting there on the sofa like that, a few meters away. He tried to keep his eyes closed, but his ears were alert for every little noise, not to mention the blood pounding in his eardrums. What are you doing, Harry asked himself, inviting a stranger into your house— someone you know nothing about? He could stab you in your sleep. He could steal everything you own, not that Harry owns much. Who was he, anyway? Louis wasn’t Italian nor British. He was intriguing and mysterious, beautiful and stubborn and an ingenue. Maybe he was an expert criminal of some sort. Your mother would lecture you for doing something so reckless, Harry thought. She would absolutely send you a howler. She would end you. If you weren’t already dead by the morning.

Harry tossed his blanket aside and turned over, pretending to shift in his sleep. In his peripheral
vision, he could see Louis still sitting in the same position, his blankets untouched, staring straight ahead. Finally Harry sucked in his lower lip and took the bite.

“Louis.”

Louis turned his head and swallowed. His head was silhouetted against the moonlight.

“What’s up?” Harry asked grumpily. “You good, pal?”

“Oh, nothing,” Louis said. His voice sounded like the hum of a quiet church, echoing from a distance. “It’s okay, I’m fine. Go back to sleep.”

Harry pulled himself up in bed. “Hey,” he said. “You’re making me nervous, mate. Not going to kill me in my sleep, are you?”

Harry chuckled awkwardly into the dark, getting no response. He scooted up higher in bed, watching Louis as he stayed totally still.

Finally Louis took in a deep breath, and when he exhaled, it seemed to be heavy and weary. Harry could see him slowly standing up.

“I think I’m gonna go,” Louis said slowly. “Sorry if I’ve bothered you.” Harry saw Louis’ profile, a few wavy strands of dark hair against the windows’ luminous glow. He looked and sounded alone, inextricably sad.

“Wait,” Harry pulled himself up higher. “Hold up. Why’re you leaving? Was it something I did?”

Louis turned his head quickly. “Oh no,” he said. “No, it’s nothing like that. You’ve been very kind, Harry. It’s… I think I should go.”

Harry turned toward him. “Are you sure?”

Louis nodded and squared his shoulders. “Don’t get up. I’ll let myself out. I’ve been too much trouble already.”

“Where are you going?” Harry’s voice climbed higher with concern. “Hey, it’s the middle of the night, Louis. You sure?”

Louis didn’t say anything else. Without any explanation, he moved swiftly and quietly out of the flat and let himself out. After the door clicked closed, Harry tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. After another minute or two, overcome by guilt, he bolted out of bed, jumped into his jeans and ran out the door to the small alcove balcony adjoining the studio. Below, a small figure was walking out of the building, moping morosely.

“Louis!” he yelled into the quiet night air. “Hold up! Don’t go anywhere!”

Harry sprinted the three stories downstairs, taking three steps at a time, hoping Louis wouldn’t walk away. He was gasping for breath by the time he got down. He pushed the door open with a sweaty hand, moisture beading on his chest and the back of his neck. Louis was standing just outside the building. He looked up with his saturated, dark blue eyes, an expression of confused delight and muted hope on his face.

“Harry?” he said.

“You shouldn’t go,” Harry gasped, trying to sound calm despite the fact that he was heaving air in
and out. “I mean, it’s nighttime and you’re not used to the neighborhood. You don’t even know where you’re going. You should definitely come back inside.”

”Is it dangerous?”

“No,” Harry replied. “I mean, maybe? Usually it’s safe, but for you... Anyway, I think we’d both sleep better if you come back in.”

Louis studied him. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

Harry held the door with one hand, one foot stepping awkwardly toward Louis. “It’s too late for that, mate, I am bothered,” he said, extending his hand. “Very much bothered. You couldn’t bother me more if you tried. I’m a bit wasted, and I need to go to sleep, like, ten minutes ago. It would be great if we could get both our arses back in bed.”

A crescent of a smile crept into Louis’ face. “So I should come back inside? You don’t mind.”

“Princess,” kicking himself, Harry answered, “it’s freezing out here. Come on now.”

“Harry,” Louis said, his eyes softening, “you’re actually very kind.”

“I’m really... really tired,” Harry answered slowly. His eyes suddenly felt heavy. “I’m usually better than this, yeah? Not a great host at the moment. Trying my best.” He cocked his head toward the door, coaxing Louis.

Louis was slowly succumbing. He came closer, and Harry held the door open a bit wider.

“On one condition,” Louis said.

“Hm?”

Louis’ eyes sparkled. “Can I sleep commando?”

“Absolutely not,” Harry said indignantly.

“Damn.”

“Next time, darling,” Harry said. “I’m usually very open-minded. Can’t, tonight. Told you, got a big day tomorrow.”

They climbed the stairs again, more slowly this time, but also more awake, the drugs and alcohol wearing off. Harry had been in such a hurry, his flat door was left open, the lights still off.

They walked in, short of breath and a lot more tired this time, but not in such a haze as before.

Harry closed the door.

”Shall we try this again?” Harry asked.

Louis steered himself to the sofa. He patted the sheets on the cushions, fluffed up the pillow and was about to pull the blanket out when Harry spoke up.

“Lou,” Harry said, “hey, didn’t you say you get cold?”

“What?” Louis turned his head. “Yes, I get chilly pretty easily.”
“Well, it’s a lot warmer over here,” he gestured to the bed. “I get hot, actually, sleeping under the covers. I have a hot body... I mean, my body tends to get hot. Temperature-wise. Anyway, why don’t you take the bed? It’s more comfortable. I’ll sleep on the sofa.”

Louis squinted. Even in the darkness, Harry could feel his eyes crinkle up in a soft, sweet smile.

“There’s no need, Harry,” Louis answered. He pulled the covers back. “I’m totally fine over here.”

Harry walked over and patted him affably on the arm.

“I insist,” Harry said. “Come on, Princess, don’t fight me on this. You’re my guest.”

Louis chewed on the corner of a lip. Harry saw him frown in deliberation, and then set his lips in a decision.

“Will you sit with me until I’m asleep?” Louis asked.

Harry’s face scrunched up in confusion. “What? Why?”

“Please sit with me,” Louis said, enunciating each word clearly. “Till I fall asleep. Please.”

“You’re asking a lot, Pemberley,” Harry said. He put pressure on Louis’ back until he turned and walked toward the bed. Harry lifted the rumpled covers. “Alright, darling. Get in.”

When Louis has settled himself, Harry sat down on the edge of the bed, parallel to Louis but with his back to the wall. Louis shuffled in the darkness. Harry was getting drowsy himself. He could tell by Louis’ breathing, however, that he was still awake.

“Can I ask you something, Lou?” he said. “Why d’you take off like that?”

Louis turned away from him, closing his eyes and exhaling. After a minute passed without an answer, Harry stared into the night and assumed that Louis was exhausted enough to have fallen asleep, because he felt like decomposing himself. He was just about to nod off when Louis answered.

“Nightmares.” It was barely above a whisper.

Harry thought about his first months after Africa, the sound of gunfire in his dreams as he woke up crying for help, the loneliness of not being able to talk to anyone about it, his sense of guilt and responsibility. The hours he spent trying to write an article and then just giving up.

Louis’ voice interrupted his thoughts. “I get bad nightmares. I wake up sometimes, screaming, scaring myself. It’s a mess, really. Everyone at the p— the house, gets disturbed. So I can only imagine what a disaster it must be for someone not used to it.”

Harry turned to look at him. “You were worried about disturbing me?” He shook his head. “You wouldn’t. I sleep like the dead.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” Louis said cryptically. Then he said, “You have no idea what it’s like.”

“Well, I snore,” Harry said. “That’s what people tell me, anyway.” This made Louis laugh. “So there’s that. I’ll strategically drown out your screaming. Or we can tie a mouth gag on you. Whatever turns you off, so to speak.”

“You’re very funny,” Louis complimented him. “What do you do, Harry? When you can’t fall
asleep? I always wonder how normal people deal with it.”

Harry wrinkled his eyebrows in a frown. “No one’s really normal, are they, when it comes to nightmares.” He watched the elegant curvature of Louis’ shoulders, the long line of his back. “I guess, sometimes I read before bedtime. It calms me down. Sometimes I play some music.”

“What do you read?” Louis shifted himself back, so he was watching Harry. Harry could barely make out the sharp tip of his nose.

“I don’t know. This and that… what my friends write, the news. Poetry sometimes. Do you like poetry?”

“No,” Louis chuckled. “Hate it. I’ve read enough poetry to last me two lifetimes. It’s all shite anyway.”

In the dark, Louis’ hand wandered over and barely brushed Harry’s leg. One finger tapped against the thigh slowly, rhythmically. Harry let him continue without paying much attention. It seemed to calm Louis. And Harry, for that matter.

Harry thought for a minute, and then began to recite in a gentle, steady voice.

*The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,*  
*And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul*  
*Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple*

Louis listened to these words, slowly turning into feeling and sense by the low, soothing, raspy baritone of Harry’s voice. As he recited, laundry turned into angels, nuns floated by with an immortal dignity. The things of this world were messengers of divine love, if one only knew how to see them.

*The soul descends once more in bitter love*  
*To accept the waking body, saying now*  
*In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,*  
*“Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;*  
*Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;*  
*Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,*  
*And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating*  
*Of dark habits,*  
*keeping their difficult balance.*

“That’s alright, then, isn’t it?” Louis said in response.

“Mm,” Harry said, stifling a yawn. “It’s one of my all-time favorites. Always works.”

Louis stirred in bed, feeling the cool, soft sheets underneath him, the warm blanket above, and Harry’s solid and steady body next to him, under his fingertip.

Louis asked, “Do you believe in angels?”

He heard Harry swallow, followed by a series of steady, heavy breaths going in and out of his mouth. A purring snore soon came out of his chest. Louis stared at the dark wall of bookshelves.
Framed snapshots sat on shelves containing hundreds of books. Paintings, photographs, posters, and other decorations hung haphazardly on the walls, along with the silhouettes of statues, mugs, and other knickknacks. A bottle of red wine sat opened on the walnut desk; all around were pens and pencils, wrinkled scraps of paper. A few dusty, dried figs were strewn on the table. Crumpled bits of paper were tossed around a square rubbish bin. Dust bunnies collected on the tiled floor. Shoes were strung out to the door, like protesting, forgotten pets.

Harry lived in a state of total chaos.

It was lovely, Louis thought. Harry was lovely. The night was everything he’d wanted. He closed his eyes and soon fell asleep, without even a second of yoga breathing.

Chapter End Notes

Harry's poem is Love Calls Us to the Things of This World, by Richard Wilbur. This incredibly moving poem takes its title from St. Augustine’s Confessions.
Chapter 3

Harry awoke with an ache in his neck and a crushing, grinding pain in his head. Inside his skull, a homunculus was crouched behind his left eye, chiseling away at it like a motherfucker. The little monster was building a Rube Goldberg contraption and Harry’s hangover was hitting every bump.

Another ache came from his neck, hanging off the bed, head suspended in midair, long strands of hair making a mess on his face. Why was he sleeping like this, anyway? His skin was sweaty and his mouth, dry. He probably snored all night.

Without opening his eyes, Harry bent his left knee in slow motion and painfully eased his body down the bed, using one hand to push on his left eyeball because— goddamnit — the hammering. Daggers shot off inside his skull. His lower back felt like gravelly asphalt. He shifted the rickety chassis of his body down inch by inch.


Now the pounding went straight to the back of his skull. His heartbeat thumped in both ears. It hurt to open his eyes, to face even a sliver of weak daylight, which must mean it’s morning, or afternoon. At least, it was the next day. Time worked like that.

The ache in the center of Harry’s brain was a garnet blooming into an amaryllis. Everything shone too bloody bright inside his eyelids. He was supposed to do something today, right? Something semi-important.

What was it? Come on now.

No.

Yes, think. Was it work?

No.

No, damn it. Leave me alone.

After many more minutes, Harry allowed gravity to drag him earthward, his legs off the bed and his body as rigidly and uselessly as a zombie, cannons shooting around his cranium like a war zone. Eventually, somewhat upright, Harry drifted to the bathroom.

He grappled his way to the medicine cabinet, found the bottle of paracetamol and shook out two tablets, downing them with metallic-tasting sink water.

Standing still for a second, with his head bent over the sink, Harry contemplated whether to give in to a nice, cleansing vom. The heat was starting to seep into his tiny attic flat. The demons in his guts were armed with dental drills, crashing their tiny, inferno carts into his intestines.

He ran the cold water in the sink and stuck his face under the faucet. Water ran down his eyes and lashes, into his nostrils and across his lips, trickling down his bare neck and the front of his chest. The cold lessened the pain in his head, clearing the sinuses. It was only after it started feeling frigid that he remembered.

Ah, fuck.

The interview was today, wasn’t it? That press conference with the Doncaster Prince.

And what time was it now? How many times had Niall Horan already tried to text him? Where was his mobile anyway—

Then, wisps of memory began leaking through his consciousness, though they were very confused. Something must have happened last night, he was pretty sure. Was there a stranger?— a man, maybe. There had been a cab ride… whiskey… poker with the boys. It had been an early night, because Niall had begged off for work. They’d left the game, walked out...

A twinge of guilt shot through Harry. The interview was in a few hours, at most, and he looked— felt— like half-baked purgatory.

He recalled coming into the flat, putting his keys down…

Shit.

Louis.

Harry opened the bathroom door a sliver and saw him lying on the bed, next to where Harry had been sleeping. Harry could barely recall how he ended up here, where he had picked him up. Was it on the way home? Harry must have been pretty far gone. He could hardly remember a damn thing after the party. His name was Louis, right? Harry recalled him sitting under a streetlight, petite but toned, his hands in his lap...

Did they fool around? Harry wondered with a speck of uncertainty. Probably not, if Harry was still in his jeans, with a massive hangover and a crick in his neck. Harry glanced down between his legs. Nope. Definitely don’t remember anything like that.

Without warning, Harry’s mouth heaved a trickle of stomach acid into the sink. Seeing real vomit deepened his headache. He grabbed a strand of of hair and held onto the porcelain sink, and hurled again, bringing liquid pulp of mushy nuts and old alcohol. Tiny bullets whizzed all around his head. As he rinsed it down the sink and gargled his mouth out, Harry tried his best to formulate a plan.
Louis had to leave. Harry had to make him leave.

Harry limped back into the studio, felt in his jeans pocket for his mobile. All night, he had slept with his phone digging into his hip. Out of habit, Harry quickly hit the “on” button, only to find the battery had died.

He walked to his desk and plugged the phone in. A weak, accusatory blip came on, signaling a pulse of life. Harry stared blankly at the phone screen, forgetting why he was even checking it in the first place. His mouth tasted like brimstone.

In his peripheral vision, Harry saw Louis, dead asleep.

He was curled like a cashew with a perfect bum out. Now Harry understands why he was hanging off the bed: Louis was sleeping diagonally, taking up most of the space. He must have pushed Harry nearly over in his sleep, his blanket wrapped around his knees. He was in all black, in a satiny shirt and expensive track bottoms. Harry couldn’t quite remember his face. Not bad, Harry thought, weirdly proud of his drunken good taste. Well done, Harry Styles. Still, he breathed a sigh of relief that nothing naughty had happened, except apparently a blank memory of how he got here.

“Hiya,” Harry croaked, sounding like a sick frog. Clearing his throat, he tried again. “Morning, mate! Rise and shine!”

No response. Louis’ chest rose and fell evenly with his arm across it, his caramel-colored hair shielding his eyes. A square jaw, a defined chin, and pink, thin lips. A rough sketch of facial hair. He definitely looked promising. Suddenly a visual popped into Harry’s memory, of brilliant blue eyes as dark as the ocean at night.

Harry held his breath. There had been a car service— Tomaso, wasn’t it?— amber streetlights, paying by credit card, dragging their tired arses up three flights of stairs. Twice, he recalled. And Louis had a humorous last name, starting with the letter P. Was it Plimpton? Plymouth? Pemberley. That was it. His Mr. Darcy... A soft guffaw escaped from his mouth.


Louis stirred and turned onto his back, legs spread apart. His eyebrows rose, then a hand came up to rub his closed eyes.

“That’s enough, Payno. Stop it at once!” Despite its sleepy softness, Louis’ voice was unmistakably commanding and confident. “Touch me again, I’ll feed you to Owen.”

Harry smirked. What a funny person! Did they talk about Payno? Was he a boyfriend? Was Owen their pet dog?

Louis lay still for a few more seconds. When he didn’t seem to wake up, Harry gave his legs a little smack, prompting him to scoot them away. After a few more forceful nudges, Louis finally lifted his hands in annoyance, and regally opened his eyes. Taking his time with slow, measured blinks, he finally located Harry.

“Oh,” he said guardedly. “Hullo, you.”

Harry waited for him. Louis didn’t seem to remember him either. Did he?

Louis’ lashes fluttered, taking Harry in. “You’re not Payno.”
Harry shook his head. “Nope.”

“Well, good morning anyway,” Louis smiled. “Have you kidnapped me?”

“You’re here on your own free will, mate,” Harry said. “Don’t you remember?”

“Course I do, Harry,” Louis smiled sweetly, crinkling his eyes. “I was hoping you had kidnapped me. What an adventure it might have been! You’re not an arsehole, are you?”

Even rumpled, Louis was adorable. His thin shirt showed off his toned upper arms, his tight belly, his shapely hips. His hair was mussed and the loose strands fell into his eyes, tangling in his eyelashes. Harry could stand here all day looking at him. Then the pounding in his head kicked him into gear.

“I’m afraid I have to be an arsehole now,” Harry said.

“What do you mean?” Louis blinked slowly at him.

“I have to kick you out,” Harry said. “You have to go, mate. Sorry. I’ve got important things to do today.”

Louis pursed his lips, mimicking him, “Sorry. I’ve got important things to do today. Look at me strutting about, I’m an important man. So very, very important.”

“You can stop being a little shite, Pemberley,” Harry said, trying to hide a fond snicker. “I’m not kidding.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” Louis replied. “Who’s Pem— ” Then the realization sank in. Louis grinned in embarrassment. “Oh, that’s right. It’s me.”

“Oh that’s right,” Harry parroted him. “You forgot your fake name, didn’t you? I hope you slept well, Louis Pemberley, or Tom Smith, or whoever you are.”

Louis gave him a big smile, stretching his arms out. “Oh, it was marvelous, Harry Styles. If that is in fact your real name. Your bed is very comfy.” His eyes crinkled coquettishly. “I didn’t even remember any bad dreams. Which is really, really good for me.”

“Right. You mentioned that.”

“And may I tell you a secret?” Louis pushed on. “This is the first time I’ve ever spent a night alone with a man.”

“Ha!” Harry replied, flustered. “For your information, you didn’t, mate. We didn’t do anything scandalous. Nothing happened between us, technically.”

Louis shrugged his shoulders, in possession of all the secrets. “Technically,” he said. “we did sleep in the same bed last night.” He pulled the covers up to his waist, and patted it down modestly. “All night, and it was fun. Don’t get all bent out of shape, Styles. No one’s coming to arrest you. They’re probably all still asleep.” He giggled. “Gosh, I’m starved. What’s for breakfast?”

“Nothing,” Harry answered curtly, running a hand through his admittedly dirty, probably-not-going-to-be-washed-today, should-have-been-cut-last-week hair. He was going to be in bad shape if he didn’t hop to it. “Nothing’s for breakfast,” he repeated. “There’s no time for it. There’s no time for anything, darling. I’m so late already. You— me— we— have to haul arse out of here.”
“Oh, really? What time is it?” Louis yawned. He lay serenely, stretching his legs.

“Look,” Harry sighed. His mobile phone vibrated on the desk, alerting him to a text. Harry glanced at it, worry shooting down his body. “I know it’s bloody rude of me, and trust me, I’m not usually like this—I treat people like a gentleman—but I’m asking you to leave now. No, not now. Like, ten minutes ago. Yesterday.” Then he reconsidered, and added, “Please!”

Harry crossed the two steps to his desk and picked up the phone, showing 9% charge. The alert was for a text from Niall.

“Oh right,” Louis said insouciantly behind him. “You have somewhere you need to be today. You’re quite important, so you keep saying.”

Louis was making no effort to move. Glaring at him in exasperation, Harry unlocked his mobile phone and clicked on the text app.

*harry you there*

That was all Niall wrote.

It was 9:39 AM. Harry still had a couple of hours until the press conference at the Doncaster Embassy, a mere half hour away by car. Thank God. He texted Niall back.

*talk to me niall*

*how’s the craic*

*tell me what’s going on*

*it’s been cancelled*

*what?*

*the press conference thing, the Prince. been postponed*

Harry wrinkled his nose, both annoyed at the change in plans and glad he hadn’t overslept.

*you sure?*

*yeah, the office just got a press release. didn’t u get it?*

*haven’t checked*

His phone lulled, and then a text showed up.

*lazy wanker. whatcha doin anyway*

Harry felt a bubble of pain in his head subside. It seems he hadn’t thrown up all the paracetamol, after all. His headache was just a tiny bit better.

*i’m home*

*have u checked ur emails?*

*no niall, i’ve checked fuck all today. got a hangover.*
told you didn’t i!!!

will ya fuck off c=3

Harry looked up in time to see Louis lick his lips, a look of impatience on his face. After conspicuously twiddling his thumbs, Louis slowly leaned back on the headboard and crossed his hands behind his head, letting the expanse of his toned chest stretch forward, his shirt fall on the fluid shapes of his muscles and nipples. Then Louis cocked his head, as if to ask, how much longer? Harry swallowed hard, turned away, and forced himself to look at the wall in front of him.

Niall’s text blinked on.

i bet u’ve got someone with u, don’t ye

Harry winced, wishing he could reach into the phone and strangle him.

not really

who is it?

listen, did they say why it’s been cancelled?

ye work fast, harry :) who is he

focus, mate

when did u have the time last night? after we left?

irish...

we left together, you and me. did ye pick up a homeless man or what

will you just tell me why it’s been cancelled >:|

so u HAVE GOT someone there!!!!!

can u not think about sex for a second. for ONE. FUCKING. SEXOND.

Harry’s face flushed to the brows. He was blushing too hard to check on Louis, who was probably going to flash his armpits next. Harry was beet red—from the heat, he told himself.

typo, he wrote.

oo ur a grouch. didn’t u get any rest all night? ;)

go on u, why did they cancel it

right then. the official press release says that the prince’s been taken ill

Harry shook his head. Celebrities always did this, cancelled at the last minute. Royals too. Capricious, fickle, self-absorbed pains in the arse.

is he then?

who knows bro
he’s not sick?

course not, ye gobshite. is this ur first job, harry?? jesus mary and joseph

Harry glanced over to Louis, who had turned his head to look around. He was twirling a thin gold chain around his neck, playing with something hanging from it—a charm perhaps. The sun looked good on him, even though he was still too pale. The morning’s glow cast his cheeks in sharp relief.

so Niall texted. u doing anything later

dunno yet

listen, whoever you’ve got there, don’t shag him all day, yeah? we have work to do

mind your own business maybe

Harry put his phone down. He walked over and sat down at the foot of the bed, as Louis pulled his legs up to make room.

“So?” Louis asked. “Who was that?”

“We got lucky,” Harry said. “That was my work colleague. Crisis has been averted, for the time being.”

“Has your work been cancelled?”

“Postponed.”

Louis seemed immensely pleased. “Oh! That’s too bad.”

“Listen,” Harry was also secretly pleased. “I’m going to hit the shower,” he said. “And when I get out, we’ll think about breakfast. But after that—”

“I have to leave,” Louis interrupted, not really listening. He hoisted himself to a sitting position. “So you’ve said. You get in the shower. I’ll whip us up some breakfast.”

Harry was incredulous. “You know how to cook?”


Harry couldn’t help but smile back. Egg whites and yolks swimming in smoky oil sounded really good. He started walking away, yanking his shirt over his head, then unbuttoning his jeans and taking them off, gesturing with his clothes vaguely toward his kitchenette.

“Help yourself,” he said. “Eggs are in the fridge. I’m not sure what else is there. Cheese, maybe? You can use whatever’s there.”

Harry tossed his dirty clothes in a corner of the room, on top of a growing pile. Once at the bathroom door, Harry glanced back quickly, and caught Louis staring at a very specific part of him, the peachy part under the pants, attached to the top of his legs. They both looked away at the same time, Louis’ chiseled cheekbones glowing bright pink.

“Sorry,” Louis pinched his nose. “I wasn’t... I...”

Harry’s mouth went dry. “D’you get a good view then?”
Louis wasn’t blind, after all! And he wasn’t as innocent as he pretended to be. Harry watched him hastily straighten himself out.

“I wasn’t looking at you,” Louis lied in a high, squeaky voice. “I’m just not quite awake yet.”

Mm, right, Harry thought. He always had a sixth sense about people sneaking a look at him. It happened fairly regularly. Louis was checking out his arse, and from the looks of it, he liked what he saw. Too bad Harry had to get to work, he thought; Louis was quite a nice full English himself. Wouldn’t mind a bite, if he must say so himself. Then he pushed the thought away. He had already overslept badly and was stupidly hungover. This was no time to fool around, no matter how fit Louis was. And damn, he was fit.

Harry ducked his head and closed the bathroom door. Then he leaned heavily against it, twisting the lock.

Christ, but the look Louis had given him made Harry half hard. He was too fucking fine, that’s what. Harry’s heart was pumping like a piston. Whoever he was, the boy out there was like fire. Harry pushed his cock down roughly with the palm of his hand, but rather than helping, it thickened up more, jerking a little. It took all of his self-discipline not to turn right back around and push Louis down.

Harry hadn’t gotten laid in way too long. Months. Now that the press conference was cancelled, he had all the time in the world— definitely enough time for a quick shag. He thought about Louis’ blue eyes, that luscious, tempting mouth. Louis didn’t look like he would mind either, the way his eyes were glued to Harry’s backside. After all, he had come home with him. Harry could ask him, couldn’t he? He looked down at his erection, which was definitely not going away. Ask him, his cock urged. Ask.

But somewhere in Harry’s brain, marinating in whiskey and jacks and queens and the beautiful boys and girls he had fucked and been fucked by, was a tiny, authoritarian voice saying: No. Forget him. Not This One. This one was different. There was a certain indescribable quality about Louis, something naive and young. He couldn’t place it, but it unsettled Harry, made him feel strangely guilty and protective all at once. It just didn’t feel right. Harry had hooked up in one-night stands before, more than once. But Louis wasn’t just anyone.

Harry exhaled deeply. Goddamn conscience.

Fuck, he would have to take care of this morning boner himself. Unconsciously, he had been playing with himself, fingering the loose skin through the fabric of his pants. He was hard now, with a monster that needed to be released. He dropped his boxers, turned the shower on, and stepped in, letting the cold water sting his skin. As steam rose from the floor, Harry put one hand on the wall in front of him, steadying himself, and allowed the water to lubricate his hand, sliding down the long shaft of his long, erect cock. His thumb played with the foreskin until he was wet inside and out, his precome mixing sweetly with warm water, forming a cloudy swirl. He gave some fast, light tugs, thumbing under the sensitive head and waking up the beast. It rose up to its full length with almost no encouragement at all, growled and twitched bright red.

“Fuck,” Harry groaned. “You’re gonna be the death of me.”

He thought about Louis’ blue eyes, his knowing smile and sassy confidence, his perky mouth. His hand worked faster, stroking the velvet skin up and down, thumb spreading the viscous precome all around the tip. He wondered what Louis would taste like, how his cock might feel inside his mouth. Harry loved giving blowjobs to the right person, and Louis looked like he needed one, would enjoy one, would cry out in that high, emotive voice, moaning his name. Harry. If his cock
were half as pretty as he was… Harry’s dick twitched hard, a drop of precome sputtering out. He imagined being on his knees, hands behind his back, Louis feeding his cock to him. Louis would hold his cock in one hand and the back of Harry’s head in the other, nudging it in.

*C’mon, Harry. Take it for me. Gonna fuck your mouth.*

Louis’ cock would fill his mouth so he could hardly make a sound. Those hooded blue eyes would become unfocused with pleasure, he would lick his lips with quiet moans.

*That’s it. You want it, love. Open for me, wider. Baby, suck it down. Like you’re gonna empty me.*

Harry imagined his tongue dragging on Louis’ cock, Louis’ hands controlling his head. Making him take more and more. Louis’ hand would become more frantic at the base of his cock, stroking it toward his mouth, and he would moan out his pleasure. Harry loved this part of the blowjob, gagging on it, the feeling of almost not being able to breathe, his eyes rolling back and feeling dizzy, and then getting a respite as the cock slid out, giving him time to breathe as the fingers stroke the cock skin back toward him, touching his lips. He loved almost sucking the fingers in as well, kisses and sucks turning into the same thing in his wide mouth, all stretching and fucking and pulling moans out of the other person’s throat, turning him crazy with the need to come. Watching himself being watched, being fucked.

*Milk it, Harry,* his imaginary Louis commanded in his high rasp. *Wrap your tongue around me. Swirl and suck it. Drink it dry. Fucking drink it all in.*

Harry saw himself ease forward, cupping Louis’ balls, feeling his spasm as he came. He tasted the first salty tang, the creamy, bitter spunk shooting into his throat, too fast, too much, too thick. He sputtered and coughed, then choked it down, wanting to show that he could. Louis would gather the drops that leaked out of his mouth and feed it back to him, the milky pearls dripping between his fingers, letting Harry suck on them too.

*Lick me up, Harry. Twirl your tongue and suck it down. I want to see you drink every drop.*

Harry’s hand slid around the hard, thick length of his own cock, now dark pink and throbbing violet at the tip. His thumb swiped over the sensitive slit, causing a groan and a litter of swearing. He was close.

But Louis wouldn’t. Louis hadn’t ever done this. Harry knew this as if it were a fact, the way he knew the alphabet, the way he knew his maths. Louis hadn’t ever had this experience, but he wanted it. His eyes yearned for it. He wanted to seek it out; he wanted to have a taste, he wanted the foreplay, the sweet talk, everything. He wanted to be loved by a man. And Harry wanted to give it to him. He would be gentle with him, make it good for him. He would tip his face forward with its rough whiskers, the tender angles cut like a Renaissance angel, and he would say it.

*Kiss me, Louis.*

Fuck, that was too much. There was no kink quite like the kink of true romance. Harry stuttered out a moan. His come shot out, missing his hand and hitting the shower wall, dripping down the lazy, winding maze between droplets. He was sure that his moan was too loud, sure that it could be heard through the door. His chest heaved with deep breaths as he came down, the last thick spurts pooling in his hand. He rubbed their velvety texture into his palm, then shook them off.

He closed his eyes and let the easy, fucked-out feeling calm his body, his heart pounding hard to soothe all the tension. He leaned his side to the shower and waited for the orgasm to subside. His arse throbbed with an emptiness, wanting more, his spine tingling down with spasms. Finally, a
little sleepy and tired, Harry soaked his hair and body, shampooed, soaped, and rinsed off, making sure to erase any remnant of spunk from the walls.

It was just a fantasy to get himself off, Harry told himself. No harm, no foul. It had nothing to do with Louis, really, and Harry could totally act normal after getting himself off. It was natural, right? Totally.

He wrapped a cotton towel around his waist and came out, rearranging his face to appear as casual as possible. Louis was plating eggs on the kitchenette counter.

“The yolks are runny,” Louis said, looking up. “I hope that’s alright. I don’t really know how to do it any other way.” The flat smelled like warm olive oil and ground black pepper. It was nice. “You’re lucky I didn’t burn the place down, really.”

Harry walked over in his towel and picked up a piece of crunchy toast, tearing off a thin strip. “Hey, you've made dippy soldiers!”

“Hmm?” A bewildered look.

“These,” Harry held it up. “Dippy soldiers? Toast strips dipped in egg yolk? Mum used to make them for me when I was young.”

Louis’ face brightened. “Oh! I didn’t know that’s what they were called.”

There it was. Louis was definitely not British, Harry thought. What British kid didn’t know about dippy soldiers? And his accent, though faint, was distinct in the background. It didn’t belong in the U.K., or anywhere in the Commonwealth, to be honest. He had certainly learned to speak flawless British English. But where was he from, anyway?

“Your mother sounds very nice, Harry.” Louis sounded subdued.

“Mum’s the greatest of all time,” Harry said, biting into a strip of toast. “We call her the Goat, my sister and I. Greatest of all time. But I suppose everyone thinks that way about their own mums, right?” He glanced up. Louis seemed distracted. Harry realized there was nothing to drink, but didn’t want to make Louis feel bad. “Hey, you want some coffee?”

Harry moved to get water, and then remembered he had no coffee in the house. To his credit, though, he never made coffee at home, not when a Roman espresso was just five minutes away.

“Louis,” he said, “you get in the shower, and I’ll run out for coffee. Or juice if you want. What would you like?”

He saw that Louis was staring at a spot at the base of his throat, eyes a little unfocused.

Harry continued, “I think I left you some hot water for a shower.”

Louis didn’t answer. He seemed completely mesmerized, staring at the canvas of tattoos on Harry’s body.

Self-consciously, Harry twisted the towel a little tighter around his waist, suddenly wanting to pull it up to cover himself. He felt as if Louis could see the fantasies he had just imagined about him in the bathroom. A flush of color rushed into his face.

Clearing his throat, Harry said huskily, “Louis, mate, d’you get a good look then?”
Louis jerked up in alarm.

“Oh, sorry,” he muttered, swallowing hard. Then he indicated with a tip of his chin, without looking at Harry. “I couldn’t help noticing. You have those funny marks.”

“What marks?”

Louis shyly got up and came closer, pointing to Harry’s chest. “Those ones. There, and there.”

Harry glanced down. “Those aren’t marks. They’re my extra nipples,” he said. “I’ve got four of them. Twice the fun, innit?”

“Fun?” Louis pinked up from the nape of his neck. “Oh my God. No.”

Harry gestured to himself. “Anything else you’d like to check out, Mr. Pemberley? I can drop trou so you can do a more thorough exam.”

“No,” Louis said, standing up. “God, I’m so sorry. Forget I said anything. I’ve been so rude.”

Harry watched Louis’ blush turn darker and deeper. Even the tips of his ears were flushed a bright pink.

“You’re blushing,” Harry remarked, slow and steady.

Watching Louis intently, Harry pulled the plate of eggs closer, slowly tearing up a piece of toast and dipping it in the runny yolk. He put the dripping toast in his mouth, tongue out, and caught the thick drops on his lips. His body was hunched over the counter like a cat, shoulder blades sharp, pec muscles plump and curved, an elbow leaning on the tabletop with his hand irresistibly traveling back and forth to his mouth.

The runny yolks made a golden stain around Harry’s lips. Swiping it with a thumb and carefully tucking it between his lips, Harry sucked it clean, his tongue darting to lick the escaped drops. He knew he had Louis’ attention, and he knew Louis couldn’t look away. Harry finished with a sly wink, as Louis’ mouth hung open.

Louis’ thought process had completely derailed.

“Go on, Louis,” Harry said in his low, raspy voice. “Take a bath. You look like you could use some washing up.”

Louis’ mouth opened and closed silently again. As he walked to the bathroom, Harry yelled after him, “Want help?”

Louis slammed the door in response. Harry looked after him and began laughing.

Harry walked over to pick out some clothes from the closet, taking out a clean towel and an extra set of clothing that might fit Louis. Setting everything on the bed, he pulled the covers on the bed to straighten them and plumped the pillows.

Soon the bathroom door opened behind him, and Louis padded out in his bare feet. When he turned around, Harry noticed that Louis was still dry from head to toe.

Sheepishly, Louis said, “I need you to show me how the knobs work.”

“Which knobs?”
“Back home, someone does the— I don’t usually run the baths myself,” Louis said. “Someone sets it and cleans it up. So I would appreciate it if you could show me how the knobs on your bathtub work. Do you pull them out or—?”

Harry stared at Louis’ flustered face. So he had spent all this time in the bathroom trying to figure out how to start the bathtub.

“You’re kidding me,” Harry said, as Louis stood quietly gazing down. “You really want to work my knobs?”


“Come on, Princess,” Harry walked toward him. “Let’s get you sorted.”

After the bathwater was running, Harry went over to his phone and unlocked it, while slipping on a pair of trousers and a short-sleeved shirt. Niall had sent over a link, a press release. Harry clicked to open it.

It was an announcement that the Prince of Doncaster had unexpectedly come down with mild food poisoning, and would be rescheduling the press conference for another time. Accompanying the press release was an official photograph of Prince Louis. As he studied the photo, Harry felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

Of course. Now it all made sense.

His name was Louis. He didn’t carry money. He didn’t open car doors. He didn’t know how to cook anything but eggs. Somebody drove him, dressed him and undressed him. He had a posh but unplaceable accent. He couldn’t even start his own damn bath.

All the mystery around Louis suddenly made perfect sense. Harry’s intuition has been right. Louis wasn’t just anyone. He was European royalty. He was Prince Louis William Tomlinson of Doncaster.

Harry stared at his mobile phone for ages. His hangover was slowly lifting. In fact, as he continued staring at the photo, it was as if distant horizons were opening up for him, clouds parting, the sun shining through.

He heard a random movement in the bathroom, waking him up to reality.

“Hey, Louis!” Harry quickly shouted, clicking his phone off with one hand. “I’m leaving now! Be back soon.”

“Gotcha!”

Harry stared at the bathroom door as if it were a fairytale. He still couldn’t believe what was happening. He grabbed his half-charged phone and a pair of sunglasses by the door, and quickly stepped out of his flat, locking the door behind himself. He felt as if he’d just secured a million-dollar treasure inside. And in a way, he had.
Depuis lors j’ai vécu dans le trouble du rêve,
Cherchant l’éternité dans la minute brève.

Since then I have lived in a chaotic dream,
Seeking eternity in the brief minute.

Parole à l’Amie, by Renée Vivien

Louis trailed his hand in the bath, watching the light skim across the water. Harry hadn’t estimated the hot water very well. It had run out halfway through filling the tub, and the bath had quickly turned tepid.

Still, Louis liked his body’s buoyancy in a bath. It was as if everything inside him—his nightmares, his responsibility, his future—also weighed less. The cool water was refreshing in the humid heat. His skin faded and wavered under the surface. The morning felt softer and smoother. Like the charm that bobbed at the base of his throat, time was suspended, and Louis didn’t have to think.

At least for a moment, anyway. He was surrounded by the smell of Harry’s half-used candles scattered around the room—there must have been at least a dozen, in various degrees of use, a few still shrink wrapped in cellophane. Louis didn’t know anyone who liked candles this much. He didn’t know anyone who liked candles, period, since they never used them at the palace. The palace had flowers—thousands of fresh flowers, every day, in most rooms, replenished by the staff. Louis was so accustomed to them, he hardly ever thought about them. He realized that everything about Harry’s flat smelled raw and strange. Fire hazards, the candles were. That’s why the palace had fresh flowers; no fire hazards allowed at the palace.

Louis thought about how Harry was a fire hazard himself. In a million years, Louis had never expected to be taking a bath in a stranger’s flat. He never expected to be able to escape in the first place, let alone bump into someone like Harry.

He hadn’t been staring at Harry’s nipples. He was staring because, even when grumpy and hungover, Harry was the most beautiful man he’d ever seen. Louis couldn’t take his eyes off him. Everything about him was captivating—his broad shoulders and messy curls, which he had a habit of brushing off his forehead, his long, elegant limbs that extended to his fingertips, his bright, gem-like green eyes, the nervous habit he had of playing with his lips. Louis liked his long, hairy legs that converged on the most perfect buttocks he had ever seen. His sexy lips. His mouth that never shut up.

Louis thought he was being discreet, but Harry had caught him.

He hadn’t realized he was staring. He was Louis, the Crown Prince of Doncaster, and no one ever talked back to him. No one flirted, no one teased. No one made him as flustered and aroused as Harry. There was a protocol for dealing with each and every person he met. His sisters, his grandfather, his servants, the foreign dignitaries. There was a protocol for Eleanor—there was
probably even a protocol for making babies. There was protocol for everything, for every minute of his life. There was no protocol, however, for someone like Harry.

The water was getting too cold to stay in. Louis ducked under the surface, soaking his head, and then washed his hair with soap as thoroughly as he could. He rinsed off in the tub, watching the suds drift on the surface. Then Louis pulled the plug and stood up, letting the excess water drip from his body.

Out of habit, he fingered the necklace and the charm with his right hand, his thumb tracing over the rounded corners of the tiny box. He reminded himself what the charm stood for, that he was the keeper of his kingdom. If he was vigilant, the world would stay calm, and everyone—including himself—would stay safe. The terror was under lock and key. No one would know his secrets. No one would peek into his dreams. Nothing would ever veer off course.

Oddly, Louis couldn’t remember any dreams from this morning, or from last night. He couldn’t recall the last time he hadn’t woken up in the middle of the night. But last night, he had slept on without dreams, for the first time in ages.

It was nice, he realized, this was nice—the man named Harry, their banter, this exploration into a real life. Louis has enjoyed this adventure so far; it had been fun.

But enough was enough. Once Harry came back, he would thank him and go. He would go back to the embassy. Joseph and Liam were probably beside themselves. Owen probably had his men everywhere in Rome.

Everything was waiting for him.

The longer he thought about it, the itchier he felt the need for a cigarette. His fingers wanted something to hold. He had them at the embassy, in his nightstand. There, he could always get Liam to fetch him a fresh pack, even as he admonished him for smoking.

Louis stepped out of the bath and peeked through the bathroom door, opened only a sliver so he could make sure all was clear. He saw that Harry had set a pile of clean clothes and a bath towel on the bed. Harry was considerate, after all.

Louis dried himself and put on, with amusement, Harry’s KISS concert shirt, the back of which said, “Hot ‘N Hard” in bold red letters. There was a small rip low in the front—right over where Harry’s laurel tattoo would be. Now why would Louis think of that? Louis quickly shook his head, trying to clear the image. Surely Harry hadn’t picked this shirt out on purpose. It was probably the first one he saw.

Louis imagined walking around the palace in such a shirt. Four generations of royal tailors wouldn’t make these KISS shirts for the Kings of Doncaster! He thought about Arthur pulling the shirt over his head, with his characteristically stoic face.

“Of course Your Royal Highness is Hot ’N Hard,” he would say, without a trace of emotion.

Louis looked around the flat, noticing again the fascinating assortment of objects that he had seen last night, the scattered memorabilia that made up Harry’s single life.

He was single, by the looks of it—there was no sign of another person in the flat, the fridge was barely stocked with wine, a paltry rind of cheese and a few eggs, the bathroom empty of personal toiletries. There was also a pile of laundry in the corner that Harry had added to this morning.

A person in a relationship couldn’t care this little, Louis thought. Harry was a Tumbleweed.
Hold the phone. Louis checked himself. Don’t give him any nicknames, you bloody idiot. He’s just Harry. A stranger. He’s not your bloody Tumbleweed. He’s not your anything.

He wandered to Harry’s desk, his curiosity getting the better of him. There were framed photos of Harry with various people.

There was a photo with two ladies who had to be his sister and mother; the resemblance was uncanny. His sister was smiling, one eye closed, standing slightly in front of Harry’s laughing mug, blocking part of his face, and his mother was next to him, her face turned toward his with a beaming, proud smile. There was another black and white photo of Harry sitting on a sofa, legs crossed on a table in front of him, like a cool hipster, a few friends in the background. He was holding a half-filled wine glass and gesticulating animatedly with the other hand, pinky flying, mouth pert and wide open, curved upward in happiness.

Louis saw a commendation on the wall, a recognition of some sort. He looked closer. It was a prize for best analytical essay on the Egyptian conflict of 2015. On the bookshelf next to it was a photo of Harry, slightly younger, hair shorter, scruff more pronounced, posing with an older man carrying a big bag on his shoulder and a camera in one hand. The photo was signed, “Amici per sempre,” followed by a scrawled signature.

Louis wandered down to read the titles of some of Harry’s books. Surprisingly, there were books in Italian, German, and French, as well as English. They spanned from religious philosophers to existentialists to contemporary poetry. Many books had markers and tags stuck in them. Harry was well read. Louis was impressed. He hadn’t expected this.

The sunlight streamed from the windows, heating up the room. A glass door led to a small balcony. The whole city of Rome lay outside, her citizens waking to one of the great testaments of the human mind. It was all waiting for Louis, if he wanted it.

Squinting, he opened the door and stepped out.

“..."
“And the guard stationed at his room?” Gates asked, voice still calm and clipped.

“He has been dismissed, sir. He claims that he brought His Royal Highness to the laundry room, to dry his pajamas.”

“Pajamas.”

Gates gazed at him with reproach. They couldn’t even laugh at how ridiculous that sounded.

Had Louis planned it? He was certainly gutsy and brash enough. Gates thought that he had seemed particularly restless—tumultuous—on this tour. It certainly wasn’t out of the question. On the other hand, Louis understood his responsibilities as a royal. He had been aged like a fine wine in his carefully controlled environment, to feel loyalty and honor above all else. Gates had supervised Louis himself, from the time he was a young child; he was his life’s work. Louis should have understood his role as the symbolic head of his people. To imagine the Crown Prince rebelling was nearly impossible.

But it was clear that something had snapped. The evidence was undeniable.

Gates stared at Owen, who was desperately trying to recall the events of the night. His cheeks were darkly ruddy. Even his soldier’s cut seemed in disarray.

“I saw His Royal Highness take his medication, sir,” Owen said. “Saw it myself. I can’t imagine that he could have left on purpose.”

“And yet,” Gates said icily, “apparently this is exactly what happened. Any evidence of foul play?”

“None, sir. We are taking all measures, sir.”

Gates sighed, his lips in a tight, thin line. The Anesidorans were arriving at dawn, practically around the corner. The press conference was less than twelve hours away.

“His Royal Highness had a routine to prevent exactly this sort of mishap,” Gates admonished, rubbing his forehead with three fingers. “We should not have altered it. Are you sure he took his medication?”

“Positive, sir.”

Owen’s broad face was lined with concern. He stood ready to follow any plan Gates devised, no matter how personally painful to himself. The Crown Prince of Doncaster, heir to the throne possibly sooner than any of them could imagine, had been missing now for four hours.

The guard had gone to the laundry room to search for the Prince after an hour, thinking that it was plenty of time to dry one pair of pajama trousers. He saw the pajamas lying in the dryer, almost as dry as his mouth felt, with no trace of the Prince anywhere.

He ran back to the royal quarters, and timidly, with his heart in his throat, knocked on the door. When there was no answer, he entered.

Initially, he felt immensely relieved on seeing the sleeping shape of a person in the bed. Tiptoeing closer, he noticed the unnatural quiet of the room, the lack of breathing or movement.

Was the Prince alright? He advanced in the darkness.

The shape lay unmoving under the covers. The guard squinted hard, but could make out little from
the shape beneath. When he was finally close enough, he saw the glint of fabric poking out from under the covers. It wasn’t the blue satin of the royal pajamas. Not even close.

With a dreadful feeling in the pit of his stomach, the guard lifted the bedcover to reveal what he had already suspected: the bundle was a decoy. The Prince was gone.

He had rushed to his superior, who immediately checked the embassy’s electronic surveillance system. All perimeters appeared to be secured. No alarms had been tripped; no cameras removed. The obscured camera in the Prince’s bedroom was finally discovered, too late.

They alerted Owen, who watched and rewatched the security video footage of the hallway near the laundry room, in succession. In the surveillance tapes, the Prince was seen in the hallway, and then backtracking, and not seen again. The only other person to pass through was a lonely service worker, taking out the week’s laundry.

Owen ordered his men to scour the entire embassy from top to bottom. Even the cellars and courtyards were combed through. They looked in closets, under beds, in the shrubbery, in the fountains and pools. If the Prince was on the embassy grounds, he was nowhere to be found. It was only after a thorough search that Owen contacted Joseph Gates.

At that moment, Liam Payne was running toward them, hair flying, a dressing gown loosely tied over his body. His face showed a mixture of sleepiness and gravity.

“Joseph,” he said to Gates. He gave a brief nod to Owen. “I’ve just heard. What’s happened?”

“Liam Payne,” Gates replied. “His Royal Highness seems to be missing.”

Liam’s face screwed up in alarm. “What?”

“I take full responsibility, Mr. Payne,” Owen jumped in. “We’re trying our best to find him. He does not appear to be in the embassy compounds. My men are still looking, however.”

Liam put his face in both hands and rubbed, as if trying to buff the bad news away. His brows furrowed in distress.

“How? Prince Louis was just going to sleep when I left him,” Liam said. “He was a bit— well, maybe a bit more playful than usual— ”

Gates’ lips stiffened with the slightest hint of a grimace, not happy with what he was hearing. Playful was unexpected. Unexpected was bad.

“— but I left him tucked under covers, going to sleep.” Liam ran his hand through his hair. It looked more wild than ever. “I can’t imagine— ”

“We’re well beyond imagining, Liam,” Gates said. “You know as well as I do that the Anesidorans will be here in— ” he glanced at his watch, “— little over three hours. More than fifty journalists are expected to arrive later to cover the press conference. We both know it is the single most important day for Doncaster this year. We have been preparing for weeks.”

“I know, I know.” Liam was too stunned to think coherently. “What’ll we do?”

Gates paced apart, a hand on his chin, his face grave. The months and months of tough negotiations with their neighboring country seem to sink before his eyes, one by one, like stones into the cloudy sea, disappearing beneath the surface and never to be seen again. Doncaster’s future was held hostage— because he had been insufficiently self-disciplined. He had been careless, despite his
vigilance. They all had.

Above all else, their Prince.

“We will regret to inform the public that the Prince has come down with a mild case of food poisoning,” Gates said. The text of the announcement took shape in his mind. “That is what we will say. We’ll send out a press release at once. It is nothing of concern, but His Royal Highness is indisposed, for the time being.”

Both Owen and Liam watched him with concern, hoping the announcement would be enough.

“Think it’ll work?” Liam asked. He clenched his thumb in his fist, worrying the cuticles.

“There will be the usual media gossip,” Gates said, “of no consequence to us, as long as we locate the Prince in time, before he turns up elsewhere. We will send out press releases. With proper discretion, it won’t even be news in a week. We shall announce a rescheduled press briefing as soon as His Royal Highness feels better.”

“Very shortly,” Liam added. “We hope?”

“We are to find him immediately,” Gates said, glaring at Owen. “As quickly as the Doncaster royal security is capable of doing. Isn’t that right, Owen?”

“Yes, sir,” Owen said. “We will locate His Royal Highness soon, sir, and with the utmost discretion. I will see to it.”

“Will you, indeed?” Gates said. His eyes were a mix of determination and worry. “I do hope so. The future of Doncaster depends on it. His Royal Highness has had a brief, inexplicable breakdown. It is manageable if we can act quickly.” He turned to Liam. “It must be so.”

Harry nearly flew down the stairs to the ground floor, his feet tripping over his rapidly churning brain. Stepping outside, Harry put on his sunglasses and walked briskly toward his favorite cafe while speed-dialing Niall on his mobile phone. He swooped by other pedestrians, barely registering them in his peripheral vision.

“Styles,” Niall answered on the fourth ring. His mouth sounded full. The phone was also crunching and popping, as if it were tucked into a ball of cellophane wrap. Harry could barely hear him. “Sup. Talk t’ me.”

“Put down whatever you’re eating,” Harry nearly yelled. “Listen up, Cupcake.”

More crackling ensued for the next thirty or forty seconds, then abruptly stopped.

Trying to control the excitement in his voice, Harry announced, “I’ve got the Prince.”

After a pause, Niall asked brusquely, “I don’t understand. What the fuck are you on about?”


Another silence passed, and then Niall was bursting into raucous, uproarious laughter, so loud that a passerby looked up at Harry. He made an apologetic face to her as the lady hurried past. Niall continued his hyena-like cackling over the phone, apparently overwhelmed.

“Shut up, Irish,” Harry insisted. “Listen, I’m not joking.”

“Right,” Niall wheezed. “Okay. And you’ll be selling London Bridge t’ me next. What else have you got, an alien in your freezer?” He laughed heartily again while Harry muted the speaker with his hand. “Oh my God, hahaha, I can’t believe you thought I’d buy that shite. So, when are we getting together?”

“I saw the press release you sent, you dongle,” Harry said. “The photograph of the Prince? That’s the same person in my flat, right now. Taking a bath. I’m sure it’s him.”

“What are you— ,” Niall stopped short. “You’re not fucking with me, are ye, because I would never, ever forgive you, Harry. You know that.”

“I know,” Harry said. “And I’m absolutely not.”

“Are you there with him then? Right now?”

“I’m out getting coffee,” Harry said. “That’s why I’m talking to you. Listen, Ni, I have pretty good reason to think it’s him.” Niall was silent on the other end now, finally paying attention. “It looks like him. He has no I.D. with him, but there are lots of other clues.”

“Mate, just ‘cause you picked up a homeless bloke to shag, and even if he’s a looker, doesn’t mean he’s a bloody prince.”

“No, I’m telling you,” Harry countered. “There are other things, lots of other things. He looks too clean, for one thing. He’s got a posh accent. He doesn’t open car doors. He asked me to undress him last night!” Harry cleared his throat noisily. “And no, for your information, we didn’t— ”

Niall cackled helplessly again. “Shite, a homeless guy wants to have sex, and you think he’s fucking royalty! Harry,” he paused dramatically, “did he smell like leftover pasta and fags, by any chance? Old canned vegetables? There’s your clue.”

“Will you shut it,” Harry interjected, exasperated. “Focus for a sec, will you? This man looks exactly like the Prince. The Prince is missing. They put out some lame-arsed press release so they can buy time, but you and I both know it’s bollocks. The Prince isn’t sick. He is missing. In my flat. At this very moment.”

Harry heard a deep intake of breath.

“Harry, if you’re not jerking my chain… can you see the potential here? It could be— ” Niall’s voice was rising in pitch. He was finally getting Harry’s point.
“Could be a scoop,” Harry finished for him. “You’re seeing it now, aren’t you? Could be an exclusive. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

“But how?” Niall was nearly yelling. “What the fuck is the Prince doing, with you?”

“Long story,” Harry sighed, “I’ll tell you later. I’m not even sure myself.”

“The fuck,” Niall groaned. “You better not be having me on. You fecking lunatic.”

“I’m stone cold serious.”

Harry heard Niall exhale. “So how d’you do that? How do the big stories always find you, you lucky bastard? Why you?”

“Dunno,” Harry chuckled. “Must be fate.”

Harry heard more clamorous crunching on the other end, and the sounds of deep breathing. He half-wondered whether Niall might be breathing into a paper bag— he was an excitable sort. If Niall were a dog, he might be a Jack Russell Terrier. They’d been known to attack themselves.

Alright,” Niall said. “I’ll bite. What’s next?”

Harry thought quickly. “I’m going to get coffee, then I’m heading home. I’ll try keeping him occupied as long as I can.”

Niall chuckled. “Dirty minds, activate!”

“I’m not going to seduce the Prince, Niall,” Harry retorted. Then he grinned. “There must be some sort of international law against it.”

“If love’s a crime, throw me in jail,” Niall quipped tartly, and then added, “I’ll head over to yours now. I’ll tail him, see where he goes. Give me a signal, Harry, unless you’re too busy shagging.”

“Too busy fighting with him, more like,” Harry said. “He’s completely impossible. Gets what he wants, even though he’s obnoxious about it. He’s driving me bonkers.” Harry thought some more. “Seems to like me alright, though.”

Niall laughed. “Yeah, well. Who doesn’t?”

“Ha.” Harry had arrived at the café. He put Niall on hold while he ordered two double espressos to go.

“Harry,” Niall said. “What’s he like anyway, this Prince?”

Harry hesitated.

This morning, in the shower, he had been thinking about Louis in quite a different way. Now his feelings were conflicted, not all of them entirely pure. Harry wasn’t sure he could do the right thing for Louis, nor that he owed him anything. Louis was a public figure, a celebrity. Journalists only reported the news. They weren’t supposed to make it. Harry couldn’t be responsible for Louis’ indiscretions. He was an adult— a public figure. Harry wasn’t responsible for Louis. He didn’t owe him anything.

“He’s an adult,” Harry said. “He knows his responsibilities. Running away was his choice. It’s on him now.”
“It could be huge,” Niall said. “Huge for you, Harry. For us. Did you think about that? It could be journalism on a whole other level.”

“I know.”

Niall was right. Harry had been out of the game for three long years. His name didn’t come up for the big awards anymore. For too long, he had been taking himself out of the running. A story this big was another chance. Harry knew he was a good writer. With a long, sympathetic piece, he could get back into the game, plunge back into the adrenaline and the real news. He felt ready for it now.

“I’ll text you later, Niall.”

“See you soon, brother.”

Harry had arrived at his building. He unlocked the front entrance and sprinted up the stairs, hoping that Louis was still there, trying to balance the two espressos in his hands. The liquid felt as hot as the blood in his veins.

The flat seemed empty as he opened the door. All was quiet. Harry lifted his sunglasses and rested them atop his wavy curls. His nose beaded with sweat. His shirt was damp under the armpits and at his back.

The breakfast dishes were still on the counter, silverware on the plates, just as he’d left them, panhandle and spatula sticking out from the sink. The clothes on the bed were gone, and the towel was rumpled and damp on the bed. Harry surveyed the flat in a mild panic, worried that Louis had left. Eventually he spotted the open door to the balcony, propped slightly ajar with one of his shoes in the door jamb.

Harry breathed in a sigh of relief. Louis was sitting outside, looking toward the city, both feet propped precariously on the railing, rocking slowly back and forth. His hand was twirling something at the base of his neck—the charm, Harry realized, attached to a gold chain. He had it on last night, too. His damp hair blew in the breeze, reminding Harry of a soft, feathery sensation on his chin—when he’d fallen asleep on Harry’s chest. Stupidly, Harry brought his hand up to his chest, as if reassuring himself that he hadn’t hallucinated the memory. The espresso spilled out as it tilted. Harry quickly righted the cup.

He walked out onto the balcony, handing a coffee to Louis. “Don’t know how you like it,” he said. “So I got you a plain double. Hope it’s alright.”

“You’re very nice, Harry,” Louis said, beaming his gorgeous baby blues on him. “But I only waited to say goodbye.” He stood up, holding the coffee back to Harry. “Thanks for everything. I’ve had a brilliant time.”

“What?” Harry set the coffee down, his face flushed. “You can’t leave now.” He pulled out a chair, trying on his most sincere smile. “What’s the big hurry? Sit and finish your coffee.”

Louis’ eyes seemed to laugh. “I thought you wanted me gone? Thought you were ‘super important’ with your important things to do.”

“No, no,” Harry answered. He shook his wavy forelocks over his eyes and brushed it away with his right hand, off his forehead. “Forget that. Change of plans. That was earlier. I’m super unimportant now, terribly unimportant. A maggot, basically. Got loads of time for you.”

Louis picked up a coffee and took a sip, still standing. “A maggot! I’m flattered.”
“Yeah,” Harry said quickly. “No. I mean, I don’t want you to go. Want you to stay. Please.”

Louis craned his head to one side, squinting into the sun. The noises of Rome buzzed all around them: motor cars, buildings, the occasional faraway car horn. The sun was already blazing, a cloudless, blue-sky day.

Louis raised a hand up to shield his eyes. “It is a gorgeous day, isn’t it?”

In his mind, Harry estimated how much time had passed, and how much longer it would be for Niall to arrive.

“It is,” he smiled. “So stay for a while, Louis. I’m asking you to.”

Louis crossed his arms and turned his back on Harry, seemingly contemplating, as Harry waited patiently for him. When Louis turned around, he was playing with his charm again, twisting it in his fingers and rubbing the corners out of habit, as if he were touching a talisman. Harry sneakily tried to look at the charm. It resembled a miniature golden treasure chest, with a tiny, illegible engraving.

“If I were at home, I’d be getting a massage right now,” Louis wondered out loud. He hurried to add, “Isn’t it silly that I would think of that? I’m just so used to having a schedule. They rule my days, sad to say. Feels a little weird.”

“ Weird how?”

Harry was stalling for time, in his mind already composing the tell-all. Prince has no clue how to start a bath, reminisces about massage. All royals were massive mental cases, weren’t they? Their heads were up their well-kissed rear ends. They were entitled nut jobs, and he didn’t feel bad of this. So he kept telling himself.

“Doctor’s orders,” Louis said. “I get massages three times a week for my— um, condition. It’s part of my relaxation therapy.”

“What relaxation therapy?” Harry asked, just to keep him talking. “Why would you need something like that?”

Louis answered, “Well, I’m just not the best sleeper. I’ve got a problem.”

“So you said.”

“I have nightmares,” Louis continued. “Really, really bad ones. I used to wake up every night, screaming in my sleep. It was frightening… not just to me. To everyone around me.”

“Your mum and dad?”

“Um… no,” Louis answered, without elaboration. “They’re very vivid, bad dreams; sometimes I feel like someone’s chasing me, hunting me down. Sometimes I don’t sleep for days.”

Harry leaned on the building’s brick wall, glints of sunlight reflecting from his sunglasses. He knew the sun cast indelible shadows from the muscles in his shoulders and upper arms, and it made a pretty picture with the highlights in his curls. He saw Louis squinting, definitely a look of interest there. Harry quirked an eyebrow.

“Sounds awful,” he coaxed.
“Our family physician’s tried a lot of different remedies. So the latest thing he’s prescribed is kind of like, a comprehensive therapy,” Louis explained. “It’s their last resort. I swear I feel like I’m going crazy sometimes.”

“Do you?” Harry said. “You don’t look crazy to me, Louis. You look alright.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” Louis looked away from him. “The whole thing’s a huge production, like an international project, getting me to sleep. There are medicines and yoga and massage, and it takes a whole village.” Louis bit his lips, forcing out a feeble laugh. “Haha. Breaking from it feels almost criminal.”

Harry smiled. “You rebel.”

“You’d be surprised, Harry,” Louis said. “Sometimes things are more complicated than they appear. A lot of people depend on me. Maybe I’m not what you think I am.” Louis glanced up to see Harry carefully scrutinizing him, then added, “On second thought, I really better go.” He started moving toward the door.

“Hey.” Suddenly Harry’s hand shot out, holding Louis’ bicep. “Wait.”

“Why?”

Harry knitted his eyebrows, his hand pinning Louis’ arm. “Let me ask you. You didn’t have any nightmares last night, did you?”

Louis paused in thought. “You’re right. I didn’t.”

“You were out like a light,” Harry said. “You didn’t wake up at all. Not that I would know, I was so tired myself, woke up with a banger of a headache. But I didn’t hear a peep, no screaming or anything.”

“That’s true.” Louis shrugged. “I guess maybe therapy is working.”

Louis was close enough that Harry could feel his skin prickle under his hand. He dropped Louis’ arm and took a step back, leaving Louis a straight shot to the door. Louis could pass now, if he wanted to, could slip past Harry’s broad chest, past his slim hips and long legs, could just brush his hand on Harry’s firm tummy and push him to one side. But he hung back, and they both felt it, the reluctance.

About fifteen minutes had passed since Harry texted Niall. The Irishman should be pretty close, Harry thought.

“You know,” Harry blurted out. “It seems a shame for you to break your routine, Louis. Maybe I could do it.”

Louis looked up. “Do what?”

“Do you,” Harry repeated. “I could help you out, if you want.”

Louis was immobile for a second. “You could… do me?”

“Your massage,” Harry coughed. “What did you think I meant?”

“Oh!” Louis backed up a step. “Gosh, no, I mean—I wasn’t asking, Harry. I wasn’t implying that — ”

Louis swallowed. At the palace, his therapist came three times a week, a tough, middle-aged, Danish male massage therapist who regularly pounded his muscles until he could cry mercy. But to be pounded by a Tumbleweed, with a body like this, and a voice like this, was an entirely different thing. Louis finally shook his head.

“I appreciate the offer, Harry,” Louis said, putting his hand up. “But I really should go.” He began to make his way around Harry’s bulk.

Fidgeting, Harry turned his body sideways to let Louis pass, scrambling to think of something. Their bodies were wedged in the small space in front of the door. Louis could feel the heat of Harry’s damp hairs radiating from his shirt. Harry touched Louis’ biceps again, and Louis nearly jumped.

“Louis,” Harry said in a low voice. “You can’t have the whole world on your shoulders.”

“What?” Louis hesitated to look at Harry’s face; they were so close.

“You have to want something for yourself,” Harry said, breath warm on Louis’ temple.

Louis barely breathed. He held his head perfectly still so he could stare straight ahead, into Harry’s throat. He was trying to conceal everything behind shadows.

“You’re not a bad person,” Harry said, “if you want something for yourself. Nobody cares. The world won’t end. No one’s watching you right now, Louis. No one.”

Louis looked up to see Harry studying him, his green eyes flecked with gold in the sun. Harry continued, softer and with humor, “Besides, I’m really good at massages. Look at these hands!”

He took Louis’ right hand and held it in both of his. His thumb traced Louis’ palm and gently pushed down, creating a relaxing pressure point. Louis’ pulse quickened.

“See?” Harry smiled. “Got massive hands. I’m really good with them.”

Harry smelled like a sweaty, freshly showered boy mixed with espresso, encasing Louis in a manly mist. Louis was dizzy with warmth, his heart pounding like a kick drum.

Louis whispered, “Is there anything you’re not good at?”

“I’m shit at apologies,” Harry replied. “Sometimes shit at being a good person. But I do try.” His smile was deep and beguiling, and his dimples cratered into his cheeks. Their faces were so close, they could practically taste each other.

“Harry,” Louis said. “I want you to know that besides being the first man I’ve spent a night with, you’re also the first to ever offer me a massage.”

“What can I say?” Harry laughed. “I’m a versatile person.”

Clearing his throat, Louis said, “You’re one of the nicest people I’ve ever met.”

“Then you definitely don’t know me very well.” Harry put a hand on Louis’ shoulder. “Shall we?”

They came into the room, adjusting their eyes to the dark interior. Louis looked expectantly at Harry.
“Should we do it in the bed or on the sofa?”

Harry laughed loudly. “Wow. We could do it anywhere you want.”

“Oh, God. It did come out wrong, didn’t it?” Louis laughed in embarrassment. He crossed the room and sat on the bed, laughing. “I hate to be a pain, Harry, but the therapist always uses oil. They say it helps the muscles relax. I mean, it’s okay if you don’t have any.”

“I got you covered,” Harry said. “Literally.” He pulled his nightstand drawer open and dug through its contents—a giant bottle of lube, many shiny, red packets of condoms, a rubber chicken, his rings, pencil erasers, candy bars. Harry pushed aside the mess of tubes and pens and juggling balls, finally retrieving a brown glass bottle with a sepia label.

“Hmm—lavender-vanilla,” Harry read the label. “Someone must have left it here.” Uncapping it, he took a sniff, then passed it to Louis. “What do you think? Smells pretty good.”

Louis sniffed and nodded. He began to peel off his shirt.

Harry stopped him, “Louis, hang on.”

He walked over to his laptop and made a few clicks. A few British voices began speaking over strummed guitar chords.

“Something to set the mood,” Harry said.

Harry ran to the bathroom. After a few moments, he came out wrestling the cellophane off a new candle. He opened the desk drawer and took out an electric fire starter, the kind used to start grills. It was way bigger than necessary for a candle.

“It’s huge!” Louis remarked.

Harry smirked, “That’s what they all say.”

“Stop it!”

Harry lit the candle and set it on the desk. An electric guitar began picking out a string of blues harmonies, accompanied by a soft rock drumbeat.

Us and them
And after all we’re only ordinary men
Me and you
God only knows
It's not what we would choose to do

“That sounds really nice,” Louis smiled. He peeled off his shirt in one smooth stroke and dropped it to the ground. Then he unzipped his trousers and started pulling them off. “Is it alright if I’m nude? The massage therapist always does the whole body,” Louis said, blushing.

“Oh of course it’s alright!” Harry said, a tad too loud. “Listen, I run a strictly professional establishment. We have high standards. No funny business.”

Louis bit his lip shyly, turned around, took off his trousers and pants, and then plopped himself
belly-down on the bed, with Harry by his side. Harry poured a teaspoon of oil into his left palm, rubbing both hands in it, softening them and warming up the oil.

“Here goes,” he said. “One professional massage therapy, coming right up. Close your eyes.”

Louis did. He felt Harry’s thumbs start kneading between his shoulder blades, the warm oil working its way through his chest. In the darkness, Harry’s touch seemed to spread into his ribs, in his lungs and the air in between, so his whole chest was filled with a lavender-scented fragrance.

Harry’s palms cupped Louis’ shoulder blades and began a gentle rotation around the bone, working along the muscles and moving toward the neck. His thumbs and fingers kneaded the muscles at the base of the neck, breaking up the knots.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Mmm,” Louis purred. “Feels okay, I guess.”

“Told you.”

Harry began working the shoulders, seeing Louis’ gold necklace dangled under the hair at the nape of his neck. The hair was a darker color there, finer, curling like down around the neck muscles. They tickled the back of Harry’s hands.

“Harry,” Louis turned his neck back slightly.

“Mmm.”

“Can I ask you something? It might be a little bit personal.”

“I don’t know,” Harry kept massaging. “Try me.”

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.” Louis paused, and then asked, “I was looking around when you were gone, and I saw an award on your shelf. Why were you in Egypt?” He waited and listened, but Harry didn’t answer immediately. Louis pushed on. “Was it for work? Looks rather impressive.”

Louis felt Harry’s hands pause, and then continue to rub the oil into his shoulders with a slower pace.

“It was a while ago,” Harry said. “A long time ago. Yeah, I was there for some work.”

“What do you do, anyway? Are you a writer or something?”

Louis heard a sharp, soft intake of breath, but Harry’s hands were still moving.

“I do some travel writing,” Harry finally answered. “Take Brits around on adventures, bit of touring, that kind of thing. Right now I’m in between jobs.”

“Camping out in Rome?”

“Ha. You could say that.”

Louis smiled to himself, his eyes closed. “Rome is very romantic.”

“Is it?” Harry ran two fingers down Louis’ spine. “Have you been here before?”
“No, just since yesterday,” Louis said. What was left unspoken was the fact that Louis had spent most of his time here, in Harry’s flat.

Harry began working on the muscles on either side of Louis’ lower spine, just above the hips. Louis was rigid and strained there. Harry could feel him tense up with even a slight touch.

“Louis, mate,” he said, “soften up. You have to let your body yield. Go with the flow, you know? I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know.” Louis grimaced. He pictured himself relaxing, as his therapist had always asked him to, imagining a softness at the center of the body and using willpower to let it spread out. He relaxed his thighs and tried to feel malleable, like water.

He asked Harry, “Does your mother live in Rome?”

“In Naples,” Harry answered. “My stepdad does business in Italy, so they’re constantly in Rome. They live on a hillside in Naples. It’s nice, actually. Right by the ocean.”

“Sounds lovely.”

“It is,” Harry said. “Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I go to mum’s house to get away.”

“Overwhelmed?” Louis smiles to himself. “I thought you were just camping out? Why are you so stressed out?”

Harry laughed. He poured a dollop of oil on Louis’ lower back, in the dimple above the buttocks. Using his fingers, he traced the oil outward in spirals, softening the skin all around.

“Touché, Princess,” he chuckled. “To get away from everything, I guess. When the city gets to be too much.”

“You’re a Tumbleweed.” It was out before Louis could stop himself.

“What?”

Harry didn’t notice the amusement in Louis’ voice. If he did, he didn’t show it.


“You’d be surprised,” Harry said, his voice wistful. “I’m not what I seem either, Louis.”

“Why? Do you have ties to someone?” Louis raised his head and turned back halfway. Harry gently pressed him back down. “Sorry. I hope I’m not being too nosy.”


“Oh.” Louis felt a funny lurching in his stomach. “You are?”

“Now.” Harry gave Louis’ thighs a tap. “I’m going to work on your bottom half.”

Louis’ buttocks contracted of their own accord. He ducked his head down as his whole face flushed red. His toes curled up anyway, and Louis knew that Harry had seen them. He laid his cheek sideways on the pillow, trying to take slow, deep, yoga breaths.

“Okay,” he squeaked. “Ready.”
Louis tried hard to concentrate on not clenching, moving, or doing anything out of the ordinary. His cock lay against his groin, chubbing up if only from nerves. He squeezed his buttocks and felt the cock twitch into the mattress—hard, but hopefully still dry. Louis tucked his head down in praying position, trying to remember the soothing chants that did not remind him of Harry’s lips and his huge hands moving over his body.

He felt Harry put one giant palm on each butt cheek, and slowly rock the cheeks in parallel, forward and back. The bastard knew what he was doing alright. He rocked in a slow, steady rhythm, back and forth, moving Louis’ groin up and down, pressing in just so. Louis felt his cheeks spread apart and come together, Harry’s thumbs just in the creases underneath.

“You’re very firm,” Harry said in a smirking, knowing voice. “These babies haven’t been worked on for a while, I bet.”

“Uh… couple of days,” Louis stuttered.

“You need to get them worked on more often,” Harry said. He was using two thumbs to knead the middle of the cheeks now, prying them apart slightly with each movement. “They’re so tight.”

“I—”


His thumb pressed in from the bottom of each cheek, pushing toward the small of Louis’ back. The back and forth motion was both arousing and relaxing. Even as Louis’ erection got harder, he felt more at ease. He tried not to make any rutting movements in the bed, holding himself absolutely still. Involuntarily, he hummed from the pleasure of it, deep in his chest, feeling his body slowly sinking toward the center of the earth.

Harry moved his thumbs down to the back of the thighs and started working on the hamstrings, following the direction of the muscles, cupping them in the enormous warm, oily softness of his hands. He nudged Louis’ legs apart and followed the contours around each thigh, leaning in with his body to work the gluteus muscles at the bottom. He traced them down the thighs, pressing the outer quads all the way to the concavities behind the knees. Louis exhaled slowly and felt a gentle tingle all over his upper legs and buttocks. He must have perked his bum in the air, because Harry cupped his arse under the rim on each side.

“You’re quite a handful, Pemberley, even for hands as big as mine.”

“Harry—” By now, Louis was as hard as a rock. He might start moaning if he wasn’t careful. “Could you please—”

“Right. Back to business.”

Harry pressed his thumb into the dimple at the base of Louis’ spine. He traced it up Louis’ back, feeling the skin prickle with goosebumps along the way, and then stood back to admire his work. Louis’ skin was flushed pink all over and slightly shiny from the oil. Frankly, he looked good enough to eat.

Harry picked up the trousers from the ground and threw them on top of the “later” pile. He walked over to the dresser and picked out a new pair, made of a satiny, thin material so Louis’ assets could be better appreciated.

“All better, I hope,” Harry said. “Did I live up to expectations?”
“It was satisfactory,” Louis cleared his throat several times. “Now can you turn around while I get dressed?”

Obediently, Harry turned around, even putting his hands over his eyes. Louis hurried into the trousers, blushing with exasperation as the material clung to him. Glaring at the back of Harry’s head, he turned around to push his erection down, then gave his cock a painful squeeze to make the erection go away. Then he zipped them up as fast as he could.

Eyes still covered, Harry said, “Now it’s my turn, Pemberley. Do I get a question?”

Despite his self-control, Louis winced. “What do you want to know?”

Clearing his throat, Harry pointed. “You keep playing with that necklace. Why do you do that?”

Louis put his shirt on and tucked his charm in, reflexively feeling the smoothed over corners. Once in the shirt, he patted the charm through the fabric to make sure it was there.

“No, it’s okay,” Louis said, meeting Harry’s eyes. “It was a long time ago. They died in an accident, when I was fifteen.” He took the charm out to show Harry. “I got the necklace for myself, so I can remember all the sacrifices they made, and the people I have to take care of.”

Harry came forward for a closer look. The tiny golden box was engraved with tinier Greek letters, with an ornamental clasp carved in front. The corners had been rounded over by constant touch.

“That sounds serious. How many people do you have to take care of?”

Louis’ eyes crinkled. “Many.”

“What does it say?” Harry gently touched the tiny engraved letters. Still holding the necklace, he leaned in to take a closer look at it, and got a whiff of the floral massage oil. Louis smelled like a field of wild lavender flowers.

“The charm is supposed to be Pandora’s box.” Louis looked up. “From Greek mythology. Do you know it?”

“The box that kept all the bad stuff in?” Harry’s breath tickled Louis’ skin. Louis could see the wispy blond whiskers on Harry’s top lip, like a frosty smear of beer. Louis nodded. “As long as no one opened the box. The myth says that it was a gift from the gods. Pandora opened the box out of curiosity, then all the bad things that plague humankind— sickness, death, jealousy— all that, came flying out. She couldn’t stop it.”

“Horse was out of the barn.” Harry smiled.

“Killed the cat,” Harry’s raspy voice crawled along the air between them.

“Well, it’s just a story,” Louis laughed nervously, tucking the charm back into his shirt. He backed away, turning a quarter turn. “An old myth. It’s not, you know, real. Curiosity is human nature.
The box is just a fairytale.”

“But you believe it.” Harry circled around to Louis. He stood in front of Louis, looking down at his bare throat, then reaching out to touch him down the muscles of his neck. Louis flinched. “That’s why you keep playing with the charm.”

Harry’s eyes were so bright that for a second, Louis felt as if he were falling into them, as if he had lost his footing. He took a step back to regain his balance, blinking to clear his mind.

“Hope,” Louis said quickly. “That’s what the letters say, on the charm. Hope was the last thing in Pandora’s box. It’s in Greek.”

“Hope?” Harry repeated.

“Mm,” Louis turned away, his face mottled with blushes. He felt dizzy, his pulse quickening for no reason at all. “I really should go. Thanks for everything, Harry Styles. I mean it. I’m really glad we met.” He began walking to the door. “I really like you. You’re a good person.”

Harry wondered whether that was, in fact, true. “Wait,” he said. “You need some money to get home, don’t you?”

“Oh!” Louis turned around. “Right. I didn’t even think about that.”

“I know,” Harry said, somewhat to Louis’ surprise.

Harry crossed over to retrieve his wallet. “Let’s see. There’s seventy Euros here. That should get you across town.” He handed the money to Louis, the last bit of cash he had.


Harry smiles endearingly. “Via Margenta 51.”

Louis stared for a few seconds into space, his eyes concentrating. “Via Margenta 51. Got it. I’m going to pay you back with interest.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Harry said, giving him an amiable wave. “Just get home safely, yeah? You know where you’re going?”

“I’ll manage,” Louis said. “Thanks.”

“Take care of yourself, you mystery man.” Harry bit back a smile, wanting to say more but shaking his head slightly, no. “I hope your life is full of kidnappings… I mean, adventures.”

“Same thing, isn’t it?” Louis smiled. “And yours as well. Full of surprises.”

As Louis turned the door handle, Harry called out, “Oh hey, by the way!”

Louis turned around.

Harry said, “I hope your first kiss turns out to be fantastic.”

Louis’ eyes squinted hard, as if trying to read Harry’s mind, to gauge whether he was joking.

“What did you say?”
“In the car last night,” Harry said, amused. “You were falling asleep, and you were mumbling. I heard you saying you’d never been kissed.”

“Did I?” Louis said defensively, his face twitching. “I must have been hallucinating.” He added, “Because I have been kissed. Loads of times. Lots and lots. I don’t know why I said that.”

“Sorry then,” Harry said. “My mistake.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Louis murmured. “I’m— I’m— twenty-four, I— ”

“It’s fine,” Harry pushed on. “In all honesty, though, you need a good kiss, Louis. By someone who knows how to do it.”

“I— ” Louis’ blush was absolutely intense now. “Who would that be?”

“Hope it turns out to be someone special.” Harry shrugged, watching him closely. “That’s all. You deserve it.”

Louis stood at the precipice of the doorway, his face a mixture of emotions, hiding all of his secrets.

“You too,” he said. “I guess. Hope you find someone special to kiss. Or hang out with, or whatever.”

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll meet again someday,” Harry smiled. He walked over to Louis. “Maybe I’ll kidnap you for real. I’ll provide the food next time.”

Louis could reach out and touch him, just like that. Harry was real. He was right there. He could pull him in.

“Maybe,” Louis said quietly. “You never know, Tumbleweed.”

He turned around, opened the door, and closed it behind himself. Harry heard his steps fading, until he couldn’t hear them anymore. On an impulse, he yanked the door open and ran out to the stairwell, shouting down the middle of the winding staircase.

“Louis!”

His voice echoed around the metal banisters in the stairwell, pinging from the hard spaces. Harry waited until he heard the footsteps halt. Louis’ face appeared at the banisters, looking up at him.

“I like you!” Harry shouted, heedless of how he might sound. His words were loud enough to fill the entire staircase, and craggy like a lizard’s loud hiss on a hot rock. It sounded ridiculous, terrible. Even from far away, he could see Louis’ expression soften, his eyes crinkle. “If you were wondering!”

“You do?”

“Yeah! I do! I like you!” Harry repeated. “In case there was any confusion.” His heartbeat quickened inside his throat, making him sound breathless.

“Okay!” Louis shouted back. “Got it.”

After a while, Louis drew back again, and his steps began echoing down the stairs. Harry returned to his flat, shutting the door against his back. He leaned against it, thinking of Louis’ bemused, skeptical expression. Then he quickly crossed the small living space to the balcony, and stepped
outside.
Chapter 4

Heartbreaks, the heavy world's upon your shoulders
Will we burn on or just smolder?
Somehow I know I'll find you there
Ooh, you wanna see if you can change it, change it
Still I know I'll see you there
Come a little closer, then you'll see
Come on, come on, come on
Things aren't always what they seem to be

Cage the Elephant

Pick up, Niall. Pick up. Pick up.

Cradling his phone, Harry leaned against the back wall of the balcony to hide himself from the street view. A few minutes had passed since Louis left his flat. Harry thought it would take a little longer for Louis to make his way down the flights of stairs.

Niall’s voice suddenly burst into his ear. “I’m here, boyo.” He sounded breathless. “Traffic was a nightmare, took forever. Has he left your flat?”

Harry grumbled, “Where’ve you been?”

“Do not get snippy with me!” Niall chastised softly. “You try finding a parking space in your neighborhood!”

Harry sighed. “Louis’ just left. He should be coming out any moment.”

Niall loud-whispered, “Oh, so it’s Louis now, lover boy?”

“Will you zip it,” Harry said, softly chewing the inside of his cheek. “Are you getting a good view of the front door? Think you can recognize him?”

“I’m not clairvoyant, am I? Tell me what he’s wearin’.”

“Oh for God’s sakes, you’ve seen his pictures!” Harry tried not to sound exasperated. “What kind of shit photojournalist are you? Anyway, here he comes with my KISS concert shirt.”

Niall, in an exaggerated stage whisper, “You did not. Your vintage KISS concert tee shirt?”

“So?”


“Yeah?”

“Seriously, H,” Niall giggled. “It’s a shitty thing to do to a normal man, let alone a Prince.”

Harry took a few small steps forward, trying to sneak a peek over the ledge of the balcony. Eventually, he saw Louis’ compact figure emerge from the building, the too-big shirt billowing
around his upper body, his arms as thin as a puppet’s. Louis was checking the street from end to end.

“There he is,” Harry said in a low voice. “Coming out now. D’you see him?”

“’Course I see him. The shirt’s loud enough to make my eyes bleed.” Niall whistled softly. “Might as well paint a big target on his back.”

Harry snorted. “That was my plan.”

“Brilliant. Well, I’m on him now. Wish me luck.” There was a moment of silence, then Niall’s voice sounded again. “Hey, Harry.”

“Hmm?”

“Your Prince Louis is a fine looking specimen of male *Homo sapien*, if I must say so myself. Did you notice that?”

“You watch your mouth,” Harry said, feigning annoyance. “It’s the shirt, Niall. Everyone looks good in *Hot ‘N Hard*. Have you checked your eyes?”

“Trust me, my eyes are fine. Right now they’re locked on your boy’s scrummy profile. And those guns… woo! All hands on deck, ye know what I mean? Anyway,” Niall laughed again, the street noises roaring in, “don’t worry. This one’s not my type— bit on the scrawny side, and too juicy in the hind end. He’s more like your type, though, in’t he? Bite-sized pudding.”

“Please.”

Harry waited silently, not bothering to dignify Niall with more. Meanwhile, he heard Niall’s camera shutter clicking away rapidly in the background. Harry assumed that Niall was taking photos; he could also imagine the headline to come: *Prince of Doncaster Spends Night at Mysterious Private Address.* Even as Niall snapped away, Harry’s insides roiled with conflicting feelings. He was seeing Louis’ last expression as he left the flat, soft and sweet, his voice curious and hopeful. Raising his right hand, Harry chewed on the cuticle of his thumb.

Niall’s voice broke through his thoughts. “I can always spot ‘em a mile away, you know. Your cute little crushes.”

“He’s a *story*, Niall,” Harry said. “Try to be a professional, yeah? Just for one day.” Harry could almost see Niall smirking below, and heard a few more shutter clicks. “Anyway, I don’t mix work and play.”

“Whatever, wanker,” Niall said. “When should I call you?”

“Hmm. I do need to stop by and talk to Courtney this morning.”

“Aye, tread lightly. She’ll be a sore one!”

Harry paused. “She’ll be angry about the story’s being delayed, for sure. It was her lead story, after all. *Our* lead story.”

Courtney Thompson was their editor in Rome. She bought and sold freelance stories to the major papers, and Harry was one of the few reliable, experienced journalists she counted on. Both Harry and Niall knew her well enough to know she wouldn’t pass up on this story.
“She’ll be livid,” Niall laughed. “Just don’t feed the wild beast, you know what I mean.”

“Got it.” Harry glanced at his phone. “So what do you think, maybe in an hour?”

“Sounds good,” Niall said. “I’ll text you if anything happens.”

“Right, then. Happy trails.”

“Right.”

Just as Harry clicked off, a text popped up on his mobile, showing a photo of the Louis, one that Niall must have just taken. It was a profile view—not the clearest angle, since Niall must have done it quickly—but unmistakably him.

Harry peeked down the street to catch Louis jogging across in the morning sun, his lithe figure lovely on the horizon, as graceful as a butterfly. Harry shook his head, reminding himself to stay on goal. He couldn’t see Niall, which was just as well, because it probably meant that Louis couldn’t see him, either. He was out there though, seeing, documenting. Following.

Louis was strolling along, dazed by everything around him. He stopped to check the concert posters tacked on the walls in rows, and then paused at the end of the block, where there was a water spigot emerging from the sidewalk.

The Roman spigots carried purified water down the mountains via the aqueducts, just like in ancient days. Harry watched as Louis slowly approached the dark spigot and gently lay his hand on it, as if touching a child. Even from where he stood, Harry could feel Louis’ sense of anticipation, his whole body alert with curiosity. He saw Louis bend over to catch a sip in his mouth, and then let the liquid drip down his neck. Wiping his mouth with the back of a hand, Louis tilted his head up to savor the sun’s rays. Harry felt his joy as palpably as a summer breeze.

A crease deepened between Harry’s eyebrows.

He turned and crossed the threshold into his studio apartment, his vision hazily adjusting to the darkness.

Blindly grabbing his keys and wallet, he was heading toward the door when the call came through on his mobile. The ringtone alerted him that his mother was calling him on FaceTime. Harry stopped in his tracks, checked himself and grinned.

“Mum.” Despite being a journalist who had covered gruesome stories of state-sponsored violence and civilian rebellion, Harry felt like a six-year-old boy whenever Anne called. Waving lightly to her, he said, “Hold a sec. Let me put you up on the monitor.”

“Good morning, darling.”

“Morning.”

Anne wavered, “Is this a good time? I can ring back later, if it’s bad.”

“No, no,” Harry answered, plugging his phone in to charge. “It’s fine. Give me a moment.”

Harry plopped down on the seat and clicked on the laptop. Anne’s face showed up on screen, an older and softer version of himself, with the same dimpled smile and large, bright, astonished eyes, the same sharp chin and mischievous expression. Looking like a teen girl, Anne had on a wide-brimmed, ribboned hat and a white poplin top with spaghetti straps, the blue sky high behind her,
pots of vibrant red and orange flowers all around.

Harry recognized it as her Naples balcony, facing the sea. He moved himself into the computer’s frame, sitting up a little straighter as he noticed himself slouching.

“Busy day, darling?” Anne asked in her fluid, reassuring voice. She was sipping lemonade with a wedge of lemon from a full crystal glass. Her garden was full of lemon trees.

“Was just headin’ out,” Harry said. “It’s alright, though. I’ve got time. What’s going on, mum?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah yeah, I’m sure,” Harry exhaled. “Actually, I’ve got more time than I thought. My assignment just got cancelled, last minute.”

Anne took on a look of concern. “Cancelled? Why cancelled?”

“Long story,” Harry answered, waving a hand. “It’s not that important, really. We had an interview — important interview — but the person we were supposed to interview got food poisoning. Allegedly. Anyway, they’ve been rescheduled.”

“Food poisoning! Is it serious, then? Was it anyone important?” She added in a lower voice, “Anyone I might know?” She winked. “Do I get to hear about it?”

Harry’s turned his eyes away on reflex. He was used to it by now, his journalistic instinct kicking in by default. He Blake, as he was trained. He was used to bluffing, and he knew that Anne knew his game face.

“Nah. Nothing interesting.” Blinking, Harry tried to look bored, his fingers mindlessly playing with his bottom lip. Meanwhile, a pair of brilliant, gemlike blue eyes drifted into his mind.

“I see,” Anne teased him. “It is juicy then. I knew it! Will the girls and I be chatting about it over brunch on Sunday?”

Harry burst out laughing. “I’m sure I don’t know what you old biddies chat about.”

“Oh, stop it! Is it a British celebrity then?”

“No, mum. You’ll read about it when you read about it.” Harry deflected. “Could be terrifically boring, for all you know.”

Anne smiled, shaking her head. “Doubtful. Your writing is always lovely, Harry.”

“Hmm. I feel like there might be some inherent bias in that statement.”

“You’re too modest,” Anne tsked. “You know you’re a fine writer, sweetie. You should give yourself more credit. And all those journalism awards seem to agree. You know what I mean, those ones given by your peers.” She gave him an encouraging smile. Harry looked away, not wanting her pity. He heard a distant voice call to Anne as she answered, “Out on the patio, darling! I’m talking to Harry.”

Soon the broad, ruddy face of his stepfather Robin popped up next to Anne’s.

“Hullo, sunshine!” Robin wiped across his brow with a white handkerchief.

Harry smiled broadly. “Robin! How are ya?”
“We’ve just been to the arboretum, your mum and I, and I’d wager we bought half the nursery.” He took a deep, long-suffering breath. “She’s a right slave driver, Harry. Works a man to the bone.” Harry grinned.

Ann nudged him. “Rubbish. You hardly ever break a sweat.” She held up her empty glass, jiggling the ice cubes. “Would you mind getting me a refill, darling, since you’re up?”

“You see, Harry? This will be your fate one day.” Robin took the glass out of her hand and set it down firmly. “How they will abuse you, once they’ve got you tied down.”

Harry shook his head affectionately as Robin draped his gloved hand around Anne’s chair, leaning in to see Harry better.

“Harry was just telling me about a super secret assignment.” Anne turned toward Robin, filling him in. “He won’t even give me a tiny hint.”

“Hush hush, is it?”

“We’re not even supposed to ask,” Anne added.

“It’s really good then!” Robin inched his chair closer. “Is one of the royals having an adulterous affair or summat?”

Harry sputtered loudly, vigorously clearing his throat. “No, no. It’s nothing like that.”

“Well, they are a funny lot,” Robin said. “All those outlandish stories to keep us commoners paying taxes, while they gallivant about, sleeping with servants, having babies out of wedlock and whatnot.”

“They’re not all bad,” Harry muttered. “Some are quite nice, actually.”

“Harry,” Anne leaned forward, her forehead and nose widened by her mobile’s lens. “Will we get to see you this summer? I’ve been missing you terribly.”

“Yeah, I’m sure, mum,” Harry forced himself to sound cheerful. “My schedule doesn’t look bad. I should have a break soon. We have the whole summer, you know.” The Italian sunshine did seem to stretch for days at a time. Harry added guiltily, “Miss you too.”

“You look thin, darling,” Anne said. Harry quirked his mouth, having nothing to say. “Have you lost weight?”

“I don’t think so.” Harry pushed his hair away from the forehead, his hand sweeping across his eyes. “Hmm. I don’t know. Don’t really keep track.”

Since moving to Rome, Harry rarely paid attention to his meals. He grabbed food when he could, going to bed many nights without a proper dinner. Some evenings he would sit with friends, listening to their stories, picking at the food he ordered, never eating more than eight or nine bites. His clothing fell at the hips, the waistband catching on his angular pelvis. His eyes shone with a hollow brightness, which he attributed to a lack of sleep.

“Are you getting enough rest? Do you need money?”

Harry thought about the last spare cash which he had just given to Louis, and then pushed the thought away.
“Stop worrying, mum. I’m getting paid regularly. I can afford my flat.” He cast his eyes down, smiling wickedly. “And besides, if worse comes to worst, I can always ask my friends to couch surf. I’m pretty sure not all of them sell drugs or launder money.”

“Oh God, Harry,” Anne gasped. “Don’t even joke about that. You know I worry about you enough!”

Robin cackled. “You’re giving her a good excuse to come drag you home, lad.”

“Both of you stop worrying,” Harry insisted. “I’m an adult, and a hard bitten journalist, remember? I miss you very much too. I’ll try to come when I have time.”

“To Naples?”


Anne’s eyes deepened into a frown. “Why ever not?”

“And don’t call her Shirley,” Robin added.

“If I show up at your doorstep,” Harry smiled, “it’ll mean I’ve given up. Remember I spent that year bumming around the world by train? I’ll figure it out. I always do. I’m resourceful, mum.” He cleared his throat deeply. “I’ve been about.”

“Oh, you heard him, Anne. He’s a big grown man!” Robin turned to Anne. His hand reached out to brush a hair away from her temple, golden in the sun. “He’s been about! Lad’s grown three chest hairs, suddenly has no need for parents!”

“Whatever the circumstances,” Anne turned around, her eyes boring through Harry’s. “I’m here for you. You know that, Harry. You can barge in here with absolutely no warning. You’re always welcome.” She blinked, then brushed at the corner of her eye. “We love you.”

Harry glanced down, then looked back up. “Yeah. Love you too.”

“Come on, lad,” Robin interjected. “Sure you can’t give us a hint?” Anne slapped him on the forearm, but he turned to wink at her. “You can trust us. Your mum and I are like MI-6, aren’t we. Absolutely on the lock down.”

“Very funny,” Harry said. “That’s not what they say, by the way.”

“Well, we’re practically the Swiss vault of information.”

Harry smiled. “Actually, it did start off a boring assignment, but I think it’s turned a corner.”

Robin grinned. “It’s going to be a headliner, innit? I can feel it in me bones.”

“Well, you didn’t hear it from me,” Harry said coyly. “Anyway, I’m off. See you soon, I hope?”

Anne kissed her fingers and waved. “Goodbye, darling. Love you.”

“Love you, Harry,” Robin added. “Get some meat on those bones. That’s an order.”

“Right.” Harry smiled as Anne waved and Robin gave him a thumbs up. “Love you more.”

Turning off FaceTime, Harry put the monitor to sleep mode and turned on his mobile. There were
no messages. He sat staring at the blank screen for a pause, and then opened his contacts to Courtney Thompson’s number and called.

Five rings went by. Six. Harry was ready to hang up when she finally picked up.

“Speak.” Courtney always went straight to the point.

“Courts? It’s Harry Styles.”

“Styles.” She was on speaker phone. The background buzzed with ambient noises, whirring fans and staticky air, the nervous energy palpable through the line. “I’ve not got the rescheduled time yet. The embassy said maybe sometime this afternoon. I have my assistant working on it, but no deets so far. Where are you?”

Courtney Thompson’s thoughts came in torrents, flushing through the air like an army of hornets. She was always impeccably put together, hair in a Wintour bob, crisp, rectangular glasses, tailored jacket. Her outer calm belied a vast inner appetite for the news. She was assertive, probing, impatient.

“I’m home, but listen,” Harry said. “Are you busy today?”

He was met with a rare moment of silence, followed by a scoff. “Are you having a right laugh, Styles. When am I not busy?”

“I’ve got something,” Harry continued. “I’d like to talk to you about it.” He held his breath, waiting. “In person.”

“What’re you on about?” Courtney’s voice now sounded farther away, distracted. In the background, Harry heard the rapid clicking of a computer mouse. She was scrolling through the news feed, probably only half paying attention to him. “What is it you can’t tell me over the phone? Tell me now.”

“In person,” Harry insisted, his voice sounding like a gavel. “Is it alright if I come by?”

“What have you got?” Harry could hear the slight upward catch of her voice. He’d gotten her attention.

Harry drew in a breath and prepared his words carefully. “It’s about the cancelled interview,” he said. He heard a pregnant silence in the other end. “From today, with the Prince of Doncaster. You’ll want to hear it, I promise.”

“Are you taking the piss, darling? Because if you are, I will personally—”

“Courts, be nice,” Harry reassured her calmly. “You’re the first person I’ve talked to, and no one else. You know why? Because I love you. And trust you. And vice versa, right?”

“You are not to call me ‘Courts,’ Harry Styles.” Her voice was stern and admonishing. “First of all, it’s not my name. My friends call me Courtney, and it’s always Ms. Thompson to you.” Harry’s lips slowly curled up, smiling. Courtney Thompson was old school, but she was still as quick as any young whippersnapper; she could hold her own in a fight. “What have you got, anyway? Stop teasing. You have a verified source?”

Harry chuckled. “As verified as it’s possible to be. You’ll want this story.”

He heard her exhale loudly, pausing forever in the Courtney Thompson universe, which was two to
three seconds. The computer monitor hummed noisily in the background while the clicking completely halted.

“Can you be here in an hour?” she asked.

“I can be there now.”

“You’ve always been good on your word, Styles,” she said. “A rock star. I can count on you, can’t I? Don’t make me hate myself.”

“You won’t be disappointed,” Harry said. “Promise… Ms. Thompson, ma’am.”

“Call me ma’am again, I’ll cut your balls off,” she said curtly. “And serve them on a platter. See you in a few.”

“Yes, ma’am. In a few.”

•••••

For three long seconds, Louis thought he might head straight back to the embassy. Imagining Liam’s frantic face made him feel slightly guilty, for putting him in that difficult position. Joseph Gates was probably now trying to stall Anesidora with a furious efficiency. Gates was good at his job, Louis knew.

What difference would one day make, anyway? What difference, at all?

His whole life was planned to the second, and would be until the moment of his death. Louis shaded his eyes, looking down the broad boulevard. The road was wide open, its doors and alleyways beckoning to him.

A squat bus with large, open windows rambled down the street and began to slow down. On impulse, Louis hopped on with a mob of other people—destination unknown, fare impossible to figure out. Most of the passengers walked past the driver without even stopping. Louis glanced at his trouser pocket, feeling Harry’s euros snug and hot against his palm, the prospect of not knowing what to pay making him mildly anxious. He decided to stroll casually to the back, blend in with other frazzled tourists and go wherever the bus took him. The driver let him pass without a word.

It was hot and stifling inside, the morning humidity dialing up like an oven, skins shiny with perspiration and tempers simmering. Some children whined about the heat, fanning themselves with their puffy, flaccid hands. The adults stared into nothingness and tried not to make contact with the person next to them. The air smelled like oranges and dirt, the red Roman dust motes swirling in the sunbeams, stray light reflecting from metallic surfaces and refracting into tiny rainbows on the floors and ceilings. Louis grabbed a lukewarm metallic post, swaying with the staccato motion of the bus, its creaks and groans pure music. His body vibrated with adventure.
Whenever the bus made stops, clots of passengers would disgorge and another pink-faced crowd pile on. Between ochre churches and nondescript buildings outside, Louis would occasionally glimpse dark, narrow alleys here and there, some shuttered storefronts, chained bicycles and fire hydrants. He recognized nothing, not the cobbled sidewalks, nor the arching streetlights, not even the slatted bench on which he had sought refuge last night. It was all a brand new to him. Early pedestrians—tourists, most likely—walked along with wilted maps in their hands. Between street corners, Louis would sometimes catch the blinding light of spacious squares in the distance, dotted with tiny pedestrians, cafes, and somber, elegant marble monuments and fountains.

They soon turned onto a large boulevard, the Via Cavour, flanked on both sides by tall buildings in shades of marigold and spice, casting their shadows into the thick traffic. Cars and trucks crawled along slowly, their horns blasting through the syrupy silence.

They turned a corner, and, as if a magic switch had been thrown, people woke up, turning their heads collectively in one direction. Louis followed their gaze. Like the opening images of a widescreen cinema, the looming hulk of the ancient Colosseum came into view, her calm, ordered arches squeezing bursts of happiness from Louis’ chest. He briefly panicked when the bus passed it. Then, as they approached the stop, he tapped impatiently for others to get off, before jumping off the bus himself.

As soon as he got closer to the Colosseum, a man dressed as a Roman centurion approached him, speaking in Italian-accented English.

“"A photo, five euros?” he asked.

“Sorry?” Louis jumped, wondering whether he’d been recognized. “No, no. I don’t do candid photos.”

The man stared at him, waiting.

Louis elaborated. “I can’t. I’m very sorry, my good man. The palace has very strict rules about photos with commoners, and—well, thank you. No. I am in no state for an official or even candid photo. Perhaps another time. You may go.” He put up his right hand and waved him off.

The centurion shrugged, scanned around, finally settled on an American family eyeing him with fascination.

Someone else brushed into Louis, and then turned to dangle a chain of postcards in front of him, showing pictures of empty piazzas and classic buildings with immaculately manicured flower beds, spotless blue skies.

“One euro, sir,” the vendor barked, gaps between his blackened teeth. “You like? Only one euro. Beautiful pictures. You see?”

Louis observed everything with confusion and interest. He spun around, seeing a few curious stares at his shirt, and feeling the sun’s heat like a blow torch. He made his way into the shade of the building, closer to the gates, and merged into a large group of tourists. A tour guide was speaking in measured English.

“The wealthy patrons would sit low, closer to the action, yes? And the commoners would sit in the cheaper, nosebleed sections, higher up. They brought their own food, because the tournaments would last all day, sunrise to sundown.” She paused, checking on the crowd. “So we find a lot of artifacts when we dig into the ruins, including animal bones. Some were animals killed in the arena. Of course some exotic animals were from far away, and therefore expensive, never killed in
combat but were only for show. Like elephants. And lions? They were actually transported here. But from where? Does anybody want to guess?”

“Africa?” An adolescent boy ventured softly.

“Yes!” she said. “And crocodiles. There were huge mock-ups of important battles, with ships and infantry and cavalry. The arenas were even flooded for sea battles. Can you imagine? And then we find some small animal bones in the ground below the cheap seats. Many, many small bones. Does anyone have a guess as to what they might be?”

“Dogs?”

“Squirrels?”

“Birds?”

“All very good guesses,” she said. “You are all so smart! Just like today, the Romans enjoyed a nice roast chicken, and theater goers do get hungry. And these were chicken bones! The hoi polloi couldn’t always afford the snacks sold on the premises, right? So, what do you do if you can’t afford the popcorn at the cinema?”

The tourists laughed.

“They brought their own!” someone shouted.

“Allora. So they brought their own grapes, their wines, their figs and chickens, and when they were done——” She flicked her fingers over her shoulders. “They threw the rubbish to the ground below. Two thousand years later, voilà. We have our archeology.”

“Where did they keep elephants?” a tall boy asked.

“There were large pens to keep animals underground,” she said. “Temporarily, of course. We will see them in a bit. You can imagine the smell, in the heat, like today? Coming to a show was the only way for some people to see these animals. They were exotic, from another continent, like dragons or unicorns to us. The animals never survived very long in Ancient Rome. They were too fragile, and people didn’t know how to take care of them.”

“They died?” a tiny girl, six or seven-years-old, asked sadly.

“Exotic animals don’t do well in captivity, I’m afraid,” the guide said. “Today we will see some of their bones. And you will see an underground section where their cages were, and the walkway where they came into the Colosseum. Come. Let’s go this way.” She put her hand out and ushered the group forward.

Louis hung back, dazed by the surreal feeling of being here. It was he who felt out of place, and not the Colosseum, which seemed to be rooted utterly to this ground and this space.

The emperors of Rome were all gone, their power in ashes, their spectacles crumbled. They, too, were slaves to their ambition. The great Romans lived and died to rule the world, they built roads and bridges across universes, their temples summoned the gods. Yet what the world loved, and what was passed on, were stories about families sharing roast chicken.

The Roman emperors entered the city on lavish chariots, down the Via Appia, as their hired slaves whispered into their ears, “You are mortal.”
A moment of darkness passed through Louis’ mind. In the green shadows came the fleeing deer, the pursuing crowd, the mad cacophony of the masses bearing down on him. He wanted to run, was running in his mind, was tripping over his feet in his haste to get to water, to green arms waiting to pull him under, to pull him to safety. Louis blinked rapidly, trying to breathe, his chest too shallow and slow. He looked down at his feet and willed them to move, and finally, he was able to raise one foot after the other. Eventually, he began walking away.

“Courts.” Harry walked into the room, seeing only the top of her face behind the computers. “Stop slacking off.”

Without taking her eyes off the computer, and with one hand scribbling into a notepad, Courtney Thompson motioned with her chin for him to sit down. She continued working silently for a few more minutes, and then closed the laptop and pushed it to one side.

“So,” she said.

“And good morning to you!” Harry flopped into an armchair next to the desk, his arms flung out. “Yes, I’d love a cuppa, thanks. Black, no milk or sugar. Make it strong, please?”

Courtney gave him a no-nonsense, solemn look, pausing for effect. Harry shifted in his seat and briskly cleared his throat.

He straightened up. “Alright. Anyway, about the Prince.” His eyes met hers.

“The Prince?”

“Prince Louis of Doncaster?”

“This isn’t twenty questions, Harry,” she said impatiently. “Spit it out.”

Harry laughed. “Well, it turns out he might not be as sick as some people think.”

She took off her glasses and pinched the corners of her eyes, then checked the lenses for smudges. She gave him her full attention only when she was completely satisfied.

“Shall we not beat around the bush?” Her manner was brusque and serious. “Please don’t make me pull teeth. What do you know about it?” Replacing her glasses, she put both elbows on her desk and looked at him until he broke off.

“The short version of the story,” Harry said, “is that I happen to know where the Prince is. He hasn’t been at the embassy since last night.”
“Is that so.” She stared him down. “Where has he been then?”

Harry returned her look now, the ball back in his court. He inhaled slowly, feeling the sweat beading inside the corners of his fingers, damp against his trousers. Beads of sweat collected outside his nostrils, and a light sheen was spreading across his bright cheeks. He could feel the moisture on his shirt, the heat on his collar.

"With me," Harry said. He took in a breath, noticing a crack at the edge of the desk. Drawn to it unconsciously, his finger traced its hard borders. ‘He spent the night at my place, and left this morning. He’s in the city right now, right this second, all by himself.”

As expected, Courtney craned her neck back, closed her eyes, and shook her head. Her bob barely moved as she sighed heavily.

“It’s not what it sounds like,” Harry rushed. “Nothing happened. Between us, I mean… uh… we slept. In a bed. Allegedly in one bed— my bed— but that’s not important right now. It was an accident! Anyway, after breakfast, he left.” Courtney Thompson definitely did not need to hear any other details.

“Come on, Styles.”

He shot forward. “I’m serious!”

“Listen, darling,” Courtney countered. “You know very well what we do around here. I might not be Arthur Schlesinger Jr., but we don’t pitch tabloid pieces, yeah? Not for clicks, not for anything. We have self-respect, one of the few things we truly have left. We verify. We have secondary, tertiary sources. Our word is our only currency.” She focused her eyes on him. “Right then. What have you really got?”

Harry sat back and strategized. He glanced around the room at the familiar objects— the bank of computer screens, the notepads, pens and pencils, the movie stills on the walls from *Funny Face* and *Charade*. His gaze finally landed on a photo on the desk. It was a candid of Courtney Thompson with Jenny Kleeman of the BBC, most likely taken at an industry event. Both of them had polite, cordial smiles and dark, sensible suits.

“I can prove it,” he said, pulling out his mobile. “Here.”

Unlocking the phone, Harry scrolled through the messages until he reached the last text that Niall sent to him. Louis’ profile, classically handsome and half in shadows, came up on the screen. It seemed like ages since he left. Harry held the screen for a moment, regarding the photo privately for the last time, and then turned it around.

“Prince Louis of Doncaster,” he said. “In person. Taken moments ago, here in Rome. On the street outside of my flat. And there are a dozen more.”

Courtney took his phone and scrutinized the photo, holding it close to her face. After a long, sobering moment, she slid the phone across the desk back to Harry, who glanced at the photo again, then turned the phone off. One hand rose to flick his lower lip nervously.

“Alright, Harry,” she said, curious and calm. “How did you manage to get the Prince’s photo? From the beginning, please.”

Harry was rolling his lower lip between his thumb and index finger, pinching the borders pale.

“Let’s just say we met, he spent the night, and I have a way of contacting him. That’s all you need
to know, Ms. Thompson.” The blood rushed back to his lip, a stripe of vivid color against his tanned face. “Interested?”

“Prat,” she uttered. She tapped a pencil rapidly on her desk, its dull rat-tat-tat punching the air. “You know I bloody well am interested. Keep going then.”


She considered this. Then, as she did, Courtney fast-forwarded to the crucial question. “What does the Prince know about you? Does he know you’re a journalist?”

Harry propped one foot on top of a knee and crossed his arms behind his head, leaning back. “Ah. Good question, that.”

“Isn’t it.” She scrutinized him carefully, and then her face dropped. “Oh Harry, he doesn’t know, does he?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Might get a more candid report this way. More revealing.” He looked at her. “Don’t you think?”

Courtney half-sighed and half-exhaled. They were entering extremely dicey territory.

“Might be a good way to learn what he really thinks of the Anesidorans,” Harry was saying. “Show his true colors. Without any media filters.”

Courtney Thompson, veteran editor, considered these words. Celebrity interviews were all about one’s appetite for lies. You tolerated their bullshit sound bites, and in return, their fame—or notoriety—got clicks for your newspaper. It was an unspoken contract. The celebs hated gotchas, and it was practically forbidden for royalty. It was Journalism 101, the most basic of journalistic ethics. You never sold them out. You never reported on them without their knowledge. Never.

But then again, her reporter would be taking most of the risk, and the story was as juicy as they came. She would be a fool not to jump on it, if he was telling the truth. It was one in a million. She knew ten papers that would buy the story right now, especially if they got an exclusive, and for high prices.

She studied her most reliable writer. People changed. One never knew. In this ancient city, even the most resilient marbles eventually crumbled to time and pressure.

“Harry,” she pressed him.

“I’m thinking a Sunday cover,” Harry pushed on, trying to ignore her. “Two thousand words. With private photos of the Prince—” he put up his hand—“Don’t worry. I have Niall Horan.”

“Horan’s in on it?” She leaned forward. “Good Lord. The two of you… Is that where the photo came from?”

Harry nodded. “An exposé of His Royal Highness, the Prince of Doncaster, as a mere mortal. See what he knows, what he’s like. Scope out the nuclear energy deal, perhaps.”

Courtney nibbled the eraser tip of the pencil. She gazed into the depthless, light green pools of Harry’s eyes, which were as inscrutable as a lizard’s.
“When will you tell him?” she asked him, watching him for a reaction. “I mean, eventually. Will you tell him? Before it goes to press?”

Harry tried to shrug casually. “Should I?”

“Harry.”

Courtney felt like she didn’t know Harry Styles anymore. There was something raw and unmitigated beneath his youth and beauty, something primeval, like hunted prey, or hungry predator.

“If I write the truth,” Harry said, looking up, “then it’s on him, isn’t it? It wouldn’t be lies. Technically we wouldn’t be printing anything untrue.”

Harry was playing with a scrap of paper on her desk, twirling it between his fingers, pinching and unfolding it between the tips of his fingers and thumb. A fabric tie around his wrist scraped against the edge of the desk. The crisp corners of the paper became folded and rolled, shrunk into a ball and flattened out again, destroyed and softened. His fingers moved like a tide over the dented, water-worn earth.

“This isn’t like you.” Courtney’s voice had the subdued inflection of a question, tinged with curiosity and the concern of an older colleague. “Great opportunity, Harry, don’t get me wrong. You’ll be paid handsomely. But this tactic isn’t your style. This isn’t what you do. You hate this kind of thing.”

“No, I don’t hate it. I actually like it.” Harry’s fingers crushed the paper and formed it into a ball. He rolled it on the desk, not making eye contact with Courtney. “It’s my job.”

“Harry.” Courtney leaned forward. “You do actually hate it. You’re not fooling anyone with that face, you know. You never liked celebrity journalism, and you don’t do it for money.” Courtney’s eyes widened, while Harry said nothing in reply. “So why? Why are you doing this?”

Harry picked up the paper and tossed it in the bin. He sucked in his lower lip. “I want back in.” He exhaled the breath he had been holding, looking up at her. “Correspondence, Courtney. Africa, the Middle East, Asia. I’m a foreign correspondent. That’s what I want.”

Courtney gazed at him sternly, waiting for him to continue.

“You’re right,” Harry said. “I hate it. Chasing celebrities, their lifestyle, their… fame. I don’t like writing about them, or their fancy dogs or yachts or whatever expensive gifts they’ve given each other. I couldn’t give two flips about royalty.” His eyes narrowed sultrily, perhaps to disguise his pleading. “Just promise you’ll help me. I want back in.”

“You’re writing the biggest celebrity piece so you can leave off writing about it?” Courtney asked wryly. “It’s rich, you know.”

He chuckled nervously. “Something like that.”

Courtney Thompson opened her mouth, and then closed it on reconsideration. “If you’re ready—are you, Harry? To get back into the fray?”

Harry looked down at his fingers, sweat beading between them. The room was saturated with humidity. Still looking down, he gave the slightest nod.

“If you’re sure, I’ll do whatever it takes,” Courtney said. “You have my word.”
Harry’s face brightened. Joy, anticipation, and fear sparked in his eyes.

“I want that journalist back,” Courtney continued. “I want the stories you used to write. I want the Harry who dove into the action. I’ll back you, two hundred percent.”

“Thank you.” He stood up, a shadow of a smile on his lips. “I’ll be in touch then.”

“Later today?”

“Later.” He turned around, his hand on the doorknob. Then Harry cleared his throat. “Oh, and um… one other thing?”

“Yes.”

“I’m uh— a bit low at the moment.”

Courtney raised her right eyebrow.

“I’m asking for an advance.” Harry’s dimple caved persuasively. “Can you spare some cash, Courts? It’s for a good cause. Save print journalism, and all that?” He pumped his fist weakly in the air. “Help a rock star out.”

“Ay,” she sighed. Her eyes stayed on him while she opened a desk drawer. “I know I shouldn’t be agreeing to this. You talk me into the worst things, Styles. How much do you need?”

“Maybe three hundred? Four?” Harry’s face was that of a child asking for more toys at Christmas. “What do you think?”

“Three! Four!” Courtney Thompson’s mouth pinched closed. “I’m not a money tree, Harry. I thought we were writing an exposé.” She narrowed her eyes, hands poised on the drawer. “Didn’t realize you were getting married to him.”

Harry pleaded with puppy eyes.

“Such a bloody expense,” she grumbled. “You really are the most audacious creature, you know that. You’re lucky I like you. Will we be taking him to La Pergola, by any chance, handing out blank checks to valets and waiters along the way?”

“He’s a Prince, Courteena,” Harry countered. “Can’t very well go second-class, can we? We’d give ourselves away.”

She shut the drawer and stood up, walking to a cabinet behind her. “God forbid we give away the secret that journalism doesn’t pay. Might discourage that line out my door.” Turning the combination lock on a safe, she counted out some cash, then took out a piece of paper and scribbled a promissory note, pushing the note and the money to Harry.

Harry winked at her, signing his name and folding the money in his trouser pocket. “You’re the bestest, Ms. Thompson. I mean it. You won’t regret it.”

“Don’t you dare Ms. Thompson me now,” she growled. “Not after scalping me. Get out, you swindler, before I take it all back.”

Harry laughed. “Goodbye, darling.”

He mock-saluted her and exited, closing the door quietly behind him. In his mind, he could see her fuming inside, but he also shared her anticipation for the piece. As he skipped down the stairs, a
text alert sounded from his mobile. Harry shielded his phone and squinted. It was Niall.

*he’s at the colosseum.*

A pause.

**who? louis?** Harry replied.

yeah, yer cute little royal crush

*he’s not my crush*

whatever. hey, question for u, does ur boyfriend know how anything works?

**please elaborate—**

i mean, he’s just waved off a roman centurion, like, dismissing him. i think he thought the guy wanted a picture with him

*he what?*

i’m actually stood here laughing. the guy’s so confused

**who do u mean? louis?**

no, the centurion guy! louis thought— ay ffs harry, do i need to send a picture for everything

**shut up. is he alright?**

Just then, a photo showed up on Harry’s phone. It was Louis, taken from the back, walking away from a man dressed in a centurion costume. His posture was elegant and relaxed, his bearing regal. Louis had really thought the centurion recognized him, and wanted to take a photo with him. It was, as Niall said, actually hilarious. And cute. Louis was very, very cute, even from the back. Fuck, everything about him was endearing.

**guess u can take the prince out of the palace,** Harry texted.

*but u can’t take the palace out of the prince, ya? ur boy’s a right barmy stitch, i’m telling ye. so. what did our boss say?*

**she’s onboard. everything’s a go. i’ve got funds even.**

oohoo!! party time!

Harry ignored him. **where’s louis headed?**

yer boyfriend’s walking north, and taking his sweet time

**alright then. i’m on my way**

i’m on him

**hey. niall**

*what*
Harry’s fingers paused as he tried to frame his words carefully. The photos of Louis lodged deeply in his chest, pushing something in him that he wished would go away. He’s just a story, Harry told himself. A means. A way out.

can u— sort of— just watch over him

why, is he gonna do a jig?

Harry rolled his eyes. He could always count on Niall for dumb jokes.

yer a dickhead

flattery gets you nowhere

listen to me, louis is a prince

yeah so?

so u know about royals

they’re not right in the head? mental? narcissist?

no, i mean he’s not like us. he’s inexperienced. bit green.

oh! a virgin?

what? how would i know that

not after last night, amiright ;)

nothing happened u dolt. i told u

alright, he’s not street smart, is what ur sayin

yes. correct

he’s sheltered

yeah. listen, get him to the trevi fountain. i’ll meet you there

how am I supposed to do that? he doesn’t know me from adam. he’s not gonna listen to me???

use ur powers of persuasion. Harry ran down the last steps from Courtney’s office, two at a time. ur charm, ur magnetism. niall, you’re irish, figure it out. i’ll be there as soon as i can

*****
The outfit caught his attention, a white, short-sleeve shirt, gossamer and soft, slightly translucent because of the small perforations in the fabric that absorbed the light. The trousers were dark, similar to what he had on. The ensemble in the window was simple but elegant, and it would vanish into a crowd better than Harry’s terrible shirt. Which Louis intended on returning, in any case.

But Louis had never done this before. He’d never walked into a shop and bought something. Liam took care of it all—he kept track of Louis’ measurements, contacted the royal stylists and let them talk to the designers. Come to think of it, Louis hardly went into a shop in Doncaster, let alone a foreign country, unless it was to promote some public campaign.

Did he have enough money to buy anything? His fingers touched the crisp bills in his pocket, sliding smoothly against each other.

He pushed the door and went in. It was small and tidy boutique, with racks of clothing hanging tastefully against the walls, and a center table showing men’s accessories, dark socks, ties, cufflinks, tie clips and belts.

Louis walked to the mannequin wearing the outfit in the window, which was about the same size as he was. The white polo shirt had a polished steel zipper running up to the base of the throat, and a tidy and modest collar, in a subtly mesh fabric. The fabric felt as elegant as it looked, sliding sensually between his fingers.

“It comes in a few other colors as well,” a voice spoke brightly in accented English behind him.

“Oh.” Louis spun around, startled. “Hullo.”

“It’s just your size, I think,” the saleslady said. She was older, with streaks of gray in her hair, and wore a jonquil blouse and ivory pants. Behind horn-rimmed glasses, her hazel eyes summed up Louis in one fell swoop. “I think the egg white is a beautiful color for you. You have a trim built. Would you like to try it on?”

“It is lovely.” Louis turned his attention back to the mannequin, his fingers brushing the sleeves.

“It would look very nice on you.” Her gaze fell on Harry’s concert t-shirt with faint disapproval. She turned back to the mannequin. “The fabric has a beautiful drape, don’t you think? Cut on the bias. This company is meticulous about details. It’s perfect for the weather right now.”

Twenty minutes later and fifty euros poorer, Louis walked out of the shop in his new polo shirt, the KISS tee bundled neatly at the bottom of a small bag. The zipper on his new shirt felt like guards protecting his charm. Out of habit, Louis touched the rounded corners of the gold charm through the thin fabric, rolling it between his fingers to be sure it was alright. Yes. It was fine.

So. What now?

The avenues were suffused with sunlight. Pedestrians and cars streaked by, honking in loud clusters. Louis realized that he was probably the poorest person on the street. Instead of being worried, Louis felt a weight promptly lift from him, like a huge sigh of relief.

Louis was nearly invisible. He was a monotonous speck amongst the Roman colors, disguised by this simple white shirt. *When you have nothing, you have nothing to lose.* His situation made him happier than a dandelion. A sign caught his attention across the street.
A barber shop.

He walked in, and walked out with a new haircut. The long curls at the nape of his neck were gone. His sides were trimmed. His fringe hung loosely to one side, layered and soft. Louis looked like a young model from a magazine. Now he was nearly completely out of money. Louis had no idea which direction the embassy was. The only person he knew to ask was Harry, and all Louis had was an address which he’d memorized like a poem. He didn’t even have a phone number.

He’d never been in such a dilemma before. A curious mixture of panic and excitement burbled in his belly, which he covered with the palm of one hand. Louis could almost feel his insides jumping.

He was strolling along in this fashion, when a tall, blond stranger hopped up next to him. Louis’ trained composure merely flickered over with a sideways glance, as he continued walking. The stranger’s hyperactive energy leapt off him, a platinum streak of lightning.


Louis stared straight ahead without stopping, his grip tightening around the handles of his bag.

The stranger slapped his thigh with one hand loudly and laughed, the sharp sound cutting the air like a knife. “First time in Rome?”

“No,” Louis said. “I’m not—I am not interested. Thanks, but no thank you.” He tried to walk faster, keeping his limbs loose in case he has to run. Unlike Harry, this man was giving off slick, unwelcome vibes. Louis had met too many diplomats with an unctuous air like this person. In the end, they always wanted something.

“Hey,” the man said, reading his mind. “It’s alright, my friend. I’m not asking you for anything.” He raised both hands in a submissive gesture, and then skipped ahead, turning around to face Louis. His feet hopped backwards with practiced ease. “Did anyone ever tell you? You’re a very good-looking man. Extremely handsome. Beautiful, even.”

Surprised, Louis couldn’t help but glance up. The man had a wild shock of platinum blond hair, and his thick brows and long lashes were as light as silver. His eyes crinkled in his smile. His lips were painted an intense scarlet. He wore a tailored linen jacket that was a designer copy, but Louis could see smudges of grime on his sleeves, and a fraying cuff. A dark green silk scarf hung around his thin neck, parallel to the veins that ran up to his ears. He was probably around Louis’ age, but appeared much older, with the quality of someone who had been around. Against all of his instincts, Louis was intrigued.

“There’s a party tonight.” The stranger continued smiling enigmatically. Louis couldn’t place his accent either. “I want you to be my guest, if you want to come. I promise you’ll have a good time.”

“What sort of party?” The words were out before Louis could stop himself.

“A special kind,” the man laughed, his toothy voice both mysterious and threatening. Maybe that’s what enticed Louis even more; he was ineluctably drawn to the Piper. “I don’t want to spoil it for you. It’s at a magical place, with pleasures you’ve never even dreamed of. Isola del Piacere, it’s called. A beautiful young man like you will certainly have a big audience.”

“Sorry.” Louis knew he shouldn’t be apologizing. It felt wrong, and the smile he got back was equally wrong. It felt like the opposite of happiness. “I don’t know what you mean.”
The man stopped in front of Louis, forcing Louis to stumble into him. His eyes were icy and gemlike. One hand rested on his waist as he scrutinized Louis, the other on his chin. A moment silently passed, and then another moment. With languor, he raised a hand to trace an index finger down Louis’ jawline, lightly tipping his chin up, appraising him.

“I think so. Yes, definitely. You are gorgeous, aren’t you?”

On reflex, Louis jerked his face away, but was otherwise immobile, his mouth dry and palms itchy. He wanted to walk away. But for all the poetry Louis had ever known, his mind was a desert. He was rooted to the ground, without words.

“Come, now.” The man’s tongue flicked over the corner of his mouth. “Let me introduce you to my friends. They’re very nice people.” He winked. “If you’ve never been to Rome, we’ll show you an adventure to remember. Absolutely no obligations, friend. You walk away whenever you want.” His tongue darted around his scarlet lips. “We know all the best people and the very best places. Will you join us?”

“I don’t have any money.” The words came out of Louis’ mouth in spite of himself. What a stupid thing to say, he realized. Dumb, dumb.

“Pfft!” The man smiled, swatting away invisible gnats. “Not a problem, friend. You see, you don’t need money when you’re with us. We make our own fun.”

Louis opened his mouth and closed it again as the stranger stood smiling at him. He was playing a bartering game, but Louis couldn’t quite understand the stakes. Lips set firmly, Louis tried to suppress the rapid quiver he felt inside. His hand unconsciously rose to steady his stomach.

Suddenly he felt a strong grip on his shoulder. Surprised, Louis turned to see another man, yet another stranger, this time with wide open blue eyes and stiff bangs shooting for the sky, smiling at him and pulling him in for a rough hug.

“Hiya!” the man shouted in a jovial Irish accent. “Well, well, well. When d’you get in, ye bastard? Why didn’t you tell me you were in town?”

“What?” Louis said. “I’m not—who—?”

Louis saw the two strangers guardedly acknowledge each other. Despite a lingering smile, the interruption had obviously angered and annoyed the first man. His cheeks were stiff with rage.

“Name’s Niall,” the second man winked. “Harry told me he ran into you this morning. How’ve you been? I’ve been wanting to meet you for a long time, the way Harry goes on about ye.”

“Harry?” Louis was confused. “He… talked about me? But I’ve only just—”

“Are ye up for a pint?” Niall cut him off. “On second thought, might be too early for that, you’re right. Pint’s good anytime though, innit? Hahaha.” Looking at the other man, Niall wrapped his arm around Louis’ shoulder and was already guiding him away. “Sorry to interrupt, my dude. This man here’s a friend of my bestie. They go back for ages. School buddies. Been looking for you all day, my good man. We’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

The first man nodded imperceptibly, piercing Niall with a deadening gleam.

“I apologize.. um… Niall, is it?” Louis pointed to the first man, still confused. “May I introduce you to…’
“Karl,” the man said, extending his hand, which Niall shook gruffly. “We haven’t met before, have we?”

“Dunno, have you been in any recent crime stories?” Niall guffawed, observing Karl’s face blanch then quickly recover. “Or had an affair with Jack Lowden? Involved in any prostitution rings?”

“I beg your pardon,” Karl cleared his throat. “Are you a— ”

“Fan of gossip?” Niall filled in. “Oh. Am I ever! Up to my neck in it; you don’t even want to know. Come on then.” He nudged Louis’ elbow, smiling effortlessly. “Harry’ll be waiting on us. Can’t make him mad. You know how he gets.”

Louis glanced at Karl, not knowing what to do, or which of his options was worse. He couldn’t understand how or why Niall would know about Harry, although his heart quickened. Realistically, he had never expected to meet Harry again. He just couldn’t allow himself to nurse any hope. Even a smudge of it was like kindling in a dry forest. One must always keep moving to stop one’s heart from hurting, he told himself. Wait till the feeling’s gone. One simply had to be strong, that was all.

“I’ll tell you later,” Niall whispered gruffly into his ear, as if he was reading Louis’ mind. “Trust me on this one, Louis.”

And strangely, Louis did. The light pressure of Niall’s hand reassured him. Niall’s knowing Harry, and his own name, also reassured him.

“If you change your mind,” Karl smiled coolly after them, a man who knew there would always be another hunt, another day. He pulled a crisp linen card from the pocket behind his pressed lapel. “The party is tonight, at the Isola del Piacere. Night club in the Trastavere. Remember that name, won’t you? Show my card at the door and you’re in.”

Louis accepted the card, tucking it in his trouser pocket. “Karl Volpe,” the card said—a fox. The linen card felt warm against his thigh, a transference of warmth from another person’s skin. His gaze wavered before Karl’s eyes, which were as pale as a drop of water falling from the icicle.


“Right.” Louis glanced at Niall’s expectant face. Niall’s eyes seemed to be communicating a secret code, but Louis lacked a decoder.

“Hope to see you,” Karl interjected. His fingers reached up lightly to brush the hair at Louis’ temple. “Tonight, yeah? Bring your friends. The more the merrier.”

With some impatience, Niall wrapped his hand around Louis’ shoulder and physically turned him away, using a gentle pressure to direct him forward. Louis turned to wave at Karl, who raised his hand in acknowledgement.

When they had gone out of whispering distance, Niall leaned in and said, “What the hell? You can’t talk to people like that, Louis.”

“Like what?”

“Like that rubbish,” Niall said dismissively. “That trash bin made of blood and bones.”

Louis was surprised. “Do you know him?”
“Don’t have to. They’re all rubbish, aren’t they,” Niall said brusquely. “The whole lot of them. They’re all the same. Didn’t they teach you anything in school?”

Louis contemplated this information. “I know enough.”

“They’re all rubbish, aren’t they,” Niall barked impatiently. “Didn’t your folks ever warn you about strangers?”

“Strangers? For your information, I’m not a child,” Louis protested. “I’m twenty-f— ”

“Come on now,” Niall interrupted brusquely. Then, seeing the hurt on Louis’ face, he stopped them in the street and turned a kinder face toward Louis. “Hmmpt. They’re— You’re— Listen, people like Karl can spot a person like you a mile away. It happens a thousand times a day in this city. You’re a mark.”


Niall paused, adjusting the wide straps of his black bag and hoisting it higher on his shoulder. His eyes briefly flicked back to meet Louis’. He set his mouth firmly.

“It’s not a playground out here.” Louis almost jumped at the way Niall flung his arm out around him. “It’s not a movie or a stage set. No one stops anyone from doing anything. You get it? Bad stuff happens, and no one apologizes for the bad things.”

Louis cocked his head. Even though Louis had only met him, and he was no more familiar than Karl Volpe, Louis felt a frank simplicity about Niall. Like Liam, Niall exuded a certainty about the world, a system of right and wrong that, like earth’s gravity, made Louis feel grounded. It felt like the opposite of being pursued.

“No one cares about a lost person,” Niall was saying, his face getting flushed. “They’ll wring you out like a rag. You gotta stay sharp, be your toes, boyo.”

Green dancing lights were swarming about Louis. Everything that seemed golden and blurry in his unconsciousness dimmed and receded. Niall was a calming force. His voice came through hazily as his hand steadied Louis.

“You alright, dude?”

Louis breathed deeply. “Yes.” The ground held tight. “I’m fine now.” After a moment, Niall let go of him, and began walking again, leaving Louis to scramble after.

“Tell me how you know Harry.” Louis skipped up, a little breathless.

“We’re mates,” Niall replied, glancing back. “We work together. He’s a Brit, I’m Irish, somehow we got to be friends. He told me about you this morning, by the way.”

Trying not to seem overly eager, Louis coughed loudly into his hand, keeping fast stride next to Niall. Hoisting his bag up again, Niall made a grunting sound, and kept walking.

Louis said, “So you were telling the truth back there.”

“Course?” Niall seemed offended. “I never lie? We were texting back and forth this morning. I was supposed to work with him today, you see. Now we both get to play hooky.”

“And?” Louis asked, softly. “Are we really going to meet him now?”

Niall shot an amused smirk toward Louis. “You’re showing your colors, Romeo.”
Louis quickly looked down, blushing from the neck up like a flamingo. His hand came up to swipe his nose, trying to hide his entire face, which made Niall guffaw.

“You like him, don’t ye?” Niall teased.

“No, don’t really care either way,” Louis tried to be nonchalant. “I mean, I’ve got nothing else planned today. Might as well.”

“He is an awfully nice chap. One of the best. And quite a looker, isn’t he.”

“No?” Louis deflected. “He’s alright, I guess. Five out of ten.”


“Thanks.” Louis tugged the shirt down, smoothing small wrinkles. They began walking again.

“Where are we going?”

“Won’t be far now.”

They had walked past gobs of pedestrians, some of them squinting into the sun, some clutching sweaty phones, maps, backpacks, pastel water bottles sloshing with lukewarm water. A few store owners were just opening up their shops, unlocking doors, winding up metal rollers. The light cast tiny shadows where the brick sidewalks lay unevenly, and flattened out larger stretches of pale silver cement. Clumps of cars zoomed by with their petulant honking.

Louis carefully swept his fringe sideways, realizing that sweat was flattening his hair. They were walking down a long road between tall buildings, the air warm and stagnant, dampening all sound. Without warning, the alley opened into a large square, the burble of water in the air, flumes flying out from a marble facade, in a fountain large enough to swallow all the people there.

Louis took a moment to absorb the spectacle. They had arrived at the famous Trevi Fountain. He had seen photos of it at some point in his life, studied it in a history book, no doubt. Yet it was a different matter to see it in person. It was both more fabulous and more fantastic, the figures more animated in actuality, but also more ridiculous— the flamboyance more exaggerated and surreal.

They walked up to the edge of the fountain. The water was clear. Louis saw coins from all over the world, strewn beneath the foam— the world washed clean. The Prince was used to impressive classical architecture back home. Everywhere he went for diplomatic functions, there were rows and rows of giant Romanesque columns standing like stalwart soldiers, stretching to a vanishing point. Grand entrances, architectural filigree, ornamentation, ostentation, bravado— these were the façades of royalty. The sublime was everywhere, and hence had become invisible to Louis.

But this… was like a fairytale.

“Hey.”

From nowhere, Louis heard that deep, craggy voice— like a razor being dragged down a sharpening belt. Without seeing his face, Louis instantly recognized the sound of his voice, its sandy edges crawling beneath his skin, lapping at his circulation.

He whipped around. “Tumbleweed.”

“Princess,” Harry grinned. His voice was hypnotic.
Louis’ breath was tied up in his chest. Harry’s light eyes reflected the turquoise water, fringed by his wheat-colored lashes. He was there in person, solid and real, and sooner than Louis had expected. His smile went to Louis’ very center. Louis felt his insides drop, like an orbiting satellite docking into port. He could almost hear the decisive click.

Harry’s raspy voice continued. “Alright, Niall.”

“Fancy seeing you here, Haribo,” Niall answered. Louis could’ve sworn that Niall winked at Harry as he turned around.

“I see you’ve had the misfortune of meeting my mate Niall,” Harry’s left dimple deepened. “I thought we could spend a day out together, since none of us need to be anywhere. Niall knows a lot of interesting things to do.”

“Didn’t you have to go somewhere?” Louis asked.

“Already went.” Harry smiled widely. “Cleared my calendar for you, Princess. The day’s all ours.”

Louis beamed inside. He couldn’t help thinking of Harry’s last words to him on the staircase. Had he meant them? Maybe it was only harmless banter. But he had raced out of his flat in urgency, and yelled down the staircase like a boy who was… and the massage was so flirtatious and… and…

This experience was completely new to Louis: not having a crush on a man (which had happened tons of times), but possibly having the crush reciprocated? He didn’t want to leap to conclusions. His insides fluttered, rising and sinking like a dinghy in a storm. Anyway, the day’s aimless adventures were suddenly looking up. Louis noticed that Harry appeared genuinely happy too.

“We’ll be tourists for the day then,” Louis stated, keeping his voice as flat as possible.

“Sure. Why not?” Harry said. “The world is our oyster. Let’s start right now.” He turned to Niall. “You have three coins on you? I’m fresh out.”

Niall tsked. “Yer bloody annoying. Why don’t you ever carry change? Too rich, I s’pose?”

“C’mon,” Harry cajoled, watching Niall dig the change from his pockets. “Don’t be like that. I’ll pay you back.” Niall shook his head as he plopped the coins into Harry’s hand.

Harry turned to Louis. “Have you ever done this, Lou? The Trevi Fountain ritual?” Louis shook his head. Harry grasped Louis’ left hand and pried his warm fingers apart, spreading his palm flat. He deposited one coin in the center, a golden half Euro.

“So, you’re going to throw three coins into the fountain,” Harry said, his voice coming deep into Louis’ throat. “Each one gives you something in return. The first one guarantees you’ll return to Rome someday. Only if you want to, of course. Are you up for it?”

“Is there a— ” Louis cleared his throat. “Like, a proper way to do it?”

“Whatever strikes your fancy,” Harry said. “No rules here, Princess. Roman gods are very forgiving.”

Louis looked at the cool brass-colored coin in his palm. He worked it up between his thumb and index finger, and then flung it as far as he could, hitting the marble pedestal several meters away.

“Good arm, my boy!” Niall beamed at him. “Any chance you play a sport? Bang up!” Louis smiled with this compliment.
Harry raised his eyebrows admiringly. “Very nice!” He held up a second coin, a smaller, duller twenty-cent Euro. “Now this one’s for romance. For this coin, the gods will promise you a hot new fling.”

“Oh boy,” Louis muttered. “Sort of cheesy, don’t you think?”

“Heyyy,” Harry admonished. “I didn’t say it would be a good romance. Maybe if you’re lucky, you can get a bad romance.”

Louis’ lips turned down. “Doesn’t matter, it won’t come true anyway.”

“Not if you’re gonna slag it like that, Lou!” Niall retorted. “You have to put something into it, you know? A little faith?”

“Who knows?” Harry added. “If you concentrate very hard, maybe your special someone’ll turn out to be a dickhead.” Studying the coin in his hand, he added wryly, “Anyway, it looks like a cheap date. Twenty cents probably won’t get you a Prince Charming.”

“Maybe a Prince Mediocre,” Niall quipped. “Or Prince Slightly Below Average.”

“Misshapen but still edible,” Harry added. “Two out of ten.”

“Give me that.” Louis grabbed the coin from Harry, muttering under his breath, “Definitely Prince Superior Class, if anything.” He was craning his arm back to eject it when Harry caught his hand.

“Aren’t you going to make a wish?” he said with an amused smile. “First real kiss and all. Now’s your chance to wish for someone nice.”

Louis’ lips parted to speak, but then his eyes narrowed and he pulled his hand back. He jerked his eyes away from Harry, studiously avoiding him. He hoped he was only blushing from the Roman heat. Louis could feel Niall’s eyes go from him to Harry and back to him again with a glimmer of amusement on his lips, as if watching a miniature ping pong match. Louis said nothing in return, but closed his eyes, concentrating, as Niall and Harry watched.

With a tremor, Louis sent the coin on its feeble journey. The coin skipped once and dropped into the water’s surface, right in front of Harry, only a meter away. All three of them stared at the coin drifting to the bottom.

Harry deadpanned, “Did you mean to aim it like that?”

“I take it back,” Niall muttered. “What a terrible throw. You don’t have any sort of arm. You’re not very athletic at all.”

“I wasn’t aiming!” Louis retorted, staring at the coin. “At anyone! It wasn’t meant to land there. The wind… it…” He protested as the air around them hung dead as concrete. Harry lifted his eyes knowingly at Louis, who was staring resolutely at the coin, trying to make it disappear and avoiding him like poison.


Louis cleared his throat vociferously. “We’ll forget about that one. Let’s move on. What’s next?”

Harry exchanged a look with Niall, before taking out the last coin, an entire euro.

“We’re getting into heavy territory here, Princess. The third coin is for marriage,” Harry answered.
“Sex, kissing, kids. The whole lot.” He winked at Louis. “Till death do us part, shared
toothbrushes, pets! What do you think? You up for it?”

Louis’ brows furrowed. A small cloud passed over him.

Harry continued, “Is there a special princess for our special Princess?”

With some vehemence, Louis grabbed the coin from him, accidentally cutting his nails into
Harry’s skin. It scratched a thin line of red across his thumb. Surprised, Harry jerked his hand back.

“Hey now!” Niall exclaimed. “Savage!” Louis’ reaction surprised him.

Louis’ eyes turned dark, no longer enjoying the game. “You know what? I can think of a million
better things to spend this coin on,” he said coldly. “Literally a million other things. What a
waste.”

Niall checked quickly with Harry, then asked, “Not a big fan of marriage?”

Louis took a slow, deep breath and held it. The veins in his neck popped out slowly as he exhaled.
He looked away, face tumultuous and overcast, not in the mood. His fist curled around the coin,
clasped tightly next to his leg, his knuckles taut and white.

Louis’ lips began to turn up in the slightest smile. “The Roman gods can go fuck themselves, no
offense to those present,” he pointed at the sky. “What do you want to do instead?”

A barely perceptible change flickered over Louis’ face, and then was gone. His fist, clutching the
coin, also visibly relaxed. He squared his shoulders ever so lightly, and a calmer, more controlled
demeanor took over. On command, Louis Tomlinson had zipped himself into a more disciplined,
more public costume—an amazing transformation to witness. He turned to Harry with a neutral,
friendly smile.

“Are you saying you’ll treat, Harry?”

Harry smiled back. Courtney’s money was burning a hole in his trousers. “Of course I’ll treat. I’m
a gentleman.”

“So you keep saying.” Louis’ eyes squinted against the sun. “Then start treating me like a
gentleman.”

*****

Valentino handed the double gelato across the counter. Louis took it quickly, before the ice cream
started sliding down the side. After sampling a few flavors, Louis had chosen zabaione and
Two of his favorite desserts at home were eggnog and chocolate soufflé, and the gelati reminded him of that sweetness.

They were at the Gelateria Valentino, a short walk from the Trevi Fountain. Chips of sugared ice dotted Niall’s lips as he wolfed down his lemon sorbetto. Harry ordered his gelato, and stood at the cash register paying. A few customers drifted in and out to check out the store’s colorful display cases.

“Better?” Harry turned to nudge Louis.

Licking up the side of his gelato, Louis mumbled, “Mmm. Hmm.”

Harry dipped a spoon into his cioccolato fondente gelato—dark chocolate. It was his go-to gelato flavor, and in Rome, some form of it was always available. Harry loved Christmas pudding flavor best, but no gelateria in Italy would indulge this Englishman. He had found it only once, unexpectedly, in a little shop near Florence. Louis’ crunchy little bites into the sugar cone were infuriatingly charming.

*Munch, munch, munch.*

“You like?” Valentino asked them.

“Hmm.” Louis crunched. “Really good.”

Harry translated, *He says it’s the best he’s ever had.*

Laughing silently, Valentino moved on to serve some new customers. A group of teenagers had entered with their frayed backpacks, and were loudly chatting and joking with each other in French.

Listening to them, Louis said in between his bites, “Naughty!”

Niall explained to Harry, “They’re school kids from Provence.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at them, “Oh, that’s right. You both know French.”

Louis gave him a side eye. “A little.”

“They’re on a lycée holiday,” Niall said. “Cute.”

Louis continued, “They’re saying how they’re going to use their lunch money to get gelato and weed, and hope their chaperones don’t find out.”

“Seriously, is that what they’re saying!” Harry honked a laugh, then put his hand over his mouth. “Sneaky lot!”

“Can’t trust the French,” Niall remarked. The white sorbetto and pink spoon brought out his shiny, apricot tan. “They’ve got hidden agendas everywhere.”

“Unlike the honest English, right?” Louis asked innocently.

This prompted Harry to cough violently, choking on a dollop of gelato. His hand struck his chest as he made gagging noises. The teens turned to stare at him, and Louis eyed him curiously.

“Alright?”

Niall raised an eyebrow, “I’ll say.”

The teens had inched up to the counter and were asking to try different flavors of gelato, conversing, laughing loudly and pushing each other. Louis, Harry, and Niall began to move away, finally deciding to leave the tiny shop.

They ambled aimlessly down the street, staying on the shaded side of the road even though a muggy heat encased them. Sweat banded their foreheads, matting their hair down. Looking like a pile of baby snakes, Harry’s locks curled up messily at the ends. Niall’s bangs flagged like wilting barley.

“So, Louis,” Niall said, pushing his sweaty hair out of the way, “what are you doing in Rome, anyway? Just visiting?”

Between bites of sugar cone, Louis mumbled, “Family vacation.”

“He’s got a big family with lots of servants,” Harry explained. He walked up next to Louis and bumped him on the hip. “He’s even got a man who undresses him at bedtime. Named Arthur, isn’t that right? A sex slave or something.”

Before Louis could respond, Niall spat out his ice cream. “Holy shit. Fucking cliché, innit?”

“What d’you mean?” Louis asked.

“Arthur!” Niall said. “The movie! Haven’t you seen it? There’s a rich British arsehole named Arthur, played by Dudley Moore, who comes to New York with his valet played by… what’s his name… old bloke, Sir John Gielgud… honestly, you’ve never seen it?”

Harry and Louis stared at him dumbly.

“Good God,” Niall exhaled. “It’s a classic comedy! And you call yourselves Englishmen!”

Louis mumbled quietly, “I’m not English.”

“How do you even exist in the world?” Niall kept on. “Jokes are flying right by you, left and right.” He shook his head. “And you’re totally oblivious.”

“We’re not as cultured as you are, Niall,” Harry teased. “Nor as handsome.”

Niall narrowed his eyes and snarled. “Agreed. But for real, Louis, you actually have someone undress you every night? That is fucking wild, that is.”

“Maybe I do.” Louis bit his lips, keeping more words back. “It’s not that strange.”

“Aren’t you a bit old for it?”

“My family isn’t like other families,” Louis replied quietly, as if it explained everything. He did not elaborate. “We have different traditions.”

Niall chortled. “I’ll say.”

“Explain what you mean,” Harry said. “How are you different? I’d like to know.”

Louis sucked his breath in, his lips tightly closed even though shiny with gelato. “When my parents passed away, I became responsible for a lot of people.”
“Your family,” Niall said cheekily, putting air quotes around family. “You keep saying that like there’s a million people in it.”

Harry asked, “I thought you were only fifteen when they passed?”

“A fifteen-year-old understands more than you think,” Louis answered, quickly checking Harry’s reaction. He took a small bite of his cone gravely. “Sometimes one’s life is already mapped out. I am set to inherit my grandfather’s business, for example. It’s been in the family for generations, just waiting for me.”

Niall said, “Bit creepy.”

“I don’t get that,” Harry said. “You can always choose to do something else. Let someone else run the business. Aren’t you your own person?”

Louis lightly shook his head. “It’s not like that. We can’t sell the business.”

Niall had finished his sorbetto and ran to throw his cup away. He wiped down his cold, sticky hands on the front of his trousers as he jogged back, licking his lips along the way.

He said, “What does the business do, anyway? I don’t understand why it needs to be passed down generation by generation. You’re not the Illuminati, are you?”

“No, silly.” Louis laughed. “We’re not. It’s hard to explain.” Niall quirked his eyebrow and scowled as Louis continued. “Our livelihood will never be for sale. Too many people’s lives would be changed. It’s been in the family for too long. I… feel responsible for them. For all of our people. My parents always said it was up to me. It is my duty.”

“Our people.” Harry probed. “It’s not a country, is it?”

“What?” Louis quickly twisted to look away, the shopping bag rustling in his hands. “No. Just a big family.”

“Sounds quite enigmatic.”

Niall grunted in agreement. “You’re a mystery man, Louis.”

“And posh,” Harry continued. “Servants, big houses. Am I right?”

Louis finished his cone and wiped his lips demurely, crumpling up the service napkin. He chuckled without much amusement. “It’s not all that glamorous, trust me. I have done a bit of traveling, but I never end up seeing much.” He gestured with his hand. “In fact, this is the first time I’ve been out and about in Rome.” He glanced at Harry quickly. “First time having a gelato too. Treated like a real gentleman, out in public.”

Harry’s dimples caved, and his mouth widened into a deep smile. “There’s a first time for everything, Louis. Lots to see and experience.”

Louis’ eyes flickered. “Apparently.”

Niall absorbed their nauseatingly flirtatious vibes and concluded, “Listen, I’d love to stay and chat, but Niall Horan has important things to do, places to be, people to meet. Gotta make like a politician in an election year, and run.”

“You all keep saying you’re so very important,” Louis remarked. “So many meetings to go to.
Such busy bees.” He gestured at the air around himself. “Yet here we all are, sitting around having an ice cream.”

Niall ignored him. “It was nice meeting you, P— Louis.” He gave Harry a knowing look. “I’d keep an eye on this one, H. Seems like a proper keeper.”

“Keep an eye on us both maybe,” Harry said, winking at Niall. “You never know what’s about to happen.”

Louis interrupted coyly, “Why? Will anyone be kidnapping me?”

“Sick,” Niall laughed heartily. “Keep it in your pants, you kinky bastards. I don’t want to hear about it. Text me if you’re up for anything fun later, I’d be up for a night cap. Hazza, d’you remember that bar I told you about?”

Harry furrowed his brows. “Which one?”


“Ah! The tourist trap, you mean,” Harry said.

“Party pooper!” Niall readjusted the shoulder strap on his bag. “Go on! Give it a try. It’ll take all of ten minutes of your grumpy arse time. They’re nice there. Won’t break your bank either.”

“Sex positions?” Louis repeated. “What—”

“It’s fun,” Niall said. “Not what you think, alright? Get your mind out of the gutter.” He gestured to Harry. “Make Mr. Crusty Curmudgeon here take you. It’ll be cute, I promise.” Harry shook his head as Niall waved them goodbye, laughing his hyena laugh.

When Harry turned around, Louis was watching him nervously, both hands wrapped tightly around the handle of his shopping bag. He squinted and his lips were pinched closed, spots of sweat glistening on his face.

“Harry,” Louis started, shaking his head. “Look, it’s alright. Don’t listen to Niall. If you have other things to do, you really don’t have to…”

“Despite my vast knowledge about being a gentleman.” Harry quipped, right hand on his chin and left arm on his waist, “I appear to be doing a remarkably shit job of putting you at ease. Sorry.”

Louis’ face puckered as his eyes crinkled in thought. “No, you’re doing fine. I’m having a good time.”

“Are you really?” Harry’s expression was gentle and genuine. “Tell me.”

Looking at his face, Louis’ stomach did a flip. “Yes, I am.”

“You hungry?” Harry slapped his elbow casually. “Wanna get a bite?”

Louis shook his head, the gelato still in his stomach. His eyes wanted to speak, but his mouth said nothing.

“We could go informal,” Harry suggested. “There’s a great appetizer place around here. Or if you prefer, we could go the full seven courses, but it’s usually sort of drawn out—”

“I was just wondering, Harry.” Louis’ voice had become steady, focused, steely.
Harry noticed the change. It made his chest go cold. “What?”

Louis looked into Harry’s eyes, so intently that Harry almost felt compelled to look away. His directness was burning. “Seems like such an improbable coincidence.”

“What d’you mean?” Harry’s breath was shallow.


“Only a few places a tourist can go.” Harry’s voice tremored. “Innit.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like Niall. He’s a nice guy.” Louis cocked his head, his question lingering. “But Rome’s a very big place. Even I know that.” His gaze bore into Harry with a knowing confidence.

“Alright!” Harry admitted. His lips were set unapologetically, his jaw square. “I asked him to find you. He found you on purpose.”

Louis’ eyes widened. They seemed ever more deeply, shockingly blue. “Why?”

Harry’s eyes turned down as he seemed to wrestle with the answer. Louis watched him calmly, silently, waiting for a reasonable explanation.

“Louis.” Harry stepped closer, enough that Louis could make out shimmering sweat in his scalp, smell the scent of grass in his hair. “I’m sorry, but you didn’t even know where you lived last night. You were so knackered… out of it… You had no money! You fell asleep on a park bench, for God’s sake. I don’t know,” Harry paused for a breath. “Call it a gut feeling.”

“You thought that I’d get lost?”

“I think you’re a stranger here. I mean, I know you’re an adult,” Harry said. “Twenty-four-years-old and all. But I know this city. Niall knows this city. Rome is a big, big city.” He raised his eyes to look at Louis once more. An understanding passed between them, a moment of clarity, a transference of words unsaid.

“You were worried about me?”

It came out as little more than a whisper— a wish voiced out loud. As soon as he realized he said it, Louis began to back away, his feet already in motion, his face a battlefield, plotting a line of defense.

Harry reached out to take one of his elbows, merely a few fingers brushing Louis’ skin. His heart was pounding.

“Yeah, no. No, I mean, I’m sorry,” Harry stammered. “I know I’m no one to you— a stranger, and I shouldn’t have.” He raked a hand through his hair. “There’s no reason you should trust me over anyone else— like you said. I could be a kidnapper— I mean, I promise I’m not, but I’d understand, you know? I’ll leave if you want me to, Louis, if I’m making you feel uncomfortable.” He cleared his throat loudly, looking away. “I just didn’t want you to get lost.”

“You do?”

“You do.” Louis hesitated, frozen like a stone. He wished that Harry would come closer and maybe hold him, or maybe just give him a manly clap on the back, brush it off as a joke. Anything but this fleeting, feather-light feeling that someone might actually care about him, for himself. It was weightier than the worst punishment in the world. Louis wished he could give in to it.

“You’re…” Harry let go of his arm and gave him space. He waited anxiously. “What?”

“I’m glad.” Louis finished. “I’m glad you decided to… I’m glad you.. we’re…”

Louis inhaled, and when he turned away to exhale, it came out as a hiccup, with such a joyous, great relief that he laughed.

“Golly,” he giggled, hiccuping again. “Oh. No.”

He laughed once more, so hard that he became breathless, body rigid and hands clasped to his chest. He made helpless gasping sounds but couldn’t stop. In between, he hiccuped loudly and regularly.

“Oh. Dear.” Louis hiccuped. “I’m glad we’re…” hiccuped again. “We’re... hic!... Bloody hell!”

Harry leaned over to check on him, a smile already starting on his face. When he saw that Louis couldn’t stop hiccuping and laughing, he began laughing too, running his hand through his messy, sweaty, manic curls. Every time they tried to stop, Louis would bark out an enormous hiccup and they would lose it again.

“Stop it!” Harry ordered him.

“I. Can’t.” Louis barked. “Stop.” The last syllable came out as a half hiccup, half low-pitched burp. Harry looked at him and they started all over again.

They stood side by side, almost touching each other and crying and gasping, hitting each other and laughing again whenever they dared to look at each other. Harry put an arm on Louis’ shoulder and Louis leaned into him, hiccuping helplessly.

“I’m all out of breath,” Louis gasped. “Oh dear.”

Harry put his face close to Louis’. Louis could almost taste his sweat.

“Boo!” Harry shouted. “Did I scare it out of you?”

“Oh!” Louis held his breath completely still, until a silent hiccup shook his chest. “‘Fraid not, Harry. You. Tried. Oh fuck.”

They drew closer and closer, batting at each other, their hands brushing with a thrilling electricity. After some minutes, Harry watched Louis’ breathing relax and slow, his chest expand with a calmer luxuriance. It was alright now. Harry had escaped this time; Louis still believed in his cover. His secret was intact, and Louis’ suspicions—as far as he could tell—had been put off.

Harry almost felt guilty. Louis trusted him. It was worse, much worse, than being suspected. His heart gnawed at him. The story, Harry told himself. You’re a journalist. Think about the story.

“You, you okay?”

“Yeah,” Louis replied. “The worst has passed. Thanks for watching out for me. The only people
who usually do that,” Louis paused, “are people paid to do it. Our family, you know. I’m just not used to people doing it out of the kindness of their own hearts.”

”Get used to it,” Harry said, not meeting his eyes. “You’re in Rome. Let’s have some fun, yeah?” Louis smiled sweetly. “Yes. Alright.”

“C’mon,” Harry said, pulling Louis’ hand. He kept his eyes averted, sticking to his purpose. “God, I’m starving. How about you? Let’s get out of here.”

This time, Louis didn’t say no.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A Roman holiday.

Chapter Notes

God, I’m done with the chapter! I’d like to thank my cheerleader Effy for her brilliance and patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From a little spark may burst a flame.

- The Divine Comedy, Dante Alleghieri

“You’re fast, Princess,” Harry said, pointing to the bag in Louis’ hand. “Went shopping already?”

”Technically, this belongs to you.” Louis held out the bag’s handles, then glanced at his own torso. “I saw this shirt in a shop window; it called to me. I swear, Harry, I really did appreciate the shirt you lent me. I was just going to have it washed and pressed.”

“Didn’t you like my shirt?”

“No, no, I do,” Louis replied hurriedly. “Of course I do. You were so nice to lend it to me.”

“Louis, I’m taking the piss.” Harry nudged him.

Louis pointed to the bag. “Your shirt was a bit— loud, that’s all,” he tried to explain.

“Heyyy, watch it. Hot ‘N Hard is one of my favorites.”


“Found it in a thrift shop in New York,” Harry said. “But you can keep it if you want.”

“No. I’ll get it back to you, if it’s your favorite,” Louis said solemnly. “I promise.”

Harry nodded, then surveyed their surroundings.

“What do you want to do today?” he said. “First day in Rome. Your choice. The city’s wide open, Princess.”

Louis considered. “What are my options?”
"Oh, right," Harry said. "You don’t know, do you? Hmm… is there anything in particular that you might like to see… top ten Italian baroque churches?"

Louis pulled a disagreeable face.

"Hmm," Harry thought out loud. "Bit niche, maybe. We could go see the Sistine Chapel? Or the Castel Sant’angelo; it’s a pretty cool place. Although, on second thought— you probably won’t like it."

"Oh? Why not?"

Harry paused. "Well. It is a castle."

"Ugh," Louis replied. "You’re right. No, thanks."

Harry shrugged. "Castles could be romantic, you know." Louis shook his head. "In a goth way? That’s where fairytales happen."

"Castles are evil and boring," Louis said. "Full of bloody history."

"What about the princes and princesses?" Harry asked. "Knights in shining armour?" Without warning, Harry crouched into a fencing position and thrust his right hand forward. "En garde, Your Liege! Allow me to defend your honor!"

Louis rolled his eyes fondly and brushed his hand away. "That’s not how it works, Tumbleweed. And anyway, it’s Your Royal Highness."

"Tomatoes, tomahtoes," Harry said breezily. "You’re in Rome, Louis! There are a thousand possibilities. If your tastes run morbid, we could go to the catacombs and see some freeze-dried monks." Seeing Louis’ unenthused face, Harry continued, "If you want food, I’ll take you to some brilliant eats. If you prefer romance—"

"Why do you keep mentioning romance?" Louis interrupted him. "I’m not looking for romance."

Harry pushed him. "Why not? You do know that Rome is short for Romance."

"I’m pretty sure it’s not." Louis quirked his eyebrow. "And besides, I’m just not interested. I don’t need any other reason." His face made Harry chuckle. "Why are you snickering?"

"You don’t see it?" Harry slapped him playfully in the upper arm. Louis swerved, but too late. Harry already made contact. "You’re full of contradictions, mate."

"What do you mean?"

"You try to be so cool on the surface, as if you don’t care," Harry explained. "So cynical and weary. I get it. But on the inside, you’re wondering who’s going to give you your true love’s kiss. You’re a romantic, Princess—"

"Oh, do shut up," Louis flushed pink from the neck up.

Harry nudged him. "Go on, admit it."

"It’s not anything like that." Louis stepped away to avoid more slapping. "I’m more experienced than you think, Styles. I’ve had all the make-out action I’ve ever wanted."

"Oh." Harry kept his features neutral. "Right. I’m sure you have."
Louis turned on him. “I’m not a prude, dickhead. I can get it if I want it. Anytime.”

“Mmm.”

“Some of us just happen to have *standards,*” Louis continued. He turned on his heels and began walking away, talking quickly. Caught off guard, Harry tried to keep up. “We have *self-control.* We don’t poke our ‘things’ in random holes for no reason.”

“Oi, self-control!” Harry laughed. “Is that what you call it?”

Louis glared. “You can joke if you want to. Unlike you, intimacy has to mean something for me. A touch, a kiss. Otherwise it’s pointless, isn’t it? I mean.” He bit his lips, too late to keep the words back. “What do you really think? Tell the truth, Harry. You read poetry. What do the poets say about it?” Louis twisted back, glancing at him.

“Who cares what the poets say?” Harry frowned, gesticulating. “This is real life. People don’t look it up in a book before they fall in love.”

Louis looked at him coldly.

“What do you want me to say?” Harry continued. “Literature is also full of people randomly fucking.” Louis winced at his words. “You can’t take what you read as a recipe for life, mate. People fall in love, who knows why? Sometimes you have to make a leap of judgment and go for it.”

“So it’s ok to hook up with random people?” Louis asked, indignant. “Just like that? I can’t believe you. I mean, technically I shouldn’t care. I have my principles, and obviously yours are very different. It’s totally fine if we don’t share values.”

Louis began stomping away like a herd of wild stallions. Harry circled his long arm out and tried to stop him, but instead hit Louis in a ticklish spot, making him jump. Louis yelped loudly and swerved away.

“Get off, you’re annoying!”

“Sorry!” Harry’s strides were longer, and he caught up in no time. “Come on, Louis.”

“Let me go,” Louis spat out.

“Please,” Harry begged again. He managed to hold him still, to the point where Louis was no longer trying to stomp forward. “Listen to me for a sec.”

Louis chewed his lips, but stopped wriggling, his hands crossed challengingly in front of his chest.

Harry paused, took a deep breath, and then continued more slowly. “I know what you’re saying. Intimacy should be meaningful. But I also think it isn’t immoral to want a little romance.”

“That’s not—”

“Shhh.” Harry put a finger on Louis’ lips to stop him talking. “I meant, for *you,* Louis, personally. It’s okay to want what you want. Nothing’s going to break. The world will still turn.”

Louis stared at him hard. His lip trembled as Harry continued. “I’m not saying hop in the sack with anybody.” Louis waited, watching him. “But it’s ok to let yourself think about it. To dream about it. I’m not going to judge you or tell on you, for sure.” Harry shrugged. “Who would I tell,
anyway?"

“You don’t get it,” Louis protested. “I can’t do that. On principle. I have higher standards to meet.”

“But why?”

Harry sighed, unraveling one of Louis’ hands and turning it between them, palm side up. For a moment, Louis thought he might lean forward and jokingly kiss his hand, and he wavered between wanting that to happen and pulling it away. He breathed shallowly, waiting. Although his hand was open, Louis’ small muscles felt tight and hard. But then Harry began to trace the crease of his lifeline with his index and middle fingers, meandering from Louis’ wrist up to his joints, gently and absentmindedly, like a goat going up a mountain trail.

Holding his hand motionless, Louis could not take his eyes off Harry’s finger. He gulped quietly, hoping his throat wouldn’t make a noise.

“You don’t know much about me either,” Harry said quietly. “Maybe I’m not as bad as you think.”

“You travel a lot,” Louis blurted out. “You’ve had an exciting life. You’ve been everywhere, met lots of people. You’re a Tumbleweed.”

“Yes.” Harry waited. “And?”

“You talk as if you’ve had many relationships, so many that you’ve lost count,” Louis said. “Maybe your heart doesn’t get broken anymore. You’ve done it all, seen it all. Maybe there’s no heart,” his finger gently poked at Harry’s chest, “in there. Maybe you don’t feel anything anymore.”

“Is that what you really think?”

“I don’t…” Louis hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“Right.”

Harry was still holding his hand. Even as Louis looked aside, he felt Harry’s eyes bore into him.

“Maybe my heart’s been broken just once,” Harry said slowly, “and not in the way you think.”

Louis’ eyes shot open. “How?”

“I’ll tell you another time, if you’ll give me the chance,” Harry replied. “It’s a long story.” Louis’ shoulders sagged back. “I’m not as callous as you think. I might surprise you.”

Louis checked Harry’s expression then, to see whether he was kidding. Harry blinked and broke their eye contact.

“I can’t be that bad, else you wouldn’t be here with me, right?” Harry let go of Louis’ hand and turned, ready to continue walking. After a few steps, Harry turned back abruptly.

“Lou,” he added, “you too.” Gently, he came closer, his hand reaching out. Barely touching Louis’ shirt, he traced the shape of a heart in the pristine, soft fabric. Louis felt his heart quicken. “You have a heart. In here.”

Louis chewed his lip, looking away, the sun bleaching his hair ray by ray. He shuffled his feet and
struggled to come up with a reply. Just as he started, Harry put his finger on his lips, shushing him.

“What’s inside matters, other people’s standards be damned,” Harry said. “You feel alive inside, don’t you? It’s not a crime. It’s part of being a human being, to want love.”

No one had ever talked to Louis like this. He wasn’t sure what to feel. A warmth rose from his belly, snaking up his middle.

“I can’t,” Louis said, shaking his head. “You don’t know. I just can’t.”

Harry drew closer. “Yes, you can. Someone like you deserves more. You know that.”

Louis furrowed his brows, dropped his eyes and turned away. After a moment, he felt Harry touch his chin and pull him back in. Louis realized he had been clenching his jaws so hard that his muscles popped and his cheek was sore.

Louis refused to look at him. Instead, he stared resolutely at the middle of Harry’s chest, right through his shirt, a valley between muscular mountains. Ridiculous, fantastic male anatomy, he thought, his mind momentarily distracted.

Louis wished he could run away, but also wished that he could give in and fall into Harry’s arms. What would it feel like? Would it be so bad? His chest was a valley of soft, bouncy muscles, a veritable human trampoline.

Looming tall in front of Louis, Harry held Louis’ hand in a calm and relaxing manner. Louis wanted to memorize this feeling, so he could call it up in the bad times to come. Somewhere around him, walls were noiselessly crumbling away.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Louis said.

“I mean,” Harry said in a matter-of-fact way, “someone as nice as you deserves better.” He waited for Louis to interrupt him, but he did not. “You weren’t meant to be hard, Louis. You’ve watched a thousand versions of love happen, haven’t you? And you deserve—” Harry paused, running an impatient, nervous hand through his hair. “You know what? Somebody needs to kiss you. Soon.”

Louis felt the floor of his heart drop down. He made a feeble attempt to break away. “Stop teasing me.”

“I’m not,” Harry said, his hand steady and strong.

Louis felt like a child at a new playground, shy and inexperienced, the play equipment completely foreign to him.

“I’m nobody,” Louis said. “No one.”

“You are someone, alright,” Harry said. He pulled on Louis’ hand, drawing him closer. “I suspect that’s the problem. You are someone.”

Louis looked into Harry’s light green eyes, intelligence and knowing filling his kind face.

“Who am I?” Louis asked him.

Harry chuckled. “Someone very special. That’s my guess.”

“Then who’s supposed to kiss me?”
Louis looked up at Harry, his eyes filled with questions, the sun glinting off his gold-flecked lashes. They were, once again, as much in each other’s space as possible without intersecting. Harry squinted hard.

“That’s up to you,” he said. “Sometimes it’s up to you to make the first move.”

Louis inched ever closer, close enough for Harry to see distinct lashes and feel his rapid breaths. His expression intense and serious, Louis moved closer, until their noses were nearly touching. With a sense of anticipation, Louis opened his mouth, as Harry readied himself, his lips perked and eyes ready to close.

“Tumbleweed,” Louis whispered.

“Yeah?”

“I think I might have had too much water,” Louis said pertly. “Must have overestimated my thirst.” Louis’ left eye winked languidly, his lashes like a moth’s wing. “I need a washroom, please.”

Harry sighed dramatically. “For God’s sake.”

Louis let go of Harry and hopped away. “What did you think I was going to say?”

“I don’t—” Harry clenched his jaw. “You—”

Louis raises his brows coquettishly. “I feel alive!”

Harry gritted his teeth. “Congratulations.”

“For what it’s worth, I did hear every word you said,” Louis said. “And I’m going to think about it, I swear. But right now I really do need to wee.”

The corners of Harry’s lips turned down as Louis laughed. “It’s what’s inside that counts, you said so. Right now what’s inside is a full bladder.”

“God, you’re so funny.”

“Aren’t I, though!” Louis grabbed his arm. “Come on, take me to the nicest toilet in Rome. What are you waiting for? You promised.”

Louis laughed wickedly as people watched them, two beautiful young men flirting so blatantly with each other, so joyful and carefree, it was like a dream. It was as if at any moment, the marble statues might start talking.

Although St. Peter’s had a hundred defects, the Pantheon had none.
They walked along the shade of the buildings, where the sidewalk simmered. The concrete and brick radiated the sun, its brilliance bouncing from the windows on the ground floor. Taller windows on the upper floors reflected the clouds, floating by in panes of dark glass. The men walked closer to each other than before, with a fresh and comfortable intimacy. There was no hesitation when they needed to scoot together to let someone pass, no awkwardness in brushing their bodies against each other. They felt the touch of each other’s skin pleasantly.

“So tell me, seriously. Have you never had a girlfriend?” Harry turned toward Louis.

“No,” Louis half-cackled. “Definitely not a girlfriend.”

Harry looked at Louis skeptically. “Are they very picky, where you’re from?”

“Who?”

Harry scowled. “The girls.”

“Ay, girls.” A vigorous cough attacked Louis. “Are you insinuating I’m a leper or something?”

Harry shot him a glance. Louis felt his neck glow up with heat, and turned away nervously. They were moving north, the sun steadily climbing overhead, heat and light beating down.

“You know what I mean,” Harry insisted. “I’m trying to figure out why you haven’t ever had a partner. Are the girls cute, where you live? Are they polite? Nice? Approachable? Or are they boring and heinous?”

“They’re not—” Louis stammered. “Course they aren’t heinous. Some are very charming. Some are quite funny and athletic as well.”

“So you appreciate a funny ball dribbler. Am I hearing you correctly?”

Louis looked up in alarm. Then he caught himself, cleared his throat and chuckled. “Shut up. They’re the best ladies in the world, if I might say so myself.”

Harry shook his head and smiled. “You’re amazing, you know that.”

“Why?”

“You’re so good at swerving,” Harry said. “You never say anything. You’re an amazingly disciplined machine.”

“I’m not,” Louis winced. “I’m genuinely proud of where I’m from. We’re a good people, and that includes the women.”

“So?” Harry turned his head. “Where are you from?”

Instead of answering, Louis looked up.

They had turned the corner and stopped at a storefront, in the shady side of the street. On the way, they passed elegant hotels, and Balenciaga and Gucci boutiques, all of which Louis walked by without a second glance. The unassuming cafe in question sat between tall grey buildings, it’s entrance marked by a slim stone arch. The white awning said, “Caffè Greco,” in gothic lettering.
An elegant stencil of “TEA ROOM” decorated the store window in burnished gold. The glass revealed a glimpse of the incandescent glow and crimson walls inside.

“Are we finally here?” Louis asked, avoiding Harry’s question and hopping from leg to leg. “Really have to wee.”

Harry shook his head, admiring Louis’ timing and his ability to duck questions. He really was a pro.

“Come on. Let’s have a drink at the bar first.”

They walked up to the front of the cafe, threading their way through other people milling about and getting their small pastries and beverages. The din of conversation was joined by the frequent clinks of plates and silverware being set down or cleared away. Men gathered near the cash register, conversing in rapid Italian, their demitasse cups in one hand and the other gesticulating forcefully. The dark polished wood reflected a large display case of fresh baked goods. A small crowd hovered over it, their fingers smudging the glass as they pointed. Sugar and buttery scents dotted the air.

Harry ordered their espressos while Louis left to find the toilet. The barista briskly fired up the drinks and set the cups on the counter on tiny saucers. Harry was about to take his first sip when he caught sight of Louis coming back between waiters and tables.

“And?” Harry raised an eyebrow.

“It’s clean enough, I suppose.” Louis picked up his cup, took a sip. “Not sure about it being the nicest in Rome though.”

“Pretty nice though, wasn’t it?”

Louis was puzzled. “It was alright.”


“Was Jesus here or something?” Louis smirked. “Holy piss, Batman.”

Ignoring him, Harry recited, “Sobald du dir vertraust, sobald weißt du zu leben. Something like that.”

“Oh God,” Louis was on alert. “You’ve done a quote.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “The person who wrote that might have been here. It means, ‘As soon as you trust yourself, you’ll know how to live.’”

With wary looks on their faces, they both said simultaneously, “Goethe.”

“I knew it!” Louis rolled his eyes and dismissed him with a wave of his wrist. “Ugh. Huge poseur.”

“What?” Harry was incredulous. “No! Goethe was a great philosopher!”

Louis countered, “Nope.”

Harry made a face. “Yes, he was.”
“He wrote greeting card aphorisms, Harry,” Louis said, to Harry’s consternation. “And they’re like, the worst cliches, aren’t they? I bet people buy posters of Goethe sayings to hang up in their cubicles to shoot darts at.”

“They do not!” Harry retorted. “You’re just being contrarian now. Have you actually read him?”

Louis glanced back.

“Don’t need to. I saw another one of his word-vomits on the wall back there.” Louis gestured behind himself. “By the toilet. It was just as weak, by the way. This place has a boner for him or summat? Like a Goethe fetish club.”

Harry laughed out loud. Louis wasn’t wrong.

“Tell me who else might’ve wee’d here,” Louis challenged him, “so I can be proper impressed.”

“Well, there’s John Keats,” Harry said. “You can’t hate on Keats. He used to live up the street from —”

“— blah blah blah depressing English autumn urn shite. Next!”

“Depress— !” Harry furrowed his brows, his mouth hanging open. “You’re not serious! There’s Lord Byron, Casanova…”

“And me, now, as well,” Louis added saucily. “That makes one important person, at least.” Harry rolled his eyes. “Although I have to admit, the washroom was proper nice. Oh, and I gave the attendant a tip—that is the correct etiquette, isn’t it? It seemed odd to have someone watch me piss. I figured he was supposed to be paid.”

Harry took a deep breath. “How much did you tip him?”

“Whatever I had left. Tenner, maybe?”

Harry widened his eyes. “You gave a ten-Euro tip to the washroom attendant?”

“Something like that.” Louis squinted. “Is that too much?”

“You spent everything you had on a washroom tip,” Harry repeated.

“Worth it,” Louis answered, leaning closer. “He handed me a towel. Proper gentleman, he was.”

Harry stared helplessly at Louis, then felt his trouser pocket to make sure Courtney’s money was still there.

“Come on then,” he said.

“Where are we going?”

Harry grunted. “I need some real lunch, and for once, I’ve got cash, even if you think everything is free and money is fake. Some of us actually have to earn that money. Are you hungry?”

Louis thought it over. “Can we go for pizza?”

Harry relaxed, surprised that nothing Louis says can surprise him any further. “Is that what you want?”
Louis smiled impishly. “I think I would, actually!”


“And?”

“Rome is for something special,” Harry smiled. “If you’re only here for a short time, I want to make it memorable for you.”

*For you.* A wild, winged creature flip inside Louis’ chest, but he flicked it away.

They exited the restaurant and headed toward a wide plaza with a large and ornate fountain, the famous Spanish Steps. People milled about, taking their rest. The wide stone stairs were flanked on either side by pastel-colored buildings in which Romantic poets had come, centuries ago, for the Italian sun to dry their consumptive lungs, only to perish months later, their faces still youthful and smooth.

Louis skipped on the brick sidewalk. “Can we go to Niall’s bar then? The chocolate one?”

“Oh, your gutter mind.” Harry shook his head in mock despondency. “You’re still thinking about those sex positions, aren’t you? What were you saying about sticking your thing everywhere, again, Princess?”


Harry rolled his eyes. “Maybe we will later. It’s in the Trastevere, where we’re headed, but I’ve never actually been there myself.”

“Then it’s something new for both of us.” Louis nudged Harry. “We can share it. It sounds interesting, don’t you think?”


Heat dripped down from the double-towered cathedral on the top of the steps, getting hotter with every concrete step. Even the people sitting on them were melting, their hands helplessly fanning the still air. Louis and Harry turned south in the slim shade of buildings.

“Can we still do pizza as well?” Louis asked as they walked.

Harry said affectionately. “You really want pizza?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever properly had it.”

Harry did a second look, and then stopped in his tracks.

“Excuse me, you’ve never what?”

“Had proper pizza,” Louis repeated. “I mean I have, of course. Sometimes I go to the kitchen and Cook gives me a bite. The roy— we have a sort of family tradition. We don’t eat anything without silverware.”

“Hang on,” Harry interrupted, a hand on Louis’ arm. “Have you never eaten sweets? Or a bar of chocolate?”

“Of course?” Louis looked at him as if he were crazy.
Harry responded, “But chocolate isn’t served with silverware?”

“Yes, it is.”

“No?” Harry tilted his head indignantly, resisting the urge to get closer. “It isn’t?”

“At ours, it is. Always. As grandfather said, if one wishes to taste food properly, one uses silverware. With real silver.”

“Bollocks!” Harry couldn’t stop himself any longer. His hand dragged through his hair, sending his curls in a sweaty cascade. “The whole point of chocolate is to eat it for fun. What your lot does is straight up mental!”

“You’re mental,” Louis responded calmly. “Maybe have a slice of pizza and calm down, Curly. I’d even cut it up for you. I’ll use plastic silverware if it makes you feel more at home. More salt-of-the-earth, like.”

“I’m going to strangle you,” Harry said. “Kickstart the revolution.”

Harry inhaled deeply and shook his head, as Louis started giggling. Harry realized then that Louis had been teasing him, winding him up. He had finally got Harry back. Harry conceded: one point to the Prince. Harry began to grin as well. He couldn’t help it. The Prince was charming.

“Come to Naples one day,” Harry said, amused, “and I’ll treat you to the best pizza ever made.”

Louis’ eyes were still sparkling. “Really?”


“Magic,” Louis sighed.

It hit Harry, then, how different Louis seemed when he was genuinely happy. His edges softened as his eyes relaxed and creased. His stance was no longer so rigidly defensive. His shoulders curved in and his head was held lightly. Louis hiccuped, catching himself, and shook his fringe down, brushing it aside with a few fingers. His body was a thin sparrow, small and fluid. He became vulnerable, his armor fallen away.

Still lost in his thoughts, Harry could only stare at Louis, mesmerized by the juxtaposition of wiry toughness and vulnerability, his agility and frailty, and the intense, oceanic blue of his eyes, until Louis grew self-conscious and coughed.

“So, which way, Harry?”

“Oh!” Harry shook himself out in embarrassment. “We’re pretty close to the Pantheon. Want to see it?”

“The Pantheon?”

Harry asked, “Have you heard of it?”

Louis’ smile was small and contained. “A little bit. Let’s go.”

The noise of the crowd increased as they traveled down the uneven brick sidewalk toward the monumental temple. Louis kept track of Harry by the glints of sunlight on top of his head.
A gigantic, clay-colored temple soon came into view across the piazza. A wide fountain burbled in the center of the square before them. Eight repeating Corinthian columns loomed in front of the temple like a sentry of guards, their fancy headdresses stretching to the sky. The entrance was topped by a massive, blank pediment, a stage set for ancient gods and goddesses. Like all intact ancient ruins, it was surreal.

“There she is,” Harry gestured. “The grand old lady.”

“She’s old, isn’t she?”

“She was already ancient when Michelangelo was born. Imagine that.”

They wound their way toward the monument. The piazza was crowded with people taking photos, walking, standing, resting, sweating—surrounded by outdoor tables for restaurants and bars. People were queuing in line in front of restaurant entrances, leaning against anything they could, sticky with futility and fanning themselves.

Louis and Harry entered the cool, dark interior of the Pantheon with light dropping from above. Harry gave Louis a moment to absorb it all, every surface a marbled color, enormous in scale yet balanced and harmonious. Louis’ mouth was opened slightly, in rapt attention.

“What do you think?” Harry asked.

Louis’ eyes were a brilliant, sapphire blue in the darkness, as if lit from within. He saw it all with a keen intelligence, distilling hundreds of pages of knowledge into a few minutes of sight and sound. He was compressing it all into his mind. Even when he stayed quiet, his eyes were loud with curiosity, hunger.

“Cool,” he said to Harry. “It’s pretty amazing, isn’t it?”

“It’s supposed to be the same diameter across the floor as it is to the top of the building,” Harry pointed.

“Up at the oculus,” Louis said, his eyes traveling up to the hole in the roof.

“Oh,” Harry said. “You know about it?”

“Mm.” Louis continued gazing at it. “Eye to the sky. Never thought I’d actually see it in person.”

“How do you know so much about this place?”

“Read about it, some. Did you know,” Louis turned to Harry and gestured toward the ceiling, “a giant sphere would fit perfectly in here, top to bottom. Read about that, too.”

Read about it. Prince Louis’ tutors had made him memorize the entire timeline of the Emperor Hadrian and the rebuilding of the Pantheon after the great fire, its conversion from pagan to Christian worship after the Roman Empire, the artistic and mosaic patterns that were also found in Pompeii. Until now, Louis had never seen anything like it. He never cared much about it, because he assumed it would never matter to him. He could hardly believe he was actually here, and didn’t have to make a speech in front of a crowd commemorating some dead person. There wasn’t a picture-perfect, deliquescing flower arrangement anywhere. No one pushed him into place to be photographed. No one shoved him onto an elevated platform. He could do whatever he wanted.

Louis walked to the nearest wall and rested his hand on a column, letting the cool marble seep into his palm. Even with hundreds of people inside, the Pantheon felt otherworldly, like an entrance to
Hades. The sarcophagi along the walls and the three-dimensional floor patterns shimmered like cenotes. Louis was reminded of the green lake of his nightmares, except here, human genius had tamed everything to a dark clarity.

“It feels like drowning,” Louis said out loud, to no one in particular, “doesn’t it? In a nice way.”

Harry turned toward him. “What are you on about?”


Seeing Harry’s confusion, he snapped out of it and tried to laugh it away. “Nothing. Never mind. I was only joking. Forget about it.”

Harry frowned. “Not to criticize or anything, Louis, but you’re kinda—— not making any sense.”

Louis’ eyes widened. “And you seem to keep a lot of secrets. What else is in that mind of yours?”

“Do I?” Louis’ voice squeaked. “Huh.” He strolled slowly along the wall, tracing the stone surface with one finger. As usual, Harry’s question went unanswered.

Harry pursued nevertheless. “For instance, you didn’t answer my question from before.”

“Which was?”

Harry stopped. “Where are you from?”

Louis sighed in relief. “Doncaster,” he said. “A tiny kingdom. Have you ever been?”

“Never,” Harry said. “And you’re here on vacation?”

“You could say that,” Louis said. They walked along the gently curving wall. “I’m officially here on government business. Boring, bureaucratic stuff.” He raised a hand. “That part I actually can’t discuss.”

“Fair enough,” Harry said. “You’re alone, then? No significant other?”

Louis paused. “Mm. No.”

Harry stopped walking, forcing Louis to stop as well. “I don’t get it. You’re young, funny, you’re not incredibly horrible, tolerably fit…”

“Thanks for saying I’m not horrible,” Louis said.

“Not incredibly.”

Louis laughed. “You really know how to make a guy feel special. And anyway, maybe I have,” Louis answered defensively. “A secret girlfriend. Why do you want to know?”

Harry met his eyes. “Just curious.”

Louis sucked his lip in, his eyes cast to the ground, and leaned against the cold wall. He brought one arm around as if to cross his chest, but then continued on in a one-handed hug, feeling his fingers up and down the short-sleeved shirt. It was a gesture of tense nerves, and Harry almost told him to forget about it; the question felt too raw. Louis was shrinking into himself.

Then Louis did something unexpected—he cocked his head to one side and shrugged, a motion both off-handed and determined. Whatever, it said. Might as well. Harry noticed a tiny tug to the corner of his lip as he squared his shoulders and became still. His chest puffed out. He took a deep
breath and raised his chin.

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” Louis stated slowly and clearly, “because I don’t like girls.”

Harry waited, unsure whether Louis had more to say. “Oh.”

“I’ve tried,” Louis turned to him.

“You don’t have to explain.” Harry was still processing those words.


Harry became still. Louis looked up and shrugged with a thin smile.

“No one else knows?” Harry asked. “You’re sure?”

“No one.” Louis shook his head. “You said so yourself, Harry. You wouldn’t judge.”

“Right,” Harry swallowed. “I did say that.”

“So,” Louis said tentatively. “It’s our secret then. Just between you and me.”

Harry frowned, his lips pinched in a line. “Just us.”

“I’m glad,” Louis said. “I thought you might understand. After today, whatever else happens, it doesn’t matter as much. At least one person in the world knows the truth.” He smiled, both resigned and relieved. “I’m gay, Harry. I’ve never kissed anyone because it’s never felt right. When I’ve kissed girls—it didn’t count for me. That wasn’t me.”

“Louis,” Harry breathed lightly.

Louis continued, “There wasn’t anyone who could know… before, you know? No, you couldn’t possibly understand, Harry, but there was no one I could confide in.” He took a deep breath. “Now there’s you. I’m actually glad it’s you.”

Harry winced, saying nothing.

Louis’ hand strayed to the charm at his throat. “You’re like my Pandora’s box, Harry. My last hope.” He shrugged and laughed lightly, twisting the chain between his fingers. “It actually feels good to say it. I’m… gay.”

Louis looked so small then, so alone and slight, that Harry wanted to pull him in and reassure him, but instead Harry rocked on his heels, backing away slowly. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

Louis frowned, watching him. “I wouldn’t have told you if I didn’t want to?”

Harry ran his hand across his face. His curls were matted damply to his forehead. He pushed them off roughly, taking a deep breath.

“Harry,” Louis continued. “I’m good, actually. Like you said, no one else knows, and no one cares, right?” He looked at Harry with softness, and then playfully punched him in the stomach. “What you said before—you were right. It is okay to admit it. I do want something that I can’t ever have. Just saying it out loud makes me feel a little bit better.”

“I didn’t think—” Harry began. “Louis, I wasn’t making any assumptions about your sexuality. I hope you didn’t think that.”
“It’s alright, Harry. Now I’ve said it, I can let it go.” Louis continued, and then looked away quickly. “Last night I was lost and alone in the city. You could have passed me by, but you took care of me and made me feel safe. With no assumptions about me. Your actions tell me you’re a stand-up sort of person.” Harry coughed, not willing to confess that Louis’ beauty may have swayed him more than a little. “And today, you even sent Niall after me. You were worried about me. I… appreciate that. By the way, he’s proper funny, that one.”

“Yeah, well. Niall’s a good man,” Harry said. “Always gets the job done. Proper bloodhound.”

Louis smiled. “Can I ask you something?”

Harry squirmed, fingers curled tight against his leg. “Shoot.”

“When you said I was nice before, did you mean it? You weren’t just puffing me up.”

“Course I wasn’t.” Harry’s heart hammering. “I meant it.”

Louis took a breath in, and then grinned with relief. “Shall we make it even, then? You tell me a secret. I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

Harry looked into Louis’ eyes, his lashes long and still, the beauty of the color piercing him, and Louis’ cheeks flushed with high color. Harry felt the heaviness of his betrayal.

“Maybe later,” he said feebly.

“You’re a mysterious one,” Louis said, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Now who’s holding back? You owe me.”

The feeling of guilt still heavy in him, Harry shifted away.

“Oh.” Louis took his hand back in surprise. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” Harry said. “It’s— ”

“Was it because of what I said?” Louis winced.

“No, no, no,” Harry retorted, loudly enough that several people turned their heads. His eyes were pleading and intense. “It’s not that. I would never think that.”

“Then…” Louis backed away.

“Louis,” Harry cut himself off and turned aside, a hand rummaging through his hair by nervous habit. “Listen to me. Stuff like this— personal stuff— you can’t be so… trusting. Don’t trust people. Don’t trust anybody, me included. You don’t know what people are really like.”

“Why?” Louis’ voice was trembling. “I know what you’re like. I do trust you.”

“But.” Harry pushed down the panic rising in his throat. “Should you?”

Louis fixed his eyes on Harry. “Yes, I’m certain of it. I’m a good judge of character.”

Harry began pacing away, the conflicting feelings inside driving him mad. His head was going in circles while Louis regarded him with a disarming innocence. He wanted to blurt it all out, but he couldn’t. This game had gone too far.

Louis stood there with a forlorn and lost expression on his face. The penumbra of the Pantheon
seemed to be swallowing him. His hands hung small and listless by his side.

In a moment, Harry turned back and tugged Louis in, sealing their shirts together in a hug. He could feel Louis’ chest moving erratically, his heart pounding impossibly hard inside. Harry wrapped his arms around Louis warmly, in spite of the heat around them, burying his head in the crook of Louis’ neck. It would be so easy to let him know. He felt Louis’ shoulders freeze, and then slowly relax and sink, giving in. Harry wanted to hold him there, on the other side of knowing what an untrustworthy, deceitful, careerist creep he truly was, before Louis could begin to hate him, before reality would divide them forever. Louis settled in. His thumb gripped Harry’s back, hooking him in place, and his chin rested on Harry’s shoulder.

“Louis, you’re very brave,” Harry told him. “Remember that. So very good and true.”

“Thank you,” Louis answered through Harry’s skin. After a long moment, Louis added, “I’m glad it was you that I told.”

“I wish—” Harry stopped, his words caught in his throat.

“What is it?”

“I wish you could have all the happiness in the world,” Harry said. “Someday. I wish everything ends well for you.”

Louis inhaled Harry’s sweat and salt, feeling safe as he seldom had before. He felt his agitation slowed down, a calm stillness enter. He wanted to remember this moment.

“You’ve already given me a lot,” he said.

He felt Harry shiver, and then hug him even tighter, his hands pressed into Louis’ back.

Finally, Harry broke their embrace. A few curious onlookers were glancing surreptitiously at them. Harry’s eyes seemed to glisten when he looked at Louis, at his beaming happiness. The light inside the Pantheon gave him a luminous glow. Harry didn’t want to let him go. He wanted to keep his skin connected to Louis, in some way linking them together a little longer. This was also the happiest he had felt in a long time. He couldn’t deny it. Harry made eye contact, and made sure Louis was paying attention to him. He started walking out of the Pantheon. Louis followed. They were two against everyone else. The light of the oculus stayed in the Pantheon, guarding the souls of the underworld.

The sedan with diplomatic license plates sat firmly in one of Rome’s infamous traffic jams, surrounded by invisible exhaust fumes. Besides the plate, the car had no distinctive marks, a black Mercedes like thousands of other air-conditioned, S-series sedans, ferrying the city’s rich from office to boutique to home. This car, however, was going nowhere. Similarly, its occupants were mentally spinning, the darkly tinted windows concealing their angst.

“Has Owen found out anything?” Liam’s worried face was even worse than his happy face, with a transparency that concealed nothing, only a desperate hope for good news.
Gates shook his head. “Our men have been surveying the area near the Colosseum this morning. They showed photographs of the Prince to a few passersby, as discreetly as they could—”

“Jesus, they didn’t!” Liam gasped. “You’re not seriously having them wave his photo around, Joseph! If it gets out that he’s missing, it would be a diplomatic crisis.”

Gates said somberly, “The Anesidorans will be extremely unhappy. We have already put them in a bind, as it is. Princess Eleanor isn’t accustomed to waiting for errant Princes, and an international treaty cannot be held hostage to his whims.”

Liam looked out at the unmoving traffic. “How did they take it?”

“As well as can be expected,” Gates sighed. “Their delegation was ready. And although there may be some fine points, in essence the treaty needed only signatures from the two countries. Now the entire process has been postponed, and we have no reasonable excuse. The press—”

“Vultures, you mean.”

“The press cannot be held off without further explanation, if this goes on.” Gates paused. “You and I both know that. We will have to come up with something better than a stomach bug.”

“We can’t have the Prince ill for too long,” Liam said.

“No.” Gates shook his head just as his pocket vibrated, alerting him of a new text. He retrieved the diplomatic phone and entered the two-step password to unlock it.

Looking at Liam, Gates said, “It’s Owen.”

Liam leaned toward him. “What does he say?”

“They’ve found eyewitnesses,” Gates answered. “A busker dressed as a Roman centurion, by the Colosseum, has seen the Prince. He’s fairly certain it was His Royal Highness. It says,” he squinted, “that the Prince was spotted in civilian clothing, and behaving in a ‘confused’ manner.”

“What does that mean?” Liam bit his lip.

“Wait. There’s more.” Gates scrolled down. “A tourist group saw him as well.” He turned to Liam. “It looks like we have an approximate location, Mr. Payne, and a timestamp. Our search will fan out from there—His Highness will probably be on foot, and we can estimate where he’s most likely to be by now, within a given perimeter.”

“We’ve got a lead, then.”

“A member of the royal family will never be lost for long, Payne. Sooner or later, someone will step up to claim him.”

“Claim him?” Liam knitted his brows together anxiously, “I don’t like the way that sounds.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“You aren’t exactly making me feel better.”

“Mr. Payne,” Gates said coldly. “My responsibility is to Doncaster and to His Royal Highness, not to make you ‘feel better.’ I’m afraid you’ll have to create your own happy place.”

“You sure?” Liam said without a hint of irony. “I could do with a bit of cheering up. Do you think
he’s okay, though?”

“The Prince is smarter than you think,” Gates replied. “He has more wits about him than mere book learning, and that’s saying a lot. We both know His Royal Highness is conversant in several languages—”

“He can get around,” Liam said. “I know, I know.”

“If you’ll excuse my frankness, Mr. Payne,” Gates said. “His Royal Highness can do much more than ‘get around.’ He’s actually quite brilliant.”

Liam sighed. This information did not reassure him. “Have you contacted Princess Charlotte or the others?”

“No,” Gates said. “We’ve secured all personnel on a strictly need-to-know basis. Communiques are being carefully monitored in and out of the embassy. All phone calls are being recorded.”

“He’s never been, you know,” Liam gestured to the street, filled with a cacophony of fumes and honking, “out there before. By himself. Alone.”

“I pity the person who dares take on His Royal Highness,” Gates said wryly. “I mean no disrespect by it. God knows he has challenged me plenty, through the years. He’s made of stern and enduring stuff.” He returned Liam’s worries look with a reassuring look. “We’ll find him, Liam.”

“But when?”

“By day’s end,” Gates ruminated. “I can’t guarantee it, but that is my goal. In my estimation, it is achievable, in all likelihood.”

Liam wrung his hands together. “Goals are nice.”

Gates looked out the window. “Rome is a big city, Liam. Tell me, has the Prince ever mentioned anything to you about leaving the compound? Do you have any idea where he might have gone?”

Liam put his head in his hands and rubbed his hair distractedly. “He never said a thing to me. Now I wish he had. At least I would know what in the devil possessed him. I can’t imagine why he’s doing this?”

“Indeed.”

“Honestly,” Liam said. “It’s so out of character.”

“Is it?” Gates said. “I wonder. Prince Louis is destined for many great things, but he hasn’t always embraced every aspect of his royal heritage.” Gates thought of the young boy under his care who would run to odd parts of the palace, lost for hours, only to turn up late for dinner. He wouldn’t have had time to dress nor comb his hair, often looking the worse for wear, considering he was an heir to the throne. The King and Queen, who dined at a later hour, were never informed of these episodes. “Perhaps this is an opportunity to find out how things are on the other side, as chaotic as it may seem to us.”

“As long as we find him,” Liam emphasized. “Safe, and in one piece. Joseph, will you do your best? Please tell me you will. I know you are trying, I know it’s silly to ask.” Liam bit his knuckles while his right knee shook up and down. “I’m just worried. I can’t help it.”

“You feel responsible,” Gates said. “As do I. We will find the Prince. I will stake my reputation
and my livelihood on it. We must, and we will.”

The car inched forward, only to stop again at a red light. Liam gazed out at the pedestrians on the sidewalks, zigzagging through traffic, hoping against all odds that he could spot the Prince amongst them.

*Where are you, Louis?*

•••••

*Staring at the blank page before you*

Open up the dirty window

Reaching for something in the distance

So close you can almost taste it

- Natasha Bedingfield, *Unwritten*

“If you could do anything in the world,” Harry asked, “what would you do?”

After a few blocks in the sun, they were both flagging again, beads of sweat sticking to their bodies. On top of that, the espresso and snacks had worn off, and they were both grumbling for real food.

After thinking for a moment, Louis’ face lit up. “Oh!”

Harry waited with curiosity.

“I’d like to feel the rain on my skin,” Louis ruminated. “Maybe take a walk on the beach.”

“And?”

Louis shrugged. “That’s it.”

“That’s it.” Harry bumped his shoulder. “Spoken like a person with everything.”

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

Harry composed himself, and took a breath. “A person of privilege doesn’t worry about their basic survival,” he explained. “Like, a clean place to live. Or a job that makes them feel satisfied. Safety, food. Their family. Things like that. A person of privilege can afford to dream about the rain.”

“You asked if I could have anything,” Louis snipped back. “I didn’t know it was going to be a political litmus test.”

“Damn.” Harry glanced at Louis quickly, gauging his mood. “You’re right,” he admitted. “I was a bit judgey, wasn’t I?”

“A bit,” Louis retorted. “Everyone can dream about the rain, Harry.”
“Point taken.” Harry hand strayed to Louis’ forearm, a finger brushing down its length. “Why don’t you tell me about it, then— the rain? Go on.”

“Ha.” Louis glared at him, and turned away sulkily. “It tends to be wet.”

Harry let out a loud cackle. Scooting closer, he draped his arm around Louis’ shoulder, and let it stay there. “C’mon, don’t be like that, baby. Tell me about the rain.”

“You’re annoying,” Louis answered. He rolled his shoulder but didn’t move away.

“Well, the rain is lovely in the spring,” Harry continued, pulling Louis closer and roughing up his shirt. “The Villa Borghese has this amazing light in the rain. If you were around longer, I’d take you to see it. It’s really, really gorgeous, one of the best places I know. Or if you make it to Naples, you can come to the beach. People swim and fish on the beach. You can take a sailboat out for the day, if you want, or hang out on my mum’s deck, just doing nothing.”

Louis relented. “Sounds alright, I guess.”

“Alright?” Harry was indignant. “Anne Twist would snip your balls for saying that— that’s my mum, Anne. She’d tell you it’s much more than just alright. My mum’s the hostess with the mostest.”

“Is she?”

“She’ll even squeeze her own lemons for your lemonade.”

Louis laughed. “God! She’s a fancy creature.”

Harry made a mock-serious face, “Anne is also a woman of privilege. My stepfather makes sure she’s completely content, at all times. Queen of life.”

In response, Louis cast his eyes down, focusing beyond the cobblestones, becoming suddenly quiet. “That’s another thing, I suppose,” he murmured.

“Mm?”

Louis chuckled, embarrassed. “Another thing I’d like to experience. Someday.”

“My stepfather?” Harry said, pretending to be scandalized. “He’s already taken, Louis.”

“No, dimwit,” Louis said. He escaped from Harry’s giant hands and walked apart, flicking his nose a few times and looking away. “Not your stepdad. I’m sure he’s very nice. But, like, someone who’d make sure… I was… content.”

“Thought you had a whole house of servants catering to your every need?” Harry joked.

Louis met his eyes wistfully, and threw his next words away. “Not like that. You know what I mean.”

They had come to a street with a few shops and restaurants. A dark-haired woman came out of a doorway, carrying two wooden sidewalk chairs, which she leaned against the wall.

“E perché ci stai evitando, Harru?” she said, addressing Harry. “Hai trovato un nuovo ristorante da amare?” Why have you been hiding from us, Harru? Have you found a new restaurant to love?

Harry’s eyes lingered on Louis, and then he turned to her. “Tu mi devi perdonami,” he said, putting
on a smile. “Guarda, Flavia, ho portato un amico.” You’ll have to forgive me. Look, I brought a friend.

“Hmm,” the lady said, examining Louis from head to toe. “Are you going to make him stand out here all day?”

“What do we invited in?”

“Of course, sciocchino.” Silly child. “Come in. The pasta has just been cut. You have perfect timing, as usual.”

She went back inside. The doorway she came through was narrow, barely large enough for two people to squeeze through, the trim painted a solid brown color. A curtain of thickly piled, vermilion-colored yarn hung in the doorway, looking like ropey dreadlocks. A yellow awning shaded the door, with “Sora Margherita” written in green cursive across it. The entrance was surrounded by mottled cement, colored in rusts and grays, with a white number, 30, stenciled to the right of the door. Potted honeysuckles climbed up the walls on wooden trellises.

Louis leaned toward Harry. “Have we done something wrong?” he asked tentatively. “Why is she yelling at us?”

Harry snickered, tilting his head down. “Oi! She always yells like that.”

“She does?” Louis was skeptical.

“That’s Flavia,” Harry said. “She and Stefano run this place. Best Roman food in the city. You’ll love it.” Harry tossed his head toward the entrance. “Come on. She told us to go in.”

“Is it open yet?” Louis shaded his eyes.

Harry laughed. “It always looks like this. Don’t worry, it’s better inside.”

Louis followed Harry in. The interior was small, with a long slate tackboard running along two walls. Neatly displayed on it were newspaper clippings, letters, customer art and postcards. A wooden board ran above, with a row of blunt wooden pegs to hang up jackets and coats. Newspaper clippings and postcards spilled over to the plastered wall in the back. An open cupboard held bottles of olive oil and balsamic vinegar above. On the floor, small tables were covered with butcher paper, and set with silverware rolled up in red napkins. There were a few patrons already seated.

“We’re lucky it’s not worse,” Harry said. “There’s usually a line out the door. I’ve had to eat in their kitchen before.”

“How do you know them?” Louis asked.

“You live here long enough,” Harry answered mysteriously, “you get to know everyone.”

They sat in one of the tables in the corner. A young man soon brought a bottle of water and filled their cups. Harry shook his hand as if greeting a friend, and a few words were exchanged.

After he left, Harry said, “I ordered the specials today. Hope you don’t mind, Lou.”

“So, what are we eating?” Louis asked lightheartedly. “Anyway, I’m glad there’s silverware. In case of chocolate bars, you know?”
Harry rolled his eyes fondly. “I’m not falling for that again. I hope you like the food. Otherwise I’d have to take you to pizza, and I think I made clear that Neapolitan pizza is the only pizza that should pass mortal lips.”

Louis sighed. “Will it ever be my time, then?”

Harry paused, studying him. Before he could say anything, however, the waiter returned with a basket of homemade bread, and a plate of carmel-colored, crispy artichokes, looking like fried roses.

“Carciofi alla giudia,” he announced, setting the plate down. The artichokes had an aroma of garlic, rosemary, and lemons.

“Dig in,” Harry invited. “Fried artichokes. We have them year round, but we’re at the tail end of the best time to eat them, spring. You gotta try these. Tell me what you think.”

Louis stabbed one cautiously with a fork, and took a tentative bite.

“Tastes like crisps,” he said, pleased. “But also like dandelions and gardens.”

“A poet,” Harry said, “describing food.”

“They’re yummy.” Louis gave him a deadly glare. Harry chuckled at his sass.

Harry helped himself to the artichokes as well. In the meantime, their waiter brought out a plate of prosciutto, sausages and cheeses, and spent a minute explaining the provenance of each item. And then came the plates of pasta with a creamy pepper sauce.

“This is… a lot of food,” Louis said between bites. “Do you always eat like this?”

“Only when I’m with royalty,” Harry laughed knowingly. “This is my secret place. Not just anyone gets to come here.”

“What did you say?” Louis glanced up, clearly startled.

“What,” Harry repeated. “You’re a visitor from Doncaster, aren’t you? So you’re my special guest.”

“But I’m not really…” Louis trailed off, unable to finish his sentence, to lie outright.

“To me, you are,” Harry said, clearing his throat nonchalantly. “Royalty, that is. Overprotected and a little bit sad. What about siblings? Do you have any?”

Louis bit his lips. “We’re a big family. I’m the oldest, and I have five younger sisters and a younger brother.”

“Much younger?”

Louis nodded. “The closest sister, Lot— my closest sister is six years younger than me.” He twirled the pasta mindlessly on the end of his fork. “How about you, Harry?”

“Older sister, Gemma,” Harry said. “By three years. She’s in England now, so we don’t see her as much.”

“Is she also a tour guide?” Louis asked guilelessly.
Harry almost spat his water out, casting an anxious look at the kitchen door. Luckily, no one seemed to be around. He raised his eyebrows quickly and returned to Louis.

“Erm— no. She works for a nonprofit aid organization in London. They raise money for cancer research.”

“Oh, nice.” Louis cut off his pasta with a slurp. “You know, I think this might be the best spaghetti I’ve ever had.”

“Shhh! Don’t let Flavia hear you.” Harry pulled closer. “You should never confuse tonnarelli with spaghetti; she’ll Flavia you alive… get it?” As Louis groaned, Harry lifted a strand of pasta with his fork. “This is tonnarelli; the noodles have eggs in them, and are cut wider, to better catch the sauce.”

Louis leaned closer to Harry as well. “The sauce is like bechamel on steroids.”

“Bechamel!” Harry marveled. “Mr. Gordon Ramsay himself.” He twirled the pasta. “Stefano makes and cuts the pasta fresh every morning. Some of the pasta served in the restaurant is dry, but never for cacio e pepe, which is what you’re eating right now. It’s his signature dish.”

Louis chewed thoughtfully. “It is amazing.”

“People queue for hours for it. It’s just fresh pasta, cheese, and black peppers.” Harry took a bite with an expression of utter bliss. “And Stefano’s magic. When the fresh pasta runs out for the day, the dish is sold out. Stefano won’t allow for substitutes. The dish is a secret recipe. And it’s been like this for twenty-three years.”

“As it should be.” Louis raised his brows.

Harry agreed. “Stefano’s a stubborn Italian man, through and through.” He paused. “What about Doncaster then? What’s your favorite dish from home?”

Louis stopped mid-bite. He mentally scrolled through the inventory of everything he’s ever been served in the palace, elaborate cuts of meat with their alcoholic sauce reductions, delicate morsels of fish, tender game such as rabbit and pheasant, caviar, cold vegetable consommes at state dinners, the huge variety of trifles and panna cottas and sponge cakes and biscuits.

“Sunday dinner, I’d say,” he concluded. “Served late, at home, usually a beef roast with some potatoes and greens.”

“So simple?”

Louis smiled coyly. “Actually, I was tempted to say breakfast cereal. I really do like it. Without milk, even.”

“Do you eat it with a fork and knife too?” Harry’s eyes twinkled. “Pizza, Sunday dinner, and breakfast cereal. A true gourmet.”

Louis glanced at him silently over the rim of his water glass as he drank, brilliant blue eyes peeking through his lashes.

“Hasn’t there been,” Harry changed the subject, subtly, he thought, “some sort of energy crisis in Doncaster recently? A problem with pipelines from Russia, or something. I heard there may be a deal with your neighbor.”
“Anesidora,” Louis finished succinctly. He might have said it too quickly.

Harry waited. When Louis offered nothing more, he pushed on. “What do you think about it?”

“Honestly?” Louis set both elbows on the table. His demeanor became cool, serious. He leaned forward.

“Mm.” Eyes widening, Harry rolled the edge of a napkin between his thumb and index finger. He wrinkled his nose and continued, “I’d love an insider’s perspective.”

Louis paused for a second. Harry unconsciously leaned forward, lips open in anticipation.

“Wellllll…” Louis answered authoritatively. “Too bad I can't answer you. That is official state business.”

“So? Your lips are sealed?” Harry nudged him. “What do you think should happen, though, personally?”

“I think the right people will make a good decision.” Louis said with no inflection to his voice, and with absolute self-control. His hand, however, strayed to his necklace’s charm, patting it unconsciously. “Whatever happens, I’m sure the decision will be for the good of the whole country.”

“There is a deal, then.” Harry insisted. He put his fork down, put both elbows by his side, and looked intently into Louis’ eyes. “No joke? There will be an energy deal?”

Louis’ response was to faintly lift the corner of his mouth. He chewed his food thoughtfully, and then pointed to the plate of meats and cheeses.

“Have you tried the prosciutto, Harry?” he asked, his voice clear as a bell. “The prosciutto is lovely. I wonder how they make it so tender?”

Harry snorted, watching him. Louis was too well-trained. Clearly Harry wasn’t going to get anywhere with him.

“You should try it with the melon balls.” Louis forcefully stabbed a melon ball with his fork, then followed up with a sliver of prosciutto below that, letting the gossamer ends dangle. “It’s the perfect balance of transparency and sweetness. Everything goes down easier when it’s sweet, you know what I mean?”

“Even a bit of politics,” Harry hinted.

Louis quirked an eyebrow and laughed. “Especially that.”

Flavia arrived to their table with a slice of ricotta torta big enough for two, laying down two dessert forks, one for each. She filled their glasses with water and asked Harry whether they wanted coffee.

“Flavia, we’re stuffed,” Harry said in Italian. “I don’t think we have room for— ”

“E mancare di rispetto a Stefano, così? You’re going to disrespect Stefano like that? Her serious expression broached no disagreement from Harry. Then she lightly flicked her head toward Louis. “This one. He’s special, eh?”

Harry barely glanced over. “Sì, lo è. Wouldn’t bring just anyone here.”
“Ho pensato che potesse esserlo, so come sei. E’ bellissimo,” she said. *I thought he might be, I know how you are. He’s handsome.* She cleared away their dishes, watching Louis, who shifted in his seat. “Sembra un bravo ragazzo. In culo alla balena, Harru.” *He looks like a nice boy. Good luck, Harry.*

Harry tried to suppress his smile. “Thank you.”

Flavia leaned over and patted Louis’ shoulder affectionately, then tilted her head toward Harry. “Good, eh?” she said in English, making sure Louis understood her. “Un brav’uomo,” she repeated, making sure she was perfectly clear. *A good man.* Then she walked briskly away.

Louis glanced over at Harry, whose hand was hiding his mouth. Louis could see a faint shadow of the dimples, however.

“Something funny?” he asked.

Eyes smiling, Harry simply pointed to the cake. “Eat up, Louis. She said cake is on the house.”

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It was close to four o’clock in the afternoon.

The overgrown bushes near the sidewalk and along the river banks obscured the Tiber River. The sun dappled through the looming sycamore trees, with their tall trunks and peeling bark shedding poems into the air.

They walked along without saying very much. Harry wasn’t sure whether he imagined it, but Louis seemed lighter; he held himself less stiffly, and swung his shoulders when he was walking. His stride was loose and curvy. In this quiet way, it impressed Harry how careful Louis was, how his physical expression was a negotiation between his natural delicacy and his training. Like a light switch flipping, Harry could tell when Louis’ guard was up.

“Did you have any deep fears when you were growing up, Harry?” Louis tilted his head sideways.

Harry noticed the rosy slope of Louis’ cheeks, which, when he thought about it, was the shape of a perfect apricot.

“Fears?” Harry said. “Hmm. I worried about my parents, like any other kid, that something would happen to them. After my parents divorced, I was always afraid my mum wouldn’t ever be happy again.”

“But you were just a child. What could you do about it?”

“Yes, well,” Harry answered. “No choice, really. Mum worked. Dad only saw us on the weekends. Gemma and I spent a lot of time by ourselves. We were bound to have morbid thoughts.” Harry turned to Louis. “I suppose you felt that, too?”

“It was different.” Louis kicked at a weed poking out of the sidewalk. “We had our whole lives
planned out— granddad’s business, you know. In a way it was worse.”

“Yeah?”

“We couldn’t talk to anyone, really, about the accident.” Louis sucked in his cheeks, the angular hollows visible even in the shade. “After my mum and dad died, there were so many Doncaster subjects… I mean, er… so many people, in Doncaster, you know, who depended on everything continuing smoothly. No glitches. There was a protocol, and we followed it. It was more important than a fifteen-year-old boy’s grief.” Louis stared at the ground. “There’s a protocol for everything. Time passed, and I just kept everything to myself.”

Harry watched him. “I’m so sorry.”

Louis turned, his left eye pinched closed and a sardonic smile on his lips. “You get used to it.”

“You can disguise your grief,” Harry said slowly, “but it isn’t healthy, I don’t think?”

Louis turned to study Harry. His attention made Harry meet his eyes, and then turn away abruptly, as if Louis could see his true intentions.

“That’s ironic, you know,” Louis laughed modestly.

“Why?” Harry stammered.

“What you just said about grief,” Louis replied. “I don’t know much about you, Harry Styles, but I know you’re keeping something back, and I know what you just said applies as much to you as it does to me.”

Harry wiped his face of expression, clearing his throat.

“What’s your deal, anyway, Harry?” Louis continued. “If you want to share, I’d love to hear your side.”

“I’m very transparent,” Harry lied, without much conviction. “What you see is what you get.”

Louis didn’t push it. Fair enough. They were both keeping secrets.

They came to a bend in the river with a clearing through the bushes. In the middle of the water stood the ruin of an ancient bridge, disconnected to the banks. Louis would always be surprised at the way ancient Roman ruins simply popped out of nowhere in Rome, co-existing with the birds and tourists and traffic. They were everywhere in Europe, but the density in Rome made them exceptional.

“Is that old?” Louis pointed to the fragment.

“As old as the Roman Empire.” Harry’s eyes followed his hand. “It’s literally called the Broken Bridge, the Ponte Rotto. People have tried repairing it over the ages, but the river is stronger. The repairs keep getting washed away.”

“It isn’t doing too badly though,” Louis said. “Still here after all that time.”

“That’s true. It’ll probably outlive both of us.”

Louis paused. They passed the bridge and walked along the slow curve of the river.

“Are you afraid of that?” Louis said. “Not leaving anything behind? Not doing anything of
consequence?"

“You’re full of big questions.” To reassure him, Harry touched Louis lightly on his upper arm, and added, “Put that thought on hold. We’re almost there.”

“Hmm?”

Harry nodded enigmatically. “Speaking of dark magic and old places, I want you to think of a good question. Something you want to know, something that demands the absolute truth.”

Louis stopped short. “Why?”

“Think of a question to ask an ancient god, if you could,” Harry wrinkled his nose. “We’re talking old, old magic. Magic that’s older than Rome.”

“Like,” Louis bit his lip. “Pagan magic?”


“Should I be scared?” Louis chuckled uneasily, willing himself to start walking again. “Can I ask a question for you to answer, Tumbleweed?”

Following him, Harry quirked his right eyebrow. “If you want. Then I’ll have to answer you truthfully.”

His chest tightening, Louis asked, “Or else what?”

“Old gods take no prisoners,” Harry intoned. “There are severe consequences for lying.”

“Oh.”

“Yep,” Harry repeated. “You don’t want to fuck with an old god.”

Louis pinched his lips tightly, his hand straying to the hollow in his neck, searching for the familiar charm.

“We don’t both have to answer though?”

Harry shrugged. “Fair’s fair, I think.”

They arrived at a large crossing, one of the Roman intersections where rotaries blend into crosswalks, and pedestrians were at the mercy of motorists. An ornate but isolated fountain burbled silently in the traffic island, a lonely child awaiting a four-century-old parent. They could see a thin line of people across the way, snaking out of a rust-colored church with an erect, rectangular tower.

“Are we close?” Louis looked with bewilderment at the cement crosswalk.

“Come on.”

Sunbeams were suspended hazily in the air, although it was already late afternoon. Louis followed Harry’s long strides across the road, their shadows trotting in parallel.

Harry slowed down closer to the church. It was clear he intended to join the line of people waiting quietly on the sidewalk. Louis traced them to an entrance into an iron gate, and then a line curving to the left, leading to a dark and vaguely sinister interior space where his view was blocked. Unlike
the Pantheon, this was not a place Louis had ever came upon in his studies. It seemed to be part of a church, yet not a well-known church. Its placement outside the main building and the line of fidgety tourists made Louis feel slightly on edge.

Louis scanned his surroundings. Surely by now, Gates has been scouring the city for him. He checked for the telltale cars with their darkly tinted windows and diplomatic license plates, and for Owen’s familiar men.

The coast deemed clear, Louis asked, “What is this place?”


No one paid attention to them as they got in line, their hair matted down with sweat like everyone else’s. Soon they were under the shade of the portico. Louis saw the line drift slowly to the right, into a separate, open area. On the other side of the line, tourists exited in small groups, smiling at the photos they’d taken. Surely this was a good sign.

It was just a tourist spot, Louis told himself. His chest fluttered with imminent panic. His dreams were just dreams, after all; they weren’t more likely than anyone else’s to come alive. His fingers sought out the familiar corners of the treasure chest charm, the edges rubbed soft over the years. Dark magic was only make-believe, wasn’t it?

He glanced quickly at Harry, whose profile was placid and amused, gazing straight ahead. The line moved, and then they were next.

People had been walking up to a large marble disk on the wall, carved with the gray image of an old man with a large mane of hair and beard— or a lion. The eyes and mouth were dark absences in the stone, chipped away by long-dead hands and menacingly hollow. A crack extended from the corner of the left eye to the perimeter. The uneven surfaces of the cheeks made the statue look as if it were emerging from underwater. The gaping mouth gave an expression of surprise, or mild condemnation.

“People come here for fun?” Louis asked, only half-joking.

“Mm. You ready, Princess?” Harry nudged him up to the stone. They studied the stern face in silence.

“Doesn’t look very friendly,” Louis remarked.

“Here.” Harry reached for Louis’ arms, which were unconsciously crossed in front of his abdomen. He loosened one of Louis' wrists and led it up to the stone mouth.

“Put your hand in there. Legend has it that the spirits will know if you’ve answered a question honestly.”

“And if not?”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “Your hand gets bitten off.”

“No!” Louis reflexively jumped away. “Seriously!”

Harry shrugged. “I’ve always answered honestly, so I wouldn’t know.”

“You liar.” Louis tried to smile, but his hand hovered in the air. “Have you ever actually done it?”
“No, I haven’t,” Harry chuckled. “But I’ve always wanted to try it. Go on. Put your hand in. Let’s give this thing a whirl.”

“Why don’t you go first?” Louis waited, but Harry wasn’t making any moves to volunteer.

Although Louis knew it was a gimmick, knew in his head that there was nothing behind the stone, something primal made him hesitate as he inched his hand toward the mawl. He slid in without touching any part of it.

“Alright,” Harry’s eyes sparkled with mischief. He put a finger on his lip. “Let’s see. My question is this. Who was your first real crush?”

Louis knitted his eyebrows and bit down on his jaw. He tried not to blurt out the name immediately, because the memory opened something black and deep within. All these years later, Louis tried to forget him and his name, and sometimes he was almost convinced that he had. If the memory didn’t exist, maybe Gates would not have witnessed anything in the conservatory, and therefore no friend had been betrayed, no family moved away, no lives or careers ruined. Because of Louis. Because he had been helpless, once, in his desire.

Harry cocked his head, waiting for the answer, while Louis’ eyes became unfocused, staring at the parallel lines across his wrist.

Louis finally said, in a voice he had heard in his head a million times, “Marius.”

Harry was intrigued. “Who’s Marius?”

“He was my best mate growing up.”

Louis looked straight into the face of the marble disk. Marius was forever a child in a space beyond, a beautiful elfin creature who might still listen to Louis, and might forgive him. It might not be too late. Absurdly, Louis recalled the shoe he struggled to put on as he hurried out of the conservatory, the costume he couldn’t take off fast enough, the feeling of panic in the hallway as he ran to his French tutor. Where was Marius now? He was also in his mid-twenties, somewhere in the world. Was he happy?

“And,” Harry prompted, “did he know?”

Louis shook his head so lightly that it was barely perceptible. “He left before… he…”

Louis’ wrist began to tremble, the thin hairs on his arms standing as if he were cold. Then the shaking of his hand increased until he couldn’t control it anymore. He turned to Harry with a helpless expression, his eyes like the liquid ocean washing the world. His lips opened silently.

It took a second for Harry to see it. When he finally did, his eyes widened and he quickly pulled Louis’ hand out of the stone mouth. He held it balled up in his own fist, clutched to his abdomen. Harry felt the rack of motion going up Louis’ arm into the rest of his body, the small but unmistakable chain reaction causing him to freeze completely. The only motion was the blinking of his eyes. When Louis’ breathing deepened, Harry kept holding his hand, rubbing a thumb over his knuckles until everything had settled down. He glanced quickly at the line of people behind them.

“You okay?” Harry asked softly.

Louis blinked a few times and then smiled. “I’m fine. Must have been a déjà vu moment.”

Harry squeezed his hand, and tried to keep his tone light. “Must have been a important one.”
“He was,” Louis said. His expression turned lively as he nodded his head towards the stone face. “Your turn, Tumbleweed.”

“You sure?” Harry scrunched his face jokingly. “We can go. There’s no need for—”

“Fair’s fair,” Louis cut in. He worked his hand loose and gestured toward the marble disk. “I have a question ready.”

Harry could read nothing in Louis’ expression, but he was intrigued. He extended his arms and flexed his hands outward, stretching out his tattoos. Then with great theatrics, he slowly lowered his hand into the gap of the marble mouth.

“Go easy on me, mate.”

Louis’ lips widened in a closed smile. Eyebrows raised, Louis asked him, “Alright then?”

Harry nodded.

“Harry,” Louis asked, “what are you most afraid of?”

Harry frowned. “Can you be more specific?”

“No,” Louis said glibly. “Just be honest, like you’ve always been.”

Harry wanted to roll his eyes, but he had to concentrate on keeping his hand still in the stone mouth. Looking into the stone god’s ancient face, he replied nonchalantly, “Temo di essere un codardo.” *I’m afraid that I’m a coward.*

“Hey,” Louis protested. “Not fair!”

“I answered,” Harry said, eyes narrowed. “Now can we go?”

Louis persisted. “Answer the question in English,” he paused. “Or French. I’ll ask you again. What are you most afraid of?”

Harry held his satisfied smile for two seconds.

“Nothing,” he answered smugly. “Niente.”

Louis’ eyes widened. He cocked his head in mild surprise. His blue irises flicked quickly to the ancient face, and then rested back on Harry’s, as if watching for something to happen.

And as astonishing as time-lapsed videos of a lunar eclipse, something *did.*

Harry’s smile began to wane. His eyes took on the look of uncertainty, then mild panic, as his arm stiffened. Louis was already moving toward him when Harry let out a painful yelp, his free arm clutching the wrist that was thrust into the mouth.

“Harry!” Louis studied his face in alarm. There was no smirk of humor anywhere. Harry was not playing with him.

Harry’s shouts became more frantic as he clawed at the skin until the fine thin hairs were stretched red at the roots. Louis came behind him, wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist, and pulled as hard as he could, his shoes slipping on the ground as he grunted. Louis’ head felt like it was in a murky fog, his heart pounding impossibly hard. As thin as Harry was, he was still bigger than Louis and a load of deadweight. He simply could not move him.
“Harry!” Louis pleaded. “Help me!”

Then it ended as fast as it began. Harry whipped around with a sly smile and grabbed Louis with both arms, so that Louis fell into him. Louis was initially flooded with relief, only to realize that he had been tricked. As Harry held him warmly, Louis leaned forward and bit down hard on Harry’s chest, springing them apart.

“Ow, boyo! That was unnecessary!” Harry rubbed his chest tenderly, face screwed up with pain.

“Arsehat!” Louis retorted. “You gave me a fucking panic! What the hell was that all about!”

“Aww, Lou.” Harry stretched his hand toward Louis, which was promptly batted away. “Were you worried for me?”

“Fuck this!” Louis slapped the air above them. He paced back and forth, face in a furious grimace. “You can’t fuck with fate, Harry. You think you can, but you just can’t! It might be hilarious to you, but it isn’t to me. Fuck! Bloody fucking hell!”

Glaring at Harry one last time, Louis began walking away. It dawned on him how the portico had suddenly become silent, all eyes focused on them. Drawing attention to himself was the last thing that Louis wanted. He ran his hand over his eyes to hide some of his face, and continued walking, hand on his cheek to shield himself, paying no attention to Harry calling his name.

He was nearly across the street when Harry caught up to him and began walking beside him without a word. Harry kept his head down contritely, hands curled loosely by his side.

After a few minutes, Harry asked, “Where are we going, Lou?”

Louis kept walking without answering, even after he felt silly. Maybe he had overreacted. It was a silly prank, that was all. In a way, he wished Liam could magically pull up alongside the curb and whisk him away. If only he could summon him like genie! Louis had embarrassed himself enough for one day. He had probably said too much, even if he did enjoy Harry’s company. It was time to nip this fantasy in the bud, and be a good Prince. No more gay confessions. No more incognito adventures. It had also been the longest time, Louis realized, that he had gone without smoking. He needed a cigarette badly, now, almost as much as he liked Harry. It was intense how much he felt this.

“I need a cigarette,” he said to Harry, voice clipped and hard. He could satisfy at least one craving.

Harry startled. “Okay.” He looked around them. “Louis, where’s your bag?”

In fact, Louis has completely forgotten about it. He wasn’t used to carrying anything, and did not have the habit to check for missing things, as it was becoming tragically clear.

“Oh no.” Louis thought out loud. “I must have left it at the restaurant. Your shirt…”

Harry was already taking out his phone. He dialed a number and spoke in Italian for a few minutes, intermittently nodding his head at Louis. When he clicked the phone off, his face was reassuring.

“Flavia is putting it away for me,” he said. “We left it under the table.”

“I left it. It was so careless of me.”

“Still need the smokes?” Harry asked.
Louis nodded. He needed cigarettes more than ever.

Harry stopped them in their tracks, looking at the landmarks around them and trying to pinpoint their location. Then he opened up a map app on his phone and punched *Cioccolata e Vino* into the search bar. Raising his hand against the late afternoon light, he noted that it had not gotten any cooler. If anything, the air had solidified into a hot brick. They were dissolving in the Roman oven.

Louis waited quietly on the sidewalk, one hand on his waist and body weight shifted to one hip. A sideways glance told Harry that Louis was even more beautiful at rest, wrist delicately bent above his hip, cheekbones casting dramatic shadows, his afternoon cinnamon facial hair coloring a sharp jaw. His hair was flaxen on his sweaty brow. Harry wanted to gather him up and smell him deeply — and then he realized how stupid this thinking was, *inhaling a Prince*. What would his punishment be, if he was found out? Who cares. It would probably be worth it, he thought. If he had only known, he would have asked Louis to snuggle last night. He had only been Louis Pemberley then, a sleepy Princess. Damn this useless hindsight.

“Sex positions,” he propositioned, one eyebrow cocked.

Louis’ body sprang alive. “Really?”

Harry quickly sent a text to Niall, along with the address to the bar.

“I’m just confirming the address with Niall,” he said to Louis. “He might be joining us later.”

“Niall’s coming?”

Harry looked at the reply. “Maybe.”

Louis brushed his fringed back and tucked a few strands of hair behind his ear. He didn’t even mind Harry taking his elbow and spinning him ninety degrees on the sidewalk.

“Was I taking us the wrong way?”

“It’s not the wrong way if you want to go to Naples,” Harry said. “A great place to visit, by the way. I know you’re tempestuous, Louis—you can’t help walking off the face of the earth. But if you’re looking for a Ménage à Trois, we’ll have to head this way.”

“Now there’s a French phrase for you!” Louis grinned.

Harry winked. “Careful what you wish for, darling. *Se son rose, fioriranno.*”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you’ve got a naughty mind, and you’re a bad influence on me,” Harry said. “Normally it’s not my kind of place, but you need a chocolate and a cigarette, and probably an ice cold bath.”

“You’re lying, Tumbleweed.” Louis said. “You want a chocolate too.”

“Damn,” Harry grinned back at him. “You know me too well.”
Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, the characters drink alcohol and use drugs, and are in situations where descriptions of physical violence and non-consensual touching can be triggering to people who have suffered this trauma. Please be aware and stop reading if you feel traumatized. Please please please observe this warning.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

The Underworld. Please be forewarned that there is alcohol and drug use in this chapter. There is also a scene of potentially triggering non consensual assault.

To the guy on the street, they blended in as European tourists, not bodyguards or security personnel. If not for their military haircuts and identical, government-issued sunglasses, Owen’s men—the Doncaster royal secret service—wouldn’t merit a second glance. They wore mismatched plaid shirts and cargo shorts, or pastel-colored polos and wrinkled khakis, and extra-wide, off-brand athletic shoes. They schlumped through the warhorses of Roman tourism—St. Peter’s Basilica, the Vatican museums, the Forum, the Colosseum and so on, showing headshots of the Prince to families with young children and older couples—the ones who might not recognize him, people not in the demographic to know his face or put two and two together.

“Excuse me, ma’am, have you seen my son/my brother/my cousin?” They would politely inquire. “He’s gotten himself separated from our tour group. Oh? A few minutes ago? Headed that way?” They nodded appreciatively. “It’s our first time in Rome, you see. We’ve been awfully worried about him. Yes, the police are helping, thank you, thank you.” In French. In Italian. In German.

By the time they arrived at the Bocca della Verità, that trail was already cooling. They had followed a series of eyewitnesses from the Trevi Fountain to the Pantheon and downward. A group of French teenagers had giggled like drunken hyenas, as teens did, but in their garrulous way, they were able to point a direction for the men to follow, south toward the Tiber River and the Circus Maximus. So, it was here that a few tourists, walking out of the portico of the Basilica di Santa Maria in Cosmedin, described how two handsome young men had taken a long time before the Mouth of Truth, how upset one of them had seemed, raising his voice, gesticulating and rushing out, and yes, that’s him, that’s the fellow in the photograph. Good-looking young man. Your cousin? Oh, but then who was the other one—?

‘Louis,’ someone said. Wasn’t it? The other one kept calling him ‘Louis.’ Chased him down the street, he did. They went that way, toward the river.

The secret service men left without another word. It was bad enough that reports had the Prince in some sort of verbal confrontation, this far away from the embassy. Already, he had been missing for more than seventeen hours. The men could now inform Owen, their boss, that the Prince was still within the bounds of the city, although apparently accompanied—forcibly held?—by another man. When security did find them, their priority would be the safety of the Prince, and only the Prince. The kidnapper(s) would be dealt with through the mandates of international law. The use of force was deemed justifiable when the lives of state personnel were in question, and the Prince was royalty, to boot. It was too early yet to declare it a hostage-taking situation, as the eyewitness accounts did not seem to imply coercion. The men were experienced enough not to prematurely arouse the fury of Joseph Gates if at all avoidable.

However, the facts did point to the Prince’s being with another man. This was unexpected. The security team was running out of time to find him before sunset, even with the longer summer day. A shot of blood orange hung on the horizon, dropping minute by minute. The men’s task would be
much more difficult once evening began, in the disorientation of half-penumbras and swerving headlights.

Liam watched Gates talking on the phone with Owen, who was at this moment skittering somewhere in the city with his men. Before the day’s end, Gates had promised, in his clinical, bloodless voice, his face as still as the taut skin covering his knuckles. Now the sun was lower, the shadows of the embassy lengthening, the recessed alcoves ever darker and more somber.

*Louis, Louis, Louis!* Liam couldn’t help pacing and shaking his head. He wished he could grab the Prince by the lapels and headbutt some sense into him. The Anesidoran representative had received the news of the Prince’s illness with a pregnant, knowing pause, his face inscrutable but his suspicions writ large.

“Liam Payne,” his Anesidoran counterpart had said curtly. “After all these months on the phone, it is a pleasure to finally see your face.” Zayn Malik, a literal model of chiseled granite, had introduced himself. “I always wondered what sort of person was behind that voice.”

“My voice?” Liam stammered. “My face? How do you mean?”

“It’s a nice voice,” Zayn shrugged, “to go with a nice face. So what’s this about Prince Louis? What is His Highness really up to?”

“His Royal Highness has had a minor intestinal ailment,” Liam answered, looking off into the distance. “That’s all. Nothing serious. We had a very long day yesterday. He was tired at the end, and I don’t blame him, honestly. I didn’t feel in tiptop shape myself.”

“Will it be protracted, do you think?” Zayn asked curiously. “Should we postpone the meeting?”

“No, no, no. It’s a minor inconvenience,” Liam tried to laugh it off. “I’m sure it’ll blow over in a day or two. The Prince is young and healthy. He’s recovering as we speak.”

Anesidoran officials had stood silently around them, waiting for the two men to finish their short exchange.

“Bonne santé au prince,” Zayn offered. “Il serait dommage que tout le travail soit gaspillé.” *Good health to the Prince. It would be a shame if all the work went to waste.*

“Indeed.” Liam bit his lip. He wondered if Zayn has switched into French because his men could not understand it. Zayn’s expression seemed to convey everything left unsaid. “Il n’y aura pas de pépins, M. Malik.” *There won’t be any glitches.*

“Thank you. I am reassured.” Zayn extended his hand. “It would be regrettable, to say the least. Il n’y aura pas de deuxième fois.” *There won’t be a next time.* “Seems like we are working with delicate constitutions, Mr. Payne? At any rate, it was a delight to meet you. Will we be in touch soon?”

Liam gave him a firm shake. “Of course. The pleasure is all mine.” Zayn’s dark eyes stayed on him until he turned to leave. Liam held his breath until Zayn was out of the room.

Now Gates was off the phone with a pensive expression, lips set in a determined line.

“Well?” Liam asked anxiously.

“Our Prince has been peripatetic.” Gates’ tone was neutral.
“Stop using those fancy words, for God’s sake,” Liam said, exasperated. “Have they found him or not? What’s the news?”

“Owen thinks they’re getting closer.” Gates briefly shut his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose with two thin fingers. “And, it appears that the Prince is not alone.”

“Dear God! Has he been kidnapped?” Liam nearly shouted. Tonight, Gates had promised. Now everything was falling apart. “God, God, Joseph, talk to me.”

“It’s unclear at the moment.” Gates could tell Liam was eating himself alive with guilt. One of them had to keep it together, and Liam Payne was proving himself an absolute pound cake who was flaking apart at the edges. Gates studied the younger man with detachment. “I’ve known the Prince much longer than you have, Liam. There has been precedence for his actions. He has previously acted on... shall we say, impulsive whims? which have tended to skew to the imaginative.” He blinked slowly and steadily, his understanding of the Prince adding an invisible weight behind his eyes. “Ever since His Royal Highness was a child.”

“Because of stress?” Liam asked.

“I would say boredom,” Gates answered. “These excursions have always been short-lived. Our protocols have nipped some potentially poor choices in the bud. The Prince seems to have a need to satisfy a curiosity, to scratch an invisible itch. As you know, the other side does tend to be immensely disappointing. A commoner’s life is full of the same human frailties, only with greater risk. It all lacks a certain glamour once one’s sobriety kicks in.”

“What’s this about other people with him?” Liam asked anxiously. “What’s this about other people with him?”

“Because of stress?” Gates asked. “These excursions have always been short-lived. Our protocols have nipped some potentially poor choices in the bud. The Prince seems to have a need to satisfy a curiosity, to scratch an invisible itch. As you know, the other side does tend to be immensely disappointing. A commoner’s life is full of the same human frailties, only with greater risk. It all lacks a certain glamour once one’s sobriety kicks in.”

“Is he alright, do you think?” Liam asked anxiously. “What’s this about other people with him?”

“Because of stress?” Gates asked. “These excursions have always been short-lived. Our protocols have nipped some potentially poor choices in the bud. The Prince seems to have a need to satisfy a curiosity, to scratch an invisible itch. As you know, the other side does tend to be immensely disappointing. A commoner’s life is full of the same human frailties, only with greater risk. It all lacks a certain glamour once one’s sobriety kicks in.”

“There’s only one man with Prince Louis, as far as we know.” Gates studied the ground, his hands clasped in front of him and voice dispassionate. “He appears to be unarmed. We don’t know exactly why the Prince is with him. Perhaps he is merely a passing fancy, you might say. In any case, the perpetrator will be taken into custody as soon as we locate the Prince.” Gates turned toward him. Before Liam could open his mouth again, Gates declared, “We will find him. We will take care of it. The mission will be completed, one way or another.”

Liam nodded hopefully. “Are you still thinking by tonight?”

Gates turned to leave. “By means of protocol, Mr. Payne. We trust in protocol, don’t we? This is why we have them in place for everything, even the most unlikely scenarios.” He turned around and added quietly, “Prince Louis enjoys putting our readiness to the test, and we will rise to the occasion. In my experience, the most difficult challenges always become manageable through small but controlled steps. We need not panic. The mission will not fail, simply because Doncaster cannot afford it.” He paused knowingly. “One way or another, our Prince will be King.”

*****
I want to taste tears
I want to free the beast from its cage
Mad like my aging soul
I want to make it all
I want to make it all
Worth something
Worth the guillotine on my head

- I’m a Fantastic Wreck, by Montaigne

“If I’m really happy,” Louis said excitedly, “let’s say, if I like what I see, how do I say it in Italian?”

On their way to the chocolate bar, Harry had promised to teach Louis a few Italian phrases, so he could practice them. Harry had decided that Louis should feel the full force of going native. If he wanted to be a real Roman boy, might as well give him a comprehensive taste of the dicks-in-the-face slang.

“You could say, fantastico, cazzo!” Harry answered. “But I wouldn’t say it to your aunt, if you know what I mean. Cazzo is very, very informal. Maybe even vulgar. We only use it between friends. The connotation is like fucking fantastic.”

“Fantastico!” Louis shouted joyfully. “Molto cazzo! Did I say that right?”

“Heyyy!” Harry grinned and glanced around. “Keep it down. I think that whole family across the street heard you. In fact, look— the grandmother’s coming this way to wash your mouth out now.”

“Pfft.” Louis waved him away. “As if she hasn’t been saying it her entire life. I’m really enjoying the language lesson, Harry. I feel a strong kinship to Julius Caesar.”

“Right,” Harry quirked his mouth, “because he used Latin, Boo, not Italian. He would never have said cazzo. Not to mention the thing— you know,” his hand mimicked stabbing his own neck with a knife, “with the Roman senators. Unless you’re also planning to die by mutiny?”

“Technicalities,” Louis blew it off. “Caesar must have said ‘fuck me’ right after he said ‘Et tu, Brute,’ don’t you think?”

“You mean as he was getting assassinated?” Harry laughed loudly. “Yeah, I’m sure he said ‘fuck me with a thousand daggers.’”

Louis tilted his head. “There you go. Anyway, back to Italian. How would you say, The whole world depends on me?” he quoted, equally exhilarated and serious.

“The world depends on you.” Harry mulled this over. “Does it really?”

“Might as well learn something useful,” Louis quipped.

Harry studied his fresh, eager face. “Do you want a dirty version or the clean?”

“Dirty version, of course,” Louis said sassily. “Dirtier the better.”

Shaking his head, Harry bumped shoulders lightly with Louis. They had completely reconciled now, the anticipation of sex-position cocktails taking up a large percentage of their brains. Loping
along, they were loose and relaxed, elbows flailing, stepping on each other’s shoes, wiping off sweat whenever they touched skin. Their feet were aching from walking all over the city. The soreness in their soles and ankles surpassed even the suggestion of attraction toward each other. The truth was, they could both use some industrial-strength, sexed-up cocktails.

“Hmm,” Harry thought. “Well, one way you could say it would be, tengo il mondo per le palle. It means *I’m holding the world by the balls.* A person who says this is an important person, but maybe a bit of an arsehole, too.”

“Oh, I love it!” Louis grinned. “It’s perfect.”

Harry glanced at him. “It’s not the most polite thing to say, but you have to agree, it paints a picture.”

Louis was giggling like a hiccuping hedgehog. “Are Italians really that obsessed about testicles?”

Harry’s face turned mock-grave. “Isn’t everyone?”

“Like, straight people?” Louis squinted in disbelief. “Women, too?”

“Speaking of bollocks, there’s another phrase,” Harry said. “Mi sta sui coglioni. It translates to *You’re standing on my balls.*”

“What in the world!”

“Means *You’re annoying,*” Harry explained. “Good, yeah?”

Louis smiled. “Dead brilliant.”

They arrived at an intersection, and ran across it when the light turned green. On the other side, Harry continued, “Penises and testicles have always been funny. They were all over the streets in the ancient Roman Empire. On the roads. On walls. Everywhere.”

“Seriously.”

“Mm,” Harry nodded. “A stiffie meant good luck. Back then, people would give charms of erect penises to male babies.” Louis scrunched up his nose in disbelief. “For real. It was supposed to bring good fortune to them,” Harry continued, pointing to Louis’ neck. “Way better than Pandora’s box, if you ask me. And a lot more fun, too.”

Louis laughed. “That is totally bent.”

“Or,” Harry said. “Slightly curved to one side, as the case may be.” He elbowed Louis playfully, waiting for him to catch up. “Penis joke.”

Just then, a car with darkly tinted windows passed them on the street. It pulled into the left lane at the next intersection, did a U-turn, and came back toward them. Louis might have been imagining it, but the car seemed to slow down as it approached them. Trying his best to be discreet, Louis swiveled his body away from the street and shielded his face with his right hand. The car passed them silently and slowly, but did not stop. Harry’s eyes tracked the car, then turned to watch Louis. What he saw was not subtle at all.

In response, Harry pulled out his phone, shielded it from the sun and clicked on the map application. He magnified the screen with two fingers to check out the side streets, tapping a few times to redirect them.
Louis was still keeping his head down and hand up when Harry pulled him toward a narrow alley, away from the main thoroughfare. Inside, the nondescript, modern stucco buildings cast their long shadows into the road.

“Might be cooler in the shade,” Harry said nonchalantly.

There was no traffic in the alley, short of the occasional roaring scooter. A few artisanal shops had their doors open. Soft voices trickled from the interiors. They walked past a shop with a cat sleeping in the bay window, her outline blurred by glass shadows.

“Hey,” Harry turned toward Louis. “You okay, Boo?”

“Are we going the right way?” Louis sounded curt. “It’s really hot.” He flicked his thighs a few times, mouth drawn tight and cheeks unconsciously sucked in. Harry could tell Louis was irritated.

“We’re getting there.” Harry checked back behind them, satisfied that no one seemed to be following them.

Louis spat out, “I’m burning up.”

“Ten more minutes, Princess. Be patient.”

Louis gave a resigned sigh, kicked a pebble out of his way and spun it into a corner of the sidewalk. Harry tried to think of something to distract him.

“Mi fa cadere i coglioni,” he said, “speaking of testicles. That’s another good phrase. It means My balls are falling to the ground.”

Louis couldn’t help uttering a chuckle. “What?”

“You use it to describe something very boring,” Harry continued. “Like, if something makes you die of boredom, you say Mi fa cadere i coglioni, ‘It’s making my balls fall to the ground’— You’re boring me to death.”

“Fantastico!” Louis answered.

“Bravo,” Harry said. “You’re a fast learner.”

“Mi fa ca…” Louis tried it out. “Say it one more time?”

“Mi fa cadere,” Harry enunciated slowly and clearly, “i coglioni.”

Louis repeated it a few times. “Nice one,” he said, half to himself. “I’ll have to tell Payno, the next time we go to opera together.”


”Who?” Louis whipped around.

“Payno.” Harry gauged his reaction carefully. “When you woke up this morning, you said you were going to feed him to Owen, or something like that. If I remember right?” Louis’ face slowly blanching of color told Harry he was exactly on target. “You were funny… quite sleepy. I figured you were dreaming, I’m pretty sure that was the name, Payno. The name’s unusual, that’s why I remember it.”

“Do I really talk in my sleep?” Louis stammered.
Harry nodded. “Mm, ‘fraid so. Can’t keep any secrets.”

“What else did I say?”

Harry shrugged. “That was it.” They walked in silence for a beat, and then Harry said, “You two must be quite good friends, if you go to opera together.”

“Uh, well... Payno is... um...” Louis scrambled to come up with a plausible answer. “Payno’s my cousin, actually,” he finally managed. “His dad runs the opera house in Doncaster, so we... we’re uh... we’re always going to opera, even though I despise it.” Louis was talking faster and faster, tripping over his own words. “It’s a chore, those screechers— big, big bores. Payno doesn’t even like them. None of us do. Do you, Tumbleweed? Like opera? I suspect you’re not the type.”

“That’s a bit tragic, isn’t it,” Harry commented wryly. “You have to go to your uncle’s operas all the time, and you’ve literally never learned Italian. Maybe you would like them more if you understood them.”

“Doubtful.”

“What was the last one you saw?”

“La Traviata.” Louis answered without hesitation, rolling his eyes. “I swear it sent my scrotum subterranean. Total ballkiller.”

“Isn’t La Traviata having a run at the Teatro dell’Opera in Rome right now?” Harry lifted his voice slightly. “What a brilliant coincidence!”

Louis shot him a cold glare. “La Traviata happens to be a popular opera, Harry, for reasons known only to the Devil. I’m sure it is constantly effing bollocks the world over. As for me, I saw it in Doncaster,” Louis insisted. “Weeks ago. And I’m sure of that.”

“I’m just saying,” Harry pushed a little, “it’s funny that it’s also playing in Rome. It was even on last evening, I think— I heard about their having to get extra security for a visiting dignitary or something.” He paused. “Wouldn’t be your lot, would it? Cousin Payno or whatnot?”

Louis snickered. “Probably some ridiculous arsehole. The poor fool.”

They had walked through several twists and turns into the heart of Trastevere, past open market squares and old churches, stores with pale umbrellas fastened near their doors, and peach and butter-colored buildings splattered with graffiti. Finally they arrived at a street barely wide enough for one car. It was their destination, the Vicolo de’ Cinque.

Walking to the corner, Louis heard a familiar voice shouting out his name. He was trying to pinpoint the direction when an ebullient Niall Horan barreled right into them.

“Hello, lovers!” Niall clapped Louis heartily on the back. His black backpack nearly swung into Louis. “How’s the craic? So, how was your day? What d’you do?”

“Niall,” Louis greeted him warmly. “Hello again!”

“Niall,” Harry nodded. “I hope you’re satisfied. You’ve won. You sold Louis on your tourist-trap-of-a-bar.” Then he added, “Here we are, against better judgment.”

“Aye, ye killjoy, ye won’t regret it,” Niall said. “It’s the cutest little place. It’s crammed with books, and a fucking old piano, and sometimes the right pianist walks in and you’re in a fucking
François Truffaut movie, ye know?”

“Sounds romantic,” Louis said.

“Better believe it,” Niall replied. He hoisted the strap on his shoulder that was nearly slipping off. “After two drinks it’s even more fucking lovely, especially with the bartenders— aye, I won’t spoil it. You’ll have to see for yourselves. C’mon, wankers. Time for multiple orgasms, maybe for the first time in your miserable lives. You’ll love it.”

Louis froze in his tracks. “Is this one of those places where the barmaids are practically falling out of their uniforms?”

“What?” Niall said, but stopped short when he saw a slight shake of Harry’s head. “No, it’s not like that. It’s all good fun! I’ve been here loads of times.”

“That means nothing, you know,” Harry addressed Niall. “As you have terrible taste.”

“Says you!” Niall laughed. “First round’s on me, boys. Friendly word of advice, though. The shots go down easy, but I wouldn’t have more than three. They catch up to you on the back end, if ye know what I mean. And,” he nodded at Harry, “Harry and I already got good and steeped last night. Right, H?”

Louis glanced between them. “You mean you two— ”

“Playing cards,” Harry filled in quickly. “We were at a card game, with a couple of mates. That’s what he means.”

“Oh!” Niall said, waving his hands. “Dear God, no. You thought me and Harry— Jesus, no, no.” He rolled his eyes at Harry, and patted his face like a puppy. “Not that I wouldn’t, mind you. Harry here is quite the dish—” Niall raised his eyebrows suggestively. “But yeah, no. Harry’s a tough nut to crack.” He shoved Harry roughly on the side. “He doesn’t like anybody. Harry has encased himself in an armored tank, shellacked it, set up an electric fence and let loose the Rottweilers. Virtual chastity belt, if you know what I mean? He’s practically a monk.”

“What?” Harry protested. “I am not!”

Niall winked at Louis. “Yes, he is. He really doesn’t let anyone in.”

Harry said weakly, “That is not true.”

They arrived at the entrance of the shop. Above the archway were the words Vendita Libri, Cioccolata e Vino. The display case was piled with old, hardcover books, antique glass vases, perfume bottles, fountain pens, ink blotters and other gadgets. Indeed, when they came close enough, they heard the tinkling of an upright piano, precariously tuned. They could barely make out the song. Laughter burbled out whenever someone opened the door.

They squeezed their way in. Niall led them back to the bar, a soapstone counter in the rear of the store, covered in liqueur bottles. A graceful candelabra hung above. Behind the bar were glass shelves with more alcohol, and an art nouveau framed mirror in black and gold. All around the shop lay mismatched chairs and desks with their varnish rubbed dull. Books lined the walls from floor to ceiling, muffling the noise. Their genres were written in Italian cursive, on signs tacked at the top. In the corner, a man in shirtsleeves sat at the piano, playing A Kiss to Build a Dream On. A line of people were waiting at the bar. They could hear the bartender say something, and then the patrons erupt in laughter.
Louis was staring at them when Niall grabbed his elbow for his attention. He pointed to a red menu board next to the bar. They were too far away to read it, but it appeared to be in both Italian and English. The line was moving steadily as people drank up, paid, and then took their leave.

As they got closer, Louis could see a lady behind the bar getting out tiny shot glasses made of chocolate. They were lined up on napkins on the counter. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Harry reading the menu too, holding back a laugh. In cursive script, they read:

**One Night Stand (Bottarella):** Bailey’s, cream & chocolate liqueur

**Quickie (Sveltina):** coffee liqueur, cream, cocoa

**Embrace (Amplesso):** chocolate liqueur, rum… and other things

**Boobs (Spagnoletta):** Bailey’s, mint liqueur

**Hickey (Succhioto):** coconut and chocolate liqueurs

**69:** eggnog and chocolate liqueurs

**G spot (Punto G):** absinthe cream, chocolate liqueur

**Kamasutra:** 2 chocolate cups, eggnog, coffee and hazelnut liqueurs

**French Kiss (Limoniamo?):** limoncello and chocolate liqueur

**Sadomaso:** absinthe

**Threesome (Ménage à Trois):** pistachio, banana, and coconut liqueurs

**Lift It Up (Tiralosù):** eggnog, coffee, and chocolate liqueurs

**Multiorgasm:** Bailey’s, vodka, coffee liqueur

**And only for those who take it anal:**

**Super One Night Stand (Super Bottarella):** large size chocolate cup with Bailey’s and chocolate liqueur

The lady at the bar was wiping off the counter when it was their turn to order. With smooth efficiency, she cleared off strands of whipped cream and chocolate shavings. The fragrance of various liqueurs rose heady and sweet, mingled with fresh cream and wisps of confectioner’s sugar. Placing three napkins in front of them, she looked up and recognized Niall.

“Tesoro!” she said. “Come va?” *How’s it going, babe?* “You have brought me two virgins today?”

“I’ve actually had—” Louis began refuting her, but Niall cut in.

“I come bearing gifts.” He spread his hand toward Harry and Louis, one hand steadying his bag. “Two fresh victims. Harry here’s a bit skeptical. Maybe you can convince him.”

“And only for those who take it anal:”

“The first time is always the hardest, no?” she commented. “It hurts a little to take the plunge, and
maybe it’s not the smoothest or the best, but the journey is worth it in the end, eh?”

Louis laughed politely, while Harry’s attention was on the menu.

Niall turned to them. “Do you guys know what you want?”

“It all looks quite... interesting.” Turning toward the wall, Louis tapped his lips. “What is your most popular drink?”

She leaned in. “Truthfully? People order 69 a lot. It’s sweet but not too sweet. For a 69, you need a good balance, eh? When you lick away at it, you get a nice, strong tingle below, and when you’re done drinking, you can munch it all up.” She winked at Louis. “È una bella sorsata.”

Harry’s eyebrows arched in amusement, and Niall translated for Louis, “She said, ‘It’s a mouthful.’”

“Oh,” Louis’ eyes sparkled. “My.”

Clearing his throat, Harry spoke up, “I’ll have a Ménage à Trois.”

“Si, caro,” the bartender gestured to the three of them, “I can see that, obviously. But what would you like to drink?”

“I— I meant the drink.” Harry stopped midway. “Oh. You’re joking.”

Smiling widely, she set down a chocolate shot glass in front of him, and poured in a clear liqueur smelling strongly of bananas, then a white creamy coconut liqueur, and finally a pastel green pistachio liqueur. Swirling the cup lightly, she picked up a bottle of Chantilly cream, shook it expertly and squirted the cream onto the drink. As Harry reached in, she brusquely put a hand out to stop him. With great fanfare, she shaved from a square of dark chocolate onto the frilly surface, then decorated it with three perfect raspberries, set in a triangle.

“Now,” she asked, “who’ll be sharing this Ménage à Trois with you?”

Harry tentatively raises his hand on his own.

“Yes darling,” she said patiently, “I know. But threesomes need to be generous to each other. Don’t your friends want in? Specialmente questa bellissima creatura qui,” she finished by nodding toward Louis. “Sembra che abbia bisogno di un drink.” Especially this beautiful creature here. Looks like he could use a drink.

Harry looked at Niall, who looked at Louis, who was staring at Harry wordlessly. Niall hung his bag on the back of a chair and giggled.

“Three raspberries,” she continued. “One for each person. You can hold the cup for one another. Try it, it’s good.”

Harry lifted the shot glass and held it up to Louis’ lips. Louis opened his mouth as Harry tipped the cup back, licking the cream and sucking in a raspberry.

“Mm, it is good,” Louis exclaimed. Then as the liquor went down his throat, “And strong. It burns a bit. I can really taste the coconut. You’re right, it is just the right sweetness.”

She motioned to Harry with her head. “Now you?”

Harry handed the shot glass to Louis, whose hand shook a little as he turned to Niall.
“Nope, not me,” Niall put his hand up. “I’ll sit this one out. Banana isn’t really my thing.”

Louis had no choice but to turn back to Harry. He held the cup under Harry’s lips, and positioned it so the raspberry was in front of him. His hand shook as Harry’s tongue flicked quickly over his upper lip. Harry’s right hand reached around to steady Louis’ wrist, anchoring it in place. A tremor shot up into Louis’ arm. He sucked in a breath and held it, suddenly lightheaded. The chandelier seemed to dim. Then Harry unlocked his mouth and took in the entire drink—whipped cream, chocolate cup and all. His grip not letting up, he licked the spilled liquor off Louis’ fingers, and as naturally as if he were eating ice cream, cleaned the Chantilly from Louis’ thumb, sucking in a tuff around the nail. His eyes connected to Louis’ as he gave his hand a little peck and let him go.

“You’re right,” Harry said. “That was pretty good.”

Niall’s mouth dropped open in astonishment. At the last minute, he glanced down at his camera bag, regretting not having a video of the whole interaction. It was journalistic gold. He turned from Louis to Harry, silently seeking an explanation, but Louis kept his eyes elsewhere, and Harry was smugly staring at Louis.

“Fuck me!” Niall said to Harry. “You’ve taken down the electric fence, ye bastard.”

At the same time, Louis said, “I’ll have a multiorgasm.”

“I bet you will.” Niall muttered in disbelief. “I bet you will.”

The lady held a cocktail napkin to Harry, and one to Louis.

“A good choice,” she said. “È pezzo forte, like the name. Are you ready?”

Louis’ eyes flew to Harry, then turned back to her. He nodded tensely.

Just like before, she placed a chocolate shot glass in front of Louis. Pouring in a thimbleful of Grey Goose, she swirled it around, coating the inside of the cup. The clear liquor polished the matte brown of the chocolate cup. Then she poured an equal amount of Kahlúa, and topped off with Bailey’s to the edge of the cup, almost spilling over. Only the surface tension of the alcohol held it in place.

“Ha!” she laughed. “Always too much, this one.”

Louis watched as she shook a canister of Chantilly and squirted a coffee-colored cream around the borders of the cup, and then layered it toward the top, forming a peak.

She nodded at Louis. “Take this one from behind,” she said. “Slowly. She’s a nasty one. She’ll surprise you at the end.”

Louis picked up the cup with both hands, careful not to spill. His first sip was mostly whipped cream, but it was still very strong. The layers of alcohol rose over each other like creatures from the deep.

He widened his eyes and blew out his cheeks. “I think I’m breathless.”

“Is it good?” Niall asked.

Louis held out the drink. “Try it.”

Niall took a sip and shook his head briskly. “Hair of the dog,” he said. “This is a multisensory
experience.”

“May I?” Harry said.

Niall handed it over, and Harry took a sip.

“I’ve misjudged,” Harry said, giving the drink back to Louis. “You were right, Niall. I definitely like this place.” He admired the drink again. “This is a kicker.”

Louis raised the cup, which was starting to melt in his warm fingers. He could feel the chocolate sliding under his thumb. He had an intense desire to lick it clean, but bit his lips instead. Holding the Multiorgasm up to his mouth, he tried to guzzle the whole thing, but had to stop midway. The vodka was kindling a furnace in his chest, its flames flying up to his throat. The sweetness lingered on the tip of his tongue long after he caught his breath.

“Whew,” he sighed. “It really does take a few sips, doesn’t it?”

The bartender stood back proudly and said, “The best part is at the end, when you finish the chocolate.” Harry nodded subtly. “It is the last pleasure.”

“Here goes,” Louis said. His nibbling of the chocolate cup made it split down the middle. The crack traveled across the bottom of the cup and up the other side, splintering it into pieces. Louis caught the pieces with both hands just as the cup was disintegrating, when Harry’s hand flew out to grab at it as well. Wrapping his hand around Louis’ hands, he totally smashed the chocolate bits.

They both stared at Harry’s hand for a second before he flinched, letting go. For a second, Louis felt the ghost of Harry’s tongue licking his hand.

“Thought it might fall,” Harry said. “Sorry, all yours.”

Louis opened his hand to see the crumbled chocolate. He bent over and sucked them down, moving his mouth around to get all the chocolate. He tasted remnants of sticky alcohol and sweet mocha Chantilly, licking them delicately off his palm. He could also smell Harry’s mouth on his hand. The musky fragrance of it lingered like the sweat around his lips. Louis became momentarily disoriented, his vision blurring.

Niall grabbed a napkin off the counter and handed it to him.

“Well, what d’you think?” Niall asked. “Did you enjoy it?”

“Don’t think I should do that again,” Louis said, laughing politely to cover his embarrassment. His hand still bore the feeling of Harry’s grip, and he stretched his fingers out until he saw Harry staring at him. He shook his head then and looked away, unable to meet his eyes.

“Is it steamy in here?” Louis whispered. He roughly wiped his hand with the napkin, put it back on the counter, and then leaned against it, shaky.

“That was probably your last orgasm,” Niall said.

Louis’ face was dusky. “Yeah, well.”

Watching Louis, Harry pulled a chair closer, and motioned with his head. “Sit down, Princess. You’ll feel better. Maybe it was too much.”

Louis waved him away. “I’ll be okay.” He cleared his throat and tried to stand more firmly. “Niall
needs to order now.”

“I’ll have what I always have.” Then he yelled out, “Chicken breast!”

“Spagnoletta?” the bartender confirmed, and Niall nodded cheerfully.

Harry shook his head in disappointment. “I cannot believe you just said that.”

Louis’ eyes traveled back and forth between them. “What’s wrong? What did Niall order?”

Harry pointed to the menu on the wall. “Boobs.”

The bartender poured crème de menthe into a dark chocolate shot glass and topped off with fresh Chantilly cream and chocolate sprinkles.

“Everyone calm down,” Niall said apropos of nothing, his hands palms down, shushing them. “The chicken has been seasoned. The chef will now do the tasting.”

“A perfect serving,” she said. “More than a mouthful is a waste, no?”

Niall giggled like a schoolgirl, and then slurped the liquor down, leaving a white milky mustache on his upper lip. He munched the chocolate quickly, wiped his hands, brushing off any crumbs, and then licked off the cream.

“Magnifico, as always,” he complimented her, pulling out his wallet to pay. “Grazie un mazzo. Ci torneremo presto.” Thanks a bunch. We’ll be back soon.

“You’re always welcome.” The bartender was already looking away, getting ready for the customers behind them. “Have a nice evening.”

The men walked out into early evening. The sky held shades of peaches and pinks, the Roman buildings burnished like goldfish in lacquered bowls. Securing his bag, Niall raised both arms over his head and stretched, lithe as a rubber band, his face contorted with satisfaction.

“What do you feel like doing?” he asked. “Evening’s just getting started. As long as we’re here, might as well have a pint at Mr. Brown’s. What’s your pleasure, gents?”

“Is that another bar?” Louis asked.

“Down the street,” Niall said. “Fine establishment, Guinness on tap. Steak and chips done right. You’ll even see an Irishman once in a blue moon.”

Louis shakes his head. “I don’t think my liver can handle it.”

“Then come keep me entertained,” Niall said. “I’m famished. Haven’t had a bite since this morning.”

“What have you been doing all day?” Louis asked. “I thought you were free.”

“New assignment,” Niall said, patting his camera bag. “Got called for a bit of work this afternoon. Very important, very sought-after man. C’est moi.”

Louis’ eyes crinkled before he laughed, shaking his head lightly. As his hand strayed to his trousers, the bent corner of the cardstock brushed against it, alerting him to the object in his pocket. Under the glow of twilight, Louis fished out the business card and held it at an angle for a better look. He had forgotten about this encounter until now; it seemed an entire lifetime ago that
he was wandering in Rome by himself. A roiling, vibrating beat came to life in his stomach, as if someone struck a match to the alcohol inside.

Karl Volpe. A scoundrel. A rubbish bin of a man, Niall had said. Someone who took Louis for a mark. The place he mentioned was the Isola del Piacere, Louis was fairly sure.

His eyes went blank for a moment, blacking everything out. Flashes of green came and went in his peripheral vision. A humming roar surged in his ears, blocking out any extraneous sound. Then all was quiet. A few blinks later, Louis refocused on the card, turning toward Harry.

“Look up the Isola del Piacere,” Louis said. There was no room for argument in his voice.

Harry quirked an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Oh,” Niall uttered simultaneously, “boy.” He yanked on Harry’s shirt, as if to prevent what would happen next. “Don’t look it up, Harry.”

Pleasure Island. That was the name of the club.

“How do you know about that place?” Harry asked suspiciously.

“I was invited to a party earlier today.” Louis’ blue eyes were mischievous, as cold as metal, glinting in the half-light. His voice came out low and hushed. “Think I’d like to go.”

Harry considered his words seriously. Louis stood with remarkable confidence in spite of a slight tremor in his chin, never breaking eye contact. He really had no idea.

“You don’t, my man,” Niall cut into both of their silences. “I’m telling you. That bloke you met is a scam artist. You see a million of them, especially at night. C’mon, if ye want to go clubbing, we’ll go somewhere else—”

“Who was it?” Harry interrupted.

Niall shook his head impatiently at Harry. “No one we know. It’s not important. Gave me a really bad vibe, is all.”

“Why?” Louis stepped forward. “What sort of party is Isola?”

“Not the kind for a P—” Niall bit back his words. “P— proper person,” he said, tongue nearly injured in the twister. “It’s a big… circus, like,” Niall tried to convey with his rapidly gesticulating hands, “with clowns, drag queens, different scenarios. It’s adult themed.”

“Like a strip club?” Louis asked.

“Not exactly.” Niall chewed a cuticle on his thumb. “More like a masquerade ball crossed with an orgy. You do know that it means Pleasure Island, right?”

“Sounds interesting.” Louis proposed. “A place with a theme.” He blinked innocently, waiting for an answer. “I’ve been to clubs like that before, I’m sure we can handle it. Could be entertaining. Don’t you think so, Harry?” His words belonged in someone else’s mouth; Louis suddenly looked like a teenage boy on an adventure.

“It’s not an ordinary dance club,” Harry said with wariness. “Isola is a private party on the periphery of all the big parties, sort of… under-the-radar.” He thought for a moment. “They have their own security, if you can even call it that. There are always ‘incidents’ there.”
“But you’ve never been,” Louis said.

“No.” Harry paused. “Isola is one of those places with a shady reputation, and that says something, in Rome. We’re not talking about a night at the Doncaster opera.” Niall whipped his head over, but Harry shook his head lightly and gave him a silent shush. “No offense to your uncle. But this is Rome, Boo. I don’t think you’d— we’d— want to get caught there. It’s not a good idea.”

“Why not?” Louis cocked his head.

“It’s…”

Harry bit down on his jaw, feeling Niall study him with an intense curiosity.

“It could get very messy,” Harry finished. “Maybe even dangerous.”

A member of the European royalty in the Isola del Piacere would be the juiciest gossip— of the worst kind. Therefore it was sure to fly off the shelves. Documented with Niall’s photos, the Prince’s escapade would dominate social media news for weeks, if not months. It would certainly overwhelm any serious news coming from Doncaster. The consequences for all of them were hard to fathom. Glancing at Louis, Harry sensed a belligerent determination in his stance, and wondered whether Louis had any idea what could befall him. Without thinking, his gaze traveled up to the base of Louis’ throat, the delicate hollow at the convergence of his collar. His necklace and charm were visible only as shadows in the thin fabric: a fragile chain, a box of secrets. The shadows converged where his neck muscles rose in a V. A brief glance told Harry that Louis had been silently watching him.

“Look it up,” Louis demanded.

“Harry!” Niall yelled again, so that several heads turned to watch them.

He exchanged a meaningful glance with Harry and understood the dilemma. For some inexplicable reason, Prince Louis William Tomlinson was digging his own grave, headed toward an epic disaster. Their news story was practically writing itself in front of their eyes. All they had to do was to let him. Harry’s troubled face, however, told Niall that he was having second thoughts.

Harry finally exhaled. “I’m not going to,” he said. “In fact, I think we should go home. I’m tired; it’s been a long day. What do you say?”

Louis considered his words, staring down at the paper in his hand.

He remembered the old conservatory filled with racks of elaborate handmade costumes. More than a decade later, the memory emerged as fresh as if it were yesterday. He was walking into a room full of crisp gauze, stiff tulle, gold trim on togas, delicate laurel crowns and tiaras. Wintry light slanted through the phalanx of windows. The armour, shields, and brocades stood at his command. Flowers of evil rose at his feet, luxurious, calm, and true. Fingertips brushing Marius’ lovely gown, Louis understood that beauty was transient, made more impossible by the steel beams and crossbars holding up the palace walls. The burden of his heredity would soon unbar the doors, reveal his true identity, and drag him away. Fire and water were awaiting him somewhere in the world. All his life, Louis had been anticipating that the underworld would eventually come and swallow him. They tossed pomegranates at his feet. They spread a carpet of roses before him. Green hands from green waters were beckoning to him. He only had to say yes.

“Go home,” he said to Harry. “I’ll find my own way home.”

“But you’re not going home, are you?” Niall said. “You’re going to that place.”
Harry frowned. “Louis, you don’t even know where you live.”

Shifting his feet awkwardly, Louis replied, “I’ll figure it out. In fact, I think I do remember now.” He swallowed, trying to find the right words, but nothing came immediately. So he said, “I’m really sorry I left your shirt at the restaurant.”

“Louis,” Harry insisted.

“I’ll be fine,” Louis reassured him. “I’m twenty-four. This is Rome, not Antarctica. I think I can manage.” Helpfully, he joked, “You forget, I can speak four languages.”

“But none of them Italian,” Harry countered.

“Go home, Harry,” Louis said soberly. “I have to do this. Please. I’ll find my own way. You’ve been a wonderful host, and I have loved everything today.” Louis paused. “But this isn’t about you. I need to do it on my own.”

Bewildered, Harry dug through his pockets and took out the money Courtney had lent him, counting out some bills. “Don’t say any of those naughty phrases I taught you, yeah? And here, take some money. Don’t ride public transportation. You shouldn’t—I mean, it can be confusing for people who don’t live here. You have my address if you need me, just get a taxi. And—”

“I’ll be fine,” Louis repeated, putting his hand on Harry’s. “Thanks for everything. I’m so glad I met you. So very, very glad.” He turned to Niall. “The bar was great, Niall. Fantastico, cazzo. You are a real gentleman.”

“See you around?” Niall said, turning to Harry again, beseeching him. “Harry! Do something!”

“Princess,” Harry fidgeted with his hands, finally extending a palm. Louis shook it gently, humorously. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Want to walk around and chew on it for a bit?”

Louis shook his head with a small smile, his mind made up.

“Then…” Harry struggled to say anything meaningful, panicking. “I guess… have a fun life.”

“I will,” Louis said. “You too, Tumbleweed. The best life.”

Lips closed tightly, Harry gave the tiniest nod. They stood immobile for a moment until Louis turned and began walking away, toward the lights and sounds of the main thoroughfare. Niall and Harry watched him shrink, his figure getting slighter and the sound of his shoes fading into the background noise. The white of his shirt became darker and darker until he was barely visible, a dot in the half-formed, crepuscular matrix.


“What’s it to you?” Harry growled. He ran a hand shakily through his hair, the curls falling across his eyes and around his ears. “Shush. What the fuck does it matter?”

“It’s not too late,” Niall persisted. “You could—”

“Chase after him?” Harry chuckled. “He’s a Prince, Niall.”
“How?” Niall asked. “I mean, how did you fall so fast? Like... so fast. Yeah, he’s cute and all, but in a day, Harry? I never thought this would be possible, Harry Styles, the man himself— ”


Niall shrugged dramatically. They looked toward the direction where Louis had gone, as if somehow that would compel him to change his mind and come back. The noise of pedestrians crossing, car motors in the distance, the murmur of twilight insects and animals filled the air.

“Want to grab a pint then?” Niall offered. “Drown your sorrows. Right down the street.”

At that moment, both Niall and Harry’s phones vibrated with text alerts. Harry’s palm hovered over the phone in his pocket.

“I think I’ll head home,” he answered Niall.

Harry pulled his phone out and squinted at the message. The light being the exact brightness to block out most of the letters, he had to swipe it on and open his texts in order to read it. Niall was checking his phone too.

“Who’s on yours?” Niall squinted.

“Courtney,” Harry said. “Yours too?”

Niall nodded. “No word on the Doncaster press conference. The embassy’s quiet as a church mouse. Anxious as a sinner on Christmas, too.”

Harry chuckled, bittersweet. “Wonder why.”

“Bet they’re out looking for him,” Niall said.

Niall adjusted the strap on his camera bag until it sat flat and secure on his shoulder. The photos in his bag carried more weight than the few trillion megapixels they were worth. Harry glanced at the camera bag, clenched his jaw and prepared to go.

“I might walk back. It’s still early.” Harry shoved a hand into his pocket. “Text me if you hear anything, yeah?”

“You sure you don’t want to come with?” Niall asked. He put a hand up to block out stray rays of sunshine. “C’mon, Harry. Night out.”

Harry shook his head. “Nice warm Roman evening like this?” His wistful expression belied his light tone. “I’ll pass this time. Call you later?”

“You sure you don’t want to come with?” Niall asked. He put a hand up to block out stray rays of sunshine. “C’mon, Harry. Night out.”

Harry shook his head. “Nice warm Roman evening like this?” His wistful expression belied his light tone. “I’ll pass this time. Call you later?”

“Listen, Harry,” Niall called out, stopping Harry in his tracks. He had seen how Harry checked out his backpack. “I was wondering, do you still want his photos?” Niall breathed quietly, not wanting to hurt him. He slapped his camera bag. “I mean— I did get some good ones of the two of you, if you still want them. To remember.”

Harry knew what Niall was asking him. The question had been on his mind all day. Harry had gathered enough, and Niall had enough photos, for a good story. If they wanted to run it.

A second passed before he said, “You keep them, Niall.”

Harry opened his mouth again, thought better of saying more, and shut it. Without turning around,
he raised his hand for a casual wave and walked away, taking care not to stumble.

前門の虎，後門の狼
_A tiger at the front gate, a wolf at the back gate._

- Japanese Proverb

And if nothing else can change me  
And I am just this way then  
Would you love me?

_I'm A Fantastic Wreck_, by Montaigne

Louis followed the Via della Renella, with only the elastic shadows of trees and lampposts guiding him. Regardless of landmarks, Rome was still a complete, expansive mystery to him. The night slowly crept on, one mild breeze at a time.

It seemed incredibly quiet without Harry. Maybe Louis had gotten used to Harry. As he walked along, Louis would notice random things that he wanted to point out to Harry: a child playing with a kitten on the street, a bicyclist almost crashing into a couple and their dogs, a bird stealing someone’s food out of their hands. Louis wanted to see Harry’s eyes light up with laughter, or shake his head in amusement. He wanted to learn some more naughty Italian phrases. He wanted to see Harry’s spontaneous laugh, the way his eyes creased and dimples deepened. It was an oddly buoyant feeling, since he’d known Harry for less than twenty-four hours, so technically Harry was still a stranger. Moreover, in his heart Louis knew that he would never see Harry again. Perhaps that was why he could allow himself to indulge in these thoughts. _Never_ was a long, long time.

The sun was setting before Louis caught the attention of a cab. He stepped forward to the curb and waved the boxy vehicle down. Without hesitation this time, he opened the car door and climbed into the worn, matte leather backseat, cracked along the seams.

The seat was old enough that it had almost no bounce. In his clearest royal diction, Louis told the driver his destination, noticing the driver’s wry assessment that someone like Louis would be going to a place like the Isola del Piacere. He wasn’t really dressed for clubbing, was he? Admittedly, Louis was grungier than he had been in the morning, hair spiked with sweat matted in different directions, a five o’clock shadow developing along his jawline. The Roman twilight cast his cheekbones into greater relief, the waning sun sharpening his mouth and chin. In his royal life, he
would never have been allowed to travel in such a state. Nervously Louis smoothed out his fringe and adjusted his collar, hoping the shirt was holding up. He had to give it to Arthur; the royal tailors did use superior materials and craftsmanship. The cab driver’s unsmiling face stared back at him on the photo license posted to the back of his seat. The cab smelled of cellars and stale cigarettes. Despite his nondescript surroundings, the smell brought back a submerged craving. Louis’ fingers sought out the comfort of an imaginary cigarette.

The driver’s guarded reaction had made Louis think, but he wasn’t dissuaded. He was already drawn to the night as if were his destiny. Now he understood why some mountain climbers died on the mountains— it was difficult to explain to anyone else. The fear and desire inside himself had always been there, a subterranean current flowing to his very core. However carefully concealed, they were thriving and nourishing, as strongly as his responsibility to the state of Doncaster. His destiny was a string that had been woven long ago, like the clue leading Theseus out of King Minos’ labyrinth. The terror had always been as real as the glory. Louis knew it, and he had to face it.

Already he was anticipating the chilled night air. It wouldn’t matter, anyway. Not in the place where he was going.

A few minutes later, the cab turned onto a street with rows of restaurants and dance clubs. People wandered the sidewalks in small groups, chatting and laughing. The traffic slowed to a crawl, stopping where cars were double and triple parked.

They finally arrived in front of a dark, windowless building, separate from the others. Louis paid the driver and exited the car, stepping out to several closed, painted doors.

“This is the place?” Louis turned around to ask.

The driver nodded and pointed. “Isola del Piacere.”

Louis nodded, still puzzled, and went to investigate. No one was waiting to go in. In fact, there was no sign of anyone at all. For all intents and purposes, the place could be a warehouse. There were no signs or lights to identify the building.

Glancing up, Louis noticed something he had been accustomed to from palace life: security cameras. In a few seconds, one of the doors cracked open and a man in a suit appeared at the entryway. He was broad and tall enough to be a bodyguard, his face without expression, head shaved, a trim beard around his muscular chin.

“Posso aiutarla?”

His voice startled Louis. “Is this the Isola del Piacere?” Louis dug our Volpe’s card and handed it to the man. “I was invited.”

“Un momento.” The man took his card and disappeared, the door closing behind him. Louis paced slowly outside, aware that he could be watched the entire time. After a few minutes, the man came out again.

“Come with me,” he said in accented English.

He held the door open, and Louis ducked through the low threshold, eyes adjusting to the dim interior. They were in a long hallway. The walls were painted a dark color with moody sconces illuminating the ceiling. The door closed, shutting out all external light. All was darkness. The man flicked on a penlight, and Louis’ hand unconsciously came up to pat his necklace, fingers tapping
the smooth contours of Pandora’s box. He followed the man’s unhurried, stolid steps through the narrow pathway, loud bass beats vibrating the floor and a synthesizer hum in front. The man walked steadily toward the noise, holding the penlight in front. Neon reflected from the dark spaces ahead.

The hallway opened to a cavernous, bewildering room. Mirrors, giant gemstones, carnival lights and painted trees were everywhere, through which large steel beams and girders could be glimpsed. It was a playspace for the end of the apocalypse. Numerous neon colors were swimming on the ceiling and walls. The illumination made it difficult to tell whether the room was above or below ground, which way was up. Thumping music filled the room, so loudly that one could not distinguish the tune. Louis could make out that there were various sections to the club, set up so each section had its own crowd and audience. Between these, club goers were milling about chaotically, some attempting to dance, others swaying or kissing or grinding on each other. The din was overwhelming, and it was dark enough that Louis couldn’t see the other side. He noticed the unusual costumes that Niall had tried to describe and finally understood why he couldn’t quite articulate it. The atmosphere was festive yet dank, with an atmosphere of exaggerated celebration.

Two people dressed as marionettes, with their faces painted in theatrical white makeup, popped up in front of Louis. Their hands were trailing strings as if tethered to puppet handles. Their faces were decorated with bright ruby lips. They were chasing and tickling one another, hands quick as fireflies. They stopped abruptly in front of him.

“Who’re you?” one of them shouted.

The other giggled, her painted face showing an exaggerated surprise. “A new boy! How delicious!”

“Have you come to play?”

Louis was still staring at them when a figure appeared before him. The wide, thin, scarlet smile, ash blond hair, and long, nearly transparent eyelashes were immediately recognizable. Karl Volpe was now wearing a black velvet suit and a white ascot, and carrying a gold-knobbed cane on his forearm. He looked taller and thinner in this outfit. The marionettes scattered.

“Good evening,” Karl shouted over the music. “I’m so glad you decided to come.”

He pulled out a cigarette, and seeing Louis’ interest, pulled another one out, lighting both of them with a pink lighter. Handing one over to Louis, he sucked in his gaunt cheeks, turned his head, and slowly exhaled.

The cigarette felt wonderful in Louis’ hand. The thin curls of smoke around him reminded Louis how fine it could be, how calming and numbing a smoke could feel in his chest. His mouth tingled. He inhaled hungrily, burning up almost half of the stick in the first puff. His eyes fluttering closed, Louis let the smoke pacify his throat.

“Easy, beautiful,” Karl smiled. “I trust you’ve had an adventure. Have you not had a smoke all day?”

Louis opened his eyes halfway, then closed them again. Smoke sluiced out between his lips.

“Do you have a name?” Karl asked playfully. “Or shall I continue to call you beautiful?”

Louis made him wait. He took another drag, and exhaled again before he answered.

“Name’s Louis.”
“Louis.” Karl weighed this response. He checked behind Louis dramatically. “A name for kings. But you seem to be all by yourself. No entourage?” Karl took another theatrical glance. “No old school friends to whisk you away?”

Louis ignored him.

Karl motioned for one of the servers to come to them. The server was dressed like an eighteenth century Viennese liveryman, in satin breeches and buckled shoes. But his sleeves were cut off and he had defined biceps, and his shirt showed off a toned chest. He carried a tray with a bottle of champagne and fluted glasses filled with rose bubbles. The server eyed Louis with a grin.

“Care for champagne, Louis?” Karl asked him. “First glass is on the house.”

Louis stood with feet planted firmly apart, trying to appear bigger than he was. He stubbed his nearly finished cigarette on the tray and tossed the butt into a glass. It fizzed and sank to the bottom. Karl immediately took out another cigarette and lit it for him. Louis did not hesitate to accept it.

“Thank you,” Louis said, out of sheer training in etiquette. Louis’ royalty was ingrained. He would always be diplomatic. But he wouldn’t be foolish enough to drink whatever was in the glass.

Karl took a glass of champagne and motioned for the server to leave. Louis could now see tables and chairs at the periphery. The stations were clotted with audience. Once in a while, he would see the top of a performer's head, and then a loud audience response would follow.

Closest to them, Louis saw a stage where a person dressed in a short toga and laurel wreath was playing a lyre. The sound was impossible to hear since the music overhead was so loud. The harpist had turned his back on a woman dancing in a cage suspended from the ceiling. She was wearing a diaphanous slip that left nothing to imagination, her nipples erect and waist curved inward. Her hands were clasped above her long red hair, her hips swaying to and forth. She twisted and writhed until her slip dress unknotted and pooled at her feet. Completely naked, her skin was as pale as marble. Her peach nipples and small mound of red pubic hair seemed like paint dabbed on her body. As the harpist stopped playing, he turned around to see the cage burst into silken flames, and the dancer disappear within. The cage then vanished into the ground. The crowd whistled and cheered loudly as the harpist stood up and bowed.

Next to this stage were the marionette dolls— the performers who had surprised Louis earlier. They were doing a hip hop-like dance, their joints popping in synchrony, their facial expressions of sadness, amazement, and surprise changing symmetrically. It was like watching a human assembly line. The bass beat vibrated up Louis’ ankle bones. The two performers in the center were the ones who had confronted Louis. They ran to the front of the stage now, blowing kisses to him and waving. Then they turned around and flipped up their skirts, tilting their buttocks up and showing off their G strings.

Across the room, a crowd of people had gathered around a central performance area. Karl led Louis closer to them. Through gaps in the crowd, he could see an elevated platform where two people were sitting on opposite sides of a table with metal bowls and equipment on top.

One of them, a man, was working with both hands in the other’s mouth. The other one sat passively with hands in her lap— it was a young woman, Louis realized, with short blond hair pulled back in pigtails. She looked to be barely twenty.

“What’s he doing?” Louis asked.
Karl brought them closer so Louis could see. The man finished working. Louis could see the woman tongue her lower lip out. A silver stud glinted in the reflection of ceiling lights, with a bar nearly invisible but for the rigid shadow across her skin. It pierced across the lip and came out the other side, where a silver chain dangled. At the bottom were two small silver balls—chains and balls. The woman stood up and turned her lip out for all to see; a coagulated spot of blood was still on her reddened skin. The crowd murmured its approval. She took a deep bow, bending at the waist and nearly folding herself in half.

A lady sashayed in front of them in a lace miniskirt and thigh-high patent leather boots. She seemed to be about the same age as Louis, but her dark eye makeup concealed any wrinkles. Her sharp cheekbones were accentuated by a bluish contour in the hollows of her cheeks. Her lips were outlined in deep burgundy. Most distinguishing of all was a piercing in the right nipple, with a silver chain attaching it to a leather collar around her neck. Otherwise her chest and belly were nude. A silver hoop was pierced through her belly button.

She leaned in, breasts dangling, the metallic chain swinging across the slope of her neck.

“Are you here to play, darling?” she asked in a French accent.

Louis recognized it as distinctly Parisian. It was the same as Monsieur Acheron’s, his French tutor who had prided himself on his adherence to the Académie Française.

“Pourquoi es-tu si loin de Paris?” Louis asked her. Why are you so far from Paris?

“Pourquoi es-tu?” she asked sharply. Why are you?

“C’est pas grave quand même. Occupe toi de tes affaires, peut-être!” Maybe mind your own business! She pouted at Karl, who laughed at her affectionately.

“He’s not for you, sweetheart,” he called after her as she huffed off, her hips swaying on high heels.

“Why was she so angry?” Louis turned to Karl.

“Because you’re not hers,” Karl said cryptically. “Unless you want to be?”

Louis replied a tad too quickly, “No.”

Karl nodded. “I thought not! Come with me and we’ll get you sorted.”

They walked toward the back of the building. An enormous bar flanked the right side of the wall, with hundreds of bottles of alcohol, in all shapes and sizes, lined against the mirrored back. A long marble countertop ran in front, where bartenders were working. Servers were carrying away drink trays as quickly as they were mixed. People at the bar were slumped forlornly or lethargically, or perched anxiously like sentinels, nursing their cocktails. Some gazed vacantly at their surroundings. Others howled loudly with laughter, their hands and eyes animated. Karl took a sip of champagne and set his glass on the bar.

Louis had been to clubs at university and despite the theatricality of this place, it was not totally unfamiliar. He understood the entertainers’ being showcased, the costumes and makeup. Yet none of this was what he came for—not the overpoweringly loud music, nor the shabby carnival theme. He was restless to leave this façade.

There was an unspoken game being played: Karl had mentioned an audience, which meant that Louis would be on exhibition. In the way that rafts were inexorably carried along tumultuous currents, Louis wanted Karl Volpe to show his hand.
Karl winked at him and led them to the back of the room, through a door that revealed another hallway. With the door closed, the music was considerably dampened. Instead there was a vibrating hum in the hallway. Louis paused, for the first time wondering whether he was insane.

“Do you wish to go on?”

“What am I doing?” Louis asked.

“You’re so gorgeous,” Karl smiled. “You could be a star. I’d like you to have a taste of stardom. As I said before, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

“What will I be doing, exactly?”

Karl looked ahead. “You’ll see.”

They walked a short distance and turned into another hallway, where Karl opened the door to another space.

Inside was an all-white room with white furniture: plush white couches on the periphery, single white Louis XV bergères in their curvaceous solitude, white benches angled toward a stage, as if arranged for an impromptu show. The “stage” was a single, square white block set a few feet from a wall, smaller than a bed, larger than a chair.

The room was empty except for the furniture. Louis looked back to Karl, who gestured to the stage.

“That’s for you,” he said. “If you wish to find out what happiness is.”

Louis stared at the enigmatic smile on Karl’s face. He wondered whether this could be an end to the Doncaster Prince and his Kingdom.

The stage was a simple white cube, at a sitting height, but also big enough to stand on. It was gleaming and clear, and when Louis came closer, the stage reflected his silhouette, his clothing and shape. As he stood there, another person entered the room and sat down in one of the chairs. He was a lanky, tall man with a mop of blond hair, his eyes feral as a mink’s, almost blood red. He draped his arm on the back of the chair and puffed on a cigarette. In the half light, it was impossible to see his face clearly.

Other people filtered in, in one’s and two’s. They dressed like party goers, in posh or eclectic clothes, and either stood chatting or sat in the audience facing the stage. Slowly the seats filled.

The door opened again. A woman in a black velvet cape came in, carrying a tray, on top of which was a glass bowl with pipes.

The cape, tied loosely around her neck, concealed a floor-length black gown cut tightly around her hourglass shape. The gown dipped into a sweetheart neckline showing her small, fitted cleavage. She set the tray down and began preparing. A soft, coin-sized resin was unwrapped and placed into one end of the glass bowl. Water was poured at the bottom, and the resin was lit to burn. After some time, smoke began to fill the chamber. Louis knew this was probably some type of cannabis, which he’d never tried before. Satisfied with her preparation, the woman pushed the bowl toward him. Louis looked up, trying to locate Karl, but he seemed to have vanished into the dark corners of the room.

...spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple

Louis doesn’t know why these lines came into his head. It might be from a lifetime of memorizing words, such that as soon as he hears beautiful things, they simply enter him, as immaterial and profound as angels. *Love calls us…* what did Harry say was the title? Louis couldn’t remember.

He took the bowl and inhaled.

A cool steam entered his throat. It was as fine as spring, finding its way through the labyrinth of his lungs. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, feeling his heart slowly expand. His mind calmed. All around him was an inky dark blue.

Before he was aware, a hand touched him lightly on the belly. He opened his eyes and saw the woman lay her palm on his stomach, soothing him. She gave him the bowl and he took another hit. Then they sat down on the stage, Louis smoking the bong and the woman with her arm around him. As he inhaled, her hand went under his shirt and scraped his back, felt his chest slowly rising and falling.

Feeling lightheaded and at ease, Louis lay back on the stage, with his feet still dangling from the edge. Her hands crept under his shirt and stroked the stiff, fine hairs on his lower abdomen with a steady insistence. Louis felt his cock slowly getting aroused. Her hand went to and fro, back and forth, fingers skimming the outline of his ribs, like wind worrying the sails of a ship. Fingers traced his belly button and skirted down to his waistband, following a dark and tumultuous trail. His breathing turned shallow and quickened. Despite the calm, Louis let out an uncontrolled moan. A herd galloped in the back of his mind. He clenched his hips and brought them forward. The nerves in his groin sparked.

The woman sat up, hovering over him. Her cape shielded him like a weeping willow. Her hands traveled to his chest, a hand cupping each of his pectoralis muscles. Their warmth felt good with the cannabis high now coursing through Louis’ body. He sighed contentedly, dreaming of the massage Harry had given him in the morning and feeling his cock fill. Harry had brought him to a frantic, panicked erection. Now Louis wanted to sink into the stage that was like a loamy grave, and to indulge in a violent, spectacular, delayed orgasm—the one he’d wanted with Harry. But since Harry wasn’t here, Louis had no reason to worry. There was no longer anyone here he cared about. He could let go without consequence.

As the woman massaged him, another person came to stand by his side. Karl Volpe had taken off his velvet jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves. His forearms were thin, battered ropes, his wrists, bony wrenches.

Louis lay completely still, enthralled by a vision. He was immobile on a forest floor. Trees towered over him. The sky was an indigo infinity. The crowd was distant, but coming closer, their hooves…

Louis’ shirt was raised above his belly button. His curved muscles cast soft shadows in the dim light. Karl put both hands on the abdomen, and bent down to kiss Louis’ skin in between. He traveled up slowly, planting small kisses until he came to Louis’ chin.

A hand was on Louis’ groin, stroking his erection. The shape tenting up his trackies was unmistakable. The slight pressure made him arch forward.

Karl stood up to take a deep hit from the bong. He let the smoke creep out, and when it was mostly gone, descended over Louis’ open mouth. His face inched closer. Feeling the warmth, Louis’ eyes flew wide open, his blue irises like canons from the depth of the sea.
They stared at each other for a second. Then Louis twisted his face sharply to the side, struggling to flick their hands off his body and sit up. A knee shoved down his groin and kept it pinned. A hand pushed him down by the shoulder. The pain was sudden and intense.

“What did you think, darling?” Karl hissed at him, leaning closer. “That you could have your fun without a price?”

“Release me at once!” Louis said in his most authoritative voice. It came out with a tremor.

The room became quiet.

“I don’t think so,” Karl said.

The crowd stirred with excitement. A few people stood up and came closer, murmuring and talking amongst themselves. Two men came to stand next to the stage. Their hulking silhouettes dwarfed Louis.

Closer, Karl spotted the gold chain dropping from Louis’ throat into the shadows of his collar.

“What’s this?” His weight leaning painfully on Louis’ collarbone, Karl eyed the necklace hungrily.

“A delicate beauty.”

Louis’ face contorted with pain and rage. “Don’t fucking touch that!”

“So it means something to you,” Karl frowned, studying Louis. “Good to know. I’d like to keep it as a proper souvenir, after you’ve gone.”

Still digging his elbow sharply into Louis’ chest, Karl reached for the necklace, and on pulling it free of Louis’ shirt, discovered the treasure box charm attached to it. He noticed the engraving of Greek letters on the charm, done with such elegance and beauty, the pure golden edges worn by constant touch.

“Hello, you lovely thing,” Karl said with dark curiosity.

Harry crossed the Tiber River and decided to follow it along the empty avenue. The evening rush hour was winding down. Cars zoomed past quietly. Shadows cast by the headlights flew by like movies.

Last evening at this time, Harry was sipping his first drink with his mates. He never would have expected to bump into a random stranger on his way out.
Who would have guessed that the Prince would turn out to be someone like Louis? His experience of writing about celebrities could never have prepared Harry for someone as wise, open, and tender-hearted. The strangers he usually wrote about knew the the price of their fame. They made their choices, for better or worse, and mostly Harry didn’t feel too bad writing his articles.

But Louis wasn’t a stranger anymore. He was a friend. Even though Harry knew the odds of their friendship being exactly a million to zero, Louis stayed on his mind and simply wouldn’t go away. Louis’ expression when he told Harry that he trusted him had detonated a tiny grenade inside. For the first time in years, Harry found someone he wasn’t afraid to protect, and he had let him go. It felt a bit gut-wrenching. And a bit like love.

Harry pulled out his mobile, opened his ‘favorites’ tab, and clicked on a number to call.

“Hello?” Her voice sounded crisp and annoyed. It was an hour earlier in London. Dinner time.

“Toad,” Harry said. “You got a minute?”

“Buttons,” Gemma said. “I’m fine as well, thank you for asking.” The line clicked with interference. “Nice to hear your voice. Are you still in Rome?”

“I’m still here.” Harry stood under a street lamp, leaning lightly against it.

“Any plans to come to England soon?”

“I was just going to ask if you were coming to Italy.” Harry cleared his throat. “Talked to mum this morning.”

“How’s our GOAT?”

“Good, yeah she’s good,” Harry said. “She and Robin want us to visit. They miss us.”

“Agh, I miss Italy so much,” Gemma sighed. “It’s the middle of summer here and I’m swaddled in two jumpers and woolen socks. How is that fair? I’ve sundresses I’ll never wear, and then I’ll be sixty.”

“And still be able to wear them, Toad.”

“True,” Gemma agreed. “For once, you’re right.”

“You’re never too young to dress how you want to,” Harry said. “You’re the one who told me that, remember?”

“No wonder,” Gemma said. “Butty, why are you calling me? Surely we’re not exchanging pleasantries about dresses? Yes, you may borrow my wardrobe and all that, if you promise not to draw on my shirts like you did in primary school.” Gemma sounded as if she was taking a drink. “Talk to me, little brother. What’s the ulterior motive?”

“There’s no ulterior motive,” Harry said. As if to convince himself, he started walking again in the dark. “Can’t I call to say hi?”

“Well, hi yourself,” Gemma said. She tsked impatiently, then made some mumbles. “Don’t mind my noshing. We’ve just set the table for dinner.”

“Should I call back?”

The shadows from streetlights made Harry’s long legs look like moving stilts. He was amused
watching them swing down the sidewalk.

“No, silly.” There were sounds of plates and cups being set down. “I hardly ever hear from you as it is. Keep talking.”

“What are we having?” Harry asked.

Harry heard the metallic clank of cutlery, muffled by cloth.

“Poached salmon,” Gemma enumerated. “Quinoa salad, fresh tomatoes. Slice of Brie.” Then, as an afterthought, “Glass of Riesling.”

“Sounds wonderful.” Before he lost his courage, Harry rushed ahead, “Anyway, Gems, I think I’ve met someone.”

“Bloody hell!” There was muted banging on the other end. “Congrats! Tell me all about him or her. Are they Italian? How long have you been dating? Is it serious?” Gemma paused. “Are you calling because you’re bringing them to see our parental units?”

“We’re not dating,” Harry said. “I’ve only just met him. And I’ll probably never see him again.” Then he added wryly, “Come to think of it, I don’t even know if he likes me.”

Gemma chuckled. “For a minute, I thought you had a real boyfriend, I was getting proper excited! What’s his name?”

Harry sighed. “That’s not important right now.”

“Hell yes, it’s important,” Gemma said. “I don’t even know how to feel about this new bloke.”

“His name is Louis.” Harry was embarrassed to hear how soft the inflection on Louis’ name was.

“Ooo,” Gemma whistled. “So what’s this about never seeing him again?”

Gemma could always tell, which was the reason Harry called her. She had a talent for sorting out his feelings liken drill sergeant or sadistic secretary. Weigh, save, and discard; that was Gemma to a tee. Sometimes Gems could be a tad brutal, but in love as in art, a brutal objectivity was often required, and sometimes transcendentally beautiful. Harry took in a sharp breath.

“Have you ever had a feeling about someone?” If anyone was going to laugh at him, let it be his sister.

“What sort of feeling?”

“Like you’ve met before, in another lifetime,” Harry said slowly. “Like you’ve known this person. Like he’s someone you’ve always imagined, and one day he shows up, exactly as you imagined him to be.”

“Oh darling,” Gemma’s voice quieted with sympathy. “Poor, poor Harry. You really are terribly smitten with Louis, aren’t you?”

“No, I— ” Harry stuttered. “I swear I’m hanging up if you’re going to be like that.”

“Take a deep breath,” Gemma advised. “Calm down. You’ll be alright. Tell me more.” She sounded like she took a bite of something. “So you’ve just met your soulmate—”

“He’s not— "
“Correction, potential soulmate,” Gemma said firmly. “A person that comes along once in a lifetime, and apparently you’re satisfied with walking away.”

“He walked away,” Harry said, “he did. Being with him is an impossibility. I can’t tell you why but it is. Believe me, it would never work.”

There was silence on the other end. Harry could already see Gemma’s judgmental expression in his head, her sharp, thoughtful eyes, her lips pursed in doubt. Harry thought about what Niall had said earlier, about him taking down the electrical fence. He pictured Louis petting the Rottweilers in his emotional yard and walking right through the fence and into his arms. A knot swelled in his throat, and he looked away, as if Gemma could see him.

“I’m not sure how to help you, Harry,” Gemma said gently. “I can tell you’re feeling conflicted. What would you like me to do?”

“What if…” Harry said, “let’s say, hypothetically, he was in danger.”

“How do you mean?” Gemma screwed up her face. “Real danger? Or hypothetical real?”

“I don’t know,” Harry hesitated. “Maybe… it’s— probably stupid, worrying. Louis has gone off to this nightclub with a bit of a dodgy reputation, and he’s not the most experienced clubber or… like… experienced in anything. Really not anything. He’s… too good for that world.” Or any world.

“And you… let him,” Gemma pondered. “Does this Louis-person have a death wish or something? And are you, in fact, a friend at all—to let him wander off like that?”

“He’s an adult man; he can choose for himself. Nothing bad happens in clubs, anyway,” Harry said defensively. “Right? Just a nightclub.”

“Mmm.” The air was pregnant with words not said.

“What are you thinking?” Harry asked tentatively.

“I think you know what I think,” Gemma said. “Or you wouldn’t have called me in the first place. I’m not your conscience, darling. You have your own. What’s it saying to you?”

Harry sighed. “It’s saying, you can never go wrong doing the right thing.”

“Oh?” Gemma asked. “Is that a Harry Styles original?”

“No,” Harry said. “My cab driver’s Gran said it… it’s a long story. It also happened to be the first time Louis and I met.”

“Sharing a ride?”

“Last night.”

They were silent for a moment.

“She’s right, you know.” Gemma contemplated. “Never cross old Italian ladies.”

Harry laughed. “So…”

“You should go get him,” Gemma said.
“I should go get him.”

“You’ll never know if you don’t try,” Gemma said, “no matter how impossible. Your heart knows better. But you knew that already, didn’t you? I’m glad you didn’t need me to tell you so. Good luck, Harry.”

“Thanks, Gems. Say hello to Michael.”

There was a pause on the other end. Gemma seemed to be thinking.

“Not trying to interfere with your life or anything,” Gemma said gently. “But Harry. You have to trust yourself again. You used to have a great sense of adventure, and you’ve always had good intuition.” Harry swallowed silently, all of his thoughts tied into knots. “I know it’s hard,” Gemma continued. “But you know, you can do it one step at a time. I know you.”

Harry covered the microphone on his phone and cleared his throat hard, so his voice would sound steady. After several attempts, he croaked out a syllable, and was able to talk again.

“Come to Italy,” he said.

“Maybe,” she laughed. “You stay safe, darling, and don’t be a hero. I don’t want you anywhere near a headline except writing it.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Ciao, babe.”

Harry clicked off. He pulled up the messages app and clicked on Niall’s number.

**how’s the guinness**

*i was about to see if u changed ur mind,* Niall texted back. *it’s karaoke night, the blokes here are all tone deaf as hell. it’s a slaughterhouse, h. come over, we’ll do ‘endless love,’ like in the old days*

**only if i can be diana ross,** Harry typed.

A string of dots angrily scrolled by on the phone’s screen.

*why do you always get to be the girl?*

**we both know i look better in pearls,** Harry wrote. *enough guff, irish, you doing anything? feel the mood to go clubbing?*

*i know just the place,* Niall texted back right away. *it’s got everything clowns acrobats punks puking into a communal toilet. u name it*

Harry could honestly kiss him for understanding his meaning so quickly.

**sounds like my kind of place**

*it’s called pleasure island, but u already knew that, didn’t u? gimme 15*

... **why**...

*need to do an errand,* Niall texted. *trust me on this one h yeah*
Harry waited for the dots to stop blinking. Niall was typing a longform, apparently. Now that Harry had made his decision, it seemed like lightyears until he could see Louis again.

_nialler. c’mon. time is of the essence_

_u can thank me later. drop me ur location, bitch i’ll pick u up_

… _hey_

_wut u want_

_nialler_

_wut!

_i love u. honest_

_i’m extremely lovable, Niall wrote, stop stating the obvious. anyway save it for the one with the cheekbones. stay where u are ye bastard. b right there_

*****

Aus ihnen kommt mir Wissen, dass ich Raum zu einem zweiten zeitlos breiten Leben haben.

Then I know that there is room in me for a second huge and timeless life.

From *Das Stundenbunch, The Book of Hours*, by Rainer Maria Rilke (translated by Robert Bly)

“Angel,” the woman said, running her hand up Louis’ bare abdomen, “you have such beautiful form.”

Louis’ concentration suddenly became crystal clear. All the sleep medicine that he had ever taken at the palace had built up a tolerance to sedatives. Louis’ hallucinations were clearing, and he became very aware of every movement around him. Two large men stood on either side of his head. Karl’s arm restrained Louis’ shoulder, with one of his knees locking down his thigh. Louis was outnumbered. The audience had come for a show, and he realized that this was the nightmare
in which he had placed himself—a scenario where anything was possible. He didn’t quite understand this world, and he had underestimated the human appetite for violence. Too late, Louis appreciated Harry’s misgivings. He had opened the door to the maenads, and he couldn’t close it again.

One summer after Marius’ family left the palace, Louis had gone to the stables to find his favorite horse, a young stallion named Whirlwind. The new head of stables had saddled the horse himself. His quiet professionalism reified to Louis that there was now a strict wall between servant and master—the one who cared for the horses and the one who would always ride them.

Cantering through the familiar hills that day, Louis felt like something was off. Despite his name, Whirlwind was an imperturbable young stallion who usually matched Louis’ energy, stride for stride. He never balked at a jump and never flinched in unfamiliar surroundings, two reasons that Louis loved taking him out. A herd of storm clouds were rolling in from the west, but it seemed at least a good five miles away. The smell of electricity crackled in the air. Whirlwind, who usually handled bad weather like a champ, was trotting off-rhythm and skittish, hard to control. Louis felt his resistance at the bit. They were a couple of miles from the palace when Whirlwind missed a rivulet jump and threw Louis. The horse reared and then faded.

Louis fell hard into the water, with a sharp pain spiraling from his chest and excruciating pain in his legs. For a moment, he couldn’t breathe. He lay silently, screaming inside but unable to utter a sound.

The horse trotted away as the world continued to spin. The sky seemed momentarily dim. The clouds continued blowing in, and slashes of rain began to pelt down. After some time, Louis could begin to inhale slowly and painfully. He summoned his strength to sit up.

It hurt like hell. He was alone, far from home.

Who knew what was broken? Louis realized that he had done it to himself—he had taken out a young horse before a storm, knowing Whirlwind could easily be spooked. He had assumed he would be safe, but danger was always there at the periphery. He had always been staring into its eyes. Louis knew, deep down, that he had ridden because he could. He had ridden because he couldn’t love, because he believed he would never be allowed to love again. The world was green and beautiful, and it didn’t care that a Prince was suffering. Louis had to save himself. Or destroy himself in the process.

Louis was done destroying himself.

Now, with Karl Volpe leaning all his weight on him, holding Louis’ treasure box so close to his face, Louis leapt forward and sunk his teeth hard into Karl’s hand.

“Aggggh!” Karl screamed, dropping the charm and backing away.

Louis had just enough time to free his shoulder and throw a haphazard punch at Karl, aiming for his eye but missing. Karl retreated further. The two large men on either side began to realize what was happening and move in.

At the same moment, the door flew open, loudly slamming against the back wall. Louis looked up to see two people rushing in. Relief and joy flooded over him.

Harry quickly pushed aside any chairs in the path and ran to Louis.

“Are we having fun yet?” he shouted toward Louis.
“Tumbleweed,” Louis exhaled. “What took you so long? My balls were— ”

Harry grabbed his hands mid-sentence and yanked him up. They both began running toward the door, where Niall was waiting. The audience scrambled noisily, backing away from the commotion. The three friends left through the door and began sprinting as quickly as possible down the hallway, with Karl and his men in pursuit.

The thumping beats of the nightclub music became louder as they approached the main room. Throwing the door open, they were met with a scene of utter, fantastic chaos.

People were fighting everywhere. Chairs were being thrown across the room, tables upturned. Performers in costume ran screaming in all directions. Others ran for the exits, trying to escape.

“What the fuck is happening?” Harry shouted to Niall. “It wasn’t like this when we came in!”

“That’ll be the Roman police!” Niall shouted back. He pointed out the men who were fighting with nightclub security, throwing punches in their police uniforms.


Niall shouted, “Thought we might need a little back up!” Niall bent close to Harry and said in a softer shout, “International law allows forceful entry where royalty is involved. And you’re welcome.”

“That was your errand?” Harry marveled.

“An anonymous Irish guy might have called in a tip,” Niall laughed, “like a few minutes ago? Keeps everyone happy. We’re all just doing our jobs, even if we’re just spinning our wheels, eh? Rome loves a bureaucracy. Come on, lads, let’s go around.”

“Niall, you fucking genius. I want to kiss you.” Harry patted him on the back.

They crouched low against the dark walls and made their way toward the front door. Mixed in with the Roman police were familiar faces in Hawaiian and polo shirts. In fact, with a lurching feeling, Louis recognized several of the fighters as Owen’s men. They’d gotten close enough that they had tracked him down. He tilted his head down and shielded his face as much as possible. In all the chaos, Louis suddenly realized that Harry was still holding his hand. Destruction erupted around them as wine glasses and liquor bottles began striking the walls and shattering on the floor around them. Screams competed with the house music as they slinked out.

As soon as they left the building, the noise faded away. Neon lights from other clubs glowed like faint Christmas decorations in the distance. They were as hidden as cave bats before the building’s dark façade.

“My car’s this way,” Niall gestured.

Louis looked down at his and Harry’s intertwined hands. Noticing this, Harry dropped his like a hot potato and turned his head away. Although it was obvious as day, Niall tried his best not to stare at these two fools. He turned and began walking briskly to the car.

He got into the driver’s seat. Harry got in next to him and Louis sat in the tiny space in the back. Louis crouched down lower in case Owen’s men were on the prowl. The streets were generally quiet in Trastavere at this time of night, the traffic mostly pedestrian. Niall started the engine and began pulling out.
“Where to, lads?” Niall asked. “I can take you home first, Louis, if you want.”

Harry turned around to look at Louis. They were in a car last night when Harry saw these brilliant blue eyes up close for the first time. They had mesmerized and confused him then. Now, he wanted to keep gazing into them, and to watch them gaze back into his. He sensed that Louis wanted the same thing, but he couldn’t be sure.

“You can drop me off first,” Harry turned to Niall.

“Drop us both off at Harry’s,” Louis spoke up then.

He met Harry’s eyes with an intense longing. Harry’s eyes dropped down to Louis’ mouth, lips flushed and slightly open.

Niall finally turned to them.

“You’re gonna make me puke,” he said, “the two of ye. Just tell each other how you feel. No more flirting. Life doesn’t give you that many chances at love, my friends. Believe me, I know. Don’t fucking throw it away.”

With a grumpy huff, Niall turned his attention back to the road and headed to Harry’s apartment.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The Kiss.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Quando io sono solo con te
sogno immerso in una tazza di the
ma che caldo qua dentro
ma che bello il momento.
Quando sono con te
non so più chi sono perché
crolla il pavimento
e mi sciolgo qui dentro
Quando penso a te
mi sento denso perché
io ti tengo qua dentro di me
io ti porto qua dentro con me.

When I'm alone with you
I dream submerged in a cup of tea
How warm it is in here
How beautiful is this moment
When I'm with you
I don't know who I am anymore
Because the floor falls apart
And I start to melt
When I think of you
I feel dense
Because I keep you here, inside of me
I carry you here, with me.

Me so ‘mbriacato, Alessandro Mannarino

In the car, Harry’s heart hammered rapidly at the base of his throat. He didn’t dare to turn around again. Niall’s words sunk into him with their grappling hooks, the blood of his guilt squeezing out one droplet at a time. He stared straight ahead, hardly noticing any of the familiar landmarks passing. He could not tell which was worse, his desire or his secret.

When the car pulled into the shadows of his building, Harry got out and slammed the door shut. Before he could come around to open Louis’ door, he had exited already, his hand on the car door and eyes subtly scanning the streets. Harry met Niall’s gaze through the window. Niall gave his an encouraging nod with a smile, and then rolled down the driver’s window.
“So, I’ll see you later, Louis,” Niall said into the quiet air. “Harry? Catch you tomorrow?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll call you.”

Louis turned around at Niall’s voice, his expression changing to delight. He stepped up to the car.

“Thanks for spending the day with us, Niall,” Louis said. “I have loads of good memories. I won’t forget them. It’s been one of the best days of my life.”

“You too, brother,” Niall answered. “You’re a little reckless, but I like that. Never a dull moment.”

“Me?” Louis smiled. “Reckless?”

Niall laughed heartily. “You can call me anytime. We’ll hang out,” he said. “Harry knows how to get a hold of me.”

“The pleasure would be all mine,” Louis said fondly.

He moved forward to shake Niall’s hand, but then changed his mind and put his head and arms inside the car window for a hug. Niall reached around and patted him heartily on the shoulder. Coming out, Louis bumped the top of his head on the window frame.

“Ow.” He ducked and rubbed his head gingerly. “Haha, well, have a wonderful night.”

“You,” Niall paused, “have a good life, yeah? Take care of yourself.”


Niall pulled away, leaving Harry and Louis in the dark. A pedestrian was shuffling their way down the road, but otherwise the residential street was deserted. Standing with a hand on his belly and an elbow resting on top, Louis nonchalantly tracked the person turning around the bend. Harry watched him, mesmerized, realizing that this guardedness was intuitive. Louis had done it his entire life—observed others as they observed him, all with minimal fuss—such that it had become second nature to him. His peripheral vision was always activated. He was probably even aware of Harry’s watching him, watching a stranger.

Louis’ dark blue eyes were still on the horizon when Harry came near him and brushed his index finger down his forearm.

“Hey,” he said. “Let’s go in.”

Louis turned to him with a playful expression. “Not going to kick me out this time?” he said.

Harry took his hand and led him up the shallow step on the curb, toward the entrance. He let go of Louis to unlock the door, and then took his hand again while going inside. They silently climbed the flights of stairs, where only this morning they had shouted to each other without care. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Once they were in the dim and narrow alcove of Harry’s flat, Harry turned around and faced Louis.

“Louis,” Harry said, still holding his hands, “before anything else happens, I need to tell you something.”

A shadow passed over Louis’ face. He touched Harry’s elbow for reassurance.

“You’re not an international criminal, are you?” he said, only half-kidding.
“Mmm.” Harry sighed, swallowing hard. “Maybe something worse.”

Louis braced himself for bad news.

“Let’s sit down.” Harry said tentatively. “I owe you a story.”

The rumpled sheets were still on the bed from Louis’ massage this morning, and the dishes were unwashed in the sink. Blue light filtered through the square windows by the balcony. The distant sounds of the city hummed like a movie projector spinning shadows and pictures elsewhere.

They sat down side by side on the sofa. The extra pillow still lay on one end, and Louis pulled on it absent-mindedly, bringing it into his lap.

“At the Mouth of Truth,” Harry started slowly, “I said in Italian that I was afraid of something.” Louis was attentive, unsure where this was going. “I didn’t translate it when you asked me. What I said was that I was afraid of being a coward. It’s something I think about a lot— cowardice.” Harry paused. “Because something bad has happened in my life.”

“Oh, Harry.” Louis glanced sympathetically at Harry’s silhouette, the sharp angle of his nose cast in shadow, his stillness.

“I haven’t allowed myself to take a big risk since then,” Harry went on. “Until you came along.” Louis waited for Harry to gather his thoughts.

“You asked me about Egypt,” Harry continued. “That was my one heartbreak. Well… up to now. It happened several years ago.”

“Were you in love?” Louis asked.

“No, it wasn’t like that, not exactly.” In the darkness, Harry couldn’t quite make out Louis’ expression. Louis was sitting completely still. Even his breathing seemed inaudible. “I was working on a story, as a reporter. I was on assignment for the Reuters News Agency at the time. We were covering the Egyptian revolution.”

“You…” Louis’ demeanor stiffened immediately, “work for Reuters?”

“Worked,” Harry corrected him. “I’m freelance now.”

On the far wall, Louis could see the outline of the framed awards, the photos with other professional people. Now these awards made sense to him. Harry wasn’t any sort of tour guide. He was an investigative journalist, and had been the entire time they had been together. Harry was a journalist who had covered international conflicts, who had been in war zones. It meant that he was very knowledgeable about international heads of state. Or prominent European royalty, for that matter.

Louis’ mind went back to their initial meeting. Did Harry know who he was when he offered him a ride? Surely he knows now… doesn’t he? A queasy feeling stirred in Louis’ stomach.

“Tell me about your heartbreak,” he prompted.

“Someone I loved died on an assignment,” Harry said. “My photographer. His name was Mattias. He was Italian, married, with children. But he trusted me, and I trusted him with my life. We were doing a risky piece in an unstable political environment. He was… just the best person for that.”
Louis shifted in the dark, crossing his feet. “What happened?”

“I was trying to meet a contact in Cairo, for an interview.” Harry turned away. He put his chin into his hand. “We got caught up in a raid, and Mattias got shot in the crossfire by the Egyptian army. He died almost immediately. I had him in my arms.”

“Oh, God… Harry.” Louis sat quietly, absorbing it. “I’m so sorry.” Harry’s voice was level and steady, but his eyes gazed into the distance, and his hands lay limp in his lap.

Harry continued slowly. “For months afterward, I would dream about it— trying to get into a car, not making it, or not going to the interview at all that day… turning every scenario in my head to keep him alive. Then I’d wake up and remember that he was gone. It went on day after day, it was incessant.”

Louis, who knew about recurring nightmares, nodded slowly, swallowing hard. His sympathy, however, was starting to intermingle with a gnawing discomfort.

Harry clenched his jaw briefly and released it. “It got to a point where I finally saw a therapist. He tried to help, but things actually got worse. I was in a state of continuous ‘agitated post-traumatic stress,’ or whatever they call it.” He sank back into the sofa. “I didn’t sleep for a long time… months. I took medications. They just made me feel unreal. After a while, I decided I couldn’t do it anymore.” Harry continued. “I left that kind of journalism, for good. Maybe I was a coward, I don’t know. I’ve avoided a lot of things since then.”

Louis took a deep breath. What Harry was implying was obvious. He was an investigative journalist, and therefore the odds were high that he knew all about Louis. Unfortunately, a lifetime of experience has honed Prince Louis’ media sense with a surgical precision.

“Are you still a journalist?” Louis asked hesitantly.

“Louis,” Harry started. “I know what you’re asking me, and I will answer honestly. I do know who you are.” He took in a breath slowly, then stood up and walked a few steps away. “Before anything else, I want you to know that there is no excuse for what I’m going to say. I didn’t tell you my story for you to pity me. I just want to be honest with you, so you know the circumstances.”

“What…” Louis’ whole body became rigid. “Who do you think I am?”


The words hung in the silence. Louis’ chest seized. His heart slowed down enough for him to feel lightheaded. His palms lay frigid and still on the cotton pillowcase.

“How long have you known?” he whispered.

“Niall texted me this morning, when you were in the bathroom,” Harry admitted quietly. “The embassy announcement that was cancelled this morning— ” Louis drew in an audible breath. “— Niall and I were supposed to be there. We were going to cover the story.”

“Niall too?” Louis’ voice came out weakly.

“It’s not Niall’s fault,” Harry turned to him. “Please don’t blame him. He just happens to be a press photographer. It was my idea to follow you and do the story on you.”

Louis let this information sink in. Niall finding him hadn’t been serendipitous after all. Guiding
him around the city wasn’t prompted by Harry’s good intentions, not even remotely.

The hazards of palace politics suddenly seemed clean and straightforward compared to this betrayal. His head spinning with questions, Louis pushed the pillow out of his lap and stood up sharply. He tried to think of some palace protocol to deal with this dilemma—*damn it, but Joseph and Liam were right*—but he had been so happy, and felt so right with Harry. Only a few minutes ago, he had almost been floating. A lonely sadness began to creep up from his toes, drawing him down. Nothing came to him. He was blank, spinning in thin air. Whatever he had hoped, it was never going to be. All was idle fantasy. They had been right, everyone who ever told Louis *no*. Louis felt his blood exiting his heart in prim little rows.

In a detached, cold-blooded way, Louis asked, “So what are you going to do now, Harry Styles?”

“Lou,” Harry turned fitfully at those words.

He paced around the sofa and stood in front of Louis, trying to meet his eyes. Before Harry could engage, however, Louis decisively and preemptively stepped back. His distrust was palpable, electric—his rising anger and disappointment prickling the shadow between them.

An uncomfortably long silence passed between them. Harry’s hands felt useless and awkward at his side. Louis seemed impossibly quiet, and it was killing Harry. With a heavy feeling, Harry slowly sank to his knees in front of Louis.

“Forgive me,” he said, watching Louis. “I was wrong. I didn’t know you then.”

“Why does it matter?” Louis turned away, feeling tired. It wasn’t as if he had never been let down before. Now he felt as if he had gone to the underworld, and found it to be an exact replica of the lying, deceitful world above. “You shouldn’t have done this to anyone, Harry— not anyone. You saw me as tabloid fodder. Now you’ve got the goods on me, don’t you?”

“No,” Harry sputtered. “That’s not true.”

Louis looked down at him. “It *is* true.”

“Louis, I’m not doing the story,” Harry interrupted. He looked up at Louis, afraid of what he would see. Louis’ face was in the shadows. Even his eyes were merely darker indentations in the darkness. “Please believe me. I decided that a long time ago, I’m not writing it.”

“What about Niall?”

“Niall knows my decision,” Harry said. “He agrees with it. Niall wouldn’t.”

“At least one of you has a sliver of journalistic ethics,” Louis said sharply.

“Yes…” Harry answered. “But actually, no— no! That’s not— I know what I did was wrong. Trust me, I *know*. And I truly, truly regret it. But my decision isn’t based only on ethics. I can’t do it now, Louis, because of you.”

Louis could hear his heartbeat in his ears, feel them bounding out of his chest.

“Harry, I don’t know what to say,” Louis said in a low tone.

“Lou—” Harry’s face was beset with worry.

“You’ve really kicked me down.” Louis contemplated. “It isn’t what I was expecting at all… and
I’m not sure why you’re bothering with… all this.”

Harry knelt for a long time without speaking. Louis stood still, anger and disappointment warring inside himself, distrust bubbling amongst the turmoil. He was tempted to walk away, never to hear Harry say another word.

“Can I ask you why you came back to the club?” Louis said. “Why come back for me, if you weren’t going to do the story?”

Harry said slowly, “Because I know you now. That’s why.”

Louis thought about it. “A Prince who’s a fake.”

“No!” Harry stared at him.

“You can let the whole world know, can’t you?” Louis continued. His hand flew up to his throat, desperately grasping at the necklace. “Everyone will find out what I am. The great, gay royal runaway. A flighty, homosexual Prince who isn’t fit to be King.”

“Your Highness,” Harry looked up, “you know who you are. You know I don’t think of you like that, I hope. Your life is for you to tell, if you ever want to, that is. That’s no one’s business but yours. No one ever needs to know.”

“Why would you care now? Why now?”

“Because… ” Harry hesitated, “you’re a real person, and…”

“Because I’m not some generic evil aristocrat? Is that it?” Louis whipped around to confront him. “Not the fucking soulless, rich gits you thought royals were?”

Louis stepped away, creating some space between them. Louis’ anger was white hot, burning at the edges, and completely justified. Harry had no choice, however. To live with himself, Harry had to come clean.

“I care,” Harry said, “because I care about you. You’re a Prince, Your Highness, and you’ll always be a Prince to the rest of the world.” Harry paused. “But to me, you’re something more.”

Since Louis said nothing, Harry continued. “I know you live for adventure, and you like danger.”

Louis turned away. “You hate phony philosophers and, well, phonies in general. You have great instincts about people, because of all the ways you’ve been used, and hurt.”

“My instincts?” Louis retorted wryly. “They’re pretty fucking useless at the moment.” He pushed his fringe angrily off his face. “Rubbish.”

Harry felt the sting of those words. Nevertheless, he went on.

“You care about your subjects,” He turned to follow Louis’ movement. “And you try to protect those who are vulnerable, sometimes at great cost to yourself. I know you’re generous and humble — and a little too innocent. You don’t take your birthright for granted.”

Louis frowned. Harry’s words didn’t touch him in the least. They stung his heart with betrayal.

“I know how you can’t sleep,” Harry’s voice was cracking with feeling. “I know you have bad dreams, and I know what that’s like, Your Highness, to stay awake reliving nightmares.”

Louis sighed. That was true. Harry had just told him.
“You left me once because you didn’t want to wake me with your bad dreams—” Harry continued. “That’s the kind of person you are. You care, too. You’re considerate, even when you want to taste the forbidden fruit. I know you like to cook, and I’ve heard your naughty sense of humor,” Harry said. A touch of lightness snuck into his voice. “You’re quick and smart. Funny and spontaneous — really funny. You charm people effortlessly. You’ve won me over. Truly. Completely.”

Harry slowly stood up. “I know you live in a cage, Your Highness, and you could walk away. But you don’t. You stay because you think it’s the right thing to do. Even if you have to kill a part of yourself to do it.”

Louis took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When he spoke, his voice was raspy, torn with feeling.

“You led me on, Harry,” Louis said. “I’m feeling like a fool right now, an imbecile— like I always do, hoping for something that will never happen, trusting people who... I’d thought... but that’s stupid, isn’t it.” He looked at Harry with immense, liquid blue eyes. “Great stories never end well for me. They always turn out with a nasty twist.” Louis looked away, biting back sadness, then quickly steeled himself. “This is arse.”

“Louis,” Harry took a step toward him.

Louis made a gesture for Harry to stay. Louis’ heart was pounding, the raw energy shooting stars to his feet. He could walk out now. And he should. But Louis also wanted to be true to himself. If he was a shipwreck at the bottom of the ocean, he would show it to Harry; it was only fair. He would raise the ship into the open. He would let Harry see it all.

“But not many things in life can hurt me, Harry; I can withstand a lot. I try to keep it all in, but this— you—” Louis was unprepared for the flood of his emotions. His hand flew to the corner of his eye, angrily wicking a tear away. He turned from Harry, disappointed in himself. “I trusted you, I— like you so much... so very much. Instead you’ve broken me.” Louis paused, a catch in his throat. “I won’t lie. This is very hard.”

“Lou,” Harry pleaded.

“I think we’re done.” Louis wiped his face roughly, struggling to keep his voice calm. “I’m sorry I lost my composure. If you knew me, you would know this is not like me... bloody ridiculous. I’ve probably made myself into a much bigger arse than I already seem.” He gulped in a few deep breaths. “Fuck all. What’s done is done.”

Louis stood stock still, his sadness and anger gathered into his palms and fingertips, itching to let Harry have it. Protocol be damned. It would feel great slaughtering a civilian, even if it’s against all of his royal training. He wanted to deck Harry, hard.

Instead, Louis walked across the room and stood in front of the door.

“Don’t go,” Harry called after him. “Please... don’t go like this. Please.”

In a few wide strides, Harry was by his side, standing in front of the door.

Looking at him, Louis forced himself to be calm. “I thought that I wanted an adventure, but it’s turned into a different sort of story. You understand, Harry, you can write what you want, but I hope you’ll choose to do the right thing.” Louis paused to collect himself, and then continued coldly, “In spite of it all, you’ve been very kind. So, thank you for your hospitality.”

He reached for the doorknob just as Harry rushed to stand in front of it. Merely brushing Harry’s
torso made Louis snap back as if touching fire. Harry’s concerned eyes met with Louis’ angry and despondent ones. Louis stared at him in disbelief, thoughts sprinting through his head.

“What are you doing?” Louis frowned.

Harry shook his head grimly, a lock of hair falling into his damp forehead. He pushed it up with a few shaky fingers, holding his ground. His lips were firmly set.

“Please move, Harry,” Louis ordered him.

“No.” Harry’s voice came out small but determined.

“Harry,” Louis said, incredulous. “Let me out.”

Harry shook his head, hair tumbling into his face again. Louis couldn’t see the pain or hurt in his eyes, nor did he need to.

With a step forward, Louis said coldly, “Get out of my way.”

Harry steeled himself as well. “Please listen to what I have to say?”

After a brief and silent assessment, Louis shifted sideways and hurled himself forcefully into Harry, knocking him off his feet. Harry quickly regained his balance and resisted, still blocking the door with his coiled body. Louis’ shoulder ached from the contact, his heart quickening with frustration.

“Harry!” Louis raised his voice angrily, pushing him. “Get out of the way!”

“You can’t leave like this,” Harry pleaded. “Louis, please listen!”

“Yes, I can!” Louis railed at him with all his might, trying to unbalance Harry and get to the doorknob. Harry resisted him, as solid as a tree stump.

“Louis!” Harry shouted, gritting his teeth, “You’re so sure that you know everything, you can’t even hear what I’m saying. You stubborn arse!”

“I don’t care!” Louis yelled. “Fuck! Just let me go!”

“Louis!” Harry pushed back, forcing Louis to retreat. “Please hear me out!”

“Hear what?” Louis’ hands were gripping Harry around the waist, trying to shove him aside. Louis’ fringe fell into his eyes. His whole forehead was a damp, sweaty, teary mess. Louis tore into Harry with untethered fury, like a trapped creature. “What the fuck do you want from me?”

“Damn it!” Harry shook his head in exasperation. Trying not to hurt him, he held Louis firmly by the waist and pushed him away with both hands. “Will you stop! I’m trying to tell you I have feelings for you!”

Louis’ mouth fell open, but no sound came out. Tears were still in the corners of his eyes. He couldn’t believe what Harry had just said.

“I have feelings,” Harry repeated. Realizing that he still had both hands on Louis’ waist, Harry dropped them quickly and stepped back. “I have—I’m— fuck, I’m head over heels for you, you royal idiot. I’ve been waiting for you to say something, do something, for hours. You think I broke you? You can’t even imagine how you’ve broken me.”
Louis parted his lips slightly, in shock. “What?”

“You broke me,” Harry said, “into a million fucking pieces.”

Louis could only stare at him, not moving at all.

“Niall’s right,” Harry continued. “I should just say it. If you walk out right now, nothing will ever be written about our time together, I promise.” Harry paused for a breath. “You can go back to your life. Everything will be the way it was. You can hate me or not, it’s up to you. You’ll still be a Prince, and I’ll still be… just Harry. But you have to know that nothing will ever be the same for me.” Harry paused. “You changed everything.”

Louis was still breathing hard. His long fringe was in his eye, as damp as if it were dipped in ink. He raised his left hand and reflexively swept back his mutinous hair, then swung his head to clear his vision. Harry’s words were tiny darts imploding inside him, their meaning just now perfusing his brain, incrementally making sense. Harry was frowning at him too, his lips trembling.

“You say you like me,” Harry gazed up at him. “Well, I like you ten times more. And if that’s how we feel, we should just tell each other.”

Louis’ mouth was slightly parted in shock. He could only keep staring at Harry, all of his words trapped inside his throat. The liquid apple green of Harry’s eyes bled into his mind.

“You like me,” Louis asked finally, “like that?”

“A whole fucking lot,” Harry admitted. “You?”

His mouth still hanging open, Louis nodded subtly, but so subtly that Harry didn’t quite catch it. It was as if Louis’ chin was moving at glacial speed.

“I came back for you,” Harry said, “because I couldn’t—I can’t— bear to be without you, not while you’re still here, while we can still spend time together.”

Louis wanted to reply, but his mouth was stuck. All he could say was, “Oh.”

“Prince, commoner, whatever,” Harry said. “I just… I just want you. Your being a prince doesn’t matter to me. I want you—the Louis I know.” Harry looked down at his hands. He wanted to say these last words before Louis left. “You wanted that special first kiss. Maybe it won’t be me. I don’t know… as dumb as it sounds, this morning when we were walking, I was almost sure you’d kiss me.”

“You were?” Louis seemed to be only capable of grunting out single syllables. His years of elocution lessons were failing him badly. He might as well have been a Siberian mink. “So… did you want…”

“Of course I wanted to,” Harry said, more quietly. He watched Louis intensely. “But there was no way I was going to make you do it, if you didn’t want to. I— I adore you, Louis. Surely you must know that. You deserve a good kiss.” He looked away. “The best kiss, from someone you choose. I’m not going to ruin it for you.”

Louis’ mouth dried up as he slowly absorbed the meaning of Harry’s words. All at once, the distance between them seemed both too close and too far apart. Louis was afraid he was going to lose it.

At the same time, Harry gave way. Having said everything he wanted to say, he shifted gently to
one side, giving Louis a clear path to the doorway. His hand made a small gesture to the door to show Louis that all was clear. He could leave. Harry’s shirt stayed sadly rumpled where Louis had manhandled him, and his chin jutted out a little to keep it from shaking. Harry turned his face away so he wouldn’t have to watch Louis walk out. The sounds of Rome roared quietly in the distance as the seconds ticked by.

Louis couldn’t actually feel his chest rising or falling. He wasn’t aware of breathing at all. Why the fuck didn’t Harry say all this before? Why didn’t Louis himself? What a fucking waste of flirting it had been—a goddamn, futile, madcap squandering of man-on-man dalliance. They were a couple of first-class knobs. With no further delay, Louis took a few steps forward and yanked on Harry’s shirt with one hand, drawing him in. Harry turned back in surprise.

“Tumbleweed.” Their faces were centimeters from each other when Louis told him, “Fuck you. Fuck you for what you’ve done.” His blue eyes went dark and impenetrable. “You don’t have permission to say this. You can’t just say any of this. And for your information, I did want to kiss you. You wouldn’t have ruined it for me, you fool.” His chest rose and fell.

Who knows how these things happen, really? A movie kiss is always perfect, lips burning hotly, eyelashes fluttering nervously and faces angled just so, two actors at the peaks of their desirability. They touch lips for the camera, and the moving pictures make us feel something—inadequacy perhaps—that our kisses will never be as good, never as photogenic or as fulfilling as the ten-foot kiss unreeling on the cinema screen. We pine, we sigh. Fixed in our minds is the imaginary intimacy that slowly explodes inside, the touch that takes away our loneliness and heals our brokenness, that makes us feel both worthy and whole. Seldom in our lives do we ever have such a moment. It’s only a fairytale, we tell each other, Pretense, as we slouch down in the upholstered seats sucking down soda pop. A movie kiss is epic. It is canonical. It is mythologic. It happens once every thousand years, and belongs with the gods.

Yet when Harry kissed Louis, readers, it was all that and more.

Harry bent down as Louis tilted his face up expectantly. Their lips were trembling, warm and dry. Their mouths met as if they were rising out of the chaotic depths together. They’d found each other. When they touched, something calm and joyful came alive inside. Their kiss was an affirmation that they had chosen each other—that of all the possible, singular beauties in Rome, this choice was their one, sublime beauty. For the first time in Louis’ life, everything fell into place perfectly.

Louis hadn’t ever been kissed like this. Harry was kissing all of him; he saw all of Louis, and he liked all of him, every fantastic, messy, contradictory bit. He kissed Louis like someone who finally found him after a long search, as if they were two travelers who recognized each other across a vast universe, finally coming home.

Harry held his jaw still, savoring the shape of Louis’ lips, tracing the flushed outline like a cartographer marking terrain. Louis was holding his breath and shaking. Harry put his hand on Louis’ back and drew him closer, easing him in gently to calm him down. A lick of the upper lip told him to take a breath, open his mouth, relax. Harry kissed Louis with his lips slightly parted, breathing in Louis’ essence, letting his smell and wetness seep in, absorbing every part of him. Louis felt the softness of his skin, the gentle insistence coaxing him to respond, nudging him, wanting him.

And finally, after breathing in Harry’s salty sweat with its subtle hint of soap and lavender, Louis began to kiss Harry back. His hand circled Harry’s neck as he fitted himself into Harry’s curves, settling himself into the round pecs, the hard, broad clavicles. He kissed Harry’s plump bottom lip
with its inviting arcs, licked it tentatively, and then entered Harry’s mouth, tasting his tongue for the first time. Other people had kissed Louis with tongue before, but never with a sense of raw surrender. Louis’ tongue bumped up against Harry’s teeth, and their sharpness and bite made him shiver. Harry’s pliant tongue started to tease him, flicking over his and making Louis flush from his chest up. His stomach was doing swoops. Soon his face was peachy warm. Louis made a sound that was half sigh, half amorous groan.

Louis closed his eyes as Harry’s teeth drew his lower lip out, stretching it. The lip was drawn taut like a bow, the snap of it sending a shiver down Louis’ front, settling in his groin. Harry’s tongue followed next. The velvety soothing of the twinge of pain shot a thrill through Louis, so he couldn’t think at all. He felt dizzy. Louis’ insides were curling like dry paper in an oven. He wanted to be bitten, licked, and eaten thoroughly. He wanted to lie down and have every part explored and kissed, like the moon lying in wait for astronauts to plant flags on its surface.

Kissing Harry wasn’t completely horrible.

“My Prince,” Harry murmured, holding his jaw, attending to the soft corners of his mouth with worshipful pecks. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for so, so long.” His fingers threaded through the fine strands of hair at Louis’ neck as he nibbled on Louis’ jaw. “I should have just done it. I wanted to, so much. You have no idea.”

“I never thought it would feel like this,” Louis said. “I would have let you a long time ago. Why the hell did we wait?”

“I wanted to kiss you at the Pantheon. And wanted to, so much, at the bar with Niall,” Harry kissed his chin. “You looked so fucking hot, I could have eaten you.”

“When you licked my hand,” Louis admitted shyly, “I… felt things, Harry. Your eyes, the way your hand grabbed mine. I won’t lie, I was totally gone for you. You really know how to turn someone on.”

“Fuck,” Harry said lightly. “We’ve wasted so much time.” His fingers brushed Louis’ hair. “Look at you.”

“Kiss me again,” Louis demanded. Harry bent close, made him open his mouth and teased with his tongue. He tickled Louis’ teeth and swept inside, stroking his tongue gently. It was sending all sorts of tingly, arousing signals below. Louis closed his eyes and purred.

“But then you left me,” Harry mumbled into Louis’ mouth. “I thought I was doing okay up to that point. You really made me doubt myself.”

“Were you worried?” Louis panted.

“Worried I’d never get to kiss you,” Harry joked. He lapped the inside of Louis’ lip rhythmically, steadily. “Of course I was worried. Especially because of the place you went to… why did you take off like that?”

“I had to,” Louis said. “I can’t explain why. I’m sure Egypt had its risks, but you had to go, too, didn’t you?”

“To chase a thrill,” Harry guessed.

Louis shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe to chase my fate or something.” His hand sought out Harry’s and he slotted their fingers together, then swung it behind himself so Harry could hold him tighter. “I’ve always felt I had to pull myself out of the underworld before it could pull me in. The
feeling is always there. I can’t put it into words.”

Harry squeezed his hand, hoisting Louis closer to his pelvis, giving him a gentle grind. “Boo, you’re fooling yourself. There’s no such thing as fate, you know.”

Louis gazed at him. “I know, but— ”

“You don’t have to punish yourself.” Harry put one long leg outside of Louis’ thigh, swinging him in. “You don’t have to run. There’s nothing chasing you. You’re fine just the way you are. I like you like this.” He kissed Louis gently on the mouth. “Exactly like this.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Louis said wistfully. “How do you rate the kissing, by the way?”


“Oi!” Harry protested. “Five out of ten! A critic!” His hand came up to brush Louis’ fringe aside where it had fallen into his eyes. “Fuck me, you’re so beautiful.”

“So are you,” Louis whispered, as if he still couldn’t quite bring himself to say the words out loud. Harry’s thumb caressed across his jawline, ran down the muscles in his neck.

“I mean it,” Harry said. “You’re so beautiful in every way. I could see that, from the first time I laid eyes on you.”

“Is that why you stopped for me?” Louis asked, his guard up. “Did you recognize me as the Doncaster Prince?”

Harry became serious. “I swear I didn’t know until this morning. I didn’t even want you to come home with me.”

Louis leaned in to give Harry a slow kiss, sucking on his lip. “That’s true, you bastard. You wouldn’t even let me sleep on the bed.”

“But you sweet-talked your way into my bed, anyway.” Harry moved his hand down so he was supporting the small of Louis’ back. Through the thin polo shirt, he could feel the hard contours of Louis’ spine, the curvy indentation of his waist, the swell of the firm buttocks. Harry’s cock contracted involuntarily, and he shuddered, backing away a little. “You’re very good at getting your way.”

“I am the Prince,” Louis said thoughtfully. “I always get my way, in every way that doesn’t really matter.” His eyes dropped to Harry’s throat, where it stayed. “Every important decision has already been made for me, sometimes before I was even born.” Louis dropped his hands and let them hang onto Harry’s waist. “By the way, did you know I’m getting married?”

“My darling,” Harry answered him, “the news did trickle through the grapevine, yes.”

Louis’ eyes widened. “You knew?”

“I’m a good reporter, Louis. I do my research.” Harry was feeling his cock thicken up even without contact with Louis. He shifted, not wanting to make the first move, but also desiring Louis more with each kiss. “I like to be prepared.” He kissed Louis on the lips, flicking the tip of his tongue lightly between them. His hardness pressed through the material of his trousers. Harry whispered,
“Do you love her?”

“I love this,” Louis leaned into the kiss. He opened his mouth and let Harry inside, let him explore and taste what he wanted. Louis kissed him back hard, thrusting his tongue in, plastering his body against Harry’s. Harry felt the unmistakable shape of a stiff erection between Louis’ legs too. In between licks, Louis said, “I just love… doing it with you.”

Harry wrapped his arm around Louis completely, holding and kissing him until they were both a little breathless. The longer they kissed, the harder they both got, until it was obvious they were rubbing against each other for pleasure. Harry felt Louis’ abdomen tense up, his thighs stiffening involuntarily below, his entire pelvis pressed up against him. Turning to give him licks along his jawline, Harry could hear Louis hitch his breath, suddenly shoving his hips forward and letting out an inadvertent squeak high in his throat. Harry put his mouth on Louis’ neck and bit down, licking and sucking until Louis was moaning, desperate for release. Louis’ moans made the muscles under Harry’s balls quake in warm, uncontrolled waves. A soft grunt was his only warning before a squirt of precome shot onto his tented pants. Harry closed his eyes, imagining Louis on the bed now with his cock hard and dripping, legs parted and bum in the air. Aroused by this image, Harry frowned furiously, sucking harder on his neck. Louis’ vein bulged with fast pulsations under Harry’s mouth, and he groaned slowly, languidly.

“Louis,” Harry breathed, cock so hard it ached, “do you want to—”

“Yeah,” Louis said, breaking from him and moving toward the bed. “Shut up. Yeah. Yeah, I want to.”

They stumbled there, taking off their shirts. Louis made it to the edge of the bed first. His necklace glinted in the moonlight. His sank down, arms reaching for Harry’s waistband, and when Harry was close enough, Louis impatiently dragged the left side of Harry’s trousers down, all the way to his thigh, exposing the muscular dent diving into the pubis. Harry’s abdomen jerked, rippling his moth tattoo. His laurel leaves pointed down to a dark, dark place, where Louis suddenly yearned to place his entire face. Harry’s cock was trapped to the lower side of the trousers. The cock’s outline behind the fabric showed Louis that Harry was big—long, hard, and ready. Louis had an urge to take Harry into his mouth. Now that he had kissed and tongued Harry, he wanted to taste all of him, inside and out. He passed his thumb over Harry’s throbbing tip and stroked the wet slit. Louis’ eyes stayed on Harry as he stroked him back and forth.

Harry widened his stance, threw his head to the side and shut his eyes, trying not to moan from the sensitive touch. He let Louis play with him as long as he wanted to, knowing that this was likely the first time for Louis. With tight anticipation in his throat, Louis pulled Harry closer, cock at mouth level, and put his lips over Harry’s pants and the head of the cock. Louis licked through the fabric, tracing the folds of foreskin around the swollen glans. The wet spot grew darker and warmer as Louis kept working with his mouth, licking, tonguing, sucking him. The wet fabric intensified the warmth and friction of Louis’ mouth. Harry’s hips stuttered forward, and his strong quadriceps strained to keep him upright.

“Ahhghh, Lou.” Harry let out slowly, “Fuck… me…”

Louis reached in and freed Harry’s cock, lifting it out carefully. The stiff cock bounced toward Harry’s leftward laurels, its silky wetness smelling of cold rain, the foreskin as soft as velvet drapes. Looking up at Harry and making sure he was watching, Louis showed him his tongue before lapping up the length of the shaft, lingering at the head to give teasing, kittenish licks from the foreskin toward the slit. The friction of the push and pull was nearly unbearable. Harry put his hand on the nape of Louis’ neck, on his soft chestnut curls, and unconsciously his fingers brushed
through the hair to keep his mouth on his cock. Still looking at Harry, Louis swirled his tongue around the head and swallowed down the precome, the sucking motion making Harry’s cock hit the back of his throat. Slowly, Louis washed the slit with his tongue, then licked his lips clean. He was about to take Harry in again when Harry abruptly pulled away.

“Hold up, Boo.”

If Louis kept going, Harry would soon come all over him. He was already pumping juice as it was. His mound of pubic hair was damp, and the vision of Louis sucking him would deliver the final blow. He wanted Louis to come first, wanted to give it all to Louis, if he could.

“Babe.”

He pulled Louis up and inserted fingers into Louis’ waistband, smoothly easing them down Louis’ legs.

With Harry’s trackies pooling at his feet, Louis kicked them off and edged closer to Harry, touching him shyly on the chest. Their cocks knocked softly together, like dueling wands.

Harry ran his finger down Louis’ triceps, the delicate curves and sinews as hazy as whispers in the darkness. Louis’ charm was a tiny dot of gold at the base of his throat. Harry’s fingers followed the shape of the arm muscle as it curved forward. With two fingers he drew Louis’ elbow in.

Their cocks stamped small, wet circles on each other’s bellies as Harry bent to kiss Louis again.

He tasted his own precome on Louis’ lips, tangy, salty and sweet. Gently he opened Louis’ mouth, licking him again. Intuitively, Louis put both arms around Harry’s neck, and Harry circled his back, pulling him in. They kissed standing in only their own skins for a long, long time, Louis’ arms around Harry, Harry’s hands slowly stroking Louis’ back.

Eventually Harry eased them both onto the bed, side by side. They were still kissing when Louis’ hand stole down and grazed Harry’s cock, which Harry pushed into Louis’ palm. He cupped Louis’ balls gently while Louis played with him, and then ran his middle finger up Louis cock, ending with his hand wrapped around Louis’ head. With practiced ease, Harry began to stroke the foreskin rhythmically, thumb on top.

A smear of liquid under his thumb told Harry that he was doing fine, as well as the way Louis arched his back and tightened his thighs. As Louis tossed his head to one side, a moan escaped from his throat. The charm fell to one side of his neck, dividing his skin into geometric patches.

“Feels good,” Louis uttered. “Fuck…”

Harry sped up the stroking. Louis was contracting his hips and slowly pumping his arse up and down, a little out of sync to Harry’s jerks. In the darkness, Harry felt sticky liquid lubricating his hand, and intuitively he put his mouth around Louis’ cock, scooting his hand down to the base. Louis gasped. Pubic hair tickled Harry’s chin. He tasted the sweet saltiness of the precome, mixed with the salt of his sweat. His tongue flicked the veins on the cock. He felt Louis jerk twice in response, his buttocks clench.

“Oh fuck,” Louis gasped. “Fuck… Harry. I’m…”

“Spread your legs, Lou.”

Harry kept sucking on the cock and jerking him off swiftly. His lips circled the ridge of skin around the head, licking it with sufficient rhythmic pressure to make Louis’ pelvis come off the bed.
bed. Knee bent to one side, Louis fucked his cock harder into Harry’s mouth, humming his muscular hips in rhythm. He vocalized a high, needy moan as one hand gripped and pulled the sheets closer. With two fingers between Louis’ legs, Harry circled his hole, traced around it. His thumb pressed on the perineum behind Louis’ balls. He could feel the muscles throbbing there, and knew that Louis was ready to go off. The tart, musky scent of sex was in Harry’s nose and mouth, everywhere. He wanted Louis inside himself, suffusing him and bulging, leaking, fucking him against a wall. Louis’ breathing hitched faster and more irregularly and his belly clenched down. His abdominal muscles were lined up in neat, delicious ridges. Pushing him further, Harry popped his mouth off, palmed the wet foreskin around the head of the cock and jerked even faster. He put his tongue on the perineum and swirled toward Louis’ hole, giving him deep licks just shy of the entrance. Louis held his breath, trying desperately to rein in his climax. Then, as if a magic button had been pushed, Louis exploded with a rope of thick, creamy come, hitting Harry in the hairline, coating his hand, and splattering onto the bed sheets. Harry could feel the muscles around his arse shuddering into his tongue as his cock kept pumping. From Louis’ throat came a roaring, husky moan, making Harry’s cock ache. His knuckles on the sheets turned bone white, and he kept moaning as the come continued dribbling around his pubes.


“Me too,” Harry said. “Got me so turned on, baby.”

Harry licked the velvety skin of his balls, cruising up to lap the come from the base of his dick, sucking and kissing it as Louis came down. Louis’ orgasm seemed to go on for minutes, with Harry sucking and fondling him, encouraging him, lovingly talking to him. Finally, Louis subsided with satisfied whimpers. His breathing deepened. He rested a hand on his belly and sighed, content.

“Harry.” Louis motioned for him to come up, so their faces were at the same level again. “Did we just have sex?” He leaned to wipe his own come off Harry’s face.

Harry pulled Louis’ hand by the wrist. He sucked on his finger to taste the come, then kissed it and let it go. He rested his head on the side of Louis’ shoulder, arm draped possessively over Louis’ chest. Harry was feeling the sweat cooling on his skin and absorbing his body’s scent mixed with the heady smell of semen.

“I think we did, Princess. Did you like it?”

“Fuck,” Louis marveled. “You are an animal, an absolute beast.”

Harry cocked his brows and tilted his head. “Is that a bad thing?”

Louis’ chest laugh moved up to his throat, ending in giggles. “You’re so funny.” He put his hand over Harry’s, on his belly. “Now let’s get you off, yeah?”

Harry turned so his breath settled on Louis’ skin. “We don’t have to, you know. This was mostly a gift for you. I just wanted you to— ” Harry swallowed, unable to finish.

“To what?” Louis’ voice was gentle and sweet. He turned to watch Harry’s angular profile— his sharp nose and lush lips, the tiny pricks of facial hair around his mouth.

Harry took a deep breath. “I wanted you to have a good memory.”

Louis reacted with an expression of sympathy. His eyes focused on Harry’s face, trying to make out what he was thinking.

“Beautiful boy,” Louis reassured him, “you already gave me the memory of a lifetime. I couldn’t
ask for anything more.”

Harry smiled. “Good. I’m glad.”

Louis turned his body on his side. “But you know, I think I’m really in big trouble now.”

Harry frowned and tipped his head in for a kiss. He traced a finger gently down Louis’ jaw, ending in the hollow of his neck.

“If you’re worried about it, Louis, I’m absolutely not going to write about any of this,” Harry said resolutely. “No fucking way. I gave you my promise. This is for you. For us.”

“I know,” Louis nodded.

Mirroring Harry, Louis started at the base of his throat and traced down, over the plump convexities of his pecs, between their cleft, and meandered down to the small bulge of muscles surrounding the belly button. Louis flipped his hand over and brushed the back down the laurel tattoos, down the dents going to Harry’s happy trail.

“I’m just fucked,” Louis said. “You know why? Because there’s only one of you in the world, and I don’t want to be with anyone else. I only want you. You’ve actually spoiled me for any happiness in life, Harry. No one else will come close.”

He caressed Harry’s cock, which had gone a little flaccid. Harry listened quietly, feeling the heavy weight of his words, remembering Louis’ calmness that morning when he said he trusted him. Harry’s heart filled with an enormous ache, even worse than desire. He wished he could keep Louis safe, away from everything he feared. As impossible as it seemed, Harry wanted to keep Louis with him forever.

“Stay with me,” Harry whispered in the dark. “I want you too.”

Louis tapped his fingers lightly on Harry’s knuckles. Something unspoken traveled between them, a pragmatic understanding. They turned and kissed, tender and chaste, holding each other softly, sweetly. Louis’ necklace had fallen askew to one side. The hour was late.

When they finally broke away, Louis’ eyes were cast down.

“I should clean up,” he said.

Harry slowly traced his jaw. “The shower fits two people pretty well.”

“Then we can both clean up,” Louis looked up with a hopeful smile. “Maybe fool around a little in the shower?”

“You’re reading my mind.” Harry hoisted Louis’ leg over his own, and palmed his generous arse. “Will you stop being so goddamn beautiful?”

Louis chuckled, “You first, you complicated freak.”

Before they went into the bathroom, Harry rummaged through his nightstand drawer and took out what he was looking for. He palmed them in one hand to follow Louis. In the bathroom, Louis stood by while Harry adjusted the water temperature, waiting for the warm water to come on.

“How do you work those knobs, anyway?” Louis joked.

Harry turned halfway around, deadpan. “You can touch my knobs anytime, Princess.”
Louis cocked his head. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Noodling closer, Louis put his arm around Harry’s back and lightly kissed his shoulder. His hip nudged against Harry’s thigh, and his come-coated cock lay chastely against Harry’s skin. He brushed his hand down to cup the curve of Harry’s waist. Harry jumped, ticklish.

When the water was finally right, Harry stepped in first, letting the warm spray splatter his hair and face. He shook like a dog and pulled Louis after him. As soon as he stepped in, Harry closed arms around Louis and began kissing him, water running everywhere down their hair and faces, caressing their chins and shoulders and bouncing from their torsos. Water wet their tongues as they teased and licked each other. They bathed in the warm, clean stream, dry sweat sliding off their skins as sadness lifted off, only the joy of the present buoying their souls. Louis pressed Harry against the shower wall and kissed him eagerly, tasting him around the droplets of water, feeling Harry’s hard-on fill up quickly as their mouths got hungrier. He raised both of Harry’s arms on the wall in a pose of surrender, and pressed his groin in, rutting him. Harry laughed into his mouth as they kissed, water filtering around their teeth and lips. Their cocks and balls were hard and slippery against each other.

“I want you so much,” Harry begged him in a low voice. “Wish you could fuck me. Want to feel you inside me.”

“Harry, I can’t,” Louis panted, licking his teeth. “We shouldn’t. We can’t. We don’t even have a condom.”

“Would you?” Harry pulled on Louis lip with his front teeth, finding that Louis had a kink for it, going soft for being bitten with just enough pain. “Not barebacking, no, although getting fucked in the shower is… it’s the most fucking intense thing. Would you want to, if you could?”

Louis pushed his cock onto Harry’s belly. “Fuck, yeah. I think so, if we had protection. I’d like to fuck you forever.”

Harry freed himself and reached around the shower, getting the packet of condom he’d taken out of his drawer and ripping the package open with his teeth.

“For you, Princess.” Looking down at Louis’ cock and jerking it a few times to firm it up, Harry handed the condom over. “If you want to.”

“You’re so confident, you arse!” Louis laughed, took out the condom skeptically. “I’ve never done this before, you know.” He chewed on his lower lip. “I don’t want to do it wrong. Don’t want to hurt you.”

“You wouldn’t.” Harry kissed his cheek, anticipating the sex. “Whatever happens, it’ll be fine. I’ll let you know if something’s wrong, yeah? You can stop if it doesn’t feel right. I’m good.”

Louis wrapped his palm around his shaft and squeezed. Thinking about fucking Harry was overwhelming. It made Louis’ cock twitch with mad desire. In spite of just having unloaded, Louis went rock hard again, with a tumultuous ache at the pit of his cock. His lips were sweaty, and his heart raced at a thousand beats a minute. Fucking Harry, someone as fit and as nice as he was—was a gay virgin sex fantasy that Louis couldn’t have conjured up in his wildest dreams. In fact, the whole sequence was incredible. Harry had already given him real, gay kisses and a fantastic blow job. And now they were going to have gay penetrative sex… Louis was soaring with feelings.

Harry’s hand cupped his, and together they rolled the condom onto Louis. The thin material felt stretchy and tight. It made Louis’ cock smooth and deep red.
“Hang on.”

Reaching outside of the shower again, Harry retrieved a small packet of lube and bit it open. He squeezed the clear gel onto the condom and smoothed it out with his fingers. Louis’ cock throbbed with want, but he had to admit that wearing a condom was a weird feeling.

“What is that smell?” Louis asked.

“This?” Harry looked closely at the lube packet. “Hmm. Green apple flavored lube. Must’ve forgotten about this one!” He continued to smooth out the lube on Louis’ cock.

“You are so quirky and weird,” Louis said with affection, winding his fingers through Harry’s wet hair. “So beautiful and quirky and weird.” At Harry’s touch, his cock perked up, ramrod straight.

“Weird gay sex is the best sex,” Harry joked. “You’ll see. But you can also stop whenever you want. You don’t owe me. It’s no big deal.”

Staring at him, Louis suddenly wanted it very much. He wanted to fuck Harry Styles.

“Turn around,” Louis commanded.

Harry turned and pressed his face against the shower stall. The warm water beat down on his back, running around and between his legs. Soon Louis’ chest was covering him, his necklace charm making a sharp little indentation in his back. Louis’ cock nestled between his arse cheeks as a hand parted them. The hard, wet cock pushed up against Harry’s hole, probing with firm, insistent pumps.


Louis’ hand gripped Harry’s cock firmly as he found his hole, and with silent, steady patience, Louis allowed Harry to relax and take him in. Slowly, Louis nudged his cock past the outer ring of muscles. Even with the condom on, the constriction felt sexy and delicious, better than anything Louis had ever experienced before. He stopped, letting the sensation sink in and overwhelm him. He couldn’t imagine being in all the way, if this is what it felt like at the beginning. Harry clenched him with just enough pressure and tightness, squeezing down on the most sensitive part of his cock. The friction was incredible. Harry gasped quickly, then relaxed and pushed back on his cock, urging him in.

“You good, Harry?” Louis’ voice had almost disappeared.

“Yeah,” Harry answered. “Gimme a second, Lou. I’m tight… it’s been months.”

“You’ll tell me if it hurts?” Louis said with concern.

“I like it,” Harry reassured him. “You’re fine. And I’ll tell you. Give me a moment to settle into it. Want you deeper. Soon.”

“Want to be deeper.” Louis’ throat was so dry, he almost couldn’t talk. “You’re incredible.”

Slowly, centimeter by centimeter, Harry relaxed and Louis felt himself sliding in. He gasped at the feeling of pulling and pushing, the friction dragging along his shaft as he’d never felt before.

“Baby,” Harry said, “I’m ready now. Fuck me hard.”

Harry was right. Shower sex was fucking intense. At this rate Louis could make a home in Harry’s
arse and start a garden, water it continuously with their come.

Louis pushed him up against the wall, his cock deep in Harry. He grunted with each pump, feeling Harry open and settle in, his stiff cock leaking and jumping in Louis’ hand. Louis stroked up his slippery skin, each of his bulges and bumps so lovely, so precious, the firm cap of the head thick with sex, the tip swirling with his viscous juice. He could smell the excitement on Harry, the rawness. Louis was fucking Harry and Harry was about to come from it. This fact made Louis more turned on, made him clench his hips and shove against Harry, his mouth a mad, incoherent muscle seeking release on Harry’s back.

Louis pumped and jerked Harry in synchronicity as Harry put both hands flat against the wall. Harry was making tiny exhalations, plump lips gasping against the wet, hard wall, small words of encouragement to Louis. He tilted his arse up so Louis could fuck him deeper. When Louis touched his prostate, Harry shuddered like a large beast, his knees briefly giving way, nipples suddenly erect.

Louis held his position. “You okay?”

“Fuck,” Harry groaned. “I’m so close. ‘Bout to fucking come.”

“Yeah?” Louis pulled his cock out and slammed back in, hitting Harry’s prostate at its base. “Is that good for you?” A quarter-sized squirt came from Harry’s slit, overflowing Louis’ thumb.


“Wanna fuck you,” Louis whispered in his ear, jerking the slippery tip of his cock and pumping him. “And fuck you. And fuck you. You’re my favorite thing.”

Harry hung his head back, eyes closed, mouth uttering the loudest, most obscene, drawn out, glorious noise.

”Need you,” Harry said. “Need you, Lou. Want you to fu— fuck me deeper.”

“You like my cock?” Louis asked. He pumped deeply and fast, feeling Harry’s arse shudder beneath him.


Harry’s precome was making a mess around Louis’ hand. His cock was so massive and slippery that Louis could hardly hang on to it.

“Baby,” Louis grunted.

Another firm pull from Louis, and Harry was spilling. His come hit the wall in front of him and trailed down in thick, shiny, white squiggles. The scent of come percolated up in the steam. The spasms in Harry’s arse made Louis’ cock shoot for the second time that night, tight propulsions from his testicles without much load, but deep inside Harry, intense, hard and drawn out. He felt like he was one with Harry— they were joined together as one person, one soul. Louis hugged Harry softly from behind, one hand on Harry’s cock bringing him through his orgasm. Harry was still leaking as Louis wound him down. His breathing was shallow, slow, marked by soft, helpless grunts.

Harry turned around at last, face sleepy and fucked out, delirious, silly. “Did you like it?”

Louis stuck his tongue into Harry’s mouth, cock still deep in his arse. Louis realized what the
feeling was. He loved Harry. He kissed his lips sensuously.

“I loved it.”

After they were both done, Louis pulled out and peeled off the condom. He tied it and tossed it just outside the shower. The water rained down on them both as they turned to hug each other, and then quietly kiss and wash up.

They were snuggling (commando) in bed when high police sirens sounded in the distance. Harry was already half-asleep, but Louis’ eyes widened with alertness. He was just becoming more conscious when soft knocks sounded on the door. A muffled voice was calling on the other side.

When the knocks came again, Louis shook Harry awake.

“What is it?” Harry mumbled.

Louis glanced across the darkened room.

“Someone’s at the door,” he whispered.

Harry bolted upright in bed, sleep shaken away. “What?”

The knocks became more urgent, and the voice became recognizably that of Niall Horan. Harry swung out of bed and quickly pulled on a pair of jeans, walking slowly to unlock the entrance. Louis also sprang out, and rummaged through Harry’s dresser to retrieve a suitable shirt and joggers.

Harry unbolted the lock. As soon as the door opened, Niall rushed in.

“Get dressed,” he said, and then noticed Harry’s jeans. “Get your top on. Where’s Louis?”

Harry put out a hand on his arm to steady him.

“No, lover. Didn’t you check your phone?” Niall fussed with exasperation. Louis appeared in front of them, swimming in a large sweatshirt and Harry’s too-long joggers. “Louis. I’m afraid we’ve got some trouble.”

“What’s happening?” Louis asked.

Niall looked from Louis to Harry, asking silent questions. He seemed conflicted on what to say.

“It’s okay. I’ve told the Prince,” Harry glanced affectionately at Louis. “He knows we’re journalists. And we’re not running the story.”

Niall sighed with relief. “Oh, thank God. There’s been anonymous buzz that the Prince is out and about in Rome.” Niall scrubbed his face up and down with both hands. “It’s not me this time, I swear. They know we were at Isola, boys. They know… probably a heck of a lot more, and I think —” Niall sighed with exaggerated worry.

“Niall,” Harry said. “Get yourself together. What did you hear?”

“I think they know, Harry,” Niall looked at Louis, “and— beg your pardon, Your Royal Highness. They know about us, somehow. They’re out there, looking for you, right now. The sirens you hear? That’s them, running around this neighborhood— the Italian police and the Doncaster royal
secret service.” He sighed again. “I don’t think we have much time. They’re gonna find us eventually.”

“Yes, I expect they are,” Louis agreed. “Owen’s men are very competent. They’re good at their jobs.”

“Owen is…” Harry was slowly piecing it together. “Head of Doncaster’s royal security?”

Louis nodded quietly.

*Then who is Payno?* Harry wondered to himself.

Niall stared from one of them to the other. “We have to get out of here, lads.”

“And go where?” Harry asked.

He exchanged a look with Louis, finally noticing, with alarm, the resignation that had crept into his face.

Stepping forward, Louis declared, “I think it’s time for me to go home.”

Harry started to contradict him, and then pulled himself back. It was true, and Louis was right to say it. It was always going to end like this. They would have been fools to think otherwise. A glance at Louis told him that he also knew the adventures had come to an end. Louis had composed his face into calm façades, his media training superbly intact. A wave of sadness washed over Harry in a way he couldn’t explain. A glass wall had reappeared. He was His Royal Highness, Prince Louis William Tomlinson again.

Niall looked from Harry to Louis and back again, rubbing his chin awkwardly.

“I’ll wait fer ya downstairs, then,” he said. “The car’s just outside.”

Niall closed the door behind himself. Police sirens began to wail just as Niall’s footsteps faded down the stairs. They were louder and closer than before, illuminating the pregnant silence of the room.

“Louis—” Harry started.

“I love you, Harry,” Louis said at the same time. They stood facing each other, not even an arm’s length apart. “I mean it. The poem that you read to me last night— the one about the soul awakening from sleep— I won’t forget it. I was lucky to hang with you, even for a short time. You —”

“Louis, don’t,” Harry tried to keep his voice steady. “Don’t say anything.”

”Harry—”

Harry’s eyes were rimmed in redness. “Please don’t make it worse.”

“You saved me,” Louis told him. His voice was breaking, but he kept on talking. “I had the best time of my life, and I found myself because of you. I’m so sorry, darling. There’s no other way for us. You know that, right?” The police sirens burst through the air, somewhere close to them. Louis took one of Harry’s hands. Tears collected in his wide blue eyes. “But it was... you’re the best thing that has ever happened to me. It was worth the while.”

“Louis,” Harry sighed with anguish. “You don’t know what you’ve done. You can’t possibly
He pulled Louis in for another kiss. They lingered as long as they could, both trying to reassure the other. Harry slowly caressed the still-damp curls on Louis’ head while Louis held on to his neck, thumb hooked to Harry’s shoulder blades to anchor down his feelings, to keep the memory of this moment. Their chests were heaving silently, but there was nothing more to say. Love overwhelmed and stopped them. Eventually they broke apart and made their way down the stairs. Niall was waiting for them in the driver’s seat. They got into the car as Niall started it up. Soon the car was merging into the drone of night traffic.

When they got closer, Niall slowed down and killed the ignition a block away.

“There ye are,” he pointed. “The Doncaster embassy. I don’t think we should go any closer, do you?”

Louis looked down at his and Harry’s entwined hands. He turned Harry’s hand palm side up, and began tracing lifelines, the same way Harry had done to him that morning. Only now it was late, with the moon barely visible above the tawny Roman night skies and the sprinkle of stars beyond the city’s haze. Truly, Harry’s hand was not even visible now, merely palpable, the lines in his skin as elusive as love. The night air settled with a crisp, cool glaze, and Harry remembered that Louis could get cold easily, that last night he had snuggled into a stranger’s jacket as if taking over an eminent domain. He almost laughed at the memory.

Carefully he held Louis’ hand to his heart. A tear dropped down, staining the back of it. Bringing Louis’ palm to his mouth for a kiss, Harry said, “See you around.”

“See you around, Harry Styles.” Louis would not look at Harry. He added with wryness, “If that is in fact your real name.”

They held their breaths together, as if refusing this act of living would somehow halt the time. At the last moment, Louis tumbled in for an agonizing goodbye kiss. Their lips met in a mess of salty tears. Harry held him tightly, their chests rising and falling in synchrony as the seconds ticked by.

“I love you, too,” Harry whispered, kissing his temple, “more than you can imagine. I think I could love you forever.” Harry stopped, a tight knot in his throat. His eyes blurred as he felt Louis’ shaking. “Don’t be good, my darling. Never, ever be good.” He stroked Louis’ hair, now nearly dry. Louis was silently trembling, crying without a sound. Harry’s chest hurt as painfully as if thorns were in him. He could hardly bear to say the next words. “Be brave, Louis.” Harry paused, kissing his hair for the last time. “Be yourself.”

Breaking away, Louis opened the car door and walked toward the embassy. He was a thin, lonely figure under the yellow streetlights. Before he even got to the entrance, however, the grand nineteenth-century doors opened, and a young man, about Louis’ age but slightly taller, ran out to greet him. He was shaking his head back and forth, smiling widely, putting an arm around Louis’ shoulders. He patted him vigorously, and even laughed out loud. From the darkness of the car, Niall and Harry watched it all silently. Just before they went inside, Louis threw a quick glance back, as if trying to locate the car. Then he nonchalantly turned around and went in, and the doors closed.
Chapter End Notes

Nine chapters now.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Hope

“Is that your final decision?” Courtney arched her eyebrows.

She waited a moment before picking up the leftover cash on the desk, a few wrinkled bills and a smattering of coins, some of them catching on the uneven surface. Silently, Courtney Thompson assessed Harry’s dark mood. After all, journalists were supposed to be professional writing machines. Some tended to be ‘on’ all the time, and others, like Harry, showed their core only once in a blue moon, like deep sea creatures whose very existence was debated. An editor wasn’t a mind reader, Courtney reminded herself, and she was also not paid to hold young reporters’ hands (if she got paid at all, these days). She understood their pain, but an editor’s empathy had its limits. As far as she was concerned, life was too damn short for coyness.

“It’s your choice, you know,” she pushed him. Harry remained stubbornly silent. “There are no official announcements as yet, but the Prince is the story of the hour.” She sipped on a tepid cup of Earl Grey. “Styles, let’s cut to the chase. The whole town is buzzing like mad, and you have my whole attention. Talk to me.”

Harry’s gaze rested at the edge of Courtney’s wooden desk, with its aged splinters, worn down over time, smooth as an old forest.

Whenever Harry arrived in a newsroom, he would smell the bygone era of newspapers, the printing presses and metallic dust, weathered copy paper sweetened by mold spores— the smells of his childhood dream. Squeaky desk chairs and acrid wall paint lingered in the background. Like most uncanny memories, no one knew what evoked them; that was the beauty of the déjà vu moment. No one went around sampling the world’s venerable news organizations. No one came to the New York Times to collect the sweat and adrenaline. No one hovered in the corners of the Washington Post for the arguments, the cigarettes, the disappointments. No one snuck into the news offices in Baghdad, or Istanbul, or Shanghai. Every newsroom had its own peculiarities, but they all shared the tangy odor of the pursuit for the truth. Harry loved that smell.

Right now, a pang hit Harry as he prepared to lie.

“I couldn’t spend any time with the Prince,” Harry said, flipping a coin between his knuckles. It traveled in and out of his fingers like a dolphin leaping waves. “Niall and I tried. He was just too fast; slipped away from us.”

“Yeah, no luck,” Niall nodded complicitly. “Soz, Courtney.”

“You’re telling me that two slick journalists such as yourselves,” Courtney said skeptically, “who have extensive combined experience working abroad, in places whose languages you are not fluent in, and who are, in addition, both excellent Italian speakers,” she let out an incredulous, dry laugh, “lost a Prince in a city that he’s never been in? Is that what you’re seriously saying?”

“Rotten luck, that,” Niall shrugged.
A wisp of a smile played on Harry’s lips. His eyes creased charmingly. “I wish I had something for you. I feel bad.”


Courtney leaned back in her chair. It was too early in the morning for mind games. She needed a refill on the tea, or perhaps a strong shot of espresso. She couldn’t understand how a dependable and ambitious grafter like Harry would suddenly turn into a cryptic Sphinx. The two of them—smug fuckers, both of them—Horan and Styles, sat like dead pheasants hung on rafters. What were they playing at? Of course there was a story. She could sense it. They knew it. They knew that she knew it. She could almost reach out and touch it. Tomorrow’s headline was practically manifesting itself, and they were mugging like utter idiots.

“Politics,” she pushed. “Espionage. International crime? There are stories waiting to be investigated. I could name twenty of them off the top of my head—stories that will bring you up to the top rank of international reporters. You can feel them too, can’t you? You give me the word, Harry, I’ll send you.”

“You could send me anyway, you know.” Harry raised his right eyebrow, pinching his lower lip between his thumb and index finger. “You said it yourself, Courts; there are plenty of stories. You don’t need this one.”

She raised an eyebrow skeptically.

“There’s no story here, anyway,” Harry continued slowly. He leaned forward to look at her dead in the eyes. “Trust me. There is no story.”

Between Harry’s smug expression and Niall’s wide blue eyes, Courtney wanted to strangle them both, one in each hand.

“Tell me what happened,” she said, looking from one to the other, a queen summoning a reckoning.

“I don’t know,” Harry shrugged. “Maybe the Prince got bored and went back to the embassy.”

Harry stood up and shook out his wool trousers. He was dressed for work; the Doncaster press briefing was going to begin in a couple of hours. Standing up next to him, Niall followed suit, straightening out a white dress shirt and silk tie. Their tailored clothes were already gathering fine wrinkles in the humidity.

Harry stared defiantly at Courtney. “Rome must not have been what he expected.”

“That’s for damn sure,” Niall chortled, then abruptly stopped himself, assuming a neutral expression and patting down his tie.

“Tell me what happened,” Courtney whipped toward Niall. “Do you know something I don’t? You showed me a photo, and promised me a story. Tell me the truth.”

“We lost him quite early on, unfortunately.” Niall’s eyes focused on a ficus plant on the bookshelf behind Courtney’s prosecuting eyes. “Actually, I didn’t really get a good look at him. Did you, Harry? He was... such an ordinary guy. Not someone you could easily spot in a crowd. Any Tom, Dick, or... Steve. I wouldn’t be able to pick him out in a line up.”

“He was quite bland,” Harry quirked his head and said flippantly. “Yeah, I agree.”

“Extremely average,” Harry reiterated. “A person of no distinctive characteristics…”

“… whatsoever,” Niall finished.

They both turned back to stare blankly at Courtney Thompson. Her determined face belied decades of experience with every possible circumstance.

“Do you want to know what I heard?” she asked.

She waited a moment.

“Rumor has it that the Prince was in the city all day, and returned to the embassy quite late last night,” she said. Harry and Niall feigned looks of surprise at each other. “There is talk of scuffles and police. The foreign office put out a statement about the rescheduled press conference at 8 AM this morning. Now what is that all about? Have you heard anything?”

Courtney stared them down. Harry elevated his eyebrows diffidently, and Niall casually shrugged. She continued.

“Alright. Listen, at the press briefing today, your job is to get in the question about the rare mineral deal with Anesidora, yeah?” she said, defeated. They all understood that this was not a request. “And ask your elusive Prince— this blandly vanilla milquetoast of human non-distinction— how Doncaster plans to continue avoiding the climate treaty— if you can manage to pick him out from the wallpaper, that is.”

She sighed. Niall’s lips trembled. Harry stared past her head into the bright window beyond.

“You’re walking on thin ice, you two.” She was mostly addressing Harry, who seemed beyond reach. Her affection for him was stretching to its limits. Something had definitely put a screw in his head, and Courtney had to admit she was at least slightly curious. “You owe me two columns, at the least, and I want— ”

“I’ll try my best,” Harry interrupted. He picked up a satchel and started walking to the door. “I know you expected more, Ms. Thompson. I’m disappointed, too. I was serious when I pitched the story.” He paused, considering his words. “Some stories weren’t meant to be written, I guess. Not by me.”

Courtney watched a thin frown sprint across Harry’s eyes and immediately disappear. She slowly sucked in a deep breath.

“You’re not going to tell me, Harry, so I won’t ask you any further. I don’t know what’s going on in your head. You can still deliver what you promised to me— no harm, no foul. The interest is quite keen out there.” She made a gesture to the windows. “I won’t say no if you reconsider.”

Already standing at her door, Harry hoisted the bag on his shoulders, turned the knob, and opened a crack.

“Unfortunately,” Harry said, giving a wistful laugh, “you’ll have to forget this one. It would seem that I have no luck with royalty. Things turned out quite differently from what I expected.”

For reasons incomprehensible to Courtney Thompson, Niall put a hand on Harry’s back and patted it with silent understanding.
Harry looked back at Courtney Thompson.

“I’ll write those stories one day,” Harry said. “I’m still an investigative journalist. The right words are waiting out there for me.” Harry took a breath. “That’s my best explanation. I’m sorry to be a pain in the arse.”

“You won’t have forever, you know,” Courtney warned him.

“I know.”

The morning light was intensely bright through the windows behind her. It was going to be another blistering Roman summer day. The weather forecast had predicted rain.

Harry blinked. Otherwise his body was fantastically still.

“Some things are worth the wait,” he said. “I’m sorry.” Then he opened the door widely and walked out. Niall shrugged sheepishly and followed him.

*****

Niall checked his wrist watch. They were standing at the bottom of the stairs, having just left Courtney’s office. The sun glinted off the watch and momentarily blinded Niall.


How different were the familiar streets of Rome this morning, merely a day after Harry took Louis around! It was as if a veil had been lifted. Here was the quotidian space where Harry drank coffee and played poker, where he avoided the same clumps of tourists shuffling around the bafflement of rotaries and hasty traffic lights every day. This morning was shining like a strange garden. Despite Harry’s heavy heart, he did appreciate the cold and lovely clarity. The city had opened for him.

Having lost Louis, Harry was no longer afraid. He could taste the metallic particles of thunder rolling down from the skies. Despite the brilliant sunshine around them, it was definitely going to rain.

“It’s at eleven,” he turned to Niall.

“You alright, mate?” Niall asked, studying him. “Are ye gonna hold it together, seeing him later?”

“We’ll only be there for a few minutes,” Harry said. “Plus there will be the usual press corps, and the entertainment journalists. You know how they are.”

Niall shook his head. “A fucking three-ring circus, that’s what it’ll be.”
“Yes, well. Courtney said the town’s buzzing, so most likely it’ll be a bigger crowd, especially after yesterday. No one will take notice of us,” Harry said, and then added for his own benefit, “we’ll mix in, get our questions answered, then we’ll go.”

“And him?” Niall asked pointedly. “How about Louis? Have you thought about him?”

Harry startled at the mention of Louis’ name, as if he might have imagined everything yesterday if Niall hadn’t been there to witness it.

“Have I thought about him?” Harry repeated stoically. “Are you serious?”

“Harry,” Niall scratched his head. “Ye know what I mean. Do you think Louis’ going to be alright? Does he get to have a say?”

Harry’s lips curled upward in a wistful smile. “I think he gets all the say.”

“And?” Niall leaned in.

Niall’s saying Louis so casually brought him close again. Louis was Harry’s Louis, not a Prince or a topic to discuss with Courtney Thompson, nor a dignitary who would soon give a press conference in front of Harry’s peers. Harry saw Louis’ piercing blue eyes and felt his unselfconscious shiver, and smelled his fleeting, misty scent of flowers. The compact shape of him fitted perfectly into Harry’s arms. Louis was a cluster of rough, raspy giggles and hiccups, soft curves and lips saying, please. Louis was once-in-a-lifetime, and Louis belonged with him.

Harry adjusted the bag on his shoulder.

“Louis is going to be crowned King of Doncaster,” he said, “and he will form a stable alliance to the neighboring country. He’s prepared for this his whole life, Niall. He’ll be a great leader.”

“Goddamn it,” Niall said. “So that’s it. You’re really gonna quit. It’s over for you two.”

Harry nodded.

He shook out wrinkles at the base of his trousers. They were tailored a little too long, friction already nipping at the hems. Imagining how they might pool under Louis’ ankles, and how those ankles might feel in his palms, Harry began walking away.

“I’ll see you in an hour, at the embassy.” Harry raised a hand to wave.

“Where ye going?” Niall yelled after him.

“Going for a walk,” Harry answered without turning around. In a softer voice under his breath, Harry said, “Want to feel the rain on my face.”

“You fucking emo hoe!” Niall shouted. “I heard that! Walking in the rain with a broken heart is a fucking rom-com cliché, ya sick son of a bitch!”

“So sue me,” Harry said. “I’m going for a walk. Mi sta sui coglioni!” You’re annoying!

“Sei un coglione!” Niall retorted, You’re an arsehole! “Don’t be late!”

Halfway down the block, Harry pulled out his mobile and clicked on the map application to check his way. He knew the general direction, and his destination was close enough to the embassy that he could sprint it. Briefly, Harry scouted the clouds on the horizon to see whether it would be prudent to run home and grab an umbrella, just in case. He couldn’t recall a time when he had been
turned away from a press conference because of being wet, but then he had never gone to the
Doncaster embassy before, either. He thumbed the name Villa Borghese into his phone. Soon the
map clicked open and gave him an estimate of twelve minutes’ walking time. That was perfect. By
the time he got to the embassy, Harry should be nicely marinated in sweat and sky tears, his trouser
hems dragging in a trail of reddish Etruscan mud.

The chaos to come just might shelter his broken heart. Niall was right about that tiny bit of self-
pity; so what. Anyway, the summer rain in Rome tended to last as long as royal romances. Harry
wanted to experience a small, controlled emotional bruise before seeing Louis again, to preserve
and process whatever had happened to them without anyone knowing about it.

And Louis? Harry sighed. He couldn’t imagine what must be going through Louis’ head.

He hoped Louis was doing better than he was, the press conference being imminent. Harry hoped
that Louis was reviewing his notes, consulting with his advisors… getting dressed and groomed by
Arthur, talking to his Payno, or whoever made up his entourage, that crowd of men surrounding his
Louis, poking at him, bothering him, when Harry should be the only one doing the poking and
bothering.

No, not really. He didn’t wish that.

Harry hoped Louis was thinking about him too. Him, and only him. Louis bound up Harry’s mind
like a painful vice.

It was early, and there were no crowds beneath the tall stone Italian pines. Harry strolled along the
main path toward the Villa and lake. The light green shade of the giant trees flowed through the
morning air. They were the guardians of Rome, standing sentry in the hills above the cosmopolitan
city, cooling and filtering the chaos below. The dry dirt along the paths was comfortably plain.
The shadows of tree trunks slanted like old ghosts across the roads.

Suddenly Harry was reminded of what Louis said the day before, that being at the Pantheon was a
bit like being in Hades, the Underworld. The description of Louis’ dreams made more sense to him
now. Harry wondered whether anyone would ever make Louis feel safe enough that his dreams
would stay away. Louis’ sleeping alone, or next to someone who didn’t understand him, was a
terrible sadness.

This place, an old vineyard that a rich dead cardinal had turned into a park, was where Louis should
be. He shouldn’t have to dream about drowning; his mind should be protected from bad things like
that. The wind was coming from the west and Louis’ skin should be here, waiting for renewal in
the summer rain, here with Harry. They should be walking hand in hand, and every once in a
while, Harry should be able to touch his face, tell him how kind and brave he is, feel his arm
prickle up with pleasure, kiss his lips, tell him that this was real. He was real. They
belonged together.

An indie tune ringtone sounded on Harry’s mobile phone. Harry frowned, since almost no one
would call him. Harry dug the phone out of his pocket and noticed an unfamiliar number, with a
country code he didn’t recognize. After letting it ring for a while, he tapped to answer it.

“Harry?”

The guy’s scratchy, tinny voice sounded familiar. It took Harry a moment to place it.

“Steve?” Harry said. “Did you get a new phone?”
“Yeah, I had to get a different SIM card for here. Guess where I’m calling from!”

Steve Aoki’s voice was smug and indistinct, with an underwater quality. A honk from an electric vehicle sounded in the background, but it, too, was unfamiliar and dulled. Pops and crackles blurred the edges around the sound.

“Are you still in Germany?” Harry asked.

“Hang on.” Crackling came through the line, then Steve’s voice swooshed back in. “You hear me alright now, bro? You’re still in Rome, right?” A clunk sounded on the phone. “I flew out here yesterday, totally last minute. I’m halfway round the world. It’s… like… four in the afternoon here.”

“Where are you?”

“Listen,” Steve’s shout came through blurs and pops. “I wanted to see how that thing went, with the Prince. Did you do it yet? What d’you think of him?”

Harry walked toward a quiet spot in the shade of trees. The sky was a strange division of bright blue on one side, and steely, patchy granite in the western horizon; rain clouds were moving in. His satchel was waterproof, but Harry wasn’t. With one eye on the clouds, Harry started walking toward the Galleries.

“It was delayed till today,” Harry said.

“Oh.” Steve sounded disappointed. “So you haven’t seen him in action?”

Harry cleared his throat lightly. “No. Not yet.”

“Man, that’s too bad,” Steve chuckled. “I kinda wanted to get your opinion, both ways, you know… whether you could get him to talk about the trade deal and like… your impression of him.”

“I could tell you later today,” Harry said. “The press conference is in— ” he checked the phone’s screen, “forty-five minutes. I’m meeting Niall at the embassy.” Harry looked up at the sky. Dark clouds were rolling in faster than he expected. Maybe he will be drenched, after all.

“Oh shit!” Steve laughed. “I’ll let you go then. I was just curious.” The phone hushed for a second. Harry imagined Steve covering it with his hand, then coming back. “Before I forget, I’m at the Hong Kong airport. About to go through customs, it’s an absolute zoo. Say, Haz, you got any plans coming up in the next couple weeks?”

Steve piqued Harry’s curiosity. “What do you have in mind?”

“I’m here for the electoral reforms,” Steve said over background noise. “Don’t know if you’ve been following?”

“I’ve read a few pieces— the pro-government legislation, right?”

“Pfft,” Steve scoffed. “I’m telling you, Hong Kong is about to explode. It’s a fucking cauldron, I swear. Things brewing everywhere, protests being organized, underground leaders— juicy stuff. One of our Hong Kong bureau guys left, and another guy’s on hiatus for a family emergency, so we’re short.” Steve paused to shout something. “My editor’s looking for another writer, Haz. I told him you might be interested.”
“Did you really?” A smile arose from Harry’s chest. “Tell me more about it.” The breeze ruffled his hair. He tucked it anxiously behind his ear.

“Yeah, ‘course,” Steve said. “I gotta let him know in the next couple of days though. I gave him your name and contact info, hope you don’t mind.”

“No,” Harry said softly. “No, not at all. That was nice of you.”

“Yeah, no big. He might call you, if it’s okay. This is through Reuter’s, so you’d get airfare, expenses, you know, the usual,” Steve said. His voice bounced in and out. The electronic garble of a public announcement sounded in the background. Harry had almost reached the Galleries. “Bro, it’ll be fun. You and me. Think about it, but don’t think too long. Jump on a plane if you want, you know what I’m saying?”

Harry’s pulse quickened. “How many days do you expect to be there? Weeks or months?”

“Oh God,” Steve said. “Hang on a sec. I gotta go get a cart for my stuff.” After a few minutes, he came back on the phone. “Can’t talk now, Hazza. I’ll text you when I have time. Save this number. You can fill me in about the Prince next time. I’m very curious about what you think.”

“Sure,” Harry answered. “Take care of yourself, Steve. We’ll chat soon.”

“Hey, you know it.” The noises in Steve’s background churned. “Get your bags packed, bro. You’re gonna come, yeah? See you soon.”

He clicked off. The first plop of rain landed on Harry’s nose. He looked up. The skies had become the color of tempered stainless steel, the sun blotted behind smoky, flattened clouds. A second invisible drop splashed his eyebrow and dripped down his lashes, making him blink. This was followed by successively faster, wetter drops. Soon rain was streaking down his face.

Harry ran the last couple of meters to the Galleries, ducking under the eaves as the rain came down in earnest. His bag clacked against his hips. Briefly, he panicked at his stupid impulsiveness. He pulled his phone out to check the time— twenty-five minutes until the press conference. It was a good fifteen-minute walk there. The rain was bouncing from the pavement now, bright silvery streaks pounding out a rapid staccato. Wet blotches marked Harry’s jacket. His hair fell into thick, limp clusters.

*Louis*, he yearned against hope. *Come feel the rain on your skin. Come feel them with me.*

He missed Louis so much that it was almost worth having to see him again. Almost. Harry chastised himself for being immature. Courtney was probably right. He should focus on asking the right questions and forget the rest.

Harry’s phone interrupted his thoughts. This time, his mother’s face popped up on the screen. He swiped quickly to answer it.

“Darling,” Anne said. “Good morning!”

“Morning.”

Harry did a childish wave to the phone screen. The rain filled the air around him, subduing his voice. His hair was swooshed to one side, and flattened on the other. He realized that he might appear less than presentable. The wall behind him was glazed like an oyster shell. The rain had made everything seem cleaner, purer, more alive. The world was glowing.
“You’re outside,” Anne asked, curious. “Why are you standing out there in the rain? What in heaven’s name are you doing?”

Harry waved a hand dismissively. “I was just taking a walk,” he said. “Looks like it’s letting up now. It’ll be over soon. It’s okay.” He hoped it was.

Anne pursed her lips knowingly. “Nothing to do with a boy named Louis, by any chance?”


His mother laughed at his stammering. “Gemma called. She was trying to make it sound like it wasn’t a big deal, but I could tell something was up. Something in her voice, you know that little smirk she has. Call it a mother’s intuition. I wanted to make sure you were in one piece, that’s all.”

Harry could feel a blush creep up at lightning speed from his toes into his face. He would kill Gemma later.

“I’m fine, mum.” He put a hand on his tummy, as if that could temper how he felt. His face was mottled with warmth and rain. “I’m fine, see? Gemma doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“There’s no boy then?”

“There’s no boy,” Harry said. “It was a dumb misunderstanding. All done with.”

“You’re sure?”

“Mum.” Harry checked the time. The rain was softer now, moving away as fast as it came. The landscape before him crisped up in bright greens and yellows, the world signaling its rebirth. “I really can’t talk now. Gotta run. I’ve got a… work obligation.”

“Oh, you’re dressed up,” Anne said. “I see it now. Well, before you bop off, Robin and I thought you could pop by this weekend for a visit.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair a few times, trying to style it at the last minute. He casually studied the tiny window of himself in FaceTime.

“What’s going on this weekend?” he asked. “Special ladies brunch?”

“Cheeky!” Anne said. “Look how grown up you are. Every time I see you, it’s like another decade’s gone by.” She shook her head softly. “I promise to make your favorite if you come. Oh, and we found some Christmas pudding ice cream for you!”

“Really!” Harry’s eyes widened. “No, you didn’t.”

She nodded. “Robin found an British specialty store tucked in Sorrento. Lovely expatriate couple,” Anne said. “Will you come for a few days, Harry? I miss you, my darling.”

“I’m sorry, I have to run,” Harry said. First Steve, now his mother. Either he was completely alone, or he was inundated with offers. Harry knew that leaving Rome would constitute running away, but fuck it, running away was what he needed to do at the moment. He should clean up his flat, maybe drop off Louis’ couture athleticwear at donation so he’d never see it or have to imagine Louis wearing it again, just get the fuck out of Dodge. “Thanks for checking up on me, mum. I’ll look at my schedule soon. Love you.”
“Love you, darling. Goodbye.”

After Harry hung up, he really did feel better. After all, he had only known the Prince for less than forty-eight hours. They weren’t soulmates or anything like that. Soulmates weren’t really a thing, anyway, the stuff of romance novels and chick flicks. The rain had slowed down considerably. He looked up at the darkened silhouettes of the broad plane trees, which were the same today as they were yesterday, as they were ten years ago, and as they will be in fifty years. Harry was glad he had this walk, to put things into perspective.

Louis was right, he realized. Things were always going to be this way. There was no other option for them. The Prince, at least, had been pragmatic from the start. It was ironic that a Prince, of all people— a Prince fixated on the Pandora myth, no less!— was more grounded than Harry was, a hard-bitten journalist. Thanks to his protocols, Louis knew that he could corral the possibility of falling in love, manage it and head it off.

So they weren’t in love. It was a one-off… wasn’t it? Louis had probably forgotten Harry by now. He might be well on his way to the altar, or to his royal VIP box at the opera, or whatever. (True, Louis hated the opera, but then again, all unhappiness was relative, wasn’t it?)

Harry put out his hand. By now the rain had lightened to a fine mist. The Gardens had washed his mood clean, or so he told himself. Fate had brought Steve’s offer at the perfect time. After a quick trip to see Anne and Robin in Naples, Harry would fly out to Hong Kong. No one had to send him to the next assignment; he would send himself.

Protests and riots would fill his emptiness; enough noise on the outside would drown out the solitude inside. There would be travel, interviews, drinking, maybe even cool new clothing and tattoos. There would be people to meet, bars to try. Asia was a whole unknown box of terrible temptations, and he was looking forward to getting blissfully lit.

As he ran down the rain-soaked road toward the exit to the park, an image popped into Harry’s mind. He remembered the tenderness and determination in Louis’ face, just before their first kiss. His blue eyes had shone through curved lashes, like light imprisoned behind a wall.

“Fuck you, Harry,” he had said.

The memory of his voice stopped Harry in his tracks, made him breathless. Louis’ cheekbones were the folded wings of a nightingale, alighting darkly in Harry’s heart.

“I wanted to kiss you too,” Louis had told him. “You wouldn’t have ruined it for me.”

It wasn’t a one-off. Louis had never treated it that way. It was true love.

Harry blinked away some moisture on his face. The rain had stopped, but the liquid running down was heavier, saltier. Anyway, his sleeve was already wet; it made no difference if he got it wetter. Harry roughly wiped his cheeks dry. He inhaled deeply, trying not to think, and then hurried down the street toward the embassy.
Arthur adjusted the Windsor knot on Louis’ silk tie, and inspected him one more time from head to toe. He picked up the lint brush on the dresser and with a quick, expert motion, brushed away the tiniest modicum of lint from Louis’ shoulder. The dark navy suit had only been delivered two days ago, made to the Prince’s most current measurements, and a tailor was on hand for any emergency adjustments. Louis stood stoically, his shoulders perfectly squared, feet nestled in cashmere socks inside shoes shined to a mirrored polish.

Liam Payne leaned against the wall, watching his friend. Although Louis stood just as he had a thousand times before, being readied for an audience, Liam was certain that there was something different about the Prince. By now, Louis’ muscles and breathing patterns were practically second-nature to Liam. So when there was a change, even if it was infinitesimal, it was as if the tides of the ocean suddenly began to flow backwards. Something just didn’t feel right.

Princess Eleanor had arrived with her delegation a half hour ago. The entourage had taken up the entire east wing of the embassy’s first floor. Her make-up artist, stylist, publicist and personal assistant were now hard at work, as the Anesidoran representatives worked in an adjacent room.

Liam had been pleasantly surprised to spot Mr. Zayn Malik in a slim-cut Italian suit outside of their official chambers, studying a sheaf of documents and smoking in the most photogenic, beguiling way. He must have been overseeing the Anesidoran party. Zayn caught his eye as Liam looked on, raising a hand in a polite solute, and Liam self-consciously waved back. Even Zayn’s greeting was like a movie star’s. He had the air of one who was used to being admired from afar, aware of the world’s fascination with him. Liam wondered whether a chance encounter could be deemed too eager. He had smiled too widely, blushed like a schoolchild and hurried away.

Arthur’s ministration on Louis had come to an end. His bushy brows assessed Louis’ chin critically, where the facial hair had been meticulously trimmed this morning. Louis’ necklace and charm were neatly tucked under his dress shirt. The rounded corners of the charm was barely discernible through the fabric. Satisfied, Arthur slowly stepped back. He nodded to himself and let out a breath.

“Is there anything else Your Highness requires?” Arthur asked.

Louis turned to study himself in the full length mirror. He was beautiful, perfect, though perhaps a tinge sad. Louis pulled the hem of the jacket down over his hips and adjusted his cuffs. Not a flap of fabric was out of place.

“Arthur, did you know there’s a movie called Arthur?”

Arthur bowed politely. “I believe it is a British comedy starring Dudley Moore and John Gielgud. It is the timeless, satirical tale of a wise manservant and his hapless master.”

“Hapless! Oh my goodness, haha!” Louis craned his head toward Liam. “What about you, Payno? Have you heard of it?”

Liam shook his head with lips turned down. “Absolutely no clue.”

“It’s good, from what I’ve been told,” Louis said enigmatically. “I bet Arthur, the main lad—Dudley Moore—bet he’s an absolute tosser.”

“It is a comedy, Your Royal Highness,” Arthur answered dryly. “They are caricatures. It’s meant to be funny.”
“Did you like it?”

“It was enjoyable, from what I recall,” Arthur said placidly. “However, I saw it long ago. I can’t say that I remember the details.”

“The valet turns out to be the much better man, if I’m right,” Louis said. “Movies are always like that. They hate rich playboys, don’t they.”

“Life is often stranger than fiction, Your Highness,” Arthur replied. “Now if there is nothing else —”

“Not that the rich don’t deserve being knocked down a few pegs,” Louis said. “Proper dickheads, they are sometimes, not gonna lie. For example, Arthur, have I ever properly thanked you?” Louis turned to Arthur’s slightly stooped figure. “For your service, I mean. No, I don’t think I ever have.”

“I assure Your Highness that I have always been rabid with excitement to serve,” Arthur said neatly. “In my line of work, there is no greater privilege, and there is no need for Your Highness’ gratitude. Regardless, any gratitude should come from me.”

“Bollocks,” Louis replied. “You know that’s not true. It should have come from me, except no one here has ever told me what a rude bastard I am.” Liam drew back in surprise, silently watching both of them. “If I’ve never told you before,” Louis continued, “thank you, Arthur, from my heart. You’ve always done a bang up job. I notice and I appreciate it.”

Arthur’s slight figure stiffened with the unexpected praise, and his normally stoic face jumped.

“I am undeserving, Your Highness.”

“Oh stop it, Art. Take the compliment; of course you deserve it.” Louis undid the top button of his suit jacket. As casually as he could, Louis turned to say, “I mean it. I often take you for granted, but you’ve been very kind to me. Thank you for your loyalty.”

“I am humbled, Your Highness,” Arthur said with unexpected feeling. “And if I may add… good luck today, sir.”

“Aye,” Louis smiled. “It’ll be a walk in the park. You’ll see. You may go.”

After Arthur left, Liam watched Louis select a handkerchief from several laid out on the table in front of him, color-coordinated to add spice and flavor to his dignified suit. Louis squared it expertly and tucked it into the top pocket. There was an air of expectant stillness about him, something which Liam had felt all morning but couldn’t place. The previous night, there hadn’t been any time to debrief the Prince. No one questioned him; all were simply massively relieved that he was back. The embassy staff had spotted Louis strolling up to the front entrance, shadowy and bedraggled in commoner’s clothing, and Liam had burst through the doors to embrace him. Louis appeared tired, but was otherwise intact and happy to be home. So naturally, Liam had taken his reticence for fatigue. The common knowledge of Louis’ poor sleep habits meant that the entire embassy was alerted to let the Prince have his rest, keeping all exits to the building tightly guarded in case of further misadventures.

However, Louis’ gravity seemed to have carried into today. There was an air of forbearance, like a gentle seawall that Louis had erected all around himself. Liam scratched his head, not understanding why.

“So how was your day yesterday?” Liam ventured.
Louis fluffed the ends of the handkerchief. When the selvages had been tucked to his satisfaction, Louis licked his lips and directed his attention to his friend.

“It was good,” Louis said. “How was yours, Liam?”

“Good, good,” Liam said, puzzled and impatient. “Did you… do anything fun?” He waved his arm, trying to be casual. Louis looked at it skeptically.

“Yes, I did,” Louis said.

He went to the escritoire where simple breakfast had been laid out, and poured a cup of black tea for himself, adding a quarter inch of milk. He saw that pastel-colored petite fours were prettily arranged on a sandwich plate, and instantly regretted not being able to eat them in front of Harry, with the dainty silver fork and knife provided for him, made of real polished silver. Pity, Louis thought, the best jokes always appeared out of sync with real time. If he had the opportunity, Louis would make sure to eat pizza with solid platinum silverware. In front of Harry—or at least he could daydream about it.


“Oh, for God’s sakes, Liam,” Louis sipped his tea. “Don’t talk about me in the third person. I’m not dead yet.”

“Sorry!” Liam shook his head sheepishly. “Your Highness, uh… what I’m trying to ask is, I mean —”


“Where were you yesterday?” Liam was almost frantic. “What happened? I was mad with worry for you! Everyone was! What in the world made you disappear like that?” He halted, surprised at the torrent of words. “I mean… inquiring minds would like to know, Your Highness. If you feel like sharing, that is. But we truly were. Mad with worry. Anything could have happened to you.”

Liam’s distraught rambling did move Louis, and for the first time he felt sympathy for his friend. Liam truly had been out of his mind with concern. Running off, as Louis did, probably wasn’t the most considerate thing to do. For a second, Louis did almost feel a little guilty, maybe a tiny, microscopic, nanometric twinge.

“Did you think I’d lost my mind?” Louis said gently.

“It did occur to me, yes,” Liam said. “Or that you were being held for ransom. I mean it, I nearly bit my nails to nothing! Figuratively, that is. I never bite my nails— bad habit. But if I did!”

“Calm down, tiger. I saw some sights I’ve always wanted to see,” Louis inspected his own cuticles like a kitten. “This and that, just stuff I’ve read about. Walked around a bit. That’s all.” He reflected for a second. “So tell me, did Joseph lose his shit?”

“What do you think?” Liam said. “Of course we all ’lost our shits.’ Collectively. As funny as you think it was, the entire embassy was ‘shitting bricks,’ so to speak, two hundred sphincters simultaneously clenched for bad news, and by the way, I do appreciate the street lingo you’ve picked up, Louis, twenty years of elocution lessons down the proverbial drain.”

“Are you quite done, Liam?” Louis asked.
“Tosser, dickhead, bollocks… you know four languages, including Ancient Greek. You’ve twelve tutors, and now look at you. What has happened to you?” Liam shook his head in distress. “Your words, your clothes, your hair!” Liam’s eyes went to the short trim by Louis’ neck, the bare, soft, vulnerable skin exposed.

“Don’t be such a fucking snob, Liam,” Louis frowned. “Chill out a little, have some fun! Poshness isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, believe me. Anyway, I’m back to wearing my prison uniform, as you can see, and hair grows back as well. It’s not that serious.”

Liam chewed on his lip and thought for a moment. “Nevermind. Tell me about one place you went to. Some place memorable.”

“Memorable?” Louis contemplated. “I did go to a place where Goethe took a pee,” he said. “You know, the poet. A cafe by the Spanish Steps, nothing fancy—a super old coffee shop, so I’m told. People seem to be really into these odd little celebrity shrines. In a way it’s endearing, you know—Goethe peed here, legend! I was almost expecting someone to show me a lock of his hair or something.”

Liam made a distasteful face. “A cafe?”

“I had quite the philosophical whizz there myself,” Louis continued, a dreamy look in his eyes. “My whole life flashed before my eyes. Two minutes of liquid epiphany. I discovered things about myself. Interesting things.”

“Oh?” Liam’s chest constricted. He wondered whether Louis enjoyed delivering these miniature heart attacks to him. “Like what?”

“I went to the Pantheon as well,” Louis said, ignoring Liam. “Cool place. Really liked that.”

Louis remembered the way Harry had pulled him in, held him still and wished him a happy life. A happy life…. Knowing what Harry had felt and thought at the time, Louis swallowed hard, missing him. In a few minutes, Harry and Niall would be shuffling in with the rest of the press corps, having their credentials verified at the front desk and taking their assigned places. Louis would have to treat him like a stranger, not to linger too long on his face, not to react in any unusual way. He couldn’t smile, couldn’t stare—forget about touching him. Harry was off-limits. For now. Who was he kidding? Harry was off-limits for good. Louis’ media training had never accounted for love, even if he was secretly thinking about shoving him up against a wall and kissing him.

“It was quite interesting,” Louis concluded.

“Were you by yourself?” Liam asked softly, not looking at Louis, leaving the pressure off. “Did you happen to… make any friends, or…?”

“Oh Liam,” Louis said. “Remember I said that I discovered things about myself? I realize now that I am definitely, totally, unequivocally attracted to m— ”

A loud knock came at the door. Both Liam and Louis turned quickly, and Louis took a moment to study the clock on the wall. It was a few minutes past eleven.

Louis took a deep breath. “Enter.”

Joseph Gates’ somber figure walked through the doorway. As on many important occasions in Louis’ life, the grey, eminent shape of Joseph Gates would insert itself at the crucial moment, being a witness to, and sometimes the architect of, Louis’ future.
Steeling himself, Louis resisted the temptation to grab his necklace charm, feeling its weight at the base of his throat, aware of the chain’s entire length around his neck. The hair at the nape of his neck stood up in tiny, invisible hackles. The back of his hands itched. In the pocket of his suit jacket, Louis curled his right hand into a tight fist.

“Good morning to Your Royal Highness.” Gates bowed coldly.

“Hullo, Joseph,” Louis replied in an equally clipped voice.

“I hope Your Highness slept well,” Gates continued, “and recovered from a long and eventful day yesterday.”

Louis paused before replying. Gates’ face was blank, belying nothing. However, Liam’s question had given him pause. Niall had also said that the secret service was looking for them, which surely meant that Joseph and Liam were both aware that he hadn’t been alone. There was no way for Louis to find out just how much they knew— where they had been and what they had seen. He doubted that either Joseph or Liam would have personally been on the streets. It was improbable, given his knowledge of the protocol. The chain of command would have gone through Owen, who hadn’t found him, after all. Did they know about Harry? Would Harry be safe in the embassy today?

At least Louis had come back on his own, he thought, internally exhaling a sigh of relief. They hadn’t found Harry, and they couldn’t hurt him, not if Louis had anything to do with it. Louis had opened Pandora’s box himself, and he would take responsibility for it. As Joseph eyed him curiously, Louis squared his chest and widened his stance, tipping his chin out defiantly. He took out his hand, put one palm on his stomach and one by the side of his leg. He was ready.

No matter what else happened, Louis was the Crown Prince of Doncaster, and he would be the future Ruler of the Kingdom.

“I am well-rested, Joseph,” Louis said. “I hope you are, as well?”

“Indeed,” Gates said. “The Anesidora delegation is waiting for us, Your Highness. The press corps has been seated. I believe all of our preparations are in place. Are there any last minute details Your Highness wishes to review?”

“I do have one question,” Louis said. “Have you heard from home? How is my grandfather?”

Joseph shook his head. “No news in the last twenty-four hours, I’m afraid. As far as we know, His Majesty King William remains in stable but critical condition.”

Louis nodded. “I’m ready then.”

Gates held the door open for Louis. A line of staff waited in the hallway, and another group stood just beyond, including a slender, tall Princess in a high-necked lilac dress. Her profile gazed off into the distance, staring into the unknown. Her dark brown hair fell almost to the small of her back. As the door opened, she turned her slender neck toward Louis with an air of bored detachment, but immediately converted it to a friendly smile. Her slim hands were crossed in front of her waist.

Louis returned the smile, the very opposite of how he felt inside. He stepped into the hallway, walked toward the Anesidorans, and nodded cordially to the Princess.

“Hello, Louis,” Eleanor said.
“Dear Eleanor,” Louis said. “Thank you for being here.”

He could feel a dozen pairs of eyes focused on them, studying their every tick and grimace. Every gesture would be interpreted for meaning. Not least were the intelligent, watchful eyes of Joseph Gates and the nervous gaze of his best friend Liam.

“Shall we?” Eleanor turned her head towards the Great Hall, where the press corps was waiting.

“Why not?” Louis said, offering her his elbow. “Let’s do this.”

The somber hallway cleared a path for the couple as they walked together. Bright stage lights flooded in from the Great Hall. It sounded like an ocean of humanity out there, a restive roar indistinguishable from the calls of a wild herd. Step by step, Louis walked toward his destiny.

•••••

When you look up at a rainbow
Do you ever wonder?
What's really waiting at the end
I don't want no gold, nothing's more than you
The amount is hard to even comprehend
Nothing I can do, I lost control
Something to hold on to so dear
And how can I miss you so much
When you're right here?

Miss You So Much, by Miley Cyrus

The embassy staff checked the microphones at the dais amidst the conversation and laughter of the press. The official video cameras were calibrated once more, and the backup computers double-checked for power and memory. The footage would be edited later to send to news outlets around the world. Reporters greeted each other with jokes and small talk, some whinging about having to cover the event, others giddy for gossip.

Because of the nature of this particular event, celebrity journalists from entertainment media were here as well. They were a different breed— Louis could always tell when an entertainment news crew showed up because of their runway looks and dramatic makeup. They resembled slightly put-out, flamboyant flamingos amongst a coven of serious crows. The photographers stood in the back with their gear, giant lenses and ringed flashes at the ready, sometimes carrying two or three cameras around their bodies. The crowd’s mood seemed upbeat. The Doncaster embassy had been generous with coffee and pastries for the press; free food never hurt for positive publicity.
Louis scanned the crowd from the wings. Maybe Harry did not come after all. Louis hadn’t seen Niall anywhere yet, either.

Like a moon to a planet, however, Louis’ attention eventually was pulled to him, seated four from the end in the front row. Jesus Christ, but he was wet— really, truly damp, splotches of water on his dark suit sleeves, the hem of his pants dragging on the ground like river rats. He looked like he swam in. His collar was puckered from the moisture, and his cheeks were flushed, two apple bright spots. Louis could tell that Harry was too lanky for the small seats, and he had folded his body like a paper clip so nothing would stick out. And it seemed that this way of sitting was customary for Harry, since he sat comfortably with total and silent concentration, one leg crossed over the other, elbows folded inward, focused on a paper pad in his lap. Worst of all, Harry was wearing a pair of black framed glasses that made him look serious and stern, brought out the sharp angle of his jaw and the dynamic line of his eyebrows. He was intellectual and gorgeous and hot as fuck at the same time. Why in hell’s name did he have to bring those fucking glasses out? Louis pinched his lips together and gulped. Fuck him. Yes, he’d like to, very much. Fuck him hot and hard. Bring him to his knees. Louis blushed furiously from temple to temple.

Liam tapped Louis lightly on the elbow. The announcer had just introduced them, and Princess Eleanor was unlinking her arm from Louis’ and walking ahead. Louis shook himself out of his excited imagination, turned his eyes away from Harry and followed Eleanor onto the stage. He adjusted the microphone to the right height, and then assumed a practiced, serious yet welcoming, genial expression. He looked into the audience, and selectively made strategic eye contact with a few people, preferably older people with gray hair and not so much glowing, taut skin or pouty, bitey lips.

“Welcome,” Louis said, a printed copy of his speech taped to the table in front of him. “Thank you all for coming.”

Louis tried not to notice a bespectacled face shoot up in his periphery, cheeks flushed and pen rapidly scribbling into a pad poised on his long legs. He made his introductory remarks, presented Eleanor, and then opened the floor for questions. He hoped that Eleanor would answer at least half of the questions, so that they could get on with photos and finish the press conference.

“Sir,” Louis called on a man in the middle of the room. His press badge hung askew on his neck.

“Prince Louis,” the man said. “First of all, I’m sorry to hear about your recent illness. I hope you’re feeling better.”

Louis nodded with a faint smile. “I’m well now, thank you.”

“My question concerns the recent increase in Russian gas prices,” the man continued. “Since the majority of Doncaster’s natural gas is imported from Russia, what are your contingency plans?” He sat back to wait for an answer.

Unconsciously, Louis glanced in Eleanor’s direction and met her eyes.

“The Minister of Internal Affairs has been meeting with Parliament back home,” Louis said. “We’ve been aware of the possibility for quite some time, and plans have been instituted.”

The man raised his pen. “Can you give an example of the plans?”

“Doncaster is in negotiations with other sources besides Russia,” Louis answered. “Because of ongoing negotiations, I cannot be more specific.”
Many reporters now had their hands in the air, including Harry, who was watching him
dispassionately, Louis thought, like any other journalist in their element. Louis pointed to a lady in
the back.

“Buongiorno, Your Royal Highness,” she said affably. “My question is, will the new energy
sources be clean? Doncaster is one of the few European countries that does not adhere to the
climate accord. How do you plan to obtain new energy under the challenges of climate change?
Thank you for your answer.”

“Energy needs going forward will be met with clean resources,” Louis stated. “There are plans in
action—”

“How so?”

Everyone turned toward the speaker in the front. The deep, raspy quality of the voice was
unmistakably Harry’s. His eyes were fixed on Louis, ridiculously sparkling and green behind his
glasses. Louis bit his lower lip. Harry returned with a fond, challenging look.

“I’m sorry?” Louis schooled his face. “And you are?”

“Harry Styles, sir,” Harry said smugly. “I was asking Your Highness how you plan to obtain
cleaner sources of energy. Doncaster has few natural resources of its own.” Harry glanced toward
Eleanor. “Are there plans for collaborations with countries that have developed better nuclear
resources, for example?”

A clunk of something being dropped, followed by a soft, “Feck!” sounded at the back of the room.
Louis looked up quickly to see Niall bending over, trying to pick something up from the floor. His
bumping into the equipment of other photographers and jumpy fluster almost made Louis smile.
The commotion was mildly distracting, but the audience quickly turned their attention back to
Louis.

“Nuclear energy is certainly a reasonable alternative,” Louis cleared his throat. “Discussions are
underway, Mr. Styles.”

“Of course, Your Highness. Thank you for your answer.” Harry paused, and then addressed
Eleanor directly. “Welcome to Rome, Princess. I hope your stay has been a pleasant one.” Harry
shot a look at Louis.

At Harry’s utterance of the word “Princess,” Louis widened his eyes to glare at him. Louis might
have imagined the slightest smirk on the fucker’s face.

“Thank you, Mr. Styles,” Eleanor answered charmingly. “It has been lovely, indeed.”

A clamor of hands went up, and Eleanor selected a reporter on the far side of the room, a middle-
aged man with flowing, floppy blond hair whose glasses were nearly slipping off the end of his
nose. He stood up in a rumpled yellow linen jacket.

“You two are so gosh darn cute up there!” he gushed, fixing his glasses. “Benvenuti a Roma! Of
course we’ve all heard the rumors of a royal romance. Beautiful young couple, engagement, you
know how people chatter. So my question is whether we’ll hear any confirmation soon, anything
official—?” He winked and sat down.

Eleanor laughed diplomatically. “Our two countries share an old friendship. It’s always nice to see
old friends, isn’t it?” She turned to smile at Louis, who nodded.
A reporter blurred out, “Give us some good news, Princess!”

“We are indeed good friends,” Louis declared. “It is our privilege to have the Princess visiting with us today. The Princess and I practically grew up together, so she is very dear to me. Now, if there aren’t any other questions, thank you all so much for— ”

“I have one more question.”

All heads swiveled over to Harry again. He wasn’t smiling or smug anymore. Soon there would be photos taken, and the press conference would be over. Louis frowned and whipped his head over.

“Yes?”

“Your Highness has been a world traveler,” Harry said. “In the last few weeks, you’ve visited many cities all around Europe. Can you tell us which is your favorite?”

“I know it seems unbelievable, but I have loved them all. Each city has its own unique beauty. I really couldn’t— ”

As Louis began his usual speech, he saw Harry’s face looking back at him with a wistful and painful longing, hanging on to his every word. Louis stopped abruptly. Louis couldn’t say those words anymore, knowing that Harry was listening to them. Diplomacy seemed all wrong. Silence filled the room as they gazed at each other, unspoken words hanging in the air.

The reporters were all waiting for Louis to finish. Eleanor also looked at him expectantly.

His eyes still fixed on Harry, Louis declared, “Rome. Rome has been my favorite.” There were approving and delighted murmurs around the room. “I won’t forget this city,” Louis continued softly. “Rome will always have a special place in my heart.”

Harry’s lips curved into a small, barely present smile.

The embassy’s events coordinator took his answer as their cue, and began leading Louis and Eleanor away. Louis broke his gaze away from Harry, offering his arm to Eleanor as they left the stage. As they stepped down, Louis could no longer make out the audience behind the obstruction of chairs and reporters getting up; Louis lost his view of Harry. The handlers were hurrying them along as well, steering him toward the room’s exit, where Liam was standing in the doorframe. In the hallway, Louis could make out Gates busily conferring with Anesidoran officials.

“Your Royal Highness,” Liam greeted him with a big smile. “Well done!”

Princess Eleanor excused herself to go back to her chambers as Louis stopped to chat with Liam. The Prince glanced anxiously at the audience again, hoping to catch one last look at Harry, but failing to spot him. At the exit, the line of people waiting to leave were all unfamiliar. Louis couldn’t find Harry’s wet and lanky form anywhere.

“Liam,” Louis said in a frantic way, “I’d like to meet the members of the press, to thank them individually.” He put pressure on Liam’s arm. “Can you please make an announcement?”

Liam tilted his head. Although there was protocol for greeting the press, it was usually planned ahead of time, with adequate consideration for security. What the Prince wanted to do was highly unorthodox.

“Is there a particular reason?” Liam gestured to the noisy room. “You can see they’re all leaving, Your Highness. It would not be an insignificant task to gather them all together again.”
Through the blur of people rushing around the room, Louis spotted Harry sitting still in his chair, gathering his things in slow motion, face empty and forlorn, limbs hanging gangly and awkward.

“Just that one,” Louis said, pointing to Harry. “I thought he asked a really good question. Didn’t you?”

Once again, Liam felt Louis’ unpredictable change since his return to the embassy.

“Just that one?” Liam said. “Harry Styles? Him?”

“I want to follow up on his question,” Louis said, “about the energy… nuclear… thing. To elaborate on my answer, a little bit. Don’t want to be wrong on record, you know, haha. Can you ask him to meet me in the side office? In five minutes.” Louis thought the office, which was adjacent to the Great Hall and looked out into the courtyard, would be quiet yet not too intimate, a proper place for business.

Liam studied him skeptically. “If that’s what you wish, my Prince.”

Louis nodded quickly, avoided further eye contact with Liam, and made his way to the office, an all-purpose meeting room and the storage space for the embassy’s mail. File cabinets lined the walls. A large, plain, wooden desk sat on one side of the room, and three modern wooden chairs sat against the wall. He paced on the carpet until a knock came at the door.

On the other side stood Harry, Niall, and Liam. The noise from the Great Hall was slowly dying down. There were soft murmurs and the cacophony of tables and chairs being put away. Harry’s face showed anticipation and longing, and Niall’s was beaming with delight.

“Mr. Harry Styles,” Liam stated, “and his photographer Mr.— ”

“Niall Horan,” Niall said.

“Mr. Horan,” Liam said. “Do you need anything, Your Highness? Would you like me to stay?”

Louis shook his head, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. “It’ll only be a minute,” he turned to Liam. “I’ll be alright, Payno.”

Harry swiveled his head rapidly for a second look at Liam. This was the famous Payno who took care of Louis, who had the privilege to say goodnight to him and wake him up in the morning. Liam didn’t seem to notice the attention, and Niall was watching all of it like a spectator.

“I’ll be right outside if you need me, Your Highness,” Liam said with caution. He took a last look at Harry’s wet hair and Niall’s camera equipment. “Mr. Horan, may I request that you leave your equipment out here, with me?”

“Huh?” Niall looked down at his cameras. “Oh! No problem, mate. Let me get something out. It’s in the side pocket, here.” He unzipped a pocket and took out a small object, showing it to Liam, who was apparently satisfied.

“I’ll be out here, Your Highness,” Liam said again. He walked a short distance into the hallway, looking back suspiciously, as if Louis might vanish again.

Harry and Niall were still standing in the doorway. Niall glanced down the hallway furtively, and then stepped gingerly into the office, facing Louis. He put his hand out, and Louis took it, thinking that he wanted a handshake. Instead, a small oblong object was pressed into his hand. Realizing that it was the thing that Niall wanted to get from his camera bag, Louis looked up at him in
surprise.

“It’s a memory stick drive,” Niall said. “With all the photos I took.”

Still not understanding, Louis turned to Harry for an explanation, but Harry looked back at Niall.

“They’re all photos of you,” Niall said, “and some of Harry, gathered into a data file. All from yesterday. I don’t know… I thought maybe you’d like to keep them for the memories. It’s the only copy there is.”

Louis glanced between Harry and Niall. “You didn’t keep a copy for yourself?”

“Nah, this belongs to you,” Niall said. “I deleted all the other ones already. You decide what you want to do with it. Toss it if you want.”

“We met with my editor this morning, Lou,” Harry explained. “We killed the story for good.”

Louis’ hand gripped around the memory stick. It felt smooth and small in his hand. He placed it carefully in his pocket.

“Thank you,” Louis said to both of them.

“No problems, mate,” Niall shuffled a hand through his hair. “So, I’ll piss off now. You behave yourself, eh, Louis? I’m not gonna be beheaded or anything like that, right, if I call you Louis inside the embassy?”

Louis shook his head. “I’m going to miss you, Niall. A lot. You’re the best.”

Niall slapped him playfully, and then opened his arms. “Come in for a cuddle.”

Louis sank into his hug and stayed for a long time. Niall patted Louis on the back, squeezing him tight. Louis’ chin was squished on Niall’s shoulder, his face crunched with fondness. Niall patted him again.

“I’ll wait outside for you, Harry,” Niall said, glancing at him. Harry had stood still, clutching his satchel as if his life depended on it. “Maybe I’ll take your photo for real someday, Louis, as King!” Niall said. “Wouldn’t that be great fun!”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Louis said. “Until we meet again, friend.”


Louis and Harry were alone at last. Suddenly there were no more words to say. There was also no time; Gates would be expecting Louis soon. In fact, he could be knocking on the door at any minute.

Harry dropped his satchel and came forward, and Louis ran up to meet him. Without another word, Harry pulled Louis in. Their arms went around each other as their lips met. Unlike last night, when they were both tentative and exploring, now their kiss was frenetic, emotional, happening against all expectations. They were kissing with pure longing and impossibility, as if the world was ending.

They peeled their jackets off and Harry spun Louis around, walked him back against a wall, pressing against him and bending to kiss him. Louis bit his lips shut, careful not to make too much
noise since Liam was waiting just outside the door. His chest heaved and fell raggedly. Harry pinned both of Louis wrists to the wall with his huge left hand, flicking his tongue around Louis’ mouth. His other hand trailed down Louis’ chest, feeling the smooth pec muscles and the hard ridge of sternum in between, then tracing over Louis’ tits and cupping the left one. His mouth still on Louis’, Harry brushed a thumb over the left nipple.

“Ah,” Louis groaned.

Harry kissed him with an open mouth. “I miss you.”

Harry cocked his head, still playing with Louis’ nipple, and leaned in to kiss him some more. His glasses were steaming up with heat. The way Harry was playing with his nipple made Louis’ cock ache and thicken up. Suddenly Louis had an image of Harry on his knees, blowing him with nothing on but his glasses. Louis wanted to come on them, watch it coat the lenses and dot Harry’s pretty nose and pouty red lips. Then Louis would ease the glasses off, bend over to kiss Harry and lick him clean. Picturing this, Louis bit into Harry’s lips so hard that he almost drew blood.

The scent of rain lingered in Harry’s hair. Louis’ arms were aching from being held so forcefully, so he shook them free and locked them around Harry’s neck. As they kissed, Harry slowly turned them around so his back was against the wall. Both of them were hard, and neither were thinking of consequences by this point. Louis pushed himself against Harry so he could feel their erections line up. Louis wrapped a leg around Harry, and understanding him, Harry grabbed his arse and hoisted him onto his hips. Harry pushed his cock up against Louis’ arse. Still kissing and tonguing Louis, Harry jammed his cock between Louis’ arse cheeks.

“Yes,” Louis growled. “My darling, yes.”

He clawed at the broad, toned muscles in Harry’s back, feeling the sculpted ripples through his clothes. Louis wanted to be with him forever, to lie next to him, spooning him, touching his bare skin every night and morning. He wanted to kiss him between his shoulder blades and nuzzle down the small of his back, along the knobs of his spine, climbing the ridges and valleys with his mouth. Louis wanted to lie in bed doing nothing on a Saturday morning, only to have Harry casually flip his body over, run his fingers around his rim, and slowly, methodically fingerfuck him until he cried. Louis wanted to feel Harry’s weight behind him, pushing his cock into his hole, getting so turned on that he can’t help exploding.

“Mng, Harry,” Louis gripped his back, kissing his neck. “Fuck.”

“We can do this,” Harry said, letting Louis down and unbuttoning his pants, getting them down to his knees. Louis’ cock sprang free.

“Should I?” Harry asked.

Louis nodded. Harry peeled Louis’ trousers off one leg, and bent down to kiss Louis’ cock. In one sweeping motion he took Louis almost all the way into his mouth. Warmth and wetness enveloped Louis’ cock, stroked it up and down. Harry sucked him sweetly.

“Aghgh,” Louis gasped.

Harry sucked him until the precome was drooling down his chin. Louis squeezed his cock at the base and milked the velvety skin forward toward the tip. The line between his hand and Harry’s mouth was a blur. His cock hit the back of Harry’s throat, and Harry swallowed. The intense feeling made Louis buck.
Groaning with restraint, Louis touched Harry on the cheek, taking off Harry’s foggy glasses. Louis set them down carefully. Harry’s eyes were so crystalline green, Louis could practically get lost in them. Harry was looking up at Louis as he swirled his tongue on the tip of Louis’ cock, stroking his slit, licking up the drops of precome. Then he lapped up his shaft and swallowed Louis down again, the gentle sucking almost undoing Louis. Despite his best effort, Louis could barely hold himself back. He wanted to come into Harry’s mouth badly. The pressure behind his balls built up like a surge.

“Want to have you, Harry,” he huffed. “Wanna feel you between my legs. Can I, just once?”

He pushed Harry off and brought him up to kiss, tasting himself on Harry’s tongue. He unzipped Harry’s trousers and pulled them down to his thighs. Springing free, Harry nudged Louis’ legs apart and wedged his hard, long cock in between, the wet tip nestled between his arsecheeks.

“You feel nice,” Harry whispered.

“You too.”

Louis closed his legs, savoring Harry between them.

“We can’t really do anything, Louis,” Harry apologized. “I didn’t prepare.”

“Never mind,” Louis said. “It’s enough to be with you.” He touched the Harry’s darker pubic hair, running his finger to the base of his cock. Pressing against him, Louis’ cock was rock hard on Harry’s tummy. “We should probably stop. They’ll come soon.”

Harry pumped his hips a few times to feel Louis’ reaction. Louis had closed his eyes. His face was lost in pleasure, lashes fanned across his cheeks, mouth closed with deep feeling as Harry pumped in and out. His cock bounced like a baton. The head was deep pink, hot and hard and coated with wetness.

“I’d love to fuck you someday,” Louis sighed dreamily.

Harry ran his fingers down Louis’ back. Both hands cupped Louis’ buttocks as he leaned forward.

“I’d like that,” he said. He kissed Louis’ nose, then all around his mouth. “I’d love eating you out, too. Anything you want.”

“That whole bar menu,” Louis laughed with his arms resting around Harry’s neck.

Harry nuzzled him. “The whole menu. And more.”

Louis kissed him once more. Their kiss deepened and they did not stop. Harry pumped his arse hard as Louis closed his legs and squeezed. It was amazing for Louis to feel Harry trembling, fucking his thighs and getting off on it. Soon, Harry was jerking himself frantically at the base, getting more desperate and going faster. After a few more seconds, Louis felt liquid shooting between his legs, running down his thighs. Harry shuddered. His pumping slowed down. He made a soft whining noise, the orgasm not as long as it was the previous night, but still intense. Watching him, Louis pushed his own cock against Harry and began rubbing it furiously, palming the head and stroking himself. Harry pulled back, cock red and come-coated. He batted Louis’ hand away and sucked his cock down, wrapping his hand at the base. One of Louis’ hands gripped Harry’s broad shoulder and the other rested on his damp curls as Harry’s head bobbed between his legs.

Breathing hard, Louis fought the urge to moan out loud, his throat burning with pleasure. Harry’s tongue was a magic wand drawing Louis’ come closer to itself like an obscene trick. Each time he licked, Louis wanted to slap something. It wasn’t only the intense physical pleasure, but also the
fucking turn-on that was Harry, Harry, Harry. At the last second, he pushed Harry away and shot creamy squiggles of come into his own hand. He moaned in a high, soft whine, worried that they might hear him, but loving it still. Louis’ contorted face slowly relaxed, and his shuddering elongated into deep, peaceful breaths.

He looked at Harry with sultry, hooded eyes, and let out a laugh. They had to find tissues and clean up. But first, Louis leaned in, kissing Harry again. They wiped themselves quickly and Louis, upending decades of palace training, shoved the used tissues behind some dusty filing cabinets—misplaced evidence of love in the workplace. Laughing, Louis zipped up Harry’s trousers and then his own. They tucked in their shirts as quickly as possible and buttoned, smoothing down their ties. Harry fixed Louis’ Windsor knot to its former respectability.

When they finished dressing, Harry glanced over at Louis and abruptly announced, “I’m leaving.”

Startled, Louis stopped what he was doing. “Why? Where?”

“To Naples,” Harry paused. Guilt and pain flickered through his face. “Then Asia. I might be in Hong Kong for an extended time.”

“Oh,” Louis said, taken aback.

Harry saw his hurt expression. He tried to stay calm. “I’m going on assignment, Lou. A friend invited me; it’s a good gig. And I have to. I can’t stay here.”

Louis was subdued. “I understand.”

Harry came closer, but he didn’t touch Louis. Nothing could make the moment easier. Even though he knew there was no choice, Harry felt as if he was betraying Louis.

A loud noise sounded in the hallway and both jumped reflexively. After a moment, Harry turned back.

“One day we’ll both find our own happiness,” Harry said. “It’ll be alright, Lou.”

“It’s not my choice, Harry,” Louis said defensively. “I want to be with you. You know that. I wish I had a choice. The country depends on me. We’ve spent months negotiating these deals. They’re extremely important to my country’s long term welfare. I can’t put myself above it, I cannot do that.” Louis shook his head forlornly. “I would choose you, you know. I would always choose you. I— ”

“Louis,” Harry touched his back lightly. “I’d choose you too.”

A knock came at the door. It startled them both. They heard Liam say loudly, “Your Royal Highness, the luncheon is about to start. Our guests are waiting.”

Louis turned to Harry. This was it. There was no more time.

“You have to chase your dream, too,” Louis said. He patted Harry gently on the chest. “Don’t give up. No matter what. It’s important to me.”

“I will.” Harry bowed his head.

“Promise?”

Nodding, Harry looked into his wide, blue eyes. Louis was smiling and frowning, trying to keep
emotions in check.

“I have hope now,” Harry said softly, “because of you.”

A knock sounded again, louder this time. “Prince Louis? Hello! Everything alright?”

“Yes! Be right there!” Louis shouted fiercely.

Without another thought, Louis quickly undid his collar button and felt for the clasp at the nape of his neck. For nine years, Prince Louis had worn his gold necklace without taking it off. The purity of the gold had worn any sharp edges to a smooth sheen. His fingers shakily worked the closure until it opened. Unhooking it from his neck, Louis opened Harry’s palm, laid the golden chain and charm within, then closed Harry’s fist over it. The chain disappeared into Harry’s hand. Louis’ neck felt cold and naked.

“For good luck,” Louis said, laying his hand over Harry’s.

“Louis…” Harry furrowed his brows, water shining in his eyes.

Louis squeezed their hands. He was touching his charm through Harry’s fingers, saying goodbye to it for the last time. Quickly, he bit his lip and took a deep breath.


“I love you, Lou,” Harry whispered.

Louis clasped Harry’s hands, picked up his suit jacket, and went to the door. Opening it quickly, Louis stepped through without looking back.

A second later, Liam knocked on the open door and tentatively came in. Quietly Harry slipped the necklace into his trouser pocket.

“Mr. Styles?” Liam said. “Everything alright?”

Harry combed his hair with his hands, picking up his jacket and his satchel as Liam watched.

“Did you get the interview you needed?” Liam asked. “His Royal Highness said he wanted to review some facts so there were no errors…”

“We did,” Harry said quickly. He forcefully cleared the crack in his voice. “We reviewed some of the facts. Gobs of great facts. I’m grateful for the opportunity, Mr.—”

“Liam Payne.” They shook hands. “I can show you and Mr. Horan out now. The embassy has an official function going on at the moment, I’m afraid.”

“Of course,” Harry nodded.

He hooked the satchel over his shoulder and followed Liam. Niall was waiting in the embassy’s anteroom, going over recent photos on his camera. Putting his camera away, Niall’s eyes grew wide with sympathy when he saw Harry. Harry pursed his lips and looked down.

They left silently through the embassy’s side door. Standing on the sidewalk, Niall turned his palm up to see whether the rain would return. The embassy’s windows were frosted opaque; nothing was visible.
“What now?” Niall asked.

Harry looked up at the sky. The layered clouds were slowly blowing away. Damp leaves carpeted the sidewalks.

“I’m going home,” Harry said.

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