Time Bomb
by ThisSentimentalHeart

Summary

“Why exactly are you here?” Louis asked, feigning annoyance and failing pathetically at it. “My publicist told me I can't go anywhere near you.” Harry said, eyes still smudged with last night's eye liner. “That makes you my favorite person in the world.”

Or the one where Louis has everything: a lead role in a giant Hollywood franchise, a glittering new house with an entertaining Irish neighbor, and a steady, normal boyfriend who he probably loves. Louis never expected to become a household name among young Hollywood overnight. He also never expected to find something endearing about the enigmatic rockstar who keeps showing up on his back porch.

Notes

This is my first Larry fic and my first fic on AO3, so if you're reading it, thank you very, very much! It kind of gets off to a slow start, but I'll try to make up for that by updating often.
Louis was fairly surprised when the first words to come from the interviewer's mouth weren't, “So you're gay, then?”

This was probably for the best, because after that bold of an opener, Louis would have had no other choice than to whip his hair theatrically with a flourish of jazz hands and say, “What clued you in?” At these words, he assumed a chorus line covered in glittery rainbow leotards would burst into the room with a resounding rendition of *It's Raining Men*. Sure, the whole display would be playing into stereotypes, but at least it would be a good show for all involved.

But alas, no chorus line. Instead, Louis was left facing this mousy haired interviewer who peered up at him over her thick glasses and began to speak.

“Since it was announced last year that you had been cast in the upcoming film adaptation of the *Metal Heart* series, there has been considerable speculation about your private life. Most notably there have been sizable rumors about your sexuality, a topic that you have remained silent about. Is there anything you'd like to say now in regards to the rumors?” She asked. What a completely rational question. How boring.

Louis inhaled a shallow breath that clipped against the back of his throat. He knew exactly what he was supposed to say next; his management had worked him through every imaginable talking point over the last week. He'd spent at least a full thirty hours in that cramped office, being grilled by middle-aged men about what words he should use.

“Stay away from anything that might be construed as a gay pun. 'Setting the record straight' for example. Or 'I'm just going to come out and say it'."

“So I probably shouldn't work the term 'Captain Blowjob' into the conversation?”

Louis was pretty sure he was hilarious. His management team wasn't convinced.

It was still a complete fever dream to just use the words “management team”. There was a whole team of people who handled his career. What poor souls.

It was already six years since Louis had arrived in LA at the idyllic age of eighteen. Eighteen-year-old Louis had survived on peanut butter sandwiches and corn chips. Twenty-four year old Louis had a *management team*. Back then, he'd shared a tiny flat with Zayn in a dodgy neighborhood overrun by feral cats. Zayn would zip across town on the city bus back and forth between modeling go-sees while Louis tried to squeeze auditions between his shifts at Red Robin's.

At the end of the day they would both tangle up on the couch together, splitting a pot of Kraft mac and cheese, to watch whatever two line role Louis had landed on a daytime soap that week. Weekends were spent sneaking into every gay club in a twenty-mile radius with their fake ID's and conning every man in the building into buying them a drink. Louis would bring just about anyone with a penis and a pulse back to their flat until one of his random hookups fled in the middle night with the stereo tucked under his arm. Fear of burglary had put a serious damper on his libido.

Like clockwork every Sunday morning he would wake up to a call from his mother, calling in a panic that he had been shot or had died in a meth lab explosion. He'd assure her that he'd actually have to enter a meth lab before he could possibly die in an explosion, and he was much too cute to get shot. She'd remind him that there was always room for him at home in Doncaster, but she knew
it was in vain. Louis was where he had to be. Sure, LA meant washing his clothes at the grungiest laundromat in existence, meant listening to men scream at each other on the street below through his bedroom window, meant smiling at casting directors through homophobic jokes and still not getting the role. Never getting the role. But Louis wasn't ready to give up yet. He owed himself more than that.

It wasn't until his twenty-first birthday that he met Liam. Louis had just finished his fourth birthday shot at his favorite gay bar when Liam slung one muscular arm around Louis' shoulders and began reciting his entire life story to him. Somewhere between drunk, garbled exclamations of, “You're amazing, man, you should be my best friend, man,” Liam had explained that he was just starting out as a talent agent. Louis had responded by telling him that his current agent was much more focused on selling crack cocaine than getting Louis any auditions. Liam had offered to represent Louis immediately.

“Tell you what!” Louis had shouted, grabbing Liam by the shoulders and looking directly into his eyes, “You make me famous, then I'll make you rich. Then we'll be best friends forever and ever and ever.”

Louis completely forgot about this exchange in the midst of the severe hangover that followed, until two days later when Liam called him with an audition for a local commercial. In a completely unprecedented turn of events, Louis landed the job. Within a month he had snagged two guest spots on TV shows. Within a year he had his first supporting role in an indie film.

Liam had a natural talent for the job. He was earnest and likable, and people just wanted to please him enough to see that puppy dog smile of his. Running into Liam at a shady gay bar was the best business decision Louis had ever made.

That was also the year that Louis met Joshua.

Zayn and his entourage of unspeakably beautiful model friends had dragged Louis to a party with a bunch of underage college kids. Louis was about to find an excuse to slip away and go to an actual bar when he spotted Joshua, a raven-haired UCLA freshman struggling to twist the top off of his beer bottle. Louis had respectfully informed him that it wasn't a twist off. When he handed him the bottle opener on his keys, the bashful smile that Joshua had flashed him in response had momentarily stalled Louis' heart.

In the months that followed, nights spent doing body shots at the club turned into nights spent in with Joshua, helping him with his sociology flash cards while a Wes Anderson film played in the background. Joshua would cook Louis dinner and Louis would try to distract him. It was as good a match as any.

Louis had just woken Joshua up with a good morning kiss a year and a half later when he got the call that he'd landed the role in Squad, a low budget buddy comedy about three college students trying to throw a massive party. The premise didn't sound particularly original, but Louis thought the script was comedic genius. The shoot wrapped in less than two months, but Louis had loved every second of it. The other actors had assured him that they were being practically robbed with the less than impressive size of their paychecks, but it was more money than Louis had seen in his entire career thus far. He even bought a new suit to attend the small premiere.

Squad had a limited release and no one had expected much from it. That was until it became the highest grossing sleeper hit of the summer. Louis experienced an overnight reversal of his entire life. Random strangers would recognize him at Starbucks and demanded pictures of him for their instagrmas, his friends would send him links to interviews he had never actually given, and his twitter followers had suddenly flown through the roof. But the gravity of everything didn't hit him
until that late night call from Liam. He was practically screaming into the receiver when he announced, “I got you the audition for the Metal Heart movie!”

Louis had quite nearly shit a brick.

*Metal Heart*, an international bestseller about teenage superheroes, being adapted into a major motion picture, and they were interested in Louis. Mega famous Hollywood starlet Eleanor Calder was already attached to the project, and oh my god they were interested in Louis.

A year had passed since that phone call. If there was any confusion about whether or not Louis landed the role, the fact that he now answered to a management team and had the chiseled body than can only be the product of being in a superhero movie are the major clues that yeah, he landed the motherfucking role.

Filming had wrapped a couple of months earlier, and somewhere in the surreal acid trip that had become Louis' life, the subject of his sexuality had become a media firestorm. He mostly took the blame for that himself, considering it was his own offhand comment that had given life to the rumors.

“Is it true that you're dating Eleanor Calder?”

“No, no, no. Lovely girl, but not really my type. What, with the uterus and everything.”

He considered tweeting that, of course, he had meant that he was only attracted to women who've had hysterectomies, but the damage was done. Louis would never admit it to anyone besides Liam and Zayn, but he'd spent the next week as a panic-stricken wreck. He'd locked himself in his flat with Joshua trying to dry more than one bought of irrational tears. His career had only just begun, and in one fell, homosexual swoop, it was going to end.

But that wasn't quite how the publicity team for the film saw it. Press for *Metal Heart* was just beginning and what better way to drum up attention than for one of the main actors to come out of the closet? Their very own gay superhero; how twenty-first century.

And now here he was, knuckles gone white where they gripped the wooden armrests of his chair, with this interviewer patiently peering at him over her glasses. (But seriously, why even wear the glasses if you're not going to look through them?) He licked his lips, noticing that they had gone very dry, and cleared his throat.

Might as well just get it over with, yeah?

“Yes, I appreciate this opportunity to be honest about this subject.” He said, shifting in his chair and meeting the interviewer's eyes. “I do identify as gay.”
PART ONE

“You and I, we’re a time bomb.”

-Tove Lo

Louis thoroughly abhorred the new green carpet. He could hardly stand to even look at it, much less allow it to touch his actual feet. It would just be too cruel to allow something as innocent and naked as his bare feet to be caressed by something so tastelessly chartreuse as the new carpet. But it wasn’t even the carpet itself that had Louis so churning with inner turmoil; it was the fact that he had signed away all of his rights to complain about it.

Louis William Tomlinson exists to complain. While most biological organisms stay alive by ingesting food and converting the calories into energy, Louis literally keeps his internal organs pumping by complaining at least three times a day. He could probably live without food or water for weeks on end, as long as there was someone nearby to listen to him gripe about how hungry he was.

But the circumstances that had lead to the great carpet debacle had been well out of his control. The day after the release of his, “Guess what guys? I’m gay!” article (it was actually titled something slightly more tasteful, but that was just beyond boring) his management had advised that he stay away from social media for a few days. Luckily for Louis, his ever-so-helpful boyfriend had just grabbed onto that idea and fucking ran with it.

Joshua had immediately installed a parental control app on Louis’ phone that blocked him from the internet, then had changed the passcodes on every internet-enabled device in the house. Louis was graciously allowed to still watch whatever he wanted on the telly and glean whatever information he could from it, but this proved futile at best. If he watched entertainment news for a good three hours, he might be privileged with a few mentions of his name, but this practice soon led to Louis standing on the couch, remote thrust in the air like a sword, screaming, “I cannot be expected to rely on this antiquated picture box for information! I will not stand for this barbarism!”

Joshua would respond with an icy, “Please don’t stand on the couch.”

After two weeks of existing in an internet-free hell dimension, Louis knew that some sort of compromise was going to have to be made. He decided to wrap his devious plan into the good news he’d been hiding from Joshua for weeks.

“I've made a bid on a new house.” He blurted, not fussing with any sort of preamble. Joshua froze, looking up from the dishwasher he had just opened.

“You're buying a new house?” He clarified, void of any telling emotion.

“Well, actually, we're buying a new house.” Louis said, hopping off of the counter top he'd been perched on. “I mean, I'm still paying for it and everything. But I want to think of it as our house.” Joshua stayed silent, looking down as a grin began playing at the corners of his mouth.
“You want me to move in with you?” He repeated, still trying to hide his smile. Louis stepped forward and slipped his arms around Joshua's waist.

“I want your name on the lease.” Louis said, low and intimate, pressing a quick kiss to his lips. “And I can't wait to hear what your mum says when we're officially living in sin.”

“Lou!” Joshua laughed, pushing him away.

“And it's double sin, too, what with all the sodomy.” Louis continued.

“Ugh, stop. That's such a gross word.”

“But in all honesty,” Louis said, tone shifting, “things have been going so well lately, I think it's time we started to spoil ourselves.”

“I whole-heartedly agree.”

“And I want you to pick out all of the floors and counter tops.” Louis continued, garnering an enthusiastic smile from Joshua. “But on one, teeny, tiny condition.” Joshua's smile fell as Louis handed him his phone, open to the parental control app.

That was the devilish deal that had landed him with the green carpet in the master bedroom. How he was expected to hold an erection in that room while something so wretched was glaring up at him from the floor was completely beyond him. Louis could practically feel the stress ulcers simmering in his stomach.

It was only the second week in the new house, and everything was finally unpacked enough to start feeling like home. Sure, the place was a sprawling abomination of guest bedrooms and multi-story windows with a pool in the backyard and a security gate out front, but they were trying to make it cozy. It was by no means an awe-inspiring celebrity mansion, but as Louis traipsed down the modern, spiral staircase towards the back veranda, he had to admit that this Hollywood thing was treating him pretty well.

Joshua was already seated at a small table, a pinkening sunset outlining his soft features. A bottle of white wine was open with a glass beside it, waiting for Louis to sit down and imbibe. Joshua preferred to sip from a glass of sparkling water with a wedge of lemon, ignoring the alcohol with haughty derision. The beer bottle that he had been struggling with over three years earlier when he met Louis had been the first and last vice he'd ever touched. Joshua's sexual orientation was so far the only exception he had made from his strict religious upbringing, his mother's acceptance of this fact still pending.

Louis sat beside him and continued on with what had become their favorite evening hobby. From their veranda, the two could see clearly into their neighbor's backyard, which had offered endless entertainment. They'd yet to figure out who was inhabiting the large house next door, but a never ending line of drunk popstars seemed to frequent his pool.

“Oh my god, that's definitely Katy Perry!” Louis exclaimed, pointing at a distant figure as she made a cannonball.

“No way. Doesn't she have blue hair right now?” Joshua countered.

“Pretty sure the blue hair's a wig, babe.” Louis said distractedly as the black haired woman in question surfaced from the water with a yelp. “Did you hear that sound she just made? It was like that part in Firework where she's like, ‘AH, AH, AH!’”
“Shhh, they'll hear you!” Joshua laughed as Louis snaked his arm around his boyfriend's shoulders and began to sing to him.

“DO YOU EVER FEEL, LIKE A PASTIC BAG?”

“Shhhhh!”

“BLOWING IN THE WIND, SOMETHING, SOMETHING FIREWORK, SOMETHING!”

“Oi!” came a cry from the yard over. Both of their heads snapped toward the source of the noise to see a blonde man looking over the fence, directly at them.

“We've been discovered. Flee!” Louis cried, grabbing his wine glass and racing into the safety of the house, Joshua quick on his heels.

They were both standing in the kitchen, Louis trying to convince a rattled Joshua that it's not a federal offense to watch your neighbor from the backyard, when a buzz echoed through the house. The sound took a moment to register to Louis as it wasn’t quite familiar yet, but then he realized someone was trying to buzz in from the security gate. Joshua's eyes grew to about three times their actual size in fear as Louis scuttled to the intercom at the front door.

“Erm, hello?” Louis said, pressing the intercom's red button.

“Hello! It's your neighbor. Open the motherfucking gate so I can get a motherfucking look at you!” a voice crackled through. Louis snorted while Joshua stood nearby, clearly scandalized by the crude language.

“Come on in!” Louis said, pressing the button to unlock the gate.

“Do you're letting him in?” Joshua asked in an unnecessary whisper.

“Did he sound Irish?” Louis asked, ignoring Joshua's worry as he opened the front door. The blonde man from before was ambling up the walkway, clutching onto a small box and a half empty bottle of tequila. His smile was so large that it hardly looked like it should be allowed to exist on Earth. He shook Louis' hand enthusiastically as he reached the front door.

“No fucking way, you're that bloke from that movie!” The man exclaimed as he stepped into the house without invitation.

“Yes, that's my official title, but you can call me Louis.”

“Wait, you're English?” The man asked, eyebrows shooting up his forehead.

“Afraid I am.” Louis responded, very used to this particular question. His American accent had become rather impeccable after six years of getting cast in American productions.

“Well thank fuck. I'm Niall Horan.” He announced, shaking Louis' hand again vigorously, apparently forgetting that he had done the same exact thing less than two minutes earlier. The smell of alcohol cascaded from Niall in a wave.

“This is my boyfriend, Joshua.” Louis said, gesturing behind Niall. Joshua was rigid with disapproval, which made Louis chuckle. Joshua was kind of cute when he got cranky, which was lucky, since getting cranky was pretty much his factory setting.

“Welcome to the neighborhood.” Niall said merrily, handing the small box and bottle to Joshua.
He turned the box over to reveal it was a package of unmade jello, which elicited another snort from Louis. “These fucking Americans.” Niall continued. “They’ll come over and drink me out of house and home for any 49er’s game, but the second you try to get them to watch an actual footie match they’re suddenly ‘too busy’.”

“That’s why you have to make British friends. We've got a couple of mates coming over tomorrow for the Manchester United match.” Louis remarked.

“Perfect, I'll be here at three.” Niall announced, once again without invitation. Louis smirked, not bothered.

“What do you do for a living, Niall?” Joshua asked, judgment heavy in his voice. He was looking from the bottle to his phone, and Louis knew from experience that he was looking up how expensive the bottle was.

“Guitar.” Niall answered, as if this were a common profession.

“You in a band or something?” Louis questioned.

“Oh yeah, you ever listen to Status Solo?” He asked. If Louis had been drinking something at the moment, he would have taken a spectacular spit-take. Of course, of fucking course he had listened to Status Solo.

“You're joking, right? I have all of your CD's. Like actual physical copies that I bought from the store.” Louis gaped.

“Aw, thanks for not downloading them illegally. How sweet.”

“Didn't your lead singer just insult the Pope or something?” Joshua asked, earning a venomous glare from Louis.

“And the queen.” Niall added. “Harry feels very entitled to his opinion. Especially when he's drunk. Speaking of which, you're both welcome to come next door. You've probably noticed we're having a small party.”

“Well, we're having a quiet night in.” Joshua responded a little too quickly. Louis was usually happy to stay in with Joshua for the night, but his heart sunk heavily at this. The lead guitarist of Status Solo was inviting them over to his house. Their poster had hung on Louis' wall in his first flat, for fuck's sake. This fact made Louis feel slightly guilty that he hadn't recognized Niall, but honestly, who could be expected to notice anyone else on a poster that featured a shirtless Harry Styles? No one, that's who.

“Fair enough.” Niall conceded, heading back out the door. “Manchester United tomorrow!” he called over his shoulder, disappearing down the walkway.

“I like him.” Louis commented as he closed the door.

“This is a five hundred dollar bottle of tequila.” Joshua said, aghast.

“Actually, it's two fifty since half of it's gone.” Louis pointed out cheekily. Joshua smirked as he set the bottle down and began to slink towards the hallway.

“Come to bed?” He asked.

It was still early, and the distant thrum of bass from Niall's house gave Louis the sneaking
suspicion that neither of them were going to get any sleep that night. But Louis found that he
couldn't really be annoyed with his new neighbor if it meant he might get an autograph from Harry
Styles.
“We live in an age where, everything is staged, all we do is fake our feelings.”

-James Bellion

Louis' mother had been mostly supportive when he'd decided to move to LA six years earlier. She had a general “You do you, honey” attitude towards most of Louis' aspirations, but she had still been slightly concerned that her precious son might be corrupted by the god-forsaken valley of sin that she believed California to be. To placate her fears, Louis had sworn he would never touch anything harder than marijuana or alcohol. He'd been able to stay true to this promise since he was eighteen, but with friends like Zayn and his pill-popping model posse, Louis had been hard pressed for entertainment that wouldn't break his vow. And thus, the addiction to crap telly had begun.

He had very real opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the Maury show versus Jerry Springer, he'd followed every plot line on General Hospital for years, and his DVR was completely bloated with old episodes of TMZ that he just wasn't ready to part with yet. Currently, he was sprawled across the couch watching a vaguely interesting E! News segment about Jennifer Lawrence's cat when Niall's face flashed onto the screen.

He was joined by four other men with sultry expressions and rebelliously black clothing, and Louis immediately recognized it as a press photo of Status Solo. The picture was soon accompanied by the female anchor's commanding voiceover.

“More Harry Styles drama is coming out of London tonight, as the Status Solo lead singer was recorded giving a bizarre interview to a reporter on the street.” The anchor explained as the image switched to an unsteady iPhone video. “The sexy singer was bombarded by press after rumors surfaced this week about tension with his longtime girlfriend, Arrienne Brant.”

Harry pushed a pale hand through his hair, the dark brown tresses tumbling in loose curls toward his shoulders. He stepped toward a reporter, his features briefly illuminated by each camera flash, his vividly green eyes flicking to the source of the iPhone video briefly. The small crowd continued to shout his name, but his attention settled on one off-screen reporter.

“Why weren't you at Arrienne's birthday party in Paris last week?” The reporter asked, thrusting a skinny microphone towards Harry's particularly pink-tinged lips.

“You know what I want? A boat.” Harry responded, ignoring the question in a low, musky voice. “Do you want to get a boat with me? The two of us, just us, on a boat.” The reporter stammered out an unintelligible response to the proposition before Harry continued. “Don't tell Arrienne, though. She can be quite mean.”

He pouted theatrically for a moment before walking away, a chorus of questions being shouted at his retreating back. The screen switched back to the anchor, standing in the E! News studio.

“All this, only a week after Harry tweeted out that he is the love-child of Pope Benedict and the Queen of England, and reportedly got completely naked at a London night club. With Status Solo's most recent album set to be certified platinum in the US and the UK by the end of the month, we have to wonder if the success is starting to get to the curly haired front-man’s head. Is Arrienne finally tired of his behavior? Tweet us what you think.”

The show faded to a commercial break as the security gate buzzed throughout the house. Louis
already knew that it was Liam, who always arrives fashionably early to any and all social events. The football match started in about an hour, so this was right on time for Liam. He'd yet to see the new house, so Louis gave him a quick tour before showing him the back veranda.

“I've got news for you.” Liam said, donning his adult voice. Louis could tell that Liam had been wanting to talk business since he'd stepped inside. “They're committing to next October for Metal Heart 2. Four weeks in LA, Four in Chicago.” It had been almost three months since filming wrapped for the first Metal Heart movie, and Liam had been negotiating his schedule for the sequel for the last few weeks.

“So I've got a year, then.” Louis remarked. He'd been told that pre-production for the next movie would be granting him a lengthy break, but he hadn't expected to have an entire year off before the franchise continued.

“Which means,” Liam segued with big, imploring eyes. “You've got homework to do.” Louis groaned. “I'm having a messenger bring over about ten screenplays for you to look at.”

“Ten?”

“I sifted through about two hundred, so I'll have no complaining from you.” He chided. “Pick something you like. Not everyone gets to pick what projects they work on.”

Louis pursed his lips belligerently at the thought of doing real work when Liam's phone pinged.

“Is that your Tinder Boy?” Louis asked precociously, alluding to the blonde haired longboarder that Liam had met on the dating app.

“S' Zayn. He'll be here in a few minutes.”

“And how is your Tinder Boy?”

“I wouldn't know. He ended things.” Liam responded, not looking up from his phone as he thumbed a response.

“Oh Liiiiiiiiiiam.”

Liam finally looked up to see Louis' arms outstretched towards him. Louis stepped forward, grabbing both sides of his face.

“Louis, don't. It's fine.” Liam warned.

“Shhhhhh, baby. Let it out. Let it out.” Louis now had Liam's head pressed to his chest and was beginning to slide down to the ground so he could cradle the burly man's head in his lap.

“Louis! Stop! I don't want to be on the ground!” Despite his protests, Liam knew his attempts were futile. He surrendered to Louis' embrace.

“Just tell me all about it. Don't worry about crying.”

“There's nothing to tell.”

“Tell me. Tell Boo Bear.”

“Don't call yourself that.”

“I just want to mend your heartbreak.”
“I’m not heartbroken. We just didn’t get on.” Liam said, sighing and settling further into Louis’ lap. “He’s getting back with his ex.”

“Oh, fuck him.”

“It’s whatever.”

“Well, at least you can ask Zayn out now.”

“Lou, don’t.” Liam protested, just as the back door opened and Joshua and Zayn poked their heads out.

“Why are you on the ground?” Zayn asked.

“Liam had his heart broken.” Louis answered matter-of-factly.

“Oh, Li.” Zayn cooed.

“I did not have my heart broken.” Liam argued, disentangling himself from Louis and rising to his feet. Louis also stood up, smirking as he noticed Zayn leave a lingering hand on Liam's shoulder as they stepped back into the house.

As with any typical footie match, Joshua pretended to pay attention for about five minutes before inexplicably disappearing into some unseen part of the house. Zayn always remained demure, watching the game silently with little to no physical movement. Liam sat rigid at the end of the couch, eyes wide as he issued a series of grunts in reaction to the game.

Niall's addition to the afternoon, however, added a new twist to the dynamic. He arrived with a bottle of whiskey under his arm that he guzzled like blue gatorade. Much like Louis, Niall's typical reaction to anything that happened during the game was to jump onto the couch and scream obscenities to everyone within shouting distance.

They were, of course, fueled off of each other's enthusiasm to the point that Louis nearly lost his balance while standing on the back of the couch, only to be saved when Niall grabbed his shirt and wrenched him forward, sending him crashing into the coffee table and swiftly crushing it.

Yes, Louis quite liked Niall.

Once furniture was being destroyed, Joshua had brought an end to lad's night, but Niall nonetheless became a steady fixture at the house over the next couple of weeks. His energy never waned, which made him endlessly entertaining. Joshua found him tiresome, but Louis had quickly begun to think of Niall as an integral part of his home life.

He’d almost completely forget that Niall was a rockstar until he’d say something like, “So one time I went to get a cheeseburger with Adam Levine,” or, “Kanye's really good at picking out birthday presents.” His celebrity exploits were juicier than anything Louis was prepared to fathom, but he was finding himself continually disappointed by how mundane Niall's mentions of his own bandmates were. The same day that the celebrity news outlets were claiming that Harry Styles had tried to bring a tiger on an airplane, Niall's only mention of him had been that Harry preferred regular cream cheese to flavored cream cheese.

It was one night while playing his third round of FIFA with Niall that Louis finally worked up the courage to inquire further about the eccentric lead singer. Niall was answering text messages between games when he suddenly turned the screen towards Louis.
“Look, Harry made a smiley face in his cereal.” Niall said, voice dripping with fondness. Louis' eyes focused on the screen to see that, indeed, there was a smiley face amongst the sodden cheerios. The accompanying text merely said, “Food!”

For a picture of breakfast food, it was strangely adorable.


“Is he as batshit as everyone thinks he is?” Niall interrupted. Louis felt his face grow warm.

“I didn't mean that, I was just wondering about, erm, well, with everything they say about him on the telly-”

“No, he didn't try to get a tiger on a plane. He's afraid of large mammals.” Niall answered. Louis analyzed Niall's face, trying to sense whether he had overstepped with the direction of the conversation. “He's honestly a really sweet guy. I've known 'm since primary.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. We learned to play instruments together when we were kids, and then suddenly we were eighteen and getting signed to a major label. The fame's kind of hit him harder than the rest of us, but he's still...” Niall faded out for a second, looking down. “He's still Harry.”

It was then that Joshua strutted out from the kitchen, a magazine in one hand and some sort of green, homemade smoothie in the other.

“Oi, Josh, you shitface!” Said Niall, his boisterous demeanor erasing any evidence of the moment that had just occurred. Louis blinked hard at Niall's use of the name “Josh.” So much for trying to get Joshua to like Niall. “Come take a turn at FIFA.” Niall demanded, gesturing with his controller. Joshua's face soured.

“No thank you.” He said mock-sweetly as he left the room.

“Lou, when are you going to get your boyfriend to start having some fun?

“He's kind of a homebody.” Louis admitted with a shrug.

“How old are you, Tommo?”

“Twenty four.”

“Twenty four years old and you spend every night of the week watching Netflix with your boyfriend?”

“Well, yeah. He's cute.”

“You're the star of a multi-million dollar franchise, for fuck's sake!” Niall threw his controller onto the brand new coffee table to punctuate his point. Louis began to focus on his own fingers as they picked at the seam of the couch.

“I wouldn't mind maybe going out a little more.” He said quietly, almost afraid Joshua would overhear them.

“Good. It's decided. Bring the lads. We're going out on Saturday. And do that gay thing where you make yourself look much fitter than a straight man ever could.”
“That's right offensive.” Louis said with a laugh as he scooped his controller back up, already wondering how he was going to get Joshua to go along with this.

“Oh, and speaking of Harry,” Niall added “He might be back in town by then. Interested in meeting him?”

Louis froze as he realized that yes, he would very much like to meet Harry Styles.
“Well I bet that you look good on the dance floor. I don’t know if you’re looking for romance, or, I don’t know what you’re looking for.”

- The Arctic Monkeys

Whenever he woke up to that deep-rooted surge of panic, that smothering anxiety that breathed down the skin of his neck through the cloudy darkness, Louis never remembered what caused it. He just wrapped himself more tightly around Joshua’s sleeping frame, clenching his eyes through pinched tears until the fear releases its hold on his lungs.

The nightmares had been the same for Louis’ entire life. They never imprinted on his memory, but his fright upon waking had reduced a younger Louis to a trembling mess of tears and shrieks. Most children eventually outgrow night terrors, but Louis’ nightmares had remained a steady presence into adulthood, popping up especially during times of stress or worry. That period just after he moved to LA was plagued with nightmares, but more recently, he hadn’t had a single one in months.

Until now, apparently.

It became obvious the next morning that Joshua was completely unaware of Louis’ midnight panic attack. He wasn’t surprised, since the younger man was a notoriously deep sleeper. Louis decided it wasn’t worth bringing up; no need to worry him over what was probably nothing.

Someone might have pinched Louis’ bum, but he couldn’t particularly blame them. His arse was looking especially fantastic beneath his black skinny jeans. He finally made it across the dance floor, weaving through a swarm of sweat-laced bodies as they gyrated to Rihanna, and slid into the booth beside Liam. Zayn and Niall perked up at his arrival, their eyes glowing beneath the pulsating lights. Both of their faces sunk in disappointment as they noticed Louis’ empty hands.

“There are quite literally seven thousand people at the bar.” Louis shouted above the roaring music. “I don’t think anything short of sacrificial suicide will get the bartender’s attention.”

Niall moaned belligerently, sinking further into his seat and glaring to the heavens above as if some divine presence was personally punishing him.

“I’m so sober I’m going to die!” Niall moaned, apparently unaware of the small army of empty shot glasses peppering his section of the table. Louis and Niall had actually been drinking non-stop since their private car had picked them up. They’d sat in the backseat, popping champagne and letting the bubbly drink swill through their fuzzy thoughts before they’d even merged onto the freeway.

Joshua had asked Louis not to drink too much tonight.

Yeah, that was a fucking pipe dream.

As if he were listening in on Louis’ thoughts, Niall spun the conversation around to Joshua’s rather obvious absence.

“Time to play a game!” He announced jovially. “It’s called, ’guess why Joshua isn’t here this time.’”
“Oh, oh, oh! Because there was a re-run of the Vampire Diaries on?” Liam guessed, jumping at the chance to roast Joshua.

“Oh did he not get his third nap in today?” Laughed Niall.

“Wait no! Was it because he was on one side of the house, but his shoes were on the other?” Liam guffawed, earning a look of understated disappointment from Zayn. Louis cleared his throat and sat up, ready to deliver his well-rehearsed excuse.

“Joshua isn't here because he wasn't feeling up to going out twice in a row, and we have an important movie premiere tomorrow.” He explained.

“A movie premiere that's more important than spending time with me?” Niall gaped.

“Hard to believe, I know, but yes. It's rather important.” Louis continued. “It's our first public appearance together as a couple.”

He was met by a chorus of patronizing ‘Aw!’s that stained his cheeks red and caused him to shout, “Shut the fuck up, Horan!” The version of the story he'd just told was mostly truthful, apart from the fact that Joshua had sprung the ultimatum on Louis just before he was ready to leave. Louis had spent the entire evening in the bathroom, blasting Lady Gaga and trying on every outfit combination he owned. He had forgotten the thrill of dressing up for a night out and was giddily eager to show Joshua his hairstyle, until he found that his boyfriend and alleged “date” for the evening was lying in bed, clad in baggy sweats, flipping through twitter on his phone. He told Louis that he didn't want to go out twice, so it was up to Louis to decide which night was more important.

And of course, of course the movie premiere was more important. Getting to stand on a red carpet with cameras flashing against their glossy tuxedos with his boyfriend's hand held firmly in his own; it meant more to Louis than he would ever willingly admit. But disappointment had been pricking at the back of his thoughts since he'd traipsed across Niall's lawn without Joshua by his side.

So no boyfriend for lad's night. Oh well. At least Louis' bum was looking rather pinchable.

Louis surfaced from his reverie as Niall pulled out his phone, the screen illuminating his features in the dark booth. Niall was typically glued to his phone, constantly snapchatting and sending out inane tweets, but this was the first time he'd taken it out all evening.

“Harry might stop by. His plane just touched down a few hours ago.” Niall explained, sliding the phone back into his jeans.

Louis' eyes nearly melted from their sockets as the words replayed through his head. Harry might stop by. Niall had mentioned the possibility of the Harry Styles showing up for lad's night earlier in the week, but it was only now that the idea seemed to flesh itself out to Louis. Harry might stop by. Those words had just latched themselves to Louis' insides and had begun to suck the life from him. What's breath? How do you do that again? Do you need to do that to survive? Oh no, breathe. Breathe.

Why was he freaking out like this? Louis had met celebrities before. Hell, he was a celebrity. There was no need for his stomach to begin digesting itself in a star-struck panic. Harry was just some bloke from some band. Sure, Status Solo had been one of his favorite bands for years, and Harry Styles was beyond fit with his waxed abs and pouting lips, and well, yeah, his lyrics had always really spoken to Louis on a deep emotional level like no other music ever had and oh no, oh no, oh no. Harry might stop by.
“Louis?” Zayn asked gently, apparently noticing his inner crisis.

“Did you just die, Tommo?” Niall inquired.

“But we're seriously going to meet Harry Styles?” Louis rasped, a long dormant inner fangirl awakening within him and clawing her way up his throat.

“Oh, I totally forgot to tell you!” Niall said, ignoring Louis' query. “Harry's a big fan of yours.”

“Of me?” Louis squeaked, losing all semblance of dignity.

“He's really into the whole Metal Heart thing.”

“But the movie isn't even out yet.”

“No, like, he's really into it. Like he has signed copies of the books locked away in a safe and he follows all of these blogs with Metal Heart conspiracy theories and the like. He keeps going on and on about how you were cast perfectly.” By the time Niall had stopped talking, Louis had both of his hands pressed into his face, attempting to smother himself out of existence.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no.” He groaned pathetically as a wave of alcohol-infused nerves spread through his limbs. This simply did not compute. Harry Styles was a fan of Louis'? How could something like that be true without space and time being torn to shreds? What even was life?

Louis was remotely aware of Liam cackling beside him as he continued to issue a steady stream of “no, no, no, no, no, no, no,” until the music changed. Louis took a sharp intake of breath as Beyonce began to demand that they, “smack it, smack it, in the air.” At last, something that made sense.

“It's dance time.” He proclaimed, jumping to his feet and tugging Liam up after him. His sense of balance dipped precariously upon standing, a result of the last round of shots, but he still found himself propelled to the dance floor with Zayn and Liam in tow.

He turned to his friends and began moving to the music, suddenly realizing how long it had been since he'd gone out dancing. Seeing Zayn beside him, whirling with a graceful cadence that left all those nearby in complete awe, Louis was almost transported back to those early days of no money and no connections, just frivolous nights at gay bars and unadulterated fun. And now here they were, six years later, in an exclusively posh night club, buying drinks on a guitar player's tab, and about to meet Harry Styles.

Oh no. Louis was thinking about Harry Styles again. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no no no no no.
Distraction, distraction, he needed a distraction. Ah, getting Zayn and Liam to dance together. What a worthy distraction.

Liam looked like a total buffoon, moving his body without inhibition with a giant smile plastered across his face. It was only too easy for Louis to lure him into Zayn's personal space. He began by dancing between them, waiting for the prime moment to slide away and sandwich the two together. Louis admired his work from nearby, particularly enjoying the uncharacteristically impish grin that was gracing Zayn's typically stoic features. Several songs pulsed by, Louis getting lost in his own head-space as he danced his little heart out until the crowd suddenly thinned.

The three men looked around, noticing the desolate dance floor and vacant bar. A crowd had begun to form near the entrance, churning with screaming girls and camera flashes. It was as if someone very important had just arrived.
“Bar's empty!” Louis noted, hearing the frantic tone in his own voice. “How about those pitchers?”

“I'll go check in with Niall.” Zayn purred, walking slowly back in the direction of their booth.

“Perfect, because I have some words for you, Payno.” Louis informed him as he launched himself onto Liam for a piggy-back ride. Liam huffed as he scrambled to lock his arms under Louis' legs.

“Bloody hell, Lou!”

“To the alcohol!” Louis roared, pointing ahead of them. Liam began to begrudgingly move forward.

“I'm not just here for you to climb all over.”

“Jury's still out on that one, babe.” Louis slid off Liam's back as they arrived at the bar. He quickly ordered three pitchers of beer (on Niall's tab, obviously) before turning his attention back to Liam. “So you know how I'm an impartial third party to your life?”

“That's a hilarious lie.”

“But Liiiiiiam, there were actual fireworks shooting out of Zayn's eyes when he was looking at you. That's a fire hazard, that. Think of everyone's safety!”

“I'm just trying to enjoy myself.” Liam said bashfully, looking down at his own hands.

“Just ask him out already.” Louis begged. “He'll say yes. I so, absolutely promise.”

“No, I just-.” Liam stammered as their pitchers arrived. Louis scooped two of them up, one in each hand, leaving Liam to carry the last one. They began to walk back to the booth. “I just can't. Not right now.”

Louis immediately spun around to face Liam.

“Look at me, I'm Liam! I'm cute and tiny and shy!” Louis mock-sang, now walking backwards with no regard for his own safety.

“Lou-!”

“I'm going to die alone with my cat and my mum because I'm shy-!” Louis' pitchers sloshed the amber liquid to the ground as he collided with someone behind him.

“Oops!” The someone yelped, turning on the spot. Louis twisted around to apologize, only to feel his soul leave his body.

Tall. Curly hair. Green eyes.

Harry Styles.

“Hi.” Louis breathed.
“I didn't know I was lonely till I saw your face."

- The Bleachers

Harry’s eyes were a striking, honeydew green framed by smudged eyeliner as black as his pupils, which had grown to about three times their original size since landing on Louis. Both of his hands were clasped over his gaping mouth, a collection of rings sparkling from his slender fingers. He looked at Louis with an expression somewhere between excitement and complete terror. Altogether, it was a pretty accurate reenactment of how Louis had been panicking earlier in the evening.

“You’re-!” Harry stammered. “You’re you!” His shock sounded unnatural through the timbre of his deep voice. Before Louis couldn’t even consider collecting himself enough to respond, Harry turned to Niall, who was absentmindedly guzzling beer straight from a pitcher from his seat at the booth. “You didn’t tell me he was going to be here!”

“Course I did.” Niall responded.

“No, no you did not. I would definitely have remembered that.”

“Oh. Whoops.” Niall shrugged, turning his attention back to his beer.

Harry slowly turned back to Louis, his eyes somehow impossibly wider and a whisper of a dimples beginning to poke through on both cheeks.

“I’m Harry.” He said on an exhale, extending his hand.

“Oh, I’m very, very aware of who you are.” Louis responded, trying to convey just how star-struck he was.

He shook his hand, and it was in that moment that Louis finally took in the person that was standing before him. At this proximity, Harry was all jawline and hazelnut curls, a flourish of full-blown, boyish dimples with the tease of inked skin poking out from under his shirt, full pink lips, remarkably skinny jeans, and this aura of charm that tangibly radiated from his glistening skin. His billowy, loose-fitting black shirt was unbuttoned to a precariously low degree, revealing a butterfly splayed across his taut muscles.

But it was Harry’s eyes that Louis couldn’t look away from. There was something so enrapturing, so gripping in his gaze that Louis found himself locked there, staring back at this smiling man.

“Um, hi! Sorry! Could we get a picture with you?” There was a woman by Harry’s side, phone in hand, a hopeful look in her eyes.

Harry and Louis broke their stare, suddenly realizing that they had been standing there wordlessly, hands clasped together under the guise of a handshake for what might have been several minutes. Harry blinked as if surfacing from a daydream and turned to the fan.

“Yes, but only if the picture is artistic in a post-modern sense.” He said as the fan whisked him away.

Louis collapsed into his seat, panting as if he had just run a marathon. He’d done it. He’d just
survived meeting Harry Styles. Or had he? Was he dead? Is this what purgatory looks like? At least there seemed to be alcohol in purgatory.

Up until that point, he hadn’t been aware that there was wait-staff at the club. But since their booth had been graced by Harry’s A-list credentials, the group had been receiving regular attention from a waitress. The alcohol consumption had increased ten-fold.

Harry would engage himself whole-heartedly with everyone at the table, demanding snippets of their life stories and reveling in whatever he coaxed them into revealing. According to Harry, Zayn’s preference for jelly donuts was “esoterically beautiful,” the fact that Liam had minored in sport’s medicine at Uni made him a “well-rounded citizen of the world,” and the fact that Niall had made his own BLT for lunch was “an achievement worthy of acclaim and renown.”

Between these conversations Harry would flit around the club. That was really the only word to describe it: Harry would flit. He would disappear at his own volition, seemingly following whatever direction his thoughts would send him in. Occasionally he would bring one of them along, dragging Niall or Zayn away to “observe an anomaly” or meet someone “utterly life-changing.” He even whisked Liam away on a little field trip at one point, which Liam had returned from by himself about ten minutes later.

“So Harry’s taking Molly in the bathroom.” Liam recounted matter-of-factly, sliding back into his spot beside Zayn.

“How do you know?” Zayn asked.

“Because I took some with him.”

“Li.” Zayn sighed, eyes fixed on Liam beside him. This reaction was a far cry from the Zayn Louis had known when they first began rooming together. Young Zayn had considered recreational drugs exactly that: recreational. But after two of his model friends had died of overdoses in the last year, his opinion on pill-popping had soured. Liam smiled at him obliviously, causing Zayn to slink a protective arm around his shoulders.

By the time Harry returned to them, there was an entire menagerie of alcoholic beverages waiting for him at the table. Free drinks had been piling up for him all night and despite his best efforts, Harry had scarcely made a dent in them. Apparently giving up on trying to consume the beverages, Harry began to mix and pour them into each other like a wide-eyed child with a chemistry set.

As the night continued, Louis became more and more certain of one thing: Harry was ignoring him. The conversation had progressed to a point that Harry was now quizzing Liam about his first childhood pet, but he’d yet to say anything to Louis since their initial greeting. Anytime Louis added his commentary to the topic at hand, Harry would giggle sheepishly and look down to his drink, waiting several minutes before he spoke again.

Despite this, Louis couldn’t even begin to count the number of times he had looked up to find Harry watching him. Their eyes would lock yet again, just as they had when they first met, and the two would spend an inordinate amount of time staring at each other until someone said one of their names.

“And Harry’s just a spoiled git who couldn’t be arsed to fly in any earlier, so he got to skip a whole week of meetings.” Niall complained, tearing Harry away from another moment of watching Louis. Harry quickly recovered from the mental lapse, turning his attention back to his drink-mixing experiment.
“Mmmm, meetings. No.” Harry grumbled, concentrating as he poured his drink into one of the pitchers, along with a flurry of other fizzy, brightly colored cocktails.

“Because picking the next single from the album apparently isn’t worth your attention.” Niall bit back.

“What’d you pick?” Louis asked Niall.

“Erm, Paradise Red.”

“That’s my favorite one off the new album!” Louis said excitedly. “I used to listen to it on repeat between takes on Metal Heart. It just kind of mellowed me out. Got me in the right headspace.”

“It’s my favorite, too.” Harry said, causing Louis to whip his head around to face him. Harry’s smile was subdued, but was brimming with delight. There was something profoundly different in his eyes, as if a dam had just come crashing down. Louis could think of no other response but to smile back at him.

“The fuck have you done, Hazza?” Niall exclaimed in disgust, noting the concoction of Harry’s creation which had now muddled into a dark purple. Harry held the pitcher out to Niall, an innocent cadence to his offering. Niall considered the proposition for all of two seconds before heartily snatching the pitcher from him and immediately tossing it back, emptying it halfway with only a couple of gulps.

“Horan you twat! Spare a fucking thought for your poor liver!” Louis yelled, causing Harry to bark out a laugh that was more adolescent boy than grown man. “Think of those less fortunate, like ickle Liam with his one kidney.”

“You only have one kidney?” Niall asked, wiping a trail of purple sludge from his chin.

“Two now. One’s bionic.” Liam explained, making an inexplicable pointing gesture with his fingers. Any form of MDMA has always had an interesting effect on Liam.

“I have four nipples.” Harry announced proudly.

“You’re lying!” Louis countered, scandalized.

“He’s actually not.” Niall laughed through a hiccup. “Count’em four.”

“How are you not in the Smithsonian?” Louis ogled. “You’re a fucking work of art.” Harry began to laugh bashfully, a little too enamored by the compliment. He was all dimples and curls as another round of shots arrived at their table.

The new surge of alcohol propelled them to the dancefloor, all of their inhibitions having long since faded into a vodka infused haze. They began to grind and dance to the music and it was clear in his eyes that Liam had mentally left the picture. Zayn plastered himself to his front, attempting to ground him as they swayed together. Louis struggled to keep himself a free agent, peeling girls off of his front and sides and sending them in Niall’s direction.

The music thrummed deep in his chest, a numb sense of euphoria beginning to seep down his spine. Every time he opened his eyes there was something that sent a new swell of ecstasy through his limbs. There was Niall with a smile that could envelop the entire room, a bottle of expensive champagne in his hand. There were Zayn and Liam, so hopelessly gone for each other but so unwilling to admit it.
And then there was Harry, twisting and gyrating without a single care. The crowd would pulse and split open like a curtain, and Harry was there every time, dancing like some hipster Mick Jagger. He somehow managed to make it look stunning.

The music changed and the beat picked up, eliciting a cheer from the crowd as the first line echoed through the room:

*Oh don’t you dare look back*

*Just keep your eyes on me*

*I said, ‘You’re holding back’*

*She said, ‘Shut up and dance with me’*

And Harry was definitely looking at him now, parting the crowd with a hand extended toward Louis. Does this boy honestly think he’s Leonardo Di Caprio, standing on the grand staircase of the RMS Titanic, holding a hand out to Rose before he takes her on the adventure that changes the course of her life?

Of course Louis took his hand.

Louis’ world lurched as Harry pulled them together with a spin. They begin twirling and moving like uncoordinated school children, throwing their heads back and grasping onto each other for some semblance of balance. Between the two of them they somehow managed to stay upright, even as they bounced in unison and screamed the lyric:

*Shut up and dance with me!*

Harry was a contradiction beneath Louis’ fingertips, somehow loose and whirlly while also warm and sturdy. It was then that Louis felt utterly liberated, every nerve and every cell in his body on fire with how much he was enjoying being alive. He was floating somewhere, a whirlwind of green and blue lights undulating around him; there was the sturdy presence of biceps under his hands and green eyes glowing through the brume. Louis felt safe yet free, and yes, it was definitely the alcohol talking, but there was absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Far too soon, the humid heat of the club gave way to a cold slap of fresh air. Louis was suddenly stumbling outside, arm slung around Zayn. Niall was nearby, his phone pressed to his ear as he called for a car.

“How’d you two get here? Oh who fucking cares. Just come with us.” He muttered, listening to his phone ring. Louis felt the trace of Zayn’s fingers on his scalp and Louis rolled his head into the touch. Zayn was so lovely, wasn’t he? Everyone was so lovely. Especially Harry. Where was Harry?

“M’ride’s here.” Harry said as a limo pulled up to the curb. Oh, there’s Harry. And there’s a fucking limousine.

“Subtle, Haz.” Niall commented.

“Here’s the quandary, Nialler.” Harry drawled, trying to stand imperiously in front of the limo
despite his level of intoxication and lack of balance. “You could take these fine people home for
the night to be boring, or you could come with me to get ice cream.”

Louis threw his head back and screamed, “ICE CREAM!” His words echoed back at them as they
reverberated down the street. Liam quickly followed suit, chanting “ICE CREAM” as he pumped
his fist. They piled into the back of the limo, joining in the chant like over hyped fraternity boys.

Louis was the last to duck into the limo and scarcely had a chance to survey the sprawling seats
before Harry was pulling him down. Before he could form a second thought, Louis was in Harry’s
lap, the taller man’s arms wrapped around his waist as a make-shift seat belt.

“Oh, okay, I just have one question.” Harry said, a note of desperation in his voice.

“Alright, but only one.” Louis responded.

“There are a lot of people who think they’re cutting the bridge scene out of the movie.”

“Oh, so you’re just using me to get details about Metal Heart?” Louis chuckled with an overly
dramatic roll of his eyes.

“No! No, no, no! I’m not! I’m not! I just-!” Harry’s head fell to Louis’ shoulder despondently. “I
just really like that scene and it’s so important to the story because it really signifies the crossroads
for all of the characters, plus all of the foreshadowing-!”

“Oh my god, Harry.” Louis said, suddenly realizing that this was the first time all night he had said
Harry’s name to his face, and it kind of tingled on his tongue; to actually be saying Harry Styles'
name to Harry Styles' face. He realized he could rather get used to the feeling.

Harry’s eyes flicked up to meet his.

“Oh my god, Louis.” He echoed.

“I can’t speak for what’s going to be in the final cut,” Louis said tantalizingly, Harry hanging on
his every word. “But we did film the bridge scene.” The relief in Harry’s face was palpable, his
massive smile splitting his face. He began to wriggle as he slid his phone from his pocket. “Hey!
That’s privileged information!”

“I know. I just want a picture.” Harry said as he held the phone in front of them, smaller versions of
themselves displayed on the screen. Harry stretched his face through several different smiles while
Louis struggled to look even slightly sober. Harry snapped the picture and smiled affectionately
down at it, beginning to click through his apps with one hand and tightening his grip around Louis
with the other.

Their driver managed to find a twenty-four hour drive through burger joint with exactly three
flavors of soft serve: chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. Zayn, Niall, and Liam all opted for
chocolate cones while Louis picked strawberry. Harry somehow managed to charm them into
swirling all three flavors, which didn’t seem like it should be technically possible.

They were all contentedly licking from their cones when the driver asked them if they’d like to
listen to some music. Harry pointed to Niall dramatically.

“Genre! Go!” Harry commanded.

“Indie electronica!” Niall yelled back.
“Uninspired, no! Liam!” Harry suddenly pointed to Liam, who visibly quaked under the pressure.

“Erm, erm, erm, pop!” He answered.

“Failure! Louis!”

“Late seventies glam rock!” Louis yelped.

Moments later, Harry was wrenching the sky roof open as Queen’s “Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy” blared through the speakers. He finally succeeded in getting it open, the top half of his body disappearing through the roof.

Louis stumbled to his feet, fighting to maintain balance as the limo took a sharp turn, and wriggled himself up beside Harry. The wind snapped in his face, strangely electrifying against the warm numb of his drunken stupor. Harry’s eyes were blissfully closed as he sang along to the music, leaving Louis dumbstruck by the sound. He was mere inches away from this voice that had so often crackled through his ear buds. Even muffled by the whip of the wind, Harry’s voice was resonant and rich, making Louis feel even more intoxicated.

The spell was only broken as Harry thrust his cone up into the air above him, the wind catching it and tearing it from his grasp.

There was something tragically poetic about the way the ice cream arced toward the pavement, Harry’s strangled “Noooooooon!” harmonizing with Freddie Mercury’s:

Oooooooh love,
Oooooooh, lover boy!

Within seconds, Harry had tumbled back into the limo, frantically demanding that the driver pull over. Startled, the driver pulled onto the shoulder of the highway and Harry quickly darted onto the road, his lanky limbs looking almost cartoonish with his inebriated gait. It was only then that Louis noticed that Harry was wearing glittery, silver boots.

The boys followed after him, actually concerned that the lead singer of an internationally successful band was about to get run over by a car in the middle of the night. Luckily, the road was completely deserted at that hour, stretched out in front of them under a line of sporadically spaced streetlights.

Harry’s lone figure was recognizable, hunched over the mangled remains of his late night dessert. He came to his feet as they approached him, gently holding onto a lone shard of sugar cone. There was something reminiscent of actual anguish apparent on his features.

“Can we bury her?” Harry asked, his voice soft. Niall took several steps toward him, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

“Course we can, mate.” He said.

The ceremony was brief and tasteful. They stood amongst the sagebrush on the side of the road, their heads bowed under the faint orange glow of the nearest streetlight. Harry sprinkled dirt over the piece of cone as Niall garbled through a version of “Greensleeves,” his Irish accent adding a poignant note to the tune. They took a moment of heavy silence before racing back to the limo, Harry trying to steal licks from everyone else’s cones.

The original plan was to drop Niall and Louis off first, but that was until Louis mentioned that he’d
only been living in the new house for a month now. This, of course, begged the question from Harry about whether or not Louis had spent any time on the roof yet. The only natural progression was for all five men to trip their way through the dark house, attempting to be as quiet as possible, so they could grapple their way from a high window onto the roof.

The view was as breathtaking as Louis had expected it to be. The neighborhood was suddenly visible as an expanse of twinkling lights and glimmering swimming pools. It was under this aura that Liam and Zayn slipped away to another corner of the roof, out of earshot of the others.

Louis was just feeling the first pangs of sobriety when Niall doubled over and began vomiting over the roof tiles.

“Oh. My. God.” Louis breathed, only now remembering that his boyfriend was asleep somewhere beneath their feet as their neighbor was spilling his guts all over their roof.

“Don’t look at me! I’m hideous!” Niall yelled melodramatically before succumbing to another bout of nausea. Harry put a heavy hand on Louis’ elbow, leading him away.

“Let’s give him a moment to himself.” Harry mumbled as Niall’s retching faded behind them. “Don’t worry about the mess. Happens at my place all the time. I’ll give you the number for the people who always clean my roof.”

“You have people who clean sick off of your roof?”

“And my pool.”


Louis took a deep breath as they both sat down, dangling their feet over the edge of the roof. Louis watched Harry’s sparkle boots swing back and forth, his pool a glittering blue backdrop through the haze beneath them. Louis hadn’t even been swimming in the pool yet. He pays someone to clean it, sure, but does he ever even use it? No.

Harry leaned back, relaxing further while staring at the starless sky. Louis looked up as well, wondering what Harry might be thinking about.

And wait. He’s relaxing on his roof with Harry Styles. When did that happen? And he promised Joshua that he wasn’t going to drink a lot tonight. Fuck.

“So Zayn and Liam.” Harry mused, breaking the silence. “From what I’ve gathered, they’re both totally smitten with each other, but they’re too shy to ever admit it?”

“You already figured that out?”

“Well yeah. And that’s what I told them earlier.”

“You told them!?” Louis gaped, physically turning to look at Harry, who was grinning devilishly. The final result was definitely something more cherubic than demonic, however.

“I’m glad I got to meet you. I’ve been…” Harry said, his grin fading into something more sincere. “That interview, erm, was really brave. When you came out. It was brave of you, and I’m glad you did it.”

“Thank you.” Louis said quietly, not expecting this shift in conversation.
“Was it hard?”

“Yes. And no. And yes.” Louis said honestly. “I mean, there are always going to assholes saying things on twitter and whatever, but people have been accepting for the most part. It was just scary to do, more than anything else.”

“Are you in love, Louis?” Harry asked dreamily. Louis breathed for a moment.

“Yes.”

“Does he make everything worth it?”

Louis turned away from him, biting his lip as he mentally prepared his answer.

“Honestly, I think I did it for myself more than anything.” He admitted.

“Hm.” Harry hummed, thinking over the answer. “Good.”

“Are you in love, Harry?” Louis asked playfully, images of Harry’s supermodel girlfriend, Arrienne Brant coming to mind.

Harry pursed his lips, his smile looking self-deprecating before he shook his head with a dark chuckle. Louis’ face fell. Harry wasn’t looking at him, his eyes fixed ahead of him as if he was watching something that wasn’t actually there. The moment hung heavily over them until the silence was sullied by Niall’s distant cries.

“Harry! I’m ready to go home now!” He croaked.

They both giggled before pushing themselves up onto their feet. Louis’ balance dipped again, sending him careening towards the edge of the rooftop.

Harry’s arms were there instantly, clenching to his sides to steady him. Louis grabbed onto Harry’s forearms until the world began to feel steady and Harry’s eyes came into focus.

“Whoops.” Louis breathed.

“Falling’s never a good idea, but if you ever do, I’ll try to catch you.” Harry told him.

“I’ll count on that.”
Louis awoke to a throat like sandpaper and a post-it note stuck to his forehead. A swell of nausea greeted him, causing him to curl into his own churning stomach. The movement almost flung him to the ground as he realized he was actually on the living room couch, rather than the spacious bed he normally woke up in. With a strained groan he finally plucked the post-it note from his forehead and turned it over to see a familiar scrawl.

Call me when you wake up. -Joshua

His stomach grew increasingly sour. The memories flooded back to him with a twinge of guilt: Joshua standing in the hallway when he'd finally headed to bed, angry words being thrown at him as he struggled to stand upright under the torrent of alcohol, his door being resolutely slammed in his face.

And thus, Louis had spent the night on the couch. His head ached in dull protest as he lurched into a sitting position and found his phone lying forgotten on the coffee table. There was a remarkable seven percent battery life remaining, despite the fact that Louis had a pile of messages and notifications waiting for him. As he scrolled through the messages it became quickly apparent that it wasn't so much a pile as a mountain. There were inordinate amounts of notifications from Twitter and his email, as well as a heap of missed calls and voicemails from what appeared to be the entire publicity team from Metal Heart.

As interesting as this strange turn of events was, Louis still found himself completely intent on hearing Joshua's voice. The phone began to ring as he stumbled to his feet, ignoring the painful outcry of every muscle in his body as he padded toward the kitchen. Joshua picked up on the third ring.

“Did you just wake up?”

“Where are you?” Louis demanded, purposefully avoiding looking at the clock on the stove as he got a kettle going.

“I'm at my mom's.” Joshua said. Louis had long considered those exact words to be his personal kryptonite. He looked to the ceiling and attempted to keep any frustration from dripping into his voice.

“And when are you planning on coming back?” He asked as evenly as he could. Joshua didn't offer any sort of response and Louis knew exactly what that meant. “Baby, we have a movie premiere tonight. There are people expecting us.”

“I'm not going.”

“Oh. You're not going. Isn't that just lovely?” Louis scoffed.

“Don't do that.”

“Tonight is important to me, Joshua. Could you perhaps just take a moment to consider what that means?”
“You dragged a group of drunk men through our house and onto our roof at four in the morning.” He countered. “What if someone fell off and got hurt? What were you thinking?”

“We were sobering up.” Louis said unconvincingly.

“And then I got to wake up to a picture of my boyfriend, drunk on another man's lap, trending worldwide.” Joshua snapped.

Oh dear god. The picture. The picture from last night. The one where, oh no, he was sitting on Harry's lap and, oh no, Harry's hand was around his waist. The flurry of messages on his phone was suddenly starting to make sense.

“Baby, I swear to you. Nothing happened. Harry's not even gay. We didn't do anything I haven't done with Liam or Zayn a thousand times.”

“That's not why I'm mad, Louis. I trust you. You know I trust you. I just—” He paused for a moment, voice sounding more desperate. “You were drunk, Louis. And now the whole world is looking at a picture of my boyfriend while you were completely drunk.”

Louis pulled the phone away from his ear as he fish-mouthed and resisted the urge to smash it on the counter top.

He knew there was virtually no point in arguing any further. Drinking had been the primary source of conflict in their relationship from the very beginning. They'd repeated this song and dance over and over again, each time pushing the restraints of the compromise they'd agreed on in their first year of dating. The aforementioned compromise had done it's job back then, working as a bandage on what was at the time a disintegrating relationship of four months.

Louis was quick to blame the entire situation on Joshua's lovely mother, Marion. By lovely, he of course meant nauseatingly overbearing and conservatively religious. Being an only child, Joshua grew up being spoiled by Marion as if he were the son of God himself. The fact that he had no siblings was probably the only reason why his parents didn't completely disown him when he came out of the closet. They were predictably horrified, but they both found it impossible to turn their backs on their only son. They still accepted the version of Joshua they had constructed in their heads after years of child-rearing, choosing to ignore any mention of his sexuality.

Joshua, on the other hand, had promptly gone through what could probably be considered a “rebellious phase.” It mostly consisted of trying beer for the first time, a rather short lived eyebrow piercing, and his first real boyfriend, i.e. Louis Tomlinson.

Louis' realization that he was in a serious relationship for the first time coincided with Joshua's religious relapse. It wasn't as if he was a crazed, bible-thumping virgin-until-marriage who was baptizing people in the backyard; there were just some little conservative tendencies that had started popping up here and there. He never swore, he grimaced at foul humor, and he absolutely hated it whenever Louis drank.

What started as snide comments and passive aggressive jabs eventually escalated to full-blown shouting matches any time Louis had a glass of wine with dinner. At his wit's end, Louis had begged Joshua to just be honest with him, because for the first time he was actually terrified of a relationship coming to an angry end. That was when it finally became clear to both of them that Joshua was overwhelmed by how different his life had become, and clinging to his “morals” made him feel like he wasn't losing sight of himself.

Louis agreed to respect that part of Joshua while Joshua agreed to keep his mouth shut if Louis had
a drink with dinner. The precedent was set, and suddenly they were in an adult relationship. Sure, Louis fucked up from time to time and would succumb to his need to be young and irresponsible with copious amounts of alcohol and weed. These nights ended in a uniform pattern: with Louis sleeping on the couch.

But, sometimes their conflict-resolution process wasn't so simple. A year earlier, Louis had flown Joshua twelve hours to spend two weeks in the UK, ending with a week in Doncaster to meet his family. The first half of the trip was spent zipping through the countryside like elated tourists. They were giddy and blissful as they got on the last train to Donny and immediately bonded with a pair of Swedish students who were sitting across from them.

They snapped pictures of each other and traded travel stories until the pair had challenged Louis to a beer drinking competition. Louis indulged them, assuring Joshua that he was only going to have one beer. This was an absolute lie.

By the time they arrived on the train platform, Louis was a bumbling, word slurring-bundle of bliss and affection. He was petting at Joshua and pulling at his hair until he finally swatted Louis' hand away.

“Could you get your hands off of me for five seconds?” He had snapped fiercely, causing Louis to take a step back in shock. This, of course, was the exact moment that Louis' mum had found them.

So much for a good first impression.

Johanna had made an honest effort to keep her mind open about Joshua, but she had an unlucky penchant of overhearing every snarky remark Joshua sent her son's way. Her opinion of Louis' first longterm boyfriend was unfortunately tarnished beyond repair. She made a point to avoid talking about him during their weekly phone calls, not wanting to upset Louis with her distaste for his choice in partner.

Joshua's mother, however, put Johanna to shame. Louis had met Marion on exactly three occasions, each in passing. Marion had completely refused to make eye contact with him each time.

So yes, the mothers were a work in progress.

“When are you coming home?” Louis asked, finally bringing the phone back to his ear.

“Tomorrow. After church.”

They both grew silent for several seconds. Louis only ended the call when it became obvious that neither of them had anything else to say to each other. He leaned against the counter and stretched his calves behind him as the kettle began to whistle. He moved it from the burner and watched as notifications continued to pile up on his phone.

Picture of him and Harry Styles trending worldwide. Right. He should probably deal with that now.

Louis stepped from the car to a shower of camera flashes and straightened his suit jacket as the reporters called his name. He tried not to linger on how badly he was yearning for someone's hand to hold as he plastered on his best red carpet smile and walked forward.

The movie was a young adult rom-com starring one of Louis' costars from Squad, and his publicist had deemed it a perfect opportunity to take his relationship with Joshua public. Louis was anxious for the press to officially know that he was off the market after a slew of tabloids had been
connecting him to every other gay man in LA over the last month. He'd thought that the rumors of him and the happily married Neil Patrick Harris were the most far-fetched, but that was until he'd been pictured together with Harry Styles.

The Instagram post itself was actually pretty cute in Louis' humble opinion. Harry's smile was blinding and charming next to Louis' trademark smirk. Harry had somehow been lucid enough to type out a caption mentioning Louis' *Metal Heart* character:

*Plot twist! Furia falls in love with a clumsy, British rocker who can shoot laser frisbees out of his eyeballs. They all die. End of spoilers. #metalheart #icecreeeeeeeeeam*

The post had elicited a genuine chuckle from Louis but had caused the internet to literally lose its shit. Rumors that Harry was secretly gay were swirling across every social media platform. The *Metal Heart* publicity team was actually rather pleased with it, reveling in the free press. But after several lengthy phone calls from Harry's management, Louis had been given a very specific set of instructions for the night.

"Try to be casual about it. You were just two guys having fun. Harry is going to be at the event tonight with his girlfriend, Arrienne, so just try to stay clear of him if you can. Work Joshua into any questions you get from reporters. We'll issue a press release after the event that confirms that you two have been dating for three years."

Louis stopped to pose for a few pictures before reluctantly approaching a reporter. She was beckoning him with a voice that was several octaves more shrill than anyone else in the vicinity and Louis was willing to do anything to make the sound stop. He paused in front of her and realized that this whole thing would look a lot more convincing if he had an actual, living, breathing boyfriend on his arm.

"Louis! You're looking fantastic tonight!" The reporter chirped, flashing her insanely white teeth that gleamed against her slightly orange skin and holding a round microphone out toward Louis.

"You are as well, love." Louis responded congenially.

"Oh, thank you! You're so sweet!" She giggled. "So let's just get to it. Is there any truth to the rumors of a romance between you and Harry Styles?"

She was going to be blunt, then. Louis could deal with that.

"And where did you hear that?" He laughed as he tried to appear natural. "No, no, no. I'm afraid Harry's rather committed to that beautiful girlfriend of his. Nice lad though. He is rather smashing up close." He realized that last bit might have been a little too much and was about to bring up Joshua when he was silenced by a cry from nearby.

"LOOOOUEH!"

There was someone suddenly behind him, encircling two arms around his front and hoisting him into the air with a spin. He landed back on his feet a couple of yards from the line of reporters as Harry's mess of curls came into focus.

"Give me your phone." Harry demanded with an impatient hand gesture. Louis glanced around them, searching for some form of help or guidance. They were supposed to be avoiding each other, weren't they? Harry grew tired of waiting and slipped his hand into Louis' front pocket, swiping his phone and immediately dialing a number into it.

"We're having a party at Niall's tonight and you're coming," Harry explained as he pressed the
phone to his ear. He pulled his own phone from his pocket with his other hand and Louis saw that Harry had called himself with Louis' phone. Louis also took that moment to take note of Harry's outfit, which consisted of a tightly tailored black blazer and another dark shirt unbuttoned to an obscenely low level. Louis no longer regretted the 'smashing up close' comment.

Harry put both phones to his ears with a cheeky grin. “Got your number. Ooooh, echo!”

Louis knew that he should say something and at least try to be the adult in the situation. Wasn't there someone in charge of this boy? Wasn't there a teacher nearby that saw that Harry was breaking the rules? Harry handed Louis' phone back as he he ducked behind him with wide eyes.

“I have to run, but I'll see you tonight.” He said before darting away, weaving through the sea of celebrities like a child on a playground.

Louis watched him disappear and struggled to process the last sixty seconds. He actually felt physically winded by the encounter. A furtive glance to his left confirmed what Louis had feared, which was that the entire moment had been within full view of the army of reporters.

Common sense would argue that he should definitely stay far, far away from Niall's party.

~

Harry slung Louis, kicking and screaming, over his shoulder and plunged into the pool with a pirouette. Louis crashed back to the surface, sputtering and clawing at the water dramatically. Harry's snicker proved that he found the display very amusing as he surfaced and whipped his hair from his face. He watched Louis with an impish grin and lustrous eyes.

“Harry Styles, do I look like a sack of potatoes?”

“No.”

“Then why do you insist on treating me like one?” Louis asked as he smacked a spray of water at Harry. Harry reciprocated with his own splash which quickly descended into a violent water fight that annoyed everyone within a ten foot radius.

Soon Niall had jumped in beside them to explain the rules of the game “chicken.” It consisted of two-person teams with one member sitting on the others shoulders above the water. The team member on bottom would steer while the one on top would try to knock everyone else over by using any and all brutal means they could manage.

Louis quickly found himself lofted into the air on Harry's shoulders as he stared down their adversaries. Niall now had a woman on his shoulders, and Louis was fairly certain that if she wasn’t a playmate then she was seriously wasting her rather buxom endowments.

“She looks nice. Let's not go too hard on them.” Harry remarked from below.

“That's sheer weakness, Harry.” Louis snapped authoritatively. He was becoming more and more aware of the margarita he had thrown back about twenty minutes earlier. “She's our enemy. We have to destroy her. Do not disappoint me.”

Harry snickered again as he tightened his grip around Louis' ankles and charged forward. What resulted was a clumsy and embarrassing squabble that lasted much longer than it should have, given the simple task at hand. After much biting and clawing, Harry and Louis found themselves careening toward the water in defeat. Despite their loss, Louis promptly declared them a dream team with a high five.
He hoisted himself out of the pool and approached a nearby lawn chair just outside of the splash zone that he had claimed earlier. He untangled his phone from his bundle of dry clothes and unlocked it. Yes, Louis was at a party with a lot of famous celebrities wearing nothing but his wet boxer briefs. But really, who was keeping score?

His phone greeted him with the news that he had another missed call from Liam. This now brought the grand total to eight missed calls since that morning. Apparently, Liam had decided to send a text to accompany his missed call.

**LOUIS PICK UP YOUR PHONE THIS ISN'T AS FUNNY AS YOU THINK IT IS**

Louis laughed because yes, it was definitely as funny as he thought it was. He quickly thumbed a response.

**booooooooooo Liam go away. xxxxx jk I would never kiss you go away**

“Tommo! How does it feel to lose to a girl?” Niall called as Louis began to slip back into his clothes. Niall now had his arm wrapped around his teammate.

“Not nearly as embarrassing as it feels to lose to an Irishman.” Louis responded.

“Up for a rematch?”

“Yes, but only if it's about ninety percent more dangerous.” Louis propositioned. Niall's eyes lit up.

“Have I shown you my katana collection?”

~

The dining table groaned under their weight as they both took their positions. Louis held his sword aloft, squinting at Niall with a murderous concentration. A small crowd had gathered around the table in anticipation of the ensuing battle. Among them was Harry, now completely stricken with panic.

“This is dangerous. This is very dangerous. Please be careful. Oh, my god. Please be careful.” He pled pathetically, both hands on the sides of his face in a stunning rendition of the original poster for Home Alone.

In direct opposition to Harry's warnings, Niall stepped forward with an unwieldy swing of his sword. Louis parried with a metallic clank and a gasp from the spectators. They smashed their sabers together, stumbling without any regard for safety or strategy. Louis only cared about destroying Niall and maybe looking like Aragorn from Lord of the Rings while he did it.

Niall floundered after taking a misplaced step, giving Louis the perfect opportunity to reach forward and snatch his sword away from him. It might be considered cheating by most international fencing standards, but Louis saw this as a very clear win.

“A hit! A palpable hit!” He cried as Niall regained his bearings. Louis brandished both the swords above his head as he let Niall drink in his humiliating defeat. In a blatant display of poor sportsmanship, Niall surged forward and gruffly shoved Louis off the table. The crowd scuttled away as the swords clattered to the floor and Louis tumbled through the air. Luckily, he landed safely in Harry's embrace, bridal style.

Louis exhaled, a swell of icy adrenaline fluxing through his veins in response to the split second of free fall. Niall was yelling some sort of apology from the table above, but Louis' attention was now
squarely directed at the man holding him.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked, adorably worried.

“Remember that thing you said about catching me yesterday?” Louis remembered playfully, reaching up to tug at one of Harry's curls, causing his look of concern to fade into a boyish grin. Louis' hand moved to the side of Harry's face as he poked at one of his crater-like dimples. “I really want to take a shot out of your dimple.” Louis admitted before his mind could filter out his thoughts.

Within minutes Harry was lying on his side on Niall's counter, a stripe of salt on his neck and a wedge of lime poking out from between his lips. Louis was positioning the top of the tequila bottle over Harry's cheek, trying to judge the ideal trajectory for maximum success. This task was proving difficult, however, as his target was quivering with each of Harry's giggles.

“Stop laughing!” Louis chided through a chortle of his own. He sloshed an unmeasured amount of tequila over Harry's face as he licked the line of salt.

Harry laughed even harder at the contact as Louis' mouth latched to the side of his face, trying to suck any alcohol that had managed to get caught in his dimple. It was an embarrassing failure of lip smacking and laughter, leaving them both short of breath and sticky with tequila.

“Lime! Lime!” Louis begged, plucking the lime from Harry's lips and shoving it into his own mouth. Harry's eyes were glossy with delighted tears as he sat up, choking on more giggles. Louis stepped forward to wipe some of the glistening alcohol from his cheek and Harry leaned in, letting his forehead rest against Louis'.

“Oi! Harry!” Niall called, poking his head into the kitchen. Louis saw that he had his phone pressed to his ear.

“Yeah?” Harry asked, pulling away from Louis.

“Where's your phone?”

“Dunno. Think I dropped it somewhere outside.”

“Magee's been trying to ring you.” Niall explained, handing his phone to Harry.

Something dark washed over Harry's eyes as he took the phone and slid off the counter.

“Hello?” He said, low and throaty, as he rushed out of the kitchen. Niall had somehow already disappeared, leaving Louis deserted. He made this realization just as his eyelids began to feel heavy, his lack of sleep suddenly washing over him. He somehow propelled himself forward, maneuvering through several party filled rooms. His first thought was to find someone who looked interesting enough to strike up a conversation with, but his sleep addled brain sent him towards the first open couch with a thump.

He stretched out on his back, blinking through the quickly onset bout of sleepiness, before pulling out his phone and flicking through twitter. The text blurred in and out and his vision waned until Zayn's name filled the screen. Louis smiled as he answered it.

“Zayner!” He cooed.

“So you'll answer for Zayn, but you won't answer for me?”
“Mmmmm. Liam.”

“What’s going on with you today? Why wasn’t Joshua at the premiere? What’s going on with Harry? I’m getting all of these calls about you and I can’t answer them because you won’t answer your bloody phone!”

“So wait, you’re with Zayn right now?” Louis grumbled.

“Yes. I’m with Zayn right now.”

“Have you been with him since last night?”

“You’re avoiding my questions.”

“Well, you asked like, seventy, so you can’t possibly expect little old me to answer them all.” Louis reasoned.

“Where are you?”

“A party.”

“Where?”

“Niall’s.”

“Is Harry there?”

“Yeah.”

“And Joshua?”

“No.”

“Where’s Joshua?”

“His mum’s.” Louis said through a yawn.

“Did, wait-” Liam stammered. “Did something actually happen between you and Harry last night?”

“Liam! What? No! No, no, no! Joshua’s mad that we were drinking. Plus all of the roof shenanigans.” Louis exclaimed, kicking his feet into the air above him. “No there’s nothing - there’s nothing going on - Harry’s straight! You were there last night! You know there’s nothing going on.” He let his feet fall back to the couch with a huff, waiting patiently for Liam to respond.

“Lou?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you having fun?”

“Yeah.”

“Forget Joshua. Keep having fun.”

“Okay, love you. Don’t suck Zayn’s dick too hard.” Louis hung up and let his eyes drift shut. He fully intended to get back into the action of the party, he just needed a brief moment to rest his eyes.
He woke up when Niall landed on his chest.

“You sleeping, Tommo?” He asked. Louis reached up to grab both sides of the blonde's face.

“I want to smush you.” Louis responded.

“You seen Harry?”

“Nope.”

“Let's go find'm.” Niall wrenched Louis from the couch and dragged him through the house. His lids were heavy and his limbs heavier as the sea of party guests waded by on the edges of his vision. His thoughts were groggy and lilted, but one idea seemed to be cropping up clearly in his mind: Sleep. Sleep. Find Sleep. Bed. Sleep.

They came to a stop and Louis’ eyes fluttered open to see Harry leaning against a wall, chatting with two girls Louis didn't recognize.


Louis stepped into Harry's space without preamble, drawing his conversation with the girls to a swift close. He wrapped his arms around Harry's middle and nuzzled into his chest.

“Can I sleep here, Harry?” Louis mumbled behind closed eyes.

“Of course you can.” Harry said brightly, wrapping his own arms around Louis and holding him tight. Louis smiled into Harry's chest.

Harry was perfect. Soft but sturdy. Warm but strong. Perfect.

Louis caught snippets of Harry's conversation with Niall, but his own thoughts had grown too warm and fuzzy to put anything to memory.

“What did Magee want?” Niall asked.

“Erm,” Harry began, something uncharacteristically serious in his tone. “He wants another picture with Arrienne. She's on her way over.”

“Over here?”

“I'm sorry. It's - it's because of me. Because of the premiere. But, erm, we probably shouldn't be, erm, talking about this...” Harry's thought faded off, causing Louis to open his eyes and look up at him.

“Harry.” he said.

“Huh?”

“You sound sad. Stop.”

“Alright.” Harry said warmly. Content with this response, Louis closed his eyes and snuggled in further, feeling the gentle vibration of Harry's voice as they slowly swayed. If Louis actually managed to doze off like that, standing upright wrapped in Harry's arms, it was definitely no one else's business but his own. He had no idea how much time had passed, but he only found his attention returning when Harry's soft grasp suddenly turned hard and stony.
“Isn't that him?” Came a posh voice. Louis’ eyes snapped open and he instantly recognized her, all porcelain skin and dazzling red hair. The last time he’d seen her was on the cover of Vogue from the magazine rack, and now, somehow, Arrienne Brant was standing only a few feet away, glaring him down.

Weren't Harry and Niall just talking about her? What were they saying? Louis' short term memory processed like thick mud as Arrienne scrutinized him with her piercing blue stare. Oh right, he was currently snuggled into her boyfriend. That was probably a no-no. Harry, however, still clung to Louis.

“Did you come alone, or-?” Harry asked.

“I brought some friends, but no. No management.” She said offhandedly, her eyes falling back to Louis. “You're honestly dragging him around everywhere with you? That's stupid even by your standards, Harry.”

“Let's just,” Harry stammered, letting go of Louis with a soft brush down his back. Louis leaned back into the wall, sagging into Niall for support. “I don't have my phone.”

“What did you do to your phone?” She asked exasperatedly.

“I don't have it.” He said, his answer clipped and stilted. He stepped toward her and placed a familiar hand on the small of her back as she held the phone out in front of them. She posed with a stoic purse to her lips and Harry smiled from behind her shoulder as she snapped the picture and began judging it. From what Louis had seen, Harry's dimples hadn't even been showing, so he couldn't imagine that it had been a good picture. Harry was looking anywhere but at the screen when a girl in a bright pink halter top timidly approached them.

“Um, hi, Arrienne! Sorry to bother you. Could you maybe sign my phone case? I'm a really big fan!” The girl said.

“Do you have a pen?” Arrienne asked.

The girl nodded, handing her phone to Arrienne with a permanent marker. Arrienne began scribbling across the back of it with a bored expression on her face.

“Thank you so much! I think you two are so cute!” The girl said, smiling at Harry.

“Oh yeah! So cute!” Arrienne said sarcastically as she handed the phone and pen back. “And honey, you're going to want to cover your cleavage a little more, unless you're actually trying to get someone to pay you for sex.”

"Hey, come on." Harry groaned, sounding disappointed but not surprised, turning to the girl who's face was quickly devolving into shock. "You look lovely."

"Such a hero you are." She said with a pop of her tongue. "And how lovely is she, exactly. Would you fuck her, Harry? Huh?"

Harry's face fell at her words and he was immediately darting from the room without a look behind him. Louis blinked with shock at the sudden departure. He traipted after him, spotting a head of curls racing out the front door.

Louis found himself outside, following a line of cars littered along the egregiously long driveway. Harry was several cars ahead with his back to him, both hands on his hips and head angled toward the ground.
“Harry?” Louis asked, surprised by the exhausted crackle of his own voice. Harry's head snapped up as he turned back toward Louis.

“Hi, Louis.” Harry said with a somber smile.

“What're you doing?”

“I was going to call a car, but my phone...” He trailed off again, making a useless gesture with his hands and scratching the back of his head. Louis stepped toward him, and although he'd only known him for maybe thirty hours, this man in front of him was so strikingly not Harry Styles. His face was drooping and melancholy, like some sort of puppy that lost its owner. What exactly was driving Louis at that moment was definitely a mystery to him, but he knew he couldn’t let that frown linger on Harry's face.

“Well, I'm tired, so I'm going to go watch *Love, Actually* at my house.” Louis said resolutely. “You're welcome to just live in Niall's driveway for the rest of forever, or you could come try to stay awake until the part when Liam Neeson cries.”

“The first time or the second time?”

“First. As I mentioned before, I'm very tired.” Louis said.

There was still a twinge of sadness to Harry's features, but at least his dimples were making a reappearance.

~

With a sniff, Louis knew there were pancakes in the vicinity. The last thing he remembered was Harry singing along to *Jump for my Love* during the scene with Hugh Grant before Louis had drifted off and spent his second night in a row on the couch. The armchair that Harry had been perched in last night was now vacated, Harry probably having returned to Niall's at some point.

Realization sunk into Louis as another flood of pancake aroma wafted over him. Either Joshua was back early, or Louis had managed to sleep well into the afternoon again. Either way, Louis had never been less excited to be greeted by the smell of brekkie.

He ambled into the kitchen, bracing himself for the impending argument, only to find Harry juggling a pitcher of orange juice and a tall stack of pancakes.

“Come on, we're eating outside.” Harry said upon seeing him, heading out to the veranda. Louis paused, mulling over this latest development. He followed Harry and leaned against the sliding glass door, watching as he applied the finishing touches to the table setting. There were bowls of fresh fruit and whipped cream, bottles of syrup, a tower of pancakes, and what appeared to be freshly squeezed orange juice. The display was almost as overwhelming as the fact that Harry Styles was here, in his house, making him breakfast.

“Did you squeeze orange juice?” Louis asked.

“I found a juicer on top of your fridge.” Harry explained, beginning to load his plate. “I don't know if you knew it was there. It was still in the box.”

Louis sighed. Buying an expensive juicer and then never taking it out of the box sounded exactly like something Joshua would do.

“Why exactly are you here?” Louis asked, feigning annoyance and failing pathetically at it.
“My publicist told me I can't go anywhere near you.” Harry said, eyes still smudged with last night's eye liner. “That makes you my favorite person in the world.”

Huh. Alright then.

A niggling concern in the back of Louis' head told him that he should be ushering Harry away, telling him that spending time with Louis was a horrible idea for his career. He should be doing everything in his power to avoid Louis. Harry already had enough scandal following him around without the added pressure of gay rumors.

Instead of voicing any of these thoughts, Louis sat down and started to slather some pancakes with syrup.

“So I have a question about some of the lyrics in Paradise Red.” Louis said, deciding it was his turn for some inside information. “You wrote it, didn't you?

“Most of it. Depends on the part.”

Louis went on to detail his theories about the song, noting the themes and some allusions to greek tragedy and Shakespeare. This lead him into describing every conspiracy he'd developed around every Status Solo song, which turned out to be a long conversation. Harry indulged his fangirling, confirming some of his suspicions while saying that others were, “intrinsically profound. I wish I'd thought of that.”

He meandered back over to Nialls' after breakfast, leaving Louis to watch daytime telly as he waited for Joshua's return. He jumped to his feet as he heard the swing of the security gate, rushing to clean up the mess from breakfast that he had been ignoring.

Louis was just rinsing off the last of the dishes when Joshua appear behind him, hooking his chin on Louis' shoulder. Louis froze as they both stood quietly, just breathing for several silent moments.

“At least you managed to feed yourself.” Joshua remarked. When Louis didn't say anything in response, Joshua threaded their fingers together and began to lead Louis back to their bedroom with a coy grin.

Apparently they weren't going to talk about the fight. Louis wasn't surprised at all.
“My youth, my youth is yours, trippin on skies sipping waterfalls. My youth, my youth is yours, runaway now and forevermore.”

-Troye Sivan

I found a flower that looks like you. xx -H

Louis smirked down at the accompanying picture of a bundle of bright blue Hydrangeas. It was just after ten in the morning, which Louis now knew as the time when Harry woke up and began to text him pictures of everything he encountered. He could see blooms of other flowers in the background, which made his smile deepen. Louis was only on his first cup of tea and Harry was already out in the world somewhere, prancing through a flower shop. Louis was absolutely sure about the prancing.

And how exactly does that flower look like me, a human?

He shot the text off as a scuttle of footsteps made his head snap towards the hallway.

“Baby?” Louis called over his shoulder. Joshua quickly appeared in the entry to the dining room, smiling to Louis when he noticed him sitting at the table, a tower of screenplays sitting in front of him. A backpack was slung over his shoulder and one ear bud was hanging from his ear.

“Yeah?”

“Are you leaving yet?”

“In like, twenty minutes.”

Louis looked down as his phone vibrated in his hand.

Blue :)

He snorted before gesturing to Joshua.

“I want to talk to you about something.” Louis said, looking to the foreboding stack of screenplays, topped with that same periwinkle title page that read Kids from Yesterday. It was now wrinkled and dog-eared from the three different times Louis had read it. Joshua slipped into the seat beside him, plucking the earbud from his ear.

“Did you pick something yet?” He asked pleasantly, taking Kids from Yesterday from the pile.

“Erm, maybe.” Louis said tentatively, watching as Joshua skimmed the pages, his eyes flitting back and forth unseeingly. “Eleanor called me this morning.” He continued, watching Joshua's posture perk up at the mention of his Metal Heart costar. Eleanor had the rare distinction of being one of Louis' friends that Joshua actually liked to be around. Liam particularly resented it every time Louis mentioned this. “She just got offered a role in that new Kurt Cobain biopic. She's going to be Courtney Love.”

“Really?” Joshua asked excitedly, obviously trying to picture the sweet, flawless Eleanor as the salacious Courtney Love.

“Which has made me realize that I really need to get off my fat arse and get back to work.” Louis
said. Joshua frowned at the mention of Louis' ample backside. He'd always found Louis' remarks about it to be self-degrading, which was completely preposterous to Louis. His arse was a work of motherfucking art. “I need to pick a new project soon, before it conflicts with the next Metal Heart.” He explained as his eyes fell to the screenplay in Joshua's hands.

“This one?” He asked, following Louis' line of sight. Louis took the screenplay back and opened it, the familiar character names looingk up at him from the black ink.

“Maybe.” He said carefully, almost afraid to convey just how thoroughly he'd fallen in love with the pages beneath his fingers. “It's erm, about this girl. She's male to female transgender. And it's the eighties. And she's half black, and she got thrown out of her house.” Louis swallowed, very aware of how segmented his sentences were. “But erm, really – really it's about this niche LBGT community in London during the height of the AIDS epidemic. But it's like, it's more than that? It's about race, and sexuality, and gender, and prejudice, and love, and family, and just being young and feeling different.” He took a pause from his rambling to look at Joshua, his heart dropping when he saw his stony expression.

“Who would you play?” He asked evenly.

“One of the supporting characters. His name's Alex and he finds out he has AIDS halfway through, so I'd have to start going on a diet like, right now.” Louis laughed meekly, watching as his attempt to lighten the mood fell flat.

“Supporting.” Joshua murmured. It hung in the air like a dirty word. “How big is the budget?”

“The budget?” Louis parroted, taken aback. “When has that ever mattered?”

“So it's low-budget.”

“Well yeah, it's an indie film, but, we've never worried about that before. Not even back when we didn't have money.” He reasoned. Joshua didn't look convinced. “Why are you suddenly fixated on money?”

“It's filming in London?” He asked, avoiding the question.

“Manchester.”

“So you'd be a twelve hour flight away.” Joshua pointed out. Louis began tapping his fingers against the table in frustration. Just then, his phone vibrated again with another text from Harry.

*How is Mr. Tomlinson occupying himself today? xx -H*

Louis left the phone on the table without responding to the text.

“We've done the long distance thing before, and we're going to have to do it about a thousand more times if I keep making movies. But it starts filming in December, so you could come stay with me for a few weeks during your semester break.”

“You want me to go live somewhere on the other side of the world?” Joshua questioned, no excitement in his voice.

“Just for a few weeks until you come back for the next semester.”

“I don't know if I want do another semester.” Joshua grumbled, looking down at the table. Louis' eyebrows shot up.
“And what did you just say with your mouth?”

“Let's talk about this later.” Joshua slung his bag over his shoulder and stood up hurriedly, his chair screeching against the hardwood floor.

“Better idea, let's talk about this now.” Louis retorted. Joshua raced toward the front door, Louis quick on his heels.

“I have class, Lou.”

“Why are you acting like this?” Louis asked, coming to a stop as Joshua wrenched open the front door. “You do know that I'm not your parents, and therefore have no right to punish you for being bad? In case the sex hasn't clued you in, I'm actually your boyfriend.”

“Later, okay?” He asked softly, his eyes beseeching.

“Okay.” Louis relented. Joshua smiled in relief before pecking Louis on the lips and heading out to his car. Louis spun around and padded back into the house, picking his phone up from the table to text Harry back.

*Just been abandoned by that kid who calls himself my boyfriend. Was thinking about stewing in inner turmoil into the late afternoon*

He sent the text before his eyes fell onto that periwinkle title page. He dropped it back onto the pile, vaguely aware that it had been a “no” from Joshua. But you know, that's just perfectly fine. Sure it meant that Louis was going to have to read another twenty screenplays, but still, it was completely fine.

Harry's response came almost immediately.

*Brunch?*

~

Louis realized that he'd been naïve to assume he'd be spending the afternoon eating artisan scrambled eggs and sipping pomegranate mimosas. To Harry, brunch obviously meant wandering through a sun-soaked farmers market, nibbling on whatever treats caught their eye.

In a rather pathetic attempt to obscure his identity, Harry had adorned himself with a recklessly floppy hat that he'd bought at an earlier booth. It was most definitely a woman's hat, but Harry couldn't be bothered with such annoying details as gender boundaries. His actual reaction to it had been, “It's so breezy, so whimsical. It's as if someone actually wove a mid-spring afternoon into a hat.” Louis had to agree with the sentiment, even though it was currently mid-October. LA, however, made no distinction between the two seasons, so Harry could enjoy his floppy hat in warm-weathered comfort.

Louis was holding an open jar of Merlot jelly (Harry's reaction: “Merlot jelly? How innovative! How exquisite!”) while Harry tore off pieces from a whole grain baguette (Harry's reaction: “Can you think of anything more romantic than a baguette? Maybe actual, living fairies or Ryan Gosling, but then it's definitely baguettes.”). Harry dipped the pieces of bread into the jelly and took turns dropping the sticky morsels into both of their mouths. Louis licked the sweet goo from his lips before continuing with the conversation, which had now settled on the topic of teenage embarrassments.

“I had this pair of red trousers.” Louis reminisced fondly. “And the braces to match. Bright, ghastly
red, mind you.” Harry snickered through his bite of baguette. “Oh, and I assume you've just been wearing Yves Saint Laurent since primary?”

“My favorite hoody for three years was actually my sister’s. I stole it.”

“That's not nearly as embarrassing as red braces.”

“Well, it was pink and fluffy.” He added with a grin. Louis melted into a hysterical fit of laughter, imaging the man beside him in a tiny, pink sweatshirt.

His ruminations were cut short, however, as they were approached by two starstruck teenagers looking to take a picture with Harry. They had apparently recognized him, floppy hat be damned. Louis quickly offered to take the picture, knowing that if he didn't, Harry would demand that Louis join them. He did this every time they had left the house together over the last couple of weeks, and when the pictures surfaced on the internet it always ended with an angry call from Harry's people to Louis' people.

Louis had already done three different phone interviews to LA radio stations in which he gushed about Joshua, but this had done little to placate the rumors swirling around Harry's sexuality. Why Harry was letting this happen to his public image was a mystery to Louis, but honestly, so was everything else going on under that floppy hat and mess of curls.

After the picture had been snapped and the teenagers were content, Harry and Louis continued their ambling through the maze of booths and stands. They had just been offered a free sample of organic mango juice when Harry spotted it. At the end of the row was a short, rectangular fence made out of plywood with a single word spray painted across its surface: KITTENS.

In the span of one human heart beat, Harry was already upon them, pulling several kittens into his arms with a string of squeals. Louis approached him slowly, attempting to mask his beguilement with a sardonic expression. This was perhaps futile as he watched Harry press his nose to one of the kitten's whiskers. What was probably a thousand dollar jacket was now actually swimming with baby cats as they squrmed and wriggled in his arms. They pawed and mewed at the doe-eyed rockstar.

“Her name is Veronica, and her name is Mary Paw-kins.” Harry said, drawing the last word out with a shit-eating grin.

“I don't think you're actually allowed to name them unless you plan to take them home.” Louis explained. The look on Harry's face at these words sent Louis into responsibility mode. “Do you have any pets, Harry?” Harry shook his head. “They're kind of a lot of work, so maybe you shouldn't adopt one on a whim?”

Harry chewed his lip as the child-like glint disappeared from his eye. Louis kind of hated himself for making that happen as Harry let the kittens leap from his arms back down to the ground.

“You're probably right.” He admitted sadly, leaning against the low fence. He was resembling a grown adult again as he passively watched the kittens tussle with each other, until a starkly white one pattered towards him. It only took the kitten one upward glance at Harry before Louis knew that any attempt to argue was useless.

That's how Louis had found himself behind the wheel of Harry's vintage, 1960's Mercedes-Benz while Harry coddled his new pet in the passenger seat.

“Her name is Countess Glitter Von Harpsichord Amarinthine Styles.” Harry decided, stroking a
finger down her back.

“And what's wrong with the name Louis Tomlinson?” Louis shot back.


They pulled up to Harry's house and Harry reached forward to push a button on his keys, causing the security gate to swing open. This was the first time Louis had ever been to Harry's house and he wasn't sure what exactly he'd been expecting, but what sprawled out before him left him almost breathless. It was quite nearly a small palace. There were stories stacked on top of stories embellished with blossoming vines and red brick. Giant windows glimmered back at them, reflecting the immense front yard and ornate water fountain.

Louis noticed that the luxuriant french doors were about twice his height as they stepped through them into the vast, open concept house. The floor was a reflective hardwood that clicked as they walked, echoing against the tall ceilings and glass walls. The furniture and décor were indescribably lavish, everything simultaneously modern and classic. Art prints covered the walls, most of them of musicians ranging from Jim Morrison and Elton John to Britney Spears and Beyonce. There was even a massive painting of Niall done in an Andy Warhol style over the fireplace.

There were two different pianos on opposite sides of the room, both topped with sheet music and half empty glasses. While Louis wouldn't describe the space as completely trashed, it was obvious that it hadn't been cleaned since a party. Every surface was littered with food plates, beer bottles, cigarette butts, and what appeared to be a forgotten banjo.

“Sorry, the cleaning staff is usually done by now.” Harry apologized, clearly embarrassed by the mess. “I had some friends over last night. But come see the rest of my house! I'm an excellent tour guide, aren't I Glitter?”

Harry whisked the kitten away and up a flight of winding stairs, leaving Louis to chase after him. He caught a glimpse of the coffee table before ascending the steps, recognizing what were the remains of several lines of white powder.

Rock and roll lifestyle. Right.

He followed Harry on an enthusiastic tour that seemed as equal parts to his benefit as the kitten's, before eventually arriving in Harry's bedroom. His bed was tall and expansive, bright white sheets and a deep plum duvet tangled together like a swirl of ice cream. A broad window offered a view into the backyard, which Louis saw consisted of a circular swimming pool lined with shimmering white tiles, a blooming garden that could have been torn straight from a Jane Austen novel, and a burgeoning apple tree that looked older than the two of them combined.

A sunken living room was attached to the bedroom, divided only by a glass partition. Louis stepped into it, noting the presence of yet another piano (he'd seen about five at this point), and he dropped onto one of the plush couches. Within seconds, he was convinced that Harry had somehow obtained the most comfortable couch ever made by man's hands.

“It's completely sound-proof, even with the window.” Harry explained as he knocked on the window, illiciting a dull, plastic thud in response.

“Is your bedroom behavior really so boisterous that you need to sound-proof?” Louis inquired with an eyebrow waggle. Harry snorted.
“No, it's more to keep the sound out.” He said. “If it gets to be too much out there, too many people or something, then I can just come in here.” Harry gestured to the couches. Louis watched him for a moment, trying not to linger on the image of Harry plunking on the piano, alone, as a party raged on outside his bedroom door. Harry set Glitter down on the floor gingerly before the silence dragged on too long.

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sit for hours, talking about the fifth season of Friends and what it would be like to breathe underwater.

A “day at Niall's house” actually meant buying a canoe and paddling it back and forth across his pool while Harry recited “Oh Captain, My Captain,” only to be interrupted when Louis was finally successful in capsizing them.

An “afternoon at the beach” actually meant a trip out to a wilderness sanctuary where they let you swim with the dolphins. Harry became completely enamored with the animals, giving each of them a new name and giggling as he tried to communicate with them telepathically.

“Do you think my pool's big enough...?” He'd wondered as Louis had driven them home.

“No. No, Harry. Dolphins don't belong in pools. They should be free.” Louis explained. Harry agreed, but that didn't stop him from buying twenty inflatable dolphin pool toys before they got back to his house.

But, surprisingly enough, when Harry suggested they, “sit under his apple tree in the backyard,” he meant exactly that. Louis would lean against the bark as he flipped through yet another screenplay, Glitter slinking around by his toes. Harry would relax nearby on the grass with a harmonica to his lips as it warbled a mixture of original melodies and old, folksy tunes that Louis didn't completely recognize. He was pretty convinced, however, that he'd heard him play the chorus of “Wrecking Ball” on more than one occasion.

Harry would always invite Louis to whatever social engagement he had lined up for the night, but he knew full-well that Louis would have to decline on account of his crabby boyfriend. He would trudge home for yet another night of watching telly with Joshua, getting a constant stream of texts from Niall from posh night clubs and parties at celebrity mansions.

Joshua and Harry didn't actually meet until the morning of Halloween. Louis awoke to the buzz of the security gate, causing him to groan and stretch his sleepy bones. His attention perked when he recognized the mess of voices wafting in from the front door.

“Morning Josh! Happy Halloween!” said Niall jovially.

“Niall.” Joshua responded, not completely unkindly, but certainly unamused with the nickname.

“Hello! I'm Harry! I made you a gift basket.” came Harry's excited voice. Louis laughed at the image of Harry handing Joshua a basket of festive, homemade treats.

“Where's Tommo?” asked Niall.

“He's still in bed.”

“LOOOUEHH!” Harry called, barreling down the hallway into the bedroom and launching himself into the bed beside Louis. “I made you a gift basket but your boyfriend is hogging it. He seems lovely by the way.”

Louis smiled as he pulled the covers back, allowing Harry to slip in beside him and snuggle into his side, resting his head on Louis' shoulder. To most, this would seem like altogether inappropriate behavior in the bed he shared with his long-term boyfriend, but it was completely normal for Louis. He had been tactile since birth and had certainly been caught in more compromising positions with Zayn and Liam than the innocent cuddling he was currently engaging in. It was all platonic, of course, and Joshua fully understood that. One of the reasons why their relationship had lasted this long was that Joshua wasn't usually prone to jealous impulses, despite
certain past circumstances that gave him every right to be.

Despite this, Harry sat bolt upright when Joshua walked into the room with Niall.

“And why aren't you coming to Harry's party tonight?” Niall asked Louis, sitting on the corner of the bed. “Do you hate Harry?” Louis glared at Niall, who knew exactly why he wasn't coming.

“We are handing out candy to neighborhood kids.” Joshua said.

“And what about after that, Joshy?” Niall quipped. Something visibly darkened in Joshua's stare.

“My name is Joshua. Josh-u-a.” He snapped, spinning on his heel and walking away. Louis instantly jumped out of the bed, rounding on Joshua once he caught up with him in the hallway.

“What was that?” He asked, keeping his voice low enough that Harry and Niall couldn't hear.

“You know I hate that.”

“That doesn't give you an excuse to be fucking rude.” Louis said. Joshua rolled his eyes and walked away without another word.

Louis apologized to Niall as they left, but Niall assured him everything was okay with a hearty wink. The afternoon mulled by with icy tension between Louis and Joshua until the first wave of trick-or-treaters appeared at their door. They'd left the security gate wide open for the night, allowing the droves of kids to come and go as they pleased. With each little girl dressed up as Elsa, Joshua became increasingly less rigid. Eventually, he became downright giddy.

The kids thinned out a bit after nine, giving Joshua the chance to sink into Louis' side on the couch with a content sigh.

“You're in a good mood.” Louis remarked fondly, drawing circles into Joshua's shoulder with his thumb.

“Can you imagine what it would be like to have our own little trick-or-treater? Helping her get all dressed up like a little pumpkin, or something.” Joshua mused, an enchanted tone to his voice. Louis tensed.

Louis loved kids. He loved kids. He really hadn't had much of a choice after having six younger siblings. Louis had been known to waste entire hours dreamily talking about what it would be like to have kids one day.

As long as the emphasis was on the phrase one day.

Suddenly, this image of a “little trick-or-treater” was melding with “I don't know if I want to do another semester” in a way that terrified Louis.

As soon as Joshua finally snuck off to bed, Louis was in a cab, relaying Harry's address to the driver.

~

Wonder of wonder, miracle of miracles, Liam decided to show his face at Harry's party. Louis had spent the first twenty minutes after arriving weaving through a drunk, costumed crowd without recognizing a soul until he spotted Harry. His hair was even wilder than usually, curled and teased into a giant, feathery mane atop a face covered in makeup. Louis was about to approach him when
he watched Harry bend down to a snort a line of cocaine off of a piano.

Needless to say, Louis had practically pounced at Liam when he found him leaning against a wall. He was dressed as a footballer in some reference to his minor in Sport's Medicine that everyone was sick of hearing him talk about.

“You massive, beardy, inconsiderate twat!” Louis yelped, smacking Liam relentlessly as he recoiled.

“Louis, stop!”

“I could have been dead, rotting in the boot of someone's car and you haven't even tried to call me to find out!”

“Who's boot are you rotting in?”

“Well you wouldn't know, because you're too busy falling in love with Zayn to give a flying fuck about poor, old Louis.” He'd begun flicking Liam's face, but stopped when he saw Liam visibly melt into fluffy, lovesick goo at the mention of Zayn's name. Louis' hands slid down to the sides of Liam's face. “Oh Liam, you've been swept away by love's tender embrace!” Liam pulled away with a grimace, but a smile was still threatening to split his face.

They tracked down a bottle of whiskey and Louis made them toast to the “never ending sex parade known as a new relationship.” Liam rolled his eyes but clinked their glasses together all the same. They threw back several successive shots that were going to completely wreck Louis in the morning before he inquired about Zayn's absence.

“Where's the Bogie to your Bacall?”

“He's running late. And I'm the Bogie.” Liam said, causing Louis to preen at his first quantifiable reference to dating Zayn. Liam noticed his smugness and started to look anywhere besides directly at Louis until his eyes landed on something behind him. “Harry's having an interesting night.”

Louis spun around to see Harry stumbling up his staircase. He tripped dramatically and slumped against the wall before righting himself and bounding up the stairs, three steps at a time.

Louis followed him, of course. Why wouldn't he? They were friends. Harry was his friend. He had every right to follow him around the dark corridors of his house. He found himself at the door to Harry's room, which was wide open, spilling light into the dark hallway.

“Harry?” Louis called to the seemingly empty room.

“Don't let Glitter out!” came Harry's voice from the open door of the attached bathroom. Louis stepped in and closed the door behind him, the sounds from the party muting with a click. He took note of Glitter lounging languidly on Harry's bed before walking over to the bathroom. Harry was sitting crossed legged on the counter, smearing hot pink lipstick on his lips. There were kiss marks littering the surface of his mirror, each one a different color.

“What are you doing, Haz?” Louis asked with a laugh of disbelief. About twenty different tubes of lipstick were scattered across the otherwise immaculate countertop.

“My last shade wasn't thrilling enough.” He said with a flourish that made his eyes widen. Louis could clearly see that Harry's pupils were very, very dilated. There had probably been more than a few lines of cocaine that night.
“So you're just sitting in here, kissing the mirror?”

“Mhmm.” He nodded proudly.

“Well, I guess I have no choice but to help you.” Louis decided as he joined him on the counter top and opened a tube. Harry watched him excitedly as he carefully traced it across his lips. “Is your girlfriend in town?” He asked.

“She's in Milan.” He answered, still fixated gleefully on Louis' lips. He smacked them in the mirror, rather impressed with his own skill. He waited a moment to see if Harry was going to mention anything else about Arrienne, but he wasn't particularly surprised when the topic dropped. Harry never talked about his mysterious, supermodel girlfriend, only referencing her when someone else brought her up.

“Why do you own so much lipstick?” Louis asked.

“It's Halloween.” Harry answered as if it should be completely obvious. “Why aren't you wearing a costume?”

“Didn't have time, love. And what exactly are you supposed to be?” Louis finally took stock of Harry's costume: red leather pants and a tight vest that did nothing to hide his v-line.

“I'm 1980's big hair rock and roll.” He answered bluntly.

“You're just an entire genre of music?” Louis asked skeptically. Harry chose not to answer, instead surging forward and planting a lengthy kiss to Louis' forehead. He eventually released him, leaving a bright pink kiss stain behind. Harry giggled at his accomplishment, flashing that charming smile that Louis had to begrudgingly admit he was becoming very fond of. It was the Harry Smile. All the same, Harry Smile aside, Louis was not one to let this kind of injustice stand, so he returned the favor by leaving a purple pucker on Harry's cheekbone. Within minutes, both of their faces were covered in a rainbow of lip prints.

“Let's go back to the party.” Harry said as he stood up, offering a hand to Louis.

“Harry, we've got to wash all of this stuff off.”

“But we worked so hard!”

“How is it going to look for you if someone gets a picture of us like this?” Louis asked. Harry took a step toward him, hand still extended.

“Louis, I honestly don't care if people think we're in love with each other. I don't see how that's supposed to be an insult.” Even though his eyes were glossed with a drug-induced haze, his complete sincerity was shining through. Louis nodded and took his hand, letting Harry lead him back down to the party.

Harry was whisked away almost immediately, but Louis didn't find himself too bothered when he noticed that Zayn had joined Liam. He threw himself into the brooding model's arms, Zayn poking at the collection of kisses on his face, and Louis demanded every detail of their budding romance. While Liam was known to huff and give clipped, non-committal answers regarding his love-life, Zayn was prone to completely gush. Liam disappeared in embarrassment as Zayn described everything about their first proper date, particularly focusing on Liam's “cute little bow-tie that was the same color as his eyes.” They spent an hour like that, chirping back and forth like gossiping teenagers. Liam would reappear occasionally to check the flow of conversation. Once he realized they were still talking about him, he would promptly flee again.
“So are you two officially a couple? Boyfriends? Soulmates destined to search the world for each other every time you're reborn?” Louis inquired. Zayn grinned subtly.

“We haven't put a label on it.” He said slowly, looking down at his drink. “But we've decided not to date other people. Be exclusive.” Louis was about to swoon at the influx of feels when the violent screech of an electric guitar ripped through the house. A large group of the partygoers, Zayn and Louis included, followed the noise to the backyard.

What they found was Harry on the roof, floundering with a neon green guitar. It was connected through a tangle of wires to an immense amp peeking out of a nearby window. It was obvious that Harry didn't know how to play the instrument, so he opted to swing it over his shoulder and smash it against the roof with a crazed burst of energy. The crowd below cheered madly, but everything about the situation made Louis prickle with worry.

Harry was completely ignorant of the cheering crowd as his eyes landed on the pool below him. He stared at it with focus, as if calculating distance. As a direct confirmation to Louis' fears, Harry bolted off the edge of the roof and leaped into the air. The crowd gasped and shrieked as Harry tumbled for two stories and crashed into the water, only a few feet shy of the lip of the pool.

Louis didn't realize that he wasn't breathing until Harry resurfaced from the water, flailing his arms and cheering. His celebration was short lived as Niall was already kneeling over him from the side of pool, dragging him by his wrist out of the water.

“I think it's time for bed, Haz.” Niall said. Harry hefted himself onto dry ground clumsily and threw an arm around Niall's shoulders, dropping his weight onto him. Niall caught Louis' eye. “Some help, Tommo?”

Louis zipped to Harry's other side, splitting the burden of his weight as they maneuvered him back into the house. Once they were safely in the warm silence of Harry's bedroom, Niall helped him change out of his wet clothes and Louis gave his hair a quick tousle with a blow drier.

They helped him slip under his sheets, all the while Harry was muttering wistful endearments to the two of them, eyes rolling about as if his thoughts were swimming through his head.

“Sleep tight, mate.” Niall said as they both began to walk away, but they were stopped as Harry grabbed Louis' hand.

“You're both so beautiful.” Harry mumbled. “I love you both so much. You're my best friends. Both of you. I love you like supernovas. Like twelve supernovas.”

“We love you too, Harry.” Niall assured him with a chuckle. Harry's eyes darted up to meet Louis' gaze.

“Louis.” He said, tightening his grip on his hand.

“Harry.” Louis responded.

“Best friends?”

“Yes.”

“Best friends?”

“Best friends.”
“BEST friends.”

“Hazza,” Louis said, now also laughing. He cupped Harry's hand between both of his, running his thumb over Harry's knuckles. “We'll see you tomorrow. Sweet dreams.” Harry nodded groggily, but didn't break his gaze with Louis.

“You're so beautiful, Louis.” He finally said, letting his hand fall to his side and closing his eyes. Even in his sleep, he was wearing the Harry Smile.

~

It took an hour before Louis managed to get a cab to pick him up, and scrubbing the lipstick off of his face proved to be a lengthy task. He was properly knackered as he slumped into the living room, falling face first on the couch. He'd resigned himself to his couch fate the second he'd left the house. He fell asleep immediately, ebbing in and out of deep, swirling dreams. He probably would have slept through the night without interruption, but a jolt of terror several hours before dawn lurch ed him awake with pained, haggard breaths.

His muscles seized with the familiar, inexplicable fear and a flush of tears pricked at the corners of his eyes as they flashed open. There was no one there beside him, only a cold, suffocating expanse of darkness breathing down on him as the crushing anxiety seeped down his spine. He stammered against his leaden vocal chords, struggling to choke out the one word that might rescue him from this vice.

“Joshua!” He finally cried out weakly, his voice cracking with the cadence of a horrified child. The sound itself pained Louis, reminding him that he was no stronger than that little boy in Doncaster with night terrors who wept and choked until his mum saved him. But his mum wasn't coming for him, and based on the deafening silence that surrounded him, neither was Joshua. He couldn't even yell loud enough to ask for help, and that's when he descended into a fit of sobs, biting painfully at the inside of his cheeks as his entire body shook. The night stretched on like that, and eventually Louis' sobs faded back into even breaths.

~

He awoke as the couch dipped, his face slightly raw from the night's tears. Joshua was sitting beside him, holding out his phone.

“This is who you've been spending time with?” Joshua asked as Louis took the phone, willing his eyes to focus on the image on the screen.

It was an Instagram selfie of Arrienne Brent wearing an emotionless stare. An angry, purple bruise was glaring from her cheek, joined by a smattering of pink abrasions up and down her neck. Her caption consisted of only one letter.

-H

Louis' insides turned to ice.

The first call from his publicist came about an hour later. He didn't answer it.

Harry's phone was off, but that didn't stop Louis from calling it every half hour. Niall was being equally unresponsive, each of Louis' calls being deferred to his voicemail. Joshua's only class for the day had been canceled, so he was free to sit quietly beside Louis as he ranted about how this must be some sort of misunderstanding. Arrienne was in Milan, thousands of miles away from her boyfriend. Harry wasn't even capable of something like this. He was Harry. He was giggles and
kittens and dimples, not nasty, violent bruises.

_He was Harry._

Louis left the entertainment channel on all day, blinking to attention every time they circulated the story again.

“...mysteriously captioning the image -H, leaving many to speculate that the injuries are the result of her current boyfriend, Status Solo frontman Harry Styles. Fans are already drawing connections between Styles and singer Chris Brown...”

Louis refreshed his news page obsessively, reading every article on the topic as they appeared. Some were questioning the validity of the image, saying that the bruises looked too perfect to be real. Others were already staging boycotts of Status Solo and branding Harry as a woman abuser. Every time that word was mentioned in proximity to Harry’s name Louis cringed, feeling the air being squeezed from his lungs.

The sun was already setting before Louis finally decided to answer his phone, this time when Liam rang him. He stood in his dining room, running a hand over the back of one of the dining chairs.

“Hey Lou.” Liam said with an exhausted sigh.

“Have my publicists been harassing you all day?” Louis asked darkly.

“They, erm, want a statement.”

“But Harry-” Louis paused as his breath caught on Harry’s name. “But Harry's people haven't even said anything yet. Shouldn't we wait until we get their side of the story?”

“Yeah, Lou, definitely. There's no rush or anything. It's just,” Liam's tone shifted. “They just want you to start to think about what you might say. Your friendship with Harry is really public, and this might be bad for the movie. They just want you to think about what your position is going to be if you need to distance yourself from Harry.”

Louis leaned against the chair and chewed at his cheek, still tender from his episode that night.

“Yeah, alright. I'll think about it.” He said heavily before hanging up. He dropped his phone onto the table and began spinning it dejectedly, listening as Joshua walked up behind him. He slipped his arms around him from behind and pressed a kiss to Louis' neck.

“I'm sorry about your friend.” Joshua said.

“Me, too.” Louis responded.

The screen of his phone lit up, flashing the name _Harry Styles_. Joshua stepped back as Louis snatched the phone and answered it.

“Harry?” He asked. Harry didn't say anything, his only response being a pained series of breaths. “Are you okay? I've been trying to talk to you all day.”

“I'm at your, erm, I'm at your gate. Could I come in?” He asked, his voice thick as if on the precipice of tears. Louis was already heading to the security controls by the front door. He hung up as Harry came to the door and ushered him inside. His eyes were puffy and tinged a devastated red, and the smell of alcohol was rolling off of him. His arms were crossed tightly across his front as if he were afraid that he was about to fall apart. Louis placed his hands on Harry's shoulders, trying to
physically hold him together.

“I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. I shouldn't be bothering you.” Harry stammered. Joshua was in the room now, silently watching the exchange.

“Did you drive here?” Louis asked. Harry shook his head.

“I was at Niall's. I should have answered my phone. I'm sorry.” He continued. Louis looked to Joshua.

“Could you give us a second?” Louis asked. Joshua gave him a loaded look before disappearing from the room. He tightened his grip on Harry's shoulders as he turned back to face him. “Harry, please, just tell me what's going on. You didn't – you didn't hurt her, did you?” Louis asked cautiously, not breathing as he waited for Harry's response. Harry's eyes welled up, a fresh flood of tears threatening to fall down his face as he violently shook his head.

“No! Of course not. I couldn't – I couldn't ever -” His voice hitched. “Everyone thinks I hurt her. They're saying these things about me and I wouldn't -” The first few tears escaped from his eyes, rolling down his cheeks and drawing a line across the spot where his dimples show when he wore a Harry Smile. “No one is going to believe me.” He said, his panic rising.

“I believe you. Look at me. I believe you, Harry.” He said firmly, trying to get Harry to look at him, but his eyes fell to the ground. “Is that picture fake?”

“It was makeup.” He said with an aimless gesture towards his face. “For her Halloween costume. She says that that's what the H meant.” Louis' eyes narrowed as an influx of anger swelled inside of him, replacing the fear and doubt that had been festering in his stomach all night.

“You're serious? It meant Halloween? Why couldn't she just say Halloween? Can she not spell? Does she not have enough fingers to type out full words?”

“She did it on purpose.” Harry sputtered, wiping at his eyes as they overflowed.

“On purpose?”

“She does this stuff all the time.” Harry's face was now glistening with tears. It made Louis remember that night he had tried to drink tequila out of Harry's dimple. He had looked back at him, face shiny with tequila, eyes glimmering and smile spreading. This was not the Harry he was looking at now. The anger he'd felt a moment earlier paled in the comparison the rage now thrumming in his bones.

“ She did it on purpose? ” Louis clarified venomously. Harry sniffled, the stream of tears strengthening. “Harry, you can't – that's emotional abuse. She can't do that to you. You can't be with some like that!”

“I'm not with her.” He murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“She's not my girlfriend.”

“You broke up with her?”

“She's never been my girlfriend, Lou!” Harry said with desperate exhaustion.
“What are you saying?”

“How have you really not figured it out?” Harry asked, eyes finally meeting Louis'. When Louis continued to stare back in confusion, the stream of tears turned into full-blown, body shaking sobs. “You're going to hate me.” He cried, his voice raw. Louis couldn't wrap his arms around Harry quickly enough. He held his body close, feeling him tremble with every sob. Harry's arms were still crossed tightly against his front, but he let his head fall to Louis' shoulder, dampening the fabric there.

“How could I possibly hate you?” Louis asked.

“I've been lying to you.”

“Just tell me what's going on.” Louis said warmly. Harry inhaled deeply, choking on the intake of air. His entire body was still for a moment.

“I'm gay.” He whispered, shuddering with a pained whimper.

Louis clung to him, eyes wide and unblinking, as everything began to make sense.
“Sensitive heart, you're doomed from the start. Meant to play the penitent part. Inquisitive mind, you're destined to find, tempted fate and knowledge divine.”

-Tennis

The first bout of histrionics had passed, and Louis found himself sitting atop his roof, watching Harry's shoulders rise and fall with every heavy breath. His back was to Louis, several feet away from him, his limbs tucked tightly into himself as his tumult of emotions began to settle. The night sky blanketed them from above, which was the only clue that Louis had towards the hour. It felt like time had stretched on an on after Harry had arrived, every minute that Louis couldn't bring Harry any sense of peace feeling like a painful eon. His cheeks were practically raw where Louis had been pointlessly rubbing tears away before he'd formulated the desperate idea of bringing Harry up to the roof. If there was one thing he'd learned so far, it was that Harry loved himself a good roof.

The fresh air had an immediate effect on him, slowing his breathing and allowing him to sit and collect himself. He'd pulled away from Louis' touch at this point, which Louis had been disappointed by, but he continued to watch Harry's cooldown from several feet away. All the while, his words kept swilling through his thoughts.

I'm gay.

It was both so shocking and yet so obvious. This news was like some key, some final piece to the riddle that was Harry Styles, that ultimately explained everything that just hadn't made sense. But it wasn't the revelation itself that was sending Louis into a mental tailspin, it was the raw, undiluted pain that had shook through those two words; a biting anguish that was so contrary to everything Harry was.

I'm gay.

Louis was interrupted from his reflections as Harry looked back at him, a touch of broken innocence on his tear-stained face. He looked at Louis expectantly, not sure of what to say.

“Alright there, love?” Louis asked warmly, leaning forward. Harry swallowed hard.

“I'm sorry.” He said thickly.

“If you say 'sorry' one more time, I will have to respectfully smack you across the face.” Louis said matter-of-factly.

“I lied to you.” He explained.

“Sometimes it's necessary to lie. It doesn't make you a bad person.” Louis assured him. “I was in the closet for years, Hazza.” Harry gave him a watery smile and a nod before shuffling back and taking his usual spot on Louis' side. He snuggled into Louis' shoulder, while Louis immediately reciprocated the contact by hooking his arm around Harry's shoulders and angling his elbow up so he could run his fingers through his curly locks. Harry made a low hum at the feeling and closed his eyes. Louis' fingers slowed as his thoughts turned a corner. “Harry?”

“Hmm?”
“What's your astrological sign?”

“Erm – Aquarius.” Harry answered, confusion clear in his voice.

“Huh. Is that significant to you?”

“No really.”

“Mm. Okay, interesting. You have a sister, right?”

“Yeah?”

“What's her name again?”

“Gemma.”

“Gemma.” Louis repeated, feeling the syllables out with his mouth. “Pretty name.”

“Why?” Harry finally asked, looking up to Louis.

“I just get the feeling that you're not really allowed to talk about yourself to anyone.” Louis said. Harry's weight became heavier on Louis' side and his eyes snapped back down. He shook his head slowly.

“No. Not really.” He admitted. There was a gravity in the air, making it thick in Louis' lungs as he waited in vain for Harry to continue.

“Harry, if I asked you to tell me the whole story, would you?” Louis asked, but Harry still took his time to respond.

“I – erm, – I'm not very good at telling stories. I kind of ramble, and I talk slow.”

“I happen to like my stories slow and rambling, and I don't appreciate you belittling my taste.” Louis joked lightly. “But honestly, Harry, if it would make you feel better, I'd like to hear your story.”

Harry pulled away, making Louis momentarily frightened that he'd gone too far, but it was quickly clear that Harry was just readjusting their positions. He gently nudged Louis back until he realized that Harry wanted him to lie down. Once he was flat against the rooftiles, Harry rested his head into the space where Louis' shoulder met his chest and slung his arm over him. Louis returned his grip around his shoulders and pulled him close as Harry let out a loud sigh and opened his mouth to speak.

“I never – I never had to come out, you know? I've always been so close with my mum and my sister so they just, they just always knew. It was never a thing.” He began. “Even when I was like, twelve; Niall got his hands on this Playboy somehow. We were at this bus stop and he was showing it to me, trying to be all secretive so this old lady next to us wouldn't see it.

'And I didn't know what to do, so I just said something about her breasts, or whatever. Just, the first teenage boy thing I could think to say. Honestly, I was a lot more interested in how the color temperature of the lighting reflected the mood of the photographs.”

“Oh course you were.” Louis murmured.

“But anyways, I said she had a nice rack, or something. Then Niall just closed it and looked at me with this ridiculous look on his face, and he was like, 'Aren't you gay?'''
Louis barked a laugh, half because of how earnest Niall was and half at Harry's impeccable impression.

“So yeah. Niall always knew, and it was never a thing.” Harry continued. “We didn't really do a lot of stuff with other people in school. No parties or drinking, or whatever. We started the band when I was fifteen, and that was it. That was everything. My mum would get so mad because she thought I was skipping class to go shoot up or something, but really, we were just spending all day in the garage writing music.

'And no one else in the band really cared about my sexuality. It never really came up, because I wasn't that into dating. There were guys here and there, every once in a while, but like, I just wanted to make music. That's all I wanted to do.

'We were rubbish, though, obviously. We were, like, embarrassingly out of tune and would play for these tiny, tiny gigs. And we couldn't keep a drummer to save our lives. It's humiliating to think about now.” Harry laughed fondly at the memory. “But we kept working and working, and then, suddenly, people were singing our lyrics back to us. Then they were buying our little CD's and merchandise we'd bring to the gigs.

'I was just getting ready to tell my mum that I wanted to take a year off with the band before Uni when we got signed.”

“You were eighteen, right?”

“Mhmm. And it wasn't a big label, or anything, but it – it just...” Harry tapered off for a moment. “Not everything about working in the music industry is what you think it's going to be, but that first album was so perfect. It was probably the best time of my life. We were still just these clueless kids, but now we were in a recording studio with actual equipment and it just – it was everything we'd been working for.

'And we had so much freedom on that album so we just poured our hearts into it. We were so proud of every song on there. I kind of hate it now, though.”

“I still own that album.” Louis pointed out.

“That's embarrassing, Lou.” Harry chuckled, receiving a squeeze around his shoulders. “And then we went on tour in this shitty little white van. Niall and I can't sleep sitting up, so we'd take turns sleeping on each other's laps. He drools in his sleep, though, so it wasn't really a fair deal. And then we'd go play these gigs and there would be more fans every time. We were so poor we could barely afford toothpaste, but still, there were girls wearing our t-shirts and asking for our autographs. We felt like total rockstars.

'And then the single took off.” Harry said, his voice sounding thick again, hinting that his eyes were welling back up. “And it was almost this overnight thing. Major labels were coming at us from left and right, trying to get us for the second album. Then we got signed and got these big, fat signing bonuses and we were doing performances on Late Night shows. I got to sit in first class for the first time and I remember asking for like, three hot towels because I didn't know what to do with them.

'But my sexuality had never been any part of it. It never came up, because why should it? I was busy working and everything. But, like, I remember the exact moment I realized that I had – erm – I guess, that I had a problem. This girl was trying to give me her number after a show, and normally I would just tell her I was gay like it was nothing, but I didn't. I don't know why, but I didn't. I felt ashamed of it for the first time.
'And then it was just months of meetings. I would sit in this gray little room with all of these men in suits, and they would coach me on how to talk and how to act. What to say in interviews if they asked me who I was dating. They came up with all of these plans and publicity stunts and I would just sit there, nodding, because it's what I thought I had to do.

'We were still so new, and I was so young that I couldn't even really think for myself. They made – they made think...’ He took a sharp intake of breath. ‘They made me think that I was going to ruin everything. That there was something wrong with me, and I was going to ruin this for my band. I believed them. I was scared and I was ashamed, so I signed it when they gave it to me.’

‘Gave what to you?’ Louis asked, resolute to keep his voice even despite the anger pooling in his stomach.

‘It's basically a non-disclosure agreement, but a lot more encompassing. Most of my personal history doesn't legally belong to me basically.’ Harry explained. Louis' grip tightened on Harry's shoulder. ‘But I wasn't seeing anyone at the time, so it didn't seem like that much of a sacrifice to me. Either my band or my nonexistent love-life, so it wasn't a hard decision. It's not like I had something like you and Joshua have.’

‘Oh, Joshua and I aren't that impressive, I promise.’ Louis sighed.

‘But then I met Nick.’

‘Nick?’

‘Grimshaw.’

‘Isn't he the guy on Radio One?’

‘He's the only man I've ever loved.’ Harry said without emotion. Louis felt an unidentifiable tug at the base of his spine at these words, but ignored it as Harry continued speaking. ‘We did an interview with him, and we just – like – we clicked kind of, you know? Things were easy with him. Everything was so new and overwhelming to me, but Nick was older and stable. He kind of, like, took care of me.

‘And things just progressed from there. We were sort of together for like a year, but we never defined anything. We just had fun with each other. And then I obviously had to go and fall in love with him.’ Harry said, causing another tug at Louis' spine. ‘But I was so scared that he didn't feel the same way, so I didn't say anything until Cardiff. We were playing one of our first big performances and he flew out in the middle of the night to meet me at my hotel room. I thought it meant something, and, erm, I told him how I felt.

‘Then he, like – he just laughed at me. Then he left. And it was just two in the morning in a hotel room in Cardiff and he left, and that was how that ended.’ Harry said, pausing momentarily.

‘How old were you?’ Louis asked quietly, fearful of the answer.

‘Nineteen, almost twenty.’ Harry said, causing Louis to swallow painfully. When Louis had been nineteen, he'd been bopping around the LA gay club scene with Zayn and a pair of fake ID's, giving blow jobs in the bathrooms and wearing tight jeans to try and get free drinks. He definitely hadn't been left alone in a two am hotel room, having his heart broken under a non-disclosure agreement. The implication brought a prickling to the corners of Louis' own eyes, just as he felt something wet fall onto his shoulder. Harry quickly smeared a clumsy hand over his eye before continuing. ‘And that was just, that was it. I didn't really want to try anymore with dating. I just
haven't seen the point, I guess. So when my management came to me about this whole thing with Arrienne, I couldn't really think of a reason not to. I tried to think of it as helping each other out. I thought maybe we would be friends, since we both have to deal with all of this stuff.”

“Arrienne's gay, too?” Louis asked.

“She has a girlfriend, yeah. They want to get married, actually. I think maybe that's why it's different for her than it is for me. She's just always seen me as her enemy and things have just gotten worse and worse. And now -- now this happened.” He breathed, a fresh flood of tears dropping to the fabric of Louis' shirt as Harry remembered the day's happenings.

“You can't let her do this kind of stuff to you.” Louis said darkly.

“But she's a victim in this, too. Just like me.” Harry reasoned. Louis' head whipped to meet Harry's gaze.

“Harry, do you realize what she's done? Even beyond how she's hurt you? Once it gets out that this is fake, do you realize how it's going to look for people who are actual victims of abuse? They're going to be afraid to come forward and get help because one time that supermodel Arrienne Brant faked an injury, and people might not believe them. She's going to make it look like women do this for attention, which couldn't be further from the truth.” Louis said angrily, but his speech was cut short when he saw the thick layer of agony in Harry's eyes. Louis' face softened before he opened his mouth again. “She's done a horrible thing that is going to hurt a lot of people, and I happen to really like one of those people.” Louis gave Harry another squeeze around the shoulders, which caused Harry to rest his head back on Louis' chest.

“I really like you, too.” He murmured quietly as his eyes drifted shut.

Louis watched him, trying to remain calm as the full gravity of Harry's story began to solidify in his brain.

It just didn't compute, was the thing. This was a man who could be distracted from an adult conversation if a ladybug fluttered by. This was a man who once claimed his favorite color was Neapolitan ice cream. This was a man that could not say a single negative thing about anyone in his life, let alone commit any of the hate that others had committed against him.

Harry's breathing had evened out, and Louis was fairly certain that he'd fallen asleep. Though it was definitely ill-advised to sleep on the roof all night, Louis decided to give him a few more minutes before jostling him awake.

He blinked up at the black-washed sky, devoid of stars from the light pollution of the nearby city. Harry's warm presence hung heavily on his side, and Louis knew in that moment that he had to do everything he could to protect him.

Whoops :) xx

Louis let his head fall back onto his pillow as he clicked the link at the bottom of Harry's incoming text message. He was sent to a Buzzfeed article titled, “Top Ten Times Larry Stylinson Had the Cutest Bromance in History”. He made a noise that was somewhere between a groan and a laugh as he began to scroll down the page.

He was met by a collection of gifs and pictures that did a pretty accurate job of summarizing his social media presence over the last couple of weeks. His scrolling thumb lingered as a few of his
#9: When they took a selfie with a horse as if it were the most amazing creature they'd ever seen, when actually, it was a pretty normal horse.

The accompanying picture was from their foray into horseback riding the previous weekend. Louis' horse, a white mare that might as well have been a Unicorn devoid of it's horn, had been kind enough to join them in a self-indulgent snapshot. They'd both posed with slack-jaws, gazing at the horse between them with over-dramatized wonder. The horse, however, had stared into the camera languidly without any opinion of its current situation.

#8: When Louis used Twitter to make Harry into his personal chef.

Below were screenshots of two tweets between his and Harry's accounts. The first was of Louis asking Harry to: “Please come to my house and make me that one cheese thing with the bread.” Harry had responded: “I am already in your house, making that one cheese thing with the bread.”

#3 When Louis was too drunk so he made Harry carry him home.

Beneath the text was a gif that Louis had already watched several hundred times from a night out a couple of weeks earlier. After a boisterous lad's night at several clubs, they'd been papped just as Louis had decided that walking was far too strenuous a task for his tiny body. He'd jumped onto Harry's back, who had gladly supported him and carried him past the waves of reporters with a dimpled smile. All the while, Niall could be heard cackling in the background.

#1: And at last, the vine that speaks for itself.

Louis pressed the play icon on the accompanying vine, already anticipating the video that would follow. Harry was lying flat on his back on the world's most comfortable couch while Glitter lounged across his face. Harry's one eye that wasn't buried beneath fur was darting back and forth between the cat on his face and Louis behind the phone, a knowing smile creeping across his face. A tentative straw appeared at the edge of the frame as Louis poked Glitter repeatedly, trying to inspire some act of savagery from the beast. Glitter gave him no reaction apart from a haughty glare.

“She's not going to scratch me. She loves me.” Harry mumbled.

“All living things can be coerced into violence, Haz.”

The vine ended and Louis watched it again several times, never seeming to grow tired of it. The rest of the article was filled with their various selfies and tweets, along with video from the night when Harry had swung Louis in a circle on the red carpet. He could still remember that feeling of dread after Harry had put him down as he realized they'd been caught on camera. Now, almost two months later, Louis took every available opportunity to smother all of his followers with pictures and videos of Harry. The fact that this Buzzfeed article existed was proof that his plan was working.

It had been just over two weeks since Harry had come out to Louis. After they'd finally climbed down off the roof, Harry had traipsed over to Niall's for the night, promising he would text and check in with him the next morning.

What Louis had received the next day was a very worn looking Niall at his front door just after sunrise, asking if they could talk in private.
“I didn't know you could physically wake up this early.” Louis commented as he shut them both into the spare bedroom.

“I'm a man of many wonders.” Niall replied.

“I don't think I've ever seen you in this house without a bottle of alcohol in your hand.”

“Thought'd be better to have this conversation sober.” Niall said, hopping up onto a desk in the corner as Louis sat on the edge of the bed. “So, obviously, Harry told you some stuff last night.”

“Mhmm.” Louis nodded, his nerves beginning to prick at him.

“I've been thinking about what I want to say to you all morning. I've, like, been preparing and everything. I started to write it down, actually, but then I got bored of that so I just decided to wing it.”

“Naturally.”

“The thing is, with Harry,” Niall began, blinking through his own thoughts. “he's everyone's friend, right? Everyone loves having him as a friend and he loves being everyone's friend. But he doesn't let anyone be his friend. D'you get what I'm saying?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Louis said, absently picking at the sleeve of his shirt.

“So he told you about Nick Grimshaw?” Niall asked and Louis nodded. “But I'll bet he didn't even scratch the surface about how bad Nick fucked him up. Like, Harry was really, incredibly in love that asshole.” Niall exhaled and met Louis' eyes, unaware of the niggling tug that was once again at the base of Louis' spine. “He wrote him all of these beautiful songs and totally worshiped the ground he walked on. None of the rest of us really got it, because Nick isn't that impressive. But he made Harry so happy and giddy, so we weren't going to say anything against it.

'It went on that entire year, but then Harry told him he loved him, and Nick, in his infinite wisdom, figured that'd be a perfect time to tell Harry that he'd never thought of them as exclusive. He'd been fucking other blokes the entire time. Then he just fucked off and left Harry behind like he didn't even care.”

“Harry didn't, erm,” Louis coughed briefly, realizing his mouth had gone completely dry. “Harry didn't tell me about any of that. The details, I mean.”

“And that's just the beginning.” Niall said as he raised his eyebrows. Louis' eyes grew wide, unsure if he'd be able to handle anymore of this story. “Harry was a right mess after that. He went on this nonstop bender. I don't remember seeing him sober even once for two months, and I was with him all day everyday. He'd just drink, and drink, and drink, then he'd take anything anyone offered him at a club or at one of our shows. He'd get so hyped up that it would actually scare the rest of us, and we do some pretty dodgy shit. Like what you've seen, with Harry on the roof with the guitar? Nothing compared to what he was doing back then.

'And every night would end with him finally breaking down and crying, so we'd get him back to his hotel room and try to get him to sleep. Then he would wake up the next morning and start the whole thing over again. I was just watching my best mate deteriorate in front of my eyes. He lost all this weight and his skin was always pale and sunken. And that's when his reputation for all of this 'eccentric' stuff started. He would do things like drop acid before an interview on Ellen, or try to take all of his clothes off on stage.

'But things started to change after this one night. It was the weekend after his twentieth birthday
and we were celebrating at this pub, and Harry was just totally losing it. Trying to get on the table, accidentally breaking glasses, falling all over the place kind of stuff. And then the sobbing started, so I pulled him into the loo to try and calm him down. But these two guys followed us in to try and get a picture, and in the time it took for me to get rid of 'em, Harry was already sunk down on the ground on the corner, calling Nick.

'All I heard Harry say to him was, 'I miss you,' and the fucker hung up on him. He hung up on Harry, as he called him, crying, from the floor of a pub bathroom. As far as I know, that's the last time they talked to each other.”

Niall looked taken aback by his own recollection of the memory while Louis' entire body thrummed with anger. Niall leaned forward and rubbed his hands over his face, allowing a sense of calm to seep back into him before he continued addressing Louis.

“But yeah, things kinda changed after that.” Niall explained. “Harry cooled down a bit, well, a lot, on the drinking and partying. He still does a lot, but it's nowhere near what he was doing. Which is good, because we'd all started talking about staging an intervention. But he started to write music again, and he put some weight and muscle back on so everyone was really proud of him and happy about it, but no one else besides me has really noticed that he's become this totally different person.

'He's been sorta closed off ever since. He's not completely there anymore. Like he's terrified of someone getting in and seeing who he really is.

'And I don't just think it's the whole Nick thing. I think it's that the poor guy had his heart broken, then he had to put on a pretty face for all of these random people who only know a fake version of him. He'd have to sing every night for this crowd of people who had no idea that he was hurting. People who he thought would turn on him if they knew why he was in pain. He couldn't even feel properly sad about his own break up because there were all of the executives in our lives telling him that he should be ashamed of himself for his sexuality, and I think he's internalized all of that and kind of built this mental shield up around himself.

'I know I'm unloading a lot on you, but it's just been me for years. Harry hasn't really let anyone else into his life, until now.”

Louis perked up as he felt something strange surge through his abdomen, almost like a wave of adrenaline or nerves. He thought over Niall's last sentence, weighing every word individually before deciding how to respond. Niall, however, beat him to the punch.

“I just want you to know,” Niall said. “Being close to Harry is a lot of work, but it's worth every second.”

“You – yeah – I mean.” Louis sputtered. “I'll do anything for Harry. Anything I can. He's become one of my best mates, and, yeah. I'll do anything for him.” He hoped his words were making some sense, despite his fragmented use of the English language. Niall gave him an appreciative nod before sliding off the desk.

He hadn't said anything else, instead just giving Louis a clap on the shoulder and showing himself out.

And that is how Louis' instagram had become a personal shrine to his and Harry's “bromance,” which had been affectionately nicknamed, “Larry Stylinson” by their fans. If there was one message that Louis was trying to get across to the media, it was that Harry was a great person and Louis supported him one hundred percent, no matter what effect it would have on his image. He'd even told his management to blacklist Harry's people, not accepting any of their calls or emails. In
Louis' opinion, the only person who had any say in Harry's public image was Harry himself.

Public opinion was just starting to shift on the entire Arrienne debacle. She'd released a public statement about the “mix up” saying that she loved her boyfriend very much and Harry isn't capable of something like that. Evidence had also surfaced about the fact that Harry was in LA and Arrienne was in Milan during the entire affair.

But not everyone was completely convinced of this version of events. Some were accusing Arrienne of faking everything for attention, while others were still convinced of Harry's role in the alleged abuse. Unfortunately for Louis, he was pretty sure that his boyfriend belonged to the latter group.

The thing was, Louis and Joshua sometimes went through periods where they just didn't get along; they had conflicting personalities and they tried to embrace this rather than deny it. It just meant that, from time to time, Louis' sarcastic comments became a bit more biting, and Joshua spent a lot of time at the shooting range, blasting clay pigeons as he pretended that they were Louis' face.

This cycle of fighting had always been a part of their relationship, so Louis knew that it shouldn't worry him, and yet a stitch of dread had worked its way permanently into the back of his mind whenever his thoughts fell onto the state of their relationship. Yes, all couples fight, but a standoff that lasted this long didn't seem completely healthy.

That's why Louis had about jumped out of his skin with relief when Joshua had suggested that they invite all of the boys over for dinner that weekend. He offered to do a spaghetti feast, and even commented that it might be a good chance for him to get to know Harry a little better. Louis had been so grateful he'd grabbed Joshua by both sides of his face and planted a sloppy kiss to his lips, which grew into something more slow, which quickened into something more sensual and desperate, which then turned into absolutely nothing, with both parties leaving the room on opposite sides.

This was perhaps the most troubling part of the divide that had grown between the two of them. No matter how ugly their fighting had ever been, they'd never withheld intimacy from each other. The fact that they hadn't been together in weeks was completely unprecedented, and apparently, no, it wasn't up for discussion.

The actual spaghetti dinner had begun with a rocky start. Joshua and Louis spent much of the first part of the evening bickering in the kitchen as Liam and Zayn stood awkwardly nearby, pretending they couldn't hear them. Joshua had slapped Louis' hand away from the pasta sauce a little too aggressively for Louis' taste, and the snide remarks had flowed freely from that point onward.

They were only interrupted when Niall and Harry arrived with a bottle of wine that Harry held forth as proudly as if he'd won it at an Olympic event. Louis took a dark joy in the fact that it appeared very expensive, and he knew that Joshua wouldn't be enjoying any of it that night.

They'd all loaded their plates to their own liking, each meeting various nutritional needs with their choices. Harry and Louis had ended up on opposite ends of this spectrum, with Harry's pasta featuring an array of bright, plump vegetables while Louis' was truly just a pile of meatballs with a few noodles on the side for dessert.

The conversation flowed as freely as the wine, and soon Louis was sporting a stomach full of warm fuzzies and general affection. He was listening idly to another one of Liam's stories about how to correctly administer CPR (everyone gets it, Liam, you minored in Sport's Medicine at Uni) as he watched Harry chew his food. To Louis' utter delight, his dimples would appear briefly between each swallow, so Louis naturally felt the need to flick him directly in the cheek.
“Ow.” Harry said, furrowing his brows.

“Maybe next time you shouldn't have crater-like holes in your face.” Louis pointed out. Harry speared a broccoli floret on his fork and held it toward Louis.

“Open up.” He ordered.

“No. It's green.”

“But Lou, you have to eat vegetables. If you don't eat any, you're going to die.” Harry implored. Louis sniggered at the fact that he'd once watched Harry snort a line of cocaine off a waitresses' shoulder, and now he was lecturing Louis about his health.

“Um, Harry. Some girls were talking about you in my Transmedia class the other day.” Joshua said casually, causing every head at the table to snap over to him. “They were saying that they believed you, about the domestic abuse thing. They don't think you did it.”

Everyone watched him awkwardly, momentarily forgetting how to breathe now that the topic everyone had been skirting for weeks was out in the open. Harry's only response was to offer him a stiff smile.

“Well good.” Louis said, breaking the silence. “Because he didn't do it.”

“They were saying that they think Arrienne did it for publicity. You wouldn't believe the things people do for publicity stunts.” Joshua continued. Louis rolled his eyes, because, yes, Harry probably had a very good idea of what people did for publicity stunts.

“Yeah, but I wish people wouldn't blame Arrienne.” Harry said, his voice low. “I don't like how quick people are in the media to just blame women. Like how so many people turned on Rihanna when those Chris Brown pictures came out.”

“What do you mean?” Liam asked.

“How people thought she was worse than him, because she let the abuse happen.” Zayn clarified.

“Right.” Harry agreed. “Which isn't true. It's just victim blaming, and it just let him get off the hook for what he did. I don't want Arrienne and I to become the next chapter in that narrative.”

“Huh.” Joshua said. Everyone turned to him once again, waiting for him to finish his thought.

“Have something to say, babe?” Louis asked.

“I'm just, I'm surprised.” He said, directing his attention at Harry. “I didn't expect you to be capable of being articulate about that kind of thing. Good for you, I guess.”

“I think it's time to open something a bit stronger!” Louis blurted, gesturing toward the empty wine bottles and trying to forget the way Harry's face fell at Joshua's comment.

He jumped from his seat as Niall called, “Here, here!” and moved toward the living room to open the liquor cabinet. Louis wasn't even remotely surprised when he heard Joshua's faint footsteps approach him.

“I'm going to bring out the coffee cake.” Joshua said curtly.

“That's your right.” Louis said, clasping his hand around a new bottle of scotch and turning to face Joshua, who's eyes fell on the bottle with a sour expression.
“Don't you think you've had enough to drink?”

“There was a way to say that to Harry without being a complete arse. He made a good point and then you were rude.” Louis snapped.

“So you're going to get drunk to piss me off?”

“No, I'm going to get drunk to hopefully forget what your face looks like.” He said, pushing past Joshua back towards the dining room.

By the time the table was clear and the coffee cake had been served, Louis was in a much more bubbly frame of mind. His eyes kept falling to Liam and Zayn, who were trying their very best to pretend they were completely neutral towards each other. This was proven absolutely incorrect, however, about every ten minutes when they would catch each other's gaze and the mutual fondness would literally pour from them.

With the physical reminder of his own disintegrating relationship sitting angrily beside him, Louis needed a new outlet for his attention besides his blissfully in love best friends. His newest distraction came in the form of Harry Style's outfit.


“Thank you. Niall got it for me.” Harry said.

“That I did. I know how to take care of my boy.” Niall announced cheerily.

“Especially since it was your fault my other one got ruined.” Harry pointed out, which made Niall guffaw.

“We did this show for Spring Break in Miami last April, and we'd been at this party for like, probably thirty hours straight. This drunk fan wanted Harry's shirt really bad, so I gave it to her.” Niall explained.

“But rather than just politely asking me, Niall decided to jump me and rip it off my body.” Harry said fondly.

“The point of the story is, I bought him a new shirt, and doesn't everyone think it looks lovely?” Niall asked with an expectant look, causing everyone to nod and laugh.

“A thirty hour party?” Louis asked.

“It was on business, though.” Harry said defensively.

“Business.” Niall echoed.

“On business, yeah? What an entrepreneur you must be.” Louis jibed. He squeaked as Harry's fingers made contact between his ribs.

“Don't be jealous, Lou. People will be tearing your shirt off left and right once Metal Heart comes out.” Harry said, tickling him again, causing Louis to attempt to tickle him back.

“Is that a promise?”

“It is.” Harry deflected another attempt to tickle him with a chuckle, before reaching forward to affectionately straighten a piece of Louis' hair that had gone astray.
Everyone froze as there was a clatter of silverware hitting Joshua's plate.

“Get your hands off my boyfriend.” Joshua snapped, his eyes zeroing in on Harry, who immediately snatched his hand back in fear.

“I - er - I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.” Harry muttered, entire body stricken by panic. Louis shook his head angrily.

“No. No, no, no. You have nothing to be sorry about.” He said to Harry before he turned to Joshua. “And what exactly is your problem?”

“My problem is that my boyfriend is trying to make me mad because he's drunk.” He snapped.

“No, love. I'm trying to make you mad because I haven't gotten laid in three weeks.” Louis said brightly, taking another swig from his drink. Joshua's eyes flared, looking as if venom was actually coursing through his veins. He abruptly threw his napkin on the table before stomping away, leaving a room of shocked guests in his wake. Louis shrugged flippantly, taking a last bite from his coffee cake.

“Louis.” Zayn chided in his low, dulcet tone. Louis immediately began to shake his head.

“No, Zayn.”

“Go after him.”

“I can't. I'm entertaining guests.”

“Louis.” Zayn said even more imploringly, causing Louis to make begrudging eye contact with him. He had the distinct feeling of a child being forced to go apologize by his mother. “Go after him. Talk to him.”

“We'll clean everything up. Don't worry about it.” Liam offered, standing up from his chair. Louis looked over to Harry, who was already busying himself by picking up the clutter of plates and glasses, avoiding Louis' gaze.

“Fine.” Louis relented with a sigh, beginning a slow walk towards his bedroom.

Joshua was perched on the end of their bed, his head in his hands. He was outlined by a single lamp on their bedside table. The sight crashed over Louis with a wash of guilt. He gently closed the door behind him.

“You've never been jealous before.” Louis pointed out.

“That's not true. I was jealous that night after New Years.” Joshua said, eliciting an icy sigh from Louis.

“You always wait to bring that up until we're fighting.” Louis bit back. Joshua just shrugged. “I'm sorry.” He said quietly, causing Joshua to look up at him.

“Why are we being so awful to each other?” He asked back, a broken quality to his voice. Louis fell into a sitting cross-legged position on the floor, looking up at his beleaguered boyfriend.

“I don't know.” He admitted honestly, noting a hint of hopelessness reflected in his voice as well.

“Are you really this mad about the sex thing? Is that all our relationship is worth to you?”
“No, Joshua, it's not the sex. It's...” Louis brushed a frantic hand through his hair as he tried to meld his feelings into words. “It's that this has never been a problem for us before. We've never withheld sex from each other because we were mad. And it just scares me that there is something really, really wrong between us. And I'm trying so hard to just get you to talk to me, but you won't. You just won't, and now I'm terrified because I'm starting to think this isn't something we can fix.”

Joshua's head snapped up.

“Don't say that, Louis.”

“But it's true, baby. And denying it doesn't solve anything.” Louis leaned in closer as Joshua closed his eyes and began shaking his head.

“No. Lou, don't say that.” He implored.

“Then for fuck's sake, just tell me what is going on in your head. Why are you thinking about dropping out?” Louis' eyes bored into Joshua's dark tousle of hair, willing him to look up. Several moments passed in intense silence until Joshua slowly raised his head, causing relief to flux through Louis.

“Oh, so it's kind of a lot of reasons.” Joshua began.

Louis leaned back, making himself comfortable, ready to listen to his boyfriend's side of the story and offer whatever supportive advice he could muster. But as Joshua continued to spin his recollection of events, Louis was left increasingly shell-shocked.

What Joshua offered to Louis was a meandering, hour-long diatribe of child-like paranoia. He complained that his professors didn't appreciate his talents, over-analyzing their most minute interactions as attempts to sabotage him. He detailed the intricate web of drama amongst his friends, branding everyone as either a morally corrupt sex-fiend or mentally inept imbeciles who were ruining his life. He even devoted twenty minutes to the fact that his assignments were a useless waste of his efforts and were beneath him.

Louis watched wordlessly as the story came to a close, and a single thought had been lingering in the forefront of his mind since Joshua had begun speaking. When had this happened? When had Joshua stopped growing up? When had Louis left Joshua behind, becoming a semi-functioning adult while Joshua retained the maturity of a high schooler? How had Louis not noticed?

Joshua watched Louis patiently, waiting for his response. Louis opened his mouth slowly, feeling his thoughts churn angrily inside his head. He wasn't sure if he’d do more damage by backing down or being honest.

“Joshua,” He began, “when you first hinted that you were unhappy with school, I thought maybe it was getting too stressful for you and you needed some time off. Or maybe you weren't sure what you want to do with your life, so you wanted to take a break to figure things out. And I would have supported that, but-”

“But what?”

“I wouldn't say something this harsh to you if it weren't completely true, but you sound like a spoiled brat who needs to stop blaming everyone else for your problems.”

It took only a split second for Joshua to transform. Eyes that had been open and pleading narrowed into spiteful slits as he glared down at Louis.
“You wanted me to open up to you.”

“But how did you expect me to react to that? 'Sure honey, go ahead and throw your future away because your professor only gave you two extra credit points. He's obviously out to get you. Here, have a new house while we're at it.'”

“I did not ask you to buy this house.” Joshua spat.

“But all you do is sit around in it and read magazines all day. What happened to all those ambitions you use to have? You wanted to be a social researcher when we first met. I used to love just sitting and listening to you talk about it.”

“Get out.” He demanded.

“You're kicking me out of my own bedroom?”

“It's our bedroom.”

“Right, so that's why I spend most of my nights sleeping on the couch.” Louis snapped as he got to his feet and walked towards the door. His hand fell to the door knob before he stopped and glanced over his shoulder back at Joshua. “And what does any of this have to do with Harry? Are you actually jealous?”

“For the thousandth time, Louis, I'm not jealous.”

“Then why are you always so rude to him?”

“Because you two are so annoying together.” Joshua griped, kneading his temples. “He's totally obsessed with you, and you just let him fawn all over everything you do. You like the attention; it's obvious. And it's obnoxious to have to watch.”

Louis felt as if every vessel in his brain had burst. His thoughts were swept into a tempest of twisted emotion and disconnected words that didn't make sense.

“That's not even slightly true.”

“He's obsessed with you. You like the attention. It's disgusting, and you're using him.” Joshua stated bluntly.

“No.”

“Either that, or you two actually have feelings for each other, in which case, we should be having a very different conversation.”

Those couldn't be the only two possibilities. They couldn't be. His feelings toward Harry were platonic; completely innocent. Brotherly, even. And of course he wasn't using Harry. Harry was one of his best friends, and he would do anything he could to protect him. He'd never do anything to bring him any harm.

And he wouldn't do this to Joshua, either. He wouldn't cheat. Because that's what Joshua was accusing him of: emotional cheating. They wouldn't survive going down that road again. Louis couldn't do that again.

A latent memory from last New Years teemed through his thoughts, the associated images snapping into focus across his vision. The ghosts of Joshua's fractured shriek's and Louis' raw,
shattered apologies echoed from somewhere in the past, met with a dull, concentrated pain in Louis’ cheek that rippled down his entire body.

He blinked back into the reality of the present, suppressing the painful memory back to where he locked it away in the loneliest corner of his mind. That night hurt. It was painful. He would never go back to something like that again.

So only one option made sense: Joshua was lying. He was wrong. He was so, so wrong.

“Harry is my friend, and he isn't going anywhere.” Louis stated, his voice inexplicably hoarse. “He's a good person, and it would mean a lot to me if you could learn to accept that.” He opened the door and stepped into the dark hallway, allowing the full gravity of their fight to seep into him.

The house was silent, which proved that their dinner guests had already left for the night. Louis walked slowly toward the kitchen, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness rather than switching on any lights. He was about to get a water glass from the cabinet to ease his throat when he noticed a warm glow emanating from the living room.

He entered the room slowly to immediately recognize a mop of brown curls poking up from behind the back of the couch. The prickling tension that had seized up Louis' entire body melted away as he rounded the couch and Harry looked up at him. His back was leaning against the armrest with his feet up on the middle cushion, a familiar ream of paper topped with a periwinkle cover resting open against his thighs. He noticed Louis with surprise, as if he were a child discovered out past bedtime.

“S-sorry.” He stammered, closing the screenplay and throwing it onto the coffee table, the title _Kids From Yesterday_ looking back up at him. Louis sat down on the opposite end of the couch, pulling Harry's legs across his lap.

“Been snooping have you?”

“I was just going to wait for a couple of minutes, because I had something to tell you, and I just kind of started reading it. Sorry, I lost track of time.”

“You liked it?”

“Yes, it was just, it was just wow.” Harry said, staring at the cover. “It's so beautiful, Louis. It's gorgeous, and deep yet subtle, but so meaningful and poignant and so – it's so, so much, Louis.”

“So that's a yes?” Louis asked with a playful smile.

“Yes. I liked it. I loved it. I couldn't put it down.” He admitted. “You're going to be in it, right?”

“Probably not.” Louis said awkwardly, looking down to his fingernails.

“You don't like it?”

“No, I love it. It's exactly the kind of film I've been wanting to make since I came out.”

“Then what's the problem?” Harry inquired. Louis' heavy silence made the reason very clear, and Harry's eyes briefly flicked in the direction of the hallway leading to their bedroom. Harry leaned forward, causing Louis to look him in the eye. “You don't have to listen to anything I say, obviously, but Lou, I didn't even get to the ending and I can already tell it's such an important movie. It's going to mean so much to so many people, and I think it would be really, really incredible for you to get to be a part of something like that.”
Louis stared at Harry wordlessly, letting his options turn over in his head.

“Yeah, it would be amazing.” Louis said softly. Harry’s eyes dropped away, overcome by something new. Louis recognized the shift in his demeanor. “You alright?”

“I just – just feel like...” He said slowly, his voice getting heavier with every word. “This is the kind of thing I should be doing, instead of hiding in the closet. I should be trying to help people.”

Louis’ hand clasped around Harry’s knee, squeezing gently.

“None of that, Harry.” He said. “Coming out is a huge step, and it’s extremely personal. No one can pressure you to come out before you’re ready.”

Harry gave him a weak smile, breathing through Louis’ words.

“If you end up getting the role, does that mean that you’ll, maybe, volunteer at teen shelters or something? For research?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“Could I maybe come with you?” Harry asked meekly. Louis’ face split into a grin, dumbfounded by the sincerity of the man sitting in front of him.

“Of course, Haz.” He promised, which finally caused Harry to mirror his smile. “You wanted to tell me something earlier?”

“Erm, yeah. Actually. So, Radio One is doing this weekend in LA thing, so they’re sending a bunch of their RJ’s and reporters out to interview people and do live video podcasts. My management kind of thinks that this might be a good time for me to do my first interview since everything with Arrienne.”

“Do you feel ready?”

“Mostly, I guess. The tour’s only a few weeks away, so I need to start showing my face again eventually.” Harry reasoned.

“Are they going to ask you about the Arrienne thing?”

“They’re not supposed to. But, erm, I kind of want to tell him to, so I can set a few things straight, you know. But, maybe not. I don't know. S'probably a bad idea.”

“What? No, Harry. If you have something to say, then you should say it.” Louis insisted.

“There’s something else, though. The interview is, erm, it's with Nick.” Harry said uncomfortably, watching Louis to gauge his reaction.

“Grimshaw?” Louis asked, keeping his voice as neutral as he could manage. Harry nodded. “Are you absolutely sure you want to do that?” The image of Harry sobbing in the corner of a restroom as Nick Grimshaw hung up on him was still fresh in Louis’ thoughts.

“Yeah, it'll be fine. It's been years, really. I just think that it'd be easier for me if I knew you were watching.”

“Well, yeah, duh. Of course I'll be watching. You'll have to turn your phone off all day because I'll be calling and texting you constantly. I'm very needy, if you haven't noticed.” Louis joked. Contentment washed over Harry.
“Okay. Good. I should probably head out. Night Lou.” Harry said, standing up from the couch. He began walking to the door before Louis jumped to his feet.

“Oi! And what kind of goodbye is that supposed to be?” Louis questioned, walking over to Harry. “Can we just make a solemn vow that we won't say goodbye to each other without at least one, really good hug?” Louis pouted at Harry in what he hoped was a good impression of a puppy. Harry laughed and stepped forward, wrapping his warm arms around Louis.

He stepped further into the embrace, circling his arms tightly around Harry's middle and turning his face into his neck. His skin swept across Louis' nose, emitting a fresh scent that Louis had come to recognize as the *HarryHarryHarry* smell. He took a deep inhale and filled his lungs with the sweet aroma and swayed calmly in the strong fold of Harry's arms.

Harry was the first to move out of the hug, but he promptly put his hands on both sides of Louis’ face and placed a sweet kiss to the crown of his head. The brief brush of lips against his hair sent another jolt of emotion through Louis' abdomen, surging powerfully through the bottom of his stomach. Surprise seemed to wash over Harry at the same moment, as he stepped back and broke the contact hastily.

They watched each other silently for a moment before Harry coughed and turned toward the door. He opened it with one last look over his shoulder.

“I think you should do the movie.” He said with a cheeky grin as he stepped out into the night and closed the door behind him.

Louis watched the closed door as something foreign and unfamiliar clamped down on his lungs, still imagining the silhouette of where Harry had stood a few seconds earlier.
"You wear your shades at night, you cannot see how hard I fall. I clench my fist so tight, try to burst through your brick walls."

- Everywhere

"Thanks Louis, we'll be in touch again before the end of the week." A voice crackled through the speaker of Louis' phone.

"No problem. Looking forward to it." Louis responded, picking his phone up from the table and ending the call. Liam took the incentive of handing a pen to Louis as he flipped open a thick folder, setting it to his left. He nudged it forward, standing behind Louis' chair in the sun-soaked dining room.

"Initial here, here, and here," Liam instructed as he flipped through several pages, "then sign and date here."

"Should I be signing this without reading it?" Louis questioned, clicking the pen and scribing LT down onto the first page.

"Don't you trust that I've read it several times?"

"I trust that you've read it about forty times." Louis admitted, continuing to initial. "So no weird clauses anywhere in here?"

"What constitutes a weird clause?"

"Like, if I can only eat almonds for two months, or I have to take over for Tim Allen as the new Santa Claus, or there are mandatory orgies every Wednesday but everyone tells me that it's a Furry when really it's not, so I get all dressed up and show up looking stupid in a raccoon costume, then everyone laughs and throws shit at me. Then we all have sex."

"No – Louis, no. There's nothing like that in there." Liam sighed. "How does your mind even go to places like that?"

"I'm a colorful boy. I can't help it."

"What're you doing?" Joshua asked as he stepped into the dining room. His brow furrowed as his dark eyes swept over the legal documents littering the table. Louis perked up at this appearance.

"Well, I just got off of a conference call with the director of Kids From Yesterday in which I officially accepted the role of Alex. Now I'm signing my life away to a small production company in Manchester from the dates of December tenth through February fifteenth. And what have you been up to this morning?" Louis said, sarcasm dripping from every word.

"You signed that without even talking to me?" Joshua clarified.

"Correct." Louis nodded, turning his attention to the bottom of the final page and scribbling his signature with a grandiose flourish. "And now, if you don't mind, sweetheart, I'm treating my brilliant agent and his gorgeous boyfriend to a celebratory lunch." Louis clapped Liam on the shoulder as he got to his feet. Liam tried to hide his smug grin as he gathered all of the now legally binding paperwork.
“Louis.” Joshua hissed.

“Have fun at school, honey.” Louis said as he slid past him, Liam quick on his heels.

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“I definitely want something spicy, but I also kind of want something buttery. To hell with it! Bring me the largest slice of cheesecake you can legally sell!” Louis proclaimed, handing his menu over to the waiter.

Liam rolled his eyes and Zayn ordered a very fancy sounding salad, which only served to remind Louis of all the heinous vegetables he was going to have to eat for the next couple of months. Signing on to play a character afflicted with AIDS meant that he was facing a very strict diet and exercise regimen, which was all starting at six am the next morning.

Once the waiter had bustled away, Zayn raised his glass, his eyes sparkling with doting pride at Louis.

“I'd like to make a toast to my very best friend in the world.” He said. “This time next year, Louis, you'll be getting ready for awards season.”

“Cheers!” Liam said merrily, clinking his glass against Zayn's.

“That's embarrassingly presumptuous.” Louis responded, half-heartedly clanking his glass. “But I would also like to make a toast to the fact that my two best friends have fallen in love and still refuse to openly acknowledge it in front of me. Cheers!” They toasted their glasses again, Liam notably less enthusiastic this time. As Louis lifted his glass to meet Liam's, he noticed that he was toasting with his left hand, which seemed wholly odd, just like giving a handshake with the wrong hand. Suddenly, it clicked. “Oh my god. Are you two actually holding hands under the table?” Liam and Zayn gave each other a knowing glance. “You are. You are holding hands under the table.”

“Now that we've established that, can we move on?” Liam suggested uncomfortably.

“Oh, no. Definitely not, because this is completely unfair. I'm done with this whole mysterious 'we're kind of dating' thing. I am your mutual best friend; you should have been giving me daily updates on every single detail of your relationship so far.”

“Sorry Lou.” Zayn said. “Liam made me promise we'd keep things just to ourselves for a little while. Until we knew if this was going to last or not.”

“But why ?”

“Because I knew that you'd make a huge deal about it, then probably scream, then cry, then make us adopt you.” Liam said snidely.

“But I created you!” Louis exclaimed.

“Actually, Harry was the one who finally got through to us.” Liam pointed out, much to Louis’ frustration.
“So you listened to Harry, even though you'd only met him a couple of hours earlier, but you wouldn't listen to me when I begged you to start dating for years?”

“ We like Harry.” Liam said. “Unlike you, he doesn't sound like a yappy dog every time he opens his mouth.”

“Rude.” Louis stated. “And after I scored you such a nice commission today. So what's the deal? Are you officially boyfriends, or what?” This garnered a very egregious eye roll from Liam, but Zayn remained amused.

“Yes. We are boyfriends.” Zayn said, struggling to form words past his unyielding smile. Louis' hands shot to the sides of his face dramatically, which was contorted with excitement.

“You two have somehow made me happy, nauseated, and jealous all at once.” Louis said.

“Jealous?” Zayn queried, eyes flicking over to Louis. “How are things with Joshua?”

“Overall, or just this morning?” Louis countered with a dark humor.

“Did something happen this morning? Is he not happy you took the role?”

“Louis thought that it would be a good idea to put his sassy pants on this morning.” Liam explained, raising his water glass to his lips with a smirk.

“Louis.” Zayn admonished.

“It's the only way to get through to that kid.” Louis defended himself.

“You know what would also really get through to him? Breaking up with him.” Liam pointed out, delighted that it was now his turn to harass Louis rather than the other way around.

“That's not funny, Liam.”

“Never said it was funny. Logical? Maybe. Unavoidable? Perhaps.”


“You know who else you like quite a bit? Harry. He's a good lad, don't you think?” Liam asked brightly.

“The fuck are you on about?” Louis asked, his eyebrows knitting together.

“Nothing.” Zayn said quickly, shooting a warning glance to Liam.

“Wait.” Louis protested, his attention turning to Zayn. “Have you two been talking about me?”

“The middle of a nice restaurant probably isn't the best place to talk about this.” Zayn said.

“Oh my god. You've actually been talking about me.” Louis repeated, blown away that Zayn and Liam had been conspiring against him. Liam was historically very critical of Joshua, but Zayn had always come to Louis' aid whenever the conversation about Joshua turned bitter. “And what exactly have you two been saying about me?”

“We just – we don't like seeing you fight with him so much.” Liam said. “It's making you unhappy, and I don't think you even see it.”
“He’s my boyfriend, Liam. I love him.” Louis bit back.

Just then, Zayn’s phone started vibrating against the white table cloth. He snatched it up, looking pleadingly from the screen back to Louis, as if struck with a dilemma.

“Go ahead.” Louis advised.

“Sorry. It’s the photographer from my shoot yesterday. I’ll honestly be, like, twenty seconds. Sorry.” Zayn continued to apologize as he answered the phone and moved toward the front of the restaurant.

A heavy silence fell over the table at Zayn’s disappearance. Louis glared unblinkingly at Liam for several icy moments, while Liam stared at the table and fiddled absently with his fork. The moment stretched on and on until Louis thought he couldn’t handle another second of it.

“Well, Zayn’s gone. Feel free to tear into me.” Louis said acrimoniously.

“That’s not what I’m trying to do.”

“And what exactly do you and Zayn say about me? Is all of your pillow talk devoted to scrutinizing how pitiful poor Louis and Joshua are?”

“Louis. No. That’s not how it is.” Liam assured.

“Then tell me. Secrets don’t make friends, Payno.” Louis said. Liam huffed sardonically.

“That’s rich.”

“What do you mean?” Louis inquired. Liam looked toward the entrance to see Zayn already heading back to the table. He leaned forward, focusing his eyes squarely onto Louis.

“We all know that something happened on New Years.” Liam said bluntly. “And we know it was bad. You don’t want us to know, but we do, and I can’t figure out what he could have done to you that you’d be afraid to tell us about.”

When Zayn sat back down, he was prattling on about something to do with reshoots, but Louis didn’t catch a word of it. His energies were focused on getting some form of oxygen into his body, because his chest suddenly weighed about forty pounds. Liam's words had lodged physically between Louis' ribcage and lungs, constricting any attempts to breath. The rest of his body quickly followed suit, with his shoulders and spine growing so rigid that the tiniest movement might shatter his bones to dust. A swell of panic was rising through his throat, causing his mouth to grow dry and his eyes to water while Zayn continued chatting obliviously.

“I don't know, I'm tired of it, I guess. It's all just unprofessional.” Zayn said.

“It wasn't him.” Louis said weakly. “It was m-” His voice faded as he met Liam's eyes, which were currently boring through Louis like battering rams.

“What?” Zayn asked, but Louis looked to the ceiling with a rasped exhale.

“Nothing.” He breathed, clutching the table until his knuckles turned white.

His cheesecake couldn't get there soon enough.
Six am interval training turned out to be just as much of a nightmare as Louis had expected. Only a few days in, and he was already convinced that his muscles had detached from his bones in protest. At least he had a greasy, carb-loaded breakfast to look forward to, right?

Wrong.

His green, morning breakfast sludge was waiting for him in a foreboding pitcher in the fridge, whispering Louis' name from it's frothy, mossy depths. He opted to take a shower before facing that particular evil.

It was the morning before Harry's interview with Radio 1 (and subsequently, public nuisance #1: Nick Grimshaw) so Louis shot him a friendly text before stepping into the warm spray of the shower to find out if he was nervous.

> And how is our Mr. Styles doing this morning?

By the time Louis stepped back out and checked his phone, a pile of messages were waiting for him from Harry.

> fine .x

> yeah, everything's good so far. :)

> great actually

> I can't find matching socks. I think I have to go sock shopping.

> I could just not wear socks. Is that weird? will anyone be able to notice?

> I should definitely go sock shopping

> no wait, I found some :) :) :) :) :)
can't decide on breakfast

it's ok, I found some bagels

Did you know that bagels are actually Jewish? they originated in Poland

there are two popular styles of bagels in North America. New York style and Montreal style.

I don't know what the difference is

but I still like bagels

sorry. I shouldn't be texting you this much

sorry

sorry Looooo .x

Louis smiled at his screen fondly before responding.

Harry, I'll grab the lads and we'll watch a movie before you have to leave for the interview

Harry responded immediately.

Thanks Bloooooooo .xx

~
“This is an outrage!” Niall declared as he entered the kitchen to see Harry chopping carrots. “What are those? Where's the nachos?”

“Louis has to eat healthy for his movie role.” Harry explained. Louis smiled cheekily from the other side of the kitchen.

“Yes, but I'm not Louis. Where are the nachos?” Niall repeated. Harry laughed and ignored him, carving a smiley face into a piece of carrot.

“Look, it's happy.” Harry said proudly, holding it out to Louis so he could see. Louis approached him and snatched the carrot away before tossing it into his mouth. Harry looked as if he had just been mugged. “Oi!” He protested. “That was my happy carrot. You ate my happy carrot.”

“Food is for eating, Curly, not for playing.” Louis pointed out, but Harry's eyes lit up at the mention of playing with food.

“Try to catch one in your mouth.” He ordered excitedly, positioning himself to toss another bit of carrot. Louis took several steps back and angled himself strategically, his mouth wide open in anticipation.

Harry lofted the orange snack into a graceful arc, landing it squarely in Louis' mouth. They simultaneously threw their arms in the air and cheered in victory.

“Dream team.” Louis declared resolutely with a high five before the three of them joined Zayn and Liam in the living room.

The happy couple was squished into an armchair together, impatiently waiting to press play on the DVD menu for the original Robocop. Interestingly enough, it was the only film all five could agree on. No one was very open to Harry's suggestions of obscure, black and white Italian Neo-Realist films and Niall's many suggestions of The Spongebob Movie fell on deaf ears.

Louis sat between Harry and Niall on the couch, munching disdainfully on his nutritionally approved movie snack. He'd pop one of the offensive morsels into his mouth about every five minutes, always telling himself that it couldn't be nearly as bad as the last piece. The implosion of earthy, organic taste that washed across his taste buds always proved him wrong, though, and he continually responded with a pained groan that was directed at Harry. About halfway through the film and approximately ten snap-pea induced groans in, Harry leaned forward to grab a piece of cauliflower and hand it to Louis.

“Just pretend it's an M&M.” He suggested.

“It tastes nothing like an M&M.” Louis countered.

“Well, yeah, I know. That's why you have to pretend.” Harry said, as if this were obvious. Louis took the white floret and chewed on it open-mouthed in defiance. “That's very attractive.”

“I know it is. It's how I pick up chicks.”

“Oh, and how's that going for you?”


“There are actually some of us here who are rather invested in the dialogue of this movie.” Liam snapped. Louis rolled his head at Liam's protest, before swooning melodramatically and throwing
himself across Harry and Niall's laps. Niall squawked in surprise at the feet that were suddenly kicked into his space.

“I can't exist under these conditions.” Louis claimed breathily.

“I completely understand. Your life is very hard.” Harry attempted to say with a straight face, but a giggle betrayed him. Louis turned onto his back to watch him, admiring the fact that a full-grown man could still giggle with such ease, until Harry spoke again. “You've got cauliflower on your face.”

Harry's hand came to Louis’ cheek easily to brush the vegetable away, but once he made contact, the soft pads of his fingers lingered against his skin. His fingers felt warm, hot even, where they idled on Louis’ cheek, and Louis' breath caught sharply in his throat. Harry's eyes were a radiant green as they stared down at Louis, which was a dazzling contrast to the full pinkness of his lips. His fingers began to stray, leaving a trail of sparked nerves in their wake as they traced Louis' jawline. His strong thumb came to rest on Louis' cheekbone, and honestly, could Harry's lips be any more pink right now? They looked like they could inspire a shade of Valentine's candy or a Shakespearean sonnet.

Without realizing he had sent any commands to his limbs, Louis' hand was on Harry's wrist, rubbing a slow circle into the back of his hand. Harry's eyes flickered to the movement, before locking with Louis' gaze yet again. But Louis' eyes were slowly drifting shut, an unexplainable gravity compelling him to move without any semblance of thought. His body had only made a minute shift forward when Niall jumped to his feet.

“Haz! Hey! Erm, nachos? Yeah? Help me with the oven? Please? Okay? Now?” Niall asked haphazardly. They both stared at Niall for a moment, suddenly remembering where they were. Louis leaned forward without protest, allowing Harry to get to his feet and follow Niall to the kitchen. He leaned back against the armrest and repositioned himself as their footsteps died away, until he finally noticed that Zayn and Liam's attention had fallen solely on him.

“What?” He questioned, looking back and forth between their concerned expressions.

“You just almost kissed Harry.” Liam stated, pointing an accusatory finger toward Louis. Louis sat bolt up right, paranoid eyes turning to the kitchen.

“What are you even talking about? No, I didn't!” He whispered harshly, waiting for the knowing look on Liam's face to relent, but it held strong. “I just had some shit on my face and we looked at each other. That hardly – that's not even – Zayn?”


“Damn right.” Louis said darkly, but at that very moment, Joshua's voice rippled through his thoughts.

You're using him.

Louis stumbled to his feet. “I - erm - I need to get home. Work on lines, and everything.”

“Okay, look, I'm sorry.” Liam said. “I didn't mean to freak you out. Sit back down.”

But Louis was already lacing up his trainers and picking his keys up from the table. The resulting jingle of metal made Harry reappear in the entrance to the living room.

“You're leaving?” He asked.
“Yeah, I've got some work to do. But I'll be watching the interview.” Louis explained, heading for the exit.

“Lou?” Harry said lightly, causing Louis to stop in his tracks.

“Yeah?”

“Goodbye hug?”

Louis' shoulders slumped as his resolution to get out the door as quickly as possible waned. He nodded with a heavy swallow and moved towards Harry, allowing himself to be enveloped in his lanky limbs. Louis made a pointed effort to ignore how Zayn and Liam were staring at them as he gripped into the soft fabric of Harry's shirt. He melted into the contact briefly, before stepping back and avoiding Harry's gaze.

“Good luck tonight.” He said quickly, then raced from the room with everyone's eyes trained on his retreating back.

Once in the safety of his own car, he blasted the radio at full volume, smothering away the toxic thoughts that were already brewing in that lonely corner of his mind where he kept everything locked away.

~

Louis had defeated his fingernail biting habit several years earlier, but somehow, his thumbnail was currently being ripped to shreds between his canines.

Harry's glowing face was filling the telly in Louis' living room, and to all who were watching, he appeared completely affable and at ease. But Louis could see that strange glitter to his eyes, that latent panic that he was trying so hard to disguise behind a wide smile as he chatted congenially with Nick Grimshaw. In truth, Grimshaw was doing most of the talking, with Harry giving slow, drawn out answers intermittently about the upcoming tour.

Louis sent off what was probably his fiftieth text of the evening.

*Your curls are especially curly. Trick of the light?*

He'd been in contact with Harry for the last few hours, texting him throughout hair, makeup, and sound check. Even after Harry had told him he was about to go on and couldn't respond, Louis had only doubled his efforts to comment on every inane thing that came to mind.

On the screen, Grimshaw had become especially excited about one of Harry's answers, causing him to lean forward and touch Harry's shoulder as he asked another question. Louis' focus zeroed in on the touch, over analyzing every aspect of it. Had Harry just stiffened up? Did he seem upset by it? Could Grimshaw tell? Asshole. He can't even tell when Harry is upset. Harry's obviously upset. Maybe not that upset, maybe he's fine. Or maybe he's just really good at hiding it.
He was so engrossed in his analysis that he missed the next couple of questions, only surfacing at the mention of Arrienne's name.

“And how long have you and your girlfriend, Arrienne Brant, been together now?” Grimshaw asked.

“Couple of years.” Harry nodded, not quite meeting Grimshaw's eyes, which was definitely for the best, since a subtle snarkiness had settled onto his face. Asshole.

“So, the two of you were the subject of a lot of media attention a few weeks ago, right?”

“Right. She - erm - she posted this picture of her face covered with bruises, and there was a lot of talk about how that had come about.”

“But it was makeup?” Grimshaw clarified.

“It was makeup, yeah. It was Halloween, and she was going as someone from The Evil Dead, or something. I'm not completely sure. She was in Milan for a show, and I've been in LA for the last couple of months.”

“But there's been a lot of drama following you two around since then.”

“I don't know if that's quite the word I would use.” Harry chuckled.

“Snafu, if you will?”

“Yeah, it was all a misunderstanding, obviously, but erm, it's put a lot of attention on a really serious issue.”

“Domestic abuse.”

“Right.” Harry said. “And Arrienne and I just want to make it very, very clear that domestic abuse is not a joke. We kind of accidentally thrust it into the spotlight, so it's not that surprising that people are, like, joking about it on Twitter, or on late night shows, or whatever. But honestly, it's not joke. None of this is funny. It's a really widespread problem that hurts a lot of people.”

“I couldn't agree more.” Grimshaw commented. “Is there any way that this whole thing could be spun into a positive?”

“Maybe, I hope so. But I think it's just really important that people understand that this is something anyone can try to prevent. If you know someone who is being abused, tell them it's not okay. You might be the first person who's told them that, or you might be the thousandth, but eventually someone is going to get through to them and they're going to get the help they need. We unfortunately live in a society where it's more acceptable to make light of partner violence than it is to have a serious discussion, and that's not going to change until people individually realize that this is not okay, and that they want to make a difference.”

“And on those wise words, we are going to take a commercial break. When we come back, Harry is going to be joined by the rest of Status Solo to perform their new single, 'Paradise Red,' so stick around.” Grimshaw gave a hearty smile to the camera before he turned to Harry to talk to him animatedly, their microphones already muted.

Louis sunk further into his seat as the feed faded to commercials. If that interview wasn't a trending topic by morning, he was going to denounce society on moral grounds. His fingers hovered over the screen of his phone, unable to find words that accurately summed up how incredible every
word that had just come out of Harry's mouth had been. The only sequence of letters he found himself capable of typing was:

*Harrrrrrrryyyyyyyyyyyyyy :):):) xxxxxx*

He switched over to Twitter and swiped through all of Harry's mentions, anxiously waiting for the internet to catch up with the fervor growing in his head. Status Solo performed in the background as he delved through the internet, smiling like a parent at their child's graduation every time he saw something positive about Harry.

Every feeling of fear or trepidation seeped out of Louis, replaced by a warm swell of pride. How had Harry done so well? He was facing the man who'd broken his heart a few years ago, who was questioning him about the biggest disgrace of his career, and somehow, he'd managed to make *that* speech come out of his mouth. How had he done that?

He hadn't even noticed that the interview had ended until Harry's incoming call was filling his screen.

“Harry!” He breathed as he answered.

“Did you watch it?” Harry asked excitedly, and Louis could hear the relief in his voice.

“I did, and it was beautiful, Harry. I'm so proud of you. You did so well.”

“I was just being brave like you.” Harry said sheepishly, which silenced Louis as he struggled to try and choke out a response.

“No, Haz. This was all you. I'm so proud of you.” He said slowly, and he could practically sense Harry letting the words sink in.

“Everyone's heading over to my place.”

“Who's everyone?”

“The band, Nick, and a couple of Nick's friends.”

Something sour slithered through Louis.

“Nick's going over to your house?”

“Yeah, we're getting on really well. It's great. Like, erm, closure, or something. I'm so glad I did this.” Harry said, the smile evident in his voice. “You should come too, Louis. I really want to see you.”

Louis' first thought was to agree immediately, but something stony sunk into his stomach as his eyes glanced over to his open laptop on the coffee table.

“I wish I could, but I'm actually waiting for Joshua to come home so we can talk about something.”

“Is everything okay?”
“We'll see.” Louis said.

“Yikes, sorry. But you'll call me tomorrow?”

“Definitely. Night, Haz. I'm proud of you.”

“Night, Lou.” Harry said happily as the call ended.

Louis set his phone down gently and pulled his computer onto his lap, the levity of Harry's conversation drowned by his open credit card statement. His phone illuminated from beside him with a text from Joshua.

_hey babe. be home soon. bringing study group. that ok? they're excited to meet a movie star ;)_

Louis powered his phone off without responding, trying to diminish the temptation to rip into his boyfriend. He didn't even think that the electronic apathy that was typically lent to text messages would disguise the fury brewing in his veins.

It had started the moment Louis arrived home from Harry's. Between Liam's accusations and the fact that his early morning workouts had turned his muscles into blocks of painful lead, he'd been dead set on taking a long bath. He'd already started the water and was just casually checking his email on his phone when he saw the message. Apparently, there was suspicious activity on one of his credit cards. After checking his wallet to find that the card in question was missing, he realized that there would be no bathtime for Louis William Tomlinson. After his recent success and influx of income, his financials were now mostly in the hands of professionals. This card, however, was an old one; one that he'd barely used in the last couple of years. All the same, he felt compelled to get to the bottom of it.

Sore muscles still shouting their protests at the lack of sudsie water, Louis called the fraudulent activity line and looked through his statement as a representative slowly ticked off each purchase over the last couple of weeks, confirming whether or not he had made it. No, he hadn't spent twenty eight dollars at Starbucks on November second. No, he hadn't gotten a three hundred dollar massage on November fifth.

He impatiently flicked ahead of where the woman was reciting purchases to spot the most recent one, which was what had apparently triggered the suspicious activity warning. Whoever had stolen his card had just spent two thousand dollars at a firearm emporium.

“Erm, they bought a gun today.” He blurted, interrupting the woman.

“I'm sorry?”

“They bought a gun. They spent two thousand dollars on a gun. Do we have to call the police, or something?”

“Sir, there's no indication that the purchase was illegal, apart from the source of the funds. Are you looking at your statement now?”

“Yeah, I've got it on my computer.”

“In the interest of saving time, could you possibly look back and find the last purchase you made
Louis scrolled up the page, eyes barely registering the Amazon orders and trips to Whole Foods that certainly weren't made by him. But his whole body stiffened with an icy jolt as he recognized one of the purchases. It was the fancy, electric fruit juicer that Harry had found unopened that morning he had made breakfast. Which meant one thing.

Joshua.

And click, there it was. Reality set in. Massage, Starbucks, endless Kindle books. That was a pretty accurate bio of Joshua's interests. And the gun, goddammit the gun.

Having grown up in a country with extremely restrictive firearm laws, Louis had never touched a gun in his life. This might be difficult to believe, considering the rather large gun locker that was currently residing in his garage, but that monstrosity was courtesy of Joshua. Louis understood that Americans had a much different relationship with firearms than those in the UK, so that's why he tried not to think much about the fact that Joshua was practically raised on a shooting range. Shooting had been the primary bonding activity between Joshua and his father since he could walk.

The thing is, Louis would have paid for any of the expenditures on his statement. Joshua was a student; Louis understood that. He was happy to help out financially because they were partners, but a two thousand dollar gun? And why did Joshua feel the need to sneak around like this, toting his boyfriend's credit card like a valley girl at the mall?

And so Louis sat in silence, kneading his sore bicep, until Joshua arrived home. He spilled into the living room with several overhyped University students, all bustling around and chirping excitedly as they introduced themselves to Louis. Louis shook each of their hands, keeping his face calm until he followed Joshua into the kitchen.

“How was your day?” Joshua asked brightly as he threw a bag of popcorn into the microwave. Louis plucked a water glass from a cabinet and filled it up without answering, his throat suddenly very dry. “Louis?” Joshua inquired, looking at him as Louis swilled water from his glass. He shifted his aching muscles uncomfortably as he made eye contact with his oblivious boyfriend.

“Well, apparently, I had a fantastic day at the shooting range with that new gun I spent two grand on.” He said sarcastically. Joshua's shift in demeanor was slight, but it didn't go unnoticed by Louis.

“It was a birthday present for my dad.” Joshua said darkly.

“The dad who won't speak to me for being a grade-A poof? Really glad I could bank roll that for him.”

“You'll just find anything to yell at me about, won't you?”

“How did they even sell that to you? That wasn't even your name on the card. Don't they do background checks or something?” Louis questioned.

“The owner knows me. He's a friend of the family.” Joshua said. Louis rolled his eyes.

“Just give the card back.” Louis demanded, holding his empty hand out. Joshua pulled his wallet out and began rifling through it.

“Whatever you say, mom.” He snapped, handing the card over.
“No, don't – don't fucking do that! Don't make me feel like you're my child. I fucking hate that.” Louis winced as his shoulder cramped again. He massaged it as he drank the last drops from his water glass. Joshua's eyebrows raised as he noticed Louis' discomfort.

“What hurts, Lou?” Joshua bit out maliciously. “Did Harry get tired of beating his girlfriend and move on to you?”

Without any form of rational thought, Louis slammed his glass to the floor, shattering it into jagged fragments that glimmered as they skirted across the tiles. The harsh clatter silenced the voices from the other room.

Scarcely a second had passed before regret rose within Louis. He opened his mouth to plead for forgiveness, but was stopped short as Joshua turned and wrenched open a cabinet. He snatched two wine glasses from a shelf and sent them to the ground with a spray of glass shards.

“Is this what we're doing now, Louis!? Is this how we talk to each other!?” Joshua screamed, sending two more glasses to the floor. Louis shirked away as more shards went flying in his direction. “Is this how we resolve our problems!? Because that's completely fine with me!”

Louis jumped back as a stack of bowls met their violent end on the tiles, which prompted him to flee to the living room to grab his keys and phone from the table. The terrified eyes of Joshua's study group followed his flight, but his focus was squarely on getting away from the tirade that was happening in the kitchen.

His hand was on the front door handle as the crashing of dinnerware silenced and Joshua's voice rang out behind him.

“Where are you going?” He demanded.

“Where do you think?” Louis shot back angrily, slamming the door behind him.

A sickly adrenaline surged through him as he walked down the driveway, unlocking his car as he powered his phone back up. He slid into the driver's seat as he punched in his phone's passcode with the intention of calling Harry, but his notifications lit up with a slew of missed calls from Niall. Confused, he clicked Niall's name and pressed the phone to his ear as he started the ignition.

“Tommo?” came Niall's flustered voice after only one ring.

“What's up?” Louis asked, craning his neck over his shoulder as he started to back up.

“Little bit of an emergency.” He said hesitantly. “We kind of lost Harry.”

Louis slammed on his breaks a few inches from the end of his driveway.

“What do you mean?”

“Things were going really great, honestly! We were drinking and having fun and everything. But then he was talking to Nick, and I think Nick might have said something kind of triggering, or something? Next thing, Harry's off his ass and we're trying to control him. I think he took something, or twenty somethings. Then he was just – he was just gone.”

“Are any of his cars gone?”

“No, so we've been searching the house and the backyard for an hour but we haven't found anything.”
“You've been searching the backyard for an hour?”

“It's a big backyard, Louis!” Niall said with exasperation.

“I'll be there as fast as I can. Text me if you hear from him.” Louis said, hanging up and stomping on the gas pedal. His engine hummed aggressively as he whizzed down the dark street.

He had never broken so many traffic laws within one commute before. He raced through every yellow light with alarming disregard for his acceleration, wove in and out of lanes between other cars, and only regarded stop signs with a brief tap to his breaks. He did much of this one-handed, as he was calling Harry's phone every few minutes, listening to it ring before going to voicemail.

Niall was waiting in the front doorway when Louis pulled around Harry's long driveway. He parked hurriedly before skipping up the steps toward the house.

“Find anything?” Louis asked breathlessly as they moved inside.

“No, but we're pretty sure he isn't in the backyard.”

“Yeah, no shit, Horan. So what do we do? Call the police?”

“No, no, no. He's on some pretty heavy shit. No police.”

They entered the main living room to find a gaggle of others, all talking amongst themselves with worried expressions on the other side of the room. Louis recognized the gangly profile of Nick Grimshaw, complete with a tall quiff atop his head and stylish boots on his feet. Grimshaw turned at their entrance, raising his eyebrows with recognition, which made bile rise in Louis' throat.

“Grimshaw needs to leave.” Louis said quietly.

“He's trying to help.”

“Harry's going to be completely humiliated if he's still hanging around when we find him. Can't we try to give him a break?”

Niall pursed his lips before nodding. He walked over to the others, offering a half-hearted excuse about how there was nothing to worry about, and he and Louis had it under control. Louis ran his hands through his hair, feeling the shaggy strands frizzing beneath his touch, and looked up just in time to see Grimshaw approaching him.

“Louis Tomlinson.” He stated, coming to a stop in front of Louis.

“Yes?” Louis responded, feeling suddenly defensive.

“You actually ran out here in the middle of the night?”

“What's your point, mate?”

“I thought it was just media hype, but is there actually something to this whole 'Larry Stylinson' thing?” He smiled condescendingly.

“I think you were just leaving.” Louis said mock-sweetly, moving to walk past him until his phone started ringing. Louis couldn't answer it fast enough. “Harry?” Niall spun around to face Louis.

“Loooooooou, heyyyyyyy.” Harry's low voice drawled.
“Is that him?” Niall asked. Louis nodded, trying to focus on Harry's voice, rather than the fact that everyone in the room was now watching him.

“That's Harry? He's seriously calling you?” Grimshaw asked incredulously. Louis should have ignored him and tried to get information from Harry, but there was something vile dripping from every part of this man that just made Louis snap.

“Yes he's calling me, because I don't have a history of hanging up on him when he needs me.” He snapped, making a hand signal to Niall, urging him to usher everyone away. Niall complied, leading everyone to the door. Nick lingered, obviously deciding how to respond, but Niall's hand was quickly on his elbow, leading him away. Louis put the phone back to his ear.

“Harry, what's wrong? Are you okay?”

“Mmmm, dunno.” Harry chuckled, his voice sounding muffled as if his mouth was pressed into the sleeve of his coat.

“Where are you?”

“At a table.” Harry's words were overlapping groggily. The sound made Louis' skin crawl.

“Tell me where you are and I can come pick you up.”

Harry laughed again as a stern, female voice sounded in the background.

“Oh nooooo.” Harry whispered

“Who is that? Who's talking to you?”

“She's mad. She's gonna call the popo, po, po.” Harry giggled again, only interrupted by his own jagged intake of breath. “M'in trouble.”

“Harry, love, you're going to be fine. Just please hand the phone to the woman talking to you. Can you do that for me please?”

“But I wanna talk t'you.”

“I'll be there in a few minutes, I just need to talk to her first.” Louis implored. He waited breathlessly as Harry grumbled on the other end before noisily handing the phone away with a muttered explanation. After the handful of seconds dragged on like years, a female voice began speaking.

“He needs to leave. Now.” She said harshly.

“Yes, I know. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm his friend and I can come get him right now if you please, please don't involve the police. I am actually begging you right now.” Louis pled, waiting for her response.

“He's from that band, isn't he?”

Louis shut his mouth, afraid of the precipice he was teetering on. Was she about to ask for a bribe? Or was she already snapping pictures of him, ready to sell them to the press?

“He's just – he's just a regular guy, and he needs someone to help him out. Please understand.” He said. She mulled over her options momentarily. Finally, she relayed the address to the twenty four hour diner she worked at. Louis thanked her profusely before hanging up and heading out to his
The diner wasn't far away, but Louis still drove as recklessly as he could manage without damaging city property. He pulled into the diner's parking lot, the white light from the kitschy, fifties themed dining area spilling onto the mostly deserted parking spaces. He raced inside and scanned the area, spotting an old man reading a newspaper in the corner and a very perturbed middle aged waitress quickly approaching him.

“You're the one from the phone?” She clarified disapprovingly.

“Is he still here?” Louis asked. She responded by pointing one manicured fingernail behind him. He turned to spot a crumpled mass of a man slumped over in a red checkered booth, his face flat on the table and buried beneath his arms. His lofty curls were disheveled as they fell to his shoulders, frayed and tangled. His shoulders lifted heavily with every breath. “Thank you, honestly, thank you so much.” Louis said to the waitress as he turned his attention back to her. He pulled his wallet out. “Let me pay you, or something.”

“No, just take care of him.” She said resolutely.

“Thank you. And, sorry, again.” Louis began to step away, but stopped short. “Actually, could I possibly get some coffee?”

She didn't seem amused by the request, but she strutted away all the same, in search of a coffee pot. Louis finally turned his attention to Harry, noticing that his hands were now erratically toiling through his own hair. He sat down gently beside him, alerting him as the seat dipped. Harry sat up with a lurch, recognizing Louis with an excitement that was glazed over by many layers of intoxication.

“Louis’ here.” He moaned happily, his eyes fluttering around listlessly. Despite the debilitating inebriation, Harry was still able to muster up a boyish excitement at seeing Louis, which made the corners of Louis' eyes prickle painfully. He wrapped an arm around his broad shoulders, pulling Harry against him. His head sagged against Louis heavily as he struggled over his own breaths. The waitress reappeared at the table, setting down a white, nondescript coffee cup.

“I'll just take the check now, please.” Louis told her, as she poured the steaming, brown liquid into his cup. She bustled away, her eyes lingering on Harry. He pushed a mass of brown curls out of Harry's face as she disappeared. “How's it going, Haz?” He asked quietly.

“Fucked up.” Harry whispered. “I fucked up s'bad.”

“Do you remember how you got here?”

“Mmm, there were people – was with ’em – but lost ’em. Left. Then I walked.”

The waitress returned with a black folio housing the check, which Louis slotted his debit card into and handed back to her. She rolled her eyes at the fact that he was using his card for a $1.79 cup of coffee as she walked away again.

“Are you okay? Does anything hurt?” Louis asked.

“Everything hurts.” He responded throatily. “Take me home. Take my – my home?”

“Soon, love.” Louis' fingers flexed across Harry's skin, feeling the goose pimples that were sprouting up on his arms. “Take my jacket, Harry.”
“No, Louis, m'not gonna – not gonna steal your jack – jacket.” Harry protested dazedly, but Louis had already wiggled out of his hoodie and was struggling to get Harry's limp arms to cooperate long enough to get into the sleeves. The fabric was stretched taut over his much larger frame, but Harry pulled the hood up contentedly before his head lolled back onto Louis' shoulder.

The receipt arrived with Louis' card, and he left a two hundred dollar tip for the untouched cup of coffee with a scribbled thank you next to his signature. He gripped Harry's hand and gently pulled him from the booth, leading him stumbling out the doors and into the parking lot.

“S'lovely. You're all lovely.” He called over his shoulder as the doors closed behind them. Louis opened the passenger door for Harry, helping him settle clumsily into the seat and fastened his seat belt. “Steering wheel's on the wrong side.”

“We're in America, Haz.” Louis closed the door slowly, and by the time he'd rounded the car and slid into the driver's seat, Harry had slumped low and kicked his feet up onto the dashboard. “You okay?”

“No.” Harry murmured as Louis set the car in reverse. “I did the worst.”

“There are much worse things you could have done.”

“I'm a ruiner. I ruin things.”

“You haven't ruined a single thing.”

“I ruin every – everything. And I did – and I with Nick, and -” Harry laughed suddenly, the muscles in his neck straining. “I ruined it.”

“What did that asshole say to you?” Louis asked angrily, turning to Harry, who shook his head. “Harry, tell me. Did he flirt with you? Or say something shitty? Because it's not fucking true, whatever he said.”

“Is though.”

“I promise you it isn't.”

“Asked me about you.” Harry said, inexplicably flaring his fingers. “Surprise.”

“Me?”

“He thought we're together, so he kept – kept asking bout you. Bout Lou. And I's like, n-no, not Louis. Not me and Louis.”

“Then, well, it's obvious that he's just been stalking you on the internet lately. You didn't ruin anything, he just knows he fucked up and now he's jealous.”

“S'not it.”

“What do you mean?” Louis questioned.

“Nick's right. Can't hide from him. He's always – always right. Now everyone's gonna hate me.”

“Harry, stop. No one is going to hate you.” Louis said forcefully.

“You're going t'hate me.”
“I will not. How could I ever hate you?”

“M’lying to you again.” Harry buried his face into the glass of the car window, his breath fogging its shining surface.

“What are you lying about?”

“Gonna hate me.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes you are.”

“Just tell me, Harry.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Gonna hate me.”

“Just tell me.”

“Gonna hate me.”

“I am not going to hate you, just tell me Harry!”

“I have a crush on you.”

Louis’ senses awoke with another surge through his stomach. His gaze snapped over to Harry, who was wearing a manic, tear-strewn smile and staring at the roof of the car.

“What?” Louis stammered.

“Ha! I ru - I ruined it. Again. I ruined it cause you just – just wanna be my mate and take care of me and be nice, but I had to get crushed on you and because I'm a ruiner who ruins good things.”

“Harry-”

“Louis, I don't feel good.” Harry bolted upright, his skin glazed with a thin layer of sweat. Louis whipped the car onto the side of the road as Harry tore off his seatbelt and shoved his door open. He doubled over as he retched into the dry cheat grass along the highway, a sympathetic pain shooting through Louis’ chest with every agonized gag.

Louis turned to dig around in the backseat, fishing out his water bottle from the gym earlier, which was still half full. He placed it in Harry's lap, who swilled the lukewarm water in his mouth and spat it out onto the side of the road. He sunk back into his seat, his entire body shaking with each breath and his entire face flushed. Louis opened the glove box and procured a package of gum, handing one to Harry.

He put the gum in his mouth, chewing on it gratefully as he clamped his eyes shut and rested his head back against the seat.

“Can we go home, please?” Harry asked, sounding much more sober than he had before.

“Harry, I don't want you to be upset about this.” Louis said tentatively, still watching Harry.
“I just want to go home.” He responded, eyes still shut and unflinching. Louis reached over to close the car door and merged back onto the highway. Gently, he crept his hand over to meet Harry's, which was resting on his leg. Harry twined their fingers together tightly at Louis' touch. Louis gave a slight squeeze, and it sent a tingle down his spine when Harry squeezed back.

He didn't release the hold, opting to drive home one-handed rather than endure a ten minute car ride without Harry's hand in his.

Niall was still at Harry's when they arrived, his worry alleviated when he saw Harry in one piece. They both helped him into bed, the entire scene very reminiscent of the night after he'd jumped off the roof into the pool. Harry's murmurs were fairly muted, however, and he cuddled into his pillows when his body hit the bed.

“I'm gonna stay the night.” Niall said. “Gonna grab a shower first, though”

Louis nodded and waited for Niall to disappear through the bedroom door before he perched on the side of the bed beside Harry's curled body.

“You still awake?” He asked quietly.

“M'sorry.” Harry muttered, his eyes still shut.

“Please don't be.”

“Shouldn't have said any of that. I'm a bad friend.” Harry's heavy lids waxed open, his pupils massive as they looked up at Louis.

Louis looked back at him, trying to weave together some heartfelt speech that would make Harry understand what a treasure he was, once and for all.

Instead, the only words he could think to say were, “That's so untrue. That's so thoroughly untrue, and I just wish you could see that.” Harry's eyes fluttered closed once again.

“S'Joshua?” he breathed.

“Huh?”

“Did you get to talk to Joshua, like you said – said on the phone?”

“Yeah. We had a really bad fight. Not our worst, but probably the second worst.”

“No, Louis.”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Louis sighed, absently running his fingers through a lock of Harry's hair.

“You have to go talk to him.”

“I was thinking about kipping here for the night.”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “Gotta go be with him.” Louis took a moment to breathe, reminding himself that Harry was safely in bed before he could make any sort of argument to head back home.

“Night, Haz.” He said softly, but Harry's quiet stillness made him realize that he had already drifted off.
He pushed himself up from the bed, his muscles once again panging from the day's exploits. He treaded slowly through the dark room, sliding his phone from his pocket and unlocking it. Waiting for him in angry black font was a text from Joshua, reading:

*don't come home tonight*

Well, that was that.

The fact that the world's most comfortable couch was within his eyesight gave Louis a very convincing argument to acquiesce to Joshua's demand. He collapsed into the plush upholstery, fully clothed, and let the sleepiness curdling above his eyelids drag them down, surrendering to exhaustion.

~

Something was clenched around Louis' lungs, wringing violently with icy claws. He couldn't breathe through the thick panic coursing down his bones, bright lights exploding behind his eyelids as he clamped them shut painfully. He was choking on darkness; it was slithering down his throat and enveloping his entire body, leaving him helpless as his nails dug into his own arms.

He wanted to scream, to call for help, but nothing escaped him except wretched whimpers; half-shrieks that were smothered by a palpable terror. His body was wracked by a series of terse shivers as he released a sob. Hot tears were streaking across his face, but his rigid bones wouldn't even allow him to wipe them away.

He was suffocating, blindly, painfully. No air could sneak it's way into his lungs, and his consciousness felt as if it was shriveling away. He was suffocating, and he couldn't save himself.

“Louis? What's wrong? Wake up!”

A hand was on his shoulder, shaking him gently. The hold on his lungs didn't relent as he let go of another sob.

“Please, open your eyes. Everything's okay.”

The hand was on his face now, softly wiping away tears and stroking his taut skin. His eyelids rolled open heavily to see Harry's worried face only a few inches away.

“He-har,” he sputtered, confused.

“I'm right here. I won't let anything hurt you.” He said, and Louis realized that he had never seen such honesty in someone's eyes before.

It was melting, all of it. The icy clench, the contracted muscles, the stiff bones. Everything was fading into warm molasses, the haze over his vision dissolving into clarity. And there was Harry, staring back at him with a warmness that radiated from his every fiber. Louis finally remembered where he was, sleeping on the couch in Harry's bedroom.
“You okay?” He asked, seeing the change in Louis.

Louis didn't say anything in return, instead tugging at Harry's hand beseechingly. Harry watched him without understanding until Louis scooted back further into the couch and pulled Harry by his elbow.

The tall man clambered onto the couch with Louis, their bodies aligned and breaths mingling as they faced each other in the darkness. Louis nuzzled into Harry's chest, weaving his arms tightly around his middle. Harry reciprocated by curling himself around Louis, enveloping him in nothing but warmth and soft skin. He hooked his chin over the top of Louis' head and threaded his fingers through the back of his hair protectively.

“I'm not going to let anything hurt you.” Harry said.

Louis closed his eyes, an unprecedented peace fluxing through him.

“I know.”
“In all chaos there is calculation. Droppin glasses just to hear them break.”

-Lorde

“Shit!”

This exclamation was followed by a thud and a cold spot on Louis' shoulders where Harry's arms had previously been. Harry clamored clumsily to his feet, following the warble of his cell phone from the bedside table across the room. Louis' eye lid begrudgingly cracked open to watch Harry's hunched form through the darkness, the November sun apparently still obscured by the horizon.

“Hello?” Harry answered quietly, his voice husky and sleep-bitten, as he made a beeline for the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

Preceded by a soft pitter patter across the floor, Glitter hopped onto the sofa and curled into the warm stretch of cushion left in Harry's absence.

“No, cat. That's Harry's spot.” Louis grumbled, placing one finger on Glitter's pink nose. “Harry's sitting there. Don't you like him? Don't you respect him as your lord and master?”

Glitter blinked at him apathetically before rolling onto her back, as if proving her dominance over her surroundings. Louis was left idly scratching behind her ears as he watched the yellow crack of light beneath the bathroom door, listening to the low hum of Harry's voice on the phone. When his barely audible murmurs were replaced by the spray of shower water against a tiled floor, Louis' eyelids finally fell shut once again.

He came back to attention, practically convinced that he hadn't even fallen asleep, as the bathroom door swung open. Harry's figure was silhouetted in the bathroom's light, haphazardly buttoning a shirt and blinking painfully.

“Did I wake you up?” He asked, taking notice of Louis' open eyes before he shut off the bathroom light.

“Initially, yes.” Louis responded as Harry ambled over to the couch. “But I would have gone back to sleep if your cat hadn't jumped up here and started yammering on about tuna fish and middle eastern politics.” Harry grinned weakly as he sat on the edge of the couch, running a hand down Glitter's back. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Er, yeah.” He muttered. “That was my lawyer. I have to go talk to my management.”

“Your lawyer? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. S'fine.”
“But it's so early. What time is it?”

“Don't worry about it. Go back to sleep.” Harry insisted.

“But is everything okay?”

“Yes. Everything is okay, Louis.” He answered. “Did Niall stay the night, too?”

“I think he grabbed a guest room.”

“Go back to sleep, Lou. I'll be back before you wake up.” Harry rose slowly to his feet, but was impeded by Louis tugging at his pant leg.

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Goodbye hug?”

Harry's responding grin was dripping with warmth as he lowered his top half down to hug Louis. They were forced into an awkward angle in an attempt to not squish the slumbering cat between them, but Louis was still content by the end of the embrace.

“Go back to sleep.” Harry repeated as he slipped away, forgetting to close his bedroom door as he disappeared into the hallway. Louis could faintly hear him rapping at a door and whispering, “Nialler?” before he closed his eyes yet again.

~

The sun had finally decided to show its face by the time Louis awoke. For several serene seconds, he stretched against the plush comfort of the couch, inhaling the crisp air and taking in the gentle cadence of morning sunlight.

But like a pinprick to an inflated balloon, the memories from the night before burst forward in a single swell.


_I have a crush on you._

And by some poetic twist of fate, each of these had occurred within the same twenty-four hour period. In his infinite wisdom and maturity, Louis decided that the best course of action was to not dwell on any of it. Instead, he got to his feet in search of breakfast.

He found Niall in the kitchen, his face as bright-eyed and energetic as it probably had been the day he was born, as he snarfed down a piece of gooey, meat-covered pizza.

“Didn't realize you were still here, Tommo.” He commented, procuring another slice from the grease-stained delivery box on the counter. Louis sat at one of the bar stools on the other side of the counter, resting his chin on his crossed arms.

“How did you find someone to deliver pizza this early?” Louis inquired.
“I've lived in LA for two years. I know where to get pizza at any time from any part of southern California.” He answered simply, angling his slice into his mouth with practiced skill. “Want some?”

“Considering the fact that I accidentally missed my gym session this morning, pizza for breakfast is probably a bad career move.”

Niall shrugged as he shoved the entire crust of his slice into his mouth in one bite.

“So, about last night?” Niall questioned. “Should we talk about everything?” Louis groaned and buried his face in his arms.

“Second thought, I will have a piece of pizza.”

“No you will not!” Came a scandalized roar from deeper inside the house. They both turned to find that Harry had arrived home and was currently walking briskly toward the kitchen as if he were about to rescue Louis from a swift death. “You are not having pizza for breakfast. You need nutrition.” He wrenched open the fridge door without looking at either of them. Niall raised his eyebrows to Louis as they both drank in Harry's appearance. He was dressed with uncharacteristic formality, each of his buttons actually fastened together up his chest. But his apparel was in stark contrast to his bloodshot eyes, sallow skin, and tangled hair that looked like the casualty of a nervous hand raking through it one too many times.

Harry distractedly threw his suit jacket onto the tiled floor as he gathered an array of brightly colored fruits and vegetables onto the counter from the fridge.

“How'd it go?” Niall asked.

“Alright.” Harry said expressionlessly, brandishing a large knife and beginning to slice through the green flesh of a bell pepper. Niall nodded awkwardly, leaving the snick of Harry's knife as the only continuing sound in the kitchen.

Louis had the distinct impression that they were both tiptoeing around a tender subject, and the polite thing to do would be to change the topic of conversation and not pry into Harry's personal matters.

Except fuck that.

“Okay, what was so important that you had to haul yourself out of this house at the ass-crack of dawn this morning?” Louis asked. Harry froze momentarily, mid-vegetable slice.

“Someone got a picture of me last night.” He said, his back still to Louis. “Had to pay him off.”

“Someone got a picture of you? It wasn't that waitress, was it?”

“No, it was before that.”

“But it's taken care of?”

“Mhmm.”

“And that had to be taken care of before the sun came up?” Louis continued to question.

“They probably thought if they got him that early, they wouldn't be able to get ahold of Sophia.” Niall pointed out.
“She answered on the second ring.” Harry remarked.

“Good girl.”

“Who’s Sophia?” Louis asked.

“Harry’s attorney.”

“And yeah, why did you need your lawyer? I’m very confused by all of this.” Said Louis. Niall leaned against the counter, trying to catch Harry's gaze as if asking for his permission to keep talking. Harry nodded tersely before plunging into the task of tearing apart kale leaves.

“Harry's the face of the band, so he's a lot more wrapped up in legal stuff than the rest of us.” Niall explained. “Like, he's had to sign agreements and contracts all over the fucking place when he started to get recognizable. Plus all of the nondisclosure bullshit. And like, the last couple of years, they’ve been using all of it to take advantage of him. Like, they twist everything around so they can control his every move. They've always done this thing where they pull Harry into a room all alone and guilt him into whatever they want, and they always get away with it because,” Niall looked back at Harry to gauge how well he was following their conversation, leaving several unspoken words hanging above them. But Louis was confident that he knew what Niall was going to say. They took advantage of Harry because he's Harry. Because he's so nice, he would probably get up from his own death bed if there weren't enough chairs to go around. “So about a year ago, me and the rest of the band told management that it was going to be a real problem if Harry didn't have legal representation at each of their meetings. Scared the shit out of ‘em. They haven't been able to get away with anything since Harry hired Sophia.”

“She's smart?” Louis asked.

“And terrifying. Perfect for our young Harold.”

The conversation was cut short by the angry whir of a blender as Harry's best impersonation of a green sludge breakfast smoothie materialized. Once liquefied, he poured the thick green drink into a tall glass and topped it with an ironically cheerful pink straw.

With a glass clink, he dropped it onto the counter in front of Louis and looked at him expectantly, making eye contact with him for the first time that morning. Harry's eyes were an all-too-familiar stain of red against green as he stared resolutely at Louis. The shadow of the previous night crept over them both in that moment, curdling in Louis' chest and stifling any attempts of congruent thought or full breaths.

“M'gonna take my breakfast poolside.” Niall decided, noticing that the air in the room had for some reason become as thick as syrup. Slice in mouth and box in hand, he raced from the kitchen in a blur of blonde highlights. Harry picked absently at the counter top as Louis took a long drag from his smoothie in a futile attempt to ignore the tension.

“Mmm.” He hummed with surprise. “This is actually pretty good.”

“I think we need to talk about last night.” Harry stated bluntly, making Louis' pulse falter.

“Oh?” He asked in faux-nonchalance. “What about?”

“It's just a crush, Louis.”

Louis' mouth clamped shut, any semblance of wit smothered away.
“Haz,”

“It's just a crush.” Harry repeated. “It's not anything – like – it's just a little crush. I'll get over it. It's easier for me to just get over it than for-” He stopped short, obviously flustered with himself. “I just really don't want this to change anything between us.”

Louis was frowning down at his hands, watching his knuckles turn white from where they were clenched around his green drink.

Harry's words were so present. So unavoidably present. There was no distraction to protect Louis from what he was saying. They were alone, unimpeded, standing with only a few feet of intangible air between them, and Harry had said the words that Louis had been so afraid he would say. Wouldn't it have just been easier to ignore what had happened? Wouldn't that have been preferable to pouring everything out on the table in the full light of day, Harry's confession brought to life between them?

And wow.

Harry had a crush on Louis.

Wow.

Of all the beautiful, interesting, worldly men that had surely sashayed in and out of Harry's life, he had somehow found something in Louis to be crush-worthy?

Louis' store of air had somehow been trapped at the base of his stomach, swirling mockingly as he struggled to breathe. An electrifying pang swooped down the entire length of his body, crowned by a deafening fuzziness in his brain.

He only grasped onto clarity as Joshua's words echoed in the recesses of his mind.

You're using him.

And it was suddenly clear that every prior notion of human anatomy was incorrect, since there was very obviously a thick bone that ran through the center of everyone's brain. Louis was completely sure of this, since he'd just felt his own snap in half.

It splintered into off-cast shrapnel, severing cords of thought and extinguishing any sparks of ideas. His stiff neck managed to look up, even as Louis felt his brain being grated into ribbons.

And yet, despite everything, there was Harry. Impossibly, Harry was still there, curls and whimsy, smiles and perfection. But in this moment, every complexity that had breathed life into Harry was irrelevant. The man before Louis was reduced to frightened green eyes and a worried quiver of pink lips.

It's just a crush.

That's what Harry had said.

It's just a little crush.

Louis needed so desperately for those words to be true. He yearned for it. There was no other option that would be even partially acceptable. This had to be okay. It needed to be okay. It couldn't be this massive revelation, beating and squirming like an exposed artery on the counter between them. It needed to be simple. Resolved.
It need to be okay.

“It's okay, Harry.” Louis breathed, as if passing judgment.

And with that, it was. It was okay. Because those words had to be true. Just as everything Harry had said was true, so was this statement. Louis said it, so it had to be true. It needed to be true.

The relief felt forced, manufactured even, but it made much more sense than the alternative. Everything was fine. They were good. It was just a little crush. People get little crushes all the time, and then they get over them. It was just a tiny, inconsequential little crush. Nothing to worry about.

And really, how was it even possible for someone like Harry to develop a crush on someone like Louis? This was Harry Styles for fuck's sake. He could probably part the red sea just by smiling at it. And he had somehow convinced himself that he had feelings for Louis? Louis, who had recently spent an entire day in his briefs and socks, eating cornflakes and playing a bubble shooter game on his phone? He hadn't even been able to beat the bubble shooter game!

Somehow, he'd had the unbelievable good fortune of getting close to Harry, but somewhere in there, Harry had become confused. He'd fallen for some idea of Louis; some caricature that didn't actually exist. Eventually, Harry would find the right person for himself, and this mistake would become clear. It would become an embarrassing little mistake he would look back on and think, 'What was I even thinking?' And when that day arrived, Louis would still be there by his side, supporting him like the friend he'd promised to always be.

That was the truth in the situation. That was the absolute, undeniable truth.

All of this was going to work out. It was going to be okay.

“Nothing's going to change.” Louis remarked, his confidence slowly returning. “You're going to have to try a lot harder than that to get rid of me.”

Harry exhaled with a smile, giving Louis the impression that he hadn't taken a breath for several minutes.

“What're you up to today?” Harry asked, relieved by the turn in conversation.

“I'm still waiting for the prodigal boyfriend to invite me back to the house, so I was hoping you'd let me follow you around all day like a stray animal and watch what you do.”

“Well, today I'm planning you a party to celebrate your new movie role, so I guess you can tag along.” Harry smirked mischievously. Louis rolled his eyes.

“Oi, I'm not some kind of Cinderella for you to just endlessly throw parties for.” Louis complained.

“Of course not.” Harry retorted, turning back to the fridge. “I want to be Cinderella.”

“Sorry curly, but you're a brunette. You'll have to settle for Belle.”

“And you'll have to settle for the beast.”

“He's hairy, mean, and never has to cook his own food. Sounds pretty apt.” Louis admitted, suddenly realizing that he was now shipping himself and Harry together as a Disney couple. That's probably a no-no when it comes to platonic guy friends who don't have crushes on each other.
Harry turned from the fridge with a white package in hand. He placed it on the counter and pulled back the white paper, revealing the fresh sheen of a pink, shining salmon.

“You're not making me a smoothie from that, are you?” Louis gawked.

“It's for Glitter's breakfast.” Harry explained, already focused on slicing the fish into thin strips.

“Harrrrrry.”

“What?”

“She's a cat.”

“Cat's have to eat, too.”

“Yeah, but like, cat food. From a can.”

“But I love her. I want her to have everything from life.”

He grinned at Harry, unsure if he had just felt an actual twinge of jealousy about a cat.

~

The sun had already set, and Louis was still lying across the plush rug on Harry's floor, struggling with a rubik's cube he'd found in Harry's junk drawer. Despite having no prior knowledge of how to solve the square shaped puzzle, he was intent that sheer force of will would eventually make him it's master.

Harry was nearby, also sitting on the floor as he rolled himself a joint from a bohemian-hipster weed box. Still deep in concentration, Louis could only offer a mumbled, “No thank you” when Harry offered him a drag. He was still waiting for Joshua to invite him back home, and he knew that the conversation would go much more smoothly if he wasn't high for it.

Harry's arm shot back after Louis' refusal.

“Oh erm - yeah - sorry. No. I'll - erm - sorry.” Harry stammered, moving to snuff it out against the top of the weed box from whence it came. Louis' eyes darted up from the object of his concentration to watch Harry.

“You can go ahead. I don't mind.” Louis said.

“Don't want to be rude.” Harry muttered feebly.

“It's not rude, Haz. It's your house.”

“You just always – always seem like...” Harry's thoughts wandered. “You never touch drugs or anything, so I didn't-”

“Oh, no! I'm not like, prude or anything.” Louis said. “I just don't want to be high if Joshua calls, and I made my mum this promise when I moved here that I wouldn't try anything harder than marijuana. So yeah, that's the only reason I don't like, partake, or anything. Can't break a promise to my mum.”
“That's sweet, Lou.” Harry grinned.

“Well, she's still pretty convinced that I'm going to be a tragic member of the 27 club, dead before thirty like Jim Morrison and Amy Winehouse.”

“You're 24. There's still time.”

“25 next month.”

“Next month? Your birthday's coming up?”

“Christmas eve.”

“Christmas eve?” Harry blanched.

“I'm honestly used to it.”

“Christmas eve?”

“Yeah, I mean, it sucked growing up, but it's not such a big deal anymore.” Louis admitted. “Harry, you still look upset.”

“Christmas eve?”

“Harry!”

“Well does everyone at least do something special for you?”

“Sometimes. Depends on the year.”

“Well it shouldn't. Your birthday should be perfect every year.” Harry stated with that simplistic idealism that came so easily to him. Louis was endlessly endeared by this part of Harry, the part that refused to believe in anything that wasn't exactly how it should be. “What did you do last year? Did Joshua do something amazing and special?”

“The holidays have always been kind of difficult for Joshua and me.” Louis admitted, the words bridging his thoughts to the memory from lunch with Liam the other day. Liam's words had unknowingly bit Louis in that tender spot that he thought had long since healed. It was like a wound festering around a knife; it didn't hurt until someone tampered with the blade.

Somehow, without Louis being at all aware, Liam and Zayn had already known that something had happened last year. His best friends had always known about it, making his secret shame larger than it was before. It wasn't just the slinking shadow in the back of his thoughts that he guarded from the light of prying eyes; it was out there for others to see. It was real, glaring him in the face, making his scalp burn hot behind his ears.

“Harry, do you remember when-” Louis paused to swallow, “when I said last night, how Joshua and I had our second worst fight yesterday?”

“Yeah, I remember you saying that.”

“Can I tell you something I've never told anyone?” Louis asked in a voice that sounded hollow and unfamiliar to him. Harry paused, caught off guard by the meek request. His timid fingers met the fabric over Louis' shoulder before his words met his ears.

“Yeah, of course.”
Louis nodded at the ceiling, a gesture he realized was meaningless, but had felt necessary in the moment. He swallowed against the hardness that had formed in his throat as he sat up and shifted to face Harry. They looked at each other, both cross-legged, their knees joined by the most minute brush of fabric as they breathed in and out.

Harry was nothing if not a human incarnation of sincerity, so thoroughly ready to listen to Louis’ story; to play the confidant. It was this unwavering earnestness that made Louis feel like this might not be a mistake.

Harry was going to understand, right? Zayn and Liam wouldn't, but they weren't Harry. Harry would see it as Louis saw it, give him the confirmation he'd been pining for almost a year.

Then maybe he could finally move on from it.

The rubik’s cube was still beneath his fingers as he mustered up enough bravery to speak.

“So, erm, Joshua is like, really close with his parents, but I've never properly met them. They think I'm like this, gay virus that's been poisoning their son for years. And yeah, it sucks. It makes me mad, but I love Joshua, homophobic parents and all. But it tends to make things difficult around Christmas.

'He always wants to spend it with his family, but I've never been invited to spend it with them. Even when I was still too poor to get back over to Doncaster to see my family. So yeah, basically, it makes me feel like shit every year, so we fight about it. We're very good at fighting about things, but not so good at finding ways to fix our problems. It's kind of just an endless cycle of getting mad and then getting over it.

'But last year, we'd just started working on Metal Heart, and I'd just come off of working on Squad, so I had some real money for the first time in my life. And I wanted to spoil everyone for Christmas, so I ended up treating the whole family to a week in New York City for Christmas and New Years. So, you know, we could go ice skating and watch the ball drop, and my mum and siblings would see how I'm obviously the best.”

“Obviously.”

“And I wanted my boyfriend there, too, which is a pretty normal reaction, I think. At first, he was so excited to go shopping and sight-seeing and everything. But Marion, his mum, got to him and somehow talked him out of it a couple of days before the trip. And yeah, I was really pissed, because he's never gotten on with my family, and I thought maybe for once everyone would be civil and happy because it was Christmas in New York.

'So yeah, I basically said fuck off to Joshua and met up with my family for my birthday. And we all just pretended that Joshua didn't exist, and we honestly had this great time. It was like, by far the best family vacation we've ever had. It was just, like, so magical for the kids and we loved watching everything through their eyes. And a bunch of my coworkers from the movie were in town, so the girls got to go shopping at Saks and Tiffany's with Eleanor. Everything was going so well, and the whole time I could just tell that my mum was proud of me because I had made it happen.

'And then Joshua called. Now that Christmas was over, he said he missed me and wanted me to fly him into the city for the rest of the trip. And so yeah, I bought him a last minute plane ticket and flew him to New York City for New Years, because I just fucking wanted my boyfriend to spend time with my family. That's all I fucking wanted.

'But he was there for like, five minutes before he was convinced that my mum was conspiring
against him, so that just snowballed out of control immediately. And everything else was wrong by his standards. Like, the hotel was too expensive, but none of the restaurants we went to were nice enough. Nothing could please him, and I just didn't get what his issue was.

'And I probably got angrier than I should have, but he was bickering with my mum and my sisters and it just made me so mad. The trip was supposed to be special. I worked so hard to make it special, you know? Like, the person I was in love with couldn't see how important it all was to me. Does that make sense?'

“Yeah, Lou.” Harry said. “You did something great for you family. You had every right to feel proud of yourself.”

“But then, erm, the night before New Year's Eve, we got invited to this party. It was this guy, Greg, who was one of the costumers on the movie. It was just this little party in his loft with all of my other friends from the movie, so I was so excited to parade Joshua around like, 'Yeah, this is the boyfriend I told you all about.'

'My step dad took everyone else to a show that night, so it was just Joshua and me, but we were still pretty pissed at each other. So, naturally, we did what we always do instead of talking out our issues: he got snippy and I drank way too much.

'He was totally avoiding me all night, which I thought was pretty shitty, considering I had just flown him into New York City then brought him as my arm candy to a party full of movie stars. Like, there was honestly this moment when we were both standing on Greg’s balcony, looking at this million dollar view of Manhattan, and all Joshua could focus on was the drink in my hand.

'And then he just went off on me. He accused my mum of trying to break us up, then he said I was turning into this vapid, materialistic Hollywood sellout like my friends. We were completely screaming at each other, and all of my friends were right inside, watching me fight with the boyfriend I had told them all about.'

'Then he took off, like he always does, and I was just so furious and embarrassed. I don't know what it was about that particular fight, but I'd never been that angry with him before. I was so fucking pissed off at him.”

“And that was the worst fight you ever had?” Harry asked.

“No.” Louis answered slowly, his shoulders sinking on a deep exhale. “That was what – that was what started everything.” He swallowed painfully. “I was so, so mad Harry. I was like, blind with it. I just wanted to hurt him, make him feel like shit, which I've never wanted to do before, but I was just so mad.

'But, erm, my friend Greg? The costumer from the movie? We'd had this, like, kind of harmless flirtation going on on set. Just jokingly, of course. He knew I had a boyfriend and everything, but I could kind of tell that he'd be interested if I ever-’ Louis swallowed again, which did nothing to ease the chalky grain of his throat. “I slept with Greg that night.” Louis whispered, kneading his forehead and purposely avoiding Harry's eyes. “And I just felt like human shit the next morning. I've never hated myself as much as I did the next day. Because, like, I'd loved it so much when it was happening. I loved knowing how much it would hurt Joshua. Then I got one look at Joshua the next morning, and I couldn't stop throwing up. Like, I was just wracked with guilt.

'Then I spent the entire day hunched over the hotel toilet, crying into my own sick every time Joshua came to the door to check on me and see if I still wanted to watch the ball drop that night.

Then I spent the entire day hunched over the hotel toilet, crying into my own sick every time Joshua came to the door to check on me and see if I still wanted to watch the ball drop that night.
The next thing I remember, I was standing in the hotel room, all dressed up to go, and I was listening to Joshua yammer on about something random. I was like, drowning in my own sweat and the guilt was making me so dizzy and thirsty I thought I was going to pass out.

'And then I just said it. I told him what I'd done. That I'd cheated on him. And I looked up and he was staring at me, but there was just so much hurt, so much hate in his eyes. I'd never seen anyone look like that before, and it scared the shit out of me. Then he was screaming and I was crying because every part of him was terrifying me, and I was begging him to calm down but he was just getting worse and worse.

'And then - he – erm, he hit me.” Louis' hands spread over his knees, the dull memory of ache in his cheekbone ebbing through his face. “He hit me on the side of the face, and I fell over, and that kind of brought him back. Like, it woke him up, and he was so sorry. We were both so sorry. But we couldn't go out with my family that night because of my face, and it just got darker the next day, the bruise, so we took off on the first flight out. And we hid it from Liam and Zayn until it faded, but I guess they always knew that something happened. I've just – I've just always been afraid to tell them because I know they'll take it the wrong way. Like, Liam was picking at me about it the other day, but he just doesn't get-”

Louis' story faltered to a clumsy halt as he looked up to face Harry. Now Louis realized how foolish he'd been to think Harry would understand; that he would just nod and congratulate Louis for finally getting that off his chest. It was clear that Harry didn't feel this way at all.

He was rigid as his eyes teemed with an unbridled fury, the veins in his neck sticking out beneath his clenched jaw.

“He hit you?” Harry asked in a strangled voice. Louis paused, knowing that the only way he was going to survive this was to tread lightly. He had to choose his words carefully, or this situation was going to quickly spin out of control. He needed to think over what to say before he said it, not just blurt the first thing that came to mind.

Despite his best intentions, Louis' frantic ramblings spewed from him all at once in a wave of excuses, “It was almost a year ago, Harry! And he's never done anything, anything like that since then. It was a one-time thing!”

“He hit you and he left a mark.”

“Yes, but Harry, it was just once and it was my fault-!”

“It was not your fault!” Harry was on his feet, his voice now throttled with near-hysteria, his eyes already swimming. Louis also stood as Harry paced back and forth, hands combing frantically through his own hair.

“Harry, Harry!” Louis plead. “It isn't even an issue anymore. It was so long ago and nothing has happened since then.”

“He hurt you.” Harry rounded on him. “He hurt you Louis! And I can't-!” Harry was suffocating under his own frenetic panic, so Louis pressed his hands to both sides of Harry's face in an attempt to ease some of the strain away.

“I promise, everything is fine.”

“None of this is fine, Louis!” Harry said resolutely.

They both turned at the sound of a door opening in the foyer a room over, and an unfamiliar face
poked out from around the archway.

“Hello?” The face, attached to a young man with gauges and a well-groomed fringe, called into the room. He seemed to notice the tension in the scene before him as he stepped closer. Harry recognized him with surprise, blinking through the pools that had formed on his lower eyelids.

“Hey, erm, I forgot you were coming by today.” Harry said, leveling his voice and wiping his eyes on the back of his sleeve. The man came even closer, revealing a large black bag slung over his shoulder. Louis didn't remember the security gate alerting them of anyone's arrival, which meant that whoever this man was, he had the code to get past the gate. Louis felt himself irked by the fact that this man was apparently so close to Harry, but Louis had somehow never seen him before.

“I could come back in a couple of days if that's better.” The man offered, noticing the pink tint to Harry's eyes and nose. “I've got another client a few blocks over.”

Ah. It suddenly clicked for Louis.

This was Harry's dealer.

“It's fine. Go ahead. I can wait” Louis insisted.

“No, we're – I can -” Harry stammered.

“Haz, it's good. Don't make the poor lad drive out to the valley for nothing."

Harry's eyes were still unbelievably heavy, and they didn't leave Louis' face as he motioned for the man to follow him into the next room over. Harry stalled in the archway to address Louis.

“I'll just be a second, yeah?” He asked.

“Yeah. Take your time.”

Louis hoped against hope that they'd take several years to finish up, because he needed more than a few seconds to collect himself. He unlocked his phone and noticed that he'd missed a call from Joshua about ten minutes earlier.

Well, speak of the devil, and he shall break a day-long cold shoulder treatment.

“Louis?” Joshua breathed as Louis called him back, the relief clear in his voice.

“Hey.” Louis answered, not knowing exactly what to say, or even how he fully felt.

“Are you at Harry's?”

“Yeah.”

“That's not far from my parent's place, right?”

“Not really.”

“Could you come pick me up, maybe? We could talk in the car?” Joshua's tone was light and hopeful, reminiscent of the boy that Louis had first fallen for, not the one who stole credit cards and shattered half the house's dinnerware during an argument.

“I'll be there in fifteen minutes.” Louis said, hanging up. He approached the archway tentatively, spotting Harry's form across the room. “Hey, Harry? I've got to go pick Joshua up.”
Harry spun around, tearing his attention back to Louis.

“No, Louis, can we just...?” Harry was still at a loss for words as he walked up to Louis and dropped his voice.

“I shouldn't have told you any of that.” Louis conceded. “I'm not in any present danger, or anything.”

But Louis was cut short as he was heaved into Harry's chest, wrapped in a strong albeit shaky embrace. Harry's breath puffed against the tender skin of Louis' ear as he spoke.

“Please, don't ever be afraid to tell me something. You can tell me anything.” Harry whispered, but his trembling shook Louis down to his marrow as he nodded into his shoulder. Harry stepped back, pulling away from where Louis had reflexively gripped into his shirt, and held him at arm's length. His hand rested defensively on his shoulder. “Call me soon, okay? Not a text. A call.”

“Yeah, Harry. Of course.”

And they were embracing again, though Louis couldn't remember how it happened. It just seemed like their default setting in that moment, to be encased in each other's arms.

It was shockingly cold when Louis finally stepped out of Harry's house, and the calming thrum of his car engine combed calmly through his mind, disentangling rational thoughts from haywire emotions as he drove away.

One thing was very clear to him: he shouldn't have told Harry. He absolutely should not have told Harry. That thought continued mindlessly on repeat until he pulled into the hydrangea lined driveway of Joshua's parent's house. Louis was very familiar with this view of the house, despite having no idea what existed past the front door.

No sooner had his headlights flashed across the expansive front window did the front door fly open, Joshua scurrying down the walkway. But to Louis' surprise, Marion was lolling along behind him, standing beneath the house number as she watched her son get into the car. Louis had the feeling one gets when in the presence of a wild animal, knowing that any false move might spook it and cause it to take flight, but he still decided to look up and make eye contact with Marion.

She gave him a stilted wave before crossing her arms yet again.

Louis blinked, half convinced that he had just hallucinated. Marion continued to watch them with an unreadable expression as Louis put the car in reverse and backed out into the street. Though his plan had been to immediately address the fight while he had Joshua captive in the car, the bewildering experience of having Marion acknowledge his existence took precedence.

“Your mum just waved at me. As if we were both actual humans exchanging pleasantries.” Louis gaped.

“Yeah.” Joshua said knowingly. “We had a long talk.”

Louis' grip tightened on the steering wheel as his insides twisted in anticipation. “What about?”

“I made her realize that you're the most important person in my life, and I need her to be nicer to you.” Joshua said, but suddenly he was clutching his seat belt as the car veered distractedly. Louis straightened back into the lane, his mental lapse subsiding.

“Seriously?”
“Yup. And you’re invited to Thanksgiving on Thursday with the whole family.” Joshua said proudly.

Louis kept his eyes firmly on the road this time, knowing how easily this news could send the entire car careening into a street light from sheer shock. Thanksgiving wasn’t an especially important holiday to Louis, given that he was British, but he’d always secretly wanted to be invited along to Joshua’s family gatherings. After almost four years of waiting, he wasn’t even sure how to begin processing this information.

“Joshua...” Was all he could manage, looking directly ahead of himself to hide any evidence of affection that was probably written across his face.

“And, um, my parents know about us and everything, but there’s going to be a lot of my conservative, extended family there, and I’m just not sure if Thanksgiving is the right platform for me to announce that I’m gay.”

“No, yeah. Right.” Louis nodded. “We’ll just tell everyone I’m your friend. Baby steps.” It was disappointing, but still an amazing advancement in their relationship.

“I’m really sorry.” Joshua whispered. He was staring down at his own shaking fingers, which only stilled once Louis took them in his own hand.

“This is honestly a really huge deal, baby.” Louis said, tightening his grip. “And it means a lot to me. I hope you know that.”

The edges of Joshua’s mouth quirked up in a hesitant smile.

The news of the Thanksgiving development sent shockwaves through Louis’ inner circle. Zayn and Louis’ mother both reacted with genuine surprise, followed by slightly apprehensive support, while Liam clammed up and responded with a stony, “Huh” in what he obviously saw as a defeat.

And then, of course, there was Harry, who’s opinion always seemed to be in a different category. A category all his own.

Louis did end up calling him like he promised, but there was something foreign and distant in their conversation that made Louis’ insides curl. He called under the pretense of inquiring about this alleged, “celebratory party in his honor,” only to learn, to his own horror, that Harry had it planned for that Saturday and it was going to be a luxurious affair.

Realizing he could only delay the inevitable for so long, Louis finally told Harry about Thanksgiving, and how Joshua was making an unprecedented effort to include Louis in his family. He clung anxiously to his phone as he waited for what felt like a decade for Harry’s response, which came as a clipped and brief show of support.

“That's great, Lou.” He said, his voice heavy. “I guess I'll see you this weekend.”

With a click, Harry hung up and cemented the burgeoning emotional distance between them.

And just why the fuck had Louis told Harry any of that? It was clearly hurting Harry much more
than it should be, considering it wasn't even an issue anymore.

But Louis couldn't dwell on it, not while he was walking up Joshua's parent's driveway with a green bean casserole in his arms. Not when he was being introduced every aging great aunt and toothless child in Joshua' extended family. Not when Marion herself had asked Louis to lead the table in prayer before the dinner commenced.

While very honored by the request, he ultimately passed the task over to Joshua, fearing he might be liable to utter an incriminating Freudian slip such as, “And I'm thankful to Joshua for the many, many hours of shower blowjobs – I mean, several years of brotherly, platonic friendship in the name of the son, the father, and the holy ghost, amen.”

He was seated near the end of the table, surrounded by Joshua, his parents, his petite grandmother Helen, and Dexter, the youngest and most socially inept of Joshua's many cousins. Even though Louis usually spared twelve years olds from his scrutinizing judgment, he found Dexter to be insufferable and patronizing after the third tale of how he had decimated his puny schoolmates in the regional spelling bee.

Helen, however, proved to be a delight. Joshua and his parents sat quietly, watching the exchange between Louis and the elderly woman with amusement. Helen wasn't quite sure which part of Louis was more fascinating; the fact that he was in movies or the fact that he was foreign. It became abundantly clear that she had no concept of what it was like to be either famous nor English as she relentlessly quizzed him on both topics.

“And do you get to kiss all of those pretty ladies in those films of yours?” She asked with a saucy flutter of eyelashes.

“Only if they take me out to dinner first.” Louis responded, causing a guffaw from Helen and snicker from Joshua. Even Marion smirked. Cheesy, heteronormative humor apparently got you points in this family.

“What's your next film? Is it one of those musical ones? Or, no, I know! Is it a sweeping romance?” Helen asked.

“Uh no, actually. It's about the-” Before the words 'AIDS crisis' could leave Louis' mouth, Joshua's hand was clamped down painfully on Louis' leg, cutting him off.

“Lou.” He said in a low warning.

Okay, so he apparently had to lie about this as well. That kind of sucked, but hey, Thanksgiving! Family! Bonding time! Yeah, the lies and shame were kind of starting to pile up sickeningly in the back of Louis' throat, but cranberry sauce! Mashed potatoes! Pumpkin pie! Thanksgiving!


“Oh, one of those art films?”

“Quite.” Louis agreed.

Granted, Louis couldn't have chosen a gayer movie to be working on and he shouldn't have been surprised by Joshua's reluctance to bring it up, but it still sat wrong with him. It just served as a reminder that none of this was real. He was lying to all of these people who were being so kind and welcoming. This affable woman sitting across from him, clucking pleasantly at his every jibe, would be completely disgusted if she knew the real reason why he was there. The realization fell like a brick onto Louis' lungs.
“Have you ever worked with one of those trained animals? Like a tiny monkey?” Helen asked excitedly.

“Not yet.”

“What about the Queen?”

“No, the Queen isn't a tiny, trained monkey.”

“No sweetheart, I mean have you ever worked with the Queen?” She chortled.

“Surprisingly, she doesn't really act much. It's a tragic waste, though. She's really got the legs for it. Much like you Helen. I've been sneaking a few glances under this table now and then.” Helen cackled at that one, and Louis didn't even care how egregiously he was hamming it up. He was resolute to make Helen fall in love with him by the end of dinner.

“I heard that you all love your Queen so much. Do you keep a portrait of her in your home?” Helen asked.

“Not since Joshua moved in. She gives him the creeps.”

“Joshua lives with you?” Helen asked, perking up.

“Louis.” Joshua huffed.

Shit. They're supposed to be good mates, not live-in boyfriends. Shit, shit, shit. Louis' mind raced and he realized the only people besides Joshua's parents who had heard him were an elderly woman and a middle schooler, who could probably both be duped.

“Did we not mention that earlier?” Louis questioned. “We've been roommates for awhile. Rent in this part of the valley is murder. Became impossible for us to live alone, so we decided to help each other out since we've been friends for so long.”

“Oh, don't I know. The money you kids have to pay for things, it's horrendous.” Helen said. “When I was your age, a dollar could buy-”

“You two are living together?” Snapped Marion, commanding the attention of everyone on their end of the table. Joshua buried his face in his hands.

“Yeah. As roommates.” Louis repeated, unsure of what the problem was. Couldn't she see that everyone was buying the excuse? Why not let it drop and move on while no one suspected anything?

Unless...

“Since when?” She demanded, glaring at her son.

Oh my god. Marion didn't know they were living together.


“Oh, wait.” Said Louis, repositioning himself to face Marion as his thoughts whirred. “But I picked him up from here this weekend. He didn't have a car here, which means you must have driven him here.”

“Yes, and?” Marion asked, her voice hinging with the first traces of anger.
“Then you must have seen our house when you picked him up. How could you possibly think he could afford that place on his own?”

“What house?”

“Our house. The one we've been living in for months.”

“I didn't pick him up from any house. He's still at his apartment on 18th.”

“You still have the apartment?” Louis hissed, turning his full attention to Joshua. The rest of the table had quieted at this point, sensing the argument that was developing.

Joshua looked down at his plate, ignoring the accusation. In one stifling avalanche, everything fell onto Louis as he glared at his boyfriend's belligerent profile.


And wait, what? No. Why was Harry's pained expression so present in Louis' vision at a moment like this?

“I can't do this.” Louis stated, throwing his napkin onto the table and standing up. “I can't do this anymore.”

He wasn't sure what carried him to the door in that moment as he felt utterly disembodied, but soon he was struggling at the coat rack as he tied his scarf around his neck with trembling fingers.

Joshua was upon him immediately, standing between Louis and the door.

“Where are you going?” Joshua demanded.

“This is how ashamed you are of me?” Louis asked. “You're actually making your parents pay for that shithole flat because you're too ashamed to tell them we're living together?”

“I'm not ashamed of you!”

“Then fucking prove it! Nothing you do makes me believe that. Like, I honestly can't comprehend you right now. One second you're scaring me shitless by talking about kids and settling down, and the next, you're keeping a secret flat and stealing money from me!”

Marion appeared, clutching Joshua by the elbow protectively.

“Please keep your voices down.” She implored. “We have guests!”

“Oh yes, because that's the major issue at the moment. Your guests.” Louis bit. Marion's face wrinkled with frustration.

“You people always have to make a scene, don't you? Have to turn everything into an issue.” She snarled, causing Louis to turn to Joshua in awe.

“You're going to let her say that to me?” He asked, but Joshua didn't respond. Of course he didn't respond. He'd never stuck up for Louis before, why should now be any different? He turned his attention back to Marion, staring at her squarely. “Do you know how long your son and I have been together? Do you have any concept of how long we've been dating?”

She floundered at the direct question, her eyes fluttering as she scrambled for any sense of
“I'm not – I'm not quite sure how long you and Joshua have been – how long you've been...”

“In a committed relationship. That's the term you're looking for.” Louis cut in. “We've been in a committed relationship for three years. Almost four. Our anniversary is coming up, actually.” He noted with dark humor. “Not that it really matters. Doesn't look like we'll be making it to our anniversary this year.”

He tightened his scarf aggressively and threw the door open, plunging himself into the obscurity of darkness outside. Joshua was calling his name as Louis traipsed across the front lawn towards the street, in search of his car. He could hear Joshua's wet footsteps behind him, but he didn't slow or turn to look at him. His foot made contact with the sturdy sidewalk as Joshua caught up with him, grabbing him by the wrist and wrenching him around to face him.

“Louis!” He choked.

“What part of 'I can't do this anymore' don't you get?” Louis spat angrily.

“It's just a little fight. We can get through this, we always do.” Joshua implored.

“It's not just a little fight, Joshua! It's all of the little fights. It's all of the secrets and the bickering and I just can't – I just can't do this anymore!”

The tears erupted en masse, gushing down Joshua's face in a deluge of heartbreak as he sunk to his knees on the damp sidewalk, Louis' hand still clasped in his. In their nearly four years, Louis had never seen Joshua so gutted, so pitiful, as he whimpered from the ground.

“Please don't. Please, please don't.” He wept, anxiously kneading the flesh of Louis' fingers as if this might be the last time he'd ever get to touch him. “I'm trying, baby! I'm trying so hard. This is – this is so, so hard for me and I can't lose you. I can't lose you, Louis.”

Louis swallowed, looking up from the groveling mess at his feet because the image was cleaving his heart in half.

“I'm not happy, Joshua.” He admitted weakly, his voice raw and exposed. It was a sentiment that he hadn't even let himself flesh out in his thoughts, much less mutter aloud for Joshua to hear. It was exactly what Zayn and Liam had been pressing him about, but he'd denied it with every shred of dignity he had. But now the truth was there, committed to words. It was real. It was true.

“I love you so much. Please!” Joshua sobbed into Louis' knuckles, devastation throttling his entire body.

And fuck, it hurt. It hurt that every moment of the last few years had come to this, to Joshua pleading at Louis' feet, drowning under the weight of his own tears. It was too much all once, so Louis threaded his fingers with Joshua's and gently pulled him to his feet.

“Get in the car.” Louis murmured. Joshua sniffled and quickly acquiesced, circling around the car to the passenger side.

They both sunk into their seats in a stormy silence, Louis cataloging each of Joshua's anguished breaths before he started the car. They didn't exchange any words for the entire ride, and it only took a few minutes before Louis broke down under the weight of the thick turmoil.

He melted into a fit of delirium, sobbing convulsively onto his jumper as he drove. The tears burnt...
as they swept down his face, leaving his skin tender and sore. Every previous notion he had held about being a grown adult who did not cry was completely shattered as he was gripped by a body shaking hysteria.

Somehow they made it home, both sitting on their sides of the bed, not looking at each other, as they fully surrendered to their own histrionics. Louis was weeping like a child and he didn't even fully understand why. What had been so awful, so triggering that he should be reduced to a blubbering pile of tears? But that just made him cry harder; the confusion only thickening inside him and tormenting him further.

He was so exposed, so wounded, that he couldn't even deny who he wanted in that moment. With quivering fingers, he managed to get control over his phone and type out a text from behind his tear-blurred eyes.

_Harry?_

He could still hear Joshua's cries from behind him as he sunk beneath the duvet. He wanted literally anyone else to be there with him besides the sobbing mess that was sharing his bed. Niall, Liam, Zayn, or even his mother to just rub his back and promise that everything was going to be okay.

But was it going to be okay? The first levy had collapsed, and now Louis could see what everyone had been telling him for so long. The person he loved was making him completely, undeniably miserable.

And Louis realized with a gut-wrenching sob that he couldn't really call that love.

Exhaustion was biting at him, but he was too terrified to close his eyes, sensing the night of panic attacks and terrors that awaited him; that were going to grab him by the throat the moment he closed his eyes.

But the last image he saw before falling asleep was the shining screen of his phone, illuminated by a message from Harry.

_Hey Lou. Everything okay? xx_

He didn't have the energy to respond, but those few words swilled through his chest with an amber warmth, finally coaxing his heavy eyelids shut.

The night wasn't interrupted by a single nightmare.
Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Depictions of physical abuse.

And yeah, get ready for this chapter guys. A lot happens.

“Yeah then I saw love disfigure me, into something I’m not recognizing.”

-Phosphorescent

Louis’ eyes were still swollen and tender the next morning as he struggled to open then. He awoke to the image of a tall glass of green sludge on his nightstand, glaring down at him with it's organic frothiness.

How lovely.

He groaned as he sat up, feeling as if every bone in his body were snapping back into place after being thoroughly disassembled. The other half of the bed was empty, the covers tangled after the remains of what was probably a restless night. Louis picked up the glass, recognizing it as what Joshua probably thought was a gesture of goodwill. He took a long gulp, hoping the thick nectar might ease the pain in his inflamed throat.

Expecting the vile, earthy nuances that he'd come to associate with the offensive breakfast drink, he was surprised as his lips were coated with the taste of citrus zest and crisp apples. He'd had a green smoothie like this once before, and the realization made him whip his head around the room in surprise, half expecting to find Harry sitting sagely in a chair, watching over Louis like Gandalf watched over Frodo in the Fellowship of the Ring. He was going to stroke his lengthy beard and inform Louis that he'd survived his encounter of Weathertop, pissed off Witch King of Angmar be damned.

Despite any sudden delusions of Tolkien grandeur, Louis saw that he was completely alone in his bedroom. Lifting himself onto his feet, Louis ambled through the house, only stopping once he spotted Joshua in the living room.

Joshua perked up at his appearance, looking simultaneously relieved and anxious to see him. Louis was suddenly thankful for the smoothie in his hand as he sat on the armchair of the sofa, using it as an excuse to avoid talking about the night before.

“Is Harry here, or something?” Louis asked, pointing to the green drink.

“He came by earlier.” Joshua said. “Was worried because you didn't text him back, or something.”

Louis nodded, realizing that the orphaned “Harry?” text that he'd sent the night before might have set off some warning bells for Harry, considering the story Louis had dumped in his lap earlier that week. He felt a twinge of guilt at how anxious Harry must have been to drive all the way out here so early in the morning, just to make him a breakfast smoothie.

Louis really was just a piece of shit, wasn't he?
“Lou, I've got to confess something.” Joshua stated, ripping Louis out of his ruminations. With those few words, the feeble facade of morning pleasantries was torn down, and Louis' stomach muscles tightened in panic. What could Joshua possibly have to confess now? What other secrets had he been hiding this entire time?

“What?” Louis asked, fingers clenching nervously around his glass.

“I've hated Harry basically the entire time you guys have been friends.”

An anvil landed with a thud in Louis' stomach, and by god did it hurt.

And just, what?

How could those words hurt so much? How could something so intangible and ethereal as spoken words hurt like a blow to the stomach? How could they seep through Louis' skin, heavy, and toxic, and suffocating?

Granted, Joshua didn't like anyone in Louis' life; he'd never really bonded with Zayn, Liam could hardly stand to be in the same room with him, and the rivalry between him and Louis' mum was an ever-unfurling chronicle of passive-aggression. How was Joshua not liking Harry any different?

Simple: because no one hated Harry. Louis had only encountered only a handful of specimens who harbored any ill feelings toward Harry and they could easily be described as the devil incarnate. There was only one way that somebody could resist being charmed by Harry, and that was by rising from the murky depths of hell itself in order to spread a plague of anguish and torment across the Earth. See: Arrienne Brant and Nick Grimshaw.

How could Louis' own boyfriend fall into this category?

Louis had intended to voice these thoughts as eloquently as they had been pieced together in his head, but all that came out of his mouth was, “How can you-? What does – how can you even-? Why would you even-?”

“Louis, could you let me finish?” Joshua asked exasperatedly, causing Louis' mouth to snap shut as he waited for an explanation. “You've always been really loyal to the people you care about, and I'm not stupid; I know how much you stand up for me to your friends. And I think about this all the time, about how we work together because we're both such independent people, you know? We don't have to be together every second of every day. You can go shoot a movie, or run around with Zayn and Liam all the time, and it doesn't hurt us. We still work.”

“Okay?” Louis murmured, nodding tentatively. He was more than slightly dumbfounded by Joshua's speech so far.

“But then, Harry came into the picture, and suddenly everything has been, 'I don't want to go see that movie, I already saw it with Harry,' or 'sorry I missed dinner, I went out to eat with Harry.'

'And usually those kinds of things wouldn't be a big deal, but for some reason, all we do is fight about it. He's been at the crux of every argument we've had ever since he showed up. And it's because – he's just the exact kind of person I can't stand. He parties too much and has all of these public freakouts for the press, and I hate it. I hate all of it, and it's what I'm so afraid you're going to turn into. Like, I'm afraid you're going to have to be a drunk idiot for the paparazzi just to stay in the news like he has to.”

“Joshua's, that's not what's going on.”
“Yes, it is Louis! And it's already happening! Every time I can't get you out of bed in the morning because you're, 'not feeling well,' I just google your name, and there's always some article about you being stupid and getting drunk with Harry. It terrifies me, Louis, because I feel like I'm losing you and there's nothing I can do.”

Louis' breath was shaky as it finally whispered past his lips, a coil of guilt wrapping around his middle and wringing him dry. “Joshua—”

“But then he came by this morning.” Joshua interrupted, looking down at his fingernails. “And we talked for a bit. I guess we never – we never got a chance to really talk before, and he was different than I thought he was going to be.” Joshua's eyes snapped back up to meet Louis'. “And I think I get it.”

“Get what?”

“I get why you're all so crazy about him.” He admitted. “He's just...I don't know. He's just nice. Genuine, I guess, is a better word. And he was so worried about you and – and I get it. I understand why you reacted the way you did when I said that thing about him hurting you. I shouldn't have said that.” His gaze dropped yet again, but this time under a cloud of shame.

Louis slid slowly onto the plush cushions of the couch and took one of Joshua's hands in his own. Relief was flushing through him like warm saline, but the feeling was fleeting as Harry's drunken confession from the previous weekend came to the front of his mind. This rare moment of understanding would have been quickly extinguished if Joshua knew the truth of Harry's feelings for Louis.

“He told me about your party tomorrow.” Joshua murmured lightly, interrupting what had been a solid minute of silence. “I'd really like to go with you, if you want me there.”

Louis leaned forward to wrap his huddled frame in a tight embrace. “Of course I want you there.”

“There was still so much that needed to be sorted out: the secrets, the stealing, the ceaseless fighting. But this moment couldn't be ignored. As tenuous as it was, at least one conflict had been resolved. Finally, there was something for Louis to grab onto.

~

Okay, but the thing is, you two can never get married.” Louis pointed out. Zayn's hands fell petulantly from where they were styling Louis' quiff as he gave him a puzzled look through the mirror.

“And why not?” Liam questioned from his perch on the bathroom counter.

“Because I couldn't possibly be the best man for both of you. It would never work.” Louis explained. He battred his eyelashes over his words, the taste of champagne still sweet on his tongue. Zayn smirked affectionately before continuing his work on Louis' hair.

They were each dressed impeccably, as per the instructions of Harry's invitation. The party had been officially titled, “An Autumnal Soiree that is Most Definitely Not in Celebration of Louis
Tomlinson (Though Secretly it Actually is, but be Super Casual About It).” It was being held in the rather extravagantly titled North Byzantine Garden and Arboretum of a very chic country club, and the dress code called for white tie. It was all a tad posh for something of Harry's design, so Louis had prepared himself for some sort of subterfuge or shenanigans upon their arrival.

“We do have other friends.” Liam pointed out, in response to Louis' earlier comment.

“How very dare you.” Louis hissed.

“How did Thanksgiving go?” Zayn asked lightly as his fingers swept through Louis' hair, but he dropped his hands yet again as he felt Louis become rigid. “Louis?”

“I don't really think I'm ready to talk about it yet.” He admitted with a humorless laugh. Liam nodded gravely.

“It went that well, huh?”

“I might have, like, realized a few things that make everything difficult.” He responded slowly, wading through his own turgid thoughts. “Yeah, I don't – I don't really know. I don't know what I'm doing.”

“Is everything okay?” Zayn asked.

“Let's just try to get through tonight.” Louis decided, shutting the lid on his bubbling stew of emotions. “We'll all get along, have fun, and be good guests for Harry. No drama. Then tomorrow, I'll reassess the situation.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Liam said supportively. Louis gave him a subdued smile, appreciating the fact that he wasn't picking at the stitches from his argument with Joshua.

It was just one night. Only a few hours, really, and everyone was on Louis' side. They'd all make it through without anything significant happening, and then he'd talk to Liam and Zayn tomorrow. He'd tell them everything about the fight, and they would tell him what to do.

Everything was under control.

Joshua joined them once the car arrived, which was a black van with tinted windows and several rows of seats. Joshua was several degrees more timid than usual, but pleasantly trying to go along with the conversation. Niall also hitched a ride with them with a curvaceous, blonde date attached to his side. He popped open another bottle of champagne as soon as he was seat-belted in. He handed it to Louis first in a friendly gesture, but Louis made to decline as he looked to Joshua in the seat beside him.

“It's fine Lou. Go ahead.” He said tersely, which garnered a loaded look from Liam. Louis could see that he clearly understood the situation. Yes, their fight had been so bad that Joshua was this desperate to please Louis.

They arrived at the dazzling, painstakingly decadent country club and were quickly ushered to the gardens to behold the opulence that Harry clearly thought worthy of Louis. They were lead to a sleek, mahogany terrace overlooking the property. It swept into a cascading set of steep stairs that poured into a courtyard below. The sight could have been very easily transplanted from a particularly bewitching interpretation of A Midsummer Night's Dream, laced and draped in delicate strings of white lights and dappled with lush flower bushes. The resplendent faces of the very attractive guest list were illuminated as they sipped their drinks and swayed pleasantly to the music.
And ah. There it was. The proof that Harry had in fact planned this party.

The song currently wafting over the sumptuous, lavish scene was Britney Spears’ *Baby One More Time*. It all clashed so beautifully; the kitschy warbling of pop classics against the opulence of the guests.

And then he noticed the second anomaly. Each of the guests, while also garbed in their finest attire, had been apparently bedazzled with an array of cheap, costume accessories. He noticed several pairs of shutter shades, foam fingers, and Mardi Gras beads adorning the sea of models, musicians, and miscellaneous celebrities below.

“Welcome to Harry Styles' autumnal soiree that most definitely is not in celebration of Louis Tomlinson, can we offer you some icing?” A chipper employee of the country club asked them atop the terrace, motioning to a display of costume accessories behind her. Louis was completely sure that Harry had made her say that.

“Jerry beads!” Niall squawked, tearing open his shirt and flashing his nipples to everyone within the vicinity and grabbing needily at the Mardi Gras beads.

“It's a Jerry Springer thing.” Louis explained to Joshua, who's brow was furrowed in confusion as they both watched Niall stop his date just in time before she followed suit. “What's Mr. Styles wearing?” Louis asked of the employee.

“I believe I've seen him in a pink feather boa.”

“Ah, naturally.” He commented. “I'll have a blue one, then.”

The group descended the perilously steep staircase, and Louis had already spotted Eleanor’s slim silhouette amongst the crowd before they'd reached the bottom step. She approached them, wearing a smile almost as dazzling as the sequin covered half-mask strapped to her face. Within seconds of reaching Louis, she was grunting painfully from beneath a bone-crushing hug.

“I didn't know you were even in town!” Louis gaped as he released her.

“We flew in yesterday. Surprise!” She said, her eyes twinkling charismatically.

“What the bloody hell are you drinking?” He asked, noticing the pink confection swirling in the hurricane glass from between her fingers.

“I think it's called a 'rim job in a spaceship' or something. M'pretty sure Harry stole the drink menu from a Sorority girl's blog.” Yeah. That sounded completely possible. “They've got jello shooters. I know how much you love those.” She teased enticingly, hooking her arm through his and tugging him away. “You don't mind if I steal him for a bit? Need to catch up.” She said offhandedly to the others, not waiting to hear their response as they wove their way to the bar.

It was swank and elegant, just like every other feature of the courtyard, but featured a menu with signature drinks like *Pink Banana-rama Orgasma* and *Oh My God Becky, Look at Her Butt*. Eleanor ordered them a round of jello shots before leaning her back against the bar and sidling up to Louis, which he immediately recognized as her “preparing for a gossip session” stance. He was preparing himself for whatever was about to spill out of her mouth, but just then, the crowd parted and he caught a glimpse of Harry from the other side of the courtyard. The sighting was fleeting, but it was enough to see the black sheen of his tailored suit and the cherubic smile he was wearing beneath the twinkle lights. Louis found himself speaking before his thoughts could betray him.

“I can't believe you flew in for this. You do know it's not my birthday or anything, right?” Louis
asked. “Harry just likes to find any excuse for a party.”

“He really cares about you, Louis.” She said dreamily. “I've been following your entire ‘Larry Stylinson Bromance’ online.”

“That stuff will rot your brain.” Louis joked.

“Okay, so I might have had my psychic do a star chart for both of you – wait! Louis! Just hear me out!”

Louis was already mid-eye roll as she plead. After their time working together on Metal Heart, he'd become very familiar with Eleanor's cursory lifestyle fads. Based on the texts and emails he'd received from her over the last month, her obsession with her psychic would last maybe a few more weeks before her next craze took precedence.

“And what did these star charts say?” Louis asked with amusement. He'd forgotten how much he loved to watch how serious Eleanor got about these things.

“Well, it's not completely accurate because I didn't have your times of birth, but it said that you two are soulmates.”

“Soulmates, huh?”

“I know he has a girlfriend and everything, and my psychic said it could also be in a platonic, brotherly way, but Louis look at him! He's so gorgeous.” She whined. As if by fate, the crowd split once again, revealing Harry as he spoke to a group of models.

“We're just friends.” Louis remarked. “And have you forgotten that I have a boyfriend?”

“Two more jello shots, please.” She said to the bartender, ignoring Louis.

“I still can't believe you flew in to see me.” He said.

“Well, Thad's a huge fan of Harry's, so he kind of jumped – wait, no!”

“Ha!”

“I didn't mean to -!”

“And yet you did!”

“This wasn't how I was going to tell you. I had it all planned out.” She griped, which caused Louis to chuckle as he bottomed another jello shot.

“Thad Dylan, huh?” He asked with a waggle of his eyebrows. He'd been sending Eleanor a string of harassing texts over the last few weeks about Thad. Media speculation had been revolving around her and Thad Dylan, one of her co-stars from the Kurt Cobain biopic she was starring in. “Traveling together? Sounds serious.”

“It's still pretty early.” She said sheepishly. “He's sweet. You'll like him.”

“Who's he playing in your movie?”

“Dave Grohl. Which means he'll be your competition when you sweep awards season next year.” She said teasingly.
“Stop.” Louis groaned.

“And you're both going to be fighting for that Oscar.”

“Louis doesn't have to fight for an Oscar. It's his if he wants it.” Harry said simply, appearing out of motherfucking nowhere at Louis' side, which made his insides spasm. He was not prepared for Harry to just show up in an unannounced whirlwind of curls and tight, black pants.

“Lovely party, Mr. Styles.” Eleanor said amiably.

“Only because of the lovely guests, Miss Calder.” Harry said back, causing Eleanor to nearly swoon under the sheer brunt of his charm.

She opened her mouth to offer what probably would have been a clever compliment in retort, but Louis had completely checked out of the conversation. It came heavily like a siege, the weight of everything he wanted to tell Harry. So much had happened since they'd last seen each other face to face, and his reservations about sharing any of it had just faded into the air. Harry's appearance hit him like a train, making his pulse spur and his breath hitch, leaving him powerless except to throw himself into the fabric of Harry's tux.

A brief second passed in confusion before Harry clutched him back with equal fervor, waiting patiently until Louis' rabbit-heart calmed to a normal rate. Harry looked down at him as they separated, completely having forgotten the party pulsating around him. The question was clear on Harry's features, not needing to say it out loud to communicate.

*Are you okay?*

Louis nodded because, yes. Yes, he was okay. Whatever it was that had just swelled up from inside and rattled him by the bones had ebbed away.

They were interrupted in the usual way: by a fan tapping on Harry's shoulder.

“Harry, my sister's been dying to meet you!” Exclaimed a woman at his side as she pulled at his elbow.

“Could I join you in just a moment?” Harry asked the woman.

“Go ahead, Harry. I'll track you down later.” Louis said, surprised by how thick his voice had gotten in the few seconds since he'd last spoken. Harry's hesitant gaze lingered on Louis, even as he was being dragged away.

“So*ulmates.*” Eleanor whispered into his ear. Louis spun around to face the bartender.

“I'm going to need, like, four more jello shots.” He demanded.

Louis and Harry were in a bit of a distant waltz all night, continually glancing in each other's direction as they slowly skirted the edges of the party, swept up by an endless stream of guests every time they attempted to cross each other's paths.

Louis eventually rejoined the group he'd arrived with, finding them standing around a tall, bar table. It looked as if Liam and Zayn were actually falling victim to the romance of their surroundings as Liam wrapped a tight arm around Zayn's waist. Both of their eyes were scrunched up over their adoring smiles, their faces only inches apart. To their side, Niall and his date were similarly tangled together, leaving Joshua looking like quite the fifth wheel.
Putting a gentle hand to the small of his back, Louis hoped to rectify the situation, but Joshua nudged away from the contact. This, of course, was nothing new. Usually Louis psycho-analyzed every one of these moments, as Joshua's aversion to PDA had stifled their relationship from the very beginning. Louis always tried not to take it personally, but part of him knew that it stemmed from that same place of shame that lead Joshua to hide Louis from his parents. But they were at a party, *Harry's party* no less, and they'd made a promise for no drama. That apparently meant no grudges over denied PDA.

Despite his reluctance to show any affection, Joshua's face was split by a wide grin.

“I met Katy Perry.” He said excitedly and without preamble. “And yeah, that was her that night at Niall's pool. I asked her.”

“Well, I'm glad that Katy Perry knows we stalked her that one time.” Louis remarked. Joshua giggled, the tenderness of his features sending an intoxicating fondness through Louis.

“How much longer are we going to stay?” Joshua asked, and just like that, the spell was broken. That moment of time travel, that brief glimpse of what they had once been, had already flitted away, stamped out by reality. Joshua was still Joshua, which meant that any socializing past ten pm was a burden.

Louis' gaze wandered, attempting to ignore Joshua's question. He knew that he'd consumed enough alcohol that he wouldn't be able to answer while keeping the flurry of conflict seething between them under control.

Several tables over, a head of curls streaked by as it headed towards the bathrooms.

“Be right back.” Louis murmured, pushing himself away from the table. Behind him, Liam was laughing at something Zayn had just whispered in his ear, Niall was raising his glass in a toast to the night, and Joshua was watching Louis' retreating back with brimming frustration.

None of this mattered, however, when Louis entered the bathroom to find Harry, it's sole occupant, leaned over the tap.

“Louis.” He breathed warmly as he noticed his arrival. Louis strutted over to him, hopping onto a dry stretch of counter top.

“That's a very striking shade of pink on you.” He remarked, picking at Harry's feather boa.

“Do you like it?”

“I do. You look very pretty, Harry.” Louis said, causing Harry to beam. Harry returned the favor by moving between Louis' legs so he could have a proper angle to readjust his blue boa.

“You got a matching one.” Harry noticed.

“Matchy, matchy, motherfucker.” Louis said, watching fondly as Harry fluffed Louis' boa to his own liking. “I don't know what you did, but you totally won Joshua over.”

Harry stiffened for a moment before finishing with the boa. He leaned against the counter, boxing Louis in but avoiding his gaze.

“Huh.” He said noncommittally.

“You okay?”
“Mhmm” Harry answered, but Louis wasn't even slightly convinced.

“Is this how it's going to be every time I mention Joshua?”

“Well what do you expect Louis? What am I even – what am I supposed to do?” Harry asked, stepping back and running a frantic hand through his hair.

“How many times do I have to tell you? It isn't a big deal!”

“Your safety isn't a big deal? Is that what you're trying to say?”

“No, that's not-”

“Because it's a big deal to me. It's a huge deal.”

“It only happened that one time.” Louis urged.

“That doesn't matter! It shouldn't have happened even once!” Harry's eyes were wide and desperate as he leaned toward Louis again. “People don't do that to people they love, Louis! I would never -!” The words stuck in Harry's throat and he looked down, his fists grinding into the surface of the counter. His head hung beside Louis as he struggled over a series of breaths.

“When you came over to my house yesterday?” Louis asked quietly. “Was it because you were, like, afraid he'd done something to me?”

Harry nodded heavily as he sniffled. Louis tugged at his ear, coaxing his eyes back up to meet his.

“I'm just so scared all the time.” Harry admitted. “It's only been a week since you told me and I – I can't stop worrying about you. It's all I ever do.”

“Please don't get this upset, Haz. Don't get this upset over me.” Louis plead.

“I can't help it. If Liam and Zayn knew they'd be freaking out just as much as me.”

“I don't know how to make you understand that this isn't a problem! He's not dangerous, or anything. You're getting yourself worked up over nothing.”

“But what if it isn't nothing!?” Harry cried. “I can't just stand here and do nothing!”

Harry's voice clipped just as the bathroom door swung open. He stepped back reflexively, sniffling as they both recovered their decorum.

With a head topped by a man bun and a face blanketed in heavy five o'clock shadow, Thad Dylan stood before them.

“Oh my god, finally! I've been trying to meet you all night.” He said excitedly, locking Harry in a hearty handshake. “Huge fan. HUGE fan.” He repeated in amazement as he drunkenly stumbled toward the urinals. “Hope you don't mind'f I take a leak. But man, your music. Seriously, man. S'awesome.”

“Thank you.” Harry said.

“Had a band in high school myself. Was sick. Got pussy all over the place. Y'know all bout that, dontcha, man?” He cackled, zipping up and heading to the exit. “See ya later, man! Sweet party!”

The door closed behind Thad's back, and normally Louis would be spending the next several
minutes cataloging each of his grievances against Eleanor's new boyfriend's behavior, (his use of the word pussy, the fact that he'd completely ignored Louis, and, perhaps most grievous of all, he hadn't even thought about washing his hands after peeing) but Louis didn't feel at all himself in that moment. He was still paper thin, locked in what was his first ever argument with Harry.

“Please don't make me choose.” Louis whispered, his own eyes starting to brim with tears.

“What, Lou?” Harry asked, leaning back in.

“Please don't make me choose between you and Joshua.” He clarified. “I can't make that decision. Don't make me do that.”

“Because you'd pick him.” Harry said heavily, but Louis clutched painfully to the counter.

“No.” He whimpered, feeling his words forming in his chest and expanding, threatening to crack his ribcage in half. “Because I might pick you.”

And the words hung there, raw and weak, between the two of them. Louis could feel his eyes prickling with the impending tears, his chest splintering with the weight of his admission.

“Louis.” Harry whispered so low that nobody should have been able to hear it.

And Louis could see his lips, tinged a lovelorn red after sipping at some fruity cocktail all night. He probably tasted like cherries and roses, or maybe like pomegranates and bubblegum.

And now Louis' hands were on either side of his face, cupping his glistening cheeks and stroking idly over his cheekbones as Harry's skin trembled at his touch. They shivered each time their breaths collided, both sets of eyes fluttering shut. Harry's hands were clenched in the fabric of Louis' suit jacket, and his face was so close that Louis could feel the heat of it against his lips.

But that was the exact moment that they both broke away, panting as Harry jumped backward and let Louis slide off the counter.

“Need to, erm, get some air.” Louis coughed, heading for the exit. Harry choked out some sound of agreement as Louis pushed himself through the door.

The party flashed past him as he fled, ascending the stairs two at a time. By the time he reached the top he could tell that someone was following him, but he didn't slow down to find out who exactly was on his tail. There were just too many people in the garden, and he needed to breathe.

He swept through the deserted halls of the country club, images of Harry flashing across his vision. His eyes. His skin. His lips.

But then there was Joshua, smashing a line of wine glasses across the kitchen floor. Struggling to open a beer bottle at a college party. Groveling at Louis' feet after Thanksgiving. Giggling about Katy Perry. Telling Louis that he's using Harry.

_You're using him._

Louis' pace quickened into a run across the empty lobby.

_What's wrong, Louis? Did Harry get tired of beating his girlfriend and move onto you?_

His footsteps clacked across the marble floor.
I feel like I'm losing you and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

The doors were within his sight, but the echoes switched to his own voice.

No, I'm going to drink this until I can't remember what you look like.

The door handle was in his grasp.

What part of 'I can't do this anymore' do you not get?

He wrenched the door open.

Joshua, I cheated on you last night.

SMACK.

The blunt cry of fist against flesh rang out, and Louis clutched his burning, throbbing cheek as he stumbled out onto the sidewalk. A second pair of footsteps came to a stuttering halt behind him, and Louis turned, expecting to see an incensed Joshua, standing in the middle of that hotel room on New Year's eve.

But no. It was November. He was outside a country club, clutching onto an injury that had faded almost a year ago.

Zayn stepped toward him, concern written across his face.

“Lou? What's going on?” He asked, winded.

“We've kissed before.” Louis stated suddenly, catching Zayn off-guard. “You and I. We've kissed.”

“Erm, well, yeah. I guess.”

“We used to kiss all the time, and it didn't even matter.” Louis continued. “We were still friends. It wasn't a big deal, just two friends kissing. Friends do that sometimes. It doesn't mean anything.”

“Oh.” Zayn's eyebrows rose as he realized what Louis was trying to convince himself of. “Yeah, Louis, but that was when we were, like, eighteen years old and drunk. And neither of us were in relationships.”

Louis glared at him, despising the truth of his statement before he began to angrily pace the length of the pavement. They were standing just outside the glass doors of the club with a group of valets who were standing in a huddle a few yards over.

“I need a cigarette.” Louis stated.

“Water would probably be a better idea.”

“No. I need a cigarette and I need one now.” He demanded, stopping in the middle of his pacing. Zayn sighed and turned to the valets.

“Could we bum a cigarette off any of you?” Zayn asked. They looked at him sheepishly, and it became clear that most of them were about sixteen years old trying to survive their first job.

Despite this, it took only a few minutes before one of them was lighting a cigarette between Louis' lips. He took an angry drag and let it exhale through his nostrils.
“What's going on?” asked Zayn.

“Nothing.” Louis grumbled.

“That's obviously a lie.”

“Isn't.”

“Are you and Joshua breaking up or something?

“Oh yes, because you'd all love that, wouldn't you? Love to prove how right you two were about my stupid relationship.” Louis bit angrily.

“That is not fair, Louis!” Zayn snapped. “I have always stood up for Joshua. For the two of you. I've always been on your side. Don't turn on me because you want someone to yell at.”

Louis scratched at his eyebrow and breathed deeply. Zayn was right, as usual. That shouldn't ever come as a surprise.

“Honestly, Zayn,” Louis said weakly, “What's your honest opinion about Joshua?” He looked at him intensely as Zayn folded his arms.

“I think he used to be really good for you. I really liked him at first. He helped you kind of settle down, and I used to be really thankful to him for that.”

“Used to.”

Zayn nodded.

“But then he – now it’s like – I hate the way he talks to you. I hate the way he judges everything you do or how he thinks he's in charge of you. He's just so hard on you and I can't stand watching it.”

“He's trying, though, Zayn.”

“I know, but is he trying hard enough? It's like you can't even leave your house without him saying something shitty to you, and you don't deserve any of that. You deserve someone who makes you feel good about yourself. Someone who can see how amazing you are.”

“Stop.” Louis said, his defenses beginning to rise.

“You deserve someone better.”

“Stop, Zayn.”

“You asked me my opinion Louis, and I'm giving it to you.”

“Stop!” His veins were starting to surge.

“You're with the wrong person, Louis!”

“Stop it Zayn! Shut the fuck up!” Louis' hand was on his cheek again, the year-old pain lighting anew like a burst of blood vessels as the word cheater undulated in the back of his mind. “I am with my boyfriend. I am faithful to my boyfriend. There isn't anyone else because I'm with Joshua and you all just need to fucking get over it!”
His cries echoed against the building, the valets shushed by his outburst. Zayn watched him, Louis' breaths heaving through his entire frame, before stepping tentatively forward.

“Louis?” He asked gently. Louis buried his face in his hands and shook his head uncontrollably, saying 'no' to something, but not being sure of what it was. Zayn pulled him into an embrace as his apologies rolled out of him. “I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay.” Louis mumbled into Zayn's shoulder, feeling a sense of peace returning to him.

“I shouldn't have pushed you like that.”

“No, I don't know...” Louis trailed off. In truth, he didn't know where that outburst had come from. Why had he felt it necessary to scream at Zayn, of all people? The inexplicable surge of violent loyalty to Joshua was slowly subsiding as he leaned into Zayn.

“Do you want to go home? What do you want to do?” Zayn asked.

“I just want to go find Joshua.” Louis said honestly. His whole chest felt carved out and it ached for some contact with Joshua. He'd just fought with two of the people he cared most about in the world over Joshua's honor, and now he just wanted proof that he'd done the right thing.

“Sure. Let's go find him. Then maybe we'll call it an early night?” Zayn offered as he ushered him back into the club.

“So much for no drama.” Louis pointed out.

“Hey, we all get a little hysterical after jello shots. It happens to everyone.” Zayn promised with a laugh.

They made their way back to the party and spotted Joshua right away. He was standing on the terrace right next to the flight of stairs, talking to a group of people who appeared to be some sort of hipster indie band that Louis probably had never heard of. Louis and Zayn approached them, and Zayn entered into the conversation amicably, trying to mask any hint of the shouting match they'd just had outside the club. Louis paid moderate attention to the conversation, catching sentences here and there that didn't really make sense out of context, as he leaned heavily into Joshua's side.

“Tired?” Joshua asked quietly as he turned to Louis.

“Mmm. Could we leave soon?”

“Yeah, just a few more minutes.” Joshua said.

Louis chuckled over the strange role-reversal: for once, Louis was the one who wanted to go home and go to bed and Joshua was the one who wanted to stay out and party. He hooked his arm around Joshua's waist for more support, but predictably, Joshua pushed him away.

Normally Louis would take the hint: Joshua didn't want people to see that they were together. But at that moment, Louis was just too drunk and tired to care. Under the layers and layers of emotional turmoil that had built up over the last week, more than anything, he just wanted someone to hold him and make him think everything was going to be okay.

Louis nuzzled back into Joshua's side.

“Stop it, Lou.” Joshua grumbled, pulling away.
“Please, baby, I'm tired.” Louis beseeched, fingers curling around the fabric of Joshua's sleeve.

“No, Louis!”

Joshua's hand was thrust into Louis' chest, knocking him backward and tearing his grip from Joshua's sleeve.

Zayn yelled something unintelligible, maybe it was Joshua's name, maybe it was Louis', but Louis had no idea because there was nothing beneath his foot as he stepped down. The shock of adrenaline was icy as it shot up his spine, his hands grasping desperately through the intangible air for something to hang onto, but it was futile. He was falling, knocking against each stair with a lung crushing slam as he tumbled on, his shoulder surging with white hot pain.

~

It was dark, and his stomach was coiled in tight knots as shock muddled through his numb limbs. When exactly he'd fallen asleep, he couldn't quite remember, but pain was springing up from every inch of his body in a deft swoop.

Something was rumbling; the walls, or the bushes, or something less definable. Wait, no, they were voices. He was surrounded by them; the clipped exclamations and cries of a shocked crowd. They were on all sides, surrounding him with their indiscernible squawks and shouts.

His eyes snapped open to make sense of it, but his vision popped with bright bursts that burgeoned around the darkness. He only had a pinhole of sight, and all he could see was that the ceiling was a blanket of stars, swirling around like glitter in a kaleidoscope.

But wait. Someone had said his name. Just now, someone was saying his name. They were screaming it in his ear.

“Louis!”

He flexed the muscles of his neck, willing them to edge his perception to his right. The darkness was ebbing away, and then there were faces. A wall of faces, all wading and floating with the same look of worry and shock.

Who were these people? Where was he? What were they all doing?

But wait, Liam.

That one was Liam. He was kneeling at Louis' side, and Louis was only now aware that he was flat on his back, his spine crying out as a wave of ache jolted through his muscles. Liam's mouth was moving, his deep voice murmuring something, but it wasn't his name. Someone else was saying his name.

“Louis!”

Who was fucking doing that?

“How you hear me? Can you hear what I'm saying?”

That was Liam, that wasn't who was saying his name. The faces that hung in his peripheral were
strangers, each muttering their own jumbled mess of worry, but none were saying his name.

But no, there was Zayn.

Zayn was standing behind Liam, hunched over as his hand tightened around Liam's shoulder. His dark eyes were wet with fear, but his lips were clenched shut.

“Louis!”

Who the fuck was saying his name?!?

His neck snapped to his left, sending another jerk of pain down his spine, but the pain was short-lived.

There was Harry.

“Louis!” He exclaimed, relief melting over him in a wash of tears.

“Harry.” Louis rasped feebly, moving to raise his hand and reach out for the tear-streaked face hanging over him.

But his action was stilled by a bone-crushing, breath smothering sting of pain from his left shoulder. His head jerked back and smashed against the stone of the courtyard in reflex, his eyes clamped shut.

“Oh my god.” He heard Harry cry out over the gasp of the crowd.

“Hey, hey, I need you to look at me.” Came Liam's voice, confident and unwavering. Louis' eyes eased open only to be assaulted by the white glare of a cellphone flashlight.

“Fuck, Liam.” Louis choked as Liam pulled the phone away.

“Your eyes aren't dilated.”

Dilated? Why would his eyes be dilated?

His body teemed with ache and a sea of people were rising around him like high-tide, and he still didn't know what was going on. He blinked through the glare of the white lights until the glowering figure of a set of steep stairs came into view, looking down on him from above, and the memory came back to him.

He fell.

He fell down the stairs.

Joshua pushed him and he fell down the stairs, and now every part of his body was on fire.

“He's awake!” Liam was calling behind him, and all Louis wanted was to reach out to Harry, to hold some part of him, but Liam was filling his eyesight again. “What's your name?” He asked resolutely.

“You know my name.” Louis groaned.

“What's your name?” Liam repeated.

“Louis.”
“Full name.”
“Louis William Tomlinson.”

“Who's the current prime minister of England?
“David Cameron.”

“What are your sibling’s names?”

“For fuck's sake, Liam.” Louis groaned.

“Louis.”

“There's so many of them.”

“I need to make sure you don't have a concussion!” Liam pressed. Louis rolled his eyes with what little strength he could muster.

“Lottie, Fizzy, Daisy, Phoebe, Ernie, and Doris.”

Liam prompted Louis to recite the alphabet as he frisked down both of his legs, searching for any injuries, until Joshua's voice broke through the surrounding clamor. He was calling Louis' name, his voice wrecked by desperation, and Louis could visualize him trying to claw through the crowd.

Harry's reaction was instantaneous as he rose to his feet, his face steeped in enmity. He stomped away, out of Louis' limited line of sight, but his voice cut through the commotion as his shouts collided with Joshua's. Louis’ eyes clenched shut again at the sound of the two of them fighting. Their shrieks were intensifying to a level that Louis had never heard before, especially from Harry, and it felt like someone was stripping every inch of skin from Louis' bones piece by piece. When it became unbearable, Louis sat bolt upright.

“Whoa, Louis.” Liam warned at his sudden movement.

“Don't want to hear – don't want to hear Joshua.” He stammered.

“Josh, mate, come on.” Said Niall from Louis' side, entering the argument as the only voice of reason.

“Too many people.” Louis stated as he tried to push himself up from the ground, but a debilitating pain caused him to double over and yelp.

“Your shoulder's dislocated.” Liam said, gentle fingers probing his left shoulder. Louis opened his eyes yet again, this time spotting Niall, Joshua, and Harry at the lip of the crowd. Niall was between Joshua and Harry, trying to separate them as Joshua yelled and snarled like a feral dog. Harry's attention had been locked on Louis since his cry of pain with a face contorted in fear, but he turned back to Joshua as he tried to shove his way past Niall.

“Too many people, Liam” Louis repeated, begging.

“Yeah, okay. Do you think you can stand up?” He asked gently. Louis nodded. Nearby, an unfamiliar voice was urging people to clear out of the way. Liam supported most of his weight once he was on his feet. “Are you okay? Can you walk? Does anything hurt in your legs?”

“No. I just want to – want to get out of here.”
Liam nodded and helped Louis up the stairs, Zayn and a small assemblage of club employees in tow. His consciousness was still wavering as they entered the front lobby, the employees fluttering about, crazed by the fear of an impending lawsuit.

Any trace of intoxication had been washed away by adrenaline, and now every fiber of Louis was running on overdrive. Everything was too loud and too bright; his thoughts couldn't keep up with the pace that everyone else was moving at.

“Shut up, please.” Louis grumbled over the frantic chirps of one of the employees.

“We need to call an ambulance.” He claimed. “It's club policy.” Louis groaned at the idea of spending the night in a grungy emergency room.

“If you do that then I will actually sue this place.” He said grumpily, eliciting a look of panic from the employees, but he couldn't be arsed to care. All he wanted was to get out of this place with the lights and the crowds and the screaming. He just wanted to go somewhere familiar with Zayn by his side. And Liam. And Niall. And Harry.

But where was Harry?

He'd been vaguely aware of Liam's fingers brushing over his shoulder during his train of thought, but he hadn't thought much of it until his shoulder quite literally exploded with pain and a stomach-turning POP! Louis lurched forward with a shriek as Zayn reached instinctively for him.

“Oh, fuck you, Payne.” Louis growled.

“It's easier to relocate if you don't know it's coming” Liam explained.

“Yes, yes, I've seen movies. I know.” He snapped angrily. “And we all get it! You minored in sports medicine at Uni! No need to break my arm to prove it!” The initial surge of pain was relenting into a throbbing burn, and Zayn's tentative hands were wrapped around his waist, helping him stand up. “Where's Harry?”

“He's trying to deal with Joshua.” Zayn said.

“Joshua.” Louis echoed, his boyfriend's name thrumming through his body with a fresh rush of sickening pain. “I don't want to be here. I want to go.”

“Okay, Louis, here's the deal.” Liam said. “You don't have any signs of a concussion or internal bleeding, so I think you can get away with skipping a hospital trip tonight. But you absolutely have to go to the doctor as soon as possible tomorrow, and if I notice anything off about you tonight, I’m calling an ambulance.”

“Oh, Dr. Payne.” Louis said.

“Do you want to go home now?”

“Not my house.” Louis said, shaking his head.

“What do you want to go?” Zayn asked soothingly.

“Can we go to your place?” Louis asked, twisting in Zayn's arms to face him. Zayn's flat was practically a second home to Louis.

“Yeah. Of course. We can go right now.”
“Wait, sir, we have to have someone talk to our manager before you leave.” One of the employees spoke up, breaking their terrified silence. “Someone has to talk to the police and everything.”

“What? No. No police.” Louis groaned, letting more of his weight fall onto Zayn.

“Li?” Zayn urged, and there was something in his tone that reminded Louis of two parents deciding how best to defend their child.

“I'll be right back, okay?” Liam said. “I'll take care of everything.”

Liam's footsteps clacked away leaving Zayn and Louis alone with a young, female employee.

“Is there anything I can get you, sir?” She asked timidly.

“You can go somewhere else and stop staring at my misery.” Louis griped.

“Water would be great.” Zayn added. The employee nodded before disappearing out of the lobby.

“What about Niall and Harry? I want Harry.”

“I'll text them.” Zayn promised, holding Louis tighter. The minutes passed by in silence as Zayn typed on his phone, and Liam returned surprisingly quickly with a set of keys in hand.

“Harry said we can take his car.” Liam said, motioning for them to follow after him. They were moving quickly, much more quickly than Louis' shock addled mind could comprehend.

“But where's Harry?”

“He's dealing with management. Trying to keep them from calling the police.” Liam explained, and suddenly Louis was already in the cool backseat of Harry's car. Zayn slid in beside him as Liam started the engine.

Louis' breathing was haggard and his mouth tasted of blood, but at least Zayn was there at his side, holding him tight but being careful of his shoulder. His phone was buzzing angrily in his pocket so he fished it out awkwardly with the arm that wasn't immobilized by pain.

His thumb hit the reject button as he saw Joshua's name across the screen and he let the phone fall limply into his lap, too tired to attempt getting it back into his pocket.

“What the fuck just happened?” Louis sighed.

“Are you serious?” Liam piped up, looking at him attentively through the rear-view mirror. “Do you really not remember what just happened?”

“I meant it as a general musing, Liam.” Louis complained.

“Who's the current president of the United States?”

“Barack Obama! Jesus Christ, Liam! I'm not concussed!”

His phone buzzed once again with Joshua's name, and he promptly rejected it again. He sunk his head into Zayn's shoulder, feeling Zayn's chin press into his forehead.

“I can't fucking believe this.” Zayn muttered, snaking a hand through Louis' hair. “I can't fucking believe he'd do this.”
“S’not his fault.” Louis whispered. “Was an accident.”

“He pushed you, Louis.” Liam stated angrily.

“But he didn't...Stairs.”

His phone began buzzing for the third time, but Zayn snatched it up before Louis could make a move towards it.

“Joshua, honestly-” he began with his trademark coolness, but he was cut off by a furious warbling through the phone's speaker. He listened to Joshua yell for several seconds until his typically stoic features melted into a vision of anger. “Stop talking, just – just how hard is it not to throw your boyfriend down the stairs? How fucking hard is that, Joshua? Don't call again. We're not letting you anywhere near him.” He hung up and powered it down, an enraged breath siphoning through his nostrils. He nuzzled further into Louis as Liam watched him proudly from the driver's seat. “Just fuck him.” He whispered.

Zayn's fuming throbbed beside him with each pained breath, and Louis clenched his good hand onto Zayn's leg as a few unwelcome tears dotted his eyes.

“Where's Harry?” He asked, and the dejected, defeated grain of his voice surprised everyone in the car, including himself.

“He's on his way, love.” Zayn cooed, his fingers running through Louis' hair protectively. “You know how much we love you, right?” His throat sounded as if it had been rubbed raw with gravel.

Louis didn't answer because he honestly wasn't sure of anything at the moment.

They arrived at Zayn's flat finally, entering the fittingly artsy, sprawling, open-concept studio with exposed brick walls and thick, contemporary art-covered columns. Liam spent at least ten minutes fussing over Louis once they were safely inside, but Louis refused to budge from his spot in the entrance.

“Someone needs to clean you up.” Liam begged, but Louis shook his head obstinately. “You are bleeding, Louis. There is a gash on your face and it is bleeding.”

“No.” Louis abstained.

“No. Harry.” He murmured, causing Liam to huff in exasperation, but luckily, that was the exact moment that Harry and Niall arrived at the door with a flurry of desperate knocks. Zayn opened the door and the flat reverberated with Niall's voice as he pushed his way inside.

“That fucking wanker Joshua tells us we have no right to take Louis with us!” Niall bellowed at about ninety miles a minute. “We have no right! Starts spouting all this shit about being kidnappers, then we're just trying to keep management from calling the police, and the piece of shit tries to throw a punch at Harry! How's Tommo? You okay? You're bleeding. See that Liam, his face is bleeding.”

“I'm perfectly aware, but Louis won't let me clean it up.” Liam groused.

“I want Harry to do it.” Louis said firmly, turning towards the doorway.
And there he was, still clad in his formal white tie and pink feather boa, eyes red and sunken from the exhaustion that comes only from emotional upheaval. But right then they were soft, smoothing over Louis with a tender glance.

“Erm, yeah, I'll do it.” Harry stammered, stepping into the flat. “If you show me what to...” He flourished his fingers as he grappled for words, but Liam was already leading them to Zayn's bathroom. Louis sat on the counter obediently as Liam walked Harry through each of his steps as Louis' appointed nurse before leaving them alone. No one had pointed out yet how much more sense it would have made for Liam to be taking care of Louis, because this moment seemed as obvious to everyone else as it did to the two of them.

Harry wordlessly washed the blood from Louis' proliferation of wounds, bandaging them up just as Liam had instructed. His fingers traced over Louis' skin with each movement, and Louis' head sunk further as each brush of contact steadied the rhythm of his pulse. Once properly taken care of, Harry leaned forward against the counter into Louis, in much the same position as the previous bathroom conversation they'd had that night. Harry's breaths were growing increasingly hollow and shaky until Louis sat back up.

“I know you've been trying to prove to me that you're not a weeper, but I think tonight can be an exception.” Louis said with a sad smile. Harry stepped back with a stifled cry, his eyes swimming. “I promised I wouldn't let anyone hurt you.” He said, broken.

“Haz-”

“And there was this moment – this moment when I was yelling your name and you weren't answering. You weren't opening your eyes and Liam was trying to get your pulse, but he wasn't saying anything.” Harry choked over a deep breath. “And it was only for a second and it was so, so stupid of me, but I thought-” another deep breath. “I thought he'd killed you.”

The agony completely broke as Harry's face twisted under a sheet of tears, his shoulders hunching under the weight of it. He looked shattered. Dismantled. Wrecked. And Louis in turn felt his own pieces dismantling; his body being demolished by the fact that he had caused even one of the tears falling down Harry's cheek. Louis was shaking convulsively, his throat smoldering with a raw, incensed burn.

“It was an accident.” He croaked, giving his last, frail attempt to convince himself of Joshua's innocence. That maybe there was a chance things were going to go back to normal after this.

“No, Louis.” Harry shook his head, stepping back into Louis' space. “It would be one thing if he had like, spun around and accidentally knocked you over, but I watched it happen. He shoved you. He didn't mean for you to fall down the stairs, but you fell because he was being aggressive towards you. He was trying to hurt you, and you got really, really hurt. He hurt you again, Louis.” His voice broke at the end of his speech, and everything was finally stripped away. Louis struggled to collect his voice from wherever it had fled to.

“We've been together for three years.” He said quietly, but they both knew it wasn't an excuse. It was a realization. It shook through Louis with a deep sob, and then Harry was clinging to him, causing a sharp pain to ripple through his shoulder. Harry jumped back as Louis yelped.

“Sorry, sorry!” He exclaimed.

But Louis didn't have time for his apologies. He just needed Harry's body wrapped around his. He needed to feel Harry clutch onto him like Louis might be stolen away at any second. He needed
him to hold him like they were the last two people in the world and everything was going to be okay.

They stayed that way, rocking, sobbing, and holding each other. Louis was succumbing to the tempest of heartache that had been brewing for days, and of course, Harry was there to catch him. Their tears fell into each other's hair, both trembling in time with each other and letting go without inhibition. Neither of them cared how pathetic they might look, knowing that the other wouldn't judge them. That the other was feeling the exact same. That they had each other, and for just that moment, nothing could hurt them.

Louis wasn't sure if he'd ever felt a pain like this. It was all coming together, festering into one hot, exposed wound of the last few years. Every moment that Joshua had upset him, had made him feel sad, angry, embarrassed, or unsafe, it was all right there, beating in his chest.

And so he wept onto Harry like a child as each wave of hysteria grew lighter and lighter. With every wax and wane of tears, he became more and more aware of where he was. He was with Harry. Harry wasn't going anywhere. He was safe.

No one seemed surprised by the raw, tear-strewn faces that emerged from the bathroom almost a half-hour later. Liam was squabbling with Niall over some sort of project he was undertaking in the living area as Zayn watched with amusement from nearby. The floor was now littered with a complex arrangement of blankets and pillows.

“It's your nest!” Niall proclaimed. “It's what everyone needs when they're feeling low.”

“Okay, I'm not denying that.” Liam explained. “But Louis is in a lot of a pain and probably wants to sleep in a bed.”

“No, I want that.” Louis said, pointing at the mess of comfort and warmth. Niall fist pumped in victory.

“You're not going to get the back support you need.” Liam argued.

“I want the nest.” Louis said bluntly.

“I knew Tommo would be a nest man. A common nester.” Niall mused.


“Yeah babe? What else do you want?” asked Zayn, jumping up from the chair he'd been witnessing the nest construction from.

“No, nevermind.”


“You guys probably have work, and stuff tomorrow.”

“Do you want us to stay the night?” Harry asked, stepping toward him. Louis swallowed.

“Please?”

“Alright, Zayn.” said Niall. “We're going to need popcorn and something chocolate. Plus some pajam-jams. None of us are really dressed for sleep.”

There was a brief chuckle as they looked at each other, all dressed in formal tuxedos and bow ties.
Zayn's stash of sweatpants and t-shirts came through, appropriately clothing each of them in something comfy enough for the nest as they cuddled together and watched *Grease*. Louis was too exhausted to make any mention of the fact that Liam already had several pairs of pajamas at Zayn's flat to choose from, but he planned to store away the information for a later date.

Niall conked out almost immediately, snoring quietly from where he was lying face down in the blankets. Zayn drifted away with a little more dignity, his eyes slipping shut under a fan of eyelashes. Louis only noticed that he'd fallen asleep when his fingers stilled from where they were carding through his hair. He was pressed into Zayn with his good shoulder and could feel him jolt back awake every time Liam sat up and checked on Louis in a panic.

Harry was on Louis' right side, entirely silent as he watched the brightly costumed high schoolers dancing across the screen. They'd made it to "You're the One that I Want" without any outbursts from Liam for at least twenty minutes, so Louis concluded that he and Harry were the only two still awake.

Despite the stiffness settling into his aggrieved arm, Louis nudged the side of Harry's leg weakly, and Harry responded without even having to look at Louis. He took his hand in his, stroking over the back of Louis' hand with his thumb before finally letting his eyes fall shut.

Louis repositioned himself, tightening his grip on Harry's hand, adamant about keeping his eyes open until the very last "Chang chang changitty chang shoobop."

~

Liam might have had a point about sleeping somewhere with more back support. Louis stretched painfully against the full onslaught of sore muscles and raw abrasions that littered his body as he woke up.

Yup, last night had definitely happened.

He carefully untangled himself from the mess of bodies and blankets, slowly sliding his hand from where it had been encased in Harry's grasp all night. Tip-toeing over the slumbering men, Louis finally procured himself from the throng and looked back at where he had spent the night. The first waves of pale sunlight were waxing across the flat, illuminating each of their sleeping faces.

And here were Louis' friends. Four men in their mid twenties, cuddled together in a nest on the floor so that Louis wouldn't feel alone.

These were his friends.

And among them was Harry, his massive eyelashes quivering as his eyes spun about under his lids. There was such a peacefulness to his features that Louis was pretty sure he'd never seen while he was awake. Part of him wanted to crawl back into the blankets, this time curling into Harry's warmth, but someone else's attention was beckoning him.

He took his phone into the bathroom, as it was the only place in Zayn's studio with a door. He locked it behind him, sinking down onto the floor and staring at the number he was about the call. He stared at the name for several breaths, preparing himself for the groveling that was about to take place, before he hit call and pressed the phone to his ear. It rang once, then twice.
“Louis?”

“Hey, mum.”

“You sound weird, baby. Everything okay?”

“Not really.” He admitted, his voice watery.

“What’s going on?”

Louis took a steadying breath, tired of crying.

“Joshua and I are breaking up.”
Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Mentions of abuse and depictions of panic attacks.

“You'll have to watch me struggle from several rooms away, but tonight, I need you to stay. Tonight, I need you to stay.”

-Twenty One Pilots

Louis flexed the muscles of his arm against his sling, his seat belt snapping back with a metallic click. He sat in the passenger’s seat of Liam’s car, watching the unmoving front door of his own house from the driveway. Niall, Zayn, and Liam had just disappeared inside on a reconnaissance mission to see if any hostile entities (Joshua or his mother) were inside.

It was the first of December, Louis realized with a hollow smirk. There wasn’t anything especially significant about the date; it just was. It was December. This was the month that he was going to turn 25. This was the month when he was going to see his family again. This was the first month that he was going to spend every morning rolling over to face an empty bed.

“Do you have any Nutella inside?” Harry chirped, hooking his chin over the shoulder of Louis’ seat from his spot in the back of the car. He had thus far been sitting quietly behind Louis after he’d elected to keep him company, and his thoughts had apparently become too distracted to handle the silence any longer.

“I’m not sure.” Louis said, craning his neck to get a glance at Harry’s face.

“I think you do. You did last time I was here, and it was still pretty full.”

“And what are you going to do with it if I have some?”

“Eat it.” Harry said with a shrug, confused as to how Louis had been unsure about his Nutella intentions. Louis chuckled as he moved his head back to stare straight ahead, and Harry blew against the back of Louis’ ear with an aggressive puff in response.

“Oi!” Louis snapped. “And who exactly gave you permission to do that?”

“The divine dualistic polarity of the Moon Goddess and Horned God.”

“Ah, so you’ve apparently had time to spout off some pagan prayers back there, and they gave you permission to blow on my ear?” Louis asked. Harry responded with a smug nod, equal parts frightened and excited to see what Louis was going to do in retaliation. “I’ve had enough of your lip, Styles.” Employing the dexterity of his good arm, Louis opened his side of the car and slid out, quickly throwing Harry’s dexterity of his good arm, Louis opened his side of the car and slid out, quickly throwing Harry’s car door open and plopping down into his lap.

“What are you doing?” Harry laughed.

“Punishing you.”
“How is this punishing me?”

“My arse is massive. You’ll surely suffocate at any moment.” Louis said flatly, closing the car door behind him and readjusting himself in Harry’s lap. The larger man laughed as he hooked his arms snugly around Louis’ waist. His head lolled back onto Harry’s shoulder as the giggling gave way to a complacent silence.

He listened to the deep lilt of Harry’s breath as they both turned their attention back to the front door, waiting to find out if the coast was clear.

“Well yeah, Louis. I don’t really see how you can keep putting up with Josh now that Harry’s in the picture.”

That’s what Louis’ mum had said during their chat on the phone from the floor of Zayn’s bathroom that morning.

“Mummmm.” Louis groaned.

“What?”

“This isn’t about…” Louis kneaded the flesh of his forehead as an excuse to take a second and prepare his response in a way that didn’t sound like a middle schooler denying a crush. “I don’t have those kinds of feelings for Harry. I wouldn’t cheat on Joshua like that.” The word “again” hung on the edge of his lips.

“Well that’s not necessarily cheating, Lou.”

“It’s emotional cheating, mum. I wouldn’t do that while I’m with someone else.”

“Okay, fine. But even if it isn’t romantic, I stand by what I said.” She continued. “Because from everything you’ve told me, you’re formed a real companionship with Harry. You have a really strong, supportive bond, and I just think that your relationship with Josh doesn’t seem strong by comparison. He doesn’t support you the way he should.”

Louis chewed on the fleshy part of his lip for the next several minutes as his mother’s well-formed opinion of Joshua’s transgressions unfurled. It was only fair, really, as Louis had monopolized the better part of an hour retelling every detail of the last few months without letting her get a single word in. He then realized, with a twinge of embarrassment, that about half of his words had been devoted to talking about Harry.

The conversation had ended when he heard the first murmurings of his awakening friends, and he hung up with that special, golden calm that only comes from a good talk with the woman who raised you.

The reason it had gone so well, unfortunately, was because Louis had left out a certain, integral detail about Joshua forcibly sending Louis in the direction of a set of stairs. He omitted this merely in the interest of preserving civilian lives, knowing that the moment Jay found out, the resulting conflagration would wipe out half of the UK.

Louis’ front door burst open without preamble, Liam spilling out and motioning for Louis and Harry to come inside. Apparently, after a lengthy search, they had determined that the house was void of any bitter ex-boyfriends.

Ex-boyfriend.
That was the term that still felt like charcoal on Louis’ tongue. Once inside, Louis felt as if his house had about doubled in size since he had last stepped foot in it. Everything was expansive, empty space. It was all too big, too liable to echo back at him anytime he made a noise. The others lingered near him awkwardly like a throng of planets in orbit.

Louis wanted to start making decisions, to take control of the situation that was now lain out before him, but too many thoughts were clawing at the corners of his mind. If he allowed one to enter, he felt that the rest would come crashing in all at once and drown him.

“You guys don’t,” Louis stammered, leaning against a nearby end table. “You don’t have to stay. I’m not going to, choke on my own tongue, or anything.”

“Louis,” Liam chided.

“You all have jobs, and lives, and whatever. You don’t have to drop everything for me.”

“Louis.”

“What, Liam?”

“We’re here. We’re not going anywhere.” Liam said resolutely. “Put us to use.”

That idea clicked. He could put them to use. He could start to get things under control, and not even notice the fact that Joshua had left his shoes by the door, or that his iPad was charging on the end table next to Louis’ keys. The cogs in his brain were finally whirring again, and he knew that he needed it all gone. Every trace of Joshua needed to be gone.

“Okay, right.” He said, snapping into alertness. “We need boxes. There are some in the garage from the move, but we’ll need more.”

“Home Depot it is.” Niall declared, already heading for the door. “You wanna drive, Payno?”

“Yeah. Definitely.” Liam responded, following him to the door.

“We’ll be back. Go team go!”

Niall sprinted out of the house as if starting the first leg of a marathon, Liam waving over his shoulder as he followed.

“So we’re moving Joshua out?” Zayn clarified, his imploring eyes falling onto Louis.

“We need to call some movers.” Louis said, not directly answering the question. “And a locksmith.”

“On it.” Zayn said as he pulled out his phone and headed into another room.

“Tell them I’ll pay double if they can get out here today.” Louis called after him, already heading to the garage. Harry was right behind him, careening forward to hold the door open as Louis spouted off a list of chores. “He didn’t bring a lot with him from his old place. Donated most of it. And now I’m realizing that he probably just left everything at his old flat. Goddamnit,” He muttered, the full scope of Joshua’s deception slowly materializing. Louis struggled to balance several boxes with one hand until Harry stepped in and took control of the task. Louis decided not to argue, knowing that Harry would rather carry the entire contents of the house on his back than let Louis exert himself while he’s injured. “But he’s got his clothes, and his bathroom shit and books, plus anything that looks unopened and expensive is probably his. Even though I probably
paid for it. And *fuck.*” He swore, coming face to face with the object of his enmity. “I don’t even know what to do with all of his stupid fucking guns, but I want them gone. I want them all gone.”

“We’ll take care of it, don’t even worry about it.” Harry said, urging Louis to move past the gun cabinet that he was locked in a glaring match with.

Everything was a whirl of movement from that moment on; cupboards and drawers being thrown open, their contents spilled out into a pile in every room unceremoniously. Zayn would zip in and out sporadically, asking Louis to clarify details of the move, all the while a niggling fear that Joshua might appear at any moment pricked at the back of his thoughts. He ignored it as the piles grew taller, a testament to the person he’d spent almost four years of his life with, reduced to a few stacks of belongings. Louis clung to the frenetic energy of the moment, distracting himself enough to stamp out any burgeoning feelings of catharsis.

There wasn’t a moment of stand still until all three found themselves in the bedroom, raking through the contents of the closet. Harry dropped an overflowing armful of clothes onto the bed as Louis watched on, listening as the fabric fell onto the duvet with a huff. The pastel v-necks and Old Navy button-ups pouted up at him, pathetically wrinkled from their rough handling.

Harry and Zayn both froze as they heard Louis’ breath hitch.

“You okay?” Zayn asked carefully.

“No, I’m not.” Louis answered, another furor rising through his tired bones. They both made timid moves to comfort him, but he stepped back in avoidance. “I’m not okay because he’s had that same, stupid pair of jeans since I met him.” Louis said, pointing an accusatory finger at the faded denim atop the pile. “And he never wears them. He insists on keeping them because who fucking knows why, but what’s he going to do with them now? Is he still going to keep them? Or is he finally going to get rid of them because they’re too small, and they have holes, and I’ve been telling him to just throw them away for years? But I’m not going to know what he does with them. I don’t have a say in it anymore. I don’t have a say in anything he does because we’re not in each other’s lives anymore.” Louis paused as his chest tightened.

“Yeah, but Louis-“ Zayn started.

“And it’s not even just that! It’s not just that we won’t eat breakfast together anymore, or watch movies, or fight or whatever. It’s not just that. It’s because *everything* is changing.” He admitted, his voice sounding like it was crumbling. “I’m leaving the country, and Harry and Niall are going on tour, and just – everything’s just changing all at once.”

Zayn stared at him, gaping under the weight of feeling useless. He fish-mouthed, struggling for some sort of words to pour from him, but he couldn’t seem to piece anything together.

But Harry was already wrapping his fingers around Louis’ good shoulder, spinning him so they were facing each other directly.

“Yeah, Louis, things are changing.” Harry agreed. “But that’s not a bad thing. You’re going to go make this incredible movie, and you’re going to pour everything you have into it. All of your pain and your fear is going to go into this role, and you’re going to give this amazing performance that everyone in the world is going to freak out over. I mean, you’re going to be *so good*, Louis. And the movie’s going to become this moving, enduring piece of art that means so much to so many people, and you’re not even going to have time to think about missing anyone. Plus, you’re going to go see your mum and all your siblings for the holidays, and before you know it, you’ll be back here with Zayn and Liam completely spoiling you.”
Louis grinned weakly, feeling his heart rate slow to a more comfortable pace. Harry’s words had tapped at every one of his fears, assuaging them and giving him something to grip onto. But he’d glossed over one detail, which was that Status Solo would be on tour until March, long after Louis would be getting back from filming.

“But, what about you?” He asked, avoiding eye contact as he idly hooked a finger through one of Harry’s belt loops.

“Well, obviously, we’ll be texting and calling each other constantly. And I’m going to skype you at minimum three times a day. You’ll get sick of me, honestly. I’m embarrassingly clingy.”

Louis smiled at the irony of the sentiment, as it was Louis who was quite literally clinging to Harry in that moment. He released his hold from Harry’s belt loop and began to tug at the hem of his shirt, as if the entire purpose of Harry putting on clothes that morning was to provide Louis with something to nonchalantly toy with as he thought.

He was nodding, he noticed, and the swell of anxiety seemed to be fading away. Harry sensed this and gently pulled Louis against his chest, sinking his face into the shock of Louis’ honey brown hair. Louis embedded himself into the curves of Harry’s front, molding himself into his supportive frame. Several leaden moments pulsed by until Louis lifted his head and spotted Zayn, still slack-jawed and unmoving from his spot beside the bed.

“Zayn, I need you to do something for me.” Louis said evenly, his mental capacities regaining strength.

“Yeah, anything.” Zayn replied, practically jumping at the chance to help. “What do you need?”

“I have to call Joshua and,” Louis swallowed. “and I have to tell him not to come back here.”

“You need me to call him?” Zayn offered, but Louis was already shaking his head from where it was pressed to Harry’s chin.

“No, he should hear it from me. But I need you to…” He trailed off on an exhale, preparing himself. “I need you to tell me what makes you love Liam.” He said bluntly. Zayn’s eyes quivered in surprise, lines of shock rippling across his features.

“No, erm, Liam and I haven’t said ‘I love you’ to each other yet.” Zayn sputtered.

“Zayn.” Louis said knowingly. “I’ve seen you two in the same room before. Don’t be embarrassed. I just need you to tell me what you love about him.” He watched as Zayn fumbled with his hands, still unsure of what he should say. “Zayn, I just really need to remember. I need you to remind me.”

Zayn looked up at him, realization finally slotting into place. His eyes were tremulous with some abstract affection and his arms crossed tightly around his chest.

“I, erm, I guess he makes me feel safe? Like, supported.” He mused, his gaze wafting around the room and never falling on anything concrete. “I can trust him with anything because he’ll always support me. He’s just so concerned about everyone, and he always has to find a way to help out. And he just knows how to take charge when there’s a problem because he wants to protect everyone.

‘And his smile. Like how he can just seem really high strung and tense one second, then he suddenly lets go of it all and his whole face lights up. And it’s always this special smile that he saves for the people he cares about. Like, it’s this little secret we share, that underneath the concern and all of the take charge, ‘minored in Sport’s Medicine at University’ Liam, there’s just
this giggly, sensitive, tender man. He just makes me happy, I guess. And I’m always excited to wake up in the morning and see him, or hear whatever he’s going to say next, or see him open his eyes, or… Okay, sorry, that’s a lot.”

“No, it was perfect.” Louis said, surfacing from the lull he’d fallen into listening to Zayn’s words. Harry was still under their spell, obliviously swaying in the midst of his embrace with Louis, wearing a dopish smile topped with two twinkling eyes. He probably had some dreamy, poetic thought sitting on the tip of his tongue; Louis could feel it in the way his arms were draped around him. It was the same way one would hold a teddy bear: more for your benefit than for whoever you’re holding.

There was a moment of guilt as Louis had to separate himself from Harry’s hold, slipping his phone from his pocket. Every one of Zayn’s words had settled into Louis, reminding him of what he had to do. It wasn’t that his endearments for Liam had drudged up something weary and romantic in Louis, it was that the words were so unfamiliar and distant. They didn’t resonate as Joshua’s image waded through his thoughts. It was time to end it.

He exited the room without explanation, selecting Joshua’s number from his favorite’s list. His house flashed by underfoot as he put the phone to his ear, stepping into the bright sunlight drenching the back veranda. The phone rang mechanically against his ear and he was already standing at the lip of the pool by the time Joshua answered.

“Louis! Baby! Oh my god!” He gasped on the other end, sounding winded by the mere fact that Louis was calling him. “Are you okay? I’ve been trying to call you and no one will tell me if you’re at a hospital or if you’re hurt, or what’s even going on. God, baby, are you okay?”

“I’m—“ Louis cut himself off before he could say ‘fine.’ Joshua wasn’t privy to that information anymore. He didn’t have to answer him. “Are you at your mum’s?” he asked, his voice guarded. He dipped his toes into the water, nudging the pool cover to the side.

“Um, yeah. I can head over right now, though. Are you okay? Are you hurt? I can leave right now—“

“Would you rather have your stuff sent to your mum’s place or to your flat?”

“My stuff? What? What are you talking about? I’ll seriously be there as fast as I can.”

“I’ll just send it to your mum’s.” Louis decided out loud, kicking the corner of the pool cover until it folded onto itself, revealing a few square feet of glimmering blue water.

“What are you talking about, Lou?”

“You’re not welcome here anymore.” He said. The line fell silent, presumably as Joshua gaped at the turn in conversation. Once the moment had passed, he bit back venomously.

“Louis. We need to talk about this first.”

“We don’t.”

“Just listen to me, alright? I’m coming over right now and we’ll talk this out.”

“You don’t live here. If you show up on my property I will report you for trespassing.”

“Trespassing? Trespassing? I can’t trespass at my own house! Stop talking and just listen to what I’m trying to say!”
“I can’t do that, Joshua.”

“Do not hang up. We’re not done talking. I am your boyfriend, Louis!”

“You aren’t though.” Louis breathed, his words ironically feather-light as they passed through him. “You aren’t my boyfriend.” He pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at the screen, listening to Joshua’s frustrated warbles but not being able to catch what he was saying. He stared at the name illuminated on the screen, watching as it slipped through his fingers and fell into the pool with a plunk.

It sunk to the speckled pool floor, the screen flickering with its last electronic breath before it came to a sputtering end. It stared up at him, black and lifeless as the water warped and distorted it’s reflection.

He snuck his foot over the water and coaxed the cover back into its original position, condemning his last conversation with Joshua to a chlorinated grave.

His attention was ripped away by the sound of his French doors swinging open from the house. He turned to see Zayn on the veranda, the same pair of Joshua’s tattered jeans clutched in his hand.

“Hey, Louis! We’re going to burn these jeans.” Zayn announced triumphantly. Louis found himself nodding in response.

“Yes. We are definitely going to burn those jeans.”

~

The last denim remains smoldered from the waste bin, the boys all serving as an audience as they leaned back and watched it from the comfort of the living room. A string of movers marched in and out of the house behind them, eradicating any trace of Joshua, box by box.

Louis looked up as one of the movers approached him, handing him a thick clipboard topped with a stack of papers and a pen. Louis flipped through the papers as the mover took note of the sizzling waste bin.

“Break up?” The mover asked as he pieced the clues together.

“Get a lot of those?” Louis asked as he jotted his signature over the bottom of several documents.

“You wouldn’t even believe.” He remarked with a smirk, taking the clipboard back.

“If you get any trouble when you drop the boxes off, you have my full consent to just dump everything. Bill me for any inconvenience.” Louis said as he recapped the pen and handed it to him.

“Bad break up, I see.” The mover chuckled. He walked away as Zayn’s phone began to ring, diverting everyone’s attention to his chirping pocket.

“It’s your mum.” Zayn said as he looked at the screen and answered. Louis’ eyebrows twitched in confusion, since he’d talked to his mum for an hour that morning and he had no idea why she would need to talk to him again so quickly. He nudged closer to Harry from his spot on the couch
as Zayn answered. “Hi, Jay. Yeah, I’m with him. He dropped his phone in the pool. Yeah, he … oh … erm, no, we hadn’t heard about … erm-“ Each time Zayn paused, everyone in the vicinity could hear a distressed screeching through the phone. Zayn dropped it to his shoulder to address Louis. “Erm, apparently it’s all over the internet that Joshua pushed Louis down the stairs.”

Louis’ stomach sunk.

Bullocks. Fuck. Shit.

The phone was already being passed along the couch toward him, his mother making high pitched demands as it landed in Harry’s hands. Louis shirked away from it as Harry tried to hand it over, shaking his head uncontrollably as the memories from the night before rose inside of him like bile. He’d never intended for his mum to find out about any of this, and now apparently people all over the world were reading about a moment that Louis could barely relive in his own head. He was supposed to be moving past this, supposed to never have to think about it again. What was the symbolic point of burning Joshua’s trousers if he wasn’t putting the memories behind him?

The anxiety was baking him from the inside, making his skin burn. Reflexively, he pushed the outstretched phone against Harry’s ear, struggling to communicate with only his eyes.

“Erm, hello?” Harry stammered in surprise. “Mrs….”

“Poulsten.” Louis murmured through the fabric of Harry’s shirt as he sunk his head into his shoulder.

“Poulsten? Yeah, no. This is Harry.” He said. That was met by an upbeat exclamation from the phone. “Oh, hi, Jay. Er, it’s kind of hard for Louis to talk about everything right now. Is it okay if I filled you in? … Okay, yeah. … So we were at this party last night. … Yeah, I was hosting it.” Harry untangled himself from the couch, throwing a look of apology at Louis as he broke the contact between them and headed back towards the veranda as he spoke to Louis’ mum.

Louis was left with only one thought.

Thank fuck for Harry Styles.

“Someone blabbed to the press?” Niall cut in, following Harry’s exit.

“That’s what she said.” Zayn verified. Louis quickly noticed the guilty way that Liam was inspecting his nails.

“You already knew, didn’t you?” He accused.

“I just – I didn’t want you to worry about it.” Liam defended himself. “I let all of your publicists know that you were going to need a couple of days before you could deal with any work stuff, but I didn’t think a scandal was going to pop up today.”

“What should I do?” He asked.

“You don’t have to worry about it right now.”

“Liam, I don’t want the world talking about Joshua pushing me down the…” he came to a shaky halt before finishing his thought. “I want to take care of this as soon as possible. It’s just going to bug me if we don’t deal with it. What would you do if you were me?”

Liam mulled the proposition over, clearly still believing that Louis shouldn’t put his focus on
anything besides relaxing and taking care of his shoulder. But, at last, he sighed and sat forward. The look on his face gave the appearance that he had already thought this plan over several times.

“Come out on top of it.” He said. “Make a direct statement that it was an accident. You were drunk, or trying to show off, or both. Make a joke or something so it sounds realistic, you know? So it sounds like something you’d actually say if you were telling the truth. Then we’ll say that you sustained some injuries, but nothing too serious, and you’re in good spirits as you’re preparing to go film *Kids From Yesterday*. Then the whole thing will just look like a publicity stunt, and some people won’t even think twice about questioning it.”

“What about the break up?” Louis asked. “Didn’t we have to release all that stuff about me being in a relationship when I first started hanging out with Harry?”

“Yes, but we never said his name, and he never made any public appearances with you. As far as the media is concerned, Joshua doesn’t even exist.” Liam explained. Niall was also leaning forward at this point, completely fascinated as he watched Liam spin the story. “In a few months, when publicity for *Metal Heart* really picks up, we can plant some articles about how, ‘newly single Louis Tomlinson was seen out at a club with so-and-so.’ It’ll never mention any break up, just the fact that you’re newly single. People will get so caught up in the relationship speculation that they’re not even going to connect the break up to what happened last night. Public interest has a very short memory. Honestly, your friendship with Harry is more well-known than the fact that you were with Joshua.”

“Ever thought of going into management, Payno?” Niall asked. Liam smiled at the compliment, but Louis’ thoughts had turned back to Harry, who had been trapped in a conversation with his mother for the last few minutes. He excused himself from the living room as Niall began to ask Liam some hypotheticals about his own thinly veiled scandals (“Say I had a friend who’s been seeing this girl, but he just found out that she runs a dominatrix agency that illegally used the Disney logo?” “Get out of that, Niall. Disney is extremely litigious.”)

Harry was still on the phone as Louis shut the door behind him. His eyes lit up in greeting and Louis joined him against the railing, listening to Harry’s side of the conversation.

“Mhmm. They’re changing the locks tomorrow.” Harry said into the phone. “Louis’ actually here now, did you want to talk to him? … Yeah. Definitely. We’re not going to let Joshua get anywhere near him. It was lovely talking to you. … Yeah, here he is.”

He passed the phone off to Louis, who pressed it to his ear with trepidation.

“Hello?”

“Lou, I’ve already checked flight schedules. I can be in LA by dinner tomorrow.” She said fervently.

“No, mum.”

“I’ve still got that travel pillow, you know, the nice one that you can heat up in the microwave? So I can just sleep on the plane.”

“There will be no sleeping on any planes with your microwave pillow, because you are going to stay exactly where you are.” Louis insisted. “I’m going to see you in less than a month, mum.”

“Yes, but Josh isn’t coming with you, which makes it rather difficult for me to pummel him to death.” She pointed out.
“Let’s not have you committing any acts of murder this close to the holidays.”

“Lou, I just honestly can’t believe any of this.” She said, her voice a near-whisper. “He always got on my nerves, but this?”

“Yeah.” Louis muttered, unsure of what to say.

“Are you okay, baby? I should just fly out-“

“Mummmmm.” He groaned. “I have four grown men watching my every move. I’m feeling sufficiently coddled.”

“Did they give you the good stuff at the hospital?”

“Yup, and plenty of it.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

“Could I call you back sometime when there’s a bit less going on? There are still, like, ten sweaty men moving boxes around my house.”

“Sure, baby. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” He moved to hang up, but was stopped as he heard her pipe up once again.

“Oh! And I really like Harry. Okay, bye!” She rushed, finally ending the call. Louis smiled down at the phone and leaned into Harry, pressing their sides together.

“She likes you.” Louis relayed.

“I like her, too.” Said Harry.

“I guess it’s mutual, then.” He remarked, rolling his head languidly to the side to admire Harry’s profile. “What do we do now?”

“Keep existing, I suppose.”

“I’m keeping you from work, aren’t I? You should be doing press for the tour, but you’re stuck here packing boxes with me.”

“No, Louis, I’m not stuck here. I want to be here. I’m dreading every appearance I have to make this week, because I’d much rather be here with you, even if that means I’m packing boxes.”

“Because you’re leaving and I’m never going to see you again.” Louis grumbled, and Harry laughed.

“I already comped you some tickets for our London show at the end of the month.” He admitted. “That’s only a few weeks apart, so you can quit your whining.”

Louis tried to keep his face impassive, despite the powerful smile that was struggling to break through. His attempts were thwarted as he failed to keep the edges of his mouth under control.

“You’re stupid.” Louis commented.

“Such a charmer.” Harry responded, leaning over to blow at Louis’ hair.
“That is a horrible habit you’ve picked up.” Louis complained as he fixed his hair.

“Thank you.”

“I’m assuming you’ve planned all sorts of ridiculous activities for this week, haven’t you?” Louis asked, turning just in time to catch the smirk on Harry’s face.

~

The crown-jewel of Harry and Niall’s last week in LA was, naturally, a massive party being held at Niall’s house that weekend. But before that could happen, Harry informed Louis that he was holding him to his “promise.” This alleged promise was actually more of an abstract agreement that had occurred the night Harry had stuck around and read Louis’ copy of the *Kids From Yesterday* script. After Harry had effectively talked Louis into taking the part, he’d asked if he’d be interested in visiting a homeless LGBT youth center for research purposes. When he’d never mentioned it again, Louis had assumed that Harry had forgotten.

This could not have been further from the truth.

It was day four of the break up, meaning he’d spent four days watching his friends rotate through his house and check up on him as their schedules would allow. The trip to the youth center served as Louis’ first effort to put on actual clothes and leave the house. On the day of the visit, their arrival time kept getting pushed further and further back as Harry’s security tried to keep their whereabouts under wraps. It wasn’t until the late afternoon that they were successfully snuck into the Southern California LGBT Shelter, and Louis was completely unprepared for what he might find inside.

Harry had known that Louis was wary about the visit all week, and he’d offered to call the whole thing off about fifty times. But Louis could see how desperately Harry wanted to go, and he knew that, had his heart not been ripped in half earlier that week, he would probably be feeling the same way. Harry was protective of him, all the same, keeping a warm hand on him at all times and constantly checking in to see how Louis was doing.

But Louis couldn’t quite convey what he was feeling as they moved through the youth shelter. There were about thirty residents averaging at eighteen years of age, all running the gamut in appearance and personal identity. What they did have in common, however, was a surprising amount of optimism and friendly personalities. Ms. Catskill, the woman who ran the shelter, told Louis that this was a common misconception about homeless youth. Most people expected them to be jaded and toughened, but most were upbeat and genuinely friendly.

Louis found himself talking with Ms. Catskill for most of the visit. She was ready to feed him with facts about LGBT youth that he found startling, such as the statistic that over fifty percent of transgender youth will attempt suicide by their twentieth birthday, and nearly forty percent of homeless youth in the United States identify as LGBT. These numbers, coupled with the bright, uplifting young men and women he met throughout the day troubled him. He’d spent the week in his massive house watching TV in his pajamas after a break up, and yet these kids were so genuinely happy to see him, despite the hardships they had already faced.

The thing was, he knew that they’d all lose themselves over Harry. In their many public outings together, Louis had seen more than one fan go berserk upon recognizing him. Louis had fans, too,
but nothing compared to the fervent idolatry that followed rockstars wherever they went. So Louis wasn’t surprised when the girls squealed at Harry’s every word and struggled to catch their breath when he shook their hands. What was surprising, however, was how everyone reacted to Louis.

Mostly, they kept saying thank you. They’d all read Louis’ coming out article, and some of them had even gotten their hands on copies for him to sign. They thanked him for what he’d done for the community and for being brave enough to go public with his sexuality.

He nodded along and signed whatever they handed to him, but all he wanted to tell them was that they had nothing to thank him for. He hadn’t done anything that helped them. He was the kind of person that had dropped his brand new iPhone in his pool because he knew how easy it would be to replace it. He lived a spoiled, comfortable life, and it made him feel sick as the hours continued on at the shelter.

But Harry was a natural. While Louis was stiff and guarded, Harry talked to everyone as if they were instant friends. It only took a few minutes before they felt comfortable enough to tell him their life stories. And of course he listened with genuine interest, giving advice where he saw fit or just saying something supportive.

By the time the sun had gone down, Louis found himself searching for Harry after getting a tour from Ms. Catskill. He found him sitting on the floor of one of the sleeping rooms. There were a few of them, each were much too small for the number of bunks that had been forced into them. The one Harry was now sitting in seemed to have attracted every resident of the shelter, who were now lounging across the bunks and mattresses in a circle around Harry.

“Lou!” Harry called, making a grabby hand toward him when he caught his eye from the hallway. Louis stepped carefully through the throng of bodies until he fell into the empty spot at Harry’s side. “Okay, I think I’ve got everyone’s names this time.” Harry said excitedly. “That’s Shanice, Benjamin, Connor…” he continued to point at each teenager one by one, pointing to their faces as he relayed their names. He would always say something ridiculous when he obviously couldn’t remember one of them (Goddess of the hunt Athena, Academy Award Winner Tom Hanks) but each teenager still watched him endearingly. He ended on Cassidy, a glowering girl painted with dark make up and an impressive collection of piercings that Louis had met earlier. She didn’t seem nearly as impressed with Harry as the others in the group. “Did I get them all?”

“Almost.” The group laughed. Louis got the impression that every room Harry walked into somehow ended up feeling like a slumber party in his honor. Louis leaned further into his side as he listened to their conversation, the kids discussing various bands that they liked, the more doe-eyed among them listing off things that they thought might impress Harry.

“I like old music. Like the Beatles.” Said one of the younger ones.

“The Beatles suck.” Cassidy said bluntly.

“They’re like, one of the best bands in history.” One boy objected.

“Every neo-intellectual teenage hipster thinks they love the Beatles because they haven’t listened to anyone else from the sixties.” She pointed out icily. “No one ever talks about James Brown, or Frank Zappa, or the Doors. But, oh, you all really love the Beatles.”

Louis decided that he liked Cassidy quite a bit.

“I like newer music.” One pointed out. “Like Maroon 5.”
“Maroon 5 sucks.” Cassidy bit out, turning to a mousy girl who was about to open her mouth. “And so does Taylor Swift, Heather, so don’t even go there.”

“My favorite band is Status Solo.” One girl said brightly.

“Fancy that, me too.” Louis responded, grinning through his brown-nosery at Harry. He waited for whatever protestation Cassidy had ready to fire, but none came as she looked down sheepishly.


“Aren’t you supposed to be studying us or something?” She asked harshly. “Making yourself feel better about yourself and your fancy life because you came down here and listened to our sob stories?”

One of the shelter’s volunteers appeared in the doorway before Louis could respond, announcing that lights out was in five minutes and everyone needed to get back to their assigned bunks. There was a murmur of disappointment as everyone got to their feet, but Harry lingered to sign a few last autographs and personally say goodbye to everyone. Louis managed to slip out as he followed a mop of angry, black hair down the hallway. Cassidy was traipsing down the corridor towards the room with her own bunk as Louis hurried to catch up with her.

“Cassidy!” He called out as he approached her. She stopped with visible shock before reworking her glower.

“Want to lecture me or something?” She asked sourly.

“Nah, I was just wondering why you’re so afraid to tell Harry that you like his music.”

“What makes you think you like his music?”

“The fact that you, rather uncharacteristically, didn’t say that it sucks.”

“Maybe I just didn’t want to hurt his feelings.” She pointed out.

“No, I don’t think you care about hurting other people’s feelings. I think your care more about keeping your own feelings intact.” He surmised. “You see, I’m a sarcastic asshole. I speak the same language as you.”

“Whatever.” She said defensively, but Louis could see she was considering everything he had just said. Her eyes widened slightly as she spotted something behind Louis, and he turned to see that Harry was heading in their direction.

“Just saying, it would probably mean a lot to both of you if you were honest with him.” Louis said, turning back to her. She sneered, and a gentle hand on his hip alerted him to Harry’s arrival.

“Getting tired?” Harry asked him.

“A bit. Ready to head out?”

“Yeah, let’s go. Lovely meeting you.” Harry said to Cassidy as he slowly led Louis away. They made it about four steps before Cassidy was calling after them.

“Um, Harry?” She asked, causing Harry to stop in his tracks.

“Yeah?” He responded, turning around. Louis tried to hide his smugness.
“I saw you in concert a couple of years ago.” She blurted out, her rough exterior fading. “My mom was a really big fan. And yeah, I know middle aged women aren’t really your demographic, or whatever. But um, yeah she loved you guys. The concert was actually the last thing we did together. She – um – she died a few weeks later. Car crash. Totally stupid and random. But, um, it was a really good show and she loved it. She bought us matching concert t-shirts and everything. I still wear mine sometimes when I can’t get to sleep. But yeah, I just wanted to let you know that, and everything. And I guess, um, thank you.”

She crossed her arms tightly across her front and avoided looking at the two of them as her speech came to an end, but Harry was already approaching her.

“That was really brave of you to say, thank you.” He said warmly, coaxing her eyes up to meet his. “It sounds like your mum really loved you.”

“Yeah.” She said quietly, her cheek hollowing as she chewed on it.

“I’d love to hear about her, if that’s alright with you.” Harry said.

Louis was ready to intervene, thinking that the topic seemed a little too sensitive at the moment for Cassidy, but it was proven, once again, that Harry was much better at reading people. Despite the fact that curfew had long since passed, Harry easily charmed Ms. Catskill into letting them monopolize Cassidy’s attention in the dining area. The three were currently pouring over a shoebox full of mementos of Cassidy’s mother, Dana.

Harry inspected each glossy picture, concert ticket, and Christmas card with a boyish smile, remarking on any physical similarities he noticed between the mother and daughter.

“How old are you, Cassidy?” Louis asked, looking at a picture from Halloween 2003.

“Just turned 18.” She responded.

“Ever thought of going to college?”

“I never finished high school.” She remarked offhandedly, watching Harry look over a handwritten birthday card. “See that?” She asked, pointing to a section of handwriting at the bottom that read love you til forever and back, mom. “Someday, when I get some real money, I’m gonna get that tattooed on my arm. Always have a piece of her with me.” She drifted off for a moment while she stared at the words, as if deciding how much she wanted to share. “She wasn’t alive when I came out, but I think she would have been happy about it. Like, proud, you know? Not just how people say it doesn’t bother them, or they’re fine with it, or whatever. Like, she would have been proud.”

They all stared wordlessly at the card, understanding all too well what she meant. That’s exactly what Louis’ mum had said when he first came out in sixth-form. She said she was fine with it. That it didn’t matter to her what his sexuality was. It took years for him to explain to her that it’s not enough to just say that you’re fine with it. It’s such a huge part of his identity, and he needed her to be proud of him.

Harry pulled Louis from his reverie as he suddenly stood up.

“Come on, Louis. I’m gonna need your help to talk Ms. Catskill into letting us borrow Cassidy for a couple more hours.”

“And where exactly are we taking her?” Louis asked suspiciously.

Harry turned to Cassidy, extending a hand to help her to her feet.
“We’re taking her to get that tattoo.”

~

The car was pleasantly quiet as they made their way home, Louis already planning to make a sizable donation to the shelter once he managed to find his checkbook. He smiled contentedly out the window, sated by that warm feeling you usually get after a holiday meal or a surprise birthday party. Somewhere, Cassidy was cleaning the freshly inked skin of her arm before getting into bed. But perhaps more importantly, Harry was only a few feet away, sitting quietly with Louis in the back of the private car.

“Arrienne’s going to be at Niall’s party this weekend.” Harry suddenly said, turning to face Louis. The abruptness caught him momentarily off guard.

“Is this the first time you guys have seen each other?”

“Since the Halloween thing? Yeah. Management wants us to get some pictures together.” Harry swallowed. “You’ll be there, right?”

“Course I will.” Louis assured him, eliciting a shy grin from Harry. Louis both loved and hated that frail smile. He hated that just the mention of Arrienne could subdue him so thoroughly, but he loved that the smile was for him. It was for Louis. “I’ve got a deal for you, Haz. You don’t go on tour, and I won’t make this movie. Then we can both just stay home and eat pie.”

“Don’t tempt me, Lou.” He said affectionately.

The dull roar of the freeway purred on, a reticent soundtrack to their locked gazes.

~

“Oh my god. Louis!” Zayn groaned, tearing the duvet from Louis’ bed.

“Oi!” he squeaked, twisting himself further into his sheets.

“We’ve got two hours until the party, and you’re still in bed.” Zayn griped.

“I haven’t decided if I’m going.” Louis responded moodily, pressing his face into his pillow. The countdown had already started in his head: only twelve hours until Harry and Niall would be on a plane to Scotland, leaving Louis behind to mope in his pajamas and drink his green smoothies.

“You’re definitely going.” Zayn decided, leaping heavily onto the bed beside him. “I’ll admit, sulking is a legitimate response to a break up. But so is getting way too drunk and having fun with your friends.”

“What is this ‘fun’ you speak of?”

“Come on, Lou.” Zayn moaned, sitting up. “It’s just you and me right now. We can get ready like we used to when we lived together and you always wore those really tight trousers. We’ll make
you look so good, every penis in a ten-mile radius will spontaneously explode.”

“I’m in a sling, Zayn.”

“But your arse isn’t, and if you haven’t noticed, it’s your best asset.”

“Arse.”

“Yes! Exactly. Come on, it’ll be fun. Just like when we were young and stupid.”

Louis’ eyebrow arched up in interest.

“Which means we start drinking now?”

“That’s exactly what it means. Now get out of bed!”

~

Even by southern California standards, it was a rather balmy December. Niall had so far refused to cover his pool for the winter based on this fact, and he’d decided to go a step further for his grand, last day before the tour starts party. The slight curve of his back lawn was now blanketed by expansive tarps, each being kept slick by a smattering of sprinklers. What resulted was the most impressive slip and slide in the western world.

Drunk celebrities of every profession hurtled down it, some using only their bodies for propulsion, others smushing themselves into inner tubes and pool toys. Niall had even provided himself with a long surfboard which he used as a sled, rocketing down the hill with a shrill cry.

Louis watched all of this with jealousy from Niall’s deck after he had received specific instruction to do nothing that might reinjure his shoulder. He sipped at his drink sulkily, putting it down only to take several long drags from the joint between his fingers, cajoling his senses into crossfaded bliss.

He was wholly unprepared, then, when the fiery mane attached to Arrienne Brant parked herself beside Louis.

“Interested in sharing?” She asked. Her voice was authoritative enough that Louis passed the joint without a second thought. “Still part of his posse?” She questioned, coughing out a puff of smoke.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“He’s fucking ridiculous. Don’t know how you guys deal with it.” She remarked, taking another hit. “You fucking him, or what?”

“We’re friends.” Louis snapped, motioning for her to pass the joint back.

“But you want to be fucking him.”

His usual response (no, actually, I have a boyfriend) was suddenly invalid, so Louis could think of nothing better to say than the first thing that came to mind.

“I don’t like you.” He stated.
“Yeah, I don’t like me either.” She mumbled, eyes falling to his sling as he handed the joint back. “Took a tumble?”

“Yes, actually. This is what a real injury looks like. I’m surprised you recognized it.”

“Hmm, sassy.” She laughed, adjusting herself in her seat. The slight upward turn to her lips fell as something dark spread over her face. “Yeah, that might have been a mistake.” She commented absently, eyes running along the surface of the deck. “At least Harry managed to get some good out of it.” She dropped the joint onto the deck and stamped it out beneath her Jimmy Choo pumps. She winked at him before floating away with a flawless gait, leaving Louis slack-jawed in her wake.

Louis rose to his feet in search of Niall and his surfboard. After witnessing Arrienne say something somewhat nice about Harry, he was confident that he could make another miracle occur. His shoulder would probably be fine.

In an attempt to protect him from further injury, Niall and Harry insisted that Louis sit sandwiched between them on the board. They took off as quickly as they could, fearing that Liam might appear and put an end to their downward flight at any moment.

Despite the fact that this was probably Niall’s tenth run down the hill, he still shrieked in absolute terror as the board picked up speed. The board slicked across the wet surface without a trace of impeding friction, propelling them into a horrifying velocity. Harry was screaming as well, digging his fingers into Louis’ hips.

Louis was rather impressed that he seemed to be the only one keeping a level head, but on further inspection, he realized that he was screaming just as desperately as his surfboard companions. Their wails only intensified as the board flew past the edge of the tarp, skidding over the pavement surrounding Niall’s pool on a fast track toward the water.

They took flight over the rippling blue momentarily, various bikini clad models running for cover, until the nose of the board sunk beneath the water and sent all three of them flying. Louis was engulfed by a deafening crash of chilly water, his sight consumed by a violet swirl of bubbles against blue. He broke through the surface, gasping and laughing as his shoulder panged an aching discontent at his behavior.

“Louis! You have movie in two weeks! You cannot reinjure yourself!” Liam was yelling from somewhere nearby, but Louis couldn’t hear him over his fixation on Harry.

He was wide-eyed and wild with the adrenaline from their brush with near-death, and Louis was completely offended that no one was trying to splash water into his gaping mouth. He floated on his back and kicked aggressively, sending a spray of white and blue into Harry’s face.

“You signed a contract, Louis!” Liam continued from dry land.

Liam eventually won out, forcing each of them to sit on the cold, tiled floor of Niall’s laundry room in nothing but their pants as their wet clothes tumbled in the dryer. Zayn sat amongst them, each clutching onto their own bottles of vodka as Liam clucked like a mother hen above them.

“We had to read this case story about this bloke who just kept injuring himself until he got this nasty, mangled wrist.” He continued.

“Interesting. Was this at University?” Louis asked through a shit-eating grin.

“Well, yeah.” Liam responded. Everyone giggled as they each took a long pull from their bottles. Liam opened the dryer and fished out everyone’s clothes, tossing them haphazardly in their
directions. “They’re still kind of damp, but it’s not cold enough to get hypothermia, or anything.”

“Pray tell Liam, where did you learn about that? Was it University?” Niall asked cockily as they struggled back into their trousers.

“Yes, actually.” Liam said. There was another round of giggles as they threw their drinks back. Louis wrestled with the task of tying his sling and holding onto his bottle of Bacardi Limon, a blunder that Liam noticed immediately. “There’s a specific way to do that, Lou. You’re not just supposed to tie it however you want.” He reached forward and fiddled with the sling.

“Oh really? Where did you learn about that? Uni, perhaps?” Louis asked coyly as everyone lifted their bottles to their lips in anticipation. Liam’s arms fell to his sides.

“Are you guys playing a drinking game, or something?” He asked, immediately met by an overcompensating chorus of “No! Of course not! No, no, no!” from his friends. They watched Liam tentatively, fearing the lecture they were about to receive.

With a manic fury, Liam snatched Louis’ bottle away and pressed it to his lips, guzzling it and surfacing with a grimace. They watched with shocked amusement as he messily wiped his mouth.

“You lads had better run.” He warned in a low growl. Without another word, they were each shrieking like children and tearing from the room, sprinting through the house as they fled from Liam. Louis wove deftly through the throng of guests, but Liam was quickly upon him, catching him around the middle as they both cackled.

“You’re it!” He proclaimed giddily, racing away.

So they were apparently playing tag. That was totally fine, though. Louis was more than drunk enough for it.

He sprinted through the mass of bodies and just caught the image of Harry running for his life into the kitchen. Louis made chase, closing the distance between them easily. Harry’s lanky limbs did nothing to protect him from Louis’ sheer speed. He squawked with laughter as Louis pounced on him, pressing him up against a wall.

His face was ablaze with delight, shining so impossibly bright that Louis felt powerless except to press a quick peck of lips against his left cheek.

“You’re it.” He announced. Harry’s smile widened as Louis made no attempt to move from his current position. He kissed Louis on the forehead in response.

“Now you’re it.”

“No tag backs.” Louis pointed out.

“Let’s go say hi to Glitter.” Harry decided, his thoughts branching off in a random direction. He pulled Louis by the hand down a hallway towards the guest bedrooms.

“Glitter, your cat?” Louis questioned as Harry opened a door and dragged him inside. He saw that the guest room had become Glitter’s inner sanctum for the night, complete with toys, food, and a luxurious kitty condo. She had apparently chosen to ignore all of these comforts of home as Harry scooped her up from her place on the bed. “Harry. You brought your cat to a party?”

“I’m sad when she’s not around.” He answered simply, lifting her into the air above his face. Louis wobbled drunkenly toward the bed, immediately drawn to the idea of something plush and
comfortable enveloping him. He fell into it heavily, pulling the duvet over his jellified legs.

“Turn the lights off. It’s nap time.” Louis ordered.

“But Louis. The party.” Harry pointed out helplessly.

“Harrrrrry. Naaaaaap time.” He groaned, rolling around in the sheets. This was all it took for Harry to set Glitter down on the floor and flick the lights off. He flung himself playfully onto the bed beside Louis.

“Gonna get in trouble.” Harry grumbled as Louis rolled over to face him. Louis pressed his forefinger against Harry’s nose.

“Are you telling me that Harry James Potter is afraid of getting in trouble?” Louis asked.

“Wrong Harry.”

“My deepest apologies. Harry Edward Potter.”

“Still wrong Harry.”

“Well then who even are you?” Louis groaned, rolling onto his back. His mind folded pleasantly under the weight of the alcohol and weed.

“You,” Harry said, now taking his turn to poke Louis in the nose. “are Bluey.”

“I’m what?”

“You’re Bluey Meowcat Fondlinson.” He announced happily.

“Ugh, you just ruined everything I like about myself.”

A ribbon of light fell across the floor as the door creaked open.

“Hey guys!” Niall’s head poked in. “What going on in here, huh?” His voice was heavy with mock-innocence.

“Close the fucking door, Horan! I’m trying to nap!” Louis barked.

“Just wanted to make sure no one’s doing anything they’re going to regret in the morning.” He said, once again with the cadence of a camp counselor who just caught his campers trying to hide a pack of cigarettes.

“You are ruining our nap!” Louis exclaimed, throwing a pillow at the door.

“Ruin it!” Harry agreed, lofting another pillow in the same direction. Niall frowned as he saw that Harry had been fully corrupted by Louis’ belligerence.

“Just remember to make good decisions.” Niall said, closing the door.

“Trying to take a NAP!” Louis yelped dramatically as the door clicked shut, once again plunging them into darkness. They listened quietly as his steps faded down the hallway. “I’m too awake for a nap.” Louis admitted mischievously, throwing himself onto Harry. He sat up, straddling Harry’s hips, his one functional hand pressed against Harry’s chest as he held himself up. Harry laughed in startled surprise. “I have many complaints I need to take up with you, young Harold.”
“Hm?”

“Firstly, your face is just too damn nice.” He complained. “I need you to rectify this issue at once.”

“M’kay.” Harry agreed, contorting his face and sticking his tongue out.

“Perfect. Next, your personality is too nice. I need that to stop right now.”

“Alright. Working on it.”

“Good, because you’re too perfect. Even your evil fake girlfriend is starting to like you.”

“Wait, what?” Harry asked, the frivolity of the moment washing away from his face. His fingers curled around Louis’ wrist.

“Er, yeah. She kind of talked to me for a bit.” He admitted, his attention focused on the spot where Harry’s finger tips were stroking over his wrist. “She, like, said that she was happy you spun everything into something positive. With the like, bruise picture and everything.”

It was subtle, but Louis had now become so attune to the minute shifts in Harry’s expression that he saw the softness that sprung up. He looked relieved, a pale, pink smile laced over his face that Louis had trouble describing in any masculine terms. He was beautiful, was what he was. Undeniably, unequivocally beautiful.

But none of this was news to Louis. Every inch of Harry was beautiful. He’d memorized every line of his face from that poster on his wall years earlier, and he’d always described him differently. He’d been fit, sexy, smoldering hot. And while this was still true of the Harry in real life, there was more to it. He was radiant, dazzling, lovely in every way imaginable.

“Hey Harry?” He whispered, his voice as thick as syrup.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?” Harry asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

“For being you.” Louis admitted with a defeated sigh. Yes, he’d just said something that sappy, but the flux of inebriation wasn’t about to let him regret it just yet. “For being there for me.”

Harry blinked, all remnant of humor abating. Louis shifted himself as Harry sat up, guiding Louis to sit in his lap and wrap his legs around Harry’s hips.

“You don’t have to thank me.” Harry said, his breath puffing against Louis’ face with every word. They both twined their arms around each other’s waists. “Do you know how many times I’ve, quite literally, cried on your shoulder?”

They chuckled, low and intimate, the tenderness of the moment beguiling them both into letting their foreheads rest against each other, until Louis’ head fell back with an embarrassed groan.

“What?” Harry asked.

“I’ve just had a very embarrassing thought.”

“Tell me.”
“I can’t.”

“Please?”

“It’s too embarrassing.”

“Please, Louis!” Harry pled, his bottom lip plumping up into a pout. Louis’ eyes lingered there before flicking up to meet his eyes, two wells of green glistening through the brume.

“I was just thinking about that night when we met. At that club with Niall? And I –” He stammered on an embarrassed laugh. “I’m just really happy that you danced into my life.”

Harry beamed at the cheesiness of the sentiment, his cheeks ruptured by his dimples. The image knocked the breath from Louis, depriving his brain of usable oxygen and smothering out any trace of rational thought. All that remained was a molten desire coursing through every inch of him, uninhibited by any sort of intelligent reason as he cupped the jawline of the man in front of him. Harry’s eyes were fluttering back and forth between Louis’ eyes and mouth, his breath caught on the tension of their stare.

Louis surged forward and connected their lips.

There was a moment of white-hot shock, but Louis couldn’t linger on it as Harry responded with zeal, limbs tightening around Louis as he succumbed to the kiss.

It was frenzied from the onset, the billowy pads of Harry’s lips moving against Louis’, biting at each other as if struggling for air. Harry’s hands gripped into Louis’ back, burning where they made contact as Louis’ fingers slipped into Harry’s curls.

They separated with a smack, both panting heavily, and Harry planted a line of pecks down his neck. He lingered at the curve of his collarbone, causing Louis’ entire body to convulse with a shiver. He grabbed Harry by the cheek and smashed their lips together again, knowing that he wouldn’t last another two seconds without connecting their mouths. They melted back into each other, lips smacking noisily with drunk desperation. Harry writhed beneath him as he tightened his grip on Louis, clinging to him like an anchor.

He nipped at Louis’ bottom lip until his mouth finally opened, Harry’s tongue lathing into the heat of Louis’ mouth with a flourish.

And just sweet holy fuck he could taste Harry. He could feel Harry’s tongue moving against his own. Harry’s entire body was pressed against him, laced with sweat and pulsing beneath his touch. Every one of Louis’ cells was beating, thrumming; his blood was starting to simmer.

And Harry was whimpering into Louis’ mouth, his sweet little moans emanating from within his chest and tingling against Louis’ lips. Each sound made Louis’ heart falter, his stomach surging in that way it only did around Harry. Louis felt his own face curving, his eyebrows arcing upside down in desperation as he deepened the kiss.

“Louis,” Harry stuttered, his voice airy and high-pitched as Louis’ hand found its way to the buttons of Harry’s shirt.

He just needed more. He needed so much more of Harry; far more than he could manage by grappling one handed with his shirt buttons.

Louis was just seething with it, this insatiable need that was somewhere beyond words. And how was it even possible that a kiss could make him feel like this? He was pulsing with ecstasy, his
eyes damp with the feeling of *Harry* *Harry* *Harry* and it was so unlike anything he’d ever experienced before. How was any of this possible? And, more importantly, how had he not spent every moment of every day kissing Harry Styles?

The last button came undone with a *pop*, the inked expanse of Harry’s chest suddenly beneath Louis’ fingertips. He traced over the contours of his muscles, causing Harry to reflexively grind up into him.

Louis plunged even more fiercely into Harry’s mouth, just wanting to be impossibly deeper. He wanted to be enveloped by the man clinging to him; by the beautiful boy moaning against his lips.

“Harry.” Louis whined, the heat rising in his muscles. “*Harry.*”

*You’re using him.*

Louis’ head snapped back, their lips popping wetly as he watched Harry’s kiss-bitten lips. Harry’s eyes opened in confusion. Pure, undiluted panic surged down Louis’ spine as Joshua echoed in his ears.

*He’s obsessed with you. You like the attention. It’s disgusting, and you’re using him.*

In some suffocating, apparitional form, Joshua was somehow there. His presence glowered over them, watching their every movement. He could see every peck, hear every moan, feel every pang of desperation Louis felt for Harry. He was there. He was watching them, whispering in Louis’ ear.

*I cheated on you, Joshua.*

The phantom pain erupted in his cheek, Joshua’s strike cracking against the bones of his face. It was so vivid that Louis felt as if he had been transported back to that hotel room on New Year’s Eve. He cheated. *He cheated.*

He tumbled from the bed, his veins frozen solid and his breath clasped in his throat as he was met by a flush of pain from his shoulder.

“Louis!?”

There were fingers on him, but he tugged away, grappling to his feet. His shoulder pulsed an angry crimson and his vision tunneled, but he needed to escape. Something was going to hurt him, grab him by the throat and throttle him until he forgot the taste of air.

He was choking loudly against his coarse, sandpaper throat as he stumbled blindly through the room, his face already wet and burnt raw with plummeting tears. There was a door knob beneath his grip, the cold sensation of brass almost unrecognizable at his numb, bloated touch.

Louis spilled into the hallway, the cacophony of the party worming down his ear canals and jolting his senses. He gasped into the hot air, still unable to take a breath. The air snapped against the back of his throat uselessly, taunting him as nothing reached his lungs.

There was a hand around his wrist, but Louis tore himself away, the momentum throwing him into a wall.

*I cheated on you, Joshua.*

His shoulder met the wall and he shrieked. The hands were on him again as he screamed desperately against the coarse grain of his throat.
“Go away!” He pled, clinging to a basic instinct to survive.

He was barreling through a swarm of dancing bodies without any regard for how he might appear to them. Everything was just exposed skin and alcohol, clouds of smoke and lustful eyes. None of it was going to protect him. None of it was going to help him breathe. His concept of where he was and what he was doing was ebbing away with each heartbeat.

His brain was splintering from the heat when he realized that the knees of his trousers were wet. The grass was damp beneath the palm of his hand, his fingers digging into the loam as he sobbed into the unforgiving darkness.

“Louis! Louis! I need you to breathe with me!”

Louis recoiled, but the hands held firmly to the sides of his face. He tried to scream for help, but all that escaped him as a pained cough.

“It’s me! It’s Liam! I need you to breathe with me, okay? It’s going to be okay, Louis. You just need to breathe.”

Louis’ hand wrapped around Liam’s forearm, gripping into the taut muscles.

“I can’t breathe, Liam.”

“Yes, yes you can. You’re safe and you just have to breathe in time with me. The danger’s just in your head, okay? Breathe in. Yeah, good. Breathe out. Perfect, Louis. You’re doing great.”

Louis panted in time to Liam’s breaths frantically.

“Can’t – can’t breathe.”

“You’re doing so well, Lou. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

His haggard breaths tumbled forward as the heat faded. The darkness was waning, the first slivers of light materializing before him. The façade of Niall’s house came into focus behind them, tall columns of amber light falling from its windows across the lawn. Snaking along in the distance was the brick wall that separated their properties, fading in and out of obscurity as it fell beneath the light from the house.

He shuddered violently as the shuffling of feet made him aware that Zayn was at his side, hunching over him protectively. Louis grappled with his tongue, wanting to tell Zayn that he didn’t need to worry. Everything was fine.

But then his eyes fell onto the figure behind Liam. Harry was shaking, his curls trembling atop his head and his eyes swimming with intense worry.


Their eyes locked, Harry’s pleading for some sign that Louis was okay as he wrung his pale hands.

You’re using him.

It was like a shot to the gut, and Louis’ face was pressed to the grass as the sobs wracked his body. He only caught snippets of the conversation over the thunderous hum in his ears.

“-get him home-"
“-need to get up-"

“I’m sorry, Louis!”

Harry’s cries split through the din, his apologies fading against the sounds of their wet footsteps. Liam and Zayn were on either side guiding him, leading him away from the party. Away from Harry.


“It’s okay, you’re both going to be fine.”

“I hurt him! I hurt Harry!” He cried, his voice cracking under the strain. “How could – how could I -?” But his voice gave out, no words able to describe the depth of what he’d just done.

The soft grass gave way to something solid that clacked underfoot, and Louis let them lead him along, pulse racing as he thought about what hell they were dragging him into.

~

Harry stared at the clock on the wall, his eyes following the second hand as it clicked along and officially announced the arrival of three o’clock. He had to be on a plane at eight am, only five hours from now, but sleep seemed agonizingly unattainable. And so, he just watched the clock, deciding to wait and see how he felt at four am.

Niall was pacing, griping and pointing his finger angrily to punctuate his points, but Harry wasn’t catching any of it. He just tightened his hold around his legs in the fetal position he had been in for the last several hours, his cheek pressed to the armrest of the couch.

He couldn’t attempt to listen to any of Niall’s words. If he did, it was all going to become real, and that would probably tear Harry in half.

But what the knotted pit in his stomach already knew was that it was his own fault. He’d been enjoying it too much; Louis depending on him for the last week. Louis had needed him, and Harry loved it too much that he’d been able to help and support him. It had all gone too well.

Nothing goes well for Harry. He should have known that something would go horribly wrong.

But did it have to be this? He would have preferred a lifetime of pining after Louis to this. He’d given Louis a panic attack. He was supposed to be there to protect Louis, and he had given him a panic attack. He’d lost control of himself, pushing Louis too hard when he should have been keeping a level head.

Louis didn’t want that from Harry. He was just drunk and vulnerable, and Harry had taken advantage of him. He had just looked so devastated; so completely destroyed. That might have been the worst panic attack of Louis’ life, and Harry had caused it.

Harry was disgusted with himself.

Niall’s pacing stopped as Liam stepped into the room, and Harry sat up.

“Hey,” Liam said carefully as he stepped toward them. “You sent everyone away?”
“Well yeah.” Niall snapped. “My best mate just had his heart broken because Louis wanted a rebound. Course I sent everyone away.”

“Niall.” Harry groaned. That wasn’t anywhere close to the truth.

“I just thought I’d come do some damage control.” Liam offered.

“This isn’t some PR scandal, Liam.” Niall bit out.

“Niall, please.” Harry pled.

“What? You actually want to talk to him?”

“Just for a second.” Harry reasoned. “Please.” He saw the trepidation in Niall, so he tried to muster enough strength to make him believe he wouldn’t fall apart in the next five minutes. Niall nodded gravely, giving Liam a glare as he left the room.

“How’re you doing, Harry?” Liam asked, sitting down. Harry didn’t answer, not wanting to lie to him. “We, erm, we just got Louis to fall asleep next door.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah. He’ll be fine.” He assured. “I’m worried about you mostly.”

“No, honestly, I’m fine.” Harry said, shaking his head and avoiding his gaze.

“I’m not sure I believe you.” Liam said. “I know that we’ve never explicitly talked about your situation with Arrienne, or anything, but I mean, I have eyes. It’ll be easier to talk about this is if we just move past that. Is that okay?”

Harry nodded, blinking.

“The thing is Harry, Zayn and I were noticing a lot of weird stuff at the end of Louis and Joshua’s relationship.” Liam explained. “Louis used to tease him a lot more, back before you met him. He never really put up with his crap before. But things just suddenly changed over the last year. He’s been really, really defensive about their relationship. Just, uncharacteristically loyal to him. And we thought for a while that maybe they were just getting to a new place in their relationship, you know? Like he was just trying to support him more.

‘But then he would get really mad about it sometimes, and it was always just weird. And then, I guess, at your party last week he totally blew up on Zayn, saying all this stuff about being loyal to his boyfriend and everything. And then he looked just as surprised by it as Zayn was. And just, I noticed that there was something off between you and Louis that last week before the party. I know I don’t seem that perceptive because of the whole situation with Zayn, but I kind of got the impression that you told Louis you had feelings for him?’

Harry choked and looked down at his fingers, pulling his legs into himself. That was the last thing he had been expecting to come from Liam’s mouth. He knew he wouldn’t get Liam to believe him if he didn’t tell the truth.

“It doesn’t matter.” Harry said, his voice thick. “Because it’s unrequited.”

“But that’s just it, Harry!” Liam exclaimed, sitting forward. “I don’t think it’s unrequited! I left you guys alone in the driveway for barely five minutes the other day, and when I came back he
was already sitting in your lap. Like, you just don’t see the way he looks at you, do you? He looks at you in a way I’ve never seen him look at anyone else. Like you hung the stars, or something. And when you guys hug, it’s not just a hug, you know? It’s an embrace. Like there’s something there that’s more than friendship. And whenever you’re not around, he’s always just texting you, or repeating something you said to him, or whining about how much he misses you. And I’m not the only one who sees it.

‘So, no Harry, I don’t think it’s unrequited. I think it’s a lot more complicated than that.” Liam admitted. Harry’s chest clenched, unable to believe anything Liam was saying. He had to be wrong, right? Louis just wanted to be mates. He didn’t want anything more than that. It was Harry that kept ruining everything. It was Harry who made him panic. “I’ve had a feeling for a while that he told you what happened on New Year’s Eve, even though he won’t tell any of the rest of us.” Liam continued. “Joshua hurt him, didn’t he?”

“I can’t tell you that.” Harry responded.

“Which means yes. Goddamnit.” Liam sighed. “Joshua’s been emotionally abusive for years, and I’ve just had to sit here and watch it happen. And now we’re finally rid of him, but he’s left Louis so fucked in the head he can’t even kiss someone else without having a complete breakdown.” Liam noticed Harry recoil at his words, so he back tracked. “Sorry! Yeah, sorry. I just assumed you guys, erm. Yeah. Sorry. But I really hope you’re not blaming yourself for any of this.”

Harry bit the sides of the mouth before responding quietly. “How can I not? It’s my fault.”

“No, no it is not! This is all Joshua. Louis is just really confused right now because he has these feelings for you, but he still feels like he belongs to Joshua. But this is not your fault. We’re going help Louis and try to get things sorted out, but erm … It might be best if, er…”

“If I stay away from him?” Harry asked, the corners of his eyes prickling with new tears. Liam nodded sadly.

“Just for a little while. Until he can get things figured out. I just think his feelings for you are a little too intense for him to deal with right now. For both of you to deal with.” Liam explained. Harry nodded, wiping at his eyes. “Are you okay, Harry? Can I get you something?”

“Erm, no. Could I just – is it okay if I could be alone for a little while?” He asked quietly.

“Yeah, yeah of course. I guess I won’t see you again before your plane leaves in a few hours.”

“Good luck.” Harry said. “With you and Zayn, I mean.”

“Thanks.” Liam watched Harry heavily. “I really do think you and Louis are going to end up together. I’ve thought that since I first saw you together.”

Harry laughed wetly at the absurdity of it, not looking up as Liam finally excused himself from the room. He couldn’t believe any part of what Liam had just said. He’d just been trying to spare his feelings while letting him know that he shouldn’t contact Louis anymore. It was kind of him, but he’d seen through it.

It didn’t make it feel any less like his bones were cracking in half.

“Y’okay, Haz?” Niall asked, walking back into the room. Harry didn’t answer, his attention stolen away by his phone chirping from his pocket. He unlocked it, the text blurring behind the pools of water forming along his lids. “What did he say?”
But Harry’s brain had just shut down. It was a text from Louis. It was garbled and mistyped from exhaustion and alcohol, but it was from Louis.

*harry im so sorry im so sorry/ pls dont giv up on me. i care about u so much. u r so important nd beautiful to me.pls dont give up on us*

“Harry? Harry! What’s wrong?” Niall was at his side, rubbing a hand up and down his back as he tried to understand what was causing his best friend’s crippling sobs.

But Harry was beyond comfort. No matter what he’d come to believe in the last couple of hours, Louis was somehow awake and he was thinking of Harry. He was letting Harry know how much he cared about him. His tears fell freely from behind his closed eyelids.

He clutched the phone to his chest, hanging onto the words and trying not to think about how much he loved the person who had sent them.
“I'm coming apart at the seams, pitching myself for leads in other people's dreams. So buzz, buzz, buzz, doc there's a hole where something was. Doc, there's a hole where something was.”

-Fall Out Boy

Louis had been chewing on the same bite of apple for five minutes, grinding it absentmindedly to pulp as he glared at the gray sky. Two socked feet poked out from under the heavy blanket that he'd brought out with him to the veranda. He'd already spotted Zayn and Liam when he'd trudged through the house, wrapped up together in the guest room. Louis had watched them with subdued derision. What a novelty it must be to have someone to hold onto while you're sleeping. He'd moved on without waking them up, grabbing a blanket and an apple, and planting himself in one of the loungers on the veranda without making any plans to move from it anytime soon.

It had been his first thought upon waking up: go find Harry. Go find him and apologize. Tell him you're sorry. Explain to him that he means everything to you. Grab him and hold him and don't let him go until he understands.

But it was thirty nine minutes past eight. That meant that Harry was already gone, whisked away on some transcontinental flight through the same gray sky that Louis was currently glaring at.

“Lou?”

Louis didn't turn around at the sound of Liam's voice.

“Yeah?”

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

“You want something to eat?”

Louis held his apple up defiantly, still refusing to turn and look at Liam. There was a hushed murmuring and a shuffling of feet, and Louis wasn't at all surprised when the door closed and it was Zayn who appeared in a chair at his side.

“Hey Louis.” He said. Louis gave a grumble in response. “You doing okay?”

Louis rolled his head to face Zayn with a snarky glare.

“Okay, I can't tiptoe around this anymore.” Zayn said, setting his tea down with a porcelain clink to punctuate his point. “We've been trying to be understanding and give you the space you the you've needed for the last year, but this hold Joshua has on you is ruinning your life.”
“Jesus.” Louis mumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose and clamping his eyes shut. “That's a tad dramatic.”

“Is it?” Zayn questioned, leaning in, refusing to let Louis shut him out. “Then tell me, honestly, how you're feeling today.”

Louis leaned back in his chair and his hand fell to the armrest, his fingers drumming anxiously against the cold wood grain. “I feel like if I never cry again for the rest of my life, it will still be too soon.”

“Please just tell me what happened last night.” Zayn implored, but Louis was already shaking his head. “Louis, please.”

“And which part would you like to hear about? The part where I sobbed into the dirt in front of Niall's house? Or maybe the part where I sobbed into the wall during that cold shower? Or a bit later, when I stayed up all night, sobbing? Which part would you like me to explain in more detail?” Louis looked to him expectantly, his eyebrows raised, but Zayn remained unphased.

“Tell me what happened with Harry last night.” He said evenly.

“That's my personal business, isn't it?”

“Louis.” Zayn sighed. “I'm not your enemy in this. I want to help you. Don't take this out on me.”

Louis looked down, because fuck Zayn for being right. Fuck Zayn for always being right. Louis could deny his inner turmoil with childish petulance until the end of the Earth, but it didn't stop Zayn from being right.

“We talked.” Louis admitted. “We were talking for awhile, and just, we were being stupid. I was stupid. Then we kissed. I kissed him.” He clarified. “And then he kissed me back, so I kissed him even more.”

“It hit you when you were kissing him?”

“Are you planning on making a point, Zayn?”

“I will, if you're honest with me.”

“I am being honest with you.”

“No, you're giving me vague, detached answers, which means you're skipping over something important.” Zayn pointed out. Louis was shaking his head again, and he realize that he wasn't completely in control of the gesture anymore.

“I never knew that kissing someone could make me feel that alive.” He whispered. “And then suddenly, all I wanted to do was die.”

“But what made that happen? What changed? What triggered it?”

“If you're trying to say that Harry did something—”

“I'm not. I'm really not. I think I already know the answer, I just think you need to say it.” He explained calmly, his brown eyes waxed over with a familiar warmth that Louis was always helpless to resist.

“I heard Joshua's voice.” Louis watched his thumb trace over the blushed skin of his apple. “I felt
like he was there, breathing down my neck, watching me. Screaming at me.”

“What did he say?”

“That I'm using Harry.” Louis looked up suddenly at Zayn, already wishing he could swallow his confession back up.

“How could you possibly think you're using Harry?”

“It's just – it was a conversation, a fight, really, that we had. Me and Joshua. That night when you guys came over for dinner, remember? He thought that I only let Harry hang around because I like the attention. That I used him for the attention.”

“But you have to know that that isn't true. Like, none of this would hurt as bad as it does if you didn't genuinely care about Harry. You're not using him, Louis.”

“That's the problem.” Louis murmured, his breath quickening. “The only alternative is that – is that I've had feelings for Harry. That I've had them all along.”

“What's wrong with that? That's a good thing! He feels-”

“I have a boyfriend, Zayn!” Louis snapped reflexively, something stony clamping inside of him. Zayn gaped at him, his breath extinguished. They stared at each other, both rendered speechless by the outburst.

“Louis, you don't have a boyfriend.” Zayn said slowly, as if he were walking through a minefield. Louis didn't know if he should nod or shake his head. What was the correct answer? Where had that even come from? “Lou.” He said, reaching out to lay a light hand on Louis' wrist. “Joshua isn't your boyfriend anymore, but you can't keep denying that he has a really unhealthy hold on you.”

Zayn's words didn't seem at all necessary, because how was it possible to deny any of this? He'd heard the outburst, just the same as Zayn. He was capable of seeing the patterns in front of him, but that didn't make it any easier to inwardly face.

“I cheated on him.” Louis finally said.

“It's not cheating, Louis. You guys broke up.”

“Not last night. It was last year, on New Years.” Louis explained slowly, watching the way that Zayn's eyes shifted, his pupils narrowing in. “I slept with someone else when we were in New York. I told him the truth, and we got in a fight.” He swallowed over the coarseness of his dry throat. “That's the great mystery you guys have been trying to figure out. Ta-da.” He added darkly.

“Louis.” Zayn whispered, the thick lump in his throat evident in his voice. Louis snapped to attention with a swell of panic.

“It was a mistake. It was a giant mistake.” He said. “You're judging me, aren't you?”

“I'm not-!”

“This is why I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want you to know about that part of me. It was a mistake.”

“I don't think any different of you, Louis. This just – it just all makes sense now.” Zayn realized, leaning back as if a massive weight had been dropped in his lap. His face was awash with emotion, both terrified and relieved. “I'm going to keep saying this until it makes sense to you. It is
impossible for you cheat on Joshua again. You aren't with him anymore. He has no claim on you, and he can't hurt you. Kissing Harry was not cheating on him, and it's none of his business. If it made you happy, that's all that matters. It's not cheating.”

“But it was.” Louis rasped, putting words to his strife for the first time.

“It wasn't!”

“It was, because if last night was real, if that kiss was how I really feel, then I've been emotionally cheating on Joshua for months. And I can't – I just fucking can't -” He bit his lip harshly. “Oh God, Harry.”

“About Harry,” Something in Zayn's tone made Louis' stomach sour.

“What? What's wrong?”

“We think it might be a good idea if you two took a little break from each other, you know?” Zayn explained, but his voice faltered as he saw what must have been actual fire in Louis' eyes.

“No, I – I can't just ignore him! I have – I have to apologize, and someone has to tell him that this isn't his fault. That I'm sorry, and none of this is his fault!”

“Liam talked to him last night.”

“Liam talked to him? What did he even fucking say? He doesn't know what's going on! I have to talk to Harry! It has to be me.”

“Louis, calm-”

“No, Zayn! I can't calm down, or hear you out, or do whatever you were going to say.” Louis fumed. “Because you didn't see it. You didn't see the fucking despair in his eyes when I picked him up from that diner. You didn't see it.”

“When you did what?”

“This already happened to him.” Louis said, his body starting to shake. “I was supposed to protect him, but I didn't. I abandoned him. I just – I just fucked everything up.”

As the last words melted into the air between them, Louis felt a a cool breathe of calm nestle into his chest. It almost felt like a form of Stockholm Syndrome; a complacency lent by his complete hopelessness. He felt almost thankful towards the realization that he was utterly trapped, because with those words he suddenly knew that he could gripe and yell at his best friend all he wanted, but there was nothing he could do to fix anything. The situation was entirely ruined beyond repair. Louis' head was a quagmire of confusion and complication, and with every passing second, Harry was flying further and further away from him, closer and closer to safety.

He was better without Louis.

And with that, the first tendrils of numbness seeped into him, gripping into his bones as every vestige of feeling faded away.

“It's nothing that can't be fixed.” Zayn insisted. “It's just going to take some time.”

Louis reached out blindly for Zayn's hand and squeezed it as he stared ahead of himself, uncaring and unfocused. Zayn could say whatever he thought would ease Louis' tension, but it didn't mean
anything. It was over.

“Could we talk about something else for a while?” He asked lightly. “Run lines, maybe?”

“Yeah. Definitely.” Zayn stood up and walked back towards the house in search of the binder Louis kept his copy of the script in.

Louis kept watching the sky, knowing that once he looked away, he'd have no reason to think about Harry again.

~

“I was not expecting you to have that nice of an ass.”

Louis spun around in surprise, his neck craning against his oversized headphones from his seat in his terminal in LaGuardia. She dropped into the seat beside him, a flourish of plump eyelashes and flawless winged eyeliner. She crossed her glossy, black pumps over her high waisted jeans and crop top as she looked him up and down. She was in every way timely and timeless, sleek yet casual. Effortless yet effervescent.

“Nona.” She said brightly, extending a manicured hand as she popped on mint chewing gum, her pail pink nail polish glistening against her dark, cocoa skin. “You more of a hugger, or a handshaker?”

“Hugger, definitely.”

“Oh good.” She said, leaning forward and pulling him in by the shoulders. His returned wince was only barely noticeable, as he was still getting used to not wearing the sling. “I've been wanting to get my hands on that tight little body of your since Danny told me you got the role.” She finally ended the embrace, even though it was the exact kind of hug Louis preferred; tight and committed. No half-assery when it comes to hugs. “Yeah, yeah, I know, you're gay and all that. Doesn't mean I can't appreciate a well put together package, does it? And how was the weather in LA this morning? I'm dying to know.” She leaned back, her silver earrings swaying into her dark, shoulder length hair as she poised herself to listen to Louis.

Louis had done a thorough job of internet stalking his costar, Neanette “Nona” James, over the last few weeks. She had a couple of small film and TV roles under her belt, but her career had blossomed on Broadway in New York. Most recently, she'd played Lavinia in an all black, all female restaging of Titus Andronicus to rave reviews. She was the first transgender woman of color to be nominated for Tony, and she was a well-known advocate for transgender rights. Basically, she was a perfect human.

The director of Kids From Yesterday, Daniel, was a close friend of hers from NYU and had written the lead character especially for her. Even though Louis had only been speaking to her for about three minutes, just the warmth and charisma of her presence made Louis fully understand why someone would write an entire screenplay for her.

When it had become clear that Louis' flight would have to connect in New York, the studio had suggested that they fly the last leg together and get to know each other. There was a small, rented home in Manchester that they would be rooming in together for the duration of filming, so a lot was banking on the hope that they would hit it off.
Luckily, Louis was already finding himself quite fond. She'd called him a “well put together package”, which had scored her an early ten points. They settled into their first class seats together, Nona chirping on about the Skymall magazine she'd already unearthed from the seat in front of her.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” The stewardess asked as she stopped by.

“Tonic water, please.” Louis tried to respond, but he was cut off as Nona leaned across him to address the stewardess.

“Two whiskeys.” She said. “Lulu and I are getting snoshed.”

And well, it would be impolite to deny a drink so early in their relationship, right? He nodded, and by the time the plane was over the ocean, they were splitting a pair of ear buds and singing along to Destiny Child's greatest hits.

“When no one is around you, say baby I love you.” They sang, dancing as animatedly as their seats would allow. “Say my name, say my name. You actin' kinda shady. Ain't callin’ me baby. Betta say my name.”

“Wait, Lulu!” Nona whispered, giggling. “That kid's filming us.”

Lo and behold, a roughly twelve year old boy was taking a video of them on his oversized iPhone from a few rows up.

“Oi! Child! What exactly do you think you're doing?” Louis called over the seats. The rest of first class glowered back at him, but Nona choked as she tried to control her continued giggling. He thought that the outburst would be enough to scare the kid into putting his phone away, but apparently rich kids were too gutsy to be intimated by the likes of drunk Louis.

“You're Louis Tomlinson.” The kid pointed out, watching Louis' image on his screen.

“And?” Louis responded in what he thought was a witty retort.

“Lulu!” Nona laughed, pulling at his sleeve.

“That going on Youtube?” Louis asked, and the kid only tightened his grip on his phone in response. “Well can't say I really care. No more nagging boyfriend to worry about.”

Nona sputtered, but Louis was already dancing and singing as the chorus came back around.

“Say my name, say my name!”

The problem with day drinking, however, was that Louis always found himself exhausted as he inevitably sobered up. He couldn't even give a thought to his jet lag by the time they touched down in Manchester. They got picked up by a production assistant, Stan, who seemed to run on nervous energy the way a train ran on coal. He drove them to their house and Louis watched through the rain streaked windows as Manchester rolled past, a dim part of his mind recognizing his homeland through the fatigue. His thoughts muddled in his brain, but he was increasingly aware that some snot-nosed middle schooler was uploading a video of him drunkenly saying he didn't have a
boyfriend anymore.

Oops.

Stan was very prepared to take them both on a tour of the home when they arrived, but Louis barreled up the stairs and threw himself into the first bedroom, sinking into a freshly made bed as sleep overtook him.

~

It scratched at his ribcage like a beast desperate to escape. It's brassy claws carved at his bones, sending jolts through his chest. He sputtered and choked as the icy fear dredged through him, alighting his senses with fiery pinpricks and wetting his eyes. He was whimpering, struggling over pathetic little rasps into the merciless silence.

He dug into the empty space in his sheets, hoping against hope that someone would just be there. That somehow he wasn't alone.

But no one was there. There was just a cold, gaping well of darkness glaring back at him and suffocating him down to the base of his spine.

“Hey, you okay?”

There was a hand clamped around his own, tethering him back to the Earth. He gripped into it, focusing his attention to this one anchor in reality. He felt like a wind-ravaged sail, snapping and writhing against a tempest, but ultimately as safe as the bonds that secured it to the ship.

“I've got you, Lulu.” Nona whispered, settling cross legged on the floor beside the bed. He wasn't going anywhere. The storm wasn't going to take him away.

~

Louis rolled over to find Nona in the bed beside him, her face smushed hilariously into her pillow as she snored lightly. She jolted awake as he pulled at an unkempt lock of her hair.

“Morning, dearest.” Louis said, his voice crackling.

“Oh hey.” She responded, yawning dramatically. “I would start with 'so, about last night,' but that's a little too reminiscent of every bad one night stand I've ever had.”

Louis chuckled, all too familiar. “Sorry you had to see me like that.”

“My old roommate in college used to get panic attacks all the time.” She explained. “She liked it when I would just stick them out with her.”

“I wouldn't say that they're panic attacks.” Louis defended, sick of how often his life had been described by that particular term lately. “They're just, like, night terrors, or something.”
“You get them a lot?” She asked, watching him with her big, hazelnut eyes.

“Sometimes. Lately, yeah.” He admitted. Their frequency had certainly increased since things with Joshua had reached a boiling point, but at least he used to only be a text away from that one person who made him feel safe. That wasn't the case anymore, so of course Joshua had used the opportunity to make a reappearance. “My ex boyfriend texted me right before I fell asleep last night.” Louis said, somehow finding it easy to unfurl this on Nona as he handed her his phone, still open to Joshua's text from the night before.

“How ex are we talking?” She asked, reading Joshua's 'hey lou, could we talk later?'

“It's only been a couple of weeks.”

“Ouch. That sucks, Lulu.”

“Yes. Very ouch.” Louis agreed, taking his phone back. “And it was kind of this big, fiery, double break up disaster thing.”

“What do you mean 'double break up?'” She questioned. Louis sighed heavily, feeling the numbness oozing back into him.

“I want breakfast.” He announced, changing the subject.

“Me too.” She agreed excitedly. “Pancakes, I'm thinking.”

“I have no idea what it takes to make pancakes.”

“It's not that hard, right? What do we need? Like, flour?”

“Eggs?”

“Milk?”

“Chocolate milk.”

“Excellent idea, Lulu.”

And it was in the resulting charred, syrup doused chocolate milk pancakes that their bond was cemented. They were glued together from that moment onwards, especially after trudging through the December slush on a Tesco run in their joggers.

His life was suddenly a complete distraction, his demanding schedule keeping his mind from wandering anywhere too dark. After his extended vacation, he was grateful when his life was kicked suddenly into high gear. Louis was immediately swept into a dizzying regimen of meetings and rehearsals the second he touched down on European soil.

They met the rest of the cast and crew on their second night after being invited to a dinner at the producer's house that doubled as an informal table read. It was a rowdy group and Louis felt right at home in the middle of their boisterous conversations. Louis was finally able to meet Daniel, the director, in person. He was a young, subdued man, but his eyes glittered with an enchanted passion as he talked about the project they were about to undergo.

But all shop talk was shut down when the evening descended into a debaucherous game of Cards Against Humanity. Nona was the breakout star of the game as each of her unapologetic selections made the entire group simultaneously guffaw and cringe. Her particular moment of genius was
matching “How did I lose my virginity?” to “winking at old people.” Eventually, Louis gave up and just curled into her side, giggling as he watched her look through her cards.

It was during one of the many conversations that night that Stan’s fate was sealed for the rest of the film. Nona and Louis realized that neither of them could cook, so they had nonchalantly mentioned something about living on takeaway. Daniel’s eyes had grown to about three times their size at this idea. Louis’ cheeks had just started to hollow out from his diet and exercise, and Daniel knew it would only take a couple weeks of Pad Thai and curry for him to fill back out.

Louis had watched Stan’s soul deflate when Daniel had suddenly turned to him and asked, “You like cooking, don't you?” While his title was still officially a production assistant, it probably would have been more accurate to call him the designated human in charge of keeping Nona and Louis alive.

The first week of production was devoted to rehearsal and some rather hands on, unorthodox acting workshops that Daniel claimed were necessary for his method of character development. Having skipped Uni himself, Louis was quite enjoying the acting classes. It was almost like being at a very intense theatre camp.

He and Nona shared a trailer on set and would eat lunch there together when their schedules overlapped. Nona was obsessed with arts and crafts and would subject Louis to whatever glitter filled project she was working on that day. She claimed that it was therapeutic, and Louis found himself mostly agreeing with her. One afternoon between scenes, they both became transfixed by a pair of adult coloring books as Louis delved deeper into the topic of Joshua.

“I don't miss him as much as I thought I would.” Louis admitted as he shaded in a lotus flower design. “But I still hear his voice in my head, you know? Critiquing the things I do.”

“But isn't that just proof that the relationship was toxic? He's changed the way you think about yourself. No one has the right to have that kind of power over you.”

“You're right.” Louis conceded quietly. His first instinct would normally be to argue, to deny anything that didn't place the blame directly on himself, but this was always impossible with Nona. She just always made sense and there was no use fighting with her. She always said what a deep, hidden part of him already knew, he just needed to hear someone else say it. “It's not fair because it feels like he never really left. I haven't spoken to him in weeks, but it still feels like he's always around.”

“When do you hear his voice the most? Is it just typical, day to day stuff?”

“No. It's mostly about a specific person.”

“Who?”

“Someone I kind of had feelings for when Joshua and I were still together.” He said, his colored pencil denting the page under the force of his stroke. He said it calmly, as if it were an accepted fact that he'd already discussed with someone else in his life, but this was far from the truth. It wasn't just that it was the first time he'd said it, it was that it was the first time he'd even allowed himself to think it. The only reason he’d been able to say it was the fact that he knew it wouldn't hurt. Nothing hurt anymore. Everything was just numb from the moment that he woke up to the moment that he went to bed.

This is what his talks with Nona had become: opportunities to finally admit things that had plagued him back before the numbness set it, back when his mind was a tangled briar patch of lies he'd
tried desperately to maintain to himself. But that was the thing about lying to yourself. Once you figure out that that's what you're doing, it becomes impossible to keep it going.

It had just been easy for him to lay it all out for her during their brief lunch conversations. This had a lot to do with the fact that she was completely removed from the situation and didn't know any of the principle characters involved. She didn't already hate Joshua for something he'd done to her personally, and she didn't have Zayn or Liam twisting her opinion. All she knew was what Louis told her, and she was simple to talk to. Behind her flawless, Barbie Doll looks, she turned out to be a well of wisdom wrapped up in a pencil skirt and tangerine lip gloss.

How he'd been so fortunate to find a veritable soul mate in his co star, Louis would never know. This was especially convenient, since between time differences and his hectic schedule, he'd scarcely spoken to Zayn or Liam since arriving in Manchester. This had left Liam particularly peeved, as it made it very easy for Louis to ignore his frustrations from the airplane video. Louis was content to just pretend that the video of him denouncing Joshua had never actually happened, so why should he worry about it? Worrying caused wrinkles, so really, he was just acting in the best interest of his dermatological longevity, Liam.

Daniel joined them in their trailer soon after, as he often did, to go over notes with Nona. That day, however, he was much more interested in talking to Louis. He wasn't completely surprised, since the first rehearsal for the scene was scheduled for the next day. It was Louis' big moment, when his character revealed to Nona's character that he thinks that he's contracted HIV and that his partner left him in response. It included a lengthy monologue from Louis and served as one of the major emotional beats of the entire movie. Basically, it was really fucking important that Louis got it right.

Daniel tried to be subtle, but it was clear that the pressure was on. He expected a lot from Louis, and Louis was ready to deliver. To make sure the complexities of the scene were fully fleshed out, two rehearsals had been scheduled: one for Friday night and another on Saturday morning. This left a big, gaping hole in both Louis and Nona's schedules for Friday morning, which was extremely rare.

They knew that they needed to get as much out of their free morning together as they could, so they decided to tick off one of the items of Nona's British Bucket List: driving on the “wrong” side of the road. The roads were slick from the December weather and Nona really struggled to get the hang of staying on the left side, which left Stan in the back seat of the car, praying as if he were about to face his own death.

Louis was calm, however, as he gave her instructions around the city and laughed at each mistake she made or when the tires skidded over the frostbitten pavement.

“We're going to die.” Stan breathed.

“At least we'll die amongst friends.” Nona smiled as she turned up the radio. She was dancing along to the song “West End Kids” by New Politics excitedly. “Isn't this song about us? I mean, about our characters? It's totally about us, right?”

“Not really.” Louis said.

“Where's the West End? Would our characters hang out there?”

“It's like Manhattan.”

“Oh maybe not, then. It's still our song though.” She claimed as she continued to sing along and
came to a sliding halt at a traffic light.

“Cheers.” Louis agreed as his phone began chirping from his pocket and he struggled to slip it out. “Well hello, my dearest Liam.”

“You're doing a phone interview with Radio 1 in ten minutes.” Liam stated.

“I'm doing what now? When?”

“I tried to give you a heads up, but you've been screening my calls. Again.” He explained with agitation.

“I'm a busy boy, Payno.” Louis explained. “You always call when I'm eating. What do you expect me to do? Stop eating?”

“Well you can explain that to Nick Grimshaw in,” he heard Liam shuffle as he checked his watch. “eight minutes.”

“Um, spit take Liam. What? Nick Grimshaw?”

“Didn't really have a lot of options, since you won't answer your bleeding phone. Breakup rumors are getting out of control over here and I'm getting a lot of pressure to do some damage control. Luckily, it helps that you haven't be seen with you-know-who.”

“Yes, wouldn't want anyone to find out about my ongoing sexual marathon with Lord Voldemort.”

“Louis, I'm not joking.” Liam sighed.

“I know. I just don't want to talk about him, Liam.” Louis said, suddenly serious. Liam paused, and Louis could feel Nona's eyes creep over to him.

“Right, yeah. You won't have to. We've already talked to Nick. He's not going to ask any direct questions about whether or not you're going through a break up. You're just going to say that you were joking around, putting on a show for that kid on the plane. Then he'll ask you if there's any relationship drama going on, and you'll say no.” Liam explained, and Louis nodded despite the fact that they couldn't see each other over the ocean that was separating them. “They're gonna call any second now, so I'm going to hang up.”

“Alright.”

“And Louis?”

“Yeah?”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too, you beardy, Nick Grimshaw loving twat.” Louis responded. “Got to go, Voldy's asking for a reach around.”

Liam laughed as Louis hung up, and only a few minutes had passed before he was on the phone with Nick Grimshaw, acutely aware that millions of people were now listening to a preplanned conversation between him and one of his least favorite people. Nona pulled over as she and Stan listened in on their side.

“I have to say, Louis,” Nick began, “I've watched that video at least a hundred times. You were dancing along to, what song was it?”
“Say my name. Destiny's Child.” Louis answered, winking at Nona.

“A classic.”

“In educated circles, at least.”

“I had no idea you were such a dancer.”

“I did my best, despite being drunk on an airplane.”

“Don't sell yourself short. You were quiet fetching.” Nick chuckled.

“Flirting with me, Grimmy?” Louis asked.

“Well I guess that depends.” Nick said. “You did mention a little something about your boyfriend in the video? I believe the exact quote was 'Well can't say I really care. No more nagging boyfriend to worry about.'”

Of course Grimshaw would have the exact quote ready to go.

“Yeah, well,” Louis began, steeling himself. “I'm afraid that that was a bit of an ill-humored joke. Sorry to say it's nothing to get excited over.”

“So no relationship drama then?”

“Not today, unfortunately.” Louis tried not to laugh as he realized that his life had been nothing besides relationship drama for the last few months.

“Disappointing for single men everywhere.” Grimshaw commented. “Well, I've been wanting to get your side of all this stuff going on with your mate, Harry Styles.”

And Louis' entire body felt like it had just liquified. He could feel the cold sweat already beading against his skin as his stomach sunk lower.

“I'll need you to be a bit more specific.” Louis said slowly, trying to hide the fact that his lungs were caving in on themselves from the massive audience that was listening to him live.

“That whole fiasco in Dublin the other night?” Grimshaw said, as if this were obvious. Louis' throat went dry.

“Afraid I haven't hear anything about that.” He admitted weakly.

“Really? I thought you two were regular chums.”

“Been filming a new movie. Kind of cut myself off from everyone for the time being.” Louis said, knowing that Nick would surely move onto a new topic after this. There was no way that this still seemed like an interesting interview to his listeners. No one would want to hear this, right?

“Well here's what happened.” Nick continued, obviously relishing in Louis' apparent ignorance of Harry's life. “He walked off stage in the middle of that new single of there’s, Paradise Red. Just totally gave up, and it took him twenty minutes before they could get him back onstage.”

“Huh.” Louis said, staring intently at the dashboard of the car as he struggled to keep himself from dissolving into a hysterical mess.

“So what do you think that's about?” Nick asked, the satisfaction clear in his voice at the fact that
Louis and Harry hadn't been talking. It stung like a prick to his heart. Nick Grimshaw was actually taunting him over live radio. They were bickering over Harry like jealous boyfriends in a dick fight, and it ignited something in Louis that he struggled to smother. He was absolutely not going to get into a jealous squabble with Nick Grimshaw over the air with millions of people listening.

Except fuck Nick Grimshaw.

“He's got a good group of people around him, so I just hope everyone's taking good care of him.” He began, sitting up as a full wave of sass fluxed through him. “Harry's always so fixated on taking care of everyone else around him, and sometimes he forgets to take care of himself. Like, a few weeks ago when I injured my shoulder, he really took it upon himself to take care of me. He was at my house everyday, cooking me food or helping me clean up. Or sometimes he would just spend the night watching Netflix in bed with me so I wouldn't feel lonely. He basically moved into my house for a week, really. It was lovely of him.”

Check mate, Grimshaw.

Louis listened with a smirk as Nick wrapped up the interview, the jealousy in his voice quite distinguishable as he said his goodbyes. The resulting text from Liam took only seconds to arrive.

Louissssssssss

Louis didn't respond as he pocketed his phone and turned the radio back on.

~

“Maybe we should run it again?”

“No, I think we've got everything we're going to get tonight.”

Daniel and one of the producers were murmuring to each other, but Louis was too absorbed in glaring at his own hands, shocked at everything about himself.

He'd been terrible.

Scene after scene, try after try, his performance had gotten worse and worse. He felt it as it happened, cringing inwardly with every poor line delivery, every contrived choice he made. He had urged himself to just tap into something but had been left with an empty, paper-thin performance each time. Louis knew it, Nona knew it, and now his director was glowering at him from the corner in disappointment. It was almost midnight, everyone was exhausted, and Daniel apparently couldn't stomach another second of watching Louis muddle through a half-hearted performance.

Nona gave him a gentle smile as she slipped into her coat, but Louis couldn't meet her eyes as he felt Daniel approaching them.

“Louis, could I talk to you for a second?” Daniel asked, and Nona stepped toward Louis
“Yeah, sure.” Louis nodded. “I'll catch up with you, Nona.”

She seemed reluctant to leave him, but was ultimately left with no other option than to walk away as they both waited for her departure.

“I need more.” Daniel said bluntly once she was out of ear shot. “This just isn't enough.”

“I know.” Louis agreed.

“This scene could make or break the entire movie. Everyone is counting on you.”

“I know. I don't-” Louis shook his head tiredly. “You're right. I have to do better.”

“Get some rest. We'll run it again tomorrow.” Daniel said, clapping Louis on the shoulder. It panged dully, giving Louis a solemn reminder of what was left for him if he didn't have this movie: the same life where his boyfriend of three years had pushed him down the stairs at a star studded party. Principal photography hadn't started yet, which meant that they could still easily replace Louis.

He caught up with Nona as she got into a car with Stan, waiting to take them home. He got into the back seat silently, the weight of his disappointment solidifying within him. He might fail and they might send him home. Then what? What did he have if he didn't have this movie? He clenched into his phone, denying the urge to call the one person who would make him feel safe again.

No one had attempted to say anything to Louis until he and Nona were alone in the house. Louis was already heading to his bedroom before she spoke up.

“Hey Lulu?” she asked, leaning against the wall in the hallway as he turned around.

“Yeah?”

“Do you wanna run through the scene again before bed?” she asked kindly. Louis ran an exhausted hand through his hair.

“I'm a little sick of it, to be honest.”

“Let's just workshop it, just you and me. No one else is here to watch. I really think you'll feel better about it if we work on it a bit.” She reasoned, her big, brown eyes blinking at him. Louis sighed, knowing she was right yet again. At this point, he would probably toss and turn all night. He might as well try to make the scene a bit better.

“Alright, yeah.” He conceded, following her into the lounge. He sat on the floor in front of one of the sofas as Nona made tea, wrapping his arms around a cushion until she sat down across from him. She had her copy of the screenplay in hand and flicked open the soft pink binder as she set down her hot drink.

“You know the patronus charm from Harry Potter?” She asked bluntly.

“Erm, jog my memory.”

“It's to get rid of Dementors. You have to think of a really powerful, positive memory to get it to work.” She explained as she turned the pages of the script. Louis saw words she'd scribbled across the pages, catching pissed, grateful, and good morning as she flicked through. “That's kind of my
method of acting. I pick an emotion or an idea that sums up every scene, and then I try to channel a powerful memory that fits it. You know what word I picked for the scene we were working today?” She turned a few more pages, the words *fucked up, warm, and bored* passing by before she landed on the page she was looking for. She turned it around so Louis could read the word scribed across the white page.

“Heartbreak.” he murmured.

“Do you want to hear the memory I use?” she asked, closing the script and holding it to her chest. Louis only then realized how often Nona listened to his every problem, but never offered up any of her own experiences.

“Yeah.” he answered, a little too quickly. “I mean, yeah, if you're okay with sharing it.”

“I completed my gender reassignment surgery when I was just eighteen.” she said. “And before that, I was on hormone blockers, and before that, I always had long hair and dressed how I wanted to dress. I've always been Neanette.” Her fingers flexed against the pink binder. “And that's all because of my parents. They've always believed that I know who I am, and I'm a girl. I'm Neanette. And as long as I've known that I'm a girl, I've also known that I wanted to be an actress. They've both been successful on the Broadway scene for a long time, mom's a producer and dad's a playwright, so they knew how important it was for me to pass for a woman if I was going to pursue acting. So they did everything they could to make sure I feel like who I really am. Like, I'm a transgender woman of color, so things have never been easy for me, but I fit in, which is really incredible for someone like me. I've been really, really lucky, and I took that for granted for a long time.

'But then, when I was sixteen, my parents made me join this support group for other transgender kids from around the area, and I met Jacklyn. We had the same taste in music and fashion and movies. And boys, too. We always liked funny little pretty boys with nice hair. You know, like straight versions of you.”

“Naturally.” Louis laughed.

“Naturally, yes. So we became best friends pretty instantly. She was always at my house because she didn't have a great home life. My parents were always really warm and accepting, but Jackie's parents were different. They thought that they had a son, and they weren't willing to change their minds. And I could just see how badly Jackie wanted to be like me and like other girls. She wanted to wear cute little shoes, and be able to go shopping for prom dresses. Like, she just wanted to feel pretty, but she still had to shave every morning and watch as she got taller and broader. And it killed me to watch it happen, because I didn't know what to do.

'And then we started to apply to schools, and I basically had an easy in at NYU because of my parents. Jackie wanted to be a lawyer, and she had all of these great schools that she wanted to go to, but she didn't get in to any good ones. And she was smart, so it was so, so stupidly obvious why she couldn't get in. I mean, it's the twenty first century, and most of my transgender friends still couldn't get into any good schools.

'Then the bullying got worse. She was getting teased and picked on all the time at her school, and no one was doing anything about it. Her parents just thought that she should toughen up, but she was scared. She was scared for her safety. I didn't know what to do, though. I mean, I was seventeen years old. What did I know about anything?

'And suddenly, she was just gone.” Nona licked her lips and looked down. “She ran away. Didn't even leave a note. I kept hoping that she would just walk in one day, and she'd somehow come to
school with me and we would figure something out for her. She didn't need her parents, you know? She had me. But she never showed back up.

'It was three years of that. I didn't see or hear from her for three years. Then one night, she suddenly called me and said she was in New York, and she needed my help. She showed up at my apartment, and she was just a complete mess. Like, she looked like she was falling apart.

'And that's – that's the conversation I thought about when we were working on that scene.” she trailed off, and Louis was already crawling across the floor to sit beside her, leaning his warmth into her side. “She'd been trying to go to school, but her parents cut her off. No one would give her a job, and she'd done everything she could do to just keep going, but she couldn't support herself. She ended up – she ended up doing porn.” Nona ran her hands over her jeans, scratching at the denim. Louis grabbed one her hands, halting her ministrations. He remembered one of the conversation's he'd had with Ms. Catskill at the homeless youth shelter about transgender women. Women of color in particular were often forced into sex work as a means of survival when everyone else turned their backs on them, all because they were just born in the wrong body. “It was killing her. She said the things they made her do, it made her feel like she was dying. And we just cried together all night. It's the most heartbroken I've even been in my entire life.”

“What happened after that? Is she okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Things are a lot better now.” Nona explained. “My parents pulled some strings and got her a job at a theatre company as a receptionist. She's a bookkeeper for them now, and she's working herself through school.”

“That's great.” Louis said, his voice surprisingly thick. Nona rested her head on his shoulder.

“It's okay, Lulu. It's not a fresh wound anymore. But I think yours still is.”

Louis closed his eyes now that the focus of the conversation had shifted in his direction. He breathed deeply, gauging how ready he was to open this particular Pandora's box.

“Last year, I slept with someone who wasn't my boyfriend. Then, when I told him what had happened, he punched me.” Louis said quickly before he could talk himself out of it. Nona lifted her head in shock, her whole body stiffening. He stared straight ahead, knowing that he couldn't get lost in the details yet. He had more to say. “Then, a few weeks ago, he was mad at me and shoved me. He didn't realize that we were right next to this set of stairs, and I ended up falling. That's how I dislocated my shoulder.”

“Louis,”

“And somewhere in the in middle of all that, Joshua made me think that it was all my fault.” he breathed. “That I deserved it, and it made me terrified that if I was anything but loyal, it would happen again. But it wasn't my fault. And that's what everyone's been trying to make me to understand.”

“Is that the first time you've been able to admit that?” she asked quietly, and Louis nodded. She nestled her head back onto his shoulder. His chest was swelling as the lead in his lungs was melting into something warm and light. The weight was washing away.

“And it made me really blind to the fact that we just didn't work as a couple.” he continued. “But I couldn't see it because I was – I was afraid of betraying him. Which made things complicated when someone else came into the picture.”

“It's Harry Styles, isn't it?” she asked excitedly. Louis shirked her off her shoulder, scandalized.
“How did you know?”

“Well duh, I internet stalked the shit out of you before we met.” she admitted. “And all I found was this whole mess of Larry Stylinson stuff, but I just figured you were good friends and nothing more. But then I noticed that you talk about your other friends all the time, even that guitar player in his band, but you never even mention Harry's name. Then you started to mention that there was this other guy in the whole relationship equation and I started to suspect something. And then when you got all jealous boyfriend over him on that call with Grimmy, it just clinched it for me and I was like, oh my god, no way. I'm right, aren't I?”

“You can't tell anyone.”

“Yes!”

“It' not my secret to tell.”

“I was totally right! That's so cute. Why don't you ever talk about him?” Her excited vanished as she watched the color drain from Louis' face. The air was suddenly thick between them, the lighthearted interlude fading away.

“Because I broke his heart.” Louis said, the silence falling heavily around them as Nona was lost for words. She stared at him as he flipped her script open and looked at the note she had left on the scene. ‘I'm ready to go through the scene again.”

~

Nona's face was blurred behind the swell of tears plumping against Louis' eyelids, only coming into focus as the pools burst and fell down his cheeks. Their haggard breathing filled the space as the onlookers watched, enraptured and speechless.

“Right, yeah. Cut. That's good.” Daniel said suddenly, as if waking from a dream. “That was even better than the last two.”

“One more time?” A producer asked.

“No, I don't want to over work it. Let's not mess with it. That's enough for today.” Daniel decided as Louis patted his tear streaked faced with the sleeves of his jacket. Nona was trying to hide her smile as they were surrounded by a flurry of movement.

Everyone was coming at him from different directions with warm words, Daniel especially singing his praises. He nodded politely, all the while his eyes were straying desperately towards the exit.

Someone was asking about lunch and Louis was only slightly aware of himself declining and excusing himself from the room. He could feel eyes on him as he made his flight out the door and raced across the lot, throwing himself into the sanctity of his trailer. He locked the door behind him and fell onto the sofa, his tears hitting the fabric before his body did.

He buried his face into a pillow in an attempt to mute his own cries to minimal success. His whimpers were too loud, too pained to be quieted as his weeping intensified and the reality fell
harder and harder onto him.

He was in love with Harry.

How could he have ignored it for so long? Because this wasn't a crush. This wasn't just feelings. Only love could hurt like this, and this really, really fucking hurt.

He hadn't even managed any control over his own breathing before he was dialing Zayn's number.

“What's up, babe?” Zayn's voice rattled through the speaker.

“You're right! You're both right. I fucked up so bad.” Louis cried.

“Whoa, wait, what's going on?”

“I'm supposed to be with Harry! The fuck am I even doing?” The phone slipped from his hand, and he couldn't muster the strength to go after it. Zayn's warbling emanated from the floor, indiscernible over Louis' cries.

Realization after realization was crashing down, and the last great wave was looming over him, ready to wipe out everything in his path. The ultimate truth was that this life changing revelation had come too late. There was damage that he just couldn't undo.

A part of him mused over what could have happened if things had went differently. If he hadn't run screaming from that room, abandoning Harry. They would have kept kissing, uninterrupted, no one else in the world besides the two of them. And maybe they would have gone even further than that, eventually wrapping into each other in happy exhaustion and trying to sleep through the noise of the party. But it would have been too loud, so they would have left the room together, hand in hand maybe, and rejoined their friends. They would have been warm and affectionate, excited about what was in store for the two of them.

But that's not what had happened.

Harry's devastated face was flashing through his thoughts from that last night that they had seen each other. A sick part of him already knew that it had been the exact same face he had probably made that night that Nick had left him.

Because that is what Louis had done. He'd left him. He couldn't even keep that one little promise to protect Harry. He'd broken him, and now it was over. No matter how intense his feelings were, no matter how undeniably it felt like his heart was splintering, no matter how sure Louis was that this was pure, unabiding love, they just couldn't be together. Louis had ruined everything that night.

They could never be together.

~

“Can we watch Squad?”

“No.” said Louis, his mum, and his stepdad in perfect unison. Daisy crossed her arms in contempt at the quick shutdown. The entire family had somehow folded themselves into a complex knot around Louis on the sofa, a slew of recently opened birthday presently peppering the floor and a
Christmas tree twinkling in the corner. It was his first birthday back in Doncaster since he was eighteen years old, and despite the considerable changes since then (a new stepdad and two new siblings) it still left him feeling like there was no place like home for the holidays. This was especially true as his mother had been chasing him around the house with every baked good imaginable, unhappy with the gaunt appearance he had taken on for the movie.

“Why not?” Daisy asked.

“It's an adult movie.” Louis explained.

“When are you going to make a movie that I can watch?”

“Why's the responsibility on me? Why can't you just work on being older?” Louis joked, and Daisy promptly stuck her tongue out at him. “How very dare-” He was cut off as his phone began to ring, and Ernie murmured from his place in Louis' lap as he procured it from his back pocket. He looked at the screen for only a moment before he turned it over for his mum to see from the other sofa. Her eyebrows rose as she read Joshua's name.

He flipped the phone back to face himself, his thumb hovering over the reject button. Joshua had called about thirty times over what had almost been an entire month since they'd last seen each other, and Louis had always been quick to ignore him. But in a move that he didn't quite understand, he pressed accept.

“Hello?” He said, handing Ernie off and untangling himself from the sofa. He trotted up the stairs in search of an empty bedroom to close himself in.

“Oh my god, Louis!” Joshua exclaimed as Louis closed the door behind him and settled onto his sister's bed.

“Yeah?”

“I can't believe you picked up. I just wanted to say happy birthday.”

“Thanks.”

“How's the movie going? How's your arm?”

“I'm not going to tell you about any of that.” Louis said resolutely.

“Come on,”

“Nothing's changed. We're still not getting back together.”

“Baby, we just need to talk. We haven't even tried to talk about this.” Joshua plead.

“Don't call me baby.” Louis snapped.

“Louis, please.”

“You hurt me, Joshua.” Louis stated, his throat tightening.

“But I'm so sorry. You haven't even let me apologize. It was an accident, baby. I didn't even see the stairs. I'm sorry.”

Louis sighed, bracing himself.
“I don't forgive you.”

He hung up and fell back against the bed, his body prickly with anxiety. He gritted his teeth and breathed through it, feeling it flux and wash away.

He'd done it. He'd somehow face the beast and survived.

“Louis?” Came a voice as the door cracked open.

“Yeah?” he responded, sitting up quickly and readying himself for an onslaught of siblings. Thankfully, it was just his mum that stuck her head in, a wrapped package under her arm.

“How’d it go?” she asked, closing the door and taking a seat beside Louis on the bed.

“Good, actually.” he admitted with surprise. “He tried to apologize, or at least, he thinks he did. But I told him that nothing changed and I hung up.”

“I'm proud of you.” she said, squeezing his knee, but Louis' attention had already shifted away.

“Do my eyes deceive me, or is that another present?” he asked as he grabbed for it. She smiled as she handed him the square package. He tore into it immediately.

“It showed up a few days ago with very specific instructions that it’s a birthday present, not a Christmas present.” she explained as he held the newly unwrapped gift in his hands. It was a photo album, it's bindings brown and leather. He opened the cover to find a sheet of paper tucked inside.

_A place for all of the memories we can't remember. -H_

His eyes lingered on the H, warmth spreading through him from every corner of his body. He set down the paper and finally looked at the first page, sputtering with laughter at the first picture. It was of Louis about two inches away from the camera, the flash blowing out any details in his face apart from his glossed over eyes. One thing was very clear: Louis was sloppy drunk in the picture.

He turned the page and immediately recognized a theme amongst the photos. They were from tons of different parties or outings, some even just from nights spent in drinking at Harry's house. Their faces smiled up at him as he looked over them; Louis and Harry making puckers at the camera on Halloween, their faces covered in kiss marks; Harry, Louis, and Niall lying in the middle of the street with their feet in the air like synchronized swimmers outside a bar; Harry and Louis kissing Liam's cheeks as he glared at the camera during a party at Harry's. Louis smiled as more pictures flicked by and realized he didn't remember a single one of them being taken.

“I think I know what it is.” he said through an affectionate smirk. “You know how sometimes, after you've been out drinking, you wake up with pictures you don't remember taking?”

“Nope.” she answered.

“Well, it happens. That's what this is.” he said, holding the album up. She leaned in to look over the pictures as he kept turning the pages. She giggled as he stopped on a picture from a club in which Louis was biting a lock of Harry's hair. He only just kept himself from running his fingers over Harry's face, which was crinkled into a dimple inducing smile.
“What's this one?” she asked, pointing to a picture of Louis sleeping at home on his own couch.

“Oh, weird.” he commented, realizing he remembered that night. “Harry was on a lot of medication, so maybe he doesn't remember taking it.”

It had been back in November during a Manchester United game that had graciously occurred at three am on the west coast due to the time difference, and all of the lads had come over to Louis' to watch. Even Joshua had joined them for awhile, pretending that he was interested in what was happening.

But Louis' attention had been squarely focused on Harry, who had been in and out of a medicated haze all night. Even though Harry had people who's entire job was just to make sure he was taken care of, he still always managed to let his allergy medication run out. He wouldn't even think about getting it refilled until several weeks later when his sinuses had fully rebelled, leaving him miserable and near death. By the time he got back on his meds, he always had to muddle through a few days of murky, sniffly, drug-induced misery before his meds took effect.

This particular night, Harry had been in and out of the conversation as he kept drifting off, his face soft and sleepy. He curled into the armrest of the sofa, his legs pressed to his chest as he struggled to get comfortable. Joshua gave up on pretending to care about the game about halfway through and headed back to the bedroom, the movement causing Harry to wake up with an inhale of breath.

“Alright there, Haz?” Niall asked.

“What's the game?” Harry grumbled, his eyes fluttering open.

“The game?”

“Score – what's the score?” he corrected.

“Two one.” Liam answered, stuffing a handful of popcorn into his mouth. Harry nodded as he pressed himself further into the armrest, crossing his arms tightly over his front. He closed his eyes again, but was immediately interrupted by a string of sneezes. Louis watched Harry's bare arms, suddenly very aware of the blanket and pillow he and Joshua had been sharing.

“Harry, c'mere.” Louis said as he slid onto the couch beside Harry and put the pillow in his lap. Harry blinked at him in confusion, his face bearing a striking resemblance to Glitter after one of her cat naps. Louis tugged at his shirt, guiding Harry's head onto the pillow on his lap and draping the blanket over his middle. Harry snuggled into the warmth happily and closed his eyes. “Not feeling good?”

“M'fine.” he mumbled back, sighing in the back of his throat as Louis' fingers traced through his curls.

“Just take a nap, love. You'll feel better in the morning.” Louis said tenderly, watching the smile spread across Harry's lax features.

His lips moved as if to say something, but the only word Louis caught was the mention of his own name. Eventually Louis and the others had fallen asleep themselves, and apparently Harry had woken up and taken a picture of Louis from his spot in his lap.

“I really, really screwed up, mum.” Louis whispered, rising from his reverie.

“I still don't believe that.” she countered. “You're always too hard on yourself.”
“Harry's only been in love once, and the guy left him.” Louis explained. “I'm the first person since Niall that he's started to trust again, and I did the exact same thing to him. I left him.”

“You had a panic attack. You didn't leave him. I'm sure he understands that.”

“You didn't see his face, mum.” he said quietly, eyes falling back onto the page. Jay scooted closer to him.

“Even if that's true, even if he does believe you took off without him, are you really going to let him go on believing that?” she questioned. “Are you going to let him believe that you don't care about him? Or are you going to fight for him?”

“I don't know.”

“Lou, would Harry ever give up on you?” she asked bluntly, causing Louis to finally look up at her.

“No, he wouldn't.”

“Then why are you giving up on him?” She pointed out. Louis opened his mouth, but no sound came out. She smiled at him, standing up. “Win him back.”

She slipped out the door without another word, leaving Louis alone with a newly ignited fire in his mind.

He unlocked his phone and opened his conversation with Harry, his thumbs firing rapidly over the keys as every thought he'd harbored over the last few weeks came pouring out. After about twenty minutes of typing and realizing he was penning a short novel, he switched over to a Facebook message, which continued to plump up in size.

It only took another few minutes of that before he deleted the message entirely, knowing that he had too much to say for a Facebook message. He pulled out his phone and listened as it rang.

“Yeah Lulu?” Nona asked as she picked up.

“What are you doing the night of the twenty eighth?” Louis asked.

“Sleeping, since we have to get back to work the next day.”

“How would you feel about driving out to London for a Status Solo show?”
"Baby I'm coming. Baby I'm coming. Say the words, baby I'll come running."

-Shawn Hook


“This trip is going to be a lot more painful if you don't learn to calm down.” She pointed out. “Everything is going to be fine.”

“You don't know that. You have no proof of anything. Your words are empty lies that you spit out from behind your forked tongue.” Louis vented, repeatedly crossing and uncrossing his legs as he drummed his fingers.

“It is so going to be okay. Right, Stanley?” She asked. Stan didn't look up from where his eyes were glued to the road as he drove their rental car.

“Just a reminder that you have to be on set at seven am tomorrow. We are leaving by two at the very, very latest.” He said.

“Okay, Stan, thanks for being a bummer.” Nona snapped. “How can you be worried about curfews right now? Louis' about to go win his man back.”

“Ughhhh.” Louis groaned, burying his eyes beneath the heels of his hands. “Music! Please!”

“My Status Solo playlist?”

“No. Oh my god. No.”

“You do realize that you're going to have to listen to them a bit tonight, right? Considering we're going to their concert and everything.” She said. Louis finally pulled his hands away from his face, considering his plight.

“I need a drink.” He decided.

“Nope. No drinking for you tonight.” Nona decided.

“Nona!”

“Uh-uh, Lulu.” She put on the mid nineties pop playlist that she knew Louis particularly vibed to. “No alcohol. Now calm down or you're going to get all sweaty and splotchy, which is not cute. You still need to impress that man of yours, after all.”

Louis' groan of protest was nearly unintelligible as he sunk lower into his seat.
It was the most out-of-body Louis had ever felt while entirely sober. The procession into the O2 Arena was a hazy blur, Louis' consciousness having fled somewhere far, far away from his own body.

Their seats were embarrassingly good, on the floor right up near the front. The full gravity of Status Solo's magnitude spilled out before them in the form of an expansive, pyro-technic imbued stage that stretched the length of the arena and was somehow a mere few feet away from them, the only separation being a flimsy, metal barricade. The whole thing was monolithic, almost hulking in it's enormity as it swelled around him.

This is what the world thought Harry worthy of. Harry, who made specialized breakfasts for his cat so that she knew she was special, was worthy of this cathedral in his name.

Louis was so, so fucked.

People paid thousands of dollars to stand where they were, and yet, the three of them had managed to weasel in for free. Niall had insisted on this when Louis had called him several days earlier, breaking their nearly month-long silence.

“Louis?” Niall answered, his tone unreadable. Louis paused, working to bring his voice up from more than just a terrified squeak.

“Hey, Nialler.” He said slowly, fear plummeting down his spine at the possibility of a verbal beratement from Harry's best friend.

“What's going on?” He asked, his tone cutting through the awkward tension. Louis exhaled, suddenly realizing that he'd forgotten to breathe since Niall had picked up.

“I'm sorry. God. I'm so sorry, Niall.” Louis said, the words spilling from him like a faucet. “I fucked up so bad and I was stupid, but I just needed time away from everyone to clear my head and I'm kind of thinking straight now and I just need to make things right and-”

“Lou, stop.” Niall said, interrupting Louis' word vomit. “I'm not the one that you should be talking to about this.”

“Yeah, I know.” Louis admitted. “That's why I'm calling. I need to talk to Harry.”

Niall's end went silent, keeping Louis at the edge of his sanity as he waited for his response. When he began speaking again, his voice more resembled the happy, drunk neighbor that Louis had become instant friends with back during the summer.


“Yes really?”

“Really.”

“Great! Perfect! Erm...” Louis thought, not having prepared himself for complete understanding from Niall. “So – like – I could come into town while you're in London for the show, and maybe you could ask him if he'd be okay meeting me? And we could talk some things out. I don't want to bombard him by just showing up.”

“Boring. No. How about,” Niall plotted. “we don't tell Harry you're coming and it's a total
surprise when you're there at the concert.”

“That’s the exact definition of bombarding him.”

“Look, I know Harry. If he knows you’re coming, he’s just going to get all freaked out and anxious, then he’ll over think everything and become this uncontrollable nervous wreck. Remember the night after his interview with Grimshaw?”

Louis swallowed painfully. “Okay, so what’s your idea of a plan?”

“Well, first of all, I comp you tickets for the front row.”

“Niall!”

“What?”

“What if he sees me?”

“Why does this all have to be about you and Harry? I work hard. Maybe I just want you to be able to see me in my rock god persona.”

“Niall!”

“Louis, trust me. Okay?”

Louis chewed on his bottom lip, struggling with his conflicting feelings about placing his trust in Niall. This was a man who had once believed a random drunk girl when she told him that she was Hillary Clinton, causing him to spend the rest of the night asking her to marry him so that he could redecorate the White House if she became president. But at the same time, this was the sole person who had watched out for Harry for years, which made Louis feel ceaselessly indebted to him.

“Yeah, alright. Let's do it.”

The scheme also consisted of Louis and his friends tagging along to the subsequent after party back in Niall's hotel room, which would finally put Harry and Louis back in the same room. Until then, they were forced to remain in the front row of the O2 arena, maintaining a nauseating closeness to one of the most prolific rock acts in the world.

Louis offered a flimsy excuse to Nona and Stan about needing to run to the washroom before bushwhacking his way through the crowd of crazed Status Solo fans. He found the men’s room eventually and made a beeline for the tap once inside. He hovered in front of the mirror, staring motionlessly at his own reflection as the same thought burned inside of him.

What am I even doing?

He wasn’t given more than a few seconds to stew over this quandary as Nona suddenly appeared at his side in the mirror.

“I gave you express instructions against freaking out.” she chided, ignoring the flurry of protests and hurried zipping from the direction of the urinals. “Oh get over yourselves.” she hushed them, clearly unimpressed.

“Nona, what if I had been indisposed?” he asked.
“Oh, I’m so sorry your majesty. I didn’t realize that I was talking to the queen of England.” she mocked in a posh British accent. Louis begrudgingly chuckled as she took a step closer to him. “I wanted to say something to you while it's just the two of us.”

“What's that?” Louis asked, amused by how oblivious she was of everyone else in the room.

“I want you to remember that this is about you and Harry.” she said firmly. “This has nothing to do with Joshua. Harry always makes you feel safe, so nothing can hurt you when you're with him. He'll protect you and you'll protect him. Now go get your boy.”

Louis, overcome with affection by this incredible woman who had someone become his friend, gave her a tight hug.

“But can I just get one beer?” he asked.

“Just one.”

Luckily his one allotted beer bubbled directly up into his head, giving his senses a slight buffer from the horror of his situation. He was almost able to forget the mission that had landed them in London as he swayed along to the opening act. His mates were pressed into his sides and his ears were already numb from the roar of the speakers, making it feel like he was just out to have a fun night, no grand romantic gestures planned for the impending evening.

The lights fell, plummeting the arena into heart fluttering darkness. The shrieks of the crowd were frenzied as they cascaded down onto the dark stage and the potential energy filling the room was nearly suffocating.

A thrum of bass boomed across the arena, rattling the bones of everyone in the crowd as the excitement intensified, until the screech of an electric guitar ripped through the air. Several spotlights popped into focus, landing on Niall and the three other instrument-playing members of the band. They were all familiar to Louis, having met them on several occasions at parties or nights out. Tonight was completely different, however, as each of them pounded on their instruments in full concert garb.

Louis' insides swilled with fanboy fervor.

Niall tore across the strings of his guitar, already leaping energetically onto an amp and rousing the crowd as the opening bars of their first hit single burst out around them. The crowd was erupting at the sight of them, but there was still one piece of the ensemble that was clearly missing.

The crowd began to positively wail as one, lone figure traipsed across the stage, still shrouded in darkness as his bandmates played beneath their respective spotlights. The figure took his place at the microphone, dwarfed beneath the immensity of the crowd, and there was suddenly a jackhammer where Louis' heart should have been.

The lights blazed as two columns of fire erupted, Harry's voice reverberating across the arena over a cacophony of screams. His black jeans clung desperately to his calves and thighs, spilling into a pair of shimmering gold boots. With absolutely no regard for the welfare of the palpating hearts of everyone in the audience, Harry had opted to wear only a tight black blazer with no shirt underneath, his tattoo dappled abs contracting with every note he sang.

He was wrapped salaciously around the microphone stand, the pole brushing against his inner thigh and the mic only a few inches from his full, pink lips. He simmered behind it with a devilish smirk, his hair swept back in a mane and his eyes smeared with black eyeliner.
It was obscenely inhuman, is what it was.

If there had ever been a moment that Louis was fully aware of how small he was in comparison to the rest of the universe, it was right then and there, clinging to his own jean jacket and watching Harry Styles grind into the microphone stand as thousands of fans screamed for him.

And. Just. Fuckkkkkkkk.

The thing was, **Louis had straddled those hips.** He had tangled his hands in that hair, had pushed his way into the warmth of that mouth. He'd held onto those shoulders, had wiped tears from those eyes, had caressed that cheek and watched over him as Harry had drifted off to sleep.

Reality only snapped back when Nona clamped their hands together, forcing him to realize that he'd been staring motionlessly at Harry. He looked to her instead, seeing the bright smile cross her face and the lights reflected in her big, brown eyes. The room was dripping with enthusiasm and it was immediately clear to Louis that there was only one way he was going to survive this concert: he was going to let his inner Status Solo fan take the wheel.

He turned back to the stage with a cheer, the adrenaline hitting him instantly. He lost himself in the high as he sung along to the songs he knew every word to. He used to scream along to them in his banged up old car when he was twenty, pouring out his burning frustration after a bad audition. Then, years later, he'd hum mildly along to the same songs spilling through his ear buds, sitting in his trailer between takes and wanting nothing more than to jump around and sing at the top of his lungs.

It was no mystery to Louis how these boys had become one of the biggest bands in the world as he watched them play. One moment, Harry would be electrifying everyone with his molten stage presence as he smoldered over the mic, the next, he'd be chasing Niall with a boyish grin after the Irishman had dumped a water bottle down his back. And then, somehow, he could still silence an entire arena as he purred through a love ballad, thousands of cellphone screens twinkling from the stands like a sheet of stars.

It all ended (far too quickly) in a flourish of silver fireworks, the band members fading away into the smoke as the crowd begged for an encore. Louis' ears were ringing as the cries of the audience pelted him from above.

The band emerged to another cheer, but Harry easily silenced them with a wave of his hand as he took his place back at the microphone.

“Alright, fine. We've got a couple more for you.” he smiled, receiving thunderous applause. “Actually got something brand new for you. We've only played it lived a couple of times, so sorry if we screw up. You okay with that?” The crowd rumbled. “That sound good to you?” The rumbling escalated. Harry shushed them once again. “Just curious, how many of you are here with your special someone? Your special person? Any of you? Wave your arms in the air if you're here with your special somebody.”

Louis stiffened as arms all around him were thrust into the air, a flurry of whoops echoing around him.

_You're my special somebody, Harry._

“Okay, I want everyone to hold your special somebody's hand during this next one.” Harry continued. “Or hug them. Or snog the life out of them if that feels right to you. Doesn't bother me. This one's called _Over Again._”
Harry wrapped his hands around the microphone as if steadying himself as Niall plucked through the introduction on an acoustic guitar. A silence swept the crowd, enchanted by the first few chords. Harry inhaled before he fell into the lyrics, his voice low and intimate as he kept his gaze down.

*Said I’d never leave her,*

*Cause her hands fit like my t-shirt,*

*Tongue tied over three words, cursed*

*Running over thoughts that make my feet hurt*

*Bodies intertwined with her lips*

Harry's eyes flicked up to stare into the audience and Louis' breath hitched. Despite the use of the pronoun “she,” he had a dizzying feeling that he was rather familiar with the inspiration for this song.

*But what even was this song?* It wasn’t – it couldn't – but *was it, though?*

Several lines had already floated by before Louis' attention returned, Harry's voice trilling as the song rose towards the chorus.

*And it's no joke to me,*

*So can we do it all over again?*

*If you're pretending from the start*

*Like this, with a tight grip,*

*Then my kiss*

*Can mend your broken heart,*

*I might miss*

*Everything you said to me.*

*And I can lend you broken parts*

*That might fit,*

*Like this,*

*and I will give you all my heart,*

*So we could start it all over again*
It felt like someone had just punched a hole through Louis' head.

Because – just – oh god, Harry. He looked wrecked, utterly raw and exposed as he sang, the devastation clear in his face and his trembling notes. He was still that same version of himself from the last night they had see each other; that tear-streaked, emotionally trampled boy who cried out Louis' name.

The tempo picked up, the audience engrossed by the growing anguish in Harry's voice.

*You'll never know,*

*How to make it on your own,*

*And you'll never show weakness for letting go.*

*I guess you're still hurt if this over*

*But do you really want to be alone?*

His voice broke on the last word, taking a trembling breath before entering back into the song. He sounded like he'd been torn limb from limb, beaten and bloodied by the very words he had written.

And what truly crushed Louis was that he been the one to do it to him.

Harry trilled through the words as the tempo eased and the song faded in on itself.

*And I will give you all my heart*

*So we can start it all over again.*

A bewitched silence followed before giving way to an eruption of applause. Harry took a step back from the microphone, collecting himself. Louis was close enough to see the glossy sheen on his eyes, the pools of water blinked away as he blew several kisses to the crowd. He was scanning the arena, his eyes drawing precariously close to where Louis and the others were standing.

And if there was any wish that Louis yearned to come true, it was for Harry to not see him in that moment. Just please, please, please, if there was any order in the universe, don't let Harry see the object of his devastation, Louis, for the first time in weeks after singing a song about their mutual heartbreak.

But of course, the fates still needed to prove how funny they thought Louis' misfortune was.

Harry froze as their eyes locked. Shock rippled through his features, settling into an image of terrified panic. Louis tried to speak through his eyes, tried to say 'Please, please love. Don't be afraid. There's nothing to be afraid of.'

Luckily, Niall was fully aware of the moment transpiring between his lead singer and the one particular audience member he had forced to stand in the front row. He leapt to Harry's side and
relief flooded Louis. Niall whispered something in Harry's ear, and Louis waited for some gesture that everything was resolved. Maybe a little smile from Harry, or a quick thumbs up even.

But neither happened. Instead, Harry nodded and turned back to the mic, brushing the moment with Louis away as if it had never occurred. He leapt into the next song, attention fully returning to the rest of the audience.

And ouch. That really, really hurt. It completely sliced through Louis, leaving him trapped in his own head as the concert barreled through the last song.

Suddenly, Louis realized that the music had stopped. Nona was screaming into his ear, and the crowd was churning out of control as the members of the band reached into the sea of hands clawing after them.

“Louis!” Nona continued to scream.

“What?”

She pointed ahead of him over the metal barrier, where Louis came face to face with Niall's beaming mug. He was framed by two burly security guards who were keeping the surrounding fans at bay as Niall leaned in towards Louis.

“Which ones are here with you!?” Niall yelled over the clamor as a desperate hand reached out and clutched at his shirt.

“These two!” Louis responded, still shocked by Niall's abrupt appearance. Niall gestured to the guards, and one of them promptly started to help Nona climb over the barrier while the other one batted away the fans who tried to follow after. Niall disappeared as he turned to sign autographs, and Louis made his way over the barrier after Stan, still dumbfounded by the situation.

They were lead up onto the stage by the guards, which was now empty of rock stars but teeming with stage hands. The full landscape of the crowd unfurled before them, temporarily stalling Louis' heart at it's surrealism. Nona took a quick selfie before they were ushered into the wings offstage.

Practically stumbling into Mark, the drummer, the group was abandoned by the security guards and left to fend for themselves. Mark recognized Louis and was surprised to see him, and Nona gushed over the concert until Niall finally found them.

“Oi! Tommo!” he called out from behind Louis, his performance adrenaline clearly still racing through him. They separated and a throng of men and women dressed in black swooped in, disentangling wires from his shirt, wiping his forehead, and thrusting water into his hand in a well practiced routine.

Everything was moving very quickly and efficiently, but Niall didn't even seem to notice the flurry of movement as he waited patiently for them to release him so that he could sweep Louis into a hug that lifted him off the ground.

“You okay?” Niall asked as he set him down.

“I just really expected you to hate me.” Louis admitted. Niall's face softened.

“Mate. I can't hate you. You're here. You're doing it.” he said. “Who're your friends?”

“Erm, yeah.” Louis sputtered, turning to his friends. “Guys, this is Niall, my neighbor. And this is Stan and Nona. Nona's my costar and Stan is our mother for the rest of the shoot.”
“Oh my god, you guys fucking killed it. I think my head is still exploding.” Nona exclaimed.

“Cheers.” Niall responded. His eyebrows raised briefly as he took in Nona's appearance, and it did not go unnoticed by Louis. He felt the immediate need to put a hand between them, forcing them to maintain several feet of distance from each other at all times.

Sure, Louis loved Niall and everything, but he loved Nona as well. Niall's dating history was long, expansive, and comically disastrous. He was not about to let Nona get anywhere near any piece of that.

Niall's attention turned to Nona, and Louis was about to leap between them and insist that they leave room for Jesus, but the crowd mulling to his right thinned and revealed a tight knot of stage hands fussing over a mop of curly brown hair.

Harry stepped away from them as he checked his phone, oblivious that every step he was taking was drawing him closer to Louis until he finally looked up. He went rigid immediately, the conversation hushing as everyone noticed his appearance. His gaze volleyed between Louis and Niall, unsure of what to do as his arms crossed tightly across his chest. Louis knew that movement well: Harry only did it when he wanted to hide.

Niall clapped Louis on the back, the momentum being the only thing that made it possible to start moving. He approached Harry, his group of friends fading away behind him as his world centered on the man standing in front of him. The burning, sexual ferocity of Stage Harry had already vanished, leaving behind the soft, lovely Harry that Louis knew. He was even more beautiful than Louis remembered, but fear was marring his features as he stayed completely still. He looked closed off, as if he'd locked himself up and thrown the key away.

“Hi.” Louis breathed as he came to a stop, the distance between them both too wide and too short.

“Hey, Lou.” Harry said softly. To Louis' relief, it wasn't dark or unkind, just mingled with raw sadness. Louis wanted nothing more than to take Harry in his arms, stroking his hair until he coaxed the fear away and replaced it with that smile he saved only for Louis.

But he couldn't reach out and touch Harry, and it just felt so alien to him. He'd never been afraid of anything with Harry. He'd always been free to just reach out and grab him, to hold him as tightly as he felt necessary. But not anymore. That line couldn't be crossed yet, and it was awkward and unbearable. Louis hated it.

“How's your shoulder?” Harry suddenly asked.

“Oh, erm, good. Yeah, it's been good.” Louis responded, reaching to his shoulder reflexively. Harry nodded and chewed at his lips. “I'm here to talk to you, Harry.”

“That's what Niall said.” Harry responded. “And yeah. Definitely. We'll talk. You're coming back to the hotel?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. We'll talk.” Harry assured him, turning away and being swept up once again by technicians and stage hands. He disappeared into a mass of bodies, leaving Louis feeling utterly deflated. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but a distracted dismissal hadn't been it.

He turned back to the others, relieved to see that Niall had also moved onto other business and hadn't seen Louis get his heart trounced on. He trudged over to them, falling immediately into Nona's arms.
“It’s okay, Lulu.” she said, holding him tight. “He’s just super busy right now. We’ll see him back at the hotel and he’ll give you his full attention and everything will be perfect.”

Louis nodded despondently into her shoulder, stopping himself from telling her that everything was hopeless and none of this was going to end up perfect.

It took what felt like an entire lifetime to get to the hotel due to the mass exodus around the arena. They arrived over an hour later, dropping off the car with a valet as Stan squawked about how late it was getting and Nona promptly silenced him.

They were escorted up to a penthouse suite and entered to find a room of rented opulence draped in drunk groupies. They were leaping off couches with hundred dollar bottles of champagne, accidentally dropping glasses with a crash and a giggle, and rubbing against each other sloppily to the droning music. It was much like any other party Louis had ever attended, except this one had a much heftier price tag attached.

Nona took the party in stride, gracing everyone with her natural charisma and striking up conversations left and right. Louis followed in her wake, his typical chipperness buried beneath a layer of anxiety. Despite his relative silence, it only took a few seconds before most of the party goers recognized him. The conversation usually went along the same lines every time, and Louis was already well-rehearsed with it.

“You were in Squad, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Whoa, you’re British? I had no idea!”

It was during one of these exchanges that Louis looked up and found Harry floating by, fighting off a smirk at the familiar response to hearing his real accent. His smile faded when their eyes met and Harry took flight to the other side of the party. Louis pined after his retreating back, watching intently as a stout, fedora topped man somehow secured Harry’s attention. His arm krept to Harry’s elbow as the two talked, their mutual smiles completely unpalatable to Louis.

And no. Who the fuck was that?

“Hey! You’re here!” Niall called as he joined their conversation. “Got a thousand people for you to meet, Lou.”

Louis only faintly heard him, as he was too engrossed in glaring sharply at the Fedoraman as he opened a beer for Harry. Confused, Niall followed Lous’ line of sight and spotted Harry as he took a swig.

“One second.” Niall said, trotting through the crowd. He didn’t say anything to Harry once he reached them, instead snatching the beer from his hand and shaking his head before rejoining Louis. He pulled him along, doing a sweep of the penthouse as he met all of Niall’s friends who were virtually crammed into every room. This was no easy feat, as the penthouse could have easily passed for a large, expensive flat, complete with a kitchen and balcony.

Throughout their mingling they would occasionally spot Harry, who would stay a few paces ahead of them at all times. Whenever Louis got close, Harry would retreat before he could make any attempt to reach out to him. To Louis’ irritation, this was often into the clutches of Fedoraman, who had long since given up on any subtlety as he drooled over Harry.

Louis’ heart was physically aching at this point. It panged from deep within, surging with sharp
jolts of pain with every heartbeat. All he could think to do was to claw his way through the crowd and crawl into Harry's arms, but the distance between them only grew as the night ticked by. With each shaky breath, a pit of truth sunk further into Louis: Harry had moved on. He didn't want to see him. Louis was too late.

His eyes might have begun to mist over and every muscle in his body might have been trembling, but he focused on keeping himself together for the benefit of everyone surrounding him. To Louis' left, a large group was hanging onto Nona's every word as she told a joke, and to Louis' right, Stan was griping about how close it was getting to two AM.

Somewhere across the room, Niall was plucking drink after drink out of Harry's hand as Fedoraman eased himself further and further into his personal space. All the while, Louis' heart was growing sicker and sicker.

"Hey! Squad's on pay-per-view!" Niall called from where he stood beside the massive telly. Being only capable of short, weak sentences, Louis' protestations were easily drowned out by the cheers of the other party goers. They crowded around the screen as Louis' face flashed onto it, causing everyone to cheer and pat him on the back.

He peaked over his shoulder to survey the group, eyes immediately drawn to where Harry lingered on the perimeter. He was staring intently at the screen as he chewed his fingernails, not even pausing to blink. Louis was confused by Harry's intensity until he looked back to the telly and realization hit him.

*Not this scene*.

Louis' character, described in the script summary as a fussy partyboy with a heart of gold, was filling a line of shot glasses as a gorgeous, bikini clad woman walked into the kitchen. The movie was overall pretty ridiculous, so her appearance only marginally made sense in the context of the scene. The actress herself had been pretty sweet, but she was a disproportionately bad kisser.

This scene was the reason that Louis knew that fact.

"Put it in the refrigerator." Louis' character told her as they spoke.

"Refrigeratorrrrrrr." Everyone laughed at his overly American pronunciation. He managed a small smile before his character inexplicably tore off his shirt, illiciting a round of catcalls from the party. The whistles and cheers only escalated as the two characters stepped in and began to violently snog.

Harry tore away from the crowd, disappearing into another room within seconds. Louis stumbled after him without a second thought, not even sure of where Harry had run away to. He walked into the kitchen, his panic rising as he found it completely deserted.

He was intensely aware that he was only a few seconds away from having another complete breakdown in the middle of a party, so he scrounged through the cabinets until he found a glass and filled it at the tap.

The water swilled down his throat slowly, easing his senses and calming his mind. But his moment of mental recollection was cut short by Nona and Stan's sudden appearance.

"Lulu, Stan keeps complaining that we need to leave in twenty minutes, but you haven't even talked to Harry yet and-"

"It's fine. We can leave now." Louis cut her off.
“But-”

“I just want to go.”

“You're leaving?” Niall burst into kitchen, making Louis feel as if they were in the middle of a scene in a sitcom. “But you guys haven't even talked yet.”

“He doesn't want to talk to me, Niall.” Louis said, feeling his resolve cracking.

“So you're just going to take off?”

“I'm too late.”

“You're not too late, Louis!” Niall promised, slipping past Stan and Nona to round on him.

“He's been avoiding me all night. He won't even look at me.”

“Because he's scared!” Niall exclaimed. “He's scared that you've had your time to think about everything, and now you're here to come let him down easy.”

“What?” Louis gaped. “How could he possibly think that?”

“Because no one's ever come back for him.” Niall explained, the simplicity of the statement completely heartbreaking. “Nobody's even fought to be with him.”

“I – I've..” Louis trailed off as he rubbed his hands over his face in exhaustion.

“If you were talking to him right now, what would you say?” Niall demanded.

“Niall.” Louis moaned, still burying his face in his hands.

“I'm serious.”

“I don't know.”

“You drove all this way and you had no idea what you want to say to him?”

“I don't know!”

“Come on!” Niall urged, but he was forced to jump back as Louis' head flicked up and he faced them with a manic intensity.

“I'd tell him that he means everything to me. Literally everything.” Louis said, his blood seething. “That I've missed him so much that I just want to pull my hair out all the time. That all I ever want to do is text him. Fuck that, I want to call him and hear his voice. And I want to hold him and kiss him again because he is all I ever think about. And it's not true that no one has ever fought for him because this is me, right now, standing here and fighting for him. I want to keep fighting for him as long as I'm alive because he deserves it and he is everything to me.” Louis was panting, adrenaline coursing through him at what might have been the most honest words he had ever spoken in his life. He looked up, prepared for the shocked faces of his friends, but instead found a sly grin on Niall's lips, his eyes falling on someone behind Louis.

And ah, if that wasn't just a beautiful cliché.

Louis wasn't at all surprised to find Harry behind him, his eyes foggy and his lips quirked up in a disbelieving grin.
God, he was lovely.

“Quite the puppet master, Horan.” Louis quipped as Niall's smile grew.

“We'll just leave you to settle things.” Niall said contentedly, putting his arms around Nona and Stan as they exited together.

“Seventeen minutes!” Stan called over his shoulder.

Once again, Louis' life had suddenly become a sitcom.

“Is it too predictable for me to ask how much of that you heard?” Louis asked as he stepped towards Harry.

“Unless you prefaced everything with 'I hate Harry and everything I'm about to say is a lie,' then I think I got the gist.” he answered cheekily, taking his own step forward.

“We should talk.”

“We should.”

And with that, they both crossed the remaining distance and melted into each other's bodies. Louis buried his head in Harry's neck and took a deep breath, inhaling Harry's deeply missed scent. His whole body relaxed as he felt the familiar surge in his stomach at being close to Harry.

“I missed the fuck out of you.” Louis muttered.

“Ditto.” Harry responded, causing Louis to chuckle. They separated slowly, eyes lingering in locked gazes as they relearned every contour of each other's faces. They were nearly frozen until Harry's lips began to move, “I have a fountain to show you.” he said excitedly, pulling Louis along by the hand towards the door. Louis was unabashed by how giddily he was laughing at the reemergence of this particular Harry; the boy who would whisk him away to see a fountain during an emotional reunion.

They wove through the party towards the door, and Harry had just opened it when, lo and behold, Fedoraman materialized.

“You're leaving, Harry?” he asked, pretending to ignore Harry and Louis' intertwined fingers.

“Yeah, for a bit.” Harry responded. “I'll catch up with you later, okay?”

Louis didn't like the sound of that, but he was rather fond of Fedoraman's grimace as they slipped into the hallway. They were both smiling wildly as they raced toward the elevators.

“So, was that a friend of yours?” Louis asked, feigning casual curiosity.

“Friend of a friend. Been hanging around for the last couple of concerts.” They came to a stop as Harry pressed the down button, the doors splitting open soon afterward.

“Does he know you're gay, or something?” Louis asked as they stepped inside. Harry paused momentarily as he reached to press the lobby button, a smirk on his face.

“Sometimes the groupies figure it out for themselves.” he explained.

“Huh.” Louis responded, leaning into Harry's side and resting his cheek possessively on his shoulder as the floors whirred past.
“Louis, I know what you're wondering.” Harry said. “And I haven't been with anyone in a long time. I haven't really wanted to be with anyone. I mean, with anyone else.”

The doors burst open as Louis' heart glowed. They stepped into the empty lobby, the rippling water of the towering fountain at it's center echoing off the marble walls. Harry tramped toward it as if on a mission, stepping up onto the rim with his same golden boots from the concert. He took a moment to balance with his collection of gangly limbs before he held a hand out to Louis, inviting him to join him. Louis stepped up beside him, their hands falling limply to their sides as they watched each other, the fountain bubbling behind them.

“So, talk?” Louis asked weakly.

“Talk.” Harry nodded, but his face snapped back to an image of fear, his brows furrowed as he spun away from Louis and started walking along the lip of the fountain, counter clockwise. Louis watched as Harry set a slow, ambling pace.

“So,” Harry began, not looking over his shoulder. “How have you been?”

“Louis stuffed his hands into his pockets before he started walking the rim himself in the opposite direction of Harry so that they were mirrored.

“Miserable.” he answered honestly. Harry looked over at him through the jets of water.

“Things are going to get better, I promise. It's just going to take some time to get past Joshua.” he said.

“Joshua? What?” Louis gaped, picking up his pace. “Harry, I don't care about Joshua.” They stopped as they closed the distance between them, standing only a foot apart from each other. “Yes, I loved him once, but he betrayed that love. Our relationship was this dead, stagnant thing that I couldn't find my way out of until I met you. Because you made me strong enough to leave him. It's over now, and I'm moving on. Honestly, I am.” He promised. “And I know that I should be taking more time before jumping into anything else, but I can't, because you're the person I can't seem to get past right now.”

Harry looked at him with a timid, watery smile as his hands landed on the sides of Louis' arms. He swayed into the touch expectantly, but was left unsettled as Harry slid past him and continued his trek around the fountain.

“Oh my god, Harry.

“What – erm – what happened that night?” Harry asked meekly, his arms crossed defensively once again. Louis continued around the fountain as well, exhaling slowly. He reminded himself that everything was okay; he could talk about this. He was with Harry. No one could hurt him as long as Harry was here. Ultimately, he decided to just lay out the truth as it came to him.

“It's, it's mostly -” he stammered, steadying himself. “I couldn't cheat on Joshua. That's what it came down to. I was deathly afraid of being unfaithful to him again. And then, when I kissed you, it was so stupidly clear that I've had these for you all along, just like everyone was saying. And that, kind of, made me have a breakdown. Zayn and Liam thought I needed time away from both of you to get some perspective, and I fucking hated them for saying that, but they were right. I can finally see everything now. I still have issues with Joshua, but they have nothing to do with you, Harry. He has nothing to do with the way I feel about you.”

Harry yelped as his boot slipped from the ledge, his flailing body landing with a splash in the
“Harry!” Louis yelled, jumping into the water himself. Harry made no attempt to get to his feet, instead looking pathetically up at Louis as the trickling water drenched his unruly curls. The sight endeared Louis beyond words.

He knelt down between Harry’s sprawled legs and cupped his face, water now spilling down his own back.

“Haz. You fell into the fountain.” he said warmly.

“And?”

“It's a tad embarrassing.”

“Not as embarrassing as jumping in after me willingly.” he pointed out, and Louis couldn't argue with that logic. Harry's hands encased Louis', pulling them down into his lap. “This is my fault.” he whispered.

“Hey, Harry. No.” Louis said, settling down in front of him, their legs tangling together beneath the ribbons of cascading water. “None of this is your fault.”

“I knew what was going to happen, and I did it anyways.”

“Did what?”

“Met you.” Harry began fiddling with Louis' fingers in his lap. “I have a confession.”

“What?”

“I had a fan crush on you for, like, a thousand years before I met you.” he admitted. “Like, I fancied you from the second I saw you in Squad. Then you came out, and you were just so funny and warm and charming in that article. It's stupid, and embarrassing, but I totally fell for you.”

“Harry, I've thought you were the fittest person on the planet since your first album dropped. The fan crush was mutual.” Louis said, running a thumb over Harry's hand.

But Harry was already shaking his head. “And then Niall told me that he was living next to you, and I had this one, glimmering second before he told me about your boyfriend. And that just totally crashed down on me. Harder than a fan crush should have. So I knew that I shouldn't ever meet you, because there was no I way I could just act normally around you. And I knew that there was no way you could possibly live up to this image I had of you in my head, so I just never wanted to cross your path.

Then, twenty minutes into being back in LA, Niall forgot to tell me you were going to be at that club with us, and that just totally crashed down on me. Harder than a fan crush should have. So I knew that I shouldn't ever meet you, because there was no I way I could just act normally around you. And I knew that there was no way you could possibly live up to this image I had of you in my head, so I just never wanted to cross your path.

His voice cracked as his own tears mingled with the fountain spray on his cheeks.
“Oh, Harry.” Louis choked, his own eyes brimming with tears.

He leaned in, powerless but to stop Harry's mouth with his own until he'd kissed his frown away.

“Louis.” Harry whimpered against his lips, his voice wrecked as Louis pulled him to his feet and pressed their lips together once again. He wrapped his arm around Harry's neck, plunging himself into the kiss with every shred of energy he had. Harry's arms tightened around him as if trying to prove that this was really happening, holding Louis in the familiar warmth that sent his senses aflame. It was intoxicating as it fluxed through him, the feeling of Harry's soft kisses as their lips moved slowly against each other, deep yet gentle. Everything clicked into place as he brushed his fingers over the slopes of Harry's cheeks.

The kiss was struggling to maintain its dignity as their lips spread into gaping smiles, Louis giggling his love sickness into Harry's dimple.

They both jumped as Louis' phone tittered to life in his pocket, having completely forgotten that anything else existed. The ringtone suddenly reminded Louis of the fundamental laws of nature that claimed that phones and water don't quite get along. He pulled it from his pocket with relief as he saw Nona's name flashing across the screen. Luckily it was merely damp, not destroyed. It was okay the first time he'd sacrificed his phone to the water gods, but two phones drowned in one month? That's bordering on diva behaviour.

“Is your phone..?” Louis questioned, looking to Harry.

“Upstairs.” he answered. Louis nodded as he put his phone to his ear.

“Yes darling?”

“Sorry to bother what is hopefully a blissful ride into the sunset, but Stan is in full Terminator mode right now. Where are you?” she asked.

“In the lobby. Everything's good.” he smiled at Harry, hoping his blush wasn't too evident. “We can head out.”

“We'll be right down.” she said, her satisfaction clear as she hung up.

“We might want to get out of the fountain.” Louis reasoned, leaning into Harry's chest and slipping a hand around his waist. Harry reciprocated the contact immediately. “We're a little bit of a bad romance novel right now.”

“Ra, ra, ah-ah-ah.” Harry hummed, pressing his cheek against Louis'. “You and me could write a bad romance.”

“Nerd.” Louis laughed, smitten out of his mind. They waded back over to the relative dry land of the lobby, hands clasped together.

“Can I see your phone?” Harry asked.

“Sure.” Louis handed it over. “What for?”

“I'm calling my assistant to bring some of my dry clothes down for you.”

“Harry.”

“Hi, yeah, could you run into my room?”
“Harry, nothing you own is going to fit me.” Louis reasoned. Harry pulled the phone away from his face.

“I don’t want you to be cold on the ride back.”

“I’m slightly damp and we can turn the heaters on. I’ll be fine.” he said, but Harry looked unconvinced.

“At least borrow a coat.” he bargained. Louis was ready to argue some more, but the idea of walking out of the hotel in Harry's coat was already starting to warm him up. He nodded and Harry smiled as he talked into the phone again. “Yeah, could you grab my Shearling jacket? I think it’s on the back of a chair, or something. Yeah. Thanks. Down in the lobby. Thanks again.”

“Harrrrrrry.” Louis whined again, nuzzling into his chest.

“What?”

“That jacket's like, thousands of dollars.”

“I don’t want you to be cold.” Harry repeated, not aware of how ridiculously expensive his gesture seemed to Louis.

Louis looked up at him tenderly, pressing a kiss to his lips just because he could. Harry seemed to feel the same way, connecting their lips yet again.

“Look what you are interrupting, Stanley. Dear heavens.” Came Nona's voice as they heard the ping of the elevator doors. They broke the kiss with a smile, turning to greet Nona and Stan as they approached them. Nona's smile was threatening to overtake the entire lobby. “Took a swim, did we?”

“Harry, this is Nona and Stan.” Louis introduced them. Harry stepped forward, enthusiastically shaking both of their hands.

“I actually saw you in Titus Andronicus when I was in New York a few years ago.” Harry said excitedly to Nona.

“Really?”

“Yes. It was fantastic. Lurid. Magnificent.” He gushed.

“Okay, stop him now before he recites entire dictionary's worth of adjectives.” Louis asked as he snaked his hand back into Harry's, slightly jealous that a whole twenty seconds had passed since they'd last touched. Stan looked to Louis sternly, obviously wanting to tap his watch as a reminder. The elevator doors opened once again, revealing Harry's Saint Laurent jacket drape over the shoulder of one of his assistants. “Could you guys go get the valet to bring the car around? I'll catch up.”

“Yes. Absolutely.” Nona said, pulling Stan away before he could protest. Harry thanked his assistant and she hurried away as he draped it over Louis shoulders. It smelled dizzyingly like Harry, and Louis thought he might swoon. Harry's hands lingered around the collar as they found themselves alone yet again.

“I don't want you to go.” Harry said softly.

“Neither do I.” They leaned in, pressing another light kiss to each other's lips until Harry suddenly
tore away.

“What are you doing for New Years?” He asked.

“Erm, we're going to go watch fireworks from some hill with the rest of the crew.” He said. “What are you doing?”

“I have five free hours.”

“Oh wow. A whole five.” Louis laughed.

“I could fly in and be with you at midnight.” Harry said, stepping even closer to him as if this were a secret. Louis' heart doubled it's pace at the idea that he could see Harry again in only a few days, but reason settled in.

“Haz, we should probably take things kind of slow, you know?” He said, avoiding Harry's eyes so he wouldn't have to see the disappointment. “Like, things are still kind of fragile, you know? Maybe we shouldn't do any crazy, romantic gestures until we're more established.”

Harry nodded, understanding. Louis kissed him once more, stepping away slowly in the direction of the doors. His footsteps felt like lead, practically dragging behind him as he felt Harry watching his receding figure.

Suddenly, he spun back around and threw himself back towards Harry.

“Okay, you know what? Fuck it.” Louis said, grabbing Harry by his hips. "I want to be with you on New Years, so let's do it, okay? Let's just do what we want to do. That's the new rule. We do what we want.”

“Yes. I like that rule.”

“Good. I like it too.”

He crashed their lips together, this time desperately and forcefully. He squeaked as Harry tightened his arms and dipped him, once again adding to their status as a bad romance.

“Not to sound needy, but please don't hang out with Fedoraman tonight.” Louis said as Harry leveled him again. “He's the worst and he likes you, which I can't blame him for, but it does make me want to destroy him.”

“Think I'm just going to go to sleep and wait until I can start texting you again.” Harry admitted.

“Good plan.”

“Lou?”

“Yeah?”

“I can't believe this is happening.”

“Ditto, love.”
Niall landed with an “oomph!” as he lofted himself onto the bed. Harry rolled over grumpily, blinking through the darkness as his blonde friend nestled into the duvet.

“Too good for our party, hmm?” He asked as he rolled to face Harry.

“M’tired.” Harry mumbled back, rubbing his heavy eyes.

“Louis’ not in this bed somewhere, is he?” Niall asked, suddenly looking at the sheets in horror. Harry gave a sleepy chuckle as he shook his head.

“We didn't get to talk very long. He has work in a few hours.” Harry explained. Niall's eyebrows arched.

“So the fact that you talked to Louis, then immediately locked yourself away in your dark room by yourself means...?”

“That I'm sleeping to make the time go faster until I can text him again.” Harry answered warmly. Niall's face quickly lit up.

“So things are good?”

“Really good.”

“Ravish each other in a closet like animals good?” Niall asked with a wink, still able to spot Harry's embarrassed blush through the darkness.

“I fell in a fountain and then cried.” Harry recounted. “Not super sexy of me.”

“Ah, Haz. You cried?” Niall asked, apparently unfazed by the part about the fountain.

“Happy tears, mostly.”

“Happy tears. That's okay, I guess.” Niall said slowly, as if weighing Harry's words in his head. “I don't remember any happy tears during the whole Nick affair.”

“Nope. No happy tears.”

Niall's face was overcome with an affectionate grin at these words, and Harry bit back the giddiness that was threatening to spill out of his every pore.

“Well, I'm glad, Harry. I'm happy for you.” Niall said. They both fell silent for a moment as the turn in events sunk in between the two of them. Never before had Niall been able to say those words so sincerely to Harry, and the implication made his entire body feel like it was blossoming. Harry grabbed one of his pillows and held it tightly to his chest, burying his smile into it.

“Are you still mad at Louis?” Harry asked, his voice muffled by the pillow.

“Eh, not really.” He admitted. “I mean, I was really fucking pissed after that party, and everything.
But I guess I can see his side of it. And it doesn't even really matter. All that shit happened, but it's
over now. What really matters is what he just did. I mean, he came back for you. Can't really hate
him if he's trying this hard to make everything right.” Harry held the pillow even more tightly as
his smile grew, but Niall's face stiffened. “Harry, you know this isn't going to be easy, right?”

“I've done it before.”

“Once management finds out, they're going to do everything they can to drive a wedge between
you two.”

“Yeah, I know. I've done this before.” Harry repeated in frustration.

“I know Harry, but like-” Niall stammered, struggling to find the words to describe his thoughts. “I
know that you were really crazy about Nick-”

“I loved him.”

“Yeah, I know, but you were nineteen, Haz.” He pointed out. “This time it isn't young, puppy love.
I think this thing with you and Louis goes way deeper than that, you know? Louis' not just anyone;
there's something really special there.”

“I know.” Harry mumbled.

“The stakes are a lot higher. Like, you can't lose him, Harry. And you two aren't very subtle when
you're around each other.”

“I know.”

“He could barely keep his hands off of you, even when he had a boyfriend.”

“I know.”

“Like, remember that time we were drunk at McDonald's and he kept trying to squeeze into your
shirt with you?”

“I know, Niall.”

“Do you, though?” Niall asked, extinguishing Harry's protest before it could even cross his lips.
Harry looked up at him, their eyes connecting with a heavy understanding. “You can't just go into
this blind, mate. You've got to talk with him about all of this stuff, cuz I don't know if he's really
thought about what he's getting into.”

“I don't...” Harry began, cut off as he clamped his own mouth shut and rolled over. Niall was very
used to this specific avoidance technique of Harry's, so he promptly grabbed Harry by the shoulder
and rolled him back onto his side and flicked him on the forehead. Harry winced and grinned as he
grappled to flick Niall back, but Niall easily subdued Harry's tangle of limbs.

“Use your words, Harry.” Niall chided as Harry gave up on getting his revenge.

“I don't want to scare him off.”

“Mate, if you were going to scare him off, it would have happened way back when you jumped off
your roof into the pool.” Niall laughed. “He's going to understand. You have nothing to be afraid
of.”
It was the day that Louis had officially dubbed as “the most cruel and merciless middle day” of his separation from Harry. It had been a day since they’d seen each other at the London show, and it would be another full day before they saw each other again for New Years.

The middle. What a heinous place.

They’d worked out the details, and it seemed that the unrelenting world of rock and roll was only willing to give Harry up for a few hours on New Years Eve. The only way they could work it out was for Harry to fly in at about ten, then have to fly out again at three in the morning. At this revelation, Louis had been ready to schedule another time to see him, but Harry was intent on visiting him, even if it just meant watching some fireworks on a remote hilltop with the cast and crew of Louis’ movie.

The lull in conversation between Harry and Louis over the last month had fallen like the Berlin Wall after their fountain kiss in London. He was practically inundated with a constant feed of updates on Harry's life, ranging from breakfast selfies to spare lines of poetry that ended in puns that made no sense out of context. Basically, typical musings from the mind of Harry Styles.

Their conversations were almost back to how they had been before the events of early December, except that there was a slightly different feeling behind the words they were trading. Their was a degree of sentiment behind everything now; an urgency to convey how important the other was at all times.

And, of course, there was the added romanticism of the Spotify playlist they were now sharing. That alone had Louis’ heart doing cartwheels in his chest every fifteen minutes. It had been Harry's idea, for the two of them to share whatever music came to mind to share with each other. But Louis only agreed because he planned to sit back and let Harry's musical genius curate a perfect playlist for him. Harry filled it to the brim with gems that Louis had never heard, but always became irrevocably stuck in his head.

Louis was currently submitted to a fetal position on the couch of his trailer. He'd planned to rehearse his scene on his own a few more times during his break, but that was before Harry's text:

*Just added a few more songs to the playlist :)))*

So, of course, Louis had fallen limply onto the sofa so that he could surrender his entire break to whatever songs Harry had chosen for him. He was still wrapped up in Harry's Shearling jacket that he'd borrowed, scarcely having taken it off since they'd parted ways. It's resemblance to Harry was uncanny: it was warm, soft, and so big that it completely dwarfed Louis. Naturally, Louis’ affection for the coat was inevitable.

He burrowed further into it's warmth as he tapped the screen of his phone, listening to the newest songs that were waiting for him.

The quiver of a few fluttering plucks of an acoustic guitar drifted through his headphones, joined by the light twinkles of piano keys.
The song was *Romeo and Juliet* by the Killers, and the lilting chords had lulled Louis into warm bliss as Brandon Flower's voice joined the music.

“A love struck Romeo,

sang the streets a serenade

Laying everybody low

with the love song that he made”

His blood felt as if it were coursing with sugary syrup as the lyrics wafted by, growing heavy as they climbed up to the chorus.

Each word struck him one by one as this retelling of Romeo and Juliet's tale wove itself through the gentle plinks of the piano keys. At the center of it, the lyrics were a plea from Romeo to his love about their past. Things hadn't worked out before, but Romeo implored that it wasn't worth giving up on.

The song finally dwindled into silence, leaving Louis with the the sneaking suspicion that Harry had picked this song especially for the two of them. This particular song was meant to say something to Louis that Harry hadn't been able to say himself.

He opened their text conversation and saw that it had only been five minutes since they'd last corresponded before he typed out the lyrics that was still twirling through his mind:

*And there's a place for us, you know the movie song. When you gonna realize, it was just that the time was wrong? Juliet.....*

He sent the text and eagerly watched the screen, confident that Harry wouldn't think of it as an insult that Louis had just referred to him as Juliet. The tiny words beneath the text switched from “delivered” to “read” and Louis dropped the phone to his chest, his heart beating against it as he anxiously waited for Harry's response, the same lyric circling again and again through his mind.

“They was just that the time was wrong.”

That's what was so true about the last few months. It had taken buckets of tears and hours of confused screaming but it had finally become clear to Louis: had the timing been different, he would have thrown everything he had into making Harry his from the moment that they'd first met. The circumstances had just been so remarkably against them so far. It had been such a tumult that, even now that they'd finally been honest with each other, everything was still very fragile. Louis was still immobilized by the need to proceed with caution at every turn.

And it was that exact insecurity that was starting to prickle at the back of his thoughts as each
minute passed and Harry didn't text him back. Time stretch on and on until it had been nearly a half hour since Harry had read the text. Louis' stomach was beginning to sour in anticipation.

That was what Harry had meant, right? That line had surely stuck out to him as much as it had stuck out to Louis. Why else would he have sent it? Unless he had honestly just kind of liked the song, no ulterior motive included.

And oh Jesus, what if that was it? What if Harry had just thought, “This is a nice song, maybe Louis will like it.” And now, Louis had responded with the most lovesick, desperate thing any human had ever said via text message. All that, and they'd only been kind of “together” for two days.

And oh fucking dear god, he'd just likened them to the most tragically romantic characters in English literature, even though they'd only kissed, like, three times and why was Louis just a walking pile of embarrassment?

Louis' whole body jolted as his phone pinged on his chest. He snatch it up and his eyes shot across Harry's text:

*I'm going to call in a second, but don't pick up. I want to leave a voicemail*

Okay. Alright.

But what did that even mean?

Louis didn't have time to ponder any of this as Harry's call came in a few seconds later. He stared at it unblinkingly until Harry's name was surely burnt into his retinas, the entire time wanting nothing more than to answer and hear Harry's deep voice on the other end.

His resolve luckily held, and he made it until the call went to voicemail without picking up. He waited for the notification that Harry had left a message for him impatiently. This, however, did not happen in a timely manner, which caused Louis to scrunch himself into a ball and mutter grumpily to himself. With nothing to distract him, his thoughts ambled once again down the path of paranoia.

Why exactly did Harry want to leave a voicemail? Did that mean that he didn't want to talk to Louis directly? What could he possibly have to say that he couldn't say in an actual conversation? Nothing good, that was certain,

PING.

There was one new voicemail waiting for him. It waited there for him, the screen blinking patiently as his finger hovered over it. In a swift movement, he tapped the screen and pulled the phone to his ear, his heart beat pulsing in every part of his body.

“Hey Lou, erm...” Harry said sheepishly, stopping to clear his throat and laugh. “Sorry this took so long. I just wanted to get it perfect.”
He exhaled loudly before falling silent. After several tense seconds, Louis checked his phone to make sure the voicemail hadn't abruptly ended without him noticing.

And that's when Harry started playing the piano.

“A lovestruck Romeo, sang the streets a serenade. Laying everybody low with the love song that he made.”

Harry's voice swept the air from Louis' lungs. He clenched the phone as tight as he could to his ear as Harry trilled through the words.

“Finds a streetlight, steps out of the shade and says something like, 'You and me babe, how bout it?''”

Louis had to physically press his hand to his chest for fear that it might rupture from the force of his beating heart.

Harry was singing the song to him. He'd taken the time to learn it so that he could sing it to Louis.

Had Louis at some point slipped into a coma only to be tormented by nonsensical fever dreams of a perfect boy who was too good for words? Because no part of this seemed remotely possible. People didn't actually do things like this, especially not for Louis.

“Juliet says, 'Hey it's Romeo. You nearly gave me a heart attack.' He's underneath the window, sing 'Hey la, my boyfriend's back.'”

The simple act of hearing Harry say the word “boyfriend” in reference to Louis sent a tingle down his entire body as his thoughts exploded over the idea.

Yes. That. Very much that.

There weren't any reflective surfaces nearby, which worked very much in Louis' favor as he would have been humiliated to see his own pulsating heart eyes as he listened to the song the first time, then the second time, quickly followed by the third time. His affections had started to soften by the fourth repeat, but unexpectedly rocketed back up to pure gleefulness on the fifth, sixth, and seventh replays.

He was only interrupted when his phone gave way to a call from the actual Harry Styles.

“I'm not, like, trying to be needy, but you haven't said anything about the song yet and I know you saw my text before I sent it and I totally went too far, didn't I? I did. Shit. I did. I went too far. Shit.” Harry apologized, his words spilling out over the phone in one breath.

“Harry.” Louis said calmly. “I haven't called you back yet because I've been listening to it over and
“Oh?” Harry responded, his voice shaken by disbelief.  
“I'd still be listening to it for the next few days if you hadn't called.”
“So you liked it?”
“I think it's probably the sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me.” Louis admitted.
“There's no way that that's true.”
“It is, though.” Louis rolled over so he could dangle his arm off the sofa and run his fingers through the carpet on the floor. “We still have a lot of stuff we need to work out, don't we?” He asked lightly.
“Yes. We do. But it's all going to be worth it.”
“Very worth it. We'll have hours to just talk when you get here. And there won't be any of those troublesome fountains to interrupt us.”
“I know, I know, baby.”
Their laughs were cut short suddenly as they both lingered over Louis' use of that particular term of endearment. Louis used pet names all the time as a joke with all of his friends, but “baby” had always been reserved for Joshua. He realized that this was the first time he'd used it with anyone else, and it had just come out so naturally.
“Haz?”
“Yeah?”
“Could you play the song for me again?”
“But you have a voicemail of it.”
“Yes, but I want to hear it again, but I don't want to hang up. Please? Please? Please?”
There was a rustling of movement and a groan, followed by a flourish of piano keys.

~

The first thing that struck Louis was the fact that Harry’s face was marred by fright again. It wasn't as dramatic as the concert, but it was still there: a subtle presence of insecurity and anxiety.

They were at a terminal that had been made private specifically for Harry's arrival at the Manchester Airport, the small gate now overrun with Harry’s security as he stepped off the plane. His hair was rumpled and his chest was once again refusing to be contained beneath something so pedestrian as shirt buttons.
Louis was embarrassingly aware of his resemblance to a puppy in that moment, the way he'd perked up as he'd locked eyes with Harry. He'd run this moment over and over in his mind about fifty times that day, but now that he was faced with Harry in the flesh, he felt absolutely bowled over.

Louis' pulse was racing, his sweat cold, his mouth dry.

And Harry looked scared again.

It clicked in Louis' head right then and there, that this could not become a habit. Harry absolutely could not be this afraid every time he saw Louis. He made a solemn vow in that moment that he would never give Harry a reason to look like that again.

With several confident strides, Louis closed the distance between them and pulled Harry into a tight embrace.

“I'm so glad you're here.” He whispered into his ear, pouring every ounce of sincerity he had into the words. He felt Harry melt in his arms, slowly becoming calm and pliant.

Louis let go, his hands sliding onto Harry's shoulders as he took a moment to look into his face. Harry rested his hands tentatively on Louis' waist, his eyes indecisively darting down to Louis' lips. It was obvious that this was still uncharted territory for the two of them, both still unsure about how the rules had changed. Do they hug? Do they kiss? Do they call each other baby and get matching tattoos?

Never a fan of fumbling through moments of uncertainty, Louis leaned forward to seal the moment with a soft kiss. Harry's body surged with surprise for a fleeting second before he smiled into it, kissing him back deep and slow as he pulled their bodies together.

The press of Harry's lips was still so new, it made Louis feel like a tulip field was blooming in his stomach.

They pulled away slowly, their faces still hovering close together as they grinned at each other. There was a stir of movement around them as Harry's security urged them to move on from the terminal, so Louis twined their fingers together as Harry lead them away.

There was a black van with tinted windows waiting for them, and it took a lot of protesting from Harry to convince his security that he'd be fine just going in Louis' car. Harry doled out his usual wave of charm as he negotiated with them, and Louis was actually impressed by how long it took for them to give in to him. They'd built up quite a resistance to him, but as with everyone else who'd ever crossed paths with Harry, they eventually crumbled beneath his dimpled grin.

Soon enough, they were seat belted into Louis' rental car and pulling out the airport, finally having the two things they'd been needing since they both left LA: privacy and time together.

Manchester whirred past them as Louis followed Nona's directions to the park where everyone was gathering. Harry was sitting practically sideways in his seat as he scrutinized Louis' very apparent weight loss for the movie. This process apparently required several pokes in the cheek from Harry as Louis tried to concentrate on driving.

“When can you start putting on weight again?” Harry asked as he pressed against Louis' jawbone as if taking scientific measurements.

“At the end of the shoot in February.”
“Can I cook for you?”

“You're still going to be on tour.” Louis pointed out.

“Doesn't mean I can't cook for you.”

“Are you planning to send me meals over the ocean by drone three times a day?” Louis joked.

“Or just bring you on tour with me.” Harry reasoned as he sat back properly in his seat. Louis tried to retain a neutral expression at the idea, but this proved a difficult task as he lips quivered into a smile.

“That is an option that we can discuss.” He said politically, causing Harry to smirk contentedly.

“Harry, we've got, like, things to talk about.”

“Things.” Harry echoed playfully.

“Things with feelings and stuff.”

“And stuff.”

“ Weird, complicated, messed up feelings.”

“And stuff.” Harry said, causing them both to smile before Louis steeled himself for his next question. Harry must had noticed, because his demeanor also stiffened.

“This is the part where I awkwardly ask you how you've been.” Louis said, eyes fixed to the road.

“I've been fine.”

“Harry-”

“No, really.” Harry insisted. “I haven't been great, or anything remotely close to that. But I've held up fine. Been spending most of my time writing songs, so that's been kind of therapeutic.”

Louis nodded slowly, his chest unclenching in relief. “So what happened during that concert when you walked off stage for awhile?” He asked, remembering back to his conversation with Nick Grimshaw on Radio 1. Harry exhaled heavily, and Louis could see him shrinking into himself out of the corner of his eye. Louis' hand reflexively darted over to latch onto Harry's. Harry's fingers wrapped gratefully around Louis', his thumb lightly stroking over Louis' skin.

“It was the first night that we were going to sing Over Again. Do you remember that one from your concert?” Harry asked. Louis nodded tersely. “So did you figure out that it was about us?” Louis nodded once again, his neck even more rigid than before. “I knew that there was a chance that it was going to be, like, hard for me to keep it together when we performed it. So I really focused on getting through it without sniveling onstage, or something like that. And I managed to do it, but I'd spent so much time mentally preparing for it that Paradise Red kind of blind sided me.

'I just started thinking about all of those times you told me how much you loved it, or went on all of those rants about your conspiracy theories about it. And I suddenly realized that I might not have one of those conversations with you ever again.” Harry looked down and Louis tightened his grip on his hand.

“I'm sorry.” Louis breathed, but Harry was already shaking his head.

“It was just a tiny second of weakness.” He explained. “That's why we do Over Again at the end of
the show now. But I've honestly been okay, for the most part. There was always this little part of me that kind of knew things were going to work out.”

“Yeah?”

“The last time I talked to Liam, he – erm – he said...” Harry trailed off, a blush rising in his cheeks. “He kind of eased my mind.”

“Harry, you can tell me what he said. You don't have to be embarrassed of anything around me. Except for the fountain thing. You should be embarrassed about that for the rest of your life.”

Harry chuckled before he continued. “He said that you really cared about me, and that he thought we'd eventually end up together. Like, we were meant to end up together. Which, yeah, I know, is st-”

“Do not say it's stupid, because it's not.” Louis scolded.

“But I didn't really believe him at first. I actually still don't fully believe any of this, to be honest. But then you sent me that text. It was this super garbled, stream-of-drunk-consciousness, but it proved that you were thinking about me. You were supposed to be asleep, but instead you were texting me about how much you care about me. I guess that just gave me hope.” He admitted, causing the car to fall into a warm silence. “That, plus your Radio 1 interview.” He added snarkily.

“And what exactly does that mean?” Louis asked, appalled.

“You know.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you could be possibly talking about. I certainly did not get into a jealous spat on national radio with your ex boyfriend as I defended your honor.” He looked over to watch Harry giggle. “Yeah, I'm sorry about that. He just really gets under my skin. Something kind of similar happened that night when he was at your house.”

“You mean big, dark, nasty explosion night?” Harry asked.

“You're going to have to define 'big, dark, nasty explosion night.'”

“That night when all of those dramatic things kept happening. Like the diner. And every embarrassing thing after that.”

“Ah.” Louis said. “Which should probably be next on our itinerary of things we need to talk about before we foray into any sort of courtship.” Louis flared his fingers to punctuate his sentence, once again pausing to watch Harry giggle. “Haz, I need you to know that you can be totally honest with me. It's okay if there's still something there.”

“Something where?”

“If you still feel something for Grimshaw.”

“Louis, no-”

“It's honestly okay. He was your first love, and sometimes those feelings don't just go away. It's not something you can control.”

“There's not – no – there isn't any – no, Louis.” Harry stammered. “I don't have any, like, lingering feelings for Nick. I haven't for a really long time. What made you think that?”
“The part where he said something to you, then you got so cross faded that I had to hunt you down at that diner.” Louis said bluntly.

“No, that wasn't – it wasn't like that. It wasn't because of feelings I had for him, it was because of how I felt about you.”

“Me?”

“I don't mean it was your fault, or anything.” Harry hurried to explain. “Niall had just mentioned something about you not being there, and Nick started joking about the Larry Stylinson thing. I guess something in the way I reacted gave me away, and it only took Nick about twenty seconds to figure the situation out.”

“What do you mean?”

“That I was hopelessly gone for you, but you had a boyfriend.” Harry said. “He just kept rubbing it in because he's Nick, and he's always liked to tease me. It finally just really got to me, and I couldn't take it anymore.”

“Harry,” Louis hissed through clenched teeth. “if I had been there, I would have strangled him with his own quiff.”

“That's rather violent.”

“I would have been there if it wasn't for fucking Joshua.”

“You guys fought that night, right?”

Louis nodded as he spotted the parking lot. He pulled into a parking space, his headlights illuminating the trail that snaked up the dark hill.

“And it was a bad fight.” Harry continued, watching Louis as he turned the engine off, but made no move to leave the car.

“He smashed half of the glassware in our house and screamed at me in front of a group of his friends.” Louis said quietly. Harry visibly cringed in his seat, letting go of Louis' hand and turning to face him directly.

“Louis, I have something I have to say to you. And it's important.” He said seriously as Louis locked eyes with him. “I will never, ever raise a hand to you, or be forceful with you, or use any kind of violence to scare you like Joshua did. I will never use guilt to control you, or put you down to get power over you, and I will always respect you as my equal, my partner, and it's extremely important to me that you understand that.”

Harry's eyes bore into Louis' with earnest intensity, and Louis had to clench his jaw to retain any semblance of control over his facial muscles. All he could think to do was to crawl across the car and sink into this man beside him until they didn't exist as separate entities anymore, but Harry wasn't done with his promises yet.

“And that's why I really, really wanted to be here tonight.” Harry continued. “I know what New Years Eve represents to you, and I just want to be able to rewrite all of that hurt together. I don't want this holiday to forever be a marker of the time that Joshua betrayed you. I want us to be able to look back on it as the first time we got to kiss at midnight, and the first time we smiled about it because we aren't sad; we're excited about what's next for us. And for the first time, I can hold your hand, and play with your hair, and tell you what you really mean to me, because you're everything,
Louis. You're everything.” His breath caught and he looked away, caught off guard by the words that had come out of his own mouth. “If that's okay with you.” He muttered as an afterthought.

Louis didn't give Harry the chance to revert to his frightened grimace as he leaned forward and cupped his face, coaxing him to look Louis in the eyes.

“Yes, Harry. All of that. I want all of that with you.” He said, his thumb tracing gently over Harry's cheekbone. “Tonight isn't a year since everything that happened with Joshua; it's my first day with you. It's our day one.”

Harry's eyes grew tender and glassy as he wrapped his hand around Louis' wrist, pulling it away from his cheek so he could softly kiss it.

“And I have something important to say to you, too.” Louis stated as Harry began kneading his hand idly. “I promise you, Harry James Edward Potter Styles,” he paused as Harry snorted. “that I am never going to abandon you. I'm always going to be here to support you, and you never have to be afraid to tell me anything. I'm going to fight to prove to you that you can trust me with anything, because you're everything, too.”

Their eyes were shimmering as they watched each other, each choking on short little laughs as they just experienced the moment together.

And as it was apt to do, Louis' phone of course interrupted them. He grumbled as he pulled it from his pocket and saw a text waiting for him.

“S'Zayn.” He said as he opened the text.

almost new years over there right? what're u up to?

Louis had nearly forgotten that anyone else existed, and suddenly remembered that he'd sent Zayn and Liam exactly zero updates about the Harry situation in the last week. He hadn't even told them about his plan to go to the show in London.

“C'mere, Haz.” Louis ordered, sneaking an arm around Harry's shoulder with a mischievous grin. They leaned into each other as Louis took a picture of the two of them, their foreheads touching as they looked at the camera with cheesy smiles.

He sent the picture off, and it had scarcely been a few seconds before Zayn responded:

!!!!!!!!!!!

Louis snickered as a text from Liam immediately followed it:

What!?! How!?! WHAT IS EVEN GOING ON IN MANCHESTER!?!??!
“You haven't told them anything yet?” Harry asked, laughing as he read their responses.

“Not since my loud, sobbing phone call last week when I realized that I'm completely bananas for you.” Louis said offhandedly, silencing his phone as Liam continued to send him an onslaught of texts. He looked up only as he realized how quiet Harry had become. “What?”

“I banana you, too.” He responded dreamily. Louis snorted as he opened his car door, trying to deny how smitten he was.

“Come on, banana boy.” He said affectionately as they slammed their doors shut. The icy air bit at his cheeks as they wandered onto the darkened path together, their hands immediately finding each other. Their shoulders bumped against each other as they walked, and Louis tried to memorize their height difference with every brush of fabric. Their joined hands seemed like they should be such a trivial detail after the weight of the conversation they’d just had, but everything was still so golden and new to Louis. No matter how small a gesture it was to just hold Harry’s hand, it just further proved the remarkable shift that had occurred between them so suddenly.

They were a couple. They held hands.

Only a few days earlier, Louis' insides had been boiling under the belief that he'd never have Harry in his life ever again; that Louis had ruined everything beyond any hope of repair. Yet here they were, hand in hand and smiling like lovesick children. And now, as the pathway crunched underfoot, Louis could fully see how absurd his worries had been. Of course Harry was going to take him back. Harry was the one person who had never let him down.

The hill wasn't especially tall, but it did look over a small amount of the glittering city. A smattering of cast and crew were already there, bundled in scarves and sipping at steaming travel mugs that were probably more alcohol than coffee.

Harry pulled his hand away suddenly as they approached, and Louis looked to him in concern.

“What's up?” Louis asked.

“Is it a problem if they know about us?” Harry asked.

“They work in entertainment. They'd never get another job if they had a penchant for selling celebrity secrets.” Louis explained, taking Harry's hand in his again. They stopped short as Louis recognized a squeal from the other side of the hilltop.

Nona was upon them immediately, engulfing them in an ecstatic frenzy as she announced to the rest of the group that, “Oh my god! Harry Styles is finally here!” She gave him an overzealous hug before playing with tufts of his hair and straightening his jacket. “Sorry honey. Didn't get the chance to admire the artwork last time I saw you.” She explained as she squeezed one of his biceps with an impressed nod. “So tell me everything. What's the deal? What's going on with you two?”

“Well, this is Harry.” Louis answered, earning an unamused glare from Nona. Before she could demand further details of their relationship, Harry stepped forward and struck up a conversation with her.

“So I keep thinking about how visceral and realistic the gore in your version of Titus Andronicus was, and I was wondering why your director chose to go that route instead of something more stylized.” He said, piquing Nona's interest.

“We didn't want to glorify the violence as something artistic, like other productions do.” Nona explained. “Our director really wanted the gore to be hard to look at so everyone would fully
understand the gravity of what had happened to Lavinia.”

“So it was more of a social statement than an aesthetic choice.” Harry clarified.

“Yes. Exactly.”

Louis leaned into Harry's side as they kept talking about the intricacies of Shakespearean tragedy, wrapping his arms heavily around his middle and sinking into him when Harry pulled him in closer. The phrases “poetic verisimilitude” and “esoteric license” were being passed back and forth as if they were totally normal things for people to say, but Louis let them waft past him. He was too spellbound by the way Harry's voice vibrated from where his chest brushed against Louis' cheek, or the way that Harry was rubbing a circle into Louis' hip where he was holding him.

There was a brief lull in the conversation as Nona took a long swig from her mug, and Louis took the opportunity to bounce onto his tip toes and smack a short kiss to Harry's cheek.

“What was that for?” Harry asked with delighted surprise.

“Just wanted to.” Louis shrugged, smiling when this earned him a returned peck on the lips.

“Okay, you are both too much. It's too cute. I can't do it.” Nona whined dramatically. She spun to face the rest of the group spread out over the hilltop, who Louis now noticed were lurking nearby, stealing glances of the rockstar in their midst. “Oh my god, guys. Stop being awkward. Come say hi to Harry.”

They came in a wave, everyone fawning over Harry as they introduced themselves and avowed something along the lines of, “No, I'm your biggest fan.” Harry of course insisted on hearing every single person's life story. Louis would have been jealous about having to split his limited time with Harry with so many other people, had it not been for the constant presence of Harry's hand on his back, seemingly experimenting with how many different ways he could hold onto him. Plus, watching all of his coworkers melt into puddles of goo at Harry's feet was more than a little amusing.

As Louis had predicted, none of the crew commented on the rather glaring elephant in the room: an internationally known rockstar in a rather infamous heterosexual relationship was now on a hilltop in Manchester, holding hands and making heart eyes with one of their lead actors.

Louis realized with a self indulgent smirk that he and Harry were a bit of a juicy scandal.

And as Harry planted a lingering kiss to Louis' hair for no reason in particular, Louis knew that no one would say a thing. No one would betray the larger-than-life public image of Harry as an out of control, unpredictable enigma with a super model girlfriend. They wouldn't say anything, even as they learned that Harry was, in actuality, this sweet, sincere man with an artistic mind and the cheer of a young child who did things like forcibly tie his own scarf around Louis' neck, whining, “But Lou! You're so tiny and I don't want you to get a cold and die!”

“I will destroy you, Harold.” Louis snapped at the mention of being tiny.

“Don't destroy me.” Harry pouted as he finished tying the scarf, his hands falling to Louis' shoulders.

“Only if you say please.”

“Pleeeeeeesease.”
“Alright. You can stick around.” Louis allowed, his hands bunching in the front of Harry's jacket. They were only reminded that they had an audience as one of Louis' female costars was betrayed by an enamored sigh.

“So are you two...?” She asked coyly.

“Human? Yes. Indeed we are.” Louis answered, trying to glaze over that loaded question.

“Okay, Louis' never going to give me a straight answer about this.” Harry interjected. “How is he doing in the movie so far?”

Louis groaned and rolled his head back as everyone in the vicinity started to sing his praises.

“You should have seen that part with him and Nona last week.” One on the crew members gushed. “Completely heartbreaking.”

“I don't even have heart strings anymore.” His costar added.

“Okay, that's very interesting and everything.” Louis interrupted, looking down at the time on his phone and trying to ignore the way that Harry was beaming at him. “But we've got about forty seconds until midnight.”

There were squawks of elated surprise as everyone realized he was right, scattering over the hilltop as everyone clung to their designated midnight kisses. Louis lead Harry gingerly away, wrapping his arms around him as soon as they were removed from the rest of the group.

“Everyone said that you've been brilliant.” Harry said proudly, dipping his face in close to Louis'.

“Well, everyone's drunk.” Louis countered, his gaze softening as he watched the way Harry's pupils waxed and waned. Everyone was counting in unison as Harry started to slowly sway. “Thank you for being here.” Louis whispered.

“Of course, Louis.” Harry breathed, his voice low and intimate, the countdown droning on behind them.

18! 17! 16!

“This year's going to be about us, okay?” Louis assured him. “No Nick. No Joshua. Just us.”

“Just us.” Harry agreed.

13! 12! 11!

“No more drama because we finally did it. We're finally together and nothing's going to get in between us.” Louis continued, but Harry's face became stony. “What's wrong?

9! 8! 7!
“It’s not going to be easy, Lou.” He said lightly, his voice barely intelligible. Louis' hand came up to Harry's face.

“It’s been previously established that I banana you.” Louis said resolutely. “That’s not something you just walk away from:

3! 2! 1!

A massive smiled was still plastered to Harry's face as he leaned in to kiss Louis, exclamations of “Happy New Year!” echoing around them.

A spray of fireworks roared to life behind them, the light twinkling behind Louis' closed eyes as he pressed further into Harry. His arms circled around his neck and his lips parted as he submitted fully to the moment, lost in the bliss of starting the New Year wrapped up in every part of Harry.

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They'd nearly skipped down the glistening streets hand in hand, searching for somewhere to get something to eat. Harry only had a little over and hour left before he needed to be back at the airport by the time they found an open restaurant. It had those delightful kinds of laminated menus with pictures of the food and tiny, fake candles in the middle of the booth tables.

“Please eat something with vegetables.” Harry begged as they perused the menus.

“Vegetables are for nerds.” Louis maintained, even though he knew that his only option was going to be a light salad until the movie was done filming. “Do you think they'd just bring me an entire cow if I asked nicely?”

“Probably not.”

“What if I showed them my arse?”

“That might be worth a try.” Harry admitted with a grin.

Louis ultimately decided to keep his private areas to himself when the waitress finally took their orders, ignoring Harry's triumphant look when he ordered a Caesar salad with light dressing.

“So,” Louis said, preparing himself to steer the conversation back in a serious direction. “Would you like to elaborate on the 'it's not going to be easy' comment from earlier?”

Harry pursed his lips without looking up at Louis, picking nervously at his fingernails. Louis hooked his leg around Harry's under the table, which had an instant calming effect on him.

“You know how I have a contract about my sexuality, right?” Harry asked, causing Louis' stomach to sink. “So, legally, I can't present a public image where I'm dating anyone else besides Arrienne.”
“But they can't stop us from dating.” Louis said defensively.

“No, they can't stop us. But they're going to try.” Harry said. “When I was with Nick, they would always schedule me like crazy so that I could barely ever see him, then they would always make him jump through all these hoops to just get a security clearance to visit me. And there would suddenly be all this bad press about him from 'private sources' and I knew it was because of them. Or they'd call and say that Nick and I couldn't go to whatever restaurant or club we were heading to because it was swarmed with photographers and I just knew that they were the ones who tipped them off. They did everything they could to make it as difficult as possible for us.”

“That's all stuff we can work around.” Louis assured him.

“But it's even worse for us, because there wasn't even anything linking me to Nick.” Harry continued. “Now there's all this speculation about you and me, and we can't even be seen out together without people accusing us of dating.”

“I hear everything you're saying, Harry, but it honestly doesn't matter. Your management isn't going to scare me off.”

“They're going to do everything they can to get between us.”

“Then let them. They can try to do anything they want, but I'm never going to let go of you.” Louis said, further proving his point by grabbing Harry's hand on top of the table.

“I just want you to understand that this is going to be hard.” Harry said gravely, watching their joined fingers as he once again ran his thumb over the back of Louis' hand.

“You're worth it to me.” Louis stated, the honesty in his voice causing Harry's eyes to flick up and meet his.

They separated as the waitress suddenly materialized at their booth, dropping their food in front of them and hurrying away.

“We do have one thing going for us, though.” Harry pointed out as he dug into his risotto.

“What's that?”

“My management has no idea we're together.”

“Hmm.” Louis hummed with a cocky smile. “Which means we're in a secret, little, romantic bubble right now?”

“For as long as we can be discreet, yeah. But I guess that kind of depends on what we do next.”

“I figure it's my turn to come visit you after this.” Louis said. “I could fly into whatever city you're in next time we both have time off. I'm hoping it's Barcelona.”

“So we'll have a secret affair across the continent of Europe?” Harry clarified.

“A tryst, if you will. It sounds very us, in my opinion. Secret tryst.”

“You can tell Liam and Zayn, though. I already told Niall.”

“Are you actually joking?” Louis gaped. “After they took practically twenty years to tell me that they were dating? No. They can stew in ignorance for a while.”
Harry smiled around his fork, rubbing his foot along Louis' ankle. The thought suddenly reminded Louis of the texts from Liam he had ignored from earlier. He dug through his phone, reading some of the best snippets aloud to Harry:

(10:39 pm) is that picture photoshopped? Are you lying about this? Is this something you would lie about?

(11:02pm) LOUIS!

(11:09pm) This is not funny. I don't know why you think this is funny because no one else thinks it is.

(11:43pm) LOUIS ANSWER ME COME ON SERIOUSLY!!!

(12:01am) Happy new year motherfucker please tell me what's going on

(12:07am) I'm going to call your mom

(12:20am) LOUISSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS
He could already feel how this was going to be difficult, but he knew that he could do it. They could get through this together.

At least, he was pretty sure that they could.
PART TWO

“If you took my pulse right now, it would feel just like a sledgehammer.”

-Fifth Harmony

Stockholm, Sweden: January 8

The overwhelming nerves had been lying dormant, waiting for this exact moment before launching their full scale assault against Louis’ brain. Throughout the trip to the airport, the plane ride, and even the private car to Harry’s hotel he had managed to maintain an unwavering sense of excitement, knowing that the boy with curly hair and dimples was waiting for him in this city.

But something seemed to switch the moment he stepped into the lobby of the hotel. His stomach plummeted and his anxiety tingled as he was received by Harry’s security and labeled “Mr. Styles’ special guest.” That’s the exact moment that everything went from a fun visit with his boy to a scheduled rendezvous with an international superstar. Every part of his body was prickling uncomfortably as he whizzed upwards in the elevator, the full gravity of his role as “Mr. Styles’ Special Guest” settling in heavier and heavier.

Yeah, this was probably where he and Harry were going to have sex together for the first time, and everyone around him knew it.

In theory, this shouldn’t be at all concerning to Louis. In fact, he should probably be commended for that fact that he wasn’t hard in his pants just from the thought. The facts were quite simple: Louis hadn’t shagged anyone in months, Harry hadn’t shagged anyone in months, Harry was fit as fuck, and Louis had just flown to Stockholm to spend the night with him. They were both consenting adults, and even thought Louis hadn’t admitted it to anyone yet, there was a definite possibility that he was already halfway in love with a man he’d never slept with. In summary, he very much wanted every part of Harry he could get his hands on.

But that’s how he felt about Harry, not Mr. Styles.

An image of Harry from that Status Solo poster Louis had coveted years earlier was looming over his thoughts, those smudged eyes glowering at him through layers of molten sex appeal and black leather. No matter how desperately he tried to calm his thoughts, they all came at him in a whirlwind; a barrage of images of Harry simmering in his otherworldly levels of attractiveness as the world bowed at his feet. Cold sweat beaded on his skin at the memories of Harry grinding and thrusting his way through the London concert, the entire stadium mesmerized by his gyrations. His palms itched as the revelations continued to crash in, Louis thinking of how many magazine covers had featured Harry’s sultry features or his chiseled body; about how many images of Harry lined the walls of lustful teenagers all of the world, craving him as the sex-imbued Adonis they thought him to be.

And somehow, Louis, who had spent the last few years growing lazy and unadventurous in a passionless relationship, had become his booty call. His feet carried him out of the elevator, following after a member of Harry’s security toward a toweringly ominous hotel room door. In a
matter seconds, that door was going to swing open to reveal Mr. Styles, and what exactly was he going to expect of Louis?

He suddenly wished that he’d had the good sense to wear something besides a pair of baggy joggers.

His stomach clenched as the door swung open, the last whisper of breath stolen from his body as the familiar visage came into focus.

Harry’s eyes were glassy and drooping under the weight of two dark bags. His v-neck was hanging from his frame and the edges of his nose were agitated and bright red as he sniffled through a smile.

He opened his mouth to say something to Louis, but was stopped by a sudden, overpowering sneeze. He opted to just step to the side and let Louis in as he gave his thanks to the security guard, his voice strangled by a pinch in his nose. Louis stood back, watching affectionately as Harry continued with his overzealous thank you, pausing for a moment as he was overtaken by another sneeze.

Every trace of apprehension from the elevator now seemed embarrassingly baseless. Harry turned to Louis with an enchanted smile, every part of him soft and warm as he opened his arms.

Louis stepped into them, laughing at how ridiculous he’d been and sinking his face into Harry’s neck. His fingers traced down the ridges of Harry’s back lightly, the moment hanging in suspended sentiment as they held each other.

In a flash of movement, Harry tore himself away and started gathering his things around the hotel room.

“We have so much stuff to do.” Harry said, his voice still pathetically nasally as he sniffled again. “We have a boat ride, and then lunch, then I need to take you shopping because you have to-“ He was cut short by another debilitating series of sneezes, doubling over as they wracked his body. Louis’ grin was still soft as he stepped forward, pulling the miserable, sneezing boy into his arms.

“Love, did you forget to take your allergy medication again?” Louis asked, brushing some wayward tufts of frayed hair out of his face.

“M’fine.” Harry muttered petulantly, his nose now a bright, cherry red. “I planned so much stuff for us to do, and we barely have any time so we have to head out super soon.” He explained. Louis traced his hand slowly over Harry’s face, trying to calm the torrent of words spilling from his mouth, but Harry was too distracted by his fervent need to entertain Louis. “I just want to do all this special stuff with you while you’re here because we never get to be together and this needs to be special and romantic and-“

With no other means to quiet him, Louis stopped his mouth with a kiss, immediately stoppering his diatribe. Harry mumbled against his lips before pressing further into it, kissing Louis’ smile and feeling the last week of separation melting away.

He tore away once again, but this time at the mercy of yet another string of sneezes.

“Harry.” Louis scolded. “Allergy meds?”

“I got back on them a couple of days ago.” Harry explained, his eyes red and glistening as he went in search of a tissue box. “Should be fine by the concert this weekend. And I’m fine now. Really.”
But the look on his face as he turned back to Louis said anything but “fine.” He laughed as he approached him again.


“Louis!”

“You’re sick, Harry. You need rest, and soup, and someone to play with your hair while you watch movies. I’m going to make sure all three of those things happen.” He grabbed Harry gently by the shoulders, trying to coax him toward the bed.

“But, Louis, no.” Harry whined. “You came all this way to see Stockholm and—"

“I didn’t come to see Stockholm, I came to see you.” Louis corrected him, his hand sliding down Harry’s arm and finding his hand. “And you’re a sickly little thing, so please don’t try to interrupt me while I take care of my boy.”

“I just…” Harry trailed off, rubbing his eye sleepily. “I wanted this to be special for us.”

“It is special, baby,” Louis said softly. “I’m here with you. That makes everything special to me.”

And it was the pet name that seemed to do it, mollifying Harry’s stubbornness as he leaned forward into Louis and nodded. Louis pressed another kiss to his lips before heading toward the phone.

“You get in your pyjamas, I’ll call room service to bring up some soup.” Louis said, watching Harry loaf over to his suitcase.

“Can I have ice cream instead of soup?”

“Course you can, baby.” Louis said with a wink, picking up the phone. He realized that he couldn’t yet explain the way it made him feel to watch Harry smile after he called him baby, but he knew he liked it.

The boat ride, lunch date, and shopping trip were all forced to go on without them as they spent the day curled together on the couch, marathoning everything on the pay-per-view. Harry flitted in and out of consciousness from where he was nestled into Louis’ chest, occasionally waking up to look at Louis with big, soft eyes and kiss him on the cheek. Louis held up his end of the bargain, endlessly running his fingers through Harry’s hair and holding him tight as he slept.

It wasn’t exactly what Louis had anticipated for the first leg of their European love story, but he felt perfectly at bliss as he helped his sleepy boy into bed later that night. For the first time since they’d met, he could curl up around Harry and hold him to his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his breathes like waves breaking against the sea. He could feel Harry’s warmth on every inch of his skin, and it was somehow seeping down into the rest of his body like a throbbing, blossoming warmth. He was helpless but to press his smiling lips against the back of Harry’s neck.

“Lou?” Harry whispered, pulling Louis’ arms tighter around himself.

“Yeah, love?”

“Thank you. And sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’m just sorry you feel so miserable.”
“I don’t feel miserable.” Harry murmured. “I feel happy.”

And with his heart tingling in a way that shouldn’t be physically possible, Louis had to admit that he was happy, too.

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Louis awoke as the full brunt of Harry’s weight rolled onto his chest. He gasped in momentary shock as Harry buried his head into the pillow beside Louis and grumbled into it.

“Oh my god, Louis, please wake up. I’m so bored.”

Louis laughed as he wrapped his arms around Harry’s bare shoulders, inviting the larger man to burrow deeper into the crook of his neck as he exhaled belligerently against his skin.

“Good morning, darling.” Louis chirped. “You feeling better?”

He nodded, his chin perched against Louis’ shoulder as he watched him. “I ruined everything.”

“I will honestly fall dead if you ever mention yourself ruining anything every again.” Louis promised, running his thumb over Harry’s cheek. “I would totally be fine just sitting somewhere and watching you sleep, if that’s the only way I got to spend time with you.”

“But that’s literally what happened.”

“Yes, but you’re very cute when you sleep, so the novelty hasn’t worn off yet.” Louis pointed out, staring at him as his mind wandered.

“What?” Harry asked, noticing the way Louis’ smile had fallen away. Louis chewed his lip as he decided how honest he should be.

“I just - I got so nervous right before I got here, and it seems so stupid now.” Louis admitted. “You were nervous?”

“Well, like … Yeah.”

“What?” Harry asked, repositioning himself so that their faces were even closer and his green eyes were even more difficult to withstand.

“About us - I guess - being together. For the first time.” Louis muttered. “It’s just kind of weird. Backwards, you know? Like, all of the feelings and everything were already there before we’d even kissed. Just wasn’t sure what to expect.”

Harry nodded slowly, rolling off of Louis and leaning on his side. “Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about that, actually.”

“Yeah?” Louis rolled as well, so they were both facing each other on their sides.

“It’s like, well - before when I was … when I was with - before when I, like -” Harry’s stammering
was cut short as Louis’ hand curled around his bicep under the blanket.

“I know you’re trying to talk about Nick without talking about Nick.” Louis said. “And this is all going to be a lot more difficult if we’re afraid to talk about people from our pasts. So could we just agree to not care? Like, we should never be afraid to mention Nick or Joshua to each other.”

“Oh, okay.” Harry agreed, avoiding his gaze.

“Don’t be afraid to tell me anything.” Louis added in a low whisper, his fingers tracing lightly up and down Harry’s arm. Harry’s eyes finally looked up to meet Louis’.

“Nick was the first person I had actual sex with.” Harry said bluntly, as if he were trying to get the words out before they betrayed him. Louis tried to swallow back the gut-wrench that burst to the surface at these words, knowing that he had promised to be supportive only twenty seconds earlier.

“Yeah?” He squeaked out, his own voice betraying him.

“Yeah, which is stupid because I trusted him enough for that, then he obviously took off and everything.” Harry explained. “But, like, he’s the only person that I’ve been with that I really cared about. You know, like, made love to.” Harry’s cheeks blushed at these words, which endeared Louis really more than it should have. There were literally droves of people on this Earth who fantasized about having sex with this boy, yet he was embarrassed to say the words make love. Louis scooted slightly closer, prompting him to continue. “Then he left me, which really, really hurt. So everything after that has just been random hookups for me. If I even had the slightest hint of actual feelings for someone, I just totally ended it. I guess I’m just - I’m just too afraid to let something bad happen again. And then you happened.” Harry looked up at Louis with a playful scowl.

“I am so very sorry.” Louis joked, coming even closer until their foreheads brushed together.

“But, yeah, I’m just kind of nervous.” Harry admitted, making unrelenting eye contact. “Would it be okay if we, just like, took things slow? Maybe?”

Louis was afraid that he might strain a muscle by the way that his face was constricting, completely beguiled by the boy only inches away from him; by the veritable sex god who was sweet with morning sleepiness and asking if they could take things slowly.

He leaned forward to press a deep, lingering kiss to Harry’s forehead, holding the back of his head tightly with his hand. They separated, Harry still watching Louis with trepidation.

“Of course we can, Harry.” He said. “Anything that makes this comfortable for you.”

Harry’s face was split by an uncontrollable grin before he surged forward to kiss Louis on the lips, his smile unyielding. Louis leaned into it as Harry pecked him with his closed mouth.

“I’m a tiny bit conflicted, though.” Harry muttered against his lips. “Because you’re really fit, and you’re in my bed.”

“And I’m a bit of a slag.” Louis added, pecking him once more on the lips.

“When do you have to leave?” Harry asked. Louis groaned as he pulled away and rolled over, checking his phone.

“About three hours.”
Harry groaned as Louis rolled back towards him, pulling him into his arms while Louis flicked through the notifications on his phone.

“Could you just quit your job, maybe?” Harry implored.

“Yeah sure. You just go ahead and call my boss and tell him that I’m too busy rolling around between the sheets with you to finish the movie.”

“Okay.” Harry said brightly, plucking the phone from Louis’ hand.

“Harry!”

“What’s his name again? Daniel?” Harry asked as he scrolled through Louis’ contacts, holding it just out of reach of his gesticulating limbs.

“Harry, don’t get me fired!”

“I’m not getting you fired. You’re quitting, remember?” Harry pointed out cheekily, smiling at Louis. His eyes snapped back up to the phone as it suddenly started to ring with an incoming call, and he held it down to Louis to see the name on the screen.

Joshua.

“That is insane timing.” Louis pointed out, the typical swell of anxiety at any mention of Joshua somehow absent as his hand brushed over Harry’s chest.

“How often does he call?”

“Almost every day.” Louis admitted. “I pretty much never answer.”

Harry’s brow furrowed at this new information. With a look of determination, he answered the phone, eliciting a terrified squawk from Louis.

“Hello?” Harry answered animatedly. “No. This isn’t Louis … It’s Harry … Yup. Harry … Louis is a little preoccupied right now; he’s engaged himself in a rousing match of polo.” Louis plastered himself across Harry’s chest, muffling his laughs against his skin. Harry traced his fingers through Louis’ hair as he continued.”No. I’m not joking. I would never joke about an equestrian sport … Alright, I’ll let him know. Ta.”

“Oh my god.” Louis groaned as Harry hung up, smiling at him with obvious pride. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

“I think he was drunk.” Harry remarked.

“No way.” Louis said, looking up suddenly.

“Isn’t it, like, one in the morning over there?”

“He doesn’t drink.”

“He sounded wasted.”

“He hates alcohol. He doesn’t drink.” Louis repeated.

“His words were slurring all over the place. You should have heard him.”
“I don’t want to hear him.” Louis said pointedly, resting his head once again on Harry’s chest with a huff. Harry’s fingers continued their ministrations through his hair, his other arm curling slightly tighter around Louis as they breathed in silence for a moment.

“He really calls you that much?” Harry asked as the seconds wore on.

“Yeah.” Louis responded, causing Harry’s movements to stop altogether. “What?”

“I just don’t like that. I don’t like him.”

“Jealous?” Louis asked playfully, but he was met by solemnity from Harry.

“It’s not that - well it is a little bit that. But mostly I just don’t trust him. He’s dangerous.”

Louis was about to protest, saying that there was no way Joshua was dangerous, but he remembered the turn of events last time he made that same promise. He decided to let Harry have his moment of melodrama before he changed the subject.

“Well Joshua is on the other side of the world where he can’t get us, and I plan on keeping it that way for awhile.”

“Let me fly you out again.” Harry urged, the somberness of the previous conversation leaving his eyes.

“Gladly. But seriously, let me pay for it this time, okay? I’m not a high scale prostitute.”

“Louis-”

“How about we take turns? Because I plan on making this quite the European love tryst.” Louis explained. “And you should come visit me on set sometime.”

“I’d love that.” Harry said softly, causing Louis to lift his head and look up at him. He was immediately met by the press of Harry’s lips, smiling as he pulled the smaller man on top of him.

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*Copenhagen, Denmark: January 13*

Mounds of snow were whizzing past the windows in the otherwise nondescript winter landscape. He was currently rubbing both of Harry’s hands between his own, as the big idiot was absolutely refusing to admit that he was freezing cold as they chatted with Harry’s elusive bodyguard, Paul.

“Harry doesn’t want anyone following him around in LA, the obnoxious git.” Paul joked from the passenger seat.

“I don’t want you to have to waste your time taking care of me when nothing ever happens in LA.” Harry corrected him. “He already moved his whole family to be near me.”

“Really?” Louis asked, puffing a hot breath onto Harry’s hands.

“Yup. M’always just a couple of minutes away in case there’s a problem.” Paul continued. “And he lets me actually do my job when he’s on tour, ever since the toothbrush incident.”
“Somebody did something to your toothbrush?” Louis asked.

“It was more that she wanted to do something to me with her toothbrush.” Harry muttered, grimacing at his own recollection, which only made Louis laugh.

“I have seen you before, though.” Paul said to Louis. “I’ve tagged along just out of sight on a couple of your dates.”

“Those weren’t dates.” Louis pointed out. “We’ve actually never been on a date before.”

“Eh? Why not?”

“Because I was very, very stupid until rather recently.” Louis said, twining his fingers possessively with Harry’s.

“So is this your first date then?”

“I guess so.” Louis admitted, though he was still unsure of where exactly they were headed. Currently, he felt as if he were being smuggled into some snow ravaged kingdom from the mind of George R. R. Martin.

Despite traveling into what must have been some of the most remote forested regions of Denmark, they eventually turned onto a road with orange lights glistening against the sweeping landscape of snow. The road was littered with man made igloos, each with a sparkling glass roof. Louis was pretty sure he’d seen this exact location on a buzzfeed list of place to visit before you die at some point, but he couldn’t remember why the roofs were made of glass.

All the same, the view of the celestial heavens above them was unparalleled; unsullied by the lights of any cities or nearby towns. The igloo itself was very posh on the inside, featuring a sprawling bed to lie on under the stars and table topped with a steaming dinner.

They ate quickly and Harry demonstrated one of Louis’ favorite quirks about him: his penchant for learning ridiculous amounts of knowledge about really niche subjects and then fervidly explaining every detail about them. Tonight, he was telling Louis all about a film he’d recently seen about the groundbreaking Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and his alleged gay affair with his guide while filming in Mexico.

This topic continued through dinner until the two were lounging across the bed, Harry’s eyes lighting up every time Louis would ask him another thoughtful question, letting Harry mentally leap down another avenue of thought. Louis wasn’t sure how aware Harry was of that fact that his musings about Russian history were very similar to his own personal narrative. He kept telling the story, the similarities becoming more and more striking to Harry’s own existence in a locked closet.

They were both lying on their sides, facing each other and lacing their fingers together as Harry spoke excitedly. Louis knew he should feel a tad embarrassed by whatever face he was surely making right now, but he was too intoxicated by the passion of this boy lying in bed with him.

“Oh, I’ve been talking too much.” Harry admitted.

“I love listening to you talk.” Louis countered.

“You can’t just let me prattle on all the time.”

“Fine. I won’t.” Louis decided, leaning forward and sealing their lips together.
They moved against each other languidly, Harry wrapping his arms gingerly around Louis until he suddenly rolled and pulled the smaller man on top of him. They molded together as Louis deepened the contact, kissing Harry slow and deep.

There was heat rising in his every limb as Louis dug his knees into the bed, straddling Harry for more leverage. He licked into Harry’s mouth easily, his chest beneath Louis rising with a deep breath. Their tongues entwined, moving against each other with a silky warmth that was doing nothing to bring Louis’ internal body temperature down to a reasonable level.

He tore away to press his mouth against Harry’s neck, nipping gently at his Adam’s apple. He continued up his neck, feeling Harry’s hands clutching into his jumper, until he left a wet kiss just behind Harry’s ear.

“Nnnf.” Harry moaned quietly, the sound almost completely muffled by his closed lips. Louis looked up suddenly, realizing that he’d never heard Harry make a noise like that before.

And wasn’t that interesting?

Louis swooped back in, running his tongue along the seam behind Harry’s ear and breathing hotly on the damp skin. He sucked and nipped until Harry was outright groaning, eventually wrenching Louis back to sear their lips together yet again. There was a hot desperation to their kiss, both of their bodies rutting into each other without any semblance of control.

With a choked moan of protest, Harry ripped himself away suddenly, separating their mouths and looking toward the other side of the room. Louis gaped in surprise, realization hitting him like a slap in the face.

They’d promised to take things slow. Rubbing against each other like animals in heat was not taking it slow.

“God, I’m sorry.” Louis muttered, his face falling onto Harry’s chest as they both panted.

“No. It’s fine. S’fine.” Harry responded, his hands finding Louis’ hair and tracing through it weakly as his breath evened.

Louis splayed his fingers across the side of Harry’s chest, stroking gently in what he hoped was a comforting way until Harry’s grip around him tightened.

“Lou! Look! Finally!” Harry yelped, pointing up toward the ceiling. Louis rolled off to follow the direction of his finger, and he finally remembered why he’d seen this place in an article before.

Waves of lilac and emerald lights were dancing across the star strewn sky, twinkling and rolling like an incandescent mist. The greens and purples spilled together, glowing on the edges as it swilled overhead.

Louis was speechless, turning to watch the northern lights’ glinting reflection in Harry’s eyes. Their hands found each other, and they lay their side by side, silently watching the luminous sky.

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Prague, The Czech Republic: January 18
The restaurant wore a heavy darkness that partially shrouded everyone’s faces as they sat on the edges of the polished dance floor. The staccato tappings of shoes against it’s surface ticked in the background as several couples twirled to the velvety piano music.

Harry had used one word over and over as he’d described this place: discretion. The establishment had prided itself for years for it’s ability to maintain the privacy of it’s important patrons, letting them dine in peace. They didn’t have to worry about lacing their fingers together over the table as the waiter brought them wine, and they didn’t have to worry about who might overhear their overflowing of affection as they talked.

The atmosphere was thick and scarlet like the wine they were drinking, and Louis couldn’t help but watch the elderly couple that was dancing slowly in the middle of the dance floor. They separated and clapped as the pianist took his exit, Frank Sinatra spilling over the speakers in his stead.

Louis’ attention was pulled back to the table as Harry hooked their ankles together. He looked at him with a goofy grin, holding a single noodle from his plate on his fork.

“Think we could lady and the tramp this?” He asked with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

“Do I think we can lady and tramp a single piece of penne pasta?” Louis clarified with a chuckle, looking at the roughly inch long noodle before leaning in over the table. “Yeah, I think we got this.”

Harry brought the noodle to his mouth, letting it protrude from his lips just enough so that Louis could get a grip on it as he leaned over the table. In a single move, Louis sucked the noodle away from Harry and kissed him.

“Hey.” Harry complained, even though he was smiling.

“Hello lads!” Niall said cheerily, pulling a chair up beside them and falling into it as if he had just run a mile. Harry’s head darted around, as if wondering what portal Niall had just fallen from. “How’s the date? Amazing. Sounds fantastic.”

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked, scandalized by his impromptu appearance. At this point, Louis was covering his face in a vain attempt to quell his giggling.

“Just thought I’d pop in. Say hi to Tommo. Hey Tommo.”

“Hi Niall.” Louis laughed, positively enamored by how upset Harry looked.

“You can’t be here.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Niall announced, ignoring Harry and pulling his phone out. “S’going to solve all your problems. I mean all of them.”

“What’s that?” Louis asked, amused. Harry sat back defiantly, a stitch of frustration appearing between his eyebrows as Niall leaned toward Louis. He held his phone out in front of them and pulled Louis in for a close picture.

“We’re going to get the internet to believe that we’re the ones that are dating.” Niall explained. Louis turned to him in surprise, only to be met by Niall’s lips in a loud, smacking kiss. His eyes were wide open in shock as the camera flashed and Niall pulled away to look at the picture.

Louis was about to fall out of his seat from laughing, but he snapped back to attention as Harry hurled a cloth napkin at Niall’s face in retaliation.
“No!” Harry protested, trying to keep his voice down as other patrons were starting to take notice.

“What?”

“You can’t just kiss my - my Louis.” Harry complained, the omitted word boyfriend hanging heavily in the air. He avoided Louis’ gaze as he continued his rant. “You can’t just do that. I have rights!”

“I’m just trying to do you a favor, Haz.” Niall muttered, looking down to his phone. “I promise, this will be trending worldwide within fifteen minutes.”

“You didn’t.”

“Afraid I did. Now everyone will forget about you two, and all the scrutiny will be on me and Louis. Nouis, if you will. Now you two can do whatever you want and no one will think you’re together.”

“Yes, Niall. That’s foolproof. Thank you for that.” Harry dead-panned. Louis was still snickering as he pulled out his phone and checked his Twitter alerts.

Several heads turned as Louis guffawed at the picture. His eye was ridiculously wide open in surprise, but Niall looked passionate and locked into the kiss. Beneath it he’d captioned, “When bae wears that little blue thing that gets your blood boiling. #Nouis4lyfe”

He showed the picture to Harry, which just served to further furrow his brow.

“M’gonna make that the background on my phone.” Niall announced.

“Don’t.” Harry said, reaching toward the phone. Niall deflected him easily and got up from his seat, turning his phone to face them.

“Too late. Have a lovely date, darling.” Niall said, grabbing Harry by the sides of the face and planting a similarly dramatic kiss to his lips.

“Oi!” Louis complained, but Niall was already walking away. He turned and gave them a shrug of his shoulders before completely disappearing.

“At least we’re even now.” Harry pointed out, wiping his mouth.

“What actually just happened?”

Harry didn’t get a chance to answer as the first notes of Ben E. King’s “Stand By Me” wafted through the restaurant. He jumped to his feet, completely forgetting any prior anger towards Niall, and pulled Louis toward the dance floor.

He turned to Louis with a flourish, his hands falling slowly to his sides. Louis laughed for what must have been the thousandth time that evening and slipped his arms around Harry’s neck, pulling him in close. Harry ducked his lips beside Louis’ ear as he sang quietly along to the lyrics.

“No I won’t, be afraid. No I won’t be afraid. Just as long as you stand, stand by me.” He sang, the grain of his voice barely above a whisper.

Louis pulled back to kiss him again, this time a deep, lingering press of warm lips.

“Sorry about Nouis.” He whispered once they separated. Their faces hovered only an inch apart as they swayed to the lilting tempo.
“It’s okay. I should have known it would happen eventually.”

Louis pressed his smile into the fabric of Harry’s dress shirt, pulling himself in even tighter as Harry continued to sing

“So darling, darling stand by me. Oh, stand by me.”


Rome, Italy: January 23

Their driver had disappeared about twenty minutes earlier, and, admittedly, should have been back already. He’d probably gotten a bit sick of Louis and Harry’s love-drunk conversation in the back seat, and was currently chain smoking behind a bush somewhere.

This was fine by Louis, as their car was perched over a seaside cliff, watching the Italian sunset over the shimmering orange sea from the back seat, both holding wine bottles in hand. They were giggling and talking about nothing in particular, roving each other’s mouths here and there and tasting the sheen of red wine.

Harry’s head fell to Louis’ shoulder with a contented sigh as he watched the sunset, taking another drag from the wine bottle.

“Do you ever just think about taking off?” Harry asked, listlessly wine drunk.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, if I just started driving, how long do you think I’d get away with that? With just disappearing?”

“Depends where you went.” Louis said.

“Maybe if I went to Mexico. Just disappeared off the map.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Knowing the whole world was looking for you while you were just wearing sunhats and sipping on margaritas.” Louis cooed, stroking Harry’s arm affectionately.

“Sounds fun.” Harry admitted.

“Don’t just disappear off the map, please.” Louis said, leaning forward to peck him on top of the head. “That’s my formal request.”

“Alright, Bluey.” Harry muttered sleepily, kissing lazily up Louis’ neck before joining their mouths. “You taste like Merlot. That makes me feel like a poet.” Harry sighed, his eyes closing and his forehead falling to rest on Louis’ shoulder. Louis turned so they were facing each other, hooking an arm around Harry’s middle to steady him as his head lolled back suddenly. “Louis, I have a question.”

“I have an answer.”

“Are you my boyfriend?” He asked bluntly, his eyes blinking wide. Louis’ fingers curled more tightly around Harry, his voice getting trapped somewhere in his throat.

“I’d like to be.” He admitted weakly, his eyes boring into Harry’s.
“So am I your boyfriend?”

“That’s what this feels like to me.”

Harry didn’t respond, instead he just gave a dopey smile and burrowed into Louis’ support again.

“I’m drunk.” He moaned, and Louis laughed as he petted Harry’s hair.

“That’s perfectly alright love. I’ll take care of you.”

Harry pulled away again to take out his phone.

“What’re you doing?”

“Telling Niall that you’re my boyfriend and he’s not allowed to kiss you anymore.”

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Manchester, England: January 29

Harry’s birthday was only a few days away, and it couldn’t be occurring at a more inconvenient time. There were less than three weeks of production left on the film, and Louis’ freetime had all but disappeared.

This was the last time that they’d be able to see each other before production ended in mid February, and they’d only managed to make it work by flying Harry into Manchester to spend a day on set. Louis had suggested they celebrate Harry’s birthday during his stay, since it was only a few days early. But Harry was, unsurprisingly, a birthday purist, and believed it to be a sin to celebrate early. He was much more inclined to postpone his birthday by two weeks so that Louis could join them for the celebration. Louis tried to point out this was completely absurd (waiting an extra two weeks for presents? ludicrous!) but Harry couldn’t be swayed.

Birthday or not, Louis was intent on entertaining Harry while he was in drizzly Manchester. He’d organized a large dinner of the cast and crew at one of the best restaurants in the area so everyone could meet Harry, but they were already running late by the time he picked him up from the airport.

And to top everything off, something was definitely amiss with Harry. He wasn’t talking much, even avoiding eye contact with Louis as they drove to the house. No matter how much he tried to ease whatever was bothering him, Harry only responded by getting more rigid and less talkative.

Louis rushed through the house once they arrived, racing up the stairs with Harry’s bag clanking behind him as Nona loudly reminded him that they had a reservation in twenty minutes.

“I know!” Louis called belligerently over the railing as he tore into his room.

“Hello darling. You look amazing.” He heard Nona praising Harry from below.

A cursory glance over his room forced him to hurriedly snatch several wayward items of clothing off the floor, tossing them into the hamper just as Harry waded into the room, closing the door
behind him.

“Do you need anything before we go? We’re running kind of late. Let me check my phone.” Louis relayed quickly, shoving a few pairs of shoes into the closet. “Shit. Stan’s already there. Are you ready to go?” Louis froze as he looked at Harry, who’s arms were folded tightly across his front and his face stony in concentration. “Okay, babe. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Harry answered too quickly, as if expecting the question.

“Harry. Come on. You can tell me anything.” He took a step forward, but stopped short when Harry took an anticipatory step back.

“Okay?” Louis relented, realizing this was worse than he’d thought. “Do you not want to go to dinner? Do you just want to talk about something?”

“It’s not that.” Harry said, his arms finally falling to his sides as he met Louis’ eyes. “It’s just-” He turned away suddenly, raking his hands through his hair in frustration.

“Baby.” Louis took another step forward, just as Harry spun around and pointed an accusatory finger at Louis’ legs.

“It’s those jeans!” He exclaimed, causing Louis to freeze in shock.

“My jeans?”

“Are they new? What’s with them? Why are they -? Louis! Do you even know what those look like on you?” Harry complained, his voice strained.

“I know they’re too small. I need to do laundry. Do they look weird?”

“No Louis! Your arse!” Harry cried, his voice almost cracking. Louis stared at him before suddenly laughing and doubling over. “Don’t laugh.”

“Is this what’s bothering you?” Louis asked, turning around and putting his hands on his hips to frame his ample backside.

“Stop! Don’t!” Harry sputtered, making a bee line for Louis’ closet. “Where are your trousers? You need to wear something else.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Louis laughed, heading toward his hamper. “There might be something clean in here.”

Before he could dig into it’s contents, Harry was upon him, spinning him around and plastering himself to Louis’ front.

“Kiss me. Please.” Harry groaned, kissing Louis feverishly and running his massive hands down Louis’ body. Louis arched into the contact, kissing Harry heatedly and sneaking his fingertips below the edges of his shirt. It had only been a few seconds, but it was already hot and desperate as Harry continued to moan. “Louis, kiss me. Please, kiss me.”

“I am, love.” Louis said between kisses, plunging in deeper and circling his arms around Harry’s neck. With the added support, Louis jumped onto Harry, wrapping his legs around his middle. The pitch of Harry’s moaning heightened in response, and he clenched into Louis’ hips as they careened toward the bed.
They fell onto the unmade sheets, Louis’ legs still wrapped tightly around Harry’s writhing body. Harry ground down into him, licking into his mouth like he was trying to sate an unquenchable thirst. Louis’ thoughts were growing fuzzy as the lack of oxygen set in, but he still couldn’t be bothered to separate himself from the tempest of Harry’s kiss.

He could feel every inch of Harry’s taut chest sliding against his own, teasing at the feeling of skin on skin contact. Louis’ own skin was prickling with beads of cold sweat as his body struggled to remain functional at this hormonal onslaught. Harry, a muscled creature of pure beauty and sex appeal, was clawing at Louis with unbridled desperation, and Louis thought that he might actually die of it. Harry’s knee dug into the bed between Louis’ legs, rubbing against his groin and quickening both of their urgent movements.

He gasped loudly when Harry finally tore his mouth away, sitting up and at last giving Louis a moment to breathe and attempt to gather his thoughts. Dinner was the first word that broke through the fog in his brain, quickly followed by reservation in twenty minutes. Right, they had dinner with the crew tonight. They were running late. Time to get back to that, just as soon as the bright lights stopped flashing on the edges of Louis’ vision.

He was so focused on his own thoughts that he completely forgot about Harry. That is, until he felt Harry’s fingers busying themselves with the zipper of Louis’ jeans.

“Haz!” He squeaked, feeling a rush of blood thrumming towards his groin at just the idea of Harry’s fingers unfastening his jeans. “Are you -” He stammered. “Are you sure?”

Harry leaned down and quieted his doubt with a heavy kiss, separating as he started to pull Louis’ jeans down.

“I want you all the time, Louis.” He whispered, his voice already thick and syrupy. “All the fucking time. I know what I said about taking it slow, and it’s probably still a good idea, and everything, but I want you all the fucking time.”

Every one of Harry’s words sent a twitch to Louis’ cock, which was already plumping in anticipation.

“Haz.” He whined.

“You’re all I ever think about.” Harry continued, his voice continuing to deepen into a silky rumble. “Back before we were together, I had to try so hard not to think about you like this, because it just wasn’t right, you know? But now that - now that we’re together, Jesus this all I think about. Just being with you, and touching you, and making you feel good. I just want to make you feel good, Louis.”

It might have been a little embarrassing how quickly Louis was getting hard, but he didn’t think anyone in the world could hold it against him, given the situation. Harry’s fingers curled around the elastic of Louis’ briefs, his movements freezing as he suddenly looked up at him.

“This is okay, right?” He asked, the sheepish version of Harry making a sudden appearance as he looked up at Louis.

“Why are you stopping?” Louis snapped, and Harry gave him a devilish grin as he pulled against the fabric, wiggling it over the swell of Louis’ arse. Louis covered his eyes with his own arms, not excited to see how completely desperate he already was for this. His cock sprung out, hardening and so embarrassingly ready for whatever Harry had in mind.
This turned out to be, however, a moment of Harry gaping open mouthed at the immensity of what was happening.

“God, Lou.” He stuttered, his voice breathy. “Oh my god.”

“It’s not a museum, you know.” Louis grumbled, waving blindly with one of his hands. “You can interact with the exhibit.”

“Dirty.” Harry laughed. Louis opened his mouth to retort, but all that escaped was a cut off whimper as Harry’s mouth wrapped around the head of Louis’ dick without preamble. Only too aware that Nona was somewhere in the house, Louis grabbed a pillow and stuffed it into his own face, muffling the string of cries that spilled out of him as Harry’s tongue swept in a circle around him.

And god, Louis was whimpering for it as Harry’s warm mouth sunk down to his base, bobbing up and down with wet pops. He clench into the pillow as he struggled not to grind into Harry’s mouth, his cries still whimpering out of his control.

Maybe his reaction was a bit much; he was certainly past the point of retaining any ounce of dignity. But god, it had been so long since anyone had touched him like this. And really, had anyone ever touched him like this? Had anyone ever moved with such a perfect tempo up and down his length, or licked his cock like they were playing scales on a harmonica? It was dizzying, and the picture he was imagining of Harry was making his spine burn white hot. He held onto the pillow even tighter, knowing that a single glimpse of Harry would send him over the edge.

They both froze as there was a knock at the door.

“Lulu? Everyone’s already at the restaurant!”

Louis tore the pillow away, looking at the closed door in fear.

“Nona - I can’t. I can’t even right now.” He said, his voice obviously raw.

“Oh. Oh! Okay. Yeah. We’ll meet you there, yeah?” She said hurriedly, her heels clicking quickly down the hallway as the situation became clear to her.

Louis looked to Harry to share a look of relief, but what he saw knocked the last traces of common sense from his body.

Harry was leering up at him, glassy eyed and wild haired, smiling before he puckered his lips and kissed Louis’ tip. Louis’ breath caught just as Harry suddenly took him into his mouth, his cheeks hollowing as he swallowed around him.

He groaned again, arching off the bed in a complete loss of bodily control.

“Sit up, come on, baby.” Harry said, his voice warm. Louis was all too obedient, sitting up immediately. Harry sidled up to him on his knees, pulling Louis up into the same position by the hips. He fixated himself with the fastenings of his own trousers as Louis started undoing each of Harry’s shirt buttons.

He attached his mouth to Harry’s neck, biting down lightly as each button popped open. He only looked up as he heard Harry pulling his pants down, and gasped at the massive secret Harry had somehow managed to hide in those skinny jeans.

But Harry was too distracted to answer Louis, taking both of their cocks in one hand, using his own spit and the burgeoning precome on both of their tips as he pumped up and down with a swivel of his wrist. Louis’ head fell languidly to Harry’s sweat strewn shoulder, moaning at the smooth rub of Harry’s palm against his sensitive skin. He felt like a ghost almost, having completely lost contact with his own senses.

“I’ve waited so long for this Louis.” Harry muttered. “ Wanted this for so long, baby. Wanted you so bad.”

Louis breathed heavily, Harry’s words awakening him deep in the back of his own mind. This was a monumental moment for Harry, to trust Louis with this, and he was not about to make Harry do all the work. He remembered back to his discovery that night in the igloo, having waited for a moment to use it again since then. With a gentle tug to Harry’s curls, he cocked Harry’s head to the side and licked the tender skin behind his ear.

Harry went almost limp at it, clutching into Louis as his body trembled. Louis held him tighter, using the leverage to lick harder, pulling Harry’s earlobe into his mouth and nibbling on it. Harry cried out, his knees almost buckling beneath him.

He was just pliant enough as Louis flipped them over, landing on top of Harry and locking their lips together. Harry’s strength was sapped as he weakly stroked down Louis’ back, his nails trailing softly against his goose-pimpled skin.

Louis sat up and struggled to pull his tight jeans the rest of the way off of his legs one handed, his other arm supporting him against the bed. Harry’s fingers traced up and down his arm as he watched him, doing Louis the favor of not commenting on how much he struggled to get out of his own clothes. Once able to move freely, he positioned himself between Harry’s legs.

“Louis,” Harry choked the second Louis wrapped his hands around his erection.

“Yes, baby?”

He didn’t answer, instead clenching his eyes shut, his fingers tracing through Louis’ hair as he lowered down and took him into his mouth. Harry groaned without inhibition, causing Louis to hope that Nona had already made her exit. He was pretty sure the neighbors would be able to hear Harry at this point, and that left him strangely excited.

He pumped his own cock furiously, bobbing up and down on Harry until his fingers were curling in his hair.

“Louis, I’m close. I’m gonna-”

But Louis didn’t slow down, instead deep throating him until he felt his eyes water. With a choked groan, Harry tensed and came into Louis’ mouth, come shooting down the back of his throat.

Harry’s tortured whimpers were all Louis had left in him, sitting up and crying out as he came over Harry’s stomach. He watched as his own come spurted across Harry’s contracting abs, both men panting desperately.

“Wow.” Louis sighed, finally falling onto Harry.

They both laughed in exhaustion, Harry’s clumsy arms wrapping around Louis.

“Think we might be late for dinner.” Harry commented.
“Yeah. That’s fine,” Louis admitted, feeling the come pressed between their bodies. He looked up to Harry, pushing a lock of hair out of his face. “How are you feeling?”

“I can’t believe I got to do that with you,” Harry said, his smile radiant and his eyes shining. Louis felt his own stomach flip at this, leaning in to kiss Harry contentedly.

“And I would never do anything like that with Niall.” Louis pointed out cheekily. Harry flicked him hard in the shoulder.

“Why would you ruin this like that?” Harry chuckled, rolling onto Louis and pressing him down into the bed.

“I just don’t want to let the love triangle die!” Louis squealed, squirming as Harry attacked him with wet kisses all over his face.

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Louis had vastly overestimated his ability to stay still in his make up chair with a distraction like Harry in the room. Harry was sitting in the swivel chair beside Louis, playing some sort of game with Nona who was sitting behind both of them. From what Louis could see, the game consisted of them just kicking each other at weird angles, but they both maintained that there were actual rules and scoring involved. Louis suspected that this was a lie.

He was also having a hard time keeping his eyes open, as he and Harry hadn’t caught much sleep the night before. They’d gone to dinner with everyone, blaming their tardiness on Harry’s late flight. They’d both been friendly and affable, but the moment they were back at the house, they were already snogging frantically and ripping off each other’s clothes.

The floodgates had certainly been opened.

They’d gotten off in every combination of alternating hand jobs and blow jobs imaginable, even just rutting against each other like crazed teenagers once or twice. There would be brief intermissions of talking about nonsense, whispering little affections in each other’s ears until they were ready to dive back in. Their lost time had been most certainly caught up on, leaving Louis’ sheets disgusting and giving Nona a reason to glower at them the next morning. Thank god for industrial strength ear plugs.

It felt different now, Louis realized, to have been with Harry in that way; to have seen him at his most vulnerable and lust-ridden. To have been the one to push him over the edge, then still be there to trace patterns over his trembling back until he lulled him back to reality. And now the idea of having real sex with Harry was even more tantalizing. Not just in a wanton, lustful sense, but in knowing how close it make them feel to each other. They’d barely begun to be with each other, but Louis was already aware that sex had never made him feel this way before. Not even with Joshua.

“He’s really going to focus on fiber and protein. Avocados, chicken, almonds, brown rice.” Harry listed off, detailing the diet he’d already started planning to help Louis bulk back up once filming ended.

“Then chocolate cake and beer?” Nona asked.

“Nuh uh. He needs healthy fat. No sugar.”
“You’re single handedly ruining my life, Harry.” Louis muttered, causing his make up artist to glower at his movement.

“It’s your birthday next week, right?” Nona asked Harry.

“Yup.” He answered. “And it’s mine and Louis’ one month.”

His make up artist huffed with frustration as Louis’ eyebrows rose, taking in what Harry had just said. His mind wandered back to New Years and their promises of it being their “day one.” So that meant it was almost an entire month that they’d been together. An entire month since the nightmare had finally ended.

An entire month of being with Harry.

Before she could begin working on his face again, he turned to shoot an affectionate grin at him.


“Nope. Just him.” Harry said, gesturing with his head toward Louis, who was trying to control the muscles of his face and fight off the smile.

“You two are just too much.” She groaned. “How have you not just gotten married yet?”

“You’re all good, Boo.” The make up artist said, patting Louis on the shoulder.

“Thanks love.” Louis said, getting up so Nona could take her turn. He gave her a kiss to the top of her head as she sat down in their customary goodbye before leading Harry into the hallway. Harry rounded on him as he closed the door, running his fingers over Louis’ face.

“It looks really real.” He murmured, his eyes roving over the dark bags and deep contours that had just been painted onto his cheeks. They were filming one of that last scenes of the film, which meant that Louis had to look completely emaciated. “I kind of hate it.”

“It’s just make up.” Louis promised him. “Just make believe. I get to wash it off tonight.”

“I still don’t like it.” Harry complained, wrapping his arms around Louis’ waist. “But you know what I do like?”

“What’s that?”

“She called you Boo.”

“Enough, Mr. Styles.” Louis laughed, pushing Harry away and walking down the hallway. Harry laced their hands together as he caught up.

“Boo Bear.”

“Enough!”


~

Manchester, England: February 15
Daniel was standing on a table, glass of champagne in hand as he wove a beautiful, moving speech to summarize the last few months together. Louis didn’t hear a word he was saying, however, because Nona was sobbing into his shoulder and squeezing him so hard he thought he might snap in half.

“I’m going to miss you so much!” She cried, squeezing him even harder. He clenched his jaw, intent on not breaking down himself. This proved impossible, however, as Nona looked up at him with watery eyes, waiting for response.

“I’m going to miss you, too!” Louis’ voice cracked, throwing himself into the embrace.

“Okay, they’re - they’re having a moment over there.” Daniel said, everyone’s attention turning to their wailing. “You guys okay? Everything alright?”

Louis looked up to see everyone at the wrap party watching them with sad, warm eyes. It was no secret on set that Nona and Louis had been instant soulmates since production began, and everyone had been wondering how they were going to handle the movie’s end. They’d both ignored the impending separation for the last couple of weeks, staying chipper and happy as shooting had finished. While everyone else had been getting sentimental about the last shot of the film, they’d both been happily demanding everyone pop champagne.

But now, at the wrap party, something had finally clicked and Louis couldn’t imagine living somewhere without Nona in the other room.

“We’ll take it outside. Sorry, Daniel.” Louis apologized, leading Nona away.

They sat out on the deck outside the house, bundled in their jackets and holding hands as they sat in chairs beside each other.

“You should just move to New York.” Nona said, sniffling. “And we could live together and have a reality show. I’d watch that. Especially if Harry just showed up every once in a while in his tiny underwear.”

“And what tiny underwear do you speak of?” Louis asked, his eyebrow cocked suspiciously.

“He came downstairs when he was staying with us. You were still sleeping. We had a conversation for, like, thirty minutes in his briefs and he was just totally not bothered by it.”

“That sounds like him.” Louis admitted fondly. “But really, if we’re going to do this reality show, it makes more sense for you to come to LA. Both Harry and I already live there.”

“That’s just absurd, Louis.” She said on a dramatic exhale. “I could never go west. LA’s just full of barbie doll blondes that are forty feet tall and weigh thirty pounds. I wouldn’t last a day. Seriously, even your boys are bleach blonde. They’re just not my people.”

“You know, one of my good friends is a bleach blonde, and he’s very,” Louis trailed off, searching for a complimentary way to describe Niall, “drunk. And disruptive. That sounds exactly like your kind of people.”

“I’m going to send you a good morning selfie every day.” Nona decided. “And you need to give me every update about Harry. Seriously, every update. Good or bad. I made you two happen.”

“You didn’t-” Louis objected, suddenly realizing she wasn’t lying. He never would have confronted his feelings about Harry had it not been for Nona’s sudden impact on his life. His gaze soften, and he lifted Nona’s hand in his so he could kiss it softly. “Thank you, Nona.”
“You’re welcome, Lulu.” She said tenderly.

They both turned as the sliding door opened and Daniel stuck his head out.

“You two going to survive?” He asked.

“No. Absolutely not.” Nona announced.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve started writing again. I could have a couple of parts waiting for you on the next one.” He said enticingly, taking a sip from his glass. Nona sat forward excitedly.

“Can we have a sex scene this time? I want to see Louis’ thighs!”

“And I want her to have the chance to see them.” Louis added brightly. “We’re counting on you, Daniel.”

~

Paris, France: February 16

It was irrational, he knew, but Louis was nervous again.

He looked immaculate, fuckable, even, as the private car carried him through Paris towards Harry’s belated birthday bash. Paul sat in the front seat, apparently after Harry had insisted someone familiar be there to pick Louis up. All of Harry’s friends had gathered at an exclusive club, waiting for Harry to get out of the interviews he’d been scheduled to give all day. They hadn’t talked yet that day, and trepidation was itching at the back of Louis’ thoughts as he got closer to the club.

It had been one thing when Louis was whisking Harry around across set in front of his friends and coworkers, but these were Harry’s friends. Many of them didn’t know Louis, and he had no idea what Harry had told them about the two of them. He didn’t even know if he was going to be there in the capacity of Harry’s boyfriend, rather than just another friend. It was completely possible that he was going to just spend the night in the throng of people oscillating around Harry, not knowing anyone else and pretending that nothing was going on between him and the birthday boy.

Did anyone else even know he was coming? How would he introduce himself to them? The thing was, ever since that drunk conversation in Italy, the word boyfriend hadn’t come up again. There really hadn’t been any reason for it to. Everyone in Manchester had already met Harry when he came to New Years, so there hadn’t been a reason to introduce him to anyone. And he still hadn’t told Zayn or Liam anything (which was driving them both particularly insane) so it just hadn’t come up.

He formed the word boyfriend with his mouth soundlessly in the back of the car, knowing that he should get used to saying it. They’d had this conversation, alcoholic influence or not, and he should learn to say it like it was the truth. He decided to find an excuse to use the word sometime soon, just to practice.

As his phone started to ring again, he knew it was his perfect opportunity.
This was the fourth time Joshua had called that day, his calls having grown in frequency ever since Harry had answered the phone back in Stockholm. They came around the same time everyday, even though Louis never answered.

He decided it was finally time to put an end to it.

“Yes?” He answered, his voice impatient.

“Louis! Hi. I’ve been - I’ve wanted to hear your voice for so long.”

“I only answered to tell you that you need to stop calling.” Louis said resolutely. “This is the last time I’m going to answer.”

“That’s fine, Louis, that’s fine. I just want you to hear me out. You’re coming back to LA soon, aren’t you?”

Louis’ blood ran slightly cold as he thought about being in the same city as Joshua again. For so long, they’d had an entire ocean between them. Even though Harry had never been close by, at least he was much closer than Joshua.

He took a deep breath, readying himself to drop the bomb on his ex-boyfriend.

“Joshua, I’m with Harry now. I’m dating Harry.” Louis said, hearing the line go silent. Joshua’s stuttering met his ears long before his words.

“What - what do you mean?”

“He’s my boyfriend, Joshua.” The line fell quiet again, and Louis could almost feel the anger emanating from the silence. “You need to move on. We’re over. We’ve been over for months. Harry is my boyfriend now, and he’s the one I need to think about.”

“Louis, no. He’s so wrong for you.”

“He doesn’t like that you call me so much, and honestly, I don’t like it either. This has to stop.”

“Look what he’s doing, Lou. This was his plan the entire time!”

“I’m going to block your number, Joshua.”

“No, baby, no!”

“I really hope things get better for you.” Louis pulled the phone away, hearing Joshua’s protests as he hung up. He sighed heavily, looking up with heavy lids at Paul, who was watching him through the rearview mirror. “Do you know how to block someone on an iPhone?”

Paul smiled at him before gesturing for him to hand the phone over. Louis acquiesced and sat back, reminding himself of what really mattered.

They were celebrating Harry’s birthday. His boyfriend’s birthday. He got two blissful days here in Paris with his boyfriend before he had to jet back to LA, and he was going to make the most of it.

*Metal Heart* was coming out in just over a month, so press was hitting high gear the moment he got back. His job was going to be to publicize the movie full time for the next few weeks, so that meant that this was the end of his and Harry’s European love tryst. They weren’t even going to get to see each other again until the Oscars at the end of the month, and even then, Harry would be there with Arrienne.
He was going to make the most of this. He was.

The club was lined with photographers outside, so Louis was snuck in the back as per Harry’s specific instructions. At least three different men in suits said the phrase, “This way please, Mr. Tomlinson” as he made his entrance, which made Louis feel like either a secret agent or the leader of a world-wide drug cartel. Kind of polar opposites, but both had similar perks when it came to being snuck into nightclubs.

He was escorted up by an elevator, watching several floors of the club whiz by through the spotless glass doors until they reached the top level. The dance floor was packed with people dancing in glistening evening wear as they flowed in and out onto the balcony that overlooked the city. A guard walked him past the shining, expansive bar toward the VIP section, which he was immediately admitted into.

He entered a dimly lit, square room packed with slightly familiar people, all holding drinks and being waited on by a private staff of waiters and bar tenders. Louis wasn’t surprised to see several lines of white powder snaking across a table, but didn’t get a chance to look any longer as Niall discovered him.

He made quick work of introducing Louis to his and Harry’s entourage, ushering him around the VIP section and making sure everyone shook his hand. Everyone seemed to recognize him by his name, insinuating that Louis’ reputation preceded him. What exactly his reputation was was still a mystery.

He was chatting with Status Solo’s drummer and his girlfriend as a dull roar of cheers erupted from the rest of the club. Everyone turned to the entrance as Harry’s silhouette came into focus, a round a greetings erupting as everyone hugged him and wished him a happy birthday. Louis stayed at the edge of the room, admiring from afar as Harry smiled and embraced everyone who approached him.

He made his way further into the throng, giving genuine thanks to everyone as they wished him a happy late birthday, but he looked distracted as his eyes roved the group.

As if snapping into place, his eyes landed on Louis and his face immediately lit up. He bounded toward him, picking him up and spinning him effortlessly as if they were a couple in a 1950s movie musical. Once his feet were firmly back on the ground, Harry smacked a heavy kiss against his lips, nonplussed by the eyes watching them around the room.

“Happy birthday, love.” Louis whispered once they separated, watching Harry’s glistening eyes as he looked on in fondness.

“I’m so happy.” He murmured, pulling Louis into another hug.

Even though Louis had already met everyone in the room, Harry found it necessary to re introduce him to everyone in the context of being his boyfriend, dropping the term as if he were getting paid to do it. He was being handed birthday shot after birthday shot, his lips glistening with clear alcohol and his hair growing increasingly unkempt despite Louis’ best efforts to smooth it down.

Even though Harry was holding Louis’ hand in a death grip, he would suddenly disappear at random intervals, twirling into the crowd and out of sight as Louis looked on in confusion. He would flit back over moments later, plastering himself to Louis with zeal, as if his enthusiasm would make Louis forget that he’d even disappeared. Harry obviously thought he was being sneaky, but it was very clear to Louis what he was running off to do. His widely dilated pupils and constant need to sniff loudly made his activities very apparent.
Making another grandiose reappearance, Harry suddenly grabbed Louis by the hips and spun him out of the conversation he was in the middle of. Holding Louis against the wall, he pressed a line of messy and frantic pecks down his throat, nibbling at the base of his neck.

“Haz.” Louis sighed, his hands gripping into Harry’s shoulder blades. “Baby, is it really okay for this many people to know we’re together?”

“Mhmm.” He mumbled, moving back up Louis’ neck. “I trust these people.”

“Yeah, but I feel like you trust everyone.”

“Nope. Don’t trust easily.” Harry said, the words spilling out quickly and feverishly. “Except you. I trust you, Louis.”

Louis held him tighter. “I’m glad. I’m glad you trust me.”

“I’m so fucking happy.” He continued, meeting Louis’ mouth and kissing him with hot intensity for several beats, then suddenly pulling away. “So fucking happy.”

With that, he disappeared again, leaving Louis feeling ruffled. He smiled at Harry’s retreating back and made his way to one of the sleek couches along the walls.

He’d only sat down for a few seconds before Niall appeared beside him, handing him a shot glass. They clinked them together and threw them back, grimacing at the bitter taste.

“So how’re things going with Haz?” Niall asked, invigorated by the vodka and gesturing for the waiter to bring them two more.

“Altogether or in the last five minutes?”

“Both.” Niall said, accepting two more shots from the waiter.

“Like, too good, honestly. Things are too good.” He admitted, sighing as he watched his boy laughing animatedly with one of his friends. “He’s high out his mind right now, though.”

“He’s not out of his mind right now.” Niall pointed out. “This level’s still manageable. If we keep him distracted from here on, he’ll be fine.”

“I could probably handle distracting him.” Louis decided, throwing his shot back. “Just need to get a bit closer to his level.”

“Cheers to that, mate.”

He wasn’t quite stumbling drunk yet, but rational thought had long since disappeared and been replaced by an innate, desperate need to press himself against every part of Harry’s body.

Harry’s disappearing acts ended abruptly as Louis grabbed him by the waist authoritatively and kissed him until they were both seeing stars. The rest of their company was just as blissed out as they were, so that fact that the two were snogging on every available surface went largely unnoticed.

Louis’ sense of adventure soon felt suppressed by the confines of their private room, so he eventually found himself dragging Harry onto the dance floor at a barreling speed. Harry’s security stumbled out after them, but weren’t able to catch them as they giggled and enveloped themselves among the knot of dancing bodies.
They grinned at each other devilishly, the lights of the club swirling across their faces and illuminating their eyes a bright purple and blue. It was immediately reminiscent of the first night they’d met each other, when they’d danced wildly like high-spirited children who didn’t care who was watching them.

But as the sultry opening chords to Ne-Yo’s “She Knows” reverberated through the haze, the atmosphere immediately melted into something luridly provocative. Louis spun around slowly and pressed himself against Harry’s hard chest, grinding his arse into his crotch seductively.

Harry’s hands gripped possessively into Louis’ hips, guiding him in a sensuous rhythm to the pulsating beat. The air was hot and wet against Louis’ face, and his back curved as his head fell back onto Harry’s shoulder. Harry’s lips met the exposed skin of Louis’ neck, sucking just hard enough to leave a mark and sending Louis’ mind in a dizzy downward spiral.

His thoughts were sizzling and twisting, only aware of the deafening music and the lush pulse of Harry’s body against his; the carnal need to have Harry against every part of him. He twisted around, his palms sliding down Harry’s chest until he was tracing the contours of his abs through his shirt.

Harry watched him, mesmerized, as Louis closed his eyes and leaned in closer. They hovered, only the length of their eyelashes separating their mouths, and smoldering under the feeling of their colliding breaths. They panted into each other’s mouths, heavy and torrid, before they crashed together with a flourish of tongues and the clack of teeth.

The alcohol and Harry’s presence melted together to make Louis so bewilderingly intoxicated that he couldn’t even distinguish between the moments that his and Harry’s mouths were connected or apart. He only felt a rush of reality as they stepped out onto the balcony, the overwhelming music of the club quieting as the cold air encircled them.

Harry was skipping ahead of him toward the railing, his eyes aglint as he turned and waited for Louis to catch up. Louis boxed him in against the railing, leaning into his body and meeting his lips with a strangely chaste kiss. They separated as Louis dug his hand into Harry’s hair, admiring the boy he’d somehow held onto for the last month and a half.

“You’re so beautiful, Harry.” He admitted, his body feeling weak.

“Love it when you call me that.”

“Fine. Then I’ll keep doing it. You’re beautiful. You’re beautiful. You’re beautiful.” He said cheekily, squeaking as Harry suddenly covered his mouth.

“S’not gonna be as special if you keep saying it!” Harry complained, unfazed as Louis licked the palm of his hand. He pulled away to kiss him again, leaning back over the railing as Louis pressed into him.

Louis’ eyes flew open as he saw the flash of lights behind his eyelids. He leaned past Harry, looking down to the road below.

“Think they wanna take our picture.” Louis said, pointing to a group of figures on the street three stories below, each with cameras in hand. “Love getting my picture taken.”

“Fix your hair first, sweetheart.” Harry joked dazedly, running his hands through Louis’ fringe. He laughed as the sudden movement caused Louis’ eyes to swivel about, trying to refocus on Harry’s face.
“Good now?”

“Excellent.”

“Oh! Up here!” Louis called down below, waving with one hand and holding Harry with the other as the larger man burrowed into his shoulder, laughing with embarrassment. “Want a picture? Here! Have a fucking picture!”

He flipped them his middle finger before Harry squawked in chagrin and pulled him away.

“Not your style, Mr. Styles?” Louis asked, stumbling after him.

“S’go home. Go home with me?” Harry asked, his eyes drooping over his warm smile.

“Always, love.”

~

While their behavior on the dance floor seemed like a promise to carry on the lurid affair in Harry’s hotel room, the two men found themselves so exhausted they couldn’t do much more than kiss lazily across the bed.

“We were so smutty, weren’t we?” Louis asked, his senses slowly returning.

“Comes with the territory.” Harry answered sleepily, pulling away and letting his head fall onto his pillow, facing Louis.

“What territory is that?”

“Your arse.”

“Ah. An expansive one, that.”

Harry smiled at him, struggling with his last remains of strength to pull himself over Louis’ chest and snuggle in.

His efforts were pointless, however, as Louis suddenly rolled off the bed.

“We can’t sleep yet!” He exclaimed, hopping over to his open suitcase.

“Mmmm, Louis.” Harry groaned, face down on the bed. Louis dug through his disorganized clothes, finally procuring the sloppily wrapped package he’d hidden at the bottom. He jumped back onto the bed triumphantly, sitting up as he handed Harry the present.

“Happy birthday.” He said proudly, watching as Harry begrudgingly sat up. He rubbed his eyes and slowly tore into the paper, his brow furrowing in confusion as he pulled the bound book from the paper.

He eyed Louis suspiciously, immediately recognizing the similarities between this book and the photo album he’d given Louis for his birthday. Louis sat close-lipped, flicking on the lamp on the bedside table as Harry flipped it open.
“Dear Harry,” Harry began, his voice spent. “First of all, sorry for kissing your Louis. But I really hope you’re calling him your boyfriend by the time you read this. It would be embarrassing if you weren’t. Especially since he’s putting so much work into your birthday present. I would never do something like this for you. Expect a gift card from me.” Harry looked up to Louis. “What is this?”

“Keep reading.” Louis insisted, edging closer so their shoulders were pressing together.

“Anyways, what do I even say, mate? You’ve been my best friend since forever, even when I was an annoying prat that no one else could stand. Hell, I’m still an annoying prat that no one can stand. But you’ve always been right there for me. You’re always waiting there when I embarrass myself in front of another girl, or make some dumb mistake and I think my life’s totally ruined. No matter what crazy fiasco I get myself into, you always talk me down and keep things in perspective.

‘But yeah, you’re always there. And you always know what to say. How are you not fucking sick of me yet? I’d be sick of me. I’m not sick of you, though. I love you actually. In a brotherly way. Fuck it, it could probably be a romantic if I really tried. You’re a fit bloke.

‘Not to sound overly cheesy and all that, but thank you for everything you’ve been through with me. We’ve literally been through everything together, and I know you’re still going to be there with me to go through the rest of this shit until we both finally die. You’re such a good person, Haz, and I’m so lucky to have you in my life. I’m proud to call you my best friend, and I’ll always be here to make sure you’re getting treated the way you deserve. Honestly, you deserve the world, and I really hope you believe me when I say that. Love you, mate. -Niall.”

Harry continued to stare at the page, blinking heavily and obviously trying to hide the impact Niall’s words had had on him from Louis. To distract himself, he started to flip through the rest of the book, seeing other faces whiz by with letters beside them.

“You had everyone write letters to me?” Harry asked.

“Mhmm.”

“But, Lou, there are so many people in here. Like, everyone I care about. How did you do this?”

“Niall helped me narrow the list down.” He explained, leaning his cheek against Harry’s shoulder. “And it was fun. Kind of felt like I got a chance to meet everyone in your life.”

“Louis, this is - this is so much.” He said, grinning widely as the pages fluttered by.

“Hey, now, you’re going to spoil the ending.” Louis scolded as Harry flipped to the last page, growing still as he saw the last face.

It was a picture of Cassidy, the girl they’d met at the homeless youth shelter, smiling as she held a framed copy of her GED diploma. His hand ran down the page slowly.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you’re paying for her to go college?” Louis murmured, his head bobbing as Harry shrugged.

“Never came up.” He gave as a flimsy excuse, his mind clearly already focused on the words Cassidy had written for him. Louis waited patiently, knowing Harry had come to the end when he released a shallow, watery sigh. Louis slowly leaned up to kiss him on the cheek.
“Read the rest in the morning, yeah? We should actually get some sleep.” He said, sliding under the covers. Harry nodded slowly, putting the book on the table as if it were the last thing he wanted to do.

He slid closer to Louis as he turned the light off, waiting until Louis was facing him before he slid a soft arm around his middle.

“Thank you.” He said quietly. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

“Good.” Louis answered, rolling onto his back and waiting for Harry to taken his usual spot across his chest. “Guess we’re even, now.”

~

Louis’ eyes fluttered open to see a gentle, white morning light slanted across the room. He wasn’t completely sure what had woken him up, until he heard another loud sniffle from beside him. His eyes flicked up to see Harry already awake, the book of letters perched on his knees and his hand wiping something from under his eye.

“Haz?” Louis asked.

“I’m not a weeper!” Harry exclaimed, suddenly leaping from the bed and racing into the bathroom without even looking at Louis.

“You are though.” Louis groaned.

“I am not! I am a man, and I do not cry.” Harry protested, blowing his nose. Louis chuckled as he stretched, looking over to his long-dead phone on the bedside table.

“Can I use your phone charger?” Louis asked.

“Yeah. It’s already plugged in on my side.” Harry called from the bathroom. Louis crawled across the bed, fishing around beside the bed until he found the cord in question and plugged it into his phone. With another stretch, he rolled out of the bed to bother Harry while he waited for it to power up.

“I feel like a celebratory brunch.” Louis announced as he rounded the bathroom door and leaned against the doorframe.

“What are we celebrating?” Harry asked, squeezing toothpaste onto his toothbrush.

“The fact that I can eat whatever I want now.” He answered, throwing his arms into the air half-heartedly.

“And that you have the self-control to eat something healthy.”

“Except mimosas.”

“No.” Harry said resolutely, his voice garbled as he spoke around his toothbrush.

“Mimosas!” Louis groaned loudly, sinking his weight into the doorframe. He heard his phone buzz from the other room as it started up.
“One mimosa.” Harry said.

“Seven.”

“One.”

“Two and a quiche.”

Harry spit into the sink as Louis’ phone pinged repeatedly from the other room, his missed texts and notifications piling up.

“Fine. Two and quiche.” Harry relented, closing the space between himself and Louis. “Only because I’m excited for you to get back to your original weight. Your mum’s excited too.”

Ping! Ping! Louis’ phone continued.

“How do you know my mum’s excited?”

“She told me.” Harry answered.

Ping!

“What do mean she told you?”

Ping!

“She texted me on my birthday. We talked for awhile.”

Ping!

“About what?”

Ping!

“About how skinny you had to get for the movie. Makes us both nervous.”

Ping!

“Glad you and my mum have something to bond over.” Louis said flatly.

Ping! Ping! Ping! Ping!

Louis turned back toward the room, watching his illuminated screen from the bedside table as it continued to chirp at them. Harry had suddenly grown suspicious, too.

“That seems like a lot of messages.” He said.

“Yeah. It is.” Louis agreed, worried.

“Everything’s okay, right?”

Louis walked slowly into the room, his mind racing through everything that had happened in the last day, assuring himself that they hadn’t done anything wrong.

He stopped short as realization smacked him across the face.

“Last night.” he remembered, turning back towards Harry. “When we were on the balcony at the
club together."

“Yeah?”

“There were people taking pictures on the street, weren’t there?”

Louis could see the moment that Harry’s blood ran cold.
"I know that your heart is still beating, beating darling. I believe that you fell so you can land next to me."

-Christina Perri

The conversation stopped suddenly as Louis dragged his chair across the floor, closing the two foot gap between himself and Harry with a wooden screech that echoed through the room. He laced his and Harry’s fingers together before looking back up with an expression of mock-innocence.

“So sorry. Do go on.” He urged, pulling their intertwined hands into his lap. Green Tie Man (whom Louis had dubbed thusly after having no interest in learning his actual name) gave the most subtle of eye rolls before he continued whatever list of inane contract details he’d been detailing before Louis’ interruption.

This incident had been labeled a “code blue”, because apparently Harry’s antics were so closely monitored, a color coded system was necessary to make everyone’s lives easier. Luckily, a code blue wasn’t as dire as a code red or code black, but it was enough that several high ranking members of Harry’s management team had taken overnight flights to their Paris offices so that they could confront Harry directly.

The picture that had plastered the front page of the internet that morning showed a blurry image of Louis, uproariously drunk and flipping off the cameras below as Harry leaned into his side. At least, this was how Louis was prepared to describe it, stripping out the fact that the picture showed Louis’ hand wrapped tightly around Harry’s waist and Harry’s forehead pressed against Louis’ cheek as he tried to hide his giddy embarrassment. The problem was, it didn’t look like two mates who were just being drunk and affectionate. There was inherent intimacy in the dark, grainy photo.

Granted, had the picture been taken twenty seconds earlier, they would have been caught in the middle of an exuberant snog session. That, Louis assumed, would have been a code black.

Once their phones had been charged up that morning, they’d been hit with the full brunt of the Larry Stylinson shit-storm that had been brewing overnight. Rumors were unfurling left and right and a full course of damage control was already bleeding into the news outlets. Some Harry/Arrienne articles that were being kept on reserve my management were already popping up across the internet in an attempt to drown out the noise. Louis had nearly gagged as a glanced over a couple of their titles: “10 Times Harry Styles and Arrienne Brant Were the Most Adorbs Couple Ever,” or “Is Harry Styles Going to Propose? His Friends Think So.”

As nauseating as the fake fluff pieces were, they already seemed to be doing the trick. There were still those that were suspicious in the comments about the picture, but the vast majority of people seemed to believe whatever garbage they were told. That bullet had mostly been dodged, but another problem was now looming over the two of them.

Harry’s management now knew that they were officially dating.

An early meeting had been called, and the change in Harry’s attitude was instantaneous. He had been so dreamy eyed and love drunk that morning until his management had phoned him. Louis watched Harry as he listened to the phone, his skin going pale, his eyes brimming wide, and his trembling hands stuffed against his sides as he crossed his arms as tightly as he could. He looked
completely horrified, which made Louis feel like every inch of his skin was prickling.

He decided immediately that no matter who protested, Louis was not going to leave Harry’s side as long as he was still in Paris. Even when Harry himself had repeatedly told Louis that he didn’t have to go to the meeting, Louis wouldn’t hear any of it. He swaggered into the conference room, taking a cursory glance of the well dressed men and women glowering at them like a death panel as they waited for Harry.

He and Harry hadn’t said anything so far, just watching as his management argued with Sophia over Skype. Whatever they were saying had been just glossing by Louis so far as indiscernible legal jargon, as he’d been far too fixated on monitoring Harry’s emotional status. The second he’d noticed Harry’s leg start jumping nervously, Louis had decided it was a massive mistake that their chairs had been placed so far apart.

Harry didn’t look up at him as Louis took his hand, his eyes still locked down on the carpet as if he were trying to pretend he were somewhere else. But he did lean slightly into Louis’ side, letting him know how much he appreciated knowing that he was right there. The loud interruption aside, Harry’s management continued bickering with Sophia.

“You okay?” Louis murmured into Harry’s ear, barely above a whisper. Harry nodded curtly as if he were a student trying not to get caught talking in class. This, naturally, was not enough for Louis, who squeezed his hand slightly tighter until Harry looked up. “Uh huh?” Louis questioned again.

“Yeah.” Harry breathed, his face softening as their eyes met.

As yet another reminder that Louis should be very, very concerned about how quickly he was falling for this ridiculous, doe-eyed boy, the conversation around them faded into white noise. Louis was all too focused on Harry’s lips to remember that they were both in a meeting that was so official that it warranted button up shirts and ties. His hand had just started to twitch with the impulse to reach up and cup Harry’s cheek when Louis’ attention was ripped away by the mention of his own name.

“…but Mr. Tomlinson has made it extremely difficult to work with his management.” Said Pencil Skirt Lady (another aptly assigned nickname from Louis).

“What was that?” Louis asked, feeling a familiar wave of sass fluxing through his veins.

“Your management hasn’t returned any of our calls for the last few months.” Pencil Skirt Woman continued, her taut face focusing on Louis as if rearing up for a battle.

And oh, a battle she was about to have.

“And what exactly did you expect from me?” Louis asked.

“Louis.” Harry whispered, leaning further into his side for support.

“No, honestly.” Louis continued, leaning forward. “You thought I’d just play along with whatever heterosexual farce you’d come up with after I found out how you’d been treating Harry for the last five years?”

Everyone in the room seemed to falter, readjusting themselves with unease at the bluntness of Louis’ statement. He watched as they squirmed, waiting for whatever retaliation they had prepared.
“Status Solo represents a multi-million dollar brand, and Harry alone as a client is difficult to estimate—"

“Okay, yes, sure.” Louis interrupted suddenly. “But Harry is not a client to me. He is my boyfriend. He is one of the most important people in my entire life. Does that make sense to you?” They watched him with tight lips. “I don’t really care how much money he’s worth, or what contracts he’s signed. What matters to me is that he’s happy and taken care of. Do you see how our ideals don’t mesh?”

“We are very interested in keeping Harry—"

“No, but really, you aren’t.”

“Louis.” Harry groaned, re-crossing his legs nervously.

“And yes, I get it.” Louis continued, his tirade now beyond control. “Gay wasn’t okay a few years ago and all that, but things are changing. Things have changed. You’re not going to make me believe that your precious ‘brand’ is going to plummet because your lead singer happens to like other boys. Take it from someone who has actually come out to the public and dealt with this: nobody is going to care. And even if they do, I can’t begin to comprehend how much money you’ve made off of the fact that Harry is a flawless human, so I can’t really make myself feel bad for your bottom line if it’s affected by the fact that he finally gets to be himself.

‘In case it’s not clear what I’m insinuating, I’ll just go ahead and say it: a coming out narrative had better be in the works. This whole charade has been going on long enough. You’ve been making your client miserable for years, and he’s obviously too nice to say anything about it.

‘I, unfortunately for you, am anything but nice. I honestly don’t care what you fucking throw at me to try and get me to leave; I’m sticking around. Harry is going to come out, and when he does, it will be as my boyfriend. Understood?” Louis finished, his eyebrows cocked in what he knew was his sassiest expression.

“That is a rather complicated subject.” Massive Mole Man (clearly name for the gigantic, festering mole on his cheek) said diplomatically, his jaw clenching uncomfortably.

“Right, so you’ll need to get to work on that immediately.” Louis pointed out. “I’ll take you off the blacklist with my management once we get out of here, and I’ll cooperate with whatever you need so that you can keep up Harry’s public image. But this is only a temporary situation. I’m not going anywhere, so you’re going to have to get used to me being a particularly prickly thorn in your side.”

Louis finished his diatribe with a smug smirk, leaving the room speechless until Sophia picked up the slack and continued the discussion, clearly pleased with Louis’ outburst. Everyone’s eyes moved reluctantly from Louis to her image on the open laptop on the desk, still wary of what consequences he was promising them.

Harry didn’t look at him and Louis could feel his body stiffen where their shoulders were pressed together. Despite this, Harry pulled their hands into his own lap, his free palm encasing them nervously and his head angling a hair closer to Louis.

They both listened for another agonizing hour as the specifics of what was expected of Louis were detailed to him. There were clearly defined rules that someone, somewhere had apparently spent a lot of time thinking about, and there was no shortage of them. It was almost formulaic the way they described everything, but Sophia maintained that no regulations could be set on Louis until an
agreement was made with his management. Though not technically his manager, Louis already had plans to sick Liam on them.

Louis’ resolve still managed to remain intact when they were finally released and escorted down to a private car. Harry immediately hunched over in his seat and buried his face in his hands as they drove away, leaving Louis to rest his hand idly on Harry’s back as he turned his phone back on. His inbox was overflowing, but he sifted through the mess in search of one specific response.

Liam had been disconcertingly silent since everything had been unleashed that morning. Normally, Louis could expect at least thirteen phone calls from him by now, but when nothing had surfaced by the time the meeting started, Louis texted him:

*Have I actually killed you over this one?*

With a sigh of relief, Louis saw that he’d finally texted back while they were in the meeting.

*I don’t want you to worry about any of this. We’ll take care of it when you get back in a couple of days. Say hi to Harry for me and let him know everything is going to be okay.*

“Liam says hi and that everything’s going to be okay.” Louis said, flicking through the rest of his inbox as his insides relaxed slightly. Liam would take care of things; he was practically a superhero.

“It’s not.” Harry mumbled. Louis’ head snapped up, surprised by the anguished grain of Harry’s voice.

“It is though, baby.” Louis said, rubbing his hand up and down Harry’s back soothingly and waiting to feel him grow pliant under his touch.

Harry shirked away, letting Louis’ hand fall onto the seat. Louis’ stomach sunk.

Okay, that was definitely strange.

“It’s not going to be fine or okay or any of that and everything’s just going to end up fucked because I couldn’t keep my stupid hands off of you for twenty seconds.” Harry grumbled, his face still buried in his hands. Louis felt completely rigid as he watched Harry.

“None of this is fucked, Harry.” Louis said. “What makes you think that?”

“Because I’ve done this before.” Harry said, finally lifting his raw, red face to look at Louis. He looked utterly lost. “I’ve seen what they do, and they’re going to do everything they can to make you leave me and *I just got you Louis.*”

Louis’ heart physically clenched, a shallow sigh being the only thing that managed to escape through his lips. He readjusted himself, as if getting his bearings, and steadied his voice.

“That’s not going to happen.” He said plainly.
“How do you know?”

“Because you’re not thinking straight.”

“Yes, I am, Louis!”

“No, Harry, you’re not.” Louis pressed, his hands tightening uncomfortably at what he was about to say. “You’re coming off of a lot of cocaine from last night.”

“What?” Harry snapped, an angry confusion playing across his features that Louis had never seen before. “What’s that have to do with anything?”

“This is what cocaine does the next day.” Louis explained, avoiding Harry’s searing gaze. “It makes you depressed and temperamental; it makes people irrational.”

Louis looked up slowly, hoping to see a gentle understanding wash over Harry, but he found himself utterly shocked at the person he was looking at. Harry’s glare was venomous, the typical stitch in his furrowed brow now icy in frustration.

“What’s that face?” Louis asked, completely bewildered.

“So you just look up side effects of drug use when I’m not looking?” Harry bit spitefully, looking out the window and scrunching his body against the door, away from Louis.

Louis watched him, gaping, having never seen a side of Harry this petty and argumentative. He took another breath, schooling his temper to a manageable level.

“I didn’t google it behind your back.” He said slowly. “I just learned a lot from taking care of Zayn.”

Harry looked over suddenly, his face still stony but obviously surprised.

“Zayn doesn’t do drugs.” Harry countered.

“He doesn’t do them anymore.” Louis corrected. “A couple of his friends died almost two years ago, within a month of each other. Overdoses.” He watched as Harry’s eyes dropped to the empty seat between them, his posture easing slightly. “So he had to get off of it. He wasn’t a complete addict, or anything, but it was hard from him to keep himself out of situations where it was social. That’s actually when he and Liam started getting close.”

“I thought you’d all been best friends since Liam became your agent.”

“I was good friends with them both separately, but they were only casual friends. Except Liam totally fell for Zayn the moment he saw him. But Zayn had just started getting pretty successful, so he was really wrapped up in that culture of drugs and parties. He was a little oblivious about how great Liam was.

‘So then, when he had to get clean suddenly, he had to cut off a bunch of his friends and it was clear that he really needed someone there to support him. I tried to be that friend, but I totally sucked at it. Like, I would accidentally sleep through my phone ringing when he needed to talk, or say the wrong thing all the time. So Liam totally stepped up, and suddenly he was the one that Zayn would call in the middle of the night when he needed to get talked down, or go on long walks with when he needed a distraction.

‘And that’s when Zayn started to look at Liam differently, but neither of them could admit it until a
few months ago.” Louis finished, watching as Harry played with one of his rings.

“I didn’t know any of that.” Harry admitted quietly, the uncharacteristic hostility having disappeared.

“Yeah, you just came in and took the credit for getting them together.” Louis pointed out jokingly, which caused Harry to finally smile. He still wasn’t looking at Louis, but his gaze melted into something softer as he watched the silver band of his ring rotate over his pale finger. “What are you thinking about?” Louis asked, a soft breath spilling out of him when Harry finally looked up at him with his familiar warmth.

“I guess, hearing that story.” Harry mumbled. “It made me think about when I knew I was falling for you.”

The last remnants of icy anxiety were whipped away as Louis beamed at Harry.

“Yeah?”

“It was kind of early, but I think it was that night at Niall’s party. When we’d only barely met, remember?” He asked. Louis nodded. “So I knew that Arrienne was supposed to show up at any second, and I was just dreading it so much, but my thoughts kept falling back to you. I just wanted to go find you and see what you were doing, but I knew that I had to stay there and wait for Arrienne. Then I saw someone walking up to me, and my heart just totally dropped because I thought it was her, but then I looked up, and it was you. I can’t even explain how happy I was to see you, even though I barely even knew you. Then you just charged up to me and grabbed me, and I wasn’t afraid anymore. I just held onto you and I swear you actually fell asleep on me, standing up.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I did.” Louis agreed as he remembered.

“That’s when I knew I was on a slippery slope with you.” Harry continued. “It wasn’t just a fan crush. It was becoming more.”

“In retrospect, that night was probably it for me, too.” Louis realized, making Harry’s smile grow even warmer. “Remember how the night before, I’d almost fallen off my roof, but you grabbed me? And then you promised me that if I ever fell, you’d be there to catch me? Then, less than a day later, I managed to fall off that table while I was sword fighting Niall. But you were right there, just like you’d promised. I think that’s when you kind of became a fairytale prince to me.” Louis laughed, but he grew quiet as he saw that the smile had faded from Harry’s face.

“I haven’t always been there to catch you.” He said lowly, and Louis’ body went cold at the phantom memory of a flight of towering stairs.

“Harry,” he rasped out over a dry throat, “no, you didn’t physically catch me, but you were still right there for me the second I woke up. And you were there every second after that to make sure I was okay and I was taken care of. I have a confession about that actually.” His thoughts wandered back to that week after he’d hurt his shoulder, when everyone was taking turns staying at his house to watch over him. Harry had been there every other day, always falling asleep under the covers next to Louis. “You’re the only one who slept in my bed with me after I got hurt.”

“You told me Zayn and Liam always shared a bed with you when they took their turn.” Harry pointed out, turning to Louis in surprise.

“Yeah, I lied.” Louis admitted. “I just wanted an excuse to sneakily hold your hand while you were
sleeping. In a completely platonic, brotherly way, of course.”

Harry laughed, his curls falling messily around his grin. He unclipped his seatbelt and slid over to Louis’ side, hunkering over to rest his head against Louis’ shoulder.

“What do you want to do tonight?” Harry asked, grabbing one of Louis’ hands and playing with his fingers.

“It’s your birthday, love. I’m up for whatever you want to do.”

“Could we just stay in tonight?”

“Course we can.” Louis answered, resting the side of his face against the top of Harry’s head.

“I don’t want you to go tomorrow.” Harry said weakly.

“I’m ready to go home.” Louis admitted. “But I don’t think it’s sunk in for me yet that I’m not bringing you back with me.”

Harry exhaled loudly at that and pulled his legs under him on the seat, his gangly limbs struggling in the scrunched car. Louis did everything he could to keep from laughing at this much larger man who was trying to make himself small enough to cuddle with Louis. It was almost impossible to believe that this was the same person who had become so angry a few minutes earlier.

Harry’s head lifted from Louis’ shoulder to kiss him lightly on the neck.

“You’re everything, Louis.” He said softly.

“You’re everything too, Harry.”

~

LA’s arid landscape broke through the clouds in one deft swoop, a wash of familiar yellow and brown that marked his arrival back home. His fingers continued to tighten around his armrest in the white knuckled death grip he had maintained since they’d left European air space.

He felt knocked back and forth between two poles, both overwhelmingly excited to finally be back home, and yet desperately thinking back to his goodbye with Harry. They’d become so used to the airport goodbyes that it had become routine; a few longing hugs and slow kisses, followed by the kind of simmering eye contact that surely made the rest of Harry’s security uncomfortable.

It had almost become comforting to Louis in a way, to finally have something routine with Harry. Their relationship had blossomed so suddenly that Louis still found himself blindsided at every turn, so finally there was at least one thing that felt familiar between the two of them.

But the last goodbye had been markedly different. Harry, of course, didn’t say anything that he thought might upset Louis, but his eyes had spoken volumes. He wanted so desperately for Louis to stay.

He had those quivering, frightened eyes that Louis had promised he’d never force onto Harry’s face again. But this time, Louis hadn’t been the cause. There were other forces that were frightening Harry, and this time, he just wanted to keep Louis by his side.
But even though it felt like his insides were actually clawing their way out of his body in an attempt to stay with Harry and never say goodbye again, Louis had no other choice but to get on that plane. Press for Metal Heart was kicking into high gear, so the next two months of Louis’ life were going to be spent giving interviews and making appearances full time.

Despite exhaustion and utter boredom, Louis couldn’t get himself to nod off once on the seven hour flight, watching his own leg bob up and down anxiously as he ticked away how many hours were now separating him and his boyfriend. It was obsessive, yes, but Harry was worth the obsession.

He was more than slightly aware that a few people on the plane had recognized him and were cataloging his every move, but he still couldn’t be bothered to do anything besides stare at the tray table in front of him. These few fellow passengers turned into a small group after they’d touched down, looming behind him and taking what they thought to be furtive photos as he made his way to the baggage claim.

It had now been nearly nine hours since he’d seen Harry, so his insides were completely worn from the tugging match between his conflicting emotions. Because of this, he was entirely incapable of retaining his dignity once he spotted Zayn and Liam.

Admittedly, in this post 9/11 world, you should refrain from making any sudden movements inside an airport, even if you’re already off the plane. This, however, did not stop Louis from barreling towards the two of them in a full sprint and launching himself onto Zayn with a spine snapping hug.

Zayn laughed through the crushing embrace until Louis finally let him go, turning to Liam and pulling him in with a murmured, “Get over here, you slab of beef.”

As much as Louis had taken a sadistic pleasure in keeping the two of them in the dark about his and Harry’s affair, now that his two best friends in the world were within arm’s reach, he felt himself completely melting into sentimental goo.

A well played puppy dog pout convinced Liam to deal with Louis’ luggage so the trio headed out to Liam’s car with Zayn glued to Louis’ side and asking nearly a thousand questions per minute. Louis stopped his interrogation short as they reached to car so he could do the one thing he’d been itching to do since he’d left: call Harry.

“Louis?” Harry answered, his voice jubilant.

“But calling to let you know that the plane did in fact crash and I died. Sorry about that.” Louis said, leaning against the side of the car and watching Liam stuff his bags into the boot without even considering offering any assistance.

“Don’t joke about that.” Harry said, though he was laughing. “I’d be very sad if you crashed and died.”

“Oh really? How sad?”

“I wouldn’t be able to stop crying for at least a day.” Harry said.

“Ah, honey, an entire day? That’s so sweet.”

“I said at least an entire day. Who knows. I might even cry up to two days.” He said snarkily. “You with Zayn and Liam?”
“Yeah. I should probably start paying attention to them now.”

“Probably a good idea.”

“You’ll call me before you fall asleep?”

“Of course.” Harry said. “I miss you already.”

“Miss you too.” Louis responded, but he bit down suddenly on his lip as another three word phrase almost spilled out of him. He hung up in a panic, his eyes growing wide and his pulse quickening as the words shot through his thoughts.

Louis had almost said, “I love you.” He’d only been with Harry for a month and a half, most of which had been long-distance, and for some reason during a short call to just check in and let him know his plane had landed, Louis had almost said, “I love you” as a nonchalant goodbye. And yes, from what he’d seen in his friend’s other relationships, this wasn’t particularly premature. There was just one resounding fact that was making Louis panic, which was that he’d only ever said those words to one other person before, and it had taken him six months.

Feeling the urge to say it already was blindsiding him.

“Was that Harry?” Asked Zayn, interrupting Louis from his intense staring match with his phone. Louis looked up to see both of their knowing smiles before he opened the car door.

“No. That was Niall. We’re having an affair.” He answered as everyone sat down and Liam started the car.

“Yeah. I saw something about that.” Zayn added. “You two looked very happy together.”

They joked for the rest of the car ride, catching up on the last couple of months of the movie shoot and each other’s lives. Louis tried to ever-so-subtly gauge where Zayn and Liam’s romance had progressed to, but Liam shut him down with a steely glare every time the conversation turned that direction. This was fine with Louis, because he knew that all he needed was to put a drink in Zayn’s hand to get all of the details.

Walking into his house for the first time in months was a tumult of mixed emotions. Of course he was happy to be home, but this had been the home he’d shared with Joshua. When Louis left for Manchester, he’d been only a couple of weeks out of a horrifying break up with a dislocated shoulder to show for it. He’d been completely miserable, desperately trying to convince himself that he could live without Harry even though something deep inside knew that he had just ruined the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Now, two months later, his problems were completely different. Harry was his boyfriend, and just the mention of his name made Louis’ heart seize up with a golden glow. But scarcely a day earlier, a panel of men in suits had crashed their little romantic bubble down on top of them.

And this realization made Louis finally stop skirting the issue.

“So, let’s address the elephant in the room, shall we?” Louis suggested as he fell onto one of his sofas. Liam nodded but avoided Louis’ gaze as he sat down. Zayn sat on the armrest beside him and let his hand linger on Liam’s shoulder as if for emotional support. This made Louis gulp audibly.

“I got a call yesterday from Harry’s management about your relationship, but I had to tell them that I honestly didn’t know any of the details of what’s going on.” Liam said slowly. “Could you kind
of walk me through the timeline?”

“Erm,” Louis began. “We’ve been together since New Years. We’ve been visiting each other back and forth since then, and I was visiting him for a late birthday party when they got the picture of us.”

“Okay.” Liam said, nodding as if pieces of a puzzle were slotting into place. “So you and Harry are officially a couple?”

“Yup.” Louis responded, not missing Zayn’s fleeting grin.

“So Harry’s people are pretty terrifying.” Liam admitted. “Like, I was afraid if I said the wrong thing, it would end in a lawsuit. So there’s no fucking way I’m just going to let them yank you and Harry around. I’ve been talking to the publicity team for Metal Heart all day and I’m basically in a task force with a couple of them to just handle yours and Harry’s relationship. The big goal right now is to drum up a bunch of publicity around you that distracts from you and Harry, but also brings attention over to the movie.”

“And I had a really great idea, but Liam doesn’t like it.” Zayn pointed out.

“It’s not that I don’t like it, I just feel like things could go really wrong.” Liam defended himself. Louis got the immediate impression that they’d had this conversation many times.

“What’s the idea?” Louis asked.

“Well Harry has a fake girlfriend, right?” Zayn asked, and Louis already knew where he was going.

“You want me to find a fake boyfriend?”

“I just think that if we sent out some pictures of you with another guy, such as, maybe, your gay model best friend, the tabloids would be able to draw their own conclusions.” Zayn explained.

“You want to be my fake boyfriend?”

“Wouldn’t you rather it was me than some random guy?” Zayn asked. “We could just act how we normally do, and it would take a lot of the heat off of you and Harry. The four of us could probably even go out publicly, because then it would just look like we’re there as a couple and we brought along some of friends.”

Louis sat back in thought and mulled over the idea, realizing that it was very appealing. But there was one glaring problem that he couldn’t get past. “I couldn’t do that to Liam if he isn’t comfortable with it.”

“Li, come on.” complained Zayn.

“It’s not that I’m uncomfortable with it.” Liam clarified. “Like, I’m not that possessive, or anything. I know you guys are just friends. But what if something crazy happens, like me and Zayn get papped somewhere, then Zayn gets torn apart on the news for being a cheater?”

“I’m willing to take that risk for Louis.” Zayn said. “We’ll be careful.”

“But what about Harry? We don’t even know how he’d feel about it.”

“I can ask him.” Louis said quietly, still thinking everything over. He had to admit how much it made sense. All it would take was one picture holding hands with Zayn, then suddenly everything
pinning him to Harry would look like conspiratorial speculation.

They put the conversation on hold for the time being and helped Louis unpack and make dinner. After a lengthy phone conversation with Nona following their few days of separation, Harry finally called to describe his entire day in vivid detail, down to the color of napkin he had at lunch and how it complemented his mood.

“So, serious question.” Louis said calmly, halting Harry’s words.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Well, nothing new. Same problem as the other day.” Louis said, and he could hear Harry’s sharp intake of breath.

“Yeah?”

“Liam and Zayn have a little idea. I don’t know if you’re going to like it, but at least think about it before you respond.”

“Okay?”

“We kind of, maybe, thought it would be a good idea if Zayn and I, like, went out together and got some pictures in front of the paps. You know? Because Zayn’s pretty well known in the modeling industry and he already came out a few years ago.”

“So people will think you’re together.”

“Yeah, but, we don’t have to confirm it, or anything. We don’t have to keep up a lie all the time. It’s just a temporary little fix. A few pictures. That’s it.” Louis held his breath as he waited for Harry to respond.

“Hmm.” He hummed, causing Louis to prickle with anxiety. “Well, I guess, like, I can’t really complain. Since I have Arrienne, and everything.”

“But if you’re not okay with it, then I won’t do it.”

“I mean, I don’t really like it, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it. I want people to know we’re together, because I want everyone to know how lucky I am, but we can’t do that. And I see how this would really help.”

“I don’t have to do it. Not if you don’t like it.”

“No, Louis. You should do it.” Harry said resolutely.

“Are you sure?”

“No. But you still should.”

And all Louis wanted to do was to wrap himself around Harry and let him know how fantastic he was, but an ocean and two continents divided them. Instead, Louis could only tighten his grip around his phone.
There were already cameras flashing, which shouldn’t have come as any surprise. They’d been planted there especially to document Louis and Zayn, so it was time to put on a show for them. They were at the bar in a courtyard restaurant in the middle of a resort hotel, giving the photographers a vantage point on a balcony above them. Apparently, Louis’ publicity team had decided that a hotel bar seemed the most likely place for him and Zayn to get a couple of drinks if they were an actual couple.

They both leaned against the bar, facing each other, as they finished off their first drinks. The first layer of alcohol was settling into a bubbly bliss, so Louis scooted closer to Zayn.

“Well Zayn Malik, I think it’s time we decided to fall in love.” Louis said dramatically.

“I agree.” Zayn said as their drinks were replaced. “Let’s laugh while we make eye contact. People who are in love do that, right?”

“Oh, probably.” Louis said, laughing theatrically at Zayn in a gesture for the cameras.

“That was terrible, Louis. I thought you were an actor.” Zayn chided.

“Here, new idea. I’m going to put a hand on your waist while you tell me what it’s like to have sex with Liam.”

Zayn sputtered over his drink as he laughed, sinking into Louis as he wrapped his arms around him.

“Mmm, no. Can’t tell you that.” Zayn said. “You’re his friend. Conflict of interest.”

“But, oh my god, please.” Louis begged, knowing that their close proximity was probably making the photographers go wild. “He’s like a total animal, right? Roaring and tearing out his chest hair?”

“No.” Zayn continued to laugh. “There’s no roaring. He’s not very noisy. He gets really focused, actually. Like, fixated on the task at hand.”

“You’re joking!” Louis guffawed. “Is he like, ‘Lie back Zayn. I learned this during a sports medicine seminar at Uni’?”

“No! Stop!” Zayn chuckled. “So what’s Harry like, then?”

“Wouldn’t know. We haven’t had sex yet.” Louis answered, the words spilling out through his tipsy fog before he could shut his own mouth. “Seriously?”

“I should not have said that.” Louis gaped, blown away by his own stupidity.

“Ah, come on. It’s me. You can tell me anything.” Zayn reasoned, sipping from his drink coyly in the hopes that Louis would elaborate. Louis clenched his jaw tightly in an attempt to keep his thoughts to himself, but the last two months of hiding his relationship with Harry had created a burgeoning volcano inside him. All he wanted to do was just talk about his boyfriend with his best friend, and the double margarita he’d just downed was making it hard to resist the urge to explode.

“We’ve done plenty of stuff together, but we haven’t had actual sex yet.” Louis explained.

“Why?”

“Trusting people is kind of hard for Harry.” Louis admitted, looking at the sweat beading around
his glass. “He’s only been in love once, and he had his heart broken, so we’re taking things kind of slow.”

“That’s sweet.” Zayn cooed. “I want to point out that just now, when you were talking about Harry, you had this look on your face that I’ve never seen on you before.”

Louis felt his face split with a grin. “Yeah. I’m really happy.”

“So things are going good, right? You only leave me in the dark when things are good, since you have nothing to complain about.”

“Yeah, everything’s really good. Perfect, kind of.” Louis said, his voice trailing off as he looked down.

“Except?”

“It’s not a big thing. Compared to how great he is about everything else, it’s really not a big thing. It shouldn’t even bother me.”

“But?”

“The other day, back in France, I saw him freak out a bit. And I’ve seen him upset before, but this was different.” Louis said, remembering his conversation with Harry in the car after they’d talked to his management. “He was just so convinced that everything was going to fall apart and that I was going to leave him. And there was just something in the way he looked at me, and I could tell he wasn’t just being neurotic. He actually thought everything was going to go to shit. He wasn’t himself, you know? He wasn’t Harry. Niall’s told me some stories about how his emotions can hit him really hard. So just, knowing that plus actually seeing a little bit of it, it kind of scares me.”

“What about it scares you?”

“He just - I’m afraid he doesn’t see it. How great he is. He doesn’t believe in himself at all, and it scares me.”

“But Louis, that’s what you’re there for.” Zayn reasoned, scooting closer and looking Louis directly in the eye. “You’re there to tell him he’s great and prove that you’re not going to leave him. He’ll learn that someday.” Louis nodded. “And, I mean, it wasn’t a big fight, was it?”

“No, not at all. It was honestly only a couple of minutes. I’d just never seen him like that before, so it kind of bugged me. It’s probably nothing, really.”

“It’ll be nothing once he gets back here.” Zayn said. “When do you see him next?”

“Oscars, then he has three more weeks of the tour, then he’s back for good.”

“I’ll toast to that.” Announced Zayn, holding his drink up.

“M’gonna bite your ear, okay?” Louis asked, pushing his uneasiness back. “Good picture for the internet, and all that.”

“It’s your show, darling.”
“So what can you tell us about your friend Zayn Malik?”

“That he is indeed a friend. A rather gorgeous friend, admittedly, but I’m sure anyone with functioning eyes is aware of that.”

The reporter licked her lips and cocked an eyebrow, clearly not impressed with his answer. The constant flash of photos was starting to become a dull background distraction to Louis now that he was nearly halfway down the red carpet, and he was mostly successful in ignoring the headache that had started blossoming from his last photo op with Eleanor.

He’d anticipated a glowing moment of grandeur from walking the red carpet at his first Academy Awards. All day, he’d been in and of hair and make up and interview prep, but now that the actual moment had come, he was surprisingly underwhelmed. Actually, annoyed might be a more accurate term for it.

The photos were ceaseless, and he continually had to wade through several questions about his alleged romance with Zayn before anyone actually asked anything about Metal Heart. By the time they finally asked something about the movie, it tended to be another banal, repetitive question which he would try to answer in an original way before his keeper ushered him further down the carpet.

He rotated these excuses continually through his head in an attempt to convince himself that there were many reasons why he wasn’t enjoying one of the most magical nights in Hollywood. But, in truth, there was only one reason he felt grumpy: Harry was here with Arrienne.

“So are you excited for your new film, Metal Heart to finally come out? I feel like people have been excited for it for forever.” The reporter continued.

“Yes, it’s definitely been a long ride and I can’t tell you how excited we are for people to finally see it.” Louis answered.

“Do you think you’ll be sending you back here next year?” She asked jokingly.

“Oh yes, definitely. As you know, superhero movies always get nominated for prestigious awards.”

The reporter started to speak again, but Louis’ head whipped around as he heard a familiar voice behind him.

“Lulu!” Nona called, but Louis was already closing the distance between them to wrap her in a spinning hug. Her glittering floor length gown unfurled as they spun. “You look lovely, sweetheart.” She said, petting his hair.

“So do you. Obviously.”

“Have you seen Curly yet?” She asked, using the nickname they’d agreed on during one of their many late night phone calls in which he caught her up to date on the covert relationship situation.

“Fleetingly.” He answered, looking furtively to the side to make sure there was enough room between the two of them and the line of reporters to speak freely. “Managed to see him plant a contractually obligated kiss on the red monster.” He grumbled.

“I’ll talk shit about her in the bathroom, if you’d like.” Nona offered.
“Nothing in the world would make me happier.”

This proved to be an untrue statement, however, as Louis neared the end of the procession and caught sight of Harry once again. He was posing with Arrienne, his hand around her waist and his smile wooden. Louis had seen the two of them together before, but this was the first time he’d had to watch Harry touch her since they’d become an official couple.

He hadn’t anticipated the way that his spine seized and snarled.

Harry saw him where Louis was lingering about thirty yards away, excusing himself from Arrienne’s side and trying to walk over to Louis in a way that didn’t look like a direct bee-line. Management had given them permission to talk once during the red carpet to keep up the appearance that they were good friends, knowing it would look suspicious if they completely ignored each other. They were not allowed, however, to make any physical contact that could be caught on camera.

It looked like Harry had chosen this moment for them, and Louis soon realized this made him much happier than any trash-talking Nona might be capable of.

As always, Harry was radiant from the top of his head to soles of his boots. And no, apparently, not even an event as elegant as the Oscars could convince Harry to button his shirt all the way. But honestly, Louis wouldn’t have had it any other way.

He stopped a foot short of Louis, watching him with an understated grin and stuffing his hands into his pockets as if this were the only way he could keep from touching him.

“Hi.” Harry said happily.

“Hi.” Louis echoed.

“I can’t even explain how badly I want to kiss you right now.” Harry mumbled.

“Believe me, I totally understand.”

“You look upset.”

“Well, yeah, I am.” Louis said, as if this were obvious. “Aren’t you?”

“Nope.” Harry said brightly.

“Why not?”

“Because I just keep telling myself about how great this is going to be next year.” He pointed out. “You’ll be here as a nominee, and I’ll be here as your date.”

Louis had to look down to hide the fact that he’d nearly choked and the three words had reappeared in his head.

I love you.

“I can’t wait.” He managed to get out, trying to retain some of his dignity. He was failing at this though, if Harry’s knowing smile was an indicator. “Are we allowed to talk at the Vanity Fair party, at all?”

“Was thinking about skipping it, actually.”
“I thought your management made a big deal about getting pictures there with Arrienne.” Louis pointed out.

“Yeah, but I think we could sneak away. I’d really rather go back to your place.”

“Back to my place?” Louis gaped. “Back to my house, rather than going to one of the most glamorous parties of the year?”

“Do you not want that?”

“No. I mean, I want that very, very much. You have no idea.” Louis backtracked. “But, Harry, you just flew in a few hours ago. Don’t you want to go home before you go to my house?”

Harry shook his head. “You feel like home to me.”

And, well, that was definitely settled.

Yes, the Vanity Fair party would give him the chance to get drunk with some of the legends that made him chose to be an actor, but it was all too easy for him to trade that for a night with his boy.

~

Louis had only opened his car door a fraction of an inch before Harry’s hand shot across his chest.

“Wait! No! Don’t get out yet!” Harry objected as he closed Louis’ door, then turned and disappeared out his own door without explanation. Louis gave the driver a fleeting glance to see if he was as annoyed with their antics as most of their drivers usually were.

He was.

Harry circled the car quickly before coming to a sudden halt outside Louis’ door, taking a moment to adjust his posture and straighten his jacket before opening it. Louis was biting rather harshly into the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as he started to step out, but this apparently wasn’t the plan. Harry ducked down suddenly and slid one arm behind Louis’ back and the other under his legs. In one swoop, he lifted Louis in his arms bridal style.

“Harry!” Louis squeaked as he squirmed.

“Thank you for the ride! Your driving was lovely.” Harry said to the driver as he struggled to close the door with his foot. He adjusted his hold on Louis before making his trek up to the front door.

“I need you to open the door.” Harry responded without answering Louis’ question. Louis dug around in the pocket of his slacks until he found his keys and made to open the door.

“Angle me down a bit.” He said, chuckling as Harry swooped down so Louis could get at the lock. He struggled to open it one handed, but once he turned the knob Harry burst through, spinning as he carried Louis inside. “Am I your bride or something? You had to carry me over the threshold?”

“Maaaaaybe.” Harry said, elongating the word playfully. He was practically skipping across the hardwood floors, despite the load in his arms.
“If either of us is a bride in this situation, it’s you Harold.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re literally a Disney princess.” Louis pointed out. Harry opened his mouth to protest, but ended up shrugging as he realized Louis’ logic was sound. Louis was about to elaborate on this point, but his words melted into a content sigh as he watched the familiar walls of his house pass by behind Harry’s profile, realizing that it finally felt like home again.

“Bedroom?” Harry asked.

“Bedroom.” Louis agreed, tightening his grip on Harry’s neck with a squeak as he spun again without warning. They spilled into the bedroom with Harry halting at the foot of the bed. “Harry Styles, don’t you dare throw me onto that bed like a rag doll.”

“I hadn’t actually considered that.” Harry confessed, taking a moment to consider his options.

“Harry-“

But Louis was already being tossed through the air, falling onto the duvet in a pile of laughter and gesticulating limbs. Harry hopped up beside him happily, almost feline in the way he sat. Louis rolled over to face him.

“I have an idea and I think it’s a good one.” Louis announced.

“What’s that?”


“Hmm, that is a good idea.” Harry admitted with a devilish smirk. He hopped from the bed and turned to face Louis, letting his blazer drop dramatically from his shoulders to his elbows. His eyes fell on Louis as his mouth hung open, just as the blazer fell to the floor. Louis squawked out a laugh before he could stop himself. “What?”

“Is this supposed to be a strip tease?” Louis asked.

“Obviously.”

“Well, it’s very theatrical.” Louis joked. Harry mock-pouted as he undid the last few buttons of his shirt.

“You can make fun of me all you want, but I got voted the seventh sexiest man in the world in Glamour Magazine last year.” Harry argued as his shirt joined his blazer on the floor. Louis’ hand tightened where it was gripping the duvet as he looked at Harry’s chest, now unencumbered by fabric. Harry sauntered over to the bed and crawled onto the edge in front of Louis, kneeling over him.

“Are you serious? Aren’t there like a hundred people on that list?” Louis asked as he drew himself closer to Harry, now eve level with his stomach. His fingers curled around Harry’s waist and he gently kissed the taut skin under his belly button. “Do you still have the article? Can we frame it?”

“That’s a little vain, don’t you think?”

“Not if it’s for me.” Louis argued, letting his words reverberate against Harry’s skin. “We could
keep it on my side of the bed.” Harry’s fingers traced slowly through Louis’ hair.

“Does that mean that there’s a side of the bed that’s mine?”

“Yup. That one.” Louis responded, opening his mouth to lick a stripe slowly up Harry’s faint happy trail. Harry’s eyes fluttered.

“Fine, but only if I can keep a framed picture of you in your Metal Heart costume on my side.” Harry countered, his voice already thickening.

“Is that a fantasy of yours?”

“Would you think differently of me if I said yes?”

Louis licked up Harry’s abs by means of a response, leaving Harry’s skin goose-pimpled. Harry’s fingers moved gingerly through Louis’ hair, his grip loose as his finger tips left an electrified trail across his scalp. This was how it always was with Harry, soft and loving when he could easily be rough and demanding. Louis kissed up Harry’s chest, rising up onto his own knees so their mouths could meet.

Their lips brushed together with what was now a practiced familiarity as Louis looped his arms around Harry’s waist and pulled him in tight. Harry’s hand fell from Louis’ hair, stroking down the side of his face with a soft reverence as his fingers cupped the curves of Louis’ cheek. Louis broke away suddenly as he swooped in towards the tender spot behind Harry’s ear, knowing that the larger man would immediately dissolve into putty. With a hitched breath, Harry’s arms went numb and hooked around Louis neck for support. He leaned into Louis, his head falling onto his shoulder and giving him more access to the side of his neck. Louis nipped at him, his tongue lathing across Harry’s skin with a growing sense of urgency.

“Louis.” Harry whispered, his voice already quivering and weak.

“Hmm?”

“I want - I have a -“ Harry stammered. “I want to-“

Louis pulled his plumping lips away from Harry’s neck and ran his thumb over the slowly darkening mark he’d left behind. Only a moment earlier, Harry had been cocky and playful; now he was already shuddering and spent as he hung onto Louis’ frame. Luckily, Louis had already learned a few secrets to Harry’s on and off switch. If his ear was what wrecked him, it was also what got him going again.

He leaned in close and puffed a hot breath against Harry’s ear before whispering, “What is it, baby?”

Harry’s hands were suddenly on both sides of Louis’ face, coaxing him into looking at him. Louis froze for a moment in surprise before Harry seared their lips together, tonguing into Louis’ mouth feverishly. He pushed him onto his back, draping his body over Louis and running a frantic hand down his chest. He kissed Louis with almost a manic intensity, writhing down into him until they both had to pull away and to let air into their lungs. Their lips brushed together with only the ghost of a touch as Harry’s eyes bore into Louis’.

“I want you, Louis.” He breathed.

“You have me, Harry.” Louis assured him, wrapping Harry in his arms and pulling him tighter.
“No, I mean - I know that - but, I mean,” Harry continued to murmur, dropping down to rest his forehead against Louis’. Louis ran a firm hand down Harry’s naked back, noticing the sweat that was already beading there.

“What’s wrong, love?” Louis asked quietly, watching as Harry’s big, green eyes flicked back up to meet his.

“I want you, Louis.” Harry repeated, his head sinking down until his chin was hooked over Louis’ shoulder. “I want all of you. Inside me. I want you.”

And those words shot below Louis’ waistline with a red, pulsating heat that rattled him until he was speechless. Coherent speech had long since left the realm of possibility, so Louis could only think to pull Harry against his chest even tighter. The weight of Harry against Louis’ body was suddenly so present and intoxicating, every inch of contact feeling like it was sizzling with fireworks. But that sensation was nothing compared to the surge of yearning weaving it’s way through Louis’ chest.

And at the same time, yearning didn’t even begin to define what Louis was feeling. It didn’t come from a place of lust for the gorgeous man who was half naked and pressed against him; it stemmed from the fact that he completely cherished and treasured this beautiful boy trembling in his arms. He gripped at Harry desperately, squeezing him until he hoped he understood how desperately he never wanted to let go.

“Lou, are you okay?” Harry asked, pulling back to look Louis in the eye again. Louis stared back at him, sinking into Harry’s eyes and cataloguing their every detail. They were just so excruciatingly green around his lust blown pupils. Louis had seen those gaping, black wells in the center of Harry’s irises before, but he could still tell that Harry was sober; he was still there behind his eyes. It wasn’t a combination of drugs and alcohol that had caused Harry’s pupils to grow past their normal size, it was Louis.

“Yes, Harry. Oh my god, yes.” Louis breathed, pulling Harry into another frantic kiss and tasting the lush warmth of his mouth before begrudgingly separating. “But are you sure? You’re absolutely so sure?”

“I’m sure, Louis.” Harry promised him. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

And the impassioned sheen glazing Harry’s eyes struck Louis like a lightning bolt, somehow managing to spark a a trace of wetness at the corners of his eyes as three words seared his thoughts.

I love you.

“God, Harry.” Louis murmured against Harry’s lips, meeting him with an equal amount of desperation as he writhed underneath his commanding frame. Harry guided Louis’ hand to cup the swell of his arse as their lips smacked and the fabric of their trousers grew warm from friction. Harry then pulled away as he kissed a trail of eager kisses down Louis’ neck and his fingers unsnapped the buttons over his chest. Louis sank back against the bed, feeling completely powerless in the wake of his own emotions.

I love you so much.

His shirt was finally ripped open, and Harry’s roving hand brushed over Louis’ skin, dipping into each curve of his hips and stomach. He tried with every fiber of his being to just lie back and take in the sensations, but he was starting to feel trapped in his remaining clothing. With a quick peck, he separated himself from Harry and struggled the rest of the way out of his shirt and suit jacket.
Catching on quickly, Harry took to the button of his own trousers and quickly stripped them off.

Louis sat back and watched him as he crawled slowly back up the bed, his lips a plump and virulent, kiss bitten red. The fact that Louis had been what made them that color sent another wave down to his groin, which made him even more eager to shed his trousers.

Harry’s lips latched down onto Louis’ chest, sucking tenderly as he undid Louis’ belt. With each second, his hot mouth drifted lower, and Louis laid back against the bed as he submitted himself to the soft flitting of Harry’s tongue. It was almost as if his consciousness was drifting in and out, because suddenly, his engorged cock was in Harry’s hand, all semblance of clothing shed on the other side of the room.

_I love you so fucking much._

He almost opened his mouth to say it, but he was cut short as Harry dropped back onto him, rutting their hard ons against each other and hooking his arms underneath Louis. Louis bit down into Harry’s shoulder as some form of an anchor, gripping tighter into him as Harry gasped. He joined the rhythmic press of their hips, his groin enflamed in a fiery warmth that was causing his breath to catch and his pulse to pound out of control. Harry’s cock was solid on top of him as it slid up Louis’ stomach in a quickening tempo, and every cell of Louis’ body was boiling.

Without a second thought he found his hand darting out toward the bed side table in search of lube, but his arm fell limp as he made an unfortunate realization. Louis’ movements stopped suddenly as his head fell back onto the pillow in down-trodden defeat.

Harry noticed immediately and his head snapped back to look at Louis.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked, his hand creeping up to cradle the side of Louis’ face. Louis, however, did not react, still internally berating himself behind closed eyelids.

“I’ve made an embarrassing oversight.”

“What?” Harry asked timidly before pulling away. Louis’s eyes burst open and he pulled Harry back down, intent on making sure Harry knew he wasn’t at fault. Harry sunk back into him with trepidation as Louis pressed his forehead against Harry’s shoulder.

“I didn’t know we were going to do this tonight, and I was in a relationship for three years, so…” Louis trailed off, his arms encircling Harry’s back in embarrassment.

“So?” Harry questioned, his voice tremulous.

“So I might not have any condoms in house.” Louis said quickly, expelling the truth before he could chicken out of it. Harry stiffened for a fraction of a second before his entire body shook with laughter.

“That’s what you’re upset about?” Harry asked, rolling off of Louis and onto his side. Louis rolled over as well so that they were facing each other, only a few inches separating them. Harry’s face was alight with a relieved smile. “I thought you were going to say you weren’t ready for this, or you were having second thoughts about me, or something.”

“Jesus, no Harry.” Louis said, rubbing his own flushed face. “How could you possibly think that? You’ve barely got me out of my pants and I don’t even feel like I’m on Earth anymore.”

“As for condoms, I’d like to point out that we should have thought about that before the thousandth time you gave me blow job.” Harry said.
“I know, I just-” Louis tried to explain. “I didn’t want to presume, or anything. You know?” Louis inched closer to Harry as Harry’s hand found Louis’ hip.

“I’m clean.” Harry said, his eyes warm. “They make us get check ups at the beginning of the tour, and I always get an STD test. Wasn’t that surprising, though, since it’s been forever since I’ve been with someone.”

Another pulse shot through Louis as he remembered Harry mentioning that he hadn’t been interested in anyone else since they’d met. Louis could almost say the same of himself, considering that he and Joshua hadn’t had sex for nearly two months when they broke up.

“I’m clean, too.” Louis said. “I had to go to the doctor once every couple of weeks during the movie so he could monitor my weight loss. I got checked right after we started talking again. I just wanted to make sure that I wasn’t going to hurt you, or anything.” Harry’s brow furrowed as his fingers cupped the curve of Louis’ neck.

“You were worried about that?” He asked. “You thought Joshua might have cheated on you, or something?”

“I don’t know.” Louis admitted, knowing that his cheeks were growing red in embarrassment. “I don’t trust him, so who knows what he did?”

“I don’t think he would have cheated on you.”

“Nope, I guess the cheating was just for me.” Louis said with a dark laugh, the mock-humor sparking something in Harry.

“Lou, that’s not what I meant.” Harry clarified, sidling up even closer to Louis so that he couldn’t avoid making eye contact. “I just - I meant that he was totally obsessed with you. He still is. And I understand that, because you’re you.”

Louis didn’t know how to respond except to bring his hand to trace down Harry’s jaw line and press a soft peck to his lips.

“So no condoms?” Louis clarified, watching as Harry bit his lip in anticipation and nodded. Louis dipped in for another kiss and shifted his weight onto Harry as he pointed to the bedside table. “Lube.” He mumbled against Harry’s mouth.

Harry flung a hand behind him blindly as he grappled with the drawer handle, never once breaking the deepening kiss they were locked into. Their breaths were growing haggard and every sinew of Louis’ body was filling with heat again as he crawled onto Harry’s chest, snatching the small bottle away from him and opening the top with a pop.

He lathered up his fingers as Harry’s legs parted, falling open in front of Louis as he languidly stroked his cock. The sight practically pummeled Louis, ensuring that he was achingly hard and very ready for this. They fell back into a fast pace with Louis pressing a few feverish kisses to the inside of Harry’s thigh before he grabbed his leg and yanked it up onto his shoulder.

Leaning in, Louis finally pressed his slippery fingers to Harry’s hole, swirling around the tight muscles before pushing slowly inside. Harry was already struggling through a light, breathy moan that sharpened in pitch as Louis stopped at his knuckle. He pulsed there and waited for a cue from Harry, who was already bucking his hips slightly with impatience.

“Lou, c’mon.” Harry groaned, his voice reaching a higher octave that Louis had never heard him use outside of the bedroom.
Louis didn’t need to be told twice, so without wasting another breath waiting he pressed further into Harry, pulling in and out quickly as he ran his other hand up and down his thigh. Harry was already gone for it, clenching his eyes shut and moving his hips into the friction.

“This okay?” Louis asked, watching as Harry worked through a round of shallow breaths.

“More. Please. More.” Harry stammered, moaning softly as Louis inserted another finger. He thrust into Harry harder and deeper, meeting the quickening momentum of Harry’s hips as he pushed back against Louis’ fingers eagerly. His hand pumped up and down his cock and swirled over the leaking precome on his tip, still muttering his delicate little cries. “Yes, Louis. C’mon. More.”

Louis could feel the sweat surfacing on his forehead as his fingers thrust further into Harry, causing Harry’s whole body to contract and squirm. He was just so deliciously eager for it, which was turning Louis on much more than he’d thought previously possible. His cock was throbbing at this point, nearly white-hot until Harry suddenly froze.

“Fuck, m’not gonna last.” Harry mumbled, pulling his hand away from his own length. “Need you. Now. Right now. God, Louis, I need you.”

Louis pulled his fingers out immediately, already searching the bed for the lube again. “You sure? You’re good? You’re ready?”

“I’m so ready I might explode.” Harry murmured as Louis slicked up his own dick, talking aimlessly as he waited. “Wanted you for so long. Wanted nobody but you. Can’t believe this. You’re so perfect, Louis. Need you so bad.”

“I need you too, baby.” Louis reassured him, crawling up Harry and falling onto his chest to give him one last kiss.

“How do you want me?” Harry asked.

“Like this is good. On your back.”

“On my back?” Harry questioned, the tremor of worry in his voice giving Louis pause.

“Yeah. I want to see you. Is that not what you want?” Louis asked

“Not it’s - it’s just not - it’s not what I usually do.”

“Why not?”

“I make stupid faces.” Harry confessed, his shimmering eyes looking up to Louis’ in embarrassment.

“What?” Louis gaped, the desperation from the moment before waning as he let more of his weight fall onto Harry’s chest. “Of course you don’t. There’s nothing stupid about you.” Louis gave him a comforting peck to his forehead, then his nose, then his cheek, continuing down his face and neck with featherlight kisses. “You’re beautiful, and amazing.” Louis continued, his lips moving down Harry’s chest and lingering on his sternum. “I love everything about you.”

Every muscle in Louis’ body suddenly froze at what he had just said. It wasn’t the exact phrase that had been plaguing him all night, but it had been close enough. That little word had just slipped out, and he looked up in fear to gauge how Harry was going to respond to it.

And what Louis saw looking back at him was Harry’s face, drowning in complete adoration and
warmth. His eyes glistened with affection as he watched Louis, his fingers moving slowly to caress the tuft of hair behind his ear.

“Louis.” He said slowly, his voice barely above a fleeting rasp.

They watched each other with wide, watery eyes as the moment coiled in on itself; steeped in sentiment and coursing with a burgeoning passion that left Louis overwhelmed. He pulled himself back up Harry’s chest to deliver one more kiss, their lips waxing against each other so slow and deep that the hair stood up on the back of Louis’ neck.

With a last delicate peck to Harry’s lips, Louis sat back and adjusted himself between Harry’s legs. Harry stretched and scooted closer in anticipation, sighing deeply as Louis’ left hand fell heavily onto one of the laurel tattoos on his v line.

“Beautiful.” Louis murmured as his fingers swept over the inked leaves. Harry’s body relaxed at the sound of Louis’ voice, and Louis watched the way his hand moved up and down on Harry’s stomach as he breathed.

Using his free hand, Louis finally lined himself up at Harry’s entrance, feeling himself tense as his tip pressed against his hole. His fingers fanned against Harry’s hip as he pressed forward, stretching Harry open with a languorous slowness. Harry’s tight heat encompassed Louis, their bare skin dragging against each other as Louis sunk deeper and deeper.

“Mmmmmfff,” Harry groaned, his hips nudging up ever so slightly.

Louis could feel his entire body sparking with sensation as Harry took him further and further in. With a heavy gasp, Louis bottomed out, realizing that he had been holding his breath the entire time.

Harry flexed as he adjusted to Louis flush against him, his thighs squeezing against Louis’ slender hips and his hand wrapping around his own cock. Louis pulled back until only his tip remained inside Harry, then dug back in with a ramming speed. Harry released another shrill whimper as Louis filled him back up, pumping himself to the same plodding rhythm as Louis’ heavy thrusts.

Louis sunk in and out, his senses overcome by every part of the man beneath him. His mind was bouncing back and forth between frenetic thoughts, memories of Harry sweltering over his actual image beneath Louis, glimmering with a faint, sweat-laced luster.

He saw Harry from months earlier, hopping up and down to the drone of music on that night they’d first met. His eyes had been just as evergreen that night as they were now, but back then they weren’t the familiar beacons that Louis could find himself falling into for hours. Back then, Louis hadn’t memorized every slight fleck of brown in those eyes, or the way he blinked when he was trying to hide the fact that he was sleepy, or how they somehow seemed to become even more round and perfect when he was swept up with happiness.

Back then, Louis had no idea that the wild haired rockstar with the pretty mouth and glittering eyes would end up here, moaning beneath him through their throes of passion. That this massive celebrity would be scheduled to make post-Oscar appearances with his supermodel girlfriend, only to sneak away to gasp and whimper in Louis’ bed. That in just a few short months, everything Louis knew about his life would be completely flipped around, and one of the most famous musicians in the world would be naked against Louis’ skin, melded together are their hips rolled against each other.

And Louis had no idea that he’d be inescapably in love with him.
“Lou!” Harry cried sharply, his back arching as Louis hit his prostate. He bucked back against each of Louis’ thrusts and tightened around him, sending a simmering surge rippling through Louis’ stomach as he continued to whine. “Fuck - it’s so - nnnngg - fuck - baby-”

“Harry. Oh my god.” Louis moaned, his spine boiling at Harry’s coarse, desperate whimpering. He fell onto Harry’s chest and into the larger man’s embrace, continuing to slam into him as Harry’s breaths hitched. They rocked into each other until Louis felt nearly delirious, only the tug of Harry’s fingers clawing into his back holding him in reality.

Their mouths collided and Harry’s tongue surged past Louis’, licking and exploring every corner voraciously. It was like he was trying to consume him; like he couldn’t get enough of Louis. And Louis felt exactly the same, desperately trying to somehow get deeper, to embed himself further into Harry until they’d never be able to separate. Harry’s legs squeezed Louis tighter as he circled them around his waist and pulled back to nip at his bottom lip.

Not one to be outdone, Louis careened forward, licking up the silky seem behind Harry’s ear. Harry clenched around him suddenly as his cry shuddered out of him, cracked and frail.

“F-fuck.”

“So gorgeous Harry.” Louis whispered, pausing to nibble his earlobe. “So perfect, baby. So perfect for me.”

“Louis I’m - I can’t - I’m gonna-!” Harry rasped, his grip becoming impossibly tighter around Louis’ shoulders as his muscles tensed.

With one last spent, hollow cry, Louis felt Harry’s warm come spurt between their chests. He sighed heavily as he relaxed into the bed, his fingers caressing the length of Louis’ shoulder blades until he was cupping his biceps.


Louis gasped through a thick breath, his pulse pounding in his head as he kept bucking into Harry. Tiny whimpers of his own desperation were escaping him until Harry quieted him with a plush kiss. All sensation in Louis’ body was coursing down his back toward his groin, building toward a scorching heat. Louis’ hand dug into the pillow behind Harry’s head, clutching the fabric.

Harry’s hand uncurled from around Louis’ arm to slip under his hand, relaxing his grip into the pillow as their fingers laced together. Harry closed his fist around Louis’ fingers, anchoring him as he swept him into one more kiss.

With a near-sob, Louis reached his peak and came into Harry, pressing into him as hard as he could manage as he rode the shockwaves out. Louis’ entire body went limp as Harry enveloped him again, both panting against each other’s sweat-glazed necks.

And of all the post-orgasm thoughts to be swirling through Louis’ head, for some reason, he was thinking about Liam.

He was thinking about how he’d somehow ended up with the kind of agent who inserted himself into all aspects of Louis’ career, just to make sure he was being treated well. How he’d ended up with the kind of agent and friend that would chase him out of a house party to bring him down from a panic attack, then spend the rest of the night at his bedside.

And he also thought about how he’d snagged a best friend like Zayn, who had been at his side at his most poor and pathetic moments. Who’d supported and encouraged him as his career derailed
at times, and was comfortable enough with him that he could just reach over and hold his hand or stroke his hair when he felt like Louis needed it.

Or how he had the kind of mother who almost flew across an ocean just because he was going through a break up.

But the reason all of these people were revolving through Louis’ head in that moment was that, between all of these incredible people who cared about him so much, and even when he added the almost four years he’d spent with his life devoted to Joshua, Louis had not once felt as close to another person as he did right then, riding Harry’s chest as his breathing evened out.

They stayed tangled like that in tender silence until Louis reclaimed his senses, finally pulling out of Harry and traipsing toward the ensuite in search of a something to clean themselves up with. Harry watched his departure with a needy pout, waiting until Louis returned with a wet flannel and to gently wipe the mess from Harry’s chest and between his legs. He threw the flannel to the side unceremoniously as Harry scooted further into bed, leaving room for Louis to climb in beside him.

Louis settled in as Harry pulled the duvet over them and turned his back to Louis’ chest, releasing a contented sigh as Louis spooned him. Louis’ thumb grazed over Harry’s skin softly, feeling the way his entire body was subtly shaking.

“You okay?” Louis asked.

“Mhmm.” Harry hummed.

“You’re shivering, love.” Louis pointed out. Harry spun around in his arms to look at him, his face soft with a smile.

“M’just really happy.” He said lightly, pushing Louis’ hair out of his face. “Can’t believe this is real.”

“I can’t either.” Louis admitted affectionately, watching the way Harry’s dimples were poking through his cheeks.

“I don’t think I can sleep right now. What about you?” Harry asked. Louis shook his head, though he knew that he could probably pass out from exhaustion if he just made the mistake of closing his eyes for more than a second. Sleep could wait, however, since Harry was heading back for three more weeks of touring the next afternoon. Louis didn’t want to miss a single second of watching Harry’s dimples if he could help it.

“You probably still don’t have any food in the house, do you?” Harry grumbled.

“I have peanut butter, beer, and canned chili.” Louis said.

“Post sex chili?”

“Only if you make it for me.”

They found themselves on Louis’ sofa within ten minutes, arguing over what to watch on TV as they blew on their steaming hot bowls. Louis sat in the corner of the couch with his legs up on the ottoman, a pillow already poised across his lap for when he knew Harry would fall asleep.

He barely managed to get through his entire bowl before he nestled into Louis’ lap, his hand curled around the fabric of Louis’ sweatpants over his knee. Harry had absolutely refused to put any of his clothes back on, so Louis had tucked a thick blanket around him and was drawing nonsensical
patterns into his shoulder as he watched the mindless late night reruns on the telly.

With a tiny murmur, Harry rolled over in Louis’ lap, curling into his chest until Louis was practically cradling him. His fingers gripped lightly into Louis’ shirt as he let out a deep breath.


“No one.” Harry muttered sleepily, burrowing further into Louis.

“Was it Nick?”

“Dunno.”

“Was it?” Louis repeated, watching as Harry gave a short nod. “I think I might have to pulverize him.”

“S’not very nice.”

“He couldn’t be more wrong, by the way.” Louis said, running a hand down Harry’s arm. “You’re perfect. You’re everything.”

Harry made a soft noise of contentment, drifting back to sleep with a smile on his face. Louis held him tighter, deciding to ignore the telly in favor of watching the way Harry’s face relaxed as he slept.

Even in the darkness, he could see how lovely and beautiful everything about Harry was, and it became even more undeniable how much he was in love with him. He was completely, thoroughly in love with Harry Styles.

And he couldn’t understand why it was so impossible for him to say it.
“Been in the dark for weeks, and I've realized you're all I need, and I hope that I'm not too late. Hope that I'm not too late.”

- James Bay

Harry’s eyes cracked open once again to a pale blur of teal. He pulled back slightly to look up at Louis, the ghostly reflection of the telly playing across his sleeping face. Harry had woken up from his spot on Louis’ lap nearly every half hour when something loud would happen on the all night marathon of *The Golden Girls* that was playing, but he’d always been too lazy to just turn it off.

Moving with a deliberate slowness so as not to wake Louis, Harry and rolled back and stretched behind him toward the remote, blackening the screen with a click. He snuggled back into the warm spot he’d made for himself in Louis’ lap, noticing his boyfriend’s head lolling to the side as he snored quietly.

Harry used to have trouble falling asleep, but it hadn’t been difficult for him to nod off over the last month, since he’d constructed his own version of counting sheep that had always seemed to do the trick. His go-to method was continuing to build the fantasy he’d been constructing of walking down a red carpet someday, hand in hand with Louis.

They’d wear suits that weren’t quiet matching, but were certainly complimentary as the cameras flashed in their wake and captured every tiny show of affection between the two. The photographers would yell their names after them, and they would turn with shared smiles as they stopped to pose like every other couple on the carpet. And when Harry bent down to give the photographers a picture of a kiss, it wouldn’t be Arrienne’s tensed lips that he met. It would be Louis’ soft mouth, and it would be Louis’ blue eyes looking back at him, and it would be Louis’ actual smile beaming as everyone watched them.

It wasn’t a very far-fetch’d fantasy, given Harry’s social standing and the number of times he’d walked down a red carpet. But still, his ribcage gave a familiar clench as the dread seeped back into him, that quiet little voice convincing him that it would never happen.

Even if his management let him come out sometime soon, was it even possible that Louis would stick by his side that long?

He clenched his teeth at the familiar struggle now tensing in his chest.

*Louis isn’t going to leave you. He said he isn’t going to leave you.*

True, but people say things all the time.

*He promised.*

But things change. Would he have made the same promise if he’d known what he was getting into?

Harry burrowed further into Louis' chest, attempting to quiet the voices in his head. No matter what was on the horizon for the two of them, it didn’t change the fact that right at that moment, he was in Louis’ house, cradled in his arms, still pleasantly sore from their lovemaking hours earlier.

He looked up at Louis’ face one more time, finding it difficult to resist staying awake all night and to just stare at him. It physically ached inside Harry when he thought about leaving Louis here all
alone. Yes, he had Zayn and Liam here to watch after him, but that also meant that Joshua was lurking around in the background.

Down to Harry’s very marrow, he did not trust Joshua.

Because Louis was strong. Louis was brave. Louis was everything that Harry wished he could be, but whenever Joshua showed up, Louis crumbled in on himself. Just the idea of leaving Louis on this continent with Joshua made a cold shiver snake through his bones.

Louis muttered lightly as he nudged his shoulders further into the cushion, his neck craning awkwardly to the side to find some support. Harry sat up and ran a gentle hand down the exposed skin of Louis’ neck.

“Lou?”

“Mmm?” Louis muttered, not opening his eyes but sinking further into the cushions. Harry smiled as he sat back and made room for Louis to readjust himself so that he was lying down on the couch. Harry turned over and pulled Louis’ arm taut around his stomach so that he was spooning him, releasing a contented sigh.

He felt Louis press one last, sleepy kiss to the back of his neck before drifting back off to sleep, but Harry was already on a different plane, holding Louis’ hand at a movie premiere as everyone took their picture.

~

Louis jumped to the side as Zayn whirled into the house, a pile of bags and boxes lurching precariously in his arms.

“Yes, I know. It looks like a lot. But just hear me out for a second.” Zayn said as he tore past Louis, heading toward the dining room table to drop the load he was carrying. Louis smirked after him as he closed the door, listening as Zayn continued to prattle on from the other room.

He’d just gotten back from a shoot in New York, and, as was his custom, he’d nearly bought out an entire boutique in an attempt to reinvigorate Louis’ wardrobe. Louis fell back into the couch as Zayn rounded the corner with a pile of shirts across his arms.

“And you’ve told me a thousand times that you don’t like paisley, but you haven’t seen-“ Zayn suddenly stopped dead in his tracks as he saw Louis sitting there, his eyes narrowing in suspiciously.

“What?” Louis asked as the silence dragged on. Zayn didn’t respond, his eyes somehow growing even narrower. “What!?”

“You slept with Harry last night, didn’t you?”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“You did!” Zayn said excitedly, throwing the shirts to the side distractedly and jumping onto the couch beside Louis. “And?”
“And what?”

“Is he still here?”

“No. I just dropped him at the airport a couple of hours ago.” Louis answered, the thought reminding him to check his phone in case Harry had miraculously landed in Spain three hours early.

“When’s he back?”

“Three weeks.”

“But you made love last night.” Zayn pressed, causing Louis to grimace at his word choice.

“Yes. We slept together for the first time last night.” Louis corrected him with a defeated sigh.

“And then we did it again a couple times this morning, but that’s neither here nor there.”

“So how’d it go?”

“Nope. Nuh uh, Zayn.” Louis bit out. “You never tell me anything about Liam, so you don’t get to hear anything about Harry.” Zayn glared at him, weighing his options.

“Fine. We can trade.”

“Yes, finally.” Louis groaned, questions flying through his head at a rampant speed. “Jesus, I don’t even know what to ask first.”

“I do. How’d it go?” Zayn asked as he leaned against the back of the couch, repeating his earlier question.

“It went…well.” Louis answered simply.

“Lou, come on.” Zayn groaned. “Gonna need a few more details. Was it better than-“ Zayn stopped short, his common sense catching up with how ill-advised his next question was about to be. He bit his lip nervously, knowing that Louis had already caught on to his line of questioning.

“That’s complicated.” Louis admitted, reflecting on his own personal ruminations over the same topic.

Had it been better than when he was with Joshua?

And once again, it was complicated.

Despite everything, Louis still felt somewhat protective over his and Joshua’s sexual experiences. The thing was, when they’d gotten together, Louis was coming off what could best be described as a three year fuck bender and which made him feel rather experienced. Joshua, however, didn’t. Louis was Joshua’s first, and the moment had been understandably monumental for both of them. It was the first time Louis had ever been with someone that he cared about that intensely, so Joshua’s sexual skill level hadn’t really mattered.

But as they had grown closer, Joshua had been more open about his insecurities with their sex life. It often wavered back and forth, which Joshua sometimes feeling inadequate with his lack of experience, then at other times he’d grow resentful of Louis’ apparent promiscuity when he was younger. They didn’t like to talk about it, and Louis became so focused on making sure Joshua never felt self-conscious about sex that even now it was difficult for him to think critically about
But in that one night with Harry, that feeling of being with someone he loved in such an intimate
together.
way had blown anything Louis had ever experienced completely out of the water. Harry made
Louis feel like his heart would explode if it started beating even a hair faster. And Harry had more
than proven his sexual aptitude, especially during that surprise in the shower that morning, but that
wasn’t even the beginning of why it was the best sex Louis had ever had. It was because Louis
could laugh with Harry; he could joke and say ridiculous things, then suddenly say something so
soppily sentimental that he’d be embarrassed in any other situation, but not with Harry. Not when
one second he felt like laughing, yet somehow also felt like crying and like growling the dirtiest
thing he could think of into Harry’s ear.

It wasn’t until he’d been joined to Harry in that way that he realized what the difference was, and it
was finally becoming clear what had been missing between Louis and Joshua for the last year:
trust. He trusted Harry wholly and deeply, which made him face the fact that he was in love with
him all the more.

And that was the other issue.

“I have a problem, actually.” Louis admitted.

“What?” Zayn asked. Louis sighed, forcing himself to say the words before he could think of an
excuse to change the subject.

“I’m in love with Harry.”

“Well, yeah, Lou.”

“And it’s like - I have been. For awhile. I don’t even know how long.”

“None of this is news to anyone.”

“But I can’t say it.” Louis said suddenly. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me, because I think
about it all the time. And I know it would mean so much to him if I could just fucking open my
mouth and tell him the truth, but I just can’t fucking say it.”

Zayn hummed quietly as he mulled over Louis’ predicament. “Well, didn’t it take you a long time
before you told Joshua you loved him?”

“Yeah. A little over six months.”

“So this isn’t abnormal for you, Louis.”

“But when I told Joshua I loved him, it was the first time I’d wanted to, so I’d just said it. I wasn’t
grappling with it after a few weeks of dating and terrified to say it.”

“Look, you just came out of a fucked up relationship with the only person you’ve ever loved.”
Zayn explained slowly. “And he betrayed you, Louis. He completely betrayed you. So it’s not that
weird that you’d be hesitant to jump into something so quickly afterwards. I think you just need to
take some time, and eventually it will feel right to say it. And maybe Harry will just say it first, and
then it will feel right.”

“I don’t think he’ll say it first.”

“You don’t?”
“No, I don’t think he’d put himself out there like that.” Louis admitted, realizing how frustrating it was that they both had hang ups like this. “I just want him to come home.” Louis sighed, throwing his legs over Zayn’s lap and leaning into the sofa cushions.

“I know. And he’ll be back soon, and all of this shit will be over.” Zayn said as he smiled warmly. “And at least you’re home, because I really missed you.”

“I missed you too.” Louis said lightly before something clicked in his brain. “Hey! Wait! I’ve just unleashed a barrel full of stuff about Harry and you’ve said nothing about Liam!”

“In my defense, I only asked one question and you didn’t even answer it.”

“Short answer: yes, being with Harry was better than being with Joshua.” Louis answered, garnering a smirk from Zayn. “My turn. How long did it take for you and Liam to bone?”

“We don’t use the word bone.”

“Fine. How long did it take before you made sweet passionate man love?”

“Honestly?” Zayn asked, his face crumpling in embarrassment. “It took, like, maybe twenty minutes.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, I mean, we kissed for the first time on your roof after Harry kind of set us up. And from then until we hooked up, yeah, it was probably only twenty minutes.”

“Ugggh, no! It wasn’t in my house, was it?”

“No. We went to his place because it was closer. He pretty much sped the whole way.”


“You asked! And you were the one that thought he ripped his chest hair out in bed.”

“Yes, because it’s funny when I say it. Liam having sex in reality is just scary and intimidating.”

“I’m afraid I can’t agree.” Zayn countered with a sly grin.

“You’re gross and I don’t like you anymore.”

“When did you and Harry first kiss?”

“Oh, have I not told you the fountain story yet?” Louis asked with a delight. “Basically, Harry was standing near a fountain, then he got on top of the fountain, then he fell into it.”

“And you kissed him?”

“I did.”

“That’s very romantic.”

“It’s hilarious, is what it is.”

“That’s it, I’m making you dinner.” Zayn announced, jumping off the couch. “I need to hear every detail of the fountain kiss story.”
“No, Harry already…” Louis began before trailing off. Zayn turned toward him with one eyebrows cocked.

“Harry already what?”

“Let me explain before you accuse us of being too obsessed with each other.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear this.” Zayn muttered.

“So, remember how I can’t cook?”

“Vividly.”

“Harry wanted to help me out while I’m getting back up to my weight before the movie, so he kind of has my meals, like, sent to me three times a day.” Louis looked up in trepidation, watching Zayn’s stony face.

Zayn doubled over with laughter. “He has meals sent to you? Are you a princess? Or a baby? Are you a princess baby?”

“If he wasn’t watching out for me, I’d probably just have slurpees and hot dogs everyday.”

“I’m sorry, this is just hard for me to wrap my head around.” Zayn laughed as he sank back onto the couch. “So is it all just delivery from different restaurants, or something?”

Louis nodded. “This week’s theme is southern Asia.” Zayn sputtered with laughter again. “Don’t make fun. He’s really proud of himself for this. I think he took a couple of weeks mapping everything out, then he sent me this color coded spreadsheet about the nutritional benefits of everything. He was so excited, I didn’t have the heart to talk him out of it.”

“Harry’s a little too good for this world, isn’t he?” Zayn mused.

Louis smiled before his mind started racing about what overly personal questions he could ask about Liam next, though his thoughts were still lingering on Harry’s adorable efforts to keep his diet on track.

The day after he’d sent over the spreadsheet, Louis had awoken to what Louis was now calling one Harry’s “freakout” phone calls.

“I’m being overly controlling aren’t I? Aren’t I, Louis?”

“No, Harry. It’s fine.”

“I’m bullying you. I’m forcing you. Just tell me to stop and I’ll stop.”

“I’m not going to tell you to stop because I don’t want you to stop. I want to eat your spreadsheet food.”

“Are you just saying that?”

“No.”

“You are, aren’t you?”
“Harry, I can’t even with this right now.”

These freak out phone calls happened a little more frequently than Louis would have liked, but he was quickly learning how to talk Harry down. A few choice words aimed to gloss over his insecurities typically did the trick, but Louis wasn’t fully prepared for the fit of hysteria that was waiting on the line for him when Harry called a few hours later.

Zayn had just left and Louis was lounging in bed, idly looking over a schedule Liam had sent over while he waited for Harry to call.

“Hey babe, how was your flight?” Louis asked cheerily, his nerves tensing as he heard Harry’s shaky sigh on the other end. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. No? I’m fine, but we’re - fuck.” Harry stammered. Louis sat up straight as his full attention fell to talking Harry down.

“What happened?”

“Management.”

Like pavlov’s dogs, Louis had quickly been trained to feel a cold shudder down his spine at that word. “What about management?”

“They’re pissed at me. About skipping the party. God, I was so fucking stupid.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“I was, though. That was our first test to see if we could handle this. I couldn’t do it. That was such a stupid decision.” Harry’s voice was already grainy and quivering as Louis sat up in bed.

“Harry, I need you to listen to me.” Louis said suddenly. “Last night was one of the best nights of my life. If you try to tarnish that for even a second by saying it was stupid, then you’re ruining something that was extremely special to me, and hopefully to you, too.”

“But they’re saying-“

“Harry.” Louis interrupted. “What was last night to you?”

Harry sighed heavily. “It was everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“So who fucking cares if management is mad? It was worth it. I wouldn’t trade a second of last night for anything. I wouldn’t trade a second with you for anything. Do you get me?”

“I think they’re going to run some bad publicity about you.” Harry said quietly.

“Let them. You’re more important to me than that, because…” Louis felt his breath stolen from him as those words hung on his lips again.

Because I love you. I don’t care what happens to me because I love you and nothing else matters to me. I love you. I love you, Harry.

And why the fucking hell couldn’t he just say that? It would mean everything to Harry. It would quiet all of his insecurities immediately. It’s exactly what he needed to hear, so just fucking say it, Louis.
“…because you’re everything, Harry.” Louis muttered, ashamed of his own cop-out. He listened to Harry’s breath evening out at the familiar mantra. “You still there, love?”

“Yeah, I’m just tired. But could you stay on the phone for a while? Just talk about something?”

“Oh absolutely. Let me lull you to sleep with some of the many fun facts I learned about Zayn and Liam’s love life today.” Louis said excitedly, listening to Harry half groan and half laugh in response as he sunk into his bed.

~

He already knew something big had happened as he watched the screen of his phone light up again. It was sitting on the make up table as a stylist smothered him in hair spray.

“Do you need to get that?” She asked.

“No. It’s fine.” Louis answered through clenched teeth, waiting as the name of one of his publicists faded away and the phone went dark again. He had yet another photoshoot with Eleanor that day and had been up since six for hair and make up. Needless to say, he wasn’t in any particular mood for whatever full-blown catastrophe had finally started to unfold. It had been a few days of anxiety waiting for Harry’s management to counter attack, which meant Louis had to talk Harry down until he could fall asleep every night. He realized that it should concern him that, despite the eight hour time difference, Harry still seemed to go to sleep the same time as Louis. Admittedly, Louis had been going to sleep very early so he’d be ready for his crack of dawn call times, but it seemed like Harry wasn’t getting very much sleep on his end.

He stared at his own reflection resolutely, ignoring every call and text that came in, until the one person he’d made a life long promise to never ignore was calling.

“Could I take a second? It’s my mum.” He asked the stylist. She nodded and moved away, checking her own phone as Louis answered. “Hey, what’s going on?”

What met Louis’ ear was a frantic barrage of shrieks and squawks that sounded faintly like human English, but in nearly a minute of it, Louis had only managed to pick up one word: anorexia.

“Wait, what? What are you saying?”

“There are pictures of you, and you’re so skinny, Louis!”

“Whoa, mum, stop. Who has pictures? What are you reading?”

“I don’t know, love. It’s on the internet. They say you have an eating disorder and I just can’t-”

“I don’t have an eating disorder. You know I don’t.”

“But Louis, you look so skinny!”

“Being skinny isn’t the same as having an eating disorder. It was just for the movie, mum. Remember all the doctors visits I had to go to during filming? It was just for the movie. I’ve already started putting weight back on.”

“But why would they say this about you, Lou?” she asked.
“Because they just want something to print. These things happen.” He answered, swallowing down the truth. “I really promise everything’s okay. Harry’s got me on this healthy diet and I’m eating plenty of food.”

“Harry’s taking care of you?”

“He is.”

“I like him, Louis.” She said warmly.

“Me too.”

“I’m going to text him about this.” She decided.

“Wait, don’t. This is going to really stress him out.” Louis explained. “Or maybe, if you text him, just say something nice? Something that will make him feel good about himself?”

“How about I just thank him for taking care of my baby, and ask him how long he’s planning on growing his hair?”

“That’s perfect. Thanks mum.” He said, sitting back. “I’m actually in the middle of hair, so I have to go. Love you.”

“Love you too, Boo.”

Louis sunk back in the chair and moved to toss his phone to the side, but paused. Knowing he shouldn’t be engaging with the beast, he still unlocked his phone guiltily and googled his own name until he was met with a slew of “Is Louis Tomlinson Hiding an Eating Disorder?” headlines.

He sighed heavily as the pictures whizzed past, recognizing some public outings he’d gone in with Nona during filming.

There they were, dressed casually with giant sunglasses on a day of shopping with Starbucks in hand. Of course, the photographers had managed to capture a moment when Louis was looking down and the light caught his jawbones just right and made him look practically emaciated, especially when it was put side by side with a picture from around the time that he was filming Squad.

But it honestly wasn’t the accusations and articles that were bothering him, though he knew that they should be. Above all, he was worried about how Harry was going to react when he found out.

He decided to face the issue head on and send a text to Harry, regardless of whether he knew about it or not:

Love, if this is honestly the best they can do, I can’t say that I’m worried about them driving a wedge between us anytime soon. Everything’s fine over here, and I can’t wait to talk to you later.

xx

The illusion of calm that he attempted to craft through his words wasn’t exactly honest, as his heart began thumping in his chest the second he sent off the text in anticipation of Harry’s response. He spent the rest of hair and make up guiltily looking through articles, wincing at the completely off-base facts that were quoted over and over again in every story.
A source close to Louis says . . . struggling with body image issues . . . pressure on the set of Metal Heart . . . worried about his health . . . stewing in his own dark turmoil...

It was probably that last bit that irked Louis the most: stewing in his own dark turmoil. Apparently these talentless gossip cogs now fancied themselves poets. He kept repeating the contrived phrase over and over in his head during the photo shoot, having sworn he’d read the same comment somewhere else recently. As if the world really needed journalists who were throwing around the phrase, “dark turmoil” without consequence.

He got through the photoshoot, his pulse jumping every time he checked his phone and saw a missed call, only to brew in a steadily tightening anxiety when he saw the call wasn’t from Harry. Liam had already planned a meeting with the rest of Louis’ publicity team by the end of that day, but Louis hadn’t taken any calls in fear of missing one from Harry.

Finally, he had to give in when an almost equally important call came in.

“I’ve never seen such assholery, Lulu.” Nona snapped, and Louis could tell that she was pacing in high heels wherever she was. “This fucking industry tears apart anyone who doesn’t have a fake, paper thin body, but the second someone’s a little too skinny, they’re suddenly anorexic? It’s ridiculous. Do people realize that not everyone who has an eating disorder is skeletal? Eating disorders happen to people in every shape size but no one cares unless they can see your bones! And some people are just naturally skinny! These people are the ones that make teenagers skip meals and throw up so that they can live up to the unrealistic images they’re seeing in magazines, then they shame them for it!” Nona stopped to take a breath in the middle of her rant.

“Could you just be everyone in the world’s older sister? I feel like humanity would really benefit from that.” Louis mused.

“You’re an actor. Actors have to change their physicality sometimes; this isn’t a new concept. Christian Bale did it, Matthew McConaughey did it, and Jared Leto and Jake Gyllenhaal. No one accused them of having eating disorders! Oh my god, it’s because you’re gay! They wouldn’t say this shit about you if you were straight!”

Louis couldn’t even respond through his sigh as he kneaded the flesh of his forehead. He’d been so wrapped up in how this was going to affect Harry that he hadn’t even thought of his own personal ramifications.

“Can I basically just quote you in every interview I’m going to have to do about this?” Louis asked.

“Yes. Of course. I’ll figure out your talking points.” She said authoritatively before launching into another rant. As she spoke, he found himself lapsing into a warm smirk at her familiar fervor, before he continually remembered his situation.

His publicists told him to stay off the internet for the night if he was interested in maintaining his sanity, and they promised that it would take only some minimal damage control to spin the situation. Over and over they repeated the words, “This doesn’t really hurt you. Things could be much worse.”

And he tried to remember that as he fell into bed that night, but all of the injustices that Nona had pointed out were now swilling through his thoughts and keeping sleep at arm’s length. He couldn’t help but to feel that she was right, and that this wouldn’t even be a story if he was straight. Actors gain or lose weight for roles all the time, and yet they were only accused of having an eating disorder if they had one particular trait: femininity. Being a woman was not something Louis had ever felt familiar with, but now he knew that he was getting a glimpse into the industry that his
female costars had to struggle through.

He didn’t know which part he should be angrier about first: the fact that he was somehow less of a man for being gay, or the fact that women in the industry were under this kind of scrutiny all the time.

Louis was already envisioning that picture of himself on the front of some listicle saying, “Top 10 Celebs who are Scary Skinny.” The thought made him more than a little nauseous.

His first impulse was to roll over onto his pillows and just not think about it, which proved to be an easy task when there was a much larger issue looming over him.

Harry hadn’t called yet. On top of that, he hadn’t even texted back. It had been hours and Louis had had no word from Harry, which was making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up with worry.

About a dozen times now he’d picked up his phone to text him again and then put it down, afraid of why Harry wasn’t responding. It was nearly three in the morning in Spain, giving Louis the brief glimmer of hope that Harry had gone to bed early and was just dreaming happily. But as Louis found himself further incapable of achieving this for himself, he finally decided to call Harry.

It rang twice before going to voicemail.

Louis was officially panicking. Without a second thought, he found Niall’s contact and called him.

“Tommo?” Niall said groggily from the other end.

“Sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“Only a tiny bit. What’s up?”

“Please don’t judge be for sounding like a clingy boyfriend.” Louis prefaced.

“Withholding judgement starting now.”

“Is Harry okay?” Louis asked, noticing Niall’s elongated silence on the other end. “Niall?”

“I think so. Why? Is something wrong?”

“There might be, but he’s not answering me.”

“He was a little off earlier. One second.” Louis’s fist dug into his duvet in anticipation as he listened to Niall walk away from the phone, and he could faintly hear a door open in the background. A couple of pulse quickening minutes passed before Niall returned. “He’s out with some of our friends. I’m gonna go track him down.”

“You don’t have to do that. You were sleeping.” Louis protested, even though he was hoping against hope that Niall would ignore him and set off looking for Harry.

“It’s good. I’m awake. I’ll go find him and I’ll let you know, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks Niall.” Louis said, struggling to keep his voice even. He hung up and let his arms fall over his face in defeat, willing himself not to cry.

Harry was out with his friends, probably drinking and snorting cocaine, and he wasn’t answering Louis’ calls. What could that possibly mean? Was he mad at Louis? Was he mad at himself? Was he driving a wedge between the two of them before his management could do it?
These thoughts must have stretched on for at least a half hour, because before Louis knew it, he was getting a text from Niall:

*don’t worry. found him and taking him home. he says he’ll call in the morning*

Louis breathed a sigh of relief that felt like it had been festering in his stomach all day. Why he’d been ignoring Louis was still up in the air, but the knowledge that he was at least in Niall’s hands was enough to get Louis to finally wade off to sleep.

~

Louis’ hand hit the bedside table with a smack as he reached for his ringing phone.

“Harry?”

“Hi, Lou.”

“Harry, oh my god.” Louis exhaled, falling back onto his pillows in relief. “What time is it?”

“Sorry. I called you too early.”

“No, Harry, it’s okay. I’ve just wanted to hear from you.” Louis admitted, listening as Harry didn’t respond. “What’s wrong?”

“Like…” Harry began, trailing off.

“Harry.” Louis urged.

“It’s *this*. It’s exactly *this*.” Harry said, frustrated.

“Are you - are you mad at me?”

“No! No, Louis! It’s just that - like - you got accused of being anorexic to the entire world yesterday, and all you could think about was whether or not I’d be able to handle it.”

“But I’m okay with that. I can’t help it that I worry.”

“I know. I know you can’t help it, because I make this too hard for you. You have to babysit me because I can’t handle anything, and that’s not fair to you.”

“Haz-“

“And once I realized that, guess what I did? I avoided you. Then I felt guilty so I went out and got high.” He said with a humorless laugh. “I’m such a fuck up.”

“You’re *not* a fuck up.” Louis said resolutely, reaching out into the air in front of him as if he could grab Harry and hold him close, but all he gripped was empty air. “You’re anything but a fuck up. Please don’t say that.”
And please don’t say what I think you’re about to say.

Louis’ pulse was racing as he waited for what Harry was going to say next.

Please don’t end this. Please, please don’t end this.

“I need to do better by you, Louis.” Harry finally said, relief pooling through Louis.

“Harry, you’re…” Louis trailed off, not even knowing what to say.

“We shouldn’t even be talking about me right now.” Harry snapped. “What are you thinking right now? How are you handling this?”

“It’s not that bad.” Louis said weakly.

“Lou.” Harry chided, hearing the avoidance in Louis’ voice. “Please just tell me how you’re doing. This has to be completely shitty for you.”

“Well, it’s just--“ Louis huffed, falling back onto his pillow. “I’m not that pissed about the accusation, or anything. It’s more - like - the reason why. I just feel like they never point out body image stuff about straight guys. This feels like people are buying it because I’m gay.”

“I never thought of that.” Harry admitted, his voicing growing dark.

“I didn’t until I talked to Nona.” Louis said, listening as Harry gave a hum of understanding.

Louis went on to tell him everything that Nona had said, then every single of his mother’s overreactions from the day before, which they both laughed over. Louis chattered on about how work was wearing him out and about what foods he’d been enjoying the most.

And through all of this, Harry listened. Every once in a while he would say something simple, or chuckle at something Louis had said, but mostly he just listened.

By the time Louis had to say goodbye and think about getting to work, all of his previous anxieties had melted into relief.

“Call me before you go to bed?” Louis asked.

“Mhmm.” Harry responded. “Only a couple more weeks.”

Louis smiled, thinking of how soon these daily calls would be replaced by waking up with an armful of Harry.

“Bye, love.”

“Bye, Lou.”

Louis hung up and immediately buried his face in his hands, releasing a body shaking sigh as the words passed through his thoughts once again.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

On with the day, then.
“Have you ever lied to a friend so that you didn’t hurt their feelings?”

“Well yeah! Of course! What kind of rubbish questions are these?” Louis snapped, turning to Eleanor as she doubled over laughing. “Of course I’ve lied before. Who hasn’t?”

Eleanor sat up as she retained some of her decorum, looking to Louis excitedly as she turned the paddle in her hand so that the bright red side was facing the interviewer.

“No?” Louis gaped, reading the bold print on the paddle. Eleanor fell into another fit of giggles, this time joined by their interviewer. “That’s a lie right there! You’re lying right now!”

“Yes or no, Louis?” Asked the interviewer through a smirk. Louis turned his paddle to the red side with a smug look.


The interviewer laughed again before looking down at his notes. Louis and Eleanor had spent the last few days being shuffled from press junket to press junket, set up in two chairs in front of a *Metal Heart* poster as dozens of interviewers came through and asked them the same set of questions over and over again.

This interviewer however, had livened things up slightly. He’d given them both paddles that said “yes” on one side and “no” on the other. Louis was pretty sure he’d seen the same thing on Ellen, but at least it was something different front the norm, which consisted of about three banal questions:

*What was it like adapting such a popular book series?*

*What’s your favorite scene in the movie?*

*How do you think the fans are going to react to the finished movie?*

At the onset of the interviews, Louis had tried to give interesting, unique answers to these questions, but by day three, his answers mostly consisted of:

*It was fine.*

*I like the end credits. The font’s rather nice.*

*Either the fans will love it, or they’ll hate it, or they’ll kind of like it, or they’ll kind of hate it. Or maybe there will be parts that they really like but other parts that they’re not so into. Or maybe they’ll just feel kind of bummed about the whole thing. Dunno. Depends on individual taste, I guess.*

Louis got the distinct impression that most of the interviewers didn’t find his glib comments as amusing as he and Eleanor did. But, honestly, how could anyone blame him for being a bit of sarcastic prick when this was what he was being subjected to? If they weren’t trudging through the same questions about the movie, then they were either talking about Louis coming out of the closet, the rumors about his relationship with Zayn, or the eating disorder debacle.

In truth, Louis kind enjoyed when they asked him about the last one. His rants were becoming
increasingly passionate and fine tuned, and he loved seeing the interviewer’s shocked face when he or she got a diatribe from Louis that they weren’t expecting.

This paddle thing, however, was proving to be at least slightly interesting.

“So, have either of you ever been in the mile high club?” The interviewer asked with a grin.

“My god, are you serious? That’s what you consider a hard-hitting question?” Louis asked. Through her laughs, Eleanor turned her paddle the green yes side. “Eleanor!” He exclaimed, aghast.

“Well, Louis?” she asked, raising her eyebrows and looking at his paddle.

“No. I have not. You happy now? Is this the scoop you wanted?” Louis joked, looking back to the interviewer, who was trying to hold it together.

“Have you ever been in love?” The interviewer asked.

Louis opened his mouth before snapping it shut tightly. Eleanor looked to him, expectant. He bit into his cheek to try and tame his smile before turning the paddle to the green yes, just as Eleanor followed suit.

“Anything to say about that, Louis?” Eleanor asked.

“Nope.”

“You don’t have a single thing to say? You can’t thinking of anything to say?” She teased.

“Afraid I can’t.” He said, crossing his legs and smiling smugly as he put the paddle back down.

“Next question, sir?”

“Are either of you in love right now?”

Louis’ eyes snapped down to his paddle, his smile finally too strong for him to deny as he held the paddle up to the yes side. He looked over to Eleanor, who was smiling cockily at him.

“And you, Miss Calder?” Louis asked. Eleanor bit her lip and grimaced, as if prepping for some sort of impact. Slowly, she turned her paddle to the red no side. Louis’ eyebrows shot up his forehead as he dramatically mouthed, “Oh my god!”

Eleanor’s highly publicized romance with her costar Thad Dylan had only hit the media circuit a couple of months earlier, but Louis knew that they’d been together for nearly six months. Or, it seemed, they had been together for nearly six months.

“That’s all of the questions I’ve got, so thank you both for sitting down and talking to me.” the interviewer said, almost giddy with the exclusive scoop he’d just landed. Louis knew that break up rumors were going to begin swirling the second this guy cleared the lobby.

“Don’t mention it, mate.” Louis said as the man behind the camera motioned that he’d stopped recording and left to take a brief smoke break. The interviewer thanked them again and shook both of their hands before leaving. Louis waited anxiously for him to disappear behind the heavy exit door before he turned on Eleanor, knowing they had roughly five minutes before the next interview would start. “Okay, so, what did that mean?”

“I don’t know. I panicked. I didn’t want to lie to him.” Eleanor shrugged. “But I wasn’t supposed
“Did you guys break up?” Louis asked. Eleanor’s cheeks hollowed as she nodded. “And we’ve somehow made it through three days of interviews and you haven’t told me about it?”

“It’s not that big of a deal.” She admitted with a shrug. “I just, kind of, had this slow realization about him.”

“What about him?”

“That he’s a tool.” She said bluntly, eliciting a guffaw from Louis. “He was always really, really sweet to me, but he could be really rude to everyone around us. Like, we’d be at dinner and he’d be complimenting me about something, then suddenly he was snapping his fingers and yelling to try and get the waiter’s attention.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Louis admitted, looking down as his phone buzzed in his pocket. He unlocked it to see a texted from Harry.

_I’m tiiiiirrrrrrrrrreeeeeeeeddttttttttddddd :((

Louis grinned as he texted him back.

_then go to sleep, sweetheart xx_

“What do you mean?” Eleanor asked.

“Well, when we were at Harry’s party, I ran into him in the toilet.” Louis explained. “Harry and I were kind of having a difficult conversation, and he just waltzed in and was a total dick. And then he didn’t wash his hands.”

“Ew.” Eleanor grimaced as Louis’ phone buzzed again.

_Come take a nap with me?_

Louis shook his head and chuckled.

_sure. i’ll be there in 5 minutes_

“And I was a little afraid that he was kind of homophobic.” Eleanor said, causing Louis to look up. “Really?”
“And a bit racist. And sexist. Just, as I got to know him more, he kind of let little comments slip here and there. I don’t think he was the kind of person who would vote against gay marriage, or anything like that, but he’d probably be grossed out at a gay bar.”

“So, in your words, he’s a tool.”

“Yup.”

Louis’ phone buzzed yet again, this time with a picture of Harry. He was sitting on the ground in what looked like a backstage area, snuggled into a corner with a melodramatically miserable expression on his face. Louis guessed that they were in the middle of a late night rehearsal and were taking a short break.

“Is that Harry?” Eleanor asked, leaning over.

“Yeah. He’s trying to make me feel sorry for him.” Louis explained, showing Eleanor the picture. Eleanor was one of the few in Louis’ inner circle that knew that he and Harry were together. She had literally yelped when Louis told her that they were dating.

“Aw, he looks so tired.” Eleanor cooed.

“He’s just being whiny.” Louis said affectionately, staring at Harry’s soft, sleepy features in the picture.

you pooooooor baby

Louis texted back, hoping that his sarcasm was coming through. Despite the sardonic response, he set the picture as the background on his phone.

“You sap.” Eleanor commented as a production assistant came into the room, telling them that the next interviewer was on her way.

“We’re going to get drinks after this, okay?” Louis asked, pocketing his phone. “And you are going to spill everything about Thad Dylan.”

“Sounds perf.”

Harry had been disappointed when Louis asked him to cancel whatever dinner he’d planned for him that night, but the disappointment faded away when Louis explained that Liam and Zayn were coming over for a late dinner and movie night. Things between Louis and Liam had been all business lately while they were handling the eating disorder media, and while Louis was always grateful for Liam at the end of the day, most of their conversations lately had ended in frustration and snappy comments. At least, Louis’ side of the conversation always ended in snappy comments.

So they thought it was a good idea to remind themselves that they were actually friends underneath all of the business stress. Liam and Zayn were coming from a fashion show and weren’t going to
show up until around ten with some takeaway, which seemed a little late to make dinner plans with a friend, but Louis knew it was because Liam always felt massively uncomfortable around all of Zayn’s model friends and would do anything to just have a beer with someone familiar afterwards.

They’d called to say that they were running a bit late, which caused Louis to mutter, “fucking liars” when they buzzed in from the security gate barely five minutes later.

“What happened to running late?” Louis asked as he pressed the intercom.

“Louis, it’s me.” Came the voice from the end, and Louis’ entire body turned to ice.

It was Joshua.

Louis took several leaden steps backward, his mind racing and yet devoid of thought.

“Louis, I just want to talk to you. Let me in so we can talk.”

His breath was snagged in his throat and all of the heat in his body was shooting towards his head. Every inch of his skin was rigid and unable to move as Joshua’s voice continued to crackle through the intercom.

“I’m not going to hurt you, or anything, Louis! You just won’t let me explain myself!” He said as Louis’ eyes narrowed, glaring at the intercom. “After how much of my life I shared with you? I love you, Louis, and you just dropped me like I’m nothing! Please, just say something to me!”

The anger swelling in Louis’ chest was sobering, giving clarity to his thoughts and loosening his muscles as his breathing reconvened. He stepped back up to the intercom.

“You need to leave.” He said authoritatively.

“I’m not leaving until you talk to me.”

“I’m talking to you right now, and I’m telling you that you need to leave.”

“Goddamnit, Louis! Let open the door!”

Louis’ breath hitched, having never heard Joshua swear like that before. His fingers were trembling again as he pressed the button.

“You need to go.” He said weakly, his voice faltering. He waited several seconds, but Joshua said nothing back. “Joshua?”

There was no response; in it’s place Louis was met by a slowly deepening silence that coiled around his neck and cut off the flow of blood to his head. His breaths were deafeningly loud, blasting against his ears as he spun around and looked at the empty house, half expecting Joshua to be standing there in front of him. He tumbled forward clumsily and clutched his chest, the panic pulsating through him in a way he hadn’t felt in months.

With a shaking hand he struggled to get his phone out of his pocket and fumbled over the keys, pressing the call button on Harry’s name.

“Please pick up. Please. Please, please, please.” He muttered desperately as the phone rang.

“Mm-hello?” Harry said, obviously half-asleep.

“Joshua’s here.” Louis rasped.
“Who’s there?” Harry asked, his voice dropping immediately.

“Joshua. He’s at the gate and - I - I told him to go away and he disappeared and I don’t - he was yelling at me, Harry! He kept telling me to let him in!” Louis said, starting to pace frenetically.

“Louis, baby, listen to me, okay? Louis?” Harry already sounded fully alert.

“Yeah?”

“I need you to breathe, okay? I need you to breathe for me. Everything’s going to be okay, but I just really need you to breathe.”

“Harry, I can’t.” Louis whimpered, clenching a fistful of his own hair.

“You can, Lou. Because you’re stronger than this and you know that Joshua can’t hurt you. I know that he can’t hurt you because you’re the bravest, strongest person I know and he’s just a petty coward. That means that he can’t hurt you.”

“Keep - keep talking.” Louis muttered, already feeling his breath evening as he slid down the wall and sat on the floor. He clutched the phone as tightly as he could as Harry’s voice cooed in his ear.

“You are an amazing person, Louis, and that’s why he can’t handle any of this. He can’t handle that he lost you, but that doesn’t mean you have to be afraid of him.” Harry continued. “You’re so much better than him and I can’t believe how lucky I am to have you in my life, baby. You’re so funny, and talented, and sweet, and beautiful. You mean so, so much to me Louis. The second I see you again, I’m just going to sweep you up in a huge hug and kiss and I’m never letting you out of my sight again, because you’re just perfect, Lou.”

“Harry.” Louis stammered, watery and warm. His pulse had settled down and he felt in control of his body once again, but his eyes were swimming with tears. “I don’t get why he freaks me out so much.”

“It’s fine, baby, but are you okay enough to get up and lock the doors and windows?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Louis muttered as he got to his feet and scampered to the back door and locked it. He hurried from door to door and window to window as Harry continued talking in his ear.

“You have to call the police.”

“No, I’m not doing that.”

“Louis.”

“If he shows up at the back door, or something, I’ll call the police.” Louis decided, and Harry could tell that there was no point in arguing. “And Zayn and Liam are supposed to be here any second.”

“Can you call them, then, and tell them to hurry?”

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“But call me back right afterwards, yeah?”

“I will. I’ll call you right back.”

“And Louis I - erm - I…” Harry trailed off, and Louis’ heart started beating at a frantic pace as he
waited to hear what he was going to say. “I - just - just stay safe? Okay? I’ll talk to you in a second.”

“Yeah. Talk to you soon.” Louis hung up and let his arm fall to his side, trying to convince himself that this was not the moment to obsess over the fact that Harry had almost just said “I love you.”

~

“Harry’s right. You should have called the cops.” Liam said. Louis let out a noise of derision rather than actually respond, closing his eyes as Zayn played with his hair. Zayn and Liam were sitting on opposite sides of the bed with Louis sprawled out between them as they talked through what had happened.

Of course, they’d only found themselves in this position after Liam had done a thorough check of the perimeter of Louis’ house, searching for any sign of Joshua. Despite what Joshua had said about not leaving until Louis let him in, he seemed to have taken off long before Liam and Zayn showed up.

“That just makes things more complicated.” Louis mumbled. “He’s not dangerous; he’s just annoying.”

“If he’s showing up at your door and giving you panic attacks, then something needs to change.” Liam said.

“I don’t think he’ll do it again. I think he got the message this time.” Louis said, sitting up and leaning back against his pillows. Zayn and Liam followed suit, leaning into Louis’ sides as they listened to him. “And, honestly, a lot of it is just that I’m not used to living alone, and I miss Harry, and things are just kind of shitty right now. It’ll be better when Harry gets here.”

“And when’s that, again?”

“A week and a half.”

“If Joshua shows up again, we’re doing something about it.” Liam decided.

“He won’t show up again.”

“But if he does?”

“He won’t.”

“Maybe Liam and I should stay over for the night.” Zayn interjected, knowing that Louis and Liam could go back and forth like that for hours. “And again next weekend.”

“You want to babysit me?”

“No, it’s just, you said you’re not used to being alone.” Zayn reasoned, and Louis weighed the offer.

“I suppose I would be alright with that.” Louis said flatly, rolling onto his side and closing his eyes. “But no sex while you’re here. Especially that thing you do with the headboard and the-“

Louis squeaked as Zayn clamped a hand over his mouth. He looked up to see that Liam’s eyes had
gone wide as he stared at Zayn.

“You told him about that?” Liam gaped.

“I had to!” Zayn plead, letting go of Louis’ mouth as Louis started laughing. “That’s how I found out all that stuff about him and Harry.”

“Wait!” Louis cried, turning over. “You told him about that stuff I told you?”

“I - erm - no?” Zayn responded, terror written across his face.

“Don’t worry, Lou. He didn’t tell me anything.” Liam said calmly. “Especially not the part when you thought Harry was upset about something, but it turned out that he just couldn’t handle the way your ass looked in tight pants.”

Zayn recoiled from Louis in anticipation of his reaction, but Louis calmly folded his arms over his middle and looked straight ahead.

“You know, I’m pretty confident that we’ll never be able to swap sex stories after this.” he said slowly. “Because by the time I’m done with the two of you, it will be impossible for you to have sex ever again.”

Both Liam and Zayn leapt from the bed with a shriek and flew out the door, Louis quick on their tails.

~

A week had passed without another sign of Joshua, but Zayn and Liam had followed up on their promise stay over at Louis’ place the following weekend. He blinked his eyes groggily as their voices wafted toward his room.

It was his day off, so he’d planned to sleep most of the day away, but apparently his friends were helping themselves to breakfast in the dining room. With an exaggerated eye roll, he hopped out of bed and in the direction of everyone’s voices. His frustration, however, was steadily decreasing as he drew closer and closer to the distinctive smell of syrup and buttermilk.

“Mmmm, pancakes?” He muttered, rubbing his eyes and turning into the dining room. His sleep-blurred vision immediately registered Liam standing over Zayn as he removed his plate from the table, both already dressed and ready for their days.

But what gave Louis pause was the third figure sitting at the table; a curly haired brunette who was supposed to be on the other side of the Atlantic for four more days, now looking up at Louis with smug nonchalance. Zayn and Liam both became silent as they watched Louis in anticipation.

“How very dare you.” Louis growled before launching himself at Harry, straddling him in his seat and throwing his arms around his neck. Harry squeezed him back tightly, not managing to say anything as he laughed. “Which one of you idiots thought this was a good idea?” Louis demanded, pulling himself away to glare at Zayn and Liam.

“That idiot.” Liam said, pointing at Harry. Louis’ head snapped back to face him.
“I hate you.” Louis decided, punctuating his point with a hard kiss.

“Don’t joke about that.” Harry said, each word squeezed between a peck to his lips. “That would make me very sad.”

“Just to get things straight, this is how you two are?” Liam asked, carrying his dishes toward the kitchen with Zayn quick on his heels. He continued to call to them from the other room. “I’m just checking, because we’ve never seen you two together since you’ve been dating, so this is what we should expect? Constant snogging and flirting?”

“Somebody has to make up for you two.” Louis responded, looking back down at Harry and running a hand over his cheek. It hadn’t fully sunk in yet that Harry was here, under his fingertips, and not thousands of miles away.

“Hi.” Harry whispered, as if in response to Louis’ thoughts.

“Hi.” Louis whispered back, kissing his smiling boy once again.

“Louis! You’re out of milk! What am I supposed to drink on the road?” Liam whined from the kitchen.

“Who drinks milk on the road? Get out of my house!” Louis bellowed, listening to Zayn chortle as they made their way to the front door.

“Nice seeing you, Harry.” Liam called back.

“We’ll catch up later!” Zayn promised, closing the door behind them.

The silence had only stood for less than a second before Louis was on his feet.

“So where will be having sex this time?” Louis asked, matter-of-factly.

“Oh gee, thanks, Lou. That’s very romantic. So glad I skipped out on work and flew across an ocean to be charmed like this.”

“I just - I mean - we have to christen the house!” Louis defended himself, gesturing wildly. “It’s the age of Harry and Louis now, and we need to make sure every room of this house knows it!” Louis pouted at him, and the corners of Harry’s mouth quivered slightly as he resisted the urge to smile. He remained rigid, however, as he glared up at Louis. “What?”

“I want to be wooed.” He said simply.

“Harold. Dearest.” Louis said, kneeling down by Harry’s side. “How would you feel about being wooed in the kitchen?”

Harry nodded sharply before getting to his feet and dragging Louis with him. They spun into the kitchen as Harry enveloped him in a kiss, wrapping him in strong arms that Louis had thoroughly missed.

There was a healthy stack of pancakes on the counter beside them, but Louis couldn’t give it a second thought. Not now that his boy was here, in his house, with nothing to get in their way besides the smell of pancakes and Louis’ growling stomach.
So a big head's up: please remember that this is a story and, for the sake of the narrative, not everything is portrayed realistically. Please don't try to drink a flaming shot like they do in this chapter, and do not use my description at the end of the chapter to gauge whether or not you assume someone has overdosed. Once again, it's a story, so please take everything with a grain of salt.

“Hey la, day la, my boyfriend's back.”

-The Angels

Louis had been awake for a full eleven minutes without disturbing Harry, which he considered to be a rather impressive feat. Harry was still grappling through the groggy throes of jet lag, and Louis had promised to let his beleaguered boyfriend sleep in as late as he wished. He’d woken with his good intentions still intact, carefully extricating himself from the knot of limbs they’d tangled themselves into and tip-toeing soundlessly across his bedroom.

He lingered for a moment in the door frame, watching as Harry rolled over onto his stomach, snoring face first into the pillow as the morning sunlight fell across his naked back. Moving with a painstaking slowness, Louis crept down the hallway and towards the kitchen, planning to make himself a cuppa like a self-sufficient, fully functioning adult.

Tea brewed and in hand, Louis gave himself a mental pat on the back for how successful his quiet morning of not bothering Harry was progressing. He breathed in the spiced, scented aroma wafting of the top of his tea with a permeating feeling of warm contentment. He was completely capable of entertaining himself without interrupting his slumbering boyfriend, leaning against his counter as he enjoyed the dappled, sun-soaked morning. He could breathe easier by just knowing that Harry was in the same house, not even need him to be awake.

Everything was quiet and warm, and Louis was peace.

This lasted another thirty seconds before Louis felt utterly throttled by boredom.

“HAAAAARRRRREEEEEEHHHHHHH!” He bellowed, sprinting across the house with loud, booming steps.

He tore into the bedroom as he shrieked, launching himself at full velocity toward the bed and onto Harry’s back. He woke with a a shocked, “Ooomph!”, grumbling in confusion as Louis straddled hips and began drumming the on his back.

“Brekkie! Now! Brekkie!” Louis chanted in time with his drumming.

Once the initial shock of being suddenly attacked had washed over Harry, he groaned loudly and shoved his pillow over his head, muttering something along the lines of, “Please go away!”

“Come along, darling. It’s brekkie time.” Louis announced brightly. He jumped off the bed and grabbed Harry by the leg, yanking him away from his pillows.
“Oi!” Harry snapped, just as another forceful tug from Louis had him tumbling in a flailing mess down to the floor. Louis readjusted his grip around Harry’s ankle and attempted to drag him from the room, but Harry was done being man-handled. He spun onto his back suddenly, jerking his leg back and pulled Louis onto the floor beside him. Harry rolled onto Louis and smothered him in an embrace, attempting to subdue him. “Shhhh, Louis. It’s sleep time.”

“Harry! No! Food!” Louis cried, wriggling furiously to get out of Harry’s grip. He managed to escape, only to engage Harry in a disjointed, clumsy wrestling match on the floor as they both struggled for dominance. With an unbridled fervor, Louis forced them into unimaginable shapes and knots as if they were stuck in an intense final round of Twister.

“You’re being annoying!” Harry groaned as Louis clutched around Harry’s middle from behind.

“Oh yeah? Who’s annoying now?” Louis asked, biting into Harry’s shoulder.

“Still you!”

Finally leveraging his size to his advantage, Harry squirmed away and snatched Louis up in his arms before he could retaliate. He sat in Harry’s cross-legged lap, unclear of how the tables had just turned. Louis gave an indignant sigh before lacing his arms around Harry’s neck.

“Lou, I’m tired.” Harry wined, making sad puppy eyes at Louis.

“Yes, that’s quite fine, but I’m hungry.” Louis countered. As if on cue, Louis stomach grumbled audibly between the two of them in protest.

“Do you want me to make you something?” Harry asked, accepting his defeat.

“No, I have an elaborate fantasy I was hoping to live out, actually.” Louis explained cheerily. “I want to go out and have an expensive brunch at a restaurant with a patio with my smoking hot boyfriend, and I want you to dress so nice that everyone thinks I’m you’re sugar daddy.”

Harry smiled weakly and pressed a soft kiss to Louis’ cheek. “You really want to go out?” He complained, but there was already a hint of resigned acceptance in his voice.

“I just don’t think it’s very fair that you toted me all over Europe like I was an expensive escort, and I never get to pretend you’re my sugar baby. It’s not fair, Harry. Please? Please, please, please?” Louis begged, but Harry still looked hesitant. “And the second we’re done eating, we can go back to your place to nap for the rest of the day.”

“My house is empty without Glitter.” Harry said in all seriousness. His beloved feline life partner had been staying with his sister, Gemma, in London while the band was on tour. Since Harry had made the last minute decision to skip out on a week of meetings and come home early, Glitter wasn’t en route back to the states yet. He’d been dramatically complaining about this at every available moment, especially resenting Louis’ comments about his cat being “fedexed back from London.”

“Fine. Then we can just come back here and sleep for at least a week. Please, Harry?” Louis strengthened his argument by leaning forward to kiss slowly up Harry’s neck, lingering at the base of his jaw. He could feel the rumble of Harry’s vocal chords before his defeated sigh left his lips.

“I’ll have to take a shower first.” He said, nudging Louis to the side so that he could stand up.

“Yeah, me too.” Louis responded, getting to his feet as well as Harry stopped in the ensuite door.
“You know what might conserve water? Showering together.” Harry pointed out.

“Right behind you, Sugar.” Louis agreed, lightly smacking Harry’s bottom as he walked into the ensuite.

~

There was only one rule: no kissing.

They could be seen together, dance together, even say each other’s names out loud, but the second that the lips of Harry Edward Styles touched those of Louis William Tomlinson, the wrath of Harry’s entire management army would crash down atop them.

With this rule lingering in his thoughts, Louis puckered his lips cheekily in Harry’s direction after catching his eye through the throng of their dancing friends. Harry smiled back with a grin that was somehow simultaneously meek and dirty (an accomplishment only Harry seemed capable of) before he jumped back into the conversation he was having with a pair of guys from another band.

A few weeks had passed and, after taking his dear, sweet time, Niall had finally decided to grace LA with his return. The subsequent party was being held at Harry’s house and, naturally, it was still thriving into the early hours of the morning. The house was completely packed with friends and strangers, so Louis and Harry had felt it necessary to check in with management and find out how much they were allowed to interact. This was becoming second nature to them, as nearly everyday began with the two of them asking permission to merely exist as a couple.

Luckily, Harry’s management had been loosening their grip recently. This was in large part due to how well Harry and Louis were navigating the secret-relationship minefield. Having already decided that they needed to be prepared to do this in the long term, they’d become extremely competitive about maintaining public discretion. They almost treated it like an Olympic sport, rewarding themselves when they could do something like go pick up milk at the store without being spotted. By frequenting restaurants with back entrances, obscure romantic destinations, and wearing large sunglasses wherever they went, they’d so far managed to flaunt their romance in general anonymity.

On top of this, Zayn’s master plan was already paying off exactly how he’d foreseen. Anytime their group wanted to travel somewhere together, the paps always assumed that Louis and Zayn were the ones in the relationship. Any shots of the group entering a bar or a club tended to focus on how Zayn and Louis were interacting, keeping any mention of Harry as a separate part of the story.

After Louis had promised to stick by Zayn’s side at Niall’s welcome home party, management had felt generous enough to lift most of the restrictions on the boys for the night. This even included their recent obsession with forcing Arrienne to make an appearance at any social gathering Harry was spotted at.

This was very fortunate, as her presence had been having a steadily worsening effect on Harry. She’d usually only show up to be snapped in a couple of photos, then she’d either unceremoniously leave or populate a different corner of the club with her friends. Even though their interaction was minimal, there was a noticeable difference in Harry when he knew she was in the vicinity. He’d just be generally glum, the corners of his mouth sagging down when he thought no one was looking at him.
Just knowing that Arrienne was nowhere near the party made the air feel considerably lighter as it entered Louis’ lungs, which was especially helpful on this night, since they were entertaining another monster from Harry’s past.

Apparently, the universe felt that there was an imbalance in their relationship since Louis was the only one having to deal with evil ex-boyfriend reappearances. Consequently, public enemy number one, Nick Grimshaw, was making the rounds at the party.

As Harry told it, Nick had reached out to him a couple of weeks earlier to tell him he was going to be in LA, and wouldn’t mind catching up again. Ever since then, the two had been texting.

Disgusting as this development was to Louis, it was important to Harry to make peace with Nick. Louis could somewhat understand that, since he had a fairly intimate understanding of the way Harry’s mind worked. This was someone who made instant friends with nearly everyone he met, and yet he wasn’t even on speaking terms with someone who had been a huge part of his life. So Louis just smiled and swallowed down the burgeoning bile in his throat that always appeared at any mention of Grimshaw’s name.

Louis had caught a few glimpses of Grimshaw sauntering in and out of the party, surrounded by a group of friends who looked adequately self-obsessed to qualify as a part of his squad. Louis was doing everything he could to ignore him, still frustrated at how long it had taken him to convince Harry that, despite what Grimshaw had told him, he did not actually make weird faces during sex.

Harry was blissfully unaware that any tension might be brewing on the undercurrents of the party, instead hopping from person to person, blowing glitter bombs into their unsuspecting faces. The thing was, this party wasn’t only to celebrate Niall’s return. The prodigal cat had also found her way home, and Harry thought it best to celebrate by dousing everyone in layers and layers of glitter. The poor creature was currently locked away somewhere upstairs where the general clamor of the party wouldn’t bother her, but Harry was doing everything he could to make sure her presence was felt. One moment, he’d be having a casual conversation with someone, the next, they were drowning in glitter, watching Harry’s retreating back as he raced away to avoid consequences.

Louis had just watched him nail two of his friends in their faces before spinning away onto the dance floor for cover. The sight had Louis glowing with an embarrassing amount of affection. In an attempt to hide his unabashed giggling, Louis made his way towards the kitchen, where he was fairly certain her could hear Niall screaming, “LIAM!” over and over again.

This turned out to be completely correct. Liam and Niall were locked into one of the most intense staring matches he’d ever encountered. Their faces were scarcely two inches apart, unblinking, as Niall continued to bellow Liam’s name, as if Liam somehow couldn’t hear or understand him.

With a stony face of concentration and determination, Liam was trying to use reason to take control of the situation. Their repartee went along these lines:

“Niall, get that out of my face.”

“LIAM!”

“I swear, Niall,”

“LIAM!”

“Get that thing-“
“LIAM!”

“Out of my face.”

“LIAM!”

It was probably an important detail that the only item closing the distance between their faces was a shot glass that Niall was holding. Another important detail was that this shot glass was on fire. The top layer of alcohol was sizzling and popping with a dancing blue flame, which was reflecting off of Liam’s annoyed features.

Zayn was perched on a the counter nearby, rolling back and forth between fits of laughter and genuine concern that his boyfriend’s beard was about to catch aflame. Louis skirted the fray to watch the show with Zayn.

“Hop on up, babe.” Zayn said, patting the counter beside him.

“Do explain the socio-political tensions that have lead us to this.” Louis requested as he jumped up.

“Niall says that he took a bartending class, but I’m pretty sure that he just watched a youtube video about how to make a flaming shot.”

“Niall, I am not going to tell you again!” Liam shouted, his voice finally rising.

Fortunately for Liam, the shot was plucked away by the sudden appearance of someone who had Louis’ stomach rolling.

“You need a straw, genius.” Nick Grimshaw said, straw already in hand. He set the shot down on the counter and promptly plunged the straw into it, sucking it up in seconds and extinguishing the flame. He stood back and gestured to it proudly. “Only way to keep from burning yourself.”

“Straws. Right.” Niall said, pointing to Nick like he was a genius and skipping out of the kitchen.

“Nice to see you again, Louis.” Nick said imperiously. Louis gave him a curt nod as he shook Liam’s hand. “Nick Grimshaw.”

“We’ve talked on phone.” Liam explained. “I’m Louis’ agent.”

“Ah! Yes! I definitely remember you. Yes. And you’re Zayn?”

“Nice to meet you.” Zayn responded, his cool exterior muffling out his distaste for Nick. Niall came spilling back into the kitchen, a bundle of straws clamped in his hand, as he busied himself pouring another shot.

“You two have become quite an item, haven’t you?” Nick asked, looking back and forth between Zayn and Louis with a wink.

“Oh, absolutely.” Louis said, making no effort to move any closer to Zayn to keep up their charade of a relationship. “Just can’t keep my hands off this one.”

“Such a sweet couple, aren’t they? Hashtag relationship goals.” Niall commented, laughing so garishly that Louis was sure Nick was catching onto the joke. Louis’ gaze flicked over to Liam, who’s jaw was tightly clenched as he looked down at his drink.

“Always.” Nick said with a smile.

“Afraid this isn’t the kitchen to be looking for a hook up. Even Liam over here’s taken.” Louis pointed out, trying to get Liam’s attention. “Heard he got this really fit bloke to fall completely in love with him, the poor guy.” Liam’s face softened slightly, knowing full well what Louis was trying to do. “So I guess the only one in here who’s boyfriendless is Niall.”

“Nah, my boyfriend’s right there.” Niall announced, looking over as Harry ambled into the kitchen, obviously trying to figure out where they’d all gone.

“Who’s your boyfriend?” Harry asked, giving Nick a smile as he walked past him. The sight sent an unpleasant shock through Louis’ chest.

“You are.” Niall clarified.

“Oh. Right. I’m fine with that.” Harry decided. “Did you guys all meet Nick?”

“Yes, they’ve been regaling me with the intricacies of their web of romances.” Nick said, and Louis saw the way he leaned toward Harry as he spoke. “Nice party by the way, Harry.”

But Harry wasn’t listening to Nick anymore. He’d walked straight up to Louis and looked him squarely in the face, a hint of mischief twinkling in his eye. Louis watched him in amusement, wondering what was about to happen to him.

“Close your eyes.” Harry ordered, his dimples shining through in the dim lighting.

“Harry.” Louis protested with a laugh.

“Close your eyes.” He repeated.

“We have one rule.”

“Close your eyes.”

Begrudgingly, Louis did as he was told, hoping that Harry wasn't about to kiss him in front of Nick Grimshaw.

Instead, Louis found himself wincing in surprise as a wave of glitter erupted in his face. Everyone was laughing as Louis slowly opened his eyes, zeroing in on Harry’s look of delight.

“Oh, fuck you, Styles.” Louis growled as he wiped glitter out of his eyes.

“But it looks so nice on you.”

“Why are you running away?”

“You’re not going to hurt me.” Harry said matter-of-factly.

“You wanna bet?”

“Yup.” Harry’s eyes flicked down to Louis’ lips, and Louis knew that he was actually thinking about kissing him this time. They shared a knowing glance that lingered perhaps a second too long to be played off as something platonic before Harry turned and slouched against the counter. Harry was leaning into Louis more than he probably should have been, but it technically wasn’t breaking any rules, so Louis wasn’t about to make him stop.
“Show me how to drink that shot without burning myself.” Niall suddenly said to Nick, lighting his shot and holding it in front of himself.

“You just have to commit. But be fast. The straw melts if you take more than a couple of seconds.”

Niall lifted the glass of blue flame tentatively, holding his straw as if about to stab it, but his eyes were wide with trepidation.

“Nah, I can’t.” He said with defeat, putting the shot down.


“I’ll do it.” Louis offered, jumping off the counter to take the shot from where it was sitting next to Niall. Once it was in Louis’ hand, Harry lurched toward it protectively and made an abrupt noise in protest, before suddenly stopping and taking a step back. “Harry, it’s not going to burn me.”

Harry’s long fingers were picking fixedly at his bottom lip as he watched Louis, grappling with whether or not he wanted to meddle. “Just be-“ He stammered, reaching out again for a split second before swallowing his words.

Louis couldn’t help but chuckle at Harry’s concern as he put the shot down and readied his straw. He knew that he shouldn’t belittle Harry like that, but he just got undeniably adorable when he was worried. He sized up the shot before plunging his straw into it, suckling up the hot liquid as quickly as he could. Once he reached the bottom, he jumped back, laughing and sputtering.

“That’s right, Tomlinson! Good show!” Nick exclaimed. Niall was cheering over animatedly as he started to immediately pour another one.

“I’ll do that one.” Harry decided, reaching forward. And now, it was Louis’ turn to get overly concerned about his boyfriend eating fire. He was about to pull Harry’s hand away when Nick spoke up.

“Don’t think that’s a great idea for you, Haz.” Nick said.

“He’s a grown man. He can drink fire if he so chooses.” Louis countered, Nick’s word shifting his opinion like a surge of electricity. Louis helped Niall pass the simmering shot over, watching cautiously as Harry put it on the counter.

He pounced on it immediately, downing the liquid in one gulp before he yelped and leapt back, holding his bottom lip in pain. Everyone staggered forward in response, but Louis was already upon Harry, holding both sides of his head and trying to assess the damage.

“Are you okay? Did it burn you? Where did it burn you? Let me see!” Louis continued to spew his concern, but Harry’s face was melting into a shit eating grin beneath his hands. Louis took a step back in angry astonishment. “You tit. You faked that, did you?”

“Now I think I’ll run away.” Harry decided through a a huge smile, racing away.

“C’mon boys. Time to dance.” Niall decided, taking one last swig from his rum bottle before leading the brigade out of the kitchen. Nick lingered behind as Niall, Liam, and Zayn passed, his gaze resting on Louis, who stuck behind as well.

“You alright there, Grimmy?” Louis asked once everyone was out of earshot, noticing the way that Nick was sizing him up.
“Makes a lot more sense now. Very clever.” He said dryly.

“Haven’t the dizziest what you’re talking about.” Louis responded. Nick’s face darkened and he took a glowering step toward Louis.

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

“No. But I think you’re probably jealous.” Louis snapped, giving him one last searing glare before following in the steps of his friends’ exit.

What was formerly Harry’s massive dining room was now a knot of dancing bodies, sweating a grinding to the pounding music under a flourish of spinning lights. The throng was dense and practically moved as one pulsating unit, but Louis still was able to quickly spot Zayn and Liam amongst the mass. To Louis’ disbelieving delight, Liam had dropped any pretense of decorum and was all over Zayn. Apparently, having to stand by while his boyfriend claimed to be dating someone else had brought out something primordially possessive in Liam, and he was proving this with a passionate snog session in the middle of the dance floor. They were standing flush against each other and giving only faint interest to the rhythm of the music as their lips moved against each other.

A niggling voice in Louis’ head reminded him that anyone who was paying an ounce of attention would know that Zayn was supposed to be with Louis, and their cover could quickly be blown if someone pulled out their phone and took a picture. But making this revelation and actually caring enough to do something about it were completely different tasks, and Louis let them continue on, undisturbed. The fact that Liam’s elusive libido was actually making an appearance was equal parts mesmerizing and nauseating to Louis, so he focused his attention elsewhere.

Louis needed only to turn his head slightly before he found himself spellbound once again, this time by the ever ridiculous antics of the man he called his boyfriend. Harry and Niall were dancing together, apparently trying to add some credence to the rumor they’d told Nick about dating each other. Despite the mismatched height difference, Harry had his back to Niall and was grinding into him mock-seductively. Niall was holding on for the ride, laughing obscenely as he held onto Harry’s gyrating hips.

“Tommo! Get your arse in here!” Niall called, noticing Niall watching from the fringes of the dance floor. With a defeated laugh, Louis made his way over to Harry who was motioning to him enthusiastically. He stepped in close to Harry, who was now sandwiched in-between the two of them.

Harry took his new task of entertaining the two of them with fervor, dropping down suddenly then slowly dragging himself up the front of Louis’ body. Louis bit his lip as Harry’s face hovered close to his own, watching the boyish mischief glimmering in Harry’s eyes as he lifted his hands above his head and swayed his hips provocatively.

Niall’s presence behind Harry gave them good cover, since anyone looking over would think the three of them were just messing around as friends. This was especially plausible given the way Harry was dancing. It was as if he was appropriating every dance move he’d seen from Beyoncé music videos, and was now failing miserably in the execution. He was laughing, though, as he snaked his arms around Louis’ neck and pressed their hips together.

Niall’s presence behind Harry gave them good cover, since anyone looking over would think the three of them were just messing around as friends. This was especially plausible given the way Harry was dancing. It was as if he was appropriating every dance move he’d seen from Beyoncé music videos, and was now failing miserably in the execution. He was laughing, though, as he snaked his arms around Louis’ neck and pressed their hips together.

Louis had to admit that he was laughing, too. The buzz from his flaming shot had bubbled up to his head and left his mind a flurry of nothing besides thoughts of how impossible Harry’s existence was. He was gorgeous yet adorable yet sexy yet hilarious - the list could presumably continue on until Louis had exhausted every adjective in his vocabulary. But what Louis could hardly wrap his
mind around was that Harry was his. Louis was the one who got to dance with him, got to kiss him, got to hold his hand under the table and got to share a bed with him at night.

That last thought about sharing a bed was becoming particularly enticing as Louis noticed that Niall had made his exit. Somewhere in the midst of their dancing, their laughter had faded away, and now they were moving against each other slowly, their foreheads pressed together as they breathed hot air into each other’s mouths. Louis’ hand had snuck up under the hem of Harry’s shirt, and his fingers were now splayed across his abs, tracing along the naked skin of his hip bones.

Their lips were so close at this point that moving even a hair forward would end in a suffocating kiss. Louis gripped tighter into Harry as he rolled his hips forward, becoming suddenly aware of how hard Harry was. The realization brought Louis’ blood to a boil.

“We can’t kiss.” Harry whispered, more as a statement to himself than anything else.

“Nope.” Louis breathed, his hand dragging down Harry’s front before nudging his fingers slightly under the waistband of his trousers. They hung there, locked into the ghost of a simmering kiss as their skin grew hot and started to crawl.


“Make it two minutes.”

Harry nodded furiously before swallowing hard. He bounded past Louis in what he knew was the direction of the stairs. Louis stared unmoving at the ceiling above him, waiting impatiently as he counted the slowly passing seconds. He made it only as far as twenty seven before he was barreling toward the staircase as well.

Louis lunged into Harry’s dark bedroom and spun around as he tried to spot the man he was chasing after, only to be swept into a sweltering kiss. Clothes were being torn off left and right as Harry licked needily into Louis’ mouth, whispering his name and enveloping his waist in his arms.

“D’you wanna - close - the door?” Louis panted between kisses, but Harry shook his head.

“Want the music.” He muttered, tearing away from Louis’ mouth to suck at the base of his neck. His fingers moved deftly as he worked at Louis’ belt.

“Someone might catch us.” Louis pointed out, Harry tearing his belt from it’s loops with a snap.

“More fun that way.” He said devilishly.

Louis responded by spinning Harry around and pushing him back onto the bed. Harry gasped lightly in surprise as Louis pounced on top of him, tearing open his fly and taking Harry into his palm within seconds. He gave him only a few strokes before bringing his mouth down onto his length, feeling Harry’s entire body constrict and coil beneath him as he groaned loudly.

He sunk down as deep as he could manage, encouraging Harry’s cries into the dark room. If he managed to get Harry loud enough, at least that would serve as a warning to anyone that might be wandering towards their open door. The pounding music of The Weeknd was drifting into the room, vibrating the walls and feeling as if were seeping into Louis’ skin.

Everything was a blur of darkness and sweat-laced skin, and soon Louis was already working Harry open, finger by finger. Harry was crying out louder and louder as each second passed and the temperature rose around them.
Their mutual impatience quickly won out, with Harry flipping Louis onto his back and straddling his hips. With a low moan, he sank down onto his engorged cock, bouncing in beat to the sweltering bass. Harry’s hand was on Louis’ chest, his fingers curling when each of his bobs were met by one of the Louis’ upward thrusts.

Harry was so lost in his own realm of concentration that he was caught completely off-guard when Louis wrapped his fingers around his cock, pumping up and down furiously. Harry tightened around him, causing Louis to arch back into the mattress with a choked cry. Their tempo quickened as they melded together, all the while whispering affections into the torrid darkness.

“God, Harry. Fuck.”

“So good, Louis.”

“You look so fit right now. Can’t believe - ungghhh - this is real.”

“Mmmm, Lou. Baby - I - I can’t!”

Harry’s whimpers heightened until his voice was cracking, their hips grinding into each other with more and more desperation until Harry reached his peak. Louis followed soon after, coming into Harry and collapsing back against the bed to catch his breath through the euphoria.

Louis didn’t realize that Harry had lowered himself down next to his side until he felt the faint press of lips against his shoulder. Louis reached a heavy hand over to pet a lock of Harry’s unruly hair out of his face, watching Harry’s eyes sink shut at the contact.

“You’re beautiful.” Louis whispered, in what had now become a post-sex ritual of his. Harry sighed against the palm of Louis’ hand before reaching behind himself blindly. He clumsily grabbed a handful of tissues from the bedside table and handed a few to Louis. “Thanks, love.” He did a cursory job of cleaning himself up, too exhausted from his steadily sobering state to particularly care. Once Harry was finished with himself, Louis plucked the tissues away and rolled turgidly out of the bed.

“Mmm, Lou. Just throw them to the side.” Harry protested as Louis got to his feet.

“We are not cavemen, Harold. We throw our come-rags in the trash like gentlemen.” Louis leaned into the ensuite to toss them into the waste bin before moving toward the door. “And I’m closing this door, by the way.”

“Oh, right.” Harry chuckled. “Can you imagine if someone had walked in? Oh god, what if Nick had walked in?” The door closed with a click, muffling out the noise from the party downstairs. Louis turned back to Harry, trying to subdue a grin. “Oh, you’d like that, would you?” Harry joked, holding his arms open as Louis crawled back onto the bed and fell onto his chest.

“Do you want to know my honest opinion about Nick Grimshaw?” Louis asked, perchng his chin on Harry’s sternum to look up at him.

“Sure.”

“Nick Grimshaw can go fuck himself.”

“Louis.” Harry whined. “But we’ve been getting along okay, and he’s actually trying to be nice.”

“To your face, maybe.”
“Did you say something sassy to him earlier?”

“Of course I did.”

“Louis!”

“I completely understand that you want to make peace with him.” Louis reasoned. “But I could never get myself to like him; not after the way he’s treated you.” He lifted himself up so he could slip under the sheets with Harry and rolled onto his side. Harry rolled over as well, sighing and looking at Louis with warm eyes. “Anyone who doesn’t constantly tell you that you’re perfect can go fuck themselves.”

Harry smiled at him before reaching forward and gripping the back of Louis’ head. He pulled him into a deep kiss that lingered before they separated.

“Means a lot to me when you say that.” Harry muttered, his fingers stroking through the hair on back of Louis’ head. It took a lot for Louis to keep from repeating the same phrase back to Harry. Honestly, it meant everything to Louis when Harry could admit he appreciated being complimented. He had been so thoroughly conditioned to reject anything nice that anyone said to him, that Louis felt like it was a victory every time a compliment landed.

“Do you know what I’d give to go back in time and meet you back when we were younger?” Louis mused. “I just don’t understand how he had the privilege of meeting you first, but he gave you up. I never would have let you go. Nick and I have a fundamental difference of opinion.”

“Really? You’d skip all your years with Joshua if it meant we could have been together earlier?”

“Obviously. Joshua was terrible.”

“Yeah, but, still.” Harry continued. “You don’t think that your time with him made you who you are today? Even though it got pretty bad, you don’t think it had an effect on who you’ve become?” He watched Louis with earnest curiosity as Louis thought it over, not exactly sure if he knew the answer.

“I don’t think so.” Louis admitted quietly. “I don’t think he had a good effect on me. Like, I don’t think I’m better for it.” Harry’s eyes grew a little in size, seemingly getting rounder with sadness. “What about you, Curly?”

Harry exhaled loudly, and Louis realized he’d been hoping Louis wasn’t about to ask him that. “I think I would have been better if I never met him.” Harry whispered. “I think things would be easier for me if I never met him. If I met you instead.”

Louis leaned in to give Harry another kiss, this one more watery than the one before. He brushed Harry’s cheek lightly and admired the softness to his features. Harry was clearly only a few seconds from falling asleep.

“Let’s sleep, love.” Louis said warmly, to which Harry nodded and rolled over. Louis spooned him tightly, kissing him on the back of his neck before letting his own eyes close.

~
I hate waking up.

Louis sat up and looked into the blistering sunlight pouring through Harry’s floor length windows, taunting him with the fact that the day had somehow managed to start without him. The party from the night before had nestled in as a dull headache at the base of Louis’ skull, and he thoroughly hoped that everyone had found their way home by now. The last thing he needed was to walk downstairs to a group of Harry’s friends still hanging around, ready to mentally capture the image of Louis in his hungover glory.

Harry was still snoring by Louis’ side, somehow managing to sleep through the light that was drenching the room. Louis sat up and ran a sleepy hand through his messy hair, taking in the state of the room around him. For the most part, Harry typically stayed over at Louis’ house unless he had to get to work early and they decided to just stay at their own respective houses. This was the first time that Louis had woken up in Harry’s room, tangled in the sheets of Harry’s bed, feeling the warmth of Harry’s skin against his arm.

He was already wearing an embarrassing smile at this thought as he took his phone from the bedside table, turning on his selfie camera to get an idea of how hideous he looked, just in case there were people lurking in the rest of the house. He had to bite his lip to keep from barking out a laugh, having completely forgotten that the majority of his face was still caked in glitter.

Harry had somehow managed not mention this during either their lovemaking or the intense conversation afterwards. Apparently, Harry was nonplussed by the presence of glitter on the face of the man who was inside of him. Interesting fun fact, that was.

Louis was still watching himself on the screen of his phone, deciding to put on an overdramatic pout and snap a picture of the damage. He posted it to Instagram immediately, since he’d been more or less ordered to be highly active on social media during these last few days before the Metal Heart premiere. He captioned it: *When you really, really have to ask yourself what you did last night.*

Harry mumbled in his sleep just as Louis posted the picture, causing him to look down at Harry’s soft, sleepy face affectionately. No matter what position the two of them managed to fall asleep in, Harry always ended up flat on his stomach, grumbling into his pillow by the time morning came. Louis ran a thumb over Harry’s hand, which was clenching and unclenching into his pillow beside his face.

“Oh really, Harry, is that so?” Louis whispered, chuckling quietly as Harry’s eyes fluttered under their lids.

He wanted nothing more than to just shake him awake so that he could keep him company, but Louis was starting to feel bad by how often he interrupted Harry’s sleep for selfish reasons. He sighed heavily and leaned back, deciding to see if Instagram was already reacting to his photo. He opened to app and pulled up the picture once again, but his stomach clenched painfully as his eyes were immediately drawn to something in it’s corner.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. SHIT.

There were Harry’s fingers, clearly there, clenched into his pillow at the border of the picture.

With trembling hands, Louis quickly deleted the picture and buried his face in his hands, knowing that it was already too late. People had definitely seen it, and if only one person had screen shotted it, Louis was royally fucked.
Louis’ internal string of, “shit, shit, shit, shit,” eventually became an audible whimpering, and Harry started to stir awake.

“Lou?” He asked groggily, sitting up. “What’s up? What’s wrong?”

“I fucked up. Again. I fucked up again.” Louis whined, his face still covered by his hands.

“What’re you talking about? What happened?” Harry asked, wrapping his arm around Louis’ shoulder and pulling his unwilling frame into his embrace. Louis immediately melted from his rigid posture and circled his arms around Harry’s middle.

“I posted a selfie and I was stupid and I didn’t see your hand was in it.” Louis said, the words spilling out of him almost faster than he could form them.

“My hand? So what? How’s anyone going to know it’s mine?”

“I fucked up so bad, Harry! We were doing so good and now I fucked everything up!”

“It’s going to be okay, Louis. It could be anyone’s hand. We’ll figure this out.” Harry cooed, starting to rock back and forth as he held Louis.

“Liam’s going to kill me.” Louis muttered.

“Everything will be okay, baby. I promise.” Harry petted his hair, the light having left his own eyes as he considered their prospects. They had been doing so well, and he could already anticipate the way his management was going react to this.

~

The fact that one of his stylists was lingering near his arse meant that her last check of his suit was nearly done. Numerous jokes about his own ample backside were already coming to Louis, but alas, the sheer tension electrifying the room had resulted in his jaw clenched tightly shut.

If there was only one piece of good luck the day, it was that the premiere for Metal Heart was being held in LA. He couldn’t imagine dealing with the stress of the last few days on top of a trip across the ocean. Then again, the idea of hiding away with Harry at his mum’s house and ignoring the rest of the world was rather tempting.

Harry wasn’t anywhere nearby at the moment, however. He was holed up in a hotel room in Hollywood somewhere, making sure his suit complimented whatever dress Arrienne would be wearing tonight. She was probably annoyed at being called in to attend the premiere with such late notice, and was most definitely taking her frustrations out on Harry.

Harry had committed to his appearance at the premiere months in advance, naturally, since he was only barely capable of hiding the Metal Heart superfan that was brewing just under his surface. Given their good behavior since returning to LA, his management had intended to let Harry attend the event stag. He was even given permission to interact with Louis as much as he wanted, as long as they didn’t touch each other in any way that could be construed as “couple” behavior. Since Louis was planning to go alone himself, it would almost have been like they were going together.

And that prospect had been flushed down the drain with the ill-fated glitter selfie.
Louis’ publicists were already on standby for something along these lines. They had a few shots of Louis and Zayn leaving a store hand in hand, and chose to release them just as the news of some stranger’s hand in his bed hit the news circuit. This way, the story was immediately spun into a gossip scoop about Louis and his new boyfriend, rather than a hunt to figure out who the hand belonged to.

Officially to the press, Louis and Zayn were now in a relationship. There was even a press kit making the rounds with quotes from a “source close to the couple” saying, “They really just wanted to keep it to themselves for a awhile, so they could get to know each other. But they’re so in love. Louis really thinks that Zayn is the one, and Zayn’s been spending every second he can with them. They’re really making it work.”

Louis hoped that Liam hadn’t been the one to write this particular lie, otherwise, he was thoroughly unimpressed with his ability to write realistic human dialogue. Now Zayn was expected to walk the red carpet with Louis to further cement their celebrity couple status.

Deciding that this wasn’t enough, Harry’s side had decided to up the ante. They were now requiring Arrienne to join Harry, and they were expecting a photo perfect kiss for the cameras. This was a big request, since they rarely ever asked them to kiss in public. Their fake relationship had still been in it’s fledgling phases when they realized how much the two of them hated to lock lips, so now it was only reserved for emergency situations.

Apparently, that’s what this was.

Harry had done everything he could to hide his churning emotions from Louis, but it was clear that the situation was grating at him. He’d been resigned to slack-faced stoicism, saying less and less each day they got closer to the premiere. That very morning, Louis had woken up to find Harry hunched over and sitting oddly still at the end of the bed, staring at his phone as he texted quickly.

“What’s up, love?” Louis asked, his voice still gravelly as he sat up. Harry looked over in surprise before he rubbed his face tiredly and looked back at his phone. Louis already knew what Harry was thinking about, and decided to forego any coyness. “You know it doesn’t bother me, right?”

“It doesn’t bother you?” Harry repeated, as if this were difficult to believe.

“Well - I mean - yes. It bugs me. But I’m not mad at you for kissing someone else. It’s my fault, anyways.”

“It’s not your fault.” Harry mumbled, this being perhaps the hundredth time he’d told Louis this. He ran his fingers idly over the black screen of his phone. “It’s not a big deal.” He said quietly, trying to convince himself.

“It’s only a big deal if we let it be.”

“You have to kiss people all the time.” He pointed out, still mostly to himself. Louis nodded, deciding not to point out what had happened the last time Harry watched Louis kiss someone else for work. It had been that night after Louis had shown up at the concert and everyone was watching Squad back in the hotel room. When Louis’ kiss scene had come on, Harry had handled it by sprinting out of the room. “I just don’t want to do it.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to kiss her. I don’t even want to touch her. It feels - it feels wrong.” Harry’s face fell into his hands as he released a body shaking sigh. These moments of unsolicited truth about
Harry’s feelings were so rare, Louis was suddenly all but catapulting himself to Harry’s side. He pulled Harry’s hands away from his face, taking one of them in his own.

“It’s just make believe, sweetheart. None of it’s real.” Louis promised him.

“But I don’t want to do it anymore.” Harry maintained, shaking his head and closing his eyes. “I’m sick of it. I shouldn’t be kissing her, I should be kissing you.”

Louis could think of nothing else but to pull Harry against him and kiss his curls, running a warm hand down his back in the silence. His distaste for Arrienne was important, because Louis had seen first hand how difficult it was for Harry to hate anyone. The fact that Nick Grimshaw had been taking flaming shots with them in the kitchen only a few days earlier was proof of this. So the fact that he was so afraid to be around Arrienne was pivotal. The list of people that Harry genuinely didn’t care for was short and he kept it very close to his chest, but Arrienne was securely on it.

Granted, she was on Louis’ shit list as well after the way he’d seen her treat Harry. Her public accusations of domestic abuse aside, she was relentless in the way she teased and patronized him whenever they spent time together. In all honesty, it was bullying, and Harry was unusually susceptible to it when she seemed to voice his own insecurities about himself. He struggled to say it aloud, but Louis could tell that Harry always felt exposed around her; always felt unsafe.

The fact that Louis couldn’t do anything to help Harry made him feel more useless than he ever had before. And so, with nothing but a quick kiss and a few warm words, Louis had sent his boyfriend into the lion’s den that afternoon to get ready for the premiere.

But he hadn’t even had a chance to stew in this turmoil because the second major fissure in his social circle had arrived soon after. In an unprecedented turn of events, Liam and Zayn seemed furious with each other.

Louis had the impression that they’d been on the brink of a major fight all day, and could do nothing more than squabble whenever they tried to communicate. What was also clear was the reason why they weren’t getting along, which seemed to be the root of every problem that day: Louis had been stupid enough to post that picture, and now nobody could be with the ones they loved that night.

They’d been short with each other all day as Louis and Zayn were getting groomed, but things had hit a boiling point earlier when Zayn had finally asked Liam if they could talk in private. They’d been in another room for several minutes, and Louis was trying to convince himself that he was imagining the sound of distant shouting.

They erupted from the room moments later and Liam walked purposefully out the back door and onto the veranda, shutting the door loudly behind him. Zayn plastered on a game face and approached Louis. He pulled out his phone and angled his face down at it, trying to obscure the watery sheen to his eyes.

“So how long do you want to stay out tonight, Lou?” He asked, his frail voice trying to sound light and casual as it wavered through his constricting vocal chords.

“We don’t have to hang around too long.” Louis promised him. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Liam’s just stressed.” Zayn said, giving him a weak smile.

Immediately the situation became clear. Louis was extremely adept at analyzing Zayn’s conflicts, and this situation was no different. When they’d lived together, countless nights had been spent
with Zayn detailing whatever argument he’d gotten into with whoever had pissed him off that week.

He’d go on and on, elaborating endlessly about every aspect of why whoever it was had deserved the verbal lashing they’d received, but Louis knew every word of it was for Zayn’s benefit. Deep down, he already knew that he was at fault, and he was just trying to convince himself otherwise. Louis always ended the conversation with, “Go apologize,” and Zayn always begrudgingly agreed.

But notice, this is not what Zayn had just done. A clipped, short answer meant that Zayn wasn’t the one at fault, and he was trying to cover for whoever had just yelled at him.

Which meant that Liam needed a swift kick to the teeth.

Zayn was still smiling at Louis as he breathed deeply and said, “Let’s have fun tonight. Okay?”

“Anything you want. Just have to take care of something first.” Louis traipsed directly to the back door, picking up the first thing he could find along the way. This happened to be a pack of gum that he’d left on the dining room table, which he swiftly lobbed at Liam’s head once he stepped outside.

“Oh!” Louis shouted as Liam winced.

“What the hell, Louis?”

“I’m going to give you one, basic rule for dating my best friend.” Louis said as he shut the door behind him. “Never, under any circumstances, are you allowed to get mad at him when you’re actually mad at me.”

“It’s not any of your business.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Li.” Louis said, sinking his hands into his pockets and strolling over to where Liam was leaning against the railing. “Look, I don’t say this nearly as often as I should, but thank you.”

“Louis-“

“No, seriously. I have to say this. You and Zayn do so much for me, and I just keep fucking up, but you’re still always there to help me out. So thank you. But please, please don’t get pissy over this. Over something as pointless as this.”

“That’s…” Liam’s words drifted without saying anything, and his gaze slipped down to his feet.

“Zayn loves you, you stupid git.” Louis said bluntly. “And for that matter, so do I. So don’t make Zayn go to this premiere thinking that he did something wrong to make you mad at him, okay?”

Liam finally looked back up at Louis, and he was biting his cheek to try and suppress a smile. He rolled his eyes at Louis’ smug face before walking past him and back into the house, hopefully in search of Zayn to apologize.

Louis took a deep, bone shaking breath and leaned against the railing, hoping that he’d mended at least one relationship for the night. Now his mind was focused fully on how his own boyfriend would be faring after the premiere.

He checked his phone again, finding no texts from Harry. He hadn’t heard from him all night, and he wasn’t sure if this was a good or bad thing. He thought about texting something himself, but
couldn’t think of what to say.

Well, he could, but he didn’t think the he should say I love you for the first time over a text message.

Zayn had to forcibly yank Louis back into the limo with every ounce of his strength he still harbored in his drunk limbs. Moment earlier, the radio had come to the chorus of Louis’ favorite Taylor Swift song, so he’d naturally stuck his head out the window to belt along to it.

“SAY YOU’LL REMEMBER ME! STANDING IN A NICE DRESS, STARING AT THE SUNSET, BABE!” He screeched, yelping as he landed with a giggling thud back onto Zayn. “I have - I have to sing, Zayn. I have to do it.”

“You’re going to wake up the entire western hemisphere!” Zayn argued, also laughing wildly as he wrestled with Louis.

In all honesty, the two men weren’t fully drunk anymore. They were still tipsy, but what was fueling their ridiculousness was the buzz they were both riding from the fantastic evening. Though he knew that his opinion was anything but unbiased, but he’d been completely in love with the film. Judging from how attwitter everyone else had been, this was the general consensus among those at the premiere.

After the movie, everyone’s enthusiasm had increased ten fold as Louis and Zayn bopped around from after party to after party. Everywhere he turned he was being given congratulations or sharing a hug of triumph with someone who’d worked on the film with him. He hadn’t seen most of the cast and crew since filming had wrapped, so the jubilation had intensified with every old friend he ran into. There were bottles of expensive champagne popping on all sides and people constantly pulling him aside to get a look at his gorgeous new boyfriend.

But that’s when the wound would rip open anew, because for a split second he’d always think that he was about to introduce them to Harry. Instead, he’d swallow back his disappointment as he remembered his situation and curl an arm around Zayn, smiling as he introduced him to everyone. But it still felt like something had completely deflated in his chest, because it should have been Harry there on his arm. Harry, who’d set an alarm on his phone for the exact moment when the movie would come out, starting four months earlier. He’d been looking forward to this perhaps more than Louis had, and now he was forced to spend the night anchored to a real life succubus.

Harry should have been there, woven to his side as he toted him around to all of his friends, but management had made it abundantly clear that they couldn’t be spotted at the same after parties together. Now faced with following an intricate route of party hopping in order to avoid each other, Louis breathed a sigh of relief when he got the following text from Harry just after the movie ended:

**hey baby, I’m gonna head back to my place with a couple of friends and call it an early night. don’t worry about staying out late. It’s your night. see you tomorrow, and can’t wait to make you listen to all of my thoughts about the movie ;)**
Since this text had arrived well after Louis’ first drink of the night, he responded with an inscrutable string of x’s and o’s before stuffing his phone away. Harry was safely home and away from the shebeast, so Louis could enjoy his night without another worry.

It was nearing four in the morning by the time Zayn managed to get Louis in the car and headed home. Even though Louis knew that Harry would probably already be asleep, he’d told the driver to take him to Harry’s house before he dropped Zayn off. He just couldn’t fathom sleeping in a cold, empty bed on a night as glorious as this. He had to see his man, even if it just meant crawling soundlessly into bed beside him and passing out. Harry had made the ill-fated decision a week earlier to give Louis a remote control to his front gate, so Louis decided this was as good a time as any to show up unannounced.

“This is mine and Harry’s song,” Louis decided dazedly, leaning into Zayn’s shoulder as “Wildest Dreams” continued.

“Oh is it?”

“He’s so tall and handsome as hell. That part’s about Harry.”

“And the part about wearing a white dress and lipstick? That about you, then?” Zayn questioned with amusement.

“Of fucking course it is. Who else would it be about?” Louis asked, aghast. The limo had just rounded in front of Harry’s house, the gate flying open as the car pulled up.

“Can I come in and pee before he takes me home?”

“Well of course, Zayner. But I’m not going to watch, or anything like that.”

“Why would you watch?” Zayn asked in astonishment, following Louis as he clumsily stumbled out of the car.

“I’m just saying I’m not going to watch you pee, Zayn.”

“I wasn’t offering!”

“I’m just saying!” Louis bounded up the steps to the front door and pulled it open, stepping inside.

“Please don’t watch me pee.”

“I’m not. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!” Louis bellowed. He turned a corner into Harry’s lounge and felt his laughter fade.

Five strangers, probably all around twenty years old, were jumping on and off of every available surface. The stereo was pounding out deafening music as they all danced with their listless, blissed out limbs. They didn’t notice Louis and Zayn’s entrance until Louis had his hand on the power button of the stereo, plunging the room into a tense silence. They looked up with hazy confusion, and Louis saw that not only were they all strangers, but none of them were Harry.

“Um, hey.” One of the girls said in a gravelly drawl, stumbling back a step and catching herself on the armrest of a sofa. Her eyes fluttered as she tried to focus on Louis’ face, and the situation became abundantly clear. Louis felt his inebriation sizzle into sudden clarity.
“Awesome. You’re all going home.” Louis decided smugly. “Zayn, do you mind if I call you another car? I have different intentions for the one outside.”

“No problem. I’ll just see if Liam’s still awake.” Zayn said, taking the initiative of ushering everyone to their feet. One of the girls stumbled into him, tripping over her garishly tall heels.

“You’re cute.” She commented, giggling loudly.

“Where’s Harry?” Zayn asked, turning back towards Louis.

“Probably in bed.”

“You check on him. I’ll get them out of here.”

“Pleasant dreams, kiddos!” Louis called over his shoulder as he moved further through the house.

He worked to quell his frustrations that his boyfriend’s house was crawling with kids straight out of a rave at four in the morning, swallowing his complaints as he left the lounge. He knew that tonight had been difficult for Harry, so he certainly didn’t need a lecture from Louis at the moment, but it didn’t make the situation any less annoying. Louis resolved to just slip in beside Harry and wrap his arms around him, maybe shushing him back to sleep if he woke up. He’d bring it up in the morning, but would struggle with his every fiber to joke and keep it light. He rounded a corner toward the staircase, stopping as a column of light from the adjacent kitchen fell across the floor in front of him.

Twinkling in the dim fluorescent light were the jagged remains of a broken bottle, it’s glistening shards laced with a thin layer of dark, red blood. Louis’ stomach clenched so painfully, it was completely possible that he’d ruptured something.

He took a shuddering step forward as his breath hitched in his throat, the bottle coming into clearer view. It was a whiskey bottle, and judging by the small puddle of brown liquid surrounding it, it had been nearly empty when it broke. The trace amounts of blood were splattered across the floor in thin spiderwebs, pressed flat in places beneath a footprint leading to the kitchen.

Louis followed it, his heart beating deafeningly in his chest as Harry’s shivering figure came into view. He was splayed across the floor, his face pressed to the tiles and his hand caked in drying blood. He didn’t even notice Louis as his eyes lolled about dazedly.

“Harry!” Louis shrieked, lunging forward and falling to Harry’s side. “Harry? Can you hear me?”

Harry’s wide, heavily dilated eyes floated up to see Louis, surprised by his sudden appearance. His lips quivered as if to start saying Louis’ name, but his face clenched with pain. “Zayn! Help! Please!”

“Lou…” Harry muttered, releasing a half sob with a sharp intake of breath. Louis took Harry’s bloody hand into his own for inspection, wincing as he spotted a tiny shard still embedded in his palm. He slowly pulled it out, struggling to keep his composure as Harry whimpered and coiled into more of a fetal position.

“Baby? What happened? What happened to your hand?” Louis asked, straining to reach up to the counter and grab a spare rag. He held it to Harry’s palm, stoppering the bleeding. His head whipped around as he heard the front door open and close. “Zayn! I need help!”

“I fell.” Harry said, his eyes open again and looking up to Louis apologetically. But Louis was close to laughing with relief at Harry’s ability to say something coherent. “Wanna sit up.” He was already on the move, struggling to lift himself up into a sitting position. Louis leaned in quickly to
help him up.

“Are you okay, love? What hurts?”

“Everything, Louis.” He whimpered, his face crumpling as he collapsed forward, his clumsy weight falling into his shoulder.

“What happened?” Zayn asked as he appeared, his face alight with shock.

“I don’t know - I think - I know he fell and cut his hand but -” Louis stammered, clutching Harry more tightly as his fears came to the forefront of his mind. “Is this what an overdose looks like?” He asked in a near-whisper.

Harry moaned loudly into Louis’ shoulder and Zayn’s eyes grew wider. He dropped down to his knees and pulled Harry’s face into his hands. Louis’ hand somehow tightened even more into the fabric of Harry’s button-up, the sight of Harry’s listless face reflected in Zayn’s concerned eyes making him feel like he was seconds from falling apart.

“Harry, do you know who I am?” Zayn asked.


“How’s your breathing? Can you breathe?” He continued to question him. Harry gave a weak nod before pulling away from Zayn and leaning down to bury his head in Louis’ lap. “Do you need anything right now? What are you feeling?”

“Thirsty.” He answered.

Zayn stood up and he went in search of a water glass. Louis stroked back a few locks of Harry’s sweat dampened hair before Zayn turned back to them. He had a tall glass of water, but he set it down on the counter and pulled a short waste bin up to them.

“I don’t think it’s an overdose.” He said, sitting down. “He’s had more than he should have, but he’ll be okay.”

“S’thirsty.” Harry whined from Louis’ lap.

“So what do we do? Do we keep him here or call an ambulance?” Louis asked, and he could see Zayn struggling with his answer.

“The thing is, Louis, if we take him to get his stomach pumped, the news is going to hit the internet before we clear the lobby.”

The gravity of the revelation made Louis drop his head, watching his boyfriend’s face coil with pain as he continued to groan. He looked back up to Zayn, feeling his helplessness materialize in the form of heavy tears along the bottom of his eyes.

“What would you do? What would you do if it was Liam?” Louis asked, his voice already raw. Zayn looked away.

“Water!” Harry whined.

“Come on, Harry. You need to throw up.” Zayn said, distracting himself from Louis’ question. “You have to throw up before you drink water.”

“Can’t.” Harry argued as Zayn and Louis pushed him back into a sitting position. He vomited
violently the second his head was over the rim of the bin, and Louis struggled to pull his hair back in time. His panic was reaching new heights as he rubbed a shaking hand soothingly over Harry’s back and watched Zayn rise to his feet, putting his phone to his ear.

“Li? Okay, there’s a problem.” He said as he disappeared around the corner. Harry continued to wretch, crying out between every expulsion. Louis was now clinging to him more for his own benefit than Harry’s, leaning his forehead against the back of Harry’s shoulder blade and trying not to dissolve into an uncontrollable wave of tears.

“It’s okay, baby. Shhh.” He whispered over and over, his voice growing more and more fragile with every repetition. It felt as if several millennia passed before Zayn reappeared, hanging up his phone and grabbing the water glass.

“How’s he doing?” Zayn asked.

“He hasn’t thrown up for a couple of minutes.” Louis responded.

“Kay. He should drink water now.” He said, handing the glass to Louis, who helped Harry guzzle it down. “I think he mixed molly with alcohol. That’s why he’s so sick. The molly is going to make him really hot and thirsty, but he can’t have more than one bottle an hour.”

“Why?”

“Because it could flood his brain.” Zayn tried to back track as he saw the last remaining color leave Louis’ face. “Liam’s on his way over and he’s going to pick up some pedialyte, so that will help rehydrate him.”

“Do you think… “Louis’ voice caught in his throat. “We can take care of him? He’ll be okay?”

“Yeah, Louis. He’s going to be okay.” Zayn said, making his voice as soft as he could manage. “He’s cognizant right now, which is good. If he passes out or starts having seizures-“

“Seizures?” Louis gaped in shock, but was cut short as Harry choked out a sob and fell back into Louis. “Harry? What’s wrong?”

“I hate it.” He whimpered. “I don’t want to do it anymore.”

Zayn looked at Louis slowly before standing up. Now that he’d thrown up a significant amount, Harry seemed to be breaking through the blurry haze that had landed him helplessly on the floor earlier. This new ounce of clarity was now, apparently, reducing him to desperate tears.

“You want a second with him?” Zayn asked, and Louis nodded. Zayn disappeared soundlessly to go wait for Liam, leaving Louis to trace his fingers over Harry’s tear strewn face.

“What do you hate?”

“Her.” He choked. “Not being with you! All of it! I hate it so much.”

“I hate it, too.” Louis whispered, holding Harry as his whole body shook. “Baby, if you’re really sick, we have to go to the hospital.”

“Wanna stay here.” He muttered, shaking his head. “Please let me stay here.” He looked up, and there was an onslaught of desperation in his blown pupils. Louis watched him with corroding determination before giving in with a slight nod. Harry sunk back into him in relief. “Hate this. Fucking hate this. Just want to be with you.”
Louis squeezed him, wanting to say something comforting, but knowing that the moment he opened his mouth he’d be crying as well. How had things ended like this? How did they end up here, crying and shuddering on the kitchen floor?

As promised, Liam showed up about a half hour later. By this point they’d finally gotten Harry, stumbling and limping, up the stairs and into his bed. He’d thrown the blankets and sheets to the floor, crying out about how hot he was and only calming down when Louis got a wet flannel on his forehead.

He was still restless and in clear pain as the sun was starting to stain the black edges of the horizon a dull crimson. Zayn, Liam, and Louis were all moving as if they’d been mummified, their eyes heavy and their thoughts turgid in exhaustion. Liam got Harry’s hand bandaged up, telling Louis that he’d need a few stitches in the morning when he was feeling better.

They both offered to stick around and help Louis watch over Harry, but Louis of course turned them down. With everything they’d done for him in the last twenty four hours alone, he knew that it was his sole responsibility to watch over Harry. And so he set himself up on Harry’s side, bottles of water and waste bin at the ready, after pulling all of his heavy curtains closed and banishing the impending morning.

Through his dizzying tiredness, he scoured the internet for responses to *Metal Heart’s* premiere, occasionally reaching over to stroke Harry’s shoulder when he’d flip over and groan. For the first few hours, Harry absolutely could not get himself to sleep. He curled in and out of a ball every few minutes, begging for water and moaning into the bedsheets.

It was probably midmorning before he finally stilled. He curled on his side, eyes closed and his breath finally lilting into a peaceful tempo. With his eyelids feeling as heavy as granite, Louis finally felt that it was safe to get some sleep. He curled in and out of a ball every few minutes, begging for water and moaning into the bedsheets.

He was breathing, and that was the only fact that could finally quiet Louis’ mind enough for sleep.

~

Louis woke suddenly, snapping up into a sitting position. The room was still plunged in darkness, giving no clues as to what time it was. He didn’t have a moment to stop and think about it, because he was already racing from the room in search of Harry, who was no longer in the bed beside him.

He sprinted through the house, blinking through the blinding daylight as he followed the sound of pots and pans in the kitchen. He came to a skidding halt on the kitchen tiles, grabbing onto the wall for support as his eyes landed on an image that should have been absolutely impossible.

There was Harry, happily cooking in his boxer briefs, looking as if he’d just had a full night of beauty sleep. His phone was stuck in the waistband of his briefs and his headphones were pumping loud music into his ears as he shimmied along to it. He jumped as Louis’ hand made contact with his shoulder, turning and visibly melting as he saw Louis.

“What time is it?” Louis asked.

“Almost four.” Harry answered, ripping his headphones out and turning to face Louis. His face was so alive and rejuvenated that it was almost impossible to believe that the previous night had even
happened. The only clue that Louis hadn’t made the whole thing up was the expression of doting gratitude Harry was wearing. Deciding he couldn’t contain himself any longer, Harry threw himself onto Louis with a crushing embrace.

He held him tightly, trying to convey how he felt by practically melding their bones together. Even as they separated, Harry peppered Louis’ hair with kisses before landing a deep one on his lips.

“How do you not have the world’s worst hangover right now?” Louis asked as Harry busied himself at the stove again. He was frying up bacon, apparently nonplussed by the late hour in his decision to have breakfast.

“I wasn’t that bad last night.” Harry defended himself.

“I was about ready to drag your arse to the hospital.” Louis pointed out, crossing his arms and leaning against the fridge. He was so overcome with relief, it almost felt like his joints were melting into warm goo. Harry shrugged instead of answering, turning off the burner. Louis leaned his head against the fridge to watch Harry. There was a moment last night when Louis had been jolted to his core, fearing that me might lose Harry. And now, however improbably, here he was, happy and lively. Once again, Harry had proven himself to be a miracle wrapped in human flesh. “So can we agree no more molly from random twenty year olds?” Louis laughed.

But Harry’s face grew stony as his brow furrowed. He idled at the stove, his entire body growing stiff.

“What?” Louis asked, lifting his head off the cool surface of the fridge. Harry moved as if he were about to shake his head, but his face grew more irritated. “What is it?”

“I just don’t think it’s your place to tell me what to do.” He muttered, spinning away with the pan and disappearing toward the dining room.

Louis stood rigid, watching Harry disappear and realizing he wouldn’t have recognized Harry’s voice if he hadn’t seen his lips moving. He’d never used that tone with Louis before, speaking with such interleaved belligerence and annoyance with even a hint of paranoia.

That was not something Harry would say.

That was not something his boyfriend would say.

And with a horrifying clarity, Louis’ future with Harry suddenly clicked into focus.
“But we’re not so starry-eyed anymore, like the perfect paramour you were in your letters.”

- The Decemberists

“But what time is it in the UK? It’s like seven at night.”

“That would be relevant if you were in the UK.”

“But my body’s still attune to it. It’s past five for me, so it would be absurd if I didn’t do a shot.”

“It’s brunch time, Niall. Brunch is sacred. Bloody Mary or mimosa. Those are your two options.” Harry declared, closing the door on their ever expanding argument.

Niall leaned back with an over exaggerated huff, looking up at the waiter with all of the indignation lent to him by the injustice of the situation. “Bloody Mary, please.”

The waiter suddenly snapped back to attention, having mentally wandered off after Niall and Harry’s quarrel had reached the five minute mark. The dispute probably could have been resolved much earlier if either of the other two parties at the table had given their input, but Harry’s lawyer, Sophia had busied herself with an impressive folio of papers and Louis had remained tight-lipped. The latter had been suspicious to both Niall and Harry, who typically struggled to get a word in edge-wise when in Louis’ company, but neither had commented on his rigid stoicism.

Sophia usually contacted Harry about once a month to update him about his ever shifting contractual details, and while Harry was on tour, this typically just consisted of a phone call. Now that he was back in LA, Harry thought it only polite to turn a business call into a friendly brunch. Louis had listened in when Harry had flown this idea past Sophia, saying, “And Niall should come to. He just got back. And my boyfriend should be there, too! You’re going to like him. I like him.”

Louis could tell how long Sophia had been working with Harry by how easily she had agreed to these terms. Personally, Louis had always wanted to meet and give thanks to the woman that looked out for Harry legally, but his desire to have a face to face chat with her had heightened with the previous week’s events.

He’d been sitting their wordlessly, listening to the light conversation as his urgency grew, waiting until he’d have a chance to speak to Sophia without Harry overhearing. His opportunity finally came when Harry announced that he need to head to the toilet, and he would miss everyone terribly while he was gone.

Niall and Sophia were chatting idly as Harry sauntered away, not knowing that Louis’ eyes were razor sharp on his back as he gauged the exact moment when he’d be out of earshot. He turned to the two of them suddenly, breaking into their conversation.

“What happens when it’s time for Harry and Arrienne to break up?” He asked, watching as they both looked to him in surprise. Their confusion was clear, as if they hadn’t understood what he’d just said. “Publicly, I mean. Is there a plan?”

“Well, um, yes.” Sophia said awkwardly. “There’s a general outline for how the publicity will unfold when they eventually decide to stage a split. Down the road, I mean.” Her words were carefully plucked from what Louis knew was a well of diplomatically combed words.
“It needs to start happening now.” Louis said decidedly, watching unfazed as they both reacted to this.

“Look, Louis.” She said, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. “There’s a lot of murky legal restrictions we have to work through before we can even start thinking about—”

“Harry almost overdosed last week.” Louis stated. The table grew quiet, a new kind of surprise rippling across their faces. “He was upset about kissing Arrienne at the premiere, so he lied about having a quiet night with friends to try and get me out of the house. When I found him he was crying, bleeding, and he was so cross-faded he couldn’t get up off the kitchen floor. He wasn’t even expecting me to show up, so what do you think would have happened if I’d just gone home?”

Sophia’s eyes were fixed on Louis, her entire demeanor unwavering as his words rolled over her. Niall sat forward and lowered his voice.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Niall asked.

“I’m tell you now. Harry isn’t coping with all of this the way you think he is. He isn’t talking to you or talking to me about how he’s feeling. He’s just being self-destructive, and I don’t know what to do but I can’t lose him.” Louis swallowed hard as his voice clipped over his last words. He looked down, already able to see Harry out of the corner of his eye as he wove through the tables back towards them.

He sat down with a soft kiss to Louis’ cheek, a reminder of how much he loved these discreet restaurants where they were shoved into the back and could behave however they’d like. He twined his hand with Louis’ under the table, immediately launching into an analysis of how the brightly colored soap in the bathroom affected his mood.

Harry was so enthralled in his own words that he didn’t notice the shadow hanging over Niall’s blank face, or the fact that Sophia was already digging through her contacts on her phone and shooting off emails as fast as her fingers could type. There was a twinge of guilt at the somber shift he’d caused at the table, but Louis knew that it was necessary as he clung tighter to Harry’s hand.

Harry squeezed it back immediately, not even pausing as his enthusiastic words continued to spill forth. Watching his profile and the way his entire face added to the telling of the story, Louis flipped through the several things he’d learned about Harry that week.

The most glaring of these revelations was Harry’s uncanny ability to bounce back after a night of partying. Sure, there’d be little flickers of a hangover as he woke up, but by the time he’d splashed some water on his face and had breakfast going, you’d think that he’d slept for at least twelve uninterrupted hours. But Louis had the feeling that Harry wasn’t hangover proof, he was just well practiced at pretending that he was. This alarmed Louis for two reasons: why did Harry feel like he needed to hide how badly the previous night had affected him and how was Louis ever going to be able to tell if he’d had too much the night before?

It was this paranoia that had lead Louis to the morbid dregs of Wikipedia, reading through accounts of celebrity drug abuse. The names of overdoses stacked up in black text as he scrolled page after page.


And the same causes appeared again and again, burning themselves into Louis’ retinas as he stared unblinkingly at the words.
It was enough to make Louis slam his computer shut, panting as the skin behind his ears burned white hot and his skin crawled. Harry had luckily been at work, because Louis would have been completely unable to cover up what had caused him so much panic. It took nearly an hour to calm himself down, which he only achieved after making the resolution that he was going to put a stop to this. After all, this wasn’t heroin they were dealing with. Things hadn’t gotten that bad, yet.

This did, however, inspire new vigilance in Louis, which had lead him to another of his many realizations about Harry. Just before they went to sleep every night, Harry would subtly excuse himself to the bathroom for different, mundane reasons. Louis had never thought twice about this until he’d begun keeping a closer eye on him, and now he’d noticed the nightly pattern. He started listening closely, not even breathing as he tried to ascertain what Harry was up to. The sounds were faint, but they were the same every night. He’d dig around in a little bag, then something small would skitter across the counter as he filled a water glass. He took one gulp, then poured it out, then joined Louis back in bed. Though it wasn’t much evidence to go on, Louis was convinced of one thing: Harry was taking something to help him sleep.

Once he’d developed this theory, several other clues immediately clicked into place. If he managed to keep Harry awake long enough after he’d come back from the bathroom, Louis could notice a slight slurring on the edges of his words before he grumbled that he was exhausted and turned over to go to sleep. He’d noticed this before, but given the new circumstances and the tireless research he’d been doing behind Harry’s back, he was completely sure that Harry was taking a sleep aid. But what stuck out the most was the fact that Harry was going to lengths to lie about it, which Louis knew meant the pills were both powerful and unprescribed.

At first, Louis reasoned that Harry might just be struggling with some insomnia and needed a little something to help him doze off. This, however, didn’t explain the secrecy. Harry made a habit of being open with Louis, often citing his distaste for lying, but he regularly withheld certain information if he knew he was doing something wrong.

If Harry had a hiding place in Louis’ bathroom for his pills, it was impossible for Louis to find. He spent days obsessing over possible ways he was sneaking a bottle around, but everything came to a halt when Louis spent the night at Harry’s. After only a small amount of sleuthing (which Louis still felt cringingly guilty over) he’d been able to find exactly what he was fearing in the back of Harry’s medicine cabinet. It was an unmarked bottle of little blue pills. His research made it easy for Louis to recognize them as Klonopin, a powerful and addictive anti anxiety drug that helped people sleep.

It’s possible that Louis had stood there for several minutes just clenching onto the bottle, feeling himself ripped apart by the fact that Harry needed something. He should have stormed out of the bathroom right then and confronted Harry; made him face what he’d found and yell, scream, and cry until he could get Harry to admit it, but he just couldn’t do it. He couldn’t look into whatever face of perplexity and hurt Harry would wear at that confrontation, finding out that his boyfriend trusted him so little that he’d started digging through his things. Or, even worse, he might catch a glimmer of that dark side of Harry; that side that had snapped at Louis and fled the kitchen without another word.

It was selfish and it was weak, but he couldn’t be mad at Harry. He just couldn’t. Instead, he could funnel all of this energy into a solution. He could bring it all to an end before things spiraled out of control, and Harry never had to be the wiser.
He just needed to treat the root of the cause. Louis needed to erase the situation that was leading Harry towards his habit of partying.

First off, Louis was going to get Arrienne out of the picture. Second, he was going to get Harry out of the closet.

~

“When does Martha get a turn?”

“My name is not Martha.”

“Martha’s after Zayn after Liam.” Niall explained, not loosening his fixated stare on the screen for even a second as the animated footie players raced by.

“Why do you play every turn?” Harry asked.

“Because I never lose.”

“My name is not Martha.” Louis maintained, pushing his face closer to Harry’s in response to being ignored. Harry didn’t look at him, instead smirking and pretending he didn’t hear him. His arm was slung around Louis’ shoulder as they all sat in Niall’s lounge, playing FIFA on his massive telly. Zayn was intent on the game, watching as Niall and Liam battled each other, while Louis leaned into Harry’s warmth and watched the game with mild interest.

“I’ll let you go sooner if you grab another bag of crisps from the kitchen.” Niall offered to Louis, causing Zayn to jolt forward to the edge of his couch seat.

“Who gave you the right to skip me?” He demanded, but Niall’s reply was drowned out by Louis’ elongated groan. He slowly pushed himself up from the couch, languidly dragging himself toward the kitchen. Harry caught him gently by the hand.

“Could you grab me a water while you’re up, Martha?” He asked innocently. Louis snatched his hand away.

“My name is not Martha!” He bellowed. “Why do you keep calling me that?”

Harry smiled at him devilishly for a few seconds before looking away. Louis groaned yet again and made his trek toward the kitchen. He grabbed a bag of crisps off the counter and quickly found Harry a bottle of water out of the fridge.

These weekly lad nights had become a regular routine, with each of them taking a turn to host. Louis marked in his head that this was the fourth week they’d kept this up, which meant it had been four weeks without any major incidents from Harry. It made Louis feel slightly sick that he was keeping tally of what Harry did behind his back, but at the same time, he was proud that he’d been able to go this long without any meltdowns.

It wasn’t entirely Louis’ effort that contributed to Harry’s good behavior, though. Niall had jumped equally on board, cornering Louis at his house about a week after Louis had bombarded him and
“Do you even realized how close we got to giving him an intervention last time, and there weren’t even any prescription drugs back then.” Niall had said. “The only thing holding us back was having to tell his mum, but we were probably only one more freak out away from that.”

“I don’t want us all conspiring behind his back.”

“But everything is against him in this. He just has to walk into a party and forty people will try to give him free drinks and drugs. It’s the way this industry works. He’s set up to fail.”

“Which is why we have to take care of him. Between the two of us, we can watch him wherever he goes.”

“He’s an adult, Lou.”

“Do you have a better idea? Do you want to ship him off to rehab over some molly and sleeping pills?”

“No - I just - I just don’t know if we can control him. He’s good at hiding things.”

“He hates lying, Niall.”

“And yet he’s convinced the entire world that he’s straight. He knows how to put on an act. He’s more deceptive than you give him credit for.”

Those words had been looping through Louis’ thoughts on replay for weeks, echoing every time Harry smiled at him happily or kissed him hello. How could someone like this be hiding something from Louis? It couldn’t be possible, could it?

Apart from his rampant suspicions, things in their relationship were going smoothly. Waking up to Harry in his arms still knocked the wind out of Louis’ lungs every morning, and when they did fight, it was over minor frustrations that were commonly iced over with a good snog.

“Liam! You’re getting slaughtered!” Zayn complained as Louis walked back into the lounge, handing Harry his glass of water.

“Thanks, Martha.”

“What is wrong with you?” Louis demanded in mock-anger, grabbing a nearby pillow and smacking him in his stomach as he sat down.

“Liam!” Zayn shrieked. Louis looked up to see Niall fist pumping in the air, having just scored a goal on Liam. Liam didn’t seem to notice, as his controller was hanging limply in his hand as he read something off of his Blackberry.

“Haha, Payno!” Niall cheered, taking to the field again during Liam’s lapse in attention. Louis let his head loll back onto Harry’s shoulder, looking up at him as their friends continued to yell at each other.

“My name’s not Martha.” Louis pouted. Harry responded with a quick kiss to Louis’ lips, causing Louis to roll his eyes in exasperation.
Their moment was suddenly interrupted as Louis’ phone buzzed from his pocket. He fished it out to find an unexpected text from Liam.

*Harry’s about to get a call from his management.*

Louis’ head snapped up immediately, watching as Liam tried to coyly ignore him and pretend that he hadn’t just sent an extremely suspicious text in Louis’ direction. Louis looked back down to respond, angling his phone away from Harry.

*and how exactly would you know that, dearest Liam?*

Liam handed his controller to Zayn so that he could plug himself fully into his text conversation.

*It’s about Arrienne.*

Yet again, Louis’ head snapped up in shock. Liam’s eyes shifted to meet Louis’ momentarily this time, his facial expression conveying just how serious he was. Louis attempted to paint himself casual as he turned his attention back to his phone.

*what about her?*

*Can’t tell you.*

*WHAT do you EVEN MEAN you can’t tell me? why even bring it up then?*

*I had to tell someone. I was going to blow up.*

*but you haven’t told me a FUCKING THING Liammmmmmmm*

*They included me in a dialogue about her publicity and it’s BIG*
Everyone looked towards Louis as he audibly growled in frustration, typing furiously at his phone. “What’s wrong, babe?” Harry asked, leaning over to catch a glimpse of Louis’ phone. Louis didn’t even respond as he spun around so that Harry could only see the back of his phone. Liam was practically simmering with anxiety at how obvious Louis was being.

Louis continued to wriggle in attempt to hide his screen from Harry.

“I C A N’T”

“I literally can’t. Promise you won’t say anything to him!”

“Liam has something he would like to tell you, darling!” Louis announced loudly, letting his phone fall into his lap. The room grew quiet, looking back and forth between Liam’s venomous glare and Louis’ smug grin in confusion. None was more confused, however, than Harry, who’s familiar furrowed brow had made a reappearance as he scrutinized Louis.

“Your management is going to call you any second.” Liam finally said, deciding to give in. “But you have to pretend I didn’t tell you that.”

“Okay?” Harry muttered, still thoroughly bewildered.

“They’re planning to have you break up with Arrienne.”

Harry’s face gave way to abrupt shock, which was mirrored by everyone else as the FIFA game whirred on in the background, utterly ignored.

“What was that?” Louis piped up, turning to Liam as Harry stared at him, slack-jawed.

“They’ve agreed on a break up narrative, and they’re about to call Harry to brief him about it.”

Harry blinked once, then twice, and on his third blink Louis’ patience ran thin.
“How do you know?” Louis asked.

“Because they want to make sure you aren’t seen anywhere near him when this whole thing is happening.” Liam explained, looking at Louis. “Their plan is to send Harry off on a vacation for a couple of weeks, then really play up the fact that Arrienne isn’t with him. And they’ve made it clear that it would look really bad if you suddenly showed up at his side while he’s supposed to be on a rebound trip.”

Louis sat back and leaned into Harry, begrudgingly acknowledging that this made sense. His only argument was that he liked Harry and wanted to go too, but he didn’t think that Liam would find this a viable argument. This wasn’t a impenetrable obstacle, though, because it was only too easy to go behind Liam’s back and do as he pleased. The fact of the matter was, Harry wasn’t going anywhere without Louis. Especially not for two weeks.

It was then that Harry’s phone started ringing from where it sat on the armrest. Everyone stared at the fateful, incoming call as Harry’s hand lingered over it, finally picking it up and putting it to his ear.

“Hello?” He nudged past Louis to race from the room, leaving everyone in silence as they strained their ears to listen in. This proved futile, so everyone turned their attention back to the game, though their interest had clearly waned.

Harry was absent for at least a half hour, ambling in later with a dazed expression and falling onto the sofa beside Louis. The others subtly looked to him in curiosity, interested in how much he’d be willing to share.

This turned out to be nothing as he once again slung an arm over Louis’ shoulders and chewing his thumbnail idly. He had a focused intensity about him as he stared at the screen, and it wasn’t long until Louis suggested they head home early. Harry was quick to comply, practically charging from the house as Louis said their goodbyes and shared a knowing look with Niall.

He was still in a distracted haze back at Louis’ house as they both got ready for bed, Louis following a couple steps behind as he tried to gauge what was happening in Harry’s head. He got into Louis’ bed without even bothering with the duvet, but became strangely fixated with fluffing his pillow. Louis sat beside him and watched him quietly, knowing that at this point, Harry was usually playfully crawling on top of Louis and kissing every inch of skin he could get access to. But tonight, he seemed to only have eyes for the pillow that refused to get fluffed.

The moment had lasted long past Louis’ ability to wait patiently, so he brought a swift end to it by jumping onto Harry and straddling his hips, then planting a deep kiss to his mouth. He writhed his body down against Harry, holding his face in his hands and practically sucking the air from his lungs. Slowly he pulled away, feeling Harry go limp beneath him.

“Hi.” Louis said as an understated response.

“Hey.” Harry responded, clearly winded.

“Talk to me?” Louis plead, putting on what he knew was his cutest pout. Harry’s resolve melted into a bashful smile as his hands slid down Louis’ back, coming to rest at the swell of his arse.

“Yeah. Sorry.” He apologized, breathing in heavily as if trying to flush out the muddled thoughts that had been distracting him all night.

“Aren’t you happy?” Louis asked. He’d been expecting some sort of news about Arrienne ever
since their brunch, and this wasn’t the response he’d expected from Harry.

“I just can’t really wrap my head around it yet.”

“But it’s everything you’ve been wanting. You’re finally getting her out of your life.”

“Yeah, I know. I just don’t really - like - get it, I guess? Like why now. All of a sudden. Especially with everything they’re trying to cover up between us.” His fingers tightened around Louis’ hips, stroking the bare skin beneath his shirt with his thumbs. Louis swallowed anxiously, feeling guilt burning in the back of his head.

“I might have - maybe - said something to Sophia.” Louis confessed, holding his breath as he watched Harry cock an eyebrow in confusion.

“You said something to Sophia?”

“More - kind of - demanded some progress with your coming out.”

“Lou.” Harry said, breathing the word out as his mind started whirling again. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Because you almost overdosed in my arms.

“Erm…”

Because I don’t trust you alone anymore.

Because I’m afraid of losing you.

Because I love you.

“Because I’m tired of seeing you sad.” He said, which was true in itself.

“You should have said something.”

“So what’s the plan? What did they tell you?” Louis asked, changing the course of the conversation away from his shady dealings behind Harry’s back.

“They want to get rid of me for two weeks, like Liam said.”

“I could probably get away for about a week.” Louis said.

“They don’t want you anywhere near me.”

“As I said, I can get away for about a week. So where are we going?” Louis asked innocently. Harry’s face split into a wide grin as he pulled Louis down onto his chest, wrapping his arms around Louis’ back as the smaller man nestled his head under Harry’s chin.

“They suggested somewhere tropical. I’m supposed to go at this like I’m recovering from a break up.”

“You could probably talk me into some daiquiris on the beach. You know, where the waiters bring it over to your chair? And you’re in one of those chairs that’s super low down in the sand. Why do people do that, anyways?” He shifted his head to look up at Harry, quickly noticing that Harry’s thoughts were somewhere far away from the hypothetical beach Louis was relaxing on. “What are you thinking about?”
“I was just thinking - you know - if I were actually going through a break up, there’s only one place I’d want to go.”

“Where’s that?”

“My mum’s.” Harry answered simply, watching Louis carefully as he awaited his response.

“Oh.” Louis said lightly, settling his head back onto Harry’s chest. “I think you could sell that to management. I mean, yeah, it would look super weird if your long term girlfriend wasn’t with you when you’re visiting your family.”

“And on the side of things that aren’t my made up public persona,” Harry said coyly, tracing his fingers in circles on Louis’ shoulder. “I’ve kind of been wanting to introduce my boyfriend to my mum.”

Louis felt lucky that Harry wasn’t looking at him, because his eyes got embarrassingly wide. Somehow, he hadn’t connected the fact that going with Harry would mean meeting his family.

“Erm, yeah!” Louis said dumbly, causing Harry to snicker. “I’d really like that. I’d really like that. Are you sure you’re sure?”

“Yes, Lou, I’m sure I’m sure.”

“That was stupid of me to say, wasn’t it?”

“It was cute.” Harry assured him. “And maybe, while we’re over there, we could visit your family, too?”

“I’m not sure if you want that. There’s about a thousand of them.”

“Of course I want that.” Harry laughed. “Do you think Liam’s going to say yes?”

“No. But I’m really looking forward to all the ways I’m going to torture him until he gives in.” Louis said. Harry laughed again, pushing Louis back as he rolled onto him, kissing him.

“My hero.”

“Wait!” Louis snapped, pushing Harry away. “What’s with the Martha thing?”

Harry’s face dissolved into a laugh. “Nothing. I just had Martha My Dear stuck in my head.” Louis looked at him, aghast, before flicking him in the forehead. “Ow!”

“Here I thought it was some clever joke I wasn’t in on, and you just had a Beatles song stuck in your head?”

“Martha, my dear. Though I spend my days in conversation, please,” Harry sang, slowly lowering himself back onto Louis.

“You’re stupid.” Louis laughed.

“Martha my love. Don’t forget me!”

Louis brought the song to a swift close as he sealed Harry’s mouth with his own.
There had perhaps never been a man with such a look of aggravated defeat as Liam when Louis told him that he absolutely needed to have a week of his schedule cleared so that he could visit his family with Harry. He’d expected Liam to put up a bit more of a fight, explaining to Louis that he had a movie in theaters and was badly needed for press, or remind him that Harry’s management had expressly forbade him from going with Harry on his trip.

But Liam had long since learned that everyday as Louis’ agent was like Napoleon facing Waterloo, so he picked up the phone to make some calls. Leader of men that he was, Liam pulled it off, getting Louis an entire week off to fly over to England with Harry. The only stipulation was that the vacation couldn’t be even minimally recreational, as Harry and Louis absolutely couldn’t be seen together.

Even with the fact that they’d have to spend all their times indoor being discreet, Louis was completely beaming with excitement on their private plane across the ocean. In all honesty, knowing that they were sneaking around behind management’s back was a tiny bit exciting, especially since they were doing it right under their noses.

Harry’s bodyguard, Paul, had to help Louis sneak away once they arrived, since management had people on the ground ready to get Harry photographed in Heathrow. Simultaneously, Arrienne was in New York, taking pictures with her squad of beautiful model friends, tweeting pre approved buzz words about leaning on your girlfriends during the tough times and not needing men to define yourself.

If only the world knew how apt those sentiments were to Arrienne’s actual sexual identity.

He wasn’t able to join Harry again until a very secret rendezvous on the way to Doncaster, when his people finally let him to take his own rental car and leave him to his own devices for the rest of the trip. Louis hopped into the car beside him, feeling like they were partners in crime on their way to rob a bank somewhere.

In actuality, they were on their way to a house full of screaming children and Louis’ doting mother, all of which spilled out the door the second the two of them pulled up. They crowded on the front porch, waving, as Louis’ head fell back against his seat.

“They’re going to devour you.” Louis commented, looking over to Harry but only catching a glimpse of him as he leapt from the car and bounded up the front steps. Louis undid his seatbelt, rolling his eyes affectionately as he followed afterwards with their bags in hand.

He traipsed up the steps toward the buzzing hive his sisters and mother had formed around Harry, who was in the midst of a detailed compliment about Johanna’s new haircut, barely noticing Louis as he came to a stop.

“How would you know it’s a new haircut?” Louis asked.

“We talk.” Jay said defensively, hooking an arm around Harry’s waist as if he were her long lost BFF.

“Harry, could you sign this?” Phoebe asked as she stepped forward, holding out a Status Solo record and a pen. Louis once again rolled his eyes, this time imagining Phoebe special ordering a record without anything to play it on. Apparently CDs weren’t retro enough for the younger
generation, yet.

“Phoebe, he’s like your brother-in-law. You don’t need his autograph. You’re going to see him all the time.” Louis pointed out, embarrassed that it had only taken a few seconds before his family gone full star struck on Harry. Harry, however, was already happily signing it.

“He’s not my brother-in-law if you’re not married.” Phoebe snapped back at Louis.

“Well I don’t plan on breaking up with him, so it’s pretty much the same thing.” Louis countered, his voice already in the petty falsetto he only used when arguing with his siblings. “Can someone please make an effort to welcome me? I’m the one you’re related to, in case you’ve forgotten.”

At this the tide shifted, everyone falling onto Louis at once with a patronizing, “Ahhhhhh.” They fawned all over him in full force as they made their way back into the house, knowing that a small crowd on the porch might attract the kind of attention that Harry and Louis were trying desperately to avoid. Louis tracked down his step father, Daniel, who was trying to play it cool about the rockstar in his house. He shook Harry’s hand, only partially obvious about how excited he was to be meeting the lead singer of Status Solo.

The entire family was charmed by Harry within seconds, which came as exactly zero percent of a surprise to Louis. Honestly, if his family had done anything besides dissolve into piles of putty in Harry’s hands, he might have lost his sense of what was right and wrong in the world. What was also absolutely no shock was the fact that Harry had at least one of the babies in his arms at all times. He seemed to be aware of where Ernie and Dorris were constantly, as if he had a sixth sense for finding babies. On top of this, at least one of the other members of the family was constantly hanging on to him, no matter their age.

The questions were coming at Harry at warp speed, but he was somehow keeping up with all of it and matching everyone’s enthusiasm. While this was absolutely endearing, there was one element of the family dynamic that was starting to prickle at Louis’ good nature. Johanna was now unabashedly flirting with Harry, and Harry was completely condoning it - nay, he was encouraging it.

Of all the scenarios Louis had imagined of Harry leaving him for someone else, he had never imagined it would be his own mother to swoop in and steal his man away in the middle of the night. The entire display had Louis broiling with embarrassment, constantly squeaking out protestations like, “Mum, oh my god! Stop touching him!”

Even as they finally wrangled everyone around the table for dinner, Johanna absolutely insisted on sitting beside Harry, who was looking around the table in amazement at the sheer number of people they managed to feed every night. Granted, the company was usually smaller with Louis in the US and Lottie off at her first year of Uni most nights, but it was still the kind of crowd Louis knew Harry was only used to at holidays and special events. He seemed a little too charmed with it, and Louis knew he was already getting ideas about the future.

Louis was helping himself to a generous helping of Johanna’s homemade mash and talking with Daniel about everything going on with Metal Heart when he found himself suddenly unable to look away from what was going on between Harry and Johana.

“Oh wow!” She was gaping, squeezing Harry’s flexed bicep. “Very impressive, sweetheart.”

“Okay. Up. We’re switching spots.” Louis demanded of Harry, already picking up his plate and jumping out of his chair.
“Oh Boo, calm down.” Johanna laughed.

“He is not a piece of meat, mother! He is my boyfriend!” Louis pointed out, patting impatiently at Harry’s shoulder until he was sliding his plate over and hopping into Louis’ seat with an apologetic look towards Johanna. Louis smugly sat down, digging back into his mash.

“You never were good at sharing.” Johanna snapped.

“What do you want to do tomorrow?” Fizzy asked excitedly. “Could we go see Metal Heart again?”

“I don’t even want to imagine the chaos that would happen if Louis just randomly showed up at a screening in Doncaster.” Harry mused.

“I told you guys, Harry and I have to stay here. We can’t be seen anywhere.” Louis repeated himself.

“But can’t you just be sneaky?” Lottie asked hopefully.

“Still not a good idea.” Harry explained. “If we got caught, my management would probably have me murdered.”

“Nah, they wouldn’t murder you.” Louis argued. “They’d have me swiftly assassinated and probably make you watch, but they wouldn’t hurt you.”

“Louis, it would hurt me to watch you get assassinated.” Harry pointed out.

“Ah, that’s so sweet.” Louis smiled, squeezing Harry’s leg under the table.

“So how long does this have to be a secret for you two?” Daniel asked with idle curiosity, obviously unaware of the complicated answer awaiting him. Both Harry and Louis shifted awkwardly, unsure of who should answer and what they should even say.

“We’re not - erm - we’re not totally sure.” Harry answered slowly, looking to Louis for help.

“Yeah, we’re not sure.” Louis jumped in. “PR’s really complicated, you know? Our images are basically their own brands, and a lot of people’s jobs depend on what we do and what we say, so we’re not completely in control of everything. So, yeah, we don’t know how long it’s going to be. But we’re doing alright, so things are okay right now.”

“But you can’t even leave the house together.” Johanna countered. Louis noticed Harry subtly recoiling in on himself.

“Being with Harry’s worth that to me.” Louis said bluntly, feeling the room grow somehow quieter at the sincerity in his voice. “So we just have to be patient for awhile, but there are worse things we could be dealing with. For instance, Harry could have nasty snake bit lips rings like Lottie’s boyfriend.”

“He is not my boyfriend!” Lottie squealed.

“Then why is he all over your Instagram?”

“That doesn’t mean we’re dating! We’re just friends!”

The conversation quickly fell in on Lottie, attacking her from all sides. Louis could sense Harry relaxing as the heat left the two of them, and he leaned over to kiss Louis’ cheek before they both
turned back to their dinners.

It was almost two hours later before the mountain of food had been consumed at the dishes were scrubbed and put away, finally letting Louis breathe a sigh of relief. He sat at the breakfast bar as he felt himself lapsing into a food coma, watching his mother as she put away the last of the wine glasses. Lottie and Fizzy had long since dragged Harry away to their den, giving Johanna and Louis their first chance to talk without any prying ears.

“He’s so sweet, Lou.” Johanna said.

“He is.” Louis agreed.

“And he’s very handsome.”

“Yeah, I know you think he’s handsome. You’ve been flirting with him all night.”

“If I brought home a boyfriend like that, you’d be flirting with him, too.” She countered.

“Not right now, I wouldn’t. Can’t imagine being interested in anyone else right now.” Louis admitted, causing Johanna’s face to melt into a warm smile.

“Remember earlier when you said something about him being the girl’s brother-in-law?”

“I was joking.”

“You never ‘joked’ about that kind of stuff when you were with Joshua.” She argued. “Believe me, I was keeping track of that. Would’ve given me a heart attack if you said something about marrying him. Harry, however, I can just see the two of you in matching tuxes. Oh, with little flowers in your lapels that match the arrangements. Oh, that would be very tasteful, Boo.”

Louis was struggling to keep his smirk within the human range of normalcy as his mind guiltily put the image his mum was describing to memory. “I mostly only said it to screw with Phoebe.”

“But do you really think that? Do you think you could marry him someday?”

“Well,” Louis thought aloud, turning behind himself to making absolutely certain that Harry wasn’t somewhere nearby, listening in on their conversation. Once he established that the coast was clear, he leaned in as if about to engage in a juicy gossip session. “I never really saw myself marrying Joshua, and I thought it was mostly because we were both young and I just couldn’t think that far ahead. But - like - I don’t know. It just feels different with Harry. I can’t imagine not marrying him, you know? But yeah - I don’t know. We’re still young. There’s no rush, but…”

“Louis, you’re smiling like you’re in love.” Johanna commented with a knowing grin.

“You’re embarrassing me.” Louis protested, jumping from his seat as she called after him. Before he could talk himself into any corners he wouldn’t be able to get out of, he decided to go check on Harry and make sure his sisters weren’t torturing him too terribly. He found the three of them sitting cross-legged on the floor of the girls’ room, all three of them looking up as Louis idled in the doorway.

“Darling!” Harry chirped, motioning for Louis to come sit as he leaned back against one of the beds. There was an intense feeling of deja vu as Louis complied and sat down, remembering the nearly identical scene back at the homeless LGBT youth center months earlier. Back then, Louis had walked into the room to find Harry surrounded by teenagers hanging on his every word as he eagerly beckoned for Louis to come sit next to him. This time, however, he didn’t have to sit at
Harry’s side like the platonic friend he use to be. Instead, he gently kicked Harry’s crossed legs until he opened them, letting Louis sit between them and lean back against Harry’s chest.

“You’re all talking about Lottie’s new boyfriend, right?” Louis asked mischievously as he wrapped a hand around Harry’s thigh.

“Louis!” She yelped.

“I’m ready to hear about Fizzy’s boyfriend.” Harry said, winking at Lottie as he rescued her from Louis’ teasing. “I assume she has twelve, so we best get talking about them now if we’re going to get a clear picture of her love life by morning.”

Fizzy angled her pink cheeks away from them, clueing Louis instantly into the presence of a gentleman suitor in her life. He leaned forward as he decided how best to unravel Fizzy’s defenses.

“What’s his name?” He asked excitedly, trying to catch Fizzy’s eye, but she was determined to look everywhere besides at her older brother as she glanced around the room. “Fiz! What’s his name?”

“His name is Carl.” Lottie answered for her, and Louis detected a slight sneer in the way her lips curled around the name. He knew that he should investigate this, but he was far too focused on the name that had just been presented to him.

“Carl? His name is Carl? Is he forty years old?” Louis gaped.

“He’s eighteen.” Fizzy responded.

“Don’t like the sound of that. Don’t like the sound of that one bit.” Louis mused. “What’s the deal with Carl, Lottie? What do you know about him?”

Lottie was sitting with her arms crossed, chewing her lip as her eyes darted back and forth between Louis and Fizzy. Her apprehension was enough to deflate Louis’ playful excitement.

“Lottie. Don’t.” Fizzy said forcefully.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Louis demanded, sitting even further forward as he honed in on Lottie.

“He punched her in the arm and it left a mark.” Lottie said suddenly. Louis’ blood seemed to curdle in his veins as Fizzy whined in protest.

“Oh my god, it went away after like a day!” Fizzy harped.

“That’s still leaving a mark.” Lottie argued.

“You’re making it sound like it was a bruise or something and it wasn’t! It wasn’t even a big deal!”

“He hit you, and that isn’t a big deal?” Louis asked, his voice low. Fizzy looked to him in fear, unsure of how to explain herself.

“It was a joke! He does it to everyone. It’s just how he says hi to his friends, and stuff.”

“Is he your friend or is he your boyfriend?” Louis clarified.

“We’re just talking right now.”
“Well that’s over. You’re not talking to him anymore.” Louis decided. Lottie bit down on her grin at Louis’ support but Fizzy was near-hysterical.

“Oh my god! You’re making it into this big thing when it so wasn’t! I shouldn’t have even said anything about it! It was just a joke!”

“Fiz, if that’s how he jokes, then what do you think he’s going to do when he’s mad?” Louis pointed out. Fizzy glared back at him with all the malice her teenage angst could muster.

“You don’t get it.” She said flatly, and Louis felt his chest flare up like it was on fire.

“Actually, I really do.” He said venomously. “I know what happens after you let your boyfriend hit you.”

The air seemed to be suddenly sucked from the room, leaving nothing but a noiseless vacuum in it’s wake. Both girls stared back at him in complete shock, ready for Louis to say that he was joking and take back what he had said. But the moment solidified when Harry brought his hands up to Louis’ shoulders and squeezed them supportively.

“What do you mean?” Fizzy asked, her eyes unblinking. Louis looked to the door furtively, making sure it was closed.

“You can’t tell mum, okay?” Louis said, and both girls scooted in closer as Harry released a loud exhale.

“Was it Joshua? What happened?” Fizzy asked. Her eyes grew wide as Louis nodded, and Harry’s arms slowly hooked around his middle, holding him tight.

“We had a big fight, and rather than trying to work things out with him, I decided that I wanted to hurt him.” Louis explained slowly, feeling Harry’s heart beating against his back. “I cheated on him, and it was a huge mistake. But when I told Joshua, he punched me in the face.”

With that, he could feel Harry’s lips lightly brush the back of his neck, his hot breath quivering with a slight hitch as he pulled away. Both girls were still aghast, apparently never considering something like that could have happened between Louis and Joshua.

“And that’s when you broke up with him, right?” Lottie asked, and Louis swallowed painfully. His mouth ran dry as he tried to explain to his little sisters, both of which looked up to him for advice on how to navigate dating, that he’d stuck with Joshua for months after he’d hit him.

“Erm - no - actually.” He said, his voice faltering with a joyless laugh.

“It was complicated, because Joshua was mostly emotionally abusive.” Harry explained, seeming to notice Louis’ trepidation. “He manipulated Louis and convinced him that what had happened was his fault. Louis was afraid of what would happen if he ever upset Joshua, so he never even considered the fact that Joshua was hurting him.”

“But no one did anything?” Lottie clarified, still shocked. “None of your friends did anything?”

“I - erm…” Harry’s voice caught in his throat.

“No one knew.” Louis jumped in. “I kept it a secret for months. Harry’s actually the first person I trusted enough to tell about it.”

“I should have done more, when he told me.” Harry muttered, his chin falling onto Louis’
shoulder, put Louis nudged him away, turning around to look at him.

“Hey.” Louis said gently, not about to let Harry’s thoughts meander in that direction. “You’re the first person I told, and you’re the first person who told me it wasn’t okay.” Louis turned back around and tightened Harry’s arms around his middle. “I only told Harry because I thought he was going to validate me; I thought he was going to tell me it wasn’t a big deal and I could move on from it. But he didn’t. He told me it was wrong, and he was afraid for me, and he didn’t stop saying it. I don’t think I could have worked up the courage to eventually leave Joshua if Harry hadn’t said all of those things to me. I could have just swept everything he was doing to me under the rug like I always did. I could have just made excuses for him. But suddenly, there was someone in my life calling it abuse, and that stuck with me.”

He could feel Harry’s tension easing where his chest rubbed against Louis’ back, and he felt compelled to turn around and give him a quick kiss.

“So is that when you two got together?” Lottie asked, probably hoping she could distract them before they started to full on snog.

“That is a much longer and much more complicated story.” Louis explained. “But seriously, Fizzy, things could have gotten really, really bad if I hadn’t kicked Joshua out. I could have gotten really hurt.”

“You get really hurt.” Harry reminded him.

“You can make a million excuses for him, but things never get better. They only get worse. You’re getting me, right?” Fizzy gave him a solemn nod and looked as if his words had cemented themselves deep within her thoughts, but Louis still made a mental note to check in with Lottie about the Carl situation in the coming weeks.

“But I still want to hear the story!” Lottie urged, trying to change the tone of the room. “When did you guys finally get together?”

“Let’s just say that it ended with me showing up at one of his concerts telling him how stupid I’d been for not asking him out the first second I saw him.” Louis summarized. “And Harry responded by falling into a fountain.”

“Oh my god! When are you going to let that die?” Harry groaned. Both of the girls were giggling.

“It is my job to make sure that everyone I meet knows that story. It’s my god-given duty!”

Harry glared at him moodily as both of the girls pestered them for more details, which Louis used as an excuse to describe every aspect of Harry’s slip into the fountain: the sound he made, what angle he fell at, the shoes that made the entire mishap possible. Everyone was eventually laughing so hard that Johanna appeared to reprimand them and usher them off to bed.

Louis and Harry had been allocated to a pull out bed in the lounge, and Louis felt adequately coddled as his mother all but tucked the two of them in as she said her goodnights. Just after she flicked off the light and disappeared, Harry had the sudden urge to run to the bathroom to wash his face again. Louis bit into the side of his cheek as he lay there motionlessly, knowing exactly what Harry was really doing and trying not to think about it. Only a few minutes had passed before Harry was crawling back into bed and falling onto Louis’ chest with a contented sigh.

“I like it here.” Harry whispered.

“I’m glad.” Louis whispered back, running a hand up and down the skin of Harry’s arm. “It’s
unreal how much better they like you than Joshua. But, then again, it’s not unexpected.”

“I think it’d be fun to have a big family like this.” Harry mused, perching his chin on Louis’ chest to look up at him with big, earnest eyes. “With just a load of kids running around. And they’d all be sassy and clever like you.”

“I’d rather they were kind and could cook like you.” Louis countered.

“Fine. We’ll just split it fifty fifty. Six of them will be like you, and six of them will be like me.”

“Twelve kids?” Louis gawked. Craning his head down to look at Harry. “Hmm. Yeah, I guess I could see that. Let’s do it.”

Harry smiled at him and pushed himself up to kiss him before snuggling into his chest and closing his eyes, giving Louis the first silence he’d experienced since they’d left the US. It was then that the catharsis could finally wheedle its way into his thoughts, reminding him that this was exactly where he and Joshua had slept when they’d visited his family together for the first time. Every aspect of that trip been so fundamentally different than even just the first day he’d been there with Harry.

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It had been a moment just like this as they snuggled into bed together that Joshua had first mumbled, “I don’t think your mom likes me,” and the rest was history. Needless to say, the cuddling in bed had ended shortly thereafter.

A couple of years had passed, and somehow this is where he had ended up - joking about filling a house with a dozen children with a boyfriend he loved so much it should have scared him, yet it didn’t.

Louis pushed Harry gently back by the shoulder, causing the younger man to grumble sleepily as he was nudged off of Louis’ chest. Louis rolled over so they were facing each other, side by side, and melded his lips against Harry’s in a kiss that was deep and slow, layered with all the words he found himself incapable of saying.

“Lou,” Harry murmured, his eyes already drooping in sleepiness. “I thought - we said nothing when we’re staying with our families?”

“I’m not trying to jump your bones, Haz.” Louis laughed, affectionately cupping his cheek and running his thumb down Harry’s cheekbone. “Just wanted to kiss you.”

“S’fine. I guess.” Harry said sleepily, relaxing into Louis’ weight as he swooped back in and pressed their lips together. It wasn’t long before Harry went soft and pliant, dragged away by a chemically induced sleep.

Louis was so poignantly perfect until that pill had made it’s appearance, reminding Louis of the tension that was brewing just under the surface of his relationship. Every part of Harry was the best thing that had ever happened to Louis except for those goddamn pills.

But why did Harry even need them? Why did he have to turn to alcohol or molly or cocaine when he wanted to feel better? Louis was always there, ready to wrap him in his arms and tell him how incredible he was. What did the pills and the drinks do that Louis couldn’t?

Harry always made Louis feel protected and loved. He would always turn to Harry long before he would have ever turned to alcohol or weed to ease his pain. So why didn’t Harry feel the same? Why didn’t he feel the way Louis did? Like he could jump off a cliff tomorrow and somehow be capable of flight if Harry believed in him. Louis was his best version of himself around Harry, and
why couldn’t Harry see that?

Was that not how he felt around Louis? Was Louis the only one who felt fearless and loved in their relationship?

Why wasn’t Louis enough?

~

After several days packed with family game nights, pick up footie matches, and late night movie marathons, it was finally time for Harry and Louis to move on. Louis was thoroughly exhausted by the time they drove away, and had been so since the first twenty four hours he’d spent amongst his family. Harry had been the opposite, though, for the most part, feed off the unbridled energy of all the kids.

Louis had almost become jealous of being forced to share Harry’s attention, but eventually he remembered that he was supposedly a well-adapted adult and shouldn’t harbor envy of children. All the same, it was bittersweet as they pulled out of Doncaster, hitting the road together on the way to visit Harry’s family. Johanna had done everything she could to guilt the two of them into staying a bit longer, but, in truth, Louis was beyond anxious to finally meet the woman who had raised his boyfriend.

He was also eager to get Harry far, far away from the clamor and chaos of his mother’s house and to the relative calm of Holme’s Chapel, since something rather incredible had happened the previous night. Their last night of sharing the pull out bed, Harry had curled around Louis and shut his eyes, and that was it. Louis kept expecting the moment when Harry would slip away to take his Klonipan, but the moment never came.

The theories raced through his head about what could have possibly brought this on. Did Harry forget? Did he run out of pills? In response, Harry tossed and turned for hours, occasionally accidentally waking Louis as he struggled through his fits of sleeplessness. Every time he awoke, Louis would look over to see Harry on the other side of the bed, curled into an uncomfortable knot as he stared into the darkness. Louis would roll over each time, draping himself across Harry and holding him tightly, only to wake up roughly an hour later having been shoved away by Harry’s fitfulness.

By the time the gray morning light urged Louis to wake up, he could already hear Harry in the kitchen, chatting with his mum. This left him with the unshakable impression that Harry hadn’t been able to fall asleep at all during the night. What exactly had happened was a mystery to Louis as he walked sleepily into the kitchen, but he could tell by the red sheen in Harry’s eyes that he’d chosen not to take a pill last night, and he hadn’t found any rest as a result.

“Did you get any sleep last night, baby?” Louis asked as he gave Harry a good morning peck, angling to the side as Ernie and Doris sped past him across the floor.

“M’fine.” Harry muttered, which was his typical form of dismissal when he didn’t want to tell a lie. There was a trace amount of sluggishness in Harry’s mannerisms the rest of the day, but apart from that, he wasn’t showing any signs of exhaustion that someone who didn’t know him intimately would pick up on. Given this new situation, Louis was more than ready to usher Harry out of the house of screaming children.
Even though Harry seemed fairly attentive and awake, Louis still insisted on driving, just as a precaution. He didn’t mention anything about the fact that Harry had presumably been awake for well over twenty four hours, instead deciding to be exceedingly doting and attentive all day.

“You okay, love?” He’d ask constantly, looking away from the road as he drove. “Do you need anything? How are you feeling?”

Harry didn’t even feign surprise at Louis’ questions, didn’t pretend he didn’t know why Louis was concerned with responses like, “What do you mean? Of course I’m okay!” He knew Louis could see what was going on, and he decided not to do him the disservice of playing dumb.

Instead, he gave him real answers like, “I’m okay,” or, “Wish we could stop for coffee.” The sad reality was that they couldn’t dip over into any towns during the drive, in case someone might spot them together and snap a quick picture. Harry seemed content, however, smiling at Louis and singing quietly along to the radio as they held hands.

He gained a new wave of energy when they finally pulled up to his mum’s house, sitting up excitedly and turning to Louis. They parked behind what was probably Gemma’s car, given the litany of politically charged bumper stickers gracing it’s backside. After graduating Uni, Gemma had decided to settle down nearby, so it was easy for her to drop by for Harry’s visit.

“You ready?” Harry asked, his reddening eyes alight with glee as he unbuckled his seat belt. “I’ve never brought a boyfriend home before.”

“Huh.” Louis commented. “So, is this not the best time to admit to you that I’m an international art thief and I’m wanted in seven countries? Also, I’m secretly a mouth breather, and I have a terrible credit score, and my name’s not even Louis. It’s Cloyd. That a deal breaker for you?”

“Hmmm,” Harry mulled it over, crossing his arms and sitting back in his seat. “Well, I guess we’ll have to break up. I’ll just pop in to tell everyone that I’ve decided to dump you, then I’ll come back and drive you to the airport.”

“Do I at least get one last shag before I’m sent adrift on the winds?”

“I’ll have to think about that. If you’ve been lying about so much to me all this time, how do I know you’re not lying about being a man? You do know that I’m attracted to men, right?”

“You’re gay!” Louis gasped over dramatically.

“The cat’s out of the mother fucking bag.”

“I’m posting that shit to twitter right now.” Louis said, pulling out his phone and pretending to type. Harry laughed as he pushed Louis’ phone away, leaning in until their faces were only an inch apart.

“I’ve had time to consider, and I think you’re cute, so I’ll confirm that request for one last shag.” He said as he kissed Louis.

“Okay, new rule.” Louis groaned against Harry’s lips. “No talking about sex for the rest of the trip because I don’t trust myself to even think about that right now.”

“Excellent idea.” Harry agreed cheerily, pulling away and swiftly jumping out of the car. Louis followed after him and linked their hands together as they approached the house. Harry was practically skipping up the steps in anticipation of seeing his mum. They weren’t bombarded by a horde of shrieking siblings this time around, instead met at the door by Anne, who lit up with a
glimmering smile that was exactly the same as Harry’s.

He threw his arms around her excitedly, rocking back and forth as he practically threatened to squeeze the life out of her.

“You look tired, sweetheart.” She commented when he finally loosened his grip.

“Mum, this is Louis.” Harry said proudly, side stepping what she’d said. This was a smart strategy, as her concern was quickly distracted by her enthusiasm at meeting Louis for the first time.

“Louis!” She chirped as if they were already familiar, sweeping him into a hug. Louis already knew that he’d be violently in love with Anne from the first moment they finally met each other, considering that she was responsible for creating Louis’ favorite human on the Earth. But now that he was face to face with her, he found himself even more enamored than he’d thought possible.

It was the little mannerisms, like the way she held the sides of his face when she talked to him or the way that she threw little sideways smirks to him over her shoulder, that really made her resemblance to Harry clear. She was quieter in her affections than Johanna had been, but her kindness and warmth were apparent from the moment they stepped into the house.

Harry’s step father, Robin, was upon them in seconds, giving his jolly greetings and welcoming Louis to the family. They were a handsy couple, constantly holding onto Louis and Harry in one way or another as they chatted animatedly in the threshold.

“Oi!” Came a female voice further in the house, quieting their conversation.

“Gem?” Harry called, complying as his mum pulled his jacket off his shoulders.

“I would like to speak to Mr. Tomlinson!” She shouted.

“Then come out here!” Harry called back, but Louis was already curious enough that he was following her voice through the house. He found Gemma in the lounge, draped across a couch facing the opposite direction. She tilted her head back to look at him upside down, her top bun bouncing as he looked at him.

“Vivi wasn’t in the movie. What’s with that? Why’d you cut her out?” She asked. Louis opened his mouth to answer, but all that escaped was a laugh. “What’s funny? Why are you laughing?”

“I’m sorry, but you have this knit in your brow right now just like Harry gets when he’s frustrated. There’s no way I can take you seriously.” He admitted. She jolted upright and turned to him, her brow continuing to furrow.

“She’s important and you guys just gave all her storylines to Xavier! What are you supposed to do with the second movie? She moves the whole plot forward!”

“I’m not actually in charge of who’s in the movies and who isn’t.”

“Is she going to be in the second one?”

“Dunno. Haven’t been sent the script yet. But I wouldn’t be able to tell you, even if they did.” He pointed out.

“Of course you would tell me! I’m you’re sister!”

“Is that so?”
“Be nice to him, please!” Harry begged, appearing suddenly behind Louis and circling his arms around his stomach.

“I’ve never been anything besides nice in my entire life.” Gemma countered.

“I’m getting the impression that you’re not the only one obsessed with *Metal Heart* in this family.” Louis said cheekily, looking back at Harry.

“Gemma, can we please agree not to talk about *Metal Heart* while Louis’ here?” Harry asked, ignoring Louis’ smirk.

“I’m not going to help you portray yourself falsely to your own boyfriend, Harry. I just want to keep your relationship transparent.”

“But *please*?”

“Mum! Louis said he wants to see the scrapbooks!” Gemma called, leaping from the couch and racing out of the room. Louis moved to follow after her, but Harry stopped in front of him with his arms stretched out to both sides, blocking him.

“I can’t let you do that.” Harry stated firmly.

“But Hazza!” Louis whined, getting on his tip toes to try and see past Harry’s arm. “I want to see your baby pictures!”

“It’s not the baby pictures I’m trying to keep you from seeing.”

Louis faked to the left convincingly enough that he managed to double back and slip past Harry’s right, running past him in the direction that Gemma had just disappeared. Harry was completely prepared to take chase, swooping him up and engaging in one of their many clumsy wrestling matches, ending with them both panting furiously and looking up to Anne in embarrassment as she came to investigate the loud noises.

Soon after, Harry, Gemma, Anne, and Louis all found themselves squeezed onto a couch together as Anne sifted through a massive stack of scrapbooks. Anne sat in the middle as she looked through them, with Harry sitting half on the couch’s armrest and half in Louis’ lap. There appeared to be one for every couple of years in the family history, and now Louis understood why it had seemed so natural to Harry to make him a scrapbook for his birthday.

“Start with this one.” Gemma suggested, pulling out a purple one from the pile. Harry was whimpering at Louis’ side, so Louis squeezed his hand supportively as he stifled a laugh.

Anne opened to the first page to reveal a large picture of younger versions of Harry and Gemma. Harry was probably about twelve and had all of the sparkling whimsy in his eyes that would be expected at such an age. His face was still delightfully blanketed in baby fat and his cheeks were shiny as he smiled with unbridled glee. That image in itself would have been enough to melt Louis’ heart a hundred times over, but there was still so much more of the snapshot to be appreciated.

It seemed that the picture had been taken at a *Metal Heart* release party for one of the books. Louis assumed this due to the fact that Harry and Gemma were clothed in rather striking costumes of Louis and Eleanor’s characters.

“Oh my god!” Louis shrieked, leaning in to get a better look. Gemma was already cackling while Harry sunk his face into his hands.
“Gemma, you’re ruining everything.” He groaned as Anne chuckled quietly.

“There are more pictures, right?” Louis asked, still looking at the picture in astonishment. Anne flipped the page to reveal a two-page spread of pictures from the event, including several in which the siblings were miming attacking each other with their unseen super powers. Harry’s chubby face was locked in a sinister growl in most of them, and Louis could feel the life leaving his body. “Oh my god! This is so embarrassing for you, love.”

“Yeah, I know!” Harry spit back and glaring at Gemma.

“It all makes sense now.” Louis said, still dazed by this incredible turn of events. “You’re only dating me because I’m playing Furia.”

“I had a huge crush on him in the books.” Gemma said. “Harry and I used to always fight about who loved him more.”

“Clearly I do!” Harry huffed, gesturing at Louis, who’s cheeks went immediately red hot at Harry backhandedly telling him that he loved him. He busied himself turning the next page, hoping that no one had noticed how flustered he’d suddenly become.

Louis had always considered it rather boring and conceited when someone subjected him to their family photo albums, but he was certain he’d never been so enchanted by a collection of pictures in his life. They jumped around from book to book, following no particular chronological order. One second, they’d be detailing Harry’s struggle with a terrible haircut when he was eight, and suddenly they’d open a new book and ten years had passed with a young version of Status Solo playing in the garage. Louis especially loved every time Niall made an appearance, since he seemed obsessed with throwing himself into scandalous poses every time he noticed a camera pointed at him.

Gemma had to leave for a business call by the time they started wading through the first years of Status Solo’s success, starting with pictures of Harry smiling blindingly backstage at tiny shows, proud of the small knot of people he was about to perform for. With each page, the crowds grew larger, the pictures in the studio became more frequent, and more and more celebrities started appearing at his sides.

And then Nick made his appearance, hovering in the back of enough pictures that he appeared to be a permanent staple in Harry’s life. They were typically in public in each shot, maintaining a believable distance from each other as if they were just part of a group of friends. But Louis’ hand suddenly tightened around Harry’s as the page turned to a picture of Nick kissing Harry’s smiling, dimpled cheek.

“Hey, mum, could we move onto a different one?” Harry asked, picking up on Louis’ distress.

“Oh! Erm-“ Anne realized, standing up suddenly. “Think I forgot your baby one in our room.” She gathered the books up and scuttled from the room. Louis leaned back against the couch and glanced up at Harry.

“You looked so young.” He said as he looked up at Harry’s face, which was noticeably more tired than it had been when they first arrived. The comparison was shocking to Louis, having just spent nearly an hour learning the cherubic euphoria he’d carried on his face for years. Even in those pictures with Nick, he’d still had that child-like sheen about him. While Louis now had evidence that Harry had had the same, heart-stopping smile his entire life, he had only just learned that his innocence had long since vanished. Louis had the unsettling feeling that had they continued in that scrapbook until Nick disappeared from the pictures, he would have been able to pin point the exact
moment when Harry lost that part of himself.

It hollowed Louis, compelling him to reach up and gently cup Harry’s face, letting the trace of his fingers remind him that this was the face that he had fallen in love with.

God Harry, I love you so much.

“Found it!” Anne announced excitedly as she hurried back into the room. She fell back into her spot beside Louis and flipped it open to a picture of baby Harry at the hospital. Harry only gave a half hearted groan this time as they flipped through the first months of his life.

Louis all but squealed when he recognized Harry’s unmistakable green eyes and dimples on his plump, baby face. With every page turn, Louis and Anne’s cooing intensified and, despite his murmured protests, Harry was begrudgingly enjoying the pictures as well.

That was, until Anne’s hand stalled over a picture of a man dressed in appropriately nineties garb, smiling into the camera’s washed out flash as he held Harry.

Harry tensed where he was leaning against Louis’ side and, suddenly, he was on his feet, muttering a garbled excuse as he fled from the room. His departure was so abrupt that it took Louis a moment to process it, piecing the situation together as Anne looked somberly down at the picture.

“Is that Harry’s dad?” Louis finally asked, keeping his voice low. Anne nodded slowly, holding the page as if about to turn it, but still lingering over it.

“Does he ever talk about him with you?” She asked quietly.

“Not really.” Louis answered, feeling that he was on the precipice of uncovering another of Harry’s puzzle pieces. It was true that Harry never really talked about his dad, but Louis had never gotten the impression that it was some deep-seated conflict hiding behind his silence. He’d mentioned the basics to Louis, of course, that he’d taken off when Harry was six or seven, and that they’d talked less and less as he’d gotten older. He just had so much to say about his mum and sister that Louis assumed his father had been swept under the rug. The last few seconds had clearly spun his opinion on it’s head. “I just know the basics; that they haven’t really talked since he left.”

“He didn’t used to be like this.” Anne said, gesturing weakly after Harry’s trail. “He didn’t used to have a problem talking about him. Even after the visits and phone calls completely stopped, he wasn’t this upset with him. Because - well, you know. He’s him. He can’t stay mad at people. Well, at least, he wouldn’t walk out of the room at the tiniest little mention of him. But a few years ago - I don’t know - he can’t stand him anymore. Don’t know what changed, honestly.” She said with a sigh, finally turning the page.

“I’ve gotten the impression that they didn’t really get along.” Louis said.

“Not really, no. I mean, Des always wanted a son, but Harry wasn’t…” She trailed off, struggling over her choice of words. “Harry was this six year old boy who liked to write poetry and wear flowers in his hair.”

Louis chuckled at the mental image of a young Harry roaming the dandelion fields as he scribed his verses. “He still likes to write poetry and wear flowers in his hair.” He said warmly.

“He’s everything I could ever hope for in a son. Kind, compassionate, artsy. But that’s not what Des thought a man was made out of. Things were always tense between them, even when Harry was still so young. Can you imagine being that young and knowing that everything you did was disappointing your father?”
She looked to Louis, but he couldn’t look back to her. He was completely overwhelmed that Anne was comfortable enough with him to talk this intimately about her son, but his heart was positively aching at what this meant for Harry. On the other side of that page was a picture of the first man who had ever abandoned him.

“It means a lot to me that you’ve been this open with me.” He said before he could chicken out of it. She clapped him warmly on the leg.

“You’re gonna find out eventually. Have a feeling you’re going to stick around.” She said, smiling at him.

“Did you think that about Nick, too?”

“ Barely knew him, love.” She answered. “I only saw him once or twice. Never got the chance to talk to him much. But no, I never thought he’d be around long. Harry didn’t look at him the way he looks at you.”

Once again, Louis looked away in a fruitless attempt to hide his reddening cheeks, reaching down to the photo album to busy his hands.

“So, not that I’m jealous, or anything,” Louis said coyly, “but there are an awful lot of pictures of Nick in that other scrapbook.”

“And I bet you’re hoping that the next scrapbook will have a lot more of you?”

“Yes please.”

“Harry! Get in here! We’re taking a picture!”

Harry ambled in eventually, confusion muddled on his face as his exhaustion became more and more apparent. Louis clung himself to Harry’s side, gripping into his soft jumper and flashing a wide smile as Anne took a picture of them on her phone.

First couple picture for the family photo album: check.

Harry’s eyes were a vibrant crimson by the time the sun went down, which made it impossible for him to convince anyone that he was still “fine.” Anne ushered them to bed early, fussing over Harry until he finally closed the door to the guest bedroom. Louis joined him despite the fact that his lingering dregs of jet lag would keep him up for a couple more hours.

Once again, Harry decided to forego his nightly pill, which left him tossing and turning feverishly from the moment he hit the bed. Louis watched him as his frustration intensified, deciding he needed to say something when Harry suddenly flipped over and buried himself face first into his pillow.

“Harry, what’s up? What’s going on?” Louis asked, leaning over and placing a hand on Harry’s back. Harry didn’t look up, instead talking into his pillow.

“Nothing.” He mumbled.

“Okay, that’s a massive lie.” Louis commented, sitting up. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Yes.”

“Then what’s wrong?” He waited several tense moments, beginning to think that Harry was just
going to ignore him completely, until Harry finally looked up at him.

“I can’t sleep.” He said, his face quivering as if about to break.

“Well, Haz, you’ve been awake for like, forty hours. You have to sleep.”

“But I can’t.” He whimpered, his eyes glistening as his defenses came down. “I don’t know why but my head is racing and my legs are restless and I’m so tired but I have all this energy and I just can’t sleep.” Harry looked as if he were teetering on a full breakdown, so Louis jolted forward suddenly to take him in his arms.

“What if you went for a run, huh? Would that make you feel better?” He asked, trying to think of something to suggest before he decided to take a pill.

“I don’t know.”

“I could go with you. How about that? We could go for a short run together.”

Harry clenched his fingers around one of Louis’ arms as he thought about it, at last releasing a long breath and sitting up.

“Yeah. That sounds good.” He decided. Louis bolted out of bed, racing around the room to find them both some clothes and trainers before Harry had even managed to stumble out of bed. They got dressed slowly, Louis trying to match Harry’s pace and not pressure him to move more quickly. Finally pulling his laces tight, Harry looked up at Louis with an exhausted grin and walked towards the door.

Robin, Anne, and Gemma were all still awake, crowded together in the lounge as they watched a film. Anne immediately muted it when she saw their reappearance.

“I thought you were going to bed.” She said, her disapproval clear.

“Still have some jet lag. Gotta burn off some energy.” Louis explained. She didn’t look completely convinced, but she eventually decided to turn the sound back on, effectively dismissing them.

It was dark outside, the pavement lit by intermittent pools of yellow streetlight. Harry stretched his legs briefly before stepping into a brisk jog, his muscle memory temporarily erasing his tiredness. Louis stayed at his side, which he knew meant that Harry was slowing down deliberately for him. They’d gone running together a few times before, but could never make it a regular activity in case they were seen together, but it had been enough to learn that Harry ran much, much faster than Louis. Due to his chosen career, Louis was by no means out of shape, but Harry was the kind of person who actually enjoyed this kind of thing. Not to mention that his legs were longer than Louis’.

The pavement eventually gave way to dirt as Harry lead them down a path that veered through a small, green park. It was bordered on one side by a grove of trees, and the path lead them directly into it. The flora grew thick on their sides, blotting out the twinkling lights of suburban life and giving them the feeling of isolation; that no one’s eyes could possibly be on them.

With this, Harry dropped from his jog to a walk, causing Louis to come to a stuttering halt. He turned back to see why Harry had stopped, only to find Harry walking towards him with his hand outstretched. Louis took his hand and walked in step beside him, assuming that this was what Harry had wanted all along. He had just been waiting until they were safely away from the public eye, but all he really wanted in that moment was to hold Louis’ hand.
Louis repeated that sentiment over and over in his head. Harry wasn’t back at the house, taking a pill to ease his troubles. He was right there, hand in hand with Louis. In this moment, he had chosen Louis. It was a small victory, but it felt massive.

“Do you feel any better?” Louis finally asked after they had both caught their breath.

“Kind of.” Harry answered, looking down at the ground.

“Haz, I know about the sleeping pills.” Louis said, the words bursting out of him before he’d even realized that he wanted to say them. He wanted nothing more than to swallow everything he’d said back up, especially once he saw Harry’s reaction.

“What?” Harry’s head snapped up, his face painted with a mild yet painful shock.

“I’ve known for awhile.”

“How? Have you been looking through my stuff?” Harry asked, and Louis could already see the reemergence of that side of Harry he’d been desperately trying to avoid.

“I can hear you, when you go to the bathroom. I hear you taking them. And then you get so tired and you slur your words. I just put two and two together.” Louis said, which wasn’t completely a lie. It just wasn’t the entire truth. “And I know that you haven’t been taking them for the last couple of days.”

Harry’s head lolled in front of him, his features softening. “Yeah, I don’t know - I just…” He started, tightening his grip on Louis’ hand. “Being around your family and everything, it just seems kind of wrong. Like, if they were my kids, I wouldn’t want that kind of stuff around them, you know?” The cogs were slowly turning in Harry’s mind, and Louis nodded as he watched him. “And then I just felt like - fuck.”

“You didn’t want to take anything in your mum’s house.” Louis answered for him.

“You guys talked about my dad earlier?” He asked, his voice light but still staring at the ground.

“Just a little. Not too much.”

“You remember when we were on your roof together before we were dating?” Harry asked.

“You’ll have to be more specific.” Louis pointed out, causing Harry to chuckle before his face grew somber once again.

“When you asked me all of those questions about myself, because you knew that I wasn’t allowed to talk about myself that much?” He clarified, somehow looking small as he glanced over at Louis, who nodded. “Could you ask me about my dad?”

Louis felt the breath vanish from his lungs, having not been ready for the conversation to turn in that direction. He looked forward to steady himself before looking back at Harry, making sure to hold eye contact with him.

“Your mum said things changed a few years ago.” Louis remembered. “What happened?”

“He showed up at my doorstep when I was twenty.” Harry said bluntly, as if this wasn’t a major revelation. Louis felt as if he’d been punched in the gut, thinking back to his conversation with Anne. When she said that things had changed with Harry and she didn’t know what had happened, Louis had automatically assumed that it was something to do with Nick. Before Louis could even
wrap his head around how many people Harry had been keeping this a secret from, he started to talk again. “At my flat in London. I just got this update from my security that someone was trying to get in, saying he was my dad. And then there he was. He just showed up with this big smile like, ‘Hi Harry. How’ve you been?’ And I was just so stupidly happy to see him.”

“Wait, so what happened?” Louis asked, not seeing how this could possibly fit into the family narrative unless something had gone very wrong. “You never told your mum?”

“Or Gemma.”

“Why not?”

“Because of what happened.” Harry said, stopping to take a break. Louis waited patiently until he opened his mouth again. “He was only there for a couple of weeks, but at first, it was just so amazing. We spent all this time together and I showed him around London. I’d play him songs and stuff, and it was all the things he hadn’t been interested in when I was growing up. Like, he always used to hate it when I played piano instead of going outside with the other kids on our street. But then, suddenly, he was sitting on the bench with me, listening to songs I was working on and he seemed genuinely impressed by all of it. He’d ask me to play them over and over again, and I’d just never had a dad like that before. A dad that was proud of the things I was doing.”

“That sounds great, Harry.” Louis said softly, knowing that this was where the story was going to take a turn. Dread was pooling at the bottom of Louis’ spine, and all he could think were the same words, over and over again.

*I love you, Harry.*

“But then things - I guess - things clicked. He kept joking around about what my songs were about. *Who* they were about. He really, really wanted to meet Arrienne. He’d seen in a magazine somewhere that we were dating. And I don’t know what it was, but he said something like, ‘Ah, you’re just trying to keep her all to yourself’ and it all suddenly made sense. He was proud of me, because suddenly he thought all of his fears that I was gay were baseless.

‘I wasn’t that son anymore who always invited his dad to music recitals instead of sports matches. Now, I was this famous, successful singer with a supermodel girlfriend. And that kind of sucked to realize.’

“Baby.” Louis whispered, tightening his grip on Harry’s hand.

*I love you so much, Harry.*

“Because, this was after everything with Nick, and I was having a hard time figuring out who I really was. I mean, I couldn’t date anyone. I didn’t want to date anyone. And I was being fed all of this made up garbage about how I was so eccentric and could date all of these beautiful women, and I just - I didn’t know if there was a real me under the branding anymore. Maybe there was nothing else beside this persona I had to live everyday.

‘But my dad being proud of me for the first time really shook me. It made me realize that none of it was real, and I couldn’t have someone like that in my life. So I asked him to leave. He wasn’t proud of me, he was proud of a lie, and I didn’t want any part of that.’

“Of course not.” Louis said, trying to add whatever supportive words he could as Harry spoke. This was starting to all make sense now, since Harry absolutely hated having to lie about himself.

“Then I took off for LA and crashed at Niall’s for awhile. I thought I just needed a second to get
my bearings, but I ended up buying my house. I’ve never even been back to my flat in London, because I feel like the second I get there, he’ll show up again.”

Louis was still mentally working through the facts when Harry came to an abrupt stop, swinging Louis around by their clasped hands and pulling him into a tight embrace. He burrowed his face into the crook of Louis’ neck, holding him so close it was like he was trying to be entirely engulfed by Louis. Louis blinked in shock before hugging Harry back, listening intently as he assessed what had just happened. Harry wasn’t crying or even breathing erratically, he just seemed to be shielding himself in Louis’ arms, as if gearing up for some sort of battle.

“Have you ever told anyone about all of this?” Louis asked, circling his arms around Harry’s waist.

“Niall knows that much. But he doesn’t know what happened when I told my dad to leave. I’ve never told anyone that.” Harry said, his voice clipped.

“What happened, love?” Louis asked, warm and soothing.

“He got mad. He didn’t understand - he didn’t understand why I was kicking him out. And I didn’t want to have to tell him why but he just wasn’t listening to me. He looked so hurt and suddenly I couldn’t lie anymore, so I told him I was gay. And I’d held onto that for twenty years because I’d been so afraid of what he would do. How he would react. And some part of me thought that maybe I was one of those lucky people, where I’d been so afraid for so long, then I’d come out and my dad would surprise me. He’d totally understand. And for a split second, I thought that maybe that was going to happen.

‘And then he started yelling.’ Harry paused for a shaky breath. “He just screamed at me. The same thing, over and over and over again so that I can never forget the way he said it.”

“What did he say?”

“That no son of his was a faggot.” Harry’s voice hitched on that last word, and Louis felt a surge of swarming fury rising from the pit of his stomach. He bit down hard on his tongue, intent on not interrupting Harry until he’d said everything he’d wanted to say. “And he screamed it so much that I started to believe it. That I’m not his son. I didn’t say anything, I just stared at him until eventually Paul came running in and had to escort him out. And I haven’t seen him since.”

Harry still wasn’t crying, but his entire body was shaking with every breath he took. Louis waited, making sure that he’d said everything he need to say before he slowly pulled back and locked eyes with him. He chewed over his words, knowing that screaming obscenities about Harry’s father wasn’t what he needed right now. He needed to be diplomatic, to say the exact things that would make Harry feel better.

Please don’t be upset, Harry, because I love you so much.

“That was so brave of you to tell me that, Harry. I’m glad you told me.” Louis said slowly, watching Harry grin weakly. He began to pick through what to say next at a cautiously slow pace, but looking into the red stained eyes of the person he loved most in the world was like taking a wrecking ball to a floodgate. His anger was done being stifled. “But just fuck him.” Louis said suddenly. “Seriously Harry, fuck him. Fuck him to hell and back and then back to hell again because just fuck him, Harry. There’s no room in your life for anyone who doesn’t completely adore. Which I do, by the way, completely adore you. And so does my family, and your family, and your band and even your cat adores you so much that she’s probably cry-meowing right now. And that’s because you are easily the most kind and amazing person I have ever met. And I know that you’re not going to believe me when I say that but you would never, in a thousand years, treat
someone the way your father has treated you. You don’t fucking deserve that, Haz. No one does, but especially not you.

‘Because the people in your life that really love you know the real you. We aren’t here for the public persona or any of that bullshit. We’re here for the real you, who is this lovely, compassionate, talented man that takes everyone’s breath away and everyone is hopelessly in love with you for that, okay? Do you get that, Harry?’

Please understand, because I love you.

“I just…” Harry muttered, looking away as he tried to dodge the compliments. He shuffled his feet nervously until Louis put his hands on both sides of Harry’s face, stilling him. He looked directly into Harry’s eyes as he thought that same phrase again.

“I love you, Harry.”

Louis’ entire body seized as he realized he’d just heard those words aloud. He’d just told Harry that he loved him. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. He’d just told Harry that he loved him.

But then he looked up and met Harry’s eyes, and then the entire world was suddenly featherlight and shimmered like a blanket of stars. Every part of Louis, every ounce of flesh, bone, and soul that made him the person that he was had vanished into the swirling air, every trace of anxiety or regret riding away on the wind until there was nothing left besides the dulcet chirping of the forest at night and Harry’s infinite, green eyes, staring back at Louis. He was swelling again, his body surging with the words that he’d kept locked away every second of every day since his first kiss with Harry.

“Harry, I love you.” Louis repeated. “I’m in love with you. I love you so, so much and it’s all I think about all day everyday.”

“You-“ Harry stammered. “Really? That’s-! You really?”

“And you?” Louis coaxed.

“Oh! Yeah! Obviously! I love you, too! Obviously!” Harry exclaimed, laughing as he pulled Louis back into a tight hug, clenching onto him as if they’d never see each other again if he left go.

“You don’t need him, Hazza.” Louis maintained. “You already have an amazing family. Actually, two amazing families, since my family has already claimed you. So now you’ve got a thousand younger siblings to deal with.”

“I love you.” Harry said again, pulling away.

“I love you, too.”

“So we’re in love, then? It’s agreed?”

Louis chuckled. “Yes. it’s agreed.” Harry’s face split into a grin so massive, Louis was afraid he might pull a muscle.

“We’re in love!” He said, his face sparkling with a delighted disbelief, which made Louis feel very certain that his lungs had been replaced with heart shaped helium balloons that were inflated to near-bursting. He surged forward to seal his words with a deep kiss, separating now and then to laugh and whisper the three words over and over again. Surely, every tree surrounding them was embarrassed for them by now.
“Baby, you’re too awake right now.” Louis pointed out. “You’re supposed to be getting tired enough to go to bed.”

“I’m sorry. I just - we’re in love!” He repeated, seeming to glow brighter and brighter every time he said it.

“Well I’m still going to be in love with you tomorrow, plus the next day, plus every day after that, so can we please try to get you to sleep tonight?” Louis implored.

“Could we go back and watch telly for a bit with everyone?”

“Sounds good, love.” Louis smirked over the pet name as he lead Harry away, feeling a weight behind it that hadn’t been there before.

Everyone was still awake by the time they returned and snuggled into the empty loveseat to join them. If the others noticed that they were suspiciously giddy, they didn’t care to mention anything about it. They sat in warm, communal silence as they watched the movie, Louis already placing an anticipatory pillow in his lap for Harry. He was cuddled into it about twenty minutes later, humming lightly as Louis’ hands brushed through his curls. Louis stared at the screen with the rest of them, but his mind had wandered far away, back to that little moonlit glen where he first told Harry he loved him.

It was still nearly impossible to believe; he’d just told Harry Styles that he loved him, and Harry had said it back.

What had seemed an insurmountable challenge an hour ago now seemed completely natural, as if things had finally clicked into place. Of course he and Harry were in love. Obviously they were. The only surprising part of it was that they hadn’t been in love from the moment they’d first seen each other.

This of course lead Louis down another stream of thought, wading into the memory of the only other time he’d exchanged “I love you’s” with someone. Granted, there was that time when a nineteen year old Louis found himself the object of affection of a deeply closeted frat boy that was marauding L.A. with his goons on their spring break. He’d been a well muscled meat head with a garish eagle tattooed on his chest and a vocabulary that relied heavily on phrases like, “bro,” and “brooooooo.” All the same, when faced with the opportunity to hook up with said frat boy in his flat later that night, Louis had the ever-so-romantic thought, “What the fuck else do I have going on tonight?” He remembered the eagle particularly well, because that’s what he’d been staring at as the frat boy clutched his abs and howled, “I love you!” as he came on Louis’s stomach.

Surprisingly, Louis did not consider this his first “I love you.” That moment of course belonged to Joshua. It was the same day he’d moved into his own flat for the first time, and was more that slightly depressed that Zayn wouldn’t be just across the hallway if he ever needed him. He and Joshua had been unpacking all day, and the two had finally collapsed from exhaustion on the couch to eat some takeaway pizza. They were just leaning into each other’s sides, too sore and tired to cuddle properly, while Joshua prattled on about all of the color palettes he was considering for the kitchen. The fact that it wasn’t Joshua’s kitchen to decorate had apparently not occurred to him, but it was so early on that Louis still found this endearing.

There was still a spark in Joshua back then, a spark that later fizzled into the petty, controlling boyfriend that he’d struggled to break up with years later. Yes, they’d already been through some major conflicts together, but they’d made it through, and that was monumental to Louis. They were happy in that moment; perhaps content was a better word, and for whatever reason, Louis finally felt like saying it.
“I love you.”

He watched Joshua slowly turn, his smile turning into surprise, then melting back into a grin.

“I love you, too.”

It had felt good. Warm. Safe. Like he was established with someone he cared about.

It hadn’t felt like his entire body was about to float away, or that he could cry from happiness at any second, or that anything could happen to him in that moment and it wouldn’t wipe the smile from his face for even a second. That night with Joshua had felt great, but it hadn’t felt like he’d been swept onto a different, dizzying plane, capable of stumbling into a free fall with a single misstep.

He looked at the room and suddenly had labels for the people in his company. There was his future sister-in-law, the aunt to Louis’ eventual children. And their were his future children’s grandparents. *His children’s grandparents.*

And then there was Harry, his eyes finally flitting closed in Louis’ lap. Louis had always felt a tremor of nervousness when considering his future with Joshua. He’d attributed it to their young age and not being ready to settle down, but thinking about his future with Harry didn’t scare him. Yes, it was still a ways down the road, but a part of Louis couldn’t wait until they finally got there together.

Robin and Gemma had long since disappeared into the rest of the house to go to bed, with Anne being the last hold out as she waited for Harry to finally get to sleep. That time seemed like it had finally come when Louis gently shook Harry’s shoulder and he awoke with a harsh intake of breath.

“Baby? You wanna head to bed?” Louis asked quietly. Harry blinked in confusion, as if trying to remember where he was. “Bed? Love?”

“Mmmm.” He hummed, sitting up and slowly pushing himself to his feet. “Night, mum.”

“Night, Anne.”

“Goodnight, sweethearts.” She responded, content that Harry was finally going to get some rest.

Finally they made their way back to the bedroom and changed back into their pyjamas, sliding into bed and facing each other. Harry’s eyelids were drooping adorably, but he was intent to keep them open and focused on Louis.

“Lou?” He whispered.

“Hmmm?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

~
Far too soon, Louis found himself sinking further and further into Harry’s Instagram pictures of his continued visit at his mum’s house. Harry had planned to stay another week after Louis’ job necessitated his return, and Louis was not happy about being on the other side of the ocean from his boyfriend. Harry’s latest post showed him baking in the kitchen with Anne, which somehow added to the narrative that Harry and Arrienne were nearing the end of their relationship, though Louis wasn’t sure how.

“Are you going to keep staring at pictures of Harry, or are you going to pay attention to me?” Zayn asked, crossing his legs moodily from his spot on the other side of the couch.

“But I miss him, Zayn!” Louis whined as he dropped his phone into his lap.

“You poor thing. I don’t think anyone in the history of time has ever had to be away from their boyfriend for a few days before. However will you survive?” He deadpanned. Zayn had been hanging around the house for the last couple of hours, showing up out of the blue after he’d had a photoshoot in the area. Somehow, Louis had managed to withhold his exciting news up until that point, but something about Zayn’s bemused expression made Louis feel like he was seconds from exploding.

“I told Harry I love him.” Louis said suddenly, smiling proudly.

“Finally, Lou!” Zayn said, his former frustration disappearing. “What did he do?”

“He got so excited he almost forgot to say it back.”

“You two are the worst.” Zayn snickered, getting to his feet and slinging his messenger bag over his shoulder. “I’ve gotta head out, but I’m really happy for you guys.”

“Can’t you just live here?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I need in my life. More time spent watching you and Harry drool all over each other.” He grumbled, heading toward the foyer. “Oh, and Li wanted me to give you this.” He pulled a magazine out of his bag and flung it into Louis’ lap as he passed by.

Louis turned the magazine over and cackled immediately at what he saw. It contained two inconveniently timed photographs of Harry and Arrienne, both presumably taken at different times and waiting in a back file somewhere until a story came along that they’d work for. Harry was grimacing in his, and Louis guessed that he’d probably just stepped into bright sunlight or smelled something unpleasant, but it certainly made him look upset. Arrienne’s picture was equally somber, and the two pictures were divided with the graphic of a ripped page and emblazoned with the headline, “Trouble in ‘Red Paradise’?”

“How clever.” Louis chuckled. As much as he’d liked Status Solo’s song “Red Paradise” before, he had to admit that now it might be his favorite song of all time.

“See you in a couple days, yeah?” Zayn asked, slipping out of the room.

“Yeah! Thanks!” Louis called back, already engrossed in the magazine article.

“...Harry’s been visiting his mother in England for several weeks now, with his girlfriend glaringly absent. Arrienne, meanwhile, has been enjoying a spring holiday in New York, bumping elbows with practically every It Girl worth mentioning. Have we mentioned #squadgoals? Is Arrienne just catching up with some old friends? Or are these the actions of a newly single woman?…”

Louis noticed that he was smiling like a maniac at the wonderfully contrived words and mismatch
of photographs that accompanied them.

“...A source close to the couple says that things have been rocky lately. ‘There’s a lot of love and respect still there, but their schedules have been getting to them. It’s had to keep things going when you’re on the opposite side of the world half the time’...”

“...fans spotted Harry near his hometown looking worn. Could this perhaps be the result of his stewing, inner turmoil?”

Louis nearly gagged over the reappearance of that goddamned phrase, but otherwise, he thought that the entire piece was hilarious gold.

He held onto the magazine for the rest of the week until Harry’s highly anticipated return. After he’d sufficiently spent enough time with Glitter to feel caught up with her life, he showed up at Louis’ house and sensed there was something up immediately. Rather than lean in to kiss Louis once they were face to face again, he craned his neck dopily to the side to try and spot what Louis was hiding behind his back.

“What’s that?” Harry asked. “A present?”

Louis handed him the package, painstakingly wrapped in bright paper. “Call me Santa Claus.”

“Unfortunately, I take issue with that fantasy.” Harry joked, tearing into the gift and furrowing his brow in curiosity at what he found underneath. Louis had framed the cover of the magazine, and was now smiling expectantly as he waited for Harry’s response. Harry looked up with calculated slowness, putting the picture down on the table as his eyes remained fixated on Louis.

In one swoop, Harry leapt forward and slung Louis over his shoulder, laughing loudly as he tore through the house toward the back door.

“Harry!” Louis yelped, flailing wildly as they exited the house. “Where are you taking me?!?”

Harry was still laughing fiendishly as the veranda passed by underfoot and the pool drew ominously closer. “Harry! No!”

Harry was still giggling as he sprinted off the edge, flinging them both into the water, fully clothed. Louis sputtered to the surface, already on the attack as he threw himself at Harry. He jumped onto his back, using his own velocity to shove him underwater. They grappled and wrestled to mixed results for a much longer amount of time than any two adults in a relationship should, only ceasing when Louis swam away to one of the inflatable recliners he’d set adrift in the water when he opened the pool earlier that week.

He climbed onto it on his stomach, watching as Harry swam over and clutched the end as if he were about to drown.

“Rose! I think there’s room on that for both of us!” Harry cried, pretending to shiver.

“It’s not a question of room, Jack. It’s a question of buoyancy. Use your head.” Louis snapped.

“Could we maybe take turns?”

“Of course. You just close your eyes and take a little nap, and I’ll tell you when it’s your turn.”

“I’ll never let go, Rose.”

“Nor I, Jack.” Louis sprung forward and pushed Harry under the water, which was exactly what
Harry was expecting. He latched onto Louis and tugged him off the floatie, scooping him up in his arms and kissing him. “Thank you for the present.”

“Welcome home.” Louis said, kissing him again. Harry had his feet solidly planted on the pool bottom, but Louis was struggling to stay above water on his tip toes, so he wrapped his legs around Harry’s waist and his arms around Harry’s neck. “Harry?”
“Hmmm?”

“Nothing - I just…” Louis hadn’t meant to say Harry’s name just then, he’d just been so struck by the look in Harry’s eyes. There was a glint there that he’d never seen before, yet looked somehow distantly familiar. It didn’t take Louis long to recognize it was the sparkle he’d had back in all of those old pictures, back before the drama with Nick and his management. Back before the pills and cocaine. Louis was suddenly abundantly glad that he’d talked to Sophia so many weeks earlier. “You just look so happy.”

“Well, yeah.” Harry responded. “I’m in a pool, kissing the love of my life. I’m pretty happy.”

Louis released a tiny squeak in response, surging forward to kiss Harry and erase his embarrassment at the utterance. He did his best to press their lips together, but his smile was so pronounced they ended up laughing into each other’s mouths more than anything.

Harry was here, beneath Louis’ fingertips, and he was happy.

Harry was happy.

His boyfriend was happy.

The love of his life was happy.
“Slowly, it's consuming me, deliberate and deep. I can't take this deeper panic. Teach me, teach me not to dream.”

- AFI

Harry Edward Styles was a motherfucking liar.

When faced with their impending six month anniversary, Harry had made a noncommittal shrug, muttering something along the lines of it not being a “big deal.” Louis, being the trusting and loving companion he was, foolishly believed Harry and carried on with business as usual.

In his defense, Harry had made a solid case for the two of them having a nice, casual evening rather than a big celebration. The massive popularity of Metal Heart had lead to Louis being flung back and forth across the globe for press events and appearances. And as they were riding the coattails of the first film, pre production for the sequel was starting to move forward, and Louis was on an intense training regimen to get him back into superhero shape. Not only did he have to build up some more bulk for this movie, but the director had decided to implement some martial arts inspired fighting styles, so Louis was training practically everyday.

As if this weren’t enough for one person to keep himself busy, Kids From Yesterday was already slotted to hit the festival circuit by the end of the summer, and they were banking heavily on Louis’ newly acquired star power to attract media attention to the small, indie project.

The aforementioned rise in Louis’ popularity had also been a bit of an overnight phenomenon. He was already used to signing autographs and getting recognized when he went out, but fan’s reactions to his appearances were closely getting on par with Harry’s, which is a delicate way of saying that people were losing their goddamned minds when they saw him on the street. While Louis was delighted by what this meant for the movie series, it also meant that he and Harry had to be even more vigilant if they ever went anywhere together.

That is, if they ever had the opportunity to go anywhere together. Louis wasn’t the only one who was getting his time stolen away from him left and right; Harry only had the luxury of leading a slightly less hectic life. Granted, they were in the midst of a brief professional lull between albums, so it wasn’t like Harry was punching his time card at the studio everyday, but this “off time” was mostly in place to accommodate the forecasted platinum certification of their most recent album by the end of the year. With a massively popular record still selling in droves, Status Solo was constantly being booked to perform as headliners at festivals and one night gigs.

In the beginning, this had given Louis’ anxiety reason to kick into high gear as he imagined Harry jet setting across the country with his litany of famous friends, smiling and laughing as one of them might slip a pill into his hand. But luckily, Louis had a lieutenant in the form of Niall, who had just as much incentive to steer Harry away from any party atmospheres while they were away. After a couple of weeks had gone by successfully, Louis and Harry had kind of leaned into the separation, already very used to having to function over long distances. They still talked on the phone everyday, skyped regularly, and texted each other non stop.

And when luck would land them in town together, Harry had all but moved into Louis’ house.
Sometimes he even stayed there when he was in LA and Louis was away. He’d bring Glitter over so he wouldn’t be lonely, taking pictures of her in every corner of the house and tormenting Louis with them.

“Look! She wants to take a bath! She’s so cleanly!”

This one had come attached to a picture of the poor creature standing in the bottom of Louis’ empty, jacuzzi tub, completely dwarfed inside of the porcelain walls.

It had started slowly, as all things do with Harry. First it was just the essentials: a toothbrush here, some body wash there. Then he was accidentally leaving clothes in Louis’ bedroom so often that Louis had taken to throwing them in with the wash and hanging them up in Joshua’s old side of the closet. After awhile, he had amassed a reasonably workable wardrobe in Louis’ house, but things didn’t really get clinched until one lazy afternoon when they were both lying on the sofa, wrapped up in each other. Harry had suddenly pointed to an empty stretch of wall on the other side of the room after a lengthy silence between the two.

“You know what would look great there?”

“What, Hazza?”

“A piano.”

And with that, he never seemed to want to leave Louis’ house, which Louis in no way objected to. Now able to compose music, there was little reason for Harry to ever go home. Louis was already falling in love with their little domestic bubble; waking up to Harry cooking breakfast before they took a shower together, taking little cat naps together and bickering about groceries. They were small things, but they meant much more when they were shared with Harry.

But these moments were, unfortunately, few and far between lately due to how intensely busy the two of them were. Given all of this information, the fact that the two of them were able to be in town at the same time for their six month anniversary seemed like more than enough celebration. Harry had promised a quiet night, waiting with some takeaway and film rental for Louis when he got back after a long day of training.

So imagine Louis’ utter outrage when he walked into the dining room to find Harry dressed in a full tuxedo, his hands wrapped around a massive bouquet of roses. His adorable smile was poking out from behind the red blossoms, waiting excitedly to see Louis’ reaction. Meanwhile, Louis’ muscles had melted into goo.

“Harry!” Louis groaned through a painfully full smile. He dropped his bag to the floor and took a cursory look at his own clothes, which couldn’t possibly look any less impressive in the wake of Harry’s tux.

“Happy anniversary.” Harry cooed, clearly impressed with himself. He stepped over to Louis to kiss him and hand him his flowers. Louis held him by the arms as he struggled between total frustration and overwhelming endearment.

“You lied!” He chirped, causing Harry to chuckle.

“I stretched the truth.” He corrected him. “And it’s totally worth it because of your face right now.”
“But Harry!” Louis was still grinning madly despite his complaints. Harry took his phone out to snap a quick picture of Louis’ defeat.

“Love you.” Harry said, pulling him in again to kiss him on the forehead.

“I love you, too, but I’m sweaty and gross right now, and look at you! You look like the Bachelor!”

“See, but I have a plan.”

“Do you, now?”

“Yes. Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes, so you have time to go take a quick shower. Dinner will be served on the roof tonight.”

“Oh the roof?” Louis sighed, not particularly surprised. Harry loved roofs. But it was then that Louis was drawn to the clamor of pots and pans coming from the kitchen. “Did you hire a chef?”

“His name’s Renaldo. This year is his twentieth anniversary with his wife.” Harry explained dreamily, and Louis could already imagine how much Harry must have grilled this poor man about his life while he waited for Louis to come home. “Can you imagine being with someone that long?”

“Maybe. Depends how often that someone completely lies about anniversary plans.” Louis quipped, giving Harry another quick kiss.

“Go shower. We’re officially behind schedule.” Harry ordered, giving Louis a light slap to the arse to get him moving.

A tiny part of Louis held onto the hope that Harry might have been fibbing about dinner being on the roof, but of course this was folly. They ended up eating their chicken under the faint glimmer of stars, the swimming pool glowing beneath them. With bellies full and satisfied, Harry eventually put his plate to the side in favor of leaning back and looking up at the dark sky. He looked absolutely ridiculous, dressed as if he were about to attend a state dinner at the White House, except for the shoeless feet poking out from his pant legs.

Louis sunk down onto his side, cushioning the side of his face on his palm so that he could have a clear view of Harry. He could just tell that Harry was about to open his mouth at any moment and say one of those little thoughts that was so uniquely him.

“You know that thing with stars?” Harry asked suddenly, still looking above as Louis chuckled.

“Do tell.”

“How everyone feels small underneath them? Because every single star has it’s own solar system with it’s own planets and it’s own moons and it just goes on an on for forever? Infinity, you know?”

“Mmm.”

“But that’s never made me feel small. I never really understood that.” He explained to Louis as he finally looked at him, his eyes as luminous as the galaxies who’s descriptions hung on his pinkening lips.

“Why’s that?”
“Because of all the millions of billions of trillions of stars and comets and planets, I somehow managed to exist. In this infinite expanse of mostly emptiness, I’m somehow here, with thoughts and feelings and eyes and lungs and - just - I don’t know. Everything else is just a bunch of ice and rocks, but here I am. And I can drink coffee or go swimming, or sleep in on Sundays or wear a fancy tuxedo on my boyfriend’s roof for our anniversary.” Louis moved their empty plates to the side so he could scoot in closer to Harry. They both turned onto their sides to lock their gazes, their fingers intertwining between them.

“And your tiny little brain can come up with all of this music that everyone else’s tiny little brains like to listen to. And even though we’re all just minuscule specks of dust, the rest of the dust likes to pack themselves in together to listen to you sing.” Louis added.

“Of all the trillions of lightyears of ethereal nothingness, somehow, someone else managed to exist who’s my everything; who’s perfect for me in every way. And even though you could have been spawned on some fiery asteroid a million miles from here, I somehow got lucky enough that you were born here. And even luckier, I managed to find you and talk to you. And, even luckier and nearly impossible, I managed to trick you into sticking around.” He looked down to Louis’ hand at this, watching the way their fingers linked together. “The stars never make me feel small. They make me feel lucky.”

The warmth in Louis’ chest was ebbing back and forth, waxing and waning until it was rising up his throat with a splash of lovesick adrenaline. He launched himself through the small space separating them, pushing Harry onto his back and straddling his hips. Harry’s voice was caught between a groan and a laugh as he grabbed defensively at his full stomach. Louis bent down, leveling their faces.

“I love you.” Louis said, pecking his lips. “And I love all of the beautiful things that happen in that curly head of yours.”

“I love you, too. But I’m afraid I’m about to spew my dinner all over you if you don’t get off my stomach.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t quite catch that. Did you say you love me and want me to start jumping on you like a trampoline?”

“Louis!” Harry whimpered, struggling to pull Louis off of him. Louis finally acquiesced, moodily pressing himself into Harry’s side and draping an arm over his chest. They fell into silence for a moment, looking up at the fuzzy sky once again.

“I bet that star is gay.” Louis announced.

“Which one?”

“That one.” Louis repeated, once again making no effort to point to a particular star.

“Which one?”

“That one!”

“You’re not pointing at any of them!”

“It really doesn’t matter, since all stars are gay.”

“That is true. All stars are gay.” Harry agreed.
“Except that one.”

“Which one?”

“That one!”

“You’re the most annoying person I know.” Harry muttered, despite the fact that he was pressing a kiss to Louis’ hair and circling his arms more tightly around him.

“Happy anniversary, love.”

“Happy anniversary.”

When they eventually made their way back downstairs, the consensus between them had been that they were so uncomfortably full of food for much anniversary sex, but this was thrown out the window the moment Harry’s lips touched Louis’. Any consciousness of their giant dinners was completely wiped from their minds until later that night when they were left panting, sated in their post love-making haze. Exhaustion thickened in Louis’ muscles, keeping him from giving more than a passing care in doing anything to get ready for bed besides getting under the duvet and closing his eyes.

But a reminder of reality pricked at him as Harry lingered in the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his face. Louis’ ears delved in, focusing on every tiny sound that might clue him into what Harry was doing in there. He turned over to see that Harry had left the bathroom door wide open, and he felt his worries temper away. There was always one tell-tale sign that Harry was doing something he knew he needed to hide, and that was a closed door.

He was awash with another surge of affection, reaching clumsily toward his phone as an outlet. Louis was already planning to partake in what had become his newly discovered favorite hobby, which was bragging about Harry under the guise of talking about Zayn.

He’d discovered this particular loophole by accident, after mistakenly commenting, “My boyfriend absolutely believes in all of those conspiracy theories,” after an interview question about superfans of the Metal Heart franchise. He’d felt his spine freeze over and his mouth grow sour from the words that had escaped from it, seeing Eleanor’s head whip in his direction from his peripherals.

“Zayn’s a big fan, then?” The interviewer asked, leaning forward, and Louis had struggled through several turgid blinks before the moment made sense to him.

“Erm - yeah. Massive fan. Since before we even met.” Louis explained, looking shiftily past the camera towards one of his publicists. She gave a firm nod and thumbs up, which eased his heart rate back to a reasonable pace.

Once he moved past the initial shock, Louis had become fairly deft at weaving mentions of Zayn into interviews by telling stories about Harry. It was mutually beneficial, as the media totally swooned over the relationship gossip, and Louis could brag about Harry for hours on end, if given the opportunity. Even though adding Zayn’s name to everything gave the stories a hint of a lie, it was still unbelievably freeing to be able to talk about his boyfriend for once.

Recently, Louis could scarcely go an entire day without talking about Harry in an interview or tweeting about him, knowing that everyone would attribute his affections to Zayn.

Harry finally returned to their bed, crawling in beside him and noticing Louis’ mischievous grin.

“What?” He asked with trepidation.
“Check my twitter.”

Harry cocked and eyebrow at him as he grabbed his phone and unlocked it. Louis watched the way his smile slowly deepened as his eyes smoothed over the words.

*To a sky full of gay stars, rooftops, and the occasional fountain accident. Happy six months, love of my life <3*

“Oh my god! Stop with the fountain thing!” Harry cried, glaring at Louis as he laughed. “The rest was sweet though. But stop with the fountain!”

Louis took his face into his hands to kiss him, assuaging any thoughts of the fountain from his mind. They separated slowly, spellbound and wrapped in each other’s orbits as Louis shut off the lamp and spooned in behind Harry.

“Love you.” Louis whispered.

“Love you, too.”

~

Nothing was piecing together sensibly in Louis’ mind, with only the disembodied blaring of his phone drawing him out of his sleep. He waded through several muddy layers of drowsiness before he took stock of Harry, warm and slowly awakening in his arms.

“S’your phone?” He muttered, groggily turning as the synapses in Louis’ mind finally managed to spark.

Right. It was their anniversary. They’d fallen asleep. His phone was ringing. Right. He turned over to pick up his phone, answering it even though he didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello?” Louis answered, sitting up. Harry reached over to his phone to check the time, and Louis watched as 2:10 AM illuminated. They’d fallen asleep only a few hours earlier.

“Lou, it’s me.”

Every part of Louis stiffened, his thoughts exploding to dust.

“Joshua?”

The sheets ruffled violently as Harry shot up into a sitting position, his eyes hanging with astonishment as he glared at the phone in Louis’ hand.

“I need to talk to you.” Came Joshua’s desperate voice, frantic and pulsating. “I need to talk to you right now. Please. I really need to just see you.”

Joshua sounded as if a single wrongly said word would trigger an internal eruption from within him, but it was Harry’s face that was concerning Louis most of all. His skin was darkening into a
potent red, his every feature glowering with unrestrained enmity.

“I blocked your number. How are you calling me right now?” Louis asked, looking away from Harry before his expression burned through his retinas.

In lieu of a response, an electronic buzz echoed through the house. Harry’s head spun suddenly toward the open bedroom door as the realization hit them simultaneously: someone was at the security gate.

The phone slid through Louis’ numb fingers, a pit of acid broiling deep in his stomach and lacing a vine of poison up from the base of spine. The shaking began in the tips of his fingers before it crept through him, throttling every sense of control he had over his own muscles. A light suddenly sprang on, popping painfully in the corner of Louis’ vision as he felt the weight of his phone disappear from where it had landed by his side.

“For your own sake, you’d better not be outside right now.” Harry’s voice was a venomous snarl, shaking with a dangerous timbre that worked as kindling to Louis’ worsening panic. Even through the blooming white noise creeping down his ear canals, Louis could still hear the tinny screams of Joshua through the phone’s speaker. “You want me to call the police? Is that what you want? Or would you rather I came out there looking for you myself? I promise you that that’s the last mistake you want to make right now.”

“H-Harry.” Louis whispered, struggling against his leaden vocal chords. “Please!”

Harry dropped the phone away from his ear and watched it in his hand, the call having abruptly ended. He looked to Louis with eyes that were so undulating with rage that Louis’ face grew hot with fear. Whoever this man was who was gripping Louis’ phone murderously in the middle of his bedroom, it was not the boyfriend he shared a bed with every night.

“He hung up.” Harry spat. “I’m calling the cops.”

“No! Harry! Please!” Louis plead, feeling as if his throat might start bleeding as the razor sharp words sliced through it. Harry looked up suddenly, his expression momentarily sobered at the painful grain to Louis’ voice.

“Louis, he’s stalking you! We have to call the police.” Harry implored.

“We can’t.” Louis maintained, swallowing against his shredded throat. Why did he feel as if he’d just swallowed gravel?

“Of course we can!”

“No, we can’t.” He said firmly. “What do you think happens when the police realize who lives here? When they realize that you’re here? This place is going to be swarming with cops and it only takes one of the, one of them, Harry, to say something about you publicly and then the whole world is going to know.”

“They’re not going to sell us out for a story.”

“You don’t know that. And even if it’s not the cops, what happens when the neighbors see all the cars outside? People know I live here. What happens if someone tweets about it, and some fans show up outside? And then what happens if the paps show up and camp out until they get a story? It’s too risky, Harry!”

“Your safety is more important that my reputation.” Harry reasoned.
“But this is exactly what he’s trying to do, Harry!” Louis whimpered, feeling his momentary sense of control flitting away. “If even one person finds out that you’re here in the middle of the night, then we’re ruined, Harry! He’s trying to get between us and I won’t let him take you away from me!”

Harry looked utterly gutted, completely torn as to what to do. They stared at each other, not even daring to breathe as the moment hardened between them. Like a crack of lightning slashing their connection apart, the buzzer wailed again, and Harry’s eyes flashed.

“Then I’ll take care of him.” Harry decided.

He was so tall just then, taller than Louis had even thought he could look. It was like he’d grown a foot through pure intimidation, domineering over Louis as he bounded to the closet and searched through it, seemingly for something to defend himself with. Louis was powerless to withhold the tears that were prickling at the corners of his eyes.

“Harry, I-!” Louis choked, sputtering quietly, but Harry was already marching toward the door after his search of the closet left him empty handed. Louis swallowed hard, gathering all of his energy into a single word as he screamed. “Harry!”

“What?” Harry snapped, turning around in the doorframe. His face was potent, and it was perhaps the most frightening thing Louis had ever seen.

“This isn’t what I need from you right now!” He cried out, his clipped voice piercing through the room.

The first tear spilled over onto his cheek, and it was a free fall from there. The darkness swept in like a deluge and the air thickened in Louis’ lungs. His bones were being chipped away beneath his skin and his voice was swallowed away. Deafening and impenetrable, a growling wind was snapping against his ears and the blistering skin of his face, leaving everything splintering and molten in it’s wake.

There was nothing besides this terrifying maelstrom and the undiluted, sobering knowledge that Joshua was there, breathing down his spine and taking Louis’ neck into his own hands, and the only person capable of saving him had vanished. He’d been replaced by someone else, some unidentifiable demon who wore Harry’s face and tarnished it. Harry wasn’t there, but Joshua was. He was so undeniably present and saturating that Louis couldn’t escape him, couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe.

It was his hearing that returned first, with his own aching cries breaking through the fading gusts of wind that weren’t really there. Next came the sensation of someone wrapped around him, hard and unabiding in the way his arms circled around Louis. They were sitting in the bed, rocking slowly back and forth as Harry gripped into him and whispered.

“I’m so sorry. I’m sorry, baby. You’re okay, Louis. You’re safe. He can’t hurt you.” Harry repeated quietly, his lips close to Louis’ ear from where their heads were pressed together. Louis was doubled over, tears falling into his lap and stiff in Harry’s grip as he clung to him.

“Ha-harry?” Louis muttered, his eyes struggling to open. He melted into Harry’s embrace, gripping him desperately. He felt Harry’s relief flux through his every muscle at Louis’ response.

“I’m sorry, Louis. Shhh, I’m so sorry.” He said lightly, letting one of his hands fall down Louis’ back to rub it gently. Louis held him so hard he was afraid he might have been hurting him. “It’s okay, Lou. He can’t get you. I’ll never let him get you.”
“You were so mad.” Louis whimpered. “You weren’t you. It scared me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Harry said, his own voice starting to shake. “I just - I don’t know. I don’t know what happened. He almost took you away from me once. I watched him do it. I watched him push you down those stairs, and I’ve never hated anyone the way I hate him. I don’t know what came over me.” Louis’ breath hitched over another wave of panic and Harry squeezed him tighter. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. We shouldn’t be talking about him.”

“Where is he?” Louis asked. “Is he still here?”

“I called Paul. He’ll be here soon and he’s gonna search the area. Make sure he took off.”

“And if he didn’t take off?”

“He’ll get rid of him.” Harry promised, drawing soothing circles into Louis’ shoulder. “Do you need anything?”

“Water?” Louis asked. Harry sat forward and slowly removed his arms from Louis’ shoulders, which caused Louis to quickly reach after him needily. “I changed my mind! Please stay here!”

“How?” Louis asked, his voice frail and watery.

“Whatever you want. Anything you want from me.”

“After Paul checks everything out, can we go over to your house?” Louis asked weakly.

“Of course, baby. Of course.” Harry pulled him in even tighter, completely enveloping Louis’ slight frame which had become somehow even smaller in Harry’s arms. “You don’t have anything to be afraid of. Joshua can’t get to you. We’re together now, so he doesn’t even matter anymore. It’s just the two of us, now. Forever.”

“Promise?” Louis asked, his voice frail and watery.

“Absolutely promise.”

“I love you.” He whispered, and he meant it with every weary part of his being. He lifted his head up, waiting patiently until Harry finally leaned in and pressed their lips gently together. He lingered there before pulling away and nestling his head under Harry’s chin, pulling Harry’s arms in around him and closing his eyes.

“I love you so much, Louis. I’m so sorry.”

Harry stroked Louis’ arms and back, trying to lull him to sleep, but Louis just couldn’t get himself to drift off. Paul finally called to let them know that he’d arrived, so Harry coaxed Louis out of bed and decided to help him get dressed while they waited to hear whether or not the coast was clear. He was quiet as he suggested coats to Louis, but Louis was intent on wearing Harry’s Shearling jacket that he’d let him borrow at the beginning of their relationship. Harry draped it over Louis’ shoulders, and Louis was immediately blanketed in warmth and Harry’s scent.

Bundled up and clinging to Harry’s hand, they waited in the lounge until Paul made his way into the house proper. He told them both that he hadn’t found anyone, but he’d noticed some evidence of someone trying to get past the gate. Louis was only passingly aware of what he was saying, as he was still trapped in his own mind. He managed to catch the gist of the situation, that Joshua had taken off the moment Harry had bared his metaphorical teeth at him.

Louis felt vulnerable in front of Paul, knowing his cheeks were still raw and tear stained. On top of
that, he just felt unbearably small, practically the size of a child beneath Harry’s jacket, but Harry made sure to hold onto Louis supportively the entire night. He held Louis’ hand, pulling him into an embrace every time there was a lull in the commotion so that he could whisper in Louis’ ear that he loved him. Louis always let his head sink into Harry’s shoulder, clutching his arms and closing his eyes as he realized he was completely incapable of loving someone more than he loved Harry in that moment. Their hands never separated, not even as Harry drove them to his house. Even as Louis lifted himself up out of his seat, Harry had already rounded the entire car to wrap Louis in his arms and lead him up the front steps.

Despite the tears and trauma that had been steeped through the night, Louis felt an unprecedented security as he slid in next to Harry in his plush, expansive bed. He even felt somewhat grateful to Glitter as she padded across the room and hopped up onto the end of the bed. Despite their regular sleeping positions, Louis opted to be little spoon that night, flexing his back against Harry’s chest every time he just needed to remember that he was there.

It was late at that point; excruciatingly so, and Louis only managed to phase in and out of sleep during the few hours he had before his alarm on his phone went off. His eyes ached as he forced them open, seeing his warbling phone in the faint morning light. He swore under his breath as he switched it off.

“What’s wrong, Lou?” Harry asked, grumbling awake.

“M’supposed to be at training in an hour.” Louis whined, sighing heavily. His voice was coarse from the night’s pain as he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Harry rolled over.

“Should take the day off.” Harry urged, wrapping his fingers around Louis’ hip and kissing the skin of his back.

“I can’t. Liam’ll kill me.”

“He’ll understand.”

“I can’t.” Louis repeated, looking over his shoulder to see Harry. “I don’t want Joshua getting in way of my life. Of our life. I want to go to work. He doesn’t get to take that away from me.” He watched Harry with trepidation, waiting to hear what his response would be.

“That’s important to you?” Harry asked quietly. Louis nodded. He sighed as he sat up and wrapped his arms around Louis shoulders, hugging him from behind and kissing him on the cheek. “Kay. Then it’s important to me, too.”

“Thank you.” Louis murmured, reaching up to hold onto Harry’s wrist. They stayed like that, with Harry hanging onto Louis.

“Is there ever going to be a point when we talk about your night terrors?” Harry asked. Louis’ hand fell away.

“They haven’t been such a big problem, lately.” He reasoned.

“Until last night.”

“I don’t really get them when you’re around.”

“Except last night.” Louis repeated with a sigh. He wiggled his shoulders until Harry loosened his
grip and he stood up, walking across the room.

“Lou.” Harry pressed, but Louis kept walking toward the ensuite.

“Really gotta shower.” He said, not turning around. He was afraid that Harry was about to tell him that he needed to do something about his anxiety, and as petty as it was, he wasn’t about to let Harry lecture him when Harry’s drug use was still such a taboo.

“Louis.” Harry said firmly, and Louis felt a drag of guilt spinning him around to look at Harry.

“What?”

“How would you feel about getting out of LA for a little while?” He asked.

“That might - that actually sounds good.” Louis stammered, not having expected this at all. “What were you thinking?”

“I’ve got that New York trip next week. Maybe Liam could get you a couple of appearances while I’m there and we could go together?”

“Nona’s in New York right now.” Louis realized aloud.

“So that’s a yes?” Harry asked, smiling. Louis gave him a short nod. Harry was already reaching for his phone, and Louis knew that he was about to bother Liam.

“Harry?”

“Yeah.”

“Love you.” He said simply, because he just wanted to say it.

“Love you, too.” Harry blinked up at him, waiting to see if Louis would say anything else. He didn’t, though, instead turning away and closing the bathroom door behind him.

~

“Lou?”

“Jesus. Who’s glommed on now?” Louis groaned, looking over his stylist’s head as he picked and fussed at Louis’ jacket. He saw that it was Harry who had peeked his head in this time, and immediately regretted the tone he’d used. “Sorry. Who’s glommed on now?” He asked, trying to sound a tad nicer in his delivery.

Everything had started innocently enough: Zayn had been offered a photoshoot in New York around the same time that Harry and Louis were going to be in the city, so they’d asked if they could tag along. This, of course, was totally fine with Harry and Louis. What they didn’t know was that this invitation would quickly snowball out of control.

Once Niall found out that the four of them were vacationing together, he threatened to throw the kind of fit that would level a small town if he weren’t allowed to join them. They decided to book a three room suite together that had a common area, that way they could all spend time together without Harry and Louis getting spotted together. But this soon lead to Niall announcing to the
world that he and Harry were in an amazing hotel together in New York, which drew in a large chunk of Status Solo’s posse. Naturally at this point, Niall would have been remiss to not invite every beautiful blonde supermodel in the city to the party, lest he be seen without a gorgeous woman at his side.

And, speaking of gorgeous women, Nona called Louis a few hours after they checked in to see if their plans for the night were still on. Once Louis told her that a legion of people had begun to coalesce in their room, she responded by inviting everyone she could think of to show up as well.

This all lead to a rather surprising call from Eleanor, who told Louis that she was in New York and was surprised that he hadn’t invited her to his party. Rather than explain to her that he was supposed to be at a taping of the Tonight Show that night and had never planned on hosting a party, he instead grilled her about the rumors that she and her ex boyfriend Thad Dylan had gotten back together. She said she’d bring him by and explain everything, to which he gave in and gave her an invite.

With the commotion in the common area growing louder and louder, Louis struggled to concentrate on the amusing anecdotes he’d prepared at the rehearsal earlier that day for the late night show. Liam had been sticking his head in about every ten minutes, reporting whichever new group of people had just showed up and reminding Louis that he needed to be out the door as soon as possible. He had been ready to snap at Liam that his stylist was trying to finish putting him together, but Harry had been the unlucky messenger this time.

“Am I good?” Louis asked, to which his stylist nodded. He walked toward the door as Harry held it open for him.

“Some of my friends just showed up and they want to meet you.” Harry explained.

“Love, I was literally supposed to be out the door ten minutes ago.” Louis said, grimacing as he saw the full size of the crowd that had gathered in their hotel room.

“Then just wave as you run out the door, please?” Harry asked, straightening Louis’ jacket and undoing everything that his stylist had spent twenty minutes trying to do. Louis had a sneaking suspicion that it probably looked better now. “Don’t be grumpy. You look cute.”

Louis got onto his tippy toes to kiss him. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Please make sure things stay under control? Please?”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Louis’ security for the night had finally noticed that he’d left the sanctity of his room and rushed over to usher him through the crowd. He gave a passing wave over his shoulder as Harry gestured to the friends he’d wanted him to meet before he was briskly lead into the hallway and into an elevator.

He took a steadying breath, attempting to get himself into the right headspace. He needed to pull his thoughts away from the thrumming hotel room filled with just about everyone he’d ever met, so that he could plaster on his movie star smile and ham up his humor, ready for the interview that had actually given him an excuse to be in New York.

The initial plan had been to get business out of the way so that the group could have some time to relax together. Louis hoped that getting to the taping on time would have been the most stressful
part of the night, but he hadn’t begun to evaluate the potential for disaster that was awaiting him at the party.

Several layers of conflict were about to collide.

The interview had gone fine, with Louis getting a good amount of jokes from the audience and feeling good about it overall. This feeling quickly soured when he got back into his car, eager to get back to the party but noticing several paps on their tail.

“We’ve got to throw them.” Louis’ security muttered from the front seat to the driver. “Can’t go back until the hotel until they’re gone.”

Louis knew that they were right, that he couldn’t be seen showing up at Harry’s hotel. They drove around in aimless circles, unable to shake one of the drivers. They were beginning to discuss sneaking Louis into a second car when Liam called.

“Are you on your way?” Liam asked.

“Trying to shake some paps.” Louis explained, looking back at the black suv that had been on their tail all night. “How are things back there?”

“So don’t freak out, but there have been some developments.” Liam said slowly.

“Harry?” Louis asked, jolting forward so suddenly that his seat belt yanked him back.

“No, not Harry. Not yet, at least.” Liam sighed. “Guess who else showed up?”

“I’m assuming the Queen of England at this point.”

“And you’d be right. Nick Grimshaw’s here.”

“Of fucking course Nick Grimshaw’s there.” Louis hissed, rubbing his temple in frustration.

“Erm, wait. Harry wants to talk to you.” Liam said, cut off by the sound of a shuffle as he handed the phone off.

“Baby?”

“Hey Harry. You doing okay?” Louis asked.

“Are you on your way back?”

“Yeah. Is he bothering you? Is something wrong?”

“No - it’s fine. I just…” Harry stammered. “I’d just feel a lot better if you were here.”

“I’ll be there as fast as I can. I promise.”

“Let me know when you’re close?”

“Yeah. I’ll be there soon.”

They eventually did have to resort to switching cars, sneaking Louis covertly into a different one and finally slipping under the radar of the papparazzi. He nearly sprinted back into the party, seeing that the crowd had blossomed even further in size. The set of couches and chairs in the center of the room could now barely be glimpsed through the wall of bodies. With a sigh of relief,
Harry materialized from the throng and rushed toward him.

“Hey, sweetheart.” Louis sighed.

“Missed you.” Harry whined, wrapping his arms around Louis and lifting him off the ground. With that simple move, Louis quickly ascertained that Harry wasn’t sober. He righted himself once Harry finally set him back onto the ground and analyzed Harry’s eyes. His pupils weren’t their normal size, but were constricted and unnaturally small, which meant that he’d had more than just alcohol. But he was smiling blissfully, and his consciousness was still there behind his tiny pupils, so Louis knew he wasn’t in a dangerous zone yet.

“Introduce me to your friends, yeah?” Louis asked, hoping to distract him from anymore cocaine. Harry nodded energetically and grabbed his hand, prancing through the fray and stopping suddenly every time he recognized someone new. It was always dizzying every time Harry introduced Louis to another slew of his friends, mostly due to the fact that literally every single person in the world seemed to be friends with Harry. Louis had become a bit of pro, however, having long ago given up on remembering anyone’s names and just trying to be generally friendly as Harry showed him off.

He had been completely charming the pants off of a girl who had done back up vocals on one of Status Solo’s albums when Louis noticed a coldness by his side. He turned to feel his insides drop, seeing that Harry had disappeared into the crowd. He’d been hoping to keep a careful eye on Harry all night, but Harry always seemed able to shirk Louis’ grasp.

He prowled through the party, keeping an eye out for Harry but also just trying to spot anyone he knew. He’d noticed Nick in the opposite corner early on and was checking in on him every once in awhile, relieved every time he confirmed that Harry wasn’t in his company. Strangely, he noticed that everyone else he knew had congregated in the opposite corner together, even though the group barely knew each other.

Louis approached to find Niall animatedly screaming at Nona while Eleanor and Thad watched the exchange with amusement.

“You’re wrong! You’re so wrong!” Niall was screaming, near hysterical.

“Tell me how I’m wrong. Give me actual evidence.” Nona countered.

“Voldemort has horcruxes and spells - and - and -!” Niall sputtered, overwhelmed. “And he can kill you instantly with a single spell! What does Darth Vader have?”

“Um, the force!” Nona barked, astounded by Niall’s stupidity. “Spells are insignificant to the power of the force!”

“Not if Voldemort uses a spell to paralyze Darth Vader before he can even use the force.”

“He wouldn’t be fast enough.”

“Darth Vader’s practically a walking corpse!”

“Voldemort got beat by a two year old!” Nona cried.

“She’s got you there.” Louis admitted.

“I’m sorry, Niall. You seem like a really nice guy, and everything, but I just really want to kick you the stomach right now.” Nona admitted.
“You know what, you’re very beautiful, so I’d be totally okay with that.”


“But it charmed you a little, didn’t it?”

“There’s a very long wait listing of people waiting to charm me. I’ll let you know.” She turned on her heel, her long ponytail snapping behind her as she waltzed away.

“If I wasn’t gay, I’d probably marry Nona.” Louis admitted.

“I’m not gay!” Niall pointed out.

“Stay away from her.”

“But Louis!”

“She’s not your type.”

“I don’t have a type!”

“I’ve literally never seen you with a woman who didn’t look like a human Barbie doll.”

“Dude,” Thad spoke up, suddenly reminding Louis and Niall that he and Eleanor were still there. “You know she’s a tranny, right?”

Louis nearly pulled a muscle in his face as he reacted to the word that had just fallen out of Thad’s mouth. Eleanor’s eyes had gone wide in embarrassment as she watched Louis open his mouth to retaliate, but Niall jumped in before he had a chance.

“What did you just say?” He asked.

“She’s a tranny, bro. Thought you should know that before you hit on her.”

“Thad.” Eleanor whined, but he shrugged as he took another drag from his beer.

“You mean she’s a transgender woman.” Niall corrected him, his eyes fixating on Thad in a way that made him gulp.

“Just, like - you know. She use to be a dude, and you just said you’re not gay.”

Eleanor looked away, her eyes near tears from humiliation.

“What are you trying to imply?” Niall asked, taking a step closer.

“Just trying to look out for you. I mean, you're not gay, right?”

“No, but my four best friends are, so go ahead and make your point about what’s wrong with being gay.”

“Four of them? You have four gay friends?”

“That’s the part that got through to you?” Niall asked, his voice rising and octave as he stepped closer to Thad. Thad jumped back in fear, and Eleanor was immediately pulling at his arm.

“Could you go grab me some water? Please?” She asked him sweetly. “I’ll meet you over there.”
He looked from her to the two men who were glaring at him icily, finally deciding to stalk away without another word. Eleanor nervously pushed a lock of hair behind her ear as Louis turned on her.

“You’re trying to get back together with that guy?” Louis asked.

“We’re trying to make it work.” She explained, her voice high. “I promise! He’s really nice when it’s just the two of us!”

“But when you’re around other people, he’s a complete arse.” Niall pointed out.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! You know I’m not transphobic. Or homophobic or anything! Jesus, I don’t even know where that all came from.” Eleanor rambled. Louis knew that she wasn’t even remotely homophobic. She was actually the first person on Metal Heart he had come out to, and she’d been completely supportive of him every since. It was breaking Louis’ heart to have to watch her defend herself like this over that guy. “He just - he just tries to impress people and he ends up saying the wrong thing sometimes.”

“El, do you really want to spend the rest of your life apologizing for him? Is he worth that?” Louis reasoned. Her eyes darted around the room, never landing anywhere for very long.

“I’m going to go talk to him.” She decided, apologizing incoherently as she wandered away.

“Just so you know, Lou, I already knew that Nona’s transgender.” Niall said suddenly.

“What?”

“I already knew that about her. I’m just saying that it doesn’t make me see her any differently.”

“Are we back on this?” Louis asked, throwing his head back in exasperation. “No, Niall! I don’t want you anywhere near her.”

“But Louis! She’s so pretty and funny and smart and just - ugh! Louis!”

“I love you, Niall. I honestly do. But I - I don’t know how to put this delicately.”

“What?”

“You don’t date. You mate.”

“Excuse me?” Niall gaped over dramatically.

“When was the last time you had a girlfriend?”

“I have girls around all the time!”

“Exactly! But none of them are your girlfriend. Which is totally fine! Don’t get me wrong. I know you’re not taking advantage of any of them, it’s just… I just know that Nona’s looking for something a bit more serious right now.”

“Maybe I am, too.”

“Right, Niall.”

“Seriously, though.” Niall said looking down at his drink with a slight hint of embarrassment. “I just - like - here’s the thing. There was this really long stretch of time where Harry and I didn’t
commit to anyone. We both had a lot of fun with different people, but that was it. Nothing serious. Just fun. It was something that we kind of shared, you know? We were on the same page in our lives, and we would talk about it with each other all the time. But now all those talks have just turned to him saying how happy he is with you, and everything, and I guess I just… I don’t know. I think I might want something like what you guys have.”

“Ah, Niall!” Louis chirped. “You’re going to make me cry.”

“Good, because that was fucking poetry right there.”

“But not Nona, though, okay?”

“Why the fuck not?” Niall groaned, not noticing as a third party walked up to join them.

“Been watching this dispute for awhile. Looks pretty heated.” Nick noted, taking a sip from his drink as he looked Louis and Niall up and down with a sneer.

“Well, I’ve got some romantic adventuring to take care of.” Niall decided, practically bounding away.

“Niall! No!” Louis called after him, taking a large swig from his beer bottle when he realized that he’d been abandoned.

“Such a coincidence we’re all in town this week.” Nick noted.

“Perhaps it was fate.” Louis said dryly.

“Wanted to catch up with Harry, but those groupies have him snorting lines left and right.” Nick said in nonchalantly, but he watched with smugness at the way Louis’ jaw clenched. “How does all that make you feel? With the drugs? Does it bother you?”

“Why would it bother me what Harry does with his other friends?” Louis shot back, deciding not to even bother hiding his distaste for Nick, who was now laughing at him.

“Are you going to stand here and tell me that you two haven’t been secretly dating all year?” He asked. Louis already knew that Nick had figured things out, but being confronted about it directly still had Louis’ stomach doing somersaults.

“That’s exactly what I’m going to stand here and say.”

“Not fooling me, no. Ha! I am certainly drunk right now!” He said energetically. “Why am I even talking to you?”

“I’ve literally no idea.”

“Can’t stand you, Tomlinson.” He muttered with a laugh. Louis was momentarily put off by the honesty, but as it would turn out, he was just tipsy enough to indulge.

“The feeling’s mutual, mate.”

“Cheers to that.” He held his bottle out, waiting for Louis to clink his drink against it before they both bottomed them. Louis watch as he gulped the remains of his red, plastic cup, grimacing before melting into an invigorated grin. He was certainly unhinged, Louis noted. “I remembered all of those little things me n’ Harry had to do. Back when we were together. D’you have to get smuggled out of restaurants all the time? Have to deal with garbage in the papers every week?”
“Still don’t know what you’re talking about.” Louis maintained. He had no problem alluding to his and Harry’s relationship in front of Nick, but he was not inclined to swap stories with him about the hardship of dealing with Harry’s management.

“Remember it all quite clearly. I was his first, you know.” He said with a slant to his eyebrow, leaving the implication ripe.

“You say that like it’s impressive.”

“Isn’t it?”

“I’d saying being his last is a bit more impressive.” Louis said, causing Nick to chortle loudly.

“Good point, Tomlinson!” He laughed, incredulous to Louis’ claim. “So that the plan then? You gonna marry Harry?” He continued to snicker, even as Louis took a step closer.

“I’m going to marry the fuck out of Harry.” Louis growled, watching as Nick’s smile faltered momentarily. He stepped back, adding distance between the two of them.

“Can’t fucking stand you, Tomlinson.” He repeated,

“You think that’s what you are to him?” Louis snapped, not ready to let the point drop yet. “You’re his first love? You think that’s how he remembers you? Sorry to disappoint, but that’s not what you are to him. Do you know how hard I’ve had to work to keep him together after the mess you left him in?”

“The mess I left him in?” Nick gawked. All pretense of decorum had long since washed away, the argument promising to become the long awaited jealous boyfriend fight the two had been threatening to have for months. “Do enlighten me! What exactly did I do?”

“You didn’t love him!” Louis yelled. “Which is absolutely idiotic because he is the single most lovable person I’ve ever met, and yet somehow you got it stuck in his head that he can’t be loved. And now, every single day of my life, I have to remind him that he’s gorgeous and perfect because he is gorgeous and perfect. But that’s not the part that bothers me. I’m happy to do that every day. The part I can’t stand is that split second when I can see that he doesn’t believe me, and you’re the reason he doesn’t believe me!”

“That’s bullshit.”

“He told me what happened. He told me that he said he loved you and you fucking laughed at him.”

“And it was bullshit! I’m saying that’s complete bullshit!”

“Are you accusing Harry of lying?” Louis asked, feeling his blood beginning to simmer.

“No, I’m saying that - that when he said that to me, I was looking for a way out.” Nick explained, looking almost manic in his inebriation. “I couldn’t deal with the secrets and the stress anymore, so I was looking for a way out. Then he gave it to me. It was a lie, but it got me out of there.”

Louis’ anger was turning into something else, curdling in his stomach as his brain whirred. He physically took a step back, as if this new information was taking up too much room. He fish mouthed for several seconds before finding his voice.

“What do you mean?” He finally asked, his words thick.
“I loved Harry.” Nick admitted, wearing a flippant grin. “And I try to keep myself from thinking like this, but after a couple of drinks, I’m pretty sure I still love him.

“You - you just…” Louis choked, grappling with the tumult of thoughts flying at him. “That’s not…”

It wasn’t jealousy that was brewing inside of Louis; there wasn’t a deep seated envy at learning that his boyfriend’s first love still had feelings for him. It was a bone shaking sense of betrayal of everything he’d thought he’d known that was warping his mind. It was the knowledge that every emotional handicap he’d struggled to work past with Harry was completely baseless, because Nick had loved him this entire time. The self-destruction and internal loathing that extinguished that glint of innocence from Harry’s eyes and thrown him into a cycle of drugs and alcohol was absolute, fabricated, bullshit.

“Get the fuck away from me.” Louis snarled.

“You going to hurt me, Louis?” Nick asked, leaning in to taunt him. The sight made Louis’ body feel as if it were on fire, and suddenly he was lunging at Nick, shoving him away.

“Get the fuck away from me and get the fuck away from my boyfriend!” Louis shouted. Aggression sparked behind Nick’s eyes like the crack of a whip, and he propelled himself forward to shove Louis back. He stumbled into a group of people who reacted in shock, but he was already flying back at Nick, ready to tear him apart piece by piece.

Rather fortuitously, this is when Liam showed up, grabbing Louis around the middle and pulling him away. Nick laughed petulantly at the sight of Louis being handled.

“Hey! Louis! Come on!” Liam urged as he pulled Louis back. Louis wriggled himself out of Liam’s hold, standing to the side and pushing a hand through his hair as he proved to Liam he wasn’t about to attack Nick again. “You need to back off, Nick.” Liam’s voice was heavy, and despite Nick’s height advantage, he was intimidated. He glowered at the two of them before walking away. “You okay?” Liam asked as he rounded on Louis.

“M’fine.”

“Did he touch you? Did anything happen?”

“No, he just - he’s just an evil piece of shit.” Louis said, feeling a sense of defeat settling in.

“What happened?” Liam asked, but Louis wasn’t even seeing straight yet. “Louis, look at me. What’s wrong?”


“Come sit down, yeah?” Liam suggested, leading Louis away.

His head was still swirling with the implications of what Nick had just revealed to him. So much of Harry, every fiber of the man he loved, was defined by that moment with Nick all those years ago. And as of thirty seconds ago, Louis knew it was all a lie.

He was falling into a seat before he even realized it, running his hands absently as if trying to smooth the worry from his brain. He was faintly aware of a glass of water being dropped on the table beside him, and Liam sitting down at his side. He was still asking Louis questions, trying not to grow impatient as Louis continued not to answer.
“Zayn keeps texting me. I’ve gotta go find him. I’ll be right back.” Liam said, and Louis finally broke through his haze as Liam hurried away. There was something markedly off in the way Liam had just spoken; the typical lightness to his tone when he said Zayn’s name was strangely absent. But before Louis could wrap his mind around what it might mean if something was wrong between Liam and Zayn, someone else was suddenly falling into his lap.

Harry straddled him energetically, pressing their lips together and burrowing into his mouth. He writhed his body against Louis’, practically sucking the air from his lungs as he aggressively snogged him.

“H - Harry!” Louis gasped, managing to pull away momentarily.

“Hmm?” Harry hummed, looking down at Louis with a mischievous grin.

“People are going to see us, baby.”

“I don’t care.” Harry said, low and final, before attaching his mouth to Louis’ neck. His tongue lathed against Louis’ taut skin, causing his thoughts to muddle.

“Harry, I need - I can’t right now.” He protested, gathering every once of strength to fight the sensation of Harry’s hot mouth against him. “We need to talk.”

Harry pulled back suddenly, a sobering amount of fear shining through his minuscule pupils.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“I talked to Nick earlier.” Louis explained, watching Harry’s anxiety visibly relax.

“Did you say something sassy to him?” He asked playfully.

“It wasn’t like that.”

“You had me freaking out, Lou.” Harry said, leaning back in to nip at Louis’ collarbone.

“Harry, he still loves you!” Louis spat out, panicking that he’d lose his confidence if he waited even a few more seconds. Harry didn’t pull back this time, instead hovering only an inch from Louis’ neck, his body rigid.

“What?” Harry asked slowly, and Louis tightened his grip around Harry’s hips.

“He told me that he loved you. Back when you two broke up.” Louis repeated, his heart hammering in his chest. He wanted nothing more than to make the words vanish from Harry’s mind, but he knew that he wouldn’t be able to keep this from him. Harry had to know, and Louis couldn’t be the one to hide it from him. “He was in love with you, Harry. He’s still in love with you.” Louis’ voice was cracking in half, and he had no idea how to keep it in one piece. He wished it didn’t sound so splintered and weak. It made him sound like he didn’t know that the boy in his arms loved him; that the boy in his arms wouldn’t care how his ex-boyfriend felt about him.

Harry drew back slowly, sitting in Louis’ lap and watching him with unblinking eyes. Both of their breaths were slowing into a plodding, aligned tempo with each other as they both just continued to stare. Louis could see the traces of stiffness in Harry’s body, tense and unmoving around his shoulders and arms; his jaw and throat. He looked as if a single puff of air would shatter him.

“He told you that?” Harry finally asked, his voice a hollow whisper. Louis gave a short nod. Harry’s jaw snapped shut again, seemingly chewing through his thoughts.
Without preamble, he was leaping out of Louis’ lap and circling the sofa.

“Harry!” Louis called after him.

“I’ll be right back.” Harry promised him. Louis watched him snake through the party, frightened as hell that he was on his way to track down Nick. Giving him a moment of relief, Louis watched Harry stop in front of a group of friends. They talked for a moment before heading toward’s Niall’s room. That’s when it clicked.

*He was getting high.*

His head sunk back against the couch as she struggled to release a stagnant breath. It sunk further into him, dead and toxic, but nothing he did would push it out of his lungs.

“Liam told me what’s going on. You okay?”

Louis opened his eyes to see Zayn standing over him, feeling a familiar wash of calmness under his brown eyes.

“Could be worse. My boyfriend could be cornering his ex who’s still in love with him. It’s all about perspective.” Louis mused as Zayn sat beside him.

“What’s he doing right now?”

“Snorting cocaine in the back with his friends.” Louis said, swallowing against a lump in his throat. He released a shaky, humorless laugh, until his eyes fell on Zayn’s stony face. “What’s up, Zayn?”

“Louis, you know what cocaine does to your eyes, right?” Zayn asked, and a wash of ice crackled through Louis’ veins. He struggled to place his words, already knowing what Zayn was hinting at, but hoping with desperation that he was mistaken.

“It makes your pupils big.”

“I just saw Harry. His pupils are pin pricks, Lou. They’re tiny.” Zayn waited to see if Louis was going to say or do anything, but he could barely breathe, let alone speak. “That’s not coke, Louis. That’s usually from heroin.”

Nothing existed apart from the gravity of those words, as the sound from the rest of the party had been swallowed away in the black well of Louis’ impending tunnel vision. His image of Zayn bent and distorted against the intensity of Louis’ stare, the blood vessels in his eyes threatening to burst. Somehow, he was on his feet, the party whipping past him as he slammed the door to Niall’s room open.

They looked up as he entered, murmuring their surprise at his violent entrance. They were clustered together like cells, with one of them in their center like their nucleus. He was draped across the bed on his back, his curly head spread haphazardly across the duvet. He sat up slowly, and his hazy smile didn’t make it clear whether he recognized Louis or not.

He crossed the room in only a few steps, pushing past the others as he took Harry’s face between his hands. He leaned in close, examining the minuscule, black holes in the middle of Harry’s green eyes. He dropped his grip on his face then, stepping back from the person he loved most in the world as his legs shook.

Zayn had followed him, and Niall had somehow shown up as well; this he knew as he tore out of the room, sprinting through the mob of people toward his own room. He fell to the floor, his face
smashed against the fabric as he curled his body around himself and gripped into his hair.

He couldn’t feel a single thing, and all he could hear were his own desperate screams.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I am so, so sorry for any anguish you might be feeling right now! I so promise that things are going to get better! (and then get worse again) But ultimately, things are going to end alright!
There was always a common narrative to Louis and Harry’s arguments. It would begin with an underlying tension, usually a byproduct of not seeing each other enough between their two careers, and would eventually come to a head over a trivial dispute.

A perfect example was the row over Louis’ beard.

When he was in-between projects, Louis reveled in the freedom of being in control of the way he looked, and took this opportunity to skip shaving altogether. Harry had been subtle in voicing his distaste for the proliferation of facial hair, but one day finally lost his patience with the situation. What was actually bothering him was not being able to bring Louis along on a club appearance he had coming up, but the frustration came out as a petulant, “So you still haven’t shaved?” as Louis came out of the bathroom one morning.

Louis was equally as frustrated with Harry’s constant disapproval, and the snide bickering had quickly commenced. This was routine for them, and the way it ended was also highly predictable.

“He’s my boyfriend. He has this dead cat hanging from his face. You can’t miss him.”

Harry’s brow furrowed in confusion for a moment until his eyes flashed with hurt as he realized what Louis was insinuating about Arrienne. He crossed his arms tightly before stomping out of the room, leaving Louis to simmer in guilt.

This was how their arguments always ended: with Louis’ cockiness getting the better of him, leaving him to have to chase Harry down to apologize. They’d been at Harry’s house during this fight, so Louis already knew where he’d escaped to. He always holed himself up in his music room on the scant occasion that he wanted to get away from Louis, moodily plunking on the piano as Louis’ words ran through his head.

He was always quick to forgive Louis, but his smile returned with a special degree of elation when Louis’ repentant, clean-shaven face showed up at the door. He’d sauntered over to Louis with a grin, taking his face into his hand.

“I’m not sure who’s boyfriend this is, because you certainly aren’t mine.” He joked, ignoring as Louis rolled his eyes. “Have you seen my boyfriend? He has this dead cat hanging from his face. You can’t miss him.”

“Okay, you have my permission to shut up now.” Louis said, kissing him.
Harry never held a grudge, and Louis was always awash with relief that he’d managed to make Harry smile again. This is how their fights always went, never deviating from the formula.

What was waiting for Harry when he woke up was not one of these fights.

The door creaked open quietly, and Louis glanced over his shoulder to see Nona bringing him a cup of tea. Her eyes furtively jumped over to Harry’s body on the bed, curled messily in his sheets following a night of turmoil.

Louis tried to turn his body to face Nona properly, but his spine was unrelenting in it’s stiffness. Instead, he waited until she padded quietly to his side, looking out the window beside him. It was unarguably morning now, the last dregs of night having been washed away beneath the breaking sunlight over the misty Manhattan city-scape. It was probably close to seven, but Louis had yet to have a moment of sleep.

She didn’t say anything, instead setting his tea down onto the windowsill before clinging to his side with another of the deep, lingering hugs she’d been giving him since they’d managed to reel him back to the surface from his panic attack. He gave her a weak squeeze back just as Harry tossed in his bed again, groaning as he coiled himself into a deeper fetal position. Nona looked to Louis with concern, but left the room quietly after he gave her a nod.

She left the door open enough for him to see her sit down in the lounge area beside Niall once again, who’d eagerly awaited her return. He was already drowning her in his words again, though Louis couldn’t hear what it was about this time. Nona listened patiently, watching as Niall rubbed his exhausted face. He looked utterly spent, his eyes rimmed with the burnt red of exhaustion and a haunted shadow hanging from his features.

There were hopeful moments, however fleeting, that Louis thought maybe Niall’s response was an overreaction. Harry hadn’t overdosed. He hadn’t had a break down, or done anything that he was going to regret once he woke up.

That is, apart from taking the heroin in the first place.

And that’s when Louis would come back to the same realization, that this wasn’t an overreaction. It had happened, the one thing the both of them had been fearing. The slope was officially well past slippery.

From what Liam had told them, Harry had been decently manageable. He’d been hardly present, lost in his own bliss and euphoria, but he was fine as everyone watched over him. In truth, Louis was the one that everyone had struggled to bring back to coherence. He remembered his fingers clenching into the carpet as Zayn tried to pull him off the ground, his voice warping in and out along with Louis’ disheveled sobs.

Things didn’t piece themselves back together until he found himself on his back, breathing in time with Liam until the fog lifted. Physically, he felt as if he’d just survived drowning, but he didn’t get the chance to enjoy a second of calm. Once his mental capacities had been reinstated, he was buffeted back and forth between an intense need to keep Harry safe and an unbelievable, suffocating anger toward him. It was like he wanted to both cradle his boyfriend and scream at him until his throat bled. Ultimately, he’d ended up staring unflinchingly out the window as Harry slept behind him, not able to stand even looking at him.

He couldn’t crawl in beside him like he usually did, telling him things were going to be okay, because they weren’t going to be okay. Everything was so incredibly fucked that Louis’ brain couldn’t even compute anymore. Harry was getting worse, and Louis was so vulnerably powerless
to stop it. What was there left to do, besides ship Harry off to rehab for someone else to deal with? Louis couldn’t fight heroin. He would lose. This was the drug that ensnared someone until they scarcely existed as the person they once were. This was the drug that had killed countless celebrities before Harry, and now Harry had had a taste.

Louis was sapped of any ounce of energy he could have even hoped to hang onto, his limbs shaking from the influx of caffeine that had kept him awake all night. He heard another rustling behind him, this time louder than before, and he could hear that Harry had sat up. Louis didn’t move, rigidly fixed as he heard Harry stumble out of bed and plod over to him.

“Lou?” Harry grumbled. His fingertips met the fabric of Louis’ sleeve, and before he could control his impulses, Louis pulled away.

Harry froze, the cogs in his brain starting to whir. The moment hardened, Louis able to sense as Harry realized what was happening, and still Louis didn’t look at him. The silence became so solid that it almost pressed the air from Louis’ lungs, until suddenly Harry tore away from Louis’ side in the direction of the bathroom. Louis held strong, unwavering in Harry’s absence, until he heard a painful retch from the ensuite.

His resolve only held another two seconds before he was darting after him, pulling his hair back as Harry curled over the toilet. He choked and vomited, the sickness coming in waves as Louis swallowed down his sympathy and held him from behind. Finally, Harry sat back and leaned against the wall, looking up listlessly at Louis as he rushed to get him a cup of water. He swilled it in his mouth, the heavy nausea still apparent on his features.

Louis walked away from him, sliding down the strip of wall between the counter and door until he was sitting opposite Harry, watched the pale and sweat-laced face of his boyfriend.

“This is partially my fault.” Louis said, splitting the silence. He worked to keep his raw voice steady, causing Harry’s eyes to flutter open. “Because I never said anything about this. About your drug use. I don’t like it, but I didn’t say anything. I just let you do it. I never told you to stop. I never told you that it scares me.”

“Louis.” Harry said softly. “It’s not-“

“Don’t you dare fucking say that it’s not a big deal.” Louis snapped venomously, causing Harry’s mouth to clench shut, realizing the gravity of the conversation. “Don’t you fucking dare look me in the eyes and tell me that this isn’t a big deal. You don’t get to always tell me that it scares you when Joshua comes after me, then go and pump yourself full of poison and expect me to just be okay with it. It’s patronizing, Harry. It’s disrespectful to me as your partner. I have just as much of a right to want to be afraid for your life as you do for mine.

‘And I am afraid. I’m terrified, Harry, because I’m watching you slip further and further into this hole and I have no clue how to rescue you. But that’s the point, isn’t it? You don’t want to be rescued. You want to just self destruct while the rest of us sit around and watch, right?’

“That’s not fair.” Harry whispered, drawing into himself. He looked so frail then, his legs clutched to his chest and his massive eyes watching Louis unblinkingly, making Louis feel like his heart was being stripped apart piece by piece.

“I can’t do this again, Haz.” Louis said, his voice choking as his throat clenched. “I can’t keep sitting by your bedside all night, afraid you’re not going to wake up. I can’t do this anymore.”

“So, like-“ Harry muttered, swallowing hard as his eyes swelled with tears. His face was burning
red and his breath came out in a desperate hitch. “That’s just it, then? This is it? You’re going to leave me over this?” He was gripping his legs so tightly that his fingers had gone white.

“Jesus, Harry! No!” Louis exclaimed, running his hands through his hair in frustration. “How many times do I have to tell you this before you’re going to believe me? I’m never going to leave you!”

“You just - you sounded like…” Harry was drowned out by his own tears as they broke onto his cheeks, cascading down in relief. He wiped at them clumsily with the palms of his hands, doing nothing to slow the deluge.

“Harry! I am so fucking in love with you that I’m crying on a hotel bathroom floor with you, three feet away from a pile of your sick! I’m not going to leave you! I’m just afraid that you’re going to leave me. Leave all of us.” Louis was more than remotely aware that both the ensuite and bedroom doors were open, and his voice was loud enough that it was probably carrying into the lounge, but he didn’t have room to care about anything besides the mess of the boy sitting across from him. He couldn’t bring himself to care about anything besides this plea for his boyfriend’s life. “This drug kills people, Haz. It kills people, and you can’t die. The world deserves to hear all of the pretty things in your head.

‘And do you realize how many people would be completely devastated without you? Do you know how many people rely on your friendship, because you’re one of the only genuinely compassionate people they know? People don’t have hundreds of friends, Harry. You’re the only person I know that has this many people that gravitate around you. And what’s more than that, baby, is that you deserve to be alive. I can go on and on about all of the people who’s lives would fall apart if we lost you, but more than anything, you deserve to be alive and happy and loved.” Louis looked down, starting to feel small himself. “And you are loved. I don’t know if you realize how loved you are, but I love you so much more than I’ve ever loved anyone. And if you weren’t here - I don’t know. I don’t know what I’d do after that. I don’t know how I’d keep going if you weren’t here.”

“I’m not going to die.” Harry maintained, but his voice was weak.

“More people die in this country from overdoses than car crashes.” Louis said, listing off one of the random factoids he’d come across within the research he’d done behind Harry’s back. “And a lot more people drive cars than do heroin, so how do you think the odds stack up for you?”

“I don’t do heroin, though.”

“Was last night your first time?”

“Well, like, no.” He admitted.

“Harry.” Louis whined.

“It was just the second! That was only the second time I’ve done it.”

“Do you promise? You’re telling the truth right now?”

“I swear, Louis.” Harry said, doing everything he could to prove his honesty in the way he looked at Louis.

“It’s gotta stop. Do you get me? This can’t happen again. I’ve seen Niall drop a small fortune’s worth of molly, and even he’s freaked out right now. Your best friend looks like a complete zombie because he thinks he’s going to lose you to this. And as for me - I-” He choked again, his
anger ebbing away under another surge of hot tears. “I lost it, Haz. They had to tear me up off the
floor because I completely lost it. I couldn’t control myself.”

“I’m sorry.” Harry sputtered. “I’m so sorry, Louis. I didn’t - I never wanted to do that to you again.
Why do I keep doing this to you? Why am I so fucking selfish?” His face was continuing to redden
as he buried it in his hands, and Louis was helpless except to crawl across the floor to sit in front of
him.

“Baby, stop. You’re not being selfish.” Louis settled onto his knees, gripping Harry’s arms gently.
“I just don’t get why you think you can’t talk to me. I tell you everything about me, but you don’t.”
Harry’s head looked up slowly, coaxed up by how tremulous Louis’ voice was. “When I told you
about Nick, you didn’t say anything. You just ran off for a hit. Whenever anything happens to me,
you’re always the first person I want to talk to and I don’t get - I don’t get why I can’t be that for
you.”

“God, Louis, no.” Harry said, taking Louis’ hands into his. “What? No. That’s - that doesn’t make
any sense. You’re the only person I ever think about. You’re so, ridiculously important to me.
More than anyone.”

“Then why do you always have to get so fucked up? Why is that the thing you always turn to
first?”

Harry stared at him intensely, his lip trembling as if on a precarious ledge, about to spill out
everything he’d held so close to his chest. “Because it’s easy.” He whimpered, his head falling as
his neck went limp. His shoulders shuddered violently as Louis pulled him in.

“It’s poison, love.” Louis whispered. “It feels good for a second, but it doesn’t last. This is what
you’re left with. Moments like this. Does this feel easy?” Harry’s head shook against Louis’
shoulder. “How do you feel right now, baby?”

“Like I hurt you.” He mumbled, his voice garbled. “Like I betrayed you, and Niall, and everyone.
And I keep fucking doing it over and over and I still - I still don’t…” His voice caught in his throat.

“And you still feel hurt about Nick.” Louis said, finishing the thought for him. Harry’s body
convulsed with a sob that was so saturated in heartache that he threatened to topple them both over,
if not for Louis’ tight hold around his shoulders. It echoed with a bitter pain that had been stuffed
away long ago, fermenting and growing stronger until it was finally released, staining Louis’ shirt
with hot tears.

“I feel so sick, Louis.” Harry whimpered, and he was slipping from Louis’ grasp down onto the
floor. He curled in on himself, shaking and vulnerable as his weeping intensified. Louis scuttled
around, positioning himself so that he could take Harry’s head into his lap. He stroked slowly
through his tangled hair, feeling Harry shiver beneath his touch.

“I don’t want you to hurt like this.” Louis cooed, feeling as Harry’s hand clenched around Louis’
pantleg. “You can talk to me about anything. Absolutely anything. It’s not a burden because I want
to know everything about you. You don’t ever have to feel like this.”

Harry continued to shudder, making no other response apart from his own haggard breaths until he
finally gathered the energy to say, “He doesn’t love me.”

Louis exhaled painfully, wishing he didn’t have to face the same uphill battle of trying to convince
Harry that he was capable of being loved. “That’s not what he told me.” Louis countered.
“No, I mean, he can’t. That’s not what love is.” Harry explained, his eyes clamped shut as he relaxed slightly into Louis’ lap. “You don’t hurt the people you love like that. If he really loved me, he wouldn’t have done that to me. You - you would never…”

“I would never do that to you, Harry.” Louis said resolutely, finally getting a grasp on what was muddling through Harry’s thoughts. His eyes stayed shut, but his face eased into a slight grin. He nuzzled further into Louis’ leg.

“This feels different than I thought it would.” Harry said. “It’s better than I thought it would be.”

Louis’ hand slowed in Harry’s curls, not understanding what he meant, until it crashed onto him with enough force to stop his heartbeat. He was almost afraid to articulate the words, even in his thoughts, thinking that the moment was fragile enough that he might stomp it out if he didn’t tread with the utmost caution.

He could feel the warmth of Harry’s cheek pressed against his leg, and his hair coiled around his finger. He tried to memorize every part of that moment, because he was almost certain that this was the first time Harry truly understood that someone loved him back. He saw how thoroughly he’d gutted Louis with his actions, and yet Louis was still here with him, holding him through his waves of sickness. He finally understood it: Louis was irrevocably and unconditionally in love with him.

“It’s different for me, too.” Louis whispered, and Harry nodded slightly, finally understanding the lengths of Louis’ devotion to him. Louis let out a long, wavering sigh, as if releasing a bundle of anxiety that he’d been carrying for their entire relationship. “I know you don’t want to hear this right now, but Niall told me about the last time you struggled with this.” Louis said slowly, stroking Harry’s hair as gently as he could. “And he told me that they were really, really close to staging an intervention.”

“What?”

“I don’t want things to have to get to that point. But if you don’t stop, they will. That means rehab, love. Things have to stop. Completely stop.”

“I’m so sorry, Louis.”

“No more molly, no more coke, no more sleeping pills, and no more goddamned heroin. I never wanted to be this person in your life, telling you what you can and can’t do, but nothing else I’m doing is working. You have to stop, Harry.”

“I’m so sorry, Louis. I’m sorry.” Harry kept muttering, clinging to Louis as they fell into silence. It only ended when Harry suddenly sprang up, overcome by another round of vomiting. The sickness came and went for what felt like at least an hour, with Louis sitting behind Harry and quietly rubbing his back.

Eventually Liam showed up in the doorway, checking in on the silence that had fallen on the two of them. This apparently seemed very suspect after the loud confrontation earlier. Liam brought Harry some gatorade and gave them some more time alone, until Harry was overcome by his own tiredness and decided it was safe to head back to bed. Louis helped him under the duvet as Harry caught his hand, looking up at him.

“Lou, would it be okay if I had a little time to myself?” He asked lightly, obviously afraid of how Louis might respond.

Louis blinked hard, keeping his face neutral even though he felt like the bottom of his stomach had
just fallen out. He nodded slowly, letting go of Harry’s hand and fleeing from the room before his expression betrayed how he really felt. He could understand where Harry was coming from, after all, Louis had had the entire night to be alone with his thoughts before he’d been able to confront Harry. But still, it hit him harder than it should have that Harry didn’t want him there by his side, ready to navigate through his turmoil with him.

He wandered into the lounge, where both Niall and Nona looked up at his entrance. They were sitting quietly, the telly still turned off.

“How is he?” Niall asked suddenly. Louis chewed his lip as he spotted an empty reclining chair.

“He’s tired.” Louis muttered, falling into it heavily, still extremely aware of the eyes that were locked on him. “He needs to sleep it off.”

“Are you okay, Lulu?” Nona asked gently. Louis let his eyes fall shut and curled into the chair before he gave a stiff nod.

They didn’t ask him any more questions, waiting a few moments before quietly picking back up where their conversation had dropped off. He didn’t catch anything they said, his mind ticking off every second that passed without Harry showing up in the doorway, telling Louis that he’d changed his mind and he wanted Louis with him.

The lilting whispers of his friends lulled him easily to sleep, his exhaustion pulling him under without much effort. He still felt somewhat aware of their voices as he slept, until he suddenly sprang forward with a sharp intake of breath.

“What?” He asked, looking around the room. The lighting had shifted drastically as the day had passed by, and now Zayn and Liam had joined them. At some point, someone had draped a blanket over Louis. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Few hours.” Liam told him. “Did we wake you up?”

“No. S’fine.” Louis muttered, looking over to the images now playing across the telly. Everyone was still watching him with trepidation, and Louis took a moment to glance around the room at their friends. Nona, Niall, and Zayn were all sharing the couch together, with Liam sitting on a chair he’d pulled up off to the side.

Louis lingered on this, taking in Liam’s body language as he leaned away from Zayn, the empty space between them glaringly present. A steady dread fell over Louis as he catalogued the distance between them. It was strikingly apparent when compared to Niall and Nona, who Louis had to begrudgingly admit were sitting beside each other with a new level of familiarity. It was subtle, revealed in the way Niall leaned toward her, his leg almost brushing hers.

This was the body language he’d learned to read from Zayn and Liam’s relationship, after the two of them had gone to ridiculous lengths to avoid any forms of PDA. But, despite their best efforts, they always physically gravitated toward each other. This wasn’t what Louis was seeing at that moment, though. He saw Zayn pulled into himself on the couch, with Liam several feet away, his legs crossed away from his boyfriend.

It jolted Louis awake with a cold shock as he realized that they didn’t look like they usually did. They didn’t look like two people who were in love.

His thoughts were suddenly pulled away from this new development, however, as a door squeaked open behind them. Louis’ head whipped around to see Harry nervously step into the lounge. Dark
bags hung under his eyes which contrasted against his unusually pale complexion, but it looked as if some of his energy had returned. He looked around the room until his eyes finally spotted Louis, his head craning around the back of his chair.

“How’re you feeling, Haz?” Niall asked immediately, but Harry didn’t seem to hear him. He locked eyes with Louis, who stared back at him just as intensely. They stayed like that for a moment, as if proving to each other that they still existed, before Harry finally answered.

“Better.” He said, his voice spent. He rubbed his eyes dopily, the entire image giving Louis familiar butterflies at how cute Harry looked when he was tired. He traipsed across the room until he stopped beside Louis’ chair, leaning into it.

“You hungry?” Liam asked. “We were gonna call up some room service.”

“Mmm. A cheeseburger.” He muttered, causing the rest of the room to chuckle. Louis reached up to find Harry’s hand, holding it lightly as he looked up at him. There was a rustle of movement as everyone started searching for the room service menu.

Harry and Louis were in a world all their own, though, still staring at each other as a thousand thoughts whirred behind their eyes. Rather than try to voice any of them, Louis readjusted himself in his chair, inviting Harry to join him. He quickly dropped down into the recliner, snuggling into Louis’ side and locking his head under Louis’ chin. Louis pull the blanket over both of them, releasing a long sigh of contentment as he circled his arms around Harry’s familiar warmth.

“Do you think they’d make me chicken nuggets if I asked for them?” Niall asked, standing beside Liam as they perused the food choices.

“Is it on the menu?” Nona asked.

“But that’s what I’m saying. Do you think they’d-”

“Niall. Order from the menu.” Liam said authoritatively.

“But they have other chicken stuff. How hard is it to make nuggets?”

“Niall.”

Louis snickered as they continued to argue, running his hand up and down Harry’s arm under the blanket. Harry nuzzled in further, pressing his forehead against Louis’ cheek.

“Thank you.” Harry whispered, his voice low enough that the others wouldn’t be able to hear.

“For what, love?” He asked. Harry opened his mouth to answer, but all that came out was a quiet, choked sob. He turned into the crook of Louis’ neck to muffle his tears, his body shaking. Louis pulled the blanket up higher, blocking Harry from everyone’s view. He tightened his arms around Harry and kissed his forehead, letting him cry out the last of his pain.

“~

“You just have to be patient with him.”

“You always say that.”
“Because you always ask the same question.”

Louis wasn’t going to admit that Zayn was right, not after he’d relied so heavily on his advice over the last few weeks. He called almost every day at this point, and Zayn always knew to answer with, “How’s Harry?”

Louis would always respond with a groan before launching into whatever incident had happened that day.

Granted, incident was a very harsh word for someone dealing with substance abuse. Overall, Harry had been sticking to his sobriety surprisingly well. It was the torn apart shreds of his personality that had been left in the wake of his sobriety that were concerning Louis to no end.

When they had first returned home from New York, Harry had been this quiet, meek, ghost of the person he usually was. He looked frightened constantly, always clinging to Louis in fear but never giving a solid reason why. He wasn’t talking much, let alone smiling, and Louis wasn’t the only one to have noticed. Status Solo had started to get back into the recording studio, and Niall had been giving Louis constant updates on how worried everyone was about Harry.

He followed Zayn’s advice as best as he could, knowing that he wasn’t going to see immediate results, but still wishing things would just get better already. Zayn told him to be warm as often as he could, to compliment Harry whenever he had a chance to.

“Mm, babe, you look good today.” Was a common greeting now, earning a sly grin from Harry as he cooked them breakfast.

“I just woke up.” He would mumble, sinking into Louis as he wrapping his arms around him from behind.

“Don’t see why that makes a difference.” Louis would respond, kissing Harry’s bare shoulder and feeling the way his muscles relaxed.

And even when Louis would wake up to an empty bed, straining his ears to hear the melancholy tinkling of the piano, he would stay gentle and positive. He would sit down next to him, asking if it was a new song and hooking his chin over Harry’s shoulder as he played it back for him. But when things got especially precarious, when Louis would come across Harry inexplicably near tears or unnervingly finicky, he’d pull out the book of letters he’d gotten him for his birthday.

He’d sit next to Harry as he read through them, slowly calming down until all he wanted to do was wrap himself into Louis. He would never complain about what was upsetting him in the moment, never voiced it when he was having a difficult time. He did everything he could to be stoic and detached, and at times Louis felt like he couldn’t take anymore of it.

Louis would lock himself in the bathroom to call Zayn in those instances, telling him it was too hard and he just wanted his boyfriend to be happy again, and normally Zayn would do his best to talk him down. But after several weeks had gone by, Zayn finally gave Louis a verbal lashing that put things back into perspective.

“You have to do this, Louis. You have to take responsibility for him, because that’s what you keep saying you’re going to do. If you can’t do it, then someone else has to. That means rehab.” Zayn pointed out. “You can’t keep going on about how devoted you are to Harry and how you’re never going to leave him, then think about giving up on him when things get a little hard. Your boyfriend is sick, Louis, and he needs you.”
“I know, I just - I just wish he was getting better.” Louis stammered, his throat closing in on itself.

“He is though. Remember how he was when we first got back? He is getting better, a little bit at a time. Remember all of the things you’ve been telling me?”

Louis nodded, his heart slightly unclenching as he wrapped himself around the truth in Zayn’s words. Slowly, Harry had been making a reappearance. A large part of this had been due to Louis’ sudden decision to pop in during Harry’s lunch break at the studio. He’d shown up unannounced, afraid that he was overstepping, only to see Harry completely light up when he saw him.

He seemed genuinely happy as he gave Louis a tour of where he worked, showing off the group’s platinum records and three grammy’s. It had gone over so well that Louis became a common fixture at the studio, showing up whenever his schedule would allow. He focused on these small moments that made Harry happy, and especially on the fact that they were cropping up more often.

It started with the return of his gleeful humming in the shower, then some of his little remarks about “the perennial nature of existence” and the “arcane beauty of that flower over there” returned. But it was one morning about four weeks after New York when Louis knew his boy was back.

“Darling, could you please, please wear this head scarf today?” He asked, waking Louis up. Louis struggled to open his eyes, seeing Harry already fully dressed and standing at his bedside. He was holding out a mint green headscarf, looking down at Louis imploringly.

“Why?” Louis asked, rubbing his eyes. Harry looked at him scandalized by how impossibly obtuse Louis was being as he gestured down to his trousers, which were the exact same shade of mint green. Louis fell back against his pillow with a laugh, looking up at Harry adoringly. “Oh my god, yes. So much yes.”

It turned out that Harry had been assembling both of their outfits behind Louis’ back for quite some time, specifically picking matching accents for both of them. They cheerfully strolled to the store that day, deliriously overcome by how cute they both thought they were, and reminding Louis of everything that had made him fall in love with Harry in the first place.

He was excited to tell Zayn all about it several days later when Harry was gone for the weekend, headlining a concert in Vancouver. He’d been digging into his morning cereal when Zayn’s call had grabbed his attention, and he answered it enthusiastically.

“Well hello, Zayner. What are you up to this morning?”

“Can you come over?” Zayn asked, and his voice made Louis’ insides freeze.

“What’s wrong?”

“Liam just broke up with me.”

And everything shattered, leaving Louis incapable of speech as he stared at his phone. Suddenly, he’d put his bowl to the side and he was sprinting through the house, searching fruitlessly for some trainers.

“I’m leaving right now.” Louis said. “I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

“Kay. Let me know when you get here.” He struggled over a breath before the line went dead, and the guilt clotted in every part of Louis.
He was mentally already back in that hotel in New York, noticing the way Zayn and Liam were sitting so far apart. But that had been so long ago. It wasn’t possible that something like this could have been brewing between the two of them for the last month and Louis hadn’t even noticed.

But that was the thing. Louis had been completely devoured by Harry lately, unable to focus on anything else besides getting him healthy and happy again. He’d talked to Zayn nearly everyday, and somehow he’d been so ignorant that he’d never asked about what was happening in Zayn’s life. His best friend’s relationship had been deteriorating under his nose, and he’d been so self obsessed that he hadn’t even noticed.

Despite this, Louis was still already calling Harry.

“What’s up, babe?” Harry asked happily as he answered.

“Liam broke up with Zayn.” Louis blurted out.


“Zayn just called me. He didn’t tell me anything.” Louis said, struggling to lace up his trainers one handed. “Jesus, when did this even happen?” It still felt unreal, as if it had to be some sort of joke. But the echo of Zayn’s broken voice confirmed to Louis that this was really happening. His two best friends, who he’d convinced himself were destined for each other, had just broken up.

“How can I help?” Harry asked.

“No, you don’t need to worry about it. I’m heading over right now. Just focus on your show.” Louis said. “I just really wanted to hear your voice.”

“I’m sorry, Lou.” He said.

“I’ll give you updates.” Louis promised, heading for the front door with his keys in hand.

“Kay. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He hung up as he dashed into the blinding sunlight, hopping into his car and speeding away in the familiar direction of Zayn’s apartment. He arrived much sooner than he would have if he’d followed any speed limits, and he pounded impatiently at Zayn’s callbox until he finally buzzed him in.

In a whirlwind, Louis tore into the studio, looking around and panting ridiculously as he took in the scene. Zayn was at the breakfast bar, hunched over the counter with two steaming mugs in front of him.

“He left me, Louis.” Zayn choked.

“But what happened?” Louis repeated. Zayn pulled away, sniffling and looking down at his hands. His eyes were glistening, which shocked Louis. In all the time that he’d known Zayn, he’d never seen his best friend cry, no matter how heartbroken or upset he might have been.
“We had a fight last night.” He explained, his shoulders shuddering as he struggled to breathe. “We’ve been fighting. Arguing, I guess. But last night got really, really bad. Like, I don’t know why I fucking said everything I said. Or why he - why he said anything of that. But we both felt like total shit afterwards. He seemed really, really sorry, so we just decided to go to sleep. And I thought that was it. We were going to work it out this morning. And I don’t know when it happened but he had already made the decision when I woke up. He was sitting there, waiting for me. Waiting to tell me that he was done.”

The tears plummeted down his cheeks, and he looked as surprised by them as Louis was. He hurried to wipe them away, but Louis was already pulling him in.

“I’m so sorry.” He cooed, holding Zayn as tight as he could until the other man finally let go. He gripped into Louis as his tears fell freely. Louis let him cry, a practice that he’d grown extremely used to with Harry. By the time Zayn started to settle down, his well of tears having dried up, the two had ended up on the couch.

He was swaddled in a blanket, sipping at his tea as Louis watched him, pulling his feet into his lap. His heart hadn’t unclenched since he’d arrived there, never having seen Zayn look so absolutely miserable. Louis was just about to say something to him when his phone began ringing in his pocket. His stomach sunk as he saw Liam’s name flash across the screen, sending it to voicemail immediately.

“Was that him?” Zayn asked, watching Louis set his phone on the coffee table.

“He can wait.” Louis decided. As if to directly contradict him, his phone blared to life once again, Liam apparently deciding to bypass Louis’ voicemail before he called him back. Louis had no patience for him, setting his phone to silent and turning it over on the table so that he couldn’t see the screen. Zayn gave a humorless laugh at seemingly nothing before he looked back down at his hands, his face falling once again into grim disbelief.

“I knew we were having problems.” He said. “But I didn’t think we were a step away from breaking up. I didn’t think we were that close to ending everything.”

“I didn’t even know you guys were having problems.”

“You have too much to worry about right now.” Zayn reasoned.

“You still should have told me. I could have - I could have helped, or something.”

“Wouldn’t have changed anything. And it didn’t seem big enough to worry you about. I kept - I guess, I kept comparing us to you and Harry. You guys have been going through so much but you’ve still been able to stay together. And I just thought, if you two can make it through all of that, then Liam and I could handle some stupid fights about my job. I just let it get bad, though. I didn’t take care of it.”

“You were fighting about your job?”

“Yeah. Both our jobs. That’s where most of it came from.” He admitted. “Liam’s got all of these clients he’s trying to find time for, but he still insists on doing everything he can for you. Which is good, I mean, I want him taking care of you. But he can’t be juggling all of these clients at the same time, and he doesn’t see that.”

“I’m sorry.” Louis said weakly, feeling a tug of guilt at the part he had to play in this. Zayn quickly saw this and back-pedaled.
“No, Louis! It wasn’t you! It’s him. It’s both of us.” His voice trailed off as he rubbed his face, as if he had momentarily forgotten what they were talking about but the memories had come flooding back. “Our jobs just don’t mesh.”

“Because you’re so busy?”

“It’s more than that. Yeah, he’s busy, but we can deal with that. It’s more that he can’t stand my lifestyle.”

“Modeling?” Louis asked for clarification.

“He feels like a lot of people flirt with me. At shoots, and parties and stuff.”

“Well yeah, Zayn. You’re a gorgeous bloke. Even I had a crush on you when we first met.”

“Ah, babe. Really?” Zayn asked, showing his first hint of a smile that morning.

“For, like, a second, yeah.”

“Why didn’t you go for it?” Zayn pushed Louis’ shoulder playfully.

“Because you were one person, and I was pretty into the whole not being with just one person thing.” Louis explained. “But wait. What would have happened if I did? Would you have turned me down?”

“You know my type.” Zayn said glumly, his thoughts turning back to Liam.

“But that can’t just be it. A bit of flirting?”

“But it’s relentless, Lou. He hates all of the events and shoots because he just doesn’t feel like he fits in. I mean, I have a face I wear at those things, I act a certain way, and he doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like how perfect everyone is. How posh. I knew it bugged him, but I didn’t realize until last night that it - that it makes him feel…”

“What?”

“Like he doesn’t deserve me. Like he can’t compete with the people around me. Like he’s the least impressive person in the room.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I know. And I keep trying to make him see that I don’t care about all of those other people. I mean - I like my life. I like going to parties with models and wearing all of the clothes and stuff, and there’s something I even like about those vapid conversations, but it’s just pretend. It’s not what I really care about. We can be in room full of models and photographers and celebrities and he’s still the only person there that I give a fuck about. And he left me.”

His voice was cracking again, so Louis surged forward to wrap an arm around his shoulders. Zayn crumbled into his lap, letting Louis pet his hair.

“I didn’t - I didn’t think it would hurt like this.” He choked, and Louis felt every muscle in his body tense. He knew this was all new to Zayn, to be completely and utterly heartbroken. He’d had plenty of boyfriends before, and many of them had ended disastrously, but he’d never been left hanging, crying out for someone he loved who’d just abandoned him. There hadn’t been someone like Liam yet, who’d made his face go so soft whenever they looked at each other, or always knew how to
place a subtle yet supportive hand on his back whenever they stood next to each other.

Zayn’s devastation was mirrored by Louis’ equally intense emotions, but what was brewing inside of him was an intense fury toward the man he’d trusted with his best friend’s heart. He’d done everything he could to support this couple, and this was how Liam had left Zayn, pathetic and sobbing into Louis’ joggers.

They were silent for long after that, not speaking to each other as the gravity of the moment had to lift away again, giving Zayn a reprieve from his onslaught of tears. In an attempt to distract him, Louis tried to pick out a movie for the two of them to watch, but to Louis’ ceaseless frustration, Zayn wanted to watch *Squad*.

“But you’ve seen it a thousand times.” Louis whined as the film started.

“I like making fun of you.” Zayn insisted, sitting up eagerly. His cheeks still glistened, but a calmness had managed to settle over him.

Louis sunk back into the couch petulantly, already familiar with what it meant to watch *Squad* with Zayn. It meant that Zayn was going to laugh every single time Louis said something, was going to parrot back all of his lines in a mocking tone, was going to lose his shit during each of the many times Louis’ character took his shirt off.

“Oh my god, look what you’re wearing.” Zayn laughed. Louis rolled his eyes while begrudgingly admitting internally that he was wearing something pretty ridiculous. That didn’t matter much, because, in case it wasn’t clear, Louis’ character was very apt to take off whatever he was wearing. “I can’t even take you seriously right now.”

“You’re not supposed to! I’m wearing MC Hammer pants!” Louis whined, causing Zayn to laugh harder as he rested his head on Louis’ shoulder. The mood steadily lightened as the movie continued on, and Louis stomached through Zayn’s ridicule as long as it meant he wasn’t crying.

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He leaned forward to grab the remote, pausing the movie and pulling out his phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Twit pic.” Zayn murmured.

“Stop!”

“I can’t! I’m already doing it!”

Louis looked down to his own phone, still lying face down on the coffee table, and decided it wasn’t worth the effort of leaning over and picking it up to see what Zayn had posted. It also wasn’t worth seeing how many times Liam had called him since he put his phone on silent. He understood that he was Liam’s best friend as well, and naturally he was the person Liam was going to reach out to, but he honestly couldn’t stomach the thought of speaking to him at the moment. Zayn’s anguish was still too fresh.

He stole the remote back from Zayn so that they could get on with the rest of the movie, grimacing every time Zayn guffawed but ultimately content that his mood had improved. At the very least, Louis was doing a good job of distracting him, even if he’d been largely absent during the lead up to the break up. They’d started digging into pints of ice cream about halfway through, and Louis picked the empty cartons up as the end credits rolled.

“What next? Another movie?” He called behind him as he headed to the kitchen.

“I wish Metal Heart was out on bluray already.”

“Can we please watch something that I’m not in?” Louis plead, opening the fridge to raid Zayn’s beer.

“Louis, thanks for coming over.” Zayn said quietly, his tone shifting. Louis leaned back out of the fridge to look at him.

“Of course, Zayn.”

“But I feel bad about monopolizing you. You don’t have to wait on me all day.” Zayn explained. Louis laughed as he took a couple of bottles from the fridge and closed it.

“Dear, sweet Zayn. It is my pleasure to wait on you all day.” Louis said, turning to the counter to open the bottles. “Even if Harry were in town, this is still where I’d want to be. Except he would probably be waiting outside, pacing up and down the street, sending me texts every twenty seconds about your well-being.”

“He’s cute.” Zayn chuckled.

“And speaking of his royal cuteness, please don’t mention anything about me drinking this beer to him.” He asked, handing him a bottle and sitting down beside him.

“Are you not supposed to be drinking?”

“Not while he’s trying so hard to stay sober. He says I can, but that’s just how he is. He wouldn’t want to inconvenience me even if it makes things a thousand times harder for him.”

“I won’t say anything.” Zayn promised. “I’m really happy you guys are together.” The words had scarcely left his lips before the dark cloud descended over his features once again. Louis wrapped
his arm around Zayn’s shoulders.

“This is gonna get worked out.” Louis said resolutely. “Liam’s going to realize how stupid he’s being, and then it’s going to be up to you whether or not he deserves to have you back.”

Zayn sighed heavily as he sunk further into Louis’ side until they were interrupted by the buzz of his own phone. He pulled away as he looked at the screen.

“Harry’s calling me.” Zayn said in confusion.

“Probably wants to see how you’re doing.” Louis explained.

“Hello?” Zayn answered. “Hi, yeah. I’m okay.” Louis sat back and smirked, listening to the deep timbre of Harry’s voice mumbling through the phone. “Thanks. Yeah. Thanks for saying that. Erm, yeah, he’s right here.” Zayn handed the phone to Louis, who was somewhat surprised that Harry hadn’t talked Zayn’s ear off for at least a half hour before asking for Louis.

“Hey.” Louis said as he put the phone to his ear.

“Why aren’t you answering your phone?” Harry asked, and the hairs on the back of Louis’ neck sprang up as he detected a hint of panic in Harry’s voice.

“Liam keeps calling me. I’m with Zayn right now. I didn’t want to talk to him.”

“He guessed that. I just got off the phone with him, and he needs you to call your publicist.”

“Call my publicist?” Louis repeated. He reached out to turn his phone over, the screen illuminating to an intimidating amount of missed calls from everyone who handled his professional life. From Zayn’s end, he’d picked up enough of the conversation to immediately reach for his laptop, googling Louis’ name.

“Did he say why?” Louis asked, his mouth going dry.

“No, but I just got a text that my management needs me on a conference call when I’m out of rehearsal.”

Louis’ mind was racing, trying to think of what they might have done that could be making the rounds through the press. They’d hardly left the house together in the last month, and Harry hadn’t even been in town for the last couple of days, so he had no idea what could be causing this amount of panic.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Zayn scrolling quickly down an article, only to reach a large picture and suddenly scroll back up with a shocked gasp. He looked over to Louis, his eyes wide.

“Louis?” Harry asked nervously as Louis fell silent.

“Is it real?” Zayn asked.

“Is it us?” Harry keep asking, apparently able to hear Zayn from his end.

“N - no. It’s not us.” Louis said, trembling. “It’s just me.”

All that was visible was Louis’ face, about three years younger, and his naked shoulders as he looked at the mirror with a mischievous smile. Cautiously, Zayn scrolled back down the page, continuing down Louis’ bare torso until it was interrupted by a black censor box. Even with the blackout, it was extremely clear that Louis was completely naked in the picture.
And yes, it was absolutely real.

Louis had been Joshua’s first when it came to everything. Reconciling his homosexuality with his conservative, religious sensibilities had been an almost overwhelming burden for him, even without the added pressure of losing his virginity. Growing up, he’d been lead to believe that he would sleep with his wife for the first time on their wedding night, which was a stark contrast to having sex with the first man he’d ever dated. It took months of trust building before Joshua felt ready, but even afterwards, the experience gave him mixed feelings.

He’d enjoyed it, that was abundantly clear, but he felt very guilty about just how much he’d enjoyed it. Louis did everything he could to work him through it, to make him understand that they’d done nothing wrong. That they were two consenting adults who cared about each other, and sex was a natural part of that.

Joshua eventually rose out of this guilty stupor, but it was followed by a strangely hyper-sexual phase, as if overcompensating for his lifetime of prudishness. It was almost an overnight switch for him, suddenly becoming sexually demanding when it came to Louis. It wasn’t anything too extreme, nothing that crossed the line of consent, but there were moments that made Louis increasingly uncomfortable. It was a disconcerting shift in their relationship dynamic, suddenly feeling like he was at the mercy of Joshua’s every whim. Admittedly, it had been sexy at first, but it steadily grew into something else.

At the time, Louis had made excuses for Joshua, but as he looked back on the relationship, he could now clearly see where the emotional abuse had begun. Louis had been out of town for a week to shoot a guest spot on a television show, and Joshua had made it very clear that he missed him. It started out flirty at first, asking for selfies of Louis so he could see what he was doing, but things quickly escalated from there.

Louis wasn’t a stranger to dirty pics. He’d sent a few when he’d lived back in Doncaster, but the experience had left a foul taste in his mouth. It seemed somewhat absurd to him, that an actor would have an issue having his body photographed like that. He had no problem with shooting sex scenes or hardly wearing anything in a shot, but there was just something about taking a picture of himself with no character to hide behind that sat with him the wrong way. This, plus the fact that his career was tentatively taking off and he didn’t want anything even remotely scandalous floating around were why he felt uncomfortable when Joshua asked for the pictures.

But Joshua was relentless, saying things that Louis could now recognize were bullying, and by the time that Louis got back to LA, they’d exchanged nearly a dozen pictures. Louis had managed to convince himself at the time that he’d started to like taking the pictures, but now he could see that he’d never been comfortable with it. Joshua’s controlling behavior had already been sinking into Louis, changing the way he thought about himself.

This phase did come to an end later on, with Joshua’s true self winning out and finding a balance with his newfound appreciation for sex. They hadn’t made a habit of sending naked photos after that, and Louis had honestly thought that none of them even existed anymore.

This proved to be mind-numbingly false, as all of them had found their way onto the internet that morning. The gossip news outlets only circulated censored versions, but alluded to the full photos...
being proliferated on other sites. It was clear that if anyone wanted to see Louis completely naked, all they had to do was type it into google.

Joshua had taken something that had been given to him in trust and respect, and sold it to the highest bidder.

His publicists were frighteningly livid. He was forced to leave Zayn behind as he was ushered into meeting after meeting, feeling like he was being put before a firing squad. It was the kind of thing he’d only ever heard horror stories about, like when Vanessa Hudgens was ripped apart by Disney when her nude photos surfaced. It was made very clear to Louis that the Metal Heart brand was ultimately geared toward kids, and they were going to take a massive hit for this. Parents weren’t about to buy an action figure for their children of a superhero who had taken part in pornography.

That’s the term they kept using. It wasn’t something intimate and personal that had been given away by someone he used to love and trust, it was pornography.

These were the exact same people that had been so supportive during his coming out, lauding his bravery to be the first gay super hero in a major motion picture. But now all of that had been torn down. For hours they did nothing but shame him, handing him punishments as if he were a naughty schoolchild.

He was going to be responsible for issuing an apology, and he was going to have to stay out of the public eye as much as he could. And on top of this, Harry’s management had worked excruciatingly hard to get through to Louis’ team so that they could issue their own demands. They made it explicitly clear that they wanted Louis to have no association with their client publicly, not even under the guise as friends.

All of this would have been much easier if Liam had been in the room, but as much as he yearned to have his support, he still wasn’t ready to even look at Liam yet, let alone speak to him. It also would have helped to have Harry nearby, but his boyfriend was currently thousands of miles away. He was onstage while Louis was getting skewered and scolded, and he’d only sent Louis one text to hold him over:

i’m leaving vancouver early. expect me late tonight. love you with all my heart.

Admittedly, it was a pretty good text. It was certainly enough to hold Louis together that night as he waited silently in the lounge, feeling like he’d been slammed with a battering ram all day. As much as it would have helped to ignore everything, he couldn’t manage to keep himself off the internet to look up all of the gory details.

All of the goodwill he’d experienced during his coming out had largely vanished, swallowed up by internet trolls leaving nasty comments. There were an abundance of homophobic slurs being thrown around as they disparaged every part of Louis, leaving him feeling like he’d been completely saturated in criticism.

He was sitting on the couch, his legs kicked up over the cushions and his back leaning against the armrest when the front door finally opened, Harry’s worried voice booming through the house.

“Louis?” He called out, the door closing behind him. He fell silent for a moment as he listened, but Louis couldn't muster up enough energy to respond. Harry moved through the house, rounding a
corner and stopping as he came across Louis.

“Hey.” Louis said lightly, surprised by the rawness of his own voice. He must have looked an absolute wreck, because Harry was practically dissolving at the sight of him. He dropped his bag and rushed to Louis, kneeling by the side of the couch.

“Oh, sweetheart.” He sighed. He pushed Louis’ messy hair from his face, cupping his cheeks and surveying him for a moment before pulling away. His hand fell to Louis’ thigh, warm and present. “Are they…?”

“They’re real.” Louis admitted. “And Joshua gave them away. Didn’t even try to get any money for them. He just wanted people to see them.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I texted him earlier.” Louis answered simply. Harry’s brow had furrowed violently, dumbfounded by what Louis had just said. “That time he called, but I didn’t recognize the number? He got a new phone because I blocked his old one. So I texted him, and we’re meeting up tomorrow.”

“Louis!” Harry exclaimed. “No, you’re not!”

“It has to stop, Harry.” Louis said definitely, having prepared this pitch the entire time he’d been waiting for Harry to show up. “I broke up with him months ago, but the abuse hasn’t stopped. He’s still always there, hurting me, and it has to stop. He keeps saying he wants to talk to me, so I’m going to do it. I’m going to talk to him, and tell him that we’re over. That I’m with you now, and you have to be my focus. He has to move on.”

“I’m coming with you.” Harry decided.

“Haz,”

“I’ll just stay in the car, but you’re not going alone. There’s no way I’m letting you go there alone.”

“I don’t know.”

“Look, I know I don’t handle things with Joshua that well.” Harry admitted. “And I want to make that up to you. I can’t explain how sorry I am about how I acted last time he showed up. I just really need to prove to you that you can trust me and I can keep a level head in situations like that. I need to prove it to myself, you know? That I can take care of you if things get dangerous. I promise I’ll just stay in the car unless something bad happens.”

Louis watched him closely, unable to find a way to argue. Mostly, he just couldn’t get past the way his affection toward Harry was slowly settling back in, relieved that he was finally home. His hand found Harry’s fingers, twining together.

“Why won’t your management let me be seen with you?” He asked weakly. “You have, like, twenty songs about graphic sex. Seems like they wouldn’t mind a little nude picture scandal.”

Harry pulled Louis’ hand up, kissing it before he started speaking. “They just - they think it ties a link to us.” He explained. “Like, if we got papped, the media would run all these stories about how I’m supporting you through this, playing up our friendship. They just don’t want the two of us in any headlines together. Which is bullshit, because I do want to support you through this because you didn’t do anything wrong.”
“I shouldn’t have been that stupid.” Louis said, looking away.

“Hey, Louis, no.” Harry said, budging Louis’ legs over so that he could sit on the edge of the couch beside him. “You weren’t stupid. You shared something extremely personal with someone you loved, and he betrayed you. You did nothing wrong.”

“Yeah.” Louis responded, though his word was empty.

“Louis. You did nothing wrong. He did. Those were personal, and he shared them without your consent. You know the term for that, and I don’t think you want me to say it.”

In truth, Louis didn’t. He didn’t even want to internally label this as a form of sexual abuse, but those words had been etched into the back of his thoughts all day. And as much as he knew that gender roles were defunct when it came to things like this, there was still the gruff voice in the back of his head telling him to man up. That men don’t get upset over things like this.

And yet he felt dirty to his core, like he just wanted to fold in on himself somewhere dark, where no one could see him, and he could keep some small piece of himself intact. Keep some part of himself hidden away where no one else could see.

“They’re calling me a faggot, Harry.” He said suddenly. “Everyone is. They hate me.”

“Hey, hey, hey.” Harry said quickly, anticipating Louis’ imminent breakdown. He cupped Louis’ neck between his hands and leaned in. “You have a legion of adoring fans, Lou. You know that. There are so many kids out there that you mean so much to. Remember how many lives you changed when you came out? All those kids at the shelter who’s lives you changed? And you changed mine, too. Remember? I read that article and all I could think was, ‘This man is so brave. This is the kind of person I wish I could be like. This is the kind of person I wish was in my life.’”

Harry blinked at him, watching as Louis gave him a watery smile, bunching his hands in Harry’s shirt. He was wearing a warm, baggy jumper, the kind that made Louis want to crawl inside of. He leaned forward to give him a quick kiss before resting their foreheads together. “Do you think your fans are really going to care? Everyone sends naked pics, Lou. No one who matters is going to care. Sure, some coalition of angry mums might complain for a second, but who honestly gives a fuck about them?”

Louis kissed him again, deep and unwavering, their chests pressing together. His lips wandered away from Louis’ mouth, kissing his neck as Louis released a light, pent up moan. Harry’s hand slipped under Louis’ shirt just as Louis winced.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked, snapping his hand back. Louis recoiled in on himself, his cheeks going red until Harry’s hand cradled the side of his face. “Baby? What’s wrong?”

“I just don’t really want to be naked right now.” He whispered, already embarrassed by the admission.

“Oh, Louis.” Harry sighed, his hand tangling in Louis’ hair before it fell down to his arm. He took both of Louis’ hands, watching them as he gathered his thoughts. “I just - I just want you to know that I’ve seen you naked when you’re all muscled up to be a superhero. And I’ve seen you naked when you were skin and bones for Kids From Yesterday. And I’ve even seen you naked when you didn’t give a fuck what kind of shape you were in, but I’ve never thought of your body as anything besides beautiful and perfect. You’ve always been perfect for me, Louis.”

Louis felt the breath escape his lungs, and he was afraid that a sizable chunk of his soul had gone with it. “Harry.” He whispered, wrapping his fingers around Harry’s hands. Harry leaned forward
to plant a long, lingering kiss to Louis’ forehead.

“M’kind of thirsty. You want anything from the kitchen?” Harry asked.

“Water.” Louis answered. Harry nodded and stood up, but stopped as Louis clung to his hand.

“Do you remember when you took me to dinner in Paris? Back when we first started dating?” He asked.

“Of course I do.”

“Remember how we danced to *Stand By Me*?”

Harry smiled at him, already pulling his phone out and opening Spotify as he walked away toward the kitchen. Scarcely ten minutes later, Ben E King was wafting through the speakers in the lounge as Harry and Louis slowly danced together. Louis hung from Harry, letting the larger man carry most of his weight as they swayed to the music.

He felt Harry’s heart beat slowly and rhythmically against his cheek, and for the first time that day he felt content; he felt safe. But know that he was going to see Joshua again for the first time since they broke up, he had to wonder how long the feeling of safety would last.

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It was exactly as it had been the last time he’d seen it, Joshua’s grungy old flat nestled in on the bottom floor of his building. He’d never thought he’d be here again after they’d moved in together, much less now that they were broken up. Harry was staring gloomily at Joshua’s front from behind the steering wheel.

“Stay in view of the window, okay?” He asked. Louis nodded before pecking him on the lips and sliding out of his seat. Harry reached out to snag his hand, just before Louis closed the car door.

“You’re better than him, Louis. Remember that, okay? He’s going to see how much stronger you’ve gotten without him, and he’s going to try to control you, but he can’t because you don’t need him.”

“Right.” Louis agreed, his nerves bubbling to the surface.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Louis gave him a soft, reassuring smile before closing the door. After a deep breath, he faced Joshua’s flat, readying himself for the battle he was about to face. He would have swallowed hard if his throat wasn’t already completely arid, his sweat so cold it felt frozen to his skin.

He didn’t even have to knock as he approached the door, Joshua already standing there waiting for him and glowering back at Harry in the car.

“Come in. Come in.” He insisted, standing alarmingly too close to Louis as he shuffled inside. He threw one look back at Harry before the door closed, a gesture that didn’t go unnoticed by Joshua.

“You brought him with you?”
“He’s my partner.” Louis answered simply, having already decided to use this answer as frequently as he could manage in an attempt to get Joshua to accept it. Joshua’s otherwise friendly demeanor flashed with anger for a moment, and Louis already felt suffocated by the closed space. He’d thought he’d be able to handle seeing Joshua, seeing the person who’d been looming at the edges of his nightmares for months, but his every fiber was already on edge. “You keep saying you want to talk to me, so do it. Say what you want to say.”

“I just want to apologize.” Joshua said, something sinister in his gentle tone as he took several steps toward Louis. “It was a mistake, Lou. I didn’t mean to hurt you. It killed me that I hurt you.”

“It didn’t kill you.” Louis muttered, backing up to avoid Joshua’s advances.

“What was that?”

“You keep hurting me, Joshua.” Louis said, finding his voice. “Even after we broke up, you keep hurting me.”

“It was an accident!”

“Giving away pictures of me was not an accident! Neither was showing up at my house in the middle of the night, or controlling everything I did and making me feel like shit the entire time we were together. And it wasn’t an accident when you hit me.”

“You cheated on me, Louis.” Joshua pointed out icily. “And I forgave you for that! Did you manage to forget that part? I didn’t break up with you over that, even though I should have. I stayed with you, then you completely deserted me without even giving me a chance to explain myself. You broke my heart, Louis. I never would have done the same thing to you.”

Louis clamped his mouth shut, his heavy breaths hammering through his nose. He was at a loss for what to do, feeling a clammy heat rising up his neck. He spun around, unable to look at Joshua’s self-righteous face for another second, taking in the flat that he used to be so familiar with. It was more cramped than before, Joshua’s boxes from Louis’ house still strewn about, unpacked. Even his gun locker was in the lounge, garishly large and out of place. But what was truly out of place was the wine bottle sitting on the counter, completely empty.

“Have you started drinking?” Louis asked, turning back to Joshua.

“You’re not innocent in this, Louis.” He said, ignoring him. “You hurt me, too. All those nights you were out partying with your famous friends and leaving me behind? I knew you before all of that. I supported you when you were nobody and no one even cared who you were. Because I cared who you were. I loved you. I still love you.”

“Don’t.” Louis warned, but Joshua was stepping toward him again. Louis became all too aware of how he was about to be boxed in against the wall, out of view of the window.

“And then you slept with that guy, and I felt like I’d been stabbed. I felt like I was going to die.”

“That doesn’t-“ Louis stammered, but the words got lodged in his throat. Panic was simmering deep in his stomach, threatening to boil over. His muscles were seizing up, paralyzing him, and Joshua completely filled his vision. He was so close, looming over Louis as he felt every ounce of bravery sapped from him. His breaths were trembling, his legs going weak.

“You are the only person I’ve ever loved, and you betrayed me.” Joshua growled.

“I didn’t…”
“You did. You broke my heart.”

“Joshua.”

“You keep breaking my heart. That’s all you do. You keep hurting me and hurting me and you don’t even care!”

“That didn’t give you the right to hit me!” Louis cried out, his voice ringing out across the cramped flat. Joshua suddenly took a step back, Louis’ words seemingly slicing through his core. It was as if a wall had finally toppled down within Louis, his anxiety pulsating into an unrelenting anger; a desperate need to vindicate himself against this terror in his life. “You’re an abuser, Joshua. That’s what you are. You manipulated me, controlled me, made me think everything you’d done to me was my fault. That’s abuse. And it doesn’t fucking matter that you’re still in love with me because I’m not in love with you. I’ve moved on from you, and I’m happier than I’ve ever been. You can’t keep following me around and trying to control me, because that part of our lives is over. I’m past you, and you need to move on, too.”

Joshua stepped back again, his face unreadable. He looked simultaneously capable of bursting into tears or slinging rage filled vitriol at Louis, but instead he opened his mouth, his voice calculated but intense.

“You think you’re happy with him?” He asked, his tone somehow more frightening than if he’d started screaming.

“I am happy with him.” Louis bit back. He struggled to walk past him, finally sliding by.

“I think about the two of you all the time. Together. In my bed.” He spat venomously, following Louis toward the door. “It disgusts me.”

“It doesn’t really matter how it makes you feel. It doesn’t change the fact that Harry and I are in love.” He opened the door, but gasped as Joshua’s had clenched around Louis’ wrist, pulling back and slamming the door shut.

“You’re not listening to me.” He said, manic.

“Let go of me.” Louis demanded, feel the beginnings of a bruise on his wrist. To his surprise, Joshua did let go, but he once again stepped close to Louis.

“He’s manipulative, Louis. You can’t trust him. He snuck in and poisoned you against me.” Joshua said desperately, his paranoia now fully realized. Louis looked him up and down, appraising what he was seeing.

“You know what, I’m glad I did this.” Louis decided. “Now I know I don’t have to try anymore. You can’t be reasoned with. I don’t need to put up with any of your shit anymore.”

Joshua’s glare intensified and he swooped in closer to Louis, only to have the door smashed into his side as Harry threw it open. He barreled in, quickly assessing the situation and standing between Louis and Joshua. Apparently, seeing the door open and close had been enough to set off his alarm bells.

“Get away from him.” Harry said authoritatively, and Louis was relieved to hear the tone of his voice. It was controlled, if only just barely so.

“You can’t be in here!” Joshua yelled, his eyes burning at Harry’s sudden appearance in his space.

But Harry wasn’t concerned with Joshua’s territorial issues. He had already turned his back on
him, shielding Louis with his body.

“Are you okay?” He asked. Louis nodded, not wanting Harry to have any other reason to lose his temper, but he impulsively reached to the darkening bruise on his wrist. He pulled away as quickly as he could, but Harry had already noticed the movement. He chewed the inside of his cheek, deciding what to do.

“I’m ready to go. Let’s leave, okay?” Louis asked anxiously.

Harry slowly nodded, continuing to serve as a human wall between him and Joshua as they made their way to the open door. But Joshua reacted like a rabid dog, trying to reach past Harry toward Louis.

“Louis, you’re not listening to me!” He shrieked desperately.

Harry whirled around, fixing Joshua with a death glare.

“Don’t touch him.” Harry snarled.

To Louis’ utter shock, Joshua didn’t hesitate to shove Harry gruffly. Louis instinctively lurched forward, ready to tear Joshua apart piece by piece for laying a hand on his boy, but Harry was already slamming the door shut in Joshua’s face. He grabbed Louis’ hand and stomped toward the car, breathing heavily. Louis let Harry guide him, still wading through the layers of swelling adrenaline that had burst in his brain at seeing his boyfriend shoved.

He didn’t remember opening the car door, but suddenly the two of them were sitting in their seats in silence, both trying to catch their breath. Louis was still swimming in excess energy as he readjusted himself in his seat repeatedly.

“God. Just - just fuck him. Just fuck him!” He said. “He didn’t want to talk. He just wanted to whine about his sorry life. Why do I even let him bother me? He’s pathetic!”

“He is.” Harry answered somberly, starting the engine and pulling away.

“You should have heard all of the shit he was saying. Fucking ridiculous.” Louis muttered, sinking back into his seat as Harry merged onto the freeway. “I’m so proud of you, Haz. If that had been the other way around, like, Nick was trying to come after you, I would have bitten his head off. And I don’t mean that figuratively. I would have bit him in the head.”

Harry smiled briefly, but his gaze was fixed acutely on the road as the car sped up. Louis let the moment wash over him, Joshua’s incensed face blaring through his thoughts and worming it’s way down into his bones. There really wasn’t a better way to describe him other than pathetic, and the fact that he was still inflicting so much pain on Louis made him feel pathetic as well.

He came back to reality as he watch their exit whiz by, and he looked over to Harry with concern.

“Babe?” He asked, increasingly put off by Harry’s concentration on the road.

“What do you ever just want to leave? Just take off and put all of this behind us?” He asked, something foreign to his voice. Louis’ hand made it’s way over to Harry’s thigh and squeezed lightly.

“Harry, can we go home?” He asked lightly, trying to stir Harry from whatever trance he’d gone into. The car sped up beneath them, sliding past the other cars on the roadway. “Harry? Can we go home? Please?”
Harry didn’t respond, but he finally took his foot off the gas and hit his blinker as he took the next exit. Louis sighed as they turned around to get back on track, and watched as Harry’s features slowly mellowed out. Where exactly that had come from, Louis was still unsure of.

“M’proud of you, too.” Harry finally said, looking to Louis with misty eyes. “For being brave enough to do that. That wasn’t easy, but you did it.”

Louis smiled softly, leaning over to kiss him quickly on the cheek. His heart hadn’t quite settled back down to the human pace it had been beating at before he’d seen Joshua, but every mile of distance from Joshua’s flat was putting Louis further at ease.

“Can we actually stop by Zayn’s?” Harry asked brightly.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” Louis admitted.

Harry promised that they were just going to “drop by for a second,” but predictably this turned into a several hour long visit that consisted of Harry hanging on Zayn’s every word, and offering the kind of sage advice that only Harry was capable of. They didn’t mention anything to him about having seen Joshua that morning, as Louis was doing everything he could to work that to the back of his thoughts. This was proving fairly fruitless, as every little thing would suddenly remind him of the way Joshua had glared at him, and he felt like he was transported back to that room.

Zayn seemed to have achieved a new level of calm by the time Harry and Louis left, and they went back to Louis’ house to share a quiet evening together. Harry quickly noticed how tense Louis was, but rather than hounding him for details, he offered Louis a massage later that night. Louis had sprawled out on his stomach across the bed, with Harry straddling his hips as he kneaded the naked skin of Louis’ back. He was completely on another plane beneath Harry’s touch, feeling as if Joshua was being massaged out of his mind.

“Your face is just so great right now.” Harry commented, causing Louis to open his eyes for the first time since he’d started.

“What?”

“You look so blissed out.” Harry explained as he ran his hands up Louis’ shoulder blades.

“I am blissed out.”

“What would you do if I just suddenly dripped hot wax on you right now?” Harry joked.

“I’d certainly be displeased with you.” Louis admitted. “At least give me a head’s up if you’re going to get Christian Gray on me”

“Louis.” Harry whined, his hands going limp. Louis rolled his eyes as he recognized that tone of voice.

“No, Harry, please.” Louis begged, sitting up and turning around.

“50 Shades of Gray is an unsafe and inaccurate depiction of a form of sex that is very important to a lot of people. There aren’t even any safety words or any other precautions.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” Louis said, hoping he might be able to cut Harry’s rant off early.

“Not to mention the blatant sexism. It’s a terrible representation of how women should be treated in a relationship.”
“I know, Harry.”

“It perpetuates a patriarchal culture.”

“It’s just fucking terrible.” Louis muttered, grabbing Harry by both sides of his face.

“And it’s just not very good.”

“Harry. I’m sorry. You aren’t Christian Gray, okay?” Louis asked, smiling as Harry nodded. “Can you kiss me now?”

Harry happily acquiesced, circling his arms around Louis’ hips and planting his lips on his. He pushed Louis gingerly back against the bed, wasting no time before he was kissing down Louis’ bare chest, nipping at the taut skin below his navel. The day’s tensions were extremely apparent in how quickly they both shed their clothing, Harry already taking Louis into his mouth as he tugged at his own length.

Louis lay back across the duvet, breathing steadily as he struggled to focus on his desire to be with Harry. It was a constant need, to have Harry’s skin against his own, but something was currently clouding in around the edges of the moment. With every pull of Harry’s mouth, every kiss and nibble to the sensitive skin of his inner thighs, Joshua’s face burst into his thoughts with increasing clarity. His voice was resonating in Louis’ ears, shrill and sharp, coming back with more strength every time he attempted to quash it.

_I think about it all the time. The two of you together._

Louis clamped his eyes shut as hard as he could, trying to focus on the sensation coursing through his body. He just needed Joshua to shut up. To shut the fuck up.

_In our bed._

It’s wasn’t Joshua’s bed. It was his bed. The bed he shared with Harry.

_It disgusts me._

Louis’ intake of breath was so sharp it stabbed the back of his throat, and he suddenly wriggled away from Harry and cowered back against the headboard. Harry looked up at him in bewilderment.

“What did he say to you?” Louis asked slowly, as if approaching a feral animal.

“No.” Louis admitted, running his hands over his face. Harry reached tentatively forward and wrapped a warm, supportive hand around Louis’ ankle. Louis reacted reflexively, pulling out of his grasp but regretting it immediately.

Harry leaned back, watching Louis with hurt written clearly across his features. Louis stared back at him, not sure what to say.

“What did he say to you?” Harry suddenly asked, his voice deep. Apparently, Harry already knew what was happening in Louis’ head. He curled in on himself, pulling his legs to his chest tightly before he answered Harry.

“It doesn’t matter.” He whispered.

“It does.”
Louis shook his head, feeling a frenzied surge of energy compel him to jump out of the bed. He was on his feet, pulling on a pair of wayward joggers on the floor, then pace back and forth across the length of the room.

“It’s not fair. It’s not fucking fair.” Louis repeated. “He’s nothing. He’s this useless nobody and yet he gets to decide everything for me.”

“He’s still a nobody, Lou.” Harry said emphatically, trying to calm Louis down. But Harry’s support did the exact opposite, adding fuel to the fire. Harry was just too understanding, too good, and it made the contrast between him and Joshua even more apparent.

“When I was dating Joshua, I was allowed to talk about him whenever I wanted.” Louis ranted. “He didn’t have to be a secret. I could walk around and hold his hand and it didn’t matter if someone got our picture, because he was my boyfriend. He was allowed to be my boyfriend. Fuck, he could have even walked a red carpet with me if he wanted to! And he was abusing me the entire time! He was abusing me, and yet he was still allowed to be my boyfriend. How is that fair?”

“It isn’t.” Harry whispered.

“And then there’s you!” Louis yelled desperately, feeling his face contort with desperate adoration at just the thought of Harry. “You’re this perfect, caring, loving, cupcake of a man who’s everything to me. Who treats me better than anyone in my life ever has, and I can’t even leave the house with you! How is any of this fair?”

Louis halted his pacing suddenly, noticing the way Harry’s eyes had started to glisten. He was covering his groin awkwardly, his nakedness suddenly extremely apparent. Louis felt immensely guilty about the position he’d left Harry in.

“Erm, love? Are you still hard?” He asked, embarrassed. Harry nodded slightly, blinking back to full consciousness after losing himself in Louis’ diatribe.

“Yeah. I can, yeah.” Harry mumbled, standing up. “I could take care of it in the shower.”

Louis swallowed hard, Harry’s shame washing over him. He nodded as well, looking away as Harry ambled over to the ensuite and shut the door behind him. Louis quickly sunk back onto the bed, burying his head in his hands and pulling at his hair.

The excruciating awkwardness of the moment was still clinging to the air, curdling with guilt in every inch of his body. It would have been one thing if Louis just hadn’t been up for it, they could have dealt with that. They both knew that they didn’t owe each other anything if one of them wasn’t in the mood, but the thing was, Louis did want to be with Harry. He just wanted to feel Harry inside of him, cradling him in his strong arms, but the foul aroma of Joshua was pungent in the air.

Instead of spending the night in the arms of the love his life, he had just gone on a rambling rant in which he pointed out Harry’s greatest insecurities in their relationship, then sent him away to wank in the shower.

Fuck, why had he said any of that? He knew Harry wouldn’t fixate on any of the positives, wouldn’t think twice about anything nice Louis had said about him. At that moment, he was probably just obsessing over how upset their secret relationship was making Louis. Above everything else, he was probably thinking about how it was his fault.

Louis jumped to his feet, tearing into the bathroom and slicing through the mist from the shower.
Harry looked up in surprise as Louis threw the shower door open, shedding his joggers and stepping in beside him.

“Is something wrong?” Harry asked, but Louis stoppered his mouth with his own, running a hand down Harry’s slick chest.

“He doesn’t get to take this away from us.” Louis decided, holding Harry by the hips and pressing their bodies together. “Joshua doesn’t get to come between us anymore, okay? That’s what he wants, but it doesn’t matter. He’s gone. He’s over.” Louis looked at him intensely, watching Harry’s mouth creep into a slight grin as he tangled his hands in Louis’ dampening hair. “If he calls, I’ll just keep blocking him. If he shows up, we’re calling the cops. He doesn’t get to be in our lives anymore.”


Louis couldn’t think of anything to possibly say that would sum up how he felt, so he threw himself into Harry, melding into him under the spray of the shower.

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The weight of Harry’s phone was heavy in Louis’ back pocket as he strolled through the glass doors of the recording studio. The secretary looked up pleasantly, recognizing him.

“They’re in studio three. I think they might be in the middle of recording, though.” She said apologetically. Louis waved in thanks as he headed down the familiar hallway. He poked his head in the window of the door, looking in at the smattering of people collected in the room. The rest of the band was there, sitting amongst a couple of producers as Harry sang on the other side of the glass. Niall spotted him at the door and jumped up to let him in.

“He forgot his phone.” Louis told him quietly, handing it over to Niall. Harry reached the end of the verse, and one of the producers started giving him notes. He looked up to see Louis in the doorway, smiling and waving at him. Louis waved back, blowing a him a quick kiss.

“You wanna stick around for a bit?” Niall asked, not looking up from his own phone as he texted.

“Nah. I’m on my lunch break. Have to get back.” He looked down at Niall’s phone suspiciously, causing Niall to suddenly pull it back against his chest. “Who’re you texting?”

“No one.”

“If you are texting Nona, I’m going to have an aneurysm.” Louis snatched the phone away from him, spilling out into the hallway as he flicked through their conversation. To his earth shattering horror, it spanned pages and pages. Niall was suddenly thundering after Louis and launching himself onto his back in a vain attempt to get his phone back.

“Give it back!” Niall shouted as the door closed behind them.

“What do you even have to talk about? How could you possibly have this many things to say?” He slowed down his scroll, catching a few snippets of the conversation. Oddly, the word “donuts” kept cropping up. “You guys just talk about donuts? Is that literally all you talk about?”
“It’s not all we talk about.” Niall protested, still flailing after his phone.

“There it is again! Donuts! You didn’t even say anything else! You just sent her the word donuts!”

“Excuse me, Mr. Tomlinson?”

They both froze mid struggle, suddenly very aware of their childish behavior as a burly security guard stared them down.

“Yeah?” Louis responded, standing up as Niall slid off his back.

“I need you to come with me.” He said authoritatively. He turned, expecting Louis to follow.

“What’s this about?” Niall asked, quick on Louis’ heels as he accompanied the security guard toward the lobby. He didn’t answer, however, causing Louis to look back at Niall.

His concerns were soon cemented as they entered the lobby. The first thing Louis noticed was a tall, domineering woman clacking around in high heels as she somehow managed to bark orders into her phone, at the secretary, and at security at the same time. The second thing Louis noticed was massive horde of paps that had astonishingly congregated outside in the short time since he’d arrived, scrambling for their cameras the moment Louis was in view.

“Not in front of the windows, you idiot!” The woman snapped at the security guard, ushering them behind a pillar. She looked angrily over her shoulder at the crowd as she talked into her phone again. “Yes. I found him. He’s still here.”

“What’s going on?” Niall asked, but he was ignored by the executive woman as she shoved the screen of her phone into Louis’ face.

“This four page email was sent directly to your manager, explicitly detailing our request for you to stay away from our client in public situations.”

“He’s my agent, actually.” Louis pointed out, watching as her face reddened.

“We could not have made our position any clearer. It was our understanding that we were in mutual agreement for the best interest of our client.”

“Erm, well, my boyfriend left his phone at home, and I dropped it off for him. I apologize if that wasn’t in the best interest of your client.” Louis remarked, still trying to wrap his head around meeting someone who spoke like a personified legal contract with every word she said.

“There are jobs at stake here, Mr. Tomlinson. People’s livelihoods. Does that register with you at all? Because we were lead to believe that you understood that, and clearly we were lied to.”

“There’s a private exit out back we can sneak him through.” Niall said. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that Mr. Tomlinson has flippantly disregarded our agreement, and there’s no telling what he’ll do next.”

“Oh my god.” Louis groaned in frustration, pulling his phone out. His thumb hovered over Liam’s name, having not spoken to him since he’d broken up with Zayn. His hesitation was short lived before he was calling him.

“He was just stopping by.” Niall persisted.

“It doesn’t matter.”
“He can’t just stop by?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Niall stepped forward as he continued to argue, but Louis shoved a finger in his ear as Liam finally answered the phone.

“Louis?” He asked, surprised.

“I’m at Harry’s studio and I’m trapped with a bunch of press outside, and apparently I’ve endangered Harry’s entire image, I’m a liar, and I’m still getting screamed at by Harry’s management.” Louis relayed as quickly as he could before the executive woman’s voice interrupted him.

“We have been extremely clear! This is a complete violation of our agreement!” She continued to yell.

“What’d she say? What did she just say to you?” Liam demanded, and Louis quickly found himself on the receiving end of three different furious people.

He struggled to repeat what Liam was saying into one ear to the executive woman screaming into his other, all while Niall continued to step in and voice his opinion. Louis was starting to feel smaller and smaller, the room caving in on him as he felt further and further trapped.

“Give her the phone, Louis! Hand the phone to her!” Liam shouted, and Louis was quick to hold the phone out in front of him, passing it along. She snatched it up, angrily turning her attention to Liam.

“I’ll be right back.” Niall promised, disappearing down the hallway. Louis watched him mournfully, feeling his one ally leaving his side.

He could hear Liam’s voice at this point, incensed on the other end of the phone as he continued to argue with the executive woman.

“He is not welcome here!” She snapped back at him. “He is not welcome anywhere near Harry Styles!”

“What?”

Louis whirled around, the relief already settling in as Harry appeared in the lobby, Niall at his side. Niall looked triumphant, as if he’d just gone to get a teacher to pull apart a fight, but Harry was glaring at the woman with a particularly pronounced stitch in his brow. She let the phone fall away from her ear as Harry approached her, handing it back to Louis.

“I’ll call you back.” Louis said quickly into the phone, hanging up as Liam protested. The woman seemed to crumble slightly under Harry’s presence momentarily, breathing in heavily as she regained some sense of authority.

“We spoke to you about this, Mr. Styles. We already explained the entire situation.” She said forcefully. Harry looked at her in confusion until his eyes looked past her, seeing the swarm of cameras outside. Louis watched the realization of the situation click into place.

“Huh.” Harry commented, nodding. He turned to Louis and held his hand out, waiting for Louis to take it. Louis cocked an eyebrow, but gave in as Harry gave him a slight pout. Harry twined their fingers together and walked past the woman, pulling Louis toward the front door.
“What are you doing?” Louis asked, seeing a flurry of movement outside as Harry opened the front door. He came to a dead halt, tugging Harry back and letting go of his hand. If they’d taken one more step, all of the paps would have seen them together. To Louis’ surprise, Harry didn’t seem even slightly worried by this. He held his hand out again, smiling at Louis.

“I’m walking you to your car.” He said, his dimples showing as charm laced his words. It was an extremely inopportune moment for Louis to get butterflies, making it impossible for him to make a rational decision.

He slowly took Harry’s hand again, distantly aware that the woman was squawking in a panic behind them, but Louis’ world had gone into slow motion. Harry looked at him, and Louis could see his hesitant determination. He squeezed Harry’s hand and nodded, watching as Harry steadied himself and faced the door again. He looked prepped for battle, ready to dive triumphantly into the fray, as he opened the door and stepped forward.

They stepped into the sunlight, the shutters of cameras flying on all sides. The paps were yelling their names, desperately trying to get their attention as they struggled to wrap their minds around the pictures they were getting.

One of the most famous rock stars in the world was walking across his studio parking lot, hand in hand with another man.

Harry held Louis’ hand tighter, which was the only outward sign he gave to his own nerves. He continued to smile and wave at them casually, addressing a couple of the ones he recognized by name. Louis rolled his eyes, because of course Harry would be on a personal basis with people who made a living by taking pictures of him walking down the street.

They finally reached Louis’ car, getting a small amount of distance from the paps. Louis leaned against the side of the car with Harry as they watched the chaos still playing out on the other side of the parking lot.

“Baby, I can’t believe you just did that.” Louis said, smiling so hard that his cheeks were already aching. His entire body was thrumming with pride, all of the anxiety he’d felt over the last couple of weeks feeling suddenly worth it. Harry smiled back, awash with a nervous giddiness.

“Think we should really sell it?” Harry asked with a sly grin, looking at Louis’ lips.

“We’re sending these people’s kids to college right now.” Louis laughed, wrapping his arms around Harry’s neck and pressing their lips together as the paps photographed them furiously. He pushed into Harry, nipping at his lips and flicking his tongue enticingly into his mouth, before they pulled away with a smack.

“Louis!” Harry exclaimed, panting. “Was that a movie star kiss?”

“Mhmm.” Louis nodded mischievously, opening his car door.

“Well I liked it.” Harry grinned as Louis sat in his seat and closed the door. He started the engine and rolled down the window, leaning in as Harry bent down to his level.

“I love you, and I’m proud of you.” Louis told him firmly.

“Love you, too.”

“Are you okay? Do you need me to stay?”
“After I made that big show of getting you out here? Get to work, Lou.”

“Fine.” Louis relented. “Call me. Text me. Anything you need. Come straight home, okay?”

“I’ll come gay home.”

“That is a terrible joke, but I love you anyways.” He leaned in to give him one last peck on the lips, their smiles lingering against each other.

He started pulling away, giggling as Harry made a big show of waving after him and yelling, “Have a lovely day at work, sweetheart!”

Louis watched him in his mirror until he turned the corner, letting go of a strangled breath he felt like he’d been holding for almost a year.

Harry was out of the closet.

Holy fucking shit.

Harry was out of the closet.
PLEASE READ: So this chapter is extremely tumultuous. Even though I first planned it out over a year ago, it somehow ended up reflecting events that happened last week. Because of this, I'm trying to include as detailed trigger warnings as I can without spoiling any major plot points. Below, I have the general trigger warnings listed. If something in that list is triggering for you, PLEASE SCROLL DOWN TO THE END OF CHAPTER NOTES for a more detailed description. I really hope that this makes it more comfortable for everyone to enjoy this fic, and please hold on for this chapter. This is the big one, guys.

WARNINGS:

Partner Abuse
Drug Abuse
Violence/Weapons

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can tell you that you're all I've ever wanted, dear. Through the din of your breathing while you're sleeping here, you wake and you ask me if I'm gonna be here forever, forever, forever. Your face so twisted and your eyes alight, I want to tell you I can change it when you cry at night, but I'd be lying. Love is defying.”

-The Airborne Toxic Event

Harry had come running the moment he heard Louis open the front door, plummeting through his house at a blinding speed until he and Louis collided into each other. Harry clung to Louis, spinning him in a frenzied embrace and planting a sloppy kiss on his lips.

They both laughed and panted, waiting for the moment to solidify into something that made a bit more sense than desperately pawing at each other before they’d even said two words.

“Hi.” Harry breathed.

“Hey honey. How was your day?” Louis asked cheekily, circling his arms around Harry’s neck as the taller man chuckled. “But really. How’re you doing?”

“Good. I think.” He admitted, his eyes alight with a frantic energy. They’d only been separated for a few hours since their display in the parking lot, but Louis had been itching to crawl away and take Harry in his arms the entire time. “Oh! Just remembered!” Harry said, reaching into Louis’ pocket and pulling out his phone. He finagled with it for a moment before popping the back off, taking out the battery, and throwing it from the room.

“Harold!” Louis shouted.

“It’s what Liam said to do.” Harry explained, setting the rest of the phone down on the coffee table behind him as he returned to his embrace with Louis.
“Liam told you to chuck my phone battery across the house?”

“Mine, too. I might be borrowing him for awhile to help me with this.”

“I haven’t even talked to him in weeks, and yet he’s convinced my boyfriend to destroy our phones.” Louis mused.

“And he’s changed all of the passwords on my social media and emails so I can’t get into them. That way I’m not tempted. Can just focus on us for a night.”

“Then how is he talking to you?”

“He set up a private email address that only he knows about. So now, everyone has to go through him to get to me. Nobody can harass us.”

“He’s thought of everything, hasn’t he?”

“We just have to sit back and ignore everything for the night. Try to entertain ourselves.” Harry said, smiling at Louis.

“Quick question, dear. Did you bring Glitter over here?”

“No, she’s back at my house. Why?”

“Well, you’re about to make some very interesting noises, and I don’t want her to think that I’m hurting you.”

Harry smiled devilishly at this, his fingers tightening around the hem of Louis’ shirt before tearing it off in one swift movement. They crashed into each other, biting and kissing feverishly as they whirled through the lounge and fell onto the couch. Louis stretched out on his back, looking up at Harry as he straddled his hips and dove in to nip at his neck.

“Harry, what are you doing?” Louis asked with a delighted curiosity as Harry aggressively sucked at his skin.

“Giving you a love bite where everyone can see it.” He answered calmly, sitting up to admire his work.

“Why?”

“Because now everyone will know I was the one who gave it to you.” He explained, cutting off Louis’ giggle as he plunged back in, apparently deciding his creation needed more attention. “Academy award nominated actor, Louis Tomlinson, stepped out yesterday with a rather garish love bite.” Harry joked, his words vibrating against Louis’ neck.

“Don’t jinx me! No one’s even seen the movie yet” Louis yelped, reaching out blindly to knock against the wood of the coffee table. The premiere of *Kids From Yesterday* was nearly two weeks away, and Louis was so nervous about it he’d established a complete moratorium on Oscar talk. Harry leaned back to simper at Louis, who decided to turn the joking in his favor. “A love bite left by the grammy winning, sexiest man in the world, Harry Styles.”

“Seventh sexiest.”

“Last year, maybe.” Louis pointed out. Harry smiled warmly down at him.

“Hey Louis?”
“Hey what?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Oh. Good. That makes me happy.” Harry commented, causing Louis to giggle again.

“Harold, you’re very cute and very sweet, but I’m really turned on right now, so you’re going to have to reign all that in and fuck me as hard as you can.”

“Well fine, I guess.”

~

Louis sunk back against the kitchen counter, flexing his muscles against the pleasant soreness that had settled in from their antics the night before. He blew steam off the sizzling surface of his tea, watching the screens of his and Harry’s phones lighting up intermittently from where they were sitting side by side.

They’d gotten the okay to turn them both back on as long as Louis played secretary, ready to tell Harry if anyone important like his mum or sister called. He’d only tracked down both of the batteries and returned them to their respective phones about twenty minutes before, but apparently this hadn’t been early enough for Niall, as Louis’ Irish neighbor had suddenly and loudly appeared at his back door, pounding against the glass as if the air outside were toxic.

“Are you okay? Have you died? Why aren’t you answering your phones! You could have been dead! Where’s Harry? Do you have anything to eat?” He asked, barreling into the kitchen and gruffly opening the fridge.

“Harry’s in the bedroom, working on his statement.” Louis explained, watching as Niall loaded up him arms with food.

“He’s writing his own statement?”

“He decided he wanted to tell the truth to everyone in his own words, instead of having some publicist put something together.” Louis explained. Liam had given Harry this option, telling him they’d already gotten offers from several online news sources if he wanted to post his own statement.

“Sounds like Harry.” Niall commented, closing the fridge door with his foot. “Why’ve you been ignoring me?”

“Liam made us turn our phones off last night. We weren’t allowed to talk to anyone.”

“But he’s doing alright?”

“He’s sober, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It is actually.” Niall admitted, hopping onto the counter as he shoved a bagel into his mouth. “So you two boned all night, now what?”

“We’re waiting for Liam to show up. And excuse you, who says we boned all night?”

“Louis.” Niall sighed.
“What?”

“Harry tells me things.”

“Like what?”

“Like the ridiculous amount of sex you two have.”

“We don’t!” Louis shouted, cutting himself off suddenly before he disrupted Harry. “We don’t have ridiculous amounts of sex.” He said in a harsh whisper.

“Louis.” Niall sighed once again.

“We don’t!”

“Okay, then, how many times a day do you guys do it?” He asked smugly. Louis opened his mouth to answer before snapping it shut, knowing that he was about to make Niall’s point for him.

“The thing is-"

“It’s more than once a day, right? It’s, like, several times a day?”

“But we’re barely ever in the same city at the same time! If you average it out, it’s not that much sex.”

“Fucking animals.” Niall laughed. “So what’re Harry’s kinks? He won’t tell me.”

“Jesus, Niall.” Louis groaned. “Why are we talking about this?”

“Duh, because Harry won’t tell me. I just said that.”

“He doesn’t have any kinks.”

“Oh, yes he does! Everyone does! Don’t give me that shit!” Niall complained. Louis crossed his arms grumpily as he found no way to weasel himself out of the conversation.

“Well, he kind of has this thing with the spot behind his ear.”

Niall’s face lit up to ask for more details when they were loudly interrupted by the front door crashing open. They listened as Liam and Sophia chattered loudly, walking briskly through the house. Louis took a deep breath, the awkwardness of having not spoken to Liam in weeks hitting him at full force as they entered the kitchen.

They were both dressed to take on the world, carrying briefcases overflowing with papers and wearing energized enthusiasm on their faces. Whatever bashfulness emanating from Louis went unnoticed by Liam as he smiled at the two of them.

“Hello, lads.” He said cheerily. “Where’s Harry?”

“In the bedroom.” Louis answered. Liam nodded as he and Sophia both plunked their briefcases onto the counter, muttering to each other about titles of documents that consisted of long strings of numbers and letters.

“So what’s - what’s all this?” Niall asked, making a broad gesture toward the papers that Liam and Sophia had procured, messily stacking them in Sophia’s arms.
“This is the countersuit.” Liam said proudly.

“You’re counter suing?” Louis asked.

“I’ve been preparing it for awhile.” Sophia explained. “Had hoped to have more time, but Harry decided not give his legal representation any sort of heads up that he was coming out yesterday.”

“If it makes you feel any better, he didn’t warn me, either.” Louis commented, earning a rare grin from Sophia.

“Niall, I could use you as well.” She said authoritatively, beckoning him as her high heels clicked down the hallway. He scampered after her, leaving Liam’s confidence deflating in the wake of Louis’ unfurling unease.

He ran a hand through his hair and breathed out heavily, leaning against the counter and looking up at Louis. He seemed to be searching for something to say to bridge the two weeks of silence between the two, but Louis beat him to the punch.

“Liam, I’m firing you.”

Liam sputtered, despite the fact that he wasn’t currently drinking anything.

“You’re what?”

“I’m firing you as my agent.” Louis said, maintaining his serene composure as Liam’s face reddened.

“Louis? What? You’re - you’re firing me? What do you mean?”

“Must I say it again?”

“Is this because of Zayn? You’re punishing me? Louis, this is my job!”

“But it’s not your only job.” Louis pointed out. “You’ve still got about a dozen other clients you’re trying to take care of, and still, you find it necessary to take care of every tiny little aspect of my life. You’re even trying to take care of my boyfriend’s scandal. It’s too much for one person, Li.”

“Then I’ll move things around!” He promised, growing desperate. “I’ll make things work. I’ll drop a few clients!”

“You’d better, because I’m looking to hire a manager, and I’d expect you to devote all of your time and attention to me.” Louis said. Liam’s head cocked to the side as one of his eyebrows shot up his forehead.

“Okay, so I’m going to let you explain what you just said before I react.”

“Oh my god, Liam.” Louis groaned. “I’m going to pay you way better, but only if you do this right. Get a secretary and drop all of those clients. Your life is only going to be me, me, me. Cool?”

“You’re serious right now?”

“I’m in the middle of the biggest PR scandal of my life and you think I’d joke about this?”

“Excellent point.” Liam admitted, now smiling as he was flooded with relief.

“And I don’t want your job to completely devour your life anymore, okay? You have people that
are too important to be ignored.” Louis remarked coldly, and Liam’s smile was extinguished.

“How is he?” Liam asked quietly.

“Jesus.” Louis sighed. “How do you think? He’s completely devastated. He’s heartbroken. Just - what are you even doing Liam? It’s Zayn!”

“I can’t talk about it yet.” Liam said sternly.

“Come on.”

“I really, really can’t.” He implored. “Not yet, at least. Give me a little more time?” Louis chewed his lip, wanting nothing more than to prod Liam until he admitted that he’d made the biggest mistake of his short life, but his sense of friendly allegiance won out.

“Fine. But only a little more time.” He said, guilt starting to trickle down his spine as the frustration ebbed away. “I should have - I should have called, or something.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not, though.”

“It really is.” Liam promised him. “I need my space, and I really wanted you there for him.” The earnestness twinkled in Liam’s eye, and Louis was about to launch into another spiel about how much Liam was fucking up his life, but Harry’s phone lit up with a name that caught his eye.

“Grimshaw.” He growled pettily, picking up the phone and glaring at it like it was some heinous thing.

“Ignore it.” Liam said.

“But - I - being a good boyfriend - and - like - trust and respect.” Louis whined, his fingers tightening around the phone as it rang. At the last second, he put it to his ear. “Hello?”

“Erm - is this Louis?” Nick asked, sparking a particularly nasty strain of Louis’ internal monologue.

No this is Harry. I might sound like Louis, but this is certainly Harry. And I just wanted to tell you that you suck, you’re ugly, and I never want to talk to you again because Louis is the best and his arse is fantastic.

“Yeah. This is Louis.” Louis answered begrudgingly.

“Is Harry around?”

He is, but he’s extremely busy and probably doesn’t want to hear from you, anyways. He doesn’t have much time to miss your sorry, limp quiff while he’s busy being in love with someone who has such an outstanding, marvelous, FANTASTIC ARSE.

“Yeah, he’s in the other room. I’ll see if he can talk.” Louis told him politely, heading down the hallway.

Sophia was standing toward the end of the bed, looking just as much a picture of authority and professionalism as ever, while Niall and Harry had tangled themselves like cats in each other’s arms, both listening to her with giant eyes. They both looked over as Louis entered, which caused Sophia to stop her sentence abruptly as she noticed him as well.
“Everything okay?” Harry asked, not noticing as Niall made direct eye contact with Louis and reach one extended finger toward the skin behind Harry’s ear.

“Don’t.” Louis warned. Niall’s concentration hardened, and Harry’s head whipped around in confusion as Niall poked him. “Nick’s on the phone for you.”

Louis had hoped that Harry would roll his eyes and dismiss it, but he quickly jumped out of bed and took the phone from Louis, disappearing from the room. Sophia watched him go with a familiar frustration as Niall sat up.

“The ear stuff was privileged information, Niall.” Louis snapped.

“Why didn’t he do anything? That was so disappointing.” Niall sighed, reaching back to pick up the laptop that was open on the pillow and slide off the bed.

“You poked him in the head. What were you expecting? Wait, did you actually want him to react? That’s weird, Niall.” Louis said, looking at the laptop as Niall stopped at his side and handed it to him. “What’s this?”

“It’s Harry’s coming out essay. He finished it. It’s already posted.”

“This is already online?” Louis gaped, his eyes scanning over the text.

“He wants you to read it, but he’s too nervous to ask you.” Niall explained, walking out of the room.

“Don’t go touch him!” Louis called after him.

“Just taking a piss!” Niall shouted back, his voice muffled as he moved further into the house. Sophia rolled her eyes as she typed on her blackberry, and Louis slowly turned and followed after Niall.

He waded into the empty guest room, closing the door with his foot as his eyes sank into the first line:

As embarrassing of an opener as this is, my story begins with a little boy in Holmes Chapel who always had to hide his collection of poppies under his bed…

~

There’d been a revolving crowd of faces in and out of the house all day, discussing press and management options with Harry and the rest of Status Solo as the sun rolled it’s way across the sky. The commotion had begun to simmer down, finally giving Harry the chance to jump in the shower and have his first moment to himself to digest the spin his life was taking.

Meanwhile, Louis was relaxing in one of the lounge chairs on the veranda, reading Harry’s coming out article for a fourth time. By the time he reached the end, he was fully aware that Harry had resurfaced, and was not-so-slyly watching him through the sliding glass door. He looked back at him with a smile, Harry taking the invitation to throw the door open and race over to Louis. He only just managed to put his iPad to the side before Harry was sliding into his lap, dangling his legs over the arm rest as Louis nuzzled his head into Harry’s chest. He took a deep breath in, Harry’s bodywash tickling his nose.

“So what’s next, love?” Louis asked, his voice so low and relaxed that it was hardly more than a grumble.
“Cereal.” Harry muttered, causing Louis to chuckle.

“I’m going to ask you too look a bit past cereal. Okay?”

“Fine.” Harry grumbled, settling himself further into Louis’ embrace. “So, I guess they’re pretty much putting an embargo on me.”

“What does that mean?”

“Because I’m in breach of contract, they don’t have any legal obligation to pay me.”

“They’re cancelling your shows?” Louis asked, thinking ahead to the benefit Status Solo was headlining a few days after the Kids From Yesterday premiere.

“They’re not necessarily cancelling them, I’m just not going to get paid whether I show up or not.”

“So they want you to work for free?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Louis-“

“They’re just taking advantage of you again! You finally got the upper hand, and now they’re doing this shit again!”

“I’m in breach of contract.” Harry repeated.

“But this was all supposed to keep them from controlling you anymore. You’re supposed to be in charge, now.”

“I am in charge.” Harry argued. “I’m still going to do what I want, and I’m going to go play with my band. They can’t stop me with money. We’re doing great, Lou. We don’t need more money.”

“Hmm.” Louis hummed, smiling.

“What?”

“S’just kind of nice to you hear you say ‘we’ when you talk about money things. It’s very domestic of us.” He explained, holding Harry tighter.

“Oh, does that kind of thing turn you on? Joint bank account?” He joked.


“Not really. Not in a way that actually matters. We’re both suing each other, so I guess we’re not allowed to talk to each other except through Sophia.”

“So we’re kind of free, aren’t we?”

“I guess we are.” Harry said, smiling at Louis. Louis leaned up to kiss him lightly. “Your essay was really beautiful.”

“Louis.” Harry whined, grimacing.
“It was, Harry! And now we get to have that conversation we were never allowed to have before.”

“What?” Harry asked, watching as Louis excitedly drummed on his thigh.

“What kind of celebrity couple are we going to be?”

“A gay one.”


“Jay and Bey. Duh.”

“But seriously, we never got to actually talk about this, because everything was always decided for us.” Louis said. “How private do we want to be?”

“How private do you want to be?”

“I’m more interested to hear how you feel.” Louis reasoned. “Just tell me everything you’re thinking. Don’t be afraid that I won’t agree.”

“Well, like,” Harry began nervously. Louis reached up to pet away some of his unruly locks, and Harry softened under the contact. “You know how a lot of gay couples are really, really private? Like, there’s more of an expectation for gay couples to keep themselves, protected from scrutiny? Which I totally get, because things are only just now starting to change. I can get that people wanted to protect their partners from getting torn apart for being gay. But then you have people like Ellen and Portia, always posting little pictures and videos of their relationship and it’s really sweet. People really love them for it. And I’m sure there are a lot of lgbtq kids out there who really look at them and see that it’s possible to have this happy, loving relationship, even if it’s not super traditional.”

“I think I know what you’re getting at.”

“And I hate this idea that there are fans out there that buy my stuff and listen to my music, and I’ve been lying to them about everything. I want them to know who I am, you know? I know that I should value my privacy more, but I just - I just don’t.” He admitted. “I’m so sick of lying and pretending and hiding every single part of my life, and I don’t want that. I want to be honest with people. Like - I want a full discretion chapter of my life.”

“That’s a big decision, Haz, but I think it’s really, really brave.” Louis said warmly. “I know this goes in one ear and out the other every time I say it, but you’ve got a beautiful mind under these ridiculous curls, and I think you’d help a lot of people by sharing it.”

Harry snuggled further into Louis, trying to hide the content grin on his face. “And is it bad that I just really want to show you off?”

“It’s a natural inclination, love.” Louis commented, pulling out his phone and opening the camera app.

“What’re you doing?”

“Remember the part that I’m officially dating Zayn, as far as the public knows?” Louis asked, turning the selfie cam on and angling their heads into the shot. “I think people are waiting for me to make some sort of comment about that.”
Harry giggled as he pressed his head against Louis’ and smiled into the picture, smiling wide in surprise as Louis turned to kiss him on the cheek at the last second. He immediately opened Instagram and started flicking through filters.

“So who’s Beyonce in this scenario?” Louis asked, looking up to see Harry glaring at him intensely.

“Did I not just astound you with a stunning rendition of ‘Partition’ from Beyoncé’s self-titled album the other day?” Harry reminded him. Louis bit back a laugh, remembering the image of Harry lunging across the bedroom to the lyrics, “I sneezed on the beat and the beat got sicker. Yoncé all on his mouth like liquor.”

“Sorry, darling. That was absurd question.”

~

“Sweetheart, are you wearing enough sunscreen?” Harry asked, grappling with Louis as he struggled away yet again. Harry’s fretting over his dermatological wellbeing had worn on Louis, and he’d soon lost his patience. Unfortunately for Louis, Harry had found an accomplice in Niall, who was all too quick to grab Louis from behind and hold him still as Harry took stock of how his skin was faring in the California sun.

“I’m fine!” Louis whined, wriggling within Niall’s grasp.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“You’re not my mum - are you smelling my face?”

“Does that smell like sunscreen to you?” Harry asked, pulling back after he had, indeed, been smelling Louis’ face. Niall quickly swept in, pressing his nose aggressively against Louis’ cheek.

“No, that most certainly does not. Grease him up!” Niall commanded.

“I can do it myself!” Louis protested, finally managing to liberate himself from their clutches. He looked to them triumphantly, holding his hand out toward Harry for the bottle of sunscreen, only to see Harry looking crestfallen. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Harry sighed dramatically.

“What?”

“It’s just that - before I came out, I never would have been allowed to put sunscreen on your face in public.” He whined, causing Louis to roll his eyes, knowing he’d already lost. He let his arm fall to the side and looked to the sky in a gesture of defeat, sensing the way Harry’s eyes lit up as he stepped forward to ‘grease him up’ as Niall had so crudely put it.

This was how Harry tended to get away with even his most fanciful whims, lately.

“But Louis! I never would have been able to go buy pineapple at two in the morning with you before I came out!”

“But Louis! We never would have been allowed to post a video of you singing Lady Gaga in the shower before I came out!”

“But Louis! Remember how I was really brave and everything, so now we’re allowed to go to the
The last one he’d been able to talk Harry out of seeing as Glitter was actually a cat and had no business at the dog park, no matter how “adventurous of a spirit” Harry claimed she had.

Today, however, was their first highly public venture out into the world as a couple, which had been thoroughly planned and analyzed down the last detail. Liam had taken to his new role as Louis’ manager with a predictable amount of gusto, spending several days preparing a visual presentation of their various options for their first public appearance. After a half hour watching Liam’s carefully crafted powerpoint, Harry had thought over his suggestions for about thirty seconds before completely discounting everything and asking, “So what about Disneyland?”

Thus, Harry and Louis had thrust themselves upon the Magic Kingdom.

It actually did give them ample opportunity to be spotted without having to stage any cheesy pap shots. All they had to do was act natural, relying on the crowds around them to take pictures and tweet about their whereabouts. They also opted for Disneyland since it didn’t require a more intimate setting with just the two of them, giving them the opportunity to get Zayn out of his flat.

There’d been a moment of awkward hesitation when they were planning the trip, when Louis realized for the first time in years that he wouldn’t be able to bring both Zayn and Liam along. But Liam had insisted that they bring Zayn, still metaphorically throwing himself upon his own sword for breaking up with Zayn, but refusing to talk to anyone about it.

But Louis was stuck in an uncomfortable limbo, knowing that he should be playing up his and Harry’s PDA, since that was the entire reason they were there, but not wanting to rub the recent success of his relationship in Zayn’s face. The whole ordeal would have been much simpler if Zayn hadn’t been relegated to a bit of fifth wheel.

With *Kids From Yesterday* premiering at the end of the week, Nona had already flown into town, and tagged along on their outing. Almost immediately, Niall and Nona’s infatuation with each other had become apparent, admittedly in their own, strange way. Being subtly tuned into the inner workings of both of their minds, he could see the affection in the way they hurled insults at each other and competitively ate their way through the entire theme park.

They didn’t engage in any romantic exchanges, but after disappearing together for about ten minutes and coming back with matching bridal mouse ears, complete with flowing veils, Louis knew that whatever was happening between them was beyond his control. It was freeing, actually, when Louis made this realization and knew that there was nothing he could do. Instead, he could focus on keeping Zayn from being completely miserable in the face of so many happy couples.

At that moment, Zayn was chuckling at the way Louis was being manhandled, finally regaining some of his dignity when Niall let him go.

“S’not funny.” He grumbled.

“Yes it is.” Zayn disagreed.

“What’s next?” Louis asked excitedly, ready to change the subject. “Tea cups? Elephants? It’s a small world?”

“No! Louis! No!” Harry shouted in frustration, tired of Louis suggesting tea cups. “Why are you so determined to ruin Disneyland for everyone?”

“Who wants Space Mountain again?”

“Harry.” Louis whimpered, sinking his head into Harry’s shoulder. Harry excitedly wrapped his arms around Louis, leading everyone in a chant of “Space mountain! Space Mountain!”

Considering what a literal Disney Princess Harry was in real life (correct use of literal, meaning that he was actually a Disney Princess) Louis had expected that they’d spend the day frolicking through Fantasyland hand in hand, bantering over tea with Cinderella and Rapunzel. Instead, Harry had been subjecting them to a non stop bombardment of high intensity rides, barely giving Louis enough time to regain control over his stomach before they were on another roller coaster. Given their combined celebrity status, they’d been gifted a fast pass, giving Harry to option to yell, “Again! Again!” and get them back onto Space Mountain immediately.

The mild surprise at finding out how much of an adrenaline junky Harry was gave way to an unsettling discomfort, reminding Louis of his tenuous sobriety.

“Come on, Lou. It’s our special day.” Harry said brightly, hushing away Louis’ negative thoughts. Without taking a moment to warn him, Harry reached in and scooped him up, bridal style, carrying him off in the direction of their next adventure. This of course attracted the attention of the people around them, who predictably gaped as they realized that the recently outed lead singer of a world famous rock back was carrying a movie star superhero through Disneyland.

Admittedly, they’d been attracting attention even when Harry wasn’t making a show of lugging Louis around. They’d been offered the opportunity to use the system of tunnels that staff used to get around, apparently a common occurrence for celebrities, but they’d quickly declined. The whole point of their day out was to be seen, even if Louis was starting to lose his patience with the number of glowers and glares they were wracking up.

Back before the movies and the fame, Louis’ natural inclination had always been to separate from whichever boy he was out with at the time when they were starting to get dirty looks, but it was going to take a lot more for Louis to feel ashamed enough to let go of his hold on Harry. It was their first time they could act in public how they did in private, and he wasn’t going to let a few bigots ruin it for them.

But for every scowl they received, it was greatly outnumbered by the outpouring of positive attention they attracted. Mostly they were met with a slew of hysterical shrieks as people recognized them, with some being brave enough to come up and ask for autographs or pictures. Despite how much it slowed their journey through the park, they made sure to stop and say hello to everyone who approached them. So far, Louis’ favorite encounter had been from a middle aged woman struggling to keep her gaggle of children in line, who had about swooned when she turned to see Louis in line behind her for soft pretzel.

“Oh hell, it’s Furia.” She gasped. “Dear god, it’s Furia.”

Louis had laughed before he introduced himself to her kids, who were equally star struck. She asked for a picture with all of them, nonplussed by how she was holding up the entire line.

“Harry, dear, you too, please.” She said, waving for him to jump into the picture. “Look kids, that’s Furia’s boyfriend. Isn’t he cute?”

“Furia has boyfriend?” One of her boys asked, clinging to her after she snapped the picture.

“Of course he does, Michael! He’s standing right there! Don’t embarrass mommy in front of Furia!”
Harry and Louis took plenty of their own pictures, as well, mostly of Louis looking utterly spent after they got off each ride. Eventually, Harry’s inner sense of magic won out, finally letting Louis take the lead as they tracked down Elsa. Guiltily cutting in line in front of a dozens of heat-ravaged children, the whole group got a picture with her, posting it immediately online.

This was soon met with a much larger group crowding around them, as their presence in the park became more and more well known. They eventually had to give up on rides altogether to keep up with influx of fans, with Harry even suggesting they split off from the others so they could still enjoy their day. But Niall, Nona, and Zayn stayed staunchly by their sides, offering to hold people’s phones as they took pictures with the two of them.

As with anyone over the age of twenty that enters a Disney theme park, the entire group was thoroughly exhausted by the end of the day, relaxing as they watched the fireworks over the castle that night. It felt celebratory, inflating Louis’ ego as he almost felt like the display had been set up just for him and Harry. Naturally, he’d been riddled with nerves that morning about how everything was going to pan out, but everything had just been so natural by Harry’s side all day. It hadn’t bothered him that people watched them as they fawned over each other, Harry kissing Louis’ cheek when he complained about all of the rollercoasters, or Louis helping Harry fix his man bun in a very well-rehearsed routine.

They’d wandered a few yards away from the others, arms wound tightly around each other as Louis felt Harry’s heart beating against his ear. Nobody had come up to ask for a picture since they’d stopped, a testament to how intimate they must have looked together.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Harry whispered.

“What?” Louis asked, looking up at him with uncontrollably doting eyes.

“New Years together. Our day one.” He said merrily. Louis smiled back, getting onto his tiptoes to peck him on the lips.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Was this everything you were hoping it would be?” Louis asked, watching as the fireworks reflected in his eyes. He breathed deeply, pulling Louis in again and hooking his chin over his head.

Louis gripped him tightly, unaware of any eyes that might have been on them, too intoxicated in his own sublime happiness.

~

After the sixth time Harry had leaned across the back of the limo to adjust Louis’ tie, Louis finally clamped his hands together and looked him straight in the eye.

“Harry.” He said firmly, feeling Harry’s fingers shudder as the car came to a final stop. The sound of the crowd was already thrumming outside, and even Louis felt light in the limbs. “Harry, come on, look at me.”

“Yeah?” Harry asked, his voice strained as he glanced over at Louis furtively. Tired of his trepidation, Louis surged forward to press a heavy kiss to his lips. Harry relaxed into it, his shivers melting away with a heavy exhale.
“I’m right here, okay? We’re doing this together.” Louis reminded him in a low whisper.

“Yeah. I - I know.”

“Ready, baby? They’re waiting for us.” Louis asked, and Harry’s eyes finally flicked up to meet his. He nodded, the first glimmer of excitement alight in his eyes. He spun to face the door, his hand clasped tightly in Louis’, and took a final, deep breath. With a click, the car door swung open, immediately flooding them in a deluge of camera flashes.

What was originally planned to be a small premiere for the low budget, indie movie had become a bit of media shit show following Harry and Louis’ coming out. The flanks of the red carpet were saturated in a dizzying amount of press, all hoping to get a glimpse of the couple’s first red carpet together. They stepped out together, shielding their eyes against the lights but smiling widely, nonetheless. The picture taking intensified as they readjusted their grip on each other and walked forward, the matching lavender accents of their suits causing the crowd to nearly swoon.

It was dizzying, leaving Louis feeling slightly out of body despite the total sobriety he’d maintained to support Harry. But Harry’s firm grasp on his hand kept him weighted in reality, his anchor standing tall and strong at his side.

But still, nothing felt quite real, the world tinged with a rosy colored surrealism. Were they actually doing this? Were they actually, unapologetically walking this carpet as a couple? This moment had been absolutely unobtainable until a mere two weeks earlier, and now the love of his life was by his side, attending a premiere for a passion project he couldn’t be more excited to finally see.

Harry was grinning gleefully as they took their first stop, stepping into their first ever red carpet pose for the paps. They’d talked about it endlessly, even studying what was typical of celebrity couples so that they’d look casual and natural. Harry, however, decided to throw out everything they’d analyzed about blending in, and turned to take Louis’ face in his hands and kiss him.

The cameras whirred into a frenzy, everyone desperately calling out their names and trying to get their attention. They separated slowly, the flashes reflecting off of Harry’s cavernous dimples as he giggled at Louis. The excitement never died down, actually only heightening as the two got used to the attention.

They started to feel comfortable with it, acting as they normally did as Harry fusses over a bit of Louis’ hair that went astray, or Louis dumping himself into Harry’s arms for support to petulantly complain about having to walk.

They separated here and there, especially when Louis found himself at Nona’s side to answer questions in the press line. Louis was just smiling at her deliriously as she discussed the intricacies of the film’s themes, only blinking back to attention when the interviewer said his name.


“Harry’s here with you tonight?” She asked.

“Oh, he’s here somewhere.” Louis said, looking behind him but not seeing him anywhere. “He’s a tad impossible to keep tabs on.”

“He’s like a little butterfly, fluttering everywhere.” Nona commented.

“That’s a very apt description.” Louis admitted laughing. He turned around again, finally catching Harry’s eye and waving him to join them.
“This is your first red carpet together?” The interviewer asked.

“It is.”

“How’s Harry been so far? Enjoying it?” She asked, smiling as Harry appeared and circled his arms around Louis’ waist. Louis pretended not to notice him.

“Well he’s been extraordinarily clingy. Just needy, you know?” He joked. “And so high maintenance. Like, I understand that he has five feet of hair, but does that warrant an entire afternoon in the bathroom getting ready?” Louis watched as the interviewer laughed, imagining the way that Harry’s brow had just furrowed from where his head was resting on his shoulder. Harry released his grip from Louis slowly and turned to Nona, taking her hand.

“Ready to go, darling?” He asked. Nona gave Louis a cheeky smile and took Harry’s arm, letting him lead her away.

“Well, I guess my relationship’s over.” Louis commented as they walked away.

“It would certainly seem that way.” The interviewer laughed.

“Better go do some damage control.” Louis said, waving goodbye to her and chasing Nona and Harry down. He called after them, making a grabby hand at Harry until he gave in and plastered himself once again to Louis’ side.

As the press line came to a slow end, Louis was overcome with a new influx of nerves, bubbling to the surface as they came closer and closer to sitting down and watching the film for the first time. Harry was nudging him in the side, giggling over seemingly nothing as they made their way into the theatre. After asking him, “What?” several times and receiving no more than a cute shrug and further giggle, Louis could do nothing besides laugh along with him. The unbridled giddiness transported him back through a slew of memories, remembering that night when Harry had hung behind to read the first manuscript of *Kids From Yesterday* that Louis had left on his coffee table.

If Harry hadn’t said those words, “I hope you do the movie,” Louis knows that he might never have ended up there, sitting in the row behind Nona and doing everything he could to annoy her before the film started.

“Rather dateless, aren’t we?” Louis asked, leaning in.

“I’m ignoring you, Lulu.” She said flippantly.

“Why didn’t you bring Niall?”

“Because Niall and I aren’t a couple.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“Harry, please control your man.” She said, turning to Harry, who immediately pulled Louis back into his seat.

“Since when are you on her side?”

“We made an alliance against you.” Nona explained, looking back over her seat.

“You did what?” Louis gasped

But Harry held his hand tight, smiling with a kind of false confidence that at least temporarily
quelled his inhibitions. Even as the lights dimmed, forcing Louis to sit back and just take in his work, it was fortifying to feel Harry’s strong hand on his. As the images flicked over his unbidden eyes, he was transported once again to the night when he’d argued with Joshua about making this movie. When the relationship that had been at the crux of his life was hanging by a precarious, feathering thread. But all through that, Harry had remained the unwavering anchor that he’d clung to. He’d been there perpetually, always offering a sweet embrace or a word of comfort.

And that’s what had set things on this current course; had given him the bravery to take his own life under control and make a piece of work that he was proud to put his name on. Whether it was a gentle, nudging reminder that he should make this project, or being the impetus that sent him devastated to his trailer over his lost love, it had all be Harry.

“This was you.” Louis whispered, his lips brushing lightly against his ear. “Everything in that scene was me realizing how much I loved you.”

Harry tried not to react, watching the scene that Nona had coached Louis through. It was that seminal scene, where she’d ripped out the pieces of Louis that were paining him the most at that time. It had, once again, been Harry. Had been the absolute trauma of not getting to be with Harry.

Giving up on appearing casual about the depiction of his boyfriend sobbing onscreen, Harry practically smashed his head into Louis’ shoulder, weaving his arm tightly around his middle before breathing deeply and continuing to watch.

But that was the thing, the pervading idea that was lingering on the tip of Louis’ tongue, yet too timid to be spoken in something so tangible as words: he’d gotten everything he’d ever wanted.

It was all he’d ever wanted, to be so ruthlessly in love as he watch something he was intensely proud of himself for. How could he have ever asked for anymore, and how had he been so fortunate to obtain even a sliver of this amount of bliss?

The after parties came at him like a whirlwind, spinning him in a cyclone of fuzzy lights and jubilant congratulations. After having grown so accustomed to a well choreographed avoidance of his boyfriend, it was a delightfully alien experience to realize that he and Harry could walk hand in hand to whichever party they chose. Beyond this, he had the unrelenting honor of introducing Harry as his boyfriend to everyone they encountered.

“*The film was fantastic, Louis!*”

“*Thanks. Have you met my boyfriend, Harry?*”

“I was crying the entire time. You were so great."

“*Thank you so much. I’m not sure if you’ve met my boyfriend, Harry.*”

All night, he was touting his two most proud accomplishments. Nona and Niall were there as well, continually running into them as they clung to each other’s side. There was an abundance of people that Louis genuinely loved, cast and crew from the movie he hadn’t seen in months, along with the boy he loved more than the Earth itself. It was enough to make his head feel ready enough to burst from the rest of his body.

Even entirely sober, he and Harry found themselves so intoxicated and enchanted on their own bliss that they ditched the parties early, meandering down the nearby side streets in a love stricken haze. Their security was following nearby, not so subtly idling in a car a few steps behind them as they spun and kissed their way down the sidewalk. It was still thoroughly dark, though the sun
would soon be breaking through the brume.

They were well aware of the gaggle of fans that were not-so-covertly following their every step on the other side of the road. They giggled and shrieked to themselves, dipping into alleyways in an attempt to cloak their whereabouts. It also came as no surprise to Harry and Louis when Paul stepped out of the car that was following them to let them know that one of Harry’s fans had just tweeted their whereabouts, and they could expect a cavalcade of fans at any point.

Given the pressing information, the two were still so blissed out that they couldn’t give it another care. They plopped down onto a bench together, Harry throwing his arm around Louis’ shoulders and kissing his cheek every time he listed one of the things he loved most about the movie. Harry had completely slung his legs over Louis’ by the time a healthy crowd had developed on the other side of the road, and they were forced to address it in one way or another.

Clearly, they could have just jumped into the car that was waiting for them, but Louis was far too gleeful to do anything besides stand up and wave their fans toward them. They came in a cascade, jolting across the street to fall upon them with their rampant selfie taking and autograph demanding. They indulged them willingly, laughing at their energy despite the garishly late hour.

And with the fleeting moments that Harry and Louis had to face one another, they whispered tiny adorations to each other, thickening the warmth that was settling deep into Louis’ chest. Harry was strong and tangible beside him, unrelenting as the fans happily chatted and took picture after picture with him. He was being tugged from side to side, arms slinking around his shoulder for selfies or slight taps to his arm to get his attention, and that was why he hardly noticed as one solid grasp tightened around his wrist.

It tugged him suddenly, the movement so abrupt that his eyes hardly registered the streak of streetlights and glimmering faces as he was torn away from the huddle. He was tripping, struggling to stay upright as the vice-like hold yanked him away from the voices, away from the warm light of the moment.

He was in an alley, the lights snuffed out as a desperate panting filled his ears. All he could see was a tuft of black hair ahead of him, the muscles of his arm crying out against the clamped hand on his wrist.

“Joshua!” He cried out, pulling back with every ounce of strength he could muster despite the dizzying change in environment. Moments before, he’d been surrounded by smiling faces and warm words. Now he was doused in the damp isolation of this alleyway, no one there apart from the sharp glare of Joshua as he slowly rounded on Louis. His eyes were molten, illuminated only by the dusty light of a distant streetlamp, and he was pouncing at Louis before he could take stock of how to escape.

His hard, bruising lips were against Louis’, and the adrenaline shot up Louis’ spine like a shot of blistering cold. He tore himself away, eyes already prickling with tears as the simmering ghost of Joshua’s lips remained heavy on his own. He wiped at them desperately, unable to placate himself of the feeling.

“Stop!” He screamed, stumbling back, his body already seizing with fear as Joshua stepped toward him again. His fingers were clapping into Louis’ arms once again, feverish in their strength as he pulled him back in. “No! Stop!”

At first, all Louis could register was a pure, unrelenting force that was pulling the two of them apart. He stumbled back, watching as Harry’s frame glowered down on Joshua, only to flounder back as the alley echoed with a sickening CRACK of fist against flesh. Harry fell into Louis,
clutching the side of his face.

He lapsed only momentarily, Louis trying to pull him in to protect him, only to feel the fabric of Harry’s suit jacket slip out from under his fingers as Harry raced after Joshua.

“You!” Louis shrieked, the raw agony chafing so violently against his already wavering vocal chords that Harry stopped suddenly, stricken still by the sound of his boyfriend’s voice.

Louis rushed to him, taking Harry’s face into his hands and choking on his own tears when Harry winced away in pain. The surrounding world was deafened as it crashed in on them, Paul sprinting at them and barking out orders to their driver, but Louis could only see the glimmer of Harry’s eyes, the flash of scalding hatred festering there.

~

“We want a restraining order.”

These were the only words that had left Harry’s lips since the police had arrived at Louis’ house. No matter how many times Louis had asked, Harry absolutely could not remember to hold an ice pack to his reddening eye, and yet he was completely fixated on the dark hand print circling Louis’ wrist.

The officer taking notes by Louis’ side subtly rolled his eyes, looking over to where Harry was pacing the length of the lounge.

“That’s going to take-”

“We want a restraining order.”

It must have been the tenth time that he’d said these words, and yet they made no difference. As the police had made abundantly clear, Harry had been the only one to follow Joshua and Louis down the alley, which meant that no other witness existed to verify their version of events. While they were mostly taking Harry and Louis at their word, there was an endless landscape of red tape that was holding up any actual action.

There hadn’t even been a moment to collect himself before he’d had an onslaught of questions being hurled at him, pressing at his already feeble grasp on his own self control. At first, Harry had been every part the supportive, enduring boyfriend that he’d countless times proved himself capable of, but with every passing moment of indecision by the police, his control over his own emotions was waning. Louis could feel him slipping, hoping desperately that the police would leave before Harry lost himself completely.

Apparently, the first mistake they’d made was leaving the scene without calling the police first giving the “alleged perpetrator” ample opportunity to make his escape out of their jurisdiction. This seemed absolutely unfair to Louis, as they’d hardly been capable of actual thought in those moments after Joshua had disappeared. All Louis had been able to concentrate on were Harry’s strong arms as he’d practically carried him into the car, holding him tight and kissing his hair as he felt the distance between himself and Joshua deepen.

Louis had since found himself struggling to maintain some facade of control by filling out paperwork with a trembling hand, as Harry proved himself continually only capable of demanding a restraining order. They scarcely received a straight answer, the police instead rather fixated on whether or not the two of them planned to press charges.

According to Louis, they very much planned to press charges. He lamented that this was the only
action they were able to take against Joshua, especially as he stole glances at the darkening bruise on his boyfriend’s face. It felt particularly dehumanizing later on, as they sidled Harry against a wall, taking pictures of his bruise from every angle.

He looked absolutely miserable as they did this, looking over to Louis apologetically, as if he’d done something wrong, and Louis could do nothing to make him understand that none of this was Harry’s fault. But the words of the officers remained fresh in their thoughts, repeated warnings that filing this case was going to take time, and that it would be up to a judge’s decision whether or not they’d be granted a restraining order.

What was most dispiriting, perhaps, was the judgmental glare of the officer when he sized Louis up. Louis could hear the venom laced thoughts in his head, wondering why a man couldn’t just take care of himself.

As the door closed, the officers finally leaving for the night, Louis felt as if each one of his ribs had been cracked individually from his chest, ground to a fine dust, then haphazardly thrust back into him. He felt like something less than human, and he had the frightening foresight to know that Harry was not in the state of mind to comfort him.

He’d disappeared, actually, Louis only knowing that he was in his house by the far away noises of him rustling about. His exhaustion hung heavy on his worn frame, so he made his way into his bed. He slipped beneath the duvet, watching the darkened wall with weary eyes as he waiting for Harry to appear beside him.

He needed to talk to Harry, to his other half about this before he’d have any trace of peace of mind. But this proved a lengthy task, Louis’ heartbeat growing heavier and heavier with pent up anxiety as Harry’s absence weighed on him. He hoped against hope that he’d be able to fall asleep, to tacitly ignore these moments of solitude, but he was painstakingly awake. He was fully aware of every moment Harry kept him waiting there, until he came stumbling and panting to bed.

He fell into the covers face first, struggling to pull them over himself and giggling slightly as the impact punched the air from his lungs, and Louis knew with an icy shock what he’d been doing the entire time he’d be gone.

Louis was on his feet before he could control himself, his voice clipped with the pulsating anger rippling through him.

“What did you take, Harry?” He demanded, not even taking a moment to breathe as he glared at Harry’s figure on the bed.

“Hmm?” Harry hummed, looking back at him.

“What the fuck did you just put in your fucking mouth Harry?” He screamed, patience dripping away after the unrelenting rollercoaster of the evening. He tore the covers violently from the bed, and Harry finally sat up.

“Doesn’t matter.” Harry grumbled, rubbing at his eyes.

“It does matter! It absolutely matters! How dare you even say that it doesn’t matter to me?” Louis asked, watching as Harry continued to avoid his eyes. “Harry! Look at me right now! At least look at me while you’re doing this to me!”

His eyes flicked up, and it was frighteningly clear that something had snapped. Louis stepped back, so shocked by the glare that was fixed on him.
“It’s none of your goddamn business, Louis!” Harry snapped, his voice a perverted hiss of what Louis recognized, and he felt his own words siphoned from his throat. His movements were heartbreaking, careening out of the bed and struggling to regain his balance as he stood up. Louis felt his internal equilibrium lurch forward, instinctually wanting to reach out and protect Harry, but he was stricken still as if by stone.

Harry stumbled past him, the anger radiating from him, and Louis was too terrified to open his mouth again in fear that it would loosen more vitriol from Harry’s lips. He was out the bedroom door, stumbling down the hallway and leaving Louis to slowly turn and watch him limp away.

Louis was shrieking internally, begging him to do something to stop Harry. The minutes passed as fast as heartbeats, Harry suddenly on the phone from the lounge.

He was calling a car. He was leaving.

_Fucking stop him, you idiot._

But in the moment that Louis was preparing himself for, in the moment that he had told himself that he would be strong, that he would be Harry’s hero, he found himself sinking to the floor, a hot wave of tears pouring over his already flushed cheeks.

The front door slammed, plunging Louis into a confined, isolating darkness that slithered into his lungs and roared in his ears. He felt completely exposed in that moment, crying like a teenager,

He was all Harry had, and he’d done nothing.

Harry was all he had, _and he’d done nothing._

~

Nearly every person that had passed him had looked over at Louis, which made him abundantly aware that he wasn’t hiding his misery well. Even Status Solo’s drummer, a man who was typically of very few words, had come over to him at one point to ask if he was alright.

He was backstage at the benefit Status Solo was set to perform at, and despite what he kept telling everyone, that he was fine, a little tired, maybe, but ultimately fine, he actually felt like the smallest thing would cause his entire body to shatter at any moment. He was carrying this corrosive secret around with him, fearing that any movement he made might betray the truth.

Two days had passed since Harry had stormed out, and they hadn’t spoken since then. No matter how often Louis called or texted, Harry wouldn’t respond, and by the second day Louis had given up altogether. He was left with this blistering need to tell someone, to get some help with this, but something was staying his hand. Something was keeping him from getting on the phone to call Zayn, Liam, or Niall.

It would have made it real, was the thing. He spent two days sitting on his bedroom floor in the darkness, trying to will time from moving forward so he could just pretend nothing bad was coming their way. But if he made those calls, plans would be put into action. They’d take the control away from Louis and confront Harry, and this entire situation would be irrefutably true.

The gravity of if felt visceral as Louis’ guilt hung on him, overhearing the panicked whispers of the stage hands and grips surrounding him. The band was supposed to go on at any moment, and Harry hadn’t emerged from his dressing room. Normally he’d already be back here, doing vocal warm ups and thanking the members of the crew. His absence was glaring, and Louis kneaded his hands as his throat went dry.
He knew there was no excuse for this, for his cowardly silence. He knew it was exactly what had made things so difficult with Joshua. If he’d just been able to tell someone he would have gotten the help he needed much earlier. But that was the problem; there had only been one person Louis trusted enough to tell the painful truth to, and that person was currently locked in his dressing room, screening his calls.

“Louis, seriously.” Niall said suddenly, pushing through a block of people toward him. He looked up in shock, his breath hitching as Niall stepped in close to him. “What’s going on?” Louis’ lip quivered, his body rebelling against him in every way possible.

“He’s - erm.” He stuttered. Niall’s face softened as he put a hand on Louis’ shoulder.

“Is something wrong? You look white as a ghost over here and Harry’s-“

“He’s on drugs again, Niall.” Louis said suddenly, his shoulders giving way to a shuddering convulsion. He was shaking his head, pulling away from Niall who’s eyes had grown miraculously wide.

“Louis, did you just say that Harry’s on drugs again?” Niall asked, his voice firm and clear as Louis began crumbling into his own panic.

“Joshua hit him and-“

“Joshua what? Wait, Louis? What are you saying?” Niall leaned down in an attempt to get into Louis’ line of sight, but before he could get another word from him, they were drowned out by a flurry of movement through the backstage. The both looked to see Harry’s mop of brown hair hurling by, a litany of assistants and stage hands struggling to keep up with him. He kept his face down as he stopped to let them mic him up, and Niall gave Louis one last look before running to his side.

Louis held himself even more tightly, watching Niall and Harry’s interaction even though he couldn’t hear a word they were saying or even see Harry’s face. Niall rounded his side, speaking fervently to him, but Harry nudged him away as he headed toward the stage. Louis was nearly knocked from his feet as technicians got into position, the crowd cheering deafeningly as Harry’s voice first rang out over them.

The words weren’t even intelligible to Louis, who still hadn’t reconciled how quickly they’d gone from Harry being holed up in his dressing room to him being onstage, beguiling his fans. Louis crept forward slowly, careful not to get in anyone’s way as he got in sight of the band onstage. He got as close as he could, knowing from previous shows how far he could go before somebody pulled him back.

Harry’s profile was illuminated, and the band had already plunged into the first song. Somehow, entire minutes had dragged by in the time it had taken for Louis to find himself there. He leaned against the wall, tentatively watching as Harry crooned for the crowd. The melody was soothing, reminding Louis of what this night was supposed to have been for the two of them. It was the first night that Louis could stand backstage to support his boyfriend’s band without having to be covertly handed around, making sure not to be seen.

Niall’s riff on the guitar overtook the speakers, ringing out across the space as Harry waited through the short refrain. He clutchted onto the mic stand with two hands and glanced to his left, spotting Louis on the wing of the stage. Louis’ expression didn’t change, as he was incapable of dredging up enough will to smile.
His insides spasmed as he saw the haunted look in Harry’s eyes, saw the way sweat was plastered to his skin and his muscles were tensing just slightly. He was staring at Louis with a look drenched in desperation, begging for help, before he dove back into the lyrics.

Something was wrong. His voice was off, his entire body looked weak beneath the unforgiving lights. The dread swelled inside of Louis, already looking around for someone to tell that Harry wasn’t okay; that he was in danger of falling apart.

But that point was made mute as Harry’s voice fell away, the music carrying on without him. He was still holding himself up by his mic stand, glaring at his hands as the song continued with his stark absence. He turned once again to see Louis, stumbling absentmindedly away from the mic stand and plodding off the stage. A cacophony of confusion rose through the stands, but Louis was entirely fixated on catching Harry in his arms once he made his way off the stage.

Harry clung to him, dropping most of his weight onto Louis before falling straight onto the ground. Everyone nearby was converging on them as Louis took a knee beside him, his trembling fingers holding the sides of Harry’s face and willing him to keep his eyes open.

“Harry! Love? Can you hear me?” Louis shouted, leaning over Harry to try and hear the words slipping through his lips. He couldn’t catch anything coherent, hearing only slurred versions of Louis’ name.

As if melting away, Harry’s features went lax and his eyes rolled up to the ceiling, staring unresponsively. A bolt of terrified lighting struck through Louis’ spine, sending a shattering wave through every inch of him.

“Harry!” He screamed, shaking Harry’s face. “Harry! Please! Please! Come on!”

Beneath his fingers, Harry’s entire body spasmed. Louis jolted back as Harry seized, his eyes still glossed over with a hazed vacancy. Louis was pulled back as some medics swooped in around Harry’s blindly shuddering body.

Grabbing him with a painfully tight grip, Louis found himself in Niall’s embrace as they both watched Harry’s uncontrollable convulsions. His eyes were still horrifyingly blank, and what struck Louis was that Harry must still be in there somewhere, unable to control any part of what was happening to him. He must be completely terrified. He must be afraid that he’s about to die.

The words rattled so violently in Louis’ head that he cried out again, this time nothing that could be strung together as coherent words but just a painful shriek of desperation. There was something inside him, wringing out his heart and lungs, siphoning the blood from his entire body until all that remained inside him was an urgent, dry pulse and a disembodied need for Harry to stay alive. Every single care Louis had ever had in the course of his life was meaningless then, easily traded away if it meant that Harry would just stay alive. If it just meant that Louis could hold him again and tell him he loved him.

The tremors were abating, slowly leaving Harry with a grim stillness as he continued to stare listlessly. The medics were barking orders at each other, and Louis had no grip on what was happening. Words were pouring out his mouth, and it took several beats for him to catch what he was even saying.

“Is he alive?” He kept crying out. He couldn’t form any thought beyond this one, needing someone to just tell him that there was some hidden heart beat beneath the pallid, hollow face of the love of his life.
There was no longer any glimmer of starlight in his eyes, no whisper of dimples as he giggled along to something in his head. All that was left was an empty skeleton, blanketed in skin so white and lusterless he could have been made of wax.

The medics were rolling up his shirt sleeve, and standing out against the sallow flesh of his arm was a deepening purple bruise rippling out from a needle prick.

Louis’ heart gave one last, tremulous beat before he felt the life spill out of his body. It was heroin, and Harry had injected it straight into his vein. Nothing Louis had ever convinced himself in his darkest dreams had prepared him for this.

Where Niall was clutching him had gone numb, overcome by a hot, frantic unfeeling that had overtaken him. Nothing existed, not the people around them, not the crowd outside, not even the air that had long since left his lungs. All that remained was Harry’s ashen face, the hints of the bruise Joshua had left seeping through the layers of make up meant to hide it.

He could see the medics preparing a syringe, about to inject Harry with something, but Louis’ thoughts were so erratic he couldn’t follow what was happening. His mind was a tempest of nonsensical threads, thinking that his bones had turned to blood and time was spinning in on itself.

The needle disappeared into Harry’s skin, and as far as Louis could understand, the only noise in the world was the rushing of blood in his own ears. It crashed and bubbled, his eyesight plunged into a red tint that was deepening and deepening into darkness.

With a painful intake of breath, Harry opened his eyes. The medics jumped into a frenzy, calling an ambulance and taking Harry’s vitals as he struggled to catch his breath. His big, green eyes were darting around in fear, having no idea where he was or what was happening.

The wave of relief was so heavy that it crashed Louis onto the floor, every ounce of water in his body spilling from his eyes. He crawled on his hands and knees without shame, pushing people out of his way until he was at Harry’s side, taking his hand in his.

His tears intensified ten fold as he felt Harry weakly grip his hand back.

~

The rest of the day could only be remembered in little spurts here and there, as if most of Louis’ memories just weren’t imprinting on his mind.

He remembered Harry raised onto a gurney, looking up at Louis with fear as Louis repeatedly told him everything was going to be alright.

He remembered being at the hospital, and suddenly it wasn’t just him and Niall anymore. They were in the waiting room with Zayn, Liam, and even Nona. Liam was saying something about the vending machine, leaning towards Zayn and just blathering on and on about it. Louis wasn’t listening, but he remembered thinking that this was probably the first time Liam and Zayn were in the same room together since they’d broken up, and it was a little sad what lengths Liam was going to to distract himself from that.

He remembers being pulled away by Zayn so that he could explain everything what was happening with Harry to Louis. What the medics had given Harry back at the concert was called Narcan, and it reverses the effects of opioids. Harry would probably only be on observation for a few hours, then they would be able to bring him home. Louis remembered thinking this was bizarre, that someone could just come so close to the edge and then just sent on their way.
He remembered that it kept getting later and later, with Nona leaning against Niall’s shoulder and looking at her phone, mentioning, “11:11, make a wish.” Niall smiled at her for a moment, before leaning forward and burying his face in his hands. Nona leaned forward as well, rubbing his back supportively.

He remembered playing with a loose thread on his chair when a member of the band mentioned that someone was going to have to call Harry’s mum. Louis’ stomach had sunk, thoroughly hoping it wasn’t about to be his job to call Harry’s mother and tell her that her son had almost died. Luckily, Niall had stood up then, walking away as he dialed her number.

And finally, he remembered when the doctor finally said they could see him, limiting them to only two at a time. Niall and Louis had made their way back, rounding the corner to find Harry, lying there as colorless as the sheets that covered him. Louis had expected his eyes to light up with the same relief fluxing through his own body, a tangible feeling of gratefulness to see the other one alive.

But his eyes were swilling with a mix of emotions, some of them too difficult to read. The one that Louis easily recognized sent a shiver down his spine, as it was the same look Harry had given him months ago after their first bad incident. The morning after he’d come home to find Harry collapsed on the floor, and he’d brushed Louis aside as he angrily muttered, “I just don’t think it’s your place to tell me what to do.”

That’s what was simmering there behind his bloodshot eyes. Niall didn’t recognize it, spilling into the room happily and asking Harry a barrage of questions all along the lines of, “How are you feeling?”

Louis followed Niall tentatively into the room, sitting on the opposite sit of Harry’s hospital bed stiffly, afraid that at any moment, Harry was going to turn his glare onto Louis and surely shatter him.

Harry listened quietly as Niall spoke to him, at times giving short answers like, “Fine,” and “Okay,” with a gravelly, spent voice. Niall could tell that it was painful for him to speak, so he mostly talked about nonsense, trying to keep Harry’s mind away from their current situation.

He leaned further back into his bed, his eye lids lingering more and more every time he blinked, his exhaustion clear. Louis looked up to the clock mounted on wall, seeing that the time was just after two in the morning.

“You tired, Haz?” Niall finally asked, noticing Harry’s sluggishness. Harry nodded heavily. “I’ll shut up so you can get some rest, yeah?”

“But don’t leave yet.” Harry muttered, turning onto his side toward Louis. He curled into a fetal position, his head resting on the very edge of the mattress, as close to Louis as he could get. He opened his eyes once again, looking up at Louis with fleeting appreciation as he whispered, “Louis?”

Louis knew exactly what he wanted, reaching up to trace his fingers gently through Harry’s hair. Harry closed his eyes and sighed, letting Louis lull him to sleep.

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Harry was actually the only one of the group who’d had any sleep by the time he was released the next morning, and yet his skin still hung colorless and waxy as he sat in the passenger seat. He was leaning against the window, his body language making it especially clear that he didn’t care to be
sharing such a confined space with Louis when there was so much to talk about.

They hadn’t spoken about anything of substance, Louis only asking tertiary questions about how he felt or if he needed anything as they drove home. Harry had given a low grunt as he turned the radio on along with the air conditioning. They made their way back to Harry’s house without exchanging a word, the car falling into icy silence when they arrived and Louis shut off the motor.

Their breaths were heavy as they both waited for the other to do something, with Louis finally turning to face him.

“Harry.” He said firmly, ready to launch into the speech that had been mulling in his head all night. Harry, however, had no patience for his words and was already throwing himself out of the car and into the house. “Harry!” Louis yelled after him, jogging to keep up as Harry tore through the house without giving Louis a backwards glance.

He chased after him, facing a slammed door as Harry locked himself in his music room. Louis leaned into the door, banging against it as he called out his name.

“Harry! Open the door!” He yelled out, listening for some sort of response from Harry. “We have to talk! Please just open the door.”

He pressed his ear to the cold veneer, hearing Harry shuffle around, but ultimately choosing not to approach the door and let him in. Louis felt something snap inside of him, at having any sort of barrier between himself and Harry.

“Open the fucking door, Harry!” He shrieked, pounding it with his fists. “I’m not joking! Open the fucking door!” He hit it as hard as he could, feeling his knuckles blistering. “Please, please let me in! I just want to talk to you. Please don’t shut me out!” His voice as warped beneath an influx of tears, his strength sapped away as he melted against the door.

“Louis, stop!” He heard Harry plead, his voice close. “You’re going to hurt yourself!” Louis was incapable of saying anything back, banging against the door desperately as he collapsed, sliding to the floor. He sputtered and cried, leaning into the door as he waited for Harry to open it and take him in his arms. To tell him that everything was going to be okay and he was going to get the help he needs.

He waited, listening to the silence in the adjacent room.

~

There were hands around his arms, pulling him up to his feet. The hands were gentle, and Louis spotted Zayn’s kind eyes above him as he pulled him closer. Niall’s blonde hair whizzed by, taking Louis’ spot beside the door. He looked down at the spot he’d previously been in, noticing the slanted shadows on the floor and realizing that it was now firmly the afternoon. His exhaustion must have overtaken him.

“Haz? It’s me.” Niall said, knocking impatiently against the door. It cracked open slightly, and Louis felt his body lurch toward it, only to be pulled in the opposite direction by Zayn.

“No, Zayn.” Louis muttered, giving a futile attempt to escape with his weakened limbs.

“You have to come with me.” Zayn said, lightly pulling him along down the hall.

He watched Niall disappear into the room, hearing the dull murmurings of Harry’s voice behind
the closed door. His heart ached to be with him.

“Where are we going?” He asked, hoping he could find some way to talk Zayn into letting him burst his way into that room with Harry.

“We’re going to head back to my place for awhile.” Zayn explained. There was something unintentionally patronizing in his voice, as if everyone had been talking about how to deal with the two of them behind their backs, and thought they knew best for them. Louis submitted to it, letting Zayn lead him further and further away from Harry, feeling his control slipping further and further away.

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“He was worried that you were hurt.” Zayn explained calmly, perched at the end of his bed. Louis had wrapped himself up in every blanket Zayn owned and was sipping from a hot cup of tea as his best friend tried to placate him. “He didn’t really tell us what was happening, just that he wanted us to come and make sure you were okay because he was afraid you’d hurt yourself.”

Louis looked down guiltily as he flexed against the marred flesh of his knuckles. “Can’t believe I acted like that.” He murmured. “That I was violent like that. But I - I feel like I’m fighting for his life here. I don’t know what to do.”

“Just based on what he was saying, we felt like some time apart might be good for you guys. Just so you get a second to breathe, you know? Your relationship is so intense.”

“I should have said something. I should have told someone that he was back on that shit. This is my fault.”

“It’s not!” Zayn promised, scooting closer to him. “It’s not your official duty to make sure he stays clean and sober the rest of his life. He’s an adult, Lou. He’s capable of making his own mistakes. And none of us expected this was going to happen. That he’d be totally sober for a month then suddenly shoot up heroin for the first time.”

Louis didn’t have the chance to argue with Zayn as a buzz rang through his apartment. He already knew that it was Liam, delivering some paperwork for *Metal Heart*. Zayn rushed over to buzz him in, not bothering to say anything to him over the intercom. He fled to the kitchen area, sitting at the counter and huddling over his phone as Liam finally appeared in the door.

Liam looked over at him briefly before approaching Louis, the awkwardness between the former boyfriends palpable in the small space. It only served to remind Louis of how disjointed everything was at the moment. Liam was holding a bag full of some of Louis’ belongings after he’d run by his house.

“I’m not sure how long you’re planning to stay here.” He commented, letting Louis look through the bag as Zayn finally looked up.

“He can stay here as long as he wants.” Zayn promised, making a point to look at Louis instead of Liam.

“Has anyone talked to Harry?” Louis asked, not able to hold this question in any longer.

“Niall was with him most of the day, now I think he’s over at his place with Nona.” Liam explained. “He actually wanted us all to meet up tomorrow morning.”

“To talk about an intervention.” Louis said, finishing Liam’s thought. Liam nodded, his eyes
flicking over to Zayn.

“That was the plan, yeah.” Liam sighed. “Probably should have asked this right when I walked in, but how are you feeling?”

“I have no idea.” Louis admitted, suddenly feeling restless as he kicked his feet off the bed. “Are you going to the gym or anything today? You do that everyday, right? That’s the kind of thing you do?” He asked, his words spilling out off him manically as he paced aimlessly across the studio flat.

“Yeah, I was going to go later tonight. Did you want to come, or something?”

“Yes. Please. Thank you.” Louis said quickly, scrambling toward the bag Liam had brought him and rifling through it for gym clothes.

“Oh, right now?” Liam asked in surprise.

“Yup, Payno. Right now. I need to run and jump and roll and just anything else to distract me right now.”

Zayn and Liam both struggled to keep up with Louis once his mind was set on getting out of the flat, but finally he was able to land himself on a treadmill at Liam’s gym. Liam had offered some sort of suggestions about core workouts or having a ‘leg day’, but Louis dismissed him as his eyes zeroed on the blinking red numbers of his treadmill.

He started at a slow jog, feeling a hot energy melting through his cramped and tired body. He punched up the speed a bit, flexing against the first influx of pain in his legs. It was refreshing to feel something for once, to have a rippling sense of physical pain that matched the chaos seething inside him.

Breathing heavily, he pounded against the speed once again, the treadmill kicking up the pace beneath him. His shoes slammed against the rubbery surface, each step feeling like a hammer driving through his limbs.

The machine gave a shrill beep every time he increased the speed, struggling to keep up its electronic warbling as he punched it higher and higher. His heart beat smashed against the front of his chest, painful stitches prickling to life along each one of his joints. His lungs expanded in his chest, begging for more air than they were capable of holding. Oxygen had stopped it’s proliferation through his body, whittling his thoughts down to the mere sensation of pain.

Nothing else was registering in his thoughts, no dread or heartbreak, nothing else besides the throttling pain that intensified in his every inch. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t see, he absolutely knew that he couldn’t run another step; and yet he ramped up the speed again.

He missed only one step and felt himself careening forward, barely able to catch himself by putting his legs on both sides of the machine. Any icy chill trembled through him as the belt whizzed underneath, an agonizing relief sinking into him as his legs stopped moving. His thumb pressed down on the speed button, watching the numbers diminish until he jumped back on with a slow walk.

Hunched over and panting, he ambled forward, the weight he was carrying before feeling much heavier. He rattled like an empty cage, the sheen of sweat freezing against his skin as he dragged his feet forward. Coming to a swaying stop, he slowly lowered himself from the treadmill and made his way to the sauna, ready to let his skin cook in the heat.
It was about twenty minutes before Liam found him in there, his worry melting away in the intense heat as Louis gave him a weak wave in greeting. He came to sit beside him, keeping his voice down in consideration of the only two other men on the other side of the sauna.

“I don’t know if we’re broken up.” Louis said suddenly, seeing Liam’s head snap over his direction in his peripherals. “That’s the thing. I don’t know if we’re done. I’m not done with him - but he - just…” Louis sighed. “He’s mad at me. And I don’t have anything to say to him that’s going to make him any less mad at me. But then, I feel like I should say anything I can to keep him from being angry with me, because if he slips away from me - I don’t know. He needs me to take care of him. I need to take care of him.”

“Can you at least try to relax, Lou?” Liam asked, causing Louis to chuckle humorlessly. It hurt so much to laugh, Louis thought his throat might be bleeding. “Yeah, that’s not really possible, is it?” Liam asked, joining in with his dark laughter.

“Here’s the stupid thing. This is the dumbest part.” Louis said, practically giggling now. “Harry’s the one I usually run to when I’m upset, right? So I keep just wanting to call him. But I can’t call him, because he’s the one who’s causing all the problems, right? How stupid is that? He can’t be both the problem and the solution, can he?” They were both laughing deliriously now, the absurdity of it somehow hilarious in the sweltering heat.

“No, no. I totally get it.” Liam agreed. “Like, when I got to the hospital and saw you there, I knew I had to say the right thing to you. So my first thought was to go ask Zayn, ‘Hey, what should I say to Louis?’ I even started to walk over to him before I remembered, ‘Oh right. He fucking hates me because I broke up with him. Right.’”

They laughed even harder, their eyes brimming with tears as they struggled to breathe.

“Jesus, Liam. You’re just not very smart, are you?”

“Can’t say that I am, no.” He agreed, sinking backwards as they both sequestered their irreverent giggling.

“Li, can you do something for me? As my friend?” Louis asked, turning to Liam to make direct eye contact.

“What?”

“Can you just look me in the eyes and tell me that breaking up with Zayn was the best choice for you? If you can just tell me that, I’ll respect it, and I won’t bug you about it anymore.”

Liam nodded slowly, waiting to see if Louis was going to elaborate anymore. When he didn’t, Liam’s lips separated tentatively, about to say something.

“S’too hot in here. Ready to head out?” He asked, standing up. He raced out of the sauna, not even waiting for a response from Louis.

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“Yeah, I talked to his mum again this morning.” Niall explained, his hands clasped tightly in front of him. “She can take tomorrow off so she can Skype in.”

“What about Gemma?” Louis asked.

“Couldn’t get her on the phone, but I texted her. I think she’s a bit shocked.”
Louis nodded, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. They were sitting in a circle, Liam, Zayn, Niall, Nona, and himself in Zayn’s lounge area. It was a bit of a grim task, planning someone’s intervention behind their back, but luckily Niall had no problem breaking through the awkwardness. He’d thought of practically everything already, planning everything out while everyone listened and agreed.

The group they’d organized for this was growing more and more in size with each passing second as Niall’s phone buzzed and he announced someone else had joined them. Liam had asked if it was better to use a large group or just a few of the people Harry was closest to, but Niall had pointed out that they’d already tried that. If Louis couldn’t get through to him, then the intimate, one on one approach just wasn’t going to work. As much as they knew it was going to traumatize him, they were going to have to gang up on him.

Louis begrudgingly agreed, already imagining how Harry was going to react to being so outnumbered, but in the end, it might actually work. Seeing how many people actually cared about him might just be the thing that would finally make him understand how valuable his life was.

“So we know for sure he’ll be at his house? That’s where he is right now?” Zayn asked Niall, who licked his lips awkwardly before responding.

“Not totally sure yet, but I’m keeping tabs on him. I’ll check in with everyone tomorrow.” He said, looking around the room expectantly. “And then we’ll do it. We’ll head over.”

Louis nodded stiffly, and it felt like the conversation had come to a close. Everything was mapped out, and there was no use discussing it any further. Liam seemed to sense this, standing up.

“I’ve got to run to my office, but I’ll come by in the morning, yeah?” Liam asked, looking over to Louis. He nodded again as Liam headed toward the door.

“I should go run and pick up dinner.” Zayn commented, also standing up. “You two sticking around?”

“Depends what dinner is.” Niall responded, eliciting one of the only laughs from the group that afternoon.

“I’ll grab pizza.” Zayn promised him with a smile. Niall gave him a thumbs up and Louis watched as Liam idled in the doorway, letting Zayn pass him as he left. Liam gave them all a wave before he disappeared as well.

Louis exhaled heavily, as if he’d been holding his breath during the entire conversation. A strange silence had fallen over them, and Nona suddenly sat up straight as if realizing something.

“I’m just gonna get some air. Okay?” She asked brightly, and Louis could see something in her eyes as she looked at Niall. It was as if this exit was staged, that the two had planned it beforehand. She smiled at Louis before slipping away out the door.

“What’s going on?” Louis asked abruptly, the second the door shut behind Nona.

“Harry wants to talk to you.” Niall answered quickly, as if their secret conversation might be discovered at any second. “I don’t know what everyone else would think about you guys seeing each other before the intervention, but he’s freaked out that you’re never going to want to speak to him again.”

Niall’s words had faded into what was practically unintelligible gibberish, as Louis was already pulling his phone out, only able to concentrate on his contacts list as he searched for Harry’s name.
Niall was right; Zayn and Liam probably would have tried to talk Louis out of seeing Harry before the intervention. It they saw each other, they might get in a fight, or Louis might let something slip about what they were planning.

But none of that mattered when Louis first heard Harry’s voice.

“Louis!” He sighed in relief as he answered. “Hi - erm. Hi.”

“Hi.” Louis responded, leaning into his hand and smiling into it despite the tears that were already brimming on his eyelids. Neither of them said anything for a moment, instead only listening to the other’s breaths.

“Are you still at Zayn’s?” Harry finally asked, his voice having grown thick.

“Mhmm.”

“Could I come pick you up?” He asked tentatively, and Louis knew that he was fully expecting Louis to turn him down.

“Yeah. That’s fine.” Louis answered, biting into his hand in an attempt to keep his voice steady.

“Kay. I’ll see you in about a half hour.” Harry said. They both lingered silently, stuck on what to say next.

“I love you.” Louis finally said, unable to control the way his voice broke at the end.

“Love you, too.” Harry responded, the melancholy smile clear in his voice. They hung up, and Louis let his head fall into his hands.

“Was that a bad idea?” He grumbled, not looking up at Niall.

In lieu of an actual answer, Niall reached forward to clap Louis on the shoulder before turning on the telly to fill the thick silence.

Despite the promise of showing up in a half hour, Harry showed up in about half that time, texting Louis to let him know he was parked outside. Zayn hadn’t shown back up yet, so it was easy for Louis to make a quick getaway.

He walked slowly out of Zayn’s building, cautiously rounding a corner to find Harry leaning against his car, his arms crossed tightly across his front. He looked up suddenly at Louis’ appearance, his face alight with both a spark of excitement and fear. Louis scarcely had a second to ponder what he should say before his body moved forward without any express permission from his brain. He threw himself at Harry, clinging to his familiar body and warmth as he bit back the predictable wave of continued tears.

“Louis, I’m-” Harry stuttered, but he was cut short as Louis suddenly pulled himself back to face him.

“Don’t say you’re sorry. Not yet at least, please?” Louis asked, and Harry bit his lip as he nodded. They stared at each other, their hands running down each other’s arms while Louis had the distinct impression that Niall’s eyes were on them from the window above.

“Back to your place?” Harry asked quietly.

“Yeah. Let’s go.” Louis agreed, rounding Harry’s car. They both jumped in, Harry twining his
hand with Louis’ after he pulled into traffic.

“What should we-” Harry started, but once again, Louis cut him off.

“Babe, I can’t talk about this yet.” He admitted. “I know it’s only been a couple of days, but I’ve really missed you, and I’m not ready to fight yet. Can we just take a second? Just have a night together like things are kind of okay?” It was a cowardly tactic, selfish even, but he knew it would keep Harry from suspecting anything before everyone showed up the next day.

“That’s fine.” He agreed, giving Louis a weak smile.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Erm, yeah. Been better.” Harry commented. Louis’ eyes traced him up and down, remembering how pale and waxy he’d looked in that hospital bed. He’d regained some color, but dark, heavy bags had collected under his eyes.

He stroked a thumb over Harry’s hand, leaning back and closing his eyes beneath the relief of having Harry within his grasp. His eyes fluttered open as the car stopped in front of his house, and realized that he had actually drifted off.

“Were you asleep?” Harry asked with a light laugh.

“Think I might have been.”

“Am I that boring?”

“Well, it’s that way that you talk really, really slowly. Puts me right to sleep.” Louis joked, looking at Harry as they hung on each other’s smiles. Part of it felt like a betrayal, joking with Harry like this while he was carrying such a daunting secret from him. But at the same time, it felt absolutely natural, like a piece of the puzzle clicking into place. “How interested would you be in just going inside and taking a bath with me?” Louis asked, starting to open his car door.

“Extremely interested.” Harry responded, reaching forward to close Louis’ door before he could get out in a well practiced move.

“Harry.” Louis groaned, watching as Harry jumped out of the car with a shit eating grin to open Louis’ door for him. He started to open it, smiling as Louis rolled his eyes. “Are you serious right now?”

Suddenly, Harry jammed the door back shut, almost catching Louis’ fingers as he did so. He leaned his back against it, facing away, so that Louis was stuck inside.

“Harry? What are you doing?” Louis asked, angry at how close he’d come to having his fingers broken in half. He looked up at Harry, who still wasn’t facing him or giving any answer as to why he’d just snapped the door shut.

He leaned forward to get some clue into Harry’s odd behavior, but the image he saw had him clawing and throwing himself against the door in a desperate attempt to get it open. Panic was scorching every part of him, leaving him abandoned of all reason apart from his basic instincts.

Standing only a few feet away from their car had been Joshua, his face haunted and hysterical, his arm outstretched toward Harry, his trembling fingers clasped around unforgiving metal.

With barely a yard separating them, Joshua had a gun pointed at Harry’s chest.
Throwing all his might into the door, Louis finally budged Harry out of the way, causing Joshua to shriek out at him to stay still. Harry was pleading something incoherent toward Louis, but Louis’ body wouldn’t function until he put himself between Harry and the barrel that was glaring him down.

“Joshua. What’re you - what’re you doing?” Louis asked, his throat trembling beneath a thick swell of fear.

“So you’re finally paying attention to me?” Joshua asked, a tear spilling down his cheek as he tightened his grip around the gun. “Finally think I’m worth paying attention to?”

“You’re - you’re always worth paying attention to.” Louis stuttered pathetically, his mind whirring into hyperdrive as he realized he had absolutely no idea what to say. He looked around anxiously, trying to conceive of some way to escape; to call for help.

“That’s why you keep blocking my number? That’s why you keep ignoring me and making me feel like garbage?”

“Joshua, this isn’t how we should talk about this.” Harry reasoned, his hand falling protectively onto Louis’ back as he took a step forward. Joshua jerked his aim directly at Harry’s head.

“Don’t touch him!” He shrieked, and Harry threw his arms back in the air.

“Please! Stop! Please!” Louis begged, his entire body shaking. He looked quickly back and forth between Harry’s stoic face and Joshua’s mangled expression. “This isn’t - this isn’t about Harry. This is about the two of us.”

“It’s him!” Joshua bit out, his anger piercing through Harry. “It’s always been him!”

“No it hasn’t, Joshua! It’s me! I’m the one who pulled away. I’m the one who broke up with you. I’m the one who’s been hurting you and mistreating you. Harry has nothing to do with it!” Louis yelled, saying anything he could think of to get Joshua’s aim off of Harry. “You’re - you’re right - baby.” Louis said, his throat sticking painfully on the pet name. With his hands raised warily, he took a slow step toward Joshua.

“Louis!” Harry protested as Joshua’s eyes snapped over to his ex boyfriend as he stepped closer. His arms remained steady, however, as they pointed at Harry.

“I was wrong. I’ve been so, so wrong.” Louis said slowly, cautiously, as each step brought him closer and closer to Joshua.

“You broke my heart.” Joshua choked out, his aim starting to slip.

“You deserve so much better, Joshua.” Louis said, his own tears falling heavily down his cheeks, hot with the desperation.

“I deserve you.” The gun fell to Joshua’s side as he looked at Louis pathetically. He closed the distance between the two of them, relief coursing through him now that the gun was out of play.

“We can talk about this. For real this time.” Louis continued, and Joshua threw his arms around him. The embrace was so tight and jarring that Louis couldn’t sink into it, couldn’t relax enough to make it feel believable. His every sense was still fully on edge, trying to predict what Joshua’s next move would be, what he needed to say next to get them both out of danger.

His back was to Harry, so he couldn’t tell what it was that he was doing, but he heard the shuffling
at the same moment as Joshua. The cold embrace gave way to a gruff shove as Joshua thrust his arm out in front of him, aiming once again at Harry.

“Don’t!” Joshua screamed out at him, and at last, Louis snapped.

It had coiled for years in the pit of Louis’ stomach, festering with his unsung hatred of Joshua and his continued desperation to keep Harry alive. It had been seething all this time, this pent up furor inside, that was stoked with each passing moment of unease about Joshua. With each moment that Joshua sent him into a blind tailspin of panic. With each minor argument with Harry. With each moment he’d felt his heart stop because Harry was slipping away.

Finally, it all snapped, and Louis threw himself at the gun.

Everyone screamed at once, but their cries were buried beneath the shattering blast. It shook down deep in his ear canals, so loud it rattled the inside of his head and left the world an empty expanse of metallic ringing.

And what exactly was happening? How - how exactly did he get here, lying back on the ground?

The sky was gray above, the kind of sinister churning of dark clouds that foreshadowed rain.

Something told him those footsteps sprinting away were Joshua’s, but he couldn’t completely remember how he knew that.

But it wasn’t just a slight, autumn sprinkling that was on the way. These clouds were that sort of bitter purple, the kind made ripe with those big, plump droplets that made everyone look up at the ceiling as they beat down on the roof.

Fuck. Fuck.

Harry was there, over him. Harry liked rain. Harry liked everything.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck, it hurts.

Harry was crying. Harry was screaming something. Harry’s fingers were tinged with blood.

If this was what pain actually felt like, he didn’t know what to classify anything he’d felt before. It emanated down his arm, down his leg, the entire left side of his body convulsing with it.

He shot me.

Harry’s fingers were light against Louis’ cheek, the sky darkening on the edges above them.

“It’s going to be okay, baby. They’re coming. You’re going to be okay.”

That must have been Harry. That’s what Harry was saying.

Joshua shot me.

“I love you, Louis.”

The clouds were only a pin point of light, falling in on themselves on all sides.

I love you, too.

He wasn’t sure if the words managed to roll past his lips, or if they were wading around as a
whisper in his thoughts.

I love you too, Harry.

Chapter End Notes

More detailed descriptions of trigger warnings:

Partner Abuse: Forced kiss
Drug Abuse: Intravenous heroin overdose
Violence/Weapons: One character hitting another character,
One character shooting another character with a gun

If you have any further questions before you are comfortable reading this, feel free to email me at pleasantlyperplexed@gmail.com

If you're reading this part because you just finished the chapter, please let me know how you felt about it. I had a hard time finishing this chapter as things take such a violent turn, but it was extremely poignant to me tonight as I am finally posting it. I was at the Pride Parade in my city tonight, only a week after Orlando, and had a very difficult time driving home as many blocks were closed after a shooting. Once again, this turn was planned long, long before any of these events, but I feel like it's so disgustedly relevant all of a sudden. I'm not quite sure what I'm exactly saying right now, but please, please let me know how you felt about the chapter. Goodnight, and thank you so much for sticking with me for much of this fic.
Some major trigger warnings for this one. Once again, I’ll post some general ones up here, with more detailed descriptions or warnings that contain spoilers at the bottom. If you’re concerned that something might be triggering for you, please scroll down to the bottom before reading.

Trigger Warnings:
- Violence
- Partner Abuse
- Grief
- Panic Attacks
- Drug and Alcohol Abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The unknown distance to the great beyond stares back at my grieving frame. To cast my shadow by the holy sun, my spirit moans with a sacred pain. It's quiet now. The universe is standing still.

-The Killers

One Year Earlier

“I need a pillow.”

“Then go get one.”

“Niall! Oh my god! Please! Oh my god!”

Niall looked up to watch Harry floundering pathetically from where he was sprawled across Niall’s kitchen island.

“I’m eating.” Niall responded through a mouthful of mac and cheese. He was eating it straight from the pot after he’d hastily made it, following the emptying of his stomach on Louis’ roof earlier that night.

“But Niall!” Harry whined, turning himself over dramatically until he was face first against the granite countertop in a display of grief.

“Fine.” Niall relented, always a sucker for Harry’s histrionics. Harry smiled at him devilishly as he left the room, looking around through the lounge for a pillow. He’d scarcely left the room before Harry started singing distractedly, slurring his notes as his voice echoed through the house.

“It’s a little bit funny, this feeling inside. I’m not one of those that can easily hide.” he warbled. “I don’t have much money, but boy if I did. I’d a buy a big house where we both could live.”

Niall circled back into the kitchen, spiking the pillow at Harry like a volleyball. “Here you go, my
Harry stuffed it behind his head as he leaned back, looking up at his phone as he held it over his head. With a short murmur, he skipped through a large chunk of lyrics before belting the chorus.

“And you can tell everybody this is your song. It may be quite simple but now that it’s done. I hope you don’t mind! I hope you don’t mind! That I put down in words, how wonderful life is now you’re in the world.” his voice tapered off as he typed quickly away on his phone. Niall struggled to contain his smirk as he recognized Harry’s telltale behavior, digging back into his macaroni.

“Excuse me, Harold?”

“Mmm?” Harry hummed, not looking away from his phone.

“And who exactly has you in this titillated mood?” he asked, grinning as Harry looked over at him with a familiar knit in his brow.

“What are you on about?”

“You just seem a bit smitten. Did you, by any chance, take a liking to someone you met tonight?” he asked coyly. Harry’s glare deepened for a moment before he rolled off the counter, holding the pillow to his chest.

“M’sleeping here tonight.” Harry declared grumpily, turning to make his way out of the kitchen.

“Aw, Harry!” Niall called after him. Harry turned slowly in the door way.

“What?”

“I’m sorry!”

“About what?”

“For making you a sad, sad boy.”

“I’m not a sad, sad boy.”

“You look like a sad, sad boy.” Niall pointed out. They stood in silence for a moment, Harry obviously thinking over his rebuttal.

“Goodnight, then.” he finally said, giving up with a sigh and turning away once again.


“Niall-”

“No one really likes him.”

“Louis likes him.” Harry pointed out.

“I’m just saying, if Louis finally came to his senses, and then maybe decided to focus on somebody else, no one would really be sad to see Joshua go.”

Harry tried to keep his face unreadable; unimpressed. He scrambled to think of something to say that might get Niall off his scent - keep him from knowing the exact way his pulse had started
Instead, he turned on his heel and marched away, feeling the corners of his smile turn up in a way they hadn’t in years. By the time he reached the spare room, his mind had wandered far out of his own grasp.

~

Present Day

That was the ceiling.

The ceiling was white.

The walls were white as well.

Apart from these few thoughts, nothing was slotting into place as Louis’ mind whirred awake. His vision felt somehow heavy, despite the dizzying lightness in his head. Stretching weakly, the stiffness in his limbs and joints fought back against him with a dull ache.

This was met by a simmering throb which pulsated down the left side of his body, emanating from his shoulder. The thought came at him like a sharp jolt, painful as it worked against the turgid grain of his sleepy mind.

Did I fall down the stairs?

The pain was distinctly familiar, washing an image of a starlit sky and towering set of stairs across his vision. But that wasn’t it - that wasn’t right. This was something else. Something new. Where was he?

With another coarse slice through his thoughts, the truth electrified him.

I’m dead. He killed me. I’m dead.

He shot up into a sitting position, the movement sending a ripple of ache through his arm and setting his head spinning. Through the haze he felt a bite - or was it a prick - in his arm. Looking down he saw a needle disappearing into his flesh, with a cord leading up to a drip bag hanging over him.

Hospital. This is a hospital. I’m in a hospital.

Once again moving too quickly, he looked to the opposite wall, seeing a large window looking out into the hallway. His eyes landed on the first familiar image as he recognized a man with his back to the glass.

“Liam.” he said weakly, coughing against his stony vocal chords. Liam was chatting with someone - a nurse, or something - completely unaware that Louis was awake. “Liam!” he said again, mustering all his strength, but he was still too quiet to alert anyone.
He breathed deeply, willing his mind to concentrate enough to get someone into his room. How did this work? Shouldn’t there be a bell, or something to press? Why wasn’t anyone in here? Why wasn’t anyone helping him?

*Where’s Harry?*

Louis’ mouth went dry instantly as the panic fluxed through him, awakening every muscle in his body. The adrenaline was ice cold, constricting his breath and setting his heart at a fluttering pace. His head whipped back and forth desperately, yearning to see Harry tucked away into some corner, safe and sound and ready to take Louis into his arms.

But he wasn’t there. He was so shockingly absent that tears were already sprouting in his eyes. He looked back to the window, this time propelled by manic desperation.

“Liam!” he shrieked, his fear ripping through his throat. Liam spun around instantly, racing into the room with shock written across his face. “Where is he? Liam? Where is he?”

“What? What?” Liam asked as he came to Louis’ side, the nurse just behind him.

But Louis’ brain was moving at a rapid speed now, his paranoia growing at an exponential rate every second that went by without knowing where Harry was.

“He shot him, didn’t he? Joshua shot him? Liam! Please!”

“You need to calm down.”

“Where’s Harry?” Louis whimpered, ready to throw himself out of the bed to find him. “He’s alive? Please. Please.”

“Lou-!”

“No, please. Please!” Louis’ eyes were swimming so heavily that he barely even registered Liam taking out his phone until he was pushing it into Louis’ face, Harry’s name flashing across the screen.

“Yeah? Liam? Is something wrong?” Harry’s low voice sputtering through the tiny speaker.

Stunned, Louis’ wet eyes flicked back and forth between the phone and Liam.

“He’s just down the block getting tea.” Liam explained. “You literally picked the only five minutes he hasn’t been glued to your side to wake up.”

Relief fell so hard on Louis that it took him a inordinate amount of time to remember how to lift his hand up and take the phone from Liam.

“Baby?” he asked, pressing the phone to his ear with a shaking hand.

“You’re awake!” Harry exclaimed, also gushing with a profound relief. “Are you okay? Liam’s there?”

“Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?” Louis asked, swallowing back the unrelenting flood of emotion that was choking him.

“What? No, love. I’m not hurt. I’m on my way back right now. I’ll be there in thirty seconds.”

“Hurry, please.”
“I am.”

“Hurry faster.”

“Literally sprinting out of this Starbucks right now.”

“I love you.” Louis said, his voice cracking weakly as he closed his eyes and leaned back into his bed.

“I love you, too.”

“But I really mean it.” he said, causing Harry to laugh quietly.

“I really mean it, too. I’ll be right there.”

Louis was nodding as he hung up, his hand falling limply to his side as a warm calm seeped into him. He was stricken by how powerfully he was feeling the relief about Harry, until he noticed the nurse adjusting his drip.

“I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake.” she said warmly, exiting the room. He watched her go, feeling Liam’s eyes hanging on him as the silence hung heavy.

“Joshua shot me.” he said, voicing the realization aloud. It was followed by a dark laugh that felt hollow in his lungs. Liam bit the inside of his cheek as he looked over to Louis’ shoulder. Louis followed his line of sight, only now assessing how heavily it was bandaged.

“Louis?” Liam asked quietly, a subdued fear looming in his voice. “Can you feel your hand?”

Louis swallowed hard, looking over to Liam’s stony face, before fixing his attention back on his motionless hand.

“I can’t move it.” he said, strangely calm as he continually tried to clench his fingers, feeling nothing in response. “Is that - is there something wrong with my hand?”

“There might be. Yeah.”

“Forever?”

“They said physical therapy might help.” he said quickly. “But - but you might not completely go back to normal.”

Louis was nodding again, breathing heavily to let the cool air blanket his burgeoning anxiety. He looked back down at his hand, lying there lifelessly. It didn’t quite feel real; any of it, really. It seemed completely likely that he had just been sucked into some elaborate nightmare, especially with the way his thoughts were growing fuzzy and dismantled.

“Where is he?” he suddenly asked. “Li?”

“Huh?” Liam asked, as if awakening from a stupor.

“Where’s Joshua?” he asked. Liam blinked heavily and opened his mouth, but no sound came out. “Liam? Did they catch him?”

“Erm-” Liam muttered, running a hand over his face and avoiding eye contact.

“What?”
But they were interrupted as Harry crashed into the room, going immediately to Louis’ side. He quite nearly pounced on him, grabbing both sides of his face and kissing him deep enough to convey his happiness at seeing Louis awake. Louis kissed him back, pressing into him despite the numbness melting into his skin, until Harry suddenly pulled back.

“Sorry, did I hurt you?” he asked.

“I think I’m very high.” Louis responded blankly. “So, no.”

Both Harry and Liam chuckled as Harry pulled up a chair by the side of the bed and took Louis’ good hand.

“Do you need anything?” Harry asked, his eyes glimmering over a massive smile. Louis shook his head as he just watched Harry, drinking in the fact that he was here, alive and safe.

But as his eyes focused in, he couldn’t miss the pallid sheen to his face and dark bags beneath his eyes; the ghost of a bruise Joshua had left a week ago. He lazily pulled his good hand up to cup Harry’s cheek, feeling cold sweat gathered there.

“You look sick.” Louis commented as Harry gently pulled is hand away, holding it. He looked down, as if trying to sweep away his shame. It was clear that whatever drugs he’d taken the night before, they were fading away and leaving a shell in their wake.

“Have you tried to move your hand?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Why does he always have to fuck with my shoulder, huh?” Louis asked, a strange wave of mirth settling in. Suddenly, his predicament seemed oddly funny. “Like, it was this same shoulder last time. What’s his deal? What’s he going to do to it next time?” Louis looked over to Liam and Harry to see if they thought he was as hilarious as he found himself, but a darkness had fallen over them both. The air somehow felt thicker, mustier. Harry was looking at Liam fearfully, who was intent on staring at his own lap. “What’s going on?”

Harry bit his lip as if physically trying to withhold any words that might spill out of his mouth. Liam finally looked up at Harry, sharing a knowing glance with him. The panic that had waxed and waned so many times already was building up again.

“Harry? What’s happening?” Louis asked again. Harry looked utterly torn, looking back and forth between the two of them.

“You should tell him.” Liam said, clearing his throat as his voice cracked uncharacteristically. “What we were talking about earlier. You should tell him.” he said resolutely. Harry now looked absolutely terrified, but nodded all the same. “I’ll go find Zayn, and then we can all talk together. Okay?”

Louis’ brief moment of humor had abated to boiling frustration, tired of being held on the end of a rope while everyone around him argued about who should tell him what was happening.

Harry nodded heavily, looking away from Liam as he got up and left the room. Louis watched Harry impatiently, eager for him to just answer the question. Why was everyone being so dramatic? How difficult was it to just answer Louis’ question?

Something flipped in his stomach as Harry leaned forward, preparing himself. Shadows were falling heavily on his gaunt complexion, and suddenly everything about the moment was horrifying Louis. Harry took Louis’ hand again, turning his palm over and idly rubbing his thumb over the lines. His fingers looked colorless against Louis’ skin, as if he were completely drained of...
blood. The image was making Louis feel sick.

“Harry, please.” Louis sighed. “You look so sick and you’re not answering my questions and - just - please tell me what’s happening. You’re really freaking me out.”

“I’m fine, Lou, honestly.” Harry said, his eyes bloodshot and tinged with melancholy. “But it was only a few days ago when our roles were reversed. When you were sitting here, and I was in a bed like that. And, just - if you felt even a sliver of what I’m feeling right now…” he exhaled heavily, as if releasing his emotions. “I don’t know how you’ve done this. How you’ve stuck with me if I keep making you feel like this.”

“Harry.”

“I have to go to rehab.”

Neither of them moved, breathed, or even blinked. The words were there, burned into his ears, but somehow they weren’t making sense yet.

“What?”

“I can’t keep doing this to you. You need better from me.” he said, some strength collecting behind his words. “Even last night, when you hadn’t woken up yet and they kicked us out of here for the night - I knew that you would need me today. You’d need all of me, not sick or tired or distracted. But I still couldn’t deal with it. So I got as fucked up as I could until I passed out. You were here with this gaping hole in your shoulder, and I was back at my house fucked out of my mind.

‘And now I don’t even know what to do, because you need me. You need me here but I couldn’t even stay sober for one night. But I was so stupid to not realize how much this was hurting you - and I don’t know what to do.’

He looked at Louis beseechingly, his eyes begging for some sort of response; some sort of guidance. He could see that Zayn and Liam had returned, lingering outside by the door as they gave Harry and Louis privacy.

“How long?” Louis asked lightly. “How long would you be gone?”

“Eight weeks.” Harry answered. Louis looked away suddenly, having no idea how he should respond to that. He couldn’t face it. He couldn’t even think about it. He needed to change the topic. “Where’s Joshua?” he asked. Harry’s face sunk, and Louis’ dread deepened. “Please. Please just tell me.”

Harry’s face was contorted with pain, and he leaned in further, fixing his eyes on Louis. He could already sense it, feel what Harry was about to say, but knew that it couldn’t be possible. Harry just needed to spit it out, and Louis would know it wasn’t true.

“God, Louis. I can’t.” Harry choked, looking behind him for some assistance. Zayn and Liam saw the signal immediately and entered the room again, but they were moving much too slowly for Louis’ sanity. Everything was just moving too slowly compared to Louis’ thundering heart.

“Where the fuck is he?” Louis demanded, actual anger finally taking over. “I’m fucking tired of this so just tell me where he is! Did they catch him? Is he still out there?”

Liam and Harry were both taken aback by the harshness of his voice, but Zayn’s serene disposition couldn’t be phased. He took the initiative, stepping to Louis’ side and looking him straight in the eye. Louis felt quieted by his gaze.
“Louis.” Zayn said, his voice solid.

“Where is he?” Louis asked one last time, barely above a whisper. His heart rate took a sudden dip, falling to a plodding pace that beat deafeningly in his ears.

*Thump. Thump.*

“They found his body at his flat.”

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

“They think he climbed your fence, and was waiting at your house for awhile. He might have been there an entire day, waiting for you to come home.”

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

“He went back to his flat. They’re still investigating, but right now, they’re pretty sure it was a self-inflicted gunshot wound.”

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

“Is he okay?” Louis asked, not recognizing any part of his own voice.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

“He’s dead, Louis. Joshua is dead.”

“No he’s not.” The words spilled out of Louis before Zayn had even closed his mouth.

“He’s—“

“Nope.” Louis repeated, having completely lost control of whatever part of his brain turned thoughts into words. “No, Zayn.”

He turned away from them, reaching to the syringe in his arm to pull it out, ready to get out of bed. This catapulted everyone into action, with Liam running around the bed and pulling Louis’ hand away.

“Louis!”

Time was somehow slowing down, sinking into something tangible that weighed down on every inch of his body. But somehow, paradoxically, everything was moving far too quickly. Too quickly for Louis to keep up with as everyone convalesced on him; struggling to keep him in his bed as he relentlessly tried to free himself.

“Where is he?” he kept asking, desperate for the truth. He needed to know the truth. Joshua could be anywhere at that point. He could be in that room with them, a gun pointed at their heads. “Are they looking for him?”
There was a shot of pain, and he saw a streak of red shoot down his forearm.

“Fuck. Louis, stop!” Liam begged. “Someone grab a nurse! Zayn!”

Louis could hear Zayn rush away, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the droplets of blood forming on his arm where his syringe used to be. The blood was violently red, vibrant, and yet he couldn’t feel it. He was bleeding, but he couldn’t feel it.

He heard his desperate breathing before he the lightheadedness set in. He fell slowly back onto his pillow, panting harder and harder, yet somehow unable to get any oxygen.

“Louis! Baby! Please!” Harry was yelling at his side, cupping Louis’ face and forcing him to look at him. “What do you need? What can we do?”

“Harry.” Louis choked, feebly wrapping his fingers around Harry’s wrist and tugging. “Hold - I need - Harry!”

“Yes? I’m right here. What do you need?”

His vision was warping, Harry’s frightened expression wavering as Louis continued to pull at his arm.

“You. Please. Please.” he muttered, pathetically attempting to scoot over in the bed. Harry complied quickly, crawling in beside him.

“Careful, careful.” Liam warned, his hands hovering protectively over Louis’ shoulder as Harry lowered himself onto the sheets.

Louis, however, didn’t currently have a single ounce of worry for his own bodily safety, and wholeheartedly threw himself into Harry’s arms.

There were more people in the room, he could hear them, could feel someone lifting his arm and pulling it away, but all he could focus on was burrowing as deeply into Harry as was possible. He pressed his forehead into Harry’s neck, feeling his fingers running through his hair, and clenched his eyes painfully tight.

He felt Harry enveloping him - could smell him and feel the rumble of his voice through his body - but the panting wouldn’t stop. He was breathing so relentlessly that his lungs ached, and yet he couldn’t stop. Even as his mind teetered, his body growing distant and the room going cold, he couldn’t slow the onslaught of breaths.

Harry was slipping away, so he clenched harder, knowing that his fingers had probably gone white, so numb they could fall off, his mind awash with static and white crested waves that sloshed back and forth.

The waitress was standing over them, her face obscured by the harsh light of the diner. He clung to Harry even harder, wrapping himself around him in that booth, knowing that he had to protect him. She was going to take Harry away if Louis didn’t protect him - didn’t give him his hoodie. Harry was cold, wasn’t he? He needed Louis’ hoodie.

But it wouldn’t come off. His arm was unresponsive, not cooperating as he tried to relax the sleeve off. Fucking come on, already. Harry’s cold. He needs the hoodie.

Shit. The funeral. He’d almost forgotten. They had to leave now or they were going to miss it. Where was his car? Could they walk there?
“We’re going to be late.” Harry told him, but Louis already knew that. Didn’t he realize that Louis already knew that? He knew they were going to be late. He didn’t need someone there to keep reminding him.

The diner was already gone, the impatient waitress already a distant memory that couldn't touch them anymore. She wouldn’t be able to find them in this garden, not when the flowers were this tall.

They were poppies, Louis realized. Massive and swaying in the sunlight, so virulently red they must have been washed in blood. Harry liked poppies. He used to pick them when he was a boy. Poppies just made Louis sleepy.

But where was Harry? He’d just been there, holding his hand, but now he’d faded away. He’d been swallowed up by the forest of towering flowers. They were thickening on all sides, snaring around his wrists and tangling themselves in his clothes. He was so tired. He just needed to find a bed.

Shit. No. The funeral. They were going to miss it, and they couldn’t miss it. Where was Harry?

He strained against his own throat, calling out as loudly as he could, but only hearing a restrained rasp in response. He pushed harder, the veins in his neck ready to pop, but still no sound came out. No one could hear him, not even Harry.

He lost Harry.

He opened the front door, stepping into the familiar sitting room.

“Mum!” he called out, once again muffled. There was no way she was going to hear him, and they had to get to the funeral. They were going to miss it, and he still couldn’t find his car.

The staircase wasn’t working properly, with each step sending him practically off balance and forcing him to cling to the handrail. He only felt that he was on solid footing when he reach the landing, finally seeing his sisters and his mum. Were they too young for the funeral? They were just kids.

The hallway lengthened before him, the floor stretching out beneath his feet until it was paper-thin. With one step, it gave way and he was tumbling down. His stomach plunged, weightless, until he was lying on his back. The stairs glared back down at him, knowing that he’d never be able to climb back up.

He could hear them, his whole family, crying out his name with painful desperation. He wanted to call back, but his throat was still solid and unyielding. They thought he was dead. Everyone thought he was dead. If he didn’t get to the funeral, everyone was going to think the fall killed him.

The shards of ice cream cone were still littered across the roadway where it had been lofted out of Harry’s hand. The limo whipped away, not caring about the passenger it had just lost. The freeway was barren as far as Louis could see. Why wasn’t anyone else here? It was time for the funeral. Why hadn’t anyone else come?

“Louis?”

Joshua offered him his hand, and Louis already knew his skin would be cold before he took it. He couldn’t feel him, but somehow he knew that Joshua’s skin was ice, melting underneath his grasp.

His eyes popped open with a sudden intake of breath, the hospital room coming back into focus.
“Sorry. Did I wake you up?” That was Nona’s voice. Nona was standing next to him.

His thoughts curdled, slowly processing where he was, and what he was doing there. Harry stirred awake beside him, his limbs still wrapped loosely around him.

“You okay?” he muttered as Louis continued to take in the room. The lighting had changed, finally making him realize that he had fallen asleep. Apparently he wasn’t the only one, as he noticed Liam and Zayn in the corner. They were napping in one of the lounging chairs, Zayn splayed across Liam’s chest. “Lou?” Harry asked again after Louis’ unresponsiveness.

“Yeah” he answered quickly, looking over at Nona. She was standing beside a few arrangements of flowers, and it looked as if she’d been trying to organize them for him when he’d woken up. “Hi.” he breathed as he saw her, smiling lightly.

“Hi Lulu.” she said back warmly.

But then it slithered into him like poison, the words that were scorched into his ears.

He’s dead, Louis.

He leaned back, physically clenching every part of his body he still had control over, hoping that that would somehow keep the thoughts at bay. Harry sighed heavily, and Louis looked over at him in concern. He was even more sweat-glazed than before, with pain written clearly across his features.

“Harry?” he asked.

“I’ll be right back, okay?” Harry asked, quickly scrambling out of the bed and rushing from the room. Louis watched the empty spot in the doorway where Harry had disappeared.

“Probably withdrawals.” Louis muttered, thinking aloud. He looked back at Nona, partially hoping that she’d disagree with him, give him some other explanation as to why Harry had fled so hastily. But she just looked back at him forlornly.

“Louis, I’m going to stick around in LA for awhile.” she said, causing Louis to both smiled and shake his head immediately.

“Nona, you don’t have to put your life on hold for me.” he beseeched her, but she was already moving on.

“I brought over some gift baskets.” she whispered, trying to change the subject. “There’s a bunch showing up at your house. Niall’s back there trying to organize everything. I think he’s a little afraid of coming to the hospital, but he’s trying to be helpful.”

Louis nodded, looking over at the reason she was keeping her voice so low: their slumbering friends who, until very recently, had been estranged ex-boyfriends, but were now snuggled together. However fleeting of a feeling it was, he was deeply happy to see the two of them together again.

But then the irony hit him, that these two would find their way back to each other just as Harry was about to be ripped away. He swallowed hard, the image darkening on him.

“Harry’s throwing up somewhere, isn’t he?” Louis asked lightly, still staring at Zayn and Liam. Even though he wasn’t looking at her, he could see Nona shifting uncomfortably in his peripheral. It ripped at him, not being able to go after him; hold his hair, rub his back and tell him it was going
to be over soon.

And with dull realization, he knew that this wasn’t going to work. He couldn’t be compelled to throw everything aside to coddle Harry while he couldn’t even use his left arm. This wasn’t going to work. He couldn’t give Harry the support he needed.

Wasn’t he supposed to be high? Why was his mind working like this?

“He’s leaving me.” Louis said quietly, giving Nona a sad smile that was threatening to melt into a deep frown. “Harry’s going to rehab.”

“Oh, Lulu.” Nona said, scooting in. “I know it sucks, but he’s going to get so much better.”

Louis nodded, repeating that over and over to himself.

“I’m just going to miss him.” he said quietly, looking up at Nona when she didn’t respond. Her eyes were fixed on the door, which Harry was currently teetering in. He was watching Louis with solemnity, looking so pale that he might fade away if the slightest breeze whistled through.

“Oi! You two!” Nona snapped at Liam and Zayn, instantly waking them up. They looked around in panic for a moment before remembering where they were. “Sorry, lovelies. Would you mind escorting me down to the cafeteria?”

Liam cocked an eyebrow in confusion, until he noticed how awkwardly Harry was holding himself in the doorway.

“Course.” he mumbled, waiting until Zayn slid off his chest to get up. He slinked tiredly past the bed as Zayn approached Louis.

He idled at the side of Louis’ bed with a watery smile that glistened in his eyes.

“Hey, mate.” he said happily.

“Hey, Zayner.” Louis responded warmly. Zayn smiled until the corners of his eyes crinkled, finally leaning in to kiss the top of Louis’ head and exit the room with Liam and Nona. Harry seemed to slump where he was standing, all smiles fading as he traipsed over to Louis’ bed. He knew to climb in next to him yet again, hooking an arm around him and nuzzling their foreheads together. They both let out lengthy breaths, relaxing into each other.

“Eight weeks?” Louis asked quietly, feeling Harry nod. “But - I mean - we know how to do long distance. We can still talk all the time.” He waited for Harry’s response, the air growing thicker every second that he didn’t say anything. Working against the stiffness that had swollen in his body, he lifted his head to look at Harry. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Well, this place that Niall helped me find, it’s really good. It’s exactly what I need right now. But it’s really immersive.” he explained. “They put a lot of emphasis on keeping the outside world outside.”

“So we can’t talk?”

“We can write letters.” Harry answered, his voice growing strained on the last word.

“Don’t go.” Louis responded immediately, as if it were a knee jerk reaction. Harry’s face reacted with surprise before he cupped a delicate hand around Louis’ cheek.
“I won’t! I don’t have to. I can stay right here if you want.” he said quickly, stroking Louis’ cheekbone as if to calm him. “Whatever you want, that’s what we’ll do.”

Louis plunged himself into the green eyes that were staring at him, bordered with red exhaustion and frighteningly pale skin. His skin was still glazed with a cold sweat, the dark bags still hanging under his eyes.

All Louis wanted to do was lift his arm and grab Harry’s arm gently; take his hand into his own. But his limb didn’t even twinge, lying there numbly no matter how much Louis concentrated. And that brought him back to reality, wading through the irreconcilable need to keep Harry close and in his grasp. He closed his eyes and snuggled back in, hooking his head under Harry’s chin.

“I want you to be happy.” he admitted. “And healthy. I don’t want you to hurt anymore. You deserve to feel better.”

“I would leave tomorrow, Louis.” Harry said. “I’d be gone. Tomorrow morning, I’d have to go. If I put it off I’m never going to be able to get myself to leave you.”

Louis nodded into Harry’s throat, still not opening his eyes. If he opened his eyes, it might dull his other senses. He might not be able to smell the scent of Harry’s skin, or feel his warm arms around him.

“But why does it have to happen all at once, though?” Louis mused. “Why can’t it just be one thing at a time? Just getting shot, or just you leaving, or just Jo-“ Louis bit his lip, his insides surging uncomfortably. Harry sensed this, kissing Louis’ hair and lightly tightening his grip around him. “I can’t talk anymore, Haz.”

“You don’t have to, baby. You don’t have to do anything. Everyone is going to take care of you.” Harry assured him.

“Can you tell me you love me?” Louis asked, his voice barely above a squeak. The request made him feel meek and helpless, but he wasn’t afraid to let Harry see into that part of him.

“Of course, Louis. I love you so much. I’m going to love you for the rest of my life.”

~

It’s just that it wasn’t a proper goodbye, was the thing. It wasn’t something he’d be able to hold onto for the Jesus Christ eight weeks before they’d see each other again. Harry drummed his hand impatiently against the kitchen counter, already feeling his will to keep standing starting to wane.

He slipped down to the tiled floor, bringing that bottle of gin that had been lingering by the sink down with him. He’d bought it at the first liquor store he’d spotted on the way over, knowing it might be the last chance he’d ever have to get completely sloshed.

He smiled against the cold lip of the bottle before throwing it back, thinking of just how gut wrenchingly ridiculous this all was. Louis was knocked out in a hospital bed at Mt. Sinai because a bullet had ripped through him, and here was Harry, getting fucked up once again, this time on the floor of his boyfriend’s empty house.

The plane was leaving first thing in the morning, Liam having perfectly managed the entire ordeal.
They needed Harry out of the picture as soon as possible, he understood that, but it was still like a blunt knife to the side. Louis needed to get better, and Harry leaving was a pivotal part of that. But that blunt knife was about to ebb away, with every drag of bitter liquid that snuck down his aching throat.

_It hadn’t been a proper goodbye, though._

As if every minuscule part of this situation wasn’t completely unfair enough, why couldn’t he have just had a decent goodbye? They’d upped Louis’ meds, and he’d barely been there mentally when they’d finally been ushered out at the end of visiting hours. He hadn’t understood what was happening; he’d smiled, actually. That’s what Harry was going to remember most: how Louis smiled when Harry was tensing every muscle in his body to keep from crying.

But nobody was here to watch him now, and he’d really taken that and run with it. His eyes were overrun with silent tears, his nose running uncontrollably. It might have actually been more dignified if he’d been wailing, had made a big show of his grief and had gotten everything out. Instead he’d just been plagued by this incessant, quiet crying that showed no signs of slowing. It felt pitiful. It felt like misery.

It was probably two or three in the morning by now, with only a couple of hours separating him from his departure to the airport. Everyone thought that he’d just gone back to his house to get some sleep, but he couldn’t let that paltry excuse for a goodbye be the last that Louis heard from Harry for two months.

He’d had to put together a present for him, something to make him feel like Harry was still there, taking care of him, even if he was going to be hundreds of miles away. And now he was going to get fucked off his arse. Paul would probably call in about an hour to make sure he was awake, and he wouldn’t be surprised by what Harry was doing. He’d just come get him, get him where he was supposed to go. He wouldn't say a single word of judgment. He never did.

Not even last night when he’d called to check up, when Harry had been sitting naked on the floor of his shower, completely fucked out of his mind because he couldn’t for a second handle what was happening around him.

Those were the nights that even Louis didn’t know about; when Harry would snort cocaine until his nose bled, then drink until it didn’t scare him anymore. No one knew about those nights besides Paul, because he’d always have to clean him up off of whatever floor he’d collapsed onto.

_You’re a right piece of shit. You know that right?_

Harry took another drag, sputtering pathetically as he tried to quiet the voices thundering in his head.

_He needs you and you’re a mess. You’re failing him._

He couldn’t stand this kitchen. Not right now, at least. If he could just take a step back and look at it, he’d be flooded with warm memories of him in Louis living in cute little domesticity. Kissing each other in their shorts as Harry made waffles or having one of their little fake arguments over tea.

But that wasn’t the memory looming over him right then. All he could remember was how this room was the only place he’d ever been alone with Joshua.

It had been that morning after Thanksgiving, when Louis had sent the single text, “Harry?” before
he’d fallen asleep, with no further responses. Harry had sped the entire way over to the house, and it had scarcely been six in the morning. When he’d woken up to find no reply from Louis, he lost all of his will to sleep. With hair still damp from his shower, he’d pounded on the front door, somewhat surprised by how quickly Joshua had opened it. He was already awake, though he looked haggard and tired.

He told him that Louis was fine, and Harry knew how suspicious it would have been to ask Joshua if he could go into their bedroom and see for himself. So he quickly came up with the plan, asking Joshua if he could make Louis one of his breakfast smoothies before he could go. The two of them chatted idly in the kitchen, the entire time Harry hoping that the roar of the blender would rouse Louis awake and he’d stumble into the kitchen, sleep rumpled and cute, but ultimately safe.

At last he was able to get into that bedroom and see him for himself, and he could tell immediately that they’d fought the night before. It was just something about how Louis was curled into himself at the very edge of the bed, and his face wasn’t fully relaxed even as he slept. It took everything in him to just leave the smoothie on the bedstand without kissing his tangled tuft of hair.

A few days later at the party, it had been utterly perplexing when Louis told Harry that he’d somehow won Joshua over during their little chat in that kitchen. How could that have possibly been true, when Harry was broiling with a hatred he’d never felt before the entire time? He’d never hated someone like that, and he’d truly hated Joshua.

But now he was gone. He was dead, and he’d tried to take the love of Harry’s like out with him.

He was about to take another swig, when a quiet meow rose from the corner. Glitter padded toward him tentatively, as if frightened by her owner’s grief. He’d brought her with him with the intention of dropping her off at Niall’s, knowing that Louis wouldn’t be well enough to look after her for a few weeks. But with his current state, he knew that Paul would once again have to make sure she ended up in the arms of someone who could take care of her. He’d failed her so many times, just like everyone else in his life.

“Come here, baby.” he whispered, reaching out toward her. She tiptoed over to him, going soft as he circled her in his arms and pulled her close. He rubbed his face against her, knowing that he was trailing his tears along her white fur. “You have to be good, okay? You have to be good for Niall. And if you ever see Louis, you have to be good for him, too.” His breath hitched, and he loosened his grip around her, afraid to hold her too closely. “You have to take care of him, because I won’t be here. And I’m sorry, baby. I’m so sorry.”

He cuddled his face into her fur, submitting to the tears that refused to stop flowing.

~

Four Years Earlier

Louis tried to stop laughing as the door closed behind him, but it was a completely impossible task at that level of inebriation. Joshua smirked at him, pulling him along by the hand as he threw the keys onto the hall table.

Shit. He’d taken Louis’ keys. He really was drunk.
“No, no, no, no!” Louis protested, pulling Joshua back. He slinked his arms around his shoulders, feeling Joshua relax under him.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes.” he murmured back, begrudgingly delighting in Louis’ current mood. Strictly speaking, no, he wasn’t supposed to finish an entire bottle of wine by himself during one of their date nights, but Joshua had been practically desperate lately to see Louis in any mood besides petty and frustrated. After a recent string of bad auditions, it was clear that Joshua was just happy to see his boyfriend smile again. “Let’s go to bed.”

“But I’m right, right? Right?” Louis asked, moving a step closer to Joshua’s chest. “I mean - I came up with Bridesmaids. I totally came up with that.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Oooh, right. Can’t upset my little teetotaler.” Louis cooed, moving his hand to Joshua’s face and running a thumb over his jawbone. Joshua looked down as he grabbed Louis’ hand, pulling it away.

“Don’t call me that.” he said, his voice low.

“Touch not the cup, touch not the cup.” Louis chanted in a gruff voice, laughing at himself. His chuckles drowned out Joshua’s reaction, which was growing darker as he glared back at Louis.

“I don’t like it when you say that.” he repeated, his voice struggling to stay controlled. Louis hadn’t noticed the sudden and stark shadow that had fallen over his boyfriend in the dark hallway, continuing with his chant.

“Touch not the - the cup. Touch not the cup!”

His back smashed into the wall behind him, Joshua’s hands tightening around Louis’ arms. The adrenaline surged through him, sobering him up enough to see the deadly glower Joshua had fixed on him. The levity from a few seconds earlier had been pulverized into quivering pieces, leaving Louis with a smoldering pool of fear in his stomach.

“J-Joshua?” he stammered.

“I don’t like it when you say that stuff.” he repeated coarsely, still glaring at Louis, still tightening his grip.

The fear was immobilizing, this unrecognizable beast simmering down on him through the eyes of his boyfriend. Through the first boy he might be in love with, and he was suddenly terrified to admit it.

“You’re hurting me.” he said lightly, but his words were barely intelligible as he struggled to gain any use of his vocal chords.

“Do you get that? Do you get how much I hate that?”

“You’re hurting me!” Louis exclaimed. Joshua’s eyes went soft, as if suddenly realizing what he was doing.

He jolted backwards, leaving Louis with the aching ghost of where he’d been clutching his arms. Louis watched him, panting heavily for no apparent reason, as Joshua’s scattered brain struggled to make sense of itself.
And, all at once, he was back. As if nothing had happened. Giving Louis the same smirk as when they’d first walked in.

“Come to bed, yeah?” he asked, traipsing away and not even waiting for a response from Louis.

~

Present Day

Zayn was saying something, maybe it was for Louis to move a little faster, but Louis had neither the energy nor the willingness to listen to anything he was saying. He shuffled up the driveway slowly, herded along like a senile old man who couldn’t be trusted to get into his own house on his own.

And perhaps there was something to that, because Louis was already stopped in his tracks as he stared at the spot where it had happened. It was inconsequential, just another square of cement without any telling blemish.

What had Louis expected to see there? Blood? Gun shells? A body?

Maybe something - just something to prove what had happened. At how much had come to a swift end on that spot. It was just glaring back at him, swept and polished, mocking him.

“Lou, come on.” Zayn said gently, pulling Louis’ gaze away from the spot. He was gazing at him with kind eyes, holding a hand out to lead him forward.

Louis knew that Zayn was just trying to help, or at least be somewhat helpful, but he didn’t want to take his hand. He didn’t want to touch anyone. So he shuffled forward, joining his side and staring forward as they approached the house.

It was almost abrasive how normal everything looked. Just like the driveway outside, his surroundings were trying to fool him into believing everything was normal. Things were clean and smelled nice. His closest friends were by his side, smiling at him.

It made him want to tear his hair out.

He might have tried it if he had either the physical or emotional energy to lash out against the normalcy. But, yet again, all he was able to do was weakly comply with what those around him were urging him to do. At this moment, it was to shuffle his way back to his bedroom.

There was impatience behind those exhausted smiles, Liam and Zayn probably guiltily wishing that Louis would move a little faster, which made him only want to slow down. It brought him a small, dark joy to push this minor annoyance onto his friends, which was somewhat disgusting when he thought about it. It was repugnant that a dank, deep down part of him enjoyed inconveniencing these people who had dropped everything to take care of him.

But all the same, did he really care about anything?

“Aren’t you glad to be home?” Zayn suddenly asked, a desperate wistfulness to his voice. Louis
looked up at him in surprise, his sentiment somehow difficult for Louis to understand.

Was he glad to be home? Well, no. He couldn’t say that he felt any differently about being here than he had about being at the hospital. But was this even his home? It didn’t smell like his home. None of the people who made it his home were here. They were both gone. One of them was truly gone.

No. This wasn’t his home. He didn’t know what this charade of walls and carpet was, but it wasn’t his home. He had no idea what he was being lead to beyond that impending door, but he didn’t want any part of it. He wanted to run away, to be overcome by the return of all the strength they’d sapped from him in that hospital bed, then break out of the clutches of all these well meaning smiles. He wanted out. He didn’t want any of this.

He wanted out.

“Stop!” he whimpered, feebly pulling back as the door swung open.

“What’s wrong?” Zayn asked, lowering himself down to look Louis squarely in the face. It was all too close for Louis, too smothering, so he pulled back again, looking past them into his bedroom.

His bed was already made and looked enticingly comfortable after the trek from the car into the house, but Louis’ attention quickly fell onto the number of items piled on top of it. He tiptoed forward, Liam stepping back with an expectant smile as Louis approached a large, brown teddy bear with a red bow around it’s neck. It was surrounded by an egregious menagerie of new, fluffy blankets and pillows in whimsical shapes. There was a hastily written note in the bear’s lap, which Louis picked up with the quivering fingers of his good hand. He could already see the dark blotches of week old tear drops on the corner of the page.

Dear Louis,

I’m sorry this is all thrown together so quickly. I didn’t have much time. I just want you to be comfy and soft and taken care of, so I hope some of this helps. I left some tea and snacks in the kitchen, with some recipes for Liam and Zayn to make for you. Also, my Shearling jacket’s in the closet, since I know how much you like it. But I might have snagged one of your hoodies, so I hope you don’t mind.

But I don’t know how I can express to you how sorry I am on this paper. There’s nothing I can say that would convey the depth of how badly I just want to stay with you. How much I wish I’d taken care of this before, so that I could be the man that you deserve. I’m sorry, Louis. I’m so, so sorry.

I’ll see you soon, so please be strong and try to be happy. Listen to some music. Get out of the house some.

All the love, H

It was far more brief and stripped of the poetic imagery Harry usually employed in his notes to Louis, which only reminded Louis of how devastated Harry must have been while he was writing
it. He couldn’t even stand to sit still long enough to write down more than a few words.

He realized that they were watching him, Liam and Zayn, and it felt like an invasion of privacy. It shouldn’t, he knew that, but this was the last moment he was going to have with Harry for seven weeks, and he had an audience.

“You hungry? How’re you feeling?” Liam asked, and he sounded hopeful. Louis gave him no response, instead tossing himself onto the bed and into the unsuspecting arms of the teddy bear. He’d already named it Bearry Styles. “Louis!” Liam exclaimed, jumping forward meaninglessly as Louis hit the bed with a dull thump. “Your shoulder…”

“What’s going to happen to it? What’s the worst that could happen?” Louis snapped, showing the first wave of tangible emotion he’d felt that day. Both of his friends took timid steps back in surprise. “Am I going to fall onto some gun that’s going to shoot through it again? Did Harry leave a gun for me in this bed?”

Harry.

Harry left him these things.

Harry had been there.

Harry was gone.

Harry wasn’t the only one who was gone.

“I’ll start some tea, yeah?” Liam asked, using the excuse to flee the room. Even though these outbursts of anger from Louis had been infrequent, they’d always been directed at Liam, and clearly it was wearing on him. Louis didn’t quiet know why he’d been so annoyed with his close friend and manager - at least, that’s what he kept telling himself. Honestly, he just didn’t what to admit why he was so angry with him.

Louis nuzzled his head into his new bear, and even though he couldn’t see them, he was absolutely sure they’d given each other some sort of look as Liam left the room. He could feel it in the way that Zayn pulled up a chair that seemed to already be there, poised and ready for him. But what did it matter? Louis didn’t care what kind of looks they gave each other.

“You don’t have to stay here.” Louis murmured.

“I do though.” Zayn answered back, settling into his chair with a sigh of resignation.

Louis sighed back, choosing to give no other response. Maybe if he shut up now, he’d be able to make them think he was asleep by the time Liam got back.

~

Louis was going to get up and get dressed today. That was the plan.

Though he hadn’t taken any measurable steps toward overtaking this plan. The last several days of hibernating in the steadily growing cocoon he’d made for himself had been interrupted only once, when his own grimminess had gotten the better of him and he’d taken a shower.
That had been less than twenty four hours ago, so what incentive was there to get out of bed now? Liam. Liam was the incentive.

“Louis.” he sighed as he entered the dangerously dark bedroom.

“What?” Louis asked. Liam made his way over to the windows and hastily pulled back the curtains, nonplussed by Louis’ grunts as the midday sun poured in.

“You can’t just sleep all day.” Liam complained.

“And what about me makes you think I’ve gotten any sleep since you left yesterday?” Louis asked, slowly becoming accustomed to the weakness of his voice. It was always strung out taut, like the tiniest slip up would make him crack. Liam looked as if he visibly deflated, walking slowly over to Louis with a binder held limply under his arms, and Louis got a dark joy out of seeing some of his own misery reflected in him. Louis had only managed to snatch short bits of sleep here and there in the last week since he’d been home, and he was sure that it was showing on his face by now. Not that he’d seen his reflection. Not that he wanted to.

Liam fell into his usual chair at Louis’ bedside with an air of familiar defeat, looking at the way Louis had wound himself into his blankets and pillows like a malformed pretzel. This was something new for him, an incessant need to be face down in his pillow with his limbs tangled into everything that surrounded him.

“You’re supposed to get dressed today.”

“I’m still going to do that.”

“Are you?”

“Liam. I see the binder.” Louis groaned as he turned over, a move that always seemed to unnerve Liam.

“We’ve still got a lot to talk about. Shit-” he grumbled, pulling out his vibrating phone. “Your financial advisor’s calling me already. Do I need to tell him you’re cancelling your meeting again?”

“Why do I even need a financial advisor?” Louis asked, settling back into the tufts of Bearry’s fur and relaxing, which quickly annoyed Liam.

“For your money, Louis.”

“Don’t need it.”

“Oh don’t you?”

“Nope. I’ll just go live with my mum. D’rather live with my mum.” Louis trailed off, feeling Liam’s eyes saddening as they lingered on him. He finally answered the phone, turning away as if that somehow made the call more private.

“Yeah, no. Today’s not going to work, either.” he explained. “I know. I’m sorry. Maybe we’ll just postpone it to next week to be safe?” Louis listened to the desperate rustling of paper as Liam pulled his binder into his lap and started riffling through it. “You know what, I’m going to have to call you back. Thanks.”
He hung up and sat in silence for a moment, the empty space between them filling with the anxieties of everything that needed to be taken care of. There were follow ups with the police, press for *Kids From Yesterday*, doctors visits, a pending lawsuit against Harry’s management, and the fact that a massive superhero franchise was currently spinning it’s wheels because one of it’s stars was severely injured the week that they were supposed to begin filming in Chicago.

But as heavily as this was all weighing on Louis, he could see how much more it was affecting Liam.

“I can take the bare minimum of what you have to say.” Louis decided, watching as Liam prepared his thoughts.

“You have to eat something today. And you have to get out of bed for your physical therapy.”

“Fine.” Louis agreed reluctantly, his hand twitching instinctively at the thought of those inane finger exercises he was going to have to do. Or, at least, attempt to do while everyone watched him and wished he could just figure out how to close his fist.

“And you should follow up with that therapist I found for you.”

“You’ve reached the bare minimum.” Louis decided, cutting Liam off before he could say anything else. Liam nodded in response, stuck in the repetitive motion for a hair too long as he tried to think of something to say to change Louis’ mind.

Ultimately, he decided to stand up, closing his binder and moving to walk away.

“I’ll make sure your mum’s still going to call again tonight, okay? You’d like that?”

“Mmmm.”

Liam took that as permission to leave, but did nothing to impede the blinding light still coming in through the windows. At least it was some incentive to try and do something else besides struggle through rough patches of sleep.

Getting dressed was overrated. He’d try again tomorrow.

~

Louis was going to get up and get dressed. He really, really meant it this time. He was going to do it.

Things were already getting better, even though it had barely been over a week since he’d come home. He’d taken a shower on his own that morning, not needing help from anyone else while still managing to keep the intricate bandaging of his shoulder dry. This was a major step forward, because he’d never experienced something so humbling as having to sit in his swim trunks and have Zayn wash his hair for him. The first night he and Zayn met, they’d gone down to the beach together, sneaking Jaeger Bombs in thermoses and water bottles. They’d drank to their new status as flat mates before jumping into the dark waves together.

Now, years later, Louis had lamely sat there as Zayn rinsed him off wordlessly, doing his somber duty in taking care of his broken friend. But Zayn had to do it, honestly, because no one else was
there to do it. He had no one else.

The two men who’d shared this bed with him were gone now, the empty expanse of sheets seeming to get larger and larger everyday as he feared more and more that it would never be filled again. That, somehow, Harry would never come back. Something would go wrong, and he’d decide that this wasn’t where he wanted to be anymore.

And as for the other person who’d slept there, he was never coming back. He was gone. Permanently erased.

He clutched further into Bearry, breathing quickly yet quietly. He pressed down against his own lungs as much as he could, knowing that if Liam or Zayn heard a single pang of unrest from the bedroom, they would come crashing in to take care of him.

That was the absolute last thing he wanted. He had to stay alone. That was the objective. To stay alone, then maybe get up and get dressed.

Because if anything had become painfully clear, it was that Louis needed to be improving faster. He needed to be taking the initiative to prove that he could get back on his feet; that he could take up his mantle as Furia again and everyone could stop worrying about him.

“*They aren’t going to replace you.*”

That’s what Liam had promised him the other day, but the words had meant absolutely nothing to Louis.

“I was supposed to be in Chicago yesterday.”

“You’re too valuable right now, Louis. They can’t replace you.”

And as much as his thoughts only functioned to fuel his internal anxiety lately, a part of him had to agree with Liam on this. He’d promised the others that he’d stayed off the internet since they’d been back, but lying had become an easy second nature once his will to care about anything had been stripped away.

He’d been tracking all of it very closely, watching as the media slung vitriol at Harry from every direction. Every outlet that had lauded his coming out had banked in heavily on this new trend; to cast him as an unfurling tragedy who was being undone by his own drug use and partying. What stung, though, was that it wasn’t completely untrue.

There were witnesses coming forward from past years, “former lovers” even, detailing Harry’s raucous behavior and self-destructive history. While most of it was clearly hyperbolic click-bait, little grains here and there were oddly familiar to Louis; like he could believe that they happened. Like it made sense that these kinds of things had happened to Harry.

“Are you hungry, Lulu?”

Louis looked up suddenly, seeing Nona’s head peaking through the door.

“No.”

“Oh well.” she said cheerily, bustling in with a tray of eggs and toast. “Don’t worry. I didn’t cook it, so it’s probably edible.”

Without batting an eye, she picked up the tray from last night with the mostly uneaten sandwich,
and submitted Louis back to his internal mantra.

*I’m going to get up today. I’m going to get up and get dressed.*

~

It was never going to happen, and he’d become more and more comfortable with that concept as each day passed. He was never going to get out of this bed. He was never going to get dressed.

But he was interrupted as Niall opened the door, standing there with an uncharacteristic bashfulness as he took in what had become of Louis. He’d practically become one with chaotic sheets and blankets and this point, completely refusing every time anyone offered to tidy things up for him. Actually, that day, he’d been completely refusing to speak with anyone, shooing them away as soon as they stepped into his room.

Except Niall, as it would seem. This was the first he’d seen of him since that last afternoon, when he’d given Louis the tip that Harry wanted to talk to him. When he’d gotten in that car, then somehow woken up with this bleak, other reality.

“Hey-” he said, stopping to clear his throat. “Hey, Louis.”

“Hey Niall.” Louis responded. Niall swung his arms and looked around the room nervously, and it was then that Louis saw something in Niall’s hand.

“What’s that?”

“Ice cream.” Niall said with a coy smile, holding up the small carton and two spoons in his hand. “Heard that you haven’t been really eating lately.” he explained, pulling up the chair that was usually at the ready for Zayn when he perched protectively by Louis’ side. “Thought I might know how to fix that.”

Louis cocked at eyebrow as he took off the lid, wanting more than anything to snap back at him petulantly, but he found his good arm already reaching for a spoon.

“You like mint chocolate chip, right?” Niall asked, watching as Louis licked the green cream out of his spoon.

“That’s you.” Louis responded, swallowing. Niall shrugged with a smile, and Louis felt the sugar ripple across his tongue, reminding him what sweetness tasted like. “Why’ve you been so afraid to talk to me?”

Niall’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and his prior timidity came back in full force.

“Erm - I’ve been…” he stammered nervously, holding a spoonful of ice-cream in his hand but making no attempt to eat it. He let out a long exhale before looking up at Louis, fixing him with a calmer stare. “If I hadn’t told you - told you that Harry wanted to come pick you up-“

“Goddamnit, Niall.”

“If I’d just know better-!”

“Niall! Jesus! It is not your fault!” Louis griped, enunciating every word in an attempt to get Niall
to understand. He sighed, banging his head back against the wall and ignoring Niall’s murmured outburst about it.

It was so profoundly not Niall’s fault. How could something so superficial as telling him to call Harry even matter in a situation like this? How could something that so barely scratched the surface have made any difference when Louis had objectively killed - when so much had happened.

“I can’t deal with any hypotheticals about what if - like…” Louis struggled to gather his thoughts. “It happened, Niall. It just happened. And it’s not your fault.”

“But it’s more than just that.” Niall admitted, looking down at his hands guiltily. “The whole thing with how you guys met? Like - I knew that Harry was afraid to meet you. That he was afraid to fall for you, so he wanted to stay away from you. And I knew that you had this boyfriend that you were really serious about, but I still set you and Harry up. I made sure you were alone on that roof together by the end of the night.”

“Wait,” Louis said, scrubbing through his tired thoughts to remember the night in question. “I thought that Harry didn’t know I was going to be there. You forgot to tell him.”

“I lied. I could just tell that you’d get on, and that you’d be good for him. And I guess I hoped that you’d be good for him, too. But none of this would have even happened if-“

“Niall.” Louis interrupted. “Are you apologizing for introducing me to the love of my life?”

Niall was about to argue when the words finally sunk in, melting his face into a warm smile.

“You really think he’s the love of your life?”

“Erm-“ It stuck in Louis’ throat, his instinctual response to affirm that of course Harry was the love of Louis’ life. But it was strangled back, roped in by a pain that throbbed from that festering red hole in his shoulder. “I want to - erm - I want to get up, now. Is that okay? I want to stand up.”

“What? Yeah?” Niall jumped up, trying to help Louis as he struggled out of his shirt.

“We should all eat dinner here tonight.” Louis said, aware of how manic his own voice was starting to sound. He couldn’t focus on it, however, as he’d just managed to slide his head through the neck hole in his shirt. “Have Zayn cook something nice. Turn around.”

“What?”

Louis shirked out of his pajamas and pants in one move, earning a slight gasp from Niall as he spun around. Louis clumsily searched around for a fresh pair of pants at the bottom of the closet as he kept talking.

“But yeah. Something nice. And we can all sit at the table and eat.” His voice tensed as he struggled into his pants, panting slightly as he moved to his trousers and hooked his leg into one of
the holes. “It’ll be like going to a restaurant, kind of. What’s the difference between restaurants and eating at home, really?”

“Leaving the house.” Niall pointed out, finally turning around as Louis finally got his trousers up to his hips.

“Overrated.”

He struggled with the last step, the button to his trousers repeatedly popping out his fingers as he tried to fasten it.

“Do you need help with that?”

“No!” Louis snapped, shocked by the hostility in his voice as he more aggressively attacked his button. Again and again, he lost his grip on it. “No.” he murmured, more gently this time. “I can do this myself. I can take care of myself.”

Once again, it popped out of his grasp.

~

“No, that was really me.” Nona laughed, kicking off her pumps and resting her feet on Niall’s lap beside her on the couch. It was kind of an unspoken agreement they had, that Niall was empirically acting as her footrest whenever she was so inclined.

“But it looked nothing like you.” Niall argued.

“Depends how you think about it.”

Nona sunk deeper into the couch, taking a long drag from her beer bottle. It was warm now, after she’d ignored it in favor of chatting Niall’s ear off for the last hour. It was somewhat ironic, since Niall had chilled it especially for her. She’d taken major offense to the British tradition of serving beer at room temperature, so he always made sure to have some in the fridge just for her.

“It looked nothing like you.” Niall maintained, looking Nona straight in the eyes to punctuate his point. They’d been discussing Kids From Yesterday, and how long Nona had to sit in make up to act in her character’s pre transition scenes.

“Thanks.” Nona responded, looking down at her beer sheepishly.

“Did - like - did it suck? Having to see yourself like that?” he asked, his hand idly falling to her knee without noticing. Nona’s hand, however, had moved to her face unknowingly, remembering how realistic the five o’clock shadow had felt on her cheek.

“I cried every time.” she admitted, the truth falling out of her. Niall looked at her with surprise, reaching forward to put his beer down on the coffee table and give her his full attention.

“What? Every time?”

“I transitioned when I was really young, so it’s not like I ever really looked like that - but…” she
trailed off. “I could still see him in there. And I really hate seeing him.”

“Did Louis help you?”

“Louis didn’t know. I would always make it to the bathroom before I started crying. I’ve never actually told that to anyone.”

Niall watched her as his thumb drew circles into her knee cap, both of them locked into slowly forming smiles through the darkness.

“I heard you stood up for me when Eleanor’s stupid boyfriend was being transphobic.” she said, changing the subject. Niall’s head hit the back of the couch as he over dramatically rolled his eyes, remembering that night of the party in New York.

“But how did he actually think he was helping me with that? Does he not realize that every single one of my friends is gay? Does he not get that I grew up in the lgbt community with Harry?” he asked. Nona chuckled at how flustered Niall was getting. “And I think he was just jealous because you were the hottest girl there.”

“Hmm, reducing me to my physical appearance, Horan?” Nona joked.

“No - I mean - not just that your’e good looking. Just - that you’re you - and - you know.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re embarrassing me in my own home.” he pointed out with a cheeky smile.

“Okay. Your turn. Tell me something you’ve never told anyone.”

“How is that what we’re doing?”

“Oh obviously.” Nona said, taking another swig of her beer. He drummed against her legs distractedly. “What’re you thinking about?”

“Harry’s mum is kind of like a mum to me, too.” he said suddenly, not looking at her. He had an odd expression on his face, she could see it from his profile. It was melancholy around the edges, but somehow still warmly nostalgic as he stared at a past that wasn’t actually there. “My parents weren’t - they weren’t the best, I guess you could say. Both drank a lot. Was kind of their thing before they had me, you know?

‘And they kind of fought a lot, mostly with each other, but sometimes it wasn’t enough - fuck.’ he looked down, and Nona sat up, pulling her legs back. She sat cross legged, close by his side. “When I showed up at Harry’s in the middle of the night this one time, must’ve been something like thirteen, fourteen years old, his mum pulled me aside. Told me that I could come over whenever I needed. I could think of their house as mine.

‘I took her up on it a lot. Constantly, actually. And they always made room for me. Always let me into their family. They raised me, pretty much. I don’t know where I would have ended up without them. Everything I do, I just want to find some way to repay her for everything she did for me.

‘But now - now I can’t even take care of Harry.”

“Oh, Niall.”

“I could see what was happening. I know what it looks like, but I couldn’t stop him. I couldn’t take
care of him. Anne practically raised me, and I couldn’t even take care of her son. Of my brother.”

He’d lost his ability to hold it together at this point, crumpling forward to bury his face in his hands. Nona was quick to swoop in, rubbing a hand up and down his back.

“Shhh, Niall. He’s going to be fine.”

“This is my worst fucking nightmare.”

“He’s getting the help he needs. He’s going to be okay. You did everything you could.” she repeated, but he was shaking his head incessantly in his hands. She leaned forward, struggling to pull his hands away from his face and hold him steady.

“Niall, look at me.” she said sternly, forcing him to meet her gaze. “I have no reason to lie to you about this. Harry is in good hands. He’s going to be okay. You did everything you could to take care of him. You should sleep easy knowing that.”

Niall stared up at her, his glistening eyes quivering under her stare, and she was unsure if he was going to cry or argue with her.

He surged forward, pressing his lips to hers.

~

“Louis! Come on! You were doing so great! You put on clothes, and ate with us! Remember all those plans you had for today?” Liam asked desperately, knowing that there was little he could do at this point to rouse the pathetic mess that was Louis Tomlinson from his mess of a bed.

“That was yesterday.” Louis grumbled back, face first in his pillow.

It had, unfortunately, happened again. It hadn’t been a nightmare or a night terror. Not some hell-sculpted panic attack wringing him dry in his sleep. No, it hadn’t been anything that malicious. Honestly, though, it had been much worse.

When he’d woken up that morning, it had been as his old self. There was a deep contentedness lingering in him when he’d opened his eyes, a genuine happiness, almost.

But then he remembered. It barreled onto him with a pounding force, the realization of how heavy the cloud looming over him had become. And for that moment, it was all fresh. It was as alien and impossible as the first time; so mind-jarringly implausible that he could only think to scream no until his throat bled.

He’s dead. He’s absolutely gone. He’s dead.

And then it soured, sharpening with each further realization.

An entire movie franchise was waiting on him to get back to work, and he still couldn’t even lift his hand.

Last of all, most bitter and disheartening at all, he couldn’t tell Harry about anything he was feeling.
All of this had landed him back at square one, glued to his bed with Liam doing everything he could to get him going again.

“Louis! You were going to go see that therapist today, and it was going to be great!” Liam said weakly, feeling his own defeat closing in on him.

Louis rolled over, channeling all of his energy into his lifeless hand. He watched his fingers struggle to respond, shifting into a nearly shapeless thumbs down. Despite the massive effort, the gesture felt very rewarding to Louis as he watched Liam’s face fall in response.

“But—” Liam sputtered, looking over at Zayn who was still standing quietly in the corner. “I got this present for you, but it was supposed to be this ‘yay, Louis’ doing so well’ kind of thing, but now…”

Liam was utterly spent as he rifled his hands through his hair, but his present was apparently dissatisfied with waiting it in the hallway for another second. Louis shot up as she sauntered in.

“Mum!” he shrieked. She raced to the bed, ready to catch him as he desperately threw himself into her arms, despite the sharp pain that rang out from his shoulder. She sat at the edge of the bed, holding her adult son as he clutched her.

Liam and Zayn made their exits quietly, leaving Louis to struggle through hitched breaths into his mother’s shoulder. Her presence was just so permeating, melting away the layers of insolence he’d built up to keep everyone around him from getting too close these last couple of weeks.

“Boo, your arm.” she said, finally pulling away.

“I don’t care.” Louis responded petulantly. She smiled at him, reaching up to wipe away tears that weren’t there. He hadn’t actually cried at all since he’d woken up in that hospital bed, not even when he was alone at night and the memories became as heavy as lead. “Mum.” he repeated weakly.

“I know, honey.” she said, pushing away a lock of Louis’ hair and donning an expression that Louis had become very familiar with in his adolescence. She was about to get what she wanted under the guise of being understanding. It was actually very endearing to Louis to be in this situation again. “So you told Liam that you were going to go see this therapist today. What happened?”

“I don’t want to anymore.” Louis answered truthfully.

“Hmmm.” she ruminated, not buying his response for a second. “I’ll pick some clothes out for you.” she decided.

And Louis knew that no matter how desperately he begged and plead, he was going to find himself talking to that therapist today.

~

“And how old were you when your parents separated?”

“Two.”
“And do you remember it?”

“I was two.”

“So no.” Dr. Carpenter responded, scribbling something into her notes. So far, she’d been mostly unimpressed with any of Louis’ attempts at moodiness. It was dawning on Louis that this was possibly why Liam had chosen her.

“And do you still talk with your biological father?”

“Not really.” he answered, rolling his eyes as she looked over the questionnaire they’d just sped through.

“Well then. Where should we start?” she asked, looking up at him with a reassuring smile. In another context, Louis might have smiled back.

“No idea.”

“Anything big you think I should know about?”

Louis shrugged, wincing immediately at the pain this movement elicited.

“How did you injure your shoulder?” she asked, pointing to it with her pen.

“I’m supposed to believe that you didn’t google me before I came in here?” he asked incredulously.

“Do you consider yourself someone worth googling?”

He opened his mouth to respond, realizing how she’d trapped him. To avoid a complete show of arrogance, he gave in and decided to answer her question, but he wasn’t going to be gentle about it. She was watching him with that same expression; open and inviting. He hated it. He hated that someone could come into contact with the absolute fucktrain that had become his life and still have such a mild expression on their face. He wanted to shock this woman. He wanted to utterly blindside her until she stopped making that face.

“My ex boyfriend stalked me and shot me, then killed himself. A day later, my current boyfriend left to go to rehab because he knew that he would be a burden on me.”

She blinked, then cocked her head.

“Let’s start there.”

~

Liam slung off his tie and threw it onto the couch the moment they stepped into Zayn’s flat, a habit he had quickly fallen back into ever since he and Zayn had tenuously become a part of each other’s lives again. Zayn stalled as he watched him, hunched over and exhausted, knowing that this was the first moment all day that he’d dropped his guard. He never would have let Louis see him like this; never would have let him see how taxing it had been to just get him out the door.

With a strange familiarity, Zayn realized that they had landed in nearly the same spots as that night
almost two weeks ago. It had been the first time Liam had been in Zayn’s flat since the break up. The gentle reunion had happened at the hospital waiting for Louis to get out of surgery, when they’d both realized that nobody else was going to be able to comfort them. It had been quiet until they ended up in the car together, tripping into a shouting match that had lasted until they set foot into the flat.

Zayn had been crying, the insurmountable stress of the last few hours breaking past his typically stoic veneer. He’d practically slapped the tears away, his blood boiling as he tore into Liam with every biting thought from the past month.

He told him that he’d failed him. That he’d broken his heart.

And that’s when the room had pivoted, coiling darkly around them as Liam himself broke. A tear tracked down his face as he told Zayn everything: how he never thought that he’d ever deserve Zayn and was constantly afraid he’d realize this and move on. He’d looked small as he said it.

Zayn had never seen him cry.

Things were stabler, now, the ripe tears having long since dried up. Liam’s body shifted from exhaustion to relief at the familiar surroundings and Zayn moved toward him soundlessly. He hooked his chin over Liam’s shoulder from behind, causing him to jump slightly before turning and taking Zayn in his arms.

Don’t think you deserve me? You dumb, dumb man.

Liam kissed his cheek lightly before letting go, pulling his phone out to listen to his messages. Apparently the fleeting moment of affection had been too distracting, and he looked at Zayn apologetically as he listened to the first few seconds of several voicemails then deleted each of them.

“You want to order something in?” Zayn asked.

“Yeah, I actually-“ Liam cut himself short as his eyebrows rose. His eyes flicked away, his mental state having been dragged away by whoever’s voice was on the other end of that message.

He pulled it away from his ear as if it had physically shocked him, pausing the message and looking at Zayn imploringly.

“What’s up?” Zayn asked, keeping his voice calm despite the sudden wave of panic that was flushing over his boyfriend.

“Remember - erm - when Louis asked us to never mention anything to him if Marion called?”

Zayn swallowed hard, his eyes falling to the phone in Liam’s hand like it was a poisonous beast circling his fingers. It had made sense at the time, Louis’ decision to put a moratorium on any contact Joshua’s mother might try to make with him. Her intentions at tracking him down could very easily be to accuse him of playing a part in her son’s death, and it was just easier on Louis’ mental state to not expect to hear anything from her.

“I think that - I think that maybe…” Zayn stammered, thinking aloud. “I think that I shouldn’t know personal stuff like that about Louis if he doesn’t know about it. Just, as a good boundary with the two of us and your job.”

Liam nodded heavily, also looking down at the phone and the pending message. Suddenly, he looked back up at Zayn with eyes so childlike it sent a shiver down his spine.
“But what if I need someone to face this with?” he asked, his voice so shallow and so very much not himself, and Zayn didn’t even hesitate before he took Liam’s hand and led him to the couch.

They sat down side by side, Zayn taking Liam’s hand into his lap and resting his cheek against Liam’s shoulder, bracing as their attention turned back toward the phone.

With a quivering thumb, Liam started the message over.

~

The sky had darkened above Louis where he sat, the chilly pool water soaking through his jeans from the step he was sat cross-legged on. His eyes were fixed upwards, mindlessly staring at the starless expanse above him.

“Is this a form of protest?”

Louis’ eyes snapped down, surprised at how close his mother had gotten without making a single noise. She ambled around the lip of the pool, watching her fully dressed yet partially submerged son.

“Nope.” he answered, focusing on the slightly cool sensation of the water on his numb fingertips. “Just sitting.”

“There are other places to sit, love. Some that make it look a bit less like you’re having a breakdown.” she pointed out, kicking off her shoes and sitting on the pool’s edge.

“I probably am having a breakdown. Who’s to say?” Louis shrugged.

“How’d you like your therapist today?”

“Fine.”

“Did you cry?”

“No.”

“I cried the first time I went to a therapist.”

“You used to go to a therapist?” Louis asked.

“Course I did. I have a million children.” she pointed out cheekily. Louis felt the first sparks of a witty retort forming, but his energy ebbed away before he came up with anything. Jay noticed his uncharacteristic silence. “Lou?”

“Did you cry about me?” he asked.

“No, no, no. Not in the way you’re thinking.” she assured him. “I was - I was very afraid that I wasn’t doing the right stuff with you. You’re a complex little thing, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“I try.”
“Just when I got my head around the fact that you like boys, I suddenly had to deal with the fact that you really like boys.” she added with a wink, causing Louis to respond with a weak snort. “Remember how you came out to me? Remember what you did to your poor mother?”

Louis smirked, reminiscing on that angst-ridden triumph. He’d been thirteen years old, and Jay had been calling upstairs for him to help with dinner for twenty minutes. He’d marched down the stairs on a self-assured whim to stand in the middle of the kitchen and make the dramatic proclamation, “Guess what, mum? I’m gay! I like boys! And no! I’ll never have a girlfriend or a wife, and no, I can’t change, so don’t even ask!”

He had stomped away then, leaving her to struggle to stir the sauce for dinner with a toddler screaming in her arms, dumbfounded by what had just happened.

“I remember there being tight trousers involved.” Louis pointed out.

“Well I don’t really remember what you were wearing -“

“I do. I looked stunning.” he said, causing them both to laugh weakly.

Louis regretfully remembered how much of a horror he’d been after that. He’d taken full advantage of his mum’s difficulty to process everything by still inviting boys over for constant “slumber parties” as “friends” when there honestly hadn’t been much slumbering or friendship going on. It took a couple of years before she finally put her foot down and enforced some rules, which had sent Louis into an adolescent fury.

It had caused quite a rift between them, only starting to cool off as Louis got closer and closer to the age of eighteen and his much-anticipated independence. In fact, he and his mum had really bonded that last year before he’d moved. His teenage rebellion had slowed down considerably, knowing that he’d be able to more than make up for it once he got to LA.

But, predictably, it hadn’t taken long after moving in with Zayn that he truly missed having his mum around.

“You had one of your nightmares the night before you moved away.” Jay said, her mind apparently on a similar track to Louis’. “Eighteen years old, screaming and crying for your mum. Then the next day, I had to put you on a plane for a different continent. It killed me to send you off like that.”

“Harry’s good about them - the nightmares.” Louis said, understanding what she was trying to get at. “Even when he’s not around, just knowing he’s always there helps.” The word ‘always’ felt stale in his mouth, meaningless for the first time in his life.

“You bottle things up, love.” she sighed. “Always known that about you.”

“Remember when I went on that hunger strike?” Louis reminisced.

“Which one?”

“You figured out that I’d had that guy from my science class over on that weekend you were out of town, then you grounded me for a month, then I refused to eat due to the injustice of it.”

“My little martyr.” she snorted. “And what would you tell that boy, now?”

“That he doesn’t know the beginning of injustice.” Louis answered reflexively, the words settling in icily between the two of them.
“I never imagined this kind of pain for you, Louis.” she said lightly. “Do you know how proud you make me? You’re the first thing I ever made in this world, and for awhile there it was just the two of us. You and me. And I was always so afraid that I’d ruin you. That I’d make some mistake and you’d be messed up for the rest of your life. But look what you are. Look what you’ve made for yourself. You have this beautiful house, and this incredible career, and a man that really loves and supports you. And you’ve done all this yourself. You didn’t need me for this.”

“Thanks, mum.” Louis said quietly, his voice betraying him.

“Now, don’t get mad at me, but when I put those trousers out for you, I stuck a surprise in the pocket. I had no idea you were planning to jump in a pool with your clothes on.”

He squinted at her, the water falling off of him loudly as he stood up and struggled to pry a sodden piece of paper from his pocket. Jay was smiling knowingly as he unfolded it. It was waterlogged but still mostly intact, and covered in Harry’s handwriting.

Dear Louis,

This isn’t going to be a very well written letter, so sorry, sorry, sorry. I know I should be telling you about what I’ve been up to and all of that, but I’m in a really excited head space right now and I’d rather just act on that than explain myself.

Here are twenty of the things I love the most about you.

20. Your ‘happy voice’. The one you use when you’re really excited. I don’t know if you’re aware of it, but it’s really sweet.

19. When you get a tiny little bit of stubble and you look like a rugged mountain man. But just a little bit of stubble. NO BEARD WHEN I GET BACK.

18. When you just say yes and jump on surf boards or swim with dolphins or whatever ridiculous thing I ask you to do. You don’t judge me or talk me out of it, you just jump into it with me.

17. How you always check in to make sure I’m okay.

16. Your eyes.

15. Feeling you. Feeling completely comfortable with every inch of you and every inch of me.

14. How you always put a pillow in your lap for me to sleep on.

13. The things you say. How witty you are and how you make everyone laugh so easily.

12. Your capacity for kindness.

11. You’re the only person I’ve been with that’s shown me what loyalty feels like.

10. How your eyes go squinty when you’re delighted. I could spend the rest of my life watching your delight, and I intend to.

9. Your energy, or ‘hootspah’, if you will.
8. Your lips

7. Your skin

5. Your hard work and the brilliance that comes out of it. Just getting to be here and watch the work you make.

4. How I feel so profoundly safe when you’re with me. I know nothing can hurt me when you’re there.

3. You somehow know how to say the words that linger with me. That get stuck in my head and keep me going.

2. How you’ve never betrayed my trust. More than just being there for me and loving me, I just trust you completely.

1. Your ability to go on. Your endless strength to keep going and make something beautiful from these horrible events that keep following us.

Sorry for the frenetic tone of this, but I just really wanted to say all of these things to you. I love you, Louis, and I miss you so deeply, but I’m doing well and I don’t want you to spend even a second worrying about me. I’m much more worried about you, darling. Please tell me how things are going, and I can’t wait to see the words you send me.

All the love, H.

It sunk so deep into Louis, this affection for his boy, that he completely lost track of where his body ended and the pool water began. After weeks of silence, here this was, a little piece of Harry that he could read and see and hold.

He had to do better. He had to do better for Harry. He had to treat him better because - because of how things had ended up with his last boyfriend.

Because is was Louis’ fault that he was dead.

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve just finished reading the chapter, please let me know how you liked/didn't like it. This chapter was incredibly difficult for me to write, and actually had to get cut in half because it became so ridiculously long. I’d especially like to know your thoughts on the twist at the beginning, since it was pretty recently that I decided for things to take that turn.

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

Allusions to gun violence
A person being physically rough with their partner
Grief over a character death
Chapter Notes

TW: Panic attacks, anxiety, grief, PTSD, allusions to an abusive relationship

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm free to be the greatest, I'm alive."

-Sia

“You look tired today, Harry.” John noted, his characteristic softness melting into his features as he said the familiar words. Harry gave a small, self-deprecating smile as the group’s attention turned to him. “What’s going on?”

“I slept on the floor last night.” Harry admitted. He could see others nodding or sitting back in their chairs, not surprised by what he’d just said.

“And why did you do that?”

“Louis.”

Once again, unsurprising. There was a communal murmuring for everyone else seated in the circle as Harry gave them an apologetic look. By all means, this wasn’t what he wanted to tell them had happened last night; he didn’t want to report his same old behavior over and over again, especially when he’d been feeling so good the last couple of days.

Early on, he’d still been able to keep count of how many times he’d given Louis’ name in response for what was getting him down that day, but after the first week, he’d embarrassingly lost track. That had been the first milestone, seeing that particular pattern in his life.

“Did he write to you again?” John asked, to which Harry shook his head.

“It was a broom. I knocked it over.”

The woman beside Harry breathed out heavily. Everyone in the circle knew exactly what he meant by this, and had been hoping it wasn’t something that was going to keep cropping up; going to become ingrained in him.

“So it was a loud sound again.”

“Yeah.” Harry said quietly, ashamedly. All it had been was the smack of a metal broom against a tiled floor that had gutted Harry into near hysteria.

But the shame was that he had honestly been feeling rather good the last couple of days. It had been calm, rather. He hadn’t been miserable. And that lack of weight on his psyche had been rejuvenating. He’d been able to say that he’d had a good day every night at dinner. It made him feel proud of himself.

This fleeting sense of calm had not come easily, in fact. It had only swelled in after the first wave of initial shock from Louis’ letter had subsided. Harry wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting from
the letter, but in hindsight, he regretted tearing it open without mentally preparing himself at all.

Dear Harry,

What you said to me was exactly what I needed to hear, but I think you know that. You always know what I need to hear. And all I want to do right now is be that same voice for you and just sit back and list out all of the ways I've fallen in love with you, but I just don’t know what to do right now. I don’t even know how to phrase this on something as cold as a piece of paper.

I know that you’d feel so much better if I could just get my life together. Then you could focus on yourself and what you need, and not worry about what’s going on with me over here. I want to be able to do that for you so badly. I just want to tell you I’m doing great and not to worry about me. But I can’t, love. You’re the one person I can talk to about this kind of stuff, and I’m afraid my whole body is going to fall in on myself if I don’t talk to somebody.

This is so fucking hard. It’s so fucking hard. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I can’t think of anything that makes this better. It’s just fucked. I’m mad all the time until that gets too exhausting, then I’m nothing. I feel like I don’t even exist anymore, because it would be too painful to exist. And I feel everyone’s eyes watching me and wanting me to get better, and I hate it so I just snap at them. I’ve been complete shit to Liam. I can see myself doing it but I don’t stop.

I just want to start feeling better. When does that part start? I’m kind of afraid that it doesn’t. That’s the secret they don’t want you to know. It never gets better. And I’m really scared, Haz. I’m scared that you don’t ever walk away from this feeling. From murdering someone. I feel like I murdered him.

God I miss you. I’m heading back to work for a week. Flying out to Chicago. It’s a terrible idea and Liam hates it, but I have to do something or I’m going to get bedsores. I really, really want to know every detail of what’s going on with you. The fact that I go to bed at night not knowing how your day went feels like this whole part has been ripped out of me. Please send me a giant fucking book detailing every little thing that’s happened to you. I love you so much, and I’m sorry I had to unload this on you.

Love you, Louis

Those words had simply hurt. There weren’t any complex emotions swirling around inside of Harry as he read; it was just plain pain. It had seared that familiar phrase right into the forefront of his thoughts, burning there so blindingly he couldn’t even get away from it when the lights were off.

Louis needs me.

Once again it had been a night of sleeping on the floor, wearing nothing but a sheet as the cold, autumn wind whipped through his windows. Some nights he’d even take a cold shower first, letting his body go frigid with icy pin pricks. It was the only outlet he had that numbed the thoughts and the feelings. He’d freeze himself until it was torturous, and the thoughts would slip away. They’d fade into the biting blue fog in his head, leaving him nothing but an empty,
There had been many of those nights, but they were slowly being outnumbered by nights spent in his actual bed, clothed and warm without any dark thoughts barking at him. Before, he would have been free to stew in his own strife endlessly, but now he was forced to be accountable. Now he was forced to face his counselor and the rest of his group therapy and explain why he looked so haggard.

That letter had been a milestone. Harry was so convinced that they were going to let him leave when he read it to the group. Clearly, he was needed elsewhere. Louis was falling apart every second Harry was hidden away at this rehab center. But that wasn’t how everyone reacted.

“Harry, do you think you use Louis to avoid your own problems?” John had asked bluntly, fixing his eyes on Harry so unblinkingly that he could look away. He wanted to argue, to say no, because that was completely irrational. Louis’ problems were Harry’s problems. They shared the exact same problems. But Harry had found it increasingly difficult to argue with John, since every time he started to coax his mind down a road it hadn’t been before, it usually ended up making sense.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that when you first got here, you would have happily complained about how little you were doing for Louis endlessly, but did that really help anyone? Did it make you feel any better?”

“No.” Harry answered quietly. It had made him miserable, aching for something to drink or swallow that would wipe it all away.

Because it had been a revelation, now that he was saying everything aloud. He could hear his own patterns, the way that he obsesses over Louis’ wellbeing and prioritized it far about his own, and John was ultimately right. It didn’t help anyone, it just suspended Harry in grief. Had focusing his every molecule on pleasing Louis helped save him from getting hurt? No. It had landed Harry in rehab when he should have been back home.

And that’s how most of the group sessions would go, with Harry bringing Louis up early on, then John pivoting and trying to get Harry to talk about himself. The frightening part was, without having Louis to preoccupy himself with, the darkest parts of himself were spilling out his mouth left and right:

The times he’d snorted cocaine until his nose bled. The time he’d almost drowned in his pool, by himself. The time his reflection had reminded him of his father so he’d punch it so hard the glass had shattered.

But he felt lighter with each of these admissions, like he was scraping off some festering wound that had been dragging him down for years. That’s when the peace had tentatively snuck in, making it easier for him to get out of bed and put on a smile for the day.

He knew that he needed to tell Louis about these parts of his life; the parts that were so shameful he’d shoved them down where no one would ever find them. Louis deserved to know, and Harry deserved to be able to share it.

Because that was truly what Louis was trying to do with his last letter. It wasn’t a plea for Harry to drop everything and come home, it was just him being honest. Because that’s what they were for each other: companions, confidants.

Harry couldn’t fix Louis. This was the mantra he’d been forced to repeat since day one. He hadn’t
believed it at first, but the truth was sinking in with every repetition. Harry couldn’t fix him. It wasn’t his duty to fix him. It was, however, his privilege to help him, but there was no reason for Harry to hang himself up as he sacrificed himself for Louis’ wellbeing.

They had to be separate while they both made themselves better, and Harry had kind of enamored himself with the poetry of that.

He’d still been working on the next letter he was going to send Louis, coming through on Louis’ request that he write, “and entire fucking book.” The most common theme that he kept writing over and over was:

Louise, you are not a murderer.

And that was the best he could do from where he was. However feebly, he was beginning to make peace with that. This had brought on something new in Harry’s life, that he realized he’d never felt before. He was feeling in control.

But the glaring exception to this was what was now his third encounter with a loud noise, and Harry could currently see John mulling over the ramifications himself. Harry had just been in the kitchen late after a long, uninterrupted session on the piano. Bumping into it accidentally, he’d been met with that shattering, metallic clack against the floor, and all he could see was blood on the ground that wasn’t really there.

He’d failed. He was powerless. He did everything he could and still he couldn’t protect Louis.

It had set him sprinting up the stairs, tearing off his clothes through tears and panting as sweat beaded against his skin.

He knew what it was. The term for it was poised at the tip of his tongue. And yet, he couldn’t accept it. He couldn’t have this thing, this problem that was going to follow him back home. Not when his boyfriend had been the actual victim. All Harry had done was watch.

“Harry, how much do you know about trauma?” John asked suddenly.

“It wasn’t me, though.” Harry stammered, pulling his legs up onto the chair and circling his arms tightly around them. “I’m not the one who got hurt.”

“You did get hurt though.”

“I don’t know.” he responded nervously, and John could see Harry cowering in on himself.

“Why don’t we talk about this a bit more in our one on one session?” John asked, ultimately deciding what course the discussion should take. “What were you working on on the piano last night?”

Harry felt the shame of the last moment evaporate instantly, a warm smile gracing his face that washed the tension from the room.

“My best friend’s in love.” he announced happily. “He doesn’t know it yet, but he is. I can tell from what he keeps sending me. I’m writing them a love song.”
“Is this something you do a lot for him?” John asked.

“No. He never gets crushes, or dates people seriously. But she’s just this amazing girl and he’s so gone for her - and…” Harry faded off, finding no words that would accurately describe the way he was feeling as well as the smile splitting his face.


~

Your ability to go on.

Those were the words written in Harry’s letter. It had been number one, actually, of the twenty things he loved most about him, though the concept was dizzying to Louis. He was stumped as to what he’d ever done to make Harry so thoroughly believe that he had this, “ability to go on,” but Harry wouldn't lie to him.

There must be something there, and it sparked a tiny glimmer of pride inside of Louis.

He was addicted to those words, now, replaying them constantly in his head. With each repetition he was further resolved to live up to them. And that was what had landed him in that plane seat, squirming into the most convoluted positions he could manage in the small space.

“That can’t be comfortable, love.” his Mum commented from the seat beside him. He said nothing back, now familiar with those around him saying this to him. Where his newfound penchant for resting in pretzel shapes had come from, he wasn’t exactly sure, but it was his new thing, and he wasn’t going to let anyone ruin it for him.

Instead he popped in his earbuds, listening to the voicemail he’d archived about ten months earlier of Harry singing the song Romeo and Juliet to him as he intermittently squeezed the stress ball his physical therapist had given him.

He's underneath the window she's singing, hey la my boyfriend's back.

Chicago was already on the horizon, the cast and crew of Metal Heart 2 eagerly awaiting his arrival. After much schedule rearranging they had finally settled on a compromise that Liam was somewhat okay with. They’d whittled down Louis’ part considerably in the section of the movie that was to be filmed in Chicago, moving much of his screen time to the LA shoot next month. Wherever possible, they had been filming with a stand in or stunt double, and now Louis was arriving to pack as much of his scenes into one week of filming as his body would allow.

After that, Louis would head back home to recuperate, ready to take on the more grueling challenges of the upcoming LA unit. Despite freely agreeing to it, Liam’s opinion of the scheduling was shaky at best. On paper, it seemed like an excellent compromise following an extremely unlucky situation, but Liam was one of the few who had a real grasp on Louis’ current emotional
and physical state.

The producers had no idea that Louis was still in shambles, still having entire days where he refused to speak, eat, or leave his room. And yet, Louis had for some reason agreed to throw himself headfirst into the demanding schedule of a full time movie shoot. Liam expected it to end in disaster, and Louis honestly couldn’t blame him.

Liam himself was dozing off in the aisle seat, apparently taking advantage of the first class treatment. He and Jay were the only two who were coming with Louis, since he claimed that he didn’t need an entire team of babysitters to follow him to work. Zayn had more than enough to worry about at work, and Louis had begged Niall to entertain Nona for a couple of weeks.

He was feeling increasingly guilty about Nona’s presence, knowing that she was turning down roles and probably missing her home, all so she could bring Louis food that he never wanted to eat.

So he propositioned Niall, asking him to get Nona out of LA for awhile and show her such a debaucherously good time that the last few weeks would seem like a distant stress dream. Niall had taken this assignment with gusto, sending everyone a picture as the pair arrived in Las Vegas.

Liam, however, couldn’t be talked out of tagging along. In his words, he was there to make sure, ‘nothing got out of control.’ And what a fine job he was doing, drooling from his first class seat as he napped.

“Lou?” his mum said quietly, pulling one of his earbuds out.

“Mm?” he asked. She looked down at this hand which was straining as it gripped into his stress ball. He released it, feeling it ache in protest. That was good though. Pain was good. Pain meant it was coming back to life.

“Almost there.” she smiled, taking Louis’ hand as the tension leaked out of his face.

He knew she was tired, her sleep schedule having been walloped by jet lag. That’s why he insisted she head straight to bed when they got to their hotel. With her noticeable absence, there was nothing to temper the awkwardness settling in between Louis and Liam. He seemed to be orbiting around Louis, unsure of what to do but refusing to take his eyes off of him.

Luckily, he was swept away almost instantly by the hectic life of a movie star. After weeks of complacency, he was suddenly thrown into a slew of fast paced meetings, a frenzied fitting session and a chaotic rehearsal for the next day’s scenes. It was intimidating to face it all at once, and he could already feel himself receding away at every turn from too much stimulation. It was enough that, despite everything he’d promised himself, he eventually approached Liam, voice low, and asked him if he could find him something hot to drink for his throat.

As menial a task as this was, Liam had lit up. It was the first thing Louis had asked Liam for help with in ages, and Louis’ understated gratitude when Liam returned with hot water and honey had forged a small amount of goodwill between the pair. They even exchanged small smiles, something that Louis would have never allowed to happen just a few hours prior.

Even though his energy was being drained at every turn, he still felt heartened to see everyone in the cast and crew again. They all approached him like the old friend he was, embracing him and making him feel truly welcomed back. They would tell him that he looked good and and would give him some warm advice, and he would nod along, trying to ignore that look that everyone seemed to be harboring in the back of the gazes.
It was pity, was what it was. There was no way he actually looked as everyone claimed, Louis knew that. He knew that his face was already thinning out from practically starving himself, that the gauntness was setting in with every passing day. He had the face of someone who was suffering, and he was able to pinpoint the exact moment when everyone saw that.

The one exception to this rule was Eleanor, who greeted him with her characteristic breathtaking smile and a hug that felt so genuine that Louis sunk into it with his every fiber. She had at least some semblance of understanding, and this was endlessly comforting to Louis.

Eleanor carried some invigorating news with her, in that she had finally dumped Thad Dylan on his sorry ass. Triumphanty she announced that she was ready to throw herself back into a sea of eligible bachelors, and with that, Louis decided that they were going out that night in order to catch up. She at first seemed hesitant to Louis’ idea, reminding him that they both had a seven am call time the next morning, but as was her custom, it took only a small amount of sweet talking before she enthusiastically came along.

Liam disapproved, that was clear, but as Louis explained, they were only going to grab dinner before heading back and heading to their respective beds. Nothing to worry about there, right?

A part of Louis had honestly intended to just get some dinner, catch up with Eleanor, then head back to the hotel. For a moment, at least, that really was the plan.

But the moment Liam’s eyes were off him, Louis’ attention was on his phone, clicking through any mention of his name on the internet. He was still supposed to be avoiding any press about himself, and as far as the others knew, he had strictly adhered to that advice. And yet, in the fleeting moments in which he had no one around to police what he was doing, he’d been keeping detailed tabs on everything the press had been saying about him and Harry.

Needless to say, only a few glimpses of headlines had his mind spinning toward a maelstrom, his every thought begging for some desperate distraction. A couple of choice words moved them from ‘getting dinner’ to getting drinks, and it only took one - two - three shots before getting drinks turned to hitting the dance floor at a gay club.

It had shook the entire nightclub, the news that two superstars were gracing them with their presence, one of which was a bit of a gay pariah. Never did Louis mention that he was trying to stay away from alcohol to support Harry, and never did he have a second thought about what hell fire of a hang over was going to be awaiting him the next morning. In fact, he hardly even noticed when Eleanor finally decided to go home, urging him to do the same soon.

He was fully aware that his current stunt was probably already hitting the internet, and that the media was going to lose themselves over Louis finally crawling out of obscurity only to make a drunken fool of himself at a gay club. And part of him wouldn’t let go just yet, reminding him of how it would make Harry feel to see what Louis was doing right then.

But something sickly and dark was nestling into the back of his brain with every drink, something that wanted this to hurt. Something that wanted to swallow up the chaos of how he was betraying everyone he loved. Something that soaked in the sweat of the men surrounding him, dancing and grazing him with their chests and roving hands.

Because, you know, Harry had no way of finding out, did he? He was home free to lean back as these slabs of muscled meat breathed down his neck surrounding Louis like he was their prey.

But, for once, he was in control of the story. Whatever hashtags were going to surface from this, it was because he chose to make them happen. He was finally the author.
The last round of drinks was hitting him hard, though he’d long last track of who had bought them for him this time. The free drinks were coming from left and right, with chiseled, picturesque men leaning against him at the counter and whispering to him about the color of his eyes as he threw them back. He could feel them pressed against him on all sides, their skin simmering with sweat. He could sense them, map them out, even, but he had no perception of who any of them were. They were just surroundings. Something tall and sturdy to wall him in.

Bass was thundering against his every sense, someone’s hand was tracing down his back, and the blonde guy across the dance floor wanted the fuck out of him. He leered at him, the simmering darkness reeking with musk and sex until the lust was dripping from every inch of exposed flesh.

That blonde guy wanted Louis, and Louis wanted to want him back. He wanted to release his last hold on himself, and to collapse into such decadence and self-decay that he grabbed that random boy and kissed him until his lips hurt. He wanted to be able to drag him back to his hotel room so that they could grind into each other until he forgot who he even was. He’d done it before, and he remembered how powerful it made him feel; how in control of his pain. He wanted to want that, and there was a time in his life when it would have come naturally.

But now, as he did everything he could to make himself believe that he wanted that blonde guy, he couldn’t feel a thing besides his stomach turning.

*Just do it. You think you deserve better? You deserve better than this?*

The boy was coming closer, prowling toward him.

*Just fucking do it. No one expects anything better from you. Why not?*

He swallowed hard, his arms going suddenly limp and his rhythm slowing until he was entirely immobilized amongst the throng of dancing men.

*Cheater.*

He was racing to the bathroom, gruffly shoving everyone out of his way as he plummeted into the sobering white fluorescent light. He stumbled toward the tap, turning it on and splashing himself in the face with the frigid water.

It awoke his senses, the sudden slap of cold. His vision warped over his own reflection, his moral compass tiptoeing back into his thoughts.

“Fuck. What are you doing?” he asked with a pathetic chuckle, listening to the sounds of two men passionately going at each other in the closest stall. He put his hands back under the stream of water, feeling the sweat and dirt being swept away, just as the blonde object of his theoretical affections spilled through the door.

He practically fell onto Louis, grabbing him by the hips and pressing him back against the wall. Without a shared word, he swooped in to connect their lips, only pulling back as Louis ducked away.

“I think I gave you the wrong impression.” Louis admitted awkwardly, very aware of this stranger who’s hands were on his hips.

“That so?” he asked, grinning down at Louis as if they were about to play a game.

“Yes, actually. I have a boyfriend who I am very committed to.”
“And where is he?” he asked, looking around dramatically.

“Rehab.” Louis answered bluntly. The blonde guy’s brow furrowed as he scrutinized Louis. He stepped back with a snort of laughter, finally loosening his hold on Louis as he leaned back against the counter.

“Seriously.”

“Do you not know who I am?” Louis asked, a bit annoyed of himself for actually saying that. But, honestly, a better part of the world knew that his boyfriend was in rehab.

“Um, no?”

“Then why have you been hitting on me all night?”

“Because you’re hot?” the boy responded, clearly confused. Louis was equally flummoxed, still not fully believing that someone could be this attracted to him without knowing who he was. “Who are you, then?”

“Louis.”

“No. I mean, who are you?” he asked again, now reaching into his back pocket for a pack of cigarettes.

“Ever seen Metal Heart?”

“Nope.” he responded, handing Louis a cigarette.

“Well, that would explain it.” Louis put the cigarette between his lips, sucking in as he lit it for him. It shot straight to his head, calming the panic that had been edging in as he realized with increasingly clarity what exactly he was currently doing.

“Who’s your boyfriend? He in movies?”

“He’s Harry Styles.”

The boy choked, a puff of strangled smoke erupting from his mouth as he fixed Louis with a glare of disbelief.

“What?”

“Yup.”

“You’re lying.”

“Nope.” Louis responded, pulling out his phone and spinning it around to show his lock screen, a selfie of the two of them back when they’d visited Doncaster. Something reminded Louis that he should, under no circumstances, be having this conversation with a total stranger who could easily sell any part of this to a garbage mag, but Louis was too enthralled by how impressed this guy was with who his boyfriend was.

“You’re dating Harry Styles?”

“I am.”

“Then what are you doing here?”
“No idea.”

“You tired of waiting for him?” he asked. It wasn’t sly, or sexual, just honestly interested as he puffed at his cigarette. Louis took a long drag, feeling the nicotine snaking into the back rooms of his mind, shutting everything off.

“I wish I was tired of waiting for him.” he admitted. “I wish that I could just be horny and shag some random guy in a public toilet.”

They both looked over to the nearest stall, the two men inside still apparently going strong.

“Why are you trying so hard to cheat on your boyfriend? It doesn’t seem like you want to.”

“It’s easier if I just ruin it, right?” he asked, aware of how far his guard had just fallen down. Why exactly was he telling these things to this guy who didn’t even have a name to Louis? But really, who cared? “Just so much easier to ruin everything. Yeah - sure, I could do this thing where I come back to work like I’m not a total pathetic wreck, or I could just be a fuck up. I could get fucked by some random dude then stumble into work drunk. Just easier, right?”

He was almost giggling with how bizarre this was, however darkly. The blonde guy nodded, stomping out his cigarette on the floor.

“Hey, Louis?”

“Yeah?”

“Stop trying to be a shit show.”

“Excuse you?” Louis balked. “I’m not trying to be a shit show. I am a shit show. My life is a total mess. You’d be shocked.”

“Would I?”

“Yes.”

“Shock me.”

“I got shot.”

“Did you?” he questioned, clearly unimpressed.

“By my ex boyfriend.”

“Oh my.”

“And then he killed himself -“ he cut himself off abruptly, unable to relish in that final punch. It was suddenly very quiet inside those laminate walls, and Louis was convinced he could hear the alcohol swilling through his blood.

“And yet, you’re drunk in a bathroom with an attractive stranger, but we’re not fucking.” he pointed out. Louis looked him up and down, snuffing out his own cigarette.

“They used to call cigarettes fags.” he said offhandedly, eliciting another snort of laughter from his audience.

“Relevant observation.”
“Why am I talking to you about any of this?”

“Dunno. Certainly wasn’t my plan following you in here.” he leaned forward, getting an inch away from his face, spellbinding Louis with fear as he waited to see what he was going to do next. “Go to work tomorrow. Work hard. Then go to bed afterwards and tell your boyfriend that you love him.” He gave Louis a final smirk before sauntering out the door, leaving Louis mentally replaying what had actually just happened.

Nothing, right? He hadn’t actually done anything.

“What am I really Louis Tomlinson?”

Louis hadn’t even noticed them until they were in his face, the couple from the stall who were apparently ready for their midnight, bathroom selfie with a gay idol.

~

It was a level of exhaustion that made it physically painful to open his eyes, a fresh ache surging through every part of his body as he turned over to investigate what had just woken him up. Of course, it had been Liam, standing in the doorway and slowly discerning what exactly he was looking at.

His face ebbed quickly from well-intentioned confusion into an expression that made Louis’ heart sink. He looked down at Louis with disappointment. He nodded, as if accepting this letdown as something inevitable. That tiny amount of goodwill they’d built up the day before had been snuffed out, and it made every part of Louis feel like it was churning with embarrassment.

“We need to leave in a half hour.” he said quietly, not looking at Louis as he turned and closed the door.

With that, Louis could do nothing besides fixate on his regret. It was clear that he was hungover, anyone with eyes could see that, and no one on set was mistaking it for an actual illness. They all looked at him like they did before, with the same rotting pity, without a hint of surprise. Louis was on a downward spiral, and it’s not like it wasn’t predictable.

But he wasn’t though. That was the thing. He wasn’t falling apart, and it became more and more maddening with every look these people gave him. He wasn’t trying to pull his life apart by the seams, but his own hung over body wouldn’t let him prove it.

It was startling, this change that had settled in over night, considering that his night of drunken indulgence had been a frenzied attempt to prove just that: he was a train wreck that couldn’t be stopped. He hadn’t felt even a feeble trace of desire to get his life back on the right track since he’d come home from the hospital, taking a sour delight in his own self-loathing and complacency.

But now, as if out of nowhere, he suddenly couldn’t stand it; couldn’t stand to see his own wretched self-destruction reflected in the eyes of everyone surrounding him. He could do better, he really could, if he could just prove that to someone.

He was inches away from breaking down by the time he stole himself away in his trailer for lunch, wishing that he could finally just cry for once and break through this pressure that was building up in his head. His head hung in his hands from his couch, just festering in it, until the door opened
with a familiar voice.

“Lou?” Jay asked, her eyes falling onto his sad visage.

“Hey,” he responded, trying and failing to collect himself. “You’re - you’re here?”

“Thought I’d check on you for lunch.” she explained, stepping in and carefully shutting the door behind her. “Was a little concerned by what Liam was telling me.”

“Mum, I really fucked up.” he admitted.

“How about this?” she asked, quickly falling to her knees in front of him as if he were going to combust at anymore. “You head straight back to the hotel after wrap, and I’ll be there with some dinner for you.” He groaned at the nauseating notion of food, but she continued on. “Then I’ll take care of you until you get to sleep tonight. You’ll be rested up, ready for tomorrow. Prove them all wrong. How does that sound? Can we at least start with that?”

“Yeah. I can do that.” he nodded, weaving his fingers through hers.

“Good. Let’s start with that. Just get through the rest of the day, and then I’ll be ready to coddle you and make you feel better.” she added with a smile. “But did - erm - I don’t really know how to ask you about this, love.”

“What?”

“Did something happen last night? Something that’s going to change things?” she was grimacing, afraid of how Louis was about to answer.

“No, no mum. No.” he answered quickly. “I mean - I shouldn’t have been out that late before work, but nothing bad happened. Nothing that Harry would be upset about.”

“Then why are you beating yourself up like this?” she asked. “Jeez, Lou, the way you were acting, I expected the worst.”

“I’m tired of feeling like this, mum.” he sighed, leaning forward to rest his head on her shoulder. She had just wrapped her arms around him when there was a brisk knock at the door. He sat up suddenly, calling out. “Yeah?”

“Ten minute warning.” the voice called through the door.

“Thanks.” Louis responded, listening as the footsteps trailed away.

“Just get through the day, Boo.” Jay said, rubbing Louis’ shoulder. “I know you can do that. You can do it.”


He’d claimed it as a trophy of sorts, still wearing it on their plane ride home just to prove his victory. The glove have been specially made for him, easy to move and morph into an position and holding his hand in that position. That way, he could hold props, point heroically at impending danger, or flash peace signs at everyone he knew, no matter how numb his hand was currently feeling.
It was custom fitted and rather expensive, and yet, Louis had somehow talked the art department into letting him bring it back with him to LA. He’d promised not to lose it, but he already had a feeling that they were in the process of making a second one just in case.

He kept giving his mum a hang loose sign, almost giddy with how well the last week had gone. Admittedly, every step had been much more difficult than he had anticipated. It was clear that this had been arguably the most trying work week of his entire life, with his body often threatening to give out under pure physical strain.

But the way everyone was reacting to him was fuel enough to keep going. He’d started slow, just showing up rested on that second day and ready to take all the direction that was given to him. It built from there, and by the time it was his last day of shooting, he’d been squeezing great moments out of dull scenes and ad libbing so well that Eleanor had repeatedly blown takes to laugh.

It was intoxicating, almost, to see everyone's pity meld slowly into pride, even though no one around him knew that he dragged himself back to his hotel room every night to throw himself in his mum’s arms, begging her to put him back together. He knew it should feel childish to have relied so heavily on his mother, but it all evened out, since she was proud of him, too.

He’d forgotten what it felt like to have someone proud of him.

This uptick in his life had a notable exception, however, in the form of Liam. Louis still avoided eye contact with him, made snide comments, and generally avoided him whenever possible. He was just as petulant and immature as he’d been for the last few weeks, only now, he couldn’t ignore the reason he was doing it. The reason had been etched into his memories, plaguing him every time Liam got within spitting distance.

It had mangled him to see Liam disappointed like that. It was a moment that he did everything he could to flee from, and yet his face kept coming back to him. And so he behaved like a child, convinced himself that he didn’t care what Liam thought. Gave Liam reason to turn his back on him before something worse inevitably drove a wedge between them.

Even though they were only a few seats away from each other, Louis hadn’t even looked in Liam’s direction that day. He’d grown accustomed to the avoidance, and the two had learned to orbit around each other now, never making contact unless it was completely necessary.

Before the guilt could swell inside him again, Louis bent the fingers of his glove down until only his middle finger was raised.


“It’s not me! It’s the glove!” he argued, garnering an eye roll from his mum. He laughed as he finally snaked out of the glove, curling his stiff fingers as much as he could around the armrest.

He looked back out the window at the tangle of clouds outside, resting happily on one thought that was very new to him. When he got home, he’d finally have something good to write to Harry about.

That thought kept him happy, buoyant, until he finally arrived home and found a fat letter from Harry waiting for him. It was extensive, just as Louis had asked, but the excitement at hearing from Harry ebbed away as he realized how little he had prepared himself for what Harry had to say.

He recounted the tumultuous last month of therapy, detailing all of the dormant demons he’d been
forced to face. His internal revelations spanned pages, and among them was the decision to be thoroughly honest with Louis, not just in words, but in practice.

And that’s where he had dug into his personal history, no longer giving Louis any reason to speculate at the truthfulness of what gossip magazines had painted as Harry’s out of control exploits. Louis now knew, definitely, which ones were true, and with each word it was like an pickaxe needling deeper into his heart.

Louis sunk further and further into his chair on the veranda as he leafed through the pages, slowly the autumn chill that was biting at his socked feet. On and on, he trudged through Harry’s eyeliner smudged history, wanting it to saturate him. He wanted Harry’s nights spent in unrelenting agony to be his own; for the two of them to share the past pain.

What tore into him the most violently was this development with Harry and loud noises, which Harry admitted he had gone back and forth on whether he wanted to tell Louis about it.

*Because there’s this voice in my head that’s telling me that I have no right to complain about what happened. What happened to you was so much worse, and my focus should be on you. Really, I really don’t want you to worry about me. It’s not about me. But I’m kind of struggling with this, and it felt cheap to hide that from you.*

It made Louis run his hand slowly over the paper like Harry would somehow be able to feel him through it. It was just like Harry, to be fighting with some internal force, and still put Louis first. It made Louis wonder how much effort had been wasted by the two of them hiding things from each other, not trying to upset the other, never able to meet in the middle and just be able to say what they needed.

*I need you to stop doing drugs.* That’s what Louis should have said. Instead of wasting months and his dwindling emotional capacity on sneaking around being Harry’s back, trying to lead him covertly into sobriety, he should have just be upfront. *I need you to stop doing drugs because it’s what I need from you, Harry.*

It wasn’t going to happen again, Louis resolved. He’d be damned if they wasted another moment together by skirtling around each other, under this guise of a perfect fairy tail romance that couldn’t be broken by any outside forces.

This thought was cemented by the ending of Harry’s letter.

*What I’ve really realized about the two of us is that the courtship is over. We’re past that. You’re it for me, and part of me actually knows that you’re not going anywhere. I’ve never known that feeling before, but I honestly do trust that you’re staying with me. And I think that’s good for us. I can really focus on getting myself to a better place, instead of constantly worrying that I’m going to lose you while we’re so far away.*

*I miss you and I’m coming back to you soon, and I’ll be such a better man for you, love. I promise.*

Louis knew that he would be better, too. When he and Harry next crossed paths, it would be as
solid people, unwavering, ready to move forward together. And that inspired him to keep pushing; to not wander back into his bedroom to hibernate in the darkness and warmth.

~

Unable to think of a better means of expressing his outrage, Louis reached forward to smack the remote off the coffee table. Jay looked up suddenly, meeting Louis’ seething glare with surprise.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Without answering, Louis turned his phone to face her, waiting impatiently as she leaned in and squinted to make out the tiny Instagram picture.

“Is that Niall and Nona? Oh wait. Oh my god!”

Two weeks later, Niall and Nona were still marauding through Nevada, their Las Vegas updates growing less frequent the longer they’d been gone. Louis hadn’t thought much of it, however, until he’d seen the picture posted to Niall’s Instagram account a few hours earlier. What was depicted through those tiny pixels were Niall and Nona, brazenly drunk and in each other’s arms, standing in the middle of one of those cheap, quicky wedding chapels. Nona’s hair was topped with a kitschy bridal veil, joined by Niall’s clip on bowtie. The caption was comprised of only three emojis: a cake, a beer, and a wedding ring.

“Is she pregnant?” Jay gasped.

“Mum.” Louis sighed.

“What?”

“She’s trans.”

“But - I mean - she can’t-? She can’t get-?” she stammered, miming a pregnant stomach.

“No. Science hasn’t figured that one out yet.”

“Doesn’t seem very fair.” she grumbled as Louis angrily pressed the call button for Nona’s number. “They would have very cute babies.”

“Your commentary isn’t appreciated.” Louis spat as the phone continued to ring, eventually going to voicemail. He hung up and immediately called her again.

“Let me see the picture again.”

“Mum.”

“I want to see her dress!”

“You have your own phone!” he bit back, hanging up as he was once again sent to voicemail. Nonplussed, he called her a third time.

“Yeah, but I don’t know how to work it.” Jay griped as she pulled out her own phone.
“Hello?” came a sleepy voice from the other end of the phone.

Louis sat straight up in his seat, taking in a massive breath of air so that he could unleash upon her a diatribe so powerful her descendants would still fear the name Louis Tomlinson.

“You know what? This is a conversation that needs to be in person.” he snapped. “I will speak to you when you get home, Neanette.”

He hung up and flung the phone to the side, tossing his head back against the couch with an overdramatic groan.

“You will be a horrifying parent.” Jay muttered as she looked at her own phone.

“You already are a horrifying parent.”

“Oh, they’re so cute!” Jay gushed, apparently finally tracking the picture down. “How long have they been dating?”

“They haven’t, though! They’ve never dated!”

“Oh, honey.”

“Don’t oh honey me.”

“Your friends just got married! This is so exciting!”

Louis groaned again, falling onto the couch and pulling himself into the fetal position as he whimpered.

“You’ll be fine, Louis.”

“I won’t though.”

~

“I’m doing excellent, thank you for asking.” Louis said enthusiastically, garnering a look of surprise from his counselor.

“Really?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes, and let me tell you why. Because I wasn’t the biggest fuck up in my life this week.” he said triumphantly.

“And who won that award?”

“Two of my friends got drunk and eloped in Vegas. I’m feeling excellent in comparison.” Louis folded his legs, hoping against hope that this is what they were going to focus on this session. Maybe she was just going to hone in on this act of immaturity, comparing it to how deftly Louis hadn’t gotten drunkenly eloped to anyone lately.

“How’s Harry doing?” she asked instead, deflating Louis’ hopes. He sighed, relaxing into a more comfortable position as a form of defeat.
“He might have PTSD.” Louis said bluntly, knowing that he’d find ways to withhold that piece of information for the entire session if he didn’t just spit it out. In truth, he’d been itching to tell someone about it, so it was somewhat of a bittersweet release to have finally uttered it aloud.

“From the incident?” she asked, rather superfluously in Louis’ opinion.

No, from that time he stubbed his toe in the lounge and screamed, ‘ouchie fuck fuck!’

“Yeah. I guess there’ve been a few loud noises that have really freaked him out. He didn’t go into a lot of detail about it.”

“So how do you feel about that?” she asked, while Louis did everything he could to suppress an eye roll.

Where did you learn that line? Medical school or nineties rom coms?

“Obviously - like - I don’t feel good about it. I don’t want him to deal with that, but it doesn’t surprise me.”

“Why doesn’t it surprise you?”

“Because he’s Harry. He’s too good for this world. There’s no way he could just walk away from something like that without it imprinting on him, or something.”

“You think he’s weak?”

“Weak? What? No. Not at all.” Louis gaped, fighting down his agitation at such an accusation. “He’s just - he feels things really powerfully. He empathizes so much that it hurts him sometimes. He’s not weak. No. He’ll be able to handle this.”

She looked back at him with a smirk.

“Remind you of anyone you know?”

Oh, think you’re so clever, don’t you?

“You’re not going to trick me into saying something that sappy about myself.” Louis countered.

“But I made you think it.” she pointed out. “How’s that going to be when he gets back?”

“We’ll be able to handle it. It doesn’t scare me - or anything.”

“Because you’ve dealt with similar struggles?”

Louis’ eyes narrowed on her, honestly stumped by what she was getting at for once. “What?”

“How you’ve coped with your own personal traumas. You had to deal with them for so long on your own, you must feel like you have some insight.”

“My own - what? I don’t have traumatic stress.” he clarified, laughing slightly at the absurdity of it. Had she mixed up her notes with some other client of hers? She looked back at him, as if what he’d just said wasn’t worthy of a response. “I don’t!”

“You told me that you struggle with nightmares and panic attacks that can be pretty frequent, if I remember correctly.”
“I’ve had those since before he hit me.”

“I’m not saying that they’re in response to him hitting you.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“What do you think I’m saying?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking you!” Louis barked at her, sick of the sarcastic banter that they usually volley back and forth. She bit the inside of her cheek, clearly weighing the benefits of explaining this to Louis or letting him figure it out for himself. In the end, she leaned forward, tapping her pen against the armrest of her chair.

“Trauma has a way of lingering inside of us, Louis. Of sitting in our bodies like a parasite, especially when you don’t have an outlet to vent to. I think you bottle things up, that you’ve been doing it for a very long time. And all of that negativity compounds on itself, weighing you down, and when it comes out in a physical way, like a panic attack, it can be confusing. Like you don’t understand where it’s coming from, because it’s been all of this stress that you’ve carried with you for years.”

“I don’t bottle things up.” Louis scoffed.

“You don’t think so?”

“I know I don’t. I’m an open book.”

“How many people have you told about when you were hit?”

Louis opened his mouth to respond, swallowing back the names of his friends as he realized that he’d never actually told them what had happened.

“I told Harry.” he said, changing his tactic. “Harry’s my person I tell everything to. I tell him everything. We don’t hold anything back.”

“So there’s nothing you’ve kept secret from Harry? Nothing you’ve been holding back?”

Louis once again snapped his mouth shut, having been ready to snap back at her that of course there was nothing he’d hidden from Harry. They didn’t do that. They didn’t hide things from each other.

He would have told her that, had the exception not immediately sprung to mind.

His eyes flitted downward, his entitled aggression being sucked form him until not much else remained. His gaze locked down on his left hand as he flexed it back and forth, avoiding the question.

She noticed his change, her own posture softening to reflect Louis’.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.” she said gently, and he looked suddenly up at her.

“It’s nothing that big - it’s just that-“ he brought his hand to his eye, expecting to find tears there to wipe away, only to find them dry once again. “When he hit me - I usually talk about that like that’s when the big problems started. When he got controlling, and I couldn’t see clearly because I wanted to please him. I always try to convince myself that that’s how it was. That he was this good guy once, but things changed. He changed. But that’s not - that’s not completely true.”
“Were there earlier signs?”

“Nothing big, like I said. Just, little fleeting moments where he would do things I didn’t recognize. Where I was kind of... The first time - he erm - he threw me into this wall. He was mad that I was teasing him, and he shoved me against the wall and screamed at me. And I was just…” Louis trailed off, the darkness of that hallway looming in on the edges of his eyesight, hearing the ghost of his haggard breath against his ear and hot against his neck. “I was scared. I was really scared. And that night when we went to bed, he was acting so normal. Like himself again. But when he kissed me - I wanted to run. Not just, like, break up with him. I wanted to physically get up and get away from him. But I didn’t. Something kept me there, and it got easier each time. To stick around. To forget how he made me feel.”

His breath felt frail, whistling through his empty body, but the heaviness was abating. The unspeakable weight was lifting, making the air light again.

He could breathe.

“Louis.” she said quietly, her voice strong through the silence. He looked up, aware of how slowly time seemed to be plodding ahead. “You were abused.”

It was simple, and it wasn’t something that he already knew, but it locked in.

“Yeah.” he said weakly.

Such a simple, strange response. But it was all he could do to agree.

“He abused you.” she repeated, thinking the repetition would help him, make him truly believe it. But his stance tightened, her words having struck a sour note.

“Why do you always say that?”

“Say what?”

“Why do you always say ‘he’?” Louis asked venomously, leaning predatorily forward. “Why can’t you just say his name? He was a person. He had a name.”

“Yes, who else?”

“Louis,” she said slowly, pausing to lick her lips. The moments were dripping in on Louis, impossibly turgid as his impatience flared.

“What? Why are you so afraid to say his name?”

“You’ve never said it to me.”

Louis blinked so heavily it stung his eyes, made him feel like his brain was wrinkling.

What?

“Of course I have.” he said, though the weakness of his voice betrayed him.

It was nonsensical. Why would she lie about that?

I have, right? I’ve said his name.
His lips circled around that opening J, but it stiffened on his tongue, feeling old and abandoned. He realized that he couldn’t remember the last time he had said that name. It might have been weeks. A month, even.

“His name was Joshua.” he said quietly, and she said nothing in response.

~

Liam was balking in disbelief, his entire vocabulary seemingly abandoning him as they continued to listen to the story Niall was unfurling for them. The new couple had graced them with their presence in Louis’ lounge, and Liam’s ghost seemed about ready to leave his body. Jay was hanging on their every word excitedly, while Zayn was leaning back with an amused expression every time Liam made an increasingly high pitched squeak.

“I just thought - you know, that couple just thinks they’re so cute.” Nona recounted angrily. “With her wedding dress and his little pastel tuxedo.”

“And it was just insulting because we were standing right there. A way cuter couple, only a few feet away, and they were just like, ‘Hi, what’s up, we’re married and so cute, kay bye.’” Niall complained.

“So you got married out of spite.” Zayn noted, holding a hand to his mouth to hide his grin from Liam.

“It wasn’t spite.” Nona said, affectionately popping up a section of Niall’s collar that had gone flat. “More just an overbearing sense of superiority and competition.”

“What?” Liam gaped.

“How are you doing over there, Louis?” Niall asked, his face laced in trepidation. The attention of the group turned to Louis, who had sunk low into the couch, his arms crossed tight as he glared at them wordlessly. He gave them no response, his eyes instead tightening in on Nona.

“But you’re getting it annulled, right?” Liam asked, too concerned to wait for Louis to eventually say something.

“Ugh, too much work.” Niall groaned.

“You’re joking.” Liam assured himself, watching with horror as they both shrugged. “Marriage is not a joke! This has serious emotional and legal ramifications! Have you even thought about that? You two are legally bound to each other now!”

“I guess.” Niall muttered.

“You guess? Niall! You both own half of each other’s assets!”

“You gonna steal half of my money, babe?” Niall asked playfully as he looked over at Nona.

“Only half?” she whined.

“It’s fine.” Niall decided, putting his arm proudly around Nona. “Nona just got an offer for a pilot season in LA, so it’s not like this is a gold digger situation.”
“You’re looking at work in LA?” Zayn asked, warmly surprised.

“Well yeah. I want to be close to my husband!” she said with a garish smile, this time pointed directly and Liam.

“Oh my god!” he responded, running his hands frantically through his hair. “Your best friend is in rehab, Niall! How is he going to feel when he comes home and finds out you got married while he was gone?”

“He’ll be ecstatic! Are you serious? He’s Harry! At least, I think he’ll be happy about it. Maybe.”

At that turn in conversation, Louis launched himself to his feet and made a beeline for the door, everyone watching his abrupt exit. No matter how decently he’d been doing lately, he didn’t for a second want to speculate on how Harry was going to feel about this. He’d been making a point not to dwell on how Harry’s emotions might implode by every single thing he’d missed while he was away, electing instead to take things as they came.

It was out of his control, so why dwell on it? That was the theory at least.

He was leaning against the veranda when he heard the screen door open, looking back with relief to see that it was Nona. Of all the people to follow him outside, she was the least likely to pry him about his feelings or how he was doing.

She tiptoed toward him, clearly put off by his steely expression and unsure of what he was going to say. She came to a stop beside him and looked up at him slowly.

“Hey Lulu.” she said quietly, almost flinching in anticipation for his response.

Louis’ knees nearly gave out under the weight of the laugh that rolled out of him. It was the kind of full body, don’t-even-care-how-ridiculous-you-sound sort of laugh that shaved off layers and layers of tribulation as it took you completely hostage. Nona joined him, first in relief, then in realization of how beautifully stupid the entire situation was.

They leaned into each other, both whimpering from the pain in their chests as their laughter died down.

“We probably will get annulled.” she admitted. “It’s just too funny to watch Liam.”

“Don’t ever get divorced.” Louis laughed. “Please, stay married to Niall. I cannot think of anything better than that.”

“Lulu! You’ve always been so mad about me and Niall.” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but, now that I’m staring at it - the two of you - who cares? I love Niall. I love you. It’s hilarious, and, whatever. You do you. God, you’re married to Niall.”

“It never stops being funny. Even when you think it’s getting old, it comes back around again.”

“Not just that, but Niall’s married to someone. To you. How did he even swing that? What lies has he been telling you?”

“That you offered to join in and do this sister wives things, but with husbands.” she explained, causing Louis to snicker.

“Done and done.” he promised her.
They stood in companionable silence for a moment, before the laughter came back full force.

~

Never one for goodbyes, Jay had planned out her last day in LA masterfully. It started with guilting Louis into early morning yoga at such an indecent hour that he was in bed long before she needed to leave for her middle of the night flight. She’d even loaded him up with a massive dinner that left him exhausted and passed out in bed, just to make sure she’d be able to slip away without any tears shed.

But, despite her best efforts, her driver was left waiting outside as Louis tracked her down in the hallway, sleep ruffled and draped in a blanket.

“Mum?” he whispered, stopping her dead in her tracks.

“But Lou, I turned off your alarm clock and everything.” she whined as she traipsed over to him.

“No one uses alarm clocks anymore. There are cellphones now.” he argued, yawning. She slipped her hand into his, already feeling the wash of emotions that she’d been attempting to avoid. She truly did hate goodbyes.

“You need to take care of yourself, okay?” she reminded him, turning their hands over and watching the way his fingers were curled around hers. “Remember when I first got here and you couldn’t even move your thumb?”

“Thank you.” he said, his voice heavy. “I couldn’t have gotten through any of this without you.”

“Yes you could have. I just helped it go a little faster.” she said with a watery smile. She leaned in to hug him tightly, perhaps to hide the tears plummeting down her face. They lingered their, neither wanting to let go. When she pulled back they both laughed with how ridiculous they were. “No tears for your mum?” she joked, as Louis found himself still unable to muster even a misty eye. “You should go back to sleep.”

“Okay.” Louis said, not wavering from where he stood in front of her.

“Fine. You can walk me to the door, you old sap.”

“I am not a sap. That is you.” he argued, walking down the dark hallway with her, still hand in hand.

~

“What the fuck is this, Liam?” Louis’ voice was dripping in enmity as he held the iPad out, the headline Does Louis Tomlinson Deserve and Oscar Just Because He’s Gay glaring back at him in black text.

Liam looked up suddenly from where he was typing away on his blackberry, struck dumb by what was the first thing Louis had said directly to him in weeks. He and Zayn had walked in only
moments earlier, Liam planning to drop off paperwork and make his exit without Louis even noticing.

The interview with Thad Dylan that had recently hit the press, however, had left Louis poised at the end of his bed, ready to pounce the moment Liam walked through the door.

“You’re not supposed to look at that stuff.” Liam pointed out.

“What? Forever? I’m supposed to stay off the internet forever? It’s been over a month, Liam!” Louis cried out, smashing the iPad loudly onto the top of the bookcase beside him. Both Zayn and Liam took a step back in reaction.

Louis had only a moment of regret for the way Liam grimaced, before the anger flowed back in at the sprawling expose Thad Dylan had just given.

_T: I just feel like a truly equal society means that no one gets special treatment. Not because of your race, your sexuality, nothing. And I think Louis would agree with that. That you should win based on your performance, not because you’re gay or trans.

I: Are you saying that *Kids From Yesterday* is pandering for votes by taking advantage of certain demographics?

_T: I’m just saying that acting is about your performance, right? You take on a different character. It shouldn’t matter if you’re gay, straight, whatever. It’s still a performance. But what are we all talking about? About Louis and his boyfriend, and all of that stuff going on with him. With his ex. It’s distracting everyone from the performances. I mean, you see his costar, Neanette, out doing press for her movie, and everything. But where is he?

That had been the snippet that had truly made Louis’ blood boil. How had something so wretched as this made it’s way onto the internet?

“What are we doing about it? Were you ever going to tell me?” Louis demanded.

“It just came out this morning.”

“But you knew about it?”

“Well - yes-“ Liam stammered.

“Then what are we going to do about it?” Louis yelled back at him.

“What do you want to do about it?” Liam countered, now matching a certain degree of Louis’ anger. Zayn stepped further back, somewhat cowering behind Liam’s frame as the clash continued.

“God, say something back? I don’t know! This is what I fucking pay you for, Liam!” Louis could feel it seething in him, a need to completely let go. He struggled to yank it back, to be able to say what he wanted to say without losing his grasp on himself. “He insults Harry in this tripe. He insults my goddamn boyfriend and we need to do something about it!”

“I’ll make some calls.” Liam grumbled, turning and clicking away through the house, shutting down the conversation before Louis was finished with it. He watched him retreat, stewing with
anger.

And that’s when his eyes landed on Zayn, fuming, a red sheen to his eyes that Louis had never seen before in all his years of knowing him.

“What the fuck was that, Louis?” he asked, his voice shaking. “I’m trying to be there for you - to help you through this, but I can’t watch you talk to Liam like that again.”

“I can’t.” Louis stammered, turning around, he leaned one arm against the bookcase as Zayn stepped after him, his voice raising.

“That’s my boyfriend, Louis!”

“Oh is he?” Louis hissed, still not turning around. “Because I remember sitting next to you while you cried because he wasn’t your boyfriend. So you’ve just completely forgotten how he left you behind?”

“That is between me and him.” Zayn said. “Yes, he left me, but that’s our business. You know who he’s never left? You. He has always been there for you, taking care of your job, and your health. Fuck, he got on his hands and knees in the dirt outside Niall’s house to bring you down from a panic attack. He popped your shoulder back into place, Louis! Of all the fucking people in this world, why is he the one you’re tearing the shit out of? You’re his best friend, Lou! And you’re acting like he’s the one…” Zayn’s diatribe faded into a murmur, backtracking as Louis slowly turned around.

“He’s the one that what? Shot me? No. I know who did that. That was my dead ex-boyfriend.” He spat. “Or do you mean the one who killed Joshua? Because no. I know that wasn’t Liam. That was me!”

It exploded out of him, a surge of force that sent the bookcase beside him crashing to the floor. Zayn leapt back as the clamor shook the house, books flying everywhere. It shocked Louis awake, sending him to the ground beside it.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Louis repeated, the molten panic swelling inside him. His vision was already going blurry, the sounds of his own breath overpowering everything else. He struggled to push the bookcase back up, books still falling from it as he struggled to get it upright. Zayn lurched forward to help him, but Louis held a hand out, holding him back.

The ritual was passing through his mind, reminding him what to do. How to hold on. Slowly, with shaking hands, he picked up a single book and put it carefully back on the shelf.

“Louis, let me help you.” Zayn begged, stepping forward again, but Louis shook his head violently.

“No I - I have to do this.” He stammered, swallowing against his arid throat. He picked up two more, focusing on their colors, organizing them by shade.

Light at the top, dark at the bottom.

It was simple enough. He could focus on it. One by one, he put them back with deliberate focus, forcing his shaking fingers to cooperate as his breathing mellowed. He heard Liam rushing back into the room, but Zayn shushed him before he could say anything. They both watched him, the moments moving by sluggishly as Louis reassembled what he had torn apart, book by book.

“Liam?” Louis whispered, his fingers wrapping around the spine of one of the books.
“Yeah?”

“Did you…?” Louis trailed off, lifting his other hand to wrap around a book, comparing the sensations beneath his fingertips.

“Erm - yeah.” Liam faltered. “That interview, when you came out? You like that magazine, right?” Louis nodded slightly. “They’ve been interested in a follow up. I could talk to them?”

“Okay.” Louis whispered. He looked up at them imploringly, and it took only seconds until they were by his side, asking him which books went where.

~

“You’ve heard of the five stages of grief?” she asked him, and this time, Louis didn’t have even a sliver of the energy needed to roll his eyes.

“And which one am I in?” he asked, avoiding eye contact by looking around the now familiar office.

“That’s the thing, I can’t really tell.” she admitted. “It’s like you’ve cycled through all of them at some point; denial, bargaining, depression, anger. But then you just start over again, jumping frenetically between all of them. You’re not on some sort of road map, you’re just all over the place.”

“Huh.” Louis noted, not wanting to let on how much that made sense to him. How validating it felt to hear his situation described in that way.

“But there’s something keeping you from acceptance.”

“I was feeling really good there for a second.” Louis argued, however weakly.

“And it didn’t last, did it? Something keeps pulling you back from making real progress on your recovery.” she watched him, as if studying, once again tapping her pen against her armrest. “I think you haven’t let yourself mourn Joshua.”

This felt like a punch to the gut; like the wind from his body had been suddenly knocked out of him.

“What?” he gaped. “Let myself mourn Joshua? What are you even talking about?” he found himself on his feet, watching as she sat back to watch him. “He abused me. Remember that part? He was my abuser.”

“Things aren’t that clear cut, Louis. There was a part of you that loved him despite what he did to you, and you haven’t given your grief anytime to heal.”

“That’s bullshit! My grief?” He was pacing now, not even looking at her. “I don’t want to mourn him because I don’t miss him! I don’t - I don’t care that he’s gone!”

“Louis, please sit down.”

“Nope. Fuck it. Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it.” he said, picking up his jacket from his chair.
“We still have twenty minutes left.”

“We still have jack shit left, as a matter of fact.” He struggled into the jacket, traipsing out of the room, letting the door slam shut behind him.

He felt dirty, guilty, like he’d done something wrong and he already knew it. The skin behind his ears was burning hot, and he told himself to calm down, to breathe.

Except fuck that.

That’s what she had said, and he was done with her. Everything she’d ever done or said was rendered completely mute by that last session. If that was honestly the advice she’d been holding onto, the great key that unlocked all of Louis’ wretched turmoil, then the last six weeks of counseling had been an utter waste.

Fuck her. Fuck all of this. Fuck every inane tidbit psychoanalytical bullshit that they’d dumped on him since he woke up. Guess what? It really wasn’t all that complicated.

Louis got shot. Louis’ arm broke. Louis’ boyfriend died. His ex boyfriend died. The other was struggling to keep from dying, or who even knew anymore.

Who even fucking knew.

He stomped through the chilly parking lot, the muscles of his face stiffening, but his eyes ultimately tearless. The car door was practically ice against his fingers, sending another jolt of panic into his churning center. Everything was numb to his touch, his thoughts scattered, his eyesight slipping under a haze. He shouldn’t have been driving; he should just call someone to come pick him up.

But the car was already thrumming beneath him, swerving around corners that he barely registered as real until he was stumbling up his driveway.

The house was barren, all of the friends and family that had gathered there to help him having long since lost interest. That good will of “we hope you get better soon, Louis,” and “we’re here as long as you need us” had finally dried up, leaving him in this empty cavern to keep company with his own thoughts.

He toppled onto the bed, clutching into that sad, pathetic teddy bear that was waiting for whatever embarrassment Louis was bringing home that day. He held it as tightly as his trembling body could manage, whimpering as his left hand refused to cooperate. He over compensated with his right hand, gripping so tight that his fingers had gone white with exertion.

His fingers sunk deeper and deeper into the gray loam and mud, disappearing as if being sucked away by something on the other side. He tugged them back, stricken with white hot panic when there was nothing left: just bleeding stubs, the pristine red falling virulently onto the colorless dirt.

The graves spanned miles, with nothing else distinguishing the endless horizon apart from the stones marking where the dead lay peacefully rotting.

“Come on.” he said from behind Loui, his voice soft; light. The voice he liked.

The voice he had loved.

He turned and fell in step with Joshua, the tombstones stumbling past slowly, wavin gently in the breeze.
Louis wanted to say something, he had so many things he wanted to say, that he’d just make Joshua understand if he had the chance to speak to him again. So many words curling on his tongue, but yet again, his voice had been strangled by something unseen.

Joshua reached out toward Louis’ hand, still bloody and mangled, but Louis pulled away. He didn’t want to touch him. Joshua was too cold. Louis’ touch might make him fall apart.

It was grimy in Joshua’s flat, those wine bottles rolling across the countertop like they were a ship buffetting back and forth at sea. Those were new, and there were so many of them. Why did he have those? Those weren’t his. But something was still familiar.

Christmas decorations. There was a feeble strand of blinking lights, all that Joshua had been able to afford, and a disheveled rope of tinsel around the window. Joshua was sitting next to it, wearing that green Santa’s hat he used to own.

“Please don’t.” Louis murmured, his voice rough and so quiet and Joshua didn’t say anything.

He stepped toward him, knowing that he had to get his attention somehow. Time was running out. He had to save him.

“Louis.” Joshua murmured.

“I’m here.” Louis promised him, but the ground was lengthening beneath him. He was sprinting, trying to get to him, to stop him.

“Why won’t you come here?”

“I’m trying!” Louis whimpered, stumbling over his own feet.

He knew it was close. The gun was close. It was in Joshua’s hand and he had to get it away from him. He had to save him.

“Louis.”

“I’m right here!” Louis shrieked, his voice clipping over every word.

He could see Joshua leaning back in his chair, reaching into his pocket.

“I love you.”

Louis plunged forward, falling into empty space until he was plummeting, ever cell of his body frigid with mortal fear.

He jolted up in bed, screeching at the top his lungs, unable to stop, and unable to remember what was making him do it.

~

Louis’ stylist was doing everything he could to work around Louis’ jitters, forcing him still as he tried to stop his frantic pacing. He could hear Liam in the next room over, chatting casually with a familiar voice.
That was the woman who had interviewed him nearly a year and a half ago. What was her name? Becky? Beth? Why hadn’t he thought to find out until just now?

Jesus. A year and a half ago. Before he’d met Harry. Before everything. When he was still with him.

He was relentlessly thirsty suddenly, pulling at the bowtie his stylist had just fastened around his neck. His stylist reach up to fix it, but Louis had already clawed it off, letting it fall to the floor as he continued pacing.

“I’m good, okay? I’m done. Thanks.” he said, trying to force his voice into something that wasn’t complete, undiluted frustration.

How was Liam talking so calmly so close by? Could he not sense the veritable flood that was drowning Louis just a room over? The rest of the group was around here somewhere, why couldn’t he find them?

He was done. He couldn’t. There was no way he could do this. It was decided.

He ran headlong into Liam in the doorway, jumping back into the dressing room to pace like a trapped animal.

“What’s wrong?” Liam asked, concerned, but unsurprised.

He was disappointed again, and that was the last Louis could withstand.

“I can’t do this.” Louis explained. “Cancel it. I want to go home.”

“Louis.”

“You’re supposed to help me, yeah? Get me out of here. I can’t do this.” he plead. Liam rubbed is eyebrow in frustration, sighing heavily.

“I’m not going to do that, Louis.”

“Yes you are.”

“You wanted to do this. This was your idea.” he said resolutely, using a firmness that he hadn’t used with Louis in nearly two months. And, Jesus, why did this eye contact sear through Louis? When was the last time he’d looked Liam in the eyes?

“I want to go.”

“No.”

"Take me home right now, Liam.”

“No.” he stepped in front of the door just as Louis stepped toward it, alighting a flame in Louis he would never have thought himself capable of. Fear flashed in Liam’s eyes momentarily until he regained his resolve, fixing Louis with an equally deadly stare. “Your boyfriend is in rehab, Louis, struggling through withdrawals and isolation so that he can be a better man for you. That’s what the man you love is doing. What are you doing?”

“I’m - I’m trying to get better.” Louis huffed, pacing once again.

“You can do more.”
“I can’t.”

“You think I believe that? I know you, Louis.”

“I can’t fucking do this.” he felt like a beast, a trapped monster in a shrinking cage, needing some way to burst out.

“What’s going on?” Zayn was at the door with Nona and Niall. The entire gang had decided to come along to see Louis’ big recovery, and now they had front row seats to his break down, because there was no way he was keeping this together. There was no way he wasn’t going to finally explode.

“Let me out of here, Liam!” Louis shrieked, his throat grated with the force of his words.

“No, Louis!” Liam bellowed back, crowding in on him. Louis didn’t step back, rising up to meet Liam’s furor.

“Liam!” Zayn called out, but the two of them were too locked in on each other to notice.

“Because it is fucking killing me to see you like this!” Liam shouted, their foreheads nearly touching as they glowered at each other. “Be a complete asshole to me, whatever. I don’t care. I can fucking handle your shit. But I cannot handle watching the way you’re treating yourself. It is killing me, Louis.”

“Shut the fuck up.” Louis snarled.

“In case you didn’t know, every single person in this room loves you.”

“Shut up!”

“Niall loves you, Nona loves you, Zayn loves you. I love you, Louis! You are my best mate and I am done watching you tear yourself apart. I’m afraid there isn’t going to be anything left when you’re done with yourself.”

Louis jumped forward, violently shoving Liam back with everything he had left. Liam stumbled backwards, simmering back at Louis as he regained his footing. Their shared glare pierced through each other, binding into something so solid it couldn’t even be broken as Zayn and Niall leapt to Liam’s side.

They were both yelling, pulling the two apart in a frantic effort to diffuse what was happening. Louis yanked himself away desperately, moving toward Liam again.

“Hit me!” he shrieked.

“No!”

“Hit me, Liam!”

“I deserve it, hit me!” Louis whimpered, his voice cracking as Niall got his arms around him again. It was pathetic, how uselessly he tried to escape, tried to be something intimidating and dangerous. Something that couldn’t be tossed around, abused, abandoned.

Something besides himself.

“What, Louis?”
“I deserve - all of this.” Louis choked, and he felt Niall’s arms softening around him.

“No you don’t, Lou.” Liam sighed.

“I do.”

“You don’t!”

“I deserve to feel like this. I earned this.” Louis repeated, feeling his face crumple beyond repair. Liam’s hands curled around Louis’ shoulders as his body started slumping.

“You didn’t kill him, Lou.”

But Louis was shaking his head. He was shaking his head because he didn’t have words that began to express what he needed to say.

“What?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is?”

“I deserve all of this.” he repeated, feeling the same pressure on his eyes, on his entire head, like a crook in a hose ready to rupture under a torrent of water.

“Why? Why do you think that?”

“I deserve it.”

“Why!?”

“Because I miss him!” he shrieked, floodgates opening from both of his eyes. “I miss Joshua! I hate him so fucking much and I still miss him!” he sobbed, choking so violently that he felt he might rip out his own throat, reaching out to clutch into Liam’s shirt as he fell to the ground.

Liam collapsed with him, holding him firm as Louis crumpled into histrionics. In what was probably the first embrace of their entire friendship, Liam pulled him in, cradling his head as he wept uncontrollably onto his shoulder.

“It’s okay Louis.” Liam promised him, his own voice stripped of it’s power by tears.

“I miss him, Liam! And I shouldn’t. I hate him!” he cried, now rocking back and forth in Liam’s arms. The room was now echoing with sniffles, and he heard the patter of footsteps. Suddenly there was another body beside him, Nona, and her arms were wrapping around his shoulders.

He gasped lightly, letting himself fall further and further into the embrace, a melting warmth erupting inside of him as he felt another pair of arms, followed by another. All five of them were tangled there together, on the floor, their faces slick with two months of unsung anguish.

“It’s - it’s okay, Louis.” Liam was sputtering, his hand still holding the back of Louis’ head. “That’s okay. It’s okay that you feel like that.”

Louis wanted to say something, but all that came out of him was a shrill cry, burrowing further into the arms of his friends and feeling their tears wetting the back of his shirt. Slowly, with each gentle rock back and forth, it became more a more okay to not say anything. He just needed to feel them, all of them, still beside Louis despite everything, everyone crying so unabashedly that it was
impossible to tell who’s tears belonged to who.

“You look good, really.” The interviewer said, and Louis could recognize that familiar hint of pity he’d grown so accustomed to.

“Thanks.” he answered, even though he knew that his eyes were swollen and red. He was sniffling, still, but a shaky calm had now enveloped him. Everyone was standing just on the edge of the room, smiling at him without a trace of pity, just a tender pride.

“A lot has happened since we last spoke, huh?” she asked.

“Understatement.” he chuckled, giving her a wet smile.

“Should we start with the most recent?”

“Alright?” Louis asked with an eyebrow waggle, causing her to giggle.

“Alright, jumping right into it, then?”

“Yeah, why not.” he said flippantly, shifting in his chair. The calm was settling in on him, the kind that only comes from being rubbed raw like sandpaper. Two months of grief had just poured out of him, now convalesced in a wet spot on Liam’s shoulder that still hadn’t dried. He schooled his words, training them through his fragile emotional lull. “Just, in response to what he said, I get it. We qualify in the same category in a lot of places, and we will hopefully both be lucky enough to be nominated for some major awards.”

“I think you’re probably a shoe in.”

“Thanks. But, I really don’t think there’s any place for what he said.” Louis explained. “The idea that – that in this ‘equal society’ it wouldn’t matter if you were gay or straight, trans or cis, black or white – it would just matter how you performed - that would be amazing. Absolutely amazing. But we still live in a world that the majority of awards are going to white, cisgender men.

‘I mean, are we really pandering for votes by having an actual transgender woman playing a transgender character? When Eddie Redmayne was nominated for playing someone transgender in the Danish Woman? And Jared Leto and Hillary Swank both won Oscars for their roles as transgender characters. And, as for straight people who’ve been nominated for playing gay roles, the list goes on and on. Tom Hanks, Jake Gylenhall, Heath Ledger, Greg Kinnear, Javier Bardem, Nicole Kidman, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Sean Penn, Collin Firth, Christopher Plummer, like – it’s dizzying.”

“And I can assume you knew all of those off the top of your head?” she joked.

“No, admittedly, I did a bit of research. But it only takes one google search to find things like, ‘50 straight actors who’ve won Oscars for gay roles.’ And not to say anything negative about any of those actor’s performances, obviously. I really look up to a lot of those performers, but it’s still an extensive list of straight actors that are getting these roles over LGBT actors, and really, really benefiting from it. It’s just - it’s just a disparagingly long list. So I don’t really understand what reality Thad Dylan could possibly be living in that he could accuse our director of pandering for
votes by casting me and Nona. We’re both getting the chance to play characters like ourselves. That’s a very rare privilege for people like us.”

“Huh,” she laughed nervously. “Those are strong words.”

“It was honestly offensive, though. When LGBT actors and actresses, particularly those that are trans are so often pushed to the fringes, or forced to stay in the closet, and then we’re accused of pandering for votes because we were finally given a chance to portray characters like us. I mean, who’s better than Nona to play that character? He wrote it specifically for her. It’s truly offensive that he said that. I agree that the award should go to whoever gave the best performance, but we aren’t the ones benefiting from any kind of privilege. And a quick google search would have educated him to that fact.”

He crossed his legs, feeling this familiar wind of sassiness blowing through him as Nona gave him a thumbs up. Jesus, when was the last time he was sassy? Why did he ever stop? It felt fantastic.

“As for some of his other quotes, he did comment on your personal life as well.” she continued, looking to her notes. “He spoke about much of the drama surrounding your life lately, and if I’m not mistaken, this is the first time you’ve spoken about it officially?”

“No, you’re not mistaken.” Louis admitted. “I believe his exact issue was that I was hiding behind all of this drama, staying out of the spotlight.”

“Yes, those were his words.”

“Yeah, huh.” he contemplated. “The thing is, Thad is clearly very proud of his work, as he should be. I saw the film, and he was admittedly very good. And it would be a great honor to be nominated beside him. And even though being nominated for an Oscar has been everything I’ve ever wanted since I was tiny, I’ve had a rough couple of months. Extremely rough. As you can probably see.” he said, gesturing to his reddened face.

“I think you’re looking very handsome.” she said with a kind smile. Louis laughed.

“I know that this is all going to end up in text, and your readers can’t see me, but I’ll just put it on the record that my face is super puffy and red right now, because things got a little emotional with my friends earlier.” he glanced over to them, seeing the way that Zayn was biting his lip nervously, not knowing where Louis was going with this. “And that’s been a common theme. I’ve - erm - I’ve been having my ups and downs. Mostly downs. Thad’s completely right, I have been shying away from the public eye, but I have other things to focus on right now - things that I’ve learned are more important that awards or fame.

‘Right now I’m focused on getting past - getting past a loss I suffered.’ he said, managing to work past his voice catching. “And focusing on my friends. My family. My beautiful costar who just got hitched.” he said, smiling at Nona. “And my boyfriend. The love of my life. Because it’s one thing for Thad to have insulted me, but everything he said about Harry was uncalled for. Harry is the kindest, gentlest person I know. He would never wish ill on another human being on this Earth, but for some reason, since he’s struggling with this addiction, people are turning on him. And that’s just cruel. Because he’s honestly amazing. He’s too good for any of us, honestly, and I so thoroughly appreciate everyone who’s been supporting him. Been supporting me. That’s what really matters.

‘I was honored and humbled to have worked on a film that I’m very proud of, and if Thad’s attacking us, the only reason I can think of is because he’s scared. He can get over it. And that’s everything I have to say to Thad. Oh, and stop texting Eleanor. She’s too good for him.”
“Alright then. Let’s move on.” the interviewer said with a grin.

“Yes. Let’s.” Louis agreed, noting the double meaning.

Let’s move on.

~

It was his nicest suit, the one he’d worn to the Oscars that year, and he couldn’t help but obsessively wipe the non existent lint off the sleeves as he stood there.

There was a hand on his shoulder, soft, and he turned. It was Zayn, his eyes soft as he joined him in the backyard.

“Ready?” he asked. Louis nodded, even though, no, he’d never be ready for this, but he needed to do it anyways.

The picture frame felt heavy in his arms, his hand growing sweaty from where it was pressed to the glass, and he heard the back door opening. They all came out slowly in procession, dressed just as starkly black as Louis. He nodded as each of them joined him, standing in a line along the grass.

It was ridiculous, juvenile, even, to be dressed so formally in such an informal setting, but the somberness that was trickling in was authentic, Louis’ nerves playing tricks with the air inside his lungs as he tried to breathe.

Louis raised the picture up to look at it, stepping forward from the group. Joshua looked back at him, his eyes peeping out beneath the numb thumb of Louis’ that held the corner of the frame.

Numb might not have been the best word to describe it; he could feel, could move. He was slow, but his hand was certainly still there. It had been the last thing Joshua had done before leaving the world, maiming Louis, and even that was beginning to fade.

“Do you want to say anything?” Niall asked, his voice much quieter than Louis had ever heard it. A distant cry from the booming roar of the drunk neighbor who had tumbled up his walkway, bringing a wind with him that would change every part of Louis’ life.

And he knew now that this profound change that had fallen on him wasn’t meant to be easy, wasn’t just some gift for him to take and run with. It was supposed to be hard, so hard it had nearly killed him, but it was meant to make him stronger for it.

He turned back to the picture in his hand, shaking his head. No, there wasn’t anything he needed to say. The picture said enough, maybe not a thousand words, but enough. It was from a moment that he’d considered himself truly happy. Young. In love. Care free as he looped his arm around Joshua’s shoulders and snapped a picture.

He held the frame still with his left hand, concentrating hard, as he popped open the frame, their images folding as he pulled them out and let the frame fall to the ground. He looked back to the others, ready to catch the lighter as Liam tossed it his way.

This was the last Louis would make eye contact with this picture, and a deluge of words and memories interlaced over it like he was dying and his life was replaying before his eyes.
But the emotions felt foreign - like it had been someone else who had experienced them. Like, all along, Louis had been watching the most difficult time of someone else’s life. That none of this could have possibly happened to him.

But it had. This was all Louis’. It all belonged to him.

The corner caught ablaze, the glossy paper melting and inflating beneath it. It warbled, making Louis drop it down onto the frame as he stepped back. He didn’t care to look at it, at the way their image warped and flexed, distorted so garishly.

What was most upsetting was the thought that popped into his head, that maybe the fire wasn’t dismantling the picture. Maybe it was showing it for what it really was.

He stepped back in line with the others, standing silently as they watched it smolder. The silence was comfortable - necessary, even, as the memory succumbed to ash.

~

He’d asked for this specifically, to have the house to himself on his first day back to work. The production had shifted back to LA finally, and Louis was back on as full time employee, no special treatment included.

But this is exactly what he wanted; to wake up early of his own accord, to go on a run because he wanted to, not because anyone told him to, to actually use body wash because he liked the way it smelt and not because he was expected to. He’d made himself a cuppa tea and a piece of toast (all on his own) and was sitting in what had apparently become his favorite place for recollection, his back veranda. His eyes traced over the trees, noticing the subtle hints of the impending winter, despite the Southern California heat.

This time last year he’d thought he was going through what must be the most difficult trial of his life. Much like now, his shoulder had been weak, and the person he loved wasn’t by his side.

A year had already passed since then, and here he was, battered and battle born, only a couple of days away from the prize at the end. He would go to work, maybe complain a bit about the early call time, then joke around with his make up and hair. He’d see Eleanor, he’d tease her, and she’d probably have something to say about the article. Hopefully it was something good.

It would all feel familiar and safe, two sentiments that Louis had thought impossible until very recently. As mellow as it was, this dull contentment was almost intoxicating, alighting his chest with a newfound warm glow.

He held his hand up, the custom fit glove he’d stolen from the first unit shoot holding it in “live long and prosper” pose. It made him laugh every time he saw it, delighting in the fact the he hadn’t lost it.

Those fuckers in art department were going to have to eat their words.

~
“Louis, if you don’t get out the door in five minutes, I’ll have to go get him myself!” Niall called into the bathroom, causing Louis to scamper out of it like he’d been lit on fire.

“Don’t you dare,” he warned.

“You gonna stop me, huh?” Niall asked, playfully pretending to come at Louis. Despite the fact that he’d just spent an hour getting his hair perfect, Louis couldn’t help but tackle Niall, pulling him to the ground.

“Uncle! I’m done! Uncle!” Niall squeaked, laughing as Louis let him go. “That is just too much pent up sexual energy for me to contend with.”

Louis gave him one last playful kick before getting to his feet and heading to the lounge. They were gathered in Harry’s house, everyone who was eager to see him back. They’d kept the group small, assuming that Harry would put together some sort of opulent welcome home party for himself when the time was right.

It was just the usuals: Louis, Liam, Zayn, Niall, and now the addition of Nona, who was officially related to the group through marriage. The one addition, however, was Harry’s mum, who had flown in earlier that day to see her boy.

“I’m off to get the prodigal son.” Louis announced, flying through the lounge as a glance at his phone made him realize how close he was actually cutting it. He slung a jacket on as he gave Anne a kiss on the cheek and fled for the door.

“Hey Lulu?” Nona asked, looking over the back of the couch as Louis opened the door.

“Yes, Neannete?”

“Go get your boy.” she said happily, the echo of a nearly year old conversation not lost on Louis.

“Well duh, Nona. What do you think I’m doing? Going out to get cupcakes?” he asked snarkily.

“Nope. Just one cupcake.” Niall added with a broad grin. Louis stuck his tongue out as he leapt out the door, racing to his car.

It had been decided that Louis should pick him up on his own, without even a driver involved. They deserved at least a car ride to themselves before Louis was going to have to begrudgingly share his boy.

It was dark out already as he drove to LAX, pulling up to the private terminal with security already expecting him.

“Good evening, Mr. Tomlinson.” a man told him as he came inside, escorted to the private terminal he’d become fairly accustomed to in the last year.

He nodded to everyone as he passed, recognizing members of Harry’s security that he hadn’t seen in months. They looked just as nostalgic as him, happy for Harry’s return. He waited in the small room, unable to sit down as the nerves fiddled with his insides.

Obsessively, he straightened his shirt and mussed with his hair, as if he would somehow be dissatisfactory and Harry would decide to land his plane in some other city. The adrenaline had him jumpy, pacing again as he saw the plane circling the darkened runway.
“Oh shit.” he actually breathed out loud, getting a chuckle from the guard beside him. He paced more aggressively, trying desperately to drown out the sounds of oncoming footsteps with his frantic movement.

He’d been alone, was the thing. He’d grown used to it, having that dull ache when he faced that empty bed, that latent disappointment when he couldn’t hear Harry’s voice.

But it was so sudden. All at once, there he was, a vision in skinny jeans and a messy man bun, eyes still so familiar that it made Louis want to cry.

He looked stripped down, like a layer of fame and glamour had been etched away, but it was good. He looked good.

He was there.

Harry was right there.

“Hey, baby.” he whispered, his voice already failing him as his eyes fell on Louis.

Jesus airplane flying Christ, Harry was here.

Louis plummeted toward him, launching himself into the air and into Harry’s arms. Harry held him back enthusiastically, holding him up as Louis wrapped his legs around his waist and clung to him in midair. He buried his face into Louis’ neck, locked into a meld of laughter and tears, his fingers clinging into Louis.

“I missed you.” he whimpered, laugh crying into Louis’ shirt.

Louis couldn’t say anything, holding him so tight that he thought they might both snap in half.

“You’re back!” he cried.

“I am.”

“You are!”

There were eyes on them, he knew, but he could feel that they were soft, overcome with their own emotion as these two halves were finally pieced back together.

Hey la, my boyfriend’s back.

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Chapter End Notes

Just so we’re all on the same page, there will be one more chapter, plus an epilogue after that. Might take me a second to finish it, since this chapter kind of walloped me more than any of the other chapters did. Would love to hear how you guys felt, since this was the first time something I was writing actually had me crying as well :(
Chapter Notes

Well everyone, here's the last one. If you're wondering why it took so long, it's because this thing is so ridiculously, indulgently long. Please forgive me, but it's the end of something I've been working on for almost ten years, so this last bit got away from me.

There will be an epilogue and it's already written, so expect it in about a week. Also, I'm including a rather lengthy authors note at the end, so once again, please bare with me.

A couple notes, yes, I stole lyrics from one Niall's new songs, and I also amended the schedule of awards season to fit my narrative. It's not quite true to real life, but I'm trading in the last of my creative license.

"I don't care what people say when we're together. You know I wanna be the one to hold you when you sleep."

-One Direction

“You shagged all night?”

Louis blinked awake, pressing an aggravated groan into Harry’s chest as he heard the thundering footsteps come closer. Harry let out an exasperated sigh as he smothered Louis in his arms as if protecting him from the approaching tempest of hurricane Niall.

He was splayed out on top of Harry in the same spot that they’d snuggled together on the couch earlier, promising Harry’s mum that they’d to manage to keep their sleepy eyes open as the trio watched a film together. Louis’ last memory was thinking of how warm and present Harry felt beneath him, how safe he felt with their bodies pressed together again. And then, all at once, he was startled awake by the door crashing open to reveal the Irish horror.

His lack of sleep was scratching painfully at the edges of his thoughts, his face already beset with a glare as Niall stepped in front of them.

“We didn’t shag all night.” Louis spat.

He could see how the situation would look suspect, with Harry’s mum having woken up around seven to find the two men still wide awake from the night before, cheerily cooking a fry up as they shrugged off their lack of rest. But it wasn’t a marathon shag session that had kept them up all night.

Louis had been forced to repeat the mantra “I have seven siblings - I know how to share - I have seven siblings - I know how to share…” for three painful hours from the moment he stepped back into Harry’s house after picking him up at the airport. Louis had secretly clung to a whimsical fantasy that everyone would greet Harry with a quick, “Nice to see you mate. Glad to see you’re well,” before moving along and leaving the two of them alone.
Niall, however, had quite ceremoniously stomped on this prospect with a plan that he’d neglected to run past Louis.

But, ultimately, Louis couldn’t complain as he witnessed Harry’s reaction to the surprise his best friend had prepared for him. Niall was waiting there, clad in a full suit, Nona standing beside him in a simple white dress with a bundle of forget-me-nots in her hands.

Harry had scarcely stepped inside when Niall made a proposal of him, grinning ear to ear with a tender enthusiasm.

“Mate, will you be my best man?” Niall asked.

And good lord, if Louis had any semblance of a beating heart, it had been knocked squarely off its axis by the look on Harry’s face. His features ignited with a dulcet gleam, looking as if he’d just looked up to learn that it was snowing sugar and stars; as if someone had poured honey over his heart.

Harry had only re-entered Louis’ life for upwards of an hour, and already Louis’ thoughts were adrift in the breeze of soft sentiment that Harry’s dimples so often inspired. Harry’s glee radiated from where he stood by Niall’s side, the room’s attention turning to Louis as Nona demanded he stand by her side.

“Be my maid of honor.” She commanded him.

“I’m a boy. I resent this.” He muttered as he cooperated and took his spot.

“No, you don’t. Shut up.” She shushed him, turning expectantly to Liam as he stood between the bride and groom.

And if there had been anything capable of intensifying Harry’s enthusiasm, is was what Liam did next. He bent over to pick up the actual officiant of the ceremony: Glitter with a bowtie snapped to her collar.

“Dear god.” Louis groaned, the ridiculousness rippling through his entire body as Harry had to press a jubilant hand to his face to hold in the outpouring of emotion. Everyone was chuckling at his struggle to collect himself. “Harry.” Louis sighed, his cheeks warm with adoration.

“Friends, family, cherished loved ones. We’ve come together today in celebration of this man and woman who stand before me.” Liam announced imperiously, and Louis was powerless but to double over with laughter.

“Louis! You are running Glitter’s speech!” Niall snapped.

“Liam wrote a speech for the cat!” He sputtered out, excruciatingly giddy at the image of Liam toiling over a blank page, attempting to capture Glitter’s essence in his words.

“Louis,” Harry whined. Louis looked to him, his uproarious laughter melting into a soft grin as he took in Harry’s pouting face.

“My apologies. Do continue.” He laughed, crossing his hands in front of him and strapping in for the remainder of the ceremony.

It was surprisingly touching, given the context. Granted, the group had done everything in their power to transform the lounge into a setting that dripped with romance while Louis had been at the airport. Lamps were turned low, with only dappled candlelight hovering at the edges, illuminating
the sprinkling of flower petals across the floor.

Liam’s poetic illustrations of love and commitment were dancing through the thick air, stirring something strangely palpable in Louis as his focus trickled away from the ceremony and over the man standing directly opposite him. Their gazes were both silken as their eyes locked, smiling and breathing at each other in lieu of actual words.

It was like a surge of spiced air flowing into his lungs, the way his every sense was inflamed by just the sight of Harry. Under the billowing veil of candlelight, he felt an unwavering, incorruptible companionship and familiarity as he and Harry continued to watch each other.

Perhaps familiarity wasn’t the exact word to describe it; it was something more like an anticipation. More, a sense that they were both peeking into their futures, to an event awaiting them down the road. Even as Niall and Nona were stepping forward to kiss each other under the scant applause of Zayn, Anne, and Liam, Louis was still experiencing the sensation of his future clicking into place.

It twisted inside of him, breathing itself to life; the delirium, the titillated excitement he’d felt every second since seeing Harry again. His undulating yearning that had been compelling his every move, blooming in a pulsating, dark need. He needed Harry with an ineffable desperation that slowed his breath and dulled his senses.

It wasn't a sexual need, exactly, or even entirely romantic for that matter. It was this uncrackable magnetism of being only a few feet away from the answer to all of his questions. As he watched the candlelight flickering in the green wells of Harry’s eyes, he knew that they were sharing the same train of thought; that they were dancing on this ledge together.

Begrudgingly, they were pulled from their shared reverie as Niall turned to Harry, demanding his best man’s speech. Louis was about to bring to light the unfairness that Glitter was given ample time to prepare her remarks, and yet, Harry was expected to perform on the spot. He was cut off, though, as Harry responded enthusiastically.

“I wrote you guys a song, actually!” He announced brightly, already making his way to the nearest piano.

They gathered around him and watched, his fingers looking particularly slender without their typical bevy of rings as they flourished across the keys. The light notes twinkled over them, weaving into his brooding voice as the melody flowed over them.

*Cause if the whole world was watching I’d still dance with you*

*Drive highways and byways to be there with you,*

*Over and over the only truth*

*Everything comes back to you*

Harry was lost in it, vanishing deeper into his words as Louis sunk further into the side of the piano, watching his boy sweep himself away in a world he’d created. Louis had spent countless nights doing this very thing, sitting audience as Harry whisked himself off to a part of his mind that was untouched by his stress; that relaxed the taut lines of worry from his face. Apart from when he
was asleep, it was only when music flowed from his fingertips that he finally found some peace, an
effect that had always been spellbinding for Louis.

But something was slightly different in this dulcet song. There was a somberness lining his
features, subtly haunting in the gravelly notes riding his deep breaths. It was deeper than before as
if dredged up from somewhere so dark and desolate that Harry must have used the better part of his
humanity to climb his way back out.

Just as the first hints of worry were prickling Louis at the base of his spine, Harry’s eyes snapped
up, locking Louis with an unbridled affection that painted the corner of his eyes with unshed tears.

*You still make me nervous when you walk in the room*

*Them butterflies - they come alive when I’m next to you*

*Over and over the only truth*

*Everything comes back to you*

The song melted into the sweet air, leaving Niall and Nona uncharacteristically affected as they
leaned into each other. No one quite seemed to know what to do under the mesmerizing cloud
Harry had submerged them in until Harry lifted the spell himself.

“Give me my kitty!” He suddenly demanded, noticing that Liam was still holding his prized feline.
The was a laughter in relief as she was passed to Harry’s doting hands.

The evening naturally progressed into an exuberant catch-up session now that the wonder twins of
Horan and Styles were reunited and feeding off of each other’s energy. Louis willingly played the
spectator, keeping one hand clasped in Harry’s and patiently watching.

This included several rapid fire “getting to know your most intimate thoughts and dreams”
questions aimed at Nona. Apparently, it had been grating at Harry every moment of every day
since their elopement that she’d become his self-proclaimed sister-in-law without the obligatory
upgrade from casual friends to bosom chums. He was equally enraptured with every detail of how
Liam and Zayn’s relationship had fared in his absence.

The energy level remained in the upper registers until after the group had eaten dinner. Everyone
was sharing the task of washing up when Harry’s mum pulled him away, giving them their first
moment alone since he’d returned. They were gone for just over ten minutes, both emerging with
red faces, watery smiles, and tender voices.

Anne headed to bed soon after, leaving Harry to join everyone in the kitchen. Zayn was putting the
last few dishes into the dishwasher, rolling his eyes as he listened to the exaggerated argument
swilling back forth between Niall, Nona, and Liam.

Unsurprisingly, it was Liam and Nona shouting their frustrations from one end of the kitchen,
iccreasingly annoyed with some cockeyed conspiracy theory of Niall’s that had finally gone too
far. Louis sat on the counter, watching the predictable turn of events with a fond grin.

Harry slinked into the kitchen quietly, making a focused beeline for Louis and burrowing his face
into the familiar spot where his neck met his shoulder. Louis breathed out a laugh in pleasant
surprise, feeling as Harry clung to him tightly, sighing adorably into his shoulder.

“You tired?” Louis asked. Harry pulled back, looking up at Louis with a shake of his head. “Not sleepy, then?”

“Nope.”

“Fully awake?”

“Mhmm” Harry bit his lip as if combing through his options before he leaned in to gently kiss Louis. They hung their, Louis’ inherent need boiling back to life as their mouths parted against each other. Harry pulled back, then, muttering against the skin of Louis’ cheek fondly. “Oh, my lover, my lover, my love. We can never go back.” He hummed quietly to a tune Louis didn’t recognize. Harry’s breath puffed against Louis’ ear, and Louis felt his inhibitions fade away. After the last few hours of watching everyone else pour their affection and gratitude on him, it completely knocked the wind out of Louis to finally be the sole focus of Harry’s attention.

He blinded Louis with another brimming, syrupy smile diving back into a tight hug. Louis stroked his hair, his breath hitching as he remembered yet again the immensity of the moment. The weeks spent in cold isolation were recent enough that he could still taste the bitterness; but now, suddenly, he was encircled in warm arms and chocolate curls.

Eyes flicking up, Louis looked at Zayn, who was already waiting for this particular signal. He gave the briefest of nods, immediately deploying his well-practiced diplomacy to break up the fight still unfurling. He worked with finesse, finally cajoling everyone into heading out the door for the night. Even with the considerable delay of the lingering hug between Harry and Niall in the doorway (“you’re my best mate I love you so much,” “no, Niall, I love you,” “No, Harry, I love you,”) the house finally quieted down, leaving Harry and Louis to traipse quietly into their bedroom.

Harry closed the door behind him with a click, submerging them into much-anticipated seclusion. It felt tremendous, immeasurable, and harshly sudden. All at once, their lives had been thrust back into their own hands, nothing to get in their way. Louis turned to look at his boyfriend who was leaning back against the door, his face alight with a playful grin that was so familiar to Louis it physically hurt.

Losing Harry had felt like a chunk of his insides had been yanked out without warning or anesthetic, leaving him to cry and beg in futility, just wanting the piece of him that had been stolen to be returned. There had been nothing to do apart from waiting. Just sit and wait, wait, wait with each breath, each blink of his tired eyes, each tick of a clock on the wall moving with such aching slowness he thought that he might desiccate.

It had been necessary, though, a critical step in piecing his broken parts back together. He’d been forced to turn inwards without a shield or safeguard, unprotected as he tried to repair the cracks in his foundation. Louis was thankful for it, the time apart, and ultimately knew that if he were forced to go back, he’d make the same decision.

But no matter the pride he took in these internal accomplishments, it didn’t stymie the way Harry’s return was rattling his core. Bones trembling, chest pounding, blood bubbling, all that slipped from his dry lips was his love’s name.

“Harry.” He breathed.

“Hm?” Harry laughed, closing the distance between them with slow, plodding steps.
“You’re giggling.” Louis pointed out.

“So are you.” Harry countered.

“Because you started it. Why are you giggling?”

“I dunno.” Harry shrugged, precious little laughs still tumbling out of him. “You just - I’m still nervous around you, Lou.”

“No you’re not.” Louis scoffed, his frame leaning forward expectantly as Harry stopped in front of him, placing heavy hands on his shoulders.

“Of course I am.” Harry smiled, his hands smoothing along the fabric over Louis’ shirt, caressing the skin of his neck and cupping the curve of his hairline. “Looking at you pummels me, Louis.” Harry stepped in, his eyes drifting shut as he pressed their foreheads together. “I am made so ensnared in your eyes. In the way you look at me.” His voice was quavering, fraying at the ends, and Louis couldn’t survive another moment of this intimate proximity. He surged forward with a crushing kiss, moaning as Harry bit back eagerly.

“Harry.” Louis sighed, running a hand down his chest as Harry forced out more endearments between each kiss.

“It sends me - staggering - and spinning until I’m so - so - so totally lost and enraptured that I can’t see anymore. Just you - and you - and - *fuck*, I’ve had a lot of time to just sit around and write love poetry about you so please forgive how embarrassing I’m being right now.”

“Keep going. Please. Please, don’t stop.” Louis begged, breathless, kissing Harry’s neck and the curves of his face as if he might disappear at any second.

Harry tightened his grip into Louis and lifted him into the air, Louis’ legs encircling Harry as they plummeted back towards the bed. They hit the duvet, Harry rolling into Louis like a wave crashing ashore.

“You undo me, Louis.” Harry continued, his voice rasping. “You just tug at my threads, so light, so gentle, and I’m thoroughly unraveled.” His hand crept under Louis’ shirt, the soft pads of his fingertips roving over his skin and searing his nerves.

Desperate to surrender to the sensation, Louis yanked at his shirt, wriggling as Harry helped him out of it and tossed it to the side. Arching his back into the bed, Louis felt cold vulnerability pooling in his stomach as he realized where Harry’s eyes were about to land.

Harry stalled momentarily atop Louis as he saw it for the first time, the marred, grisly flesh forever marking the place where a bullet had ripped into Louis’ shoulder. He watched Harry, unblinking, unbreathing, as his soft fingers learned this new feature on Louis’ body. Harry’s eyes softened, looking up at Louis’ tense face.

“You’re shaking, darling.” He said, his voice low.

“Am I?” Louis asked lightly.

“A little,” Harry admitted, leaning in toward the scar, pressing a fleeting, tender kiss to the pink skin. “You don’t need to. We’re safe now.”

Louis released a heavy, trembling breath and relaxed into the mattress, feeling Harry’s warm lips trace lightly across his chest. His eyelids waxed closed, raising a hand to coil into Harry’s curls.
“Keep talking. Please. Don’t stop.” He breathed.


Louis’ chest seized as he bit back a whimper, clenching eyes tight as the first sprinkling of tears beaded along his lids. Harry pulled back, lifting himself level to Louis’ face and easing a thumb across his cheekbone.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” Louis sputtered, opening his eyes and laughing at how illogical these stupid tears were. “Nothing’s wrong. That’s why I’m crying.” He admitted, nuzzling his cheek further into the palm of Harry’s hand. Harry was looking back at him, nodding, understanding all too well what Louis meant. If ever there was another person understand the bittersweetness leaching Louis of his composure, it was this man poised over him, dusting Louis in affection with his honeyed words.

“Don’t cry, sweetheart.” Harry whispered, and Louis could already hear the splintering in his voice before the saw the water swelling in Harry’s eyes.

“No, no, Harry. You can't cry.” Louis implored, circling his arms lightly around Harry’s waist as he relaxed more of his weight onto him.

“You started it,” Harry argued, his voice a hitched whimper as his face completely crumpled.

“Oh, Harry.” Louis cooed, brushing Harry’s long mane from his face as the tears fell in earnest. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I just love you.” He grumbled. His eyes were exceptionally raw, his emotions so exposed that Louis thought he might be able to reach right into Harry’s mind and weave his fingers through his thoughts. “I just love you, and I don’t know what else I can really say besides that. I can keep - keep writing some fairytale love song and throw all these shiny words at you, but it just doesn’t compare to how I feel about you. How I’ve felt about you since we kissed on New Years, since I held you under the northern lights, since that night after you fell down those stairs and we fell asleep holding hands. And even - and even before that, Louis.” He sniffled, and Louis took Harry’s face between his hands.

“Me too, Harry.” He tried to say, but Harry’s words were spilling out of him without a shred of control.

“Since that - that night when you came and found me. At that diner. And we’ve never talked about it, but I always think about that night. I was alone - and terrified - and my head was spinning and I was so scared, Louis.”

“Baby,” Louis choked, pulling him down and cradling his head against his chest. He ran a soothing hand up and down Harry’s back, feeling the cold pinprick of Harry’s tears against his skin. “I was scared, too, Harry. I was so afraid that something was going to happen to you. I couldn’t handle it; the idea of you getting hurt.”

“But you were there. You suddenly appeared. And you stayed.” He muttered, kissing the inside of Louis’ bicep. “And every time I thought you’d leave, you didn’t. You’ve always stayed.”

“Of course I stayed. You’re home to me.” Louis said simply, watching the weary grin break through Harry’s tears as he lifted his head. “I think I might have stolen that line from you.”
“Yeah.” Harry laughed. “Sounds familiar. Ugh.” He lifted a hand, swatting away his wayward tears. “I didn’t want to spend our first night back together crying all over each other.”

“Have you met us, Hazza?” Louis laughed. “We cry about everything. We were going to cry tonight, it was a given. Might as well get it out of the way early.”

“I’m not a weeper.” Harry muttered, gracing Louis with a sparkling, coy smile that felt totally tailored to him; their own little secret. Harry lifted Louis’ left hand, taking it in his and kissing each of his knuckles. He watched in tempered anticipation, smiling as Louis slowly wove their fingers together.

“Baby, your hand is so much better.” He gaped. Louis grinned, watching the pride coiling inside of Harry. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Louis responded. “So much. So, so much. And you - Harry - I can’t talk like you and I wish I could, but - Harry.” He breathed out to steady himself under Harry’s curious gaze. “I’m so proud of you, my love. My strong, brave, beautiful love.”

Harry’s body stilled, breathing the words through his nose until they fluxed through him, imbedding deep inside. He mused over the moment for another breath before leaping back into Louis, twining into the sheets as they pressed every inch of themselves together.

The remainder of their clothes were shed, the giggles and jokes making way for gasps and groans, the tension and tears soaked away beneath a sheen of sweat. It swept through in pulses, knocking sense from Louis’ mind with each beat of Harry’s heart against his chest. Eight weeks of it he’d endure, of living inside a body wracked with the pain of years he hadn’t even lived. Eight weeks of drowning in an expansive bed that was always cold to the touch.

His body needed this, it ached and begged to be touched and held. His hand was meant to be clasped in Harry’s, his lips hooked on his collar bone, their hips flush and rocking against each other as Harry sunk inside him with the rush of fireworks.

Louis was meant to be senseless, devoid of thought and self. Only skin, only breath, only muscle, bone, blood. Only a throbbing, a pounding, a pulsating; the lush drag of Harry deep inside him.

Louis’ legs were made to lock Harry in tighter, his fingers to trace through the beading sweat, his eyes to drink in the way Harry bit his lip, furrowed his brow. His lungs there only supply the air for his moans, his whispers, the last cry that ripped out of him.

Just lips, soft, wet, red. Just darkness. Just a slow, thick darkness.

And love, just a tangible love that blanketed their naked bodies.

At long last, Louis’ capacities abandoned him, and all he could perceive as love. He was somewhere, swirling without a physical body, just his beating heart. This was assuming that his heart was actually the organ that regulated love. In truth, was that more of the brain? Or was it some sort of combination?

It honestly didn’t matter, though, as he was just some amalgam of flesh and bone, alive but not tethered to the Earth. Indescribably content.

This was how he remembered that night, and this is why the glare he was focusing toward Niall was darkening.

“Intermittent lovemaking, yes. But no shagging.” Louis corrected him grumpily. Harry’s neck
craned as he made a cursory glance around the room, making sure his mum wasn’t into earshot. She’d disappeared while they were sleeping, Harry realized with relief.

“We talked, mostly,” Harry explained, sinking back down.

“I’m not sure if we have the same definition of the word ‘talk,’ young Harold.” Niall laughed. “You don’t actually employ your cock in the art of talking.”

“I’ve had enough of your accusations, Horan.” Louis snapped, pushing himself off the couch and barreling into Niall. He yanked him to the ground, quickly devolving into a frenzied attack of playful limbs and teeth.

Harry wasn’t lying, was the thing. They’d certainly taken every opportunity to spring back into bed together over the course of the night, but between that, they mostly talked. The thought of going to sleep hadn’t crossed either of their minds when there was still the option of talking mindlessly for hours.

There had been a litany of revelations whispered into each other’s arms during those early morning hours. At one point, they’d been snuggled in one of the loungers on the back patio, Harry’s back pressed to Louis’ chest as he curled in his arms to watch the stars. It was this moment Harry admitted that he had decided to sell his house.

“It’s just so massive and empty.” He explained, a fixated intensity rising in his rant. “The entire time I’ve lived here, it’s just been me. Alone. It feels like this mausoleum I’ve built for myself to waste away in. A tomb.”

“Do you really feel like that?” Louis asked, scrunching his hand gently in Harry’s hair as he nodded. “That’s really maudlin, love.”

“I don’t know - I just want something different. I don’t want to go back to how things were. How they were before I met you.”

“So you want to move in with me, then?” Louis asked, knowing this was the natural next step. Harry curled further into his arms. “Harry?”

“I mean - if you don’t - if you don’t want…”

“Of course I want you to. You practically already lived there before you left.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Harry clarified, spinning over to look up at him. “I just mean, a lot of stuff has happened there, and I can understand if you wanted some distance.”

Harry’s eyes were giant, waiting patiently as Louis slowly nodded.

“Joshua’s gone.” Louis finally said, his voice direct. “He doesn’t get to be a specter in my life anymore. Regardless of how everything - how it all ended, he doesn’t haunt over our decisions.”

Harry watched him seriously, slowly turning around and sinking back into the crook of Louis’ arm.

“Lou. I need you to promise me something.” He whispered.

“Anything.”

“Well, hear what it is first.”
“What, Harry?”

“If something happens with me again…” Harry said, his voice grave. “If I lose sight of what’s important, I need you to promise me you’ll do what’s best for yourself.”

“Harry.” Louis groaned, hoping they hadn’t somehow regressed back to square one, with Harry constantly in fear of Louis leaving him. “I’m not going to -“

“Wait, though.” Harry interrupted. “Like, thinking that I’m just cured - that’s everything’s going to be so perfect and easy now because I’ve been to rehab - that’s a delusion. That’s not something I can live up to. It’s completely possible that I could fuck up again.”

“Then I’ll be there to help you,” Louis assured him.

“I don’t doubt that, Lou. Not for a second. It’s just, if things got really bad, like if you don’t even recognize me anymore - if I got dangerous -“

“You’re not dangerous.”

“If I was, though. If it was getting harmful for you, I need to know that there’s a point that you can take a step back and protect yourself.”

“Harry,” Louis whined, the topic settling in uncomfortably. He saw Harry’s point, but he didn’t want to acknowledge the reasoning behind it; the possibility that Harry could ever change that dramatically.

“I can’t handle the pressure of knowing that you’ll follow me into a disaster if I lose myself again. Please don’t be a martyr, Louis.”

“Pot, meet kettle.” Louis murmured, avoiding answering the question Harry was waiting so patiently for. He sighed heavily, begrudgingly. “I’m going to be with you for the rest of our lives, Harry, but if you’re ever being a real prick, I will put some space between us.”

“That’s all I ask.”

“Any other demands while I’m being so generous?” Louis joked.

“Erm, well…” Harry trailed off, his body going rigid again.

“Sounds important.”

“There are - like - some things I want to talk about. That I realized are really important to me - something I really, really want. At least, I want to talk about it.”

“Some things?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of things?”

“You and me things.”

“You and me things?” Louis repeated, stroking a hand down Harry’s arm.

“Yes.”
“What kind of you and me things?”

“Like - not right now. Not this very second. Maybe in a few months? Years? Months? I don’t know.” He rambled. “I mean, we should definitely work on getting back to normal right now. That should be our focus above everything else, you know? Putting our lives back together. Figuring out what’s normal for us now. But once we’re there - normal - I kind of want to talk about certain things.”

“Certain things?”

“You and me future things.” Harry clarified, his hand squeezing Louis’ leg. Louis’ hand stalled, his heart swelling as he realized what Harry was getting at. Harry seemed to notice, the words continuing to tumble out of him in a nervous response. “And maybe - maybe we can talk about a word that starts with an M and it’s kind of scary word to say out loud, but it’s also exciting, but mostly terrifying and nerve-wracking and-“

“When things are settled down, when we’re both ready?” Louis said gently. “Yeah, we could talk about getting married. If we feel like that’s the next step for us.”

Harry didn’t turn to look at him, didn’t say anything, his only response the way his hand tightened around Louis’ leg and the way the ecstasy seemed to radiate from him. Louis tugged at his shoulder, coaxing him into turning around so he could give him the kind of kiss the moment deserved.

Emboldened by the success of their conversation, Harry continued on with the long list of ideas he’d fixated on during his time in rehab. As the night ebbed away, they found themselves planning an extravagant family trip to New York for the holidays, a do-over of sorts after Louis’ catastrophic attempt two years earlier.

Even as the sun crept onto the lid of the horizon, their plans were growing increasingly fanciful, promising that the next chapter of their lives was going to be solely focused on the two of them. They were going to travel the world, explore, discover life together.

That is, if they managed to survive awards season.

“Please! Harry! Call him off!” Niall begged from the continuing fray. Louis had him in an unrelenting choke hold, his pure annoyance having leveraged him the upper hand.

“Don’t want to,” Harry said tiredly, rolling over to better watch Louis pummel Niall.

Anne eventually re-entered the room, her purse hanging from her shoulder. She took one look at the two of them and uttered a simple, scolding, “Boys,” and they leaped off of each other.

“Where are you going?” Harry asked, rolling onto his back as his mum leaned over the couch.

“Since you two are so determined to sleep the day away, Niall is taking me out for lunch.”

“Because I didn’t stay up all night sha-“

The word never made it’s way fully out of Niall’s mouth as Louis clapped an angry hand over his face. He responded by licking Louis’ palm, fluttering away as Louis yanked his hand back.

“You’re a toddler, Niall!” Louis called after him.

“And yet I’m of the legal drinking age. What a dangerous combination!” He shouted back,
slamming the door behind them.

Harry stretched his arms wide open, welcoming Louis back into his embrace beneath the blanket. He nuzzled back into Harry’s chest, settling in.

“I hate him, Harry. I hate your best friend.” He muttered.

“I know you do.” Harry chuckled. Suddenly, Louis whipped his head back.

“You only want to move in with me to be closer to him don’t you?” Louis gasped. Harry watched him for a moment, weighing his chances of survival as he hid his face beneath his hands, protecting himself from Louis’ agonized shriek.

“I’m just trying to keep the love triangle alive, Louis!”

~

"Harry’s Confinement" was what Louis had found himself referring to it as before he could stop himself. On the surface, Harry was throwing himself heart first into his new life with Louis, looking over renovations and adding his own little touches to the house. Initially, he’d been reluctant of anything that might inconvenience Louis, arguing endlessly about how much license Harry should have.

It had taken a week of bickering for Louis to finally convince Harry that he wasn’t “disrupting his comfort” by turning one of the guest rooms into a music room. To Louis, it seemed clear. Harry had a music room at his old house, so, naturally, he should have one at the new house. Alas, no, Harry was too intent to fret over the invisible guests he was convinced he was putting out. He’d only opened up to the possibility once Louis told him that his physical therapist had suggested he start practicing piano to improve dexterity in his hand.

Harry had all but swooned at the notion of teaching Louis to play his favorite instrument.

“We’ll play together. It will be our weekly thing.” He decided excitedly.

“Sounds fantastic.”

“And you’ll have your own desk where you can sit and compose.”

“And you’ve gone too far.”

“We’ll write competing operas, constantly inspiring each other through a heated rivalry.”

“That’s the plot of Amadeus, love.” Louis pointed out.

“Very romantic film, that.” Harry hummed, stepping forward to kiss the side of Louis’ face.

“He dies at the end, Haz. The other guys kiss him.”

“Spoiler alert, Lou.”

Louis had sorely missed the most rewarding parts of having Harry around, which were the little, ridiculous chats they’d have. Sometimes they’d be casual and sweet, often funny, and sometimes a
simple discussion would lead them to a major epiphany.

The news about Harry’s relationship with Nick had started innocently enough as a discussion about hair products, with Louis eventually mocking Grimshaw’s signature hairstyle.

“I swear, next time he comes skulking around, I’ll be able to smell him from a mile away with all that product in his hair.” Louis laughed, fading slowly as he noticed the serious look on Harry’s face. “What?”

“Why would Nick come skulking around?”

“Because he does that,” Louis said with a shrug. “The whole - you know - still being in love with you thing.”

“Did I not tell you?” Harry asked, realization awakening on his features.

“Tell me what?”

“Oh shit, that was right before I left for rehab. I didn’t get the chance to tell you.” He explained. “It was so long ago I just forgot, I guess. Assumed you already knew.”

“Knew what?”

“I told Nick to bugger off,” Harry said simply, causing Louis to gape at him.

“Oh did you?” Louis asked jokingly.

“Yup. When he called me after I came out? I told him that he needs to stay away from me from now on.”

“Wait, really though?” Louis clarified. “You really said that to Nick?”

“He was goading you that last time we were all together. I’m not okay with that.” Harry explained. “You’re my partner, and he can’t be in my life if he’s going to come after you.”

Louis laughed, unable to think of how he was supposed to respond to that. Say he was thank you? Say he was proud?

But, just, just fucking yes Nick Grimshaw was fucking gone. Not only was he gone, but it was Harry who drove him off, entirely of his own volition. It hadn’t even been a result of Louis badgering Harry, he just finally respected himself enough to demand some space.

Everyone was still lofting the phrase “get back to normal” at the two of them as if this were a concept that would just click into place with time. What was exceedingly clear to Louis, however, was that things were never going to back to normal. The elements they’d stacked together in their relationship were so exceptionally shaken that it wasn’t even clear what normal was supposed to be anymore. Their normal had been sharing their relationship with a stalker and with the pervasive presence of Harry’s drug abuse. They were suddenly alone in their relationship, nothing impeding the distance between the two of them as Louis turned over in Harry’s arms and asked him why felt so cold, or why his arms were shivering just slightly.

But it was always Harry staring back at him, undiluted and sharply focused. It was more mind-bending than Louis had prepared himself for, to have constant, unwavering access to a sober, clear Harry. All too often, though, this new clarity lent itself to quietness, left him isolated in his music room as he wistfully toiled over his piano.
It was like watching an animal in captivity. Louis had stopped suggesting trips out of the house, maybe a hike to clear their heads or a scheduled appearance together because Harry always turned them down.

All day, every day it was calculation with Louis, afraid that he might overstep and say the wrong thing. Maybe he wasn’t being patient enough, wasn’t being understanding enough, and maybe that’s why Harry remained a hermit.

Liam, however, put things in perspective for Louis, finally giving in and briefing him on how Harry’s legal battles were faring. Not well, it would seem, as they were fighting a massive corporation with very clear contractual obligations. They were fighting their case based solely on empathy, not grounded in logic or facts, which meant this was an uphill battle.

He’d been begging Harry to get back into the media circuit since the sway of the masses was one of the only cards they had left to play. If enough people sympathized with Harry, if popular opinion turned against his management, it would become too costly to continue the litigations and they could perhaps settle out of court.

Still, this didn’t rouse Harry from his stupor, and Liam assumed he was afraid. Without any positive press coming from their side, the media had been tearing him apart to make a salacious buck.

Louis was all too familiar with the negativity being spread in Harry’s name, as his veritable nemesis had enthusiastically taken the lead. Thad Dylan had been relentless, retweeting other people’s insults targeted at the couple or making his own subtle digs. Liam begged Louis not even follow Thad, let alone engage in his shit stirring.

“He’s trying to get a rise out of you. It’s political.” Liam explained. “It’s not like he’s some villain from an 80’s high school movie. He’s not a bully for the sake of being a bully. He’s trying to get your attention so it gets his name back in the press. Do you know how many twitter mentions he got after you talked about him in that interview?”

Louis kept this reasoning in mind with every homophobic Furia meme or insulting parody of Status Solo lyrics that pumped itself out of Thad’s twitter. But he finally reached the end his rope after one unforgivable retweet.

It was a picture of someone dressed as Harry at a party, which would have been rather complimentary if the costume hadn’t included a streak of white powder under his nose. Thad had added his own commentary to the photo, saying:

pretty sure i saw the real thing at a party one time

It was so simple; so poetically dull and yet maddening that Louis felt the veins in his eyes plumping with blood. There were no thoughts of poor Liam, no regards to his own reputation. There were only his fingers and 160 characters to shut Thad up.

@thaddylan remember seeing you too, mate. Before or after you used the loo and didn’t wash your hands?
And, well, that was that, wasn’t it?

Liam had called him within five minutes, proving that he really was an exemplary manager, which was at least some consolation. The fact that he was very correct and Thad’s intentions to piggyback on Louis and Harry’s notoriety should have pleased him as well because Thad spent the next few days sitting down with any reporter that would have him.

Louis had been on set for one of the final shoot days of Metal Heart 2, his heart pattering excitedly after some fantastic news he’d just been given. He was already thinking of how he was going to tell Harry, only to have the entire situation soured.

“I have to ask, everyone is dying to know. Did Louis Tomlinson really see you skip washing your hands in the bathroom?” The interviewer asked at one of Thad's his press junkets, the video already having popped up on youtube. Thad laughed it off with practiced nonchalance.

“’You know, the night he’s talking about, I hardly remember. Maybe?’ He laughed.

“Really?”

“Who knows? I definitely remember seeing the two of them in the bathroom, getting high or something together.”

Turns out the motherfucker hadn’t learned his lesson yet.

Louis was shaking with anger as he opened twitter, thinking of the sweet, compassionate man moping about their house and what this true and utter douchebag was doing to his good name. He had to avenge him. It was his chivalrous duty.

In a sweltering rage, he fired off tweet after tweet, paying no mind to the cadence of his thoughts.

Sorry @thaddylan, turns out you weren’t interrupting me and Harry “getting high” that night.

You were actually witnessing the last day of my abusive relationship. Was getting some advice from the most loving, caring person in my life.

And no, your drunk, ignorant arse did not wash your hands

In response, Liam merely informed Louis that he would be driving him home from set that night. It felt frighteningly reminiscent of his mum telling him they would talk when she got home when he was a reckless teenager.

But the car ride was surprisingly amicable, Liam appearing far more relaxed than Louis had expected.

“I’m going to take a break from being your manager for a second, alright?” Liam asked, Louis watching him cautiously. “I just wanted to say that Thad Dylan is an asshole, and I admire how
“Well thank you, Payno.”
“Okay, now I’m going to be your manager again.”
“Fuck.”

But Liam didn’t scold him, didn’t patronize him with the merits of remaining civil on social media. Instead, he talked about a conversation he’d had with Harry that had left him unsettled.

“He was kind of alluding to some stuff the public doesn’t know about.” He explained. “I guess, during that phase after he and Nick broke up. Sounds like, maybe, it’s some stuff that would really wreck him. Has he told you about any of that?”

“Yeah, he’s told me about some of it,” Louis muttered, thinking back to that letter drenched in Harry’s heartache, detailing every mistake he’d made after Nick abandoned him. “But, I don’t know. It’s just shit that a lot of people have done. Doesn’t mean people will believe it.”

“Staying home all day, that just doesn’t seem like Harry, you know?” Liam mused. “I can’t see how that would make him happy.”
“IT doesn’t. He’s pretending he’s fine, but he’s not.”

“I think - if that stuff’s going to come out, it’s going to come out. It’s just inevitable.” Liam explained. “It’s not a reason to stop living.”

With that, Louis had marched upstairs to find Harry pondering over the piano, intent on bringing a swift end to the confinement.

“Come on. I’ve got big news and I want to take my man out for dinner.” Louis announced, snatching Harry’s sheet music away. Harry looked down, biting the inside of his cheek.

“Rain check?” He asked, testing Louis’ resilience.

“No, Harry. We haven’t gone out since you came back, and I have a dangerous craving for Italian.”

“I can make us Italian.”

“Or we could go somewhere else and have somebody cook for us for once.”

“Can I have that back, please?” Harry asked, extending a dejected hand toward the sheet music.

“No, Harry, because I’m fucking sick of little ass wipes like Thad Dylan making me feel like you’re back in the closet.” Louis snapped. “Who exactly are you helping by just sitting around in here? Yourself? No, in case you haven’t noticed, it’s actually hurting you.”

“Louis.” Harry said calmly.

“After all the stuff you said about your other house being your tomb, and now you’ve just given up! You’ve fucking given up, Harry!”

“Lou,”

“What? What’s your excuse this time? What could you possibly have to say now? Or would you rather we just sat in here quietly and didn’t talk to each other?”

Harry’s eyes tightened on Louis, swelling with bravery as he opened his mouth.
“Louis, you have a shorter fuse than you used to.” He said, his voice as unrelenting as his searing eye contact. Louis’ mouth fell open argue until the words hit him, stealing his voice.

“Huh?” was all he managed to choke out.

“You get angry more quickly than you used to. I don’t think you’ve realized it, but you do. You have more of a temper and I haven’t known how to talk to you about it.”

Louis watched him, his mind twisting over the sharp turn their conversation had just taken. His first urge, red hot and primal, was to argue until his voice went hoarse. But that sent a cold shot down his spine, realizing he’d just proven Harry’s point, hadn’t he?

He didn’t quite remember when he tromped out of the room and how he’d ended up in his bed, staring at the ceiling as his emotions simmered in his chest. Time continued to pass, quiet and sobering, breathing some clarity into his mind.

Eventually, Harry joined him, crawling in beside him after he’d had time to cool off. Louis didn’t look up, even as Harry curled a hand around his shoulder.

“Hi honey, how was your day?” He asked jokingly.

“Oh you know, I made an arse of myself in front of my boyfriend,” Louis commented, eyes meeting Harry’s. “Am I terrible? Am I a complete terror?”

“No, Louis!” Harry sighed, scooting in closer beside him. “This is why it took me so long to tell you. I knew you’d take it too hard.”

“God, I just - I hadn’t noticed,” Louis admitted. “But now, now that I’ve been thinking about it, I’ve been a douche, haven’t I? Been snapping at people. And shit. All that stuff I said about Thad Dylan.” He groaned in embarrassment.

“You’ve gone through shock, Louis. Life altering shock. I mean - there’s going to be stuff you have to work on for awhile, but you’re not a terror.” Harry assured him. “You just get so frustrated sometimes, and it’s always over stuff that doesn’t matter. It makes me feel so bad for you, but I never know what to say.”

“You can say, ‘oi, Tomlison, you’re being a real git.’”

“Noted.” Harry joked. “I know you’re not mad at me. It’s just something we can work through.”

“Thank you for telling me,” Louis said quietly, giving Harry a solemn smile. Harry returned it, leaving a heaviness in the air as the other issue hanging over them sunk in. Louis breathed in heavily, in and out, several times, just staring at Harry as they both struggled to decide what they should say next. “Why are you so afraid, Harry?”

“I’m…” Harry trailed off, busying himself with playing with the fabric of Louis’ sleeve. “It’s just kind of difficult - I guess - with my deal with loud noises? I’m kind of hesitant to … with the big crowds, and everything. Everyone come after us.”

“Oh, Harry.” Louis sighed with ashamed realization.

“I’m a little anxious about it. Might be kind of triggering.”

“Harry, I am such a royal fucking idiot.”
“You’re not!”

“I am, though.” Louis decided, rolling over to wrap his arms around Harry’s neck.

“You’re not an idiot. I just haven’t been honest with you, like I promised to be.” Harry muttered, his arms tightening around Louis’ body.

“I just don’t want you to be unhappy,” Louis admitted, melting further into Harry’s hold.

“Wait, what was the good news?” Harry asked suddenly, pulling himself away so he could see Louis’ face. “What were you talking about earlier?”

“Oh, right,” Louis remembered. “Seems a bit out of place, now.”

“Tell me.” Harry insisted. Louis looked back at him, biting his lip precociously as Harry’s curiosity mounted. “Louis! Tell me!”

“The Golden Globe nominations came out today.” He said, doing everything he could to control his smile as Harry’s look of disbelief gave way to alarming jubilation.

“You’re nominated? Yeah? That’s what you’re saying? Louis?” Harry plead, but Louis just laughed at him. “Louis! Answer me! Best supporting actor, yes? Louis!” He was actually shaking Louis at this point, climbing into his lap and pinning him back against the headboard until he finally nodded.

“Yeah, I got nominated.”

“Fucking knew it!” Harry shouted in triumph, striking the air with one fist pump before leaning down to kiss Louis. “I knew it, baby. I knew it!”

“It’s not the big one yet, Haz.” Louis reminded, trying to get a handle on his enthusiasm.

“M’so proud of you, baby. You’re gonna look so good on that stage with your award and everyone’s going to be like, ‘Who’s boyfriend is that?’ Then I will stand up, literally stand in my seat on live broadcast and be like, ‘Mine! That is my boyfriend, so kindly take your eyes off of him because he is mine and mine only.’”

“Harry, if you take the Golden Globes hostage, we’ll never get invited to another awards ceremony.”

“How about the Oscars?”

“If we are lucky enough to be at the Oscars this year, let’s do everything we can to behave ourselves, yeah?” Louis reasoned. Harry chewed his lip, clearly rejecting the idea.

“So, Italian, huh?” Harry asked quietly, striking Louis quite dumb.

“Erm, yeah, totally.” He said happily. “If you’re up for it.”

“Fine, but we’re wearing those matching bowties I got for us.” Harry decided, sliding off of Louis and heading toward the closet.

“Oh, we’re going to be fancy are we?” Louis asked with a wiggle of his brow. Harry shot a devilish wink back in Louis’ direction in response.

Indeed, the initial plan had been to be fancy, deciding on a restaurant so exhaustively posh their
bowties actually made them feel underdressed. They were served those nauseatingly undersized portions that left them utterly starving once the meal was over, which had them racing to the nearest grocery store on the way home. It was with a relentless determination that they trekked through the store, drawing considerable attention as they marauded the snack aisle.

“Please get something semi-healthy, my love!” Harry called down the walls of shimmery plastic bags as Louis approached him with an already open bag of Cheetos.

“I think these have potatoes in them somewhere. Or corn, maybe?” He wondered, offering Harry a handful.

“And fat, salt, and the tears of abused orphans, I could only guess,” Harry commented, already popping one in his mouth.

By the grace of some merciless deity, they finally landed themselves at the checkout counter and came face to face with their own likenesses splattered across nearly every magazine. They both let out a patronizing, “Awww,” as People magazine informed them that “Louis says enough is enough . . . devastated Harry kicked out . . . how partying tore them apart . . . story on page 8…”

Harry picked it up with a fiery grin, pulling his phone out.

“Remember what Liam was saying the other day?” Harry asked.

“Aww, babe. You know I never listen to what Liam says.”

“About getting back on social media? Getting more people on my side?”

“Oh Harold, you scoundrel.”

Louis took the phone from Harry, holding it out so they were both on the screen, the magazine in-between them. They made ludicrous faces, drawing the attention of anyone within a ten-foot radius. Harry was giggling as he looked through the pictures.

“Think Liam will like it?” He asked, stepping up to the cash register.


“Yikes.”

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Despite their boastful claims that they were soulmates put on this Earth entirely to benefit each other’s existence, Harry and Louis simply weren’t on the same page when it came to charades.

“Cat! Cat! Cats! Cats the musical! Jellicle cats! Garfield! Crookshanks! Simba! Rum Tum Tugger! Cat, Harry! Cat!” Louis screamed in increasing frustration. Harry continued with his ministrations, clearly miming a cat, offering no further clues as to which cat he specifically was. The rest of their company was delirious with laughter, Niall cackling particularly heinously at Louis’ turmoil. The timer was running down, and Harry had been playing with an imaginary ball of yarn for the last thirty seconds. “Cat! CAT! MOTHERFUCKING CAT!”
“Out of time, Tommo!” Liam announced, still guffawing as Louis stomped over to snatch away the piece of paper with Harry’s clue.

“Baby?” Louis gawked, devastated by Harry’s ineptitude. “How was that a baby?”

“Because Glitter is our baby!” Harry shouted, equally infuriated by Louis’ inability to follow what was clearly a natural progression of thought.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Louis exclaimed, hurling the slip of paper into the air and collapsing back onto the couch in defeat. “How much are we losing by now?”

“A considerable margin!” Liam announced happily. “Nona, your turn.”

“Do not touch me,” Louis warned as Harry slinked over with a coy smile. Undeterred, he slipped into Louis’ lap and kissed his cheek.

“I’m sorry, Loulie.” Harry chimed, leaning in closer as Louis tried to distance himself from the affection.

“I don’t like you anymore.”

“I should have just pointed at you because you’re my baby.”

“Stop.”

“You’re mine and Glitter’s baby.”

“Why are you like this? Who made you like this?” He questioned, making the critical error of turning and making eye contact with Harry. In the length of one breath, he was goo again, melting into Harry’s arms. “I love you, but I just don’t understand why you are so intent on being completely useless.”

If someone had told a younger Louis that, at the age of 25, he’d be spending his Friday nights playing rousing games of sober charades, he would have resorted to making some sort of Satanic sacrifice in the hopes of rescuing his endangered youth. Having a boyfriend who was nine weeks sober, however, softened his opinion of family game night.

Eventually, the game died down and the group separated, with everyone besides Louis and Zayn following Harry over to one of his freshly delivered pianos. They looked like a Christmas card, all gathered around the instrument together festively. Granted, the tune was a bit frenzied as Harry tried to keep up with Niall’s convoluted rendition of *Gangsta’s Paradise*.

Zayn and Louis watched from a distance, Zayn gripping Louis’ ankle where he’d kicked his feet up into his lap. He let out a little chuckle, causing Louis to look up and note the phone in his hand.

“Do I like the Foo Fighters?” Zayn read aloud, and Louis immediately recognized the quote as one of his earlier tweets. “Depends. Is Dave Grohl being portrayed by Thad Dylan?”

“I was simply responding to a fan’s question.”

“Of course.”

“You know what, Zayn? It’s so easy for you to just sit there all cool and stoic, but you don’t know what it’s like to have the heart and brain of a relentless arsehole.”

“Nah, I think you should rip the piss out of him,” Zayn admitted. “He’s crossed a line, coming after
Harry. Plus, he’s driving Liam up the wall.”

“Cheers,” Louis said happily.

“S’all just been reminding me of your interview, when Harry was in rehab still.”

“Hm?”

“You were talking about sticking up for him. Protecting him.” Zayn clarified.

“I have to,” Louis said. “He’s just - he’s had too much happen to him because no one’s been there to protect him.”

Zayn nodded slightly, glancing back in the direction of the piano, his thoughts humming behind his dark eyes.

“Back before you came out, when everyone was figuring out you were gay?” He asked suddenly. “That’s how felt, too. I just wanted to protect you. Wanted to blaze across twitter defending you. Tried a few times, to be honest. And it made me feel better for a second, you know? But I had to realize that it really wasn’t going to fix anything. I didn’t have that kind of power. You did.”

“What’re you getting at?”

“You rescued yourself from that situation, Louis. It was all you. I supported you as much as I could, but things didn’t get better until you decided to stick up for yourself. That’s what fixed everything.”

Louis’ gaze dropped, his mirth vanishing as he realized the meaning of Zayn’s story. He felt the mask he’d been wearing all night starting to slip, the tension coming to the surface.

It was a newly adopted habit with Harry and Louis, a way to stay on the same page no matter how convoluted their thoughts and feelings got. Anytime Harry got too glum, or Louis’ anger sparked too quickly, they’d find a way to deconstruct it, to peel it back to the tucked away thought that was truly bothering them.

Things would get frantic quickly, tears spilled as buttons were pushed. Louis would pace fervently, tear at his hair, while Harry would get small, look as fragile as he felt.

But they would keep pushing each other, keep prodding as the admissions become deeper, rawer, and more tangled emotions were dragged up to the light of day.

“What’s really bothering you?”

“They’re just going to say some made up shit, Louis. Those paps at the restaurant. Can’t even eat without them making something up and making a story out of it.”

“But what’s really bothering you?”

“That it’s - it’s become such a chore to do anything. They’re following us everywhere like gnats. Everyone’s always staring at us and judging everything we do, like we’re doing something wrong.”

It would take time, but the surface issues would eventually give way to the darker thoughts: fear of relapse, the guilt that still hung heavy around Joshua’s name, the dark cavern Harry’s dad had left.

“He didn’t even call my mum, Louis. Or my sister. Or anybody. He didn’t even try to get ahold of someone to find out if I was okay. He knew I was in rehab. How could he have missed that? I
fucking overdosed, Louis. I could've - could've died and my dad didn’t even care.”

But they pulled each other back at the teetering point, tethering each other in before someone tumbled over the edge. They would kiss, fold into the softness of each other’s arms, remind each other of their love. It required time and patience, but eventually, they would even out, both a bit a wiser for it, both a bit closer than they had been before.

Louis was thinking of these moments, these tumultuous conversations as he stared at Zayn, all at once remembering the last thing Harry always said during their conversations.

*I feel like I’m hiding again. I hate it.*

It was ruling over him, an echo behind his every thought, how he was supposed to help Harry feel like he wasn’t hiding anymore.

“That scares the hell out of me,” Louis admitted. “Waiting for Harry to rescue himself.”

“Have some faith, okay?” Zayn said, gently shaking Louis’ shoulder. “He’s done it before.”

Leave it to Zayn to color family game night with somber wisdom. Harry was still warm and chipper in bed that night, propping himself up on his pillow as Louis stood rigid to the spot by the side of the bed. He was staring at the swirling design of the duvet, hardly present as thoughts continued to rock back and forth in his head.

“What’s up?” Harry finally asked, pulling Louis back to attention.

“I was just thinking,” Louis explained quietly, slowly taking a seat on the bed.

“Bout what?”

“When you came out of the closet.” He said, watching the surprise ripple across Harry’s face.

“Why?”

“It was really brave. I’ve said that, right? I’ve said it enough? And I’m proud of you. I’m still proud of you.”

“Are you okay?” Harry asked, gently pulling Louis down to his side and securing and arm around him. “You’re acting weird.”

“I just want to sleep.” He admitted quietly, letting his eyes drift shut and willing his mind to quiet.

~

It was always present after that, this blustering hope that the defining moment was waiting around every corner. What was it going to be, though? The thing that finally spurred Harry into action; incited his will to take the reigns back in his life. When was that superhero going to reappear, not sparing fear a second thought?

As fatefully as just about anything else that happened to them, it finally happened at the worst possible moment.
Their trip to New York had materialized rather miraculously, with both Harry and Louis’ families en route for Christmas and New Years. There was an aura of nervousness, however, hovering around their plans. Given their track record with the city, they were hoping this holiday would disprove Louis’ theory that he was simply cursed.

They had only just touched down when the curse as invariably confirmed, their phones devolving into mania the moment they took them off airplane mode. In the five hours they’d been airborne, fate decided to twist the knife a bit further, splashing the press with an unprecedented Harry Styles scandal.

Louis didn’t truly panic until he got the news that Liam had already booked a flight to New York to captain the damage control team. It was a frenzy, with assistants and publicists descending on Harry with dire warnings but no concrete details that clued Louis into what exactly was going on.

Just as he was trying to hang onto Harry and keep him close, his boyfriend was swept up by handlers who were intent on hiding him away in a hastily acquired temporary office space. Apparently, it was already monikered “Disaster Headquarters.” Louis objected, offering to at least come along with Harry to wherever they were planning to take him.

“It’s fine, really,” Harry said, his calmness more alarming to Louis than if he’d been shaking. “It’s not like it used to be when they’d take me in a room and yell at me. These are Liam’s people.”

“Can’t I just come with you?” Louis asked again, feeling incrementally more pathetic every time he asked.

“Lou, you’ve got a family of nine arriving at our hotel in a couple of hours. Focus on them, and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He was ushered away to their hotel, left to wander his and Harry’s sprawling suite in heavily apparent exile. The silence was taunting, amplifying the already commanding voices in his head. His resolve lasted about five minutes before he was sinking down to the floor, opening his phone and googling Harry’s name.

Former Harry Styles Aid Tells All in Scandalous Interview

The words felt already emblazoned on his corneas, burnt in as the dread rose in his throat like bile. The story was prolific, cropping up on dozens of news sites with the same details slightly rearranged.

Insights about Harry were dropped as casually as if it were his horoscope, rather than secrets he’d agonized over before even being able to share them with Louis. Immediately Louis could identify the blatant lies, the editorializing that just reached a bit too far and came to the wrong conclusion. No, Harry didn’t have a troubled past with his mum, and no, he’d never been arrested for public intoxication.

But what stung, the things that were going sink Harry, were the pieces that were absolutely true. It’s as he recognized the details Harry had shared with him that he knew this wasn’t fake; he had actually been betrayed by someone in his inner circle.

The source claimed to be a former, short-lived aid of Harry’s who had correctly deduced that he worked for the rock star after a difficult breakup. Unfortunately, he’d also correctly concluded that
his ex had been none other that Nick Grimshaw. The most recent articles included the only response the Radio 1 host had given so far, a brief tweet consisting of:

¯\_(ツ)_/¯

What a relentless fucking dick.

Harry was relying on every ounce of strength he could muster to create a better life for himself, and this pompous pinhead was making light of the time he broke his heart. Louis’ hands were already shaking as he continued, realizing with dull heartache that this wasn’t even the worst of it.

The source made increasingly lewd allegations, detailing how frequently he was asked to handle STD tests, arrange for clean up crews after destructive parties, and once had to shoo two men from Harry’s hotel room because Harry couldn’t remember their names and didn’t want to be rude.

Louis resented being reminded of the exploits, but he could at least find solace in the fact that Harry had told him all about them. They weren’t secrets, so there was only so much damage they could do to Louis’ steadily shredding disposition.

But the worst was still lurking at the end of the article, ready to wallop any sense of calmness that Louis had managed to hold onto.

According to the aid, his breaking point had happened about three months after the breakup, after he’d been left the task of making sure a man leaving Harry’s room one morning had been paid for his services.

Louis stared at it, the words so alien they couldn’t quite lodge in his brain. Clearly, obviously, that one was a lie. It was just a fabrication designed to sell ad space, Louis told himself, clenching his teeth so hard his jaw was aching.

But the anxiety didn’t ease, even as he repeated the words to himself.

It’s a lie. It’s a lie. It’s a lie.

But what if it wasn’t a lie? What about this anecdote was different than the others that Louis was so quick to write it off as false? Why was there this small, sickening part of Louis that might actually believe it?

He slammed his phone to the floor with a plastic clang, expelling the information away. It didn’t matter in the slightest whether or not the story was true. It didn’t incrementally change how devoted he was to him.

The stitch in his stomach tightened, even as he slid his phone away from him and worked through what was actually upsetting him. He just had to deconstruct it; get to the root of his fears.

It wasn’t disgust, he realized; there was nothing about sex work that inherently bothered him. It wasn’t jealousy, either. He just felt sad, he realized. The thought just left him sad.
He clamped down on it, struggling to his feet to put on his bravest face and carry on. Gone were the days that their lives were thrown off track by this needless sensationalism. Harry was in Liam’s more-than-capable hands, and Louis had an excessive number of siblings to get settled in.

Their rooms were all on the same floor, close enough for convenience but private enough from Harry and Louis’ suite that they could make an exit when it was needed. Everyone came spilling in at once, fussing over ever thought that crossed their minds: most notably, Harry’s absence.

Johanna made a characteristically large show of it, shouting, “Where’s my favorite son-in-law?”

“Mum, you don’t have any son-in-laws, let alone a favorite.”

“You’re avoiding the question, Boo.”

When things were slightly more settled, in that everyone had dropped their bags in the appropriate rooms and were now wreaking havoc in Tomlinson style, she finally cornered him for a private chat that he couldn’t avoid.

“Is it what I think it is?” She asked with apprehension, physically bracing herself.

“Well, what do you think it is?” Louis asked, staring at his phone as if willing it to give him some news.

“Lou.” She sighed, and Louis felt his brave facade slipping out of place. “Lottie got her hands on it first. Had to keep it away from the younger ones.”

“Mum, it’s really not as bad as you think.”

“Is it true, though?”

“It’s…” He started, looking down at his phone again. “It’s complicated, you know? I mean - it’s life. And life is complicated. It’s not black and white like some trash printed on the internet.”

“I get it.”

“No, mum, really!” He plead, turning his whole body towards her. “You’ve met Harry. You’ve talked to him. He’s stayed in your house, and the man that you know is who he really is. That’s Harry. He adores you and the kids and - and I’m not going to lie to your face and tell you all the stuff they’ve written about him is made up. Some of it is, some of it isn’t, but that’s our lives. Things get hard, and there’s a lot of temptation and when you finally reach your lowest low, someone is there with a camera because everyone thinks it’s their business.”

“I get it, Louis.” She said, holding the sides of his face to make eye contact with him. “You don’t need to convince me. And I think he’s calling you.”

His eyes snapped down to find Harry’s name flashing across the screen. He answered quickly, spinning away from his conversation with his mum.

“Harry?” He asked.

“Hey, Lou.” He answered. He sounded winded, as if he were walking briskly, but there wasn’t an emotional edge behind his words.

“How are you? How did things go? Are things okay?” Louis asked, his questions shooting rapidly from his mouth.
“Yeah. M’fine. Might have volunteered our hotel room for something, but everything’s gonna be fine.”

“For what?”

“I’m almost back. Can I explain in a second?”

“Yeah, Harry, that’s fine,” Louis responded, realizing he sounded equally breathless now. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

It landed on Louis to get Harry’s family into their rooms and mixed together with the Tomlinson clan in time to leave for dinner, as Harry’s attention was worlds away from their family vacation. In a whirlwind of a camera crew and blinding lights, their suite was suddenly unrecognizable as they prepared an interview set up.

Liam had finally arrived, giving Louis a point-man amongst the crowd of strangers milling through the room. He was frazzled, his typically quaffed hair starting to fray, but was clearly feeding off the momentum and nervous energy.

“They’ve been chomping at the bit to get the first interview with him,” Liam explained after Louis asked how he’d managed to set this up so quickly. “Just put a soft inquiry out there and it got snatched up pretty instantaneously. It’s a bit of a rush, trying to get it filmed and in the can before people start taking off for the holidays.”

It was a plan of attack, what Liam and Harry had hatched. A lengthy, tell-all, televised interview to succinctly voice his side of events in one go. Fluff questions and cute anecdotes to mislead attention from the scandal had been expressly discouraged, under the pretense that Harry would open up to several of the most personal questions.

They’d slipped Harry into a tightly tailored black suit jacket with a crisp white shirt underneath, somehow cajoling him into fastening the majority of the buttons. He was so focused on the task at hand as he sat in the interview chair, a cyclone of stylists primping him on all sides, that he seemed completely unaware of just how cute he looked.

Louis made it his primary objective to remind him of this, orbiting him at an obnoxiously close proximity that certainly interfered with the jobs of several crew members. If one too many seconds passed that Harry’s face fell into lax concentration, Louis was right there to fiddle with his hair until it was mussed to Louis’ standards. He could feel the intense loathing radiating from the hair stylist who had to stand at the ready to correct whatever changes Louis had made.

Despite the tirelessly assembled trip itinerary that claimed their families should have left for dinner about ten minutes prior, Johanna made an ostentatious entrance just before the interview started, loudly pushing her way through the crowd that had amassed.

“I know! I know! I’ll just be a second!” She shouted blindly, making her way to Harry, a sight that had Louis laughing.

“Mum, what are you doing?” Louis asked as she leaned in to peck Harry on the cheek.

“Just wishing my favorite son-in-law luck.” She claimed innocently, nonplussed by the absurdity of what she’d said. She’d just put an entire film crew on hold so she could wish luck to someone who, once again, was not her son-in-law. “We love you.” She said rather seriously, making the kind of heavy eye contact that only mums were capable of.
“Love you, too.” Harry chuckled, the appreciation wavering through his voice.

Clearly satisfied with the brief exchange, she made her exit, but not before running a hand through Harry’s locks that was so destructive, the hairstylist just pulled it back into a bun.

Louis hovered on the fringes, chewing distractedly on his thumbnail as the final preparations clicked into place, Harry chatting casually with the woman who was going to be interviewing him. His face was devoid of fear, his lips curled into a natural grin. His eyes were already illuminated as they were apt to do when he found himself completely enthralled with a conversation. It was his factory setting, really; she could have been talking about low-fat milk, but Harry would still focus as if she were revealing that she’d been abducted by aliens.

He appeared calm, though. Louis soon realized that he must look about a hundred times more nervous than Harry.

“And how long have you been sober?” She asked early on. Louis watched the exact moment Harry tempered his smile, pulling back at his instinct to look childishly giddy. He wasn’t quite successful in this, and Louis was glad.

“How long have you been sober?” He said, his dimples refusing to be subdued.

“Congratulations.” She said jovially, and Harry smiled as if he’d just been congratulated by a close friend. Louis held a hand over his adoring smile, afraid some doting sigh might fall from his lips as he wrapped his head around Harry.

You are too, too good for words.

“It’s been a tumultuous ride lately, trying to keep up with your story. It seemed for a moment that a day couldn’t pass without something new and sensational happening to you. It’s been a bit unbelievable, to be honest.”

“I’m just as dumbfounded as you.” Harry chuckled in good humor. Louis couldn’t help but wonder how long that would last.

“Just to review the timeline, it looks like things ramped up a few months ago when several nude pictures were released of your partner, Louis Tomlinson. A couple of weeks later, this news was completely overshadowed when you were caught holding hands with Louis and kissing him in a series of photos. The next day you penned an open letter confirming the validity of the pictures, admitting that you identified as gay and that you’d been in a secret relationship with Louis.

The story soon took a turn when you stumbled off the stage at one of your concerts, and news outlets reported that you’d been admitted to the hospital following an overdose. Before any official statements were released, we learned that you and Louis had been targeted by an unidentified gunman and that Louis had been injured in the altercation. Soon we learned that the gunman was actually an ex-boyfriend of Louis’, and, to everyone’s shock he’d taken his own life.”

“And then I went to rehab.” Harry added quietly.

“Right. That’s a lot for a three-week news cycle.”

“I feel slightly winded just listening to it.”

“Can you understand the skepticism of some in the press? That perhaps parts of this were set up? It honestly felt like we were watching a movie. Surely no two people could be this unlucky.”
“Yes, I can definitely see how it would look like a publicity stunt.” Harry admitted. “I would have actually preferred if at least some of it had been fake. But it wasn’t all some massive, tragic coincidence. It was a series of events - like, each part set the next thing in motion.”

“And it started with the release of the nude pictures?”

“There was a bit of an ongoing saga before that, but yes, that’s definitely the moment things intensified.”

“Was Louis responsible for the release, or was it a hacking issue?”

“Neither.” Harry breathed, his eyes straying away as he watched the past playing out in front of him. “Those pictures had been in the possession of his former partner, and we confirmed with him that he released them willingly, without Louis’ consent.”

“This former partner?”

“Joshua. Yes.” Harry clarified. “The same man who ended up shooting him. You’re right; it does sound a bit like a dramatic movie.”

“A bit, yeah.” She agreed with a somber warmth. “This ex-boyfriend of Louis’, Joshua as he’s been identified, there’s been speculation about the nature of the relationship between the three of you. Is there any truth to the rumors that the shooting was the result of an ongoing feud after you, to put it plainly, stole Louis away from him?”

“Is that what people are saying?” Harry asked with a self-deprecating smile. “Certainly imaginative.”

“But Joshua and Louis were still dating when you met him, correct?”

“Yes, that’s true. But to describe it as me stealing Louis away, that’s an overly simplistic description of an incredibly complicated situation. And - I guess - Louis already explained things in the interview he gave a month ago, that’s the only reason I feel okay being so open about this. Because we need to bare in mind that there is a family in mourning right now. His parents lost their only son, but the situation was completely avoidable. It’s maddening how things would have gone differently if Joshua had had the support system in place to help him. And that’s why I feel like it’s irresponsible to keep my mouth shut on this. I want people to know how dangerous things can get when no one steps in.”

“What was the nature of their relationship when you first entered the picture?”

“When I first met Louis, they really did appear happy on the surface. I could tell there was disapproval from his friends, but early on I chose to take Louis at his word. Because Louis and I, we had an immediate bond. It was just effortless between us, and that transformed into this close friendship over a very short amount of time. It wasn’t necessarily romantic at first. Well, admittedly, I had a massive crush on him from the beginning, but his friendship meant more to me than that. I was desperate to keep him in my life, so it never crossed my mind to do anything to come between them.

“So in that sense, no, I never tried to steal Louis from Joshua. It didn’t seem plausible that someone as incredible as Louis could ever think about someone like me in that way. But obviously, ha... obviously, we got a bit closer, and he opened up to me more. That’s when my image of Joshua began unraveling. I could suddenly see that his behavior toward Louis wasn’t just a pattern of little annoyances. It became clear that there was a lot of abuse going on; emotionally and at times
physically. Then he, erm - something really terrible happened, and Louis ended up getting really hurt. It was - it was chilling, to see it. It was my nightmare articulated.

‘I was more than ready to do everything I could to keep the two of them apart, but, luckily, I didn’t need to. Louis had had enough, and he found the strength to end things. He was just, he was miraculously strong because Joshua was completely intent to keep his claws in Louis. But Louis walked away. He did it for himself. I might have played a small part of it, but truly, it was all Louis rescuing himself from abuse. It was Louis liberating himself. And yes, it eventually opened the door for us to be together, but that wasn’t the intention at the time. He left Joshua to save himself.”

Louis shivered as he felt goose pimples dust his arms, overcome by the praise and validation. These were all things Harry had said before, but it never failed to impact Louis when he heard it again.

“Was it soon after the break up that you began dating?” She asked.

“It was about a month later.” Harry remembered. “We kind of had to reconcile a lot of emotions before we could jump into something new. Louis, especially, needed to unravel a lot of pain that had been inflicted on him. It took a little bit of time, but we’ve been together almost a year now.”

“So, coming back to what we were talking about earlier,”

“Got a little off track there, didn’t I?” Harry laughed.

“Those pictures Joshua released, are you saying that had something to do with your coming out?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Harry agreed.

“Was it something you’d been planning?”

“Not particularly. I’d been building up to it for years, but no, I hadn’t planned on it happening right then. But, I suppose, it was something I’d been hoping to do for a very, very long time. Alright, so, elephant in the room, there’s obviously been some revelations about my past in the news lately. Some of it is completely false, but, I have to admit, some of it is also very true. I’m not going to split hairs over what’s conjecture while a good part of it actually did happen. ‘I know how terrible it all looks without context, but that was an extremely dark period of my life, and I’d really lost any trace of respect for how I was treating myself. I was trying to punish myself.”

“What were you punishing yourself for?”

“For being gay.” Harry said bluntly. “I was very young. I had a lot of responsibility, but I was still extremely young. I was trying and failing at growing up. Because that’s what growing up is supposed to be, you know? It’s supposed to be making peace with that parts of yourself that are a bit different from everyone else. About learning to love those integral parts of yourself. And yet, everywhere I turned, I just had people wishing I could be straight.

‘I was going through this terrible breakup. The kind that makes you question what you know about yourself. And then my dad made this brief reappearance in my life that ended just as badly as my relationship had.”

“Are you close with your father?”

“No.” Harry said simply. “Haven’t spoken to him in a couple of years.”
“Have you ever wanted to reach out?”

“Well, yes. Sometimes, yeah, I do want to reach out. But I know there isn’t a point to it.”

“Why’s that?”

“He’s disappointed in me. He’s the first person to have ever been disappointed in me for just being myself. And recently, I’ve had a lot of time to process how I feel about that, and I know that I don’t need an influence like that in my life. My disappointment in him is more important than his disappointment in me.”

Louis’ head slid back and hit the wall behind him, his neck no longer capable of holding it up under the weight of his thoughts.

“But, anyways, there was a lot going on back then.” Harry continued. “And this part of me was so convinced that the magical solution was coming out. If I could just somehow be open about that part of me, everything would be fixed. But I couldn’t. I legally couldn’t come out. I just didn’t have the bravery at the time to fight for myself.”

“So how did you handle those feelings?”

“Alcohol. Cocaine. Pills. Bad decisions in general.” He said simply. “I’d wake up and immediately these thoughts would hit me, and I’d think, ‘Wow, this really, really hurts. I don’t want to feel like this.’ So drinking or taking a pill would take the edge off. It would erase the edge entirely. So years went on like that, taking this easy out until it was intrinsic to me. I didn’t even recognize that was becoming an addict. Not when it was still so much easier to snort a line than come out of the closet.”

“So what changed? What was so different about a few months ago?”

“I was sober.” Harry admitted. “I’d been sober for a little while and it gave me a clarity that I’d been missing for a long time. I couldn’t avoid things the way I usually could. So then, when those pictures came out and Louis was so devastated, it had a really profound effect on me. Joshua just kept cropping up, proving to Louis that he could still control him, and there wasn’t much I could do about it. I couldn’t even admit that Louis was my boyfriend.

‘I guess I was finally sick of it; of that being our normal. One of us being torn apart in the press while the other just had to stand there with our hands tied. So that day, he was having trouble getting to his car because we were being swamped by paps, and I just thought, ‘I want to walk him out to the car so he isn’t afraid.’ And, I don’t know, it was just as simple as that. Suddenly it was easy, so I just did it. Haven’t regretted it for a second.

‘Except, I suppose, I can see in retrospect how that must have exacerbated the situation with Joshua.”

“What exactly was this situation?”

“He couldn’t let go of Louis. He’d call him constantly, show up at the house in the middle of the night, anything to get his attention.”

“So he was stalking him?” She asked, surprised.

“Yes. Absolutely. And I was just terrified all the time. He’d already hurt Louis before, so there was this constant fear. He was getting more and more erratic, but I think the coming out is what totally unhinged him. That’s when he actually attacked us the first time.”
“He attacked you?”

“He was trying to make off with Louis, showed up out of nowhere. Joshua was totally convinced that if he could just get Louis away from me, if he could talk to him alone, then things would go back to how they were before. This was how his brain worked. He appeared out of nowhere one night, grabbed Louis, then hit me when I chased after them. These were the things going on behind the scenes.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

“That’s the worst part. We did. We did everything we were supposed to do, but the system just doesn’t work. There’s so little you can do if someone is stalking you until it’s too late. Until it ends with someone getting hurt. So it was - it was inevitable, at that point. My relapse.”

“This is what lead to your overdose.”

“Correct.”

“Do you remember anything about it?”

“I remember the needle going into my arm, then waking up on the floor with all these people surrounding me. And they were all panicking, Louis was crying. But, no, I don’t remember much else. Don’t even remember going on stage.”

“Was there any discussion of rehab at this point?”

“Not to my face, no. I wasn’t being particularly understanding. Didn’t get the gravity of everything. But there would have been an intervention if it hadn’t been for the shooting.”

"Is it true that you were present at the shooting?"

"Yeah." Harry said, his voice almost a whisper as a thin shadow crossed his face. "Yeah, I was there. Sorry, it’s just-

"No, it’s fine.” She assured him as he wiped prematurely at his eye, willing himself not to cry.

“It’s like - he’s the love of my life, and I watched the blood draining out of his face. It’s an amount of helplessness that I wouldn’t wish on anyone. But that - that kind of helps me understand what happened next, with Joshua. I think I can understand what he was thinking. And I do find myself thinking about it a lot. If things would have gone differently if I’d chased after him. If I hadn’t let him run away. Honestly, if he hadn’t been alone convinced that he had to die.” Harry looked down then, biting into the side of his cheek as his eyes glazed over with a stoic intensity.

“But you attended to Louis.”

“Yeah.” He said quietly, taking another moment to stare at the ground before finally looking back up. "Couldn’t really think about anything besides Louis.”

“That seems like an incredible amount of guilt. It seems like you could easily get lost in that kind of guilt.”

“Erm, yeah. That’s an accurate way of looking at it.”

“And it wasn’t long afterward that you checked into rehab?”

“About a day later,” He admitted. “It was the first thing we talked about when he woke up. It just
finally got through to me. That - seeing Louis look so - look so lifeless. That if that was how I’d made him feel when I overdosed . . . Yeah. It was just a wake-up call. Set my priorities straight.”

“And what made you leave so quickly? So soon after he was shot?”

“It was probably the most difficult decision of my life. Deciding to leave him like that. My last memory of him before I left; his arm was just wrapped in these bandages, and this clotted blood was stained through it, and he was just pale and bereft and - I don’t know.

‘But I was - ha - this is the hard part is to admit. I was hung over. I had to keep getting up to go vomit because I’d spent the night before snorting cocaine until I forgot that my boyfriend was unconscious in a hospital, and he might not ever move his arm again.’

The silence became thick in the room, listening to Harry, the soft light playing off of his watery eyes. But the tears didn’t break, and the interviewer didn’t speak up.

“And that wasn’t okay. Clearly, that wasn’t okay. Louis had enough to deal with without me spiraling out of control. So I had to leave. I talked about it with him, and with our friends and everyone in our lives, and we decided that I wasn’t in good enough shape to take care of him. That I wanted to be there for him, but I was too sick. I’d honestly - I’d honestly end up doing more harm than good.

‘And that’s extraordinarily humbling. When you’re in a long-term relationship with someone, and you know you’re their go-to person for everything. You, above anyone else, are there to take care of them. And then, suddenly, I was the problem. That really - that really shook me.’

This was indescribable, was the thing. It was touching, enrapturing TV that was going to silence all of Harry’s critics. The poor people who were going to sit back to casually watch this interview were going to find themselves wrapped up in the simmering vulnerability of this genuinely sweet man, rooting for him as each of his words wove his tale.

It was wrenching, shattering, captivating, and that’s why Louis fled.

Nonplussed by how slamming a door would interrupt the sound recording, Louis flung himself into the private bedroom to throw himself into frenzied pacing that did nothing to slow his rabbit heart.

The dull murmur of Harry’s voice continued, a distant rumble in Louis’ hot ears that was eventually overtaken by a cavalcade of voices and movement. Louis’ voice lodged in his throat in anticipation, feeling the world looming closer and closer to the door that separated him from the tempest.

There was a knock, sharp, deliberate, piercing the hissing haze building up in his consciousness.

“Louis?” It was Liam, an agent of predictability.

“Mmm?” Louis murmured, pacing all the more relentlessly.

“Want me to grab Harry? We’ve got a five-minute break.”

Louis said nothing, the word yes feeling as unobtainable as the ability to slow his frantic feet. The seconds were plump and turgid, dragging by in suffocating silence until the door gently creaked open, Harry’s curious expression poking in.

“Louis?” He asked, the situation solidifying in his brain as he saw Louis spin around with a manic expression. “Oh, love.” He cooed, stepping inside and closing the door behind him.
“Don’t, don’t you - do not!” Louis warned, pointing a shaking finger at Harry that stopped him in his tracks.

“Louis, what’s wrong?”

“You are not allowed, Harry - you are not fucking allowed to even - even for a second - Jesus, Harry!” Louis whimpered.

“Breathe, please, my love.” Harry implored, taking a cautious step forward.

“No. I will not breathe.” Louis argued, his voice jagged. “Because, Harry, you are not allowed to feel like that. You’re so, not fucking allowed.”

“Feel like what?”

“You were not the problem, Harry!” Louis cried. “You are - you’re the least problem in my - my stupid life and . . . Fuck! Harry!”

“Louis, please, come on.”

“I cannot stand thinking you ever feeling like that,” Louis admitted, throat thick and fighting back against every word he managed to croak out. “We’re supposed to be honest with each other, right? We’re supposed to tell each other everything we’re feeling? Well here’s how I feel: thinking of you like that wrecks me. It hurts me so, so bad that I feel like my insides are bleeding and I’m drowning and I can’t do anything because you thought that you were hurting me. That you’re the best fucking thing that has ever happened to me, but being with me made you feel like that. That’s fucking heartbreaking, Harry. That breaks my fucking heart because you did not let me down. Never for a second did I think you let me down. Yeah - like, the timing sucked and everything but it was - it was the bravest thing anyone had ever done for me and how fucking dare you think that you let me down for a single fucking second.”

“Louis,” Harry said, his voice no more than a whisper like he was facing down a dangerous animal, but Louis’ diatribe only intensified.

“No, Harry!” Louis yelled, his entire boy shaking. “I might be dead! I could have died! Joshua might have killed me and I’d be dead right now if you hadn’t been there. You actually saved my sorry fucking life so you don’t have any right to think that anything that happened was your fault!”

“Louis, you need to sit down,” Harry said forcefully as Louis swayed back. He lunged forward, but Louis held his arms up again, closing his eyes and breathing deeply through his nose.

*I’m not in danger.*

He repeated this phrase through his murky thoughts until they took solid form. The cool air tightened in his lungs before releasing out, his bones lighter in each breath. He knew what danger felt like, what hopelessness felt like when it clenched around your thoughts.

*I’m not in danger.*

Harry was here. Harry was safe. They were both safe and Louis’ emotions had no reason to be strangling him.

His arms fell limply to his sides, Harry recognizing it as a gesture that he could finally close the distance, wrapping Louis up in a tight embrace drenched in warmth.
“It’s just an interview, Lou,” Harry whispered into Louis’ hair as his emotions finally unstoppered, his eyes lined with wet relief. “She’s just asking me questions about stuff that’s in the past. You know I don’t feel like that anymore. We’ve talked all this out and you know I don’t feel like that anymore.”

“It just sucks to hear you talk like that.” Louis snuffled, pulling himself tighter against Harry’s chest. “And I realized that I’ve never told you that before.”

“What?”

“That you saved my life.” Louis murmured, starting to rock.

“But Louis,” Harry said his voice quivering. “You did, too. You saved my life. I was just so miserable and hopeless and - and I don’t like to think about where things would have ended if you hadn’t been around to teach me to fight for myself.”

“I just want you to be happy.”

“I am. I’m happy for the first time in a really long time.” Harry kissed the top of Louis’ head, continuing their slow sway as Louis gave a tearful laugh, finally pulling back.

“I think I just - I just haven’t had a good freak out since you’ve been back,” Louis explained. “Things were getting bottled up. A lot of emotions today.”

“I need to talk to you about that, though. I need to explain.” Harry said seriously, looking down as he intertwined their hands.

“Haz, you don’t have to. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change things.”

“It’s true, the part about the prostitute.” He said, voice strong and meeting Louis with an unwavering gaze as Louis swallowed hard.

“That’s - it’s okay, Harry,” Louis responded, his voice choked and giving himself away.

“There’s a reason I didn’t tell you. I wasn’t sure if you’d believe me.”

“Still don’t know if I do.” Louis admitted.

“Because, at the time, sex wasn’t what I need.” He explained slowly, Louis finding himself hanging more heavily on each of his words. “There were people around, at the time, if sex was what I wanted. What I didn’t have at that time in my life, what I really wanted, was someone to just hold me while I slept.”

Louis felt a wave of cold sorrow flood his chest. “Oh, Harry.”

“I’ve never paid someone to sleep with me. I just paid him to be there. To make me feel like I wasn’t so alone. To hold onto me.”

“Harry, no.” Louis sighed, falling into Harry’s chest as he rubbed his hands over his face. “That is just way too heartbreaking, love.”

“Do you believe me?”

“I really wish I didn’t. But that sounds exactly like something you’d do that and makes me so, so sad.” Louis moaned, finally wrapping his arms around Harry, even though he felt that it was physically impossible to hold him as tightly as he deserved.
“It’s alright. It’s all in the past.” Harry maintained.

“When this is over, when all of these people finally get out of our room, I’m going to hold you all night.” Louis decided. “I’m going to braid your hair, and kiss you, and tell you that you’re perfect and beautiful until you’re sick of me.”

“You’ve got your work cut out for you.” Harry chuckled, pulling away as they both struggled to collect themselves.

“How does it feel, though?” Louis asked with a smile that felt like an old friend.

“Hmm?”

“That you’ve got someone to hold onto for the rest of your life?” He asked brightly, laughing with an intimate sadness as Harry swayed back into him.

“I don’t have the words to describe it, my love.”

~

Harry struggled to temper his nerves as his fingers tightened around the journal behind his back. Louis was pressed to the rail of their hotel suite’s balcony, though most of his weight was idly leaning into Harry beside him as he watched the commotion below. Harry was sure Louis didn’t realize he was doing it, that it was merely the subconscious pull of one magnet to another. His eyes flicked down to watch the festivity as well, crowds bustling by in puffy coats as year’s end ticked relentlessly closer.

Louis watched the pandemonium with a calm detachment, seemingly grateful that they could observe as spectators. He’d been at peace for days following the wrap on Harry’s interview. It had premiered a day earlier, but they’d decided it was out of their hands, nothing to worry over.

It actually felt better than he’d expected. The entire time he was sitting in that interview chair, rambling on about parts of his past that he’d worked so hard to move on from, he kept wondering if any of it was even necessary. Why not stay above it? Ignore it? Avoid engaging.

But it was like a heavy rock had been dislodged from his chest. Everything unsaid that had been plugging his thoughts was finally out there, free in the world. He didn't have to be dragged down by it anymore. At last, he could fully move on.

The only worry Harry harbored was how Louis was going to react when Harry revealed the small deception he’d managed to hide until that moment. Early on they’d decided against getting each other any presents. With Louis’ birthday, Christmas, and their anniversary occurring in such quick succession, they decided to forego materialism and just enjoy each other’s company. It seemed inarguably counterproductive to add more possessions to their stockpile when they were working so hard to downsize and consolidate with Harry’s move into the house. Spending time with each other’s family was enough of a gift. Well, that plus the jacuzzi tub they’d decided to have installed in the master bedroom while they were away, but apart from that, no presents.

Well, except for what Harry was expertly maneuvering out of Louis’ eyesight behind his back. He had a feeling Louis would forgive him, given the warm holiday spirit that had positively enraptured him during the trip. His hovering nerves after the interview abated once they met up
with the rest of their clan, everyone mingling together in one of the suites as Christmas sweaters as hot chocolate was proliferated.

Everyone had clicked so quickly, with Anne delighted to be smothered in kids again and all of the girls clinging to Gemma like she was a human Barbie doll. They clung to her, pelting her with thousands of questions until Harry came to her rescue, exuberantly pulling all of the kids into his arms when he greeted them.

It was easy to forget all the strife, the lingering problems of adult life as he tumbled about on the floor, playing and wrestling, singing Christmas carols and delighting them with funny faces. The atmosphere thickened with a peppermint sweetness, Harry glancing over regularly to watch how the two families melded together so naturally.

He was lying on his back on the floor, one of the toddlers propped up on his chest as they clapped their hands together in a convoluted version of patty-cake that they were making up as they went. The mums were perched together on the couch, mugs in hand, talking as quickly as their red stained lips would allow. Harry would look up every once in awhile when his or Louis’ names were mentioned, listening in as they made plans for the two of them without giving them any say in the matter. Kids were racing by, the stepfathers trying and failing to keep them under control now that the mums had tagged out. Gemma was yelling something from the kitchenette, Louis squawking loudly at whatever he’d said that had upset her, and Johanna had just started another sentence with the phrase, “Our boys.” Everything slotted into place so perfectly, it didn’t seem like this could be something placed in reality. More like a cinnamon-scented daydream.

Without warning, Louis was suddenly hopping into place behind Harry, crouching down to plant an upside down peck to his surprised lips.

“Hmmm?” Harry hummed as Louis hovered there, staring down at him with a beguiled grin.

“Nothing. Just love you.” Louis said.

“Love you, too.”

Content with the exchange, Louis pushed himself back up to his feet in search of Gemma, hoping to torture her further.

The best moment came hours later after Harry and Louis retired to their suite, taking full advantage of the privacy of their room as they tangled into the sheets. They fell back against their pillows, glazed with sweat where their skin mingled together, bodies aching slightly but doused in a rose gold happiness. There, as he curled over Louis’ chest and into his arms, feeling his lips against his forehead, Louis whispered over his steadying breath.

“You’re so good with them. The kids.” He mused, more to himself than anyone else.

“Makes you happy?” Harry muttered.

“Very much so.”

There were unspoken plans formulating in Louis’ thoughts, Harry could almost hear them whirring about. Louis was grinning blindly as he watched the ceiling, eyes misting over as he thought about their future. Harry was powerless to do anything besides watch him, content at another sign that they were on the same page.

“What time is it?” Harry asked, his lips moving languidly to Louis’ collarbone. Louis grumbled as he turned over, checking his phone on the bedside table.
“12:04,” Louis responded, already rolling his eyes as Harry pulled back with an excited gasp.

“Well happy birthday, Mr. Tomlinson.” He purred, sitting up to straddle Louis’ hips.

“Happy birthday to me, indeed.”

“You know what we do on birthdays, don’t you?”

“Not particularly, since we’ve never actually been together on one of our birthdays.”

“So I guess we’ll just wing it?” Harry asked with a mischievous smile as he ducked down to land a plush kiss to Louis’ lips, quieting any misguided thoughts he might have had to just turn the lights off and go to sleep.

That had been the last moment they’d had between just the two of them, swept into a veritable tornado of activities and family holiday time from that moment onward. In the next few days, they explored every nook and cranny of the city, watching as sparse snowflakes fluttered over the sparkling streets. Every shop window glittered with Christmas lights, music wafted from every corner.

Louis’ eyes had been practically twinkling, scrunching up in the corners the way they did when his delight was too overflowing to hold back. He would turn back toward Harry with that blinding grin poking out from behind his scarf, taking his hand and leaving Harry to drown in warm fuzzies.

The dulcet domesticity settled in on Christmas morning as he wrapped an arm around Louis’ shoulders, sitting back in matching sweaters like a couple of happy husbands trying to catch their breath as the kids ransacked their Christmas presents. It was simple, it was warm, it was sugar-kissed and starry-eyed, but mostly it was safe. His arm was curled around his boyfriend’s shoulders and he couldn’t fathom a single thought that would coerce him to move.

Vague plans for New Years had focused around elbowing through the Times Square horde to catch a glimpse of the ball dropping, but as the last day of the year wore on, Harry and Louis found themselves increasingly keen on staying behind, just the two of them. There was an understated disappointment since everyone was hoping to use their combined clout to get a better view, but in the end, they had to understand. Harry’s interview was still trending worldwide, so throwing himself into one of the densest swarms of tourists in the world wouldn’t exactly equate to a pleasant anniversary.

They were finally alone again, the sparkling cider in Harry’s champagne glass bubbling like the nerves in his chest as he watched Louis making snide comments about the people below.

“Look, Harry, I want to be that guy when I grow up.” Louis said excitedly, pointing toward a middle-aged man marching by in bedazzled glitter suit.

“You already are that guy.” Harry laughed, tugging gently against Louis’ shoulder until he was facing him. Louis looked up at him expectantly, already poised and ready for an affectionate eye roll. “I want to talk to you about stuff.” Harry announced.

“Oh do you? Whatever about?” Louis joked as he swayed in closer to Harry.

“Well, obviously, obligatory anniversary spiel and all that.” Harry explained. Louis bit back his smile as he settled the rest of his weight against Harry’s chest, readying himself for whatever words Harry had felt compelled to prepare. “I’ve just been thinking about a year ago today; remembering what we talked about, how happy and giddy we were. I was just thinking about how enchanting every second of that night was. It was all so fresh and new. Exciting. Bubbly.”

“Entirely.” Harry agreed. “But that morning, when I kissed you goodbye and got on that plane, the first of many times I’ve left you behind at an airport, part of me was terrified. I had this gut feeling that you were just too good. Feeling this happy surely couldn’t be allowed. Fairy tales couldn’t be real, right? Something was destined to go wrong.

‘But never in a thousand years would I have envisioned everything we’ve gone through this year. Never could I have expected so much fate to crash on us so unapologetically. I would never have believed what was awaiting us. But, as another anniversary gift for us, I think we should get a free pass from talking about any of that.’

“So generous.” Louis chuckled, running a hand distractedly down the buttons of Harry’s jacket.

“Even if I’d known, though, everything we were facing, the part I would never have believed was that we’d stick together through all of it. That we’d become so inextricably close, that every little thing you do would make me fall a tiny bit more in love with you, even a year later. That I would trust you more than I trust myself, sometimes. That you’d redefine my everything.”

“Mmm, you’re getting mushy.” Louis groaned, hiding his smile in the collar of Harry’s coat. Harry ran a hand up and down his back, careful to keep one behind his back with his much-awaited surprise.

“I have to. It’s my job.”

“My turn to get stroppy?” Louis asked, looking up from his burrow.

“If you’d like to.”


“It was lovely, darling!”

“Now show me what you’ve been hiding behind your back.” Louis demanded, arm darting out to try and snatch his present away.

“I’m not hiding anything!” Harry gasped, stepping back to evade Louis’ clutches.

“Oh yeah?” Louis asked, jumping in to tickle Harry’s stomach in retaliation. Harry barked in surprise, some of his cider sloshing from his glass as he flailed. “Now look what you’ve done, Harold. You’ve made a mess.”

“I’ve made a mess? I was simply responding to an attack.”

“Fine. We made a mess together.”

“An apt description of our entire relationship.” Harry commented, pecking Louis on the lips as he laughed.

“So what did you get me despite our clear instructions not to get each other anything?”

“How do you know I got you something?”

“Because you lie, Harry!” Louis groaned. “It’s your anniversary tradition. I take you at your word and then you lie to my face.”
Harry opened his mouth to argue, but had to admit that Louis’ logic was sound as he remembered their six month anniversary. With a shrug Harry pulled the book from behind his back, looking down at the worn pages and binding. He could feel Louis’ curious eyes falling heavily onto it, waiting patiently as Harry held it close to himself.

“I did a lot of journaling in rehab.” Harry explained. “A lot of writing, you know? Music and stuff. Poetry. Just stuff I was thinking about. But - erm - you kind kept cropping up in everything I was writing about. Like, I couldn’t stop writing about you, even when I was in the middle of other things I was trying to work on. So, eventually, I just decided to start a separate journal that was just about you.” Harry finally held it forward, a coy smile playing across his lips. “This was my Louis journal.”

Harry could practically see Louis’ brain switch off under the swell of emotion. He looked almost hollowed out, his face quivering into an expression he’d be utterly embarrassed if anyone else saw. Slowly he looked down, wrapping careful fingers around the journal as if any sudden movement would cause it to vanish into the air. Harry pulled back, watching as Louis opened to the first page.

The twinkle was back, dancing through his eyes with tangible endearment as he looked over the scrawled words. He became somehow small, compact, wrapped up in an unabashed fondness as he smiled to himself. It was a side he didn’t show often, his veneer of sarcasm stripped away layer by layer until there was nothing left to hide his joy. He was cute, was the problem, which made Harry’s head feel like it was floating away with the levity of his thoughts.

“Oh, Harry.” Louis whispered as he flipped another page, his lip going diaphanous pink were his teeth bit down into it.

“Yeah, I’ve got a bit of a crush on you.” Harry admitted with a shrug, causing Louis to giggle.

“What’s this?” He asked, turning the book over in his hands. “You tore these pages out.”

“You can’t see them yet.”

“Why not?”

“You will.”

“Now?”

“Not now.” Harry maintained, smiling at Louis’ bolstering irritation.

“Why can’t I have them now?” Louis demanded.

“Because it’s not time yet.”

“But it’s my present.”

“And it’s not time yet.”

“Harry!” Louis cried, his childlike desperation winning out. “But I want it now!”

“Too bad.” Harry singsonged, pulling Louis into a hug that he hoped would pacify him.

“But I want it now.” He grumbled petulantly.

“Can’t always have everything you want.”
“I have you, don’t I?” Louis asked snarkily.

“Excellent point. Here are those extra pages.”

“Really?”

“No, Louis.”

“I can’t stand you.” Louis deadpanned, struggling out of Harry’s embrace and heading back towards the door.

“Where are you going.”

“Just stay there for a second.” Louis ordered, bouncing inside with a continued giddiness. Harry waited impatiently as he realized how little trust he had in his partner returning. He had just convinced himself that Louis had left to go rifle through Harry’s things for the missing pages when he defied expectations and reappeared in the door, a small package held triumphantly in hand.

“And what is that?” Harry chirped as Louis handed it over. “I thought you were supposed to be the honest one of the two of us.”

“Could’n’t help it. I’ve got a bit of a crush on you, too.” Louis laughed, watching as Harry tore the paper back to reveal the picture frame beneath. He got one look at it before his head was snapping back with laughter.

“It’s beautiful!” He howled between giggles.

“You asked for it, remember? Ages ago. It’s for your side of the bed.” Louis explained, craning his neck so he could admire it as well. He looked proudly down at the image of himself, dressed in his Furia costume and preening provocatively between takes. He’d had it taken especially for Harry.

Harry, however, was laughing too exuberantly to even see straight anymore so he leaned forward into Louis for some semblance of support. He sunk his head further into his shoulder, his senses consumed by this ridiculous, hilarious, perfect man that was unshakably, soundly his to keep. He was still sputtering with laughter into his shoulder as the first wave of fireworks crackled above them.

“Harry! We’re missing it!” Louis squeaked. “You’re supposed to kiss me!”

Without pause he pressed their mouths together, sinking into a kiss that had been titillating and new exactly a year ago. The brush of lips had since grown familiar, their mouths parting with an intimate ease. Sparkling bursts and explosions were still dotting the sky like swells of dying stars as they slowly pulled away.

“Happy anniversary, love.” Louis whispered.

“Our day 366.”

“Mhmm. Our day 366.”

~
In the weeks following the release of Harry’s interview, it managed to construct a life of its own. Public opinion was aflame with Harry’s face proliferating every media avenue available. Liam was fast establishing himself as the MVP of the group as he coached both of them though it. It was his never-ending job to remind them that they’d done everything they could do, and now their focus should just be on living their lives.

It was clear that Harry didn’t know how to reconcile the newfound attention. For so long his primary goal had focused on being open to the press, showing the world who he really was, but the new scrutiny proved to be bittersweet. When one magazine proclaimed him the “New Face of Addiction,” Harry had been unsettlingly quiet, obviously unsure if this was a moniker he even wanted. Admittedly, the article had been primarily positive, speaking on the much-needed destigmatization of substance abuse, but it still remained that this was never what Harry thought he would be defined by. He’d never considered that his legacy would be the heroin induced seizure he’d had backstage at a concert.

The situation became increasingly fraught with controversy as Louis’ self-identified nemesis, Thad Dylan, sunk his unwashed hands into the matter. He’d leaped imperiously onto his high-horse, decrying what he labeled as a “glamorization” of drug use.

Awards season was already descending upon them with the Golden Globes only a few anxiety infused days away, and the Oscar nominations being announced in just over a week. As if stepping back into the public eye for the awards shows wasn’t enough for Harry and Louis, they now had a self-absorbed, antagonistic, unhygienic jackass mingling with them at the same events. They were forced to attend the same parties, the luncheons, and the same press events with the expectation to appear amicable for the sake of their respective movies.

This was highly problematic as Louis’ natural inclination upon seeing Thad’s smug face was to smother it beneath a pillow until he suffocated. Dramatic, perhaps, but there ain’t no business like show business.

The real danger didn’t come until Harry threw away the guise of taking the high road and became just as petty as Louis. He’d expected Harry to be his pillar of rationalism, calming him down and steering him away from Twitter in favor of being the bigger person. In actuality, it became routine for Harry to shake Louis awake in the middle of the night, thrusting Louis’ phone in his face with Thad’s most recent inflammatory comment, chanting, “Drag him, baby, drag him!” until Louis tweeted back.

At least they were a good team.

This was never more apparent than the hours leading up to the Golden Globes as they were dressed and primped for the red carpet. It wasn’t the first time that they would walk together as a couple, but somehow it still felt uncharted, nerve-wracking, even, as they slid into their suit jackets.

Harry looked predictably dashing, which did nothing to slow the frenzied pace of Louis’ pulse. He was already employing every trick in his arsenal to school his anxiety, but it was all undone by this boy who so often stole his breath away.

He merely smiled and Louis was goo, Harry’s grin as bright as a field of stars against his black tux. It wasn’t particularly considerate, making Louis subservient to his own affections when he was already so consumed with worry, but Harry did his best to rectify his wrongs. He stayed solid by Louis’ side from the moment they stepped onto the red carpet, ready to pacify him with a warm hand or a private grin when his anxiety crept in. It became a habit very quickly, with Louis leaning into Harry for comfort or reassurance.
They both remained subdued, especially given their past red carpet antics. But they plastered on their polite smiles and gave short interviews here and there. Harry would give Louis space for a moment, letting him give a few short, prepared answers to reporters before he’d swoop back in, giving Louis an exit just as he needed it.

“I’m gonna have to borrow this one.” Harry said apologetically, leaning in just as Louis had grown tired of being asked the same contrived questions once again. Harry lead him away with a gentle hand, quelling the icy adrenaline that had made a reappearance in his chest.

Nona and Niall proved to be their polar opposites, deviating much of the attention that came their way with their chipper exuberance. They would bound in and out, arms linked together, weaving increasingly bizarre lies about the nature of their relationship.

“We’re siblings.” Niall claimed as Louis and Harry once again walked past them.

“Same mom. Same dad.” Nona agreed.

The celebration was thick in the air, cameras spinning and struggling to keep up with the bevy of sparkling celebrities bedecked in their finest evening wear. But it all felt strangely removed to Louis, like he was watching everyone, not actually a part of it. The only part that felt real was Harry’s soft hand in his. So often they would just stand there, giving a rehearsed wave to the cameras while Louis leaned into Harry’s side, taking a moment to just gather his breath.

No, this wasn’t the first award show he’d attended. He kept reminding himself of this, as if it might become pertinent at some point. That it might finally click and his nerves would ebb away.

But this was the first awards show that was his. That he had been invited to not as a guest but as a subject for judgment. It was hollowing him, making him feel devoid of skin and bone as all these eyes burrowed into him.

And that’s when gentle lips would graze his temple, when warm fingers would brush through his hair. Harry would look at him with his unwavering eyes, patient as Louis reclaimed his emotional footing and readied himself to keep moving.

It simmered down when they were ushered to their table, joined by the warm familiarity of Niall and Nona seated beside him, of his director, Daniel, and the other key members of the production he’d sorely missed since they wrapped. And, of course, there was Harry, pulling their chairs close together as he remained a protective presence at Louis’ side.

It became easier to relax as the show began, Louis thinking of Zayn and Liam watching at home as the host spouted off jokes and lightened the atmosphere. It almost felt as comfortable as a night at home as Niall felt obligated to make boisterous jokes during the commercial breaks.

Nona would roll her eyes and keep his ego in check with her typical witty jabs and Harry would lean in with his intermittent whispers, his affectionate little kisses and hand squeezes under the table. He suddenly began to melt into the comfort of it, began to get swept up in the excitement of the show.

He had just dropped his guard, all too unprepared for the walloping blindside as Thad Dylan’s name thundered through the sound system to uproarious applause.

Louis was met with no other thought then that cameras were still on him, capturing his reaction, ready for his disappointment to write the next day’s slew of press. He had to steel himself, had to hide the gut punch that had knocked the wind out of him. He had to hide the way his entire body
was sinking down, down, ready to crash through his chair with the weight of what had just happened.

He’d lost. Thad had won.

Thad sauntered to the stage, ecstatic and brusque as he fed off the energy of the crowd. His smile was too garish, his words too undeserving of the acclaim he was receiving.

Fuck. *Fuck.* This was disappointing. Not just the loss, no, it was having lost to this creature who’d made sport of the most difficult time of Louis’ life. That a fame-crazed garbage pile could spew his homophobia and transphobia all over the internet and then be rewarded for it.

He couldn’t look at Harry, already feeling that he was moments away from being sick. Instead, his eyes landed on Niall who was looking back at him, face contorted with shock.

“He wasn’t even that good!” Niall whispered angrily.

“People just like Dave Grohl, not him.” Nona bit out petulantly.

“Fucking nineties nostalgia.”

“*Fucking nineties nostalgia.*” Nona agreed, turning to look at Louis. He’s just released his first, shaking breath, his chest still feeling like an empty cavern. “You okay, Lulu?” She asked, leaning in and taking his hand.

“Nona,” Louis stammered, fixing her with an intense stare. “If you don’t win, I’m going to kill you. No way we’re going home without a statue tonight.” He gave her his best smile, which she was only able to partially reflect, turning back to the stage as Thad finally made his long-awaited exit.

Louis leaned back to find Harry’s arm already slung around the back of his chair, waiting for him. He settled into it, letting the situation sink in and trying to lodge sensibly in his brain. It was only then that he questioned himself; had he really expected to win so much? There hadn’t been any moments where he stared off dreamily, fantasizing about getting in front of the crowd and accepting his award. But, still, a part of him felt like this lingering applause should have been his; that Thad was slinking away with an award that should have been in Louis’ hands.

What was most disheartening was that this was his first loss, a reality of most acting careers, and it felt like it was picking him apart, piece by piece.

Luckily, he wasn’t given much time to wallow in his own disillusionment as Nona achieved the inevitable. To absolutely no one’s surprise, she ended up winning the Golden Globe for Best Actress in a drama, finally giving everyone at their table something to jump in the air and cheer obnoxiously about. In a calculated move, Louis decided to bury away his grief and pour everything into this moment for his friend, finding himself in a competition with Niall to see who could clap the loudest as she made her way up to the stage.

Clearly, Louis won through sheer determination.

The feeling of triumph permeated the coming days, Louis refusing to engage in any of the media’s pressing questions about the “feud” with Thad. Instead, he was busy preparing himself for the event looming in their near future.

It was inarguably the biggest moment of his career thus far, so, fittingly, he was sitting on his couch in his pajamas for it. Everyone had slept over at Harry and Louis’ for the 5:30 am Oscar announcement, crowding together in the lounge as the nominations were relayed on the telly. It had
never been so eerily quiet in a room that housed both Louis and Niall until the best-supporting actor category was announced, Thad’s name leading the pack.

Niall was booing so loudly that he drowned out the rest of the names, causing a panicked uproar as Liam scrambled to hit the rewind button on the remote.

“Niall you piece of shit.” Liam snapped as he pressed play at the beginning of the segment. “If you don’t just fucking sit there quietly.”

The announcer read Thad’s name again and Niall didn’t miss a beat as he screeched out another unwieldy boo.

The room surged toward him but was ultimately too late as he was silenced by a deft, well-practiced hand from Nona clapped across his mouth.

“And Louis Tomlinson!”

Their eyes flicked to the screen for a split second before the cheers set in, Louis sinking so far down into the couch he was in danger of slithering off onto the floor.

“Oh, Niall almost killed me.” Louis groaned as he buried his face in his hands, drowning in relief. Zayn was already standing in front of him, pulling him to his feet as everyone took a turn giving him a congratulatory hug.

“Niall, do you know what I would have done if you had actually killed my boyfriend?” Harry asked as Liam’s hug threatened to crush Louis in half.

“I imagine you would have killed me.” Niall surmised.

“Yes. Slowly. And with relish.”

“Yum.”

Finally released from Liam’s giddy vice grip, Louis spun around to look down at Harry, his body moving without thought as he fell onto him. His knees straddled Harry’s hips and his arms circled his neck as he clung to him tightly, his muscles loosening as Harry gripped into his back. His phone was buzzing in his pocket, presumably his mother or some other relation calling, but his body had become somehow too heavy to move. He sunk deeper into Harry, uncaring of ridiculous it must look. He just wanted to clutch onto him, exist there, as he tried to process the words spinning behind his clenched eyes.

Academy Award nominated actor, Louis Tomlinson.

Harry yelped slightly as Louis clenched him tighter, suddenly pulling back and petting the skin of his neck.

“Sorry! Sorry.”

“So fine, Louis.” Harry said warmly, his hands cupping the sides of Louis’ face with reverent fingers, slowly pulling him in for a kiss. He didn’t open his eyes even after they parted, Louis readjusting so he could cradle himself in Harry’s lap. Harry wrapped him in strong arms, fingers tingling where they stroked over the crest of Louis’ shoulder. “I’m so proud of you.” He whispered, only loud enough for Louis to hear as the announcements progressed.

The celebration didn’t break out in full until the Best Actress category was announced, Nona
erupting into uncontrollable tears the moment her name spilled through the speakers. None of their best attempts could placate her unhinged sobbing, especially once Niall descended into tears himself, the two of them clinging to each other and weeping.

“I’ve never seen Niall cry before.” Harry commented, almost dazed as he watched the pathetic display.

Sleep was fully out of the picture given the level of excitement, so the party continued into the kitchen as an elaborate breakfast was prepared and everyone attended to the endless string of phone calls that were spilling in.

Even Harry’s phone was buzzing without reprieve, leaving him to flip pancakes one handed as he answered his phone with, “Gemma! My boyfriend’s gonna win an Oscar!”

“Harry.” Louis scolded, causing Harry to turn to him with a surly look.

“What? Like Thad Dylan’s gonna win it?” Harry gaped, scandalized.

“He might.”

“Nope!” Harry decided loudly, turning away so as not to be bothered by Louis’ pessimism.

This became the theme of the passing weeks, with Harry swept up in the jubilant awards fever, whispering, “Academy Award winner, Louis Tomlinson” at his every whim.

Louis would be minding his own business, sudsing up in the shower when the curtain would be zealously ripped back, Harry shouting, “Why hello academy award winning actor, Louis Tomlinson!”

“Nominated actor you tit.” Louis would grumble back, pushing away as Harry tried to step in with a lip-smacking kiss.

But Harry would hear none of it. In his curly headed little world, Louis was going to claim that statue as his birthright, it was only a matter of waiting until they could go pick it up. His attempts to quell Harry’s award hysteria continued to fall on deaf ears, eventuating in the most embarrassing snapchat of their relationship (a highly competitive distinction).

Louis was rudely awakened the day before the SAG awards by Harry bursting into their bedroom, speaking animatedly to his phone.

“So here’s my boyfriend, Louis!” He chirped happily, turning the phone as Louis dove beneath the tangled covers.

“Harry!” He shouted as he felt Harry’s weight fall onto the bed beside him.

“Little known fact, he’s been nominated for an Oscar. We’re going to put it right here on my side of the bed, next to this lovely picture he gave me for our anniversary.”

“Harry!” Louis groaned again, rolling over and peeking out over the duvet.

“Yes, my love?”

“I fucking hate you.”

“Did you hear that everyone? He fooking hates me.”
“Stop!”

His blind enthusiasm had finally infected Louis as they attended the SAG awards in New York, the slightly more relaxed atmosphere putting Louis at ease. It didn’t have the media presence as other award shows, giving him a reprieve from the cameras and interviews. Harry stayed by his side, looking endlessly charming in the perky, periwinkle tux he’d decided was behooveing the occasion. They made their private jokes, shared fleeting pecks, intertwined their fingers at their own fancy, all while Louis constantly reminded himself what a novelty this was. How hard they fought for the right to hold hands and sit beside each other in public.

The muscles of his back were relaxed, the cogs in his mind calm, his defenses drooped down just low enough for it to feel like his spine had snapped when Thad’s name was announced once again.

Harry’s arm was around his shoulders in an instant and Louis went limp beneath it, leaning into Harry as his clamorous thoughts snagged and yanked him from his body.

It almost hurt worse this time; almost felt more sickening, like his hopes were rotting in the pits of his stomach as Thad made another triumphant dash onto the stage. It hurt more because Louis could already calculate his chances slipping away. The feeble flame he’d been gripping onto, this flimsy hope that Thad’s win had just been an upset, had been a preamble to a contentious, back and forth fight for the Oscar, had been extinguished with a single, shallow breath.

An official precedent: that’s what he was watching. It was a pattern taking shape and form. Thad was about to fly through a season of acclaim and Louis had a front row seat.

Harry did everything he could that night not to discourage Louis, not to let his own bad mood affect him. He instead turned to a conspiratorial approach, decrying the corrupt politics and money changing hands behind the guise of an awards program. Louis listened as long as he could, bemused until it became too much.

“Harry, love.” Louis interrupted him from his place in their hotel bed. “I don’t think I want to talk about it anymore.”

Harry’s expression snapped from frustration to fright, terrified that he might have been doing more harm than good during his meandering rants.

“I’m sorry, Louis. Do you want to talk about something else? What do you want to talk about?” He asked with bubbling worry.

“Just want to sleep.” Louis answered, his voice gravely with enough strain that Harry didn’t question it, just pulled him in tight and shut off the light.

He was still snuggled tight into Harry’s chest when his phone buzzed obnoxiously a few hours later. Hesitant to break the warm cocoon he’d made for himself in Harry’s arms, he waited it out, closing his eyes in relief when it finally went to voicemail.

Hardly a moment had passed before it was buzzing again.

“S’yours?” Harry mumbled as he pulled away, giving Louis no excuse to ignore his phone any longer. He turned over noisily, eyes focusing in surprise as he looked at the screen.

“Eleanor?” He answered.

“I’m outside your door!” She announced loudly, the coinciding echo from the hallway legitimizing
her claims.

“You’re - why?” Louis sputtered, swinging his legs out of the bed and heading to the door.

“I need to talk to you!”

“Yes, but why?” Louis asked, hanging up as he opened the door. Alas, there stood Eleanor still radiant in her gown from the ceremony, her makeup melting around the corners and a champagne bottle in her hand.

“You skipped the party!” She shouted, causing Louis to shush her and close the door behind him as he stepped into the hallway.

“Wasn’t in the mood for it.” He explained as her attention turned to the bottle, struggling with the cork.

“What are you doing here?” Louis asked, pulling the bottle away from her, lest the cork finally get free and shoot into his eye.

“I just told you.” She said, rolling her eyes. “You weren’t at the party.”

“And?”

“And I need to talk to you!” She took the bottle back forcefully, leaning against the wall and sinking down to the floor. “Sit down, Lou.”

“Just for a second, okay?” He agreed, sitting down beside her as she sunk her focus back into dislodging the cork. He couldn’t help but grin as he imagined how charming the sight of them must be, her in her sparkling cocktail dress and him in his pants and a t-shirt, sitting cross-legged in a hotel hallway with a reluctant bottle of champagne. “I know you’re not drinking cuz of Harry, but-“

POP! She squeaked as the fizz erupted onto the carpet, her head falling back against the wall with a thump.

“But,” Louis continued the thought for her, taking the bottle away and slurping away the brimming bubbles. “But I could be convinced to imbibe if there’s a particularly good reason.” He looked at her expectantly, waiting to be coerced into taking a sip.

“Here’s a good reason.” She said. “Thad is a fucking toolbox.”

Louis guffawed, sputtering as he took a drag of the sparkling wine.

“Cheers to that.”

“They had this waiting in my room - like - as a celebration for Thad and all that shit.” She complained, taking the bottle and throwing it back. “Like, what do I want to celebrate Thad for? He’s an arsehole!”

“Truer words have never been spoken from the floor of a hotel hallway.”

“Do you know what he used to say during sex?” She asked, her head falling listlessly against to wall to look at Louis.

“I don’t, actually.”

“He’d like - he’d never last. Finish early all the time. Then he’d look at me and be like, ‘ya good?’
And, like, no! We’re not done here, yet! I was never ‘good’ Thad! Fucking toolbox!”

“Why did you date that guy?”

“Because I’m clearly a masochist, Louis.” She sighed. “It’s just not fair, though. You’re so nice and he’s so douche faced and you’re so lovely and he’s so dumb fuck dumb, dumb, dumb arsehole.”

“I appreciate it, Elle, my ever so eloquent friend.” Louis said affectionately, taking her hand and smiling at her.

“We don’t need him. We’re superheroes.” She grumbled, dropping her head to his shoulder. They were shadowed in a pink warmth, the companionship waxing heavily over them until Eleanor’s phone chirped to life. She pulled it from her bra with an eye roll, her head once again smacking into the wall behind her as she read the text. “It’s him!” She groaned.

“No!”

“Yes! He will not stop texting me! Look!” She held the phone out so Louis could read it.

“Where you at? Who talks like that? Just fuckboys.”

“Just fuckboys, Louis.” She agreed, looking down at her phone until a surge of laughter caused her to double over.

“What?”

“Idea! Idea!” She yelped, leaning over and holding her phone in front of them. She snapped a picture, sending it to him immediately. Louis lasted a total of ten seconds before he was nearly crying with laughter, imagining Thad alone in his hotel room with no one besides his trophy to keep him company.

~

More than anything, Louis kept wishing there was some way for him to opt out. The BAFTAS hovered on the horizon like some dark fate waiting to tear him limb from limb, and all he could hope for was some exit strategy he hadn’t come across yet.

All too soon he was in another hotel room, avoiding Harry’s glances as he skirted around any topic besides the ceremony taking place the next day. There were less than twenty-four hours separating him from another public embarrassment, another night of watching Thad’s jarring smile accept another award.

“Louis?” Harry asked quietly, jolting Louis out of his thoughts. He was surprised to find himself standing at the edge of their bed, his arms folded and doing nothing besides staring at the duvet.

“Am I not cut out for this?” He asked suddenly. Harry’s face contorted in confusion and he was already closing the distance between them. Louis didn’t unhinge his tight arms as Harry pulled him in, but he didn’t fight against the embrace as his cheek fell against Harry’s shoulder.

“What could you possibly think you’re not cut out for?”

“This. The losing. I’m being such a spoiled brat about it.” Louis explained, letting his eyes fall shut
under the weight of his frustration.

“You’re not.”

“Most people lose this stuff. It’s part of the job. Why am I having such a hard time with it?”

“I’m willing to bet most people have a hard time with it, too.” Harry said gently, rocking Louis slowly. “Most people are disappointed. They just don’t want anyone to know.”

Louis tightened his arms across his chest, sighing deeply as Harry rocked him slowly back and then slowly forward. Without fail, Harry was caring. He was relentlessly, unequivocally there, and that made Louis clench his eyes tighter.

“I’m afraid I’m disappointing you.” He admitted, his voice choked as Harry became suddenly still. He loosened his arms, coaxing Louis’ face up until their eyes met.

“Louis.” He beseeched. “How could you possibly think that you disappointed me? What have you done that could have disappointed me?”

“You’ve just been so excited and you want this so bad!”

“No, no, baby! I’m excited because I’m proud of you!” He smiled, his hands still strong where they curved around Louis’ cheeks and jawline. “I’m excited because people are finally seeing what I see. Because you’re finally getting the recognition you deserve. You’ve already made me so, so proud. You already did the work, and if these idiots don’t see that, then it’s their loss. It’s their problem if they can’t see how brilliant you are. I already know how lucky I am that I get to spend the rest of my life with someone as talented, as hardworking, as loving as you. You deserve these awards, but you don’t need them. It doesn’t change anything. Doesn’t make you any less than what you already are.”

Louis nodded, his eyes darting down to the fabric of Harry’s jumper as he found it too emotional to retain eye contact. “I love you.” He murmured, his forehead falling to Harry’s collarbone as he waited to be swept up in a familiar embrace.

“I’m so proud of you, Louis. I’m so lucky to get to spend the rest of my life with someone who makes me so proud.”

Louis was determined not to say another word the entire night, because, surely, anything he uttered would cheapen the words Harry had left alive in the air. They went to sleep wordlessly, limbs tucked together and tangled, until Liam barged into their hotel room the next morning without warning, iPad in hand.

“How are you still asleep?” He demanded, pulling back their covers. “I thought you’d have seen it by now! How are you sleeping through this? We’ve awoken to a new, beautiful world!”

“How are you still asleep?” He demanded, pulling back their covers. “I thought you’d have seen it by now! How are you sleeping through this? We’ve awoken to a new, beautiful world!”

“Who gave you a key to this room?” Louis grumbled, sitting up and pulling the covers back over his legs.

“I am the key to your life, Louis. I have access to everything.” He said simply, flicking through pages distractedly on his iPad. “How are you sleeping through this? Surely you sensed the shift in the world.”

“What?” Harry murmured sleepily as Liam handed him the iPad, open to a video on youtube.

“Got posted last night. Been taking calls all morning. This changes everything, Harry. Honestly - I
never in my wildest dreams thought something like this would fall into our laps.”

Louis glanced at the screen, his stomach plummeting despite Liam’s lofty words as he recognized the person in the thumbnail as Arrienne. Harry was equally suspicious, looking up at Liam as his body tensed beside Louis.

“Just watch it.” Liam implored, smiling as Harry’s finger finally fell onto the play button.

“Hi guys, this is kind of hard for me to talk about. But it’s something - it’s something that’s been eating at me for a long time, I guess. And I’m fucking tired of feeling guilty. Sorry. M’pretty nervous right now.”

She was sitting in a nondescript room, probably her bedroom, and the video quality looked like she had recorded it on her phone. What struck Louis was how genuine everything appeared. From his experience, it looked like Arrienne had just taken her phone out and started recording without any tampering from her management or press.

“Obviously I’m here to talk about Harry. Ha. What else is anyone talking about right now? Fuck. Um . . . Well, when I started modeling, I had boyfriends. Lots of boyfriends. So many that it got a little suspicious that I couldn’t make any of them stick. Weird, right?

‘So my contract, the same one Harry had to sign for our management, it really controlled my public image. Like, really, really controlled it. I’d have to bring my dates in to get approved, even if it was just a casual thing. It was like I was a teenager and I couldn’t go out unless my dad met the guy first.

‘And it was tiring because, like, none of them stuck around. I couldn’t work it out with anyone and I started thinking that there was something wrong with me. Then I met this girl and it was like, ‘Yeah. Duh. I’m gay. Duh.’

Louis’ entire spine felt icy with surprise, watching Arrienne run her hands over her face and sniffle loudly.

“So yeah! Surprise. Ta da, I guess. That’s the big secret I’ve been so afraid of telling. I met this girl and I fell really fucking hard for her and I wanted to be with her. I wanted her to be my girlfriend. But, um, my management wasn’t okay with that. They didn’t give, like, their approval like they did with all of those random guys.

‘And it didn’t matter that I was - that I was in love for the first time. That I’d finally figured out this huge fucking part of why I never felt happy with anyone else. All they cared about was that she was a girl. Apparently, according to them, that wasn’t going to work. I couldn’t be gay. That just wasn’t going to work.

‘So the next time you make this giant fucking epiphany about yourself, try to imagine what it would feel like to be told it’s just not going to work. That this was going to have to be covered up. Try to
imagine how you’d feel if they brought this guy in - this other guy who needed to hide that he was gay.

‘That’s how I started ‘dating’ Harry. They set us up as this never ending photo op and I was so, so pissed. I was just trapped and angry and - and I didn’t know how to deal with it. I didn’t, really. I just - I took it out on him. I was surrounded by these men who were in charge of me, these people I couldn’t stand up to if I wanted to keep my job, and Harry just became this easy target. I blamed everything on him, even while I knew it wasn’t his fault. I saw what I was doing, and I still didn’t stop myself.

‘I don’t know. I was just better at it than him. The stakes were higher for me. He didn’t have anyone he was trying to hide, trying to protect, so he just didn’t try as hard as I did. I could tell there was this part of him that just wanted to get caught, to get the easy way out, and it pissed me off so much.

‘Then he starts hanging out with this guy, Louis. Immediately, our press guys freaked out. All of these red flags went up from, like, the second they met, because they were so obvious. They couldn’t be within ten feet of each other without drooling.

‘I was scared shitless. Because, if he did something stupid, if he got caught, then I was going to have to pay for it. All of my hard work would be gone because these two guys were so hopelessly gone for each other that they couldn’t just keep their fucking cool.

‘So, then, when they came to me with - with an out - I jumped at it. I’m ashamed of how easily I said yes. Didn’t even consider how it might hurt Harry. They offered to shorten my contract - to let me out earlier - if . . .”

She looked up, her face shrouded in guilt. Louis’ fingers were clenched around Harry’s kneecap beneath the covers.

“If I helped get Harry under control. Reminded him who was in charge. Fuck. I feel disgusting just saying that, but that’s what they told me. They wanted to remind Harry that they were in charge of him.

‘And that’s how the picture on Halloween happened. The one where I was covered in bruises. It wasn’t some coincidence, it was carefully crafted by people who were getting paid to make their client feel like shit.

‘I actually laughed at them when they told it to me. I really thought it was a joke, because that was just heartless, right? Like, I wasn’t close with Harry, but he’s a teddy bear. He would never hurt anyone. And now they wanted me to convince the world that he’d abused me?

‘Fuck, I was just so desperate. I was so, so in love and she - I could feel her leaving. It was all getting to be too much, the secrets, the guilt, everything. I could feel myself losing her and I wasn’t thinking straight.

‘So I did it. I did that gutless thing and I’ve regretted it every second since. I got out of my contract a few months later, but it felt so cheap. It felt dirty. It still does. They let me out of it a little earlier than we’d agreed because - I guess - they told me that Harry was having some issues. That ending our relationship might help. I didn’t really take it seriously, thinking that someone like him could
have actual, adult issues. He’s like - he’s like a little kid. He smiles too much. Gets excited about the stupid stuff.

‘And then he overdosed. And that - that felt like . . . I felt like I’d stabbed him, or something. It might have been a bit narcissistic, to think I had that kind of effect on him, but I felt like what I did had something to do with it. It hit me so hard because I finally fucking got it. I could totally see how he’d ended up there, because I’d felt the same things he did. Alone. Ashamed. Gross. Dirty. But for most of it, he didn’t have someone there to take care of him like I did. For most of it, he was alone.

‘And I think that’s the saddest part. That’s the part I think about the most. Him just wanting someone to help him.

‘But why - why am I bringing this up now? I guess I’m just trying to set things right. A bit, at least. I mean, I got what I wanted, and he’s out now. He’s got Louis. I just needed to get this off my chest because I really fucked up. I wish I’d just stuck it out. Found a different way, but I didn’t. So I just felt like I needed to say something. To tell everyone to just fucking leave the poor guy alone right now. He’s trying to clean up his act and support his boyfriend. So take your heads out of your asses and stop printing this garbage about him to just sell magazines. You’re all just shit stains and you need to find new jobs besides profiting off our lives.

‘That’s, um, that a topic I could go on for awhile about, but I need to wrap this up. I’ve been talking too much. Fuck. Fifty-fifty chance I never get around to actually posting this. But, anyways, I’m sorry. I hope this helps a bit, but I really am. I’m really sorry.”

The video ended, the final frame freezing as Liam and Louis turned to Harry. He was profoundly dumbstruck, chewing the inside of his cheek unblinkingly as the screen went black. Liam only lasted a few more seconds in the turgid silence before he was on his feet, shouting jubilantly as he paced.

“‘You know what this means, right? You get what this means?” Liam asked.

“Baby?” Louis asked quietly, leaning in to get a better look at Harry. He was struggling to gauge his emotions through his inert expression. There was no movement to betray him, not even a breath to reveal if he was relieved, if he was scared, if he was happy.

“I need to call her” He said suddenly, blinking back to alertness as he dropped the iPad onto the bed and started looking for his phone.

“But Harry! Do you get what this means?” Liam repeated himself exuberantly. “They slandered you. They slandered you, Harry!”

“I need to talk to her.” Harry repeated, finally finding his phone amongst the folds of the duvet and standing up. He looked at the screen blankly for a moment before propelling himself out of the bedroom.

“Louis, you understand, right?” Liam asked, desperate for someone to join in the celebration with him.

“Not really, Li.” Louis admitted.

“It’s slander!”
“You’ve said as much.”

“We can counter sue.” Liam finally explained, relishing over the term as it rolled over his tongue. “We can counter sue the shit out of them. They publicly disgraced their own client. We have the testimony that proves they publicly disgraced their own client. Slander, Louis! Emotional reparations, Louis! They’re going to have to settle out of court or we’ll totally sink them.”

Liam’s attention was ripped away as his phone went off, giving Louis a moment to plow through all of the information that had been dumped on him. With a pinch to his lungs, he remembered that night when Harry had shown up at his doorstep, cheeks slick with his own tears and breath thick with a day’s worth of alcohol.

It was difficult to be excited about what this meant with that image still so vibrant in his memory, despite having been over a year ago. Almost a year and a half ago, Louis realized. The hurt still felt so recent, so fresh, and yet that night belonged to a different life.

Desperate for a distraction, Louis ambled out of bed, leaving Liam to his phone conversation as he wandered into the suite. Harry was lying on his back on the couch, his phone flat on his chest and his arms draped dramatically over his face. He didn’t move as Louis sat on the edge of the couch, didn’t react as Louis’ fingers tightened around his ankle.

“Did you call her?” Louis asked. Harry nodded. “Short conversation?” Louis waited for another nod, instead met by Harry’s arm darting out and grabbing Louis by the wrist, pulling him forward until he crawled onto Harry’s chest. “What are you feeling right now, baby?”

“I don’t know how I should feel.” Harry admitted.

“Well, there’s a lot of good that’s going to come of this.” Louis explained. “Liam thinks you can settle out of court, so all this legal stuff can hopefully go away. You’ll probably get your catalog back. You’ll be able to perform again.”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed, letting his arms fall away so he could look at Louis. There was a tense smile there, relief brimming at the edges of his eyes but too timid to fully take over.

“This is a good thing, Haz. That’s what I think.” Louis whispered, pressing tiny kisses to his face. “You’re free, now.”

“Louis?” He asked, his voice light despite how tightly his arms were curling around Louis’ lower back.

“Yeah.”

“This is me - erm - turning to you? That’s that you called it, right?” Harry stammered, stalling Louis’ movements as he was swept up in confusion. “This me not, not running off to - this is me choosing you, instead. To turn to. I just wanted you to know that that’s - that’s what I’m thinking about right now. That’s what feels natural to me, now.”

If Louis had once had a beating heart, he’d certainly forgotten what it had ever felt like because Harry fucking Styles.

“I love you so, so much.” Louis whispered, feeling every muscle tightening in frustration at how little was at this disposal to prove how much he meant the words he was saying. “I’m so proud of you and things are going to be okay. Things are going to be great.”

“Can we - can we have fun tonight?” He asked suddenly. “Just try to enjoy the ceremony and
everything? I know it’s been hard for you to enjoy but just - just who cares? So Thad wins some stupid metal? Whatever. Let’s still clap as loud as we can when they announce your name with the other nominees and be all cheesy for the cameras. I mean, how often do we get to do this? Get to go to a show honoring your work? Get to just be young and in love? Let’s have fun. Not let anyone ruin this for us.”

“Alright.” Louis said, his smile heavy. “Let’s have fun.”

It quickly became their mantra for the night, no one taking it more seriously than Niall as he bounced up and down on the entire car ride over to the BAFTAS. In a predictable turn of events, his energy proved to be infectious and Louis was quickly exhilarated. They were receiving more than a few glowers from the more somber and distinguished on the red carpet, which only served to fuel their playfulness further.

Sure, they were wearing thousand dollar tuxes and reporters from around the world were documenting their every move, but wasn’t that more than enough reason to act like crazed children high on a sugar rush?

“Well, there are a lot of themes that I think are really important to a lot of members of the LGBTQ community. Particularly young members.” Louis explained to a reporter as they discussed the film. “There’s a lot of truth in what the characters go through-“

Louis was cut off as a streak of blonde appeared on his peripheral, Niall’s arms falling energetically onto Louis’ shoulders.

“Have you met this man?” Niall asked the reporter, winded as he looked in the camera. “Have you met Louis Tomlinson? This stag of a man? I love this man!”

“I love you, too!” Louis exclaimed, turning to grip Niall by the forearms.

“I love you, too!”

At this they were jumping up and down, mock crying, pulling each other in for a hug. Even though Harry had been trying to give Louis some healthy distance as he worked the rope line, he decided to step in as this was the third interview to have descended into similar, Niall-induced histrionics.

“You’re done. You’ve had enough.” Harry scolded Niall as he stepped in and took Louis’ hand. He pointed an angry finger at the reporters. “You’re enabling this. All of you are enablers.”

Their behavior didn’t get any better even as Harry attempted to chaperone, the group still acting with the kind of abandon they usually reserved for Niall’s pool parties. Undeterred by his best attempts, Harry was quickly seduced by Louis’ playfulness and giddiness as the nominated actor did everything he could to poke Harry’s buttons.

Whenever Harry would receive a question from a reporter, Louis had taken to quietly humming a Status Solo song that had been stuck in his head. This escalated quickly as he bopped along to the beat until he was singing it into Harry’s face, drowning out what was always a well-thought out, detailed answer. If Harry attempted to quiet Louis, Louis would retaliate by shimmying, a move which Louis knew would serve as a fatal blow.

Before long the two of them were ambushing Niall and Nona, dancing against them in a flash before twirling away through the crowd. At a certain point, their immature antics had reached the extent of their acceptability, and it became clear that they should really pull in the reigns for the sake of Liam watching at home.
This was, of course, when Louis decided to leap onto Harry’s back for a better view of the scowling celebrities they were racing past. The aura of liveliness refused to die down even as the ceremony began, leaving them all fidgeting in their seats and constantly leaning in to make inane comments.

Louis and Harry had been taking turns leaning forward to pinch Niall’s earlobes, giggling to each other every time he spun around, face lit with rage, as he tried to figure out which of them had done it. Louis would later be embarrassed to admit that he’d been completely entranced by Niall’s ear, assessing the scant blanketing of blonde hairs and pink skin as he plotted his next attack, that he almost missed what had happened next.

“And the winner is, Louis Tomlinson!”

~

“We need - ! We need something better than this. Something better! Something befitting the occasion!” Louis proclaimed with ample grandeur after only five minutes of schmoozing at one of the BAFTA after parties. Given the euphoria of the evening, it hadn’t taken any further elaboration to get Niall, Nona, and Harry out the door, ditching what was perhaps the most starstudded event currently happening in the UK so that they could crash karaoke night at the closest gay bar.

Hours earlier, Louis had struggled to string together a semi-coherent acceptance speech. He made a few garbled remarks, ineloquently citing the importance of the subject matter, thanking the few names he was able to remember through his mind-numbing shock, and capped it off with an earnest, “I’m sorry. I was really not expecting this so you’ve caught me off guard.”

Harry’s elated smile had not faltered since Louis landed back at his side, which made it all a tad too good for Louis to fathom. It became his goal for the evening to keep that grin from sliding off of Harry’s face, to keep his delight sparkling from his dimpled cheeks, which had him quickly pivoting as they arrived at the first party to learn of the open bar. It wasn’t due to a lack of trust, he knew Harry would be able to keep himself away from the champagne that was being passed around like it was flowing out of the faucets. Louis just didn’t want even a split second of craving to muddy their night. He didn’t want even a solitary thought of regret that he couldn’t join in with everyone else to cross Harry’s mind.

A distraction was needed, and a glorious, flamingly gay distraction was what they received.

The already packed club had turned into a thick knot of bodies packed in together as they crowded the stage. The roof was surely reverberating due to the shrieks as Harry and Louis ascended the stage. They were still clad in tuxedos, still glittering with awards show prestige. Phones were being thrust into the air in front of them, everyone clamoring for a view as Harry took one of the mics.

“Hello everyone.” He greeted them, his smoky voice drowned beneath a cavalcade of shrieks. “Louis just won a BAFTA.” He said simply, smiling radiantly. “So did my friend, Nona, right there. Been a big night for everyone. Alright. We’re gonna sing Total Eclipse of the Heart.”

And if there had ever been a sentence capable of blowing the minds of every soul in a gay bar, Harry had pinpointed it. Louis was laughing so uncontrollably that he almost missed his first line, stuttering into the first notes.
“Turn around.” Louis sang, immediately upstaged as Harry spun toward the crowd with vigor, his body wracked by the notes ripping out of him.

“Every now and then I get a little bit lonely and you’re never coming round.”

“Turn around.”

“Every now and then I get a little bit tired of listening to the sound of my tears.” Harry took a powerful step to the edge of the stage, his every muscle constrained with focus and determination. They were only a few lines in and already Harry was on a different planet, singing, breathing, living the words with a passion typically reserved for stadium concerts rather than karaoke bars.

“Turn around.” Louis cajoled him, doing everything in his power to keep a straight enough face to keep singing, very aware of how many phones were focused on him. But this was proving an increasingly impossible task as Harry descended further and further into his own velvety, theatrical sorrow.

“Every now and then I get a little bit terrified, but then I see the look in your eyes.” Harry spun slowly, fixing Louis with a look of such dramatic affection that his soul had probably melted and seeped out through his toes.

“Turn around, bright eyes!” Louis sang back, his voice clipped with laughter. Harry twisted his body back toward the audience as the intensity simmered. The entire crowd pulsed with the moment that was coming; it was tangible in the air as Harry mounted the melody, the drums blasting from all sides, thumping in their ears and pummeling their ribcages.

“Every now and then I fall apart!” He plummeted to his knees, whipping his hair back like the rock god he was born to be. “And I need you now tonight! And I need you more than ever! And if you only hold me tight, we’ll be holding on forever!”

The sight was magic, the musky air aflame with his performance, with the gravity of his shattering voice. Louis was spellbound, gutted by it, struck that all Harry needed was a cheap microphone and tiny stage to electrify expectations.

He slowed into the refrain, met by applause and shouts during the brief interlude. Rising to his feet, Harry reached back toward Louis to join their hands, Louis stepping up to join Harry at the edge of the stage. He looked at Louis sheepishly, the music rising in waves around them, and there in those bright eyes was Harry again. However impossible as it seemed, that man who had just been gyrating and convulsing as if compelled by an otherworldly force as he serenaded this crowd had so quickly flipped back into just Harry again. Just the man who hummed to himself while he brushed his teeth every morning. Just the boy who always came sprinting out to the front door in the middle of the night, sliding around in his thick socks when Louis came home late from a trip. Just the love of his life who he was determined to spend the rest of his days with.

Alas, with only the passing of one eighth note, he was enraptured again in the song, shrieking into his mic with a tremulous crooning that had Louis’ chest thrumming. A sea of cell phones twinkled up at them, swaying in rhythm as they enchanted Louis. He clapped along to the chorus, just as enthralled with Harry’s mystifying performance as the rest of the onlookers, leaving him wholly unprepared for the emotional onslaught Harry had prepared for him.

Suddenly, Harry gripped his arm and yanked him, spinning him so they were only inches apart and showering him with his full force of fervor. Louis gripped into Harry’s arm, desperate for something to keep him from flying off the stage, finally plunging into the song alongside him.
“I don’t know what to do, I’m always in the dark. Living in a powder keg and we’re giving off sparks. I really need you tonight! Forever’s gonna start tonight. Forever’s gonna start tonight!”

Harry broke away, his hand limp in Louis’ as his eyes fluttered shut, the last words trembling from his mouth.

“Once upon a time I was falling in love, now I’m only falling apart. Nothing I can say, a total eclipse of the heart.”

Harry released a mighty sigh, the weight of his performance escaping his mortal flesh to take its place amongst the stars. The crowd erupted in euphoria as he swung around to face Louis, pulling him into a swaying hug that Louis never wanted to part from.

“I love you way, way too fucking much, Harry.” Louis shouted above the clamor, laughing with abandon as he swung in Harry’s arms. Harry tucked his face into the crook of Louis’ neck, suddenly bashful in the face of applause.

Jesus he was happy; he was so tremendously overjoyed that it was due to start pouring out of him at any moment. Here they were, open for the world to see, and Harry was incredible. He was magnificent. He existed somewhere beyond reason, and he was there for Louis to keep.

~

“I’ve brought you a pocket square.” Zayn proudly announced, holding forth the aforementioned fabric in an offering.

“Have you now?” Louis chuckled. “Not sure how the stylists will feel about this.”

“It’s Harry approved, so that’s all the authority I need.” He explained, tucking it into the pocket of Louis’ charcoal gray suit. “It’s my favorite pocket square, as a matter of fact.”

“So I should think twice before I blow my snot into it?”

“You should think about forty times before you do that, because as I said about twenty seconds ago, it’s my favorite pocket square.”

“Who has a favorite pocket square?” Louis questioned.

“I do, and I want it to be with my best mate on the biggest night of his career.” Zayn said in frustration. “And maybe if he stopped yapping, I’d be able to say all of the sappy stuff I’d prepared.”

“Sounds like you picked an arse of a best mate.”

“Cheers.”

Zayn had just pulled them away into the study, trying to avoid the chaotic bustle of the rest of the house as everyone finished adorning themselves for their night at the Academy Awards. They’d chosen Niall’s house as the rendezvous point, since Louis pointed out that this was truly a more special night for Nona than it was for Louis.

Nona was about to become the first transgender woman to win an Academy Award for best
actress, and somehow, the rest of the company found this on par with Louis sticking it to Thad Dylan. Twice now Louis had been forced to remind Niall where his priorities should be as he continually started chants prognosticating Thad’s demise.

“There’s a reason I want you to wear this.” Zayn explained, swallowing back what was clearly an embarrassing swell of emotion. “Because I got to go to this thing with you last year, and I don’t think it’s super fair that I can’t go again this year, so I want you to take a little piece of me with you.”

“Mmmmmm.” Louis’ capacity for speech had descended to a low, guttural moan that spilled out of him in a stream of pure catharsis. “Zayn.” He responded, his voice hollowed out by the bro feels that were playing tennis with his heart.

“Louis.” He smiled back.

“But, Zayn.”

“And if - if this thing goes to shit and Thad walks off with an Oscar he doesn’t deserve, like, who cares? Right? I mean, Cher’s won an Oscar for acting before. How big of a deal is it, really?”

“But I want to be Cher so bad.” Louis admitted.

“Beside the point. Bad example.” Zayn corrected himself, dropping his hands to Louis’ shoulders. “None of that compares to everything you’ve gone through this year. It’s broken my heart so many times to watch you go through all this stuff, but you did it. You worked hard, and here you are. It all turned out alright. Like, Lou, you got shot.”

“I know.”

“So, like, just remember that this is all a show. It’s fun, and if you win, that’s great. But if you don’t, there’s stuff that’s more important. The fact that you got yourself away from Joshua. That you found Harry. That you’re just fucking alive, Lou. Both of you. We almost lost both of you.”

“Yeah.” Louis whispered, nodding absently.

“You’ve worked so hard for your life. That’s what matters.”

“I love you, mate.” Louis said quietly, smiling as Zayn pulled him into a hug.

“I love you, too. And Jesus, Lou, that boyfriend you found.” Zayn laughed as they pulled away. “He’s so good.”

“He is.”

“He is so, so good for you. Stay with him.”

“That’s the plan.”

“What’s happening in here?” Liam asked, barging into the room without preamble. “Are you just hugging in the dark in here?”

“Liam! Join us!” Louis commanded, offering an arm in Liam’s direction.

“And I’ll be taking my exit.” Liam decided, attempting to back out.

“Liam you twat! No!”
Within seconds Louis was scampering after him, tackling him to the floor with the help of Niall who joined in at the first sign of a chase.

It left a lump in his throat, waving goodbye to Zayn and Liam as they stepped into their car. They were standing there side by side, Liam’s arm circled around Zayn’s shoulders nonchalantly until the car rolled away.

The intensity mounted with every passing second, compounding on itself until the door was flying open, the vibrantly red carpet sprawling out before them. They stepped out slowly, taking stock as they readied themselves for the chaos of flashing lights. Louis smoothed down his jacket, looking up as he noticed Harry come to a stop in front of him.

“Love of my life?” He asked.

“Yes?”

“Want to hold hands?” Harry held his hand out, Louis’ nerves melting away as he giggled at the gesture. He curled their fingers together, gripping into the tight hold before they turned and faced the mayhem together.

At every turn his surroundings loomed over him, trying to remind him of the enormity of the event. These were the Academy Awards, Louis. This was the biggest night in Hollywood, Louis. The entire evening was wrought in gold and splendor, Louis.

But he was above it all, uncaring as he treated the carpet like a casual stroll with his boyfriend. He was determined to transcend the gaudiness and pandemonium. Yes, he was up for the most coveted award in his entire field, but there was no reason he couldn’t just enjoy spending a nice evening with Harry.

This proved especially possible as Harry’s good mood was uncrackable. He’d somehow transformed into a butterfly in human form, smiling exuberantly and answering questions like the enamored, proud boyfriend he was.

“What do you think your chances are tonight?” A reporter asked, but before Louis could piece together an answer, Harry’s arms were already wrapped around his middle, Harry’s chin perched on his shoulder from behind.

“Loulie can have any award he wants. He’s perfect and incredible. We’re not worried.” He chirped.

“Just pretend he’s not here.” Louis said. Like the fluttering insect he was, Harry was soon distracted and scampered away, leaving Louis once again alone with the reporter.

“This is your first nomination, correct?” She asked.

“That is correct.”

“So how are you feeling so far? Nervous?” She asked with a blinding grin.

“Honestly, I’m just trying to enjoy it.” Louis admitted. “I’m here to represent a really fantastic film that means a lot to me, and - I mean - I was here last year and it was just so different. I was falling in love with that goon that was just here, but I had to pretend I wasn’t. Getting to be here, and getting to be honest - it’s great. I’m just happy to be here.”

Finding their seats was the first moment he’d had to catch his breath after the whirlwind of the press line. He was quelling the slight embarrassment that had been cropping up by their behavior;
by the end, Harry and Louis had reached complete abandon and had more than once started skipping down the red carpet, hand in hand.

But, honestly, who were they trying to impress? Decorum was never their style.

The reality of sitting through a four-hour ceremony finally settled on them, tempering their energy and excitement. It was all rather repetitive at this point, smiling through the opening number and clapping along for the winners of the first few categories. Even Niall was clearly restless, getting up to stretch his legs and harass everyone in their proximity during each commercial break. After they spotted him making his way toward George Clooney, Nona jumped to her feet to act as a chaperone. She wasn’t completely qualified, but she was at least a few degrees more restrained than the terror of Ireland.

Louis leaned back in his seat, staring at the stage and realizing it hadn’t quite clicked that he wasn’t watching it on TV. Soon, either he or Thad was going to have to climb up there as one of them was officially declared the winner of their Twitter feud. And also the winner of an Academy Award, but that wasn’t quite as important.

Then again, perhaps neither of them would win. Louis guffawed without preamble at the thought of that kind of upset. How fitting that would be. Slowly, his head lolled to the side to face Harry, who was already looking at him.

“Hard not to reminisce, you know?” Louis mused. “About everything leading up to this.”

“Darling.” Harry cooed, nudging their shoulders together. “Why do you sound so sad about it?”

“I’m not. I not necessarily sad.” Louis explained. “Just emotional. Just a lot of emotions. Thinking about - about where we were when I read the script the first time. It just kind of sucks to think there was ever a point that I wasn’t with you.”

“Doesn’t matter, anymore.”

“And that - like, how long has it been? Fourteen months since we started dating? The lengths we went to just to hide everything. Now I can just sit here with you. I can kiss you. I can just be normal with you.”

“We can be ourselves.” Harry murmured.

“That’s amazing. This is all amazing. It’s all too good for a little shit like meself.”

“Lou, do you remember when we were here last year?”

“S’all I’ve really been able to think about.” Louis admitted.

“Remember what I said to you?” He asked. Louis smiled, sugary and warm, ready to hear him say it again.

“Jog my memory.”

“That we’d be back here this year. That you’d be nominated. That I’d be your date.” He repeated, his words slowing as the moment thickened between them.

“You’re a right Nostradamus, love.”

Harry laughed, opening his mouth to add something to the conversation, but letting it fall shut as
his eyes fixated on Louis. Neither felt particularly compelled to say anything, to move, to blink, if it meant hampering with the tender stare. His thoughts were already humming together into listless affection, his adoration swilling so thoroughly through his veins that he was left dispossessed of all but his most lilted sentiments.

*I cherish you, Harry.*

Their lips were already brushing together with a timid peck, lingering in their captive world until everyone around them began taking their seats, breaking the spell. Louis leaned into Harry’s side as they turned toward the stage, feeling as if he weren’t even in the room anymore. He didn’t have any more patience for this nostalgia, for any further anxiety at the category that was coming up next; he just wanted to be. He just wanted to exist, feeling the warmth of Harry’s shoulder against his.

He didn’t fight back as his eyes slid closed, leaving him with nothing but the feel of Harry’s jacket against his cheek. With nothing but the smell of early morning pancakes, the sound of a harmonica in the backyard, the memory of poetry and pet names, of silly dances in their socks and jumpers, of soft lips and strong hands to gently wipe away the tears.

Harry’s slight nudge jolted Louis back to reality, opening his eyes as he realized a cameraman was now setting up in the aisle beside them. The lens was hovering close enough that Louis could see his own reflection in it. A singular, female voice finally broke through Louis’ stupor.

“Here are the nominees for best supporting actor.”

Louis was ready for his heart to drop, for his lungs to clench, for his every muscle to tighten in anticipation as the nominees were listed.

But it never came. The serenity never broke, even as Louis grinned into the camera at the mention of his own name. A part of his mind was protesting, trying desperately to snap Louis back into reality, but it was all in vain. His thoughts remained enraptured by the man beside him, thinking of nothing else but curly hair and dimples. Of long, ambling nights that ended in starlit adventures and quiet jokes they whispered so low that no one else would ever hear.

More names. Polite clapping.

Tear stained notes from rehab. Harry’s pale, bloodless face in that hospital bed. Their first, sweltering kiss breaking away to a hazy image of Harry dejected, crying out Louis’ name.


Basking in each other’s arms under the northern lights. Harry’s face trembling with delighted relief as Louis told him he loved him for the first time. Kissing in the spray of a fountain.


He couldn’t shake it, this overwhelming feeling. It was just Harry, a singular thought. Just Harry. Just soft. Just brave, just beautiful, just his. Just Louis’ for the rest of their lives.


It was so sudden and startlingly clear. This award, his performance that he’d specified as the hardest project he’d ever worked on, none of it was true. That designation was Harry’s. Harry was the single thing on this Earth that he would fight to the end of his life for. Every break down that he’d clawed his way out of, every time pulled himself up from the mud and tears and broken
bones, it was all to be the man that could deserve someone like Harry.

Stark, clear, burning bright across his pumping heart was the revelation that Harry was all he wanted. Louis just wanted Harry. All of him. Forever.

“And the winner is . . .!”

~

“Mmm, Lou, no.” Harry grumbled, swatting Louis’ hand away from where it was pinching his nose shut.

“Wake up, please. I’m very bored.” Louis announced precociously.

“Well, that sounds like a personal problem.” Harry counted as Louis rolled onto him, the sheets tightening around them like their own personal cocoon.

“Hey guess what? I know you were very worried that my feelings would dissipate overnight, but guess what?”

“What?”

“I still love you.” Louis smiled down at him, watching Harry’s expression soften as their thoughts tiptoed back to the night before. The moon bathed moment when Louis had finally gotten flustered enough to accidentally admit he loved Harry.

“I’m never going to get used to saying that.” Harry admitted, giving Louis a quick peck.

“Well, why don’t you try?”

“I love you.”

“Huh, me too.” Louis said brightly, leaning in for another kiss. “Hey, Harry?”

“Hey, what?”

Louis traced a gentle hand through his unruly curls, staring at Harry as he affectionately mapped every crevice of the beautiful face beneath him; a face that smiled so brilliantly that it seemed impossible that anyone would ever frown again.

“You made it through the night.” Louis pointed out happily, realizing Harry had slept soundly without the help with medication.

“I did.”

“You slept and everything.”

“We made it through the night.” Harry corrected him.

“Hey, Harry?”

“Hey, what?”
“How would you feel about making it through every night together?”

“That’s alright with me.”

“Every night for the rest of our lives?”

“All those nights?”

“All of them.” Louis clarified. “Would that be okay? If we did this for the rest of our lives?” He watched Harry’s eyes as they somehow looked even more round, even more green, Louis’ hand still idly petting through his locks.

“You’ll have to marry me first.” Harry snapped, his face suddenly delighted with his own sassiness.

“Alway high maintenance with you!” Louis groaned as Harry giggled, curling his arms around Louis’ middle.

“Fine. It’s alright with me if we spend the rest of our nights together forever and ever, since that’s what we seem to be having an adult conversation about right now.” He added, dryly.

“Excellent.” Louis smiled, giving him another kiss. “And I promise we can spend a couple of those nights on your roof watching the stars.”

“I love stars.” Harry agreed. “That’s probably why I love you so much.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a star!” He announced with a theatrical flourish of his hands. Louis’ eyes were already rolling, even as Harry’s eager lips met his.

“I love you, you precious thing.” Louis murmured.

“I love you, too, my shining star.”

~

“Harry.” Louis said suddenly, his head whipping to face Harry, his heart thumping fiercely in his throat, completely unaware of the silent tension that was holding the audience imprisoned. Harry looked over to him in worried surprise, seeing Louis’ near-manic intensity. “Harry, I - !”

“Louis Tomlinson!”

The entire world was shooting jarringly to its feet, shocking Louis’ senses as his equilibrium dipped. It was frustratingly loud, deafening with frenzied shrieks while all Louis wanted was to talk to Harry. All he could register in the pandemonium was his annoyance that Harry was standing, wasn’t close enough that he could say this thing that was broiling in his chest and needed to escape.

And then, oh.

Oh god.
He was sinking, further and further, face smothered in his own hands as the weight of something he’d never imagined landed on him. His skin, his marrow, his every individual cell ignited.

What, though?

Someone was dragging him reluctantly to his feet, which was excruciatingly absurd. He was focusing his every intention on not crying, forget trying to stand. A familiar song was pounding through the speakers; Louis recognized it from the soundtrack of his film. It wasn’t Nirvana. It wasn’t the rallying cry that Thad Dylan had bounced along to every time he’d accepted an award. It was from *Kids From Yesterday*. It was Louis’ song.

Oh, oh, god. What?

“Louis! Love!” Harry screamed, and it wasn’t until he looked into those gigantic, green eyes that simmered with exceptional excitement that the moment could be defined in words.

*I just won a motherfucking Oscar.*

The realization propelled him into the air with what probably looked like an inarticulate fist pump, throwing himself into Harry’s arms immediately after.

“Harry!” He cried, feeling his feet leave the ground as Harry clutched him.

He was being torn away, thrust into the arms of Niall and Nona, then jumping between quick embraces of so many people he’d given up on recognizing any of them. All at once he was alone, without the stability of anyone’s arms as he stumbled down the aisle, so small in what felt like a cathedral above him.

Cameras were swirling around him, the applause and music still explosive against his ear drums. He was swept up in a procession of ballgowns and suits, led up the stairs until the glinting statue was thrust into his hand.

The glittery metal was cold against his palm, the weight just as heavy as he’d hoped it would be. He looked down at it, at the tiny golden man devoid of any distinguishing features. Odd as it was, it struck Louis that the statue wasn’t smiling. How could anyone resist smiling at a moment like this?

He set it down on the podium with a grandiose CLUNK, taking his first moment to catch his breath. This proved futile as his eyes crept up and were met by a sea of faces, waiting to be moved by his words.

Oh shit.

Louis was supposed to speak, wasn’t he?

Shit. Fuck. Shit.

“Erm, what?” His voice crackled in disbelief, the crowd joining in as he laughed. “I just - I don’t know. What am I actually supposed to say? I’m supposed to be composed enough to say something right now? I - erm - I’ve got to, got to thank - wait, I’m not supposed to thank people, right? People hate watching that? Yikes. I’m just wasting time in front of millions of people right now. This thing is wasted on me.” He wiped his brow as the crowd gave him another subdued chuckle. “I really do, though, I’ve got to thank my director. My writer. Daniel. He - erm - this film he made really hit home with me.
‘Because, for a lot of the people in my life - people like me, things are still . . . It’s still dangerous for me to be gay, people like me still get killed, and I’m a white man. So to be in a film starring a transgender woman of color, it’s been a really profound privilege.

‘And I really should wrap this up - I know - jeez. This is a lot of pressure. But I just need to…” Louis swallowed, shaking his head, wishing he could look up and the field of faces would be gone, only one face remaining. “I have to thank the man who really made this happen for me. I wasn’t going to do this film. I kind of got talked out of it, but Harry, baby, you gave me the strength to do this.

‘You give me the strength to do everything I do every day, and I feel so sorry for you that you’re stuck with me. Because I just love you so much from your - your curls down to those glitter boots. I adore you, my love. And Harry, I just . . . “ His voice faltered, his hand wrapping tighter and tighter around the statue. He had only seconds left, only one flickering moment to just gather that final ounce of courage and say the words pounding against the back of his throat. “Harry?” He asked, looking into the crowd, ready to just jump in with everything he had. “Will you marry me?”

It was like a shock of adrenaline through the entire, cavernous room, gasps and yelps erupting from every seat. Cameras were whipping around as everyone craned in their seats, the uncontrollable chatter in the room leaving Louis clueless as to what he was supposed to do next.

_I just asked Harry to marry me._

Fireworks burst in his stomach.

_Says yes. Please marry me. Please say yes._

At this point, Louis was long overdue to be played off the stage by music, but none came. A part of him knew that he’d just caused a frenzy amongst the producers of the event, no one daring to cut off what would be the most captivating moment of the night.

It was still so thoroughly scattered as people began shushing each other in an attempt to control the situation enough to hear an intelligible answer. Louis was starting to shake now, feeling like he was swaying over a ledge, waiting for someone to reach out and pull him back to safety.

At last, there was a shout, one single yell that rose above the noise that Louis could have recognized anywhere. But Louis still couldn’t see him, couldn’t make out what he was saying. It didn’t sound like yes; it was some inscrutable word that was making Louis’ blood drain.

“What was that?” He asked anxiously, leaning into the podium as the crowd quieted further.

“Obviously!” Came Harry’s voice, stressing every syllable in his slow cadence. “Yes!” He clarified, met by a wave of applause that threatened to crack the foundation of the theatre. Louis let loose a tear that he hadn’t realized he’d been holding back, laughing and wiping it away as he leaned back toward the microphone.

He needed to speak quickly, because he could already feel his potential to fracture into a thousand pieces. He was actually going to die on the stage, with everyone watching.

“Harry I - I don’t exactly know what happens next? I have to leave the stage, or -,” And he was laughing again, eyes soaked and he didn’t care. Who could? Who could care about something as trivial as laugh-crying when he was going to marry Harry? “I don’t know! They’re pulling me off! I love you!” He called.

Louis ducked off the stage to the last flutter of applause. He was shaking, smiling, crying,
clutching the award to his chest because it was the only thing there to hold onto. He was being ushered along quickly, down hallways draped in golden curtains and grandeur. He knew he was supposed to be paying attention, supposed to be imprinting this to his memories so he could tell his grandchildren about it.

But that just led him back to Harry. To the intertwined future that wasn’t just a lovelorn fantasy anymore. It was happening. He was going to marry Harry. Somehow, he’d just won an Academy Award, and it still wasn’t the most life changing event of the evening.

No fucking way did he care about these hallways. In fact, fuck hallways. *Fuck hallways because he was going to marry Harry.*

He was going to do it. They were going to get married. They were engaged.

*They were engaged.*

Louis knew where they were taking him, out to be hammered by press and photographers until the next award recipient could come and relieve him. He was about to be forced to answer hundreds of different questions that he didn’t even honestly know the answers to, before he even got a chance to talk to Harry. Harry was somewhere back in the audience, light years away from the endless sequence of hallway these handlers were leading him down. They were doing their best to cater to him, asking if he needed anything. *I need Harry, damn it.*

“Water, please.” He managed to crackle out. He downed the bottled in one go, attempting to drown his nerves before he was thrust in front of the press. He was going to hide the giggling, stroppy mess that he’d become from these cameras that would document the moment for the rest of his life. He was going to gather himself, school his emotions.

“Mr. Tomlinson?” asked on the handlers, gesturing toward a door.

“Yeah. I’m ready.” He announced. He took a deep breath, relaxed his face, and stepped through it with triumphant bravado.

Alas, it was a dressing room.

Embarrassing, he had to admit, but above all, baffling. Why exactly had he been escorted in here? He turned to ask as much, quickly receiving his answer as a blubbering, shimmering, smiling, crying, curly headed man stepped in behind him.

Yes, Louis was already lost amongst his own tears.

“Harry!” He attempted to say, cool and casual, but he was already fully weeping. Without hesitation they were locked in each other’s arms, descending further and further into sobs and laughter. They pulled back, kissing with pathetic desperation. Louis clung to Harry’s face, finding it sopping wet but dimpled with delight, which only increased Louis’ own emotions two-fold. “Hi, baby.” Louis whispered, his voice a shallow ghost of it's former glory.

“You really mean it?” Harry sputtered, wiping his face clumsily as they separated.

“Yes. Yes, Harry, of course I do!” Louis promised him. “Want me to do it proper?”

“Mhmm.” Harry nodded, chuckling. His face was so hopelessly crumpled in on itself, so spent, so wracked with an unbridled happiness that it blinded Louis.

They both laughed, watery, affectionate, as Louis lowered himself slowly to one knee. Harry’s
breath hitched as he pulled his hands through his hair, somehow crying with even more elated
gusto than before. Louis took his hand, trembling with a shaky breath.

“Harry Styles.” Louis said, looking up into the face of the incredible force that had enveloped him.
“Harry. Love of my dismal, sorry, little life. I - I want to give you some beautiful, rehearsed speech
because that’s what you deserve, darling. You deserve all the pretty things in the world, but I’m
useless and I can’t think of anything.”

“You’re doing good.” Harry whimpered.

“Remember that time you fell in that fountain?”

“Louis!” Harry shrieked, his voice finally reaching a shrill octave that Louis had never thought
possible.

“Be my husband, Hazza? Marry me?”

Harry was too vastly inundated with his deluge of unending tears that all he could do was nod,
pulling against Louis’ hand to try and bring him to his feet.

“Wait, wait, wait. We need a ring.” Louis joked, looking around furiously. At last, inspiration
struck, and Louis plunked his Oscar clumsily onto the top of Harry’s hand.

“Oh really?” Harry asked, nearly losing his footing with laughter. “Do I get to keep that?”

“Not on your life.” Louis said, finally standing up.

“We’re going to melt it down to make me jewelry?”

“Nope.” Louis smiled, leaning in to meld their lips together for a long, reverential moment. Slowly
they pulled apart, fighting against the gravity that so vigorously wanted to keep their lips joined.
Tears continued to stream down their raw cheeks, hands crept into each other’s hair, foreheads
brushed together.

“You’re everything, Louis.” Harry breathed, deep and potent.

It hit Louis directly in the heart, icy and laced with fluttering adrenaline. Slowly it abated to
warmth, surging through his stomach and arms, his fingers, his toes, his face, his cheeks, his eyes,
his lips. His every part drenched in the love he felt for this man. This boy. The reappearance of
those three tender words they had uttered to each other long before they had the courage to say I
love you.

None of it was enough; to kiss him fearlessly; to hold him or lose his hands in his unruly curls. It
wasn’t enough to whisper that he loved him. None of it was enough for Harry.

He was going to have to marry him. Truly, Louis didn’t have another choice.

“You too, Harry. You’re everything, too.”

"I just want it to be you and I forever. I know you wanna leave, so c'mon baby be with me so
happily."
“If I have to hear the word ‘symmetry’ again, I’m gonna call off this entire wedding.”

The look on Harry’s face following these words, however, dissuaded Louis from making another of these flyaway disparagements.

They’d been engaged for scarcely twenty four hours before Harry had delved deep into wedding plans, musing over themes and decor with a faraway look in his eyes.

“What about a fairy tale wedding?” Louis suggested lightly, earning a bemused scowl from Harry.

“I don’t like that.” He decided.

“You love fairytales!” Louis argued, just enjoying how easy it was to poke Harry’s buttons.

“Yeah, but not for our wedding. Not for us. It’s just setting up unreal expectations. We’re a couple, not a fairytale.”

“I’ll prove you wrong, you know.” Louis added snarkily.

“Oh will you?”

“Mhmm. Every day’s going to be a fairytale with us. Every day will perfect. No problems, ever, ever again.”

“Would you like to make a bet?” Harry asked with a begrudging grin.

“I would.”

“Because I’ve met you, Louis Tomlinson. You can’t go five minutes without causing a problem.”

“I’ll stake my life on it, Harry.” He declared grandiosely, “There will be nothing from here onwards besides perfect, blissful harmony.”

He kissed him, wondering to what degree the universe was going to prove him wrong for this blatant display of hubris.

They enjoyed a long engagement, and yet, Harry still managed to maintain a constant level of hysteria over wedding preparations. Several times Louis had panicked himself, thinking that the wedding must be only a day away, because surely no reasonable person could be this despondent over flower arrangements for an event that was still a year away.

“You are such a stereotype.” Louis noted as he found Harry once again flung across the couch like a discarded corpse. Louis perched beside him on the edge of the middle cushion, pulling one of Harry’s hands into his lap.
“I am - I am overcome-“ Harry muttered, his voice tremulous with the deep ache of knowing the world was harshly unfair. “I am overcome by the - the very ineptitude of these earthly instruments to express the depths of my devotion to you. The tools of these uninspired mortals fall short of your magnificence and - and it’s killing me.”

“Alright, so let’s switch that part of your brain off.” Louis said calmly, running a thumb over Harry’s furrowed brow as if smoothing the anxiety away. “And talk like two human adults who are about to commit to each other for the rest of our lives.”

The brow stitch returned with a vengeance, his petulant glower still intact as he rolled over and curled into a fetal position around where Louis sat.

“But it’s important, Louis!”

“You know it’s not the actual wedding that matters, right? We’ve talked about this, love. It’s fun to get to celebrate with with our friends and everyone, but it’s the part that comes after that matters. The part where we’re married. Where we spend the rest of our lives.”

“I know.” Harry grumbled.

“We don’t have to do this, if it’s stressing you out too much. We could elope today for all I care.”


“Right. Do forgive me.” Louis smiled, recognizing the plausibility that Harry might murder him if he tried to push the topic further. He gave Harry a kiss to the cheek before making his exit, hearing the typical slew of muttered remarks from Harry.

“Most beautiful day of our lives . . . how dare you . . . symmetry of the hydrangeas . . . “

But in a surprise reversal that Louis never let him live down, it was actually Harry who very nearly pulled the plug on the ceremony on the eve of their heavily anticipated nuptials.

Louis had finally managed to nod off after several hours of restlessness. They were sleeping separately in adjacent hotel rooms (because symmetry Louis) when a large mass was suddenly catapulted onto his chest.

“Maybe let’s just run away?” Harry whispered frantically, giving Louis no time to get his bearings after having the wind knocked so suddenly out of him.

“Harry?” He sputtered, a pointless inquiry because, honestly, who the fuck else would have just attacked him in the middle of the night?

“We don’t have to do this, right? In front of everyone? What if something goes wrong? What if they hate it?” He asked, burying his face in his hands.

“Haz, do you not want to get married tomorrow?” Louis asked, immediately regretting his words as Harry’s eyes pierced him with disbelief.

“Why would you say that?!“ He very nearly shrieked, and Louis was doing everything he could to quell his fond laughter as he ushered Harry under the covers with him. Harry softened into his side, letting Louis hold him tight.

“Baby.” He cooed, running a hand up and down Harry’s arm. “Nervous?”
“No. Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“You’ve planned the hell out of this thing, love. Even if I didn’t show up tomorrow, still, the only thing people would be talking about is how lovely the ambience was.”

“But what if-”

“The entire world explodes and we all die? Yes, what if?”

“Louis.”

“But who cares, though?” Louis asked, feeling Harry huff against his shoulder. “No, really. What horrible thing could possibly happen that would even matter? Either way, we’re going to end up married at the end of it.”

“Hmmm.” Harry sighed dreamily, the idea of marriage still having a calming effect on him despite their lengthy engagement.

“This time tomorrow, you’ll be married to me, and I’ll be married to you.”

“Fine.” Harry exhaled, feigning frustration despite his rather telling smile. He nuzzled further into Louis as if he were making a home for himself, letting his eyes flutter shut.

“Ah, planning to sleep over, are we?”

“Shut up.”

“If I’m not mistaken, someone had this idea in the first place - the two of us sleeping in the same room.”

“No one’s listening to you right now, Louis.”

“But then there was someone else, this tall, curly haired monster who absolutely insisted that we be separate for twenty four hours.”

“If a Louis Tomlinson complains non stop in a hotel room, but no one’s actually listening to him, does he make a sound?” Harry asked, his sass snapping into form as he cracked one eye open to look at him.

“Go to sleep, fiancé.” Louis said warmly, kissing Harry on the forehead before settling back into his pillow.

“Alright, fiancé.”

“But no funny business.” Louis snapped. “I’m already facing the uphill battle of making an honest man out of you tomorrow - ouch - did you just bite me?”

Indeed Harry had, leading to a giggling tickle fight beneath the covers.

They received a rude wake up call the next morning from Zayn and Niall, the latter of which was infuriated by Louis’ lewd acting of luring Harry into his bed. Even as they pounded at the door, demanding attention, the couple still ambled sleepily in each other’s company, Louis groaning as Harry pulled open the curtains.

“Don’t be like that. It’s our wedding sun.” Harry explained as brightly as the scorching light pummeling Louis.
“Oh is it?”

“Yes, in fact.” Harry hopped back onto the bed to give Louis another tender kiss, even as Niall shouted his frustrations through the door.

“Louis Tomlinson!” He bellowed. “You have stolen something very important from me! You have stolen! From me!”

Harry was quickly snatched away from him for prenuptial preparations, leaving Louis in the mercy of Zayn’s ongoing deluge of emotion. He’d been like this the entire year, devolving into near tears anytime someone brought up the wedding. He’d become a stroppy old thing, somehow able to switch between his aloof stoicism one minute into a warm pile of mush the next.

His romanticism remained invariable despite the turbulent course his love life had taken over the past year, Louis having been forced to play spectator with the ever present trace of guilt that his haughty claims of a “perfect, fairytale life” were somewhat at fault. In what was a cruel twist of fate, it seemed that Louis was being punished by proxy through his friends. While his and Harry’s relationship continued on a well-deserved steady course, his friends were looped in a perpetual cycle of the on-again off-again variety.

Zayn and Liam were leading the pack, having called off their relationship three times since Harry and Louis’ engagement. Liam was the first to point out that the third time shouldn’t even count, since it lasted less than a day. At that point, they’d ridden out the entire break up narrative so often that their rekindling was inevitable, so why waste energy pretending they were still mad at each other?

Their apparent issues had become a bit of a joke, with Louis usually responding with a flippant, “Oh, so you’re gonna break up with Liam again? That what you’re going to do?” This usually put things back in perspective.

Luckily, they both seemed to be past the incessant break ups, having gone strong for the several months leading up to the wedding. Louis liked to believe he had a considerable hand in this, as the couple wouldn’t last the verbal lashing from Louis if they ever decided to call it quits again.

Nona and Niall’s issues, however, had been enough to stall Louis’ tongue. Things had started simply, with schedules that just didn’t quite mesh at times. They’d easily shrugged it off, loosened their reigns on each other. Nona’s visits to New York would linger a bit longer while Niall expanded to different social groups, leading a starkly different life. The distance burgeoned up over time until they were shadows in each other’s lives, speaking for the first time about the details of getting their marriage annulled.

Louis had to admit he was choked up by it, far more than he thought he’d be if their marriage ever took a turn, the night he finally confronted Nona about it on the phone.

“But, Louis, it’s not like it was a real wedding, you know? Not like with you and Harry.” She explained, Louis resenting how serious the conversation had become. “It was just a joke, you know?”

But he’d wanted to believe in that joke, in the arbitrary serendipity of finding love in a kitschy Vegas wedding chapel. It disassembled this conviction he’d held about a more tender world, something more lyrical and classic.

He and Harry bit their lips as Nona and Niall carried on separately, dating other people, even. Secretly, they had been conspiring with whimsical, parent trap-esque plots to get the two back
together, but time didn’t appear to be on their side. Again and again they were faced with the disappointment that this wasn’t a movie; a love song; a fairytale. It was only with the utmost reluctance that they accepted the tarnished reality of things.

But the bitterness of their situation hadn’t even settled before the clouds cleared to the sound of stomping high heels through Niall’s house. They’d been chatting over brunch in Niall’s kitchen when Nona made her surprise reappearance, her face alight with determination. She looked windswept, as if she had just leapt off the wing of an airplane.

“We need to talk.” She said succinctly, cocking an eyebrow impatiently as she waited for Harry and Louis to clear the room.

They sheepishly piled their plates up before making their exit as they muttered, “Nice to see you, too.”

Louis would never forget that last glimpse he got of Niall’s face before leaving the kitchen, seeing the starstruck hopefulness that was pouring out of him at the sight of Nona. It was weeks before anyone saw the couple again, apparently having decided to take a belated honeymoon to celebrate getting back together.

In a turn of events that Louis had thought bleakly unlikely, those who were meant to be together had rekindled beautifully, everything back into place in time for the wedding to end all weddings.

Louis knew all six of them were already waiting for him at the end of the aisle, standing under an arch adorned in lace and wysteria. The painstakingly assembled guest list was scattered amongst the seats in their radiant garb, separated into three sections. Two aisles split the audience, moving diagonally until they met and joined as one, finally approaching the arch at the front of the ceremony.

Harry had organized this arrangement with specific intentions for Louis and Harry to walk down their aisles simultaneously, throwing gender conformity to the wind. They would meet up in the center, taking the last few steps hand in hand.

“And what? We just walk down by ourselves? No one there to give us away?” Louis asked crassly when Harry had run the idea past him.

“Who exactly is going to give us away? Our dads?” Harry joked, face intent on his sketches of the seating.

“Doesn’t seem very fair.” Louis noted, emptying a bag of crisps into his gaping mouth. “We’re both so much closer to our mums.”

He knew he’d made a real break through when Harry responded with an enthusiastic gasp.

“Louis!” He cried.

“What?”

“The symmetry, though!”

He’d groaned at the time, but had to admit that Johanna’s presence at his side was quelling his fears about the task ahead of him. The walkway stretched out before him, sprinkled with flower petals and an unabashed elegance. The scene was effortlessly opulent, drenching even the most guarded, curmudgeonly corners of Louis in a soft enchantment. The air was sumptuous, redolent and thick from the whispering clusters of flowers. They were dappled in a halcyon sunlight, soft
shadows layering each other in silvery penumbrae.

It was quite easy to lose one’s head in a scene like that. It was only Johanna’s vice like grip on his elbow that reminded him that this wasn’t some nebulous dream, and he was actually expected to perform.

They moved forward, step by step, everyone’s heads turning their way with saccharine delight. His mind couldn’t help but wander away, so utterly aware of the ridiculousness that had lead up to this scene steeped in efflorescence.

“No crying.” Louis had demanded of Harry a day earlier. “You want to prove you’re not a weper? This is the moment. I don’t want to see a single tear on that face of yours.”

“I promise, Louis.”

“Not your mum, either. Not one member of your clan is to mist over for even a second. We have spent far too much time and energy in our relationship crying.”

“I promise, Louis.”

“We’ll see. I know you.”

But he met a new depth of embarrassment when it was actually he, Louis Tomlinson, who turned to take one look at Harry before his face was flooded in tears. And no, they weren’t gentle, mature tears that would photograph well when they looked back on this day. It was garish, ugly crying that was spiraling so thoroughly out of his control because, just, Harry.

He was resplendent like the sun, bright and beautiful in his light gray suit. His face was glowing, glistening was the problem. Louis had done his very best to bate his breath but this man standing in front of him had unjustly ripped every trace of oxygen from Louis’ lungs, leaving him a quivering shell in front of these onlookers. His curls, his eyes, his smile, they were all familiar and yet altogether astonishing, how they all worked together to make this marvel.

Louis wanted to fall forward, to bury himself in the boy that had his heart palpitating in his throat, to hide his shameful tears in the folds of his soft fabric, but Johanna was already lunging at her soon to be son-in-law. The familial similarities were apparent in the shrillness of her cries, having also dissolved into histrionic tears. Much to Louis’ dismay, both Harry and Anne retained their gentle smiles, putting the Tomlinsons to shame as Louis blubbered. Johanna gave Harry a quick embrace, but was quick to surrender her hold as Johanna shifted her attention back to Louis, sobbing into his shoulder as she clutched her first born.

They were truly a sight, both sputtering and whimpering pathetically until she finally had to let go; finally had to take a step back and let Harry approach the man he was planning to marry.

Harry grinned down at him, running two smooth thumbs over the wet planes of Louis’ face in adoration.

“You ready, love?” He whispered, beguiled by Louis’ emotional breakdown. Louis nodded, taking Harry’s hand to continue on, but it was all for show. He was still whimpering and whining as they approached the arch, sniveling as new tears continued to blanket his cheeks.

He looked up through a blur of tears, begrudgingly admitting the seamless symmetry of the sight. They had chosen to keep things simple, choosing only two people to stand on each side of them as
they exchanged their vows. On Harry’s side stood Niall and Gemma, on Louis’, Nona and Zayn, all of whom looked near tears themselves as they watched Louis’ struggles.

In the middle was Liam, smiling brilliantly as he readied himself to recite the words he’d prepared, unrestrained by a cat in his arms.

Shakily, his breath hitching in his throat, Louis turned toward Harry, fixing his eyes on his periwinkle bowtie as he waited for Liam to greet the crowd with a grandiose, “Ladies and gentlemen! We are gathered here today....”

But his expectations were dashed as Liam began to speak, his voice warm and familial, poignant and intimate.

“I want to start by welcoming everyone, and addressing the fact that if you’re here, it’s because you share the same privilege I’ve been enjoying the last couple of years. And that’s to know this couple standing in front of me. To know Harry and Louis.”

Louis looked over to Liam at this, meeting warm, brown eyes that were already waiting for him, misted over with a vulnerability he seemed to have been saving for this moment.

“But no - hey now!” Louis scolded, also smiling. “There’s a reason I tell this story all the time. There’s a reason why I’m bringing it up now, and that’s because that night so perfectly summed up everything we are. That night in that fountain - that was the first time we’d seen each other after weeks of separation. After weeks of moping and whining, on my part at least, but never getting it through my head that all I needed to do was come back to you.

‘And we’d only known each other a few months, but already, I was slipping into this place where I just knew you were the answer. You were the person I was supposed to be running to. Calling at the end of the day. Fall asleep next to.
‘Jesus.’ Louis muttered, swallowing. ‘I can’t describe you, Harry. I can’t say anything that does you an ounce of justice, because you hung the stars. There’s this swirling galaxy of pretty things in your head, and I get a glimpse of it every time I look at you. Words aren’t good enough for you, love. They’re just not magnificent enough.

‘And that’s why we found ourselves on the lip of that fountain that night, because I had a long car ride and an early call time facing me, but I still couldn’t leave until I’d told you how I felt about you. That I was bananas for you.’ He said, his voice thick like syrup, Harry’s eyes glazed with affection. ‘That I was - that I was falling in love with you.’ Just like that, the tears were welling up again, strangling his voice. ‘And then you slipped and fell into the fountain.

‘Because why wouldn’t you? You’re you. Of course you fell in.’ He chuckled, struggling over a wayfaring breath. ‘And I jumped in after you, because I’m me. Because that’s what I vow to do for the rest of our lives. You once promised that you would always catch me, and I don’t think I can make that same promise. You just dance on too many roofs, sweetheart. I can never keep up.’ He smiled again, his eyes hanging on Harry’s as the snickering died down.

‘But I can promise, I can fully swear to you, that I’ll jump in after you, Harry. Even if I’m not sure if I’ll be able to pull the two of us back out, I’m always going to jump in after you.’

Harry was biting the inside of his cheek, his face strained with emotion as he watched Louis’ lips stop moving. The silence sank in, only broken up by intermittent sniffling as Louis’ words faded into the air.

“And now, Harry will read the words he prepared.” Liam said suddenly, his voice strong against the quavering sentiment hanging in the air. Harry nodded, and Louis bit his lip, bracing himself.

Oh this was going to be rough, wasn’t it?

Harry pulled the papers from his pocket, unfurling them with slow, controlled movements, and Louis felt the last of his self-control leave his body. He recognized them instantly as the pages that had been ripped out of his journal: the journal Harry had written over a year ago in rehab, then had given to Louis as a gift on their one year anniversary. It had been so long ago that Louis had quite nearly forgotten about those missing pages, giving up on Harry’s promise that he’d hear what was on them someday.

“Just - erm - some context.” Harry grumbled, turning to the crowd. “This was a letter I wrote for Louis quite some time ago.”

Jesus. Fucking. Christ. Harry had been holding onto these vows for over a year, and Louis was somehow supposed to maintain his composure in front of his friends and families?

He was going to die. This was how he was going to die.

“Dear Louis,” Harry started, his voice that velvety, familiar drawl. “Even now, as I write this, we’re separated by thousands of miles that feel so visceral, so apparent to me in everything I do. But, even now, even in this separation, I can’t help but smile as I write your name. It’s a name I’ve repeated possibly thousands of times in every register of my voice. It’s a name I’ve laughed, that I’ve yelled, that I’ve wept. I should be unaffected by it, surely, by now, and yet I’m still smiling.

‘Such a trite thought though, isn’t it? To simply say that your name makes me smile. It’s a line in a pop song. A strong opener in a Tinder conversation. Not a summation of how my thoughts falter over your name as I ink it across this blank page.
‘It holds nothing to the way my pulse is pitter pattering against my pen at this moment, remembering how effortlessly your hand folds into mine. The words pale to the warmth waxing over me right now, remembering the ways we’ve brushed together, fallen into each other’s arms as if we were never meant to separate.

‘I’m quite the sight, Louis, my knees knocking with coquettish nerves and my cheeks reddening as my brain and heart struggle for control of my bloodstream. If it’s not clear, my love, I’m struggling over my every word, because I’ve always believed so fiercely in my ability to define my feelings with a pen. To make sense of these emotions running rampant in my body.

‘But you’ve proven yourself indefinable, haven’t you, darling? Proven yourself above the words I’ve collected to try and make sense of my surroundings. How fitting, then, that you’ve left me senseless, remiss.

‘I remember in alarming detail when it hit me, cleaved me in the chest, that this was really happening. You were laughing, delighted about something as you so naturally are, and you turned your body into mine to hide your smile against the skin of my neck. It was such a small act, such a minute moment of intimacy, of your reliance on me, but it shocked me alive. It set me aflame, feeling your beautiful laugh against my collarbone.

‘And I thought, surely my heart had just grown wings and was trying desperately to escape. It attempted to flee, to rescue itself from this flood of rhapsodic delight that my every part was drowning in. Because, clearly, nobody could be this smitten and still able to hold breath in their lungs. Nobody could be this spellbound, this beguiled, this doused in bubbling, exuberant love and still manage to stand upright.

‘But I begged for my wandering heart to stay. Yes, corny, I know. But bare with me. I begged and begged to just be granted one more moment of this. I would give every ounce of the blood pumping through my veins to just spend another second in the bloom of this man - this man who had redefined my worship of the stars.

‘And in your arms, in your delicate embrace, I first reached out to feel your heartbeat. I felt your life beating against the pads of my fingers, and knew that you were fighting the same internal struggle as myself. That you were real, alive, and locked in this same fight as me. This fight to keep our hearts pumping as they careened out of control for each other.

‘I’ve known - I have always known - how willing I am to give myself to you. How eagerly I’d surrender any piece of me if you asked. This was something I’ve always been prepared to do, since that first kiss, our first press of lips. But it means something much more, now, that promise to give my life to you.

‘And that’s because you breathed life back into my tired body. You crashed into my labyrinthine thoughts and cleared out the weeds, pruned the blossoms I’d deserted to darkness. You wove the worth back into me, showed this hollow mass that I could live with myself; be happy about who I am. That I deserve to be happy with who I am.

‘And now, I humbly offer myself to you, Louis, to share our mirth, our melancholy, our moments just sipping tea and watching the clouds drift by, for the rest of our lives. I promise to love you fully, to respect you entirely, to stand in front of a world of onlookers and never consider letting go of your hand.”

His words faded into the tangible air, the aura so thick that it had been smothering Louis with his flowering emotions. He clenched his fist, bit his lip as hard as he could, but he just couldn’t shake it.
The next bout cascaded down his face, hot and unrelenting, and he knew there was no point in fighting it.

He was a helpless weeper. Might as well accept it and focus on somehow surviving his “I do.” The audience was still recovering from Harry’s prose as their foreheads met, leaning into each other as Louis sputtered and kneaded Harry’s hands in his.

“I do.” Harry whispered, a tiny laugh dancing off his lips.

“Please don’t cry, darling.”

“Marry me, yeah?”

“Yeah.” He agreed, finally sniffling as well as they both leaned back and faced Liam.

He warbled through some familiar words, none of which imprinted on Louis as he eagerly watched Harry, watching the elation blossoming in his eyes. His eyes fell to Harry’s lips, pink and lovelorn, as they formed over the two words.

“I do.” He said, fixing Louis with a cocky grin as his breath caught in his lungs.

Liam was speaking again, but it seemed ridiculously unnecessary. He couldn’t stand another second of this, another heartbeat of this overrated “fiancé” stuff. He needed to be married to Harry. He couldn’t withstand another blink of his eyes or inhale of his breath in which we wasn’t married to Harry.

The room went quiet and the words tumbled delicately from his mouth.

“I do.” He murmured, his smile bursting across his face so fiercely it threatened to knock him off his feet.

“By the power vested in me by the state of California, I pronounce you lawfully wedded husbands. Please, feel free to kiss the groom.”

The applause, though uproarious, paled in comparison to the kiss Louis planted on Harry. He cupped his husband’s face with hands that trembled under the weight of euphoria - pressed their lips flush with each wave of sparkling relief.

Miraculously, they’d done it. These two bumbling, clueless boys had finally done it. Their enamored laughter eventually parted their lips, both men sinking into each other as they turned to face the applause. Niall was already on his feet, shouting his jubilance at the newly minted husbands.

In a honeymoon befitting them, the two disappeared for months. They were enigmas of the press, having practically vanished into a cloud of affection. It was a chapter in their lives of ceaseless exploration, trekking to each corner of the globe as Harry made good on his promise to show Louis the world. Many times they had decided they’d seen enough, been away for too long, and they should really think about heading home this time. But their travels would always spark some new curiosity, would illuminate some new corner they hadn’t sunk their feet into yet.

Their media saturated lives were so distant as they marched through foreign cities, swam in crystal blue rivers, watched operas in languages the didn’t understand, stood in the shadows of icy blue glaciers, or kissed as sunset broke over the deck of their sail boat.

And at every turn, Harry was reading or writing. He was striking up conversations with strangers or picking up unfamiliar interests. He was, for once, just soaking up what was happening around him, unencumbered by stress or fear. Though it shouldn’t have been possible, Louis always felt it
sink deeper and deeper into him, how grateful and in love he was.

As contrived as it was, Louis truly did feel enriched when they finally came home. He’d led an effortless existence, delighting in something new everyday, all hand in hand with a man that made him fall more in love every time he caught his eye.

He was always grateful for that time they took for themselves, those years when they basked in each other’s company. When they fell into the domestic routines that only encompassed the two of them, still able to enjoy lazy weekends of sleeping in and lounging in each other’s limbs.

It felt familiar yet new at every turn, even as each year ticked by, their first, second, third wedding anniversaries. Every year they would pull out the pictures, would relive that day, would hound Zayn and Liam about when they were going to get around to getting hitched.

There was a very sudden and very momentous end to that time, the next chapter beginning with Harry’s frenzied shout of, “Up! Up! Run! Go!” at five in the morning. He jolted upright like a bullet, hardly noticing as Louis clenched his chest in shock. Still panting in panic, he watch Harry hurl himself out of bed.

“Harry! God!” Louis groaned, collapsing back into his pillow. “I thought we were going to die, or something. What time is it, even?”

“Time to go. That’s what time it is.”

“Harry!” Louis whined again, his exasperation reaching new heights. “Our flight’s not till nine. We have so much more time to sleep.”

“What if there was an accident on the interstate? Or what if - if - what if there’s weather, or-”

“Or what, Hazza?” Louis snapped. He sat up to fix Harry with the look he’d come to know as his ‘my husband is the most ridiculous human on this planet and I married him anyways’ glare. Harry glared back with his, ‘you made a vow to protect me and you are actually killing me right now’ glower, which had a tendency to win their silent arguments.

“Please, Louis!” He whimpered, his desperation finally breaking through and sending him racing toward Louis’ side of the bed. Without a moment of hesitation he lunged on Louis, grappling with his resistant body until he managed to sling him over his shoulder.

“We’ve talked about this!” Louis cried as he was dragged into the bathroom, Harry already getting the shower going and moving to pull Louis’ shirt off. “Hey - hey! I’ll take it from here. I’ve got it.” Louis grumbled, surrendering to a situation he knew he wasn’t going to be able to escape.

He stepped into the warm spray and the tiredness faded from his eyes, the burgeoning excitement quelling his grumpiness. By the time the sun was peaking over the dusty horizon, Louis was just as much a bundle of nerves as Harry.

Their meticulously packed bags were slung over every shoulder, hoping they were fully prepared. A private car was already waiting outside to take them to the airport, but, despite the flurry of the moment, Harry was suddenly struck dumb, lingering in the doorway.

“Harry? Come on.” Louis insisted, but Harry just stared back at Louis with wide eyes, stepping back further into the house. “What’s going on, baby?” Louis asked more gently, stepping forward to take his hand and ground him back on earth.

“It’s just … Louis.” He smiled, dreaminess overtaking him.
“What?”

“This is the last time we’re going to be in this house before we’re dads.”

And oh, you precious, beautiful thing.

As was so common with his ability to compute the things Harry said, Louis was beyond words. He was left with only the ability to kiss him, melting some calmness into him before they headed out the door, hand in hand.

They’d talked about it very early on, the prospect of raising kids. There was never any agreement about exactly how big they wanted their family to be, choosing instead to follow where life took them. Harry had been very passionate about the prospect of adopting, but, obviously when the time was right. They enjoyed their few years of wedded bliss before they felt ready for the next shift in their lives, landing them on a plane to Brazil to meet the newest member of their family.

It was a sweltering summer afternoon that Harry had one eye on Louis, one hand on the baby girl sleeping on his chest. He was lying on his back, sapped of energy by the August heat, watching the way Poppy’s tiny body was lifted up and down with each of his breaths. Her cocoa skin was dewy, her black curls shining.

But Harry’s focus had been ripped away from his daughter as Louis stalked further into the lounge with his hands behind his back.

“Louis.” Harry growled in warning, but he was too late. Louis suddenly pulled his phone out, snapping a frenzied series of pictures. “No, Louis!” Harry hissed, struggling to keep his voice down. He did everything in his power to keep his chest still and Poppy’s slumber undisturbed while shielding her with his hands from Louis’ onslaught of pictures.

“But Hazza! You look so cute!” Louis cooed.

“She is fresh from her bath! She is not ready for pictures! Give her some dignity, Louis!” Harry demanded, leaving Louis to flick through the pictures he’d manage to get. One was semi in focus, which was about the best he’d managed for a candid shot in the last few months. If Harry had proven one thing about the kind of father he was, it was fiercely protective.

Hopeless, as well. That would certainly be the other word to describe Harry’s parenting style. It had become apparent extremely early that Harry’s fragile temperament was not quite ideal for keeping another human being alive. The poor boy tried so hard, propelled by the best of intentions, but more often than not ended up passing the crying child off to Louis’ more practiced hands.

“I’m terrible. She hates me.” Harry would lament in paranoia.

“She doesn’t hate you, Harry.” Louis would huff, bouncing her up and down. “She’s a baby. She doesn’t hate anyone. Least of all you.”

Louis had once attempted to throw Harry into the deep end, leaving the two of them alone for an entire afternoon for the first time. He’d come home to Harry in a frenzy, Poppy strapped to his chest, bundled up in her tiny coat and wool hat.

“Louis! She’s burning up! We have to go to the doctor! She’s terribly ill!” He proclaimed the moment Louis stepped through the door.

“What?” Louis asked, trying to assess what exactly was happening.
“Our daughter is ill, Louis! Why aren’t you listening? She is on fire! Feel her forehead!”
“Well, yeah.” Louis sighed, pulling her hat off. “You have her in winter clothes and it’s ninety degrees outside.”

“The air conditioner kicked on. Babies lose most of their heat through their head, Louis.” Harry snapped, and Louis knew he still had a lot of work to do.

Hopeless was definitely the word to describe him, and in more way than one. Even as he became more competent in his parenting, he was still hopelessly in love with the little girl in their lives.

In one of their quieter moments they’d all snuggled in bed together, Poppy lying between her Pa and Daddy as they both reveled in the sight of her. Her tiny hand was curled around Harry’s index finger as she gurgled happily.

“I think I might love her more than I love you, Louis.” Harry had whispered suddenly, as if this were some covert secret. “Sorry.”

His infatuation never wavered as Poppy grew older, still melting into a puddle of goo and declaring her his baby whenever she did something that made him happy. Louis was guilty of it as well, enabling Harry’s constant gushing over how incredible their child was.

“Poppy’s the best, isn’t she?” Harry would ask as they watched her playing with her toys, doing nothing of particular acclaim.

“The best.” Louis would invariably agree.

The more sentient of a little person she became, the more she resented the constant coddling. They’d raised quite the problem when they realized, even at the age of four, their daughter was vastly smarter than the two of them.

Her maturity often outpaced her father’s as well, accepting the next addition to the family with grace and poise. Much to Louis’ frustration, Harry had somehow snuck a theme into the naming of their children when they brought home baby number two.

Louis had gone into the negotiation with a fervent disapproval of turning their children into a garden, and yet he came out the other end somehow accepting the exact name Harry wanted.

He got his revenge, however, when little Rosemary’s tiny lips couldn’t annunciate her own name, proclaiming herself, “Romy,” a name that she grew further into with every passing year. As her tomboyishness flourished more and more, she distanced herself as far as she could from the fanciful moniker of Rosemary, much to the distress of her daddy.

This seemed to be Romy’s primary objective in life, to further and further vex Harry with her indignation toward the world of femininity. Baring in mind that this was a man who wore glittery boots and women’s hats, the inability to dress up his daughter in cute outfits was a harrowing blow.

As Romy got older, Louis saw that she could understand Harry’s dissatisfaction; could see her daddy’s disappointment for just being herself. This was when Louis had a tough conversation with Harry, reminding him of how it felt when he was young and his father had pushed an alien identity on him. This shook Harry, and with some work, he was able to pivot and learn to support Romy for who she was.

But truly, Romy was Louis’ girl.
She was always ready for him when he got home, her excited smile giving him enough energy to head into the backyard for a kick about or some playful wrestling. She was a fast little thing, a bullet child when she really got moving. And she had an arm, able to loft balls further and further every time she played catch with Louis.

Romy, however, was not nearly as gracious when she learned that she would soon be getting a little sister. She’d been a stinker about it, actually giving in to Harry’s cuddles and affection to prove to herself she wasn’t about to be replaced.

Varying slightly from the flower theme, they welcomed yet another little girl, Willow, into their lives. In his retrospective nostalgia, Louis could pinpoint this as the next paradigm shift in their lives, things permanently changing once they were outnumbered by the kids.

Poppy was growing frighteningly older, already having been in school for a couple of years and bringing home homework that neither of her dads could understand. Romy was taking part in pretty much every sport offered at a peewee level, even on a boy’s American football team after Louis had threatened to bring down the entire league if they unjustly barred his daughter’s inclusion based on her gender.

On top of this, they now had another screaming bundle of helplessness living in the house. He could look back and see where the first cracks started to splinter, where he and Harry started to drift, so caught up in their children and their jobs that it became easy to ignore each other.

What added the final note of stressor was their talk of relocating. They’d always considered moving back to the UK, even when it was still just the two of them, and with the kids getting older, it was imperative that they soon landed somewhere permanently. Nona and Niall had made the move to London about a year earlier, leaving a gaping hole in both Harry and Louis’ lives where their neighbors had once been.

It was tempting to be closer to Niall and Nona, not to mention the two grandmothers who’d been cursing the vast distance between themselves and their grandkids. Louis’ major hang up was whether it meant losing Liam as his manager, something he hoped to avoid at all costs, but the subject stayed open when he learned that the perpetually unmarried Zayn and Liam were also considering heading back to the homeland. Zayn was focusing on making a shift from modeling to photography, and they’d thought that making the move would be a powerful start to the transition.

With all of this in mind, it was difficult to turn down the pilot script that found it’s way into Louis’ hands. He’d been thinking about making a switch to TV, preferring more structured hours without having to pick up and spend several months on a location shoot, away from his family. When he was offered a tantalizing role in an HBO series filming in London, it seemed that fate was telling them it was finally time to move on.

Zayn and Liam planned to follow along soon after, since it was easier for them to uproot without a gaggle of children to think of. This proved to be an aspect of life that Liam and Zayn chose to avoid, Zayn explaining it to Louis one night when he finally gathered up the nerve to ask him about it.

They’d been relaxing on the couch together, listening with amusement as Harry and Liam struggled to wrangle the unbridled energy of the girls in another room.

“We’ve gone back and forth on it. A lot, actually, but I think we’re pretty decided.” Zayn admitted. “I mean, we love kids. But I think we just love our lives right now more. We’re both still so dedicated to our jobs, and we - honestly it’s just this relief that we can do whatever we want with our lives. We can take trips together on a whim. We can see movies. Go to dinner. Not have to
worry about anyone else but ourselves. Is that terrible?"

As a shrill cry echoed through the house, Louis found himself shaking his head.

“No, I can’t say that it is.”

“And we’ve got your girls, you know? We can come over and spoil them, but then we get to go home without changing any diapers.”

The cries intensified, and Louis heard Harry’s exhausted voice calling out.

“Louis! I need another pair of hands!”

“Don’t know why we didn’t think of that.” Louis muttered, readying himself for whatever disaster had been enacted on the house this time.

Niall and Nona had taken a very similar course to Liam and Zayn, also remaining childless thus far. They were constantly sending everyone pictures of their exploits, documenting their continually glamorous lives. There was a touch of jealousy in Louis, honestly, watching the lives that his friends had.

By no means did he regret the family he and Harry were raising together; the girls were the center of his world. But any honest parent had to admit that it wasn’t all sunshine and rainbow kisses. It was frustration, it was work, it was watching something slipping away between himself and his husband under waves of exhaustion and frustration.

It was just too easy for them to grow apart, becoming passing ships in the night under the weight of their responsibilities. Louis saw it happening, felt the disappointment and fear clawing at his heart, but the complacency became too comfortable.

The move proved to be such an all encompassing whirlwind that he didn’t have a spare second to worry over the state of his relationship. He was swept up in his new job, on easing the children into the transition, and Harry had enthusiastically thrown himself back into the recording studio to work on a solo project.

Louis had noted it in the corner of his eye, feeling a familiar hint of uneasiness at the people Harry was surrounding himself with. There was irresponsibility seeping back in, a look in his eye and an unabashed quality that Louis hadn’t seen before Harry’s stint in rehab. He was avoiding time at home in larger increments, the suspicion in Louis hardening into something he couldn’t quite swallow every morning Harry didn’t give him a kiss on the cheek before he left for work.

He felt every part of his body plummet in a way he’d forgotten was possible the night Harry dragged himself into their bedroom, his steps stumbling and unfocused, his breath rank with alcohol. Louis had snapped half, screaming at the pitiful pile his husband had made of himself on the floor, somewhere in the back of his mind thinking that he should get control of himself before he woke up the kids.

But this dark, forbidden fear was far beyond his control, because he could still remember the terror that had laced him when he sat by Harry’s hospital bed, watching his bloodshot eyes listlessly blink after his overdose. That had been years ago, when they were still so young; before they’d built up this family together.

He bellowed his frustrations and wept like a much younger man, pleading with Harry until he finally saw that light flick on. It had thawed a frost that had settled in over the last couple of years, seeing that familiar yearning in Harry’s eyes to do the right thing; to fight for Louis.
His infuriated exterior had crack, falling to the floor to taking Harry’s languid body in his arms and brush his tears away. It was all too reminiscent of their past, a time when they made mistakes and every decision they made was life or death.

But the stakes hadn’t been as high back then. They no longer had the luxury of room for mistakes. “It’s okay, my love.” Louis whispered. “We knew - that this might happen. Even back then. This happens. We’re going to take care of it.”

“I have to go back, don’t I?” Harry whimpered.

“Yeah. Yeah you do. Because you have little girls to think of now, Harry. You’ve got daughters who love their daddy, and you have to take care of them.”

Their entire world had flipped itself on it’s head in less than twenty four hours, the trivial day to day mundanities that had been for some reason so important a day earlier were put into perspective as Harry made his quick exit. His shoulders trembled as he kissed each of the girls, intensity throttling him by the spine with each of their questions about where he was going.

His strong face was quivering around the edges, Louis knew, as he followed Harry down the driveway toward the private car waiting for him. They hesitated as Harry sat down, Louis leaning down into the open car to subdue him with a deep kiss.

He cradled Harry’s head, wishing there was some way he could tangle his fingers in his unruly curls and keep him home. There were so many things he wished he could say, something he could whisper to ease the tension and shame fluxing through Harry. Louis just wanted to soothe him, remind him that things were going to be okay, but the words faltered somewhere in his throat.

“Make me proud?” He asked, his hollow voice pathetically hopeful.

“Yeah.” Harry murmured, his entire face furrowing in despair. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He whispered, the endearment stinging where it landed in Louis’ chest as he realized how long it had been since they’d exchanged those words.

As much as he willed it not to happen, for some force to intervene and restore balance, the car took Harry away, leaving Louis alone for the second time in their relationship. It was startlingly quiet when he went back into the house, making him self a cup of tea because he couldn’t fathom what he was supposed to do at that second. He didn’t know what to do with his hands, whether he should sit or stand. His mind whirred over the last time this had happened, how he’d collapsed into his bed without any intention of sleeping. How he’d stewed in his depression, let it rule over him.

But he didn’t have that option this time. Never was this more apparent as he pulled Poppy, Romy, and Willow into the lounge together to explain that they weren’t going to see their daddy for awhile. He had to make these sweet, attentive kids understand that their daddy was very sick, but he was going to be alright. They just had to be strong for him, to make time to call him on the phone or write to him.

Willow was still a stuttering baby, having no idea what Louis was saying. Romy was young enough that she took Louis’ words at face value, asking if she could get daddy a get well card. Poppy, their ever astute firstborn, seemed to understand more of what was happening than Louis would have hoped, becoming subtly aware of the more precarious lives her dads lived than her friend’s parents.

His weeks away were frail, colorless, with Louis struggling to maintain a strong face as he kept the
cogs of the family moving, despite the fact that he cried himself into a restless sleep most nights. He felt wasteful, ungrateful, as he realized how heavily entrenched his love still was for Harry. How had he not reminded Harry of this every single day of their lives? When the night terrors made their bleak return, Louis always managed to stumble his way into the baby’s room, wrapping Willow up in his arms until the fear slowly ebbed away.

Harry’s returned was a whirlwind of triumph, his jubilance acting like a shot of adrenaline in Louis as he was finally back into his husband’s arms. Harry was all smiles and kisses with his daughters, lofting them into the air with laughter. But Poppy remained subdued, somehow frightened by this new quality she’d discovered about her father. Louis understood it, knowing her feeble world had been rocked at the proof that her larger than life father was, after all, just a fallible mortal. Their previously precocious, bright beacon of a daughter had darkened, and Harry noticed it immediately.

It was tough when they finally settled on the decision, having hoped to wait a few years before they had to introduce Poppy to this particular side of their parents’ history. They knew that the information was out there, ready to one day be lofted onto their daughters. It had always been a given that they’d have to find a time to talk to each of the kids before they learned about that dramatic saga for themselves.

The task fell to Harry, knowing that he’d find a way to be soft. Louis was watching the closed bedroom door through his fingers, anxious as their talk stretched the length of one hour, then two.

All at once they burst out, faces raw but warm, hands brushing together with a new, shared closeness. Harry wouldn’t indulge Louis in his relentless questions about how it had gone, only sharing with him the detail that, “Our daughter is really incredible.”

The relapse had hit a reset switch in their family, refocusing Harry and Louis on what parts of their lives truly mattered. It made them sappy things yet again, indulging in the little affections of their younger selves. Harry would drop in on set and Louis would surprise Harry in the studio just to say hello and give him a quick kiss. They fell back into their old habits of saturating each other in attention, feeling the need to be touching each other in some way whenever they were close in proximity.

Even on the nights that they fought, when the household tensions got the better of them, even when Louis was banished to sleep on the couch because Harry didn’t want to look at him, they still managed to prove that they were one of those couples that would never grow tired of being smitten with each other.

It was a story that Poppy went on to tell when she grew older, describing what kind of life she had with her dads. It had been late at night as she curled up in the lounge, watching the telly. Louis had marched in, obviously mussed with frustration, and had muttered something about taking the remote from her as he fell onto the couch.

He had fallen asleep quickly, and apparently, Poppy had looked like she was asleep as well given what happened next.

Harry, draped in a blanket and head hanging in feeble shame tip toed into the lounge, leaning over Louis’ sleeping body.

“Lou?” He whispered, gently shaking him awake. Louis looked around for a moment, regaining his senses as Harry sunk down to his knees beside him. “Hi.”

“Hi, baby.” Louis sighed.
“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

They’d hung in the warm, midnight silence for a moment before Louis scooted back, making room for Harry to squeeze in beside him on the couch.

She didn’t know if anything followed this, as she had quickly run to her room in disgust at the display of affection between her parents.

Things managed to settle back in over time, back into their domestic dream as the kids continued to learn and grow. Liam had weaseled himself into a coaching position on a junior girls’ rugby team so that he could groom his star pupil, Romy. She was a destroyer on the field, decimating anyone who had even the notion of getting in her way. Despite his early trepidation, Harry had joined Louis as Romy’s most enthusiastic cheerleaders. He’d been worried at first about her safety when rugby ended up as the sport she fixated on, but Louis reminded Harry that she was in good hands with coach Payne. He had, after all, minored in Sports Medicine at Uni.

Poppy was rapidly approaching adolescence, a fact that Harry and Louis claimed with every fiber of their being they were handling with grace.

Their stumbling attempts to connect with her often ended with one of them bursting into her bedroom while friends were visiting and boisterously asking, “So what’s up, girls? Talking about boys? Aren’t they the worst? Let’s talk about how disgusting boys are!”

While, more often than not, she was typically doing homework with her friends, the constant interruptions for her parents were curdling her insides with embarrassment. Things hit a boiling point after a bungled sleep over when Harry and Louis chose to join in with karaoke, performing a raucous duet of Miley Cyrus’ “Living in the USA.” (and yes, they were completely oblivious to the fact that Miley Cyrus was in her early forties and was no longer en vogue amongst the youth)

This had ended with emergency reinforcements being summoned in the form of aunt Nona, the only voice of feminine reason in Harry and Louis’ war against their daughter’s reputation amongst her friends.

Nona had ordered them away, promising to give them a mental lashing when it was their turn, before sitting Poppy down to try and explain what was happening.

“You see, sweetheart…” She began. “Your dads are convinced that they are teenage girls. They think that they’re ‘cool dads.’ Which, you and I both know, they’re not. For the most part, they’re really, really great dads, but they’re so, so embarrassing, Poppy. They make sport of it. They always have. This is your burden to bare.”

Nona had recently been added to the ranks of motherhood after she and Niall had taken a sudden life change. They could pinpoint everything back to Willow, as the blonde little snowflake started turning into her own person. In every way Romy was Louis’ girl, Willow was Harry’s. She was a gentle thing, reveling in flowers and anything that sparkled. Johanna had brought their attention to it first, noting that she reminded her of Harry at that age.

Harry had responded with a new level of protectiveness, worried about how the harsh world was going to break down his little treasure if he didn’t do everything in his power to shield her. These fears were intensified when Willow first started preschool, and Louis and Harry noticed a particular fascination Willow had with one of her classmates; one of her female classmates.
She was still too young for Harry and Louis to settle on any labels, but it scared Harry immensely about what the world was going to exact on his daughter if she was LGBT, given his own dark history with coming to acceptance with his identity. It gave Harry a renewed interest in LGBT youth, leading him to start a foundation with the other members of Status Solo, particularly focusing on youth and homelessness.

Niall had met Harry’s enthusiasm over the foundation with equal vigor, frequenting fundraisers and lending help with more hands on work. It had been a natural progression that lead Nona and Niall to open their home to their first foster child. The second came soon after, and things truly snowballed from there. They’d spent ten years proving they were completely content with just the two of them, only for their lives to be suddenly inundated with children. Fostering occasionally lead to adoption, and their family seemed to balloon overnight, surpassing the size of Harry and Louis’ team of girls in a few years.

Harry was able to redeem himself in Poppy’s eyes in her twelfth year when the first horseman of the puberty apocalypse reared its ugly face. She had called Louis while he was on set in a frenzy that the period had finally begun.

Louis was blindsided by it, having told himself he was ready for this moment, even though he was clearly emotionally unprepared. He stuttered something about going to the school nurse and asking her for help, but it turned out the true crisis was in what had happened to her jeans.

Harry was home from work that day so Louis sent him on the mission, assuming he’d just drop by the school to drop off some new trousers. What Louis didn’t know, was that Harry had been waiting for this exact moment to secure his place in parent superstardom.

He brought her some new jeans along with some other necessities; some pads for her locker and painkillers. But he didn’t stop there, bringing her flowers and enough chocolate for her to drown herself in. Claiming that this was a day to celebrate how amazing she was, Harry signed her out of school and took her shopping, to the movies, and out for ice cream.

They had a bevy of self esteem talks, Harry making her understand how special she was and how beautiful of a journey it was to become a young woman. Once they got home, Harry prepared an extravagant dinner after bundling her up on the couch with pillows and a heating pad for the cramps settling in.

Louis had noticed the change between them immediately, that they had just clicked into this new level of understanding. Suddenly, Harry was appreciated counsel to all of her friend troubles, her boy dilemma’s, and her school concerns.

“When did this happen?” Louis asked one night as they climbed into bed together.

“What?”

“When did you become a better parent than me?” He asked bluntly, earning a laugh from Harry. He pulled Louis over to him, trying to cuddle away his worries. “Remember when you were rubbish with her? She loved me so much more when she was a baby.”

“She still loves you, Louis.” Harry maintained, kissing his beleaguered husband.

Louis was still a sucker for the babies, even as his were getting older. There had been a shift early on when Poppy was still young that had continued with each of their daughters, whenever Louis’ anxiety would make a reappearance. If a nightmare clawed him awake at night, he used to turn over and nuzzle himself into Harry until the fear waned. But after they adopted Poppy, he always...
found himself slipping out of bed, snuggling one of the girls until his heart settled down.

He had been finding himself rather bereft of babies, however, when the first conversations started up about what it would mean to explore a surrogacy. As with all other things, it had been Harry’s idea. Louis had been waiting for something from Harry along these lines, understanding that it was just himself and Gemma on his side of the family, and that he would eventually feel the evolutionary need to procreate.

But he was surprised, however, when Harry revealed that he’d been hoping that Louis would be the biological father.

“I’ve always just really wanted a little version of you running around.” He explained, his eyes glazed over with dreaminess. “I’d really love that.”

Louis found himself hoping against hope that, despite Harry’s wishes, he hadn’t just created a little carbon copy of himself when James came into the world. He’d finally put his foot down, bringing an end to the flora theme amongst the children. Little James Styles Tomlinson, a perfectly respectable name for a poor boy born into a family of older sisters to torture him.

James was still a tiny thing, only a few weeks old when Louis got the news from Zayn that he’d long since decided he would never hear.

“So, er,” Zayn said over the phone. “Liam and I have decided to get married.”

“Fucking finally, Zayn!” Louis exclaimed, putting two practiced hands over James’ ears at the obscenity. Yeah, he was a pro at this parenting thing. “At last, we’re going to have an answer to this quandary I posed to you fifteen years ago.”

“What?”

“How can I possibly be a best man for both of you?”

Opting for something simple and casual, Liam argued against the inherent need for a best man, which irked Louis to no end. It was an intimate affair at their house, gathering just their closest friends and families to gather around the lounge as they exchanged brief vows. It was a night of food, kids in cute dresses, and embarrassing dancing from all of the parents in the room.

Louis wouldn’t take the snub of losing his best man status lying down, which lead to him hoisting himself onto a table to make a bombastic speech encompassing the length of Zayn and Liam’s relationship. Rather begrudgingly, even Liam found himself touched by Louis’ words, while his children blanched with horror at his antics, a familiar feeling for them.

“Pa, can I hold the baby?” Poppy asked later that night, making grabby hands.

“Yes, actually, you can.” He said brightly as he recognized the song now tumbling out of the stereo.

Oh don’t you dare hold back
Just keep your eyes on me,
I said ‘You’re holding back’
She said ‘Shut up and dance with me!’
Harry and Louis spun to face each other with jubilant grins, the nostalgia rolling over them.

“This is the very first song your Pa and I ever danced to.” Harry said proudly, his hand slipping into Louis’ with a familiar grip.

“Love at first sight.” Louis cooed, leaning in to kiss him.

Poppy made a sound of disgust, rolling her eyes as the two men who claimed to be her parents threw themselves enthusiastically onto the makeshift dance floor. They flailed wildly and unabashedly, the memories of their first meeting flooding in and inspiring their frenzy of gesticulating limbs.

It was still so clear to Louis, those images of Harry jumping and swaying under the canopy of swirling lights, clutching Louis’ with warm hands on that night when they’d still been strangers, yet somehow were already lost in each other. He could still remember that momentum that had fluxed through him, the abandon that had engulfed his entire body as he danced with a man who made Louis feel safe for the first moment in years; made him feel free to dance and laugh and enjoy the simple act of being alive.

Swept up in the romance of it all, their request lead to Ben E King’s “Stand By Me” playing through the lounge. It was always their go-to song, swaying slowly together with Louis’ forehead pressed to Harry’s shoulder.

With his eyes delicately fluttering shut, he could almost pretend they were back in France, ensconced in a burgeoning, clandestine relationship. Louis could practically smell the musk of the restaurant, could still feel the way the amber light reflected the deep-seated romance simmering in his chest.

Slowly he opened his eyes, catching a glimpse of his children flitting around on the edges of the room; Willow trying in vain to coax an unwilling Romy onto the dance floor. Poppy finally came to her rescue, handing James off to Zayn before she twirled her delighted sister into the fray.

Waxed with gentle affection, Louis lifted his head from Harry’s shoulder to meet his eyes, sinking comfortably into his gaze.

“You alright?” Harry asked in his deep, characteristic lilt.

“Mhmm.” Louis said with a nod of his head. “Just love you.”

“Love you, too.” Harry muttered through a love-laced smile.

He pulled Louis in again, encapsulating him in warmth as they slowly swayed to he warbling tune.

_Darling, darling, stand by me_  
_Oh, stand by me_  
_Oh stand, stand by me_

Louis felt the deep rumble into Harry’s chest before he heard his voice join the dulcet notes. His
voice wafted down to meet Louis’ ear and Louis pressed himself in further, still so unable to feel physically close enough to Harry. The laws of physics had never done the two of them justice. And so he just held him, held onto his curly headed boy with eyes like a world of their own and a mind like a field of flowers. Louis held snugly onto Harry, willing himself not to burst into a sea of swirling stars.

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