"Did you see her cuts? They were all really shallow. I bet they didn’t even bleed.” His face was filled with a strange vindictive malice that was incredibly out of place not only in the somber atmosphere filling the makeshift room but also on the normally happy and compassionate Niall that everyone knew and loved.

Liam gasped slightly. “Niall!” he exclaimed, scandalized at the callousness of his best friend. “Why would you say that?”

“It’s true,” he insisted, voice hard and gaze fixed challengingly on Liam, his normally soft baby blue eyes turned to cold and relentless steel.

“But even if the cuts are shallow, she’s still cutting herself. She’s hurting herself on purpose. That’s really serious, and really scary.”

“Not if the fucking cuts don’t bleed it isn’t,” Niall sneered.

Or the one where the boys encounter a fan who engages in self harm, and Niall's response is catastrophic.

PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS A REPOST! IT IS NOT PLAGIARIZED! It is exactly the same as my original story Life on the Borderline EXCEPT that there are no accents/phonetics in
this version. This is for the people who complained about my use of dialects/accents in the original.

Notes

In case you didn't read the summary, THIS IS A REPOST! IT IS NOT PLAGIARIZED! I am reposting/rewriting this story because a lot of people complained about my use of accents and dialects and phonetics in the original version. This version is exactly the same EXCEPT for the fact that I have no phonetics and accents depicted in the writing. I am doing this because, while I still firmly believe that phonetics add to the authenticity of a story, I recognize that not all people are auditory learners like myself and thus might struggle to read/understand the dialogue. I am going to continue updating both versions of this story because I personally enjoy writing phonetically but I understand that you may not like reading it. Basically, this is my translation fic for the dialogue in the original version.

I am so incredibly serious when I say DO NOT READ THIS IF YOU MIGHT BE TRIGGERED. I don't care who you are, if reading this might cause you any harm, then I am begging you not to. I know that there are plenty of you who will read this anyways with the purpose of triggering yourself, and for those people, I am begging you not to. It's not worth it, and I can preemptively say that it's just fan fiction, real life is better anyways, you're not missing anything crucial to your life, and I'd much rather you be safe and happy having not read my writing than miserable and in a dangerous place having read it.

To those of you who do read this, do not fool yourselves into thinking that the issues I am discussing are at all romantic. Do not think that self harm and mental illness are merely plot-lines to be used to romanticize the suffering of characters and add drama to a plot. Because they are not. They are not something that you wish upon anyone, real or fictitious, and they are not something that you desire to have for 'attention.' Do not read this purely for the angst, and then go comfortably off thinking that this was a good story line. This is not beautiful, this is not fantasy, and this is not simply a plot-line.

I wrote this for me and only me, and have posted it for rather selfish reasons (wanting feedback on my writing, and validation that there are other people who feel this way), but I also am posting this in the faint hopes that it will raise awareness and make people realize that mental illness is not beautiful or whatever. And I hope that someone will be able to read this and feel less alone, because you are not alone; there is incredible stigma against mental illness, but know that just because it is only ever mentioned when in reference to death and violence, does not mean it is something to be ashamed of. The only difference between mental illness and cancer is that no one blames you for getting cancer. To those of you suffering from, or know someone with, mental illness, do not feel ashamed. Hold your head up high. Do not blame yourself. Do not feel alone. Stay strong. Talk to someone, anyone. Get the help you need and the help you deserve.

Now that the serious and discouragingly depressing warnings are out of the way (assuming that a few of you are still reading this at this point (thank you to all of you lovely troopers out there, I appreciate you all very much)), I will get to the point and apologize in advance for my atrocious use of dialects. I tried very hard to make this accurate (as accurate as fan fiction can be, that is) and I think that writing in accents does that. However that does not mean that I did it correctly, or legibly. PLEASE TELL ME IF THIS IS TOO HARD TO
UNDERSTAND OR IF I GOT IT WRONG; I WANT TO FIX IT, I just might need a bit of help. Also, call me out on grammar errors, that stuff is my life (nah but seriously, if you have corrections/suggestions/errors please tell me).

Okay, I'm done. Go ahead and read...

See the end of the work for more notes.

- A translation of Life on the Borderline by LiaisInLove
“Oh my god! I love you guys so much!” The shriek rose above the cacophony, coming from a tall brunette girl practically throwing herself across the table in her enthusiasm. “You have no idea how much I love you!” she wailed, her voice on its ascent to reaching a decibel that only bats could hear.

Remarkably, she was scarcely any different from the thousands of other screaming girls. But what first truly caught Liam’s attention were her arms, which had shot out in an attempt to hug him as he signed yet another of their cd’s; they were skinny and rather pale, not an uncommon trait, but they were covered in a myriad of thin red and pink lines; cuts and scars ran like railroads from her wrists up her arms, disappearing beneath a tight-fitting t-shirt.

His eyes widened. He shook his head slightly, as if trying to clear the foggy mirage brought on by the ten thousand times he’d written and re-written his name in three hours and, of course, the severe sleep deprivation. Yet, even after blinking, the perturbing image did not fade.

In a bit of a daze, Liam paused in his signing, causing there to be a hold-up in the line, the items that he was supposed to pass on to Harry withheld temporarily, which in turn caused a break in the rest of the boy’s exhaustingly synchronized pattern of smile, ‘hello, love,’ sign, slide left, grab from the right, repeat. Harry, anticipating the flow of paraphernalia, looked towards Liam, bemused. Why was Liam, efficient, responsible, on task Liam, holding them up and gaping like a goldfish out of water?

He followed Liam’s eyesight to the tall and scantily clad teenage girl, at first failing to notice anything out of the norm. Then, scrunching his nose in confusion as he distinguished the crisscrossed tracks snaking up her arms.

Harry, meticulous process temporarily forgotten, turned to Louis, nudging him slightly. He leaned in to Louis’ ear, raising a hand to both direct his voice and block anyone from seeing what he says, and whispers, “Look at the girl in front of Liam. Look at her arms; is that what I think it is?”

Obeying Harry’s request, Louis abandoned his signatures and stared shrewdly and, in typical Louis Tomlinson style, completely unsurreptitiously at their fan. “Yep,” he says definitively, and then elbows Zayn, hard—Louis is many things, but tactful certainly is not one of them—relaying the information.

Zayn stares at Louis, before he proceeds to look where he was directed to, his brow furrowing at the sight.

By this time, it’s been a solid twenty seconds since Liam has signed anything, and the cd’s are building up, and the fans are screaming, and the massive line has stalled momentarily, and Paul ushers the girl along to appease the roaring crowd who all want their turn, beckoning at the boys to keep signing, lest they be trampled by a hoard of teenage girls, effectively breaking the spell.

As the girl moves down the table, unaware of the commotion she’s caused, the boys resume their signing, not quite able to put her and her scars out of their minds.

When she reaches Niall at the end of the table—as the sole leftie of the band, it makes the most sense that Niall be on the left-most side, although he normally disregards this—he smiles at her, his lips drawn, his eye’s narrowed, and somewhat guarded. A moment later she is replaced by another squealing girl, and the pattern resumes.
Smile, ‘hello, love,’ sign, slide left, grab from the right, repeat. Smile, ‘hello, love,’ sign, slide left, grab from the right, repeat.

Hours later, when the boys were settled down in the lounge area of their bus, Harry broached the subject they had been forced to hastily abandon earlier. “Ehhmmm….so…you know that girl…the one with…you know….with the…you know…on her arms…” he trailed off.

Louis, as Harry’s closest mate, surmised what he was rambling around, and got straight to the point. “Ya, the one who cuts herself. That’s awful innit,” he supplied. Harry nodded fervently whilst Zayn hummed his agreement and Liam grew forlorn, his face set in gloomy thought. Niall, however, sat in stony silence with his arms crossed and his back stiff, no longer lounging easily on the cushioned armchair, he was now rigid; tensed and ready to either fight or flee. He glared wordlessly at the floor.

“It’s just, really awful that someone would do that to themselves, you know. Like, I can’t believe someone would be so messed up to do that…” Liam trailed off, rubbing his forearm, fingers worrying over the four bolded arrows: his base, where he could center his four brothers, marking them upon his skin where he would never lose or overlook them. His fingers touching the ink, seeking reassurance that his boys were all safe and accounted for, protected from the evil that had poisoned the girl from earlier.

Zayn placed a calming hand upon Liam’s shoulder, leaning across the couch to ensure that Liam knew his boys were safe, and loved him back. “Yeah, ‘tis,” he murmured, accent thick and immeasurably soothing, as it gets when he is alone or around his friends, no longer needing to keep his words proper and legible (him being worn out from the especially long day did not help, making his Yorkshire accent ever more prominent, and ever more difficult to understand). “I expect she’s going through a really hard time and all. I just, like, hope she gets, like, the help that she needs, you know?”

Liam’s head bobs fervently. “Do you think she’ll be okay?” Harry asks tentatively after a moments pause.

Louis sighs, “I hope so Haz.” He reaches to his left, pulling Harry towards him, whilst gently patting Liam, who’s on Harry’s other side. “But self harm is a really scary thing. She might be being abused, and she’s probably depressed too.” He slides his right hand wearily through his hair, making it stick up temporarily. “But I hope she’ll be okay.” He looked years older at that moment. Without his usually present joking and rather sassy defenses up, he barely resembled the fun-loving prankster everyone had fallen in love with. He looked like a tired old man rather than the idiot schoolboy he usually was—though, at twenty, it is quite arguable that he should look and act considerably less like a child and more like an adult, to which he protests in his normal way by saying “fuck off,” to all the critics and continuing to act however he pleased, whether that be like an immature teenager, or a sarcastic ball of snark and sass. He sighed again, and the boys lapsed once more into silence.

After a moment, Liam broke the quiet; “But, like, why? I mean, I understand that she probably has it really touch, but why would she—or anyone really—even cut themselves? It can’t feel good, and it’s really dangerous? D’you think she’s trying to kill herself?” He asked, worry escalating.

“Maybe, but I think, like, self harm’s different from suicide.” Zayn answers, face twisted in thought. “But I think is suppose to be a release or sommat. Like, your brain gives off endorphins and stuff when you’re in pain, so it probably does that when you hurt yourself. It might make you feel better for a bit ‘cause of that, right?” He was merely thinking out loud, dwelling upon his past knowledge from biology, but that was a rather long time ago, so he wasn’t sure if his speculations
were even close to the truth or not.

Shuddering slightly, Harry said, “That’s awfully…ironic…right? No, really,” he insisted when no one said anything, “If putting,” his ‘posh’ southern side shining through as he emphasized the ‘t’ and the full ‘ing,’ opposite of Louis and Zayn especially, who, whenever reverting back to their strongest accents, always left off the ‘g’ and blended and blurred the ‘t’s’, “yourself in pain makes you feel better, that’s really…ironic…and sad.” He shuddered a second time, causing Zayn to lean past Liam to gently card his fingers through Harry’s wild curls—he had just showered, and the humidity, alongside letting them air-dry, caused his normally styled hair (the boys, aka Louis, never failed to make a pun about this) to become less of swooping waves ending in curls, and more a ridiculous mass of bushy curls—a look that would be ridiculous on others but which he, of course, managed to pull off seamlessly. Harry, in a rather cat-like manner, allowed his eyes to drift shut, leaning into Zayn’s touch.

Normally, Louis would have made a pussy (cat of course, get your mind out of the gutters you pervs!) joke, but refrained. He instead settled for pulling his best mate closer to his chest. “I really hope she’ll be okay,” he repeated.

Silence filled the make-shift room for a moment, the only sound coming from the rumbling of the bus, and each of their breaths slowly inhaling and exhaling, remarkably healthy and alive. “Maybe our songs make her feel better. She was smiling, right?” Harry asks, his voice quiet and husky.

“She was.” Liam confirms. “The whole time.” After a short pause he adds, “But to be fair, everyone there was smiling, even the crying ones,” the momentarily hopeful look slowly sliding off his face to be replaced by his former gloom. “I just can’t believe she hurts herself. She’s only a kid. Probably not even seventeen. She’s just a kid, and she has to go through so much!” Overwhelmed, he buried his face in Zayn’s chest.

Zayn may not look it, but he holds the position of comforting mother in the band. Liam’s nickname given to him by the fans may be Daddy Direction, and he may or may not live up to it—what, someone has to keep the boys in line and look out for them; they’d all manage to kill themselves or someone else otherwise—but his ‘sensibility’ rests mainly in preventing and often times fixing problems as opposed to doling out comfort. And Louis, as the oldest, takes his role as big brother seriously, though he denies it, protects his brothers, just as he does his sisters; always quick to pick up on distress and, in his ever joking and self-deprecating manner, dole out compliments and jokes to lighten the mood. He spots worry and anxiety and homesickness and sadness like a hawk and swoops in with a laugh and a joke and a prod and the showering of compliments that may seem like he’s taking the piss to the untrained eye, but in actuality are him being overly sappy and honest to cheer up whoever it is who has been spotted on his radar. But he is not a lovey-dovey, hold you when you’re crying, softly sing a lullaby to ease you to sleep, stroke your hair, mummer sweet words in your ear, kiss you on the forehead, calm you down with gentle soothing and a his steady heartbeat, lie with you until all your tears have dried up and then some, let you bury your head in his neck or chest to escape the cruelties of the world never once minding the tearstains and snot that soak his shirt, cuddle you tight to his chest to make the pain go away, envelop you in a hug that makes even the darkest and strongest storm become nothing more than a little wind and rain, shelter you from your demons, tell you that he loves you with the utmost sincerity in front of thousands of screaming fans, his friends, family, disapproving critics and haters, or on camera for the whole world to see just the same as he does when it is just the two of you curled up on a couch or lying side by side in bed. That’s all Zayn. Harry will cry with you, and try to make you smile, while offering a shoulder to cry on and an ear to vent to. Niall will hug you and listen to your worries and fears, compassionate and empathetic, lifting the burden off of your shoulders and onto his own skinny ones without you knowing, never once complaining or commenting about the heavy weight bearing down upon his slight frame. Liam will make your
problems his own and not rest until he can fix them; he will worry and worry and problem solve and agonize over how to fix it all until he can find a solution. And Louis will make you laugh and forget about your pain, all the while deflecting any additional heartache and hurt and boosting your confidence through corny jokes and incessant compliments that seem like jokes but are entirely truthful. But Zayn, Zayn is a comforting hand, a chest where you can lay your weary head to rest, a heart-felt ‘I love you,’ a peaceful and steady heartbeat grounding you, reassuring you that you are loved, you are alive, you will be okay, and that he will be there for you every step of the way, no matter what.

Tenderly stroking Liam’s short hair, Zayn rests his chin atop Liam’s head, slotting their bodies together in the kind of intimacy that only Zayn can pull off without being sappy or romantic. “I know. But she’ll be okay. We made her smile. We can make her and all of our fans smile, and maybe forget about the bad things for a while, and that’s all we can really ask for, yeah.” His chest vibrates as he speaks. Liam nods his head slightly, not yet ready to pull back from Zayn’s warmth to face the grim reality that there are people in the world with problems that cannot be fixed mealy with a song and a cheeky smile.

“She’s just a kid,” he whispers into Zayn’s cotton shirt.

“I know.”

The others, as is always the case when Zayn slips into, as Louis likes to dub, ‘Mama Bear Mode,’ feel like they should not be intruding on such an intimate and tender moment. But before they have time to feel like they ought to look away, the moment is over.

Yet Harry is not quite ready to drop the subject, thoughts needing to be spoken still whirling around in his head. “I could never…do that. Like…take a razor…and…hurt myself on purpose. I wonder what makes people do that. It has to be really bad.” He still can’t quite find the words to express his thoughts so he continues to ramble on, Louis’ arm still wrapped around his shoulders. “People who…cut…do you think they know it’s dangerous? They have to…right…?” He looked at Louis out of habit—Louis always has the answers after all.

“Probably, Haz. It’s pretty obvious that it’s dangerous; I mean, with all of the blood loss, people must know they could go too deep and bleed too much and die.”

Liam rejoins the conversation, “Yea, I think people like that know what they’re doing is bad, but they don’t know what to do instead.”

“It’s an addiction, ‘cause, like, the endorphins released are supposed to make you feel better, kinda like how drugs make you brain release chemicals that make you happy, and so you do anything to get that high again. So even though they know it’s bad, and probably want to stop, they just keep doing it; they can’t stop. It’s a disease. It’s proper scary.”

The boys were all pondering what had just been said, when they heard a snort. Louis looked up to see Niall sitting atop the lone armchair rolling his eyes and shaking his head. “What?” Louis asked rather harshly.

Niall gave a sort of snort-scoff type thing, and rolled his eyes a second time. “You’re all making it seem like it’s a big deal. Did you see her cuts? They were all really shallow. I bet they didn’t even bleed.” His face was filled with a strange vindictive malice that was incredibly out of place not only in the somber atmosphere filling the makeshift room but also on the normally happy and compassionate Niall that everyone knew and loved.

Liam gasped slightly. “Niall!” he exclaimed, scandalized at the callousness of his best friend.
“Why would you say that?”

“It’s true,” he insisted, voice hard and gaze fixed challengingly on Liam, his normally soft baby blue eyes turned to cold and relentless steel.

“But even if the cuts are shallow, she’s still cutting herself. She’s hurting herself on purpose. That’s really serious, and really scary.”

“Not if the fucking cuts don’t bleed it isn’t,” Niall sneered.

Louis, having none of Niall’s shit cut in, “Why are you being such a dick?”

Niall narrowed his eyes at Louis, his normally sweet face hard. “I’m not. You all are just falling into her trap. She wants you all to feel sorry for her; that’s why she’s showing off her scars; they’re on her wrist for Christ’s sake, how original. She’s just a fucking attention whore.”

“Niall!” Liam gasped, horrified at the cruel words spewing out of the supposedly nicest and purest person in the world. Harry, eyes as wide as saucers, was gaping, opened mouthed, back and forth between Louis and Niall. Zayn, was glaring at the latter.

“Shut up you prick!” Louis growled, furious that someone, let alone one of his friends, could be so heartless. “You’re just jealous that, for once, the attention isn’t on you! You always need to be the fucking center of the fucking world! You can’t handle not being in the lime light!”

“Fuck off!” Niall spat, his face contorted with fury.

But Louis pressed on “You can’t handle that someone actually has bigger problems than you. You can’t handle that someone has real problems as opposed to you! Poor Niall,” he taunted, adopting a vicious mock baby voice, “Poor wittle Nialler misses his mummy! Boo Hoo! Let’s all comfort him and treat him like he’s a king because that’s what the wittle baby wants! Wittle baby Nialler needs more attention! Because being the fucking center of the whole fucking world isn’t good enough for him! He needs to be the center of the whole fucking universe! Poor wittle Niall!”

“I said shut the fuck up you motherfucking cunt!” shouted Niall. By this point both boys were on their feet, yelling across the room.

“Oh yeah!” Louis bellowed back, “Or else what? Gonna go throw a temper tantrum?”

“Shut up!” Niall screamed at the top of his lungs. Harry, Zayn, and Liam were enraptured in the fight, never having seen Niall like this, unable to tear their eyes away, too stunned to even attempt to calm either boy down.

“What are you gonna do itty bitty wittle baby Nialler?” Louis had totally lost control, too. “Are you gonna go cry about it? Does baby Nialler want his mummy? You gonna go crawling to Zaynie ’cause you’re scared of nasty Louis? Are you?”

Face distorted, Niall shook with rage as Louis yelled on. “Or wait!” he screamed, incredibly viscous and hurtful as he tended to be when angry and having lost control. But this time, Louis took it to a whole new level of cruel, advancing on Niall glaring down at him, finger jabbing his chest, “How about you go cut yourself so then we will care about you more! Then you can be the center of the motherfucking universe just like you want! Go on, go run off and cut your arms! I’ll even lend you my razor! That way you can be special and get all the attention you need!”

“Louis!” cried Harry, Liam, and Zayn simultaneously, all broken out of the spell of shock.
At the same time Niall began screaming, “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” shaking his head frantically from side to side, so hard he was quite likely giving himself whiplash, his hands clenching over his ears in an attempt to block out the noise.

Liam jumped into action, trying to pull Louis away from Niall, who was now on the verge of hysteria. But Louis resisted, shoving off Liam’s hands, continuing his shouting. “Go on! If it’s no big deal then go cut yourself you pathetic cunt! ‘Cause it’s no big deal right? Right?”

“Shut up! Shut up! I hate you! Shut up!” Niall wailed, head still whipping side to side, covering his ears with his palms pressed hard against his head. Liam managed to pull Louis away, but it was as if a crack had started in the dam and now all the water that had built up was pouring out, slowly at first and then all at once. And now the torrents could not be stopped, and their little brother was being swept beneath the unrelenting waves, drowning, suffocating beneath the merciless tide. Niall was fracturing before their eyes and there was not a thing they could do to stop it.

Liam yanked Louis out of the room, snarling, “Go calm down,” before returning to see the last of the Niall that they knew splintering into millions of jagged pieces.

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” He continued to scream at the top of his lungs, voice tearing, and ripping painfully. But he didn’t stop there. “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” It was as if he was possessed, no longer in control of his own body. Niall was gone. His body was in the room, screaming and jerking wildly, but Niall Horan—the sweet and lovable boy who loved music, and guitar, and food, and life all around with more passion and fervor than should be humanly possible, the always happy, always smiling, always laughing boy who could never turn down a pint with his mates or a good cuddle, who belted out Justin Bieber songs unabashedly and particularly loudly in the shower, who swore with the gusto of a proper Irishman, who never failed to call his mam and da and brother every Sunday, ending each and every call with an ‘I love you,’ who laughed at the stupidest things, and laughed loudly and unashamedly even when nobody else did, and had the worst habit of perpetually leaving the toilet seat up, and knew the words and chords to every song ever written—was no longer in the room; he had faded away, leaving behind an empty shell controlled by the demons he had concealed so well.

Harry stood frozen with terror. He had never been more terrified in his life. Not when he had gotten lost in the park when he was five, his first day of school, when he went to overnight camp, when he had been waiting to here his fate on the x-factor, when he nearly lost all of his clothes and got torn to shreds in the insane mob in Paris, nor when he had barely avoided a potentially fatal car-crash when he was learning to drive. He had never known a fear as great as what he felt now, watching his best friend fall apart. He couldn’t speak, he couldn’t move. He could only stand and stare, mouth gaping open, eyes wide, as Niall screamed and screamed and screamed.

Zayn tried to stop Niall, enveloping him in a firm grip, hands on his head to make him stop, because he was going to give himself a concussion soon if he didn’t stop, it was that bad. But the second Niall could no longer move his head, he began clawing at his face, blunt nails ripping through skin. “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” He shrieked, all the while trying to claw his face off with his nails. “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!”

Tears were streaming down Harry’s face as he stood, paralyzed, watching Niall’s demise.
Louis stood in the doorway, shell-shocked. Too horrified to yet feel guilty or ashamed or worried or sad or anything other than horror.

Zayn grabbed Niall’s flailing arms, shoving aside his own fears and thoughts, trying only to get Niall, his best mate, his little brother for Christ’s sake, to stop hurting himself.

Niall’s screams had turned unintelligible, louder and more desperate than ever before. The boys screwed up their faces at the pitch, but Niall kept screaming, “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” it kept on going, barely stopping for him to draw breath. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” His eyes were rolling, and he was flailing, trying to hurt himself in any way possible, despite Zayn’s firm hold. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” it went on and on and on. He looked utterly deranged.

All of a sudden, Niall dropped to the ground, Zayn sinking down with him, the faintest glimmer of hope surfacing. But the instant Niall hit the floor he began slamming his head as hard as he could into the ground, and any thought that Niall would come back was destroyed.

Zayn pulled his head to his chest, but as he did so, Niall began ripping at his skin again, pulling his hair out, leaving angry red lines and tiny beads of blood welling up in the wake of his clawing, still screaming. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Liam ran forwards, sitting before the struggling pair and wrenching Niall onto his lap, his muscular arms wrapping around Niall’s small form, stopping him moving. Zayn knelt before Niall, gripping his head, hands on either side of his face, holding him steady.

“I want to die! I want to die! I want to die! I want to die!” Became Niall’s screams, his words garbled, but unwaveringly clear to his petrified friends. “I want to die! I want to die! Kill me! Just kill me! I want to die! I want to die!”

Harry was openly sobbing, Louis’s knees gave out and he sunk to the ground, Liam’s face was screwed up in agony, tears sliding down his cheeks as he held Niall to him. Tears silently cascaded down Zayn’s face, but his voice was steady as he spoke. “Shhhhhhhhh, Niall, Niall! Please look at me. Look at me, Niall. Please look at me.” He held Niall’s face steady, and gazed into his eyes, but Niall was gone. His eyes were empty, devoid of life, all traces of Niall James Horan, the incredibly special boy who had the amazing gift of making everyone around him happy, had vanished, leaving behind frozen, dead ice.


Liam cradled Niall to him as Zayn continued to murmur. Niall’s screams began to die down bit by bit.

“I want to die,” Niall whispered, still out of touch with reality, eyes still far away and hollow.

Niall gradually grew silent, as his eyes began to melt the lifeless ice, yet he remained distant, clearly not present.

Zayn and Liam rocked Niall, continuing calming him, and easing him back from the abyss.

After a few minutes, Liam placed Niall in Zayn’s loving arms, consigning that if anyone could drive away the devils possessing their smallest, it would be Zayn.

Zayn, back pressed against the couch, sat cross-legged, Niall in his lap, cradled to his chest, staring down into Niall’s eyes, one hand caressing his burning cheek, ghosting so gently over the inflamed and raw skin. He began to sing quietly, his eyes’ never leaving Niall’s.

“Face me, are you tired of living? Replace, she was so unforgiving. And I’m so frustrated, so dilated, and she’s telling me I’ve wasted my time. And I’m running back like, just to face the facts right, to tell me your voice takes me through the night.” His eyes were still wet, yet he sang, quiet but unwavering. “Your smile and your memory simply eases me to sleep. In my ear, while the whispering melts my heart on every beat. Still you’re singing lullabies and postcards to this place. And we’re asking for so much more. Now you’re bringing smiles and laughter to this face. While bad memories are in pieces on the floor.” He inhaled shakily, blinking back tears. “Face me, are you tired of living? Replace, she was so unforgiving. And I’m so frustrated, so dilated. And she’s telling me I’ve wasted my time. And I’m running back like, just to face the facts right. To tell me your voice takes me through the night. Time past, heal this broken heart; pulled away that sellotape. Take your time, ’cause I won’t mind. I doubt if I even know that I’m awake. And still you’re singing lullabies and postcards to this place. And we’re asking for so much more. Now you’re bringing smiles and laughter to this face. While bad memories are in pieces on the floor.”

Zayn trailed off, tears dripping slowly off his face and splashing onto Niall’s forehead. Bending over, Zayn hid his face in his little brother’s soft blond hair, unable to contain a single heaving sob. He just wanted his brother back. He just wanted him back. He just wanted him back.

“Please, Niall, please,” he begged, shaking with grief, “Please come back. Please. Please. Ple-ase,” his voice cracking painfully. Letting out another wrenching sob, Zayn swallowed, and began to sing again, tenderly brushing away the tears pooling on Niall’s blank face. “When the rain is blowin’ in your face, and the whole world is on your case. I could offer you a warm embrace, to make you feel my love. When the evening’s shadows and stars appear, and there’s no one there to dry your tears, I could hold you for a million years, to make you feel my love.”

Zayn’s dark hair lay messily upon his head, sticking up in every which way, having been washed and left uncombed after the long day. The incredibly long eyelashes framing his piercing brown eyes glistened with beaded tears caught in the elegant tendrils. Short stubble from several busy days without a shave lined his tanned jaw, adding to the air of effortless beauty that he emanated so flawlessly, a look that, as with many things, only Zayn could pull off, and which all of the boys secretly envied. Even his silver hoop earing enhanced his undeniable graceful dignity rather than make him look like a douchebag who’s trying too hard to be cool, as it should, and as it undeniably would to anyone else. Yet Zayn’s most remarkable features were not his gravity defying lashes, nor his perfectly pink lips, nor exquisitely sculpted jaw and high set cheekbones, nor even his tanned skin, but rather his eyes, which burned with bright embers of passion: sparkling with love, blazing with fierce determination, shining with joy, glistening with empathy, glowing with loyalty, a clear window into his soul, that emblazoned him in the hearts’ of others. His expressive eyes, which were now filled with a sorrow so deep, so earnest, that words could not even begin to describe the anguish blistering his heart.

He laid his forehead against Niall’s, tears rolling onto Niall’s barren face, his lashes fluttering against abraded skin. “I know you haven’t made your mind up yet. But I would never do you
wrong. I’ve known it from the moment that we’ve met; no doubt in my mind where you belong. I’d go hungry I’d go black and blue, I’d go crawling down the avenue. No there’s nothing that I wouldn’t do to make you feel my love.”

“To make you feel my love,” Niall’s breath tickled Zayn’s cheek as he whispered alongside Zayn hoarsely, his voice so soft, Zayn wouldn’t have heard it if he wasn’t resting his head upon his little brother’s.

Zayn gasped, pulling back so he could stare into Niall’s still vacant eyes. He kept singing, fingers caressing, “The storms are raging on the rollin’ seas, and on the highways of regret. The winds of change are blowin’ wild and free; you ain’t seen nothin’ like me yet. I could make you happy make your dreams come true. There is nothing that I would not do;”

“To make you feel my love,” Zayn sang, Niall echoing in a whisper, his eyes, though still hollow, were fixed upon Zayn’s, finally seeing him for the first time in hours.


Niall whimpered, face scrunching up as he began to cry.

“Shhh shhh. Don’t cry. You’re alright. You’re gonna be just fine. I love you so much, Niall.” He brushed away Niall’s tears with the pad of his thumb, nestling his small body—had Niall always been this tiny, this delicate, this fragile, this breakable…this broken?—into his warm chest, shielding him from the harsh world, inhaling the cozy honey sent of his shampoo, sighing with relief that, broken, scarred, and crying, at least his Niall was back from the terrifying place he had vanished to; he was at least present, and for now, Zayn would gladly accept that.

“You’re gonna be alright, Nialler. You’re gonna be alright.”

Through this, neither Zayn nor the other boys noticed that the bus had come to a stop, pulled over on the side of the highway, and that the driver and Paul had rushed into the room to see what the tumult was. Both were standing there, baffled, unsure what to do up until this point. As if a switch had been pulled, they both jumped into action, Marcus, a portly middle-aged man with an easy-going disposition, hurriedly ushered Louis, Harry, and Liam, shell-shocked and still crying, off to the bunks in the back of the bus, depositing a shaking Harry into Louis’ arms (he learned early on that, when in doubt, give Harry to Louis, and ninety nine out of a hundred times that in it of itself will solve the problem). What Marcus did not expect however was for Harry, sobbing so hard he could barely see, to flinch and recoil from Louis faster than if the elder boy had been carrying the Bubonic Plague, bawling, if possible, even louder than before.

“What the fuck is going on?” Marcus scratched at his dwindling hairline, making him resemble an overlarge ape.

“Louis…Niall…this girl…they were fighting…and Niall…he just…he just…that…cutting…he said…and Louis…and then…shouting…and then he…was screaming…and wouldn’t stop…and he kept hitting himself…and…and…I don’t know! I don’t know!” Liam wailed, incoherent, stumbling over his words.

Liam’s howling response did nothing whatsoever to elucidate the situation, and neither Harry, practically heaving with the force of his sobs, nor Louis, stupefied and benumbed, were in any fit state to offer up further explanation. So Marcus instead thrust Liam and Harry together in the hopes that they would comfort each other and began to speak slowly and clearly to Louis, patting
his back.

With a little coaxing—he was a father after all—Louis came out of his shock-induced trance. “Y’alright?” he questioned the kid.

“No.”

With a grunt of assent, Marcus instructed Louis to calm down the other two, while he went to check in with Paul and see how the situation was going. Clapping the boy once firmly on the shoulder, the man picked his way back down the thin aisle. The boys of One Direction reminded him of his own two sons, Connor and Duncan, now all grown up at twenty-four and twenty-five, when they were younger, and seeing the normally happy lads in such distress made his heart ache for his boys.

Upon his return to the entertainment room, he found Paul in the midst of a vigorous interrogation. Zayn was speaking to him over Niall’s, who was curled up into a ball on his lap, dirty blond head, breaking off every few second to shush Niall, rubbing a steadfast hand up and down his arm.

“—Then Louis and Niall started shouting—it’s okay Niall, everything’s fine, we all love you—and they were really getting into it. And Louis said—“ he broke off suddenly, not wanting to risk sending Niall back into his previous state. “Can we finish this in, like, a minute?” Zayn ran a hand through his already tussled hair.

Paul, although confused, stressed beyond belief, and in dire need of the details of the night’s events, nodded roughly. He hurriedly bustled down the bus to get the story from the other lads.

After Louis and Liam, haltingly and painstakingly slowly recounted the precipitating events leading up to Niall’s breakdown, he retreated to the driver’s section where he extracted his phone.

“Hello. My name is Paul. I am the tour-manager for a rather famous band. One of the members is currently having severe psychiatric problems. I was hoping you could tell me the hospital’s privacy policies and advise me as to whether or not he needs to be brought to the emergency room immediately or if I should book an appointment with a psychiatrist and, if so, how best to go about that.”

“Yes. Of course,” came a slightly tinny female voice. “What band?”

“I’d prefer not to say over the line,” Paul replied.

“Yes, of course,” she repeated, “my apologies. What seems to be the problem? Or rather, what symptoms is he displaying?” she amended.

“Well,” Paul faltered, unsure how best to phrase it, “two of the band members were fighting—shouting—and then, the one I’m calling about now, he seemed to just crack. I’m not really sure, but he was shouting ‘I hate you’ and was covering his ears and shaking his head violently. He didn’t seem to be aware of it or anything else. I think he couldn’t stop. It was like he was possessed or something. And then he started clawing at his face with his nails and trying to rip his hair out—“

“Did he cause significant injury,” the woman interrupted.

“I don’t think so; he’s pretty scratched up. But the bleedings stopped.”

“Okay. Please continue, Paul.”
“Well, one of the other boys tried to stop him, because, well, he was hurting himself pretty badly,” he paused; it sounded so unreal over the line, like something straight out of a drama, but it wasn’t made up; it really did happen.

“Go on,” she prompted after a few seconds.

“Right. And then, after one of the boys grabbed him, he started slamming his head into the floor, screaming ‘I want to die’ over and over again. I don’t think he could stop. And once the boys stopped him banging his head, he started back up again on his face with his nails. I think at this point he was screaming for them to kill him. Umm, and then, when they had him contained so he couldn’t hurt himself anymore, he just was screaming. Just screaming. Like someone was torturing him or something…” He broke off.

“Is that all?”

“No. Umm. So one of the boys finally got him to stop screaming, but he was just…gone…I don’t know…I’ve never seen anything like it…”

“Were you present for all of this?”

“No, I heard the shouting and I went to see what was going on. I came in when he was yelling that he wanted to die,” his voice cracked suddenly, and Paul had to blink back tears. “I didn’t know what to do. I’ve never seen anything like it before. It was terrifying.” Paul cleared his throat before continuing. “So after he stopped screaming…I don’t really know how to describe it…he was just…was totally blank…like he wasn’t even present in the room...or alive...just gone…”

“Is he still in a catatonic state?”

“No. One of the boys was able to get him to snap out of it after a while. He’s…present…in the room, but he won’t stop crying or shaking. He hasn’t said a word…I don’t know if he can…” Paul trailed off.

“Okay. Thank you.” There was a pause as the faint scratching of a pen could be detected through the phone. “It does sound like it is a psychiatric problem. Does he have a history with mental illness?”

“No.”

“Has he ever been in the hospital for psychiatric reasons before?”

“No.”

“Does mental illness run in the family?”

“Neither of his parents have any mental illness. I don’t know his full family history, but to the best of my knowledge, none of his immediate family have any mental illnesses.”

“What is his age?”

“He is eighteen.” It hit Paul once again; Niall was eighteen, eighteen. Just a kid.

“Okay. Thank you.” More writing. “It would be best if you brought him in immediately. He is very likely still a danger to himself and potentially others.”

“Thank you. But in regards to his privacy…It’s just well, he’s not really in a fit state to determine
whether or not he wants to share this with the public now, and well, if this got out, it could possibly 
ruin his career…”

“Yes. I understand. Rest assured, we have very strict privacy policies here to protect patient 
identity. But we can also make it so that his name does not appear on anything other than direct 
patient charts that are seen only by his doctors. All staff are contracted to a H.I.P.P.A.—Health 
Insurance Portability and Accessibility Act—agreement, meaning that they are forbidden from 
releasing or disclosing any patient information to anyone not directly involved in the patient’s 
treatment, and are at risk of losing their jobs for any violations of H.I.P.P.A. In terms of other 
patients, I can request a private room, in a separate area than the Emergency Department, but still 
considered an emergency department room—we do have several for high profile cases and 
patients,” she paused and the sounds of typing permeated through the line, “one of which is open 
now.”

Paul exhaled forcefully, “Thank you.”

“Are you able to get him here quickly, or do you need me to dispatch an ambulance?”

“We are on the tour bus—we pulled over on the side of the highway—I think it would be best if 
you could send an ambulance.”

“Of course. What is your location?”

Paul checked the bus’s navigation system and relayed the coordinates through the phone.

“Okay, I will send an ambulance team over. They should be there in about half an hour.”

“Thank you so much.”

“No problem. Just until then, make sure you keep him calm and away from anything that could be 
used to harm himself or others. And do not leave him unattended; make sure someone is watching 
him at all times.”

“Yes. Okay. Thank you,” Paul once more was forced to blink back tears.

“Everything will be okay, Paul. We’ll take good care of him, don’t you worry.”

Paul nodded, but realized that she couldn’t see him. “Okay, thank you.”

“Hang tight, help will be there shortly.” Paul thanked the operator once more and then hung up the 
phone, hitting the end call button with his pointer finger, before sighing loudly and returning to 
check on his boys.

The next half hour was passed with Zayn cradling the still crying Niall, Marcus calming the other 
boys while keeping them in the back, and Paul acting as a go-between, checking in on everyone. 
By the time the flashing red and blue lights could be seen through the windows, everyone was in 
tears.

The paramedics boarded the bus, trailing the yellow gurney behind them. Paul led them into the 
entertainment room, gesturing to Niall, quivering and curled into Zayn like a frightened kitten. 
“His name is Niall,” he muttered to the large man in his late twenties, who nodded, before swiftly 
moving forwards.

“Hi Niall, my name’s Eric,” he said cheerfully, crouching down—his knees cracking loudly—in
front of his prone figure. “I’m a paramedic and I’m here to help you feel better.” He spoke slowly and calmly, as one would to a child. “I want to bring you to the doctors’ so that we can find out what’s going on, and help you feel a bit better. How does that sound?” Niall burrowed further into Zayn, trembling violently.

The other paramedic, a modest looking woman also in her late twenties, early thirties, began setting up the gurney, lowering the metal framework so that the stretcher was at knee-height, and raising the bed portion so that it was in a sitting position, the long black straps hung over either side, swinging back and forth like the chime on an old grandfather clock.

“Okay, Niall,” Eric said, clapping his hands together. “Do you think you can stand up?”

In response, Niall clung, if possible, even tighter to Zayn.

“Hey, hey. It’s okay, Nialler. They’re just here to help you.” Zayn murmured soothingly, to which Niall whimpered.

“I think it’d be best if you just stood up with him, don’t you think,” Eric interjected, rising back to full height with a loud ‘umph,’ he was a heavy man after all. Agreeing, Zayn placed one arm beneath Niall’s knees, and moved the other so that it wrapped around the middle of his back. He then began to stand slowly, on the one hand struggling because, although Niall was titchy, a fact which all of the boys and pretty much the entire world always commented about, he was roughly fifty-five kilos of essentially dead weight, and on the other hand, Zayn was trying to be a steady and gentle as possible. When he did get to his feet and straighten, he reflexively tightened his hold around Niall.

“Good, now why don’t you just set him down here,” Eric patted the gurney, which his partner then raised to waist-height. Reluctantly, Zayn made to place Niall upon the gurney, but Niall clung tightly to him, shaking violently and whimpering. The way Niall was acting, it was as if Zayn was throwing him into a pit of burning lava. Setting Niall upon the gurney, Zayn then began to slowly pry Niall’s arms from around his neck, but Niall howled in fear and refused to let go.

With his heart aching horribly, Zayn managed to wrench himself away from Niall. The female paramedic made quick work of strapping down Niall’s ankles and then his thighs, and was already trying to fasten the strap around his waste before Niall started thrashing, crying out, “Noooooooo! Noooooo! Nooooo! Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me! Please! Please! Please don’t leave me! Nooo!”

“Nobody’s leaving you Niall, we’re here to help. You’ll be able to see them in a little while after we help you feel better.” Eric’s words did nothing to appease the now writhing boy. He tried a different approach, “Niall, would you like for Paul to come with you? Would that be good?” Niall paid no mind to his words, still in an absolute panic.

The woman, Kate, then buckled Niall’s chest, the strap going over his arms, restricting his movement. She nodded to Eric before lowering the gurney flat, so that Niall was now lying, strapped down to the bed. She then clicked the metal sidings up into place. “Alright, Niall. I’m going to raise the bed so we can wheel it. It’s going to feel a bit like a rollercoaster. Ready?” He never stopped wailing and trying to free himself as she and Eric quickly raised the gurney to its full height. “Good to go,” she directed to Eric and Paul.

Niall was once more in hysteria. He was screaming and thrashing as though he was being led to his death. “Zayn! Zayn! Zaaayyn! Nooo! Don’t let them take me! Zayn! Please! Zaaaaayyyyyyyn!” His already shredded throat ripped at the force of his screams. He continued to scream for Zayn to save him as Eric and Kate wheeled him down the bus, Paul trailing worriedly behind like an
overanxious dog.

Zayn, on the other hand, sunk to the ground and hid his face in his hands. He couldn’t bring himself to look. It was the worst thing he’d ever faced: Niall screaming for him while he had to stand back and do nothing as his little brother was taken away by strangers, terrified and alone and thinking that Zayn didn’t care, didn’t love him enough to save him. He couldn’t quell the sobs building in him. And so he lay there on the ground, sobbing as Niall’s screams grew fainter until they finally vanished once he was shut inside the ambulance.

Louis, Liam, and Harry hesitantly crept into the room—Marcus was on the phone—huddling around Zayn. Harry was in tears again (he’d never stopped), as was Liam. Louis gathered Zayn into his arms, running his fingers through his hair, trying to soothe him. All four remaining boys crowded together for comfort. They leaned upon each other’s shoulders, and cried together.

Eventually, the boys lay down, completely and utterly exhausted (it was four o’clock in the morning and their day, before any of this insanity began, had started at the crack of dawn and been packed with interviews, the signing, a concert, and a meet and greet) on the floor. Louis, forever the leader and protector, lay with Liam and Harry curled on either side of him, their head’s resting upon his arms, and Zayn practically on top of him, his head upon Louis’ chest. And so the four brothers lay as such, devastated and crying, their thoughts all trained solely upon their smallest and frailest brother, hoping, begging, and praying that he would return to them.
Chapter Notes

Okay, so this is kind of short, and seems a bit like filler, but it's not; I'm just a lazy bum and didn't want to keep writing tonight and I wanted to put this up now, so the chapters relatively short (well, it is in comparison to my behemoth of a first chapter, that is).

Also, I didn't say this last chapter (the note was already getting pretty long) but this is fiction. It has no basis in real life whatsoever, and I do not want it to. And yes, I am aware that it is creepy that I am writing fiction about real people, but the way I see it, this is not me pretending to control/alter/wish different things for their lives, but rather, the way I see it, this is purely a medium to convey a story, purely a fictionalized dimension with no place or relevance in reality, based upon how the public perceive the boys of One Direction to be. Not sure if that makes sense, but whatever.

So, last chapter, I was appalled at how lazy I was writing it, and how bad the writing was, so I tried a bit harder on this chapter, and I am disappointed to say that it is still kind of shit because I really am a lazy bum. (Wow, I sure know how to give a convincing sales pitch as to why you should read my story). Umm, yea. So sorry for that.

If you might be triggered, I promise it's not too late to turn back. To all you sadists out there, yea yea, go ahead, I can't stop you (though I could just take this down...hmm.. (sorry; it's late, I'm tired, I'm rambling, and I'm somewhat unconvinced that anyone even reads the notes anyways, so I'm just blabbering here, but I'll shut up now)).

The night passed unbearably slowly and unimaginably fast. The night passed in a whirlwind of screaming and tears. The night passed in hazed exhaustion, frantic phone calls, and crazed desperation. The night passed in heartbreaking sadness and overwhelming anxiety. The night passed, bringing with it no prospect of relief in dawn’s shimmering light. The sun rose steadily and surely despite all the trauma and fury that night had thrown, not knowing that these boys’ lives would never be the same, not caring that the five brothers nearly became four, and that their heart and soul, their sun, the light that keeps them going through all of the craziness, through all of the good and bad alike, their littlest brother was nearly lost in the treacherous claws of darkness. And they wondered how the rest of the world continued on around them when their own had erupted cataclysmically. How was it that the sun could rise and the birds chirp just as any other day when Niall was gone? Surely the world must know that its purest and most beautiful soul was missing, and surely the world must grieve, the sun hiding behind a mask, the sky weeping freely, the birds singing their lament, the oceans stilling to silence as they mourned, praying over the boy, the child, who warmed the hearts of so many. Yet the world didn’t care as it bustled on around them, and they were left reeling in the wake, alone in their grief.

And it was in that grief that Louis, Liam, Zayn, and Harry battled for air, the crashing waves of despair threatening to engulf them, pin them beneath its suffocating breadth, smother them within its endless grasp. And it was in that grief that Niall had sunk, drowning and dying, unable to swim, unable to escape, unable to survive. And he had cracked, swept beneath the fury, whirling in the tumult as he tried desperately, tried valiantly to escape. Yet Niall hadn’t pulled free, hadn’t escaped. And so, as the others clung to the raft of wreckage which kept them teeteringly afloat,
Niall sunk deeper and deeper into the ocean, wrenched away from the surface where his brothers lay begging only for a faint glimmer of his beaten body which they could rescue from the furious tide, pull to the safety of the flimsy raft, resuscitate and breathe life back into. But their prayers were ignored, and they were left searching in vain for the brother that the waters had so cruelly claimed.

With morning’s life restoring light, the four brothers hoped to invigorate their search, and find their younger brother. But, after several painstaking hours spent cuddled into one another, sheltering from the raging winds, the messenger returned, heralding wretched news.

Paul broke the news to them over the phone.

“Lads, I’m so sorry,” he said, sounding older than he ever had, having seemingly aged ten years over the night, “But you can’t come and see Niall.”

“What do you mean, we can’t see Niall?” Liam asked, dumbfounded.

Paul’s voice crackled through the line wearily, “I mean that it is hospital policy that psychiatric patients can only be seen by my immediate family.”

“That’s shite! We’re his brothers! Niall will tell them!” Harry insisted.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Paul sighed.

“That’s complete shite!” growled Louis. “It’s not like they have his records, so how would they know that we’re not related?”

“I’m sorry boys. But other than the fact that your famous and they only have to type any of your names into Google or read a magazine to find out that it’s not true, they have strict rules about family visiting even then.”

“So, what, we’re just gonna wait for Maura and Bobby to fly out? They won’t be here until tomorrow at best! Niall’s gonna be all alone! He’s gonna think we don’t care!”

“Wait, what about you?” Zayn interjected, not allowing Paul to answer Liam’s question. “Are you allowed to see him?”

“Boys, slow down.” Paul sighed deeply, unsure how to deliver the news. “Niall’s eighteen.” Louis made to interrupt, but Paul preemptively cut him off before the words could leave his mouth; “No, let me finish. He’s eighteen, and that means that Niall is a legal adult. Which means that he alone is responsible for his medical decisions. Medical decisions and information disclosure.” Here Paul stopped, running a tired hand through his thinning hair. “He has refused to allow the disclosure of his information to anyone. Meaning, he won’t tell or let anyone tell his parents that he is even in the hospital.” Paul paused, letting his words sink in.

“So Maura and Bobby don’t even know…?” questioned Harry.

“No. They do not. And because of the laws here, they won’t know unless Niall himself tells them.”

“But we could—“

“No.” Paul cut Louis off for the second time. “Firstly, even if you told them and they came out, Niall could and very likely would refuse to see them and would not allow the doctors to tell them anything. Secondly, you could get us and the hospital in some serious legal trouble.” He knew
neither explanation thus far had convinced Louis. “And also…Niall doesn’t want them to know…”

“Okay, so fine! We can’t visit him! Now what’s wrong with him?” Demanded Liam, his protective papa or, as the fans dubbed, “Daddy Direction” side poking through.

“You don’t understand,” Paul moaned, nearly at his wits’ end. “Niall alone is responsible for his health information. I am not related to him. I am not a health provider. Niall forbid the doctors from telling me anything.”

Total silence followed his revelation; the boys at a loss.

“All I know is that it is confirmed to be a psychiatric problem and that he will be on suicide watch for at least twenty four hours. After the hospital found out that I was not related to Niall and then he told them I’m not responsible for his health and forbid them from telling me anything about him, I don’t know anything.”

“What?”

“He can’t do that!”

Shaking his head in exhausted resignation, Paul sighed yet again. “It’s the law here. There’s nothing we or the hospital can do. They told me that it’s because of patient privacy and independence that the majority of psychiatric patients and their families basically get massively fucked over. They could all lose their jobs or even get arrested if they gave us any information.”

“So…so…what do we do?” Harry asked, blinking through the stinging in his eyes.

“We wait. I’ve already been in touch with Jody, Gregory, John, Elise, Jackson, Finn, and Simon. They are currently contacting the lawyers to review your boys’ contracts—just to find health policies. Luckily, you were supposed to have the weekend off, so we haven’t needed to cancel any shows or anything yet, but that may change. Right now, all we can do is wait…I’m so sorry boys, but there’s nothing we can do; I’ve tried everything. We just have to wait.”

The conversation ended shortly after that; nobody knew what to say. The bus (1D-mobile as the fans (and Liam and Louis (all of the boys, really)) call it), no longer parked on the side of the highway, lapsed into silence.

Silence loomed thickly in the air, constricting, stifling, choking, smothering its victims until they were left gasping for air, dizzy and disoriented. Silence was deafening, so loud it hurt their ears, yet no one knew how, nor had the will-power to break it. For what was there to say? And so they sat, prisoners of the silence, gagged and chained, unable to escape its hold, unable to make a sound. They sat in their jail cells, paltry slaves of the omnipotent Silence.

For how long they sat shackled to the wall, it is uncertain; Silence has a way of blurring time, his tendrils wrapping around ones’ head, fusing to meandering thought, interspersing chronology, corrupting patterns, tangling itself to vague memories, ensnaring one within the emulsified labyrinth of their mind. For how long they sat imprisoned, fading and spiraling in and out of thought, it cannot be said. But finally, after hours, or what could have been mere minutes, Louis escaped the crushing hold. “Fuck!” he screamed. “God fucking dammit!”

He had sparked mutiny in Silence’s rule, and the other prisoners were able to escape whilst their captor was stunned and momentarily frozen, reeling from the attack.

“Fucking shithole! God fucking damn! I’m such a fucking cunt! This is all my fault! God damn fucking shit!” The guilt he had repressed throughout the night now returned surfaced in full force, a
ferocious tidal wave of unrelenting fury, knocking down all caught in its undertow. “Why did I say all of those things! Why am I such a fucktarded shithead! God dammit!”

Liam, Zayn, and Harry all rather selfishly let him rage on because, after all, he had said some absolutely disgustingly horrible things to Niall, and well, he should feel guilty, and it’s easier to blame Louis for triggering Niall than to face the truth that none of them had known anything was going on with Niall. Clearly Niall didn’t just go crazy out of the blue. Clearly, they hadn’t noticed that anything was wrong. Clearly Louis alone did not cause Niall to break, but he was the straw that broke the camel’s back. And break it he did. And it’s easier to blame him for putting that final straw, than to admit that they all crushed Niall under countless bushels of burden, and that they had failed to notice him straining, weakening, bearing his load in pained silence until it was too late and he was lying broken on the floor. So they let Louis shoulder the blame for a short while. But all bets were off once Louis began to cry.

They swooped in, laden and stewing in their own guilt and regrets, and assured Louis that it was not solely his fault. Yes, they were angry and hurt, and incredibly disappointed, but they did not blame Louis for Niall’s breakdown. “Look, Lou,” said Zayn, placing a cautious hand on his friend’s shaking shoulder, “It’s not your fault. What yah said was horrible, and there’s no excusing that, but obviously this didn’t come out of nowhere. And it’s all of our faults for not realizing.”

Louis moaned, shaking his head. “But I should have realized! I should have known! I’m supposed to be your older brother! I’m supposed to know! I’m supposed to protect you lot! I’m supposed to protect Niall! But instead, here I am tearing him down, hurting him! All I ever do is fuck things up!”

Everyone thinks that it’s Louis who is Harry’s rock, always supporting him and building up his confidence, but really, it goes both ways, leaning more towards the side of Harry supporting Louis. He pulled his older brother into a bone-crushing hug, his long gangly arms wrapping tightly around him. “Don’t say that, Boo. It’s not true and you know it.”

“God,” Louis keened, trembling with grief, “I told him to go cut himself. What kind of sick person does that?”

Harry kept him firmly in his arms as he said, “Lou, you were angry. When people get angry, they say things that they don’t mean. That doesn’t make it alright, but you didn’t mean it.”

“No! Not at all! Of course not!”

“And you are sorry.”

“More sorry than I’ve ever been about anything,” Louis replied.

Harry nodded, “We know, Boo Bear. So tell Niall—“ he broke off, suddenly brought harshly back to the present, “when…when we see him.” He had to stop himself from repeating out loud his thoughts ‘if we see him.’ After a moment’s pause he continued. “Tell him...He’ll forgive you. Our Nialler can’t hold a grudge…” he trailed off, coming to the grim conclusion that none of them know Niall as well as they thought they did.

The four brothers ventured once more into Silence’s empire. Yet this time, they stood a united front against the ominous foe, holding him at bay. Somewhere along the way, Harry began to sing. Not loudly nor fully conscious of his words, just a gentle murmur that broke up the howling winds, quelling and comforting, not easing, the wrenching ache in his heart, but soothing it ever so slightly, “Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; in the jingle jangle morning I’ll come
followin’ you. Though I know that evenin’s empire has returned into sand, vanished from my hand, left me blindly here to stand but still not sleeping. My weariness amazes me, I’m branded on my feet; I have no one to meet, and the ancient empty street’s too dead for dreaming. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; in the jingle jangle morning I’ll come followin’ you. Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin’ ship. My senses have been stripped, my hands can’t feel to grip, my toes too numb to step. Wait only for my boot heels to be wanderin’. I’m ready to go anywhere, I’m ready for to fade into my own parade, cast your dancing spell my way, I promise to go under it. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; in the jingle jangle morning I’ll come followin’ you. Though you might hear laughin’, spinnin’, swingin’ madly across the sun, it’s not aimed at anyone, it’s just escapin’ on the run, and but for the sky there are no fences facin’. And if you hear vague traces of skippin’ reels of rhyme to your tambourine in time, it’s just a ragged clown behind. I wouldn’t pay it any mind. It’s just a shadow you’re seein’ that he’s chasing. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; in the jingle jangle morning I’ll come followin’ you. Then take me disappearin’ through the smoke rings of my mind, down the foggy ruins of time, far past the frozen leaves, the haunted, frightened trees, out to the windy beach, far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow. Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free, silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands, with all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves

Let me forget about today until tomorrow. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me; in the jingle jangle morning I’ll come followin’ you.”

It wasn’t until Harry had finished that he realized that he had absentmindedly been singing Niall’s favorite song. The ache in his heart grew stronger.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, I have no idea whatsoever how the British healthcare system works. I don't even know all that well how the American system works (it's really complicated, okay! Nobody really understands it! (okay, well nobody my age does at least)) and I'm massively lazy and don't want to research it. So I have no idea what the policy is for the British NHS when citizens are abroad in the U.S. If anyone does know, please tell me, because I am curious, and I want this to be as accurate as I can make it. But, for the most part, what I am writing is pretty much true to the extent of my knowledge (with a bit of wiggle room)

Secondly, I have shamelessly made up people left and right who are affiliated with the One Direction Management in my story. So yea.

Thirdly, I have this one line in there that says "Clearly Niall didn’t just go crazy out of the blue." and I would like to say that mental illness does not make you crazy. Crazy is actually an incredibly insulting thing to call someone with mental illness, and it contributes to the stigma, so please mind your words, and think before you speak. The only reason I put it in here is because this is written from the perspective of people who do not know about or understand mental illness, and so they don't know that mental illness isn't someone going "crazy" or “insane.” So don't be offended.
Fourthly, Bob Dylan is just...Jeeze, I don't even know...he's just fantastic, and you need to go listen to Mr. Tambourine Man now! And no, that probably isn't Niall's favourite song, but it's my favourite song, and so I am allowed some creative license here (you know, me being the author and all)

Fifthly, please correct me on grammar and facts and accuracy and stuff; I want to make this as good as it can be.

And sixthly, be kind to one another, remember that you cannot control others, but you can control what you say, and you should remember that your words have bigger influence than you think. There is no upside in being mean or rude. And have a lovely day.

Lots of Love,
-Lia
Chapter Summary

Niall was a mess. Bruised and scabbed, he was barely recognizable, looking much more like a horrifying monster from a sci-fi movie than even Mad-Eye Moody, let alone an eighteen-year-old kid with psychiatric issues.

Chapter Notes

There are several lines in here that might sound ignorant/offensive/stigmatizing and I would like to clarify that one, they do not align with my own personal beliefs, two, they are only said to add to the story, and three, I truly mean no harm and hope that I do not offend anyone.

And I must beg you once again, PLEASE DO NOT READ THIS IF YOU MIGHT BE TRIGGERED! I AM SO FUCKING SERIOUS HERE PEOPLE! PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE DON'T READ THIS IF THERE IS EVEN THE FAINTEST POSSIBLE CHANCE THAT YOU MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO DO SOMETHING DANGEROUS OR HARMFUL TO YOURSELF! Of course I know several of you masochists will read precisely for that reason, but I still beg you not too.

And I must also warn you that some of this is pretty graphic.

Okay. Still reading? (Just checking) I'm done. Have at it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the end of day one, the boys of One Direction—the mentally sound ones, that is—stood a united front, a family linked together through love, respect, and trust.

By the end of day two the façade had crumbled, the family shattered and splintered, leaving every man for himself, fighting for survival in the wreckage strewn waters, lone heads amongst the endless shambles of clumsily bobbing debris. Each boy afraid to bear the onus of fault, preferring to isolate himself so that his mind could placatingly ease the brunt of accusation and responsibility on the others’ shoulders. For if they were to stand together, then they were to fall together; they would all be forced to accept that it was under their negligence that Niall had drowned.

They were now staying at a random hotel—a rather shitty one and under false aliases to prevent recognition—where they each had their own room. Normally, if management was feeling generous and got five rooms for them, they would still wind up piled together like sardines, simply expanding the territory in which they could wreak havoc. But not this time. Liam took to pacing, treading endlessly over the dingy carpet. Harry was glued to his phone, determined to read through every single tweet Niall ever wrote. Louis watched shitty television shows like it was his job, terrified to let his mind wander. And Zayn drew. He drew cartoons of Niall smiling and laughing, of the five of them hugging, of them performing, of Niall singing, of Niall riding a segue because that seemed like something Niall would do, of Niall playing guitar. But he also ventured beyond
his usual caricatures, into the realms of lifelike portraits.

He dug out a set of drawing and sketching pencils that had been gifted to him by some fan—normally he’d have been ashamed that he couldn’t remember her name, but now he simply did not care. He’d never used them before; he was busy and the art he had time for on tour was strictly cartoons, caricatures, comics, and doodles. Yet now he chose to delve into the emotionally baring art of realism.

Cartoons were Zayn’s usual preferred style because there’s no pressure to be accurate or realistic. They’re supposed to be goofy and disproportional, and if they’re off, no harm done, you can laugh at them. But sketching is a whole different category. And Zayn prefers not to put the added pressure of having to be realistic on something that calms him down and takes his mind away from things.

Yet it seemed like the right thing to do now. So he set to work, starting with the light grades, drawing one feature at a time. He drew without pause, stopping only to use the toilet or eat. His nimble fingers were blackened from the shading and blending, switching effortlessly from pencil to pencil, to erasing, to blending.

He did not know for how long he worked, but when he finally set aside his now stubby pencils, Niall was everywhere. He stared back at Zayn, frozen in the blissful snapshots of Zayn’s memories. Zayn had framed him, happy, forever smiling, in the moments where he knew his brother best. This was his Niall. This laughing, grinning, singing, joyful boy—child—was his Niall, his little brother. Not the screaming, crying, psychotic boy possessed by his demons. That was not his Nialler. That was just an illusion, a jarringly false note in a familiar song. But these pictures…they played the real note, harmonious and sweet, soft and loving, gentle and caressing, just like the real Niall. This was Zayn’s little Nialler.

And when Zayn could draw no more, he stared at Niall and mourned. He mourned for the boy he had adopted as his brother and vowed with all of his heart to love and protect. He mourned at his failure as a brother, a protector, and a friend. He mourned for the pure soul he had grown to love so strongly yet had so suddenly lost. He mourned for the same pure soul that he had not cherished enough, that he had not guarded more fiercely, that he had allowed to be stolen away and plundered right beneath his own eyes, that he had not saved. Zayn stared at his Niall and cried until there were no more tears left to cry and no more sorrow left to mourn; the river of anguish had not run dry—such a great river could never cease to be replenished—but it had reached the ocean, the enormous, never ending ocean, and so it became not a wave of agony but an all-encompassing sea of despair in which hope and joy had no place. And thus his pain was indistinguishable from the sea that had flooded his world.

And so the days trudged on.

Liam paced.

Harry Twittered.

Louis watched television.

And Zayn drew and stared at his pictures.

Paul ran interface. He was back and forth between the hospital and the hotel and on the phone incessantly. He tried, with little avail, to get an update on Niall’s condition; each call was thwarted by the complex laws governing patient confidentiality. It wasn’t until three days after Niall’s breakdown (as they had started to call it) that he received any news.
“Mr. Horan is ready for discharge,” were the administrator’s words. Eight and a half minutes later Paul was at the hospital, demanding further information, reassurance, or at least a glimpse of his boy.

Back on the bus (Paul did not want to risk bringing Niall to the hotel or anywhere else public), the boys waited eagerly for Niall’s return. However, when he finally came through the door, they were struck dumb.

Niall was a mess. Bruised and scabbed, he was barely recognizable, looking much more like a horrifying monster from a sci-fi movie than even Mad-Eye Moody, let alone an eighteen-year-old kid with psychiatric issues. Every inch of skin was covered in bloody scabs. And the skin that showed beneath the gashes sealed over by dried blood was a revolting myriad of purple and red bruises. Upon his forehead, which bulged sickeningly, intruded six stitches, dark black juts of surgical thread attempting to seal together the gaping holes that had finally come unglued. Small patches of missing hair littered his head like a minefield within his greasy hair. A blood vessel had burst in his right eye, and his left, though not bloody, per say, was swollen to a slit. If they had not known this was Niall, they would have never been able to spot him beneath all of the grotesquely disfiguring wounds.

Liam could feel the bile rushing up into his mouth. He gagged, unable to stop the intense waves of nausea, but managed to swallow back the vomit. Normally not one to get queasy, even when others around him are sick (he is the go to man for cleaning up when the boys are all plastered and hung over and have thrown up all of the alcohol they have gorged themselves upon after all) he could not stop himself gagging once, twice more, fighting back the rising bile. This was different. He’d happily clean up all of the drunken barfs in the world for never having to look upon the maimed face of his younger brother ever again. Yet he couldn’t do that. Because this was his Niall. And somewhere beneath the swelling, and the purple and black mottled skin, and the jagged burgundy lines, and the mutilation, was his little brother. And he could never turn his back on Niall. (But he already had and that’s what had gotten them here in the first place, hadn’t it)

Stepping out from under Paul’s precautionary arm, Niall flashed a grin—albeit lopsided and painfully inhuman—and said with his cheerful manner about him, “I reckon I look right fit, don’t you think lads? I think this should be me new look; I bet the fans would love it.”

Everyone’s jaws dropped. Literally dropped. It would have been comical if the situation hadn’t been so sickeningly serious. Because everything was just so ridiculous; Niall, after having a psychotic breakdown where he tried to hurt, maybe even kill himself, and being forcibly taken to the hospital screaming for them not to abandon him, and then the days where he refused to tell them all what was going on, and then he comes back looking like he’d been hit by a truck, but he’s cracking jokes and acting like nothing had just happened. What the literal fuck?

Seemingly unaware of the fact that he was doing anything even remotely abnormal, Niall threw his head back in a joyous cackle of laughter. When no one made a sound or showed any indication of possessing the ability to form words, Niall quipped, “What, cat got your tongues?” and chuckled again at his own joke.

“No…” Liam began, but could not find the words to continue.

“Liam!” Niall happily chirped back.

“No…” Liam started again.

After half a second’s pause Harry echoed, “Niall…”
“Alvin!” Snorting at the cartoon-like manner of the conversation, Niall once more burst into giggles. He alone saw humor in the exchange. He was the only one laughing.

Finally, Liam found enough words to heave out the question that had been blistering on all of their tongues’, “Why are you smiling?”

Without missing a beat, Niall said in his simplistic and straightforward manner, “Because I’m happy.”

That was not enough. “But…but why?” Niall had just been released from the hospital where he had been taken after breaking down. The last time the boys saw him he had been screaming about how much he wanted to die and how much he hated all of them. He had been, for all they knew and feared, trying to kill himself. And he had been carted away to be locked up, still screaming his head off. And in the days following, he kept his medical problems a secret, blocking out everyone completely. And now here he was, bruised and scarred, mauled beyond recognition, acting like nothing had even happened in the first place. How could he possibly be…happy?

He didn’t even pause to consider before offering up his honest answer, “Because I missed you, and now I’m back with you again, and,” he chuckled lightly, “I sound like a right sap, but I really love you lads, and I’m just happy to see you.” Now wasn’t that an answer to melt everyone’s hearts. And that should have been enough. It would have been enough if not for the recent upheaval of the world. In the world where Niall Horan was a happy and amicable boy who loved life and everyone in it, the boys would have lapped up the response in less than a second, chalking up the overly sappy sweetness to Niall just being Niall. Yet that world had decided to take a break for a while, and the one filling in for it couldn’t have been any more dissimilar. So the reappearance of the old Niall within this markedly different new world was indeed suspicious and highly alarming—as almost as alarming as the disappearing act the old world had played.

Liam struggled, chewing over his words, trying to organize his mind enough to vice his thoughts. After a few moments of shell-shocked silence, Liam found enough semblance of order to say, “But Niall, you were in the hospital. You were there because you were trying to hurt yourself…you…you said you…you...” unable to bring himself to finish, he trailed off, brown eyes glistening. He bit his lip hard to keep from spilling the emotions welling up inside.

“That was then. I went to the hospital and they helped me through it. I’m much better now. I promise.” His intense gaze held Liam spellbound.

“Yeah,” Niall breathed, stepping forward in a cruel twist of irony to place a hand—with nails clipped unnaturally short—on Liam’s shoulder. Looking Liam directly in the eyes, he said, “I was. I was having a really hard time. But that was then. I went to the hospital and they helped me through it. I’m much better now. I promise.” His intense gaze held Liam spellbound.

“But…what…how…”

“I was having a hard time, and I just kind of flipped out. But I’m fine now. Well, my face isn’t fine, but I think I’ll live,” he grinned cheekily, eyes—or his right eye and what could be seen of his left—glinting with mischievous humor. When no one showed any hint of a smile, he sighed. “I’m sorry you all had to see that. It must have been really scary. But that’s in the past now, and I’m trying to move forwards from it.” There was a certain delicacy to his words that hinted that he was ready to be done with the conversation.

Like a dog out of water, Harry shook his head, hair flopping every which way, “Of course you are, buddy. And we’re all here for you.” Niall beamed at him, and Harry returned his smile, slinging an arm over his best friend’s shoulder.

“Ta, Haz.” Niall squeezed Harry around the middle with his free arm, the other still resting on Liam’s shoulder.
“Yeah, yeah Irish,” he said fondly, gently ruffling Niall’s blond hair. And it was in times like these where Harry showed his true strength. Because, contrary to popular belief, although Harry was the youngest and had gotten emotional that one time in ‘A Year in the Making’—they said they wouldn’t show that part, but they clearly lied—he’s no weakling. He’s sensitive, but that doesn’t make him any less strong. He wears his heart on his sleeve; there are no secrets with him. He’s honest, unafraid to show his emotions and able to express himself without shame. And that is the damn strongest thing anyone can do: show the world your heart without qualms; be who you are; one hundred percent authentic one hundred percent real.

And yeah, maybe he can’t let absolutely everything roll off his back, but he’s certainly no baby, and he’s definitely tough, especially when it comes to putting on a brave face for his brothers. If that’s what he needs to do to make them happy, then he’s sure as hell going to do it. Because Harry is fiercely loyal and incredibly perceptive. He has a knack for knowing exactly how to make those he loves feel better, and he will do whatever it takes. Even if that means putting aside his own grief and hurt, he’ll do it. He’ll do it because he’s Harry, and Harry is one of the kindest and most caring people on the planet.

So Harry, even though his heart was screaming out that Liam was right, made light with Niall, bantering, drawing the other lads out of their shells. Because that’s what Niall needed at the moment. He needed his friends to smile and not interrogate him and laugh with him and ignore all of the things that had happened over the past few days. So Harry did his best to get the others to ignore the fact Niall had just come back from the hospital, that he was barely recognizable beneath his cuts and bruises, that he had completely shut everyone out, and that the last time they had seen him he was having a psychotic episode or breakdown or whatever the hell it was. Because that’s what Niall needed.

As Liam and Zayn were reluctantly coaxed out of their shells, Louis remained quite. He couldn’t overcome the elephant in the room that had seemingly decided to sit all six thousand kilos of itself down on his chest, squashing all thoughts but those of itself out of him. Battling for breath beneath the tremendous weight, Louis could no longer ignore what needed to be said. “I’m sorry, Niall!”
He blurted out.

Everyone froze.

“Niall, I’m so, so sorry! I didn’t mean anything I said! I—“

“It’s okay. I’m sorry for losing me temper at you,” Niall interrupted.

“No. You have nothing to be sorry for. You had every right to be mad at me. I was completely out of line. And I am so, so sorry. I don’t know how you’ll ever forgive me, but—“ Louis was bordering on crying, his face scrunched up with sorrowful guilt.

Niall laughed, but not in a cruel way. “It’s fine Lou. We all say tings when we’re upset. Don’t worry about it.”

Unconvinced, Louis pushed on. “No. It’s not fine. What I said was horrible and I’m—“

Niall cut him off. “It’s fine Lou. I forgive you.”

“I’m so sor—“

“It’s fine.”

“But—“
“It’s fine!” Niall practically growled with a certain finality in his vice that said quite clearly drop it or things are going to get ugly.

Louis was left with a dilemma: either he push the situation to find out what’s really going on (and ease his guilt of course), or he go against his every instinct and judgment and allow the subject to drop. Normally Louis would choose the former option, no question or hesitation. But given recent events…the last time he pushed Niall it ended catastrophically. And he really, really did not want that to happen again. But with everything that had happened, Louis wasn’t sure that Niall really was ‘fine.’ And he really, really did not want Niall to break down again.

Torn, Louis decided to allow it to drop; he’d play Niall’s game, but only for the time being. And thus, he clapped his hands together, declaring, “Who’s up for FIFA? It’s been ages since I’ve kicked all your fat arses.”

Niall grinned, “I’m in!” He then yelled, ”Not it!” at the top of his lungs.

“Not it!” Louis practically screamed, at the same time as Liam and Zayn.”

“I am not that bad!” Harry wailed, sincere in his indignation that they were all competing to see who didn’t have to be on his team.

“Of course you’re not, Harold,” Louis appeased, “You’re absolutely fucking terrible. Seriously, you should not be allowed near any kind of football, ever.”

“Bastard!” Harry grumbled, making to swat Louis in the crotch, but missing as Louis nimbly moved out of his reach.

“You’re just bitter that you suck!”

“Fuck off,” he mumbled, looking somewhat dejected.

“But you’re the most gorgeous hunk of walking sex I’ve ever seen, and I’m so turned on by the mere sight of you, I can barely contain my raging libido,” Louis pretended to swoon. Harry, in response, batted his eyelashes before diving in to give him a very painful and very visible love bite on the neck. It was moments like these that made it seem like the Larry shippers might actually be on to something.

Niall interrupted with an affectionate, “Get a room you homos! I wanna whoop your arses sometime today, so you can snog each other later.”

Putting on his most seductive face, Louis purred, “You know you want in on this. We could have a threesome,” he paused, “Or you could just watch.” Zayn snickered, while Liam snorted in derision.

It was not long before the five of them were crammed together on the couch, shouting at the television. Harry, after making a big stink about being unappreciated and what not, watched the battle raging on the screen from the sidelines, rather than joining in.

By the time evening rolled around, it was almost as if the past days had never happened. Almost. If it weren’t for the revolting distortion of Niall’s face, maybe Harry could have forgotten, but it stared back at him, an ugly reminder of the demonic presence lurking beneath the surface.

He was not about to accept Niall’s “cure” without any further questions, but for now, like the others, he deemed it best to hold his tongue. “Nialler, play us a song. It’s…too…quiet in here.”
Niall who was sandwiched between Zayn and Liam on the couch—neither wanted to let him out of their sight, much less their arms for fear that he would slip away again—laughed and said, “Get me me guitar den; I don’t reckon dese twats are going to let me up any time soon, do you?” Liam rolled his eyes, and made to knock Niall’s chin affectionately before thinking better of it and squeezing his shoulder instead.

Harry pried himself off of the floor where he had been lying sprawled out (it’s Harry, don’t ask…) and stretched with a yowl like a cat. Louis snickered. Harry just rolled his eyes and sauntered off, returning half a minute later with one of Niall’s acoustic guitars.

“What should I play?”

“Whatever you want Nialler.”

“Jeeze, putting the pressure on me, yeah? Making me decide and all,” he teased. For a few minutes there was silence as they all listened to Niall strum randomly. But after a while, he began to sing. Softly at first, hardly more than a murmur, as though he wasn’t even aware that there were four other boys hanging on to his every word as though his life depended on it—his depended on it.

“Oh I am just a poor boy though my story’s seldom told. I have squandered my resistance for a pocketful of mumbles, such are promises. All lies and jest still, a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest. When I left my home and my family, I was no more than a boy in the company of strangers in the quiet of the railway station, running scared, laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters where the ragged people go, looking for the places only they would know. Oh lie-la-lie. Lie-la-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie. Lie-la-lie. Lie-la-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie. Lie-la-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie. Asking only workman’s wagers, I come looking for a job but I get no offers. Just a come-on from the whores on Seventh Avenue. I do declare, there were times when I was so lonesome I took some comfort there. Now I’m laying out my winter clothes and wishing I was gone. going home, where the New York City winters aren’t bleeding me, bleeding me, going home. Oh lie-la-lie. Lie-la-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie. Lie-la-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie. In the clearing stands a boxer and a fighter by his trade. And he carriers the reminders of ev’ry glove that layed him down or cut him till he cried out in his anger and his rage, ‘I am leaving, I am leaving,’ but the fighter still remains. Oh lie-la-lie. Lie-la-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie. Lie-la-lie. Lie-la-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie-lie.”

Niall trailed off as quietly as he had begun, resuming his lackadaisical strumming. However the boys’ minds were not so easily diverted. Harry knew—he just knew—that this was Niall saying he would not back down; he would not let them in, even if it killed him. So with the pit of dread in his stomach growing, Harry scrunched up his nose and tried not to cry.

Chapter End Notes

I feel the need to emphasize that anything said within the diegetic world (the world of the story) does not necessarily reflect my own personal opinions or beliefs or how things actually are in real life. For example, when Niall says, ”Get a room yeh homos!” I am by no means insinuating that there is anything wrong with homosexuality, it’s just a part of the story; I’m really not trying to offend anyone, and I hope I haven’t done so.
I also would like to give song credit to Simon & Garfunkle for their wonderful song, "The Boxer," but when I wrote this I was actually thinking of a cover of their song by Mumford & Sons. Both versions are fantastic and I highly recommend listening to them.

I also am struck by the urge to emphasize that this is fiction and the Public Persona of the One Direction boys are only serving as a means to which I can assign and tell a story. I am under no false illusion or desire that any of this has ever happened or that I even have created accurate portrayals of their personalities. This is purely fiction, and they, as my most current obsession, are purely a platform upon which I can convey a story. I dunno if that makes any sense to y'all (I just turned southern (it's been a long week (plus who actually reads the notes (if you do, then I deeply admire you, and you get a gold star in my book)))

Finally, please remember to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving with one another and yourselves. Laugh and love more, cry and hate less. I promise it helps. Stay safe, stay strong, and stay true to yourself. You are all wonderful, and you are all important.

Lots of love,
-Lia
Neither Lost Nor Found

Chapter Notes

All of the usual trigger warnings and me begging you not to read this if you might be triggered apply.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two weeks passed before the bruises and scabs healed enough to be concealed by makeup. They put out the word that Niall had the Flu. #feelbetterniall was trending world wide on Twitter.

Everyday when the boys went out to do signings and interviews and shows, Niall stayed behind in the bus or hotel and Skyped with a therapist. He was always done long before the boys returned. Preston stayed with him during the day to make sure that he was being safe. That’s all anyone knew.

Anytime the boys tried to ask how Niall was, he got defensive and closed off and whichever lad had dared to question him walked off feeling somehow guilty for even thinking not to fully trust Niall.

Liam was sick of it. He couldn’t take not knowing what was going on, not being able to help, not being able to fix it. Because Niall was acting like everything was fine—he was acting “normal”—but Liam knew, he just knew, that all was not fine inside Niall’s head. And it was killing him not knowing the truth.

Indeed it was tearing all of the boys apart. Tensions were high as they all trod on thin ice, slipping and sliding as they tried their best not to upset Niall. It wasn’t like he suddenly became a prima donna or anything like that. He still acted like the laidback, carefree Irishman the world thought he was…(as long as things were going his way) It’s just that they were playing Niall’s game; they were playing on his field and they were playing by his rules. And Niall’s rules were that no one could get inside his head. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. He totally, completely, and entirely shut down the moment anyone tried to breach his security system.

It was some sort of sick nightmare. Niall was fine and happy and normal…until someone brought up something he didn’t want to talk about…And then he’d be off on a tirade, furious that they didn’t trust him, and they wouldn’t let go of the past; “I don’t understand why you can’t just let bygones be bygones. I’m better now but you just want to keep bringing me down by drudging up the past.” He had told Liam in a very wounded and offended manner after Liam had tried to get him to open up. And Liam had walked away, hurt and confused, somehow feeling guilty and criminalized for caring about Niall’s wellbeing.

And that’s how everything was. Niall played hard and he played dirty, using their weaknesses against them. He had shouted that Harry was a selfish attention-whore hell-bent on making himself look good by comparison, when Harry had asked Niall if they could talk about what had happened. He had snarled that Zayn was overbearing, suffocating him after Zayn had implored him to talk to him. And he had hit below the belt with Louis, guilt-tripping him for all of the horrible things he’d said to him; “Oh how about you lend me your razor so I can go cut myself hmmm? Would that make you happy?” he had growled. And Louis had retreated, in tears and inconsolable.
Yet when no one was questioning or pushing him, Niall was back to his old self. Smiling, laughing, and joking as though he didn’t have a care in the world. It made no sense. And it was killing the boys. Even Paul was at his wits end.

But Niall wasn’t bending an inch. With each passing day, Niall’s walls grew higher and higher until he had completely secluded himself within his own ivory tower. He was there on the surface, but beyond that, he was an enigma. No one had a clue what he was really thinking anymore. And perhaps that was how it had always been, but now everyone was aware of it, and it stung all the much more.

Liam especially, was taking it hard. He had always been the one who was able to ‘fix’ things. He prided himself in being able to solve all of the boys’ problems. Yet with this...

He didn’t even know what the problem was, so how on earth could he go about making it better? And Niall of course denied that there was anything wrong. He was acting like everything was fine and dandy and Liam just couldn’t accept that. None of them could.

Maura called Niall daily, checking in on him. She, like everyone else, thought that Niall was sick with the Flu and it was agonizing for her, thinking that her baby was halfway across the world when he needed her. And she didn’t even know the half of it. She even called Liam to get the truth about Niall, knowing that her youngest son would lie to her because he didn’t want her to worry. It was the hardest thing Liam had ever had to do, lying to Maura like that. He had had to pretend to go along with Niall’s lie. And he hated it.

Bobby also called—he worried almost as much as Niall’s mother. He, like his former wife, knew their son and so he also called Louis, who he had taken a real liking to. It was something about Louis being like an older brother who looked out for and protected his youngest child that he so strongly appreciated. Louis, too had lied to Niall’s father, insisting that he was pretty sick but the boys and management were taking good care of him, watching him like a hawk.

“Your dad just called me,” he told Niall, coming out from the bunks and into the hang out area. “I told him that you’re sick but getting better.” Niall didn’t meet his gaze.

“Ta,” he murmured, still not looking up from his lap.

Louis wasn’t buying it. He was so sick of all of this crap. It was beyond ridiculous. So he said rather harshly, “How long do you expect me to keep lying for you?”

Icy blue eyes met his own. They narrowed, preparing for battle. Louis stared back, his own gaze appraising. They just stared, neither willing to concede defeat. And still, Niall did not speak. He just looked Louis dead in the eye with frightening intensity. He was not about to break the frigid silence, Louis could tell. For a few moments the two of them were frozen there in bitter silence. Then Louis’s soft but firm voice shattered the ice, “Nialler, we can’t keep doing this.” He spoke cautiously, choosing his words with great care. “You, expecting us just to ignore the fact that you had a breakdown.”

“That’s a bit rich coming from you. Seeing as you’re the one who caused my ‘breakdown’ in the first place.” Louis visibly winced. Of course Niall was going to go there. He tried to brace himself for Niall’s vicious attack, but nothing could ever make the words hurled at him sting any less. “And anyways, I’m not expecting you to ignore anything.” Niall snarled back, defensive in his tone and demeanor. He sat up straight, bracing himself for a fight. “I’m simply asking that you don’t worry me parents and make them prevent me from touring and being in the fecking band with you lot, as they would absolutely do if you told them about me ‘breakdown,’” he sneered the
“Surely that’s not too much to ask from you, letting me stay in the band?”

Louis knew Niall was trying to trap him, but he couldn’t resist. “Niall, of course not—“

But Niall cut him off before he had a chance to speak. “Oh wait, I forgot, you’d rather that I slit my wrists, right? That’s what you said, wasn’t it?” He was jeering now. And Louis knew all too well that he was walking into a trap, taking Niall’s bait, yet he couldn’t help but try and defend himself.

“Nialler, you know I didn’t mean it. I said I was sorr—“

“Oh of course Louis. You said sorry so everything’s all good and forgotten,” he taunted.

“No, of course not! I—“

“Just expect me to forget that my best friend, who’s supposed to be like a brother to me, told me to go and cut myself because I’m a useless fucked up attention-whore! Is that it?”

“Niall,” Louis pleaded. “No, I didn’t mean—“

“You didn’t mean it? Well then why the fuck did you say it? What the fuck is your problem? Who says that to people?”

“I know! I’m so sorry! I was angry and—“

“So naturally you tell me to go cut myself. Thanks for stabbing me in the back. Or the wrist, I should say. ‘Cause that’s what you wanted right? Would that make you happy if I went and slit my wrists? Hmmm?”

Tears were leaking out of Louis’ eyes. He furiously wiped them away with his sleeve. “Never! Nialler—“

Niall cut him off with a snarl, “Only my friends—the ones who don’t tell me to go slit my wrists—can call me Nialler.”

“Ni-all,” Louis’ voice cracked as he began crying in earnest. “Please, you know how sorry I am.”

“Do I?” He spat. “You just expect it to be okay that you say all of those things to me? You expect me to trust you after all of that? That’s fucked up, and you know it.”

“I know! I know! And I’m so so incredibly s-sor-ry,” sobbed Louis. “You know that I would never want you to do that, okay! I’m so sorry. Please, forgive me. I hate myself so much for what I said to you. I am so guilty. I can’t eat, I can’t sleep. Please. All I can think about is what I said to you and how horrible I was and how much I didn’t mean any of it and how incredibly sorry I am. Please forgive me, Niall—” he broke off with a sob, stopping himself from using his brother’s nickname, which would only further incense him.

“Oh so now you expect me to feel bad and forgive you because your crying,” Niall stated coldly. “D’you want me to comfort you now because you feel guilty?”

“N-no!” Louis stammered through his tears, “I don’t Niall. I don’t blame you for hating me! I hate myself too.”

“Oh cut with the pity party. It’s not gonna make me forgive you.” Niall’s words were filled with a cold sort of malice that had become increasingly frequent as of late.

Louis flung an arm up over his mouth to stifle his sobs. After a moment spent trying desperately to
compose himself, he managed to say, “Niall, I’m so sorry. I’ve never been more sorry of anything in my life. I hope one day you can find it in you to forgive me. I love you so much, and I’m so so sorry that I hurt you. I understand if you hate me, but I really hope you can forgive me.”

It was as though a switch had flipped inside Niall. The bitterly frozen walls around him melted in an instant and he was back to his normal loving self. The ice frosting his eyes too had vanished, transforming his face back to its childlike mask. “Of course I forgive you Boobear. I love you too.” And he tugged Louis to the couch where he then crawled into his lap, cuddling into him warmly.

The argument was seamlessly forgotten in the hours that followed. But there lurked the dark reminder that it would resurface the next time Louis attempted to breach Niall’s securities.

Niall’s first concert back was amazing. The love and support for Niall was overwhelming. Indeed he didn’t stop beaming the entire time. It was like he was radiating happiness, like the sun, shining so brightly that nothing could ever diminish his elation. When it came time for the boys thank you speeches to the fans, Niall went first.

He stood, proud and tall, his heavily made up face (Caroline, much to her dismay, had needed to cake on so much concealer and foundation to cover the remnants of his scratches and bruises) practically glowing with joy. “I just wanted to say a massive thank you to all of you who sent me your love and support when I was sick. I was feeling pretty lousy and just knowing that I have all of you here means the world to me. You all made me smile when I was having a hard time and that means more to me than you all can ever know. So thank you so much for being there for me. I say it all the time but I reckon you can stand to here it a bit more; you are the best fans in the world and me and the lads are so incredibly lucky to have you. We still don’t know what we did to get this lucky. Thank you all so much. I love each and every one of you, and I just want you to know that if you are ever having a hard time, listen to our music and know that we are here for you, and we love you all so so much.”

Harry, Liam, Louis, and Zayn did their best not to gape at Niall who had just revealed more to the fans than he had to them in the two weeks since he had been back. Baffled by how open Niall was being, they tried not to let their surprise and confusion show on their faces. They were in front of thousands of people, many of whom had cellphones and video cameras, after all. But it was hard.

Liam knew there were two Twitter questions left before they were to move on to the next song. After thanking Claire from section C, row 6, seat 23, the next question appeared on the screen. It read, “Niall can you please sing us a song?” Niall skipped across the stage to where Dan was standing, and pried his guitar off him.

“Thanks bro,” he chirped into his microphone, sashaying back to the other boys. Dan, meanwhile vanished offstage to grab another guitar. Snapping his microphone into the stand onstage, Niall slung the guitar strap across his shoulder. “Of course I can sing you a song, Marissa of Section E row 7, seat 14. This is one of my favourites.” The screams of the audience intensified. He began to strum quietly. His soft voice drifted hauntingly through the air. “So I was lost, go count the cost before you go to the Holland road. With your heart like a stone you spared no time in lashing out. And I knew your pain and the effect of my shame; but you cut me down, you cut me down. And I will not tell the thoughts of hell that carried me home from the Holland road with my heart like a stone. And I put up no fight to your callous mind. And from your corner you rose to cut me down, you cut me down. So I hit my low, but little did I know that would not be the end. From the Holland road, well I rose and I rose, and I paid less time to your callous mind, and I wished you well as you cut me down, you cut me down. But I’ll still believe, though there’s cracks you’ll see.
When I'm on my knees, I'll still believe. And when I've hit the ground, neither lost nor found, if you believe in me, I'll still believe. And I'll still believe, though there's cracks you'll see, when I'm on my knees I'll still believe. And when I've hit the ground, neither lost nor found, if you believe in me I'll still believe.”  By the time he had finished, the crowd, which had momentarily fallen silent as Niall’s hauntingly beautiful voice washed over them, began to scream their appreciation. The American fans especially loved Niall. While he was not as universally popular in England—some of the crueler girls insisted that, as an Irishmen among Brits, he did not belong—the American fans doted upon his Irish charm, adoring his childlike innocence in a way which no other fans did.

Niall grinned bashfully, trotting back to Dan to return the guitar. Liam tried not to gape at Niall, who had silenced the crowd of screaming girls with his breathtakingly honest song. It felt like Liam had been punched in the stomach; he could do little more than stare, dumbstruck, at Niall, suppressing the chills that had crept up his spine as he sang. This was the most open Niall had been since the incident, as Liam had taken to calling it, and it was not his boys to whom he had confided. It to was thousands of strangers. And they didn’t even know anything about him. Sure they watched interviews and followed him on Twitter, but they didn’t know that Niall preferred his sandwiches sliced diagonally rather than vertically. They didn’t know that Niall’s fingers itched and tapped out songs when he was bored. They didn’t know that Niall stubbornly insisted on serving ice cream with a little spoon rather than an ice cream scoop. They didn’t know that Niall could never go to bed while fighting with someone because he was afraid that if he didn’t make up, something terrible would happen to them, and he would never have a chance to tell them that he loved them. They didn’t know that Niall compulsively cleaned when stressed. They didn’t know that Niall talked to himself in a Yorkshire accent when he was trying to concentrate. They didn’t know that Niall sometimes slipped into Irish when he was overwhelmed or particularly homesick. They didn’t know all of the little things that made Niall Niall. But Liam knew them. And so did the boys. Yet Niall trusted these strangers more than he trusted his own brothers. And the pain of it pierced Liam’s heart, wrapping its claws around his lungs, squeezing tighter and tighter, making it difficult for him to breathe.

He didn’t need to look at his boys to know that they, too, felt the aching pain in their chests. Under the guise of taking a sip of water, Liam managed to compose himself as the next Twitter Question lit the screen. “Harry, Liam, Zayn, and Louis, can you please sing a song to Niall?”

Without thinking, the words sprung to Liam’s lips, and within seconds his boys fell into place, filling in the gaps, singing with him. Wordlessly, Liam took the melody, Harry sang the low harmony, Zayn took the high harmony, and Louis joined Liam on the melody.

“Cold is the water. It freezes your already cold mind, already cold, cold mind. And death is at your doorstep and it will steal your innocence but it will not steal your substance. But you are not alone in this, and you are not alone in this. As brothers we will stand and we’ll hold your hand, hold your hand...”  They trailed off. Screams erupted from the crowd. Niall, turned to his right buried his head in Zayn’s chest, hiding the wetness that had appeared in his bright blue eyes. Liam felt his murmured, “I love you” to Zayn and his heart swelled.

“We love you too Nialler,” he whispered in his ear, rubbing his back gently. And Liam was filled with hope that perhaps things would get better. However, like many things as of late, Liam was proven wrong yet again.

Chapter End Notes
Song credit to Mumford and Sons for their two amazing songs, 'Holland Road,' and 'Timshel.' If you haven't heard these songs, honestly, they are spectacular and I highly recommend that you do listen to them.

I've said it before, but I really want to emphasize that this is an entirely fictitious story with no accuracy or bearing on reality whatsoever. I do not fool myself into thinking that I know One Direction or any of the people in this story and have characterized them correctly. This is purely a medium in which I can vent my feelings.

Also, just to make it clear, this story takes place in early 2012. Louis is 20, Zayn is 19, Liam is 18, Harry is 18, and Niall is 18. And because this is fiction and I am lazy, tour dates and other things/events that happened in 2012 will not have any accuracy whatsoever. So fair warning.

Lastly, be kind to yourself, patient and compassionate with others, smile, laugh, spend time with people who make you happy, and above all else, remember that "kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see." Do not give up. Do not lose faith. Stay strong. Each and every one of you are worth it. I'm going to leave with a wonderful quote, "To the world, you may be just one person, but to one person you may be the world."

Lots of Love,
-Lia

End Notes

Once more, I shall repeat myself: THIS IS A REPOST!
For those of you willing to brave the accents, the original version can be found here:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/1850959/chapters/3981751
I will be updating BOTH this version and the original version when I finally do get my lazy ass around to updating.

That aside, I'd love to hear what you think of the story :) Comments literally make my day...just putting that out there haha

I'll be truthful, updates will be sporadic.

Thank you so much for reading.

I want you to remember that if you ever need someone to talk to, or encourage you, or believe in you, or support you, or you just need a friend, I am always here for you. Please don't ever think that you are alone, because you are not. You can find me on tumblr at lia-is-in-love.tumblr.com

I love you all so much and I hope that each and every one of you find the happiness and peace in life that you deserve.

Lots of love,
-Lia
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!