**Hiding Place**

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**Hiding Place**

by [alivingfire](http://archiveofourown.org/users/alivingfire)

**Summary**

Louis never wanted a soulmate, didn’t really care for the whole Bonding thing at all, really. Enter Harry Styles, who’s wanted to be Bonded for as long as he could remember. With one fateful meeting in an X Factor bathroom, Louis gets a dagger on his arm and the realization that just because Harry is his soulmate doesn’t mean it’s mutual.

From the X Factor house to Madison Square Garden, from the Fountain Studios stage to stadiums across the world, Louis has to learn to love without losing himself completely, because someday his best friend will Bond to someone and replace Louis as the center of his universe. Meanwhile, Harry begins to think that maybe fate doesn’t actually know what it’s doing after all, because his other half has clearly been right in front of him the whole time. All he has to do now is convince Louis to give them a chance.

*Or, the canon compliant Harry and Louis love story from the very beginning, where the only difference is that the love between them is literally written on their skin, and there’s only so much they can hide.*
Just a few quick notes to (hopefully) make everything a little more clear before we get started:

- This is a soul bond/soulmate fic, NOT a/b/o. No one has a self-lubricating anus. At least as far as I'm aware.

- When I say canon compliant, I mean INTENSELY canon compliant. I got all of my dates for interviews/tweets/et cetera from here, here, here, and here. All recreated tweets are exactly what Harry or Louis said (minus some spelling mistakes when I couldn't help myself), and the pictures within the fic link to the originals. The only part of this story that is meant to not line up with reality is the tattoo timeline, the reason for which is explained early on.

- This fic is heavy on X Factor references in the first chapters. If you have a life and haven't been able to watch all thirty episodes of a competition from five years ago, you may not remember/recognize some of the smaller details or background characters. I hate feeling like I'm not getting a reference that the author of a fic assumes I've gotten, so I've linked all relevant interviews/tweets/performances within the story. You can definitely understand the story without watching those, but just in case you feel like you don't understand what specific moment I'm talking about, the link is there for you.

- Song titles and lyrics are in italics, POV switches are indicated by [...].

Thank you so much for reading!

EDIT: There is now a playlist for this fic here that you can listen to as you read.
Part One: long before we both thought the same thing

Chapter One: 9 July 2010 - 26 July 2010

9 July 2010

Harry Styles is sitting on the roof of his house contemplating the stars.
It’s 11:11 p.m. on the dot, and the world is quiet.

His mum would have a fit if she knew he was out here. After that time he fell off the roof trying to rescue an injured baby bird, she’s been terrified to let him get any higher than a few feet off the ground without being tethered to something or without following closely, ready to catch him if he falls.

“Can’t have my baby being hurt,” she always said, bopping Harry on the nose when he rolled his eyes.

(Gemma usually pretended to vomit at that display of sappiness, but she always was the more independent of the two of them. She doesn’t need Anne’s overwhelming affection to be happy, she just is. Happiness radiates from Gemma; Harry absorbs it.)

Harry tips his head back against the side of his house, the gentle sparkle of a starry night raining down on him. He’s always loved the stars. Cliché as it possibly could be, he likes that the heavens make him feel small. Galaxies and celestial bodies fly around in the air above him—how could his problems seem big compared to that? How could his tiny anxieties amount to anything? How could it be this hard, in the grand scheme of things, to pick one audition song?

The wind ruffles the pages of his journal; on the worn sheets are lines of carefully amassed text scribbled over several months of contemplation, and then crossed out and highlighted over and doodled around in the weeks following. Two full columns of songs he loves to choose from. He has preliminary X Factor auditions in fourteen hours. He should have chosen his song weeks ago, instead of pretending everything was taken care of and cheerfully ignoring it. He can’t breathe with the weight of his decision heavy on his shoulders. He can’t breathe with anxiety pressing in on his lungs. He can’t breathe.

Stars, look up at the stars. Miles upon miles away. Twinkling innocently and proof that there are bigger things in the universe than what song he’ll sing to the X Factor producers in less than twenty-four hours, even though they’re the same producers who could potentially pass him on to Simon Cowell and a chance at fame. The stars will keep shining even if he chooses the wrong song and performs it terribly and doesn’t even get a chance to perform on camera. They’ll also keep on twinkling if he doesn’t pick a song at all, and instead just screams at the producers in terror when it’s his turn until he’s escorted out.

Harry looks back down to his journal in his lap, a gift to himself with his first week’s wages at the bakery. It’s usually full of scribbled sort-of poetry and doodles, but now it’s open to the well-thumbed list of songs that is currently the bane of Harry’s existence. He uncaps his pen and crosses off a song by The Script and a couple of Elton hits that were put on the list more for sentimentality than anything else. He narrows his eyes and runs through a few choruses under his breath to ensure he still remembers all of the lyrics, striking through more and more song titles as he sings his way down the list. He scratches off a Rihanna song because he’s not sure he could do it justice and a Bryan Adams song because he can’t remember the words. After a few more minutes of progress, he’s down to only a couple of options.

His eyes flit back to three words toward the top of the potential song list, traced over with careful green highlighter ink. Isn’t She Lovely is an official Styles Family Staple, a favorite when he and Gemma dance around the kitchen and sing and joke to keep their mum company while she cooks dinner every night.

It’s more than that, though: Isn’t She Lovely makes him think of a pastel-tinted future: a baby girl in his arms and a (for the time being) nameless, faceless partner with their arm wrapped around Harry’s waist. A Marker on his skin, though he can’t even begin to guess at the pattern it will someday take.
A soulmate in his life. A family being built.

It’s 11:11 p.m., and Harry Styles is sixteen years old. He wants fame, yes, he wants recognition for his talent. He wants to make people happy and to bring strangers closer together. He wants to make a change in the world, even if it’s only in the worlds of a few people. But, more than anything else, he wants love. He wants a Bond that withstands the test of time, a soulmate who loves him even at his absolute worst—when his skin is all broken out and his hair is greasy and he’s cranky from lack of sleep. He wants someone to pour his affection into, to rebound his love back to him tenfold. And he wants it now.

He makes a wish on all the stars in the sky that he'll soon find his soulmate and begin his happily ever after. He doesn’t care that he’s not legally old enough to vote or volunteer for war or to drink, he’s old enough to know he’s ready to fall in love.

Pinpricks of light shine in the inky darkness of the sky, and Harry Styles sings Stevie Wonder into the sleepy silence.

...
have been thousands of recorded cases of Markers changing after a soulmate dies or is found being unfaithful, the most common effect being the Marker turning completely black.

Upon Bonding, couples hold a Bonding ceremony with friends and family, though Bonding ceremony customs and traditions vary from culture to culture. Bonding registration and documentation in most developed countries entitles the couple to medical and legal rights, share of household wealth, and tax benefits. Though legally contracted Bonds and childbirth are possible between two Unbonded people, it’s highly unusual and, in some societies, frowned upon. Since Bonding is triggered by a person’s full name being spoken, most people choose not to reveal their last names to friends or significant others until the relationship is deemed serious enough to consider the possibility of Bonding. Many religions prohibit sex outside of Bonds.

The music and film industries have created trillion-dollar genres based around soulmates. Schoolchildren dream of finding their perfect mates and planning their ideal Bonding ceremonies. The Bonding ceremony industry itself rakes in billions each year off overpriced desserts, dresses and tuxedos, flowers, and honeymoon packages.

To find one’s soulmate is to find one’s other half; or, at least, this is the message spread by priests and reverends, by parents of little girls and boys, by Hollywood, by the seamstress convincing people to buy her expensive, one-of-a-kind Bonding ceremony gown. Without a Bond, the world has decided, a person cannot be whole.

No one discusses the dark side of Bonding. How some soulmates never meet. How some soulmates do meet, but never Bond because one half of the Bonded pair dies or never speaks the other’s full name in their soulmate’s presence. How some people only half-Bond, where one person’s Marker appears and the other person’s does not, leaving the Bonded person in a state of limbo and unrequited love, their soulmate meant to be with someone else. How countless Bonds have been found to have been faked for political or financial reasons. How being Bonded doesn’t stop men and women from cheating or running away or deciding that being Bonded is too much responsibility.

Bonding may be what the majority of people look forward to most in life. But for those who have seen Bonding’s damaging effects, it’s a nightmare waiting to happen.

10 July 2010

There is nothing more ridiculous than the posturing that goes on in a group of entertainers trying to get on TV.

Louis can handle it the first time the camera crew swings through and the people around him crowd him out to shove their ugly mugs into the lens. Even the second time, it’s fine. Whatever. The third time, however, he grits his teeth and elbows back when he’s shoved out of the way. He can make a fair amount of noise when he feels like it, sure, but he can’t compete with a crowd made up entirely of people taller and older and so much louder than him. Instead he moves back, reaching out to run his thumb over the black silhouette of a butterfly on his mother’s wrist.

It’s an age-old balm to Louis’ irritated nerves. Since he was small, just a baby really, he’d sit on his mum’s lap and stroke the shape on her inner wrist when he was bored or upset. As he’d gotten older and realized what that shape was, what it meant, he probably should have stopped. But he never did —maybe because he’s a little selfish, or maybe because he wants to make the butterfly Marker mean something good for his mum rather than bad. Mostly because it’s familiar, like someone cracking knuckles when they’re nervous or clearing their throat before speaking in front of a crowd.
There’s a girl being interviewed just a few feet away, perched on a stool in the middle of the waiting, judging crowd. Her motions are exaggerated, her eyes wide in theatrical excitement in a way that is reminiscent of the drama club Louis was in back when he was still in school. He’d heard her sing for a different camera crew earlier, and she’s not bad. She’s also utterly unremarkable, just like everyone else except for the blue wave that seems painted onto her shoulderblade, rippling every time she moves her arm. A corresponding yellow sun is bright against the tan skin of the man standing proudly next to her, both of them wearing sleeveless shirts to make sure their Markers are visible. This interview will probably be aired when the show starts; everyone loves a good soulmate support story. Louis watches the two of them until the line moves, just a little, and the interviewer catches Louis’ eye and waves him forward. She flashes Louis a brief smile and consults her clipboard as he settles into place on the stool, his mum behind him and Stan and Hannah holding their place in line.

“Hello, Louis. A few quick questions and we’ll be out of your hair.”

She rattles off a rapid series of inquiries: his age, his influences, what brought him here today, who he’d brought with him. He stumbles through a few answers, feeling utterly unprepared.

“Erm, I’m eighteen. I don’t really know my influences? Like, I guess whatever’s on the radio.” His voice shakes and he looks to the interviewer for support, though her terse nod is anything but reassuring. “That’s my friend Hannah and my other mate Stan over there, and this is my mum, Jay.”

The cameraman pans slightly to catch his mum in frame, and immediately zooms in on her butterfly wrist. She automatically links her arm through Louis’ and steps closer, smiling.

“Hello,” the interviewer says again. “Is your Bondmate here today? We could get a nice shot of the family before we head to our next contestant.” Louis feels his stomach drop, and his mum’s smile turns tight.

“No, he’s not around. Sorry.”

The interviewer’s eyes widen infinitesimally and after a stilted apology, Louis is told he can get back in line. Louis sighs, because now his mum will be all anxious and there’s no way his couple of sentences are interesting enough to end up on the air. He watches as they move to the next boy in line, tall and skinny with Justin Bieber hair and a self-confident handshake. His answers are long and well-articulated, just shaky enough that he seems confident but excited; his smiles are wide and sincere and make his eyes crinkle in delight. The camera loves him. The interviewer even laughs at one of his jokes.

The Bieber wannabe moves back to the line after a few more minutes, and Louis, for a lack of anything better to do, keeps watching as an older woman with thick white hair is interviewed, then a girl in her mid-twenties. He’s just looking away when a bright laugh catches his ear, the curve of a dimpled grin and a head of curly chocolate locks. The line shifts forward again and Louis loses sight of the interview station and the person being interviewed, and he shakes his head to clear the sound of a loud, throaty laugh.

Next to Louis, his mother is still muttering about invasive questions. “The nerve,” she says, rubbing absently at her wrist, and Louis thanks every star in the sky when Stan does his best friend duty and sweeps Jay away to find some water and walk off some steam.

There’s hours to go until he even gets to audition, and at this point Louis can’t wait until it’s over.

Harry is in awe. The X Factor backstage… it’s just so cool. There are people everywhere, bustling
about with their earpieces and paperwork and slightly manic looks on their faces. Camera cords trail along the ground as nervous contestants tremble their way through more interviews. It’s sweaty and hot and a little grimey but it’s fantastic, the edgy energy of lots of loud, talented people trapped in a large room together with no outlet for their energy. It’s the greatest thing Harry’s ever been a part of.

He’s tapping his toes and watching as his name and contestant number get closer and closer to the top of the performance list, which is displayed on a couple of screens at the northernmost end of the room. He twiddles his thumbs, jokes with Gemma and his best friend Jonny, endures his mum’s fussing and playing with his hair. He makes conversation with everyone around as the crowd shifts and moves, striking up a hilarious joke contest with a loud blonde girl a few years older than him and drinking in buckets of advice from a fifty-year-old opera singer. He paces in tight circles and gives multiple interviews to different cameramen and waits and waits and waits some more.

But minutes turn to hours, waiting turns to worrying, and the adrenaline drowns the happy butterflies in his stomach and replaces them with upset bees.

“Bathroom!” he announces loudly when the buzzing in his veins starts to drown out the noise around him. He slides through the crowd and follows some signs to a back hallway bathroom. When he steps inside, the sweet bliss of silence is soothing to his poor ears. He leans back against the door, just trying to breathe as deeply as he can while he has a moment to himself.

It happens quickly: in the space of a few heavenly silent seconds, Harry somehow finds himself clinging to the sinks, legs akimbo against the tiled floor. The back of his head is bursting with pain, his vision exploding in yellow and black. The only thought bouncing in his head is the one that tells him choosing a door as a resting place was probably a mistake.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” the panicked voice shrieks. Whoever it is that kind of assaulted him with a door is extremely loud. “You’re talking really slowly, I think I gave you brain damage!”

Harry frowns. “I always talk like this.”

There’s a moment of silence, then an embarrassed giggle.

“Hi?” someone asks, presumably the one that bashed his skull in with the back of the bathroom door. Apparently they piece the scene together, because they suddenly let out a panicked yelp. “Oh, shit! I’m so sorry, mate!”

“Uh… it’s fine.” Harry says. The bathroom lights are very, very bright. And also maybe stabbing him through his eyelids. But really, everything’s fine.

“Oops,” he giggles to himself dazedly, vision swimming.

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Harry frowns. “I always talk like this.”

There’s a moment of silence, then an embarrassed giggle.

“Oh my God.”

Harry blinks again to clear his vision, and finds that he’s nose-to-nose with a very tan, very blue-eyed stranger. It seems highly unfair that Harry's face is basically pressed up against the face of the most attractive boy he’s ever met, and that this fantastic turn of events could only occur while he's kneeling in pain on a bathroom floor and completely unable to enjoy the experience. He grins dopily, the boy grins back, and then their laughter is echoing off the bathroom walls.

“Honestly,” the boy says, offering a hand and helping Harry to his feet, “you shouldn’t just loiter in doorways. It’s going to cause you actual brain damage some day.”

“And then I’ll talk even slower,” Harry says, and feels his lips tug up when the boy laughs delightedly.
“Exactly.” He turns to a urinal but doesn’t move to use it, just staring into the white porcelain like he expects it to do a trick. Harry raises a single eyebrow when the boy looks his way, and all he gets is a shrug in response. “Told my mum I had to wee, but I think I actually just needed to get away from her.”

“Oh, right. Parental escapism is why I’m here as well,” Harry says, nodding. He leans against the nearest stall. “It’s just so—”

“Loud,” the boy finishes for him, and Harry laughs weakly.

“Yeah. And—”

“Scary.”

“Terrifying.”

“Definitely.”

It’s quiet, the both of them grinning down at the floor. Harry scuffs the toe of his boot along the tile grout.

“I heard you practicing, out in the main room,” the boy says suddenly, thumbing over his shoulder. “You’re really good, you’re for sure getting through to the next round.” Harry feels his face flush.

“Oh, thanks!” he says breathlessly, and then automatically coughs because wow, Styles, be cool. “I really hope so, it’s a great opportunity.”

“Yeah, you’re something special,” the boy says, nodding decisively. “You’re gonna go far, kid.”

Harry laughs again. The sound echoes back to him as a shrill cackle off the tiled walls, because Harry is about as cool as a whistling tea kettle. But, “The Offspring?”

“Dance, fucker, dance,” the boy agrees solemnly, and Harry doesn’t care that his laugh is too loud, because this may be the funniest person he’s ever met. It helps when he gets a sunny smile in return. “Let’s take a picture!”

“Here?” Harry asks, gesturing at the bland bathroom wall behind him.

“Sure, why not? Someday I’m gonna need proof I met the biggest star in the world in a backstage bathroom. And I can use it as blackmail when you’re rich so you can buy me things.”

Harry laughs again and they pose for increasingly silly pictures for the next few minutes, ending with one where the blue-eyed stranger is licking his dimple and Harry is rolling his eyes in exaggerated bliss.

There’s a knock at the door and a harried-looking man with a badge and a clipboard leans his head into the bathroom. “Harry Styles?” he asks, glasses slightly askew.

Harry jumps a little—he’s never heard his last name used so casually up until today, mostly because he’s told very few people what it actually is. This isn’t the real world, though, it’s show business, and every person affiliated with the show who’s spoken with him so far has used his last name. It’s usually a small thrill, hearing someone else say his full name for the first time. It doesn’t happen often, but it always sends as shiver zipping through his limbs when it happens to him, typically wiping his mind clean of whatever it was he was about to say, and what he just heard, and everything else, really. It’s not quite as exciting when the fourth assistant in a row uses it like it’s no
big deal, though.

“That’s me,” he answers.

“You’re on next, your family is at the front of the line.”

Harry gulps, the calm serenity brought upon him by his bathroom trip fleeing right along with the breath in his lungs. “Great,” he says eventually, but the man is already long gone. He fixes his fringe in the mirror, and turns to face the other boy, who automatically sticks out his hand.

“It was nice to meet you. Good luck…”

“Harry Styles,” he says, shaking the the boy’s hand and feeling more mature than he ever has before. His full name sounds strange rolling out of his mouth, but he has the strangest feeling that the sunshiney boy next to him should hear it. “Thanks.”

“Louis Tomlinson,” the boy says in return, along with a grin. There’s a loud noise outside the door, so Harry nearly misses it when Louis says, “And you’re very welcome, Harold Styles.”

Harry’s brain goes blank for just a moment, an echo of Louis’ pretty voice wrapping around his last name filling all the space in his brain; it’s not very exciting when random assistants say it, but Harry likes the way Styles sounds as it drops off of Louis’ tongue.

He does feel a tiny swoop of disappointment, though, when he realizes that Louis said his last name and nothing wildly dramatic happened like a Marker appearing on his skin. And he called him Harold, which was weird. But, before he can contemplate that line of thought any further, the assistant returns to pull him away from the nicest person Harry has ever met in a bathroom.

... The door swings shut and Louis collapses against it, forgetting all the advice he’d just given Harry about lingering in doorways and potential brain damage, feeling as though his heart will completely beat through his chest and fall to the grimy floor. He hasn’t said anyone’s full name in years, not since he and Stan had whispered each others’ names out loud a few years back and winced in anticipation of potentially Bonding. He doesn’t know who was more relieved at the lack of Markers appearing, him or Stan.

Not that he doesn’t love Stan, he does. It would just be a little like being Bonded to his brother, so he’s happy just to have him as a friend.

But apparently Louis just goes around telling random kids his full name in bathrooms now, decorum and self-restraint be damned. And he said the guy’s name in return! Sure, the guy was cute in a dimpled, baby-faced charmer kind of way, and sure, he has the voice of a gravel-throated angel and is probably going to win this entire competition, but still. It doesn’t matter that Louis had the fleeting thought of I don’t think I’d mind being Bonded to him because he’s not, he said Harry’s name and nothing happened and that’s it, he’s officially the rudest person ever and he didn’t even get a soulmate out of the ordeal.

Louis shakes away all lingering thoughts of wide smiles and curly hair and makes his way back to his little cheering section. His mother is standing on tiptoe, presumably searching for him above the crowd. When she catches sight of him, she waves frantically.

“Louis, love, you’re almost next!” she exclaims, and Louis glances up at the list of performers blinking on the screen nearest the stage. Sure enough, right under 165998 - Harry is 155204 - Louis. He feels his knees lock up in pure, unfiltered fear, and he coughs at the feeling of something trying to
“Right,” he croaks. The same assistant that had barged into the bathroom to collect Harry finds their group and pulls them forward, away from the crowds “backstage” and to the actual backstage, just behind the curtain. Louis does another quick interview next to his mum and his mates, and then everyone except him is hustled to another location to be recorded for reactions as they watch him perform.

Louis grips his microphone tight in his hand, but he may as well be holding a bar of soap with how sweaty his palms are. It’s just him and his thoughts and a screen beside him, showing the empty stage. A few dozen feet in front of him is the assistant and, he assumes, Harry, but the stage lights are too bright to see anything but his silhouette, his curly hair his only identifier. There must be some kind of signal, because the assistant pushes Harry forward and suddenly he’s there on the screen next to Louis, stumbling onto the stage.

Louis can’t help his grin as he watches the boy field questions from the judges.

“Erm. I… work in a bakery,” he says at one point, and Louis giggles into his palm at Harry’s slow syllables, as though each word is weighed for its true worth before he says it. Louis thinks it’s adorable.

The crowd laughs at the cute boy on stage, and Harry seems to settle a bit. His grin is the slightest bit brighter when Louis Walsh asks him who he sings for.

“What, like my inspirations?” Harry drawls, half his mouth quirked in a small grin. “Well, there’s my mum and my sister, they’re both here with me.”

The judges smile politely, and Louis can see Harry casting his mind around for something interesting to add.

“I also have a biggest fan, we just met backstage,” Harry says, and Louis feels his stomach flip. Oh, Christ, Harry’s going to tell everyone how embarrassing Louis was backstage and then he’ll have to immediately follow him out there. That’s, God, that’s mortifying. He’s eighteen, he’s not supposed to be swooning over sixteen-year-olds with dimples and baby fat. Especially sixteen-year-olds who are decidedly not his soulmate.


“Yes, he’s another contestant. We met in the loo.”

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“Yes, he’s another contestant. We met in the loo.”

“And who is this biggest fan?”

Louis puts both hands over his face, blushing so hard he feels like even his palms are hot with embarrassment.

“His name is Louis Tomlinson.”

Louis’ left arm burns as though it’s been touched with a hot poker. It hurts, fuck, it hurts so bad he has to double over to catch his breath. The heat blooms outward from a thin line up the front of his forearm, and Louis pushes his fist against his mouth to keep from screaming. His microphone drops to the floor, entirely forgotten. He shoves his sleeve up to try and figure out what the hell is going on —

And stops dead when he sees the black edge of something on his forearm. Something that definitely wasn’t there when he got dressed this morning.
No, Christ, no.

Not here, not now.

Not him.

Louis needs his mum. Immediately. He tries to rush around the corner to the viewing area but a hand stops him. The assistant looks him over with kind eyes.

“Nervous?” he asks, and Louis shakes his head frantically but it doesn’t matter, the guy is much bigger than him and has no problem dragging Louis back up to his spot and his abandoned mic. “Don’t worry, it happens to everyone. It’s only a few minutes, and the whole thing’s done.” He smiles, but Louis can’t return it. He accepts the microphone again automatically, his arm moving independently of his brain.

“I-” he starts, but then clamps his teeth together. He can’t tell this random stranger what just happened, not before he’s even told his mum. And definitely not before he’s even sure what actually happened.

Maybe it’s a fluke. Maybe Louis got a- got a cramp, or got stung by a bug, or scratched himself, it could have been anything, really, and maybe he just imagined seeing something black on his arm. He slowly pushes his sleeve up again, hiding it from the view of the assistant and the backstage cameras. About six inches above his wrist he stops, because he hadn’t imagined it. There it is, the edge of some kind of image, big enough that he can’t see the entire design without pushing his sleeve up any higher.

Oh, God, he’s been Marked. It’s real. It actually happened.

And his soulmate, the goofiest, prettiest kid he’s ever met, isn’t Bonded back to him.

Harry is still on stage, and it can’t have been more than a few seconds since Louis’ entire world was turned upside down because his singing is just beginning to reverberate through the room. He’s good, his version of Isn’t She Lovely scratchy and youthful but clearly performed with loads of talent, and he’ll go through to the next round, no problem.

Louis suddenly feels like his wrists have been tied to two cars that both take off in opposite directions: he wants to both get through to the next round alongside Harry and to be sent home to never see Harry ever again.

Harry finishes his allotted minute of singing, and the judges are all smiles. Louis Walsh does his customary bit of disagreement over Harry’s experience. When the crowd boos, Harry adds a tiny little rebellious “boo” of his own and the entire room falls a little bit more in love with him. Louis included, against his very stubborn will.

He’s dying a little, like he’s been given a thousand papercuts that are going to bleed him out but take decades to do it. It hurts, and even though he’ll live for now, it’s lethal all the same.

Louis Walsh says no, but Simon and the guest judge say yes. Harry Styles is through to the next round. He beams and waves and leaves the stage, and suddenly it’s Louis’ turn.

The walk across the stage takes approximately a thousand years, and Louis is winded with terror by the time he reaches the X marking the middle. He can’t hear anything over the pounding of his pulse reverberating against his eardrums. He pivots to face the judges, the darkened faces of the crowd, and cameras that are recording his every move for anything interesting to broadcast to the nation.
His arm still burns, so he he tugs at his sleeve.

(He’s hiding his Marker. It’s been three minutes since he Bonded to a relative stranger who didn’t Bond back. *He still isn’t okay.*)

“Hello,” he says, and he prays a fervent thanks for drama classes that ingrained facial control into his life. His voice only shakes a little. “I’m Louis.”

The crowd puts two and two together and giggles break out, and the sound is so much louder out here that Louis immediately starts sweating.

“Ah, our famous superfan,” Simon says, and Louis tries to shrug. Nonchalance is far beyond his reach at this point, but he can aim for honest.

“He’s good, you can’t blame me.”

“No, we can’t,” the guest judge, Nicole, smiles. “Tell us about yourself, Louis.”

“Oh, well, I’m eighteen, from Doncaster.”

“And your family?”

“My mum is here backstage, and I have four little sisters.”

No one asks the follow-up question, and so the whereabouts of his dad remain undisclosed. But the crowd shifts restlessly, as though the mention of an Unbonded mother is making them uncomfortable. Instead of the hot flash of anger Louis would normally feel on his mum’s behalf, he just feels empty. That’s his life, now. He’s Unbonded too.

Well, half-Bonded, if he wants to get technical about it. He doesn’t.

Emptiness that he’d barely held back while he waited behind the curtain makes a break past his defences, seeping into his bones and weighing him down like stones in his pockets. He’s drowning and there’s not even any water in sight.

He can’t talk anymore, just nodding when the judges tell him to go ahead. He’s being recorded for national television, he’s in a room with three celebrities, thousands of audience members, and a whole horde of people backstage watching his every move for weaknesses. He can’t say anything, he can’t scream, he can’t cry.

So he sings.

His first line is shaky, and he fears that his aching ribs won’t let him get through this with any sort of dignity. But then the weight in his chest breaks through his ribs and leaks out through his voice. Louis sings *Hey There Delilah* and it’s no longer about hope for a future with a pretty girl, but instead about lost love, and wearying unhappiness, and crushing inevitability. Tears prick at his eyes as he sings *it’s what you do to me* and he hopes, just a little, that his own little heartbreaker is watching Louis drown onstage.

Somehow, miraculously, he makes it to the end of the song. He tries to smile, tries to listen for his fate, but he can’t really hear what anyone’s saying over the rushing of blood in his ears. He nods when the judges look like they’ve said something serious, and smiles when they smile. He hears only three words:

Yes. Yes. Yes.
He’s going to bootcamp.

Part of the backstage area is cordoned off specifically for those who have been voted through to the next round. There are several crews around to do even more interviews, and bottles of water and snacks. There’s also a large screen set up so they can watch the other contestants, and this is what Harry makes a beeline for as soon as he’s hugged his mum and sister and jumped up and down just a little to celebrate getting through.

Louis is there on screen already, standing center stage with his nice flippy hair and shiny blue eyes and… well. That’s about all there is in common with the charming, bouncy Louis he met in the bathroom and the Louis out on stage now.

Harry feels a twinge in his gut for his new friend. He looks utterly lost, eyes caught in the mid-distance and dazed, hands shaking so hard his microphone makes little noises each time it scrapes his shirt. Maybe he’s just nervous, but it looks so much worse than a bit of nerves.

The first thing Louis says, though, is that Harry is good. And yeah, Harry is pretty proud of his voice, but Louis says he can’t be blamed for being a fan and Harry feels a bit like he’s swallowed a star. Gemma elbows him hard and sends him an evil smile.

“Someone’s got a cruuuush,” she sings, and Harry doesn’t pull his eyes away from the screen when he flips her off. She huffs, and their mother tuts, but he’s too busy to notice.

Louis starts singing, and Harry winces a little at the first missed note. But something happens after that, a switch is flipped, and suddenly the emotion in Louis’ voice is dialled up to eleven and each word is heartbreaking, gut wrenching. Harry’s always been a bit sensitive to the emotions of others, and tears gather in his eyelashes before he even realizes it. He’s not alone, though; nearly everyone paying attention backstage is in the same state, and cameras in the audience catch several people wiping wet streaks from their faces.

The song ends, and the judges seem stunned.

“Wow, Louis, that was…” Nicole starts, but the crowd stands and cheers over the end of her sentence. Harry beams, happy for his friend—he got a standing ovation at auditions, that’s amazing—but Louis seems unmoved. His eyes are resting somewhere just above the judges’ table and his smile is slightly vacant. He keeps tugging on his left sleeve.

“Louis Walsh leans forward. “Louis, I wasn’t sold at first. You had a rocky start there, and I was about to make the same argument about you that I made about Harry that went before you, that you weren’t ready.” Boos flood the air around him, and he waves them away. “But, but, by the end of the song you changed my mind. You have some talent, and you’re clearly here to win.” Louis nods again, but stays silent.

Next is Simon. “Louis, I like you. You need a little vocal coaching and we need to do something about those nerves, but once you hit your stride you stayed with it. Work on getting comfortable, work on holding your notes, and you’ll go far.”

They vote, and unanimously send him through. Harry cheers, high fives his mum, and turns back to
the screen to see Louis nod once more and say a tiny “thank you” into the mic.

Harry, feeling fizzy with excitement for himself and his new friend, jumps the rope and skips backstage. Louis is just reaching the end of the stage, and Harry watches him drop the mic with a low thud and immediately bury his face in the shoulder of a woman who Harry can only assume is his mum. Two other people stand nearby, looking confused.

Harry creeps forward, suddenly unsure of his welcome and feeling like he’s intruding.

“Louis?” he ventures, his voice small. Louis’ back stiffens.

“Hey, Harry,” he says, voice cheerful and yet somehow wrong. He lifts his face from his mum’s neck and his eyes are red and puffy.

“Congrats?” Harry hadn't meant to make it a question, but it seems appropriate now with Louis looking like he’d just been given the worst news of his life, not three yeses after a standing ovation from his first ever X Factor performance.

“Thanks, man. You too, congrats.”

“Thanks.”

It’s awkward. Harry shifts from foot to foot, feeling incredibly out of his depth. Louis is looking everywhere but at Harry. Whoever followed Louis out on stage has begun belting out Celine Dion and the sound of it floats between them in the air like choking dust.

Near, far, wherever you are

Louis finally breaks the silence. “Right, erm. We- we have to go.”

Harry snaps his eyes up, a little hurt.

“You aren’t staying? There’s an afterparty for everyone that got through today.”

Once more, you open the door

“I know, I just. Can’t.”

“But.”

“Sorry, Harry.”

And my heart will go on and on

Louis is still wrapped up in his mum’s arms and his eyes are still glassy and Harry’s insides still ache because this should be a happy moment, right? It’s a good thing. Louis and his group are making their way past him and he cannot take it, it’s not fair that his new friend is sad on such a good day, so he jogs forward and catches the back of Louis’ shirt.

“Louis, can I get your phone number?” Louis turns around slowly, his eyes wide and red. “Please? Since, you know, we’ll be at bootcamp. Together. I mean, not together. Because technically we’re competing against each other? But I still want to be friends.” Harry feels the flush of embarrassment, but keeps going. “And I can be your biggest fan too, since you’re mine. I mean. Sorry.”

Love can touch us one time
And last for a lifetime
“I… yeah. Um. Sure.”

“Really?” Harry squeaks, feeling a smile breaking across his face. Louis doesn’t smile back, but there’s a bit of an answering twitch at the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah, course. Here, lemme see your phone.”

Harry doesn’t know what happened in the twenty minutes between he and Louis taking selfies in the bathroom and him turning into this, this quiet boy whose hands tremble when they brush Harry’s and whose quiet sniffles can still be heard over the Titanic theme being belted onstage. Harry doesn’t know what it was, and Louis doesn’t say, but they’re exchanging numbers and Harry feels a little bubble of hope that bootcamp might be fun with someone he knows by his side.

He watches Louis walk away when they’re done, nearly propped up between his mum and the boy who’d introduced himself as Stan. As Harry watches them leave, he inexplicably feels a little like he’s watching a good percentage of his internal organs walking away from him.

And in the background, Celine’s signature song is being warbled into the rafters.

Near, far, wherever you are
I believe that the heart does go on

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14 July 2010

The thing about being half-Bonded to someone, Louis discovers, is that the majority of your time is spent hating that other person for doing this to you. It’s not a front-of-the-mind thing, more like a rock in your shoe: it kills at first, but eventually the pain fades to the background. It hurts, that realization that you’re not the perfect match for your own perfect match. You hate them for making you re-examine everything you thought you knew about yourself. You hate them for dredging up every insecurity and hidden fear. You hate them; Louis hates Harry, but at the same time he really, actually doesn’t. Beyond the logic that implies that Harry did not force Louis to Bond with him, Louis just cannot find it in him to hate the friendliest, sweetest human on the planet.

Because, Louis has also discovered, that is who he is Bonded to. His soulmate is a boy who apologizes when it rains because rain seems to make people unhappy, although he personally believes it feels like the world is having a nice cool shower. Harry texts Louis pictures of a range of baby animals, from cats to dogs to elephants to rabbits, because he isn’t sure which is Louis’ favorite and he wants to cover all his bases. Harry Motherfucking-Ray-Of-Sunshine Styles adds a kiss to the end of every text and doesn’t seem to have let Louis’ lack of replies to any of his fifty-seven messages dampen his spirits or enthusiasm.

Another one buzzes an alert to Louis’ phone as he contemplates life and irony and his complete lack of good luck.

(10:34 a.m.) **Harry:** Good morning! x

Louis sighs, hates Harry for a few seconds, feels bad about it and takes it back, and rolls over. It’s past time for him to get up, anyway, and at this point he’s just putting off the inevitable.

He has three items on his to-do list for today, and as it’s been four days since he returned home from auditions he can’t really make any excuses to hide in his room any longer. His sisters seem to think he’s contracted some sort of contagious disease (Variations of “Lottie told me you have measles but
that’s not a real thing, right Lou? Measles aren’t real, right?* have been shouted through his bedroom
door multiple times) and Louis still hasn’t answered any of Stan’s calls or well-meaned texts. He also
hasn’t showered in three days and has only eaten whatever his mum leaves on his nightstand while
he pretends to be asleep. He’s pretty sure it’s been a full day since he even bothered to get out of bed,
which is an issue.

He still hasn’t looked at the Marker on his arm.

The thing is, Louis had spent the drive home from auditions and the first night back home in
Doncaster being horribly, terribly upset at a large number of people and things: himself, Harry, X
Factor itself for forcing them into a room together, Simon Cowell for creating the damn show, the
French just because he felt like it, and, lastly, whatever deity decided it was a good idea to link
people together through highly noticeable tattoo-like Markers that appear instantaneously (and
painfully, though no one ever saw fit to warn others about that part) on their skin. That first very long
night was spent analyzing every conceivable flaw Louis could find inside himself that wouldn’t
allow his soul or conscience or chemicals or whatever to align with Harry’s and cause him to Bond
to Louis in return. After that horrible self-reflection period he moved on to mourning, soaking his
pillow through with tears until he had to flip it just to find a dry spot to cry some more.

Louis had used the next day to go over his options, and while it really wasn’t much of a decision, he
wanted to take his time thoroughly examining each possibility. Essentially, he could either not return
to X Factor and head to uni in a few weeks for the fall term (never really an option, as school is the
worst and Louis really, really wants to be famous), he could call/text/smoke signal/send a carrier
pigeon to Harry and let him know the situation and get his input (again, no. What hell would be
worse than telling the happiest kid on the planet that he ruined your life by not being your
soulmate?), or he could go to bootcamp, pretend nothing strange happened and the post-audition
breakdown was all due to nerves, and that the Marker was actually a tattoo he’d had all along.

It absolutely sucks, but the choice is obvious.

With that done and dusted, he came up with his checklist, which brings us to today.

1. Actually look at the Marker on his arm, seeing as how it will never go away and he has to pretend
   he’s not only familiar with it, but that he’d went and had it tattooed onto him on purpose.
2. Tell his sisters he isn’t dying of some as-of-yet unidentified illness, and then also tell them he’s
   half-Bonded to someone they’ve never met and probably never will meet, at least as long as he gets a
   say.
3. Have a bit of a cry with his mum.
4. Gather up and pack all his long-sleeved shirts, because he’s going to pretend his Marker is a tattoo
   and practice that backstory until it seems natural, but getting away with not talking about it at all
   would be even better.

So yeah, busy day. He’ll also probably bathe at some point.

The first item on the list is the easiest and also the hardest. Louis doesn’t want to know what the
physical representation of Harry Styles is where it’s appeared under the veneer of his skin. He
doesn’t want a symbol of unrequited love so blatantly on his arm; he never wanted a soulmate to
begin with. Never wanted to be Bonded. Never wanted anything except maybe to perform in front of
people and have some fun with some mates. But that hope has been flung out the window and here
he is, Bonded, Marked, and wearing three-day-old Depression Sweatpants.

Louis scoffs at his own thought process: drama runs deep in the Tomlinson veins, but even this is too
much. He needs to man the fuck up and just do it. Louis sits up (dislodging days worth of crumbs
and dirty socks and all manner of other unpleasant things) and strips off his sweater, allowing himself
one deep breath to steel himself.

It’s a dagger.

The majority of Louis’s brain freezes immediately at the unfamiliar new addition to his body. It looks like a traditional sailor tattoo, all bold lines and subtle shading. It runs crookedly across his forearm, the point angled towards his inner wrist. It’s pretty badass, if he’s being kind to himself, and in this rare instance he actually is. It’s something he may have actually considered as a real tattoo one day when he was older and bolder and Abercrombie & Fitch did not take up the biggest percentage of space in his wardrobe.

The tiny part of Louis’ brain that is still functioning after the somehow still-shocking appearance of his Marker is screaming in terror. This isn’t some tiny silhouette or text Marker that he might be able to hide or cover with some sparse makeup now and then, this thing is fucking huge. He’ll never be able to wear anything short-sleeved again without constantly being reminded of this dagger on his skin. He’s fucked, completely and utterly fucked.

Okay, judging by the stampede of girls that barrel into his room, Louis’ screaming hadn’t just been internal.

It’s silent when his sisters all notice the Marker. Then, as things tend to do in households containing teenage girls, everything erupts all at once.

Phoebe and Daisy throw themselves onto the bed, taking turns prodding at Louis’ arm and screeching questions at him.

“Did you get a tattoo?”

“Mum’s gonna kill you!”

“Can I get a tattoo?”

“Why did you get a knife? It’s so scary!”

Fizzy has slumped against the doorframe, her hands covering her mouth as if holding in screams.

“Why didn’t you get it in color?”

Lottie is nowhere to be seen, but the clattering of footsteps on the stairs proves that she, like Louis, prefers to run rather than deal with avalanches of emotion. Meanwhile, Daisy and Phoebe are still screaming.

“Yeah, pink would have been so cool!”

“Or red!”

“Yeah, red!”

“Alright!” Louis shouts over the din. “Sibling meeting in ten minutes. I will meet you all downstairs on the sofa after I fetch Lottie.” None of his sisters move, though they are all at least quiet now, the twins pouting petulantly and Fizzy’s fist scrubbing dully against her eyes. “Go!” he cries, and they scatter like birds.

Louis puts his head in his hands and allows himself just one second to fall apart. A horrible, dark-humored portion of his brain spouts that it was quicker than he thought it’d be to cross two items off
his checklist, though the rest of him hates himself for letting his sisters find out he’s Bonded in the worst way possible.

And then he sucks it up, throws on a sweater, and makes his way to the backyard where, as he knew she would be, Lottie is sitting up in the old tree in the backyard.

Louis hoists himself up next to her with the help of years of muscle memory, his foot easily finding the knot that serves as the first foothold. When he settles on the thickest branch next to Lottie, the silence swallows them for a little while. Louis feels his heart pounding in his ears and his throat and even his stomach. He didn’t think it’d be this hard, to tell people that the Tomlinson version of a nightmare has come true.

But Lottie had been there through the whole original mess that caused his distaste and fear of Bonding in the first place. Louis and Lottie were each other’s lifelines, simultaneously the people drowning and attempting to pull each other to shore. Fizzy was there too, of course, but she and the twins were far too young to remember thrown plates and shrieked insults and choked sobs from their mother’s room at night. Fizzy and Daisy and Phoebe had slept completely through the terrible final night, the one Louis had spent with his arms wrapped around Lottie as she sobbed into his shoulder, both of them huddled behind his coats in his wardrobe and listening to the car drive away.

Louis and Lottie, and their mum as well, they don’t see Bonding as a blessing. They see Markers as manacles rather than symbols of love.

He swallows hard, any words of consolation he might have had for his sister dying terrible deaths in his throat. They sit in the quiet of a Yorkshire morning and breathe, because breathing is key to survival and surviving is what they do.

Slowly, cautiously, Lottie reaches for Louis’ left arm. She pushes his sleeve back and they both stare at the dagger.

“It’s not… what I expected,” Lottie says quietly, and Louis is still just trying to breathe, so it sounds a little like she’s shouting at him while he’s submerged underwater. But he nods, and clenches and unclenches his fist a few times.

“I know,” he says. “The whole thing is pretty unexpected.”

“Yeah.”

It’s quiet again, but it’s a better kind of quiet. Birds chatter overhead, a car drives through the neighborhood. The old lady from two doors down shouts to turn the damn telly off, Robert, and help me with these groceries. Louis breathes in, and Lottie breathes out.

She extends a blue nail-polished finger and traces the outline of the weapon that will forever be on her brother’s arm.

“It’s a little cool,” she admits grudgingly, and Louis chokes a laugh. “At least it doesn’t seem to be anything sappy.”

“Right. Better than their name inside a heart.”

“Or an infinity sign with their initials.”

“Or a quote, God, can you imagine?”

“No lies, just love.”
“Love conquers all.”

“What was that one we saw when we were shopping, do you remember? Like half a smiley face that lined up with the other person’s when they held hands.”

Louis snorts and Lottie giggles into her palm, and maybe everything will be okay.

Inside the house, Phoebe and Daisy and Fizzy are sitting quietly on the sofa, simultaneously silent for probably the first time ever. When Louis leads Lottie into the room, he holds up a hand before Daisy and Phoebe can launch into another interrogation avalanche. He breathes in, clasps his hands together, and:

“Girls, this isn’t a tattoo. It’s a Marker.”

It hurts, watching Fizzy’s expression collapse again. She’d suspected, of course, but Louis confirming what she’d feared is horrible, a punch to his already sensitive gut. The twins don’t know how to react, their little brows furrowed as they take in Fizzy’s tears, Lottie’s hand wrapped tightly around Louis’ wrist.

Daisy stands and approaches Louis like she would a feral cat. She touches his Marker again and looks at Phoebe, who reaches out to touch it as well.

“This doesn’t change anything,” Louis says, mostly to fill the silence. “It doesn’t have to, and I won’t let it.”

“So you aren’t Bonded?” Phoebe asks tremulously, channeling the despairing emotion in the room.

“Well,” he sighs. “Technically I am, yes. But I’m, um. The only one that did.”

Fizzy chokes. “You half-Bonded?” Louis nods, hating that he can’t just say he Bonded like a normal person, giving his sisters some kind of hope that Bonding doesn't always equal bad news. But he can’t, and there’s no hope at all being half-Bonded. Tears swim in his eyes as well, but he clears his throat and pushes them back.

“Who is it?” Daisy asks fiercely. Phoebe nods sharply beside her. “We can tell them that wasn’t very nice of them.”

Louis huffs a laugh and gathers his two littlest sisters to his chest, thanking whoever is up there for their innocent ferocity, like baby tigers squeaking little roars. “I’m not telling.”

“But-”

“No, Phoebes. I’m not telling any of you, because I don’t want you hating anyone on my behalf. Especially since they didn’t ask for this to happen either.”

Lottie leans into Louis’ right side, and Fizzy moves to his left. He presses kisses to all their foreheads as Lottie whispers into his sleeve, “It isn’t fair.”

“No,” Louis agrees. “It isn’t. But we’ll be okay.”

He slips his phone out of his pocket, sighs, and opens Harry’s string of unanswered texts. If he’s doing this, he’s going to do it right.
Later, Louis does some research so his fake-tattoo backstory seems legitimate.

Daggers, apparently, symbolize the harsh reality of life. They represent the strength needed to endure, and can be a reminder to stay strong or keep at it.

The irony of it all is enough to send him into hysterics.

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20 July 2010

Harry thought he knew what to expect from bootcamp. A little singing, a little dancing, some nerve-wracking waiting, sure. But this? This was not expected.

Rain is thundering down on Wembley Stadium, and even though the roof has been closed as much as it can and the stage is protected, the downpour is causing issues in other areas. Currently, all the contestants in the Boys category are following a vocal coach like lost ducklings, their assigned practice room having flooded from a forgotten open window. All three of the other categories are already deep into practicing their group songs, and Harry is shaky and nervous at the thought of being unprepared in front of the judges.

It doesn’t help that he’s soaking wet, because while the stage and seats had been protected from the rain, the outside edges of the stadium floor hadn’t and that’s where they’d been corralled for a few minutes until their vocal coach had found them to lead them away.

Even before the rainstorm of Biblical proportions had begun it had been a not-great day. The clipboard-bearer that Harry had tried to check in with this morning hadn’t had the latest updated list and his name wasn’t under the correct category; so, for a solid ten minutes he was terrified that he wasn’t actually supposed to be here and that he’d dreamed up the whole making-it-through-to-the-second-round thing. After that had been sorted (with profuse apologies from all involved), he’d slipped and fell into a mud puddle and couldn’t go change because they’d taken his suitcase at check-in. He’d missed breakfast this morning because he accidentally slept through his first alarm and had been forced to wolf down some crackers for sustenance, which sat like lead weight on his churning stomach. And he’s pretty sure Louis from auditions has avoided him all day.

Which, well, in the grand scheme of things, the last one might not seem like the biggest deal. But it still stung, because Louis had texted him back a week ago; they’ve had multiple conversations and they’d even talked about bootcamp and here they are, at bootcamp, and Louis has not said one word to Harry.

Not that Harry let him get away with that easily. The entire crowd of contestants had been arranged on the stage for a welcome from Simon and Louis Walsh, so while everyone was catching up with people they’d met at auditions, he’d slid his way through the group so that he was always within polite speaking distance of Louis, trying (and failing) to catch his eye. He’d built up his courage and turned to start the conversation himself several times, only to find Louis deeply engrossed in speaking with other boys. (Which, yeah. Harry didn’t really like that, it made something strange and hot flush up the back of his neck. But he couldn’t interrupt, that would be rude.) He’d even bumped
into Louis once, and that one was even an accident. Louis had taken one look at him, made an odd squeak, and then walked quickly away.

It had made for a not-quite-pleasant afternoon, that’s for sure. It didn’t help that Harry wasn’t going to have to concentrate hard to learn the Boy’s group song; he’s been singing Michael Jackson since he could walk, *Man in the Mirror* would be no stretch for him.

And now here he is, curls weighed down with water and feet slipping on the slick tile of the Wembley hallways. Harry blankly follows the boy in front of him, no idea where the group is heading until the people in front suddenly stop. They’re in a stairwell, one of their vocal coaches at the front of the group yelling something into his phone.

“Stay here!” is his last command before he storms off, leaving the collected forty-odd guys standing awkwardly in the silence.

Harry leans against a railing, looking over the rest of the group from his vantage point. Some of them have already sat down, claiming whole stairs for themselves. Others have started talking, but their words are impossible to make out over the roaring thunderstorm echoing off the brick walls.

“Well t’is is fecking awful,” says a voice next to Harry, and he turns to see a bottle-blond boy grimacing as he wrings the water from his sweater sleeve. Harry chuckles quietly and nods.

“It is, yeah,” Harry agrees. “Not what I thought I’d be doing today.” The blonde nods, shaking out droplets from his hair like a dog. Next moment, he’s sticking out his hand.

“Niall, ‘m from Mullingar, Ireland.”

Harry shakes it. “Harry, Holmes Chapel, England.”

“Good to meet you, Harry,” Niall says.

“You as well.”

“Seriously, though, this is awful timing. I don’t know all the lyrics to the song, and I don’t wanna be staring at my paper when the vocal coaches are picking out the weak ones.”

“I’ll help,” Harry volunteers immediately. Niall flashes a grin and pulls out the heavily folded and very damp lyric sheet they’d all been handed before setting off on the journey to their new practice room.

“This one,” he says, pointing out a line in the second verse. He hums a little, stops, and frowns. “I’m just having a hard time hearing it, ya know? I usually pick songs out on guitar while I’m learning the words so I get the notes faster.”

“You play guitar?”

“Oh yeah, I’m way better at guitar than singing. But being good at both is even better, so that’s why ‘m here,” he answers cheerily. “Left me guitar with the luggage, though, didn’t think I’d need it.”

“There’s one,” Harry points down at another boy and the black case propped up next to him. “We could borrow it?”

“Good idea!” Niall says, immediately bounding down a few steps to talk to the guitar owner. He brings the guitar and the boy over to Harry just a few moments later. “Harry, this is Christian. And this is Christian’s guitar.”
“Nice to meet you,” Harry stands and shakes Christian’s hand, but he only gets a tight nod in return. Harry doesn’t know Christian at all, of course, but he looks nervous, lips tight and skin clammy. “Are you okay?” he whispers, leaning close.

“Hate thunderstorms,” Christian says, opening his mouth as little as possible. “Not great with small spaces, either.”

“Ah,” Harry says, looking around at where they’re a little trapped on a small, crowded stairwell that echoes with rumbling thunder every few minutes. He pats Christian on the back in sympathy.

Niall has plopped down on the step above them, strumming quietly. He reads the lyrics from the sheet as he plays, hitting the strings perfectly but going off tempo with the words. He huffs, starts over, and cuts himself off after he messes up the lyrics again.

“What shall we do?” Niall says. “Why don’t we sing it again? I think I see it now.”

“Here,” Harry says, settling next to Niall and pulling Christian down with him. “Play it again.”

Niall does, strumming easily. He gets to the top of the verse and Harry sings quietly.

I've been a victim of a selfish kind of love
It's time that I realize
That there are some with no home, not a nickel to loan
Could it be really me, pretending that they're not alone?

Niall nods along, joining Harry at the top of the next line.

A willow deeply scarred, somebody's broken heart
And a washed-out dream
They follow the pattern of the wind you see

Christian lends his voice, barely more than a whisper, as they finish.

’Cause they got no place to be
That's why I'm starting with me

Niall strums the last line and laughs brightly. “That was excellent, mates! It’s the nickel line that’s getting me, but I think I see it now.”

Harry turns and beams at Christian. “Your voice is amazing!”

Christian flushes pink and looks at his shoes. “Thanks,” he mutters.

There’s a small cough behind them. They turn to see a boy Harry’s pretty sure he remembers from auditions, with serious brown eyes under a furrowed brow. “Hey, lads, mind running through that again? I wanted a little more practice as well.”

“So!” Harry says, and the boy scoots forward hesitantly to sit between him and Niall, who starts playing at the top of the song this time. By the chorus, a few other nearby boys have lended their voice to the fray as well and at the end, a shockingly beautiful boy with dark hair and sharp features hits a bell-clear high note and sends the entire stairwell into surprised silence.

“Start over!” someone calls, and a few other voices agree. Niall cracks a grin, standing and pulling Harry up next to him, and they launch into the song for the third time.

I'm gonna make a change
For once in my life
It’s shaky to start, Harry adjusting to hitting the low scrape of the first few notes more loudly than he’d been singing earlier. Christian and the other boys next to him join on the next line, and the chorus hits with all forty guys singing along. It’s rough from lack of actual practice, voices overlapping and echoing strangely off the walls, but it’s still pretty good. The song wraps up, everyone laughs and cheers, and someone shouts, “Again!”

They’re even better the second time, and by the third time some boys are improvising, launching into harmonies and pulling out high notes. Harry, Niall, Christian, and the serious-faced boy who sat by them weave their voices together, and Harry feels his grin split his face when even Christian starts smiling. Niall is rocking back and forth, dancing in what little space he has.

Harry bounces a little, closes his eyes and singing as loud as he can, *that's why I want you to know*, and when he opens his eyes he notices someone watching him. Louis is halfway down the next flight of stairs and half-hidden behind some tall guy with a fedora, but Harry can still see he’s singing just as loud as Harry is. Harry expects him to look away, to avoid contact like he has all morning, but Louis just smiles back, his eyes crinkling, and the sunshine in his grin seems bright enough to clear the clouds outside and send Harry’s heart into overdrive.

A few guys have pulled their phones out, recording the spectacle of forty soaked *X Factor* hopefuls jamming on a flight of stairs in Wembley Stadium. Harry just laughs, and sings, and laughs some more, tilting his face up like a flower searching for the sun.

Just as Niall is about to launch them into the fifth repeat, a throat clears and catches their attention. Simon Cowell himself, followed by Louis Walsh and their vocal coaches, stands in the doorway to the first level, one eyebrow raised.

“Very impressive,” he says, amused. “Let’s see what you can do when you aren’t in the worst acoustic corner of the stadium.”

A weak cheer goes up around them as the boys gather their things to follow Simon into the hallway. The serious-eyed boy falls in step with Harry and offers his hand.

“Liam,” he says, smiling a little.

Harry grins back. “Harry. This is Niall,” he pokes the blonde in the back, and Niall waves over his shoulder, “and Christian.” Christian just smiles, but he’s looking much better than he had been as they make their way to an empty lounge. The vocal coach leads them through the song as a whole group three times, then separates them out into groups of five or six. He points Christian, Harry, Niall, Liam, and one other boy into a corner of the lounge.

“You five can work on the song together, someone will be by to hear you in a few minutes.”

Christian and Liam immediately settle against the wall, while Niall and Harry turn to the new guy.

“Tobias,” he says, shaking hands all around. Niall introduces everyone else, and they launch back into the song without preamble, Niall leading on guitar.

It’s so much better without the echo of the staircase and thirty other guys trying to outdo them. Liam and Harry’s voices are similar enough that they blend well, and Niall’s rises higher to take a light melody that winds around them. It sounds amazing, and it’s fun, repeating the chorus a few times so they can point out little flaws for each other to fix.

Christian slides closer and closer to Harry as they continue, his thigh pressed against Harry’s. Every time Harry compliments him, he flushes and stammers. Niall won’t stop giggling and nudging
Christian in the side, and while Harry isn’t in on the joke he smiles anyway, because he likes Niall and he likes Christian and he likes that they are getting along.

Harry almost forgets that Simon is there, watching them all and evaluating their every move. He just sings, smiling through it all and winking at Liam to make him laugh, and doesn’t remember anything is different until Tobias suddenly freezes, coughing unexpectedly.

“Again,” Simon’s voice says from behind Harry, and Niall strums a few chords to start them over. Liam, Tobias, Harry, and Niall launch into it once more, but Christian just mimes the words, his face sweating again. At the end Niall stumbles a little over the words, but Harry and Liam cover him and they finish strong. Harry turns to see Simon look each of them over, nod, and walk away. When he leaves, Christian breathes out unsteadily, but otherwise doesn’t mention anything. His leg is shaking where it’s touching Harry’s.

Eventually, the groups are split up and switched around, and Harry meets four new boys: a boy about his age named Tom, two guys in their mid-twenties named Jeff and Raul, and the boy who’d hit the amazing high note on the stairwell that caught everyone’s attention.

“Zayn,” he introduces himself shyly, fist bumping against Harry’s.

This group is harder to work with, as Jeff and Raul compete to be the loudest and Tom keeps going off-key at the loudest possible moments. Zayn works an octave above Harry, reaching for notes that astound Harry, missing a few but hitting most of them. Simon comes by again to listen, a vocal coach following him, but this time doesn’t say anything.

The groups switch again, and Harry is put with Liam again while meeting a few new boys, Jack and Will and Ralph. Then again, and Harry’s back with Christian and Tom and two others, Bill and Aiden. And then finally, finally, finally, the vocal coach announces that this will be the last group switch before they rejoin as a full group.

Harry gets sent to a corner to start a new group, then Niall joins him with a cheery high five, then a ginger kind Harry hasn’t met yet, a man in his early twenties who looks outraged to be stuck with a bunch of teenagers, and, lastly, “Louis!” Harry says excitedly, bouncing on his toes before scooping Louis into an impromptu hug.

“Oh. Hi,” Louis says, and when Harry lets him go he looks bemused, but he’s still smiling at least. “I’m Louis,” he says to the rest of the group from the circle of Harry’s arms, waving a little.

“Nope to meet you, Louis,” Niall says, nodding once. “Let’s do this shit.”

It’s the best group yet, Harry thinks joyfully. The guy in his twenties (“Nicolo,” he’d grunted when Niall prompted him for his name) has a strong, bright voice, which melds well with Niall’s and the other boy Harry doesn’t know (“Mark,” he’d squeaked). Harry, to his utter delight, finds that his and Louis’ voices wrap around each other like they’re doing it on purpose, Harry’s raspier and Louis’ clearer, Harry low and Louis high.

They sing the song again, and again, and again, and each time Louis and Harry get a little louder, a little more confident, and soon they’re making up the main part of the vocals, Nicolo is taking the upper harmony above them and Niall and Mark tangling around their melody as well. Harry meets Louis’ eye and they smile, rounding out a final chorus perfectly.

“Well done,” comes a voice from behind them, and Harry realizes they’d been the last group singing, Simon and his coaches around him all watching and looking slightly impressed. Harry beams.
This might be the greatest day of his life.

At the first possible moment, Louis makes a dash to a nearby bathroom and away from Harry Styles, slamming the cubicle door and latching it roughly. He collapses against the wall, a tiny part of him thankful that Wembley bathrooms are a lot cleaner than public bathrooms tend to be.

The rest of him not focused on bathroom sanitation is nearly comatose with pure, blinding panic.

The plan, carefully thought through and meticulously checked for any holes with the help of his sisters and his mum (leaving Harry nameless and staying gender neutral throughout, just to make sure there were no forthcoming threats on Harry’s life from the Tomlinsons or Stan), was for Louis to play it cool. He would tell Harry that he hadn’t felt well during auditions, had come down with a stomach bug and been bedridden when he’d made it home. This explained his reaction after his audition, why he couldn’t stay for the afterparty, and why he hadn’t answered Harry’s texts for a few days. He brought only long-sleeved shirts so the dagger itself wouldn’t even be an issue. He was going to be friendly, sure, but professional. **Hello, Harry, it’s good to see you too. Why yes, this is exciting.** Conversation over.

But then he actually saw Harry, and that all went flying out the window. Along with any shred of sanity, credibility, and composure to which he tried to cling.

Because Louis had prepared for Harry’s charming side, his kindness and sweetly innocent commentary. He’d forgotten entirely that he was also the most beautiful thing Louis’d ever laid eyes on, all softened angles and wide green eyes and, God, Louis had taken one look at his massive hands and actually whimpered. (The boy next to him had heard and taken a careful step away from Louis, averting his eyes like Louis had dropped to his knees right there in the mud. In that guy’s defense, though, the possibility of that happening was very real.)

It’s not fair, honestly, Harry just throwing himself around while he’s all chocolate curls and dimpled smiles. Other people have to focus, and then there’s a Harry Styles just out there existing and being so damn happy he’s like delight personified.

So the plan was completely scrapped from the word go, tossed wherever he’d thrown any hope of making a graceful exit from this competition with any semblance of dignity. Rather than interacting with Harry early and getting it out of the way, he’d struck up a dozen forgettable conversations to ignore him and then escaped the immediate area as soon as he could. Louis came up with increasingly inventive hiding spots while they waited on the main stage for their welcome from the judges, crouching behind taller guys and infiltrating some of the nearby groups and even, once, stealing someone’s hat, sending desperate texts to Stan and Lottie through it all.

They were both sympathetic, but unyielding.

(9:32 a.m.) **Stan:** i don’t care how pretty they are lou. u have to go talk to them.
(9:32 a.m.) **Stan:** also TELL ME WHO IT IS

(9:53 a.m.) **Lottie:** grow some balls !!! you can’t avoid them forever !!!
(9:56 a.m.) **Lottie:** and quit telling me about their bum i don’t care !! it’s weird !!!

It was bad enough when they were in the same general area, Louis orienting himself around Harry like he’s the bloody North Star. But then, of course, it got worse.

A streak of lightning, a clap of thunder, a flooded practice room, and then forty boys found...
themselves soaking wet and trapped together in a tiny staircase with no supervision. Louis couldn’t stop shaking, his hair was dripping straight into his eyes, and his shoes were so soaked that each step caused a flood of murky water to pool around his ankles. And then Harry, perfect Harry with his still-springy curls and clinging shirt, had started singing with some blonde kid holding a guitar and some other guy who looked at him like he was John Lennon’s angel sent to save them all. His sweet voice had filled the air and drew almost everyone’s attention without him even realizing. Louis hadn’t been able to look away as he’d sang, dancing gleefully around the guitar player and another angry looking one with Bieber hair.

Harry had opened his eyes to see Louis watching and had lit up like a fucking solar flare, bright and just dangerous enough that Louis knew he should look away. But he couldn’t.

Louis couldn’t concentrate once they’d finally moved into their new room to practice, his voice small and overwhelmed amidst all the others. It wasn’t until the last group, when Harry had greeted Louis with a massive hug that he didn’t deserve and a smile that cut right through his ribcage, when his voice twined with Harry’s like sparks and tendrils of smoke, gravelly and bright in equal parts, that Louis even felt he had a chance to make it to the next day of bootcamp.

And Simon had seen it all. And Harry had been radiant. And Louis had to be far, far away, preferably as soon as physically possible.

So as soon as Simon’s back was turned, Louis had sprinted for the bathroom.

Louis digs his phone out of his pocket, ignoring the latest message from Lottie (talk to them yet ???) and going straight for his mum’s contact. He doesn’t care that it’s the middle of the day, that she’s at work. He needs someone that can actually help him through this ridiculous pain in his heart, a rib-cracking squeeze of his insides like a giant fist around his torso.

“Mum,” he gasps when she answers, tears already running down his face and collecting on his lap. “Mum, I can’t.”

“Oh, Lou,” she sighs, and the noises of the hospital in the background fill the quiet for a moment. “I told you it would be hard.”

“I didn’t know it would be this hard though,” he sniffs.

“I know, love. The first bit’s going to be the worst. But you were so sure you wanted to do this, and you can’t give up now, right?”

“Maybe I should just go home. I overestimated myself.”

“Lou, no. Listen, baby, you’re the strongest person I know. If it…” There’s the small sound of her breath hitching and Louis sobs too, a sharp-bitten off breath. “If it wasn’t for you, I’d not have made it through my rough time. You stepped up, and you survived. That’s what we do, right?”

“Right,” Louis whispers.

“So what you need to do now is whatever will help you survive. If that means ignoring him, you do that. If that means becoming his friend, be his friend.” Louis hums, but otherwise stays quiet. “Wanna hear my advice, babe?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“Talk to him. Take a chance. It’ll only be worse if you don’t and you’re left always wondering what could have been.”
“But-”

“There’s a reason this happened, love. It may be fate, it may just be brain chemistry, I don’t know. But I do know that it happened and something like that pulls you in for a reason. Go figure out what it is.”

“Yeah, I will,” Louis says, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. “I will. I can.”

“Good. I love you, Lou.”

“Love you too, Mum. Call you later.”

Louis allows himself a minute to catch his breath, and rubs away the last few tears that escape. Breathe in, breathe out. He can do this. He can do this. *He can do this.*

He can’t be for Harry what he would *kill* to be: a proper soulmate, his other half in body and mind. (Louis may be adverse to the idea of Bonding in general, having watched the collapse of his mother’s relationship and forced to deal with the aftermath. But with Harry, it may not have been so terrible; too bad he’ll never get the chance to find out.) There is *someone* out there who is destined to be all that for Harry Styles, and Louis hopes that whoever it is will realize the gift they’re getting.

Until then, until a Marker appears on Harry’s skin and he’s whisked away for his fairytale romance, Louis can be a friend to him. He can work his way through this ridiculous singing competition by Harry’s side for as long as they allow him to be there, and he can keep in touch when they inevitably go their separate ways. He can build up a well of memories for the day he has to let this kid go; Louis will never have a full soulmate that he Bonds to and who Bonds back, he may never have a real relationship beyond a few dates before the other person realizes that Louis has already been claimed, but he *can* have this, some stolen time with the soulmate he's not meant to keep.

*He can do this.*

He opens the stall door and nearly walks into a teary-eyed Harry standing right in front of him, arms already reaching out to pull him into their second embrace of the day.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, I’m so sorry. A crew member sent me to get you because we’re going for lunch. I didn’t mean to listen!” Harry babbles into Louis’ shoulder. “I just want you to know that you aren’t alone, and that I’m scared to perform again too. It’s terrifying, but it’s an amazing opportunity.” He pulls away and shoots Louis a tearful smile. “We can do this!”

There’s no way Louis can do this.

... 

Harry stands on a spotlit stage, blinking and sweating. Twenty other boys from his category are in a line beside him, their every nervous twitch caught by the camera lenses, every uncomfortable throat clearing and shoe squeaking on the stage floor causing them all to jump. The Boys category had been split into two groups after the group performances: one group going forward and one going home. The other half has already been led back onto the stage, shaking and shivering, to hear their fate. Now it’s Harry’s group’s turn.

Harry wants to feel sure that he’s in the group going to the next round rather than being sent home, but there were good singers in the first group, including Tobias (who Harry’d heard had a breakdown on stage, but he hadn’t seen it for himself) and Christian and Mark.

The judges and coaches are watching them like cats watch fish in a bowl.
Harry’s eyes are drawn to Simon. The others don’t scare him, not really; he knows Louis Walsh has a little bit of pull, obviously, but he’s seen the way Simon is treated like backstage royalty wrapped in a tabloid cape. If he wants people in, they’re in. And if he wants them cut, they’ll be cut.

Harry jerks when Dermot steps forward, mic in hand even though he’s standing right next to the group and they can all hear him perfectly fine. He gives a short spiel commending how hard they’ve worked, how accommodating they’ve been with the weather difficulties.

Harry nods along with the rest of the boys, but his heart is pounding a little too loudly to take anything in. Niall is to his right, brushing his shoulder against Harry’s as he rocks back and forth on his heels. Louis is on Harry’s left, his arm burning against Harry’s even through two layers of fabric. Harry reaches out and twines his fingers in each of their sleeves. Just the simple fact that Harry is even able to do that, to be next to Louis without him averting his eyes and turning away, tells him that today may be going better than he thought.

Harry had always assumed heartbreak was a flowery description of sadness thought up by some melodramatic poet swooning across his chaise lounge, but then he’d followed Louis into that bathroom earlier, heard him sobbing on the phone to his mother and actually experienced it for himself. His blood had left his limbs to thunder towards his chest so suddenly that he’d swayed on his feet, nearly braining himself on a bathroom door for the second time in Louis’ presence. Heartbreak apparently doesn’t just mean sad; it’s gut-wrenching anguish, the taste of bile at knowing someone good is hurting and the twist of his stomach at the sound of their tears. Hearing Louis’ quiet admission of “I overestimated myself” had tears pooling in Harry’s eyes.

Louis had been crying over his fear of performing, and Harry had cried over Louis.

But then Louis had stumbled out of that bathroom stall and seen Harry, blotchy-faced and tear-stained, apologies for eavesdropping dribbling from his lips, and he’d smiled. He’d wiped the wetness from Harry’s cheeks and grinned, his own eyes still red around the edges but his smile sparkly enough to outdo a diamond mine.

“You’re absolutely correct, Harold,” he’d murmured in answer to Harry’s horrified rambling. “We definitely can do this.”

And then, just like he hadn’t avoided Harry all afternoon before sneaking off to have a cry in a bathroom, Louis stuck to Harry like glue for the rest of the day. Where Harry went, Louis went, joking and giggling the whole time, and Harry was so ecstatic it felt like happiness was pouring from his pores, settling like glitter on his bones.

Then they were finally led back on stage for the group performance, finally allowed to sing like their lives depended on it. Harry and Louis had been in the third group to circulate to the stage during the Boys performances and Louis shone like starlight, his voice high and strong and soaring. So when it came to his turn, Harry had belted out they follow each other on the wind you know straight at Louis, bent nearly in half as he scraped for every last bit of vocal power.

It had felt amazing, the best performance of Harry’s life, and he and Louis and Tom and Niall and Christian had all skipped giddily as they’d made their way off stage, convinced they’d made it through to the next day.

Then the waiting had begun, and the weird anxiety cocktail of adrenaline and fear poured energy into their veins so that soon they were bouncing off the walls rather than just vibrating in their seats. Louis and Niall had teamed up to dance in a circle around Nicolo whenever he moved until he got so angry he complained to the staff, and then they threw grapes at him from across the room and pretended they were falling from the ceiling. Harry, when questioned about the amount of fruit
littering the ground around Nicolo, laughed so hard that he’d nearly lost his voice. After being told off, Harry and Louis had spent a good hour unwinding with their sides pressed together as they sat against a blank stretch of wall, chewing idly at sandwiches they’d scavenged from Mary in the Over-25s group and grinning at each other for no reason.

“Got a stomach bug right before our auditions,” Louis had said between bites, waving his arm vaguely and continuing a conversation Harry can’t recall starting. “I don’t even really remember singing, I just knew I got through. Woke up a few days later to some fuzzy memories of being on stage and just a very small number of texts from you.”

Harry blushed, remembering his dozens of unanswered messages about everything from salad to elephant pet names (because Dumbo is the obvious, right, just like you could really only ever name a pet lion either Simba or Nala, so what other name could you possibly give an elephant? Dumba, for a girl, perhaps, but otherwise options are very limited. The question still haunts Harry to this day). Louis had just ruffled his curls and declared it charming rather than creepy.

But now, well, with Dermot stepping back into the shadows and Simon’s eyes trained on them like a sniper spotting a target from a nearby hilltop, Harry tries to think back over every second of the whole day to check for weaknesses. There’s so much that could have tipped the scales, so much he may have done that could have hurt his chances.

The gleaming red light of the camera seems bright in the gloomy darkness behind the judges. Harry stares at the shine glaring off the makeup on Louis Walsh’s forehead because he can’t really focus on how enormous this is, how even if he gets through tonight he’s got to do it all again tomorrow.

The air is lodged in his chest, almost choking him. Beside him, Niall is rocking on his toes and Louis is frozen, his breath coming out in sharp bursts.

Simon picks up a mic. Harry’s heart stops.

“Boys…”

Oh God oh God oh God OH GOD

“...It’s good news.”

Niall jumps a foot in the air. Aiden hugs everyone near him, including Liam, who’s collapsed into tears. Tom beams, his hands behind his head and staring at the ceiling. Zayn just walks away, shaking his head like he doesn’t believe it.

Harry loses all control of his actions, that’s his only excuse. When he turns to face Louis in slack-jawed amazement and finds him already there in his space, beaming, he tackles Louis to the ground in a pile of uncoordinated limbs and fanatic excitement. Despite finding himself trapped under nearly six feet of lanky, still-damp-from-rain teenage boy, Louis looks beyond ecstatic. He frees a small hand and pats Harry’s face gently.

“We did it,” he whispers, smiling so hard his eyes are sky-colored crinkles.

“Yeah,” Harry says breathlessly, ignoring the outbreak of laughter from everyone nearby and the whirring of cameras capturing their every move because this is the best day, ever, of his entire life.

Ever.

Time passes in strange drips and drags for Louis throughout the rest of the day after they’ve passed
their first test, disjointed and surreal. Moments stand out in sharp relief against the fast-paced rush that seems to define their time at bootcamp.

He watches Harry say goodbye to what seems like every single boy who was cut, hugging them and wiping their tears. He spends a full ten minutes with the guy who had sang with him and Niall on the stairwell, a quiet boy who Louis hadn’t paid any attention to anytime he wasn’t smiling at Harry or laughing at his jokes. Louis inches closer to them while feigning conversation with Zayn and Aiden, straining to catch anything.

“...think you’re going to go really far on this show,” the boy is saying softly, “and I hope you win it, of course. And you’re probably going to forget all about me when you’ve got your recording contract or whatever.”

Louis watches Harry frown and shake his head. “Course I won’t, Christian.”

Christian grins weakly and shakes his head as well. “I hope not. I just want to say, if you ever find yourself near Essex, look me up. Maybe, um,” he blushes fiercely. “Maybe we can spend some time together.”

Louis knows that, logically, he has no real claim on Harry at all and was actually sort of rude to him through his highly successful Avoid Harry At All Costs campaign.

It’s just.

Louis has always had a jealous streak a mile wide, and Christian is smiling hopefully and won’t stop touching Harry’s arm. Louis turns away, tries to stay engaged in his conversation with Zayn about what to expect tomorrow, but—

“That sounds very nice, thanks,” he hears Harry reply. Maybe Christian realizes the vagueness of Harry’s answer at the same time Louis does, because when Louis peeks back over his shoulder Christian’s brow is furrowed and he looks as though he used up all his courage asking Harry out the first time, and now is stuck wondering if his answer actually meant yes or no.

A few minutes later, after Harry hugs Christian one last time and he makes his way back to Louis’ side, Louis loses all self control and lets the question burst: “You know he was sort of asking you out, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” Harry shrugs. “He’s nice, but there wasn’t really anything between us. I think when I meet someone that’s going to be important in my life, I can tell.”

Louis, mollified and a little surprised that Harry’s innocent act worked as well on him as it did on Christian, leans against Harry’s shoulder and tries to hide his smile.

“Sort of like when I met you,” Harry continues, happily nudging Louis with his elbow.

Louis’ heart suddenly expands to take up all the space inside his ribcage. It’s a not entirely unpleasant sensation, so he just smiles the best he can and turns to talk to Aiden for a while, feeling
like his insides have become coated in sugar.

During some free time that afternoon, Harry is dragged away to do a bit for the ITV cameras. He comes back flushed and looking upset.

“I had to, uh, go on a date? Like a fake date, with a girl who’d told the crew she thought I was cute. And then I was filmed talking to a couple of other girls, and at the end they all showed up at the same time like I was cheating?” He shrugs, frowning. “I think they’re trying to say I’m, like, a player or something. Which, clearly not, you know? I’ve never dated anyone. I mean, they ended it funny—that Wagner guy came up and pretended I’d been texting him too, and then he carried me off. But like, yeah. It was still weird.”

Louis wants to laugh (and to pour water on whatever chick is walking around talking about how cute Harry is—because yeah, he is, but they can just back off) but he also wants to pull Harry close, to wipe the genuinely troubled look off his face just at the insinuation that he might fake-cheat on a fake-date.

He cheers Harry up with another round of Let’s Throw Things Down Nicolo’s Shirt.

After a late dinner at the hotel, a sheet is passed around with the song options for the individual performances in two days. Louis stares at the familiar titles so long that everyone else at the table has signed up before he’s even caught his breath. He scribbles down a few choices next to his name, and then excuses himself to his room to throw up a couple dozen times.

With the whole getting-to-know-his-soulmate debacle, he’d forgotten all about things like solo songs and more elimination rounds and the possibility of watching Harry and Niall and Aiden and Zayn and all the rest of his new friends move on to the next round without him. He lays in the dark and tries not to think about the fact that he has to prove once more that he deserves to be here.

21 July 2010

The second day of bootcamp is a thousand times more difficult than the first.

Louis and the other boys had been able to get away with pranks and games throughout the first day with minimum interference, earning glares only from Nicolo, who is the most uptight person in their category and probably in the entire country. On the second day, though, dirty looks are thrown at his little group of friends the first time they burst into loud laughter, and they quickly learn that every time a batch of faces is sent home, the mood grows more and more somber.

From then on, the boys work just as hard as everyone else to impress the judges. Louis doesn’t speak to anyone more than the necessary niceties in passing, and it isn’t until the entire Boys category is halted in the middle of their choreography run-through that they can even chat.

“What’s goin’ on?” Niall asks, wiping his red face with a towel and pointing at the conference going on at the judges’ table. Louis shrugs, watching Simon sigh and stand up, but Aiden leans in
conspiratorially.

“Heard somebody walked out, didn’t want to dance. I think whoever it is was embarrassed.”

Harry seems shocked. “They’re giving up because they’re embarrassed of dancing in front of people?”

“Not everyone has your moves, love,” Louis teases, miming Harry’s signature step-clap-step-clap that he uses every time the choreographer yells to freestyle. Niall collapses into giggles while Harry shoves Louis away with a huff and a poorly concealed smile. They catch up on gossip with Tom and Paije and Liam while they wait: some girl came in half-drunk and with something suspiciously white dried in her hair halfway through vocal practice yesterday, two guys were sent home already for smuggling in coke, one girl didn’t sleep in her room last night but won’t tell who she stayed with.

“Look, it’s Zayn!” Harry whispers a few minutes later, and, sure enough, Simon reappears with an abashed Zayn in tow. They all take their places for the dance one more time, and Louis almost trips when he finds himself watching Zayn instead of focusing on the actual song. Zayn isn’t even that bad of a dancer—sure, his freestyle is awkward, but everyone’s freestyle is awkward. Harry had laughed so hard at Louis’ jazz hands the first time through that he’d had to pretend he was choking to be able to take a break and gulp some water. Louis makes his way toward Zayn as the Boys are dismissed and the Girls category takes their place on the stage.

“Not too bad, Zaynie,” Louis says, ruffling his hair. Zayn grins half-heartedly and pushes Louis’ hand away.

“It’s just, it’s embarrassing, innit? Like I can’t do what those other guys can do, so—”

“Neither can I,” Louis shrugs. “If I tried to breakdance or flip or do the fucking Stanky Leg then I’d probably break every bone in my precious, toned, naturally gorgeous body.” He runs a hand down his hips, showing off the goods.

Zayn cackles. “I would pay good money to see you do any kind of dance with the word stanky in it.”

“Oh really?” Louis says, arching an eyebrow.

And that’s how Louis becomes the center of a one-man dance circle in the stage wings, taking suggestions from the audience and making up any that he doesn’t know, immediately declaring his version as the correct one and whatever YouTube has to say against that is “false, thank you very much.”

At one point Louis catches Harry’s eye in the midst of the crowd. The laughter on his face is so bright that Louis can’t breathe for a moment.

22 July 2010

Individual performances feel like they stretch somewhere between fifteen minutes and an entire eternity. There’s a girl that raps and a dancing duo with paint on their face and voices that can do things that Louis’ definitely can’t. He slips into a state where he isn’t even listening anymore, just running through the words to Just Haven’t Met You Yet over and over until he starts answering in lyrics.
“Nervous, Louis?”

“I might have to wait, I’ll never give up. I guess it’s half timing.”

“Erm. Sure?”

“And the other half’s luck.”)

Harry disappears from his side at one point and reappears on stage, giving Louis something solid to focus on for a couple of minutes while he croons an Oasis hit. He catches a flash of blonde that might be Niall, a dark head and a high note that might be Zayn, hears Liam say something about why he has the X factor. He sees a flash of that blue shirt that Aiden is wearing. Bits and pieces that make up people that Louis has sang with and danced with and joked with for the last four days.

Far, far too soon, there’s a tap on Louis’ shoulder and a whispered, “You’re up soon, love,” from a headset-clad woman with frizzy brown hair. Louis accepts the pats on the back from the others, and trips his way to the waiting area.

Somebody named Rebecca goes before him. She kills it. He can’t breathe.

Then he’s out on stage and trying to do Bublé justice. He can’t remember any of it, just the overwhelming nerves before he opens his mouth and the silence that echoes before the polite applause when he’s done. Simon watches him with sharp eyes and whispers to Louis Walsh as he leaves the stage, and then Dermot is grabbing him by the shoulder and asking how he feels.

“I- I don’t,” is all Louis can get out, and then Dermot grimaces and points Louis toward a chair as he hyperventilates.

23 July 2010

It’s the final day of bootcamp, and the contestants are all out on stage for the last time as a full group.

“There’s been some changes,” Simon says, and Louis squeezes Zayn’s arm until his knuckles are white.

The Over-25s are now the Over-28s. The Boys category has now gotten even more competitive, and Louis mentally prepares for the phone call he’s going to have to make to tell his mum he’s coming home. He’ll have to register for the fall semester at the University of Manchester soon, as long as he isn’t past the deadline. Is it too late to get housing close to campus? He’ll probably need to find a roommate.

There’s definitely no way he’s going to the Judge’s house, that’s for sure.

The acts lurch their collective way off stage to wait again.

The Boys are the last category left backstage to hear their fate. As they’re called forward to line up, the atmosphere is quiet but thumping, like the tense silence in the seconds between rolling thunder. At least it’s right to the point: it takes only a couple of minutes to space them evenly and start the roll
call. Louis listens in growing desperation as names are slowly announced, boys disappearing offstage with fist pumps and exhilarated grins.


He didn’t make it. They didn’t make it.

Harry finds Louis and buries his face in his shoulder as they’re walked back off the stage, hitching sobs muffled in Louis’ shirt. Zayn attaches himself to Louis’ other side.

Niall and Liam both get accosted by cameras and walk away mid-sentence, tears falling too hard to continue. Niall pulls his sweater over his face to hide his sobs, and leans his face into the middle of Zayn’s back. Harry yanks Liam into the forming cuddle pile as well.

Louis wants to fall down, to collapse under the weight of his grief, but he can’t—he has to stand up for these boys who are trusting him to hold them up.

“Don’t leave yet, guys!” the headset-wearer calls. “Got some last-minute instructions.”

Louis doesn’t care. His heart is crushed and mangled and left to rot on the dusty, scuffed floor of the Wembley stage, and it’s breaking from the weight of the boys sobbing into his shirt from all sides, and it’s whispering tiny truths like you weren’t good enough anyway and now you can quit him cold turkey.

Louis knows that was what he wanted once. He doesn’t want that anymore.

“I’ve got five names here, the judges want you back on stage,” the headset-wearer says (and Louis maybe should have learned her name, after all this emotional connection they’ve shared. Harry probably already knows the names of her kids and her cats and her Sunday badminton teammates).

“Zayn, Liam, Harry, Niall, and Louis. Follow me.”

“Probably just want to get more footage of us crying,” Zayn mumbles, and Louis silently but strongly agrees. They can’t pass five more boys on to the Judge’s House, they’ve already increased it from six acts per category to eight to accommodate the two judges who couldn’t make it to bootcamp. They aren’t going anywhere; they’re just being squeezed for more primetime tears.

Louis follows Zayn out onto the stage and notices four girls coming up the other ramp to join them as well. They’re holding hands. Louis wants someone’s hand to hold if he’s going to be told once more that he doesn’t belong here, so he settles for gripping Niall’s jacket in his fist.

It’s Nicole that addresses them. “Hello,” she says softly into a microphone. Her voice fills up the massive stage, which had seemed so small when a hundred other acts were around them. Now Louis can feel the open space behind them and it seems wide as an ocean at his back.

“We’ve thought of each of you as individuals.” Well, yes, that’s how they auditioned. Louis contains his bitten-off scoff—they aren’t going to make this quick, they’re drawing it out painfully slowly.

“But you’re too talented to let go.”

That’s, well. Louis is going to have to make sure his mum records this episode somehow, he wants that as a ringtone. Something he can take to his mates and any moron geography teachers back home. He might be going home, but he’s talented.
Simon’s voice is a wrecking ball through Louis’ carefully constructed wall of denial.

“We’ve decided to put you through.”

This time, it’s Louis that does the jumping. He flings himself into Harry’s arms and all he can think is *I get to keep him for just a little longer.*
Part One: 16 August 2010 - 29 August 2010

Chapter Notes

Longer note at the end, just wanted to say thanks to everyone who commented and rec'd so far!

Also, as far as the links go, most of them are linking to different parts of the same long video. There's not any way (as far as I'm aware) to have the video stop at a certain point, so I can see how it would get confusing to be watching the video and then switch back to the fic only to find you have to read through things you've just watched. There's not really anything to do about that at this point, so just keep in mind that if the video starts talking about something else/switches to a new location, the scene I'm writing about is probably over. If anyone has any suggestions, I'd be happy to hear them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Two: 16 August 2010 - 29 August 2010

16 August 2010

“Harry,” Niall calls over the sound of the grease popping around the bacon. “Why’s it called a bungalow?”

“S’better than cottage, innit?” Zayn says, his head leaned back against the arm of the chair he’d claimed hours ago. “Less Snow White.”

“I like Snow White,” Harry adds mildly, biting his lip as he executes yet another perfect pancake flip.

“You mean you like doing housework and you want to live with seven rugged men,” Louis laughs, poking Harry in the stomach. Harry giggles and swats him with the spatula.

It’s strange, because the five of them don’t really know each other at all. They’ve been thrown together by the will of Simon Cowell, they haven’t seen each other since they were put together as a band at bootcamp over a month ago (texting everyday helped lessen the distance, but it wasn’t the same as talking in person and Harry has missed them); yet here they are, just two weeks away from their trek across the globe to wherever their Judge’s House is and a chance at a spot in the final twelve on the X Factor.

Liam says they’re lucky they all have unique enough voices that they were chosen. Niall says they’re lucky nobody chosen for the group is a complete cunt.

It should feel strange, knowing that they’re five random lads from across the U.K. and they have nothing really in common other than singing. They’ve only been at the bungalow less than a day, but —

Well, it’s rather like being lumped with four new best friends, if Harry’s being sappy about things. He and Niall already get along like fish and water. Zayn has redeemed himself tenfold from the dancing debacle at bootcamp with his intelligent jokes that leave you wondering if you even
understand the complexity to which you’re being made fun of. Liam is serious and stoic until you break through his shell, and then when he settles he makes quiet little jokes that are funny enough to send Harry rolling on the floor. And then Louis.

Louis, who fills spaces in a room that nobody even realized were empty. Louis, who can take a dip in the pool at midnight and turn it into the greatest adventure of all time. Louis, who is louder than loud and larger than life and the glue already holding them all together.

Maybe it’s because he’s the oldest. Maybe it’s just because he’s Louis.

Either way, it’s four in the morning and Louis demanded late night breakfast, and so Harry is making pancakes and bacon and eggs and if he has time he’ll squeeze some fresh orange juice. Because Louis isn’t wrong, and he’d make a damn good Snow White.

A few minutes later, Harry sits on top of the pool table, eating his pancakes and trying not to drip syrup onto the green felt. He looks out over his group, his boys, and feels a ridiculous swell of happiness.

... 

Niall, apparently, is the type of person who doesn’t sit around twiddling his thumbs and wondering if he’s someone’s soulmate.

At four-thirty in the morning, after an excellently prepared meal by Harry and a quick round of FIFA on Harry’s Playstation, Niall marches in holding a crumpled piece of paper.

“Harry Styles,” he reads loudly, and Harry squeaks in surprise and falls to the floor from his perch on Zayn’s lap. “Liam Payne, Zayn Malik, Louis Tomlinson.”

“What the hell?” Liam asks, jumping up and pulling the paper from Niall’s hands. “Where did you get our last names?”

“Heard yours and Harry’s at bootcamp, wrote ’em down. Went in Zayn’s bag and Lou’s wallet for theirs,” Niall says, shrugging easily. “Hey, Louis, how long has that condom been in there?”

Louis gasps, affronted, and knocks Niall to the floor in one swift tackle. He settles on Niall’s chest and reaches for the nearest spillable thing, which is Zayn’s orange juice.

“Lou, I just squeezed that,” Harry pouts.

“It’s for a good cause, Harry,” Lou says back, distracted. Niall is flailing like an eel, attempting to avoid the dripping juice that Louis is aiming for his eyes. When he hits his target and Niall squeals, Louis sits back, satisfied. “No more snooping!” he scolds, smacking Niall’s hands.

“Well there’s no more secrets for me, now!” Niall complains, his hand over his eyes. “Clearly my soulmate isn’t here. Unless one of you’s gonna half-Bond with me, which’d just be awkward.”

Louis upends the nearly-full glass of juice over Niall’s head.

Later, when the lights are dimmed and Niall’s showered the pulp from his hair, Louis and Harry lie across from each other in the almost darkness right before dawn. They’re on different mattresses but close enough to touch, and Louis doesn’t stop his fingers from tracing the patterns of the shadows on Harry’s hands.

“This is going to be amazing,” Harry whispers, eyes already drooping closed.
“Yeah,” Louis answers, but Harry’s already out cold.

The room is quiet with four sleeping boys and their newly-minted bandmate who can’t fall asleep, staring at the ceiling as night fades on into morning. He’d told himself the entire train ride to Holmes Chapel that this was what he wanted, despite any hurt it was going to cause being around Harry all the time. He’d stared down the possibility of leaving Harry forever when they were rejected at bootcamp, and he won’t willingly put himself through that again.

What he hadn’t realized, though, is that the pain of being around Harry isn’t the hardest part anymore. It’s background noise, like an arthritic wrist or a bad knee. Constant, unwavering, but manageable. Over time, sure, if Louis was facing ten years of lying across from the sleeping face of Harry Styles and not having him, it would probably kill him. He couldn’t do it. But here, in this sort-of vacation home with four rowdy boys and a world held at bay for just a little while, it’s easy to pretend.

Besides, they may be decent singers, but they’re going up against groups who have years of experience on them. If anything, they’ll be lucky to even be let in the door at the Judge’s House. Probability and common sense dictate that it’ll be a miracle if they’re still together as a band in another two weeks, let alone years down the road. Louis will deal with the hurt when his allotted time with Harry is over.

No, the hardest part isn’t the ache of being around his soulmate and not having him. It’s looking around at these four boys and knowing that they’re going to click, they’re going to connect so well with each other because they’re less than a day in and they’re already like this, this sprawling monster of limbs and cuddles, Zayn’s head on Liam’s knee and his leg across Louis’ chest, Niall’s face in Harry’s stomach, Harry’s arm over Liam’s ankles and this, Louis’ hand clasped in Harry’s.

It’s hard when he remembers that he’s here with his half-Bonded soulmate who will never love him the way he wants, sure, and that their time together has an expiration date. It’s even harder to look around and see people who can be his best friends, and knowing that his time with them has an end date as well.

17 August 2010

Harry is the youngest of the group—which he hates being reminded of, so Louis makes sure to drop it into conversation as often as possible—and even though Louis remembers exactly what he himself was like at age sixteen, he has a hard time imagining Harry making awkwardly uninformed sex jokes and laughing at dick graffiti when he literally watched Harry be moved to tears by a pet adoption commercial on late night TV.

So it’s a little shocking to look up from his bowl of cereal the next morning to see Harry deepthroating a banana and looking incredibly smug about the dark red flush on Niall’s face. Zayn doesn’t seem to have noticed, his attention on his phone, but Liam is staring so hard at his toast he looks constipated.

“What’s wrong, Niall?” Harry asks, licking a stripe up the bottom of the fruit, which he has helpfully turned so that it angles downwards to be as anatomically correct as possible. “Bananas not your thing?”

He looks over at Louis and winks, and Louis nearly falls out of his chair in his haste to flee the room and throw himself into an icy shower, pinching his inner arm every time his mind strays back to
Harry's plush pink lips wrapped around that stupid banana.

The majority of the time, Harry is just as innocent as his wide eyes make him seem. His lower lip wobbles when his mum calls to check on him and he smiles brightly at the simplest things, like seeing Niall and Zayn cuddling on the sofa while fast asleep or a trio of ducklings waddling across the yard. Sometimes he pulls Louis outside just to look at clouds, countless minutes spent giggling over the shapes of elephants in tutus and old men with hair sprouting out their ears. When he needs a moment to himself, he cuddles up with a pillow and a little leather journal in the corner of the room, tapping a pen on his lip in concentration. When Niall wants to eat ice cream and talk about his feelings, Harry drinks in every word, his face completely earnest. He cries during Titanic—and Louis knows this because Harry has already made them watch it as a group, for “team-building purposes”—and bakes when he gets bored.

But other times, Harry narrows his eyes and smirks like the devil himself, and when Louis tugs on his curls in passing he moans, “Oh, God, harder!”

For his own sanity (and the sake of his poor, overworked wrist), Louis should shut it down. He doesn’t.

18 August 2010

It’s not until the end of their third day together that Niall says, muffled through a mouthful of popcorn, “You touch Harry a lot.”

Louis, who currently has his hands buried in Harry’s curls, stops his head massage (which has Harry moving his head back to nudge Louis’ hand impatiently like a cat) and cocks an eyebrow at Niall. He tries to keep his face blank, while on the inside he’s tearing his mind apart to come up with an excuse for why he sleeps better at night with his head on Harry’s chest.

“He touches everyone a lot,” Zayn points out without looking up from his phone, which is true because Louis sleeps with his head on Harry’s chest but his legs tangled with Zayn’s and his arm thrown over Liam. Louis feels his stomach thaw a little.

“He doesn’t touch me a lot!” Niall protests.

“That’s ‘cause you smell,” Louis says delicately, running his hands through Harry’s hair once more. “Take a bath every once in a while, and I’ll give you a hug.”

Liam snorts. Harry softly pinches Louis’ leg in retribution, assuring their bandmate, “You don’t smell, Niall.”

That night, Louis makes a big show of choosing Niall’s shoulder for his pillow while they’re watching Terminator. He also stamps a massive reminder in his mind to maybe hang on Harry less and the other boys a little more. It’s not his fault he’s from a family that hugs rather than discussing tough issues, but he can try to squash any ideas popping into his bandmates’ minds about Louis touching Harry more than the rest of them.

... 

In their first week together as a band, the roles become clear.
Louis is the big brother. He dispenses advice as easily as jokes, and knows the exact thing to say to set the room at ease. He’s entirely confident in himself and every word he speaks. He’s who the boys come to for cuddles—especially Zayn, who gravitates toward the others in quiet moments after he’s gotten off the phone with his mum and sisters and needs a hug. Louis and his always-open arms cause comfort to bloom between the five of them that Harry didn’t think possible, and it pushes all of them to touch each other like they’ve been together for their whole lives: ruffling hair and arms flung over shoulders and heads resting on chests when they’re settled in a pile on the floor.

(Harry smugly knows that no matter the situation and no matter how much time he spends looking after Zayn, Louis always makes time to pull Harry into his arms. When Niall jokingly complains about Louis’ designated Harry Cuddle Time, Louis shoos him away with a “he’s the youngest, Niall, I’m protecting him from the harsh realities of the world” or a “don’t you have a terrible hat to wear?”)

Niall, meanwhile, is the stress relief. He’s always up for a kick around in the yard or a game on the Playstation. Harry delights in the fact that Niall will laugh at any joke or halfway witty remark. But he is also always ready for the calm moments, strumming his guitar to fill the sleepy silences of warm afternoons and tossing existential questions into conversations between casual comments.

(“Pass the crisps, H. Hey, have you ever thought that maybe, if we’re destined to be connected to one other person for the rest of our lives, that fate is real and our choices don’t actually matter? Because I really want to buy this new guitar, but me mam says I don’t need another and I think in the long run it can’t hurt.”)

Zayn is the smartest of the five of them by far, countering Niall’s terrifyingly huge questions with ever deeper answers, sending them all into spins of arguments rivaling the chicken and the egg debate. Sometimes he retreats to one of the bedrooms with a book and his phone for moments of solitude when the rest are bouncing off the bungalow walls. Other times, though, he perks up when Louis gets that mischievous look in his eye and they run off into the sunset leaving destruction in their wake, cackling all the while.

(“Louis, there’s no more super glue, you’ll need something else to attach the toilet seat to the door. Louis? Are you listening, babes, it isn’t going to work! Louis!”)

Harry likes to think of himself as the metaphorical jack-of-all-trades, filling the niches of the group as they appear. He is the audience to all of Louis and Zayn’s pranks, Niall’s one-man concerts in the shade of the backyard tree, Liam’s observations and ideas for future songs and performances. Harry keeps them fed, keeps them happy, and keeps them from falling too far over the edge of hyperactive or comatose. He also likes to think of himself as the comic relief (especially after one bit with a whipped cream can he pretends to jack off into some bowls of ice cream which he’d thought was hilarious, and Niall had laughed so hard he’d cried and even Liam had smiled, though Louis looked like he had a stomachache through the whole thing and had ran to the bathroom right in the middle of Harry’s epic moan-filled finale). He tags along on Liam’s morning runs and Niall’s night swims and whispers prank ideas into Louis’ ear to hear him snicker gleefully. He falls asleep starfished in the middle of them all, reaching toward his boys and pulling them close as he can.

Liam… Well.

25 August 2010
On the Wednesday before they leave for the Judge’s House, Liam interrupts a spirited marshmallow and chocolate missile war with a timid, “Should we, I don’t know. Practice?”

Niall, Harry, and Zayn make halfway interested faces, but Louis snorts.

“We’ve only got a couple more days here,” Liam presses.

“Yeah. That’s a lifetime. We don’t even have to choose a song,” Louis points out.

Which is true; not an hour after they had all arrived at the bungalow, they’d gotten a call from Simon himself.

“We’re being pushed to add songs by the guest judges to the early rounds of the show,” he’d explained, his powerful (and still rather terror-inducing, even at long range) voice tinny through the speakerphone, “so you’re doing Natalie Imbruglia’s *Torn*. I’ll email you a song file to work from with backing vocals and music. Don’t let me down.”

And then he’d hung up before they could answer.

“Right now, I want to push this chocolate against Niall’s face until it melts,” Louis says, holding up the chocolate bar like it’s proof in his favor.

Harry knows Liam’s right, and he realizes that Liam’s determination stems from getting to this stage of the competition before and then being sent home. But Louis is grinning like he’s already won and lifting another handful of marshmallows, and Liam’s idea is completely forgotten.

That night, they drag a mound of blankets and pillows out to the trampoline so Harry can fall asleep under the star-studded navy sky. Liam still hasn’t volunteered anything since his suggestion to practice, and the air between the five of them has grown strange and stagnant. So Harry does what he feels like he needs to do: he fills the silence and talks about what he knows.

“There’s this old legend, right, that Zeus split people into two pieces as punishment, because people were trying to overthrow the gods and they were almost powerful enough to do it. And then Apollo felt bad and sewed up their wounds, but they always missed the part that was split from them. So the two sides were always meant to find each other to become complete again, and when they found them they were happy and they became known as soulmates.”

Niall laughs once. “You utter sap.”

“It’s legend!” Harry protests. “I didn’t make it up.”

“No, but you brought it up.”

Louis, Liam, and Zayn stay silent. The discomfort between them is foreign where it tickles the back of Harry’s throat, and he coughs uneasily.

“I just, um” Harry shrugs. “Gemma had an old book of soulmate myths and history and I used to make her read it to me. I love soulmate stories.”

“So you’re a *romantic* sap,” Zayn teases, tapping Harry's chest.

A moment falls like stifling snow between them, hushing the night around them like a blanket of
powder. This time, Niall is the one to breach it.

"Sometimes," he says haltingly, and the others settle in for another of their strangely sincere late night chats, "I think that maybe there's not actually a soulmate for everyone. And that I'm one of those that'll never be Bonded."

Harry reaches out and tangles his fingers in Niall's sweater while Zayn answers.

"There's been a lot of studies and stuff saying that soulmates usually are born or live in the same areas, or have similar personalities and hobbies and things like that. That makes it more likely that you'll meet whoever it is."

"Are you guys not excited to meet them?" Harry asks, trying and failing to keep the wonder from his voice. "I'm so ready to be Bonded. It's all I want, really, that and to have a music career."

"Yeah, of course," Zayn murmurs. "It's what everyone wants, right?"

"I read this interview one time," Liam says, breaking his silence, "I think it was Shayne, or Leon, I don't remember but it was definitely an X Factor winner. He said that just in the couple of months everyone was in the X Factor house together, a whole bunch of the contestants Bonded. He said he'd heard from some of them that whoever Bonded with them would hear them singing on TV and be drawn to come to the live shows or to the meet and greets. And some of the contestants Bonded with each other as well."

Harry feels a shiver run across his shoulders. The show has already brought him amazing new friends and some incomparable opportunities, could it possibly bring his soulmate too? The idea is intoxicating, and he shivers again.

"Oi, quit kicking about," Niall laughs, slapping Harry's stomach to make him lay still.

"Can you imagine?" he asks breathlessly, and Niall and Zayn and Liam giggle at his poorly concealed awe.

They shift back into the nest of blankets and body heat, the quiet between them less heavy. Stevie Wonder is playing in Harry's head again, and his arms itch to curl around his missing other half that he's never even met.

"What about you, Louis?" Liam asks carefully, and they all wait for Louis to accept the question as the olive branch it's meant to be.

Louis stays silent. Harry looks over to see his eyes squeezed shut like he's trying really hard to fall asleep.

"Lou?" he whispers, gently prodding at Louis's elbow. His eyes open slowly.

"Sorry, lads," he says, voice strained. "Bit of a headache." It's quiet again, and Harry watches as words roll around on Louis' tongue like he's weighing their worth. "I've... never really wanted to be Bonded."

Niall flips onto his stomach, making the trampoline bounce them all out of their comfy positions. Zayn hisses and throws a pillow, but Niall ignores him. "Why not?"

Louis twitches his shoulder like he’s trying not to shrug. “Not really a happy story, that one, and I don’t want to be sad right now.” He smiles thinly, and then shuffles closer to Harry to lay his head on Harry’s shoulder. “But, I bet Harry here has a couple thousand more soulmate myths he’d love to
share with the group.”

It’s an obvious change of the subject, but… “Well, you know that test that you can have done to confirm your Bonded status?”

“That one they always use on Jerry Springer?” Zayn laughs. “That’s in your soulmate book?”

“Yeah. Well, I mean no, not the Jerry Springer part. But like. It’s more than just to check whether a Marker is fake or not, or whether someone’s lying about being Bonded. It’s also used if two people don’t Bond at the same time to make sure their Bonds are matched for each other, like in weird circumstances where more than one person says their full name at the same time or something.”

“So, you mean they hear people say their name, and a Marker just appears and they don’t know who it’s for?” Liam asks incredulously. “That’s scary, what if you Bonded and didn’t even realize?”

“You won’t, it burns like hell,” Louis says into Harry’s shirt, and then coughs loudly. “Um. S’what I’ve heard, anyway.”

Harry nods. “That’s what I’ve heard, too. Like being branded, or something.”

“Getting your Marker is painful? That sucks absolute arse.”

“Don’t be judgmental, Niall, some people like that sort of thing,” Harry giggles, his laughter at his own joke the only noise in the long-suffering silence that follows.

“I don’t know if you’re implying that people like pain or they like having their arse sucked,” Zayn says slowly, and Harry cackles.

Louis groans and shakes his head. “Why do I bother pretending you’re the innocent one that needs to be protected when you are the worst one out of all of us.”

(Harry’s favorite new thing is moaning Liam’s name when he’s anywhere near him, because Niall just laughs and Zayn ignores him and Louis moans louder to outdo him, but Liam turns crimson and runs from the room like it’s been lit on fire every single time. It’s wonderful.)

“If innocent is your thing, I can make it work,” Harry offers, fluttering his eyelashes, and Louis groans again and buries his face in Harry’s neck.

“Did your story have a point, Harry?” Liam asks.

“Oh, right. Well, back before that test was created there was no way to check Bonds, but there’s this old story from like Russia or something that says when two soulmates touch each other’s Markers at the same time, something happens.”

Silence.

“Something… happens,” Zayn says.

“Yeah.”

“That’s the big finale of the story?”

“Well, I mean. It’s different for everyone. Sometimes they feel different, like get hot or cold or whatever, and sometimes they change colors or glow and stuff. But something is supposed to happen.”
The others laugh, and Louis shakes his head sadly at the state of Harry’s apparently horrid storytelling skills.

“I’m not a bad storyteller!” he cries, and the others scoff. “I’m not! Okay, there’s another one from, like, a Native American tribe, and…”

Harry attempts five more soulmate myths before he concedes that okay, maybe explaining what he ate for lunch the day he read a certain story does not add any valuable background to said story. He also admits that leaving out the part where the main characters were from different countries would have helped clear a few things up. Either way, he fake-pouts to hide his smile at the thought that he found four people that will put up with bad storytelling just because they like him.

26 August 2010

The next day, after Zayn expresses his desire for a campfire and Harry expresses his desire for s’mores, and they’re sprawled around the fire nearly dead to the world from sugar crashes and sporadic sleep, Louis tells Niall to fetch his guitar.

“Liam’s right, boys,” he says, clapping once and startling them awake. “It’s time to practice. We’ve got a competition to win.”

Three hours later, and they’ve ran through their song so many times that even Liam is starting to tire of it, so they’ve moved on to some of their other favorites just for some variety and to get a feel of how their voices blend. Liam, who’s had more singing lessons than the rest of them combined, helps them pick out harmonies and back vocals just in case they get to choose their own song later in the competition. They toy with *Hey Jude* for a while, but it feels a little sacrilegious to be covering the greatest band of all time while they’re still so young and shaky. They sing and sing some more and toss out song ideas like confetti. They remind each other that anything they perform has to be recognizable but not overplayed, easy enough to learn but not simple enough just to be a karaoke cover, something that will set them apart but not be outside their comfort zone.

Harry feels a tingle growing in his palms, like he’s on the edge of a cliff staring out into foggy oblivion. They’re on the cusp of something, and it feels real and it feels right.

The others must feel it too, because Louis’ eyes positively sparkle in the firelight as he asks, “What do we think, boys, one more time through?”

Filtered pop was never Harry’s preferred music style, but he may change his mind after hearing the way their voices swirl together in the chorus of his new favorite song.

...
Louis jumpy because the dagger still hasn’t been revealed, due to strategic swimming only at the darkest part of night and wearing lots of sweaters despite the fact it’s August). They part ways from the bungalow only for a few hours, to meet with their families for the last time before they’re off to the next round at their Judge’s House.

Breakfast at a local cafe is a noisy affair, as Tomlinson events tend to be, and it’s the perfect thing to tide Louis through the (unlikely, but still present) threat of a lengthy separation from his favorite girls. When most of the plates are cleared and the time he’s meant to be at the airport has crept uncomfortably close, Louis stands and taps the side of his mug of tea with his scone to signal a toast, which doesn’t do much by the way of noise-making but is just ridiculous enough to have even Lottie giggling into her palm.

Louis smiles and reminds himself to keep it light, because tears are already lurking in his mum’s eyes and really, his own are not far off. So he adopts his most dramatic voice to declare that he will probably remember their time together fondly when he’s won the *X Factor* and is living in his mansion in LA. He says he might call but only if he feels like it and there isn’t anything interesting going on anywhere in the vicinity. He also says he’s decided to be the designated rapper of his new group, so they should take one last look at him before he trades his chinos and polo shirts for a shaved head and gold chains.

“By the way, does anyone know a good chain guy in London? I want to make sure all my ice is of the highest quality,” he sniffs, inspecting his nails. Fizzy groans and throws a balled up napkin at him, and he finally breaks down and joins them in giggling. As his mum and the older girls grab their purses and make to stand, he clears his throat to catch their attention one more time. “Honestly, though, I want to say I’ll miss you all, and I’ll call every night and every morning if I can manage it. I don’t really know how long I’ll be gone, but I’ll be thinking of you the whole time.”

He hadn’t kept it short enough, because the tears spill over before he can even think to stop them. Everyone else is in a similar state, at least, and he gives a watery laugh before finishing.

“I know there’s been some… stuff that’s come up lately, with the, um,” he gestures vaguely at his arm and the dagger always lurking under his sleeves. “I still haven’t talked with the person, so I need you all to not tell people anything until it’s all sorted. But—”

He breathes in and thinks of dimples and curls and a large hand flung out to trace patterns in the stars.

“I think it’s all going to be okay.”

They wave teary goodbyes as Louis grabs a cab to the airport to meet up with his boys, the rest of the *X Factor* Groups, and their production crew. He spots Zayn at the Heathrow security line, and once their bags are checked and they’ve stepped through the metal detectors, slipping on the slick tile in their socked feet, they spot a head of bleach blonde hair and make their way to the other three-fifths of their band, who are engaged in a spirited discussion of their possible destination and judge.

“France,” Harry is declaring as they walk up. “It’s gotta be. We’ll have Cheryl, and it’ll be France.”

“There’s no way!” Liam protests. “Cheryl won last year and the year before, they’ll give her a weak category like the Over-28s.”

“Dude,” Niall laughs. “They had to create two bands from thin air out of solo performers, I think this is the weak category. I wouldn’t mind having Cheryl,” he muses, scratching his head.

“I bet you wouldn’t,” Harry says, waggling his eyebrows absurdly.
“Cool it, Harold, we aren’t even on the plane yet,” Louis sighs, announcing their arrival, and Harry shrieks and scoops him into a hug like they didn’t literally wake up this morning tangled in a five-person puppy pile.

The other groups are milling around them, watching out of the corners of their eyes but pretending like they aren’t. Louis gets it; there were perfectly legitimate groups at bootcamp that didn’t make it, groups they had probably connected with over the hours of singing and dancing and waiting just like Louis had with Aiden and Tom and Paije and the four boys around him. The solo girls who were also put together in a group are getting the same treatment, so they’re standing on the outside edge of the larger crowd of contestants and crew.

Speaking of crew, a familiar woman with a headset and frizzy brown hair approaches them, rifling through the contents of an overloaded clipboard.

“Helena!” Harry cries, running to hug her, and Louis tries to contain the way his eyes want to roll in the most fond way possible. “How’s the dog?”

“Good, Harry,” she laughs, digging out a large manila envelope. “I’m assuming you lot are One Direction?”

Harry had come up with the name during a rehearsal break only the day before, staying suspiciously silent through a Ninja Turtles versus Power Rangers debate that had erupted and escalated rather suddenly.

“One Direction,” he’d said, blinking the spacy look from his eyes to see Louis attempting to smother Niall with a pillow and Liam putting Zayn in a sort-of headlock. They’d all looked up at the same time to see him frowning at the entire scene.

Well, except Niall, who hadn’t moved in a while and should have probably been checked on at that point.

“One Direction,” he’d said again, “our band name. Because, like, that’s the point of our two weeks here, right, and that’s the point of everything we do. We want to be better together, and to do that we all have to be moving in the same direction. One Direction.”

“I like it,” Louis had declared, and Liam and Zayn nodded in approval as well while Niall gave a weak thumbs up with his face still hidden under Louis’ pillow.

“Yes, we are One Direction,” Harry answers Helena proudly, taking the envelope. Other groups are already opening theirs and chattering loudly, so Harry unseals it and lets the bundle of tickets and itineraries fall into his palm. The other boys crowd around him to read—

“Spain!” Louis cries, jumping onto Zayn’s back in excitement. “Zayn, Spain!”

They probably won’t even make it past the Judge’s House round, may be returning home within the week and back to thinking about school and jobs and things that aren’t international music careers. But Louis can feel it, now; they’d sang together while packing this morning and had slipped into four-part harmonies as though it was the easiest thing in the world, and he knows they’ve all crossed the line from hoping they do okay to actively making sure they make it to the live shows.

Louis has never even left the U.K., and now he’s going to Spain.

…

Harry realizes that there is probably more to Marbella than beach-front properties and happiness,
he can’t really think of anything else that could be right now.

The convoy of contestants, assistants, camera crews, stylists, and who knows who else were shuttled directly from the airport to the most beautiful house that Harry’s ever seen. It’s massive—a three-story traditional Spanish villa-slash-mansion (if there could ever be such a thing), surrounded by a lush garden, a pristine pool, fountains every few feet, and a pathway to the sea through the backyard.

“Is this heaven?” he whispers to Liam, starry-eyed, and Liam wraps an arm around Harry’s shoulders in answer, beaming up at their home for the next three days.

Suitcase upon suitcase is wheeled into the house, followed by dozens of camera equipment bags and cases of makeup and hair products. Each of the groups is filmed walking down the gravel path to the house, chattering happily and staring up at the house in awe. Harry knows he isn’t much of an actor, but pretending to be ecstatic about his surroundings isn’t too difficult a stretch.

Following their acting debut, however, begins the side of things for which Harry isn’t quite as prepared: the staging.

After going through auditions and bootcamp he knows, at least in theory, that camera crews are catching every interaction and nervous twitch and eye roll at every minute of every day. He also knows the production crew is very good at their job, and watching six previous years of the show have taught him that certain pieces of footage or a wrongly worded interview question can change the way the entire nation looks at a contestant. He knows that during live shows, the audience are asked to hold signs they didn’t make and cheer for Dermot and the judges like they are five messiahs sent to save Britain through the power of pop music.

So it shouldn’t be surprising that an assistant stands on the steps of this beautiful villa (which is definitely not where their judge actually lives), and lectures them about what is expected of them in the next few minutes:

“Cheer for your mentor when he or she is revealed,” the assistant reads. “Laugh at any joke he or she makes. Someone should start a chant of the mentor’s name at some point. Someone has been designated to start a group hug, make sure to join in. If anything unsatisfactory happens, the reveal will be reshot.”

Harry doesn’t know what to think of all the manufactured spontaneity. The production crew at bootcamp hadn’t needed to create drama or tension or excitement; it was around every corner, and the cameras just needed be rolling to catch it all. Here, though, everyone is still cordial and tension seems to be internal rather than external, so for entertainment’s sake some spectacles must be scheduled and choreographed.

Harry isn’t comfortable with the “showbiz” side of the competition, but Louis is absolutely mesmerized. He watches the production crew with sharp eyes, taking in every movement and the lengthy setup behind every angle they shoot. He’s nearly vibrating with a potent combination of new information and nerves by the time they deem the groups positioned and coached decently enough to let them finally meet their mentor.

“It’s Simon!” Liam crows to the other four as the rest of the crowd cheers.

Simon looks out over the gathered groups like Mufasa surveying his kingdom and holds out his hands. He introduces their guest judge, Sinitta, and tells the groups that they’ll be singing for the two of them this evening and then he’ll reveal his final three groups for the live shows by tomorrow. They clap and cheer some more, Harry’s hands starting to sting a little from all the applauding and his toe aching where it was stomped by the heel of someone’s shoe, and then they’re abruptly
shuffled to a new location for another shot.

“It’s to make it look like some time’s passed, like we’ve been here more than twenty minutes,” Louis whispers excitedly. He must be right, because Simon makes a big show about walking up and discovering all of them hanging out poolside in a fully clothed, tight-knit group, as though he felt like doling out some friendly advice and it was just his luck that all eight of his acts were together in the same place. Once he and Sinitta are gone once again, the same assistant tells them they need to be fully dressed and downstairs at five-thirty to start makeup and hair, but that they can do whatever they want until then.

Five whole hours of freedom stretching out in front of them. Harry wants to take Simon’s sort-of-fake-but-still-smart advice to heart, to spend the full five hours practicing their two minute song over and over until he can’t do anything but sing those words, but the achy pressure of competition is starting to weigh in his stomach and he needs a break. Just a tiny one, the shortest ever. Couple hours, tops. Judging by Zayn’s twitchy fingers and Niall’s bright eyes, he’s not the only one.

There’s a beach within spitting distance and Harry wants nothing more than to have some fun with his band as though they never left the bungalow, a few more promised hours of sunny happiness before the competition has to rear its massive, terrifying head once more.

...!

They’re in cloudless, lovely Spain, their mansion (mansion!) backed up to the pristine beaches of Marbella, and Louis has no chance in hell of convincing his bandmates to do anything other than throw themselves headfirst into the sea during their break.

Ordinarily, at any other time in his life, Louis would have been the first in the water. Now, though, he changes into his swim trunks and thinks of nothing but the massive fucking dagger on his arm, and the lengths he’s gone to hide it. How was he to know, all those weeks ago when he decided to be brave and face Harry at bootcamp, that he would be hiding his left arm for so much longer than just a couple of days?

He’ll just have to play it off. He took four years of drama classes, he was Danny fucking Zuko, he can convince four unsuspecting boys (as well as a horde of his competitors and drama-hungry camera crews, but whatever) that there’s nothing strange about his “tattoo.” He’ll just say he’s had it so long he’s forgotten about it; sorry boys, completely slipped my mind.

As it turns out, it doesn’t come up.

The boys sprint out the back door, pushing past an irritated guy in a too-tight shirt who Louis is pretty sure is one-half of Diva Fever. Louis feels bad, but he’ll apologize later. Maybe. Probably not. Right now, he’s bringing up the rear as Harry races Niall down the cobbled footpath to the ocean, shrieking all the way. The tang of salt is crisp in the air and even though Louis feels dark and gloomy inside his chest, the lingering smell of suntan oil filters into Louis’ lungs like refined sunbeams, brightening his mood with each step. He rounds the final corner and suddenly it’s blue water as far as he can see, sand untouched and waves crashing and the other four boys the only people around for miles.

Harry whoops and pulls off the sweater he’d worn on the plane, throwing himself gracelessly face-first into the water. He comes up sputtering but beaming, wet curls plastered to his head. With an almighty crash, Niall flings himself in after Harry. Then follows Liam, who strips to reveal a ridiculous six pack (and Louis’ hands go automatically to yank on the bottom of his shirt, because some people can’t have six packs and it’s rude for others to flaunt their genetic superiority in front of their bandmates, Liam). Zayn is next, surfacing a few feet from Harry looking like the Little
Mermaid’s long-lost Pakistani cousin.

Louis sighs, still fiddling with the bottom of his shirt. He stops and takes one deep breath, and then continues toward the lapping sound of the water on the sand and his yelling friends, pulling the fabric of his shirt up toward his chest as he runs.

And then he falls, screaming, a bright flare of agonizing pain shooting through his foot.

... “We were swimming in the sea earlier, and Louis cut up his foot on a piece of broken glass,” Harry says blankly, trying to keep his eyes focused on the dark lens of the camera and trying not to think of Louis’ pale, drawn face as he’d been bundled away in the ambulance. He looks down at his lap. “It’s swollen really bad, and he had to go to hospital.”

He feels like he should add more, but he can’t come up with anything to add other than the constant loop running in his head: *is he okay is he okay is he okay*. Zayn nudges his side and picks up where he left off.

“We’re panicking a bit, we’re not sure when he’s going to get here or what’s going to happen with our performance.”

Liam sighs and shoots his patented sad puppy look into the camera. “For us that’s really bad, because we haven’t had much time as it is to practice. I mean, we just got put together. We really do need him.”

The cameraman gives them a thumbs up and moves on to film Belle Amie, who are singing and sunbathing by the pool.

Four and a half hours of freedom left in beautiful, sunny Spain, and Harry feels lost.

... Minutes fly by as Louis waits, perched on one hospital chair with his foot propped up on another. It’s two o’clock, it’s two-thirty, it’s three o’clock, it’s four.

To calm his nerves, he sings, practicing under his breath and hoping his boys are doing the same, preparing for the worst if he can’t make it back in time.

A tiny, tiny piece of him is a little glad that he’s here, so that his voice can’t be responsible for sending the boys home. After spending extensive amounts of time around incredibly talented singers at bootcamp and then all that time at the bungalow listening to Liam and Harry trade riffs like knock-knock jokes, Louis’ confidence in his own voice has plummeted. He could sing this song backwards in his sleep, but one wrong note could throw the whole thing off. He wouldn’t be able to take it if he was the guy that sang that one wrong note.

The tiny piece that wants to let the boys sing without him is growing a little louder the longer he has to sit and wait. Surely they don’t *really* need him, right?

But the rest of him wants to be right there with his boys, putting his soul on the line right next to theirs in the hope they get through. Minutes tick by, and his internal tug-of-war rages on.

... Harry sighs, slapping the CD player to stop their backing track without finishing the song for the
third time in a row.

“It doesn’t sound right at all,” Liam rubs anxiously at his brow.

“It’s not thick enough,” Harry groans, putting his head in his hands. “Not without Louis.”

They keep singing, but it never gets any better. Louis and Harry are supposed to make up the bulk of the chorus, with Liam taking the lower harmony and Niall and Zayn doing the backing vocal. Without Louis, Harry’s voice isn’t strong enough to carry it on his own. Liam tentatively suggests rearranging, but they all disagree.

“There’s not enough time,” Zayn despairs, and Niall moves to throw his arm around his shoulder.

“Let’s just keep running through without him, and when he gets back he’ll fit right in. He knows his part,” Niall reassures them, so they just keep singing.

... 

It’s almost 4:30 before a harried doctor can check that there’s no more glass in the cut and bandage Louis’ foot. He’s given a few days’ worth of painkillers and shooed out the door to make room for the next patient.

Louis’s heart is jumping in his throat, and he itches to get back to Harry and Zayn and Niall and Liam.

So it’s a little bit awful when it’s another half hour before an *X Factor* producer is sent to fetch him, and more and more time ticks by as traffic comes to a standstill on the way back to the house. Louis taps his fingers anxiously on his knees and watches his chance of making it back to his boys before they perform dwindle away.

...

“One Direction?” a familiar voice calls, and Harry looks up to see Helena motioning them over to a production crew-claimed corner of the backyard. Harry feels heavy as he pulls himself to his feet and they make their way over to her. She’s flipping through her clipboard, her constant accessory, and looks up only briefly to send them a sympathetic smile. “Louis is supposed to be on his way back, but we haven’t heard anything in a while. You’re meant to be up second to perform, but we’re moving things around and you can be last, if need be.”

“Thanks,” Liam nods. He wraps an arm around Harry’s waist when Harry drops his head back, pleading internally to whoever’s listening to send Louis back to him faster.

“They need you on the front steps to film you lot waiting on Louis,” Helena finishes. “Good luck, boys.”

The crunch of gravel announces Louis’ arrival, and Harry isn’t thinking of cameras or performances or anything, really, when he launches himself at him, pushing his face into Louis’ neck and breathing in salt and sweat and Harry’s coconut shampoo that Louis had stolen at the bungalow. Zayn and Niall aren’t far behind, Liam bringing up the rear with his arms spread wide around them all.

“Nice to see ya,” Louis says, muffled by Zayn’s shirt. “Shall we rehearse, then?”
Harry insists they carry Louis to keep pressure off his foot, and they stumble like a drunk eight-legged monster to a secluded bench under shady trees. They all face each other in a wobbly sort of circle, hesitance written in their expressions; Harry feels a tugging unwillingness to sing in front of Louis and show them how bad they are without him around to direct and take the lead like he had at the bungalow. However, Louis is having none of that.

“Let’s hear it, then,” he says brightly, clapping and rubbing his palms together. “We’ve got one chance to blow Simon away, better make it good.”

They sing without music this time, Liam stronger on the first verse than he has been all day, Harry’s voice steady through his solo and then—

Like hearing a song performed by a full orchestra when before you’d only heard the violins, *Torn* is broken open: Louis’ voice is a platform to push Harry’s louder, Zayn and Niall carrying their backup melody brilliantly. Liam is solid as ever, rounding out the sound. It’s amazing, it’s better than it had ever sounded at the bungalow and Louis’ eyes are shining.

“That was absolutely fantastic, boys,” he gushes. “Crushed it.”

Harry agrees, and for the first time since he’d found Louis collapsed on the ground with a shard of glass through his foot, he feels a flicker of hope.

Diva Fever performs for Simon before them, and, though it’s incredibly rude, Harry can’t help but hope they can do better than *that*. It’s mostly off-key and their dancing is strangely camp and they’re likeable guys, sure, but… really? The Groups category really is in trouble if this is what it has to offer as far along as the Judge’s House stage.

When Harry whispers that to Louis, he snorts into his palm and shoots Harry a crinkly-eyed smile. Diva Fever wrap up their song and Louis turns away, bringing the boys in for a huddle.

“We can beat that,” he promises. “We sound fantastic, we’re better looking, and our shirts fit better.”

The others laugh shakily, and Louis grins around at them all, meeting each of their eyes as though forcing his confidence through to them. They turn back to see Diva Fever bow and exit, sending One Direction evaluating looks as they pass. Niall leads the way as they file out onto the patio, the small space surrounded by three different cameras and all sorts of lights and microphones and, of course, Simon and Sinitta watching them closely.

Harry, remembering Louis’ injury and annoyed at himself for walking away without offering his shoulder to lean on, looks back over his shoulder to check on his friend. Louis hasn’t moved yet, and is instead staring down at his microphone with an inscrutable expression on his face. Louis pulls at his lip as though in deep thought and then, almost too fast for Harry to see, switches his mic off.

That… what?

Why would he—

Feeling stunned, Harry watches Louis join them and doesn’t even realize that Simon has spoken until Louis answers with a self-deprecating grin, “Yeah, it was a piece of glass? Like a broken bottle.”

“Painful?”
“Very, very painful.”

“But you’re alright now?”

“Yes,” Louis says. And then he smiles, as though he hadn’t just rendered himself useless with the flick of a tiny switch.

Simon nods for them to begin. The music floods through the speakers, and Liam steps up to take his part.

It’s good, Harry knows, especially after hearing some of the competition as they’d waited on Louis to return. They’re on key and aren’t dancing like idiots. But it’s lacking, still, and Harry can see that Liam picks up on it as they head into the chorus. Louis is singing, but it’s almost guaranteed that Simon can’t hear him over the instruments and the other four amplified voices. So Liam abandons the bottom harmony that rounded everything out to help with the backing vocals, blending his voice with Niall’s and Zayn’s to give the song some semblance of dimension.

Harry finishes out the chorus and slides into his second solo, and the words seem alarmingly fitting:

There’s nothing left, I used to cry
My inspiration has run dry

Harry watches as Louis smiles and sings, but no one can hear.

The judges don’t give feedback at this stage, but Simon hadn’t seemed outright disgusted so, at least there’s that. They’re shuffled around the corner and back into the house before anyone speaks.

“It didn’t… sound right,” Liam says slowly, gaze flickering up from his feet.

“Yeah,” Zayn agrees. “Like, it sounded stronger when we just went acapella.”

“I noticed that too,” Niall adds. Harry just shrugs, and watches Louis for a reaction from the corner of his eye.

All Louis says is, “What’s done is done. Let’s grab some dinner.”

There’s pizza left for them in the kitchen, the rest of the acts scattered as the sun sets on Marbella. They shake the stress from their limbs over dinner, joking and tossing pizza toppings, and then Liam, Niall, and Zayn join the group forming outside to play some football as Harry helps Louis settle into a sofa. Harry fluffs a pillow and gently rests Louis’ foot on it, then sits back to survey him critically.

“What, Harold?” Louis finally asks, picking at a fingernail and not meeting Harry’s eye. “You want to say something, spit it out.”

“Lou.”

“What.”

Harry stays silent until Louis tentatively looks up, throwing his hands skyward once he does. “For Chrissake, Harry, put the pout away. Yes, I turned off my mic. We did fine, and it’s over now, so.”
“We needed you,” Harry says quietly, looking down at his clenched hands. “We struggle without you. We need you.”

Harry leaves him on that sofa and heads out to the pool to clear his head, hoping to breathe a little easier away from the heady influence of Louis.

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The next day is strange. Decisions won’t be announced until late afternoon, so they’ve got an entire tension-filled morning to get through without snapping and screaming for answers. Harry wakes and rolls over to see Liam is already gone even though it’s still early, probably out for a run or down in the villa’s gym. Zayn is asleep in his single bed, and Niall is snoring loudly from the other top bunk. Harry sits up and stretches, knees popping as he maneuvers his way down the ladder of his bunk. He changes quickly, throwing on a new pair of shorts and ruffling his hair into something less like hurricane damage. A small voice breaks the tranquility.

“I’m sorry, Hazza,” he hears, and he turns to see Louis still in the bottom bunk under Harry’s, curled up and small under his blankets. He’s got his glasses on and looks younger than Harry’s ever seen him. “I didn’t want to ruin everything. I’m sorry.”

Harry wavers. He hates confrontation and usually chooses to let it fade away naturally but this feels important, like stale air that needs a window flung open to clear it, and after a moment he slides under the covers next to Louis. The share a pillow and breathe together, in out in.

“It’s not just me, though,” Harry whispers. “We share the same parts of the song, yeah, and I need your help, but it’s all of us. Together. We’re here as a group because we’re better together.”

Louis’ breath hitches and he buries his face in Harry’s chest, forehead against collarbones. Harry doesn’t continue with the things he wants to say, that Louis is the glue and the spark and the reason they click, that they need him like a crew needs a captain. That they’re five scared boys but Louis is the least scared, and that makes the other four brave too. He doesn’t say all this, knows Louis would laugh it off or think Harry was making fun, so he just tugs on Louis’ sweater to pull him closer.

When Liam comes back bearing breakfast and teas for all of them from downstairs, Louis and Harry are almost back to normal, casually arguing over the merits of being born with or acquiring superpowers (“Spiderman is the ultimate success story,” Louis declares) versus having enough money to make yourself into a superhero (“Batman is literally just a regular dude. If he gets shot, he doesn’t have invincibility to back him up,” Harry counters). Niall watches sleepily from his bunk, throwing scenarios into the ring when things get a little too agreeable. Zayn is still asleep, his pillow pulled over his head.

Now that things are back to their natural state, the morning doesn’t seem like it stretches on so endlessly. They stomp downstairs after showers and breakfasts in beds and claim a spot in front of one of the massive TVs for a few quick rounds of FIFA, then they hand the controllers off to the guys from The Reason to spend a little time outside. Louis keeps score from a poolside chair, his bandaged foot propped up on a glass table, as the other four team up for a vicious game of chicken—Harry and Niall against Liam and Zayn.

“That was a close one, but I’m going to have to give the tie to... Curly and Blondie!”
“Get in!” Harry cheers, high-fiving Niall.

“That’s four in a row, Louis! We get it, Harry is your favorite!” Liam cries, but Louis just smirks and throws crisps at Liam that get stuck in his wet hair.

Eventually, though, it’s back to business. They’re pulled aside to do some moody waiting-on-results shots, then it’s back to the house to wait. Lunch is subdued, each group claiming a corner of a room as they pretend not to check out the competition. Like lines have been drawn in the metaphorical sand, no one crosses to speak to other groups, sticking with their own even as the tension reaches a breaking point.

The first two groups are called to meet Simon, FYD and The Reason. They won’t be coming back once they get their answer; there’s a bonfire party on the beach once this is all over, a goodbye for the ones going home and a congratulations for the ones moving forward. The top three groups will be officially announced there.

The boys keep up a running commentary as the room slowly empties, half to fill the strained silence and half to calm their nerves.

“FYD over The Reason, they can actually sing,” Liam whispers. Harry agrees—FYD are like a less sexy male burlesque troupe, but The Reason just stood and sang without compensating for their average vocals.

“I don’t know, at least The Reason guys are somewhat attractive, in that I-live-at-the-gym sort of way,” Louis argues thoughtfully. “You can teach someone to sing, you can’t teach them to look better.”

Harry frowns and flicks Louis’ nose. “Don’t be rude.” Niall cackles and flicks Louis on the nose as well, and Louis pounces on him as the two duos—Twem and Diva Fever—are called forward.

“I haven’t seen Twem perform, but Diva Fever were pretty bad,” Liam murmurs, steadily ignoring Niall and Louis scuffling next to him.

“Twem was at my audition, they barely got through,” says Zayn.

“Duos never really do well, do they?” Niall says, his voice muffled by Louis’ armpit. “Maybe they’re both going home.”

The girl groups are called forward next, Husstle and Belle Amie leaving the room much quieter in their wake.

“Husstle can dance really well and sort of sing, and Belle Amie can sing really well and sort of dance,” Louis says.

“Yeah, that could go either way,” Liam shrugs, pulling at his fringe. It’s only them and the last guy group, Princes and Rogues, and Harry hopes just for their pride’s sake that they aren’t sent home because of them. Bowties, newsboy caps, and shorts with knee-high socks might work for schoolboys, but not men in their late twenties.

It seems to take a lifetime for their groups to be called, Princes and Rogues going in front of Simon before them. One Direction are left in the house’s foyer, not able to hear anything or see the other group. They bounce on their toes and reassure each other that it’s cool, it’s all good, we’ll be fine and mess with their hair even as the stylists hiss at them to stop. Helena comes to fetch them a few minutes later.
“You’re up,” she says, and Harry can feel his knees shake as they’re led around the house and back to the patio. He automatically wraps his arm around Niall’s waist for comfort as they come to a stop and Simon surveys them.

“Do you understand why I did this?” he asks, and though it’s mostly rhetorical the boys all murmur in agreement. “I think, once we got through to the bootcamp stage, there were weaknesses. Which is why we made the decision about all of you individually.”

Harry attempts to breathe deep. These pauses are all for TV, it’s all about creating drama. They want good, stressed-out reactions for the cameras. It’s fine.

“To a point, you came in at a disadvantage, because you didn’t have the time the other groups had.”

It doesn’t mean a no. It can’t be a no. It’s fine.

“On the more positive note, when it worked, it worked. My head is saying it’s a risk, my heart is saying you deserve a shot, and that’s why it’s been difficult.”

If Simon Cowell has ever used his heart to make a business decision, Harry will eat his shoe. But he has to cling to that shred of hope, that little part of him screaming I don’t want to go back to trying anything on my own and I need them to breathe and it’s only been two weeks.

“I’ve made a decision.” Louis is reaching over Niall to squeeze Harry’s shoulder, and it’s the only anchor keeping him from drifting. “Guys… I’ve gone with my heart. You’re through.”

Chapter End Notes

A couple of notes, now that I can’t spoil anything:
- I based Louis switching off his mic off of my very real belief that his and Niall's were both muted when they performed Torn for Simon in real life. Louis is entirely too loud for his voice to not be heard at all. I don't think that was his decision in real life, so I made it his decision in the fic and because it's fun to be angsty about things like that. :)

- I had Louis cut his foot on the beach rather than making it to the water to be stung by a sea urchin because he can't reveal the dagger quite yet... that takes away all my fun.

- If you sat and watched all those performances by the other acts, bless you. I can't do it, they're so cringy. Even 1D, I can't watch Liam's creepy stare without secondhand embarrassment.

- Sorry about the last picture, I just couldn't help it. God, I crack up every time I see it. Those little babies have no idea what they're in for.

Future chapters will have a lot more going on in them, but I had to lay out the backstory and get them to the competition first. I hope you're enjoying!

Find me on tumblr here if you want to chat, and there's a tumblr post for this fic here.
Part One: 30 September 2010 - 10 October 2010

Chapter Notes

Hello hello!

From this chapter on is where it gets a little more in depth with the X Factor people, which, again, if you haven't sat and watched the whole season can get pretty confusing. So here's a guide before we begin:

Groups (mentor: Simon) - One Direction (hopefully you know who they are :)), FYD, Belle Amie, Diva Fever

Girls (mentor: Cheryl Cole) - Cher Lloyd, Rebecca Ferguson, Katie Waissel, Treyc Cohen

Boys (mentor: Dannii Minogue) - Matt Cardle, Aiden Grimshaw, Paije Richardson, Nicolo Festa

Over-28s (mentor: Louis Walsh) - Mary Byrne, John Adeleye, Storm Lee, Wagner

Like I said before, all the tweets in this fic are real and if you click on the pictures it'll take you to the original if you don't believe me (because some of this was wild, honestly. They got away with a lot, back in the golden days.)

EDIT: Thanks to The_Emmed and Layla for pointing out that the picture of someone who looks like baby Harry Styles smoking a bong actually isn't baby Harry Styles smoking a bong. The internet has lied to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Three: 30 September 2010 - 10 October 2010

30 September 2010

There’s something about the X Factor stage that feels magical.

It’s not the actual stage itself, because when all the fluorescent lights are on and the stage is bare of props and colorful dancers, it’s really just a scuffed floor in a dim room. There’s still something there, though, like the echo of contestants past or something equally symbolic. A cocktail of passion and determination and fear and newfound fame. Louis sits at the edge of the stage and smiles, peering up into the rafters and just taking it all in.

He thought they’d never make it here. They had stood in front of Simon as he’d given his spiel, heavy with dramatic pauses meant to force them to their most desperate and dramatic expressions, and Louis had steeled himself once more to the thought of giving up this band, his boys, for good.

The boys who are currently intruding on Louis’ rare reflective mood and are chasing each other across the stage, shrieking and giggling. They’ve been told to wait in here while their sample outfits
are prepared by the stylists, so the wardrobe department will have their sizes for competition outfits and they can have nice clothes to wear around the *X Factor* house when the cameras come to film behind-the-scenes extras.

Speaking of, they get to *live in the X Factor house*.

It’s all more than a little surreal. The groups had been moved in just this morning: One Direction were given a room to themselves, right across from two still unoccupied single rooms. Since the Groups typically are harder to schedule around, they’ve been brought back early to settle in until they meet all the other finalists at the welcome party later tonight.

“One Direction?” a PA calls from a side door, “they’re ready for you!”

Louis follows Liam down a back hallway and into a large room that looks as though someone’s rather glittery wardrobe has exploded. A woman with a brown bob haircut and wild purple eyeshadow introduces herself as Grace, the fashion director.

“We’ve got some different styles for you boys to try out, so I’ll start with this one,” she grabs Liam’s arm. “Make yourselves at home, but be sure you see our hairstylist Linda at some point before you’re done.”

The afternoon passes quickly, the stylists cheerful and the atmosphere fun. Louis and Harry swoon when Liam comes out in his first outfit—“Look at that chest! And those arms, hold me, Harold, I feel dizzy!”—and Liam hides his red face in his hands until Zayn throws a can of hairspray at Louis to get him to shut up.

They laugh at Niall’s piercingly blonde head as he gets his dye job touched up ("Never shoulda dyed it in t’ first place," he complains good-naturedly, "Now I'll have to dye it forever or no one will recognize me!") and groan at Harry’s naughty schoolboy jokes as he tries on posh blazer after posh blazer (even though his raunchy cover of *Hit Me Baby One More Time* is actually really good, throaty and low, and Louis has to pull his eyes away from the pen Harry keeps biting exaggeratedly and the finger twirling one of his curls). Even Louis gets a taste of his own medicine when he sits for his haircut and Zayn convinces Linda to let him have a go before Louis can protest, then cuts off a large chunk from a wig the same color as Louis’ hair and lets it fall where Louis can see, gasping and apologizing. Louis flies to his feet, clutching the back of his head desperately and swearing that if Zayn ruined his hair he’d sue and then murder him. The other four collapse in laughter, Zayn tossing the wig at Louis’ face when he figures it out.

Louis is just getting pulled off the sofa, the last one to try on his few outfits, when Grace asks Harry to run and fetch her a coffee from the tiny kitchenette down the hall. He agrees cheerfully and bounces out of the room as Louis steps into a curtained-off corner, pulling the first outfit off its hanger: a white polo shirt and red jeans, nice enough quality but nothing he wouldn’t wear on a typical day back in Donny.

He steps out and submits himself to the approval of Grace and Liam and Zayn and Niall, who are all finished with their haircuts and highlights and are tangled on the sofa. Louis gives an exaggerated swirl and his best catwalk face to a chorus of the boys’ laughter, and when he gets back to Grace she nods approvingly and bends to roll his trouser legs to uncover his ankles. He turns to the mirror to check out the way his bum fills out the trousers (very well, he might add), and he’s startled when Zayn’s voice cuts clearly through the room.

“Louis, it that a tattoo?”

Louis automatically turns back to hide behind the curtain and pretend he never heard the question, but Zayn is across the room and up in his space before a full second has passed.

Louis tries to shrug nonchalantly, wincing as Zayn’s fingers prod at the dagger. He prays wildly that tattoos and Markers don’t feel any different under other people’s’ fingertips, because Zayn loves tattoos and might actually be able to tell a fake one from a real one.

“Um. Yeah?” he answers meekly.

Grace tuts and cocks her head. “Does Simon know about this?”

“No?”

“That might change how we style you, he may want to hide it-”

“What the hell, babes, this is sick!” Zayn interrupts, twisting Louis’ arm to see every angle. Niall and Liam jump up to see the dagger as well, Niall rubbing at the edge like he thinks it might smudge off.

“It’s real!” he cries in surprise.

“What’s real?” Harry calls from the doorway, and Louis’ blood freezes.

“Louis has a tattoo,” Liam says, sounding slightly like a child tattling on his sibling.

“No he doesn’t,” Harry laughs, walking closer to bring Grace her coffee. Louis tries to tug his arm from Zayn’s grasp, to escape back behind the curtain and back into the comfy certainty of the sleeves of his sweater before Harry can see the Marker that he caused. Zayn doesn’t let go, though, not even seeming to notice Louis trying desperately to get away as he peers closely at his arm.

Harry draws nearer, and the moment he can see over Niall’s shoulder that no, Liam isn’t kidding, he drops Grace’s drink to the floor, the carpet muffling the dull thunk of ceramic and the splash of coffee.

As though he knows that this is big, a moment, Niall grabs Liam and Zayn (who struggles, eyes still locked on the dagger like an art lover finding a new Monet stashed in an attic) and they back away. Harry approaches cautiously, mouth dropped open in a perfect O.

“Lou,” he murmurs after a solid minute where Louis can’t breathe or move or do anything, really.

“This is fucking amazing.”

“S’just a tattoo, Haz,” Louis jokes weakly.

“No, it’s.” Harry reaches out slowly. “It’s perfect.”

Harry’s fingertip touches the dagger, and Louis’ legs give out.

Louis passes it off as his foot still giving him trouble from when he hurt it at the Judge’s House, and his dagger is pushed to the back of the minds of his bandmates as they hoist him back to the sofa and fall over themselves to fetch him water and snacks and a cool wet cloth and anything else, Lou? What do you need?

The moment they turn their backs, Louis digs out his phone and pulls up his web browser.
And that’s how he discovers that Markers, apparently, can be aphrodisiacs and severely sensitive when touched by the owner’s soulmate, which explains why there’s a clawing, aching, needy feeling low in his gut that hasn’t gone away and flares brighter and hotter every time he meets Harry’s worried eyes.

He sneaks away for the most intense wank of his life the moment they get back to the house, collapsing against the door and definitely not thinking of Harry’s awestruck face as he’d touched Louis’ dagger, lighting Louis up from the inside out.

They’re given one new outfit apiece—Louis instructed to wear a jacket because they don’t know what Simon’s decided yet about showing his dagger—and allowed a little free time for a short nap (which is nearly impossible to wake Zayn from, and it takes ten minutes of gentle coaxing from Liam before he’ll even open his eyes) before they’re bundled into a van and taken to the studio.

The welcome party is in a few hours but first, they’ve got a date with Simon Cowell.

His office is in a quiet corner of the Fountain Studios complex, one of those rooms designed in a strange mix of textures and colors that really shouldn’t work, glass and wood and five white leather chairs awaiting them in front of Simon’s massive desk. There’s a screen on the wall playing video snippets he recognizes from bootcamp and a view looking out over foggy London and Louis gets a weird anticipatory feeling in his chest, something like someday I want a power office that terrifies everyone who walks in.

But for right now, he files into a seat on the less impressive side of the desk, Simon surveying them over the top of his glasses.

“Hello, boys,” he says, and they’re still in awe and intimidated by the very name of this man, so all they can do is mumble hellos and squirm in their seats. Simon knows, of course he does, but he kindly does not point out their knocking knees when he says, “I’ve got some things we need to talk about.”

The first of these, he continues, is Louis’ dagger. Still not used to having it out in the open and discussed like it’s not a massive, life-changing thing, Louis swallows quietly and tries to nod and not hyperventilate.

“We considered having you cover it through the run of the show,” Simon says, “but it would take almost constant work with all the behind the scenes interviews we film. If we hide it but someone gets a picture anyway and tweets it, they’ll be publishing articles about how you Bonded with everyone in the house as well as the judges within an hour.”

Louis, who’d unwisely chosen this moment to take a drink of water, chokes.

“Besides,” Simon continues over Louis’ spluttering and Harry slapping his back to clear his airways, “we think it could help the overall group image. A visible tattoo will make you all seem just a little bit older, and it’ll counteract the baby faces in the group,” he smirks, nodding at Niall and Harry, who don’t help their cases by scowling like upset toddlers.

“Does looking older help us?” Liam asks.

“It can’t hurt. You’re already the youngest act left on the show and you’ll be compared to adults from the moment the Judges’ House episode airs. Youth is always good in the entertainment
industry, but you can’t seem too inexperienced. That’s where the tattoo comes in,” he waves his hand at Louis. “You can’t be aged with makeup like girl contestants can, but this subtly tells the audience that you’re mature enough to be here.”

Simon sets his mug down and leans back in his seat. He gives them a long, searching look over his glasses before continuing.

“Look, I like you boys. Raw talent alone could get you through the first few rounds of this show, and since you’re handsome lads you’ll have no trouble pulling a good bit of the female vote. And to be completely honest with you, you’re my strongest hope in this competition. I think with vocal training and time to learn each other’s strengths and weaknesses, you’ll have a recording contract by the end of the year.” Harry reaches over and squeezes Louis’ hand, hidden from Simon under the desk and shooting fire up Louis’ arm. “So you should start learning about how the industry works now, before you’re actually in it. I’m going to be very upfront with you about things, because you’re smart and I know you want this, and everything I tell you will only help you get further.”

The boys nod, their fear slowly disappearing under the gaze of the first person to treat them like adults rather than just really lucky kids.

“Of course,” Simon continues flippantly, “the moment I see you’ve put something I tell you on Twitter or record me to show to anyone outside this room, your career will be over as well as your chance of winning the show.”

Liam gulps audibly, they all rush to agree they’ll keep their mouths shut, and Simon starts talking.

He tells them that no group has won X Factor because they’ve never been likeable enough—they’ve all been in the same vein as FYD, choreographed out of their authenticity and frightened out of their originality. Girls don’t vote for girl groups, though that tends to be their main audience because if girls won’t vote for girl groups, boys definitely won’t. That’s two of Simon’s acts gone, right there.

Boy bands, he says, have to walk the narrow line of approachable and unattainable. They have to be seen as down-to-earth, just normal lads given amazing opportunities. They absolutely will not be successful if they’re standoffish or seem at any way unwilling to connect with their fans, but they can’t seem too available. Every reporter they will ever meet will ask if they’re willing to date a fan (to which, he says, they must always reply yes), because boy band fanbases are built on potential soulmates waiting in the audience. That’s where the unattainability comes in: they’re totally open to dating and Bonding with a fan, but that fan has to be the perfect person.

“Of course, if the marketing and messaging for the band is done well, every girl will consider herself a perfect match for her favorite boy band member,” Simon says. “That’s what makes them buy the albums and the concert tickets and all the merchandise, to seem closer to the band and their future soulmate.”

That’s how it worked for all the famous bands: Take That and Westlife and the Backstreet Boys.

“We don’t, um,” Harry interrupts. “I don’t think we consider ourselves as, like, a typical boy band.”

“Yeah,” Niall adds. “We practiced all types of music for the show, not just pop stuff.”

“And we don’t want to dance,” Zayn mutters, and Simon barks a laugh.

“Diversity is good,” he agrees. “And I definitely don’t think you fit the mold of a typical boy band, you’re right. But know that while you’re on the show, that’s how you’ll be seen.”

“Won’t” Louis starts, before cutting himself off. Simon gestures for him to continue. “Won’t that be
a good thing?”

“How d’you mean?” Liam asks.

“Well, if we’re seen as a typical boy band but then we do a decent cover of, I don’t know, Elvis or somebody like that, somebody that isn’t ordinary pop, it’ll make us seem new and different from other boy bands. Sort of like we’ve broken the mold, or something.”

Simon raises an eyebrow. “Impressive. You’ve got a good mind for the industry.”

Louis wants to stop this moment, right here, because Simon Cowell just complimented his idea and that may be the defining moment of his life (besides the whole soulmate thing, that was a little important too). Liam reaches over and pats him on the back, and Zayn sends him a wink like he knows what Louis’ thinking, Harry, never one for subtlety, beams and squeezes his hand again.

“So if you aren’t the next Take That,” Simon muses, “who are you going to be?”

They spend a decent half hour talking influences, favorite artists, and their comfort zones. They uncover common ground on everything from ‘70s rock to current chart-toppers. They talk image and styling and decide that, unless it fits the theme of the week and is their absolute last option, they don’t want to rely on ridiculous costumes or gimmicks to get votes.

“This is good, we can definitely play around with this to find your niche,” Simon says, looking over his notes. He scratches a few more lines and then looks up, smiling. “We’ll talk song choices and set up a practice schedule tomorrow, but for now I think the party has started down in the studio.”

Simon’s right—the studio is hopping when they make it downstairs, happy shouts going up all around as new people enter and see friends from bootcamp who’d made it to the live shows.

“My boys!” cries Mary from the Over-28s category as they step inside the too-loud, too-crowded room.

“Mary!” they cry back, each stepping up to hug her. After that it’s like a massive game of Pass The Boybander, Louis getting separated from the others as he accepts hugs and surprised variations of you’re here! from Cher and John and Rebecca. He greets Belle Amie even though it’s only been a few days since he’s seen them; they seem friendlier here, now that their finalist spot is secured and the threat of being another failed X Factor experiment isn’t constantly breathing down their necks. He says hello to the FYD boys as well, and can’t help but think of Simon’s words back in his office, that they’re overprocessed and won’t last the double elimination rounds.

He turns after a polite head nod to Katie and—

“Ow, shit, sorry—Louis?”

Louis looks up, eyes watering from smacking face-first into: “Aiden!” he cries, bouncing on his toes to pull his friend down into a hug. “You’re here! I knew you’d be here!”
“Liar,” Aiden laughs into Louis’ neck, and God, with worrying about his own future, Louis hadn’t spared a thought for results from the other Judges’ Houses. He presses his face to Aiden’s shoulder and laughs, bright and happy.

“Who else made it?” he asks as they draw back, smiling goofily at each other.

“Um, this guy Matt, he was in the Over-25s until they changed it,” Aiden says, shrugging. “He’s cool, quiet but an amazing singer. And then, uh…”

“Spit it out, arsehole,” Louis laughs, and Aiden just smirks and gestures over Louis’s shoulder. There’s a familiar face in the corner, sipping from a bottle of water with his nose wrinkled at the noise around him. “No, shit, Nicolo made it through? Excellent.” He rubs his palms together and smirks.

“You look like an evil chipmunk, stop it,” Aiden chuckles, batting at Louis’s hands. That’s how Harry finds them, giggling like mad and throwing ideas back and forth for the best things to slip into Nicolo’s sheets back at the house before he’s inevitably kicked off the show for his sour face.
“Aiden!” Harry says as he walks up, hugging him close. He pulls away quickly, though, and settles beside Louis with a strange look on his face, like he’s ecstatic to be here but at the same time would rather be just about anywhere else. Louis nudges him with his hip.

“Okay?” he asks, and Harry smiles back beatifically.

“Am now,” he answers, throwing his arm over Louis’ shoulders. He turns back to Aiden, whose eyebrows have lifted to successfully blend with the floppy front of his quiff, and grins, letting the silence settle. Louis squirms at the uncomfortable moment.

“Guess who’s here, Haz,” he says to break the silence.

“Who?”

“Our favorite fruit target,” Louis grins, nodding to where Nicolo is sighing his way through a conversation with one of the Over-28s, a loud guy with bright red hair. Harry actually slaps his knee in glee, laughing his loud, squawky laugh.

“Perfect,” he laughs. “Someone else for you to focus all your energy on.”

Louis is pouting at the insinuation that Harry doesn’t want his full, undivided attention and Harry is smiling innocently down at him like he’s not going to give in and apologize when Aiden clears his throat.

“I’m, erm, gonna see who else made it,” he says, gesturing over his shoulder at the amassed crowd. “I’ll see you both later.”

Louis frowns, wondering what his deal is, but then Harry is whispering about fruit trays and hiding spaces in the darker corners of the room and Louis is sufficiently distracted. Soon Nicolo is cursing in Italian and ducking fruit bombs as Louis and Harry and (once he sees the fun he’s missing) Niall are tossing from different locations so he can never catch them.

They’re shuttled back to the house an hour or so later, and Louis is delighted to learn that one of the single rooms across from theirs is Aiden’s, but the room owner himself just pats Louis on the shoulder to wish him goodnight and disappears behind his door without another word. Inside the boys’ room, Zayn has already settled under his covers, Niall is rummaging for his toothbrush in his bag, and Liam is doing sit-ups on the floor (“Disgusting, Liam, do you have to do that filthy habit in this hallowed room?” “I saw you use a dirty pair of pants to clean a cobweb earlier, Lou, I don’t think the room is ruined.”). Harry is already in his top bunk over Louis’ as well, and he beckons Louis closer once the light is shut off and Liam and Niall hop into their own beds.

“G’night, Lou,” he whispers, a streetlight outside catching on his eyelashes as he blinks slowly.

“Night, Harry.”

When Louis falls asleep, he dreams of an office and fancy desk and undiscovered new talent sat across from him, shaking and starry-eyed to hear him talk about their potential, and then he dreams of staring out his office window at the wide, wide world and a pair of strong, wonderful arms wrapping around his waist from behind.

“You did it, Lou,” the person rasps joyfully in his ear, and Louis wakes to a tear-stained pillowcase
and the false memory of chocolate curls brushing his cheek.

... 2 October 2010

Harry is in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on the last batch of still-warm cupcakes he’s just baked, when Louis scampers by and comes to a sliding halt at the bottom of the staircase. He cups his hands around his mouth and, in an impressive show of volume that Harry is sure no one but him will appreciate, bellows, “IT’S TIME!”

Just as expected, three different people stumble out of their rooms, yawning and stretching and looking otherwise put out that their alarm clock for their evening naps is a hyperactive boy who’s already snuck three cupcakes when Harry’s back was turned. Louis just smiles angelically and bounces back into the kitchen, reaching for his fourth snack before Harry smacks his hand with a wooden spoon.

“No!” he insists, not falling for Louis’ pouty bottom lip. “To the living room with you, I’ll be right there.”

Louis sighs dramatically but leaves the kitchen, and Harry finishes icing the last cupcake before arranging them on two trays and following him. As he makes his way to the large TV room in the center of the house, stepping gingerly to avoid the spill he’s very aware he’s capable of, Harry grins as he hears Louis ordering people off a particular sofa from three rooms away.

“I put up signs!” he’s whining as Harry walks into the packed room behind him, bearing dessert. “I claimed this seat!”

“Yes, it was adorable,” Cher laughs, holding up the PROPERTY OF CURLYLOCKS AND LOUIS sign. “But you weren’t here, so I did my British duty and colonized.” Katie giggles where she’s wedged in the sofa beside her.

“C’mon, Lou,” Harry says before Louis can start in on whatever insults he’s about to throw. “We can sit on the floor.”

Louis huffs and points dramatically at Katie and Cher, announcing, “Neither of you gets a cupcake!”

“Cupcakes?” Niall calls, his head popping up in interest from where he had been deep in conversation with Matt and Mary. The trays are passed around—except to Katie and Cher, at least until Harry feels bad and takes two over to them. When he returns to Louis’ side, Louis pouts, but still pushes and prods until he’s half in front of Harry, leaning back on his chest, and someone switches off the lights as a familiar voice floods the room.

“Thousands applied, now just 32 acts remain.”

The X Factor logo illuminates the room, and Harry feels a shaky thrill that, yeah, he’s actually on the show, and this time he’ll actually be singing and no one will be telling him to go home. They watch the recap from last week, all the dramas of bootcamp summarized into a few quick shots, and then there’s Dermot, kicking off the Boys category at their Judge’s House with the Sydney Opera House looming dramatically behind him.

The room is silent save for the television spitting back recorded versions of their own words, which is strange in a group this full of colorful, loud people. It’s like they’re all waiting for the other shoe to fall.
drop, for Simon and a camera crew to bust back in and tell them you just thought you were good enough, but you’ll never actually do anything worthwhile!

It’s Mary who breaks the silence, her deep laugh booming when her onscreen self forgets the words to the Coldplay song she’d been given. “Never even heard the song before,” she explains to the giggling group, “My daughter looked at me like I’d grown a third eye when I told her that.”

From there it’s more fun, more like what Harry expected when they’d agreed as an entire group to watch this week’s episode together. The Boys category portion of the show is already over but Matt and Aiden trade funny stories from Australia at each commercial break. Mary and John talk about the Irish manor the Over-28s had stayed in, how everyone was so serious except that Wagner fellow, who’s just a bit off even when the cameras weren’t making everyone antsy. Then it’s the Groups being shown, and Louis takes great delight in regaling the crowd with the story of his foot injury like a soldier returned from war, complete with wistful sighs and a choked, teary voice. He gets an anonymous cupcake to the face for his efforts (though Zayn cackles suspiciously from the back where he’s surrounded by the Belle Amie girls and an uncomfortable-looking Liam) but doesn’t really seem to mind, scraping the icing off his cheek and licking it off his fingers.

Harry looks away for a while after that, thinking of his Nan in lacy underwear and cemeteries and tries not to think about the hot press of boy leaned against his chest, at least not until he’s calmed down enough to pay attention to the TV once more.

Dermot reappears on-screen to introduce the next group performing. Cher does a pretty excellent impression of the guy from The Reason going off pitch on his solo, and then bam—there they are, the newly minted One Direction being broadcast to the nation for the first time ever as a group.

It’s strange seeing himself on the telly, Harry thinks distantly. It’s not like he doesn’t know what he looks like, but he stares at the screen expecting to find what he sees in the mirror every day and—between the nerves and the updated wardrobe and the makeup—his onscreen face seems alien.

There’s teasing aimed at the boys when they leave the screen after their song but it’s gentle, lighter, less pointed; Harry meets Niall’s eyes across the room and they trade unsurprised looks. They’d all talked about it after the welcome party in the studio; everyone had seemed surprised to see them, and there were rumblings about both of the Simon-created groups making it through to the live shows. Now, though, the others know that they’re here based on more than their looks and Simon’s heavy hand, that they can compete and improve and be in this competition for the long run.

They’re here to stay, and they aren’t leaving without a fight.

3 October 2010

The next morning, Harry stumbles down to breakfast and the kitchen goes silent.

“Good morning,” snickers Niall.

“Very good morning,” Katie laughs.

“Hazza, put on some pants,” Zayn groans, burying his face in his hands. “This isn’t the bungalow, there are other people here.”

Harry shrugs, still wiping the sleep from his eyes, and wraps an afghan from a nearby chair around
his waist before reaching for a plate.

“Okay, that’s your blanket now,” Cher says decisively. “You can have that one. Just don’t change blankets willy-nilly, I don’t want to cuddle under something that’s been against your bare arse.”

Harry just lifts an eyebrow and smirks. “Sure about that?”

Cher is throwing a muffin in retaliation when Aiden steps into the kitchen and clears his throat.

“Harry?” he asks quietly as the conversation starts back up around them. “Can I have a word?”

Harry follows Aiden to the deserted TV room, blankets and pillows and popcorn flung haphazardly from their group time last night. When Aiden turns, he’s biting his lip and looking supremely uncomfortable.

“Yeah?” Harry prompts.

“I was just, um,” Aiden says, looking anywhere but at Harry. “Just wondering if, like… if there’s anything going on between you and Louis?”

“Going on?” Harry asks, nose wrinkling. “We’re in a band together. He’s my best mate.”

“Yeah, but,” Aiden shrugs. “Like, is that it?”

“Does there need to be more?” Harry asks, a little irritated. He doesn’t just throw around titles like best friend like they’re nothing, it means something. “Louis is important to me. We’re best friends.”

“Best friends?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Okay, good.”

“Are we…?” Harry asks, lost. “Is that all you wanted? To ask if Louis is my best mate?”

“Um, yeah, basically,” Aiden shrugs again, grinning. And then he stops. “Are you naked?”

Harry just laughs, and they walk back to the kitchen. More people are awake, now, chattering happily over bacon and sausages. Louis has stolen Harry’s seat, resting his head on the table next to Harry’s plate of eggs. Harry nudges him until Louis relinquishes his seat and then settles onto Harry’s lap, burying his face sleepily in Harry’s neck and stealing bites off his plate. Harry attempts to eat with one hand, the other curled around Louis’ back, and pointedly ignores the glances they’re receiving from the rest of the room.

“What’s on the agenda today, then?” Rebecca asks, her quiet voice drawing attention just because the sound is so rare.

“We’re in the studio today, I believe,” Mary answers. “It’s our first official day.”

“Gonna be big,” Cher says happily over her tea.

She’s not wrong.
At the studio, they get their first shock of the day.

“Meet the Wild Cards!” Cheryl announces, and in walk four more acts to stretch the field of finalists to sixteen: Paije for the Boys, Treyc for the Girls, Wagner for the Over-28s, and Diva Fever for the Groups.

The original twelve acts feign enthusiasm (great, four more acts to compete against, every contestant’s absolute dream) well enough that the cameras and the judges deem them okay to mix and greet the newbies, and Louis immediately turns to Harry with raised eyebrows.

“Diva Fever?” he asks, not even bothering to keep his voice down. “That’s the best option he had? They’re like the opening act in a gay club on burlesque night.”

Harry claps a hand over his mouth to stifle his bark of laughter. Then he realizes—

“Wait, Lou. How do you know what gay club dancers are like?”

Louis just winks and sidles away to mingle, and Harry’s stomach suddenly feels like he swallowed a snake.

They’re given *Viva la Vida* for the first show.

Which is—

Yeah, it’s good. Because it could have been N’SYNC or something, which would have started them on a terrible road down which lies matching sweatsuits and choreographed dance routines where they pretend to be puppets; or it could have been something wildly out of their comfort zones (which isn’t much, they’re open to a lot, but it could have been, like, Icelandic yodeling dubstep or some such). But still, it’s the most famous song in the world right now and one that can probably take very little variation or it’ll sound like a completely different song. So it’s good, because they’re getting good rock songs, but it’s also bad, because they’re getting *really good* rock songs.

So it’s… yeah. It’s good. Probably.

To say it goes downhill after that would be like saying that rollercoasters also go downhill sometimes: a complete and terrifying understatement.

“Zayn, you’ve still not got the timing down. Know when you’re coming in or we’ll give the solo to someone else. Niall, you’re majorly flat. Liam, you’re overpowering everyone else, and it’s supposed to be a harmony. Harry, stop staring at Louis for ten seconds and you might not be a beat behind through the whole song.” Their vocal coach, Savan, rubs his temples and waves his hand as though even looking at them hurts his head. “Again.”

They start over. Zayn misses his cue once more, and Niall’s solo still sounds off. Liam runs over everyone else because the only one in the group with better volume is Louis, who Harry can’t stop watching because Louis gets flustered halfway through the chorus and stops singing which in turn throws off everyone else’s timing.
Savan stops the music again and pulls the CD out of the player, brandishing at them like it’s a weapon.

“Go back to the house and practice. We’ve got six days to perfect this as well as choreograph your staging, and right now I’m not sure that’s enough time.”

“Maybe Savan’s harsh on everyone?” Niall shrugs. They’re back in the van on the way back to the house and the other four are quiet, lost in thoughts of two hours spent with Savan and not one decent run-through achieved.

Apparently, he’s not.

“Savan loved our song choice,” Craig from Diva Fever brags over dinner. “He said we’d get a lot of attention for it.”

“He told me my voice was perfect for mine!” Katie agrees, chopping happily at her chicken.

Around them, all the acts chatter happily about their amazing first days of practice, some of them already moving on to work on their choreography with the creative director. Even shy, quiet Rebecca is grinning and swapping stories with Aiden, the two of them laughing over Aiden’s story of tripping over his mic stand.

Harry can’t look up from his plate, the snake in his stomach making its presence known once more.

“I just…” he tells Louis later. “I knew we wouldn’t be perfect, but I thought we’d be. I dunno. Better.”

They’re on the sofa in the TV room, the only two people interested in watching the second part of the Judges’ House episodes. (“You know what happens,” Niall had said when they’d brought it up at dinner. “Why waste an hour pretending you don’t know who got through?”)

Harry is nestled between Louis’ legs, his back to Louis’ chest and playing with the seam of Louis’ pajamas. Louis hums, gently untangling Harry’s rogue curls and braiding them.

“We’ll figure it out,” he reassures Harry. “And even if we don’t, even if Zayn misses his solo and Niall goes off-key-”

“And if you stop singing halfway through the song,” Harry adds darkly, poking sharply at Louis’ thigh.

“And if I stop singing halfway through the song,” Louis allows, tugging on a curl in retaliation, “we’ll still be okay. We can’t be the worst ones here, you saw the Judge’s House auditions.”

Harry snorts, but stays quiet. His next thought is interrupted by Rebecca, who walks into the room, covers her eyes and apologizes, and walks back out.

“That was weird,” Louis comments mildly.
“Not everyone’s used to walking in on two people spooning on their sofa,” Niall answers as he walks by the doorway. He laughs and calls up the stairs, “Hey Bex, at least Harry’s wearing clothes this time!”

“When were you not wearing clothes?” Louis asks. “I feel like I should be outraged and appalled at your behavior.”

Harry shrugs. “Breakfast this morning.”

“Oh. Well that’s just your typical Harry wake-up call, then,” Louis says, continuing his braiding. “I thought it would be a more scandalous story than that.”

Harry laughs, but the sound is weak. Needing something to do, something to focus on rather than the knot of anxiety lodged in his throat like bad medicine, he reaches for Louis’ left arm and slowly pushes up the sleeve. The tattoo on Louis’ arm is revealed slowly, and it feels like an unveiling, almost, because Harry got to see it once that first time but not since, as Louis gets cold easily and wears jackets and long-sleeves pretty much constantly.

It’s fascinating, like discovering an entirely new facet of Louis that Harry could have never dreamed up. The black edge of the tattoo emerges bit by bit as Harry’s hand keeps pushing his sleeve up and up. Louis is motionless, silent, not even breathing, it seems, as Harry reaches out and traces the bold edge of the dagger with the tip of his finger.

"Um," Louis says, but doesn't follow it up so Harry keeps touching, keeps swiping his finger along the dark lines and subtle shading. Louis coughs and shifts his hips and Harry pinches his inner elbow in warning.

"Stop that," he scolds. "This is my first real look at it."

Louis just hums, his hips twitching again against Harry's back. Harry's eyes follow his own finger up around the dagger handle and down around the blade. It's like it isn't even a tattoo, more like it's just an indelible part of Louis that was always there; a little shocking, a little bold, but doesn't that sum Louis up? Unexpected and attention demanding in the best way.

"I've always wanted a tattoo," Harry murmurs. Louis doesn’t answer, but his toes curl against Harry’s shins. "More than one, actually. Loads. As many as I can get."

Louis lets the silence settle for a moment, lets Harry drink in his fill of the ink before pulling his arm away gently and returning to his braiding. Harry lets him, but only because his fingers feel good in Harry's hair and he couldn't give the dagger the attention it deserves anyway, not with his mind pulling a thousand different directions that are all somehow still pointing towards panic.

On the long-forgotten screen, the video versions of themselves are standing in front of Simon, waiting to hear his verdict on whether they’d made it to the live shows. Harry can remember Niall’s quick breathing, Louis’ shaking hand on his shoulder. So much panic in the moment, with so much happiness to follow.

Louis pauses in his braiding and watches with Harry as they’re passed through. He shifts a little, dislodging Harry from his comfortable resting place as he digs his phone from his pocket, and Harry watches as he opens Twitter.

They’d had to sign intense nondisclosure agreements and incredibly thick contracts before they could leave bootcamp, binding them to participating in the competition as a group. In it were agreements that they would practice with Simon-approved vocal coaches during the break and that they would
be subject to any and all changes he saw fit, as well as a ban on any negative statements about the show, Simon, or the production company. They had to clean up their Twitter accounts of anything unsavory, and update their Twitter handles to include their band name in some way—once it had been chosen—as soon as the bootcamp episode was on. They couldn’t mention that they’d made it to the live shows until the episodes aired.

Now that their forced silence is over, Louis can tweet to his heart’s content.

Harry smiles, half-watching Louis scroll through congratulations tweets and answering a few. Louis, ever the perceptive one, hooks his chin over Harry’s shoulder and says softly, “Seriously, Curly. It may take us a while, but we’ll clean things up and get it right. We aren’t going out of this competition on the first night, I guarantee it.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.”

4 October 2010

Louis is right, of course. After a long evening of rehearsing in their room until their throats ache as the rest of the house is silent in sleep, they wake up determined and inspired to blow their vocal rehearsal out of the water. And they do: Zayn hits his cue every time, Niall is completely in tune, Louis’ voice hangs with Liam so he isn’t overwhelming the other three, and Harry smiles and sings perfectly in time.

But it’s Savan’s reassurances at the end of their session that leave them bouncing and beaming on their way to staging practice.

“You lot are real contenders here,” he says. “Some of these acts, they’re here for novelty or for their pretty faces or because they used up all their talent just to make it to this stage. You boys are new and pretty, but your talents are just beginning to come to light. I’m going to push you, because I know you can do this.”

…

5 October 2010

Two days after the Judges’ Houses results episode airs, Louis wakes up to a congratulatory text from
Stan (well done u wankerrr!! xx) and no idea what he’s talking about. Not, at least, until Zayn looks up from his own phone from across the room and says, “Morning, Lou. Check your Twitter.”

Ten thousand new followers. Louis drops his phone onto his face in shock.

Zayn laughs, but his eyes are wide with glee and he’s scrolling madly through his own mass of new fans.

Louis dresses in a daze, realizing at one point that he’s trying to put a beanie on his foot like a massively overstretched sock (which he promptly abandons, because who needs socks anyway?), and stumbles out of their room.

And, for the second time in too few days, he smacks straight into Aiden.

“Jesus,” Aiden laughs, keeping Louis upright with two hands on his shoulders. And then he looks Louis up and down and laughs harder. “What the hell are you wearing?”

Louis looks down to see neon orange trackies (Niall’s, complete with IRISH PRIDE in green across the arse), a purple plaid button-down, one wool glove, and two of Harry’s skinny scarves. He doesn’t even bother answering Aiden, just shoves his phone in his face.

“Look!” he beams. “I have fans!”

“Well shit, Mr. Popular,” Aiden says. “I got a couple thousand, but that’s ridiculous.”

“I think I’m going to use mine to rule the world,” Louis says dreamily. “I can mobilize them and take over London before anyone suspects anything amiss.”

“Yes, I’m sure your loyal following of teenage girls that want to have your children will jump at the chance to ransack the city,” Aiden scoffs. “Let’s get some breakfast, Herr Louis.”

Louis follows Aiden downstairs (after discarding the glove—he doesn’t mind trendsetting, but even he will admit that Michael Jackson is probably the only person that could ever pull off wearing only one glove) and claps delightedly when he sees the breakfast spread.

“Ten thousand adoring fans to worship me and pancakes? Best day ever!”

Louis settles into his customary seat in Harry’s lap—Harry only grunting in acknowledgment and continuing to eat steadily through his own stack of pancakes—and turns back to Aiden.

“Okay, if I can’t rule the world,” he speculates, reaching over to Harry’s plate to stab a slice of strawberry and pop it into his mouth, “I could at least rule England.”

“What, are you going to battle it out with the Queen to see who can wear the crown?” Aiden asks. “She could kick your arse and not have a single curl out of place at the end.”

“I don’t know,” Liam chimes in from across the long table. “Louis is scrappy. I box twice a week for my workouts and he almost beat me once when we were wrestling.”

“Excuse you, Liam,” Louis accuses, wielding his fork like a tiny trident and flinging bits of pancake everywhere. “I won that fight.” Harry, without even looking away from his phone, calmly reaches out and takes Louis’ fork, setting it down next to his plate. Louis lets him, only because he has a point to prove.

“You did not,” Liam says, affronted.
“I did too! You were crying at the end, that means I won!”

“My eyes teared up because you threw sugar in them, that does not count.”

Louis waves his hand airily. “Semantics, Lima Bean. The moral of the story is that with my horde of rabid fans I could take over the country.”

“Rabid fans?” Niall asks interestedly. “Where and how and can I have some?”

“Check your Twitter.”

By the end of breakfast, their phones have been confiscated by Mary and Aiden and hidden somewhere so that they’ll perhaps talk about something besides their mass amounts of new followers.

They don’t, but it was a valiant effort.

6 October 2010

Now they’re on good terms with Savan and have gotten their staging mostly worked out with the creative director (they walk forward, sing, trade places, sing, spread out, sing, et cetera, et cetera), Louis feels a little freer when they step into the studio to rehearse. He teases Savan about letting them do Dr. Evil’s version of It’s a Hard Knock Life for their next performance, appeals for ballet to be added to their choreography (including a full demonstration of what he’s capable of, which ends with him falling on his arse but Harry in tears of laughter so all in a day’s work, really), and chases the wardrobe girls up and down the halls with cups of water he threatens to pour on their perfectly coiffed hair.

Now that they’ve hit their rhythm, and now that their song is on point and only getting better as each of them gets more confident, Zayn, Harry, and Niall are all on board with mischief making in the X Factor kingdom.

Liam, not so much.

“Honestly, Louis,” he groans after finding his headphones covered in chocolate syrup. “I was going to listen to our song some more. You know, the one we’re performing in front of all of England in three days?”

Louis scoffs. “You know that song better than Coldplay does at this point, Liam, honestly. Relax a little, have some fun.”

“I’ll have fun when we win,” Liam growls, swiping his headphones and iPod and stomping outside.

“Leave him be,” Zayn calls from the sofa where he and Matt are playing FIFA. “He’s just stressed.”

“Well he’s taking it out on me,” Louis grumbles.

“Quit pranking him, then.”

“He has the best reactions!”

“Harry!” Matt calls. “Come get Louis, he’s bored!”
“Coming!” Harry yells back, appearing in the doorway not five seconds later with a bright smile.
“C’mon Lou, let’s make cookies!”

Louis sighs, but lets himself be dragged to the kitchen where he can eat cookie dough from the bowl and make fun of Harry’s horrible jokes rather than think of whatever crawled up Liam’s arse.

... 

After the attention One Direction gets on Twitter, the producers decide to start a series of video diaries for fans to ask questions and get a chance to see the acts outside of their performances each week. One Direction film their first one and it’s only about a minute long, but they delight in watching the viewer count shoot up as Saturday draws nearer and nearer.

And already, there’s a storm brewing on social media, bigger than the boys even realize, big enough to raise eyebrows in the Syco offices. They don’t understand the implications, that no one gets this much attention this quickly, and no one from Syco is going to tell them in case it breaks the spell. But the boys have a great time anyway figuring out what all the trends on Twitter mean, #TheWorstRoomSquad and #WhatTheCurlyHeadedGuySaid and, the most popular one, #teamlarry.

... 

7 October 2010

Thursdays and Fridays are spent rehearsing on the actual stage rather than a practice room, and Louis in turn spends Thursday and Friday panicking just the tiniest bit.

Well, okay. A lot.

He feels so confident in his boys, his band, that he spares no thought to them not getting through to the next round. He could literally fall off the stage and he knows Niall would just jump right off behind him like he’d done it on purpose and the other three would do some vocal gymnastics to distract everyone from what happened until they could hoist themselves back up to finish the show.

But he thinks of Savan’s speech he directs to Louis every time he falls deep into his own thoughts during vocal coaching: “You’re the backbone of this, Louis. You may not have a solo, but you have to hold the chorus up.”

He thinks of Harry’s sorrowful face back in Spain after the Judge’s House audition, near tears and adamant in his faith in Louis.

We struggle without you. We need you.

It’s too much to think about, almost. He’s never been needed, not before now. Sure, he’s been the best mate he could to Stan and Hannah, a good son for his mum and a dependable force for his sisters. But they’d survive without him, if they needed to. He was never necessary, never vital.

Apparently, that doesn’t hold true for his boys. And knowing that he’s needed, and that he could be
a reason behind why they fly or a strike against them if they fall... It’s frightening, to say the least.

They haven’t seen Simon in a few days, but he shows up during their practice time slot on Thursday afternoon and watches from his spot at the judges’ table. Louis tries to deduce how he feels about their performance from his facial expressions, but he’s completely impassive during the longest two minutes of human history.

“Boys,” he says as they gulp down water, trying and failing not to look like all their hopes depend on his opinion, “That was excellent.”

Louis feels his knees go weak, and he leans into Zayn’s side as Liam fist pumps and Harry claps Niall on the back, grinning broadly.

“It’s only been a few weeks and you can hear the improvements,” Simon smiles. “You sound a thousand times stronger. Well done.” Harry reaches over and taps Louis’ shoulder, meeting his eyes meaningfully.

“Because of you,” he mouths over Niall’s head. “You make us strong.”

We struggle without you. We need you.

Louis takes a deep breath, because he can’t break down. He’s needed.

9 October 2010

Although it’s one of those places he always wants to be, one of those areas where he just feels more alive, more *Louis*, than he does anywhere else, Louis has only been on an actual stage performing for actual people a grand total of five times in his life.

It’s even less impressive when considering one of those was his initial *X Factor* audition, one of those was his bootcamp solo, and the other three times he'd been wrapped in a fake leather jacket as Danny Zuko in *Grease* back in school.

And even though his track record of important stage experience is rather slim and insignificant compared to the halfway-to-professional resumes boasted by the likes of Matt and Liam and Mary, Louis knows that on stage in front of thousands of screaming people is where he's meant to be.

He just wishes his nervous, bubbling stomach would jump on board with that idea as well.

Zayn is pacing, back and forth and back again in the tiny backstage area as the set from Nicolo's performance is pushed aside and cleaned up. Liam, in direct contrast, is frozen where he's leaned against the wall, staring fixedly at the floor and breathing so slowly Louis is a little worried for his health. Niall is *Niall*, unshakeable and unflappable, constant and consistent. He's pacing alongside Zayn one minute and dancing with Harry the next, then another minute passes and he’s bounding over to crew members to ask if they need help with anything. Harry is torn somewhere between all of these, staying glued to his small claimed section of the wall but shifting restlessly, joking easily with Niall when he's within earshot but otherwise silent, focused.

Louis just watches, afraid to open his mouth.

A crew member counts down out on the stage, and suddenly the crowd is roaring and the cameras
refocus on the stage after a commercial break. Dermot's voice floats oddly over the applause, like it's being reflected to them off the crowd rather than coming through the speaker set up right next to them.

"Making their live debut performance, it's the last of the Groups and Simon."

"Right," Simon says, "My last act up tonight: get ready, it's One Direction."

The footage from their formation as a band appears on the screens in front of them, their excited faces larger than life as the video-Simon announces we’ve decided to put you through at bootcamp. Louis can't watch it again, not right now and for the dozenth time in the last few days. Instead, because it feels like the right thing to do and because if he doesn't do something he's going to snap, he pulls the boys into a huddle.

"Right," he says over the video version of himself telling everyone that he's eighteen and from Doncaster, "listen up. We've got more talent in our lovely little fingers,” he wiggles them for dramatic effect, “than half the contestants on this show put together. We are not going home tomorrow night, we are in this for the long haul. So we might as well start it off right, yeah?"

The other four nod, the video ends, the Viva la Vida violins start up, and off they go.

It's a blur, it's a rush, it's every performing cliche and so much more because it's real, it's happening to them.

And it's not perfect, because Niall's mic is too loud so his back vocals are the main focus during the chorus and Zayn still doesn't come in at the exact right time. Harry goes off beat a little in the middle but Liam ropes him back in with a tap on his arm. But it's still perfect, because it's Louis and it's Harry and it's Liam and Zayn and Niall and they're here on this stage doing what they want to do and, from the sound of the crowd, they're smashing it. Louis sings, he sings his bloody heart out, and he knows that now that he's found this feeling, he's not letting go.

Liam belts that was when I ruled the world and Louis throws his arm around his and Zayn’s shoulders, pulling them close as the crowd goes absolutely raving mad like they really do rule the world. Screams pour in like rain after a drought, heavy and all-encompassing and making Louis feel tiny on that big open stage.

It doesn’t stop, either, the boys having to adjust their in-ear monitors to be able to hear Louis Walsh extolling their virtues over the shrieks of hundreds of high-pitched voices. They scream over Dannii as well, and the boys can only barely hear Cheryl when she says, “You look like you were meant to be together as a group.”

As they crash their way offstage, cameras lie in wait to catch their reactions. They're perfectly willing to play along, grinning and sweating and screaming and announcing it was the greatest moment, the best thing ever. And then the cameras are off but they can't stop, still bouncing and rocking off this high, pulses still pounding from the force of their hearts attempting to beat straight out of their chests.

Louis' blood has been replaced, there's no other explanation, because right now his veins sizzle with liquid heat, with molten luck. And whatever has flooded Louis’ insides has infected the others too. Niall is vibrating, hugging each of them in turn and then hugging random assistants and stylists and passers-by as well. Zayn has Liam’s face in his hands, their foreheads tilted together, Liam’s eyes wide as Zayn whispers fiercely to him, a fast hiss of words that Louis couldn’t hope to catch. And Harry-

“Lou,” he all but moans, curls tugged out of their smooth sweep and into a thousand directions. He’s
got a flush high on his cheeks and his lips are bitten raw and his eyes are brighter than Louis has ever seen them. It’s almost obscene, it’s terrible, Louis can’t catch his breath as Harry keeps yanking on the front of his shirt. “Lou, I- I need to do something, I have to go, have to-”

“Hazza, calm down-”

“Louis, take me somewhere,” he begs, “I need to- Oh! Lou! Take me to get a tattoo!”

“What?” Louis half-laughes, incredulous. “We can’t just-”

“No, that’s what I need! I’ve got this-” he cuts himself off, gesturing broadly to his chest, “there’s something, something there, it’s like, my heart, or- I need to focus on something else. Just- just sneak me out, we can call a taxi and I’ve got money, let’s go, take me to get a tattoo, Louis, please-”

There’s a jerk on Louis’ arm, and he and Harry are pulled in two different directions as the group is split to give individual post-show interviews. Louis barely concentrates, still able to see Harry over the interviewer’s shoulder; Harry’s hands are shaking wildly and he’s still peeking at Louis over his shoulder every few seconds. Individual interviews wrap, and they’re pushed together for one more as a group. The stage behind them is still relatively quiet during a commercial break, and, from his spot next to Louis, Harry starts to calm himself. The red stain on his cheeks is still evident but his hands have stopped trembling by the time the cameras stop recording and they’re moved to the room with the rest of the finished contestants.

Harry watches Louis from under his eyelashes like he’s just realized how desperate he’d sounded, like he’s embarrassed of his own reaction to the adrenaline pumping through him, but he doesn’t say anything.

They’re pushed into a backstage lounge, a large TV on the wall displaying a direct feed from the stage, the rest of the contestants gathered around it. They watch the final three acts perform, though Louis finds it hard to focus on Wagner’s inane dancing and off-key opera when there’s unused energy still crackling in his veins and a nervous, twitchy boy beside him who doesn’t know what to do with the high of performing still burning in his lungs. It’s not until Aiden’s song starts that Louis is able to pull his body back under his control, his attention able to focus entirely on Aiden, who leaves the entire room breathless with his intensity when he sings.

In the quiet that follows, the room settles; the pent-up adrenaline seeps from the performers and out of the room like fog under a door. Aiden joins them eventually and smiles Shakily, sweat carving trails in his makeup as he tries to control the trembling of his hands. Treyc performs last but the room isn’t hopping on misplaced energy anymore—it’s sleepy contentedness, the feeling of wanting to crawl into bed after facing a large amount of stress and coming through mostly unscathed. The entire crowd of thirty-odd contestants is settled and placid as they’re herded to a back door at the end of the show to head back to the house, acts slipping out in fours and fives into awaiting vans.

When One Direction steps out, the world seems to halt for a moment. There’s a breathless moment of stillness before bright white obscures Louis’ vision and he fears for a long few seconds that he’s gone blind. Flash after flash illuminates the grimy back alley behind Fountain Studios, and Louis wildly reaches out for Niall, who’d been in front of him only moments before. He finds a swath of fabric—an edge of a jacket, maybe—and lets whoever it is tug him along. After he blinks a few times and his vision clears enough to see that it is Niall’s familiar blonde head he’s following, the sound swells to hit him as well.

It might not have even shocked him if it had just been wordless screams; he had been on stage in front of a massive crowd not a half hour ago, he probably could have convinced himself that the shrieking was still in his head. But the shouts definitely aren’t just sounds, they’re deliberate, pointed.
“LOUIS TOMLINSON!”

It’s like a slap to the face from an invisible offender. He’s still half-blind from camera flashes and stumbling and someone is screaming his full name. More than one someone, a dozen someones, and he still can’t see.

That doesn’t happen, that isn’t supposed to happen; he doesn’t tell anyone his last name unless they’ve been friends for years and he has sufficient blackmail material on them (or if they happen to be a random curly-headed kid in an X Factor bathroom, but that’s an anomaly, really). How did they find out? How-

“HARRY STYLES!” breaks through his panicked mind next, shocking him into moving. If it had just been his own name he may have stopped to sort it all out but not when it’s Harry, poor Harry whose pupils are dilated from a potent mixture of surprise-fear-confusion. Louis shoves him into the van first (“ZAYN MALIK!” being shouted by multiple voices behind him, “LIAM PAYNE!”), urging the rest of the boys in quickly after him (“NIALL HORAN!”). The van door slides shut and the vehicle is eerily, echoingly quiet compared to the chaos right outside the metal door.

As one, like protagonists in a bad horror film, they turn back to face what they just escaped.

Girls. Dozens of them, maybe hundreds, brandishing signs and massive pictures of the boys’ faces. All still screaming, all pushing as a mass to get closer to the van, the force of five or six burly security guards attempting to hold them at bay. The driver curses and speeds away before the girls can make it around to the front of the van, taking a curve dangerously fast to put them on a side road that’ll eventually lead them back to the X Factor house.

The adrenaline that had left their systems back in the studio has returned full force. Harry is hyperventilating, so Louis pulls him close with shaking hands.

“We’ll be okay,” he reassures all of them, though his quiet voice isn’t enough to break the debilitating echo of their names being screeched by unknown voices, over and over and over again.

They take turns hopping in the shower back at the house, not bothering to close the bathroom door because their time at the bungalow stripped away most of the need for modesty between them, plus Niall kept complaining that he couldn’t get to his toothbrush if they locked him out. Louis is under the spray now, watching makeup and sweat swirl down the drain and wishing the pounding anxiety could be washed away as well.

It’s not like he doesn’t want people screaming for him. Standing on stage tonight as they’d finished their song had been the most fantastic feeling he’d ever experienced: basking in the bright heat of the spotlight and having wave after wave of cheers and affirmation sweep him up.

It’s different, though, when it’s his full name. It’s not even like he’s worried about spontaneously Bonding with someone (because that traumatic life event has already happened, thank you very much Harry Styles), but it’s still jarring. It’s an entirely different experience to be cheered at while on stage and to be surprise-attacked on the way to a vehicle in a shady back alley. The press of people, the sheer feeling of being a small person in the epicenter of a large crowd, it doesn’t sit well on Louis’ bones. Not to mention the fear it etched on the rest of his bandmates’ faces.

He knows that celebrities’ last names are often well-known, and though he adores the thought of
being famous he’s not quite sure he’s celebrity-level yet. He thought he’d have more time.

He sighs, and turns off the water.

Back in their bedroom, Zayn is pacing again. Liam is wrapped in a blanket, his legs fidgeting like he’s trying to keep himself under control. Harry is curled up in a ball in Louis’ bunk, Niall next to him and petting through his hair. Their energy from performing has shifted into something darker, making them flinch every time someone walks by out in the hallway and twitch with restlessness they can’t escape or relieve here in their tiny room.

It’s so wrong—this isn’t how this night was supposed to go. They were supposed to spill out of the van and into the house to kick off the We Survived The First Live Show party. Harry’d even baked a cake, and that morning all of the acts had joined in decorating the dining area just to keep their minds off of their performances that night.

Now they’re here, filled to the brim with stressful adrenaline, torn somewhere between fight and flight.

Something needs to be done.

“Right, boys,” Louis announces brightly, making Niall jump high enough to bash his head on the bottom of Harry’s bunk, “Grab your blankets and pillows and follow me.”

Like the Lost Boys following Peter Pan, they file out of the room behind him without question and three minutes later are tangled in a familiar pile in the backyard, limbs and fingers woven together on their spread blankets under the stars. It’s a warm night for October, a slight breeze soothing on overheated skin.

It’s still quiet, though, the jumble of boys twitching and shaking under their sheets but quiet like they’re afraid to shatter the silence. Like at any moment the fences around the house will fall like the walls of Jericho and they’ll be trampled and suffocated by thousands of hysterical fans.

Louis doesn’t like silence unless he’s using it for his own benefit, and this quiet is definitely not for his benefit.

“Rebecca, Katie, Cher,” he says, and he could start a career with the number of silences he’s broken tonight. “Fuck, Marry, Kill.”


“It’s a game, Hazza.”

“Still disrespectful.”

“We aren’t going to tell them to their faces, mate,” Zayn rolls his eyes. “Fuck Cher, marry Bex, kill Katie.”

“You’d kill Katie?” Liam asks interestedly.

“She uses more product in her hair than I do, and that’s cause for concern.”

Niall hums. “I’d fuck Rebecca. It’s always the quiet ones you have to look out for.”

Louis nudges Liam. “Hear that, Liam? Apparently you’re a sex god.” Liam, in an eloquent reply, chokes on his spit and turns an interesting shade of puce.
Fuck, Marry, Kill spills over into Who Would Win In A No-Holds Barred Cage Fight (“Wagner, obviously, have you seen the picture of him holding the lion by the tail?” Harry screeches) which transitions to talking about the actual performances.

“I still can’t believe we sang on national TV,” Liam breathes.

“And we didn’t pass out or throw up on Simon’s suit or anything,” Louis reminds them.

“We have, like, proper fans,” is Zayn’s contribution, which brings the mood down a little. In the stillness of the backyard, the screams of a hundred different blank-faced people echo off the inside of Louis’ skull.

Louis Tomlinson Louis Tomlinson Louis Tomlinson

“I feel like it shouldn’t be so scary, what happened,” Harry whispers.

“We’re ready for it now, it won’t startle us next time,” Louis promises. “There are a dozen different exits in that building, we can have Simon arrange for us to have leave from a different area next time. He’s probably seen this happen a hundred times before.”

“Yeah,” is all Zayn says, little more than a breath of air. Louis shivers, pulls the sheet around his hips higher up on his chest, and launches into a new topic:

“I’m pretty sure Dannii has a crush on me.”

“Come off it!” Niall snorts.

“She couldn’t take her eyes off me the whole time we were performing! Forget men her own age, I’m gonna sweep her off her feet.”

Niall’s laugh is enough to burst the tension into something a little more manageable, and the conversation sweeps along until they’re drifting off, chatter dying slowly as Liam then Zayn then Niall fall asleep. Louis rolls to face Harry, who’s still watching the stars like they’re going to spell out an answer to all his questions.

“It’s not...” Harry starts, shifting restlessly. “It’s not my fault, is it?”

“Your fault?” Louis asks, his face scrunching in confusion.

“Yeah, um. The, the name thing.”

“How could it be your fault?”

“Oh, well I. I said yours, remember? At auditions?” he says hesitantly, as though expecting Louis to put two and two together and come to the conclusion that everything is Harry’s fault and he can’t be trusted.

I’ve got a biggest fan. His name is Louis Tomlinson.

God, of course Louis remembers. The defining moment of his life so far, when Harry had said his name on stage and a dagger had appeared on his arm. And yeah, that wasn’t the best thing for Harry to do, to say Louis’ name in front of that audience, but he had been excited and nervous and Louis definitely knows the desperation to say the right thing when Simon is looking at you like you’re as interesting as the gum he scraped off his shoe.

“It’s not your fault,” Louis confirms, shaking away the faint memory of a burn on his forearm and
the instantaneous appearance of a Marker.

“But—”

“There are thousands of people who go through those auditions,” Louis shrugs. “It wasn’t very likely that I’d get through to begin with, and there was an even smaller chance I’d be a finalist on the live shows. I’m sure not a single person remembers my name from that, and they didn’t even include it in the episode.”

Which is true—they’d watched their audition episodes at the bungalow, just for the sheer excitement of being on TV and to relive the high of getting through bootcamp before heading off to the Judge’s House. The only part of Harry’s audition they’d kept in had been his part about working in a bakery, and Louis got maybe fifteen whole seconds devoted to a snippet of his song and his thanks as he’d been passed through.

“Besides, that doesn’t explain how they know your name, or any of the other boys’. I think someone must have leaked it out somehow.”

Harry hums, his eyes a little less troubled. “Thank you,” he says after a moment, sincerity plain in his raspy voice.

“For what?”

“Getting us out of the mob. Getting us out of our heads. Getting us here, really.” Harry shrugs. “Take your pick.” Louis wants to wrap him in cashmere and happy thoughts and tell him he’ll be okay. He wants to never see this uncertainty in those eyes ever again.

“Ah,” Louis says, shifting onto his back so that he and Harry have the same wide blue view of a light-studded night sky. “Don’t thank me yet, I charge a steep price.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry chuckles.

“That’s right. I demand full control of the remote any time I’m in the same room as a TV and breakfast in bed every Sunday morning.”

“I can handle that.”

“Good.”

Louis thinks back, past the scare on the way to the vans, back to the situation he’s been trying really hard not to dissect for meaning; he thinks of Harry clinging to him and begging him for a distraction, something to get him out of his head. Begging for release, really, though Louis knows it’s not the kind of release Louis so desperately wants to give him.

Although...

“I’ll make a deal with you, H.”

“What’s that?”

“The moment we pack our bags and leave this house with our recording contract, I’ll take you to get your tattoo.”

Harry sits up, beaming. “Really?”

“Really,” Louis laughs quietly. “As long as you promise your mother won’t murder me.”
“She won’t,” Harry swears. He lays back down, grins at the stars.

Time drifts and Louis feels himself do the same, but before his eyes close for good he hears Harry’s voice.

“I’m so glad I get to be alive at the same time as you.”

Louis doesn’t have an answer, not one that he can spill here into the night air without it being as painful as spilling blood from his veins, but he doesn’t need to have one. He reaches out and twines their fingers, falling asleep to the sound of Harry breathing beside him.

10 October 2010

In the morning, Louis wakes to a plate being pressed into his hands.

“Your terms demanded breakfast in bed on Sunday mornings,” Harry says, smiling brighter than the morning sunshine that outlines him in a halo of white. “You aren’t in a bed, so breakfast in the yard will have to do.”

It’s the best wake up Louis has ever had.

They’re in Simon’s office again but the mood is a little different this time, to say the least; there’s quite a huge difference in a quick meeting to talk about their musical inspirations while Simon jokes with them over his lunch and this, Simon surveying them closely over folded hands, dressed in full X Factor judge armor with his pressed blazer and shiny black shoes.

“Well boys,” he says without preamble when they’re escorted in, “heard we had a bit of an issue leaving the studio last night. Seems we need to have another talk.”

And so they do.

The problem with shows like the X Factor is when it’s starting out or in rough patches, it’s good to have friends in the media to write or report on your stories, to spread the gossip you want to be spread and to hype up potential audience members into viewing on a weekly basis. It’s a tricky line to walk, balancing between a tell-all and no stories being published at all. The key to X Factor is the human interest side of things—everyone loves Beyonce, but her jump from nobody to notoriety wasn’t documented and shown to the public on a week by week basis. The singers don’t have to be world class when they’ve got amazing stories, and it’s the job of X Factor to properly tell those stories.

But once the show reaches a certain level of popularity and it’s weaned off of having to feed stories to the media, the media still wants stories. The public doesn’t really care what the media has to do to get those stories, either. So, every year, some minor member of the X Factor staff is contacted and paid by reporters to keep up a steady flow of gossip and pertinent information.

“Last names of contestants aren’t always leaked,” Simon explains. “Even the other acts typically don’t know each other’s full names until there’s only a few weeks left together. But, when there is a
particular interest by the public in getting the names of certain acts, the media will bribe whoever they need to for that information."

“Particular interest?” Louis repeats, his mind catching on Simon’s grimace as he’d said it. “Is there a particular interest in us?”

Simon takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes.

“When we discussed musical influences, none of you mentioned other boy bands,” Simon says, and Louis knows he isn’t the only one thrown for a loop at the subject jump. “In fact, you said you didn’t think you really were a boy band. Am I right in assuming you’ve never been to a male pop band concert?”

The five of them shake their heads.

“And I’m probably also right in assuming you’ve never heard of Kevin?”

Louis knows a couple of Kevins, back in Donny: there’s Kevin that was in his class at school and there’s Kevin that works the deli counter at Tesco, and he’s pretty sure one of the backstage assistants here at the show is named Kevin too. But, despite all appearances otherwise, Louis is an intelligent individual and knows how to read a room, and so he keeps his lips sealed and shakes his head instead of shooting off a sarcastic reply.

Simon leans back, twining his hands over his stomach. “I didn’t even think to warn you, but of course you’re the perfect target for things like this. I thought we’d have until the finale, at the very least.” He looks up and meets the eyes of each of the boys across from him. “I owe you all an apology, and I think I should explain what’s actually going on.”

Like many strange things that still have effects reaching far beyond their intended outcomes, it all started in the 1990s.

Boy bands exploded onto the pop scene as a viable genre, a real moneymaker, and they pushed the image of the available superstar just like Simon said One Direction would have to do. The boy-next-door image was sold and sold and sold some more, pushed to its limit for every pop band, and every single one of the band members (according to their interviews and press releases, anyway) was looking for love and would be happy if they fell for a fan.

The trouble came, Simon explains, when that never actually happened. Boy band members were photographed falling out of clubs after partying with models and actresses, they Bonded with famous singers and rich heiresses and world-class athletes, and not a single famous boybander actually Bonded with a fan.

The fans, sensing shaky truths and forced statements, took matters into their own hands. They started bringing signs to concerts, but instead of the signs proclaiming how much they ♥ Take That, they painted their own names in large, easily-read block letters. The hope was that a band member would read the sign, the girl would hear her name being spoken by her soulmate, and her Marker would appear. Then she could show it to the band member somehow, she could say his name back so he could get his Marker as well, and they’d be happy forever.

“Record label executives loved the idea,” Simon admits. “It’s almost risk-free. Girls were more likely to come to concerts if there was a perceived opportunity to Bond with a band member that very
night. The band could read the signs as though they were actively looking for a fan to Bond with, so they could maintain the available image. But even if someone’s actual soulmate was in the audience, what are the odds her sign would be picked to be read, or that the right band member would be the one to read it?”

It became a staple of every boy band performance, and sometimes it even spread to individual singers’ concerts if their appeal was high enough. Fans were happy, the artists were happy, and everything was fine as boy band popularity kept expanding into the new millennium.

Until one boybander read a sign at a concert and the inevitable one-in-a-million event happened.

“Kevin Richardson, one of the Backstreet Boys,” Simon sighs, typing his name into Google and spinning the computer screen so the boys can see. The first result on Google is a shaky video entitled simply KEVIN BONDS with over fifty million views.

It’s a short clip, all of two minutes, of a break between songs during a Backstreet Boys concert where they’re thanking the crowd for their support and reading a few of the name signs around them.

“Thanks for coming, Elana Smith!” a blonde one calls, waving.

“Hello Sarah Richards!”

“We love you so much Kelly Orrera!”

It goes on for a few more signs, then the tallest of the singers on the stage steps forward and says—

“I’m so glad you could make it, Kristin Willits!”

There’s a shocked scream from the audience, piercing enough that the low-quality camera catches it even over the roar of the rest of the crowd. The audience goes nearly silent, and the voice cries out again, this time shouting, “Kevin Richardson!” into the quiet arena.

On stage, Kevin lets out a harsh yell, grips his shoulder like he’s being burned (because he is, Louis realizes with a horrified gasp, remembering the searing pain of his dagger appearing on his skin), drops his microphone with a resounding thud, and runs off stage.

In the remaining few seconds of the video, the arena erupts into chaos. Then the video cuts to black.

The boys sit and stare at the screen in shocked silence.

“All hell broke loose after that,” Simon says. “Kevin’s picture was on the cover of every magazine and newspaper in the entire world the next morning.”

“Did he ever find the girl?” Harry asks, a hint of urgency in his tone.

“Oh yes,” Simon answers. “It took about a week to track her down. They had the test done to confirm their Bond and that was that. However, that’s not nearly as sexy of a story as it could have been, so their team spun it a bit. A press release was sent out saying that he immediately jumped into the audience and found her, still holding her sign with her name on it, and swept her away to a life of riches and glamour.” He rolls his eyes. “Obviously, the public ate it up.”

To push it even further, Kevin and Kristin’s Bonding ceremony was televised, and there were more reporters than family members in the audience. It was elaborate and over-the-top, the guest list a veritable who’s-who, a solid mix of press and A-list celebrities.
“It seemed perfect, because it was a PR strategy that never should have worked, and then when the inevitable finally happened they were able to spin it and get the most press out of it.”

“So, it all worked out?” Liam asks.

“It did, then Kevin left the band.”

When boybanders Bonded with models and actresses, they were expected by the fans—as well as their soulmates—to stay in the public eye, to stay relevant. When Kevin Bonded with Kristin, though, they both wanted to start a family, to have a normal life out of the spotlight. He had millions to retire on, and so he bought himself out of his contract.

“And, through it all, the fans had gotten even more determined. The Kevin and Kristin situation was the dream; even though the odds were astronomical that a fan’s own soulmate was a member of a boy band and would happen to read her sign out of the thousands around, it became an even bigger deal. Because now, thanks to Kevin, they had proof it might actually happen.

“That’s what you’re facing,” says Simon. “That’s why the fans pushed so hard to learn your names. You’re ideal soulmate material, and they all want to be the one to wear your Marker.”

Louis shivers.

The *X Factor* has never had to deal with anything of this scale before, Simon explains. Boy bands that have come through the competition have traditionally never done well, and if they have then they’re usually outside the typical boy band age range.

That’s why FYD won’t last long, he says. They’re too old for their demographic. Belle Amie won’t have to worry because the same pandemonium is never seen for girl groups like it is for boys. Diva Fever are already publicly Bonded to each other, so they’re fine. Solo artists rarely get the same sort of attention, but Aiden and Matt will be warned.

“We can control the mayhem during the show because it’s structured and your time on stage is so short. No one can get mad at you for not taking time to read every sign in the building when you’ve only got two minutes to perform.” Simon leans forward to put his elbows on the desk. “We’ll beef up security around the studio and the house, and we’ll make sure your names are printed as little as possible. The fans might be an issue when the X Factor Tour rolls around, but we’ll deal with that when it comes.”

“We won’t, um,” Liam says timidly, “we won’t have to read the signs with the names on them, will we? During the tour, I mean. Since we’re not like a regular boy band.”

Simon just taps his fingers on his desk and turns to his computer, reading something apparently much more engrossing than Liam’s question. “We’ll see,” is all he says, and Louis’ stomach squirms for his bandmates, who have all gone pale and shaky as they’re ushered out to rehearse the group song for tonight’s results show.

...
meet him or watch him perform or anything, really.

But, you know, he’s still here. That’s pretty cool.

Harry looks out over a crowd of thousands and wonders if Usher ever felt like the weight of an audience’s stares was enough to crush the life from his body.

Probably not. Usher doesn't seem like the morbidly contemplative type.

Dermot is reading off the names of the acts that have made it through to the second week of live shows. Two of the groups, Belle Amie and Diva Fever, have already made it through safely. Six of the individual acts have been put through as well, leaving the stage emptier and emptier as each name is called.

“Next act through to the second week is… Wagner!”

“You’ve got to be joking,” Simon says snidely, just loud enough that his groups can hear. Louis snickers quietly into his palm—just like every other time Simon had muttered something disparaging about the other acts under his breath—and Harry feels his frown deepen.

He just doesn’t get it, Louis’ almost hero-worship with Simon. Since the meeting earlier that had left them all reeling, Simon’s non-committal assurances about having to participate in a ridiculous PR stunt like reading names off of signs in a crowd had left a sour taste in Harry’s mouth.

It's not that Harry doesn't respect Simon, he does. Obviously, he trusts that Simon has their best business interests at heart. He wants them to succeed, Harry truly believes that. It's just... This is terrifying, really, to look out over a crowd of a thousand people and know that those signs with your name dashed across them aren’t actually there for your benefit. It’s like finding out a friend only likes you for your money, or something; these screaming girls don’t like him for his sense of humor or his personality or his charm, not really. They just want to Bond with him so they’ll have a famous (and hopefully rich) soulmate.

“The tenth act going through is… Rebecca!”

Harry claps for Rebecca and tries to breathe. It’s all just so much. Harry wants to find his soulmate, of course he does, but does he really want to meet them because he was forced by his management to read their name off a homemade sign? His stomach rolls again just at the thought.

He’d always thought the revelation of his soulmate would be all rose petals and sunset-watching in somewhere romantic like New York or Paris. It’d be someone he knows, someone he’s comfortable with and they’ve mutually decided they’re ready to learn each others’ last names and have accepted and are excited about the possibility that they are soulmates. Not sharpie scrawls and glitter hearts on fluorescent green posterboard read out in front of a thousand other people.

His thoughts have been shaky since last night, since the ambush at the vans by dozens of sign-wielding girls. Harry hadn’t understood, then, what they’d wanted from him. Now he gets it.

“Returning to this stage next week is… Mary.”

The longer they’re out here, under the spotlights and the heated stares of the audience, the worse Harry feels. His skin prickles and he’s sweating, but his fingers are cold and he feels clammy. Zayn and Liam are comforting weights pressed against him on either side, but it’s not enough. Louis, who has been shooting him worried glances since they took to the stage, eventually just wraps his arm around Harry’s waist to pull him close.
Harry doesn’t think to thank him, but Louis can probably tell he’s the only thing keeping Harry upright.

“The next act that will be here for next week’s show is…”

Harry wants it to be them. Of course he does, he couldn’t stand it if they made it this far only to be knocked out in the first fight. He wants to be here another week, wants to prove to Simon (despite any ill feelings he may have toward him at the moment) and the rest of the nation that they are talented and worth paying attention to. He also wants to be very far from this stage and the hungry eyes of thousands of people as soon as he possibly can.

“One Direction!”

Harry turns, wraps Louis then Niall then Simon in hugs, and jogs offstage.

He then finds the first bin available and bends over it, vomiting viciously.

One week down, he thinks miserably. Nine more to go.

Chapter End Notes

I think the end notes will probably continue to be a feature, just because trying to explain some of this stuff within the fic would be tough, so... here we go:

- Obviously, I know that was Ed Sheeran and not Harry singing Hit Me Baby One More Time, but I love Ed's version and that's what I heard in my head as I was writing that scene so I stuck it in.

- Just to clarify, the twitter handles aren't harry_styles and louis_tomlinson yet because they still think their last names are mostly unknown.

- The next chapter deals with it more, but I put in Harry having performance anxiety because I think he really does/did suffer from it, especially back when they were just getting started.

- If you don't watch any other performances from this season of the X Factor other than One Direction's, I would suggest you at least watch Aiden's from this chapter, where he sings Mad World. I used to think that song was ridiculous but I honestly love his version.

- I chose Kevin from the Backstreet Boys because he's the one that really did leave and eventually made the band break up, and his wife's name really is Kristin Willits.

Hope you liked it! The tumblr post for this fic is here and I'm on tumblr here.
Chapter Notes

Helllllo!

Quick warning for this chapter: for the first couple of sections Harry is suffering from what I consider an extended anxiety attack. I don't consider it very graphic and it all gets resolved, but I just wanted to throw that out there just in case. If you think that might be an issue, it's all out of the way by the October 17th section or you can message me and I can give you the general idea of what happens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Four: 11 October 2010 - 28 October 2010

11 October 2010

Something’s wrong with Harry.

Well, besides the obvious. Louis had bounced offstage to celebrate getting through to Week Two with his favorite curly-headed life ruiner only to find him headfirst in a bin and emptying his guts. Louis’d chalked it up to excitement or nerves. It’s been almost twenty-four hours, though, and he hasn’t gotten any better.

“Hazza?” Louis calls into their bedroom, dark and empty save for the shifting lump in Louis’ own bed.

“Mmph,” is all he gets in return. He steps forward and pokes at the boy hiding under his blanket.

“Hazza, love, you’ve got to eat something.”

“Nmph.”

“Yes.”

“Nmph.”

“They’re wanting us to film our video diary, and we need our charming one or it’s just gonna be awkward.”

There’s a noise and Louis thinks it’s a snort, but he’s been wrong before and Harry is still buried resolutely under Louis’ sheets.

Well, that’s quite enough of that.

Louis yanks the blanket back, exposing Harry’s two-days-with-no-shower mat of curls and sweaty skin. Harry yelps and clings to the material but it’s too late, and Louis whips the offending blanket into the floor in victory. He grabs both of Harry’s wrists and tugs, pulling him to his unsteady feet.

“Shower, put on one of your nice collared shirts, and come down to the staircase so we can film the
diary and the camera crew can leave everyone alone,” Louis instructs, shoving him towards the bathroom. Harry still doesn’t say a word but trudges dutifully toward the open door, Louis watching as closely as possible to make sure he follows instructions without flat-out ogling Harry’s bare arse in the dim light of the room.

(Because apparently that’s not just a thing he does at the bungalow or when he’s alone; Harry is naked all the time. He has not one ounce of self-consciousness from his pigeon toes to his love handles, and takes absolute delight in walking the X Factor house hallways with it all hanging out just to see the shock on the other contestants’ faces. For Louis, however, all it’s done is increase his time in the bathroom because it’s the only damn place he can find the solitude for a sneaky wank before he’s confronted with the realities of Harry’s nudist side once more. And now Louis has had a naked Harry Styles in his bed, but due to impatient cameramen and Louis’ own rotten luck he wasn’t able to enjoy it. Life is so unfair.)

Louis lights a few candles on the bathroom counter (vanilla and apple cinnamon, Harry’s two favorites) for ambiance and steps back, admiring his work. He plans to head back downstairs to keep Niall from irritating the production crew too badly—because Louis is all about pranks but somehow the crew seems off limits, especially those with recording equipment and no sense of boundaries—when he hears a timid sound over the water hitting the wall of the shower.

“Lou?” Harry calls pitifully.

Louis steps hesitantly back into the bathroom. The shape of Harry is almost clear through the frosted glass of the shower door. His head is hung, the water trailing off his nose, and his eyes are squeezed shut.

“Yeah, babe? Need something?”

“No, but.” Harry pauses, his voice choked. “Can I… Can you stay in here with me?”

Christ, that’s a nightmare wrapped in a wet dream. A naked Harry Styles asking him to stay and shower with him, except not really at all.

But, because Louis is apparently a sucker for his soulmate, he hums an affirmative and perches on the edge of the bathtub. “Something on your mind?”

The water rattles against Harry’s skin as he clicks open his shampoo bottle (something coconut-y and fresh that’s good for Harry’s sensitive skin). His hair is completely covered in white foam before he answers with a question of his own.

“We deserve to be here, right?”

“Of course,” Louis answers automatically. “If we weren’t, we’d be the ones packing up and leaving instead of Nicolo or that other group. The annoying ones.”

“FYD.”

“Yeah, them.”

“I’m just,” Harry says slowly, even more thoughtful than his usual measured way of speaking. “Worried, I guess.”

“Well we’re all a little anxious, baby Haz. That’s just part of the competition.”

“No, not that.” Harry tips his head back into the stream of water, the white suds washing down his
body and, okay, Louis should probably face any other direction so he can make it through this conversation without feeling like he wants to set himself on fire. He clears his throat and pivots a little, shifting to stare at his own reflection in the mirror instead of Harry’s dripping body that’s just starting to flush from the heat of the water.

“Okay, then, walk me through it.”

Harry takes a second to compose his thoughts, then: “I’m just thinking. About, um, what Simon told us? Like, that all those fans out there just want to Bond with us. They might not even like us for us, we just happen to be young and on TV.”

“Harry-”

“And like, there were other groups that didn’t make it here because of us, and.” His voice pitches even higher, his words falling frantically into the echoing shower stall. "What if all the screaming fans and new Twitter followers are just around until they realize we aren’t actually good enough to be here? Or what if we get sent home early, I can’t bear- we just got started as a band and I can’t be on my own again- And, and what if someone Bonds to me, oh God, what-”

“Harry!” Louis interrupts forcefully, abandoning his post on the bathtub edge and throwing open the shower door. Harry is sobbing, his arms wrapped around his middle and squeezing at his own ribs like he’s holding himself together through sheer force of will. He’s pressed himself into a corner, slumped like some invisible offender has punched him in the gut. Louis steps forward, not caring that he’s getting absolutely soaked or that he just got his fringe to behave—it doesn’t matter, none of it matters. Harry is crying and he needs Louis, and Louis could never say no.

“Shush, love,” Louis says, crushing Harry in a hug. Harry wails, burying his face in Louis’ shoulder. “Calm down, it’s okay.”

Harry’s hands are curled into Louis’ drenched hoodie, his head tucked under Louis’ chin. “I-”

“Nope,” Louis cuts him off, determinedly cheerful. “No more. We’ve let all the bad out into the shower, time to let it go.”

“But-”

“Nope.”

Louis doesn’t know how long they stay there, but it’s long enough that the pounding water has turned from hot to warm to unpleasantly cool, like a steady rain they can’t avoid. It’s also long enough that Harry’s tears slow to soft hiccups and his shaking has subsided just a little. And lastly, it’s long enough for Matt to barge in, not noticing the two of them in the shower for a good few seconds and then letting out a high-pitched yelp when he finally does.

“Shit!” He hops backwards, sending his dry clothes and towel flying. “Um, okay.”

And then he backs out, shaking his head.

Harry snickers quietly, the sound muffled by Louis’ shoulder. Louis takes the opportunity to pull back a little, taking in Harry’s red eyes and watery smile (pun not intended).

“Let’s get you warmed up, then,” Louis murmurs, and Harry nods slowly. They shuffle across the hall, both of them leaving a dripping trail and Harry still very naked (Louis studiously ignoring Matt’s pained expression from his room and the Belle Amie girls’ catcalls and giggles) and then they’re back in their bedroom. Harry shudders in his puddle in the middle of the room, Louis digging
through his suitcase for a production crew-approved outfit.

Louis shuts the door, depriving their leering audience from a show. He deposits some khaki shorts and a polo shirt onto the nearest flat surface and wraps a towel around Harry’s shoulders, pulling out a towel and a new outfit for himself as well.

“When we were at auditions,” Louis says lightly, stripping off his wet t-shirt with some difficulty, letting it fall to the floor with a sodden smack, “I didn’t plan on getting through. I’d already been and tried to be on the show once before, have I told you? Last year. I didn’t even make it in front of the judges, they just sent me home after I stood in line all that time. So I got to the stage this year and I thought, ‘Well, yeah, that’s a little bit further. I might even make it on television this time.’ I didn’t plan on getting through because I looked around everywhere and saw all this talent, all these voices that mine could never compete with.”

He takes a breath, letting Harry pretend he isn’t listening so hard he’s forgotten to keep dressing himself, leaving him half-crouched with his trousers pulled halfway up his thighs. Louis continues undressing like it’s just another conversation, just another talk with his best friend, and not like he’s pouring out his innermost thoughts while Harry slowly gets dressed and Louis slowly gets naked. His soaked joggers join his shirt on the floor.

“And I saw this boy,” Louis laughs quietly. While Harry’s back is turned, Louis drops his boxers to the floor and starts drying himself viciously with his towel. “With this ridiculous curly hair and these outrageous dimples, and he was so much cooler than I could ever hope to be, and so confident even though he was one of the youngest around. Then it turns out he sang like a fucking angel, which is really just the cherry on top of the unjust sundae. I remember thinking to myself, ‘Now that kid, he’s going places.’ And lo and behold, I nearly bash his brains in with a bathroom door and insult him by telling him I think he’s got brain damage when really he’s just the slowest speaker on earth.”

Harry giggles softly, finally yanking his own trousers up to his hips as Louis chases the last few drops of water off his chest and begins towelling his hair.

“I met that boy in a bathroom and I said to myself, right there, that once I’d gotten my rejection I’d go straight home and rack up the phone bill voting for him when he makes it through to the live shows. Because there’s no way he wouldn’t, right?” Louis continues, dropping his towel and reaching for his dry boxers. He smiles at the memory—it’s gold-tinted, like it happened years and years ago even though in the grand scheme of things it’s only been a little more than three months. “And then I got my M—uh. I got sick. That stomach bug, remember? Couldn’t pay attention to anything, just stumbled out to perform like it wasn’t the worst I’d ever felt in my life. I can’t even remember singing, it’s just a big blur of fear and pain. But I got through, and the first thing I thought to myself was that I get to see that Harry guy again, I get to be around him for another whole week.”

Which is, well. Slightly untrue. Those were definitely the words he’d been thinking, but they’d been tinged with just a hint more panic and he’d been so terrified of the new Marker on his arm that the thought of anything other hiding in his bed had been incomprehensible. But Harry is fully clothed now and has sank to the ground, staring open-mouthed at Louis and listening reverently to his every word, and Louis thinks a little bit of glossing over the specifics will be okay. Louis pulls a pair of jeans over his arse and reaches for his new t-shirt.

"Bootcamp was strange, because I felt like I shouldn't be there, and that somehow I'd tricked my way in. Surely as soon as I sang again they'd realize their mistake and kick me out, not even give me a chance to say goodbye. But somehow I got put in the same group as you when it was time for eliminations, and I didn't even think about being sent home anymore because there was no possibility in my mind that you wouldn't make it."
Louis smiles and fluffs his fringe. His eye catches on one of Harry’s jackets slung over the post of his bunk bed and he pulls it on. When the soft red and black material is warm on his shoulders and the sleeves so long they nearly cover his fingertips, he settles in front of Harry on the floor. Harry pulls at his bottom lip, his eyes wide.

"And then, well. You were there, you remember. They rejected us, but then put us together as a group and again, all I thought was that I'd get maybe another week and a half with you, and now with Niall and Zayn and Liam as well. But that was all we'd get, surely, because we were all individual singers and you can't just force a group together and expect miracles. I think that's why I sabotaged Liam's practice attempts so often at the bungalow, because I couldn't stand the thought of us realizing it just wasn't going to work." He stops and grins. "But also because Liam has a stick wedged up his arse and needed to let loose a little."

Harry laughs shakily into his hands and then sniffs. Louis laughs too, grabbing one of Harry's hands and turning it over, running a finger down his life life through the center of his palm.

"Then we sang together," he continues, grinning down at the hand that's big enough to cover his whole thigh. "I haven't given our chances a second thought since then. Because you and Liam, you two could be stars on your own. But with us, when we're together, it's... It's magic. It's better than magic, it just fits. And I think you feel that way too."

Harry nods, watching Louis dance his fingers across his palm. "Yeah," he rasps, the scratch in his voice the only evidence of his shower breakdown.

"You don't know if we're supposed to be here, and I totally understand that. And I think Simon's chat yesterday left all of us a bit- well, a bit off. But I think you're wrong," he says, covering Harry's left hand with both of his own. "I think we're exactly where we're meant to be. I think girls are screaming our names because we're good at what we're doing and we're cute and, sure, they want to have our babies but, like, in a nice way."

Harry snorts, sounding like he didn’t mean to but it happened anyway, and Louis cuffs his chin lightly.

“We know what to expect, now. We didn’t have any trouble leaving the studio last night, and now we know how the crowds will be. We can get security if it’ll make you feel better, and we can get as much help from Simon as he can give us.” Louis scoots closer to Harry, brushing a damp curl from his eyes. “I don’t really believe in fate, because even if it’s real it’s screwed up enough things that I can’t put faith in it. But you, and me, and us, this band, this competition. Yeah, I believe in that. And this is exactly where we’re meant to be.”

Harry is sniffling again, but this time he’s beaming, and he buries his face in Louis’ shoulder once more.

“Thank you, Lou,” he murmurs, and Louis pulls him closer instead of answering.

Ten minutes later, the cameras are rolling for their video diary and Louis feels a warm hand brush comfortingly down his spine out of the sight of the cameras.

“Louis is the leader.” Harry proclaims, and Louis pretends like he isn’t going red in embarrassed delight. He gives the camera an of course I am look and what he feels is an appropriately modest
shrug. That is, until Harry smirks and continues, “cause that’s the only one that’s left.”

Louis splutters and flips him off (ignoring the mutters from the camera crew of “Gonna have to cut that”), but he can’t help smiling as he turns back to the front, burrowing back into his borrowed jacket that smells like Harry’s coconut shampoo and the boys’ shared bedroom upstairs.

Then, embarrassed at his own mushiness, he yells “I like girls who… eat carrots,” just to hear the boys laugh.

And they’re right where they’re meant to be.

At family dinner that night (as Harry insists it should be called when they all eat together at the massive dining room table), Sophia from Belle Amie leans across the table and says, “So, either Nicolo or FYD’s empty room is the sex room now, right?”

It’s a very strange sentence, and most of the group laughs in surprise, but the funniest part is seeing Harry’s eyes widen comically as he flushes bright red and chokes on his roast potatoes.

“The what?” he exclaims when his airways are clear.

“The sex room?” she continues, raising an eyebrow like he’s the crazy one. “Like if we want to bring someone home but have roommates or just don’t want some random to be in our rooms and steal our stuff. We could keep it well stocked.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this,” Matt laughs, but Harry still looks scandalized.

“A sex room sounds like a brilliant idea,” Wagner announces in his heavily accented voice. “I believe I will try it out for myself as soon as possible.”

And that effectively ends that conversation, because the thought of touching the sheets that Wagner’s sweaty ponytail had once rested on during his passionate lovemaking is enough to turn anyone’s stomach.

It’s a running joke through the entire next week, though, FYD’s old room newly adorned with a glittery handmade sign made by Niall and Cher, and the contestants delight in bringing it up during interviews just to see the reporters laugh along like they’re in on the joke (or suddenly get serious, like they’ve dug up new gossip on the contestants’ sex lives). They’re all pretty sure no one’s used it, not yet at least, the door staying tantalizingly unlocked; and it’s literally just an empty room—totally bare save for a bed and a desk and the smell of lemon floor cleaner, but Sophia’d had a very, very serious look on her face and it’s really only a matter of time before someone breaks the seal.

Harry’s face turns red every time he passes the room, and it’s Louis’ favorite thing in the whole universe.

14 October 2010

Except, despite Louis’ soliloquy about his X Factor journey and heartfelt words on faith and fate
while he and Harry dripped together on their bedroom floor, despite a night spent tossing sex room jokes around the dinner table, despite Louis’ best efforts during the video diary to keep things light and lovely, Harry doesn’t get better.

Well, he does a little. He stops moping in their room upstairs and continues showering regularly, but now he just mopes in the kitchen and the TV room and the various lounges as well, and spends an hour in the shower every morning just standing there, letting the water run over his downturned face. He sings when they go to vocal practice and his his marks during choreography training, but it's hollow and he's quiet and reserved through it all. He hasn’t spoken in an interview since their video diary, preferring to hang back and smile vacantly and let the other guys do the talking.

When the next Saturday and their next performance draws uncomfortably near and he’s still moping and avoiding everyone, Louis assigns each of the boys a task and ropes a couple of their housemates into Operation: Figure Out What The Hell Is Wrong With Harry.

Liam (codename Bieber Hair) is on song duty. There's nothing Harry loves more than singing, as he'll tell anyone that has unfortunate enough luck to ask. Liam's job to coax Harry into singing when he looks sad coincides wonderfully with Liam’s own insatiable need to practice every minute of the day not devoted to sleeping.

Harry obliges Liam a few times, but instead of rehearsing the Kelly Clarkson song they're performing this week he forces Liam to harmonize with him on various songs so depressing that even happy, bubbly Niall can’t be in the same room as them.

“No more!” Liam shrieks when Harry brings up yet another Joy Division song for them to try. “No more!”

Niall (codename Lucky Charms) is the distraction. Liam (reluctantly) agrees to sing sad songs with Harry again? Nope, Niall swoops in with bowls of ice cream and a DVD they haven't seen yet and tugs Harry away. Harry meanders upstairs to continue his trend of napping every two to three hours? Niall is already in their room, insisting that yes, this is the best time for him to teach Harry guitar and no, it can't wait, Niall made a solemn vow and “do respectable Irishmen go back on their words? No, no we do not!” Harry spends an hour staring at the rain out the window? Niall shoves oven mitts on his hands and demands to be shown the correct process for perfect pastries.

Harry may be depressed and he may be locked in that curly head of his, but he isn't an idiot, and he soon finds places to sleep or wallow where Niall doesn't think to look. One day Louis knocks one of Cher's snapbacks off her shelf while they're deep in conversation over Rihanna versus Nicki Minaj, and he yelps in surprise when he bends down to pick it up and comes face to face with Harry, curled in a ball under her bed and fast asleep.

Zayn (codename DJ Malik at his insistence) has one move, but it's incredibly effective: when Harry is pouting or looking otherwise forlorn in his presence, Zayn plops himself in Harry’s lap, smacks a kiss on his cheek, and starts discussing the first thing that comes to his mind. There’s a variation that allows for a standing Harry as well, where Zayn wraps himself, koala-like, around Harry’s front. He locks his arms behind Harry’s neck and his legs around Harry’s waist and Harry has no choice but to wrap his hands around Zayn’s thighs to support him as they launch into yet another discussion on the manic qualities of Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker and whether it was too over-the-top.

Louis could have put himself on cuddle duty, sure, but Zayn is an excellent replacement and tenacious as all hell.

Cher drags Harry to her room for deep, introspective talks on the price of fame and the culture of superstardom. Katie and Rebecca clean out the boys’ tub and run baths for Harry, complete with
fancy oils and bubble mixtures and sugar scrubs that leave his skin glowing. Matt teams up with Niall to teach Harry guitar. Mary talks to him for hours about her daughter and her pets at home. Aiden drags Harry shopping after they’re dismissed from the studio at the end of each day.

Louis (codename Dragon Fire (though everyone refuses to call him that, citing unfairness in his choice of codenames, which of course he vehemently denies)) is the assistant to each and every phase of Operation: Figure Out What The Hell Is Wrong With Harry. When Liam is about to search out Harry for another mini vocal practice, Louis hands him an iPod filled only with songs about sunshine, puppies, young love, and candy. He shoves random items into Niall’s hands as distractions to throw at Harry (“What am I supposed to do with lipstick and an ink pen, Louis?” “Do your job, Niall, that’s what you do!”). When Zayn walks anywhere near Harry, Louis trips him or hip checks him or picks him up and sets him on Harry’s lap himself. He tags along when Aiden takes him shopping and he helps Katie and Rebecca choose the best bubble bath for Harry's sensitive skin and he locks Harry in Mary’s room for hours, because if anyone can convince him of the joy this show can bring, it’s her.

It still doesn’t work.

16 October 2010

It’s not that Harry didn’t realize what was going on around him all this week. The boys weren’t particularly stealthy, with their codenames and their mission reports and their grand plans of fixing Harry. Louis, especially, was about as subtle as a sledgehammer when he was using their bandmates or housemates to try to draw him out of his funk.

And it’s not like he wanted to be a miserable arsehole. He’d honestly thought that after he and Louis’d had their talk, he’d be fine and ready to go and perform the hell out of another song so they could survive another week on the show. And he was fine for a little while, until he’d made the mistake of checking his Twitter mentions and saw nothing but garbled caps-locked shouts about having his babies and handcuffing him in basements so he could never leave. The few that mentioned their singing at all were pretty adamant that One Direction wasn’t good enough to be on the show.

And there he’d gone again, spiraling back into that horrible circle of panic and doubt and fear.

It’s so much more that what he prepared for, now. This show is meant to be the acts impressing four big names in the music industry and securing enough voters from the general population to root for them and keep them in the competition week after week. It’s meant to be a showcasing of talents, not a parade of eligible teenage boys that everyone from screaming girls to women their mums’ age are reaching out to sink their nails into.

He’s being pulled apart, and the ones doing it aren’t even kind enough to make it quick.

Because that’s what it feels like, every time Harry’s full name is shouted over the ambient noise of a crowd. Every time the X Factor contestants leave the studio, every time Aiden drags him out to shop or walk or see a film, every time they pass through the gates to get to the house—there they are, a
mass of fans jumping and waving and screaming his name. It’s taking that part of him that had always been reserved for the people closest to him and chucking it out to the masses. It’s breadcrumbs tossed to pigeons, but the pigeons have their own agenda and are using the breadcrumbs for their own nefarious purposes. It’s like someone throwing out sheets of paper with his bank information all over it, it’s like someone renting a billboard to display his home address and the hours he’ll be there. It’s private information and now it’s shared with the world.

And, now that it’s out there, Harry lives in complete and utter fear every single day that someone is going to shout his name and a Marker is going to brand itself onto his skin. And the thing is, he’s not even sure why that is bad. He’s always wanted to meet his soulmate, so why is the thought of it happening now causing him to lose sleep at night?

It could be the fear of having his soulmate find him and then lose him, especially if he wasn’t allowed to stop and try to find the person. It could be that he is wary of being deceived, of being tricked into thinking someone Bonded with him when they didn’t. It could be the fear of the pain, the anxiety of knowing that if he does Bond then it’s going to hurt, at least for a little while. It could be the fear of Bonding to someone who doesn’t Bond back, but that’s a rare problem and really the least of his worries.

It could be that he’s afraid there’s no soulmate out there waiting for him at all. That a Marker will never appear. That he’s meant to be alone but people will go on shouting his name at him anyway.

He finds it hard to spend time with the other acts, because they get to live the amateur musician’s dream and spend their time rehearsing to perform every week with only a few spare paparazzi following them for a few minutes as their penance. And he finds it hard to spend time with his bandmates because they’re receiving the same crazed treatment that he is, full names shouted like it’s nothing special and cameras brandished in their faces and security having to sneak them out of back doors, yet they’re all holding up perfectly fine.

Harry has longed for his soulmate his entire life. The moment he found out what that white lily was on his mother’s ankle, he’d thought of little else as much as he thought of the person he’d someday Bond with. He’d spend hours imagining bringing his soulmate home, introducing them to his family, making plans for the future, travelling the world together, raising children. It had always been something happy, something good to look forward to in times of stress. But now, as the possibility of actually being Bonded looms ever larger every day, Harry just wants to run.

It’s melodramatic and awful and Harry hates himself for dragging his friends through this. But he still can’t shake the nausea in his stomach or the trembling of his hands.

He can’t focus on being his best with this fear forcing him to carry its weight. He needs to prove to himself, to Simon, to the other boys, and to the nation that One Direction is worth the hype. That they’re more than pretty faces that Simon Cowell has decided will become popstars one way or another. They can earn this, they can win it on their own terms, but not when he the thought of performing makes his hands shake so badly he drops his mic.

It’s more than a need to run. It’s a need to flee, to be away from the madness of this new life for just a little while.

He just needs ten minutes so he can feel like Harry Styles again.

Unfortunately, that doesn’t seem to be in the cards.

“Harry, you’re missing your cue again! Start it over!”
Harry’s got another solo this week, a full verse right after Liam kicks off the song on his own. He knows his cue—thank you very much, Savan, he isn’t an idiot—but if he opens his mouth he’s going to puke all over the freshly-mopped *X Factor* stage.

The song restarts, Liam sings the opening lines, and Harry misses his cue again.

“Okay, take a break,” Savan says, rubbing agitatedly at his temples. “Harry, look over the lyrics. You can’t start panicking now, we’ve only got nine hours until you perform.”

Right, well. That’s exactly the pressure Harry needs right now.

He doesn’t follow Liam and Zayn as they move to sit in a few chairs offstage but just plops down right next to his mic stand, his stomach rolling like waves at sea. The cool metal of the stand is nice where it rests against his forehead.

His hearing is a little muted, thanks to the blood pounding in his ears and fueling his headache, so the conversations around him slide in and out of his head without meaning. He’s pretty sure Niall is next to him, chattering away and attempting to distract him even though he can’t hear a word he’s saying. However, it’s clear as a bell when an assistant in the soundbooth calls down to Savan, “Um, I think their music is missing?”

“What?”

“Like, the song file. It isn’t on the laptop anymore.”

Harry doesn’t know why he’s surprised. Their audio file going missing hours before they perform is just another punch to the gut—it’s been an entire week of up and down and then further down and then down some more.

There’s chaos around him, crew members running every which way attempting to solve the problem of the missing song and generally panicking. Harry ignores it, staring at the empty air in front of him until he feels something wet and cold pressed into his hand.

“Drink up, love,” Louis is saying, his blue eyes muted in the dimness. There’s something else being pushed into his other hand as well. “I bought you a few minutes, but you’ve gotta go fast.”

“Wha—” Harry says, looking down to see a water bottle in one hand and a familiar blue mobile in the other. “What did you do?”

“Deleted our song off the sound laptop,” Louis shrugs.

“You did what—”

“Not the time, Harold.”

“Lou—”

Louis crosses his arms and nods toward the side stage door. His single raised eyebrow is brooking no argument, and Harry has never loved him more than he does now.

“Go,” Louis commands, and Harry wraps him in a quick hug before scampering for the exit, ignoring the protesting of his stomach and the pounding of his head. It’s a matter of moments to find an unoccupied supply cupboard to shut himself in. He dials his mum’s number with shaky fingers.

“Hello?” he hears, his mum’s voice tinny through the speaker but perfect and absolutely what he
needed, and Harry can’t help but sob when he answers.

“Mum.”

“Oh, Harry,” Anne breathes, “you scared me!”

Harry chokes a laugh, then starts to bawl.

Louis is the most brilliant human on the planet. Harry doesn’t know how Louis figured out that he needed something comforting and familiar but he did, and he deleted their fucking song and completely screwed up their performance day rehearsal just to let Harry get fifteen minutes away from cameras and assistants and new friends with pity on their faces.

It’s a tiny thing but it’s huge, and if Louis wasn’t already well on his way to becoming Harry’s best friend before, he’s certainly top of the list now.

Harry lets it all spill out, right there onto the dirty floor of the supply cupboard: their talks with Simon about things that shouldn’t concern him, the screaming fans who somehow got a hold of their last names, the so-called “journalists” who leaked their names onto Twitter in the first place, the smirky production crew who watch them like they’re just stupid kids and they aren’t good enough to be here, Liam’s work ethic and Niall’s bounciness and Zayn’s fluttering conversations and Louis, Louis, Louis.

Anne doesn’t say much, just hums and makes the appropriate noises at the appropriate times. When he wraps with another sob and a dwindling sentence about the ache in his ribs that has weighed him down all week, she sighs sadly.

“You know what this is, babe,” is all she says, and Harry lets his shoulders slump.

“Yeah,” he whispers.

Anxiety had plagued Harry from an early age, tugging on his nerves like plucked guitar strings, pulling at him with thoughts about being unloved and a burden and strange. Different. And then he’d gotten older and went to school and had those fears confirmed, even by his closest friends—“You’re so weird,” they’d laugh as he danced in the hallways or used words with more than three syllables, and he’d smile but inside his heart would race and his traitorous brain would whisper you already knew that—and he’d learned to shut it out, a little, gotten more confident in the parts of him that were different and unique. It’s how he got so far on the X Factor in the first place, it’s how he was interesting enough to be chosen for the band.

And sure, sometimes Harry still does strange things that make Liam shake his head in bemused confusion and make Zayn and Niall cackle with glee (“Legend,” Niall always shouts, and that’s how it makes Harry feel, like a legend), and he could always look to Louis to see that yeah, he’s weird, but it makes his friends laugh and it makes Louis’ eyes crinkle like he’s looking in the sun and that must mean it’s okay.

But then came the other side of things, because he can’t have something in his life that’s as wonderful as his band without receiving something bad as well; so now there’s the side where he can’t blend into a crowd anymore when he wants to, because girls are trailing after him and screaming and paparazzi hide to catch proof of him talking with his mouth full or tripping and falling while out shopping. Everything about this competition takes what originally made him stand out and makes them his defining characteristics: his curls and his voice and his weird sense of humor.

It hadn’t felt like anxiety, this time around. It had felt different, stronger; some new beast to grapple
with rather than an old familiar nemesis.

“Yeah,” he says again. Like Voldemort, though, fear of the word anxiety only increases the anxiety itself, and speaking about it has always lessened its impact. At least, it does when told to the right people (Harry has a scattered string of once-friends who caught him panicking over simple things like art projects and Halloween costumes or throwing up over being teased about his clothes, and rather than helping they only laughed along. He's more careful about who he opens up to now).

“But it sounds like you’ve got help, at least,” Anne says, and Harry can hear her smirking from Holmes Chapel. “Liam and Zayn and Niall and…”

“Louis,” Harry supplies too quickly, then smacks his hand over his face when she laughs.

“Ah, of course. Lovely Louis, how could I forget.” Because of course Louis had charmed the absolute pants off of Anne the moment they’d met at the bungalow, had her giggling into her hand in the first thirty seconds. Harry’s pretty sure they even exchanged phone numbers and have been texting ever since. Luckily, Louis is equally annoyed that his mum Jay loves Harry just as much, and that she always insists Louis give him a hug at the end of their phone calls. “The boy who’s replaced me as the most important person in your life.”

Harry can’t help but giggle. “Mum, stop. He’s a good friend. M’best friend.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” she says.

The storm in his stomach has died down a little, the pounding in his head reduced down to something paracetamol might be able to handle. “Thanks, Mum.”

“Love you, sweetie. And call me first, next time, rather than bottling it all up,” she chides. “Even though it sounds like you got the pampering of your life this week.”

Harry chuckles. “I did. I’ll pay ‘em back, though.”

“I know you will.”

It’s still a little hectic on stage when Harry sneaks back, assistants still bustling about and tossing papers like they’re going to find the digital version of the song underneath a stack of scripts or something. The other boys are at their mics, Savan working on getting them ready to practice without music until a backup copy can be brought to the studio. Harry steps up to Louis and crushes him against his chest, his face buried in the back of Louis’ beanie. Louis squawks, drawing the attention of Savan and the other boys, but relaxes in Harry’s hold after a few seconds.

“Thank you,” Harry whispers fervently. Louis turns in his arms and gives him a bright grin.

“Anything for you, Hazza dear. What say we get this rehearsal going?” he claps his hands together gleefully. “And maybe someone will catch the miscreant that deleted our song.”

Harry laughs breathlessly and thanks whoever might be listening for Louis Tomlinson.

They give Harry’s solo to Liam since he's still a little shaky, but it’s okay.

He still avoids everyone as much as he can in the crowded studio hallways, dressing quietly and
smiling silently through hair and makeup. He’s better, after recognizing the problem and talking it out with his mum, but he still needs a little recuperation time. He’s never had a stretch of anxiety last a full week, and the last vestiges of it stick to his limbs and his thoughts, like the dregs at the bottom of a cold cup of tea.

But the performance nears and he feels better, less like he’s going to fall over at any minute and more like the spark he’d felt before their first song last week, the nervous thrumming of excitement.

It’s okay. He’s okay.

The stage lights go down and they take their spots at their mic stands, the crowd screaming and brandishing signs. It’s less pointed, more of a wall of indefinable sound rather than spears of individual names. That helps, soothing Harry’s frayed edges. He grips the mic and breathes, breathes.

**The lights go up.** Liam sings. They all join in. Harry feels his shoulders move without his consent, feels the beat pulse up through his boots and into his veins. He’s **back**.

Zayn hits the final note, and Louis wraps his arm around Harry’s shoulder. Harry tilts his face into Louis’ neck for a moment, just a moment, and feels the last ashes of his anxiety bleed out onto the floor.

“Thank you, thank you,” he whisper-shouts to Louis again, and Louis laughs and tugs him closer.

“Anytime, Haz.”

Harry can barely hear him over the screams. Somehow, it’s still okay.

Back at the *X Factor* house, they throw the party they’d meant to throw the week before to celebrate surviving another grueling week of rehearsals and interviews and judges sniping at each other to create drama. They’re all too exhausted to do anything more than shovel cake into their mouths and drape themselves across the sofas in the TV room, but it’s still a party. Harry reaches his hands up and stretches, sprawling himself out even further across the laps of his bandmates. They all accepted his position with very little fuss, probably knowing the cuddles are necessary at this point.

In a quiet moment, Mary says, “It’s good to see you back, Harry.”

Murmurs of agreement go up around the room, even from those who hadn’t actively helped try and bring Harry’s good mood back. Zayn squeezes Harry’s ankle, and Liam smiles to himself as he fusses with the hem of Harry’s shirt.

“Yeah,” Harry says honestly, sitting up a little to look at everyone, “thank all of you. I… wasn’t having the easiest week,” everyone chuckles at the understatement, “but it would have been so much worse without your help.”

“Wasn’t us, love,” Rebecca answers quietly. “That was all Louis.”
Louis is uncharacteristically quiet, running a hand through Harry’s hair instead of answering. Harry tilts his head back to look at him, grinning.

“I know,” he says quietly, and Louis flickers a smile. “He’s the best.”

Several people coo—Niall being the loudest—and Louis turns an impeccable shade of red, burying his face in Harry’s hair.

“Well if one good thing came out of this week,” Aiden calls from the sofa he’s sharing with Matt, “it’s that Louis was so focused on making you better that he couldn’t wreak havoc on the rest of us.”

Everyone laughs as Louis lifts his head and points across the room with a screeched, “You’re first on my list, Quiffy!” Harry giggles at Louis’ faux outrage.

Louis had told him that he doesn’t believe in fate, and maybe he was telling the truth; but how could it be anything except meant to be that they’re here, together, doing what they love and doing it well? It’s fate, and fate is kind, and Harry is so, so happy.


17 October 2010

Results shows are terrifying in their own way, because there’s absolutely nothing more they can do to convince the voters to call their number. If they’re at the bottom, they’re at the bottom, and that’s just how it goes.

And the worst part is, they can’t even spend the whole time preparing to get their answer. Instead, they have to go out and perform a silly group song with all the other acts, knowing full well they’re making fools of themselves and that some of them are going home within the hour.

But their performance of Telephone is over and done, Katy Perry has performed, and Harry is standing next to Simon and listening to his muttered remarks throughout Dermot’s roll call of survivors, little phrases reverberating through his mind that Simon tosses around like it’s nothing—Wagner, really? and honestly, she’s very lucky because she did bloody awful and what the hell are people thinking.

The anxiety creeps back up, prodding at Harry and telling him that if Simon wasn’t his mentor, he’d be saying similar things about them. But then Louis flickers his gaze over, crossing his eyes and sticking out his tongue to make Harry smile, and Harry firmly pushes the lung-crushing panic away.

They make it through to week three, and Harry jumps straight into Simon’s arms.

A still from the video of the results show gets passed around Twitter, arrows and bright red circles drawn to highlight a strange smudge on Louis from One Direction’s arm. Within hours, fans have screenshotted multiple instances of that same black spot that could be seen during ITV footage from the X Factor house and the video diaries, but there’s no consensus as to what it could be. It isn’t until a snip of a few seconds of X Factor Life Through a Lens footage is found that the shape reveals itself
to be a dagger, dark and bold on Louis’ arm where it’s slung over Harry’s shoulder as Harry cooks breakfast.

#LouisStabMeWithYourDagger trends on Twitter for the next three days.

A “secret insider” leaks information to The Sun that it’s Louis’ Marker, and that he’s already Bonded with someone related to the show: either a judge, a stagehand, or another one of the contestants.

Louis himself has been coy about the whole situation and has not yet issued an official statement, someone named Dan Wootton writes, but our insider suggests we don’t need to look outside the X Factor house for his soulmate. In fact, more than one source reports that there is one particular person with whom Louis seems to spend the majority of his time.

All we can say is this: curls may get the girls, but it turns out they may get the boy band members as well.

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18 October 2010

Louis isn’t sure whether it’s the potent combination of a happy Harry and another guaranteed week in the X Factor house or if someone slipped really good drugs in his tea, but he can hardly contain his fondness for the silly curly one through the entire video diary the next day.

The other boys are being ridiculous about it, though; they were integral parts of the cheering up Harry operation, they should be ecstatic. Instead, Zayn jams his thumb hard into Louis’ side when he leans over and bites Harry’s shoulder, and Liam kicks him in the back when he spends the entire question time making faces at Harry from under his hood.

It’s just some fun, honestly.

Plus, the hood hides Louis’ eye roll when the questions all turn out to be about the kind of girls they’d date rather than anything interesting.

Like, you know. Music.

19 October 2010

With Harry back to his normal sunshiney self—a good call to Mum is all you need sometimes, and Louis is happy to prescribe it to any friend in need—and another good performance under their belts, the band begins to settle into their roles and responsibilities and practice schedules. They’ve learned a good many of each other’s quirks, thanks to spending every night and the majority of every day together. It should feel forced at this point, like a sleepover that’s gone on far too long, but it doesn’t. Something’s clicking, something’s happening, and it feels amazing.

There’s only one problem, one that has simmered since the creation of the band and comes in the form of one scowling, huffing bandmate: Liam.
It comes to a head a few days after the second results show. Louis and Niall are throwing things over the second floor railing onto Harry below them, fast asleep and sprawled on a beanbag chair.

A sock has just been tossed to land on Harry’s stomach (“Ten points!” cries Niall, before Louis knocks him to the floor hissing “Hush, you idiot! He’ll wake up!”) when Liam finds them, dragging Zayn behind him.

“We should rehearse,” he declares, brown eyes serious as he takes in Louis attempting to gag Niall with his own sleeve.

“Nah,” Louis laughs, yanking Niall’s shirt halfway off to give himself some extra leverage. “I’m good.”

“Louis-” Liam tries again, but Louis just cheers triumphantly when Niall’s mouth is successfully bound.

“We practiced all morning, Liam!” Louis insists. He doesn’t even look up, expecting Liam to either give in and help him tie Niall’s wrists with the other sleeve or to walk away. Liam does neither.

“Louis, would you listen to me?” he shouts, and the echoing stairwell rings in the wake. “This is a competition, we can’t spend our days acting like morons and expect to win! Don’t you want this?”

Louis feels his eyes widen, the smile dropping from his face when he sees the sincerity and ferocity on Liam’s face. “Li—”

“Don’t Li me! I’ve had it with trying to make you do any work. You’re too busy screwing around and flirting with Harry do anything worthwhile. If you didn’t want to work hard, you shouldn’t have accepted your place in the band.”

Liam storms away. After a moment of ringing silence, Zayn follows, tossing Louis a stony look.

A quick glance around tells Louis that the argument has drawn a little bit of attention. Harry is awake and staring up at him from his beanbag, biting his lip like he wants to say something but doesn’t know what. John, Aiden, and Matt are all leaning out of their rooms, and Mary and Katie are looking out of the kitchen. Everyone is quiet.

Louis looks down at Niall for a little bit of support, but Niall just shrugs and says garbled nonsense through the fabric of the sleeve still stuffed in his mouth. Louis pats him on the arm.

“I don’t know either, Niall.”

Liam is in one of the lounges, his headphones in his ears and his eyes closed as he taps his fingers along to a muffled song. Louis slinks in and watches, just for a moment.

He completely understands where Liam is coming from. Louis has always been the type to put off thinking of unpleasant things, to have fun while he can and work when he must. He drags Niall and Harry and Zayn into his shenanigans because it’s more fun with friends and he knows they don’t want to sit around doing nothing. He’s an entertainer at heart, can’t stand the idea of someone being bored in his presence.

And Liam, well. Liam is the most focused person Louis has ever met. He doesn’t know if it stems
from events in Liam’s life or if it’s just his personality, but it’s part of the reason that he’s so likeable. He throws that determination into everything he does, not just singing: he’s the perfect person to have on your team in just about every situation.

They’re two opposites, but they aren’t too opposite. Louis knows he can step up, be more focused on the work when work needs to be done. But Liam can loosen up a little too, because time and time again they’ve proven that they work so well as a group because they fit, and only by spending time together and having fun will their connection strengthen.

Liam looks up, his eyes suspicious when he sees Louis lingering in the doorway. Louis waves meekly.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Liam says, peering around Louis like he expects him to be hiding a water gun behind his back. “Hey.”

“Can I sit?” At Liam’s nod, Louis slides next to him on the sofa. Liam takes out his headphones, the tinny sound of his music not breaking the awkward silence between them. “I just wanted to tell you that, well, I know I don’t always seem like I take this seriously.” Louis folds his hands in his lap, which are twitching insistently at the forced honesty. “I know I joke around a lot, and I know sometimes I go over the line. And I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s okay,” Liam says, but Louis waves it off.

“No it isn’t,” he says. “You’re absolutely right, this is a competition and not a vacation, and I should focus more on making sure I’m ready for each week. But…” he looks up, meeting Liam’s eyes. “Just because I mess about and have fun with the lads doesn’t mean I’m not in this for real. I know that we can win this, but that it won’t be easy. I can focus more during our rehearsal sessions and help keep us on track. I should have been doing that to begin with, anyway,” he shrugs, looking down at his knees.

Liam takes a deep breath. “I know I get…” he waves his hand. “Intense. About everything. And it’s been something I’ve done for a while, and that’s probably why I don’t have-” he stops, rubbing his neck awkwardly. “Um. It’s not a new thing, and I know I need to learn to let go sometimes. I think I’m still stuck in the solo mentality, you know? Like if I don’t do the work, I won’t get any further.”

“It’s good you work so hard,” Louis reassures him. “We wouldn’t be anywhere without you. It’s probably why you’re the most confident one out of all of us. You could do this in your sleep.”

“Can I… can I tell you something?” Liam asks, and Louis nods. “I’m completely bloody terrified. Absolutely shitting it.”

Louis laughs outright, shocked. “No way! You’re, like, Mr. Confidence!”

“And I thought I was a decent actor,” Louis jokes, nudging him slightly.

Liam chuckles, but when he nudges Louis back he’s switched back to sincere. “We wouldn’t be anywhere without you either, Lou.” Louis shrugs again, but Liam tugs his sleeve to make him stop. “Honestly, we wouldn’t. We did awful without you at the Judge’s House.”

Louis smiles down at his hands, but doesn’t answer. Liam’s the second person to tell him that he’s
necessary in this band, and of course Louis would love to think that, but he’s still having a hard time believing that it’s more than just Harry and Liam being sweet. Obviously, he knows he doesn’t have the natural vocal talent they do, or Zayn or Niall either, and the complete lack of solos even being considered for him basically lets him know his place here. He’s loud and he can carry a chorus with the best of them, and that’ll have to do for now. But, Liam’s being kind and it’s not his fault he’s the best singer in the band, so Louis mutters a “Thanks, man,” and lets the silence simmer around them. Both of them grin down at their knees, awkwardly avoiding eye contact until a familiar Irish-tinted catcall fills the air.

“Kiss and make up already, would ya!”

Louis and Liam look up to find an audience, three sets of eyes watching them not-so-sneakily from the doorway. Louis’ eyes go straight to Harry, whose dimple is visible even where he’s trying to hide. He sighs dramatically.

“If you say so, Niall,” Louis says heavily, then launches himself at Liam, peppering his face with kisses and sucking a love bite onto his neck. Liam squawks in indignation, trying to ward off Louis’ attack and failing miserably.

“Heyyyyy,” Harry pouts from the doorway. Louis lifts his head from a bright red Liam to grin.

“Jealous, Curly?”

“Maybe,” Harry bites his lip, scuffing his toe. Louis feels the blush creep up his neck and ducks to hide his face. Harry skips over and launches himself onto Louis’ back, making Liam groan under the added weight. “I’ve always wanted to kiss Liam and you beat me to it.”

“Oi!” Louis laughs, attempting to buck a giggling Harry to the floor. Niall and Zayn throw themselves into the fray as well, and within minutes they’re all sweaty and grinning uncontrollably.

“So,” Liam says, lifting his head from the bottom of the pile. “Is now a good time to rehearse?”

The other four groan, Louis leaning over to flick Liam on the nose, but it turns to laughter easily enough and they spend the rest of the day there in that tiny lounge, joking and talking and yes, even singing.

20 October 2010

Louis doesn’t hear about the latest article until a smirking Matt pushes it against his bowl of cereal one morning, his eyebrows wagging.

“Are the rumors true then, Louis? You’ve Bonded with a judge and you’re rigging the competition so you lot can win?”

Louis, having only looked down to catch a picture of himself spread across the cover of the day’s Daily Mail, chokes on his coco pops as Matt howls, pounding him halfheartedly on the back. Cher giggles from across the table.

“Is it Dannii or Cheryl, then?” she asks. “Or, oh God, it isn’t Simon, is it?”

“Right,” is all Louis says, faking a laugh and pushing away from his cereal. “It’s, you know. All
Cher and Matt collapse in giggles, pounding the table and Louis’ back. “ Fucking brilliant,” Matt laughs; Cher is already on her phone, texting the hilarious news to the rest of their housemates who are spread out across the house and out at the studio. Louis shoots them a grin over his shoulder and swipes the Mail as he heads out of the room, abandoning his mostly-full cereal bowl. He begs a cigarette and a lighter from one of his favorite cameramen, Ricky, and kicks the back door open, striding out into the quiet morning.

He doesn’t have a destination in mind, but he does have a goal: sweet, peaceful solitude for a few fucking minutes so he can wrap his head around yet another article—the fifth this week, and that’s just the major papers—speculating on Louis and his Marker.

He’s denied it twice already. Simon hadn’t even asked for the truth, he’d just pointed Louis toward a specific reporter lying in wait as they left the studio one day and told Louis to deny, deny, deny. So Louis did, fuck all good it did.

To keep away fans and paps, the X Factor house is on its own private bit of land—Louis isn’t sure exactly how big the property is, but it’s large enough that they’ve had two separate footie games going at the same time that never even came close to overlapping. It’s easy to find an empty patch of trees and a bare bit of ground to wallow on. He spreads the paper out and sighs at the horrible title.

TOMMO’S “TATTOO” screams at him above a strategically chosen picture of Louis with his arm wrapped around Harry’s waist, the tip of the dagger visible under his pushed-up sleeves, both of them beaming and flushed from the X Factor finalists’ shopping trip yesterday. Honestly, they probably had dozens of pictures to choose from if they wanted one of Louis and Harry together; he’d been stuck to Louis’ side like he’d been superglued there through the entire shopping trip, and Louis had let him because he knew just how terrified Harry was going out to face the press and the fans for the first official time since they’d been ambushed behind the studio. It had seemed like a wonderful day, though, for all their apprehension; the fans had been excited but respectful, not a single last name was screamed that they could hear, and the boys had been optimistic that their days of Bond-obsessed fans were already over. It had been a good day, and Louis had gone to sleep happy. Then this bullshit was tossed in front of him before he’d even finished his morning tea and here we are.

X Factor star flaunts symbol on his arm, the article goes on to say, but is it really a tattoo like he claims? Bond expert Dr. Laura gives her opinion on the potential Marker, and we talk to fellow X Factor finalists on just who they think Louis’ lucky soulmate might be!

The caption under the picture is what makes Louis toss the paper aside, growling. Louis Tomlinson, 18, and bandmate Harry Styles, 16, celebrate their band’s place in the X Factor final twelve. Styles and Tomlinson were seen together the entire outing, and sources report the boys are never far from each other’s sides.

Fuck. Fuck.

Louis doesn’t have to worry about the other finalists catching on to what's really happening; they all think it’s hilarious, the greatest inside joke that isn’t really just between them, every new day bringing another round of waggled eyebrows and insinuations.

(“Saw you in the kitchen with the Sainsbury ladies, Louis. Got something you need to tell us? Someone you should introduce to the family?”

“Dibs on maid of honor at the Bonding ceremony!”
“Dibs on, um... Officiant!”

“Like anyone’d let you officiate an actual Bonding ceremony, Niall.”

“Well, looks like you lost my services for your ceremony someday, Aiden.”

Louis laughs along, because the only other option is to go ahead and announce that the Marker is for Harry but yeah, thanks, he didn’t get a Marker in return. It’s fine. It’s fine.

The public, though, aren’t so easy to convince. The fans seem to be split half-and-half—one group tweets him invasive questions about who he’s Bonded to (the majority convinced it’s Harry, #teamlarry flourishing yet again), and the other half believing it’s a tattoo but tweeting him suggestions of what they’d do to him if he was their soulmate.

Louis draws in a deep breath, letting carcinogens fill his lungs, exhaling a smooth rush of smoke. His fingers twitch around the cigarette, because this isn’t the addiction he’s satisfying, the craving he needs to quench.

Because through it all, right by his side, is the beautiful, oblivious, problem-causer himself Harry.

Louis has thought about a lot of things about his Marker and his Bond to Harry over the past few weeks. He’s moved far past the denial stage, and he’s well on his way to acceptance, but.

It’s just, all things considered, if Harry had Bonded to Louis in return, if they were proper soulmates, it may have been the greatest love story of all damn time. For all Louis has scoffed at the idea of fate, this story fits the definition to a fucking T.

The circumstances leading up to Louis bumping into Harry in the bathroom are ridiculously far-fetched. Like just the other day, when Louis had suggested they perform a song by The Script and Harry had made some offhand comment about seeing them in concert, then comparing dates and finding out they’d been at the same show. The same fucking show. Louis could have met Harry two years earlier, could have danced and sang with him like the couple of idiots they are without the eyes of the world on them. And there’s the whole meeting in the toilets thing too, because there were thousands of people at the Manchester auditions, thousands, and out of all of them, Louis went to the exact right bathroom at the exact right time to find Harry (well, find may not be the right word. Assault Harry with a door, maybe, but it’s all semantics in the end).

And even beyond all that, moving past all the things that led to Harry being there in that bathroom and being the type of person that laughs when his brain chemistry is questioned by a stranger, nothing could possibly convince Louis more of fate meddling in their lives than the fact that he and Harry just told each other their full names within fifteen minutes of meeting each other.

Because just months later the thought of strangers knowing his last name had sent Harry into a week-long anxiety cloud that he’d barely clawed himself out of, but first he’d told it to Louis like it was nothing.

And Louis, God, Louis can count the people he’s told his last name to on one hand. His mum had never checked the boxes on the forms at school that let his last name be shown in the records, so his teachers never knew. When Louis had created a Facebook account he’d made it entirely private, not clicking the option to let certain people see his last name if he allows it, just in case someone had looked over someone else’s shoulder and seen it. Even distant family members don’t know it, just like he doesn’t know theirs. He and Stan had only swapped names because they were young and curious and Stan’s mum had make a joke about them being already Bonded because they were so attached at the hip.
Louis just doesn’t tell people his last name. He never has. He’s seen far too much heartbreak come from a name dropping from one person’s lips and causing a Marker. And it’s not like it’s the eighteenth century—no one is ostracized anymore for sleeping with people if they aren’t Bonded. Sure, traditionalists still claim that sex should wait until the Bonding ceremony ends, but that way of thinking is quickly dying out and Louis has met more than a fair few boys and girls that didn’t let him not telling them his last name get in the way of a good time. He’s gotten off in enough dark corners at parties and bathroom stalls in clubs to know that not being Bonded can still lead to a decent orgasm, and he’d been perfectly fine with that being the situation for the rest of his life, no messy Bonding required.

But he’d walked into that bathroom and spilled his best kept secret to angel-faced Harry Styles. And then, instead of him being just another close friend that happens to know his name, Harry turns out to be his soulmate.

Fucking fate. All that’s missing to make this an actual fairytale is the lack of Marker on Harry’s arm.

A shout from the house breaks Louis from his thoughts.

“Lou, if you’re out here we’re getting ready to go to the studio!” Liam calls, his voice echoing in the still morning air. Louis inhales one last deep drag of smoke and stands, crumpling the cigarette and the *Daily Mail* article under his shoe.

Fucking fate can jump off a fucking cliff.

21 October 2010

Savan calls for a break, and Louis immediately makes for the door. Vocal practice this week has gotten a little tougher, Savan adding more complex harmonies, pushing them to expand their ranges, and to work on singing louder in general; it makes Louis nervous, which makes him drink more water, which makes him have to run to the bathroom every time he gets a chance. An annoying cycle, sure, but at least it’s better than getting flustered and staying silent throughout half a performance while feeling the disappointment radiating from Harry.

Louis opens the studio door, and for the third time in too few days smacks directly into a familiar broad chest.

“We have to quit meeting this way,” he says, rubbing his stinging nose. Aiden just grins.

“You should look where you’re going, I think.” He rubs the back of his neck and gestures toward the studio. “Rehearsal?”

“Yeah, taking a short break. Just popping to the toilet, so.” Louis starts to back away, sending a little wave over his shoulder. He’s almost to the bathroom door when Aiden calls him back.

“Wait, Louis!” he says, jogging up to meet him again. “Wanna hit a pub for a drink with me after this?”

“A pub?” Louis asks. Are they even allowed at pubs? He can drink legally, yeah, but as *X Factor* contestants they’re under quite a bit of scrutiny. “*Can* we go to a pub?”

“Sure,” Aiden shrugs. “Matt and I went to one a couple days back, and the Over-28s go as a group
once a week. That’s why we never have to deal with Wagner on Tuesdays.”

That does explain a lot—Louis had always just assumed someone had finally told Wagner off for his incessant opera or he’d decided Tuesdays were for meditating or something.

But, fuck, does a night away from the house sound great. He grins. “Pub sounds great, mate.” Then the other shoe drops, along with his smile. “Are you sure you want me to go?”


“Well,” Louis shrugs, and gestures to his arm. The tip of the dagger is barely visible under the edge of Louis’ pushed up cardigan sleeves. “Things have been a bit, um. Hectic? Since this got out. Sort of get swarmed every time I step outside.”

“We’ll sneak out, then,” Aiden smiles, and Louis feels the pull of his own in return. “I’ll get you a wig from wardrobe, they’ll never know.”

Louis laughs and agrees, waving again after they make plans for whoever finishes their rehearsals first to meet at the other’s studio room.

Aiden’s rehearsal ends earliest, as it goes, and when Louis and the rest of the boys file out of their studio he’s propped up against the opposite wall, spinning a bright purple wig on his fingers. Louis cracks up at the sight and immediately shoves it onto his head, airily brushing the sparkly fringe out of his eyes.

“How do I look?” he asks seriously. “Inconspicuous?”

“The very picture of sneakiness,” Aiden agrees solemnly, and they both laugh again. “Ready?”

“Always.”

Louis follows Aiden a few steps before a hand on his arm tugs him back. He spins to see Harry, frowning deeply, the other three boys pretending not to watch over his shoulder.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“Pub,” Louis says, tilting his head. “Need a break from the madness for a while.”

Harry glances over to Aiden, his eyes tightening a little. “Can I come?”

Louis is about to agree—if Harry wants to follow Louis around like some kind of beautiful shadow, Louis isn’t going to be the one to protest—but Aiden interjects before he can.

“It’s over eighteen only tonight,” he says, stepping up behind Louis. Very, very close behind Louis. He can feel the solid weight of Aiden’s chest press against his shoulders, one of his knees nudging the back of Louis’ thigh, a hand on Louis’ hip. “Sorry, H.”

Harry’s eyes tighten a little more, though his smile is still friendly. He steps up a little closer to Louis as well, one of his hands reaching out to brush nonchalantly at Louis’ shirt over his stomach. Louis shivers, the too-light touch tantalizing on the sensitive skin right above the waistband of his jeans. “Can’t pick another place?”

“Nope. Meeting others there, too late to change.”

“Hmm,” is all Harry says in return. He looks down at his own finger, which is now tracing up the buttons on Louis’ shirt. His eyelashes smudge against his cheeks.
Louis can’t breathe.

“Maybe next time,” Aiden says, and his hand on Louis’ shoulder pulls him away, Harry’s eyes snapping up as Louis takes one step back, then another. Zayn, his face carefully blank, moves up to pull Harry away in the opposite direction as well.

“Right,” Louis says, wrangling his vocal chords under his control. “I’ll be back later.”

“It’s film night,” Harry calls. “Don’t miss it.”

“I won’t,” Louis promises, because of course he wouldn’t—film nights were his idea in the first place.

And then Aiden tugs him down a side hallway and away from Harry’s penetrating stare. Louis hears Niall exclaim “What the fuck was that?” and, honestly, he’d like to know the answer to that as well.

He’s been to parties, he’s been to clubs; he knows that behavior, and it isn’t often seen anywhere outside of a crowded dance floor. Not to brag or anything, but Louis’ been the middle of more than one aggressive sandwich of jealous boys and girls who were dancing with him first before someone else came along and wanted a try.

But that couldn’t be what just happened. Aiden’s his friend, and Harry’s his best friend. And he knows how Harry looks when he talks about sex: it’s all smirks and wiggling eyebrows and overly-exaggerated smoothness, and definitely not soft touches and bitten lips and lowered eyes.

He’s probably just a little hurt that he’s missing out on a fun night. Well, all the boys are—Louis hadn’t known the pub they’re going to is over-eighteen-only tonight, but even if he had it’s not like the others could drink in public. He’d assumed they’d want to go back to the house anyway, as it’s been a long day.

Aiden and Louis slip out an unguarded side door, Aiden grabbing Louis’ wrist as they sneak behind a group of paps hanging around the main studio entrance. Louis tosses the purple wig in a bin as they pass one but pulls the hood of his jacket up, just in case.

The pub Aiden takes him to is clean and brightly lit, the food good and the music decent. Aiden shrugs when no one else shows up, saying something about them getting held up at the studio or something, though Louis’ not exactly sure who was even supposed to join them in the first place.

Louis doesn’t care. Aiden buys him the most ridiculously colorful drinks on the menu and they claim the jukebox for a full half hour, refusing to play anything but Destiny’s Child and Britney Spears until the old men at the bar are cursing at them. Louis feels light and breezy for the first time in at least a week, probably longer, and he hasn’t stopped laughing since they set foot inside. Aiden is no better, his three straight pints before the food even arrives causing his cheeks to bloom red and his eyes to shine brightly.

They trade jokes and their best impressions of the other contestants as hours slip past, no interruptions between them.

Louis’ just on the edge of too drunk, long past tipsy and into the point where the room is pleasantly hazy and the colors swirl like paint in water. Somehow he and Aiden have ended up on the same side of the booth, pressed together from shins to shoulders. It’s warm. It’s also nice, because Louis hasn’t gotten to be near a cute boy who isn’t a member of his band in months. Which, honestly, is unfair for Louis’ mental stability.

When Louis tries to share this with Aiden, it comes out more like, “You’re warm, an-and cute but so
are my other boys, like, my band? And tha’ makes me sad.” Aiden howls and slaps the table—and Louis’ not quite sure it was hilarious enough to warrant that reaction, but he is a very funny person so he might be wrong—when his phone buzzes in his pocket.

(8:34 p.m.) Hazzaface: Louuuu x
(8:35 p.m.) Hazzaface: Come home, it’s movie time! x

Louis texts back what he thinks is an affirmative and pokes Aiden in the shoulder. “Home,” he says, assuming Aiden will get his meaning. Louis stands and sways a little. When Aiden blinks up at him confusedly, he pokes him again. “C’mon, home now.”

“Mmph,” is all he gets, but Aiden drags himself up and lurches forward to throw his arm around Louis’ shoulders as they make their way outside. A cab swings by to pick them up—Louis thanking the driver profusely for being so wonderful and then asking how long it took to grow his spectacular mustache—and then they’re on their way back to the house. Louis slumps against the seat, his head flung back as he watches lights illuminate the ceiling of the cab before flickering away and plunging them back to darkness.

“This ’s fun,” he says, grinning. He rolls his heavy head around to get a look at Aiden, who’s grinning back.

“Yeah,” Aiden agrees happily. “Was.”

The familiar sound of clicking cameras starts up the moment the cab turns the corner in front of the X Factor house, paparazzi jumping to their feet to capture Aiden helping Louis out of the cab and the two of them stumbling through the gate and up the short drive. One of the Over-28s, John, is sitting on the front steps, mid-cigarette, and gives them an amused once-over as they approach.

“That explains it, then,” he says, but refuses to elaborate as he helps Louis up the stairs without falling on his arse.

“Cryptic mo’fucker,” Louis mutters, and John laughs as he pushes open the door.

“Nah, not really,” he grins. He slings his arms around Louis’ and Aiden’s waists and helps them make their fumbling way up to their respective rooms.

“Thank you, sweet soul,” Louis says sincerely, patting John’s forehead. John chuckles and pats his shoulder in return, then leaves the two of them in the hallway, swaying and grinning at each other.

“W’should hang out more often,” Aiden says. Louis nods enthusiastically.


Aiden laughs lowly and steps closer. “’nks for comin’, Lou,” he murmurs, then presses a smudgy kiss to Louis’ temple. Louis beams blearily up at him.

“Yeah, ’course. Nighty night,” he waves, falling into his room. Aiden watches, grinning, as Louis struggles with his cardigan until he gives up and falls into bed, face-first and fully dressed.

22 October 2010
Louis wakes with a throbbing head and a dry mouth, and no memories that would explain why Harry glares at him until lunchtime or why Aiden keeps shooting him small, secretive smiles.

However, tabloids and Twitter alike explode over TOMMO AND AIDEN’S WILD NIGHT OUT and their supposed love triangle with one Harry Styles.

*Who will win our lovely Louis’ heart?* Dan Wootton asks gleefully in his article, as though he’s bet on a winner and feels good about his choice. *Only time will tell.*

The first house Bond happens that day, on the Friday of week three. Fridays are when the excitement of performing starts building low in everyone’s guts, when some retreat to their rooms and shut away the world, and others expel their energy through late-night rehearsals or jogs through the neighborhood or pick-up footie in the yard. But they always make sure to gather for dinner, because the following night they’ll eat when they have a spare moment at the studio and by Sunday evening some of them will be going home.

So it’s when Harry’s popping veggie fritters into a pan and Mary’s marinating some chicken that there’s a scream from upstairs.

Before anyone can move, there’s an excited thundering of footsteps on the stairs. Treyc and John appear around the corner, breathing hard but beaming.

A second of silence, then—

“We Bonded!” Tracy shrieks, and the kitchen erupts in chaos.

The two new soulmates grin shyly at each other across the room as they’re passed to each contestant to be fawned over and squealed at. Mary shoos the group away after a few excited minutes—“Go on, t’ lot of ye. Give ‘em some breathing room”—and Harry, shivering with excitement (because he *loves* Bonding stories but he’s never been a *part* of one, this is *amazing*), announces he’ll bake something to celebrate. Another cheer goes up at the news, the mass of people wandering back to whatever they were doing before.

Harry’s stomach flips when he sees Aiden and Louis make their way back upstairs—because why, what are they doing, why can’t they hang out downstairs in full view of everyone else, *why*—with Aiden’s arm thrown jauntily over Louis’ shoulder.

The fritters are mostly finished, so Harry sets them aside and pulls out the flour and sugar and eggs, his mind preoccupied as his hands follow the familiar task.

It’s not that Louis can’t have friends, because, well *obviously* not. Harry wants everyone to be friends with Louis. All people should be subjected to time with Louis to see how wonderful and funny and perfect he is. It just makes sense.

It’s just.

Harry’s stomach has been bothering him since yesterday, an angry rolling thunder that luckily held itself off during their rehearsal time but picked up right as they stepped out to find Aiden waiting for Louis to sweep him off to a fun night out. And, well, ever since Louis nearly singlehandedly pulled
Harry from his anxiety attack last week, when things start to feel off that’s immediately who he reaches for. And now that Aiden’s spending so much time with Louis alone, Louis isn’t there when Harry reaches for him.

And, you know. Aiden keeps touching him and it's just weird. Uncomfortable.

Liam says he’s being unfair, but like. What does Liam know? How is it unfair to ask Louis to stay home with his best friend who might be ill instead of going out with Aiden?

And it’s just gotten worse since then. Harry woke up this morning and a copy of The Sun had been taped to the boys’ bedroom door, a massive picture taking up a majority of the page showing Aiden propping up a red and giggly drunk Louis. As though it had waited for Harry to stand up and walk around a little, the sick swooping feeling in his stomach came roaring back in full force.

The pan is greased and the batter beautifully thick as Harry pours the cake mixture in, swiping over the top with a spoon to get an even, flat surface. With the cake in the oven and the chicken and veggies cooling, Harry rounds up help to carry dinner in to the main table. There’s an appreciative rumble as the group tucks in, the ones sitting near Harry and Mary patting them on the back before reaching for their forks.

With Zayn and Katie deep in conversation on his one side (“You don’t have a teasing comb? Honey, you’ve got-” “Of course I’ve got a teasing comb, what kind of barbarian do you think-”) and Esther and Sophia from Belle Amie gossiping on his other, Harry silently picks at his chicken, his mind still whirling. He’s not looking up at Aiden and Louis, who are sitting directly across the table from him and spelling rude messages with their peas.

Harry really likes Aiden. He’s hilarious and a massive dork and when he hangs out with all of One Direction he might as well be a sixth member. He’s always up for a prank and hates talking to interviewers so he makes sure to make things awkward as possible so they’ll leave him alone, and his mum sends care packages that he always shares with Harry. They’ve gotten on so well through this whole thing.

And it’s more than regular friendship, because that’s what X Factor does: it accelerates everything. Living and eating and breathing every second of every day with the same people shoves relationships into fast-forward. They know little details about each other that lifelong friends don’t even know, and Harry knows more about most of these peoples’ sex lives than he ever wanted (because late nights lead to invasive questioning and too-honest answers, and Harry couldn’t look Rebecca in the eye for three days after she explained that she was pretty sure he’d never been to her version of the Eiffel Tower).

Even if it weren’t for the media tossing Harry’s last name out into the world like it’s nothing, he’s pretty sure the others would know it by now anyway. There are just far too many official documents lying around thanks to the production crew, and they’re all in such close quarters that it’s almost impossible not to overhear sensitive information. So Harry now knows most of the last names of his fellow contestants. (And subsequently found out that none of them are his soulmate, because it turns out the Niall Approach of just automatically saying someone’s last name as soon as you learn it so you aren’t caught in potential Bond limbo has caught on, the majority of people in the house just choosing to end all the questions and know immediately whether they’re going to Bond or not. So no, Harry isn’t Bonded to any of the four Belle Amie girls, Matt, John—no surprise there, now that he and Treyc are showing off their matching treble and bass clef Markers on their calves, Katie, Cher, or Aiden.)

Harry likes Aiden because they’re ridiculously similar in sense of humor and hobbies, and he’s honestly going to miss him when they eventually don’t see each other every day. Before Louis had
gotten over whatever issues he’d been harboring at bootcamp and talked to Harry, Harry and Aiden had been inseparable. It’s just that if Harry’s friendships in the house have grown quickly, it’s *nothing* compared to the relationships with his boys.

For example, Zayn has kissed Harry’s cheeks more in the last three weeks than Harry’s mum probably has in his entire life. Harry doesn’t go more than fifteen minutes without talking to Niall or Liam unless they’re all asleep, which sometimes means they text each other from different rooms of the house if they’re too lazy to get up. And then there’s Louis, who has filled more gaps in Harry’s life than he could ever hope to count.

This is more than best friend territory; it’s well on to codependency.

So Harry sees Aiden pressed against Louis as they share the same chair and it’s- it’s-

“Wrong!” Zayn cries at Katie, and, yeah, that sounds about right.

The timer in the kitchen goes off, and Harry sighs quietly before standing up. He gets a round of cheers when he sets the finished cake down in front of John and Treyc, but Louis and Aiden are too busy giggling at each other to even look his way.

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**23 October 2010**

At rehearsal the next morning, Simon tells them the song doesn’t sound right.

Eight hours to go, and they have to polish up their backup song that was meant to be used if they end up in the bottom two acts and get it performance ready.

Liam gets an unhealthy gleam in his eye and he and Louis share a nod before they hustle the other three boys into an empty studio, *Nobody Knows* by Pink on constant repeat for the next few hours before they can take to the stage and try again.

“Yeah, seriously good,” Simon tells them this time, and they all breathe a sigh of relief.

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**24 October 2010**

Another week, another results show starting with a cheerful group song before they’re put through the mental anguish of waiting for Dermot to call their names and send them to the next round.

One Direction makes it through.

Treyc and John are the bottom two, and they have to compete to see who stays in the competition and who goes home. They’ve been Bonded all of 36 hours, and now they have to see who is staying in the competition and who is going home. Treyc is already crying.
Treyc wins.

Later, when Harry asks John if he and Treyc are going to be okay (and no, he isn’t tearing up because that would be ridiculous, it must have been all the dust in the air), John just ruffles Harry’s hair and smiles gently.

“’Course we will. There’s more to life than singing,” John promises. He looks over his shoulder and, apparently not seeing whoever isn’t meant to overhear, leans closer. “Remember that, alright? When important people are in your life, make sacrifices. Keep him happy.”

Harry doesn’t have a chance to ask who “he” is supposed to be before John is kissing Treyc and waving to everyone else as he steps out of the X Factor house for the last time.

24 October 2010

Apparently tired of running the same Is X Factor’s Louis Bonded and to who? stories (which leave Harry feeling oddly angry, like he wants to find the journalists responsible and fill their shoes with yoghurt), the tabs start publishing articles of a new breed.

Harry chokes on his bacon as his own face stares up at him from the front page of The Sun, a white line and a cartoon heart separating him and—

“Is that Frankie Sanford?” Niall asks over his shoulder. Zayn stands as well, clapping Harry on the shoulder and giggling.

“Finally broke in the sex room, did you?” he teases, and everyone listening in (which is everyone, basically) laughs. Harry reads the the headline again, feeling sick—ONE DIRECTION’S HARRY: ‘I FANCY FRANKIE’.

“Mornin’,” comes Louis’ voice, scratchy from sleep. He wobbles his way to Harry, covering a yawn with one hand and balancing a full bowl of cereal in the other. “What’s-?” he asks as he sees the paper, stopping when the words hit him. “Oh.”

Harry squirms. “I didn’t- Lou, I didn’t. They made that up.”

“I know, love,” Louis says, resting his cheek against Harry’s forehead. “They do that.”

25 October 2010

The boys are shaken awake at the truly awful hour of eight a.m. by a camera crew insisting they film their video diary before heading out for a full morning of interviews.

“Please don’t put this bit on the Xtra Factor,” Harry mumbles as he shimmies down from his top bunk wearing nothing but tired eyes and sleep-rough hair. The cameraman keeps the lens pointed
solidly above his waist, but Harry still has the sneaking suspicion that some part of his naked bum is going to end up on the internet.

Once dressed, they’re shuffled down to the back staircase—nicknamed the Vidcase by Liam who thinks he’s hilarious and has a way with words, and who pouted when Niall pointed out he literally just pushed two unexciting words together to make an unexciting hybrid—and Harry’s steered toward the front step, Louis by his side. In protest of the early morning and (at least according to the dark muttering he spews every few seconds) those “ungodly flickering lights,” Louis wraps a scarf around his face and almost immediately dozes off against Zayn’s knees.

It takes a few minutes for the crew to set up and to hunt down the Twitter questions they’re meant to answer, but eventually Louis is shaken awake and the countdown begins.

3, 2, 1, and cue the red recording light and Louis’ Entertainer Voice.

It’s different than his Interview Voice, see: in the interviews that are shown before their performances each week he sets his sentences up perfectly so that his last line can be said with gravity, like a punchline to a good joke even when it’s not meant to be funny.

His Entertainer Voice’s main characteristic is that it’s just loud, loud, loud. Louis in entertainer mode has no qualms and no shame. It’s over-the-top and it feels a little like he’s overcompensating (because Harry listens when Louis thinks no one is paying attention to him, and he knows Louis still believes he’s here only through sheer luck, knows he’s starting to itch for a solo and when he was told he had one when the finalists sang *Forget You* he’d lit up, at least until he realized it was the spoken part and was included only for comedic effect). The Entertainer Voice is Louis acting out in the only setting that allows it, because the only interviewer that specifically asks him any questions is Dermot right after they perform each week, and that’s only because Louis always ends up standing by him because he’s the shortest in the group and has to be in front.

It’s loud and the tiniest bit obnoxious but it’s also so Louis, it wouldn’t be right to make him rein it in.

He high fives Harry after Zayn talks about their “best performance yet,” which, of course, Harry agrees with, but he can’t really chime in because Louis doesn’t pull his hand away for a few seconds and the blood in Harry’s body has all moved into his arms, tingling and sparking where his palm rests against Louis’. Louis turns his face into the wall, probably to hide a yawn, Harry can’t really see; but then Entertainer Voice is back and Louis spends the rest of the diary pretending he’s confused where Liam and Harry are sitting and it’s all great fun.

He leans in at one point and puts his face directly in front of Harry’s mouth and, for an inexplicable moment, Harry sways forward.

And then he realizes what he’s doing and pulls back.

Probably just a natural reaction to someone (could be anyone, didn’t happen just because it’s Louis) being that close to his face. He in no way was going to kiss Louis in that millisecond of brain loss. That would be ridiculous.

Just to make himself feel better, Harry smacks Louis in the face a minute or so later.

28 October 2010
In punishment for being the last contestants at the studio that Thursday night, One Direction, Treyc, Aiden, and Wagner are roped into a quick Question Time interview. Louis is handed the question cards—because, at this point, he’s basically the unofficial host; if One Direction ever gets voted off they’ll probably keep Louis around just to make people laugh in the interviews nobody wants to do—and is pointed towards the center chair.

Aiden beats Louis to it and grins cockily up at him, patting his lap. “Saved you a spot, Lou,” he laughs. Since Louis sitting in people’s laps is so common that it’s an anomaly to see him sitting in his own seat, Louis shrugs and sits primly, already reading through his questions. Aiden, who apparently didn’t get the memo that Louis does this with literally everyone—honestly, he rode to the studio this morning on one of the security guard’s laps—beams like he won a prize.

Louis sits on Harry’s lap during breakfast every morning. It’s not that big of a deal.

(Maybe Harry’s just hungry, because all of a sudden his stomach’s acting up again.)

Like with everyone else he comes in contact with, Louis using his Entertainer Voice makes Aiden overdramatize himself as well, his voice grand and booming in the little room. He and Louis bounce off of each other like old partners, like cohosts on an actual show, like two people who’ve known each other decades. Aiden pulls the cards from Louis’ hands and passes them to Harry.

“You wanna read the questions, Haz?” he asks, and though Harry feels like he’s gonna be sick he sees Louis nodding encouragingly, so he stands and reads the first question about speaking other languages.

“Little bit of French,” he says when it comes his time to answer.

“Do it!” Aiden demands of Harry, jostling Louis so he giggles.

“Little bit of German.”

“Do it now!” Aiden says again.

Harry reaches for his primary school-level French but loses all the words in his head, English or otherwise, when Aiden looks away from Harry and plants a lingering kiss to Louis’ neck, just out of the sightline of the cameras.

Louis and Aiden laugh together through the rest of the interview.

Harry doesn’t answer any more questions.

When they get back to the house, Harry grabs Louis tightly by the wrist and drags him to the kitchen, telling him they’re having Best Friend Time and watching crap telly and that he gets no say in the matter. Louis just shrugs and clambers onto the countertop as Harry pulls together some snacks.

They joke and talk about their song for the week and Harry doesn’t give in to the weird urge to scream that is bubbling in his throat.

“Um,” Louis says as Harry turns to dig some ice cream out of the freezer. “Back in a sec, H.”

Harry waves him off, scooping generous helpings of mint chocolate chip out into two bowls, each
garnished carefully with crumbled up cookies. He grabs a single spoon—because they only ever use one anyway, passing it back and forth between them as need be, and Harry doesn’t want to dirty up extra dishes for no reason—and makes his way toward the TV room.

“Lou!” he sings, stepping gingerly around the piles of wellies and tennies that litter the area by the front door. “Got you some—”

He steps into the TV room, smiling at the back of Louis’ familiar gray jacket. And then he drops the ice cream, the ceramic bowls cracking as they hit the solid wood floor.

Aiden, funny and sweet and tall and lovely, horrible Aiden, is kissing Louis, and Harry's heart has fallen from his chest.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on tumblr [here](http://example.com) if you want to scream at me about that cliffhanger and the tumblr post for this story is right [here](http://example.com).
28 October 2010

“...think that Katie’s going to straighten my hair tomorrow, since we’ve got some free time in the morning, she’s been begging for ages, and then I think I heard that Simon wants us to…”

Louis watches Harry flit around the kitchen and can’t help feeling like something is off.

It’s been off, too, ever since the morning he woke up to his mother’s disapproving texts *(the sun online has a whole gallery of pics of u drunk, boo. ur sisters r asking if ur ok)* and the cottony discomfort of too much alcohol coating his mouth.

It’s not like Louis isn’t going to go out with friends just because his mum and his pouty sixteen-year-old best friend want him to stay home. Yet, somehow, he still feels like he should apologize. Which is ridiculous, really. *He didn't do anything wrong.*

Harry is amassing enough junk food to kill your average American, and has just flung open the freezer door—"Ice cream, Lou! Gotta have ice cream."—when Louis sees a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye.

It’s Aiden, half-hidden in the doorway and beckoning him over. Louis excuses himself from Harry for a moment and makes his way over.

“What’s up?” Instead of an answer, Aiden grips Louis’ wrist and tugs him toward the TV room. Louis frowns in confusion. “Aiden—”

“Wanna go out with me?” Aiden asks quickly, like he's shoving the words out by force. “Tonight?”

Louis’ frown deepens. He just changed into his pajamas, and Aiden wants another pub night? No thanks. “Tonight?” he asks, wrinkling his nose.

“Yeah?” Aiden asks back. “Or, um. I don’t know. Any night?”

“Well we don’t have to make plans now, it’s not like my nights are booked up.”

Aiden looks stricken. “Yeah, um...”
“Plus, I promised Harry mmph—”

All of a sudden, like Louis’ the lead actress in a cheesy rom com, like he's Rose and Aiden is Jack, like every bad cliche in the book come to life, lips are on his and rendering him silent. Aiden presses forward, one hand sliding up Louis’ back and the other on his neck, his mouth tentative but sweet against Louis’.

Before Louis has the chance to register any thoughts or feelings about this turn of events beyond an echoing what???, there’s a loud crack behind him and several gasps.

And Louis knows. He knows that whoever it is that decides quantities of luck likes to fuck him over: likes to put him in a band with his soulmate so he has to find something new to admire every day but not be able to have him, likes to push pretty boys at him when Louis is undeniably emotionally unavailable and unable to handle them, likes to make everything in Louis’ life as difficult as possible.

Louis detaches from Aiden and turns with guilt already bubbling in his gut, panic already racing through his veins.

There stands Harry, eyes wide, hands shaking. Two bowls lie broken beside his feet, ice cream pooling around his socks. His lip is trembling, tears already glistening in his eyes.

And then he’s gone, stumbling towards the stairs and pushing past the unwitting audience to the soap opera playing out in the TV room: Katie, who’s covering her mouth with both hands and Rebecca, who looks like she’s seconds from tears herself and Mary, who’s watching Louis with intense scrutiny.

There’s a moment of silence, then a door slams upstairs and Louis is shocked into action.

“Harry!” he yells, pulling out of Aiden’s arms and sprinting toward the stairs. He nearly slips in the spilled ice cream and he stops for an absurdly long moment, wondering if he should clean it up, it is his fault, but then Cher is there behind him holding a rag and pushing him towards the stairs once more.

“Hazza, Harry!” he cries, dodging Katie and Rebecca and Mary, feet pounding and breath coming out in sharp gasps. He skids to a stop in front of their room, yanking on the doorknob. Locked.

He pounds on the door. “Harry, please! Harry, let me in!”

There’s no answer.

Louis rests his head against the door. “H, please. Please, I’m begging you. Let me in.”

It doesn’t even make sense. Why, why on earth did Harry run? And why did Aiden kiss him? Why is this all happening?

"Harry, please."

And Louis knows two things, just as surely that he knows grass is green and Harry’s eyes are greener: Harry isn’t letting him in anytime soon, but Louis can't be anywhere else but right here waiting when he does decide to open the door. So he turns, presses his back to the unforgiving wood, and slides down into a miserable heap.

And then, in a moment of startling clarity, Louis remembers that he currently lives in the clearest of all glass houses. Camera crews roam their halls day and night, searching for the perfect bit of footage to spice up another week of Xtra Factor or to perfectly balance out their pre-performance videos. He
also knows that there are a couple dozen newspapers and a couple thousand girls on Twitter that would pay dearly for video proof of Aiden kissing Louis, and would empty the bank vaults for the thrilling sequel of Louis dashing away from the kiss to console a crying Harry. Panic squeezes his throat shut, at least until he looks to his left and sees Zayn and Liam keeping watch at that end of the hall, Mary and Niall at the end to his right. Not watching him, really, but watching out for him.

With that settled, he sends up a sincere thanks for being surrounded by the best people on Earth, then tries to clear his mind of anything that isn’t how sorry he is, because it’s unlikely but maybe being Louis’ soulmate has given Harry the power to read his thoughts.

Except the only thing he can think is a running loop of my fault my fault my fault.

And, speaking of things that are Louis’ fault...

At Niall and Mary's end of the hallway there are whispers. Mary’s voice is soothing and careful, her Irish lilt subdued, a direct contrast to Niall's ever-raising tones and furiously waving arms. Mary looks down the hall at Louis and meets his eye for a long, silent moment as though she’s asking a question, then turns back toward whoever is in front of her and nods, letting the person through.

A few eternity-stretching seconds later, Aiden slides to the floor next to Louis.

"So," he says, and somehow there's still a hint of humor in his voice. "Guess that answers my question."

“I’m sorry,” Louis says, and it’s less than a whisper, little more than an exhale, but it’s all he can give at the moment.

Aiden hums in answer, tilting his head back. Silence reigns between them. The air grows thick in Louis’ throat, nearly choking him: the stifling feeling of his world on fire.

Beside him, Aiden fidgets. He picks at his fingers and slides his feet in patterns across the floor and then, like he’s aiming for nonchalant but missing completely, he moves his hand to Louis’ left arm. Louis freezes, but doesn’t stop him as he slowly pushes up the sleeve of Louis’ jacket to reveal the dark shape of the dagger. Strange, how this feels like the echo of Harry doing the exact same thing downstairs while they’d snuggled on the sofa so long ago; Louis is even wearing the same jacket.

But then it’s so, so different, because Harry had been jumpy with adrenaline and fascinated by the bold lines and Aiden doesn’t even touch it, just looks on resignedly. But, then again, Harry was touching something that he caused: it’s basically his, even if he doesn’t know it. Aiden is just an innocent bystander.

Aiden doesn’t really ask when he says, “It’s for Harry, isn’t it.” And Louis doesn’t really answer when he shrinks in on himself, running a self-conscious hand over the dagger. But, then again, maybe it is an answer.

Aiden takes it as one, at least. “I’d always wondered, you know. Because you’re affectionate with everyone, but. You’re different with him. Like he’s special.”

And this is how Louis loses the last shreds of his sanity; because if it took Aiden three weeks to figure it out, how long until the media put two and two together? Or the boys, who are always watching Louis and Harry like they already know, who are already telling interviewers things like Harry and Louis are like an old Bonded couple and we’re all best mates but Louis and Harry are something else entirely, how long will it take them to find out? Or, God, how long until Harry himself notices, starts feeling uncomfortable around Louis because he loves him but not in that way?
Maybe this is the way out. Aiden is offering something more than just a date or some fun while stuck together in the *X Factor* house. It’s a chance to move past Harry, to be able to be his friend without any other attachments getting in the way. Louis and Aiden already click, Louis knows that they’re compatible. And Aiden knows that Louis has already Bonded, so there won’t have to be an awkward reveal. Maybe Aiden thinks the same way Louis used to—that a Bond isn’t necessary to have a good relationship. He likes Louis for who he is and isn’t going to expect anything Louis can’t give. He and Aiden could be perfectly happy together. They could.

Logically, it makes sense. In reality, it makes Louis’ stomach turn.

Because it isn’t fair to Harry, who is inevitably a part of this and, someday, somehow, will have to learn the truth. (Maybe. If Louis ever works up the courage.)

It isn’t fair to Aiden, who, by dating Louis, loses the opportunity to go find his own soulmate. Who would always know that he was a second choice when all Louis wants is Harry.

And it’s not fair to Louis.

“I’m not going to ask you to do anything ridiculous like choose between us,” Aiden says like he’s reading Louis' thoughts. “Partly because that’s an awful thing to do to two of your close friends, but mainly because I know you wouldn’t choose me. After all this,” we waves his hands to indicate the door and Harry's silence behind it, "if I can have you both in my life in some capacity, I’ll be happy.”

Louis smiles sadly. Why is everyone around him too good for this world? “Sorry,” he whispers again.

“Lou,” Aiden scolds, words soft. “You can’t help who you Bond to. And, for what it’s worth, I think it’s really brave, what you’re doing. Most people would have ran, or forced Harry into a Bonding ceremony by now.”

Louis still smiles, but he shakes his head. He isn’t brave, he’s anything but. He’s weak and selfish; like an addict with a limited supply, but rather than weaning himself off he’s taking bigger and bigger hits. Swimming deeper and deeper into murky water and knowing there’s no escape but to drown. Setting himself up for the worst kind of heartbreak, because he’s letting himself believe something that could never come true.

And, somehow, he’s made Harry believe it as well. Because best friends aren’t supposed to get upset when they see their friends kiss other boys. The sheer number of times Stan high-fived Louis when he’d walked in on him shoving guys up against walls at various parties throughout their friendship is probably lost forever to history and smoky memories. *That’s* how best friends react. Best friends don’t cry and barricade themselves in their bedrooms.

It has to be Louis’ fault, that somehow he’s half-convinced Harry that they’re in some sort of relationship—like it’s dating without sex, emotional intimacy without physical intimacy. And they aren’t, Louis wouldn’t have ever done this on purpose, because Harry had always been adamant in his stance that he’d never date or sleep with anyone that he couldn’t see as his soulmate.

("No, it's not- I just. Obviously I'd love to have sex, like, as soon as possible," Harry had insisted when they'd talked about it one night, causing Niall to sputter with laughter. “But. I also really like the idea of waiting for my soulmate? It just seems... right, somehow? It's stupid, I know." Niall and Liam had teased him for being old-fashioned, but it’s one of the things Louis loves about him: Harry believes in romance and fairytales and fate, of all things, and there’s something wonderfully admirable about that even if it is naive.)
Aiden stands, brushing off his trousers, and nods toward his room. “I shouldn’t be here when he opens the door, he might get the wrong idea,” he says ruefully, eyes on the ground. As he steps away, he says, “I know things’ll probably be weird between everyone for a while, and I’m sorry about that. But I hope we can get through this quickly, because you lot are my closest friends here.” Another quick, small smile and then Aiden leaves Louis to his riotous thoughts.

It’s fitting, Louis thinks later when the other acts have filtered through the hallway—tiptoeing around Louis still sitting outside their bedroom door, Louis not looking up to see the pity or accusation on their faces—and Zayn, Liam, and Niall have cleared off to claim some sofas to crash on until Harry unlocks the door.

It’s so, so fitting that Louis never wanted a soulmate, ever, and then he got one. And it feels like a punishment matching the crime, because he couldn’t Bond to someone boring and quiet and out of the spotlight; he’s just the first of thousands and thousands of people who are going to fall for Harry Styles in their lifetimes, and because he’s too weak to let Harry go for good he’ll be around to watch every single one of those other people fall, and he’ll be around for the day Harry falls in love right back.

29 October 2010

It’s still dark outside when Harry creaks the door open, Louis startling awake and half-falling backward into their moonlit bedroom. Harry’s eyes are shadowed, careful, ringed in red and bruised purple from lack of sleep.

They stare at each other for a moment before Louis speaks for the first time in hours: “Go for a walk with me?”

And in the navy-black of almost-morning, frost coated grass underfoot, Louis promises Harry that it meant nothing.

“Aiden’s just a friend, and we talked about it and it won’t happen again,” he swears, and he means it.

Harry says he understands but that he’s not sure he’ll be able to be around Aiden, at least for a little while. Louis tells him that it’s completely his choice, and that he’s sure Aiden will respect that.

As they cook breakfast for the rest of the house (well, as Harry cooks and Louis samples), the familiarity between them is uneasy, but it’s there. Harry shoots him a tentative smile as Louis starts gathering plates and silverware to set the table, and he thinks maybe they’ll be okay.

The rest of that morning is a little weird, because everyone’s eyes are dull and blotchy from the late night drama and they’re all walking about with half-formed smiles, trying to pretend they all got adequate amounts of sleep. The camera crews pick up on it, nudging people for details, but everyone just tells them it’s the pressure of competition. I’ll be better once I’ve had me tea, they say, or just a little nervous, I think.

And, for most of them, that’s part of it as well. As it’s Halloween week, some of them are performing in costumes or with dancers for the first time. One Direction isn’t doing anything over-the-top, but the
wardrobe girls are having lots of fun slashing up outfits for them to wear Saturday night.

The boys are at the studio, just leaving their last costume fitting before the performance and heading off to their afternoon rehearsals when a familiar voice calls to Louis. He turns to find—

“Simon!”

He’s in his standard white button-down and jeans, and Louis always feels better when he sees Simon in normal clothes; he’s unconsciously associated Simon’s pressed blazers with uncomfortable discussions in his office about hordes of fangirls throwing themselves at (mostly) underage boys.

“Hello, hello,” he says, looking down at his phone and sending off a quick text. “I’ve got somewhere I need to take you, won’t be but a moment.”

So Louis shrugs to the other boys and follows as he’s led out of the crowded backstage hallways and to the more spacious office locations on the second floor. Expecting them to head to Simon’s office, Louis is a little thrown when instead they bypass it and Simon stops by a door labeled Conference Room B. He opens it and ushers Louis in.

Waiting for him on the other side of a long, expensive-looking black table is a group of well-dressed people in full business attire—men in sharp white shirts with their jackets draped on chairs behind them, young women with perfectly coiffed hair and sharp eyeliner and classy, professional pantsuits. It seems like they’ve been here a while, judging by crisp shirtsleeves that have been rolled to their owners’ elbows and the nearly empty water pitcher sweating on the table in front of them. Louis feels utterly ridiculous in his TOMs and his beanie and the red eyeshadow still lingering from his makeup test.

The two men in the middle seem to be the most important; they’re the only ones with water glasses and they’re the only ones who don’t have stacks of paper or buzzing iPhones on the table in front of them. They’re also the most relaxed in the room, chatting casually as the other four or five people sat around them stay silent.

“I’ve brought Louis here for you,” Simon announces, drawing their attention. “Got to run to rehearsals, but he knows his way back when you’re through with him.”

“Ah, Louis. Nice to meet you,” the important man on the left says, extending a hand. “Richard Griffiths.”

“Harry Magee,” the other introduces himself, and they gesture for Louis to take a seat.

Louis wonders if their casual use of their last names is because they are already Bonded and have nothing to fear, or if it’s some kind of power play he’s never encountered; either way, he takes the proffered seat and swallows uncomfortably.

“We are the founders of Modest! Management, which is the managerial side of the Syco brand,” Griffiths explains, pouring a glass of water and pushing it across the table to Louis. “We work with artists on everything from songwriting and recording to touring to publicity.”

“Oh,” Louis squeaks, and then takes a gulp of water just to have something to do.

“We offer our services to all X Factor finalists because if the show does well, then Syco does well,” Magee continues. “Normally we’re only called in for a bit of media training but, sometimes, we also handle special cases.”

"Special cases?” Louis asks. The other people who aren’t Magee and Griffiths seem to be their
assistants or interns; they’re scribbling notes on legal pads and tapping rapidly into their phones, not missing a word either of them says. Louis gets so distracted watching a girl dash hasty notes in shorthand that he nearly misses what Griffiths says next.

“Yes, special cases, which is why we're here today, actually. Are you Bonded to Harry Styles?”

Louis jolts, spilling water across the front of his jeans. He sets his glass down unsteadily and swipes the liquid onto the floor, his face burning.

“No,” he eventually stutters. “No, I’m- I’m not Bonded to anyone.”

Magee and Griffith survey him closely, like checking for weaknesses.

“So the dagger on your arm is not your Marker?”

Louis flinches. “No, it’s uh. It’s a tattoo.”

“And if we tested it, we wouldn’t find you were lying?”

“No!”

Griffiths sits back, apparently satisfied. “That’s good to hear. It never goes well when members of a band are Bonded. Look at Fleetwood Mac, that was a disaster in the end.”

“We’ve been getting questions,” Magee says. “Questions having to do with your video diaries. Everyone seems to think that you and Mr. Styles are Bonded based on how you’re interacting and the appearance of your tattoo, of which there is no record in any form before you auditioned for the show.”

“No, I’m. No. It's a tattoo. And Harry's my best mate, that’s it,” Louis protests.

“Good,” Griffiths says again. “That’s good. However, I think it’s in the best interests of the band that you and Mr. Styles tone it down a little. You can’t draw in female fans if you’re focused only each other.”

“Simon tells us he’s discussed the expectations that fans have of boy bands. If two of the members seem unavailable, it’ll sink the entire brand.”

Louis swallows. “Right.”

"Luckily, it’s not gone on too long to be fixed. We've leaked the X Factor house whereabouts to some of the fans on Twitter. They won't be able to get to the actual house, of course, but you'll be expected to greet some of them at the gates tonight for autographs and pictures."

Fanservice, that's what Simon had called it. Giving the fans what they want, even if what they want is to Bond with you and spend all your money.

Magee gestures to a woman on his left, pin-straight blonde hair tied back in a tight ponytail and sharp, immaculate red nails tapping rapidly on Blackberry keys. “This is Claudia,” he introduces. Claudia looks up at Louis and nods, her eyes sharper than her nails. “She’ll be the liaison between us and your band. She has your phone number, and she’ll be checking in periodically in person as well with messages from us or Simon.”

"We can't alienate any fans at this stage,” Griffiths says. “Just keep doing well and listen to our instructions, and you boys will be sure to get your record deal."
"I think we'll be seeing a lot of you and your band mates in the future, Louis," Magee says with an air of finality. "Good luck."

Louis stammers a goodbye and leaves Conference Room B, stumbling a little as he makes his way back down to the practice studio by sheer muscle memory.

"What'd Simon want, Lou?" Liam asks when he steps back into the room.

"Um," Louis says dazedly. "They, uh, want us to do autographs and pictures with fans tonight. They're leaking the location of the house."

As it has been a few weeks since their terrifying ambush after the first results show, the fear of facing dozens of screaming fans has lessened for them just a little. It's still overwhelming, but with security always within arm's reach it becomes a little more manageable. Simon had even convinced them to begin stopping for pictures with the fans that waited for them at the studio every morning; the other boys have grown bolder because of it, far less jumpy at screams and camera flashes.

"Chatting up a bunch of girls who fancy us to bits?" Niall asks, raising an amused eyebrow. "Not a bad night." And then he leans over, sharing a high five with a smirking Zayn.

"Ha, yeah," Louis agrees faintly, and then they go back to rehearsing.

It's not that Louis doesn't appreciate every single one of their fans. Of course he does; they've only made it this far because some people have deemed them worthy enough of the time to cast a vote or two to keep them in the competition.

He's just already tired of describing his ideal girl just to give the fans something to scream about.

The other boys eat it up, grinning and asking did you hear all the girls screaming tonight and look how many girls are outside the studio and do you think the girls will like our song this week? And Louis just smiles dully and makes a joke every time a reporter asks "So how has being on X Factor helped with girls?"

Maybe Louis is biased. He's always loved girls, loves their soft hands and secret smiles and long, smooth legs in short skirts. Loves long lashes and lipstick-sticky kisses and high, breathy gasps. But it had only taken a few experiments in his early teens to realize that, yeah, he likes boys too, likes strong hands and sharp angles and deep, bone-melting voices. And while he'd never turn down a pretty girl that wanted a dance or a snog, Louis was always sure that if he ever settled down, it'd be with a boy.

And, lo and behold, he Bonds to a boy.

So of course he appreciates the fangirls, but he doesn't appreciate them because they're girls. He'd be just as thankful if they were old ladies or young boys or thirty-year-old men.

(In fact, he might have preferred if they were thirty-year-old men, but that's neither here nor there.)

"Thanks for coming, love," Louis smiles at the last girl waiting at the fence for a hug and a quick picture. He gives her a short peck on the cheek for the camera and grins when she screams a little, then makes her promise she'll vote like crazy to keep them in the competition this weekend.
"I will, I swear," she says solemnly.

The boys walk back to the house in the chilly twilight air, Zayn and Niall teasing each other at their fumbling attempts to talk to the first few girls they’d approached—"Eh, um, eh, hey ladies, I’m t’ Irish one. Want to hear me burp t’ alphabet?" "Like you’re any better! Vas happenin'? What does that even mean?"—when Liam nudges at Louis’ shoulder.

"You're pretty good at all that," he says shyly, waving his hand over his shoulder to indicate the gate and the now long-gone crowd of screaming girls that Louis had successfully wrangled.

"Yeah, Lou," Zayn agrees, smirking. "Right smooth talker you are."

"They're just people," Louis rolls his eyes. "Yes, they have boobs, but they're still just people."

They're still laughing at Niall's exaggerated impression of Louis wooing all the girls ("Right, ladies, single file line and hands above the waist. It costs extra to touch the goods!") as they walk into the house. Harry's laugh stops abruptly as they come upon Aiden on the stairs, who is sheepishly and unsuccessfully trying to blend into the wallpaper.

"Hey," he says softly, and no one answers except for Louis' quiet hey in return.

In all the terrifying excitement of getting confronted over his Bond to Harry (the image of Magee and Griffiths staring straight into his soul will haunt him forever) and the fan service that had followed, Louis had almost forgotten about Aiden's kiss and Harry's hurt feelings; last night feels like it was decades ago.

He sighs as Harry pointedly turns his shoulder away, brows furrowed unhappily, the other boys following his lead and ignoring anyone who might be on the stairs as they stomp as a group past the miserable looking Aiden.

The evening continues to be strange, most people heading to bed early to combat being kept up late the night before. The One Direction boys are on edge, taking turns facing off on FIFA but being strangely cordial about it, Niall and Zayn and Liam flicking glances between Harry and Louis like expecting an eruption of a fight or tears.

Their salvation comes, funnily enough, from a wandering camera crew needing to film the Who’s Who segment that week.

And it's Louis’ time to shine.

“Let’s do an impression of Wagner!” he says. Harry halfheartedly agrees and Louis immediately forces himself in Harry’s space, clutching at his cheeks in a way only one of Wagner’s actual victims would understand (the boys being frequent targets of Wagner’s strangely intense promises of affection and money when he wins X Factor—the chances of which are about as likely as the chances he’ll convince anyone to go on holiday with him when he does).

He smooths Harry’s curls exaggeratedly. “I vill take you on holiday.”

Niall jumps in. “You are so beautiful, I vant to kees you.”

Harry reluctantly grins as Niall ruffles his hair and massages his shoulders. Louis, sensing a
weakening of Harry’s bad mood, steps closer and runs his hands up and down Harry’s sides and chest, then pinches his cheeks and pulls him in. Harry is grinning widely when Louis presses a forceful kiss to his cheek, trying to push Louis and Niall away even as he beams at the cameras.

Harry participates wholeheartedly as they mock Belle Amie next, cheeks still pink from Louis’ kiss. Mission accomplished.

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30 October 2010

Louis Walsh looks up at them from the Judge’s Table after they sing Total Eclipse of the Heart, smiling and barely audible over the screams of the girls behind him, and says, “I think there’s something great about you.”

The words reverberate louder than the cheers in Harry’s head as he leads them offstage, his legs still clumsy and shaky from their performance.

*Something great, something great*

And then something else, something that feels like an echo of words he’s spoken to Louis at some point, but that feel even stronger now—

*We’re better off together here*

*Something great*

1 November 2010

It isn’t until they’re all perched on the Vidcase Monday afternoon that Harry blinks blearily—his daily nap had been rudely interrupted to film their video diary—to see that it’s Zayn, not Louis, perched next to him on the front stair.

“‘re’s Lou?” he mumbles, rubbing his stinging eyes.

“Dunno,” Zayn answers, tugging at his necklace. “They called us down to shoot this and he disappeared. I’m sure he’ll turn up, though.”

And he does, thirty seconds after the crew members throw up their hands in defeat and start filming without him, a rubbish bin lid perched jauntily over his face.

Every time Harry turns around to answer a question or make a comment Louis answers with his typical blinding grin, but it fades earlier than usual and he often glances away to look at the production crew. Harry turns back and forth several times to see what caught Louis’ eye, but the only thing Harry can see is the blonde lady standing with the crew.

She’s watching them sharply and texting on her Blackberry, her red nail polish flashing viciously, and when she meets Harry’s eye he gets shivers chasing up his spine.
After a third run-in on the staircase with Aiden that leaves them both stammering awkward apologies and *excuse mes*, Harry decides enough is enough.

Aiden is, despite recent events, one of his closest friends in the house. Sure, he kissed Louis. (Which, okay—best not to think of that when he’s working up the motivation to make amends with the guy. Just the thought of the kiss makes Harry unable to see anything but long fingers tangled in Louis’ soft hair and a large hand spread across his small, smooth back and—no, no, *no*, okay, *no*.)

So he kissed Louis. But Louis told Harry that nothing was going on between them, and Harry believes him. He also believes that Aiden is sorry for what he did (and Harry still doesn’t have a good reason why he should be sorry. He spent a full night tossing and turning and thinking angrily *he should have to apologize*, but then another part of him that sounds suspiciously like Zayn would whisper *but why? you don’t own Louis and he can kiss whoever he wants* and Harry never thought up an acceptable response. Louis and Aiden are friends and they’re both single and they are consenting adults and they can do whatever they want but at the same time they can’t do *that*, it’s just not right, it *isn’t right* and Harry knows, deep down, that he should fix this bridge before it’s burned to complete ash.

Not knowing the best way to jump into an uncomfortable situation and wanting some form of edible bribery to make things go smoothly, Harry bakes a batch of cookies—peanut butter double chocolate chip, Aiden’s favorite—and slides them onto a pretty decorative plate he finds in the cupboard. He makes his way up the stairs, takes a deep, steeling breath in front of Aiden’s closed door, and knocks.

“*It’s unlocked,*” Aiden calls, and Harry steps inside.

He’s sitting at his desk, laptop open and Facebook pulled up, dressed cozily in sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt, mug of tea cooling on the desk in front of him. He looks incredibly surprised to see Harry in the doorway.

“*Um,*” Harry says, because the cookies help with the entrance but not the whole talking-about-things part. “*Cookie?*”

“*Fuck, of course,*” Aiden laughs, looking happier than he’s been in days. Harry settles onto the bed and munches on his own cookie, picking idly at Aiden’s sheet.

“I just, erm,” he starts, but Aiden throws a bit of cookie at him.

“*Hush,*” he says, smiling a little. “*Me too. We’re good.*”

They polish off the entire batch of cookies before Louis finds them, his eyes sparkling happily as he takes in the scene—Aiden and Harry side by side on the bed, laughing uproariously at Aiden’s ex-boyfriend’s attempts at sexy bathroom mirror selfies. Louis lets out a war cry and leaps across their laps, barely avoiding crushing Aiden’s laptop and sending them all into fits of vicious giggles.

At dinner, Liam and Zayn and Niall watch with careful eyes as Harry and Aiden trade bad knock-knock jokes over Louis’ head while he pointedly ignores them, at least aside from the occasional jab with a fork to refocus their attention back on him for a moment. It’s not back to normal, but it’s
4 November 2010

“How old were you when you got your first kiss?” Niall asks when they’re pulled from a rehearsal break to shoot the Question Time interview again this week.

Louis panics. He picks his most grating, annoying accent to distract everyone from his moment of silence and says, “I actually only had my first kiss last week.” And then he freezes.

He’s an idiot; he’s so, so stupid because he got his first kiss when he was ten fucking years old, it was Sarah from school and it was behind the library and Aiden was in no way his first kiss, why, why, why—

Zayn snorts and Niall laughs like he does anytime anyone does anything, really, and Harry grins as well, but Louis still truly, truly hates himself.

Zayn and Harry are weird at dinner.

Well, weirder than usual.

They sit at the corner of the massive dining table and whisper through the whole meal, neither of them really eating but picking slowly at their food. Louis tries to keep up in a highly competitive game of “Name That Random Early-2000s R&B Song” with Niall and Liam but he’s quickly outmatched—he’s more of a Britney and Christina guy rather than a fan of Nelly and Chingy and other assorted dudes wearing chains with their names on them.

Instead, he watches Zayn and Harry: Harry with his nervous-bitten lips and Zayn with his wistful eyes.

It all comes out when they’re huddled in the TV room, an old episode of Top Gear playing while only Liam watches. Matt and Aiden are curled up and napping on another sofa, Aiden’s mouth hanging open as he snores and Matt’s hat askew. Mary, Katie, Rebecca, and Cher are deep in a game of bridge. Wagner is singing opera somewhere, the sound echoing dimly like they’re being haunted by a particularly unthreatening Brazilian ghost.

“Zaynie, Hazza, you’re making me sad,” Louis pouts, pulling them both close. “Let me solve all your problems and fill your lives with joy.”

“Just need your smile for that, darling,” Zayn says, deadpan.

“And your bum,” Harry adds cheekily, squealing when Louis smacks him with a throw pillow.

“Tell me what’s wrong!” Louis demands. “I saw your pouty faces all through dinner. Spill!”

Zayn sighs and rubs a hand through his hair. “Mum called, a little before dinner. Walia’s first boyfriend just broke up with her so they’re doing a big family weekend thing to cheer her up.” He shrugs. “Just feel weird that I’ll miss it.”
Louis frowns and pulls Zayn close. He misses his mum and sisters, too, calls them as often as possible and is planning to arrange tickets to one of the live shows for them as soon as he can, but Zayn is even worse—he calls his mum before every breakfast and again at night, texts his sisters and his dad incessantly. Louis knows he’d never have missed out on something like pampering his little sister after her first heartbreak if he’d been home, so it must be killing him to hear about it from afar.

“Okay, that’s one sad boy explained,” Louis says. “Now you, Curly.”

“I dunno,” Harry answers listlessly. “It’s just a not-great day? For me, you know. Like, I just feel sad? And it’s my nan’s birthday but I missed her call because of rehearsals today.”

“Well boys,” Louis says seriously. “There’s only one thing that can happen now.”

“Yeah?” Harry sniffs. “What’s that?”

The answer is, naturally, the world’s most awesome sleepover.

Which, okay, since they sleep in the same room every night it may not seem like a big deal. But Louis pulls out all the stops, because he cannot handle cute, sad boys pouting at him to fix things.

So, thirty minutes later, Zayn and Harry are propped up in Louis’ bunk, mugs of hot chocolate in their hands and a bowl of popcorn being passed back and forth between them. They are, at Louis’ insistence, wearing their nicest pajamas (Harry in red flannel, Zayn in Batman chic) and the most ridiculous slippers on their feet that Louis could scrounge up (Mary’s classic bunny slippers on Zayn and Cher’s blue cotton-candy-explosion inspired ones on Harry). Louis’ laptop is at the foot of the bed, the Heathrow opening scene of *Love, Actually* playing on fullscreen. Louis steps back with a satisfied smile.

“Perfect,” he beams. “Now, boys, I’ll leave you to wallow and cry over Hugh Grant and his beautiful face.”

“What, no!” Harry protests, and Zayn frowns and throws popcorn at him.

“Stay, idiot. We’re in your bed.”

“Well…” Louis says, because Liam had wanted to work with Louis on strengthening the harmony in *Kids in America* for tomorrow night, but—

“Yeah, alright. Budge up.”

“No, no,” Harry says, wagging his finger like Louis is a naughty schoolchild. “Put on your nicest pajamas and find some slippers, then you can get in bed.”

“And hurry up, you’re missing the movie,” Zayn mumbles, sipping his hot chocolate and watching Bill Nighy throw a fit in a soundbooth. So Louis pulls on his blue plaid pajamas and convinces Rebecca to lend him her favorite white satin slippers and then he settles between Zayn and Harry in his bed, throwing an arm around each of them so they can lay their heads on his shoulders, demanding that they feed him popcorn.

They don’t bother leaving when the film ends, and Louis closes the laptop with his foot before turning on his side, yawning. “You can stay,” he says, and that’s all Zayn and Harry need before they’re pulling the covers over all three of them, Harry snuggling close to Louis’ front as Zayn buries his face in Louis’ back.

It’s all very comfortable and warm and a little bit perfect.
5 November 2010

Zayn is still asleep when Harry and Louis crawl out of bed the next morning, and when he finally stumbles down to breakfast he places a long kiss in Louis’ hair, mumbling a thank you that does not make Louis tear up in the slightest, of course not. He pinches Zayn’s cheek in return.

That night, as they all move around each other in familiar nighttime routines, Zayn insists that he’s fine and can sleep in his own bed, and besides Harry talks in his sleep and Louis kicks and they’re basically the worst people to share a bed with, ever. Louis sticks out his tongue at that and Zayn flips him off, grinning as he settles into his bed. Harry, though—

A soft cough makes Louis look up from his phone, his text to Stan unsent. There stands Harry in his usual sleep attire (which are tiny, tiny black boxers that make Louis irrationally angry at Calvin Klein because how dare he create such flattering things) and he’s pulling at his lip like he’s got a question he doesn’t want to have to actually ask.

Louis just throws the covers back and pats the mattress next to him, turning back to his phone and trying not to laugh at the massive grin on Harry’s face as he cuddles in next to Louis.

Harry’s out like a light before Niall even returns from brushing his teeth.

6 November 2010

Early rehearsals on Saturday morning go extremely well, Simon heaping praise on them that they aren’t really sure what to do with.

“That is brilliant,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest and smiling like the most smug man in the world—which, to be fair, many people claim he is. He dismisses them for a quick lunch, and Louis hooks his arm through Liam’s as they bounce toward the exit, both of them throwing thank yous at Uncle Si as they near him.

A firm hand grabs Louis as they pass, though, Simon giving him a look that spells trouble or disappointment or something else equally terrible, and so Louis waves Liam on and waits to hear what he did wrong.

(He’d tried to stay away from Harry during the video diary this week. He tried, he did. He sat the furthest away from him and he literally wore a bin lid on his head so when he could feel a ridiculously fond smile pour over his face, he could clamp it down and hide behind the plastic. Claudia didn’t look pleased, but Louis feels like Claudia is one of those people who never looks pleased.)

Simon turns Louis so that they’re both surveying the stage, looking out over the gathered dancers in red and white and blue cheerleader outfits and he stays silent, like he and Louis are just watching them rehearse for the hell of it.

“They’re not a tattoo, is it,” he says, and Louis feels his knees lock. His breath leaves him in a mighty whoosh and that’s it, it’s over, Simon will ask to publicize it for votes and that’s the end of Louis’
life.

It was good while it lasted, he supposes. He’ll have to go live in a cabin in the Alps now, or a cave in the Scottish highlands. Aren’t there deserts in America where no one lives? Really, anywhere that they don’t have TV or internet or radio or newspapers or a carrier pigeon station or wood and matches for smoke signals because he doesn’t want to be around people when they find out he’s the unluckiest bastard in the world. Complete and utter pity will be rained down, not to mention how weird Harry will probably get when he finds out (because he’s such a good person that he’ll probably feel bad about the whole thing, and that’s just the worst part of it all).

Or maybe Simon won’t even keep him, maybe he's more trouble than he's worth at this point. Maybe Simon will make him quit the band and use Louis’ Bond as a reason for the split. It would make some massive attention-grabbing headlines: LOVE IN ONE DIRECTION—LOUIS TOMLINSON’S HALF-BOND REVEALED.

Louis is probably going to vomit. He hopes Simon doesn’t mind.

“I Bonded at nineteen,” Simon says, pushing through the panicked waves of thoughts breaking over each other in Louis’ mind. “She’s a beautiful, wonderful woman, and more than I could ever handle. We’ve been separated for more than fifteen years now.”

Oh, apparently Louis isn’t getting the quick boot; Simon’s feeling nostalgic.

Maybe he can convince him to let Louis stay for true love’s sake.

“Every day I look at my Marker and it hurts,” he says, and it’s said so simply, like it isn’t a sentence full of pain. Is that how Louis will be in a few years? Dead to the agony, numb to the loss after Harry inevitably Bonds with someone lovely and perfect and decidedly not Louis? Maybe Louis can hang out with Simon and learn how to channel his aggression into making millions off of cultivating the talents of others. “You can work through it, you know. The heartbreak. It’s not like your heart actually stops beating. It just beats a little slower.”

“I’m so sorry,” Louis finally says, and he doesn’t know if it’s for Simon’s story or for not telling about the Bond or for Bonding in the first place.

Simon turns and regards Louis with careful, careful eyes, so different than his usual razor-edged glare. “You can work through it,” he says again. “But you can’t wear your heart on your sleeve. This industry will rip you to pieces, and throw the scraps to the public for dessert.”

Louis gulps and nods, still waiting for the bad news. Is he staying in the band as the lovestruck, lovesick fool, or is he out of the band for good? What nightmare will he read about himself tomorrow in The Sun?

“If you aren’t going to tell the world, I won’t either. No one should be forced to share that information if they don’t have to,” Simon says, and suddenly oxygen seems to exist in the universe once more. “Come by my office if you need anything. Otherwise, you’ve got your pre-performance interview in an hour.”

And then he walks away, like he didn’t just drop a bomb and then walk away without detonating it.
video is all about life in the X Factor house, and Harry immediately starts talking about his burning desire to turn into an actual Disney princess.

“I was kinda looking forward to being the domestic one,” he says, straightforward and serious as ever, his little cherubic face glowing with earnestness.

Louis, whose stomach feels like it’s about to burst apart with the weight of the apprehension lodged in it, who has just had his Bonding status with Harry questioned for the third time in the past week, snorts loudly.

And Harry, perfect, sweet Harry who is absolutely ruining Louis’ life, pouts and says, “I was being serious!”

And Louis laughs even harder, because he is actually Bonded to motherfucking Snow White.

It seems incredibly ironic that tonight, after hearing that one of the biggest names in the worldwide music industry knows his deepest secret and sort-of pinky-swore not to tell anyone, Louis is wearing a short sleeved shirt for the first time during this whole competition. And he's the only one, the other lads in full star-spangled schoolboy attire with their blazers and varsity jackets. Louis runs an anxious hand over the dagger, an automatic reaction when it’s out in the open; rubbing his fingers back and forth like if he creates enough friction it'll just smear off.

Their opening video plays behind them as the lights are tested and the cheerleaders get into place. The audience, who are asked to remain quiet until the video ends and the song is about to start, swell with half-whispered murmurs every time a spotlight flashes over the boys.

Louis might as well have just worn a shirt with an arrow pointing right at the dagger—the fabled maybe-Marker that The Daily Mail has been raving about for weeks is finally on live TV, not just seen through blurry, far-off pap photos and pixelated screenshots from the video diaries.

“One Direction!” the video announces, and then they’re off, bouncing around in the physical representation of a Niall fantasy: cheerleaders as far as the eye can see (he'd spent the week telling every camera crew that walked by that he was supervising the dancers, leering at the camera and repeating “It’s a hard job, but somebody’s gotta do it.” Louis had heard him say that exact line at least five times. Niall is a creep). The crowd is screaming their little hearts out as the boys jump around onstage like the hyperactive idiots they are.

Louis still feels like a spotlight is trained on his arm as Louis Walsh and Simon bicker about the rulebook and their song choice, and for the first time he thinks he might have an inkling of how Harry felt when his anxiety had hit so hard—he wants to be as far away from this stage as possible, as soon as possible.

How long until they find out? his mind whispers treacherously as he looks over the crowd, a few recognizable faces standing out from their fanservice with the girls outside the studio this morning. How long until the dagger isn’t just a curiosity, but a symbol of what the world knows you’ll never get to have?

How long do you have until it's all over?

Dermot reads out the number to call to vote for them and Louis breathes a sigh of relief, itching to get out of here and back to his nice, safe room back at the house where the only people who scream his
name are his fellow contestants when he forgets to put the milk back in the fridge.

But then he feels a weight drop onto his shoulder, curls tickling at his ear, and he looks down to see Harry’s chin digging into his collarbone as he glances up at Louis and smiles.

And all the stress, built heavy in Louis’ limbs and head and hands and weighing his feet down with each step he takes, melts away, gone through the cracks in the stage floorboards and far, far away.

Sometimes Louis looks at Harry and he can't breathe. And it's really unfair, you know, because Louis already has a dagger on his arm and a carved out niche in his heart and a good chunk of his sanity, all of that dedicated to Harry, and it's not fair that he also has to deal with fizzing in his stomach and tingles in his fingers and an inexplicable urge to wrap him up and hide him from the world. Harry is Louis’ soulmate, his destiny in human form and his true other half (if the stories are to be believed and now, after two months of living with and touching and growing to need Harry Styles, Louis is starting to believe them). There's all that already happening, but Louis never planned on actually falling for him.

But sometimes, when Harry's stolen his breath and Louis waits for him to give it back, Harry is looking back at Louis like he scattered the stars. And it probably means nothing.

But maybe it means something.

Louis had completely forgotten that they’d been able to score tickets for all the families and friends to the show this week, what with all the Bond questions from powerful men who want to use him to make a lot of money and loudly doubt his life choices along the way. He’s just caught Harry around the waist after a shrieking chase through the halls—the post-performance adrenaline still as potent as it had been on week one—when he hears a familiar admonishment.

“Louis William.”

“Mum!” he cries, spinning to see Jay, his sisters, and Stan all watching him in varied states of amusement, and suddenly it feels like his hand is burning where it’s clutching Harry’s hip. So he unwraps himself from where he’s pressed against Harry’s back as casually as he can before launching himself at his mum.
“Missed you, Boo,” she says, and Harry claps in delight.

“Boo!” he snickers. “I will never call you anything else.”

“Don’t you have someone else to annoy?” Louis grumbles at him, but Harry just smiles sunnily and kisses Louis and then Jay on their cheeks before spinning and skipping to the other side of the room where his own family is waiting. Louis pulls each of his sisters in for long, tight hugs, wiping tears off of cheeks when necessary, then turns to Stan.

“Excuse me, Mr. Popstar, I’m looking for my best friend,” he says to Louis seriously. “He’s got a dumb shaggy haircut and wears normal-colored jeans, and thinks he’s actually going to make it on TV.”

“Oi, wanker,” Louis laughs, punching his shoulder and then leaping into his arms.

There’s a quick game of catch-up, Fizzy and the twins filling him in on everything that has happened since they spoke on the phone yesterday (which, apparently, is a lot), and then Harry’s there again, tugging on his hand.

“They’ve brought the vans around, Lou,” he says. “We’re heading to the W Hotel for an afterparty.”

“Which door?”

“Um. Dunno, I’m gonna follow Liam, he usually knows what’s going on.”

Somehow, the five boys and assorted family members all successfully find themselves at the right door—thankfully with no paps or fans in sight, as their regularly scheduled ambush may have traumatized the younger kids in their group—and herded into vans. It’s a short trip, Louis regaling his audience with tales from the house and giving everyone the lowdown on what the other contestants are actually like when they aren’t on telly.

“Rebecca? Ah, yeah, Bex is actually the nicest human on earth. But then one morning I used the last of the milk and she almost ripped my head off. Luckily Harry baked brownies for me to give to her as a peace offering.”

“Yeah, Wagner is as weird as he seems. Hazza and I once spent the whole afternoon trying to find him, because we could hear him singing but he wasn’t in any room we checked. I think he haunts the attic.”

“I’ll introduce you to Aiden, he’s the best. Haz swears he should’ve been put in our band instead of Niall, but he just says that when Niall can hear to piss him off.”

“Alright, Lou,” Stan scoffs after a few minutes, “Let’s hear one story that isn’t about perfect-curls Harry, yeah?”

Louis blushes so hard he’s pretty sure he’ll melt the frost on the window, and avoids Stan’s and Lottie’s and his mum’s identical smirks for the rest of the drive.

The hotel is lavish: colorful and bright against the dark night, large windows on the bottom floor showing a view into their party from the pavement outside (perfect for pap pics, Louis thinks), a smattering of sparsely-decorated tables and modern lamps bouncing light off the bottles of champagne on every available surface. Louis is pulled away to change into less sweaty clothes and to wipe the makeup from his face with the rest of the boys, all of them chattering in excitement and pulling promises from each other to meet everyone’s families.
Harry and Louis walk out to find their mums have already found each other, laughing and swirling half-full glasses of wine. Gemma is showing Lottie how to braid Fizzy’s hair in a fishtail on a nearby sofa, and the twins are talking animatedly with one of Zayn’s sisters.

It’s a strange night, but it’s fun. Louis and Harry introduce their mums to the other contestants and are introduced to other family members in return. (Liam’s mum pulls Louis in for a tight squeeze, saying “I’m so thankful Liam is with such good boys. He loves you all so much,” and Louis sniffles, suddenly choked up, and whispers to her, “We love him too, don’t worry.”) They laugh and joke and wine is drunk and Anne even lets Harry have a glass of champagne, though she tells Louis to watch him and Louis can tell from Harry’s pink cheeks that that’s not an idle warning but one born from experience.

When Louis asks, Harry just groans and covers his eyes. “It was one time.”

“Four times, Harry,” his mother corrects. She turns to Louis and Jay with a familiar dimpled grin. “Harry likes to think he can sneak through a dark house after going to parties without knocking anything over or falling down the stairs or forgetting which room is his and crawling into the wrong bed.” Louis laughs, loud and bright, as Harry attempts to drown himself in the little bit of alcohol left in the bottom of his glass.

Eventually, though, Louis can’t avoid Stan’s knowing eyes on him any longer and makes his way over to the sofa where he and Niall are connecting over a shared love of hor d’oeuvres and cheap booze, Louis settling in and swiping a spinach puff from Stan’s plate. Zayn and Waliyha join them after a moment, drawing Niall into another conversation as Stan turns to Louis with shrewd eyes. “It’s less noticeable on TV,” he says, popping an olive into his mouth. He waves his hand airily. “The whole fond… thing.”

“Well,” Louis says timidly, “that’s good, I suppose. I’d hate for things to be obvious.”

Stan just snorts, sipping at his wine. “Fess up, Lou. It’s him, right?”

Ugh, this is the worst. And Louis can’t get away with lying, because Stan knows his every facial expression like he’s written an encyclopedia on them. So Louis just sighs and nods, saying, “Yeah.”

Stan nods as well and then—that’s it. He switches the subject to that of Oli’s attempt at dyeing his hair black and never makes another comment. Louis thinks he’s gotten scot free, until he’s searching for a bathroom at one point and he hears two familiar voices from behind a large column. Louis stops to listen, stomach tense.

“… hurt him, alright? He’s a right git sometimes but I love ‘im, and he deserves the best,” Stan is saying, words sharper than Louis is used to hearing from him even after all the wine.

“Of course I won’t,” Harry protests, his voice quiet but sure. “*Never.* I love him too. He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

A quiet moment, then: “Good. I want him to be happy, and if you’re what makes that happen then I’m glad you’re around.”

After Louis kisses his mum goodbye later that night, he presses his face to her shoulder and breathes in deep—one last moment surrounded by the smell of home before it’s back to his new life of
paparazzi and show rehearsals everyday.

“I miss you,” he murmurs, and she presses gentle hands to his neck.

“You too, love. But this is good, I think. You’re really making it here.” Louis just smiles into her collarbone. “And…” she starts again, “your, um. Tattoo situation? Is that all okay?”

Louis thinks of earlier, how a smile from Harry cleared the storm from his sky.

“Yeah,” he says honestly. “I think it’s good. It’s all good.”

9 November 2010

There’s a window seat in Simon’s office that Louis has claimed as his own.

It’s not particularly comfortable, but it gives Louis a view of the clouds that shift by overhead and the crowds gathered around the studio entrance down below, the paps on one side and the screaming girls on the other, an interesting scene to observe as he listens to Simon run the world from just a few feet away.

Sometimes Zayn joins him when he needs a moment of quiet, his knees pressed against Louis’ as he reads or plays on his phone. Niall comes up to find him here when he wants a nap, his face pressed into Louis’ thigh as he twitches in sleep. Liam doesn’t often make his way to the office, just because he always has a thousand other things he thinks he should be doing: rehearsing their next song or practicing choreography or working out or giving interviews or personally greeting each fan waiting outside the entrance, trying to have long, meaningful conversations with each one of them when really all they want is a picture and a kiss on the cheek.

Harry sits with him sometimes too. He wiggles his way between Louis’ legs to lay against his chest, his hair in Louis’ nose as he dozes or whispers random thoughts to Louis about dinner ideas or shopping trip plans with Aiden and Niall or little details about his mum and sister or his friends from home or their friends in the competition. Sometimes he falls asleep and Louis has to shake him awake when it’s time for another rehearsal or the vans are there to take them home.

(“Harry.”

Nothing.

“Harry.”

Still nothing.

“Harry Styles!”

“Hmm, wha-? S’going on?”

“You’re an idiot, that’s what.”)

Sometimes it’s all four of the boys, pretending they need a break from the madness downstairs but really craving that special time together that they’ve grown so accustomed to, where they sprawl together and talk about everything and anything. They’re usually at the studio from far too early in the morning to long past sunfall; rehearsals and choreography practices and quickly inhaled meals
and interviews and behind-the-scenes extras all stretch the days into unscheduled masses of time together where they don’t actually get to be together. It’s helped that Savan has taken a step back in vocal rehearsals, working them through their harmonies the first couple of times and letting them practice on their own after that, checking on them sporadically to check their progress throughout the day rather than holding their hands through multiple excruciating hours of singing the same two minute section of a song. So now the boys have a little bit more down time, and sometimes they spend it up in Simon’s office.

And sometimes it’s just Louis.

Simon hadn’t batted an eye when Louis had showed up at his office door on the Sunday morning after he’d asked about Louis’ Marker, when Louis was on a break between rehearsals. He’d just waved Louis in and continued his phone conversation with Leona Lewis, who apparently wants to dye her hair again and Simon is trying to talk her out of it.

Louis uses his time in Simon’s office to think, and the other boys know this. It’s why, when they wander in, they’re always quiet whether or not Simon is even in the room. Louis loves them for it, because he has to plan.

And, well. Planning for life after the band is a bit like writing a will, Louis thinks.

Not that he’s written his will. If, for some reason, he dies anytime soon, his stuff will go to his mum (except maybe the clothes the other boys have stolen for themselves, but to be fair they’ve basically all dumped their suitcases onto Harry’s empty bunk for a communal wardrobe and it’s gotten to the point they don’t remember who actually owns what). But, basing his knowledge of writing a will off of what he’s seen on in movies and on TV, it’s probably a similar process. It’s uncomfortable and a little morbid and, really, all it is is planning for the worst.

Because, obviously, Louis does not want to leave the band. He doesn’t want the band to fail, either. He wants to be in One Direction forever, if that’s an option. But, based on common sense and Simon’s comments, at some point, someday, being a boybander won’t pay the bills, and Louis will have to figure something else out.

His old plan had been teaching, though he’s not really sure why. Maybe because he’d always had to deal with teachers who were unhappy in their jobs and hated him for being loud and not super great at geography, or whatever, and he wanted to help out kids who someday will go through the same thing. He could spend his days reading plays or literature and making classes do improv activities. It had seemed like a viable choice at the time. Not anymore.

Now, Louis sits in Simon Cowell’s office and learns how to survive in the music world even if you aren’t making music.

Because Louis loves being on stage, and he hopes the audiences love him being there. But, at least most of the time, Louis is a realist: he knows that with each progressing week and yet another lack of solos for him, his importance in the band seems less and less solid. And he loves his boys for sticking up for him when he gets upset about his voice, but that doesn’t magically make him into Robbie Williams. It just makes him a decent singer with really great friends.
When they’d been at the bungalow for a few days back in September, Anne and Robin had come to check on them and dropped off a few newspapers that mentioned any of them in their *X Factor* reports (as individuals, since the bootcamp episode hadn’t aired yet). Harry got quite a few mentions, several writers putting him in Who To Watch lists. Zayn got a couple of sentences here and there, and Niall did too for his cheeky back-and-forth with Katy Perry during his audition. Liam was in every single article, reporters falling all over themselves to say it’ll be him bringing home the trophy, giving him six-to-one odds of winning it all. He’d already been linked to Cher, the two of them called the new *X Factor* power couple. Louis was in none, not even the Doncaster papers.

The situation in the press is a little different now. Liam still gets a lot of attention, yeah, and they’re still linking him with Cher, but it’s little more than vague speculation and gossip about Liam’s dreamy eyes now. Harry is the tabloid darling, the new Justin Timberlake, the one linked to the models and the actresses five or six years older than him (even though, if the tabs could actually see him, they’d find he spends conversations with girls his age trying—and failing—to be cool and he spends conversations with older women stammering and blushing and he spends his nights wrapped around Louis instead of any of them).

Niall and Mary are Irish royalty in the press, Zayn is the bad boy (and how they got that idea, Louis would love to know; Zayn is the cuddliest kid on the planet).

And Louis is the guy with the dagger.

Not one note about his voice, only mentioning the competition or the band when they need to explain who he is. Louis’ headlines don’t come through any talent or action of his own, but from a highly visible involuntary reaction.

And that’s why he’s writing his One Direction will, because someday he and his dagger will be old news and management will either leave him behind or find someone to replace him who can actually sing.

Louis is pretty sure Simon knows about this plan. He lets him in his office, for one thing, but even more helpful is when he introduces Louis to the people who come in to meet with Simon for his various projects. He doesn’t even chase Louis from the room when the meetings start, just waving his hand at the other person to keep going when they see Louis hanging about by the window and stop to raise their eyebrows questioningly.

It’s how Louis learns about pap walks and Tweetdeck and the power dynamics in every single working relationship.

And sure, maybe none of these producers or executives or managers will remember him later, but maybe they will. And *maybe* is all Louis needs.

That night in their room, when Zayn is falling asleep and Niall is watching a movie on his phone and Liam is checking Twitter (but refusing to tweet because he’s terrified of breaching contract in some irredeemable way), Harry turns around in Louis’ arms and puts on his Serious Talk Face.

“Lou,” he says quietly, cuddling close. His eyes don’t meet Louis’, instead watching his own finger trace the outline of Louis’ collarbones with faint, barely-there touches. (It’s very, very distracting.)

“Yeah?”
“Why do you trust Simon so much?”

It is, at the same time, exactly the question Louis was expecting and not what Louis expected at all. He knows Harry has a hard time around Simon, knows that’s why he only comes up to visit Louis during his quiet time in Simon’s office when he’s desperate for a cuddle or some reassurance of some kind. Louis had always chalked it up to nerves—Simon is still incredibly intimidating, and Louis spends multiple hours with him every day now—or to feeling like his office is somewhere Harry doesn’t belong.

Apparently not.

“I think...” he starts, because Harry wants a serious answer and so Louis needs to fight his natural reaction of sarcasm to think of one, “I think I don’t, actually. I know Simon is out for two things, which is to win the competition and to make the most possible money. But we’re his only chance to win since Belle Amie went home, so I assume all decisions he makes regarding us, at least right now, are for our benefit.”

“But...”

“Look, love, I get what you’re saying. If Simon thought he could make a profit off of us performing disco tunes in our onesies, that’s what he’d make us do. He doesn’t really think about the effects on us, like, as people, just the effects on the band and the show. And maybe someday that might hurt us. But...’ he stops, gathers some more stray thoughts into something logical. Harry shuffles a little closer. “Honestly, the more time I spend with him and the more I learn about the music business, it’s fascinating, right? All these people we assumed were out there being famous just because they want to be or they’re good enough to be—it’s not like that, it’s super calculated and takes teams of people to make one person into a star. But it’s also, like, the most extreme example of a dog eat dog world, because they’ll do literally anything for money. That’s why I don’t trust Simon, but at the same time I trust him more than I’d trust anyone else.”

He thinks of the Modest! executives, Griffiths and Magee and their cold, manipulative stares. He thinks of Claudia and her ever-tapping fingernails on her Blackberry, reporting his every move to her superiors.

“Simon is blunt and mean sometimes, but you know exactly what you’re getting with him and where he stands,” he finishes. “He might stick a knife in you, but he’ll at least have the decency to let you know it was him that did it.”

Harry is quiet for a moment, which draws Louis’ attention to the fact that the quiet has settled over the rest of the room as well. Zayn’s eyes are open, watching Louis carefully. Niall has pulled his headphones out of his ears, and Liam has locked his phone, tapping it against his shin.

“You’re really interested in all this, aren’t you?” Harry finally asks. “Like, the other side of this whole thing.”

“Rather be a mogul than a popstar?” Liam adds helpfully, and Harry nods.

Louis, in eloquent answer, shrugs. “I don’t know. I want to be in this band, first and foremost. But someday you lot might get sick of my shit and toss me out, and then what do I do?” He laughs and covers Harry’s mouth, smothering his indignant protest. “I know, Hazza, you won’t ever kick me out. But it may not be up to you. I’m not exactly the frontman of the band, you know? So yeah, it’s interesting. And... no, it’s stupid.”

“It’s just—well, Simon sort of has the power of God, doesn’t he? He can choose one person out of thousands or millions who has the same amount of talent as everyone else, and he can make them into a star. Can you imagine that? Like even if it’s just for a little while, he can just reach out and pull anyone he wants to fame. If I could do that...“ he chuckles. “I’d spend my days trolling YouTube and Twitter for people who have talent but don’t have any way to make their dreams happen. I could be their way in.”

“That’s lovely,” Harry says, removing Louis’ hand so he can talk. “That’s so amazing, Lou.”

Louis shrugs again, embarrassed but a little pleased.

It’s quiet again, the boys all lost in their own thoughts, when Zayn suddenly pipes up, mischief in his voice.

“You have a YouTube video out there somewhere, don’t you Louis?”

And, despite Louis’ vehement denials to the contrary, they end the night by listening to Louis’ old covers of The Fray, because of course Louis has a YouTube channel and an old dream of someone like Simon Cowell stumbling upon it and making him a superstar. After the fifth replay, Louis tries to shut the laptop and is met with loud opposition.

“This is art!” Zayn cries. “Art!”

“Someone figure out how to put this on iTunes, it’ll be number one by tomorrow,“ Niall says. Liam just laughs and laughs, pinching Louis’ cheek in happy retaliation of all the nonsense Louis has put him through.

Harry snuggles close and grins. “We do this because we love you, Boo.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Louis grumbles, but he can’t stay mad for long. “Love you too, arsehole.”

Chapter End Notes

Couple things:

- I use Magee and Griffiths as the Modest mouthpiece a lot in this fic. I don't think they're as involved as I make them seem, but it's hard enough trying to write a fic where nobody uses last names and I have to work with a Harry Styles and a Harry Magee and Simon Cowell and Simon Jones and Louis Tomlinson and Louis Walsh without also adding tons of background characters that will just confuse people. So, just so everyone knows, I'm aware that Modest probably doesn't send its top two people to deal with every little issue.

- Niall really did say that "It's a hard job, but somebody's gotta do it" line about the cheerleaders in at least four videos I watched to write this chapter. I love him, but Niall's a bit of a creep. :)

I'm going to start posing teasers for the next chapters on my tumblr each week if you're interested in that sort of thing, and the post for this fic is here if you'd like to reblog and spread the word.

Thanks for all your lovely comments and notes about this so far! The next chapters will
be quite a bit longer, and I'm excited for everyone to read them!
Part One: 11 November 2010 - 3 December 2010

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Six: 11 November 2010 - 3 December 2010

11 November 2010

Louis and Niall have invented a game.

It’s a sort-of cross between beer pong and Chinese checkers, with added elements of Tetris and also maybe Jenga? Harry’s not really sure. No one is really sure, even after the third run through of the six pages of sloppily written rules that only Niall and Louis can decipher.

And, thanks to the X Factor house’s strict no-alcohol-in-the-house-or-anywhere-near-you-ever rules (strengthened tenfold and actually being enforced after Aiden and Louis’s papped night out, which absolutely does not make Harry smirk every time someone complains), there isn’t even any beer to put in the cups. Harry admittedly has only limited experience with the game of beer pong, but the alcohol was easily always the only enjoyable part.

Currently, he’s watching Louis direct Liam and Niall into stacking a third table on top of two others in a wobbling pile.

“Like a six-pointed star!” he keeps crying. “That’s what we need!”

Niall, as co-creator of the game, is happily on board. Liam doesn’t look so sure, but at the same time he’s been walking around with that oh God he actually likes me look ever since he and Louis had their heart-to-heart and decided they were both in it to win it. Harry doesn’t blame Liam, as he’s pretty sure he’s still in his starstruck-by-Louis phase as well, and if Louis required a piece sawn off the Eiffel Tower and a lock of Simon’s hair for the game, he’d be the first to volunteer for the errand.

Liam and Niall finally get the tables situated in a way that makes Louis make a happy noise, and then he’s flitting around shoving random shoes from the pile by the doorway under table legs to keep them from wobbling. Then he stands, and claps, and says, “Right, then, we need one more person. Harry, be a doll and go fetch Aiden, he’ll love this.”

Harry doesn’t give it a second thought, just nods happily and hops up the stairs. He’s humming to himself as he enters Aiden’s room, the need for knocking long past as Harry is perpetually naked and he’s walked in on Aiden changing before so they’re even, there’s nothing else that can happen to be embarrassed about.

(Or so he thought.)

The room is dark, lit only by a lamp half-covered by a thrown jumper in the corner. There’s a sound of shifting on sheets, bare skin on cotton, and something else, maybe, something slick and sensual. But Harry doesn’t notice any of this in the moment, too preoccupied with picking his way into the dim room without face-planting and receiving a bollocking from the makeup team who’d have to cover up his black eye.

But then he hears a, “God, Aiden, yes,” and he finally looks up and realizes what he’s walked into.
And then he’s stammering out apologies, because he’s a moron who can’t just sneak quietly from a room when he walks in on two close friends in the middle of what seems to be very enjoyable sex.

“God, sorry, I’m—” Harry jabbers, and Aiden’s head pops up off the pillow to stare at him, his mouth open in shock and his pupils dilated. Matt looks surprised as well, but he’s three fingers deep in Aiden and he still hasn’t stopped moving and, okay, Christ, Harry needs to leave but his feet won’t work. All he sees is slick skin and damp sheets and fingers and, “I’m so- shit, shit, sorry, I’m so sorry!”

He backs into the desk, trips over a stray boot, falls against the door and mumbles one more, “Sorry, sorry!” before he’s finally in the fresh, clean air of the brightly lit hallway.

And then he runs to the bathroom and locks himself in. Half-formed thoughts fly through his mind as he shucks his trousers and gets a hand around his suddenly-straining dick.

Christ he didn’t-

It’s not like he’s never thought about-

Of course he’d known that guys could-

But why was it so hot-

His hand moves quickly, his breath stuttering, and he’s trying to picture the scene without any reminders that those are his friends he’s quite literally wanking over: his very good friend Matt whose thick, slick fingers had pushed into Aiden so easily and Aiden, his very, very close friend who had just taken it, who’d been gasping like it had been the best thing he’d ever experienced.

It’s so easy for Harry to picture himself instead and, oh, heat stirs up his spine and tingles in his fingers as he imagines being spread out across someone’s sheets, and he has no idea what it would feel like to have someone inside of him but based on just-witnessed evidence it’s pretty fucking awesome. His hand pulls quicker and quicker, a familiar tugging sensation growing below his stomach, and he’s panting and moaning and all he can imagine is someone’s chest as they hover over him, hair brushing his stomach as they dip low, lips on his skin and fingers probing gently at him, back muscles shifting beautifully when he looks down to watch, sweat causing limbs to glide easily across each other, the muscles of their forearm flexing under the dagger tattoo with each press inside —

“Fuck,” Harry moans, one last twist of his wrist throwing him over the edge, gasping and shuddering as his vision whites and his limbs go numb for just a second, his heart pounding wildly as the sparks dissipate slowly from his veins.

That was… “Fuck,” is all he can think.

His mind is pleasantly hazy as he trips back down the stairs, where he finds that the idea of tables stacked on top of each other has gone about as well as anyone should have expected, one of the tables now upside down with its legs pointing toward the ceiling and one teetering dangerously as Louis attempts to balance cups full of a mysterious liquid on it. Liam and Niall are arguing, yelling over each other and gesturing at the upside-down table.

“Where’s Aiden?” Zayn calls from where he’s watching the entertainment unfold from the nearest sofa.

“Um,” Harry says, because he sort of forgot what he’d meant to be doing and definitely didn’t come up with an excuse. His voice is languid and throaty, so he clears his throat. “Asleep?”
“Bullshit,” Louis snorts, turning around. “He thinks our game is stupid, doesn’t he? Well that is not going to work, he is not better than us. C’mon, Hazza, let’s go punch him til he joins—”

Harry panics, which is the only explanation for his next actions.

He pounces, throwing Louis to the floor in a bounce of flailing limbs and Louis’ screeches. Louis stares up at him in alarm. “Hazza, what the hell?”

Harry just shushes him with a finger pressed hard to his lips, steals his glasses, pulls the bottom of Louis’ shirt up to cover his face, unties the drawstring of his sweatpants so they’ll fall if he doesn’t tie them back, then stands and sprints upstairs. He skids into Cher’s room with the sounds of Louis’ muffled cursing following him like hunting dogs nipping at his heels.

“Yeah?” she asks, raising one exquisitely groomed eyebrow as though it’s perfectly reasonable for Harry to burst into her room, panting and sweating.

“You- Louis- beer pong,” he gasps, and maybe he should work out more, because this is embarrassing.

“Beer pong?” she asks delightedly. “Why didn’t you say so?”

Louis is still slowly getting to his feet when Harry leads Cher downstairs, his sweatpants drooping low on his hips and his hair mussed from his t-shirt. Before he can ask what he clearly wants to ask, Harry bounds to his side.

“Look, I found your glasses! And Cher, she wants to play. Look!” Harry holds out the glasses like an offering. Louis just squints at him.

“You are a strange, strange creature,” he says, but accepts the glasses and points Harry and Cher to their places around the three-table monstrosity of a pong game.

They’re all confused about the rules by the second round; Harry can hardly wrap his mind around a game that includes balancing empty cups, hand-eye coordination, and math when he’s also trying to have an internal crisis in peace. (And it doesn’t matter that he just wanked, he’s so confused and still so turned on that the breeze caused by Louis’ excited jumping is almost enough to set him off again, right here in front of everyone.) The Red Bull and Lucozade mixture standing in as a substitute for their lack of beer is making them all twitchy and laugh too loudly at things that aren’t really that funny.

It’s still an intense competition, though, Louis and Cher and, surprisingly, Liam all locked in intense battle to the very last round.

Louis wins, of course. He celebrates by running countless laps around the outside of the house in nothing but his sweats, whipping his t-shirt above his head and howling at the moon.

Harry celebrates Louis’ win with another two orgasms in the shower, his knuckles red and covered in indentions from his teeth when he’s finished.

And then he lies awake for hours, watching the moon make its way across his windowed view of the sky while Louis sleeps curled around him. His breath is warm on Harry’s neck and sending shivers through his limbs, and Harry is trying very hard to concentrate on anything but his sudden, overpowering interest in having someone absolutely wreck him.
12 November 2010

Harry is standing outside Aiden’s door.

It’s been a long, strange day. He spent the majority of it in the studio rehearsing with the boys, but he also worked in time for a nap in Simon’s office on Louis’ chest, a run with Liam, cooking family dinner for the house, and still, still cannot get the burning curiosity from yesterday out of his mind.

He’s just… amazed probably shouldn’t be the right word, but that’s what he is.

Harry has thought about sex about as much as anyone would expect for a teenage boy. He’s watched countless hours of porn alone in his room at home, has perfected the art of the two-minute wank, wakes up with extreme morning wood more often than not. He’s felt the thrill in his stomach when a girl runs her hand up his arm, that possibility of something more than a friendly kiss to the cheek (even though that's the extent of his experience, and just because girls have hinted doesn't mean they followed through). He knows that sex is the big perk of Bonding, and that most of the time guys his age only want to Bond because they may finally get some guaranteed sex out of it.

But he’s never thought about sex with a boy. According to the half-hard state his dick has been in all day, he’s very interested in the idea.

And it’s not like, before yesterday, he’d have anything against a Bond or a relationship with a boy. It’s just so uncommon for same sex couples to Bond that he never really gave it more than a cursory thought, a shrug and a hey, a Bond’s a Bond. If his soulmate was a guy, so be it, but since it was so unlikely he never really thought through those implications.

Now he knows, though. He’s aware of gay sex. It’s on his radar. He’s more than keen on the idea. And he has no fucking idea what to do with that.

He needs help. So he’s outside Aiden’s door, his palms sweaty and face already burning in embarrassment, but he knocks anyway.

“Yeah?” Aiden calls, and Harry lets himself in.

And then freezes, because Matt is laid out across Aiden’s bed, idly strumming at his guitar.

“Need something?” Aiden asks, lips twitching into a smirk at Harry from his desk.

“I, um. Can I, uh- can you- yeah?” Harry rambles, and he feels like an even bigger moron when Matt quirks an eyebrow at him and stands, stretching.

“I’ll leave this stimulating conversation to the two of you,” he chuckles, winking at Aiden and closing the door behind him when he leaves. Aiden watches Harry, still grinning, but seems to take pity on him after a moment and gestures to the bed.

The bed he and Matt have had sex on, probably more than once.

Right.

Harry perches on the very edge of the mattress, basically sitting on nothing and pretending there’s no strain in his thighs because of it. Aiden notices, though, and rolls his eyes.

“The sheets are clean, dork,” he says, and shoves Harry backward so he’s fully seated on the
mattress. Then he clambers up beside him, propping his chin on his fist. “So… what’s on your mind, doll?”

It would be so much easier if Harry could just say it. If he was Louis, or Niall, or somebody else who doesn’t get embarrassed easily, he could just spit it out and they could have this conversation like the almost-adults they are. Harry is not Louis, though, not nearly as brave even in dumb matters like asking their mutual friend how to go about sticking his fingers in himself and/or asking someone else to stick their fingers in him. So Harry stammers out something stupid like, “I just wanted to, um. Talk? Like. You know.”

“Ah, yes. Talking. Texting with voices. I’ve heard of it.” And of course Aiden’s taking the piss, because Harry’s an idiot and he’s making literally no sense. So he tries again.

“Like, maybe you could. Um. Answer some questions?” and then Harry immediately regrets it, because the smirk unfurls once more on Aiden’s face.

“Questions about what, dear Harry?”

Harry hates himself. “Um.”

Aiden laughs loudly, a single bark right in Harry’s ear. And then he laughs again as he slides off the bed and rummages through a drawer in the bedside table. He pulls out a bottle, and Harry flushes even hotter when he reads the label—Astroglide it proclaims, and then underneath that are even scarier words: Anal Lubricant.

“You’re lucky I just went to the shops,” Aiden says, laughter still evident in his voice. “Two-for-one offer, so I stocked up. Otherwise I’d tell you to go get your own.”

Harry gingerly takes the bottle and it feels a bit like it felt the first time Harry had watched porn—illicit and dirty, but hot, really really hot. He doesn’t want to get caught with this, but the fact that he could makes him shiver. And then he remembers that he still doesn’t really know what to do.

“Can you… how do I—”

“Christ,” Aiden says, dropping his face into his hands, “This is less funny, now.” But he looks up at the ceiling like seeking solace, sighs, and then turns back to Harry with a determined expression.

Thirty minutes later, Harry’s mouth is hanging open as Aiden describes his third favorite sex position (doggy style) and how it affects prostate stimulation (very, very well apparently). He has a note open on his phone where he’s typing in words that Aiden says that he doesn’t recognize to look up later (he has no idea what felching is but he’s very interested in finding out). He now knows more about the inner workings of his arse than he ever thought necessary or possible.

“I have to ask,” Aiden says as he wraps up a story involving his neighbor, a treehouse, and a children’s birthday party that has Harry cringing. “Is there a… particular reason you’re asking all this?”

“Um,” Harry says, because how do you tell your friend that walking in on him getting fingered by another friend possibly awakened a new part of your sexual identity?

“Got your eye on anybody?” Aiden tries again, and his eyes look more serious now, his grin less prominent.

“Not really,” Harry answers, and he’s pretty sure it’s the truth because he truly hadn’t been able to get over the mere existence of gay sex, let alone been able to imagine himself with anyone else in
particular. Not that he can’t tell when a lad is attractive—he sleeps next to Louis every night, he
knows what a beautiful boy looks like.

“Oh,” Aiden says lightly. Harry gets the feeling he was expecting another answer. “So nobody’s
captured young Hazza’s eye?”

Well, of course people have caught his eye. Or, well, one person. But he can’t shag his best friend
because it’s just a horrible, terrible idea. Really, it can only lead to heartbreak; he knows he isn’t
Louis’ soulmate even though it feels like Louis is his other half sometimes, and Louis isn’t his. He’s
said Louis’ full name plenty of times, he’d know if Louis suddenly got a Marker.

But it hasn’t happened, so they’re best friends. It’s fine. He doesn’t want to have sex with Louis. The
thought just makes his head spin a little, that’s all. Sometimes he thinks about kissing Louis and his
spine feels like it’s been lit on fire. But that’s, like, not that big of a deal.

Aiden is watching him knowingly. “Right,” he says. “Good talk.”

“Hey,” Harry says, because this chat can’t be all about embarrassing him. “You and Matt, how
long’s that been going on?”

serious.” “Just some fun,” Harry echoes. He’s never really thought about casual relationships, always
assumed someone came out of them hurt. Maybe not, though.

“Yeah,” Aiden shrugs again. “It’s not that big of a deal. Lots of people have casual sex.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, of course. I know some people are against it and wait for their soulmate, or whatever, but it’s
not a bad thing to want more than one person in your lifetime. And it really helps you figure out what
you want out of sex, and what you like. So, when you do meet your soulmate, you don’t have to
fumble through awkward sex to get to the good stuff.”

Any sex would be the good stuff to Harry at this point, but he’ll let that comment go. And then, for
some reason, his mind slides to Louis again. How sometimes he talks to that one younger camera
guy, Ricky, and cocks his hip out like he’s flirting. His jokes and stories about sneaking into clubs
when he was still underage and all the wink-nudge fun he had. How his hips move when he knows
people are watching him, like he’s putting on a show. How he doesn’t get stuttery or awkward when
girls grab his arm or his hand, how he just laughs like it’s no big deal and touches them right back.
Like he’s used to strangers having their hands on him.

And, well. Harry’s pretty sure it’s not a secret to Aiden that Harry wants to kiss Louis sometimes.
He’s pretty sure Aiden can keep his secret, and he’s dying a little bit because he needs to know. So
he asks.

“Has, um. Has Louis ever talked about… anything like that? Casual relationships?” he asks, staring
down at his hands. When he looks back up, Aiden’s eyes are sad.

“I think he’s the one you should ask,” he says quietly. “That’s his business.”

“But you know,” Harry presses.

Aiden just sighs. “I think Louis knows what he’s doing,” he says, and then refuses to answer any
more of Harry’s probing questions.
But he doesn’t really need to. There’s something odd brewing in Harry’s stomach that tastes metallic and feels like poison, and that’s really all the answer he needs. So he switches the topic again, asks Aiden something about flavored lube that sends him on another wild ride of anecdotes and advice, and tries not to think about other people that aren’t him getting to be with Louis.

Later, Harry slips out of Aiden’s room and back into the boys’. Zayn is reclining on his bed, flipping through a graphic novel he bought the other day, and doesn’t pay attention as Harry pretends to rummage through his bag and hides the bottle of lube under some of his t-shirts he never wears. He’ll use it later, when he can get the room to himself and doesn’t feel like throwing up because other people have touched Louis in places he hasn’t and probably never will.

13 November 2010

Except, here’s the thing. Harry never gets a chance to use the lube.

Not the rest of Friday, because everyone gathers in the TV room that night to watch a film and it’s one of those togetherness moments where they all get clingy because someone will be going home after the next day’s performances. And then, of course, there is no such thing as alone time on Saturdays during the X Factor, because when he’s not rehearsing this week’s song with the boys or practicing their choreography and staging, he’s being shuttled from interview to interview to makeup chair to another interview. Grace is buttoning Harry’s blazer and shooing him out to join the other boys backstage and before he knows it, Simon is announcing “One Direction!” and the video of them at the Harry Potter premiere showing on the big screens as they’re led out to their positions on the stage.

Harry loves Elton John, and for some reason this song seems particularly apt tonight. He turns and sings to Louis as the words hit him, cameras and Aiden’s cautious words forgotten.

I need to tell you, how you light up every second of the day
But in the moonlight you just shine like a beacon on the bay

It’s like each week it gets better and better, being on stage—the fan frenzy has only multiplied but they’re used to it, at least a little. The threat of a crowd is underwhelming compared to the joy it brings to see hundreds of people singing along, and it isn’t even their song. Someday it’ll be their lyrics, their words spilling from the mouths of thousands.

It’s enough when Simon says, “This is the first time I genuinely believe a group is going to win this competition,” it’s enough to be by Louis’ side on that stage, to have Liam and Zayn’s arms around him, to have Niall grin back at him every time the judges mention them making it to the final, it’s enough to be here on this stage with these boys.

He wants Louis for himself, yeah; but he doesn’t need anything else but this right here.
Sunday dawns bright and early; Harry is flipping pancakes and joking with a sleep-rumpled Louis, whose hands are wrapped around a steaming mug of Yorkshire tea as he blinks drowsily and slings quick words in his raspy morning voice. The peace is ruptured, though, when Aiden appears in the kitchen and asks them both to come with him.

“There’s been a leak,” he says in a rush when they’re alone. “On Twitter. My friend sent it to me. I’m last in votes, at least as of a few minutes ago, so I might be going home tonight.”


“You never know,” Aiden shoots back, and it sounds like less of an argument and more like a surety, that show business—and the X Factor specifically—is, above all else, fickle. “Katie’s been in the bottom three times already and keeps fighting her way out. I haven’t ever been in that situation, and my backup song isn’t my best. I could go home.”

“No,” Louis says again, forever stubborn, but it’s wobbly this time. Harry still can’t make his vocal cords work: he knows the show is a competition, that every week someone goes home—the ever-increasing number of empty rooms in the house is a testament to that. It’s just that so far, he’s only said goodbye to people he was friendly with, not actual friends. He can’t bear the thought of Aiden just being gone.

Aiden pulls them both close, the kind of hug that pushes the world away for a moment.

“I didn’t tell you this to make you sad,” he laughs self-consciously. “I have actual news, something I think you both should hear.”

“Yeah?”

He steps back a little and pushes a hand through messy hair. “It actually, um, happened after our... our chat, Harry,” he says, and Harry tries very hard to change his expression into one of innocent curiosity, because Louis is now watching Harry with that sharp, attentive look in his eye—the one that promises that there will be no secrets around him. Harry gulps before he can help it, but then Aiden is continuing and drawing both of their attention back on him. “I was talking to Matt, about, well.” He flickers a glance at Harry. “I was talking to Matt, and…”

“Say it,” Louis says, his eyes wide like he already knows the news. Harry is still completely lost—what could Matt and Aiden have talked about that would be spurred on from a conversation about lube and no-strings-attached sex?

Aiden just grins, and flips his wrist so the soft underside is facing upward to show—

“Oh my God!” Harry cries, leaping forward to pull Aiden into a hug. “Oh my God, oh my God!”

There, right across the veins and pale skin of Aiden’s wrist, is a subtle, beautifully-curving M that hadn’t been there before.

“You Bonded! You Bonded!” Harry is still cheering into Aiden’s neck, and Aiden cackles and slams his palm across Harry’s mouth, hissing for him to be quiet but still beaming like a child with a new toy.

Harry turns back, surprised that he’s the one that has to be shushed when he’s in a room with Louis, the loudest person to have ever spoken words, ever—but Louis looks struck dumb, mouth gaping. Harry decides to give him a moment and turns back to Aiden, smiling so widely his cheeks hurt.
“This is amazing,” he gushes. “I’m so happy for you. And your dumb soulmate, who should be with you at all times so I could give him a hug now too.”

“My dumb soulmate,” Aiden says, raising a dainty eyebrow, “is sleeping off the very enthusiastic night we just spent together, and has already moved money around in his account so we can get a flat in London together soon if I do go home tonight. So you can shut your mouth.” But his eyes crinkle and he grins like sunshine and Harry is so, so happy for him.

“So what’s it like?” Harry asks, bouncing a little. He’s known people who were Bonded before (John and Treyc are still in the house’s group text and send updates or little good luck! messages before the show each week), but he’s never actually had Bonded friends and this is a fabulous opportunity to ask as many questions as possible. “Being Bonded, how is it?”

Aiden, instead of answering Harry directly, looks at Louis; Louis, meanwhile, is biting his lip like he’s half-scared Aiden is going to scream obscenities at him for some reason.

“It’s…” he says, and his eyes are so, so wide, trying to push a meaning through to them and Harry believes him without even wondering what it is he’s meant to be believing. “It’s good. It’s really, really good.”

Louis sighs, or maybe he coughs; all Harry knows is that Louis looks like he’s been punched in the gut and told to look happy about it. But he finally moves, finally steps up and wraps Aiden in a real embrace.

“Happy for you,” he whispers.

For one terrible second, Harry wonders if Louis actually means it.

It truly seems like mockery that each week, as the finalists get more nervous and the stakes get higher and the goodbyes get harder, the group songs to kick off the Results Shows get cheerier and cheerier. This week, it’s Can’t Stop Moving—ironic, then, that all Harry wants to do is stand still and take it all in, to stop the world from turning just for a little while.

(Well, maybe that’s not true. Maybe he wants the world to spin a little faster, so it’s past showtime and past the reading of the results and past a time when he has to fret about Aiden going home and all the implications surrounding that. So he can just know whether his heart’s going to be broken when he goes to sleep tonight.)

Harry’s not even the one in danger of going home, but he watches Aiden fidget and twitch and shoot glances at Matt from the corner of his eye and Harry’s heart is certainly beating like it’s the last time he’ll be on stage.

And, for some unfathomable reason, all the acts are in denim. Which is, like, the most laidback of fabrics. The kind that says, nah, bro, everything’s chill. Grab a beer and let’s hang.

Harry does not feel chill. Harry wants to run a marathon and punch a couple of walls.

Louis is watching Aiden as well, but his gaze seems to be different: sharper, maybe. A little less fond and worried, like Harry’s, a little more baffled. Evening creeps closer and the three of them spend a last night together joking and talking in wardrobe like they usually do as Grace brushes powder to
cover the bags under their eyes—and it may not even be the last time, Aiden might have gotten an influx of votes throughout the day, or he could still beat someone in a final showdown, but it still feels like he’s leaving and Harry’s stomach has never felt so unsettled—and they very much do not talk about Matt.

“Just a secret for a little while,” Aiden had said to Harry and Louis that morning. “Just to let us get used to the idea, and to get our feet under us. We won’t keep it quiet forever, especially after Matt wins this whole thing and can shower me in his newfound riches.”

And then he’d bounced away, cackling, Harry chasing after him with a shrieked, “You take that back! We’re gonna be the ones who win and shower you in riches!”

But now they aren’t talking about it, and it’s almost like a normal night: one where they’d sing a silly group song and then stand on stage until their names were called and then it’d be back to the house for a night of popcorn and pajamas or out to the afterparty to schmooze and mingle. Someone else would be gone: an acquaintance that Harry might miss nodding at in the mornings over cereal, someone he might have joked with during rehearsal breaks, not a friend.

Louis has talked before about the music business being brutally competitive and aggressive, and Harry, logically, gets that. And X Factor is sort of its own little world, a miniature version of the entertainment industry around them; puppy-eat-puppy rather than dog-eat-dog, perhaps. So he knows that he, at this point, should see all the other competitors as The Enemy. Not to be trusted. Only out to do one thing—to win the competition and steal his chances at fame.

But that’s not how it works.

He’s been in the X Factor house for six weeks, and in those six weeks he’s gotten closer with some of his competition than he did over sixteen years with most of his friends back in Holmes Chapel. Sure, there were people in the house that he wasn’t always super crazy about—Wagner springs to mind though he mostly keeps to himself now, and there was Storm who’d bashed One Direction for being cutey, and the FYD guys who were so focused on winning that they didn’t have any friends to be sad for them when they left. And there are the others who Harry likes but who just clicked with other people, Treyc and the Belle Amie girls and Paije.
It’s only been six weeks but Harry can’t imagine living anywhere but where he is now, that not-quite-townhome not-quite-country-house not-quite-mansion with all the tiny bedrooms and drafty corners and piles of shoes by the front door. He can’t imagine not getting a kiss on the cheek from Rebecca and Mary for cooking breakfast every morning. He can’t imagine not arguing over control of the TV with Matt or being grossed out by Cher’s fake eyelashes left wherever she damn well pleases or Katie curling Zayn’s hair when they were all bored one night, then doing Liam’s and then it wasn’t funny anymore because he actually looked really good. He can’t picture a morning not spent laughing with Aiden while a mostly asleep Louis sits on Harry’s lap and steals his food.

It’s not the big things that have drawn these people into Harry’s personal orbit, it’s not their singing abilities or their potential superstardom, it’s the little things. The things he doesn’t even realize he likes about them until they aren’t there anymore and he suddenly misses those tiny, insignificant parts of the day that build into something a lot like friendship but a lot like family, too.

And now Aiden is so sure he’s going home. He’s going home and breaking out of the *X Factor* orbit and he’s disrupting the balance of Harry’s entire universe and he just Bonded with Matt and it's so unfair to be forced to live with people until you start to love them only to have them taken away.

With that thought, Harry’s gaze flicks to Louis.

It’s two minutes to showtime. Stage assistants have placed them all along the corridor up to the stage, Dermot standing amongst all the denim-clad performers like a besuited dream, a Beauty School Dropout kind of vision. Harry is at the end of a clump of boys, in front of Paije and behind Niall. They aren’t supposed to get out of order, they were put this way for a reason for filming purposes yadda yadda yadda. Harry can already imagine the hissed threats from the assistants whose noses are glued to their clipboards until they smell a hint of trouble or notice anyone sticking a single eyelash out of line.

But, you know what? Fuck it.

Harry slides against the wall, ducking past Niall and Zayn and Liam until he’s next to Louis, who’s still watching Aiden warily while simultaneously holding a half-hearted conversation with Mary. Harry leans around him and kisses Mary on the cheek, tells her, “You won’t forget the words, don’t worry” (because she always worries and always, always does amazingly), and spins her to face Rebecca. She picks up her thread of conversation like it had never dropped, Rebecca immediately leaning in and listening attentively.

With all of Louis’ attention now on him—as well as one perfectly curved eyebrow raised in his direction—Harry just says it.

“Move in with me.”

Louis laughs, teeth and eyes glittering in the low light of the stage wings. “We live in the same room and sleep in the same bed, Hazza. We cannot live together any more than we already do.”

“After the show,” Harry continues, insistent. It’s not a joke, it isn’t funny. Aiden is probably going home tonight and Harry’s world is being rocked and there is one thing in his life right now that is day-to-day consistent, his North Star in all this madness, and he will not let that slip away when their run on the show is over. “Live with me. In London, in Doncaster, in Holmes Chapel, I literally don’t care. Let’s move in together.”

The smile slides into open-mouthed shock on Louis’ face, and the director calls for quiet and counts them down. Harry is still watching Louis and Louis is still staring at Harry and somewhere in the background Dermot is speaking (“Tonight, on the *X Factor,*” he says ominously to the camera, but
who cares, who cares).

A makeup artist steps in front of Harry and mimes fluffing his hair for the cameras. Harry ignores her, staring over her shoulder.

Louis still looks shocked, but a slow grin appears.

They aren’t supposed to talk, what with Dermot attempting to give a stirring speech to open a wild night of intrigue and entertainment or whatever his job is meant to be, but Louis cocks his head to the side and crinkles his eyes when he giggles and steps around the makeup artist like she’s not even there.

“Let’s move in together,” he agrees, and Harry smiles so widely his cheeks ache.

The group song is ridiculous but Louis gets a solo, so at least there’s that.

Well, it’s not a real solo. But the camera focuses on Louis while he, Matt, and Liam harmonize on the last line together and it looks like he’s got a solo, and that’s more than what he usually gets. He’s smiley and bouncy and dances up to Mary when the camera is on them and he thrives under the spotlight.

Louis looks like the fucking sun, and Harry is so happy to burn.

As he predicted, Aiden is in the bottom two acts, right next to Katie.

Harry loves Katie, her weird quirky style and raspy giggles and her unconditional support of everyone around her. He loves Katie so much, would do anything for her, but God does he want her to go home.

Aiden is shaking under the harsh spotlight, his hands rattling the microphone and it’s obvious even from the stage wings where Harry and Louis are standing on either side of Matt, watching the world fall to pieces.

“Aiden, never been here before,” Dermot says over the crowd, “how’re you feeling?”

Aiden just shrugs, his movements jerky. Matt laughs wetly, rubbing at his eyes. “Idiot,” he says fondly, and Harry is so familiar with that particular brand of affection (feels that swell of oh my God, why do I like you again? every time Louis pours milk in Harry’s boots or writes LOUIS WAS HERE in permanent marker across his back while he sleeps) that he instantly steps closer, slipping his hand into Matt’s and squeezing. Louis wraps his arm around Matt’s waist, and then they wait.

There’s a call for a commercial break, and Aiden and Katie are led to another area until it’s time to perform. The lights come up as the judges make their way to their seats, and it feels like the whole world is waiting in silence. Zayn and Liam are standing a little ways off to watch the results as well, whispering to each other worriedly, and Niall has his arm around Mary’s shoulders nearby. Most of the acts are still here, actually, which is different from most weeks.
But most weeks, they aren’t outraged by the person sitting in the bottom two, and, between the show politics and the talent levels involved, they all usually have a pretty good idea who’s going to go home before the singing even starts.

Matt pulls Louis closer and rests his head on top of Louis’ hair, pulls Harry closer too and brings their clasped hands up to his mouth. “He shouldn’t be up there,” he whispers, and Harry hates how close he sounds to breaking.

“No,” he agrees. “He shouldn’t.”

Aiden sings first in the final showdown. It’s decent but he’s shaky, and Harry can see Simon’s tiny frown as the lights come back up.

Katie nails her song.


Because of the tie, they go to deadlock and back to the first public vote.

Aiden had the fewest votes. He’s going home.

It’s all a bit blurry after that, and not just because Harry’s teared up more times than he can count.

Aiden comes trudging off the stage and straight into Matt’s arms, and then, like all the acts sent home before him, is passed around for hugs and kisses and you’ll be alright and keep in touch, yeahs and Harry has a hard time watching, because of course Aiden saves him and Louis for last.

“I have something I want to say to you two,” he says quietly, fiercely, leaning in close. “I don’t care what comes out of this show, and I don’t care if you lot get your album deal and go on a dozen world tours. All I care is that you both take care of each other. Because this,” he points to the two of them, voice shaky, “this is something great, and I refuse to let you two lose it. Take care of each other, because no one else will be able to.”

He wraps them both in a hug, and doesn’t even seem to mind that Harry soaks his shirt with tears. With Aiden between them, Louis reaches out and grips Harry’s hand, and it feels like a promise.

15 November, 2010

It’s all a bit somber the next morning, breakfast a muted affair. Katie looks on the verge of
apologizing for everything, but it’s not really her fault and there’s not really anything anyone could do. Everyone presses kisses to Matt’s forehead as they leave the table for various errands and rehearsals, because although Louis and Harry are the only two that know he and Aiden Bonded, everyone can still see how torn up he is about Aiden being gone.

Harry slides him extra bacon, at a loss for what else to do.

When they’re sent to the Vidcase, Louis clearly has absolutely no interest in pretending to care about filming a video diary. He grabs a book from Rebecca’s room on the way and reads lines from it instead of answering questions. Niall and Zayn think it’s hilarious—and it is, Harry is pretty sure everything Louis does is hilarious, but he’s really more focused on the tightness around Louis’ eyes than anything else—and poor Liam just tries to direct the derailed train of this diary back into some semblance of order.

“On Sunday we got through, which was amazing, but the sad thing was that Aiden went home as well and he’s one of our close friends,” he says, oblivious to the quick intake of breath and stuttered phrase from Louis as he tries to pretend absolutely nothing has just been brought up, a massive elephant that sits among them and uses up all the oxygen.

“We were all a bit shocked Aiden was in the bottom two,” Harry says, watching Louis stiffen from the corner of his eye.

“’No!’ Jimmy protested,” Louis reads from the book, studiously ignoring everyone and reverting back to his need to keep others laughing to distract from his own internal issues.

It’s awkward until Liam says that he’d quite like to be a birthday cake, and then that’s the end of that as Louis and Harry both turn to mock him mercilessly.

17 November 2010

Every morning when Harry unwraps himself from Louis’ sleep-heavy arms and stumbles to his bag to dig for clean clothes, he feels a jolt when his hand brushes his illicit bottle of lube.

He still hasn’t been able to use it. It’s sort of an impossibility to get more than half a second alone in this house, which is ridiculous because there are literally fewer people living here every week and yet Harry can’t get one moment to himself.

He’s so fucking frustrated he might actually combust.

The whole waking-in-Louis’-arms bit isn’t helping much, either. At least being the little spoon means he isn’t waking Louis with his morning wood. Instead, the weight of Louis’ morning erection pressed against his back tends to be exactly what propels Harry out of bed and to the bathroom every day for a quick, unsatisfying wank.

Even if he had all the time in the world, though, Harry’s not sure he’d actually be able to… you know. Do it.

Because it’s one thing to think about having someone around you, above you, inside of you in an abstract, tormenting way; it’s something entirely else to pour slippery stuff on your fingers and stick them up your own bum. What Harry really needs is a moment to himself with a laptop so he can research this thoroughly, because as helpful as Aiden was with his discussion of banana-flavored
lube and the pros and cons of the reverse cowgirl position, it doesn’t really explain what he’s supposed to expect. Or do. Or be looking for. Like yeah, there’s a prostate somewhere in there, but where? And what do you do when you find it? Is it like a button you’re supposed to push—instant orgasm guaranteed? Or is it one of those things where you have to know exactly what to do and how to move to make the good things happen?

Harry needs answers.

It’s on his mind more than it probably should be over the next few days, seeing as how everyone else is focused on surviving another week in the competition and making it to the final seven acts. But it’s Beatles week, and they’re doing one of those songs that Harry would literally have to suffer brain damage before he could forget the words. And the distracting thoughts always seem to pop into his head at the worst moments: like when Louis is licking ice cream from a spoon or when Louis sighs against Harry’s neck and snuggles closer in his sleep or when Louis flutters his hand while speaking and draws attention to his delicate, gorgeous fingers and fuck, Harry starts realizing that he may not be quite as terrified anymore because he wants that, wants fingers buried deep inside of him—

So, okay, maybe he is ready.

He starts making excuses when they’re at the house to slip up to their bedroom to try and get a private moment. But then Niall will follow him upstairs, chattering about organizing a house-wide footie match that night after dinner, or Zayn will already be there on the phone with his mum or cuddling with Liam (which happens more than Harry would have ever guessed, but between Zayn and Louis they’re starting to wear down Liam’s walls that make him blush madly at physical affection), or Louis will catch him on the way upstairs and cling like a koala, refusing to let Harry out of his sight. Even aside from his bandmates there is no privacy to be had, and he realizes this when an ITV camera crew almost catches him smuggling the bottle of lube to his bed when he finally gets a rare moment alone.

If only there was a place to go, a secret door he could stumble across that opens to a room with a bed and a guarantee of no interruptions. Somewhere he could go specifically to have a spectacular, drawn-out orgasm and—

Oh, Jesus. Of course.

The sex room.

In all the madness since that first Sunday when FYD and Nicolo had packed their barely-unpacked bags and left the house and their newly empty rooms, Harry had completely forgotten about the sex room. Niall and Cher’s gaudy glittered sign on the door—The Sex Room: No clothes and no X Factor babies allowed! Don’t be silly, wrap your willy!—had become just a part of the background to him. He doesn't even know if anyone has ever used it, or if it still has recently washed sheets (well, washed six weeks ago, but if no one's used them that still counts, right?) and the lingering scent of lemony cleaner.

Maybe he'll be the first to break it in.

Harry takes the first opportunity he's given to sneak away—Niall actually does end up organizing a game of football out in the backyard just as night is setting in. Harry waves everyone off with promises that he'll be out in a moment, he can be substituted in at half, just have to check something
really quickly, you lot go get started, and weaves through the small crowd heading outside to get back upstairs and to his room. Before he loses his nerve, he sticks the bottle of lube and a small towel up his shirt and scurries to the sex room. He looks furtively over his shoulder for camera crews, errant contestants, or the wandering, curious eyes of the Xtra Factor hosts who tend to show up at the most inopportune times for a juicy bit of gossip. When he slips inside, the door closes behind him with a foreboding **click**.

The air smells a little stale, and the bed is still perfectly made; somehow, these tiny pieces of evidence proving Harry’s the first in here makes him feel the slightest bit better. Maybe if he forgot about this room, so did everyone else.

He strips off, folding his clothes and setting them on the empty desk. He pulls the top sheet back carefully, and lays himself across the bed, shivering a little at the cool fabric against his overheated skin.

Then he stares at the ceiling, because what’s the next part? Does he just… go for it?

Fuck it. If Aiden didn’t tell him that this whole thing has specific steps that need to be followed, he’s pretty sure it’s just sort of make-it-up-as-you-go.

So he starts with his hands. Running over his thighs first, light fingers up the inside of his legs toward his interestedly twitching cock, up past his hips and his waist and over his ribs to his nipples. He’s always been sensitive here, always been able to tug on them a little and feel it all the way down in the base of his dick; some strange nerve ending that stretches the length of his torso and makes him bite his lip involuntarily at the tingling, needy feeling that shoots through him. Soon he’s making noises as well, little *mmphs* and bitten-off *ah-ahs* that slip past his teeth.

His cock is heavy against his leg by now, his interest in the proceedings beginning to outweigh his trepidation. He palms himself once, then can’t stop because *Jesus*, it’s been ages since he was able to devote more to a wank than a hasty minute in the toilet; this feels spectacular now that he’s able to work himself slowly to full hardness rather than having to push out a quick, fleeting orgasm. He throws his head back, his left hand stroking circles across his chest and his right pulling slowly at his cock.

He keeps his right hand moving, up and down and collecting the drops of precome from the top to make the slide easier. With his left he reaches out, fumbling for the lube, and tries to pour some out onto his shaky finger.

And—shit. He drops the bottle onto the tile floor with what has to be the loudest clatter of all time. He launches himself off the bed and chases the lube as it skitters across the room, tripping over his own feet in his haste. When he finally has the bottle safely back in hand, he tries again.

Attempt number two goes just as poorly when he realizes there’s a safety seal under the lid and he can’t actually get any lube out onto his finger. Frustrated and turned on beyond what is probably healthy, he huffs and pulls off the seal, finally able to slick his fingers.

He reaches back slowly with one hand, past his aching balls to—**there**. He twitches automatically at the cold lube on his hole, but it warms soon enough and then it’s good; no, beyond good, it’s **amazing**. He didn’t expect to be so sensitive but every brush of his finger makes him shudder, his eyes slipping closed automatically as he just lets himself feel for a moment, the building heat thrumming along with his heartbeat.

After another solid minute, he works up the nerve to change the angle. He moves his wrist down a little more, angles his finger up, and shoves past his rim and inside.
And immediately pulls back out, because—

“Fuck!” he hisses, the pain of the stretch too much, completely yanking himself out of any rhythm he’d built. His arse stings angrily, and he feels bitter tears of frustration well in his eyes.

It’s so stupid; how can the thought of someone else’s fingers be so hot but then when he actually tries it, it’s so awful?

But… maybe that’s the key.

Harry thinks back to a week ago, to the brief fantasy that had bled into his mind after seeing Aiden and Matt together, the one that had made him come so hard that walking had been next to impossible. He can remember it perfectly—the thought of someone working their way up his body, tracing lines with their tongue and slipping fingers into him with no fuss, no sudden pain. A strong, tanned back that Harry can mark up as his and shining, sweaty skin. Blue eyes peering up at him through their fringe as they take his cock into their wet, hot mouth—

He whines quietly as his hand falls back to his cock, picking up the rhythm of the imaginary person sliding up and down, sucking lightly and lingering lovingly on the sensitive spot under the head. He pictures the person reaching out and snagging the bottle of lube as he slicks up his own fingers once again, sliding over his hole carefully and feeling his hips jolt at the sensation.

His imaginary partner smirks up at him, taking him deeper as their finger becomes more bold, rubbing quicker across his fluttering rim. Harry’s left wrist starts to protest at the angle and so he shifts and just like that, his finger slips past the loosening muscle and into himself and he barely notices. His fantasy partner is slowing now, his mouth languid as he pays more attention to his finger in Harry’s arse than his mouth on Harry’s cock. His finger slides slowly, so slowly, up past another knuckle and it stings but it’s okay, it’s fine because he’s still got that heady pressure on his dick and the stretch is slowly disappearing and suddenly it’s happened, Harry’s got a finger inside himself.

Harry moans at the thought more than the actual feeling, because it’s nice and it feels pleasant enough but it’s not what he was expecting, he wants more. So he pushes a little deeper and, wow, oh, yeah that’s better, the thickness of his finger filling an empty space he didn’t realize even existed.

His fantasy partner thrusts his finger in and out, slowly and carefully but deeply, and Harry’s back arches as he grinds back, seeking more, always more. He pictures this partner chuckling darkly, his high, raspy voice asking, do you like that, Haz? How do my fingers feel inside you? and oh, God, it’s not just any voice he’s imagining, it’s Louis.

It’s Louis whose delicate pink mouth he’s picturing stretched around the head of his cock and making his hips jump erratically, it’s Louis whose finger is pressing deeper and deeper into Harry and making his feet slide on the sheets in overwhelmed bliss, it’s Louis who watches him fall apart with sharp eyes and shifting, lithe muscles and a raspy, affected voice, do you want more, love? I can make you feel so good.

It should be wrong but it isn’t, because of course Harry wants Louis to be the one to do this, of course he wants Louis to break him into pieces and put him together again.

Harry pulls his finger out and reaches for the lube again, reapplying it to two fingers this time. He breathes deep and pulls his knees to his chest and presses in.

It’s another sting of pain but the stretch is so worth it to feel the fullness, to know that he’ll still feel this when he’s done, moans spilling into the room that he couldn’t possibly contain. And then he slips back into his fantasy; Louis is lying between Harry’s legs and licking slow stripes up the bottom
of his cock as he fucks in and out of Harry with two fingers, pressing into places that have never been touched. Harry whines again, needing even more, needing gasoline poured on the fire that’s burning him alive from the inside out. As his wrist cramps again, he changes the angle once more so that his fingers are crooked inside of him, dragging over his walls and—

“Fuck,” he moans as his fingers slide over something that makes his vision flash black and his whole body arch desperately off the bed and yeah, God, that’s exactly what he needs to chase the building orgasm low in his groin. His imaginary version of Louis’ eyes darken as Harry loses it, keening and gasping as he rubs over the spot again and again and his hips pump desperately up into his fist.

“Please, please,” and he doesn’t even know what he’s begging for, doesn’t remember anything except heat and want and pulsing thrusts and, “Please, Louis.”

Harry’s voice is deep and broken and he can imagine Louis biting his lip, leaning over to press kisses to Harry’s shaking thighs. He throws his head back, gasping desperately. It’s almost done, he’s so close, the pressure has built so high that he may explode before he comes, he might just evaporate because one person isn’t supposed to feel all this, it’s madness and ecstasy and all things good in the world all at once. He’s teetering on the edge and he just needs something to push him over, and so he hears Louis’ voice in his head, murmuring filthy words against Harry’s sweaty skin, come for me, love and let me see you, I want to see you.

“Louis!” Harry cries as his orgasm crashes into him, his body thrumming and pulsing with each stripe of come that splashes across his chest. He’s dizzy and exhausted and sated and still so full with two fingers inside himself that it aches when he pulls them out. He’s blissfully content, breathing deep as the tingles fade from his limbs.

As he comes back down, shivering and stretching, he realizes that the room is just a little brighter than he remembers, a little less echoing. With a horrible sinking in his chest, Harry propels himself up on his elbows.

Rebecca and Mary stand in the doorway, mouths agape.

They definitely saw. They definitely heard Harry scream Louis’ name. And they definitely can see that Louis himself is nowhere around.

They know he was fantasizing about Louis while masturbating. Christ.

“We were going to make s’mores,” Rebecca says faintly after a horrible minute spent staring at each other. “Couldn’t find the marshmallows, thought you might know where they are.”

“Um, yeah,” Harry says, and he sounds like he’s been fucked for hours, his throat garbling his syllables and making his words scratchy and even slower than usual. He coughs, and that doesn’t help at all. “They’re in the cupboard next to the fridge. Behind the sugar.”

Mary’s lips are twitching. “Sure, we’ll check again.” She starts pulling Rebecca out of the room, who is already trying to stifle giggles into her palm. “We’ll... leave you to it.”

They pull the door closed behind them, and Harry can immediately hear them dissolve into loud, side-splitting laughter out in the hallway. He just pulls the disgusting sheets over his head and prays that this is all just an incredibly realistic dream and that he’ll wake up soon.

No such luck.
Harry takes a shower and slips down to the TV room while everyone’s still outside playing footie, the muscles in his arse and thighs too sore to put up with anything more strenuous than sitting. He only gets a few minutes of solitude, though, before a glistening, panting Louis deposits himself in Harry’s lap, still high from his apparently single-handed victory. His beanie is slipping off his sweaty hair and Harry’s old t-shirt he stole is sticking to his back, and Harry actively has to control a whimper as Louis rocks back and forth on his lap in excitement.

“We won, Harry! It was brilliant, and you missed it, and you should definitely be ashamed,” he says, poking Harry in the chest.

“Oh he’s ashamed all right,” Mary says from another sofa. “He locked himself away just to punish himself.”

Rebecca nods sagely, her lips twitching. “Yeah, he was absolutely begging for forgiveness. Surprised you couldn’t hear it from outside, he was quite loud.”

Harry glares at them, but Louis just looks bemused. “Sure, I bet that’s exactly what happened,” he says dryly, then turns to press a thumb to the spot where Harry’s dimple usually sits. “Seriously, Haz. Wanted you on my team. Where were you?”


Mary and Rebecca collapse into giggles.

19 November 2010

Louis and Harry are wasting time on their phones and Niall is napping on a nearby sofa when Cher knocks on the doorframe to catch their attention. Harry doesn’t notice, his headphones in his ears, but Louis looks up. “Hello, love.”

“Hey babe,” she grins. “C’mon, crew wants us to film this week’s Question Time.”

Question Time long ago became the Louis Tomlinson Show, complete with Niall as his announcer and Harry as his lovely assistant, the Vanna White to his Pat Sajak. In fact, most of the behind-the-scenes interviews have become One Direction focused, and the other acts assure them they’re fine with it.

“Keeps us from having to watch our every step and saying something we shouldn’t, because most of the cameras are on you lot,” Mary laughs when Louis asks.

It’s a good thing, too, because it sort of becomes like second nature for them to expect a camera to be there to catch their every word, at least while they’re at the studio. Louis has—in his humble opinion—perfected the art of the one-liner directly into the awaiting lens, and has no qualms about pretending he’s filming an episode of The Office and rolling his eyes to the camera when something vaguely eye-roll-worthy happens. With their familiarity of being on camera growing, the boys are sought out for more and more inane sponsor-hosted segments, like Megamind or Pop, Flop, and Fizzle and, of course, Question Time.
Sometimes Louis thinks the other acts let the boys act like morons and monopolize the media attention because they think it might distract them or throw them off when it comes time to perform. Oddly enough, the little voice in his ear that says these things sounds a hell of a lot like Simon.)

Louis sighs and stretches, yawning a little. “Harry.”

Harry’s eyebrows are furrowed down at his phone screen, his tongue poking out a little as he lines up an Angry Bird shot. Louis pokes him. “Harry Styles, you pay attention to me.”

Harry tugs his headphones out of his ears and smiles. “Did you say something?”

“Question Time, come on,” Louis explains before helping pull Harry to his feet. He wakes Niall with a sloppy, wet kiss to his forehead and skips away, giggling maniacally, when Niall wakes cursing and wiping Louis’ spit off his face.

They’ve invited actual customers of the sponsoring brand to ask questions this week, so Louis doesn’t even have to deal with the question cards. He just settles into his customary chair—with Harry resting comfortably on the floor between his legs, and it’s proof of how accustomed everyone is to Harry and Louis being, well, Harry and Louis that the only person so much as batting an eye at them is one of the guests—and learns the names of the two new people so he can introduce them in the most over-the-top way possible. The camera crew counts them in, and Niall does his ridiculous announcer voice to introduce the segment and your host, Louis!

“Hello, and welcome to Question Time!” Louis booms, and calls for the guests to start reading questions. They’re pretty standard: who would you like to sing with in the final, who would you like to interview. Then one of the guests reads her next card (“Who has the worst habits in the house?”) and Rebecca, sweet, quiet Rebecca, laughs hysterically into her mug of tea, Mary slapping her knee and chuckling loudly beside her.

Louis can feel Harry stiffen where he’s resting against Louis’ leg, shaking his head at them. Mary just laughs louder.

“Is there something we’re missing?” Louis asks, a little bit of real curiosity slipping through the overacted enthusiasm of his voice.

“Go for it if you want,” Harry says, voice just a little too loud. Louis would possibly murder for a chance to see his expression, but since he can’t do that he compromises by staring directly at the back of his head.

“I won’t,” giggles Rebecca.

“Go on, lay it on me,” Harry says even louder. “Lay it on me, Bex!”

“I won’t!” she laughs. “Erm…”

“Go on!” Harry shouts, and Louis covers his mouth because now he’s dying to hear what Rebecca is going to say. But she doesn’t say anything, continuing to um and uh for another few seconds. Behind the camera, one of the crew starts rotating his finger in a circle, the classic hurry up gesture.

“Gonna have to rush you for an answer here,” Louis says.

“Um, me?” Rebecca says. Everyone giggles.

“You what?” Louis chuckles, because out of everyone in the house it’s definitely not Rebecca who has the worst habits.
“Taking long baths, by any chance?” Niall asks, and everyone laughs again, even the guests who clearly don’t know anything about any of their bathing habits.

Harry, though, doesn’t relax again until Louis throws him an easy question about musical influences and rubs a soothing hand through his hair as he mumbles something about John Mayer and Stevie Wonder and Elvis.

Back at the house, Harry disappears upstairs for a little while and Louis spies his chance to wrangle an answer out of Mary and Rebecca. He finds them chatting in the kitchen over a freshly-opened tin of biscuits. Louis tries his best to be casual, sliding innocently up to them and grabbing a handful of biscuits and propping his hip up against the counter, but they immediately stop their conversation to grin at him shrewdly so he drops the act.

“What do you know that I don’t know?” he demands, biscuit crumbs flying. Rebecca dissolves into another fit of giggles, and Mary just shakes her head, smirking.

“So, so much,” she laughs.

“Please?” Louis begs. “Please tell me. I hate not knowing things. Please. Please, Bex?” he asks, fluttering his eyelashes at Rebecca.

“It’s nothing, Lou. Just some fun. Nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t believe you,” he declares, but knows a losing battle when he sees it. He’ll regroup and try again later.

He thinks he hears Mary mutter, “Idiot boys don’t know what’s right in front of them,” as he leaves, but he doesn’t have any idea what she could mean because he’s pretty sure he’s not missing anything at all.

20 November 2010

The next afternoon, they’re back in wardrobe for the first time since Aiden left. He, Harry, and Louis had usually spent their evenings together before shows, the three of them and sometimes Niall and Zayn and Liam, waiting around as each one got changed into the night’s outfit and then had his hair and makeup done.

Tonight Harry and Louis go in early before the rush for a lack of anything better to do, joking with Cher as multiple stylists tease her hair into its usual massive volume.

“So you need to pick which dress you’re wearing tonight,” Grace reminds her as she bustles past them holding Wagner’s Sgt. Pepper-style jacket, and Cher pouts.

“What, out of these two?” Harry asks, gesturing to two similar white dresses hanging behind her. Cher nods and Harry moves closer to inspect them. Louis follows and nudges him softly.

“Gonna steal the one she doesn’t wear?” he jokes, but Harry’s serious face makes the laughter fade
pretty quickly. “Hazza, tell me you aren’t going to take the dress. It’s definitely not your size, for one.”

“No,” Harry says slowly, sliding careful fingertips down one of the dresses. “Girls have it so lucky, though.”

“What?”

“They, just, they get so many better options than guys get for clothes. Like, feel this,” he says, bringing Louis’ hand up to touch the material. It slides through his fingers like water, silky and cool to the touch. “If a guy wears a silk shirt, he’s automatically camp and flamboyant and a hundred other ‘not manly’ things. But girls are expected to wear nice stuff like this all the time.”

“Sort of a double-edged sword, innit?” Louis asks, though he thinks he gets Harry’s point. “Girls are expected to dress feminine a hundred percent of the time, and guys are expected not to care that much about how they look. People should just wear what they wanna wear and other people shouldn’t judge them for it. Girls or guys or whoever else, doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah,” Harry agrees, biting his lip and smiling. “Yeah, that’s absolutely right.”

“Am I gonna have to buy you some silk, love?” Louis asks lightly, and Harry giggles and shakes his head, still running his hands over the dresses like he can’t stop.

“No. I’ll buy my own, someday.” He sighs wistfully. “I can’t wait for when I’ll be able to afford clothes I actually want to wear.”

“Yeah?” Louis asks. Harry wears pretty normal clothing now, at least as far as he’s seen. Jeans and sweaters and t-shirts, all pretty basic stuff.

“Yeah,” Harry says, chewing on his lip again, though this time it seems to be from nervousness rather than to hide a smile. “With my, um. My anxiety, it makes it feel like it’s hard to breathe, sometimes. And when I was little, I always associated that with the collars of my shirts, so when I got anxious I’d stretch my collars out so I wouldn’t choke anymore. Obviously, that’s not what actually caused it, but that’s what stuck in my head.”

“Is that why you don’t like wearing clothes?” Louis asks cautiously. Harry’s talked a little about his anxiety, but always obliquely, and this is the first time he’s mentioned it directly since his weeklong attack nearly two months ago.

“I think so,” Harry answers. “After shirts became connected with my anxiety, I sort of stopped wearing them whenever I didn’t need to, and that led to not wearing anything altogether. It doesn’t help that I have, like, super sensitive skin, so heavy denim and stuff like that can get really irritating after a while.”

“Hence the silk,” Louis nods, and Harry snorts.

“Yeah, hence,” he laughs, elbowing Louis and breaking their quiet bubble. “Dork. Let’s go get changed, I want to find Liam and go over our harmonies in the second verse, I think I’ve been going sharp but I can’t tell.”

The screams are louder than ever before after they finish their version of *All You Need Is Love*. the
judges completely inaudible as they try to give their comments.

Dermot shoves a mic in Louis’ face, asking something none of them can catch over the still-shrieking crowd, and Louis just laughs and says, “Sorry, I didn’t hear a word of that.”

Dermot laughs as well, his very white teeth glittering in the spotlight. “You’re happy, right?”

“Yeah,” they all agree, and it shocks Louis how true that actually is. He’s happy.

21 November 2010

Early Sunday morning, all the contestants are shuffled out of the house and to the studio to rehearse for the group song performance. Rather than covering a fun, silly song like usual, this week is the debut of the series’ *charity single*, and everyone from the producers to the PAs are doing everything to guarantee that it will go off without a hitch.

Recording the single itself had been a strange experience, because all Louis knows about recording music comes from TV and movies, and so he'd expected every sound booth to be like the one in *Love, Actually* with the instruments scattered about and stools for the singers, posters of famous concerts on the walls and warm, worn rugs on the floor. For the *X Factor* single, though, since the group is so large, they got short amounts of individual time in the booth and then were stood on risers like a primary school Christmas performance and told to project as much as they possibly could.

It had also been early in the season, way back in September, so the producers had assigned the solos without knowing who would still be in the competition when it was time to perform it and who would have to be called back: Treyc, for example, had a pretty important solo, as did Aiden. Wagner and Katie got barely anything, though they’re still actually in the competition. One Direction didn’t get a part together as a group, though Zayn, Harry, and Liam got solos while Niall and Louis mouthed along for the video—it seems pretty clear that they weren’t really supposed to hang around this long in the competition, and Niall and Louis were supposed to have been long forgotten by now.

A weird thought, but sort of empowering: *go ahead, try and get rid of me. I’m still here.*

It’s strange, looking around now as the Belle Amie girls and Nicolo and Storm file into the studio like they’d never left, and it makes Louis realize just how short this competition actually is in the grand scheme of things. How fleeting the run on stage can be, especially if the audience doesn’t take to you.

But they’re going to be on an actual, sold-in-stores album, which is... God, it’s *amazing*. Never in a thousand years would Louis have ever believed that he’d be in this position: a finalist on the *X Factor*, in one of the most talked-about bands in the country, recording a single for charity.

And, of course, the return of voted-off contestants means they get to see—

“Aiden!” Harry cries, leaping up from his seat and into Aiden’s arms as soon as he steps into the room. Louis follows, wrapping them both in a tight hug. They break apart reluctantly, each pretending they don’t see the others’ red-rimmed eyes or hear the throaty, choked edge to their laughter.

It’s all smiles through the early rehearsal and then the fittings for the acts who haven’t been in the studio throughout the week and then the afternoon rehearsal and then pre-show hair and makeup. It’s
like Aiden never left, like the past week hasn’t happened, and Matt is glowing, never further than a few feet from his side; even when they go onstage to perform, he stays as close as possible.

Louis feels a strange sort of contentment spread through his limbs at the afterparty that night, sipping wine with Liam and running a hand through Harry’s sweat-dried, hairsprayed hair, watching Matt and Aiden twirl around the impromptu dance floor. (They play it off as friendly, because they still haven’t announced their Bond; maybe it’s better this way, with the paps more than happy to photograph Harry’s head in Louis’ lap rather than the actual celebrity couple just on the other side of the room. Louis is definitely willing to take the tabloid bullet for them if being in public together can make them this overjoyed.)

Harry seems to feel it too, sighing wistfully. “Wish we could just stay here, like this,” he mumbles. “Don’t want to say goodbye to anyone else. Just want to be here with you and the boys and all our friends.”

Louis bends and kisses his forehead. “I know, love. Me too.”

Matt dips Aiden at the end of the song, and looks up to wink at Louis as he does. Louis drains the rest of his wine, suddenly very tired and very aware that he won’t get to spin his favorite person out on a dance floor anytime soon, not with the eyes of the nation on him, salivating for proof that Harry is his soulmate.

And it’s not even the eyes of the nation he’s worried about now; it’s the eyes of Claudia in the corner of the room, reporting their every move back to the Modest! bosses and probably suggesting they bring Louis in for yet another meeting about subtlety and private versus public relationships (which would be his fourth such meeting with Griffiths and Magee in the past few weeks, and he truly does not need a refresher).

Louis wishes, just for one night, that he could let it all go—the dagger, the executives looking over his shoulder, the screaming and crying girls who will never get him to Bond with them.

Unfortunately, life isn’t a Hugh Grant film, and real life is never easy.

22 November 2010

Louis is taking a well-deserved nap in an empty lounge at the studio—because Simon is in America this week and so Louis has had to find new places to spend his break times—when he registers a gentle tapping on his arm.

“Sorry, love,” Grace is saying, and Louis wakes slowly to see her standing over him, looking apologetic with a cup of tea in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. “Can I get you to come with me to wardrobe?”

“Bit early to be getting ready for Saturday night, isn’t it?” he asks sleepily, rubbing his eyes. “It’s all of ten o’clock on Monday morning.”

“It’s noon, dear,” she laughs, and, oops, so much for his super-quick nap, “and it’s never too early. But this is for tour wardrobe, not the show.”

“Tour?” Louis squeaks, finally sitting upright. He accepts the tea that Grace hands him unthinkingly, gaping at her.
“Yeah, tour. Remember, the thing that happens when the show ends?” she laughs again. “I’d assumed you lot had already discussed all that with Simon, since he sent the go ahead to start compiling your outfits.” She waves the sheet of paper around and starts down the hallway, Louis trailing after her and trying desperately to wake up a little quicker. “He must be pretty sure that you’ll sign your contract with Syco at the end of the season, most of the acts that sign with other companies don’t come on the *X Factor* tour.”

“No, we haven’t talked about it,” Louis murmurs into his tea. “Won’t we have to, though? Sign with Syco, I mean.”

Grace shoots him a funny look. “Not necessarily. Simon will obviously be the first to offer, of course, since you can’t sign any other outside contracts while on the show and I’m sure he’s monitoring who can talk to you at the moment, but there will probably be other offers as well. You boys are pretty popular.”

She leads him around a corner into wardrobe and Louis suddenly feels like he’s stepped into the closet of an incredibly swanky pirate—red, white, and navy as far as the eye can see, gold accents on everything from blazers to beanies, eight different sets of braces flung over the nearest chair. Grace turns to him with a glint in her eye.

“Did you know that dagger tattoos are considered traditionally nautical?” she chirps. “Completely related question, how do you feel about stripes?”

(Louis tries on more outfits than he could possibly hope to count, and they all look exactly the same. Sailor Louis, apparently, is going to be a thing.

One good thing comes of all the fuss, though—Grace has to leave halfway through for a Katie-related hair emergency and Louis is left to explore the wardrobe room fully for the first time with no one around to distract him. He rifles through cupboards and shifts things around on some shelves, not really looking for anything but enjoying being nosy. He stands in front of a large shelf full of nail polish for a long time, looking over the rainbow of colors; Harry’s been begging Grace to paint his nails for the show for months, but Simon keeps saying no.

He steps through a curtain he’d never noticed before to find a long room filled floor to ceiling with old costumes and clothing: rack after rack of outfits, shoes, and accessories, some catalogued with the names of contestants from two, three series ago. Louis, ever the tactile kind of guy, runs his hands along the clothing as he passes and stops only when something made of luxurious, cool fabric catches his attention. He pulls out a silk shirt, off-white and vintage, and immediately stuffs it under his hoodie to smuggle it out of the room.

Later, he gives the shirt to Harry, who promptly bursts into tears and refuses to stop hugging Louis for a solid twenty minutes. The shirt is just a little too big on him, but he’s only sixteen and he’ll probably grow into it. And even if he doesn’t, he still looks amazing, radiating happiness as he runs joyful hands over the fabric again and again.

“I’m keeping it forever,” he promises Louis, pressing a kiss to his cheek and wiping away another wave of happy tears. “You’re my favorite person in the world and I love you so much.”

“Love you too, Hazza,” Louis grins in return, and Harry will never, ever understand how true that really is.)
25 November 2010

“I never thought I’d say this,” Niall says from his sofa, where he’s been staring at the ceiling for the past hour, “but sometimes I hate living with a bunch of girls.”

“Heeeyyy,” Harry frowns, because it’s not nice to call people girls as though it’s an insult and it’s also not nice to insult your friends (or your bandmates who hold your musical future in their hands, but whatever). Zayn doesn’t even react, just punches the air when his left winger gets past Harry’s defenders for the umpteenth time to put him even further ahead in their third game of FIFA. Harry pitches his controller to the side, huffing.

“Not you,” Niall says, throwing a pillow at Harry, “though you are very pretty. I mean the actual girls.” And then he waves his hands toward the kitchen, where Katie, Cher, and Rebecca are up on the countertops and painting each other's' toenails.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I mean, I love ‘em. They’re like me sisters. That doesn’t mean I want them around all the time, though, with the screaming and the drama and the hairspray.”

“That’s what it’s like to have actual sisters, grouchy,” Harry says peaceably. “They probably feel the same way about you.”

“You just need to get laid, mate,” Zayn finally says, winking over at Niall, who shoots straight up.

“Can we?” he asks, eyes bright.

And then they’re scampering upstairs, leaving behind a horrified Harry.

“What?” he screeches, chasing after the two of them (though that may be a bad idea, he realizes, but honestly, what). “You two- are you two-”

“Christ, H, chill out,” Zayn laughs as Harry turns a corner to find the two of them changing out of their sweatpants and into jeans and nice shirts. “Niall and I are not swapping orgasms, I swear.” He reaches over for his magical bag of hair supplies and heads into the bathroom while Niall douses himself in Axe body spray.

“Not today, anyway,” Niall winks, and Zayn laughs broadly. “Nah mate, there’s, like, tons of chicks that hang out down by the front gate. We go talk to them when we can,” Niall explains, fluffing his fringe.

“You do?” Harry asks, sinking down onto his bed. (Well, Louis’ bed, but honestly there’s not much of a difference anymore.)

“Yeah. Liam comes sometimes, too, but he’s a little too shy for it.”

“Why didn’t you invite me?” Harry feels like he should be offended, but Niall just shrugs.

“You’re always with Louis, figured you were just fine.”
“Oh. And… Louis doesn’t go?”

Niall laughs and ruffles Harry’s hair. “Don’t get jealous, Haz. Louis never comes.” And then he frowns. “Good thing, too, those girls love him. They’d never pay attention to us if he went. They literally carry bags of carrots around just in case he shows.”

Zayn steps out of the bathroom, his hair perfectly coiffed.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Wait!” Harry stands. “I want to go.”

“You do?” Zayn asks, eyebrow raised. “Where’s Lou?”

Harry shrugs, feeling a little miffed. He’s not Louis’ keeper and they aren’t conjoined twins—they can do things on their own every once in a while. Besides, he’s starting to feel a little weird about the Louis-based fantasies that have popped into his head the last few times he’s been able to sneak off to use his lube (with the door firmly locked, just in case). Just because he wants Louis so badly it makes his heart race doesn’t mean Louis feels the same, and he wants to try and get a grip before he does anything he can’t take back.

Like throwing Louis against a wall and snogging him until neither of them can breathe. That might ruin the friendship, a bit.

“I want to go,” he says stubbornly, stripping himself out of his own pajama pants. “Give me three minutes.”

Zayn and Niall exchange a look, but they both lean against the wall to wait. Harry throws some jeans on and switches his (Louis’) old t-shirt for one of his button-downs, then checks his teeth in the bathroom mirror. A quick shake of his hair and then a swoop of his fringe to the side, and he’s ready to go.

It’s chilly in the near-dark of a wintery early evening, but it’s a lot warmer than it could be for this time of year. Harry follows Niall and Zayn as they approach the group of ten or so girls by the gate, feeling slightly apprehensive.

“Sometimes we text or tweet them, other times they’re just, like, waiting,” Niall says, and then shoots Harry a dirty grin. “Good to be on TV, right?”

Zayn and Niall split off when they reach the girls, posing for some pictures before stepping in closer to a few fans in particular, their voices going soft as the girls blush.

That doesn’t seem that hard. Harry can do that.

“Hello,” he says cheerfully to one girl, who immediately starts sobbing, shoves her camera in Harry’s face and blinds him with the flash, then runs away. He blinks, spots still in his eyes, and asks dazedly, “What did I do?”

There’s a soft chuckle from his left, so he turns and blinks some more until another girl appears, pushing long brown hair behind her ear. “You frightened her off with all your good manners,” she says. “Shame.”

“Yeah, it is,” he says, a bit dumbly. She’s quite gorgeous, this girl: large blue eyes and amber-
colored hair and smooth, tan skin. “I’m Harry.”

“I know,” she grins. “I’m Ashley.”

“Hello, Ashley. Please don’t blind me and run away screaming.”

She laughs. “I’ll try my best.”

Ashley is lovely, really—hilarious, and cheeky, and very smart. She lives just around the corner, apparently, and her friends had wanted to come see the X Factor house and she thought she might as well join. “Part of being underage, right?” she sighs. “Can’t do anything actually fun yet, so I’m making do.”

“I wouldn’t know,” he shrugs, blasé. “I get to do fun things all the time. I’m famous, see.”

“And so humble, too,” she says seriously, making Harry double over in laughter. “Want to take a walk with me?”

Harry looks over her shoulder, seeing Niall with his back to the gate, his arms around the waist of a dark-haired girl who is kissing him deeply, and then Zayn, whispering in another girl’s ear as he leads her toward the shadows of the trees ringing the house. He looks back at Ashley, who’s biting her lip and waiting for a response. “I’d love to.”

Ashley grabs his hand and pulls him along, long hair fluttering in the slight breeze. They laugh and joke as they meander up the street, the cool evening air making them the only souls around. Harry’s heart thumps in anticipation every time their hands brush. It isn’t long before he’s got her pressed up against an alley wall, nuzzling at the side of her throat as she runs her hands across his chest.

“You’re so fit,” she gasps, ducking to press her lips to his cheek. Harry grins against her skin and trails his lips up, seeing her match his smile. Her blue eyes shine brightly even in the low light, and she smells like cotton candy and vanilla. He’s just about to lean in, just about to press his lips to hers (and will she be able to tell she’s his first? He hopes not, he hopes this is something he’s not awful at, that this can be a story they both tell their friends without regret) when she smirks and quirks an eyebrow. “What’s the deal, Curly?”

And that—

Okay.


Harry has found the girl version of Louis.

He stumbles back, aghast. Ashley looks stunned as well, still leaning against the dirty brick wall.

Harry is seconds away from screaming in frustration; he needed one night to get Louis off his mind, to help him remember that Louis is his friend, nothing more, and he goes and finds an exact replica of his best friend who actually does want to kiss him.

“I’m sorry,” he croaks, “So sorry.” And then he turns and sprints away.

It’s only a couple of minutes back to the house, but Niall and Zayn and the small crowd of fans are long gone. Harry jogs inside, up the stairs and to the boys’ bedroom. Louis is there, curled up and sleepy-soft in his bed, watching something on his laptop. He beams when he sees Harry.
“Hey, Curly. What’s going on?”

Harry doesn’t say anything as he crawls into bed, shoes and coat and all, and presses his face to Louis’ neck, breathing deeply. Louis doesn’t pry, just runs a soothing hand over Harry’s back.

A few minutes later, Harry’s spine has relaxed and his nose isn’t cold and he can pretend that he forgot his first kiss was almost with a girl named Ashley when he really wants it to be with a boy named Louis. And Harry thinks he may have gotten away with it, can lock it away in his mind and be left in peace; at least until Niall traipses back into the room, cheeks red and grin bright, and shoots Harry a broad wink.

“Alright, mate?” he asks, chipper. “How’d it go?”

“Yeah, good,” Harry mumbles into Louis’ shoulder. “Fine.”

Niall throws him an odd look but doesn’t ask anything else as he changes back into sweatpants and heads back out, and Louis is still quiet.

Until—

“Hazza, why do you smell like cotton candy?”

“Um. No reason, Lou.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, promise.”

27 November 2010

Week eight. One away from the semi-finals.

Harry’d never thought they’d get this far, not in his wildest dreams. They were so untested, coming in, still feeling out their own personal sounds, not nearly ready to choose a style for their hastily constructed band.

And here they are, one of the final seven. If they make it through the double elimination this weekend, they’ll be in the final five.

That’s, like, proper famous territory. That’s being one of the headliners on the X Factor tour when it kicks off in the new year. That’s almost a guaranteed recording contract and an album and tour of their own someday.

Of course, they have to get there first. And Simon leaving them alone this week is sort of terrifying. Because Harry chose one of the two songs, and what if he got it wrong? What if they do horribly and it’s all his fault? He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he caused them to go out early.

But Cheryl had approved when she sat in on a rehearsal, and Savan said it was a strong choice. So maybe they’ll be okay.

He hopes they’re okay.
Jacket taut across his shoulders, makeup smeared on his skin, hairspray keeping the curls intact, and it’s time to perform.

Harry looks over at Louis—wearing stripes for the third time this week, and when Harry’d asked Louis just rolled his eyes and said, “Get used to it, might as well change my name to Captain Jack by the end of all this”—who meets his eyes and nods, smiling softly.

He’d spent the whole night before reassuring Harry that the song choice wasn’t going to sink them. He’d been all praise and affection and whispered reassurances, though he had needed to clarify one point before they’d fallen asleep.

“Real quick, though, Haz, and be honest. You didn’t suggest the song because it has the word ‘69’ in it, did you?” Harry had burst into giggles, and Louis had continued, mock serious. “I won’t stand for that, you putting our futures on the line because all you think about is sex.”

Harry shouldn’t have worried; it goes off like a smash, the crowd clapping enthusiastically to the beat and the screams as loud as ever. It’s like he’s an overinflated balloon at the end of the performance, filled with so much joy and excitement and acceptance when Simon announces, “I had nothing to do with it, Harry chose the song,” and Niall tugs him into a hug and Louis gives him a smile, that smile, the one that says I’m here for you and I’m proud of you and we did it.

They run offstage, bouncing and glowing and happy, so happy, and this time they actually get to do something with all that energy. They get to perform again, twice in one night, and it shouldn’t feel this huge but it is.

Grace ushers them into wardrobe, where they’re stripped and redressed and sent back out to wait for their second song of the night.

It’s You Are So Beautiful this time, and it’s the most stripped-down performance they’ve done yet. No backing track, no recorded back vocals, just a piano and their voices.

It is a little hard to look at Louis as they settle into their places, though, because this would be a perfect time for him to get his first solo and his soft, clear vocals fit the song beautifully. But, again, he and Niall are left with nothing while the other three do all the singing. Harry knows Louis wants a solo, though he hasn’t asked for one yet, and he hopes and prays that Louis doesn’t hold it against him that he’s getting three-quarters of the solos tossed his way every week now, really whether he wants them or not.

Again they nail it, and Harry beams when Louis leans back and mouths well done as they step up to get their comments from the judges. Louis reaches back (out of the view of the cameras, of course) and wraps his hand around Harry’s wrist, rubbing soft circles and grinning, or at least grinning until Louis Walsh says, “You’ve proven that everyone in this group can sing,” and then the smile disappears.

“I know I’m a decent singer,” Louis whispers into Harry’s throat late that night, his face hidden even though he can feel Louis’ eyelashes blinking rapidly and the hot roll of a tear or two. “I know that, and if I wasn’t I wouldn’t be here. I just want to prove that I deserve it, you know?”
“I know, Lou,” Harry murmurs, pressing a kiss to the top of Louis’ head. “You do, your voice is beautiful. I’ll drop my own solo next week if I have to, because you deserve to have one.”

Louis shakes his head, smearing his tears into Harry’s skin. “No, Hazza. You’ve earned your solos. I need to earn my own.”

Harry lets the silence settle for a moment before opening his mouth again, crossing his fingers that Louis will let him lighten the mood. “If not, we’ll just make sure there’s a ridiculous speaking part in each of our singles, since that seems to be your job for the group songs and you do it so well.” He grins, letting Louis feel it against his hair.

Louis stiffens for a second, then snorts and flicks Harry’s nipple. “Great, cheers. Tosser.”

“I mean it, Lou. All the spoken word poetry we can fit into our record, it’s all yours,” he swears solemnly, trying not to shriek as Louis pokes at his ribs.

“I’ll show you spoken word-” Louis threatens, but another voice in the dark room makes him pause.

“I will murder you both if you don’t shut up,” Zayn swears, and Harry stuffs his fist against his mouth to keep his giggles inside. Louis kisses the tip of his nose and rolls over, pushing back into Harry’s space and letting Harry wrap his arms tight around his waist (even though he’ll complain about it in the morning when they wake up sweaty and disheveled).

“Love you,” Louis murmurs a few minutes later, sleep pulling him under.

“Love you,” Harry answers into the back of his neck, holding Louis just a little closer as he, too, drifts off.

**28 November 2010**

Another Sunday night, another results show.

Someday, this won’t be their life, and it’s going to be very, very strange. But for now, Harry lines up next to Liam and Zayn as Dermot opens the show from backstage.

There’s no group song this week, so once Dermot shoots his opener and Grace checks their outfits one last time, they’re allowed to watch The Wanted and Justin Bieber and Nicole Scherzinger perform before they’re herded back to line up for the results. Louis wrinkles his nose through The Wanted’s whole performance.

“They sort of seem… what’s the word I’m looking for?” he says, waving his hand like he might conjure it out of thin air.

“Presumptuous?” Liam suggests, and Louis shrugs.

“I was going to go with ‘twattish’ but that’s probably nicer. Good vocabulary, Liam.”

They line up with Simon on stage to hear the results for the eighth week in a row and, for the first time, Harry allows a little bit of stress to bleed through. The competition has thinned out almost all of the weaker acts, and there’s a real shot of them being in the bottom three. And if they’re at the very bottom, they get sent home straightaway, no chance at redemption. They might be going home.
“The fourth and final act that is definitely going to the semi-final is... One Direction.”

Zayn and Liam jump into a hug, Niall and Harry throw themselves at Simon, and Louis punches at the air, howling in triumph.

They did it. The semi-finals.

Another Sunday night means another results show which means another afterparty at the same hotel. It’s funny, because Harry’s actually pretty sure these parties are meant for networking, so the acts can meet others in the business and make connections to help them when they’re out in the industry. Harry just uses them as a place to score some excellent cheese and mini sandwiches while making fun of everyone with Niall, and Louis comes for the choice wine. The boys only really hang out with each other, and Rebeccas and Matts and Aiden, when he was here. Cher, too, when she deigns to come, and Mary when her knees aren’t hurting too badly after the performances.

Harry’s never really felt that need to go out and make nice with the bigwigs. As conceited as it sounds, if they really are producing the kind of hype that Simon says they are with the public, the right people will come to them. And if not, Simon has introduced Louis to dozens of record execs and writers and others with pull, and he’s kept all their contact information if for some reason they someday need it. (The business cards are hidden in his backpack, right next to a photo of his mum and sisters and that pack of cigarettes he thinks Harry doesn’t know about.)

It’s another lazy night at the party tonight, Louis swilling the white wine in his glass between bites of crackers and cheese, Zayn and Liam whispering to each other over Niall, who’s stretched out with his head in Zayn’s lap and his feet in Liam’s. Harry is tucked into Louis’ side, stealing sips from his glass every few minutes and feeling his cheeks getting warmer with every swallow.

Suddenly, there’s a shadow over their sofa.

“Evening, boys,” says Simon, and he’s positively smirking. Harry feels himself shivering involuntarily. “Harry, a moment?”

Harry exchanges a wary glance with Louis, but gets to his feet and brushes off his blazer. The wine, luckily, doesn’t seem to have affected his balance at all, which is good because Simon immediately turns and leads him away, weaving through the crowded room. Eventually they come upon Dermot, of all people, laughing with a beautiful woman in a short, almost indecently tight dress.

“Harry,” Simon says, drawing the attention of Dermot and the woman as they approach, “I’d like to introduce you to Caroline Flack.”

Caroline looks Harry slowly up and down, which is something he didn’t think people did in real life, only high school rom-coms with evil cheerleaders as the main villains. She smirks and extends a hand. “Harry Styles, so good to meet you.” Harry shivers again at the sound of his full name leaving her blood red lips, but shakes her hand anyway. She sticks out her lower lip in a pout. “Aw, no Bond Marker? Drat, I thought I could scoop you up before someone else gets their claws in you. You’re positively edible.”

Simon and Dermot chuckle, and Harry suddenly feels like he’s missing out on something rather huge. “Erm, hello,” he says, and, ah—there’s the effect of the wine, his tongue fuzzy and heavy in

“Thanks, doll,” Caroline purrs, and she slides across Dermot so that she’s next to Harry rather than across from him, and then the conversation between her, Dermot, and Simon continues as though Harry isn’t standing there, wondering what the hell he’s supposed to gain from this.

Caroline definitely isn’t letting him leave, though, directing a few questions to him about life in the house and how it feels to perform on stage. He answers best he can, though Simon and Dermot steer him out of more than one phrase that begins, “Oh, um, I dunno, I guess…”

“But you’re the biggest band in the country now,” she says, raising her glass in a mock toast. “Front page of every paper, it seems.”

“Oh, yeah, Harry’s our resident heartthrob,” Dermot laughs.

“I can see why,” Caroline answers, her eyes lingering on Harry’s lips for a moment.

There’s a small noise behind them, and they turn to find Louis standing there, watching Caroline with a careful expression.

“Louis!” Dermot cheers, and finishes another glass of wine.

“Hello,” he says quietly, then turns to Harry. “Hazza, they’re bringing a van around, we’re all headed back to the house.” He flicks his gaze around the circle, landing last on Caroline’s hand lightly gripping Harry’s forearm. “Coming?”

Harry looks at Simon, who’s looking at Caroline, who’s looking at Louis, eyebrow raised in amusement.

“The famous Louis,” she says, extending her hand once more. Louis takes it, face still blank. “I’m Caroline. I’ve read all about your little bromance, it’s adorable.”

Louis laughs, but his eyes stay narrowed. “That’s us, a couple of super adorable teenagers.” He turns completely away from her and back to Simon. “What do you think, Uncle Si, can I steal Haz back? I’ve been promised the chance to choose the film tonight.”

Harry grins at that, happy that Louis is here to drag him out of this strange conversation and that he’s being so absolutely Louis about the whole thing. “You’re just going to make us watch The Notebook again.”

Louis nudges him, smirking. “You’re just so pretty when you cry, I can’t help it.”

“Adorable,” Caroline says again from behind them, and a sour look crosses Louis’ face for a split second. Simon waves his hand airily.

“Yes, yes, I’m done with him. See you around the studio tomorrow, Harry, and Louis, I’ve got a
writer coming in at three I’d like you to meet.”

“See you around, Harry Styles,” Caroline purrs, and Louis’ grip on Harry’s hand tightens. “I’m sure we’ll meet again soon.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Harry answers automatically, though he really isn’t sure that’s true.

Louis frowns the whole way across the room and into the van, where Zayn, Niall, and Liam are stretched across the back seat in various states of consciousness. Once the door is closed behind them and they’re headed back to the house, the question Harry can hear stewing inside Louis finally bursts forth.

“So who is she, anyway?” he asks, then immediately looks out the window like he didn’t say it.

“Apparently she’s going to host Xtra Factor next year?” Harry says, still a little unsure himself. “Not exactly sure why I needed to meet her.”

Louis fumes out the window for another minute. “I didn’t like her.”

“Me neither,” Harry shrugs. “Sort of gave me the creeps. Like, she’s pretty, yeah, but also almost as old as my mum. And that’s quite strange, when you think about it.”

The firm line of Louis’ shoulders slump as he laughs his real, bright giggle for the first time since Harry was dragged away. “She was a fan of our ‘bromance,’ though, so at least she has good taste.”

Harry scowls. “I hate that word, bromance. It’s homophobic. Also, I have never once called you my bro.”

Louis flutters a hand to his chest and sticks out his lower lip. “You don’t want to be my bro?”

“I am so much more than your bro,” Harry laughs, pinching Louis’ pouty lip.

“That’s what everyone calls us, though,” Louis says lightly. “Just two bromantic dudes bein’ bros together. Broing out, if you will.”

“Well if you’re my bro, we’re a whole new species,” Harry says, and pulls out his phone.

“That’ll teach her,” Louis says, rolling his eyes, but he grins the whole way home.
At some point between afternoon rehearsals at the studio and Savan sticking his head into the practice room to tell the boys the van has arrived for them, Louis disappears. Not for long, not really. Just long enough to make Harry think that he should probably go check because somewhere there might be something (or someone) on fire. But he’s comfortable, sprawled out on the floor with his head on Liam’s chest.

(They’ve slowly convinced Liam it’s the best way to practice their vocals, and Savan even played along and told him he’d read studies about it, it helps you sing from your diaphragm rather than your throat or some other appropriate-sounding nonsense. It’s all rather convincing for a prank in which the sole purpose is to secure more resting time for four lazy teenagers and their ultra-competitive bandmate.)

Before Harry can get truly worried, Louis slinks back into the studio. He smiles at Zayn’s greeting, but his eyes are stormy and his hand twitches every few seconds like he sort of wants to punch something.

But, in true Louis fashion, he refuses to comment and brushes his disappearance off as another meeting, no big deal, lads, just some good old fun with Uncle Si.

And then, when they’re back at the house and told to meet at the Vidcase for their video diary, he changes into his glasses and a button-down shirt and bowtie.

He cuts Liam off in the middle of discussing the double elimination of the night before, adopting that strange, nasally voice that tends to creep in when he’s being over-the-top and he’s very, very aware of it.

“Um, I’ve decided to take this moment to say, the boys have told me I need to be a bit more serious in the diaries.” Harry frowns at that, because he’s never said any such thing, and the other boys have the sense not to say it either. Stopping Louis from acting how he wants would be like trying to force a hurricane in the opposite direction. “So I’ve tried to go for a bit of a smarter look, just trying to be more serious.”

Harry turns, because he can’t help it, and finds Louis staring off camera, an eyebrow raised challengingly. The only person in his line of sight is Claudia, someone on the PR team or something who is always there when they film their video diaries and pre-show interviews and outside interviews—he only knows her name because he accidentally overheard a not-quite-friendly exchange between her and Louis once after he and Harry’d been out shopping and gotten papped holding hands as Harry had dragged Louis from store to store.

(“...careful, because every time you are in the papers it hurts the band a little more…” “...excuse me, Claudia, if I ask you to take your bosses’ suggestions and return them, preferably shoved neatly up their arses.”)

Her eyes are narrowed, her red nails tapping testily at the back of her Blackberry. They narrow even further, hardly more than angry slits, when Louis leans up and rubs at Harry’s shoulders.

Harry feels somewhat like a pawn in a game of chess he didn’t even realize was being played.

Eventually Louis reveals a Superman t-shirt hidden under his button-down in spectacular (and loud) fashion, and it’s like his weird telepathic tug-of-war with Claudia is done for the day.

At least, until—
“If you could Bond with any celebrity, who would it be?”

Louis pats at Harry’s shoulder. “I’d Bond with you, Harry.”

There’s a cracking sound somewhere in Claudia’s area as she drops her phone, but it hardly registers. Harry stares at Louis, because—that’s more than playful flirting under the guise of their "bromance.” Louis looks completely serious, none of his ridiculous accents or voices or cheeky winks in sight. At least a hundred years pass, or some other measurable but simultaneously infinite amount of time, and then a hint of a smile appears on Louis’ face, a tiny quirk of his lips. “Because it rhymes.”

Liam snorts and ruins everything. “No it doesn’t.”

“Hush, Liam, I’m being funny.”

Harry feels his lips tug up without his permission. Louis wants to be his soulmate. And, well, he isn’t. Because if they were soulmates, Harry’d have a Marker on his arm and these past few months would have been entirely different. But—

He still wants to be.

…

30 November 2010

The thing about being on X Factor is that it lets you see what it’s like to be famous without actually being famous.

Like, Louis knows that his is not a household name. He has a pretty big following on Twitter, sure (he’d texted Stan with every new follower from 19,901 to 20,000, and by the fiftieth text Stan had threatened to change his number). People scream for him during the live shows, yeah, but he’s still not anywhere near celebrity status. When he and Harry and Niall sneak out to Tesco to restock on ice cream and crisps, no one gives them a second glance. Not until there's tipped-off paparazzi on their trail, and then nobody actually recognizes them, just that they must be known for something.

So when Louis leads the way out of the limo (a limo) onto the red carpet (a real red carpet) of the Royal London Chronicles of Narnia premiere (an actual, A-list film premiere) and a thousand different cameras start clicking and flashing in his direction, it's nice to feel a little famous.
Leicester Square looks like Christmas came early, benches and lampposts and fountains covered in holly and red velvet and gratuitous amounts of fake snow. It’s smaller than the Harry Potter premiere they’d went to a few weeks back (and it could never compare, because that’s where Louis got to meet Emma Watson. That actually happened), but at that one they had been little more than guests with a slightly higher access than the common folk. Here, they’re still not guests of honor or anything—that would be the Queen, bloody hell—but they get their moment on the red carpet and some time with fans who came out in droves in the cold just to meet them.

“Hello, love,” Louis smiles as he approaches the barrier where the fans and standing and cheering. The girl, who has a bright red 1D painted on her face, squeals a little and hands him a notebook and pen.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, you guys are my favorite,” she gushes, vibrating with excitement.

“Yeah?” he laughs. “Keep voting, then, we aren’t quite to the end yet.”

“Of course! Thanks so much, Liam!”

Niall bursts into laughter beside him. “To be fair,” he laughs, patting Louis on the back, “all white brunette boys look the same. Go blonde, they’ll never forget your name.”

Louis pelts him with fake snow.
Linda, one of the *X Factor* assistants, rushes up to them once they’re finished at the fan barrier. “You’ve got one scheduled conversation with Joe McElderry that we have to video, and then you’re all done appearance-wise.”

“That’s it?” Zayn asks, rubbing his arms. The wind has picked up and it’s gone from a little chilly to borderline freezing.

“That’s it,” Linda confirms. “You can hang around if you want, but we weren’t able to snag tickets to get you into the actual film.” She gives them a parting nod and then bustles off to brief Matt, who’s still at the fan barrier signing autographs.

They find Joe McElderry, the *X Factor* winner from last year, and have a terribly awkward conversation, where Joe beams and spouts vapid clichés for the cameras while the five boys smile and nod in answer. “You’re nearly there now,” he promises. “You just gotta get out there and totally go for it.”

There’s not really anything they can say to that (because it isn’t really advice, is it? It’s just saying that they have to do what they were already going to do. It’s non-advice, if anything), but the camera crew signals that they’re good and wrapped. The moment the camera light switches off, Joe’s beatific smile drops and he puffs warm air onto his hands.

“Fucking hell, so fucking cold,” he swears angrily, hopping from foot to foot. Louis immediately likes him a thousand times more. “Old Simon got you out in the snow for a bit of press coverage, eh?”

“It’s supposed to be a perk for us,” Harry says, and Joe laughs.

“Right. Well, congrats, you’ve officially stood in the general vicinity of Liam Neeson and froze your bollocks off so that the press could get some pictures of you in suits. What a night.”

Harry looks a little distressed that his fun night might have the secret, nefarious purpose of getting more press attention for the show. Louis pulls him a little closer under the guise of keeping warm.

Joe leans close. “Alrighty, boys, listen up. For the three seconds we’ve got no cameras on us, I’m going to give you some actual advice.” He looks over his shoulder and drops his voice even lower, causing the five of them to crowd closer. “If you want to make it once the show’s tour is over in the spring, you’re going to have to trust each other and nobody fucking else. You got it? I don’t care what bullshit Simon has spouted, he cares about money and only money and if you aren’t making enough to keep him happy then he’ll find a new way to squeeze it out of you.”

Someone calls from another area, “Joe, we need you up on stage in five!” and Joe adopts his smile once more, waving over at them in confirmation.

Before he leaves, he mutters one last, “Trust each other, but no one else.”

“That was…” Niall starts shakily, and though he doesn’t finish, they all get what he means.

“We already knew that, though,” Louis says, trying to wipe the petrified look off of Zayn’s face. “We know not to trust anybody, we know they want to make money off of us.”

“Yeah but we’ve never heard it that… bluntly,” Liam says, eyes wide.

“Then I’ll be more blunt from now on,” Louis says, huffing. “I’ve been saying the same thing for months.” He grabs Liam and Zayn and moves them along, because they’re still uncomfortably close to the fan barrier and a dozen different paps to be having this conversation. When they reach a more
secluded area, he turns back to the four others who are following him like lost ducklings, looking around at the decor and the people milling about like everything in their lives has been a lie. “C’mon, lads. We get one night out, let’s make the best of it, yeah?”

Louis gets four pouty shrugs in return, and rolls his eyes. “That’s the spirit.”

Despite the boys’ abrupt slap of reality courtesy of Joe McElderry, they realize that they shouldn’t waste perfectly good suits, a square full of celebrities, and an evening free from their obligations. So they wander. They almost lose Niall when he swears he sees Prince Philip (“That’s just an old dude, Niall, not the fucking prince. Stop shouting at him, Christ.”) and it’s still cold as hell, but they have fun celebrity-spotting and walking through the square and stopping for pictures with fans.

Louis can’t think of anything that could have made the night better, not when he has his boys by his side, minor celebrities seeking them out so they can get papped together, and a phone full of texts from a jealous Lottie and Fizzy who beg him to get Ben Barnes’ phone number. And then—

“Snow!” Liam says joyfully as the first fat flakes fall. Zayn and Niall look up as well, Zayn’s lip quirking into a smile as Niall laughs delightedly.

Harry is standing just a little ways off, facing away from them, his head tilted back at an angle as silent snow falls gently around him. His curls glint in the firelight thrown his way by a gas lamp. He looks like a painting, a work of art; like if the snow around him stopped in the air for just a moment, he’d belong in a museum.

Fuck the Mona Lisa and her smile when there’s beauty like this out in the real world.

When Harry turns, he’s got pink cheeks and snow in his eyelashes and a soft grin specifically for Louis.

And a thought appears in Louis’ head. It isn’t particularly violent or blunt, not like the lightning strike metaphor of which people seem to be so fond. It’s quiet, less than a whisper but no less true because of it, a warm unfurling that starts in his chest and pushes out to his tingling fingers, his heated cheeks, his weak knees, his frozen toes.

Louis is in love with Harry.

He’s known since the second day at the bungalow that he loves Harry. He’d moaned it out over pancakes that morning: “Fuck me, Harry, I love you and your pancakes.” He loves all the boys, and he tells them regularly. They’re sort of shockingly affectionate for a group of teenage guys.

But this… this is different. This is being willing to act like an idiot in a thousand video diaries if it means making Harry laugh. This is being called into meetings with Modest! every single week because he’d rather put a hand on Harry’s waist during an interview than play along with their public narrative. This is knowing that someday Harry will leave, find someone worth his while, and he’ll Bond with them and have the happily ever after that he craves, and Louis will be left cherishing the time they had together.

This is waking up next to Harry every day, and wanting nothing more out of life than to just keep doing it.

It’s surprising, this sudden revelation, though it shouldn’t be. Every major world religion and most Hollywood films with a romantic plot say that soulmates are complements, the perfect other half. If there’s one thing about Louis and Harry that is true, it’s that they fit like puzzle pieces: Harry is the dawn to Louis’ dusk, his exact complement.
Louis didn’t really think he was missing a whole half of himself before he met Harry, not really.

He was wrong.

Louis breathes in deep and stares at his soulmate, a boy who smiles like sunshine and sings like rainfall falling on a tin roof and who will never love Louis back, not in the same way. And then Louis tips his head back to look at the night sky flecked with white snowflakes, and he laughs and laughs and laughs at his luck.

…

3 December 2010

A laptop screen is shoved in front of Harry’s face unceremoniously while he naps, and he almost falls off the sofa in surprise.

“This,” he hears, and then a familiar tan finger is tapping at the screen impatiently. “Hazza, listen. This, I want to try it.”

Harry scans the screen groggily, still half-asleep and befuddled at the turn of events. From what his blurry eyes can tell, it’s a recipe of some kind on the BBC website.

“You want me to cook for you, like I do every night, and you decided to wake me up to tell me this,” he says, not even lucid enough to lift the end of the sentence up into a question. Louis frowns.

“No. Sit up and listen, this is important. I want to cook this.”

Harry sits up. “You want to cook.”

“I want to cook.”

“You want to cook your first meal by making—” and then he leans over to read the screen again, “chicken stuffed with mozzarella cheese and wrapped in parma ham.”

Louis beams. “Yes, yes I do.”

This is a horrible idea. A truly awful idea. Louis can make tea and cereal, and... that is the end of the list. He put water on the stove to boil for pasta one day and then forgot about it, almost burning the whole house down. He regularly scorches toast until it’s unrecognizable as food. His favorite kitchen utensil is the massive filet knife, because he can grab it and say, “It looks like I’m in Psycho, Haz, look!” and then imitate screeching violin sounds at the top of his lungs. If he didn’t need a stovetop to make tea, he would have no use for the kitchen at all.

But he’s beaming like it’s the best idea ever and Harry is helpless to grin back. “Alright then. Let’s make you into a chef.”

It goes rather spectacularly awry from the word go.
“WHY DO YOU KEEP SAYING BUTTERFLY, I DON’T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS,” Louis screams, violently stabbing at the chicken breast in front of him. The oven beeps angrily behind Harry, reminding him that it’s been preheated and ready to go for several minutes now. There’s cheese stuck to the ceiling and olive oil in his hair and enough salt on the floor to dehydrate the whole city.

It’s quite a bit of a disaster, and Harry can’t stop laughing.

He waits for an opportune moment (when the actual weapon—why was this a good idea—is pointing away so he doesn’t lose a finger) and gently takes the knife from Louis’ hand. He slides the mutilated chicken across the counter and reaches for another, standing behind Louis and wrapping his arms around his waist. Louis stills immediately, watching Harry’s careful hands.

“Butterfly means cut it almost in half,” he says, grinning into Louis’ shoulder as he slowly slices at the meat, “then fold it outwards. That’s where the mozzarella goes.”

“Oh,” Louis says quietly, then reaches for another piece of chicken and the knife. “Gimme.”

He cuts cautiously, hands a little shaky as he butterflies the second piece of chicken, tongue poking out in concentration. Soon, though, there are two pieces of stuffed chicken wrapped in ham and ready to fry. Louis looks at the olive oil popping in the pan in trepidation.

“Want me to do the first one?” Harry asks carefully, but Louis shakes his head.

“No, I want to do it.” He shoots a self-deprecating smile at Harry. “Can’t be that hard, right?”

Harry bites his tongue, but it actually goes pretty well. There’s a moment he thinks they’re going to lose one of the chickens, Louis gesturing a little wildly with the spatula while telling a story and nearly sending the meat flying. He saves it, though, and grins delightedly when Harry applauds his quick hands.

It’s too much for Harry to handle on his own, so he shares it with the world.
When the chicken is slid into the oven and the potatoes are boiling, Harry starts reaching for plates and silverware.

Louis slaps his hand away. “What are you doing?”

“Um.” Harry frowns. “Setting the table?”

“No,” Louis disagrees, pulling the plates from Harry’s hands. “My job.”

“But—”

“This is the part I’m good at, Harold. Let me shine,” he winks, then swans around the corner and out to the main dining table to set their places. Harry rolls his eyes but smiles as he checks on the chicken and starts mashing the potatoes. Louis insists on ladling the finished potatoes into one of the fancy glass bowls and using the wine glasses for their water.

“Ambiance,” he claims, fluttering his fingers. “Atmosphere. Drama.”

“Well, you’ve got one of the three covered,” Harry murmurs, giggling when Louis pulls at his ear.

When the oven is switched off and the sink is full of dirty dishes, Louis stands at the doorway waiting for Harry, looking slightly apprehensive. He wipes his palms on his sweatpants and adjusts his shirt, almost like he’s nervous.
“Ready?” he asks, holding out an arm as though to escort Harry to the table and, honestly, Harry really doesn’t know what all the fuss is—

Oh. Oh.

Rather than the usual ragtag assortment of X Factor contestants, Sainsbury employees, film crew members, assistants, or Xtra Factor hosts that always seem to find themselves hanging around the dining room during the evening, it’s completely deserted.

But not empty, not by any means. The center of the long table is almost overflowing with candles, a few tall white pillars in the center all the way down to dozens of tiny tea lights.

“What…”

Louis stands off the the side, hands clasped behind his back and grinning.

“Lou,” Harry says weakly, “what is this?”

Louis shrugs. “I realized, the other day, that the two of us have never had a real, proper meal together. Not without a dozen other people around.”

“Yeah, but-”

“So,” he continues loudly, smiling. “I asked everyone, very politely, to give us an hour to ourselves.”


Louis clears his throat and steps forward to pull out Harry's chair, waving him forward. He shakes out Harry's napkin—a cloth napkin, where the hell did he get a cloth napkin—and then ruins the proper gentleman illusion by draping it gently across Harry’s face. Harry snorts, slipping the napkin into his lap and ruffling his hair back into place.

Conversation between them flows as easily as it always has, even despite the unusual situation. The wafting scent of chicken and spices floats in the air. They watch each other eat and talk and laugh like it's a foreign experience, their familiar faces new to each other in the flickering candlelight. They trade stories about their days even though they were together for most of it—Harry talks about their staging for Saturday’s show, how the creative director wants them to actually dance this time and Zayn had laughed in his face at the suggestion. Louis, in return, tells him about the writer Simon had introduced him to, someone named Rami who’s written songs for everyone from the Backstreet Boys to Bon Jovi and is interested in working with them when the show is over. They compliment each other on a meal well done and giggle over the replies to Harry's tweet and it should be weird, right? Because this has all the signs of a classic date, with the homemade meal and the candles and the actual alone time in a place where that sort of thing tends to be an impossibility.

They used the fancy plates, for Christ’s sake. Harry's never been on a real date in his life but he feels proper wooed.

Their loud laughter dwindles into something more gentle as the evening rolls on, candlelight reflecting off of empty plates as their voices get softer and they lean closer. Louis rubs his hand on Harry’s thigh when Harry tells a joke and doesn’t move it when he’s finished laughing (and this shouldn’t make Harry’s pulse pound like it does, it shouldn’t make his throat go dry in anticipation, it shouldn’t be a big deal because Louis does this all the time, it doesn’t mean anything).

(But what if it does?)
If this was a film, this would be where the soft acoustic guitar starts playing quietly in the background while Harry shifts closer. It would be where Harry notices how Louis’ eyelashes cast delicate shadows on his cheeks when he looks down to trace patterns on the tablecloth, where he can’t pull his eyes away from Louis’ mouth and the way he licks his lips right after he laughs. He’d notice Louis’ hands, his gentle wrists, his slender fingers and the way they dance up Harry’s arm.

He’d look up at Louis and see the sparkle of something promised in his eyes, and he’d lean in slowly, so slowly it doesn’t feel like falling so much as ebbing, a tide pulled to its rightful place.

Harry’s lips are inches, mere breaths, from Louis’ when Louis speaks.

"If a picture of this ends up on the Internet,” he says conversationally, and maybe Harry’s imagining the forced nonchalance, or maybe the blood rushing in his ears is making him hear things incorrectly, “I’m suing all of you."

Harry is confused until he looks up, finding a small crowd of people watching from a balcony above them. Liam waves sheepishly, the only one who actually seems to be ashamed of being caught spying. Cher and Matt pretend to wipe away tears of pride, but Mary and Rebecca look to be on the verge of actual tears. Niall, naturally, is not even trying to hide his phone or the shutter sounds it makes as he takes picture after picture (“Don’t worry, I’m sending all of these to Zayn!” he says, laughing). Even some of the production crew have put their cameras down long enough to watch, Harry recognizing a few friendly faces who wouldn’t record this and give it to the producers—Jim and TJ and Louis’ favorite Ricky that he sometimes shares cigarettes with when the rest of the boys are inside.

With the abrupt realization that Harry and Louis aren’t as alone as they feel, the restive, quiet mood between them is broken. Louis laughs and flips their audience off, then helps Harry blow out the candles and get the dishes to the sink to be washed. The rest of their housemates trickle downstairs for their normal activities as Harry cleans up and Louis sips his nightly cup of Yorkshire, pretending it’s just another Friday evening and nothing has changed when really, everything is different.

But, just like any other night, they fall asleep that night in each other's arms.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, look, some actual sexual content! Yay!

I'm doing sneak previews for this fic every week on my tumblr, and my ask box is always open if you want to scream at me about how literal I was being by tagging this work 'slow burn.'

The post for this story is here if you want to reblog and spread the word.

EDIT: I've had multiple people ask about Louis saying Harry's full name in this chapter. It is on purpose, and it will be explained! I promise I know what I'm doing. :)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 7: 4 December 2010 - 12 December 2010

4 December 2010

It's tense in the studio going into the semi-final.

Which makes sense. They've come so far and they’re all so close to the finish line, but one act is going home tonight and the other four will make X Factor history and, as one can probably imagine, that puts a little bit of a strain on everyone in the building at Fountain Studios.

It keeps building as morning wears into afternoon, pushing almost to the edge of everyone’s breaking points. They all know they’re high strung on nerves and adrenaline, too little sleep and too much pressure, but they can’t help but snap at each other over the tiniest of things. Matt makes Cher cry when she accidentally sprays hairspray in his eye, and they all decide that cramming together in the overflowing wardrobe room isn’t the best route to take tonight.

Cher goes one way, sniffling, Matt goes another, Rebecca stays to have her long hair twisted up in a gravity-defying bun, Mary goes to call her daughter, and One Direction find an empty room to themselves where they can breathe freely and talk louder than a whisper without setting someone off.

Of course, the nerves haven’t magically vanished just because they’ve moved to a new room. Within minutes, Niall and Louis are screaming at each other over God knows what, Zayn is staring angrily into a corner, arms crossed tightly across his chest (and Harry can’t tell if it's because of the screaming match or because he’s not been invited to join in the screaming match). Harry himself is pressing his hands to his ears to block the noise, overwhelmed and terrified and feeling that awful creep of anxiety begin to spin through his veins.

Liam stands, claps loudly a few times, and yells over the din, “Favorite song we’ve performed on three!”

They all stop in their metaphorical tracks. Niall's mouth is still open after a wordless shriek of anger, and Louis is paused mid-shouted sentence (“...wring your neck, leprechaun-”). Zayn raises a single unamused eyebrow, not deigning to speak but communicating quite clearly: Is he serious?

Liam starts counting. “One.”

Apparently he's serious.

"Two."

Louis snorts, his eyes challenging.

“Three.”

Harry opens his mouth to answer, feeling a little like he's powerless to stop himself. He isn’t the only one.

“Summer of ’69,” Harry says.
“Nobody Knows,” Zayn says.

“Kids In America,” Niall says.

“Torn,” Louis says.

Bemused silence radiates through the room. Liam looks like a smug babysitter who got the kids to calm down, eyes crinkling as the corner of his mouth tugs up in a satisfied grin.

It’s not a good look on him.

“I thought you hated Guilty Pleasure week, Z,” Harry says, anxiety unspooling a little in his stomach before it can get any traction. Zayn unwinds his arms, his fists unclenching.

“Nah,” he chuckles, “Just thought they were gonna make us do something stupid. But then they gave us an actual decent song, so I felt better about it. Summer of ’69, though? I thought that one about caused you to have a meltdown, didn’t think it’d be your favorite.”

“Well it’s the first song we got to pick on our own, and you guys agreed with my choice. It was,” Harry stops, grins at his hands. “It was nice, y’know? Happy day.”

Zayn grins as well and punches him softly on the arm.


“I liked the cheerleaders,” he says, and Louis giggles. “And we basically hopped around like idiots through the whole thing, it was awesome.”

“Why Torn, Lou?” Zayn asks curiously.

“Yeah, that was probably our worst one we’ve ever done,” Liam adds.

Harry snorts. Louis sends him a sharp look in return.

“What was that about?” Liam asks, eyebrows furrowed.

“Nothing, Liam,” Louis says quickly. “Nothing at all.”


Louis loudly switches back to the original topic. “I like Torn because it’s how we became us, y’know? That could’ve been our first and last song together, but it wasn’t.”

The room is a lot more comfortable after that, the stress eased away. “Good tension breaker, Liam,” Harry says, and Zayn nods in agreement.

“Thanks!” Liam says brightly. “I was watching Friends last night, right, and it was the one with the game where they say the first thing that comes to their minds to make a decision. Just sort of popped into my head, you know?”

“I like it,” Louis says approvingly, and that’s how they pass the next hour.

“Favorite James Bond movie.”

“Favorite Disney princess, and don’t pretend you don’t know any, Zayn, we all know better.”
“Favorite Friends character.”

“Favorite Rihanna song,” Harry asks, “In honor of our first performance tonight.”

They’ve all slid into the floor to lay in a star shape, their heads together and legs pointing outwards. Grace is going to kill them when they show back up at wardrobe for their pre-show check with wrinkled clothes and flattened hair, but they really don’t care at the moment.

“That’s a good one,” Niall agrees.

“I like Unfaithful,” Liam chimes in. “I like the piano.”


“Of course, Lou,” he laughs, and Louis just grins.


“In this scenario,” Liam questions thoughtfully, “Are you the rude boy, or are you speaking to the rude boy?”

Louis shrugs. “Both? Sometimes I am the rude boy, sometimes the rude boy is after me. But,” he says, grinning lasciviously at the ceiling, “no one ever asks if I’m big enough. Or if I can get it up.”

Niall and Liam groan in answer, but Harry bursts into giggles. “I want to see you try and pull someone by just singing Rude Boy at them.”

“Yeah?” Louis asks, rolling his head against the carpet to look over at Harry, smirking. “Wanna watch me dance up on someone and tell them to take it?”

Oh.

Harry feels his face flame, his mouth drop open. He definitely doesn’t picture it; definitely doesn’t think of Louis in a darkened room where the bass pulses against the walls and the air is heavy with sex and smoke. Louis with shiny skin, too-tight skinnies, sweaty hair shoved back off his face, his hips moving filthily as he pushes someone back against a wall (not Harry, definitely not Harry, not that he’s even thinking about this happening at all, of course not). He doesn’t think of how Louis’ breath would be warm in his ear as he murmurs “Do you like it, boy?” into Harry’s ear, their chests pressed together. He doesn’t think about Louis’ hips lining with his, anchoring him in an indecent rhythm. He doesn’t think about letting go of all control, about letting Louis catch him as he tilts his head back and surrenders.

He doesn’t think of any of that, and he definitely, definitely doesn’t feel his cock twitch in his jeans. “Um,” he says when he manages to figure out how words work, and then he coughs.

Louis’ grin widens, and he sings loudly, “Tonight, I'mma let you be the captain. Tonight, I'mma let you do your thing, yeah.” He shimmies his shoulders, drops his eyes to Harry’s bitten lips. “Tonight, I'mma let you be a rider. Giddy up, giddy up babe.” Niall, who is cackling at Louis’ antics as always, slaps a hand over Louis’ mouth to muffle the chorus.

Is this what death feels like? Or is this a religious experience? Either way, Harry can’t breathe.
Maybe it’s just the light in the room shifting, but Louis’ eyes seem a lot darker when they meet Harry’s again. Harry’s stomach feels full of cooling lava, of electric butterflies, of powdered sunshine; something that leaves his veins sparking and his pulse thrumming. Louis still hasn’t looked away.

The spell is broken by Liam. “Favorite brand of cereal!” he all but yells. Harry startles at the noise, finally able to force his gaze back to the ceiling and take a deep, shaky breath.

Liam may be a smug bastard sometimes, but he may also be an actual saint.

*Only Girl in the World* is actually Harry’s least favorite song they’ve performed yet, just because it really isn’t his style and there’s not much room to show off their vocals. But it’s right up Zayn and Niall’s alley and their energy is catching, so it’s a fun time bouncing from one side of the stage to the other.

At the end of the song, Louis wraps an arm around Harry and Zayn’s shoulders, who reach for Liam and Niall and pull each other in for a group hug. The crowd eats it up, screams its approval.

There’s no way to know for sure, but Harry’s got a gut feeling.

After they sing *Chasing Cars*, the gut feeling morphs into full-blown confidence.

This time next week, they’ll be performing in the final.

... 

5 December 2010

If Saturday at the studio had been tense, it’s nothing compared to Sunday morning. Little sleep and less patience has led to an ugly cocktail of tears and frequent shouting, followed by weepy iterations of *I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it* and hugs that threaten strangulation. Louis has caused and solved more breakdowns this morning than he has the past five months of being on this show, and all he wants is a minute away from the hysteria.

So he grabs Harry (the kid who is on the verge of collapse due to nerves every time they take the stage and yet who is the only lucid human in the fucking building at the moment) and drags him down a hallway until he spots a familiar head of light blonde hair.

“Ricky!” Louis calls, and he spots a grin behind the massive camera that whips his way as he bustles up the hallway. “I need a distraction.” Ricky automatically reaches for his pack of cigarettes, but Louis stops him. “Nah, something else. Got any segments you need willing participants for?”

Ricky’s grin widens, and he unshoulders the camera. “Sure do, Lou. Got a sponsored game that was s’posed to be filmed a week ago, totally forgot.”

“Is it mindlessly stupid? Ridiculously cheesy? Incredibly embarrassing?”

“You know it.”

Louis smirks at Harry, who’s watching the exchange warily but smiles back when Louis catches his
eye.

“Let’s do it.”

Ricky leads them to the room everyone’s been using as a large coat closet, the decor consisting of one long makeup mirror, various belongings of the crew and acts strewn about, and an empty sofa. Louis has to refrain from making the obvious amateur porn joke.

Well, he tries really hard to refrain. It’s worth the blow to his joke-telling dignity when Harry squawks a loud, surprised laugh, eyes squinting in glee. After he’s recovered, Harry sprawls himself across the sofa, kicking both feet up to rest along the back. Louis perches next to him, awaiting instructions.

Ricky is completely right: it’s a stupid game, one of those where the sole purpose is to make minor British celebrities do embarrassing things on camera. Sainsbury’s, for some unfathomable reason, wants them to unwrap as many chocolate coins as they possibly can in one minute.

As it turns out, a full minute of something so dumb is more than Louis can handle. Halfway in—two chocolate coins unwrapped apiece, not that he’s keeping track—Louis goes for the sabotage. He grabs for Harry’s still-wrapped pile, stealing more ammo and making Harry laugh a delighted raspy laugh. Harry retaliates by going after Louis’ stash in return.

Which, conveniently enough, is neatly situated in Louis’ lap.

Louis screeches when Harry’s massive hand grabs for the chocolates and completely misses, palming his dick through his sweatpants.

_Fuck._ Why would anyone need such huge hands? It’s impractical, and unnecessary, and _rude_, and—oh, hell, and it’s making Louis hard. What does he do? _What does he do?_

He panics, that’s what he does.

Louis throws his pile of chocolate at Harry’s face. Harry takes it in stride and fends off the attack, giggling. Louis has just run out of coins to throw when he hears Harry half-whisper through his giggles, “Now kiss me, you fool.”

Louis freezes; there is not a single universe in which he is strong enough to resist when Harry Styles asks to be kissed.

However, he _does_ just barely have the strength not to launch into a full-on snog when there’s a camera pointed at him and he’s got a mouthful of stolen chocolate coins. Especially since it sort of sounded like an actual request but also sort of sounded like a joke, and Louis would probably actually die if he leaned in to kiss Harry and Harry leaned away, claiming he was just kidding. Harry’s usually open-book face is written in code now, and Louis doesn’t have the time to break it to see if he really meant what he said.

Louis takes a breath and takes a chance, going for a sort-of compromise. He leans forward, laying hard kisses along Harry’s throat and trying not to choke on chocolate. He pushes frantic hands through Harry’s hair (because he has lost all control of the situation and his limbs) and wonders if this looks like two mates just having a laugh.

_Probably not._

Christ, this is a bad idea. Harry is an idiot for asking on camera, and Louis is an idiot for giving in. He’s going to be in so much trouble.
The thought of Magee and Griffiths staring down their noses at him as he explains yet again that he is not Bonded to Harry and no, that video evidence isn’t what it looks like is enough to send Louis scrambling backwards, straightening his beanie. Harry laughs breathily as he leans away, the skin on his neck red from Louis’ lips, God; Louis turns to the camera like it was always the plan to devolve their dumb game into a faux-snog with his best friend.

“So,” he laughs uneasily into Ricky’s camera, trying to ignore they way the cameraman’s eyebrows have risen behind the eyepiece. “Who won?”

Ricky eventually leaves Harry and Louis alone when they’ve given him sufficient material to make his bosses happy, and they spend their remaining free time there in the coat room, chewing on discarded chocolate and talking with Mary, who’s barricaded herself in with them after making Rebecca cry about her false eyelashes.

Harry chatters on like nothing’s wrong. Louis tries really hard not to think about the way Harry’s hand felt on his cock. He tries even harder not to puzzle out why Harry would tell Louis to kiss him in front of a camera.

Or at all, really.

Eventually, responsibilities find them in the form of Liam, and they’re dragged to wardrobe to change out of their sweats and into their typical results show uniforms—gray and black as far as the eye can see, Harry in his usual blazer and Louis in a skinny scarf.

Louis tugs at his own sleeve to hide the dagger and tries to breathe deeply as they’re led on stage to find out whether they’re going to the final.

Saying goodbye to Aiden had been awful. Like losing a limb, or sending a brother off to war.

Well, okay. Maybe not the brother part, since Aiden had pretty adamantly tried to stick his tongue in the vicinity of Louis’ mouth multiple times.

But, for metaphor’s sake, it was a similar experience. Just completely gone from one day to the next, nothing remaining except his involvement in the house’s group text and the t-shirts Louis had stolen from his wardrobe. It had been truly, truly terrible, and Louis still misses him every day.

And yet, somehow, losing Mary is even worse.

Louis had never even considered that she’d be gone. She’s a Dublin hero, a national treasure, a powerful singer and a wonderful woman and sometimes the only thing that stood between the X Factor finalists and total chaos. There had never been any doubt in Louis’ mind that she’d be in the final.

But the judges vote to keep Cher in the final four, and so Mary has to leave.

Harry is sobbing, as is Niall. They cling to each other as Mary leaves the stage, her head held high and her elegant black gown sweeping the floor. Louis can’t breathe, his own sobs caught somewhere in his lungs. He rests his head on Zayn’s shoulder, lip trembling.
Mary smiles when she sees them waiting offstage, a single tear rolling down her cheek. She gathers Niall and Harry to her, hugging them close and looking over their heads to where Louis, Liam, and Zayn are watching, their arms around each other.

Her rich voice rolls over them in a soothing rhythm, repeating the same words over and over again: “Be happy, my boys. Be happy.”

6 December 2010

The boys find the Vidcase cordoned off the next morning. There’s a large sign proclaiming wet paint, even though nothing is a new color or looks wet or smells like paint at all, really.

There’s another new addition as well: Claudia stands just next to the sign, business classy from her blonde ponytail to her almost-too-high pumps to her crimson lips that match her sharp fingernails. Her professional air is not quite good enough to hide that bit of a sneer twisting the corner of her mouth.

"No video diary this week, I’m afraid," she says coolly, looking straight at Louis.

So, the Superman bit last week had gone too far. Or maybe that wasn’t even on the radar, maybe they’re being punished because Louis proclaimed he’d Bond with Harry (and oh, the irony). Or maybe it was the chocolate coin game.

There’s a lot for them to be punished for, apparently.

Either way, Louis pissed off Claudia’s evil overlords enough to cancel their last ever video diary. The one chance they get to thank the fans and let them get to know the band a little better. Bastards.

It's almost worth it, though, to know that Louis' stunts must be making enough of an impact that action must be taken. That he doesn't sweat and squirm through all those meetings with those blank faced men for nothing. That all the little comments and critiques at his expense haven't gone to waste.

Louis isn't sure what management actually thinks is happening. Sometimes they confront him like he's playing up a fake Bond for personal publicity, using a real tattoo as a fake Marker and Harry as his accomplice. Sometimes they talk like he's just a silly boy with a crush and that his infatuation is so clear that media outlets are using it to sell stories independent of his wishes. They haven’t asked again if Louis is actually Bonded, and he wonders if Simon has convinced them otherwise. Or maybe they think he’d tell them if he was.

(It's sort of terrifying to be told that your Bond—or pretend Bond, and really there’s no difference when it comes to the press—can ruin the band. But it's even more empowering, because it means Louis holds a little bit of information that makes the most important men he’s ever met shake in their Italian leather shoes.)

Louis might be winning the war (because what can they do, really? They can call him in for a thousand meetings, it won’t make him stop loving Harry. And it’s not like they could make him date someone else, that’s just ridiculous) but he’s lost this battle, and Claudia’s sneer tells him she knows it too. He’s just opening his mouth to let loose some sort of snarling protest when someone beats him to it.

“No,” Liam says authoritatively. “We have to do a video diary. That’s out of the question.”

Claudia’s eyes flicker over to him. “Sorry, that’s what I’ve been told.”
“Well you were told wrong, then. The fans are expecting it, and we can’t let them down.”

Liam doesn’t scream or bluster when he argues, he’s all thought-out phrases laid one after the other to inflict maximum damage. Louis would love to learn his fighting secrets, if he only had the patience to sit and formulate arguments rather than screeching _oh yeah, well fuck you_ at the top of his lungs. Sadly, it doesn’t seem to be in Louis’ cards, but he sure is glad to have Liam on his side in this case.

“Again, sorry to tell you this-”

“Then don’t,” Liam says, lifting his chin and showing a little defiance, some steel behind his soft exterior. “We’ll take it up with Simon later. I’ll be sure and let him know it was you that told us no.”

Claudia is too good to flinch, but her eyes do tighten infinitesimally.

“Fine,” she says.

“Fine,” Liam shoots back.

And then he herds the other boys away, and he even grins a little when Louis turns back around to stick his tongue out at Claudia.

Simon agrees with Liam.

“Of course you’re doing a video diary,” he says, looking affronted. “Who told you that bullshit?”

“I don’t know her name,” Liam says, eyes crinkled a little in the corner at having Simon agree with him. “Blonde lady, think she’s with PR.”

Louis clears his throat. “Claudia,” he says quietly, and Simon catches his eyes for one beat, two, three.

“Oh,” he says succinctly. “Well, we’ll fix that. It won’t be today, though, we’ve got too much to do. You’ll be doing the home visits all day tomorrow and won’t have time to rehearse.”

Harry bounces on his toes a little at that—they’ll be visiting each of the four English boys’ cities (Mullingar is out of the question due to some intense snow, and Niall isn’t taking it very well), but the Holmes Chapel stop will be at Harry’s actual house.

Simon grins, and pulls out a sheet of paper. “Let’s talk about song choices for the final,” he says, and in true dramatic fashion he slowly slides the paper across the desk rather than just reading out what they’ll be performing. The five boys’ heads knock together as they lean in to read, but nobody complains as they take in the three songs that will literally decide their fate.

“Elton!” Harry breathes happily.

“Robbie Williams,” Liam whispers rapturously.

“Torn,” Louis murmurs, and he looks up to see the other four watching him closely. He thinks of his own words from just a few nights ago—_it’s how we became us_—and grins, a little out of breath with things like redemption and happily ever after swirling through his mind. He gets four grins in return, and he stores them away in the back of his mind like trophies.
It’s weird in the boys’ bedroom that night. Louis has the itching urge to apologize, though he’s pretty sure he hasn’t done anything wrong and doesn’t really know what he’d be apologizing for. Still, something’s… off.

The boys move around each other like choreographed dancers in the small space: Harry tosses Niall a t-shirt from the communal laundry pile, Niall twirls out of Liam’s way as he moves toward the bathroom, Liam reaches over as he passes to cover Zayn’s bare foot where he’s kicked his duvet crooked, Zayn tugs on Louis’ elbow in a silent plea and almost dislodges his toothbrush, Louis grins and hands Zayn his phone charger so he doesn’t have to leave the warmth of his blankets, all of them moving pieces in the nighttime clockwork routine.

Liam is the one to break the silence. “Let’s talk about today, shall we?”

“What about today?” Louis asks warily.

“We sounded bloody fantastic, that’s what,” Zayn answers.

He’s not wrong. They won’t be able to really practice *She’s the One* in full until their scheduled time with Robbie Williams on Wednesday (which, by the way, is still something that Louis hasn’t thought too much about because he might scream or faint or cry, even though he should probably get all that out of his system before he does all three in front of Robbie), but *Your Song* is the perfect mix of rocky and soft for them, and *Torn*—

When they practiced *Torn* it sounded like it was being sung by a group who’s been together for decades and know each other better than they know themselves. Like it was being sung by people much older and more experienced than the five boys who were actually singing.

“I know we’ve gotten stronger since we got here and started getting regular vocal lessons, but—”

Niall cuts Liam off. “We sound fucking ace, yeah. I just don’t get where that comes from, ‘cause like, it takes a lot more than some vocal coaching to get us from how we sounded at the Judge’s House to how we did today.”

Harry snorts.

Zayn looks over at him sharply. “What, H?”

Harry flicks his eyes over to Louis, who’s starting to understand why he feels that need to apologize. He stays quiet, though, and so does Harry.

“Nope!” Niall announces. “Nope, no, we aren’t doing this shit. No secrets among bandmates.” He throws a balled-up sock at Harry and points threateningly. “You tell us what you know.”

Harry tosses another glance at Louis, and seems like he’s going to keep from answering until he’s hit in the face with a pair of Niall’s boxers this time.

“Jesus, okay! We sounded different at Judge’s House because Louis turned off his mic when we performed.”

The room rings with the echo of his words. Louis feels the residual shame well up in stomach as Liam, Niall, and Zayn turn to him, looking betrayed.

“You did what?” Liam gasps. Louis can’t stand the confusion on their faces, so he turns away.
“Harold,” he admonishes quietly. “That was months ago! Thought we were past it.”

“Nope,” Harry says, popping the ‘p.’ “Still mad at you ‘bout all that. And there’s no secrets between bandmates, see.”

“Damn right,” Niall says, throwing a sock at Louis this time. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“I didn’t want to ruin our chances!” Louis answers defensively. “I didn’t think I was really necessary.”

“You were,” Zayn quietly throws in. Louis can see Harry nod from the corner of his eye.

“He knows. I made sure he knows.”

Louis rubs absentmindedly at his forearm. He can remember it like it was yesterday, Harry’s disappointment, his words that had echoed in Louis’ mind for hours after that, keeping him awake far into the early morning. We needed you. “Yeah, I know.”

Niall clears his throat. “That was good. Therapeutic. Now, any more secrets that need to be aired out?”

Louis curls in on himself, trying to look like all his secrets have been bled out for the day. He’s not about to go announcing that he’s Bonded to Harry when something as small as him not singing one song four months ago caused that big of a reaction. The other boys are quiet too: Harry is chewing on his lip and Niall is messing with his fringe and Zayn is looking at his phone but clearly listening intently, his eyes never moving.

It’s Liam that bursts.

“Harry used the sex room!” he reveals, then claps a hand over his mouth.

What?

Wait, no.

No, he’d never—

“No,” Harry says dazedly as Louis turns slowly to face him. “No, that’s. No-”

“I overheard Rebecca and Mary,” Liam continues. Louis sort of can’t breathe. “They talked about how loud you were, and that you kept saying someone’s name but they didn’t say who.” Harry shakes his head wildly.

“No,” he says again. Louis feels like his insides are being yanked out of his body, but it’s happening so slowly that he can feel every painful inch of it. Someone else, someone that is very much not Louis, got to touch Harry? Got to lay him across unused cotton sheets and touch his skin, hear his moans, see him flush with sex and endorphins? Had him screaming their name? Louis needs— he needs to find out who, needs to hunt them down and hear whether they treated Harry like how he deserves—

Niall and Zayn look to be on the verge of delighted laughter, Niall’s eyebrows already raised in surprise.

“I didn’t, it wasn’t-” Harry says to Louis, and it makes him wonder what his face looks like right now. It can’t be good, going by Harry’s panic.
“Was it that brunette girl from the other night, Hazza?” Niall asks, grinning darkly. “Bet it was, she was all over you.”

A memory hits like a sledgehammer: Louis cuddling a shaky Harry in this very bed not too long ago, still fully clothed and smelling like strange, sweet vanilla. His stomach twists.

“Yeah, I was with her friend,” Zayn adds. “Ashley, right? She was hot.”

“No, it was no one!” Harry cries in anguish. “There wasn’t anyone in there with me!”

There’s a stunned silence as Harry’s meaning hits home. Louis sits up, the sinking feeling in his stomach dissipating a little.

“Oh my God,” Liam says.

Niall collapses against the nearest wall in laughter. Zayn howls, slapping an open palm on his mattress. Liam is chuckling into his palm, still looking a little contrite.

Louis feels like a balloon has popped in his chest.

“Hazza, love,” he giggles, deliriously happy that he doesn’t have to hunt anyone down, reaching over and rubbing at Harry’s ankle. “If you needed time for a wank, you should have told us. We’d have given you some space!”

“Christ,” Harry moans, burying his face in his hands. “Please, please stop.”

“Whose name were you yelling?” Zayn asks, cackling. “Who’s the fantasy wank material?”

“Nobody,” Harry mumbles through his hands.

“Oh my God, do we know them?” Niall asks, gleeful. “We do, don’t we? Is it Cher?”

“Nah, mate, gotta be Cheryl,” Zayn says.

Harry stands suddenly, his limbs tight and uncoordinated. His face is angry red, splotchy. “It’s no one, alright? Back off!”

It’s not very convincing, as far as threatening exclamations go, especially since Harry’s voice breaks horribly in the middle of it. He stares at the ground but, just once and like he can’t help himself, he flickers the briefest glance at Louis. The silence turns immediately into something stretched and uncomfortable.

Louis’s skin feels too tight all of a sudden.

He’s pretty sure he hears Niall whisper, “Oh.”

Harry buries his face in his hands again. The room is horribly quiet.

"I'll be in the shower," Harry mutters, even though his hair is still wet from the shower he took not an hour ago. The other three turn to look at Louis when the door closes.

"You two aren't..." Liam trails off delicately, and Louis shakes his head. He feels numb.
It goes quiet after that, the lights turned off and the other boys badly pretending to sleep, letting Harry have his alone time but ready to jump out of bed if he needs help. Louis uses the time while Harry showers to try and reorder his jumbled thoughts, because he’d flown so frantically from shame to anxiety to hot rage to glee to… whatever this is, something that feels like confused secondhand arousal.

Maybe Harry was lying because he could tell Louis was hurt. Blatantly lying isn’t a very Harry-like thing to do, but trying to spare his feelings definitely is.

Oh, God. What if he can read Louis’ attraction to him like it’s stamped on his forehead? It has to be so obvious, there’s no way he can’t have some idea of how much Louis wants anything Harry is willing to give.

Then again… even Harry isn’t so self-sacrificing to let other people think he loudly masturbated rather than having sex with an actual person. So what if that’s not what happened? What if Harry actually was just getting himself off?

What if he was getting himself off to thoughts of Louis?

Christ that’s. That’s beyond flattering, that’s like. That’s the kind of thought that makes Louis’ brain spin, and he can’t linger on it too long without dreaming up ridiculous scenarios in which Harry decides to protest the entire biological process of Bonding and decides to just stay forever with his infatuated best friend in a semi-but-not-really-platonic lovefest. Which isn’t going to happen, because Harry is the guy who cries over the thought of meeting his soulmate on a weekly basis. And Louis shouldn’t want that anyway, he should want Harry to find his soulmate and be happy and not want to have sex with Louis.

It’s getting hard, though, to pretend that all those glances and touches and whispers and I love yous don’t mean something more.

He’s still awake when Harry tiptoes back into the room, and he feigns sleep as Harry pauses by the bed, as though deliberating on whether or not to climb in like nothing’s changed. Harry eventually slides in behind Louis, pressing his face between Louis’ shoulderblades and murmuring, “I know you’re awake.”

Louis turns over. “Sorry. I just-”

“No,” Harry says, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-”

“It’s fine, Hazza,” Louis whispers, aware of the other three boys in the room probably straining to listen.

A long, long pause.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

7 December 2010

Louis is in a van that is hurtling down the A1 somewhere between London and Doncaster at an ungodly hour of the morning, and Harry is holding his hand.
Well, sort of.

“They’re just so tiny,” Harry whispers, his massive paw cradling Louis’ hand to compare sizes. Louis tries to make an affronted noise but it comes out more like a sleepy grumble, and his skin is tingling where Harry is stroking his thumb over the pads of Louis’ fingers.

“Not that small,” Louis says. “Not the smallest ever.”

“The smallest in the history of time,” Harry says in awe, tracing Louis’ wrist. He twists around in the V of Louis’ legs and shoots him a sly grin. “I’ll be taller than you with my next growth spurt.”

“Excuse you,” Louis sniffs. “I could have a growth spurt too.”

“I’ll be tall and strong and you’ll still be-” He stops at Louis’ raised eyebrows, “-slightly less tall but just as strong?”

Louis snorts. “I’ll always be older, at least.”

Harry hums, turning back around and wiggling to get comfortable, his back against Louis’ chest. “Uglier, too.”

“Why, I never,” Louis gasps, pinching Harry’s side and making him giggle into his palm. “The impudence! The audacity! The-”

“Unmitigated gall?” Harry finishes, gasping in air between laughs. “I was with you when you watched The Grinch last night, remember?”

Louis pokes him in the ribs. “Hush, you. Back to your original, unnecessary, and totally untrue comment, my mum says I’m the prettiest boy in the world.”

Harry grins, tracing Louis’ palm again. “She’s not wrong.” Louis feels his face burn, so he drops his forehead down to rest on Harry’s shoulder in lieu of answering. “Speaking of mums,” he continues slowly, “I think I’m gonna tell mine today, in person. About us living together?”

Louis freezes, sending a furtive look around the quiet van. They’re the only two still awake besides the driver; the cameraman in the passenger seat is fast asleep, and the three other boys nodded off not long after they left the TV studio this morning after their interview for Ireland AM. This van is the kind where the second and third rows of seats face each other, leaving an empty space in the middle for easier access in and out of the vehicle. Perfect for paparazzi photos of a group of people arriving or leaving an event, funnily enough, but it also means Harry and Louis get a perfect view of Niall with his feet angled up against the window while he snores loudly and Zayn using Liam’s lap as a pillow.

Louis is pretty sure the crew member driving isn’t paying attention to them, too busy humming along to U2 on the radio to hear their conversation. Still, he whispers when he answers Harry’s comment.

“Were you being serious, then? You want to live together?”

Harry frowns. “Yeah, of course. Did you think I wasn’t?”

“No, God no,” Louis half-laughes. “I believed you. We just haven’t talked about it in, what, three weeks?”

“What’s there to talk about? I mean, we won’t really know what we can afford until after the show ends, but then we can start looking for places we like.”
“Hazza, love, there’s so much more than that,” Louis says gently. “I’m not, like, an expert, but I’d started looking at housing for uni before the show and there’s so much that goes into it.”

Harry is quiet for a moment, biting his lip. “Like what?”

“Like… Like we never even picked a city. So, do we both like London enough to live there? And if so, where in London? What neighborhood? What style of flat do we want—a studio? One bedroom, two bedrooms? Do we have to get insurance? What about security? And that’s just the flat itself, we don’t have anything in the way of our own furniture. Plus, God, Hazza, you’re still sixteen. Would I have to be your legal guardian since you’re underage? I have no idea how any of that works. There’s so, so much to talk about.”

Harry’s shoulders slump further with each new word, and Louis feels awful for that but he can’t let Harry continue thinking it’s as easy as picking a flat and throwing out some cash. Louis runs a soothing hand up his spine, about to apologize, when—

“I want to live in London, and so do you, that’s what you said when we first moved into the house. If we can choose to live anywhere, I’ve always wanted to live at Primrose Hill, but I’m open to just about anywhere. We could do a three bedroom flat, one for both of us and a guest room for if our families come to visit. I can talk to my mum about insurance, and about borrowing some furniture from our house that she isn’t using. Simon will set up security if we want it, I’m sure. I have pictures saved on my phone with ideas for decorating a kitchen and a living room. And I don’t care if I have to do a tree’s worth of paperwork to live with you, that’s what I want to do.” Harry has turned fully to look at Louis, his voice never above a whisper but his eyes blazing. “I want to live with you, Lou. I really do.”

Louis feels a little bit like he’s been hit by a truck, his heart pumping loudly with all his feelings for this ridiculous boy. He wants to jump on top of this van and shout it to the world, to tweet it to the hungry mobs following him on Twitter, to announce it to all of England when they go live on Saturday night.

But he can’t do that, so he grins and pulls Harry back against his chest and into a hug. “I would love to move in with you,” he says, muffled into Harry’s shoulder. “Now,” he says, sitting back up in time to catch Harry’s beaming grin, “show me these kitchen inspiration pictures.”

Harry nods off a little into their discussion of the ideal flat color scheme (Louis likes gold and red and black and white, Harry likes pale greys and lavender and cerise, even though Louis is pretty sure that isn’t even a word, let alone a color), leaving Louis time to think. Now, normally this isn’t a good thing—a bored Louis with nothing but his thoughts in a silent van nearly an hour from their destination would ordinarily be recipe for chaos and bloodshed—but right now he’s feeling languid and lazy and introspective and less like he wants to tie Niall and Liam’s shoelaces together.

Today they’ve got four distinct stops for appearances: a school visit, a home visit, a signing, and a concert. And it’s strange, it’s so, so strange, that the crew chose Doncaster for the school visit. Almost like fate, except Louis doesn’t believe in fate. Actually, in a weird way all of the stops throughout the day seem to align pretty decently with what each boy is hoping to get out of the home visits.

Like Harry: the boys had watched old X Factor series to prepare for the final, and Harry had teared up at every single one of the interviews with the finalists’ family members or friends. A party for the band at his house in Holmes Chapel is perfect for him: he gets to spend time with his mum and sister
and stepdad, and he gets to introduce his bandmates and new best friends to extended family and his friends from school. He gets to have his sob-inducing conversation with his mum about how proud she is of all he’s done. He won’t have to sing for any of them (“I know it’s ridiculous, because we sing on national TV every week, but… like, the thought of singing in front of a room full of people who’ve watched me grow up makes me want to puke,” he’d told Louis when the home visit discussion first started, and the green tinge to his skin lent him some credibility on that front). He gets to see all the important faces and remember who he’s singing for each week without actually having to face the pressure of performing in front of them.

Then, they’ll go to Bradford, and Zayn will get to experience the popstar life with the signing at the HMV. He’ll get the chance for friends to come see him be proper famous without having to worry about cameras following around his parents and sisters, because from what Zayn’s said they’re all pretty private and he doesn’t want them to get overwhelmed.

And lastly it’s the performance at Wolverhampton, where Liam will get to show everyone that doubted him and bullied him and ignored him that he’s already done more with his life than they ever will, though Liam won’t see it that way.

“I’m just excited to show all those people who were so put out when I didn’t make it through last time that it can happen. Like maybe some little kids will be inspired because we’re from the same place and if I can make it this far, so can they,” he’d said shyly.

Because Liam is the actual nicest human on Earth, and Louis absolutely does not understand him at all.

But before they get to all that, it’s Donny and a visit to Louis’ old school. And this might be the most poetic of all the appearances, even more than Harry getting strength from his family or Zayn being reminded what’s awaiting them after the final and Liam proving that he’s worth something to the people who thought he wasn’t. Because inside that school, waiting in the auditorium, are a dozen people who believed in Louis and wanted him to succeed (his mum will be there, of course, and his sisters, and Stan and Hannah and maybe a couple more friends from the footie team and the drama club), and a thousand other people who told him he’d never make it.

There’s the geography teacher who said he’d never amount to anything—and God, Louis remembers that day like it was yesterday: the shaking in Louis’ hands, the barely contained anger. He’d never actually wanted to hit somebody that badly before, but there’s a first for everything and Mr. Johnson was begging for a bloodied nose, his ankles crossed on his desk and his smirk fixed in place. And there’s the boys Louis used to hang out with and take the piss out of for fun, that group of friends that wasn’t actually all that friendly, but they fell in together because they hated their teachers and hated their schoolwork and could sneak beer out from under their dads’ noses for lad’s nights. Oli and Calvin and Nizam, guys who laughed when Louis said he’d auditioned for *Grease* until they realized he wasn’t kidding, so he didn’t even bother telling them about *X Factor*.

And now they’re all still there, still in Donny with the dead-end jobs and lack of motivation and their petty, vindictive jealousy.

And here he is, an *X Factor* finalist.

Ah, justice.

With the thought of the look on Mr. Johnson’s toady old face, he falls asleep with his face pressed into Harry’s curls, the van's tires against the road his lullaby.
For a few long seconds, Louis thinks they’ve taken a wrong turn and ended up in some parallel universe.

Because he expected a couple dozen fans, some overexcited preteens with nothing better to do on a snowy Tuesday. But standing in the freezing cold outside Hall Cross School, jumping and screaming and waving signs and wearing the boys’ names on their shirts and faces and arms, has to be at least two hundred people.

“Oh my God,” he murmurs, and Harry taps an excited rhythm on his thigh in agreement.

After three hours in a stuffy vehicle, the cold blasts their ears and faces and hands as they step out of the van, Louis leading the way and waving around to the excited crowd. It’s almost too much, like that first time they’d stepped out into the alleyway behind the studio and were mobbed by screaming fans, but this time they know to stay close together and work through the crowd as a unit, signing posters and scarves and posing for quick pictures.

The boys are pushed inside and led toward the auditorium. Even with the heavy backstage door closed, the chanting from inside echoes clearly in the hallway: One Direction, One Direction.

“We aren’t even singing,” Louis has to remind himself, and Niall laughs beside him.

“Doesn’t seem to matter, does it?” he says.

The roar is deafening as they take to the stage, the microphones not loud enough for them to drown out the crowd with their pleading for more votes and their thanks for the support so far. But like Niall says, it doesn’t really matter: Louis blows a kiss at one point and the roof nearly collapses, the high-pitched screams ringing loudly.

He spots bitter old Mr. Johnson among the teachers, scowling at the noise. He sees Calvin and Oli and Nizam leaned up against the very back wall of the auditorium, arms crossed as they take in the scene.

“We love you, Donny!” Louis shouts as they leave the stage, feeling higher than he does after any Saturday night performance.

It’s a quick, teary hello and goodbye with Louis’ mum and sisters before they’re hustled back into the van and on the road to Holmes Chapel.

“Three whole days without my face, and then you’ll see me again Saturday for the final,” Louis had reminded them, wiping tears off of Daisy’s face. “Cheer up, buttercup!”

Jay had pulled him close before they’d left, kissing his cheek fiercely and whispering, “I am so, so proud of you, Boo. So proud.” And then Louis’d had to pull away before he started bawling and refused to leave ever again.

But now—

“Holmes Chapel!” Liam reads off a sign as they draw near, a picturesque village appearing in the distance. They get a police escort all the way to Harry’s front door, which can’t be seen behind the crowds of people spilling over his lawn and trampling his neighbor’s petunias.
It’s quiet inside the house, which is a blessed miracle after the pounding their eardrums have taken since this morning.

Or, it’s quiet until they round a corner into the kitchen and they’re accosted with the sound of champagne bottles uncorking and party poppers cracking, a cheering crowd of people in Harry’s mum’s kitchen beaming widely at them. Harry leaps back at the sudden noise, grinning widely and pawing at the air in a halfhearted attempt to ward off an attack.

The crowd inside is boisterous but manageable, hugging each of the boys just as tightly as they hug Harry, aunts and uncles and old school teachers and friends greeting them like this isn’t the first time they’re meeting. Ridiculously, for the second time today, Louis feels his eyes well up. It’s been far too long away from the Tomlinson clan for him, and he misses the overwhelming atmosphere of too many relatives in too small of a space.

Eventually, though, Harry’s stepdad Robin wrangles everyone’s attention and calls for a toast.

“Harry, it’s absolutely great to have you home,” he says, his gentle voice commanding in the quiet room. “And the rest of the boys with you as well. It’s like you’re all family now.”

Louis feels a smile twitch at his lips, and he looks up to catch Harry watching him, his eyes shiny and his lips wobbling.

Robin lifts his champagne flute to the boys. “To One Direction.”

They have an hour to mingle after that, all but one of the cameras stowed away so the boys can grab as much champagne as they want without offending the eyes of the nation. Louis is on his third glass and sort-of listening to Harry’s friend Jonny and his old boss from the bakery swap stories, watching Harry and Anne on the sofa across the room. He’s trying to see whether Harry’s told her about their plan to get a flat together—surely not, not with that camera right in his face—when he feels a hand on his arm.

“So, you’re the famous Louis,” says a girl with lavender hair and Harry’s green eyes, and Louis grins.

“And you’re the famous Gemma,” he says in answer, and a dimple appears in her cheek to confirm.

“What’s this I hear about a tattoo?” she asks, leaning forward conspiratorially. “The Sun says you bonded with Louis Walsh, they’re calling you Louis Squared now. And since they are the epitome of top-notch journalism, I believe them.”

Louis laughs and pushes back his sleeve, letting Gemma inspect the dagger. It’s still strange that people can, y’know, see it, that his love for Harry is literally branded onto his skin, but Gemma just inspects it with a raised eyebrow and an impressed nod.

“I like it, you can hang around,” she declares, then loops her arm through Louis’ as they make their way around the room. Gemma prods him for information between introducing him as Newt Scamander to her relatives to see who gets the reference, but then everyone is calling him Newt and Gemma is laughing as he pouts.

“Hiya,” Louis hears after their lap around the room, and turns to find Harry beaming at him.

“Hiya,” he says, and they grin at each other until Harry notices Gemma’s arm twined through his. He
frowns like an angry kitten. “Back off, Gemma, find your own best friend.”

“Oh, Harry,” she says, feigning surprise with a hand fluttering to her chest. “You mean my friend Newt?”

Harry ignores her and turns back to Louis. “So…” he says meaningfully, raising his eyebrows.

Louis feels a weird flip in his stomach, even though it’s really not a bigger deal than any two mates sharing a flat together. It’s cool, he’s chill. “Yeah?”

“She said it probably can’t happen right away, money-wise and with the whole, like, me being underaged thing, but maybe we could look during the X Factor tour?”

“Yeah?” Louis asks again, smiling so widely his cheeks hurt. “Really?”

“Really,” Harry nods, and they both laugh incredulously at the same time, reaching out to wrap each other in a tight hug. Gemma’s eyebrows have skyrocketed to her hairline.

“Why do I feel like I just watched the consummation of an arranged Bonding?” she asks, shaking her head and leaving the two of them in their bubble.

“You’re moving in with me,” Harry breathes. Louis hugs him tighter, closing his eyes and breathing him in.

“You’re moving in with me,” he counters giddily, ignoring the way his dagger tingles on his arm every time Harry’s hand brushes it, reminding him of all the ways this is a bad idea.

Pulling into Bradford is less exciting than the previous stops, even to Zayn, because the day’s been so full of excitement followed by long stretches of stillness as they're cooped up in a vehicle that it feels like it’s been a decade since they left London. The crowd is amped, though, and by the time they get into the store even Zayn is giggly and bouncing, third wind caught and carrying them through.

The signing is… a lot to take in. The HMV is not set up for a line of hundreds of people. Girls are screaming, crying, throwing things, chanting, and really, in all honesty, not paying that much attention to the actual band.

It’s like, they get so overwhelmed at the idea of meeting the boys that they end up not talking at all, just thrusting posters and shirts in Louis’ face as he tries to ask how they’re doing and then wailing as they walk away.

It’s sort of mind-boggling.

Still, at the end of their allotted hour they’re shuffled back outside and into the awaiting van for one last trip, and the crowd’s energy as they speed away keeps them hopping and joking for the full two hour trip to the outskirts of Wolverhampton, where Simon joins them for the last few miles.

“I try to make it a habit not to lie to you boys,” he says, and if Louis didn’t know better he’d say that was awe in Simon’s voice. “X Factor contestants don’t get this kind of reaction. I don't care who they are. This is big.”
**Wolverhampton** positively roars when they take the stage.

Louis wants to roar back. He wants to shout his appreciation from the rooftops; these people took
time out of their lives, where they have families and jobs and school and a hundred thousand other
things to focus on and worry about, but they still took time out of their days to vote for five silly boys
who just want to be famous.

Louis can't roar back. One, because they probably wouldn't be able to hear him but two, because
how do you thank people for something like this? Simon gave them their second chance when he
formed the band, sure, but the voters at home gave them their third (and their fourth and their fifth,
week after week up to now, just a few fitful days from the final).

Louis can't roar back to Wolverhampton and the rest of Great Britain that voted for them, but he can
sing.

So that’s what he does.

Over their heads, the sky bursts into life with color and light, fireworks tracing brilliant shapes in the
air.

For the sixth and final time today, the boys are led to the van amidst a crowd of screaming girls.
They wave as they pull away, watching out the rear window as some of the girls try to chase the
vehicle through the sleepy streets of Wolverhampton.

“Oh, shit,” Louis hisses as one girl wipes out on the icy pavement. Beside him, Liam claps a hand to
his mouth, stifling a laugh. “Niall, did you see-”

Louis turns to find Niall sprawled out on the floor of the van, fast asleep and snoring softly. Zayn
and Harry are already curled up like kittens sharing body heat on the opposite seat, blinking slowly
as they watch Louis and Liam with sleepy eyes.

Louis prods and pushes Liam until he has him how he wants so they can fall asleep comfortably as
well, Louis curled into Liam’s broad-for-a-teenage-boy chest with Liam’s arms wrapped around him.
He’s just closing his eyes when Liam shifts a little, arms tense, breathing in like he wants to ask
something but is still looking for the words.

“What?” Louis mumbles, “Just say it.”

Liam presses a rueful grin into the top of Louis’ head. “Sorry. Just been wondering something lately,
ever got a chance to ask… Why don't you ever want to Bond, Lou?”

The air doesn’t freeze in Louis’ chest but he does feel a little colder, his dagger tingling like it wants
to be noticed. Across Niall’s sleeping form, Zayn and Harry have both blinked their eyes back open,
watching Louis carefully. He shrugs, clinging to shreds of nonchalance, and picks at a string on
Liam’s jeans. “It’s a sad story, Li. ‘M not sad right now.”

Liam huffs a little, breath warm on Louis’ forehead. “You’ve said that before.”

Louis remembers; it was a calm night under the star-sprinkled sky, the trampoline warm under his
back, the bungalow lights dim against the darkness. Harry to his left, Zayn to his right, frustrated
silence between the five of them filled by Harry’s sleepy slow voice spinning soulmate stories from Gemma’s old hand-me-down book. Louis’ own voice soft in the heavy, warm air.

*I’ve never really wanted to be Bonded.*

It was true before Louis went to auditions and Bonded with Harry, it was true at the bungalow, and it’s true now. He’d lost his faith in Bonding the moment he and Lottie had to hide in the wardrobe and press blankets to their ears to muffle the screaming of their parents, when he had to steal the twins from their cribs in the middle of the night and barricade them in his room because the sound of breaking dishes and slammed doors had startled them awake.

And then, because fate doesn’t take his opinion into consideration, he Bonded anyway. And Louis loves Harry with his whole heart, but being Bonded to him without having him Bond in return is the absolute hardest thing he’s ever lived through, like surviving every day without breaking down and begging Harry to love him back is a mighty accomplishment.

Louis closes his eyes and breathes in, breathes out. “It’s still true.”

He tries not to notice how Zayn’s eyes flick to meet Liam’s, his expression troubled.

He tries not to notice the sadness in the corners of Harry’s eyes as his gaze traces Louis’ face.

He still sees. It still hurts.

There’s still more than a hundred miles until they’re back in London, and Louis spends every one of them wondering why love is always painted in colors like pink and yellow when it feels so much like blue.

…

8 December 2010

There are billions of people in the world who could potentially be Harry’s soulmate.

In direct contrast, there are five people who it definitely is *not*: Liam Payne, Zayn Malik, Niall Horan, Jonathan Harvey, and Louis Tomlinson.

Jonny, he knew that one early. He’s the only person from Holmes Chapel that Harry liked and liked Harry in return for more than just a few months. Not that Harry was ever disliked; no, people loved to get to know him, because he was just a little too pretty to ignore, just this side of weird to be interesting. Just close enough to different to be eclectic. People liked the quirky side of him, in theory, at least until they were forced to confront reality in the form of Harry’s painted nails or love of poetry, his rocketing anxiety over things they always assured him didn’t matter. Those little tics and things that made him just a little less like everyone else. Jonny, though, Jonny didn’t leave him behind like an abandoned hobby, a curiosity. Other friends dropped Harry when they realized he never would get over his “interesting” quirks, but then came rushing back to be his friend when he was suddenly regularly on TV. Jonny stayed through it all.

When they were twelve and had been friends for almost five years, they’d done what all kids do—they swapped last names to see if they were soulmates. Jonny had laughed it off when nothing happened, but to Harry it had been sort of heartbreaking when he’d heard “Harry Styles” and no Marker appeared, because what if Harry never found anyone who liked him as much as Jonny?
He’s moved past that now, obviously, but that first rejection had been rough. He’d felt like there was something inside him that had to be wrong, because Jonny is funny and smart and a good person and what does that mean if he doesn’t match with Harry?

Next was Niall, that first night in the bungalow when he’d read out their names like it was no big deal. Later, Harry’d said Niall’s in return when they were alone. Again, nothing happened, and Niall had nodded in confirmation before clapping Harry on the shoulder and leaving to find Zayn for a dip in the pool. That one had felt less like a rejection and more like a confirmation of what he already knew: Harry loves Niall, had already loved him at that point even though they’d only known each other a month, considers him a brother, but could never see himself Bonding with him.

Zayn and Liam had been at the same time. They’d circled together one night in their bedroom in the *X Factor* house, when Niall was terrorizing the girls from Belle Amie and Louis was sneaking a smoke with that cameraman friend of his. The room was dark around them save for one of Harry’s flickering candles. It had been oddly ceremonious, Harry solemnly reciting their names and hearing his in return. Again, nothing happened, but it was sort of nice to have that cleared up. They’d all made stilted jokes until the uncomfortable tension melted away, and then they’d raced each other downstairs to get the first seats for dinner. Harry didn’t notice until later that Liam and Zayn never said each other’s names, but he figured they probably already had at some point during all their alone time together.

And then Louis. *God*, Louis.

If a person could will themselves into having a soulmate, Harry and Louis would be Bonded a dozen times over. Sometimes it hits Harry like a tidal wave, a need so deep he loses his breath with it when he sees Louis cover his grin with a dainty hand. He didn’t know people could *feel* like this; he didn’t know that one person could have so much sway over him.

And yet they aren’t soulmates, because Harry has said Louis’ name multiple times, and he’s sure Louis has said his in return. It’s a cosmic tragedy that he isn’t meant to be with Louis, that there’s somebody else out there that he’s going to love because of his biology or brain waves or whatever when he’s got the most perfect boy in the world right here in front of him.

It almost makes Harry want to rebel against fate.

Which is, *God*, definitely a new train of thought. Even as recently as a couple of months ago, there’s no way in hell he’d have even entertained the possibility of being with someone who isn’t his soulmate. But now, he really doesn’t care. He’s done waiting around when what he wants is dangling just within his reach.

His thinking might be a little influenced by Louis, because he’s always been so resolute in his distaste for Bonding as a whole. There’s a story lying deep in that boy’s heart that he doesn’t like thinking about, that dashes his blue eyes with grey when it’s brought up. He’d laid his head on Liam’s chest just last night in the van back to London and gotten lost in his own head for long minutes between slow answers, his eyes caught somewhere in the middle distance, making Zayn shift uncomfortably and Liam send flickering looks of panic to Harry. Harry had just watched, waiting for Louis to pull himself out of wherever he goes when serious Bonding talk is brought up. The hurt in his eyes is like a knife to Harry’s gut every time, so very reminiscent of the dagger tattoo staining Louis’ arm.

(Did he get the dagger because of whatever happened that he doesn’t talk about? Is it a reminder? A warning? A symbol of danger, of hardship, of strength? Harry aches to know, but that’s another secret Louis keeps locked away like precious gems in a treasure hoard.)
Harry wants to talk to someone about all this, but Louis seals his secrets up like a high security bank vault and Harry doesn’t want Zayn or Niall or Liam to get any more ideas after that distressing conversation about Harry’s activities in the sex room. Not that he doesn’t want them to know important information about his life, but he wants to be sure about things first. Besides, he already knows exactly what they’d say.

Niall would laugh at first, thinking Harry was joking. And then it’d dwindle off, and he’d get that look on his face and he’d go full Irish, “H, be serious wid me. Is it Lou? Y’ can tell me, I won’t tell ‘im. But I knew it, I knew you two would end up t’gedder.”

And Zayn, he’d let Harry talk and get it all off of his chest, but he’s too diplomatic to tell Harry his actual opinion. He’d help him see from all sides, yeah, but in the end Harry would just be bogged down with even more details and Zayn would be watching him with sharp eyes and absolutely no answer to make it easy on him.

Then, there’s Liam, good ol’ Daddy Direction, Mr. Responsibility himself, and he’d say exactly what Harry’s mum would say, just in a deeper and less sure voice: “But, Haz, look. You’re so young, and, like, of course you feel like this now. And of course you love Louis, like, there’s no doubt about that. But what if it’s just because he’s the first for you? Like, first love being overwhelming is a really common thing, you know. I just want you to be happy, and Lou too.”

And, okay, yeah. Hypothetical-Liam would be right in some ways, because Harry is only sixteen. But there’s been nothing and no one to impact him and actually change his beliefs as intrinsically as Louis Tomlinson, and that has nothing to do with his age.

So maybe he’ll take his fate into his own hands. Maybe he’ll sit down with Louis and have an adult discussion about their relationship and where they go from here.

Or maybe he’ll work up enough courage to just kiss him and figure out all the boring stuff later.

He does know one thing, which is that he doesn’t want to start anything potentially life-altering when they’re days out from the biggest performance of their lives. The final looms, ever-present, shadowing over every conversation and vocal practice and even the video diary they filmed this morning, so much that even Zayn and Liam were uncontrollable, bouncing out of their seats because of Zayn’s “energy juice.”

So Harry will wait, because if he’s going to do this then he’ll do it right, and he wants to be able to devote all his time to making the right decision, both for him and for Louis. He’ll tamp down on the heart eyes as much as he can—and, God, it’s been rampant lately, Harry has basically kept nothing under wraps—and he’ll be the best mate he can for Louis. He’ll sort out his emotional stuff when the show is over. He’s accepted his bone-deep crush on Louis, and it’s under control until he can figure out what he wants to do.

Well, okay. Just because Harry’s finally got his crush under control doesn’t mean he wants to watch Louis flirting hard enough with someone else that even Zayn is turning pink.

And especially not when the person Louis is flirting with is Robbie fucking Williams.

Harry clears his throat, stepping back up to his mic stand. It’s slick with sweat, because it’s sort of terrifying to sing an internationally famous singer’s song while in his presence, and his usual means of tension relief (Louis) is too preoccupied (flirting) to help him. “Shall we?” he croaks, and Liam
shoots him a nod and grabs his mic as well. Louis is still giggling at whatever Robbie is saying, his hand resting lightly on the older man’s forearm as Robbie bellows a deep laugh.

“Lou,” Zayn murmurs, but it takes three more tries to get his attention.

“Sorry, lads,” he says breathily when he turns around, fussing with his fringe. “From the top, then?”

Harry tries really, really hard to keep his expression neutral. He knows how Louis gets around attractive older men, all pink and raspy-voiced and soft, like he’s suddenly six inches shorter and a thousand times softer. He’s seen it a dozen times before, with that blonde cameraman Ricky and a couple of reporters and even Simon, once or twice back in the beginning. And now he can add Robbie Williams to the list.

Harry would shake it off if it wasn’t so purposeful. Louis flirts with everyone, it’s just how he is. He can call anyone love or darling and have them tripping over their feet to fetch him whatever he wants. But with certain people, it’s like there’s intent behind it. And, from the way Louis leans into Robbie’s arm around his waist as they sing, he is another one of those certain people.

“Sorry,” Harry says in the middle of a run-through, Savan pausing the music as Harry runs a fitful hand through his hair. “Just. Can I get a minute?” He’s off the stage and in a deserted bathroom before Savan or anyone else can answer.

He splashes water on his face and breathes deeply. He’s being an idiot, because he can’t really get mad at Louis for flirting with a popstar when he doesn’t know Harry’s spent every hour of the day so far thinking about their hypothetical future together.

He just wishes he didn’t have to see it. Or hear it. Or know that it was happening at all, to be honest.

He dries his hands and stares at himself in the mirror, willing himself to get a grip before heading back out to try again. He’s about to step onto the stage when he hears whispers just on the other side of the wall.

“...think you’re doing?” he hears Niall hiss, and the tell-tale thwap of a slap to a fabric-covered arm. “Robbie Williams is Bonded, Jesus, Lou!”

“Fuck off,” Louis’ voice growls. “I’m not actually doing anything, I’m just talking.”

“You’re just being an arsehole, that’s what you’re just doing,” Niall mutters. “You’re acting like a starstruck idiot and you’re making your best mate so uncomfortable he had to leave the stage. Or did you not notice Harry leaving when you were batting your eyelashes at the forty-year-old with a soulmate and kids waiting for him at home?”

Louis is silent, giving Harry a chance to settle the loop-de-loops his stomach started doing the minute his name was dropped into the conversation. Then Louis sighs, and there’s the quiet sound of a shoe scuffing at the floor. “I was going to check on him, I promise,” he murmurs, and Harry hangs his head. God, he must have been so obvious. “I didn’t… I don’t mean to make him upset.”

“He doesn’t mean to get upset,” Niall replies easily. “And, fuck, Lou, we all know you’d never hurt Harry on purpose in a thousand years. Just, like. Keep in mind that he watches you, y’know? Even when you don’t realize it.”

“Yeah,” Louis breathes. Harry hopes it’s not meant to sound as resigned as he’s making it out to be in his head. “Yeah, of course. I can’t stand making him sad, it’s like kicking a puppy.”

Niall snickers. “Actually think it’d be easier to kick a puppy. At least it wouldn’t apologize for
hurting your foot, not like Haz would.” Louis laughs too, little more than a huff of air. “Love you, dick.”


Niall’s shoes squeak as he walks away, and Harry tiptoes back to the bathroom to avoid being caught eavesdropping. He tries to look less satisfied at having some of the best mates in the world, but his reflection just isn’t having it. He’s still grinning a little when Louis appears in the mirror, arms crossed and a little smile of his own tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Hey, you,” he says. “Ready to get back to work?”

“Yeah, course,” Harry answers, drying off his already-dry hands. He makes his way over to Louis and the door, reaching for the handle before Louis stops him, a gentle hand pressed to Harry’s chest.

“I didn’t mean to flirt with Robbie Williams,” he says bluntly. “Usually that would be bullshit, but it’s true. He’s, like, my childhood hero, and I guess I got sucked in a little.” He looks down at the tops of his shoes, twisting his foot awkwardly. “I’m sorry.”

Harry shrugs. “It’s okay, Lou. You don’t owe me anything.”

“Yes, I do,” Louis replies quickly. “I knew how nervous you were about all this, and I didn’t help at all. That was shit of me, Haz, and I know it.”

“It’s okay,” Harry says again, grin settling into something a little more sincere. “Can’t really blame you, can I? You aren’t here to coach me through anxiety attacks.”

“Um, yes I am,” Louis says, raising an eyebrow. “That’s basically written word for word in the best friend code. Thou shalt not abandon your best mate when he can’t breathe in the presence of a popstar.”

Harry laughs. “You’re an idiot.”

Louis grins back. “Yeah, but I’m your idiot.”

Practice goes a thousand times more smoothly after that, and Robbie doesn't even notice when Louis isn’t glued to his side anymore and instead spends his time checking on Harry after each run-through of the song. He rubs a soothing hand over Harry’s shoulders as the end of rehearsal draws near, leaning close to whisper in his ear.

“You’re doing amazing, love. So proud of you.”

Harry feels warm all the way down to his toes, his skin burning like Louis left an imprint long after he’s back at his own mic stand.

...  

11 December 2010

Louis wakes to Harry scrambling out of bed, bare feet thudding as he scampers to the bathroom. There’s a door slamming, the sound of a faucet being wrenched on, and the tell-tale sound of
retching echoing off the walls. Louis pads sleepily into the bathroom and finds Harry face-first in the toilet, eyes streaming as he gags and coughs again and again.

“Sorry,” he says roughly, spitting into the toilet. “You can go downstairs, I’ll be fine.”

“Nope,” Louis replies softly, wetting a cloth and dabbing at Harry’s forehead. “Best friend code, remember? I have to hold your hair back while you puke, it’s in the job description.”

Harry just moans and presses his face to the porcelain, accepting the glass of water Louis passes him gratefully.

The Sainsbury ladies are bustling about the kitchen when Louis finally convinces Harry to lurch downstairs. They cluck at Harry’s pale face and promise a nice warm brekkie as soon as they sit down.

Harry takes one look at the syrup dripping from his pancakes and dashes back upstairs, hand pressed to his mouth.

“Maybe not today,” Louis apologizes, sliding some plain toast onto a plate and heading up to find Harry again.

They rehearse with Robbie for an hour, then practice the staging for their own song for another. And then they’re dismissed, told to keep busy and stay inside the building until Grace comes to fetch them to change into their performance clothes.

Unlike last time, the acts are so wrapped up in their own heads they don’t bother snapping at each other, so they all end up hanging out in wardrobe like it’s any other week. The stylists have already started on Rebecca’s hair, teasing and spraying and doing a lot of things with combs that Louis doesn’t really understand. The boys and Matt don’t really have anything to do, not for several hours at least, but they don’t want to leave the area with all the excitement. They dig up a Playstation and hook it to the tiny TV in the corner, getting through several rounds of FIFA before Cher gets back and Matt has to go rehearse.

Eventually, though, even FIFA can’t hold their jumpy attention, and the boys spread out on the sofas and floor, tossing questions and jokes at each other in an attempt to keep calm.

Louis sees Harry move next to Cher to watch her get her nails done and it gives him an idea, so he steals one of the stylist’s nail kits and drags a small table over in front of the sofa.

It’s a calming routine for Louis, because he used to paint Lottie and Fizzy’s nails as a distraction when things weren’t good back home. And Harry’s been wanting to paint his nails for weeks, though Grace kept apologizing and telling him that Simon wasn’t allowing it. Louis pulls Harry away from Cher and sits him down on the opposite side of the table, hands spread on the surface as Louis looks through his little bag of tools.

“Lou,” Harry murmurs as Louis gets started with a file, smoothing the ragged edges of his bitten-off nails. “Can’t do this, we’ll get in trouble.”

“I’ll use a nude color, don’t worry,” Louis reassures him. “Want to pick some lotion for me, love?”
Harry bounces to his feet and heads to the cabinet in the corner with the massive array of sprays and lotions and creams. He comes back with a bottle of something hypoallergenic and lightly scented of cocoa butter. Louis massages the lotion into Harry’s skin, pushing on the pads of his palms with his thumbs and stroking outward, down Harry’s long fingers.

Harry hums happily, drawing Zayn’s attention.

“Whatcha doin’, Louis?” he asks, picking up the tube of lotion and smelling it.

“Getting Hazza here performance ready,” he says, winking at Zayn and going back to work with the cuticle trimmers. “Want me to do you next?”

He doesn’t really expect Zayn to say yes, but Zayn has sisters too and has probably been subjected to manicures of his own many times, and so he isn’t really surprised when Zayn shrugs. “Alright then. Got anything with sparkles?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Louis laughs, uncapping the nude polish and tapping the excess off the brush. He slides on an even coat, one stripe down the middle and one to each side, broad strokes to cover Harry’s wide nails. Soon he’s sliding over in front of Zayn, filing off a few uneven edges on his nails but otherwise not finding anything to fix. Liam watches interestedly over his shoulder, holding out two different bottles of clear sparkly polish for Zayn to choose from.

Niall squawks when he looks over to see a group activity he isn’t part of, and Louis prepares himself for the lecture he knows either he or Harry could probably do in their sleep—nail polish isn’t just for girls, Niall, don’t be a prick is already sitting on Louis’ tongue. Happily, though, he never has to say it, Niall just pulling a bright blue polish out of the bag and waving it in Harry’s face.

“Do me, Haz, do me!”

“Don’t think we can do blue, Ni. Grace said Simon wouldn’t let me do a bright color.”

Niall pouts, a wrinkle appearing between his brows. He digs in the bag again and unearths a pale pink, so light it’s almost white. He holds it up for Harry’s inspection, Louis watching from the corner of his eye as he spreads a subtly glittered clear coat over Zayn’s nails.

“Yeah, if we only do one coat this should be fine,” Harry murmurs, pulling Niall’s hands close and frowning. “But, um, first…”

Louis looks over and laughs, Harry’s trepidation clear on his face as he takes in Niall’s dry, cracked hands, calluses from his guitar strings, and nails that have been bitten to the quick. He pats Zayn’s finished hand and scoots over, wielding a nail file and handing another over to Harry.

“Dream Team to the rescue,” Louis says, grinning and bumping Harry’s shoulder.

Twenty minutes later, Niall’s hands are freshly moisturized, his cuticles are under control, and his nails are smooth, even, and painted in a light coat of Ballet Slippers. Niall holds his hand up in awe, his mouth agape.

“This… is… wicked,” he breathes.

And then he prances around the room for another hour, hands aloft to show everyone his legendary nails.
The wardrobe room, which is crowded and bustling even on slow days, fills to the brim as all twelve of the acts that have already left the show swoop in throughout the day to grab their outfits and congratulate the finalists. They swap gossip back and forth—the Belle Amie girls in particular dig for everything they’ve missed since being sent home in October—and the stylists flit wildly about, spraying down flyaway hair and adjusting ill-fitting jackets and dresses.

Aiden greets each of the boys with massive hugs, pulling Louis close and smacking a kiss to his forehead just to hear Grace shriek about smearing his makeup. He pulls Harry off to the side for a minute, and Louis can’t hear what he says but he would kill to know, especially since whatever it is makes Harry turn bright red and flick a glance over to Louis. Aiden doesn’t even try to be subtle, turning to look at Louis as well and dropping a huge wink his way.

Whatever, it’s fine. Louis loves being the focus of attention, even if he doesn’t know why.

He shakes his head and moves to hug Katie, who’s just made it in and is already in happy tears at seeing everyone reunited.

Eventually, though, only the final four acts are left in wardrobe, their hair and makeup immaculate as the minutes tick onward toward showtime.

The group song passes in a blur of dancers in metallic jumpsuits and oddly clashing outfits (“Why d’you get to wear sweatpants, and I’ve got to wear an evening gown?” Rebecca had whined, picking at the seam of Louis’ bright red trackies before they’d went on. Louis had just shrugged—he didn’t get it either). Then the finalists are rushed backstage, waving thanks to all the other acts as they call good luck before being shown to their places in the front few rows.

The boys have to sit for almost half an hour before it’s their turn to get back on stage. One of the countless assistants is leading them up to their places when Louis stops.

They haven’t got long, thirty seconds, tops, but he has to do something about this achy, nostalgic-for-something-that-hasn’t-ended-yet feeling in his chest. The other four circle around him, slinging arms around waists in their customary pre-show huddle.

“I,” Louis starts, but horrifyingly enough he chokes, his voice cracking. “God, sorry boys. I’m just…”

“We know, Lou,” Liam says over the low rumble of the crowd. His eyes are focused, his expression calm.

Zayn snickers, plucking at Louis’ shirt. “And we love you too, loser.”

Louis takes a deep breath and smiles. His four favorite boys on the planet smile back.

Louis never was much of an Elton fan, preferring new music to old in ninety-nine percent of cases.

He has to admit, though, there’s something about the words of Your Song that just strike true. He sings it to Harry, just like he’s sang every song to Harry, and the words roll like truths right off his tongue.
Back offstage, back to wardrobe, jumping into neatly-hung suits waiting for them in a row.

Louis adjusts the collar of Harry’s ridiculous purple suit and smiles.

“Let’s go sing with a legend, yeah?” he grins, and Harry grins back.

They don’t actually sing that much once Robbie gets onstage, just those little harmonies in the background. Still, Robbie beams when they hit you’ll be flying and high fives each of them, slipping back between Harry and Louis and hugging them close until his next solo.

Harry looks near delirious, he’s so happy. He laughs over Robbie’s shoulders as they tumble into a group hug, Robbie’s deep bellow of a laugh rolling over them as the crowd goes absolutely nuts.

Louis wants to press this moment between the pages of an old book and keep it forever. There’s no way life gets better than this, it’s just not possible.

It’s almost too easy to forget that, at the end of all the good, it’s still a competition and so there must be bad to balance it out.

“In no particular order, the first act going through to the final three is… Rebecca.”

Louis breathes deep, because that’s not a surprise. He beams at Rebecca as she floats by, but then the lights go down again and it’s time to focus. Two more acts going through.

Zayn’s hands are twitching out of the corner of Louis’ eye. The barest hint of glitter on his nails catches the spotlights, and somehow that little bit of abnormality in the sea of familiar nerves calms Louis’ racing heart.

There’s nothing they can do now. It’s out of their hands.

“The second act through to the next stage of the X Factor final is…”

Louis has never wanted anything so badly in his life, save the boy bouncing anxiously on his toes next to him. (There’s nothing he can do about that, either. That was out of his hands from the second the dagger appeared.)

“One Direction.”

They’re through.

They did it.
There’s no afterparty at the hotel tonight, no champagne to be popped or arses to kiss, no possibility of staying out too late or risking their vocal cords. Just seven tired people splayed out across the sofas in the TV room back at the house, the smell of too much hairspray and too little sleep still lingering in their pores. They snack on cold popcorn and sip lukewarm mugs of hot chocolate and try to wind down after the longest day of the longest week in existence. Rebecca is curled up like a cat in an armchair, her long lashes fanning across her cheeks. Matt and Niall are laid at separate ends of the longest sofa, their feet tangled in the middle. Matt is still beaming, still looking incredulous at his luck. Niall is back to staring at his pale pink nails.

Zayn is on Liam’s lap in another armchair, wrapped in a light blanket and blinking sleepily as Liam pets his hair. Louis, shockingly enough, is curled against Harry’s side, tracing tired circles on his ribs as they take in deep, even breaths.

“It’s quiet,” he mumbles, and, indeed, it’s quiet enough that everyone hears.

Harry hums, his chest vibrating under Louis’ cheek. “Bit creepy, innit. There’s supposed to be noise at all times here.”

“Did tonight actually happen?” Matt asks, staring at the ceiling. “Or did I dream that?”

“It happened,” Rebecca smiles, never opening her eyes. “We’re the final three.”

“The final three,” Liam breathes reverently.

“The final three,” Niall laughs.

“The final three,” Harry murmurs into Louis’ hair.

For one brief moment, everything is perfect.

12 December 2010

It’s a quiet, peaceful morning breaking over London. The air is cold, the achy kind that pours chills into bones and doesn’t let go, icy claws biting at exposed skin. It catches in Louis’ lungs and mingles with the smoke when he breathes in, making his eyes water when the wind hits just right.

He taps the ashes from the end of his last ever X Factor cigarette and watches the world wake up.

It’s been six months. Six months of being in Britain’s next big boy band, six months with four lads who fit scarely well into the empty niches of his life, six months of showbusiness and interviews and video diaries and the sleepy, curly-headed wonder he left sprawled out in his bed just a few moments ago.

Six months ago, Louis made a decision to go to bootcamp and get to know Harry Styles, because he thought that would be the only chance he’d get to do so. He expected to wave goodbye as Harry headed off to the Judge’s House and Louis went back to Doncaster, that he’d watch Harry’s career bloom each week on the show until the world was at his feet, begging for bits of his attention. He expected to love Harry from afar just like everyone else, always out of reach, until the day Harry Bonded to someone else and Louis could pretend to move on.

This is not where he thought he’d be.

The X Factor final. A chance at a recording contract. Four new best friends, closer than blood. A
terible crowd of other talented new friends. Connections in the music industry. The potential to prove everyone wrong and make a name for himself.

But there’s the other side of all this as well: his face (and arm) in the tabloids at least once a week. Speculation over his potential Bond running wild. His biggest secret within reach of thousands of people who just aren’t looking hard enough or don’t have enough sway to convince others of the truth. Secret meetings with angry old men who want him to be someone he isn’t. Waking every morning with fear in his heart that today will be the day that someone with an audience finally finds that elusive proof that Louis’ dagger isn’t just a random tattoo.

And, to top it all off, Harry Styles is in his bed every night, in his arms every day.

It’s too much, and it’s exactly what he’d feared six months ago when he’d contemplated the risks of seeing Harry again. Back then, he’d feared loving Harry and losing him too soon. Now, he fears that Harry will love him back and there’s still nothing they can do.

Because it doesn’t really matter, does it? Louis’ fate is decided, it’s wrapped around Harry like the latest Topman blazer. He can’t move on from this: his relationship with Harry now, (mostly) platonic as it may be, is the only relationship that Louis will ever have. There is no After-Harry version of Louis, there’s just this one: the one that loves Harry too much for his own good. Destiny chose his future, and destiny says he can only be happy with Harry.

Harry’s fate, though, is about as clear as a mud puddle. He’s happy now, yes, spending the majority of his waking hours and all of his nights with Louis. But someday that will change. Someday he’ll outgrow boner jokes and nine hour FIFA tournaments and cuddling with his (mostly) platonic best friend. He’ll meet somebody who will say his name and sweep him away, off to his domestic dream life with a mansion and kids and cats and dogs. There is an After-Louis version of Harry, and Louis doesn’t know how much of a role he’ll be allowed to have once someone else steps in to take his place as the most important person in Harry’s life.

It doesn’t matter what Louis wants, because he can’t derail the inevitable. And someday he’ll be left alone with nothing but his memories and the smell of vanilla and cinnamon candles and coconut shampoo.

He doesn’t regret getting close to Harry, could never regret something that has brought him the kind of earth-shattering joy that Harry did. He’ll never mourn his time on *X Factor* or his time in One Direction, however long that may be. But he will regret his lack of strength, the way he let Harry close to his heart without even trying to keep a little distance, because someday that will be what breaks him.

Maybe Simon will offer them a recording contract no matter how they do in tonight’s show, and they’ll still get to record an album and go on the X Factor tour and maybe even a tour of their own. Maybe they’ll become the biggest band in the world. Maybe they’ll go down in history.

It doesn’t matter. One day, probably soon, Harry will find someone he loves more than Louis and he is going to leave. And Louis already fears the inescapable pain in his future, the Harry-shaped hole he’ll have to live the rest of his life around.

Louis breathes in cold morning air and nicotine-flavored smoke, and breathes out a steady stream of self-loathing and dread.
Simon is waiting for them in his office, his glasses perched low on his nose as he flicks through a thick stack of papers. He waves them in distractedly, holding up a finger to stop any pleasantries until he gets to the end of his page.

“Sorry, boys,” he says, voice smooth as he sets his papers to the side. “How are we feeling, then? Confident?”

There are about four hundred people standing outside the studio already, despite the cold and the fact that the final doesn’t actually start for hours and hours. The fans screamed themselves hoarse when the boys stepped out of the van at the studio entrance, and even cheerful Liam was shaken by the intensity. They might be a little used to the commotion but they’ll never actually be comfortable with it.

So, basically, Louis feels like he’s going to vomit all over Simon’s very nice desk.

“Good,” Simon booms even though no one answered. “Look, I’m not going to keep you from rehearsals. Just a quick note, because I know we won’t have much time tonight no matter how the voting goes.” He slides his glasses into his pocket and leans back, crossing his arms. “I’d like to schedule a meeting, just the six of us, for tomorrow morning. I have some things I’d like to discuss, and while some of it hinges on the results tonight, either way I want us to be able to have a talk about the future of the band. Does ten o’clock work for you?”

Four heads turn in Louis’s direction, seeking approval. Their reliance on Louis’ steadiness helps beat back the nausea rolling in his own stomach.

“We’ll be here,” he answers firmly, because accepting a meeting doesn’t mean accepting a deal of any kind, even though he’s pretty sure if they sign with anyone they’ll sign with Simon because he’s a familiar evil. No need to tell him that, though, especially when the boys have so studiously ignored talking about album deals at all, even amongst themselves.

“Excellent,” Simon smiles. “Great news. Well, off to rehearsal with you, and I’ll be by to check in before it gets too late. Don’t forget that we’ve booked rooms at the W London for you and your families tonight.”

It’s a clear dismissal, so the boys slink out of the room and downstairs to the studio for their rehearsal time.

The atmosphere is subdued in wardrobe tonight. There are no FIFA matches being played on the TV in the corner, no bouncy pop playing through the speakers, no chitchat or whispered gossip. All the contestants besides One Direction and Matt and Rebecca are quiet when they come in for their outfits, kissing cheeks and whispering wishes for good luck but leaving quickly to get dressed somewhere else.

Matt’s eyes are red as Grace rubs moisturizer into his skin, and Rebecca is still as a marble statue in the stylist’s chair. Niall is picking nervously at the polish on his nails, dismantling all of Louis and Harry’s hard work. Liam and Zayn have disappeared, and Louis feels like doing the same thing.

It’s exciting, of course, but there’s so much finality in the air that Louis feels like he’ll drown in it. No matter how the voting goes tonight, this is the end. No more group songs or film nights at the house or five boys crammed into one too-small room. No more performances, at least not until the tour. Everything they do after this point will be of their own volition, no X Factor to act as a platform to boost them.
Louis doesn’t realize he’s shaking until Harry sits next to him on the sofa, pulling him close. It’s a reversal of their usual ways—Harry likes being the little spoon and Louis likes making him feel safe—but it feels right, somehow, to burrow into Harry and not come out until Grace is calling for him to get dressed.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Louis is singing on the same stage as Robbie Williams.

During that first rehearsal last week, when technical issues had dragged their practice on far too long and Robbie had leaned close to joke in Louis’ ear, he could feel himself getting softer, quieter, more tactile than his usual self, wanting to appeal to Robbie and putting more effort into it than he ever does with anyone his own age. He hadn’t noticed Harry’s panicked exit until Niall was dragging him to a corner to berate him about flirting with a Bonded guy.

And it wasn’t even like that, not on purpose. Stan has joked about Louis’ daddy issues enough that he’s aware of the way he compacts himself around older or bigger men, but he never does it on purpose. It always hits him later, that he must have looked like a proper flirt with his delicate voice and lingering hands. He doesn’t mean for it to be that way, but that’s still the way it happens.

Now, he looks over at Robbie and Robbie looks back and sends him a wink, and there’s no flutter in his tummy or tingle up his arms. And, really, that hadn’t happened at the rehearsal either. Robbie makes Louis nervous, just like every attractive older man makes him nervous, but he doesn’t make him excited.

He doesn’t make bolts of something rush across Louis’ skin when their arms brush.

Not like Harry does.

Harry grips Louis’ hand tightly as they’re led to their places for their first song of the night, the stage lights off so their opening video can be seen clearly. Louis doesn’t need the lights on to feel the nerves running through the five of them like a chain of electric shocks, jumping from boy to boy, fluttering heartbeats and twitching fingers. Louis wants to pull them all into a hug, to postpone this for just a moment, but they’re already in place and the lights are starting to brighten.

Liam may be just as anxious as the rest of them, but his voice is steady, and hearing him sing the first line of Torn feels a lot like coming home. Like they’re back at the bungalow, firelight flickering between them, Niall and his guitar weaving music around the sounds of distant traffic and the waves lapping in the pool. Five voices learning each other in the dark, five boys dreaming of their big chance.

It isn’t anything like their Judge’s House performance. Louis’ mic is on, for one thing, and he can hear his own voice blending with the others’ as they harmonize behind Liam. Niall isn’t bouncing like he’s had too much sugar, and Zayn isn’t trying to hide his face behind Liam’s shoulders. Liam’s still probably doing his brooding stare, but at least they’ve gotten him to tone down the intensity a little bit over the past few months. They’re connected, a working unit, five pieces of the same machine. And they sound amazing, they sound perfect, better than any rehearsal they’ve had all week and a thousand times better than their stumbling performance of the same song at the Judge’s House.
Louis harmonizes with Harry as they head into the chorus and there’s that feeling again, that heat in his lungs and the dizziness in his head that says this is too easy, we aren’t supposed to fit this well. He’d felt the same at bootcamp when he sang Michael Jackson with Harry and watched him light up the sky with his grin.

They sing you’re a little late, I’m already torn and Louis can’t stop from reaching out and touching Harry, just for a moment. And he can’t help but shiver when Harry reaches back, lashing them together.

The stage lights falling as Dermot announces who is moving forward shouldn’t be routine. It isn’t meant to be, it’s supposed to be nerve-wracking and terrifying and all those things Louis felt on the first results show. But now the fear is familiar, the ache of want so ingrained that Louis uses it to propel himself forward, to his usual spot in front of Simon and next to Harry.

Matt gets through first, which is no shock to anyone. Through the haze of the spotlights and the madness of the crowd Louis can see Aiden, right up in the front row next to the stage with the other acts, his eyes wide and shiny like he’s holding back tears.

Somehow, that calms the rush of anxiety at being in the bottom two for the first time in the entire competition.

Dermot takes a deep breath into the mic, as though he knows he’s about to demolish someone’s dream and is feeling regret for that already. Louis flicks a glance to Harry, sees him pinching the skin between his eyes like he’s fighting off a headache rather than about to hear the most important news of his life. Louis pats his hip, breathing deeply. They’re going to be okay, because they’re going to get through.

“The second act still in the final is… Rebecca.”

Wait.

No, that’s-

That’s not right.

Rebecca is crying, and so is Liam. Zayn hasn’t moved, dumbstruck.

They’re all dumbstruck. Niall’s jaw is slack, staring at Dermot like he expects him to retract his statement. Harry’s fists are clenched, his breathing ragged. Louis has no idea what his face is doing. In a thousand years, a thousand scenarios, Louis never once considered not actually winning.

Which is stupid, because of course they only had a one in three chance tonight. They barely had any chance at all, really; it’s sort of a miracle they even made it this far.

There’s a pit where his stomach used to be. He can’t get enough air. It’s all over.

Dermot moves them to the middle and introduces the video of their X Factor journey as Niall breathes out shaky sobs and Liam crouches, holding his head like he’s in pain.

There’s Harry at his audition, there’s Louis right after him. There’s the last day of bootcamp and their formation as a band. There’s Louis jumping into Harry’s arms like he’s coming home. There’s the Judge’s House performance, Louis’ hair all shaggy, Liam’s stare intense, Harry’s eyes flickering to Louis, his eyebrows tilted in a slight frown. Simon putting them through, their first on-camera group
hug.

There’s the live shows, *Viva La Vida* and *Kids in America* and the Harry Potter premiere and Halloween and Beatles week and the England game and song after song after song.

Six months of their lives, condensed into a ninety second video clip.

Dermot asks Louis about the highlights of being on the show and he stutters through something about working hard and ends on a shrug. How is he supposed to reflect on his time here when there’s an ache in his chest, when his favorite people in the world are devastated around him like he’s the epicenter of an emotional earthquake?

“Zayn,” Dermot says, leaning across Louis. “What’s going to happen to One Direction now?”

Zayn doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t even blink. “We’re definitely gonna stay together. This isn’t the last of One Direction.”

There’s a small crowd waiting for them in a room backstage, a horde of mums and dads and sisters and grandparents and friends that cheer when they enter, like they’ve won instead of getting the boot an hour into the final show. Louis is swept up into a hug by what seems like his whole family at once, Phoebe and Daisy squeezing his legs as Lottie thumps into him from behind and Fizzy from his front, flinging their arms around his neck.

Louis’ mum presses kisses to his cheek, smearing his makeup.

“Mum,” he protests, laughing, “off!”

Stan coos from behind her and kisses Louis’ other cheek.

“But we love you so much, Boo Bear!” he simpers, and Louis laughs and pushes him away.

“We do!” Daisy agrees from where she’s sat on Louis’ shoe.

“Even when you smell like too much hairspray,” Lottie adds, wrinkling her nose.

Eventually, Louis untangles himself from his family and Stan and they find a place to sit, Jay gripping Louis’ hand tightly like she’s afraid to let go. They chat about the drive to London and the horrid parking situation and their room at the W Hotel, and definitely do not talk about the show at all.

Harry finds his way over after a few minutes, leaving his mum and stepdad talking with Liam’s grandparents. “Lou!” he says, throwing himself into Louis’ lap. “I found you.”

“Well done, Hazza,” Louis laughs. “Good job finding me in this roaring crowd.” He gestures around the room, at the thirty or so people all milling about and talking quietly.

Harry pouts and Louis flicks his lip. “Hello, Jay,” he says primly, dimples appearing. “And Phoebe and Daisy and Lottie and Fizzy and Stan.” The girls all wave, Lottie’s face going an interesting shade of red at being talked to by a boy. Stan grins, nodding his hello. Harry turns back to Louis, tugging on his shirt. “Lou, my mum wants to talk to you at some point about flat hunting, because she’ll have to take time off work and wants to schedule that soon.”

“Flat hunting?” Jay asks coolly, and, in a horrible flash of realization, Louis remembers they’ve only
shared their plan for moving in together with half of the mothers involved. He slides Harry off his lap, leaning forward to grab his mum’s hands. She lets him, eyes narrowed suspiciously.


“Louis William,” she warns.

“Harry and I want to get a flat after the X Factor tour ends in April,” he rushes out. “In London. We have a meeting with Simon tomorrow to talk about contracts and we’ll know after that what we can afford, so you don’t have to pay anything.”

“You are eighteen years old,” Jay says.

“Almost nineteen,” he protests.

“Harry is sixteen.”

“Almost seventeen,” Harry pipes in.

“I would have been moving out for uni anyway! And Harry’s more of an adult than I’ll ever be, Mum. He cleans and cooks and everything.”

“So you’re moving in with him so he’ll baby you,” Jay says shrewdly.

“No!” Louis argues.

“Besides, I like cleaning. Laundry is fun,” Harry says, beatific.

Phoebe frowns up at him. “You’re weird.”

He shrugs. “I know. So is your brother.”

She mirrors him, shrugging nonchalantly. “I know.”

“Can we talk about this later?” Louis asks weakly. “We sort of have to go congratulate the winner onstage in a few minutes, and I’d rather I still had my head when we do.”

Jay hmphs but leans back, and Louis takes that as an agreement to scamper to his feet, pulling Harry behind him. “Love you Mum, bye!”

They grab Niall and Zayn and Liam and rush back to wardrobe, and Grace scolds Louis for sweating off his foundation.

“Sorry, Gracie,” he sighs. “Just broke the news to me mum that I’m probably never moving back home.”

“Ooh,” she hisses sympathetically. “Poor mum.”

“Poor Louis,” he argues.

“Poor Harry,” Harry says from the next chair over, and Grace and Louis can’t help but agree with that.
Everyone waiting backstage for the winner announcement is dressed in all white except One Direction. Again, Louis doesn’t know why. Fashion is beyond his comprehension most nights, let alone the biggest reality TV night of the season. Maybe it’s an us versus them thing? The three finalists in color and the others washed out? Metaphors, man. Who knows.

All the acts except the last two are just offstage, watching Matt and Dannii and Rebecca and Cheryl get into place, all the dresses and Matt’s sweaty forehead sparkling under the spotlights. Matt shoots a look their direction, smiling sweetly and wiggling his fingers in a tiny wave. Louis jumps in front of Aiden and blows kisses back, making Aiden cuff him round the head and sending Niall into a fit of giggles. An assistant shushes them, swatting their direction with a clipboard.

“What do you think, then?” Louis murmurs to Liam as the crowd noise dies down. “Who’s our champion?”

“Matt,” Liam answers in a whisper. “One of the assistants left Dermot’s voting tally behind last week after dress rehearsal and I saw it. He’s been number one every single week except that very first week, and Mary won that one.”

Mary, who’s right behind them in a glittering white gown of her own, snorts. “You’re damn right I did.”

Harry chuckles on Louis’ other side just as the spotlights rise and the stage lights go down.

“Judges, contestants, this is it,” Dermot says above the steady thrum of the crowd.

“Isn’t it weird how the judges are basically more important than the actual acts?” Zayn mutters. “Like the phone numbers to vote have the judge’s faces next to them instead of ours.”

“And they get a better entrance at each show,” Niall adds.

“They’re the stars, we’re just here to make them more famous,” Katie says, and it’s sad that everyone around them (ignoring Dermot’s speech about what the nation has decided and the cacophony that is the dramatic reveal music) nods and chuckles deprecatingly.

“The winner,” Dermot booms, “of the X Factor 2010 is…”

“I just want it to be over,” Aiden whispers.

“I just want it to never end,” Harry murmurs.

“Matt!”

Matt drops his head into his hands. Aiden bursts into loud tears. The lights flash wildly. Matt hugs Dannii. The X Factor music thuds all around. Matt hugs Rebecca. Aiden hugs everyone standing around him, still sobbing.

Matt is handed a microphone and Dermot announces his first single, and after a verse and a half the other acts are finally allowed to rush onstage and congratulate their winner.

Somehow, Niall is the first to reach Matt, leaping onto his back. The others mob around him as well, his black jacket a beacon in the sea of white. Harry and Louis are right in the middle, Louis pushed to Matt’s side and Harry with his face against Matt’s neck. But Aiden fights his way to the front of the crowd, the others stepping back a little almost out of instinct, and Aiden and Matt sing together into the microphone, if I take a bruise I know you’re worth it. Then, like a dam bursting, like a volcano erupting, like a supernova exploding, Aiden pushes into Matt’s space and kisses him.
fiercely. The song is forgotten as they clutch at each other, the M on Aiden’s wrist catching the light perfectly as he tangles his hand in Matt’s hair.

The world flares, or at least this little part of it does, the crowd screaming and the lights from cameras and phones flashing madly. This kiss will make all the front covers tomorrow, but Matt and Aiden are too wrapped up in each other to care.

Across a mob of contestants who are just as shocked as the audience, Louis finds Harry, who is already looking back with shiny wet eyes and a wide smile. They move toward each other automatically, meeting at the back of the crowd of contestants, everyone so busy watching Aiden and Matt that they aren’t noticed at all.

There’s no final comment before the final live show ends, no send-off from Dermot to close everything neatly, just pandemonium and celebration and Harry and Louis crashing into each other in a breath-stealing hug, fitting from hips to shoulders like puzzle pieces clicking into their rightful places.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s the end of part one! Part two is from December 2010 to July 2012, and the next chapter will be posted like always at the end of next week.

tumblr | fic post

come talk to me if you have questions/comments/concerns/ideas/anything!
Part Two: 13 December 2010 - 21 December 2010

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder: thanks to the dagger appearing early, the tattoo timeline is going to be way, way off. Everything else should be canon compliant, but that had to be updated and changed a little.

Also, I literally have no idea what the boys’ original contract was with Syco, and I have no in-depth knowledge about how entertainment contracts work, so I got a lot of information from the articles that came out at that time. I actually think the guys signed a three year deal and then re-signed for another two, but in this story they definitely wouldn't do that, so I went with a five year contract instead.

Enjoy part two!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

part two: to be loved and to be in love

Chapter 8: 13 December 2010 - 21 December 2010

13 December 2010

There’s a thick contract on the table in front of Louis, and he feels like he’s supposed to be more excited than he is.

Not that he isn’t excited. It's… complicated.

It could have something to do with the absolute lack of glamour of this entire process. He was pretty sure—before this morning, at least—that contract signings are supposed to happen with press conferences and beaming handshakes and snap-happy photographers clamoring for the best shot.

This feels more like all those meetings Louis had with the Modest! execs, where everyone is a little tense and nobody lets their guard down for even a second.

One of Simon’s lawyers is talking; has been, actually, for quite a while. He’s covered everything from promotional merchandise to brand image to non-disclosure agreements and artist rights. It’s all very jargon-filled and carefully vague, Louis is pretty sure, and he knows he needs to pay attention because they don’t have a lawyer on their side of the table to do the listening for them. In fact, Louis seems to be the only one on their side of the table even still awake: Niall dropped off long ago, his jaw slack, not even keeping up the pretense of propping his eyes open. Zayn has his glassy stare pointed straight out the window, and Louis hasn’t seen him blink since they sat down. Harry made it a little longer, but he’s slumped over as well, head on Niall’s shoulder and eyes blinking blearily. Liam is sitting bolt upright next to Louis, but his eyes are red and even glassier than Zayn’s, focused probably on a spot on the wall behind the lawyer’s head, but Louis can’t really tell. They're all running on little sleep and large headaches, and Louis is itching to crawl under his chair and curl up
to take a nap.

He can refrain, though. He's a strong, independent boy who don't need no nap.

“...twenty-one days from the end of this meeting to make a decision, corroborating only with the legal assistance deemed capable by Syco Entertainment and Modest! Management…”

The lawyer is still talking. It shouldn’t be possible. It’s been hours and hours, doesn’t he need a water break? Besides, Louis is pretty sure he could melt this speech down to its essentials in less than a minute, probably with time to spare: we’ll pay you, but not too much because you’re new and your fans are fickle, and you don’t get much say in anything at all. Done.

There's ringing silence for just the shortest of seconds when the lawyer finishes, and Simon is the one who fills it.

"We'll leave you boys to discuss. How's half an hour sound?"

He's gone before Louis can answer, his retreating form followed by the small crowd of essential Syco and Modest people who have been sitting in on the discussion. Then the five boys are alone, blinking and yawning and slowly shifting awake.

Zayn smacks the back of Niall's head and he wakes with a start, snorting and rubbing drool from his face.

"Wha-? D'miss somethin'?” He mumbles, rubbing his eyes. "S'over?"

"Not yet, dear,” Louis mumbles, rubbing at his temples. “They're giving us a little bit of time to talk over the basics, and if we agree to those then we can take the full contracts to read over and decide."

Niall holds up a thumbs up as he stretches, groaning loudly. Louis sighs and flips through the massive stack of papers, feeling wildly out of his depth.

"Let's have it then, Tommo," Niall yawns, waving him on.

(Tommo used to just be a media thing, something Louis was never really called until Niall started using it as an answer to his Louis-given nickname of Neil. Louis still isn’t sure he likes it, the whole casual use of the last name thing, but as that information had already been released to the public and he's already Bonded, there's really nothing else that can happen.

Plus, it's sort of like his own version of Becks, and he will take any excuse to be more like the most amazing human to ever live. So Tommo is stuck, at least for now.)

"Right," he says, leaning forward and folding his hands together. "I can't catch everything that he's saying, and I think that's on purpose. But what I have understood doesn't seem out of the ordinary. At least, I don't think it is. He's being pretty strategic on what he is and isn’t saying, but nothing has sounded weird so far.”

“So, we’re good?” Niall asks. “That’s it, and we accept the contract?”

“I don’t think we should sign right away,” Louis says, and Liam nods next to him. “We should definitely have a lawyer look over it, and we might want to come up with some demands of our own if we see some weak spots. But we won’t know any of that until someone trained for this can read it all the way through.”

“I agree,” Zayn admits. “I don’t think I heard anything after the first heretofore.”
Louis snorts, rubbing his face. “Let’s just call it an end and head back to take a nap. I can’t decide anything when I’m this tired.”

“Yes,” Harry finally speaks up, though he doesn’t lift his head from the table to do so. “Nap. Please.”

They get their nap time, and a little more besides; it’s five in the evening when Louis rolls out of the hotel bed he’d collapsed face-first into, rubbing at his grainy eyes. He stretches and scratches at his stomach as he pads into the kitchen, barefoot and bare-chested, his sweatpants slung low on his hips. He flicks on the kettle, settling against the counter to watch the sun fall over London through the suite’s massive windows and wondering how the hell he can still be tired.

He’s not even hungover, is the thing. The afterparty down in the hotel lounge had strung along until almost four in the morning, with people plastered all over the furniture and each other, yelling and cheering and spilling drinks. Dermot fell out the door holding a bottle of champagne when he tried to leave, toasting anyone he recognized and singing Matt’s new single at the top of his lungs. Matt and Aiden made out through the entire party; they’d arrived hand-in-hand, took a couple of pictures, then claimed a sofa for themselves and never resurfaced. There were so many people, from the contestants’ families to record executives to past X Factor contestants. And, of course, there was those groups of people who just seem to gravitate towards others more popular than them, brandishing phones and cameras to capture their success at mingling with the uncommon folk.

It had been a smashing party, to be sure, but between the watchful eyes of the One Direction mothers and the X Factor minders and the numerous reporters, none of the boys had managed to even slip away for a cheeky smoke outside, let alone to sneak any alcohol.

Which was fine, because even though Louis is perfectly legal and able to drink, he’s never really been comfortable with the idea of getting sloshed in front of his sisters. So he’d stayed perfectly sober along with the other boys and watched the party descend into alcohol-fueled chaos, chatting and laughing with his family and the boys. As the night turned into early morning the families drifted off to do their own things: Zayn’s mum led his sleepy sisters like a line of ducklings to the elevator, Gemma and Niall’s brother Greg ducked away from their parents to do shots at the bar, Liam’s mum kissed all the boys on the cheek as she said goodnight. Louis and Harry were roped into herding the Tomlinson clan up to the fourth floor, so they trailed behind their gossipping mothers, each carrying a sleeping twin, doing their best to block Lottie’s attempts at sneaking back down to the party.

As it turned out, Louis and Harry’s families were in rooms right next to each other, so Anne and Jay took the unconscious twins from the boys’ arms once they arrived and shooed them away.

“Have a good time!” Anne called.

“And don’t do anything stupid!” Jay had added.

“I’m not going to lie,” Harry had said as they’d walked back to the elevator bank, “I’m exhausted.”

“Oh thank God,” Louis had laughed. “I didn’t want to go back down but I thought you wanted to. It’s no fun being the only sober people in the room.”

So they’d changed tracks, calling an upward bound elevator and making their way to their suite on the top floor. To their surprise, Zayn, Liam, and Niall were already there, sprawled across bright red sofas and talking quietly. Louis and Harry settled in and seamlessly joined the conversations,
whispering with voices rough from earlier tears and exhaustion as light started to flood the room, a weak winter sun peeking over the London skyline.

“We should want to be apart by this point, shouldn’t we,” Niall had said at one point.

“We are shockingly codependent,” Zayn had murmured back, burrowing into Liam’s side and hiding his eyes from the light.

“It would feel weird to be in the same building and not be in the same room, anyway,” Harry had said, and that was the end of the conversation as each of them tipped over into sleep, at least until the alarm on Louis’ phone started blaring at nine o’clock so they could get ready to meet Simon.

The kettle whistles and Louis hears a pained grunt from a nearby sofa, a head of messy brown hair appearing over the back.

“Morning, Tommo,” Liam yawns, and Louis smirks.

“Evening, Lima.”

Liam grabs a water bottle out of the fridge, cracking it open as Louis sips his tea. “Where’s Harry?” he asks, wiping at his mouth. “Thought he’d be stuck to your side like usual.”

Louis shrugs. “Dunno. It’s a big suite, could be anywhere.”

Like he’s been summoned, Harry stumbles out of one of the bedrooms, wearing only the tiniest pair of pants Louis has ever seen (and, honestly, Calvin Klein, fuck you very much for all the hot liquid Louis just inhaled). “Tea?” Harry croaks hopefully, and Louis starts him a mug so he can turn away and not look at this ridiculous boy and his ridiculous abs and ridiculous curvy hips for just a moment. Niall bounds in soon after, wrecking the peaceful early evening with his revived energy.

“Let’s talk business,” he says, rubbing his hands together. “Also, food. In fact, food first. Shall I call us some room service?”

Without waiting for an answer, he hops over Zayn’s still-sleeping form (he didn’t even make it to a sofa, poor lad, just curled up right inside the front door like a well-dressed cat) and finds the sleek hotel phone. He’s grinning widely when he comes back.

“I ordered one of everything. Also, beer.”

Louis groans and puts his heads in his hands, fearing the gleeful headlines when Simon decides they’re not worth paying for and gives them the boot, and Harry rubs a calming hand between his shoulderblades. It’s Niall they have to soothe, though, when the food cart arrives with no alcohol.

“Sorry, sirs,” the waiter says, rolling in the heavy cart, “but we were instructed by Mr. Simon Cowell not to serve drinks to this room as there are minors present.”

Niall gives an almighty sob, shortly cut off by a mouthful of pizza. “Sad,” he garbles.

“Someone go wake Zayn so we can start on this monstrosity,” Louis says, flipping through one of the contracts in front of him. Liam jumps up like he’s been lit on fire. The other three stare at him, Niall still chewing sadly.

“I’ll. Um. I’ll do it,” Liam says, blush creeping up his neck. Harry sends Louis raised eyebrows when he turns away, shuffling over to Zayn. Louis shrugs back—he doesn’t understand Liam on his good days, let alone when their sleep schedule has been fucked to pieces and they’re all a bit loopy.
Eventually, though, all five are seated around the massive dining table, munching on chips and steak and sushi (because Niall literally ordered one of everything, and so they’ve got the strangest mix of food that Louis has ever seen piled in front of them) and paging through their contracts, speaking up when they come to a passage that sounds important or off in some way.

“It says here we only get one to two percent of album sales, is that right?”

“Why do our families have to sign nondisclosure agreements? What could they possibly say that is that damaging?”

“We get no say on merchandise, apparently. I dread to see what our faces are going to be put on.”

“I hate to be this person,” Zayn says as he finishes ahead of everyone else, “but… this doesn’t mention money. At all.”

Louis has hit the same wall. “They probably took those pages out so we couldn’t take them elsewhere to get a better offer.”

Zayn hums, flicking his hair out of his eyes. Liam shifts a little, flicking a glance around the table.

“Gonna be honest, lads, a contract is a contract to me. Either way we’re being paid to make music.”

“Hear, hear!” Niall cheers.

Louis nods as well, but an unsettled feeling creeps into his stomach the more he reads things like artist releases all creative control and forfeit of social media rights as necessary and positive promotion regarding Simon Cowell, Syco Entertainment., Modest! Management, and all related subsidiaries.

It feels a bit like calm before a storm, and Louis isn’t sure they’re prepared for the size of the clouds approaching.

14 December 2010

Louis is on the trampoline at the bungalow, the black canvas warm from a day in the sun. The sky is cloudless overhead, marbled gold and sunfire pink and sickly green. The stars form constellations and dissolve before his eyes: first Sirius, rearranging into the Gemini twins, then Leo’s long mane.

Harry is here somewhere. Maybe to his left, or to his right, Louis isn’t sure. But he’s here, his warm cashmere-chocolate-firelight presence soothing to Louis’s soul. And then Louis can feel him, his curls against Louis’ temple and his long legs pressed against Louis’ shin. It’s all wonderful and happy, and Louis takes a deep breath that tastes like honey and bottled sunshine.

But:

"I hate you," Harry says simply, a peaceful offering to the sky. “I hate you, because you keep secrets and you want things from me that I can't give."

Louis can't speak. His words have been stolen. The sky rumbles, twisty charcoal and smattered white. The honey in his mouth turns to ash.

"The other boys hate you too," Harry continues, his doe eyes tracing the shifting patterns in the stars and never once flicking to look over at Louis. Louis wants to grab his face, to force their eyes to
meet, but his arms are too heavy. "That's why they aren't here, because they hate you so much. They
can't even stand to look at you. We're kicking you out of the band and taking all the money you
made, so now your family will hate you too. And you deserve it."

He finally looks at Louis, and the green in his eyes is actually black, flat obsidian with no remorse,
no care.

"You've loved me for six months and you want me for yourself, but I'm meant for better things than
you. This is goodbye, Louis. I'll never see you again."

Black-eyed Harry slips to his feet, a thousand times more graceful than the green-eyed version of
himself. He walks away and doesn't look back, his shoulders straight and unburdened with Louis'
weight anymore, and Louis can't breathe. His stomach is sinking in, he's screaming but making no
sound, he's imploding like a black hole, he's—

He's awake, blinking rapidly and gasping for air. Sheets are tangled around his hips, sticking to his
sweaty skin. He's staring up into wonderfully green eyes.

"I made bacon!" Harry announces. He’s sitting cross-legged on Louis’ chest, smiling brightly. Louis
feels like crying again, and it’s not because Harry’s weight is making it hard to breathe. "Also,
you’ve got a promise to keep."

The boys have the whole day off, a glorious twenty-four hours of rest before they have to meet with
a lawyer and make terrifyingly far-reaching life choices.

Liam (who is already awake and finished with his morning jog) and Zayn (who is still asleep and
probably will be until the clock switches from AM to PM) are planning a movie and dinner night out.
Niall (who is awake, happily texting nonstop, and has already eaten all the bacon) is spending the
day with his family, who took time off of work to spend a few more days in London. Louis and
Harry, apparently, are going to get—

"A tattoo? Today?" Louis asks weakly, thinking of how wonderful Anne's hugs are and how well he
and Gemma get on, and how he's probably not going to get that warm treatment anymore when they
find out he's the one behind Harry’s obsession with permanent body modification.

"Yes," Harry says gently, the same voice a parent would use to explain to his child why they have to
go to school. "You promised that as soon as the show was over, you would take me. Technically the
show ended two days ago, so I've been very patient."

"And you’re absolutely positive your mother won’t murder me?"

Harry hums, twirling his fork through the syrup on his plate. "I'm pretty sure," he shrugs. "She was
okay when Gemma got her nose pierced."

Louis groans, lets his head drop into his hands. "That’s not permanent though, Haz. We’re talking
forever, here."

Harry shrugs again. "I know what I like and what I don’t, and I know what I want. It’ll be okay."

"Please tell me you’ve at least done research," Louis pleads. "That you have an idea of where to go
and what to expect. And money, because they’re expensive."

"Oh," Harry frowns, lips pouting as he thinks. "Can’t we go where you got your dagger?"
Louis’ heart skips for a second, panic blanking all his thoughts before he can come up with a quick addendum to his fake backstory. “It’s in Doncaster, we can’t drive all the way there.”

Harry’s pout deepens. “But-”

“No, Harry. If we’re going to do this, there are perfectly good tattoo artists in London. In fact,” he says, a plan slowly forming, “why don’t you have Zayn help you look up some options while I hop in the shower? He knows more about tattooing than I do, and he’d love to help.”

Green eyes go supernova as Harry’s pout turns into a blinding smile. “Perfect, great idea Lou!”

Louis internally congratulates himself on a job well done as he gathers his things for a shower, slipping his phone between the folds of his towel so he can sneak it into the bathroom without catching anyone’s attention.

He’s only got about half an hour to brush up on tattooing basics before his shower will start to seem suspiciously long, and he plans to use every minute of it to ensure his secret stays a secret.

Zayn was delighted to help Harry research tattoo artists in the area, and even had a few recommendations based on his expansive list of artists he wants to work with someday. Harry asks if he wants to tag along and get his first bit of ink as well, but Zayn makes a face and says no.

“M’ mum said she’d murder me if I came home with a tattoo before I turned eighteen, and I’ve got less than a month left, so,” he breathes in and scrunches his eyes shut like it hurts to be responsible. "I can wait."

Harry and Louis wave goodbye and bundle themselves in a cab to head to Shangri-La Tattoo, the grey London morning cool on their skin and the city’s people rushing around them like a stream parting around unmoving stone.

The building is smaller than Louis expected, exposed brick painted bright blue and a crooked sign on the front door claiming “Come in, we’re OPEN.” It’s bright inside, warm and comfortable, just a few people lounging about on crumbling vintage furniture and chatting while a woman with the side of her head shaved tattoos a tiger across a man’s back.

The conversation stops as Harry and Louis step in, a little bell above the door tinkling their arrival. A man hops up, throwing out a heavily-tattooed arm and grinning.

“How’re ya?” he asks, shaking their hands enthusiastically. “What can I do for you lads?”

“Do you have time for a walk-in appointment?” Harry asks, voice a little shaky. His eyes keep flickering to the man getting the tiger, the way his muscles shake as he tries to keep still.

Their greeter smiles a little wider. “Why yes, we do. A little early Christmas present for yourself?”

“Something like that,” Harry agrees.

“Well then, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Liam.”

Louis almost laughs, because this Liam is nothing like their Liam, and he can’t help but picture his bandmate with a big bushy mustache and an armful of tattoos. Harry must be thinking something similar, because a tiny grin appears for the first time since they’ve stepped into the shop. “Harry,” he
answers, “and this is Louis.”

“Good to meet you. Now, what are we thinking for today?”

Louis hadn’t noticed in the cab—too preoccupied with making sure they got to the right place— but Harry has brought his little leather-bound journal along with them: it’s well-worn and curved a little, like it spends a lot of time with his big hand wrapped around it, bending the spine to form it to the curve of his palm. The pages are torn and heavily marked, dog-eared and tattered, and Louis had spent countless evenings at the X Factor house watching TV or chatting with his mum on the phone while Harry curled up next to him, scribbling away and filling pages like he was being paid to do it. Louis never tried to peek, knowing if Harry wanted him to see he’d make it clear, but he always itched to read the words in Harry’s head put down on paper.

Apparently, someone was listening to his wishes.

“I’ve got a list,” Harry says when Liam asks for artwork ideas. “No actual pictures, but it’s pretty simple stuff.”

“You have a whole list?” Louis asks, surprised but also not really, because Harry is always thinking a dozen steps ahead; he probably started cultivating tattoo inspirations from the moment he saw somebody else’s ink and thought I might want one of those.

Harry ducks his head and grins at the ground. “Yeah. It’s probably stupid. I just don’t want to forget any ideas.”

“S’not stupid.”

Harry scuffs the floor with his boot. “Wanna see?”

Louis feels his expression brighten, and before he can answer Liam is ushering them to the back of the studio where there’s a desk littered with paper and pencils and pens of all kinds, half-finished artwork scattered around. Liam winks and pulls up a couple of chairs.

“I’ll leave you two to discuss,” he says, then heads back to his seat on the sofa to give them a little privacy. Harry sits and opens his journal, flipping to a page near the front filled with words written in at least five different colors of ink, crossed out lines and little doodles.

“Can I…” Louis asks, motioning to the journal, and Harry slides it to the middle so they both can read.

The first few entries have been crossed out with heavy strikes, leaving nothing behind. The first legible words are star outline, then another that says G and A. There are little notes next to most, like the one that says bird/birdcage and then, next to it, (ribs? or chest). Louis reads through the list, peering closely at the ones he can barely make out, picturing each of them inked across Harry’s pale skin. There are some lines that are little more than vague descriptions, like Hebrew or front of ankle, maybe GM? and some that are highly detailed. It isn’t until most of the way through the list that one catches Louis’ eye.

“Hi?” he asks, pointing to the two small letters with no notes or drawings beside it. Harry shifts in his seat.

“Yeah, erm. It’s just. I’ve always wanted to be able to use whatever tattoos I got as a symbol of, like, things I’ve been through or people I’ve met. Like a record of my life, y’know? And I knew I’d want
something to symbolize the \textit{X Factor}, because even though we didn’t win it’s still life-changing. But I also knew I’d want one for the people I met through it.”

“So…” Louis says slowly, realization dawning, “\textit{hi is-}”

“The first word you said to me,” Harry finishes, blush pinkening his cheeks. “I know it’s sappy, and stupid, probably. But I didn’t just get fame and a band out of the \textit{X Factor}, I got you, too.”

Louis can’t feel the expression his face is making, but he’s sure it’s probably incredibly mushy and embarrassingly transparent. How did he end up with a person in his life as perfect as Harry Styles? It’s almost like he was really, really good in a past life. Like a monk, or a firefighter, or something.

“Wow,” he finally says, and Harry’s mouth twitches at the corner.

“Good wow?”

“Best wow,” Louis answers. “Is that what you’re getting, then?”

“Well, I really want the star outline,” he says, pointing to the top entry. “It’s got a lot of meaning behind it that is important to me. Plus, five points, five boys—I think it’s a perfect \textit{X Factor} commemoration and it’s not too crazy for a first tattoo. But if you don’t mind, I’d like to get \textit{Hi} too.”

“Why would I mind?”

Harry shrugs one shoulder. “Dunno. Might think it’s stupid, or something.”

“Never,” Louis murmurs, tapping his fingers on Harry’s arm. “I never ever think you’re stupid.”

Harry calls Liam back over and explains what he wants, pointing out two spots on his bicep. Liam’s going over pricing and sizing when he asks about the font for \textit{Hi}.

“Could, um,” Harry says, turning back to Louis (who is still looking over Harry’s tattoo list, because right after \textit{Hi} there’s a string of ideas that all seem to fall under the same theme: a ship, a compass, an anchor, a rope, a mermaid, a lighthouse… The dagger on Louis’ arm is tingling like it agrees Harry should get all of those). “Could you write it, Lou?”

Louis looks up, blinking away the sea-faring phrases still rolling in front of his eyes. “Yeah, course.”

They dig up a pen and some paper, and Harry indicates how big he wants the word to be. Louis writes it, tongue sticking out between his teeth in concentration, because if there ever was a time for good handwriting it’s when it’s about to be permanently inked onto your best friend. Soon, Harry’s being led to a chair and settling in, his lip bitten hard between his teeth. Liam’s bustling about, snapping on some gloves and pulling out a disposable razor and black ink caps.

Harry grows still when Liam preps the area, leaving it pale and smooth and ready for ink. He’s back to chewing on his lip in earnest, though, when the star stencil is being placed, his arm stretched above his head so Liam can get to his inner bicep easily. Louis scoots as close as he can, grabbing Harry’s outstretched hand and leaning close, as interested in seeing the process as he is to keep Harry occupied and calm.

The tattoo gun is buzzing mere inches from his skin when Harry chokes out, “Wait, wait.”

Liam shuts off the gun immediately, placing it gently back on his side table then rolling his chair back over to Harry’s side. “What’s up?”
Harry’s broken the skin on his lip, and his hand’s gone all clammy. “What if…” he clears his throat. “What if that’s where my Marker is supposed to go? How am I supposed to know?”

Louis feels his own hand spasm in Harry’s without his permission. Liam, however, looks perfectly calm.

“Some people do choose to wait until their Marker shows to get tattoos, yeah,” he says, tilting his head. “A lot of people tattoo around them once they appear, like a centerpiece. However, keep in mind that your body knows where your Marker will appear, even though you don’t. If you feel good about this spot,” he says, tapping Harry’s soft inner arm, “you’re probably good to go.”

Harry shifts his gaze to Louis. “This isn’t a bad idea, right?”

Louis runs a hand over Harry’s outstretched arm, the star stencil and it’s sharp points, Harry’s bicep waiting for its ink. And then, because he’s masochistic and can’t help himself, his eyes flicker to Harry’s bare left forearm: the place where, if Louis was only so lucky, if only fate was a little kinder, there would be a corresponding Marker on Harry’s arm to match his own dagger. “No, Hazza,” he finally says, tearing his mind away from its litany of if only if only if only. “I think it’s brilliant.”

Harry grins, a little weak but none the worse for wear, and Liam clears his throat. “Besides,” he says cheerfully, “if a tattoo you get happens to overlap with your Marker, there’s a simple laser surgery that can remove the tattoo without harming the Marker.”

“How about,” he says, “if you get hi, I’ll get oops.”

Louis gapes at him. “You will?”

Louis laughs, runs a hand through his hair. He shouldn’t. He really shouldn’t. Tattoos are so, so permanent. But, well. Tattoos might be permanent, but so are Markers, and either way Harry’s already permanently altered him. Might as well get something of his own choosing, this time. “Yeah, I will.”

A horrible, terribly brilliant idea has been forming like a particularly violent hurricane in the back of Louis’ mind since he saw two little letters in Harry’s handwriting in his journal, and he loses his hold on the words sitting heavy on his tongue.

“How about,” he says, “if you get hi, I’ll get oops.”

Harry smiles and the world turns a little faster, Louis’ heart beats a little louder, and the buzz of a tattoo gun echoes in both of their ears.

Soon, Harry’s breath is hitching as the needle pierces skin, ink flowing under Liam’s careful hand. Harry’s fingers squeeze Louis’ and it hurts, but soon there are new additions to Harry’s arm; a sharp-pointed star to stand for his boys and Hi, one scrawled word, not even really a phrase, not really meaningful at all, except it is. It’s so meaningful, the most important word Louis has ever spoken to the most important person he’s ever spoken to. The lines appear on Harry’s skin and Louis is in awe, because maybe this is more meaningful than a Marker. Harry will not choose who he Bonds to
someday, but he chose to have a memory with Louis immortalized on his skin.

His lips are still bitten red but he’s not shaking anymore, and with his pink cheeks and flyaway hair he’s the prettiest thing Louis’ seen in a lifetime. Louis sort of wants to kiss him (more than usual, that is), even though he knows he can’t.

It takes all of twenty minutes for the ink to seep into Harry’s skin, and then he’s done. He’s tattooed. The star and the word are covered in ointment and a bandage, wrapped in tape.

Now, it’s Louis’ turn.

He shouldn’t be this nervous. There’s no way the bite of the needle can match the burn of his Marker appearing, and that happened out of nowhere. He knows what’s coming this time, can see the gun waiting as Harry draws out OOPS! on a spare bit of paper and Liam transfers it to a stencil.

Maybe that’s why he’s shaking like a leaf on a windy day: he’s anticipating the pain this time, and it’s sort of terrifying.

Harry notices, because that’s what Harry does. His eyes are careful as he watches Louis strip off his sweater and tug at the hem of his t-shirt, hands twitchy. Louis’ eyes, meanwhile, are trained on Liam as he changes gloves and cleans all the trappings left over from Harry’s tattoos.

“Well, looks like someone’s ink cherry has already been popped,” Liam notices delightedly, gesturing at the dagger once it’s unveiled. Louis just smiles, knowing it’s too weak to seem genuine, but he can’t really bring himself to care. Liam takes it in stride. “Want your new one next to it?”

“No,” Louis hears himself say. “Other side.”

Harry’s hand is hot in his as Liam switches sides, setting up next to Louis’ right arm. Liam catches Louis’ eye, gets a nod of confirmation, and starts up his gun for the third time.

The sting of the needle is fierce, more rough and impure than the white-hot heat of his Marker. But, as quickly as it comes, it levels out into something manageable. It’s strange, almost as though choosing to bear the pain makes it lesser, like the bite grows softer as Liam draws the second O, the swoop of the P. He traces Harry’s underline with a steady hand and that’s it, it’s done.

Louis prods the slightly inflamed skin around the tattoo, careful to avoid the ink but unable to tear his eyes away, at least not until there’s a small voice breaking through his consciousness.

“Can I see?” Harry asks, and careful long fingers lightly outline the word near the crease of his inner elbow. As always, Harry’s skin on Louis’ sends sparks that have no end, trails of heat that flare under his fingertips, and the skin around the OOPS! throbs like it knows Harry’s the reason it was put there. Harry traces a circle around the new ink, accidentally smearing a bit of the ointment daubed over it.

“Oops,” he says, peering up at Louis through his eyelashes.

Louis laughs, the sound loud in the small shop. “Hi,” he answers.

Liam shakes their hands again as they bundle up to leave, handing them both business cards and instructions to call if they’re ever back in town and wanting some new ink.
“Liam Sparkes?” Harry asks, reading off the card. “Is that your real name?”

“Nah,” Liam laughs. “Picked it out of a book once. Used to be Sparks without the E, but it got mistaken for a porn name one too many times. But this way, people can look me up online.”

Louis grins, liking Liam Sparkes more with every passing minute. “You’d make an excellent porn star,” he assures him on the way out the door, and Liam howls his thanks.

“I like him,” Louis declares as they settle into a cab.

Harry beams next to him. “Yeah, me too.”

The boys are properly in awe when they meet back up in the hotel suite that night and see the twin ink on Harry and Louis’ arms.

“You saps,” Niall laughs, but his eyes are bright as they pull the bandages off.

Zayn claps them both on the shoulders. “They’re our saps, though.”

Louis rolls his eyes but can’t stop smiling, Harry in the same way where he’s tucked under his arm. The plastic wrap around their bandages glints in the light of the television as they settle in to watch the new *Inbetweeners* episode, their boys tossing popcorn at each other around them as night turns to morning, their day off turning forward to a day back at work.

15 December 2010

As they’d been told during their meeting with Simon, they were given three options for lawyers they could work with to go over their contracts and decide whether they wanted to sign or not. Between the five of them, their knowledge about the legal system and entertainment rights went about as far as what Simon had allowed Louis to learn throughout the course of the show and what they saw on *Entourage*. So, really, it didn’t really matter which lawyer they chose, because any of them could say anything, and the boys wouldn’t know whether he spoke the truth or not. And, based on the fact that all three of their choices for lawyers are paid by Simon, Louis doesn’t trust any of them one bit.

When the lawyer they’d randomly selected steps through the door of the suite, that distrust grows like a weed in the sun. He’s a slick lawyer cliché, with his greased-back hair and sharp-creased suit, briefcase carefully placed on their suite’s dining table, the shiny leather stark against the candy wrappers and banana peels littering the surface.

His name is James, and Louis sort of hates his guts before he even speaks.

“Gentlemen,” he says, smiling a shark-like smile, a firm handshake distributed among them. They take their places (once Louis and Liam have made enough small talk that an embarrassed Harry could speed-clean the table, leaving behind a clean surface cleared of rubbish and old food) and begin.

Unlike the last lawyer, who talked in circles just to see their heads spin, this one speaks like he’s explaining the contract specifics to toddlers.
“Let’s cover the basics. It’s a combined five year-five album deal with Syco Entertainment and Modest! Management. Syco covers the music production side of your affairs, Modest! handles your public image and all that entails. At the end of the five years, you can negotiate for an updated contract or extend this one for a longer amount of time.”

“Is that five years or five albums?” Liam asks.

“No, that's five years and five albums. You are expected to record the next album in the break between each tour."

Louis clasps his hands on the table, his hands shaky like his jangling nerves.

“Due to the nature of your previous contract, you will take part in the X Factor Live Tour from February to April no matter what you decide in regards to this contract,” James continues, tapping the thick stack of paper sitting in front of him. “If you do decide to sign, you’ll begin recording on the album the moment the tour ends. Mr. Cowell has decided that he wants a single by fall at the latest, summer if it can be managed.”

Something seems off about that, but Louis can’t stop to think it over because James is barrelling forward.

They discuss percentage cuts of album and ticket sales, and he tells them not to be worried about seemingly-small percentages because a small percent of a multi-million pound tour is still a lot of money, and others besides just them have to be paid as well. He says that most artists leave merchandising decisions to their management team, so they shouldn’t worry that their contract would say they have no final say over the use of their images to sell products. He says that, since none of them are experienced in any part of the recording process, they can’t be expected to suddenly turn into a band that writes all its own music on the very first album, so the clause about not having complete creative control should be seen as a good thing.

The thing is, Louis has no idea if he’s just spewing bullshit or not, but it sounds like Simon (through James) is trying to put a positive spin on something that isn’t actually that positive for them. As it stands, they get a tiny percentage of tour sale income and an even smaller percentage of album sales, no merchandising control, and no creative control. But, as part of their NDA, they can’t go get a second opinion from anyone. Not even their parents. And Louis doesn’t know how, but he’s sure Simon would know if they tried going to someone else.

“Most of these changes and decisions wouldn’t begin until after the X Factor tour ends,” James says. “However, assuming you accept, there is one thing that will need to change immediately, which is your social media. Now that the public knows your full names, Syco and Modest! would like for you to drop any references to the band in your Twitter or Instagram handles to make it more authentic. Put your full name like any other celebrity, and we’ll get your accounts verified. Also, you will need to update your passwords and security questions to something more strong to keep out fans and hackers, and you will give that updated information to management as well.”

Add loss of social media control to the list too, then. For the first time all day, Liam’s face goes a little pinched, and Louis remembers his hesitation in their meeting with Simon when he’d asked if they’d have to read fan name signs at concerts. None of them are comfortable with the idea of playing fans and their hopes of Bonding to sell more tickets, and changing their social media to their full names just seems like it’s handing the fans more ammo.

“Now, let’s talk money,” James says, and his grin grows sharper. “The part you’ve probably been waiting for, eh?”
“No, actually,” Louis mutters under his breath. Not everyone is out to get rich, and that attitude makes Louis' stomach twist. Maybe James doesn’t hear, but Louis thinks he sees his eyes tighten just a little.

“In a standard five-year contract, the cut that goes to the artist is dependent on guaranteed sales. As you are a new artist and there is no way to predict sales, Syco has outlined a standard straight-percentage cut.”

“Okay,” Niall says testily, “but what does that mean?”

James inclines his head. “It’s a two million pound record deal, with later payments coming after albums and tour tickets are released. Of that original two million, some goes to your management, some goes to Syco and your producers, some goes to your daily handlers that will be with you for publicity appearances and on tour. A large portion is set aside for tour and recording expenses as well. You, as the artist, get a cut of 40,000 pounds.”

Liam’s pinched expression flees along with the tension in the room. “Each?” he asks breathlessly. Niall looks like he’s already seeing all the beer and bad hats he can buy with his pile of earnings. Fuck, that’s more than Louis thought he’d ever see at one time in his life.

“No,” James says, and the happiness disappears as quickly as it came. “Forty thousand split between the five of you. Eight thousand each.”

Oh.

James leaves soon after that, leaving a card so the boys can call with questions (even though he warns he’s a busy man and may not be able to answer right away, which, “Thanks for bending over backwards to help us out, Jamie boy,” Niall mutters at his back as he leaves) and the suite is left in silence.

“Eight thousand pounds is still more than I’ve ever had in my life,” Zayn offers weakly.

“And we’ll make some off of the albums and tours,” Harry says. It’s still echoingly quiet.

Liam puts his face in his hands. “Is this ungrateful? It feels ungrateful.”

“It’s not,” Louis says quietly. “You hear two million pounds, you expect to get a little bit more than a few thousand tossed your way. We’re the artist, right? We’re supposed to be paid, at least enough to live off of. No one can survive five years on less than ten thousand pounds.”

Niall slaps his hand on the table. “Look. We knew that we wouldn’t get the best deal because we didn’t win. But we still got a recording contract. That’s massive, lads, and we should be proud.”

“Niall’s right,” Harry declares. “And, it’s not like we’ll pay for anything while we’re on tour, I don’t think. And then we record an album, and we’ll get paid when the album is sold. So we’ll be okay.”

Louis admires their optimism. And Niall's right—they didn't win the competition, and so they aren't going to have ridiculously generous contracts right from the start. They have to prove themselves first, and they're probably lucky to be getting an offer at all. But still, he wonders if every artist signing a recording contract feels this same way: like they’re walking face-first into a trap.
Harry’s shoulderblades and tries to breathe for the first time since the lawyer left the suite.

“Something isn’t right with this, Hazza,” he whispers into the dark of the room. “Most X Factor acts take at least a year to put out an album, we get six months? It’s like he’s afraid people will forget about us if we don’t put out music as quickly as possible. And we can’t even see if any other recording company would be willing to take us on, because that’s a breach of contract. I don’t like it, babe.”

“You said once,” says Harry just as quietly, a raspy echo, “that you don’t trust Simon but you trust him more than any other executive. And I think that’s what we need to keep doing. Like, keep our distance, but assume he’s doing what’s best for the band. Because if we’re able to make him money, then he’s happy and we can keep doing what we love to do. So yeah, maybe we have to rush an album out in six months to make sure people remember us, but then once that’s done then we can take time to make music we want to make.”

Louis smiles a little into the back of Harry’s neck. “When did you get so wise?”

“I always have been, grasshopper,” Harry says loftily. “You were just too busy fretting over our future to see it.”

19 December 2010

It’s the eighth time they’ve sat and watched Love, Actually together as a band, but Harry says that’s okay because now it’s actually the time of year where they’re supposed to watch it.

They’re curled up in front of the suite’s massive television, all of them except Liam on the floor because he’s the only one who can get comfortable on the horribly stylish furniture littered around the room. It’s dark save the light from the screen, and they’re watching as Hugh Grant pines away inside Downing Street, his beautiful face heartbroken when he sees that guy Angelina Jolie married kissing that brunette lady from EastEnders.

“This is the worst relationship in the whole movie,” Niall complains, his voice wafting above the sad music.

“No way,” Liam shoots back. “Colin what’s-his-name and the Spanish lady—”

“Portuguese,” Zayn corrects.

“Right, Portuguese, that’s the one. How do they think that relationship will last? They can’t speak to each other and they literally have nothing in common!”

“Ah, he’s a romantic, Li,” Louis says faux-wistfully, waving his arm around like he’s painting a scene. “He loves the idea of love, he just needed a pretty girl to fill the spot. Besides, the worst relationship is clearly Snape and Trelawney—”

“Wrong movie,” Zayn corrects again.

“Right, right, Hans Gruber and Nanny McPhee—”

“Louis, I swear to God—”

“Anyway, those two are the worst. She doesn’t care but at least she’s trying for the kids, and he
doesn’t care and he just fucks everything up for some random chick.”

From the silence that follows, Louis figures the joking in his voice faded out to something a little more sincere, but he can’t really help it if the father leaving the family storyline hits a little too close to home.

“Can we agree that Keira Knightley and the guy whose name I can’t pronounce are the best ones, then?” he continues loudly, filling the quiet. “Like, she didn’t leave him for the pretty boy with the grand romantic gesture, and their Bonding ceremony was fantastic.”

“Oh, definitely agree,” Niall says. “Or maybe the guy that has the orgy with the American girls.”

“Don’t think that counts, Ni,” Zayn laughs, tossing a throw pillow at him. “Not really a relationship, is it?”

“It could be, we don’t know,” Niall says, indignant. “Maybe they’re in a polyamorous relationship.”


“The best couple is clearly Martin Freeman and the blonde lady.” Zayn throws his arms up, stretches. “Nice, normal relationship, no drama, fake sex on camera. And then we know they stay together at the end.”

“I think it’s the little boy and the little girl,” Liam says.

“Young love,” Niall simpers, rubbing his knuckles through Liam’s hair. Liam makes an affronted noise, batting his hands away.

“Liam Neeson,” Harry says quietly, finally joining the conversation. “He and his soulmate are the best relationship.”

“Why, babes?” Zayn asks, tugging on a curl.

“True love?” Harry says, shrugging. “He got to be happy with his soulmate for a little while, and that’s more than what a lot of people get.”

That… hits a little too close to home for Louis’ liking. He has already accepted that he won’t get his own happy ending, but to think that Harry could ever lose his soulmate—it’s too much. Far, far too much emotion for an evening in with the boys.

“Too many feelings!” he says, bounding to his feet. “Boys night in is not supposed to end in tears.”

“Yeah!” Niall agrees, jumping to his feet as well. “Let’s do something!”

“Like what?” Zayn asks.

“We could finish up the list of questions for the lawyer,” Liam suggests, gesturing to the page ripped from Harry’s journal and full of half-articulated inquiries. “The next meeting with him is in two days.”


Liam frowns. “Can’t drink in public, can we? Still being watched to make sure we don’t end up in the papers.”

“And it’s not like we could convince any bouncers that you and Harry are anywhere near eighteen,”
Zayn jokes, squeezing Niall’s cheeks. “Adorable little baby faces.”

Niall pouts. “Get off me, brute.” And then he brightens again. “Lads night in, then! We’ll sneak in some booze, make it a proper night.”

“Lou’s the only one that can buy,” Zayn says. Niall turns his pleading eyes to Louis.

“Please Lou. Please. Please please please—”

“Is this even what everyone even wants to do?” Louis asks, eyes flicking over to where Harry’s still curled up and watching Liam Neeson’s stepson learn to play the drums on the screen.

“Yes,” Niall says decisively. “We do.”

Zayn shrugs. “I’m in. ’S’long as you get something decent, not just cheap beer.”

“Li? Haz?” Niall asks.

“I guess,” Liam says slowly. “If that’s what everyone else wants to do.”

“They do,” Niall says again. “H?”

Harry tears his eyes away from the screen. “Sorry, what?”

“Head in the clouds, that one,” Zayn laughs. “Lads night, Lou’s gonna get us stuff to drink if you want.”

Harry sits straight up, eyes wide. “Really? A party?”

“Party of five,” Niall chuckles. “S’all we need.”

“Yeah!” Harry says, grin wide. “Sounds fun!”

And that’s it, Louis is powerless to resist the dimples. “Fine,” he sighs heavily, “but I’m not buying all on my own. Fork over some cash.”

There’s an off-licence not too far away, just up the street a little. A couple of paps are lounging across the street from the hotel’s front door, but they don’t look his way when he slips a beanie over his head and pulls his hood up, his gray sweatpants and backpack blending him into the surroundings like any other student.

It’s a small corner shop, neon glowing in the windows. A bored-looking woman sits behind the till, popping her gum and flipping through a magazine. Louis sends her a nod as he steps inside, surveying his options.

Liam and Harry hadn’t had any requests, Zayn wanted “something that doesn’t taste like fucking piss, mate, that’s all I ask,” and Niall wanted Guinness, lots and lots of Guinness.

Right.

Louis goes for his own favorites first, grabbing a bottle of cheap vodka and some coconut rum. He passes the small section of schnapps and grabs a bottle of peppermint, thinking Harry will like the taste. He finds Niall’s Guinness and a bottle of Jack for Zayn and he has no idea what Liam would
want, so he snags some Fireball for him. The girl at the register raises an eyebrow when he hauls his load to the front, but rings him up with no comment.

“That all?” she asks. A familiar row of white boxes behind her head catches his eye and he grins.

“Not quite.”

“The prodigal bandmate has returned,” Louis announces as he steps back into the suite, backpack clinking ominously. He gets four loud cheers in answer, the boys skidding around the corner to see their prizes. Louis pulls out each bottle like unveiling treasure, lining up each one on the table so the boys can voice their approval.

“And something for Zaynie, because I may have snuck one and noticed you were low,” Louis says, pulling out a box of Marlboros from the bottom of the bag with a flourish. Zayn’s eyes go wide, and he throws his arms around Louis in a tight hug.

“Alright, alright,” Louis laughs, kissing Zayn on the forehead then shoving him gently away. He reaches for the bottle of Fireball and cracks it open, pouring five shots’ worth in the cheap souvenir glasses he’d picked up from the guest shop downstairs.

"To us," Louis says, officious as he could possibly be for a boy with bare feet and sweatpants still wet at the bottom from the dirty snow outside. The other boys bring their glasses up to clink against his.

"To us," they echo, each throwing back the burning whiskey.

The shots hit like bullets: Harry splutters, Liam grimaces, Zayn hums, Niall whoops.

Louis just grins, the clinging taste of cinnamon on his gums, and settles in for a good time.

There are more shots, lots of them, a number large enough that Louis should be concerned but, well, fuck that. Then Niall finds individual bottles of juice and cans of soda in the fridge and they can drink even more, the fruity tang of Louis’ pineapple-mango juice blend cutting the harsh sting of his admittedly heavy-handed pours of vodka.

His arms feel floaty. Leaves on the breeze, or something else appropriately poetic. Light and buzzing, just the tiniest bit. And, like, he can see, that’s not the issue. His eyes are working just fine, thanksverymuch. Everything is just a little... fuzzy. Particularly ’round the edges. His tongue is fuzzy, too, making it hard to say things like salivating salamanders in Spain (which, believe it or not, is a phrase that came up organically in a conversation with Zayn). Harry’s fuzzy too, just in an even better way, his curls soft against Louis’s thighs.

Harry looks—he looks like one of those guys. From the films, the ones who wear togas and lounge around on uncomfortable-looking furniture all day. The Greeks! Romans? Something. Either way, Harry looks like those guys; like he should be surrounded by girls waving palm fronds to cool his skin and- and fruit being hand fed to him by pretty Nubian boys. Nairobiian. Nubile? Whoever it is, they should be feeding Harry fruit. Louis could feed him fruit, he’s pretty sure Niall ordered grapes the last time he got room service and surely there’s still some in the suite somewhere. He could feed Harry grapes. Or grape juice. Grape juice and vodka. Mmm, vodka. And grapes. Shit, isn’t he
supposed to be feeding Harry?


“Mmkay,” Louis agrees, leaning back and carding a hard through Harry’s hair. He wonders if the curls would stay as curly if Harry grew his hair out. Like the ginger from Brave, only better. Less nasal, and, you know. Less archaically Scottish. Maybe Harry is the ginger from Brave, only instead of wishing for his mum to turn into a bear he wished to be sent forward in time to be a famous musician. And a boy. And a non-ginger. Yeah, that’s possible, Louis will just have to come up with a clever plan to see if Harry knows how to use a bow and arrow. “Harry, y’ever kill a bear with a bow and arrow?”

Nailed it.

“Saw a bear at the zoo once,” Harry mumbles, turning over on his back. They’d turned out the overhead lights ages ago, but Harry still squints upward like he’s staring straight into the sun. He makes his hand into a claw shape and holds it up, pawing idly at the air. “His real name was Roscoe, but I named ‘m Chicago in m’head.”

“Why?”

“’Cause he was a grizzly. And, and ‘cause, like. The Bears suck, y’know? Like, bring in a quarterback who knows what he’s doing.”

Louis doesn’t know what that means. Harry scrapes Louis’ cheek lightly with his hand-claw, then drops it to pat the ground for his mug, lifting it to his mouth and pouting when nothing drips out.


“Yes, your highness,” Louis says, moving Harry’s head from his lap and clambering to his feet. “One refill, coming up.” He bows low, almost falling over, and smudges a messy kiss to Harry’s hair. Harry hums contentedly and flops his arm over his face, grinning like an idiot.

Louis stumbles his way to the kitchen, past Niall who’s lining up another three shots for himself while simultaneously finishing up his last bottle of Guinness. He avoids Zayn where he’s dancing to Beyonce by himself next to the sound system, eyes closed but somehow still avoiding stepping on Liam, who’s sprawled out on the floor and giggling at something on the ceiling. Louis looks up. There’s nothing there. Liam is weird.

Louis avoids one of Zayn’s flailing arms and ducks into the kitchen. He flicks on the kettle and rinses out Harry’s mug, setting it to dry as the water heats. He pulls a new glass for himself out of the cupboard, filling it with water and taking a large gulp.

He’s not actually that drunk. It takes quite a bit for him to actually get sloshed, which was a wonderful thing to discover about himself as a young teenager and also an incredible bragging right to hold over Stan’s head, who, to Louis’ never ending delight, is a weepy drunk who loves everyone and feels the need to tell them. Repeatedly.

So yeah, he’s not really as pissed as he seems, but he likes how loose his limbs feel and how he doesn’t feel the need to screen every word in his head, because it’s been a long time since he’s just, you know, let go. He couldn’t at the X Factor house, not with camera crews following his every move and gossiping reporters around every corner. Also, the whole alcohol ban thing, which may or may not have been his fault. He’d tried to let loose on his one pub night with Aiden (the one that may have led to the alcohol ban in the first place), but had failed pretty spectacularly at that when he
spent the whole time texting Harry instead of forcing as much alcohol into his system as he could handle. He probably hasn’t had a real piss-up in, God, months. Maybe since the good-luck-wanker-hope-you-get-famous-so-you-can-buy-me-things party Stan had thrown for him before auditions. And that was, what, July?

Louis doesn’t drink to get drunk, he drinks to have fun. And it is fun, alcohol is so much fun. But as much fun as it can be, he can never really go full out because it always feels like there’s something he’s hiding, something that he can’t just let drop if he gets careless. Now it’s the dagger and the whole soulmate… thing, but there’d been stuff to hide back in Donny, too. He’d go to parties and drink and see his friends and dance and laugh and yet, somehow, there would always be someone at the party who would stop him and ask about his mum, how’s she doing, heard from your dad lately? Couldn’t believe when I heard about all that, that blows, mate, they’d say, then stumble away, presumably to ruin someone else’s night by dredging up old painful memories. And Louis knew, he always knew, that they weren’t just asking to be polite; that’s not how it works in places where everyone knows everything about everyone. His parents’ split was big gossip, and people wanted more. He had to learn to drink without forgetting, to party without letting go. How to drink enough to make things a little blurry but not enough to pour secrets like rain.

And now, he has even bigger secrets, and more people trying to hear them.

But here, in this suite, with these boys, he knows he’s safe. If he ever decides to open up about his parents or his absolute shitshow of a childhood, the boys will be there to listen. He doesn’t want to, but he knows it’s an open-ended invitation that, someday, he might take them up on. When it’s just the five of them, Louis feels like he can let the alcohol be felt, let the words in his head slip out a little easier.

The good thing is that he knows he could have a whole shelf of wine and a barrel full of vodka to himself and he’d never spill the big secret, the whole half-Bonded-to-Harry thing. Probably because it’s just a part of his life, now, just like how his eyes have always been bluey-greeny-blue and his mum’s always been a nurse, Harry’s always been his soulmate. He just didn’t know about it before. But now he does, and he knows better than to tell anyone.

“Tell anyone what?” Zayn calls, never pausing in his dancing.

“Nothing, twat,” Louis answers, and the kettle whistle distracts them both. Zayn continues twirling perfectly to the beat of Single Ladies, and Louis leans over to switch off the kettle, pouring out a mug full of water, dumping in some instant hot chocolate mix, and pulling his mind out of serious things he doesn’t have to worry about right now. He reaches for a nearby bottle and thinks of something happier.

Like Harry. Harry, who is a ridiculous, ridiculous boy and, as it turns out, does not have a high alcohol tolerance but who is the pickiest drinker Louis has ever met. He took one sip of Louis’ ninety-percent-vodka-ten-percent-juice cocktail and grimaced, smacking his lips like he was trying to will away the taste. So then he tried Niall’s Guinness, to a similar result, then part of Zayn’s Jack and Coke, which he deemed “not terrible but also not good.”

Then he had a taste of the peppermint schnapps Louis had bought for him, declared it to be Christmas in alcohol form, and dumped a fifth of the bottle into a mug of hot chocolate.

Just from the first few rounds of shots and his sips from the others’ drinks, Harry was already flushed and wobbly, his voice like a recording on half-speed. His first schnapps-laced hot chocolate had him singing at the top of his lungs to Destiny’s Child’s greatest hits (which prompted Zayn’s one-man dance party in the first place) and sprawling across anyone he could force to lay still long enough.
“Christ, Hazza, haven’t you drank before? Ever?” Niall had laughed, his voice slightly muffled behind Harry’s shoulder as Harry climbed into his lap.

“Had beer at parties in school,” Harry’d answered, reaching up to braid tiny sections of Niall’s hair. “Beer is gross, so I didn’t drink a lot. Weed is good, though. And so is schnapps.” He stopped, looking concerned. “Are schnapps. Is schnapps plural? Is there such thing as one schnapp?”

Niall had just snorted, shaking his head and patting Harry’s cheek.

Hot chocolate number two had Harry abandoning Niall’s lap to join Zayn on his smoke break out on the balcony, stealing his cigarette to take a drag and promptly launching into a coughing fit for five full minutes afterward, sparking a debate between the two on the point of smoking if it doesn’t get you high. Zayn won, but only because Harry had forgotten what he was doing and wandered back inside halfway through his argument, rearranging Louis so he could drop his head into his lap, nudging Louis’ hand with his nose until Louis started running fingers through his curls.

“I just like m’ mum,” Harry’d slurred, which. As a best friend, that’s a high compliment. As a person who is thoroughly, disgustingly in love with him, not so much.

Louis finishes creating the masterpiece of Harry’s third spiked hot chocolate with a jaunty peppermint candy resting right on top of the marshmallow mountain. Harry makes an overjoyed noise when he sees it, making grabby hands and wriggling excitedly. (Liam, whose abs are currently being used as Harry’s seat, winces but doesn’t say a word.)

“You are my favorite,” Harry tells Louis very, very seriously. It takes him a full minute to say the whole sentence.

Louis pats his curls and walks back over to the sofa—which, through the miracle of alcohol, has suddenly become passably comfortable—and settles next to Niall, stealing his vodka Red Bull and taking a long sip. Niall shuffles and throws an arm around Louis’ shoulders, nuzzling into his hair.

“Excellent night,” he says, tipping his glass to clink against Louis’.

“Excellent night,” Louis agrees.

The night slips on, accompanied by a soundtrack of Beyonce, and Liam and Niall’s bickering over things like the necessity of Cadbury eggs in society, and loud laughter when Zayn tries to do the robot and smacks himself in the face. Louis is still in that pleasant past-tipsy stage but not into full-on plastered, a delicate balance he’s perfected over the years.

He has no idea where most of the others are now. Liam and Zayn fucked off an hour ago, and Louis is pretty sure they’re asleep but couldn’t tell you where. He knows Niall is still in the suite too, because every once in a while there’s a delighted Irish cackle usually followed by an ominous noise like glass breaking or shelves falling. Louis would check, but, well, he’s still making noise so he has to still be alive, at least. Niall’s also either on the phone with someone or talking to himself, his voice echoing when he shouts nearly incomprehensible phrases about Derby or guitars or Guinness.

Harry is smashed, utterly and completely pissed. He’s curled up in Louis’ lap with his head on Louis’ shoulder, giggling at nothing, his mouth pressed against Louis’ collarbone so that every time he speaks his lips drag hot sparks on Louis’ skin. He’s talking now, long, dragging phrases that catch in Louis’ ear and linger.
“...m’ friend Ash said there’s another ‘rticle in th’ paper,” he’s saying, words syrupy slow and just as sweet, “‘bout me havin’ an older girlfriend. Said ‘ve been dating a Blueberry model. Bur. Burberry.” He giggles, then frowns again. “But ‘m not. ‘m not dating anyone.”

“Just people making up stories, love,” Louis says. “Don’t pay them any mind.”

“But ‘s wrong,” Harry protests. “Like, ‘ve apparently been dating all these, like, older women ‘nd stuff, whatever, but ‘ve never even been on a date at all.”

“Neither have I, though, so that’s not that big of a deal,” Louis reassures him. “Lots of people don’t date until they’re out of school or ready to settle down.”

“No,” Harry growls, frustrated. He sits up, wobbling a little. “No. ‘s not fair. They say I’m- I’m like a sex symbol. S’what Ash said. Like, th’ I hook up with fans all the time and go out with all th’se ladies. But ‘ve never even been kissed—”

“Really?” Louis asks before he can stop himself, a little voice in his head yelling shut up, idiot, change the subject! “Never? Not even when you were little, like a kiss on the cheek?”

Harry’s lower lip wobbles. “No, never. Nobody wanted to. But I want to. ‘s not fair, Lou.” He tilts his head, looks up at Louis through his eyelashes. Louis would think it was a move if he didn’t know Harry was absolutely sincere. “Can you? Will you kiss me?”

Fuck. This is worse than sad naked Harry climbing into his bed back in the X Factor house for comfort, worse than snuggling up to Harry every night, worse than knowing in an abstract way that someday Harry will leave. This is real, Harry in front of him looking like a wrecked fallen angel, lips puffy and eyes bright and hair a complete mess. This is Harry offering himself to Louis, and, fuck, all Louis wants to do is take and take and take.

He leans forward.

He can’t do this.

He keeps leaning forward.

What is he doing? Harry is drunk, so drunk, and he might not even remember this but Louis definitely will.

His hands settle on the top of Harry’s thighs. He’s so close he can count Harry’s eyelashes as they flutter shut.

He’s inches away, he's centimeters away.

He can’t do this.

“Why not?” Harry whispers, and oh, Louis is thinking out loud again.

“You’re drunk, Hazza. I can’t do this when you’re drunk,” he pleads, leaning away just a little to try and clear his head.

“I’ll remember,” Harry promises, leaning forward again. Louis stops him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Not the point, love.”

“Kiss me, Louis. Please.”
“God, Harry,” Louis groans, running fretful hands through his own hair. “Don’t make me do this. You can’t make this decision right now.”

“In the morning, then,” Harry says. Louis looks up to see green eyes clearer than they have been the whole night. “When ’m sober again.”

Louis studies his best friend in the entire world and thinks. Despite Harry’s moment of clarity here at the end, this is obviously the most he’s ever drank in one sitting. If it’s anything like Louis’ first time drinking, Harry’ll be bed-ridden all morning. He probably won’t even remember this, as the last moments of a night are always the haziest.

“Yeah,” Louis agrees. “Yeah, tomorrow. When you’re sober. If you still want to.”

Harry holds out a solemn little finger. “Pinky swear.”

Louis pinky swears.

Harry grins, pats Louis’ cheek, and is asleep within minutes.

20 December 2010

Louis wakes with a stiff neck, a dry mouth, and a horrible feeling that he made a very stupid promise to his very drunk best friend.

He’s on a chaise lounge near a massive window looking out over a grey Leicester Square. It’s bustling, a typical London almost-Christmas scene, and for a second he forgets that he might have a mess to deal with and wraps himself a little tighter in the blanket he’d pulled off a spare bed. It’s early, but they’d all went to sleep early too, Louis carrying Harry’s sleep-heavy body to the room they usually share just a little before midnight. It’s probably not even eight o’clock, but he’s never been able to sleep late after a night of drinking, his stomach upset with him for his bad choices and making its protests known.

He needs a shower, but it can wait. For right now, he’s got a quiet view of his favorite city and a moment to himself to collect his thoughts.

Or, well.

“Morning,” Liam yawns, stretching widely. He’s in basketball shorts and nothing else, looking tired but happy.

“Morning,” Louis murmurs. Liam fixes himself a glass of ice water and sits next to Louis’ feet on the lounge. “Where’d you get to last night?”

“Dunno, really,” Liam says thoughtfully. “Think we were in Matt’s suite for a bit, he’s right down the hall. Or maybe it was Rebecca’s, she was there too. Either way, they have a Wii and we played tennis for a bit.”

“You had a Wii party without me?” Louis asks, scandalized. Liam smirks.

“You and Harry looked perfectly content where we left you, don’t even pretend otherwise. And we invited Niall, but he was on the phone with his friend Bressie talking about pasty-faced English cunts so I figured he didn’t want to come.”
Louis laughs, pulling the blanket higher up to cover his shoulders. “Probably not, no.”

Liam stands and finishes his water. “Thought we might sort out those questions for the lawyer and email them over, that way he’ll have answers ready for us when we meet up tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” Louis agrees, before stopping him from walking away. “You, erm. You aren’t the one actually sending the email, right?”

Liam rolls his eyes. “No, Louis, I will let Zayn type the email. I’m aware that I’m not the best spellist —”

“Not a word, love.”

“—and you and Zayn have all email and text-sending rights after last time.”

“Well, Lima, asking the lawyer about our anal salary is a rather large difference than asking about our annual salary.”

“Yes, yeah,” he mutters, but ruffles Louis’ hair anyway. Louis stretches his legs when Liam leaves, preparing to drop back into a doze and rest a little longer before the day officially has to start. That dream is crushed, though, when Liam reappears, flopping down onto Louis’ legs and ignoring his pained grunt as he reads over their list of questions. “I figure we should ask about those nondisclosure agreement sections, especially for our families. It’s not like we’re hiding massive secrets, at least not as far as I’m aware, so there’s nothing our families could say that could hurt anyone.”

Louis stares at him. Liam looks up from where he’s scribbling notes, brow furrowed. “What?”

“We’re doing this now?”

“... yes?”

“It’s like,” Louis reaches over, grabs his phone, “fuck’s sake, it’s only seven-thirty, Liam.”

“And?”

They don’t look away, neither willing to give in. Louis’ stubbornness is a thing of legend, but he does sort of want to just be over and done with the whole thing so he just sighs and waves a hand. “Continue.”

They bang out a couple more suggestions, ideas on improving the merchandising clause to be a little more in their favor and options they like better than the whole no-creative-control-because-you’re-young-and-dumb thing that Syco has written up. Liam’s just laying the list to the side to show the other boys later when the suite’s front door smashes inward, a dishevelled Niall standing in the doorway.

“Did I break a table last night?” is his first sentence, and both Liam and Louis shrug in answer. He toddles to his room, stepping back out almost immediately, looking the slightest bit like a scolded puppy. “I did.”

Liam looks constipated at the news, but Louis just chuckles and stands, stretching, and fixes enough tea to drown the protests of their achy limbs.

Zayn rolls out of bed at around eleven, disheveled and still prettier than any human has the right to be, silently joining them on the sofa and stretching facedown across Niall’s lap. Niall pats his hair
and then uses the back of his head as a resting place for his can of Coke.

It’s nearly noon before Harry appears, looking like a bedraggled, half-drowned kitten. His curls are matted to his face on one side, lines from a pillow still pressed into the skin of his cheek.

“Water,” he groans. He stumbles toward them and Liam intercepts him, spinning him (slowly, as Harry’s a little green around the edges) and chaperoning him to the bathroom.

“Shower first, H. You’ll feel better.”

Harry just blinks like Liam’s spouted off something in German. “Shower.”

“Yes, shower,” Liam agrees. “Water and soap, good for the soul and…” he pauses, flicking his glance to Harry’s nest of hair, “... other things.”

Harry mumbles something that must be agreement and meanders into the bathroom, idly stepping out of his boxers before Liam can close the door. Louis feels heat flash up his neck and across his face, and he stares at the table in front of him until he feels the blush die down a little and he can return to the conversation around him without babbling about perfect pale arses.

Harry eventually emerges looking a little more human and a lot more wet, leaving a dripping trail as he makes his way over to where the boys are watching old Doctor Who reruns and arguing about who is going to have to get up to order lunch. Louis stares at the screen with a burning intensity as Harry sleepily greets Liam and Niall and Zayn, his voice scratchy like sandpaper. When he can feel Harry’s gaze on him, he takes a deep breath and prepares for the inevitable awkward moment he’s sure is coming.

Because of course it’s going to be awkward. It's like their first time performing on the X Factor live shows all over again—Harry got overwhelmed and asked for something he didn’t really want so he could take his mind off of things. Or, well, maybe not the best example, because Louis did end up taking him to get that tattoo he promised, but. He's pretty sure Harry won't be begging for a kiss again now that he's sober.

Besides, Harry's got to have realized by now that he can open his Twitter at any point and have anyone he wants, someone happy to give him his first kiss with no strings attached and no baggage, unlike Louis who is so tied up in strings and lugging such heavy bags that he probably looks like a ball of yarn trying to run away from home.

So Louis turns, bracing himself for a sympathetic look or awkwardly avoided eye contact, and instead finds Harry with his normal sunshiney grin and a stupid, stupid tiny towel wrapped low around his hips.

"Morning, Lou!” he chirps with his dumb gravelly voice, then flitters away to put on some clothes.

Huh. Must have actually forgotten the whole thing, then.

That suspicion grows as they settle in for lunch, Harry throwing together some sandwiches to “give room service and Simon’s wallet a break,” and not once does he pull Louis off to the side to explain anything or have a chat about their feelings.

Not that Louis is lingering in corners by himself to make it easier, or anything. He doesn’t need closure on this. It’s fine.

Lunch is quiet, Zayn still sporting a headache that even paracetamol can’t defeat and the others nursing hangovers of their own as well. Louis can’t keep still, his hands twitching when he reaches
for his water or fork and jumping every time Harry opens his mouth to speak. Harry doesn’t seem to notice, powering sleepily through his sandwich and yawning occasionally.

Eventually Zayn breaks the comfortable quiet, standing and pushing away his own half-finished sandwich.

“Gonna go, um,” he says, waving his hand nonchalantly, “gonna see Rebecca. Talk about, like, her kids. And stuff. That’s it.”

“Having fun smoking with Rebecca, then,” Louis laughs, and Zayn throws his napkin at him but grins as he slips on some shoes, promising that if Rebecca has any extra he’ll try to wheedle it off of her.

Liam leaves soon after as well, claiming that his stomach has settled enough that he can still get in a decent workout. He waves cheerily before disappearing out of the suite, his iPod and headphones in hand.

And then there were three.

Harry pushes back from the table and yawns yet again, his new tattoos catching the light when he stretches, and then starts to gather the dirty dishes. Louis and Niall both snort when they hear water hit the bottom of the sink in the kitchen and the sound of Harry quietly whistling as he scrubs at their plates.

“I’m fully convinced he’s an alien,” Niall says. “No teenage boy cleans to get rid of a hangover. It’s just not natural.”

Louis feels like he should defend Harry, but, to be honest, it is pretty strange.

He and Niall stay at the table for a little longer, Niall texting and Louis leaning back with his eyes closed, listening to the familiar sounds of Harry in a kitchen, his quiet humming barely audible over the sounds of clinking dishes and pouring water. He’s humming *Hey There Delilah*, and Louis wonders why, but not enough to get up and ask.

Then, Niall ruins everything.

“Bressie’s in London!” he says delightedly, responding rapidly to a text. “That fucker, I thought he was still back in Mullingar all this time. Guess he got in this morning.” He stands like he’s going to leave, and Louis panics.

“You’re going?” he asks, and Niall looks at him like he’s grown a second head, nodding slowly. “Why, though? Bressie can come here and hang out! Free food, y’know. And… and we can finally meet him, yeah?”

“Don’t think he wants to have flown to London just to hang out in a hotel, Lou,” Niall says carefully. “But I’ll bring him by tonight, introduce him to you lot.”

He putters off to change out of his sweatpants and is back within minutes, slipping his phone into the pocket of his jeans and throwing on a snapback to cover his messy hair. Louis walks him to the door (with Niall flicking strange glances at him but not saying a word) and claps him on the shoulder. “Have a good day, mate,” he says, sounding weak even to his own ears.

“Yeah, ‘course,” Niall answers cheerfully. “Always do, don’t I?”

And then he’s gone.
Louis takes a deep breath, steeling himself for an afternoon with an oblivious Harry who begged Louis to kiss him just hours ago and then forgot all about it. Maybe he can sneak back through the living room and sleep the rest of the day away. Or he could just leave, he’s mostly dressed and his wallet and shoes aren’t too far.

Or, he could stop fucking around, coming up with scenarios to avoid his best friend and just deal with the situation. This is Harry. He cries when he sees pigeons hit windows, he’s not going to hurt Louis.

He takes a deep breath and turns.

Harry is there, less than a foot between them, head cocked a little to the side and watching as Louis slowly loses his mind. Louis sucks in a gasp before he can help it, the sound loud between them.

“You’ve been twitchy all day,” Harry says.

“Have not,” Louis mumbles. “Just. Hungover, you know?”

Harry just watches him, like he expects a little more. When he doesn’t get it, he speaks again. “You pinky promised me something last night.”

“Oh,” is all Louis says. He’s going to have to book a flight to Antarctica as soon as this conversation is over, because surely this must be the part where Harry apologizes and says he didn’t mean it and Louis has to accept that his life is a bad romantic comedy where he’s the best friend who never gets his happy ending. He feels himself bracing like the words will be a physical impact, curling in on himself.

Harry takes one step forward because he doesn’t understand personal space and Louis takes one step back, finding himself against the entry wall. He has to look up, just a little, which is ridiculous because just a few months ago he and Harry were exactly eye level, and how has he not noticed that Harry’s gotten a little taller just since they’ve known each other? He’s literally grown right in front of Louis’ eyes, which somehow feels symbolic and also like something he shouldn’t be worried about as Harry stares at him now, fiddling with the neckline of his t-shirt.

“Lou,” Harry says, and that’s all he gets before Harry sways forward, pressing his lips lightly against Louis’.

It’s not fireworks, because bad clichés have no business being anywhere near Harry Styles. It’s not electricity either, or magic: it’s like standing in the ocean and feeling the waves pull at his body. It’s floating and freeing and the wonderful sense of rightness, of being exactly where he belongs.

Harry’s lips are soft and careful and, oh, of course, this is Harry’s very first kiss, that’s why his mouth is so tentative and unsure. This is the story he’ll tell to his kids someday when they ask, remember Louis, he was in that band with me; yeah, he was my first. Louis doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe, just lets Harry take what he wants.

And then Harry pulls back, and it’s over. It’s the waves receding back into the sea, low tide pulling him away from Louis’ touch.

And it’s not enough.

It’s never been enough, not with Harry. There’s never been a moment with Harry where Louis thought, this is all I want, I’m content with what I have. There’s no end to the need, no finish line where Louis will stop. He’s always wanting more, pushing for it even though that little rational part of his brain is screaming that it’s a bad idea.
When he went to bootcamp it wasn’t enough just to be civil to Harry, he had to fall in with his group of friends and stick by his side like he’d been glued. When they were at the bungalow it wasn’t enough to just become a better bandmate to Harry like he did with the other three, they had to become inseparable, codependent after just two weeks. When they were at the X Factor house it wasn’t enough to spend every moment of the day with him, Louis had to have Harry by his side every night as well.

And so when Harry touches the softest of kisses to Louis’ lips, there's no way it's going to be enough.

“No,” Louis says nonsensically, and he wants to have enough control over himself to be able to walk away but he doesn’t have that, so instead he puts a hand to Harry’s chest and takes control of something else. “No, not like this.”

They switch roles, Harry taking a stumbling step backward and Louis crowding into his space, pushing until Harry’s back hits the opposite wall, the breath rushing out of him. His eyes are wide, mouth hanging open. Louis gives it a moment, a build-up of anticipation as they stare at each other, then he surges up onto his toes and gives Harry a real first kiss before nerves and logic get the better of him.

If the last one was like waves on the surface of the ocean, this must be the current underneath, impossible to fight. It’s inescapable, Louis drowning under the crushing weight of Harry Styles and knowing that this is the best end for him. Exactly what he needs to survive and the poison that kills him all at the same time. Louis leads and Harry follows, exchanging breath as their lips move, Harry making little noises every time Louis’ teeth bite down gently on his lower lip. He presses forward, chest against Harry’s and feeling him shiver, persuading him to open his mouth with little swipes of his tongue.

Fingers twine around curls as Louis moves even closer, pulling away from Harry’s lips just to slide lower and kiss the skin under Harry’s jaw, behind his ear, down his neck. Harry makes a shocked noise, his hips jumping against Louis’, and Louis hums in answer. He slides his mouth back to Harry’s and it’s another glorious minute without breathing, just lips sucking and tongues sliding. He tries to keep his eyes open, to see the way Harry looks when he makes the noises currently driving Louis crazy, but they keep sliding shut when Harry tentatively brushes his tongue against Louis’ instead of letting Louis lead every single moment.

It feels like a small eternity has passed since Louis shoved Harry against the wall and pressed their mouths together. Harry’s moaning with abandon now, raspy and deep in his throat, his hands shaking where they’re clutching at Louis’ waist. They’re moving as one, Harry catching on quickly to the way Louis’ head tilts and his hips shift and how he gasps involuntarily when Harry finds the sensitive spot on the back of his neck with his clever fingers. Not too bad for a first kiss floats through Louis’ mind, and then he realizes.

This was never supposed to go this far. This was never supposed to happen at all.

Louis wrenches himself away, staring at Harry from far too close as they gasp in air.

"I'm sorry," he breathes, and it's true, it's always been true, he's been apologizing since the day they met and Louis will never be able to make any of it up to him. He backs up to the suite’s front door, finding the knob behind his back. "I'm so sorry, Haz. I'm..."

There's no more to say. He throws open the door and slams it shut behind him. As the door closes, he thinks he hears the soft, shocked sound of Harry saying “No, Lou, wait-” but he’s probably just hearing what he wants to hear. He sprints up the empty hotel hallway to another room, pounding on
the door with a heavy fist.

He doesn't have long, he knows. It'll only take Harry a minute or so to recover from Louis' abrupt exit and then he'll be out in the hallway and he'll find Louis still there and want to talk and no, no Louis definitely can't do that. So he raps at the door again, his hand stinging at the force of knuckles on wood.

He looks down and remembers suddenly that he's barefoot. He has no wallet and no coat and he's pretty sure he just broke his best friend's heart and broke his own in the process, and there's the creeping knowledge in the back of his head that Harry will get over this someday but Louis definitely never will, and all of this is happening all at once and still the only thing Louis can think is I'm not wearing any shoes and why is nobody answering the fucking door-

The door opens, Aiden filling the space with a surprised smile and the smell of stale sex. Louis sort of hates him, even though he doesn't. Aiden's smile drops when he sees Louis, barefoot and shaking and teary-eyed.

"Shit," he says, which sums things up quite nicely. "Matt!" he calls over his shoulder, then tugs Louis inside. "Lou, Christ, what's wrong?"

The door shuts and Louis can breathe again, knowing that Harry can't corner him to talk if he can't find him. Matt rounds the corner, looking similarly content and rested before he can fully take in the scene and his smile drops as well. "What happened, Louis? Is everything okay?"

"No," Louis says. It's the truest thing he's ever spoken. "Everything hasn't been okay in quite a while."

There's a sudden pounding on the door, a desperate call of "Matt, open up!"

Louis scrambles to hide around the corner, Matt and Aiden watching with wide eyes. "Make him leave, please," he begs, and he doesn't even care that they share a wary glance before Matt goes to open the door.

"Oh, thank God," Harry says from out in the hallway, and Louis wishes he could see him but is also so glad he can't. "Have you seen Louis? I just- we- he just left, and he didn't take anything and I'm worried."

He sounds worried, that's for sure, voice all wobbly and unsure. Another thing for Louis to apologize for later. That particular running tally has grown far, far too large.

"Um, no, mate," Matt says. "Haven't seen him. I can give you a ring if we do, though."

"Perfect, thanks," Harry says, and then he's gone. Louis lets out the breath he didn't know he was holding and opens his eyes.

Matt and Aiden's suite is similarly decorated to theirs: modern, futuristic furniture in shades of red and white and overly large electronics tucked into every available space. Louis wants to talk about that. Or maybe Matt's new contract with Syco he just signed, or Aiden's, or bloody politics. Anything, really, he'd rather talk about anything right now except what's going on.

"Lou," Aiden starts but Louis pulls away, shaking his head.

"I can't, I can't, I'm so sorry but it's all f*cked up and I just need time alone but I can't get any in that suite and I don't have any shoes and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry-"
"We can get you shoes, babe," Matt says carefully. "And a coat, too, if you need it. It's freezing out there."

Louis was planning on staying indoors but now that Matt’s mentioned it, out there sounds like a pretty damn great place to be.

"Thanks," he says gratefully, and soon he's bundled in Aiden’s jacket under Matt’s coat and Aiden’s shoes with about six pairs of socks because they're so large on his feet. He's also loaded down with promises that he won't do anything stupid and that he'll call if he needs help.

"I know you don't want to right now," Aiden says as he checks the hallway to make sure Harry's not still out there searching for Louis, "but come talk to us when you're ready. I want to help, and so does Matt."

Louis doesn't need help, he needs self control and a few hours to himself and a fucking time machine if he can manage it, but he nods anyway and slips out of their suite and out of the hotel. He doesn't think, doesn't talk, doesn't plan a destination, just walks and tries to lose himself in the rhythm of London and pretend he's not Louis Tomlinson for just a little while.

There’s only so far Louis can go in too-big shoes and there’s not really anywhere he can go with no money, so Louis stops at a park and huddles on a bench, watching the footprints of passerby muddying the once-pristine snow on the pavement.

It’s hard not to see symbolism in that, stomping all over something that once was innocent and now is tainted, but that’s a little heavier than Louis ever planned to go so he stops that train of thought.

His lips still taste like Harry.

His phone vibrates incessantly, and as he pulls it out to silence it he catches some of the words on the screen and wants to throw himself off the nearest building.

(1:34 p.m.) Hazzaman: Lou please tell me where you are
(1:38 p.m.) Hazzaman: Im really worried and no one has seen you
(1:42 p.m.) Hazzaman: sorry please im sorry just come back im so sorry

(1:58 p.m.) Zaynie Poo: harry says you left and he’s really worried?? everything okay?? xx
(2:23 p.m.) Zaynie Poo: it’s been over an hour, mate, you need to call and at least let us know you’re alive. xx

(2:08 p.m.) Nialler: haha mate h said he cant find u are u lost????
(2:19 p.m.) Nialler: but really lou haha where did u go hes rly worried
(2:31 p.m.) Nialler: not funny anymore answer ur phone!!!!

Louis breathes in a shuddering breath and unlocks his phone, sending a quick text to Liam, who must still be at the gym otherwise he would’ve sent more texts than the rest of them combined and assembled a search party while he was at it.

(2:33 p.m.) Louis: Hey Li I’m out taking a walk and I’m fine , will you let H know? Don’t know when I’ll be back. x

And then he shuts off his phone.
He’s being overdramatic and he knows that; he’s seen every bloody romantic movie, he knows that lack of communication is the source of ninety-nine percent of problems. Honesty and trust, right, that’s all it takes.

Except that’s not all it takes, because sometimes honesty would just make things worse and sometimes one half of the relationship puts entirely too much trust in the other half who has done nothing to earn it.

From day one, Louis should have been working on keeping whatever happened between him and Harry as platonic as possible. He went into this friendship, hell, he went into the entire fucking competition, knowing that he and Harry would never be together and that he would have to learn to live with it. But then, somewhere between the cuddles and the forehead kisses and the I love yous and the nights spent wrapped around each other it all got muddled. And, again, Louis can deal with his own emotional breakdown, it’s inevitable and he knows it and he’s already prepared to spend a solid six to eight weeks crying on his mum’s shoulder when Harry’s actual soulmate comes into the picture.

What he can’t deal with is Harry’s emotional distress, because somehow Louis has led him to believe that it’s a good idea to start something romantic between them when there’s literally no way it will end well. Because even if they do this, even if they start an ill-thought-out relationship, Harry will bond with someone else. And that means he’ll have to leave Louis, and he’s such a good fucking person that it’ll probably cause him all sorts of anguish to see Louis alone and Louis is not okay with that.

The same goes for coming clean and telling the truth—if Harry were ever to find out that Louis is bonded to him, he would drop all pretense of trying to find his own soulmate to stay with Louis. And, God, while that literally sounds like the best outcome to anyone’s life ever, Louis can’t do that to Harry. He can’t force him into some sort of pseudo-legit relationship just because his biology or whatever is fucked up and decided Harry was the best option to dump his pathetic future on. Especially since Harry’s biology was smart enough to keep him away from the emotional trainwreck that is Louis Tomlinson.

It’s a lose-lose situation for Louis, but at least someday Harry will be bonded and Louis can know that he won’t have ruined everything for the best person he’s ever known. He can live with his own unhappiness, but he can’t live with Harry’s.

The whole hotel is quiet when Louis gets back, almost like it’s holding its breath for the eruption that’s about to happen. He almost stops in front of Aiden and Matt’s door to stall, but he knows everything will just get worse the longer he waits, and so he keeps trudging on in his too-big shoes and too-big coat.

He has to knock when he gets to their suite, since his key is in his wallet and definitely not on him. There’s the sound of the TV being muted, a rush of footsteps and then the door is thrown open to reveal Harry, looking anxious and tired, Zayn and Liam and Niall behind him in a similar state.

“Oh, thank Christ,” Harry gasps, pulling Louis inside and wrapping him in a hug. Louis clears his throat and pulls back, looking up at Harry and trying really hard to ignore the other three who are watching closely.

“Can we talk?” he says quietly, and Harry nods and lets him lead the way to their bedroom, closing the door behind them with a solid click. The TV volume is turned back up on the other side of the
door, and Louis is so grateful for the little bit of noise suddenly filling the space between them.

He turns to find Harry perched on the bed, watching him. His nails are bitten down and bleeding, his hair a mess. He looks haggard, like he hasn’t slept in days even though Louis was only gone for six hours at most.

Louis prepares his carefully made speech in his head.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and then he realizes Harry’s said the exact same thing.

“Why are you sorry?” they both say in unison, and Harry grins weakly.

“It’s my fault, Lou,” he says, and Louis automatically shakes his head. “It is, I shouldn’t have tried anything and it wasn’t fair for me to do that.”

So much for Louis’ agonizingly crafted speech; though, really, he really should have planned for Harry to take the blame onto himself. “No, God no, Haz. It’s my fault, I feel like I’ve been leading you on for months, and you may have started it but I took it way too far.”

“But I wanted that,” Harry argues. “You didn’t take it any further than what I wanted. You could have taken it further, even.” Louis has to suppress a shiver at that, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Don’t,” he begs. “Just let me apologize.”

“No,” Harry says stubbornly. “I don’t accept. It’s not your fault.”

Louis crosses to sit next to Harry on the bed, carefully keep space between them. “It is, because we both know that we aren’t soulmates but I still pushed past what friends normally do. This isn’t how best friends are supposed to act.”

“It wasn’t just you, though,” Harry retorts. “I asked to sleep in your bed first, and I told you I love you first. You started the forehead kisses, yeah, but I gave them back just as often. This isn’t a one-way relationship.”

“I could have said no, though, even if you started it.”

“Why is that your responsibility?” Harry asks. “Why is it up to you to decide what we can and can’t do?”

“Because I’m older!” Louis says. “I’m the legal adult, I’m the one that should know better.”

Harry lets the silence sit for a moment, his eyes searching out answers in Louis’ face.

“It’s not up to you to carry the world, Lou,” Harry says softly. “Eventually you’re going to get tired.”

Louis laughs, but it’s quiet and sad. “I am tired. I’m so tired, Hazza.”

Harry scoots back and lays down, patting the bed next to him. Louis gives in and lays down as well, face to face with Harry and able to see every bit of the stress he put him through today. “So, what now?”

“You’re my best friend, and I’m happy with that,” Louis says quickly. “We don’t have to change anything just because I have no boundaries.”

“I want to, though,” Harry whispers. Louis swallows, his mouth suddenly dry. “Kissing you today was… God, I can’t get over it. It felt right, you know?”
“Yeah,” Louis whispers, because it had. Nothing had ever felt more right.

“And so I don’t see why we have to stop,” Harry barrels on, and that’s when Louis has to sit up.

“Harry-”

“Listen to me, Lou. You’re my best friend and my partner in crime, and now you’re my first kiss. You’re important to me, and you’re never not going to be a part of my life. I don’t see how something like us kissing can ruin that.”

“It can,” Louis says desperately. “Hazza, someday you’re going to meet your soulmate, and that person probably won’t be very happy that you spent your time kissing your best friend instead of waiting for them.”

“This isn’t the Dark Ages, people can kiss whoever they want if they aren’t in a relationship,” Harry says, annoyed. “And any soulmate of mine is going to have to accept that. Besides, wouldn’t it be better that I’m kissing you, who I trust, rather than going out and finding random people in clubs or something who might want to hurt me?” He sits up as well, creeping close to Louis’ side.

“Harry,” Louis says, because he’s run out of arguments but he still knows this is a bad idea.

“Shut up, Louis,” Harry whispers, and kisses him.

It’s heated and apologetic and sure, like Harry’s gotten the answer he wanted and is celebrating, and Louis tells his hands to push him away but his hands pull him closer instead, hips aligning as Louis falls backward and pulls Harry along for the ride. They’re gasping breaths every time their lips disconnect before they collapse back into each other, tiny moans escaping into the air between them.

Eventually, Harry pulls away, leaning his forehead against Louis’ and catching his breath. He’s grinning a little, smug.

“See,” he says quietly, his lips brushing Louis’ with each word. “This is right.”

Louis needs to say no, but his mouth won’t form the word. “Okay,” he says instead. “What are a few kisses between friends?”

This is an awful idea. Louis leans up and kisses Harry again.

Harry huffs a laugh when Louis pulls back. “I can’t promise I’m going to stop with a few.”

Louis groans. “What monster have I created?”

Harry giggles and leans down to catch Louis’ lips again instead of answering, and they don’t leave the room for the rest of the night.

When it’s too late at night to be morning and too early in the morning to be night, Louis is barely awake and finds his arms wrapped tightly around Harry’s waist, the scent of his vanilla candles and coconut shampoo heady around him. Harry’s breath is even, steady as waves on a shore.

“I want to be enough for you,” he whispers to the back of Harry’s neck, and then he’s falling asleep to the rhythm of Harry’s heartbeat.
Zayn, Niall, and Liam gang up on Louis when he emerges for breakfast the next morning.

“Scared us half to death,” Liam says, hands on his hips. He’s never looked more like Louis’ mother than he does right now, but Louis knows better than to tell him that.

“Yeah,” Niall chimes in. “You have to talk to us. Communicate!”

“Don’t be an idiot, basically,” Zayn says, and Louis would roll his eyes if he didn’t know they were all genuinely worried for him.

“Sorry,” he says quietly, and Niall throws an arm around his shoulders.

“You’re forgiven,” he says genially.

“Have you apologized to Harry yet?” Liam asks. “He’s the one you ran out on with no explanation.”

Louis looks over to where Harry’s at the stove, frying bacon and pretending he’s not listening. His lips are still a little puffy from last night, a mysterious red scratch that matches Louis’ fingernails like a brand across his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Louis says, “yeah, I think I made it up to him.”

Harry doesn’t say anything, still valiantly pretending he can’t hear what’s going on, but the corner of his mouth lifts just a little.

“Breakfast is ready,” he calls before Liam can be all disapproving in Louis’ direction again. Louis scampers up to help Harry set the table, trailing a finger over his hip when the boys aren’t looking and delighting in the tiny intake of breath he gets as a response.

They didn’t exactly agree to keep it a secret from the others, but Louis knows Harry didn’t tell them the specifics from yesterday and exactly what it was that made Louis leave. He also knows just how disapproving Liam can get and he is already berating himself enough for letting it go this far, so he definitely doesn’t need Liam’s help.

They sit and have breakfast and Louis is appropriately apologetic and Harry spends the whole meal running his foot up Louis’ shin and grinning every time Louis’ breath hitches.

Apparently, while Louis was out on his trek across London to Sort Shit Out, Liam had wrangled the other boys into finishing up their questions and negotiation ideas for the lawyer to send to Simon. Not only had it sufficiently distracted all of them from worrying about Louis, but they’d actually cobbled together some pretty impressive arguments and compromises to get a little more room to work with their contract. After a few emails back and forth, the negotiated segments were ironed out and Simon invited them in to have their official contract signing so they could go home a few days early for Christmas.

It’s still strange to see how empty Fountain Studios can be when there’s no show to prepare, the narrow halls empty and echoing with their footsteps. Even Niall is subdued as they trek through the corridors, the omnipresent feeling of being somewhere they don’t belong hovering over their heads. Besides the couple of bodyguards who let them in, they don’t see a single person on the way to the upstairs conference rooms.
Until they open the door for their meeting, that is, and find a small army of besuited men and women waiting for them, Simon in the center of it all like a worshipped god accepting sacrifices from lesser beings.

There’s not much buildup, just the same boring lawyer from before explaining that their input was taken into account and some of the sections were changed, though the non-disclosure agreements for them and their families were still necessary.

Louis didn’t expect any different—the other boys may not be toting around any earth-shattering, band-ruining secrets, but he sure is, and Simon was right in thinking his family knows. His hand shakes a little when he signs his name right under Zayn’s, but then it’s over and done and glasses of champagne are passed around like it isn’t eleven o’clock in the morning.

“I think you made a good choice, boys,” Simon says, shaking each of their hands. “I’m flying you out to California to talk with some of my producers and writers before the tour starts, so I’ll send you the details once they’re finalized. Until then, enjoy a few weeks off.”

Zayn turns to Louis, eyes wide. “California,” he whispers, and they punch each other in excitement until Liam drags them off to go talk to important people.

There are congratulations passed to them from every side, including one from Claudia that Louis wishes he could have ignored and an entire smirk-filled conversation with Magee and Griffiths that he wishes he could have skipped all together, but soon Harry’s making an excuse on Louis’ behalf and pulling him out of the crowd and into an empty office a few doors down. There, they celebrate the contract signing in their own way: Louis’ tongue in Harry’s mouth and his thigh between Harry’s legs, gasps and moans in the small space.

No one comments on their absence when they get back, but every time Louis looks across the room and sees the flush on Harry’s cheeks he feels a little thrill, and he wonders how long they could possibly hope to have before this all blows up in their face.

Chapter End Notes

Just a general thought for the rest of the story to keep in mind -
Please don’t take my word for what I say happened as gospel, because we're talking about a band whose reality is so far removed from their narrative that it's laughable, but the narrative is heavily documented while reality is hidden away. If what I've written doesn't line up with what you think happened in real life then just remember that this is a universe where tattoos appear spontaneously when people say certain words, so a little contract change isn't that hard to believe. :)

Come talk to me if you have questions!

tumblr | fic post
Chapter 9: 24 December 2010 - 10 April 2011

24 December 2010

Harry wakes up at 12:01 (thanks to three alarms and Gemma yelling at him through the wall to turn all of those alarms off), sends a tweet that he’d saved in his drafts, and calls Louis while his phone pings with retweets and favorites.

“H’lo?” comes Louis’ raspy, sleep-heavy voice, and it sends a thrill up Harry’s spine.


“That was gorgeous, love,” Louis laughs softly. “Number one single, if only I’d thought to record it.”

“Only the best for you, Lou,” Harry grins. He plays with a loose string on his sweatpants and, before he talks himself out of it, says, “Next time I see you, the very first thing I’ll do is give you your birthday kiss.”

It’s quiet for a second, and Harry worries he’s overstepped some line he didn’t even know existed, forgetting that every new step for them along this road is precarious and unsure. But then Louis giggles again and the world rights itself. “I’ll hold you to that. Hope we’re not in front of paparazzi when we reunite, though. Could be awkward.”

“Ah, right,” Harry agrees. “Me too, because I already said I’d do it and I’m a man of my word.”

“Right,” Louis says, voice amused, and Harry sort of wishes he’d Skyped him instead of calling because he really wants to see Louis’ face right now. “Thanks for the wakeup call, babe.”

“Don’t mention it. Had to be first, otherwise you wouldn’t remember it.”
“Nah, I think I’d still remember even if it wasn’t,” there’s a rustling sound, “12:06 in the morning. Very punctual, you are.”

“Of course I am.”

“Gonna go back to sleep, if you don’t mind. Call you later when I can be my usual witty self.”

“Course, Lou. Happy birthday again.”

“Thanks, Hazza. Love you.”

“Love you more.”

Louis does call again later when Harry’s watching TV with Gemma, full to bursting with exciting news about the Rovers jersey he’d gotten from his mum and the party Stan’s throwing for him that night.

“His parents are leaving early for his nan’s and left him the house, and he’s already got everything set up. And he promised he’d make sure I don’t make too much of an arse of myself just in case someone takes a picture to try and sell to the *Mail*, so he’s not drinking until almost everyone leaves. It’s going to be wicked,” Louis gushes, his voice just as sparkly and wonderful as it usually is, even though Harry has discovered that he might like his gravelly sleep voice just as much.

“That’s amazing, Lou,” Harry says, and he means it, because Louis deserves all the best things in life, especially when Louis doesn’t agree. “Are all your friends able to make it?”

“Yeah, sure, I think,” Louis had said, and Harry can just imagine the way he’s probably waving his hand about like he’s trying to bat the question out of the air. “That’s not what’s important, though. What is important is that he also invited all those bitches who said I was an idiot for trying out for *X Factor* and now have to pretend they supported me the whole time.” He sighs dreamily and there’s a thumping sound, almost like he’s fallen backward onto his bed in bliss, which Harry would bet is exactly what happened. “It’s going to be beautiful.”

“Sure,” Harry snorts. He turns over to see Gemma watching him from the recliner, rolling her eyes because Louis is loud enough that she can hear every word even without him being on speaker. Harry flips her off and shuffles onto his back, getting comfortable under a too-small blanket. “I was, um, talking to Mum earlier, and she said it was okay if you want to come to Holmes Chapel and visit soon? The United versus Stoke City match is early in January, maybe then?”

He actually hadn’t talked to his mum about it at all, but asking Anne if Louis could come visit would be a bit like asking a child if they wanted ice cream: even if it isn’t in the best interest of anyone involved, the answer is always yes. It’s a little frightening how charming Louis can be and Anne is one of those people he tries hardest to win over, even though she’s already sold.

And, well. Now that their relationship is… different, Harry wants to be able to do things with Louis. For Louis, really. Not a date, just. Similar to a date. A best friend date. A best-friends-who-kiss-sometimes date.

“Really?” Louis says excitedly. “A chance to see my favorite Premier team and my favorite boy?”

“So you’ll come?” Harry asks.

“How could I possibly refuse,” Louis says, and Harry’s cheeks hurt from smiling so widely.
Louis begs off a few minutes later, arguing with Stan who’s in the background bellowing something about helping set up decorations, but he promises he’ll call Harry later as soon as he gets a free moment.

Gemma is smirking when he hangs up, but pretending she isn’t. “How’s the boyfriend?” she asks innocently, and Harry throws a pillow at her.

“Not my boyfriend,” he says, but he can’t help the squirmy feeling in his stomach that starts up when he remembers the very boyfriendy things that he and Louis do now, including the very thorough goodbye he got before they parted ways back in London.

Gemma must be able to tell, because she fake-retches and throws the pillow back and tells him to take it upstairs if he’s going to have impure thoughts in front of her.

Harry takes Gemma’s advice after a while and heads up to his room, but only because there are only so many Christmas film reruns he can sit through before he wants to burn down their Christmas tree, and there’s not really anything else he can do.

Holmes Chapel at Christmas is, like, peak Holmes Chapel. It’s snow-covered churches and red and green storefronts and children building snowmen and carolers and tinsel literally as far as the eye can see. But none of his friends that are home from uni or on winter break from school have time to see him between all their own holiday plans, and Liam and Zayn and Louis are too far away for a quick visit while Niall is in a different country altogether. So here sits Harry, alone in his room and scrolling on his laptop waiting for something interesting to happen on Facebook, listening to his family downstairs get increasingly louder from the red wine his mum had brought out.

And, of course, he is definitely not waiting for a text from Louis. Because that is pathetic and also not what certified Cool Popstars With Recording Contracts do.

So he announces the Twitcam session he’d promised yesterday and sets his laptop up so it won’t be wobbly, pulling a sweater over his head (because while he’s fine appearing on camera without a shirt, his mother told him if his nudist streak was captured on video one more time that he’d have to worry about a lot more than some rabid fangirls) and digging out a Santa hat to look a little more festive.

All his Twitter mentions seem to be centered around wishing Louis happy birthday, so he lasts all of fifteen seconds into the Twitcam before mentioning Louis himself. “Does anyone want to see Louis’ Christmas present I got him? Or,” he corrects, knowing how important a distinction it is for Louis that his birthday and Christmas be kept separate, “not a Christmas present, it’s his birthday present.” He reaches behind his laptop and grabs the box he’d wrapped earlier, silver and shiny. He sets it back off to the side, carefully not laying it over his phone so he won’t miss if Louis calls or texts.

But Twitter is a little dead, probably thanks to people actually spending time with their families or whatever, so he lasts another minute and a half before the lure of his phone is too much. “Gonna call Louis,” he says, even though he’s well aware that it’s nearing ten o’clock and Louis’ party is surely well underway by now.

Harry ends the Twitcam early and goes to bed early as well, feeling irrationally disappointed that he hasn’t heard from Louis in over ten hours and also embarrassed at himself for being so glaringly dependent on his best friend.

He wakes hours later to an insistent buzzing under his cheek, his phone blinding him momentarily and showing a massive string of unread texts.

(10:34 p.m.) **Lou Bear**: Hazza look !!!
(10:34 p.m.) **Lou Bear:**

![](fic pics.jpg)

(10:35 p.m.) **Lou Bear**: They’re vodka pokeballs !!!
(10:38 p.m.) **Lou Bear**: Not as tasty as they look :/… xx
(10:59 p.m.) **Lou Bear**: Miss ur face xxxxxx
(11:18 p.m.) **Lou Bear**: chrstmas treee dance prty XXx !
(11:24 p.m.) **Lou Bear:**

![](fic pics 4.jpg)

(11:27 p.m.) **Lou Bear**: m mate saRa lol
(11:38 p.m.) **Lou Bear**: ur th human vers ion of watmlon vodka
(11:40 p.m.) **Lou Bear**: thts my favorte its impportant to me yu know that
(11:48 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** its almst not my birhdy anymrew :(
(11:51 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** yarent u hre i lve yu
(11:59 p.m.) **Lou Bear:**

![fic pics 3.jpg](attachment:image)

(12:00 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** hey mate thot u might want this pic for urself :) - stan
(12:06 a.m.) **Lou Bear:** ok this is stan again he made me take another one
(12:07 a.m.) **Lou Bear:**

![fic pics 3.jpg](attachment:image)

(12:10 a.m.) **Lou Bear:** says he looks like james bond… do with that what u will. time for me to get drunk, night h! - stan
(12:12 a.m.) Lou Bear: stanly toook my phon! !! why
(12:23 a.m.) Lou Bear: mm tqueila
(12:33 a.m.) Lou Bear: pARty rok is n the hous thight evrybd juuus Hv a good
(12:47 a.m.) Lou Bear: lve u love u ove yu

Harry grins, saves the non-blurry pictures to his phone and emails them to himself just in case, and sends one text back in reply.

(1:09 a.m.) Harry: Love you too, more and more every day. Hope the hangover is kind to you tomorrow. Happy birthday, Boo. :) xxx

And then he falls back asleep with a smile on his face, knowing that at least his favorite person misses him too.

...

26 December 2010

Louis wants a refund from whoever decided it would be funny to make his birthday on Christmas Eve, because helping his mother wrangle a brood of overexcited Tomlinson children on Christmas morning after too much watermelon vodka and not enough sleep is number one on his list of Not Fun Things To Do.

And the worst part is that his mum knew. She so knew why Louis had to keep a hand on a stable surface at all times and why he had to sprint to the toilet when he caught a whiff of slightly-burnt bacon, and she definitely used it against him.

“Take your sisters out to run off some of their energy,” she’d instructed mid-morning, and when he groaned and dropped his head to rest on the table she continued, “or I’ll do it and you can get started on Christmas roast. The carrots still have to be boiled, and I heard somewhere those are your favorite…”

Louis had considered being left in the kitchen all alone to cook the most important meal of the year, all while being assaulted with a dozen different overpowering smells, and he felt his face go white in horror.

“That’s what I thought,” his mum said smugly, and that was how Louis spent all Christmas afternoon chasing after his sisters and trying valiantly not to throw up.

It was still fun, which is the annoying part, because even when he’s so hungover that the sunlight reflecting off the snow felt like knives in his eyes, he still loved being able to spend time with his favorite ladies and see their faces when they opened the gifts he bought for them in London. His mum had cried when she’d unwrapped the tiny diamond pendant he and Harry had found at a vintage store tucked away near their hotel in London.

He’d collapsed into bed that night with a nightmare of a headache but a smile on his face, sending a few short texts to Harry that guaranteed that he’d lived (but only just) before falling asleep.

The next morning Louis is in a better state, his stomach interested in the idea of food even if his head says it's still a bad idea. He lies in bed for a solid hour after he wakes up, trading texts with Liam and
Niall, who are both spending Boxing Day with their extended families. Harry's still not awake, judging by his unanswered texts, and Louis wouldn't dare text Zayn before noon.

That's how Stan finds him, halfway underneath his duvet with his phone two inches from his face, playing Angry Birds until Harry wakes his pretty arse up and decides to text him back.

"You survived the best birthday party ever, then," Stan says cheerfully, falling across Louis' legs and ignoring his squawk of protest.

"Barely."

"That's me as well. Mum kept asking me if I'd caught a stomach bug, but I think they pieced it together when the sight of the mulled wine sent me running for the toilet."

Louis grins up at the ceiling. He loves his boys but he misses this as well, Stan's uncomplicated friendship, his unwavering support. He likes having a person who knew him before the spotlights hit, and if anyone's up to the task of keeping him grounded, it's Stan.

"Figured we could grab some Nando’s for lunch," he's saying, wriggling his way under the covers next to Louis. "Maybe catch a film, or I scored some weed off Nizam's cousin. Up to you."

"God, Nando’s sounds bloody amazing," Louis laughs wistfully. "I’ve had nothing but hotel room service for the last two weeks."

Stan turns, gives him his most unimpressed look. "You poor, starved child. How did you ever survive." He rolls onto his back, taking one of Louis' pillows and most of the duvet along with him. "Sleep time now, then Nando’s. You woke me at a completely unreasonable hour."

"What?" Louis half-yelps, affronted. "You woke me!"

Stan just pats his face, hard. "Shut up, superstar. And you're paying for lunch."

They doze for a few more hours, until the twins bounce their way into the room and demand that Louis help give them makeovers with the beauty kits he'd bought them for Christmas.

"Sorry ladies," Stan grins, used to dealing with Louis’ sisters and all that entails, "his afternoon is all accounted for. Tonight, though, he's all yours."

They grab their takeaway (Stan rolling his eyes when Louis gets stopped twice for autographs, but smiling when he thinks Louis can’t see him and offering to take pictures for everyone) and head back to Stan’s, Louis running to hug Stan’s mum before they barricade themselves in the basement. Before long, the homely smell of cheap weed and cheaper food fills the room.

"It's been so long," Louis moans, taking a deep drag. "I've missed you."


"Was talking to the joint, actually."

"Oi," Stan scoffs, swatting Louis on the back of the head. "Arsehole."

Louis laughs, holding up his phone to snap a picture of himself blowing out a stream of smoke. It's hazy and gritty and all sorts of artsy, something Harry definitely would approve of, so he texts it to him and sends it to Zayn as well just for good measure. Zayn texts back a picture of himself smoking
from a hookah next to his older sister, holding thumbs up and grinning. Harry answers with one of himself pretending to smoke a lit decorative Christmas candle, Gemma hiding her eyes in embarrassment in the background. Louis giggles, saving that picture to the almost full secret folder on his phone.

"What's Harry up to, then?" Stan asks lazily after a long pull on his own joint.

"With family, I think," Louis answers, falling slowly to lay his head in Stan’s lap. After a moment, he bites the bullet. "He kissed me."

"Course he did," Stan says, unruffled. "M a little miffed it took you so long to tell me."

"What?" Louis asks, confused. "No, it was last week. The day before I came home."

"What was special about that one, then?"

"It was our first kiss," he says, baffled. He thought Stan would realize how big of a deal this is. "That's what was special!"

"Christ, no shit?" Stan says, words slow and sleepy even though his eyes are wide and earnest. "I'd have sworn on me mum’s grave you two have been at it for months. Why wait so long?"

"I'm not his soulmate, Stanley," Louis reminds him, aiming for nonchalant and missing by a mile. He pulls on the joint again to keep up the pretense of aloofness. "I didn't want to drag him into anything he'd regret later."

Stan snorts. "Maybe you’re too hypnotized by the curls when it happens in person, but I know you’ve at least seen video footage of the way that kid looks at you. I doubt he'd regret anything you ever let him do."

"But," Louis groans, pressing his palms to his eyes, "that's the problem. I'm, like, forcing him into doing this but somehow he thinks it's his idea."

"Lou, Jesus, you aren’t forcing him—"

"I am, I fucking am," Louis says in despair, sitting up. "He’s sixteen years old, and I’m nineteen now, and he thinks he knows what he wants but he doesn’t, and I’m taking advantage of all of that and using it to make out with him at every opportunity."

Stan narrows his eyes, exhaling smoke before he answers. "You don’t get to decide what he wants."

Louis laughs brokenly. "That’s what he said, too."

"Probably for good reason." Stan tosses the roach from the joint in the cereal bowl they’ve been using as a makeshift ashtray for years and turns to face Louis fully. "Look, Lou, you know I know next to nothing about dealing with lads in this type of…" he waves his hands, "situation. And I know even less about the music business, but I’m sure that you’re going to have to keep all this a secret for at least a little while, even if Simon approves. Why don’t you deal with that rather than some misguided idea that Harry doesn’t want you?"

"Fuck," Louis says, dropping his head into his hands. "I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. Even if Harry does want to do this, it’s such a bad idea."

Stan rubs his back soothingly. "Someday, I hope you’ll realize that whoever it was that made you think you don’t deserve good things was wrong. You deserve to be happy, Lou, and he makes you
happy. That should be enough.”

Louis’ breath hitches on a sob he’ll never admit to, and he curls into Stan’s side like he used to do when they were a lot younger and a little stupider. “I love him.”

Stan pets his hair, steady as ever. “I know you do.”

"I sort of want to tell him,” Louis says quietly. "Just get it out in the open. 'Hey, Harry, you're my soulmate. Sorry I'm not good enough to be yours in return.'"

"Lou," Stan chastises. "This isn't some kind of fucking karma. It's biology, and so what if biology is working against you?"

"But it would end all this drama," Louis sighs. "Every day is like walking a tightrope. Is today the day he reads the fans screaming about my stupid dagger on the internet and realizes it all makes sense?"

"That's up to you, of course," Stan says with a frown. "Tell him if you think it'll make you feel better. But think about it from his side, too. What if he came up to you out of the blue and was like, 'Hey, Lou, you're my soulmate and I'm not yours, and I've kept that a secret but now that we make out regularly I felt like I could trust you enough to finally tell you.' Like, that would sting to hear."

Oh God, it would. Harry would be torn a thousand different ways—he'd be trying to figure out if Louis actually loves him, or if it's just some reflex from the Bond, or if Louis' lying, and if he's not lying why he didn't tell the truth for so long. It would send Louis reeling, that's for sure, and Harry would probably be just as bad.

"I don't know what to do," Louis confesses quietly. "No matter what I do, he's going to get hurt."

"Well," Stan says slowly, "you're happy now, right? Maybe you should just keep doing what you're doing."

What Louis is doing is swinging on a pendulum, swaying back and forth between I love him so much I'd die without him and I hate myself for taking him when he belongs to someone else. But Stan is right; even with that tug-of-war inside his chest, he's still never been happier here in this state of limbo.

He takes a last pull on his joint and lets all his cares out with the stream of smoke.

4 January 2011

“Welcome to Holmes Chapel!” Harry says grandly, flinging open Louis’ car door before he’s even shifted into park. Louis laughs and pulls Harry close, checking no one is watching before leaning in to kiss his cheek.

“Been here before, love,” he reminds him, pulling his keys out of the ignition and reaching into the backseat for his bag. “But thanks for rolling out the welcome.”

Harry’s eyes seem more sparkly here, or maybe that’s just because it’s been almost two weeks since Louis has seen him and laptop webcams do not do him justice. And then Louis steps out of the car and has another realization.

“You got taller,” he accuses, poking Harry’s chest. “How did you get bloody taller, it’s been ten
Harry dimples at him. “Dunno,” he shrugs innocently. “Mum says I’ll hit six foot before I’m twenty.”

Louis huffs. “Rude.”

Anne’s in the kitchen when they step inside, baking something that smells amazing. She kisses Louis on the cheek and tells him how to find the guest bedroom upstairs before shooing them away. Harry rolls his eyes and intercepts Louis before he can open the guest room door, pulling him across the hall to his own room.

“Like I’d let you stay anywhere else tonight,” he says lowly, pulling Louis’ bag off his shoulder and laying it off to the side.

Louis laughs and steps close, looking up at Harry through his eyelashes. “Let me, hmm? What would you do if I said no?”

Harry growls low in his throat and pushes Louis onto the bed, straddling his hips. His lips crash down on Louis’ without warning, pulling a low moan out of Louis that he can’t stifle. His tongue is strong and sure as he presses his way into Louis’ mouth, commanding and confident and making Louis melt back into the mattress to let Harry have his way. When he finally stops for breath, Louis gasps, “Okay, I’m convinced.” Harry grins and leans back in, only to freeze at the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

When Harry’s stepdad Robin pokes his head through the doorway, Louis is sitting primly on the edge of the mattress and Harry is unpacking his bag for him, innocent as could be. “You boys ready for the big day?” he asks, and Louis and Harry agree enthusiastically. “Leaving in ten, then.”

“Bit early, isn’t it?” Louis asks, but Harry just grins.

“Got a bit of a surprise. And no, I won’t tell you,” he says when Louis opens his mouth. Louis pouts until they’re in the car, Harry typing on his phone and looking excited when Louis’ pings with a notification.

fic tweets 5.jpg

Louis narrows his eyes. “Why did you tag Ferdy? We’ve met him all of once at the England game, Haz, and I bet he doesn’t even remember.”

Harry just shrugs, looking smug.

Louis crosses his arms, because Harry knows how much he hates not knowing everything that’s
happening. He rereads the tweet, looking for hidden meaning. “You should have put commas,” he says spitefully. “It makes it look like you’re calling me your father.”

Harry roars with laughter as Robin chuckles from the driver’s seat, and Louis lets a small smile slip as he settles in for the drive to Manchester.

Robin drops them off with a wave in front of the Old Trafford glass-fronted entrance, right next to the statue of the United Trinity. Louis is in awe, and then even more so when Harry grabs his hand and pulls him to a well-hidden side entrance he’s never noticed before. A smiling woman in a Manchester United jacket greets them as they approach.

“Harry?” she asks, and smiles when he nods. “Welcome to Old Trafford. Right this way.”

They follow the woman—Melissa, as her badge announces—through the sparse hallways under the pitch. The incline grows steeper as the decor grows more ornate, red and black and gold murals and glass cases filled with trophies and framed jerseys adorning the walls. Louis feels like his insides are going to burst, he’s so excited, and Harry shooting him little smiles every few seconds doesn’t help.

Suddenly, they’re passing the locker rooms and just up ahead, no, they can’t be—

Melissa leads them right onto the Trafford pitch, the lights bright overhead and the grass soft underfoot. Louis spins slowly, taking in the white seats among the red spelling out MANCHESTER UNITED and STRETFORD END and the Nike swoosh, the Sir Alex Ferguson stand, the dugouts awaiting their players. He’s so busy staring at his surroundings that he almost misses that tell-tale thump of a hard boot to a ball.

“Come on,” Harry whispers when Louis freezes, seeing the international football stars having a kickabout just a few feet away. He takes Louis’ hands in his and tugs, pulling them forward until one of the players notices them.

“Hello, hello!” Rio Ferdinand calls, jogging over the them. He’s already in his jersey and sweats, the 5 blazoned across his back and the Champions League patch bright on his sleeve. “Harry and Louis, yeah?”

Christ, Rio Ferdinand knows Louis’ name. He shakes Ferdy’s hand silently, afraid of what will happen if he opens his mouth. Harry is bubbly enough for the two of them, thankfully enough, thanking Ferdy and the other players—his brother Anton and Ashley Williams of Swansea City—for letting them come.

“No problem at all,” Ferdy grins. He points over his shoulder to the home dugout. “Got a couple of extra balls if you want to join.”

It’s official, Louis is dead and in heaven and somehow he got to take Harry and Rio Ferdinand with him.

Louis loosens up when he gets a ball underfoot and is able to play around a little, joking with Anton about size not mattering as he lines up to take his first shot. It’s a perfect kick, netting exactly how he wants in the top right corner just out of Anton’s reach. He can feel himself blush red when Ferdy and Ashley hum approvingly, Ferdy reaching over to pat his shoulder.

“Might have some competition in warm up today,” he says, making Louis bring his hand up to his
mouth to cover his giggle.

Harry lines up for a couple of tries as well, and even though he doesn’t make a single one he laughs delightedly all the same, charming even the perpetually frowning Ashley. They’re allowed almost a full half hour on the pitch before Melissa reappears to show them to their seats, the first few members of the crowd starting to trickle in.

“Good to see you lads again,” Ferdy says, shaking their hands. “Hang out after the match, we’ll see if we can find somewhere to go and cause some trouble.”

Louis swoons as Ferdy jogs back down the tunnel, falling into Harry’s arms.

“So,” Harry chuckles as he helps Louis upright again. He scuffs the grass with his trainer, biting his lip to keep from smiling too widely. “Good first date?”

“Oh my God, Hazza,” Louis answers weakly. “Best first date.”

Harry beams but tries to hide it, hugging Louis close before they trot over to an amused Melissa, who takes them back to the tunnel and through the hallways until they’re out with the rest of the fans streaming in to find their seats. They find theirs pretty easily, Robin already waiting with nachos and drinks for both of them.

“Have fun, boys?” he asks, eyes twinkling like he can tell Louis is a few seconds from fainting in excitement.

“Oh my God,” Louis says again. Harry laughs and tells Robin it was great, letting him know that Ferdy invited them to hang out after the match.

“Right little superstars, you are,” Robin says, raising an impressed eyebrow. “Invitations from footie legends are hard to come by for the average folk.”

Louis turns to Harry, who’s trying not-so-stealthily to steal a nacho from him even though he has his own plateful. “How did you set all this up?”

Harry grins. “Ferdy followed me on Twitter after we met him back in November, so I messaged him and asked if there was any way we could set something up. He sent me Melissa’s number, and here we are.”

“Christ, you are magnificent,” Louis laughs fervently. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

Harry shrugs and steals another nacho. “You love me.”

He says it like it’s obvious, like being capable of loving him is worth being rewarded. Like loving Harry Styles isn’t the easiest habit Louis has ever fallen into.

“I do,” he replies softly. “I love you a lot.”

The match is fantastic, thrilling up to the last minute. Ferdy doesn’t even play, resting up for the Liverpool match just a few days away, but it’s still an incredible time. Louis leans over to press a kiss to Harry’s cheek at the half, more than a little overwhelmed.

Ferdy and Anton are waiting for Harry and Louis outside the locker room after the match, Ferdy spinning keys on his finger and grinning. “Ready?” he asks, and Robin slips Harry some cash before
they’re whisked away to Ferdy’s Porsche in the player’s parking lot for a speedy drive through the Manchester streets. Ferdy parks curbside in front of an elegant looking building, ROSSO declared proudly over the door, and this time it’s Harry who’s gripping at Louis’ hand in shock.

“My family has tried to eat here before, it’s always booked,” he whispers to Louis in awe. “And Ferdy owns this place, this is amazing!”

Ferdy and Anton lead the way in and head straight for a table in the center of the restaurant, waving when people call greetings to them and stopping for a couple of autographs and pictures. Diners give Harry and Louis once overs as they pass with the towering Ferdinand brothers, as though trying to figure out what they’ve done with their lives that allows them to hang out with famous athletes.

The food is fantastic when it arrives, the wine flowing freely and laughter loud and boisterous. Ferdy teases Louis for being starstruck earlier, so Louis teases Ferdy about being so old he needs to skip a match to rest up for another one days away. Harry asks after Ferdy’s kids and Anton groans like he’s heard all the stories a thousand times, tossing a napkin at his brother’s head.

“Don’t get him started,” he laughs, guarding his drink when Ferdy winds up to throw the napkin back. They’re interrupted by a small cough, and the four of them turn to find a teenage girl standing at the edge of their table, pen clutched in her hand.

“Hi,” she breathes and then, to everyone’s surprise, turns to Louis and Harry. “I’m a huge fan, can you guys sign something for me?”

“Uh, sure,” Harry says, a little startled. The girl hands Louis the pen and he grabs a nearby drink coaster.

“What’s your name, love?” he asks, and she flutters her hands before answering.

“Amelia.”

“Gorgeous name,” Louis winks, signing the coaster with a flourish. He passes the pen to Harry, who chats with Amelia as he writes a little message, signing his own name with two xs after.

“Suppose you two must get that a lot,” Anton comments when Amelia leaves.

“Only when we go outside,” Louis answers jokingly, and Ferdy howls with laughter.

Brave Amelia must have clued everyone in to the existence of boybanders in the crowd or tweeted or something, because it’s like she opened the floodgates and soon Louis and Harry can’t take more than a couple of bites of their steadily cooling food between excited teenage girls coming up and shoving pens and paper and phones in their faces. Ferdy laughs through the first dozen or so, but after twenty minutes and no sign of slowing down, he signals for a waiter and has them relocated to a private room in the back.

“I had no idea my restaurant was so popular for teenage girls,” he says, and Harry shrugs.

“We’re used to it.”

Ferdy pats his shoulder in solidarity, and they finish their meal in peace.

They’re settled comfortably in the backseat of Robin’s car when both Louis and Harry’s phones buzz with notifications.
Louis thumps his head against Harry’s shoulder. “Pinch me, Hazza, I think I’m dreaming.”

It’s quiet at Harry’s house when they pull into the drive, Robin warning them to be careful going up the stairs so they don’t wake Gemma. Harry and Louis undress for bed in a sort of daze, their phones still pinging with new tweets from Ferdy and Anton and Ashley Williams, who’d joined them later in the night.

Louis snuggles against Harry once they’re in bed, unable to control the spreading feeling in his veins that tells him to pull Harry close and never let him go.

“You’re too good to me, Harry,” he whispers, and Harry grabs his hand tight.

“Nah,” he says easily, “I just try to treat you exactly how you should be treated.”

Louis smiles and buries his face between Harry’s shoulder blades. He reaches behind him for his phone, typing out one more tweet before falling asleep.

23 January 2011

“California here we come, right back where we started from, Califor...” Harry sings, only stopping when Niall claps his hand over his mouth.

“You aren’t allowed to sing that anymore now that we’re in California,” Liam decides. “We’re not
on the way anymore, we’re here. It’s happened.”

“Okay,” Harry agrees cheerfully, then sings, “California knows how to party, in the cyyyyyy—”

“I’m going to murder you and no one will ever find you,” Zayn says conversationally from three chairs over, and even though he doesn’t bother to open his eyes, everyone is aware that his threat is entirely valid.

“Now, now,” Louis says, stretching. “All love, no stress. We’re in California!”

“California dreamin’, on such a winter’s day—”

Okay, Hazza,” Louis interrupts in exasperation. "Give it up or I will let them murder you.” Harry beams and taps his hand on Louis’ thigh.

“No you won’t,” he laughs, and he’s right. How could anyone be angry when they’re here, LA, the City of Angels, home of the stars, only a few short hours standing between them and a scheduled meeting with the producers for their album?

“Maybe our producer is Jay-Z,” Louis says wistfully. Zayn snorts.

“Yeah, and maybe we’ll get a duet with Beyoncé on this album, too.”

“And Paul McCartney while we’re at it,” Niall chimes in. “He can sing backup.”

“And Taylor Swift on tambourine,” Liam finishes.

“That would be an interesting song,” Harry says seriously. “Genre-crossing.”

“You’re an interesting song, sweetcheeks,” Louis reassures him, squeezing his shoulder. He shoves his sunglasses further up his face and kicks his legs back out, basking in the California sunlight.

They’re the only ones out at the pool which, considering it’s January, isn’t really that surprising. But for five boys who stumbled onto a plane at arse-o’clock this morning wearing four layers apiece to combat the chilly London winter, Cali is a balmy paradise at a sunny 22 degrees.

(Though there had been a hint of a panic when Louis had checked the weather app on his phone as they were landing and it declared the temperature outside to be 72 degrees. Niall had curled up in his seat, refusing to leave the plane for fear of bursting into flames, and it was all very dramatic until Zayn—who was still more than a little irritated that Louis had convinced him that the plane would do a loop-de-loop after takeoff—reminded them that Celsius and Fahrenheit are things that exist and that people live in LA so it’s unlikely that the weather there is hot enough to roast people to death. Zayn is very intelligent and long suffering and deserves good things for putting up with the idiots in his band.)

Niall shifts in his chair, his cheeks already red just from the few minutes they’ve been outside.

“How can you all just lay there,” he says as he sits up, looking around at his four lounging bandmates in disgust.

“S’nice,” Harry says drowsily. He’s already a little closer to tan and a little further from typical porcelain Englishman white. “Warm.”

“Well I’m going for a swim,” Niall declares, jumping to his feet and racing to the pool, hitting the water with a Tarzan yell and an almighty splash. He’s back at the lounge chairs in seconds, shivering
violently. “Cold,” he moans, wrapping himself in all the towels they brought from the hotel suite, even stealing the one Zayn was using as a pillow.

“It’s January, Ni,” Louis reminds him sleepily. “Water’s probably going to be cold.”

Niall makes an affronted grunting noise from under his pile of towels. “You are all terrible humans for letting me do that.”

“We don’t let you do anything, we just sit back and let nature run its course,” Zayn murmurs.

Louis’ eyes are closed so he misses the transition to the next bit, but suddenly there’s a very high-pitched shriek, and Louis blinks back to wakefulness to find a livid Zayn in waist-deep water, screaming insults at Niall, who is cackling by the side of the pool.

“I will murder everyone you’ve ever loved,” Zayn swears, his hair wilting sadly. "I'm going to put acid in your shampoo. I'm going to pull out your teeth and sell them to fans on eBay, but for not very much money so it's really embarrassing."

“So violent today,” Niall admonishes. He’s so busy prancing and giggling that he misses Liam sneaking up behind him until it’s too late, and then Niall is being flung once more into the pool as well. Zayn laughs triumphantly and splashes Niall, then splashes Liam, who shrugs and dives into the pool too, coming up shivering but beaming.

Louis laughs loudly at them, because that’s what you do when your friends are idiots and do idiot things, and he reclines in his lounge chair and basks in the sun, appreciating himself for being warm and dry and Not An Idiot.

Then the world goes sideways as Harry picks Louis up out of his chair like it’s the easiest thing in the world, and suddenly Louis is underwater and cold and what the fuck—

When he emerges from the water, coughing and glaring and dripping chlorinated water into his eyes and honestly, what the fuck, he’s face to face with Harry, who apparently jumped in after he threw Louis and is now doing a decent impression of a wet poodle, curls dripping rivulets of water down his face and past his massive, ridiculous grin.

Niall and Liam and Zayn are laughing, their play-hate at each other directed now at the one who was laughing at them. Since they’ve got an audience, Louis can’t kiss Harry until neither of them can see straight and then push him underwater while he’s distracted, so he just does the second half instead. Harry flails as he falls but somehow wraps a hand around Louis’ wrist as he goes, pulling Louis under with him.

It’s quiet there, under the water, calm and peaceful and, yes, freezing as a fucking iceberg but he’s already here and it’s freezing out of the water as well, so Louis stays; he floats a few inches off the bottom of the pool and enjoys being in the water. Harry stays with him, eyes wide and dancing in the clear water, bubbles escaping through his grin. He reaches out a hand, slow as it cuts through the water, and runs a single fingertip from Louis’ temple to his jaw.

It’s ridiculous how intimate it is, a single touch felt through water and within crotch-smacking distance of the lower halves of their other three bandmates who aren’t supposed to know anything is happening.

It’s affectionate and surprising and also stupid as all hell, because the water is still very clear and they are very visible to their very nosy best friends. But Louis is well versed in stupid choices, and attempting to convince himself that kissing his best friend won’t end in heartbreak is tip top of the
list. So Louis lets it happen, blinking at Harry and Harry blinking back and they stay underwater grinning like morons until Louis’ lungs start to ache.

They resurface and, as though they’d discussed it while they were underwater, turn to the other three and immediately start a vicious splash war. Louis emerges victorious through the strategic use of hiding behind Liam until everyone was tired, though Zayn says nobody wins in a splash fight since everyone ends up wet anyway and Niall is under the (incorrect) impression that he was the winner.

Louis is a gracious and kind champion, and only laughs at them for being losers for five minutes, tops, but apparently five minutes is too long and they toss Louis back into the pool anyway.

Louis is well aware of the work hard to play hard dichotomy.

He knows that, since they didn’t even win the X Factor, and since it’s been years since a British X Factor act got any traction at all outside of the U.K., they have a lot to prove. He knows that boy bands have a short shelf life as it is, and if they’re serious about making music as their careers they have to set a solid foundation to build off of later. He knows that it doesn’t matter how much they want to succeed, if their first album flops then it’s game over and Simon will kick them off his label as soon as he can. And he knows that for this album to succeed, they have to have excellent working relationships with their producers and writers and musicians and, if they do have good relationships with them, they may get to offer some of their own opinions and be taken seriously in making their own music.

And for all that to happen, they have to meet these writers and producers and make a good first impression. Louis knows this, he does. It’s just…

It’s hard to concentrate on work, even fun work, when there’s a palm tree outside the window blowing in the balmy breeze and the guy on TV this morning said today’s the best kind of day for surfing.

Yet here they are, their fourth meeting of the day with yet another group of writers, and Louis knows he has to suck it up and concentrate and play nice and be the Business Brain of the group, using all that industry knowledge he learned while they were on the show. But they only get, like, two and a half days in California before they’re shipped back to foggy London and life as usual, and he didn’t plan on spending every bit of it indoors.

This is the big one, though: they’re meeting the guys responsible for churning out what will become their first single. If these people do a shitty job because they have a bad first meeting, that’s One Direction’s future down the drain in one fell swoop.

The assistant who’s been in charge of shuttling them to each meeting knocks on the door of yet another boardroom, ushering them in when a voice calls, “Come in!”

Louis takes in the room as they enter, the tall ceilings and wide windows and polished table and a familiar face in the middle of it all breaking into a smile.

“One Direction!” Savan cheers.

“Savan!” they yell back, falling over each other to hug to their X Factor vocal coach. He steps back once Niall is finished attempting to smother him and beams.

“So good to see you!” he says, then looks around at each of them. “I swear you’ve all gotten taller. It’s only been a month!”
“Everyone but Lou,” Zayn snickers.

“Oi!” Louis cries, “Unfair! My genes are working against me.”

“Your jeans are working for me,” Harry winks, smacking Louis playfully on the arse. The others groan, and Louis reaches back to pinch a cackling Harry on his ribs.

“Right,” Savan agrees bemusedly, knowing full well that they will get no work done at all if he lets all that continue. “Come on over and have a seat, I’ll introduce you to the rest of the team.”

There are about ten people lounging around the room, drinking from water bottles or speaking quietly with their heads close together, jotting down notes on crowded sheets of paper. There’s no music being played at all, which seems odd in a songwriting session.

“This is Carl, he’s a bit of a jack-of-all-trades, and over there is John and Phil, they’re our engineers. Next to them is Iain, and I think you’ve met Rami before?”

Louis recognizes the lanky Swede when he stands, remembering a meeting in Simon’s office back in December. “I have,” he says, stepping up to shake Rami’s hand. “Good to see you again.”

They exchange pleasantries with the rest of the song-making group, and then Savan sits at the end of the table with them to go over the process.

It’s funny, Louis thinks idly, that their vocal coach is apparently also a fairly accomplished songwriter and who, thanks to the months spent working with the band, now has a decent amount of knowledge on the boys’ voices and ranges and what they can and can’t do. It’s also funny that Rami is the other main writer, when Louis was specifically called to Simon’s office to meet him before they’d ever even signed a contract.

Or, at least, it would be funny if it wasn’t so terrifying in a Simon-Cowell-is-a-puppetmaster-controlling-every-aspect-of-the-world-around-me sort of way.

Savan explains that he and Rami have been working on finishing the single so that the band can start recording once the X Factor tour ends in April. Savan and his team of writers already have the lyrics down, and Carl and Rami have been tweaking the music to get it perfect.

“Can we hear it?” Liam asks, patented puppy eyes wide.

“Yeah,” Niall begs. “Please?”

“C’mon Savan.”

“Please.”

“Alright, alright,” Savan laughs. “I think we have a recent demo we sent to Simon, hold on.”

He grabs his laptop and fits himself back into the middle of the boys, clicking through his files. He finds what he was looking for and hits play, and then pulls up a word document that must be the lyrics, WHAT MAKES YOU BEAUTIFUL in bold across the top.

Catchy guitar floats through the speaker, a sort-of familiar melody that Louis can’t quite place. He reads the lyrics to the first verse as Savan’s recorded voice sings along.

It’s a fun song, no doubt. A little repetitive, a little vapid, but they are a boy band, so Louis knows he can’t really expect Stairway to Heaven for their first single. It’s catchy, and it’ll be good for the radio.
There’s just something… off about it. Looking around at the other boys, he can tell they hear it too.

Part of it might be the division of the lyrics. According to Savan’s word document, Liam and Harry split the verses and bridges between them and all five sing the choruses, and that’s it. Just like on the X Factor, Niall and Zayn and Louis are just the Supremes to Liam and Harry’s shared role as Diana Ross. And yes, there’s a whole album’s worth of other songs being written that Louis and Niall and Zayn might get a chance to solo on, but it won’t be the first single, and that absolutely blows.

Niall seems to be thinking on a different track. “Can I-” he starts, his fingers twitching as he thinks, then spins, searching. “I need me guitar, can’t believe I forgot it.”

Carl, who’s sitting nearby and apparently listening in, leans closer. “Got one over there,” he says, pointing to a corner where a small pile of instruments waits to be played. Niall bounces to his feet, returning with an acoustic guitar slung over his shoulders.

“What if,” he starts when he’s settled, “what if the tempo is a little faster. Like-”

He scrunches his eyebrows together in concentration and plays the opening guitar riff, then again, speeding it up a little. The familiarity catches at Louis’ mind again, until he realizes:

“Summer Nights!” he exclaims, clapping. “That’s what it sounds like, that was going to bother me.”

“Oh,” Liam says, eyes wide. “It does!”

Niall starts over, the chords a little smoother as he gets used to the melody.

“Can we…?” Harry asks, gesturing to Savan’s laptop and the lyrics on the screen. He nods, gesturing for them to have at it. Louis crowds closer so he can read, noticing out of the corner of his eye that the rest of the writers in the room have stopped to watch them.

“Oh, yeah! Like,” Harry looks over to make sure he’s got the words right. “You’re turning heads when you walk through the door.”

“I like it!” Louis says. “Okay, Liam, start over.”

Liam, with Niall’s guitar accompanying him, sings through the first verse with their changes. Harry takes over at the bridge, fumbling a little as he remembers how it’s supposed to sound.

“Try this,” Zayn suggests, “instead of ending the line like normal, what if we stretched it a little?”

“Perfect,” Niall chimes in. “From the top.”

They work their way through the song like that, just like they used to do for their performance songs during all those live shows. They figure out a solid harmony for the chorus which is carried mostly by Louis and Liam, stretching you don’t know-ow-ow like they did in the verses. Louis suggests Zayn take the next verse instead of Liam again, and he shoots Louis a grateful look for proposing it. They’re a little stuck for something to make the second bridge not so repetitive until Niall sings, “na na na na” in place of lyrics, and Harry snaps a one, one-two beat along with him. Harry has Niall
sing the last bridge, they finish up on a strong chorus, Louis sings the last line, and that’s it. They’re

done.

The room is quiet when they look up. Rami looks stunned, Savan a little smug.

“Taught ‘em well, didn’t I?” he laughs, and though some of the writers don’t look happy that their
song was dismantled by a bunch of teenagers, most of them seem quietly impressed.

“Think that’s enough work for the day,” Niall says cheerfully, handing Carl his guitar. He rubs his
hands together and grins. “Now, back to the pool?”

“It’s cool they, like, took us seriously,” Liam says later when they’re sprawled across a massive king-
sized bed in their suite. “When we were working on the song, I mean.”

“I hope they keep the changes,” Louis says. He yawns, pushing his head back to rest on Niall’s
knee, glancing over at the flickering images on the muted TV screen. A young Will Smith is wearing
a lot of neon colors and animal print while gesturing wildly on screen—there’s been a Fresh Prince
of Bel-Air marathon on since they got to California, and they haven’t changed the channel since they
found it.

“They’ll have to keep some of them, at least,” Harry says, biting at his lip. “We may not have music
engineering experience or whatever to back it up, but I think our version sounded better.”

“Do you think we’ll get to write any songs in the future?” Niall asks. “Like from scratch? I think
we’d be good at it.”

“Harry’s got all kinds of songs in that journal of his, I’d bet you anything,” Zayn teases softly,
tousling Harry’s curls. “Waiting for the right moment to unleash them on the world.”

“I just want our songs to have a little more…” Harry trails off.

“Substance,” Louis finishes for him.

“Yeah. Like, I know we’re aiming for a certain market and that market likes cutesy pop, but they can
like other things, too. Deeper things.”

“Maybe next album, babes,” Zayn reassures them, and they eventually drift off with superficial
teeny-bopper pop playing in their heads.

24 January 2011

Louis’ back hits the wall and he loses his breath on a moan. In the next moment, Harry is pressed
against him and trying to give it back.

For someone who, just a little over a month ago, had never even been kissed, Harry’s taken to it like
a duck to water. His lips are soft but all-encompassing, his tongue slow and searching. He knows
that stroking Louis’ ribs when they kiss makes him jump forward and push their chests together, and
that if he lightly touches the back of Louis’ neck it’ll have him melting into whatever surface is
closest.

He’s a natural, probably one of those people who just decides he’s going to be good at something
and then just is. It’s not fair, and he’s using it against Louis and that’s even unfairer.

Like right now—Liam, Zayn, and Niall are waiting downstairs with Savan, who says he knows a club that doesn’t card and will let them in so they can party tonight. Louis and Harry are meant to be meeting them, but Harry’d taken one look at Louis, shirtless and pulling on his tightest jeans, and all hope of being ready to go in the next few minutes had disappeared.

He rolls his hips against Louis’ now, hands hard against the wall on either side of Louis’ head. Louis’ fingers are trailing up Harry’s torso, lingering over the sensitive spots by Harry’s hip bones and brushing lightly over his nipples. Harry gasps, biting Louis’ lip in answer.

“Harry, Hazza,” Louis breathes as Harry moves to trail a line of kisses up Louis’ neck. “Feels-feels amazing, baby.”

“Yeah, Lou,” Harry whines, hips stuttering.

They lose track of time to each others’ mouths, breath heavy in the air between them. Louis feels lightheaded, happy for the wall behind him and Harry’s solid presence in front keeping him upright. He’s tangling hands into Harry’s hair to keep him close when he hears the door to the suite close.

The two of them spring apart; or, well, Harry springs backward. Louis just tries to look like it’s not a strange thing that he’s plastered to the wall, panting, cheeks heated. No one appears, though, and he and Harry shoot each other confused glances when the suite remains empty.

“Must have been next door,” Louis shrugs.

The close call cools them off though, enough for Louis to throw on a shirt and for Harry to ruffle his curls back into place after Louis’ hands had wrecked their smooth order.

“Like waiting on a bunch of girls,” Niall grumbles half-heartedly when they finally find their way down to the hotel lobby, but nothing else is said and the night devolves into a hazy mess of glitter and thumping bass and too many margaritas, a celebratory exclamation mark on the end of their very first California journey.

26 January 2011

Flying is usually something that Louis enjoys, because it means a break in the monotony of daily life, a chance for adventure.

Flying while hungover, though: not nearly as fun.

Zayn, Louis, and Harry are in a row together, with Liam and Niall on the other side of the aisle next to one of their security guards. Niall had begged Liam to watch Anchorman with him until Liam had given in, and then three minutes into the movie fell asleep. Liam wasn’t much better, though, nodding off with his head against Niall’s shoulder.

Harry didn’t even make it to the air; he was out before the plane left the runway. He’d handled his shaky stomach and pounding head with less grace than the rest of them this morning, thanks to it being only his second time seriously drinking, so Louis had plied him with Tylenol he’d found at the hotel shop and gallons of water until Harry’s exhaustion took over and put him to sleep just minutes after they’d settled into their seats.

It’s been hours now, and they’re apparently nearing the American east coast. It still looks the same to
Louis, but he lost interest in looking over Harry's sleeping body out the window when the ocean disappeared and made way for patchwork green farmland as far as the eye could see. He and Zayn are on their third round of Monopoly on Zayn’s phone while the newest *Harry Potter* plays on Louis’ laptop.

The film ends, the familiar orchestral music flowing through their headphones, and Louis moves the cursor to pick something new. He’s stopped, though, by a hand on his wrist.

“Lou,” Zayn says quietly, voice oppressively muted by the still air of the quiet cabin. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Louis quirks an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

Zayn turns in his seat, his face more serious than Louis expected. A dozen scenarios pop into his head, each less plausible than the last—is Zayn going to tell him he’s as obnoxious as he always feared? Are they kicking him out of the band? Is someone ill? Is *he* ill? Did he Bond to another unsuspecting teenager?

Okay, he’d probably know if the last one was true; still, stranger things have happened.

“It’s about…” Zayn says carefully, his eyes flicking down to where Harry’s head rests in Louis’ lap, his mouth open a little in deep sleep. “Well, it’s about you. And Harry.”

Louis keeps his expression pleasantly confused, or, at least, that’s what he’s aiming for. By the look Zayn’s giving him, it’s probably not working. “What about me and Harry?”


Shit.

Still, the best advice Louis ever got from Simon comes into play once more: deny, deny, deny. “We’re always together, all five of us,” Louis says dryly. “Part of being a band, I suppose. Lots of quality time together.”

“Lou,” Zayn gives him an unimpressed look. “We saw you yesterday. Walked in on everything at the suite last night before Savan took us out, because you two were taking so long and we were sent to see why. I *saw* you.”

Louis remembers the sound of a door closing, air suddenly appearing between his body and Harry’s as they’d leapt apart. There’s no way to know if anyone had really been there before the noise, and the only memory Louis has is the sound of Harry’s moans, his pleas for more whispered into Louis’ mouth.

Zayn rolls his eyes when Louis gets a little lost in his head at that particular thought, not even the threat of exposure enough to pull him out of that memory. Zayn snaps in front of his face a few times, looking exasperated. “Alright, then, head outta the clouds or the hotel suite or wherever the hell it is. Even though," he smirks, "that is a pretty good impression of yourself yesterday when Harry had you up against the wall.” He waggles his eyebrows at Louis, shimmies a little in his seat.

Okay, so Zayn knows. Maybe more people do too, he did say *we* to begin with. That’s—it’s not good, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be bad, either. Zayn’s good people, he wouldn’t throw Louis and Harry under the bus or run and tell Simon. And it's not like Louis want to hide anything from him, he wants to be able to share the happiest part of his life with the boys.

“So what now?” Louis asks quietly.
Zayn stops shimmying and shrugs, flicking his hair. “I was going to ask you the same thing. What’s the plan, babes? You and Harry aren’t Bonded, and you know better than to think anything good can come of this.”

“I know, Zayn, it’s… It’s complicated.”

Zayn snorts. “I’ll say. It’s like, this is your thing, it’s not my business to tell you what to do. But at the same time, it does affect the band and so it’s sort of all of our business? So yeah, I’d definitely say it’s complicated.” He flicks his contemplative gaze to Louis. “So, again, what’s your plan here, man? This can’t end well.”

“It’ll end just fine,” Louis says shortly. “Either Harry or I will Bond to someone eventually and we’ll go our separate ways. Stay friends, nothing changed there, we just won’t keep doing… what we’ve been doing.”

“You’ve talked about this, right? You’re on the same page?”

“Yes, Zayn, we had a very mature discussion, and then Harry stuck his tongue in my mouth. It was very productive.”

Zayn wrinkles his nose. “Alright, thanks for that.” He pats Louis’ shoulder, back to serious. “I just want you two to be happy.”

“I know, mate. And we are. He’s my best friend, and now sometimes we kiss. That’s all. No qualms, no fuss.”

“Yeah, okay,” Zayn says skeptically. Louis rolls his eyes and shifts, glancing down at Harry to make sure he slept through the entirety of this conversation. When he finds Harry’s face still smooth and slack in sleep, he looks past Zayn across the aisle to make sure Niall and Liam missed that whole conversation as well.

No such luck: apparently the two of them are better actors than Louis gave them credit for, as they’re both very awake and watching from their own seats, bright eyed but cautious. Liam is worrying his lip between his teeth, Serious Face on full blast. Niall just looks careful, a spark of something else hidden deep in his baby blues.


Louis just nods, his gaze falling to his own hands twisted in his lap. It's kind of hard for him to look at the faces of three (or, really, four, because even though Harry’s asleep he’s still part of this) boys who want the very best for him, and don’t begrudge his happiness even when it's so clearly going to end in someone getting hurt.

It’s quiet for a moment, then Zayn nudges Louis with his elbow.

“Enough heart to heart for one day. Let’s watch Iron Man next.”

1 February 2011
Louis hits send and the tweet goes out, hundreds of his followers already favoriting and retweeting his message. He sits and watches the numbers go up just for a second.

He is definitely not stalling. That would be ridiculous.

It's just lunch. A quick meal with his four favorite boys, who now all know that Harry and Louis are in some sort of pseudo-kinda-sorta-relationship. And then Anne and Gemma and Robin as well, who very much do not know that Louis spends a lot of his time now pushing Harry into closets for quick snogs.

Harry's birthday will be a little quieter than Louis' and Zayn's (both of which they'd celebrated belatedly in California, since they couldn't all be together on the actual days). But, of course, as the youngest of the group Harry's just now turning seventeen, still a full year away from legality and public wild nights out. So this year, Harry just asked for a lunch with the boys and his family before they head to Fountain Studios for their first ever tour rehearsal.

Louis smooths his shirt and pulls the keys from his car's ignition, twirling the keyring on his finger as he saunters his way into the restaurant. He's led to a private room in the back, steeling himself and pasting on an easy smile before he flings open the door.

Everyone’s sat around a large round table in the center of the room, a modest pile of presents taking the place of a centerpiece. Niall, the closest to the door, looks up from his phone and catches Louis hovering in the doorway.

“Louis!” he says happily. “Thought you’d gotten lost.”

Louis grins, ruffling Niall’s hair. Niall’s drawn everyone else’s attention now, a chorus of greetings shouted from around the table. Harry, who’d been talking with Gemma, turns and sees Louis, his eyes lighting up.

“Lou!” he exclaims, like Louis hadn’t help coordinate everyone’s schedules to plan this lunch and was obviously going to make it, “you’re here!”

Harry jumps to his feet, making his way around the table and skidding to a stop in front of Louis, bouncing on his toes in excitement. And then, as though they’re the only people in the room, he presses a kiss to Louis’ lips. It’s chaste and sweet and sends Louis’ heart thundering against his ribs for more than one reason.

“Uh-erm,” Louis stammers when Harry pulls away. His eyes must look like saucers, they feel so wide, and his muscles ache from tensing so suddenly. “Hello?”

“It’s been four days apart, love,” Louis says, still wondering what the hell Harry’s doing but not able to keep himself from laughing. “And we talked on the phone for two hours last night.”

Harry just grins and bites his lip, tugging on Louis’ hand and pulling him to the empty seat next to his own. Louis takes a deep breath and finally looks around at the damage.

The boys haven’t batted an eyelash, as though it’s a common occurrence to see Harry and Louis kissing even though not five days ago Zayn was grilling Louis about his intentions and plans in proper big brother fashion. He’s smirking now, though, and trying to hide it behind his pint. Niall and Liam are talking amongst themselves, though they’re smiling too much for a conversation about workout schedules while on tour. Robin didn’t react at all, other than chuckling into his own pint and patting Anne’s back.

Anne and Gemma’s eyebrows have raised so high they’ve practically migrated to the tops of their heads.

“Hello, Louis,” Anne says, eyes flickering between him and Harry.

“Hi Anne, Gem,” Louis says bashfully, lowering his eyes to his plate. Gemma’s eyes have narrowed now, like she’s able to read Louis’ every thought and is wholly unimpressed. Anne still looks shocked.

Robin laughs again. “Come on, dear,” he soothes, patting Anne’s hand. “it’s not like this is news. Not with H going on about a ‘hypothetical’ guy he knew who ‘hypothetically’ kissed his best mate and ‘hypothetically’ wanted to do it again.”

That startles a laugh out of Louis, and he reaches over to pinch Harry’s flaming cheek. Harry bats his hand away and drops his forehead to the table. “Robiiiiin,” he grumbles. “That was private.”

Everyone hoots with laughter, Niall even pounding the table, tears in his eyes.

“Was it private when you told me Louis tastes like butterscotch and happiness?” Liam asks, eyes sparkling.

“Or when you texted me asking if it was too early to swear off kissing anyone else ever?” Niall adds, wiping his eyes.

“Or-” Zayn starts.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough,” Harry cries, leaping to his feet and smashing a hand over Zayn’s mouth. “New topic!”

Louis raises his hand. “One quick comment,” he says, grinning. “I don’t even like butterscotch.”

Harry groans, dropping his face into his hands and blushing all the way down to the V of the unbuttoned top of his shirt. Louis just laughs, clinking his glass against Robin’s when he offers and wondering if this is how it’s supposed to feel being Harry’s soulmate.

“This isn’t the X Factor competition anymore,” the creative director says later when they make it to the studio for rehearsals. “You aren’t trying to establish yourself to new audiences or break new boundaries. These fans know you, and they want to see you as they saw you on the show.”
“So…” Zayn asks slowly. “No dancing?”

“No dancing,” the creative director nods, and all five boys sigh in relief.

19 February 2011

When they were on the *X Factor*, or at least towards the end of the show, nerves didn’t tend to hit Harry until those final few seconds before he stepped on stage. He always had something to distract him, or he could watch the other acts and forget about his own issues for a while.

Their first time performing on tour, though, that’s a whole new beast.

Rehearsals have been fine, since they’re only updating songs they already did on the show and could spend their time focusing on choreography or timing or, y’know, the whole popping out from under the stage thing to kick off their section of the show.

Harry’s naturally clumsy. He trips over his own feet daily; the idea of being flung on stage in front of thousands of people is mildly terrifying.

But he’s not the only one panicking. There’s hours to go yet, their big kick-off show in Birmingham starting at 2:30, but every act is already backstage, shaking their way through makeup and wardrobe. They’d had the big tearful *X Factor* family reunion last night, tears flowing as easily as champagne, and now it’s like they never left the show, teasing and joking and soothing nerves as crew bustles around them.

Harry is between Louis and Mary on a sofa, Louis’ arm around his shoulders and his face nuzzled into Louis’ neck. Matt, Aiden, and Niall are nearby, messing around on Niall’s guitar. Liam’s listening to his iPod and pacing. The hair and makeup girls are trying to figure out what to do with Katie’s shorn-off hair, and Cher and Rebecca are chain smoking just outside.

Louis taps his fingers on Harry’s knee. “Wish we could go outside, concentrate on something else for a while,” he says into Harry’s ear, and Harry doesn’t know if he means kissing or football or something else entirely but he’s definitely on board.

“How?”

Louis gets a mischievous look in his eye, the one that tells Harry he’s got a halfway cooked up a scheme swirling in his head and is about to drag him away for something clever and annoying and possibly illegal.

Harry is so ready.

"Let's decorate Liam's bunk on the bus with his shaving cream," Louis grins, rubbing his hands together. Harry laughs and agrees, but then Louis stops and furrows his brows at something just over Harry's shoulder.

A harried-looking assistant drags an unapologetic Zayn through the doorway, the usually-smooth
Zayn tripping over his own feet. “Sit,” she commands, shoving a his shoulder until he sprawls himself across Louis’ lap, snickering. Her mouth narrows into a thin line. "Keep an eye on him. We're liable for any damage he causes."

“Hello, dear,” Louis says mildly, petting Zayn’s hair. “Getting into trouble a little early, aren’t we?”

“You’re,” Zayn starts, then breaks off in giggles, “you’re only in trouble if you get caught.”

“You smell like a coffeehouse in Amsterdam.”

“I’m in trouble,” Zayn says, toppling to the floor. He frowns for a moment, rubbing his bum, then giggles again. Louis rolls his eyes and stands, hauling Zayn to his feet as well.

“Let’s get this one sorted. Jesus, you reek.” Zayn just laughs, docile as a kitten, head lolling onto Louis’ shoulder.

Harry plans to follow as Louis leads Zayn away, but he’s stopped by a hand on his arm.

“Is it true, then?” Katie asks, eyes twinkling merrily. “I heard someone spotted you and Louis kissing behind the buses.”

Harry feels his face heat, works to keep his face neutral.

He and Louis, though unsuccessful in keeping their relationship a secret from the boys, have decided they really are going to try and be more discreet while on tour; Harry remembers the serious look on Louis’ face on the way to the studio after his birthday lunch like its burned into his skull, his careful words still echoing in Harry's head.

“You know I love you more than anything, Haz,” he'd said, hands confident on the steering wheel as he wove his way through traffic. “I’m happy the boys and your family know about… what we’re doing and that they don’t care, but other people won’t be as kind when they find out. And management specifically wants us to seem available. So, and I hate this, but I think we’re going to have to be careful and keep things between us for a while.”

Harry had agreed, even though it had stung to hear. He'd never want to do anything that made life difficult for Louis, but that's all he seems to do lately. He'd resolved, right there in the passenger seat of Louis' shitty car, to keep their relationship a secret if that's what Louis wanted, even if Harry himself wanted to shout it from the rooftops.

Now, though, it’s strange to have to deny it to people who’ve been with them from the beginning.

“Um,” Harry says to Katie. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Psh,” Cher scoffs, joining the conversation. “Look at that grin. Someone’s been bad, eh?”

“It’s not like that,” Harry protests, but Cher and Katie’s smiles widen like he’s just confirmed everything.

“Is it you, then? He really did Bond at the house, and it was to you?”

“How romantic,” Katie coos, clutching her hands together.

“I.”

“Where’s your Marker, then? Hid it well, didn’t you.”
“Guys, really-”

“What’s this about a Marker?” Mary asks. “Little Harry, did you find yourself a soulmate and forget to tell us?”

“It’s Louis!” Cher announces giddily.

“Really?” Paije asks, eye wide. “I thought The Sun was just spewing bullshit the whole time.”

Harry casts his eyes around, a little overwhelmed, and locks eyes with Aiden and Matt and Niall, all three who are watching worriedly from across the room as the crowd around Harry grows. Harry drops his head, scuffs his shoe on the floor.

“There’s nothing going on between me and Louis,” he says finally.

“Oh, I don’t believe that for a second,” Cher laughs. “We lived with you, remember?”

Harry just smiles, tries to keep from burning the place down with the heat of his blush. “I have to- to go,” he says vaguely, waving his arm toward wherever Louis dragged Zayn.

“We’ll get it out of you sometime,” Mary chuckles, and then everyone is distracted by Niall declaring he’s going to streak during the concert and Harry can finally get away from invasive questions asked by people with good intentions.

They’re under the stage at the LG Arena, the crowd roaring above them as their “journey to X Factor” video plays for ten thousand screaming people. Louis has gathered the band to him, his Lost Boys searching for some confidence before the biggest show of their fledgling careers.

Harry sort of wants to throw up and curl into the fetal position but also sort of wants to just go, to smash their first ever concert and get it over with, to stand on stage like he’s always wanted to do.

“This is what we’ve been waiting for,” Louis reminds them, stilling a shaky Niall with a hand to his shoulder. “This is why we auditioned, and this is why we worked our arses off for months on end. For this.”

“Let’s do it, boys,” Liam grins, and they throw their hands in like an American football-style huddle. And then they laugh, because no one says anything so they just stand there like a bunch of idiots.

“We really need t’ come up with a chant or something,” Niall muses as he and Liam and Zayn head back to their spots.

Louis grips Harry’s wrist hard before he ever gets a chance to leave, his hand sweaty. His eyes are wide, but not playful or excited like they usually are. He looks terrified, his pupils blown.

“Tell me I’m going to be okay,” he begs Harry, leaning close.

Oh, fuck, that’s right. Harry’s been so wrapped up in the excitement of the flashing lights and seeing old friends that he’s completely forgotten their new song arrangements: Louis and Niall are finally performing their first real solos.

It had been decided at that first rehearsal on Harry’s birthday, the five of them negotiating with their new vocal coaches—Savan still in California, apparently—to spread the solos and duets out a little more evenly, giving each of them a chance to show what they’ve got.
“I haven’t sang anything on my own since my bootcamp solo,” Niall had said, voice like steel. "I want to sing, s'why I'm here."

Harry and Liam had pushed hard for the shift, knowing they would be the recipients of the new solos if things didn’t change. Eventually, an overwhelmed creative director had been brought in to settle things and, knowing the boys from all their rehearsals during the run of the show, told the vocal coaches to take their opinions into account.

Louis hadn’t said anything while in the meeting, but the way he’d kissed the breath right out of Harry later that evening let Harry know he truly was grateful.

But now it’s time to deliver, time to put on a real show and sing five songs back to back with no break, no breathing time. Just the five of them and a screaming crowd waiting to cheer them on.

“‘You aren’t going to be okay,’” Harry murmurs just loud enough for Louis to hear over the rumble of thousands of people. Louis tries to pull away, looking hurt, but Harry doesn't let him, nudging Louis’ forehead with his own. “You’re going to smash it. You’re going to be the best thing this world’s ever seen.”

Louis gasps brokenly and pulls Harry in for a searing kiss, the waiting world forgotten for just a moment. They pull apart as Liam starts hissing at them to cut it out and get to their spots, the music for Only Girl in the World starting to pound through the arena.

“I hate this song,” Louis laughs, shoving Harry away so they can get to their trapdoors in time.

They’re launched onstage. Harry doesn’t fall. The world goes bright as a supernova when Louis sings.

20 February 2011

Harry supposes there will be a time in his life that he gets tired of being asked about potential celebrity crushes and his hair care routine, but that is not this day.

It’s the X Factor acts’ first ever press day, the time between the matinee and evening shows devoted to spreading the word about the tour on every platform possible. A large backstage room at the LG Arena is filled with reporters and interviewers, all jostling around the performers to try and get the perfect sound bite or video footage. Flashes from heavy duty cameras are constant, jarring, and the music blasting overhead makes it hard to even think. But it's still exciting, the thrill of knowing people want to listen when you speak.

One Direction had done their first few interviews together, but the last one had devolved into a spirited game of tag (initiated by Louis, naturally) that had the reporter fuming and so the boys had been divided and sent their separate ways to do individual interviews.

Harry’s situated on a sofa not too far from where Louis is doing his own interview, curled up and smiling coyly at a man who’s already flustered. Louis grins at Harry over the man’s shoulder, winking quickly before turning his attention back to the poor guy who probably just wants an update on their album plans and instead is getting the full Tommo Treatment, batting eyelashes and scathing wit and all.

Two girls, not much older than Harry, throw themselves suddenly onto the end of his sofa and turn
to him, beaming. Harry, startled, flails for a moment before he realizes they aren't fans who have
snuck in.

“I’m Kate,” one says, smiling uncomfortably wide. “This is Carly. We’re with Sugarscape. Mind if
we ask you some questions?”

“Sure,” Harry agrees, smiling. They seem friendly enough, and at least these two seem harmless, not
like the middle aged woman with shiny hair and shinier teeth who’s backed Zayn into a corner,
brandishing her microphone like a sword.

Turns out they are very nice, giggling at his jokes and complimenting his hair. It’s sort of like
hanging out with his girl friends back home, only this conversation is being recorded.

“Okay,” Kate says, “last few questions, and we’ll do these all together. First snog, first celebrity
crush, and first real crush?”

“My first snog was, um,” Harry stalls, then decides to keep it vague (and a lie, but it’s not like the
real person will contradict him). “A girl from school. My first celebrity crush was… Frankie Sanford
when she was in S Club Juniors, and my first real crush was…”

His gaze falls immediately back to Louis, who’s in between interviews and playing on his phone.
His hair has fallen in his eyes, a caramel waterfall he brushes back with a light hand. He looks up
and catches Harry staring, a slow smile spreading across his face. He’s beautiful, the most beautiful
boy in the world, and Harry’s chest aches when he flicks his gaze away like he can’t let himself look
at Harry for too long, the pink in his cheeks even visible all the way over here.

“Louis Tomlinson,” he finishes.

“Who?”

Harry turns back to the camera, holding back a smile. “Louis Tomlinson.”

“Louis Tomlinson?” Kate grins. “How does he feel about you?”

Harry thinks of sneaky kisses in the parking lot between the buses, long sessions on various pieces of
hotel furniture that leave his lips tingling and swollen, the relief on Louis’ face when Harry had
welcomed him back after he ran away, like he’d expected Harry to turn a cold shoulder and instead
was smothered with a hug, his raspy whisper when he thought Harry had been asleep that same
night, I want to be enough for you.

“Mutual,” Harry tells the Sugarscape reporters. “We’ve discussed it.”

Harry does dozens of interviews that day, all sorts of feature pieces for papers and radio shows and
TV programs across the country, so it’s easy to forget about his comment until he’s at a late dinner
with the boys that night, still hyped after their second show of the day. His and Louis’ phones both
buzz in the middle of the table, and they roll their eyes and joke about what badly used meme
Gemma has decided to send in their group text today.

Needless to say, it isn’t Gemma.

(8:49 p.m.) Unknown Number: Management would like to speak to you both tomorrow, 10:00.
They’ll send a car.
21 February 2011

The blonde PR lady Louis hates is waiting on them when they stumble off the bus at 9:55 the next morning. She looks like she wants to stab them with her stilettos, but instead she smiles stiffly and silently leads them to a black sedan idling nearby.

“Don’t know why we couldn’t just have a meeting on the bus,” Louis says loudly as they slide next to each other in the backseat. Claudia visibly restrains herself from responding as she sits next to the driver. “There’s a lovely breakfast nook slash pull out bed we could have sat at.”

“Do you know where we’re going?” Harry whispers to him once they’ve driven a little ways from the venue. Louis seems far too calm, almost as though he’s whisked away for secret meetings all the time and has become a pro at it.

“Not specifically, but I can give a pretty decent guess at what’ll be there,” Louis says darkly. “Lots of uncomfortable chairs and a table that is too long for the number of people sitting at it, all to give the illusion of power.”


Louis takes a deep breath, avoiding Harry’s eyes, but he’s saved by a sharp bark from Claudia: “We’re here.”

The chairs are really uncomfortable, just like Louis said, and the table is far too long for the five or six people gathered for the meeting. Harry and Louis are ushered to the empty side of the table, and they settle into high-backed seats that already have Harry’s back aching.

There are three men sitting across from them, a flurry of assistants like moons orbiting three self-assured planets. The men are calm, sipping from glasses of water and watching Harry and Louis like they’re visiting a mildly interesting exhibit at the zoo.

Louis said something about the illusion of power, but there doesn’t seem to be any illusion about it. These men reek of unfiltered wealth and understood influence, the kind that doesn’t need to be flashed about to prove that it exists.

“Louis, Harry,” one of them says, a small, hard smile appearing on his otherwise emotionless face. “Good to see you again.”

“Right,” Louis says, a touch sarcastically. “How’s Susan and the kids? Manage to fit in any good golf lately?” He rolls his eyes. “Just say what you need to say and we’ll go.”

“There’s no need to be antagonistic, Louis,” another man says. “This matter affects all of us.”

“I don’t even know what the ‘matter’ is,” Louis snarls, miming quotation marks in the air, “but I can guarantee that it only affects the two of us and has nothing to do with you.”

The men ignore Louis completely, all three turning to Harry like a choreographed routine. “I believe we’ve never been introduced,” the first man says. “I’m Richard Griffiths and this is Harry Magee, and we represent Modest Management. With us today is Simon Jones from HJPR.”

Harry nods at them, still shaky from their abrupt dismissal of Louis and his open hostility. He’s hit by the feeling that he’s stepped into something deeper than what he can see on the surface, like he was just dropped into the middle of a war zone with no weapon and a disgruntled ally.
“Hello,” he says quietly. He feels himself shift closer to Louis unconsciously, then regrets it immediately when Magee’s eyes automatically narrow on the disappearing space between their bodies.

“There’s an issue we need to discuss,” Magee says. “It may be too late to keep it from reaching the public, but we can at least prevent something similar from happening again.”

Harry sort of wants to ask what it is they’re meant to be preventing, but has the distinct feeling that it would be a bad idea. So he waits, watching one of the assistants place a laptop at the head of the table, the screen black. She leans up and taps the space bar before heading back to her seat.

Harry is shocked to see his own face fill the screen, the familiar white brick wall from the LG Arena acting as the interview background. His video self spends most of the thirty second video looking offscreen, and Harry doesn’t have to try hard to remember who exactly he was paying attention to when the questions were being asked.

“My first real crush was Louis Tomlinson,” his video self declares, and everyone in the room besides Harry flinches.

Even Louis.

Magee leans over and slaps the space bar again, pausing the video on Harry mid-snap of his gum. The silence is heated, like the glares Louis is sending across the table are enough to set the table in front of them on fire. He's scratching at his forearm like he's trying to remove the skin through his sleeve.

Harry cowers in his seat, wondering what punishment he’ll receive. Will he have to go on the record or something and take it back? Are they going to yell at him? Harry’s never been good at confrontation. Maybe he won’t ever do any more solo interviews, since he screws things up so badly. Christ, Louis had warned him they’d have to be discreet, and he still couldn’t play it cool.

It’s like a brick to the stomach when, instead of saying anything to Harry, Magee and Griffiths turn to Louis with thinly veiled contempt.

“We told you to handle this,” Griffiths says coolly, hands folded in front of him. “This doesn’t look handled.”

Louis looks downright livid. “No, you can’t- No. You said to handle it but there’s nothing to be handled. I can’t be blamed for things I didn’t do.”

“We expected you to share with Harry that whatever you two do in your own private time must stay private.”

“Nothing happens in our private time,” Louis insists. “And even if it did, this is not that big of a deal. Who cares? The way he said it could be played off as joking anyway.”

“If I may,” Jones says, speaking for the first time. “It’s not so much an issue of whether Harry was joking or not, it’s how the fans take it. And, thanks to observant fans during the show and the help of the press, you two already have a large following looking for any proof of ‘evidence’ of your relationship. This will only add to that, no matter how much you claim it was a joke.”

“It cannot be stressed enough,” Magee says, slapping the table emphatically, “you are nothing without your image, and your image must be to seem available. If you act like a Bonded couple, you do not seem available.”
Louis throws himself backward, his shoulders thumping against the unforgiving back of the chair. He crosses his arms testily. “It’s already posted, right? So there’s nothing we can do now.”

“Yes, this Sugarscape website,” Griffiths reads with a sneer, “has already posted all of your interviews. They don’t have a high readership, but they’ve been gaining aggressively for a few months.”

“I do not care,” Louis says sharply. “Just say your piece so we can go. There’s nothing that can be done now.”

“Well,” Jones says slowly, “you could always schedule some dates with known, easily recognized fans, that would-”

“No,” Louis growls. “No, absolutely not. We’ll play nice, but you can’t pimp us out to save your own wallets.” He stands abruptly, holding out a hand to help Harry to his feet as well. “We’re finished here.”

“You need a car to get back to the arena.”

“We’ll call a cab,” Louis says, then slams the door behind them.

They’re silent until the car arrives, Louis pacing the small space in front of the office building they’d been dragged to, Harry biting his nails and trying not to cry.

Louis gestures for Harry to get in the cab first, sliding quickly in next to him and muttering the address to the driver.

Hot shame has welled up in Harry’s stomach, his eyes wet and throat closing with unshed tears. He feels like the worst person in the world. Louis had told him, he’d told him, he knew Louis needed him to be careful in front of cameras and he still answered without thinking. And then, instead of stepping in and taking the blame like he should have, Harry let Louis take the brunt of the accusations, like Harry had no part to play instead of being the reason for all the trouble.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers, not even knowing if Louis can hear him. The cabbie isn’t listening, too busy humming along to the radio to pay him any attention. “Lou, I’m so so sorry.” A sob escapes, scratching at his throat on the way out.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Louis says mournfully, a marked difference from the venom that had leaked into his tone back in the meeting. Harry glances up to see Louis unbuckle his seatbelt and slide across the seat, his eyes unfathomably sad. He pulls Harry into a hug, fingers curling in Harry’s hair. “No, no, baby, don’t apologize.”

“But-” Harry hiccups, tears flowing freely now, “it’s-it’s my f-fault, it’s be-because I-”

“Absolutely not,” Louis says fiercely. “This is not your fault. I should have been more clear.”

“No, n-no Louis please, please, I’m sorry-”

“Stop apologizing,” Louis begs quietly, muffled in Harry’s hair. “Please. I can’t stand to see you upset.”

Harry sniffs into Louis chest, tears leaving a wet patch on his shirt. “Lou,” he says, sitting up and wiping wetness off his cheeks, “how many meetings with them have you had before today?”
Louis avoids Harry’s eyes. “Oh, Haz, I don’t know. A few.”

“A few?” Harry laughs brokenly. “You practically have a routine down with them. You knew exactly where we’d go and what they’d say before we even got there.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Louis says quietly, picking at a loose thread on his trousers. “I got called in once, God, months ago, back in October I think. It was, um,” he flicks his glance up, apologetic, “after the whole Aiden… thing. And they basically said we had to be careful, because tabloids were looking for stories and if they thought we’d Bonded then it would be in every paper for weeks even if it wasn’t true.”

“Why didn’t they talk to me?” Harry demands. “I’m as much a part of this as you.”

Louis shrugs. “I don’t know, love. But they brought me back in a few times after that. After some of the video diaries and the sponsored segments.”

“Oh, God,” Harry says weakly, a stray thought striking like a bolt of lightning. “I told you to kiss me in that one video. The chocolate coin one.”

Louis laughs a little. “Yeah, you did. Scared me to death, too.” He brushes his fringe out of his eyes with delicate fingers, then places his hand carefully on Harry’s. “Don’t blame yourself, please. If anything, I should’ve seen this coming. Once I realized they only panicked because it was their profit at stake, I stopped worrying so much about their threats. I mean, what can they do? Force me to Bond with someone else? But I knew they'd bring you into it eventually, use you to get me to cooperate.”

"How would they use me?"

"Think it's pretty obvious, love," Louis smiles softly. "Start getting that look on your face like you're about to cry and I'll fold like a house of cards."

Harry sighs, the grief still welling deep in his stomach but soothed a little by Louis’ honesty. “I’ll try to be stronger,” he offers.

Louis shakes his head, the motion almost violent. "Don't you dare change a thing."

They’re almost back to the venue, the line of buses for all the acts appearing in the distance. They’ve got a long day ahead of them, a six hour drive from Birmingham to Dublin taking up the majority of daylight.

Louis squeezes Harry’s hand just before they exit the cab, the tiniest shadow of his usual playful smile tugging on the corner of his mouth. “So…” he says slowly, drawing it out. “I’m your first real crush?”

Harry groans, pulling Louis in by the back of the neck to silence his giggles with a rough, quick kiss.

“Don’t go telling anyone,” Harry laughs when they separate. “I’ve got a reputation for chasing middle aged women to uphold, you see.”

26 February 2011

It’s funny how something extraordinary can become routine over time.
Harry stands center stage at the Odyssey Arena in Belfast, the words of *Chasing Cars* rolling off his tongue without thought. It’s their eleventh show, their second in Belfast, and already Harry is sure that he’ll never want to do anything else ever again.

Well… okay. He wants to do this forever, but maybe not this *specific* tour.

The wardrobe department (or Simon, or their PR people, who knows, honestly) has decided to put them in the same basic outfit for every single show. Harry has no idea why, and he remembers Louis saying he’d had to do a fitting for a whole bunch of nautical themed clothing and Niall had went in to try on some sweaters, but none of that seems to be available. Instead, Harry’s in the same grey blazer every night, the boys just as monochromatic around him. There’s one night where they get to change things up, just a little, but then it’s back to black and grey, the blazer chafing at Harry’s shoulders.

Plus, they don’t get to sing their own songs. Singing covers of their *X Factor* songs feels a little like glorified karaoke, with flashing lights and fireworks to distract from the fact that they’ve already performed these songs on TV before.

And then there’s Magee and Griffiths, who hover like overgrown vultures, only meaner. They’ve appeared backstage after every performance since the meeting (y’know, the one where they revealed they’ve been blackmailing Louis into acting like he and Harry are nothing more than cordial friends). Harry tries to ignore them, but it’s sort of like trying to ignore police sirens—they make themselves known, making sure to pat Harry on the shoulder before they leave so he has to acknowledge they were there. Louis always asks them if they’ve got anything better to do, but they just smile like Louis is a toddler throwing a tantrum and don’t answer.

Claudia is even more omnipresent; not a tweet gets sent without her approval, not a single interview happens without her there, watching with narrowed eyes over the interviewer’s shoulder. Every time she sees Harry’s hand so much as innocently brush against Louis, her Blackberry is in her hand to report it.

So yeah, if Harry could just take his band and then the other acts he likes as well and stick them all on some *other* tour of England and Ireland, that’s the one he’d want to do forever.

But, he has to admit, even with all the management-related drawbacks it’s still pretty wonderful. The crowds are enthusiastic, even if they aren’t at the shows to see One Direction specifically, and they always scream loudest during their intro video compared to the other acts.

And, even better, Simon has security confiscating all signs at the doors, so they don’t have to deal with onstage fan service just yet.

There’s a slow turntable they use during the beginning of *Forever Young* and that’s where Harry finds himself, staring out over the crowd as he belts his lines. He pivots to face inward at the same time as the other four, Zayn’s grinning face across from him.

Harry doesn’t much want to be young forever, but he’d trade almost anything to be able to stay on stage with these boys forever instead.

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5 March 2011

“It seems… bigger.”
“Well, Neil, that’s the beauty of being the only people here, as compared to being among hundreds of other people all fighting for attention.”

“We aren’t the only ones here! Rebecca’s right over there. And Matt and Aiden are- oh, Jesus, okay, don’t look. But they’re here too.”

“Missing the point, Ni.”

Wembley stretches out in front of them, the stadium empty and waiting for a crowd to fill its seats. Louis, Zayn, and Niall are sitting at the edge of the stage, their legs dangling. Harry’s laid across their thighs, eyes closed, head in Louis’ lap and ankles crossed in Zayn’s. He inches closer to sleep with every stroke of Louis’ hand through his hair.

“Hello, boys,” Mary’s voice floats over to them. A shadow passes over Harry’s face and then is gone, followed by the sound of a chair squeaking as Mary sits.

“Hello, love. You’re looking ravishing,” Louis says, all charm and cheek, and Mary chuckles.

“Oh, hush you. I’ve no need for another pretty boy falling all over himself to tell me nice things.”

“Another?” Louis gasps dramatically. “Mary, I thought what we had was real! I love you! I need you!”

“Reject another one, did you Mary?” Rebecca’s voice calls, and Niall cackles. Rebecca’s heels tap sharply on the stage as she settles next to them. “Can’t believe we’re back at Wembley.”

Zayn rubs a light thumb around Harry’s ankle, his voice contemplative when he speaks. “Bootcamp seems like years ago, doesn’t it.”

Rebecca hums, her warm voice like the sunlight falling across Harry’s face. “Time moves fast when you’ve got other things to worry about.”

“We were a ragtag bunch, weren’t we?” Louis laughs.

“Ah, but many a ragged colt made a noble horse,” Mary says wisely.

“I think I used to have that on a t-shirt,” Niall muses.

“Remember when Zayn refused to dance?” Cher teases, her distinctive lavender perfume settling as she joins the steadily growing group.

“For good reason, too,” Zayn grumbles. Harry can hear Liam’s chuckle right behind Zayn.

“Remember when Louis wouldn’t stop dancing?” Harry asks, eyes still closed as he grins, and everyone laughs as Louis makes an affronted noise.

“What are we talking about?” Aiden’s voice calls, his heavy shoes thumping against the stage.

“Bootcamp.”

“Ah, those were the days,” Matt sighs. “There was that girl, remember? She came back for the final with that group of rejected acts, but she showed up to rehearsal that first day with beer dried in her hair.”

Katie shouts with laughter. “Christ, no, that wasn’t beer. She was supposed to be in my room, so I heard the whole story. That was definitely a mix of vodka and come, potentially with some cocaine
mixed in.”

“Wasn’t she a mum?” Liam asks.

“Lord help that child,” Mary says.

“And the guy that broke down crying when he messed up his solo, remember him?” Aiden asks. “Full on tears, right in the middle of Michael Jackson.”

“Tobias,” Harry supplies.

“Was he the one that asked you for a date, Hazza?” Niall snickers.

“No,” Harry says, and then frowns, remembering kind eyes and a nervous request to spend some time together but no name. “That was, um-”

“Christian,” Louis answers shortly.

“You little heartbreaker,” Cher laughs, reaching over Niall’s lap to tap Harry’s cheek with a long fingernail. “And you had that Xtra Factor segment with all the girls, too.”

“Yes, yes, he’s quite the charmer,” Louis says loudly.

“Aw, don’t be jealous Lou Lou,” Katie giggles. “He wuvs you bestest.”

“Damn right,” Louis says, but his voice is tinged with laughter. He tugs on one of Harry’s curls, and Harry nuzzles his stomach in answer.

The wind is the only noise for a little while, all of them contemplative over times long gone. It is strange how things have changed in such a short amount of time; that was less than a year ago, and yet here they all are, fundamentally different.

Rebecca, Matt, Aiden, Cher, Mary, and One Direction all have recording contracts. Katie’s gone from media darling to having her family’s dirty laundry dragged piece by piece across the front of The Daily Mail every week. Wagner is… well, who knows about Wagner. There’s talk of Cher getting her own fashion line. Mary has a shrine dedicated to her back in Dublin at her old job, a testament to how much the Irish love her. Rebecca’s kids will have enough money to go to school and live comfortably as long as they want. Aiden and Matt are Bonded. They survived the X Factor machine, made it out the other side with some semblance of dignity and, if not that, then at least a little bit of cash to keep them afloat.

“Did you ever dream we’d be here?” Harry murmurs to Louis.

“Not together,” Louis chuckles. “I thought you’d be off dazzling the world and I’d be back home, pre-ordering your albums and wallpapering my room with your posters.”

Harry giggles, finally opening his eyes. Louis is radiant above him, the sun silhouetting him from behind like a work of art, his hair fluttering in the breeze. His eyes shine, and his fingers trail a soft pattern up Harry’s ribs.

“I’m glad you’re here with me,” Harry whispers. “Just like I pictured it.”
Niall is in the lounge at the back of the bus, strumming idly at his guitar as the bus nears the Liverpool Arena. Harry’s next to him, scrolling through Twitter and trying to pass time until they stop and he can get up and stretch his legs a little. The radio is playing softly, the driver listening to a station with a nice mix of current and older music. Familiar piano starts playing, and Harry drops his phone onto his chest to sing along, Niall strumming an accompaniment.

“Easy come, easy go, that’s just how you live.”

“Oh, take, take, take it all, but you never give,” Liam’s voice sings back from the kitchen, the sound of cereal hitting the bottom of a bowl adding to their harmony.

Harry grins. “Should’ve known you was trouble from the first kiss, had your eyes wide open, why were they open-”

“Oohh,” Niall and Zayn both vocalize, Zayn laughing softly in his bunk.

Liam takes over from there, his strong voice handling Bruno Mars’ runs with ease. Harry leans back and just listens, because he loves to sing but he also loves hearing people sing, especially when they enjoy doing it. Niall sings the yeah yeah yeahs in the background of the chorus, Zayn piping in when he feels like it.

There’s a whisper of cloth as the curtain of one of the beds is whisked open, and Harry looks up to see familiar feet kicking out of a top bunk, Louis’ legs and then bum appearing slowly as he wiggles out of his bed, sleep-rumpled and rubbing his eyes.

(Harry’d tried to convince him to take a bottom bunk, but the look on Louis’ face had been enough to stop him in his tracks. So now, Harry has to make sure to keep his arms pulled close to his chest while he sleeps at night or Louis might stomp all over him when he tries to get up for a piss or a drink of water.)

Louis settles into Harry’s lap once he’s made his way into the lounge, forehead against Harry’s cheek as Liam keeps singing. He’s humming along under his breath, his sweet tenor no more than a whisper.

“Go on,” Harry whispers, nudging Louis when Liam takes a break, presumably to take a bite of cereal if the audible crunch is anything to go by.

Louis blushes, but sings quietly. “Gave you all I had but you tossed it in the trash, you tossed it in the trash yes you did-”

“Louder!” Liam calls, and Harry stifles a laugh into Louis’ shoulder, Louis huffing in Liam’s direction.

“To give me all your love is all I ever asked, ‘cause-”

“Louis, LOUDER!” Liam shouts.

“WHAT YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND,” Louis sing-shouts back, laughing, “IS I’D CATCH A GRENADE FOR YA.”

“There we go,” Liam yells, satisfied.

“THROW MY HAND ON A BLADE FOR YA,” Louis sings, jumping to his feet and pulling Harry
along.

“I’D JUMP IN FRONT OF A TRAIN FOR YA,” Harry belts back, grinning and spinning the both of them in a circle. “YOU KNOW I’D DO ANYTHING FOR YA.”

Louis giggles and steps close, looking up through his eyelashes. “I would go through all this pain,” he sings, soft but clear, his voice like bells. His palms rest on Harry’s chest, warm, bright spots of heat through Harry’s t-shirt. “Take a bullet straight through my brain. Yes, I would die for you, baby.” He takes a deep breath, smile melting away, his eyes going sad. “But you won’t do the same.”

They don’t sing anymore after that, letting Liam and Zayn take over as Niall plucks steadily away in the background. They just sway with the motion of the bus, back and forth in the tiny open space of the lounge, their eyes never leaving each other.

The song ends eventually, Liam breaking into his own falsetto vocal run as Zayn sleepily clambers from his own bunk and, according to his footsteps, joins Liam in the kitchen. Niall stands, sighing, and swings his guitar to his back.

“Gotta get outta here before I see something I don’t wanna see,” he grumbles, but he’s smirking as he shoulders softly past Harry and Louis. “Fucking disgusting, I swear. Heart eyes and drool all over the place.”

Louis hums and pulls Harry closer as soon as they’re alone, resting his cheek against Harry’s shoulder.

Harry kisses the top of Louis’ ear. “I would do the same,” he murmurs. “You know that, right? I know it was just the lyrics, but I would do the same. I’d do anything for you. Anything.”

Louis leans back a little, bites his lip. He looks like he’s about to argue, but Harry can’t let him. Not about this.

So he presses close and kisses him hard, sucking Louis’ bottom lip into his mouth. Louis tastes like the tea he’d had not an hour ago and the chocolate he thinks no one knows about even though they’ve all been stealing pieces for weeks. Louis moans a little, a bitten-off sound that reverberates into Harry’s mouth.

"Disgusting!" Niall shouts. "I can hear you from here, and that is too much!"

Louis pulls back, giggling. “Oh, sugar bear, baby cakes, light of my life eternal!” he says loudly, swooning dramatically.

Harry laughs. “Sweet cheeks, pumpkin spice latte of my heart, never let me go!”

Niall fake retches from the kitchen, and Louis doubles over in laughter before he tugs Harry’s hand, leading him to join their bandmates. Harry drops into a chair, pulling Louis into his lap.

“Sounded good though, didn’t we?” Liam says brightly through a mouthful of Cheerios.

“Swallow first, then speak,” Zayn says, tapping Liam’s chin. “But yeah, the song was awesome. Too bad we can’t switch out something in our set.”

“I am getting a little tired of Kids in America,” Louis admits. “It’s not really meant to be sung, you know? It’s a shouty song. Like that one about Mickey Mouse.”

“Oh Mickey, you’re so fine, you’re so fine you blow my mind.”
“Shut it, Harry. We should ask, then,” Niall says seriously. “I already know the guitar, we can smooth out the harmonies. What can it hurt?”

Apparently it can hurt a lot, judging by the pained look their main vocal coach gives them when they ask.

“I don’t have time to deal with this,” he snaps. “Wagner has decided he wants to do a show entirely in German and Matt lost his voice, so I do not want to deal with any more changes. Maybe later.”

Harry drops his eyes to the ground, his lower lip pouting before he can help it. Louis squeezes his arm and steps forward, stopping the coach from leaving with a hard hand on his arm.

“You don’t have to do anything. It’s already ready to go, and we all agree on what song to replace. Plus, people on Twitter are starting to complain about the concerts looking like the same show every night, what with the same songs and same outfits. They want a unique experience, and you want happy customers. Right?”

The coach narrows his eyes, watching Louis silently for a moment. Louis stands his ground, raising a single eyebrow.

“Fine,” the coach surrenders, throwing up his hands. “Get approval from the band, let me hear a solid run-through by at least three o’clock, and we’ll see.”

They convince the backing band to give it a shot, and Niall even gets to play his guitar on stage. The vocal coach reluctantly agrees, and they sing *Grenade* that night in Liverpool to four thousand fans. It’s probably not even that big of a deal, but somehow it feels like a win.

“I actually quite like you calling me baby cakes,” Harry tells Louis that night, playing with Louis’ fingers as they watch another streamed episode of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* in Harry’s bunk.

“Yeah?” Louis grins. “Well I quite like being called sweet cheeks. Fitting, innit?” he gestures to his bum, which is nearly obscene in his red sweatpants.

“Very fitting,” Harry agrees solemnly, grabbing a handful of Louis’ arse and earning himself a slap to the chest, a bright laugh, and a long, lingering kiss, in that order.

9 March 2011

Before every show, the boys decide on a different way to exit the stage after *Forever Young*. Usually they just have a contest to see who jumps the highest, but sometimes they get creative. Like one night
in Dublin, when Niall dared Harry to do a forward roll that ended up with Harry nearly kicking Liam in the face and Niall in tears from laughing so hard. Before they’d popped through the trapdoors to start their set tonight, Louis had smirked and called out to the others, “Bet I can get off stage faster than any of the rest of you.”

A race, then, is set, all of them sending half-joking waggles of eyebrows through Forever Young as they make their way back to the main stage, jostling each other to be first in line back to the center stage stairs.

There’s no doubt Louis will win, as he is actually really athletic and, when he wants to be, could outrun any of them and double back to laugh in their face. But they can’t just hand it to him, and Liam is the most competitive human that Harry has ever met, so the five of them go tumbling out the exit of the stage in a mad topple of flailing limbs and shrieks. Harry stumbles backwards out of the fray, arms pinwheeling, and is only stopped by a solid weight at his back.

“Oh,” he wheezes, then realizes it’s a person he’s slammed into. “Thanks, mate, I would’ve-”

He turns to see his savior and automatically takes a step back, Magee’s scowl like a physical barrier.

“Well, Harry, looks like you’re all having…” he trails off meaningfully, glancing over Harry’s shoulder to where the other boys are probably still wrestling, “fun. Excellent, excellent.”

It doesn’t feel excellent. It feels like Magee wants to lock him in a room until their next show so he can’t cause any more damage, at which point he will be allowed to go perform only if he agrees to be the empty-headed, vapid frontman who doesn’t cause any problems that they want him to be.

“Have a good few days of rest,” Griffiths says coolly beside him. “Spend time with your families, but let’s not see anything unwanted on Twitter or in the press, hm?”

And then they’re gone, leaving behind strained silence and a pit of rage in Harry’s stomach. He jumps when a hand touches his shoulder.


“Can we go somewhere? Not the bus, just. Somewhere.”

“Yes, love,” Louis says, eyes careful. “We have to be back in about twenty minutes for the final song, though.”

“I don’t care,” Harry huffs, pulling angrily at his hair. “Just.” He drops his head into his hands. “Please, Lou.”

“Yeah,” Louis whispers, “course.”

Louis finds an empty dressing room, probably Aiden’s that he doesn’t use because he unofficially shares with Matt at each venue. Louis pulls Harry onto a sofa, a firm hand pulling him to rest his head under Louis’ chin.

“Gonna tell me what’s wrong?” Louis asks into Harry’s hair.

“Is this how it felt?” Harry whispers. “All that time you were being called to secret meetings, is this how you felt?”

“How do you feel?”
“Like I can’t do anything that they can’t see,” Harry murmurs. “Like any wrong step I take could be the end of everything we’ve worked for.”


“What?”

“Knowing that they can’t really do anything to stop us. If I decided I wanted to kiss you in front of all the people at the next show, there’s no way they can stop that from happening.” He pokes at Harry’s stomach, making him chuckle reluctantly. “Don’t worry, I won’t. I think the Twitter meltdown would be worse than anything management could do.”

“Someday,” Harry says. “I want you to do that. Kiss me in front of everyone. When our future album sales don’t rely on us being potential boyfriends for all our fans.”

Louis laughs. “Sure, babe. When that day comes and if you still want it, let me know.”

“That is, if your future soulmate doesn’t mind sharing,” Harry jokes halfheartedly. Louis laughs again, but it’s strained.

“I’m sure we can work something out,” Louis says, and then quiet reigns again.

It’s strange to think about Louis having a soulmate that isn’t Harry. Not that Harry’s thought (much) about what it would be like to be Louis’ soulmate himself, but he’s given absolutely no thought at all to Louis someday having someone else to come to when he’s lonely or homesick or tired.

And maybe unconsciously he’s realized that it’s probably going to happen, because every night there are thousands of people watching them perform and some of them are screaming their names and, at some point, one of them might hit and stick and one of the boys will be Bonded. And it might be Niall or Liam or Zayn, and it might be Harry, but there’s also a chance it could happen to Louis and that thought makes his lungs feel full of boiling water.

So he refuses to think about it.

“Remember after our first show, when I was stressed out and asked you to take me to get a tattoo?” Harry asks.

Louis scoffs. “Asked? I don’t think so. Demanded, more like.”

Harry giggles, curling closer to Louis’ side. “I was very polite, I’m pretty sure.”

“Right,” Louis teases. “Well, Harry, I do remember that. And, just my opinion, but we probably shouldn’t get you inked every time you feel overwhelmed or upset, because I think we’d run out of skin by the time you hit eighteen.”

“I don’t get upset that easily.”

“You cried two nights ago when Aiden stepped on your boots and got them dirty, love.”

“Those are nice boots!”

“Either way,” Louis laughs, “let’s save tattoos for the big moments, yeah? We’ll find another way to de-stress you for the rest of the time.”

“You could buy me a kitten.”
“Or… a sweater. That requires no food and won’t poop everywhere.”

“A yacht, maybe. I’ve always wanted a yacht.”

“I’d rather buy you a kitten.”

“A vacation home in the Alps,” Harry sighs wistfully. “Or- oh!”

“What? Harry, I can’t afford a home in the Alps. Give me a few years, yeah?” Louis says, concerned. Harry scrambles to sit upright, grabbing Louis’ hands.

“Let’s take a trip at the end of the tour! We aren’t recording the album right away, right? We’ve got a little bit of a break. Let’s go somewhere.”

Louis doesn’t look convinced. “A trip where?”

“I don’t know! That’s the fun part. We could go to Germany. Or… Japan. Or America! I liked California, and I’m sure the rest of the country is good too.”

“Babe, I don’t think management is going to let us take off on a romantic couple’s vacation together,” Louis says apologetically.

“Then we take Niall along, buy him his own room, and leave him there to entertain himself. Or Liam and Zayn can come too, and make it a boys’ holiday.”

“I think they’re all going to want to go home, see their families.”

“Stan, then! Bring Stan, because he loves you and would probably enjoy a vacation, and I’ll bring my mate Jonny, and then it’ll look like it’s just a friend trip. Nothing romantic about it at all.”

Louis sighs, but his lip quirks into a smile at the corner. He rubs his face and grins ruefully. “Alright then, H, let’s do this.”

Harry cheers and flings himself forward, kissing all over Louis’ face.

“Get off, you bloody great puppy!” Louis laughs, holding Harry at arm’s length. Harry persists, though, and eventually is wrapped completely around Louis like an octopus, his head on Louis’ chest. Louis frees a hand, rubs it up and down Harry’s spine. “You were really upset, weren’t you?”

“It’s just a lot all at once,” Harry admits into Louis’ shirt. “Because there’s stupid Griffiths and Magee every time we step off stage, and that automatically ruins any excitement. Then Claudia, always staring at me like I’m a delinquent who’s gonna steal her jewelry or something. And then everyone else, being all- well, you know.”

“Yeah,” Louis sighs heavily. “I know.”

Harry doesn’t know if one of the boys told (which is unlikely, but it also seems like the sort of thing Liam would do thinking that he was helping), or if everyone else just put two and two together, but somehow it got out to the rest of the acts on the tour that Harry and Louis were telling the truth and hadn’t Bonded, even though they’re obviously far past platonic now. And, since everyone on this tour is determined to know everyone else’s business, they’ve all gotten very involved. Like, trying to start heart-to-heart talks about how waiting for their soulmates is an exciting thing, and that Harry and Louis shouldn’t rush into hasty decisions that are going to hurt each other. Or having conversations just within their earshot about how legal Bond contracts are perfectly acceptable if two hypothetical people want to go that route, but it’s just not the same as a real Bond. And sending them
pitying looks when they’re just sitting backstage, perfectly casual, keeping their hands kept to
themselves and trying to enjoy their tea. They’ve been careful with their touches since Modest!
started breathing down their necks, and they’ve never been caught by anyone except Niall or Zayn
or Liam, but it’s like everyone’s just assumed they were kissing all along and never told.

“So where should we go for our holiday?” Harry asks, trying to shake the weight from his bones.
They’ve probably only got a few minutes before they have to head back to the stage for the big finale
after Matt’s set, but he’s not ready to give up a quiet moment with Louis all to himself.

Louis hums. “You know where I’ve always wanted to go?”

“Where’s that?”

“France.”

10 March 2011

(1:33 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** Stan agrees to be our chaperone to France if we pay his way and agree to let
him have a bedroom to himself if he brings a lady home. Do we accept? xx
(1:36 p.m.) **Harry:** We do. Tell him we reserve the right to refuse if his lady friend is interrupting
Friendship Time. x

(1:42 p.m.) **Stan:** it’s a good thing ur in a homosexual relationship with lou, cos that was the gayest
thing i’ve ever read mate
(1:44 p.m.) **Harry:** FRIENDSHIP TIME PRIVILEGES REVOKED
(1:46 p.m.) **Stan:** no wait
(1:47 p.m.) **Stan:** i still want to hang out!
(1:47 p.m.) **Harry:** NOPE

(1:51 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** Stan is crying on my bed about missing out on friendship time . Care to
explain?
(1:52 p.m.) **Harry:** He knows what he did.

(2:23 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** Stan just asked how far the drive is between Donny and Holmes Chapel. He
also wants to know your favorite type of cake, and apparently those two questions were unrelated.
(2:25 p.m.) **Harry:** It’s double chocolate fudge, but make him sweat a little longer.
(2:26 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** Don’t insult me, I know your favorite type of cake !! Goodness man you’d
think we weren’t best friends or something. Do you know mine?
(2:29 p.m.) **Harry:** Any kind of birthday cake that isn’t red, green, or frosted to look like a Christmas
tree.
(2:30 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** You DO love me! xx
(2:31 p.m.) **Harry:** Obvss xxxxxxxxx
(2:42 p.m.) **Stan:** harry please!
(2:43 p.m.) **Harry:** NO

(3:03 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** Mum is making Stan clean the girl’s bathroom upstairs because he’s depressing everyone.
(3:08 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** Stan: ‘You aren’t my mother!’ Mum: ‘I’m as good as! You’re doing laundry next.’ Stan: ‘Yes ma’am.’
(3:11 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** Stan just found Lottie’s training bra and screamed. This is the best day. xx

(3:15 p.m.) **Stan:** i’ll come clean ur bathroom!
(3:17 p.m.) **Harry:** NO x
(3:18 p.m.) **Stan:** i’ll give lou a kiss for u!
(3:20 p.m.) **Harry:** DON’T YOU DARE
(3:21 p.m.) **Stan:** i’ll buy u a pressie!
(3:24 p.m.) **Harry:** …
(3:26 p.m.) **Harry:** What kind?
(3:28 p.m.) **Stan:** dunno yet, but somethin good! promise!

(3:38 p.m.) **Harry:** Friendship Time privileges restored. Buy me something nice. x
(3:39 p.m.) **Stan:** ur the best! see u in a couple weeks!

(3:43 p.m.) **Gems:** Stop laughing at your phone like an idiot, loser.
(3:44 p.m.) **Harry:** Stop pretending I’m not the funniest person in this family, loser.
(3:45 p.m.) **Harry:** Or the most talented, or the most famous, or the eventual richest, or the best dressed, or SFKwrgg$#yK2sa

(4:02 p.m.) **Gems:** [video attached]
(4:02 p.m.) **Gems:** How much do you think the Sun will give me for proof that Harry Styles can get beaten up by a girl?
(4:05 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** I’d go with the Mail, they pay better. xx
(4:06 p.m.) **Gems:** Good advice, Newt. You can stick around.

(4:04 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** Did I just receive a video of Gemma putting mashed potatoes in your hair while you screamed? xx
(4:05 p.m.) **Harry:** … Maybe.
(4:06 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** What is that she used to tie you down?
(4:07 p.m.) **Harry:** My X Factor audition scarf.
(4:07 p.m.) **Lou Bear:** Kinky. xx
12 March 2011

They come back from their short break to play the Manchester Arena twice, and it’s like all of Harry’s wildest childhood dreams come true. His and Louis’ families are able to make it for the second night, both Anne and Jay’s eyes shiny with tears when Harry shouts “We love you Manchester!” and gets a roar from the crowd in return.

Louis switches places with Liam during Grenade that night, slipping his palm up Harry’s spine when the lights go dark after the song ends. His eyes are near sparking when the lights come back on, staring straight at Harry like there isn’t a crowd—including their mothers—watching them, mouth parted just the tiniest bit.

Harry almost misses his cue to start My Life Would Suck Without You when Louis licks his lips.

The moment they tumble offstage, Harry is dragging Louis away by the collar of his shirt, ignoring Zayn’s teasing call of “Use protection!”

Harry slams the door behind him when they find an empty office, tugging Louis close and spinning them, shoving until Louis’ back hits the wall with a solid thump.

“You’ve got twenty minutes,” Louis breathes against Harry’s lips, eyelashes fluttering. He grins at Harry’s hitch of breath. “Let’s see what you can do.”

Harry kisses the breath out of him, their lips sliding and sucking in a way that still sends Harry’s fingers and toes tingling even after weeks of exposure. Louis fists a hand in Harry’s shirt, tugging him so close he can hear their heartbeats like an echo of each other.

They’re only a little late in getting back to the stage for the finale, hair disheveled and cheeks pink while they adjust themselves in their trousers. Aiden rolls his eyes, thumbing a blossoming bruise on Harry’s neck and tugging his blazer’s collar up to cover it.

26 March 2011

“Erm, lads?” Liam says hesitantly, holding out his phone. “Have you seen this?”

There’s a blurry picture on his screen, pixelated and clearly zoomed in to the full capacity of whatever device had been used to take the picture. It looks sort of like the side of one of their tour buses, and two shapes that might be Harry and Louis but, honestly, the quality is so bad that it’s nearly impossible to tell.

“I can’t even figure out what I’m supposed to be looking at,” Louis says, munching on a bag of
“Well, the fans are saying it’s you and Harry,” Liam explains apologetically, as though he’s the one that started the rumor. “And that you were,” he lowers his voice, “kissing, outside of the bus.”

“Probably not, then,” Louis shrugs. “We keep everything inside these four walls.” He gestures to the bus around them, the glasses in the cupboard rattling a little as the bus takes a turn.

“Well,” Harry corrects slowly, something half-remembered sticking out in his mind. “There was that time- Nottingham, I think? We thought we were the only ones in the parking lot.”

“Shit, you’re right,” Louis says, but munches another handful of crisps. “Luckily they only got this crappy picture.”

“What if management sees, though?” Harry asks. “What will they do?”

“What can they do, really?” Louis laughs harshly. “They can yell all they want, or look disapprovingly in my direction. I don’t really care. That,” he waves at Liam’s screen, “is not proof of anything. Let’s see what they’ve got for us.”

28 March 2011

“Well, you asked for it,” Liam gently chides.

“I guess I did,” Louis answers quietly. “I’m so sorry, Haz.”

Harry doesn’t say anything, just reads the headline for the fifth time. His stomach feels coated in lead.

“I mean, it could be worse,” Zayn tries, looking worried.

“X Factor’s Harry Styles ‘dating 23-year-old model,’” Niall reads over Harry’s shoulder. “Shit, man, they’re pushing that again?”

“Why is it such a big deal who we may or may not be dating anyway?” Liam asks. “Every time I talk to Cher we have our picture taken and it ends up on Twitter.”

“Same for me and Bex,” Zayn nods. “It’s all bullshit, surely everyone knows.”

“Not the point,” Harry says hoarsely. “I don’t want to be this person. The idiot teenager trying to hook up with models because he’s sort of famous now. I want fans to know about the actual Harry Styles.” He looks up at Louis. “Is that stupid?”

“It’s admirable, love,” Louis tells him, brushing a hand down his side. “Most seventeen year olds would be ecstatic to be linked to,” he leans over to read from Harry’s phone, “Syanne Patterson. Or, okay, maybe not. I don’t even know who that is.”

“Think that’s the point,” Niall says grimly. “She needed promo, you and Harry need punishment, it’s a perfect fit.”

Harry sits, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “I mean, I guess Zayn’s right. If the worst thing they
can do is tell the world I’m dating an older model, it’s not that big of a deal.”

Niall snorts. “Yeah, especially since once again Niall gets no press love at all. What do I gotta do to get a headline? Snort coke off Wagner’s breasts?”

“I think you may be glad for that later, Niall,” Liam says reasonably. “I mean, I don’t like most of the headlines about me. Clearly neither does Harry.”

“Whatever,” Niall says. “I want all my sleazy antics to be captured forever and shared with the masses.”

Louis scoffs. “You fell asleep with each hand in a bag of crisps at 9:30 last night, Ni. Not exactly out banging strippers or doing hard drugs.”

“Ah, but!” Niall says, holding up a finger. “They were stolen crisps. So. Who’s the bad boy of One Direction now?”

“Did you steal my crisps?” Zayn asks, outraged. Niall smiles, pinches Zayn’s cheek, then bounces back to the lounge as though he thinks he can escape while in a moving vehicle, whooping at the top of his lungs. Zayn gives chase and Louis follows, and then of course Liam and Harry have to go as well and throw themselves onto the wrestling pile.

Harry forgets about the model he’s never met but is apparently dating almost immediately.

...  

3 April 2011

The Sugarscape reporters remind Louis a little bit of One Direction, just on the media side of things instead of the music side: the two girls they send for their interview are full of jokes and innuendo, not afraid of being silly or a little unprofessional to make the boys feel more comfortable. It helps that Claudia had to take a phone call and step outside, so her presence isn’t making them all second-guess themselves like usual.

“I’m Kate, I interviewed you all back in Birmingham,” a brunette girl says, smiling brightly as she shakes their hands. “And this is Sara.”

“Got a bit of a game for you,” Sara says, grinning shamelessly. She pulls out a mass of pink silk, unfolding it to reveal a large pair of ladies’ underwear. “We’re going to try and fit all of you into these.”

Liam immediately gets his Competition Face on, narrowing his eyes at the fabric like sizing up a boxing opponent.

“Both legs?” he asks brusquely. Kate and Sara exchange a gleeful glance, probably not expecting them to agree so easily.

“Yeah, both legs. If they rip, you lose.”

“Do we just... jump in?” Harry asks.

“Go for it!”
Less than a minute later they’re sprawled across a sofa in a tangle of limbs and shrieks, Niall, Harry and Louis with both legs inside the constricting fabric, Liam and Zayn with one each. Zayn is, unsurprisingly, the last one standing, and is the only one that isn’t making pained noises as their circulation is cut off, unlike Niall and Harry who are both screaming bloody murder.

Tension successfully broken, the rest of their interview questions with Kate and Sara flow easily, banter and teasing remarks tossed back and forth on both sides of the camera (once they’ve escaped the pink satin panties, of course). They chat about everything from Pokemon to fan manips to Harry’s frequent nudity.

“Harry was naked about... thirty minutes ago in that room,” Louis points, gesturing to the hotel room connected to the one they’re using now. And he had been, refusing to put on yet another blazer, wearing nothing at all until Liam coaxed him into some boxers so Grace could come in and talk some sense into him. When he’d still refused, crossing his arms over his bare chest and his hip cocked out in his sassiest stance, wearing the tiniest, clingiest boxers Louis had ever seen, Louis had smiled sweetly at Grace and pinched Harry in the side until he agreed.

Harry protests the accusations of nudity, the corner of his mouth tugged up in a grin. Louis wiggles next to him, getting comfortable with his leg thrown across Harry’s thighs.

The subject eventually changes to something a little more appropriate, something about album dates that Liam can answer smoothly. Harry looks over and catches Louis’ eye, winking.

Once Sara’s camera is packed away and she starts her goodbyes, Kate pulls Louis and Harry off to the side.

“I heard you got in trouble after our last interviews,” she says quietly, apologetic. “And I wanted to make sure everything was okay with you.”

“How did you know?” Louis asks quickly.

“How do you mean, ‘okay?’” Harry asks at the same time.

Kate huffs a quick breath, flicking her glance over to where Sara is joking with Niall and not paying attention to them at all. “Listen,” she says even quieter, and they both step closer to be able to hear, “I can’t say too much. Let’s just say I have a contact within Modest! who I trust, and they told me about your meeting. And as far as whether you’re okay or not…” she trails off, looking pained. “Look, I don’t want to be the first to tell you this, but I think it won’t really be a surprise. Modest! and Syco are both known for having not super great business practices, and a lot of their artists have left the label from stress or actual injury from being overworked. I think Simon and those idiots from your management team know they have something big with you boys, and I’m worried they’ll try to squeeze you for all you’re worth. And if they were unhappy with you for ruining a part of their plan, I know they don’t hesitate to stoop pretty low for punishment.”

Louis breathes out shakily. She’s right, it isn’t really surprising, but hearing it all laid out so factually is a bit of a blow.

“I’m working on,” Kate bites her lip, “a bit of a side project, I guess. No one knows about it, except me and my editor. But I think we can work together to keep you from being completely taken advantage of.” She holds up a hand to stop Louis when he opens his mouth. “No ‘insider scoops’ or
anything like that, and definitely no tell-all interviews. We’re still too new for that, no one would believe it. But, if we do things the right way, I think we can undermine a lot of the work they might do that you lot aren’t happy with. Especially since they can punish you, but they can’t punish me or Sugarscape itself.”

“What can you do, then? What’s the plan?” Harry asks.

Kate grins, and the edges of her smile holds a sharpness Louis recognizes in his own smile. “A few well-placed comments here and there can make a world of difference, Harry.” She holds out her hand. “Do we have a deal?”

Louis shakes it without hesitation. Harry does as well after only a moment of deliberation.

“I look forward to working with you,” Kate says. “I think it’ll turn out to be very beneficial. For all of us.”

Kate texts Louis later, when they’re all in the lounge at the back of their bus watching *Batman Begins*. He reads it, grins, and tilts the screen so Harry can read as well.

(7:49 p.m.) **Kate (Sugarscape):** Project Fuck Syco and Fuck Modest Too is apparently already in motion. Just heard from my contact that your favorite person Claudia is in trouble for leaving the room and letting you lot wear panties today, since we were able to tweet that One Direction wears ladies’ underwear and they can’t do a thing about it :)

6 April 2011

Louis steps off the bus into a beautiful day, the kind of spring afternoon that makes him forget where he lives and the ever-present rain or fog or wind that’s sure to sweep in and ruin everything soon. The mood around the venue is bright and cheerful, the last dregs of winter leaving everyone’s systems.

It’s their second day in Cardiff, their last stop on tour, and it’s starting to feel like it did towards the end of the actual *X Factor* show. All the acts are just a bit clingier, a little more emotional when they sing *Heroes* together at the end of each performance.

So they all jump on the chance for a game of five-a-side footie out in the fenced-in space behind the venue when Louis suggests it, even Rebecca trading her heels for some tennies. Mary is off to the side, acting as cheerleader for both teams since her arthritis won’t let her play.
Harry and Louis are put on separate teams, and spend more time teasing each other than actually paying attention to the game. Especially since, bless him, Harry’s like a baby deer on wobbly new legs, and sometimes he kicks the ball and ends up flat on his back on the pavement, laughing up at the sky, so when Louis actually tries to play against Harry he ends up feeling bad about beating him.

It takes Katie huffing out a plea for a break for Louis to look up and realize they’ve been playing for an hour, long enough for fans to have flocked around the edges of the fence with cameras and phones held aloft. Louis gives the gathered crowd a wave as he trots over to where Liam is passing around a water bottle, making sure everyone gets a drink before he finishes off the bottle himself.

Louis wraps an arm around Harry’s waist, tugging on a belt loop of his jean shorts. Harry smiles down at him, pushing his sweaty curls off his forehead.


Claudia is leading a small group of reporters and camera crews across the pavement, pointing some of them off to where Aiden and Matt and Rebecca are lounging, and bring the last two interviewers over to where the One Direction boys are standing.

“Split up into two groups,” she says briskly. “These interviews are going online at noon, so please stay on topic and try not to get yourselves into trouble.”

A reporter in a striped t-shirt comes up and shakes Louis and Harry’s hands. “Vanessa, from Wales Online. So great to meet you lads.”

“Nice to meet you,” Harry says, beaming. Louis can see the moment Vanessa melts a little under that famous Harry Styles charm, stuttering out the beginning to her next question.
“I-I, erm, I’ve been asked specifically to say your last names when I introduce you, and that’s always an uncomfortable moment when it happens on camera, so do you mind if I just get that out of the way now?”

“No, of course,” Louis reassures her, a little surprised. “No one’s ever asked before, it’s usually just an assumption that since they know it, they can say it.”

“I’ve seen a couple of Bonds happen during live segments, it’s usually incredibly awkward,” she laughs. “And while I don’t think that’ll happen today, you never really know do you?”

“They do seem to strike at inopportune times,” Louis agrees.

“Okay then; Harry Styles, Louis Tomlinson,” she says, pausing for a second just to make sure.

Harry examines his arms and his bare legs. “No Markers here.”

“Yeah, I think you’d know, Hazza,” Louis teases, tucking himself against Harry’s side and rolling his eyes for Vanessa’s benefit.

“Okay, now that that’s out of the way,” Vanessa laughs, “let’s get the cameras rolling and I’ll get out of your hair.”

Vanessa is a lovely interviewer, asking questions outside the standard “Who’s your celebrity crush?” or badgering Harry for information on the latest of his model girlfriends. She asks about their favorite places they’ve seen while on tour, and Louis tells her about Niall dragging them all over Dublin for the few days they were there. She laughs at their stories about life on the bus and their favorite fan gifts.

“Cardiff is your last stop on the tour, correct?” she prompts.

“Yeah, we’ve got five shows left here, counting tonight’s, and then we’ll take a break,” Harry answers.

“Recording your album, or do you have other plans for your time off as well?”

“Doing a bit of recording, but I think that’s mostly happening over the summer. We’ll go home for a while, see friends and family,” Louis says.

Harry nudges him. “And France.”

Louis grins. “Right, France.”
Vanessa’s eyes are sparkling. “What’s in France, then?”

“Just a little best friend trip as soon as the tour ends,” Harry explains, his smile wide. “Us two, Louis’ best friend Stan and my best mate Jonny are heading to a resort for a few days to ski and see the sights.”

“Fun!” she gushes. “France is gorgeous this time of year.”

“I’ve never been,” Louis admits. “I’m really excited, and Hazza’s mum told us they loved the resort we’re going to, so I think it’ll be great.”

“Yeah, we booked an apartment at a chalet right on the slopes. Just a couple of rooms and a kitchen, but that’s all we need, really,” Harry says, smiling crookedly at Louis. Louis feels his face heat a little, remembering the promises on the chalet’s website about discretion and romantic scenery.

“That’s wonderful that you’re taking your friends as well,” Vanessa says. “I’m sure they appreciate that.”

Louis snorts. “Took a little bit of negotiation, but it all worked out.”

Harry throws an arm over Louis’ shoulders. “Communication is key.”

Louis laughs, feels his eyes crinkling without his permission but honestly, *this boy*. He’s too much for this world.

Louis is almost so caught up in Harry’s exuberant sharing of their plans and his wildly gesticulating arms that he almost misses Claudia’s narrowed eyes over Vanessa’s shoulder, her fingers rapidly tapping on her phone.

Vanessa wraps up the interview with a congratulations on the successful tour and a promise to keep
an eye out for the album when it drops later in the year. Harry tugs Louis closer as Vanessa turns to help her crew pack up, his arm still snug around Louis’ shoulders while Louis slinks an arm around his waist.

“’M sleepy,” Harry yawns, pulling his sunglasses off for a moment to rub his eyes. “Football wore me out.”

“Same,” Louis agrees, stretching. “Need a good nap, a cup of tea, and a phone call to me mum before I can even start to think about a show tonight.”

Harry nuzzles the side of Louis head, and Louis is just about to suggest that they find themselves a patch of shade to claim for a little nap when Claudia reappears, pulling her phone away from her ear, mouth in a straight line.

“You can’t run the interview,” she says to Vanessa.

Louis suddenly feels wide awake.


“It goes against the image we are trying to promote for the band,” Claudia sniffs.

“Alright, hold on,” Louis says, his temper flaring. He steps forward, a disgruntled Harry following. “There’s nothing wrong with the interview. They can cut out the part about France if you’re unhappy with it.”

“It’s the entire thing,” Claudia says lowly, turning her back to Vanessa as though trying to keep her out of the conversation.

“I don’t think I asked anything inappropriate,” Vanessa says confusedly over Claudia’s shoulder.

“You didn’t,” Harry reassures her.

“What do you mean, the entire thing?” Louis asks Claudia incredulously. “We talked about the album and tour and the bus, how is that damaging to the band?”

“It’s not the words you said,” Claudia says, ice on every syllable. “It’s how you acted. You were touching through the entire thing. Harry didn’t look at the interviewer once. And then you described in detail your couple’s vacation, which is how fans will take it even if you did mention the other people going.” She turns back to Vanessa. “If it is posted, it will be without our permission and you will be hearing from our lawyers.”

And then she’s gone.

“I’m so sorry,” Harry mutters to Vanessa.

“Right,” she says blankly, then shakes her head a little as if to clear it. “I’m sorry as well. I would have diverted you if, well. If I’d have known.” She smiles thinly. “Good luck to you both. I think you’ll need it.”

“Thanks,” Louis murmurs as she and her crew pass to get back to their van. “Wait, Vanessa!” he calls, and she turns back to face him. “Who asked for our last names to be included? Was it your editor?”

Her brows furrow. “No, actually, it was your management.”
She sends them a sympathetic smile before turning around and Louis and Harry are left alone, a path of destruction and bad choices in their wake.

10 April 2011

There’s something in the air on the last day of tour that reminds Louis of the stress of Christmas; it was such a far-off date back in the beginning that no one ever really planned for what they’d do when it eventually and inevitably rolled around. The crew seems just a little more frantic than usual, the acts a little more sentimental. They gravitate together as morning turns to afternoon, the scrappy little mismatched family thrown together by fate and Simon Cowell, who bicker and compete like siblings but love each other just the same.

It’s strange, and Louis has had this thought before, but he doesn’t quite know what to do when he’s not around these people. When this show ends tonight that’s it, their *X Factor* ties will be almost completely severed. They might run into some of the others that are on the Syco label with them, but Louis doubts they’ll ever see Katie again, or Wagner (not that much of a loss, but he’s still a familiar face in an unfamiliar industry), or Paije.

Louis is suddenly ferociously glad for his boys, because he can’t take Aiden and Matt and Rebecca forward with him into this lightning strike of a career, but he can take the guys who have become closer than his brothers. He started this whole process, all those long months ago, as a solo artist, just him and his voice up on stage, but now he can’t imagine it; his voice sounds wrong on it’s own now, it needs Niall’s to lift it and Liam’s to challenge it and Zayn’s to accentuate it and Harry’s to wrap around it, to gild it into something shiny and almost unrecognizable. He needs his boys, not just onstage but always.

He’s with those boys now, and Louis can’t tell if the expression on his face is happy or sad but he knows at whom it’s directed, because Harry’s eyes are sparkling right back at him in the gleam of the spotlights. They’re on the turntable singing *Forever Young*, and strange, unwelcome nostalgia is running in his veins. It’s so misplaced, this nostalgia, because this isn’t supposed to be the end for any of them: the point of this tour, of this whole show, is to be a beginning, the kickoff of dazzling music careers. But it still feels like an ending, a draining drag of sadness and fear of what may (or may not) lie ahead.

There’s one face through the whole night that hasn’t been affected by the sentimentality of the end of all this, and that’s why Louis can’t keep his eyes away: Harry glows, he shines, he seems to have no doubts of their future or their friends’ futures.

“*Do you really want to live forever?*” Harry sings right to Louis, and Louis doesn’t know the answer.

Yes, of course he wants to live forever. (And, with his Peter Pan syndrome hard at work, he wants to be young forever too.)

It just doesn’t seem quite worth it if Harry’s not there as well.

Harry has one of the last notes in the charity single, the song they all perform together for the big
finale of each show. It had been a big joke between the boys back when they gave the part to Harry at rehearsals in February, because the producers pushed so hard for both Liam and Harry to be the frontman that sometimes it was like they were competing with each other and they both got solos in the single, when really the opposite was true.

It’s less funny now; in fact, Louis might even go so far as to call it poetic.

Almost all the artists on the tour have signed contracts and have already set in motion the process for recording their own albums and planning their own tours, but nothing is ever set in stone. Those albums could fall through, those tours may not sell tickets and might be cancelled altogether. There’s no way to know if this series’ X Factor finalists will truly go on to do inspirational things, or if they’ll fall to the wayside like so many reality TV hopefuls before them, forgotten and bitter.

This might be the last time One Direction stands on stage together; hell, this might be the last time Louis is on a stage ever. And it’s poetic because it’s Harry, the youngest person on the whole show, the one who should be most vulnerable, the one who should be taking pictures of the crowd like Cher and Katie or crying like Rebecca and Aiden, no one would blame him.

But Harry sings his line and he sings it straight at Louis, and Louis knows. He knows that it might be all over tonight or they may become international superstars or they may fall somewhere in between, but his X Factor experience begins and ends right here, with the two of them. A fated meeting in a bathroom all the way to Britain’s biggest stage, and all along it was them, two souls meant to find each other through all the madness.

It doesn’t matter, for this one moment, that Harry doesn’t love Louis the way that Louis loves Harry. What matters is that they made it, and they made it together, and no matter if they go on to change the world or if the band breaks up tomorrow, they are what they each got out of X Factor. The oops and hi forever tattooed on their skin confirms it.

The crowd is thick on stage, unorganized and chaotic in a way that X Factor finales tend to be. Everyone is hugging and crying and celebrating a beginning and mourning an end, and Harry sings to Louis, we could be heroes, just for one day. And they’re pressed tightly together, partly because of the other singers jostling them but partly because there’s nowhere else they could be, and when Harry sings Louis hears it straight from Harry’s mouth rather than distorted through his in-ears.

Confetti explodes from the ceiling. Harry hugs Louis, Louis crushes him back.

We could be heroes.

Chapter End Notes

Couple of things!

- The pictures of Louis from his "birthday party" are from October 2011 and I'm not writing about that night so I decided to use them here. I don't have any idea if Louis had an actual birthday party, but he wasn't with Harry and I’d bet a lot that he did have one at one point.

- In the tweet from Ferdy, he tagged the wrong Louis in the real one and Louis replied to him and told him. I corrected it just because the real one without explanation within the story probably would have been confusing.
- So, just like with the contract negotiation in the last chapter, I gave the boys way more of a voice with the songwriting than they actually probably had. I don't think they had anything to do with the writing of WMYB, but I wanted to have a scene where they sort of "discover" songwriting together, since that became such a big deal for them on subsequent albums. I also wanted to show it as the "corporate" songwriting style where people who know the industry write something generic and stick any available artist in to cover it vs. (for lack of a better word) meaningful songwriting, where artists and writers take something and make it their own. I think a lot of UAN tracks were written for any pop act, not One Direction specifically, which is why when they started writing their own stuff it sounded so different.

- Apparently, the interview with "Vanessa" never saw the light of day and no one knows who/what it was for. I think that's hilarious, so I wanted to include it.

Thanks for reading! Hope you liked this chapter, the next one's a bit... emotional. :)

Tumblr | Fic post
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10: 10 April 2011 - 2 July 2011

10 April 2011

The warm, fuzzy feelings of camaraderie and family during the X Factor acts’ final show ends the minute they find their way offstage. Claudia is waiting, toe tapping as though impatient that she had to sit through a performance before the boys were ready to go do whatever it is she’s dragging them away to do.

They’ve got one last Q and A, apparently, which will be released on Twitter while the band is on its short break. They’ll film it in the bus, and then they’re free to go.

But first, they have to change out of their sweaty performance clothes.

“Has anyone seen my white shirt?” Niall bellows from the bus lounge, hands on his bare hips, his suitcase lid thrown open and displaying the pell-mell mess inside for all to see.

“Just grab another one, between us all we have to own a thousand plain white tees,” Zayn calls back from the breakfast nook, already fully dressed and playing on his phone.

“Oh, it’s what you do to mee—”

“Shut it, Harry.”

“I need my t-shirt!” Niall insists, heading toward the bunks. “If any of you fuckers stole it, I’ll piss on your suitcase.”

“Lou, I think you took my black V neck,” Harry says, poking his head into the lounge. Louis looks down at Harry’s black V neck, which he’s currently wearing.

“No I didn’t,” he says, and Harry rolls his eyes but grins. He’s still shirtless, Louis can’t help but notice, so when he squeezes past Harry on his way to the front of the bus he makes sure to scratch lightly at the sensitive spot on the back of Harry’s hips. Harry’s breath hitches, and he drops the shirt he was trying to unfold. Louis counts it as a win.

“Niall, pick another white shirt!” Liam calls, fluffing his hair as a single cameraman sets up to film them.

“Oi, fuck off, that one was my favorite!”

“I’m going to miss this,” Zayn says, deadpan, and even though it’s sort of sarcastic Louis knows he really means it.

Harry has to dig out one of his own white t-shirts for Niall before they can finally get started, Claudia handing each of them with a generic question they pretended to pick from Twitter.

“What was the loudest crowd on tour?” Liam reads, and Louis tries to answer but then Harry starts
rubbing his hand up and down on a water bottle and he loses the ability of speech.

Because oh, right, that’s still a thing. Post-show adrenaline used to manifest itself in shrieking games of tag up and down the Fountain Studio hallways, or stealing Zayn’s bag of hair products and leaving clues for him to find it. Now, well, Harry usually just bites his lip and flutters his eyelashes as they step off stage and Louis finds them an empty room to snog in until they can’t feel their lips anymore.

They didn’t get to do that tonight, though, so Louis watches Harry’s massive hand slide up the water bottle again, twisting a little at the top. He’d think Harry was doing it on accident, if it weren’t for the way Harry’s leg keeps pressing insistently up against his and the way his mouth is ticked up in the tiniest of smirks.

He misses Harry’s answer about the loudest crowd, but it doesn’t really matter because he pays him back later: when Harry goes to say his favorite song to perform, Louis runs a delicate finger up the seam of Harry’s trousers and makes him half-shout his answer.

Another win for Tommo.

Liam’s parents and Niall’s mum are outside when the interview wraps up, Maura rolling her eyes at her son’s half-zipped suitcase and the trail of socks and underwear he’s leaving behind. Niall smacks a kiss to each of the boys’ foreheads and bounds away, jabbering excitedly to Maura about stopping at Nando’s before they head to the airport and oh, by the way Mam, someone stole me favorite white t-shirt! Lousy load o’ cunts, to which Maura replies by swatting his bum and telling him off for his language, much to the delight of his bandmates.

Liam’s exit is a little more subdued, just hugs for Zayn and Harry and a minute spent running away from Louis while he cries, “Li Li, I’ll miss you!” until Louis finally tackles him and smothers his cheeks in kisses. Harry is barely able to pull Louis away, apologizing to Karen as Liam clambers to his feet, blushing profusely.

“Love you my little spring blossom, my handsome puppy face!” Louis calls just to see Liam go even more red while his eyes get those little crinkles like he’s trying not to give in and smile.

“Love you too, Lou,” Liam mumbles bashfully before he’s settled into his parents’ SUV, waving as they pull away.

Zayn turns and kisses Harry and Louis on their cheeks as well, hitching his knapsack higher on his shoulders and clicking the button on his suitcase handle. “You’re back from France in about a week, yeah?”

“Yup,” Louis nods, straightening a stray piece of Zayn’s hair.

“A couple of days before we head to the studio,” Harry confirms, pulling Zayn close and nuzzling into his neck. “We’ll miss you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Zayn laughs. “Miss you too, babes. But I also miss my mum’s cooking and I’m s’posed to be catching a ride with Bex, so I think I’m gonna go.”

“Call us when you get home,” Louis instructs.

“And tell your family hello for us,” Harry adds.
“You’re like my second set of parents,” Zayn teases, rolling his eyes. “I’ll be fine. Love you both.”

“Love you too,” they chorus back to him.

And then there were two.

“Hey,” Harry says suddenly. “I should check my phone. Which is on the bus. And you should come with me.”

Louis eyes him carefully. “You’re being weird.”

Harry steps close, brushing his lips against Louis’ cheek. “You should come with me,” he repeats, slower and deeper.

“Right,” Louis coughs. “Good idea.”

Harry yanks him by the belt loops all the way to the back of the empty bus. “Our parents are running late,” Harry tells him, shoving him unceremoniously onto the sofa, “so we have some time.”

“C’mere then,” Louis breathes, and Harry grins and pounces.

“God,” he moans against Louis’ mouth, pausing only to suck on Louis’ bottom lip until it tingles. His tongue curls around Louis’ like he’s sucking ice cream from a spoon. “Been too long. Always have a time limit or someone walking in.”

“Mm, yeah,” Louis agrees nonsensically, wrapping his hands around Harry’s back to bring him closer. Harry shuffles forward in his lap until his face is hovering over Louis’, their chests already heaving with heavy breaths. No clothes have been removed but this is still the closest Louis has ever felt to Harry, their hearts thumping loudly in the silent space.

“Need you alone for a full week,” Harry murmurs into Louis’ ear before licking a stripe up his neck. “You and me and a bed, nothing else. No one else.”


“You’re an idiot,” Louis half-laughs into his mouth. “We aren’t even going to Paris.”

“Haven’t got to sleep in your bed for weeks,” Harry says pitifully like he didn’t hear Louis’ comment. “Wouldn’t let me get in your bunk for some reason, I missed you.”

“We can’t both fit in those bunks, Hazza,” Louis groans. “Have you seen my bum?”

“Oh, Christ, your bum,” Harry moans loudly. “I love your bum. I dream about your bum.”

“Fuck,” Louis grits out. Harry’s been rocking against him steadily through this whole ridiculous conversation, and now Harry’s talking about his bum in reverent tones and Louis has always had a bit of a thing for being looked at like he hung the stars, so he’s inching closer to what could become an embarrassing situation in his trousers and—is that a phone?

“Haz,” Louis gasps, “Harry, phone’s ringing.”
“Don’t care.”

“It’s probably your mum, babe—”

“Shut up, Lou—”

There’s a knock at the front of the bus. “Yoohoo!”

“Shit, it’s my mum!” Harry whispers frantically.

“I told you!”

“Shut up!”

“Louis William, you had better be packed!” comes another voice.

“Shit, it’s my mum!” Louis gasps, horrified.

When Anne and Jay reach the back of the bus, their noses wrinkled at the detritus left behind by four messy boys and a Snow White wannabe who couldn’t keep his bandmates in line, Harry and Louis are sitting at opposite ends of the sofa, both clutching pillows nonchalantly in their laps and studiously looking anywhere except at each other.

Much later, after dinner and wine and hugging all the Tomlinson ladies goodbye, promising to call when they get to France, Harry and Louis are snuggled together in the back of Robin’s car. Anne is asleep in the passenger seat, Robin humming tunelessly to the radio, and it’s like the two boys in the backseat are the only two people in the world.

“Can’t believe it’s over,” Harry murmurs, shifting a little. He’s got his legs thrown over Louis’ lap, his arms looped around Louis’ shoulders. “Can’t believe we actually did a tour.”

“We’re the real deal, babe,” Louis grins, tapping Harry’s nose to see it wrinkle.

“Gonna miss everyone, though. ‘S weird we won’t see them anymore.”

It is weird. Louis has tried not to think of it too much, because he even though they’re the youngest of the X Factor bunch he still feels protective over all his friends, worried about no one signing them or their labels treating them badly and, of course, very worried that their schedules will never coincide so that they can see each other again.

Embarrassingly enough, Louis starts getting that itching feeling in the corner of his eyes like he’s going to cry, and he tries to bury his face in Harry’s shoulder. Harry clucks and shifts, pulling Louis’ face into his hands. He smiles sadly when he wipes the first tear off Louis’ cheek.

“Love you,” he whispers.

“Love you too,” Louis answers. He wriggles his phone out of his trouser pocket, wanting to commemorate all the feelings swirling in his chest in the only way he knows how.
15 April 2011

The moment Louis steps through the door of their home away from home for the week, it’s like the air gets a little easier to breathe.

Harry gasps when he follows Louis in, dropping his bags to the floor, mouth agape.

Stan is a little more vocal: “Fuck off!” he says, laughing. “This is fucking wicked!”

Jonny is the last in, grinning to himself as he shuts the door. He’s a quiet one, kept to himself most of the trip from Manchester to Moutiers Salins Brides les Bains, but he seems nice enough and Louis knows Harry cares for him a lot, so he’s trying to not scare him off.

Louis abandons his suitcase and knapsack near the large, comfy-looking sofa and meanders through the rooms, taking it all in. The apartment is all paneled wood and homey red and blue and cream fabrics, looking more like a French aunt’s home for which she lovingly knits covers for all the furnishings than a chalet at a luxury French ski resort. It’s shabby and warm and perfect; Louis has had enough of sleek modern hotels for a while.

There are two cozy bedrooms, one with a queen sized bed and the other with two twins. The kitchen is the largest room in the apartment, fully furnished with a small refrigerator and an old oven, and Harry is already pulling snacks and drinks from their bags and stocking the cupboards. The only bit of technology in the whole place is a large flatscreen TV, tucked into a corner like it’s the only thing to be replaced in the last couple of decades.

It’s late in the day already, streaks of pink and orange taking over the blue of the sky, streetlights blinking to life outside the windows. Harry calls out asking for quesadilla preferences (basically just for Stan’s, because Harry has been cooking for Jonny for years and for Louis for months), and Stan cracks open one of their multiple bottles of vodka, pouring generous drinks for all of them.

“To one hell of a vacation,” he toasts, and he and Louis share conspiratorial grins and throw back their drinks while Harry sips his own, grimaces, and returns to the steak sizzling in the pan.

Louis is wobbly when he crawls into bed, unsure of the time but knowing it’s far too late for respectable adults on their very first vacation to still be awake, and yet far too early for him to give a
Harry’s already there, stretching and groaning and pointing his toes, smacking his lips after a yawn. He’s in one of his pairs of tiny, tight boxers than usually make Louis want to set things on fire, but tonight he feels too hazy and pleasantly numb to care about propriety or touching Harry when he really hasn’t earned it. He cuddles up close to his soulmate, wrapping his arm around Harry’s waist, his vodka-infused breath sweet in Louis’ face.

He’s breathtaking like this, curls falling across his forehead and softly illuminated by moonlight. Like an angel that decided Earth needed a little more beauty in it and took it on himself to make that happen. He’s sleepy and slow-blinking, warm and snuggly, miles of skin under Louis’ wandering fingertips.

“Missed you,” Harry slurs, shifting slowly under the sheets, pushing his knee between Louis’ thighs.

Louis hums, tangles his hands in Harry’s hair. They’ve been sharing a bed since the tour ended and Louis went back to Holmes Chapel with Harry, but Harry’s right in feeling like it wasn’t the same—they were in the same bed, but it wasn’t like it used to be back in the X Factor house. Back then they were nothing more than incredibly clingy but very platonic, so it didn’t matter that they were in close quarters with three other boys. On tour, they couldn’t both get comfortable in the bus bunks, meaning the only times the fell asleep together were when they napped at a venue or on the sofa in the bus lounge. In Holmes Chapel for those few days before they’d left for France, they’d had Anne and Robin on one side of Harry’s bedroom walls, Gemma on the other, and didn’t even risk spooning for fear of Anne’s suspicious gaze. So, really, this is the first time they’ve really been able to share a bed out of anything more than friendship without family nearby.

The thought sends Louis’ insides shivering.

Harry’s lips are sweet and pliant against his when he leans in, his tongue tracing hints of alcohol and spices still in Harry’s mouth. He shifts toward Harry across the mattress until their chests are pressed together, skin to warm skin. Harry groans at the feeling, more a rumble in his throat than anything else, and he shudders when Louis runs a hand up Harry’s torso and lightly grazes over a nipple. It takes a moment in Louis’ sleep-and-vodka muddled brain to realize their hips are moving in tandem, rolling and shifting against each other, chasing release without permission. Louis moans, the feeling of building orgasm distant but present in his belly.

“Lou,” Harry breathes, but his movements are slackening. Louis detaches himself for a moment, confused when Harry’s lips stop moving against his. Without Louis’ mouth to keep him focused, Harry’s head drops heavily onto the pillow, his breaths already deepening. His hips slow, the movement tapering off. He blinks his eyes open one last time, as though aware for a second of how he’s leaving the situation, and beams drowsily, a slow spread of a smile across his tired face. “Night sweetcheeks,” he murmurs, eyes falling shut once more.

He’s asleep within moments, leaving Louis panting and half-hard and bewildered at the turn of events. Louis shifts onto his back, covering his eyes with his arm and trying to get his heart rate back to something resembling normal. He grabs his phone while he tries to control his breathing, typing out a sort-of-sincere, sort-of-fondly-frustrated tweet for the silly, wonderful boy next to him to find tomorrow morning.
And then he crawls out of bed, awkwardly waddling to the bathroom under the influence of Stan’s deadly vodka cranberries, too little sleep, and all the blood in his body trying to redirect away from his dick.

16 April 2011

Louis’ first full day in France goes like this:

He falls out of bed with a pounding headache and dry mouth long after the sun has risen, disoriented and befuddled. He maneuvers his way out of the bedroom carefully, a hand pressed to the doorframe as he adjusts to being upright.

Stan and Jonny are sharing a bowl of crisps on the sofa, drinking beer and watching a Real Madrid game on the massive flatscreen, friendship blooming between them in front of Louis’ very eyes when they both insult Ronaldo’s new hairstyle at the same time and turn to give each other impressed looks.

"Morning Lou," Stan calls when he noticed Louis in the doorway. "Paracetamol is on the table."

"Bless you," Louis rasps, stumbling his way to the kitchen table where he does find a bottle of pills and a water bottle waiting for him. "Where’s Harry?" he asks when he finished the water, tossing the bottle into the bin and pressing a hand to his unhappy stomach.

"Taking a bath," Jonny says over his shoulder, shooting Louis a deliberate smile. Louis suddenly wonders how much Harry has told him about their relationship, but shrugs that off as an issue for when his head feels less filled with melted fudge.

"Ah," Louis says, for lack of ideas on what else to say. "I'll, erm. Check up on him, then."

Jonny’s grin widens, but he dips his chin in what Louis hopes in acquiescence. Stan looks away from the TV as well, smirking. Louis knocks on the bathroom door, slipping inside before Harry answers just to get away from the twin smug looks being aimed at his back.

The room is dim and warm, the only light coming from a small congregation of candles in the windowsill next to the sunken bath. Harry is reclined in the giant tub, his head pillowed by a towel, eyes peacefully closed. There's bubble bath up to his chin, his dark curls the only spot of color in the flame-washed room, his alabaster skin blending with the porcelain of the bath.

Harry cracks an eye open slightly, smiling. "Hi."

"Hey, baby," Louis says quietly, picking his way over Harry's trail of shed clothing to the side of the tub, sitting in a dry spot. He pets at Harry’s hair softly, remembering that this is still early in Harry’s
discovery of his limits with alcohol and that he probably feels a little like death warmed over. "How are you?"

"Well, I threw up a few times when I woke up," he says conversationally, "then brushed my teeth but the taste of the toothpaste made me throw up again. So Stan made me drink water and take medicine and when I kept that down, he said keeping out of bright light would help my headache."

He gestures to the candles.

They smell familiar, a sort-of-Christmassy mix of smells, vanilla and cinnamon all floating together.

"Did you bring your own candles?"

Harry levels him a Look, petulant and adorable all at once. "Obviously, Louis," he says, like it's usual practice for seventeen year old boys to carry emergency scented candles. "What if we needed some and there weren't any in the apartment? What would we do then?"

Louis tries to control the side of his mouth, which wants to twitch up into a smile. "I have no idea, love."

Harry hmmpfs, but reaches out of the water to tangle his wrinkled fingers with Louis' dry ones.

Stan, Louis, and Jonny convince Harry he doesn't need to make lunch, seeing as how they're all still a little delicate from the night before, so they snack around through the Real Madrid match and recover slowly from their hangovers before deciding they should figure out this whole skiing business.

They'd rented equipment when they rented the apartment, so just inside the closet nearest the back door is a jumble of different sized ski boots, poles, helmets (which even Harry scoffs at, because they are adults and cool and do not need things for safety), and, of course, their skis.

It takes a while to get dressed in their snow pants and coats and sort everything out, divvying up the stash of equipment ("Did anyone need child's sized boots? Oh, Louis, those must be yours." "I know where you sleep, Stanley, and I will shave your eyebrows off and tweet it to five hundred thousand people."). Eventually they're dressed, booted, and setting hesitantly out from their back door, which leads directly out onto one of the green-leveled ski runs.

Skiing is tiring and a little ridiculous, as it turns out, but also fun and fast and they're in one of the most beautiful places Louis has ever seen, which only adds to the experience. Not one to stick to the bunny slope for too long, Louis forces himself to get used to the strange feeling of the skis sliding quickly over the powdered snow, the loss of control that comes with a gain in speed. He can’t quite get the hang of how to stop, so he just tumbles to the ground when he needs to take a break, waving cheerily to anyone who might be watching (or laughing). Harry falls just as much, though his falls tend to be less on purpose and more because his precious Bambi legs can't hold him upright for long.

They even get recognized by a few English girls here on holiday, which is exhilarating in its own way. They chat and pose for pictures, signing awkward autographs on lift tickets and receipts that the girls had in their pockets.

Stan heads to one of the resort's community areas after a few hours, mumbling something about snow bunnies in skirts, and Jonny is talked into heading to one of the local pubs by a pretty French girl. Harry and Louis decide to stick it out and do a couple more runs, their legs burning in exhaustion but the mountain air just a little too delicious to miss out on.

They find a map and peruse their options, at least until Harry sees something that has him cackling and has Louis immediately looking up which lifts they need to take to get them to a specific run.
They nearly fall over with giggles when they find the right place, immediately conscripting someone to take their picture with Harry’s phone.

(4:56 p.m.) **Harry:** Look where we are!!! x

(4:56 p.m.) **Harry:**

(4:58 p.m.) **Nialler:** ahaha legend!!! west philadelphia born n raised!!

(5:01 p.m.) **Zaynie:** are you chilling out? maxing? relaxing all cool? xx

(5:02 p.m.) **Lou:** Nah, we got in one little fight and our mums got scared.

(5:08 p.m.) **Lima:** MOVIG WITH YOURE AUNTY ND UNCLE IN BELLAIR

(5:09 p.m.) **Lou:** Yes, thank you Liam. xx

Eventually, even the thrill of saying they’re skiing Bel Air can’t overpower the exhaustion in their limbs, and Louis and Harry take the ski lift back to their chalet already complaining about the soreness they’ll have to contend with tomorrow.

Stan is back already, and accompanied by a guest, if the noises through the closed bedroom door are anything to go by. Louis nearly collapses into giggles at hearing Stan’s sex noises, but Harry shushes him with a fond smile and grabs some leftover quesadillas for them to eat out on the balcony overlooking the mountain.
“Good day, wasn’t it,” Louis asks through a mouthful of steak and peppers, and Harry makes a face but grins back.

“Was a good day,” he agrees, pointing his toes in the ridiculous grey and black plaid boots he bought for himself (a matching red pair on Louis’ feet, of course, because they are those people and have embraced it wholeheartedly). He’s sleepy soft in his big jumper and tired eyes, hands curled around a mug of hot chocolate.

Stan joins them a little later, red-faced and so satisfied that Louis has to throw the peppers that fell out of his quesadilla at him. Jonny’s back by ten, sweaty and loose-limbed as well, and he exchanges a fist bump with Harry before he sits. They watch the night fall over Courchevel, and everything is wonderful.

18 April 2011

By their third day in France, they have a routine down.

They all wake up late in the morning or early afternoon, huddled over their teas and coffees until the light doesn’t hurt their tired eyes as badly and Harry can whip up eggs or bacon or something appropriately delicious and fattening. They ski for a few hours, staying together in a group or pairing off to explore side trails. Louis convinces Stan to try a jump which ends hilariously badly and one time Harry leads Louis to a little forgotten meadow where they barely catch a glimpse of a baby deer before it bounds away.

They ski until their knees ache, and then they take a break and convene over a late lunch to figure out their plans for the rest of the day. One night they go out to a club in town, dancing and shouting and laughing under neon lights until Harry and Louis have to drag a giggling Jonny back to their apartment, a teary Stan (“I jus’, I jus’ love you Lou Lou, s’much.”) trailing behind them. One night they go bowling, then head to a bonfire party thrown by one of the local guys they meet on the way back to their apartment. They’ve rented snowmobiles and gone sightseeing and napped a lot and ate even more. They did a Twitcam that first night, which was to appease management for going on a distinctly coupley vacation where they couldn’t be papped on their time off. Which, well, didn’t really help with the whole not-a-couple image they’re supposed to be sticking to.

Either way, every night they end up back at the chalet long after the sun’s gone down, alcohol-heavy and giggly. Stan and Jonny head to one bedroom, and Louis leads Harry to their own bed, fingers intertwined. They kiss until their lips go numb, twirling fingers in each other’s hair and panting into each other’s mouths. There are hesitant touches that never go further, always ending with one of
them excusing himself to the bathroom while the other gets himself off right there in the bed, wiping the mess hurriedly with tissues before the other gets back.

Louis doesn’t want to push for anything Harry isn’t ready to give, and he’s still battling all the I shouldn’t even be kissing him thoughts that tend to pop in at the worst times. He’s pretty sure Harry just thinks they’re taking it slow. Either way, Louis has seen a lot of action with his hand lately, and it’s getting harder to resist when Harry lines their hips up just right.

Tonight they’re staying in, their wallets suffering under the cost of expensive club drinks and tourist prices for even the basic necessities. Jonny’s making a pitcher of margaritas, Stan’s flipping through the channels trying to find a film or a footie match or anything other than French films with subtitles, and Harry’s got his head in Louis’ lap, humming as he gently untangles his curls.

“Haz!” Stan shouts suddenly, bounding to his feet and making Harry squawk in surprise, falling from Louis’ lap into the floor. “I totally forgot!”

“What?” Harry asks wildly, but Stan is already in his room digging in his suitcase, muttering to himself and tossing things against the wall.

“Aha!” Stan cries triumphantly, coming back into the living room with a box in his hands. He presents it to Harry, grinning maniacally.

It’s a badly wrapped present, about the length of a shoebox and half as wide. The wrapping paper is silver sparkles, ripped in places and covered in messy tape, a mangled bow barely hanging on to a corner.


“It’s my payment for Friendship Time!” Stan explains giddily. “Had to come up with a pressie, didn’t I?”

Harry brightens at that. “Oh yeah!” He tears at the paper, the pathetic bow tossed into the air. Harry gets the box open, rifling through tissue paper before he suddenly shrieks in surprise, tossing the box away like it’s full of spiders.

“What the hell?” Jonny calls from the kitchen. “Hazza, you alright?”

Stan is literally rolling on the floor laughing, tears streaming down his face. His curiosity burning, Louis reaches over and picks up the box, removing the lid carefully so whatever it is doesn’t bite him or something.

It’s, well.

“You love purple!” Stan insists to Louis, still crying from laughter. “I was thinking of you when-”

Harry’s inching toward Louis’ side, peering into the box with a little more interest now that he’s not being confronted with an unexpected purple dick. “Do you like it?” he asks Louis, poking it with a finger. “We could—”

“Okay!” Louis cries, throwing the dildo to the side and dusting his hands. “Change of subject. Please, Jonny, tell me those margaritas are ready.”

Stan giggles, sitting up. “Yes, someone get Lou some alcohol so he can chill the fuck out.”

Louis flips him off, flouncing to his feet and grabbing the largest glass he can find.

An hour and many margaritas later, the concept of a glittery purple dildo is much, much funnier.

“Educate those ‘f us who don’t partake in…” Stan trails off, waving his hand vaguely to indicate the proper use of a dildo. “How is it?”

“Well,” Louis giggles, picking up the dildo with two fingers. “I’ve never had purple sparkly sex, so that may be different. But regular, non-sparkly, skin-colored sex is, um.” He thinks of hot breath, hotter skin, in out in out right there please. He shivers. “Pretty fucking amazing.”

“Is it true you can come without having your cock touched?” Jonny asks from where he’s laying upside down in a recliner, head brushing the ground with his feet pointed straight up in the air. He’s a lot looser after a few drinks, Louis has learned over the past few days. He’s also possibly the most blunt person Louis has ever met, which puts him near the top of the list of Louis’ favorite people at the moment. After Harry, who’s, y’know, always top of the list, and Stan, who bought them a purple fucking dildo.

He’s the best. But back to the question.

“Fuck yeah I can,” Louis announces. “Like, fuck. It’s amazing.”

“Really?” Harry gasps, like Louis just told him that Santa is real rather than saying it’s possible to ejaculate if someone massages his prostate well enough.

“Yeah, really,” Louis confirms solemnly.

“But… how?” Stan asks, his face scrunched in confusion.

“Well, when one boy loves another boy very much—”

“Oh fuck off, Lou.”

Louis snorts. “I’m not telling you the ins and outs—”

“Ha,” Harry laughs, face down in the carpet.

“—of bumfuckery, Stanley. Find yourself a willing partner and experiment if you’re so interested.”

“I will not just go experiment,” Stan says. “I like girls and girls only, mate, as you are well aware. I just wanted an insider’s knowledge without having to do… that.”

“But experimentation and figuring yourself out is key to a fulfilled life!” Louis insists, throwing
popcorn at Stan. “Make some mistakes! Go wild! Be young and stupid, Stanley!”

“Forreeever young,” Harry sings loudly and still, annoyingly, on key. “I wanna be forreeeeever young.” He rolls onto his back, poking Louis until he gives up and harmonizes.

“Do you really want to live forever?” they half-shout, half-sing. “Forever, and ever.”

“Oh, fuck off with your angelic harmonies,” Jonny grumps, tossing a pillow at them.

“Sorry Jonny,” Harry says mock-sincerely. “Didn’t know you didn’t want to hear our majestic voices for free rather than paying for a ticket like the common folk.”

“Didn’t that song leak?” Stan asks, pouring himself another margarita, throwing a handful of salt at the rim of the cup like he thinks any will actually stick. “Like, Twitter or something?”

“Yeah we got, like, no money off of that,” Louis says. “Simon says we may put it on an album later, just because it’s already ready to go.”

“I like that song,” Jonny says cheerfully. “Catchy.”

“We should record a version, Jonny Boy,” Stan laughs. “I’ll hack Lou’s Twitter and put a link so everyone will buy it.”

“And I’ll hack Hazza’s and tweet how amazing we are,” Jonny agrees, laughing.

“No hacking!” Harry says, wagging a finger. “No no.”

“Feel free to record it though,” Louis grins at Stan. “I’d love to have a copy. It would make for some wonderful blackmail.”

“Psh,” Stan snorts. “Blackmail. I ain’t ashamed of my talents! I’ll do it right now.”

“You can’t sing, love,” Louis says, trying to break it to him gently even as he holds back from bursting into laughter.

“Then I’ll express myself through the noble art of dance,” Stan says imperiously, launching to his feet and pirouetting gracelessly.

And, well, that’s all the motivation Louis needs to grab his laptop and find their version of Forever Young in his iTunes library, handing his camera to Harry to record every moment of this in its pure, unfiltered glory.

Ten minutes later, Louis has uploaded Stan’s dancing to YouTube and tweeted the link for the world to see, and Stan is pouring his fifth margarita with no cares in the world.

“C’n I ask a question?” Jonny asks. He’s sprawled out on the floor now, everyone having changed positions to prepare for the spectacle that was Stanley, Lord of the Dance. Harry’s on the floor as well, his legs flung over Jonny’s stomach and his head between Louis’ feet, fingers wrapped around Louis’ ankles and stroking over his ankle bones.

“Course, J,” Harry yawns. He’s taking it easy tonight, sipping water between drinks to pace himself and far more aware than he usually is with this many drinks floating in his system. They’re all pacing themselves really, as three straight nights of drinking are less fun when followed by three straight mornings of hangovers.
“How weird is it, the whole last name thing? Like, with everyone just knowing that. Isn’t it scary?”

Louis lets the question sit for a moment, because he hasn’t actually thought about it in months. It’s just a thing now, part of being sort-of famous. And, of course, he never really had the same fear attached to the world knowing his name like the other boys did: he’s Bonded, so there will be no (more) spontaneous soulmates appearing in his future. But it is still strange, having grown up in a world where it was good enough to only know everyone’s first names, where it was rude, borderline insulting, to use someone’s last name without their permission, and to suddenly be thrust into a new world where last names are traded like currency, blatantly used and exploited.

“It is weird,” Harry answers before Louis can wrap his mind around an answer that isn’t too maudlin. “Because, like, it wasn’t supposed to happen in the first place. It was a leak on Twitter, so we had no idea. Just stepped outside the studio one night and bam, everyone’s screaming out our names.”

Jonny shivers. “Can’t imagine, mate. That’s like, invasion of privacy or summat.”

“I cried the first time,” Harry admits easily. “It was awful. I can’t believe Lou held it together so well, I have no idea what would have happened if he wasn’t there to get us out. It was, like, full on mob.”

Louis knows exactly how he kept moving: nothing could happen to him, but something could have happened to Harry, or Zayn, or Niall, or Liam.

“What’s scarier,” Louis says carefully, “is feeling like you’ve lost control of your life, a little bit. Like if there’s that one little piece of you that you can keep to yourself, you know you’ll be okay. But then suddenly everyone has it and it’s not just yours anymore.”

Jonny shakes his head, taking a long pull from his glass. Harry rubs a thumb over the arch of Louis’ foot soothingly.

“What’s weird is, like,” Louis says, “actual celebrities don’t really do that. Like, Brad Pitt doesn’t walk into a room and introduce himself as Brad Pitt, he’s just Brad. And that’s the normal way, right? But then a reporter does an interview with him and calls him Brad Pitt and everyone that watches the interview thinks that’s what he wants to be called. So regular people are calling him Brad Pitt, and interviewers call him Brad Pitt, but that’s it. If George Clooney walks up to Brad Pitt, he doesn’t say, ‘Hey, Brad Pitt!’ He just says ‘Hey, Brad.’ It’s all the non-famous people around the celebrities who use the last names so easily.”

“You’ve never met Brad Pitt or George Clooney,” Stan reminds him teasingly. “You don’t know what they like.”

“We met Justin Bieber, though,” Louis shoots back. “And all the assistants and reporters called him by his first and last name, but Simon and the other actual celebrities didn’t. And when Rihanna and Christina Aguilera were there, and Robbie Williams, they didn’t say each other’s last names. Just first names.”

“Rihanna only has a first name, though,” Stan points out, and Louis throws the dildo at him, chuckling.

“What’s weird is that it even affected us,” Harry points out, meeting Louis’ eyes. “We’d only been around all the X Factor stuff for a few hours when we met in the bathroom, and we told each other our full names like it was no big deal. Luckily nothing happened.” Louis sees Stan grow still out of the corner of his eye and takes a deep breath, working to keep his smile normal.
“Yeah, lucky,” is all he can say, and then it's quiet as Louis avoids Stan’s meaningful looks.

“I used to get the chills right before I walked outside,” Harry continues softly, hand spasming a little on Louis' ankle. Louis slides to the floor, tugging at Harry’s sweater until he sits up and moves back into the V of Louis’ legs, his back against Louis’ chest. “I’d think, ‘Okay, Harry, this might be the time it happens. It might be time to Bond. Are you ready?’ And of course nothing has come of it yet, but it was almost like choosing to let that happen to me every time.”

“I have a theory,” Louis says, playing with Harry’s fingers, Stan and Jonny watching raptly as they spiral into deeper topics, “that management is pushing our names out there on purpose.”

“Really?” Harry asks, frowning. “You never told me.”

“It’s a working theory, I don’t have any real proof or anything. Maybe they aren’t. But remember what that reporter told us back in Cardiff? They’d told her specifically to use our last names.”

“Oh…” Harry gasps. “I didn’t put that together. Oh my God.”

“Why, though?” Stan asks. “Why is it important for people to know and use your last names?”

Louis rubs a hand over his eyes. He's been debating on whether or not to share this with the boys, not wanting to scare them for no reason if it turned out to be a false lead. But he’s pretty sure he’s right. “When our names first leaked,” he explains for Stan and Jonny's benefit, “Simon called us in and told us this story about one of the Backstreet Boys. He and a fan Bonded in the middle of a concert and apparently it was huge, PR-wise, but it didn't matter—he still quit the band to have a normal life with her. But there was something Simon said when he told us, something like how their PR team hadn’t thought it would ever happen, but when it all seemed to work out they got amazing press out of the whole thing up until he left.”

Louis looks up, meeting Stan’s eye, then Jonny’s. Harry is statue still in his arms, his heartbeat thudding so hard Louis can feel it through his thick sweater.

“They can’t make us Bond, thank God, but I think they’re pushing for the opportunity for it to happen as often as possible. Sort of a one in a million chance, but it’s happened once before. And I think if it does happen, they’re ready with damage control and a strategy to make as much money as they can off of it.”

“Fuck,” Jonny breathes. “And it’s Simon doing all this?”

“There’s probably a whole team,” Louis admits. “Not just Simon, though I’m sure he’s played a part. I can guarantee that our management is part of it, this seems like the sort of thing they’d come up with.”

“That’s those two old jackasses that kept telling you off, yeah?” Stan asks. Harry twists in Louis’ lap, poking Louis in the chest.

“You told Stan about your Modest meetings and not me?” he asks, hurt.

“Because Stan has an outside perspective,” Louis soothes, trying not to blurt out and he knows about the Bond that I can’t ever tell you about. “You’d have assumed it was your fault and beaten yourself up about it.”

“No I wouldn’t—”

“That’s literally exactly what you did,” Louis chuckles quietly. “So yeah, you would.”
Harry grumbles, crossing his arms. Louis cuddles him close, dropping apologetic kisses into his hair.

“It’s snowing,” Stan says suddenly, pointing out the window. They all race to the balcony, huddled in their blankets and ignoring their freezing bare feet as the world goes quiet and white around them.

“If something happens,” Jonny says suddenly, “and one of you two Bonds with someone, you’ll take care of each other, right?” He turns to look at Louis and Harry with serious eyes. “Me and Stan, and your mums and your band and lots of other people, they can help, yeah, but you two have to watch out for each other.”

“The moment Harry Bonds with someone,” Louis says, ignoring Stan’s sad eyes and the rolling of his own stomach, “I will make sure everything happens the way he wants it to. Even if that means helping him break the contracts we’re in, I don’t care. I promise.”

“Me too,” Harry says determinedly. “Anything Louis needs, I’ll help.”

Jonny nods. “Good,” he says, and then Stan throws a snowball at Louis’ head and they forget about the future, just for a little while.

17 April 2011

The best thing about being on holiday is that Louis doesn’t have to check his phone every few minutes for updates to the schedule or reminders to be professional or missed calls from reporters or fans who somehow got his number. In fact, Louis doesn’t check his phone at all for the first couple of days, turning it to vibrate after he calls his mum to assure her they’ve made it in one piece.

So they’re hit with a bit of a surprise when he and Harry are reclining on the sofa the next morning, Louis watching the end of Die Hard as Harry pats around on the floor for his own phone, yawning as he unlocks it and heads to Twitter.

And then yelps, dropping his phone on his face.

“Oh no,” he says, looking up at Louis with wide eyes. “Lou, we have a problem.”

i <3 louisss @AidenAndLouisLovvve: #LARRYSEXHOLIDAY FUCK FUCK RED FUCKING ALERT
Zoe Styles @landofthelarry112: aksdafblaekb28afjaOMG @Louis_Tomlinson @Harry_Styles
amanduh @ForeverYungID: @tinylouie did u see this?? #larrysexholiday
Rose Malik-Horan-Tomlinson-Payne-Styles @XFactorFangirl95: ITS A DILDO I DONT CARE WHAT YOUR INSIDER SAID #LARRYSEXHOLIDAY
HanaBanana @daddyharrygetit: #larrysexholiday that’s DISGUSTING they are STRAIGHT you are all IDIOTS
HARRY FOLLOW ME PLS @harryheartslouiss: @Harry_Styles @Louis_Tomlinson so which 1 of u is the bottom??
1D Daily @1DDailyUpdates: #BREAKING louis posts video on his youtube acct, sex toy spotted on couch! #larrysexholiday http://youtu…

Louis waits for the call all day, a flash of Claudia’s name on his screen to tell him exactly how much he fucked up, exactly how they’re going to be punished. It never comes, and Louis doesn’t know if that’s better or worse.

“Maybe they haven’t noticed?” Harry asks tentatively when Louis brings it up. That’s possible,
Louis guesses; #larrysexholiday hadn’t trended very long, and a lot of fans were arguing back against the “Larry believers” about whether it was actually a dildo, calling them deluded and reaching.

Somehow, though, Louis knows that management noticed. And that if they aren’t saying anything, they’re planning on keeping this mess for a later use.

23 April 2011

London was chilly and damp after beautiful Courchevel, but the group’s welcome home was warm as ever. A whole brood of Tomlinsons as well as Anne, Gemma, and Robin had been waiting at the arrivals gate for them, Anne and Jay smothering each of the boys with hugs and kisses. Harry had wrapped Louis up in his own hug before they’d parted ways, home to Holmes Chapel and Doncaster for a couple of days until they were back in London for their first official day in the studio.

They haven’t done any recording yet, just worked with Savan and Rami on perfecting their vocals and learning the lyrics. They’d kept a lot of the changes to What Makes You Beautiful that the boys had suggested, which had made them all exchange excited grins that probably weren’t all that subtle.

Now, though, is another day off, and Harry, Louis, Anne, Jay, and Gemma are flat hunting.

Or, well, Louis and Harry are flat hunting. The other three are shooting down every single option they’re presented and crushing all of Harry’s dreams.

“Too small,” Anne says of one flat, a lovely one bedroom with a beautiful view. “I know you two don’t think so now, but there will come a time you need some alone time and will want more than one bedroom.”

“I think a studio is a horrible idea.” Jay says of their next stop, looking around with a wrinkled nose. “Louis wouldn’t have anywhere to hide his mess when you have guests.”

“These appliances are ancient, you’ll end up burning the place down.”

“No security! You need a gate or something, you are sort of famous, you know.”

“Did you see the neighbors? Don’t think so, I’d never be able to sleep at night thinking you were being murdered.”

“I think they don’t actually want us moving out,” Harry mutters glumly to Louis as they leave yet another perfectly nice flat. Louis sighs and nods, watching Jay and Anne whisper to themselves just ahead, Gemma sending them a smirk over her shoulder.

“I’ve got that one last place for us to show them, and I think we should drop the news on them there,” Louis answers quietly. Harry grins and nods, nudging Louis in the side as they slide into yet another taxi with their mothers and Gemma.

“Princess Park Manor?” Jay reads as they cab pulls into a tree-shrouded drive. “What is—oh my God.”

The Manor is huge; it’s ornate and ridiculously posh with its dome and columns and sweeping grounds. Louis and Harry exchange another grin as Anne and Jay press their noses to the window, even Gemma looking shocked at the opulence.
“Hello sirs,” a man in a suit greets once the cab rolls to a stop next to a lavish fountain, “Would I be right in assuming you are who inquired about our space available in The Dome?”

“That’s us!” Louis says brightly, offering his arm to Jay. “Lead the way, please.”

“Louis…” Jay trails off as they pass the indoor pool and the state of the art gym, “We can’t afford this.”

Louis just grins and kisses her on the cheek as they file after their guide, who introduces himself as Tom, down a long, elegant hallway with rich red carpets and chandeliers every few feet. There are different hallways branching off this one, each ending in a massive wooden door. They come to the end of the main hallway to another door, the only adornment a shiny golden handle with an ornate swirling design and a golden plate with an etched outline of the manor’s dome.

“The Dome area encompasses five floors, with three bedrooms, a cinema room on the top floor, and a 360-degree kitchen. I can give you a moment to look around but please, come find me if you have questions,” Tom says, bowing a little as he unlocks the door. “I hope you like it, this is one of our most coveted living areas.”

The door swings open and Louis understands why; he’d seen some pictures on the property’s website when he’d looked up contact information and of course the pictures were gorgeous, but it’s nothing compared to seeing it in person.

The door opens into a living room, already furnished with expensive-looking white leather furniture and a fluffy blue rug in the center of the room. From the living room branches a short hallway that leads to two of the bedrooms, bright, airy spaces with large windows and cool greys on the walls. Due to the round edging of the dome up on the fifth floor shaping the flat, all the rooms have at least one circular wall, leading to some interesting custom shelving and some furniture built directly into the wall. Both first floor bedrooms have small ensuite bathrooms, with modern glass-walled showers and just enough space for two boys who don’t have tons of products to store. Louis twirls in the middle of the airy, open living room, the sun bright through the windows as he flexes his bare toes in the plush carpet (all of them having kicked off their shoes at the front door to spare the almost-white light grey flooring from footprints).

There’s a well-hidden staircase in the corner of the living room, leading to the second story and the aforementioned 360-degree kitchen. The moment Harry steps in and sees the dark wood cabinets ranging along half the room, the sleek chrome ovens and other appliances that Louis couldn’t begin to name, the simple glass table in the middle decorated with a bouquet of fresh flowers, he claps his hands over his mouth, eyes bright. Louis pats his back as he moves to the next floor, knowing that the kitchen is Harry’s domain and any comments he could add would be along the lines of “Oh, cool, a table” and “Look, the fridge works” so he decides to leave Harry and the mums to it. Gemma follows him up into the third floor as well, rolling her eyes as Anne exclaims over the downdraft system over the hob.

The third floor boasts the massive third bedroom, which Louis is pretty sure is supposed to be the master, and the ensuite attached to it which is nearly larger than the bedroom itself. There’s a huge bathtub against the far wall, shiny and white with indents for two people to bathe at the same time. The cabinets under the sink are pale grey as well, but there’s a single cheery yellow painting on the wall for a pop of color. The bedroom has French doors that open onto a balcony and a California king sized bed just begging for its sheets to be mussed. The fourth floor is made up of empty lounges and nooks, rooms the website had said could be used as libraries or offices or game rooms, depending on their needs.

Then Louis opens a door and Gemma is gasping behind him as they finally reach the top floor, the
dome itself: a high, arching ceiling, exposed beams crisscrossing above their heads, an enormous chandelier dangling in the center. The curved walls are exposed brick, a massive screen covering one full side of the room and a long half-circle of a couch against the other. A tastefully hidden projector, the lens just barely visible from its niche high up in the wall, casts the Princess Park logo on the screen. A full service bar is tucked into a corner, a wine glass rack built into the wall.

Gemma whistles, spinning to take in the chandelier above her head. “I’m not going to lie,” she says faintly, “if you end up moving in, I’m never going to leave. I’ll just hide in one of your thousands of rooms until you forget I’m here.”

Louis chuckles. It is sort of over the top. Well, really over the top. No one needs this much room, especially two teenagers looking for their first flat. But…

It’s perfect for them. The bedrooms are light washes of grey, just like Harry wanted, and it’s got the sort of kitchen that Harry has entire Pinterest boards dedicated to (not that Louis is supposed to know about those, but Harry is the least sneaky person ever and sometimes falls asleep looking at different styles of marble countertops). And then there’s this monstrosity of a cinema room, red and black and old wood, just like how Louis always imagined his future home. The whole place is modern but not space-age, roomy but comfortable, beautiful but not untouchable like a museum. There’s enough room that both of their families could stay at the same time if they wanted, as well as the boys and some other friends all at the same time. Louis would bet all the money in the world that Harry is already planning fancy meals and dinner parties for that kitchen and dining area. They can each have a bedroom on the first floor to call their own and share the master so they can both have the amazing bathroom. They could build a life here; their very own sanctuary to barricade themselves in on bad days when the world gets to be too much and all they want is each other.

“I want to live here so badly,” he finally answers Gemma.

“Me too,” he hears from the doorway, spinning to find Harry watching him with wide eyes. He crosses the room in a few skipped steps, taking one of Louis’ hands in both of his. “Me too, God, Lou, this is even better than I ever thought. The website did not prepare me for all this.”

“They should add it as a disclaimer,” Louis laughs. "Expectations should be raised upon arrival, not lowered."

Harry giggles as well, tipping his head back and staring up at the chandelier. “It’s perfect, Lou.”

An unfamiliar voice floats toward them as three sets of footsteps start up the stairs, Tom leading Anne and Jay in while apparently explaining the property’s extensive security and private lift access straight into the kitchen. The mothers both go wide-eyed at the cinema room, stopping and staring up at the insanely large screen on the wall and the glittering chandelier.

“Do you like it?” Harry asks breathlessly, bounding over to his mum. "Isn't it wonderful?"

“It’s… beautiful, Harry,” Anne says carefully. She and Jay trade a Look, one that Louis’ vast experience in troublemaking (and subsequently being caught whilst troublemaking) tells him that he should fear.

“Thank you so much for the tour,” Jay says sweetly to Tom. “Could you give us a minute to talk to the boys? We’ll come find you as soon as we’re done.”

Tom nods serenely, backing his way out of the dome without a single word. The moment he’s gone, Jay strides across the room and grabs Louis by the ear.
“Ack- Mum! What the hell—”

“This is all very lovely, but how are we supposed to explain to the nice man that you can’t afford this place and we’ve wasted his time?” Jay hisses. Louis bats at her hands, screeching.

“Ow, ow!”

“Do you even know how expensive this place is?”

“About five thousand pounds a month—”

“*Five thousand pounds—*”

“You only got eight thousand a piece from your contracts, didn’t you?” Anne asks Harry incredulously. “So are you only planning on using up all your money to live here for a couple of months?”

“Mum, no, it’s not—”

“Louis William, I ought to bring you straight home for pulling something like this—”

“Would you *listen* to me?” Louis gasps, wrenching his ear out of Jay’s grasp. “I’m trying to tell you that Simon gave me a budget for our living costs!”

The room is silent.

“What do you mean?” Anne asks, still aiming everything at Harry. He grins at Louis.

“Louis pointed out to Simon that he’ll want to keep us in London, that way we can do promo or recording whenever we need without having to travel across the country. But we can’t live in London on what our contracts paid, so Louis asked if any part of the rest of the two million pounds we didn’t get goes toward our expenses, and apparently a big part of it does.”

“It’s meant for tour,” Louis adds, still rubbing his sore ear, “but by the time we're touring we’ll have album sales to help pay for things as well.”

“So it doesn’t matter how expensive it is, because Simon and our management are footing the bill!” Harry says giddily. Jay and Anne look to be in some sort of shock, their mouths gaping wide. Gemma stifles a laugh behind them. "And the nicer the place we rent, the better off our image will be in the tabs. Simon always says it’s more about looking successful than actually being successful, so we used that to get him to agree."

“The security is good, it’s *clearly* nice enough, no worries about neighbors,” Louis grins, ticking off all their arguments on his fingers.

“And you said you like it,” Harry reminds them.

Anne chuckles, shaking her head. “I think we’ve been duped.” Jay just rubs her temples, but she’s grinning as well.

“Alright then, little businessmen. Let’s go sign some rental contracts.”

On the way out of the flat to find Tom, Harry pulls Louis into one of the bedrooms.
“Thank you for moving in with me,” he says shyly, swinging Louis’ hand.

Louis laughs, pulls Harry close. “Welcome home, love,” he says, and presses a kiss to Harry’s cheek.

28 April 2011

Louis and his family are already at the flat when Harry and Anne arrive, both lugging boxes full of Harry’s t-shirts and shoes.

Or, well. He’s assuming it’s Louis’ family. Otherwise their new home has already been broken into by a loud group of people listening to Mr. Brightside at full volume and playing a game of tag up on the fourth floor.

“Hazza!” Louis cheers when he finds him in one of the first floor bedrooms, the one with the darker stripes of charcoal grey on the walls. He stands, brushing off his bare legs and bounding over scattered open boxes to smack a kiss to Harry’s cheek. “I took this room, I figured you’d like the lighter one.”

“Hiya, Lou,” Harry says, swallowing hard when he sees the ratty old tank top Louis is wearing, the neckline down almost all the way to his nipples. But then Jay is standing up to hug Harry as well, and he has to pretend he wasn’t imagining ripping her son’s shirt off with his teeth, at least not while she’s in the room.

A blur of shrieked giggles and glittered shoes runs by out in the hallway, then another. Lottie comes sprinting by just a few seconds later, pausing in the doorway to say, “Hello, Harry,” before shouting, “Phoebe, get off the table, that’s glass!” At the sound of an ominous crash, Jay groans and jogs out the door, leaving Harry and Louis grinning at each other in a now empty room.

“Didn’t say hi properly,” Harry says, looking up at Louis through his fringe. Louis’ grin twitches.

“Oh yeah?” he murmurs, stepping close. “Is there a special kind of greeting for people moving into their first flat together?” Harry shivers a little when Louis steps inside his space, quirking his head to the side and smirking. “What’s going on, babe? Is the domesticity turning you on?”

Harry groans and pulls Louis in with a fist curled in that wet dream of a tank top, attacking Louis with rough, breathless kisses until Louis makes a soft noise and that’s it, Harry’s done for and can’t be blamed for his actions. Louis’ hands come up to pull Harry in harder by the back of the neck, biting at Harry’s lips in that way he does when he wants Harry to fight back. So, Harry fights back: he tangles a hand in Louis’ hair and slides the other up under the loose fabric Louis’ tank top, scratching down his chest. Louis gasps, shuddering when Harry leaves his palm there in the center of his chest over the lines he just scratched, skin to burning skin. Louis is sucking a hot trail down Harry’s neck when Gemma clucks from out in the hallway.

“Knock it off, donuts,” she says, rolling her eyes when Harry squeaks and they jump apart. “Mum’s coming back down to get more boxes and no one wants to see that.”

Despite the several times that something gets thrown at the back of Harry’s head for staring at Louis while he hoists boxes and chases his sisters and lifts the bottom of his shirt to wipe the sweat off his forehead, unpacking goes quickly. Mostly because, other than clothes, Harry and Louis don’t really
own a whole lot of anything; what they do have could maybe fill one floor of this flat, but it definitely doesn’t take all five. Luckily, the previous renters had had a lot of furniture made to fit the circular walls and wouldn’t need it wherever they were moving, so for a little extra added on their first month’s rent they got to keep most of it and they don’t have to worry about rushing out to buy beds and sofas and shelving.

Other than that, the flat is a little bare. Louis’ got some comic books they stack on a shelf in one of the fourth floor rooms they’ve declared to be the library, though besides those comics and a couple of Harry’s poetry books is pretty barren. There are some films to stick in the cinema room and lots of shoes to arrange in their walk-in closets. Harry has some small kitchen appliances that he stocked up on once he knew they really were moving in together. That’s really it—as far as “bachelor pads” go, it’s a pretty sparse one.

Harry has plans, though; he’s going to buy so much stuff to fill the space. Sculptures. Pottery. Old books to put on the library shelves. Art that makes him happy and art that makes him sad and so, so much art that just makes him think. He can start some kind of eccentric collection, like 18th century woodcarvings or black and white album covers or weird hats, maybe, he’s always loved hats. Stuff, y’know? It’s gonna be amazing—a little bit of him, a little bit of Louis, a whole lot of Simon’s money, and now they have a home.

But it’s now nearing evening, a good majority of their belongings have been unpacked and put away, and Harry and Louis are trying to hide the way they’re staring at each other from across their brand new living room while various women in their families and Robin meander about as if they’re planning on staying forever.

Which, well. That would put a damper in Harry’s plans, which consist of Louis, that massive sofa up in the cinema room, and hours of uninterrupted snogging until he can’t feel his lips anymore.

But it doesn’t matter how many floors of space there are between them, Harry cannot even imagine trying anything with Louis when his mother is still in the same flat. It’s just… no.

Unluckily for him, the families show no signs of leaving. Anne and Lottie are hanging curtains that Harry had no idea he even owned, Robin is checking the water pressure in the bathtub and all the showers, Jay is dusting their pristine brand new furniture, Fizzy and Gemma are watching TV up in the cinema room and the twins, judging by the giggles, are hiding either under Harry’s new bed or in his closet.

Either way, they clearly aren’t getting ready to leave, and that is an issue because Louis just licked his lips while staring at Harry’s mouth and Harry’s hands are itching to grab him and pull him flush up against himself and honestly, he loves his mum, but he’s just about to shove her out the door if she doesn’t leave soon.

Gemma pops back into the room, sipping on a Coke (which is one of two things in their fridge at the moment, a twelve-pack of Coke and a banana Harry brought in case he needed a snack). She takes one look at Harry and the way he can’t seem to stop looking at Louis, and grins.

“We should head home, Mum,” she says.

“But, the curtains…” Anne says, sounding lost.

“They’re smart boys, I think they can hang fabric on a stick,” Gemma consoles her, jerking her head for Harry to lead them to the door. Louis jumps to his feet as well, wrapping an around around Jay’s shoulders and promising her that they will get a vacuum and learn to use it.
"I have one, don’t worry," Harry calls over his shoulder to Jay, who looks relieved until she passes a spot where she swears there’s a draft and starts inspecting the insulation on one of the windows.

"Look, Mum, Anne and Gemma are leaving," Louis says desperately. "Don’t you want to head home as well? It’ll be after dark at this rate."

"Don’t you rush me, Louis," she warns, running her hand over the window frame and feeling for a breeze. "My baby has grown up and left home before I was ready, so I will take my time leaving."

Eventually, though, the younger sisters are wrangled, the older sister is rolling her eyes and escorting both teary mothers out the door, the stepdad is grinning like he knows just how badly the new flatmates need some time alone, and finally, finally, the flat is quiet.

"Well, Hazza," Louis says, clicking the lock on the big front door, "we’ve got a flat to ourselves and nothing planned. Whatever should we mmph—"

"Shut up," Harry hisses against his lips, "shut up shut up shut up."

"Shutting up," Louis gasps, mouth falling open under Harry’s insistent tongue. They move together for ages, eons, heads tilting and breath heavy, hot skin and swollen lips. But Harry’s back is aching from all the lifting and Louis is starting to lean into him like he does when he gets tired so Harry pulls back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and watching Louis' blue eyes go even darker.


Louis gulps and turns, sprinting to the staircase and clattering up four flights of stairs. Harry follows on his heels; they’re even more winded when they get to the top, but it's worth the stitch in Harry's side when Louis tugs him down on top of him, both of them stretched out on the sofa and pressed together chest to toes. Harry reattaches their lips and they're at it once more, biting and sucking at each other's mouths, little whispers of noise spilling into the air around them.

Louis runs his hands up and down Harry's back, scratching lightly at the sensitive spots on the back of his hips. That has Harry bucking, trying to get away from Louis' ticklish fingers as they dance underneath his t-shirt.

Louis, instead of stopping, arches up into Harry, grabbing his bum with both hands and keeping him moving in that same rocking motion, back and forth. It's the tiniest of movements but it's thrilling, Harry’s spine zinging with heat as Louis gasps right into his ear, tugging on his earlobe with his teeth.

"Lou," Harry moans, his hips jolting again. "Lou, we gotta—"

"Fuck, Hazza," Louis whimpers, pulling Harry against him even more quickly. Harry's hips start into a natural roll, hitching a little when his cock brushes Louis', only a few thin layers of fabric between them. That thought has Harry moving faster, shoving Louis' tank top to the side and sucking a bruise onto his chest. "Fuck," Louis groans again. "Feel so good, love, so perfect."

Harry couldn't stop right now even if his mother walked back in and demanded it; it's not a conscious decision, but as long as Louis keeps whispering his name like a benediction, his body is no longer under his control. He's rolling and shifting and chasing something heavy in his stomach, a heat wave that has his hands shaking and heartbeat fluttering. Harry throws his head back and Louis bites at his throat, the sharp hint of pain enough to throw him over the edge of orgasm with Louis following right after.
It’s white hot heat, a star expanding to disintegrate him from the inside out, tingling fingers and numb lips and flushed skin and a pulsing, crashing thrum of pleasure in his veins. It’s white noise and static, fuzzy brainwaves that read yes and more and need and not much else, because nothing else could possibly matter right now. It’s white vision and black shadows, life leached of color because who needs it when you can feel this. Everything is white in the moment right after, everything is new.

It's more than just coming, it has to be; Harry's a teenage boy, he's had his share of orgasms and nothing was ever like this. Maybe it's the way Louis' body feels against his, hot hot skin and sweat and more, something like elation or happiness that pours from his veins and into Harry. Or maybe it's the way Louis has gone boneless, his hands still pulling Harry in tight as they ride out their aftershocks together, hips still slowly circling. Maybe it's the way Louis is looking at him like he's something precious and something to eat at the same time, hungry and possessive and grateful and needy.

Harry's arms are aching from holding himself up so he drops onto Louis, who huffs an oof into Harry's hair as he settles. Harry turns his face to rest on Louis' chest, tracing around the bruise he'd left there with soft fingers.

"I think," he says, feeling a little smug, "we can consider this room christened."

Louis snorts, running a hand through Harry's hair, but he doesn’t shoot back any witty comments about taking the room’s virginity or anything at all, really. "Yeah," is all he says, and it's all Harry needs to know that something is off.

He can barely get Louis to be quiet at the best of times, and now he's all loose and pliant after coming and Harry was assuming there would be some good cuddling and sweet talk about how amazing it was. This is their first pair of orgasms with each other—Harry doesn't need rose petals and moonlight, but sated, sleepy half-thoughts before Louis eventually drifts off would be nice. Instead, Louis’ hands have stopped tracing patterns on his lower back.

Harry props himself up on his elbows again. “Lou?”

Louis is staring up at the ceiling, biting the inside of his cheek. “Yeah, just. Just processing.”

“What is there to process?” Harry frowns. “We were kissing, and then we came. That’s it.”

“I didn’t mean to—” Louis cuts himself off with a shake of his head. “Okay, yeah. You’re right, that’s it. I’m going to take a shower.”

“No, wait,” Harry says stubbornly, pushing Louis back down when he tries to sit up. “Something’s obviously wrong, just tell me what it is.”

“It’s not you, Harry,” Louis says with a grimace, rubbing a hand over his face. “It’s just me.”

“‘It’s not you, it’s me’? Really?” Harry scoffs, hurt. “Is this you wanting me to wait for my soulmate again? Because that’s bullshit, Lou, and I’ve told you that.”

“Harry—”

“This isn’t that big of a deal. We got off together, so what?”

“Haz, seriously—”

“Lots of people do it, and, like I’ve said before, isn’t it better that I’m doing this with you, because I
know you love me and won’t hurt me—”

“Fuck, Harry, maybe this isn’t about you for fucking once,” Louis says, and Harry’s just about to shoot something back when he realizes what Louis is saying.

Because, well. It really isn’t all about Harry, is it? Louis had said after their first kiss that it wasn’t fair to Harry’s eventual soulmate for them to get caught up in… whatever this is, but it’s not just Harry’s soulmate they have to worry about. Someday, there’s going to be another person in Louis’ life who kisses him, someone besides Harry.

And that feels wrong, really, thinking that. It’s wrong that someday there will be people between Harry and Louis. It’s not natural (even though technically it is). It goes against everything inside him. And it’s that same feeling that’s been building for months, that one that says that maybe Harry doesn’t need a soulmate when he’s got a Louis instead.

But, apparently, Louis isn’t thinking that way. Because if this panic about rubbing off on each other isn’t about Harry’s soulmate, then it must be about Louis’. And if Louis is worried about whatever that person will eventually say when he tells them about him and Harry, then Harry and Louis must not be thinking the same thing about their arrangement. Because Harry is thinking long-term with Louis. Like, forever.

Harry didn’t kiss Louis with the intention of it leading to a relationship, but if that’s what happens then Harry has absolutely no issues with that. In fact, he might prefer it; it’s all well and good that there’s someone out there that his biology has matched him with, but he found Louis on his own and he wants to keep him, biology be damned.

Maybe he just needs to convince Louis of the same.

But not right now, because Louis looks like someone has told him he’s developed some untreatable disease and he’s got to go wallow about it, and Harry needs to let him have that. So he sits up carefully, avoiding putting his hands anywhere on Louis that isn’t totally friendly, and scoots back to let him stand.

“Are…” Harry trails off when Louis stands and makes his awkward way to the door. “Are we okay?”

Louis turns, sends him a sad smile. “Course we are, H.” He shrugs, won’t meet Harry’s eyes. “I just never really meant for things to go this far, that’s all.”

2 May 2011

The next few days are uncomfortable; or, at least, they are to Harry. Louis still smiles when Harry kisses his cheek in the morning, but doesn’t turn and catch his lips in a deep kiss in answer like he normally would. He’s still wonderful and loud and Louis, and Harry still loves him very much, but he’s making things awkward and Harry wants it to stop.

But for now, any plans of getting Louis to potentially reconsider the entire framework of their relationship or maybe just getting him to kiss Harry again are put on hold, because the boys are all coming to see the flat for the first time and staying with them for a couple of days before they head to Sweden to actually start recording their album.

Harry’s currently cooking, because they’d finally went shopping for food yesterday and spent hours
perusing the aisles at the shop, debating organic yoghurt brands and arguing over cereal choices and it was so much like how they used to be that Harry is still grinning, stirring the dry ingredients for a batch of cookies. He’s already got a cake cooling on the counter nearby, a massive pasta bake warming in one of the ovens, some chicken in a pan in the other, and various other treats scattered about his wonderfully giant new kitchen and all its counter space, but he just wants to make sure they’ll be well-stocked for the next couple of days and Niall won’t be complaining about dying from hunger like he tends to do half an hour after every meal.

Louis jogs up the stairs and rolls his eyes when he sees Harry cracking an egg into a bowl and stirring. “They’ll still love you if we have to order pizza at some point,” he reminds Harry, grinning fondly. “Not that I don’t love the apron, Julia Child.”

“You know Julia Child,” Harry comments dreamily, “you are the perfect man.”

Louis laughs again and swipes a fingertip through the cookie dough, sucking the mixture off his finger with a pop. Harry’s just about to making a joke about sucking dough off of something else when the doorbell rings and Louis’ eyes light up.

“Coming!” he shouts, even though there’s no way anyone could hear him from the second floor and through the soundproofed walls. But he runs off anyway, letting in whichever of the boys got here first. He hears Louis giving the tour downstairs and is just sliding his tray of cookies into the oven alongside the chicken when Louis leads in all three of their bandmates, who are staring around at the kitchen with open mouths.

“Holy fuck,” Niall says eloquently, and Harry laughs and sets the timer for the cookies. He pulls his apron off, going to hug each of the boys and joining them on the second half of the tour, because he has to see their expressions when they get to the dome.

“This bathroom is bigger than the whole tour bus,” Liam says incredulously when they get to the master bath. Zayn just snorts at all of Harry’s soaps and products lined up on the side, pointing to his Barbie bubble bath.

“They were out of non-themed kinds,” Harry defends, pouting. “And the Barbie one smelled better than the Iron Man one.”

Liam makes an affronted noise at that, personally offended that Harry wouldn’t choose Iron Man, and Louis has to shove them all out of the bathroom and up to the fourth floor. Niall fist pumps when he sees the pool table and the foosball in the newly-minted game room, high fiving Harry in appreciation, and Zayn immediately moves to peruse their tiny library.

And then, finally, Louis and Harry get to do a dramatic reveal of the cinema room, even Zayn going slack-jawed at the chandelier and the Man United match being projected on the wall.

“I gotta say,” Liam says, looking impressed, “I feel like Simon has an intern or something deciding our budget, because there’s no way he believes you need all this.”

“But we do, Lima,” Louis says earnestly, flopping back onto the sofa. “We need it so much. So important. So many reasons.”

“Right,” Liam scoffs, but grins at Louis as he sits next to him.

“Better than where you’d be living if that Claudia was deciding, eh?” Niall laughs darkly. Though Louis had been the first to deal with Claudia, they all become well acquainted with her through the tour, and now it’s everyone’s expressions that sour when she’s in the vicinity rather than just Louis’.
“Yeah, especially since her main job is to keep me and Louis apart,” Harry says, pulling Zayn and Niall over to the sofa as well.

“Wait, what?” Niall asks.

Oh, right, they don’t know. “Yeah,” Harry says carefully, shooting a look at Louis, who’s gone still. “Apparently management doesn’t want us doing ‘coupley’ things? Because it goes against the band’s, like, image or whatever. You know, the thing Simon said a long time ago, about us always seeming available for fans.”

“How do you know?” Liam asks.

“They’ve called us in for a few meetings,” Louis answers simply, like those meetings aren’t absolute nightmares that have the two of them second guessing every action when they’re out in public.

“I just don’t get why that matters,” Zayn adds. “Like, there are three other band members, and the fans on Twitter seem to love the whole, “I just don’t get why that matters,” Zayn adds. “Like, there are three other band members, and the fans on Twitter seem to love the whole,” he waves his hands, “Larry thing.”

Niall huffs, personally offended on their behalf. “Why is it so bad that you’re seen as a couple when you are a couple? I mean, that’s what you are, yeah?”

“Well…” Louis trails off, and the room goes quiet.

Oh.

Louis is picking at a thread on one of the throw pillows, not meeting anyone’s eye. Harry, meanwhile, feels like his heart has fallen out of his chest and rolled away to live somewhere else where it won’t be so abused. He hadn’t thought that much had changed since he and Louis had gotten off together on this very sofa, but apparently he was very, very wrong.

“I’ve gotta…” he stands, pushing his hands through his hair. “Um, cookies.”

And then he jogs downstairs, trying not to listen to the icy silence in his wake.

The cookies aren’t finished yet when he reaches the kitchen, and he doesn’t really have the ingredients or concentration to whip anything else up, so he just slides down against the kitchen island and stares through the oven door window at the cookies, slowly rising as the seconds tick on. That’s where Zayn finds him a few minutes later, thunking his head back against the base of the island and wondering how he’s managed to make it so far in life when he is clearly the world’s biggest moron.

“Hey, you gotta stop,” Zayn says, pushing his hand behind Harry’s head to soften the self-inflicted blow. “Don’t be an idiot just because Louis is being one.”

Harry humphs, crossing his arms. “Right. My very platonic not-dating-me-at-all best bro Louis.”

Zayn sighs and sits next to Harry, crossing his ankles and tilting his head, watching Harry thoughtfully. “You get that he’s scared, right? That’s why he’s being all weird about things.”

“Scared?” Harry asks blankly. “He’s Louis. He’s not scared of anything.”

“That’s not true,” Zayn says carefully. “He’s scared of you.”

Harry feels his mouth drop open, words lost somewhere in the confused buzz in his brain. Zayn pats his shoulder in pity.
“Put yourself in his shoes, mate. He doesn’t want to Bond to anyone, we know that, and that’s fine, whatever. But you have mentioned Bonding and your future soulmate at least once a day since we all met you. Then, despite all that, you start whatever this is with Louis, which was your idea, right?”

“I kissed him first, yeah,” Harry says, feeling like he’s stepping into a trap.

“Right, and he ran away. That’s what all that was back in December, yeah? When he went missing and you were freaking out.”

“Yeah…”

“So he’s your best friend, and you’re his, and you love each other and it’s all weird and wonderful. Then you throw the romantic side of things into the mix, and he gets scared and runs away. But he agrees to keep doing it, because, as I said, he loves you and, let’s be real, he will take any opportunity for more attention from you. And then, apparently, management calls you into meetings to tell you both that your relationship will ruin the band. Am I right?”

“Well, it was just Louis at first,” Harry says, the horrible feeling that he’s saying the wrong thing growing. “All through X Factor, he was in the meetings by himself. I didn’t get called in until we were on tour.”

Zayn gives him a look, one that goes straight through Harry’s ribs. “That’s… even worse than what I thought. Okay, wow, so there are meetings about your relationship and I’m sure, no offence, but you probably didn’t take that well. So you panic about how your relationship might be ruining things even though you’re the one who started it, and Louis has to reassure you that nothing is wrong when he wasn’t sure about it to begin with.”

Harry gulps, but Zayn continues ruthlessly. “And now I’m guessing something happened recently that changed things between you yet again—”

“We dry humped on the sofa upstairs—”

“Jesus fuck Hazza, I was trying to get as few details as possible. Right. So you did that—”

“Frottage, I think that’s what it’s called.”

“Shut up, honestly, shut your mouth. You did unspeakable things to each other and I’m sure you were all good with that, maybe even asked for it or were thinking about trying something new with him soon, but Louis panicked again. And so you two got all weird and awkward instead of talking about things, and believe me we could all tell the moment we walked in, so don’t pretend you didn’t, and then he says something stupid upstairs and you run away and here we are, with two idiots who obviously love each other but are completely shit at communicating.”

“I… still don’t see why he’s scared,” Harry says slowly. “Like, all the rest of it, yeah, that makes sense. But how does all of that add up to him being scared?”

Zayn rubs his temples. “I’m surrounded by idiots. Okay, Hazza, look. Eventually, either you or Louis is going to Bond to someone else, yeah? You’ve said each others’ names, you didn’t Bond to each other, so you’re meant to Bond to someone else. So what happens if he Bonds first? Suddenly Louis has a soulmate that he didn’t want, a brand new relationship with, most likely, a total stranger, and you don’t have anyone. He has to end his relationship with you because his body or brain or whatever chose someone else, and he has no say in any of it. Since he never wanted a soulmate you won’t have to pretend to be happy for him, which will just make things worse if he can tell you’re upset.”
"Now say you Bond first. Suddenly there’s someone new who takes Louis’ place, and yeah he’ll always be your best friend but it won’t be the same, because he won’t be the most important person in your life anymore. You’ll have a new relationship and he’ll have lost his relationship, and when you try and make him feel better it’ll just make things worse because he’ll think you pity him. So there you’ll be, with a brand new soulmate that you can’t concentrate on because you’re worried about your best friend, who is now suddenly alone after you pushed him into a relationship he was scared of starting in the first place. And he’ll have to try and be happy about your Bond, because it’s something he knows you always wanted. Add to all of that the fact that you two are the most jealous fuckers I’ve ever met, and you’ve got one hell of a mess to deal with."


“Do you get why he’s scared, now?” Zayn asks, eyes blazing a little. “Do you see? No matter how things end up, he loses. And I’m sure he thinks that being with you is worth it, but he’s also probably thinking about how much things are gonna hurt in the future every time you kiss him. Unless you decide you just aren’t interested in Bonding anymore, this relationship can only end in pain. And even then, even if your soulmate-pining arse decides you want to stay with Louis forever instead, he’ll always know he was a second choice, since you’re with him right now only because you met him before you met your soulmate.”

“I, um,” Harry whispers, feeling tears well in his eyes. How could he not realize how selfish he’s been? Louis is supposed to be his best friend, and somehow Harry's cornered him into the worst-negotiated relationship ever. “I have been thinking, maybe, that Bonding might not be so important to me—”

“Don’t you dare tell him,” Zayn threatens, voice low. “Don’t you fucking dare, H, not until you are absolutely sure. Don’t give him that hope only to take it away. Sort yourself out, figure out what’s important to you, then share that with him. Don’t dangle the potential for a real relationship with you in front of him like a rabbit with a carrot. I love you, you know that, but I’ll fucking murder you.”

Harry sobs, wrapping his arms around his knees. Zayn pulls him close, tucking Harry under his arm and letting him cry into his chest.

“I’m s-sorry,” Harry wails. “I d-didn’t, I-I’m—”

“Hush, Haz,” Zayn murmurs into his hair, “I know. Believe me, we all know. Everyone who’s ever met you knows you wouldn’t hurt Louis on purpose.”

“But I st-still did,” Harry cries.

“You haven’t yet, no. You might someday, but you haven’t really yet. You have to talk to him, babes.”

“I know,” Harry whispers. “I’m j-just, I’m scared.”

“Just talk to each other. Lay out the facts, figure out your options, and make a decision. But you have to let him decide for himself what to do,” Zayn says, kissing Harry’s head. “You can’t choose for him.”

“Right,” Harry says, sobs dying in his chest as he pulls himself back under control. “Right, I’ll. I’ll go talk to him.”
“Good,” Zayn nods. “I’ll get Li and Nialler, we’ll go grab some booze and leave you two alone for a little while.”

Louis is up in the cinema room still, that same throw pillow he’d been so interested in earlier resting on his face as another Premier League match starts up on the screen. He looks tiny, a small spot of color in the big room, dejected and curled in on himself. The self-hatred in Harry’s veins runs strong when Louis notices him in the doorway and winces, sitting up slowly.

He’s so lovely, Harry thinks, and it’s silly now that that’s what sticks out to him as they stare at each other across the room, but it’s true. Louis got a haircut recently so it’s more piecey and disheveled and makes him look older, his fringe framing his face like gilded metal around a masterpiece. His pretty blue eyes are sad, and Harry hates that, and his lovely small hands are anxiously moving over his thighs as Harry approaches, and he hates that too.

“Zayn sent me up to talk,” Harry says quietly, and Louis grins a little.

“Yeah, Niall and Liam laid into me as well. Though I think they were just worried I’d dumped you or something.”

“You didn’t?” Harry asks, looking up through his fringe. Louis looks distressed.

“God, no. Of course not.”

“Good,” Harry murmurs, slowly sitting next to Louis on the sofa. “Zayn explained some things, and I think we should… talk.”

Louis grimaces. “Yeah, I get the feeling we should too. So you go first, then I’ll go.”

“Right, um,” Harry says slowly. “I guess I should start with I didn’t realize that I was, like, pushing you into this horrible situation. I don’t really think I gave it any thought at all, actually. I just knew you were there and I wanted to kiss you and I love you, and that’s all that really mattered. And I meant to keep it, y’know, casual, and easy, but I think that doesn’t really work with best friends? Or maybe it does, just not with us. Because I can’t be casual with you, and I should have realized that.”

Louis takes a deep breath. “Okay.” He lets the breath out, a slow whoosh. “Okay. So. What does that mean for you, going forward?”

Harry ruffles his hair, choosing his words. “I think that this past year has changed things for me, and I don’t think I… believe everything that I used to. But I also think that I need to sort myself out before things go any further between us, because I can’t stand the thought of us having to be apart because of anything I did when I wasn’t sure.”

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“Okay,” Louis says again. He’s staring down at his hands, picking at his cuticles. “Right. Well, I guess I’ll start by saying that you’re not pushing me that hard into anything I don’t want to do. In fact, in the beginning I thought I was the one pushing you, because I’d been so obvious since the day we met about how important you are to me and I never really learned how to keep that separate from other things I felt for you. And you’ve been my best friend for months, now, and I thought I was just being horribly greedy in wanting more from you, but then you made it seem like you wanted more too. And that was… honestly, that was all amazing. I didn’t ever really believe that I could have anything like that with you, and then it was like everything in the world was out to prove to me that I was right and I couldn’t have you.”
"Who told you that?" Harry asks, indignant.

"Well," Louis says immediately, "first there’s management, telling me how awful I am for not being able to control myself around you, and there’s every interviewer in the world and they all want to know about your girlfriends and your hair routine and don’t care about the other four of us at all, really. And I started thinking about how easy it would be for them to replace me, since I don’t really matter. And then fucking Twitter, and the fans at the shows, and I’m so grateful to them but they all want you so much, the whole fucking world wants you, and I have to stand there and watch and pretend that I don’t get to have you, or at least a little part of you.”

“You have more than a little part of me,” Harry promises shakily. “You have all of me.”

“Don’t,” Louis says, squeezing his eyes shut. “Until you’ve sorted out whatever it is you need to sort out, just... don’t. I know you love me, and that’s enough for now. But I can’t stay in this limbo with you, where it feels like we’re boyfriends but only when we’re alone, and it’s like you said—we can’t be casual. There’s too much here for us to pretend we don’t mean the world to each other. So let’s just be Louis and Harry, best friends, until you know what you need to know for us to move into the place we need to be.”

Harry leans forward and crushes Louis in a hug, sagging in relief when Louis caves in on him as well. They’re collapsing stars, pulling each other down into black infinity. Or, no, the opposite really—they’re expanding supernovas, always within each other’s orbits as they burn brighter and hotter. Either way they’re caught, pulled together like magnets, like their missing pieces line up and they can trade broken parts to make a whole happy person.

Harry can’t lose this. He’s only seventeen with his whole life ahead of him, and he knows that people come and go, but Louis isn’t one of them. And Harry will do whatever it takes to keep them together. He just needs to figure out how.

3 May 2011

The flat is quiet when Harry gets up to make breakfast the next morning, untangling himself from Zayn and Niall’s limbs and padding carefully out of the master bedroom and downstairs to the kitchen.

Things are… better. Not back to normal, by any means, but Louis and Harry are both on the same page now and are at least able to joke and tease each other without taking things personally, and they’re back to doing what Liam calls their “freaky mind reading thing” where they can hold conversations across rooms without saying a word.

No kissing, though, and no hand holding or cuddling. It’s a smart plan, and Harry is glad Louis suggested it, because if he tried to decide on how he felt about the future of their relationship with the taste of Louis still on his lips, it would be no contest. He needs to be confident about his decisions before going back to Louis with ideas about where to go from here. So he and Niall and Zayn had slept on the king sized bed in the master bedroom and Louis and Liam had shared Louis’ room, rather than all five of them cramming onto the master bed like they normally would.

Bacon is sizzling in the pan when Liam finds his way into the kitchen, gulping down a full glass of water before he ever answers Harry’s greeting. Harry slides some toast onto a plate for him so he won’t starve while they wait for the others to wake and Harry cooks up Niall-proof amounts of breakfast food.
They chat about their trip to Sweden as Harry starts on the eggs, both of them excited to see Rami’s studio and to start cobbling together pieces to make their actual album. They haven’t heard any of their songs except for *What Makes You Beautiful*, and Harry is anxious to listen to the rest.

Niall, with his impeccable timing, bounces his way into the kitchen just as Harry’s switching off the stove, sliding the last of the eggs onto a plate. He’s got a disgruntled Zayn by one hand, a soft, sleepy Louis by the other.

“Knew you wouldn’t let us eat ‘til we were all here,” Niall explains as he maneuvers the half-dead Zayn and Louis to empty seats at the table. “So don’t worry, we’re all here.” Harry snorts, but shovels some extra bacon onto Niall’s plate anyway.

It’s a slow, languid morning, all of them content to spend the day in pajamas and watching TV, napping occasionally and snacking constantly. They don’t really have to pack for Sweden, as Liam, Niall, and Zayn already are using their suitcases and Harry had packed his and Louis’ bags a couple days ago. They’re all in the first floor living room watching an old episode of *MTV Cribs* when Louis asks if the others have thought about finding places to live in London for themselves.

“Nah, not really,” Niall says easily. “We’ll be in Sweden for a month and a half, no use finding a place just to leave it empty for weeks. I’ll look later.”

“Same,” Zayn agrees. “I can stay with my parents or family here in London if I need to.”

“You can stay with us too,” Harry adds, Louis nodding his agreement. “Clearly, we have enough space.”

Liam grins when Niall lights up. “Think you’re going to regret that offer, lads.”

“I’m never leaving,” Niall says solemnly, throwing himself down on the sofa and clutching the cushion to his chest. “You can’t make me.”

“Oh, hell,” Louis says, rolling his eyes. He launches himself onto Niall’s back, squirming and wiggling until Niall is crying with laughter.

“Gonna record the album from right here,” Niall shouts, gasping between bouts of choked laughter. “Bring me a mic and me guitar, I won’t be moved from this spot.”

“You think that now,” Zayn laughs, messing up Niall’s hair. “But wait until the lovebirds have made up, you’ll want to be as far away as possible.”

Niall shrieks, fighting his way out from under Louis. “No!” he shouts, grinning widely. “No, I won’t watch you two do whatever weird things you do to each other. You can’t make me!”

Harry laughs, glad they can joke about it when yesterday he thought the tension would do him in. But now, Louis grins at him across the room a little bashfully and Harry feels his cheeks heat in that old familiar way, and he thinks that maybe everything will be alright.

6 June 2011

Time passes quickly in Sweden, almost as though the country runs on double time compared to the rest of the world. Each day is like its own little adventure, a foray out into the wide, wide world for the boys of One Direction.
They’d just gotten used to the idea of being famous in England, of having paparazzi show up when they went to the shops for some milk or showing up in the papers when a tweet gets taken the wrong way; but that was in London, where X Factor news is crammed down the throats of the unsuspecting public daily. The five of them had been big news all through the winter as they’d finished the show and then signed their album deal and Harry had apparently dated some models and D-list singers he’d never actually met, and then they’d done the tour and garnered some more press for themselves. So, really, being considered a celebrity in England was weird but becoming more routine, just another way to describe them: Oh, that’s Harry, he’s got curly hair and green eyes and he was in that boy band on X Factor. They aren’t quite to the level where they have to worry about being mobbed at all times, or have their flat broken into or their phones hacked; really, they only get pap attention when management calls to arrange it and they tend to be able to get around without attracting too much attention. They are becoming more well known, though, their Twitter follower numbers skyrocketing as they begin teasing pictures and videos from recording the new album.

But this is an entirely different country, a country where they have their own version of X Factor to worry about and surely have more important things to do than obsess over a foreign boy band. Harry is shocked when a small crowd is waiting for them at the airport when they land, and then an even larger group waiting and screaming outside their hotel. (Or, at least, he’s shocked until he finds out from a thin-lipped Louis that management had let their hotel location ‘leak’ to a Swedish fan on Twitter with thousands of followers and who, mysteriously enough, tweeted a few days after they’d arrived that she was loving her signed merch package from the newly created 1DHQ.) Liam got chased by a crowd of shrieking girls one morning when he was out for a jog, and now has to keep his training to the hotel gym or go for a run ridiculously early in the morning if he wants to avoid that nightmare again. Louis and Niall tried to sneak out for some McDonalds one night with their hoods covering their faces, and were fine until they made it to the restaurant and took their jackets off, thinking they were safe. (They weren’t; Niall’d had to hide in the bathroom to call security while Louis barricaded himself in a booth, bombarded by shrieking girls brandishing cameras and greeting him by his full name, all-seeing eyes watching for any sign that a Marker had appeared while he signed napkin after napkin.) Worried for their safety, the security team asks them to stay in the hotel or the recording studio at all times unless they have a full escort.

The fans aren't the only new thing about this trip: suddenly, the boys have an entourage, a little band of people meant to keep them out of trouble and make sure they don't do or say or wear anything too
ridiculous. They’ve got regular security guys now, familiar faces working to keep them safe. They have a tour manager, Paul, whose rough brogue becomes the morning alarm making the boys get up. They even have a stylist and a hairdresser. It’s strange but it’s nice, almost like a little family-away-from-home as they settle in Sweden for a month of recording.

So they fall into a routine with the fans and their new team, and the recording of *Up All Night* begins.

They have studio time every weekday morning and some weekend afternoons, a full five to six hours with Savan and Rami where they perfect harmonies and solos before hopping into the booth one at a time to record. For the first few days they were all wide-eyed at the process, watching breathlessly as Liam was the first to make his nervous way into the booth, sliding headphones over his *curly* hair (which was new, something he’d convinced the stylists to let him try when the hour-long sessions with the flatiron every morning got to be a bit tiring) and taking a few deep breaths before the music flooded the room and his headphones, and he started belting those first few lines of *What Makes You Beautiful*.

It’s been over a month of recording now, off and on, and it’s like they’re all old professionals. They make their sleepy way from the hotel to the studio every morning, Savan calls someone into the booth to record, and the other four spend their time goofing off or rehearsing the next song until it’s their turn to sing.

Well, all except Louis.

Louis, so far, hasn’t had any solos in any of the songs they’ve recorded. Nothing in the first single, but he seemed okay with that because he was a main part of the chorus and Niall didn’t have a solo either. But then they recorded the next one, *Gotta Be You*, and no solo in that one either; in fact, the only parts Louis and Niall had at all in that one were the *hey hey hey* in the background. Then they did *Up All Night*, then *Taken, Same Mistakes, I Wish*, and suddenly half the album is recorded and Louis has done next to nothing. Niall hasn’t gotten many solos either, but Savan lets him play guitar on lots of the tracks and, he quietly tells Harry one night, he’s okay with the other boys taking the lead because his guitar is his strength, even though he’s been working with Savan to strengthen his vocals so he’s more confident. Louis can play the *piano*, but there isn’t really any room for that in any of the songs so far so he’s stuck mulling over his lack of involvement while the others get to have fun.

“Who’s that fifth member of One Direction?” he asks mockingly under his breath one day as Liam steps into the booth to record the opening for yet another song. “Oh, nobody knows, he’s just the flamboyant one with the stupid dagger, he doesn’t matter.”

But it’s the Monday after a long weekend of promo, lots of magazine and newspaper articles about the single and they’d even called in and talked to The Breakfast Show on Radio 1 at one point just to make sure all the people back home remembered them, and Louis has just found out he’s got the main vocal in a duet verse with Zayn in *One Thing*. It’s his first time recording on his own without the other boys’ voices blending and softening his (since Liam and Harry usually record their parts first, as Savan seems determined to build the album around them). Louis is shaking as he sets the headphones over his ears, fixing his fringe nervously.

Harry doesn’t know what would be better for himself and the other three to do at this point—Louis is so anxious the paper in his hands is crinkling in his shaking fist, and he may not want anyone to hear his first few attempts until he gets over his nerves. On the other hand, Louis thrives under pressure and always wants to be the center of attention, so if they ignore him he may take it as them not caring. Harry is wracked with indecision, nervous on Louis’ behalf as Savan cues up the music.

Louis stares hard down at the lyrics sheet, his quick four lines highlighted and circled. Savan presses
play, the music starts... and Louis doesn’t sing. Savan clicks the button for the microphone so Louis can hear him through the headphones.

“Remember your cue?” Savan asks. Louis shoots him a thumbs up. “Alright then, we’ll try this again.”

The music plays, the cue comes and goes, and Louis stays silent.

“What’s up, Lou?” Savan asks, a little bit of irritation creeping into his voice. Niall, who was plucking out the melody for Save You Tonight while Liam harmonized along, sets down his guitar, everyone fully paying attention to the unfolding scene now when before it was really just Harry and Savan. Louis gulps, wipes his forehead.

“Nothing, I. Um. Again, can I try again?” he stutters, voice cracking. Zayn shoots Harry a worried look.

The music starts, the cue comes, and this time Louis sings, but it’s a little off tempo and rushed, Louis’ usually clear voice shaky and small. It’s quiet in the room when he finishes his few lines, and even Liam is biting his lip in concern. Louis’ glance flickers around at them all through the glass, taking in their careful expressions.

“I can try again,” Louis says, scrubbing a fretful hand through his hair. “I can do better, let me try again.”

Savan nods, playing the music. This time is even worse, Louis stumbling through the words and waving his hand halfway through for Savan to shut off the music. His eyes are shiny when he stares up at the ceiling, clearly frustrated at himself.

Harry sneaks across the room to Savan, who looks confused. “Hey, how do you start the music?” Harry asks quietly. Savan points to a button on the massive soundboard, raising an eyebrow. “Can you give us a minute? I won’t press anything but that button, I swear.”

Rami looks like he’s about to protest, but Savan knows Louis and Harry’s dynamic well enough that he simply steps aside, gesturing for Rami to follow him out. Liam catches Harry’s eye and nods without a word, herding Zayn and Niall out as well. Then it’s just Harry at the soundboard and Louis in the booth, wiping angrily at his eyes.

“Lou, babe,” Harry says quietly into the mic. “Just you and me, yeah?”

“This is so stupid,” Louis mutters, brushing away more tears. “I know it’s stupid, but I can’t stop freaking out.”

“There’s no one here you have to impress,” Harry reminds him gently. “We all love you, and we all know you can sing. There’s no reason for you to stress.”

“Reason has nothing to do with it,” Louis says bitterly. “Maybe you should take this solo. Clearly you wouldn’t have a breakdown while trying to sing the first couple of lines that get tossed your way.”

Harry stays quiet for a minute, letting Louis take in a few deep, uninterrupted breaths. “Hey, remember after our very first live show together? When I was going through my anxiety mess and you forced me to get out of bed and into the shower and made me face things rather than hiding?” Louis nods. “That was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, but I think if you hadn’t been there then things would be so, so different right now. But you said... you said that you believed in me, and you believed in us, and you believed in the band. Do you still believe in me?”
“Yeah, of course.”

“And do you still believe in us? The dream team? Hashtag Larry Stylinson?”

Louis cracks the tiniest of smiles. “Yeah.”

“And do you believe in the band?”

“Definitely.”

“Well, if you believe in us and you believe in the band, then you believe in yourself, because you are a necessary part of both of those things. But I know, stuff like that can make sense in theory but not translate so well when you’re feeling bad about yourself. So, here’s the deal. You believe in me, and I believe in you.” He stares through the glass at Louis, holding his gaze. “I have so much faith in you, Lou. I think if you wanted to run the world, I’d be the first to swear allegiance because no one could stand against you and make it out alive. And I think that if you talked to Savan, you’d get as many solos as you wanted, because Liam and I have gotten our share and this isn’t a two-man band. But right now you’ve got these few lines, and Savan said this will probably be a single later this year, so it’s time for you to unleash that Tommo vocal power you know you have.”

Louis closes his eyes, fixes his fringe again, and nods. “Okay. Play the music.”

Harry hits the button, the music plays, and Louis sings.

It’s still scratchy where usually his voice is crystal clear, but it’s stronger than before and he catches the emotion perfectly, the happiness bleeding through every syllable.

“That was amazing, Lou,” Harry beams. “One more?”

Louis does it again, then another, closing his eyes and laying his lyrics sheet to the side as he sings out his piece. Harry starts offering quiet, nonchalant suggestions.

"I think you can hit those last words a little lower, wanna try?"

“That break in the middle of I need you here with me was perfect, Lou.”

"Can you push a little louder? Like, the diaphragm thing Savan taught us?"

Louis furrows his brow at Harry through the glass, resting his hand a little too low on his stomach. "Here?"

“Nah, like,” Harry demonstrates with his own hand, resting below his ribs so he can feel his diaphragm move up and down as he breathes. Louis squints through the glass, moving his hand up and, this time, going a little too high. “No,” Harry shakes his head, but it’s too hard to demonstrate so he steps through the door to the recording booth, moving behind Louis without a second thought. He presses his chest to Louis’ back, sliding one arm around his waist and grabbing his hip, resting the other hand over Louis’ smaller one over his diaphragm, feeling his heartbeat thud and his breathing quicken.

Harry clears his throat as Louis removes the headphones, laying them aside. “Sing,” Harry instructs lowly, so Louis sings his part without music into the silence of the booth, clear and careful. Harry rests his chin on Louis’ shoulder, tracing the shell of his ear with the tip of his nose. “Again,” he murmurs, and Louis shivers but complies. Harry softly sings Zayn’s higher harmony along with him, breathing against his neck.
This is the closest they’ve been in weeks, their best-friends-only vow still in place until Harry sorts his shit out (and he’s trying, he’s trying so hard to be genuine and sure about what he’s doing, and most of the time he looks at Louis and sees everything he’s ever needed wrapped up in a tailored-for-Harry package. But sometimes he hears *Isn’t She Lovely* in his head and feels pangs over that soulmate still waiting out there for him, because if Harry chooses Louis he’s choosing the fate of his soulmate as well, making them stay Unbonded without him, and it’s so hard. They don’t really cuddle anymore, or hold hands, or give long, lingering hugs for no reason other than that they want to; it’s too confusing, too tantalizing to just give up any pretense of trying to figure themselves out and fall back together like they did so naturally to begin with. But Harry’s body has missed Louis’, the way they fit like fate intended it.

So they sing *One Thing* to each other in the quiet recording booth: nothing but their voices twining together, no music or Liam’s falsetto between them, and every note is perfect. Harry knows that not every love song is about them, but somehow they also *are* all about them at the same time; Louis had called *What Makes You Beautiful* vapid in a catchy way when they’d heard it the first time, and *One Thing* is the same format (what is the one thing? How is the mysterious recipient of the song supposed to know she has it if it’s so undefinable?), but *I need you here with me now* has never sounded more true than it does when Harry sings it into Louis’ skin.

Louis is completely relaxed against Harry’s front, his breathing even as he sings his lines and the chorus again and again, his voice sure and confident in a way Harry hasn’t heard in months. And Harry could stay with him like this forever, pressed together and whispering how wonderful Louis is right into his ear, but they also sort of have an album to record and an antsy couple of producers who want to wrap things up quickly, so Harry taps his fingers on Louis’ stomach before he can start his verse again.

“Wanna know what your one thing is, Lou?” Harry asks teasingly. Louis breathes a laugh, resting his head back against Harry’s shoulder.

“What’s that, then?”

“Your bum,” Harry answers, grabbing Louis’ arse with both hands before running out of the booth, cackling. Louis screeches, affronted, but he’s grinning and his cheeks are still red when Harry leads the rest of the group back into the studio room.

“Ready, Louis?” Savan asks, and Louis nods, exchanging a small grin with Harry before settling the headphones back over his ears.

It only takes one try. Louis nails it.

...
as he steps out of the booth and throws himself into Harry’s lap. Harry *oofs* in surprise, but wraps his arms around Louis’ waist anyway, pulling him close. Louis doesn’t move for the rest of their time in the studio, reveling in being able to touch Harry again without wondering if he’s ruined everything good and pure about him.

They don’t even separate when it’s time to head back to the hotel, where they’ll spend a few hours off before they have another scheduled interview with a Swedish newspaper. Louis clasps his and Harry’s hands together as they walk down the long studio hallways and to the elevator. It isn’t until he can see out the front door and notices the conspicuous group of teenage girls lingering just outside that he drops Harry’s hand, adjusting his shirt and ruffling his fringe.

One of their security guys, Preston, pulls them into a group just as the girls outside notice them and rush to the door, waving frantically. “The vans are a little late,” he says apologetically, “but the boss says this would be a good opportunity to do some fanservice and sign some stuff.”

Zayn stiffens a little, never really too fond of being thrown into a crowd with no escape route. “I sort of wanted to go shopping,” he says, “can I do that instead?”

“Take Rob with you,” Preston nods, gesturing for another of their security team to come over. Liam volunteers to go with him, and they sneak with Rob out a side door. Louis, Harry, and Niall exchange nods and deep breaths, then they follow Preston out onto the street and into the giddy cloud of shrieks and hairspray waiting for them.

There are only about fifteen or so girls there, but when each one is louder than the last it can get a bit draining, especially with the added jolt Louis can see run through Harry and Niall’s limbs each time one of the girls greets them with “Harry Styles!” or “Niall Horan!” Eventually, though, everything is signed, and everyone has said the three boys’ names and confirmed they aren’t soulmates (and some of them ask desperately after Liam and Zayn, as though they realize those two are their last shots at potentially Bonding with One Direction).

Louis and Niall had slowly led the group away from the front door and toward a couple of benches, and by the time everything has been signed and all the pictures have been taken, the three of them are seated, looking up at the smiling girls. Soon, the girls start realizing that they aren’t being rushed off to another location and Preston isn’t herding the fans away, so they start to grow more bold and less screechy.

“Niall,” one asks in a lilting accented voice, “can you talk to my friend on the phone? She loves you.”

“Harry, will you sign my shoe?” another asks.

“Can we hear one of your new songs?” begs another.

A couple of the girls in the group are the kind who that just stand back and record the boys’ every move, but Louis can’t really bring himself to care this time.

He’s in Sweden recording an album, it’s a glorious sunny day, he’s got the best boy in the world by his side, and in just a few days they’re headed back to London and their lovely new flat they can decorate with the knick knacks and some artwork they’d found while they were here.

So Louis slides his arm along the top of the bench, just brushing Harry’s shoulders. Harry notices, brightening a little as he turns to smile at Louis, trailing a hand up Louis’ arm as he whispers quietly “Not so bad this time, is it?”
Harry leans forward to sign the girl’s shoe when she asks again and Louis lets his arm rest along the back of the bench, tilting his head back to bask in the sunlight. Apparently that’s when Zayn and Liam decide it’s safe enough to come back, attracting the attention of all the girls. Liam waves a little but follows Zayn to sit by Preston while Zayn puts on his Mysterious Brooding Model mask that tends to keep people away. The little crowd is so distracted by the new arrivals that no one even reacts when Harry leans back against Louis’ arm, laying his head on his shoulder.

Well, no one except Louis, who can’t help but stroke his hand along Harry’s arm just to feel him shiver.

It’s a beautiful day in Sweden, and all is right with the world.

8 June 2011

Or, well, Louis thought everything was right with the world.

Louis and Harry spend the short flight from Stockholm back to London listening to Harry’s iPod and playing ruthless games of naughts and crosses in Harry’s journal. Harry serenades Louis with Temper Trap songs, our blood’s still young hummed soft in Louis’ ear as Liam and Niall sleep across from them and Zayn reads a small stack of comics on Louis’ other side.

Louis’ phone pings with new texts and tweets when he switches it back on as the plane touches down in London, and he scrolls through messages from his mum and Stan before he reads one that makes his heart drop into his stomach.

(4:42 p.m.) Claudia (Management): You are expected at Fountain Studios for a meeting as soon as you arrive back in London. Security will bring you. Come alone.

Fountain is quiet and dark even under the summer sun, which never bodes well. It can only mean that Modest or Simon or their new PR people from HJPR are here specifically for him rather than calling him in while another event is happening. He wants to go home to Harry, to be in their flat for
just a little while and relax for just a second instead of being marched up the studio stairs like he’s never been here before. Preston is a nice enough dude but he’s got a death grip on Louis’ arm like he’s been warned he might make a break for it (which is definitely possible, Louis had thought long and hard about running when the car door opened before Preston got a good hold on him).

Apparently this is a big meeting, as Louis gets steered to the largest conference room and, yep, there’s old Magee and Griffiths and Jones and Hackford for the PR stuff and dozens of twittering assistants and interns and Claudia on her phone and there’s a screen up on the wall with something already paused and this is just great, a wonderful way to be welcomed back to London.

“Ah, Louis,” Magee says like he isn’t some kind of life ruining vampire, “Take a seat, please.”

Maybe if Louis just stays quiet, doesn’t snap back or roll his eyes, he can get the lecture over with quickly and be on his merry way.

“We need to discuss a few image issues that have arisen since we spoke last.”

Well, Louis has never really been good at biting his tongue.

“Image issues, eh?” he asks lightly. “Did I forget to match my shoes and my belt again? I’m always forgetting, silly me.”

“Right,” Griffiths says, ignoring him completely, “Hackford and Jones’ team have compiled some recent events that need to be addressed.”

“Can we just assume that I’m sorry for all of them and will be a good little boy from now on?”

Silence echoes, Griffiths and Magee stony-faced and unamused, and Simon Jones clears his throat awkwardly before pushing a button on his laptop and starting the video on the screen.

It’s exactly what Louis thought it would be, Stan dancing on screen to their version of *Forever Young* in a French ski resort apartment. The video has been enhanced, lightened and slowed a little, and when the Louis on screen leans forward to laugh there’s a bright purple dildo next to him on the sofa.

Jones stops the video, clicks again. A set of tweets appears, where a girl had tweeted Harry for April Fools Day saying bad news, Louis is breaking up with you and he replied with that better be a joke. He clicks again, and there’s a video of their last tour performance in Cardiff, Harry throwing his arms around Louis’ shoulders and hugging him tightly as they sing the final song. There’s Louis’ tweet of I love Harry more than you from when they were in France, there’s his one calling Harry baby cakes, there’s one from his mum about Louis going home to his soulmate tomorrow the day before he and Harry moved in together.

There’s a shaky video of Harry and Louis on a bench in Sweden, Louis’ arm around Harry’s shoulders.

It’s silent again when the video from Sweden stops, the room frozen.

“You can see how all of this looks when it’s put together,” Hackford says carefully. He’s Bonded, Louis notices distantly, a Marker that looks to be a phrase in Italian wrapped around his wrist like a bracelet. Louis wonders what Hackford would do if he was told to stay away from his soulmate and act like he doesn’t love them; wonders what any of them would do, really. If Griffiths and Magee and Claudia even have soulmates, or if they’re some kind of human evolution with no souls at all, no empathy or morality.
“I can’t pretend Harry doesn’t exist,” Louis says finally, his voice shaky. “We are in the same band, after all.”

“There is a massive difference in the way you treat Mr. Styles—”

“Don’t use his last name, you haven’t earned that—”

“—versus how you treat, for instance, Mr. Horan. Or Mr. Payne, or Mr. Malik.”

“We know you think there isn’t any sort of effect your actions have on the band or the One Direction brand,” Jones says. “But that is completely false. Same-sex Bonding may have recently become legal and more acceptable, that doesn’t mean everyone has suddenly become okay with homosexual relationships. The more you two act as though you are Bonded, the less support the band will get from people who don’t accept that type of relationship.”

“And, along that same line,” Magee continues, “even if there is no evidence of you and Mr. Styles being in a relationship, your… shall we call it flamboyance? Your mannerisms have made many people assume things about your sexuality and relationship preferences even if they have no proof.”

“You can be trained out of those,” Griffiths dismisses. “It’s the interaction with Mr. Styles we are concerned about. Any time you so much as hint at a relationship between the two of you, you lose fans.”

“You think we can’t punish you for not listening to us,” Magee says gravely, “and that’s where you’re wrong—if push comes to shove, there are more intense alternatives that don’t just involve linking Mr. Styles with models who want a little bit of publicity.”

If there’s such a thing as emotional assassination, it’s just been performed on Louis.

But he won’t cry. He won’t. He swore ages back, after that first meeting with Magee and Griffiths, that he’d never let them see cracks in his armor. He’s too proud and stubborn, but he also just can’t give them the satisfaction of knowing they caused him to react. And so Louis stands, working valiantly to keep the tears from falling as he clears his throat.

“I understand,” he says shortly, stoutly. “Are we done?”

Magee gives him a long, searching look. “I believe we are. We’ll be in touch.”

Louis doesn’t let him finish before exiting the room as quickly as he can, wiping his eyes as soon as the door closes. He doesn’t even notice anyone else in the hallway until he’s already upon them, his head low as he collides with someone tall and wearing sparkly peach heels.

“Louis?” comes Rebecca’s soft Scouse-accented voice. “Y’alright, love?”

Louis shoots her a watery smile. “Yeah, hey Bex. I gotta, I’m sorry—”

He runs past her, ignoring her call of “Louis!”

Three hours later, he’s on his mum’s doorstep in Doncaster.
London is alive and bustling, the summer warmth soaking in as people rush from shops to taxis to the tube to home, wherever that is for them. Harry delights in being among them, he and Niall moving with the crowd as they trot their way to Tesco, stocking up on food and supplies after more than a month away from the flat.

“Is it weird, being able to say you have a flat?” Niall asks, chomping on a handful of pretzels that they haven’t paid for yet and scandalizing an old lady who’s watching them pile more and more bags of crisps and varieties of meat into their basket. “On account of you being seventeen and all.”

“No, yeah, I got why it might be weird,” Harry chuckles, weighing two different options of apples in his hands and then shrugging, tossing both of them inside the cart. “I guess it is, a little. But not really, ’cause we had all of five days there and then we left for Sweden, so it was more like staying at a hotel than anything else.”

Niall hums, already distracted by a display for frozen pizzas. Harry’s phone chimes and he pulls it from his pocket, trying to keep an eye on Niall as he pushes the cart and reads the text from Zayn at the same time.

(3:28 p.m.) **Zayner:** hey mate u heard from lou?

Harry frowns, calling ahead to Niall, “Hey, Ni, did Lou text you?”

“Nah, mate, I got nothing. Why?”

“Dunno,” Harry answers, typing the same back to Zayn. The uneasy feeling in his stomach doesn’t settle when Zayn replies.

(3:29 p.m.) **Harry:** Nope, he didn’t text me or Niall. What’s up? Thought he was with you. x

(3:31 p.m.) **Zayner:** don’t really kno yet. tell u when u get home.

“That’s ominous,” Niall comments darkly from over Harry’s shoulder.

They agree they’ve probably got enough food for several lifetimes and pay quickly, throwing their haul into a cab and directing the driver back to Princess Park. They struggle to the manor’s private lift with armfuls of bags, Harry having to drop several of them to the elevator floor to wrestle his key out of his pocket so they can take the lift straight into the kitchen.

Liam and Zayn are there when the elevator doors part, grabbing bags and helping to carry them to the table. Zayn hops up to sit on the counter next to the fridge, expression a little troubled, and Liam leans up next to him, his arms folded. Harry, suddenly nervous, starts unpacking groceries and putting them away just to have something to do.

“So?” he asks, clearing his throat. “Where’s Lou?”

“Well,” Liam says carefully, exchanging a look with Zayn. “We don’t really know.”

Harry turns around at that, container of ice cream still in hand as the refrigerator door hangs wide open. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“We don’t know,” Zayn repeats. “We thought he was taking the taxi with the luggage and following us here, but when the car got here he wasn’t in it, just the bags.”

“Okay,” Niall says slowly. “So where did he go?”
Liam and Zayn exchange another look, and Harry almost throws the ice cream at them. “Well, apparently he was at Fountain Studios. And, erm.” Liam flicks a glance up to Harry. “Rebecca had a meeting with Simon and some people from management, and she ran into Louis while he was on the way out of the room with all of them.”

Harry’s stomach clenches.

“She texted me as soon as she saw him,” Zayn says cautiously. “And, Hazza, don’t panic, but he was crying pretty badly.”

“Shit,” Harry whispers.

“And he’s not answering his phone now,” Liam adds, “so we don’t really know where he is.”

“Shit,” Niall echoes.

They take turns calling Louis’ phone for hours, only stopping when Louis’ voicemail is full and, coincidentally, Harry’s fingernails have been bitten so ragged that they hurt.

Liam convinces Harry that he’s probably fine, that he probably is just crashing with friends and needs a night to clear his head. Harry knows that’s bullshit but he still lets himself be led to the master bedroom, Zayn snuggling in on one side of him in the massive king-sized bed, Niall on the other.

Normally, their cuddle nights are Harry’s favorites. Tonight, though, he can’t get to sleep without the little loud one wrapped around his back like usual, kicking in his sleep and basically being a nuisance but also making sure they’re all comfortable and happy before passing out.

Harry just hopes he’s okay, wherever he is.

9 June 2011

Harry gets a single text the next day, which calms the rational part of him that was worried Louis was dead in a ditch somewhere but infuriates the rest of him, which was hoping in vain that Louis’ phone had died and that he’d call as soon as he could for Harry to come join him wherever he’s hiding out from the world.

Apparently not.

(2:47 p.m.) Lou Bear: Hey Haz, needed a bit of a break from everything for a while . I’m fine, don’t worry. Be back before we’re scheduled at the studio xx

Harry throws his phone against the wall in frustration.

10 June 2011

“The thing is,” Harry fumes to Zayn as Liam and Niall have a shouting match over proper ping pong etiquette, “I know exactly where he is. He’s in Doncaster, I’d swear it on my life.”
“That’s what I figured too,” Zayn admits, throwing an empty beer can at Niall when he flicks Liam on the nose. “We’re the only people he knows in London unless he went to stay with Matt and Aiden again.”

“Tried that,” Harry says, huffing. “I went there yesterday and made them show me every room in their flat, just in case.” He should have suspected that’s who helped hide Louis the last time he ran away, because Rebecca would have told Harry right away and Mary and Cher had been on different floors of the hotel entirely.

“So go to Donny,” suggests Niall, who’s apparently been listening in and hasn’t let that affect his assault on Liam with the ping pong paddle. “He’ll take one look at that face and crumble, you know that. And I’m sure Jay’ll let you in, she loves you.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Liam chimes in, stealing Niall’s paddle and thwacking him in the head with it before returning to his spot to serve like nothing had happened.

Harry stands up. “I’m gonna go.”

“Good,” Zayn nods approvingly. “Take a shower first, though, you sort of reek.”

“And call Jay, just to make sure he didn’t convince them to go on a family vacation or something,” Liam says.

“And,” Niall says, casting around for something to add as well. “And pack condoms! Safety first, ‘n all that.”

“Wow,” Harry laughs, and it’s the first time he’s let himself do that in three days. “Thank you, Ni.”

Harry does call Jay while waiting for the one o’clock train to Doncaster, pacing restlessly until he’s able to board.

“Yeah, he’s here,” she says heavily. “I’ve been forbidden from calling any of you, but you called me so this doesn’t count. He’s been in a right state.”

“Is it… did he say why?” Harry hedges.

“Hasn’t said much of anything,” she admits. “He came home and went straight to bed. He gets like that when he’s in a mood and needs to think things over, it was the same after all that happened at your  
*
X Factor
*
 auditions.”


“Did he?” Jay asks distractedly. “Sorry H, think one of the girls is calling for me. But don’t worry, Lottie and I will work on getting him to talk on this end of things before you get here.”

“Thanks, Jay. You’re the best.”

“Don’t let your mother hear you say that,” she laughs, and they hang up just as the train is pulling away.
Harry passes the first part of the two hour trip watching the scenery flick by in a green blur outside the window and scribbling things in his journal. He’d been flipping through some bookmarked pages (passing the tattoo list; he’s been itching for more ink to join the star and the Hi on his skin but something is holding him back, even though Temper Trap lyrics have been calling out to him ever since the phrase refusing to surrender started hitting him a little more personally) when a circled line on a random page stuck out to him, something he’d written after one of their live show performances last October, something he’s pretty sure one of the judges said.

Something great.

There’s a half-finished couple of lines under the circled phrase, and Harry scratches out some more words to fill it out into something like lyrics as the train nears Doncaster and his frustration starts peaking again.

I need want you here with me, just like how I imagined pictured it
So I don’t have to imagine anything keep imagining

Is it too much to ask for something great?

Harry falls asleep somewhere near Peterborough, waking groggily when something buzzes insistently near his thigh. It takes a confused second to understand it’s his phone, and he nearly falls out of his seat trying to get it out of his pocket before it stops ringing.

“Hello?” he asks breathlessly.

“Hey, Haz,” Louis says quietly, his voice soft through the phone.

Harry lets out a breath he feels like he’s been holding for years. “Oh my God, Lou. You scared the shit out of me.” He looks up, realizing they must be close to the station as the train slows. He shoves his journal back into his bag and sits up, back cracking loudly from his funny sleeping angle.

“Yes, I’m sorry,” says Louis weakly. The train rolls to a stop as they sit in silence, Louis’ breath hitching like he’s trying not to cry. Harry’s not far off either, but he’s always been an unashamed weeper, unlike Louis who has always tried to hide his emotions away.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” he asks, breaking the silence as he grabs his bag and slings it over his shoulder, filing out behind a woman whose sleepy baby is watching Harry over her shoulder. Her Marker is bright on her outer forearm where she’s cradling the little boy, a blue star against her dark skin. Harry’s stomach jolts with that familiar I wish I wish but it’s weaker than usual and he easily tamps it down.

“Yeah,” Louis says again. “It’s stupid, I just…”

“But what?”

Harry spots Jay waiting for him down on the platform. She’s got dark circles under her eyes and Harry knows his probably match, and they hug and kiss each other’s cheeks like they’re survivors of the same war. He mouths Louis and points to the phone still attached to his ear (Louis still silent, like he’s formulating and strategizing what to say rather than just saying what Harry needs to hear: the fucking truth) and Jay looks relieved, nodding and waving for him to stay on the phone as she leads him out to her car.

“Lou?” Harry tries again. There’s an almighty sob in answer. “Oh, Lou, babe, don’t cry.”
“Can’t help it,” Louis sniffs. “Everything is just. It’s just. I’m so sorry to make you worry, but I thought it would be worse if I came back to the flat and tried to pretend everything was okay.”

“I don’t want you to pretend you’re okay,” Harry says fiercely. “I want you to be okay, and when you aren’t I want you to tell me why so I can fix it.”

“Not everything can be fixed, Hazza,” Louis says brokenly. Maybe Jay can hear him, or maybe she sees the complementary shattering of Harry’s expression, but either way she presses her foot to the gas a little harder, getting them back to the house a little quicker.

“Don’t know that if you don’t talk to me,” Harry says. “It was management again, wasn’t it?”

Louis breathes out, a whoosh against the phone’s mouthpiece and straight into Harry’s ear. “Yeah, it was. I don’t even really know if they had a specific purpose this time, they just basically told me to quit being so me and then sent me on my way again. Who told you, was it Rebecca?”

“She texted Zayn,” Harry admits. “But you can’t get mad at her, we didn’t know where you were at all and we were worried you’d been kidnapped or something.”

“I’m sorry,” Louis apologizes again, voice thick. “I’m sorry, I’m so—”

“Quit apologizing,” Harry pleads. “Just tell me—what do you mean, they told you to quit being you?”

“Y’know, the whole…” Harry can picture him, rolling his eyes to cover his hurt feelings, “flamboyant thing. They say I’m putting off a gay vibe and I’ll scare away the parents who won’t let their kids listen to anyone who’s not one hundred percent certified Unbonded and straight.”

“Those fuckers,” Harry snarls, and Jay growls wordlessly next to him in agreement. They take the next turn sharply, Louis’ house visible in the distance, his car parked outside. “That’s bullshit, you aren’t scaring anyone off. You’re everyone’s favorite, and they’d know that if they paid attention at all instead of panicking over tiny things like you and me looking at each other.”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s bullshit,” Louis argues. “They’re in charge, and we have a contract that says so. And it’s not just my mannerisms,” he spits like it’s a direct quote, and Harry is going to burn Fountain Studios to the ground, “it’s our tweets and our interviews and our concerts and the fucking dildo on the couch in that video of Stan from France. It’s our whole relationship, they say it’s wrong and maybe, I don’t know, maybe they’re fucking right? They’re the experts, yeah?” He bites off another sob and Harry does the same, the world going blurry as he blinks away tears. Jay pulls up in front of the house and Harry struggles to take off the seatbelt without moving the phone from his ear, fighting uselessly when the belt won’t unclick. Jay reaches over to help as Louis continues.

“You said that you didn’t realize our relationship is unfair to me, and it sort of is but it’s okay because it’s you and I love you and you didn’t start anything with me to hurt me, but I can’t,” Louis stops, breathes out harshly, and Harry stumbles out of the car, leaving Jay and his bag behind as he rushes up to the Tomlinsons’ front door. “I can’t help think that I’m ruining my love life, yeah, and that’s fine, whatever, I knew that part,” Louis sobs, “but what if I’m ruining the band, too?”

Harry bursts through the front door, startling all of Louis’ sisters, who are gathered on the stairs and trying to pretend they aren’t listening. Lottie looks like she’s been crying for days, red eyes puffy and free of her usual shaky teenage makeup. Harry takes the stairs two at a time, ending the call as he passes the girls and stalking to the third room on the left out of instinct, throwing open Louis’ bedroom door.
Louis is standing in the middle of his room, head buried in his hands and sobbing into his palms. His phone is on the ground between his feet like he'd dropped it there. Harry hurls his own phone on Louis’ bed, where it bounces off one of his pillows and goes careening off to places unknown. The sound startles Louis and he spins around, red-rimmed eyes wide.

“H-Harry,” he hiccupps, “I th-thought you hung up, I thought you were mad at me—”

“No, shut up, listen,” Harry says, moving forward and taking Louis’ face in his hands. His skin is hot, the tear tracks damp. “You are not ruining anything. You are the best person in my life, in anyone’s life, and if someone can’t see that then they’re fucking blind. I’m not going to let some ignorant old men dictate how we live our lives and tell us that this is wrong, because it’s not.”

Harry surges forward, kissing Louis desperately. Louis sobs, scrabbling at Harry’s shoulders to pull him closer. It’s desperate and sad and wonderful because it’s been so long and Harry wonders how he ever imagined a life without this, without Louis by his side in all things instead of just most of them.

And it’s like a puzzle, where the picture is there but all the pieces are messed up and have to be rotated and rearranged until everything becomes clear: Harry kisses Louis and everything makes sense, everything fits exactly how it’s supposed to.

Harry pulls away from Louis’ mouth with a gasp. “I love you, I love you so much.” He dives in again, tasting the soft sound of astonishment Louis makes. “And it’s more than it was before, because you’re still my best friend but I’m pretty fucking sure you’re my other half too, and I don’t care that you’re not my soulmate because I found you all on my own. I need you, I can’t be happy without you.”

Louis pulls back, his lip wobbling, and he says the hardest thing Harry’s ever had to hear.

“I’m sorry I’m not your soulmate.”

“Shut up,” Harry says, teary-eyed again. “I don’t need any stupid Marker to tell me who I love. I can decide on my own.” He pushes up his sleeve, baring his *Hi* tattoo, rubbing a thumbs over Louis’ *oops!* as well. “I don’t need to be pointed towards someone perfect when you’ve been here the whole time.”

Louis looks closer to breaking now than he did when Harry walked in. “Are you sure? Be sure, Haz. Don’t take this away later because you don’t mean it.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” Harry answers firmly, kissing Louis again.

…

Jay comes upstairs eventually and finds Harry and Louis fast asleep and cuddled together on top of Louis’ duvet, too exhausted by emotional revelations and nights apart from each other to stay awake a moment longer.

She snaps a picture and sends it in a group text message to Anne and Gemma, and then opens her group message with Liam, Niall, and Zayn and sends it to them as well.
(5:17 p.m.) **Jay:** [picture attached]

(5:17 p.m.) **Jay:** I think we're okay.

(5:21 p.m.) **Anne:** Precious boys xxx Hopefully they’ve finally got it all sorted now.

(5:23 p.m.) **Jay:** I don’t think it’ll be easy, but I think they’re on the right track.

(5:24 p.m.) **Gemma:** At least they’re in the same place now, nothing good ever comes from them being apart. x

(5:17 p.m.) **Jay:** [picture attached]

(5:18 p.m.) **Jay:** everything is good here.

(5:18 p.m.) **Zayn:** thaaanks jay. can u keep us updated on when they’re coming back to londn? we can stall recording for a bit if we need to. xx

(5:20 p.m.) **Liam:** yeh ive got sum solos to record if they need sum mre time

(5:22 p.m.) **Niall:** why r we not discussin how cute this is?? im settin it as m wallpaper on m phone!!!

…

Louis wakes to warmth against the side of his face, something tickling his nose. He blinks blearily, the familiar shadows of his room at night coming into focus. His cheek is against Harry’s shoulder, Harry’s head tilted to rest on top of his, his curls falling across Louis’ forehead.

He shifts a little, wiggling carefully out from underneath Harry and sliding out of bed, slipping on some Toms he finds nearby and sneaking downstairs.

It’s June but it’s still chilly when the sun goes down, so Louis grabs an old blanket off the back of the sofa and wraps it around him, stepping out into the backyard. There’s an open space in the middle of the grassy expanse, right between the old swing set that had been set up for Louis years ago but was then passed down to each subsequent sister as they each outgrew it, and Louis’ old football goal he’d asked for for Christmas when he was nine to practice his free kicks.

Louis sits, the crispness of the air helping to wake him up as he leans back, idly examining the stars overhead.

It’s been a rollercoaster of a day, especially since Louis had planned on spending it doing absolutely nothing but wallowing just like he has the past few days, wrapped up in his duvet and refusing to leave his room. But then Lottie had barged in and talked about school and *EastEnders* and Fizzy stealing her new boots until Louis had sat up with a groan, and then their mum had joined them to coax Louis downstairs for some food.

He would have refused, but he could smell bacon and his stomach had rumbled something fierce, so he gave in.

Lottie and Jay talked at him, all through breakfast, about how exciting things seemed to be recording the new album, about Liam’s daily texts to the families about their schedules and appearances, asking question after question about their time in Stockholm. Louis had let himself be cheered up incrementally, finally relenting and telling the story of how Niall had gotten stuck in an elevator and they’d almost convinced him to open the escape hatch and climb up the ropes like *Toy Story 2* when the power had reset and he got out of the elevator the normal way.
“And then he’d thought we’d done it on purpose, which is stupid because if I knew how to shut off elevators I’d plan a better prank than that, and Harry—” He’d stopped abruptly, stomach churning unhappily.

Jay had sighed, grabbing his hand. “He’s probably worried about you,” she’d said. “You need to tell him where you are.”

“I texted him yesterday,” Louis mumbled, avoiding her eyes. “He knows I’m okay.”

“I doubt he believes it,” Jay said. “You ran off and left without telling him and turned your phone off so he couldn’t check on you, I bet he hasn’t stopped worrying this whole time.”

That had led to Louis staring guiltily at his phone for a solid couple of hours, picking it up and hovering his finger over Harry’s number before locking it and pushing it away again. Over and over again, back and forth, until the guilt in Louis’ lungs overwhelmed the embarrassment at running away again and the fear that maybe this time it went too far, and Harry won’t want to deal with him and his shit anymore.

Then he called, and he cried, and he said things that he wished he didn’t mean but he really, really did, things about ruining everything because he loves Harry too much, and then Harry was there, and he was saying things too only everything he said was wonderful.

They’d kissed until Louis couldn’t breathe and then just a little more, but then Harry had pulled him onto the bed to lay down, face to face, and the stress and fear and anger and sadness and everything else that had been weighing on Louis’ shoulders had dragged him into sleep, Harry following shortly after.

And now he’s here, trying to sort out the confused swirl of thoughts inside his head, but at least they aren’t all tinted rage red anymore like they have been for days, and now he’s got thoughts like the way Harry’s eyelashes flutter when he sleeps to counteract how much he wants to punch Harry Magee and Richard Griffiths in the face.

He’s spent a lot of his time over the last few days trying desperately not to think, but sometimes he slipped up. And so it’s not like he was prepared for Harry to come and declare his more-than-best-friend love for him in the most emotional way possible, but now that that’s actually happened (and all of Louis’ dreams have come true) he has a few ideas on how this whole thing should go so they don’t end up even more broken than before. Now he just needs to get Harry to agree.

Like he could hear his name in Louis’ thoughts, quiet feet whisper over grass and then Harry is there, settling behind Louis and spreading his legs on either side of Louis’ hips, his chin tucked over Louis’ shoulder.

“Whatcha doing?” he asks, sleepy voice little more than a rumble.

“Thinking,” Louis answers, leaning back. Harry hums and wraps his arms around Louis’ belly. His toes tap at Louis’ ankles, which are exposed thanks to the ancient sweatpants he’d found at the bottom of his wardrobe that he’s pretty sure haven’t fit since he was eleven and hadn’t yet grown into his arse.

“Brought you clothes,” Harry says. “Forgot to tell you before we fell asleep. Figured you probably didn’t pack before you left.”

Louis wants to be able to say he packed perfectly fine because he is a fully functioning adult, thank you very much, but, “I tried to. Got all the way here with one oatmeal-colored sweater, five pairs of
socks, and those yellow swim trunks of yours.”

Harry snorts a laugh into Louis’ neck. “Knew it.”

They’re quiet for another minute. “We didn’t, um,” Louis starts hesitantly, “Didn’t get a chance to do this before, but I was thinking we could talk? About, like,” he waves his hands. “Expectations, and stuff.”

Harry shifts a little. “I don’t really have any expectations, to be honest.”

“Should I do mine first, then?” Louis asks. “See if we agree?”

“Go ahead.”

“Right,” Louis starts, hunkering down in Harry’s arms. He’s not even wearing a shirt and seems fine, but Louis is fully clothed and wrapped in blanket and warm boy and is still shivering. Harry notices, he always notices, so he unwraps Louis’ blanket cocoon and wraps it around both of them, so it’s like sharing it with a space heater. Louis makes a happy noise in his throat before getting back to business. “Um, okay. So first, I don’t think we necessarily need to, like, hide our relationship, especially not just around the boys or our families or whatever, but maybe around fans? And in interviews, obviously, because that would be pretty unprofessional.”

“Hide, like in what way?” Harry asks slowly. “I won’t ignore you.”

“No, don’t do that, that would drive me mad,” Louis says without thinking. “That’s awful. But, um, maybe just acting more like we do with the other boys. Less touchy, if we can help it. Just enough that we’re still us but we can also fall under the ‘bromance’ label if anyone pushes us to comment on it.”

“So like we were during the tour,” Harry says. “No kissing or hand holding or anything romantic outside of the bus or private places.”

“Yeah,” Louis says, relieved. “Exactly like that. And, um.”

“Just say it,” Harry says easily. “I doubt anything you’ve thought up could make me angry, I’m sure you’ve got your reasons.”

“Yeah, I know you wouldn’t get mad it’s just… embarrassing,” Louis says, squirming a little. “Um. So, like, the thing we did that set off this whole… debacle. Back at the flat—”

“Frottage,” Harry inserts helpfully, not a hint of shame in him. “I looked it up, it’s called frottage. Or dry humping, but the word hump is gross and that was not gross.”

Louis coughs. “Yeah. Yeah, that. I think we should take it slow with things, you know, like that. Physical stuff.”

Harry’s quiet for a second. “Is there a reason behind that, or is this for my benefit? I’m not gonna change my mind, Lou.”

“No, it’s not that,” Louis reassures him. He looks heavenward for a second. “I’ve had a lot of sex, honestly. I had a single mum who worked a lot so I had the house to myself often if I wanted to invite people over, and I went to parties with Stan pretty regularly from about age fifteen on. I know how to do hookups, one night stands and stuff. I’m even pretty decent at them—never been kicked out the next morning, usually I could stay friends with them. I’m good at casual relationships. Well, except for ours,” he grins, nudging Harry with his elbows. “I failed pretty spectacularly at keeping
“I’m okay with that,” Harry huffs a laugh into Louis’ neck.

Louis chuckles. “I bet. What I’m saying, though, is that I’ve never really done sex in real relationships. I had people I slept with more than once, but I never really dated them because I had no intention of Bonding. I’m afraid that we’ll start doing more serious stuff and I’ll fall into that same mentality, and I don’t want to treat you like a one night stand. You mean so much more to me than that, and I don’t want to screw things up.”

“I… I get that,” Harry says slowly. “I’m sort of coming at this from the opposite way, because you’re the only one I’ve ever done anything with.” Heat flares in Louis’ cheeks, his palms itching. He rubs a slow circle over Harry’s knee, trying to make the gesture less possessive than it feels in his head. “So I trust you.”

Louis breathes out. “Good.”

“If you take too long to get to the good stuff, though, I will complain,” Harry warns, laughing. “I’m gonna want parts of you inside parts of me, like, soon.”

“Christ,” Louis groans, covering his face. “I’ve created a monster.”

Harry laces their fingers together, grinning into the nape of Louis’ neck. “Do you have more? We seem to be on the same page so far.”

“Just one,” Louis says, “and you’re not going to like it.”

Harry shifts, like he’s preparing for a physical blow. “Okay. Go.”

Louis breathes in. “When you Bond to someone else, I’m taking a step back and taking myself out of the picture.”

The wind shakes the branches of the tree nearby. Otherwise, everything in the world seems silent, like everyone everywhere is holding their breath. Harry is motionless.

“No,” he croaks finally. “No, I don’t like that one.”

“I don’t care,” Louis says. He untangles their fingers and turns in Harry’s lap so they’re facing each other, the blanket still around their shoulders. “If you can’t agree to this I’m done, right now.”

“Lou, that’s not fair,” Harry says, looking hurt. “I chose you, I want you. I don’t need that other person.”

“But they may need you,” Louis says gently, grabbing one of Harry’s hands and squeezing it between both of his. “I’m not going to be the one to make you choose between your best friend and your soulmate. When that person comes along—”

“If they come along—” Harry interjects sullenly.

“Okay, if they come along,” Louis allows, “I will go back to being just your best friend. It’ll be awkward, but we’ve gotten through some awkward stuff before. I just can’t be the one to take away your future when I know how much you’ve always wanted all of that, the soulmate and the family and the super cheesy, grossly romantic Bonding ceremony.” He grins weakly, cuffing Harry’s chin lightly. “It’s not to hurt you, it’s to keep from hurting you. You’re already giving up enough to be with me.”
“What about your soulmate?” Harry asks softly. “I don’t know if I can promise the same thing. I don’t know if I’ll be able to let you go just for someone else’s sake.”

Louis’ stomach jolts sadly. “We’ll deal with that if it comes, I s’pose.”

Harry hums quietly. “That’s… that’s gonna take me some time to wrap my head around. But I’ll try.”

“Good. I think- I think it’s a good idea.”

Harry hums again. “Is that all you’ve got for us to talk about?”

“Yeah, yeah I’m done.”

“Okay. I thought of one, too.” Harry sweeps his almost-too-long fringe out of his face, biting his lip. “You know I’m not the most, erm, confrontational of people. I don’t really like to rock the boat, or cause trouble, and I agree that keeping our thing a secret is smart. But I don’t want to just follow along with what management says, and I don’t want to keep it a secret to make their lives easier. I want to keep it between us because we want to.”

Louis frowns. “I guess. I just don’t really see why that matters. Either way, it’s a secret.”

“Because if we’re the ones deciding to keep our relationship private from the world, I think it’ll be easier for us to deal. You hate people in authority telling you things you don’t want to hear,” Harry grins. “But if it’s us setting our own boundaries, that’s different. Like, if I want to tweet you and I think it won’t hurt anything, I want to be able to do that. Or touch you, or look at you. All those things they don’t want us to do, I want to be able to do it if I think you’re okay with it too.”

Louis feels a smile spreading on his face. “You little rebel. I think I’ve been rubbing off on you.”

“Just the once,” Harry says lightly. “Frottage, remember?”

Louis’ laugh bursts out of him, startling the world into moving again. Harry grins and leans forward, kissing Louis lightly on the cheek and then pulling him down to cuddle together and look up at the stars, Louis’ head on Harry’s chest.

“I’m gonna miss talking to you in public like I’m used to doing all the time,” Harry murmurs. “I don’t like having to watch my words.”

“Maybe we can make up our own language,” Louis says. “Then we can say anything we want and no one will know.”

“That… sounds like a lot of work,” Harry chuckles.

“Well we can’t use a real language, because then people who speak it could translate what we’re saying and it wouldn’t be much of a secret.” A thought strikes, and he sits straight up. “Sign language!”

“What?”

“We can learn sign language! There’s an app for it, I saw it once. And then we can talk in public and nobody will have a clue.”

Harry giggles, pulling Louis back down. “I love it. Great idea, babe.”

Louis squirms happily, not sure what he should do with all these butterflies that have suddenly been
released into his veins. Harry must be able to tell, because he starts tracing patterns in the stars that he says are constellations, even though Louis is pretty sure he’s just making it all up.

“... the Great White Sharkbear over there, next to Bellatrix Major…”

Louis blinks slowly, sleep pulling at him with Harry’s rumbling voice as his lullaby. Harry stops talking after Louis goes still, running his hands up Louis’ spine.

“Do you think,” Harry asks quietly, “the stars ever get tired of having to listen to all of our serious conversations?”

Louis smiles against Harry’s skin, already drifting. “Nah. I think they like being able to see us fall in love.”

23 June 2011

With Savan and Rami’s songs for the album all recorded in the London and Sweden studios, One Direction are packed up and shipped back to California to meet with more writers, record more tracks, and hopefully garner some overseas press while they’re at it.

For the first time, Louis is a little sad to be leaving England; he’s usually too excited by the prospect of adventure to look back, but in the days following his and Harry’s triumphant hand-in-hand return to London, he thinks he was never happier. They spent every moment of every day together: they went to the studio in the morning, went shopping or to the park or the cinema in the afternoon, Harry cooked dinner every night while Louis sat next to him on the counter and supervised, then they spent the rest of the evening watching TV from the bed in the master bedroom (which Harry has started calling their room, making Louis feel like he’s been lit on fire in the best possible way) and lots and lots of snogging.

Not that the snogging is kept only to the evenings. The snogging sort of happens… everywhere. All the time. Enough that Louis has started to expect large hands grabbing his waist when he walks past empty doorways, dragging him into closets and unoccupied rooms for furious moments of biting, sucking kisses before someone is sent for them and they have to break apart, panting, wiping the taste of each other from their mouths.

So Louis sort of misses London and the happiness within their flat, but California isn’t that bad, especially when the boys meet Kelly Clarkson and record the song she wrote for them. Liam looks dazed through the whole experience, stuttering madly when Kelly shakes his hand.

They’re at the studio again today, Zayn in the booth recording his parts of More Than This. Niall has disappeared with one of their songwriters, Jamie, to find some food, and Liam is asleep on a beanbag chair in the corner.

Harry and Louis are sitting at opposite ends of a short sofa, their legs tangled in the middle. Harry’s playing on his phone, Louis flipping through the channels on the small TV on the wall. He’s frowning as he flicks through channels in the 500s and still finding nothing but American football or grave-faced news anchors on seemingly every channel and still no signs of quality content. Like Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. That’s what he wants to watch, had just assumed that there was a channel somewhere that played episodes of it twenty-four hours a day. Apparently not.

Louis’ phone chimes a tweet notification, and he unlocks it distractedly while settling on some reality show about a guy who skateboards in an abandoned warehouse or something.
Louis laughs, poking Harry with his toe and thumbing out a reply.

Harry giggles, running exaggerated hands through his hair and shaking his curls out slowly like he’s in a shampoo ad. It’s so long compared to what it was when they met, the curls wild and loose like something Louis’ pretty sure he’s seen in footage from Woodstock. It’s gorgeous, and for all Harry’s joking about curls getting the girls he really does look fantastic and it really is working for Louis. He shuffles across the sofa and into Harry’s lap, kissing him slowly.

Jamie and Niall choose that moment to reappear. “Oi!” Niall shouts, waking Liam, who falls off his beanbag with a squeak. “Not where we have to watch!” Louis just flips Niall off over his shoulder, angling his head and pulling Harry’s lip between his teeth to hear him whimper. A door opens, and Zayn joins them.

“You know I love you both, but I do not want to see your tongues,” he says mildly, throwing a pillow at them. They break apart, grinning.

“You’re just jealous,” Louis says, tucking himself in the small space between Harry and the back of the sofa. Harry laughs and stretches, pulling Louis close.

“Nope, don’t think so,” Zayn says. “Ni, you’re up in the booth. I’m gonna go find some bleach for my eyeballs.”

“I think he meant he was going to find a cigarette to kill his lungs,” Harry says disapprovingly, watching Zayn disappear. Louis taps his fingers on Harry’s chest.

“I thought you said smoking was hot.”

“Smoking itself is not hot. It’s hot when you smoke,” Harry corrects.

Louis smirks. “Zayn’s hot too, though. And he’s all moody with it, frowning while he puffs away.”
“Zayn is hot in an objective way,” Harry says delicately. “You’re hot in, like, an I-want-to-stick-something-else-in-your-mouth kind of way. And that doesn’t really have anything to do with the smoking, that’s just you”

Louis laughs, loud and bright, and moves his hand to trace patterns on Harry’s abs. It’s quiet again for a few minutes, faint strains of Niall’s voice floating in from the room next door. Zayn comes back eventually and joins them on an adjacent sofa, smelling like fresh air and nicotine, and Liam stretches and moves from his beanbag, laying himself across Zayn’s lap instead. Zayn automatically cards his hands through Liam’s curls, the silence between the four of them sleepy and sated.

Louis falls asleep against Harry’s chest to the sound of Liam’s soft snores, Niall’s voice barely audible through the walls, and Harry’s heartbeat under his cheek.

2 July 2011

The boys have a personal assistant now, which is pretty cool. His name is Marco, and he’s a sort of squirrelly-looking guy who always looks on the verge of a nervous breakdown. But he’s decent at his job, helps get the boys where they need to be when they need to be there, and has taken over Liam’s duties of informing the One Direction parents what’s going on in their sons’ lives day-to-day.

Which is how Louis scored Wireless Festival tickets at the last minute for himself while Harry takes Gemma out for dinner. He goes to see the Black Eyed Peas and Bruno Mars and a bunch of other people that Harry went wide-eyed at when he told him, even though Louis had never heard of them. He dances and sings and declines fan pictures so he can lost himself in the growing crowds as night falls over Hyde Park. He stumbles into a cab at some point, crawling in bed next to Harry when the sun is already throwing faint lines of orange over the horizon.

He wakes abruptly the next day with a message waiting on his phone, Harry’s displaying one to match:

(8:15 a.m.) Claudia (Management): There is a meeting scheduled for 10:00 at Fountain Studios that you both must attend. A car will be waiting outside the Princess Park complex at 9:40.

Louis’ stomach writhes when the car deposits them in front of Fountain, but he grabs Harry’s hand and keeps him close anyway as they’re led to the worst conference rooms in the world. Magee and Griffiths are waiting for them as usual, Claudia tapping at her phone and the interns poised to take notes.

“It has come to our attention,” Magee says dangerously as they sit, “that you two are not only living together, which you did not disclose to us, but that you are also sharing that information with anyone you feel like telling instead of keeping it quiet. There are tweets as proof, and it is too late to ask anyone to delete those because the fans have already saved pictures of them and spread them all over the internet.”

“One of you will be moving out,” Griffiths says decidedly. “You will not be staying in the same flat, there’s no reason for it and you both have reasonable stipends to pay for separate places.”

“No,” Louis says calmly, though his palm is sweating against Harry’s. “We signed a joint contract
for at least a year, and I did the paperwork to be Harry’s guarantor. Neither of us is moving out.”

Everyone on the Modest! side of the table looks stunned, and Louis can’t tell if that’s because he kept his composure or because no one has ever told them no.

“You have to move out,” Griffiths says. “If word gets out—”

“If you make one of us move I’ll call the tabs myself,” Louis says, feeling steel creep into his voice. “I’ll tell them that Harry and I are looking into legally Bonding as soon as he turns eighteen, and that none of us in the band have any intention of Bonding with fans. I’ll leak the album before it’s released. I’ll destroy any attempts at getting a good interview with us. I will make myself into the diva you seem to think I am. You cannot make us move out.”

Griffiths and Magee share a long look, then Magee sighs and flicks his hand at one of the interns. “Send a message to the *The Sun* to run an exclusive that all five of them are living in the same complex and call them ‘luxury celebrity apartments.’ Have it all be Simon’s idea as well, and do not let anyone know that they didn’t all move in at the same time. If anyone asks, tell them that three of the flats were being renovated until now.”

Griffiths sends another intern to call Princess Park to secure three more flats no matter the cost, and Claudia is sent to personally call Liam, Niall, and Zayn to inform them of their new living arrangements. By the time it’s all said and done, Harry, Louis, Magee, and Griffiths are the only four in the room.

“You might have gotten away with this, but only because Simon wasn’t paying attention to what he was signing off on,” Magee warns. “I don’t care who you are or how much you’re worth, you do not run this show. You will do what we say.”

Harry tenses next to Louis, but when Louis shoots him a glance he’s almost overwhelmed to see Harry’s chin raised in defiance, a world of difference from the last time they sat at this same conference table together, shaking and scared. Louis squeezes his hand and they both face forward; a united wall against Modest!’s anger. Griffith’s eyes narrow.

“We mentioned other ways of punishment if you didn’t behave at our last meeting,” he says coolly. “Clearly, you don’t believe us. So consider this strike two: get another, and we’ll introduce drastic measures.”

Magee smiles at Louis, and there’s no life in his eyes. “Don’t worry. She’s a very nice girl, as far as punishments go.”

“If you’re quite finished with the vague threats,” Harry says quietly, “we’ll be heading back to our flat.”

Louis holds tight to Harry’s hand as they leave the room, the ambiguously mentioned blackmail still bouncing in his head. He tries to work out what they could mean, but the only thing he can come up with is another link to a model or singer who needs press, only with Louis’ name in the headlines this time instead of Harry’s.

It doesn’t really matter, in the end. Management tells Louis *don’t even look at Harry* and Harry whispers *don’t ever look away*, so Louis is just going to have to get used to watching Harry from the corner of his eye.

Chapter End Notes
Did we all survive this monster? Hope so. Here's some notes for this chapter:

- I have no idea where H and L actually stayed while skiing in France, but the link in the story is what I used for reference.

- I checked, like, multiple articles about the Princess Park apartment and every single one said the flat was spread across five floors, so if that seems excessive then take it up with Louis and Harry. :) Here's my inspiration for the bathroom.

- Articles about when H and L moved in together are very vague, and I've never been able to find anything that says they didn't move into Princess Park as soon as the XF tour ended, so that's what I based it on. It's very possible they moved in later, but I found no proof either way.

I really wanted to put this in the fic, but I didn't want anyone to think it was an actual picture so I decided to keep it here in the notes. But this was the picture that Jay "took" and sent in the group texts to the boys and Anne and Gemma. (Doesn't that look scarily like Louis?? But the curly-headed one also sort of looks like Liam, so I didn't risk it.) Hope you enjoyed! Next up is Leeds and all that entails. :)

tumblr | tumblr post
Part Two: 23 July 2011 - 2 October 2011

Chapter Notes

This chapter is where the story starts to earn its explicit warning, so... have fun? :)  

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 11: 23 July 2011 - 2 October 2011

23 July 2011

“Maybe they’re just going to keep flying us places so we never go home again?” Harry asks, watching the blue, blue Pacific Ocean loom nearer. “Then no one will find out we’re living together.”

Louis snorts, leaning against Harry’s shoulder to look out the plane window as well. The people on the beaches are little more than colorful specks at this distance. “Not much of a plan, is it? Seems like it’s way more likely we’ll get caught together when we aren’t in our very secure flat with its nice big gates,” he says, biting playfully at Harry’s shoulder when the plane starts to angle downward. “But if they want to fly us to California to shoot a music video we could have shot in Cornwall, I’m fine with that.”

They play footie and splash around on a beach for hours, singing into cameras every once in a while and otherwise just goofing off and enjoying the sunshine. The girls are brought in and introduced and Niall’s eyes go bright and Liam gets all stuttery and it’s all a bit wonderful; the girls are cool and it all feels natural to sit around a bonfire and laugh and joke and dance and flick sand at each other.

Late that evening, Harry and Louis get caught holding hands by one of the crew members, but then Liam grabs Louis’ hand too and they take off running like it’s no big deal and Niall “lets slip” that Harry thinks one of the girls is cute.

Louis plays it up for the cameras, slinging his arm around Harry’s shoulder and saying “Harry here has fallen deeply in love. It was blossoming from the start,” while Harry blushes and grins and pretends it’s because of blossoming love with what’s-her-face and not because Louis is tickling his ribs while he talks. And then, once Harry’s parts with the girl in question are all filmed and he can stop serenading her, his chest pressed to hers while she bites her lip and looks away, Louis drags Harry behind the abandoned lifeguard chair and kisses him until he’s dazed, clutching at Louis’ shirt for attention the rest of the night and not even sparing a glance for anyone else.

24 July 2011
They spend the whole next day frolicking shirtless on the beach, and the girls are nowhere in sight. Harry doesn’t think he’s ever seen Louis look so smug.

Before they board the plane back to London, Claudia stops Louis with a hand on his arm. “Fans have been tweeting your friend Hannah about being your girlfriend. We’ve asked her to tweet the truth, and you need to reply to it.”

Louis frowns until he sits next to Harry, pulling out his phone and, yes, there’s a new tweet from Hannah on his newsfeed (Don’t get caught up in this Louis/Hannah thing. We’re both happy and still best friends.). Louis shows it to Harry.

“That sounds like a breakup tweet,” Harry says, his brow furrowed. It does sound like a breakup tweet, but this is a relatively simple request, as far as their PR team is concerned, so Louis tweets an answer (best, best friends. Always x) and lays his head on Harry’s shoulder, planning to spend the flight back home fast asleep in his favorite place at the curve of Harry’s neck.

9 August 2011

There are many benefits to fame: money, for one thing, recognition for another. Invitations to exclusive events and parties. People who love you without ever needing to meet you.

But maybe the very best part of being a quote-unquote “celebrity” is being able to meet some of the most amazing, talented, interesting people around and have them think you’re interesting too.

Which, for Louis and Harry, means a dinner date with the cuddliest ginger in the world: Ed Sheeran. “Oi,” he’s currently saying as Harry steals a tomato from his salad. “Hands off, eh? You’ve got more money than I’ll ever see, no need to steal from the needy.”

Louis snorts, sipping from his pint. “Doubt it, mate. Dunno what your contract looks like, but ours is awful. We get spending money when we need it, but don’t see most of it.”

“Oh, right,” Ed says, nodding seriously. “Forgot you were with evil old Si. It’s really as bad as everyone says, then?”

“It’s pretty bad, as far as contracts go,” Harry says flippantly, stealing another tomato and ignoring Ed’s stab at his hand with a fork. “But it’s still a record deal, so we actually can’t complain.”

“Sure you can,” Ed says easily. “Complain away. Just not to me, because I’m still poor and Simon Cowell gives you an allowance. And probably not on Twitter, just ‘cause you’ll look like a knob.”

“And it’s breach of contract to say anything negative about Simon or our management.”

“Well Christ, now I feel bad,” Ed laughs. "Okay, let me hear your woes. Did Simon actually get pec implants?”

They’d met Ed a few weeks back at one of the industry parties Simon likes to bring them to just so they can be charming and cute and prove that the old X Factor machine can still churn out some quality stars. Harry had bumped into Ed as he’d been sneaking a massive bottle of champagne out of the ballroom they'd been in, and instead of making excuses Ed had just grinned and offered Harry a swig.
“Dull night, innit?” he’d said, so he and Harry snuck through a side door and found themselves in the empty car park behind the hotel. Harry had texted the rest of the boys to make their escape and they’d all spent the night passing the bottle around and listening to Ed’s stories instead of making small talk with executives who don’t care about them because they haven’t yet made any money.

Now, Harry, Louis, and Ed are sat at a small booth in the back corner of some dingy gastropub in Brixton. Ed has played a few gigs here before, and when Harry’d called him up to invite him to dinner, he’d said the burgers are excellent and the chips aren’t too shabby, and that the beer was cheap enough even he could afford it. The beer comment had sealed it for Louis, who, even though he has a nearly unlimited credit card in his pocket with Modest footing the bill (for emergencies, they’d said, but sometimes buying a new Topman sweater is an emergency for Louis), still has the mentality of a broke teenager.

Louis and Ed get on like a house on fire, and Harry's sort of surprised but really shouldn't be. On the outside, they're opposites: Louis is loud and boisterous and Ed is calm and complacent, but underneath Ed's friendly top layer is a quick wit and acerbic tongue and under all Louis’ energy is deep focus for the things he cares about. They’ve already had a few long, profound conversations about songwriting that had left Harry’s head spinning, because Ed drops wisdom like candy and Harry didn’t even know Louis wrote at all, but after hearing him talk about it Harry’s pretty sure anything Louis put down on paper would move him to tears.

Not that Harry doesn’t consider himself a decent enough writer, but he doesn’t really have a process. He writes what’s in his head or what he thinks will sound good, and he can work on a project off and on over months before he can consider anything a respectable effort. Louis and Ed, though, have methods. Ed gets tipsy to loosen his tongue and plays his guitar until his fingers bleed and his throat itches and the words are all there without him remembering writing them, and Louis locks himself away from the world with only his laptop and his keyboard until he has a song, fully polished and every word meticulously chosen.

"I've never heard any of your songs," Harry pouts, and Louis goes pink.

"They aren't that good," he shrugs. "I just write when I've got something to get off my chest."

“I want to hear them, though. I don’t care if they’re good.”

“Maybe if you’re good,” Louis grins, bopping Harry’s nose.

“Christ, you two are fuckin’ adorable,” Ed says, sounding pained.

“Yeah, we know,” Harry beams angelically, leaning his head on Louis’ shoulder. “Our bandmates are sick of us.”

Louis smirks, pressing his thumb into Harry’s dimple.

(They’ve been working their way through the sign language app on Louis’ iPad at night before they go to sleep, but some sign language is pretty universally known or super obvious. Like, for instance, I love you, which was the first thing Harry looked up after learning to fingerspell his and Louis’ names.

“We can’t do that in public,” Harry had frowned when they watched the instructional video. “That’s the whole reason I wanted to learn sign language, so I could tell you I love you even when people are all around.”

“We could fingerspell it,” Louis had suggested weakly, even though that probably would make it
even more obvious that they were up to something than Harry hugging his chest and pointing at Louis.

“Or make up our own version,” Harry had said, shrugging. “You wanted to create our own language, here’s our chance.”

They’d sat there thinking for ages until finally Louis had just held up a thumb, smiling widely until Harry got what he was trying to say. “Nobody would suspect a thumbs up to mean anything different,” he’d laughed. “We could do it on camera and no one would know.”

“Probably shouldn’t do it on camera, I think that’s considered porn,” Harry’d grinned, waggling his eyebrows. Louis had rolled his eyes, but held his thumb up anyway, because he loves Harry even when he’s being an idiot.

Meanwhile, Ed watches the two of them like they’re lunatics, but in the most fond way possible. “Right, can’t see why they’d get sick of that.”

Harry steals another tomato, this time from Louis, but he trades it for one of his own olives because olives are disgusting and horrible but Louis likes them.

“If you’re handing out olives, throw some over here,” Ed says through a mouthful of food.

Harry makes a face. Louis grins, looking delighted, and pokes Harry in the side. “Ed can be my new best friend, he and I have similar taste.”

“But if you’re friends with me you get more gross olives, because I’ll give you mine,” Harry points out.

“Ah, but friendship forged from love is deeper than friendship born of hate,” Ed says sagely, even though no one asked for his opinion. Harry pouts and pulls out his phone.

Louis pulls out his phone when it chimes with a notification, shaking his head when he reads what Harry tweeted. He leans over and kisses Harry’s cheek.

“Silly boy,” he says. “I love you despite your uppity view on delicious vegetables.”

“Fruit, I think,” Ed says lightly, spearing another olive with his fork. “Like tomatoes.”


Louis grins in anticipation. “Who’s there?”

“Olive.”
“Olive who?”

“Olive you.”

Louis beams, and kisses Harry on the cheek again.

“Yeah, can’t see why your bandmates don’t want to be around that,” Ed laughs. “So, those your Markers?” he asks, nodding to the *oops* and *hi* on their arms.

Louis freezes, and Harry shifts in his seat. “We aren’t, um,” he shoots a look at Louis, who just shrugs minutely, eyes wide and worried. But Harry knows they can trust Ed, he’s above all the ridiculous media games that One Direction are usually so tangled in, so he just says it. “We aren’t Bonded.”

“No fuckin’ way,” Ed says immediately, laying down his fork. “You have matching fuckin’ words on your arms, what are those, your first words to each other? Fuckin’ sickening. You’re glowing so bright you look like you’ve been sprinkled with pixie dust. I refuse to believe you aren’t together.”

“We are together,” Louis says lightly. “Just not Bonded.”

Ed, who had been reaching for a chip, stops with the food halfway to his mouth, jaw hanging open in shock. “No fuckin’ way,” he says again, tossing the chip back down on his plate. “I have to hear that story.”

So they tell it. Or, well, Louis lets Harry tell it, which is sort of a first because Harry usually takes approximately an hour to say anything. Louis helps Harry give the abridged version, skipping over Louis’ aversion to Bonding because that’s all a bit personal when they’ve really only met Ed (plus, even Harry doesn’t really know the full story), and the weird thing when Aiden kissed Louis and Harry had wanted to set him on fire. But they give him the overview, that they met in extraordinary circumstances and happened to be put in a band together and then realized they were in love even though they aren’t soulmates.

Ed looks stunned when Harry finishes (“And that’s, um, for us, like. I love ‘im, ‘nd he loves me, and we decided, um, Bonding wasn’t, like. Important. For us.”).

“Mates,” he says, eyes wide. “That’s, like, a proper love story. That needs poems written about it, or paintings. Tapestries or some shit, I don’t fuckin’ know.”

“We could write a song,” Louis teases, tapping his thumb on Harry’s thigh. His eyes are crinkling, even though he’s trying to play it cool.

“Shit,” Ed says again. “Totally reminds me. Simon called me up not too long ago, asking if I wanted to write anything for you boys for your album. I didn’t really have anything in mind, but, *damn.* I wasn’t joking, this shit needs to be recorded for history.”

“You’re going to write a song about us?” Harry asks, floored.

Ed grins. “Hell yeah I am. Lou, grab us a pen from a waitress.”

“You’re writing it now?” Harry asks, his voice pitching higher. Did he forget to wake up this morning? Is he still dreaming?

“*Hell yeah,*” Ed says again. “H, be a doll and ask the bartender for his guitar. Tell’ m it’s for Ed, he’ll let you.”
An hour later, Ed’s fingers are red from the guitar strings and his and Louis’ pints have been drained and refilled and drained again, and Ed’s got half a song about them scribbled down on a napkin.

“I need more,” he says, looking up from where he’s just written you know I’ll be your life, your voice, your reason to be. “Otherwise this is going to be one short, ultra-mushy song about fairytales and true love forever and people’ll think I wrote it about Taylor instead of you two.”

“Well it’s not all sunshine and rainbows,” Louis says, frowning a little in thought. “I mean, I had to ask Harry to give up looking for his soulmate just to be with me.”

“And management hates it,” Harry adds. “We’re learning sign language so we’ll be able to speak to each other in public since they separate us at every turn.”

“Oh my God, you’re Romeo and Romeo,” Ed laughs disbelievingly. He taps the pen on the edge of the guitar and thinks, then leans over and writes another line: hands are silent, voice is numb. “So what happens when one of you does Bond? It’s sort of inevitable, what with the national fame and continental tour and all. Soulmates tend to be drawn to each other, so if they’re out there they’ll find you.”

Harry shifts in his seat. “We deal with it when it comes,” he says, echoing Louis’ answer from when he’d asked the same question.

“We make the most of things until we can’t anymore,” Louis adds softly.

“Damn,” Ed says grimly. He writes out one more line, and Harry’s heart suddenly aches.

I’ll find the words to say before you leave me today

After they part ways with Ed and grab a taxi back to the flat—Ed promising to clean up the lyrics and send the finished product along as soon as he can—Harry lays his head on Louis’ shoulder. “I guess I never thought about what other people think about us,” he says quietly. “Like, what our story must sound like from the outside.”

Louis shrugs, his shoulder shifting under Harry’s cheek. “Yeah, I dunno. I mean I wondered how the boys would react, just because they were there from the beginning and know us better than most people do. Me mum, too, I thought about her. I don’t really care for people’s opinions outside that little circle, though.”

Harry hums. He’s never given thought at all to what people would say if he and Louis were found to be actually dating, rather than just super touchy in interviews and otherwise ambiguous. He hopes, if someday people do find out, that no one will be mean about anything. Somehow, that feels a little unrealistic.

Louis is watching Harry think, a little furrow in his brow. He kisses Harry’s forehead and tugs his phone out of his pocket.
Harry quirks a grin and immediately thumbs out an answer.

21 August 2011

What Makes You Beautiful premieres worldwide on BBC Radio 1 on the tenth, and that kicks off a weeklong string of heavy promotion and interviews that leave Harry so tired his head spins.

(“Get any sleep last night?” Scott Mills asks during their interview before the song premieres. Harry tries so hard not to look over at Louis, because no, he didn’t get much sleep the night before, but that has less to do with nerves and more to do with the ring of bruises around his neck that his shirt is barely covering.)

But the media blitz is finally over, and the PR team has given them the weekend off to take a breather. Louis mentions that Ed said he was going to V Fest if anyone wants to join, but Zayn’s going back to Bradford and Liam mumbles something about sleep and Niall’s friend Bressie is in town, plus they’re all still trying to discreetly move into and furnish their new apartments at Princess Park while pretending they’ve lived there for months (which Harry and Louis have apologized profusely for, even though the other three swear it’s okay because if they’re being forced to live somewhere, at least it’s somewhere really, really nice).

So Louis, Harry, and Ed hit V Fest by themselves.

Louis does about six tequila shots in a row when they hit the nearest alcohol tent at Weston Park, going loose-limbed and giggly within their first ten minutes at the shows. They’re waiting around for Arctic Monkeys to finish setting up on the main stage and sort-of watching Wiz Khalifa’s show while Louis dances circles around Ed and Harry, who are both nursing beers and trying not to laugh at him.
“Did you see that?” Louis asks, his wide blue eyes astonished. “Those people brought an inflatable sofa, Hazza! That’s so smart! I’m gonna tell them.”

Harry chuckles and swoops his arm around Louis’ waist before he can stumble away and get lost within the crowds, murmuring, “No, Lou, don’t steal the nice peoples’ sofa.”

Louis pouts, full-on with his bottom lip out. “I wasn’t gonna—”

“Yes you were,” Harry laughs.

Louis grins back. “Okay, I was.” He wriggles free, returning to his dancing.

“Louis? Harry?” they hear, and turn to see Matt Edmondson, one of the Xtra Factor hosts they’d met while on the show.

“Maaaatt,” Louis sings, holding up Matt’s hand and twirling himself. “Maaaatt’s here!”

“Christ, Hazza, did he sneak a few extra drinks when you weren’t looking?” Matt laughs, gently pushing Louis in Harry’s direction. Louis immediately throws his arms around Harry’s neck, nuzzling into his chest.

Harry just grins down at Louis when he answers. “Nah, letting him blow off steam. S’been a long week.”

“I’ll say, I’ve heard you lot on the radio every single day it seems,” Matt says. Someone from Matt’s group calls for him, and he holds up a finger. “Picture before I go? I can tweet it.”

“Better not,” Harry says apologetically. “Me ‘nd Lou aren’t really supposed to be seen together out in public.”

“Take one of me!” Louis says suddenly, spinning around to face Matt again (while Harry grabs his waist so he doesn’t tip over). “No, no, listen! It’s a good idea, because then it looks like I’m here alone, see?” He grins brightly, then dashes away to the group with the inflatable sofa he’d been eyeing. Harry can’t hear what he says but he knows that smile, the one that’s a bit sweet and a bit innocent and almost too bright to look directly at without risking giving him everything you own. The people with the sofa are not immune, and Louis tugs Matt and the inflatable sofa over to an empty area, throwing himself across the chair and posing for Matt like it’s a photoshoot.

Ed chuckles as he watches Louis chatter to Matt, his hands moving wildly. He pulls out a cigarette—offering one to Harry as well, who declines—and lights it. “He’s having fun, inn’e?”

Harry smiles. “Yeah. He loves stuff like this. We both do, really. Like, being able to have the things we do now but also be able to get away from it all.”

“I get that, man, I do.” Ed takes a drag. “I can’t imagine your lives. The screaming girls alone would do me in.”

“You tune it out eventually,” Harry shrugs.

Ed inhales again, the tip of his cigarette glowing red. “You know what you two would love?” he asks, then slowly blows out a stream of smoke.

“What?”

Ed shoots him a grin. “Leeds.”
They eventually convince Louis to give the sofa back to its rightful owners—once Matt has a decent picture of Louis and tweets about it without mentioning Harry or Ed—and head closer to the stage where the lights are just starting to brighten for the Arctic Monkeys show. Louis has worked off a little of his alcohol so he’s able to hold his own when Harry pulls him back against his chest to dance to *Do I Wanna Know*, Ed next to them and bopping his head to the beat.

“*Maybe I’m too busy being yours to fall for somebody new,*” Harry sings in Louis’ ear, and Louis’ eyes shine before he leans in and presses a kiss to Harry’s lips, just two boys in love in the middle of a screaming crowd.

25 August 2011

“Hey, Lou, did Ed mention Leeds to you?”

“Leeds? Like the place or the festival?”

“The festival.”

“Yeah, he did actually. Think he’s playing a smaller stage Friday night, said it was a good time. Really chill, apparently. Why?”

“Would you wanna go?”

“What?”

“Would you wanna go? If we could, would you?”

“Yeah, Haz, that would be amazing, but—”

“I got us tickets.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah? You wanna *mmph*—”

“Shut up, shut up and kiss me you idiot, of course I wanna—”

“Lou?”

“Yeah, love?”

“What are we going to tell management about Leeds?”

“You know what, Hazza? *Fuck* management.”
The boys are called in to shoot the second video for Bring 1D To Me at the studio, so Harry and Louis pack up Louis’ car with all their stuff for Leeds so they can leave right after it’s finished. Louis is giddy the whole time, tugging on Zayn’s elbow while he talks and mussing Niall’s hair. Liam is delighted, cackling every time Louis says something halfway funny for the video.

Harry can relate; he’s smiling so hard his cheeks are aching.

The moment the recording wraps, Louis pulls Harry into an impromptu ballroom dance around the room, narrowly avoiding the expensive camera equipment and the people carrying it.

“I’m so exciiiiiiited!” he sings, twirling Harry in circles until he gets dizzy.

“Well let’s go, then!” Harry giggles.

Niall, Liam, and Zayn follow them out to the car, Niall apparently very concerned for their packing skills.

“You’ve got your tent, right?” Niall asks, his arms crossed.

“Yeah, Ni, it’s in the car already.”

“And your wellies? We made a special trip to buy those, you’d better have them.”

Louis rolls his eyes, poking Niall in the stomach. “Yes, Niall, we have everything we need and we’ve got battery chargers for our mobiles and we are big boys, remember? I’m older than you, in fact.”

Zayn slings his arm around Niall’s shoulders. “Don’t worry, we’ll order in a pizza when you leave, he’ll cheer right up.”


“You’ve got our spare key if you need into ours, yeah?” Harry asks, checking to make sure everything has fit into the boot of Louis’ car and closing the door.

“Yeah, all good,” Liam reassures him. “Go ahead, have a good weekend. Be safe.”

“And we stuck some surprises in your bag,” Niall says, wagging his eyebrows, pizza indignation forgotten. “Just in case you two get bored once you’re there.”

“Oh, God,” Louis winces, “that’s terrifying. Will whatever it is die before we get there?”

“It’s not alive, Lou, it’s—” he stops himself, smirking. “Well, you’ll see.”

“Call us when you get there!” Liam yells when Louis is settled in the driver’s seat, Harry waving at them through the window. Liam and Zayn wave back until they pull away from the studio, then Zayn kisses Niall on the forehead and throws his empty arm around Liam’s waist, guiding them back inside.

“Christ, it’s like leaving our kids behind,” Louis says, watching them in the rearview mirror. Harry
grins and reaches for his bag, pulling out his specially made Leeds roadtrip CD. They’ve got three hours on the road ahead of them, and Harry’s got nothing but great music and the best boy by his side to entertain him the whole way there.

“I think this flippy part goes there? And then the pole bends- nope, nope, not like that.” Harry stands, brushing his sweaty fringe out of his eyes. The pieces of plastic and bright yellow fabric that make up what apparently will become a tent are scattered in front of him. “Lou, any suggestions?”

Louis hums, not even bothering to open his eyes from where he’s sunbathing in the one chair he bothered to unfold. “Gonna be honest, Hazza, I’m right hopeless with that stuff. No clue at all. You were good in woodshop, weren’t you?”

“That has nothing to do with—”

“Right, maybe I’ll go grab us some drinks?” Louis says, standing and stretching, his black t-shirt riding up to expose a tiny sliver of tan hips, which is completely unfair because by the time Harry's done controlling the urge not to knock Louis to the ground and pull his shirt off with his teeth, Louis is already long gone. Harry sighs and gets back to work.

“It looks like a tent!” Louis exclaims when he gets back, carrying four brownish drinks in plastic cups. Harry just nods, still a little out of breath from wrangling the air mattress into the tent (apparently you’re supposed to put the mattress in the tent first, then blow it up, but nobody warned him). He takes two of the cups Louis offers him, frowning at the murky liquid.

“What is this?”

“Y’know, love, I don’t really know,” Louis says, peering into one of his cups. “I just asked the girl for something strong and cheap.”

Harry grins, shaking his head, and holds up one of the cups for a toast. “To Leeds.”

“To Leeds!” Louis cheers, gulping down half his drink in one go. Harry tries to do the same but nearly chokes, the strong burn of alcohol making him grimace. He and Louis finish their first drinks and slip on their wellies, looking over the band list on the Leeds website with Harry’s phone and discussing their options. Some girls wander by and overhear, and after they take pictures with Harry and Louis they suggest some of their favorite options. Louis just makes a face, but that's probably because one girl suggests The Horrors right before asking Harry to sign her boobs.

The girls leave eventually and Harry and Louis decide on seeing The Vaccines. They start to wander that way when Louis stops Harry with a hand on his arm.

“Tell me to shove off if this is dumb,” he says, “but can we turn our phones off? We’ll be together the whole time, there’s no need for us to have them on.”

“Yeah, ‘course,” Harry agrees, switching his phone off. “Sort of nice, innit?”

Louis smiles. “It is, yeah. Nice to escape for a bit.”
Harry swallows the last of his second horrible cheap drink and tosses his cup in a nearby bin. Louis does the same and digs around in his bag for two flasks, handing one to Harry and zipping the tent up. Before they set off over the muddy grounds to the stages, Harry pulls Louis in close and kisses him quickly.

“This is gonna be amazing,” he whispers, and Louis beams.

Drinks and more drinks fade the concerts to the fringes of Harry’s mind, long stretches of ambient noise followed by short bursts of quiet while they stumble between the different stages, the music never replacing Louis as the most important thing happening in front of him. Harry and Louis dance and sing even when they don’t know the words, and they join the screaming masses when familiar songs drift through the air. Someone passes a joint by at one point and Harry takes two massive hits, shotgunning the second into Louis’ mouth before he loses his nerve; Louis squeaks in surprise but kisses Harry fiercely, only pulling away from his lips long enough to blow the smoke out before he turns back to Harry’s mouth.

They’re stopped for pictures a couple of times by people just as unsteady on their feet and red-eyed as Louis and Harry, some of them even saying they like the new single, which Harry had sort of forgotten was out until they mentioned it. Several different groups of girls invite them back to their tents, but Harry just giggles until they get the hint that it isn’t happening and walk away.

My Chemical Romance is the last major concert that night and Louis says his little emo heart insists they go, so they find their way to the right stage with a crushing crowd of excited people. The band puts on a brilliant show, and since they emptied their flasks hours back Harry and Louis are actually able to pay attention, singing to Na Na Na and Famous Last Words and laughing as the heavy guitar from Teenagers shakes the ground under their feet.

When the set ends, leaving their ears ringing and throats hoarse but smiles bright and brilliant, Louis props himself up against Harry and Harry slings an arm around his shoulders, nuzzling into his hair. The girls next to them ask if they want to walk over to the silent disco together, and Louis sends Harry a sparkling look.

“What do you say, Harold, you up for it?”

The silent disco looks like the sort of thing that only teenagers drunk out of their minds could come up with, the music mostly muted in the background so they don’t look entirely delirious but everyone still dancing enthusiastically, matching black headphones over everyone’s ears. And, since drunk out of his mind is a state Harry’s been in all day, he thinks it looks brilliant. They’re handed their own headphones and suddenly Katy Perry is being blasted into their ears and they’re dancing along. A few more people tap them on the shoulders for pictures; one group of girls is particularly insistent, and Harry and Louis have to dodge through the crowd to get away, holding each other’s hands and laughing maniacally as they escape.

Harry is exhausted, his limbs achy and his head throbbing, but he can’t stop laughing and he’s pretty sure this is the best day of his life. He and Louis dance like idiots, pulling each other back when they stray further than arm’s reach away. They mouth the lyrics to each other when the words fit, when it seems right.

“This will be the final song,” a voice says into their headphones as the sky starts turning slate grey instead of pitch black. Pitbull and Ne-Yo start singing in Harry’s ears, and something about the bass
and the beat makes him tug Louis close, his hands on Louis’ hips. Louis blinks up at him through heavy lashes, his mouth parted, cheeks pink.

“Grab somebody sexy, tell ‘em hey,” Harry sings, and even though Louis can’t hear him he grins, the corner of his mouth ticked up in a filthy smile. He traces a finger down Harry’s chest, following the line of buttons on his shirt, and tucks a thigh between Harry’s legs.

“I want all of you tonight,” Louis mouths back. He bites his lip, his eyes flickering down to Harry’s mouth. “Give me everything tonight.”

Harry feels his face flush, his and Louis’ hips working to the beat. He moves his hands over Louis’ firm back and shoulders, one tangling in his hair, the other pushing his headphones off so he can hear when Harry gasps, “Okay.”

Harry’s breathless, he’s endless, he’s never needed like this. Louis moves his hands up where he had been gripping Harry’s shirt in his fists, sliding Harry’s headphones off as well.

“Oh?” he rasps. His eyes are wide, pupils wider. Harry can still hear Ne-Yo’s voice from his headphones, and so he leans close, his mouth to Louis’ ear.

“I want you tonight,” he murmurs along with the song. Louis breathes out shakily, nodding.

“Oh,” he says, then smiles widely, like he can’t believe it. Harry grins back: believe it. Louis laces their hands together and they’re off, only pausing to drop off their headphones and then they’re racing back to their tent, searching frantically for the spot of yellow in the darkness.

“There!” Harry says, yanking Louis forward. They skid to a stop in front of their tent, Harry nearly breaking the zipper in his haste to get the tent flap open. They tumble inside, giggling as they tangle together in a heap on top of the air mattress. Louis wraps his arms around Harry, pulling him into a deep, heavy kiss, moaning into Harry’s mouth. Harry tugs on the front of Louis’ shirt.

“Off,” he begs against Louis’ lips, “off, Lou, please.”

“Yeah,” Louis gasps back, ripping his shirt off over his head. Heat tingles in Harry’s veins, his breath stuttering. He leans over and sucks a bruise onto Louis’ collarbone, Louis throwing his head back, his hand wrapped in Harry’s curls holding his head in place, urging him to keep going. Harry rumbles involuntarily, the sound low in his throat, pushing at the hot skin with his tongue.

Louis reaches for his shoulders, pushing at the fabric of his shirt. “Why’re you wearing two?” he asks desperately, yanking off Harry’s button-down and tugging the t-shirt over his head. He pulls Harry back down when the shirts are gone, both of them moaning at the press of bare skin to bare skin.

Harry’s necklaces are cold between them and Harry knows this but can’t feel it at all, too wrapped up in Louis’ wet mouth and his hooded eyes. He reaches for the button of Louis’ trousers, stopping just quick enough to breathe, “Can I?”

“God, yeah,” Louis chokes, lifting his hips to help. Harry groans in frustration when he remembers Louis’ wellies, ripping them off and tossing them to a corner of the tent so he can pull Louis’ trousers all the way off.

And then he stops, the heated moment still for just a second, because Louis is as close to naked as Harry’s ever seen while in bed with him and somehow it’s different here than in any dressing rooms they’ve been in before: his chest is shiny with sweat and heaving with quick breaths, his thighs flexing as his feet slide on the sheets. His collarbone is still wet and shiny from Harry’s mouth, a red
spot already forming. His boxers are tiny and hiding nothing, the long line of Louis’ cock twitching under the fabric. Louis palms himself and Harry’s mouth goes dry.

“Hazza,” Louis moans, “please.”

Harry nods, not knowing what he’s agreeing to but knowing he wants it nonetheless. Louis reaches out, pulls Harry closer by his belt. Harry bats his hand away, whipping the belt out from the loops and throwing it somewhere. Louis’ fingers are on the button of his jeans, then, undoing it and tugging down the zipper so slowly that Harry might actually combust. Louis’ hand is inches from his cock, which is throbbing desperately from sheer proximity.

Harry rolls onto the mattress next to Louis and squirms all the way out of his jeans. He puts a hand on the waistband of his pants, about to shuck those away as well, but Louis’ light hand stops him.

“Let me,” Louis says, and Harry almost cries, he’s so turned on by the need in Louis’ voice. Louis straddles Harry’s waist, inching soft fingers under Harry’s boxers and sliding them down, over the head of his dick and all the way off, and Harry has been naked in front of Louis countless times but he’s never seen Louis look so affected by it. His hands shake when he traces Harry’s v-lines, up his ribs and barely brushing Harry’s nipples, making him arch off the mattress. Louis leans down and crashes their mouths together, sloppy, heated slides of tongues, tiny whimpers that Harry can’t contain.

“Can I touch you?” Louis asks, his voice throaty and low. “Please, Harry, please let me touch you.”

“Yes,” Harry moans, “yes yes yes.”

Harry shakily props himself up onto his elbows to watch and almost immediately regrets it, because the sight of Louis’ small hand wrapped around his cock is enough to have his orgasm already thudding at the base of his spine, the heat growing in his limbs. Louis moves his hand up to the head of Harry’s cock, smoothing over beads of precome to make the slide easier. When he reaches the head he loosens his grip and twists, just a little, and Harry’s throat scratches from the force of his shout.

“Shh,” Louis giggles quietly, but his breath hitches when Harry sobs out again, and Harry feels Louis’ thighs twitch around his hips as though in sympathy.

Louis starts working out a rhythm that Harry’s hips eagerly follow, long, smooth pulls that have him whimpering within seconds, broken gasps of Louis’ name filling the air. His hands reach out to clutch at the blankets, twisting in the sheets. He’s so close and it hasn’t been that long but at the same time it’s been months, over a year, and all he’s wanted was this, Louis’ hand on his cock and shoving him toward orgasm, and Louis is, Christ, now he’s touching himself too under the fabric of his boxers and how fucking dare he hide that away—

“Let me see,” Harry asks frantically, “please, Lou—”

Louis moans, higher than Harry’s ever heard his voice go, and he lets go of Harry’s cock for the quickest second to shimmy his pants off and, oh, oh hell, he’s too gorgeous, his cock curving up and pulsing with every gasped breath, it’s too much, and the moment Louis’ hand wraps around Harry again he’s gone.

Harry goes boneless, light-headed and dizzy and tingling fiercely from his fingers to his lips. Come pulses over Louis’ fist and up Harry’s abs, an obscene painting in the yellow-filtered light of the tent. His toes curl and muscles shake in exertion, and he wonders how anyone ever get anything done when they could be doing this instead.
And then Louis’ elbow brushes his abs; Harry’s eyes flutter open and he remembers that Louis is still hard, rocking up into his own fist and gasping desperately. His hips move where he’s seated on Harry’s thighs, short, rhythmic thrusts.

“So gorgeous,” he moans, his hand a blur as he works his cock. “So fucking hot, Hazza, I—”

Harry sits up, ignoring his protesting and sore abs, and wraps his hand around Louis’ cock as well. “Wanna,” he slurs, his tongue still heavy in his mouth from his own orgasm. “Lemme help, Lou.”

Louis whimpers, letting Harry take over, and leans in for a messy, filthy kiss. Harry can’t really keep up, his head still spinning and spacey, but he lets Louis have his way as he tips Harry’s head back for more leverage. Harry’s never had his hand on anyone else’s cock before and he can’t tell if he’s doing really well or if Louis is just at the stage where everything is making him sob into Harry’s mouth, so he sticks with the basics. Quick, tight strokes, fast enough that his wrist starts to ache, his other hand tracing the sensitive spot on the back of Louis’ neck under his hairline.

“C’mon, love,” he murmurs when Louis pulls his mouth away to gasp in air. “Wanna see you come.”

That does it; with a cry of “Harry!” Louis comes, arching obscenely, Harry’s hand around his back the only thing keeping him upright. His come mixes with Harry’s on Harry’s stomach, and something about that makes Harry’s blood go fizzy, like he could go another dozen rounds or so if he wasn’t so exhausted. He falls back onto the mattress and Louis falls with him, sliding off to the side with a small oof.

For a long moment, there’s no sound but their breathing, like the world outside disappeared and they didn’t even notice.

Then Louis smiles, his bitten-red lips quirking up, and Harry laughs breathlessly. He pulls Louis closer, tangling their legs together and shifting until they’re inches from each other’s face. He presses a kiss to Louis cheek, his skin warm under Harry’s lips.

“Hey,” Harry giggles quietly.

“Hey,” Louis answers, eyes bright and happy. He rubs a thumb over Harry’s bottom lip. “I like the way you look afterward. All soft and warm.”

Harry feels warm, that’s for sure, and he’s not really sure about soft but Louis is the one cuddling up to him, so he’ll have to take his word for it. He buries his face in Louis’ neck and sighs happily, his eyelids heavy.

“Love you,” is the last thing he murmurs into Louis’ skin before he slips into sleep, Louis’ whisper of “Love you too” following him into his dreams.

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28 August 2011

Harry is already awake when Louis blinks into consciousness, the sunlight through the thin fabric of the tent making his sleepy eyes glow.

“Morning,” he rasps, his deep morning voice and his hand running up Louis’ naked back making Louis shiver.
“G’morning,” Louis murmurs, eyes fluttering shut again. He hums, pointing his toes and stretching. His back twinges, because even a nice air mattress is still just a thin protective barrier between them and the hard ground, not to mention the hours upon hours of standing and dancing and running the two of them did yesterday. He’s pleasantly surprised to find he’s mostly hangover-free as well, figuring they must have worked off most of their alcohol before they fell asleep.

And then his eyes fly open, remembering exactly how they worked off their inebriation.

Harry is still watching him, mouth ticked up in a grin. His curls are wild, and there’s a dark bruise high up on his throat that Louis only sort of remembers putting there. He looks debauched and dirty, a Woodstock baby who sleeps in tents and puffs on strange joints when they’re passed his way and drinks questionable drinks (even though his flask was filled with his trusty peppermint schnapps) and comes all over himself with no worries for who might overhear.

Louis is so, so lucky.

He pulls Harry in for a kiss, his breath stale and probably awful after all the vodka he had yesterday but Harry hums like he tastes like sugar, licking into Louis’ mouth enthusiastically. They trade kisses for long minutes, the sounds of the campsite waking up all around them filtering through the air.

“Time s’it?” Louis asks when they break for air.

“Dunno,” Harry says easily. “Music hasn’t started yet, so it must be before noon.”

Louis reaches for his phone to check the time, holding down the power button when he remembers they’d turned them off the night before. His screen goes white with the Apple logo so he tosses it to the side for a minute, turning back to Harry.

“So last night,” Louis starts, delighting when Harry’s face goes pink, “that was good, yeah?”

“I think by good, you mean best night of my life,” Harry says seriously, curling his hand around Louis’ and bringing them to his mouth to kiss his knuckles. “I didn’t know I could- I just, I didn’t know. You were amazing.”

Louis smiles bashfully. “You were pretty good yourself, love.”

Harry shrugs nonchalantly. “I don’t know, might need some more practice.” He grins when Louis laughs, pulling him in for another kiss. The sound of Louis’ phone vibrating wildly makes them separate, both of them looking over and freezing when they see the dozens of notifications filling the screen. Louis feels his hand shake when he unlocks it, not sure whether he should start with the missed calls or unread messages or 99+ Twitter notifications.

Oh, God, did he tweet something last night?

“Messages first, maybe?” Harry suggests, biting his lip. Louis taps the green icon, finding new texts from Liam, Zayn, Niall, his mum, Harry’s mum, Lottie, and Claudia. His heart stops for a second, worried something family related might have happened, but all those messages are just checking in and making sure they got to the festival okay. Louis thumbs out a quick reply in the family group message and the moves to the others, starting with Niall and Zayn’s from early yesterday afternoon.

(3:24 p.m.) **Nialler:** did u find ur surprise yet?? hahahaaa

(4:12 p.m.) **Zaynie:** hey lou did i leave my vans shirt in ur flat? xx

(4:15 p.m.) **Zaynie:** forgot u probly arent checking ur phone. went and got it myself, no worries. have fun xx
Harry looks cautiously optimistic. “Maybe nothing happened after all?” he says, but then Louis opens Liam’s messages.

(6:06 p.m.) Lima: lou plese answer im so sorry
(6:12 p.m.) Lima: i thot u told them where u wer!!!
(7:19 p.m.) Lima: pls don’t be mad

“So I guess management knows we’re here,” Harry says heavily.

Louis nods, biting his lip. “I don’t even want to read what Claudia sent.”

“Call Liam first, make sure he hasn’t thrown himself out a window because he thinks you’re mad at him.”

Louis does that, putting Liam on speakerphone. Liam answers already in a panic. “Lou, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Slow down, lad, give us a second,” Louis says. “Start from the beginning, we don’t really know what even happened.”

“Claudia called,” Liam says quickly. “They were wanting us to go on a pap walk to the shops or something to go with all the new articles about all of us living together, but I told her you and Harry were still at Leeds and she went all quiet and made that noise, you know, the angry one, and—”

“Calm down, Li,” Louis hears in the background.

“Is that Zayn?” he asks curiously. “What’s he doing at your place so early?”

“Slept here, doesn’t matter,” Liam says. “I didn’t know you didn’t tell them, it was on Twitter and stuff so I thought they knew!”

“We’re not telling them much of anything now,” Louis explains. “They’ve pissed us off, so we’re not going to play along and make their jobs easier.”

“Don’t freak out, Liam,” Harry soothes. “It could be way worse. At least we weren’t caught snogging or anything.” Then he stops. “Or, well. We haven’t checked Twitter yet. Were we caught snogging?”

“Don’t think so,” Zayn’s voice suddenly cuts in. “Liam’s breathing into a bag for a moment, give ‘im a sec. But all I saw last night was Louis’ tweet and a bunch from some girls that apparently chased you around for a while. And there’s a couple of pictures, but nothing bad, just normal fan ones.”

Harry breathes out, and Louis says, “Thanks, Zayn. Tell Liam not to have a heart attack, we should have warned him that we aren’t really playing along with management right now.”

“Right, yeah, he’ll be alright,” Zayn says. “Go back to whatever you were doing before.”

“Well,” Harry smirks, “you heard the man.” He reconnects their lips with a loud, obvious smack.

“Hang up first!” Zayn screeches. “I hate you both!”

Louis laughs quietly. “Love you Zayner! Tell Li we love him too.”

“Yeah, yeah, love you too. Go be gross some more.”

Louis hangs up and checks Twitter briefly; like Zayn said, it’s mostly retweets of his tweet from the
night before (which just said silent disco ....shh and could have been so, so much worse) and notifications from people tagging him in group pictures.

He taps the screen to get to his missed calls list, hovering over Claudia’s name. Harry is watching, pulling at his Leeds bracelet, rubbing over the letters like a talisman.

Louis takes a deep breath, and hits call.

Claudia doesn’t bother with a greeting. “When leaving London for an extended period of time, you should inform us so we can tell the PR team. Especially when more than one of you is going.”

“You mean me and Harry,” Louis says coolly. “If I brought Niall, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Also, it’s our day off, so we don’t have to tell you anything.”

“Regardless,” she continues. “This is considered your final strike, since you didn’t warn us and you were clearly seen with Mr. Styles in a romantic context, even if no photos were taken. Due to that, new PR tactics will be introduced at your next meeting.”

“What new PR tactics?” Harry asks.

“The details are still being confirmed. The band has an interview day with Sugarscape on September 6th, you will both meet with us beforehand to discuss your options. Separately.”

Louis swallows, his throat clicking. Meetings together are hard, because Harry has to watch Louis take the brunt of the blame and Louis has to watch Harry curl in on himself in distress with every new accusation, but meetings apart are even worse.

“We’ll send the details for the meeting soon,” Claudia says, and hangs up without another word. Louis breathes out slowly.

“Okay,” he says carefully. “Sounds like things might change. But we’ve got a little bit of time to prepare, at least.”

Harry’s lip wobbles. “I don’t know why they can’t just let us be happy,” he says tearily, voice breaking.

Louis’ heart breaks as well, and he smiles sadly. “They don’t think they could make money off of that.”

“But they could!” Harry insists. “People like us together, we trend on Twitter all the time!”

“I know, love,” Louis says softly. “I know. But they’re stuck in their ways and we’re outside their usual formula for success. They aren’t going to let this go easily.”

Harry buries his face in Louis’ shoulder, forehead to sweaty skin. “Let’s just stay here forever. Live in this tent and never leave.”

“Might need some food eventually,” Louis says mildly, tickling at Harry’s ribs. “A shower, perhaps. And we sort of have a magnificent flat to go home to.”

Harry huffs. “Yeah, alright. I finally got the kitchen how I like it, I guess.”

Louis rolls his eyes and laughs. “You pushed the table a little to the left and replaced the flowers, not much of a renovation.”

“How dare you,” Harry gasps. “I spent hours slaving over that kitchen, days.”
Louis rolls his eyes exaggeratedly. “Oh, boo hoo, you stood in your lovely new kitchen”—Harry rolls on top of him with a squawk of protest—“tapping your lip and checking your Pinterest boards for inspiration”—Harry tries to cover Louis’ mouth, shrieking when Louis licks him to get him to stop—“calling your mum for hours”—

“You don’t understand the delicate process of interior design!” Harry laughs, finally grabbing Louis’ wrists and pinning them to the mattress. Louis bucks his hips, cackling when Harry squeaks in surprise and falls to the side. They giggle into each other’s mouths, biting teasing nips and tangling their hands together.

“I think,” Louis says quietly, resting his forehead against Harry’s and watching his eyelashes flutter, “there’s nothing we can do about it now. We probably shouldn’t have been fighting against them so openly, but now we know. So let’s just forget about all that, and have an amazing fucking time today, and drink way too much, and maybe,” he smirks, “try some more of that frottage you’re so fond of. And then go home tomorrow and celebrate Liam’s birthday and drink even more.”

Harry, whose mouth had dropped open at the mention of frottage, nods quickly. “Yes, yes I like all those things.”

So they do.

Their day starts by spending ten minutes trying to get out of bed.

It’s tough, see, because leaving the bed means leaving their little cocoon of warmth and happiness and Louis’ access to miles and miles of Harry's naked skin. They keep getting distracted, falling into each other's mouths with long, delicious kisses and each time one of them pulls away to murmur "We should..." the other one always answers "Yeah, we should," but nothing ever changes. Harry’s hands are growing bolder, tickling his fingers up Louis’ ribs and over his back and trailing incrementally lower, lower, and Louis shivers and tries to remember what was so important that they were going to stop doing this. But the music from the first concerts of the day starts outside their tent and Louis’ stomach won’t stop growling in hunger, so Louis yanks himself away in an admirable show of self restraint. He rolls out of the sheets and off the air mattress, trying so hard not to notice the way Harry’s eyes slide up his body like a physical touch and go dark and wanting at what he sees.

But eventually Harry gets up too, both of them digging out clean outfits from their bags and chewing gum in place of brushing their teeth. Harry's just reached in his bag for a pair of socks when he makes a confused noise and pulls out a plastic Tesco bag, a smiley face drawn on the side. "Think I found Niall's present," he says, pinching the bag with two fingers and lifting it to inspect it.

Louis, dressed only in his pants and striped t-shirt for the day, peeks over Harry’s shoulder and sends him a glance in trepidation. "Shall we open it?"

Harry gingerly unties the knot and peers in, his eyebrows scrunching in confusion. He pulls out three things, passing each of them to Louis: a box of rainbow condoms (“Nice, these are good quality”), a bottle of lube (“Ooh look, Haz, it warms up as you use it”), and,

“I swear this thing is haunting me,” Harry says dryly, pulling out the sparkly purple dildo. Louis just cackles, taking the dildo out of Harry’s hand.
“Where’d he even find this? I haven’t seen it since we left France.”

“Must’ve found it in my bathroom,” Harry answers distractedly, reading the label on the lube bottle. Then, realizing his mistake, he freezes.

“Your bathroom, huh?” Louis says, ever-so-casual. “Wonder what it was doing in there?”

“Nothing. It was doing nothing,” Harry says quickly.

Louis hooks his chin over Harry’s shoulder. “So you haven’t used it?” He can feel Harry’s gulp.

“No,” he says shakily, “no I don’t, um.”

“Don’t know how?” Louis asks lightly, right next to Harry’s ear. Harry squirms. “Need someone to show you?”

Harry shivers and spins to face Louis, his eyes wide and needy. “God,” he says, throwing his arms around Louis and yanking him into a biting kiss. “Yes, show me, show me how—”

Louis is nodding in agreement, already reaching for the button on Harry’s jeans when someone outside stumbles against their tent, shaking the whole place and sending Louis sprawling back across the mattress and Harry still standing but pinwheeling his arms to stay aloft. Whoever it was yells a slurred, “Sorry, mates!” and walks off with a loud laugh, but the mood has been sufficiently broken: Louis laughs, shaking his head, and Harry scratches behind his ear as he grins ruefully.

Louis clambers to his feet. “Later,” he promises, sending a wink Harry’s way before moving back to his bag to finish pulling out some clothes.

A few minutes after that Louis is pulling on his wellies, tucking in the bottom of his trousers to keep them from getting muddy, but he’s distracted when Harry pulls on a t-shirt and emerges looking rumpled and artless, a Robert Mapplethorpe photo in motion.

Harry knows the perfect routine to keep his hair shiny and luscious, can rock a blazer and bow tie like he was born to be a public school pretty boy, but there’s something about dirty and disheveled that just works for him. He can ruffle his hands through his hair and throw on some aviators and he’s suddenly some sort of tousled rockstar, even in his flower-print wellies.

And it hits Louis that this isn’t the same sixteen year old that he met in a bathroom. He’s a year older, a year sharper. He’s lost a little of that baby fat, and along with it he lost some of that youthful blind trust. Not that he’s jaded or scared—he’s still the boy who loves fiercely and unapologetically and quickly, capturing new friends as easily as he captured England’s hearts. But he’s careful, too, cautious around people who aren’t his family or his band or those people he lets in to see what’s behind his pretty face. He’s grown, Louis realizes, he’s grown into something new right in front of his eyes, and he’s going to keep growing, keep evolving, and Louis is going to get to see it happen.

They pause before unzipping the tent flap, checking that they’re both decent to be seen in public, and Louis tugs him close one last time before they tumble out. He kisses Harry’s pretty bruised lips that quirk up into a familiar smile, one of the only things that’s stayed constant since the moment they met.
They wander out to listen to music and everything is just the same as the day before; everyone around them looks a little more tired, a little more ragged, but they're all still drinking like their lives depend on it and dancing like their feet don't ache and having the times of their lives. Harry and Louis try to lose themselves in it again, drinking from their flasks they’d filled before leaving their tent and dancing and laughing. They watch concerts for Two Door Cinema Club and The Mighty Mighty Bosstones and pay far too much for food from the concessions and take pictures with fans when they’re recognized.

But they’re careful, watchful in a way they hadn’t been yesterday. Now that management knows they’re here it's like all semblance of anonymity has been stripped from them, and in its place crowds common sense. They'd been stupid, yesterday, and if one single person had been sober enough to recognize them and snap a picture of them kissing or smoking or falling over themselves wasted, or if someone had recorded anything from outside their tent last night, it would be more than just a little scandal: they'd have a breach of contract on their hands. So they drink less and touch less and even though everything’s the same, it’s also not the same at all.

Clouds roll in sometime in the early evening, and Louis shivers through the whole Jane’s Addiction concert before Harry takes off his jacket and hands it over, grinning when Louis pulls it on without protest.

There’s another silent disco at the end of the night, and by the time Harry and Louis make their way over the place is packed, nobody wanting the Leeds experience to end.
Louis is among them. It’s just been one of those days, where he wanted things to just be light and normal and happy but everything got bogged down in details and he spent the whole day looking over his shoulder, making sure no one noticed anything they shouldn’t. But now they’re out in a field filled only with music and lights, surrounded by people who have been drinking steadily since they woke up this morning, and Louis just wants to be with his gorgeous boy and forget everything that isn’t the two of them.

So he grabs himself and Harry some headphones and dances like nobody’s watching, because nobody is. Nobody cares about two boys dancing in the middle of a crowd.

Harry beams but still keeps a careful distance between them, at least until a girl passes them some neon shots and then some more, and suddenly things don’t seem so dark and dire anymore.

Harry doesn’t look like he’d be a great dancer, all long limbs and awkward angles, and he’s not going to make it on Strictly anytime soon, sure, but he follows Louis’ lead and puts his big hand across Louis’ back to feel him move and that’s all Louis needs, really. They sway and bounce and never disconnect, never look away, and the night revolves around them like planets around the sun.

Nicki Minaj fills their ears and Louis raises a challenging eyebrow, spinning in Harry’s arms and fitting himself back against Harry’s chest. Louis rolls back in time with the music, boy you got my heartbeat runnin’ away, and Harry slides his hand across Louis’ stomach to anchor him close. There’s a teasing finger inching up under Louis’ shirt and a hand gripping his hip and there’s no way tonight won’t end just like last night, with them sprinting out of the disco to find a place to tear into each other. Harry doesn’t even make it to the end of the song before he’s ripping the headphones off Louis’ ears and hustling them back to their tent.

He throws Louis to the mattress once the tent opening is safely zipped, and Louis wonders how this could be the same boy who fell apart from just Louis’ hand yesterday, because now Harry’s tossing Louis’ wellies away and yanking his trousers down to his knees and sucking bruises onto Louis’ hip bones.

Louis whines high in his throat and yanks Harry down on top of him. They kiss frantically, bitingly, Louis kicking his trousers the rest of the way off as he nips at Harry’s bottom lip. Harry’s shirt is the next thing lost, then his jeans, then Louis’ shirt. Louis wraps his legs around Harry’s waist, bringing him close.

“Remember what happened the last time we were like this?” he breathes into Harry’s ear, knowing that Harry won’t be able to think of anything except the cinema room back at the flat, the two of them so consumed by each other that they hadn’t felt their orgasms building until they were there, coming and gasping, still fully clothed. Louis still dreams of it; still wakes up hard some mornings thinking of Harry writhing above him, using Louis to get himself off. He needs it again, needs that memory with fewer clothes and awkward follow-up conversations, needs it like he needs air.

Harry moans, his pupils overwhelming the green of his eyes. He rolls off of Louis to strip off his briefs while Louis does the same, their breathing loud in the small space. Then Harry’s back on top of him, slotting his thigh between Louis’. The friction between their flush hips is almost nonexistent, Harry holding himself almost perfectly still, but Louis’ toes still curl in anticipation.

“Harry, you bloody, oh,” he whimpers when Harry shifts a little, “tease.”

“Fuck,” Harry answers eloquently. He rocks his hips down, starting a pulsating motion that has Louis reeling, gasping. Harry leans down to connect their lips, not so much kissing as panting into each other’s mouths. Harry’s guiding their hips faster now, a smooth grind of hot skin. Louis scrabbles his hands over Harry’s sweat-glossed back.
“Hazza, Haz, love, I’m—” he tries to get out, and Harry nods wildly as well.

“Me too, me too, God,” he cries out, coming with a choked moan. Louis feels the heat of the slick slide between them, and he's still thrusting, still chasing his own release.

But then Harry slides off of his perch on Louis' hips to dig around for something nearby, and Louis almost combusts in frustration. “Harry,” he whines, "what're you—"

Harry rolls back to Louis’ side, suddenly holding the purple dildo and bottle of lube. “Can you show me? You said you’d show me.”

He sounds so earnest, looking down at Louis with his chest still heaving and his eyes still dilated from his own orgasm, that it makes Louis keen, gripping the sheets to keep from reaching down and just finishing himself off. Louis snags the bottle, flipping open the top and coating two fingers quickly. He throws one leg over Harry so that he’s sitting between Louis’ parted thighs, because if he wants a demonstration then damn it, he’s getting a demonstration.

It’s been a long time, though, so Louis starts easy, rubbing a single finger over his rim. He breathes out, the slow touches almost too much with how close he was to coming. He rubs one last time then switches the angle, sliding his finger all the way in.

“Shit,” Harry whispers, and Louis nods in agreement. He’s long past just aroused so he knows he can go quickly, thrusting in and out of himself a few times before adding a second finger, hitching a little at the stretch. It’s strange, doing this with an audience; Louis feels like he’s putting on a show, but it's involuntarily when his hips lift as both fingers slide all the way in. He fucks himself like that for a moment, scissoring his fingers when the sting fades away. He’s patting absently for the lube when Harry murmurs “Here,” and holds out the bottle, and Louis lets Harry pour lube all over three of his fingers when he holds them out.

Louis whimpers when he’s pushing all three fingers inside, the burn delicious, his pulse throbbing his rim around his fingertips. He thrusts hard, trying to relax but tensing because it’s so good, and Harry’s little intakes of breath next to him aren’t helping. Louis tilts his wrist to angle upward, beckoning his fingers so he can—

“Fuck,” he moans, arching uncontrollably as his own fingers prod insistently at his prostate. “Fuck, Harry.”

“Yeah?” Harry moans back, muffled behind where he’s biting on his knuckles.

“Hand me the- the-” Louis begs. Harry whimpers and grabs the dildo, coating it in lube first. The sight of his big hand around the toy is ridiculously hot; Louis can’t believe he ever laughed about it, ever considered it anything more than dangerously arousing. Harry’s lube-slick hand slides over Louis’ as he passes him the dildo, Louis shifting to get a good grip on the base.

He positions the head of the toy at his rim, shifting to get comfortable. It’s hard on his wrist at this angle but he knows it looks amazing, can almost see himself reflected in Harry’s wide, wide eyes. He takes a deep breath and pushes, in, in, and there, his hand meets his arse and the toy is seated deep inside. Louis is gasping, and it’s not bigger than he’s had before but it’s more than he’s had in a while, so he pulls it out slowly before thrusting it back in. He does it once more, changing the angle to find his prostate and when he does he cries out, hips jumping and arse clenching.

And then he sets a rhythm, short quick motions that have him panting, moaning, and he doesn’t need much because he’s been on edge forever, or at least that’s how it feels. So he works the toy in and out, head flung back and eyes squeezed shut, choking out needy sounds with each thrust. His left
hand moves to circle his cock, the grip awkward with the hand he rarely uses but it doesn’t matter, he’s so close that the air around him is almost enough pressure to set him off.

Louis feels Harry shifting so he forces his eyes open, noticing Harry’s puffy, bitten-red lips, his sweaty chest, his hand around his own cock, which is already hard again. He reaches out with his other hand, toward Louis, extending a finger and oh, oh, running it over Louis’ stretched rim, feeling where the toy moves in and out of him. With that one touch Louis comes, wailing out “Harry!” and feeling like a star has suddenly burned itself out in his veins, sparkling heat pulsing everywhere inside him.

And then Harry is there, kissing him fiercely. “Gorgeous,” he moans, “so fucking gorgeous, Lou, I ___”

His hips hitch, his hand a blur over his cock, so Louis tugs at his hips to pull him closer, straddling Louis’ chest.

“Come on me,” he says, his voice rough and sated.

“Oh my God,” Harry says in awe, but he shifts forward a little more to comply. Three or four tugs later he’s coming with a bitten-off cry, shooting across Louis’ chest and neck and even some on his cheek. He slumps over, laying his head on Louis’ shoulder. Louis prods and rearranges him until he’s tucked into Louis’ side, a single sheet flung over them haphazardly. They shift together until they’re comfortable, sleepy and satisfied.

“Do I still look soft and warm?” Harry murmurs into Louis’ skin. Louis blinks open his tired eyes to take him in, his pink cheeks and wild curls and his lovely strong back adorned with scratches from Louis’ nails and his petal soft lips and Louis smiles, thumbing under his green, green eyes.

“You look like flowers,” Louis whispers softly. “A meadow. Somewhere warm and colorful and all my own, where I go to be all by myself. And you look like my favorite book with the tea-stained pages, all the highlighted parts that speak to me in ways other books just don’t. You look like a bonfire, the brightest thing around, so bright I can’t look at anything else. And you look like silk, and softness, and happiness. That’s what you look like.”

And now he looks like he’s on the verge of tears, his smile wobbly and radiant like the sun. That’s another one: he’s like the sun. He is the sun, basically, Louis’ own little center of the universe. “And do you know what you look like, Lou?” he asks throatily.

“What’s that?”

“Home.”

29 August 2011

Monday morning is difficult, Louis and Harry moving tentatively, tiredly. They pack quietly, throwing their things into bags and not bothering separating what’s Harry’s and what’s Louis’ because they’re going back to the same place anyway. Louis folds up the air mattress and Harry breaks down the tent and they trudge back to the car, sleepy brushes of their hands between them.

Since Louis drove to Leeds, Harry drives back to London, falling in line with the exodus of cars leaving the campground. The sun is bright overhead, Harry’s aviators reflecting sunbeams onto the
dashboard. Louis curls up under Harry’s coat, tracing his fingers over the veins in Harry’s hand.

They make it back to London just in time to shower and throw their dirty clothes into the washing machine before three other boys pile into their flat, smiles and hugs all around. Zayn’s carrying a cake and Niall’s carrying beer and Liam’s carrying his favorite movies, and they sit in the kitchen and chat about the festival and what the others did with their days off while Harry whips up quesadillas and chips (at Liam’s request).

“By the way,” Louis says, watching Harry’s sure hands as he slices the peppers, “ought to thank you, Niall.”

Harry snorts, sending Louis a smirk over his shoulder. Niall, unsuspecting as ever, perks up. “Oh yeah? How come?”

“Got a lot of use out of your surprise, didn’t we Hazza?”

Niall only looks confused for a moment before his face crumples in disgust. Liam and Zayn look the same, Zayn even pretending to retch.

“I did not need a report back,” Niall says vehemently. Louis shrugs, innocent as ever.

“Just thought you’d want to know,” he says, leaning over to press a kiss to Harry’s shoulder.

After quesadillas and chips and all the beer Niall brought and the entire double chocolate cake and some of the rum Louis had in the fridge and the popcorn Zayn insisted they needed, the boys are spread across the cinema room in the Dome and groaning about their overly-full stomachs. *Batman Begins* plays on the projector screen in the background, though they’ve all watched it with Liam enough times that they don’t really have to pay attention.

“I’m going to have to double my workouts for days to work this off,” Liam groans, and Louis throws a pillow at him.

“No talk of exercise in my house,” he demands, not bothering to lift his head from Harry’s chest to see if he hit his target.

“Our house,” Harry corrects, and Louis acquiesces to that with a kiss. Then another, because Harry tastes like spices and rum and Louis can still feel a twinge in his bum from their activities yesterday but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to go again and again (and again and again and…).

And then the pillow he threw at Liam smacks him in the back of the head, and, well, that can only mean one thing: war.

“Happy fuckin’ birthday, Lima!” Louis cackles as he and Niall double-team the birthday boy with pokes to the ribs and pillows to the face. Zayn and Harry are wrestling nearby, Zayn attempting to tickle Harry and Harry resisting valiantly.

Liam just grins, his eyes crinkling, even when Louis wallops him right in the face.
They curl up as a sleepy tangle of boys and blankets on the master bed at some ungodly hour of the morning, Louis spooning Harry and Liam spooning Zayn and Niall in the middle, Zayn and Harry’s hands interlaced over Niall’s chest.

“Love you boys,” Liam murmurs sleepily.

“Love you too,” they all answer before dropping off into sleep.

2 September 2011

The second night after they get back from Leeds, Louis opens himself up with three fingers when Harry begs him to let him watch again, spread across their king-sized bed with its soft sheets and familiar scents. He lets Harry guide the dildo inside him this time, teaching him between gasped breaths and little whimpers just how to work it in and out of Louis until he's screaming, crying, coming without being touched at all.

The third day after Leeds they don’t have a single thing to do, so they spend the morning kissing lazily until Harry rolls himself on top of Louis and settles their hips together like puzzle pieces finding their homes. They rut against each other and pant out half-endearments like "fuck, your hair, so fucking sexy," and "want you like this everyday," and "there, there, right there fuck fuck love you."

They eat lunch together in the kitchen without putting on a stitch of clothing, and when Louis accidentally drips sauce from his sandwich on his chest Harry licks it off. They wank each other off three more times before collapsing into bed with exhaustion at nine o’clock that evening, their lips and hips both bruised, and sleeping right on through to the next morning.

The fourth day after Leeds, Harry asks if he can give Louis a blowjob. Louis, who is on the phone with his mother at the time, coughs violently and hangs up with choked promises that he'll call her back later. He pushes Harry back against the wall with a hard arm to his chest, making Harry go pliant and tip his head back and whine for more. Louis brings him to orgasm with his lips marking Harry's throat and his hand working him in a smooth, slow rhythm.

That night, he whispers into Harry's shoulder that he's scared to push Harry too hard, afraid any little next step could be what turns Harry's stomach and makes him think choosing Louis was a bad idea. And he knows Harry gets it; Harry knows that Louis has to take his time with this because it's just one of his little things. Louis thinks of Harry giving him a blowjob and it's hot, yeah, of fucking course it's hot, but then the Harry in his mind turns into the last guy who went down on him, some random boy at a party before he left for bootcamp last year. And he pictures doing to Harry what he did to that boy, fucking his face and pulling his hair and leaving him with a sloppy handjob and a kiss on the cheek in goodbye, and it's so, so wrong. He doesn’t want to fall into that with Harry; he deserves a hundred times better, a thousand. He’s already settling for Louis, no need to scare him off with things he’s not ready for.

But Harry is also insatiable and curious and a teenage boy, and Louis knows it won’t be long before he asks again. And Louis may not be strong enough to resist twice.
Harry and Louis do a lot of fretting in the days leading up to the Sugarscape interview day and their scheduled meeting with management, though there's really no reason for it. What's done is done, and no amount of hypothesizing over their new PR tactics will change it.

They do decide to share the situation with the boys, though, knowing they'll want to be in the loop to any drastic changes, especially after Liam's panic while they were at Leeds. So they order in Chinese one night and lay it all out: how Modest has been pushing Louis to cut his interactions with Harry since back when they were on the show, how Claudia was brought in to make sure Louis couldn't do too much damage, how they've been hinting about vague "punishments" for months every time Louis and Harry so much as looked at each other.

"I guess I don't really understand that part," Niall says, fumbling with his chopsticks before giving up and grabbing a noodle with his fingers. "They aren't, like, our guardians, right? Like, normal famous people don't get chewed out by their management, do they?"

"I don't think there is a normal when it comes to celebrities, Ni," Zayn says.

"I'm with Niall, though," Liam says. "What can they do, really?"

Louis sighs. "That's the issue, we don't really know. I found some parts in our contract that I think cover that sort of thing but I couldn't make heads or tails of it, so I took pictures and sent it to me mum—"

"Louis," Liam gasps, horrified. "That's a breach of contract!"

"Not anymore," Harry says grimly. He’s pushed his food aside and started painting his nails, the slow, smooth stroke of red polish helping calm the shaking of his hands. "We've signed it, so as long as we aren't sharing it with the public we can show it to whoever. It was only really a secret up until we signed, because they didn't want someone with any actual knowledge on the subject to point out everything that isn't standard practice in it."

"Yeah, so me mum shows it to her lawyer and he read over those sections I sent, and apparently it's super vague, but Modest and Syco have complete control over our public image."

"What does that mean, though?"

"Well, in typical cases, management handles public image by choosing clothes for the celebrity, or picking who can and can't interview them, or deciding what brands can sponsor them," Louis explains. "Like, McDonalds will never sponsor Beyoncé, right, 'cause that doesn't fit her public image. But Eve Saint Larent, they could sponsor her because they do fit her image."

"Yves Saint Laurent, Louis," Harry corrects despondently, dropping his face into his hands. "Honestly. And Beyoncé wears Versace, not YSL."

Louis waves his hands. "Semantics. Either way, our contracts say we don't get any say in our image at all. We have to do what they say or it's a breach, and then they can sue if they want. I mean, they can't make us do anything illegal, but otherwise they've definitely got control over everything else."

"So what do you think that means regarding you two?" Niall asks carefully, leaning over to help
Harry screw the lid back on his polish without ruining his nails.

"Honestly?" Louis shrugs. "No idea. They want to separate me and Haz, and there's lots of ways to do that. They already tried to make us stop living together once, but that didn't go well and it was already in the papers, so they gave up."

"Didn't go well?" Zayn smirks.

Harry grins widely. "Oh, Lou shut that down quick. Told them he'd go to the press about everything, got all serious and calm. It was super hot."

Zayn rolls his eyes fondly. Niall fake retches fondly. Liam throws a water bottle at him fondly.

In any case, there's nothing any of them can do until Tuesday and their interview day with Sugarscape rolls around. Claudia texts Louis and Harry that there is a room reserved in the office space next to Sugar magazine headquarters where Magee and Griffiths will meet them, and that a car will be sent for them.

And so they wait.

... 

Harry's been taller than Louis since they met—Louis is sort of tiny, and even though Harry knows better than to point that out he's still noticed. He likes that, likes that Louis' personality is so big it makes him seem bigger, makes it so that he can still curl around Harry and make him feel protected, loved. Harry doesn't care that his hands dwarf Louis', that Louis can steal his clothes but he can't steal Louis' anymore; Louis has always been larger than life, and Harry loves that about him.

So why does he seem so small, folded in on himself and clutching at Harry's hand as the car deposits them in front of Sugar magazine?

When Harry asks, Louis just shakes his head. "I don't know, Haz. I'm just worried. I have no idea what to expect."

Harry tries to make himself bigger than he feels to take some of the burden from Louis, but it doesn't feel right. Louis is the protector, Harry is the protected; it's how they've always been.

Their driver opens the door and Harry pulls Louis out behind him, following their security guard into the office building next door. It's deserted, empty hallways and flickering fluorescent lights. It fits well with the sense of dread in Harry's veins.

Claudia waits for them outside a seemingly innocuous door, her ever-moving fingers flying across the keyboard of her phone. She takes one look at them and beckons.

"Harry first," she says coolly. "Louis, Preston will take you to wait in another room. No running off."

Harry turns to look at Louis, who has gone ashen. Harry kisses his cheek and squeezes his hand, sending reassurances without words. He flicks his glance up to Preston, who looks sad but steady, a hand around Louis' elbow.

And then Harry is led into the room, a similar setup to the one at Fountain and no less intimidating for it not being Modest's home turf. There are Griffiths and Magee in the center (and Harry
remembers what Louis scoffed at them last time, and, really, don’t they have any other clients to worry about? Surely One Direction aren’t important enough for the heads of the entire management company to call them into regular meetings?). There are the PR guys, Jones and Hackford, and there are the numerous twittering interns, fussing over each other and taking notes and pouring water for the men paying them to be there. There’s a girl in the corner playing on her phone, but she doesn’t look up at Harry so he doesn’t pay her any attention.

Harry sits, tries not to feel like he’s being metaphorically marched to his death.

“Harry,” Griffiths says, “Harry, Harry, Harry. We warned you this would happen and you didn’t listen. You brought this on yourself.”

Harry doesn’t answer. He’s tight-lipped, his fingers clenched together under the table. He achingly wishes Louis with him.

“I’m sure Mr. Tomlinson would understand if you were to end your relationship to save the band,” Magee hints. Harry’s stomach twists at hearing Louis’ name in his ugly mouth. “Surely you both must have realized there is more at stake than what this ill-fated romance is worth.”

Harry twists the Leeds bracelet around his wrist, pulling and pinching, little shocks of pain to distract from the suggestion; like he would just drop Louis like he didn’t matter, like what they have doesn’t matter, just because a pros and cons list doesn’t work out economically in their favor.

He twists his bracelet again, drawing Magee’s eyes. He clears his throat, and says as clearly as he can, “I love him. We’re happy together. I can’t change that, and I wouldn’t if I could.”

Griffiths leans back with a sigh. “So be it.” He gestures at Jones. “Your PR team has created a strategy to help raise your profile, but it is dependent on you sticking with the narrative we are attempting to build for you. Continue to act out in public with Mr. Tomlinson and the narrative will unravel.”

“The good news is that this PR move will seriously help build name recognition for you and the band, both here and across Europe before you start your tour,” Jones says earnestly. “We aren’t doing anything that won’t help you in some way.”

“And what’s the bad news?” Harry asks cautiously.

Hackford laughs, like he thinks Harry is joking. “The bad news is that it can’t start immediately. It has to seem natural and organic, so we can’t jump straight into it. It’s a slow process.”

“What’s a slow process?” Harry asks, frustrated. They’re skirting something, and all he wants is a straight answer.

“Before we lay out the specifics,” Magee interrupts just as Jones is opening his mouth to answer, “I think it should be explicitly stated that you have no say in this, Harry. By signing your contract, you forfeited your image rights to us. We cannot control your personal life, but any part of it that bleeds out into your public life and goes against the image we build for you is considered grounds for a terminated contract, not to mention a lawsuit.”

“It’s like Jones said,” Griffiths continues. “We don’t choose publicity stunts to punish you, we choose them based on what your reputation needs or what the band needs to be successful. In fighting us, you hurt yourself, your band, and your chances at a profitable album and tour.”

“What does my reputation need?” Harry asks tremulously.
Magee and Griffith smile their dead-eyed smiles, and Jones turns his laptop to show a photo of a familiar smirking face.

…

“You should drink your water,” Preston says when Harry’s meeting stretches into half an hour. It’s the first words he’s spoken since he led Louis to an empty lounge to wait, just the two of them and some water bottles left on a table.

Louis cracks off the lid of one of the bottles and nearly spills it all over himself, his hands shaky and weak. He twists the lid back on and continues his pacing.

Preston’s phone vibrates and he stands, making Louis’ heart jump. He gestures for Louis to follow, and they make their way back just in time for the door to open and Claudia to step out, followed by Harry. Claudia is mostly blocking Harry from view but Louis can tell something is wrong just by the slump of his shoulders, his hitched breathing.

“Hazza?” he asks worriedly. Harry moves around Claudia and his face is blotchy with frustration, an anger Louis rarely sees in him settled badly in his limbs. He looks livid and bitter at the same time, and Louis is pretty sure he could point a finger in any direction and Louis would start a path of destruction without asking for a reason why. His hands don’t shake as he reaches for Harry, who steps toward him.

“Lou—” he says, but Claudia redirects him before he can find his place in Louis’ arms.

“Take Harry next door,” she tells Preston. “There’s a small room downstairs where they’re being interviewed, the other three should be here already.”

And then she tugs Louis into the room before he can protest.

There are at least a dozen people here, the same old faces Louis is used to seeing and one new one. A pretty girl sits in the corner, her ankles crossed delicately, her fingernails tapping on the back of her phone. She shakes the ice in her Starbucks cup and smiles.

“Louis,” says Magee’s familiar voice. “Please come in. We’d like to introduce you to Eleanor.”

…

Harry paces a short circuit in the small room: back and forth, back and forth. Niall and Liam and Zayn watch, their worried eyes following his endless loop.

"Time?" Harry asks from between gritted teeth. He doesn't usually get this angry, but it feels earned this time.

"It's been forty minutes, H," Liam says after checking his watch. "He'll be here soon."

"You guys will be okay," Niall reassures him.

Harry scoffs, never breaks in his pacing. They'll be okay? Yeah, right.

The door bangs open and in rushes Louis, a small storm of wrath and fear, a Tasmanian devil of a boy. He ignores the other three, rushing over to Harry and gripping his shoulders tight.
"Are you okay?" he demands.

"I'm, yeah," Harry says nonsensically. He rubs his hands on Louis' arms, his face, like checking for a physical wound when that's not the kind of pain they're dealing with here. "You, what about you? What do you have to do?"

Louis' eyes go a little hard. "I," he announces dryly, "am starting a long term relationship with a biology uni student who happens to be a big fan of ours."

Harry feels his stomach drop. "Long term?"

"They threw the word years around a lot," Louis answers bitterly. "But you, what are you doing? Tell me mine's worse, please."

Harry shrugs, his gaze dropping to the floor. He can't be righteously angry about it anymore now that he knows Louis is okay; now he's just tired. "I," he says, echoing Louis, "am going to have an affair with Caroline Flack."

The sudden silence could make a mime uncomfortable.

"Caroline Flack, like from Xtra Factor?" Zayn asks, his eyes wide.

“Caroline Flack, the middle aged woman?” Niall asks incredulously.

Louis hasn’t moved. He’s still stuck in shock, his mouth open in an O.

And then he laughs. He laughs, and he drops his hands to his knees and laughs some more, laughs until he’s hoarse.

“Oh, no, he’s cracked,” Liam says sadly, and that just seems to make Louis laugh harder.

“Lou?” Harry asks, trying to pull Louis back up to face him. Louis comes willingly, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes.

“Don’t you get it?” he asks.

Harry shoots a bewildered look over at the other three, who all look stunned as well. “Um, no?”

“They’ve been planning this for months!” Louis says, waving his arms wildly. “Simon specifically introduced you to Caroline last year. Did you have to sign paperwork today?” he asks, and Harry nods. “Me too. I noticed the date when Eleanor signed—that’s her name, my new girlfriend, Eleanor—and it was back in July. That’s why they had Hannah tweet like we were breaking up even though we never dated, they were making me look single. It all fits!"

“O… kay?” Harry says slowly. “How is that funny? It seems worse, actually.”

Louis grabs Harry's shoulders, huffing a last laugh. “Because these stunts weren’t pulled out of thin air to punish us, they were going to do them anyway. They probably just waited to tell us until we did something that went against our public images. See? It made us try to stay in line and it makes them look like they follow through with their threats, even though really their 'punishment' was part of the plan all along."

“But why?” Niall asks. “What’s the point? I thought they wanted us to Bond with fans.”

“Technically Eleanor is a ‘fan,’ so that still works,” Louis says, rolling his eyes. “But that’s not the point: see, now I can be seen with Harry and be touchy or whatever and I’m just his best friend,
right? Because I’ve got a wonderful long-term girlfriend I obviously love dearly so I can’t be in love with Harry.”

“That’s…” Liam says slowly. “Diabolical.”

“It’s sleazy is what it is,” Niall announces darkly. “Don’t like it, and it’s not even me.”

“What now?” Harry asks. “What do we do?”

“Can’t do anything, can we?” Louis asks flippantly. “Contracts, and all. But you know what?” He pulls Harry close, smiling and shaking his head. “I don’t even care. I’ll get papped with a fake girlfriend. I’ll tweet about her, whatever. But there’s nothing they have over me now. They can’t make me behave with a punishment because the punishment was never real.”

Harry’s smile spreads as well. “So, back to normal?”

Louis shrugs, then grimaces. “Well, I mean, you will have to deal with Caroline. And for people who want us to be seen with fans, that plan makes no sense at all unless they’re trying to scoop that middle aged market. But, it’s like you said,” he tells Harry, tucking his fringe behind his ear with soft fingers, “we set the boundaries, not them. We decide what we want the public to see and know about us, not them.”

Harry breathes out slowly. “We’re gonna be okay?”

Louis is crinkly-eyed and beaming in answer. “We’ll always be okay.”

... 

The Sugarscape girls are a delight, as always. Kate, their secret accomplice who writes articles about Harry’s hair and the mysterious nature of their bromance when things are slow and then texts them the link to get their opinion, sees Louis and Harry playing footsie under the table when they arrive and sends them a wink. The website is doing an entire One Direction month so Sugarscape has got to get thirty days worth of sound bites and interesting content out of them which, after they find that the first interview question is about Niall’s lack of toplessness in the What Makes You Beautiful video, goes swimmingly.

“We promise at one point we were all topless,” Harry says in that way that leads most people to wonder if he’s being a tease on purpose or if he’s the most innocent human in the world. Louis tugs on his hair, because he knows which one it is.

Over the course of the group interviews, the two of them are nearly nauseating together:

Kate makes a joke about them doing a naked photoshoot and Louis putting a carrot in front of his penis to hide it, and Harry says, matter-of-factly, “I don’t think it’d cover it.”

Liam brings up Louis’ habit of changing everyone’s names (“Shut up, Ian”) and Harry calls Louis Chop Suey for no discernible reason. But then he follows that up with “My favorite thing about Chop Suey is his eyelashes,” and Louis feels himself go all red, at least until Zayn says something about Liam’s “chiseled physique” and they all get a bit sidetracked making fun of that.

Harry mutters something about giving Modest something to work with while Kate shuffles through her notes and, at the first available opportunity, says, “I like girls,” in the most unnatural and uncomfortable voice possible. Then he turns around and gives Louis a broad wink.
All in all, between the penis jokes and the talking over each other and Zayn trying to give articulate answers while Niall laughs hysterically at the word “chewy,” it’s a bit like any other day with One Direction. Kate and the rest of the interviewers are near-cackling with glee when they turn off the camera after the group interview, letting the boys know they can take a break before starting on individual interviews. Kate sidles over to Louis and Harry while everyone is distracted.

“You two okay?” she asks quietly under the guise of sorting out her schedules for the day. “Heard there were some rough meetings this morning.”

“You know,” Harry says, leaning against Louis until Louis gets the hint and slings his arm around his waist, “we are perfect, the two of us.”

Kate flicks her gaze up. “Good,” she says after a minute. She peeks over her shoulder to make sure they’re still alone and then says, “Remember what I said, about undermining Syco’s stories? Reckon it’s time for that to start?”

Louis’ smile widens. “I think we’ll give you plenty of material to work with over the next few months, yeah.”

Kate smirks. “I bet.” Then she straightens up and says a little louder to Louis, “Tell your girlfriend hi for me, then, and I look forward to seeing the eventual paparazzi pictures of you two.”

“We look forward to eventually having the paparazzi take our pictures,” Louis answers, grinning, even though he and his girlfriend have never discussed paparazzi or anything at all, because funnily enough they’ve never spoken.

The editor in charge is rearranging things for the individual interviews, sliding chairs around and adjusting the lighting, having Niall sit first while the other boys sign things for the giveaways. Louis is tracing lazy circles on Harry’s hip under his sweater as he waits for Liam to pass him more things to sign, brushing lightly over Harry’s soft skin as he chats with Zayn about lunch plans.

“Lou,” Harry whispers, but then doesn’t say anything else, shifting in his seat, so Louis smiles at him and turns back to Zayn. He moves his fingers out from under Harry’s sweater and instead runs them up the inside seam of his trousers.

Niall’s interview starts, and Louis half-listens to his answers while drawing a picture of Liam on a poster that gets sent his way.

“Lou,” Harry says again, but Louis just scratches lightly as his thigh in answer until he can finish drawing Liam’s curly hair.

“Lads, what’s my favorite word for boobs?” Niall calls. Louis shrugs. Harry taps at Louis’ knee once more.

“Lou,” he says, and Louis turns to see his cheeks are pink. “Can I give you a blowjob?”

What a weird kid. His sense of humor is so strange.

“I’d love it, if you could just wait,” Louis grins, patting Harry’s knee.

Niall cackles from the chair, and Louis realizes everyone heard Harry’s joking little request. The
editor’s eyes are wide, and, in contrast, Claudia’s are narrowed so far they’re almost closed.

Oh well. Harry was clearly joking, and it’s not like Sugarscape will put this part online.

When Harry yanks Louis into the bathroom on the way to find some snacks, Louis realizes Harry might not have been joking after all.

“Jesus,” he chokes when Harry attacks his neck, biting and sucking and making his knees go weak. “Hazza, what—”

“Wanted you all day,” Harry pants, kissing Louis hard, tangling his hands in Louis’ hair. “Want you all the time.”

Louis moans, grabbing Harry tight around the waist and nipping at his bottom lip, making him gasp. Harry fumbles at Louis’ waistband, his fingers scrabbling on the button and zipper. When he finally gets Louis’ trousers undone, he immediately slides his hand inside, palming at Louis’ cock.

Louis falls back against the wall as Harry starts stroking him, long, smooth pulls that have his hips jumping. His head tips back, his mouth hanging open, and he’d be more ashamed of his moaning if it weren’t for the way Harry’s fingers dance along the vein on the bottom of his cock.

Then Harry drops to his knees, and Louis goes lightheaded with need.

“Harry,” he says breathlessly, “you don’t, Christ, you don’t have to—”

“Want to,” Harry says, still stroking Louis’ cock but leaving hot kisses up the shaft as well. He licks hesitantly at Louis’ slit, his wide eyes flicking up to take in Louis’ reaction and looking satisfied when Louis keens.

“Haz, Hazza,” Louis whimpers. “You beautiful thing, oh—”

Harry’s mouth is tentative and soft as he slides carefully down Louis’ cock. He hums and the vibrations of his throat have Louis gasping. He moves back up, sucking at the head for a moment and closing his eyes; he’s a debauched angel, with plump red lips wrapped around Louis’ cock and his long eyelashes fluttering as Louis combs through his hair.

He slowly picks up a rhythm, his suction not quite hard enough to have Louis coming even though the sight alone has Louis toeing the edge already, his limbs on fire. He changes the angle a couple of times, experimenting with how far he can take Louis down, but he soon turns sloppy, enthusiastic.

“You’re so good,” Louis sobs out, “perfect, perfect fucking mouth oh God—”

Louis wants to last a little longer, but Harry’s happy noises every time Louis can’t control his hips are the hottest things Louis has ever heard, and the way Harry’s hips are rutting up against Louis’ leg is almost too much.

“Coming,” Louis gasps when the ache starts to peak, “Harry I’m coming, I’m coming.”

Harry moans when Louis comes, still sucking vigorously and rubbing against Louis’ leg. He pulls his mouth off of Louis’ cock and cries out, pressing his face to Louis’ hip as he comes in his pants just a few seconds later.
“Oh my God,” Louis says dazedly, collapsing next to Harry on the floor. His skin is still tingling, his eyes seeing spots. Harry leans his head on Louis’ shoulder and sighs in satisfaction.

“Told you,” he hums. “Wanted t’ give you a blowjob.”

“Yes you did,” Louis huffs a disbelieving laugh. “I guess I should stop trying so hard to keep you from doing things you actually want to do.”

“I’d tell you if I didn’t want to do something,” Harry says. “But, spoiler alert, there’s not really anything I don’t want to do. I want to try it all. Like, have you ever had a rimjob? Apparently those are—”

Louis claps his hand over Harry’s mouth, not sure his poor spent cock can handle Harry talking about licking him out just yet. Harry giggles adorably like he didn’t just suck a dick in a public restroom, kissing Louis’ palm and snuggling closer to his side.

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10 September 2011

The opening riff of What Makes You Beautiful pumps through the speakers, the crowd screaming in delight.

Harry clutches his chest and tries to breathe.

They’re backstage at Red or Black?, about to perform their first single live for the first time ever. The producers and the boys’ PR team had thought easing them into the performance would be better than throwing them on stage for the full song the first time, so they filmed an intro video where they sang on a tube car full of girls and then the girls chased them back to the ITV studios.

Harry’s panting like he really did just run down the Wembley steps all the way backstage, his breath catching in his throat. It’s terrifying, because they’d always had cushion on X Factor and on the tour if they fucked up; here they have nothing, even if it is a Simon Cowell show, and Harry’s the only one with a solo. If he ruins this, he might ruin everything. The single might not sell when it releases tomorrow because people think they can’t sing.

Why isn’t Liam doing the solo? Why does it have to be Harry? Why can’t he breathe?

Louis notices Harry doubled over in panic and his eyes go wide but it’s too late: the doors open, and the boys have to run on stage and sing the chorus, a crowd of dancing girls behind them.

Harry sings, but he can’t hear over the heavy pumping of his heart, the blood rushing in his ears.

He moves mechanically to center stage through the na na na nas, the other boys behind him. The lights drop, a single bright spotlight trained right on his face.

His hands shake.

He sings, or at least he tries to. The low scrape of notes is almost too low, his voice trembling and weak. His lungs are full but it’s not enough. A thousand eyes pierce him from the audience. A million more pierce him through the cameras broadcasting this to the nation. He can’t breathe.

His voice echoes back to him through the in-ears, soft and awful.
The other boys take over when the chorus comes back, and thank God for that. Harry hears his voice go scratchy, his throat welling like it does when he’s about to cry.

The song ends. Harry catches a fluttering piece of paper and hands it off to the host. A girl reveals her t-shirt to be black. Two people win a million pounds or something. There’s a lot of screaming. A few girls grab Harry by the arm as soon as the cameras go off, smiling in that way that says he’s welcome to step close, to slide a hand around their waists, to be the cheeky charming Harry always chasing girls in the papers. He stares at them, lost. He can’t breathe.

A strong hand on Harry’s back ushers him away from the girls and to the bustling backstage. He thinks he hears Liam’s voice, that soothing tone he gets when people are upset. But who’s upset?

“Can you breathe for me, H?” he asks calmly. Harry gasps in a breath; oh, apparently it’s him.

Zayn says something about water and Niall chirps, “On it!” before scampering away. Then all Harry can see is blue, calming and patient blue, Louis grabbing his face carefully with both hands.

“Hazza,” he says carefully, “you’ve got to breathe, baby.” He puts one hand on Harry’s chest and one on his own, mimicking a slow breath. Harry sucks in air but it’s too fast and he chokes, coughing. Louis presses a water bottle into his hands, urging him to drink.

Zayn’s hand is rubbing soothing circles on his shoulders, and Niall is hugging Harry around the waist. They all look so concerned that Harry takes another breath, slower this time. The fuzz in his vision clears a little bit, the ringing of his ears subsiding. He breathes again, and again.

“There he is,” Louis smiles softly. “Want to sit down? There’s a sofa right over there.”

Harry nods and lets himself be guided to sit down, the plush material of the seat pulling him in. “M sorry,” he croaks. “I didn’t mean to fuck up, I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t fuck up,” Zayn says, shaking his head. His hand is the one still on Harry’s back, tracing slow circles. “You did fine, babes.”

Harry scoffs sadly. “Did not. I sounded awful, no one will want to buy the song now.”

“Haz—”

“I th-thought I was over this,” he says, and to his horror tears start to roll, dripping down his face. “I-I thought I could d-do it.”

Louis, who is still crouching in front of Harry to check his breathing, pulls him into a tight hug. “It’s okay that you get nervous,” he says. “And it’s okay to mess up. We still love you.”

Harry shakes his head again but lets himself sink into Louis’ body, collapsing in like a dying star. Zayn kisses Harry’s hair and Liam puts his knee and Niall, for lack of anything better to do, rubs at his shins. Harry laughs weakly, the sound muffled in Louis’ blazer.
“’M sorry,” he says again. Louis shushes him.

“Quit apologizing. We’ve still got all day tomorrow to promote the song, plus the interviews we’ve been doing for weeks. You can’t bring down a whole promotional campaign with one performance.” He pulls back and looks Harry in the eye, wiping his tears. “Be happy, love. Everything’s just fine.”

13 September 2011

Kate from Sugarscape texts them the link to a brand new article bright and early two days after What Makes You Beautiful is released.

“They are on course to score the fastest selling single of the year,” Louis reads excitedly. “We did it, Haz we—”

Harry yelps and tackles him back against the mattress, and the two celebrate so loudly that Liam, whose flat is the closest to theirs, texts them to let them know he’s excited too, but maybe they should save their voices. They ignore him.

Harry drags Louis back to Shangri-La that night and has Liam Sparkes tattoo I CAN’T CHANGE right where his Leeds bracelet had sat.

14 September 2011

The next day, when Harry’s wrist is still a little red from its new ink and Louis can’t stop reading the words and kissing him breathless anytime they’re alone, Harry gets a shock in the form of Claudia. She stops him just as they’re on their way out of the studio where they’d just been interviewed on Daybreak.

“What do you mean I’m not going to Niall’s birthday party?” he asks, bewildered. “Of course I am.”

“You are underage, you can’t go on a celebrity-studded pub crawl which will definitely be on every gossip site tomorrow,” she says testily. “Also, we’re debuting Louis’ girlfriend and we can’t risk you taking the headlines away from that by hanging all over each other tonight.”

“What’s happening tonight?” Louis asks, clapping Harry on the shoulder as he walks up, the other boys following. “Other than getting absolutely hammered, I mean.”

Harry turns to Louis, his brow furrowed. “She thinks I’m not going.”

Louis’ smile drops immediately. “Why not?”

“Eleanor is going tonight,” Claudia sniffs. “She’ll be at your flat at ten o’clock so you can ride there and arrive together. Harry isn’t going because he’s underage.”

“Then don’t let any paps take pictures of him!” Louis demands. “That’s a thing, I know it is. You can keep them from publishing whatever they want, I know you can.”

“We can but we won’t,” Claudia says. “Harry can’t be there, but Eleanor will. That won’t change.”
So, later that evening, while Louis changes out of his t-shirt into a light blue button-down and fusses with his hair in the mirror, Harry changes into his sweatpants and watches from the bed, curled up in a little ball.

Louis sighs when he sees him, kissing his forehead. “I’m sorry you can’t go,” he murmurs.

“Maybe it’s best,” Harry shrugs dully. “I’m not a great actor, people will probably be able to tell I don’t like her.”

Louis hums, carding his hand through Harry’s hair. The doorbell rings and Harry flinches.

“Better let her in,” Louis says apologetically, slipping on his espadrilles. He takes the two flights of stairs down to the lowest level and their front door, Harry following dejectedly. Louis opens the door and there stands the girl from the Modest meeting, curled brown hair framing her pretty heart-shaped face. She’s wearing a tiny dress and tall heels, a purse and jacket hooked over her elbow.

“Hello,” she says quietly.

Louis nods and turns back around, a corner of his mouth tucked up in a small smile towards Harry, who’s lingering in the doorway to the living room. “Can you chuck me my jacket, H? It’s on the sofa.”

Harry does, but doesn’t throw it to Louis like he usually would before tottering off to watch telly or something. Instead he holds it out, ignoring Louis’ quizzical look as he slides his arms through the sleeves.

“Oi, lads,” calls Liam’s voice from out in the hallway behind Eleanor. “All set? We’re picking up Danielle, so we need to—oh. Hello,” he says, awkwardly shaking Eleanor’s hand. “Right, then.”

“Who’s Danielle?” Louis asks. Liam goes pink. “She was a dancer on X Factor when we were there. I needed a date, so,” he shrugs. Louis’ face splits into a wide grin.

“Way to go, Lima,” he laughs. Liam grins a crinkly-eyed grin.

“Thanks, Tommo. We’d better head out, Zayn’s already on the way there.”

“Right,” Louis says, brushing off his jacket and facing Harry. Harry looks past Louis to Eleanor, who’s studying them with inquisitive eyes.

“You signed an NDA, yeah?” he asks, his voice rusty and rough.

“Yeah,” she says, and her voice is like bells.

“And you won’t say anything?”

“I can’t,” she says with a self-deprecating smile. “I don’t have the money to pay if I get sued, and there’s nothing I could get out of it anyway.”

Harry nods. “Good.”

Then he slams Louis back against the wall, kissing him fiercely. Louis makes a shocked noise but grabs at Harry’s bare back, his hip, his elbows, before settling into his hair and holding him close.
Harry growls into his mouth, biting and sucking hard, wanting to bruise, wanting an outlet for his frustration. Louis takes it, stays pliant and soft as Harry grips his hips hard, tilting his head when Harry moves down to his throat, marking just behind his ear to claim what’s his.

“Harry,” Liam says behind them, pained. “C’mon, lads, we have to go.”

Harry yanks himself back with a last pull on Louis’ lips, wiping his mouth with the back of his wrist. Louis is still against the wall, panting and disheveled, his lips bruised and the spot by his hairline marked with lines from Harry’s teeth.

“Be good tonight,” Harry says, voice raw, and Louis shivers.

“Yeah,” Louis breathes, stumbling toward Harry and kissing him again, all soft lips and fluttering lashes. There’s a tug and Liam wrangles them apart, Louis leaving a scratch across Harry’s chest in his wake. Harry clenches and unclenches his fists, licking his lips.

“Lou,” Liam urges, pulling him away. Eleanor is still in the doorway, her eyes wide.

“I’ll get him home soon, H,” Liam promises, looking uneasy.

Harry nods at him and watches them go, Liam the barrier between Louis and Eleanor, Louis looking over his shoulder every few steps like he wants to turn back.

Harry watches until they’re gone.

It’s midnight, it’s one, it’s two. Harry’s watched enough old episodes of Great British Bake-Off that he could open his own bakery, but hasn’t absorbed more than a few words. He painted his nails black, removed the polish, painted them purple, removed it again. The scratch Louis left across his chest throbs in the best way.

His phone sits on the sofa next to him, lighting up every few minutes with updates from Liam or Zayn or drunken jumbles of letters from Niall. He got one message from Louis and it’s still open on Harry's screen, even though it was sent almost half an hour ago.

(2:43 a.m.) **Lou Bear:** Home soon xxxxx

There’s a click at the front door and Harry stands, moving to the hallway just as the door swings inward and reveals Louis. The top few buttons of his shirt are undone and his hair is messy. He meets Harry’s eye and automatically drops his gaze to the floor, twisting his hands in front of himself and peeking up at Harry through his lashes.

“Hi, babe,” he says. He doesn’t sound drunk. Doesn’t really look like it either when he ambles forward, his steps careful but steady. Harry watches him approach.

“Hi,” he answers. “Good night?”

Harry doesn’t know what this feeling is, this achy urging in his chest. He wants to wrap Louis up in his arms and ignore anyone else management throws their way. He wants to run away with Louis and never look back. He wants to tie him to their bed and never let him free. He wants to suck his cock and slide his fingers into him and wring so many orgasms from him he can’t remember any word besides Harry. He wants to press his tongue to every inch of his body.
Louis is in front of him now, delicate and fidgety. He bites his lip and strokes his hand up Harry’s arm.

And that’s… familiar.

“Hazza,” Louis says, and his normally clear voice is soft and throaty. He looks smaller than usual, dainty and precious, young and beautiful.

And it hits Harry where he’s seen this before: almost a year ago, when Robbie Williams rehearsed with them for the X Factor final and Louis was flirting with him.

About ninety-nine percent of Louis and Harry’s interactions on a daily basis can be considered flirting, but this is different. It’s intentional, it’s Louis acting with Harry like he used to do around older men, making himself small and coy.

Fuck.

Harry kisses him, leaning down and using his height to his advantage for once, tilting his head to capture Louis’ lips. Louis whimpers softly and presses closer, his hands gripping at Harry’s shoulders. The kiss is slow and burning, heat licking up Harry’s spine with each nip of their teeth and flick of their tongues.

Harry breaks the kiss for a moment, pressing their foreheads together. Louis whines and tries to reconnect their lips but Harry stops him.

“What do you want?” he rasps.


Harry reaches for him again, stooping and wrapping his arms around Louis’ thighs and hoisting him up; Louis wraps his legs around Harry’s waist as though on instinct. Harry kisses him as he makes his slow way to the stairs and up to their bedroom, only getting distracted a few times by the sweet-bitter taste of Louis’ mouth. When he makes it to their destination he drops Louis and lets him fall back into the center of their bed, a petite spot of cream and caramel and robin’s egg blue against the white duvet.

Harry pounces and never resurfaces: he strips Louis of his clothes that smell like beer and smoke and other people and throws them to the corner of the room where he doesn’t have to see them. He kisses bruises into Louis’ hips and over his heart and along his collarbones. He mouths at his cock until Louis cries out in frustration and then he does it some more. He teases and pushes and kisses and licks and murmurs words in Louis’ ear that have him moaning, shifting under Harry and baring his throat.

Harry’s never been in charge before; he’s always left that to Louis, because he knows what he’s doing and Harry likes being overpowered and overwhelmed under Louis’ steady hands.

But tonight, Harry needs to take and Louis needs to be taken and those needs align perfectly: Louis is pliant when Harry moves him where he wants, his usually loud, voice-shattering cries muted to breathy whimpers and high whines. Harry licks lightly around the crown of Louis’ cock, as teasing as he can make it. Louis growls and thrusts up, trying for more pressure; Harry doesn’t let him, not until Louis is begging, pleading.

“Please,” he breathes, eyes rolling when Harry licks a stripe up the bottom of his cock. “Please, need you, please.”
Harry gives him what he wants, sucking Louis in deeply, tight pressure and Louis’ taste heady on his tongue. Louis falls apart. He moans and moans but it’s still quiet, still gasps of air compared to his usual exuberance, and Harry’s name drips from his mouth like honey.

“Harry,” he whimpers. “Love you, Haz, love you.” Harry’s hips rock involuntarily into the mattress, the fabric of his sweats a tantalizing texture. But it’s Louis’ turn: Harry sucks at the head of his cock while he works the rest with his hand, the slide smooth and quick.

“Close,” Louis warns desperately. His thighs flex around Harry’s head, his hands twist in the sheets. “So close, Hazza, you’re so good, make me so hot, oh—”

Louis comes in thick pulses across Harry’s tongue and they both moan, Louis high and weak and Harry low and long. Harry mouths Louis through the aftershocks, his hips jumping with sensitivity.

“Fuck,” Louis breathes.

Harry, as soon as Louis settles, stands and shucks his sweatpants as quickly as he can, his cock hard and heavy. Louis whines again at the sight, grabbing at Harry and pulling him back down on top of him. He kisses the taste of himself out of Harry’s mouth and palms at his arse, hauling him so close it’s like he thinks they’ll fuse together.

Harry has been on edge for ages, since Louis left to go to the party in the first place, really, so Louis’ hand around his cock has him arching and moaning. He connects their mouths again and again, tugging Louis’ bottom lip between his teeth. Harry licks a stripe up Louis’ throat and finds the spot he left earlier, a warning for anyone who might be getting any ideas. He worries at it with his teeth, darkening the blue-purple of the bruise.

“Mine,” Harry says into Louis’ skin, and he hates the word as it comes out of his mouth but Louis whimpers and nods.

“Yours,” he agrees brokenly, and that pulls Harry over the edge, moaning and writhing. Louis works him through it and doesn’t complain when Harry drops on top of him, their sweaty skin sliding together. They maneuver their way back up to the top of the bed, Louis’ head on Harry’s chest.

“Didn’t mean it,” Harry breathes apologetically into Louis’ hair once their heartbeats have slowed back to normal.

“Yes you did,” Louis chuckles quietly. He taps Harry’s chest, right over his heart. “Don’t mind being yours as long as you’re mine.”

Harry breathes out in relief. “Yours,” he nods, and kisses Louis one last time before they fall asleep.

17 September 2011

*The Sun* breaks the first exclusive on Eleanor, saying she’s two years older than Louis (she’s six months younger) and a model (she’s a student). But they get her name right and there’s no denial from a One Direction representative, so it all goes a little wild on the internet.

Louis and Harry are both still putting on brave faces when it comes to Eleanor. She’s a quiet girl, seems nice enough, but it’s hard to like her in the face of what she represents.
So they ignore her, mostly. Or, well, Louis does. Harry just tries his hardest not to glare, just in case someone gets a picture and a (true) story is written about Harry Styles’ wild jealousy over his best friend’s new girlfriend.

Louis fights back against management by letting Niall smash a cake in his face later that night at their gig at G.A.Y. Bar. Somehow, Harry feels a little less stressed each time Louis sucks a cream-covered finger into his mouth on stage in front of a crowd of cheering, enraptured men, especially when he knows he’s the only one who gets to take Louis home afterward. Claudia is off to the side of the stage, her eyes so narrowed they’re almost closed.

Louis strips his caked t-shirt backstage and, while no one is looking, Harry licks a stripe of icing off his nipple.

Later, Louis lets him lick a whole lot of other things too.

20 September 2011

If Harry wasn’t aware it was a war before, he certainly knows now.

He answers a call from Claudia when Louis is in the shower, and his stomach drops at the news: a stagehand at G.A.Y. got a picture of Harry licking cake from Louis’ chest, and while it’s blurry enough that it can be written off as a strange angle, Modest still had to pay to obtain and delete the picture and keep the guy quiet.

Later that day, the Harry _Styles twitter account tweets Caroline Flack for the first time.

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1 October 2011

The boys spend five days in New York shooting the Gotta Be You music video, frolicking in the woods in their sweaters and scarves and looking like every autumnal pretty boy cliché. Louis gets laced into braces that frame his chest and pull his trousers tight across his arse and the director keeps having to point Harry’s attention back to the girl he’s apparently meant to be seducing (because even though this video is about Zayn’s love interest, the other boys have to be seen in the background being Single and Flirty and Aggressively Heterosexual and Into Girls).

The director tells them to look melancholy and wistful and Liam nails it (after asking what wistful means), his big puppy eyes glinting in the firelight, but Niall mostly looks confused and Zayn just looks angry.
They shoot hours of footage of the boys having fun at the lake that won’t be used; what is used is a bunch of close-up shots of them all traveling from some place to another place using various modes of transportation and then singing pensively while fireworks explode and the rest of their gang has a wildly fun time wearing Ralph Lauren out in the wilderness. It’s sort of every boy band stereotype rolled into one video but they just shrug—that’s why they have a PR team, right? They’re supposed to be experts on things like this, and the boys aren’t exactly within their own target audience, so maybe girls like this sort of thing.

What makes it so easy to shrug it off is the down times between filming. Louis and Harry spend hours snuggling in front of a roaring fireplace in a gorgeous log cabin, drinking hot chocolate and kissing until their lips are numb. They carouse lakeside with Niall and Zayn and the contraband alcohol they convinced one of the security guys to smuggle them (“We’re legal back home, that’s what matters!”). The boys talk late into the night and cuddle together whenever they feel like it. Niall pulls one of the girls for a roll in the pine needles on their second night and spends the next two days bouncing in glee. Even Liam gets into the sort-of vacation spirit, leading the teasing aimed at Zayn for all his awkward on-screen flirting. They don’t have interviews or fake girlfriends or paparazzi or anything to worry about here; it’s a little like heaven, if heaven was American.

The break away from England leaves the boys relaxed and rejuvenated when they fly back home, even when they’re called into a full band PR meeting the moment they return.

“The tour tickets went on sale this morning, as you know,” Simon Jones had said. “And they sold out in 10.6 seconds. It’s a record, that’s never happened before.”

The boys are breathless and giddy as the team throws around phrases like raised expectations after an impressive first single and breaking into the American market. Liam keeps grabbing Louis and Zayn’s hands like he can’t help it, little twitches when Jones mentions meetings that they’ll sit in with Columbia and Universal label executives and performances on the U.S. X Factor.

Louis has never been so happy inside a Fountain Studios conference room; this, of course, means something has to go wrong very quickly.

Jones stops Louis on their way out of the studio, his grin bright like he’s got good news. “We’re doing another Eleanor push today before you fly out to Stockholm tomorrow. She’s in a car outside, we need you to be seen at a park together.”

Louis’ stomach drops. “Today?” Louis asks, agitated. He had plans for today, plans involving Harry and their bed and the fourth season of One Tree Hill before they have to pack for Sweden. Not stilted conversation with a girl being paid to pretend she likes him.


Harry doesn’t ask where Louis is going when he heads for a different car than the rest of them, just bites his lip and lets Zayn take his hand and lead him the opposite direction. Zayn looks sad too, his small smile remorseful as Louis slides into the backseat next to Eleanor.

Security follows at a safe distance—and out of the sight of the cameras—as Louis and Eleanor take a meandering walk through a nearby park. It’s a gorgeous day, sunny and warm, and Louis wonders if this is what it’s like to have a normal girlfriend, a pretty girl who makes his heart thump when she points out two birds above them in the trees.
But then the clicking camera of the hired paparazzi brings him back to earth and he remembers that none of this is normal, or even real. It’s a romance novel version of reality, painted soft with Photoshop and makeup and specifically chosen outfits, meant for the pages of a magazine.

They’d been told not to look at the camera, which Louis is used to doing but not so blatantly: the pap is standing mere feet away, backpedaling when they walk closer to keep them within frame. It’s a bit like being dropped into a lion cage and told not to think about lions.

Louis swings his arm at the same time Eleanor adjusts her shorts and their hands brush; the camera flashes wildly.

“So,” he says awkwardly, breaking the camera shutter induced silence. He might never actually like Eleanor, just because of the reason for her existence in his life, but he can hold a conversation with anyone and the tense air between them is probably making for some terrible photos.

She giggles quietly, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth. “So,” she says back.

“Nice day, innit?” he tries, and she laughs again, shaking her head.

“I think you’re making it more awkward,” she teases, and Louis huffs dramatically.

“You find something to talk about, then,” he sniffs, smiling a little when Eleanor has to pause to think of something.

She notices, rolling her eyes behind her sunglasses. “Oh, alright then. You’re flying to Sweden tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” he answers, shoving his hands in his pockets. “It’s the Bring 1D to Me thing, we’re doing a bunch of interviews and stuff and then flying to Milan.”

“Cool.”

They make stilted conversation through the whole loop around the park, ignoring the overweight, heavily-breathing man tracking their every move and the noise from his camera every time they look even slightly in each other’s direction. Finally, though, Eleanor hits on a subject Louis is happy to talk about.

“How’s Harry?” she asks, just quiet enough that the pap can’t hear, and Louis lights up.

“Brilliant, he’s so brilliant,” he says, grinning. “He’s—yeah. He’s great.”

Eleanor’s shoulders shake with quiet laughter. “How on earth do you plan on keeping things with him a secret? I say his name and you look like I’ve promised a million pounds.”

Louis snorts. “Well, it’s not like you can say anything either,” he reasons. “Our security guys know, and that guy can’t hear,” he says, nodding at the pap and getting a camera flash in his eyes for his insolence.

It’s quiet again but they’ve made their circuit, so Louis guides Eleanor to the car with his hand hovering over her back, carefully not touching her but hearing the final clicks of the camera anyway.

It’s a little after seven when Louis gets back to the flat, but the whole place is silent and dark.
“Hazza?” he calls, kicking his TOMs off in the doorway and wandering through the lower floors.

He finds Harry already in bed, the room pitch black except the little bit of sunlight fighting its way through the heavy curtains and the glow of Harry’s phone on his face. He’s curled up in a little ball, his shoulders stiff.

“Hey, baby,” Louis greets him softly, going to press a kiss to Harry’s cheek. Harry lets him, but otherwise doesn’t move. His eyes could burn holes in his phone, his thumb swiping every few seconds. He’s on Twitter, it looks like, and Louis wouldn’t even pay any more attention if he didn’t catch sight of the top tweet.

It’s a picture of him and Eleanor, the sun highlighting their faces and making them glow. Louis is grinning right at the camera, and Eleanor is smiling at Louis.

They look like a real couple.

“Hazza,” Louis tries again. He reaches for Harry’s phone but Harry pulls it to his chest, batting Louis’ hand away.

Louis doesn’t know what to do: this is just as new territory for him as it is for Harry. And, really, he can’t blame him too much, because the thought of Harry taking a sunset stroll with Caroline Flack makes him want to burn down London so there’s nowhere to walk. Louis would want space, so that’s what he gives Harry.

He digs out his suitcase and rummages through their massive closet, throwing t-shirts and shoes and pants in a pell-mell mess at the bottom. There’s a pretty good chance he’ll hate himself for this when he tries to find something to wear later, but right now Harry’s mad at him and it’s not really anything he can fix so he throws some more things; like that pair of TOMs Harry got him for his birthday last year, he throws those against the wall. He slings Harry’s hat collection in every direction. He yanks clothes from hangers, lets them pile in the floor. He destroys and he destroys because it’s the only thing he has the power to do.

Louis sinks to his knees in the middle of his self-created disaster zone and drops his head into his hands.

Harry is still awake when Louis crawls into bed, but there’s a pointed space on the bed between them where usually they would be found, cuddling or kissing or just laying close and whispering. Harry’s shoulders are hunched so high it must be painful, so Louis makes a mental note to grab him a heating pad for the plane ride tomorrow. Otherwise, he doesn’t say anything, just watches over Harry’s shoulder as he keeps refreshing Twitter and finding more pictures of Louis and Eleanor.

The silence is strained in a way Louis has never really had to deal with before, because Harry’s never acted like this before. The words they aren’t saying are a heavy weight on the bed, almost like Eleanor is actually there between them, taking up physical space and keeping them apart.

Louis sleeps fitfully that night, the light from Harry’s phone a constant beacon in the dark.
2 October 2011

Harry sits by Niall on the flight to Stockholm. Liam and Zayn glance worriedly between Louis and Harry, but don’t say anything. Louis watches *One Tree Hill* by himself for the full two and a half hour flight, pretending nothing is wrong.

“I kind of have this habit of crawling into my shell,” Chad Michael Murray says on Louis’ screen, and Louis looks over at Harry again. His eyes flash away, like he’d been watching Louis too.

“You know I love you, right?” Chad says through Louis’ headphones. “No matter what happens to either one of us, you will always be in my heart.”

Harry glances at Louis again and Louis had never looked away; their eyes lock, and Louis can read a novel in Harry’s, his fear, his sadness, his pain. Louis hopes Harry can read the reassurances in his.

Harry slips his hand into Louis’ when they step off the plane onto the private tarmac.

Louis has a hard time *pulling his gaze* from Harry throughout the rest of the day. Even if they were really mad at each other, rather than at their situation, they’d have to suck it up and be amicable for the cameras; this is almost worse. Louis doesn’t want to sit through an interview where they’re asked yet again which of them is the best kisser (as though they get graded at the end of each kiss and compare notes to see who is best)(and besides, Harry is *obviously* the best kisser but Louis doesn’t get to be the one who says it, so he waits until Liam does and then agrees vehemently). He wants to kiss Harry in apology for looking halfway happy with Eleanor, he wants to hold his hand and promise they’re okay.

But he doesn’t get to do that, because after he spends all day watching Harry’s every move, straightening his collar just for an excuse to touch him, playing with the Leeds bracelet still around his own wrist and watching Harry follow the movements of his fingers, they don’t get to go home. Instead, they’re hustled onto another plane, this one bound for Milan.

Harry sits next to Louis this time, and the other three sigh audibly in relief. But the tension isn’t gone, not really, so the two of them dick around on their phones instead of talking to each other.

It’s midnight exactly when Louis gets the notification that Harry has *retweeted something*, and when he reads it his throat gets scratchy with tears.

Louis types a tweet in answer, and watches Harry’s hands go still when he reads it. His lip wobbles, and Louis grabs his hand.

“I’m sorry,” they both say at the same time, and then huff teary laughs.

“No, I’m sorry,” Harry says over Louis. “It isn’t your fault.”

“It’s not yours either,” Louis reminds him.

“It’s just hard,” Harry whispers. “Because if you were with her, things would be so much easier for you.”

“I don’t want easy,” Louis says, rubbing his thumb under Harry’s eye to catch his last tear. “I want you.”
Harry sniffs and nods, burying his face in Louis’ shoulder. The tweet from Louis is still open on his phone, and Louis reads the words again, hoping Harry realizes just how true they are.

Always in my heart @Harry_Styles. Yours sincerely, Louis

Chapter End Notes

Don't really have anything to add to this chapter, just thank you to everyone who's reading, sharing the tumblr post, commenting, and leaving kudos. You guys are wonderful!

tumblr | fic post
Harry has discovered the joy of online shopping.

He’s always felt some aversion to it because it takes all the fun out of the whole process: he likes being able to touch and examine things and bring them home right away. Online shopping doesn’t have quite the same instant gratification, and he’s always wary of buying something that won’t fit or isn’t what he expected.

Now, though, Harry gets it.

If he’s out getting lunch with people and he remembers on the way home that Louis’d had the last of the milk with his tea that morning, he can pop into Asda and be in and out, no problem.

But when he knows they’ll be in London for more than a few days and he has to stock up on groceries, it’s a whole other routine. He has to call and arrange a car, and security, and inform Claudia so she can check and see if the higher-ups want him papped or not. If yes, he has to change into his usual Harry Styles the Lad outfit, complete with blazer and pure white shoes. If not, he stuffs his curls up into a beanie and wears one of his hoodies and hope no one notices him.

He doesn’t even think about going clothes shopping anymore: he doesn’t get to wear anything that isn’t chosen by management anyway, and they definitely wouldn’t let him spend money on the outfits in the window of the Gucci and Dolce & Gabbana shops on Old Bond Street.

So he’s an online shopper now, using some of the money Modest gives him to buy things for the flat or cool old t-shirts he’ll never get to wear in public or, well. Other things.

It’s these other things that have arrived in the post today, a discreet box with plain packaging but pretty hot pink tissue paper hiding all the prizes inside. Louis had ripped into the package with abandon when it appeared with the rest of their mail, the smile he directs at Harry filthy with promise.

Which is how Harry finds himself flat on his back in the center of the living room, naked and shiny with sweat, his legs over Louis’ shoulders as Louis works a second finger inside him.

Harry feels full but not full enough, taken but not taken enough. He’s long become an expert on what he can do to his own body, but it’s so different when it’s Louis’ fingers, so much more intimate than when Harry does this himself. Louis’ are smaller than his but so sure, so sweet when they slide in. Harry’s gasping, he’s crying, it’s so much, it’s too much, it’s not enough.

They’ve got a brand new bottle of cinnamon and vanilla scented organic lube and Louis is dripping it across three of his fingers, his mouth soft on Harry’s cock. It stings when he pushes in but the sting sends Harry reeling, gasping and writhing until Louis holds him down with a firm hand across his hips.
He tries to arch up, tries to get more inside him, but Louis is avoiding his prostate on purpose, his baby blues bright under his long lashes. He mouths at the head of Harry’s cock, working his fingers into a smooth rhythm.

“Louis,” Harry moans, “please, please, Lou, please—”

Louis hums and moves faster, thrusting his fingers deeper. Harry gasps and tilts his head back, close to being swept away by Louis’ overwhelming attention. Louis pulls his mouth off of Harry and murmurs into his hip, “So good, baby, so good for me. So gorgeous.”

Harry keens, his toes curling against Louis’ back. “Lou.”

Louis drags his finger over Harry’s prostate and Harry sobs. He reaches up with his empty hand and rubs over Harry’s nipple, pinching and pulling until it’s puffy and achingly sensitive before moving to the other. He keeps working at Harry’s prostate, the waves crashing over Harry and taking him further under, the world disappearing except for Louis, Louis, Louis.

Cinnamon and vanilla and sweet sweat combine in the air, Harry’s moans filling the space left over. Louis’ fingers are quick and sure, rubbing over Harry’s spot unerringly. Harry’s hips twitch as Louis works him, the heat shivering up his spine. Louis knows, can read Harry’s body better than any book, so he sucks Harry’s cock back into his mouth and Harry comes instantly, pulsing pleasure roaring through his veins.

Louis’ mouth is on his in an instant, or maybe even quicker; Harry’s head is fuzzy and spinning, his attention nonexistent. But he can feel the vibrations when Louis whispers against his lips so pulls himself in to focus.

“Let me plug you up, baby,” Louis is begging, “fill you up with it, keep you ready for me, please Hazza—”

“God,” Harry whines, “yeah, Lou, yeah I want it.”

Louis crawls open to their new box of toys, tossing aside another bottle of specialty lube, their new dildo (which is a little longer than the purple sparkly one), and a box of tropically flavored condoms to find the pink anal plug Harry had chosen. He’d seen it while scrolling through the website and went hot and cold and hot again and so stuttery that Louis had to suck him off right there on the sofa before they could continue shopping.

Now, Louis slides it out of the box, ripping off the plastic and slicking it with lube. He pushes Harry’s knees up to his chest to get a better view, licking his lips before asking, “You ready?”

Harry nods wildly and throws his head back when Louis pushes the plug in, the stretch minimal until he gets to the widest part. Louis gentles Harry with a kiss, then another, and then Harry is distracted by Louis’ lips and almost doesn’t notice the plug sliding further in, the flared base snug against his rim.

“What?” Louis murmurs.

“So good, Jesus Lou, so good,” Harry gasps. It’s just on the edge of too much, a constant pressure that Harry can’t escape and that is pulling him further down into dazed and dizzy. The plug has a button to make it vibrate but Louis doesn’t switch it on, probably knowing Harry’s too sensitive to appreciate it right now. Instead, he straddles Harry’s chest, his own cock in hand.

“Most beautiful—oh—most beautiful boy,” he pants, hand a blur over his cock. Harry stops him with a heavy hand, his motions slow as he pushes Louis’ hand away and takes over.
Harry’s head is still whirling but he knows Louis’ body better than his own, has spent months now learning Louis’ every twitch and huff of breath. He knows where to bite at Louis’ collarbones to make him squirm, the ticklish spots on his hips that, when pressed hard enough, have him going limp and pliant. He knows that the spot right under the ink of his dagger tattoo is incredibly sensitive, so that’s where he lays his other hand now, stroking over the bold black lines on tan skin. Louis whines, his hips rocking, his cock throbbing in Harry’s hand.

Louis comes in steady pulses across Harry’s collarbones with a loud cry, his pretty chest heaving, his strong shoulders shaking.

Harry pulls him down to snuggle, and Louis lets him only after using Harry’s t-shirt to wipe them clean. Harry doesn’t mind, his head too spinny to do much besides hug Louis close. Louis tugs a blanket off the sofa and covers them, cuddling into Harry’s side.

The peaceful silence is ruined by a brash Irish voice in the doorway.

“Oi, lads, car’s on the way to Jesus Christ—”

Harry flutters his eyelashes open to find Niall backing out of the room with his hands over his eyes, banging off the wall several times before he can stumble back out into the hallway.

“Niall?” comes Liam’s voice. “What’s—oh, oh my God, I’m so sorry.”

Louis snickers into Harry’s throat. “S’alright, Li, we’re done.”

“Fuck’s sake,” Zayn says tiredly when he enters. “We have an interview in half an hour. Get some clothes on, you two.”

Louis snickers again but stands, reaching out to pull Harry to his feet as well. Harry sways, unsteady and wobbly as he follows Louis to the stairs. The plug shifts with each step, a constant reminder.

Louis dresses quickly, disappearing to the bathroom to do something with his hair while Harry stares at his racks of clothing which have all morphed into one big blob of color he can’t make sense of.

Louis chuckles when he reappears back in the closet and Harry hasn’t moved. “Need some help, love?”

Harry nods, stepping carefully into some pants Louis tosses his way first. Louis slides a checked shirt on Harry’s arms, doing up the buttons quickly. He chooses a cardigan next, then some trousers. He hesitates before helping Harry into the trouser legs, ruffling his hair gently.

“Do we need to take the plug out?” he asks. Harry shakes his head. He likes it, likes the way he feels full and owned. He makes grabby hands at the trousers, pulling them up his own thighs with a little bit of concentration. Louis smiles. “Okay, we’ll leave it in. But you’ll have to wake up a little for the interviews, babe.”

“I can,” Harry promises, his voice syrupy slow.

Okay, maybe Harry can’t.

Either the interviewer from Getty Images is the fastest speaker Harry has ever encountered or his head is just too fuzzy to take it in; either way, he has to concentrate incredibly hard to make out anything he’s saying.
“...reality TV, with the X Factor. Would you... Big Brother house?”

Harry bites his lip when Louis shifts next to him, nodding along to whatever Zayn is saying. Harry nods too, just to make it seem like he’s present in the room and not slowly drifting back inside his own head. Louis notices Harry trying to clamber back to full awareness, and he keeps smiling innocently as he reaches his arm around Harry slowly, sliding his hand inside the back of Harry’s pants.

Harry realizes what he’s doing just a second before he does it—the plug is switched on and Harry automatically arches upward, trying to get away from the intense sensation. Zayn is still speaking and looking at Harry as though he’s lost his mind; Harry has no idea what his face is doing, no clue what the camera is capturing. Louis presses the button again and the plug is switched off just as Zayn wraps up, and prods Harry in the back for him to answer.

“I just want to see the house,” Harry says loudly. Louis grins in the corner of Harry’s eye and Harry, considering his duty for the interview done, lets himself check out again. He blinks sometime later and there’s a different interviewer in front of them, a lady this time.

“...anything the fans don’t know about you?” she’s asking.

“The fans know a lot, actually,” Niall says. “I don’t know how they find some stuff out, it’s a little scary.”

“Yeah, they keep bringing bananas for Harry to meet and greets because they know it’s his favorite fruit,” Zayn laughs.

“So give me something they don’t know.” the interviewer urges again. They five of them lapse into silence for a second, before Liam snaps and points.

“Got one! If Louis like you, he won’t use your real name,” he says.

“Oh, that’s a good one,” Niall agrees. “He’s called me Neil since, like, our first day together.”

“And I’m Ian,” Liam says, smiling. “Zayn is Wayne.”

“Sometimes it’s not even stuff like that, it’s nicknames and stuff too,” Zayn adds. “Like I’ve never heard him call Harry by his name, it’s always Hazza or H or something else.”

It’s true, Harry thinks hazily: even the first time they met, Louis hadn’t said Harry’s real name. He’d called him Harold and Harry usually hates that, because Harold is the name of a cranky grandfather, not a singer, but it hadn’t seemed so bad falling from Louis’ mouth.

It’s strange that Harry’s never really thought about that before: he’d been so surprised that Louis had said his last name that he hadn’t even properly registered that he hadn’t said his first. Not that it mattered, in the end, since neither of them Bonded. Still, it’s weird that it’s taken Harry so long to notice.

But he can’t give that thought the proper attention it deserves now, because Louis is grinning at him and reaching around his back again, and with another flick of a switch Harry loses any trains of thought he’d managed to pull together.

When they get back to the flat that afternoon, Harry’s so needy with arousal that he drops to his knees just inside the front door, mouthing at Louis’ cock through his chinos. Louis curls his fingers
in Harry’s hair and, when Harry begs for it, fucks Harry’s mouth with sloppy, uneven thrusts.

When Louis finally pulls the plug out of Harry’s arse he has three fingers slick with cinnamon vanilla lube to slide in its place, finding Harry’s prostate and having him coming in under a minute.

They save the new dildo for another day, though they do take a picture of it next to the old sparkly purple one and send it to Stan.

(4:41 p.m.) Louis: Looks like yours just doesn’t measure up, mate
(4:43 p.m.) Stanley the Manly: RUDE

22 October 2011

Harry’s “torrid love affair” with Caroline Flack is a bit of a joke, to be honest.

Even Louis and Eleanor, whose romance currently consists of the one scheduled pap walk and two tweets (both coming from Louis’ account and neither of which he sent), have garnered enough press attention for Jones to leave him alone for a little while. Compared to that, the whole Caroline thing is nonexistent. Their first “outing” together is a party at the W Hotel, where Harry greets Caroline when he walks in and then spends the rest of the night avoiding her and hanging out with Nick Grimshaw instead.

The boys had met Grimmy at the GQ awards back in September, and then again at the BBC Radio Teen Awards just a few weeks ago. Nick had, within a few minutes of their few meeting, asked Harry if he does his shoulder pump dancing from the X Factor days when he goes to clubs and made Louis nearly fall over in laughter, so they’d immediately clicked (because anyone who can make Louis laugh is good in Harry’s books). Nick thinks the Harry and Caroline thing is hilarious; he’d heard it through the social grapevine, apparently, and had nearly choked on his gin and tonic when he was told it was meant to be a serious stunt.

“Like you could ever pull those dreamy green eyes away from Louis’ arse in those jeans,” Nick had teased at the Teen Awards, and Harry and Louis had both went pink.

So Harry parties with Nick and the Primrose Hill gang—even though he’s still underage and that’s apparently what kept him from going to Niall’s party, but whatever—and stands in the same circle as Caroline for the duration of a two minute conversation. That’s all it takes, though, because the next morning blurry photos of the group are online and, while no reputable or even recognizable sources have picked it up, several shady online sites run stories about the two of them. Claudia is even happy enough with the results that she lets Harry and Louis go see Ed’s concert in Manchester the next night.

Louis and Harry are the center of a storm, the calm bit in the middle while around them whirls rumors and “insiders” with information that isn’t true and tweets that neither of them send. They’re happy to let the team create their public images, though, while they hang out with the boys and their friends and even dance together at a jewelry store opening without getting in trouble.

The next attempt to grab the public’s attention comes after Louis and Harry have dinner with Lou, their hairstylist who’s just had the most adorable baby girl, and her soulmate Tom at their house. Harry tweets the next morning thanking them for dinner, and Caroline replies like she was there as well. Before Harry can figure out what he’s meant to do—because surely if she had been there he would have tagged her, yeah?—someone else replies for him, tagging her and everyone else (except Louis, of course) in a reply about the dumplings.
With that one simple tweet exchange (a third of which was not even Harry but probably some intern at Modest who’d been told to reply for him) and blurry photos from that one party, Haroline is born.

Jones and the PR team are ecstatic; the “romance” is picking up traction and attention, and both of the fake relationships, according to Jones, need only one more push to send them both over the edge.

So, one off weekend when Louis and Harry head to Manchester to hang out with Gemma, Harry finds a tweet on his account that he didn’t write saying he has a sore throat (he would never use the phrase Man Flu, he's not some kind of moron who thinks regular flu is too girly for him), and Louis gets a text telling him to take a train to Doncaster, where Eleanor will meet him and be introduced to his family.

“We’ve walked around outside together once, and they think that’s enough for her to meet the family?” Louis asks incredulously. “No one is going to buy that.”

Gemma pats his hand, grinning. “Not if you keep telling every interviewer that it’s casual, that’s for sure.”

Harry snorts. “That’s the plan. We’re just going to look as uninterested as possible and hope PR calls them both off.”

But Louis still has to go, so Harry and Gemma drop him at the train station before heading back to Gemma’s with Chinese for dinner.

“You’re handling it alright, then?” she asks Harry over her shrimp lo mein. He shrugs.

“About as well as I can.” He pokes inside his own container of Szechuan chicken with his chopsticks. “Mine is supposed to look a little unreal, I think. Like, with her being so much older and both of us connected to X Factor, I think if anyone looks hard enough it’s pretty clear it’s for PR attention. But.” He pulls out his phone and finds the picture he’d saved of Eleanor and Louis’ park walk, the one where he’s smiling right into the camera. The one that makes his stomach ache. “This looks like a real couple.”

Gemma shakes her head. “No, you donut.” She opens a picture on her own phone, sliding it across to him. It’s one that Harry had sent to her after he and Louis had been to Tom and Lou’s, baby Lux between them and Harry’s arm around Louis’ shoulders. They’re beaming, glowing, purely happy just from a few hours with each other and a tiny baby to cuddle.
“*This* looks like a real couple,” Gemma continues. “In fact, it’s sort of sickening. So quit panicking about what the public sees, and remember that *this*,” she pokes at her phone again, “is real life.”


Louis makes it to Donny before Eleanor, hugging his mum and buying them both teas at a station shop while they wait for his girlfriend to arrive.

“Lou, I think something happened,” she says quietly, leaning close to keep their conversation from the crowd around them. Louis’ brow furrows.

“What?”

“There are messages on my Twitter that I didn’t send. Some of them had the address of our house,” she says, her eyes wide. She looks so much like Fizzy, innocent and worried, that Louis hates to break the bad news to her. He sighs.

“They probably used your account to leak the location so fans would be there,” he says heavily. “Sorry, Mum, I should have warned you. Eleanor is part of my ‘public image,’ so anything they do regarding her is covered by my contract.”

“Even telling fans where your family lives?” she says, unconvinced.

“All of it,” he answers. “It’s vague enough that they can get away with a lot. Management has been tweeting on my behalf for months, so I’m not surprised they’re using your account now too.”

Jay smiles bleakly, rubbing her hand on Louis’ arm. “I’m so sorry, Boo.”

Louis smiles lightly. He doesn’t like telling his mum too much about the heavier side of show business; she knows about Louis’ meetings with management, of course, and she knows a good bit about how they disapprove of him and Harry, but Louis tries not to overload her. She’d just worry, and she wouldn’t be able to stop it which would just make her feel guilty, too.
“Nothing we can do,” he says, throwing his arm over her shoulders. “Now, where should we sit to wait for the next train?”

It’s about as stilted as expected when Eleanor meets Jay and the girls.

She and Louis have each other’s phone numbers, and they’ve awkwardly texted a couple of times, but everything is still incredibly stilted between them because, well, the relationship is entirely fake. Louis hates it because it’s so weird and uncomfortable and Eleanor’s a perfectly nice person, but at the same time he doesn’t want to play along with Modest’s stupid stunt and make it seem like he’s oh-so-happy with her, so he’s stuck in limbo. He can’t talk about it with Harry, either, because even though Harry knows Louis didn’t choose this situation, it stills hurts him and he still gets all withdrawn and wobbly-lipped when she’s mentioned.

So, since she and Louis aren’t even comfortable on their own yet, it’s not like he can help any as she stands bravely in front of Jay’s considering eyes, Lottie and Fizzy’s obvious once-overs. The twins are a little more vocal.

“Where’s Harry?” Phoebe squeaks immediately.

“Yes, I miss him,” Daisy adds, watching Eleanor suspiciously.

“We’ll Skype him later, girls, how’s that?” Louis says. “But for now, how about some footie? It’s about time we get the old team back together.”

The twins cheer and run upstairs to grab their shoes and a ball while Lottie pulls Louis into a hug. “You good?” she asks.

“Yeah,” he says. “Or, well. Could be worse.”

Fizzy snorts behind them. “Of course it could be worse. You’re famous, dummy.”

Louis laughs, burying his face in Fizzy’s hair when he hugs her. “I’ve missed you brats. It’s good to be home.”

Eleanor spends most of the day studying for an exam she has soon and Louis spends most of it pretending she isn’t there and spending as much time with his actual favorite girls as possible.

After footie in the yard, Jay cooks up lunch and they all take turns filling Louis in on all the Donny gossip. Louis, who’s gotten a lot better with his nail polish skills since moving in with Harry, gives the twins a manicure while Lottie hooks her laptop to the TV so they can watch the One Direction performance from the Teen Awards. The girls spend the whole performance making fun of everything, from Louis’ shirt to Zayn’s shoes to Niall’s happy bouncing.

“I will admit,” Lottie says in a long-suffering voice. “You lot do look good up there.”

Louis swoons. “Finally, I get the praise I’ve been craving! It’s all for you, Lots, everything we do.” Lottie rolls her eyes and pushes him away, but she’s grinning when she brushes her fringe off her face.

They Skype Harry that afternoon, who blows Louis a kiss and holds up a thumbs up that Louis barely has time to reciprocate before the girls start talking over each other, updating Harry on the
nuances of their lives.

“There’s a girl here,” Phoebe whispers to the screen. “I don’t like her very much.”

“She’s too quiet,” Fizzy adds, her tiny eyebrow cocked like she thinks Harry’s rightful place is being challenged and she is unimpressed by it all. “She’d never actually fit in here.”

“Not like you,” Daisy says.

Harry smiles, and even from the pixelated image on the screen Louis can see he’s gone all shiny-eyed with happy tears. He sniffs a little, his lips twitching as his smile threatens to grow too wide.

“Thanks, ladies,” he says. “You have to be nice to Eleanor, though, it’s not her fault I can’t be there.”

“Let’s let Harry get back to hanging out with Gemma,” Louis says, shooing the girls away so he can get in his own goodbye with Harry before he goes. “You okay, babe?”

“I’m good,” Harry says, the corner of his mouth ticked up in a small smile. “I wish I could be there.”

“I wish I could be there,” Louis answers. “I hate that I had to leave.”

Harry leans forward like he’s actually looking around Louis, then sits back with a bigger grin. “So they like me more than her?”

Louis rolls his eyes. “They like you more than me,” he says, laughing. “You do not need to worry about being replaced.”

“Good,” Harry says, nodding once like he’s pleased with that answer. Louis holds up a thumbs up and gets one in return before logging off, wandering back downstairs and wrapping his arm around his mum’s waist. He lays his head on her shoulder as they look out over Lottie and Daisy bickering over the TV, Fizzy reading a Harry Potter book in a nearby chair, Phoebe doing keepy-uppies with her mini football in the center of it all.

“I miss this,” he says quietly. “I love everything that I get to do, and the boys, all of that of course. But I do miss this madness.”

Jay kisses the side of his head. “You’re a family man, Boo. It’s how you’ve always been.”

Louis hums. “True enough. Always wanted a big brood someday.”

Jay chuckles, bumping her hip against his. “You say that like you’ve changed your mind.”


Jay snorts. “Please. Like I don’t know that you and Harry are the most baby-crazy boys in the country.” Louis splutters, his cheeks going red. Jay just laughs. “I was there for Harry’s audition too, remember? Isn’t she lovely? Isn’t she wonderful? You two’ll have more babies than you know what to do with.”

Then she pats his cheek, humming Stevie Wonder as she moves into the living room to settle Lottie and Daisy’s dispute, like she didn’t just rock Louis’ world with the mental image of Harry grinning softly down at a tiny baby girl like she’s the most precious thing in existence.

Harry holding Louis’ tiny baby girl.
He sits heavily in a chair next to Eleanor, clutching his chest like an old man on the verge of a heart attack. Eleanor takes one look at his dazed face and pats his knee soothingly.

“Dreaming of changing nappies with Harry?” she says, the corner of her mouth twitching.

“No,” he croaks. “I’m. I need to… go.”

He escapes out to the backyard, spending fifteen minutes with his hands behind his head, trying valiantly to breathe. He definitely does not text Harry, begging for babies as soon as possible.

Or, well. He might type out the text a dozen times, but he never actually sends it. And that’s what counts, in the end.

Louis has a train back to London at 7:20 that night, and Eleanor’s back to Manchester leaves at 7:05, so after an early dinner Eleanor packs her books back in her bag and Louis rounds up his sisters, smacking a kiss to each of their foreheads and promising to visit again as soon as he can.

“And you’ll bring presents?” Daisy demands.

“And Harry?” Phoebe adds.

“I will bring both of those,” Louis swears, crossing his heart.

Jay appears, holding the keys to her car so she can drive Eleanor and Louis back to the station. “All ready to go?” When the two of them nod, she heads to the door and starts to open it.

Someone screams outside, and Jay shuts the door quickly.

“What the hell?” Louis asks. Jay shakes her head, wide-eyed, then peeks through the curtains and gasps.

“Oh, Lou, there’s a bunch of people outside.”


“A whole bunch of girls,” she says, flicking the curtain closed again. Louis, putting the pieces together, moves to the window as well, finding a small horde of teenage girls watching for them. “Should we wait until they leave?”

Louis and Eleanor share a grim look. “No, Mum, they’re here on purpose,” Louis reminds her. “That’s why someone using your Twitter leaked the house location, yeah? They have to see that Eleanor’s here and get proof.”

“Oh,” Jay says, biting her lip.

“It’ll be fine,” Eleanor reassures her. “We’re used to it. Just don’t look at them, and pretend like everything’s normal.”

It’s a relatively quiet group of girls, cheering “Hi!” when Jay and Eleanor and Louis step out but otherwise silent, their phones all up to capture the moment. Eleanor slides into the backseat while Louis sits with Jay up front, the ride to the station as quiet as the crowd they left behind.
23 October 2011

Louis loves lazy days in the flat. He’s not so fond of them when he wakes up alone, though.

He doesn’t much fancy the idea of spending his day all by himself in the big empty flat, wandering from floor to floor like a bored ghost until Harry comes back, so Louis invites Zayn over to smoke a little and watch some crap telly since they don’t have any scheduled appearances for the day.

“Where’s Hazza, then?” Zayn asks, his eyes red as he puffs a ring of smoke towards the ceiling.

“Manchester,” Louis answers, his head heavy where it’s hanging over the back of the sofa. “Saw Gem ‘nd his parents yesterday, I think he’s with Grimmy today.”

Zayn hums, reaching for the remote to switch it off of *EastEnders* and onto some cooking show.

Louis wishes he could be in Manchester. He likes Grimmy, even if he wasn’t sure he would at first. They’re very similar, he and Nick; people like Harry draw attention when they walk into a room just by being who they are, while people like Louis and Nick draw attention by being as loud and exuberant as possible. They both have the kind of humor that can cut a little deep sometimes, and Harry says they have similar ways of looking at the world.

“You pick things apart until you figure them out,” he says one day, peeling an orange and popping a section into his mouth. “You do it with people, too, and Nick is the same. You both like to know everything there is to know.”

But they’re also sort of opposites: like the whole name thing, for example. Nick announces his last name to the world and dares anyone to use it against him, wielding it like a weapon, while Louis has always hid his like a bad habit. Nick has a self-assuredness that Louis envies, and he wonders if he would have learned to wear his secrets like armor if he hadn’t Bonded to Harry so early.

So Louis had expected to butt heads with Nick easily, but a couple of sniping quips between them led to teasing each other over their hairstyles and that sealed it: anyone who could make Harry do his goofy squawk laugh and who could hang with Louis without getting offended was good in his books.

But now it’s the opposite problem he thought he’d have to deal with, because Harry is texting him little jokes that Nick says and Nick is texting him unflattering pictures of Harry eating or yawning and either way, Louis is missing out because he’s supposed to be having a weekend in with his definitely-not-fake girlfriend so he can’t be seen with his definitely-not-real boyfriend.

Louis can’t get too upset, though, because management approves of Harry hanging out with Grimmy, says it makes him look more mature, and since Nick and Caroline’s groups party together sometimes it’ll make that whole charade look more real. But Louis likes it because when Harry is out with Nick he gets to dress and act more like his actual self, rather than the management-constructed Harry Styles™ Certified Popstar. He can wear his soft flannel shirts and his old band tees with rips in the sleeves and his Chelsea boots. Today, Harry’s in a big white t-shirt with a low scooping neckline, his tangle of necklaces glinting from Nick’s camera flash with every new picture.

If hanging with the London hipster elite can help Harry feel more like himself, then Louis is happy. He just wishes he could be there to see it.

...
24 October 2011

Harry hitches a ride back to London with Nick and arrives just in time for Louis to kiss him on the cheek as a hello and throw him a blazer, telling him a car is on the way to pick them up for an interview.

Harry is nervous, because there are articles now in the Mail and The Sun linking him to Caroline when before it had just been gossip on Twitter and blind items in dubious papers. He’s been in plenty of media training and can talk about things like album sales and touring news to anyone, but it’s different when it’s something he wants no part of, something that hurts a little to think about.

Because it’s not an inside joke between him and the boys and Nick any more, it’s something people know about and want to hear him discuss. And the more it’s brought up, the worse it makes him look, like an idiot teenager chasing women who are humoring him, a flirt who can’t control himself.

There had been paps outside the Princess Park gate when Nick had dropped Harry off and he’d tried to pretend he couldn’t hear them, but the echoes of hey, Styles, how does that old pussy taste? and have your balls even dropped yet, kid? and I thought you were gay with that camp lad in your little band bounced off the inside of the car like ricocheting bullets. Nick had patted his leg sadly, but there’s not really anything he could say to make it better.

So Harry expects the question when they get to the interview, but he’s still at a loss for how exactly he’s supposed to play this, especially since he doesn’t want to.

“Just keep it vague,” Louis offers, scratching at Harry’s scalp in the car on the way over to calm him down. “Deny it if you want, there’s no photo proof of anything because nothing has happened. And then tell Claudia you were playing it coy or something.”

Harry hums and buries his face in Louis’ shirt, wishing the press could just go ahead and write their awful articles without any quotes from him involved.

“Well I heard,” says a sparkly-eyed reporter right on cue in the middle of their first interview, leaning close like she’s sharing juicy gossip, “that you went out partying and a certain Harry ends up kissing Caroline Flack.”

Harry turns unconsciously to look at Louis, who nudges him in the back and widens his eyes, a clear play it cool. “Ooh,” he says jokingly, and Niall joins in.

“Now it all comes together,” Liam says.

“Is this true?” the interviewer pushes, and Harry can see Louis roll his eyes.

“Um,” Harry says.

“Yes,” Louis says.

“No,” Harry says.

“No,” Louis says.

“No,” Harry repeats. “It was a bit misconstrued. It wasn’t- it- it wasn’t really like that.” And that
should be it, right? He’s been asked, he gave an answer.

“One might ask,” Louis says suddenly, “how a kiss might be misconstrued?” Harry flicks a glance back at him, wondering why he isn’t just letting it go, and there’s a tightness around his blue eyes that wasn’t there before.

And Harry realizes that this is Louis’ version of what Harry went through when he saw those pap pictures of Louis and Eleanor: it’s a stinging denial of what’s right in front of his face, and although Harry and Louis both know that all of the evidence is contrived that doesn’t always stop the hurt from welling up.

Harry turns and dimples at the reporter, begging for the end of this inside his head. “It wasn’t like that, no.”

“Oh,” the reporter digs, and can’t she take a hint? Harry is done. His grin turns exasperated. “So you didn’t end up getting it on?”

What the hell kind of question is that? Rude.

“It was just a greeting, is that what you’re saying?” Louis supplies.

“It was just a hello kiss, wasn’t it?” Zayn says.


“And a goodbye one too,” Louis adds, and Harry denies it one more time before snorting and shaking his head.

“So,” the reporter continues, “do you at least have a crush on her?”

Harry isn’t getting out of this easily, that’s clear now. He lifts his head and smiles in annoyance. “Yeah. I think she’s lovely. She’s a really nice lady.” Louis laughs shortly behind him. “Uh, she’s really hot.”

Niall cackles, and the interviewer, finally armed with a quote she can use, wraps it up.

“I’m sorry,” Louis whispers later, wrapped around Harry on the sofa in their cinema room. The other boys are there too, absorbed in the footie match up on the screen and letting Louis and Harry have their moment. Or, well, Liam and Zayn are watching the match. Niall is snoring somewhere behind the sofa. “I’m sorry I dragged it out, it was just awful to hear and I lost it, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Harry answers quietly. “It’s over.”

Not yet, it isn’t. Claudia texts them a few minutes later to tweet the link to buy the album online, all of their phones going off at once with the message.

“This is why we gave them our passwords, innit?” Zayn scoffs. “So we don’t have to take the time to do this.”

“They probably want it personalized,” Harry shrugs.

In the following days, the other three who were awake tweet their own versions.
Look at this sexy mother trucker bit.ly/nn1k8a .....I want him on my shelf.

Check out Liam's rippling Abs posing in this naughty picture. Make sure you get a copy! bit.ly/qyJKjo
Claudia is furious, but it’s too late to delete them now.

Management handles the rest of their promotional tweets.

12 November 2011

Fajitas are sizzling on the stove, Harry’s had two glasses of wine, and Louis is dancing around the kitchen to Ed’s new single on the radio. It’s a perfect night, Harry fuzzy from his drinks and grinning as Louis shimmies by himself to *Lego House*, his happy flailing completely out of time with Ed’s soulful lyrics. Harry pulls Louis close when he passes so he can kiss him, wanting to taste his smile.

They’ve had a lovely few weeks. Louis’ been back to *X Factor* a couple of times to visit since they’ve been in London, and Harry’s been out with Nick and the gang. Louis was even able to come out with them one night, and besides one pap hiding behind a car who snaps a quick picture before security chased him off they completely got away with it, no earth-shattering headlines about Larry Stylinson partying together the next day. No Caroline, either, and no Eleanor, nothing but Louis and Harry and tour rehearsals and the *Gotta Be You* video premiere and an announcement of their added American tour dates.

Harry and Louis have done nothing substantial except laze around their flat, wasting idle days with the other three boys who come and go as they please; it’s no longer strange for Harry and Louis to wake up with Niall asleep in their bed beside them, or for Liam to be in the kitchen fixing a sandwich and offering them one as well, or for Zayn to be up on the fourth floor cuddled up in one of their armchairs with a book. It’s everything Harry ever wanted back when he auditioned for *X Factor*, the perfect popstar life with his best friends and his favorite boy.

The doorbell ringing interrupts their little piece of heaven.

Assuming it’s one of the boys just ringing the doorbell to irritate them, Louis and Harry have a silent conversation over who has to go answer it. Harry glances down at the steak cooking in the pan, a clear *if I leave, you are in charge of dinner* and Louis answers with an eyebrow raise of *if I leave, I*
might shrink all your clothes in the dryer later.

Harry sighs and skips downstairs to the door, preparing to accept Niall’s shoddy excuse for a reason to come over right at dinner time.

Except it isn’t Niall.

“Ah, hello,” Harry says, confused.

“Hi,” Eleanor answers. She’s got a backpack slung over her shoulders and a comfy pair of sweatpants instead of one of her usual fashionable outfits. “I’m here for the X Factor night in.” At Harry’s continued confusion, her pretty lips purse. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“No…” Harry says. “Not that I know of. But come on in, I’m making dinner.”

Eleanor follows Harry upstairs to the kitchen, where Louis is singing Drake into a spatula, wiggling his hips along with the beat. “Hey Haz, was Niall—” he turns and sees Eleanor, frowning. “Oh. Hello.”

“She’s here to watch X Factor with us, apparently,” Harry says lightly, taking the spatula from Louis and returning to the meat cooking in the pan.

“I don’t mean to intrude, but I was sent by Modest,” Eleanor says. “I thought I’d do a bit of homework until the show comes on, take a picture to prove I was here and that’s it.”

“Yeah,” Louis says, waving his hand. “Should be fine. Have a seat.”

It’s a little stilted with Eleanor there, her textbooks spread across the table. Harry finishes up the fajitas and Louis pours some more wine, moving around each other comfortably as Louis pulls down some plates and cutlery.

They eat there in the kitchen, Louis cross-legged up on the counter and Harry next to him, his hip propped against the marble. They chat about getting to go back and perform on X Factor tomorrow night; it’ll be Harry’s first time back at the studios since their own finale last year, or at least the first time back that’s not for a meeting with management. Eleanor eats and writes notes at the same time, notebook pages filled with flowing script.

“Well,” Louis claps his hands together when his plate is cleared. “Guess we should head on down.”

The TV is already on in the living room, the last few minutes of this week’s The Chase flickering quietly in the background as Louis and Harry cuddle together on the sofa and Eleanor settles into a loveseat by herself.

Once the show starts it’s easier for the tension to dissipate, Louis as loud as ever as he picks apart every little detail just to hear Harry giggle. Eleanor is just as sharp as Louis and the two of them bounce off of each other, their banter a little more pointed than it would usually be among friends but otherwise witty and quick.

At an advert break, Harry asks, “Do we want to go ahead and take the picture now?” and Eleanor shrugs, moving to curl up on Louis’ other side. Louis’ phone rings, Liam’s face appearing on the screen.

“Lima!” Louis cheers when he answers. “You watching X Factor, mate? Gotta vote Amelia back in, that was rubbish!”

Harry frowns, his phone’s camera already open. “Should I wait?”
Louis shakes his head. “Looks more authentic this way, right?” He turns back to the TV, rolling his eyes. “Yes, Liam, I am paying attention to you. Please continue.”

“Am I tweeting it?” Harry whispers to Eleanor as Louis listens to whatever Liam is saying. She nods.

“Think so. To show I’ve got the best friend approval,” she smirks, making air quotes.

Harry chuckles and takes the picture, Eleanor’s face strategically hidden like she’s laying her head on Louis’ shoulder but still recognizable. As soon as the shutter sound clicks, Louis’ faint smile drops.

“Wait, what?” he asks. “Hold on, Li.” He covers the speaker and turns to Harry. “Did you know we’re going on Xtra Factor tomorrow night?”

Harry finishes typing his tweet and posts it, the retweets and favorites already pinging his notifications. Then he realizes what Louis said. “No, no I didn’t.”

“Fuck,” Louis growls. He uncovers the speaker. “Thanks for passing it on, Li. See you in the morning.”

Harry slumps over, worrying at his lip. He hadn’t planned to ever have an actual conversation with Caroline throughout all this, assuming reports in the papers and his answers in interviews would be enough to keep the rumor going until the PR team decided his image was adult enough. This is going to be awful.

“What do we do?” he asks Louis nervously. “I- Lou, I can’t—”

“I don’t know, Haz, okay?” Louis snaps. He stands, pushing Harry’s hand away when he grabs at Louis’ shirt. “I need some air.”

He stalks to the stairs, disappearing up to their bedroom. Harry and Eleanor are left in awkward silence, flickering images from the show still playing on the screen.

“I’m, um,” Eleanor says, “gonna go back to studying, I think.”

“Yeah, sure,” Harry answers listlessly. The bright happiness in his chest has faded, leaving a bad taste in his mouth and the beginnings of a headache.

When a few minutes pass and Louis doesn’t return, Harry goes back on Twitter. His mentions are full of the usual, girls screaming over his hair and others trying to comfort him via the internet about Louis apparently leaving him for Eleanor. He’s gotten a lot of replies over the picture he just posted, but alongside all of that is tons of hate for his association with Caroline, girls feeling betrayed that he would choose a woman twice his age instead of one of them.

Harry hates it, suddenly. His stupid fake relationship has ruined yet another lovely night, and now Louis is pouting somewhere over something that isn’t either of their faults.

Harry sees a tweet that says Caroline’s posture is so man-like and, without considering the consequences, retweets it.

Less than a minute later, Louis retweets one of the replies.

Frustrated, Harry tosses his phone aside and grabs for his wine glass, emptying it before moving on to Louis’ abandoned drink as well. A notification that Louis has tweeted has him reaching for his phone again.
Harry scoffs and answers.

Harry stalks upstairs, past Eleanor in the kitchen and up to their bedroom. The balcony doors are flung open, chilly night air filling the room as the curtains billow dramatically. Louis stands silhouetted against the moon, a lit cigarette dangling from his fingers and a cloud of smoke around his head. His shoulders are hunched, his head hung.

“Lou,” Harry says, leaning on the balcony railing next to him. “Louis, look at me.”

Louis shakes his head, breathing out more smoke. Harry steps closer and slips his hand around Louis’ waist. His arms are covered in goosebumps, his skin cold. His eyes and nose are red, his breath shaky.

“I hate this,” he whispers. “I hate it so much, Haz. She’s awful, she’s a terrible person but she gets to be linked with you and I—” he sniffs, rubbing his eyes, “I’m the one who loves you but I have to pretend I don’t.”

Harry rubs his hands up Louis’ arms, trying to warm him. “Gemma said something last time I saw her, and it helped a lot. She said that it doesn’t matter what the public sees, as long as we know the truth. I know Caroline’s just desperate for attention, and I know you love me. That’s what matters, yeah?”

Louis leans against Harry. “I know that. And I know you didn’t choose this, it’s just hard to stay calm about people making life choices for us. And now, no matter what else happens, people will think of you as the cougar chaser, and that’s not right. You are… you are everything, and they’re ruining the chance for people to fall in love with the real you like I did.”
“I don’t need everyone to fall in love with me,” Harry murmurs. “I’ve already got you, and that’s more than I thought I’d ever get.”

Louis slumps, laying his head on Harry’s shoulder. “Tomorrow is going to be hard.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Harry says.

Louis huffs quietly. “Yes it does. You know me, Haz, you know I’m going to snap the moment I see her near you.”

“Then do it,” Harry shrugs. “Make it awkward. Make her want out. Make people not believe it’s real. I don’t want people to think I’d chase after someone almost as old as my mum, and maybe she’ll realize she doesn’t want to be linked to a teenager. I can make fart jokes or something, I don’t know.”

Louis laughs into Harry’s collarbone. “Yeah, we’ll see.”

They fall asleep that night with no space between them, clinging close to ward off the impending day.

13 November 2011

The crowded Fountain Studio hallways seem tiny, almost as though the boys have outgrown them in the year since they left. The air is thick with that electric mix of hope and fear that used to be so familiar, and Harry breathes deep the smell of hairspray and cologne and heavy makeup and excitement all in small spaces.

The show’s makeup and hair team is ecstatic to see them, passing the boys around for hugs and excited comments on how much they love the singles and how proud they all are. Their old show stylist, Grace, and their new stylist, Caroline Watson, compare notes and tips on how to get the boys to behave but ultimately decide it’s mostly a lost cause. Lou Teasdale directs the *X Factor* stylists on how she wants each of the boys’ hair done and starts on Harry’s herself, twisting some errant curls back into place and combing product through so it’ll stay put. Grace helps smooth moisturizer and foundation on their faces, and they fall into the familiar routine of “Stop talking, Louis, or I’ll hairspray you right in the mouth” and “Your fringe is fine, Zayn, stop messing with it” just like back in the old days.

They’re outfitted in their blazers and in-ears and, just as One Direction is announced over the crowd, Harry pulls Louis close to press a hot kiss to his lips. “Never got to do that when we were here,” he murmurs, and Louis smiles like sunshine before they make their way onstage.

*Gotta Be You* goes off like a bomb, the crowd erupting into cheers in the best sort of way. Harry hits every note and it’s suddenly so clear how much they’ve grown, how at this exact time last year they’d been stressing about Aiden going home and Harry had just asked Louis to move in with him. He was sick with nerves every time they stepped on stage, terrified of a voice crack or a missed lyric that could end it all, and he loved his best friend desperately with no hope of ever being able to act on it. Now they’re the guests all the acts are scrambling to shake hands with, it’s their single they get to sing on stage, and Harry’s belt is digging into the bruises Louis pressed into his hips last night in their shared bed.

Dermot sends them offstage when the song is over like prodigal sons returning home. There are
cameras waiting to catch their reactions, just like in the old days, and they give a short interview backstage about *Gotta Be You* being released and how things have changed over the past year.

“Caroline Watson styled us today and she’s wicked,” Zayn says.

“We all love Caroline,” Louis says. “Well, Harry loves a different Caroline, but that’s a different story.”

“God,” Harry groans, laughing. He’s ready for Louis’ jabs tonight, knows he’s not gonna pull any punches, and he’s ready for the knockout only because when he wakes up it’ll be Louis nursing him back to health. Harry’s given Louis free reign to tear ‘Haroline’ apart, even if he’s caught in the crossfire. So until it’s done, he’s going to deny and be vague and laugh it all off as a particularly unfunny joke, hoping Caroline reaches her limit and calls it off before Harry reaches his and snaps something off that he shouldn’t while on live TV.

The cameraman gives them the thumbs up and the go ahead to find their way to the side stage where they’ll be filmed for *Xtra Factor* once the show ends. The crew bustles around them to get things sorted but they’ve still got an hour, so the boys sprawl out across some empty seats in the tiny backstage area, resting up a little after the adrenaline of performing ebbs and watching the week’s results. Harry lays his head on Louis’ chest and falls into a light nap, only waking when Louis presses little kisses to his forehead and nose and the boys fake retch behind him.

“’M up,” he mumbles, kissing Louis back quickly before Lou Teasdale drags him away to touch up his hair.

Claudia is waiting for him in the doorway, holding a bouquet of flowers and for a split second, Harry wonders what type of person would think Claudia would want useless things like flowers. Then she says, “Give these to Caroline when you get called in.”

Harry frowns, because that's an awful idea. Hackford and Jones had said they wanted to alter his image into something more mature, and yet they’re sending him into a live interview with a bouquet of tacky flowers to give to his “crush” in front of everyone, like a twelve-year-old plucking up the courage to ask a girl to the dance. He keeps frowning until Louis asks who the flowers are for and Harry tells him. Louis’ confused smile freezes for a moment like it does every time Caroline is mentioned, then his eyes gleam with promise and his lips tick up in a smirk.

“Give them to Olly,” he suggests impishly.

Harry cackles in glee at the idea, and that’s exactly what he does when they're called to go on stage: Caroline’s hands reach out for the flowers and Harry continues right on past her to hand them to Olly, along with a long, smacking kiss to his cheek. He kisses Caroline’s cheek too, but that’s just because he sort of can’t be rude on purpose, then settles where he’d been told to sit between her and Niall on the sofa.

Louis’ teasing punches, those light taps in the first round of the fight, start almost immediately. Harry says that it’s nice being back on the show and can’t really think of anything else to add (because usually this is where Louis steps in to steer him out of the middle of a wandering sentence of *ums* and *likes*) so Louis remarks, “I think he’s just nervous around you,” to Caroline.

The audience *ooohs*. Caroline smiles, her eyes tight. She’s a pretty good actress, Harry will give her that. “I don’t think so, for some reason.”

“Me neither,” Louis says, because he’s out to dismantle Haroline but also because he likes claiming the things that he feels are *his* and Harry fits solidly under that category. Caroline talks over him,
asking Niall about the act kicked off the show that night, but that’s okay. Louis doesn’t give it long before he brings it up again.

“Which girl do you fancy the most, Harry?” Olly asks later, asking about the contestants left in the Girls category.

“Caroline,” Louis answers for him, and the crowd hoots. And then it goes quiet as everyone waits for an answer.

Harry flicks a glance to Louis, and Louis is just raising a challenging eyebrow in his direction. Harry can read the tilt of his mouth clear as day: *play the game, Hazza.*

“Yeah,” Harry answers when Olly asks again. “They’re all nice.” He glances pointedly at Louis again. “Bit young for me.”

Caroline laughs, but Harry watches Louis pinch his lips together like he does when he knows he shouldn’t smile.

Harry assumes Louis feels like he’s done his job for the night; the rest of the interview is smooth sailing, Louis directing his jabs at Zayn because he knows he won’t fight back.

Claudia wants Harry and Caroline to take a picture together at the end of the night. Harry refuses, and hops into a car hand in hand with Louis instead.

They stumble into the flat together when the car drops them off, a flurry of shaky hands and bitten lips as Harry fumbles getting the key into the lock. Louis presses against his back, grinding his hips into Harry’s arse and mouthing at the back of Harry’s neck.

Harry finally gets the door open and Louis immediately pins him against the inside wall, his knee between Harry’s thighs. “Looked so good tonight, baby,” he murmurs into Harry’s throat, biting kisses into his skin. “ Couldn’t take my eyes off you.”

“Lou,” Harry whines. “Need you, please.”

“What do you need?” Louis whispers into Harry’s ear, tugging on his earlobe with his teeth.

“Need your mouth, Lou, please, please suck me,” Harry rambles, Louis’ hands raking through his hair.

“Do you think you deserve that, then?” Louis asks lightly, running a delicate finger up Harry’s zipper and making him throb. He’s got his other hand in the middle of Harry’s chest, crucifying him up against the wall.

“Didn’t even look at her,” Harry pants. “Didn’t talk to her. Don’t want her. Want you.”

Louis steps back, letting Harry off the wall. His eyes are dark, the blue and green colliding in a storm. “Upstairs,” he growls.
Harry doesn’t hesitate, taking the stairs two at a time until he’s at their bed, the sheets still rumpled in the shape they left them this morning. He starts stripping, pulling at his blazer until it’s a crumpled heap on the floor and tugging his white shirt off and throwing it across the room. Louis comes up behind him as he reaches for his belt, stilling him with a hand to his stomach and a kiss to his shoulder. He works Harry’s belt out of its loops slowly, his mouth leaving a mottled kaleidoscope of bruises across his shoulders in places that guarantee Harry will feel them for days.

He strokes circles around both of Harry’s top nipples, coming so close to the sensitive nubs but not close enough, and Harry drops his head back on Louis’ shoulder in frustration.

“Want my mouth, baby?” Louis asks, his pretty voice a hammer to Harry’s fragile nerves, sending him begging.

“Yes, God, yes,” he pleads, voice broken.

Louis unbuttons Harry’s trousers, sliding them slowly over his hips, down, down, until they’re pooled at his ankles. He runs a hand over the bulge in Harry’s pants, making his knees buckle. There’s a constant stream of noise in the back of Harry’s mind, a chant of please please please Lou love you please he only barely realizes he’s saying out loud.


Harry strips and falls across the bed, the duvet welcoming him in. Louis is still fully dressed, his waist trim in his blazer, his arse a masterpiece in those red jeans. He’s grown his hair out so it’s ruffled and messy and Harry loves it, it drives him absolutely wild when Louis fixes his fringe with dainty fingers and looks Harry over with sharp eyes.

“Do you want to get me off first, or do you want to come first?” Louis asks, and it feels like a test that Harry will never, never fail.

“You first, Lou, let me suck you,” Harry moans. “Fuck my mouth, I’ll be so good, please.”

Louis groans and unbuttons his jeans, pulling out his cock and stroking it once. He straddles Harry’s chest still fully clothed and rubs his cock against Harry’s parted lips. Harry lets him, staring up at Louis with wide eyes. He’d do this all day if Louis wanted; Louis has the prettiest cock Harry’s ever seen, long and thick and perfect, and anytime it’s near his face is an excellent time in Harry’s world.

“Open,” Louis says, and Harry opens his mouth wide to let him feed his cock in, gentle but insistent until Harry’s lips are around the base and his nose is brushing Louis’ stomach, Louis’ cock tapping at the back of Harry’s throat. Harry swallows, working his tongue along the underside until Louis’ breath hitches and he pulls back before thrusting in again. “Hands,” Louis says, and Harry holds his hands up so Louis can lace their fingers together.

Louis sets a rhythm, a slow, pulsing in and out while moaning raspily. Harry closes his eyes and enjoys the taste, the feeling of Louis’ hot arousal heavy on his tongue. It shouldn’t be this hot, having a fully dressed Louis on top of him, taking what he wants and using Harry’s mouth to get himself off, but it makes Harry’s blood blaze hot. He sucks enthusiastically, humming, and it doesn’t take long for Louis’ hips to falter, his eyelashes fluttering as his movements go jerky.

“Gonna come,” Louis grits out, “Hazza, love, Haz—”

He comes with a cry, his orgasm both sweet and bitter in Harry’s mouth. He’s sweaty and disheveled, his outfit rumpled, his hair matted. He’s the most beautiful thing Harry’s ever seen.

Louis lazily strips off his blazer and his blue scoop neck, kicking his trousers off next. He drops
heavily on top of Harry, their skin so hot they could fuse together. Louis kisses Harry slowly, his mouth languid, then pulls away to lick and kiss a slow path down to Harry’s nipples, which he takes into his soft mouth like candy he’s savoring. He presses kisses over the tightened peaks, Harry whimpering with each flick of his tongue.

Louis leaves a trail of love bites down the center of Harry’s chest like a treasure map marking the spot. He does an admirable job of ignoring Harry’s cock even when it’s right in his face, instead sliding down and taking Harry’s balls into his mouth. Harry goes stiff with shock for a moment before melting into the mattress, his fingers curling into the sheets.

“Lou, babe,” he whines, “babe, please, your mouth.”

Louis smiles against Harry’s hipbone. “Nobody can suck you like I do, can they?”

“No, no one,” Harry agrees wildly. “You’re the best, Lou, need you.”

“What about Caroline?” Louis asks, licking a corkscrew pattern up the bottom of Harry’s cock. “Bet she knows what she’s doing.”

“Don’t care,” Harry moans. “Don’t care. She’s not you, only want you.”

Louis makes a quiet noise at that. “Only me?” he asks after a moment, his voice small. Harry, with a great amount of effort, flips them so that he’s on top and Louis is underneath him, biting his lip and avoiding Harry’s eyes.

“I don’t care about anyone else,” Harry says fiercely. “You are my Louis and the love of my life and I will never ever want anyone but you.”

Louis meets Harry’s stare. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, love,” Harry promises. “We’re forever and ever, you and me.”

Louis pulls Harry down for a rough, passionate kiss, clutching at Harry’s shoulders, fingers digging into the bruises he left earlier. He flips them again, Harry throwing his head back when his back hits the mattress.

Louis doesn’t tease, this time. He takes Harry down with ease, his throat relaxed enough that he can get almost halfway down Harry’s cock effortlessly. His small hand works a rhythm over the base, meeting his mouth on each slide down. Harry’s hips buck without his permission but Louis just absorbs it, humming happily.

“Close,” Harry gasps.

Louis redoubles his efforts and Harry teeters on the edge, the whiteness of orgasm pulling at him as Louis lifts his head and meets Harry’s eyes.

“I love you so much, Harry,” he says, and Harry comes.

14 November 2011

“...While an embarrassed Flack told Walsh to stop it, another Louis was ready and waiting to reignite the mockery later in the show,” Louis reads gleefully from his iPad the next morning. “Caroline will probably be hoping this will be the end of the matter, although somehow we doubt it.”
“So proud of you,” Harry grins fondly into his pillow. “Now shut up so I can sleep.”

15 November 2011

Claudia calls Harry the next day and tells him he’s got a date scheduled with Caroline that night.

“The table is reserved for four people, so bring friends if it’ll make you more comfortable,” she says, voice crisp. “Just be ready by seven, and a car will be out front to pick you up.”

“Convenient,” Louis rolls his eyes when the call ends, “what with our album coming out in two days and the X Factor ratings dropping, so when all the papers report on your date they can add that stuff at the bottom.”

“What are the odds that I can get out of this?” Harry asks.

Louis tuts sadly. “Not good, babe. Sorry.”

“Who am I gonna bring on my fake date?” Harry despairs. “I can’t tell too many people or it’ll get out.”

“What about Nick, he knows her, right?”

“There’s a party for Alexa’s birthday tonight ‘cause they were all too busy to do it last week,” Harry says glumly. “This is awful, I don’t want to go on a date with her.”

“I know, love,” Louis says, stroking his hair. “Claudia said there’s two more seats, yeah?”

“Yeah… Hey, if you and Eleanor came we’d make every headline,” Harry says, perking up. “Can we double? Then we could just have dinner at a nice place together and ignore them.”

“Think she’s got classes she can’t miss this week, otherwise I’m sure I’d have a public date too,” Louis says, but he’s got a glint in his eye that always spells trouble for someone. “I’ve got an idea, but I have to go check something first.” He steps up on his tiptoes and kisses Harry’s cheek.

Harry checks his watch; it’s nearing five o’clock. “Will you be back before I go?”

“Dunno, but I’ll have my phone,” Louis answers, padding out the door completely barefoot, leaving a baffled Harry in his wake.

Harry puts off getting dressed until the last possible minute, throwing on one of Louis’ t-shirts he’d bought at Leeds under his blazer and ruffling his hair into something resembling his usual mass of curls. The car trip is a short one, the driver dropping Harry out front of the St. Martin’s Lane hotel.

Caroline is standing in the lobby in leather pants and a sheer blouse, and she ends a phone call as he approaches.

“Thought you weren’t going to show,” she says, her dark-rimmed eyes watching him sharply when he shrugs.

“I’m here now,” he says, and lets her take his arm as they make their way into Asia de Cuba in the bottom floor of the hotel. The restaurant is small and chic, bare lightbulbs and crisp white tablecloths, the space interrupted only by a single white pillar in the middle of the room covered in black and
white photographs. The host sits them at a table next to a window, and Caroline orders a daiquiri before she takes the seat across from Harry. Harry opts for water, since he wouldn’t be able to drink anyway and they’ll more than likely be papped.

The restaurant is full but quiet, conversation muted in the small space. It makes the silence between Harry and Caroline even more pronounced, the clinking of their silverware on the appetizer plates and the ice in their glasses the only noise. It’s excruciating, and the only reason Harry isn’t breaching it is because Caroline looks just as uncomfortable as him, and she keeps shooting glances out the window and around at the rest of the restaurant patrons like expecting someone to save her.

“So,” she says finally, breaking the silence. She reaches out and trails a fingernail over the back of Harry’s hand. “What have you been up to since I saw you last? Breaking any more hearts?”

Harry’s nose wrinkles. “Um, no. Couple of interviews, but it’s been quiet, mostly.”

“No parties?” she asks, leaning close. “I figured you’d be out every night, young and virile boy like you.”

“Um. No.”

“Did you invite anyone else?” she asks when that route of conversation clearly ends.

“Well…” Harry trails off, and that’s when he hears a familiar voice across the room.

Yeah, yeah, we’re part of another party,” says Louis, only is it Louis? It sounds like him, at least.

“And, oh, there they are! We’ll find our own seats.”

Sure enough, that’s Louis’ walk and that’s Louis’ voice, but it sure doesn’t look like Louis. His fringe is combed back in a gorgeous quiff, highlighting his high cheekbones and sharp chin. He’s wearing eyeliner, or at least there’s something different about his eyes: they look wider, bigger than their usual crinkled look. And then there’s his outfit, which Harry is pretty sure is made up entirely of things from Harry and Liam’s wardrobes: baggy black jeans and a long, flowing top hiding his thin frame, a loose scarf around his neck. It’s just about as far in the opposite direction as his usual public persona that Harry wouldn’t have recognized him at all if he hadn’t spoken. He grins when he comes near, a sharp edge to it.

“Louis?” Harry breathes, and Louis claps him on the shoulder before dropping into the seat next to him.

And with him is—

“Zayn?” Harry laughs. Zayn’s familiar brown eyes wink at him from under the wide brim of one of Harry’s hats, his distinctive quiff hidden. He’s also wearing eyeliner but only at the edges, which round his eyes, making them seem less narrow. He’s got some sort of makeup that makes his cheeks seem fuller, less sharp. He’s gone with a similar clothing approach to Louis, wearing a cheap silky shirt Harry had found in a thrift store one day and tight, tight jeans, his feet laced into motorcycle boots rather than his usual Nikes. They both look like they’d fit in well with Nick and Pixie and Aimee and the hipster gang Harry’s sort of in now.

“Sorry we’re late,” Louis grins brightly, going to brush at his fringe before realizing it isn’t there. He reaches for a menu instead. “Ooh, posh. What did you order, Hazza? I’ll get something different so we can share.”

“Hold on a tick,” Caroline says. “This ain’t happening. Sorry, boys, but this is a date.”
“Is it?” Louis feigns surprise. “Awful quiet for a date.”

“We’re Harry’s guests,” Zayn adds.

Caroline gestures at them, turning to Harry in exasperation. “Harry, honestly. We’re going to get photographed, and it won’t take that long for people to recognize these two.”

“So there won’t be pictures of us in the Mail tomorrow,” Harry shrugs. “I’m okay with that. Not like a fake source won’t tell reporters exactly what they want to say happened anyway.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asks.

“If I may,” Louis says, patting Harry’s hand. Caroline snorts, cutting him off.

“No, you may not,” she says. “I want to hear this from Harry, not his spokesman. This is supposed to be for your benefit, remember?”

“I don’t know how this isn’t clear,” Harry says slowly. “I don’t want to do this. I don’t agree with this at all. It makes me look bad, it makes you look bad, and if my contract didn’t state that I had to do it, I wouldn’t.”

“Again,” Caroline says like she’s talking to a two-year-old, “this is to benefit you. All of you, actually,” she says, looking at Louis and Zayn. “I don’t get anything out of this, but I’m still doing it.”

“Don’t get anything out of it?” Louis laughs. “Listen, doll, we aren’t idiots here. Not only do you get major press and linked to the most popular X Factor act in years when the majority of the British public doesn’t give a damn about you, but you’re also seen as the one who stole girl-crazy Harry’s heart. You look like a pedophile, sure, but who could resist these curls? No one would blame you, not really.”

“And then,” Zayn continues for him, his voice hard, “in a few months when there’s no need for X Factor promo, you’ll try to get Harry to settle down and he’ll reject it, running off to America to spread his womanizing ways over there as well. You’ll get a book deal in a few years, Harry gets a new reputation as a heartbreaker, and Simon gets to roll in bigger piles of money.”

“So don’t give us this bullshit about not getting anything out of this,” Louis finishes. “And don’t get any ideas about getting a piece of Harry before you go. He’s too smart for you.”

“And spoken for,” Harry adds.

“That too,” Louis winks at him.

Caroline’s eyes widen imperceptibly when she understands. “I’ll go to Simon, I will. There’s no way he knows about you two, or if he does then he doesn’t know the extent of it.”


Caroline is silent, her jaw working.

“Who did your makeup?” Harry asks Louis, grinning.

“We’ve got an in with Little Mix now,” Louis smirks, kicking at Zayn’s foot under the table. “Nice girls, they are. Very accommodating to all sorts of strange requests.”
“Good on them,” Harry laughs, delighted. Zayn, underneath all his makeup, is probably that subtle shade of pink that means he’s embarrassed, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Now,” Louis says. “What do you say, Zaynie baby? Should we split some calamari? Modest is footing the bill, so please feel free to not be a cheap date.”

Zayn twitches a smile. “Sure thing, love.”

“I got the scallops for a main course, if that helps you decide,” Harry adds, unable to control his smile. Louis smirks back, rubbing circles on his thigh under the table.

16 November 2011

Louis likes to collect all the articles where management’s little pet reporters have to struggle to write Harry and Caroline’s romance in a convincing way, dodging massive obstacles like Harry’s clear disinterest and the fact that they’ve never hung out willingly on their own.

The morning after their date with Louis and Zayn provides another gem for the collection.

Caroline and Harry went for a meal at the Asia De Cuba restaurant, Dan Wootton writes. They were clearly enjoying being together and didn't seem to care who saw them. Two other friends joined them while they were eating but it was clear they only had eyes for each other.

“I’m so glad you could pull your eyes away from Caroline long enough to even greet me,” Louis says seriously, his eyes twinkling. Harry shrugs nonchalantly.

“I wasn’t going to, but then I saw your excellent fashion sense and your impeccable eyeliner,” Harry says. Louis grins, the corners of his eyes still smudged with a little bit of black that he couldn’t wash off in their shower the night before (not that their shower was actually focused on getting clean, but whatever.) “You put so much effort in, I felt like I had to.”

“And I am lucky for that,” Louis nods. He then texts the link to the article to Kate from Sugarscape, Zayn, Liam, Niall, his mum, Harry’s mum, Claudia, Gemma, and Stan, and spends the rest of the day, including their time at a carnival photoshoot, acting out his favorite parts of Dan’s joke of an article and laughing uproariously.

Harry lets him, grinning uncontrollably, because a happy Louis means a happy Harry, and maybe this can be the nail in the coffin of the joke called Haroline.
17 November 2011

With all of the drama surrounding Harry’s blossoming relationship with Caroline and his own with Eleanor, Louis had sort of forgotten about the album debut. Their pre-sale numbers were amazing, and the singles had both done better than they’d ever imagined, but it still all really hinges on a successful album release: if this flops, they might not be able to do the U.S. tour dates after all.

But, really, there’s nothing they can do about it anymore; Louis has tweeted, he’s been interviewed, he got himself a fake girlfriend, so now Louis is just trying to be zen about it and concentrate on enjoying the listening party and album release with his boys. They’ve arrived early to hang out before they have to go to hair and makeup, checking out the area where they’ll sit to introduce their first ever record.

For people who, by Zayn’s estimations, have made quite a hefty bit of cash off of One Direction so far, management certainly doesn’t pull out all the stops for the album release livestream. They’re on a shoddy-looking sofa on a soundstage meant to look like a teenager’s basement hangout, or at least that’s how Louis interprets it. There are pictures of people’s hands making a heart shape wallpapered up behind them— isn’t that a Taylor Swift thing? — and a few sad balloons on the floor.

“Wow,” Louis says flatly, kicking a balloon and sharing a miffed look with Zayn. Niall is entertained, though, rolling amongst the balloons and giggling.

Lou Teasdale and Caroline Watson find them and drag them off one by one to change and get ready,
taking Zayn and Liam first. Louis sprawls out face-first on the empty sofa and sighs, feeling the familiar weight of Harry sink into the seat next to him. His phone vibrates in his pocket, but he’s too lazy to get it.

“Hazza,” he says sleepily into the cushion, “could you?”

Harry, who is never one to miss an opportunity to feel up Louis’ bum, grins and complies. He unlocks Louis’ phone, reading his messages.

“Oh my God,” he whispers, and Louis’ eyes fly open.

“What? What is it?”

“It’s…” Harry drawls out, eyes flickering quickly over the screen. “Lou, oh my God.”

“What?” Louis asks again, fear rising. Harry finishes whatever he was reading and turns the screen to Louis.

(1:02 p.m.) Kate (Sugarscape): Did you see this?!?!!!
(1:03 p.m.) Kate (Sugarscape): http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/lostinshowbiz...
(1:03 p.m.) Kate (Sugarscape): It’s working!!!!

Louis taps the link, an article appearing: Is Harry from One Direction’s X Factor romance all it seems?

I suppose that on all other occasions when the Sun reports a relationship between a 32-year-old woman and a 17-year-old young adult, it tends to be gleaned from crown court proceedings, with the elder party typically a biology teacher or something in PE. But back to Harry and Caroline, and their incredible showmance. I need hardly remind you of the controlling intelligence behind this publicity. Even Caroline's surname seems like something developed in a petri dish in Cowell's subterranean lab, designed specifically to appeal to subeditors who find themselves so tempted to deploy "copping some Flack", that the impulse overrides any concerns they might have over the veracity of the tale in question.

Still, she's certainly taking the flak for this romance, if a tweet she posted yesterday is anything to go by. "Hi one direction fans!” it ran. "To clarify. I'm close friends with harry ... He's one of the nicest people I know ... I don't deserve death threats. :) x"

Well quite. Something in my waters tells me Friday’s Sun will reveal that Xtra Factor beauty Caroline Flack has received death threats from crazed One Direction fans. And so it goes on – a timely reminder than it's still Cowell's world. The Sun's just printing it.

Louis forgets about the shitty livestream setup after that, and he grins so much through hair and makeup that he gets a mouthful of hairspray and Lou Teasdale has to smack his cheek to get him to stop so she can fill in his makeup in the crinkles by his eyes. The tension and worry over album sales is gone, the boys giddy and bouncing as they file in to start the listening party.

The livestream itself ends up being a bit of a mess: the interviewer, Diana, didn’t read the questions beforehand and keeps bumbling them, and she can’t remember the names of any of the songs. The challenges are stupid and management reps behind the camera keep motioning for the boys to get
excited and loud but it’s hard when they have to concentrate on being loud. Louis is naturally loud, he doesn’t need to be told to try harder.

But Louis gets to answer questions about the songs they recorded and cuddle up to the boys while doing it, and it’s almost like a typical day in the life of One Direction, only with more clothing than they usually wear and they aren’t usually, y’know, being recorded during cuddle time. Louis sprawls his leg over Liam’s and leans into Zayn (because he wasn’t allowed to sit by Harry, and he didn’t even push it when Claudia looked like she’d rip his arm off if he asked) and enjoys this moment, right before everything begins.

“If you had to **cook a meal** for a girl,” Diana asks at one point, “what would it be and why?”

“Louis you’ve done some cooking recently,” Liam grins, passing the mic over.

Louis smiles widely, because even though it wasn’t that recent at all, he’ll still take any opportunity to talk about how romantic he is. “I cooked the sickest meal. Bear in mind, this is one of the first meals I’ve ever cooked,” he explains to Diana, who is the only one on camera who wasn’t present for this story. He holds out his hands to demonstrate, palms up. “I cooked chicken breast, stuffed with mozzarella…”

The livestream is only an hour long, and it’s over quicker than Louis expected. Harry announces *What Makes You Beautiful* as the last song and that’s it, it’s done; their first album has been heard by the masses. Louis straightens out his shirt and stands, assuming it’s time to leave, but Harry yanks him back down for a cuddle. Louis snuggles in, happy to have his boy wrapped around him after a fun, but long, day.

And then Claudia hisses, “*The camera is still on.*”

...  

**21 November 2011**

Harry and Louis get their punishment soon enough: in a Sugarscape interview four days later, the reporter tells Harry she’d heard he and Caroline were moving in together.

Harry’s stomach aches when Louis laughs, loud and long, but leans forward to ask, “Where’d you hear that?” When the reporter just smiles, Louis’ expression hardens a little. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Erm,” she says, flustered. “OK! Magazine. We thought you could clear up the rumors for Sugarscape,” she continues, nodding at Harry.

Well. Time to invent something, since apparently disputing a rumor that he’s moving in with a woman he’s spoken to less than five times is something that needs to be done. “You know, I didn’t know anything about this, right,” Harry says, deciding to keep it vague. “And I get a text from my mum and she goes, ‘I didn’t know you were moving?’ So I don’t know, I have no idea where that’s come from.”

“We didn’t think you’d move out from the boys,” the reporter says.

“From me!” Louis corrects, pouting. Harry hates it, he hates all of it; that’s not a real pout on Louis’
face, but it’s definitely real pain lurking in his eyes.

“You’d never leave Louis, would you?” Zayn asks, and by the look in his eyes he knows. They all know; this is much harder than Harry ever expected, so much more hurt for both of them than what a fake relationship should cause.

Zayn rubs his hand on Harry’s arm to bring him back to reality. Harry sighs; he and Louis are so lucky to have them, to have three boys fighting beside them. It’s just awful that they have to fight at all.

Harry looks right at Louis when he answers, “Absolutely not.”

Behind Zayn’s head, Harry shoots Louis a thumbs up. Louis takes a minute, but he answers with a thumbs up in return.

22 November 2011

Of all the rooms in their swanky flat, Harry’s favorite is the master bathroom.

He loves the cinema room, with its arcing ceiling and comfy couches, and he loves the kitchen and all its gadgets and bright, open space. And of course he loves their bedroom: the balcony where Harry plays guitar and Louis smokes and acts as his muse, the reading nook built below the window surrounded by piles of Harry’s poetry books, and the huge, soft bed where Louis has taken him apart and put him back together more times than he could count.

But the bathroom, this is Harry’s little slice of heaven.

Candlelight flickers on the walls, battling against the sunlight streaming in from the wide open window. The room is warm and steamy, the mirror fogged and showing the clear imprint where Louis writes his name in the condensation after he showers. Harry sinks a little deeper into the hot water and tips his head back against Louis’ shoulder, utterly content.

Louis strokes a hand over Harry’s chest, tracing patterns in the bubbles. There’s music in the background, a small playlist Harry put together with help from Ed and Nick; they’d been all accommodating when Harry’d texted them for slow romantic songs, but were a little less enthusiastic when Harry explained he needed music because he thinks he’s finally ready to try fingering Louis but wanted something to commemorate the occasion.

Ed had replied bit too much info, mate, but good luck I suppose and Nick had just sent him a selfie, frowning into the camera and accompanied by a single word: why.

But they’d had good suggestions, sweet melodies and velvet guitar mingling in the air with the familiar scent of Harry’s vanilla and cinnamon candles. Harry knows Louis is listening because he keeps humming bits of the songs into Harry’s ear. His soft breathing tickles Harry’s neck, making his red polished toes clench and unclench against the side of the tub.

“Keep me warm inside our bed,” he sings, and this is Louis’ voice as Harry loves it best; no shakes of fear, no worry about his performance compared to anyone else, just soft and sweet and untroubled, the soundtrack to Harry’s happiness. “I’ve got dreams of you all through my head.”

Harry strokes his hands down Louis’ thighs where they’re bracketing his hips, soft touches dulled by the water. The teal polish on his fingernails pops against Louis’ caramel skin, a perfect complement.
Eventually, Louis sweet-talks Harry into ducking his head under the water and he does, emerging to find Louis with a palmful of Harry’s coconut shampoo and gentle fingers ready to massage it into his hair and scratch lightly at his scalp. Harry melts, soft noises falling from his mouth as Louis works. Louis does himself next, coaxing Harry to lean up as he washes his hair perfunctorily then cupping his hands to rinse both of them off.

They spend another half hour in the bath, trading lazy kisses and quiet comments, enjoying an afternoon where they aren’t expected to be anywhere or do anything. The water turns lukewarm and Louis suggests they move to the bedroom, toweling off and jumping into bed with wet hair and no clothes. They warm up soon enough under the blankets, the November chill kept away by their body heat.


“Fuck, Hazza, of course you can,” Louis chuckles breathlessly. “Could never turn you down, love.”

“You did with the kissing at first,” Harry points out, rolling across the bed to rummage for their lube. “And the blowjobs.”


Harry smiles angelically back at him. “That is definitely a good thing for you to remember.”

He drops the lube onto his pillow and rolls himself on top of Louis, shifting them together. Louis groans at the contact, warm, flushed skin burning like cool fire where they touch. His mouth is lovely and soft against Harry’s, letting him lead the kisses with soft nips and long, lazy caresses. Harry rolls his hips, though it doesn’t take much to get Louis interested; he’s meeting Harry’s thrusts by the third roll.

“You’ll tell me what to do?” Harry asks, moving his lips to Louis’ throat. Louis moans.

“Fuck, that’s the hottest thing,” Louis gasps. “Yeah, baby, I’ll tell you. I trust you.”

Harry hums, making his way down to Louis’ chest to kiss around his nipples. He’s not as sensitive as Harry but he still tips his head back and hums when Harry licks over them, leaving gentle bites all across his chest. Louis threads his hands through Harry’s curls, tugging a little when he sucks kisses right over Louis’ heart.

Harry sits up, reaching for the lube and shuffling down to rest between Louis’ legs. The slick is cold against his fingers so he slides them together to warm them, flicking a last glance up at Louis.

“You’ll tell me what to do?” he asks.

“Always,” Louis grins, so Harry drops his hand to rub small circles over his hole. Louis gasps, his thighs falling open. “More,” he begs, “more, Hazza.”

Harry presses in, losing his own breath when he does. Louis is tight, his muscles clamping down on the tip of Harry’s finger. It doesn’t seem to hurt, though; in fact, the further Harry pushes in, the higher-pitched Louis’ whines go. Harry watches Louis’ mouth part on an “Oh,” as his finger slides all the way in, his knuckles against Louis’ rim.

“Good?” Harry can’t help but ask, and Louis nods desperately.

“Fingers are so long,” he moans. “Perfect, love, so perfect.”
Harry smiles against Louis’ thigh, pulling his finger out and sliding it back in. Then again, and again, a little faster each time until Louis has the sheets bunched in his fists and he’s begging, “Two, Harry, I need two.”

Harry slicks up his middle finger and works it in next to his first, Louis’ muscle giving in a little easier. He’s hot and silky smooth on the inside, and Harry collects every whimper and gasp when he catches his finger on Louis’ rim on the way out.

“More,” Louis begs again, “Christ, Hazza, love you so much, need you, more, more.”

He’s far too coherent for someone being fingered, so Harry pulls his fingers out, slicks up three this time, and slams them back in. Louis arches, crying out, “Yes, fuck, yes!” Harry works his wrist and sets a rhythm, quick and rough. He bends down and licks over the head of Louis’ cock, relishing in the clench of pressure around his fingers when he does.


“Yeah, love?” Harry asks, swirling his tongue around the tip.

“Harry… oh,” Louis says again, his eyes wide and dazed.

Harry slows his thrusts only a little, turning his wrist so he can crook his fingers forward, searching for the perfect spot and… there—

Louis screams, his hips jolting as Harry touches at the rounded spot of nerves. His chest is heaving, sweaty and shiny, and he’s got one hand fisted in his own hair.

“There,” Louis howls, rolling his hips down to meets Harry’s thrusts, “there, there, there.”

Harry sucks his cock back into his mouth and Louis is gone, coming hard and loud. Harry swallows away the bitter taste on his tongue and licks Louis clean, his fingers still curled inside him.


Harry hums, his hips catching friction in the sheets as he moves. Louis’s body is finished, spent, but Harry isn’t finished with Louis’ body; he licks down to press his tongue against Louis’ balls, sucks kisses in the joint of his hip and the juncture of his leg meeting his torso, kisses bruises into his inner thigh. Louis lets him, his legs twitching in sensitivity.

“Wanna try another something new?” he murmurs, and Harry whines against his hip, still kissing desperately like he’s leeching the taste from Louis’ skin. “C’mon then, up ‘ere.”

Louis tugs weakly at Harry’s arm and Harry detaches his lips, shuffling up to spoon behind him. He bites at Louis’ neck, his shoulder, watching as Louis reaches out for the lube again. Harry’s breath catches.

Louis doesn’t use the lube on his hole, but instead slicks up the space between his upper thighs. He crosses his legs and shifts backwards against Harry’s chest. “C’mon,” he says again. “Fuck my thighs, love.”

Hips jolt forward without Harry’s permission: the space between Louis’ legs is warm and wet, so tight that Harry sees constellations.

“Shit,” he breathes, thrusting slowly. “Lou, holy hell.”
Louis arches his back, displaying his throat to lean back and kiss Harry. “Let me have it,” he whispers throatily, and Harry whimpers, rolling his hips and letting the wildfire in his veins consume him whole.

All it takes to burn to pieces is Louis’ hand between his own legs, squeezing the head of Harry’s cock each time he thrusts. The need builds in Harry’s stomach and bursts out of him in shaky moans and tingling fingers, vision white.

They’re both shaking, exhausted and sated and captivated, watching each other with lidded eyes as their breaths even out. Eventually, Harry stands on wobbly legs to fetch them a towel and Louis heads downstairs for some tea, bringing up two steaming mugs and handing Harry his with a kiss.

Louis switches on the telly and, like he’d planned it, a voice announces the top twenty boy band countdown on 4Music. Louis makes a happy noise and sips his tea, and the two of them collapse into each other and waste an hour watching a countdown which could only end one way: clearly, the Backstreet Boys have to take the number one spot, there’s no contest. Harry and Louis bicker over the positioning of their other favorites, lamenting Take That’s low placement and arguing N’SYNC versus Westlife, their arguments interrupted only by kisses. Harry even tweets to commemorate the occasion.

All in all, Harry thinks, tucked into Louis’ side while he gesticulates wildly on the N’SYNC’s popularity as correlated with the severity of Justin Timberlake’s haircut, this isn’t how he thought life would go without his soulmate. He thought he’d spend his days regretting his choice, wondering what his other half was doing without him. Even if he loved Louis, and he does, he didn’t think it would be enough to circumvent his want for a soulmate-filled future.

He didn’t expect his life to be like this. He didn’t expect his love for Louis to be all-consuming, all-encompassing. He didn’t expect to be so proud of his tattoos, the I CAN’T CHANGE and the Hi and the star and more planned for the future, the Markers that biology may not have given him but that he chose for himself instead. He didn’t expect to be here, wrapped around Louis in their bed, in the home they’ve built, in the life they share.

But if this is what life is like without a soulmate, Harry thinks he’ll be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me if you have questions or comments!
Part Two: 25 November 2011 - 14 February 2012

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13: 25 November 2011 - 14 February 2012

25 November 2011

Harry likes to think he knows himself pretty well. He's always been self-aware, almost too aware; it's part of his anxiety, always has been. He knows he talks too slowly and that he cries too easily and he hasn’t yet learned not to take comments on the internet to heart. He lets people walk over him sometimes and he relies on others to fight his battles and, most of the time, he's far, far too nice to people who (according to Louis) don't deserve it. He’s not perfect, he’s well aware of that.

Still, Harry clearly doesn’t know everything about himself, as he discovers early in an interview with some nobody TV reporter who tries to fit in with the band and be one of the lads even though he’s at least ten years older than them. And this is what he discovers—

Harry, as it turns out, is incredibly possessive of what he considers his: namely Louis, especially when reporters won't keep their hands off.

The boys of One Direction have had to get used to it, a little; they don't know if it's their age or their gender or just the way they've been marketed, but every reporter and fan seems to think they're entitled to the boys' bodies without a hint of shame. Girls kiss their cheeks and grab their clothes and reporters run their hands up their arms and through their hair and Harry can’t help but shudder at some of it, feeling like little more than a prop to pose with, a good story for Instagram. It’s sort of like when their last names became public knowledge, just another little piece of them taken away and handed to the masses.

But this is different, because it’s not like the middle-aged female reporters who flirt and wink for the sake of the camera. Harry recognizes the look; this guy has intent, and Harry won't stand for it. The reporter asks for their advice for current X Factor acts and skips Louis, but then leans across Harry’s lap and lands his hand on Louis’ knee once Niall finishes talking. “Now, Louis, I didn’t skip across you there, of course,” and then, just, leaves his hand there.

Harry stares at the reporter, because he can’t look at someone else’s palm on Louis’ knee. His Louis.

It takes a few lifetime-stretching seconds, but the reporter moves his hand while Louis gives a probably perfect answer about Little Mix. Harry immediately puts his palm over the same spot, and he’s not naive or dumb enough to think he can remove the reporter’s touch, but. He pats Louis’ leg anyway, trying to think of anything except the word mine.

Louis, who loves Harry a lot but who is also a little shit, smirks at Harry as soon as the reporter looks away.

And Harry’s hand spasms.

It takes him a minute to rejoin the conversation, but it’s good timing—the interviewer asks what movies make the boys cry, and Harry has answers for him. (Because Harry may want to push this guy from the room and lock him out so he can’t look at Louis anymore, but he won't. Because he’s a professional.)
“Bambi,” he announces. Everyone groans in agreement, but he loses them with his next comment. “That’s a classic for a first date.”

Everyone stares; it’s okay, Harry’s used to it.

“At first, you think it’s a bit weird, ‘cause she’s like, why is he putting Bambi on,” he explains, “but then at the end she’s like,” he stops, miming having a cry. Louis plays along, burying his face in Harry’s shoulder and wailing; Harry, out of instinct, tangles his hand in Louis’ hair.

Louis stills, meeting Harry’s eyes and his lips spreading into a slow smile, and he slides his hand up to rest on Harry’s neck.

The reporter says something. Harry can’t hear over his heart pounding in his ears.

He lays his own hand on the back of Louis’ neck. If they weren’t in a room with the other boys and a handsy reporter and a couple of cameras, Harry would know what this was leading to; since they are in a room with all those things, Harry doesn’t know what to expect. Louis tugs him close.

And then he shoves his face into Harry’s shoulder, pretending to pull Harry into a snog.

Harry, because he loves Louis back but because he can also be a little shit, bites at Louis’ throat while their raised arms hide him from the view of the cameras. Louis hitches a breath, tilting his head back a little out of instinct. Harry pulls back, satisfied.

“They’re a band that, obviously,” the reporter laughs nervously as they break apart, flicking his glance over at a livid Claudia behind the camera, “you know, are close in more than one way.”

Zayn, Niall, and Liam laugh. Louis bites his lips and slides his hand up and down Harry’s bicep, stroking lightly through the fabric of his sleeve. The two of them ignore the next few questions in favor of whispering to each other.

The reporter doesn’t touch either of them anymore after that.

Because Harry is Louis’, and Louis is Harry’s. And they absolutely, unequivocally, belong to no one else.

5 December 2011

Nick is sitting at Harry and Louis’ kitchen table when Harry gets the text.

Because, as they’ve discovered, Nick Grimshaw is not the type of person to have sort-of friends. He’s an all or nothing kind of guy; you’re either among his closest mates or he hates your guts and lets you know it.

Luckily, Harry and Louis fall into the first category.

So, because Nick Grimshaw is not the type of person to half-ass a friendship, it takes only a month and a half of really knowing each other before Nick has a key to their flat (Harry’s lost track of how many copies of keys they’ve handed out to friends and family. They should probably be safer about that. Oh well). He can now be counted among the usual suspects who are likely already in the flat when Harry and Louis arrive home from the shops or a sneaky date to the cinema or tour rehearsals.

Like the day Louis drags Harry out to the open grounds behind the manor to have a kickabout with
his old football (which turns into a roll in the grass of the open field, stealing breathless kisses under the grey-blue sky while the football lies abandoned nearby). They're only out of the flat for an hour and it had been empty when they left, but when they return Zayn is up in the cinema room watching How I Met Your Mother, Liam is in the library reading a stack of Louis’ comic books, and Niall and Nick are giggling into their bottles of beer in the kitchen over something Niall was tagged in on Twitter. Just a normal day in the Princess Park complex, really.

Harry loves it, honestly. He loves walking into their kitchen and finding Nick and Aimee and Pixie fixing a late lunch because Nick’d just finished at the studio and wanted to see if Harry wanted to tag along with them to that new shop over in Islington, but they were hungry and Pixie swore she was gonna starve if they didn't eat. And he loves walking hand in hand with Louis up to the cinema room to watch the Rovers match only to find Niall already there with the pre-match commentary on, snacks and drinks spread out and waiting for them. And he loves spending hours with Zayn in the tiny, slowly-growing library, nothing but the comfortable silence and the sound of flipping pages between them, Louis and Liam keeping themselves occupied with the pool table just a few rooms away. Ed crashes in their flat for a full week at the end of November, telling them he wasn't going to pay for a hotel in London when he's got friends with “ample room to spare, eh? C’mom, lads, let me play you this new song ‘ve written.” Stan comes down and stays with them when he can get away from school for a few days, and Jonny's been by a lot as well.

The flat is like Grand Central Station, people coming and going at all hours; Harry and Louis never wish for company or entertainment. Harry buys a Lego Harry Potter set when Lego House goes to number one, and he and Ed spend a full night building the plastic brick version of Hogwarts. Niall stops shopping for his own groceries, just adding what he wants to the list on Harry and Louis' fridge. Zayn’s books slowly migrate into the library, and Liam stores some exercise equipment in one of the extra rooms so he doesn't have to leave the party flat to go work out. Nick stays over so often he’s got a drawer of pajamas in Harry's first floor bedroom, the one he never sleeps in anymore. The nights spent talking and drinking with the boys and their old friends from home and their new friends in the business are some of the best memories Harry has.

And, of course, when Louis corners Harry and whispers in his ear that Harry’s wearing far too much clothing and if Harry’s feeling lucky they can break out their box of toys, all it takes is a click of a lock and they can be totally alone. The flat full of friends can be forgotten and they don’t need to be entertained because they’re there so often that they quite literally make themselves at home. And, thanks to Liam and Nick barging in once and demanding Harry and Louis settle an argument for them, subsequently finding Louis working their new dildo into Harry for the first time as he moaned desperately at the top of his lungs, all their various friends know to take the locked door very seriously.

But there’s no locked door now and everyone is (mostly) clothed, just a shirtless Harry fixing some sandwiches for tea as Nick scrolls through the Harry Styles tag on Tumblr and finds embarrassing gifs to show him.

“Oh, God, look at this one,” Nick tuts faux-sympathetically, though he’s grinning widely as he turns his phone to show Harry a loop of himself doing karate back at the X Factor house (and smashing it, even though Nick doesn’t seem to agree).

Harry laughs anyway, batting the phone away and bumping the fridge door open to grab some lettuce. His own phone buzzes on the countertop next to Nick. “Could you grab that?”

“Oh, for you, darling,” Nick drawls, thumbing across Harry’s screen and reading out the text. “It’s from Claudia? Ooh, saucy new lady?” he laughs, but stops when Harry drops the head of lettuce to the floor. “Harry, what’s wrong?”
“What does it say?” Harry says, spinning to look at Nick. His eyebrows are raised high, but he doesn’t comment as he flicks his eyes back down to read Claudia’s text.

“There have been more articles disputing your relationship with Caroline,” he reads, “so you will be staying at her house tonight. Take an overnight bag. The car will be by at 6:00 p.m.”

Harry sinks down into the chair next to Nick. He’s not breathing, he’s pretty sure.

Nick seems to be panicking. Harry can’t blame him. “Hazza, this is a little scary, now. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nick, I can’t,” he says, dropping his head in his hands. “This has already gone too far, I can’t go stay at her house.”

Nick pats him awkwardly on the back. “It’s show business, H. That’s how things work, though I hate to say that.”

“If it was for something worthwhile, I might be able to stomach it a little better,” Harry says. “But it's literally meant to make me look sexually active. And while that's true, I don’t think the reality is something Modest wants spread to the public.”

“All you have to do is take a walk to her house,” Nick says soothingly. “You don’t actually have to follow through with anything.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about,” Harry answers morosely.

Nick frowns, but he's interrupted before he can ask another question by Louis and Niall bursting into the kitchen, sweaty and disheveled from their workout down in the manor’s gym. Louis flings his gross towel at Harry's face, digging in the fridge for some water. “Hello, love,” he says between gulps of water. “And hello, Nicholas.”

“Lewis,” Nick says, nodding. Louis flicks water at him from his fingertips, laughing when Nick’s hands fly up to cover his quiff. His smile stills when he turns back to Harry.

“What's wrong, baby?”

Harry hesitates for a split second. The thing about these fake romances is, according to Hackford and Jones, they don't hurt anyone. Everyone wins. But that's not true—Harry shatters every time Louis leaves the flat for a fake date with Eleanor, and he knows anything implied between himself and Caroline is the same for Louis. He hates that they have to go through these ridiculous cover-ups and schemes for a bit of PR and to bury the truth of their real relationship, but he’d carry the burden entirely in his own if it meant Louis could walk free.

That wasn't a choice Harry was offered, though, and hiding things will only make it worse, so he sighs and pushes his phone to Louis, the text still lit up on the screen.

Louis is white-knuckled when he finishes reading, and Niall is frowning viciously where he's looking at the message over Louis’ shoulder. Nick looks like he wishes he was anywhere but here.

Harry doesn't really feel anything; he's still numb to it all. Not really processing.

“Okay,” Louis says finally, his voice throaty and a little too loud. “Don't go.”

“It's not that easy, Lou,” Harry says quietly. “You know that.”
“It could be that easy,” Louis shoots back. “They can't fucking tell you to walk into a literal cougar den. You can't do it. You can't go, Hazza.”

The end of his sentences are ticking up like questions, getting shriller with every word. He's clenching his hands into fists, his face screwed up like he's angry but trying not to be and failing miserably at it. Harry stands and folds him into his arms; Louis collapses into him, slumping over to rest his head on Harry's shoulder.

“Don’t go,” he says again, and he’s tiny and petulant and he doesn’t share very well but he loves Harry so much that Harry’s heart aches.

“C’mon, Lou,” Niall says behind them, patting Louis on the back, “that’s not fair to Haz. He doesn’t want to go either.”

“I really don’t,” Harry laughs bleakly. “And I’m sure I have to do a walk of shame for the paps in the morning, so I won’t be able to leave and come back here tomorrow night.”

Louis huffs, burrowing deeper into Harry's hold.

“I'll go,” Nick says heavily, like he's volunteering for war. He pushes back from the table and stands, joining the other three. “I'm friends with Caroline, I can tag along and it won't be weird.”

“Oh, Nick, would you?” Harry asks, desperately relieved. “That would be amazing, I don't want to be alone with her.”

“Cazza isn’t that bad, H,” Nick says wryly. “She won’t actually eat you, despite any maneater titles she's earned.”

“I had to reassure my mum the other day that I wasn’t cheating on Louis with her because it’s been so bad in the papers,” Harry says, and Louis shudders in his arms. “It’s not about her as a person, it’s that she agreed to this situation at all.”

“If it wasn’t her, it would’ve been someone else who needed press attention,” Nick reminds him gently.

“She’s still horrid,” Louis mumbles churlishly into Harry’s collarbones, and even Nick cracks a smile.

“Well then, Hazza, guess we should pack ourselves some jammies and a few dozen bottles of wine, because this sleepover will be incredibly awkward if I’m forced to be sober,” Nick declares. Harry just cuddles Louis closer, leaving his lips pressed to his forehead and wishing he didn't have to have all the bad in his life like Caroline and Eleanor to counteract all the good like being in the biggest band in the country with his best friends and the love of his life.

Harry and Nick get dropped off around the corner from Caroline’s flat; they can already hear the faint buzz of the awaiting paparazzi, the shuffling and muttering of a group who’d been told to show up at a certain place if they want to make a bit of cash and who don’t really care what they have to do to get it

Harry stops Nick with a hand to his chest just before they round the corner of the building. His lungs are having a bit of a hard time, his chest aching. He thumps himself hard in the sternum and coughs.

“Honestly, Harry,” Nick says, rolling his eyes. “There’s no need for the dramatics. They aren’t hiring
you out as a rent boy, you just have to walk in, say hello, stay in her guest room—which is lovely, by the way—and then walk back out the same door tomorrow morning.”

“Right,” Harry says, shaking out his shoulders and steeling himself. “Right. Okay.”

Nick grins, cuffing him on the chin. “Ready, boytoy?”

“I hate you,” Harry groans, but he’s smiling as they turn the corner and the paps lift their cameras, flashes and clicks going wild, the men bellowing insults and questions alike to get Harry and Nick to react. Nick stays a few feet back from Harry so he’s not in all the pictures, but he’s a steady presence as Harry hoists his bag higher on his shoulder and hops up the front steps and into the lobby of Caroline’s building.

She’s waiting on the other side of the door—understandable, what with the clamor outside—and she smiles shortly at Harry when he takes off his beanie and ruffles his hair. “Harry,” she says, but her smile turns genuine as Nick follows her in. “And Grimmy! What a surprise!”

“You know me, can’t resist a bit of drama,” Nick laughs, kissing Caroline’s cheek.

“I’ve got a chicken bake in the oven and some wine upstairs,” Caroline says, leading the way to the lift. She and Nick chat in the kitchen when they arrive and let Harry explore her flat in peace; it’s relatively small but extravagantly decorated, like a baroque shoebox. Though, really, Harry and his massive flat have no room to talk about extravagance, so he keeps his comments about the pearl-draped lamps and gilt framed Manet and Degas prints on the walls to himself. The whole place smells like jasmine and luxury.

He’s quiet all through dinner, as well, Nick and Caroline filling the silence as they gossip about Olly’s new girlfriend and Alexa’s new dog. Harry joins in when he can, but spends most of it texting Louis about literally nothing at all, just because he misses him.

(7:23 p.m.) **Harry:** Might go grocery shopping tomorrow with Liam, I think.
(7:25 p.m.) **Hullabalou:** Ooh, buy us some crisps, had the last for dinner tonight
(7:26 p.m.) **Harry:** You ate something besides crisps, right?
(7:26 p.m.) **Hullabalou:** Yeh !! Had some pretzels as well.
(7:27 p.m.) **Harry:** I hate how adorable I find that.
(7:28 p.m.) **Hullabalou:** xxxxxxxxxxxxx

The three of them are skirting the awkwardness of this whole evening, but Harry is glad for Nick’s frankness when his patience bursts at Caroline pointedly turning away from Harry when she speaks and Harry with his phone two inches from his face the entire evening.

“Jesus,” he scoffs, gulping the last bit of his wine and pouring himself another healthy-sized glass. “If I were a less intelligent person, I’d think you two were fucking, what with all the tension in the room.”

Harry laughs, startled, and Caroline ticks the corner of her mouth up in a smirk.

“She wishes,” Harry jokes tentatively.

“Yes I do,” Caroline shoots back frankly. "But I know you'd be thinking of someone a lot louder and lot shorter than me the whole time.”

“When you've got the best, why would you trade down?” He asks smugly. Then frowns. “Not that Louis is an object that I own.”
Caroline shakes her head, exasperated. “You are something else, Harry Styles.”

Harry takes the thinly veiled confusion as a compliment.

“Can I ask a question?” Nick asks later. They’re all alone since Caroline shut herself in her room early, claiming a headache. Harry isn’t bothered; after Louis and Zayn crashed their last “date,” he’s surprised she’s spoken to him at all. And things are always going to be weird when she still so blatantly pushes for things Harry is never going to give, so he’d really prefer to keep their relationship as cordial and kept at arm’s length as possible.

Nick’s still holding a glass of wine, though he’s emptied and refilled it a couple of times. He swirls the dregs, looking over the rim of the glass at Harry. They’re thigh-to-thigh on Caroline’s guest bed, the soft, casual fabric of their joggers out of place in the frilly, feminine room. Harry shrugs, gestures for him to ask his question.

“Do you still want to find your soulmate?” he asks. “Even though you have Louis? Would you still want to know who it is?”

Harry picks at his cuticles. “I don’t know, honestly. Most of the time, no I don’t want to. I love Louis so much that anything more would just be… It would be too much, I think. It scares me what I’d do for him, and a Bond is supposed to be even stronger.”

“But that’s just most of the time,” Nick pushes, always the interviewer.

“Well,” Harry shrugs. “Of course I’m curious. I want to know what kind of person fate picked out for me, because it's something I always wanted before Louis and I think it could tell me a lot about myself.”

“So what changed?”

Harry thumbs at his own lip. “I used to need to know who it was, back before I ever met Louis. I felt like I wasn’t complete until I found them, like I was just waiting until someone came along to finish me, I guess. But then I did meet Louis and it's like…” He stops, struggling for the right words. “Contrary to what people think, we don’t need each other to survive. We wouldn’t die without each other. It’s not like that. It's like, I am the best version of myself with him. And I don’t need him like I need air, but I do need him in different ways.”

Nick doesn’t prod for more, but his eyes are sad and his fingers drum on his empty wine glass, like he wants to ask but he doesn’t want to open his mouth to do it. So Harry keeps going.

“I need him… when we’re in a different hotel every night of the week and I can’t get comfortable because nothing is familiar, I have him to remind me of home. I need him when yet another twat on the internet says I can’t sing or I don’t deserve to have the solos or be in the band, because he’s there to tell me they’re wrong. I need him when fans and reporters and paparazzi and randoms on the street grab me and touch me like they own me, because then I remember that he’s the only one who I gave that right and that power over me. And I need him in the good times, too, not just the bad; like when the album hit number one and every week we continued on X Factor and when we moved into a flat together, I needed him then because he was the only one I wanted to share that with.” Harry looks up from his hands and meets Nick’s eyes. “What about you, Grim? You ever going to settle down?”

Nick shrugs halfheartedly. “It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just that I’ve never found that person, you know?” He smiles wistfully. “I never found my Louis.”
Harry throws his arm around Nick’s shoulders, pulling him close. “You will. You deserve the absolute best.”

“So do you, popstar,” Nick replies quietly. “And I’m glad you found it.”

7 December 2015

Harry’s exit from Caroline Flack’s flat the next morning makes the front page of the Sun and the gossip columns of most of the rest of the major papers. Twitter goes nuclear, so Louis steals Harry’s phone and shuts it off through a day of tour rehearsals and meetings with management to discuss recording the charity single with this year’s X Factor contestants to help boost the still-falling ratings.

Harry’s jittery and weird, and Louis can’t blame him. He’s so grateful that Nick could be there with Harry last night since Louis couldn’t be, but the won’t always be that lucky. The thought of that makes Louis’ vision go a little red and his heart go a little blue.

Harry showers as soon as he and Louis get back to the flat after a long day out running errands and sitting through meetings, which isn’t too strange. But when he steps out of the bathroom with his skin scrubbed red and raw, Louis’ eyes go wide.

“Holy shit, baby, what did you do?” Louis asks. He hovers his hand over Harry’s reddened skin, afraid to touch and cause Harry any pain.

Harry shrugs jerkily. “I- I still smelled like her.”

Louis can feel his eyes narrow the slightest bit without his permission. “Yeah? Smelled like an old folks’ home and cheap perfume?”

Harry shivers when Louis traces a finger down the middle of his chest. “Make it better, Lou,” he whispers.

Louis jerks his chin up. “How?”

Harry bites his lip, and Louis knows that look. His stomach swoops in anticipation when Harry tilts his head to the side and looks up at Louis through his eyelashes.

And then Harry’s phone beeps with a text.

Harry takes a deep, shuddery breath before stepping slowly away from Louis to pick the phone up and read the text. His hand shakes when he does. “Caroline’s staying here tomorrow night.”

“Is she,” Louis says. He can’t feel his fingers, but he knows they curl into a fist.

The phone beeps again. Louis doesn’t give Harry a chance to read the message, just takes his phone and tosses it away, and then reaches out and jerks Harry forward into a burning, crashing kiss, lips and tongues fitting together fiercely. “Fuck it,” he says wildly, throatily.

And Harry, pulling back from Louis’ lips for a moment, answers with a desperate, “Fuck me.”

Louis’ breath catches. “Haz—”

“Fuck me,” Harry begs, his eyes wide and earnest, his voice shaking with need. “Fuck me, Lou.
Make me forget anyone that isn’t you.”

And Louis stops for a moment, breathing in, breathing out, and stares at this boy. This boy who is lifted up and exalted in the papers as Britain’s greatest offering to the world one day, called a slag and a slut and an idiot teenager the next. This boy who has always been made up of the best parts of the world, but whose worth people didn’t actually see until he had a spotlight pointed at him. This boy who Louis loves more than anyone in the universe, who knows exactly what he wants and what he needs and relies on Louis to provide that for him.

He wants Louis, and who is Louis to say no? He’s learned his lesson about denying Harry what he wants, and he’s in far too deep to refuse Harry anything now.

Louis shoves Harry onto the bed and rolls him onto his back, hovering over him and kissing, kissing, kissing; kissing until their lips are puffy, bitten red and sensitive. Louis runs hands all over Harry’s body, across his chest and up his sides and down his thighs. Then he reaches over and rummages in the bedside table, pulling out a condom and their bottle of lube. “You’re sure?”

Harry nods fiercely, his eyes closed and his mouth open as Louis tugs at his curls. “Yes,” he gasps, “yes, Lou, I’m sure.”

Louis hums and bends his head, licking circles around Harry’s nipples before moving up to mark his sternum and under his collarbones. He knows Harry never needed rose petals and candlelight, that this is spurred on by that same need to be claimed that Louis gets after being forced out on a date with Eleanor, but he also still wants to make this the best night of Harry’s life if at all possible.

Louis’ first time was at age fifteen with a pretty girl from school, and it was messy and awkward and they stopped hanging out a week after it happened and never spoke again. Louis’ first time with a boy was at a house party when he was sixteen, and he didn’t know the guy’s name. They didn’t even get completely naked, just tugged each other’s trousers down for convenience, and the guy used a packet of lube he’d had stored in his wallet that looked like it had been there for years. This won’t be like that; Louis won’t do that to Harry.

The cinnamon vanilla lube is cold on Louis’ fingers as he pours it out, and Harry jolts when Louis lowers his finger to rub over his hole. This part isn’t new, Harry’s heavy breaths familiar as Louis pushes a first finger in up to the hilt. The first time Harry had let Louis do this it had been a religious experience, and each time since then has been like anointing himself in Harry once more. He knows when to spread his fingers to make Harry cry out, knows that when a red flush starts spreading from high on Harry’s cheeks to his chest that he can add a third. He reads Harry’s body better than any book by this point, all these months of touching and learning leading to an ease and an awareness Louis has never had with anyone else.

Louis rolls on the condom—biting his lip to ground himself, as even the perfunctory touch of his own hand is dangerously close to setting him off after watching Harry writhe underneath him—and lines himself up, thighs shaking as he aches to push in. He takes a second to look down at Harry spread below him, tousled curls and wide, wide eyes and ridiculous sultry lips, broad chest and tattooed bicep and wiry thighs. He’s moving like he’s still got Louis’ fingers inside him, little jumps of his hips and his feet sliding on the sheets. He’s needy and impatient, he’s perfection wrapped in Egyptian cotton and tattoo ink. Louis’ fallen angel, disheveled and wrecked. Louis uncurls Harry’s hands where he’s twisting them in the sheets and laces their fingers together.

And then he pushes in.

“Lou,” Harry breathes as Louis’ hips settle against his arse. He’s shaking, eyelashes fluttering as he tries to keep them open.
Louis can't speak. He's fucked people before, but it was never like this. He's never slid into a body that he knew so well. It's a powerful feeling, a surge so deep that Louis aches with it, and he whispers “I love you, I love you,” into Harry’s mouth over and over.

But even though this is new, though he's never pressed into Harry like he belonged there, he still instinctively knows exactly what Harry needs.

So he grinds forward, shifting his hips to push as deep as he can go, letting Harry revel in the stretch. Harry flings his head back and howls, scratching long stripes down Louis’ back. Then Louis pulls back, so slowly, and starts thrusting in a deep, pulsating rhythm.

“Take me so well, baby,” he breathes against Harry's chest, biting kisses against the soft skin. Harry moans, knotting his fingers through Louis’ hair. “Most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Never—oh—seen anyone perfect as you.”

Harry seems beyond words, whining and throwing his head from side to side. His thighs tighten around Louis’ hips every time he thrusts forward, his toes curling against Louis’ back. He cries out so fervently that Louis wonders if they’ll wake the whole manor, and then he realizes he doesn’t care: if Harry’s making noises that sound like they’re ripped from his throat, Louis is doing something right and he’ll never, never stop.

Louis’ back is starting to strain from the strength of his thrusts so he shifts, moving closer to Harry so that each rock forward is shorter and quicker. It’s the change of angle Harry needed, apparently, as he arches his back off the bed and cries out, “Louis, oh my f—Louis.”

The thudding heat of arousal in Louis’ heart and fingertips and lips burns even brighter, and he brands Harry with kisses, he leaves scorching bruises on his hips. And Louis knows, in that moment, that he’ll never be able to find someone that fits him as well as Harry does. That he’s Harry’s first, and that Harry will be his last.

Louis sobs at the thought; Harry is crafted from warm marble, a masterpiece with a soul, and Louis gets to have him for a little while.

“Close,” Harry chokes. “I’m so close, Lou.”

“Love you,” Louis pants. “Always will.” He kisses a bruise over Harry’s collarbones, just above his heart, bites and works the skin until it's black and blue under his teeth. He works a hand between them and pulls once, twice, and Harry comes, shouting and shivering, squeezing around Louis’ cock.

Harry leans forward and crashes their lips together, and Louis is torn between speeding up his thrusts to follow Harry into orgasm or slowing down and staying like this forever, just the two of them on ruined sheets in the home they’ve built together, joined as one for a fleeting moment.

But Harry takes the decision out of his hands, cupping Louis’ cheeks and murmuring, “Forever yours, Louis Tomlinson.”

Louis’ Marker tingles like a livewire and his hips jolt, and then the pressure in his veins explodes outwards like he’s the center of a bomb. He cries out, and a rush of heat and pleasure pounds through him as his limbs go weak.

Harry kisses him through it, and they tangle their sated, sweaty limbs into a never ending circle of Louis and Harry, and they don’t move except to smile giddily and whisper endearments to each other for hours and hours and hours.
It isn’t until much, much later, when Louis drags Harry out of bed for a cuddle on the sofa and old episodes of Friends, that Harry dares to venture onto the internet.

Louis watches over his shoulder as he dives in. His mentions are full of people screaming at him about Caroline and screaming at him about breaking Louis’ heart and screaming at him to fuck them, but he scrolls back a little further into his notifications and he starts finding the same picture retweeted over and over, everyone mentioning him begging for a reaction. Harry clicks on the picture.

Louis freezes—he’d totally forgot.

It’s a blurry photo of what looks like a Metro page, the bottom line the only one in focus.

*Thank you Styles for making me egg on toast every day. Boo, London.*

Harry twists around to look at Louis. “Was that you?” he asks.

Louis grins. “Maybe.”

Harry tackles Louis back into the cushions, kissing him soundly.

“I love you so much,” he murmurs against Louis’ lips.

“I know,” Louis laughs, biting at Harry’s bottom lip. “I love you too.”

8 December 2011

*Caroline* is coming over at seven o’clock, or so they're told. At four o’clock, Harry drags Louis into a cab and across London to Shangri-La, shaking Liam Sparkes’ hand as he says, “Here for another?”

Within two hours, Harry has *won’t stop ’till we surrender* curling between the star and the *Hi*, and the word *LOVE* inked over the bruise Louis had left underneath his collarbone.

They don’t answer the door when Caroline knocks to be let in, just call out that the door’s open. The boys are up in the cinema room and Louis is pretty sure Nick is somewhere on the lower floors, so he trusts Caroline can find some way to occupy herself. They can hear the creak of the big front door, the click of her heels muffled against the carpet. She doesn’t try to come upstairs and find them.

It’s probably a little childish.

Okay, it’s a lot childish, but Louis doesn’t care; he leaves the bedroom door wide open so that Caroline can hear when Louis lays Harry out across the sheets and opens him up, so she can hear every cry of “Oh, oh, Louis!” as he takes Harry apart, the gleam of his new tattoos shining in the lamplight as they fall into each other and forget everything that isn’t each other.

18 December 2011

It’s been weeks of rehearsals, months of planning, years of dreaming, but it’s here.
One Direction are going on tour.

Bags are packed, cars are called, and so the Up All Night tour really starts in front of the Princess Park manor, five sleepy boys helping the security team load up their bags into the boot of a car.

“Damn,” Preston breathes when he hoists one of Harry’s bags to his shoulder. “What did you pack, a library?”

“Those are my shoes!” Harry says, indignant. “Oh, and some books, yeah. And a few candles for the bus. Some extra shampoo in case they don’t have my kind in the nearest shop when I run out. All of Louis’ favorite films. Two bottles of water in case I get thirsty—”

Louis pats his hand over Harry’s mouth and leaves it there to keep him from talking.

Niall falls across the car’s backseat when it’s time to leave, already close to snoring. Liam rearranges him with soft hands so he and Zayn can slide in after him, curling up in the seats and untangling their headphones for the long drive. Louis stands next to the open car door as he waits for Harry to finish thanking everyone on the security team so he can get his goodbye kiss; Harry is taking a separate car to a location just outside Watford, where he’ll switch over to Caroline’s car so the paps can get pictures of her dropping him off (because he can't drive himself, what the hell how is no one stopping this?) and their tearful goodbye.

“If I cry, it’s because she’s wearing too much perfume and it stings my eyes,” he says when he finally gets back to Louis’ side, rolling his eyes at Jones’ pleading texts asking him to look at least a little emotional for the pictures. He leans down and kisses Louis softly, then waves at the other boys before sliding into his own car.

It sucks to be split up while traveling but they make it to Watford Colosseum at almost the same time, Harry grinning and waving at Caroline and the paps (and looking decidedly not that sad to be leaving Caroline behind) and joining the other four boys as they walk inside the building.

And then, PR tactics aside, it’s time to get ready for a show.

Louis knows these songs by heart, they’ve rehearsed the steps and choreographed stage switches dozens of times, but he still finds himself walking through it all in his head as he does his vocal warm-up. Everyone is a little twitchy, a little quiet, the sounds of Boyce Avenue warming up the crowd heard clearly through the walls as they wait backstage. They’ve got a little room to themselves and Niall is pacing around it, stepping over Zayn where he’s lying in the floor with his hands over his face and weaving past Liam when their paths cross. Harry is curled into a ball in Louis’ lap, though they’re both too jittery to be a comfortable cuddle.

A knock on the door startles them. Paul leans in, smiling. “About twenty minutes, lads. Need anything?”

Four of them shake their heads. Liam clears his throat. “Are there a lot of people?”

“Packed house,” Paul grins, and everyone loosens a little. They’d been told that they didn’t have anything to worry about, that the tickets had sold out in record time, there will be people in the audience; still, Louis kept waking with nightmares that they’d bounce onstage and find an empty arena staring back at them because no one actually likes them. “Girls screaming my bloody ear off when I walked through, and signs about as far as the eye can see.”

The air leaves the room again.

It’s been over a year since they stepped out into the alleyway behind Fountain Studios and found a
mob of fans bellowing their names at top volume. They could avoid acknowledging it on the show, they could avoid it on the *X Factor* tour, but they can’t avoid it anymore.

“It’s time to grow up and be a boy band,” Claudia had said earlier when Liam asked if signs were being confiscated at the door.

In other words: it’s time for you five publicly Unbonded boys to step out on stage in front of thousands of people who all want a piece of you, and read their names off of their signs like they have a chance of being your soulmate.

Their tour choreographer even built time into their concert for it, a full three minutes between *Everything About You* and *Use Somebody* where they’re meant to thank fans, talk about how grateful they are, and, most importantly, read fan signs.

Right.

But Louis still doesn’t have anything to worry about, except for disappointing a few people who he definitely won’t Bond to. The other boys have to read each sign knowing that any of them could be the one that causes a Marker, any sign out there could be the one held by their soulmate. They’ve all grown still, even Niall stopping his frantic pacing.

They stay like that until it’s time to go on, Louis wracked with indecision. Would it be better to play it off? To joke about it? To try and make them forget?

He still doesn’t have an answer when they’re herded to the stage, the crowd screaming as one as their opening video plays onscreen, shots of waves crashing on a beach and the van from the music video flying down an empty road. The walls nearly fall down from all the shouting when Harry appears in the video, his likes and dislikes on screen next to his face (likes: Milky Way crispy rolls and girls, dislikes: white cars and beetroot)(Louis thinks sometimes their PR team forgets they aren’t actually running a dating service). Louis is next on the video (likes: *Grease* and parties, dislikes: baked beans and cheesy chat-up lines) but he ignores the screams and his own face blown up on the screen to yank his boys into a huddle just out of the view of the crowd.

“I’ll read the signs tonight,” he says, and three faces fell into relief. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Louis, no,” Harry frowns. “What if you Bond?”

“I won’t,” Louis shrugs, trying to keep it light. “The odds are astronomical that any of our soulmates are here. It won’t happen.”

“No,” Harry says stubbornly, crossing his arms.

“Hazza, someone has to do it,” Louis says desperately, knowing they’re running out of time now that Niall’s on screen (likes: Nandos and playing guitar, dislikes: *The Only Way is Essex*). “Just let me this time. We’ll sort out something else tomorrow, just let me do this tonight.”

Harry frowns viciously and now it’s Liam on the video (likes: singing and surfing, dislikes: spoons and posh food). Zayn, Niall, and Liam are watching like nervous parents at a tennis match but don’t offer to step in, which is how Louis knows they’re actually terrified of the signs waiting for them. Zayn’s image is on screen now (likes: drawing and tour buses, dislikes: burps and y-fronts), and they don’t have any more time to waste.

Louis bounces on his toes and curls his hands in Harry’s shirt, yanking him into a short kiss. The screams multiply out in the audience at the five second countdown on screen and Louis pulls back. “Let me do this,” he says.
Harry bites his lip, looking anxious. “Okay. Just tonight.”

They make it out to their spots on stage just milliseconds before *Na Na Na* starts and they’re jumping into action.

There’s something electric about being on their own tour. It isn’t like the last one, where all the girls were there to see them but also Aiden and Matt and Paije and the older teenagers were there for Cher and Katie and the adults were there for Rebecca and Mary. This crowd screams for *them*, this audience is *theirs*.

It’s even easy to ignore the mass amounts of signs being waved to get their attention, giant poster boards with girls’ names painted brightly across them in hopes that their names will be chosen out of the hundreds around them. It’s easy to pretend the shrieking girls are here solely for the music when they sing along to his lines in *One Thing*, when they roar enthusiastically every time one of the boys waves or dances or blows kisses. And maybe some of them are here for the music; there are plenty of people in the crowd not holding signs up for them. And even for the ones that do want to be Bonded to one of the band members so desperately, can Louis really blame them? He can’t imagine a life better than the one he has with Harry, and he can’t fault anyone who would want something similar with one of their favorite musicians. He can live with the screaming and the crying because he knows the fans are just passionate, and he’d never want to discourage that.

Louis has a bit of a moment looking over the swaying crowd halfway through the show, their phones in the air and their hands aloft, screaming along as he belts out lines from a song that was written about his actual relationship by *Ed fucking Sheeran*, a song on his band’s album that went to number one in multiple countries.

This is his life now. Louis is officially a popstar.

Louis reads the fan signs perfunctorily when they get to that segment of the concert. Liam reads one as well, but he shudders a little and his smile goes awkwardly phony and he shuffles off to drink a whole bottle of water instead of continuing. The fans don’t notice his clumsy attempt, the wave of noise crashing louder as they realize what Louis is doing when he calls out, “Thanks for coming, Samantha Crowe! Nice to see you, Katherine Wilson!”

The screams are deafening, and Louis rocks back on his heels for a moment before continuing.

*My soulmate is right over there!* he wants to shout. *I'm his, and he's mine for now. You can’t have either of us!* But he doesn’t.

He powers through. It’s easy to shrug off all the broken hearts he knows he caused when he walks past Harry and he gets a hand trailing up his arm, reminding him who he really belongs to.

**23 December 2011**

The last show of December is in Manchester, a rousing crowd that welcomes Harry home with adoring, open arms. He drinks it in, standing center stage with his arms flung outward, like he’s absorbing the energy of the screams into himself.

And then he turns it all on Louis, all that focus, all that love. “*This*… this venue is quite special to
me, I’ve been to quite a few gigs here before. And, I remember, about three years ago I stood just about there,” he says, pointing out a spot in the crowd like he can see the imprints from his shoes, “to watch The Script in here. And it turned out,” he says, gesturing to Louis, “that Louis was at the same gig!”

Fate, destiny, flashing lights; it’s all a bit of a blur in Louis’ mind when he thinks too hard about it. That destiny is really trying to make its presence known. The crowd erupts.

Then Harry reminds everyone it’s almost Louis’ birthday, and the screams go deafening.

Louis groans when an arena full of people call him Boo Bear, but it’s almost worth it for the radiant happiness on Harry’s face when he plays along. Louis thanks them for the tweets and the **Twitter trends** they’d started for him (which he was planning to put to use as soon as the concert was over) and smacks **Harry** on the arse in retaliation as soon as he’s near enough.

They’re less than a week in, and Louis is already sure he never wants to do anything else for the rest of his life. He’d live on that tour bus with the tiny, cramped bunks and the miniscule toilet and the lounge sofas that smell like sweaty boy because that’s where Niall and Liam like to collapse after shows. He’d let the Princess Park flat sit cold and empty if he could keep rolling from city to city with his favorite people. He never wants for entertainment or a willing prank partner, the security team and Lou and Caroline and the backing band all like extended family now, rolling their eyes fondly when Louis runs past them in the venue hallways screaming at the top of his lungs.

Even the fan signs aren’t that bad, but Louis can’t exactly say that to anyone. He’s the one who is so outspokenly against Bonding that he dragged Harry away from wanting it as well, he can’t just turn around and say that it doesn’t really bother him any more. So he protests when Liam decides they all need to read the signs during the shows—insisting Louis can’t be expected to carry the burden on his own—but his perfectly valid excuse for keeping the other four from potentially Bonding in the middle of a concert can’t be used.

(He can’t even imagine how that conversation would go. *Oh, right, just let me handle the signs, lads. I can’t Bond again, my soulmate is right here! And I’ve known he was it since an hour after we met. Yeah, no.*)

So Louis lets Liam decide that they’ll all read at least one sign per concert so it isn’t obvious to the crowds that they don’t really want to do it, and he loves the boys a lot for agreeing, despite their uneasiness and the fact that it’s totally unnecessary. (And sometimes, because it’s still so scary for them, they read the signs wrong on purpose, or pretend to get confused and read the first name from one sign and the last name from another. Sometimes Zayn just makes up names and pretends he’s reading them from somewhere out in the audience, and no one ever knows. They try and do as little as possible, because with each new sign read they’re letting another fan know that she’s just another face in the crowd rather than a soulmate that’s found its match.)

Louis spends the night at Harry’s family’s house after the concert in Manchester and has birthday breakfast with Anne and Robin and Gemma while Harry plays footsie with him under the table. Harry sends him off to Doncaster with a healthy snog and a promise for more when they get back to the flat after Louis returns from France.

Louis hates that he has to spend another Christmas away from Harry, and what’s even worse is what will follow, but Louis pushes it out of his head. He can worry about impromptu holidays with his not-quite girlfriend later. Right now, he’s on a mission: Louis has the driver (because that’s a thing he has, now) stop at Stan’s before rolling onward to his waiting family.

“Lou!” Stan says, pulling Louis in for a hug when he answers the door. “Happy birthday, mate!”
“Thanks,” Louis grins. “Hey, what are you doing for New Year’s Eve?”

Stan’s smile grows wide.

“I think you’re about to let me know.”

28 December 2011

Louis doesn’t like to compare Harry and Eleanor. There’s just no reason to; he loved Harry from just about the moment he set eyes on him, and his first meeting with Eleanor was tainted by a room full of Modest employees watching their every move. Even taking the soulmate side of things out of the equation, Harry is still Louis’ favorite person in the world. Eleanor, by default of what she represents, is most definitely not.

So, really, he shouldn’t compare his French vacation with Harry to his French vacation with Eleanor. Nothing good will come of it.

God, Louis wishes it was Harry here with him, sequestered away in a Parisian hotel. They could cuddle in bed and sleep too much and eat too much and give and receive far, far too many blowjobs. Yet all the wishing in the world won’t make it so; Harry is in Holmes Chapel, Eleanor is here in France, and Louis is trying to be civil.

Okay. Louis is trying not to be downright mean, at least.

Louis and Eleanor are going to Disneyland Paris tomorrow before heading back to England, but until then it’s uncomfortably quiet in their tastefully decorated room, sleek furnishings and contemporary electronics from wall to wall. (He misses that cozy, shabby-chic apartment where they’d stayed in Courchevel. He misses watching sunsets over the mountains before dancing the night away in clubs and collapsing into bed heavy with alcohol and happiness. He misses Harry.)

Louis sighs loudly, unlocking his phone and starting up a tenth game of Draw Something with Niall. His laptop is open in front of him, logged into Skype, but Harry’s busy with his family and hasn’t been able to log on yet.

Louis sighs again.

Eleanor, who’s reading from her Kindle on a sofa across the room, snaps the front of the case shut and lays it down on a nearby table. She stands and crosses the room in a few long strides, closing Louis’ laptop and ignoring his affronted noise as she settles into the chair next to him.

“Let’s talk about this,” she says, and it’s the most assertive tone Louis’ ever heard from her. He sits up a little straighter out of instinct.

“Talk about what?”

“This,” she says again, then rolls her eyes when he still looks confused. “We’re in a three year contract, Louis. If you can’t stand to be in the same room as me for one weekend, how are you going to get through three whole years?”

Louis shrugs, sullen. He doesn’t like to think about that contract, sort of like how he doesn’t like to think about Harry’s with Caroline. Like if he pretends they don’t exist, they’ll just disappear.

Eleanor frowns, a furrow forming between her perfectly arched brows. Then she leans back, pulling
one of her feet up into the seat like she’s getting comfortable. “All my life, I wanted to be a model,” she says. “Everyone always told me that it was a bad idea, that I was too smart for that. That I could do something with my life. But that had nothing to do with it, you know? It was just the only thing that I was really passionate about. Sure, I could be a doctor or a lawyer and be unhappy the rest of my life, or I could start a style blog and someday sit front row at Fashion Week and be deliriously happy. It seemed like an obvious choice to me.”

She brushes her hair off of her face with a light flick, a self-deprecating smile unfurling slowly.

“But fashion is about who you know. There aren’t any more Cinderella stories in the industry—you’re either famous or you’re rich enough that you don’t have to be. I’m neither of those, obviously. I have to save up for months to buy brand name shoes or bags or jackets, and by the time I do they’re out of season.” She looks up at Louis, meeting his eyes. “This is the only shot I have to get name recognition without buying my way in. Every time my picture is taken with you as we leave clubs or high-end hotels I get a little closer to my dream. I’m not doing this to hurt you, I’m doing this for me.”

“I know you aren’t trying to hurt me,” Louis says quietly. “But it does still hurt. Every time another article comes out about how madly in love with you I am, Harry and I both crack a little more.”

“You’re famous, babe,” Eleanor says. “There will always be articles. When you and Harry have been together for a decade and you’ve got dozens of children and that magical life together that you want so badly, there will still be articles claiming you look tired or unhappy or that Harry’s cheating or that your kids hate you. It’s just how entertainment works. You give up a lot to gain a lot.”

Louis rubs his hands over his eyes. “I know. And I know it’s a small price to pay for what I get to do. It’s just hard to remember that out of context.”

“Here’s what I know,” Eleanor says easily. “You’re a part of one of the biggest bands in the country right now, and you’re probably going to break into America just as easily. You have four amazing best friends you get to live with in a posh manor paid for by Simon Cowell. And the love of your life gave up everything he ever wanted to be with you.” She nudges Louis’ knee with her toe. “Is it really so bad to hang out with me in exchange for all that?”

Louis cracks a grin. “I guess not.” He nudges her back. “How’d you get roped into this, anyway?”

“I’ve got some connections,” Eleanor says archly, then quirks her lips up in a half-smile. “And by that, I mean I went to school with Richard Griffiths’ son. Now, come take a look at this purse I found and tell your PR team it’s what I want from you for Valentine’s Day.”

Things still aren’t ideal, and Louis still wishes it was Harry with him as he takes in the sight of fireworks over Cinderella’s castle, but things are better. With each new day, it’s a little less like being locked in a cage.

31 December 2011

Louis hears the phrase “push-pull” in the context of his own relationships (both fake and real) from Niall, of all people.

They were in the cinema room at the flat after Louis had returned from France (actually, after he returned to London from Holmes Chapel, where he’d gone right after returning to England to cheer Harry on for his driver’s test). It was a pretty typical afternoon, popcorn throwing contests and
watching Derby on the projector screen while knocking out a six pack, when Louis brought up the New Year’s Eve party he and Harry were planning and how easily the PR team had accepted it when he’d told them about it. Niall had shrugged like that was obvious and said, “Yeah, well, you just got back from a holiday with your girlfriend and according to the papers Harry’s spending every other night at Caroline’s, so the party will be your push.”

Louis frowned. “My what?”

Niall crammed a handful of popcorn in his mouth and fist-pumped as Derby's keeper made a save onscreen before answering, “Your push.” At Louis’ bemused shrug, Niall continued. “You know, like push and pull. Management pulls you and Harry further into your public relationships with fake dates and tweets, and then let you push back by doing what you want to do every once in a while. Push-pull.”

“But why would they let us push at all?” Louis had asked, skeptical. “They sort of own us.”

“If they don’t let you push and do your own thing,” Niall explained easily, “you’d do it anyway and cause all sorts of problems. Like Leeds. Or moving in together. Or literally any interview where you two can’t keep your damn eyes off each other.”

Derby was making another run the length of the pitch and so Niall turned his attention to the screen while Louis took a long swig of his Corona and sat back, lips pursed a little in thought.

Everything about him and Harry, once they really decided they were in it for the long haul and they were completely committed to making it work, had been easy. Anything holding them back before Louis fled to Donny and Harry followed him there to bring him back home, all of that was Louis’ fear of losing Harry and Harry’s fear of losing Louis. All their pining and wishing was based on the assumption from both of them that things were one-sided, or at least that the other didn’t feel as strongly. But now that that’s all been proven false, now that they’re on the same page, everything has fallen into place more easily than Louis would have ever thought possible.

But now, knowing this, something that Niall had seen so easily but that Louis had missed because he had assumed that he and Harry had the upper hand over management, not that management was playing them to get them to behave… it makes Louis’ gut clench. He doesn’t like the thought of Hackford and Jones and Magee and Griffiths and Simon Cowell himself looking over Louis’ shoulder, watching his every move, keeping track of his happiness and his willingness to do stunts and judging when they should let him do something he wants just to keep him complacent. Because Niall’s right—if management had said no to the New Year’s Eve party, they would have thrown it anyway. The party buses from Donny bringing all of Louis’ friends were paid for, there’s a stack of booze bottles and mixers that cost them hundreds of pounds and the help of their whole security team to carry up to the bar in the cinema room, and Ed and Nick and James Corden and Eleanor and all of Liam and Niall and Zayn’s friends are planning to come, not to mention everyone Harry and Louis invited themselves.

It’s like thinking you’re smashing a test and then being told the teacher is counting all your answers correct even when they aren’t just to make you feel successful.

Louis doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like it one bit.

But that’s a worry for another time, he decides, ending his reminiscence and staring out over the raging party unfolding in front of him.

It shouldn’t be possible to fill a five-story flat, but he and Harry have done it.
A DJ on the fourth floor spins Rihanna remixes in between songs about dirty sex by some band from Manchester called 'The 1975' that Harry’s fallen in love with. A mass of people are grinding together to the music in front of the decks, a crowd of raised arms holding clear plastic cups and sweaty bodies sliding against each other. Niall’s brought his guitar (because of course he has) and is picking along with the DJ on a sofa, a blonde island in the middle of a crowd of adoring girls and jealous boys who all hang on his every word. Liam, who is very worried on Harry and Louis’ behalf that their things will be stolen but who also promised he’d let loose this one time, is carrying his own plastic cup and sipping from it as he sort-of follows Harry from room to room (Louis takes his cup and tries his drink when he passes; when it doesn’t burn his throat on the way down he pours half of it out and replaces it with whiskey, then pats Liam on the bum and tells him he expects it to be empty when he sees him again. It is, and to Louis’ delight that means that Liam is dead center in the middle of the dance floor, doing his signature little step-shuffle and nearly elbowing a cackling James Corden in the face). Zayn has claimed a spot in the master bedroom, talking to a group of his friends and Liam (sweaty and red-cheeked after his dancing) in between picture after picture with different groups of girls. When Louis swoops through to make sure no one has set fire to anything they shouldn’t, he finds an actual line forming like Zayn’s an attraction at an amusement park, so Louis scatters the girls with promises that he saw Liam’s friend Andy taking his top off up on a different floor. Zayn thanks Louis with a wink and Louis says it’s no problem with a sloppy kiss to Zayn’s cheek.

Kate from Sugarscape is here as well, typing notes into her phone about Louis and Harry’s matching bathrobes and their framed pictures of themselves at different events, which she promises to write a glowingly mushy story about as soon as she’s back at the office and as soon as her eventual hangover subsides. Nick drops by a little before eleven, bestowing cheek kisses and taking pictures but swanning off again after about a half hour because “places to be, darlings, people to please, pictures to Instagram. I’ll be by tomorrow if I can crawl my way out of bed.” Ed floats around like a red-faced fairy godfather, a bottle of gin tucked under his arm which he generously uses to top off anyone’s drinks, whether they want it or not. Louis sees Eleanor a couple of times; her friends are taking pictures of everything from the ornaments on Harry and Louis’ downstairs bedroom doors to their personalized stuffed animals that Anne had given them when they moved in, and they grab Louis and snap photos with him every time he walks by. He nods at Eleanor when this happens but they don’t take a picture together, because the last thing he wants is her attention-seeking friends going on Twitter and claiming that this was a couple’s party thrown by him and Eleanor instead of him and Harry.

Speaking of, the countdown to midnight is playing loudly on the screen up in the cinema room, and the curly-headed wonderboy is nowhere to be found. Louis and Harry haven’t been able to spend tons of time together since the first bus from Donny arrived and fifty of Louis’ loud, massively Yorkshire friends spilled out and immediately started pouring themselves healthy glasses full of vodka. Harry is glowing every time Louis does see him, though; he’s sort of perfect in the role of host, a social butterfly who doesn’t mind taking dozens of pictures with Louis’ starstruck friends and doesn’t even panic when someone slops a drink down the front of his nice blue shirt. He just laughs it off and changes into one of his soft flannels, unbuttoned low on his chest to show his necklaces and his cleavage.

Louis had seen him in passing after the wardrobe change and tried to pull him into a bathroom for a snog, but then Nizam and Oli had appeared, pulling on Louis’ arm and dragging him away before Louis could even get his lips on his boyfriend.

Louis should find him now. It’s been far too long since he’s seen him, and he misses him.

Yeah, good plan, Tommo.
He makes his wobbly way to the staircase, his mostly-empty plastic cup in hand, and maneuvers his way around several deeply kissing couples (is that Niall? Well done, lad) as he stumbles his way into the cinema room. There he finds Harry, his arm around Stan as they toast and take shots, Harry’s long throat working as he swallows. Louis gulps as well, though for an entirely different reason.

“Boo!” Stan says, tugging Louis in closer with a hand fisted in his shirt. He’s grinning goofily, his cheeks splotchy red. “I—hic—’m so excited ‘re heeeere.”

“’lo Stanley,” Louis smiles, patting his cheek. “Go ‘way now, ’m gonna make out with Hazza.”

“Tha’ s’fuckin’ adorable,” Stan says without a hint of sarcasm, wandering away and shouting random numbers along with the countdown to midnight that is just starting on the screen.

“Gonna kiss me?” Harry slurs brightly, leaning down to nuzzle his nose against Louis’ cheek. “Gonna be my New Year’s resl- resm- resolution?”

“Don’ think that’s th’ right word,” Louis murmurs against his lips, wrapping his arms around Harry’s shoulders and rising up on tiptoe. The countdown is at ten (except Stan, who's at eighty-four, sixty-two, seven…).

“Babes,” says a low voice next to them. Louis leans back a little and they turn to find Zayn there next to them, his eyes a little red but otherwise looking flawless as ever. “Not here, yeah?”

Louis leans back a little more, wobbling slightly, to find most of the room not-so-discreetly watching them, some with their phones even raised to catch anything that might happen on camera. Louis flushes a little, waves, then runs unsteadily from the room, tugging Harry along behind him. They're giggling maniacally as they dodge around swaying couples all attached at the lips as the clock strikes midnight, 2012 dawning in front of them.

The lowest floor is mostly empty, nearly everyone having migrated up to the top floors following the music and loud voices. Someone (or a few someones) have sequestered themselves in Louis' bedroom judging by the noises through the door, but Harry's room is empty, so they rush inside. Harry clicks the lock and falls across the bed he rarely uses anymore, pulling Louis with him.

“Happy new year, Lou,” he whispers.

“Happy new year, love,” Louis answers, crashing their lips together. Harry follows him as Louis rolls them over, fitting himself underneath Harry and reaching up to tangle his hands in his hair. Harry moans, rolling their hips together.

Louis moves a hand down and rubs over Harry's cock through his jeans, drawing a gasp out of him. He lowers the zipper and slides his hand inside Harry's pants, pulling him to full hardness with a few strokes. Harry lets his head drop, his thighs hitching every time Louis rubs his thumb over the head.

“It doesn't take long—a few long, smooth strokes have Louis’ toes curling, and the alcohol in his blood fizzes and flickers like little burst of electricity. He tangles his legs behind Harry's back and pulls him into a biting kiss as he comes, gasping and crying out into Harry's mouth. Harry follows after a few seconds, catching the come in his hand to keep from staining their clothes. He cleans himself off with a tissue from the bedside table and wraps himself around Louis, who's feeling loose-limbed and boneless.
“Gotta go back to th' party,” Harry mumbles into Louis’ hot skin. “Gotta be good co-hosts.”

“We’ve been good co-hosts all night, they can mind themselves,” Louis says, sated and sleepy now that he’s stopped moving for a moment. “Stay with me f’r a minute.”

That’s all it takes; Harry melts back into Louis, resting their foreheads together. “Mmkay,” he murmurs easily.

Louis breathes in the smell of cinnamon candles and coconut shampoo, resting his lips against Harry’s cheek. “You called me your resolution earlier,” Louis giggles quietly.

Harry hums. “You sort’f are,” he says. “Everything I wan’ to happen this year involves you.”

Louis traces Harry’s eyebrows, the edge of his jaw. “Like what?”

“I wan’…” Harry trails off, his eyes slitting almost all the way shut and smiling softly, “I want a number one in America. I want us to make enough money to buy my mum the car she’s always wanted and pay off Gem’s school fees. I want to kiss you in every city we play a show in.” Louis hitches a breath, wiggling closer. Harry’s nudges their noses together. “I want to wake up to your face everyday. Those ‘re my resolutions.”

Louis breathes out slowly, his eyes watering a little. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Harry lays his palms on Louis’ cheeks. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to anyone.”

It takes a long time for the co-hosts to return to the party. When they do, it’s to find that things have spiraled into debauchery rapidly since they last walked through their flat; the bacon sandwiches that were passed around have been completely demolished, some lying half-eaten in the corners of the rooms or crumbled across unused furniture. The dancing mass in front of the DJ has only grown, the floor shaking under dozens of jumping and stomping feet. Stan and Niall are leading a sing-along to Auld Lang Syne in the cinema room even though neither knows the words. That group cheers when Harry and Louis re-enter, drunkenly applauding the people who have made this night possible.

Luckily, since the alcohol supply has been severely depleted, no one is sober enough to notice that Harry’s shirt has suspicious white stains at the bottom and Louis’ hair has clear furrow running through it matching Harry’s fingers.

Well, almost no one noticed.

“You two’ve been kissin’,” Liam grins dopily, wagging his finger at the two of them. He’s leaning almost all of his weight on Zayn, who still looks supremely unruffled but also extremely amused at the situation. Liam’s head lurches as he follows the path of his own finger in the air. “I c’n tell, ‘cause ‘m smart,” he elaborates, tapping his temple and then poking himself in the eye with a soft, confused, “Ow.”

“Think it’s bedtime for Liam,” Harry says, patting Liam’s cheek.

“No, no,” Liam says, shaking his head. He reaches out and taps Harry’s chin. “Shh. Wanna tell —hic—you th’ I’m so happy f’r you,” he says, his lower lip wobbling suddenly. “Y’re goin’ through really hard stuff, an’ I, an’ I’m just so happy you’re t’gether.”
“Aw, Li,” Louis says, wrapping his arm around Liam as best he can without dislodging him from Zayn’s support. “We love you a whole lot.”

“You c’n kiss each ‘ther whenever you want,” Liam says tearfully, petting Louis’ face. “I won’ even say it’s gross.”

“Thank you,” Harry says, absolutely sincere, and he and Louis both swoop in to kiss Liam’s cheeks before Zayn leads him away. Liam tries to reach out and take someone’s fedora as they pass and Zayn gently pins his hand to his side so he can’t, ignoring Liam’s grabby hands as he tries to pull away.

At five hours into the new year, Harry and Louis find themselves in the middle of the wreckage that once was their flat. People are passed out on the windowsills, in doorways, behind sofas. There’s a slice of bacon hanging from the cinema room chandelier. The DJ’s music has been lowered to a dull thump of bass as he starts to pack up his set, and the cheering crowds in Times Square that are larger-than-life up on the screen are muted, their joy silent.

Louis can see Harry contemplating whether they should just go ahead and start cleaning, but Louis isn’t having it. He grabs Harry’s hand, pokes Niall in the forehead until he wakes up, and the three of them stagger out of the flat and down the hallway to Zayn’s place. Niall collapses onto the sofa as soon as he crosses the threshold, and Harry and Louis sprawl across the guest bed.

Harry’s asleep almost the second his back hits the mattress. Louis is quick to follow, and his last thought is that they’re going to have to find a way to top this somehow next year, and he’s looking forward to the challenge.

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“No, see, it’s like a management technique,” Louis explains, gesturing abruptly and nearly elbowing Harry in the gut. “Or… yeah. Something like that. I don’t know, it just made so much sense when Niall said it!”

“I think I get it,” Harry says to put him at ease, even though he’s really not sure he does. “So, like, we’re allowed to do good things like interacting with each other in public and having dates or whatever because they pull us back by making us date Caroline and Eleanor. Right?”

Louis’ brow furrows in thought. ‘Yeah. I think that’s it. I dunno, honestly, Niall’s the mastermind here. All I know is that he said things about pushing and pulling and those things made sense.”

“Were you drinking at the time?” Harry asks, and he wriggles under Louis’ bum as Louis pinches his hips.

“Niall has good ideas sometimes!” Louis defends loudly, but then Niall chooses that moment to walk into the room carrying what looks like a handful of Skittles squished between two cookies.

“It’s a Skittle Sandwich,” Niall informs them, even though literally no one asked. Louis throws a water bottle at him for ruining all his credibility with one fell swoop.

“Even if your idea comes from an unreliable source,” Harry says loftily, though he can’t stop his
grin, “I get what you’re saying. Like, since we had the party at the flat and it was so public, you think they’ll hit us with more stunts soon to make us seem straight and taken.”

“Exactly,” Louis says. He shifts a little, getting comfortable where he’s resting on Harry’s thighs. “They can’t go too long without our names in the papers, and a stunt with the girlfriends is the best way to draw attention.”

“I know you’re probably right,” Harry says, rubbing his thumb over the back of Louis’ hand, “but I really hope you’re wrong.”

He’s not wrong. A PR intern interrupts their conversation a few minutes later to snap a picture of them to tweet on the official account.

When the spots clear from Harry's eyes from the camera flash, Claudia is looming over them. Louis jumps in surprise, making Harry wheeze.

“Isn’t this cozy?” she taunts. “I do hate to break it up.”

“Do you, though?” Louis asks.

Claudia lifts a corner of her mouth in a bad imitation of a smile. “I really do. But we need one of Harry’s bracelets, and we can’t find it.”

“Why?” Harry asks automatically, covering the stack of bracelets on one wrist with his other hand.

“You were photographed wearing a Links of London bracelet a few days ago, and so we’re giving it to Caroline for her to be papped in as well.”

“You think a thirty year old would be sharing a jewelry box with her seventeen year old boyfriend,” Louis says flatly. “That might be more unbelievable than her dating him in the first place.”

“Thirty-two year old,” Harry corrects. “Let’s make sure we get the proper ages, here.”
“You’re so right, love,” Louis allows, nodding. “The thirty-two year old with the boyfriend born when she was a teenager, you think she’d be stealing his things and wearing them? It’s not enough for her to date someone underage, she has to act like it too?”

Claudia rolls her eyes. “It’s the best way to establish that they are still dating despite the distance.”

“And despite the fact it’s not real,” Harry adds.

“Just tell me where the bracelet is,” Claudia says, and it looks like she’s getting a headache just from talking to them. Good.

Harry hesitates a moment; his Links bracelet is literally the only one on his arm that wasn’t handmade or bought for less than five pounds in random thrift stores. He’d seen it while out shopping with Nick one day, and when he’d hesitated over the price tag Nick had nudged him and raised his eyebrows. “Live a little, eh, popstar?” he said, and that was all the encouragement Harry needed.

And now he has to let that good memory be ruined when Caroline wraps the bracelet around her own wrist.

Harry sighs and goes to untie it, knowing all the arguing in the world won’t keep it out of Claudia’s hands. Louis helps him untangle it, then he hands it off to Claudia without comment.

“Was that so hard?” she asks disdainfully.

Harry feels Louis stiffen. “Was it hard for you to take the stick out of your arse long enough to walk over here?” he shoots.

“Just leave it, Lou,” Harry says tiredly, patting his thigh. “They’d steal it while I wasn’t looking if they needed to.” Or they’d just bungle things again, like when they gave Caroline a scarf to wear that was Harry’s, only for the fans to point out later that it was actually Niall’s.

“You’ll get it back later,” Claudia says. “We’ll give it to Caroline when she comes to the show tonight, then once she’s papped in it we’ll give it back.”

“She’s coming to the show?” Harry asks, actually shocked. Louis looks like he agrees; he hates Caroline to her core for what she’s agreed to do, but Harry knows even he wouldn’t throw her in a room full of people who actively despise her and who are willing to defend the boys of One Direction until the day they die. Not a single fan is happy with the Caroline situation—especially since a lot of them think that it caused Harry and Louis to break up, and the ones who don’t believe that are the ones who want Harry for themselves and think Caroline is in their way—and Harry would bet money that the moment Caroline is spotted, the crowd will make its displeasure known.

“She’ll be in a box so the crowd can see her,” Claudia says proudly, like it’s a brilliant idea.

Harry and Louis exchange a quick look, one that holds an entire conversation. Do they let management know that this is a huge misstep, that things can only go badly? Or do they let it play out, and risk facing the wrath of the PR team if (and when) it all goes wrong?

Harry twitches a tiny shrug, Louis blinks in answer, and they both stay silent, letting Claudia walk away without letting her know what a shitshow she and the rest of their management are about to unleash.
Harry's way of coping with the fan signs is to pointedly ignore them. He'll interact with the people holding the signs, ask them questions, joke and wink and blow kisses. But he absolutely will not read them, no matter how exuberantly they wave them in his direction.

He just can’t. He’s not ready yet. He’s not ready to face the reality of reading a sign and hearing the scream or the gasp that means he’s found his soulmate, he’s not ready to find his biological other half when it means he would lose his heart’s other half.

But then Harry reads one sign and doubles over in laughter, a loud squawk that immediately draws Louis’ attention and makes him smile without even knowing the joke. Harry moves to his side immediately, trying to point out the specific sign in the crowd of neon and glittered posters.

“What?” Louis asks, pulling out an in-ear to hear Harry better. Harry leans closer, his lips against Louis’ ear.

“Look at that sign,” Harry repeats, pointing out over the roaring audience. “The yellow one, red letters.”

Louis’ eyes narrow against the glare of the spotlights as he scans the crowd. Harry watches his eyes flickering over all the options, and can see the moment his eyes land on the one Harry saw.

“FLACK OFF, CAROLINE,” he reads, absolutely delighted. He covers his giggle with the inside of his wrist, eyes squinting in glee. “I know we’re not the type of band that can invite girls backstage, but I really wish we could meet her.”

They both wave, and the girl holding the sign grins widely and waves back. Harry knows that’s about the extent of what they can do, but he gets the feeling that the girl knows they agree.

Caroline, up in her box with a low-lit spotlight pointed at her, doesn’t look as happy. But, then again, the fans had started a chant between Boyce Avenue’s set and the start of One Direction’s, a rousing chorus of we hate Car-o-line (clap clap clap-clap-clap). So at least they aren’t doing that anymore.

Maybe, Harry thinks derisively, she shouldn’t have traded her soul for a few articles in trashy papers. Then she wouldn’t have the problem of a whole nation’s population of teenage girls hating her guts.

Oh well. Too late.

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All Louis knows is, when the boys disappear backstage for their first costume change Harry catches Louis around the waist and kisses him hard, biting at his lip and clutching his hands in Louis’ shirt. Paul claps loudly to break them apart and Harry stumbles back, wiping his mouth and grinning lasciviously as Louis stares at him in bewilderment. Paul shoves them out on stage again before Louis can reciprocate or sort himself out, his fingers tingling from a rush of sudden arousal.

And it’s like that one stolen kiss unleashes a flood. Louis takes a break to drink from his water bottle, and Harry walks straight up to him and steals it, wrapping his lips around the bottle top and taking long gulps, his eyes never leaving Louis’. He throws his feet into Louis’ lap when they sit on the sofa that is dragged out in the middle of the show and nudges pointedly at Louis’ dick, using the toe of his shoe to stroke up and down over Louis’ zipper.

During *Save You Tonight*, as he and Harry pass each other at the back of the stage, Harry reaches for his hand. Louis lets him (will always let him, if Harry reaches Louis will always reach back) and their hands connect, a quick moment of *trailing fingers* before they detach and continue on to their marked spots on stage.

And that’s fine. That’s relatively normal; he and Harry have always been affectionate on stage, have always played between solos and costume changes. But Louis is a little worked up, to say the least. He jumps when Harry looks his way, his blood thudding when Harry licks his lips. He spends all of *What Makes You Beautiful* watching Harry move.

Then they perform *I Want*, and that last, tiny fragment of self-control Louis had been clinging to is shattered.

Something black and silver is hurled toward the stage. Louis is mid-solo and can’t look over to watch, but he sees Harry bend down and pick it up from the corner of his eye.

And then, disregarding the end of the show and the confetti falling from the ceiling, ignoring the other boys harmonizing and the crowd screaming, Harry walks right up to Louis and hands him a pair of *fuzzy black handcuffs*.

Louis means to drop his mic down to his side, to turn away so the watching audience can’t see the way his eyebrows raise, the way his throat shudders as he swallows hard. He means to do that. He doesn’t.

So the whole crowd sees when a grin spreads uncontrollable across Louis’ face and he cocks his head to the side. And they all see when he licks his lips and says, “Later.”

And, in that moment, Louis forgets about his girlfriend and Harry’s girlfriend and those carefully crafted narratives they aren’t supposed to destroy. All he knows is Harry, Harry, Harry, and the way his heart thumps like a drum when he smiles back.

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26 January 2012

The last concert of the Up All Night tour’s European leg is over. Confetti litters the floor like paper snow, coating posters left behind by fans, empty cups and nacho trays, abandoned chairs. The Waterfront Hall staff and the band’s stage crew work quickly and quietly to dismantle the drum set, the microphones, the campfire setup.

Five boys sit on the stage, looking out over where a mass of their fans had stood and danced to their music not an hour before. Their limbs are achy, their hair matted with sweat, heads heavy with
sleepless nights and long hours. They can’t stop grinning.

Paul sticks his head out from backstage, calling, “Few more minutes, lads, then we’ll be ready to go.” Niall shoots him a thumbs up, then Paul disappears again. Louis sighs, stretches, points his toes, and lays his head on Liam’s shoulder.

There was a feeling in the air at the end of the X Factor, and then again at the end of the X Factor tour, that cool burn of nostalgia and fear for times ahead. It’s absent tonight; Louis doesn’t feel that heart-pounding panic of what now? He knows what’s next, he knows where he’s going and who he’s going with.

He slides his hand across the scuffed stage floor and finds Harry’s, squeezing it tight.

Louis wants to tell the boys he loves them. They say it in almost every interview, and Niall shouts it every night as he crawls into his bunk on the bus, and Zayn murmurs it every morning when Louis fixes him a coffee to help him wake up, and Liam mumbles it when Louis hugs him tight around the middle just to remind him he’s got his boys to lean on. And Harry, Harry says it with every meeting of their eyes across a stage, with every brush of their thighs when they sit on the concert sofa together, with every t-shirt he lets Louis steal and every morning he lets Louis sleep in when they had a late night. With every brush of their lips, every tangle of their fingers, every hitch of their hips.

Louis wants to tell his boys that he loves them, because without them his life would be immeasurably worse.

But then Niall burps, loudly, startling Liam and making him squeak. Zayn snorts, ruffling Liam’s hair. Harry, who had been staring down at an unopened Penguin bar, ignores all of that to read the joke off his candy wrapper (“What do penguins like to eat?” Silence. “Brrritos!” More, slightly pained silence.).

Louis shakes his head at himself. This isn’t a day for sappy declarations, this is a day to tie Niall’s belts into a knot with his headphones, and to hide all of Zayn’s snapbacks.

This isn’t the end. They have so much more to do.

The flight from Belfast to London is just short enough for a quick nap on Harry’s shoulder, Harry’s legs thrown over Louis’ lap and his feet resting on Liam’s thighs. All five are bumbling and sleepy as they’re ushered to a car that will take them back to Princess Park for the night before they’re back on a plane bound for LA tomorrow evening.

It’s a quiet drive across London, street lamps leaking light through the car’s tinted windows. Zayn falls asleep face down in Harry’s lap, and Louis only has the brain capacity to giggle about it for a few moments before he too is asleep on Niall’s chest.

It’s a long half hour or so of lugging suitcases and bags up to the various flats alongside the equally tired security team. They’ll spend the morning doing laundry and repacking for the next week in California, but for now they drop the bags just inside the doors of their flats and collapse into bed, exhaustion from the show and travelling back to London heavy on their limbs.

Louis is on the edge of sleep, curled up around Harry as his lashes sway lower and lower, midnight creeping on toward one o’clock. An abrupt noise interrupts his slide into unconsciousness.

Harry’s phone vibrates again. And again.
Harry groans, shifting in front of Louis and pushing back the covers so he can swing his legs out of bed. He pushes his curls back from his face sleepily before reaching out and fumbling with his phone.

“H’lo,” he rumbles raspily. His spine stiffens when the caller starts to speak, and Louis can hear Claudia’s tinny voice through the speaker against Harry’s ear. Louis sits up gingerly, rubbing sleep from the corner of his eyes.

“Wait,” Harry says suddenly, stopping Claudia’s flow of words, “what?”

Claudia repeats herself. Harry sucks in a breath. “Oh my God.”

“What s’it, Hazza?” Louis mumbles.

He turns to look at Louis, his phone held loosely in his hand. He looks wide awake. “I’m breaking up with Caroline.”

Louis is wide awake as well, his heart thumping with sudden adrenaline. “What?”

Harry’s smile grows slowly, like he’s still in disbelief himself. “I’m breaking up with Caroline. The X Factor season is over and we’re heading to America. I don’t need a girlfriend anymore.”

Louis’ breath catches. Harry’s free.

“Hang up the phone,” he says breathlessly. Harry does it without a second thought, tossing it next to Louis on the bed and kissing Louis heatedly. It rings again almost immediately, and Louis knocks it off the bed; Claudia probably wants to talk next steps and damage control and Harry’s tweet to assure everyone that they’re still good friends, but Louis can’t give him back now.

They’ve gotten quicker with practice: Louis is three fingers deep inside Harry within minutes, scissoring his fingers as Harry rips open a condom with his teeth and rolls it down Louis’ cock. Louis holds Harry’s wrist above his head as he thrusts in, giving it to Harry deep, hard, leaving both of them breathless and grinning ridiculously against each other’s lips. Between the exhaustion and the complete lack of foreplay, it takes a little longer than usual for Harry’s breath to start hitching and his toes to start flexing. Louis’ orgasm smashes into him out of nowhere like a hit-and-run, leaving him dazed for a moment before he pulls out of Harry and thrusts two fingers back in, pulling Harry off quickly as he rubs insistently at his prostate.

Louis collapses next to Harry, both of them panting; it takes a few moments before he can muster the energy to get to his wobbly feet to dispose of the condom. He grabs a wet wipe from their bedside table (which Harry had bought after their third or fourth night in the flat, after consistently falling asleep covered in come and waking stuck to the sheets) and cleans his boyfriend with soft strokes. He blinks up at Louis sleepily, making grabby hands and pulling him back down into a cuddle.

“Every time they throw something new at us,” he rasps quietly, his throat scratchy, “I worry that it’ll be the thing that ends us. That it’ll be too much to handle. I thought Caroline was going to be that thing.”

Louis brushes his hand through Harry’s hair. “I wouldn’t let that happen. Until you get sick of me through your own volition, I’m here until the end. And I’m not giving up just because they want me to.”

Harry’s eyes flicker back and forth between Louis’ for a long time before he leans forward and takes a kiss, their lips soft and sweet until they drop into deep, dreamless sleep.
The week in LA passes in a haze of *iCarly* filming and crowds of screaming girls outside the hotel and interview after interview after interview. They meet Big Time Rush, the band they’ll open for when they join their tour in America, and Harry dodges questions about Caroline like he’s walking through a minefield.

And, through it all, he and Louis have so much sex it’s almost frightening.

The boys notice immediately. (“Like we couldn’t tell something was different,” Liam had scoffed after a day or so, “with you two walking around looking shagged out of your minds all the time.”

“And Harry got the word ‘love’ tattooed over his heart,” Zayn added, rolling his eyes. “I don’t know how much more obvious you could get.”

“Plus, you’re walking like you got sunburned on your arse,” Niall said serenely, and Louis burst into laughter as Harry looked down at his bowlegged stance, his bum still sensitive from all the attention it had gotten lately. Zayn dropped his head into his hands and apologized to the mother in line behind them at the fro-yo shop whose children started asking her what ‘arse’ means.)

They do one last interview about who their *Valentines* are—with Harry and Louis choosing each other and playing it off as a joke, one of their favorite things to do just to see Claudia’s eyes narrow in rage—and then they’re back on a plane to London.

It’s funny, Harry thinks with a smirk about an hour after boarding the plane, that just a week ago he’d never even had sex at all, and now he’s being bent over the sink in an airplane toilet and fucked within an inch of his life. Then Louis thrusts forward, hits his prostate dead-on, and he stops thinking anything for a while.

Niall has their PA, Marco, print out the pap pictures taken of Louis and Harry as they had walked through LAX and hangs them on their fridge the next time he comes over, claiming they look like they’ve just gotten back from their honeymoon.

When Harry sees the pictures, he really can’t argue.

And he maybe asks Marco to print out a couple more copies for his own photo collection as well.
14 February 2012

The two weeks back in London before they head to Paris are what make Harry finally start to believe in Niall’s push-pull theory. The articles and messages in the media and Twitter are so extreme, back and forth and back again, that he’s not even sure what people are supposed to be believing anymore.

Louis’ mum starts retweeting fan videos of Louis and Harry set to romantic music, and Eleanor is brought to London to stay in their flat for a few days. Eleanor and Louis go on a grocery shopping trip to be papped together, Kate writes an article for Sugarscape about the epic Larry Stylinson affair, and Jay retweets that, too. They perform at Dancing on Ice and do an interview afterward where apparently they’re too flirty, because Claudia sends Louis, his mum, and Eleanor out to dinner afterwards and calls the paparazzi.

Harry doesn’t know if management gets angry about the back-and-forth or if they just saw an
opportunity and took it, but two days after *Dancing on Ice*, Louis and Eleanor get sent to France for a romantic ski holiday.

Harry spends the five days Louis is gone trying to keep busy. He goes to Manchester and has dinner at *Rosso’s* with Ferdy. He and Tom Atkin have a *boys’ spa day*, complete with Lou’s homemade facials. He has Zayn, Liam, and Niall over every night to keep him distracted, and drags them to the shops to find a perfect Valentine’s present for Louis. And he texts Louis constantly, doing live commentary of the footie matches and the films he watches, sends a dozen pictures of himself cuddling baby Lux, texts about the meals he cooks and the stupid things Niall does to make him laugh and the new books he finds in dusty old shops.

He stays off of Twitter after Louis posts a picture of him and Eleanor skiing together.

But Louis returns, the boys regroup, and the two weeks of madness pause for a moment, the whirlwind slowing into something manageable, when their plane touches down in Paris.

Not that they have nothing to do; Valentine’s Day morning finds Paul knocking loudly at their door far too early, calling for them to get dressed and meet downstairs in one of the hotel’s meeting rooms to kick off a day of appearances and interviews.

“Okay!” Louis yells back. Harry ignores all of that completely, his head lolling as he works to keep his rhythm. Louis grabs his bum to help, lifting Harry’s hips and then letting him slide slowly back down on Louis’ cock.

“Feels so good, Lou,” Harry moans, balancing himself with a hand to Louis’ chest.

“Yeah?” Louis murmurs. “Gonna get yourself off without any help? Just hold me down and use me?”

Harry nods, overwhelmed by the combination of Louis’ rough voice and soft hands. It’s ridiculous how complete he feels, full of Louis and achy with need. It’s like he’s not whole without Louis inside him, like any time they aren’t connected in the most visceral way possible is just time spent waiting until they can do it again. He rolls his hips, his eyes barely opening in time to see the way it makes Louis swallow hard.

“It doesn’t take long for Harry to come; he knows exactly how to roll his hips to hit his own spot and he never lasts long in the morning, anyway, so a few more moments have him cursing and moving faster, chasing his release. When his orgasm crashes over him like a wave pulling him under, Louis flips them and rocks into Harry a few times before he’s coming as well, biting Harry’s throat to keep from screaming.

It takes them a while to get dressed after that, Harry’s thighs still carrying a twinge of exertion and Louis’ hair so sweaty he gives up on fixing it, resigned to a day of sex hair.

Paul rolls his eyes when they finally stumble their way downstairs, and Lou rushes over with her powder brush to try and cover the bruises up Harry’s neck as Caroline Watson fusses with Louis’ sweater. Down in one of the hotel’s small meeting rooms, they record four radio interviews in a row and answer the same basic questions for which they’ve been given answers to recite (“How are the French fans? Would you ever come to perform in France? What do you look for in a girl?”). Then, they’re hustled off to a Virgin Megastore for a *signing* (and Harry stops right outside the door, saying he can’t go into virgin stores anymore; Louis is the only one who laughs, and that’s why Harry loves him). It’s afternoon before the signing ends, and Harry is looking forward to curling up in their
comfy hotel bed for a nap before setting out to explore Paris with Louis.

But it’s not meant to be. In the car on the way back to the hotel, Paul turns in the passenger seat and points at Louis and Harry. “Since you two made us all late this morning, you can do the last interview of the day on your own. The rest of you are free, just make sure you take security if you go somewhere and you’re back in the hotel by midnight.”


“Good thing you two didn’t want to do something romantic today, right?” Zayn teases, ruffling Harry and Louis’ hair. Harry pouts, swatting at his hand.

“Paaaaauuuul,” he whines. “Make these three do it, I want to take Louis on a date!”

Paul makes a face. “Eurgh, even more of a reason to make you do the interview.” At Harry’s offended look, he sighs. “It’ll be over with quickly, then you and Louis can gallivant all over Creation if you’d like.”

Harry sighs, and resigns himself to actually working a little longer before he and Louis can go out and celebrate being the actual couple in the band. Louis leans up to whisper in Paul’s ear—probably still trying to get them out of the interview, though Harry can’t actually hear him—and Harry leans back to talk to Zayn about whether he’s going to make plans with Perrie when they get back home.

“I dunno, mate,” Zayn shrugs nonchalantly. “We aren't really dating, right? We're just friends. She's cool, that's all.”

Harry frowns a little; that sounds about as realistic as the rest of Zayn’s scripted answers to questions he doesn’t want to answer. He turns to Liam instead, who’s fiddling with his phone. “What about you, Li? Taking Danielle somewhere?”

“Oh, I dunno,” Liam echoes. “She's not really my girlfriend. We're just friends.”

Liam and Zayn meet eyes, stare for a moment, and then they both look pointedly out the windows the rest of the drive to the hotel. Harry feels like he's missing something; he and Niall share a bemused look before ignoring it and launching into a conversation about trying snails if they all meet up for dinner tonight.

“Be good, boys,” Paul warns as he ushers Louis and Harry to their interview room, his expression stern.

“We will,” Louis says, patting Paul’s arm like he isn’t the type to wreck an interview just because he feels like it.

“Scout’s honor,” Harry adds, though he's still a little miffed at Paul for not giving in to the patented Harry Styles puppy pout like literally anyone else would have.

But, really, it's just one interview. How bad could it be?

They don’t know, Harry and Louis, that this interview isn’t just another in a long string of the same questions and answers broadcast to new faces. They don’t know that this interview will be dissected, giffed, studied and scrutinized, held up as proof, that it’ll be the one countless fans use to answer “How can you actually think Harry and Louis are together?” It’s the beginning of the end, and,
really, it’s the end of the beginning.

Harry and Louis don’t know, as they settle into the chairs in front of a blank white wall, as Harry straightens his blazer and Louis pushes his sweater sleeves up to his elbows, as they settle in for what’s supposed to be yet another interview. They don’t know that Paris changes everything.

The first phrase Louis speaks in French goes straight to Harry’s knees, and he is suddenly wildly thankful that this is a sit-down interview.

The second phrase (“Oui, je m'appelle Louis.”) hits him right through the ribcage, and it’s somehow the most earth-shatteringly sexy phrase anyone has ever spoken. Harry stares at his lap for a few moments as the interview commences, willing the dizzy flush of his cheeks to die down because, damn it, they’re only twenty seconds in.

Harry and Louis have only ever done one interview just as the two of them, the one back in Cardiff on the last day of the X Factor tour, and that one was never released to the public. Harry had thought it was ridiculous at the time that Claudia had demanded for it to be deleted; now, he might concede that she may have had a point.

It might be because in normal interviews, when all five boys are crammed onto a sofa built for two people, Harry and Louis’ teasing and pet names and soft touches are all diluted by the other three boys. It’s hard for Harry to stare deeply into Louis’ eyes, lovely as they are, when Niall is making fart jokes and Zayn is tapping the back of his head just to be annoying.

There’s no one here now; just Harry, Louis, their interviewer, Chloe, and her cameraman. No Paul to keep them on track, no Claudia to make them second guess their words. No Niall and Liam and Zayn to distract interviewers and divert the other two from falling into the rabbit hole of LouisandHarry.

Harry works to pull his eyes away from Louis’ lips as he gives a standard answer to a standard question, and the tiniest part of his brain starts to realize they might be in a little bit of trouble at the end of all this.

“Louis is…”

Harry usually hates these questions, because being asked to describe Louis is likes being asked to choose a favorite star in the sky. And he can't really say the words he wants to say: love of his life, his light eternal, sunshine in the darkness. Boyfriend, that would sum it all up quite well, but that's definitely off limits.

Does he go with something true but vague—lovely, kind, wonderful? Something more descriptive—caring, adventurous, loud? Something more bro-pal-friend acceptable—funny, smart, competitive?

“Spontaneous,” he decides, thinking of sneaky surprise kisses and impromptu dates to the cinema or the midnight cafe Harry loves right down the road from their flat, two a.m. films and ice cream in bed, driving through London in the middle of the night because they’re young and in love and don’t need that much sleep.

Louis studies Harry for a moment when it's his turn, “And Harry…” He's sprawled in his chair like he never really gets to do in interviews, comfortable and relaxed. He looks like he does when they're together at home, joking and laughing over Chinese takeaway and Breaking Bad, ratty clothes and
unwashed hair, just Louis and Harry and their good friend Netflix.

Harry wonders if he's facing the same dilemma of having so many words to describe Harry that he can't pick just one. Louis reaches out and moves one of Harry's curls with a gentle hand, finally answering, “Curly.”

Harry's heart thumps giddily; he's never realized just how much of himself he was holding back in typical interviews with the boys. And, really, he shouldn't be surprised that this seems so much more natural than usual: his automatic reaction in any scenario is to be touching Louis and trying to make him smile. It's what he would do any other time hanging out with the boys, so it's like he’s hiding his natural reactions when he can't be that way just because a camera is pointed at them and someone is asking questions.

Something about this room, though, or the quiet cameraman, or Chloe's soft voice, something is lulling them into a comfort level where Harry the Womanizer and Louis the Funny One don't have to be at the forefront. They’re soft and tender, looking only at each other when answering each question. Even when Eleanor is brought up, they don't flinch away.

“How long have you been together?”

Louis tilts his head in thought. “Uhhhh. Yeah, like…”

Harry wonders for a split second if he really did forget or if he's just not worried about getting it right. Either way, it doesn't matter—the relationship is as fake as the blonde in Niall's hair. And he knows Louis remembers their various anniversaries, first kisses and declarations marked in their calendars, and they've even started tentatively planning a trip for their “official” anniversary in June, a year to the day that Harry followed him to Donny to tell him he loved him.

“A year?” Harry teases, thinking back to Valentine’s Day a year ago when he and Louis spent the full day curled together in a London hotel room, pleading with the X Factor directors to let them stay in bed all day instead of going in for tour rehearsals. (They won, obviously.) Or, just a little less than a year ago when they were moving into their first flat together. Or even over a year ago, when Harry kissed him for the first time.

Louis huffs a laugh, biting his lip like he knows all that Harry’s alluding to before turning back to Chloe. “Four, five months?”

“What’s her name?”

“Eleanor,” Louis answers.

Harry is still grinning, because it’s fun to talk about Louis’ girlfriend when they aren’t actually talking about Louis’ girlfriend, and they’d never get away with being this flippant if certain management people were here. “Very French.”

“Yeah,” Louis agrees, his voice light and fluttery like it really only is when he’s talking to Harry. “Is that a French name?”

“It can be,” Chloe answers with a shrug, the French tic strong in her short syllables. “And what’s the most romantic thing you’ve done for a girl?”

“Well I can’t cook,” Louis says after a moment, and Harry bites his cheek to keep from smiling: that’s his favorite opening of any of Louis’ patented interview answers. “And I once cooked a meal, the first meal I ever cooked, I cooked…” He looks right at Harry, holding out his hands in his now-signature motion. “Chicken.” Harry copies him, letting loose a grin as he remembers that disastrous
evening in the kitchen, “stuffed with mozzarella,” and the way the candles reflected the sparkle in Louis’ eyes, “wrapped in Parma ham,” how even then, they couldn’t keep away from each other, how they spent the evening watching each other speak with hooded eyes before they even knew how much deeper that need would grow, “with some homemade mashed potatoes.”

Louis shrugs when they finish their choreographed routine. “And it was alright, for a first meal.”

Harry hums his agreement. Considering Harry’s first meal was cooked when he was ten he can’t really compare the two experiences, but he can say from his side of things that chicken wrapped in Parma ham was one of the best meals he’s ever had. Definitely a memory he’ll never forget, that’s for sure.

“I would definitely say Harry’s the most confident with girls,” Louis answers a little later, his lips pursed like he’s trying valiantly not to smile. And Harry knows why—Louis has an ease around girls that the other four just don’t have, but Harry’s the one that the fans flock to because the newspapers and Twitter say he’s the charming one. So Harry has learned to be charismatic and quick on the spot, just because he’s put in that situation so often.

“You’re quite confident with girls, though,” he rebuts back to Louis, grinning.

“Quite,” Louis agrees, his lips thin in amusement. “But you’re on a whole new level of charming.”

Harry meets Louis’ mischievous eye. “Thanks, man.”

Harry doesn’t even realize the two of them are answering questions like this is a couple’s interview until Chloe asks “What’s your favorite love song?” and they both shift until their shoulders are touching.

“A Million Love Songs,” Harry answers immediately. It’s probably not his actual all-time favorite (and he couldn’t narrow it down to one if he tried), but he and Louis had listened to it on the flight yesterday and the words still echo in Harry’s head: A million love songs later and here I am, looking to the future now. “Take That.”

Louis drops his head back, smiling fondly at Harry. “That such a hard question. For some reason sticking in my head is Drops of Jupiter, is that a love song? It is, innit?”

“Yes,” Harry agrees, humming a line and watching the way Louis’ lazy-soft grin curls.

They talk about French fans (and Harry never knows why they’re asked, because of course they’re going to say that they’re the best. He’s never going to insult a country’s population of teenage girls right to their faces) and what they’d do in France for a day (“I think I’d just go to a really nice French restaurant,” Louis says, and then watches Harry’s lips move as he agrees).

Chloe is a quiet interviewer, mostly letting Louis and Harry ramble until they get near an acceptable answer. She only interrupts a couple of times, when Harry or Louis says something that, in a regular interview, Niall or Zayn would have talked over or corrected to sound less like the two of them are head over heels for each other.

“Was this done by a fan?” Louis asks, taking the poster Chloe passes them. Harry doubts it; the descriptors for each band member are almost word-for-word matches of the public personas their PR team has built for them.
“Cute and Irish,” Louis reads for Niall. It's funny how all of Niall’s… Niall-ness can be summed up with that, but it actually explains a lot. And he really is one of the most precious people on the earth, so Harry nods. That one fits.

“Sexy and smart,” they read next to Liam’s face. Louis bites his lip and Harry grins. Sexy, sure, that fits just fine, Harry’s seen Liam's abs. He's secure enough in his love for Louis to admit Liam is ridiculously attractive. And it's not that Liam isn't smart, either, because Liam can read a room like no one else that Harry has ever met. He's almost got a sixth sense about knowing the right thing to say or do in a given situation, how to rile up a crowd or to calm someone in hysters. He's also really good at picking the perfect word in a given situation; it made him an excellent person to have when Savan let them work with the songwriters a couple of times, because Liam could always snap his fingers and come up with the perfect lyric to fit a missing space that sounds like it belongs there. But Zayn is the smart one in the band, if they're going to be honest, and while Liam can read people like the back of his hand, if it wasn't for autocorrect on his phone they would never be able to understand a word he typed. So Harry and Louis make “Ehh…” noises for a moment before moving down to Harry.

“Hot and dangerous,” Louis reads, the corner of his mouth tucked up in a hint of a smirk. What Harry wouldn't give to read his thoughts right now, because he's grinning down at Harry's picture like a hundred different nights spent rolling across their mattress are rolling through his head. He meets Harry's eyes for a long moment, his own baby blues twinkling playfully. “I like dangerous,” Harry adds helpfully into the quiet space.

“No hot?” Chloe cuts in. “Why?”

It's the simplest thing: Louis reaches out and lays his hand on Harry's forearm, saying “Of course he's hot,” like it's not something that will make Claudia go berserk later.

Harry feels himself go pink, and he can't bring himself to care that a camera is catching this rampant flirting. He's got a soft, fond Louis in a pretty sweater looking at him like he hung the moon, and he doesn't care about anything anyone else has to say.

“Quiet and mysterious,” Louis reads for Zayn. Harry understands where that image of Zayn comes from, because he has this Look he can slide behind when he doesn't want to deal with people, a cool mask of indifference so severe that it makes Harry want to apologize for even glancing his direction, but that's not the real Zayn. He's just an extreme introvert; he can be just as loud, just as hyperactive as Louis and Niall, just as goofy and playful as Harry and Liam. But if he doesn't get his time to cool off and gather his thoughts before dealing with more people he gets tetchy and snappish, so he usually just withdraws into himself and lets the others do the talking while he sits and looks effortlessly cool. It could put off a mysterious vibe, sure, but that's not all he is. But to say that would not only reveal to the general public that their public personas are—gasp—not perfectly natural and one hundred percent true, but that their team has strategically been building them into twenty-first century iterations of the famous boy band stereotypes: instead of the Sweet One and the Bad Boy and the Player, they've got the Mysterious One and the Smart One and the Curly One. So Harry and Louis smile weakly and agree to Zayn’s description before moving on.

And then it's Louis’ turn to be described: “Funny and adorable,” Harry reads, delighting in the way Louis’ nose wrinkles at the second one. “Um, I would describe him more as,” Harry says, feeling the need to defend Louis’ masculinity just the tiniest bit (and feeling awfully reminiscent of “the carrot wouldn't cover his penis” joke he'd made at the Sugarscape interviews), “funny and handsomely rugged.”

Louis laughs a little. “Thank you.”
Harry smiles. “Yeah.”

“Thank you, Dangerous Dave,” Louis says, leaning back and grinning.

A whole conversation happens in the moments between Louis’ comment and Harry handing the poster back to Chloe. Louis’ raised eyebrows say, *you make fun of me, I’ll make fun of you.* Harry’s slight nod says, *I was being complimentary, you idiot.* Louis’ chuckle says, *oh really, try harder next time.* Harry’s wide grin says, *you’re ridiculous.*

And Louis’ thrown back head and delicate giggle says, *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

“How do you feel about this jacket?” Louis asks when the interview ends, Chloe and her cameraman packing up and leaving Harry and Louis still there in the comfy chairs. He picks at the fabric covering Harry’s shoulder, his eyebrow raised.

Harry looks down at said blazer. He’s worn so many since back on *X Factor* that they’ve sort of become like a second skin, the thick fabric familiar on his body now. “Erm. I like it, I suppose?”

“Yeah?” Louis asks. “So you don’t want to change?”

Harry sits up a little, sensing a change in plans. “Why would I change?”

Louis winks. “It’s a secret.”

Harry scratches his chin. “If I don’t change, can we go right away?” Louis nods, eyes twinkling. “Then I’m good, let’s go.”

They have to be somewhere at seven, Louis tells Harry once they’re outside the hotel, a security team following at a respectful distance. “Until then,” he says, spreading his arms grandly, “Paris is yours. What do you want to do first?”

Harry smacks a kiss to Louis’ cheek and then drags him across the city, from patisserie to tiny clothing shops to gardens filled with lovestruck couples. They’ve seen the major landmarks before and they want to avoid being spotted, so they keep to the quiet back streets and away from the tourist traps. Their hands never unclasp, their smiles never fade. Louis seems looser, more at ease than he is in any other place except inside the safe walls of their flat, and the whole world has shrunk so that it’s just Louis, Harry, and Paris.

Louis reveal his surprise as evening falls: It’s the tiniest French restaurant, complete with a chef belting opera in the kitchen and romantic pink lighting. Louis gives their name at the door and they’re taken to the very back of the room, a small, dark booth with a single candle on the table. A bottle of wine is already waiting for them, tucked jauntily in a small ice bucket.

“It’s Valentine’s Day in Paris, how did you get us a table?” Harry asks in awe, rubbing his thumb over Louis’ knuckles.

“I am very important,” Louis says with a toss of his head, then giggles adorably. “Also Paul helped.”

They try all the things they’d talked about in their interview with Chloe, frog legs and escargot and smooth French wine, their legs tangled under the table and sitting far too close to each other. They don’t say much, just watch each other in the flickering candlelight and grin like the world could fall and they wouldn’t look away. Their forks are battling over shared strawberry mascarpone crêpes when Louis says in a quiet voice, “I don’t want to ever leave Paris.”
Harry reaches for his hand, their fingers sticky from sugar and their hearts full of love, and says, “I know.” Because he does. He feels that same itch that Louis does, the one that says it would be nice to stop and take a breath for a moment, the one that says they could so easily disappear into the Parisian night and never return to a life of management control and heavy security and fake girlfriends. But that itch doesn’t listen when Harry tells it that he loves his life, and that those small trials are worth the smiles on the faces in the audience as he belts their new favorite song, it doesn’t take into account how much he’d miss seeing the other boys everyday. That as much as he’d love to survive only on Louis and love, the world doesn’t work that way and he can’t just go invisible when he wishes.

Louis tucks himself into Harry’s side. “Let’s live here someday. Let’s live in Paris because we love each other so much that we couldn’t possibly live anywhere else.”

“I’ll buy you the prettiest French house,” Harry murmurs into his hair. “Big, wide windows where you can curl up and nap. Classic art on the walls next to your Spiderman posters. A garden in the back for the kids and the dog and your football goal.”

Louis hums, brushing his nose over the LOVE banner tattooed over Harry’s heart.

“If there was ever anywhere I’d run to, it would be Paris.”

Louis’ surprise is two-fold; when they slide into the car waiting for them and their security guys out front, the driver takes them to an entirely different hotel than the one where they’d stayed the night before.

“I told Paul he could either help me find a new place for us to stay tonight, or he could deal with the noise complaints tomorrow,” Louis grins, tugging Harry out of the car and into the lobby of the tiny but luxurious hotel not far from the city center. Hotel de la Paix is emblazoned on the awning over the door.

“Ah, bienvenue messieurs,” says a pretty woman at the front desk. “Your room is ready and your bags have been brought up for you already. Enjoy your stay, s’il vous plaît.”

Louis doesn’t give Harry much of a chance to look around the small, lavishly decorated room once they make it inside. He flings open the balcony doors to reveal a stunning view of the Eiffel Tower lit against the starry background, and then he pulls Harry out of his blazer and lays him tenderly across the ivory-colored sheets. He makes love to Harry like the Earth is ending and brands kisses across his cheeks, his chest, his lips like someone might come to steal him away. Harry feels so full of starlight and elation that he’s surprised he doesn’t just rip at the seams, spilling out soft cries and love into the quiet Parisian night.

When they’re spent, lying sweaty and sated against warm sheets, Louis draws the blankets over their heads and cocoons them in warmth.

“I’ve told you I love you today, yeah?” he murmurs, running his thumb along the edge of Harry’s jaw.

“A couple of times,” Harry smiles, pressing a kiss to Louis’ palm. “Never enough, though.”

Louis’ smile is nearly bright enough to light the dim space where they’re tangled under the blankets. “When’s the last time you were in Paris?”

“My mum and Robin brought me and Gem here the summer before she left for uni,” Harry says,
tracing patterns over Louis’ collarbones.

“Oh,” Louis says, staring hard at Harry’s shoulder. “And, um. Robin’s not your mum’s soulmate, right?”

“Nah,” Harry says, rolling onto his side so he can see Louis better. “My real dad, Des, he and my mum tried to stay together, but they just didn’t work out. Mum always said that even Bonding can’t force two people to fall in love, and Bonding can’t make them stay in love, either. So she and Des split up, and she met Robin a few years later. His soulmate died years ago, right after they Bonded.”

“That’s so sad,” Louis says. “All of it. I’m sorry for your mum.”

Harry shrugs. He didn’t used to be so nonchalant about it, but Robin being in the picture helped a whole lot. “She’s got Robin, and me and Gems. She’s happier now, anyway.”

“What about your dad?”

“I see him from time to time,” Harry answers. “He and mum didn’t have, like, a bad split. They just knew it wasn’t working and decided to end it rather than letting it drag on.”

“That’s good,” Louis says, little more than a whisper. “My, erm. My real dad. He and my mum’s split was bad.”

“Mark?” Harry asks quietly, remembering the friendly guy Louis had introduced as his dad the couple of times he went with him to Doncaster.

“No, Mark’s not me real dad,” Louis murmurs. He takes a deep breath like he’s steeling himself. “My real dad’s name is Troy. He’s a massive prick, ‘ve always hated him, so as soon as Mark came into the picture I asked if I could have his last name instead.”

“Why do you hate him?” Harry asks carefully. This is the most he’s ever gotten from Louis about any father figure in his life; he’ll talk about his mum and his sisters until the stars fall out of the sky, but Harry’d asked about his dad—and not even his real dad, apparently—all of one time, and when he did Louis had clammed up and ran away and Harry hasn’t asked again since.

Louis gives his default answer: “It’s a long story.” But this time he sighs, rolling onto his back and staring up at the blanket tented over them like it holds all the answers. “I can tell you. If you’d like to hear it.”

“Only if you want me to hear,” Harry answers, tiptoeing around a time bomb. Louis doesn’t say anything for a long, long moment.

“Me mum had me at eighteen,” he finally starts. “It was a really big deal, because she wasn’t Bonded. But she’d argued to everyone that would listen that it didn’t matter, because Troy Bonded to her, and she loved him.”

“Your dad half-Bonded?” Harry asks, stunned. That’s almost unheard of; nearly no one Bonds without getting a Bond in return.

“No,” Louis says grimly, “he didn’t. His Marker was from his real soulmate, but they broke up and he left whoever it was, I guess. He hid his Marker until mum said his name and then told her it was for her.” He shakes his head, his jaw working. “She believed him, why wouldn’t she? So they were dating and then she got pregnant, and I don’t know if his plan was just to use his old Marker to get sex, or what, but he definitely didn’t plan on a kid. So, ten days after I was born, he told my mum the truth and ran off.”
“No,” Harry gasps.

“Yeah,” Louis says, his mouth twisted sourly. “So suddenly my mum has me all on her own, and she’s trying to finish school at the same time. But when I was about six or seven, she met Mark. They Bonded within a week of meeting each other. She got a butterfly Marker on her wrist, bright red and pink. I loved it, I thought it was the coolest thing.” He blinks slowly, like reliving sepia-toned memories. “Things were so good. I had a dad who raised me like I was his own, and Mum had someone to help her with all the things she’d been struggling with. Lottie was born, then Fizzy, and everything wasn’t perfect, but it was good.”

Louis laughs a little. “Mark was the first one to buy me a football,” he says fondly. “Always said he couldn’t understand how Mum never thought of giving me a ball to kick about until I wore myself out. Bought me my first goal, too—I’d be out there for ages, kicking until the paint fell off the bars. He used to come to all my school matches when Mum couldn’t make it.”

“That’s amazing, Lou,” Harry says, squeezing his hand. Louis squeezes back.

“The twins were born when I was twelve,” he says. “And things were still okay, but they weren’t as great anymore. Or maybe I just started noticing things because I was older, I don’t know. Money was tight, and since Mum and Mark were working constantly I was always at home with the girls. I hated it,” he says, shaking his head again bleakly. “And I was so loud about how much I hated it. I love my sisters, obviously, but I hated missing out on things with my friends to babysit, and I hated being stuck at home all the time. I started sneaking out at night but it didn’t really matter, because no one was there to even catch me. I wish I could go back, now,” he whispers, blinking back tears. “I could have been so much better, I could have saved everything from falling apart. But I didn’t.”

“That’s not your job, Lou,” Harry reassures him desperately. He tugs at Louis’ arm until he rolls over, burying his face in Harry’s chest. “I know you think you have to carry the world, but you don’t. You were just a kid.”

“I was a kid, but I could have been better,” Louis insists.

“You could say that about anybody,” Harry argues. “I could have spent my teenage years learning productive things or studying, but I just let my friends straighten my hair until they burned a chunk off.”

Louis laughs wetly. “You’re ridiculous.” He lifts his head from Harry’s chest and wipes his eyes. “Anyway. Mum and Mark had always fought, but they stopped trying to be quiet about it. They’d be at it all night, screaming about money and spending time with the kids and stupid things, tiny little things that don’t matter like repainting the front door and picking up milk at the shops. But they fought all the time, and it just got worse and worse.”

“You don’t have to keep going,” Harry whispers. “Don’t feel like you need to finish on my account.”

“I want you to know, though,” Louis says fiercely. “I want you to understand. To know that if I’m messed up, there’s a reason for it.” Tears are leaking steadily now, though his voice has stopped shaking. “Mark never, like, hit Mum or anything, nothing like that, but there was always broken stuff when we’d come down to breakfast the next morning after a big fight. Dishes and things, because they always seemed to fight in the kitchen. It would always wake Lottie up in the middle of the night with all the noise, so she started coming in and sleeping with me because she was scared. And sometimes it woke the twins, so we’d sneak across the hall and get them out of the cribs so we could rock them back to sleep.”
He breathes in deep like trying to draw air past a broken rib. “The last night was the very worst one. Lottie came to my room at midnight when they were full swing in the middle of a fight. Picture frames were breaking and Mum was crying and everything was so, so loud. We went and got the twins when they started crying, Fizzy, too, and we all hid in my closet for hours. And then it just… stopped. It was almost morning, we’d been up all night, and suddenly everything was quiet.”

Louis looks at Harry for the first time since he started his story, cerulean blue marred navy with pain. “That silence after all that was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever lived through. I came up with every possible scenario for why it suddenly sounded like no one was even breathing downstairs anymore, but I was too scared to go check. But I had this feeling, it was weird but I- I knew I was right, so as soon as I got out of the wardrobe I walked over to the window and I saw my dad carrying a bag to the car. I’d never seen him cry before, but he did that day. He saw me in the window and he waved, and that was it. He never- he never came back home.”

“Oh, Lou,” Harry says, his heart broken. He hugs Louis close as his breath goes all wobbly and unsteady.

“You- you said your m-mum and your dad just stopped loving each other, yeah?” Louis asks shakily. “What was that like, to see that happen?”

Harry feels his brow furrow. “I don’t know, actually. I was really young when they broke up, so I’ve really only known them like they are now. They act like friends who haven’t seen each other in years and don’t really know how to talk to each other anymore.”

“I can’t even imagine that,” Louis says, achingly soft. “Realizing that you don’t really love the person who’s supposed to be your other half anymore. That all those feelings would just fade away.”

“It was hard to grasp,” Harry admits. “I’ve grown up being told that soulmates are meant to be together forever, and yet my mum and dad couldn’t do it. It really made me question a lot of things.”

“But you still believe,” Louis sniffs, wiping his eyes with the back of his wrist. “You still believe in soulmates, and fairytales. How can you think that soulmates will stay together forever when even your parents fell out of love?”

“What do you mean?” Harry asks, confused. “That’s like asking how I can believe in cats when I once had a pet dog.” Louis snorts softly, shaking his head. “My parents’ relationship didn’t work, but that doesn’t mean no one’s relationship ever works out. My grandparents were together sixty years before my Nan died. There are millions of couples who stay together their whole lives. David Beckham has been with Victoria for, like, fifteen years. If you can’t believe in Posh and Becks, what can you believe in?”

“So many couples don’t make it, though,” whispers Louis.

“That’s true,” Harry allows. “My parents and your parents are not the only ones. Niall’s parents are split up too, y’know. It happens all the time.”

“So how can you believe in love?” Louis asks desperately. “Your parents stopped loving each other, that’s a horrible thing to go through. To think that something so strong can just end. And my parents, it’s almost worse because they do still love each other, they love each other so much, and yet it still didn’t work. A Bond wasn’t strong enough to keep them together.”

“Lou-”

“This is why I didn't want to Bond,” Louis cries, sounding defeated and worn down like a stone
worn away by years of crashing waves. “First, my deadbeat father used it to trick my mum into being with him only to turn around and leave when it worked, and then a real Bond wasn’t enough to keep my parents from breaking up even though they still love each other. How am I supposed to look at that and see a happy ending for myself with a Marker on my arm? How am I supposed to believe that soulmates are really meant to be? How can you still believe in love when love can ruin everything?”

From the beginning to the end of Louis’ speech, Harry’s heart shatters like crystal, like glass, like diamond crushed with a heavy weight. How can a person who breathes sunlight and happiness be filled with so much sadness? How can the person who Harry fell in love with so easily think that love never gives, it only destroys? How can Louis, the boy filled with so much care for the people around him that it bursts out of him, be afraid of the very thing of which he’s made?

“You wanna know how I can believe in love?” Harry asks, cupping Louis’ face and wiping under his eyes with his thumbs. “How I can still hope for a happy ending when there are so many bad ones to serve as warnings?”

Louis sniffs, nodding. His eyes are red-rimmed and overflowing, aching for answers.

Harry smiles, his own tears pooling. “You prove love exists to me everyday.” Louis’ breath catches and his lips start wobbling again. “You love me so much that I can’t even believe it sometimes. Every time you stand up for us against people who want to tear us down, every time you hold my hand through my anxiety attacks, every time I wake up next to you and you look at me like you’ve realized you’re the luckiest guy on the planet, that’s how I believe. After all the shit I’ve seen and that we’ve dealt with in the past year and a half, sometimes you’re the only thing that makes me believe that good can still exist.”

Louis grips the hand holding his cheek and his face crumples, tears falling and making his breath hitch.

“And now,” Harry continues shakily, “now I know it’s even more than that, because it takes so much courage to fall in love even when you know it’s gonna hurt. You’re the bravest person I know, Lou.”

“Harry,” Louis sobs. “God, I love you so much.”

“Seeing other Bonds break and relationships end hasn’t ruined everything for me,” Harry says tearfully. “It just makes me realize how lucky I am to have you.”

Louis kisses Harry like he’s drowning and Harry can give him air, gasping and panting between hard presses of lips. Harry over Louis and drops so close he can feel Louis’ heartbeat against his own, both thumping wildly.

“I love you,” Harry promises between kisses, “I love you so much.”

If earlier Harry had been filled with stardust and happiness, now he’s bursting with golden devotion, bright passion. It burns slower but it still burns hot, their kisses hot drags of lips and bites of teeth.

“I need you,” Louis begs, squirming underneath Harry. “Please, please, Hazza, I—”

“Are you sure?” Harry asks desperately, his blood pounding and his hand shaking. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” Louis says, wrapping his arms around Harry’s shoulders. “I trust you. I need you.”
Harry has never touched Louis as softly as he does then, brushing his lube-slick fingers lightly against Louis’ rim. And he’s never touched Louis so slowly, either, waiting long seconds between touching Louis and pushing in, handling him like delicate glass, like he might shatter in Harry’s hands. Louis’ eyelashes flutter shut and his lips part to take in quiet, needy breaths when Harry presses a little deeper.

Harry doesn’t let Louis push him harder; when he starts grabbing for Harry’s hands and whining for more, faster, Harry gentles him with sweet kisses and light nips to his chest, his thighs, his throat. He keeps his touches slow and smooth, brushing against Louis’ prostate so frequently but so slowly that it eventually reduces him to shivered exhalations of only Harry’s name over, and over, and over.

He only pushes in a second finger when Louis pleads for it brokenly, his words nearly lost as he tries to bury his face in his pillow. He only adds in a third when Louis is incoherent, his chest shuddering with each breath.

If Harry expected to feel like he’s the one taking Louis as he slides in, he’s so wrong. Louis clenches around him and throws his head back with a soft gasp and his hands clenching the sheets, and Harry has never felt more conquered. He can’t concentrate on his own thudding arousal when each shift of his hips draws the most beautiful sounds out of Louis, a soundtrack of half-moans and bitten-off curses, dirty words in Louis’ sweet mouth. He can’t focus on himself when he thrusts forward and one small hand curls in his hair like it can’t be helped, when the other scratches long marks down his back.

Harry is dripping sweat, Louis is spilling tears as he begs for release, and they’re both lube-sticky and saliva-slick. The sheets are twisted between their legs and their pillows are damp from perspiration and spit. It’s perfect. Every moment is perfect. Harry will never forget the way Louis looks against those sheets, how he sounds in the still night air.

“Love you,” Louis wails as Harry’s thrusts grow shorter, harder. Harry tangles their hands together. When they come it’s together, and it’s intense, and it leaves Harry feeling shaky and full of contradictions: white-hot brilliance and dark-cooled longing. Harry’s whole world has been changed in this one day, and he can never go back. He’ll never be the same person he was before they came to Paris.

Harry pulls Louis to lay on Harry’s chest, the sheets tangled around their hips, and cards his hand through honeyed hair.

“This was the best day of my life,” Louis murmurs against Harry’s collarbones.

Harry doesn’t even stop to try and come up with anything to compare. “Mine, too.”

"I'm so happy I got to hide away from the world with you," continues Louis softly. "And that we got to have today for ourselves."

“Oh,” Harry says, surprised, a familiar phrase catching at the edge of his thoughts. “There was a quote, it was in that old soulmate legends book Gemma gave me. ‘Eventually soulmates meet, for they have the same hiding place,’” he recites, the phrase rolling from his tongue after years of reading those words over and over, wondering where he’d be hiding when his soulmate came to find him.

Louis may not be his soulmate, but he still came to find Harry.

Louis reaches a sleep-heavy hand up and traces his finger over the tattoos littering Harry’s bicep, the love banner over his heart. “Whenever I’m forced on another vacation with Eleanor, or stuck in a
meeting with management,” he rasps, “or when we aren’t allowed to sit next to each other because we might look too in love. Whenever I’m not with you, I’m going to think of this bed, right here. And I’m going to think of ivory sheets and the Eiffel Tower outside, and I’m going to think of Paris, and I’m going to think of you.” He lifts his head, his eyes full of all that courage he’s always hidden away, all that love from which he’s always run.

“I’ll think of you, Harry,” Louis says. “Because you’re my hiding place.”

Chapter End Notes

We’ll always have Paris.

tumblr | fic post
Part Two: 14 February 2012 - 6 June 2012

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the wait! I wrote the first half of this and had to scrap it because it was awful, then had to rewrite it while also moving to a new house and finishing up finals. But it's extra long to make up for it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 14: 14 February 2012 - 6 June 2012

14 February 2012

Harry and Louis are falling asleep in each other’s arms in a Parisian hotel when an emergency meeting is called at the Modest! Management head offices back in London.

“This is unacceptable,” says a woman at the front of a darkened room. A still from a video taken just hours before is being shown up on a large screen, Harry and Louis frozen mid-laugh and looking more like a couple than they ever have on camera before. “These are teenagers, and you are letting them run all over you. This job shouldn’t be that hard.”

Four incredibly well-connected men sit in front of her like chastened schoolboys. Magee and Griffiths are in the middle, since they like to think of themselves as the spiders in the center of a web, even though to the woman at the front of the room they’re nothing more than self-important fleas. Hackford and Jones, slunk low in their seats on either side of them, haven’t looked up from the floor. Those two are still new to the industry, but this is no way to make sure they’re in it for the long run; once people start finding out that a couple of idiot teenagers have undermined every PR stunt they’ve put in place, they’ll never work in showbusiness again.

“This is pathetic,” she sneers. “I’ve never seen anything more inept. You think giving these two fake girlfriends and calling it a day will work? Of course it won’t, they can’t stop staring at each other long enough to even confirm they’re dating anyone else. And you made Harry Styles date a woman twice his age to make him seem sexually available, yet your market is teenage girls? Literally any model, actress, or singer would have worked and you chose the one old enough to be his mother, and then the X Factor promo for Caroline wasn’t even enough to help the show. People are supposed to love him, and you made them hate him. The stunt was an absolute failure.”

The interns and assistants that Griffiths and Magee keep around them like a suit-clad harem are silent and motionless, like they’re afraid of attracting her attention. Only one is even looking up from her own shoes, a blonde woman with eyeliner sharper than the edge of a knife. Claudia: she’s a waste of space too, leaving the room long enough for whole interviews to happen without her supervision and so preoccupied with looking over the band’s shoulders to see what they’re tweeting that she doesn’t even notice what they’re actually saying where cameras and sneaky fans can hear. She’s vindictive and petty, but not in any way that’s useful.

“This luckily it’s not too late to fix this,” the woman says, tossing her hair out of her face. “You’ve done a piss-poor job so far and nearly let Syco’s biggest client self-destruct into a rainbow-colored nightmare, but that’s finished now. You will follow my plan to get this back under control so that these five”—she jabs a pointed nail at the Up All Night album cover now on the screen—“don’t ruin
themselves and us with them. They bring in more money than all our other clients combined, and we haven’t even begun to tap into the U.S. market.”

“What do we do?” Jones asks, his voice trembling.

Good. She likes to see weak men shake when she speaks.

“We target the leader,” she says breezily, pointing a laser pointer’s dot right in the middle of Louis Tomlinson’s forehead. It looks eerily like a sniper mark. She likes that, too. “The other four follow his lead. If we can silence him, we control all of them. He’s got a girlfriend, but he’s still camp. We’ll train him out of that. We make him look like a shut-in who only spends time with her instead of doing cool celebrity things. We stop putting his name in articles so he becomes less recognizable. We control his Twitter. We take away his voice.”

Jones and Hackford are nodding, the interns all scribbling notes. The woman continues in a voice like steel.

“We need to separate his name from Harry Styles—Harry is the one poised to be the face of the band, and if it’s him versus Louis the fans will choose Harry. The two of them will not speak to each other in public. They will not interact. We will start rumors that they hate that fans think they’re in a relationship, and that Larry Stylinson ruined their friendship. We deny everything.”

Ann-Marie Thomson spreads her hands on the table in front of her, leaning into a power stance. “I was brought in to fix the mistakes you made, and it will happen if you listen to what I say and do your jobs.” She stabs at the photo of Louis’ face with a hard finger. “Give me six months. In six months, Louis Tomlinson will be irrelevant and hated by his own fans, and he will not be a threat any longer.”

15 February 2012

It’s strange for Harry and Louis to be back in the world after their night in Paris like nothing earth-shattering happened, like the world didn’t spin a little slower to let them have a chance at a lifetime of happiness in a single everlasting night.

Their flat still seems the same when they open the door, stale air with a hint of the cinnamon candles that Harry had extinguished before they left for France. Their bed is just how they left it, the left side where Harry sleeps perfectly made up, the pillows fluffed and arranged, while Louis’ side is a crumpled heap of blankets, dirty clothes tangled in the sheets.

London still moves around them like clockwork. People are still going about their lives, still reading and playing and running and tweeting and living, everyone is still just living, living like they aren’t at the epicenter of an emotional upheaval greater than any before. Harry can’t imagine anyone loving anyone else as much as he loves Louis; he can’t imagine anyone’s perfect night being as perfect as theirs.

Harry cooks lunch and invites the boys over, and they still look at Harry and Louis the same way. That one, if anything, should be what’s different. London can continue to churn, Twitter can be refreshed with all new words and messages, the Earth can continue to spin, but the boys should be able to feel the atmospheric shift. They should be able to read the difference on Harry and Louis’ skin as easily as they can read their tattoos.
They should be able to look at Harry and see that Louis Tomlinson has finally let him in.

16 February 2012

Life goes on, though Harry can hardly believe it, and for the boys of One Direction that means an interview with Sugarscape at a go-kart track.

Harry sort of isn’t in the mood; it’s not Sugarscape’s fault, it’s not anyone’s, really, but he got Louis to himself for a whole night where they did nothing but draw patterns on each other’s naked skin with the lightest of fingertips and press poetry into each other’s veins with the softest of kisses, and now he has to pretend that’s never happened, to strap back into that Harry Styles outfit and charm that doesn’t sit right on his bones anymore. It’s vapid and false, and though his iCarly debut proved he could never act with a script and a director, he’s gotten pretty good at acting off the cuff every time he’s been out in public for almost a year now. The role of a lifetime: Harry Styles as himself.

But he can’t just decide to be stroppy and not go to an interview because he wants to spend a day in bed with his boyfriend; he’s got the greatest job in the world, despite the unhappiness his management team wants to bring into it and the media inanity that their careers are based on, and sometimes that means pulling on the quirk of a smile when all he wants to do is crawl into the circle of Louis’ arms and never emerge.

It helps when he sees their interviewer for the day: Kate is beaming as the boys pile out of their van, Louis and Harry both pulling her into quick hugs.

“’lo, love, how’re ya?” Louis asks, flicking his fringe out of his eyes with quick fingers.

“Good, doll, and you?” Kate asks, air kissing at their cheeks. “Good Valentine’s?”

Louis sends Harry a private smile, trailing his hand up his back. “It was amazing.”

“Excellent,” Kate says sincerely. Then her grin turns a little sharper. “That means you’ll be ready for what I’ve got planned today.”

“What’ve you got planned?” Harry asks, and Kate’s grin grows wider.

“You want us to do what?” Zayn asks skeptically when they’re led inside, holding up a red jumpsuit.

“Red isn’t really my color,” Liam says in consternation, holding the sleeve of his own jumpsuit against his arm and looking to Louis for confirmation.

“Nonsense, Lima, it really brings out your eyes,” Louis answers, fluttering his lashes at Liam. He was the quickest to don his suit, his words muffled behind the padding of the helmet he’s already stuck on his head.

It takes Harry ten minutes to arrange his curls so that when the helmet slides on he can still see. Louis laughs at him through the whole process, but when Harry finally pulls the helmet over his eyes, Louis is there to congratulate him with a kiss to the hard plastic-covered forehead.
Harry’s work was all for naught, he finds out, as they’re led to a corner of the racing track room and sat on raised benches to do their interview before they get to go cause havoc and destruction on a go-kart course. Lou bustles around fixing the makeup they’d smudged while messing with their helmets, and Kate directs the camera crew as they set up.

She still hasn’t told them what the big surprise for the interview is yet, but, in her words: “You’ll know it when we get there.”

Harry doesn’t have time to worry about that, though, as Kate launches them into the interview with the typical Sugarscape tact, shouting over the boys’ ambient noise, “Oi! We’re ready!”

“Bloody hell, alright, love,” Louis says, wiping his mouth and setting aside his can of Red Bull, which starts them all off about exactly as expected, chaotic and unpredictable. They don’t ever really mean to derail interviews, but after being asked the specifications about their ideal soulmate or what superpower they’d want for approximately the eight hundredth time, One Direction tend to take the task of making the interview interesting into their own hands. There are only a few interviewers that can wrangle them back onto topic when they get on a roll—Grimmy is one, just because he knows the boys well enough to smack them across the back of the head if they get off on a tangent, and the Sugarscape girls are just about the only other reporters on the very short list.

So, with all the grace of a seasoned One Direction interview veteran, Kate steers them back into safe waters and they power full steam ahead. They talk Valentine’s Day and Paris (though not the side of Paris Harry and Louis experienced), Marvin from JLS’s wedding, and Liam’s mysterious vanishing kidney. Kate pushes them into talking about Mario Kart in the worst segue of all time, but at least they’ve got an explanation for the tomato red jumpsuits they’ve been zipped into.

Then Kate’s mouth ticks up into a smirk, and Harry’s stomach flips in anticipation.

“So, Harry and Louis,” Kate says, “you guys obviously have a special relationship that people have picked up on.” And maybe that’s the reason for the apprehensive turn in his stomach: Harry stiffens, because he trusts Kate, but other interviewers have been shot down a lot quicker for implying a lot less.

Louis must be thinking the same thing, as he straightens up slowly, his spine tensing under the red of his jumpsuit. But there’s no flash of blonde hair as Claudia catches a whiff of inappropriate topics, no snarl of “Cut that out,” so Harry slowly forces his shoulders to loosen again.

Kate barrels on. “So you must get quite competitive when you’re… playing things. Like Mario. So, who usually is in front and who usually, kind of, gets behind?”

Holy shit.

The vaguely unsettling feelings are gone, replaced by giddy tinges of laughter held tight in Harry’s limbs. He can only see a side of Louis’ face, sat in front of him like he is, and but the corner of his mouth is pulled back almost in awe, like he can’t believe Kate went there. Harry suddenly wants nothing more than to play along, to make a few thinly veiled innuendos about his sex life that’ll have the whole world chattering.

And there’s no Claudia in sight to stop him.

“So,” Harry says slowly to clarify, and Kate is openly grinning now, “between me and Louis, who’s in front and who’s behind?”

Louis turns and looks right at Harry when he says, “I think we kind of share that, really.”
Oh, God, it’s so much harder to hold the laughter in now. Louis is ace at this game, keeping a poker face and sliding quick one-liners into the conversation with aplomb, while Harry grins too widely and ruins his jokes with awful timing and jumbling his words. Louis is loose with laughter, his grin languid.

Zayn, who is smothering his grin into his wrist, is not so chill.

“Um, yeah,” Louis continues while he looks at Harry, his smile starting to pinch his lips together like he might break, “sometimes you take the front.”

“Sometimes I take the front, you know,” Harry agrees. He wants to make a joke so badly. He won’t make a joke. He won’t. Okay, he will. “If he’s a bit tired, I’ll go behind and push him along.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Louis agrees. How is he still not laughing? Harry is about to die. “But, y’know.” Oh, there it is, Louis is getting gesticulative. It’s almost guaranteed the next thing out of his mouth will knock the room into uncontrollable giggles. “We’re both, y’know, we’re both quite generous to each other so we think that, sometimes, he should get to do what he wants to do. Go first.”

_Oh my God._

Harry was expecting a Louis quip, not an _actual discussion of how they decide who tops and bottoms._

“A bit of give and take?” Kate asks, her face red with laughter.

“Yes,” Louis says easily, like he didn’t just buy himself another shame-on-you meeting with Modest and a couple of public dates with Eleanor over the next week, at least.

Zayn completely loses it, sliding his helmet back over his face to muffle his laughter. Niall doesn’t hide it at all, cackling out loud when Louis points out Zayn’s bad acting job.

Liam, however, doesn’t get the joke at all.

“Is anyone, um,” Kate says, struggling now as well, “good at any particular level?”

Louis spins to face Liam, probably knowing that if he turns to look at Harry again they’re both going to break. “Liam, aren’t you very good at—”

“Daisy Hills,” Liam says, completely serious.

“Daisy Hills,” Louis says, like he doesn’t know. “Is that... front or behind?”

“Daisy Hills,” Liam repeats, smiling confusedly like he knows there’s a joke but he doesn’t know what it is, exactly. “I’m very good at it, I’ve got the fastest time. Like, two minutes, dead.”

Niall laughs so hard he goes redder than his jumpsuit. Harry and Zayn both join in, and Louis squirms like he can’t believe how great this day is.

“Two minutes dead!” he crows, giggling. “He’s not an endurance man. Two minutes and it’s all over.”

“I’m trying to crack two minutes,” Liam says earnestly, not helping his case at all.

Niall rolls into Louis’ side, howling.
There’s no message from Claudia waiting for them after they finish with Kate, no separate black car idling outside to whisk Louis and Harry off to a meeting. It itches at Harry like a missing piece of a mostly-finished puzzle but he puts off thinking about it until later, distracted by Zayn finally taking pity on Liam over pizza that evening and explaining exactly what Liam was alluding about himself on a video that will most definitely be seen by thousands and thousands of people.

Liam does a spit-take, spraying Niall with water. “You were talking about sex?” he whisper-screeches. “What- how- how did we get away with that?”

They’re too busy laughing at Liam’s misfortune to mull over the lack of Claudia in their day, but eventually Harry does remember. And it feels too suspicious to just be their good luck.

“What do you reckon?” he asks Louis, who shrugs, but picks at his lip worriedly.

Harry never thought he’d be waiting anxiously to receive a text about a punishment, but somehow not hearing anything at all seems worse.

(That’s not the only thing Harry realizes after the fact. He’s halfway through with hanging his laundry up in the closet before they have to pack for Italy in a few days when he replays Louis’ words from earlier and has to jog upstairs to set the record straight.

“You know I love it when you fuck me, right?” he says as he bursts dramatically into the cinema room. Louis raises a single eyebrow at his exclamation and doesn’t bother setting his Playstation controller to the side, doesn’t even press pause. Niall, meanwhile, chokes on his beer and turns a horrid shade of purple.

“Jesus Christ, Hazza!” Liam exclaims, clapping his hands over his ears like that’s going to erase what he just heard. Zayn groans and shakes his head, rubbing at his temples as if to say he has a perpetual headache thanks to Harry and his outbursts (and this doesn’t even happen that often, Zayn, just when Harry has Very Important Things to talk about and no time to frame them in not-startling ways).

“Listen, Liam,” Harry says impatiently, “I’m sorry, but hush.”

“Yes, Harry,” Louis says, bemused. “I know you love having sex with me. What’s this about?”

“No, no, not what I meant,” Harry says, waving his finger. “You said, in the interview, that I should get to do what I want and go first. Which means I’m fucking you, right? And that’s amazing, it’s the best thing I’ve ever done. It’s my proudest accomplishment. But I also still want you to fuck me.”

“I’m not going to stop fucking you just because you’ve fucked me,” Louis answers, his brow pinched. “I like both, too.”

“If you’re first, wouldn’t that mean you’re in front?” Zayn questions thoughtfully, his agony apparently forgotten. “So Louis was actually saying you should get to do what you want and be fucked, not the other way around.”

Harry stops, tilts his head in thought. “Oh. Right.”
“Are we good, then?” Louis laughs, rolling his eyes in the fondest way possible. “We’re versatile. It’s good news.”

“Can you fuck me now?” Harry asks brightly. Louis checks the time on his phone and shrugs.

“Sure, why not?” And then he reaches out to snag Harry by the front of the t-shirt, yanking him into a kiss.

“Not on the sofa!” Niall screeches.

“Not in front of us!” Liam shrieks.

Harry throws Louis’ t-shirt at Liam’s face. They’re left alone pretty quickly after that.)

20 February 2012

They never do get the expected punishment for blatantly discussing bumming with Sugarscape, but things do change, even just in the few busy days following the interview.

The band is shuttled off to Italy to perform in a festival and, after leaving the show, Zayn and Louis are pushed into one car and Harry, Liam, and Niall in the other, though they’re all going to the same place. They chalk it up to just trying to get out of the area and back to their hotel as quickly as possible—the crowds had been more than a little overwhelming—but it still seems like all in one car would make more sense. Then it happens again, and again, the band traveling in separate vehicles despite the fact that they can all quite comfortably fit into one.

And then come the interview changes: when the boys pile onto sofas for the latest round of “Who’s your celebrity crush?” and “Who is the best kisser?”, someone forcibly puts Niall between Harry and Louis. When they get up for a break and to rearrange, Liam takes his place. Then Zayn. Then all three.

And it’s not really Claudia doing all the work, though separating Louis and Harry is one of her favorite pastimes (along with stepping on ducklings and taking candy from small children). There are new people around, now, men in pristine suits and women in crisp dresses, and they all have sharp eyes and no smiles and watch Harry and Louis interact like they want to lock them in separate rooms. They don’t introduce themselves, just say they’re part of the new publicity team.

Simon Jones is with the band a lot now, too. He never actually came to oversee PR stuff before, but it’s like they can’t get away from him now. Harry is typing out a tweet about breakfast with Louis one morning when Jones walks up behind Harry, reads the tweet draft over his shoulder, and says, “Better not, Harry.”

“Maybe things are getting more serious before we go to America?” Liam suggests when Harry talks to him about it. Everyone has noticed the change: people sitting between Louis and Harry means they don’t interact that much, and then the whole group dynamic is off. Niall laughs too much in awkward silence and Liam overcompensates and talks so much that Zayn has to start nudging him to get him to stop, and Harry and Louis still speak to each other, but now it’s just over the heads and between the shoulders of their bandmates.

And maybe it is for their upcoming trip to the States. The rest of their team has grown—the security crew has almost doubled, Lou and Caroline Watson both have teams of assistants to help them, and
they have a videographer now, Cal. Paul has his own little band of managers that keeps everyone in line and on schedule. So, sure, when put in that context, it makes sense for them to have new publicity people.

But in the context of everything else happening around them, it’s suspicious at the very least.

Like the string of tweets Harry sees on a train trip back from a performance in France that makes his stomach lurch uncomfortably.

1D Updaters @1d_up_daters: The new interviews are just confirming what my #insider said, sorry!
1D Updaters @1d_up_daters: .@larrilove5evr I don’t know what to tell you, that’s all my #insider could say. Louis & Harry are uncomfortable with the rumors and it’s making things awkward between them.
1D Updaters @1d_up_daters: .@mollymalik @5boys1staircase it is true! I heard Harry is so annoyed that he doesn’t want to live with Louis anymore. Larry shippers are ruining the bromance!!

It could be just someone making up lies for attention, sure. Update accounts actually do that a lot; Harry doesn’t know how many times he’s read about himself sneaking out of fans' houses after he took them home from clubs, and apparently Liam has already died several times over, but this seems different. A few update accounts are run by Modest interns, and some of the others have “insiders” who are also Modest interns, and Harry can't remember which category this one falls into but he knows that this message is management sanctioned. Louis gets a hard edge around his eyes when Harry shows him the tweets, but there’s nothing they can do: Harry tries to post a picture of himself and Louis on Instagram to reassure the fans and he finds out his password has been changed. Louis tries to tweet and gets the same result.

“The next time I see Claudia, I’m demanding she give us our access back,” Louis fumes. “They could say anything, and we wouldn’t be able to dispute it because it’s against our contracts!”

In the end, they don’t have to wait for their next interview to see Claudia—they’re called into a meeting first. A black car comes to collect them, and Harry feels his spine stiffen before they’re even sat inside, his muscles coiling in fight or flight. Louis’ fingers twitch erratically, tapping against his knees.

There are a lot more people in the Fountain Studios conference room this time, and Harry recognizes a few emotionless faces as the people who have been forcibly separating the two of them at each turn.

Magee and Griffiths, who normally seem to thrive off of the attention lavished onto them by their band of awestruck employees, don’t look so happy to be the center of attention now. Harry even thinks he sees a sheen of sweat on Magee’s forehead, and he feels thrilled for the slightest moment before he schools himself back into passivity.

Play it cool, don’t get mad. That’s his and Louis’ approach today.

(It doesn’t work.)

“We’ve told you before,” Louis says stormily only a few seconds in, “we aren’t moving out. We have a contract until at least April, we’re staying at Princess Park.”

“You can stay at Princess Park,” allows Griffiths. “Harry will be moving out, though.”

“There’s no reason for it!” Harry argues hotly.
“You are eighteen, a legal adult. No legal adult who makes millions of dollars a year needs a flatmate,” Magee answers.

“You can’t make us move!”

“I won’t do it, I’m not going anywhere.”

A throat is cleared over the rising voices; Harry doesn’t see who it is, but the room shifts in response. Griffiths and Magee’s eyes both flicker over to the source of the noise and they simultaneously sit up straighter, their shoulders tightening like they’ve received instructions from a silent general.

“You will be moving out, Harry,” Griffiths says decisively. “Living with Louis is affecting your public image, which is our jurisdiction. We’ll give you a week to find somewhere new.”

“A week,” Harry says, voice flat. “You’re giving me a week to pack up everything I own and to find a new place to live, all while going to the Brits and then flying to America.”

“As we said, we have a home on standby in Hampstead for you, and we are happy to pay for a moving service while you are gone. You won’t be left homeless.”

Harry’s words fail him, so he turns to look at Louis, who is caught between incensed and wearily accepting. Harry hates that look, he hates resignation anywhere near Louis’ face. “Can we have a minute to talk?”

Griffiths doesn’t smile, but he doesn’t have to—Harry can see the gleam in his eyes, the one that says he thinks he’s won. “No, I think there’s nothing for you to talk about. This isn’t a discussion.”

Harry’s jaw clenches, but a small palm on his thigh stops him from whatever he was about to do (flip the table, storm out, burst into tears, something). Louis and Harry look at each other for a long moment, an endless moment, and then Louis lifts his hands.

_They can’t make you sleep somewhere else_, Louis signs with rapid fingers. Harry feels a rush of gratitude for Louis keeping a cool head, and lifts his own hands to answer.

_They really want me to move, though_, Harry replies. He's rusty, his sign language confined to quick phrases while on stage, and he and Louis haven't carried a fully silent conversation in forever. The whole room is tense and quiet, everyone watching in confusion as Harry and Louis' hands flit through the air.

_Maybe you should_, Louis signs, then waves his hands when Harry looks offended. _Maybe we both should._

“Stop,” Magee says uncertainly. “Stop that.”

Harry ignores him. _What do you mean?_

_Our lease ends in April anyway_, Louis signs, raising his eyebrows. _I can stay at the flat and you can move to this new place, and when the lease is up we’ll find somewhere new to live together._

_I still want to live with you until April_, Harry replies to Louis, his own brows pinched.

“What are you saying?” Griffiths demands.

_You will_, Louis assures Harry. _I’ll stay with you at the new place, and you’ll stay with me at the flat. We’ll just have two homes now._
Harry bites his lip, still a little worried that they’re somehow walking into a trap. Louis smiles sadly, like he knows.

*We could have a backyard*, Louis signs, his smile turning hopeful. *You could start a garden. I could start a footie team. Zayn could grow a weed patch and we’d never have to buy from shady dealers again.*

Harry grins slowly, but widely. *Okay. I’m in.*

Louis grins back, then turns to Magee and Griffiths, who look dumbfounded. “Okay, Harry will move. But you don’t get to choose where I live when the Princess Park lease ends in April.”

The two managers look at each other in alarm, like they’re worried that Louis agreed so quickly after his mysterious conversation with Harry right in front of their noses. They’re also probably suspicious of the way Harry can’t seem to stop grinning.

“Right,” Magee says finally. “If you can find a suitable place to live next between now and April, we will not find one for you.”

“Good,” Louis says brightly. “Are we done?”

“Yes…” Griffiths says.

“Wonderful. We’ll be at our flat, oh, sorry! I guess I mean *my* flat now,” Louis says, sweeter than poison, and smiles broadly on the way out the door.

There’s a woman there in the seat nearest the exit, and her eyes are narrowed at them as they approach. Louis notices her too, and gives a cheery salute as they pass. She lowers her head like a bull about to charge, but doesn’t say a word as they leave her and the rest of their silent management behind.

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21 February 2012

The morning of the Brits dawns bright and early, and when Harry remembers what’s happening is mere hours, what that suit hanging on the front of the closet is for, his stomach starts jumping in a mix of anticipation and nerves.

Louis is already awake, playing around on his phone. “Grimmy is *tweetin’* me like he isn’t plastered to our sofa downstairs right now,” he tells Harry, rolling his eyes fondly. Harry grins and stretches, pointing his toes as his muscles strain. Louis eyes him without a hint of shame. “You’re gonna have to stop that if you want to leave this bed anytime soon.”

Harry smiles lasciviously. “And if I don’t?”

“Oi, popstar!” calls Nick from downstairs. “You’re out of Cheerios. Send for some!”

“You’re out of crisps, too!” yells Niall.

“Are they all here?” Harry asks incredulously, sitting up and shaking out his hair.

“When are they not?” Louis asks glibly. “Hey, apparently will.i.am is having a party after the show ends tonight. Ed’s going, you wanna?”
Harry hums. “Maybe. Isn’t Emile Sandé having one too?”

“Oh I don’t know, is she?” Louis asks, interestedly. “Zayn loves her.”

Harry hums again, tracing a pattern up Louis’ ribs. “I’m nervous.”

“Yeah, me too,” Louis says, matter-of-fact. “Keep thinking it’s all a joke, that we’re going to show up and they’ll be filming us for reactions when Ashton Kutcher jumps out to tell us we’ve been punked.”

“Oh my God, I didn’t even think of that,” Harry panics.

Louis pats his knee. “If it’s any consolation, I don’t think they’d spend all that money on us just for us to show up and be told we can’t go in. Plus there was that whole official announcement of all the nominees thing.”

“Oh my God, we’re nominees,” Harry says in wonder.

Louis giggles. “You’re hopeless. C’mon, let’s feed the masses before they start eating your fake flowers.”

Everyone gets dressed in Louis and Harry’s flat, Caroline Watson and Lou coming over to help strap them into their nice fancy suits and taming their hair into something awards-show-worthy. Everyone’s loud and jumpy but grinning, an incredulous edge to everyone’s smiles that says they didn’t think they’d ever be here.

They have a limo tonight instead of the usual vans or nondescript black cars. Niall tries to pop open the bottle of champagne waiting for them and nearly slops all of it down his trousers, so he hands it off to Zayn to do it instead. They drain the whole bottle before arriving at the O2; it’s only a couple of glasses for each of them, but the bubbles combine with their nerves to make them red-cheeked and giggly, bouncy and jittery.

They sober quickly, though, when they step out of the limo and see the spectacle waiting for them on the other side of the car door.

A long red carpet stretches out in front of them, engulfed on one side by photographers screaming their names and fans on the other side screaming even louder. Ahead of them are a dozen different massively famous people posing in front of the white background, Rihanna and Adele and Bruno Mars, each of them surrounded by whirling groups of assistants and managers and various other entourage members. Liam waves over at Jade from Little Mix, who are getting out of their own car not far away.

Ed, who is the only celebrity in the area who looks at ease and also the only one without an entourage, spots them halfway through one of his interviews and walks away without finishing, leaving the reporter gaping after him and stuttering out an awkward transition to her next interview. Ed meanders over to the One Direction boys without a care, his hands in his pockets and grinning.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he says.

“Well, hello there Edward,” Niall says.
“First awards, right, boys?” Ed confirms. They all nod. “It’s a good time. And, between the six of us,” he says, looking around nonchalantly for a moment before leaning in, “what with all the live aspects of the interviews, it can get a little hard for PR plans to be followed like they’re supposed to be.”

Harry doesn’t get it, but he’s glad Liam is the one who asks. “What do you mean?”

“What I mean,” Ed says blithely, “is that when a camera is shoved in your face and you’re suddenly live, you could say anything and no one would be able to stop you. Funny, that.”

Louis’ eyes are twinkling, mischievous. “That is funny. Thanks for the insight, Ed.”

“It has always been my pleasure, Louis,” Ed smiles, then nods his head as he makes his way to the next interviewer beckoning him over.

So, when an American reporter thrusts a microphone at them and asks if they’ll be behaving themselves or if they’ll have any alcohol (because Americans do so love to condemn the rest of the world for letting teenagers drink regularly and would much rather have them doing it illegally instead), Louis shrugs and says, “Of course.” He looks at Harry out of the corner of his eye. “I think this is, uh, the only night of the year that we can kinda really get away with it, so we will be having fun.”

He’s not lying. The moment they get to their table, Louis is cracking open their second bottle of champagne and pouring out glasses for each of them.

“Yes, Liam,” Louis says, “you are having some. You’re going to have a good time whether you like it or not.”

Louis keeps the boys chatting and active as the awards begin, calming their shaking hands with refills of their glasses. Harry can tell by the near-manic look in his eyes that he’s close to panicking as well, but looking after the boys is what’s keeping him from flying off the edge and so Harry lets himself be pampered.

Tiny Tempah takes the stage to announce the Best British Single and Harry is potentially going to throw up. They can’t beat Adele, they can’t beat Ed or JLS or The fucking Wanted, but Harry wants to so badly.

The little clip of What Makes You Beautiful in the reel of nominees is Harry and Louis singing into the camera together, which feels poetic, somehow, since the other seven seats at their table are filled with the still-nameless people of their publicity team who have worked so hard recently to keep the two of them from being seen next to each other.

The screams of the fans in the back of the O2 are louder for them than for anyone else, but Harry tries to stay calm. He and Louis have been practicing their gracious loser faces, and he has to work to maintain that mask.

“And the winner is…”

Harry grips Niall’s hand under the table, shaky and sweaty.

“One Direction!”

“Holy shit!” Zayn exclaims, and the whole table jumps to their feet as the crowd thunders its approval.
Harry doesn’t know what to do; he’s overcome with sheer shock and Niall keeps trying to pull him into a hug but someone else is pushing him out into the aisle to start the walk to the stage, so he stumbles a little when he’s pulled both ways. A microphone is pushed into his hands as they take the stairs and Harry automatically turns and hands it to Louis, knowing anything he tried to say right now would be along the lines of **holy shit holy shit we did it we didn’t fail holy fuck**.

“Wow,” Louis says as they take to the stage, his voice echoing over the crowd. He meets Harry’s eyes across the podium, the other three boys between them. “We cannot believe that we are stood here on this stage.”

When it’s Harry’s turn he thanks the fans, wishing he could actually convey to them how much he means when he says it’s all for them. Because it is—they wouldn’t have made it to the *X Factor* final without them, wouldn’t have broken records with their first album and their first single. They’re passionate and creative and Harry is so, so proud to be the face that represents such a ridiculously wonderful group of people.

Liam takes the mic next and it’s his job to thank their team, which Harry isn’t quite as on board with, though that isn’t Liam's fault. Most of them, sure, the ones who work with the boys day to day, Lou and Caroline and Paul and Preston and the rest of the people that keep the S.S. One Direction afloat, Harry is so grateful to them. But to the ones pulling the strings, the ones that will take credit for this award when they had nothing to do with it? They don’t deserve this. In fact, it sort of feels like they’ve succeeded *in spite* of their team.

Louis apparently agrees: when Liam thanks everybody at Modest, Louis shoots him a look of disbelief so clear that he might has well have written *fuck no* across his forehead.

And Harry remembers Ed’s words, and knows that’s exactly why Louis didn’t even attempt to school his expression; *no one would be able to stop you*.

Harry really, really likes award shows.

Harry also really, really likes champagne.

James Corden, who’s hosting the awards, joins them at their table for a scheduled chat between performances. He sits next to Louis, who he’s known forever, and asks the boys some scripted questions about the album being number one in multiple countries and inching up to number nine in the U.S. charts before they even head over to promote it.

“Harry, can you confirm or deny that tonight you will be stepping out with Denise Welch?” James asks, another joke at the expense of Harry the Cougar Chaser but probably the first one not meant maliciously. (James had handled the rumors about Caroline and Harry’s “romance” about as well as Nick, laughing uproariously when he heard and then having to be convinced that no, it wasn’t a joke. He never really did play along with that narrative—probably because he’d walked in on Harry and Louis in the process of taking each other’s clothes off multiple times over the course of their friendship and that’s the sort of image that will stick with a person.) Besides, it’s sort of a high compliment: Denise Welch brought Matty Healy into the world, hypothetical older-woman-crazy Harry could do a whole lot worse.

“It’s true,” Harry confirms like they’d rehearsed, and James laughs like they’d rehearsed.
“You heard it here first,” James cries, and Harry slaps a hand to his forehead like he’s let his big secret out into the world, mostly because he’s had a lot more champagne than he realized and he thought it’d be funny.

He sees Zayn shaking his head from across the table, so maybe it isn’t.

The rest of the ceremony flies by, and the boys spend it drinking and drinking and more drinking, bottle after bottle of champagne pulled out of the massive ice bucket in the middle of the table and popped open, though the PR team can take some of the blame for the disappearing alcohol as well. The boys haven’t eaten since the tiny bit of lunch they’d managed to force down their nervous throats hours earlier, so it’s a good thing they aren’t nominated for any more awards or meant to have any more arranged screen time because they are quickly leaving tipsy and approaching drunk. Niall is so red-faced it’s almost a little scary, the warm flush high on his cheeks. Zayn spends ten minutes giggling at Harry’s bowtie, and Harry spends that ten minutes giggling at Zayn’s giggle. It’s a mess, they’re all sloppy and uncoordinated, loud and obnoxious, but it’s the best night Harry’s had in ages.

Once the cameras are pointed another way, **all of them** except Niall send tweets out thanking the fans for what they’ve done (and Niall only didn’t because Louis took his phone to play games on the drive over to the O2, and neither of them remember where he put it), and even with all the bubbles in their veins they don’t spell anything wrong (even Liam, though he did have a little help from Zayn).

Harry doesn’t know which person on the PR team gets the message or if it’s not even anyone at the table—everything’s a little blurry at the moment, he’s only about seventy-five percent sure that it’s Niall he’s still sitting next to—but water bottles are shoved into each of the boys’ hands during Blur’s performance at the end of the night, and they’re told to drink those as quickly as possible.

Harry sips at his—he will not be rushed, thank you; drinking too fast gives him the hiccups—but then he hears the words “press room” being passed around by their anxious team. He tries to picture himself getting up in front of a crowd armed with microphones and cameras with his tongue loose from the alcohol, and he suddenly understands the undercurrent of panic at the table.

So he gulps down his water (hiccuping miserably a couple of times), and then another, and just when his cheeks are starting to feel less warm and his knees less wobbly he’s urged to his feet and told to head backstage where they’ll be interviewed before going to the dreaded press room.

The thing is… they are not sober. The water helped, but it did not cure. It’s been a long time since his first night drinking with the boys way back after the *X Factor* ended, and Harry’s done a lot of drinking to catch up on his tolerance levels since then, but they also had a lot of champagne tonight. Buckets of champagne. **So much champagne.**

They’re all handed microphones, and told to act excited but composed. Harry’s pretty sure that all goes **out the window** when Liam starts singing in his falsetto and they all yell over each other about making copies of the award since they only got one.

Harry gets dizzy when he stands too quickly and grabs onto Louis’ arm for support, so they make it over to their **second interview** much more slowly than the other three. Louis sprawls across Zayn when they arrive and Harry perches next to them, swaying contently and letting Liam take the majority of this interview. Harry leans forward at one point and gets a little exuberant in his gesturing to the camera, so he balances himself with a hand on Louis’ **thigh**.
And then he leaves his hand there. And then he squeezes. And then moves his hand up. And squeezes again. Louis catches Harry’s wrist once the camera is turned off and tickles at the soft skin of his inner wrist with even softer fingers, his eyes dancing.

One of the PR men behind the camera rubs his temples as the interview ends like he knows he’s going to be fired in the morning.

And here’s the thing about Harry when he drinks: he gets flirty, and he gets touchy, and all he really wants is to be kissed. Specifically, all he wants is to be kissed by Louis. When Harry had asked Louis to kiss him for the first time way back in that W Hotel suite they’d lived in for a while, alcohol may have been the push of chemical confidence he needed to form the words he’d ached to say for months. But behind all that there was something else forcing him along, a buzzing ache to have his lips bitten like somebody loved him, and pouring alcohol on those flames only made it all worse. That’s why he’d begged for Louis’ mouth on his that night: those glasses of peppermint schnapps were the drops of water that burst the self-control dam.

So, when there’s a lull between the interview and their time slot in the press room, and when Louis is looking at him in that same way as he did when they were in a hotel bed in Paris, looking at him like Harry’s a star and Louis just wants to make a wish, Harry leans forward to kiss Louis. Because Louis is his boyfriend, and Louis loves him, and he loves Louis, and the alcohol floating in his veins said it was a good idea. And he’d forgotten, honestly, that there were thousands of cameras within spitting distance, and that their PR team doesn’t even really want them talking for some reason lately, let alone interacting like romantic partners and definitely not kissing in public where literally anyone could see. He forgets all that, and he grabs Louis’ forearm and leans in.

Then there are solid hands on his shoulders holding him back; Harry looks up to see two of the PR guys staring down at him with identical looks of horror, like kissing Louis would have been akin to setting his mum on fire. Louis is glaring up at them.

“Wha’d you do tha’ for?” he asks, indignant. “No one was watching!”

“Someone is always watching,” one of the men answers shortly. They let go of Harry’s shoulders but stay close, ready to step back in if Harry tries again. He doesn’t, because he realized about half a second after he saw the widening of Louis’ eyes when he angled forward that kissing him in public might be the sort of thing he should discuss with Louis first.

Still, the only person that should be telling Harry not to kiss Louis is Louis. Not two people who want to be mysterious and not tell anyone their names even though they’re all supposed to be working together as a “team”, and definitely not two people who happily follow orders handed down by greedy people who like to squeeze the boys for more money like overused sponges.

In the end, Harry has been plied with water but is still so, so tipsy, and he shakes the annoyance off with a flip of his product-sticky hair and focuses on fun things. Like finding Adele to tell her the joke he made up (“What’s it called when someone stops being an Adele fan? Inf-adele-ity!”) and complimenting Rihanna on her diamond-encrusted flask (and nearly choking when she offers him a sip from it—whatever she’s drinking smells like nail polish remover and tastes like petrol).

They’ve sweated out a little of the champagne when they head into the press room, but the whole night is still so surreal that the overwhelming sound of clicking cameras and yelling paparazzi makes Harry feel even more drunk under the scrutiny. He’s hot and rumpled and his hair’s a mess, and he can’t help but yell, “Hi, cameras!” when they enter, even though he knows it sounds stupid.

Niall does the lion’s share of the talking to the sharp-eyed crowd, because he could have finished all the champagne at the table by himself and still probably would be more steady on his feet than Harry
is when he’s sober. He answers most of the questions and does the requisite thanking of the fans.

Harry doesn’t even see it coming. The guy in charge of the press conference asks who’s going to get the award at home, and Liam says they’re going to break it into five parts.

“So who gets the head?” the man asks.

“I want the head!” Niall shouts.

“I guess you get the head,” Liam laughs.

“Harry’s getting head,” Louis says, and then passes the microphone back to Harry like the sharing-a-mic equivalent of a mic drop.

It takes Harry a second, and when he gets it, he laughs his loud, squawky laugh that only Louis can bring out of him. When he looks over Louis is smirking like the cockiest kid on the planet, and he pointedly meets Harry’s eyes before turning back to the other side to look to their PR team, who are looking mutinous. Louis raises a single defiant eyebrow, and Harry loves him so much his heart could burst.

Because it was their team that unleashed this, they were the ones who put the pieces in motion and who were only giving Louis more ammo to aim back at them. And if they keep pushing, things are only going to get worse.

They follow Ed to will.i.am’s party that night and then another party in a hotel ballroom after that and then Harry loses track of time and location but he knows it’s Louis’ hand in his pulling him to the next destination, the next adventure, and he knows he’ll never let go.

...  

25 February 2012

They’re in Detroit between radio interviews when Harry’s phone buzzes with a message from Gemma.

“Oh, apparently I’ve officially moved out,” he says, frowning down at the article she’d linked (along with about a thousand question marks). Harry Styles of One Direction goes solo as he buys his first home blares at Louis from the screen, and he looks away like he can make himself forget the words if he does it quick enough.

“Huh. That was quick,” Louis says lightly, rapping his knuckles on Harry’s knee.

“Have you seen the new place, then?” Niall asks, his head in Louis’ lap. Louis runs his hand through Niall’s hair, making the semi-quiffed front separate into its natural wave.

“Saw it the day after the Brits. It’s nice, of course, but they’ve already leaked the address to fans,” Harry shrugs, like his team didn’t give out his personal information just for a little more internet fame and the souls of a few more girls who think Harry will notice them if they camp outside his home. “I won’t be able to stay there much, not without security. And I won’t be able to leave stuff there or
people will break in to get it.”

“What a life we lead, eh?” Niall says, but he sounds sad.

Louis pats Niall’s forehead and changes the subject.

Harry curls up in Louis’ lap that night after the Big Time Rush concert, his face pressed to Louis’ collarbone. It doesn’t matter that his legs are long enough to drag the floor, or that his bum is so bony it makes Louis’ thighs jump when he moves, Louis wraps an arm around his bare waist and lays a row of kisses to Harry’s shoulder, breathing him in.

“I can’t believe I’m this sad about something I already knew was going to happen,” Harry murmurs, and Louis doesn’t have to ask him to clarify. The multiple articles about Harry moving out have hung over his head all day too, and it’s ridiculous because, like Harry said, they knew this was coming. This isn’t some retaliation article that hit them out of nowhere, this was basically laid out explicitly for them.

And yet, Louis had to see comment after comment, tweet after tweet, all of them celebrating that Harry has come to his senses and decided to leave his friendship (or relationship, depending on who you’re asking) with Louis behind. He’s matured, thank God Louis read, over and over and over, like Harry didn’t spend this morning pouting because they ran out of peach jam at the hotel breakfast bar. Harry Styles, the mature one, who actually loves Louis’ juvenile pranks and jokes, thanks very much, and if he wasn’t so bad at them he’d been worse than Louis by a long shot. Like he’s not still an eighteen year old who’s going to be stupid and fun every once in a while, no matter how “adult” they make his public image out to be.

“I know,” Louis says finally, “same for me. I didn’t think it would hit me this hard.”

“I just wish we were able to pick the place,” Harry says. “If we’re gonna be the ones living there, we should have had that choice.”

“The whole thing is weird, honestly,” Louis answers heavily. “All of a sudden they don’t want us speaking to each other because it’s unprofessional, or it’s distracting, or whatever other excuses we’ve been told recently. And I’d bet anything that they’re the insiders leaking all the details about us hating each other now. I just don’t know why.”

“Giving a reason for why I’m moving out, maybe?” Harry shrugs. “Most of the PR strategies don’t make sense to me. Also, how far could they really hope to take this? It’s going to be pretty obvious I don’t hate you when I still talk to you on stage and don’t treat you any differently.”

“I don’t know, love,” Louis agrees. It’s the most consistent part of his day, that he never really knows the full weight of the machinations shifting behind the scenes, though recently he's started trying harder to piece it all together.

“You know,” Harry says conversationally, though his lips are turned down in a pout, “I’ve read ten thousand articles about myself since we started and yet these are the ones that hurt the most. I love living with you, and- and the idea of you leaving kills me because… we’re not just together, you’re my best friend. Even if people can’t see the relationship we’re in, they can see how much I adore you anyway.”

“I hate it too, Hazza, but I don’t think other people think the way you do. You always want others to
be happy, but most people are petty. They like to see people fighting, and,” Louis laughs bleakly, “they sure seem happy our friendship is apparently falling apart.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Harry argues, frustrated. “If they’re our fans, don’t they want us to be happy?”

“Not everyone is a fan, though,” Louis reminds him. “Some people have hated us since X Factor. And with the fans, well. A good percentage of them want to sleep with you, so if they thought we were dating they’re happy that you look single now. And with the rest of them, they want to see you out with other celebrities. They fucking love when you spend time with Grimmy, and now that we’re in America they want you to hang out with fancy new American celebrities rather than boring old Louis.”

“Yes, and that’s lovely of them to hate my friends and want me to move on when I clearly don't want to. But, sure, I’d love to hang out with Katy Perry or whoever, that doesn't mean I want to live with those people. I want to live with you.” Harry pokes Louis in the center of his chest, like he’d forgotten who Harry was directing this to. “You’re my best friend. You’re the love of my life.”

Louis’ heart takes a minute to restart its beat, just like every other time Harry has blindsided him with how much he loves Louis. He kisses Harry’s shoulder in answer. “Baby, you aren’t getting rid of me, no matter what the papers spout off. You could literally tell me that you want to rent a shack on the outskirts of Holmes Chapel and I’d agree to go with you as long as I can take me kettle and the Spiderman statue.”

Harry chuckles, biting Louis’ shoulder. “Don’t really fancy a shack, but a house in Cheshire might be nice.”

“Yeah?” Louis asks, tickling his fingers up Harry’s ribs to see his smile bloom a little brighter. “We’ll get one in Donny too, then, just for a complete set.”

“Greedy,” Harry accuses lightly, giggling.

“We’re multimillionaires, Haz. If anyone’s supposed to be greedy, I think it’s us,” Louis points out. “Plus, isn’t property, like, a good investment or something? So there’s our reason.”

Harry smiles brightly and tangles his fingers with Louis’ and strokes his thumb over the back of Louis’ hand. “One in London for work.”

“One in LA for surfing,” Louis says, then frowns. “As soon as I learn how, anyway.”

“And one in New York, just because we can,” Harry finishes, kissing the tip of Louis’ nose and looking more cheerful than he has all day.

I’d do anything, Louis thinks to himself, and it’s not a startling realization, more like an obvious statement, I’d buy a hundred houses, I’d go bankrupt, just for him to smile at me.

I’d never leave if he never wanted me to.

2 March 2012

In yet another interview in Washington D.C., Harry says he’d quite like to slow dance to a cover of the Pixie’s Where Is My Mind by Sunday Girl.
Louis tucks that tidbit into his pocket, calls Harry “quirky,” and lets Harry loop their arms together for the rest of the interview as he secretly plots away.

3 March 2012

Louis would have never dreamed in a thousand years that he’d ever get tired of jet-setting across the world as part of his job, but somehow over the last year, that’s exactly what happened. Between flights from LA to London and back again, hours upon hours where Louis is stuck in a confined space and not allowed to stretch his legs, it starts to wear on him. Plus, between his own usually erratic sleep schedule and jetlag, flying for more than a couple of hours can throw him off for days. Add to that the crowds they tend to attract (or that management calls and summons for a bit of PR) and you’ve got a recipe for an unhappy Louis. Zayn’s the same way, gets itchy and irritable when surrounded by screaming crowds and suspicious security that always give him a second or third look when they read his name on his passport.

But there are buses as part of their traveling circus; three, actually, two for crew and one for the boys and the entourage if they want it. So, while Harry and Niall and Liam decide if they want to fly or take the bus while trekking across America opening for Big Time Rush and doing mad amounts of promo, Zayn and Louis can be found on the bus ninety-nine percent of the time.

The bus isn’t ideal, because it’s still a small space and it’s still spending an insane amount of time traveling, but Louis and Zayn claim it as their own and soon it’s home on the road, a comfortable space to fall into at the end of the day when nothing else is ever the same.

Liam, Niall, and Harry get homesick, of course, but they can shake it off easier than Zayn and Louis can. They’re okay with changing hotel rooms every night, falling asleep on different mattresses. They have better methods of coping, too: Harry has taken to working out nearly constantly with Liam (while Louis enjoys the results) and Niall picks at his guitar until his fingers are numb. And it’s not like Louis and Zayn stay on the bus to be antisocial; the other three are always welcome, and if they’re staying in a city for more than a day they will happily join the other boys in a hotel. But city after city, night after night, it’s nice to come back and sit in a familiar place when the stress gets to be a little much.

They’re still in D.C., jumping off the bus into a small crowd of waiting fans standing outside the radio station where they’ll be interviewed soon. Louis traces a finger up the back of Harry’s arm to let him know he’s there and guides him to the door without too many stops. Once safely in the station, the boys settle and listen to Paul lay out the schedule for the rest of the week.

“We’re in New York tomorrow, Connecticut on Thursday, Washington D.C. on Friday, and then Boston on Saturday,” he tells them, and closes his notebook with a snap. “Me and some of the crew are flying out this afternoon to get to Albany early after this interview, and you can either join us or take the bus. Just let me know.”

Louis’ bones ache with exhaustion just hearing that list rattled off; he can’t remember the last time they had a single day where they weren’t working. There hasn’t been a day where they haven’t had at least one interview since probably December, if not before. Things will slow down in a couple of weeks when they head back to England before continuing their own tour again in April, but until then they’re starting to drag, and the constancy of it all is pulling on their tempers and their sleepy limbs.

So Louis makes an executive decision.
“Boys day on the bus?” he suggests. “We haven’t had a proper lie about in ages, who cares if we’re on the road while we do it?”

“I’m in,” Harry says automatically, which surprises no one. Zayn nods, but that was a given, too.

“Yeah, alright,” Liam agrees.

“Lads night!” Niall cheers. “Or. Lads day! Lads… afternoon and early evening!”

The bus ride from Toronto to Albany is about six hours long, which isn’t nearly as bad as some other commutes they’ve had, so the boys settle into the back bus lounge easily to pass the time with a few hours of FIFA and napping.

Louis is resting his back against Harry’s chest with his ankles crossed in Zayn’s lap, drifting drowsily between asleep and awake. The subtle roar of the road under the tires is a soothing hum in his ear, and even Liam and Niall’s taunting back and forth is comforting in the background. Zayn is tracing circles around Louis’ ankle bone, and Harry’s left hand is twined with Louis’ as he scribbles in his journal with his right.

“Oi, look, someone drew me fanart,” Zayn says, turning his phone so Louis can see.

“That’s awesome, mate,” Louis says, peeking at the screen through half-lidded eyes. “You should follow the artist, maybe she’ll do more. Who is it?”

Zayn’s cheeks pinken. “Erm. Her Twitter name is Zerrie Forever? So I don’t know.”

“Hmm,” Louis says teasingly, eyes opening fully. “Like Zayn and-”

“Hmm,” Louis says teasingly, eyes opening fully. “Like Zayn and-”

“And Perrie, Lou, yes,” Zayn replies, flicking Louis on the ankle bone. “You’re such a shit.”

“He really is,” Liam agrees over his shoulder, trying to keep one eye on his match with Niall, “but what are we talking about?”

“Zayn and Perrie being in love forever, apparently,” Louis says. “Though he hasn’t bothered to tell us about it, so thanks for that, mate.”

“There’s nothing to tell, babes,” Zayn reassures him. “She’s cool, and we hang out and smoke sometimes. That’s about it.”

Liam clears his throat.

“Well,” Zayn says after a moment. “Okay, that’s not, like, totally it. Management wants us to date for PR.”

“What?” Louis says, sitting up. He thought only he and Harry would have to do that, Zayn shouldn’t have to get a fake girlfriend. His hands are shaking, just a little. “Why?”

“It’s not like Eleanor, Lou,” Zayn promises. “It’s not, like, covering anything up. I don’t have any secret romance the world already knows about but that management has to convince everyone is fake. Little Mix is just struggling with getting people to pay attention to them, and they’re a Syco artist so it helps the whole company.”
“When did you find out about this?” Louis demands.

“I dunno. I had a meeting in December, I think?”

“And you went alone?” Harry asks, finally pulling himself from his scrawled words in his beaten journal. “You don’t have to do that, you could have asked one of us to go. It’s proper scary being alone in those meetings.”

“I wasn’t alone, Li went with me,” Zayn shrugs.

“So you just didn’t tell the rest of us,” Louis says, a little hurt. He tells the boys everything, and he sort of assumed that it was mutual.

“To be fair, Lou,” Liam pipes in warily, “PR relationships are pretty normal in our line of work, and most of them aren’t as harmful as yours and Harry’s.”

“And me and Pezza get along well,” Zayn adds. “It really is just two friends hanging out and getting papped for some publicity.”

Louis crosses his arms, but stays silent. Maybe his views on forced romances are a bit skewed, what with the nightmare of Caroline, and Eleanor’s enduring presence. But still, he feels protective over Zayn, doesn't want him doing anything outside his comfort zone for publicity’s sake. Just like he wouldn't want Niall to have to do it, or Liam. Harry's different, but that's just because Louis has had to see Harry in fake relationships before, and he'd do anything in his power to keep Harry from doing it again. Louis is the only person who he is comfortable with having a fake girlfriend, because it's nearly entirely his fault that there's anything to hide in the first place—if the other boys had to pick up his slack, it just wouldn't be fair.

“Were you and Danielle a fake relationship too, then?” Louis directs to Liam.

“Not really,” Liam answers, basically abandoning his game with Niall to turn and enter the conversation fully. “She was nice enough and I needed a date for Niall’s party that one time, so I asked. We know we aren’t soulmates, so we're just friends.”

But his cheeks are red and he's avoiding Louis’ searching gaze, so Louis takes Harry's pen and throws it at him, saying, “You're holding out on us about something.” Liam rubs at his mouth and the thought clicks. “You kissed her!”

Liam goes, if possible, even more red. “I, erm.”

“You kissed her?” Zayn asks, cutting him off. “Was it after Niall's party?”

“Tell us the details!” Louis wheedles.

Liam coughs. “It was after Niall’s party, yeah. Just the once, though. It was weird, so we didn't do it again.”

“Aw, Liam,” Niall teases, patting his thigh. “You sure you did it right?”

“He knows,” Zayn says, then stumbles out, “I'm sure he knows. What he's doing, I mean. Like I bet. But I don't know, like, from experience.”


“Ha ha,” Zayn rolls his eyes, but he looks relieved as he turns back to his phone. Louis lets him get
away that, though he and Harry and Niall all exchange *what the hell* looks with each other when Liam reaches for his controller to rejoin the game. Louis feels out of the loop yet again, though this time it feels deeper than just not kissing and telling. And, well, it would be hypocritical for Louis to demand that everyone spill all their secrets when he won’t do the same, so he watches the blush fade from Liam’s cheeks and wonders what goes on when the other three aren’t around, but otherwise stays silent.

“And what about you, Ni?” Louis asks after a few quiet minutes. “Got a special lady or gentleman in your life we should know about?”

“Nah,” Niall says with ease. “You know me, I get it out of the way early. No use dancing around wonderin’ if we’re meant to be when we can just bypass all the fretting and jump straight into a relationship with nothing looming.”

“You're sort of a genius, Ni, has anyone ever told you?” Liam says conversationally.

“Sure, loads of times,” Niall jokes, then reaches back and high fives Louis when his team scores on screen.

It's funny, because even the most hardcore of fans have fallen into the 1DHQ-sanctioned trap of thinking of the boys as one-dimensional, flat people who fall into easy-to-digest categories: the charming one, the mysterious one, the sensible one, the funny one. And, of course, Niall, the happy-go-lucky one, the easy-to-read one. The one who wears his heart on his sleeve, the one who is simple and cheerful and wants nothing but his guitar and his boys.

It's funny, because comparing that to the real Niall is like comparing a Barbie doll to a real person. Niall laughs at everyone's jokes, and he loves his guitar, and he tweets more than the rest of them combined, and that's him on the surface, sure. But Niall laughs at everyone's jokes because he knows the importance of making sure everyone is heard, never wants anyone to feel like they're silent in a crowd. And he's always strumming his guitar because that's how he communicates best, his words not always coming as easily as lyrics. He can wield his guitar to ease the tension in a high-strung room or to hype up an audience or to set a tone the rest of them can follow, calming and soothing frayed nerves after nights of too little sleep and too much stress. And Niall tweets like a madman, sure, and the fans read and reply and discuss how precious he is, how sweet and simple that he loves Derby and he loves his friends from home and he loves the boys, and that's all Niall thinks about because that's all he tweets about. But, in reality, Niall tweets a lot but says little, keeping his real thoughts about anything more substantial close to his chest.

Niall speaks four languages and writes music better than he does English; if anyone has earned the label of The Mysterious One it’s him, and Louis suddenly wonders if there's anyone out there who actually *deserves* Niall. He's a ray of sunlight through a dark room, and Louis would do literally anything for him—anyone who wants a place in Niall's life will have to pass Louis’ judgment first, because he would burn the world down if Niall was ever hurt. If anyone ever hurt *any* of the boys Louis would jump into action quicker than a lightning strike, but something about Niall makes Louis want to wrap him in fleece and tuck him away from the world, to keep that brilliant smile in place even when things aren't so great.

So when Niall shrugs easily and says no, no ladies or gents in the picture for him now, Louis lets his spine uncurl, knowing Niall and his good, good heart are safe for another day.

Then Louis soundly kicks Niall’s arse in FIFA for making him worry.
Louis is playing the alphabet sign game by himself, because Harry is still writing in his journal (“I think ‘ve got something… I don't know, Lou. I think there's something here, something we can use someday”) and Niall swears Louis cheats at FIFA even though he doesn't (and, hypothetically, if he did, there's definitely no proof of that).

So Louis is loudly calling off letters from random billboards as the bus speeds on into New York—the state, not the city. They're in the part of New York that's all quiet neighborhoods and simple charm, not the hustle and bustle of urban life. They won't be in actual NYC until next week, when they loop through Tennessee before circling back to Radio City Music Hall.

Liam is listening to Louis read off signs, because that's what Liam does, and he cocks his head a little to the side while Louis searches each billboard and signpost for an X.

“What if we played this on stage, lads?” he asks thoughtfully, as though their time on stage is boring enough that it needs to be supplemented with car games to make it interesting.

“I’d rather not, mate,” Zayn counters. “I like to pretend the signs don’t exist, myself.”

Louis gives up on finding an X and turns back to fit himself against Harry's side, running his thumb along his bottom lip in thought.

That's one part of this job that has never made sense to Louis. He's absolutely sure now that their management and record company would consider a public Bonding the best possible promo they could ask for. Ever since he shared that theory with Harry, and then the two of them hashed the idea out with the other boys, it just seems like the only course of action that makes sense with the way the band is being marketed. Fans aren't making signs with their names to be cheeky or to be cute, it's serious. They really do believe that they belong with one of the boys, even though the odds of that are astronomical. A few days ago, Claudia handed down the judgment from the higher powers that they weren't reading enough signs on stage, so now there are two sign-reading segments of each show. They almost spend more time speaking than they do singing.

And it sucks, absolutely. It’s the absolute worst that the job they love so much is connected with such a shitty, money-hungry industry, one that exploits innocent teenagers for a little more cash. It’s awful that to get to do things like performing across America, they have to pretend to date people for promotional benefits and tweet praises about products they’ve never used.

But Louis gets it. A single tweet from one of the band’s Twitter accounts can turn the tide of a company’s marketing campaign, and that’s power that their label and their management won’t let go of easily. A single papped night out with the boys will put a person’s name in the headlines for days. It makes sense that their management wants to use the boys for every bit of star quality they can wring out of them, and if a public Bonding is the best way for them to get that PR, that’s what their managers will push for.

It’s the boys’ reactions to it all that Louis doesn’t understand.

They aren’t amateurs anymore. They aren’t five starstruck lads who are counting their blessings everyday to just be able to perform; they’ve wrapped up a national tour and have gone international, they’ve won a Brit, their album hit number one in multiple countries. They aren’t being paid allowances by Modest now, they’ve got real paychecks rolling in from album and tour ticket sales. Every time the Nokia advert or the Pokemon commercial airs, every time a company uses their faces to sell makeup and jewelry, posters and calendars, their team gets a whole lot of money and the boys get a cut as well. Louis has well over a million Twitter followers now; Harry’s rapidly approaching three million. They don’t jump at paparazzi waiting for them and radio interviews are now run-of-the-mill. They aren’t the same boys who stepped out behind Fountain Studios and were ambushed
by people screaming their full names—they know how to handle crowds, now, they know how to maneuver and distract long enough to get to safety.

And the other boys aren’t like Louis. They always wanted to Bond. Sure, they weren’t as upfront about it as Harry was, but Louis remembers all their conversations: Zayn wants a big family and Liam wants someone who loves dogs and Niall wants someone to spoil. They don’t necessarily want to Bond soon, but they do eventually want it to happen. They want their confirmed happily-ever-afters, and Louis can’t blame them for that.

So why does it matter where it happens? Why does it matter if they meet their soulmates in clubs or through mutual friends or from reading their names off of signs at concerts? If they really want to Bond, why does it matter how it happened?

Louis isn’t one to deny his own curiosity, so he asks.

“Lads, can you explain something to me?” Louis asks, playing with the ring on Harry’s finger that he’s started wearing recently. Maybe they hear something in his voice, or maybe they’re just bored after multiple hours of FIFA, but Niall pauses the game immediately and he, Zayn, and Liam turn to face Louis, waiting for his question. Even Harry, mid-written sentence, caps his pen and snaps his journal shut. Louis clears his throat. “If you lot love the idea of Bonding, why does reading signs at the concerts scare you so much?”

The silence after his question is considerate, as though the others hadn’t ever thought through the reasons for their distaste.

“I think,” Harry says in his meandering tone of voice that means he’s piecing together sentences like Lego blocks. “I think, for me… Well, besides the obvious, because I don’t really want to Bond anymore,” he pauses, kisses the side of Louis’ head for emphasis, “but for me, if it happened during a concert, I would just feel really vulnerable.”

“That’s the word!” Niall snaps. “It’s not that I wouldn’t be happy about it, but there’s so much that could go wrong. You could lose the person in the crowd, or someone could say it was them but they’re lying.”

“I was always worried that I’d read the sign and it would be so loud that I wouldn’t know anything happened,” Liam says, a crease between his brows. “Like, in that video Simon showed us of the Backstreet Boys concert, the girl screamed and you could hear it over the crowd. But what if you didn’t? You might never know.”

“Plus…” Zayn trails off meaningfully, raising his eyebrows. “I mean. I’m nineteen. We’re all young and famous, and if we Bond now they’ll be building ‘ready to settle down’ PR narratives immediately. If I found my soulmate, obviously I would be with them, but I’m enjoying just having fun, you know?”

“Yeah,” Niall agrees slowly. “I used to think I was ready, y’know? Like, when I was sixteen, I would think, yeah, if my soulmate shows up today, I’m ready to go. I’m ready to start. But really? I was the worst at sixteen. I definitely wasn’t ready to be in a relationship, let alone one that’s meant to last the rest of me life. And I would have hated for the person who’s supposed to love me forever to have to meet my sixteen year old self. It was not a good time, lads.”

“I can’t imagine being Bonded now,” Zayn says, tracing a pattern on his sweatpants with careful fingers. “There’s so much already happening, and then add jumping headfirst into an immediate long-term relationship on top of that? And then, if management knows, which they obviously will if it happens onstage, they’d pull you away from your new soulmate and stick you in hours of meetings
to go over how to handle it all. You’d have to decide your whole future before you even knew the person.”

Liam fidgets. “I just don’t think I’m… ready. As a person. I feel like you’re supposed to have your whole life together before your soulmate comes in, and then you start your new life with them as, like, a fully-functioning person.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Louis interjects before he can stop himself.

Liam looks up from his hands. “You don’t?”

“No, I don’t.” Louis says thoughtfully. Clearly that’s not the case, as Harry came into his life when he was at his most unsettled, and it’s only grown more tumultuous since then. If fate really does play any part of it—and at this point, he doesn’t know if he believes it does—then it wouldn’t have given Harry to him at all, but it definitely wouldn’t have pushed him into Harry’s path so early, when everything was about to change. “I think that if there’s any sort of guiding influence out there, it gives you your soulmate when you need them most. And that it might not even make sense at the time, and it might make you angry or feel like you aren’t ready, but you are. They wouldn’t be there if you weren’t.”

“Yeah,” Liam says, realization dawning. “Yeah. You’re right, of course you’re right. Why would we meet if it wasn’t meant to happen at that exact time?”

“There is no such thing as a coincidence,” Niall adds, looking just as caught in his thoughts as Liam.

“I’m so glad you didn’t want to Bond, Lou, because I can’t imagine giving you up for anything,” Harry says, his arm coming to rest across Louis’ shoulders, “but it’s too bad, just for your soulmate’s sake. If you wanted to find them, they would be the luckiest person in the world.”

Louis can’t handle the irony, so he pats Harry’s hand in thanks and walks away to have a quick breakdown in the bus toilet.

5 March 2012

Somewhere on the road between Boston and Durham, North Carolina, the bus convoy stops for an overnight stay in a small town for a night. The boutique hotel they’ve booked is cozy and charming, and Liam, Zayn, and Niall fall into bed gratefully for a few hours of rest after a quick dinner of McDonalds burgers.

Harry and Louis, however, don’t join them.

Louis had cajoled and wheedled their way into the hotel’s honeymoon suite, promising Paul they’d be extra good in the following days to make up for the tiny change in price.

It was worth it, though, to be able to run Harry a hot bath and let him relax after hours and hours of traveling. When he steps out of the steamy bathroom, freshly scrubbed and hot-water pinked, smiling so widely his dimples look etched of marble, Louis has room service dinner laid out on the tiny corner table.

“This is nice,” Harry says bashfully, swirling a fork through his pasta. Louis tangles their feet under the table. “What’s the occasion?”

“Do I need an occasion?” Louis asks, mock affronted. “I saw an opportunity to treat my favorite
person, and I took it."

“Well, I appreciate you bullying Paul into letting this happen,” Harry laughs.

“Please,” Louis scoffs, waving his hand. “He loves me, he’d give me anything. If anything, he needs to learn to stand up to me. I’m too fucking adorable for my own good.”

Harry laughs so hard he nearly inhales a meatball, and Louis can feel his eyes crinkle with glee as he smacks Harry on the back to keep from choking.

Dinner ends with chocolate cake and the last of their bottle of wine, and as Harry’s savoring his final few bites of dessert, Louis slips out of his seat and digs his iPod from his bag.

“Lou,” Harry asks when he sees Louis move to the sound system in the corner, scrolling through his music for the right song, “what are you—”

He stops when gentle piano fills the room like fog, a high voice harmonizing in the background. Louis watches Harry’s mouth fall open in increments, like he knows the song and he knows it’s Louis who pressed play, but he can’t reconcile the two in his head.


“I remember lots of things about you, Hazza,” Louis tells him, taking his hand and pressing a kiss to the soft skin. “I remember every little thing you’ve ever told me. But right now, I remember that you wanted to slow dance to this song, and I think that’s what we should do.”

Harry’s waist is warm under Louis’ palm, his breath sweet from chocolate and sparkling alcohol. He sings the words to the song, a rumbling, throaty voice next to Louis’ ear as they sway, with your feet on the air and your head on the ground, and Louis presses his face to Harry’s shoulder.

Harry’s vanilla and cinnamon candles flicker in the window as they turn, no space between them as they fall, impossibly, a little more in love.

9 March 2012

New York City is so alive it feels like the spark that starts a fire, so brilliantly lit that Harry loses his breath when he sees that famous skyline. There’s something in the air that feels like life and exuberance all bottled and sold to tourists for ten bucks a pop, and Harry wants to know the city like he knows London, like he knows Holmes Chapel. He wants to harness New York and carve a niche out for himself, to walk the streets until they’re familiar. It feels like things happen here, like this is a place that will leave its mark on Harry, a permanent brand on the inside of his ribs.

Harry has always felt at home in LA, has always identified with the long hair, don’t care, froyo-and-kale for lunch, vodka-and-caviar for dinner attitude of the West Coast, knows when his feet touch sun-kissed sand he has found a place to just be. He isn’t strange there, he isn’t an anomaly, he isn’t too big for his skin and the city around him. And Louis loves LA but has always felt more at home in London; the city wraps around him like a favorite grey jumper, thousands of years of history paving the way for one Louis Tomlinson to come in and take it by storm. He can choose to blend with the seedy corner pubs and the ancient streets and the smell of fog and wind, and he can also act as the daylight that breaks through London’s overcast skies. He likes familiarity in large doses and he also...
likes being able to step down a new street every time he goes out, and London gives him that.

New York is both, and it’s neither; it’s diverse and let it be enough for Harry, and it’s structured and hallowed enough for Louis. The city sparkles like a drop of white wine on the rim of a glass and thumps like the bass in a darkened club, it’s not sterile or stale and it’s not like anywhere Harry’s ever been before, but it’s definitely somewhere he wants to return.

And he remembers a conversation with Louis, brilliant Louis, love of his life Louis. A conversation about a future that is so crystal clear in Harry’s mind that there’s no other path except the one they’re on, the one where they do choose their own house in London, and they do get a place near Louis’ family in Donny and one in Cheshire, and they do get a place in LA for when they have to work there. The future where, someday, they do buy a New York City apartment like they’re Chandler and Monica with a much bigger bank account, and everything is settled and comfortable like a timeworn t-shirt; where there are no more doubts, where Louis stops thinking that Harry could leave and Harry stops thinking that Louis will change his mind.

“Do you see yourselves making America your second home?” a radio interviewer asks.

They’re on a small stage overlooking a crowd of a few hundred wildly ecstatic girls who all cheer at the question, and all Harry can think is Louis, Louis, Louis.

“I think they answered for you,” the reporter jokes.

Harry looks at Louis, his Louis, his favorite person, his unbreakable boy held together by warm adoration and firelight smiles, and he says, “I like New York.”

Louis makes one of Harry’s favorite faces, the pinched-lip one that tells Harry he wants to grin but Claudia’s rage hovers over them like a storm cloud to keep it from happening. And then Harry startles when Louis lands a soft touch on his leg, and he looks down to see Louis’ silent answer.

A thumbs up.

There’s so much love in Harry’s veins that he barely lasts a few more minutes without breaking and replying; their hands are hidden by the table in front of them, so Harry reaches over and taps at Louis’ thigh with his thumb, a one-two-three beat he knows Louis will interpret correctly:

I-love-you.

24 March 2015

It’s hot in Dallas.

That’s all Harry can think. It’s March, it’s not even summertime, and yet here Harry is, drenched in sweat.

They’ve been from one side of the country to the other in a mad run of promo. They’ve done a thousand radio interviews, ten thousand magazine and newspaper ones (and Paul tells him to quit exaggerating, that’s not true, you haven’t hit a thousand yet, but Harry doesn’t believe him, Harry won’t believe him). They perform on The Today Show, they perform on Nickelodeon, they perform after every radio interview. The lyrics of What Makes You Beautiful haunt Harry like a particularly catchy ghost.
The Larry Stylinson rumors roar overseas right along with them, so Louis cakes Harry in the face after one radio interview and Harry gives Louis a lovebite on camera during a different one, just to give the observant fans a little more to work with. But, later, when Louis and Harry take to their secret Twitter and Tumblr accounts they use to check up on the fans and survey the general mood, it's not the big things that their fans are hung up on. It's the small things, the instinctual ones or the accidental ones: the way Louis slides his arm back into Harry's touch, the way Louis looks at Harry while agreeing with an interviewer that he's being faithful to Eleanor, the dozens of fading bruises and bite marks across their skin that Lou never can completely cover with makeup, the little Ls Louis writes on Harry's skin to mark him when a tattoo gun is too far away. It's these tiny details that make the fans collapse into caps lock and declarations of I CAN'T HANDLE THESE TWO.

Larry Stylinson rumors are not all that follow them across the pond, though: Harry’s womanizer reputation and Louis’ facade as Eleanor’s loved-up, shut-in boyfriend chase them like bad diseases. Harry is asked relentlessly about Caroline and the Louis_Tomlinson account tweets incessantly about Eleanor—the latter is flown out for a week in NYC to remind the fans just how happy and taken Louis is, that he can't stand to let too much time pass without seeing her (even though they've been dating for five months and Louis just followed her on Twitter, but that's not suspicious at all). Louis and Harry are told about her arrival the day before she lands, and it doesn't go well: after the meeting, Harry gives Louis a litter of bruises for him to wear like jewelry before she shows up, and, for some reason, the PR team still gives the okay for some radio DJs to ask Harry about Eleanor when he's doing a solo interview that afternoon.

“Dude,” says the most abrasive DJ of all time, “what’s with all these tweets I’m getting? Is there some kind of jealous thing going on with you and Lewis’ girlfriend Eleanor?”

Harry has been in so much media training that he usually just lets his answers roll off his tongue: when talking album sales he thanks the fans, when asked about Caroline he insists they’re friends, when asked about girls, any girls, famous ones or specific nationalities or literally any of them, he says they’re hot. This time, though, he probably should have thought his answer through before speaking. “I don’t really want to talk about that, to be honest,” he says wearily, gritting his teeth against the pounding headache forming right between his eyes.

He only realizes how that sounds—like Harry's a scorned lover with a jealous streak (which, well, is very close to the truth, though he's not going to break that exclusive on Johnjay and Rich’s shitty morning show)—when the interviewer goes, “Oh my God, are you serious?”

“I’m kidding! No, I’m. I’m kidding,” Harry laughs uncomfortably, pulling at his shirt collar in frustration as the topic rolls on toward something a little more safe.

At almost the exact time Eleanor lands in New York, a fan at a New Jersey signing asks Harry if he and Louis are dating. It’s crowded, it’s loud, the girl’s phone is up to catch his reaction but she’s shaking so much the video will be basically useless, so Harry nods and confirms without thinking of ramifications, because all he knows is that he’s tired and he loves Louis and he wants to tell the people that support them that they’re happy, in any way he can.

Louis, luckily, doesn’t have to deal much with Eleanor himself while she’s in the States. Jay and her new boyfriend Dan—who Louis eyes suspiciously when they meet but otherwise doesn’t heckle too much—bring the Tomlinson girls over for a short holiday and Eleanor tags along with them almost everywhere they go, rather than following Louis around like a lost puppy. It doesn’t seem to really matter that Louis and Eleanor’s only public interaction is a heavily documented walk around Central Park and shopping for some new pants for Louis at Topman; the fans assume that when neither of them are out in public they’re locked away together, when in reality Eleanor is out doing her own shopping with Lottie and Louis is actually locked away with Harry.
Amongst all that, *Up All Night* has its U.S. release and it goes straight to number one; the Beatles couldn’t do it, the Spice Girls couldn’t do it, yet One Direction debuts top of the charts in America with their first album. Within that one glorious week of watching sales numbers climb and climb and those inconceivable phone calls ("Lads, you did it, you’re number one."), suddenly everything gets even more serious.

Which leads to today, to Dallas, to a day so muggy and hot that every movement makes Harry want to submerge himself in an ice bath and never climb out. But he can’t. He can’t stay inside in the frigid air-conditioned hotel, either; no, he has to leave his cool cocoon and venture out to yet another PR meeting with Louis.

They have these meetings almost daily, now. Harry doesn’t know if it’s Modest or if it’s Simon or if someone new is in charge, but they’re altering tiny details of their public identities day by day, and every time they come up with something new, Harry and Louis are brought in on it. And, every time they’re called by Claudia and pulled away for another conference room date with some of their least favorite people, Liam, Niall, and Zayn sadly watch them as they go, like watching lambs led off for the world’s slowest slaughter.

The new PR team members are sat around a table when Harry and Louis are ushered in, and they all look serious, their hands clasped and their heads tilted, not a single ankle moving fretfully and not a single hand tapping at the table.

“Take a seat, please,” says one of them. Harry has heard their names a couple of times as they talk amongst themselves, but they’ve still never actually been introduced; the longer this goes on, Harry gets a little happier about that. (He’s pretty sure this one’s name is Jake, though, and the woman sitting next to him is Alice, but he will be passive aggressive and call them hey instead of their names for years until they decide to introduce themselves.)

“You know,” Louis says conversationally as they settle into chairs and he laces his hand with Harry’s, their standard way to get through these meetings now, “I don’t think I can seem any more attached to Eleanor than I already am, unless you’re ready to fire up the tattoo gun and fake a couple of Markers.”

“We’re not here to talk about Eleanor,” Jake says. “We’re here to talk about Larry Stylinson.”

“Okay,” Harry says when Jake doesn’t continue. “Well… Here we are?”

“Right. The fans, rather than fully believing the public narrative as we wanted, have began to split down the middle,” Alice says. She consults a page of notes in front of her. “A majority of the fans may not believe that Harry and Caroline actually dated, but they are basically sold on Eleanor. She’s just like them, and that gives them hope, which has caused boosts in ticket sales.”

“That sounds good,” Louis says, befuddled, meeting Harry’s eyes and shrugging minutely.

“There is still a vocal minority in your fanbase that swears you and Harry are dating, however,” the woman says.

“Well…” Harry says again. “They aren’t really wrong, are they?”

“Those fans are highly dedicated to the Larry romance,” Jake says. “We need to bring them over to the other side. Divided fans can be a benefit in some areas, but for this we want them on the same page.”

“We need you to deny Larry Stylinson,” Alice finishes for him, like a staccato raindrop at the end of

“What?” Louis asks incredulously.

“It’s gone on long enough. It interferes with your public narratives, it divides the fans, it’s probably losing sales. All of that can be fixed by one denial.”

“This won’t affect your personal lives,” Alice says. “Just your public ones.”

“And then you won’t have to worry about fans finding ‘evidence’ that could lead to a breach of contract.”

“Deny Larry Stylinson,” Alice says succinctly. “Do it today, and you’ll never have to do it again.”

Soundcheck is at noon. The sun stands high overhead, beating down on them as they practice the songs they know by rote, as they sing words they could perform in their sleep.

Harry burns with indecision. He hates the idea of slapping all those fans who can actually see the truth with a straight-up denial, especially after how lovely they’ve been. But a chance to get management off their backs for a little while… freedom is so near, but Harry’s never felt further from it.

“I don’t want to do this,” Harry says as they head back down into the tunnels behind the baseball stadium where they’re performing. Louis slings an arm around his shoulders, rubs at Harry’s chest.

“I know,” he answers. The other boys were told as soon as they got out of the meeting—Liam offered to do the denial for them, but Louis waved him off. It wouldn’t be good enough, not this time. “We’ve got a little while. Let’s just try to forget it.”

Just try to forget it leads to Harry sprawled across a sofa in the corner of the locker room where they’ll change for the performance and do their radio interview later. Photographers are meandering to catch behind-the-scenes shots of Zayn and Niall kicking a football back and forth and Liam running his hands over all the name placards at each player’s cubby. Harry ignores the cameras like it’s second nature, pointing his toes and stretching, his t-shirt riding up to expose a hip bone. He doesn’t bother fixing it; honestly, the others are so used to him being half- to fully-naked that no one bats an eyelash.

Except Louis, who catches sight of Harry’s bare waist and stops trying to cram a baseball helmet onto Preston’s head long enough to meander over to inspect the situation himself, swaying his hips with something like intent in his eyes.

“Hello, pretty boy,” he says, bending over to trace a light finger along Harry’s exposed skin. Harry shivers and grins indecently up at Louis, whose eyes darken between one blink and the next.

“Hello, love,” Harry answers. “Finished bothering the people paid to keep us safe?”

“Never finished, just taking a break,” Louis says, his eyes never leaving Harry’s lips. He bends slowly again, this time leaning all the way over to whisper in Harry’s ear, covering his mouth so the snap-happy photographer nearby can’t hear when he breathes, “You look so fit today, that little patch of skin is driving me crazy.”
“Yeah?” Harry asks, his eyes lowering automatically in response to Louis’ raspy, rough voice in his ear.

“If we were alone, I’d already have you bent over this sofa,” Louis murmurs. “I’d wreck you. I’d have you screaming so loud the walls would echo with it.”

A rush of heat and need rockets through Harry’s body, fingertips to toes, and he tips his head back to allow it. “What’s stopping you?”

Claudia, that’s what. Louis is curling his hands in Harry’s hair when a sharp voice calls, “It’s time to get ready.”

Louis bites at Harry’s ear, nipping at the lobe before slowly, slowly pulling back and standing straight again. His tight blue trousers are doing nothing to hide the thickened ridge of his cock in his Topman boxers, and Harry’s mouth actually waters, eager for a taste.

“Harry, come change your shirt!” Caroline Watson calls, and though Claudia’s anger isn’t enough to deter Harry from knocking Louis to the ground and crawling on top of him, the reminder that the rest of their team—the ones Harry actually respects—are all here and watching them too is enough.

Harry pushes slowly off the sofa and bends his head to whisper a promise in Louis’ ear. “Later.”

Louis’ sharp eyes follow him as he slips out of the white shirt he’s been wearing all day, narrowed cerulean irises lingering on the cut of Harry’s hips, the rise of his shoulders.

God bless Liam Payne for dragging Harry to the gym all those times over the past few months. The baby fat has been stripped from Harry’s hips, his stomach rippled just that slightest bit. Louis’ gaze is like a physical touch that Harry can feel on every inch of his bare chest and it makes Harry feel like there’s a spotlight trained on him, a flush rising from his ribs to his cheeks. Harry chases that feeling, waits to put the right shirt on until the very last minute just to see the way Louis’ breathing goes labored and his lips get bitten until they’re pink.

There’s a Q&A before the performance, and Louis spends it watching Harry, fixing his sleeves, patting his thigh. Harry leans into it, the sun on his skin no match for the heat blooming from Louis’ simple touches.

The actual concert passes in a haze; Harry feels tied to Louis, can feel himself mirroring those little movements he’s watched Louis do on stage for months. Louis catches his eye every time he goes to get a drink, his throat moving smoothly as he swallows his water and pulls Harry further into his orbit. They move like two parts of the same person, watching without watching, moving without needing to see. It’s instinctual, it’s born of days spent doing nothing but touching each other, breathing each other in. An invisible string laces Louis to Harry, Harry to Louis.

They hardly make it out of the sight of the fans before Louis has an iron grip on Harry’s arm, separating them from the rest of the group as silently and stealthily as possible. Harry’s heartbeat ratchets up a few notches, his skin already prickling at the unyielding grasp Louis has on him. Harry feels his shoulders loosening, his muscles going pliant, his whole body amenable to whatever Louis has planned.

But they aren’t stealthy enough: a firm hand comes down to rest on Harry’s shoulder and counteract Louis tugging him away. When he turns, it’s Claudia’s suspiciously narrowed eyes looking back.

“You have two interviews to do, then the meet and greet. No time for a break.” She steers them back into the middle of the group and marches them personally to the locker room, her hard gaze brooking no argument.
Harry aches with need, but he takes a deep, calming breath and tries to relax.

They’re to do the denial for a TV reporter—no chance of any fans saying it’s doctored audio that way—but first they’ve got a radio interview to get through. Harry changes back into his white t-shirt from earlier, the blue one all sweaty from their time outside; Louis takes one look at the necklaces tangled in the dip between Harry’s pecs and spins on his heel, leaving the room.

“Kidd Kraddick,” the interviewer introduces himself, pulling Harry’s attention away from Louis’ retreating back. “I think we’re gonna have fun today, guys.”

Niall, Harry, and Zayn start the interview alone, Lou working quickly to clean up Liam’s smudged makeup and Louis sneaking back into the room a few minutes later. Harry thinks Louis is staying off-screen on purpose; he’s dickering around with some of the baseball equipment and harassing Preston and generally being uncooperative, but Harry can’t blame him. The moment Louis is back within Harry’s range, he can’t promise that he’ll have the control over his hands to keep from reaching out and anchoring them together.

They have to get all of the wildness out of their veins before they sit down for the more serious interview—for Louis that’s going to take a little longer than most, and he’s not helping himself the way he keeps meeting Harry’s gaze across the room, his eyes tracing Harry’s face, Harry’s hands clutching the microphone, the spread of Harry’s legs.

Louis finally joins the interview when he damn well feels like it and, other than holding up a pitcher of warm apple juice to Harry’s lips and making him drink it, his eyebrows raised as though to say impress me the entire time, it all goes relatively well. They call a Kardashian and Louis puts on the baseball players’ stuff they were told not to touch, and all the while he and Harry watch each other, Harry thumbing a drip of apple juice off his chin and sucking his thumb into his mouth. Louis’ mouth parts a little and he doesn’t say much else through the rest of the interview.

After Kidd packs his stuff away and thanks them, Louis pulls Harry close again.

“Such a tease,” he whispers, his thumbs fitting into the dip of Harry’s biceps.

“You’re one to talk,” Harry answers lowly, his hands landing on Louis’ waist.

“One more interview,” Claudia interrupts, and Harry hates her, he hates her, and his skin aches for more of Louis’ touch. He wants Louis to take him away, to lock them in a room far from responsibilities and reason. He wants what Louis promised, he wants fingertip bruises on his hips and scratches down his spine.

But then he remembers what this is, what this interview means, and Louis watches his face drop into uncertainty.

“Let’s just pretend this is any other interview,” he murmurs, tucking a curl behind Harry’s ear. “Just us and the boys. I’ll do the denial. It’ll be fine.”

“I can do it,” Harry offers weakly, but Louis shakes his head.

“No, love. I’ve got this.” Then he grins, and tickles Harry’s ribs. “Besides, I was there for iCarly. You can’t act for shit.”

And then he sprints away, cackling at the top of his lungs as Harry gives chase.

The thing is, Harry wants to treat this like a normal interview. He does. They’ve done so many that the protocol is ingrained in him: he knows which questions Liam and Niall will answer, and he
knows which ones Louis will take. He and Zayn usually wait for things to be directed to them, and it’s all a well-oiled machine, no awkward pauses or talking over each other unless they just want to derail the interview.

But Harry can’t help it, in this tiny room with cameras inches from their faces, the he can’t treat this like any other day. That the camera catches long moments of him staring at Louis as he answers questions about the album. He can’t just pretend they haven’t been flirting heavily for hours, now, and he can’t ignore the hot press of Louis’ body against his side. He can’t help but be captivated by everything Louis does, his wide grin when Louis rolls his eyes (off camera, of course) at the story of a girl bringing a bag of carrots to a signing for him.

“A lot of the girls were bringing me green t-shirts for St. Patrick’s Day,” Niall says, and Louis muffles a giggle in his palm.

Harry leans close and murmurs to Louis, “Probably hoping for some of his Lucky Charms, right?”

Louis buries his laugh in Harry’s back, and Harry reaches over and pats his thigh, grinning widely.

But then comes the set-up, the ease into the question they’ve been on edge for since they sat down.

“I have to ask about… the bromances?” the reporter asks, like she’s confused and like she wasn’t told to ask this exact thing. “Between Liam and Niall, and Harry and Louis. That you guys are, like —”

“Aw, you’re killing Zayn,” Niall laughs.

“I thought it was me and you,” Zayn teases at Liam, and Liam pouts jokingly right back as he shrugs.

“It’s one big five-part romance… bromance,” Louis says.

Liam, because he’s Liam, tries to take the question and keep Louis from having to answer. “I don’t know, the fans made these little things, it’s quite cute, actually, it’s really funny, they mold our names together—”

“Some people- some people genuinely think,” Louis says loudly over Liam, turning away from the camera to look at Harry. “I was looking at this the other day. Some people genuinely think we’re Bonded.”

“Oh,” Harry says, at a loss for what to add that won't completely counteract what Louis is trying to do, “yeah. I saw that.”

“They genuinely, seriously think we’re Bonded,” Louis says again.

Denial done. It’s over.

“The van is leaving for the signing in one hour!” Paul calls.

Louis doesn’t answer, too busy shoving Harry into the nearest empty office to let Paul know that he heard.

Harry gasps out something like a moan when Louis shoves him back against a wall, his shoulders
aching in the best way as they connect with hard stone. Louis chases him back, pressing against Harry as he tangles his hands in Harry’s hair and pulls him in for a kiss. Harry is nothing more than need held together by desperation in the shape of a boy, a whimpering mess of sweaty hair and flushed cheeks.

Louis yanks his t-shirt over his head and tosses it away, then does the same for Harry’s. He ducks down and bites sharply at Harry’s nipple, undoing Harry’s trousers at the same time. Harry, wanting more, always more, pushes the fabric down so that he’s completely naked, plastered against a wall and craving anything Louis wants to give, crying out when Louis’ teeth scrape patterns over his sensitive chest.

“The desk,” Louis growls, stepping back from Harry and leaving him wobbling and unsteady on his own. “Over the desk. Arse up.”

Harry nods so hard his head hurts for a second, and stumbles his way clumsily across the office so that he can lay his torso across a large wooden desk, bent in half so that his arse is up in the air.

“So gorgeous,” Louis groans, bending over to bite Harry on the cheek before shucking his own trousers. He digs a packet of lube from his pocket—this is a prime example of why they carry them everywhere—and rips it open. “How many fingers do you need?”

“Just two,” Harry whimpers. “Want it quick, Lou.”

“Fuck,” Louis grits out, but he slicks up two fingers and slides them into Harry without preamble. Harry arches, feeling split, feeling taken, and all Louis has done is press inside with light fingers. He’s overwhelmed, the hard edge of the desk digging into his ribs, Louis’ small but firm hand resting unflinchingly in the center of Harry’s back, not giving him an inch. His face is slick with sweat against his arm, lightheaded and floating, anchored only by Louis.

Louis preps him quickly, widening his fingers and scissoring, brushing over Harry’s prostate when he starts to squirm. “Ready,” Harry slurs, voice little more than a low rumble. “Lou, babe. Need you. ‘m ready.”


“Please, please,” Harry whines. He hardly knows what he’s saying, anything to get Louis to inside him. “Can’t stand it, need you. Babe, Lou, please.”

Louis lines himself up and pushes into Harry with one slick thrust, a jolt that throws Harry forward against the desk. He gasps, moaning, “Yes, Louis, yes, like that.”

Louis lays into him, his hands tight around Harry’s hips, his thighs slamming forward into the backs of Harry’s legs. This isn’t a bed in Paris, this isn’t their California king mattress back in London, this isn’t rose petals and moonlight and whispered promises of forever love. This is primal, and it’s powerful, and Louis’ mouth against Harry’s shoulder is the best kind of ownership. Harry sobs, scratches at the wood under his nails, howls out when Louis drags against his prostate.

“They can’t take you from me,” Louis snarls. “Mine, always mine.”

“Yours, fuck, fuck!” Harry gasps, destroyed and lit ablaze, coming untouched against the desk. Louis pulls out, spinning Harry before he can gather his bearings or his words or his anything at all, throwing him back up against the same wall he’d been pinned to earlier.

“Up,” he demands, wrapping both arms around Harry’s waist. Harry doesn’t hesitate, too orgasm-heavy and fucked out to second guess, just curls his arms around Louis’ neck and lets Louis pin him
up against the wall, his legs twined around Louis’ waist. Louis’ biceps are bulging from the effort and, despite all odds, Harry can feel himself growing hard again.

Louis takes one hand away and lines himself up again, thrusting up into Harry. Harry’s sensitive and sore, weak from all of Louis’ attention, so he buries his face in Louis’ shoulder and lets him have his way, his arms straining as he holds Harry up.

“Lou,” he murmurs brokenly, each thrust upwards a shot of adrenaline to his tired veins.

“One more time for me, Hazza,” Louis breathes, hoisting Harry higher with one arm so he can wrap his right hand around Harry’s cock. “Let me see you fall apart.”

Harry’s toes curl and his eyes fall shut, the slick slide of Louis’ hand a balm to his sparking nerves. Maybe it’s the all-day foreplay, maybe it’s the blend of pleasure and pain, Louis’ hot skin and the hard wall against his back. All Harry knows is that it takes only about four more pulls of Louis’ hand and he’s coming for the second time, keening and panting and flushed all over, his sweaty hair drooping in front of his eyes. He hears nothing but white noise and Louis’ breathing, he sees nothing but static and Louis’ chest in front of him, but he feels everything, trails of dynamite pleasure shivering up and down his body. Louis thrusts once, twice, three times and then joins Harry in bliss, burying himself as far as he can go, his arms and thighs shaking with exertion.

Harry won’t remember much about the signing they go to after that. He won’t remember the faces or the gifts he’s given or the small talk that he has time for before the next fans moves in front of him. But he will remember Dallas, the way his body aches in a way that reminds him of gasped breaths and tangled fingers, the way sweat still drips from the ends of his curls, the way his cheeks are flushed and his eyes can’t focus on anything for too long. The way Louis claimed him after he had to publicly let him go.

Harry will always remember Dallas.

25 March 2012

The denial didn’t work.

“We’re revamping,” says the PR rep, Alice, in Harry and Louis’ next meeting the day after they leave Dallas. “We can’t continue this half-hearted narrative push.”

“I thought we already were in a narrative push,” Harry frowns.

“It’s changing,” adds the other rep, Jake. “We’ve had some interviews talking about Eleanor and some talking about Harry being charming with girls, but we’ve had some questioning a relationship between you two as well. That can’t happen, that’s what the denial was meant to fix.”

“We can’t do any more than we already are,” Louis protests.

“Sure you can,” Alice says briskly. “We’re flying Eleanor out again and you will tweet about her more. You’ll mention her in interviews and share stories about her. The next time you’re asked about where you were when you heard about the album going to number one, you’ll say you were with
Louis shakes his head. “But—”

“And Harry, we’ll be editing your image as well. We’ll issue some articles about the American girls going crazy over you, and solidify you as single and ready to date.”

Harry clutches at Louis’ hand. “Okay, but—”

“That’ll be all, boys,” Jake dismisses. “Thanks for coming in.”

Louis goes on a papped walk in yet another park with Eleanor when she arrives, and the pictures hit the Metro back in the U.K. within a few hours. British media writes off Larry Stylinson as a silly American invention: oh, look at Louis and his very-much-not-Harry-Styles girlfriend! What a lovely couple! American media, meanwhile, blames the Larry phenomenon on the overactive minds of teenagers.

And when they go to a signing a few days later, Paul pulls them aside, pity full in his eyes, and says they won’t be able to sit next to each other anymore.

“Guess you two shoulda kept your hands to yourselves back on the X Factor, eh?” Paul jokes, trying to lighten the mood. “Then we’d never be in this mess.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right,” Louis agrees, and Harry hates it, he hates it. Louis looks right at Harry, his eyes unfathomably sad. “Shouldn't have taken what wasn't mine.”

12 April 2012

Harry is getting tattooed on a sunny hotel balcony.

Niall is next to him, his feet dangling out over the street below them, sucking on a Heineken and trying valiantly not to wince every time the tattoo gun buzzes to life against Harry's skin. A Sydney sun beats down on them, making them lethargic and syrup slow.

The Oceania leg of the tour has been an absolute dream: if their March was a nonstop whirlwind through America, coast to coast to coast again, April in Australia is a gentle breeze. They aren’t rushing from radio station to radio station, they aren’t packed with appearances from sunrise to sunset. There’s no Eleanor, no Australian female celebrity for Harry to be linked to for promo. The fans are still wildly enthusiastic, but they’re relatively respectful, and the majority of them are happy with a quick photo and autograph before letting the boys move on.

They spent their first full day in Australia on a yacht, far from the more persistent fans who were armed with the boys’ hotel and flight information handed straight to them from 1DHQ. Liam taught Louis how to fish (and immediately reaped what he had sown, having to dodge and roll as Louis started waving his pole wildly, the incredibly sharp hook at the end of the line weaponized in his hands). Niall and Harry spent hours in the water, joined by the others when the heat of the day got to be too much. They worked their way through a case of Coronas and spent a whole lot of time talking
about nothing at all, steadily bronzing under the ever-present sunlight (except for Niall, layered under a thick sheen of sunblock and remaining stubbornly pale).

Harry couldn’t have asked for a better day, and it was exactly what they all needed. The months and months of seeing the same faces, spending hours a day promoting their album, appearances, merchandise, whatever, all of that had worn down that natural friendship the boys had so easily fallen into at the beginning until they were little more than coworkers, strangers sharing hotel rooms. Harry and Louis spent all their time locked away from everyone else, too hesitant about being caught unawares to go many public places together, and too distracted by each other when they were alone to wonder what was going on outside the hotel room door.

But Harry had laid out on that yacht’s back deck next to Zayn with the intent of napping the afternoon away, and had looked over to see tattoos on his friend’s skin that he didn’t even know Zayn had.

And it had hit him, suddenly, that if he’s grown up since they were first put together as a band way back at the X Factor bootcamp, then the others have too. And he’s seen Louis’ growth, has seen his subtle shifts and cultivated nuances, could chart his maturation and the different stages of his hairstyles, but he’s not so sure he could do the same for the others.

Harry knows details about Liam, Niall, and Zayn that can only be learned through intense observation, and they’ve had the sorts of deep conversations that can only come from mass amounts of time spent together. But Harry has always been focused on how everything and everyone around will affect himself and how it will affect Louis and how all of that affects their relationship, which means that he hasn’t had quality time with the other three boys in ages.

Take Liam, for example: he says he’s not dating Danielle, but she and Eleanor are still touted by the media as the One Direction girlfriends that all other girls should aspire to be, and Harry doesn’t know if they really aren’t dating or if Liam’s lied to them about it being just for events. Harry doesn’t know how Liam’s perfectionist self is doing with all the performances they’ve done, if he’s running through moments where his voice went a little off over and over until it drives him mad like he used to do on X Factor. Harry doesn’t know if he has already started stockpiling ideas for the next album, if he’s even still interested in the writing and producing side of the process.

And then Niall: Niall, who evades every PR narrative thrown at him with careful, clever steps, who knows exactly what to tweet and what to say to get the exact reaction that he wants. In every interview, he either talks about the boys, his guitar, or getting out to play some golf. And Harry doesn’t even know if Niall plays golf, doesn’t know if he still wants to buy that Fender Telecaster he’d wanted back in LA, doesn’t know if he’s still planning to spend their month off at the end of tour back in Mullingar with his family or if he wants to see Spain like he’d talked about at one point. Harry doesn’t know if any of the pretty girls Niall pulls when they go out together have been worth writing home about, if any caught his eye for more than a night.

And, of course, like Zayn: Zayn has ink across his collarbones that Harry doesn’t know the meanings behind, and he might potentially be in negotiation with their management over a PR relationship with Perrie or he might not, Harry was never told the final decision. He doesn’t know if Zayn got to meet Rihanna when they were at the Brits, and he doesn’t know if he ever found a place in London to use for an art studio, or if he wants to keep his flat at Princess Park since he doesn’t have to pay for it. He doesn’t know if he’s found a house in Bradford he deems good enough for his family, even though he’s been looking for months.

Basically, the boys have spent so much time together that it’s pushed them apart; Harry might know Zayn’s deepest ambitions of showing his sisters that Muslims don’t have to be hated and feared, he
might know that Liam wakes up each morning with the drive to be better, to work harder, because he’s terrified of going back to being the boy with no friends, and Harry might have spent two years having circular, introspective discussions with Niall about the price of fame and its psychological consequences, but he doesn’t know if he could say what the other three even like to do on their (rare) days off anymore.

Harry’s life has been little more than turmoil and turf wars for months now, and the bandmates he knew from recording *Up All Night* aren’t the same ones who are promoting it alongside him. That’s why he spends the day on the yacht relearning it all: he asks so many questions that the boys joke that he’s secretly a journalist, and they talk for so long that their throats are hoarse at the end of the day. And Harry doesn’t know if it makes him feel better or worse that the others felt the same way about him, that they’ve grown up right in front of each other and yet they aren’t as familiar as they used to be, that the five have split into Louis-and-Harry and the Other Three. They spend the day mending that, promising each other that they won’t let it get back to how it was.

So, two days after that, Harry is getting tattooed on a Sydney hotel room balcony, and Zayn is the one holding the gun.

It’s Tom Atkins’ tattoo equipment, and he’s inside the room watching TV and within shouting distance if anything goes wrong, but Zayn’s had enough tattoos done that he knows the process and Harry trusts him.

“So, like,” Zayn says, reaching over and taking a swig of his vodka Red Bull, “just an A, right here?”

He points at the inner crease of Harry’s left elbow, a little distanced from the more Louis-related tattoos higher up on the same arm. Harry nods, and Zayn fires up the gun.

It’s over in seconds, and the fiery buzz of tattoo pain is a familiar ache now, but it’s made longer by the look of pure horror on Niall’s face as he watches, his mouth agape and his Heineken forgotten.

“Dude,” he gasps. “You don’t take, like, medicine beforehand? Paracetamol, nothing?”

Harry shrugs, inspecting the tiny A now inked for his mum. It’s not even his first of the day—Tom has already done three for Harry: LDN for where he and Louis already live, LA and NY for where they’re looking next. “Nah. It’s over before the pain meds would kick in anyway, y’know?”


“Think that’s a no, then,” Harry teases to Zayn, who sets the gun aside.

“I didn’t know you wanted tattoos at all, Ni,” Zayn says, stretching out. He’s got his own bit of new ink done by Tom up on his chest, his grandfather’s name in Arabic, and he’s careful to keep that stretch of skin out of the sunlight as he lays back next to Harry.

Niall shrugs. “Someday, yeah. I want one for you lot, kind of like Hazza’s star, only cooler.” He laughs and avoids Harry’s swat at his arm, nearly spilling the last of his beer. “But really. I just always wanted me Marker first, yeah? I don’t know how you two aren’t worried about accidentally covering it up.”

“The guy who did me and Lou’s first tattoos, he said that your body knows where your Marker is supposed to go. So, like, if you feel strongly about getting a tattoo somewhere then and don’t feel like it’s wrong, you’ll probably be okay,” Harry says.
Zayn reaches over and grabs his cigarettes from where they’re resting on a nearby table. “I’m not really worried, to be honest,” he says, flicking his lighter. “Whatever happens is what is meant to happen.”

Niall gets to his feet to grab another beer from the fridge and ignores the wave of screams that rises up as he does. It hadn’t taken long for the fans to find their hotel, but they can’t really see anything unless one of the boys stands up or moves around, otherwise it just looks like an empty balcony. Harry doesn’t mind—if the fans are content with catching flashes of the boys from twenty stories up, that means they aren’t harassing Louis and Liam during their first attempt at learning to surf.

Harry ignores the screaming as well as he can, stealing Zayn’s cigarette for a quick drag before handing it back and nestling up against Zayn’s side.

“Forgot to ask,” Niall says as he reappears, “d’you hear that demo the new producer sent over for us to listen to? Sounds sick, the next album is gonna be massive.”

“Nah, haven’t got a chance to, yet,” Harry says, stealing another puff of Zayn’s cigarette, not even bothering to take it from Zayn’s fingers as he does. “Lou said he liked it, though.”

“You’ve written a couple of things, right Hazza?” Niall asks. “You gonna try and get them on the album?”

Harry thinks back to the newest words written in his journal:

we were meant to be, but a twist of fate
made it so you had to walk away.

“I don’t know. I’ve got ideas, but nothing’s really finished.” He nudges Zayn with an elbow. “Weren’t you working on something, Z?”

Zayn nods, exhales a stream of smoke. “Yeah. M’ mate Shahid, he’s a producer, yeah? Does a lot of stuff with Emeli Sandé and Leona Lewis. Anyway, he’s doing his own album, and I’ve helped him with a few songs. Lots of hip-hop influence, R&B. Some of it’s pretty cool but he isn’t going to use it, thought I might see if we can fit it into ours.”

“It’d be great to get some of that on this album,” Niall says. “I like pop just fine, don’t get me wrong, but me, you, and Li all listen to R&B too and I think we could do a cool spin on things.”

“Tha’s what I was thinking, like,” Zayn sits up a little, his eyes wide with enthusiasm. “We’ve got all sorts of influences, yeah? A little bit of everything. It would be cool to have those represented, like an homage.”

“I guess it’ll depend on the new producers,” Harry asks. They’ve got a meeting set up with them, two guys named John and Julian, almost as soon as they get back to London, and it might turn out to be an entirely different experience than it was with Savan and Rami. They just don’t know, and they won’t for a few more weeks.

“Oi, I heard there were some shirtless popstars flashing their tits to fans around here,” calls a familiar voice that has Harry’s mouth twitching up into a grin without his approval. Louis and Liam make their way out onto the balcony—eliciting another round of delighted screams from the fans—and they’re both wind-whipped pink with salt-swirled hair, tan lines evident from their wetsuits. “Oh, it’s just you three. Pity.”

Harry flicks Louis on the ankle and tugs on his hand until he sprawls down next to him, reaching for the bandage covering Harry’s new tattoos. He inspects the list of cities with a little smile, thumbing underneath the reddened skin.

“How was surfing, lads?” Zayn asks.
“Excellent,” Liam grins delightedly. “Louis fell off constantly and we only had to do one awkward interview in our wetsuits, so not a bad day at all.” He taps at Zayn’s collarbone, near his own new tattoo. “I see you lot kept yourselves occupied.”

“Don’t worry, we spent the first half hour pining after you two,” Niall reassures them, “then Tom brought out the gun to distract us from the pain.”

“Rightfully so,” Louis nods, poking Niall for his cheek. “No tats for you, though, eh Niall?”

“He’s waiting for his Marker first because he’s a big soppy romantic,” Zayn teases.

“No, it’s because I’m sure the tattoo removal process you idiots will have to go through when you finally get a Marker and it shows up under one of your tattoos is going to hurt like hell, and I’m going to make sure I’m around to laugh at it,” Niall shoots back, and Zayn laughs as he flips him off.

“Who did yours, babe?” Louis asks, stroking at Harry’s inner elbow.

“Tom did these three, Zaynie did the A,” Harry coos, reaching over to pinch Zayn’s cheek. “’Cause he loves me.”

“Very true, but touch me again and I’ll light you on fire,” Zayn replies pleasantly. Harry grins and tilts his head back to kiss Zayn’s shoulder.

“Damn,” Louis says, ignoring all of that completely, his eyes still on the new NY on Harry’s arm. “I think you’ve got me on a Pavlovian response, H. I see you with new tattoos and I want one, too.”


The miniature screw marks over Louis’ ankle bones take all of three minutes, but the buzz of need seems to be filled; Louis goes from antsy to placid the moment the needle touches his skin, relaxed and languid in the V of Harry’s legs, resting back against his chest. Harry presses fluttering kisses to Louis’ neck as Zayn works, marveling at being able to feel the tension rise and fall in Louis’ body in a way he never gets to experience when they’re in actual tattoo parlors.

“Me next,” he murmurs as Zayn finishes up Louis’ ankles, turning his feet outward for easier access. “Same thing.”

Zayn does it without question, his tongue sticking out a little in concentration. When he finishes, he wipes his brow and sits back. “That’s actually really sick, lads.”

“It is,” Niall agrees, leaning in for a closer look.

“Can… can you do mine, Zayn?” Liam asks, and Harry automatically shakes his head, wondering when he started hallucinating. Liam, misreading Harry’s head shake, backtracks quickly. “Unless you two don’t want me to, of course. If this is, like, a couple’s thing, I can do something else.”

“Course we don’t mind, Li,” Harry says. “The more the merrier.”

“You’re sure?” Liam confirms.

“You're sure?” Louis asks. “First ever tattoo can be scary.”

“We’re here, hold our hands,” Harry demands serenely. “It helps.”

Liam gulps and scoots hesitantly forwards, grabbing Louis’ hand with his right and Harry’s with his left. Nobody mentions it, but he’s shaking as Zayn grabs the razor to shave the area clean. “Does it
“Little bit,” Harry answers honestly. “But these are tiny, no worries there.”

“And you trust our artist, yeah?” Louis asks teasingly, but that seems to be what settles Liam’s anxious bones: he looks down at where Zayn is poised by his ankle, waiting for the signal.


Liam flinches a little when Zayn starts, his muscles jumping the tiniest bit. Zayn clamps his hand on Liam’s knee to keep him still.

When Liam is freshly adorned with his first daubs of ink, Zayn hands the gun to Harry. “I want it too,” he says simply, and Harry doesn’t even hesitate. Zayn's ankles are stamped with the friendship screw in no time, and Harry's hand only shakes a little drawing the first line.

“Niall, c’mon,” Louis wheedles. “You have to! They're band tattoos, and you basically are the band!”

“I swear, Tommo,” Niall promises. “The moment I get me Marker, I'll get screws on me ankles. But I promised myself a long time ago that I would wait and get me Marker first, and I want to stick with it.”

“The very first day after you Bond,” Louis says, holding out his pinky for Niall to swear on, “you come in ready for your friendship screws.”

Niall does one better—he pinky promises all of them, swearing solemnly to ink himself the very day after he bonds.

...  

13 April 2012

The first one happens in Sydney.

It’s not that the crowds are louder here, or more enthusiastic. They might sing along to the lyrics a little better, because the album has been out longer by the time their concerts roll around. But otherwise it’s sort of the same as the American shows, or the U.K. ones.

But this one is different: the first one happens in Sydney, and it happens to Harry.

They’re taking the scheduled talking break as the campfire scene is set up on stage, and doing the requisite reading of fan signs. Liam is up first, reading a few, thanking the fans for all their support in between each name. Louis and Harry are sharing a water bottle off to the side, whispering to each other about plans for the night, if they’ll be able to sneak away and go to a pub or something.

Zayn reads his couple of (probably incorrect on purpose) signs, then Niall does his, both taking their seats around the fake fire.

“Hello, Sydney!” Harry calls into the mic, leaving Louis with a final trail of fingers against his arm.

“How are we doing tonight?”

He gets a roar of noise as a response, and he grins widely. “Excellent, excellent. Well, I hope you’re having a good time, because that’s our jobs—to make sure you have fun. How about you, Anna
DeClane, having fun? And Yasmin Jones, are you as well? Great!"

Harry’s a natural at this part; he’s at ease and confident (on the outside, at least) and he always has been so genuine about checking in with the fans, making sure that they’re getting their money’s worth for a good show. He waves and shakes out his curls, and Louis can see him thinking, okay, a couple more just from the little flicks of his eyes across the multitude of signs, the way his fingers tap anxiously on the mic.

“I know I’m having an amazing time,” he continues, “and I hope you are as well, Kimberly Taylor!”

A scream louder than all the rest rips through the arena, and the world pauses for just a minute.

Louis can’t breathe. He can’t breathe. He can’t breathe.

Air has fled the arena. His hand shakes, his heart pounds, histraitorous eyes are already welling up.

And then a wave of sound, a complete wall, an unendurable crash of thousands of voices, they all cry out, “HARRY STYLES!” like they're trying to force their own Bond onto him, like they can somehow change that his soul is linked to the girl out in the audience with her name on a sign.

Louis can’t look. His first instinct has always been to be by Harry’s side, to carry him through whatever trials he encounters. His heart pulls at him to go check on his boy (but not his boy, Harry was never his boy), but he can’t, he can’t, his heart aches and his bones are rattled and somewhere amongst all those voices shouting Harry’s name is his soulmate, and if he looks over now Harry’s probably clutching a spot on his body with a brand new Marker, and Louis can’t.

“Lou!” Niall shouts without his microphone, just barely audible over the still-thundering crowd.

Louis can’t, he can’t. The security guards are working fiercely to keep the horde at bay, the crowd fanatical and fervent, driven mad and throwing caution to the wind, all of them wanting to be close to Harry as he searches for his soulmate, and Louis wonders which one out there actually is the right person, which body among the masses is meant for the love of his life.

“Louis!” Zayn also shouts, but Louis is frozen, frozen, he can’t, his heart is in his feet and his lungs are filled with grief and he thought he’d have so much more time with Harry before someone stole him away.

The fans are near-frenzied, now, and the confusion means the whole show has been derailed, the fake campfire flickering innocently nearby, and from the corner of his eye Louis can see his bandmates crowded around his boyfriend.

Another conflicting crash of emotion falls into Louis, a pulsing anger that the others have just let Harry stay on stage with a brand new Marker, where everyone can watch as his life changes. Where he’s still in the danger zone, the epicenter of an emotional bomb, and he’s just been left there.

It’s that thought that does it, that pushes Louis to finally look over, to draw himself out of his own head: he’s only ever been okay with facing pain head-on when it came to Harry Styles, and this time is no different. And, yeah, Harry getting a Marker today with some random Australian girl (fuck, fuck, they don’t even know him, not the real him, they aren’t going to know just how amazing he is but they get to keep him forever anyway) means that Louis’ happiness is basically over, but Harry’s well-being in this moment comes above all else.

So Louis takes a breath, he breathes deep, he pushes back the hurt radiating out from the hole in his chest, he turns, and:

And Harry’s staring back, all four of his bandmates are, but Louis’ gaze is stuck to Harry. Wide
green eyes are staring back: bewildered, terrified, confused… but not in pain. Harry’s hands hang by his sides, not holding any place where he might have a new Marker, and he doesn’t seem to be suffering the kind of branding agony that comes with a new symbol forced onto his skin. He looks shaken, but unchanged.

He didn’t Bond.

“Right,” Louis says into his microphone, stupefied, half a stage and a world away from the center of his universe, who needs him now more than ever. “Zayn, you’re up first?”

The crowd is no less wild, but as Josh counts in the beginning of *I Gotta Feeling*, they’re distracted just long enough by Zayn jumping into a vocal run that Louis can smuggle Harry backstage. He follows Louis unflinchingly, his eyes stuck somewhere in the middle distance.

“I didn’t,” Harry says blankly as Louis pushes him towards Paul, who’s already on the phone. “I- I didn’t Bond. I didn’t Bond to her.”

“It happens sometimes, babe,” Louis promises him. “It’s not your fault, it’s just biology.”

“I didn’t Bond,” Harry repeats vacantly. “Lou, I didn’t.”

“I know, love, I know,” Louis says desperately. “Stay with Paul, baby, he’ll get this sorted.”

“No,” Harry says, the first sign of life appearing in his voice as he forces his gaze over to Louis. “No, Lou, you can’t go. I need you.”

“You’ll be fine, Hazza, absolutely fine,” Louis babbles, clutching Harry’s hands. “I know it’s confusing, but we can’t just abandon the show. You stay here, stay with Paul, I’ll go back out and finish the show, and we’ll get to the bottom of this afterward.”

“Lou,” Harry says, but doesn’t add anything else. Instead, he leans forward and connects their lips in a short, hard kiss. “I thought I’d lost you,” he murmurs, his voice mangled with pent-up fear. “I thought-”

“I know, I know,” Louis says, pressing their foreheads together for an everlasting second. “You didn’t lose me, love. I’m right here.”

Liam is leading the crowd in a sing-along to *Forever Young* when Louis sneaks back on stage. When Liam looks over, checking that everything is okay, Louis nods and motions for him to go ahead.

“Sorry for all the confusion, everyone,” Liam says cheerfully, voice only strained the slightest bit. “This is Moments.”

*Oh, the irony*, Louis thinks to himself as the band starts up the slow intro of Harry and Louis’ song.

It only gets worse when he sees Harry watching from the stage wings, when their eyes connect as Louis covers Harry’s lines.

*If we could only have this life for one more day*
Harry and Paul presumably sort everything out, as he reappears on stage just in time for his part of *Everything About You*. The crowd goes absolutely manic, but Harry doesn’t mention the very obvious elephant in the room, merely smiling a strained smile and singing his parts as per usual.

“Security is looking for her,” he mumbles to Louis during another water break. “They’re going to try and find her in the crowd.”

Louis swallows hard and nods, because he doesn’t have anything to say that isn’t begging Harry not to leave him.

Kimberly Taylor is a pretty girl, blonde hair up in a messy bun and wide brown eyes outlined in bold black strokes of eyeliner. She looks absolutely rattled, the hem of her One Direction shirt twisted and scrunched in her nervous hands. A blonde woman is sitting next to her, probably her mother, and has a protective arm wrapped around her shoulders.

She’s waiting on one of the dressing room sofas, staring straight out into the hallway like waiting on her executioner. Louis looks in through the open door and meets her wide, panicked eyes, and they stare at each other for a long, long moment.

She can’t be more than sixteen. A rational, kind part of Louis’ mind aches for her and what she must be going through. The rest of him wants to send her away without a second glance.

“Oh, it’s okay,” he says to Harry, who doesn’t want Kimberly to see him unless he’s absolutely sure that he will be able to go in and face her, and so is standing just off to the side, his hands held tightly by Liam and Niall. “Here’s the deal. She’s scared, and you’re scared, and that’s completely understandable. But we can’t just ignore this, yeah?”

“You’ll be okay, babes,” Zayn adds, combing through Harry’s hair.

“We love you, Haz,” Niall whispers.

“Okay,” Harry says, shifting his shoulders like preparing for war. “Let’s go.”

Kimberly stiffens when Louis reaches out and pushes the door open wider, leading the little band of boys inside. Paul is already there, as is Claudia. Another sofa is arranged just across from the one where Kimberly sits, and that’s where Louis guides them, Harry in the middle and surrounded on all sides by people he trusts.

Harry clears his throat. “Hello,” is all he says, and it's all it takes for Kimberly to break.

“Hi,” she says between gasping sobs. “I’m sorry, I just have to- *Harry Styles*.”

Harry flinches but it doesn’t matter, as once again nothing happens. His hand twitches in Louis’ as he takes in another deep breath. “I’m so sorry.”

Kimberly shakes, her thin shoulders shuddering. “What- what happens from here?”

“I don’t know,” Harry says honestly. “This has never happened to me, either.”

Kimberly’s mother speaks for the first time. “What do you mean, you don’t know?” she asks, lifting
an eyebrow incredulously. “You get a legal Bond with my daughter, that’s what happens.”

Harry shakes his head. “That’s not fair.”

“Is it fair that my daughter is going to have this forever?” her mother asks, twisting Kimberly’s arm so that her forearm is bared, showing the reddened skin around a brand new Marker. Louis doesn’t even have a moment to panic—because, shit, what if it’s a dagger like Louis’ and gives away his secret as well—before he registers that, no, it isn’t a dagger, it’s a vine of tangled roses, faded like a pencil sketch.

Zayn interrupts, “Harry isn’t bound to anything.”

“So what you’re telling me is that my Kimmy has to spend the rest of her life bound to this- this- this boy,” her mother says shrilly, pointing across at Harry, who shrinks into Louis’ side. “And he’s not even going to do anything about it?”

“It’s not uncommon for fans to Bond to celebrities, ma’am,” Paul says, his eyes wary behind his professional mask. “It’s unfortunate when the celebrities don’t Bond back, but you can’t force Harry into anything”

“Harry can’t get a legal Bond with everyone who half-Bonds with him, anyway,” Niall says staunchly.

Kimberly is still crying silently, tears tracking down her face. “I c-can’t believe this,” she wails. “This i-is the wo-orst.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry says again, and he sounds heartbroken. “I really am.”

“It’s not your fault,” Louis promises him.

“I’m going to be alone forever,” Kimberly says brokenly, curling in on herself. “And I’ll never be able to be with my soulmate? How is this fair?”

Louis can’t stand it, so he moves to crouch in front of Kimberly, taking her hand. “It’s not fair, you’re right,” he murmurs quietly, not even sure if anyone else can hear. “But love doesn’t rely on being a biological match. You can find someone who doesn’t need a Bond to love you.”

“H-how?” she whispers.

“You just have to keep your eyes open,” he answers softly. “Sometimes, it hits you out of nowhere.” He reaches up a tentative hand and brushes the tears from her cheeks. “You’re strong enough to withstand this, or it wouldn’t have happened. I promise.”

Louis wraps Kimberly in a hug, and when she shudders tears into his shoulders he knows the question tearing at her mind, because he’s not much better off:

Is it better to love Harry Styles and to have him for a short while, or to never have him at all?

22 April 2012

It’s hard to move on after Sydney. It wasn’t Harry’s fault, yet he feels responsible. Liam, Niall, and Zayn are now even more terrified of reading fan signs. And Louis, Louis keeps replaying Kimberly’s wretched sobs, how is this fair, knowing that if he’d met Harry at a different time, that would have
been him.

But they try to move on; Paul tells them it really isn’t an unheard of phenomenon for fans to half-Bond to celebrities, but that they usually don’t occur so publicly. Harry spends a lot of time on the phone with Ed, who has a way of putting things in perspective, and who talks through some song ideas with Harry to keep his mind off of things.

They play Brisbane five days later, and Louis nearly has to force the other boys onstage. He’s also worried about half-Bonds, knowing now how the scene would play out, but at the same time one of them has to keep a cool head, and apparently that duty falls to him.

So he plays it up. He dances with Niall, wraps an arm around Zayn and props his chin on his shoulder during a break, has Liam give him a piggyback ride backstage for one of their outfit changes. And he interacts with Harry in ways that make management shoot him angry looks and cut it out gestures from next to the stage. It seems to work—Harry’s smiles almost reach his eyes by the time they get to Gotta Be You, and he’s leaning into Louis’ arm thrown over his shoulders by More Than This.

Liam is thanking the fans after I Want when Harry walks over to Louis, squeezes his shoulder, and whispers, “Thank you,” in his ear.

As Zayn steps up to do his own thank yous, Harry circles back, and kisses Louis on the cheek. Like it’s nothing. Like they aren’t on stage, dozens of cameras and phones pointed at them. Like there’s no potential Kimberly out in the audience, watching it all unfold.

Louis and Liam go bungee jumping in Auckland the next day, but the swooping in his stomach from launching himself off the Sky Tower is nothing compared to the way Harry looked at him on that Brisbane stage, overflowing with gratitude and adoration, full to the top of his curly head with love.

But they can’t just trade cheek kisses onstage and expect nothing in return, especially when they’re supposed to be firmly set in their roles as the womanizer (who’s never kissed a girl) and the loved-up guy with a girlfriend (who actually has a boyfriend).

So, while in Auckland, the management teams hunts down an American model named Emma in want of some promo and has Harry walk her to her hotel door.

Unbeknownst to Harry, their team also gave Emily the okay to kiss Harry goodnight, and she does it within plain view of the salivating paparazzi. It doesn't matter that if he’d kissed her without permission he'd have a sexual harassment lawsuit on his hands, it doesn't matter that Harry's so uncomfortable in the pictures that his shoulders are a high, tight line, it doesn't matter that the kiss looks horribly awkward and obviously planned; within hours it's everywhere, and Louis can't get away.

He takes a scalding shower when he sees the pictures and tries not to cry.

The revulsion from the impromptu kiss and the lingering fear and pain from watching Kimberly’s half-Bond don’t go away, even after another few days of New Zealand sand and surf. Harry decides they should try something else: instead of ignoring the memories, pretending they didn’t happen, they attempt to drown it all away.

Which is how Louis and Harry wind up completely smashed in a Wellington bar, singing along to that stupid song by The Wanted at the top of their lungs and basically being the biggest idiots in the world.
“I love you,” Harry mumbles, squishing Louis’ cheeks with his palms and swaying forward, unsteady on his feet. His words drip like honey, slow and sugar sweet. “I love you, like.” He thinks for a long moment. “So much.”

“I love you too,” Louis swears ardently. “I... ‘lso love tequila. More, please!”

The bartender grins and tops their drinks off, and Louis loses himself in Harry and trying to find the bottom of his glass. They spend hours there, drinking steadily, heavily, the other boys and most of the security detail leaving to go back to the hotel. Paul leaves Louis’ newest security guard, Alberto, to watch over them and makes them promise not to do anything too stupid.

They promptly forget that promise with the next round of shots, but Louis isn’t chasing a desire to destroy or wreak havoc, so he and Harry are content and complacent where they are, feet tangled under Louis’ barstool, heads heavy with drink.

“‘m so glad you’re here with me,” Harry says later, his elbows sliding on the slick bar top.

“Me too,” Louis grins. “This bar ‘s excellent.”

“No, no,” Harry says, closing his eyes like Louis’ answer pains him. “No. Here. Like, in the band. On the tour.”

“Oh,” Louis says eloquently. His heart thumps a double-time rhythm against his ribs. “Yeah. Me too.”

“I couldn’ ‘ve gotten through this without you,” Harry murmurs. His eyes are wide, his pupils dilated. His white t-shirt is clinging to his shoulders, his back.

“I feel the same, love,” Louis says. He knows this is an important conversation, one that he should be giving his full attention, but Harry’s lips are soft pink and he keeps biting them like he knows what it does to Louis.

Louis leans forward.

He’s confused when, a moment later, he’s facing the opposite direction, staring out of the bar’s windows instead of planting his lips on Harry’s like he’d intended. Harry’s got an arm across his chest and his curls tickling Louis’ neck as he leans in, brushes kisses under Louis’ ear.

“Not here,” he rumbles. “Fans're watching.”

As though to accent his point, a flash from a camera outside the bar illuminates the window pane through which Louis is staring. A giggly group of girls waves, screeching periodically.

“Let’s go back to the hotel,” Harry continues, his lips catching Louis’ sensitive skin. “I ‘ve a promise to keep, anyway.”

Oh, God, he does. Hours ago, on a ragged brown sofa in the middle of a Wellington theatre stage in front of a crowd of thousands, Harry had leaned down, just like this, to whisper filthy promises in Louis’ ear.

“I’m going to eat you out tonight,” he’d rasped, like the mere thought was enough to steal his breath. “Lick you until you cry. Can’t wait to finally taste all of you.” And then he’d stepped back, leaving Louis a shivering pile of unhooked braces and racing blood, his knees shaky with need.

“Yes,” he gasps now, “yes, let’s do that.”
When he turns, all thoughts of the girls outside watching their every move are gone, banished under the light of Harry’s promising smirk.

The hotel sheets are cool against Louis’ heated skin, the pillow hot against his face. Harry’s spreading his cheeks like he owns him, peppering tiny kisses down his spine as he moves lower and lower, almost to where Louis aches for his tongue. His fingers dig into Louis’ bum, the muscles tender under his massive hands.

“I bet you taste like caramel here, too,” Harry breathes into the dimples on Louis’ back. “I bet I won’t ever be able to stop.”

“‘kay,” Louis stammers, his heartbeat ratcheting up so that it’s a staccato beat in his throat. Harry bites at his cheeks and Louis twitches forward, his veins already thrumming with more arousal than he’s ever felt just from being touched.

Harry is the biggest tease in the world, and he knows Louis’ body so well that he’s confident when he draws the teasing out, licking closer and closer to Louis’ hole but never over it. He bites soft nips all around, sucks bruises where it’ll ache for Louis just to sit.

“Harry,” Louis whines, “you’re killing me.”

“Not yet, I’m not,” Harry mumbles.

The first touch of Harry’s tongue has Louis’ shaking arms giving out, making Harry have to haul him up so that his arse is back up in the air. He bites the sheets but that doesn’t keep him from gasping loudly, his whole body shivering from the lightest licks. Harry hums like he’s savoring the taste, kissing Louis’ rim before licking over him again and again.

“Good?” Harry asks, like he doesn’t know, like he can’t tell from the way Louis is vibrating against the sheets that he’s never experienced anything like this.


“Haven’t even gotten started yet,” Harry says, and Louis trembles in sheer anticipation. “‘m gonna-”

He doesn’t say what he’s gonna do, but his hands make it clear: they spread Louis even further open and he licks harder, making Louis buck forward. It’s the strangest sensation, warm and wet, hot breaths against his hole, but everything about it is the most intimate thing Louis has ever experienced, Harry’s oral fixation out in force as he tongues him again and again.

“So smooth,” Harry says brokenly. Louis whines in answer.

Harry’s figured it out, now, as quick a learner as he ever was, and he’s going at it with thick, firm strokes, confident of the sounds he can wrangle from Louis with biting, sucking kisses. He alternates between tracing patterns against Louis’ inner thigh and spreading him apart with unyielding fingertips, surely leaving aching bruises for Louis to find later.

It takes just two pushes of Harry’s tongue past Louis’ rim for him to be flushed with heat and teetering on the edge, squirming with need. “Haz,” he slurs. “‘m so close, baby.”

Harry redoubles his efforts, buried so deep he has to pull away to gasp breaths, and when Harry
points his tongue one final time the tension in Louis’ belly crests and breaks, flooding him and the sheets under him with his orgasm. He cries out and Harry moans with him, working Louis through it.

“That was the most gorgeous thing,” Harry says dazedly, “I’ve ever, ever seen. God.”

Louis doesn’t answer, still trying to uncurl his cramped fingers. He rolls onto his side with a whimper and throws his hand out, searching for the ever-present little black bag Harry always unpacks first, without fail. When he finds it, he digs a square foil wrapper out without looking.

Harry’s eyes widen when Louis slides the condom into his hand. His cheeks are flushed and wet, his hair sweaty and wild, and he’s so hard it looks painful. “You’re sure?” he asks, taking the condom carefully. “Don’t wanna hurt you.”

“Then don’t leave me hanging,” Louis mumbles, rolling back onto his stomach and spreading his legs.

Harry whimpers and digs for the lube.

The first two fingers slide in without resistance, and Harry makes another choked sound at that, as though he didn’t realize the severity to which he’d licked Louis open. “‘nother,” Louis demands, and Harry complies.

The stretch is the best burn, soothing the need glowing in Louis’ blood with a different kind of ache. Harry stays away from his prostate, knowing all too well that Louis’ second orgasm always needs more coaxing than his first, knowing that his prostate will be too sensitive until he’s completely overwhelmed and begging for more.

Harry slides home and Louis arches back to meet him, his hands slapped against the wall so he can push back. He’s shivery with desperation, his cock already full and throbbing again. “Fuck me,” he pleads, his voice wrecked. “Fuck me, fuck me.”

“Yeah,” Harry breathes, his hands finding their home on Louis’ hips. “Gonna.”

The first thrust drives the breath from Louis’ lungs, and it takes a few seconds for him to remember how to get it back. It feels so good that his fingers tingle with it, heat flushing his thighs, his shoulders, his cheeks. He’s already close to coming again, wrapped up in waves of pulsing pleasure.

“Can still taste you, love,” Harry rumbles, like he knows all Louis needs is that last little push, and that his voice is just enough to do the trick. “Best thing my mouth has ever touched.”

“Yeah?” Louis gasps.

“Yeah,” Harry promises. “Look so good now, Lou, can’t believe I get to eat you and fuck you in one night. Look so good on my cock, prettiest boy in the world.”

Louis comes, falls into the stars with Harry’s whispers ringing in his ear.

“Love you,” Harry says, spilling the words into Louis’ mouth, “love you love you love you.” His kisses are sweet and soft, a contrast to his last few hard, quick thrusts. When he comes he presses his teeth into Louis’ shoulder, his hips slowing and his breath shuddering.

Louis kisses the center of Harry’s chest when they curl together, once they regain the feeling in their limbs and wipe the come from Louis’ stomach. “I’m so glad no one took you from me,” he whispers into Harry’s skin.
“No one will ever take me from you,” Harry whispers back. “Never.”

Louis wakes to a new tweet from Harry, and he hopes that Harry was right, that nothing ever comes between them and the happiness they've somehow stumbled upon.

tweet

10 May 2012

The few weeks between Australia and heading back to America to do that leg of the *Up All Night* tour is less restful than Louis would like, and it’s spent only intermittently with Harry. They do a weekend in *Chesterfield* (where Harry litters Louis chest with bruises so large he spends the next three days tugging his collars up to cover them) before Harry goes to LA for a work trip and Louis spends some much-needed time with Stan. When Harry gets back from LA, they book a table at Rosso and spend the next day in Manchester, seeing the Styles-Cox family and Jonny before heading back to London.

Louis and Harry officially moved out of Princess Park in April, and since they’d been in Australia where they weren’t able to do their own house hunting, they’d put their mums and Gemma on the case instead. On not-so-great nights in Australian hotels, when fans shrieked outside their windows until the early hours or when Harry had to go kiss the American model a little more for a *Mail* article, they’d cuddle up together and go through the listings their mums had recommended, talking pros and cons of flats versus houses, and dreaming up design ideas. They fell in love with a home in *north London* without even stepping inside, and though it was sort of terrifying to drop two and a half million pounds in one sitting, when they were let off after a grueling flight from Australia and found themselves inside their fully-furnished new home, it seemed worth it.

That’s where they are now, FIFA paused on the massive plasma screen as Harry runs to the kitchen to grab a couple more beers. Zayn’s asleep on the window seat overlooking the backyard, and Liam’s on the way over from his own new home, which is near Harry’s public house in Hampstead.

Louis stretches out and yawns, his fingers stiff from the Playstation controller. His hair is unwashed and stuffed under a beanie, he hasn’t changed out of his trackies in two days, and his stomach’s still a little tacky with Harry’s come from their three rounds of vigorous morning sex. It’s all a little
beautiful, and there’s not much that can shatter the silence of such a perfect day.

Except.

The front door is flung inward, startling Zayn awake and making Louis squeak in surprise. In walks Niall, an unreadable expression on his face, trailed by a confused Liam.

“Ni?” Zayn asks carefully. “What’s up, babes?”

“I,” Niall starts, and then shakes his head, lowering himself into a chair. Harry comes up behind Louis, squeezing his shoulder and shooting him a baffled look. Niall laughs, and Louis’ never heard his usually delighted cackle sound so subdued. He looks up and meets each of his bandmates’ eyes. “I guess it’s time for me to get those screw tattoos, then.”

Zayn figures it out before the rest of them. “Nialler,” he breathes. “Did you-”

Niall laughs that strange, weak laugh again and pulls the collar of his shirt down. His meaning hits home as soon as Louis sees the edge of a black symbol right over Niall’s heart.

“You Bonded?” Harry asks, his hand spasming on Louis’ shoulder.

“I Bonded,” Niall affirms.

Harry is across the room before anyone else can move, knocking Niall into a massive hug. The other three follow, squeezing so tightly that they can almost ignore Niall’s hiccuping breaths.

“Oh my God,” he gasps into Harry’s shoulder. “I Bonded, I Bonded.”

“Do you know who it was?” Liam asks.

“Yeah, fuck,” Niall breathes. “God. She’s a model.”

Harry giggles at the awe in Niall’s voice. “You have braces, and you landed a model? Good on you, Ni.”

Niall rubs his eyes. “It’s all happened so fast, shit. Her name’s Barbara, I met her at a party in Dublin. Did my usual thing, you know, said her name as soon as I knew it. I’ve never had anyone scream after I said theirs, though, and I panicked for a good long while until I realized she was asking for my name as well, cool as ever. I told her, she said it back, my chest started burning like a motherfucker, and, well.”

“Show us again,” Zayn says, and Niall pulls his shirt aside to show his Marker. It’s a simple Celtic knot, white against his pale, freckled skin and outlined in black. It’s small, only a couple inches across, but it fits Niall to a T.

Louis prods around the symbol like he usually does with Harry and Zayn’s new tattoos while Harry asks, “Did she get a knot, too?”

“Nah,” Niall says, his shoulders loosening a little. “She’s Hungarian, so she got a little traditional heart pattern. She tried to tell me, but I was still freaking out and wasn’t able to hear much.”

Zayn settles on the sofa near Niall, propping his chin on his hands. “When did all this happen?”

“Erm,” Niall says, thinking. “Yesterday? Yeah, yesterday. Holy shit, it’s not even been a full day.”

“Did you two, well,” Liam trails off meaningfully. When everyone stares blankly back at him, he
huffs and continues. “Did you, like, decide you wanted to make it official, or what?”

Niall rubs at his nose. “Yeah, erm. Yeah. We did.”

“Fuck, congrats, man,” Harry says, pulling Niall into another hug. “That’s amazing.”

“Thanks, bro,” Niall laughs. “It won’t be for a while. We’re both only eighteen, you know? And her career’s just starting with Victoria’s Secret, so we’ve got no reason to rush.”

“Oh my God, you’re Bonded,” Liam says.

“I’m fucking Bonded,” Niall says in awe.

“It’s good, yeah?” Zayn checks. “You looked freaked out when you came in, and we weren’t sure.”

“I think it is,” Niall says slowly. “I… I didn’t expect it, you know? I thought, at the rate we’re going, it would be my late twenties before I find my soulmate, maybe thirty. I didn’t… fuck, I’m eighteen. I’ve not done half the things I wanted t’ do before I Bonded, and now it’s happened and I can’t go back. It’s forever. And she’s great, Babs is great, but I don’t really know her at all. It’s terrifyin’, yeah? To tie meself to someone I don’t even know.”

“But, Nialler,” Harry soothes, perching on the arm of Niall’s chair and scratching through his hair in comfort, “you can still do all that. If Barbara is your soulmate, she’ll be interested in doing things that you want to do, too. And now you have a partner for all your adventures, for when we can’t go with you.”

“And lots of Bonds are strong even when they don’t know each other well when they meet,” Liam points out. “That’s what this time is for, to get to know her.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Niall agrees, kissing Liam’s shoulder in thanks. Then he straightens up.

“Speaking of, she’s coming to pick me up in a few, and you’re going to meet her. And you will be civil.”

Harry frowns, affronted. “We can be perfect gentlemen when we want to be, Niall,” he says, offended. “It said so in the Sun.”

There’s a knock at the door that Niall had banged through and left wide open earlier, and in the doorway stands a gorgeous, slight girl with long, wavy hair and piercing blue eyes not that different from Niall’s. Her cool, marble-esque exterior cracks when she meets Niall’s eyes, pink appearing high on her cheeks and her lips tilting up in a smile.

“Hi,” she says, and Niall lights up.

“Heya, Babs,” he says, then coughs. “These are the boys. Harry, Liam, Zayn, and Louis.”

“It is nice to meet you,” she says, shaking their hands. “I have to steal Niall away, though. My parents want to meet him.”

Niall blows out a breath and smiles. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

Louis snorts, shaking his head and speaking for the first time in a long few minutes. “In that shirt? No, no you aren’t.”

Niall looks down at his simple red polo. “What’s wrong with me shirt? It’s fine, right?” He looks to Barbara for confirmation, and she bites her lip to hide a grin.
“Well…” she trails off, giggling when Niall’s mouth drops open in shock.

“I thought this shirt was good!” he cries. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing, nothing!” Harry insists, wrapping his arm around Niall’s shoulders and leading the pack up to his and Louis’ bedroom on the second floor. “It’s just not a meeting the parents shirt, right?”

“What’s a meeting the parents shirt look like?”

Harry pulls out a wildly patterned silk top from his yet-to-be-worn pile and grins.

They eventually get Niall into a slate grey silk shirt, toned down from Harry’s wild ideas but better than the casual polo, complete with Barbara’s seal of approval. Liam, Niall, Louis, and Harry wave from the doorway, watching Niall slide into the driver’s seat of his Range Rover and take Barbara’s hand across the center console, blushing wildly.

“Can’t believe our Niall was the first to Bond,” Harry says, throwing an arm around Louis’ shoulders.

The other three stay quiet.

Louis, of course, has been Bonded to Harry almost longer than he's known him. He's gotten so used to keeping the secret that he almost doesn't flinch anymore when talk of soulmates is brought up, and he's used to the sight of the dagger on his arm.

But, if Louis’ suspicions are correct, he might not be the only Bonded band member: in fact, Harry might now be the only member of One Direction that is not Bonded.

It's not that Liam and Zayn have said anything specifically—if anything, they give it away by what they aren't saying. Namely, the stunts with Perrie and Danielle being accepted so readily. That, and the familiar look in their eyes when Zayn is asked about Perrie and Liam about Danielle, that potent cocktail of jealousy-disappointment-anger. The one that Louis is so familiar with he could probably write a book.

It's just like with Eleanor, only in this case (because he's absolutely sure that if Liam and Zayn aren't ready to share with the other boys, they definitely haven't told management) the fake relationships aren't to cover anything up, they're for pure promotion. Zayn and Liam are, in the PR team’s eyes, available and unconnected, so they're primed for stunts.

And it's not that Louis is going to force them into coming out as a couple to him; God knows that he's a hypocrite, but not that much of one. And maybe they aren't actually Bonded, maybe Liam and Zayn are more like Louis and Harry, falling into a relationship that isn't guided by biology. That's also possible, and while Louis might lose a Marker amongst all Zayn's new tattoos, he's sure he'd have noticed a Marker on Liam, at the very least.

Either way, whether it's a Bond or not, Louis will protect them from management and the media’s prying eyes. Just like with Niall and Barbara: until they're ready to announce to the public, Louis will deflect like a madman. He’ll joke away any probing relationship questions, he’ll take the brunt of the heaviest stunt.

And he won’t say a single word to Harry.
As if by fate, the tabloid speculation on the One Direction love lives ramps up as they prepare to leave for America. The *Daily Mail* is doing little more than playing a guessing game with each morning’s headlines, and *The Sun* writes sickening sweet fluff pieces on Eleanor and Louis’ comfortable and settled relationship, hinting that she’s moving in with Louis as soon as she graduates from uni, that he might be shopping for Bonding ceremony rings though there’s been no official announcement of any big news yet.

There’s no connection in the papers between Niall and Babs, and everyone sighs in relief when each day delivers news about every (real and unreal) relationship except the newest and the most vulnerable. Lunch with Barbara’s parents had went well, the Palvins unable to resist Niall’s charms, and in the two weeks after they Bond Niall and Barbara are nearly inseparable. She spends hours at Louis and Harry’s house, helping Harry in the kitchen and smuggling Louis some new Prada sweaters her designer friends gave her that Louis will only be able to wear on days off—because his contract is with Topman, and heaven forbid he ever wear anything else.

The boys pack up and ride to Heathrow together in a swirl of speculation, Harry with his model girlfriend he’d kissed back in Australia, Liam and Danielle, Louis and Eleanor, and Zayn and Perrie.

The last one, apparently, is going into effect for real, just as the boys head for the States. Perrie waves awkwardly as members of the band and the entourage start to appear outside the airport, security ready to keep the fans at bay as they move through the airport. They have to be seen, that’s the whole point but it puts the girls in danger from jealous fans, so they move into positions like a militarized outfit, the girls in the center of the roving circle.

Perrie kisses Zayn goodbye and Liam looks pointedly away; that picture will make the front of the *Mail* tomorrow.

When the boys land in America, one thing becomes clear: Louis, Liam, and Zayn are considered off limits, and no one really seems to know about Niall. Which means, funnily enough, that the brunt of the media attention falls on the shoulders of Harry, the single man among his taken bandmates, the 1DHQ-appointed frontman standing out from his friends once again.

Harry’s got five pap walks already scheduled, and they’ve been in America for all of twenty minutes.

Louis wishes he could do something. He can’t.

And, what’s worse is that the knowledge Louis either knows for sure or is pretty sure about—his own Bond, Niall’s Bond with Barbara, Liam and Zayn’s potential relationship—all of that is enough to have a tabloid editor on his knees, willing to sell his soul for what Louis knows. The One Direction management has a gold mine of press stories; they could own the headlines until the next two albums came out, if they played their cards right.

But they don’t care: they’d rather have countless meetings telling the boys to look more available to fans and to post on Instagram more to give fans that illusion of being able to see into the boys’ private lives, but then they link them to non-fans, famous girls or becoming-famous girls (as Eleanor and Danielle now have their own update accounts, something which Louis will never understand). They set them up for one media image, then saddle them with another. They could have at least three separate romantic stories running in the papers and guaranteeing sales jump and piqued interest, but they’re too busy playing out tired old PR schemes that already the fans are bored with.
They’d rather tell Louis that he’s only notable because he’s dating someone pretty. They’d rather tell Harry his only worth is his sex appeal.

They’d rather crush and spread the pieces than build something longlasting or worthwhile.

22 May 2015

The first concert on their own American headlining tour, and the first concert after Niall’s Bond, is in Connecticut.

It’s a little unremarkable, only that nervous edge at playing a full set for their first American audience lending anything new to the stage interactions. They still do dumb things, still tease and play on stage, still dance badly but enthusiastically.

Only now, Niall takes the majority of the sign reading, because he’s the only one openly amongst the band who is able to do so. None of the others are willing to admit to any secrets—even though Louis, Zayn, and Liam all eye each other suspiciously, daring each other to come clean while staunchly refusing to do it themselves—and so Niall, who thinks he’s the only one not in danger of Bonding to anyone onstage (though that half-Bond potential from a fan is still possible, just like poor Kimberly back in Sydney) does the majority of the work.

They finish the concert without incident, and Niall collapses into bed that night, exhausted and on edge from bearing the weight that Louis usually carries.

The next day, Niall crawls into Louis’ lap on the bus and hugs him ‘round the shoulders for the first full hour of the drive from Connecticut to Virginia. He doesn’t say thanks, Louis doesn’t say that he’d gladly do it anytime, but they both know it just the same.

27 May 2012

There are still unsold tickets for some of the late June concerts through the southeast region of the States; there aren’t many unsold, but there are a few.

One Direction’s management leaks the news, through shady Tumblr anonymous messages, through sketchy update accounts on Twitter, through suspicious online news sources, that Harry is planning to leave the band for a solo career, and that these concerts might be One Direction’s first and only shows in these cities.

The tickets sell out within hours, and Harry cries himself to sleep curled against Louis, sobbing about being used as a weapon against his own fans.

Two more fans half-Bond during concerts as the band treks cross-country, one to Zayn and one to Louis, both met with the same result as Kimberly, both Bonds unrequited. It almost becomes routine, the concert pausing for the slightest moment as security hunts into the crowd for the right fan and the boys check up on the bandmate who read the sign, ensuring there's no new Marker before pointedly moving on as though nothing had happened, then meeting the fan backstage. The boy who Bonds to Zayn doesn’t even seem surprised when he finds out he's not Zayn's soulmate, but the fan that Bonds to Louis is in hysterics, begging that he doesn't leave her, that he promises he’ll love her, saying she’ll kill herself if he doesn't Bond back. Louis tries to help, just like he had with Kimberly, he tries to reassure her that an unreciprocated Bond isn't the end of all things, but the girl—Amanda—is
inconsolable.

“I'll love you forever,” she sobs, “but you don't love me.”

Security ends up escorting Amanda from the dressing room, and paps get a picture of Louis watching from the doorway. The next morning, a dozen papers write stories about Louis the heartbreaker, refusing to leave Eleanor even as Bonded fans throw themselves at his feet.

There are no more tickets to buy, no more venues to fill, so 1DHQ decides to add another show on the back of Louis’ surprise garnered press.

In December, One Direction will play Madison Square Garden.

6 June 2012

There's a moment, in Mexico City, that will stand out in Louis Tomlinson’s mind for the rest of his life.

It took a long time for him to accept that his love for Harry was deeper than a biological link. And it took even longer for him to realize that those feelings weren’t platonic, that he would never be able to convince himself that he didn’t crave Harry’s touch, that he didn’t depend on Harry’s smile.

And he’d had his moment, the first time he’d laid Harry out across their bed, where it clicked in his mind that he’d never recover from what Harry has done to his heart. He was Harry’s first, and Harry will be his last.

But in Mexico City, all of that wraps itself into a neat packaged memory for Louis to hang onto forever.

They’re at the Auditorio Nacional, the concert hall packed floor to furthest wall with screaming fans. Zayn and Niall are taking a water break, Liam is off to the side fixing his microphone, and Harry-Harry is center stage, his arms outflung and head tipped back. His t-shirt is soaked through with sweat, following the curve of his spine. He's not doing anything, he's not riling up the crowd or asking for anything in particular, but the roar of noise is almost overwhelming.

The whole world loves Harry Styles, and Louis loves him most of all.

He will never be over this feeling, this rush of blood and adoration that pounds through him when he hears Harry's squawky laugh or watches him fiddle with the bracelets around his wrist, the very bracelets that management has Caroline Watson put on him to cover up the I CAN’T CHANGE tattoo he’d gotten after Leeds. He’ll never look at Harry and see anything but happiness, soft joy and radiating rightness; everything telling Louis that the two of them don't fit comes from outside the Louis-and-Harry bubble, from management and the media and from jealous fans who want Harry to themselves.

On a stage in Mexico City, it's becomes clearer than ever that Louis is in this until his last breath. He will never be over this boy, will never meet anyone who can compare.

Louis Tomlinson was ruined for life when he stepped into an X Factor bathroom and bumped Harry Styles headfirst into a sink. He was ruined at the ripe age of eighteen and has only fallen deeper since, the dimple-flashing, cheeky boy growing into an intelligent, breathtakingly beautiful, incredibly kind man with the world in his hands. Louis is more captured today than he ever was.
before, and tomorrow it will only continue to grow.

Louis catches Harry's hand in passing, the slightest brush of fingertips, and he hopes. He hopes, he prays, he *begs* to whoever might be out there that he can keep Harry for just a little longer. Just a little longer, just a few more memories, just a few more firsts, and then the person who deserves Harry can have him.

Just a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or comments, please let me know!

* tumblr | fic post*
Chapter 15: 1 July 2012 - 3 December 2012

1 July 2012

Harry wakes to sun on his face through thin hotel curtains and sore limbs from Louis’ tender touches and sharp teeth the night before. Louis is breathing evenly against the back of his neck, in out in, a soothing rhythm like a personalized lullaby.

A morning at the pool, Harry thinks sleepily, burying back into Louis’ warmth. That’s what they need. A morning at the pool with the lads, or maybe a morning dip in the ocean. Either way, really, and then a leisurely afternoon nap, dinner somewhere nice and discreet, sharing sticky kisses through dessert, then off to the concert center for tonight’s show. One more day, one more performance, then they’ll be home, hidden away, safe from the world as they recuperate and rest and gear up for round two.

One more day and it’s the end of the road.
Spotlights are different at the end of tour; they’re hotter, brighter. Heavier, like they’ve accumulated the weight of the emotion from the shows before and pour it back tenfold onto everyone who touches the stage. It’s the same with the people involved; they’re tired, overwrought and wrung out, heavy with finality and sentiment. It’s a tired sort of weight on their shoulders, but it’s balanced by something else: there’s something like luminosity under a performer’s skin as they take to the stage for the final time, something like radiance in their smiles.

One Direction is not immune to this end-of-tour incandescence, and Harry feels emboldened by it, like nothing could happen while his Chuck Taylors rest against this worn stage. The world only exists here, this tiny venue in Florida, some little oceanside city he’d never known existed before he stepped off the bus into it. The edges of the Earth stop at the walls of this concert hall, and for this last ever show it’s home away from home. Fort Lauderdale welcomes them and they return the embrace, happy for a chance to entertain for a few hours, to make fools of themselves for one more
night as a delighted audience cheers them on.

They may be old professionals at performing now, but this is only their second ever tour finale, and the *X Factor* tour just wasn’t the same. Everyone’s futures were still so undecided, tenuous grips on contracts and plans so fragile, and they were all too emotional to really take it in. Harry remembers nothing of that final *X Factor* concert except the raining confetti as he’d squeezed Louis close, hoping beyond hope that they hadn’t performed their final show ever.

There’s none of that strangling fear tonight, not here. The five boys are loose and lively as they move, the concert less rigid and structured than a normal show. They sing and dance, they joke and laugh, they answer Twitter questions and wrestle around on the familiar worn leather of the stage sofa. Louis, as is his nature, takes it a step further than anyone else: he comes back out after their final costume change—where they’re supposed to be in suit jackets and bowties for *I Want*, despite it being probably the least romantic song they have—in a full Adidas tracksuit.

“It’s black and white, at least,” he says, Cheshire cat grin curling on his face. “I fit right in.”

Harry takes it all in, absorbs it, knowing that soon this will all be a fond memory, another series of mental snapshots in his mind: the night they wrapped up their first international tour. They aren’t sad, and they aren’t nervous for the future, but they are sentimental at taking a new step and leaving this section of their lives behind.

(“Do you think we’ll ever stop thinking of our lives in terms of eras?” Niall asks one night on the bus as they rumble onward to a new city. They’re all in their bunks, curtains drawn and lights low, but from Liam’s lack of snoring and Zayn’s restless tossing and turning and Louis tracing patterns across Harry’s chest (as they’d made sure this bus had bunks big enough to accommodate even Louis’ arse), they’re all still awake.

“No,” Harry answers him quietly, his voice rumbling under Louis’ soft fingers. He doesn’t really have an explanation for his answer, he just knows it’s true: this is the *Up All Night* era, their freshman year, their spring. They’ve come through it more mature and relatively unscathed, and now they’ll move on into their summer. But he doesn’t say any of that out loud—not just because it’s prattish, but because he’s not sure he could form that feeling into words.

“That’s what I thought,” Niall answers, and it’s a long time before any of them can drop off into sleep.)

So it isn’t sad to end the tour, but it is a little disquieting. Like they’re on a precipice, looking out over something new that they just can’t see yet. Like they’re at the bow of a ship, looking out over foggy waters that could hold treasure, yes, or it could be the hunting grounds of sirens, and the only way to find out is to move forward.

They take a bow at the end of the show, arms around waists as they bend, bow, wave, repeat. They’ve been told to stretch their time on stage and not to hide away for their end-of-show celebrations, as the PR team and the boys alike all know this is the sort of access the fans want into their lives. So Harry hugs Liam, and Niall, and Zayn, right out at center stage, and the crowd roars its approval.

Harry wonders if the next tour will be like this: he knows there will be one, they’ve already been in long-term scheduling talks with Modest and Syco about recording the next album and the tour after it, but he wonders if it could ever compare to this, the first blush of fame and the worldwide road trip with his best friends. If things will change, if they’ll be expected to be different, somehow.

But maybe that shouldn’t be a worry on his mind right now, because things are already different.
The five boys who set off from Princess Park early one morning to play the Watford Colosseum are not the same boys on this Florida stage. They aren’t even the same boys who shared Coronas and tattoo needles on a Sydney hotel balcony. Things have changed: some better, some worse, and some neither, just different.

They kicked off the tour with rigid rules for the stage and looser ones for public and private; that’s been reversed, now. They have multiple minders and handlers now for every interview, they’ve been media trained within an inch of their lives, have been given scripted answers to pre-written questions and told to memorize them and make it seem natural, and there isn’t a single time Harry’s tweeted in the last few months where a little voice didn’t pop up in his head to whisper what do the fans want to hear? They used to be unleashed on interviews and given free reign to run wild; not anymore. The One Direction name is actually recognizable, the brand is thriving, and it can’t afford to be sullied by a single wrongly worded answer.

But on stage, they’re as close to free as they can be. Their strict adherence to a perfectly timed setlist and their personalized stage dress codes have been mostly abolished: the band goes on stage when they can get themselves into gear and Paul can corral them in one place, and if they want to go on a fifteen minute tangent about socks or cartwheels or Niall’s favorite breakfast foods in the middle of a show, they do. Offstage, their persistent wheedling and whining to Caroline Watson and her wardrobe team has worn them down so that they can be a little less dolled up for every minute of every show (“To tell you the truth,” she whispers to Harry one night, straightening his bow tie, “I think it’s all ridiculous, too. You’re teenage rockstars, and you look like you’re going to prom. But I’ve got something in the works for your next tour, don’t worry, love.”). In the early shows, it was blasphemy to be anything but fully buttoned, zipped, and tucked into their British Dream Boy outfits, Louis’ braces and Niall’s polo shirts and Zayn’s varsity jackets that have taken the teenage fashion industry by storm. But by the time they hit Australia summer was full in swing, and once they reached America there was no going back: they begged Caroline to let them wear less to combat the oppressive summer heat and she begrudgingly accepted, and so soon Zayn was performing in tank tops, Niall was wearing his snapback to keep his sweaty hair off his face, and even Liam got bold enough to start rolling the sleeves of his flannel shirts. Harry could never escape his blazer prison sentence entirely, but he could start leaving his casual shirts unbuttoned, exposing the white vest and usually-hidden necklaces underneath. Harry was pretty sure, Louis knows, too, and so he does it on purpose, turning it into a miniature strip tease before they step back on stage and grinning impishly at Harry through the rest of the show.

Sure, they can’t get too crazy; even now, their last show of this whole tour, Zayn wasn’t able to wear his earrings, and Niall couldn’t wear the t-shirt he’d bought on sight when they’d went shopping in Dallas (CRAZY MOFOS is apparently not conducive to their saintly personas), and Lou made Louis shave his stubble as Harry whined pathetically and begged her to change her mind (she didn’t; if CRAZY MOFOS goes against their image, the rough five o’clock shadow dusting Louis’ cheeks and the muss of his fringe definitely is. Partly because it makes Louis look like the guy who played Kenickie in Grease rather than a baby-faced dreamboat. Partly because Harry’s mouth waters uncontrollably when he catches sight of it, and Claudia didn’t want to run the risk of Harry being on stage when his willpower inevitably gives up and he drops to his knees in front of Louis). But it’s still better than it used to be, and they have Caroline’s continued promises that she’ll push for more realistic concert attire for the next go round.

But their relaxed stage antics and wardrobe isn’t all that’s changed over the course of this tour. Early on they’d added a Twitter questions section, which, while usually the most memorable part of each
show, was just another way to get the band to read the full names of more fans in the audience. And, to Zayn’s chagrin, these couldn’t be misread without being obvious, so they capped it at five questions every night, each of them carrying an equal burden. Niall offered to do all of them, but the others talked him out of it: he and Barbara are understandably still keeping their new Bond private from everyone except close family and friends, and that would be a major tip off to observant fans.

Another new thing is that the other boys have started to up their stage antics to try to match Louis and Harry’s and make it less obvious—Louis swears that’s an order from Claudia that the others just don’t want to admit to and Harry agrees, because it’s uncomfortable as hell. They’ve always been an affectionate group, probably always will be when they’re comfortable and don’t feel like they’re putting on a show. But Louis and Harry’s is born of actual intimacy and a lack of personal boundaries, and the others can’t quite fall into that, no matter how hard they try. Niall can pull it off easily enough, but Zayn always looks mildly uncomfortable when he hangs all over Harry between songs and whispers in Niall’s ears. Liam is even worse, because while Zayn truly is tactile when they’re in private and just doesn’t like the public aspect while on stage, it took a long time for the other four to wear down Liam’s walls. It’s against his nature to hug Louis around the waist or to hip bump Niall as he passes—he’s a receiver of all the cuddles he gets, not an instigator. On stage, the awkwardness is magnified and usually captured on camera forever.

But these are small changes in the grand scheme of things, the stage interaction and their clothing changes and the Twitter questions, all rolling together into one big, inescapable fact: they aren’t the same band and this isn’t the same tour as it all was when they started out way back in December. Back when Caroline Flack was dropping Harry off to sham a tearful goodbye in Watford, he and Louis were still feeling out their relationship and all it entailed, and they’d never performed their own songs in front of screaming crowds of thousands.

There’s no girlfriend for Harry now, though gossip sites on each side of the Atlantic like to hint at scandalous activities with all the fans who scream when he dimples, reporting on rumors of girls falling out of Harry’s hotel room at all hours. And Louis still has Eleanor, though that’s about as convincing of a stunt as Zayn’s with Perrie, surviving entirely on Twitter and false gossip and falling apart the minute anyone starts to pull at the unraveling strings.

Back on the Florida stage, the backing band, Jon leading the way, comes down and takes its own bow. As the crowd’s attention shifts to them, Louis meets Harry’s eyes across the stage and they move together without a pause, Harry burying his face in the crook of Louis’ neck and breathing in the sweet smell of stage sweat and Louis’ hairspray.

This is what Harry feels will change more than anything as this tour ends: already, it’s like iron shackles have been welded to hold Harry and Louis on opposite sides of the room. Tonight, this cruddy little stage in Fort Lauderdale, this feels like the last step in a long line of increasingly stronger pushes.

They’ve fought it, so far, because that’s what they do: when management institutes a rule that they aren’t happy with, they deliberately do the opposite. When the new PR team tells them to tone down the stage interactions, Harry and Louis spend the Twitter questions time openly flirting on the stage sofa. But Louis smiles at Harry, and later his Twitter is covered in declarations of love for Eleanor. Harry grabs Louis’ hand as they pass onstage, and after the show he’s sent out to mingle with more models in front of waiting paparazzi.

It's not punishment, not retaliation; Harry knows better now, that that's not how business works. Management and their clients aren’t like parents and their children. It’s never been retaliation, it’s always been a reaction. They have to keep Harry and Louis’ public images solid and consistent, and to do that they have to counteract all that Harry and Louis actually do that weakens those images.
So Harry understands, though he doesn’t like it. He knows what will happen when he licks his lips at Louis across a stage, and he weighs that risk against the reward, the pink blush on Louis’ cheeks. The risk is usually worth it, but that doesn’t mean the consequences don’t hurt.

Harry hugs Louis on a Florida stage, knowing that if things continue the way they have been, this might be the last time he’ll be able to do it.

The boys are unwilling to leave the stage but the goodbye can’t stretch on too long—leave them wanting more, that’s the motto—and so they pile off to the stage wings in a flurry of high fives and bouncing excitement. Hugs with the crew are next as the boys reach them, a couple of wiped away tears from Caroline and Lou making Harry teary as well. When Paul tries to act like it’s business as usual, they knock him to the ground and clamber over him in a wriggling puppy pile of boys, ignoring his mock-aggravated huffs.

“Alright, alright,” he says gruffly, picking Niall up by the scruff of his neck and getting to his feet. “Quiet down now. To the dressing room with you.”

They sober up at that, standing up and brushing the dirt off their sweaty clothes. “How many?” asks Liam, his hands only shaking a little. They’ve all gotten a little better at this part since Kimberly in Sydney, but it doesn’t ever get easy.

“Two,” Paul says. “Harry and Niall. As always, you other three can go change and relax on the bus if you want.”

They never do, though Paul always gives them the option. Better to face the night’s half-Bonded fans as a unified front. Louis squeezes Harry’s hand and Liam puts his arm around Niall’s shoulders, and Paul leads them to the dressing room, the high of performing their last ever *Up All Night* concert fading with each step.

Somewhere around the first New Jersey concert at the end of May, even the rabid American media got tired of reporting just how fanatical their teenage daughters were over One Direction. There has to be an angle, or the story gets old. The rumors of Harry sleeping with fans gave had no proof to work with, what with them being completely and utterly false, so the reputable sources stuck with hinting at it rather than reporting it as fact, and there were only so many stories they could squeeze out of Eleanor and Louis’ and Zayn and Perrie’s tweet exchanges.

And then the story broke about the fan that half-Bonded to Louis being dragged away by security, and the angle was found. The media loves it, loves reporting on One Direction’s latest “spurned half-Bonds,” calling it—and them—bigger than Beatlemania. And the public eats it up: a boy band with a rabid following isn’t nearly as interesting as a boy band whose concerts produce at least one half-Bond every week or so.

They made Barbara Walters’ Most Fascinating People list off the back of all the press and recorded their [interview](#) for it while in New York, but the hubbub didn't die there. National press honestly didn’t know what to do with it, just like with most teenage passions, so they brought in the psychologists, the pathologists, the androgynologists, all to explain to the adults what in the hell was happening with their kids.

“There are no more half-Bonds in the world today than there were back during Beatlemania, or when Elvis performed on *The Ed Sullivan Show*,” said a smarmy, Cambridge-educated Bonding specialist for part of a 60 Minutes special. “In fact, there were probably more half-Bonds for John Lennon during the mass public hysteria of Beatlemania than there are for the members of One Direction since the Beatles were a more…” he smirked, “relatable band. There is no way to know for sure, but there were probably just as many people with half-Bonds to their idols back then as
there are today. We just hear about more now because more are being confirmed now.”

“The difference,” said that man’s colleague, a social androgynologist who studied at Harvard Medical, “is the access these fans have to their soulmates compared to fans of Buddy Holly or Frank Sinatra or, like Dr. Benns said, the Beatles. Bonds don’t form when people become famous, so these teenagers aren’t just choosing to Bond because they think these boys are cute. Bonding is still largely a science with many unknown variables, but what is known for sure is that it is predestined. No matter how much people wish for anything different, Bonds can’t and don’t change from birth. These fans were always meant to Bond to One Direction’s band members, and they would have even if the band members never became famous. But, by becoming well-known and recognized, the band became able to give those people a chance to see them, potentially meet them, and in some cases confirm a half-Bond if the band member says their name.”

“In today’s world of international travel and worldwide concert tours,” the first specialist continued, “fans have unprecedented access to their favorite musicians, actors, or athletes. If the parent of a One Direction fan is willing to shell out the money, that fan could potentially see them a hundred times a year. That wasn’t available during Beatlemania. So where Beatles fans whose soulmate was Paul McCartney were stuck at home, watching him from afar, One Direction fans don't have to do the same.”

“And while not every One Direction fan was born with one of the band members as their soulmate,” a steady-voiced announcer said as the scene changed to a group of teenagers on a sofa, four girls and a boy, talking with an interviewer, “the fans who do Bond are in good company.”

“I'm Denise, and my soulmate is Niall Horan,” the furthest girl on the left introduced herself.

“I'm Anna, and my soulmate is Liam Payne,” said the one next to her.

“I'm Krista, and I'm Bonded to Zayn Malik.”

“My name is Anthony, my soulmate is Harry Styles.”

“And I'm Amanda, and I Bonded to Louis Tomlinson.”

“How do you recover from the shock of Bonding to someone who doesn't Bond back to you?” the interviewer asked, steepling her hands.

“I don't know if it was a shock,” Anthony said. “The first time I heard Harry's voice, it clicked for me. I knew I had to go to the concert, there was no way I couldn't, and I knew I’d do whatever it took to get him to notice me.”

“Same for me,” said Anna. “I couldn't really put a name to it, but I knew I had to go to the Detroit show. And when Liam didn't read my sign, I knew I had to get tickets to the Chicago show the next night as well. I’d have followed them to Mexico City the night after that if I’d needed to.”

“Me too,” said Krista, nodding. “I always felt connected to Zayn, even if it was never confirmed. And I wasn’t really surprised when he didn’t Bond back. I mean, it sucked, but I wasn’t surprised.”

“I’ve always assumed that when Liam or the other guys in the band Bond someday, it’ll be to some superstar model, some actress, I don’t know. Someone out of my league, because that’s what he deserves,” Anna shrugged.

“The half-Bonding all depends on the guys reading the fan-created signs during concerts, is that correct?” the interviewer asked. “If they didn't do that, you'd never know for sure they were your soulmates. Does that bother you, that they’re taking that risk when they read the signs?”
“No, it doesn’t bother me,” Anthony said immediately, shaking his head. “That’s what everyone wants to happen. We want to Bond to them, but, obviously, the ideal scenario is that they Bond back.”

“They were meant to read our signs,” Denise said. “Just like how we were meant to Bond to them. It's all fate.”

“I mean, we help fate along a little bit,” said Krista, smirking a little. “I made the most massive sign I could, and I acted like a complete idiot until Zayn noticed me and read my name. I wasn't going to sit by and let that opportunity pass.”

“Mine happened when they were answering Twitter questions,” Amanda said. “When Louis was the one who started reading what I'd tweeted and I realized he was going to say my name, I knew it was coming. I was like, ‘Okay. Here we go.’ And I was right.”

“Amanda, your Bond and the scene with meeting Louis after the show, that's what brought this phenomenon to the public’s attention, right?”

“Yeah, it was. That picture was tweeted something like a hundred thousand times,” Amanda answered.

“And how does that feel, being the one who brought this to light?”

“It was scary at first,” Amanda said thoughtfully. “I didn't really know where to go from there, you know? I'd met my soulmate, found out he wasn't mine, and I still loved him and wanted to support him and the band but I didn't know how to do it without always being sad. But that's when Anthony found me on Twitter and said he was in the same boat.”

“It's sort of like, we hit the pinnacle as a One Direction fan. You can't be more devoted than we are,” Anthony continued for her. “But it's also, like, where do we go from here?”

“The answer?” the voice-over asked thrillingly. “Exclusive One Direction soulmate clubs.”

“We talk constantly,” Krista nodded. “And not always about the band. We're best friends now, and the Bonds brought us that.”

“The One Direction crew and management have always been good to us, too,” said Amanda. “They send us things from time to time, tickets or merch or whatever. Sort of like a thank you, I think, for staying so devoted.”

“It's good to have that support, from the band’s team and from each other,” Denise said. “Sometimes it's hard to wrap my mind around the idea that I'm sixteen and half-Bonded.” She moved the collar of her shirt aside to show a heart-shaped Celtic knot under her collarbone. “These guys are here for me when I have those breakdowns.”

“They aren't the only ones,” the voice-over said. “As each new fan Bonds, they find themselves with hundreds of thousand of new friends who want to know the type of person whose soulmate is a One Direction member.”

“I gained... fifty thousand followers on Twitter?” Anna guessed. “Something like that.”

“My Instagram blew up,” Amanda agreed.

“We're sort of considered superfans,” Anna said. “It's not really by choice, but it's still true. Most of us spend our days on Twitter, keeping up with our soulmates through their tweets, update accounts,
and news articles. We probably know more about them than their moms.”

“Do you have any contact with the band?” the interviewer asked.

“Harry follows me on Twitter and Instagram, and he's messaged a couple of times to check on me, make sure I'm doing okay,” Anthony preened.

“It's, like, the least they can do,” Krista joked. “I gave my soul to you and you didn't Bond back, you can at least have me showing up in your Twitter feed.”

“We talk to the crew more than the actual guys,” Denise said. “We’ve hung out with their hair and makeup artist before, and with some of the stage crew. But the boys are too busy to keep up with all of us.”

“One last question,” the interviewer said, politely interested in the answer. “Do you regret going to those concerts? Would you rather have stayed Unbonded, or have you accepted being half-Bonded?”

“In the end, I'm happy with my choices,” Amanda answered for all of them. “I'm sad Louis isn't my soulmate as well, but that's just how fate worked out. Either way, I'm Bonded to my favorite person in the world, I've got new friends who understand me completely, and I'm famous among One Direction fans. I'm proud of this part of my life.”

One Direction themselves were curled up together on a quiet, low-lit bus somewhere between Mexico City and San Diego when that 60 Minutes segment aired. When it finished, they were all a little more than shocked, a buzzing silence falling between them.

“Maybe they're so casual about it because they're so young,” Harry had suggested weakly. His stomach was all kinds of twisted; he ached for those people whose destiny had led them to this, a metaphorical notch on Harry's belt, and not even the fun kind. Anthony and Kimberly and Sara and Rafaa and Allie and more, spread across multiple continents and with only one thing in common: a soul Bonded to Harry Styles. He hates that he's somehow done this to them, chosen them out of the crowd at random, but he doesn't do it on purpose. They may feel some kind of pull toward him, Harry doesn't know, but he's definitely never felt it for anyone in return; if he had, he would have avoided all of this like the plague. He'd never willingly put anyone through a half-Bond, no matter how nonchalant they are about it.

“They aren't that young,” Niall refuted. He looked almost angry, frustrated and lacking an outlet. Zayn squeezed a hand around his wrist, warning him not to be careless even if their half-Bonds weren't there to hear what he said. “They're sixteen and seventeen, we're eighteen to twenty. We wouldn't have acted like that if we half-Bonded a couple of years ago. We would have taken it seriously.”

“We don't know, though, do we?” Liam asked quietly.

“Maybe it's their coping mechanism,” Louis had said abruptly, his voice raising with each word. “Everybody handles things differently. Just… just leave it alone. They didn’t ask for this.” And then he'd left the other four in resonating silence, stalking away with his shoulders hunched high, though he couldn’t go far.

The other three caught Harry's eye, and he shrugged, nonplussed. He found Louis in his bunk and curled around his back, staying quiet until he was ready to talk.

“You aren’t disappointed in yourself for this, are you?” Harry had whispered into Louis’ hair. “It’s
“You don’t think anything is my fault,” Louis whispered back.

Back in Fort Lauderdale, that’s stuck on a loop in Harry’s mind as they trudge backstage to meet the latest members of the One Direction soulmate club. *You don’t think anything is my fault*—well, no, of course he doesn’t. Harry knows he’s a little biased, but he’s always thought Louis was the best type of person, selfless and caring and so, so full of love. He knows that Louis would never choose for anyone to Bond to him if he wasn’t able to give a piece of himself in return; just like how he knows that if, somehow, Louis ever half-Bonded to anyone, he wouldn’t expect them to give up finding their own soulmate to be with him. He’d hate that, Harry is absolutely sure of it, and he’d never be able to live with himself if his soulmate was missing out on their happiness for him.

Luckily, he and Harry aren’t like that, and they’ve fallen into a relationship where Bonds have nothing to do with it. He can’t imagine how messy it would be if it was any other way.

Harry’s half-Bonded fan tonight is a girl named Heather, and Niall’s is actually older than him, a twenty-something named Amelia. They’re both polite, resigned, saying Niall and Harry’s names with little hope of getting them to Bond. Heather’s forearm now bears a tangle of lightly shaded roses, and Harry can’t help but fixate on the image as they reassure the girls that they’ll keep in touch and that everything will be okay. All of Harry’s half-Bonds, at least as far as he’s aware, have gotten Markers shaped like flowers in the same spot as Heather’s, and he’d always wondered what that meant. Will his match theirs, someday, some sort of blossom on his arm? Or is it meant to be complementary, like a yin to a yang? What's supposed to match flowers, anyway?

Not that he ever plans on finding out, but it’s still interesting.

Harry slumps against Louis’ side as Heather and Amelia take their leave. Exhaustion weighs heavy on his eyelids and shoulders, and this time it isn’t counteracted by a performance high. “Wanna go home, Lou,” he mumbles tiredly. “Take me home.”

“Soon, love,” Louis says, petting his curls. “Soon.”

Harry never sleeps as deeply and as dreamlessly as he does on the plane back to England, his head pillowed on Louis’ shoulder, anxieties about half-Bonds left on the ground behind him.

6 July 2012

It takes a week for Harry to stop startling awake at the crack of dawn, expecting Paul to come barging in to shake him awake at any moment before he remembers he’s home and safe and warm in his own bed next to Louis. It takes almost three days for Harry to stop automatically reaching for his management-approved blazer-button-up-bowtie combination when he wants to go anywhere, and the relief is almost tangible when he’s able to slip into his new skinny jeans and oversized t-shirts instead. And it takes five full days for Harry to answer the backlog of texts and Whatsapp messages and Twitter DMs and actual, real life phone calls from people other than his mother who are wanting him to hang out as soon as possible.

But, as he wakes to an insistent buzzing one morning, one particular batch of texts catches his eye as the most urgent, sent only a few minutes before.
Harry snorts and goes to throw on an outfit and ruffle his hair into submission, tilting Louis’ head back as he plays Call of Duty and kissing his forehead without making him look away from the screen.

“Going somewhere?” he calls, his thumbs flying wildly on the controller.

“Brunch with Nick. I'll be back soon,” Harry answers, grabbing a banana for the road.

Louis hits pause on his game and beckons Harry over, pulling him to stand between his knees. He kisses a path across Harry’s stomach over his shirt, making Harry giggle. “I was going to go over to Ed’s today, want to go with me?”

Harry perks up. “Ed's in town? Yeah, I'd love to see him. I'll take a cab to brunch and text you the address so we can ride together.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Louis smiles, tugging Harry down for one last long kiss before sending him out to the waiting taxi.

Brunch with Nick and his crew is at a discreet little cafe not far from the BBC Radio studios. Harry arrives in a flurry of hugs and cheek kisses, then makes them all swear they won't Instagram any pictures until they're leaving the restaurant, lest the place be overrun by fans within minutes. After a few teasing jabs at Mr. Superstar needing everyone to comply to his rules, they tuck in to an excellent brunch.

“Glad to be back in London, then?” Nick asks between bites of omelet.

“You have no idea,” Harry says, taking a swig of orange juice and spearing a slice of kiwi from his fruit salad. “I think touring is the best part of the job so far, but even the best things can be draining.”

“The best part isn't the money?” Rita asks in surprise. “Is your management still not paying you, love?”

“Yeah, they are,” Harry shrugs genially, not offended by Rita's assumption. “That's just never been what it's been about, for me at least. I've always loved performing, I'd do it for free if I had to.”

Alexa snorts. “Luckily you don't have to, eh? I know how much that watch on your wrist costs.”

Pixie calls Alexa a materialistic airhead and Alexa calls Pixie the spray-tanned pot calling the kettle orange, and the fake fight dissolves into a table of giggles as they joke about which one of them is going to leak the details of their feud to the tabs. Harry laughs so hard he cries, wiping away the wetness on his cheeks as his phone vibrates on the table next to his water glass.

(11:49 a.m.) Louve of my Life: hey hazza just left the house be there in 20 to get you xx
(11:50 a.m.) Louve of my Life: also love youuu xxxxx

“No soppy texting face at the brunch table,” Nick complains, poking Harry in the wrist with his fork, though he lets Harry finish his answer to Louis before jabbing at the phone’s lock button.
“How’s little Lou?” Pixie asks. “I miss him, he's a riot.”

“He’s good, yeah,” Harry answers, feeling his lips twitch involuntarily into a smile. “He’s amazing.”

“Oh Lord help us, look at that face,” Alexa scoffs teasingly. “Someone change the subject before I am absolutely sick.”

The twenty minutes pass quickly, and when Harry gets the text from Louis saying he's close the others decide to pay their bills and head back to work or whatever else they’re doing as well.

“It's tough,” says Nick, stretching up on his tiptoes before settling his arm comfortably over Harry’s shoulders as they meander to the front door. “But someone has to be Britain’s favorite morning DJ. It's a hard life I've chosen.”

“You just took a two and a half hour brunch break,” Harry points out.

Nick claps his hand over Harry's mouth. “I said it's a hard life, not that I was despondent, Harold. Learn to listen.”

Harry's laughing so hard he almost misses the hostess calling for him as they approach the front door, her voice panicked.

“Sir, sir!” she calls, jogging over to Harry and stopping him with a hand to the forearm. He’s got his hand on the door handle, ready to step outside. “So sorry, sir, but I thought you'd want to know that there's a crowd waiting for you outside if you want to take a different exit.”

Harry spins and peers through the glass; it's tinted, so the clump of phone and camera-wielding girls outside can't see him, but, sure enough, there they are. Lying in wait.

“How?” he asks, disappointed. “I tried so hard to keep this quiet.” And he had, he’d taken every precaution—no tweets, no Instagram, he’d sat with his back to the room in the cornermost booth (which goes against Nick’s very being, as he loves the spotlight and all it entails and would usually insist on having the center table), he’d even entered through a side door when he’d gotten here. He hates the pandemonium that can be unleashed when his location is broadcast, and he hates even more causing nice restaurant staff to stress because of him.

“Oh no, Harry,” Rita says, clapping her hand over her mouth. “I totally forgot, it was me. I tweeted this morning that we were thinking of doing brunch here, but I didn’t know they’d connect that to you.”

“It’s fine,” Harry says on autopilot, unlocking his phone. “I just need to call Lou, if he drives by it’ll be mayhem.”

The phone rings a couple of times before Louis picks up. “Hello, darling! Miss my voice already?”

“Hey, babe,” Harry says. “Don’t turn down the street in front of the restaurant, it’s—”

“Too late,” Louis chirps. “Why, is there no parking? Oh, is that… Is that crowd in front of the restaurant? Are they there for you?”

“Yeah, Lou, just keep going, it’s—”

“Shit,” Louis hisses, and Harry can see the moment the crowd of fans spots him, rushing to the very brink of the pavement’s edge, some stepping right out into the street. “Shit, Haz, I can’t park, I’ll have to—”
“Yeah, yeah, just lose them, pull around to the back—”

“No, fuck, they’ll check there.” The girls envelop the vehicle with no regard for traffic, crowding like a stampede as Louis curses wildly from inside the car, trying to keep from running any of them over.


“Lou, babe, what can I do?” Harry asks desperately.

“Don’t come out here,” Louis barks. “That’ll just make it worse.” His voice is strained and he looks murderous through the dark windows, trying to pull forward as girls take selfies against the windows of his Range. Harry clutches his phone and watches helplessly. “I can’t, fuck, I can’t fucking go anywhere. Did you bring security with you?”

“No, I didn’t think I’d—”

“Fuck, is that… is that who I—”

Harry nods, though Louis can’t see him. He knows exactly who he’s talking about, thought he recognized that dark head of hair amongst the mass of fans. “Yeah, it is.”

“How did she know where you were?” Before Harry can respond, Louis makes a noise of relief as a space opens for him to roll forward and away from the girls. “Okay, I’m gonna pull away and lose them. I’ll circle back, you said there’s a side door?”

“Yeah, yeah of course. I’m so sorry Lou, I didn’t—”

“It’s fine, Hazza. See you in a few.”

Harry’s stomach flips anxiously as he waits with Nick and Pixie at the side door to the restaurant, knowing full well that Louis won’t blame him for the swarming fans but also knowing he’s going to be in a foul mood either way. As soon as the Range pulls into the gated private car park, Harry slides into the passenger seat and immediately starts apologizing.

“How did they find you?”

“Rita tweeted,” Harry answers in a tiny voice. “She didn’t know I was coming yet, I’m… I’m so sorry, Lou.”

“I just…” he trails off again. “I just don’t understand it. Why do they throw themselves out into the street like I’ll be able to watch all of them at once, and then get mad when I almost roll over their toes or when I look frustrated in their pictures? Of course I’m fucking frustrated, I—ugh, sorry, sorry,” he says, burying his face in his hands for a moment. “I just need to cool off a bit, that was incredibly stressful.”

“Take your time,” Harry murmurs, rubbing his hand soothingly on Louis’ thigh. “This is why we have drivers, usually.”

“Yeah.” Louis pushes his fringe aside. “Was that really her, was that—”

“Yeah,” Harry answers, tensing. “It was Morgan.”

“Christ,” Louis mutters. He shakes his head and clenches his fist, before settling his hand on the stick
shift and throwing the car into reverse. Harry waves sadly at Nick and Pixie through the window as they pull out of the lot and they wave back, looking upset on Louis’ behalf but, just like Harry, powerless to do anything about it.

They make it to Ed’s townhouse over in Kensington in no time, but it’s in strained silence, the radio the only tension diffuser between them. *He’s not upset with me, just the situation*, Harry repeats to himself, over and over and over, but it feels more like a lie with each recurrence.

Ed’s not a believer in locked doors, so Harry and Louis don’t bother hesitating in the doorway when they arrive. Harry turns automatically toward the floating sound of aimless guitar coming from the back garden, but Louis sticks his hand in his pockets to check for his cigarettes and gestures wordlessly at the staircase that leads up to the balcony.

Harry nods. “I’ll be out back if… if you need me.”

“I’ll be out soon,” Louis says. “Just need to lose some of this tension.”

Harry smiles unhappily and leans in to kiss Louis’ cheek, but he doesn’t get any other answer before Louis spins and heads toward the stairs. Harry rubs at his chest with shaky fingers, hating that the biggest things are always beyond his control when it comes to Louis being hurt.

... 

Louis holds the first inhale of smoke in his lungs until his ribs ache, then releases it out into the air like sucking poison from a snake bite. He watches Harry slide open the door directly below him, stepping out into the bright sunshine and making Louis’ heart flutter when he waves up at him, but Louis doesn’t go downstairs to join him. He won’t go sully Harry’s mood even more until his pounding headache dissipates and he doesn’t feel like curling into a ball and crying.

Ed’s the only one out in his garden, his shiny copper-red hair glinting in the summer sun, but it doesn’t look like he’s been alone for long: empty lawn chairs on his patio are arranged in a lopsided circle, and the multiple ashtrays scattered across a few different tables are still holding cigarette butts and the remains of pungent joints, still putting off tiny tendrils of smoke. Ed’s barefoot and loose-limbed, sitting cross-legged in the grass, thumbing little patterns on his guitar strings that Louis can barely hear from two floors above him.

He can definitely hear when Ed notices Harry, though, his voice carrying across the yard. “Hazza!” he says cheerfully, and strums a happy G chord to accompany himself. “Thought I was getting Tommo today, but I got the other one instead.”

“He’s here, he’s…” Harry thumbs over his shoulder and Louis looks down at his hands, not quite ready to be sociable and cheerful yet. He crosses his arms, cigarette dangling from his fingertips, and hangs his head.

“Is he alright?” Ed asks quietly.

“He’ll be okay, it’s just.” Harry shrugs, and Louis cheats; he peeks, and from the slump of Harry’s shoulders Louis knows he’s still afeet up with feelings of uselessness. “Fans found me at a restaurant and bombarded him when he tried to pick me up.”

Ed hisses sympathetically. “Christ, I can’t imagine. Not taking it well, I see.”
“The lack of privacy is... it’s tough,” Harry admits, kicking off his ridiculous posh boots and uncurling his toes in the lush grass. “For all of us, really. Zayn absolutely hates it, he can’t stand it, but Louis isn’t far behind. And it’s not that he hates the fans, because ninety-nine percent of them are the most amazing people in the world. But that one percent that doesn’t see anything wrong with stalking us sort of ruins it for the rest of them.”

“Jesus,” Ed says.

“There’s, like, a line, right?” Harry says, ruffling his hair like he always does when he’s unhappy. “And most fans know not to cross it. Like, they see us in public and stop us for a picture, that’s great. We can chat all day long when I’m out running errands or shopping or whatever, and we literally owe them our careers, so... I can stop for a selfie. No problem. But some of them are too young to know what’s crossing the line, and some of them...”

Louis knows what Harry’s thinking; or, well, who Harry’s thinking. He’d thought it was a trick of the light when he’d seen the horrifyingly familiar face through his car window in front of the restaurant, but apparently not, as Harry’d seen her too.

Morgan.

Another one of Louis’ ill-gotten Bond twins, who’d Bonded to Harry when he read her Twitter question at a concert. Only, instead of fading quietly back into her life forever changed but fundamentally the same like poor Kimberly back in Sydney, or selling his story to 60 Minutes and every tabloid site from Argentina to Armenia like Anthony, Morgan decided to do something else. She used her instant rise to internet fame and sudden new popularity and started, of all fucking things, a One Direction update account.

And Louis should have guessed that Morgan was that type of fan, the one percent type of fan. The thinks-she’s-cute-while-she’s-stalking-them kind of fan.

Morgan had Bonded to Harry at the San Jose show. After their usual meeting with the half-Bonded fans from that night (Morgan was one of three and she wasn’t even the most interesting, as the other two had both Bonded with Zayn and almost got in a fight right there in the dressing room), Morgan apparently immediately bought tickets for the next night’s show in Oakland. And then the next nine concerts after that as well. She followed them from California to Texas to Florida and apparently across the ocean to England, too, since she was the one who left a makeup smudge on Louis’ driver side window when he was mobbed back at the restaurant.

Louis would love to know what kind of job or neglectful parents are paying for her to jaunt around the world following a band soon to be going on an album writing and recording-related break, but he’s pretty sure if he knew it would just make him angry. He also wonders how she always seems to know where they’ll be, but he doesn’t spend too much time thinking about that one—slipping information to update accounts, especially one ran by a soulmate of the band who’s guaranteed to be loyal to the band’s management, has the new Syco PR team written all over it. The whole thing does, actually, and Louis would be not be shocked if he ever heard it confirmed that Morgan has a deal with 1DHQ; she’s been reporting “insider” gossip with increasing regularity from the fans Harry allegedly took back to his hotel rooms, and she definitely doesn’t try to disprove the rumor that Harry and Louis had a falling out and don’t talk to each other anymore.

Louis knows that she probably does it for attention, for imaginary internet fame that means nothing in real life. He knows that if he didn’t get to interact with Harry everyday—and, really, it’s hard for Louis to think that he and Morgan are literally in the same boat, only he’s lied about his connection to Harry and has reaped the rewards while she decidedly has not gotten the same benefits—he might also be dramatic and stalkery and obsessive. He doesn’t know, really, what would have happened if
things went the way he thought they would, where he was sent home from *X Factor* bootcamp while Harry moved on to win the show and the hearts of the world. Maybe he would have been the first update account owner, standing outside the *X Factor* house and Fountain Studios for hours just for a selfie, making contacts with shady journalists and One Direction roadies for tidbits of information and access behind the scenes.

He doesn’t think he’d have gone that way, but. Honestly, who knows?

So he understands Morgan's motivation, knows that once you’ve had Harry’s full attention it’s hard to give it back, but that doesn’t make it okay that she’s made their lives more difficult. And he gets that if their positions were reversed, that if she’d secretly half-Bonded to Harry and had coerced him into a relationship and he publicly half-Bonded and got nothing but heartache, he’d maybe feel differently… but he can’t help it. He *hates* her, hates her to her core, but he’ll never give her the satisfaction of knowing that.

Because there’s no way she doesn’t know about him and Harry. She may not know the depth of their relationship, but she has to know there is one. She’s around too often and they’re too comfortable backstage or between interviews or when they’re having dinner in *private* to tone down their natural chemistry that makes it abundantly clear they’re head over heels for each other. And maybe she knew before she had all her special access, because when she’d bargained with Harry for soulmate privileges after the San Jose show, she’d hardly looked away from Louis’ hand resting casually on Harry’s waist. And Louis isn’t saying that seeing that little affirmation of the supposed relationship every One Direction fan is at least slightly aware of made her push for more perks, but she certainly changed her angle rapidly when she zeroed in on Louis’ fingers on Harry’s hip.

She’d first insisted hysterically that Harry should choose to be with her despite not Bonding back, contending it was only fair, that she shouldn’t have to be alone while he searched for someone else. That was easy enough to deflect, as that was a dishearteningly common request from half-Bonds and Harry knew how to negotiate out of that minefield. That was when Morgan noticed Louis’ hand, though, and she switched tacks.

“Your phone number, I at least need your phone number,” she’d sniffled, but that was another one Harry had learned to deny, soothing, slow promises that he'd keep in touch, but by phone wasn’t the best way to do it. That was the window Morgan needed.

“Follow me on Twitter,” she’d suggested next, and when he agreed easily to that, she angled for more. “Could you tweet me, too? Just every once in a while. Nothing crazy, I promise.”

“I can… try,” Harry had agreed warily, and it was as though he’d sealed his own fate; he tweeted something short about how lovely it was to meet her, Morgan gained two hundred thousand Twitter followers overnight, and Louis did a double take when he saw her front row at the Oakland show the following night, waving up at him like they were old friends.

And so Morgan and one of Liam’s half-Bonds, Stephanie, have teamed up with a little band of loyal recruits to document and spread the band’s daily, sometimes hourly, locations, as well as pointed bits of gossip every now and then as well. Morgan and Stephanie have a nearly cult-like following, and while they don't always get every detail about the boys’ days correct (they’ve never once tweeted that Louis and Harry live together, though surely they know—now that Louis knows they’re in England, it explains the cars that stop in front of their North London house that wait for Harry to leave before driving away, and he and Louis aren't particularly subtle when he stays with Harry in the public Hampstead house as well), they get close enough or so wildly wrong that the ideas have to be planted by someone, someone sounding suspiciously like Claudia.

“I can forgive the younger fans,” Louis hears Harry say after an age of silence. He’s leaning back,
his legs stretched out in front of him. “They see the older fans following us wherever we go and trying to hack our bank accounts to find out where we are and they think it’s normal. They can’t help that the people setting the example don’t have a moral compass. But the others…” Harry sighs, tugs on his own curls. “Ed, fuck, it’s ridiculous. They got our flight information the other day and some of them bought tickets on the same plane just to sit by us. They tried to use a lockpicking kit to get into my Hampstead house so they could hide in there until we stayed there again. A couple of them actually slept with people on our crew to try and get keys to our hotel rooms.”

Ed stays quiet, but Louis can see the furrow in his brow all the way from the balcony.

“What happened with X Factor, with the social media stuff that helped us get started,” Harry says slowly, twisting his hands. Ed waits for his syrupy words, patient as always. “That was, like, unprecedented. Nothing had ever happened like that before. And then it just grew—people knew us in Sweden before we’d even recorded an album, we had fans in America before we’d ever performed there. It’s insane, and that kind of dedication… I can’t imagine pouring that much of myself into anything.”

“It was insane to watch it from the outside, that’s for sure,” Ed agrees.

“It’s double-edged, though,” Harry says. “On the one hand, it’s amazing to be able to actually talk with fans from around the world and get their messages, to see the art and hear the stories, it’s more than I ever expected. But with that, since fans feel like they know us, and they do, but not, like, every part of us…” Harry shakes his head like he’s trying to wrangle a coherent thought. Louis can see the tension in his spine from his spot on the balcony and he aches to trace his hand up the bumps visible through his soft t-shirt to relieve it. But he also still feels that dark swirl of anger in his lungs, the one that manifests itself in the turned-down corners of his mouth and the dulled sheen of his eyes, the one that makes Harry worry needlessly that Louis is finished. So he’ll stay up here, watch from afar for a little longer, and try to kill the anger with a bit of smoke. “It’s this sense of entitlement, yeah? That since they built us up, they deserve to see every part of us. But if they take everything, that leaves nothing for ourselves. We’d be empty shells. It’s my right as a person to have secrets, even if they seem small or insignificant.”

“Even if it’s just how much you love Louis’ arse,” Ed grins, and the mood lightens as Harry laughs. The frustration in Louis’ stomach lifts a little just from the sound, the sun a little brighter when Harry smiles.

“Exactly. I have a right not to share that, but the fans—I mean, not all of them, but a lot of them—they think that they have a right to know. And when we don’t give it freely, they do what they can to find out for themselves. But what’s worse than all that is that the worst offenders are half-Bonded to us.” Harry laughs weakly, sadly. “Me, specifically. What does that say about me, when people who are born with me as their soulmate have no issue stalking and harassing the people they supposedly love?”

Louis’ stomach twists, and the frustration is back. He hates it he hates it he hates it; he's among that number, he's just another boy Bonded to Harry Styles that causes him to think he must intrinsically be terrible because his half-Bonds are all terrible.

“I don’t think it says shit about you,” Ed says frankly, and Louis’ battered, smoke-filled heart perks up, cautiously hopeful. “I think you can't help who is biologically linked to you, and since you have no say in that and it has nothing to do with you as a person, you can’t be held accountable for your half-Bonds being arseholes.”

Harry huffs a quiet laugh. “Yeah?”
“Fuck yeah,” Ed agrees emphatically. “Look, I’m not going to give you relationship advice, that’d be like me giving you parenting advice. It’s just not realistic. But, let’s be real here, H: you’ve got the best situation right now. You’re in the biggest band in the world, your fans adore you and most of them aren’t stalkers, and you’ve got a boy—” he looks up at Louis, who can’t look away in time to pretend he wasn’t listening, and Ed holds his stare, pointed, but reassuring “—who loves you for you, not because his body and fate told him it’s a good idea. You’ve got the best of everything, but if you spend your life looking for the shadows, that’s what you’re going to find.”

Harry’s quiet for a long time, and Ed lets him be. Louis finishes his cigarette and tosses it into the ashtray, ruffling his hair and heading for the stairs, tired of brooding when, really, the mobbing wasn’t that bad. It was startling, sure, it was overwhelming and scary for a few minutes, but it could have been so much worse, and he’s not going to let it ruin his day when he’s got a curly-headed wonderboy to cheer up. He’s crossing through Ed’s open, airy living room to the door opened out to the garden when he hears Harry again.

“I do know I’ve got the absolute best life,” he says quietly. “And I know Louis is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. But that’s why I hate the fans trying to force themselves into our private lives—it’s not for me, not really. I can deal with it. But Louis gets so frustrated, and withdrawn.”

“Why?” Ed asks. “He feels like it’s an invasion of privacy, or summat?”

“Honestly?” Harry asks, and Louis rounds the corner out into the garden just in time to see him shrug. “He doesn’t talk about it much, so I don’t know. I think he’s torn between wanting to keep important parts of himself to himself, things like… like our relationship, and his family history, and things that maybe even I don’t know about, and then also feeling obligated to the fans, like maybe they should know, after everything they’ve done for us.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it obligation, Harold,” calls Louis, and he watches Harry jump in surprise at the sound of his voice. Louis grins at him as he pads over, kicking off his shoes to join the barefoot brigade. He settles into the space between Harry's thighs, his back to Harry’s chest. “If this was a perfect world, I’d tell the fans everything. About my family, my mum, my dad, about all my fears and anxieties, about you… Hell, I’d never shut up about you,” he says, and Harry grins. “But this isn’t a perfect world, and if I give everything away like that, people can use it against me. And I don’t want that, I don't want the chance for my biggest secrets and parts of me being used against me.”

“I get that,” Harry murmurs. “I do. I just hate to see you upset, when this really is only going to get worse.”

“Then I’ll get over it,” Louis says firmly. “I’ll get better at handling it. I can’t fall apart every time a fan startles me, I’d have a breakdown eventually.” He turns in Harry’s arms and kisses the tip of his nose. “I’ll be okay. I will. But let’s talk about something happier.”

Harry still looks concerned, but the corner of his mouth lifts in a helpless smile. “Okay. Something happy.”

“Tell us, Edward,” Louis says, turning back to Ed, who’s been picking away at his guitar and letting them have their moment. “What have you been up to?”

“I’ve actually been meaning to get you two over here soon,” Ed says. “Your new producers called me up, asked if I wanted to do another song for your next album, and I had one already started so I said yes.”

“Ooh, can we hear it?” Harry asks, settling his hands on Louis’ knees.
Ed grins sharply. “Yeah, I’ll play it. But I’ll probably have to give you partial writing credit, Hazza.”

Harry’s eyes narrow. “Why?”

Ed doesn’t answer, but his grin grows wider as he settles his guitar more comfortably in his lap and strums it, finding the right key.

It’s a pretty, simple melody that Ed wrings from the strings, something echoing and familiar in it. He runs through the intro a couple of times, like confirming the notes in his head, before he opens his mouth and starts to sing.

*Your hand fits in mine like it’s made just for me
But bear this in mind, it was meant to be*

Something about the lyrics are even more strikingly familiar than the tune, something Louis feels like he remembers being whispered into his ear in the middle of a long-forgotten night. Something he feels like he’s read written in Harry’s handwriting before, on the little scraps of paper he keeps stored inside his favorite poetry books.

*I’m in love with you, and all these little things*

Louis can feel Harry’s arms circling his waist and pulling him closer, and he knows Harry’s filled with that same coursing knowledge of *this is us, he wrote us*. If *Moments* was their struggle, *Little Things* is their reward, the reason why they go through all the pain. It’s Harry and Louis in a song, gentle and affectionate, silly and adoring, and so in love it almost hurts to hear it.

When Ed finishes, Louis asks softly, “Again?” So Ed plays it again.

*You can’t go to bed without a cup of tea
And maybe that’s the reason that you talk in your sleep*

White cups with beige tea rings left in the sink, whispered conversations in the dead of night when everything else is still. Harry’s hand spread over Louis’ back, tracing the little dips just above the curve of his bum. His hand covering Louis’, his long fingers touching along the love line slashed across his palm.

*I know you’ve never loved the crinkles by your eyes when you smile
You’ve never loved your stomach or your thighs*

Harry kissing the four little freckles above Louis’ mouth. Insisting that Louis has the most beautiful voice in the world, and that everyone hates the sound of their own voice but that doesn’t mean it’s not the prettiest he’s ever heard. Pulling Louis away from the mirror when he stands there too long, frowning at his arse and the way it makes every pair of jeans look almost obscene. Promising that he wouldn’t change a thing. That he loves every part of Louis.

All his little things.

“Holy shit,” Louis breathes when it clicks. He turns and pokes Harry in the chest. “This sounds like you. You wrote this song.”

“I- I don’t think I did,” Harry says, bewildered.

“Well…” Ed trails off, smirking. “I might have taken inspiration from a few drunken texts I got.”

That’s just about the only sentence that could have pulled Louis’ attention away from Harry at that
moment, but God if it didn't do the job.


Ed cackles. “Going on and on about how perfect Louis is from his perfect little ankles to his perfect bum. And then I thought Hazza just needed to get laid, right? Sexual frustration. But then I got one about your eyelashes, and your laugh, and your voice in the morning, so I realized it was just Harry being Harry and talking about his favorite subject. I’ve saved them all for posterity,” he says, and laughs when Louis immediately scoots over so he can see the screen of Ed’s phone.

“This is art,” Louis giggles, trying to decipher drunk Harry’s excited texts (hES llikea fariy ED ED lik a PiXIE i FLOVE HHUM). “Hazza, love, you’re a poet. A modern Keats.”

Harry buries his head in his hands. “Oh, God,” he groans, but he’s grinning behind his palms. “Ed, you dick.”

“Next time,” Ed says wisely, “when you want to wax rhapsodic about Louis’ eyes, text him about it instead.”

“It’s so sweet that your drunk ramblings were turned into a love song about my arse,” Louis says, and Ed howls with laughter as Harry flops back onto the grass, bemoaning his bad choices and his mean, mean boyfriend.

14 July 2012

When Harry and Louis agreed to buy the house in North London, they’d never seen the backyard. Anne and Jay had said it was nice and large, the property website had the size specifications, and the house already had a gardener on retainer built into the buying price. The mums promised it was big enough for a footie goal, and that was all Louis needed.

It ended up being one of their favorite parts of the property, expansive and shady, full of flowers and, just like Louis dreamed, a full-sized football goal.

So he hates that he’s tainting it with this, now, because up until today, this backyard has been a magical place. He and Zayn have smoked dozens of joints right there on the deck, Zayn sketching on a blank notepad and Louis dozing in and out under the summer sun. Niall cajoled Harry into buying him and Babs a couple-sized hammock that hangs between two beech trees near the backdoor. Liam and Harry work out back here all the time, while Zayn and Louis lounge nearby and pretend not to watch from behind their sunglasses.

But no fun for Louis today. Nothing but that familiar drain of sadness pulling at his limbs.

**Thwap. Thwap.**

Louis has a bag of footballs next to his feet. His sweaty fringe hangs in front of his eyes. His foot aches. He keeps kicking.

He can’t get the words out of his head. *I forgive you. I used to be scared.*
Thwap. Thwap. The sound of the leather of his boots against the leather of the ball reverberates through him, a rhythm to the words haunting his head.

He reaches down for the next football and is stopped short when there are no more to grab. The backyard is littered with white and black balls, the net of the goal full to bursting.

With nothing to distract him, Louis collapses in on himself and falls to the ground.

It’s one thing for management and the PR team to use his Twitter account to tweet Eleanor (whose account is also fake and rarely actually used by her, so they’re basically making up a conversation with two dummy participants), to push a relationship online so he doesn’t have to be so convincing in person. He doesn’t care that they use his name to sell products he’s never actually used. He doesn’t care, as long as they don’t ruin his name completely.

But this? Using his account to shame one of his friends for not working hard enough? It's not okay, it's not, and Louis hates his management to his very core.

He’d texted Rebecca as soon as he read the tweet on his account: I’m so sorry Bex I’m so sorry it wasn’t me I didn’t send that. Rebecca’s reply had been public, and Louis doesn’t blame her. It makes her look kind and careworn while he looks like an absolute arsehole.

Rebecca was one of Louis’ closest friends back on X Factor. He’d never put her lack of album success down as being lazy or unwilling to work hard, she was one of the hardest workers he’d ever met. She’s got the same management and record company as One Direction, so Louis is absolutely sure she’s being run ragged just like they were during their promo run.

And yet, apparently it hadn’t been enough. Or it wasn’t worth the profit she was generating. Louis doesn’t know. All he does know is that, once again, he’s been used by his management to cut down those who don’t agree with them; he’s been weaponized for the sake of a few pounds.

His chest hurts. His lungs hurt. He’s crying, though he hadn’t realized it. He pulls his phone from his pocket with shaky hands, ignoring the bursts of notifications from his tweet, ignoring the rash of angry fans who think he’s been callous, hurtful. The tweet was hurtful, though it wasn’t him that sent it. He taps the little blue icon and he reads it again.

Louis’ fingers tremble as he stabs at the home button, navigating to the phone icon instead.

“Hey, Lou!” Harry says when he answers the call. “What’s up?”
“Harry,” Louis sniffles. “Where are you?”

The noise in the background of the call doesn’t cover Harry’s immediate shift to concerned. “Cara had extra tickets to the Burberry show. What’s wrong?”


“I’ll be right there,” Harry promises.

Louis tosses his phone away, hearing it land somewhere behind him. He can’t look at the tweet anymore, it’s already ripped his ribcage open with a few careless words.

He hears when Harry’s car arrives at the gate, the crunching of tires on gravel. He hears Harry slam open the front door, slide open the back door. He hears his feet on the grass as he steps over to Louis’ phone and stops for a second, reading the words on the screen.

He sits next to Louis, hugs him tight. “It’s not your fault,” he whispers, and Louis shakes his head. He’s heard that enough, especially in the last couple of years.

At one point does he stop making excuses and admit that maybe he is the one causing all the problems?

28 July 2012

“How about… Back On Top.”

“But we weren’t ever not on top, you know? We’re one for one with number one albums. It’s not like this is a comeback.”

”Don’t call it a comeback, I been here for years-“

”Not now, Hazza."

”Also, Back On Top sounds vaguely sexual.”

”Next!”

“We could do something with, like, the world apparently ending in December. That’s still a thing, right? Like December 21st, we’re all flying into the sun?”

“How do you suggest we name an album after the world ending, Niall?”

“I dunno, I was just throwing it out there.”

“It’s Not the End?”

”Mildly morbid, innit?”

“We could name it after a song, that’s what we did for Up All Night.”

“But we don’t even know all the songs yet, some haven’t been written.”

“Let’s be real, lads, and call a spade a spade: We Aren’t Little Kids and We Want to Sing Songs
“About Sex.”

“Catchy.”

“Subtitled: Nevermind, Our Management Wants Us To Appeal To Preteens.”

“Even better.”

“I hate to break up this brainstorming session, guys,” says the band PA, Marco, peeking his head inside the studio room the boys have commandeered. “But your new producer is here.”

In walks the last type of person Louis would have ever expected to see; he thought with the raised stakes of this second album, needing it to perform at least as well as *Up All Night*, Syco would have found some polished California hotshot with a dozen platinum albums under their belt. That, or brought Savan back for the full album, rather than just a couple of songs.

He definitely didn’t expect a guy with wild curly hair down to his chest, a straw fedora, loose white t-shirt, and khaki shorts, looking like he left his surfboard strapped to his Jeep after hitting the waves earlier.

“What’s up, guys?” he asks, smiling disarmingly, his voice surprisingly soft.

Liam’s the first to shake off his shock. “Hi, yeah. Sorry. I’m Liam.” He stands, offers his hand. The others stand and introduce themselves as well.

“Right, so let’s get started,” Julian says, settling into an empty seat around the circular table and kicking his feet up. Louis immediately likes him, and he and Niall share a grin at their new producer’s laid-back style. “I just wanted to kick things off by getting to know each other, getting a little more comfortable. I’m hoping that this will be the first day of a long working relationship, so we gotta start things off right, yeah?”

“Sounds great,” Harry says, his voice shining and genuine.

“Awesome. Let’s start with a little about this next album—I know you’ve recorded a few things, some potential first singles. Your old producer, he was over that, right?”

“Right,” Niall answers. They’d gone to Sweden back in May during a break in their performing schedule, meeting Savan and Rami and laying down the groundwork for a few tracks: *Live While We’re Young* and *Kiss You* and *Heart Attack*.

“So you probably noticed that the songs Savan wrote for you were very similar to the stuff from your first album,” Julian continues, gesturing avidly. “Classic pop, lots of fun kicks and harmonies. The rest of your album isn’t going to sound like that. We can’t risk shocking the fans by throwing them something that sounds completely different, but we want to start moving toward something a little more mature. A little less bubblegum, though there’s nothing wrong with bubblegum. We’ll move you into a little older audience bracket with each new album, and so that way your audience can mature with you.”

“That sounds great,” Liam says earnestly.

“I think it will be,” Julian agrees. “We’ll start with a couple more rock-y tunes this time around, then about five or six for the next album. By the fourth it’ll be almost entirely rock or rock-influenced.”

“I love this,” Louis says, leaning forward to lean his elbows on the table, “but can I ask why? I’m sure we all appreciate moving away from the Take That comparisons, but, well.” He chances a
“I get that,” Julian says seriously. “And, in all honesty, I’ve been in the business a while, and I know what you mean. There’s always a reason, but I think this isn’t a front for something else. You don’t fit pure pop, you just don’t—you aren’t dancers, and your concerts are actual concerts, not spectacles like the old boy bands. Your voices work for all sorts of things, you could probably jump from folk rock to almost hip-hop without breaking a sweat. And the more versatile you are, the better you’ll sell.”

“That was just an example,” Julian says, somewhat apologetically. “I don’t know if we’ll go that far, but I’d love to talk about that when we get a little further along.”

Zayn doesn’t slump, but Louis watches him withdraw a little from the corner of his eye. He shifts to taps Zayn’s leg reassuringly, but then Julian changes the subject with a bright, “I heard you were talking album titles. Let’s get that going again, I’d love to hear your ideas.”

It takes a while to get back to that comfortable give-and-take when there’s someone new watching their interactions, but Julian doesn’t stick out like usual outsiders do. With his subtle prodding and guidance, they fall back into their previous discussion, though a little more serious this time.

“What do you want the fans to feel when they hear the new stuff?” Julian asks quietly. They’re a couple hours in, now, still in the same room but a little less uptight; Liam’s up and slowly pacing one wall of the room, Niall’s got his feet up on Zayn’s thighs. Julian hadn’t batted an eyelash when Louis had squeezed into Harry’s chair with him, so he’d either been briefed on what to expect regarding them or he just doesn’t give a shit.

“I want them to feel like they’re learning more about us,” Niall says after a quiet moment. “Like, not the stuff they can hack our phones to find out, but the real stuff. Important stuff.”

“Good,” Julian says approvingly, and Niall beams.

“I think we should mention that we know how important the music is to them,” Harry continues after a quiet moment. “It may not be, like, groundbreaking stuff, but it’s their favorite songs and it doesn’t have to be super deep to be influential. If they find comfort in it, it’s important.”

Something in that resonates in Louis. “I like that,” he says, brows furrowed as he tries to connect the memory he’s trying to place. Then it hits. “It’s like all the fans who tell us that they met their best friends through us, or that our songs or concerts are how they reconnected with their sister or friend or mum or whoever. It brings people together.”

“There was a girl,” Zayn says, circling Liam’s wrist when he passes and bringing him to a stop. “Remember, Li, we were out at dinner once, and this girl came up to us, and she said our music kept her from killing herself. So, like, we connect people, and we help them.”

“But it’s not just the fans,” Liam adds slowly. “It’s us, too. It brought us together, and it helps us. You lads are my best friends, and—” he stops suddenly. “One Direction is the reason why we all belong.”

A word stirs in Louis’ head. “Home,” he says simply. “For us and them. One Direction is home.”

And so the second album title is decided: Take Me Home.
Julian orders in a couple of pizzas and sends for some beer as afternoon turns to evening. Niall breaks out the guitar and they go over Ed’s finished version of *Little Things*, matching the harmonies and working out the solos. They fill Julian in on the origin of the more specific lyrics, and tease Harry mercilessly about his obsession with Louis’ thighs immortalized in song.

“Question,” Louis says, his stomach fizzing with laughter and Heineken. “Would we be able to try our hand at writing a little, this time around?”

“Absolutely!” Julian enthuses. He’s kicked off his sandals and let Niall steal his hat, and he’s unlike any other music professional Louis has ever met. Except maybe Ed, who is the most chill human of all time, but Julian comes pretty close. “The more of yourself you add to a song, the more you’ll love to perform it, and the fans will be able to tell. Why, do you have something to share with the class?”

Louis thinks of the word document with half-finished lyrics hidden deep within his laptop, the melody he can’t help but tune and tweak when he plays around on his keyboard. “Maybe.” He shrugs. It probably isn’t ready yet, in all honesty, but he wants to try his hand at writing, maybe helping with an already existing draft of someone else’s song. “Haza here definitely has a few things, I know.”

Harry blushes. “Oh, I don’t… I mean, yeah. Maybe. It all still needs a lot of work.”

“I love the idea of some personal stuff,” Julian says, “but if it’s not ready to go now, maybe we’ll work on it and tweak it for the next one. That way you have a better chance of making it into the song you hear in your head, rather than having it altered to fit the sound of this album. But I’ll totally work the writing sessions with the McFly guys and me, Jamie, and John around your schedules so you can sit in.”

“McFly?” Niall asks, shooting straight up. “McFly is writing songs for us?”

“A couple, if we can wrangle it,” Julian laughs.

“Hey, Zaynie,” Louis says, poking Zayn with his toe. “You should tell him about your idea. Like, representing our roots.”

“Nah,” Zayn mumbles, flushing a little.

“C’mon, Z,” Niall says.

“Well,” Zayn says, sitting up straighter. “It’s like. Me, Ni, and Liam sort’f grew up on hip-hop, R and B, you know? Some other stuff too, Top 40 and classic rock and whatever, but for me at least it was always about rap and hip-hop. So I was thinking, we could work some of that into a couple of songs as, like, a tribute to our influences.”

“Wouldn’t really fit with our other stuff, would it?” Liam asks easily.

“But we could make it fit,” Zayn argues. “It’s our album, shouldn’t we get a say? Niall and Lou like the idea.”

“We *do* get a say,” Liam says, confused. “They listened to our suggestions for the last album.”

“They listened to your suggestions,” Zayn shoots back. “I talked about this same thing with Savan
and Rami and they shut me down. Said it wouldn’t work.”

“I think that’s amazing, man,” Julian says carefully when Liam doesn’t reply. “I’m gonna be honest, I don’t know if it can happen since we’re moving to a more rock and alternative vibe, but I like where your head is at. We’ll see what we can do.”

Niall drags Harry and Julian into a conversation about guitars, but Louis watches Liam and Zayn instead. Liam scoots his chair quietly over to Zayn’s side, and he picks at his jeans fretfully.

“You didn’t tell me you wanted to try writing,” he says quietly.

“Yeah, well, maybe there’s a reason why,” Zayn answers just as softly. “They took every suggestion you and Lou gave for the last album, and I tried one thing and got shot down.”

“But Julian seems better,” Liam tries. “He seems like he actually wants to hear our ideas. Maybe it can happen.”

Zayn snorts. “Right. It’s not going to. Jesus, Li, I knew you were willing to spout out the bullshit management feeds us about making all our own decisions, but I didn’t know you’d actually bought into it.”

Liam’s shoulders square, and Louis feels himself tense a little in anticipation, ready to step in if he needs to. “What the hell, Zayn?” he whispers, hurt. “It’s not my fault Savan didn’t like your idea.”

“Maybe not,” Zayn answers, his voice cool. “But he fell all over himself to incorporate your ideas, so maybe there’s just something about me that doesn’t work here.” He stands suddenly. “Going for a smoke. Lou, wanna come?”

Louis follows Zayn out a side door behind the studio, careful to stay out of sight of the crowd of fans gathered at the front door. They both light up and inhale in silence, leaning up against the warm brick of the studio wall.

“I don’t fit this band,” Zayn says after an age of silence. “Not the way it is now. I don’t fit with this, like… sugary pop good boy image. I like different things, and I feel like I’m wearing a costume when I’m just meant to be myself.”

“We all feel like that, babe,” Louis replies quietly. “Not always with the music side—you know me, I’m solidly Top 40—but with the rest of it. We all have roles to play, here.”

“Is it better or worse, I wonder?” Zayn muses, blowing a smoke ring. “To have to fake a relationship, or to have to fake a personality?”

“I don’t know,” Louis answers honestly. “But maybe it’ll get better. I don’t like seeing you like this, Z.”

Zayn is quiet for a long, long time, staring out into the distance like slotting puzzle pieces into place. “Maybe it will get better.” He stubs out his cigarette and crushes it underfoot. “Someday, maybe I’ll feel like I belong up there with you lads on stage like I do when we’re just by ourselves.”

Louis doesn’t have an answer for that, because Zayn’s not really wrong: the characters that four of the One Direction boys play are just exaggerations of the reality, taking certain traits and stretching them while lessening others. Zayn, though; Public Zayn is an entirely new person, and Louis understands just how hard it is to constantly play a role when it doesn’t fit. He can’t relate to not having his voice heard while songwriting, but for the rest of it…
“Love you, Zaynie,” he says, pulling Zayn into a hug before they go back inside.

“Love you too, Lou,” he murmurs, and he clutches Louis tight before they get back to business.

... 

5 August 2012

The same day that Harry sees the first articles linking him to Cara Delevingne (even though the two conversations Harry has had with her involved complimenting each other’s hair and pointing a tipsy Cara in the directions of pretty girls who were staring at her legs), he’s stopped on the street by two fans.

They aren’t screaming, which is always a good start, and they’re both at least Harry’s age, if not older. They also don’t do the pretending-to-text-but-actually-sneaking-a-picture routine, which Harry always appreciates.

“Hi,” says one of them, a pretty girl with heavy-lidded eyes and dark hair. “Could we take a picture?”

Harry sets his frappuccino down on a nearby shelf in the small boutique and smiles. “Sure, no problem.”

“Thanks so much,” the second girl gushes, flicking her bleached blonde hair out of her eyes. “We’re massive fans.”

They wrangle an employee—who has already helped Harry choose multiple pairs of overpriced skinny jeans and a couple of jumpers, otherwise she probably wouldn’t be so pleasant while playing photographer—and do a couple different poses, then do individual pictures as well.

“How’s your day been?” Harry asks the dark-headed one, who grins.

“Good. Just shopping, seeing the sights. How about you?”

Harry chuckles. “Yeah, same. Buying some jumpers.”

“For Louis?” she asks coyly, batting her lashes, and Harry laughs.

“No,” he shakes his head, and when the girl’s expression falls a little, he leans close to whisper, “but he’ll probably steal them anyway.”

“OhmyGod,” she rushes out, bouncing on her toes. “That’s adorable, oh my God.”

Her blonde friend isn’t so easily swayed. “Aren’t you dating Cara Delevingne?” she asks, her eyes narrowed. “Or can you just not pick between them?”

“Sarah,” her friend hisses.

“No,” Harry says firmly. “I’m not dating Cara.”

“Right, he’s with Louis,” the dark-headed girl says. “But you probably can’t say that, can you?”
“I, erm,” Harry stammers.

These aren’t the first fans to ask about Louis, though they’re usually a little more secretive about it. They’re also usually recording him, hoping to catch him slipping up and admitting to something that their PR team has tried to keep quiet.

And then he realizes it doesn’t even matter, because the two girls are bickering amongst themselves (“It’s so obvious, Sarah, they’re together and their management is covering it up, didn’t you look at that link to the treatise I sent you?” and “Fuck’s sake, Addie, just because he hugged his best friend a lot back when they first met does not mean they’re fucking now”) and not paying him a bit of attention.

When the PR team sat them down before the first on-camera denial in Dallas, they’d said that the fans have split down the middle: half believing that Harry and Louis are in a relationship, half believing Louis is with Eleanor and Harry is with, well, everyone else. Harry thought they were being overdramatic to make a point, as they do that sometimes, but, really, they weren’t wrong. There’s a fierce dichotomy among the fans, and while the slight majority don’t believe that Harry and Louis are in a relationship, the side that does believe tends to be older, and have evidence based on things besides articles in the tabloids to back them up. They're also very, very vocal.

Harry and Louis have spent multiple slow nights at home combing the evidence of their relationship—their fans are a persistent lot, that’s for sure, and incredibly detail-oriented; when Harry says this, Louis bursts into giggles and says, “We aren’t hiring, love, this isn’t a job interview”—and it’s always amazing to see the little things Harry thought no one would notice. The secretive smiles and the silly faces and the casual touching; there are some moments captured on video that Harry wasn’t even aware of before he saw it for himself, times when he couldn’t help but smile at Louis as they performed, or times when Louis watched Harry sing with a face so fond it was almost sickening.

Harry has always liked giving the believers something more to work with, so here, in this snobby shop with racks of clothes that sixteen-year-old Harry would have salivated over, he throws caution to the wind.

“I’m definitely not dating Cara,” he reiterates, breaking the argument. “And… I’m not really at liberty to say anything else, but.” He flashes his phone and clicks the lock button, and a selfie he took back in Florida, Harry kissing Louis’ cheek as their matching aviators reflected a brilliant sunset, lights the screen for a quick moment.

“Oh my God,” Sarah breathes.

“Oh my God,” Addie squeals, looking like all her wildest dreams have come true. “Okay, now that I knew—I mean, I knew, but I never knew for sure, you know? Anyway, now that I know, I just wanted to say that not all of us”—she raises her eyebrows pointedly at Sarah—“believe the media. We know you aren’t some crazy homewrecker or, like, a womanizer.”

“I don’t believe everything the papers say,” Sarah protests. “I definitely don’t believe the shit with the radio DJ, like, she’s your mum’s age. Why, when half the world’s population wants to sleep with you, would you pick a Bonded middle-aged woman from Manchester? That’s more ridiculous than the Caroline Flack nonsense.”

“And we don’t all want to sleep with you, either,” Addie continues. Harry frowns at the sudden switch of topic. “Like, the fans. Not all of us are your fans because we want you to Bond with us and give us dozens of curly-headed children.”

“Not like that!” Addie rushes to say. “No, like. A lot of us like One Direction for the music and
because you lot are funny and fun, not because we want to sleep with you. Sorry, babe, you aren’t
my type.”

“I’m not?” Harry asks, pretending to be affronted. Addie doesn’t take the bait.

“Nope,” she says happily, lacing her hand with Sarah’s, who rolls her eyes but grins affectionately.

“Anyway,” Sarah says, laughter in her voice as she tugs Addie away. “You probably weren’t
expecting an ambush, so we’ll let you finish shopping. Thanks for being nice.”

“Thank you!” Addie echoes, waving back at him. “Oh, and say hi to Louis for us!”

The encounter with Addie and Sarah—while far more tame than many Harry has been through—
sticks in Harry’s head as he pays for his new jeans and jumpers and heads back to the house. He
ruffles Liam’s hair as he passes where he’s claimed a sofa for a nap in the living room and bounds up
to his and Louis’ room to deposit his bags. Once all his new things are put away, he deposits himself
in a comfy armchair by the window overlooking their garden.

“Hazza!” Louis calls a little while later, and Harry doesn’t bother answering when he hears Louis’
footsteps on the stairs. Harry looks up from his journal and grins at Louis when he appears, sweaty
and rumpled after his workout with Niall and their new trainer.

“Hello, love of my life,” Harry says, snagging Louis by the waistband of his shorts and tugging him
close. They kiss for a long minute before Louis pauses for breath and leans back, raising a curved
eyebrow.

“What did I do to deserve that?”

Harry stands, kissing Louis’ cheek. “I’ll tell you in the shower, c’mon, you smell like Niall’s awful
Old Spice deodorant.”

“I ran out,” Louis admits as he trails after Harry. “Had to steal some from him.”

Louis and Harry have shared enough showers by now that they’ve worked out a routine,
maneuvering in and out of the water to wash, rinse, repeat; when they aren’t pausing for more sexy
purposes, they can be in and out in fifteen minutes, and that’s with stoppage time for a quick second
of bum worship on Harry’s part.

“So what happened with you today?” Louis asks as he lathers shampoo through his hair, squinting at
Harry with one eye to keep suds out.

Harry tells him about Sarah and Addie, his sneaky way of telling him that the rumors about he and
Louis are true, and about Addie’s reassurances that not everyone supports them because they want
something out of it. “It’s not that weird,” Harry says, soaping up his curls. He spins so Louis can
help him rinse, tipping his head back. “I know not everyone that bought our album wants to fuck me,
I’m not that vain. But it goes against everything we’ve ever been told, so it sort of stuck with me.”

“I didn’t ever really believe that crock of bullshit,” Louis says, concentrating on scratching at Harry’s
scalp for a moment. “Because I don’t care how hot he is, you’d never catch me dead with a Justin
Bieber album, or, like, the Jonas Brothers CD. I’m just not interested. So I knew the majority of the
fans had to at least like our music enough to tolerate it, even if they’re only active fans because they
think we’re cute.”

“It was strange to see two people together who believe the complete opposite about us, though. One
thought we were together and the other thought I was dating Cara, they usually don’t mix groups like that. Though, really, I can’t blame the one that got it wrong,” Harry says darkly, scrubbing at his shoulders. “They’re enjoying pushing the womanizer angle on me, aren’t they? Because apparently it would be better for me to be linked to everyone at the same time rather than to the one person I’m actually in love with and very happy with.”

“Well, you know,” Louis says lightly, switching places with Harry and handing him his conditioner. “If you take three out of five of the band out of the running for potential soulmates, profits might suffer.” He rubs at his chest with body wash, a cool melony scent filling the foggy shower. “Well, actually, it would be five out of five.”

“Zayn’s not actually dating Perrie, though,” Harry says confusedly. “And Liam’s not dating Danielle.”

“No, I know,” Louis says, and raises his eyebrows meaningfully. Harry shrugs, and Louis rolls his eyes. “Liam and Zayn are together, babe. I’m, like, ninety percent sure.”

“No,” Harry says automatically, though that would actually explain a few things. “They would tell us. Wouldn’t they?”

“Maybe they’re working up to it,” Louis says. “I don’t know. They either aren’t soulmates or they aren’t Bonded yet, because Liam doesn’t have a new Marker he’s trying to pass off as a tattoo and I haven’t seen anything new on Zayn in a while, either. But there’s definitely something happening there.”

“Wow,” Harry says. His mind is still buzzing, trying to fill in all the times Zayn and Liam were on their little dates and Harry had thought nothing about it. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice.”

Louis chuckles a little. “I can. You’re a little oblivious sometimes, darling.”

“Not that oblivious,” Harry replies, frowning. “I’ve noticed something happening in this shower, for example.”

Louis tries to twist away when Harry nudges his half-hard cock with his knee. “I can’t help it!” Louis cries, half-giggling and half-moaning when Harry slides a thigh between his legs and pushes him up against the shower wall. “You’re really fit, love, and you look sexy when you’re wet.”

“Yeah?” Harry asks, flipping his hair exaggeratedly. “Gonna do something about it?”

Louis grins, and they leave the shower half an hour later with wobbly limbs and flushed faces, collapsing into bed for a nap to recuperate for round two.

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11 August 2012

Summer 2012 brings with it a lot of things, but notable amongst those is the Summer Olympics in London, and management gave Louis tickets to watch Tom Daley in the diving competition.

But it’s not as generous as it seems—it never is, not with their management—and it’s all a front to grab some headlines with the person sitting next to him: Eleanor.
They settle themselves into their specifically assigned seats, conveniently across the pool from the unsubtle pap with the massive camera, the only person in the building not admiring Tom’s abs.

Harry’s had to kiss a couple of his not-girlfriends for a bit of extra PR, and Louis’ had to kiss Eleanor a couple of times as well, but it’s never been this planned. Claudia’s never told Louis explicitly when to kiss her, he just always went with it when Eleanor leaned in, assuming she was under orders of her own. Not until today, at least; they were sent here with specific instructions, because there’s only so much romance that can be faked in 140 characters on Twitter.

“Quit fidgeting,” Eleanor hisses through a smile, clapping as a Chinese diver does some spine-tingling contortions in the air and gets a high score.

“I can’t help it, I’m about to knowingly cheat on my boyfriend,” Louis smile-whispers back. “It’s not a great feeling.”

“Think of it as acting,” she suggests. “Actors kiss other people all the time, it doesn’t mean anything. And it’s not like he doesn’t know.”

Harry does know, and that’s half the issue. Louis’ stomach does some strange contortions of its own worthy of a gold medal when he thinks of Harry seeing these pictures on a dozen different websites later, because it’s sure to be spread from London ‘round the world. He’d convinced Harry to spend the day with Nick so he wouldn’t sit at home, scrolling through Twitter and waiting for the news to hit, but somehow it doesn’t feel any better knowing he’s out at a club drinking to pretend he’s okay.

When the management rep behind Louis and Eleanor nudges Louis with her shoe, he pulls out his phone to send a final message.

(3:42 p.m.) Louis: Wish you were here

Then he leans over and presses his lips to Eleanor’s, and wonders how he ever planned on doing this with anyone else but Harry, ever. It’s awkward, his neck’s at a weird angle, and he can’t remember how to kiss someone whose lips don’t mold to his like it’s instinct. It throws him back to his days of adolescent fumblings in the dark at house parties, only now it’s not terrible because he’s nervous, it’s terrible because he’s seen how good it can be.

But then it’s over. The pap snaps a few more photos of Louis and Eleanor taking a selfie and cheering on Team Great Britain, then Louis is finally able to check for an answer.

(3:44 p.m.) Hazza: Wish I was there. xx

14 August 2012

Julian calls them up a few weeks into the recording process to let them know Savan and a couple other writers are going to meet up to work on a song, and the band is welcome to come and give their input if they’re interested. Louis passes the news along and they all decide to go, piling into Zayn’s Range Rover and stopping for McDonalds on the way.

“That way even if it turns out we suck at writing, today is still a good day,” Niall says happily, munching on his Big Mac.
“Niall, we are literally millionaires,” Louis points out dryly. “We could have the greatest food in the world, but you have McDonalds and it’s a good day?”


It’s the old crew of songwriters at the studio, Savan and Rami and a couple other guys who helped them with the last album. They’re scattered around a long table, water bottles and laptops every few feet. They welcome the boys in when they arrive, asking how things have been while Savan teases them about growing up right in front of his very eyes.

And then they get to work.

It’s a very methodical process, songwriting, or at least it is with this group. Louis has written a couple on his own time, little pieces of things that wouldn’t leave his head, but it was never like this.

“Okay, so we’ve got a framework,” Savan says, walking them through the swinging, solid tune, a little repetitive but that’s basically a standard for a Savan-written song. “Now we’re going to build the lyrics.”

So they do: line by line, piece by piece. Every word examined for maximum impact. It’s like seeing a math problem worked out on a board—each step forward in the process affects the whole song, and so each one is chosen with care.

And it’s possibly the most manufactured part of the entertainment business he’s seen so far. Which, really, is saying a lot.

“But if we use ‘dreaming’ here, I think it gives it more of a fantasy edge. Where with ‘thinking,’ it’s more realistic. The girl is thinking about someone she actually knows, as opposed to dreaming about someone she’s never met.”

Louis’ head is starting to spin. There’s nothing real about this song—he can’t help but compare it to the ones Ed’s written for them, where the words are meaningful because of what the writer meant, not because of how multitudes of teenage girls will take them. It’s What Makes You Beautiful all over again, just vague enough to make any fan think that it could be about them.

None of the boys have contributed anything, because there’s been no room to. Louis stares at the cursor blinking on his own laptop, the Google Doc with the lyrics open in front of him, Savan’s color highlighting the word he and another writer, Carl, are arguing over.

Louis bites his lip, considering. And then he jumps his cursor down under the chorus and taps out a phrase, trying it out as he hums under his breath.

Liam makes an interested noise a few seats over, and his name appears next to Louis’ on screen. He highlights a word and changes it to something else, and Louis nods in approval. Harry hooks his chin on Louis’ shoulder and reads from Louis’ screen, then reaches over and backspaces, taking out an unnecessary couple of words to smooth it out.

“So it’s decided,” Savan says, clapping his hands. “We’re keeping it as ‘thinking,’ not ‘dreaming.’” Then he stops when he sees the new addition at the bottom of the screen. “Louis, did you write that?”

“Uh,” Louis says, though it’s pretty clear it had to be one of them, and Louis’ name is the one next to the blinking cursor. He reads the words again before he decides to commit. Deciding he’s satisfied, he shrugs. “Yeah?”
“It’s good!” Savan says incredulously, like he can’t believe Louis was able to string a couple of sentences together. “Really good, actually.”

“I helped,” Liam says immediately when he sees Louis isn’t getting told off. Louis throws a bottle at him.

“How’d you come up with that?” Carl asks. “I didn’t even think you were paying attention.”

Louis shrugs again, rereading the words. Baby tell me, would it change? I’m afraid you’ll run away, if I tell you what I’ve wanted to tell you.

“I don’t know,” he says, trying not to look at Harry. “It just came to me.”

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**24 August 2012**

Louis and Harry in a dark room together usually means one of two things: they’re either sleeping, or they’re getting off. If they haven’t gotten to the latter yet, it’s because they’re still shaking off the former. They’re usually quite predictable when it comes to what they do when they’re alone.

This… is not so fun as either of those options.

They’re at Fountain Studios in a small room with those obvious two-way mirrors up on the walls, watching old interviews. Stuff from way back in the *X Factor* days, last year during the *Up All Night* promo, even some from just a few weeks ago. It’s been going on for a while now, probably nearing an hour, and Harry still doesn’t get it. There’s no common thread connecting all of these interviews, and the five PR managers watching silently in the back of the room aren’t filling them in on what’s going on.

Harry is mildly (read: incredibly) confused about why this is all happening. He’s never been good at picking out motivations and meanings, that’s always been a Louis thing. But, at least with all his new questions he got a couple of answers, as well.

For example, they got to find out the reason behind that sudden shift in his and Louis’ public images way back in March; it all boils down to one woman, someone named Ann-Marie who introduced herself as the head of Syco PR just before pressing play on this strange interview video mix, even though Harry has literally never seen her before. Or maybe he has seen her, and he wasn’t introduced to her and she made no impression—he’s usually pretty good with keeping track of notable people, and he feels like he would remember someone with that much coolness in their eyes and power in their title.

He also found out that they’ll be performing at the iTunes Festival soon. Which… doesn’t seem incredibly relevant to watching hours of old footage, but it’s still cool.

And that’s about it. Okay, so he traded two tidbits of knowledge for a veritable truckload of questions. Still, those two tiny pieces were more than he had before, and he can mull over them while pretending to watch younger versions of himself act like an idiot to make younger versions of Louis smile.

“This was my favorite one,” Louis murmurs under his breath, and Harry blinks his eyes back into
focus to see the tail end of the interview they did together in Paris. He sees himself flinging his head back to laugh, remembers the way the whole day had felt like a dream, softly lit, pearls and rose petals, cool silk sheets and warm skin. He can still taste the chocolate from their dessert, can still feel the imprint of Louis’ fingertips on his skin, hear the echoes of his soft cries.

“Yeah,” he answers succinctly, biting his lip as Louis laces their fingers.

The lights come back on, and the two of them startle into sitting up straight.

Ann-Marie, the PR lady, is in the doorway. She’s holding a clipboard, and she looks wildly unimpressed.

“We’ve brought you in for a reason, today,” she says, her voice cooler than her eyes. “And it was not to be a romantic backdrop for your declarations of love. This is a business meeting, you are professionals. Please act like it.”

Harry feels himself flush in angry embarrassment. He doesn’t have anything to say, but he also doesn’t unwind his hand from Louis’, and Louis doesn’t let go either. Ann-Marie’s haughty eyebrow raises a little higher.

“Fine,” she says. “We can do it this way. We’re here to fix your interview behaviors. It’s gone on long enough.”

“What do you mean, ‘fix’ it?” Louis asks shortly. “We’re saying exactly what we’re supposed to say.”

“You sometimes say what you’re supposed to say. But it isn’t about your answers, it’s about your body language.”

“Oh, this again,” Harry huffs. “You want me and Louis to stop looking like a couple.”

“Yes,” Ann-Marie says firmly. “I do. And, as the person in charge of your public image, and who knows the ins and outs of your contract, I have the power to sue you if you don’t comply.” She leans forward until she’s eye-level with the two of them, like a snake drawing attention to her rattle when they really should be watching for her bite. “And it won’t just be for your paltry amounts of money in your little joint bank account. I don’t want that, I’m much richer than you. No, I’ll make sure you never work in the music industry again. Not as a writer, not as a producer, sure as hell not as a singer. You won’t even be the PA for someone else’s PA. I have that power, and I am not like your useless management team. I will use it.”

“So we’ll stop tickling each other in interviews, or whatever,” Louis says, and Harry doesn’t know if anyone else knows him well enough to hear the smallest of shakes in his voice. He learned to deal with Magee and Griffiths and taught Harry to do the same; they were a familiar evil and Harry’s long since learned they don’t hold the world in their hands. But Ann-Marie—she scares him, and she doesn’t look like she holds the world in her hands, because she looks like she keeps in trapped under the heel of her stiletto instead. Ready to crush when it doesn’t give her what she wants.

“Not good enough,” Ann-Marie says. “We’re trying something a little different today.”
31 August 2012

It only takes a week.

One week, seven meetings. Two or three hours a day in that dark room, watching the same few videos of Louis and Harry as the PR professionals, led by Ann-Marie, point out every single way they’re giving themselves away as a couple. And how, exactly, those little natural tendencies, those little brushes of hands and elbows, those little smiles, are going to ruin the band and their careers.

“We have statistics proving that as soon as boy band members start seeming unavailable to fans, they flock somewhere else,” says one of the PR people. Her eyes are dead. Harry hates it. “Sales will drop if this continues.”

“It used to be seen as cute, but it won’t for this next album,” says a man with his own set of blank, emotionless eyes. “The longer it goes on, the worse it will be for your reputations.”

“Every boy band needs a frontman,” Ann-Marie says. Something about her voice, floating quietly through the air as they rewatch themselves over and over and over, seeing every touch that is wrong and bad and ruining everything, is almost hypnotic. “If one isn’t chosen, the fans pick one for you. They chose Harry, and so he’s the desirable one. If he seems taken, the fans will leave. If you continue this way, you’ll be seen as a threat, rather than a friend. It’s probably already started.”

Harry knows she’s wrong. He knows, somewhere deep in his head, that there are reasons why she’s wrong. He met fans just the other day who said that they didn’t want to sleep with them. Surely they aren’t the only ones.

But it’s hard to use logic when being battered by persuasive voices on all sides.

And they aren’t even pointing it at Harry.

“See how you’re leaning into him there?” a PR person says, using a laser pointer and circling Louis’ tilted hips and the way they angle into Harry's comfortably, with familiarity. “Fans see this and automatically assume you are their competition.”

“They want to like you. They don’t want to look at you and see a threat to their potential Bond with Harry, they want to look at you and see Harry’s bandmate. That’s all.”

“Harry's desirability is the only way for this band to stay afloat,” Ann-Marie says. “The fans have chosen him, and if you are in their way, you're also standing in the way of the band’s future.”

Harry’s stomach swims in hate, in anger. It won’t work, this forced separation. Louis loves him too much. Whispering in his ear about how wrong they are isn’t going to work.

Right?

It takes a week. And at the end of the week, when Harry and Louis are walking back out to their car after an intense three hours of being told exactly how they’re ruining the band by touching when no one is looking, Harry's hand brushes Louis’. And Louis automatically pulls back like he's been burned.

Harry stops immediately, and grabs Louis’ hand so tight he feels the bones shift.

“We aren't doing this,” he says throatily. “They're trying to pull you away from me, and I'm not going to let them. They can't do that.”
“I can’t help it, Hazza,” Louis whispers. His eyes are ringed with dark circles. He hasn’t been sleeping well, tossing and turning late into the night, but Harry hasn’t taken the damage in completely. His delicate hand shakes in Harry’s. “I can’t.”

“Magee and Griffiths used to tell you the exact same things,” Harry whispers fiercely back at him. They’re the only ones in the car park and still Louis is curling in on himself, like he can’t handle being this exposed. “Why is this different? How is this affecting you when you used to tell them to fuck off?”

“I don’t know,” Louis moans, hiding his face in his hands. Harry hates it. He hates it so much. “It just does. You and this band are the two best things that ever happened to me, and I can’t let either one of those be ruined because of me. And maybe I never really believed Modest had the power to hide me, to push me out of the band. But she does, Hazza, I know she does. And she’ll do it, too.”

“I can’t stand this,” Harry answers desperately. His voice catches, tears aren’t far off. “I can’t stand to see you beaten. You’re never supposed to be beaten, you’re Louis.”

“Maybe this did it,” Louis says. His voice sounds empty. Harry will burn London down if he has to hear it like that again. “Maybe this is what beats me.”

“No,” Harry says. It blazes in him like wildfire, like untamable wrath. Like he has the power to stop this from happening. “No. We aren’t doing this.”

He directs Louis towards the passenger seat of his car and peels out of the lot, going far too fast for the old London streets. His head is a rush of fear, loathing; he knew this job would get hard, he knew he and Louis wouldn’t be allowed to act like boyfriends in public in case it hurt the feelings of the fans.

But this, what they’re being put through, it’s wrong. It’s aversion therapy, is what it is, and it’s inhumane. They can’t force the love of Harry’s life into being too scared to touch him. He won’t let them. He won’t.

“Where are we going?” Louis tries to ask. His voice is tiny in the emptiness of the car. Harry doesn’t answer, but Louis doesn’t seem surprised when they park in front of a small brick tattoo parlor, the Shangri-La sign crooked on the door.

Liam Sparkes knows them well enough by now to have a chair cleared off by the time Harry’s marched the two of them through the front parlor and to the private back area. Harry can feel himself morphing into something more than himself, stormy and terrifying. He feels something ancient and sad in the corners of his eyes. Something full of pain and hurt in the shaking of his hands.

He pulls off his shirt with one swift motion before settling into the chair. “A birdcage,” he says, not bothering with pleasantries. “Right here on my ribs.”

Louis and Harry chose their cage, gilded it themselves with promises that it was what they wanted. They knew when they fell into this relationship that it would come with secrecy and hidden touches. But now others want to lock the door from the outside, to keep them trapped in what used to be their safe haven. Harry won’t let it happen; he’ll fight until he bleeds, until he’s broken. He won’t let himself be caged by outside forces.

Louis doesn’t say a word as Liam inks his skin, the buzz of the gun taking the place of any conversation. Harry knows, knows as deeply as he knows that Louis loves him, that he gets it. That he understands what it symbolizes without needing Harry to explain. The once-bright edge of righteous anger in his blue eyes is dimmed a little, but it burns like embers at the bottom of a fire. Not
smothered entirely, just dormant.

And for the first time since this began, Harry has hope.

“Anything else?” Liam asks as he finishes. “I don't usually recommend multiple tattoos in one sitting, but.” He grimaces. “Seemed needed, tonight.”

“Yeah,” Harry says raspily. He hasn’t spoken in a while either, lapsing into silence as Liam sketched onto his skin. He gets a hanger right under the LA-LDN-NY set, quick and simple, to remind himself of the superficiality of the industry he’s chosen to be in, and that nothing he does or that is done to him really matters. When that’s finished as well, Harry looks up at Louis, catches his eye and holds it. “Two more. Things I can’t on my left arm, and Things I can on my right.”

Liam’s hand quick and sure as he sketches out a stencil and gets Harry’s agreement on the design. Louis watches as the needle pierces his inner arm and ink begins to flow, and his hand twitches in Harry’s.

“Why?” he asks finally. His voice is like sandpaper, like water over gravel.

“I’ve already sort of started it,” Harry answers, and his voice answers like thunder, like the growl of a predator kept locked up too long. “Things I can’t on the arm with the tattoos, because I have to get those instead of just telling the world I love you. Because there are rules to keep it from happening, even though that’s all I want to do. Things I can on my blank arm, and I’ll fill that when I’m free to do so. To write what I want to say rather than to symbolize what I have to keep hidden.”

“Harry,” Louis whispers, and something settles in Harry’s heart.

They’ll be okay. They aren’t yet, but they will be.

It’s just a stumble on their road to happiness.

Liam finishes quickly enough, not bothering giving Harry the lecture about aftercare when Harry could recite it by heart. He does clap Harry on the shoulder before they leave, Louis watching silently from the doorway.

“Be good, you two,” Liam says. “And take care of each other.”

They’re quiet on the way out to Harry’s car, the summer evening air like a blanket around them, deafening the outside world. The street outside the shop is silent, and so are the two of them as they clamber into the vehicle.

“I know you said we shouldn’t use tattoos as coping mechanisms,” Harry says after a few minutes, his hands not gripping the steering wheel quite as tightly this time around. “But I don't care. I'll write it all over my body if I have to. I'll learn it in every language and tell you every day in every way. I'll dedicate myself to you over and over until you finally get it, Lou.” He reaches over, takes Louis’ hand. It’s not shaking anymore. “I'm not going anywhere. This band isn't going anywhere. And you definitely aren't going anywhere. Not until you want to.”

“That's not your call,” Louis murmurs. “It's Ann-Marie’s. And if I don't stop touching you in public, she'll kick me out of the band.”

“I think it is my call, actually,” Harry says lightly. “Someone told me recently that the fans have decided that I'm the leader of the band. And maybe that's bullshit to make me follow along with the PR plan, but I think I can use it either way. They want me to have influence, I'll take it.”
The next day, between a morning jog around the neighborhood that leaves Louis sated and loose and a few hours curled up with a book of Harry's favorite poetry, pressed up against Harry in the hammock in their backyard as he dozes on and off, they have another round of media training with the PR team.

Louis doesn’t sit back and take it this time; he endures it, grits his teeth against light accusations, clenches his fist at the subtle suggestions to let Harry go.

And after it’s finished, he takes Harry’s hand and says, “Let’s go back to Shangri-La.”

If Liam wasn’t surprised to see them the day before, he’s practically got a chair saved when they come back that day.

“Because I can't put I CAN’T CHANGE on my body,” Louis explains to Harry as Liam inks quotation marks on the inside of his wrist. “I do need to change. There are things about me that aren’t always good, and I need to fix those. But when it comes to you, and how I feel about you, that won't change. That can't change.”

Harry stifles his protests that Louis is perfect just the way he is, and prompts him, “So the quote marks…”

“Are to say that I'm not quite there yet. But in regards to this,” he says, tapping the words across Harry's wrist. “When it comes to you, and how I feel about you. That won't change. So this is my agreement that I feel the same.”

Over the next few weeks, the band bounces around the world to record and do promo for their iTunes Festival performance and upcoming album, from France to Sweden to LA, and things slowly go back to normal. Louis schools himself in front of cameras, better at controlling his hands and his automatic reactions now that it’s been drilled into his head to do so, but he doesn’t let it take him over entirely. He doesn’t let himself be relegated to the back just to pave the way for Harry to take the front. He’s still careful, he might always be, now that he has poison-coated words heavy in the back of his mind.

But now, when he starts to cling to Harry when they’re alone because he’s afraid to let go, when he feels himself getting swept away in uncertainty, he only has to look over and see Harry’s scattered declarations of love to settle himself.

And he adds a few of his own as well:

A cup of tea—"For my favorite line in Little Things. Also, because I'm a proper Englishman and I know what's important in life."

Four silhouetted birds—"So the cage doesn’t sit empty."

Far Away—"Because Nickelback is cheesy, but I really would withstand all of hell to hold your hand. Have done already, actually."

They’ve been told they’re unacceptable, they’re unsustainable. Harry has been told he has to carry the band on his back and Louis has been told he can’t carry anything at all. They’ve been told that what they do will ruin everything they love, their futures, their careers and the careers of their best friends.

But they won’t listen. Not entirely, not when they can help it.

“Is it worth it?” Ann-Marie asks before they leave for Sweden to record the song Ed wrote about
how much they love each other.

“It’s worth everything.” Louis whispers as he curls against Harry’s chest that night.

“Never forget,” Harry answers, and they fall asleep dreaming of winning a war they never knew they were fighting.

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21 September 2012

The media training wasn’t randomly timed, as it turns out. The boys are all together at rehearsals for the iTunes performance when Louis’ phone vibrates once, twice, three times. Harry is closest, so he reaches over to unlock it and check Louis’ new slew of messages.

(3:22 p.m.) **Stanley the Manly**: hey mate everything ok with u and haz? talk 2 me if u need to

(3:22 p.m.) **Lottie**: That wasn’t you right??

(3:22 p.m.) **Mum**: Everything okay, Boo?

“Lou?” Harry asks, and holds out his phone. Louis’ brow furrows as he reads the messages.

“Did an article come out today or something?” Niall asks, reading over his shoulder.

“Um, Lou?” Zayn says, and there’s a weird spike of fear in Harry’s stomach as Zayn bites his lip, clearly worried. He holds out his phone, and the other boys crowd around.

Harry’s close enough to Louis that he feels his whole body shake, and he immediately wraps him into his arms. Niall piles on, then the other two finish it off.

This is so much worse than anything else management has said through the mouthpiece of Louis’ name. Louis was utterly broken when his influence was used to shame their friend for not working hard enough, and that was aimed at someone who knew how the game worked, and that it wasn’t really Louis saying those things. These are innocent fans being taken out in one cruel sweep, and the replies to the tweet are confused, hurt.

Louis has to take a while to recover, and the others don’t blame him. They call it quits for the day
and caravan back to Harry and Louis’ house, where they smother Louis in affection and cuddles until he stops sniffling. They watch *Grease* in silence so Louis won’t get aggravated at them talking over his favorite parts and Harry cooks his favorite dinner. Niall and Zayn run to the shops to buy mint chocolate chip ice cream and Liam offers to carry him from room to room so he doesn’t have to walk. They whirl around him like planets around a sun, trying to keep him lit and warm.

“Quit treating me like I’m made of glass,” he says tiredly when Harry offers him a foot rub and Zayn draws smiley faces on his hands. “I’ll be okay, it was just a bit of a shock.”

They go back to rehearsals the next day, and no one on the crew says a word about their abrupt end the day before. Lou and Caroline and Paul and the ones who know Louis well enough to be concerned pull Harry aside and ask if he’s okay, and Harry shrugs.

“He’s better than I thought he’d be, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

They rehearse, and Louis gets that face that says he knows what everyone is doing when they bring him cups of tea during breaks and kisses on the forehead between songs. But he doesn’t fight it, just rolls his eyes when Niall hangs off of him like a koala.

“You’re okay, right?” Harry hears Zayn ask when they’re being shuttled to an interview.

“Yeah. I can’t apologize for something I didn’t say, and I can’t take it back,” Louis sighs. “But there’s no use worrying over it. The fans that know better will see right through it and understand that’s about as good of a denial they’re going to get out of me, since clearly I can’t do it on camera. It is what it is.”

Harry isn’t sure he believes him until they’re on stage at the iTunes Festival, deep into the middle of *Moments*, Louis’ clear voice ringing out like a bell, like a siren song pulling him in.

Louis passes Harry on the way to the front for his solo. Harry’s not supposed to look at him. He does anyway.

He’s not smiling, not trying to make Niall laugh. He’s completely cool until he looks to his right, just a little, and breaks the rules by catching Harry’s eye as well.

And something breaks, just a little. That tiny point of contact between them soothes the ache and deepens the wound at the same time, and Louis’ mouth pinches into a straight line to keep from smiling, just for a moment.

Harry grins back, and they’re a whole stage away from each other and a whole world apart, but they won’t be that way forever. The moment they leave the stage, they can collide like passing stars once more. It’s hard, but it’s not unbearable. It can’t break them.

And the next day, when they’re sat in a meeting to talk about the perfume they’re apparently launching, Louis does nothing but smile.

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29 September 2012

Sometimes, sex with Louis is like slipping on an old, worn shirt. It's soft, and warm, and reminds
Harry of sunny yesterdays and bright tomorrows. Harry can spend hours with a pliant, gentle Louis in their bed, worshipping the curve of his spine, the dip of his waist. Leaving trails of kisses across his shoulders and chest, nuzzling the sensitive skin on the back of his neck. There are days when Harry doesn't let Louis out of bed and Louis doesn't fight hard to leave, and they spend the day tangled in a web of limbs and laughter, pausing for quiet kisses under the covers. They move slowly, comfortably, sometimes not coming for hours, dancing each other to the edge and pulling back with huffed breaths and smiled, teasing curses. *I love yous and you're beautifuls* are peppered onto their skin like freckles, like butterfly wings, like drops of honey.

Sometimes, sex with Louis is like a lightning strike. Sudden, abrupt, unavoidable. They'll be out at Funky Buddha with Liam, watching each other down rounds of shots, licking the stickiness from their lips from electric blue alcohol. Or they'll venture out to somewhere new, faceless crowds who don't know their names as they press together in heated neon dreamscapes. Or they'll follow Niall to house parties with the lights turned way down low, music thumping through the walls like a heartbeat. Either way, they'll lose their inhibitions with drained drinks and lingering touches, drunk on each other more than any kind of spirit, and then they'll find themselves on a dance floor, Louis pressed against Harry's front, a shadow of heat and a flash of hunger. Liquor will convince them that they can't get close enough, and so they try harder: Louis tangles his hands in Harry's curls, circles his thumb on Harry's bare hipbone. Harry slides a hand under Louis' shirt just to feel him shiver, runs his nose up the curve of Louis' neck. That's the static buildup in the air, the rolling humidity the reaches a breaking point before—

A sudden crash of lightning, of lust and love colliding in a breathless moment; Louis will drag Harry to a bathroom stall or an empty bedroom or a deserted back alley, anywhere he can get his hands on Harry. It's always messy, always fast, always dirty. Harry mutters things in Louis' ear about owning him, taking him, of marking him for the world to see. Louis promises to make it hurt, to make Harry ache, to make it so he can't shift a muscle without remembering what Louis had done. They get off with their pants and jeans barely tugged down enough for Harry to get a hand around both of their cocks, or sometimes Louis pushes at Harry's shoulders until he drops to his knees and takes Louis' cock in one swallow. That's never the only time they come on nights when the storm between them rolls in; after the lightning strike of quick, rough, semi-public sex, the thunder follows when they get home: Harry opening Louis with deep, pulsing thrusts of long fingers. Louis sucking Harry until he's floating on endorphins and not enough oxygen. Hard, sharp thrusts that leave the recipient gasping, crying. Bruises that won't fade for days.

Sometimes, sex with Louis is like a decathalon. He gets in moods where sleepy morning tumbles aren't enough, where he has to manhandle Harry onto the floor in their living room, or spread across the dining table, or on top of one of their pool tables. He'll eat Harry out for hours, pushing him to the edge until he's hovering there, shivering, pleading, and then pull him back. He'll kiss and suck at Harry's nipples until he's crying, begging for release. He'll fuck Harry with slow, even thrusts until until he's mad with desire, a shift of angle all he needs to come but Louis won't give it to him, not until he's half-delirious with it.

Sometimes, sex with Louis is a surrender. When Harry's out with Cara specifically to be written about in the next morning's papers, or when another woman uses his name for publicity with no regards to his feelings or the feelings of her soulmate she so easily forgot, Harry comes home and gives himself to Louis. He takes the darkness in his head and pushes it outward: to his tingling hands that Louis ties to the bedposts. To his rolling stomach, where Louis bites bruises in the shape of an L. To his teary eyes, which Louis blindfolds until they're wet for a different reason. Louis spanks him with a specialty paddle until his name is branded on Harry's bum for days afterward. He clamps Harry's nipples and tugs, tugs until he's screaming at the top of his lungs. He puts Harry in pretty silk panties and garters and then rips them off of him again. He makes Harry come until he can't form words, then plugs him up so that as soon as he's coherent, they can begin again.
These days take recovery time, and Louis is the only one who can break him into pieces and then put him together better than he was before. He cuddles Harry until he dozes off and wipes away any come and lube so he doesn't wake up sticky. He feeds him strawberries and pineapple and gives him sips of water until he isn't quite as spinny, and talks to him about how much he loves him in a slow, soothing voice until Harry's head doesn't feel filled with cotton anymore. He checks a dozen times to make sure he didn't cross a line, and Harry reassures him that he never does.

Sometimes, Louis needs to surrender too. When his youngest sisters call him crying about their friends saying Louis doesn’t love Harry, he loves Eleanor, when he spends yet another weekend trapped inside the house because he can’t be seen with Harry and Nick and all their friends, when an interviewer praises him for being such a devoted boyfriend to the girl he barely speaks to, Louis gives himself back to Harry to complete the circle. Harry uses Louis' favorite vibrator on his prostate until he’s crying, wrung out, three different loads of come on his chest before Harry decides he’s had enough. He’ll slide a cock ring onto Louis and ride him until he makes himself come twice, then finally lets Louis have his own. Harry’s not sure he recovers from the sight of Louis trussed up in silk ribbons, his hands bound behind his back, his throat arched as he begs for more. Louis might be able to break Harry into pieces, but Harry can seal all the cracks in Louis’ armor, and sometimes it’s the only thing that can keep the both of them sane.

And sometimes, like today, sex with Louis is like coming home. Louis spoons up behind Harry and thrusts, his teeth leaving ridges in Harry’s shoulder. Harry moans on an exhale, his eyes closed in exaltation as hips seek more, rolling backward like a tidal wave. Sunlight through the open curtains traces their bodies with glitter, sweat trails like paths of starlight. Louis’ hands are comforting weights on Harry’s hips, weighing him down to keep from floating.

“I love you,” Louis presses into Harry’s skin.

“I love you, love you,” Harry gasps as he falls over the edge, Louis holding his hand the whole way.

4 October 2012

October hits, and between finishing up tracks on the album and the promo season starting to ramp up, Louis has next to no time to help with the details of the charity match he’s set up with the Rovers. His mum’s handling a lot of it since she’s able to run to the DRFC offices easier than he is, and some of Louis’ management are helping as well, but there’s still a ton to do.

He buries himself in his and Harry’s shared office at the house one morning, making calls to the charity headquarters to see if they can supply t-shirts and to Stan to see if he wants to head up the food donation committee, since Louis’ wrangled a spot for him to play in the match as well and so he owes him. He’s just gotten off the phone with the Donny public relations director to see about their remaining advertising budget when he looks up to see Harry leaning in the doorway, biting his lip as he smiles.

Louis grins back. “Yes, Harold?”

“You look sexy like this,” Harry says, walking around the desk and sliding onto Louis’ lap. “All mature and responsible, making phone calls and organizing things. Super hot.”
“Yeah?” Louis smirks. “Does maturity get you hot, Hazza? I can put on a tie if that’ll do it for you.”

“Oh God yes,” Harry moans loudly, and they both break into giggles. Harry kisses Louis’ forehead and leans back. “I actually came in for a reason—the boys and Babs are coming over for dinner tonight, so I can either do quesadillas or lasagna. Your pick.”

“My pick?” Louis gasps, tickling at Harry’s ribs. “What an honor. What do you feel like making?”

“I dunno,” Harry shrugs, smiling down at Louis. “Either. That’s why you need to pick, or I’ll never decide.”

“How about lasagna, then?”

“I can do that,” Harry chirps. “Be done with all your adulting and phone calling by six, or I’ll come drag you out of here.”

“Yes sir,” Louis salutes, and he hears Harry’s answering laugh all the way down the hallway.

“Babs! You look lovely as always, my dear,” Louis says, kissing Barbara’s cheek as he lets her into the house. She hands him a bottle of wine.

“We come bearing gifts,” she trills.

“You know you don’t have to do that, you’re way better than Nialler and we don’t make him pay to come to dinner,” Louis teases.

“It’s not for you, it’s for me,” she grins. “I don’t trust your taste in wine, sorry, Tommo.”

Louis cackles and lets her by, then Niall is in her place.

“What, no love for me because I didn’t bring you alcohol?” he whines.

Louis pounces forward, knocking Niall to the ground in one swoop. He plants kisses all over Niall’s face until he’s screaming, laughing so hard he’s hiccuping.

“Let me—hic—up, you—hic—you bastard—”

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised this is how the night is starting,” says Liam in the doorway. Louis looks up to see him and Zayn silhouetted over him, and he leaps to his feet.

“So sorry for that display, gents,” Louis says, bowing deeply. “A thousand apologies. I know you only expect the highest class here at Casa Stylinson, so I do humbly beg your forgiveness.”

“Oh, great,” Zayn says, rolling his eyes and nudging Liam. “So now this is something we get to deal with tonight. Thanks, babes.”

“Please, sirs,” Louis says, bowing deeply again as Niall cackles nearby. Harry, who’s come to see what all the fuss is about, giggles in the doorway as well. “Allow me to take your coats.”

Liam huffs but slides his jacket off, laying it across Louis’ outstretched arms. “Please don’t destroy
“And I will murder you if you hurt mine,” Zayn says, adding his leather jacket to the pile. “So don’t.”

“Of course not, I’ll—” Louis stops, his feet faltering. “Payno, is that a tattoo?”

“Erm,” Liam deflects for a moment, but he can’t hide the four massive arrows on his forearm, so he shrugs. “Yeah. I’ve been, um. Thinking of getting it for a while, finally decided to, y’know. Go for it.”

“Yeah, I took him,” Zayn takes over. “I wanted some new stuff as well, so I took him to my guy in London.”

“You got one too?” Harry asks.

Zayn nods. “Yup, got a couple. This bird,” he points to his hand, “and a skull on my shoulder, I’ve got pictures so I don’t have to strip. And…” He rolls his arm outward so they can see the realistic microphone now adorning his inner arm.

Harry raises his eyebrows at Louis, but they don’t say anything until after dinner, when Louis pretends to help Harry with the dishes so they can talk without being heard over the running water.

“What do you think?” Harry murmurs. “They aren’t in the same spots.”

“Don’t have to be,” Louis says. “My mum’s and Mark’s were in different places.”

“ Weird,” Harry says, glancing over his shoulder. Liam and Zayn aren’t acting any differently, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything either. He sighs, looking sad. “I wish they’d tell us.”

“They will when they’re ready,” Louis says, patting his back. “Give them time.”

22 October 2012

If someone had ever told Louis that he’d be playing at Keepmoat in a charity match he’d organized, he would have told them to lay off the hard drugs and clear their head.

If someone else had ever told him that he would be having a hard time savoring the moment because his boyfriend is insatiable… well, that one he might have believed a little easier.

(7:32 p.m.) Hazza: Just look so fit in your Donny kit, I can’t stand it
(7:32 p.m.) Hazza: Want to take it off you with my teeth
(7:33 p.m.) Hazza: No, changed my mind, want you to wear it while you ride me
(7:33 p.m.) Hazza: With your hair all sweaty
(7:34 p.m.) Hazza: And your skin all shiny
(7:34 p.m.) Hazza: I want to bite your thighs, they look so good
(7:35 p.m.) Hazza: Want to be in you so bad, babe

They’re staying at Louis’ mum’s tonight so they don’t have to drive all the way back to London, but
now Louis is regretting that. How is he supposed to make Harry keep these filthy promises when his baby sisters are right down the hall?

And it’s only half. There’s still a whole other half of a match to play, not to mention the speeches and donation ceremony they’re doing at the end.

“All rested up, lads?” calls a field manager. Louis’ team all stand, stretching and hopping to get ready to go back on the field.

Louis bites back a groan, clicks his phone lock, and heads back out onto the pitch.

It’s hard to concentrate on anything but the ache of his muscles as the match begins again, but Harry on the sidelines puts up a pretty good fight for the most distracting part of the night. He’s smiling so widely his dimples are like canyons, and his eyes are glittering so much that Louis can see them across the stadium. With his pink cheeks and his too-big coat and his rain-damp curls, his bright, loud laugh as he dances when Louis’ team scores, he doesn’t look like someone who sexts his boyfriend while in public.

But then he meets Louis’ eyes, unmistakably looks him up and down, and licks his lips.

Louis is so filled with adrenaline, he scores a few minutes later.

There’s only one message on Louis’ phone after the match and all his duties as the organizer are finished.

(9:32 p.m.) Hazza: Don’t clean yourself up, stay how you are. Want you just like you were on the pitch.

Louis shivers, towels off all the wet grass on his legs, and makes his way out of the locker room and back up to the mostly-empty stadium. Niall and Liam are doing penalty kicks on the far goal, and Lou is leading Lux around on her tiny chubby legs, Daisy and Phoebe trailing and cooing over her.

Stan’s lying in the wet grass, his cheeks still red from all their exercise tonight and looking on the verge of death.

“Boo!” his mum calls, waving him over. She’s standing with Lottie and Harry, who are both talking enthusiastically about Lottie’s barely-noticeable purple strip she’s dyed in her hair. Jay hugs him, wrinkling her nose. “This went so well, love, I’m so proud of you. But didn’t you have time for a shower? We would have waited.”

“I, uh,” Louis says, and Harry finally looks his way. He feels Harry’s gaze like a physical touch as it traces up his thighs to his forearms, still glistening and veined from exertion. “I can take one at the house.”

“Right,” Jay says, and she sounds a little distant as Harry’s eyes catch on Louis’ throat just as he swallows. “Well, we’re going to be here for a while, making sure everything’s in order.”

Louis blinks and shakes his head a little, and Harry’s smirk unfurls like a banner, his intentions clear as day. “Sorry, Mum, what?”

Jay raises an eyebrow, her own smirk hiding in the corner of her mouth. Lottie is less subtle, grinning up at Louis like she’s old enough to know what’s going on. “I said, we’ll be here for a while. Why don’t you… go ahead and take Harry to the house. We’ll be back around eleven.”

Louis isn’t sure whether he should be mortified at what his mum is implying or grateful for the opportunity, so he goes with neither and decides not to think about it, grabbing Harry’s hand and
jogging them both out to his car.

Harry is on him as soon as the door shuts. “Holy shit,” he moans against Louis’ lips. He’s trying to crawl over the center console, his knees sliding on the leather interior. “You’re so fucking hot, I can’t believe it. Like David Beckham, only hotter, holy shit.”

“Quit exaggerating,” Louis gasps, flinging his head back as Harry bites at his throat.

“m not,” Harry murmurs. “God, you could have bent me over right there on the pitch and I would have let you.”

Louis whines high in his throat and shoves Harry back to his side, throwing the car into reverse and squeezing out of the lot. “Gotta get you home,” he mutters, “or we’re gonna get arrested for fucking in public.”

Harry moans in the passenger seat, and Louis makes the mistake of looking over: he’s got his jeans unzipped and his hand down his pants, his eyes closed as he pulls himself off with long, smooth strokes. He blinks his eyes open to see Louis watching him and he lifts his hips to slide his jeans down a little, letting Louis see a strip of skin.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Louis breathes, his heartbeat rabbiting. He takes a turn much too fast and burns his tires down an empty side street. They’re so close, but still so far, and Harry’s going to kill him before he can even get off.

Harry’s breath starts hitching as they near Louis’ old house’s street. “Lou,” he whines, his feet sliding. “Gonna—”

“Don’t you dare,” Louis growls. “Not ‘til you’re in me, you promised.”

Harry pounds his fist against his thigh but stops stroking himself, his knuckles cracking with how hard his hands are clenching. The last few minutes slide by in a few hazy turns, Louis getting them to the house safely based only on muscle memory, and Harry is out of the car before it’s even parked. Louis follows, his feet slipping on the grass as he follows.

They tumble inside, kissing frantically. Harry throws Louis up against a wall and a picture of him as a toddler rattles in its frame, Harry marking his neck and collarbones with bitten bruises. Louis cries out when Harry scratches down his chest, his massive palm dragging over the tender skin.

“Off,” he pants, tugging at Louis’ jersey. “All of it, off.”

Louis complies, flinging his jersey away and stepping out of his shorts. Harry immediately drops to his knees, nuzzling against the juncture of Louis’ thigh before licking a stripe up the bottom of his cock. Louis tangles his hand in his curls and tugs, guiding Harry’s mouth in a rough, quick rhythm.

“D’you wanna fuck me?” he breathes to Harry as he yanks on his hair. Harry moans and nods, his eyes watering. “C’mon then. Upstairs.”

Harry chases Louis to his bedroom, pulling his own shirt off as he goes and trying to kick off his tight jeans. He falls against Louis’ bedroom door and rips his ankles free of their denim constraints, and then he’s finally, finally naked. Louis meets him in the middle of the room and they crash like cars, leaving nothing standing in their paths. Harry’s lips are vicious, his tongue deadly. Their skin slides together, chests and thighs and arms, slicked by sweat and desperation.

“Where’s the lube?” Harry says, and Louis scrambles over to their bags they’d deposited in the corner when they’d arrived earlier. He fumbles for the black bag in its own special pocket and digs
out a condom and lube.

“Here,” he says, thrusting them at Harry. “How do you want me?”

Harry steps up behind him, licking the sweat from his shoulder, and murmurs, “Like this.” Louis shivers and nods, his pulse pounding. “Bend over for me, love.”

Louis bends at the waist, laying his elbows on the bed to brace himself. Harry’s first slick finger circles his rim and pushes in without delay, making Louis slump. His thighs are already trembling from exertion, his shoulders shaking from the match and holding his upper body off the bed.

Harry adds the second finger and holds Louis up by the hips when he buckles. His toes curl against the carpet as Harry rubs over his prostate.

“Now,” he begs. “I’m ready.”

Harry doesn’t ask if he’s sure, just reaches over and opens the condom, slicking himself without pulling his fingers from Louis. His voice is like sin when he rumbles, “Want it to hurt, Lou? Gonna stretch you out when I push in, gonna make you sore tomorrow.”


Harry’s not wrong; Louis’ muscles protest and clench automatically as Harry starts to push in, and he has to take in a few deep breaths and roll his shoulders before he can relax enough for Harry to slide home. When his hips meet Louis’ arse, they both moan.

“Can’t believe I get to have you,” Harry says brokenly, shifting his hips a little before he really starts thrusting.

“You have me,” Louis promises weakly, “now take me, take me.”

Harry draws his hips back and crashes them forward, setting a punishing rhythm that has Louis jolting against the sheets and crying out. They’re both too worked up for this to be a marathon, and the way Harry’s hips are shuddering he’s already teetering near the edge. Louis is moaning constantly, incoherently, when Harry wraps a hand around his cock and starts tugging. He’s fuzzy around the edges, his whole being shrunk down to his cock in Harry’s hands and his arse being pounded by Harry. The quick prep gives the whole thing a rough edge, a zing of something extra that is going to make sitting tomorrow nearly unbearable but makes the burn right now so delicious.

Harry snaps his hips once more and Louis arches, sobbing and screaming as he comes, striping the bed under him and immediately collapsing on top of it.

“Lou,” Harry grits out, increasing his speed while Louis is still fucked out of his mind and feeling nothing but rushing tingles. His breath is hot in Louis’ ear, his skin fiery against Louis’ back, and when he comes it’s like a thunderstorm, sweeping Louis away.

They somehow stumble into a shower and wash off with sleep-lazy limbs, rinsing sweat and come and dried grass down the drain, and then collapse into bed. Harry is asleep within moments, his breathing heavy, and Louis keeps his eyes open just long enough to kiss Harry’s shoulder in a half-hearted goodnight before he follows him into slumber.
Louis wakes from a light doze to whispers downstairs, the familiar sound of the Tomlinson brood making their way into the house. He sits up and rubs his eyes, Harry still dead to the world next to him, facedown on his pillow. He always sleeps hard after sex, so he’ll be out for a while, but Louis’ stomach is rumbling and so he creeps out of his room and down the hall.

“Mum, what are… ew, it’s someone’s pants!” Louis hears before he rounds the corner, and Louis grimaces.

“Yes, well,” says Jay, sounding on the verge of laughter, “your brother hasn’t lived with girls in a few years, loves, he’s forgotten how to be polite and not drop trousers wherever he pleases.”

“Where are Hazza’s pants?” says Daisy sleepily, and Louis coughs a laugh. Jay looks up to see him in the doorway and uses him to keep from having to have that particular conversation.

“Give Lou Bear a hug goodnight, little loves, then head on upstairs.”

The twins turn and see Louis as well, running over and hugging him round the waist.

“You lost a lot of clothes,” Phoebe say critically, poking Louis’ nude belly.

“And somebody bit you,” Daisy points from his other side at teeth marks on his bicep.

“Er, um, it’s from football,” he answers, strained, and kisses the girls on the head to send them to bed before they make any more observations. Fizzy follows after raising an unamused eyebrow at the crumpled pants on the floor and stepping delicately over them, kissing Louis’ cheek before bounding up to her room.

“You’re gross,” Lottie says, and he pinches her side in retaliation before wrapping her in a hug and tugging her braid before she, too, heads to bed.

“Well,” Jay chuckles, looking around at the trail of Louis’ clothing. His jersey is hanging from the ceiling fan in the living room, and Louis isn’t even sure how that happened. “At least you have a healthy love life.”

“Ugh, Mum,” Louis says, rubbing his temples. “Please, no.”

“Oh, hush,” Jay laughs. “You’re setting me up for some awkward conversations with three out of four of your sisters, so I am allowed to tease you for it in return.” Louis meanders over to her and lays his head on her shoulder, yawning. “Why aren’t you asleep?”

“Was,” he answers through another yawn. “Heard you lot, thought I’d come say goodnight.”

Jay hums. “Why don’t you clean up your clothes, you filthy thing, and then grab the ice cream and bring it upstairs.”

“Is it an ice cream sort of night?” he asks, remembering his years back in sixth form, tossing and turning for hours with questions and fears and anxieties, eventually giving up as the moon began to set and getting the ice cream from the freezer. He’d bring the tub and two spoons up to his mum’s room and she never once turned him away, taking his offering of sweets and listening as he talked his way through whatever problem was plaguing him for the night. It’s how they became so close, those late night chats sometimes the only way he got to spend alone time with her, between her job and his school and taking care of the girls.
“I don’t know,” Jay says lightly. “Is it?”

There are about a couple thousand things Louis wants to talk to her about, little things he forgets when they’re on the phone and things too big to deconstruct without being face to face.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’ll be right up.”

He grabs his crumpled uniform and the tub of mint chocolate chip ice cream in the fridge, sneaking up the stairs past the already-dark rooms of his sisters. He drops his kit in his room and checks that Harry’s still sleeping, brushing curls off his sweaty head and kissing him softly. His phone buzzes with a notification across the room, so Louis tiptoes over and silences it after checking the text from Liam that says he and Niall made it back to London okay. When he exits out of that he sees his last text from Harry still on the screen, the one commanding him not to wash before Harry could get his hands on him.

Harry didn’t know about the joy of sexting until Nick put him onto it (“You’ve never texted a picture of your cock to Louis? Well what the hell do you use your phone for?”) and Harry had adopted it with no small amount of grace. He’s brilliant at it; he can write things so filthy they make Louis’ knees weak and they’re usually timed so that Louis reads them in public and then has to make an excuse why he’s gone over all stuttery. The issue Harry faces is that he’s easily distracted, and doesn’t let that little bit of himself interfere with his sexting. Louis scrolls up a little and finds the last string of sexy texts Harry had sent him that just proves his point.

(5:52 p.m.) **Harry:** [picture attached of the tops of his thighs and bubbles, his cock barely visible through rippling water]
(5:52 p.m.) **Harry:** Getting clean for you so you can mark me up again later.
(5:53 p.m.) **Harry:** Can I tell you a secret? Sometimes when you come on me when we have morning sex, I don’t wash it off all day.
(5:54 p.m.) **Harry:** That way every time I move, I can feel you on me.
(5:57 p.m.) **Harry:** Also, I saw four people walking the exact same dog today, I swear. It was a bull terrier and it had the same collar all four times, but different owners.

Louis still can’t believe Harry sent dirty messages while right next to Liam and Niall, in public, on the sideline of an incredibly well-attended football match that Louis was playing in. He owes Harry something big after that.

But not now—he shakes his head and locks his phone again, throwing the room into darkness. Then he creeps back downstairs to his mum’s room, her little TV on in the corner of the room and flickering the room in flashes of bright color.

“Thought you got lost,” she teases, taking the spoon Louis offers her while he climbs under the covers until they’re shoulder-to-shoulder.

“Checking in on Harry,” Louis says, scooping his first bite of dessert.

“He still asleep?” When Louis nods, she smiles. “Sweet boy, he’s so wonderful.”

“He is,” Louis agrees. He stabs his spoon back into the cream, deliberating for a moment. “I still haven’t told him, you know. About being Bonded to him.”

Jay doesn’t look surprised, or upset. She just nods, slowly. “Do you know why?”

“It’s too late now, isn’t it?” he laughs humorlessly. “I’ve had a hundred thousand chances and I skipped them all because I was scared. I should have told him as soon as it happened, I know that
now. Maybe we’d still have became best friends, maybe not, but at least he would know. And then I should have told him when Simon put us in a band, and then when we were at the bungalow, and then when we were in Spain and we’d gotten through to the live shows. After the show ended, when we signed our contract, when we moved in together. All of those could have worked. If I told him now…” he shakes his head. “He’d hate me.”

“That boy is incapable of hating you,” Jay says softly. “He loves you so much, and I don’t even think you realize it. If you ever changed your mind, I think he’d be okay if you told him.”

“I wouldn’t be,” Louis says. “If he told me out of nowhere, after nearly two and a half years in a band together and almost a year and a half properly dating, that he was half-Bonded to me, I couldn’t forgive that. I’d assume something was wrong with me, and that’s why he didn’t tell me. Or that he thought he couldn’t trust me. Or that he was only with me because he thought he had to be.”


Louis huffs a laugh. “Doesn’t matter, does it? It’s the other way around, and I’m the liar.” He sniffs, rubbing at his nose. “And it’s so hard, Mum. To look at him and know that I’m hiding this massive thing that he deserves to know about me. I’ve told him literally everything else. About Troy, and Dad, and helping you raise the girls. All my fears and insecurities, he knows every bit of that. But he doesn’t know he’s my soulmate.”

Jay pulls him close, kisses his forehead. “Oh, my love. Have you thought about taking a break, maybe? Taking a step back for a little while?” Louis stays quiet, so she continues carefully. “Or, love, don’t take this the wrong way, but maybe it’s not healthy for you to stay in the band. You have the money, you can buy out of your contract.”

And the thing is, she’s right. It would be the best case scenario for their management, they would let him go easily just to not have to deal with him potentially forcing Harry out of the limelight and causing any more problems. Louis has always taken the lead in dealing and negotiating with them, and without him the boys would be completely under Syco’s thumb before someone else could step up and take his place. Louis could learn to have a life outside of Harry; he could find his interests and passions outside of his massively co-dependent relationship. He’d be brokenhearted, of course, and Harry would be sad as well, but they’d live.

But Louis can’t. In theory, it’s possible; in reality, it’s not. Louis could never willingly walk away from this band—he’s been creating contingency plans since the X Factor days, sure, but those are last resort. He’d never leave the band to go into producing or writing, not while the band is still an option. He’ll suffer through no solos (though Take Me Home has been kinder to Louis than Up All Night was), he’ll help write vapid, silly songs, because One Direction is the second best thing that’s ever happened to him. And because it brought him the actual best thing that’s ever happened to him.

Because Louis could only willingly walk away from One Direction if there was no way for him to continue and the others succeed, but there’s no plausible way Louis could leave Harry without Harry asking him specifically to do so. Harry’s not made a home just in Louis’ heart, he’s taken over every capillary and every vein, every cell, every neuron. Louis’ life is made better by Harry, Louis’ life is Harry. He lives and dies by Harry’s smiles, he’d sacrifice everything to make him grin. Fate tied Louis to Harry but Louis willingly held on, until his admiration turned to adoration, his fascination into pure, true love.

Harry is the love of his life and his best friend. Niall, Liam and Zayn are his brothers, closer than blood. Lou, Caroline, Paul, Alberto, that’s his family. Performing on stage is his dream job, and music is what makes Louis’ heart beat. He couldn’t give that up, not for anything. Not for a little heartbreak now and again.
(And even if I left, says a tiny, cynical voice in the back of his head, I could never get away. Harry’s everywhere, England’s sweetheart, the boy with the curls. I’d never be able to escape.)

“No,” he finally says to Jay, his voice shaking but sure. “No, I haven’t thought about it. I can’t do that.”

Jay stays quiet for a long time and Louis does too, but then they change the subject to Niall and Babs and their future plans, and Louis can breathe easier for a little while. The last thing Jay says before Louis slips back to his own room is soft, almost too soft to be heard, but he just barely catches it: “You should tell him, love. Tell him before it’s too late.”

25 November 2012

A month passes, and Louis’ mum’s words stick in his head like catchy lyrics. It’s been a wild month, with the album release and subsequent press extravaganza. They perform all across Europe, they pose for a dozen different articles, they release the Little Things video, they perform in front of the bloody Queen at the Royal Variety Show, and do so many interviews that Louis’ head spins. Somewhere along the way, Harry gets two massive birds tattooed on his chest, covering the love banner (“They’re me’n you, Lou, look! This one’s bigger, and this one has curvier eyebrows.”) and Zayn takes Louis so they can add a couple more to their collections as well (Louis getting a stickman on a skateboard and a little doodle camera, Zayn getting his X Factor numbers scattered around the crossed fingers on his forearm).

And still, through all that, through weeks where they’re working so hard and flying from country to country, from Europe to America and back again, through times when he’s so tired he can barely make it to bed at the end of the day, still her words echo. Tell him before it’s too late.

And Louis wonders. Should he? Should he risk it? Should he put his heart on the line and hope that Harry doesn’t see it, battered and bruised, and wonder why he doesn’t hold out for something better and less broken?

He’s missed his chance to do this the (relatively) easy way, back when everything was new and strange and different, back when Harry didn’t know him well enough to pick apart his reasoning from unspoken words and tiny, involuntary gestures. But that doesn’t mean he’s missed his chance entirely, just that it’ll be harder this way.

The plane touches down on the JFK Airport tarmac and Harry shifts awake, the sun highlighting the brilliant green of his sleepy eyes. “Are we here?”

“We are here,” Louis confirms as the plane taxis to a stop. The rest of the boys and crew are shaking themselves awake around the first class cabin as well, yawning and blinking sleepily.

Harry pulls his phone out of his pocket and unlocks it, taking it off airplane mode. “Didn’t you sleep?” he asks raspily, clearing his throat.

“Nah,” Louis shrugs. “Was just thinking.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry asks. “That’s a lot of thinking, a whole ocean to cross. What about?”
“Lots of things. The album, mostly. And, y’know,” he grins at Harry. “MSG.”

“God, I know,” Harry says, grinning back. “The world’s best-known venue, and we’re playing it.”

“Hush, you’ll give me chills,” Louis says giddily, but they’re interrupted by the wild sound of Harry’s mobile finding service long enough for his tweet notifications, texts, and missed calls to roll in. He opens the messages as they stand to shuffle off the plane, wrinkling his nose at what he reads. “What is it?”

“Taylor Swift’s people,” Harry says. Louis grimaces on his behalf; Taylor may give off a princess vibe, but she and her people are not used to being told no, and they’re persistent about getting Harry to start a public fake romance for PR. “Claudia just texted me about it again. I keep saying I don’t really want to, if we can avoid it, but I think they’re gonna make me anyway.”

“T-Swizzle?” Niall asks, bouncing to catch up with them. “You’re gonna date her? You lucky bastard.”

“You’re Bonded to a model, Niface,” Louis rolls his eyes. “And she’ll kick your arse if she hears you talking like that.”

“And I don’t want to date her,” Harry says. “I didn’t like any of my stunts before, and I don’t really want any breakup song written about me, thanks. But her team has been talking to Modest about it for weeks.”

“Are you talking about Taylor Swift?” Liam asks, him and Zayn catching up as well. With all the boys in one location, the security team, Alberto in front and Preston holding up the rear, leads them toward the masses of fans waiting for them to step inside. “Did you know she has a paper plane necklace just like yours? I saw it on Twitter the other day, everyone thinks you two are already dating.”

“No,” Harry says slowly. “I did not know that.”

Louis nudge his shoulder, not liking the way Harry’s brow has furrowed. “Started the stunt without your permission, maybe?”

Harry shrugs like he doesn’t care, but Louis can still see the faint frown between his eyes. “Maybe.”

There’s no time to talk about Taylor anymore as they step inside and a crowd mobs them, so they don’t have time to think about anything except following the boy in front of each one of them in line to get out safely.

But at the hotel that night, the two big thoughts battle it out for consideration in Louis’ head. The Taylor Swift thing has been there for a while; Louis doesn’t like the idea either, but that’s more for selfish reasons than anything else. Business-wise, it’s actually probably a good idea, as the only Americans who know about One Direction are the ones under age sixteen. If they can infiltrate Taylor’s fanbase, they’ll be golden.

But the other one, his mum’s words fused to his brain, that’s what stops him up short, makes him grab a cup of tea from the hotel cafe and take it to the balcony of his and Harry’s hotel room, the
sound of Harry’s shower a soothing hum in the background.

Maybe after Madison Square Garden, Louis thinks, sipping at his not-Yorkshire tea. Maybe then, when they have a bit of a break, maybe he can build up the courage to tell Harry then. Maybe he can finally get this all out on the table, once and for all.

“After MSG,” he promises to the cool November air, and as he says it, he almost believes it.
“Ready?” Paul asks.

They take the stage to the pumping start of *Up All Night*, the crowd screaming before they’re ever in sight.

Madison Square Garden.

*Here we go.*

No matter the venue, a One Direction show will always go the same way: energetic start, goofy games, bouncing, jumping, teasing each other, arms around shoulders, hip bumps when they switch places, cuddling during water breaks, and so much laughter their ribs ache with it. They stop every once in a while to take it all in (“I’m from a small town called Bradford,” Zayn says at one point, staring around at the cheering crowd in amazement, “and, let me tell you, things like this do not happen to boys like me.”), but otherwise, *MSG* is just like every show they’ve ever done expanded to a bigger stage.

They’ve performed the *fuck* out of all their songs so far—not a note missed, not a voice cracked, not a lyric forgotten. They’ve introduced stuff from the new album, tried out their *Teenage Dirtbag* cover, they’re even going to bring Ed out to do *Little Things* with them later, and it’s all gone off like a bomb. Louis has never been prouder to be a member of One Direction, and the night’s not even over yet.

They’re taking a break now, their first one of the show, and as they scatter to find towels and water bottles the screens flicker to black and light blue for Twitter questions.

Harry reads the first question. “Who can jump the highest? That’s from Molly Hanna, in section 17. Hello, hope you’re having a good show!”

Louis breathes out a little when there isn’t the tell-tale scream of a Bonded fan; they could handle it if it happened, security is ready to hunt down fans that Bond and he’s handled all the rest of Harry’s half-soulmates about as well as could be expected, but he doesn’t want that tonight. Not here, that’s all he asks. Not this one night.

They line up for a jumping contest near the little catwalk at the end of the stage. “Niall’s got a dodgy knee,” Louis reminds the audience before he jumps, though he does get some impressive air. And then when Liam tries, Louis’ face is so unimpressed that Harry doubles over in laughter, cackling his loud, squawky laugh. “Average,” Louis snarks, and Harry giggles again.

Louis can hardly pull his eyes away; Harry’s like a diamond under the MSG spotlights, and he glitters brighter than the sun. He winks when he catches Louis looking, then gives his go for the jumping contest.

After that they answer another Twitter question about animals and mating calls, and then Zayn does an impression of their taxi driver who had picked them up at the hotel a few days and who insisted they were the best band in the world. Then Louis gets the signal from Paul offstage, and he calls “One more question!” as the screen changes.

“What is your ringtone on your phone?” Liam reads. “That question from Erin Thomas in section 3.
Interesting question, Erin, haven’t gotten that one before.”

“Mine’s *Call Me Maybe,*” Niall says immediately, then shimmys as Harry sings, “*Hey, I just met you, and this is crazy!*”

“It’s relevant, it’s catchy,” Louis nods like a professional ringtone reviewer. “Good choice, Nialler. Five stars.”

“I’ve always wanted, like, a really unique ringtone,” Harry says, tapping his lower lip. “Something no one else has.”

“Hipster,” Louis coughs, and he grins at Harry as the crowd laughs.

“What is it now?” Zayn asks, and Harry brightens.

“It’s this really great song on this band’s self-produced EP—” he says excitedly, but Niall waves his hands to cut him off.

“Let’s move on before Harry has a heart attack,” he says fondly, rolling his eyes.

“You know what would be cool, lads?” Liam says slowly. “20,000 of our closest friends screaming our names. Now *that’s* a unique ringtone.” The crowd loves the idea, goes absolutely nuts. Liam grins like he always does when people like his suggestions, crinkly-eyed and bouncy like a puppy, and says, “Should we do it?”

“I like it,” Niall agrees enthusiastically. “Let’s do it.”

“You first, then, Lima,” Louis says, directing him to center stage. “Now, what do you want this gorgeous crowd to say?”

“Um,” Liam shrugs. “How about just my name?”

“Your name, a classic,” Louis says. “Okay, crowd, ready to go? We’ll do *Liam Payne* on three, alright?”

The audience roars, so Louis counts them down as Liam holds his phone aloft to record it. “One, two, three, *LIAM PAYNE!*”

“Very well done there, excellent coordination,” Harry says after the screams die down. “Well done, well done.”

“Z, you next?”

It’s funny, Louis thinks as Zayn pulls out his phone and Niall steps up to lead the crowd, that this used to be their biggest fear. Two years ago, if a crowd of 20,000 people had been screaming his name in unison at his face, Louis would have had a meltdown to rival Harry’s back at the *X Factor* house.

But here, now? They aren’t scared anymore.

That’s not to say Louis will actually ever be used to people saying his full name. No matter how long he’s in the industry, or how many times it happens, it’ll always make him jump. And nothing can even *happen*, he’s already Bonded, but that hardly matters. It’s just strange, it’s so strange that they’re taught all their lives that it’s so uncommon for others to *know* your name, let alone to say it, and if they’d never become famous they’d probably have had a couple of people in their whole
lifetimes say them. Louis might not have ever even *heard* his full name; at age eighteen, before
Harry, he’d certainly never planned on telling it to anyone. But they did become famous; they were
just teenagers when the spotlight landed on them, still are teenagers, really, except Louis himself, and
in that moment they were thrust into this life where people try to take pieces of them and sell them to
the highest bidder, and that includes their names.

And they’ve clearly not become more comfortable with saying names, either; Liam said Louis’ full
name once while scolding him about something and sounded so much like Jay that Louis’d
immediately made a face and shook his head, saying, “Never do that again.” Niall’s a little more
okay with it, as he was who coined the Tommo and Payno nicknames to begin with, but Zayn and
Harry absolutely refuse.

And Louis, well; he’s said Liam, Niall, and Zayn’s a couple of times, but never really got into the
habit. Even when he knew it wouldn’t cause a reaction, he’d just rather not. And Harry’s… he never
said Harry’s at first for an entirely different reason. He’d been so disillusioned by that first rejection
in the *X Factor* bathroom, and then Harry said his name and he’d Bonded and that threw everything
into disarray; by the time Louis learned that he’d said Harry’s name wrong, it didn’t matter. He’d
said it a couple of times just on the edge of Harry’s hearing, when he was wearing headphones or
when he was asleep, so that it wouldn’t be a big deal. So that he’d never have to actually look at
Harry as he said it and watch the pity in his eyes as that rejection was confirmed.

It’s just ironic, standing here on the biggest stage in all New York, maybe the world, that this is
where the other four are shedding their fear. Where they embrace it, where they *ask* the fans to
yell their names rather than divert them from trying. And Louis never feared that, not really; he
feared *saying* full names, one full name in particular, and suddenly he hates that he’s let this drag on
so long.

The whole arena screams ZAYN MALIK and Zayn beams, bouncing giddily on his toes. The noise
startles Louis back into the present and he shakes his head, blinking a few times to clear his fuzzy
vision.

“You next, Lou?” Niall asks where he’s stood off to the side with Harry, his arm over Harry’s
shoulders. “I’ll count you off.”

Louis lifts up onto his very tiptoes like that’ll make the screams louder, and Madison Square Garden
rumbles with the sound of thousands screaming LOUIS TOMLINSON. He giggles behind his wrist
when it echoes, delighted by the novelty of it all, and steps back next to Liam.

“You or me next, Ni,” Harry says, tapping Niall’s sternum.

“I wanna go,” Niall says, and steps up to take his spot. Liam leads the countdown as Louis grabs a
water bottle; three, two, one, NIALL HORAN, and Niall bows in thanks.

“Best for last, amirite?” Harry says, waggling his eyebrows, and Zayn rolls his eyes and nudges him
forward. Harry strides to center stage, pulling his phone out of his pockets and maneuvering to the
audio recorder. He holds it out in front of him, flashing a thumbs up over to where the other four
stand.

“Okay, everyone,” Niall says, “It’s *Harry Styles* on three, alright?”

Harry stands center stage with his phone held high, and Louis makes a decision. It’s been years, *two
and a half years*, that he’s been too afraid to take this step. To cross this line. It hurt so much when
Louis got his dagger and realized Harry didn’t get anything in return, and that will always haunt him.
He’s bottled this up into this massive *thing*, and it won’t even do anything when Louis finally does
just say it to Harry’s face, he’s so sure of that. If Harry was meant to Bond back, they’d know. Something drew Louis to Harry, that’s abundantly clear, but nothing’s ever drawn Harry back to Louis. It’s always Louis doing the chasing. It’s always Louis doing the pushing.

Louis taps his mic against his collarbone, and something in the motion catches Harry’s eyes. And, suddenly, Louis just wants it to be over with. He wants to know, once and for all, that nothing will happen. Once he knows, he can stop worrying, stop panicking, and start figuring out how to tell Harry’s he’s half-Bonded to him. He can move on to the real problem.

Harry smiles at him, and Louis decides. He’s just going to do it.

And Niall counts, “Three, two, one!”

And the whole crowd yells HARRY STYLES.

And Louis says it with them.

And—for a split second—the world is silent.

Then Harry lets out a loud, pained yell, grabs his arm, and runs offstage.

And Louis' stomach drops like a lead weight, because he knows.

It happened.

It finally happened.

And Madison Square Garden erupts.

Chapter End Notes

*dodges tomatoes* I KNOW I'M SORRY!

I'll be posting the last chapter and the epilogue at the same time. Updates will be posted on my tumblr!
Chapter 16: 3 December 2012 - 10 December 2012

3 December 2012

The crowd is in an uproar, blurred upturned faces behind a solid wall of sound, but Harry can't hear it.

The spotlights flash like solar flares, shining right into Harry’s eyes, but Harry can't see them.

There’s sweat between his shoulder blades, a shake in his hand, a lock in his jaw. He feels none of it.

All Harry feels, all he sees, tastes, knows, is pain, unendurable pain, intolerable pain. A sledgehammer to his delicate bones, a fire set in his muscles, copper and iron in his mouth when he bites his tongue. Everything radiating from a single point on his acid-dipped arm, the epicenter of the end of the world blossoming beneath his skin.

Pain, confusion, fear; they battle for a place in Harry’s head. Fear wins.

He holds his arm and screams.

And then it clears. It clears in an instant; it’s not like sunshine after the rain, it's too dark for that, it’s more like a wave of anesthetic. It sweeps through him and washes the clinging trails of agony away, like whatever it was isn’t still lingering in his bloodstream like silent poison. He’s weak-kneed and his fingers are numb, his face is wet with tears, but he’s alive. Somehow, he made it.

And, in the confusion, someone got him off stage. Maybe he did it himself, fight or flight kicking in and, with no one to fight, he fled on his own. Maybe security came and got him. Either way, he’s backstage, the audience out in the seats still in pandemonium behind him.

Backstage, which he expected to be just as mad as the arena, has been completely transformed. The crew members that tend to lounge around through the shows, doing odd jobs and running equipment to the sound booth, they’re all on their feet, bustling around like soldiers on a mission. And soldiers doesn’t seem to be the wrong word: the longer Harry looks, the more apparent it becomes. The crew was ready for this, and they move in synchronization, the usual lazy nonchalance of the roadies and the messy flurry of the assistants and PR interns regimented, precise.

If Harry thought Louis’ theory about management capitalizing on an on-stage Bond was just paranoia before, he certainly doesn’t now. This is a disciplined team in disaster mode, except the disaster was created. Man-made.

They’re playing God with souls and Bonds and Harry is the only suffering victim.

Paul stands in the middle of it all, a general amongst his troops, and bellows orders into his phone and walkie-talkie. There’s a clear chain of command, the stagehands going to the managers who go to the media assistants who go to the personal assistants who go to the PR team who go to Paul, and Harry watches it all unfold like a surreal parallel universe.

“Lights out on stage,” Paul barks into the walkie-talkie, then brings his phone up to his ear. “Get Ed from the back.” He lowers both and, for the first time, looks right at Harry. “You alright, lad?”
Harry nods, because it's not like he can say “No, the people you work for orchestrated my worst nightmare and it came to life just now, didn't you see?” Paul claps him on the shoulder, then there’s a commotion somewhere that Paul immediately moves toward, leaving Harry a stranded island in the middle of a mechanized mess of scurrying people. Preston is next to him, diverting anyone with their eyes glued to their phones or clipboards who would run Harry over otherwise.

Harry’s arm still aches like a fading bruise, and now he’s been left alone to think about it, which is just about the worst possible scenario.

He’d always heard that Bonding was painful, but he’d never really put much stock in it. Like, sure, it hurts for a second, but look what you get as an end result—you get a soulmate. It’s like when women give birth and they put up with all that pain so that they can come out the other side with a tiny, beautiful baby. Bonding, in theory, should work the same way, but Harry’s never been in such pain in his life and, at the moment, he’s not quite sure it was worth it.

(A tiny voice in Harry’s head whispers that maybe his Bond hurt so badly because he didn't want the end result. He didn't want to find his soulmate.)

And, well. He's assuming he Bonded. That's just about the only plausible explanation: an arena full of people say his full name, and he’s struck by a sudden blinding, burning pain so terrible that he loses the ability to think. It has to be a Bond, right? He has to have a Marker on his arm now.

He’s trying to regain that ability to not think again; he might put up with another lightning strike of pain if it meant he didn’t have to face the truth and consider his options. He’d give anything just to be able to pretend nothing has changed.

It doesn’t work, and deeper than the throb in his arm is the more cerebral pain; not the line of smoldering fire that burned up his arm, not the pounding headache from twenty thousand people screaming at once, not the ache in his muscles from when they’d seized in shock as it happened. It’s a different pain, sharper; he left his heart back on stage, securely held by a pretty boy with sparkly eyes and Harry’s first word to him tattooed on his arm, the only one who could treat it right, and yet now he’s supposed to yank it back like a yo-yo on a string and hand it just as easily to someone else.

No. No, he can’t. He won’t.

Someone grabs his shoulder, and Harry automatically yelps, “I won’t!”

Claudia ignores his outburst. “Emergency meeting. You’re needed.”

The commotion Paul went off to solve makes its way backstage and its presence known; it’s the other four boys, corralled by the security team and being herded away from the stage. Liam, Niall, and Zayn look shocked, still, confused and worried and scared, and Louis—

Louis finds Harry’s eyes like instinct and they lock, and in that moment Harry’s in more pain than he was when he felt like his arm was being ripped open. Louis’ eyes are blank, haunted, staring through Harry like a dagger piercing him. He’s walking like he’s got weights strapped to his feet, Alberto keeping a hand on his back to keep him moving and upright. He’s clutching Niall’s hand like it’s a lifeline, squeezing so hard the tendons in his forearm are standing out. He’s wrecked, outside and inside, so wrecked he can’t even throw up the walls he built so meticulously over twenty years, and Harry’s heart thunders in his chest.

Harry has to go to him. He has to.

That’s all he can register before the hand on his shoulder reasserts its presence and yanks him away,
Claudia hissing, “Now.” He considers ripping his shoulder out of her grip but then Preston is there on his other side, shaking his head minutely. Harry doesn’t trust Claudia as far as he could throw her, but he’d trust Preston with his life, so he slumps, letting himself be led away.

“Can Louis come too?” he asks hopefully. He looks over his shoulder and sees Louis staring into the middle distance, the other three around him and trying to get his attention. And he knows it’s selfish, that Louis is trying to wrap his head around this just like Harry is, but he wants Louis in this meeting with him; even dead-eyed with shock, he’s still the rock Harry leans on.

“No,” Claudia answers before Harry can get his hopes up.

“But...” Harry tries, but he’s cut off when Claudia raps twice on a door before opening it and ushering him inside. The entire PR team seems to be inside, clumped in little groups and buzzing, all of them, worker bees getting ready to be sent out to do the bidding of a higher power. And the queen in charge?

A voice Harry hasn’t heard in literal years is issuing orders from a laptop screen on the other side of the room. Simon Cowell’s almighty power seems muted, somehow, like his shitty laptop webcam can’t capture the magnitude of his influence.

Or maybe he’s just not as powerful as Harry used to think.

Somehow, that’s what makes the realization hit; Harry’s attention is caught by Simon, and all he can think of is the optimistic, bright-eyed, part-time baker version of himself who stepped on an X Factor stage with a dream and a song. How he thought he wouldn’t survive the show, how an ambush of fans behind the studio sent him spiraling into a pit of self-doubt and roaring anxiety that he only clawed his way out the other side with the help of the other boys. How Simon showed them the video of the Backstreet Boys concert Bond like it was a worst-case scenario, while his team plotted a way to make it happen to them too.

That’s what makes Harry’s knees buckle so that he falls into a chair, the shock shaking off as hysteria starts to set in. He Bonded. That happened, holy shit, that happened on stage and, and, and holy fuck he had started to think maybe they’d gotten away with it, maybe Zayn and Liam really did Bond to each other and maybe Louis and Harry were the last two left and maybe they could dodge Bonding on stage but no, it happened, it happened to him. Harry can’t breathe, he can’t, the Backstreet Boys thing was, like, a myth, and he’s heard stories that made him think that maybe it was all contrived for the PR, he didn’t think it would ever happen again but it did, it happened to him, and—

And, fuck, Harry’s soulmate is just out there, they’re in the same building, maybe for the first time ever, or maybe they’ve met but they never knew; it doesn’t matter now, what matters is that that’s the literal other half of him somewhere out in the arena and he’s never going to be able to find them, there are thousands upon thousands of people it could be.

And... and he doesn’t even know if he wants to find them.

This is the most critical juncture of his life; he’d always told Louis that he wouldn’t leave him for his soulmate, and he still means it. I choose you, I want you, that’s what he said, and he always believed it. He still does. He’s terrified and anxious but his entire being aches to push past Preston standing in the doorway to get to Louis, who’s hurt and probably just as scared as Harry. Zayn said that, if Harry ever Bonded, it would be the hardest thing Louis would go through, and Harry hates that he’s alone for it. Harry yearns to be with him, to talk this through so he knows they’re okay, so that he can put his full concentration into deciding his next steps. He wants to press his love into Louis’ skin until Louis has to believe him, and then go find his soulmate and sort out what to do from there.
But, it doesn’t look like Harry’s going to get that chance. And so he has to decide by himself what he wants to do; here, in this crowded backstage room at Madison Square Garden, he’s going to have to make a decision that will affect him forever: does he pretend it never happen, write it off and forget and go back to Louis different but the same, or does he search out his fated other half knowing he’s going to break their heart when he refuses to leave Louis?

For the first sixteen years of his life, all Harry ever wanted was to meet his soulmate. And he can’t deny that he’s curious now, of course he is. He still wants to meet his soulmate, though for an entirely different reason now. He won’t be getting to know them so that they can kick off a brand new relationship, he doesn’t want that. He has Louis. He’d never leave Louis, not willingly.

But when Harry was saying I choose you, I need you in the Tomlinson backyard back in Doncaster, Louis had said something back. “But they may need you,” he’d said, and Harry couldn’t believe it, not back then. He couldn’t believe anyone would need him more than he needed Louis, and maybe that’s still true.

However, he hadn’t yet met Kimberly in Sydney, Anthony in New Jersey, even Morgan in San Jose. All of those people, they needed him, and he didn’t ever know they would. They needed him, but they needed him for different reasons, for things he couldn’t give. He couldn’t love them just because they loved him first, he couldn’t give them the parts of him that were already held by someone else.

Now there’s a new person. His body, his DNA and his cells and his biology, all of that says he’s going to love them, that they match perfectly, puzzle pieces that connect in the exact right ways. So much of Harry’s being is taken up by his love for Louis, but his body still Bonded him to someone else. And maybe Louis is right, maybe they need him, just like Kimberly and Anthony and Morgan. Maybe they need him in a way he can help.

He’d never leave Louis. He wouldn’t, he wouldn’t. But fate and biology combined to lead someone else to him, how could he not at least meet them?

Fuck, his head’s a mess. All he wants is to talk to Louis.

And, great, he’s crying again.

Someone sits across from him, someone clutching a clipboard scribbled with messy notes. “Snap out of it,” Claudia says, and Harry flinches at the intrusion. If they’re not going to let him go talk to Louis, he’s going to need five minutes to collect himself. When he says this, Claudia shakes her head. “No,” she snaps. “Not possible. We’re on a strict timetable here.”

“This is my life, my soulmate—” Harry says heatedly.

“And this is your career,” Claudia interrupts. “The next few minutes are critical. Suck it up, dry your eyes, and be a professional.”

Harry clenches his fists under the table. Claudia doesn’t notice.

“Ed is back on stage now, he’s got the crowd calmed down a little,” she says. “You’ll go back out and perform Little Things with him like we had scheduled, then he’ll leave the stage and the show will continue as normal.”

“We’re still performing?” Harry gapes. “When the whole fucking place knows I’ve just Bonded, we’re going to pretend it didn’t happen?”

Claudia raises an eyebrow. “That’s exactly what you’re going to do. If you feel the need to give an explanation, say you were stung by something, or that there was a spark from your microphone pack.
The crowd won’t pick it apart, they’ll wait until the concert is over before going on Twitter and seeing what everyone is saying.”

“It’s on Twitter?” Harry asks weakly.

“It’s everywhere. A fan video has thirty thousand retweets already, and it’s made the rounds on Tumblr as well. Multiple major news networks have reported on it.”

“God,” Harry breathes, dropping his head into his hands.

“Go back out, finish the concert,” Claudia says. She consults her notes. “After Little Things, since you’re skipping a few songs, you’ll only have four more to do after that. It’s on your arm, correct?”

Harry rubs at the spot on his forearm that still aches, the Marker he hasn’t even gotten to look at yet. “Keep your sleeve pushed down. Don’t say a single word about it, don’t acknowledge it.”

“But why?” Harry asks, frustrated. “Everyone knows, why all the secrecy?”

“If the story breaks all at once, public interest will die out in two, maybe three weeks,” she explains. “If we let people speculate for a little while and then confirm it while sending you out on pap walks and to major events, that’s more than a month of press. Then we’ll do another round where you’re searching for your soulmate, then another when you’ve found them. We’ll dominate the headlines for six months if we play it right.”

The enormity of this whole situation weighs on him like stones tied to his shoelaces, and Harry’s suddenly exhausted for six months that haven’t even happened yet. “I just want to go home,” he whispers.

“You can’t,” Claudia says shortly. “Not yet. The PR team is moving to a different location to strategize and plan, and when you’re done with the concert Preston will bring you back to us. We have a lot to decide and not a lot of time to decide it in.” Harry doesn’t say anything, so she nods like he’s agreed. “Preston? Escort Harry back to Paul, please. Tell him to have the band back on stage in no less than five minutes.”

Paul is surrounded by three wonderful people making a hell of a racket when Harry emerges out of the room behind Preston. Zayn and Niall are shouting, full on, top-of-their-lungs screaming, poking Paul in the chest like he couldn’t break their fingers with a twitch of his own and berating him for various reasons. Paul, to his credit, isn’t laughing, and even looks a little chastened as Zayn’s bony finger shoves into his pectoral. Liam is on the phone next to them, stony-faced, and Harry doesn’t have to hear him to know which voice he’s using, the authoritative one, the dealing-with-stupid-adults one.

“-tell us where you put Harry, he shouldn’t be alone right now, you arsehole, I don’t care what Modest says-”

“-back on stage, are you insane? They’ll eat him alive, everyone in the world knows-”

“-listen to me, we won’t stand for this, this is emotional damage and I won’t put up with it-”

“Lads,” Harry says quietly, throatily, and they all stop, just for a moment.

“Hazza, thank fuck,” Niall breathes, then flings himself forward. Harry catches him and feels patched together for just a moment, Niall squeezing him until he can’t breathe, Zayn pushing his
hand soothingly through Harry’s hair. Tears well up again and he stutters out a tremulous breath they all hear, and Liam reaches over and pats Harry’s back without stopping his shouting into the phone.

“Where’s Lou?” is the first thing he asks, and Zayn and Niall exchange a look.

“With Alberto. Think he just, you know. Needed a second.”

Harry heart hurts with every minute that passes without seeing Louis, without being able to reassure him that he doesn't need to hide away, that he doesn't need to run. Harry still loves him, a little sting in his arm isn't enough to deter that.

Still, he won't chase Louis and force him to talk if he needs a minute to catch his breath. Harry understands; his head hasn't stopped spinning since he doubled over with pain on the MSG stage.

“What’s, um,” Harry sniffs, “what’s Liam doing?”

“On the phone with Magee, I think,” Zayn says. “They want us to go back on stage and Liam won’t allow it.”

“Daddy Direction,” Harry hiccups with a laugh.

“Yeah,” Niall agrees, his eyes soft as he looks Harry up and down. “You okay? It hurts like a bitch, doesn’t it.”

“God, it did,” Harry says. Zayn bites his lip.

“So you really…?”

Harry shrugs. “I- I mean I think so. I haven’t seen it yet, but. Something happened.”

“You haven’t looked at your Marker?” Niall asks. “Where is it, your arm?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Grabbed it as you ran off. Plus, I don’t know, seems right, yeah? Like you’re supposed to have it amongst all your tattoos.”

“Let’s see it, then,” Zayn says, and Harry nods, but his sleeve is too tight to push it up high enough to see. He starts to unbutton his shirt just as Liam hangs up and joins them.

“I know you get naked when you’re anxious, but is now really the time?” he asks gently, sliding his phone back in his pocket.

Harry stops attempting to strip for a moment. He’ll have the Marker forever, there’s not really that much of a rush to see it when a thousand other things are happening. “What’d they say?”

Liam shrugs unhappily. “Said this is our biggest gig we’ve had so far, can’t stop it for anything. I told him we’d sue for mismanagement or something, I don’t know, but he didn’t seem fazed.”

“They’re going to make us go back on no matter what,” Harry says dully, ”and I’d at least rather have a plan than just be shoved onstage and told to wing it.” Liam smiles sadly and pats his shoulder.

“Lads, Ed’s wrapping up on stage, we need to get you into position,” Paul says, ending yet another phone call. Then he stops, does a head count. “Where’s Louis?”

“Here,” says a small voice, and Harry whips around to see Louis, his Louis, and he almost wishes he
couldn’t. His eyes are red-rimmed, his hands shaking. Harry’s never seen him look so small. And he
won’t look up and meet Harry’s eyes.


“I’m sorry, lads, I know this is tough,” Paul says quietly. “We have to go. Louis, Niall, Zayn, you’re
in from stage left. Liam, Harry, you’re stage right.”

“Lou,” Harry tries again, but Louis turns away to trail after Niall and Zayn, his shoulders hunched
like he’s fending off blows.

“C’mon, Haz, you can talk after the show,” Liam murmurs. “Give him time to process.”

“I haven’t had time to process either,” Harry mumbles. “I need to talk to him. I need to, Li.”

“After the show,” he promises again, and wraps an arm around Harry’s waist to guide him to their
position.

Ed’s illuminated by a single spotlight on stage, and it’s proof of his skill as a musician that the whole
arena has stopped in its frenzy for information to listen, *Kiss Me* echoing from the rafters like a
lovestruck ghost.

*This feels like I’ve fallen in love,*
*Fallen in love*

Ed starts to wrap up the song with a fancy bit of fretwork and glances to his right, seeing Harry there
with his arms wound around his stomach like he’s been punched. He steps back from the
microphone as he plays the last bridge, just his guitar strings and a captivated audience, and he
mouths *Okay?*

Harry shakes his head.

Ed doesn’t pretend to smile to make Harry feel better, just ends the song with the tiniest of flourishes
and bows his head at the applause. “Thanks for letting me taking over for a bit,” he says, “but the
band you’re here to see is back for a few more songs. Ladies and gents, One Direction.”

Liam leads Harry back out onto the stage as Zayn does the same from the other side, and the world
goes bright, whiter than white as every camera is lifted to catch Harry’s every step, his every blink
and his every tiny frown. He keeps his head down, watching Liam’s feet until they pass the X
marking where Harry’s supposed to sit. He does, ungraceful as ever, and he looks to his left.

Louis’ eyes are shiny under the spotlights, his red eyes even more apparent. He’s closer to Niall than
he’s supposed to be, giving their little line a lopsided appearance, but it doesn’t seem to be on
purpose. He’s looking over the crowd with vacant eyes, sweeping like he knows what he’s looking
for but has no hope of finding it.

The crowd is still screaming wildly, still crying out “Harry, Harry!” like he’ll be able to hear all of
them. He takes a breath, steels himself, and looks up at the pleading crowd. He immediately can’t
see, blinded by twenty thousand cameras catching his expression, but he does a little wave that
nearly brings the roof down and then goes back to staring at his microphone.

Four songs. He can get through four songs.

“Sorry about that, everyone,” Liam says, seemingly unbothered by the raging crowd who only
barely die down to hear him, though from where Harry’s sitting he can see the smallest shake in his
Niall starts plucking the opening of *Little Things*, and sobswell unbidden in Harry’s throat.

It’s Louis’ song, an ode to his eyelashes and his freckles, his insecurities and his habits and the way Harry loves it all. It’s Louis’ song, and Louis won’t look at him. It’s Louis’ song, but there’s a Marker on his arm that belongs to someone else.

How is this fair? How is any of this fair?

Harry’s chest aches when Zayn starts, *Your hand fits in mine like it’s made just for me.*

He teeters on the edge when Liam joins him to sing, *It’s you they add up to.*

He shatters when Louis sings, *Makes no sense to me.*

Louis presses a hand to his belly to get more volume but he’s still drowned out by the crowd, singing lines about himself to an audience that, for a night, doesn’t care, who sing over Louis’ parts but go absolutely, utterly still when Harry lifts his mic to sing.

Harry’s always let his voice go raspy for this song, he likes the way it sounds like he and Louis are having a conversation after just waking up, still sleepy soft and warm, still wrapped in their sheets. Whispering how much they love each other as the world wakes up around them, hidden within their Egyptian cotton cocoon.

His voice has a rasp in it tonight, but it’s not the same. This one is born of held-back tears and not enough air in the room, it’s born of shadows and fears and Louis’ shaky voice as he sings his song, *their song.* He hopes the fans don’t notice the sheen of tears in his eyes that barely stay unshed, that shake his vision like a subtle earthquake and blur twenty thousand people into one mass of waiting, watching eyes.

Harry gets through it. His voice breaks on *you’re perfect to me* but he gets through it, and he lets Niall take over with a breath of relief. A warmth settles next to him as the crowd cheers its arrival, Ed, Ed’s careful arm around his shoulders like he might break into pieces, like he’s not already collapsed in on himself like a busted window in an empty house.

He sings into Harry’s mic during Harry’s last solo, *I’ve just let these little things slip out of my mouth,* and he leads them into the last harmony. Six voices combine to make magic and yet, somehow, Louis’ voice is the only one Harry can hear.

Ed hugs Louis first when the song ends, and Harry almost joins them, as he would any other night. Hell, any other night he’d have tackled them both to the floor in excitement. But he balances on his toes for a second too long, and then Ed moves on to Zayn and Louis moves out of the spotlight and Harry misses his chance to talk to Louis with a friendly presence between them. Harry watches him wipe at tracks of wetness down his face and he aches, he aches for both of them.

They should have talked. They should have refused to go on until they got a minute to recuperate and reassure each other. They can’t pretend everything’s fine when it’s not, they can’t go on like it’s normal when it’s everything but.

Harry wants to fix it. Needs to fix it.

He walks over to Louis and prays the spotlight stays trained on Liam, who’s thanking Ed for coming out to join them. It does; they’re in darkness for the slightest of seconds when Harry reaches Louis’
side, but it doesn’t matter. Louis avoids Harry’s hand trying to touch his shoulder and Harry’s never felt so hopeless while looking at Louis, not even back before they were really together and Harry thought he’d never get the courage to ask for what he wanted, not even at bootcamp when Louis pretended Harry didn’t exist. This is worse, it’s so much worse than anything Harry’s been through before, and still Louis won’t look at him. He backs away like he’s afraid to be near Harry too long.

“Lou,” Harry says desperately as Louis makes his escape. Louis chokes a sob at the sound of his name, his face crumpling. “Nothing’s changed.”

Louis chuckles miserably, shaking his head. “Everything’s changed.”

He swipes away the tears under his eyes one last time and plasters on a fake smile, and he leaves Harry standing there in the darkness.

Louis still holds Harry’s heart, he always will, but it's crushed to powder, it's bitter pieces of glass held together by sheer hope, and when it beats it doesn't actually beat, it just echoes Louis’ name.

Harry stands in the darkness just beyond the spotlight and with every step Louis takes away from him the knife twists, and twists, and twists, and Harry bleeds, and bleeds, and bleeds.

One Thing is a blur, Kiss You lasts a millisecond, and Harry’s not even sure they do C’mon, C’mon. Harry is dazed and Louis is smiling false smiles and not a single person in the crowd isn’t convinced they witnessed something newsworthy. Harry doesn’t comment, Liam doesn’t try to smooth things over, and they push through despite the restless audience, the faces lit up by phone screens between songs, looking for confirmations and gossip articles instead of watching the band on stage.

And then it’s the end of the show, and they all say thank you, and they’ve performed What Makes You Beautiful so many times that Harry doesn’t need to concentrate to do it. The arena echoes with cheers as they take a final bow, and then it’s over.

It’s over, at least, for the fans streaming toward the exits. For Harry, the night has only just began.

“What’s next?” is the first thing Liam says as they step off stage into the safety behind the curtain. “What do you have to do now?”

“Claudia wants me straight back into a meeting,” Harry says, “but I need to talk to-” He looks over his shoulder, cranes his neck to glance around. “Louis. Where is he? Where’d he go?”

“We’ll find him and get him to you,” Niall says confidently. “But come on, show us your Marker.”

“Nosy brat,” Zayn huffs, nudging Niall with his elbow.

“What? I’m interested,” Niall says, unapologetic. “Plus, you should see it before you have to show it to management. You’ll need a second to wrap your head around it.” He lowers his voice, raising his eyebrows meaningfully. “I know how it goes.”

Harry looks up at Preston, who’s waiting nearby to take Harry to Claudia, and who shrugs but taps his watch to tell Harry to hurry. Harry strips immediately, pulling off his shirt and closing his eyes for a moment before rolling his arm over into a swath of light from the stage.

It’s a rose.
Lightly shaded, not bold and dark like most of the rest of his tattoos, the rose sits right at the apex of his forearm. It’s massive, which explains why Harry’s whole limb felt like it was being sawed off, but it’s gorgeous, delicate and feminine amongst the scattered striking sketches on his skin.

“Holy shit, Haz,” Zayn says, tracing the highest petal. “It’s beautiful.”

“This looks like something you’d actually get as a tattoo,” Liam says, and Harry wonders if he’s thinking of the four massive arrows up his own arm, the ones Louis swears up and down are his Marker, though he’d said just weeks before it had appeared that he’d never planned to get more tattoos than the screws on his ankles. Harry’s rose does fit, it looks like it’s always belonged on his skin, like the Hi and the swallows on his chest, like oops! and the dagger on Louis, like Zayn’s crossed fingers. Some tattoos just fit, natural as ever, and apparently the Marker is just the same.

Harry prods at it; he sort of hates it for causing so much trouble, but he sort of loves it as well. It’s as much a part of him as his curls or his hands or his knocking knees.

“Gotta go, Harry,” says Preston, pulling him out of his reverie, and Harry tugs his shirt back on and grabs Liam’s hand before Preston gently pulls him away.

“Find Lou,” he says, he begs, “please. I’ll have my phone, I’ll wait for the text. Just find him, and let him know this doesn’t change anything.”

“We will,” Liam promises, and that’s as much of a reassurance Harry will get as he’s led to their plotting PR team and the scheme they’ve cooked up around him.

…

Louis pulls his hood lower, the too-big coat the best disguise he could find on the way out the only unguarded side door, the one the crew had been using for smoke breaks all day. Fans are everywhere, streaming around him as they head for their cars and the taxi bank, but he blends in with them like he’s painted in urban camouflage and keeps his head down.

Alberto follows at a distance, pulling his own baseball cap lower on his head, as he’s almost as famous as the band now and if he gets recognized, the fans will look for Louis next. They don’t walk too close so they don’t risk being spotted, and they don’t risk being spotted because Louis needs a clean getaway.

A black SUV idles nearby, and not a single person pays attention as Alberto and Louis slip inside.

“Where to, sir?” asks the driver, and Louis tugs the coat tighter around him. It’s Harry’s, he realizes with a sick roll of his stomach. He can’t take it off because he’ll freeze, or, at least, that’s what he tells himself. He clutches the too-long sleeves and blinks away tears, stares down at the hands that used to clutch Harry’s back when life was easier and his heart wasn’t yet broken.

Harry wore this coat last time they drove out to Donny to visit Mum and the girls. He’d worn it as they’d kicked the leaves off of broken Yorkshire pavement, as they’d wandered hand in hand down places Louis roamed as a kid. They rewrote themselves over Louis’ childhood and sealed up the holes in his lungs from all the mistakes he’d made back then. He’d healed, a little, and Harry had been wearing this coat as he smiled and listened to Louis talk about pranks and parties and hangovers and gossip.
Let me have this, he thinks miserably. Let me have this one last thing.

“I don’t care,” he finally answers. “Anywhere but here.”

…

Twenty-five people are sat around this Madison Square Garden backstage room, a Gucci-clad war council. It’s got all the signs of long-term habitation, laptop and phone chargers in every outlet, a small mountain of empty coffee cups and at least one more clutched in every person’s hand, and the girls’ heels have been kicked off like it’s a sleepover instead of a planning meeting for a lasting publicity grab. Harry wonders if they’ll just stay in this room until they check off every item on the big PR stunt to-do list or someone official kicks them out; they seem like they’re here for the long haul, and they probably won’t let Harry leave until it’s all sorted.

There’s no table between them like a usual management meeting, and Harry sort of misses its comforting familiarity. He’s in a rolling desk chair against the longest wall, a half-ring of management reps surrounding him, clipboards and phones poised.

There’s also no Louis next to him like there would be in a typical meeting, and he misses that way more than the stupid table.

Sitting across from Harry are Paul, Claudia, and the two PR people who gave Harry and Louis the order to do their first public relationship denial back in Dallas, Jake and Alice. There are other familiar faces around, the reps who oversaw the Brits and the Teen Awards and Harry’s date with Taylor Swift just yesterday.

Holy shit, has it only been one day? Time’s slowed to a crawl, and Harry’s stuck in the flipped hourglass.

“Let’s start with a status report,” says Alice, and an intern steps forward.

“The original video has hit two hundred thousand favorites, and about fifty thousand retweets. Since it’s still early morning in Europe, we’re expecting that number to at least double in the next twelve hours. ‘Harry Bond’ is a worldwide trend, and he’s gained almost twenty thousand new Twitter followers since the video hit.”

Another man clears his throat. “Most major news sources have at least tweeted about it as a rumor, and E!, Billboard, and nearly every tabloid have reported it, though they’re all making sure to say it’s unconfirmed. We have a list of outlets that have contacted us for statements as well. Nothing tweeted from the big three yet, but ABC has contacted us, so it might make Good Morning America if we can get back to them quickly enough.”

“Excellent. Arthur, if you’ll take the list needing statements and send them what we’ve typed up,” Alice says, nodding. “Joanie, if you could call ABC back? Talk to Rich, he’ll work in what we want.”

“We’ll need to contact the Mail, get this started in the U.K. as well. What’s their printing time?”

“I think it’s 3:00, I’ll have to check-”

Harry slides his phone out of his pocket as the PR discussion rolls on and clicks the lock button.
Or, well, not nothing. He’s got so many Twitter notifications that the screen can’t go dark between each one, and green missed calls are woven in between, but there’s nothing from Louis, and there’s nothing from the boys.

“Okay, Harry,” says Jake, slapping his hands on his knees and leaning forward. Harry jumps and turns his phone over, the screen lighting the denim of his jeans. “We need to talk options for your tweet tonight. There are a couple of different ways we can play this: we can hint at it, mention it being an incredible night but not saying explicitly why. That’ll draw interest, but if we don’t provide solid news after that people will get upset at being left out. There’s the quote or song lyric option, those have always been popular with the fans when you send those out, and of course it would be love lyrics. Or, the last way we could go is to not tweet at all. If we go this route, it’s more mysterious, it’s more tantalizing to fans, but it’s also more realistic: you meet your soulmate, everyone would expect you to go dark for a couple of days to get to know them before making an official statement.”


“Interesting choice,” says Jake, nodding like Harry gave a sound argument for his selection. “Amy, if you could clear the potential tweets we have drafted, just to make sure those aren’t sent.”

“That takes care of tonight,” says another woman, glasses perched low on her nose as she scribbles notes. “Next we’ll need to decide how to structure the following forty-eight hours.”

Harry slides down in his seat, filled with dread and exhaustion and a little bit of anger, though he’s not sure who it’s directed at. He checks his phone. Still nothing.

He thumbs open a new message to Liam as the team discusses calling paps to the hotel in the morning and sending Harry out looking disheveled or having him stay out of sight to draw more speculation.

(10:18 p.m.) Harry: Anything?
(10:21 p.m.) Lima: Nothin yet bro. Mite b at the hotel
(10:22 p.m.) Lima: Were n the green room when u gt a break. Ur mum n jay are here 2
(10:23 p.m.) Lima: Love u bro. Let us kno if u need nything

“Moving on to Google search analytics, here are the numbers from before the concert tonight…”

Harry picks anxiously at his fingernails. Surely Louis didn’t go back to the hotel. That’s the last place he’d want to be, alone and sad and scared. Harry can’t believe he’s not wrapped up with one of the boys or his mum, demanding comfort until Harry can get out of his meeting. He can’t believe he’d just leave, not when there’s so much to talk about. Not when Harry needs him.

But where is he?

…

Five tiny glasses are lined up in front of Louis’ face. He won’t let the bartender take them.

“I like keeping things that don’t belong to me,” he says, but nobody answers. Nobody’s there to hear
him. He’s alone.

He pokes at the line of shot glasses, unable to tell if it was straight before or if it’s straight now, his vision swimming after little food and a whole lot of vodka.

He taps the bar, mumbles, “’nother.” The bartender hesitates, but pours him another shot when Louis glares at him; it tastes like water going down.

What a day. What a fucking day.

The best day of Louis’ life falling off into the worst night of all time.

Or, maybe he should say the best day of Harry’s life and the worst day of Louis’. He’s probably off with his new soulmate, forgetting all about Louis and the way they were supposed to be together forever.

“So funny,” he slurs to the bartender, who either doesn’t hear him or doesn’t know what to say. Doesn’t matter, Louis is talking to someone who isn’t there.

It’s so funny that Louis built up his courage and finally said Harry’s name, and it didn’t even matter. It’s so funny that the stupid fucking PR team is trying to spin Harry running offstage holding his arm into a hundred different headlines when everyone knows what happened. Everyone knows, they know. Harry knows. Louis knows. He knows.

It’s so funny that Louis wanted one person, ever; he wanted Harry more than he wanted to breathe, to laugh, to sing and to be recognized, but so did everyone else. Someone got to say his name tonight and cause a reaction; it’s probably some teenager infatuated with his hair and his slow, syrupy voice, someone awful and annoying who everyone will hate. Or it’s a boy, a tall, gorgeous boy who doesn’t pout when he’s out of cereal and who doesn’t make Harry clean up after him because he’s a slob and lazy and not worth all the trouble, and everyone won’t hate him, they’ll love him, because he’s tall and kind and beautiful, everything Louis is not.

The TV behind the bartender flashes an urgent news update at the bottom of the screen, interrupting the evening’s sport headlines: One Direction member Bonds on stage? More at 11.

Maybe it’s worse than all that, maybe Harry Bonded to someone famous; there had been a lot of choices there if that was the case. Maybe it was one of those gaggle of models he’d seen in the center aisles, dancing to Stand Up without a care in the world. Maybe it was one of the VIP seat holders, the children of the New York elite, social circles so high above Louis that he can’t even contemplate them. Maybe it was Taylor fucking Swift, wouldn’t that be grand? With her stupid long legs and her ridiculous wide eyes and her delicate features that look so good next to his, a couple made for the front covers of magazines. Made to sing songs to each other, about each other, perfect fairytale lives mere mortals couldn’t understand.

It doesn’t really matter though, does it? Whether it was a random fan or Taylor Swift or someone in between, it happened, and it took half an hour for Harry to even remember Louis existed. And then he’d tried to corner Louis into a conversation on stage, like Louis didn’t know what was coming. He knows what it means that Harry kept watching him across the stage like a kicked puppy begging for forgiveness; he knows that Harry can’t resist the draw of his soulmate any more than Louis could resist the same thing. He knows that a conversation is coming as soon as he’s able to face it, one that’s meant to let him down easy but will send him spiraling instead.

“So I left,” Louis mutters, laying his head on his arms. He left, because that’s what he does. He runs. He hides. He makes the difficult choice so that someone else doesn’t have to. He removes himself
from situations where he’s not wanted.

Harry’s coat is too big and too warm for this dive of a bar, and it’s not like any of their fans will be searching him out at a place like this, especially since he’s still not even legally able to drink here for three more weeks. But he won’t take it off, because it’s more than a disguise. This coat is just another in a long list of things Louis has taken from Harry that he shouldn’t have.

Alberto appears at Louis’ side, and Louis leans into him. “Wanna go home, Al,” Louis pleads, his eyes itchy like he’s facing down a hundred years of tears and a thousand sleepless nights and he’s already so, so tired.

“The car’s outside,” says Alberto’s low voice. “We can be back at the hotel in twenty minutes.”

“No, no,” Louis says, shaking his head so that it sloshes like all the liquid in his stomach. He clambers carefully off the barstool. “No, home. Take me home.”

“Your mom and sisters are here,” Alberto says. Louis is distracted by that for a fleeting second: what he wouldn’t give to be wrapped in Harry’s arms right now, but his mum is a close second.

But no. He can’t go to the hotel, Harry will be at the hotel. He can’t. “I can’t,” he moans. “Home, Al. Please.”

Alberto disappears for a second and Louis sways on his feet, counting shot glasses and the bigger ones lined up behind, the ones that had held his double whiskeys and his Long Island Ice Teas before he’d drained those, too. His stomach rolls.

“I can get us tickets on the next flight to London,” Alberto says, pocketing his phone. “But we’ll need your passport from the hotel.”

“C’n you?” Louis slurs. The words are thick in his mouth. His eyelashes don’t want to open when he blinks. Alberto scoops him up, laying a hundred dollar bill on the bar top. “Sorry,” Louis apologizes to the bartender as he’s carried out the door and buckled into the backseat.

“Sorry,” he repeats, and he is. He’s so sorry.

He’s so sorry.

…

Syco PR and Modest didn’t just build a plan around a potential stage Bonding, as it turns out. They built entire narratives, whole articles written and ready to be sent to major publications to be released once the specificities were filled in, pages of drafted tweets that tease and titillate but give nothing away. There are multiple routes based on confidence of finding the soulmate versus time planned to spend looking, and they had several avenues built to match the public persona of each of the boys. The team lays out Harry's personalized options before him like a tarot card reader deciding his future, and every single one of them makes his stomach whirl. Not in a good way either, more in a sitting atop a rollercoaster, looking down and not seeing the ground kind of way.

There’s the recreated concert idea: “MSG is booked until September, but they have a routine maintenance and cleaning day scheduled in early March that they will postpone if we're willing to pay,” says Jake. “We can offer half-priced tickets to everyone who was here at MSG the first time
and then we can ask the Unbonded fans to bring signs that you read out sporadically through the concert. Eventually you’ll find the person who you Bonded to, as, we assume, they will Bond to you as well when you read their sign. We’ll whisk you backstage, have the Marker test performed, and if it matches we’ll do the announcement of your confirmed Bond in the week following.”

“Why can’t I just do the test now, if it’s that easy?” Harry asks, exasperated, but Jake shakes his head.

“Can’t do that, for a couple of reasons,” another rep says. “Your Marker is made up of DNA matching your soulmate’s, but you have to have that matching DNA to run the test. We could run it now, but it would only be tested against the DNA samples we already have on file, which would just be your bandmates and the crew.”

“Oh,” Harry slumps. That’s no good, then. Still, there’s no need to have an entire concert just for him to read some signs. Not that he wouldn’t love to play MSG again, but, well, it’s not exactly like they’d have earned it. Also, he’s supposed to wait until March as this hangs over his head? An actual sword of Damocles that he would live with for months? No thanks.

So, they introduce the more, in their words, “low-key” option: a meet and greet, emphasis on the meet. Alice explains that one. “We invite everyone that was at this concert to a meet and greet, and we’ll give them nametags. You’ll be the last in the line of band members, you’ll read every person’s name, and if they Bond to you we’ll take a DNA sample and some information so you can contact them later. If any of them is a match, we’ll announce to the media later that week with a nice photoshoot or People magazine cover story or something. Very classy, very low-key.”

“I don’t think you know what low-key means,” Harry says, brow furrowed. “Three or four hours of people screaming at me because they’ve got the best chance of being my soulmate is not low-key, that’s pandemonium. We have a hard time with security at a regular meet and greet.”

“So, that’s a no, then?”

“That’s a hell no.”

Claudia, of course, introduces the final option, and it’s by far everyone (else’s) favorite. “We’ve been in talks with E! already, and they offered a spot in their summer show lineup if we wanted to record your search for your soulmate in exchange for some mutual promo.”

Harry hates it already, wonders which one of his poor bandmates would be offered up for a fake relationship with a Kardashian or something now that he’s out of the running. The disgust on his face apparently isn’t enough to make her stop.

“It would be a cross between a classic dating show and a reality show,” Claudia continues. It’s the most excitement Harry’s ever heard in her usually cool voice, and that worries him more than anything else. “We have everyone who was at the concert submit video applications saying why they want to be your soulmate. We narrow the field down to a few hundred, and then we bring those fans in for interviews. The field will be cut to a hundred after the interviews, and then we’ll move into the competition aspect of the show: trivia contests, personality profile matching, seeing who is actually a good fit for you based on how well they know you, your band, and what the public wants from a celebrity’s soulmate. After we’ve narrowed it down to thirty, they’ll meet you for the first time and move into a house together. Then—”

“Stop, stop,” Harry says, burying his face in his hands. “I can’t- this is- I need a moment.”

A Cinderella story with a horrifying twist. That’s what this is. They’re trying to make some random
person, his soulmate, someone who found themselves in the crowd at a One Direction concert and yelled Harry’s name at the exact right time, they’re trying to make that person compete for Harry’s hand. Like he’s Prince Charming up in his ivory tower, and he’s going to throw trivia about his favorite things and his bandmates at them to make sure they’re deserving of being his soulmate.

Harry’s gonna be sick.

“T...
“I know,” Harry answers miserably. “I don't even know if I want to meet them. I'm happy with my life, with Lou,” he sobs once, “if he still wants that with me, anyway. But if I do this show, and I don't think I'll have a choice, I'll have to at least pretend to be with whoever wins it, whether they're my actual soulmate or not.”

“You don't want to meet your soulmate at all?” Anne asks gently.

“I don't know,” Harry groans softly, rubbing his eyes. “Not really, because what good would it do? I'm not leaving Louis, no matter what he thinks is happening. So it would be meeting them just to say sorry, we can only be friends. But if I don't try to find them, I'll never have that question answered. It'll be a loose thread I have to pretend I'm okay with all my life.” He sighs, leaning against his mum again. “I'm just really confused about it all, and there's only so many times I can run through it in my head. And I really need to talk to Louis, but he's disappeared.”

Jay stands, and Niall makes room for her to sit on Harry's other side. “I don't know where he went, love, but I know how he thinks. You do too, but you're just a little preoccupied, you can't be blamed for that,” she says, taking the hand Niall had been holding. Harry watches her consider her next words, looking so much like Louis that his chest hurts a little. “He's probably thinking that if he stays here, you'll pick him just to keep from hurting his feelings. So he thinks he'll get out of your hair, let you make an unbiased choice, and he'll be waiting when you're ready.”

“I don't want that, though,” Harry insists. “I've told him a hundred thousand times, I'd choose him over anyone. But he's not here, so I don't know what to do.”

“He's probably at the hotel,” Jay promises. “And, well, he gets that stubbornness from me, so I know it's deep-seated. And I know that's frustrating. But he loves you, Harry, I never thought I'd see him as in love with anyone as he is with you. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen two people more in love than you two. But he'll need time to wrap his head around everything that's happened, and he'll want to do that on his own.”

Harry blinks down at his hand clasped in Jay's, her small fingers just another thing that reminds him of her son. There's one major difference, though; Louis got a lot of traits and habits from his mum, and wearing too-big jumpers with sleeves that fall to his fingers is one of them. Harry's rarely seen Jay in something that bares her wrists to the world, so he's never seen the butterfly Marker that's on display now. It's black, a silhouette like smudged charcoal, but it used to be brilliantly colored, to hear Louis talk about it. Bright pink and red, a beacon of love and hope, only to fade when her soulmate left.

Harry wonders what will happen to his rose if he never meets his soulmate; does it stay the same? Or will it, too, turn black and faded, a hopeful promise turned sour?

Another thought to tumble around in his head, like there aren't enough of those already.

“This is the worst day,” Harry whispers, wiping his eyes. He’s still in his sweat-crusted stage clothes, his eyes itch like hell, he’s hungry and tired and all twisted up in a hundred different terrifying thoughts. “I'm gonna take a shower. If Paul comes by, tell him I'll be back as soon as I'm done.”

“Like hell you will,” Anne mutters, kissing Harry's forehead. “You take your time. Paul knows you need a minute to yourself.”

Harry rests his heavy head on her shoulder for a moment before getting to his feet, grabbing his bag and heading to the tiny bathroom. He turns the water so hot he shakes with it, his body arching to avoid the stream when his mind is too busy chasing itself in circles to realize his skin is being scalded. Soon the room is filled with steam, cloudy and muddled just like his thoughts, and he tries to
rinse it all down the drain like he does the sweat and dried tears that had clung to him. It doesn’t work; he’s feeling fresher and less heavy with weights and worries when he shuts the shower off, but he’s no closer to a solution and no less confused.

He digs out his post-show outfit—the one he was planning to wear to the after-party that he was supposed to spend schmoozing with Taylor Swift, what a laugh—and presses his palms to his eyes for a long, long moment before he opens the door again. He’s numb when he emerges from the bathroom, his hair dripping onto the shoulders of his Pink Floyd shirt. Everyone looks up as he re-enters, and there’s nothing like the feeling of walking into a room and knowing the people inside all just stopped talking about him. He ignores it, falling back into his place between his mum and Jay on the sofa, pulling his feet up and wrapping his arms around his knees.

“Hazza,” Niall says slowly. “I was thinking. If I- if… If it’ll help, I can tell management. About me and Babs. That might take some of the heat off of you.”

“No,” Harry says automatically. “No, Ni, you can’t. They’ll get you a reality show too, and they’ll make you have your ceremony on E! when their ratings are low. No, I won’t let you.”

“That’s what we told him,” Liam agrees.

“But if it can help—”

“It won’t, can’t you see? They’ll just squeeze us both for promo instead of just me,” Harry argues. “If I could have kept this from them, I would. But I couldn’t.”

The room is quiet for a few minutes, until Anne takes his arm carefully, turning it so she can see the rose. “I know this is tough, love,” she says quietly, “but this is really beautiful.”

“That’s what I said,” Zayn grins softly. “Lucky jerk would get a work of art naturally on his arm.”

“What if it’s, like,” Liam says in that voice he gets when he’s trying to singlehandedly save the world. “Metaphorical, or something?”

“Oh, Liam,” Niall says, chuckling. “Please, illuminate us.”

Liam frowns. “I’m being serious. Like, what if the person’s name is Rose?”

“That… is not a metaphor,” Zayn groans, shaking his head like he’s in pain. “That’s pretty much the opposite of a metaphor, that’s about as literal as you could get.”

“It could stand for something though,” Niall allows, tapping his chin. Harry knows what they’re doing, he’s been on the other side of this when Zayn gets frustrated about not being able to go places without attracting a crowd or when Liam works his arse off and his voice still cracks mid-song. And while he’s not quite sure he’s going to be able to be cheered up that easily, he’s happy to let them try. “Isn’t ‘desert rose’ a thing? Maybe they’re from the desert?”

“How is that helpful?” Liam scoffs. “Is he supposed to go up to everyone and be like, hello, do you live in or near a desert? It’s for science.”

“‘You’re from Death Valley? Excellent, I think you’re my soulmate,’” Zayn says.

“It could be Yellow Rose of Texas?” Liam tries. “Except it’s not really yellow, it’s more… skin colored.”

“Bed of roses?” Zayn tries.

Niall snaps. “Stop and smell the roses.”

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” Anne joins in, cuddling Harry close.

“Does anything go with roses?” Liam asks. “Like, what goes with roses? Rose and...”

They never get a chance to dive into that, because then Paul is in the doorway, knocking lightly to get their attention. “We’re gathering back up if you’re ready, H,” he says apologetically. It’s not a good look on him, despite how much he’s worn it tonight.

Harry sighs and ruffles his hair. “Right. I’ll be right there.”

Paul nods and leaves, and the little bit of cheer that the boys had managed to scrounge up seeps from the room, leaving Harry cold and still so, so tired. “Why don’t you lot go to the hotel? It might be hours until I’m done, there’s no need for you to stay here.”

“Are you sure?” Anne asks, patting Harry’s hand. “We don’t mind waiting.”

“I know you don’t,” Harry says, getting to his feet. “Just go, get some food and some sleep. Preston will bring me back to the hotel when it’s all done. If it’s ever done.”

He kisses his mum and Jay on their cheeks, hugs the boys close one last time, and forces himself to walk back through the empty halls to the PR station. The discussion has already started inside; how do they contact all the MSG concert goers, should the application videos be voted for online by fans or chosen by the team, should it all be filmed ahead of time or could the later portions be filmed week to week. Harry ignores it, sitting in his chair in the center of the room and letting all the confusion and terror and turmoil unspool in his head.

A few hours ago, he’d been on the top of the world with his very best friends right beside him. He’d had a packed Madison Square Garden at his feet, and he’d never felt more alive. It had been a dream come true up until it wasn’t anymore; he’d danced with Niall and harmonized with Zayn and teased Liam. He got to see Ed, one of his best friends, perform for a brand new captivated audience. And Louis, of course he watched Louis; they’d traded glances and smiles all night, they bumped hips and hands when they passed, and Louis had looked right at Harry during all the best parts of each of the songs: I can love you more than this and ’cause I got three little words and the way that you kiss on me.

And then it all went wrong and, honestly, how is Harry supposed to sham his way through a reality show where he’s supposed to be finding his soulmate when he remembers next to nothing from the actual moment? It was bright lights and burning pain and, really, the only voice he could make out clearly was Louis’ because he’d had the microphone up near his mouth. His in-ears had even rang with it, because Louis is a lot of things and loud is somewhere at the top of the list.

And-

Wait.

Harry stands abruptly. His heart thunders in his chest.

“Bathroom,” he mutters, and he escapes into the hall. Preston follows him, probably making sure Harry isn’t bolting, but Harry pays him no mind. He shoulders his way into the nearest restroom, leaning heavily against the wall.
Because holy shit. *Holy shit.* A crowd of thousands screamed his name, and the only heard one voice. A voice that, the first time they’d met, said his full name wrong.

“Holy shit,” Harry breathes again. His heart is in his throat, his breathing rapid. He’s gonna, he’s gonna, *holy shit,* he’s gonna be sick. He’s gonna pass out. He’s lightheaded and unsteady, the bathroom walls wavering around him, he gasps and realizes he hadn’t been breathing.

He yanks his phone from his pocket with quivering hands, because something is ringing in his head insistently, something Liam said pulling at his attention. *What goes with rose?* He opens up his browser and types *rose and-*

*Rose and dagger* is the first result.

“Oh my God,” Harry breathes, raking a hand through his hair. He falters, falling back against the cool tile, his knees too weak to hold him up. “Oh my God, holy shit, *oh my God.*”

There’s no way. There’s no way that, all this time, *Louis* was his soulmate. There’s no way. He’d said Harry’s name before, surely. Surely, over two years of a romantic relationship and two and a half of being in a band together, Louis said his name. He wracks his brain, trying to come up with something, *anything.*

“You’re very welcome, Harold Styles.” That’s what Louis said, that day in the *X Factor* bathroom. *Harold.* He’d always said Harold. Or H. Or Hazza. Harry when he was being serious, but never alongside Styles.

And he’d never corrected himself.

*Holy shit.*

Harry looks back at his phone, taps the first link to *rose and dagger tattoo meanings* with trembling fingers.

*Duality of humanity: the juxtaposition of danger and beauty. The coexisting of dark and light, death and life.*

*With great love comes great pain.*

Harry bursts out of the bathroom, his chest heaving. “Preston,” he pants, “we have to go to the hotel. *Now.*”

It takes Preston some convincing and a text to Paul promising that he’s going straight to the hotel and that this might be the only way to avoid having his romantic life turned into a reality show, but within a few minutes Harry is in the back of a nondescript car, hurtling down the streetlamp and starlit New York streets towards their hotel.

He’s trying not to think. He’s trying not to get too far ahead of himself, because he could be wrong, very, very wrong. Roses go with lots of things, not just daggers. And Louis might have gotten that dagger way before *X Factor,* Harry never asked. It was always just *there,* as intrinsically part of him as his blue, blue eyes or his soft fringe, his sense of humor or his unfailing kindness.

Harry breathes in, holds it, counts to sixty, lets it out. Again. Again. Again. He won’t jump to
conclusions without (more) solid evidence. He won’t.

The car pulls up to the side entrance of the hotel—far from the crowds standing at the main entrance, and he’s not even sure if they’re there for him but he’s not risking any time finding out—and Harry leaps out, stumbling a little on tired legs before regaining his balance and hurrying inside, Preston jogging behind him.

He’s trying not to think, but some thoughts bleed through his walls: what if he’s right? What if, all this time, all he ever wanted was really true? What if he and Louis found each other and held on tight only to find out fate wove them together when they weren’t looking?

Little bursts of fervent happiness, of delirious ecstasy, pop in his thoughts like champagne bubbles. He tries not to bounce on his toes, but he can’t help it.

He won’t jump to conclusions. He won’t.

(But what if he’s right?)

“Lou!” Harry shouts when the elevator doors open. He doesn’t care that it’s nearing two in the morning, he doesn’t care that his thumping footsteps as he runs to their room will wake everyone up. The band and crew have the whole floor to themselves, and Harry can apologize later, he knows they’ll forgive him. “Lou, where are you?”

Harry skids to a stop in front of his and Louis’ room. They’ve been staying in this same hotel for over a week, so Harry expects to see their room in the same orderly chaos he and Louis had left it in before heading to the MSG soundcheck, with Louis ensconced somewhere inside. Probably huddled in bed, curled in the blankets and trying to stay awake until Harry gets back.

That’s not what he finds.


The room is spotless; Harry’s suitcase is tidily tucked into a corner, his coat hung from the clothes rack. His bathroom kit is all packed away on the counter next to the sink.

Louis, and his things, are nowhere to be found.

Except…

A small white spot in the middle of the dark hotel duvet catches Harry’s eye, a piece of hotel stationery folded dozens of times. Harry opens it with shaking hands, his breath coming in quick gasps. The words are fuzzy, smudged and bumpy, like Louis wrote them while falling asleep or while riding in the backseat of a car.

Haz —

I can’t be here and watch you choose someone else. I need some time before I’ll be okay. Don’t worry about me, I knew someday this day would come.

Please be happy. For me.

— Lou

Harry immediately crumples the note in his hand. He has not gone through hell and back only for Louis to tell him to be with someone else. Especially if there isn’t anyone else. He ignores the note’s
contents, ignores the word Louis was trying to say. Louis doesn’t get to say goodbye, not after all this. Not after everything.

Harry squeezes the note and calls out desperately again, “Lou!” Because he can’t have gone. He can’t. No matter what the sinking in Harry’s stomach is trying to tell him, he has to still be here. He can’t have left. "Louis!"

“Mate,” Niall says in the doorway. He’s sleep-mussed but alert, Zayn and Liam looking similarly concerned behind him. “What happened?”

“I need to talk to Louis,” Harry says, spinning around like Louis’ playing the worst-timed game of hide and seek of all time, and that he’ll pop out from under the bed crowing about how legendary his pranking skills are. He pretends there’s no note, though he doesn’t let it drop from his grasp. “This isn’t like before, I need to talk to him.”

“Why don’t you sit down, Hazza,” Liam says gently, guiding Harry to an armchair with a soft hand on his back. Preston closes the door before Harry’s shouting wakes anyone else up. “We’ve had some news from him.”

“Where is he?” Harry asks immediately, refusing to sit. “Is he here? He’s gotta be. But where’s his stuff?”


Harry freezes. Niall hurries to explain. “It’s okay, he’s fine, he just needed to get away for a bit. I saw Alberto coming in to get his stuff, and he told me Louis didn’t want to make a big fuss.”

“We had some recording and appearances, but those can be postponed or rescheduled,” Liam says cheerfully. “And I’m sure he’ll either come back when he’s ready or we’ll be back in London before you know it.”

“And we’ve decided we’ll go with you to your next meeting,” Zayn finishes. “You shouldn’t have to do this on your own, and we’ll volunteer to do whatever stunts we have to do to keep you from having to do a reality show.”

That’s the drop of water that breaks the dam; Harry had thought he’d crumbled in the MSG green room in his mum’s arms, but that was nothing. He disintegrates, collapses, falling weakly into the armchair. A chill slices through him, though before he’d been warm.

It doesn’t make sense. He wouldn’t leave. He’s never left, not before.

“Home?” Harry breathes. His hands flex on his knees, and he watches it happen detachedly. “He just… left?”

“Yeah,” Niall says, exchanging bewildered looks with Liam and Zayn. “You know how he is, he has to get his head on straight before he can deal with anyone else.”


“You heard Jay, he thinks it’s what’s best,” Liam says gently.

“He’s gone, oh my God,” Harry says brokenly, and that does it. He sobs once, loudly, achingly, “It’s Louis, it’s Louis.”
“What’s Louis?” Liam asks, alarmed.

“It’s Louis,” Harry sobs, and he’d told himself to try not to rush to conclusions but it’s like a puzzle piece clicking into place, he’s so sure now that he’s right just as everything else goes wrong. He clutches his stomach, tries to breathe past his broken heart. His ribcage has collapsed, it had to’ve, he can feel it cutting at him from the inside and making his head swim. “Louis is my soulmate.”

“What?” Niall gasps.

“It’s the dagger, it matches the rose,” Harry wails. “I thought he’d said my name before but he hadn’t, he said Harold when we met. Tonight was, shit, it was the first time he’s said it.”


“Yes,” Harry cries. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. He used his mic, he’s the only voice I heard.”

“Oh my God,” Liam gasps. “Your rose, it’s exactly where his dagger is.”

Harry nods tearfully. “And I never asked when he got it, I just assumed it was before we met.”

“Lou never says anyone’s full names,” Zayn says weakly, like he’s tired just from following Harry’s train of thought. Harry is exhausted just from forging it. “But he did tonight, I saw it. He said everyone’s.”

“We have to find him,” Harry says pleadingly. “We have to go to London, now, I can’t- he keeps trying to leave and I won’t let him.”

“What do you mean, trying to leave?” Niall asks, frowning. Harry hands him the note, getting to his shaky feet.

“He told me, ages back,” Harry sniffs, wiping his face of tears. “He said when my soulmate came into the picture, he’d leave. I always said no, but he was already decided.”

“And he doesn’t know it’s him,” Liam says in horror. “Oh, God, he’s probably heartbroken.”

“Stupid noble bastard,” Zayn says.

“We have to go, we have to find him,” Harry repeats. He gets to his feet, wobbling a little in exhaustion.

“We can’t tonight, though,” Niall says. “No more flights to London until the morning. Jay and the girls took the last one, once they knew Louis was headed back already.”

“The morning?” Harry echoes weakly. “I can’t wait that long.”

“You have to, babes,” Zayn says. He and Liam guide Harry over to the bed, pulling back the covers so he can slide in. The mattress is too soft against his back after a day of standing and a night of performing, especially with no familiar bony elbows or freezing feet to keep him company. “We’ll get tickets and arrange everything. You sleep.”

“I can’t,” Harry says faintly, trying to shove the covers off of himself. Liam pins his hand, his brow furrowed. Harry stills, but that doesn’t change the situation. “I can’t, Li.”

Liam gets it. Harry knows he does. He rubs his jaw and sighs sadly, beckoning Niall over. “Ni, me and Zayn’ll get everything sorted. You keep Hazza company.”
Niall climbs in next to Harry without argument, pulling him close and cuddling up behind him. As Zayn and Liam let themselves out of the room, the silence falls and presses in on Harry’s ears. His pulse thuds in his wrists, and he’s so tired but he can’t fall asleep. He’s simultaneously sleepless and exhausted.

“What if he’s not at the house?” Harry whispers. “What if I can’t find him?”

“We will,” Niall says, and in shouldering some of the weight he lets Harry feel lighter. Sleepier.

“I need him,” he murmurs as his eyes close.

“I know.”

Sleep comes easy, but doesn’t last. It’s restless, it’s uneasy, and Harry kicks himself awake more than once feeling like he’s forgotten something just as he’s fallen off the edge of a cliff. At around five o’clock he gives up, uncurling from under the heavy blankets and throwing on a beanie and a jumper before stumbling out to the balcony.

Morning over New York City is muted and crisp, his breath fogging in the air. Somewhere out in the metropolis is Harry’s PR team, still probably plugging away at constructing a reality show that he’ll only participate in over his dead body, and Taylor Swift, whose hotel Harry was supposed to stay at tonight if things went according to plan. Scattered across the city are people who came to the show last night, people who yelled Harry’s name and watched him run off to hide the reaction, who might have woken up this morning with excitement in their veins wondering, is it me? Could it be me?

And, somewhere, maybe London, maybe LA or Rome or Dallas or Stockholm, maybe still here in New York but definitely not where he’s supposed to be, which is wrapped up in the bed Harry just left, is Louis. Grieving a relationship he thinks has ended, nursing wounds that are self-inflicted.

For the hundredth time over the last twelve hours, Harry huddles against the biting winter wind and wonders, Louis, where are you?

…

4 December 2012

Louis stares up at his and Harry’s home, and he knows, now that he’s here, that he can’t go in.

He can’t pretend that this is just another break after a normal PR run. He can’t go in and see the life he and Harry built together, their photos, their films, their instruments and clothes, Harry’s artwork, Louis’ footie kit, their life mingling like it’s preserved in a mausoleum.

He can’t face it. It’s too raw, and it brings up too many questions he’s tried so hard to avoid.

(Will Harry’s new soulmate come here to live with him? Will Harry expect him to move out soon, or will Louis have a little time to look for something new? Or is Harry never coming back here again, moving somewhere new and leaving his past mistakes behind him?)

Louis gets back in the car.

“Take me back to the airport,” he says, and he doesn’t look back on the house as they pull away.
With the help of some sleeping pills and on the heel of a restless night of little sleep, Harry makes it to London in one piece. He startles awake as the wheels touch tarmac, wiping drool from his face as he straightens up, moving his legs from where they’d been slung over his mum’s thighs and rubbing at his neck, sore from laying against Liam’s shoulder the whole flight.

He squints at the sunlight when he disembarks. It feels wrong; today is a day for dramatic declarations in the rain, not brittle chill in the weak winter sun. They’re staring straight into a sunset, having wasted a whole day on the plane, evening setting in and fading everything to black.

“Call us when you’ve got news,” Anne says, kissing Harry’s forehead. He smiles and nods, knowing that he must be faring better than he was a mere flight ago if she’s not insisting on coming with him.

“Ready?” Niall asks as they slip into a dark-tinted SUV.

Harry smooths his t-shirt and tries to calm the racing of his heart. Now that he’s here, back on the same continent as Louis, the things that had seemed so black and white the night before aren’t so sturdy anymore. Certainties are no longer definite; somewhere over the Atlantic the idea seeped into his head that maybe the dagger and the rose don’t match, and maybe this is all a coincidence. Maybe he’s connecting things that aren’t really connected.

But maybe he’s not. Maybe it’s fate giving Harry his first lucky break.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Harry says, and ruffles his hair as he breathes.

The house is empty.

Harry and the boys scour it, top to bottom, every room and bathroom, every closet and cupboard. The football goal sits unused in the backyard, the bed remains undisturbed, it’s all just as tidy as it was when they left for America.

Harry sits heavily, collecting his breath. He’s built up this conversation into massive proportions, and now the adrenaline and anxiety roll along his skin like scuttling bugs, making him twitchy. Antsy.

“Okay,” Liam says, levelheaded as always. “Let’s make a list. Where else would he go?”

“The other house?” Zayn suggests.

Harry shrugs. “I wouldn’t think so, it’s the public house so people know when we come and go from there. But we can check. Um, we could try Ed’s, but, no, he’s still in New York. Matt and Aiden’s, maybe, we haven’t seen them in a while but he’s hid there before. But…” he says slowly, “I bet he’s in Doncaster.”

“Let’s go there first, then,” Niall says, clapping his hands. Harry stands, glad to have instructions to follow; if he’d come back on his own to find an empty house, he’d probably have had a breakdown.
But he can’t break. He’s got to find Louis.

He repeats it like a mantra in his head.

“Call Jay,” Zayn suggests as they jump back into the vehicle and give the driver instructions. “Might save us a trip if she says he isn’t there.”

“Would she cover up for him if he was?” Liam asks.

“Yes,” Harry answers immediately. “But only if he asked.”

He calls and, for the first time he can remember, Jay doesn’t answer with a sunshiney, “Hello, love!” He locks his phone, tries to bat away that foreboding feeling bubbling in his stomach. “Didn’t answer.”

“They’ve gotta be home, though,” Niall points out. “Their flight left last night, they’ve probably been there for hours.”

“Let’s just keep going,” Zayn says. “Isn’t this what he did last time he ran away, hid at home until you showed up?”

“Yeah,” Harry answers. He rubs his knuckle over his sternum and breathes.

It’s fully nighttime when the car rolls to a stop next to Jay’s van, Doncaster silent around them as they shake their travel-heavy limbs and stretch. The house is brightly lit from inside, shadows moving past the windows, muted shrieks of giggling girls heard from outside.

Harry knocks, and the shrieks stop. Jay opens the door, Louis’ sisters all gathered behind her.

“Hey,” Harry says. A collective breath is released, and Harry doesn’t know if it’s because it’s him specifically or because it’s anyone but Louis, but he takes it in stride. “Lou isn’t at our house. Is he here?”

“Sorry, love,” Jay answers, shaking her head. “He isn’t.”

“Sorry,” Harry says quietly, because he’d been expecting that, whether it’s truth or not. “But can I come in and check?” Jay nods, steps back. Harry hugs her for a long moment, feeling the tension in her shoulders.

“Hazzy!” says Phoebe, bouncing on her toes. “Are you staying with us tonight?”

Harry moves close to the little clump of girls. He kneels and opens his arms, and the twins fit themselves immediately against his sides. “Don’t know yet, Pheeb,” he says. “We’re looking for your silly brother.” He kisses their heads and stands, pulling the older two in for hugs next. The other boys, who are greeting Jay quietly at the door, follow Harry as he jogs upstairs. Louis’ room is empty, as are the other upstairs bedrooms. Harry’s stomach sinks as he checks the darkened bathrooms, the living room, the backyard where, almost two years ago, he and Louis laid it all on the line and decided that what they had was greater than the potential of getting hurt.

Harry wonders if Louis would still agree.

He sits in the same grass, chilly and frosted over now, unlike that June night that changed his whole
life for the better, and breathes.

“Harry,” Lottie says as he and the boys start bundling back up in their coats and gloves to go poke around the rest of Doncaster, the teenage haunts Louis had shown Harry on their long autumn walks. Jay is putting the twins to bed and Fizzy is watching TV, but Lottie’s still whispering like she’s breaking oaths just looking at Harry. “He didn’t tell us where he is.”

Harry stops, turns fully to face her. “What?”

“I know you think we’re hiding him, but we aren’t,” Lottie continues, just as quietly. “Mum and I, we know he’s stubborn, and we know he’s scared. If he told us where he was and asked us not to tell you, we still would. Because you’re what’s good for him. But we don’t know. He didn’t tell us.”

Harry swoops down, crushes Lottie to his chest for a moment. “I know,” he reassures her. “I didn’t think you’d let him self-destruct.”

“Not on purpose,” Lottie promises. “I will say… he called when our flight landed. Didn’t tell us where he was going, just said he’d be safe, and that he’s with Alberto if there’s an emergency.”

“Thanks, Lotts,” Harry murmurs, kissing her forehead. Familiar blue eyes catch his for the slightest moment.

“Find him, will you?” she asks, barely shaky, because she’s a Tomlinson and Tomlinsons are strong. “I owe him a kick in the arse.”

“Charlotte! Language!” scolds Jay from the kitchen. Lottie grins a heartbreakingly familiar grin and pushes Harry out the door to where the other boys are waiting in the cold.

“Where to first?” Liam asks, blowing warm air on his hands. He’s lit up by Christmas lights on the nearest house, red and green alternating against his skin.

“Let’s try Stan’s,” Harry says, leading the way to the car. The driver backs smoothly out of the drive, following Harry’s directions to increasingly unlikely places Louis would be hiding, Stan’s house and Oli’s and Calvin’s and Nizam’s, the Donny Dome and Keepmoat, the park behind Louis’ old school, the record shop up the street.

Harry ticks off the locations as they search each one, and he only shudders a little when he breathes. They call it a night at around two o’clock. Louis isn’t in Donny, and the longer they search, jetlagged and achy, the more irritable they get. Jay offers them some space at the house to kip until morning, but the driver assures them he’s wide awake and can get them back to London safely.

“I just want to sleep in our bed,” Harry murmurs to Jay when she tugs him in for a last hug. “Maybe it’ll give me inspiration.”

“I understand, love,” she whispers. “Take care of yourself. He’ll come home eventually.”

“I’ll find him first,” Harry promises, though he knows that wasn’t her point. He means it, though; he’s not going to sit back and wait for Louis to try and get Harry out of his system. He’s going to
find him, to put it right. To put everything right.

He doesn’t sleep on the ride back to London, though he’s the only one awake in the silent vehicle besides the driver. He kills his phone battery little by little as he combs through Twitter, Tumblr, even Instagram, searching through Louis’ mentions for any signs of a sighting, pap pics, rumors, anything. There’s nothing even remotely close; all the fans are talking about is Harry’s exit from MSG, and what that means for the good ship Larry Stylinson if Harry Bonded to someone else. Harry closes out of the apps when he realizes he doesn’t know the answer to their questions.

His head hits the pillow back in his and Louis’ London house just as the clock nears four in the morning. Liam and Zayn are in the guest room next door, Niall in the one down the hall, and the sound of their soft snuffling and snoring rocks Harry to sleep. His last thought is of Louis, of tomorrow, and of all the places he still has to look.

But he’ll find him. He will.

And Harry breathes, breathes, breathes.

…

Louis never thought of himself as a masochist, but then he went and fell in love.

He has Alberto call to make the reservation, not sure he’s up to the task; plus, he hasn’t spoken more than a few words in nearly twenty-eight hours, and he’d probably cough for a solid minute if he tried to get anything out.

And he doesn’t want to turn on his phone. That’s the biggest one. Can’t look at Twitter, see the fans fawning over their new favorite It Couple, Harry his probably gorgeous soulmate. Can’t look at the worried messages from his mum and sisters, Gemma, Anne, the boys. Paul, Preston, Lou, Caroline, Stan, Ed, Nick. Harry. Can’t listen to the panicked voicemails, can’t swipe through Tumblr looking for fun rumors he can plan to “accidentally” confirm like it’s a normal day, can’t haunt the update accounts on Twitter and see how badly they’ve gotten things wrong.

“Bienvenue messieurs,” the pretty woman at the front desk greets them as they walk up. She doesn’t falter at recognizing Louis, though her eyes linger for the shortest second. Louis wonders if she remembers him coming here before, or if she’s just seen him on TV. Wonders what kind of recognition that is in her eyes. Wonders if she’s curious about Alberto’s presence instead of Harry’s.

“Thank you for choosing Hotel de la Paix, enjoy your stay.”

Alberto got them two rooms next to each other, and Louis stands between them, at a literal crossroads.

Masochism wins again, because it’s not good enough just to be in the same hotel in which Harry had torn him apart and pieced him back together again for the very first time. No, Louis’ love of pain goes far deeper, and he chooses the room where he can open those same doors for that same clear night view of the Eiffel Tower, lays back on the same ivory sheets. Immerses himself in the life he used to have, when he stood next to Harry and the world bowed at their feet.

Maybe his love will die a death of overexposure. Maybe if he ruins this room with sadness, he won’t have to think of the happiest night of his life spent right here in this same bed.
Louis doesn’t change into comfier clothes, doesn’t shower and wash the dirty strain from the day off of himself, just lays atop the covers and lets the cool Parisian air coat him like the worst type of blanket.

He doesn’t cry, because he can’t.

But he does hope, just before exhaustion takes him, that wherever Harry is, he’s happy.

Happy, warm, and safe. Louis will withstand hell if only Harry can have heaven.

8 December 2012

Days pass.

Harry spends them half-dazed, half mind-crushingly focused. He searches every possible place in London where Louis might be hiding—Ed’s place, Nick’s, Matt and Aidan’s, their own house in Hampstead. The old X Factor house, the W Hotel where they’d lived for a few weeks when the show ended. He tries a myriad of other high-end hotels, checking all the fake names he’s ever heard Louis use when he’s trying to be under the radar, most of them a variation of Louis Styles or Harry Tomlinson that usually make Harry’s cheeks heat happily when he hears them. Nothing. They have multiple joint bank accounts, but Louis hasn’t used any of them; he made a pretty huge withdrawal the day after Madison Square Garden, so he must be using cash to keep from leaving a trail.

Harry and Louis’ living room becomes headquarters—Zayn, Liam, and Niall stay with Harry every night, and Babs is a frequent guest as well. Others pop in and out when they can: the Little Mix girls, their friends from the X Factor days who are still in London, Nick and the Primrose Hill squad, Ed, Cara and some of her friends Harry’s met a couple of times, Julian, and, not to be forgotten, a whole slew of management reps and security, all hell-bent on getting Harry back into a meeting to confirm plans for his reality dating show.

“You can’t avoid this forever,” Claudia says, tapping her fingernails testily on the doorframe after her third ignored phone call. Harry refuses to invite her in; he doesn’t want her here, and he’s made that pretty clear. “We have security searching for Louis as well, we will find him. Until then, you have major decisions to make.”

“No, until I find him,” Harry says shortly, and slams the door, locking it vindictively.

Between all of that, Harry throws himself into research. Because, he reasons, there has to be something that the Bond is good for besides just linking him and Louis (he thinks) together. Not that it grants, like, superpowers or anything, but, well. Maybe he’s hoping for a miracle, or maybe he just needs to find the right myth, the right passage. Gemma’s old hand-me-down soulmate legends book gets a new life, the pages filled with scraps of paper and highlighted phrases that Harry then checks from other sources. He finds multitudes of theories and lore that tell of all sorts of soulmate effects once they have their Markers: heightened senses of smell and sight, improved sense of direction, growth spurts. This might be true, but it’s not very helpful.

“How is there no magical soulmate quality that lets you, like, close your eyes and be led to where the other person is?” Harry griped to Zayn one night, lamplight casting shadows where they’re hunched over old tomes Harry bought online to help their search.
Zayn shrugged. “That’s not really the point, is it? Soul Bonds are meant to seal together two people who fit and connect through saying each others’ names, not match a couple who aren’t even in the same place.”

Harry growled and pushed his book off the table in frustration then, angry at himself for getting upset over biology, picked it up and kept reading.

There are no old legends about Markers leading soulmates to each other, but Harry does stow away others just in case they come in handy: he rereads his old favorite folktale, the Russian one he told the boys about when they were at the bungalow, the one that says soulmates need only touch each other’s Markers to prove they are matched. Other than that, he’s basically back to square one.

And the search goes on.

“Why don’t you tell them to just drop the TV show idea, what with you knowing who it is and all,” Niall suggests when Harry sends Claudia and her accompanying security team away for the fifth time. He’s reclined back on the sofa Louis usually uses for his Call of Duty marathons, yawning into his hand. They’d all had a late night last night; they thought they’d found someone who said they’d seen Louis in Manchester, but it was just an update account making up false rumors. (Harry was so frustrated he reported them and called his lawyer, and within an hour their account was deleted.)

Harry shrugs, collapsing on the seat next to him. “And say what? ‘Yes, hi, cancel all those contracts you want me to sign, it turns out I’m Bonded to the guy you don’t want me to publicly be friends with.’ That’d go over well.”

“What do you think they’d do?” Liam asks. He’s sprawled out in the window seat, Zayn’s head in his lap.

“Honestly?” Harry asks. “Who knows. They have contingency plans for everything, but I don’t even think all their plotting covers this. It could range anywhere from making me do the reality show anyway and then just claiming the winner and I couldn’t make it work, to outing me and Louis and selling our real story to the highest bidder.”

“God, they’d make a killing with that,” Zayn says. “Hidden relationship, friends-to-soulmates, it’s like it’s made to sell.”

“And if they did, that’s how Louis would find out,” Liam reminds them all, “what with him dropping off the map and all.”

Harry covers his face with his hands and scrubs at his tired eyes. He doesn’t sleep much, not anymore. Every ring of his phone has him sitting bolt upright and scrambling to unplug it, only to find it’s a Twitter notification from someone he follows or a text from a sympathetic but ultimately unhelpful friend. And when he’s not compulsively checking Twitter and Tumblr for any hint of anyone who could potentially be Louis, he’s squeezing his eyes closed and pretending that’s close enough to sleeping that he’ll be okay the next morning.

He never is.

He’s lucky the boys have stayed so long; it would be so much worse if he didn’t have to stifle his nightly weeping into a pillow to keep from waking them, or if no one was there to shove him out of bed in the morning. They have excellent deflection skills as well, and when Harry’s breath starts coming in gasps and he realizes that it’s been nearly a week since Bonding to Louis and he still hasn’t come home, they wrangle him out of it with cuddles and jokes and copious amounts of alcohol, applied as necessary. When it’s two in the morning and Harry can’t contain his sobs within
the tear-soaked pillow anymore, the three of them kick in his bedroom door and fall asleep draped together, like it’s a sleepover and not a worst case scenario.

And, when worst comes to worst, they talk Harry through the situation, reminding him of all the ways he’s not crazy, pointing out every little coincidence and detail that mean Louis really might be his soulmate, that he’s not just chasing wishful fancies.

He yawns so widely his jaw cracks, and Niall reaches over to nudge him with his toe. “Go take a nap, mate,” he says. “We can keep a look out for any sign of him, and I know you’ve just been pretending to sleep at night.”

Harry doesn’t even bother protesting that, so he stands on sleep-wobbly knees and ruffles his hair.

“He can’t get his hand muscles to clench around it before Liam steals it, then wanders sluggishly upstairs.

He closes his eyes when his head hits the pillow, but it’s not enough to make his brain shut down. It’s like an overheated engine that’s been running about six days too long, puffing smoke and wrecking all the parts that were still intact. His mind has had one track over the last week, and it won’t stop until it pieces the big question together: where would Louis go?

Harry knows Louis better than anyone in the world, and he’s exhausted all his potential ideas. He can’t think of a single place Louis would go if it wasn’t Doncaster and it wasn’t London. He loves traveling but he wouldn’t go somewhere new to shelter himself away when he was at his most vulnerable. He’d go somewhere he’s been before, somewhere big enough to lose himself but small enough he’d feel protected.

A hiding place, that’s what Louis would look for.

And, for the second time in the longest week in existence, Harry’s eyes fly open and he gasps with realization.

I’m going to think of Paris, and I’m going to think of you.

Harry scrambles to his feel, his shaky limbs filled with adrenaline. “Lads,” he says, tugging on the first pair of shoes he comes across. "Lads! I figured it out!”

Thundering footsteps reach the top of the stairs, and Liam, Niall, and Zayn gape at Harry as he flings his four-day-old t-shirt off and yanks on something reasonably clean. Louis’ voice, soft and sweet, echoes faintly in his head.

I’ll think of you, Harry. Because you’re my hiding place.

“Paris,” Harry says, breathless, and he’s never been more certain. “Louis is in Paris.”

9 December 2012
Self-imposed exile is the worst thing Louis has ever put himself through, and that includes falling in love with his best friend who he could never keep forever.

He’s chosen his prison, and maybe that was mistake number two: it’s the most romantic room in the most romantic city in the world, an aesthetic cell, silk pillows and draped linens and that view, oh, that view, the City of Light laid out for him like a blanket of stars. More elegant and beautiful than any pearl draped lady, and he can’t appreciate it.

He can’t wander the streets, taking in the old city’s sights and sounds. It’s not that he thinks he’ll be recognized; six days of stubble and a baseball cap will cure that thought, but he can’t do it. He can’t taint Paris with his sadness.

So he stays inside. Six days, six nights, he stays in this room. He orders in extravagant food he can’t stomach, has a bottle of wine for lunch and another for dinner, and smokes so many cigarettes his tongue’s turning grey. He doesn’t watch TV: tried that, and the screen flickered to life just as Harry’s face flashed across the screen. They’d taken a red carpet photo of him standing next to a Kardashian and superimposed a question mark over her head, as though they were searching for the face that fit her body, as though it’s impossible to think Harry Styles could ever Bond to anyone not dripping in diamonds and influence. Louis’ French was too rusty to follow the story exactly, but he heard the smirking reporters say âme sœur like they knew, like they were in on the joke but no one else was, like they could just say that Harry’s got a soulmate and leave it like that.

The lightning that had struck his heart at the sudden appearance of Harry’s image left an ashy taste in his mouth as the reporters moved on to cover Harry’s greatest hits, Caroline Flack and Cara Delevingne and now, could it be, perhaps even Taylor Swift?

Louis had hit the power button with such force that the remote had clattered to the floor. He kicked it under the bed and left it there.

So, with no television and no desire to roam the city, nobody but the moon and his smokes for company, Louis passes the time by thinking.

He thinks of the past. He thinks of those blessed six months on X Factor, the time of his life with his new favorite lads. Fame without really being famous, scheduled pap walks and sneaky trips to the shops. Curling up around Harry every night and wishing on every star he’d see something worth noticing in Louis. He thinks of that shaky first December, playing gigs in tiny pubs to warm up to performing for real, the smile Harry would shoot him when he nailed his minimal solos. He thinks of stolen kisses they thought nobody saw, he thinks of midnight dancing in hotel rooms across the world, he thinks of stages and performances he’ll never forget. Two albums he’s so proud of, millions of fans in dozens of countries, two sold out concert tours.

He thinks of the future: the three albums yet to be recorded. That song that’s been bouncing in the back of his head, working itself into something real as he sleeps. Niall and Babs’ Bonding ceremony, and Liam and Zayn’s if they ever own up to their not-so-secret relationship. He thinks of his sisters, Lottie’s aspirations to be a stylist, Fizzy’s to be a lawyer, the little twins to be a princess and a lion, and how he would move heaven and earth to make those dreams come true.

He thinks of his contingency plans. He’s pretty sure Julian would let him write for his other artists, smaller names than One Direction, of course, but Louis would expect nothing less. He could talk to Rami or Savan, see if there’s someone in the production business he could shadow for a while until he got his sea legs. Simon mentioned something about coming back to judge X Factor once, a long time ago. It may have been a throwaway comment, but Louis is persuasive. He could try uni, he supposes, but that’s not where his heart lies. Not anymore. His drama teacher dreams will always be there, but they’ve been buried by fantasies that are simultaneously a hundred times more unrealistic
and a hundred times closer to his reach.

He thinks of Harry. He can’t help that, it’s just where his mind goes. He thinks of curls, of soft skin, of sweet smiles. Kindness, gentleness, respect and humility. Talent and beauty and wonder, intelligence and humor and wit. The boy who, above all else, is his best friend. The man who, irrevocably and irredeemably, he fell madly, madly in love with. The other half of his heart who, permanently and eternally, left his mark on Louis. Literally, a dagger appearing on his once-clean skin, and figuratively, the reason behind the ink that graces the rest of him.

He used to never want tattoos. He thought they looked cool on other people, but he wasn’t convinced. What could be so all-encompassing in his life that he would feel the need to brand himself with it?

*I guess I found out,* Louis thinks sardonically to himself. He found someone worth writing all over his skin, but he was taking ownership of a heart that was never his with each new stab of the needle.

And it’s even funnier, because they had plans for more. So much more.

Louis has turned his phone on airplane mode so the messages and notifications have stopped, and he’s going through his hundreds of photos and screenshots just to pass the time and pretend, for a brief moment, that everything is normal. If he ignores the thunderstorm online, if he doesn’t turn on the television or see a newspaper, it’s almost as though this is just another day. Like Harry went out to get breakfast and Louis is lounging around and waiting for him before they start their day.

It’s mid-morning, a cool, gloomy day outside the window, and a certain picture catches Louis’ eye: Harry always wrote his tattoo ideas in his journal, but Louis always took pictures and saved them to his phone.

The last time they’d seen Liam Sparkes, it had been a little more planned, as compared to rushing in while delirious on each other and full of rebellious anger at their management like it had been so many times before. Harry had gotten a couple of his already finished tattoos cleaned up and refreshed, like the guitar silhouette and the *can I stay?* he’d had Tom Atkin do a while back. Louis was getting his first upper arm piece, a heart with headphones because he’s nothing if not cliche. They’d hung around for a little while after their ink was finished and wrapped, pointing out designs they’d liked in Liam’s multiple books of inspiration ideas and joking and talking with the rest of the Shangri-La staff.

Then Harry shoved aside a binder of tribal tattoos and discovered an entire book of nautically themed designs, and Louis thought Harry was going to have to sit and catch his breath from all the excitement.

They already had a couple of clearly designated couples’ tattoos: their first words, the birds and birdcage. But Harry lingered a long time on some more obvious ones, a ship and a compass, a rope and an anchor. Louis had patted his hand, grinning and murmuring, “Someday, love.”

Probably not anymore, but it had been a nice thought.

Either way, Harry had flipped a page and almost rushed right on by a design that didn’t seem to fit in with the rest of the designs at all, but that caught and held Louis’ attention immediately.

“Wait, Hazza,” he’d said, flipping backwards and finding it again. They both stared down at the page for a long while, taking it in.

“Is it meant to go together?” Harry asked, tilting his head. “They don’t really, do they.”
“But, look,” Louis said, pointing. “The top part is totally me, the bottom part is you. They do fit.”

“They’d line up when we hugged,” Harry grinned.

“Or…” Louis had suggested, waggling his eyebrows and making Harry snort.

“We should… we should add that to the potential list,” Harry said, nudging Louis shoulder.

Louis took a picture, the flash sketch lighting up for a moment in the dark shop, and Harry squeezed his hand.

The picture looks different, now, here on the screen of Louis’ phone. Back when he’d seen it, it stood out to him as a testament of his inner growth. He’d realized, slowly but surely, that it didn’t take a Bond to fall in love. It took a Bond to make a person take a second look at someone they may have never noticed, a Bond could strengthen and add forever to a shaky kind of love, or a Bond could confirm what a couple knew all along, that they were meant to be. But Harry not being Bonded to him didn’t mean that he didn’t love Louis, that they couldn’t be a committed and forever kind of love too. He’d seen the tattoo sketch and thought, yes, this, exactly. It was out of his hands that he Bonded to Harry and that Harry didn’t Bond back, but that didn’t mean their love was any less real.

Now, now he sees it and it it resonates something else. Now, he sees it and it hits deeper than it even did before: it embodies resignation, concession. He won’t get things I can and things I can’t on himself, because the very idea of someday filling an arm with things he can do is optimistic in a way Harry is and Louis is not. But there are things he can’t do, a whole list. And now, at the very top of that list, is love Harry Styles and be loved in return. There is a new reality, one that changed in an instant on stage in New York City.

Blankness, numbness, grabs hold of Louis as he stares at the shaky photo of Liam Sparkes’ sketch. It pulls him close and he can’t shake it, not for long minutes where he tries to breathe and ultimately fails.

It’s been six days, and Louis hasn’t accepted it, not yet. He can’t wrap his mind around Harry being taken from him. He always knew their relationship had an end date, but to be blindsided by it was devastating. And maybe, maybe if they lived in a world where biology didn’t dictate the majority of relationships, maybe if they lived in a world where people were free to love who they love without fear or shame, maybe Harry and Louis could have had forever.

But they don’t. And they won’t.

And maybe he needs a reminder of that.

Maybe he needs that reminder embedded in his skin. Where he can’t forget.

Louis stands on sleep-deprived and alcohol-weak legs and collects himself. He knocks on Alberto’s door once, twice, ignoring the surprise on his bodyguard’s face when he sees Louis is the one standing there.

“We need to find a tattoo parlour,” he says, and the ferocity on his face must be strong enough that Alberto doesn’t argue, just nods and grabs his phone and room key.

Louis spent his whole life building walls. The foundations were laid when Troy Austin fucked out of
his and his mum’s life when he was an infant, leaving them to fend for themselves. He gathered bricks with every fight between his mum and Mark, every morning Jay tried to hide her red, puffy eyes under cheerful smiles, like everyone in the house hadn’t heard the screaming the night before. His half-Bond to Harry was the moat he dug to keep people further away, the spikes he laid atop the walls to leave anyone who came to close shredded and bleeding.

But Harry dismantled it. Brick by brick, stone by stone. Kisses were his weapons, and he wielded them expertly. Sex was his battering ram, taking Louis apart in the deepest of ways. Whispered *I love you* were the fires lit to burn the remains of what used to protect Louis’ heart. His promises of forever were the bridges laid so Harry could get closer than anyone else before.

Harry hurt Louis, though never intentionally. Every crack in the wall was a memory that was only semi-healed. A bandage over a gaping wound.

Harry hurt Louis but, more than anything else, Louis let himself be hurt. He knew Harry loved him, loved him *fiercely*, but it’s not enough. They couldn’t fight outside forces. He knew that biology dictated his fate, and still he tried to take it in his own hands. And he was burned, oh, God, how he burned.

*It Is What It Is* curls like smoke along Louis’ chest and, for the first time, he hands fate the reins. He steps aside, because he can’t keep pretending he’s in control.

He never was.

…

Harry tries the Eiffel Tower first, because he’s a cliche. The winter evening tugs at him, patisseries and coffee shops beckoning him in from the cold, but he doesn’t let them tempt him away. He wraps his coat closer around himself and shoves onward.

But, no, Louis isn’t at the Eiffel Tower. Which makes sense, because it’s not really a place a person is meant to stay at for extended periods of time, and definitely not overnight. So he takes a different tack.

He can’t remember every single detail of his and Louis’ evening in Paris, mostly because what came after overshadowed it all, but he can remember most. He starts at the hotel where they’d had their only solo interview, where Harry and Louis flirted with abandon and the outside world did not exist. Nothing there, and no Louis Styles or Harry Tomlinson or any variant of the two was booked into any of their rooms. He traipses back into the cold, heading for the first bakery they’d stopped at and bought buns, trading sticky kisses and chocolate giggles. Nothing. Next is the tiny shop where Harry found a silk scarf he still doesn’t really know what to do with but that Louis had seen and immediately agreed Harry needed it, so Harry bought it. No sign of him, and the shopkeeper doesn’t recognize a photo of Louis when Harry shows her one. The quiet back streets away from the tourists, he walks them all, eyes open for any sign of a pretty boy who’s lost and needs to come home.

His phone buzzes, so he pulls it from his pocket to check the message.

(8:34 p.m.) **Nialler:** any luck?????

Harry types a negative and stows his phone away. The boys hadn’t been able to come, not immediately; in the few minutes Harry had been trying to take a nap, Claudia had returned to try to
convince Harry once more that he needed to come to a meeting and sign contracts for his new PR plan as soon as possible. She’d overheard Harry’s yells but not his actual revelation that he was going to Paris, so she tried to tag him with a security guard who isn’t as soft on him as Preston is and who wouldn’t let him get away easily.

It didn’t work, of course: a new security guard with no in-depth knowledge of the band and their quirks and tells was no match for the four of them, and Harry had been able to sneak out through an ingenious distraction involving bubble gum, Claudia’s phone, and the car management had sent to pick him up. Just before he’d leapt the backyard fence and thrown himself into Grimmy’s car to make a quick getaway—all part of their master plan—the boys had promised to follow as soon as they could shake security.

But maybe it was all for naught; Harry changes course for his second to last stop of the night, the restaurant Louis took him to before they’d locked themselves away from the world. Couples fill the restaurant’s booths and tables, candlelight flickers invitingly, and though it’s a lovely scene there’s not a single sign of Louis anywhere.

There’s one more place, but it makes less sense for Louis to go there than it does for him to have come to Paris in the first place. If Harry was trying to escape what he thought was a crumbling relationship, he wouldn’t stay in the place it where it burned the brightest. He’d go somewhere new with no memories attached, not somewhere that drips old happiness like honey. He wouldn’t seek out the place where they’d huddled together under glossy, skin-warmed sheets and traded secrets and kisses until the sky turned from star-sprinkled black to blue to purple to pink with the rising of the sun. Where Louis said it was the best day of his life—no, no that’s not where he’d go.

But Harry isn’t Louis, and he came all the way here. He has to try.

The hotel is lovingly lit, enticing and inviting, and Harry revels in the warmth as he slips inside. He approaches the attendant at the front desk and Harry knows, because her eyes wouldn’t widen like that for just anything, she’s too professional and this place is too expensive to be surprised by random famous people dropping in. Louis has to be here, Harry can feel it. His heart thumps unsteadily.

“Bonjour,” he murmurs. “I’m looking for a friend, I think he has a room here. Louis Tomlinson?”

“Sorry, sir,” the woman says, and Harry almost believes her sincerity. “There’s nobody here with a reservation by that name.”

He clears his throat. “Could you, um. Could you check for an Alberto?”

Her tiny moment of hesitation is all he needs.

Harry stands outside the hotel room longer than he’d like to admit. He flips the keycard over and over and over, tries to match his breathing to the movement of his wrists.

“I shouldn’t do this,” Alberto had said as he’d opened the door to his room for Harry, but he knows Louis almost as well as the boys do by now, and even allowing Harry to be let up to his room was enough to let Harry know he was worried.

“Please, Al,” Harry had begged. “Please, let me see him. I know him, I know he’s not taking care of himself and I-” his voice breaks. “I’m not either. Please. One of us is going to break. Or both of us.”

“I shouldn’t,” Alberto replied again, but something had shifted in his tone.
“Please,” Harry whispered. “He’s hurting, Al, and I need to be there.”

That did it: Alberto handed over the key after pulling a promise from Harry that if Louis sincerely wanted him out, he’d leave and at least give them both time to cool down. Harry promised, but he doesn’t think it’ll come to that. It’s too poetic not to end all the waiting here, and he and Louis both are too dramatic to have it out anywhere else except the place where they truly connected.

Harry’s heart is hammering. It’s ridiculous that he’s worked himself up into this state, but he can’t help it. A storm has brewed and he’s at the center: he’s standing outside the exact hotel room that once held all his most favorite memories and now holds the rickety uncertainty of his future. He swallows hard and flexes his hands. Summons his strength with a deep breath. He flips the card, flips it again, and slides it into the door lock.

Harry debates knocking but, well, it’s too late now. One more roll of his shoulders, and into battle.

Except the room is empty.

Not uninhabited; the bed is unmade (the right side, Louis’ side, while Harry’s side remains undisturbed) and there’s a small pile of clothes at the edge of the bed. The shower is running, pounding water the only sound behind the bathroom door. The room smells stale, tepid and desolate, and with only one weak lamp on in the corner it’s dark as a cave. Harry crosses to the balcony door and opens it, letting the cool night air sweep away the metaphorical cobwebs for a few seconds before closing it again to ward off the chill.

He flips on another lamp, and his breath stutters for a moment. Empty wine bottles are everywhere, at least a dozen, and littered between those are crumpled cigarette packs. No signs of food or water, nothing relatively close to sustenance a human needs to survive. Harry’s stomach rolls.

And the shower stops.

Harry sits gingerly at the end of the bed, his head bowed. Conflicting emotions crash through him; he’s angry at Louis for running without waiting for Harry, upset that he’s trying so hard to leave their relationship behind, worried at Louis’ sheer lack of self-preservation, terrified that he’s wrong about his assumptions, anxious that Louis will kick him out without letting him explain, and, the tiniest part of him, just so relieved that he found him. Nothing good has ever come from them being apart.

There’s rustling from within the bathroom, the sound of fabric over skin, the scrape of a razor. Harry’s breathing quickens.

The door opens, and out steps Louis.

And the breath is punched from Harry’s lungs.

Louis is drawn, pale, his usual glimmer muted and peaked. The circles under his eyes are like bruises. He hasn’t seen Harry yet, so he doesn’t try to hide the shake in his hands like he would any other weakness. But that’s not what catches Harry’s eye.

*It Is What It Is.*

Harry’s throat is dry, his head dizzy. He reads the words on Louis’ skin again and again, but he can’t accept them.
He knew, theoretically, that Louis thought their relationship was over. But to see it so starkly, Louis’ resignation written literally across his heart, makes Harry want to curl in on himself, to hide his own heart away so it won’t keep breaking. To cleanse his wounds with tears, salt and burn to make the pain go away.

But his pain is nothing compared to Louis’; he sees it in the slump of his shoulders, the sharp angle of his cheekbones. If Harry’s right, if the dagger is for him and Louis has had it since the very beginning, then Louis has been carrying a soul-heavy secret for years. Harry’s been shouldering his burden for a week and he thought he might break, but at least he thought all along his Bond might be reciprocated. Louis did not; Louis has been living off of no hope for so long that Harry can’t imagine how he’s still standing.

“Lou,” Harry chokes, and Louis flinches, dropping his phone and his pile of clothes. His eyes widen when he looks up to see Harry and he sways; Harry jumps to his feet and wraps him in a hug to keep him from falling. “Oh my God, Lou.”

Louis makes a strangled noise in his throat, his arms hanging limply by his sides. “Harry?” he asks, like he can’t believe it, like Harry’s a particularly tactile hallucination. They haven’t been apart this long since the break between their X Factor auditions and bootcamp; they’ve definitely never gone more than a day without speaking to each other. Harry missed Louis like a piece of his heart was missing—which, if he’s correct, is actually what was happening. Harry buries his face in Louis’ hair and breathes him in.

And then, before Harry can say anything new, Louis twists out of his arms, backing away from Harry just like he had on stage, until his shoulders are against the nearest wall. The fresh ink on his chest is still raised and red; it’s brand new. Somehow, that’s worse.

“Lou, what’re you-”

“Did you find her, then?” Louis asks. His voice is brittle, raspy and cold like fallen leaves on pavement. He won’t look at Harry, staring hard at the floor between Harry’s shoes. “You must be here for a reason. Your soulmate, did you find her?”

“No, you listen,” he says, voice hoarse. “I don’t know why you’re here. I don’t know what you think this is going to accomplish. I’ll get—” his voice breaks, and he swallows like it’s painful, “I’ll get over it, eventually, but it’s going to take some fucking time, Harry, okay? I’ve- I’ve made plans, it won’t get awkward. I can leave the band quietly before tour starts, maybe take Simon up on that offer to start my own record imprint. He can milk it for PR when he needs it and I can still work in music. I can’t pretend like nothing happened, but I’ll,” he shudders a little, ”I’ll be okay.”

Harry’s eyes well up. “Louis, no, we need you, I need you-”

“I can’t do this,” Louis whispers, and he might as well be screaming. “I can’t pretend to be happy for you. Someday I can. Someday I will. But I- I can’t right now. You’re my best friend, I still love you, but I can’t do this.”
A love declaration has never sounded so much like spewed poison. “I’m not leaving,” Harry says shakily. “Not until you talk to me.”

“There’s no fucking point!” Louis explodes. “You have a soulmate to go home to, and I have a broken heart to ignore. Just-”

“No I don’t,” Harry interrupts. His heartbeat, dormant and mangled, picks back up again.

“You don’t what?” Louis asks harshly. “Have a soulmate? I saw it happen, Harry.”

“I don’t have a soulmate to go home to,” Harry replies. He stands, his legs shaky. “He isn’t at home.”

“Oh, great,” Louis chokes a laugh. “It’s a he. You know who it is, and it’s a he. Holy shit, I can’t do this.” He pushes past Harry like he’s headed for the door, and Harry fully believes Louis would tramp around Paris in nothing but a towel mid-December just to get away from him, but he won’t let that happen. Luckily, Louis has been living on a diet of Merlot and complimentary hotel pillow chocolates, and so he can’t pull his arm from Harry’s grasp a second time. His voice breaks again when he says, “Let go, Harry.”

“No,” Harry mutters. He tugs Louis away from the door and over to one of the room’s armchairs, pushing gently at Louis’ chest until he sits. He kneels in front of Louis, almost making a joke about how they’ve been in this position before (in this exact hotel room, no less) but decides he’d better not. Instead, he lays his palms on Louis’ thighs and looks at him, waiting until Louis finally meets his eyes.

“Hazza,” he whispers, and Harry swallows another wave of tears.

“You have been the biggest part of my life since I met you,” Harry says throatily. “I wouldn’t be the same without you. My whole life changed because of you. I would never hurt you, never.”

“You have, though,” Louis mumbles. “It’s not your fault, but you did.”

“And I’ll spend the rest of my life making that up to you.”

Louis scoffs weakly. “No you won’t. I can’t be the most important person in your life anymore. It’s not fair to your soulmate.”

“Lou,” Harry whispers, and he moves his hand up, covering the dagger. His hand tingles, and he takes that as a good sign. “Lou, it is fair.”

Louis looks down at the hand on his arm and Harry can see his next sentence clicking into Louis’ head before he even says it. “Don’t,” he breathes, “Don’t you dare-”


Harry doesn’t know what he expected, but it wasn’t for Louis to crumple, to crash headlong into silent, heaving tears. “Don’t,” he repeats, watery and broken. “I know what you’re doing, and I won’t let you.”


“I know I’m not your soulmate, Harry, you don’t have to lie to get me to come home,” Louis sniffs, wiping desperately at his face. “Just let me lick my wounds in peace, please.”
“I’m not lying,” Harry insists. “Louis, it’s you.”

“No it’s not, I said your name the first time we met,” Louis says desperately. “You didn’t Bond, it’s not me.”

“You said Harold,” Harry cries. “I couldn’t Bond then because you didn’t say my real name!”

“I’ve said it since then,” Louis replies brokenly. “It never happened, it’s not going to happen—”

“It did happen!”

“Stop,” Louis begs. “You don’t mean it, you can’t mean it.”

“I do!” Harry vows. “Fuck, Louis, you’re my soulmate. I wouldn’t lie about that!”

“Yes you would!” Louis insists loudly. “If you knew it would make me happy, you’d pretend we were Bonded even if we weren’t. You would!”

“I don’t know any other way to say this, just listen,” Harry pleads. “You’re the only voice I heard that night. You’re the only one it could possibly be.” Louis opens his mouth to interrupt, but Harry shuffles closer, his hand still gripping Louis’ forearm tightly over the dagger. “Shut up, Louis. I don’t give a fuck what scientists have said, I don’t care about predestination and biology, I chose you and you chose me. I chose you earlier, yeah, and I’m sorry you had to go through that alone, but you chose me back. It wasn’t fate, it wasn’t destiny, it was us. We did this.”

“I didn’t choose this,” Louis whispers.

“Yes, you did,” Harry answers gently. “You did. You never say anyone’s full name, but you did the first time we met. You said it wrong, yeah, but you still said it. And then, after everything you’ve been through, you said it again, onstage in front of twenty thousand people. You chose me.”

Louis just shakes his head.

“Fine,” Harry says, swallowing hard. “Fine. Let’s try something. If nothing happens, I’ll go. I’ll quit the band instead of you, and I won’t even stay in music. I’ll go to uni, I’ll go back to the bakery. I won’t contact you unless you come to me first.” He leans back, shucks his jacket and reaches for the sleeve of his shirt, rolling it deftly. “But if something does happen, maybe that’ll convince you.”

The rose is unveiled slowly, and Louis goes tense under Harry’s arm at the sight. “Haz,” he mumbles, trembling a little. “What- what do you want me to do?”

“Just touch it. Please,” Harry says. This is his last chance, and it feels like it. A precipice opens up before him, and he’ll either fall to safety or crash and burn trying. He takes a step over the edge. “Please, Lou.”

Louis bites his lip, and he and Harry stare at each other for a long, unending moment.

It’s the crescendo, Harry thinks. It’s the orchestra building. It’s the waves rising. It’s the cymbals crashing. It’s the top of the rollercoaster before the plunge. It’s the moment the lights go off in a theatre before the action begins. It’s building, it’s building, it’s building; something spreads in his chest, lightness in his arms, his fingers, his neck. It’s building, it’s amplifying, is the ground shaking? Maybe that’s just his hands. It’s building, it’s expanding, and Harry can’t bear it, he can’t—

Louis sighs hopelessly, strokes his thumb over Harry’s rose.
The crescendo bursts open, the waves crash, the noise is deafening. Harry’s arm goes hot, too hot, far too hot, burning blazing heat that spreads to his shoulders, his fingertips. All he sees is fiery light but no, that’s not his eyes, it’s the rose, it’s the dagger, they’re both glowing, glowing hot hot heat on Harry’s skin.

“Holy shit,” Louis gasps, and Harry agrees but he can’t speak, his hand is fused to the dagger and Louis’ hand is molded to the rose, they burn they burn they burn and no one ever said that this could happen but it did, it’s happening, and the rose glows glittery bright and the dagger pulses heat and Harry breaks, he breaks, he throws himself forward-

And the dam breaks, the walls fall, the tide returns to the sea. Harry kisses Louis and the circle is complete, Harry tastes Louis and the world has been set right.

Louis is sobbing, Harry might be too, the dagger and rose are still vibrantly glowing but it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter.

Harry is Louis’ soulmate. And Louis is Harry’s.

... 

The world falls away for a little while. Time might pass, but it might not. Louis has no idea either way. He has no space in his mind for anything but Harry, Harry, Harry, overwhelmingly, loudly and boldly, Harry.

Harry nips at Louis’ lip as he pulls back, their cheeks wet and their mouths wetter, their skin singed but untouched. He brushes his thumbs under Louis’ eyes, collect tears like gemstones, and smiles a watery smile.

“Told you,” he rasps, and Louis laughs, laughs until the tears come again.

Louis leans his forehead against Harry’s and breathes in the smell of old clothes and Harry’s coconut shampoo, the smell of home. When he regains his breath, when the ground doesn’t seem quite so shaky, he leans back.

And gasps.

“Harry, your rose,” he breathes, stroking at it with his finger. Harry shivers, his breath hitching when he sees the change as well.

“What…? Did yours-”

Louis holds out his arm and, sure enough, his dagger has changed, too. The Markers aren’t glowing as brightly as they had been but they’re still emitting the faintest of light, a soft sparkling sheen.

“Is it going to stay like that?” Louis asks, prodding at his arm. He’s had the dagger for years, now, but it’s like he’s seeing it in a new light. Before, it had been an aberration, a symbol of things he’d never wanted displayed proudly where it couldn’t be hidden. It’s so much more now that he’s accepted it, welcomed it, even, and the glitter overlay just seems natural.

“I don’t know,” Harry admits. “I didn’t actually know what was going to happen.”
Louis leans forward to kiss him again, relieved beyond words that he’s able to do this, that he doesn’t have to live his life as though he’s never had this. When they part, Harry holds his face gently.

“I’m so sorry, Lou,” he says. “I’m so sorry you suffered and lived all those years thinking I would leave you. I can’t imagine how you did it.”

Louis places his hands over Harry’s, keeping them there against his cheeks. “No, it can’t be your fault. I didn’t tell you, and that was my choice.”

“I’d never be mad at you for hiding it,” Harry says, pulling his hand away to rake it through his hair. “Not after this week. I wouldn’t blame you for never telling anyone.”

“I’m sorry I left you alone for that,” Louis murmurs. “If it was anything else, any other major crisis, I would have been right there with you through it all. I just couldn’t- couldn’t handle the idea of someone else taking you.”

“No one else ever will,” Harry promises, kissing Louis again. They kiss until Louis is lightheaded and then kiss a little more, mouths relearning each other like it’s been years instead of days apart. They kiss until Harry’s stomach rumbles, startling them apart.

“Oops,” Harry chuckles, rubbing his belly. “Guess I haven’t eaten much lately. Too busy.”

“Yeah,” Louis agrees, and he does feel a little guilty when Harry sweeps a pointed glance around at all the empty bottles in the room. He hadn’t meant to neglect himself entirely, but when the heart wants nothing but wine and smoke, that’s all he’s going to feed it.

“You know what I’m craving, all of a sudden?” Harry asks, a glint of laughter in his eyes. “Chicken.”

Louis smiles slowly, widely. “Yeah? Maybe wrapped in a bit of ham, as well?”

“Mm, maybe,” Harry agrees. “But you know what would send it over the top? Stuffing it with mozzarella.”

“And a side of homemade mash,” Louis finishes.

Harry laughs against his lips. “God, Lou. I missed you.”

“Yeah, love,” Louis agrees softly. “I missed you too.”

As it turns out, high class hotels don’t often stock parma ham, so they have room service bring up all sorts of other delicacies instead: breads and cheeses and fruit, light fare they can eat with their fingers as they curl together on the bed and share sticky sweet kisses. Louis’ blood hums, tired and twisted up after revelations and reunions, but still whispering little sparks of heat every time Harry thumbs at his lip or traces his jaw.

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And, well, it’s to be expected when Harry knocks the tray of fruit aside and rolls on top of Louis; they aren’t made to be separated, and they aren’t made to fall apart. It’s against their nature, and their nature must be returned to its balance.

Exhaustion weighs too heavily on their bones for them to be anything more than sweet and gentle tonight, but sweet and gentle is exactly what they need. Louis is dizzy with desire, fervently needy,
and it’s been far too long since his skin has touched Harry’s. He loses the towel and Harry loses his
clothes and they tumble, across the bed and into the floor, laughing until they’re moaning, moaning
until they’re gasping, gasping until they’re silent and wordless with ecstasy.

Harry trails his lips down Louis’ ribs, patterning bruises shaped like his mouth. Louis tugs at Harry’s
hair until his back is arching, his mouth dropped open in breathless bliss. Harry opens Louis up with
his mouth and a couple of fingers, and they move together slowly, deeply, each thrust of Harry’s hips
catching something deep within Louis and making him sob into Harry’s collarbones.

Louis comes first, rolling euphoria sweeping through him at the thought that this is it, this is his
soulmate, this is his forever. His dagger thrums with a familiar heat but it’s not blinding, not this
time, it brightens and fades with the rush of his orgasm. When Harry follows him a few minutes later,
his rose does the same; Louis kisses over the spot and his lips tingle as they touch glowing skin.

“I love you,” Harry whispers, like it’s a secret, like it’s a hidden gem.

“I love you,” Louis answers, and it’s forever wrapped around his words.

They find themselves back up on the bed after a rinse in the shower, and while sleep pulls at his eyes
and limbs, Louis pushes it away. He’s done without and been fine so far, and there’s too much still
hanging over them to rest comfortably.

“I feel like,” Harry says, his head pillowed on Louis’ chest, “this is the point where we should agree
to communicate better in the future.”

Louis hums. “Sure, I’ll agree to that.”

“But…” Harry prompts, hearing the lift at the end of Louis’ sentence.

“But,” Louis allows. “Well. We sort of needed it, didn’t we? Or, I did, at least.”

“Tell me,” Harry requests quietly.

“Say I’d told you right away that I’d Bonded to you,” Louis says slowly, corralling his thoughts into
coherence. “You’re the sweetest human alive, so you would have automatically suggested we should
be together, because it wouldn’t be fair to me if we didn’t.” When Harry shifts, Louis knows he’s
right. “And that’s if you didn’t beg me to say your name in return, which I probably would have
refused to do, on the grounds that I was terrified and scared that you and your biology would reject
me. So we would have started dating almost a year earlier than what we did, but I would have been
thinking that you were with me out of pity the entire time.”

“Okay, I see that,” Harry agrees.

“It’s like…” Louis searches for the right words. “I wouldn’t have fallen in love with you in the same
way if I thought you weren’t with me just on my own merit. I would have assumed you felt it was an
obligation, or thought that you would be a bad person if you left me. And then we were put in a band
together, and it would have been worse—you’d either have to be with me so it wouldn’t be awkward
that I was half-Bonded to you, or you’d have to pretend it didn’t matter. But like this, I knew that
you didn’t love me based on the idea that fate told you it was right, but because you loved me for
me.”

“I do love you for you,” Harry says, kissing Louis’ collarbone. “And you’re right, it wouldn’t have
been the same. We chose to fight for our Bond before we even knew there was one.”

“Speaking of choosing,” Louis says, wrapping one of Harry’s curls around his finger, “you said we
chose each other. Before all the—” he waves idly at the glimmering Markers on their arms, “you know.”

“I did,” Harry says thoughtfully. “It came to me in the moment, but I really believe that, you know? The very first time we met, you said my name. It wasn’t the right name, but it didn’t matter—you still claimed me.”

“Other way around, I think, love,” Louis huffs, poking Harry’s side.

“Not really. I mean, sure, you got a Marker, but it stuck with me, too. We were drawn to each other in the bathroom, but that might have been the end of it until you said what you thought was my full name. If you hadn’t, I wouldn’t have said yours on stage. It’s all connected.”

They lay in silence for a moment, drinking in the warmth of their sheets and the sounds of a cool Parisian night outside the window.

“Can I… can I ask something?” Harry asks carefully a few seconds later.

“Course, baby.”

Harry traces a shape that feels suspiciously like a heart on Louis’ bicep. “Could you tell me why? Why you never told me about the Bond?” Before Louis can answer, he backtracks. “I mean, I completely understand what you said about it being better in the long run that I didn’t know, because it’s the only way you could trust that I actually loved you for you, but. Before you knew that, what was your reason?”

“Fear,” Louis answers simply. “I tried to write it off as other things, at first. I tried to tell myself that, since I thought you hadn’t Bonded back, I would just stay away from you. Obviously, as you remember, that worked for about the first half of the first day at bootcamp, then I gave up. So then I said that it was to protect our friendship. Especially after we got put in a band—I saw that as a sign I was doing the right thing by not telling you, because we could have never been as close if our relationship was always off-balanced. I thought you’d be awkward around me, or pity me.”

Harry hums to show he’s listening, but doesn’t interrupt.

“But, really, it all boils down to fear,” Louis continues. “I should have told you, I know that. When I knew that our friendship was stronger than anything else I’d ever seen, and then especially when we started dating, I should have told you. But that fear of rejection, that was what did it.”

“I wouldn’t have rejected you,” Harry whispers.

“No, I know,” Louis agrees. “You wouldn’t’ve. But you would have remembered, eventually, that I didn’t say your full name in the bathroom, and you would wonder why. And you would’ve asked me, and I would have either had to lie, or build up the courage to say it then. And saying it to your face, that was the stuff of my nightmares. Seeing the sympathy, the pity when I said your name and got no reaction, which is what I was sure would happen, I couldn’t handle that. Then time went on, and my excuses got weaker but my certainty grew stronger. I couldn’t tell you, because you’d think I didn’t trust you, or that I was using you. And- and if I lost you, Hazza, I’d lose everything. I almost did, and I nearly didn’t survive. So I didn’t press my luck.”

“You are the softest kind of brave,” Harry murmurs, pressing another kiss to Louis’ sternum. “You are so kind, and so strong.” Louis doesn’t know what to say, and Harry doesn’t need an answer, and so they fall into silence again. Louis knows Harry’s going over the past few years in his head, recognizing and realizing all the moments when Harry was so close to the truth but too close to
realize it. Louis lets him think and drifts off on his own thoughts, knocking away intrusive worries about the future and management and what his mum’s gonna say for just a little while.

But soon his attention is caught again when Harry slides his hand over Louis’ chest, tracing the new words inked there on his skin.

“Tell me what you were thinking,” he says, tracing the curl of the first I.

“I wasn’t, really,” Louis answers slowly. “I couldn’t move past this major block in my mind, that you were gone. I always knew it was an option, more than an option, I thought it was a certainty, but I never really considered what that would mean when you were gone. It was… it was like I was standing too close to a painting, sort of. I couldn’t figure it out, and everything was too blurry because I couldn’t get away long enough to look at it clearly. I needed a way to distance myself, and…” he trails off. “This is the best way I could do it. Taking something we’d planned together and making it mine gave me a little bit of control. Except not really, because the whole point of the tattoo is that I don’t have control.”

“I’m sad you got it when you didn’t know all the details,” Harry says, tracing the reddened skin.

“Well,” Louis says haltingly. “It doesn’t really… change anything, does it? Being Bonded.” He feels Harry tense against him and hurries to finish his thought. “Publicly, I mean. In private, obviously, this changes, Christ, it changes everything. But in public… Hazza, they aren’t gonna let us have this fairytale story. This not only doesn’t change our PR narratives, it makes it worse. You ran offstage clutching your arm after an arena full of people yelled your name, everyone knows what that means, and when we go to tell them that it’s me you Bonded to, after all that fuss, it’s going to be like telling them we’re quitting to be monks. They can’t make money off of us together, or so they think, and they’re not gonna try to make it work if there is that risk of failure.”

“So we’re going to have to stay hidden,” Harry murmurs.

“It is what it is,” Louis reminds him, pressing a comforting kiss to Harry’s hair.

They change the subject to how they’re going to break the news to their mums without giving them heart attacks and slowly they drift off, falling asleep wrapped in each other, in silk, in glowing Markers and warmth, in love.

10 December 2012

Hotels have always meant sleepy morning sex for Louis and Harry, and this hotel, even under extraordinary circumstances, is no different. Louis fucks Harry slowly, achingly deep, a weak winter sun dappling him in light. Harry tosses his head against the pillow, his knees flung over Louis’ shoulders, kissing at the dagger when Louis moves it within reach. Harry comes crying Louis’ name, Louis comes biting Harry’s shoulder, and the rest of the morning passes in sated bliss.

Until there’s a knock at the door.

“Did we actually order that pizza, or did we just talk about it?” Louis mumbles, adorably confused and rumpled, half-hidden under the blankets. Harry shrugs, wrapping a sheet around himself and meandering to the door.
He cracks it open, recognizes their visitors, and shakes his head amusedly.

“So?” Liam demands from out in the hallway. He looks like he’s run here all the way from England, disheveled and panting. Niall and Zayn are behind him, trying to peer past Harry into the room. “What happened?”

Harry laughs and swings the door open wide, letting the three newcomers see Louis still sprawled out in bed, bitten kiss marks across his chest and his hair sex-rumpled and messy. “Lads,” he nods, like this hasn’t been the most turbulent week of their already exceptional lives.

Chaos erupts all at once: Liam collapses against the doorframe like his knees can’t hold him anymore, Zayn sprints across the room to punch Louis on the arm and then hug him close and Niall howls, “You fuckers!” and tackles Harry to the floor, shouting incomprehensible gibberish and Gaelic curses between loud laughs. Then he stops. “Hazza,” he says. “Are you naked?”

“Um,” Harry answers.

“Mistake, this was a mistake!” Niall screeches, flailing and trying to unravel himself from the twisted sheet and only succeeding in uncovering more of Harry instead. By the time all is said and done, Harry’s covering himself with a nearby pillow and the ivory sheet is wrapped in a neat accidental bow around Niall’s knees.

Louis laughs, bright and bell-clear, and something settles inside Harry, some brighter form of happiness he’d never known existed.

His love and his boys, all together again. With them, he could conquer the world.

They pass the day in all sorts of ways; Liam, Niall, and Zayn had been up at dawn to sneak out and make their flight, so they nap intermittently now that they know Harry and Louis are okay. The latter two join them off and on—once they’ve at least put on pants, of course—and the late morning turns to early afternoon in a sleepy, content sort of quiet. They order lunch at Niall’s insistence and eat on the bed, potluck-style, passing bowls and trays of food until they’re all stuffed.

They do talk about important things, of course, because the world doesn’t halt just because One Direction is hiding from it.

“So,” Zayn says carefully over a mostly-empty bowl of pasta. “Management. What’s the plan?”

“They aren’t going to let this go easily, Hazza,” Niall says, licking sauce from his fingers. “Not with all the plans they had in place.”

“Plans?” Louis asks sharply. “What plans?”

“Ah, well,” Harry grimaces. “They were pushing me to do a reality dating show with all the Unbonded people from the MSG show?”

Louis’ inquisitive gaze turns hard. “Oh were they? Probably well thought-out, too, yeah? Definitely would have ended up with you finding the right person?”

“Probably not,” Harry admits. “I was against it from the beginning, but they were pretty staunch. Luckily, I got away before they locked me in a room to sign the contracts.”
“So, I ask again,” Zayn says. “What’s the plan?”

“We shouldn’t have to keep this from them,” Louis says. “If they were a competent management team, they’d find a way for us to come out as a Bonded couple without any backlash and without losing fans. This story is golden, but it goes against the entire image they’ve built for us.” He shrugs, sighs. “Honestly? Maybe we tell them the truth, ask them to do damage control and spin it so we look good, and hope for the best.”

“We could always…” Harry trails off uncertainly. At Louis’ nudge, he picks it up again. “We could always threaten to leave. Buy out of our contracts, come out on our own.”

“But then we couldn’t be in the band,” Louis reminds him softly. “We’d either be on our own, or the other three would have to buy theirs out as well, and then we’d be One Direction but with no team, no PR, and no label.”

“You could still threaten it,” Liam suggests.

They lapse into silence, all of them hitting the same few walls, knowing that until Harry and Louis actually do go talk to management, there’s no way for them to know how all of this will be handled.

Afternoon passes just as quietly as the morning, the five boys sprawled on a massive bed, and it’s all calm and peaceful when Liam says, “Tell us the story, then. Start to finish.”

Louis meets Harry’s eyes, Harry nods for him to go ahead, and Louis starts telling his side of their story as early evening sets in. It’s slow, melodious, his voice soft as he picks out words and memories, showing the boys his version of the memories they shared. He talks about the line between fear and exhilaration that he walked daily, the tightrope of emotions from which he swung. The sun sets and he tells them about signing the contract, locking himself into a guaranteed five years with his soulmate who didn’t know the biggest secret of his life. They drag the mattress off the bed and out onto the balcony as he tells them about his struggle to not spill everything to Harry, his fear warring with his shame. The stars begin to appear as his tale approaches MSG, where Harry weaves in his side of things.

When the story finishes they’re all on their backs, staring up at the night sky like it’s summer of 2010 and they’re back on the trampoline at the bungalow.

“If you were so sure he wouldn't Bond to you, Lou,” Liam asks quietly, as if afraid to disrupt the peace of the night, “how’d he convince you?”

Louis holds out his arm in answer, but the glow of their Markers has faded even more throughout the day: it’s more of a shimmer now, something that’ll catch a person’s eye when the Marker is touched by sunlight but otherwise indistinguishable from their other tattoos.

“I don't get it,” Liam admits when Louis doesn't elaborate.

Harry reaches over and strokes over the soft bit of forearm where the dagger lies, and the shape glows slightly, like a little flame has been lit below his skin. “That's how,” he says simply, and Zayn whistles lowly.

“And that happened when you touched the Markers at the same time?” he asks.

“We kissed, too,” Harry adds.

“Too bad there isn't another Bonded couple out here with us to see if it's unique to us,” Louis says pointedly. It takes the guilty party a couple of seconds to get his meaning.
“Wait,” Liam gasps, “you knew? The whole time?”

“Did you Bond the day you came to dinner at Haz and Lou’s?” Niall asks. When Zayn nods, Niall shrugs. “Then yeah, the whole time.”

“You weren't particularly subtle,” Louis teases.

“I don't think we really tried to be, not around you lot,” Zayn says, lighting up a cigarette. He takes a drag and passes it to Liam. “We toned it down around management, because, well.”

“Well what?” Harry asks.

“Well,” Zayn repeats. “We saw how they reacted to you and Lou being in a relationship, and at the time we didn’t even know there was a Bond involved. We thought it was better to keep it quiet.”

“Probably was,” Louis admits, taking the cigarette from Liam's fingers. “What me and Haz went through… I wouldn't put my enemies through that. And I really hate some people.”

“What took you so long?” Niall asks, ever tactful. “I get Lou’s excuse, but what's yours?”

“Fuck, I don't know,” Zayn says. “We'd been hooking up for ages, since the X Factor house, but never really talked about it. It was fun and all, but nothing serious.”

Liam snorts. “Right, nothing serious. You weren’t there, Hazza, and Louis was too busy texting you all night to see it, but when I took Danielle as my date to Niall’s birthday last year, he nearly didn’t let me out alive.”

“I think I always knew,” Zayn says, pretending like Liam hadn’t spoken. He steals the cigarette from Louis and puffs on it once, twice. “But if we’d Bonded when I first started getting that feeling, it would have been back on, like, week five of X Factor. Once we crossed that line, there was no going back.”

“It felt like we weren’t ready,” Liam adds. “Or, at least it did in my mind. Like we had to accomplish things, be proper adults, ready to settle down.”

“What changed your mind?” Louis asks. “All of that is still true, you’re still really young. Hell, we all are.”

Liam chuckles, running his hand over Zayn’s. "You did.”

Louis frowns. “Me?”

“Yeah, you,” Liam replies. “I knew Zayn was scared, but I felt the same way—it was sort of inevitable, you know? We didn’t say each other’s names at first because we both knew what the result would be. And then...” he trails off, grinning slightly. “Remember that day we were all on the bus, and you asked us about why we didn’t want to Bond on stage? And then you said, I remember it, you said that we don’t have to be fully-functioning people before we Bond.”

“You said that the universe gives you your soulmate when you need them most,” Zayn continues for him. Smoke winds around them like fog from the end of his cigarette. “That hit hard.”

“We still waited, talked it over,” Liam finishes. “We figured out what it would mean for the band, for us. Where we’d live, if we’d do a public ceremony, all of that. Once it was all pieced together, I finally said his name.”
Niall doesn’t let the peace linger for long. “Touch ‘em.”

“What?”

“Do what Lou and Harry did. Touch ‘em and see if something happens.”

So they do; Zayn lays his palm across the chevrons on Liam’s arm, and Liam’s hand wraps around the microphone on Zayn’s, and… nothing.

“You gotta kiss,” Harry reminds them.

It isn’t like his and Louis’, where everything built into one moment like falling over the edge of a waterfall. Zayn tugs Liam close and grins into their kiss, and there’s a sharp snap in the air, like sudden static electricity. Zayn yelps and pulls his arm back, twisting it to see.

“Here, hold on,” Louis says, fumbling for his phone. He turns the flash on and holds it over their arms.


The ink splatter around Zayn’s microphone is now vibrant, vivid red, almost too bright to be natural. The second chevron on Liam’s arm is the same.

“This must be the one that stands for you,” Liam says to Zayn, prodding at the newly-red arrow.

“What do you mean?” Harry asks.

“We’ve been trying to figure out how our Markers matched,” Zayn says. “Since, you know, most of the time they go together somehow, but ours really don’t. But we think they stand for you lot.”

“Us?” Niall asks.

“Like, the band,” Zayn continues. “My microphone is pretty obvious, and Li always said if he got a tattoo it would be to represent the four of us, so. Guess this,” he thumbs the red chevron, “just confirms it.”

Harry smiles and lets the conversation wash over him, and he definitely doesn’t say what he’s thinking. Because Markers may not lead soulmates to each other, despite his wishful hoping a few days ago, but they do say a lot about a couple. In all Harry’s research, he kept coming across the same basic idea: the more a couple’s Markers complement each other, the better the track record of happy Bonds.

And maybe that doesn’t mean anything, maybe Zayn and Liam’s Bond will be perfectly strong, but their Markers stand for the boys instead of themselves or their relationship. Maybe it’ll all be fine. Maybe with Louis and Harry and Niall’s support, they’ll make it through.

Niall falls asleep in the middle of a text to Babs (“Surrounded by all these couples, I can’t help it!”) and Liam cuddles behind Zayn until they, too, are fast asleep. The balcony is quiet, the city peaceful, and Louis has wormed his way into the circle of Harry’s arms, his face pressed to Harry’s neck.

He’s seconds from drifting off, heavy and sleepy in Harry’s embrace, when he whispers something amazing against Harry’s skin.
“I’m so happy to have met you, Harry Styles.”

The rose on Harry’s arm flares as he feels a rush of affection for this boy, this man, this angel who crashed headlong into Harry’s life and flipped it upside down, who loved him so fiercely he broke his own heart, who is so brave and so strong that Harry can hardly believe it.

Harry looks up at the stars and thinks of a wish he made all those months ago, when he’d sat on the roof of his house and sang Stevie Wonder to the sky. He’d made a wish to find his soulmate, to start his happily ever after, and he never thought it would take this form. Sold out arenas and London mansions, number one albums and the brightest star in the sky right here, right in his arms. A love stronger than any walls, a love that makes his name sound like a hymn when it leaves Louis’ mouth.

A love so vast that Harry looks up, sees the entire universe, sees every star and every moon and everything above him, and yet he knows he holds the center of it all against his chest.

Harry tears his eyes from the heavens and looks down, finding Louis grinning at him sleepily like he knows.

And maybe he does.

Harry pulls his soulmate close, kisses the crown of his head, and thanks the universe for his miracle.
Epilogue: Winter 2012 - Spring 2018

Chapter Notes

Longer note at the end, but I just wanted to say thank you to everyone who's taken this journey with me. I appreciate you all more than you know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


Winter 2012

Harry and Louis get five more days in Paris.

They spend it the way they spend all off days: in bed, hardly dressed, eating ridiculous food from the room service menu and taking far too many baths. When they leave the hotel room it’s for quick jaunts to nearby bakeries and coffee shops, short walks where Harry can stretch his legs and Louis can see something besides the same four walls for a quick minute. They shop in boutiques they pay to keep quiet about their visits and they eat in restaurants with policies of no cameras or phones.

It’s different, because in all the time Harry and Louis were dating and keeping it from the public, it was mostly management-sanctioned (though they tried to pretend otherwise) and so, while they never went out of their way to get caught hanging out together, they never necessarily cared if it got out, either. This is different because this actually is self-imposed; Louis makes a thousand jokes about being spies, and keeps trying to convince Harry to go out in a balaclava to complete the look. It’s a little exciting but incredibly exhausting, and they’re so thankful for their discreet new friend at the front desk, who calls security when fans who think they’ve spotted Harry and Louis try to sneak into the hotel to confirm.

It’s nice, just for a few days, to pretend everything’s going to go back to normal.

After they send the boys home with thanks for checking up on them but unsubtle hints that they’re going to have a whole lot of sex whether the other three stay there or not, Harry and Louis steel themselves, unplug their phones, and call their mums.

“Lou!” Jay exclaims, the phone not even ringing once before she answers. “Boo, where are you?”

“Um,” Louis laughs, abashed. “Paris?”


Louis looks over his shoulder, where Harry’s standing out on the balcony, eyes a little misty as he talks with Anne. Despite the winter chill, he’s got his sweater sleeves pushed up on his forearms; Harry says he likes it better that way, but Louis knows it’s because he likes to look at the rose. Louis doesn’t mind. “Yeah, he found me.”
“And?” Jay demands. When Louis doesn’t answer immediately, she says, “Louis William, I know you like your drama but this is quite enough-”

“He found me, Mum,” Louis says again, smiling slightly. Harry turns and catches him looking, grins back. “And I told him. Or, well, he already knew. He figured it out.”

Jay seems stunned into silence. “He- what?”

“He Bonded back, Mum,” Louis says, and he knows there’s disbelief in his voice but he also can’t really help it. “I said his name on stage, he Bonded to me. And when I- when I left, he pieced it together. We’re Bonded, Mum.”

“Lou,” Jay whispers, her voice breaking too. “Oh, baby, I’m so happy for you.”

She demands the whole story, of course, and Louis makes it quick but tries to fill in all the gaps between now and when he left her with a short, rushed phone call saying he’d be fine, but he was going to hide out for a while until everything died down. He’d hated leaving her with that burden, but it was necessary—they hadn’t talked about specific details of the days they were apart, but Louis is absolutely sure that the first place Harry went after he found their London house to be empty was Doncaster. So Louis tells her, every gory detail of the fight and the epiphany, everything except the part where Harry fucked him six ways to Sunday as soon as they’d both slept off their exhaustion and emotional hangovers. She doesn’t need to know that much.

At one point Harry wanders over, cupping the bottom of his phone to hide the mouthpiece. “Mum wants to talk to you,” he whispers.

Louis nods, saying, “Hey, Mum, wanna talk to Harry?”

Jay says yes, of course, and he and Harry do a quick phone switch. Louis takes a moment before raising the phone to his ear. “Hi, Anne.”

“Hello, love,” comes Anne’s voice, so soft and so like her son’s that Louis is instantly teary. “I’ve heard we’ve had an interesting few days.”

Louis coughs a laugh, wiping under his eyes. “You could say that.”

Anne laughs quietly as well. “Louis, dear, Harry told me what a hard road this has been for you, and that you were willing to walk away if that would be what made Harry happiest.” Louis sniffs, his lip wobbling. “And I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you being willing to do that, but.” Anne sniffs too, her voice scratchy when she chuckles. “Oh, honey, I’m just so glad it was you.”

Tears stream down Louis’ face and he breathes, breathes and breathes, trying not to dissolve into the hysterical tears that are threatening to fall. “Me too. God, I’m so glad it was me.”

Anne’s voice is like sunshine when she says, “There’s not a single person in the world who deserves Harry more than you.”

Harry’s wiping tears away as well across the room, and Louis doesn’t know what Jay said to cause it but he’s sure it’s not unlike what he was just told by Anne. Louis feels warm, warm and happy and loved, so loved, and suddenly he can’t stand to be across the room for another moment. Louis refocuses on the phone in his hands for just a second. “Anne, I’m so sorry, but I need to go tell your son I love him.”

Anne laughs a watery laugh. “Of course, of course.”
Louis drops the phone to the bed and crosses to stand in front of Harry, pulling him close by his belt loops. Harry, who gets weepy at chewing gum commercials, is red-eyed and hiccuping. “I p-promise,” he says, tracing Louis’ jaw with his thumb. “I won’t ever let him hurt again.”

Louis slips the phone from his hand and holds it to his own ear. “Mum? Harry’s busy.”

Jay scoffs lightly, though she sounds teary as well. They’re all just a big, blubbering mess, and Louis would be embarrassed for them all if it wasn’t so beautiful. “Alright then. At least let him dry off a little before you attack him.”

Louis ignores her and tosses that phone aside as well, bringing Harry in for a slow, sweet kiss that leaves them both breathless and smiling so hard their cheeks hurt.

Harry’s the one who sets up the meeting.

“You’re the important one at the moment,” Louis says, shrugging. “I’m the one that disappeared and made their lives easier for a little while. If you hadn’t been looking for me, I doubt they’d’ve cared.”

So Harry makes his second call of the day, dialing a number he never thought he’d willingly dial and expecting a much less friendly reception than when his mum had answered the phone earlier. Unsurprisingly, the person he dialed answers on the second ring.

“Claudia speaking.”

“This is Harry,” he says clearly, then panics a little. “Harry, uh, Harry Styles.” He squeezes Louis’ hand to relieve some of the tension in his wrists. “I’d like to set up a meeting.”

Claudia is quiet for a long moment, and Harry’s hand starts to sweat against the back of his phone. “With whom?” she finally asks.

“Everyone.”

It’s quiet again, for long enough that Louis starts to think that maybe Claudia has hung up. Then: “Saturday. Arrange your own plane tickets to LA, we’ll reimburse you. I’ll text the details.”

Harry breathes out heavily when he ends the call, Louis watching him carefully. “Saturday, then?”

“Saturday,” Harry answers.

“Saturday,” Louis echoes. He rubs his hands on his jeans. “Okay, then. Let’s pretend it’s not happening until we’re forced to think about it.”

Then he tackles Harry back onto the mattress, and they’re sufficiently diverted for an impressive amount of time.

Simon’s in town, or so they’ve heard, and so Harry and Louis are sent a car at the airport that takes them to the CBS Studios in west LA rather than the Columbia offices.

It doesn’t matter either way, because there’s just one goal of this whole charade of friendly meetings and amicable scheming: all Harry and Louis want out of this is to not be completely screwed over.

This is a hundred times bigger than any Modest-scheduled meeting; Modest is a tiny fish here in the
big ocean, and their ripples barely have an impact. Instead, Louis and Harry are escorted to a top-floor conference room with its own security team, shiny glass tables and leather chairs as far as the eye can see, and a far cry from the tiny Fountain Studios rooms where eighteen-year-old Louis used to be shamed for being so openly infatuated with Harry when they were still contestants on a talent show.

The room is crowded, Louis can see through the frosted glass of the door. The murmuring inside is a low rumble, one that will probably go silent when he follows Harry into the room.

Harry grabs his hand. “Together?”

Louis smooths his shirt, twitches his wrist to fix his fringe. “Together.”

As predicted, the room goes silent when Harry and Louis walk through the door. They’ve both worn long sleeved shirts on purpose, but there’s still a laser-like amount of focus directed at Harry’s arm. His Marker is still unrevealed, as of yet; the media has been speculating for weeks, but to guess a person’s Marker they would need to know his soulmate, too, so the guesses have ranged from One Direction song lyrics to his (unknown) soulmate’s initials to a realistic pair of wings across his whole back.

No one ever guessed a rose, for some reason.

Familiar faces are on the side of the table opposite them when they sit down in the last two empty seats: Paul, who nods sadly but doesn’t say anything, Claudia, Magee and Griffiths, Hackford and Jones, Ann-Marie Thomson, Jake and Alice from the PR team, one of the Columbia execs, Joel, and, of course, the center of the web, Simon Cowell himself.

“Boys,” he says, and there’s no coolness in his tone but no familiarity either; Louis shifts his shoulders, because if they want today to be all business, that’s what it’ll be.

“Simon,” Harry nods.

“We were expecting only Harry today, I thought,” he continues idly. “Thought you were still hiding out in France.”

Louis stiffens, because there’s nothing like running away from the world only to be told that the world knew where you were the whole time.

“You said you were looking for him,” Harry says to Claudia.

“We did, and we found him, and we left him alone,” Claudia answers. “We felt that was best.”

Harry’s hand clenches, but he doesn’t rebut. The last thing they need is an all-out war where they’re on the defensive right away; they have a plan, they can stick with it. Louis places his hand gently on Harry’s thigh. Harry shakes a shuddery breath, then says, “The reality show will have to be cancelled. I found my soulmate, and I won’t sign a contract to do a show based on a false premise.”

Tension in the room twangs like a plucked guitar string. “You found your soulmate,” Griffiths repeats. “And you’ve confirmed it?”

Harry resolutely does not look at Louis, just like they practiced. “Yes.”

“You’ve had a Marker test done already?”

“Didn’t need to,” Harry says. He’s uncomfortable carrying their side of the conversation but, for all
intents and purposes, Louis is moral support today, nothing more. He can’t speak on Harry’s behalf, not here.

Simon isn’t watching Harry, though—his eyes are narrowed right at Louis when Jones asks, “And who is this soulmate?”

Harry clears his throat, and here comes the part where the strife is going to show: “I’d rather leave that undisclosed, thanks.”

The small crowd of executives and PR professionals seems shocked. “Harry, why?” asks Hackford, looking truly baffled, like his work creating their PR narratives hasn’t caused them more grief than anything else they’ve dealt with so far.

Louis can’t contain the tiny snort of derision, but he otherwise stays quiet. Harry seems to absorb that, making his shoulders lift higher in defiance. “We want to come out together, but I want to sign the contract for it before I say who it is.”

“Harry,” Magee says, sounding like a principal dealing with a naughty child: disappointed, but unsurprised. “Let’s cut the bullshit, shall we? That’ll make this whole process go so much quicker.”

“I don’t care about a quick process, I want it done right,” Harry argues. “I’m not going on record.”

“It’s Louis,” Simon says, and there’s not a hint of question in his voice. The room goes still. Louis’ blood freezes.

Ann-Marie turns, like a shark smelling blood in the water. “Is it? I thought that was a half-Bond?”

“So did I,” Simon answers, like Louis isn’t sitting right there. “I wasn’t aware he didn’t ever do the obvious thing and try to say Harry’s name back, but it seems that might be the case.”

“H,” Paul says, speaking up for the first time. “Is it true?”

“I’m not confirming anything,” Harry answers shakily, though he doesn’t look directly at Paul.

“The entire world is waiting for you to reveal your soulmate,” Ann-Marie says, folding her hands together on the table. “How do you propose we handle that if you won’t confirm who it is?”

“That’s your job, not mine,” Harry says.

“You can tell us,” Hackford wheedles. “Whoever it is, we can spin this.”

“Let’s move on, shall we? Address the real issue here,” says Joel, the Columbia rep. “Harry is our most recognized name in the band, and has been pushed to the frontman spot for years now. If he doesn’t want to reveal his soulmate, that’s fine. Especially if it’s an inter-band relationship,” he says, looking right at Louis, and a panicked voice in his head yells they know! They all know!

Ann-Marie taps her fingers on the table. “And, whoever this soulmate is, the two of you want to publicly come out as Bonded?”

“Yes,” Harry says, his voice solid for the first time since they sat down.

“No,” Simon answers simply. Harry’s mouth gapes.
“Why not? That was the plan, right? For one of us to Bond on stage and for you to spin it into the biggest media story of the decade?”

“Louis is your soulmate,” Simon rumbles. “You might not confirm it here, but we know. And we will not let you go public with your relationship.”

“A public fan Bond would have garnered incredible media attention, and we could have shaped your soulmate into a celebrity in their own right in no time,” Ann-Marie says. “All a Bond within the band does is set you up for band breakup rumors every time you don’t look overjoyed to be in each other’s presence.”

Louis scoffs, and he shouldn’t jump in, but he can’t help it. “As though you’ve ever cared about breakup rumors before.”

“They have their uses, in certain times or situations,” Hackford answers.

“To sell tour tickets to impressionable teenagers who don’t know not to believe the media,” Louis shoots back.

“Either way, you will not be coming out with Louis,” Simon says to Harry. “It goes against the image we’ve set up for you, and we can’t afford to lose your name as a public interest. If you’re unavailable, that’s what happens.”

“That would have happened when I Bonded to anyone, though, regardless of who it is,” Harry argues, his voice going a little shrill. “This makes no sense! You could spin me coming out with anyone! If we’re both famous, shouldn’t that be even better?”

“It doesn’t fit your image,” Magee says.

And, apparently, that’s the end of that.

“So,” Joel says, rubbing his hands together. “We need a distraction from an on-stage Bonding and a way to explain his Marker. What’s the plan, team?”

“We’ve still got a half-signed contract with Taylor Swift that can be used,” Ann-Marie answers, “and I think I’ve got an idea for the Marker, too.”

Harry and Louis spend the rest of the meeting in silence; they’re contract-bound to follow what their team says to do as long as it isn’t against the law, and while pretending to date someone while newly Bonded to someone else is horrible, it isn’t illegal. Modest and Syco have them trapped.

And that’s how Harry has a follow-up meeting scheduled for him with Taylor Swift and her people in two days, and another public date following that.

As the meeting wraps up, there’s no more tension in the room. Not for the management team, anyway; they’re loose-shouldered and relaxed, confident that their plan will not only work but will grab headlines and media speculation for days. Harry, though, is shaking, shaking hard, and Louis feels numb.

“Well, boys,” Simon says as the last details are decided. “Anything to add?”

Harry shakes his head, but Louis, well. Louis has just seen the boy he loves have his idea of being able to come out with his soulmate be ripped to shreds.
“Over the past few years,” he says slowly, rubbing his thumb over Harry’s knuckles, “you have let thousands of truly awful rumors about all of us, but Harry in particular, be spread like wildfire. You started a lot of them, but you didn’t bother to deny any of them. And now you…” he trails off, feeling all the eyes in the room on his heavy shoulders. He stands, the sound of his chair scraping against the floor the only sound in the room, and takes Harry’s hand to pull him to his feet as well. “You’re supposed to protect us when we make mistakes and divert when we have problems. Not advertise them. Not make up more drama for press mentions.”

“This is how the business works, Louis,” Simon says, spreading his hands like he’s played no role. “It is what it is.”

Louis’ chest burns like he’d said it on purpose. Maybe he did. “You’ve taken something amazing, and you’re treating it like a liability. I don’t want any Bond of Harry’s to be used and manipulated for promo, but it could have been done. The whole world loves him, and they’d love his soulmate no matter who it is.”

He pulls Harry with him to the door, stopping for the quickest moment with his hand on the handle. "I know you’re not going to change your minds, but that's your loss. Because the reality? It’s a goldmine. Way better than any romance you could ever try to create. And I hope it's that bullshit way of thinking that ruins you.”

“They’re just going to… ignore it?” Liam asks incredulously when Harry and Louis return to the hotel. “Like there aren’t a dozen videos and twenty thousand eyewitnesses that saw you grab your arm and run off stage?”

“They’ve ignored all our other rumors,” Harry shrugs dully. “Why not this one?”

“But you’ve got a massive fucking rose on your arm that wasn’t there before,” Zayn points out.

“I’m going to be papped at a tattoo parlour soon, they’ll spread that’s what I got.”

“There’s got to be something you can do,” Niall says. "Some way to fight back." Louis is about to deny that when he realizes something. “Actually…” he says slowly. “Ni, will you grab Harry's journal? I’ve…” he looks up at Harry, feeling a little bit of sparkle back in his eyes. “I’ve got an idea.”

The meeting with Taylor Swift and her team goes about as well as Louis and Harry thought it would; she’s getting the bulk of the benefits, including almost a guaranteed number one album that will be all about Harry when he inevitably breaks her heart. Harry, well, he’s getting some promo for their new album, at least, and maybe people will finally stop calling him a cougar chaser. That's about the extent of what he can hope for.

“Listen,” Taylor says to Harry at the end of the meeting, when her manager and Claudia are shaking hands like they didn’t just sign away all of Harry’s dignity. “I’ve heard the reason why you’re finally agreeing to this. And, I mean, I know it’s not confirmed or anything, but Ed talks about you two all the time, and I feel like I really know you.”

“Ohay,” Harry says, not sure where she’s going with this.

“This is amazing promo, for both of us, and I’ll have tons of material to use for my next album, but I
don’t want to ruin your relationship. And, honestly, I can spin a lot out of just a few dates, trust me. So,” she says, her famous wide eyes soft when they catch Harry’s, “if this ever gets to be too much, just let me know.”

Harry nods, his ribs aching a little less. Taylor’s a smart businesswoman, everyone in the industry knows this, but Ed really does seem to like her. She’s got to be a better fake relationship partner than Caroline Flack, right? “Thanks,” he murmurs.

She leans closer, tilts her head towards Harry’s. “From what Ed’s said, you and Louis are, like, the perfect couple. And I really don’t want to mess anything up for you, or make things difficult.”

“I mean,” Harry shrugs, “it’s tough no matter what. Louis… he has hard time when I’m linked to anyone, and this is going to get way more attention than anyone else I’ve dated.”

Taylor pouts her lip in sympathy. “If I can do anything to make it a little easier, you should definitely let me know.”

And then an idea strikes; or, well, an addendum to Louis’ idea strikes. “Actually, I think there is.”

When Harry outlines Louis’ plan, Taylor’s eyes go wider. “Wow, that’s devious.”

Harry grins, nodding. “That’s Louis.”

“I love it,” she grins, then she’s back to cheerful princess in the blink of an eye. “And, you know, maybe you can write a song about me someday, too!”

Harry grins a little, but he shakes the idea away. The last thing he wants is to spend the rest of his career being asked about Taylor Swift.

“It’s a good thing I like you two,” grumbles Freddy, his eyes bloodshot as he unlocks the door to Shamrock when the sun’s still barely peeking over the horizon.

“I know, thank you so much, Freddy,” Harry says, clapping him on the shoulder as he passes. The parlour is silent and still, the way it never is during regular hours, and there’s one chair in the middle of the room that’s set up and waiting for Harry. Freddy grabs a binder of designs and hands it to Harry before settling onto his stool. Harry flips through the pages, tracing some of the pictures with a careful fingertip.

“There are some more geometric and abstract designs towards the back,” Freddy says, watching Harry. “But I know you said you wanted realistic.”

“Yeah, no, these are perfect,” Harry murmurs. He turns the page and he’s hit with certainty. “This one.”

“Yeah? It’s gonna take a few hours,” Freddy warns him.

“That’s fine,” Harry shrugs. Freddy does some quick prep, shaving the large swath of Harry’s arm so that it’s smooth and ready, and then he starts.

Taylor appears about an hour later, looking sleepy but excited. “I’ve never been in a tattoo shop before,” she says, walking the walls and taking in all the sketches and designs. “Tattoos are the
coolest things, but they terrify me.”

“It’s not—” Harry stops, groaning a little when the gun runs over a tender spot. He laughs quietly. “Not that bad.”

“Yeah, I can tell,” Taylor teases, rolling her eyes.

Slowly, the shop opens around them, different artists Harry’s met with before coming to check on Freddy’s new work. “You and your sailor tats, man,” says one of them, shaking his head.

Harry grins. “Gotta have something to remind me of home.”

One of the other customers eventually leaks that Taylor is there with Harry, just like they’d planned, and it isn’t long before paps are congregating outside the windows. Harry watches them for a while, and when Freddy leans back at one point to wipe his brow, he notices them too. “Want me to call them off?” he asks.

“Nah,” Harry answers. “That’s the whole point, innit?”

Taylor comes over after talking with some fans in the corner—one was getting a treble clef tattooed on her ankle—and makes it just in time to see Freddy finishing up some of the details. “It’s gorgeous, Harry,” she says. “Good choice.”

When Freddy goes to wrap the new tattoo gracing Harry’s bicep, Harry stops him for a second. “Can you wrap the rose too?”

“But that’s not a tattoo, that’s- oh.” Harry can see the point slamming into Freddy like an anvil. “Oh, I get it.”

And so when Harry leaves Shamrock Social Club, Taylor’s hand clasped in his so that the picture’s guaranteed to be picked up and run by the major press, it’s with what seems to be two new tattoos: a massive ship on his upper arm, and a delicate curling rose right underneath.

And the news of his potential Bonding is forgotten completely as outlets around the world spread the latest gossip on everyone’s favorite It Couple and the tattoos Harry Styles definitely got to represent Taylor Swift and not anyone else.

Freddy’s last customer of the day doesn’t get nearly the amount of attention as his first, not within the general public, at least.

But when Louis Tomlinson leaves Shamrock with a brand new compass on his arm, the arrow pointing home and, coincidentally, also pointing towards Harry’s side of the bed when they’re sleeping, One Direction fans nearly have a meltdown.

Louis unwraps the ship reverentially when they both get back to the hotel that night, tracing the mast with light, trembling fingers.

“It’s gorgeous,” he whispers.

“I know we sort of fell into the nautical theme because of the dagger,” Harry says, thumbing Louis’ bottom lip, “but they’re sort of fitting, aren’t they? Keeping your home with you even when you’re
apart.”

“And I’m your home?” Louis murmurs, his eyes suspiciously shiny.

“The only one I’ll ever need,” Harry promises, and kisses Louis like he’s trying to steal his breath.

Louis and Taylor meet eventually, it’s sort of inevitable. Harry expects the Louis Tomlinson Dislike specialty, frosty voice and cruel-edged laugh, stuff he reserves for members of The Wanted that get a little big-headed and Simon’s best friend Dan who writes terrible articles about the band and then tries to be their best friend.

It’s a little stilted, a little cordial, and Louis scoffs when he hears that Harry’s taking Taylor out to release doves in the English countryside (and no, Harry doesn’t get it either, because there’s nothing about it that screams romance). But they make it through with no blood shed, and Harry sighs in relief.

Harry thinks that’s it until a few days later, when Louis gets a paper airplane tattooed on his arm.

“She can have you in the papers, with her fake necklace and fake relationship,” he says, slightly smug and ridiculously attractive about it. “I have the real thing. Forever.”

Spring 2013

“You know,” Louis mutters to Zayn as he takes a swig from his water bottle, “I’ve always wanted to be an actor.”


They watch a little longer as the cameraman circles Harry and Liam some more, trying and failing to look like they’re having a casual conversation that isn’t being recorded, then Zayn shakes his head and goes to have a smoke (unfilmed, of course, because that sort of thing won’t be put in the documentary) and Louis goes to cuddle with Niall.

It’s a strange experience, having a crew filming them at all hours. There’s not a moment when Louis feels like he isn’t putting on a show, and only a few weeks into it they’re all already exhausted.

And then they were sent a couple of pictures from a One Direction marketing presentation, and the reasoning behind management’s sudden interest in a documentary becomes a little more clear, and the band themselves get a little more infuriated.

(4:46 p.m.) Kate (Sugarscape): I’m only sending these because I think you should know what your team’s not telling you
(4:47 p.m.) Kate (Sugarscape): And this isn’t short term, it’s long term
(4:47 p.m.) Kate (Sugarscape): I’m so sorry :( 

Louis had opened the email she’d sent and felt a hot rush of anger. There on his screen, in cheery primary colors on a goddamn Powerpoint presentation, was his marketing image laid out in nice, simple terms.

And his main selling point? Eleanor.
She won’t be in the documentary, he’s already made sure of that, and he knows she doesn’t want to be; someday, when Harry and Louis do come out as Bonded, she’s going to want to be as far from being linked to them as possible. Nobody tends to sympathize with the girl or guy keeping a Bonded person closeted.

But it was even worse: on Harry’s slide, above the happy bubble talking about Harry’s hair and the boxes calling him beautiful, were the words “adorably slow.”

And Louis- Louis saw red. Harry’s been sexualized by the media and his own team since he was sixteen and was, for all intents and purposes, pimped out to a woman twice his age for some promo that only made her more unlikeable. He’s been called a womanizer, a homewrecker, a manwhore, and their team has not only not stopped those rumors, they’ve fed them. His name is used to promote unknown models and D-list actresses, and he never once got a say in any of it.

And now this—they’re simultaneously sexualizing and infantilizing him, painting him as stupid but cute to millions of people who love him dearly. Louis shut his laptop when that idea clicked in his head; he couldn’t look at the slides anymore, it was making him sick.

So now he sees cameras circling Harry like vultures over a carcass, and he has to leave. He can’t stand to watch Ann-Marie and her well-trained stooges edit out all the brilliant parts of Harry Styles and sell his image to the world as a beautiful simpleton. He can’t do it.

Harry finds Louis later, nearly asleep on Niall’s lap.

“Lou,” he whispers, and Louis snuffles into Niall’s collarbone.

“Good, you’re here, you can take him,” Niall says in a rush. “I’ve had to piss for an hour, but I didn’t want to move him.”

Niall shifts out from under Louis just as Harry reaches over and pulls him closer to himself, and Louis curls around him tightly. Harry presses a kiss to his hair, leaving his lips there for a long moment. “You okay, babe?” he asks after a quiet moment.

Louis shrugs. “Don’t like it. Don’t like the idea of them selling you as an idiot when you’re smarter than anyone.”

“I mean, I appreciate that,” Harry says, “but there’s not a thing we can do.”

Louis grunts, shifting on Harry’s lap. There aren’t any cameras around, and even if there were, it wouldn’t matter. The documentary crew signed intense non-disclosure agreements before they ever started filming, and Morgan Spurlock was told explicitly to include little to no interaction between Harry and Louis in the finished product, no matter how much video evidence they collected otherwise.

“Besides,” Harry continues, “maybe I could use that to my advantage. If the whole world let’s me speak because they think I’m an idiot, I can do a lot more damage than if I’m kept silent because they think I’m intelligent and up to something.”

Louis sighs. “Maybe.” He stands, stretching his achy limbs. “Come on, come help me cheer up. Let’s bleach dick shapes on Niall’s hats.”
They get used to it, in the following months. It becomes normal to wake with a lens in their faces, it becomes typical to angle their bodies to the cameras for the best shots, to read relevant texts and tweets out loud for the cameras.

It’s weird, but weird becomes normal. Nothing in their lives is ordinary, not anymore.

Julian joins the tour full time in March.

“Simon’s set a pretty heavy deadline,” he explains when he joins the boys on their bus. “We have to have this next record ready to go by November, but you’ve got no open time between now and then to set aside and record, and I know you boys wanted to try writing on this one, too.”

“So what’s the plan?” Liam asks, looking confused.

Julian spreads his arms, like introducing the next big adventure. “We, my friends, are going indie rock. We’re recording on the road.”

Writing with Julian, John, and Jamie is worlds different than writing with Simon’s old hand-picked crew. It’s quieter, usually, and entirely less methodical. Where Savan and Rami started with an already constructed base meant to convey a specific meaning to a specific audience, the new writers are far looser, more worried about putting out a musically and lyrically sound track than conveying certain messages.

“I work for the man,” Jamie says once, taking a hit of a joint and passing it to Liam. “That doesn’t mean I am the man. I’m not here to sell your image, I’m here to sell records.”

Louis likes Jamie a lot.

Liam and Louis’ first time songwriting with the new group comes about a week after the production team joins them on tour. Julian doesn’t like to write on the bus—“That’s fine for you, man, I just can’t do it. I need space.”—so they book a hotel room in Belfast. Julian brings his guitar, Louis brings his mini keyboard, and they get to work.

And by get to work, that means they lounge around the room, snacking and drinking and talking lazily until inspiration strikes.

“You know what’s fascinating?” John says, rolling a half-empty bottle of beer between his palms. “That your fans, like, they don’t just want to sleep with you. It’s not like they’re groupies, it’s… It’s just different.”

Jamie nods in agreement. “When we were looking up stuff on you guys, before we agreed to come write on the last album, we kept running into the same stuff. Like, yeah, there are those people who call you Daddy and want your money, but the majority act like your mothers.”

Liam and Louis laugh, because he’s not really wrong. “Yeah,” Liam chuckles. “I could see that. Supportive, call us their babies, make sure we’re looked after and get angry on our behalf.”

“You’re sort of a safe space, aren’t you?” Julian asks. “Like, a happy place for your fans. Is that hard?”

Louis flips his own empty bottle between his hands. “I don’t know about hard. It’s a big
responsibility, right? Like, I’ve got sisters, and I remember how it used to be for meself as well—if Beckham wore a certain pair of Nikes, I wanted those Nikes. And it’s more than just what we wear or use, but if we’re happy with who we are, with ourselves, they learn to be the same way.”

“Helps us, too,” Liam adds. “I saw this girl, once, and she didn’t want to take a picture with me because she thought she’d look fat. And I told her not to call herself that, that she was beautiful. She said that was the nicest thing anyone’d said to her, and that hit me, you know?”

“So you’re saving their lives, and they’re saving yours,” John says. “Cool.”

*Diana* is completely written within the next couple of hours.

Niall keeps the poster from the end of the *Best Song Ever* video. Before he takes it, though, Zayn adds one little thing to his spray-painted title at the bottom: a question mark.

*This Is Us?*

Louis and Liam join the writers for a few more songs, taking emotions or stories and weaving them into lyrics. They write *Midnight Memories* after a night out that Louis hardly remembers, they pen *Little Black Dress* and *Little White Lies* back to back and laugh to themselves about being clever, and Harry joins them to write *Right Now* when he gets stuck on a few lyrics in his journal that he can’t make anything out of: *And we won’t be going home, for so long, for so long, but I know I won’t be on my own.*

Louis is incredibly proud of the work they do, he is. Still, he can’t help but keep flipping back to the word doc he’d saved on his laptop during the madness of Haylor, the few weeks he spent watching Harry’s perfect unfolding romance with America’s sweetheart with the rest of the world, the highly-planned and captured-from-every-angle New Year’s kiss, the ski trips and the dinner dates. It was a month, just a month, and Taylor’s got her writing material and Harry’s got his name recognition, and all Louis has is a bad taste in his mouth and a few more tattoos to cover up his pain.

He never brings it up when they start talking new songs, never mentions anything when Julian asks what he’s been working on.

But when insomnia hits, when he’s awake on the bus and the sound of the tires against the road is keeping him awake instead of lulling him to sleep, he pulls out his keyboard, and he writes.

**Summer 2013**

“I’ve made a decision,” Harry declares one day, bursting into the bathroom halfway through Louis’ shower.

“Um, okay?” Louis calls, still working shampoo through his hair. Harry frowns, pulls the curtain back so that Louis can make eye contact with him because this is important. He takes a moment to appreciate the view because, well, naked and wet Louis, but then Louis laughs and clears his throat, raising his eyebrows. “Thought you were going to tell me something, love.”

Harry blinks. “Oh, right. I’ve made a decision.”
“So I’ve heard,” Louis nods, still smirking.

“Right. I’ve decided that I want to grow my hair out,” Harry says, remembering his mission.

“I think that sounds great, baby,” Louis says, turning so he can rinse his shampoo.

“No, like. Really grow it out,” Harry pushes.

“Really grow it out?” Louis echoes, opening one eye as the water slicks away the suds. “How long?”

“Um.” Harry looks down at his chest, holds his hand at about nipple height. “Here, maybe? I think it would be cool to get it long enough to donate.”

“That’s wonderful, Hazza,” Louis smiles. “I love it. I bet it’ll look gorgeous.”

Yeah, but,” Harry says, picking at his lip. “I’m sort of. Scared? Because, like, I wore one heart print shirt to my birthday party and everyone said I wanted to be a girl, don’t much feel like going through that again.”

Louis shuts the water off, stepping out of the shower so that he’s toe-to-toe with Harry. He pays no mind to the puddle forming around his feet, just takes Harry’s hand in his and holds it to his chest. “Hazza. I think you’d look beautiful with long hair. I think you looked beautiful with short hair, and I like this quiffy thing you’ve got going on now. You could probably even pull off going bald, though I don’t recommend it,” he grins. “If you want to grow your hair long, I think that’s amazing. And if anyone calls you names…”

Harry’s breath hitches as Louis steps so close they’re sharing air, his warm, slippery body pressed against Harry’s chest. “If anyone says one bad thing to your face, you tell them three things. One,” he says, and presses a kiss to Harry’s right cheek, “you tell them you’re the prettiest person in the world, and they can fuck right off. Two,” he kisses Harry’s left cheek, “you tell them that’s homophobic and heteronormative, and that they can fuck right off with that as well. And three,” he says against Harry’s lips, “you tell them that your soulmate will kick their arse if you don’t do it yourself, and that they should get a fucking life.”

Harry sways a little from all the blood in his body rushing southward. His voice is weak when he says, “I wanna wear my nice fancy shirts, too.”

“You wear all the fancy shirts you like, baby,” Louis says, kissing Harry hard, pulling him close until they’re both breathing unsteadily. Then he steps back, still holding Harry’s hand, and says, “You gonna join me in here, or are you just gonna keep watching me shower? I’m not judging, but I know what I’d prefer.”

Harry grins, and shucks his pants so quickly he almost falls down.

The boys are in an L.A. recording studio, having a quick break between trying to lay in as much material for the new album as possible in a proper studio instead of a hotel room, and Niall, Harry, and Louis are trying really hard to pretend they can’t hear Zayn and Liam screaming at each other out in the hallway.

“-third fucking album in a row, Li, how can you not see this? I try one little line with a little R&B, they make me record it ‘til I don’t do that any more. There’s no soul in this record!”
“How fucking dare you? Lou and I wrote half of these songs, we poured ourselves into it, don’t you care at all? Your soulmate and your best friend are writing music and you think it has no soul!”

“I’m not saying they aren’t good songs, I’m saying they don’t fucking fit me! I don’t fit this fucking band!”

“Nobody fits the band, not like how it used to be! None of us were actually being ourselves on the first album, it wasn’t just you. We’re changing it, or we’re trying to, we’re evolving it into something real, here, but you’re not even trying! You just assume we’re gonna shoot you down and don’t even bring it up anymore.”

“I’ve been told no too many times to try again.”

“You’re acting like this is all on you. You’re acting like we haven’t had to pretend either. You aren’t fucking alone here, Z, no matter how much you act like it!”

“Should… should we go out there?” Harry asks worriedly.

“I don’t know,” Niall shrugs helplessly. “They’ve been like this for ages, I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“-go out and have a smoke. Don’t fucking follow me, Liam.”

It’s quiet out in the hallway for a moment, the sound of retreating footsteps echoing eerily. Liam pushes open the door and sighs when he sees the other three waiting for him expectantly.

“Everything okay, Li?” Harry asks gently.

Liam collapses into a chair. “Yeah, fine. Can we not talk about it?”

So they lapse into uncomfortable silence. Louis can’t take awkward moments, not with this group of boys anyway, so he stands and walks around the room. There’s nothing interesting to play with, so he opens the door to the sound booth and slips inside.

Strumming a guitar is only so much fun since he doesn’t really know how to play one yet (and Harry keeps trying to teach him, but their lessons always go spiraling wildly out of control when Louis sits between Harry’s legs and his hands are covered by Harry’s massive palms. Louis’ got a hot soulmate and he’s easily distracted, sue him), so Louis slides behind the piano instead, fitting his fingers easily to the keys. He plays a scale, another, another, stretching his hands to cover a full octave.

He plays the melody that’s been hanging around the back of his head for months now, the thrumming sound that reminds him of waves on a shore, the one attached to the words that float through his head when he drifts off to sleep. He plays it once to loosen his fingers, twice to smooth it out, and three times just because. He’s sitting back, satisfied and smiling, when the microphone from outside the booth crackles.

“Lou,” comes Harry’s voice, and Louis looks over to see him, Niall, and Liam standing over the soundboard, wide-eyed. “What was that?”

“That?” Louis asks, pointing over his shoulder at the piano. Harry nods. “Just, I don’t know. Something I’ve been working on.”

“Yeah? It’s gorgeous, babe,” Harry replies, sounding a little awed. “Does it have words yet?”

“Um,” Louis says, feeling himself blush. “Sort of?”
“Let’s hear it!” Niall cheers, and he doesn’t even need to be near the microphone for Louis to hear him.

“I don’t know, lads, it’s not really finished,” he deflects.

“C’mon, Lou,” Liam says quietly. His eyes are still a little red around the edges, and that’s what convinces Louis to sigh dramatically but spin back around to face the keys, flexing his fingers a little. Then he sings.

My hands, your hands  
Tied up like two ships

His voice is shaky, it probably always will be the first time he sings new things to people without being able to rehearse it first, but it still goes better than expected. He hits the last chords with heavy fingers and lets the notes fade out, the strings reverberating and humming into the silence of the booth. The door opens before he has a chance to turn around, and suddenly Harry’s there, right in his space, kissing him desperately.

“Lou, oh my God,” he breathes between kisses, “that was so beautiful, holy shit.”

“It’s just a—mph—just a song, babe—”

“No it isn’t, fuck, you wrote our song—”

“Erm, is anyone gonna tell me why we’re watching these two make out in the sound booth?” Zayn asks, his voice throaty like it is after he cries. Louis pulls back from Harry and looks past him; Zayn shifts under the scrutiny, looking uncomfortable.

“Lou wrote a song,” Niall says.

“Ah,” Zayn says, like that explains it. And maybe it does.

“Play it again?” Harry asks quietly, and he curls into Louis’ side to watch his fingers dance along the keys, hums along to the chorus.

Zayn’s familiar presence joins them, pressing along Louis’ other side. Liam stands behind him, and Zayn cautiously leans back against his legs.

They won’t apologize with words, that’s not how Zayn and Liam work. They apologize through looks, through touches; it’s not always the easiest thing for them, but they’ll survive.

"I’ll always hoooold on,” Zayn harmonizes with Louis on his third time through.

“‘Cause you make me strong, ” Harry murmurs in his other ear.

Harry can’t let Louis one-up him in the romantic song department, so he disappears off with an Irish producer who worked with some of his favorite bands and comes back with Something Great, a ballad he tells Louis he wrote on the train to Doncaster before their relationship properly started. And then, because Something Great moves Louis to tears and Harry is a sadist, he disappears for another few days with their old team, Savan and Carl’s group, and returns, grinning, with a song called Happily.

Julian puts Strong and Happily side-by-side on the album. Something Great almost doesn’t make the
final cut—not because it isn’t good enough, but because the Syco executives hear it and claim it’s too personal. Meaning that fans will see Harry’s name on the credits and they’ll piece together that it’s for Louis, and that it’s their cry to come out to the public.

Julian fights for it, though, and it’s a hard fight, but he emerges victorious: *Something Great* stays on the album.

*This Is Us* premieres in London in August. It’s strange, because they’ve been to premieres, they’ve been to album launch parties and award ceremonies and their fair share of red carpets around the world, but they’ve never been to one for their own accomplishments.

And, sure, the whole movie is entirely contrived and so artificial it might has well have been scripted (and some parts completely were—management still doesn’t like to admit that Harry and Louis own multiple homes together, and so they filmed some of his parts in Ben Winston’s attic, spreading rumors through the fans that Harry’s been living there off and on for months while the Hampstead house is being redone. As though Harry, as a millionaire, is more likely to couch surf with the director of their music videos rather than just… go to another of his houses), it’s still surreal to see some of London’s elite dolled up for *them*.

The boys spend the morning at Niall’s, as it’s the closest to the premiere location. Babs brings breakfast and Lou and Caroline and the style team descend around lunchtime, laying out outfits and starting on hair and makeup. Harry, out of his couple of options, chooses the heart pattern shirt he wore to his birthday, and Louis kisses him as a reward for being brave enough to try it again.

*Everyone*’s coming tonight, which means that around half-one, when the boys have been plucked and prodded and poked and are fully dressed, they’re sent to Niall’s theater room to watch films and pass the time so their families and friends can be primped as well.

The mums pop in to check on them (Karen already teary, Maura squeezing their cheeks, and Anne, Jay, and Trisha planting kisses on their foreheads) and the sisters descend in waves, begging to watch something besides *Anchorman*, and soon the boys shuffle out to find something else to do as Lottie and Safaa steal the remote and change the channel to a Disney movie.

Louis is passing through the kitchen, grabbing a Red Bull for himself and a water for Harry, when Eleanor walks in, Starbucks in one hand and garment bag in the other. She waves and heads to the living room where the rest of the crowd has congregated, joining Perrie and Gemma on a sofa.

Nearly everyone is dressed and ready to go as it nears four o’clock, and Paul starts dividing the groups; the boys will each arrive with their families, friends, and girlfriends, and after some pictures the band will regroup on the red carpet as the families mingle.

“I think that’s everyone,” Paul says, reading from his list, “except-”

“Sorry I’m late!” says a voice in the doorway, and everyone turns to see a pretty brunette stumble in, pulling on towering blue heels and trying to walk at the same time. “Traffic was terrible, sorry.”

“Soph!” Liam exclaims, giving the newcomer his crinkly-eyed smile. Louis flicks his glance at Zayn, who’s watching them embrace with narrowed eyes. “Hello, babe, how are you?”

“Right, that’s everyone,” Paul announces. “Harry, you and your family take the first car.”

The crowd shuffles outside, talking excitedly, and Louis hangs back until Liam and the new girl are near him.
“-meet them, oh! Here’s one—Lou, this is Sophia. She’s a friend of mine, we met back at Andy’s birthday.” Liam beams as Louis and Sophia shake hands.

“Nice to meet you,” Louis says, sending a thoroughly confused look at Liam.

“Soph is, uh, she’s my date,” Liam coughs, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably.

“Ah, another fake girlfriend, eh?” Louis chuckles, nudging Liam with his elbow. “Funny that, for a boy band, we sure have to hire a lot of girls to hang out with us.”

Sophia chuckles, and Liam grins a little. “That’s true.”

“Here, you should meet-” Louis turns, lifts up on his toes to peer through the One Direction-related crowd spreading through Niall’s neighborhood. “El!” Eleanor turns, peering over the top of her sunglasses, and makes her way to Louis, Liam, and Sophia. “Eleanor, meet Liam’s fake girlfriend Sophia. Sophia, meet my fake girlfriend Eleanor.”

“Oh, new blood.” Eleanor says, waggling her eyebrows. “Welcome to the club, doll. Perr’s gonna make us t-shirts.”

Sophia laughs at that as well, and Louis thinks she’ll fit in just fine.

At the end of the summer is when everything changes.

Louis and Harry, ever since that disastrous meeting back in December where Simon shut down all plans of them coming out anytime soon, have fallen in line (mostly) and let the management team get complacent. They’re pretty much locked in their image contracts and, until those are finished, won’t have much say in anything, what with Modest and Syco PR teams working together against Harry and Louis instead of the two of them and their management working to protect themselves from Syco like it should be. So, they decided after Haylor hit its fiery (or should it be watery?) end and a new list of people needing promo was drawn up for Harry to date, they’d play along. Louis wouldn’t fight back too much against tweets being sent to Eleanor or scheduled Starbucks dates. Harry would go to fashion shows and art galleries with the model of the week. They’d be quiet, and, the whole time, they’d be planning.

Through three years in the industry, a couple of international tours, and buying a house in Beverly Hills, Harry and Louis have built up quite the extensive list of contacts in the business. Hollywood and L.A. are incestuous and smaller than a lot of people outside the industry think: everyone knows somebody who knows somebody, and there’s no need for six degrees of separation in the music business when connections can be made in less than four.

They hear the name Azoff in conjunction with 30 Seconds to Mars; Harry doesn’t know much about them as a band, their music is more Louis’ style than his, but he’s met Jared Leto and he seems like a good guy. Ariana Grande, who’s been talking with Harry about writing something for her second album, has a friend whose lawyer worked on 30 Seconds to Mars’ case against EMI, and, when hearing through the grapevine about Harry and Louis’ search for a competent manager once they (inevitably) split from Modest, let them know that Azoff might be just the kind of manager they’re looking for.

They have to be careful, though; setting up an official meeting with Azoff violates their contract with Modest, and Harry has no doubt in his mind that they’d sue over a lot smaller of an infraction. It has to seem natural, then, and it can’t be seen or heard by the wrong people. Harry asks around discreetly
for some more information, maybe a way to get in contact, but in the end, Simon does all the hard work for them.

They’ve just finished their last show of the North American leg of the tour at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, and the boys tumble offstage in a haze of sweaty limbs and adrenaline, bouncing off each other like puppies. They give out high fives and hugs with the crew as they pass through the backstage area to the dressing rooms, Liam, Zayn, and Niall diverting off to their own individual rooms as Harry and Louis make their way to their shared dressing area, which is separate from everyone else’s because, in Paul’s words, “I never want to hear either of you make the sounds I’ve heard you make in private ever again.”

They undress quickly, stripping out of their damp clothes and trading sweat-sticky kisses, gulping water and trying to cool down. Louis has just plastered himself onto the sofa and Harry’s contemplating a shower when there’s a knock at the door. Harry considers putting on a shirt but shrugs, assuming it’s Niall to share which random celebrity he’s decided to be best friends with this week has invited them out, but-

Well, it’s not Niall.

“Hey, Harry, sorry to interrupt,” says Brian, one of the tour managers through CAA who joined them when they hit America. “I’ve got someone who wants to meet you.”

Harry, who’s expecting a crew member’s daughter, maybe, or even a low-level celebrity who was at the show tonight, does not expect the short older man who sticks out his hand and gives Harry an obvious, and unimpressed, once-over.

“Nice to meet you, son,” he says. “I’m Irving Azoff. Why don’t you put on a shirt and we’ll have a little chat.” Harry scrambles aside, open-mouthed, and Brian nods and shuts the door behind Azoff. Louis sits up on the sofa, wide-eyed as well. Azoff nods as he looks around the room and chooses a chair, crossing his legs and looking intently at Harry for a long moment, and then Louis. “I’ve heard you’ve been asking about me.”

“I have,” Harry agrees after a moment, clearing his throat. “I- we need help.”

“You’re under Simon, am I right?” Azoff asks, and Harry nods. “Well, that explains it.”

“How did you know we were looking for you?” Louis asks.

Azoff chuckles. “I know everything, kid, but I heard it from a couple different places, actually. My son works for CAA, you haven’t met him yet, but you will. And I had a meeting with the man himself today, he wants me to manage his American *X Factor* acts next year and he’s starting to realize that Modest Management is the worst excuse for a client team that the world’s ever seen. I told him to fuck off, of course, that show’s a sinking ship and I won’t work anywhere near him, but a few of your crew members stopped me on the way to the meeting and asked me to find you two. They’re loyal to you, and that means you must have done something worth being loyal for. Normally that’s money, but for you two, I think it’s something else.” He taps his fingers on his knee, still watching them closely, then, “Tell me what you want.”

Harry looks at Louis, who nods imperceptibly. “We’re Bonded,” he says. “Simon won’t let us come out because our availability is our main selling point and he thinks if we come out we’ll lose fans.”

“First of all,” Azoff replies, taking off his glasses and wiping them clean. “That’s total bullshit. That excuse only works when people are attractive but untalented. I’ve heard your stuff, and now I’ve seen you perform—you don’t have to hide behind a pretty face. Second of all, that’s a dick of a
move and something he’s been doing for years, and I’m sick of it. Assholes like him are the reason this business is the way it is.”

Harry’s heart rate picks up, and he sees Louis sit up straighter.

“I can help you,” Azoff says, and Harry’s breath catches. “It won’t be easy, but I can make it less terrible until we get you out from under them. It’ll have to be covert at first, and then it’ll have to be blatant. No missteps, no jumping the gun. We’ll have it planned down to the day. But it’ll happen.”

And so Harry and Louis start planning their escape.

**Winter 2013**

Harry’s hair tumbles down to his shoulders now, lengthening into heavy waves that frame his face and curl invitingly on his neck.

On a day out shopping in London, he spends hundreds of pounds on a pile of headscarves. Louis thinks nothing of it, until the day Harry comes downstairs with one wrapped up in his curls to keep his hair out of his eyes, and Louis nearly chokes on his cereal.

He takes Harry right back upstairs, uses four of Harry’s pretty new headscarves to tie him to the bed, and doesn’t let him loose for hours and hours.

Management sends Harry a list of potential winter girlfriends. He secrets it to Brian, who sends it to Jeff, who gets it to Irving. Harry gets a message back within a day to pick Kendall, since she’s an Azoff client who’s hiding a few secrets of her own, and she’ll at least be a friendly face to work with while Syco spins their friendship into the love story of the season.

“Holidays are so much more fun when you’re rich,” Louis says bluntly, running his hands over a pile of new cashmere throws they just bought for their mums. Harry throws his head back and laughs, earning aggravated looks from a pair of rich old ladies on the other side of the shop.

“You’re so right,” he chuckles. “Alright, who’s next?”

“We got all the sisters, Jeff and Glenne, Nick, our mums, our stepdads, the lads, Stan, and Jonny,” Louis reads from his phone. “All that’s left now is Ed.”

“Ah, Ed. What do you get someone just as well-off as you who doesn’t care about material things?” Harry asks, swinging bags of gifts from his arm thoughtfully.

“New tattoos?” Louis suggests.

“I mean,” Harry says, looking down at the little padlock on his inner wrist. “We already tattooed each other. That’s pretty intimate.”

“He doesn’t need a car, he doesn’t need a holiday. What do you get the musician that only wants to make music?”

Harry stops in front of a shop with a massive grand piano in the front window display, struck by inspiration. “More music.”
Ed uses the guitar they buy him to write what will eventually become the biggest song in the world. The words he composes are based on the ones he heard fall from Louis’ lips into Harry’s ears as they danced slowly together at their Christmas get together that year, candles and music low in their living room, not able to notice another soul in the world save each other while every soul in the room couldn’t look away from the two of them.

Louis has kissed Harry under the light of a thousand stars, and he’ll do it again and again and again, every time he has a chance.

Spring 2014

The Where We Are tour is harder than any other tour they’ve done so far.

Harry isn’t sure why; maybe it’s because it’s the third year in a row where they’ll be in hotel rooms more than ones they actually own, maybe it’s because he misses his family fiercely, maybe it’s because this past winter, even with him having his easiest fake girlfriend setup so far, was still incredibly hard on them. Harry wins Villain of the Year for the second year running and cries into Louis’ shoulder for a whole night, hiccupping and sobbing until his voice goes. An article comes out claiming Harry has slept with over four hundred women, and that’s the one that gets to Louis. They’re shaky—not the relationship, never the relationship, but their hearts are hurt and their shoulders are heavy. And they’re tired, so, so tired.

Where We Are is also more intensive for another reason; Harry and Louis aren’t allowed to interact at all. They can’t look each other’s way, they can’t speak on stage. Consequences are severe, now, and Ann-Marie is not the type to bluff. So they lock it away. Learn to sing to each other without looking right at one another. Figure out how to step back, slip behind a mask. They react in different ways: Louis withdraws, letting Liam and Niall take the bulk of the talking and fan engagement while he stays off to the side with Zayn, and Harry tends to isolate himself and focus everything on the fans. Either way, the shows change, because two members pretending the other doesn’t exist is incredibly difficult, especially among the most affectionate band in the world.

It’s all a swirl of false media images and clutching each other close backstage to ward off bad news. Sources claim Harry’s out with different girls every night, when in reality he’s usually curled up with Louis and a good book, trying to get comfortable on his fifth new mattress in five nights. When he wants to go out, he does; he’s a celebrity, he’s barely out of his teens, he wants to drink and have fun, but those nights aren’t as numerous as the tabloids make it out to be. He’s not crashing and burning, he’s not sleeping his way through the States, he’s just having fun and letting go.

If there’s one part of his image Harry tries hard to change, it’s that of the frontman. The womanizer image will probably never die, not with his team helping it along, watering it like a dying plant when it’s been a few months without Harry being raked over the coals for something scandalous. The rumor of him and Louis falling out and quickly growing into animosity won’t ever go away either, because if Syco PR is committed to the playboy Harry image, that’s nothing compared to how badly they want the fierce Stylinson hatred rumor spread.

But Harry can control whether he’s the frontman or not, and he declines as often and as obviously as possible. He steps himself out of the spotlight unless it’s impossible for him to do so; in interviews, he stops answering unless he’s directly addressed, and he swerves confirming rumors like he’s
dodging bullets. It’s ridiculous that he was ever pegged as the frontman anyway; the band never needed anyone to be the clear leader, and in moments of indecision it was never Harry that made the final call. That always fell to Louis, or, in a few rare cases, Niall.

So Harry steps back. He hates being the focal point of all One Direction vitriol. He hates that, as the frontman, it’s so incredibly easy for the PR team to whisper little rumors about him leaving the band to go solo, miraculously always at the times where they have singles to be bought or concert tickets to be sold. He hasn’t wanted to be a solo artist since the first time One Direction sang *Torn* for an audience. He’s not the best at being the mouthpiece and spouting the official management-given lines to the press, that’s Liam, and he’s never been the best at the business end of things, that’s Louis. He’s not the frontman, and he ducks every insinuation thrown his way that implies he is.

Harry sings love songs to Louis every night that were written just for him, and he knows Louis knows the truth even if they never look each other’s way, even when others try to tear down the happiness they build.

And so begins the *Where We Are* tour.

They’re in Manchester, a month into the tour, when a rainbow bear is thrown on stage at Harry’s feet. He’s not supposed to look at Louis, it’s an accident that he even does, but he sees Louis’ quirked lips trying not to smile at the bewilderment on his face and so he signals Alberto to take the bear backstage and hide it away to keep for themselves.

Later, it’s Niall that gives them the idea. “Lads,” he says, finishing off the last of his beer and wiping his lip with the back of his wrist, “wouldn’t it be, like, hilarious, if you dressed it up and stuff.”

Louis’ eyebrows scrunch cutely in the middle, and Harry wants to kiss him. So he does. “Why on earth would we do that, Neil?”

“Because it’d be funny,” Niall says easily, shrugging.

They tape the bear up to look like it’s in bondage gear and dub him Teddy Mercury (once everyone finishes groaning at Harry’s pun), but there’s no way to tell the fans that, so online they start to call him Rainbow Bondage Bear. They also start digging for some hidden meaning, as though, like Harry’s tweets and Louis’ behavior around Eleanor, if they look hard enough they’ll find secrets and clues that prove Harry and Louis are in a relationship.

“Well,” Louis says dubiously as he scrolls through his secret Tumblr account, “we always said we wished we could actually tell the fans what’s happening. They took Twitter away, they took Instagram, and they took all our public appearances. Maybe a rainbow bear is the only way.”

Ed writes another song, another heartbreaking pile of words and plucked guitar strings that leaves Harry’s heart in shambles when he hears it. Louis is the one left speechless this time, though; *Little Things* was Harry's ode to Louis through the mouthpiece of Ed's guitar, and so *18* is Louis’ to Harry.

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*I have loved you since we were eighteen*
*Long before we both thought the same thing*
**Summer 2014**

Jay and Dan decide to get a legal Bond and throw a massive Bonding ceremony that July, and it’s the first time Harry has a chance to meet a lot of Louis’ family, what with the non-stop touring and all. Jay drags him to every obscure relative, introducing him as “Louis’ boy” and beaming proudly as all manner of aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and family friends hug Harry like they’ve known him for years.

There are paps watching their every move, barely hidden on the edge of the garden where the reception tent is held, but if they’re here it’s on purpose, and if it’s on purpose it’s because their team leaked it. So Harry sticks with Liam and Sophia (and not a soul asks Liam where Zayn is, though they all wonder quietly to each other and Louis clenches his fist angrily when he finds out he didn’t bother showing up), and Louis hangs out with Niall and Stan.

That is, they stay separate until the sun falls and the party is taken inside the tent, where a four piece band sits in the corner and plays all Harry’s favorite songs. He sweeps Louis onto the dance floor and holds him close, spinning them slowly under the soft lights.

“That’ll be us, soon,” Louis whispers, his head against Harry’s chest, nodding to his mum and Dan as they circle together, grinning brightly and looking exhausted but exhilarated.

Harry hums, moving his mouth to Louis’ ear. He’d abandoned his hat long ago, so he has no issue dipping close, making Louis shiver when he murmurs, “Two years, love.”

“Which one of us is going to wear white?” Louis teases, pretending like he isn’t clutching at Harry’s arm, needy, biting his lip like a vixen just to drive Harry wild. Louis Tomlinson in a well-fitting suit talking about their own Bonding ceremony—it’s a recipe to make Harry combust.

“Well, I am clearly the pure one, out of the two of us,” Harry says, flipping his hair.

“You haven’t been pure in years, baby,” Louis murmurs. He traces a finger down Harry’s chest. “Innocence never suited you anyway, you’re meant to look tempting. Show up at a wedding in a sheer shirt with your tits out and your butterfly all on display, and not a single person is surprised.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry asks lowly, sliding his hands down to Louis’ lower back, lower, down to his arse. “You’re one to talk, with your hair and your waist and your bum-”

“You’re just saying parts of me,” Louis laughs, grinning softly.

“If I start telling you details about every part of you that makes me want to lay you out across the nearest table, we’re going to get kicked out of your mother’s Bonding ceremony.”

“Take me somewhere else, then,” Louis says, and that’s all the permission Harry needs.

Round one is in the doorway of the hotel room, Harry’s arms bracketed around Louis as he shoves Harry’s trousers to his knees. Round two is in the shower, Louis’s nails scrabbling on Harry’s slippery back as Harry thrusts hard, pinning him to the wall. Round three is over the desk in the corner of the room, the wood cutting into Harry’s thighs with each snap of Louis’ hips. Round four is against the window, Louis sobbing as Harry licks him open. Round five is in the armchair, Louis laid across Harry’s lap as Harry spanks him until he’s spacy. They collapse into quick sleep when their legs won’t hold them anymore, but there’s still a round six the next morning, and that’s their first one in the actual bed, slow blowjobs that last endless minutes and leave them tingly and giggly when they come, the glow of their Markers the only light in the room.
The next time Louis meets up with Liam, Julian, Jamie, and John, he has a fully written song ready to present them.

“No Control?” Jamie asks, eyebrows raising as he reads the lyrics. “Bit suggestive, mate.”

Louis grins, thinks of Harry face slack with bliss, pillow creases still crossing his cheeks. “Good. It’s meant to be.”

It’s August when their world falls apart. August first, appropriately enough, as though the world decided to start ending on a schedule that made it easy to keep up with.

Harry follows Louis into Zayn and Liam’s hotel room without paying much attention to the destination. He’s on Instagram, watching a video Nick posted and wondering if he’s supposed to get the joke, yawning as he settles into a chair and Louis falls into his lap.

“Fellas,” Niall nods, as though they didn’t have breakfast together an hour ago.

“What’s up, Li?” Louis asks, twirling one of Harry’s curls around his finger.

Harry looks up for the first time, noticing that Liam, the one who called them all in here, is sitting with his back to the wall next to the bed, his head bowed. He doesn’t look up at Louis’ question, just gestures at Zayn. He’s sat in the middle of their bed, his shaggy hair a mess, clothed in sweatpants that look too loose and a t-shirt that’s too big. He’s usually so much larger than life with his brooding aura and that unimpressed look that will cut a person open and his ever-present cigarette, and yet here, in this moment, he seems so small. He’s curling and uncurling his fingers, fidgeting in a way he never does.

“Lads,” he says, and when his voice shakes Harry sets his phone aside, knowing that something actually must be wrong. “I’m leaving the band.”

“No you aren’t,” Louis says in the ringing silence that follows. “No.”

“Lou, I don’t- I don’t want to,” he says, his eyes blinking rapidly. “I have to. For- for my own sanity.”

“No,” Louis says again, like he’s broken, like he's stuck. He clutches hard at Harry's shirt.

“Z,” Niall says weakly, and he looks almost as devastated as Louis, “we're so close to being free from Simon, and then we can make anything we want to. We can do a whole album of whatever you want, just-” he swallows, “just stay.”

“But, it's right there,” Zayn murmurs. “What you just said. A whole album of what I want isn't the same thing as a whole album of what you boys want. And I can't keep pretending that they're the same.”

“Zayn,” Harry says, and usually he’d be the weepy one, the one already in tears on the floor, but for some reason the emotions are stuck, stuck somewhere near his ribcage, and he's hardly able to breathe. “We can talk about this. We’re- we’re brothers, we’re in this ‘til the end. This can't be the way it ends.”

“I can't keep pretending,” Zayn whispers. “I've been with you lads every day we've been prepping
for this new album, and even through the bullshit and the fucking media narratives and the fake relationships, it's so clear that you love what we do, and that it's all worth it when we record a song that you created from scratch. I haven't… I haven't found that. Not yet. I can't see being called a terrorist as worth it when I'm recording songs that aren't as deep for me as they are for you.”


Liam's face is wet, his eyes blotchy and his nose red. “I've tried, Tommo. I've tried everything. He's been wanting this for years, and I can’t…” he sobs, just once, but once is enough to break Harry's heart. “I can't think of any more excuses to make him stay.”

“I don't need excuses to stay, I need reasons not to give up,” Zayn replies, and it sounds like a practiced argument.

Louis crying now too, and he’s rubbing at his Bus 1 tattoo like it stings his hand. Harry doesn’t know what to do; he’d always known Zayn wasn’t happy, but he thought the new direction of the band was at least better than where they’d come from before, that Zayn could hold on a little longer.

Louis stands, his knees wobbly, and stumbles over to the bed. “Don’t go,” he sniffs into Zayn’s throat. “Don’t.”

“I have to, Lou. I don’t want to,” he says, and his tears fall into Louis’ hair. “But I have to.”

There are meetings, so many meetings. So many things to decide and plan and rearrange. Zayn is leaving in April during a tour break, and so they have to decide what promotional things he’ll be in and what he’ll have to miss because they’ll be released after that.

And, through it all, Zayn starts to pull away. Maybe he already had been and now he just doesn’t have to hide it. Harry watches Louis watch Zayn, his smiles wider now like he can taste freedom, and he wonders if Louis is thinking about their own situation. If freedom tastes as good as Zayn makes it seem.

A week after Zayn tells Syco and Modest he’s buying out of his contracts, Liam calls the other three and they go get dinner somewhere discreet. It’s quiet but warm between them, because they’re all suffering in different ways, and they talk about unimportant things and eat off each other’s plates and, for a little while, it’s almost normal. But then Liam pushes his empty plate back and clears his throat.

“Boys,” he says, and Harry’s stomach swoops. Is this another blow Harry may not survive? Is Liam leaving, too? “I think we should talk about the band.”

Louis, clearly on the same track of mind as Harry, raises his eyebrows worriedly. “Yeah?”

Liam rubs at his chin, scraping his hand against his stubble. “Yeah. I think… I think we need to be serious, boys, and be honest. If…” he coughs, “if there’s ever going to be a time for a clean band breakup, it’s going to be when- when Zayn leaves.”

“Do you want a band breakup?” Harry asks, and Liam shakes his head immediately.

“No, definitely not. But… well. If anyone else does, I think it should be said now. I don’t think,” he sniffs, and Niall leans over to rub at his back, “I can’t go through another shock. So let’s get it all out in the open. Is anyone having doubts?”
“Never,” Niall says immediately. “You boys know me, I’ll be in One Direction until I’m the only member of One Direction.”

“Same with me,” Harry agrees. “Solo stuff is interesting, but I’ve always loved being in a band. Being in this band, especially.”

Louis shifts a little, but he also says, “Yeah. Me too. In it for the long haul, boys.”

“Okay, good,” Liam says, nodding. “So… what now?”

“I mean… it’s not really One Direction without Zayn, is it?” Niall asks quietly. “We’ve said that before.”

They did, Harry remembers it. Sitting around a campfire and pretending there wasn’t a camera crew capturing their every move, sure, they did it then, but they’ve talked about it other times, too. When the level of their fame would suddenly strike them and they’d have to sit back for a little while, they’d always talk about the odds. What are the odds we’d all be put together and get along this well? What are the odds a little band of losers from the X Factor would smash it like this? What are the odds that we’d be this big if someone else had been picked in my place?

And Harry had always agreed. It always seemed inevitable that the five separate lives would entwine like this. But now one strand is unraveling, and Harry’s on the same page as Liam: does one person leaving mean the end of what they’ve built?

“But…” Harry says slowly. “We are One Direction without Zayn. We have been, for a while now. He hasn’t been present, not really. Going through the motions and everything.”

“I think we also need to take into account that…” Liam says, ruffling his hair and looking frustrated. “I mean, listen. I love Zayn more than anyone in this world. I would die for him. But he’s doing this the wrong way—he’s leaving us stranded and he’s abandoning the fans, too.”

“That’s, um, that’s not all,” Louis says, just as quietly as he did before. “He asked me to come with him.”

The other three freeze. Harry’s heart sticks in his throat. “He did what?”

“He knows,” Louis sighs, playing with his fork, “that I’ve always hated our management, I mean, we all do. But I’d dropkick them into a furnace. I’d run over Ann-Marie with my car and wouldn't bother to check for damage. If they offered me a way to leave tomorrow and never see them again, I’d do it.” At Harry’s stricken look, he rushes to say, “But I couldn’t leave you boys, and that’s what Zayn was asking. I belong here—it took me long enough to realize, but I do. And I’m not giving up on that.”

“And this is why we need to sort this out,” Liam says, brows furrowed. “So, what’s the future of One Direction?”

And, over empty dinner plates in a private back room of a restaurant they’ll never return to, they figure it out.

**Fall 2014**

Life has never felt so uncertain as it does going into album promo season for *Four*. Zayn is still stepping further and further away, spending time with some asshole named Naughty Boy who sneers
at Louis the first and only time they meet like he's better than him. There’s the minefield of getting through dozens and dozens of interviews without revealing Zayn’s leaving, or any of the myriad of Bonds within the band, or that as soon as their contract ends they’re out from under Simon’s thumb forever. They smile when asked questions about girls, they joke about things they’ll do on their second worldwide stadium tour, they play inane games and answer those same few questions over and over.

And, in the middle of it all, during the highest point of madness leading up to the album release, Harry and Louis get a message from Irving: they’re done playing nice behind an iron closet.

They take separate routes to knock on the closet door: Harry’s the household name, so his doesn’t have to be so huge, but he’ll get a bigger backlash. Still, he doesn’t hesitate during an interview after they get the okay to start pushing back; an interview asks his four favorite traits in a potential soulmate, and when Liam gives him a golden setup by saying the person should be Unbonded, Harry shrugs and says “Not that important.”

The quote gets more traction than they’d ever expected. Fans and the general public alike dissect it in comments, blog posts, tweets, and in person: by “not that important,” does that mean there’s already someone in the picture? And, for the segment of their fans who have only become more vocal since the beginning, they write post after post proving that yes, there is someone that Harry’s Bonded to, and that someone is Louis.

Louis watches it unfold and holds Harry’s hand when the inescapable retaliation hits back, all the fans who’d held out hope for years that Harry might Bond to them take to Twitter and Tumblr in droves: some claim he didn’t know what he was saying, some claim he was joking, and some, a lot of them, actually, realize he knew exactly what he was saying and toss vitriol at him because of it.

And then it’s Louis’ turn. If Louis gave a quote like “not that important” in an interview, it wouldn’t matter nearly as much. He’s still the least-known band member, the shutaway with the girlfriend who doesn’t do much and who used to be best friends with Harry. There are also all the rumors that have swirled around him for years, rumors about the dagger on his arm that some fans swear is for Harry. If he said “not that important” to a question about a potential soulmate, he’d be all but confirming what everyone already thinks.

Opportunity comes to him eventually, though: Apple’s CEO Tim Cook comes out as Bonded with another man, and Louis wears his rainbow Apple shirt the next day in support.

He expects the backlash from fans who don’t want him to be Bonded to Harry. He definitely expects the angry messages from Syco and Modest, who couldn’t get too mad at Harry about his comment because of the insane slew of press it garnered for them, but they can get angry at Louis.

He doesn’t expect them to use it against him in another round of self-defamation, though, and his knees nearly buckle when he sees the latest tweet on his account that he didn’t send.
Harry Instagrams in black and white that day, and tells Louis he won’t post in color again until they’re free. Louis pulls him close and whispers that he hopes it’s sooner, rather than later.

“You need color in your life, love,” Louis murmurs. “I hate to think I’m the reason you can’t see it.”

“You are the color in my life,” Harry answers, and there’s no more talking for a long time after that.

The American Music Awards that year are a bit mad; hints about Zayn leaving have leaked to the press, so they have to deflect and laugh away all of those rumors. They’re performing Night Changes, which was nobody’s vote for their second single (but, hey, Syco never asked anyway, so why would that matter?) and it’s one of the hardest to perform, so they’re all a little on edge for that, too. And, through it all, Claudia trails them like a particularly irritating shadow, stepping in before interviewers can get anywhere near topics that management doesn’t want the band addressing.

But they step on stage to perform and that melts away; Harry’s wearing the greatest jacket he’s ever laid eyes on, Katy Perry beat Taylor Swift for the pop artist category, and Louis looks like an angel in the spotlights, shadows carving his cheekbones into marble.

Harry doesn’t even notice that he sings every line right to Louis, but the rest of the world does.

“Why do you get to be the prince and I’m just the little one with the cheekbones?” Louis complains when they check the Tumblr link Lottie sends them after the show, but he presses his grin against
Harry’s shoulder when they realize that even as management kicks all the dirt on them in the world, their love still outshines it all.

**Winter 2014**

The next time Louis and Harry are in California, they finalize the paperwork for their newest house, a beautiful beachfront in Malibu that Harry’s been eyeing for ages.

It’s the excuse Harry needs to clean out the wardrobes and closets at the London house which, as the one they’ve owned the longest, has accumulated more once-worn outfits than anywhere else. He’s digging through the shirts that have been shoved to the back of his side of the wardrobe to see if there’s an old favorite he’d forgotten about that he wants to keep at the new place. He finds the heart print shirt that’s too small for him now, blazers and bowties he hasn’t worn in years, and then his hand connects with something he hasn’t felt in ages, cool silk sliding against his palm.

Harry owns clothes now that would make his sixteen-year old self weep for joy, bright patterns and sheer tops and, well, he’s always had an affinity for silk, and every time Harry brings a new one home Louis teases him about his guilty kink.

But he really shouldn’t, because he’s the one that started it all with *this*, the slightly off-white silk top he’d stolen for Harry from the *X Factor* wardrobe department. The last time Harry had worn it, it had hung from his shoulders and the sleeves were so long they covered his fingertips. Now, after years of working with a personal trainer and a couple of growth spurts he hadn’t yet hit at that point, the shirt fits Harry like it had been made for him.

He wears it to a music awards ceremony in Cannes, and the next morning he tops a dozen best-dressed lists. When asked for the designer, Harry shrugs, grins at Louis (whose eyes twinkle right back) and says, “Oh, I dunno. Had it for years.”

In January, at probably the dozenth Azoff family dinner that Harry and Louis have been invited to, Irving calls the two of them and Jeff into his office for an after-dinner brandy and a short meeting.

“This year is going to be your year,” he promises, tapping his ring against his glass. “Or, it will be until next year: that’s my plan, that each year is better than the one before. It’s entirely possible.”

Harry, whose alcohol tastes have changed since he was a sixteen year old novice who turned his nose up at anything that wasn’t peppermint schnapps, takes a sip of his drink and nods. Louis, curled against his side, asks, “What’s the plan?”

Jeff and Irving share a grin, and Harry feels himself smiling without even hearing their idea.

In February, for the first time in two years, Harry and Louis take a public flight together from L.A. to Australia to kick off the new tour. Fans dub it Lairport, Larry Stylinson trends worldwide on twitter, and even all the management-sanctioned update accounts have nothing to say that makes it seem like Harry and Louis still hate each other.

“I wonder if they realize we’re more excited than they are?” Louis asks, switching between social
media sites on his phone and grinning widely at each devolution into keyboard smashes and caps lock.

“Doubt it,” Harry answers, chuckling. It’s a private plane, so they’re only sharing with Alberto, Preston, and a couple more security guys they’ll need when they land. “Still, how are we meant to pass all these hours before we land?”

Louis clicks the lock button on his phone and smirks.

The fans are so overwhelmed by Harry and Louis being openly together in the same space that it takes them days to take a closer look at the pictures, the holes in Harry’s shirt that match Louis’ fingers perfectly.

Spring 2015

Between the beginning of the On The Road Again tour and Zayn’s imminent split, Louis nearly misses the break-up with his own girlfriend.

However, it can’t go easily, and it can’t make Louis look good: respectful and kind are not words that Syco PR wants associated with Louis Tomlinson. So, in a private hotel pool in Bangkok, a curly-headed girl named Katie that Louis has never met before walks to his side and says, “Hi, I was told to kiss you? There’s paparazzi here, apparently.”

Louis looks over at Zayn, who shrugs. And then he looks back in the doorway to the hotel, a sick feeling building in his stomach as- yeah, there she is, Claudia’s familiar blonde ponytail and her red lips pulled back in a smirk.

Katie kisses him, and the pictures hit the internet soon after. The Daily Mail and the Sun write righteously scathing articles raking Louis over the coals, calling Eleanor his devoted girlfriend and the victim of rampant cheating. But Harry takes Louis’ phone and doesn’t let him check compulsively to see what people are saying and they bury themselves in performing, learning to do shows as a foursome since Zayn went home for a quick breather and says he isn’t coming back until the South Africa shows.

Still, Eleanor and Louis have one more phone call as their fake relationship tumbles to the ground, and while things have been a little more strained lately—it was much harder than Louis thought it was going to be to see his fake girlfriend in his mum’s Bonding ceremony while his soulmate sat in the audience—they end the contract on amicable terms.

“Good luck, Lou,” El says, and Louis is glad, here at the end when he’s able to look back, that if he had to be stuck with someone to pretend to love for almost four years, it was at least someone decent. “You don’t deserve everything you’ve been put through, and I think you’re gonna be able to come out on top.”

“Thanks, El,” Louis says, and he looks up as the door clicks, Harry slipping into the hotel room after his workout with Mark and smiling a hello at Louis. “I, erm…” he trails off as Harry strips out of his ratty sweats, “I really…” Harry pulls his shirt over his head, leaving him only in an indecent pair of compression shorts, “appreciate…” Harry turns so that Louis can see the sweat trail down his broad back, shoots a lascivious grin over his shoulder, and pulls the shorts down.
Louis chokes, and Eleanor laughs in his ear. “Go,” she chuckles. “Don’t make me listen to whatever is happening over there.”

Harry disappears into the bathroom and the shower starts, and Louis laughs at the ceiling as he lets his head fall back. “Thanks again, doll. Take care.”

And then he strips and follows his stupid seductive soulmate into the shower, kissing the smug smile off his face.

Zayn doesn’t ever come back from his break.

It doesn’t really shock anyone, Liam least of all. When they get the group text from that lets them know he won’t be coming back for the last few Asia shows (srry lads i just can’t i gtta go home), Liam just sighs and turns in early.

When the Facebook status announcing Zayn’s departure from the band is posted, the four members of One Direction are together in a Jakarta hotel room. They don’t speak, just stay where they are sprawled across Niall’s bed. Louis, who would normally be leaning back against Harry’s chest as he drifted in and out of a nap, is curled around Liam like a mother cat with a kitten. He pets his hair and pats his shoulder and all the while he’s lost inside his own head, his eyes blank.

They keep going, of course. They were more prepared for this than anyone else. Still, when they perform a few nights later to a stunned but supportive South African crowd, Harry tears up as he thanks the audience.

“You will always be there for us,” he says throatily, “and we will always be there for you.”

Liam leaves the stage during Through The Dark, and Louis follows to check on him. Niall and Harry hold down the fort, but it’s hard. It’s all hard.

They’ve got a message from Zayn waiting for them when they step off stage, but no one replies. Not even Liam.

(9:32 p.m.) Zaynie: hope ur all ok, i’m sure u smashed it tonite. love u lads.

In the On The Road Again tour break in April, the one where they were supposed to be staying out of the spotlight for a while until Zayn’s news died down, Harry and Louis are apart for the longest time in five years.

They’ve never been the kind of couple that needs to constantly be together; they couldn’t be, not with all the different PR threads and schemes their team made them follow. And it’s weird, Louis thinks to himself as he reclines out under the spring sun in Liam’s backyard, because nothing about his relationship with Harry is the way he thought his Bond—if he ever had one—would go.

There’s the obvious parts: he never knew love was supposed to feel all-encompassing, that when the person who holds his heart smiles it would make his whole body thrum with happiness. He didn’t know that learning to fall asleep wrapped around another person’s body would be so hard to forget when they aren’t there. He didn’t realize, after spending all his life wanting nothing but the sunshine of freedom, that a boy who drips stardust and moon smiles would make him appreciate the night so much.
But there are other things he didn’t realize, either. He didn’t know, back before a dagger ever etched itself into his skin, that it would soon become routine that he and his future soulmate would kiss other people in public to keep their own relationship a secret. He didn’t recognize the depth to which some people would stoop to hide something lovely just because it might not make them money.

Mostly, though, he didn’t think that he’d find a person who would walk into his life and wipe away the cobwebs of fear and doubt like Harry would. That first smile, and he was hooked. Louis had kissed dozens of people, but one press of Harry’s lips to his and he knew he’d never want anything more.

He writes a song, there in Liam’s backyard as Jamie strums along on his guitar, about finding his home in Harry, and Harry finding his in Louis. About being scared and alone, and then finding the person that made everything make sense. About being lost, and finding the person to lead him to the light.

*I’ll make this feel like home,* he types, and his fingers feel light. Harry is his home, has been for years, always will be. And Louis wants to tell the world.

Harry spends their month apart making his own music too, stuff he teases Louis with while they’re on the phone, playing the demo in the background just quiet enough that Louis can hear the lightest strains of piano.

“Not yet,” he always sings when Louis begs him to send him the song so he can hear. “I want to see your face when you hear it the first time.”

"Harold," Louis groans. “We do have technology that makes that possible. We can Skype! FaceTime! Snapchat! Anything!”

Harry giggles, and concedes that, maybe, he has a point. They set up a Skype date for later than week and Harry tells Louis to have tissues handy, to which Louis scoffs, claiming that he is *stoic* and *tough* and *does not cry*.

At the first line of *If I Could Fly*, Louis starts bawling.

At the fourth replay, he’s still crying.

After the eighth time through, he concedes that Harry might have had a point.

One of the charities Liam is a patron for has *Gatsby-inspired ball*, and he invites Louis and Niall to join him at it. The two of them have a blast strolling into shops and demanding their best Roaring Twenties attire, trying on ridiculous suit after ridiculous suit until they settle on appropriately flamboyant outfits. They go together, because Harry’s still in L.A. and Babs is out in Hawaii for a photoshoot, and head out to the Trekstock event in high spirits.

They’re both a little shocked, though, when they arrive and see Liam, his arm wrapped around Sophia’s waist.
This isn’t their first red carpet, though, and the One Direction boys are nothing if not professional (when they want to be), so they smile and pose for a few minutes until the press get their fill, and then Niall and Louis both steer Liam and Sophia into the ball, finding a discreet corner to have a chat in before Liam’s duties pull him away.

Louis breaks the silence as they huddle together away from cameras. “Lima. Sophia, it’s nice to see you.” He flicks his glance to Liam. “If a little unexpected.”

“Um, right,” Liam says, rubbing at his forehead. “Well. Louis, Niall, Sophia is my girlfriend.”

“Yeah, we’ve met,” Niall rolls his eyes. “We’re just wondering why your hired girlfriend had to come to a non-management designated event.”

“No, lads,” Liam shakes his head. “Sophia is actually my girlfriend.”

“Liam, you’re Bonded to Zayn,” Louis says sharply. “You can’t have a girlfriend.”

“I can, and I do,” Liam says quietly. “Zayn broke it off. We aren’t together.”

Louis and Niall are stunned into silence. Sophia squeezes Liam’s hand sympathetically and murmurs, “I’ll leave you three to chat.”

“What do you mean,” Louis says, and it doesn’t really come out a question, “Zayn broke it off.”

Liam blinks hard a couple of times, shrugging listlessly. “I don’t know what to tell you, Tommo. Zayn needed a break from everything, and that includes me.”

“That’s not how it works,” Niall insists. “You’re soulmates, you’re perfect for each other.”

“Yeah, we are, but that doesn’t automatically mean the relationship is perfect,” Liam answers. “I’m not going to force Zayn to stay with me if it’s not what he wants. He deserves the option to say no.” He clears his throat as someone up on stage announces the beginning of the ball, and pats his hair to make sure it’s in place. “I have to go. But don’t… don’t worry about me. I’m going to be okay.”

Niall and Louis watch Liam walk away and don’t speak for a long time, each locked in their own thoughts.

“It just doesn’t make sense, Haz,” Louis whispers on the phone later. “I don’t understand it. They love each other so much, and yet they let it all fall apart just because they’re scared to try.”

Harry hums, his tired voice a low rumble. “Not everyone sees the fight as worthwhile as we did though, Lou. Some people just want relationships to be easy.”

Louis sniffs, rolls onto his side in their massive bed, wishing Harry was next to him to make this all a little easier. “It’s like me mum and dad all over again. I just have to watch as it all falls apart.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Harry replies. “If they need help, they’ll ask for it. Maybe Li’s right—you know he and Zayn only ever fought when we’d been together for long periods of time and they couldn’t get any breathing room. Maybe being apart for a little while will help them sort out whether it’s all worth it or not.”

Louis sighs, fiddling with the pillowcase under his head. “Everybody should just be more like us,” he declares sullenly. “If they all realized how lucky they are to even have a soulmate, everyone
would be a whole lot happier.”

Harry laughs. “Right, well, we can’t be the relationship model for everyone.” Louis grins a little, but then Harry speaks again. “Besides, Mr. Perfect, it probably wouldn’t be the best if everyone was exactly like us. I went in to do some laundry today and found a load of your clothes sitting in the washing machine from the last time we were in Malibu. They’re all a bit moldy now.”

Louis gasps, affronted. “I did no such thing!”

“I mean, unless someone who has so much Adidas clothing that there’s no way they could be anything but a walking billboard for them broke in to use our washer, I think it was you, love.”

“Oh, was it just my Adidas stuff?” Louis asks, ire forgotten. “I’ll just make them send me more.”

Harry laughs again, his squawky loud one that tends to startle birds when he does it outside. “I love you so much.”

Louis grins, curls around his pillow. “I love you too.”

Summer 2015

Louis, Liam, and Niall fly back to America at the end of April to join back up with Harry and do some writing and recording for the fifth album. They’ve also got a little bit of promo to do, a few interviews here and there and, of course, they have to make a stop by Corden’s new show.

“Lads, you don’t understand,” he says when Harry calls him one day and puts him on speakerphone as he bakes a batch of brownies and the other three sit around and watch. "Nobody watches TV at 12:30 in the morning, no one but uni students and insomniacs. Show up and boost my ratings, I’m sure you owe me for something.”

“Are you going to make us do something horrendously embarrassing?” Louis calls, grinning.

“That depends,” James answers slyly. “How do you feel about dodgeball?”

But, before that, Harry and Louis are brought in for a meeting with Magee, Griffiths, Ann-Marie, and some of the rest of the PR team.

“We’d like to start raising Louis’ image for a potential coming out in November,” Ann-Marie says shortly, as though the idea of it causes her pain. And as though she’s not the one who nearly single-handedly brought Louis’ image to the depths anyway. “Industry insiders are saying Bieber might be dropping his album at the same general time as yours in the fall, and he’s got the comeback hype on his side. Not to mention Adele, who’s going to sweep any other album out of the water. We’ll need a headline, and we’ll need a big one if you want another number one.”

“How do you plan on raising my image?” Louis asks carefully. He’s incredibly excited by the idea of him and Harry potentially coming out together earlier than they’d planned in November, of course he is, but he doesn’t trust Ann-Marie at all, and they wouldn’t hand that gift out without having an ulterior motive.

“Papped nights at clubs, mostly,” Magee says. “Harry’s image as the partier and womanizer has been cleaned up slowly over the past year or so”—With no thanks to you, Louis thinks snarkily, knowing that any and all headlines involving Louis and Harry are checked by an Azoff before they’re published, even if Modest and Syco don’t know that—“and you’ll be able to take his place as the fun
one in the band. We’ve even recruited a few of your friends from Doncaster to join you and make it look more natural. You’ll want your name to be just as famous as his when you come out: you want it to be ‘Harry and Louis of One Direction Bonded’, not ‘Harry Styles Bonds with bandmate.’”

“It’ll be mostly painless,” Ann-Marie says. “Though, there is one plan in the works that would be a sure way for your name to become known.”

That’s more along the ominous route that Louis had been expecting. “And what is that?”

“Well,” says Griffiths. “There are only a few guaranteed ways to garner immediate press: an arrest, a new relationship with someone of interest, a drug scandal, or…”

“Or?” Harry asks, his hand twitching around Louis’.


“Why, though?” Harry asks, grunting a little as he swings his club. It’s a great shot, the ball landing softly in the middle of the green with a gentle thud. “Why would they suddenly be okay with us coming out?”

“They aren’t okay with it,” Irving says from the golf cart, sipping from his beer. “They need it, though. Simon’s empire is crumbling, as I’m sure you’ve heard, and One Direction is their biggest meal ticket. If they lose you, Syco will probably go under. X Factor is failing, people stopped caring about American Idol years ago, and besides you boys and that girl group they’re completely ignoring, their record label is almost nonexistent.”

“So they want us to come out under them so, what, we’ll be appeased enough to stay with Syco?” Louis asks incredulously from next to him. He doesn’t golf, doesn’t really see the point, but he told Harry he likes the way his bum looks in the trousers, so he’ll dress the part and spend a day drinking while other people do the actual exercise. “Putting us through years of shit and giving us one good thing like they’re handing out presents, do they actually think that’ll work?”

“They might think you see it as worth it,” Jeff shrugs.

“I know this is petty,” Harry says, straightening his pink golf shirt and tightening his bun. “But I don’t want to be the catalyst that keeps Syco alive a little longer. We’re coming out anyway,” he gestures to Louis, who nods in agreement, “so why should it be in November and not when we originally planned when they would reap the benefits?”

“They might try some other tempting offers,” Irving warns. “Solo deals, production and writing work, things like that.”

“I don’t care,” Louis says staunchly. “Niall and Liam won’t fall for it either.”

“Do you know who you’re signing with next, then?” Jeff asks.

Harry shrugs. “Probably staying under Sony, they have more power to keep us than Syco does.”

“I don’t care,” Louis says again. “Just not Syco.”

Irving nods, taps his knee. “How about this, then. They want to raise your profile, Louis? Let them. Play along. It’s not the first time someone used a fake baby stunt to gain some recognition, and the public has a short memory so it won’t haunt you. They’ll start asking for more definitive future plans
as the tour comes to an end, but be vague until then. Let them waste their resources keeping you happy and then, when you have some ideas on who you might want to sign with, let them know you won’t be renewing your contract. They already know you want to take a break after the new album drops, correct?”

“Yeah, we told them we want a few months off.”

“Good. They’ll take that as confirmation that you’re resigning after the contract ends and give you some more time.”

“Prepare for a smear campaign if they find out early, though,” Jeff warns. “Try and keep it under wraps.”

“Absolutely,” Irving agrees. Then he claps his hands. “Alright, enough business. If we’re gonna sit in the sun and watch you two idiots play Tiger Woods, I need another drink.”

**Fall 2015**

Everything goes just as Irving said: Louis takes Simon up on his offer to start a small record company **offshoot** for himself, though he doesn’t know if he’ll get to keep it when they move away from Syco, and Liam is introduced to some producers interested in working with him on some solo projects. A girl that Louis had gone clubbing with in May, Briana, announces a pregnancy, and Louis becomes a headline-grabber in the space of a single eventful hour.

*On The Road Again* rolls through the U.K. at the end of September, and it’s the greatest couple of weeks the band’s ever seen. Even with Louis having to pretend to be excited about a baby that doesn’t exist and, if it did, is definitely not his, even with the absence of Zayn still felt keenly by all of them, it’s still the time of his life. He’s alive on stage again, running and bouncing and playing with Liam and Niall, sending flirty looks to Harry across the stage, watching him absolutely lose his shit every time they perform *No Control* and serenading each other during *18*.

It’s a good time for everyone, not just Louis. Harry shines brighter than ever before, absolutely killing his *Drag Me Down* solo every night and giving everyone in every stadium the view of a lifetime in his fancy sheer shirts that would look ridiculous on anyone else. Niall has become the vocal star of the band, taking over Zayn’s parts in most of the songs, his voice stronger than ever, and when Babs joins them for the month in the U.K. he’s even better. Liam is ever-steady, solid as a rock, and Louis makes it his personal mission to ensure Liam laughs on stage at least five times a night.

He and Zayn are even mending things, Zayn happier and healthier away from the intense schedule the band has gotten used to. Liam’s still with Sophia, and Zayn still has a lot to make up for, but they’re at least getting back to a solid friendship. He’s apologized profusely for leaving mid-tour leg, let alone mid-tour, and admits he’s even got *Drag Me Down* as his ringtone.

“Don’t get cocky, though,” he jokes tentatively to Louis on the phone one night. They aren’t back to where they were, they may never be, but Zayn is Louis’ brother, and brothers sometimes might not like each other but they never stop loving each other.

He does warn them, though, of things to come. “My new management are, like, they’re way better than Modest, obviously. But they still need me in this, like, this certain image? And it’s way more like me than my image was in the band, but,” Louis can hear the shrug from across the Atlantic. “Well, they want me to distance myself from One Direction, and I don’t really know how far they’ll
take it. So, I mean, you know how print interviews go, just take it with a grain of salt, babes.”

So the tour rolls through England and everything is as good as it can be; Briana’s batshit family causes a stir every once in a while, and Zayn’s management spreads a few interviews that aren’t entirely complimentary of One Direction or their fans, and they still have to deal with Claudia and Ann-Marie and Griffiths and Magee and a whole load of other manipulative executives and managers, but it’s still good.

Until they reach Belfast.

It’s shaping up to be a normal night before a normal show: Harry’s sprawled across a sofa writing in his journal, Louis and Niall are playing ping-pong, and Liam’s texting Zayn and watching a film on his laptop. A knock on the door startles them all into stopping what they’re doing: they’re already dressed and quiffed and hairsprayed and they’ve already had their meet and greet, so they aren’t supposed to be doing anything else until they’re called to head to stage. The door opens, and in walks, of all people, Simon Cowell.


“Not the time for pleasantries, I’m afraid,” Simon says shortly, crossing his arms. Claudia and a few members of the PR team are behind him in the doorway, watching with narrowed eyes. “I’ve heard of a couple of rumors that I’d like some explanations for.”


“I’ve gotten wind of a few meetings between executives from Epic and Columbia and an undisclosed band who, from the pictures I’ve seen, look a hell of a lot like you four,” he says coolly. “If there’s an explanation, I’d love to hear it.”

“Just checking our options, I think,” Louis shrugs nonchalantly, though his heart is racing.

“And why would you need to do that, when you’ve made it clear you’re resigning with Syco?” Simon asks through gritted teeth.

“Did we?” Harry asks lightly. “We said we’d like a break this spring when the album and singles are fully out. Didn’t say anything about resigning.”

Louis has seen Simon go red with rage before. He’s never seen him go nuclear.

He screams. He screams and rages and curses and threatens, he howls like a banshee denied millions of dollars made from overworked barely-adults who he’s an authority figure over. Louis screams back, because he’s wanted to for years, and when he runs out of words Niall and Harry take his place. It’s a cacophony, it’s a wretched symphony of voices overlapping into one big mess of sound. They fight, they fight hard, arguing about their rights as artists and unsafe working conditions, rigid control that ended in Zayn being chased away and the other four close to breaking.

But it’s Liam who steps in, an enduring presence not unlike a stone in a stream: unmoving, unshakeable, and the one who was always the most likely to side with management.

“No,” he says, a rumble of thunder after the rain. “We aren’t coming back to Syco after the contract ends. Five years has been long enough.”

Simon breathes heavily, sweating patches through his shirt, his skin an unhealthy red. And then he turns, spinning on his heel and stomping out of the dressing room.
The smear campaign starts with Liam, then: One Direction have performed through illnesses, lack of sleep, broken bones, and deaths in their families. Yet when Liam puts his foot down in Belfast, Simon has the show stopped, and places the blame directly on Liam’s shoulders.

So the smear campaign starts with Liam, but it doesn’t end there.

“Maybe that should be my next tattoo, right across the forehead.” Harry says, sweeping aside his curls to trace his hairline. “WE ARE NOT BREAKING UP. Has a nice ring to it, yeah?”

They’re squeezed on a sofa for another round of album promo interviews, waiting for the next reporter to arrive and ask them about their earth-shattering hiatus. Harry stretches his arm across the back of the sofa and Louis curls close, yawning sleepily. “It’d help if Dan Wootton stopped reporting exclusives about how much we hate each other.”

“He’s a moron,” Niall says easily. “Hey, did you know everyone on the internet calls him Dan Fuckton? I think that’s more fitting anyway.”

Liam snorts a little, shaking his head. “That is fitting, actually.”

There’s a knock at the door, and an assistant leans in to say, “Ready for the next one, boys?”

Louis sits up, frowning a little at not having near enough time to cuddle, and Harry kisses his forehead in apology before nodding to the girl. “Sure, send them in.”

“Hello, One Direction!” says a loud woman from the Telegraph. “Heard this might be the last time we’ll ever interview you lot!”

Harry sighs and feels the rest of the boys do the same, and they settle in for another round of needless denials.

**Winter 2015**

As the *Made in the AM* promo rolls onward, the smear tactics from Simon’s team get a little more pointed and a little more focused: there’s a tiny mention of a drug scandal involving Niall, and when Liam and Sophia break up there’s a little bit of “falling off the bandwagon” press regarding that, but three of the four band members remain relatively unscathed.

Louis, though, not so much.

It’s everywhere, it’s everything. The media picks him apart, his looks, his voice, his Twitter fights and his lack of notoriety. Briana’s family pushes into full on attack mode, calling Louis a deadbeat dad to a child that doesn’t exist and a cheater when Louis is set up with a winter girlfriend of his own for the first time.

It doesn’t matter that Louis donates millions of his personal money to dozens of charities to help kids with illnesses, that he loves his family so much he’d do anything for them, that he is the absolute best thing that has ever happened in Harry’s life and everyone else who knows him; he and Niall and Liam and Jay and his sisters and all their friends just have to watch as the boy made of sunshine is picked apart.
And yet, it’s like it doesn’t even matter. Criticism rolls off of Louis like he’s wrapped in Adidas-branded armor. He’s stronger than Harry’s ever seen him, he’s more confident than ever before. He wrote seven songs on a chart-topping album that fully fits the sound and image they want as a band, including a scathing destruction of Haylor in the form of *Perfect*. Every time an article comes out condemning Louis for anything, the fans rise up and defend him in droves like a personal army.

It’s tough, there’s no way it wouldn’t be. There are still things to be worried about: Liam and Zayn still haven’t reconciled after a few more of Zayn’s interviews were published where he bashed One Direction fans and criticized their music, Niall and Babs are having a hard time with her being on a month-long shoot in Peru, Briana’s family, while mostly irrelevant, do catch some attention from time to time and send the fans into a panic, and everyone in the world assumes Harry’s going to be the next one out the door for a solo career. The four of them stay up late some nights talking everything over, their fears and insecurities, their worries. Liam talks about his nightmares that Zayn never comes back to him, that he decides he doesn’t want to be tied down and that Liam isn’t worth it. Niall tells them that he didn’t think he was going to make it to the end of the year, that he thought he’d either crack under the stress or too little sleep, but that now that they’re on the other side, he thinks he’ll be okay. Louis admits he’s worried that Ann-Marie and the Syco team have been right all along, and that the fans won’t come back when they find out Harry and Louis are Bonded.

But it’s the light at the end of the tunnel. They’re almost out of the rough patch. Simon’s influence lessens by the day, and they’ve got multiple offers from other record companies ready to welcome them with open arms when they’re ready to return.

They’re almost free.

**Spring 2016**

The day they’ve been waiting for dawns bright and early over Cheshire, dew on the grass melting away into a pleasantly warm day. Harry and Louis get one kiss, one they laugh into as they keep their eyes squeezed shut and as Gemma tugs Harry’s arm to get him out of bed before he opens his eyes and they start the day with bad luck.

Louis gets a moment to revel in sleep-heavy bliss before he’s dragged out of bed next, Lottie and Fizzy pulling him from the room and into his designated area for the rest of the day. Inside are a row of navy suits hanging by the window, a row of shimmery dresses on the other side, a TV tuned to Manchester United match day commentary, and some of his favorite people in the world waiting for him with breakfast and smiles.

“How,” says Niall, the first on his feet. “You ready?”

“Been ready for years, lad,” Louis answers, but his heart beats unsteadily as though to counteract his words. Stan is up next to squeeze Louis in a hug, clapping him on the shoulder as they pull back.

Louis is the last to be dressed, as everyone in the immediate area knows sticking him into a multi-thousand pound Givenchy suit and asking him to not wrinkle it for a few hours is a recipe for disaster.

“You’ve settled down a bit, lovely,” Lou teases as she starts on his hair. “But not that much.”

_Lottie, Fizzy, Daisy, and Phoebe are in glittery gold dresses and towering heels, and Jay rushes in from all her prep down at the chapel to slip into her own gown. Stan and Niall are buttoned into navy suits, their shoes so shiny Louis can see his face. Morning passes into afternoon and he forces down_
part of a sandwich when Jay insists she won’t be carrying him up the aisle when he passes out.

Soon, the clock strikes three, and it’s time to go. Louis is ushered into a car and then dazedly follows Niall into a side room at the chapel, where they’re to wait until they get their cue.

The sound of a murmuring crowd grows on the other side of the wall, all of Harry and Louis’ family and friends, everyone they love in one room for the first time. That might be the part that makes Louis lose his breath for a minute, wavering and having to sit in the chair Stan shoves at him.

“Not getting cold feet are we, eh?” he laughs quietly. Louis shakes his head: no, not cold feet. Just a whole lot of emotion battling inside him.

The knock on the door is quiet, but it nearly makes Louis’ heart stop. His mum steps inside, shimmering and lovely in the swath of sunlight through the window. “Ready, Lou?” she asks. He takes a deep breath and nods, following her, Niall, and Stan out of the waiting room and to the door outside of the east side of the chapel. His hands are shaking, which is ridiculous; he’s sang in front of stadiums full of thousands and thousands of people, he’s performed countless times on national TV, he’s even sang for the bloody Queen, but a thirty-foot walk down an aisle is nearly giving him a heart attack.

The doors open from the inside, and the ceremony begins.

Stan goes first as the first strains of music float out the door, a string quartet covering *Sweet Disposition*. Niall turns and gives Louis a massive hug and a wet smack on the cheek before he, too, disappears inside.

“Lou,” says Jay, and Louis takes her arm.

“If you say something to make me cry, Mum, I swear to God-”

“No, no,” Jay chuckles. “Just letting you know I love you, and I’m so proud of you. You’re incredibly lucky to have Harry, but he’s lucky to have you, too.”

“Mum,” Louis sniffs, trying to blink back the tears she said she wasn’t going to cause. She laughs again, tinkling bright, and tugs Louis into the chapel.

Niall and Stan are waiting on Louis’ side of the church, while Jonny and Liam stand on Harry’s side. In the crowd are dozens of people watching and already teary as the two soulmates appear: Ed, Nick, the *X Factor* gang, Pixie and Alexa and Rita, all the extended One Direction families, Taylor and her newly found soulmate Karlie, Julian and John and Jamie, Irving and Jeff and Glenne, Cara and Kendall, Paul and Lou and Caroline Watson and Alberto and Preston, and dozens of other friends they’ve met through their years together. Zayn is next to Gemma on Harry's side of the church, smiling that wide, crinkly-eyed smile that anyone so rarely gets to see, and every one of Louis’ sisters, even baby Doris, is already sniffling.

Louis and Harry appear at the same time on opposite sides of the chapel, and Louis has to stop for a minute when he blinks the sunlight from his eyes and catches sight of his beautiful soulmate.

Harry’d commissioned a custom suit from Gucci and they’d fallen all over themselves to comply, Louis knew that, but Harry was a stickler for tradition and so this is the first time he’s seen Harry in it. It’s incredible, a vintage slim fit, double breasted with two rows of gold buttons against the deep blue material. As Harry steps into the path of a sunbeam from a window high overhead the suit is lit like a Christmas tree, swirls of subtle sparkling gold in twisting patterns across his chest and arms.

Somehow, by the grace of God or Jay Deakin, one of the two, Louis makes it to the head of the aisle.
next to Niall, just in time to meet Harry as he reaches the same point. Louis lifts onto his toes and kisses Harry without even thinking about it, doesn’t realize he maybe shouldn’t have done that when the minister clears his throat and the crowd titters with laughter. Louis grins back at his mum, who’s trying to look stern but mostly looks like she’s biting her lip to keep from laughing.

“Sorry,” Louis whispers, and the crowd snickers again. He steps back to his mum’s side and kisses her cheek as Anne and Harry do the same, holding her close for a long minute before she and Anne trade, pulling their son-in-laws in for kisses as well.

“Take care of him,” Anne murmurs, and Louis nods.

“Of course. Always.”

The mothers take their seats on the front pews next to the rest of the family members, and the ceremony begins for real.

Louis knows the minister is talking, probably saying really wonderful things about love and forever and how Bonding is a covenant and things like that, but Louis can’t really focus on anything except the ways his hands fit into Harry’s and the happy sheen in his best friend’s eyes.

Harry is the first to do his vows, his voice shaky as he turns Louis’ Bonding ring over and over in his hands.

“Louis,” he says, beaming, and takes a shuddery breath. “You’ve been the love of my life since before I knew how true that actually was. You’re my rock and my salvation on my dark days, my sunshine and my champagne on my best days. Every morning that I wake up next to you is the best day of my life and I—” his voice cracks, the first roll of happy tears falling down his dimpled cheeks. The crowds coos in unison, and Harry laughs shakily. “Every day I spend apart from you makes me love you all the more when I get to have you back, and I would never trade a single hour I’ve ever spent with you for any time with anyone else. Even when you’re playing your ninth hour of FIFA in a row and you haven’t showered in four days,” he grins, and the collected crowd chuckles along, “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Harry’s face grows serious again, and he uses his hold on Louis’ hands to pull him a little closer. “You said, once, that you wished you could be enough for me. I don’t even know if you remember that or if you know I heard, but I did. And I promise, Lou, you aren’t just enough for me, you’re everything for me. You’re my reason, my everything, and I love you so much.”

He slides the ring onto Louis’ fourth finger with shaky hands. Louis takes a shuddery breath and pulls Harry close to kiss him again, pulling back and wiping his eyes of tears.

“That’s gonna be really hard to top, love,” he sniffs, grinning a watery smile, and the crowd giggles. “But I’ll try. I’ve been so in love with you for so long that I don’t think I even remember how I fell, just that one day you were the curly boy I met in the bathroom and the next you were the most important part of my life. I was so thankful to even get to know you, to be your best friend, that I didn’t even care that I didn’t think you’d ever love me back. You were the brightest star in the sky and I was privileged just to get to see your light. And then,” he shakes his head in disbelief, still amazed all these years later, “then you said you loved me, too. And I was astounded that someone like you could fall for someone like me. And then I thought that there would never be any way you would love me as much as I love you, and that was okay, too. To have any of your love was more than I could have dreamed of.”

He swallows, blinks back tears. “And you Bonded back to me, and ever since that day I’ve made a promise to myself, and I’ll make it to you here today: I promise to love you more tomorrow than I did
today. I promise to spend the rest of our lives making sure you don’t have a second of doubt in the strength of what I feel for you. I promise to protect you and to let you protect me when I need it. I promise to respect you, to cherish you, to love you forever.”

Harry’s Bonding ring slides into place on his finger.

And that’s how forever begins.

The rest of the day is a blur of laughter and love, champagne and cake, glitter and navy and sky blue. It’s Harry twirling Louis on the dance floor, it’s both of them shucking their suit jackets and never going more than a few minutes without a kiss, their Markers glowing under the fabric of their sleeves. It’s being surrounded by all the people who love them most in the world and being told again and again that they are the luckiest couple on the earth to have found each other.

It’s Louis realizing Harry’s wearing the silk shirt he stole for him during X Factor, it’s Harry realizing Louis is using one of his favorite of Harry’s headscarves as a pocket square.

It’s watching Zayn and Liam, whose reunion and rekindled relationship has been nearly entirely done from separate continents, fall into each other’s arms and proceed to ignore everyone else in the room. It’s being pulled into a lively and quite terrible approximation of an Irish jig with Niall and Babs, whose own Bonding rings glint in the spring sunlight.

It’s love, overpouring love, overwhelming love.

The evening slows and Louis can catch his breath as a good majority of their friends stand to make toasts for them. Niall and Liam do one together that has Harry bawling within seconds, Gemma blinks back her own tears as she tells Louis that she hopes one day she’ll find someone that looks at her like Louis looks at her brother, and Zayn toasts to good health and fortune and a lifetime of knowing that they’re the best parts of each others’ lives.

But, surprisingly enough, it’s the most unlikely duo who steal the show: Nick Grimshaw and Ed Sheeran.

“Allright, alright, enough crying, now,” says Nick, waving a teary Cara back to her seat. He’s got a half empty glass of champagne and a wide smile that spells trouble. “I’m not much for speeches,” he says, and half the room laughs, “or for demanding attention,” the rest of the room joins them, “but I’ll give this public speaking thing a go.” He lifts his glass and tips his head at the newly Bonded couple.

“Harry and Louis. You two know that I’m a romantic, but I’m also cursed with being the biggest cynic in the world. And life is tough for people like me, or Taylor,” he nods to the popstar in the back of the room, “or Ed,” he gestures to the table he’d just left, where Ed is nodding in agreement. “We want that true love fairytale but don’t really believe it exists. And yet, here you two come along, and you ruin every pessimistic observation about love I’ve ever made.” Harry and Louis chuckle. Nick smiles, but he raises his glass in salute. “You give hope to people who didn’t think that was possible, and you do it without trying. Just watching you two be in love makes the rest of us fall a little more in love with life. Keep that happiness, don’t let it fade. You deserve the very best of fairytale romances.” He nods at the couple. “To Harry and Louis.”

Ed’s comes a little later and, of course, it’s accompanied by a guitar. “For those of you outside the music industry, you might not know this,” he says, strumming along with his speech like he can’t help it. “But these two were the worst kept secret in the business. They can’t go an hour without talking, can’t go a minute in each other’s presence without touching. We all knew how it would end, though nobody really knew. When I met these two, they told me they weren’t Bonded and I thought
they were trying some really lame prank.” He rolls his eyes, and Liam, Niall, and Zayn snicker, well aware that most pranks Harry is involved in aren’t the most well thought-out schemes. “I thought there was no way anyone could possibly fit Louis like Harry does, and vice versa. They were always meant to be each other’s missing pieces.”

He takes a seat on a stool and strums his guitar again. “I’ve written a few songs about these two, because they’re sort of a never-ending source of inspiration. They’ve sang a couple, but I kept a few for myself, too. You might have heard of one, it’s called Thinking Out Loud.” The whole crowd chuckles, nodding along, and Ed laughs. “Yeah, it gained a little bit of radio play, thought you might’ve. I won’t play that, I’m sure you’ve heard it before. But there’s another, a little less well known, and I thought I’d play it for you all today.” He adjusts the guitar, meets Harry and Louis’ eyes. “Hazza, Lou, this is for you.”

Loving can hurt
Loving can hurt sometimes
But it’s the only thing that I know

Harry pulls Louis back to the dance floor even though their limbs are achy and their shoes are pinching their feet and, really, neither of them should be trying to showcase their dancing skills. It doesn’t matter; the world fades away in Harry’s arms, just the two of them and the words to Ed’s song.

Oh you can fit me
Inside the necklace you got when you were 16
Next to your heartbeat
Where I should be
Keep it deep within your soul

Spring 2018

Harry Styles is standing on the balcony of his Parisian house contemplating the stars.

It's 11:11 on the dot, and the world is quiet.

His soulmate would have a fit if he knew; it’s warming up as the season starts to change but the nights are still chilly, and he tends to be a little overprotective when it comes to the bundle currently nestled in Harry's arms.

"Isn't she lovely?" Harry sings quietly. "Isn't she wonderful?"

He's reminiscing, a little. Thinking back on his life and the ways it's changed, thinking back to the beginning, before he knew what his future held.

At age sixteen, Harry Styles wanted fame and to bring strangers closer together. He wanted to make a change in the world, even if only in the worlds of a few people. But, more than anything else, he wanted love.

He never could have imagined, that wide-eyed sixteen year old, that love would do more than hit him out of nowhere. That it would turn his world upside down, that it would hurt like fire and cure all ills, that it is a bliss beyond compare.
A strong, familiar arm wraps around Harry's waist, a chin propped on his shoulder. “What are you two doing out here?” Louis' voice rasps, his stubble a soft scrape on Harry’s bare shoulder. His Bonding ring is cold against the sensitive skin of Harry’s hips.

“Just enjoying the night, Lou,” Harry whispers, and Louis leans over to move the blanket aside a little to see their little girl’s eyes closed, her tiny perfect lips pouted in sleep.

Louis hums, kissing Harry’s shoulder. “It is a beautiful night, isn’t it.”

Pinpricks of light shine in the inky darkness of the sky, and Harry Styles sings Stevie Wonder into the sleepy silence, his baby girl bundled in his arms, his soulmate tucked against his side.

And everything is perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for following me on this crazy journey. When I started this six months ago, I never dreamed it would come this far.

Thank you to everyone who has commented, messaged, gave kudos, or shared the fic with friends. I compulsively fall into a pile of giggles every time I read a nice note, and I'm so, so happy to be part of such a passionate group of people. Before I started this fic I'd never even gotten a message on Tumblr, and now I have friends I've met through this story that I speak with every day.

A quick shout out to Rachel, who talked through ideas and sent me horribly heartbreaking songs to get me in the mood to write. You know how, at the end of the Harry Potter novels, the epilogue was this weirdly happy thing that made no sense? That was going to be the same story for this fic, but Rachel kept that nightmare from happening. Thanks so much to you, doll.

There's now a playlist for this fic, just things that reminded me of H/L as I was writing or that I used as inspiration for certain scenes. It's in order, so you should be able to follow it along with the story as you read.

Again, thank you so much to everyone who's been with me on this ride. I'm on tumblr here if you ever have questions or comments about this story, and I keep all my extras and my inspirations for the fic here if you're interested. There are already some scenes I have in mind for drabbles and extras that I wasn't able to fit into the actual fic, but if you have any ideas for more you want to see written, let me know!
The new fic post is here if you'd like to share it, and I'd love you so much if you did. :)

Again, thank you so much for reading. This fic has been my life for months, now, and it's strange that it's over, but I'm so glad I was able to share it with you all.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!