Fading

by tothemoonmydear

Summary

Louis knows about beauty; the combination of qualities that pleases the aesthetic senses. He creates that combination every day in the garments he designs while studying fashion at uni. The cut of the design, the color of the fabric, the intricacy of the stitching; it all comes together to create something beautiful. When the science student with the long legs and dimpled smile agrees to model for him, Louis decides he’s found beauty personified. Harry just thinks Louis needs someone to show him how beautiful he is.

Notes

This has not been edited or britpicked at all so I apologize in advance for all the errors! Thank you for reading!

DO NOT TAKE, TRANSLATE, OR POST MY WORK PLEASE
Chapter 1

Louis almost snaps when there is a light tap on the door of the studio. His knuckles go white on the edge of the cutting table but he forces himself to take a deep breath and put on a smile before he turns around. He isn’t the type to take his frustrations out on others, he prefers to take them out on himself. When he turns he finds Liam poking his head just past the door frame, hesitant to come in and disturb Louis.

“S’alright mate, come on in, I’m just cutting,” Louis smiles, setting down his heavy set of fabric scissors.

Liam strides in and approaches the long wooden table, strewn with exquisite looking fabrics and wispy pieces of pattern paper. He has no idea what Louis will do with the fabrics but he can already see the beauty in the materials and colours Louis has chosen to use together. Liam slings his arm around Louis shoulder and Louis leans into his touch with a sigh.

“Alright?” Liam asks gently.

“I mean, everything is coming together really nicely but I’ve asked the girls to ask around because I need a male model and they haven’t been able to find anyone. So now I’m going to have to go out looking for someone and I really don’t have time for that, nor do I think I can get anyone to agree,” Louis sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“You know Zayn would do it for you, or even me,” Liam offers, hating to see his best friend stressed.

“I know babe, and thanks, but Zayn is too short for what I’ve designed, and you’re way too muscular for that blazer,” Louis sighs, gesturing over to the mannequin where the half finished piece hangs, “I need someone long and lean.”

“Why don’t you scope out the basketball team?” Liam suggests, brushing his fingertips along the silk spread across the table.

“Hannah asked Robbie already but their tournament is the day of the runway show so none of them will be able to do it,” Louis explains, he lets out a huff, “but I should get back to work,” he adds pointedly, because talking about it is stressing him out.

“Alright mate, I’ll leave you to it. I’ll keep my eyes open for someone,” Liam says, squeezing Louis shoulder gently, “you want to come with Zayn and I for lunch after next period?”

Louis stomach aches at the thought of sustenance but he shakes his head, “no thanks Li, I already grabbed a burger before I came in here,” Louis lies.

“Okay, see you at the flat then?” Liam nods.

“See you,” Louis agrees, already distracted with thoughts about his design.

Liam sees himself out and Louis lets out a sigh of relief when he’s left alone in the silent studio again. He loves his best friends to death but he’s barely keeping it together with the pressure of the winter fashion show and even though they mean well he thinks better when he’s alone. He has three weeks and he knows everything will be ready in time, because Louis may be late when it comes to everything else but he has never had problems with deadlines when it comes to his designs, but this male model issue is throwing him for a loop.
The upside of being in the fashion design program at the university is that he has about a hundred pretty girls who are more than willing to model for him, but he is seriously deprived in the male model department. He’s been at the university two years already and as its his third year he has the privilege of showing his entire winter collection at the schools winter fashion show along with the other third years.

This year he got adventurous and decided to branch out into mens designs and while the garments are turning out spectacularly, he’s now scrambling to find someone to fit them and do them justice. He leaves the cutting table with the fine silks to go over to the three mannequins in front of the frosty studio window. The first holds a thin legged trouser with a beautiful pea coat that is only waiting to have the buttons sewn on. Louis is waiting to find buttons that are just right on one of his many trips to the fabric store. The second mannequin holds a tweed dress pant with a thick cowl neck sweater, the trousers are unforgiving and half of Louis’ stress is finding someone with good enough legs to pull them off. The third mannequin is his favourite; the jeans are perfection and the soft fabric of the hand sewn t-shirt contrasts perfectly with the denim. The blazer though, the blazer is his masterpiece.

Louis sighs and rubs his eyes, trying to ignore the way his stomach cries. He lied about the burger because Zayn and Liam were already on him about not eating enough dinner last night. Their class schedules are so different that it is easy to lie about when he eats but it is harder on weekends because they all share a flat and the boys tend to notice when they don’t see him touch any food all weekend. He’s good at excuses though, and any time the start to seem concerned Louis just eats. He eats and then he goes for a shower, which really means he runs the water so they don’t hear him running on empty. He finds it easy to ignore the throb of his stomach when he grazes his hand over his chubby hips and bulbous belly. Instead he turns back to the cutting table and focuses on snipping the correct shape into the silk for the cocktail dress he plans to finish before the end of the period.

Louis does finish the dress by the time the bell rings and he packs up his stuff and tucks everything in his corner of the studio. He has his merchandising class on the other side of the campus but he has to stop at the beverage cart to grab a tea, hopefully the splash of milk he adds will help combat the slight dizziness that comes with running on empty. He slings his messenger bag over his shoulder with the paper cup in his hand and he is about to hurry off to class when someone catches his eye.

There, leaning against the wall outside the biology lab is possibly the most gorgeous boy he’s ever seen. He’s talking and laughing with a smaller boy who has artificially blonde hair. He is posed like he’s in the middle of a GQ shoot; all lazy stance with perfect angles, one foot propped back against the wall, one hand raking through perfect chocolate brown curls. He’s tall and lanky, but not too reedy. He’s made of thin hips and long arms and a square jaw. Then he laughs and it is really more of a cackle but it is strangely beautiful the way he throws his head back and claps his hand over his mouth.

Louis can’t help but notice the huge sparkling green eyes and a set of the most adorable dimples. Louis doesn’t know what the blonde boy is saying but it must be hilarious because the beautiful boy against the wall is still chuckling when he dips his head down and grins bashfully at the ground. Then the classroom door opens and the beautiful boy straightens up off the wall to go into class. Louis’ breath catches in his throat when he notices the boys legs. He looks like he was poured into his jeans.
Louis finds it extremely easy to ignore the ache in the stomach, the buzz in his head and the stress in his bones because he’s just found him. He’s the one. Louis has to have him.
Louis thinks about the boy on the way to his merchandising class, he thinks about the boy at his desk, he thinks about they boy as he types up a report, he thinks about the boy until the bell finally rings signalling the end of class. Louis can picture him in his garments, he can picture the way the tweed trousers will look on those mile long legs, he can picture how the blazer will fit perfectly on the boys square but not overly broad shoulders.

He is perfection and Louis decides he’s willing to venture a trip into the cafeteria to find him. He gathers his things and tucks his laptop under his arm before leaving the classroom. The halls are crowded and Louis’ frustration is at a new high as he tries to pass through. When he finally reaches the cafeteria he pauses near the entrance and looks around. He sees Zayn and Liam, he’ll go sit with them until the curly haired boy shows up. Louis knows the boy may not even come to the cafeteria, but its worth a shot.

Louis is about to start over to his friends when he hears a familiar cackle. His head whips around and sure enough, there is the boy with his head thrown back in a laugh. The laugh is clearly caused by the same blonde boy, they sit across from each other at one of the tables. The boy claps a ridiculously large hand over his mouth to try and stifle himself and hangs his head, his shoulders shaking. Louis feels a smile tugging at the corners of his lips at the adorableness of it.

Louis turns on his heel and starts toward the table. When he approaches he hears the thick Irish accent of the blonde boy forming a sentence ending in the word cunt. The brunette almost releases another cackle but then he seems to notice Louis approaching and freezes with a grin on his lips. Louis offers a polite smile and the blonde cranes around to catch a glimpse of whoever the brunette is staring at. His eyebrows shoot up when he sees Louis.

“Hey,” Louis says easily, pulling out the chair beside the blonde and sitting down.

The pretty ones mouth is still gaping open and the blondes eyebrows are almost touching his hair line. Louis finds it a little odd because he doesn’t think he would be quite so put off by a stranger taking a seat but he just maintains a polite smile.

“Sorry to interrupt your lunch, I was just wondering if you had a minute?” Louis asks the curly haired one.

His voice is slow and deep and it seems to rumble from somewhere deep inside. The boy sounds quite gruff to have such boyish dimples but there is a gentleness to his voice. He gives a shy smile, only one dimple showing, and looks at Louis expectantly. Louis nods and brightens his grin, he is asking for a favour after all.

“What’s your name?” Louis asks first.

“Er- Harry Styles,” the boy replies.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Louis Tomlinson,” he says.

“I know,” Harry says, but then he looks like he wishes he hadn’t said it.

The blonde seems to laugh under his breath for some reason and Harry shoots him a scathing look. Louis isn’t all that surprised that the boy knows his name. Louis is by definition an introvert, he’d
much rather be alone or with his two best friends because social interaction tends to be draining on
him. However, while he would prefer to be alone, when he is forced into social settings he is
extremely outgoing and has the ability to interact well with almost anyone. All his life he’s been
surrounded by people who consider themselves his friend, even though he is the type of person who
only has one or two true friends at a time.

So he isn’t surprised that Harry knows his name because almost everyone does; Louis has introduced
himself to people before and received hurt looks in return because he’s already met them. He knows
for sure he’s never met Harry though, because he knows he would remember a boy like this.

“Right, well, I actually had a huge favour to ask you and I want you to keep an open mind before
you say no, yeah?” Louis asks, grinning.

“Erhm, alright,” Harry says, totally nonplussed.

“What year are you?” he asks.

“First,” Harry says, as if he’s admitting something bad.

“Alright so I doubt you know then but every year there is a winter fashion show. I’m in my third
year to get my fashion design degree, and so the winter collection that I’ve designed is going to be
shown,” Louis explains.

Harry nods but still looks confused, “thats great, but um, what does that have to do with me?” he
asks.

“Well I’ve designed three menswear outfits and I need someone to model them on the runway,”
Louis continues.

Harry’s eyebrows scrunch up, “surely you’re not implying you want me to do it,” he lets out a
nervous chuckle.

Louis is nothing if not determined though, “thats exactly what I’m implying. I saw you in the hall
and its like you were built for what I’ve designed. I need you to do it,” he says.

Harry scoffs, “I’m not a model- I- I can’t model,” he stutters.

“Well you can walk can’t you?” Louis says gently, “it will be easy, all you need to do is put on three
outfits and walk down a runway. Easy Peasey.”

Harry shakes his head vigorously, “listen, I’m really flattered but I’m not the most graceful individual
and I’d probably fall flat on my face. And I really don’t think I’d do your clothes justice,” he’s shy
and self depreciating and Louis finds it adorable.

“Listen Harry, I’m not really the type of guy who takes no for an answer. I don’t want to be too
forward but I’ve decided you’ll be perfect and I’m asking you nicely,” Louis says with a playful
smile.

Harry blushes and looks down at his hands on the table, “I don’t want to let you down,” he says
quietly.

Louis is a little thrown off by the genuine concern in the boys voice. Louis realizes he isn’t saying no
because he doesn’t want to, or he has something better to do, he sounds genuinely worried that he
won’t do well enough. It is absolutely endearing.
“Hey mate,” Louis says so Harry looks up at him, “you’ll be perfect.”

“He’ll do it,” the blonde says brightly, both Louis and Harry raise their eyebrows at him, “right Haz? Tell him you’ll do it.”

Louis grins and looks at Harry, “okay, I’ll do it,” Harry says, with a sheepish smile.

Louis claps his hands together, “great! That’s awesome! Give me your number so I can tell you when to come to the studio for fitting,” he says.

When he’s taken down Harry’s phone number he thanks him again. He also finds out the blonde boy is called Niall and thanks him for helping convince Harry. He leaves Harry looking like he’s wondering what he’s gotten himself into. Louis is grinning from ear to ear when he goes to the table Zayn and Liam are at. They look up from their own little world when he pulls out a chair beside them.

“I’ve found my model!” Louis says happily.

“Who?” Zayn asks excitedly.

“A first year named Harry Styles. He’s perfect; his legs are so long and thin and he’s got torso for ages,” Louis explains.

“How’d you convince him?” Liam asks, relieved to see his best friend less stressed.

“I was pretty persistent,” Louis shrugs, “but now that I’ve solved that dilemma my mind is clear so I’m going to the studio to work for a bit. See you lads at home.”

He bids them goodbye and then hurries out of the cafeteria, feeling light with relief. The lightness turns out to be from hunger though, and by the time Louis gets to the studio his heart is racing and he feels dizzy. He digs around in his bag until he finds the plastic bag of celery sticks he packed in the morning. He munches on them while he sketches and downs a bottle of water to help fill his stomach. He can’t stop himself from thinking of how beautiful Harry was up close, all red lips and white teeth and eyes so green and warm.
“Lou where are you going I made breakfast!” Zayn exclaims from beside the stove.

Liam looks up from the newspaper and frowns as Louis slips his shoes on. He knows Zayn made breakfast, he could smell the bacon all the way in his room. It was painful how loud his stomach cried for it. He had to bury his nose in his pillow just to get away from the scent, had to chug the glass of water beside his bed to try and trick his stomach.

“Sorry mate, I want to get some time in the studio before first period. I’m going to grab an egg sandwich when I get my tea,” Louis lies.

“Might as well just set up a cot in the studio, we never see you these days,” Liam sighs.

Louis feels a twinge of guilt, “I know, I’m sorry. It’s just the show is coming up and-“

“We know, we know. It’s okay bebz just promise you’ll be home for dinner?” Zayn says pleadingly.

Louis forces a smile and nods, “for sure, I promise,” he says.

“Okay, drive safe,” Liam grins.

Louis waves over his shoulder and leaves the flat, his smile drops as soon as he’s in the hall. Being home for dinner means eating a meal. He’ll have to restrict intake for the day now, because even though he’ll purge everything he eats he has to account for the calories that will be absorbed before he can casually make his way to the bathroom after dinner. That means no milk in his tea and he definitely can’t have the two sections of the mandarin orange in his messenger bag that he was going to allow himself.

He really wishes his complex had an elevator, because even though he’s only going down the stairs his knees are already aching a bit. Sometimes he has to sit and take a break half way through on the way up. When he finally gets down to his car he cranks the heat and fiddles with the radio until he finds a decent station. He doesn’t really have anything to do at the studio but he needed an excuse not to sit and eat breakfast with them.

When he arrives there are a few students milling around the hallways but he doesn’t run into anyone he knows as he grabs a tea and heads to the studio. He goes straight to the three mannequins by the window, fingering the light fabric of the t-shirt under the blazer and adjusting the neck of the sweater. For the millionth time since he first laid eyes on Harry in the hall Louis’ mind flits to the image of the boy in the tweed pants that he’s spent so many hours on.

Then Louis has a moment of uncertainty, because maybe Harry will have changed his mind. Maybe he’s just one of those people who can’t say no face to face and when Louis texts him this morning he’ll make up some excuse and get out of it. Louis stomach churns unpleasantly as he hurries to his messenger bag to find his phone. He thinks for a moment before he composes the text.

‘Hey Harry, it’s Louis Tomlinson. Hope you’re still willing to help me for the fashion show, just wondering when you’d be able to meet up?’

He sends it out and sets down his phone because it isn’t even eight in the morning and he doesn’t expect a reply until later. He’s only just turned away to go get his sketchpad when his phone dings in response.
‘If you still want me I’m still willing. I’m on my way to school now actually, or I’ve got free period second, or over lunch, or after school, whatever works for you.’

Louis smiles a little at the text, the boy certainly is accommodating and the hint of self depreciation is cute. He’s relieved. It would have been so easy for Harry to say ‘oh sorry I’m actually not going to be able to do it.’ He doesn’t owe Louis anything, doesn’t even know Louis. But here he is, offering up every spare moment he has.

‘You’re up mighty early, I’m not interrupting your study time? And I’m already at school if you want to pop into the studio now, but if not I have a free period second as well.’

Again the response comes within the minute.

‘I go for a run in the mornings and Niall bitches if I hang around the dorm after, while he’s trying to sleep, so I’m free right now. Can I bring you a coffee or a muffin or something?’

Louis stomach is begging him to say yes, writhing upon itself, pleading for some sort of sustenance, but Louis is good at ignoring his stomach.

‘No I’m good thanks, see you soon.’

Louis goes to his corner of the studio and gathers the things he’ll need to fit Harry. He rolls the three mannequins over to his work bench and takes out his pincushion and measuring tape. He vaguely wonders what Harry will think of his designs. Yesterday the boy was just wearing jeans and a band t-shirt and Louis guesses he isn’t the type of guy who puts much thought into what he wears. Louis figures he’s one of those effortless types, someone who could throw on a poncho and look amazing.

Louis is not one of those types. He stood naked in his closet for far too long trying desperately to find something that wouldn’t show his fat rolls. He had settled on an oversized baby blue jumper and a grey pair of trousers that didn’t cling to his legs. He had rolled up the cuffs of the trousers and then made his way to the bathroom to coax his hair into its usual feathery quiff. When he looked at himself in the mirror his first instinct was to shove his fingers down his throat to try and get rid of some of the extra pudge lingering around his jaw line, but there was nothing in his stomach to expel.

Louis is bent over his sketch book when there is a light knock on the door. Harry pushes the door open and steps into the studio, smiling brightly. He wears a pair of black jeans, a loose grey button up and a navy blue snapback positioned backwards on top of his head. Louis’ eyes linger on the few curls that are loose at the sides of his face, before meeting Harry’s bright eyes. He’s definitely an effortless beauty. Louis returns the smile and gestures the boy over.

“I brought you something anyway, I always get a mocha so I got you the same and I got us both a scone, hope you like that?” he asks hesitantly.

For the first time Louis notices the tray with two cups, and two paper bags that Harry holds in one hand, the other hand holding onto the strap of his backpack. Louis stomach twists. It would be so easy to say no thanks, make up some lie about not liking what he’s chosen, pretend he just had a huge breakfast. Except Harry is looking at him with those huge green eyes; so innocently hopeful.

“That’s nice of you, thanks,” Louis says, with a smile.

For the first time Louis notices the tray with two cups, and two paper bags that Harry holds in one hand, the other hand holding onto the strap of his backpack. Louis stomach twists. It would be so easy to say no thanks, make up some lie about not liking what he’s chosen, pretend he just had a huge breakfast. Except Harry is looking at him with those huge green eyes; so innocently hopeful.

“That’s nice of you, thanks,” Louis says, with a smile.

He clears off a corner of the work table for Harry to set down the tray. Harry grins, looking relieved and slips off his backpack. Louis pulls up and extra stool and Harry sits down, folding his long legs up so his feet rest on one of the rungs. Louis positions himself on the edge of his seat as Harry sets his cup in front of him. Louis watches his long fingers as he flattens out the paper bags to set the
Harry’s movements are slow and languid and Louis wonders if Harry would walk on the runway like that. He pictures the lanky boy striding slowly in his garments and feels himself smile.

“I really appreciate you doing this Harry,” he says.

Harry grins behind his coffee cup and shrugs as he sets it back down, “I’m flattered you asked me, though I really don’t understand why,” he says sheepishly.

“Because you’ve got the perfect body type for what I’ve designed,” Louis replies, with a shrug.

Harry shrugs in return, “well I’m happy to help then I guess.”

They exchange a smile and Louis feels Harry’s eyes on him as he hangs his head and wraps a hand around the coffee cup, trying to leech some of the warmth from it.

“So you and Niall live in the dorms?” Louis asks, making small talk while he waits for Harry to finish his breakfast.

“Yeah, just met the bloke, but turns out he’s a good guy so it worked out fine,” Harry replies.

Louis finds himself watching Harry raise the scone to his mouth, noting the way his tongue peeks out past his teeth like some sort of landing pad for his food. It makes him smile for some reason.

“Except for when he’s kicking you out of the room at seven in the morning,” Louis says playfully.

Harry lets out one of those ridiculous cackles, almost choking on his scone, and promptly smacks his hand over his mouth to stifle himself. The sight draws an involuntary laugh out of Louis in return.

“Why don’t you just go for your run later in the morning?” Louis asks.

He picks at his scone a bit, pulling bits off. To anyone it looks like he’s absentmindedly eating, picking apart his food. Nobody ever notices that none of it makes it into his mouth. Louis is good at distractions.

“I don’t know, I just wake up early, I can’t help it. Then I get antsy. I can’t just chill in bed because then I toss and turn,” Harry shrugs, “hey you haven’t even tried your coffee. Do you not like mochas?”

Louis thinks the kid looks far too disappointed in himself over something as simple as a coffee. He’s got a little frown on his full pink lips and his eyebrows pull together and up and Louis thinks its the most adorable pout he’s ever seen. Louis wonders how anybody in the entire world could ever stand to disappoint someone who could pull a face like that.

“Oh no, I love mochas, I’m just waiting for it to cool down,” Louis says for an explanation.

Harry seems satisfied with that answer and the lines between his eyebrows ease. Louis can see the whip cream fluffing through the opening of the lid. He knows just how sugary and sweet that whip cream is, let alone the chocolately concoction in the cup. He also knows it isn’t going to be easy to casually slip away to get it out of his stomach if he has a sip. He’s obsessing over the caloric content of a sip when Harry’s warm voice draws his attention.
“You look really good with your glasses on,” he says, with a shy one dimpled smile.

Louis eyebrows raise a bit in surprise as his fingers brush the black plastic frames, “thanks.”

Harry just grins, and takes another swig of his coffee. Louis busies himself with picking at his scone to hide a blush.
“Wow Louis are these what you’ve made?” Harry gasps, standing up from the work table and approaching the mannequins.

Louis watches for a moment as Harry circles them, his mouth hanging open slightly and his eyebrows raised. His long fingers brush at the collar of the peacoat, he bends down to get a better look at the jeans. He tests the knit of the cowl neck sweater against the back of his hand, lets out a little ‘wow’ as he thumbs the detailing on the hips of the tweed trousers.

“Louis,” he murmurs, straightening up and circling round the back of the mannequins, “I mean, I figured you were good but wow.”

Louis is sure he must be an unpleasant scarlet colour as he stands up, “thanks,” he says with a shy smile.

“I love herringbone,” Harry mumbles more to himself as he lifts the sweater to look at the waistband of the trousers.

“Didn’t figure you for the type of guy who’d be able to distinguish between tweed patterns,” Louis says, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice.

Harry looks up and shrugs sheepishly, “I like fashion,” he admits, moving on to the jeans, “every year I save up and take my sister to the Burberry winter show for her birthday.”

“Wow, thats really sweet of you,” Louis says quietly.

Harry chuckles, “well its not like I can get us front row or anything and it’s a bit selfish because I love it as much as her.”

“No, it’s really sweet,” Louis states, “I feel like I’ve misjudged you, I took you as more of a casual dresser.”

“Nice clothes are expensive,” Harry shrugs, “but I can clean up well when I have to,” he adds playfully.

Louis laughs, “yeah mate, I don’t doubt that,” he says easily.

Harry looks up with a very distinct blush on his cheeks and grins bashfully. Louis thinks it’s adorable. He watches as Harry wanders over to the other mannequins on the other side of the work table, taking in the gown and cocktail dress.

“Are these yours too?” Harry asks.

“Yeah I’ve got seven women’s looks as well,” Louis replies, “my friends Hannah and Sadie are wearing them for me.”

“You’re so talented,” Harry says.

“Thank you Harry,” Louis says shyly, “I’m glad you like what you’re going to have to wear.”

Harry laughs, “everything you’ve made is something I’d buy if I saw it in a shop,” he says sincerely as he circles back to the three mens outfits.
Louis smiles, “they’re going to look great on you,” he says.

“I hope so. I’m a little nervous to be honest,” Harry frowns, going back for a sip of his coffee.

“Nervous of what?” Louis asks.

“I’m kind of knock-kneed, I don’t want to fall on my face on the runway or whatever and blow it,” Harry says softly, avoiding Louis eyes by taking a bite of his scone.

“Well I don’t see that happening but if it does I promise I won’t be mad,” Louis replies playfully.

He’s rewarded with Harry’s lopsided grin, “okay thanks,” he laughs.

“No worries,” Louis smiles.

Harry’s eyes linger on Louis for a moment and Louis’ linger on Harry, taking in the bow that his top lip forms, the little freckle on his left cheek below the corner of his lip, the darker ring of green circling the jade colour of his iris. Harry blushes and looks away first and it makes Louis a little curious.

“You never told me what you’re in school for,” Louis says, having to hop up a little to get onto his stool.

Harry sits down easily on his stool, “I’m a science major, so my course load is just boring science classes, like chem, bio, physics. I haven’t decided what I want to do yet but a Bachelor of Science is pretty much good for anything,” he shrugs.

“Science is your passion?” Louis asks.

Harry shakes his head, “no science is just easy.”

“So what are you passionate about Harry?” Louis wonders.

Harry seems to ponder that for a long time before he shrugs and shakes his head. Louis frowns, he can’t decide whether the boy just genuinely doesn’t think he has a passion or maybe he’s too shy to say. There’s a spark in Harry’s eyes though, and it makes Louis curious.

“There must be something. I’ve shown you mine,” Louis says gently, gesturing vaguely at the mannequins.

Harry meets Louis’ eyes for a fleeting second and then shrugs again, “I like to sing. But you can’t make a career out of that unless you’re amazing and I’m definitely not. So it’s a hobby. I don’t know if that counts.”

Louis kind of wants to reach out and raise Harry’s chin so he’ll meet his eyes but he doesn’t, “and when you’re singing does it feel like everything kind of just drifts away and that’s all that matters for a bit?” he asks.

Harry nods, “yeah,” he affirms.

“Then that definitely counts as a passion,” Louis says.

Harry looks up and gives a shy smile. Louis smiles in return and wonders when the last time he smiled this much was. Harry asks about Louis then, and Louis explains that he shares a flat with his best mates Zayn and Liam. Harry asks about the fashion show and Louis tells him that its three days, the first years each get to show one garment, second years get to show three and third years get to
show a full collection.

Harry asks to see his entire collection so Louis leads him over to his corner of the studio where his garments are all on hangers separated by which model will be wearing them. Louis has never been and will never be one of those people who receives compliments well, he’s always unsure of whether people mean them or whether they just feel required to give them. He’s always struggled with believing people when they say nice things about him and by extension his designs.

There is something so different about Harry though. Louis thinks maybe Harry is one of the most genuine people he’s ever met. The way his eyes light up with something like awe as he examines each piece, the way he mumbles observations about each detail as if he doesn’t even mean for Louis to hear. Each time he raises his eyes to Louis and says something about how beautiful the top is or how well made the skirt is there is a sincerity in those big green eyes that kind of throws Louis off.

Louis blushes a lot and he thinks he says ‘thanks Harry’ too much but he doesn’t really know what else to say. He really means it though, he really is thankful for Harry’s kind words and for Harry’s sincerity and for Harry’s interest in the things he’s spent so much time on. Louis decides that Harry is just kind, and it’s nice, the sincerity is nice.

They end up back at the work table and Harry asks how Louis finds time to put so much detail into so many pieces. Louis admits he doesn’t really do much besides work on his clothes and school. He feels a little lame because he used to party but he never really feels like it these days. Harry just shrugs and says Niall’s his only friend in all of London so his social calendar is empty too.

Somehow they end up on the subject of interests and find they both love football. Louis says he used to play but doesn’t anymore because he’s out of shape. It’s a quiet admission and he’s a little surprised when it comes out of his mouth but Harry just says he wishes he could play but he wasn’t joking when he said he has two left feet. Louis finds out that Harry loves to cook and Harry finds out that Louis likes to play the piano, though Louis insists he’s no good and only does it for fun. They get on the subject of family and Louis loves the way Harry almost seems to brag about his mum and sister and step father, it shows how much he loves them and he thinks a nice boy like Harry deserves to have a nice family.

When its Louis’ turn to talk about his family he feels a smile on his face as he talks about his sisters but it falters a little when he mentions his mum and her new husband. He changes the subject quickly because he hasn’t been home in years and he misses the girls so much that he can feel it in his chest. He doesn’t tell Harry that though, he just makes a joke about how sometimes Zayn and Liam feel like his little brothers and Harry says he can relate because Niall is a handful.

Both of them are kind of shocked when Louis glances at the clock and realizes there is only ten minutes until the bell rings for their first period. Louis doesn’t even remember the last time he’s had a conversation this easy with anyone other than Zayn or Liam. Usually when he talks to his classmates he’s pretending to care what they say and being polite. It’s different with Harry, he thinks maybe Harry could read the dictionary and he would still listen. It’s been a really long time since Louis met someone that he’s clicked with like this. He only hopes he hasn’t bored Harry to death.

“I’m really sorry, we didn’t even get one outfit tried on for fitting,” Louis frowns.

Harry laughs and shakes his head, “it’s no big deal, it was worth it to get to know you a little better. If you like I can come back second period?”

Louis blushes, because there is that sincerity again, “you wouldn’t mind? I could even just fit you and pin everything and then you could come back later to try the garments on again when I’m done, that way you don’t have to waste your whole period in here?”
“It’s not a waste Louis,” Harry says earnestly, “really I don’t mind. Maybe I could just bring my textbooks and work on some Bio homework in here with you? I promise I won’t distract you.”

He has that innocent hopefulness in his eyes again and Louis realizes he really wouldn’t mind Harry staying at all. Louis doesn’t even think he would mind if Harry did end up distracting him.

“Sure, if you want to,” Louis says, smiling a little.

“Great. I’ll be off but I’ll see you in a bit yeah?” Harry beams, standing up and pulling on his backpack.

“See you,” Louis replies, with a little wave of his hand.

Harry turns to leave but he glances over his shoulder, “you better finish that scone,” he says, adding a cheeky grin.

Louis blushes and forces a smile, “I will.”

Harry gives a little nod and heads to the door. Louis watches him walk away and Harry is a little bit pigeon toed but Louis decides there is something graceful and easy about the boys long strides. Harry glances back once before he exits, his eyes meet Louis’ and he flashes possibly the sweetest smile Louis has ever seen, and then he’s gone.

Louis lets out a little sigh as he gathers up Harry’s empty cup, his full one and the remainder of his picked at scone to take to the bin. He feels bad throwing away the things Harry brought for him, which is strange because Louis should feel relieved that he made it through the morning without ingesting anything. Maybe it’s because Louis could tell that Harry doesn’t have extra money kicking around and he certainly shouldn’t be spending it on food Louis isn’t going to eat. Or maybe it’s because of that little look Harry got in his eye, like he really just wanted to please Louis with his offering. He does feel guilty, but he still throws it out, regardless of the way his body begs him not to.

As Louis cleans up his work table and rolls away his mannequins he finds himself glad that they didn’t rush through the fitting. He’s glad he got to know a little bit about the boy. Louis doesn’t really know why Harry would want to spend his morning in the studio with him, but he figures he must be a little lonely. Louis knows how that feels, because maybe he’s a little lonely too. But maybe he felt a little less lonely with that dimpled smile directed at him.
When Louis gets to the studio after first period there are a few other students tidying up their work stations and they all exclaim hello’s at him. The professor offers him a warm smile and follows him over to his station.

“Everything is coming along beautifully Louis,” she says, brushing her fingers along the knit of one of the dresses.

“Thanks Ms. Schinnour. I’ve found my male model,” Louis tells her, a little excitedly.

“Oh thank heavens, have you fit him yet?” she says.

“He’s supposed to be coming in this period,” he explains.

“Wonderful,” she beams, squeezing his shoulder gently, “I’ve got to go but I’ll see you in fourth.”

Louis says goodbye and begins gathering the things he’ll need to fit Harry. Louis is the only person allowed to be in the studio without supervision. It’s the smallest one on campus and Ms. Schinnour only uses it two periods out of the day for her first years. Outside of those periods Louis is allowed to use it whenever he needs.

The fashion degree program is extremely selective so the first year classes usually only have about twenty students and the number dwindles down to about ten by third year. There is a large studio specifically for the students to work in during their free time but while most of them thrive in the group work space, Louis always felt suffocated.

He won Ms. Schinnour over when he was just a first year because he’s always been so eager to learn and improve, so willing to accept criticism and use it to better himself. He’s been her pride and joy ever since and when she saw him struggling with all the chattering that is constant in the group studio she offered him the free space. She’s been nothing but kind to Louis and he credits her for keeping him going when he hits patches of feeling painfully uncreative and horribly self loathing, though he’d never admit the latter to anyone.

Eventually the last of the first years have gone and Louis is alone in the room, stripping the outfits off of the mannequins for when Harry arrives to try them on. He spent the better part of first period replaying his time with Harry over in his head. He is still surprised with how easy the conversation flowed, how freely his smiles came.

Liam is on the football team and he has tons of mates from that, Zayn has his friends that he skateboards with and his friends from his classes. Louis only has Liam and Zayn. He has tons of people that he’s friendly with, who he could call his friends if he wanted to, but he just doesn’t connect with people easily. It’s different with Harry though.

“Hey Lou,” comes the deep warm voice from the doorway.

Louis turns and smiles, “hey, thanks for coming,” he says.

“More than happy to,” Harry replies, coming over and dropping his backpack on the floor.

“Do you know you’ve got a slash of pen ink across you chin?” Louis asks causally, trying not to laugh.
Harry’s cheeks flush a lovely red colour as he begins rubbing vigorously at his chin, “I have a horrible habit of chewing the end of my pen and sometimes I go for the wrong end by mistake, please don’t judge me,” he groans.

Louis laughs and shakes his head, “okay I won’t. You’ve got it now, stop before you rub the skin off your chin.”

Harry grins at him sheepishly and rubs the back of his neck, “wonder how many people laughed at me while I was walking through the hall,” he laughs.

“Only a few I’m sure,” Louis says with a casual wave of his hand, “how was your class?”

“Boring,” Harry shrugs, “just Chem. What did you have?”

“Perspectives,” Louis replies, “just analyzing fashion and design around the world and such. It’s a good class.”

“Sounds interesting,” Harry nods, watching as Louis continues to strip down the mannequins.

“So you want to try this stuff on and I’ll pin and mark?” Louis asks.

“Sure, what first?” Harry replies, stepping forward.

“The tweed trousers,” Louis replies, because he knows they’ll be the hardest to fit.

Harry slips his shoes off and Louis has every intention of handing Harry the pants and stepping away to give him privacy but then Harry is unbuttoning his jeans. In an instant he’s peeling himself out of the tight black denim and then he is standing in front of Louis in a pair of black boxer briefs.

Harry stands there with such an easy confidence, hand scratching lazily at one of his porcelain coloured thighs where there is a light dusting of hair. The hair gets darker and a bit thicker down at his calves and his toes turn just slightly inwards. He clearly has zero issues being half naked in front of someone he’s only just met and Louis envies it so much. Louis can’t even stand seeing himself half naked, he spends so much time making sure his clothes are loose enough to hide his fat, the thought of being half naked in front of another person literally makes the back of his throat itch. Louis understands why Harry is so confident though, maybe he would be too if his legs were pure lean muscle and a mile long.

Keeping his face casually expressionless and averting his eyes from the bulge in Harry’s boxer briefs, he hands Harry the trousers. He gets them on and fumbles with the zipper and button for a second before he waits to be inspected. Louis bends down to get a better look as he circles around Harry, taking in the pants as they sheath Harry’s legs. He lifts up Harry’s shirt just enough to see the waistband of the pants.

His focus is drawn when Harry sighs, “I don’t look good enough in them do I?” and even though Louis is behind him analyzing the pants he can hear the frown in Harry’s voice, “they’re such nice trousers and I probably make them look wonky don’t I? You can say, I promise I won’t be offended if you want to find another model,” he says quietly, sounding utterly disappointed in himself.

Louis frown deepens as he circles around so he can see Harry’s face. He really hates the frown he finds there. Harry should never have to frown like that, like he’s disappointed in himself.

“Harry what are you talking about? Why do you think they look wonky on you?” Louis asks.

Harry’s head hangs, “because you’re frowning,” he mumbles.
Louis kind of wants to laugh at him but he stops himself. He just looks so adorably contrite, as if he feels like he’s failed Louis and that is the last thing in the world he wanted to do. It’s strange to Louis and he doesn’t really understand at all why Harry seems to care so much.

“Harry that is just my face when I’m focused,” Louis laughs, “actually I’m really surprised. They look like they fit you perfectly. I was sure I would have to take them in or let them out to get the right fit but they look exactly how they’re supposed to. How do they feel?”

“They feel perfect,” Harry says quickly, “you actually think they look okay?”

Louis laughs again and nods, “yeah come see,” he says, leading Harry over to the full length mirror along the wall.

Louis watches as Harry lifts his shirt to see the waistband and does a full turn, analyzing the pants from every angle. Louis takes in the way the trousers skim Harry’s ass perfectly, hug his thighs just right, sit perfectly on his hips. It’s almost insane how well they fit the boy.

Harry’s eyes are bright as he turns to face Louis, “they’re so nice Louis, holy shit,” Harry says sounding awed, “like the detail and the cut and the pattern of the tweed.”

Louis cheeks warm, “thanks Harry,” he says, “I still have to hem them obviously, I left the cuffs unfinished because I didn’t know how tall the model would be, but I guess I don’t really have to do any other alterations.”

“I’m glad I fit them okay,” Harry says.

“I told you that you would be perfect. Now for the actual show do you have a pair of plain black dress shoes, like nothing too fancy, just plain?” Louis asks.

“Yeah I do,” Harry confirms.

Louis nods, “Do you think maybe instead of doing the cuffs of the pants now you could bring in those shoes another day, whenever works for you, and I could hem the pants so they’re the right length when you’re wearing those shoes?”

“Yeah for sure, sounds good,” Harry agrees, grinning and finally turning away from the mirror.

“Great. Do you want to try on the sweater that goes with the pants?” he asks as he goes back to the work station.

When he turns back around with the black cowel neck sweater in his hands Harry already has his shirt half unbuttoned. Louis eyes slide across the milky white skin of Harry’s chest and graze the ridges of his defined abs. As Harry pulls his arms from the sleeves Louis’ eyes trace the sharp cut of his v-line where the trousers hang on his hips and he notes the bulge of his biceps.

“Yes I do have four nipples, I know it’s weird,” Harry laughs as he folds up his shirt.

Louis notices the two extra dark spots and shrugs, “unique,” he corrects, with a smile.

Harry chuckles, “okay we’ll go with that,” he says.

Again Harry stands in front of Louis half naked and completely at ease. He takes the sweater from Louis’ hands and pulls it over his head slowly and carefully. Louis thinks maybe there was a time when he would be able to admire the way Harry’s muscles stretch and flex as he raises his arms above his head, he thinks there was a time when he would have been tempted to use his teeth to mar
that silky skin with purple and blue.

Now though, he kind of just wants to curl up inside himself. There is Harry, who looks like he’s been chiselled from granite and painted in ivory, and then there is him, short and fat and plain and fat. So Louis doesn’t think about how he wishes Harry would strip down and let Louis touch every single inch of him. Louis thinks about how he wishes Harry would hurry up and get that sweater on before he tries to claw out the back of his throat when the itch to purge becomes too much.

Finally Harry has the thick, warm sweater on and Louis steps forward to adjust the neck. Louis is at eye level with Harry’s chest and Harry looks down at him and smiles, a stray curl falling in his face. Louis smiles in return but focuses on making sure the sleeves are the correct length and the hem of the sweater hits at the right place.

“What do you think?” he asks as he leads Harry back to the mirror.

Harry pauses to observe himself, turning and looking over his shoulder at the back. The tweed looks charcoal from a distance, only up close can you see the herringbone pattern, and the black of the knit contrasts nicely. The neck of the sweater hangs loose, showing just a bit of Harry’s neck and collarbones.

“I honestly don’t even know what to say Lou. This looks like something that should already be being sold in shops,” Harry says, running a large hand down the arm of the sweater.

Louis doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to the sincerity in Harry’s voice, “no, but thank you,” he says, “I’m glad you like it.”

Harry turns to face Louis, “no I’m serious Louis, you’re amazing.”

“Thanks,” he says, his voice coming out a little quieter than he means it to.

Harry just smiles and Louis smiles in return. They decide to try on the pea coat and thin legged trousers next. The hunger pains are pretty bad as Louis makes his way back to the work station and he digs around in his bag for a bottle of water. While Harry is changing Louis chugs the water to try and get his stomach to stop writhing.

In the end everything looks amazing on Harry, as Louis knew it would. The black trousers need to be let out a bit in the crotch area but that is an easy fix because Louis can just loosen the dart stitches at the hips. The double breasted pea coat fits perfectly and Louis just needs to go looking for the perfect buttons. The jeans are a little loose because its harder to let out denim so Louis had left them bigger. He pins them to fit Harry’s lean legs. The t-shirt fits perfectly, the scoop neck showing off the angles of Harry’s collarbones.

Louis cant stop smiling when Harry puts on the blazer. It is by far his favourite piece and it fits Harry so perfectly its unreal. As Louis watches his vision for the runway show come together the excitement almost feels like it fills the cavernous emptiness in his stomach. By the time Harry has tried everything on and Louis has done all the pinning the period is almost over. Harry changes back into his clothes while Louis carefully hangs the garments.

“Thank you so much Harry, you’re a perfect fit and thank you for helping me,” Louis says, as Harry pulls on his backpack.

“I’m really glad everything is going to fit. Honestly though Lou you’re so talented I cant even get over how amazing everything you make is,” Harry shakes his head, his eyes wide and his voice sincere.
“Thanks Harry, but seriously you have to stop telling me how good I am or my neck isn’t going to be able to support my big head,” Louis says jokingly, even as his cheeks flush.

Harry smiles softly and shakes his head, “I’ll stop telling you how amazing you are when you stop looking like you don’t believe me when I say it,” he chuckles softly when Louis looks at the ground and his cheeks darken a shade, “like that,” he says.

Louis laughs a little and shakes his head, “Alright Harry. I’ll text you when I’m finished the alterations yeah? So we can figure a time for you to come with the shoes for me to measure the hems?”

“Sure, how long do you think the other alterations take you?” Harry asks.

“Well I’ve got to finish up the girls changes too so probably a couple days,” Louis guesses, “but now that you’re all fitted there isn’t much rush because the show isn’t for a couple weeks.”

“Oh,” Harry says, rubbing the back of his neck, “will I get to see you before that?”

Louis almost says ‘I’m sure I’ll see you in the halls or something’ but then he stops himself. Harry has his bottom lip held in his teeth and he’s got that hopeful expression on his face again. Louis reminds himself that maybe Harry is a little lonely, he only knows Niall after all.

“Well you know where to find me if you’re ever bored during second period,” Louis says with a shrug.

Harry’s face literally lights up and it makes Louis smile, “awesome,” he says, “see you tomorrow Lou.”

Louis smiles and gives a little wave, watching Harry walk to the door. Again Harry glances back in the doorway and Louis is rewarded with that sweet smile that automatically draws a smile of his own to his lips. Louis has noticed that Harry carries a sort of glow around him, a warmth that seeps into Louis’ bones with every one of his raucous laughs, each one of his kind smiles. The glow leaves with Harry though and Louis is left feeling cold and empty as he packs up his things for his next class.
Chapter 6

By the time the bell rings at the end of the day Louis is almost a little scared to drive home. He knows that Liam had last period free so he’s been home cooking. Louis knows he is going to be walking in the door to a huge meal and he’s got no way out of it. He’s had nothing but water and milk free tea all day, and now he’s feeling it. His head throbs and if he stands up too quickly lights pop behind his eyes. He’s mostly used to the perpetual dizziness but its a little scary to drive when he’s feeling so light headed.

Louis can stand the hunger pains, he actually kind of likes the way his stomach aches, but he hates the heart palpitations. He can’t handle the way sometimes he’ll be sitting still and it will just kind of hit him that he can feel his heart racing in his chest. It’s strange because he feels like his heart beats so fast but it’s not a pounding or a thumping, it feels more like it’s fluttering in his chest. Sometimes he lays awake at night wondering why his heart is rabbiting when he’s been laying still for hours then he begins to wonder if maybe its just going to stop. He doesn’t necessarily think that would be a bad thing.

It isn’t that he doesn’t like his life, he knows how lucky he is to be in school for something he loves, to have a nice flat and enough money to get by, to have to friends who care about him so much and treat him so well. Louis likes his life. He just doesn’t like himself. Sometimes he just hates himself so much that he doesn’t think he deserves any of the things he has, sometimes he just hates himself so much that closing his eyes and thinking about his heart stuttering to a stop is oddly relaxing. He makes it home even with the dizziness but he has to sit on the stairs because he feels like he’s going to pass out and he knows he has to gather his energy for the lads. He walks through the door to the flat with a huge grin on his face and calls out a bright sounding hello. He finds Liam in the kitchen, turning chicken in a pan, and the smell hits Louis like a brick wall. He’s so thankful that Liam is the one cooking because he’s always liked being healthy, if it were Zayn they’d be eating something battered and greasy.

It smells so good but even though his stomach cries for it his throat is already itching, dreading the food. He’s not sure when it happened but it doesn’t take will power not to eat anymore, it takes will power to force food down his throat. His body has learned that it is just going to come back up later and his mind has learned to feel like shit about the calories and he literally just dreads it. He slides up behind Liam and rests his chin on the taller boys shoulder. Liam hums a bit and rubs his cheek against Louis’, stirring some sort of sauce.

"Smells delicious, what are you making," Louis says.

"Curry chicken and veggies," Liam replies.

Louis silently thanks the stars there are no carbs, "great," he says, "what time is Zaynie home?"

"Should be in a few, he just wanted to stop by the skate shop on his way home or something," Liam replies, "how did your fitting go?"

Louis isn’t sure why he blushes when his mind flashes to Harry but thankfully Liam is preoccupied with dinner, “it went really well. He looks great in everything. I don’t have too many alterations,” Louis says, folding himself up on one of the chairs at the table.

“And what is the guy like, what did you say his name was again?” Liam asks.
“Harry,” Louis says, and he really hopes Liam doesn’t notice the way his voice is a bit softer around the name, he clears his throat, “he’s nice.”

Liam turns to face Louis and leans back against the counter, “like nice, nice or I’ll force myself to put up with him until the fashion show is over, nice?” he enquires.

Louis laughs a little, “like nice, nice.”

Liam’s eyebrows raise a little. Louis wonders when Liam started noticing how anti social Louis has become, because the surprise on his face is brought on by the fact that Louis hasn’t shown anything more than indifference for anyone other than he and Zayn in a long time. Louis can tell Liam wants to ask more but then the front door is swinging open and letting Zayn into the flat.

“Hey bebz,” he says, dropping his book bag by the door.

“Hey,” Liam says.

“How was your day?” Louis asks, as Zayn shrugs out of his coat.

“Mundane,” Zane replies, “how was your fitting?”

“It was nice,” Liam says before Louis has opened his mouth, exchanging a meaningful look with Zayn.

Zayn’s puts in an effort to keep his expression even, “that’s good. What was your models name again?”

“Harry,” Liam supplies.

The two of them often do this, so Louis is used to it. They talk above his head with glances and expressions like a set of parents would their son. He used to fight it, telling them to stop having silent conversations about him, but he knows they just care about him a lot. He figures he’s probably a bit much for one person to handle so they have to kind of tag team it, they’re always a ‘we.’

Zayn plunks down in the chair beside Louis, “so everything went smoothly, that’s good. Harry was erm- cooperative?” he asks.

“Why don’t you two just ask what you really want to ask,” Louis says, rolling his eyes.

They exchange another loaded look over his head, apparently Zayn passes off to Liam, “nothing Lou, we’re just wondering if you’ve made a new friend,” Liam shrugs.

“What, two friends aren’t enough?” Louis asks, only half joking.

“Of course we’re enough you twat, we just worry about you when we’re busy with other shit and you’re home alone,” Zayn says.

“I don’t mind being alone,” Louis shrugs.

Another meaningful look before Liam takes over, “we know, but you used to be the one who always wanted to be out doing something with people or we’d come home to the flat full of your friends and-”

Louis forces a laugh, “I’m just older now guys, I’ve just mellowed out a bit,” he says with a shrug.

“We know, and that’s fine, we just wanted to know if maybe this Harry is a good guy or not,” Zayn
shrugs, offering a sheepish smile.

Louis resists the urge to roll his eyes, “from the two hours I spent with him he seems like a good guy,” he says, mirroring Zayn’s shrug.

“Two hours? We thought he was just going to meet you for your spare period?” Liam asks, eyebrows raised.

“He got to school early so we were going to do the fitting then but we ended up talking instead,” Louis explains.

“What did you guys talk about?” Zayn asks, failing horribly at nonchalance.

“Dad can you please tell Mum to stop fussing,” Louis says dryly.

Liam just laughs and gives Zayn another look, “go wash your hands you two, dinner is ready,” he says.

“Why am I always the Mum,” Zayn grumbles as he follows Louis to the bathroom.

Louis just laughs. After they’ve returned to the kitchen with the front of their clothes damp from fighting over the water tap they sit down as Liam brings the food to the table. Louis stomach clenches and his throat itches but he makes a big show of stating how amazing it looks. Louis has been dieting on and off for over a year now and he’s learned a few things. They started getting worried before when he’d say he wasn’t hungry, or he’d ask for smaller portions. When they got worried they started watching him, making sure he ate. That only made him have to purge all the time though, and Louis really, really hates purging. He knows how bad it is for his teeth and his throat.

He’s learned that if he talks about eating and doesn’t mention wanting to diet they just take his word for it that he’s stuffed his face at school on his spare, or grabbed a burger on the way home. It’s convenient because their schedules don’t match up enough for them to know he’s lying and then he only has to purge when he can’t get around eating with them. Louis has also learned how to get away with eating a lot less when he is forced to eat in front of them. He keeps them talking, keeps them distracted, while he makes himself look busy cutting up his chicken or scooping up his vegetables. They don’t even notice how he holds his fork by his mouth a lot, as if he’s about to take a bite, but the fork never really makes it into his mouth.

Eventually though it always gets to a point where Liam and Zayn are almost done eating and they’ll start looking to Louis’ plate to see if he’s almost done too. Louis knows if he doesn’t get some of his food cleared by that point they’ll start asking why he’s eating so slow and if he’s feeling okay and he doesn’t want that. So he eats. He cuts tiny little pieces of his chicken and stabs the smallest vegetables on his plate and puts them in his mouth and chews. He chews until each bite is completely pulverized so that the food will hurt less coming up.

His stomach is thankful for the food until about five bites in. He’s so hungry and the food tastes so good but he’s so used to having such small portions that by the time Louis has had six bites he feels like he is going to explode. He wants to stop, he needs to stop eating, but he can’t, because the boys will be finishing up soon and wondering why the hell Louis has barely touched his food. He can practically feel the food sticking to the walls of his stomach and he feels repulsive and disgusting and he has to force himself to raise the fork to his mouth each time.

He acts animated and happy and takes the piss out of the boys and listens to them talk about their day and nobody would know that his skin is literally crawling as he chews each bite. This loud, funny
guy used to be him, he used to love being surrounded by people, used to love being the centre of attention. As he forces himself to swallow he thinks about when that changed. When he started hating having peoples eyes on him, when he started wanting to be alone, when he started hating himself. He smiles and he laughs and he chews and he-swallows but he’s aching, he’s itching to be on his knees on the bathroom floor.

Finally Zayn and Liam are finishing up and Louis plate is clear enough to pass. He starts raving about how amazing it was, complimenting Liam on the spices and saying how stuffed he is, all the while subtly gathering the plates before the boys bother taking a look at his. He busies himself with clearing the chicken bones off of their plates and the remaining food off of his while the other two finish their beers and discuss which movie they should all watch.

“Thanks so much for dinner Li, it was delicious,” Louis says, “you guys pick a movie I’m going to take a shower and then I’ll join you, yeah?”

They don’t think anything of it because Louis always has his showers after dinner and he’s able to slip away while they’re still laughing in the kitchen. He goes to his room and he grabs a pair of his sleeping sweatpants and a over sized pullover hoodie before slipping into the bathroom and locking the door. It’s practically ritual for him at this point. He turns the shower on hot to steam up the room, and then he clicks to the music on his iPhone and turns it all the way up, setting it on the counter. The boys don’t question that either because Louis always has music playing while he showers.

When the mirror is steamed up enough that he doesn’t risk catching sight of himself he slowly strips off his clothes. He washes his hands, since his fingers will be down his throat in a moment. When that is done he slowly lowers himself to the ground, into position, his knees on either side of the toilet, the seat and the lid raised up, one arm supporting himself against the porcelain. He’s quiet now, he can do it without making loud gags or coughing and sputtering, but the running water and music make one hundred percent sure nobody will hear him.

He takes one last deep breath, reminds himself that it’s worth it and opens his mouth. With practiced ease he reaches two fingers towards his throat and he strokes at the back of his mouth, almost lovingly, coaxing. He clenches his stomach and triggers his gag reflex and it only takes a few times before he can feel it coming up. It’s like he’s coaxing the food back up, easing it out of his throat and into the toilet. The acid burns his throat and no matter how well he chews there are always chunks, but as the vomit rushes up and pours out of his mouth he feels better even though it feels disgusting. The ease with which he can make his stomach expel it’s contents is almost that of a mother bird regurgitating food for her babies. He draws it up over and over, from his stomach, out his mouth. He hardly pauses to breathe and the only sound is the puke splashing into the toilet. Tears streak his cheeks and his throat burns but with each round of vomit he feels a little lighter. He retches and retches until the vomit stops coming and a long stream of saliva hangs from his lip as he tries to breathe. The saliva is tinged with blood but that is normal for him, it means he’s almost done.

On shaky legs he stands and grabs the cup he keeps by the sink. He fills it up three times, chugging each cupfull, before he kneels by the toilet again. The first time he makes himself throw up the water there is still a little food mixed in. The third and fourth times nothing but clear liquid comes, until finally he is just making himself dry heave.

He sits for a while, just trying to regain his breath and calm the clenching and unclenching of his stomach muscles. His throat is on fire and his eyes are puffy from the tears but he feels empty, and after the torture of shovelling food into his mouth empty is the best feeling in the world. Eventually he flushes the toilet and then steps into the shower to wash off the stench of vomit and self loathing. He rinses his mouth out and spits a few times. He can’t brush his teeth right away because after the
acidity of his vomit the toothpaste will strip his enamel, if he waits a bit before he brushes his teeth aren’t as sensitive the next day.

After his shower he pulls on his baggy clothes and brushes his teeth and heads out to the living room to hang out with the boys. He fits easily between Liam and Zayn on the couch, his cheek pressed to Zayn’s shoulder and his legs pulled up to his chest. Zayn’s arm wraps around his shoulders and Liam’s wraps around Zayn so they form a sort of knot. It’s familiar and comfortable and Louis feels safe and at home while they watch a movie they’ve all seen a million times. Louis feels okay until Liam and Zayn declare its time for bed and he crawls into his bed alone. He pulls his knees up to his chest and falls asleep fighting back the tears, but thats nothing new for Louis.
Louis is pouring over his laptop, working on his design history homework, when there is a soft knock at the door. He raises his head as Harry pushes it open, and gives a little wave with his big square hand. It’s strange how the warmth he brings in the room with him reaches Louis almost instantaneously. Louis finds himself smiling.

“Hi Lou,” Harry says, approaching the work station.

“Hey, how’re you,” Louis replies.

“I’m good, you alright?” he says, still standing a little hesitantly.

“I’m good,” Louis nods.

“I know you were probably just being nice when you said I could come find you but I usually just sit in my truck and study so I thought maybe- you know, if I promise not to annoy you I could study in here- with you?” he says, hopeful face on again.

Louis shrugs, “sure Harry, if you want to.”

“Really? You don’t mind?” Harry asks, still gripping the straps of his backpack.

“No,” Louis laughs, “I don’t mind. I’m just doing homework.”

Harry grins and sheds his bag. Today he wears another pair of impossibly tight black jeans and a grey t-shirt that is much too large for him. It has a small red heart on the pocket over the left side of his chest with the word ‘lover’ written in it. His chocolate brown curls are swooped across his head like the first day Louis saw him. There are three other stools around the work station but Harry walks straight to the one beside Louis and sits down. He opens his backpack and pulls out a physics textbook and a notebook.

“What did you do last night?” Harry asks, as he flips the pages of his textbook.

“Not much, just dinner and watched a movie with the lads,” Louis shrugs, “you?”

“Nialler forced me to go to the pub with him for dinner but I left pretty early. He didn’t get in until about three I think,” Harry replies.

“What was he doing at a pub until three on a Wednesday?” Louis laughs.

“I doubt he stayed at the pub, he probably went home with some bird,” Harry rolls his eyes at that, “I love the guy but he’s a bit of a slag, coming home at three is pretty regular for him.”

Louis gives a small chuckle, “well you’re young that’s what you guys are supposed to be doing I suppose,” he says.

Harry shakes his head, “nah, I’m not the random hookup type,” he says, “I’m a bit of a hopeless romantic.”

Louis hums, “that must be nice.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asks.
“Liam’s the same way. I always tell him its a luxury to be able to be a romantic, it means you haven’t been made cynical,” Louis replies easily, “hold onto that as long as you can.”

He was scrolling absentmindedly through the notes on his laptop but he looks up when he feels Harry’s eyes on him. Harry’s eyebrows are pulled together and he has on a slight frown. His elbow is propped on the desk, his cheek resting against his fist and he stares at Louis while he nibbles a bit on one of his knuckles. Louis feels his cheeks warm and he raises an eyebrow.

“Cynical?” Harry asks.

“Believing that people are motivated by self interest; distrustful of human sincerity or integrity,” Louis recites from some dictionary definition he’d read once.

“I know what cynical means Lou,” Harry says with a small smile, but he frowns again, “so you are then?”

“I am what?” Louis frowns.

“Cynical.”

Louis shrugs, “I’m definitely not a hopeless romantic,” he says.

Harry goes back to chewing on his knuckle. He’s still looking at Louis but Louis doesn’t have anything else to say so he returns his eyes to his laptop. Neither of them say anything for a while, but Louis can feel Harry’s eyes on him. When Harry breaks the silence his voice is gentle, laced with a note of curiosity.

“Why are you cynical Lou?” he asks.

Louis blanches at the question, raising his eyes to meet Harry’s, “bit of a personal question innit?” he tries to keep his voice light but fails.

Harry’s cheeks colour but he doesn’t break the gaze, “sorry. I mean, it just seems like a shame,” he bites his lip and looks down at the table.

“What seems like a shame?” Louis asks, taking in the way Harry’s eyelashes fan across his cheeks.

When Harry looks up his eyes are intense, “you deserve the luxury of being a hopeless romantic,” he says, “everybody does,” he tacks on as an after thought.

“Ahh young Harold, your naiveté is endearing,” Louis says, his voice teasing and light in an attempt to shake off the personal topic, “so you have a someone then, someone to shower your romance upon?”

Louis doesn’t want to think about the things that have made him cynical, because the wounds are still fresh. Time is supposed to heal things like these but when he spends the hours before he falls asleep picking at his scabs and analyzing the sores he wonders if they ever will. That is for when he’s alone though, he doesn’t want to be dredging up old pain in front of this boy with the big bright eyes.

“No, I don’t have a someone,” Harry replies, looking down at his book again, “do you have a someone?”

Louis lets out a bit of a chuckle, “no,” he says simply.

Louis doesn’t even know why Harry bothered to ask. Harry can see Louis with his own eyes, he
must see that nobody would want Louis. He isn’t sure but he really hopes Harry wasn’t mocking him, because he is just starting to feel a little less tense around him. He busies himself, typing on his laptop, hoping the conversation will drop. Harry takes the hint because he goes back to jotting down notes from his textbook.

Louis doesn’t mind the silence, he’s content to just bathe in Harry’s warmth for a bit. He finds himself looking at Harry out of the corner of his eye, at the way the loose grey cotton of his t-shirt rests on his broad shoulders. He’s swimming in it really and Louis wonders why he’s wearing a shirt that is far too big for him. The designer in him takes over and he reaches out. Harry doesn’t startle when Louis touches him, he just looks up from his paper. For a moment he watches Louis fingers as they roll up his sleeves and then his gaze fixes on Louis face.

There is a soft smile on Harry’s lips as he stays still and watches Louis. When Louis has rolled up the first sleeve so that it bunches near the top of his bicep Harry wordlessly shifts on his stool and holds out his other arm. Louis smiles a little as he rolls up the second sleeve. He looks at Harry and now he looks like he’s being fashionably casual, instead of like he threw on a shirt without checking the size. Harry grins and shakes his curls out of his face, swooping them back into place.

“Thanks,” he says, “I try to have style but sometimes I fall a little short.”

Louis laughs and shakes his head, “no I like that shirt,” he says, “it suits you,” he adds, poking lightly at the ‘lover’ emblazoned inside the heart.

Harry laughs and shakes his head a little, “well if you approve,” he says.

“I approve,” Louis nods, turning back to his notes.

They’re quiet again for a while as Louis types. He can see Harry in his peripheral vision, twirling a pen between his long fingers and then raising it to his mouth to chew on the end. It’s nice to have company, Louis thinks. Maybe it’s just nice to have Harry. It isn’t long before Harry speaks again though, his voice a low rumble that seems to hang in the air.

“Tell me more about yourself Louis,” he says causally, rocking back on his stool with his big hands splayed on the desk.

Louis raises his eyes to Harry’s and sees they’re earnest and hopeful, “what do you want to know?” he asks.

“Everything,” Harry says easily, “I want to know what your favourite colour is, I want to know what your favourite food is, I want to know who your favourite band is, your favourite song. And I want to know why.”

Louis is a little taken aback to say the least, he laughs a little, “why?” he asks.

“Yeah I want to know about you and then I want to know why you are the way you are,” Harry grins, unabashed.

“No I mean, why do you want to know about me?” Louis asks, raising an eyebrow.

Harry laughs and shakes his head, “because I think you’re the most interesting person I’ve ever met.”

“You’re taking the piss” Louis says with a roll of his eyes, turning back to his laptop.
Harry doesn’t say anything though, for so long that Louis finally looks up and meets his eyes. Harry’s eyebrows are pulled together again and he’s regarding Louis with something like confusion. Louis frowns, trying to figure out if he’s missing something. He waits for Harry to say something but he doesn’t and he’s about to open his mouth to ask why Harry is looking at him like that when Harry finally speaks.

“You actually seriously don’t see how amazing you are then?” Harry asks, almost like he’s talking more to himself than to Louis.

Louis nose scrunches a little as he looks at Harry confusedly, “what?”

But Harry shakes his head and gives a small smile, “nothing, just- I mean it, I want to know about you. Just humour me, yeah? What is your favourite colour?”

Louis frowns, still confused but Harry just looks so damn sincere and hopeful and all of the adorable things that keep making Louis humour the boy with his coffee and his compliments and his questions. Louis doesn’t understand why Harry is bothering with him, but he thinks maybe he is kind of glad he is.

“My favourite colour is Red,” Louis says, as if its the biggest admission of his life.

Harry smiles, “red is a strong colour,” he says, looking at Louis so intently that Louis feels his cheeks warm.

“You have to tell me yours now,” he says, pretending to be insistent.

Harry laughs and nods, “mine is blue.”

“How unoriginal,” Louis says playfully, “are we talking like dark blue or light blue or like teal blue or what?”

Harry grins, “like your eyes,” he says simply.

Louis’ smile falters for a second because he’s pretty sure Harry is definitely mocking him now. Maybe he’s just teasing him good-naturedly but it hurts Louis all the same. He’s not sure whether he should make a sarcastic comment or just ignore the statement. Instead he looks away and forces a laugh, feeling the itch at the back of his throat for the first time since Harry walked into the room. Louis realizes that just hanging out with Harry was keeping those thoughts of self loathing at bay, he was thinking about other things instead of how much he hates himself.

Those thoughts are back in an instant though, because maybe if he wasn’t so disgusting Harry’s joke about his eyes wouldn’t be a joke and maybe someone would actually compliment him and mean it. He plasters a smile on his face and turns back to his notes. Harry doesn’t say anything else for a bit after that. When Louis glances over he’s frowning down at his textbook, curls falling in front of his face. This silence is different than the others, it’s uncomfortable and Louis doesn’t like it.

“What is your favourite band?” he asks, trying to keep his voice light.

It turns out to be a good topic change though, because Harry perks up and Louis gets to watch his eyes sparkle excitedly as he raves about some band that Louis has never heard of. Music turns out to be a good subject because they actually have a lot of common tastes. Harry is into some obscure bands that Louis doesn’t know but Harry just pulls out his phone and they share a set of earphones so Louis can listen. Louis likes more mainstream things but when they’ve been through Harry’s playlist they switch over to Louis even though Harry already knows and likes most of Louis’ favourites.
Harry scoots his stool closer to share the earphones and Louis doesn’t mind because it just makes it easier for Harry’s warmth to seep into him. They listen to the music sometimes, and talk over it other times, and even though neither of them get much homework done Louis’ cheeks hurt a bit from smiling and he figures that’s a good thing. Eventually they have to start packing up their things for their next class though. Harry invites Louis to eat with he and Niall in the cafeteria, Louis says no of course, but it was still nice to be invited.

They go their separate ways when they leave the studio but not long after Louis receives a text that says ‘I meant it, about your eyes.’

He doesn’t reply.
Chapter 8

Louis snacks on six almonds and drinks a tea with a splash of milk while he works on the alterations for the girls garments during lunch. His last two classes pass by easy enough and he makes his way back to the flat. He knows it will be empty when he gets there, Liam has football practice and Zayn will be at the skatepark. Louis tells himself he doesn’t mind being alone, that he likes it, but that’s a lie. He unlocks the door and the flat feels almost as cold as it was outside. He dumps his messenger bag and beelines for the thermostat to crank up the heat. He goes to his room and finds another jumper to pull on, changing out of jeans and into sweatpants.

He pulls his laptop out of his bag and sets it on the counter in the kitchen, opening iTunes and selecting a song so the music fills the empty apartment. Next he pulls up his favourite recipe website. He finds a recipe for teriyaki noodles with prawns and vegetables and begins to gather all the ingredients he’ll need. Louis makes dinner almost three nights a week when the boys don’t get home until later. He was never a good cook before but he’s learned, he puts a lot of care into the things he makes for them.

Cooking for them is one of the only ways he can give a little back of what they give to him. They take care of him all the time and he likes being able to have a warm meal waiting for them when they get home after a long day. He cooks the prawns in the pan with the teriyaki sauce, boiling the noodles and the vegetables on the side. His movements are slow and deliberate because his joints almost constantly ache. He used to be a bundle of energy, flitting around and never sitting still, now he just feels tired most of the time.

When the prawns have coloured up he drains the water from the noodles. His hands shake as he holds the pot over the sink and the simple task leaves his heart fluttering. He ignores it, as he always does. He adds the noodles to the sauce and prawns to brown while he drains the vegetables. He sets aside six pieces of broccoli for himself. He sautéés everything together, and breathes in the smell. His mouth waters and his stomach almost turns in on itself but he doesn’t even crave the food in the pan because he knows he’ll just hate himself even more later.

When the food is done Louis covers it and keeps the burner on the lowest setting before sitting down at the kitchen table with his six pieces of broccoli and a large glass of water. He gets up to refill his water after his third full piece because the water helps his stomach feel like it’s getting more. The broccoli doesn’t taste like much but it weighs heavy in his gut and he has to force each bite down. He only eats five pieces.

Louis goes to the pan, scoops out one noodle and one prawn and sets them on his plate. He scoops up some sauce and smears it around on the plate, splitting apart the prawn and squishing the noodle a bit. When the plate looks used he sets it in the sink.

When Zayn gets home he finds Louis bundled up on the couch trying to keep warm as he flips through channels. He dishes himself out a plate and comes to snuggle under Louis’ blanket. Louis whines a little when Zayn lets the heat out of the cocoon but he quickly scrambles over and presses himself against Zayn’s side to try and leech some of his body heat.

Zayn presses a kiss to the top of Louis’ head, “you eat already?”

“Yeah I was starving, sorry I couldn’t wait for you guys,” Louis lies.

Zayn doesn’t question it because Louis always eats before they get home on the days he cooks dinner. They never question it.
“Thanks for cooking, smells delicious,” Zayn replies.

When Zayn is done eating he opens his arms to properly cuddle Louis and they’re twined up together when Liam gets home from practice. He grabs a plate and comes to the couch, getting under the blankets and sandwiching Louis in the middle. He says his hello’s but digs in quickly, ravenous from practice. When he is finished he sets his plate next to Zayn’s on the coffee table and finishes the rest of Louis’ water.

“How was your day?” he asks.

He slips his arm around Louis shoulders, his hand squeezing softly at the back of Zayn’ neck. Both of them lean into Liam’s touch and they all slot together perfectly. There are looks exchanged over Louis’ head when he mentions that Harry came to hang out during second period again but neither of them press the topic as he continues on about the rest of his day. Zayn talks about his classes and some new trick he learned at the skate park. Liam tells them about practice and makes sure they’ll be at his game on the weekend, even though he knows Louis already has it circled on the calendar hanging on the fridge. Everything is pretty routine for the three of them but its comfortable and easy. They watch the football game on telly and Liam’s fingers play absentmindedly in Louis’ hair. Zayn rubs softly at Louis’ ankles, completely unaware that he’s easing some of the ache in Louis’ joints. Louis isn’t sure if they even realize they’re doing it anymore, these small comforting touches, but they really do help. He feels warm and loved and content. Until he finds himself alone in his cold bed again.

Louis is on his knees hand stitching beading onto the hem of one of the gowns when Harry shows up during second period the next day. He grins at Louis a little sheepishly, hovering with his hands on the straps of his backpack. He wears a white long sleeved t-shirt, a pair of jeans and a beanie with his fringe left out across his forehead.

“Can I join you?” he asks.

“Sure,” Louis says.

A smile splits his face as he slips out of his backpack, “I brought my dress shoes to hem the pants, but I’ll just leave them here for whenever you’re ready.”

“Sounds good, this beading is going to take me a while but maybe we can hem them tomorrow if you’re free?”

“Sure Lou, sounds great,” Harry agrees, setting the shoes on the floor under the work station.

Harry takes his books out of his backpack and Louis is expecting him to sit at the table but instead he leans back against the wall near Louis and lets himself slide down until he is sitting on the floor with his long legs stretched out. He hooks one ankle over the other and opens his textbook in his lap.

“You don’t have to sit on the floor with me mate, I’m just down here because if I don’t do the beads while the dress is on a mannequin the design will turn out all wonky,” Louis says with a laugh.

Harry shrugs, “I’d like to watch you work,” he says, “if I’m not bugging you,” he adds quickly.

Louis smiles and shrugs, “suit yourself.”

Harry doesn’t mention the text that Louis never replied to and Louis is thankful for that. Harry stays quiet for a while and Louis works, his glasses perched on his nose and his small fingers deftly sewing on each delicate glass bead. Louis doesn’t hear the scratch of Harry’s pencil in his notebook for a while and he looks over his shoulder to find Harry watching him. He smiles unabashed and
Louis finds himself returning the smile and returning to his beading.

“Did you catch the footie match last night?” Louis asks around the needle he holds between his lips.

“Man U absolutely smashed it,” Harry says excitedly.

He starts in on some rant about the game and how shit the other team played and Louis laughs and agrees, keeping up the conversation as his fingers work nimbly. Sometimes Liam and Zayn will come see Louis during his spares but he always finds himself willing them to leave him in peace to work. It’s different with Harry, his warm voice hangs in the air and wraps around Louis and it’s nice. The conversation flows freely between them and they switch topics seamlessly while Louis works and Harry watches.

Louis never used to have to try and be funny, he’s always had a sharp tongue and impeccable timing, but lately its always been work just to keep up with the conversations he couldn’t care less about. He hasn’t even bothered being funny around anyone other than Zayn and Liam and even with them it’s been rarer than he’d care to admit. The first time Louis makes Harry laugh, like really truly laugh, is completely by accident. He says some off hand comment without even thinking and he almost jumps out of his skin when Harry lets out a cackle of laughter. He’s made Harry cackle before but he continues even after he’s clapped his hand over his mouth. His shoulders shake with it and Louis can hardly remember what he said but Harry is laughing so hard that he snorts. By the time Harry gets himself together Louis is laughing too and he decides Harry’s laugh is definitely the best thing he’s ever witnessed.

After that Louis actually makes an effort to be funny, adding in a joke during their random conversation and sending Harry into another fit. Louis keeps the conversation going while he sews but every time Harry starts laughing he has to stop what he’s doing just to watch. He watches the way Harry’s eyes scrunch up with the force of his dimples, the way he tosses his head back and claps his hands like a seal, laughter shaking his whole body. It’s beautiful.

Louis is mid-stitch when Harry asks to use his laptop and he doesn’t even bother asking what for when he tells Harry to go ahead and grab it out of his bag. Harry is quiet as he sits with Louis laptop but Louis doesn’t mind the silence, his cheeks still hurt from laughing and he feels warm with Harry off to the side of him. Eventually Louis glances at the clock and sees that there is only ten minutes before the bell rings. He packs up his beads and supplies and rolls the mannequin back to his corner.

He leans against the wall beside Harry and slides down so he’s sitting next to him. Harry leans against him a little, the heat from under the cotton of his shirt seeping through all the layers Louis is wearing. Louis instinctually leans into the warmth a little, just as he would with Liam or Zayn and before he knows what is happening Harry’s arm is around his shoulders. He only tenses for a second before he realizes that it feels okay. Louis is tactile, he’s always been very hands on with his friends, and he figures he can probably call Harry a friend now.

Instead of watching what Harry is doing on the laptop he allows himself to sink a little closer to Harry’s side and rest his head against Harry’s neck, shutting his eyes against the harsh fluorescents of the studio. Harry’s fingertips trace absentminded patterns up and down the sleeve of Louis’ denim jacket as he clicks around on the laptop. Harry sighs and Louis feels his breath ruffle his hair.

“I made you a playlist,” Harry says when Louis opens his eyes.

“Really?” Louis asks, looking at the new list of songs organized in his iTunes.

“Yeah, just stuff I thought you might like. Don’t worry I illegally downloaded so it didn’t charge your iTunes account,” Harry says, “just sync your iPhone when you get home.”
“Thanks Harry, that’s awesome,” Louis says excitedly, “haven’t had new music in ages.”

“No worries Lou,” Harry says and Louis can hear the smile in his voice.

Louis notices the title of the playlist and points to the screen, “nothing on my mind but you?” he asks.

“It’s a line from I Always Knew by The Vaccines, number one on the playlist,” Harry says, “I hope you like the songs I picked my taste is pretty eclectic.”

“I’m sure I’ll love them,” Louis replies, as Harry closes his laptop.

When Harry removes his arm from around Louis’ shoulders Louis misses it instantly. Harry stands, stretching his arms above his head and bending side to side to crack his back, before he puts the laptop in Louis bag. He stands in front of Louis and holds out both his hands, smiling warmly down at him. Louis reaches up and Harry’s huge hands completely envelop his as he pulls Louis easily to his feet.

The lights pop behind Louis eyes though, and he finds himself gripping onto Harry’s hands for balance because he’s swaying on his feet. He was dizzy and light headed to begin with but standing up so fast made his blood rush and his heart start to flutter. He shuts his eyes to try and get the spinning to stop and Harry releases his hands but holds onto his shoulders instead, supporting him. Louis takes a deep steadying breath and when he opens his eyes he’s met with Harry’s concern. His eyebrows are pulled together and Louis feels his cheeks heat.

“Lou are you alright, you went all white there for a second and I thought you were going to fall over.” Harry asks in a hushed voice, reaching up and ghosting a thumb across one of Louis cheekbones.

Louis forces a laugh but it sounds artificial even to his own ears, “just got a little light headed,” he laughs again, “doesn’t that ever happen to you?”

“Erm- no I don’t think that’s supposed to happen,” Harry replies slowly, frowning deeply, “are you sure you’re alright?”

Another laugh, “yeah Harry, don’t worry I’m aces. We better hurry or we’ll both be late for class.”

Harry is still frowning when he nods and he seems reluctant to let go of Louis’ shoulders. Louis smiles and steps out of his grasp bending, carefully, to pick up his messenger bag and slinging it over his shoulder. Harry picks up his backpack, still warily watching Louis. Louis plaster on a smile and leads the way out of the studio.

“Thanks so much for the playlist,” Louis says outside the door, giving Harry his brightest smile.

Harry observes him for a moment, eyes searching Louis face for some sign of distress, but when he finds none he lets his frown go and smiles in return. Louis still sees the worry in Harry’s eyes but he’s thankful he isn’t pressing it.

“See you tomorrow, yeah?” Harry says, hand reaching out to gently squeeze Louis shoulder.

Louis nods, holding onto his smile, “sure Harry,” he says before turning to go to his next class.

Not long after he’s sat down in third period his phone buzzes in his pocket, ‘hope you’re feeling okay, text me if you need anything.’
'I'm really good Harry, don’t worry :)’ he replies.
Chapter 9

“Bebz you’ve got to wake up now if you want time to have a shower, if we’re late for Liam’s game he’ll kill us,” Zayn says gently, rubbing Louis’ shoulder.

Louis groans and rolls over, looking blearily up at Zayn, “not gunna shower, come snuggle with me for an extra half an hour and I’ll throw on a beanie?” he asks.

Zayn smiles like he was hoping Louis would say that and pulls back the covers to climb in. Louis wore a cozy old jumper and some flannel pyjamas to bed, but even with his heavy duvet he’s still cold when Zayn scoops him into his arms. Zayn hisses a little when Louis slips his freezing feet up the cuffs of Zayn’s jeans but he just holds him closer.

“You’re so bloody cold Lou,” Zayn says and Louis can hear the frown in his voice.

Louis doesn’t reply, just snuggles closer and shuts his eyes while Zayn draws patterns on his back. He dozes off a little, comfortable and warm beside his best friend. He had heard Liam up early running the blender for his protein shake. He’s always been a morning person and Louis knows he’s probably tidied the house and done their laundry already. He’s left to go do whatever their team does before games, Louis and Zayn will only get to see him for a minute before the game starts.

“Alright, we should head out,” Zayn sighs, too soon for Louis liking.

“I don’t even know why they are having a football game when there is frost on the ground,” Louis grumbles into Zayn’s shoulder.

“Stop whining, it’s the championship match,” Zayn says but Louis can hear the smile in his voice, “last one till spring.”

Louis lets out a groan and rolls out of Zayn’s embrace, stretching until all his joints have given a satisfying crack. He pushes himself up and rubs his eyes, clearing the morning scratchiness out of his throat. Zayn sits up and smiles fondly at Louis, even though Louis knows he must look like a mess. Zayn is fully dressed and his quiff is immaculate as usual. The thing Louis loves most about Zayn are his eyes; the colour of whiskey and framed by long dark eyelashes. They’re beautiful but they’re also so kind.

Louis has a thing for kind eyes. He has always said the reason he chose Liam to be his best friend on their first day of class in first grade was because Liam had the kindest eyes he’d ever seen. Liam’s are dark and deep but so warm and Louis just knew he could trust him. It’s the same reason he chose Zayn on their first day of college. Even though Zayn was quiet and Louis was loud, Louis took one look in Zayn’s eyes and knew he could trust him too. Liam was a little hesitant of Zayn at first, because Liam had always been the centre of Louis attention and then Zayn came along and clicked with Louis so quickly. Louis has always had a lot of love to give though, and Liam quickly realized there was room enough for both of them.

Louis stumbles out of bed and to the closet, deciding on a pair of jeans and a creamy white cable knit sweater. Zayn has wandered off to the kitchen but Louis closes his door, just to be sure, before stripping and yanking his clothes on. He gabs his grey beanie with the pompom at the back and brings it with him to the bathroom. He brushes his teeth and washes his face, only looking in the mirror to run a brush through his hair and arrange his fringe under his hat.

Louis goes to the front hall closet and pulls on his beige suede coat. Zayn hands him a pair of gloves
and pulls on his own leather jacket and gloves. Louis leads the way down to his car and he starts it and plugs in his iPhone, trying to keep his teeth chattering to a minimum as they wait for the car to warm up.

“Since when do you listen to The Kooks?” Zayn asks as the music thrums through the car.

“Oh, Harry made me a playlist,” Louis says as he looks over his shoulder to back out of the parking stall.

Zayn makes a surprised noise in his throat and grabs Louis’ phone out of the cup holder to scroll through the songs.

“He has pretty eclectic tastes,” Zayn says, switching it from Junk of the Heart by The Kooks to Thrift Shop by Macklemore, “is this from the States?”

“Yeah some of it. I actually like all the songs he picked, put on I Bet You Look Good On The Dance Floor by Arctic Monkeys,” Louis instructs as he gets on the motorway to the football field.

He had fallen asleep listening to every song on the playlist and he couldn’t find a single one he didn’t like. Louis thinks maybe he’ll make a habit of putting on the playlist before bed because for some reason his bed didn’t feel as lonely with the music playing softly in the back ground.

“When did he make it for you?” Zayn asks.

“On Thursday during second period.”

“Were you guys doing fitting for the fashion show?”

“No I was beading and he did homework,” Louis says.

“Did he come see you on your spare yesterday too?” Zayn asks, doing a really poor job of feigning innocent curiosity.

“Yeah. I hemmed the black skinny leg trousers,” he replies slowly, “is there a problem?”

“Of course not Lou, that’s great. So you guys just like, hang out now?”

“He comes every day on spare Zayn, that’s it. Please relax,” Louis says good-naturedly.

He feels a little pathetic that Zayn is so excited that he seems to have found a friend. Even before when Louis was super outgoing he still only kept Liam and Zayn close, he’s always been okay with just the two of them. They didn’t start worrying about that until Louis stopped wanting to hangout with anyone but them. Harry had come to the studio again yesterday and they had gotten the pants hemmed but that hadn’t taken long. They spent the rest of the spare sitting at the work station playing hangman and twenty questions simultaneously.

Twenty questions was interesting with Harry because he actually thought long and hard about each question he asked and Louis often ended up just asking Harry the same question he had just asked of Louis. Louis’ sides hurt from laughing at the end of the period because they ended up swapping embarrassing stories and Harry told one about his Mum walking in on him trying on her high heels when he was a kid. In exchange Louis told the story about the time he and Liam were looking at porn for the first time when they were young and his Mum walked in.

He doesn’t tell Harry about how that was the day he admitted he was gay. He had muttered something along the lines of ‘fuck he’s so fit,’ and Liam had looked at him confusedly and asked,
‘aren’t you looking at the girl he’s doing it with?’ and Louis had shaken his head and instantly felt completely ashamed because he hadn’t meant to say that out loud. Liam had seen his discomfort and shrugged, ‘no big deal Lou, if you want after this we can watch guy porn, to see what thats like,’ he had said. ‘Are you- are you sure you wouldn’t mind?’ Louis had stuttered. Liam had just smiled and shrugged again, ‘you watch Toy Story with me all the time even though you don’t like it.’

Louis didn’t tell Harry that because they hadn’t discussed his sexuality yet and he really doesn’t want to scare off the first new friend he’s had in ages by being gay. So yeah, there are some things he won’t talk about with Harry, like his eating habits, or his family situation, or his sexuality, but other than that he had found himself being open with Harry on Friday. He had also found himself storing every little fact about Harry away in a special little section of his brain; every seemingly insignificant idiosyncrasy, every little tidbit that Harry divulged about himself, every thought he said out loud.

“Are you going to bring him to meet Li and I?” Zayn asks, scrolling through the music until he lands on Change of Heart by The Vaccines.

“Zayn he’s not a boyfriend I have to bring home to meet Mum and Dad, you can meet him whenever you want,” Louis says exasperatedly.

“Alright Lou, sorry for prying,” Zayn grins.

“S’okay,” Louis laughs, thankful the music is loud so Zayn doesn’t hear his stomach making obnoxious grumbling noises.

Louis heard Liam making breakfast in the morning, had heard he and Zayn talking while they ate, but he had stayed in bed, to avoid having to make an excuse not to eat, and had fallen back asleep. His stomach usually whines right when he wakes up, but eventually it gives up and shuts up, resorting to clenching and unclenching to try and get Louis’ attention instead.

They pull up at the football field and see the teams sitting in the grass stretching. The stands are only half full but they will definitely fill up before the game starts because the senior team making it to championships is a pretty big deal. Louis finds a parking spot and Zayn grabs the blanket out of the back seat to keep them warm against the breeze. Zayn slings his arm around Louis’ shoulders and they make their way towards the seating along the side of the field. Louis waves across the pitch to Liam and Zayn looks for the best seat.

“Louis!” someone calls and Louis would recognize that voice anywhere.

He turns his head and sees Harry sitting next to Niall four rows up, waving at him. Harry wears a brown leather jacket with a bit of fur around the collar, his hair looking exceptionally windblown and his cheeks rosy. Niall sees Louis and waves excitedly too, even though Louis hasn’t seen him since the day he met the two of them in the cafeteria.

“Hey Harry, hi Niall” Louis says, smiling and giving a wave before he begins to lead Zayn to an empty spot at the bottom row.

“What are you doing, why aren’t we sitting with them?” Zayn whispers.

“Oh, I don’t know- I never really thought about it. We only hang out in second period,” Louis shrugs, he doesn’t want to bother Harry and Niall.

“Come sit with us!” Niall calls, as if he and Louis are best friends, waving them over excitedly.

Zayn takes that as invite enough and begins dragging Louis up the steps to get to the fourth row. Louis meets Harry’s eyes and smiles sheepishly. Harry’s got both his dimples out because he’s
smiling so big. They have to step over a few people to get to the empty spot beside Harry, and Louis is grateful when Zayn holds his hand to help him step over someone’s cooler without tripping. Harry slides over a little and Louis sits himself down, but with Niall on Harry’s other side and Zayn on his he finds himself pressed right up close to Harry.

“Er Zayn, this is Harry and Niall,” Louis says, leaning back so Zayn can reach across and shake their hands.

“Great t’meet ya mate,” Niall says to Zayn.

“Heard a lot about you,” Harry grins and Louis laughs.

“Good to meet you both, and good things I hope,” Zayn chuckles.

“Yeah lots of good things,” Harry replies, smiling down at Louis.

“What are you guys doing here?” Louis asks him as Zayn spreads the blanket across their laps.

“Ni has dragged me to every game, he’s a bit of an enthusiast,” Harry says, stage whispering.

“Oi you love it, shut up,” Niall says, elbowing Harry.

“Really? We’ve been to every game too, Liam is on the team, can’t believe I haven’t seen you before,” Louis says.

“Guess you weren’t looking,” Harry grins, “cute beanie.”

Louis cheeks warm a little and he smiles, “thanks,” he says.

“Lou theres Li,” Zayn says.

“Oh yeah, we’ll be right back,” Louis tells Harry and Niall.

Zayn holds his hand again as they go back down the row and then down the stairs. Zayn and Liam think Louis has balance issues so they are always reaching out to support him, keep him from toppling. They joke about what a klutz he is and tease him about watching where he puts his feet but really they just want to keep him safe. They’re always looking out for him, always so ready to catch him and steady him. They don’t know the reason he waivers so much is because he’s constantly light headed and fighting off dizziness but he loves them for caring regardless.

Liam is waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs and Louis throws his arms around his neck and buries his face in. Liam squeezes him back and plants a kiss to his head. Louis pulls away and Zayn wraps his arms around Liam and gets a kiss on his hair, simply because if Louis got one and he didn’t Zayn would have whined. When Zayn steps back Louis straightens out Liam’s jersey and bends down to pull up his knee socks a bit.

“You’re going to kick ass,” Zayn says, clapping Liam on the shoulder.

“You’re going to win,” Louis adds excitedly.

“I don’t know, they’re a really good team and Jamie twisted his ankle so Ben is subbing in and I don’t know if-“

“You’re going to win,” Louis repeats.

Liam looks down at Louis with hopeful eyes, “you think?” he asks.
Louis cups Liam’s cheeks and peers up at him, “Liam god damn Payne, you are going to win,” he says sternly.

Louis has known Liam most of his life and he knows exactly what Liam needs to hear before a game. When they used to play on the same team Louis would say the exact same thing. Liam needs all the doubt to be removed for him to be confident and for some reason Louis telling him is enough to remove all doubt.

Liam finally grins and nods, “alright, yeah,” he says.

“Just as long as you have fun,” Zayn says.

“Stop being such a Mum,” Louis teases.

Zayn grins and then his eyebrows shoot up, “speaking of which! I met Harry, we’re sitting beside him and his Irish friend,” he tells Liam.

Louis groans, “Niall. The Irish friends name is Niall.”

“Where is Harry?” Liam asks excitedly.

“He’s the one with the brown curls and the big teeth, in the brown jacket,” Zayn whispers conspiratorially.

Louis scoffs, “his teeth suit him,” he says.

Zayn raises his eyebrows, “wasn’t insulting the guy Lou, no need to get defensive,” he says, trying to hide a grin.

Louis just rolls his eyes as Liam scans the crowd, “oh shit he caught me looking at him,” Liam says.

“What is wrong with you two, it isn’t a big deal. I’m sure you can meet him after the game too. Just relax,” Louis says exasperatedly.

Liam seems satisfied with that and he grins, “right, well games about to start.”

Louis throws his arms around Liam again and squeezes him tight, “you’re going to win.”

“You’re going to have fun,” Zayn adds, joining the hug.

Louis elbows Zayn and it’s worth it to see Liam’s eyes scrunch up when he laughs at Zayn’s shriek. Liam jogs off and Zayn and Louis make their way back up the stands to their seats. Harry grins at Louis when he sits back down and Zayn covers them with the blanket. The game starts and Louis appreciates the way Harry’s warmth seeps into him along the side thats pressed next to him.

The second the whistle is blown the game is intense and Louis isn’t even a tad embarrassed when he’s shouting encouragements at Liam with Zayn hollering along beside him. He’s even less embarrassed because Niall really is an enthusiast and he’s bellowing at the entire team. Louis looks over at Harry once or twice and finds his eyes on him, an amused smile playing on his lips.

“Come on Styles, this is the most important game of the season,” Louis says to hide the fact that he’s blushing under Harry’s scrutiny.

Harry smiles and looks like he’s about to say something but something catches his eye on the field and he stands up, “go Liam go!” he hollers.
Louis is dazed for a second until he realizes Zayn and Niall and half the stands are on their feet as well, because Liam is streaking up the pitch with the ball, barrelling towards the goal. Louis jumps to his feet and nearly passes out from the sudden movement but he grabs onto Harry’s arm to steady himself.

“Come on Li!” Louis cries, his shouts mixing in with Zayn’s, Niall’s and Harry’s, “go, go, go go!!”

Liam zig when the defence zags and he does a move that Louis taught him, flicking the ball up and over when one of the players lunges at his feet to steal it. Harry, Niall and Zayn are still screaming beside him but Louis holds his breath because he knows Liam and he knows exactly what to watch for to see if he’s going to score. Liam is all in his head, he doesn’t just feel it like Louis used to, he thinks and plans and calculates. Louis can watch the positioning of his hands and the swing of his leg and know exactly what Liam is planning to do before he does it. He knows Liam is going top left corner and his eyes flick to the goal keeper and he sees the keeper is going to go right. Louis cheers then because before Liam’s even swung his leg back Louis knows it’s a goal.

The crowd erupts when the ball goes in and Zayn wrings Louis around the neck, whooping for Liam. Liam beams and gets clapped on the back by his teammates, waving up and them when the rest of the crowd dies down and he can only hear the four of them yelling.

The game continues and Zayn and Niall eventually get fed up of discussing the game across Louis and Harry so Niall steps over them to go sit beside Zayn. Harry and Louis talk a little, mostly about what they did last night; Louis made the boys dinner and they played some FIFA, Niall left Harry to go out with some girl and he spent the night reading. That brings them to the subject of favourite authors and their conversation is only sporadically interrupted when they cheer on Liam. Liam has ended up with four people on his cheering squad now because even Niall is too busy talking to Zayn to cheer constantly, but they all always cheer for Liam.

It gets even more blustery by half time and Louis vaguely wonders if his lips are blue. He’s just barely fighting off the shivers because he doesn’t want to look like a startled chihuahua in front of Harry. It’s even worse because Niall and Zayn seem plenty warm and Harry is practically radiating heat as usual. Louis knows he shouldn’t be this cold but he is, and his joints are aching, and his ass really hurts from sitting on the cold bench. Harry is talking to Niall and Zayn about something over Louis’ head and he focuses the warm rumble of his voice instead of the fact that he cant feel his toes.

His eyes are trained on the pitch as the game picks up again, and the dull ache of hunger that is ever present has been switched out for the sharp pains that sometimes make Louis’ eyes water. He’s used to them though and he just tucks his hands in his pockets and subtly squeezes his sides because the pressure on the outside helps distract him from the stabbing on the inside.

“Lou you’re like, trembling. Have my jacket,” Harry says, drawing Louis out of his thoughts.

Louis scoffs, “Harry you’ll freeze you’ve got a t-shirt on underneath. Don’t be stupid, I’m fine,” Louis says, though the tension in his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering betrays him.

“No Harry I’m fine,” Louis argues, shaking his head.

“C’mere then,” Harry says and he’s unzipped his jacket and is holding it open, his nipples instantly hard from the cold wind.

“No Harry I’m fine,” Louis argues, shaking his head.

“If you don’t come here I’m going to take my jacket off altogether and it will be on your conscience if I catch a cold,” Harry shrugs, starting to pull his arm out.

Louis huffs and rolls his eyes, admitting defeat. Harry grins like the cat that got the canary and scoots closer. Louis slips his arms around Harry’s waist under the jacket and Harry wraps the jacket around
Louis’ shoulders and pulls both sides together. His arms are still in the sleeves and he wraps his arms around Louis’ shoulders so that Louis is essentially cocooned against his side.

Louis thinks maybe it’s a little undignified but he’s sure Zayn would have cocooned him too if he had a big enough jacket, and it’s instantly so much better so he can’t bring himself to care. Harry is naturally like a sauna and Louis’ body lets out one last shiver at the sudden change of temperature and then the heat begins to pour into his bones.

He’s so comfortable that he doesn’t pull away to scream as Liam goes for another goal, and Harry doesn’t move either, though his shouts vibrate against Louis hair where his head is pressed next to Harry’s throat. He and Harry don’t talk much after that but they don’t need to and Louis likes that. He’s fallen into the same easy comfort with Harry that he has with Louis and Zayn and he commends himself a little because he may not be the most social anymore but he still knows how to pick people.

Louis looks up at Harry from his place under his chin and Harry smiles down at him, left dimple on display. Louis observes him for a second, taking in the splay of curls across his forehead, the pink tinge on the apples of his cheeks, his jade coloured eyes. Louis thinks maybe Harry has the kindest eyes he’s ever seen. He gives a small smile and looks back to the game.

Liam’s team ends up slaughtering the other and when the final buzzer goes Harry bounces up and down a little with excitement, jostling Louis and making him laugh. The teams line up to shake hands and then go off to their change rooms to shower. Louis pulls himself out of Harry’s cocoon and stands up beside Zayn to stretch, as everyone else starts to drift out of their seats.

They get down to the grass and Louis turns to Harry, “we have to wait for Liam to get out but I’ll see you on Monday?” he says.

“Actually Lou, Niall and I thought we should take Liam out for dinner to celebrate the win,” Zayn says excitedly, “he doesn’t like going to the team parties because they get too rowdy,” he adds as explanation to Harry.

Louis heart drops and he tries to keep the frown off his face. That isn’t okay. Everyone will be watching, they’ll notice if he doesn’t eat. If he makes some excuse they’ll be watching him from then on out. If he eats he won’t be able to purge. He can’t wait until they get home because who knows if they’ll leave fast enough and that food will sit in his stomach and be digested. Purging at the restaurant is out of the question, they’ll notice if he’s gone too long. What if someone walks in on him.

He needs to say no, he can feel the panic rising in his throat just at the thought of letting the food settle in his stomach. He needs to say no but Harry is looking down at him with that hopeful look in his eyes and its even worse when Louis turns away and sees the same hopeful expression in Zayn’s eyes.

The worst part is that he can picture how excited Liam will be when they tell him they’re taking him out for dinner. Just last week he was saying how he missed the three of them going out. He’s just won his most important game and Liam never asks anything of Zayn or Louis, never complains when he spends his nights curled up on the couch because Louis doesn’t feel like going out and he doesn’t want to leave him alone.

Now he’s hesitated too long and he can’t even think of a good excuse not to go and the three of him are looking at him expectantly and he feels guilty and he’s panicking but struggling to keep it from showing on his face.
“Sure, sounds good,” Louis says, artificially manufacturing a bright smile for his face.

They all look so excited and Louis knows he should be happy that Harry and Niall get along with Zayn so well and he’s sure they’ll get along with Liam too. He should be happy because he knows Liam is going to be happy and he can tell Zayn is happy and he’s sick of holding his friends back. He should be happy because Harry is smiling down at him like he’s completely thrilled and Niall is bouncing on the balls of his feet in excitement. So Louis acts happy because he knows he should be happy but really he feels like clawing the back of his throat out.
Chapter 10

When Liam comes out of the building after showering and changing Louis lets Zayn hug him first so when he goes into Liam’s arms it doesn’t seem strange when he lingers there. Liam just accepts a bit of his weight as Louis nuzzles into his neck telling him he did great and seeking comfort in Liam’s strong arms around his shoulders. Liam doesn’t know what’s wrong with Louis, he usually never does, but after the hug he keeps an arm around Louis’ shoulders as if it’s his choice not to let go. The others don’t see Louis’ hand under Liam’s jacket fisted around his sweatshirt.

Liam smiles down at Louis as they stand side by side facing the other three but there is a question in his eyes. Louis just smiles in response. Liam probably just thinks he’s having social anxiety about Harry and Niall or something. He doesn’t know that Harry makes Louis feel more comfortable than he has in a long time and it’s impossible not to get along with Niall, but Louis can’t exactly say ‘I’m nervous because I don’t know how to hide my diet from you’ so he lets Liam think whatever will keep his arm around his shoulders.

Liam turns his smile to the others and Louis smiles a little brighter, “Li, this is Harry and Niall,” he says.

Liam does not remove his right arm from around Louis’ shoulders, because true to form he’d rather share a ridiculously awkward left handed hand shake than let go of Louis when he can sense that Louis needs him. Harry is eyeing them a little but he smiles warmly and shakes. Louis knows the dynamic between the three of them is confusing as fuck for an outsider but he can’t bring himself to care at the moment. Harry will figure it out if he wants to be an addition, if he wants to fit somewhere. Maybe Niall too, Louis will have to see.

“Good meeting ya,” Niall grins.

“Yeah mate,” Harry agrees, “great game.”

Liam grins, “thanks,” he says, bashfully.

“That third goal was sick!” Niall adds enthusiastically.

They go off on a tangent, Liam, Niall and Zayn talking game and it’s a moment before Louis realizes Harry isn’t in the conversation. When he raises his head from where it was pressed alongside Liam’s neck he catches Harry’s eyes on him. Harry offers a shy smile and Louis returns it, taking in the way Harry stands with his hands in the pockets of his impossibly tight jeans, shoulders a little hunched.

“Oh and Liam we’re taking you out for an early dinner to celebrate!” Zayn says excitedly.

Louis breaks away from Harry’s gaze and looks up to Liam. The look of surprise and utter joy on Liam’s face would be comical if Louis didn’t know how ridiculously genuine the reaction is. His thick eyebrows shoot up and a grin splits his face and instantly he looks down to Louis confirming the statement.

Louis brightens his smile a notch, “yeah we’ve got to treat our champ right,” he says, pinching Liam’s side playfully and eliciting a laugh.

“Wow thanks guys,” Liam grins, “thanks,” he adds, quieter and pressed into Louis’ hair, just for him.

Louis hates that. He hates that Liam feels like he needs to say a special thank you to Louis just for agreeing to go out for dinner with his friends. He hates that Liam is so surprised that they’re treating
him to a night out because he knows that Louis would rather be at home. Louis hates that Liam doesn’t know it’s the food he hates, not the going out. Louis would go out every single night with them if he could just be with them and not have to worry about avoiding food.

Louis knows he can’t claim he’s not hungry because Zayn knows he hasn’t eaten yet. He can’t claim he’s not well or the two of them will swoop in and begin fawning over him, insisting they go home to play nurse and doctor. He can’t show how much he’s panicking because then that smile will be off Liam’s face in an instant and Louis doesn’t want to do that, never wants to do that to his Liam. Louis decides he needs to get his shit together.

He extricates himself from Liam’s side and claps his hands together, “so where should we go eat?” he asks, faking excitement.

Liam beams down at him, so sincerely excited for a dinner out. Liam is just like that, you could hand him a chewed up old pencil and tell him it was a gift and he’d still look at you like a kid on Christmas. Louis lets Zayn and Liam bicker about where to go, until Niall finally exclaims that he hasn’t eaten all day and is dying and they decide on the little greek restaurant downtown. Away from Liam’s side Louis feels the cold lapping at him again and he tucks his arms around himself.

He catches Harry’s eyes on him and he wonders if Harry is a little nervous because Liam and Zayn can be a little overwhelming sometimes what with their bickering like an old married couple while simultaneously finishing each others sentences. Harry smiles though, and as always when Harry smiles Louis finds himself smiling back. It feels a little strained because Louis’ throat is itching already, but the warmth behind it is real. It’s always real with Harry, Louis can’t help but notice.

“So Niall d’you mind leading us there, we’ve never been?” Liam asks, “Zayn you’ll go with Lou,” he adds.

“Li I think I can handle following you,” Louis says, rolling his eyes, “Zayn can go with you.”

Liam has his own car at the field and it doesn’t make sense for Louis to go with them and leave his car here because the field is all the way on the other side of town from their flat. Niall is the one twirling a set of keys around his finger so Louis assumes he drove himself and Harry.

“No Lou, don’t want you driving alone,” Liam says gently and Zayn nods in agreement.

“I’ll go with you,” Harry offers, smiling brightly with that hopeful look on his face.

Louis’ frowns, “what about Niall,” he says.

“I know where the place is mate, let Haz go with, yeah?” Niall grins, always grinning, “he’s been there too so if we get separated you’ll be alright.”

Louis just shrugs and Liam eyes Harry up and down before glancing at Zayn and exchanging one of their looks. Zayn must approve because then Liam nods. It’s ridiculously really, Louis thinks, but they’re the family he has. They all start back to the parking lot and split off to their respective cars, Liam will follow Niall and Louis will follow Liam. They get in Louis car and Harry has to slide the seat back a bit because his legs are so long. Louis starts the car and plugs in his iPhone. Harry’s playlist floods the speakers as he waits a second for the car to warm, and tries not to look like he’s having a seizure from shivering too hard.

“So the playlist is alright?” Harry asks, as Louis backs out of the parking stall and pulls up behind Liam who is idling behind Niall.

“Yeah it’s really good, thanks mate,” Louis confirms as Niall leads them out of the parking lot.
“May I?” Harry asks gesturing at the phone in the cup holder.

“Sure,” Louis says.

Harry scrolls through landing on See The Sun by The Kooks and Louis reaches forward to turn it up. He welcomes the music as a buffer between he and Harry. They’ve never hung out outside of school and Louis is a little worried the conversation won’t flow as freely in the real world. His stomach is also clenching and unclenching violently and he has to take one hand off the steering wheel to wrap his arm around his middle. He’s discrete as he tries to physically hold himself together and drive at the same time.

“I have to say, I’m pretty pumped to be hanging out,” Harry says and Louis can hear the grin in his voice.

“Yeah? How come?” he asks.

“Didn’t think you’d ever want to hang out outside of school,” he says, sounding sheepish.

Louis shakes his head, “sure I would Harry,” he says.

Louis can see Harry’s grin from the side, dimple in full force, “yeah?” he asks, turning to meet Louis’ eyes.

“Yeah,” Louis laughs a little.

“Doyouthinkmaybeyou’dliketohangoutsometimejustthetwoofus,” Harry says, and Louis thinks its definitely the fastest he has ever heard Harry speak.

“Say again?” Louis asks, putting on his signal light to follow Liam around a corner.

“Er- you think maybe we could hangout some time? Like you and I?” Harry repeats, rubbing the back of his neck and looking straight ahead.

Louis smiles a little and nods, “sure,” he says.

“Really?”

“Yes really,” Louis nods again.

Harry just beams across at Louis, and Louis just laughs and blouses a little under Harry’s gaze. Poor boy must be pretty damn lonely if he’s this excited to hangout with me, Louis thinks to himself, but however the reason he doesn’t mind. As long as they don’t go to eat. His smile falters a little at that thought but Harry doesn’t notice because he’s grinning out the window.

The drive to the restaurant is short and they just listen to music but Harry’s dimple shows the whole time as he bites back a smile. Louis would find it endearing except he’s panicking inwardly about this meal he’s about to sit down to. They pull into the parking lot behind Liam and Louis takes the stall beside him. Louis gets out and Harry waits to let Liam get out beside him before he opens his own door and climbs out. He reaches to the sky and his back lets out a couple loud pops.

Liam’s eyebrows raise, “alright mate?” he asks Harry.

“Yeah I’ve got retched posture, my back cracks a lot,” Harry laughs.

Zayn comes around the front of the car and slings his arm around Louis shoulders, as Niall bounds over from his car. Louis leans into Zayn as they go up the walkway to the restaurant. Harry reaches
the door first and he holds it open for them.

“Such a gentleman,” Louis teases as he and Zayn pass.

He misses the way Harry’s cheeks redden as he continues to hold the door for Niall and Liam. Louis and Zayn approach the hostess and Zayn asks for a booth for five. She leads them to one by the window and the restaurant is half empty because it’s still too early for the dinner rush. Zayn slides into the booth first and Niall slips in across, as Louis sits down beside Zayn. Liam slides in next to Louis and Harry sits beside Niall, across from them.

Louis feels Zayn’s hand on his leg by his knee under the table, rubbing slow circles with his thumb. Zayn is always comforting Louis, even if he doesn’t know what he’s comforting for. Louis isn’t sure when Liam and Zayn decided they needed to protect him, needed to comfort him. Loud, outgoing, confident Louis used to be the real Louis. The boy who always knew who he was and never cared what anyone thought of him, the one who people loved instantly and the one people gravitated to, he was real once upon a time. That is the Louis Liam knew for their whole childhood, that’s the Louis that Zayn met their first day of college.

Then one day everything fell apart and Louis tore along the seams and that just wasn’t Louis anymore. He hated himself more and more every single day. Maybe after all those years of always giving everything of himself, laying every bit of himself out on the table for everyone to see, maybe there was nothing left for him to give. He was empty and stripped bare and when he finally got a good look at himself without all the brightness and loudness and exuberance he hated what he saw.

He kept up the act for their first year of uni, being loud and fun and all the things people always loved about him, but it wasn’t him anymore. One day he just couldn’t keep up the act anymore. He remembers kind of wanting to die but he’d never tell anyone that. He closed in on himself and he might have even shut Liam and Zayn out if they let him, but of course they didn’t.

The comfort and the protection came long before he let himself stop acting though. When Louis’ world fell to shit and he had to get away, they came with him to London for school and everything shifted. They had always been impossibly close before, but Liam and Zayn became both his family and his protectors. Louis doesn’t know when they decided he needed their protection and their comfort, and maybe they don’t realize how fucked up Louis really is, but he thanks the god he doesn’t even believe in every day of his life for them.

“Lou?” Liam says gently, squeezing his hand under the table.

Louis blinks and his cheeks heat when he realizes everyone’s eyes are on him, “hmm? Sorry zoned out there for a mo,” he says.

“S’okay love,” Zayn says, “he’ll have a water,” he tells the waitress who is hovering at the end of the table with her eyebrows raised at Louis.

He knows Louis only ever drinks water. Louis offers the waitress a sheepish smile and nods, she bustles off having already taken the others drink orders. Liam’s hand takes it’s place on his other knee, mirroring Zayn’s. Comforting, always comforting. Louis realizes everyone is looking at their menu’s so he picks his up. He smiles reassuringly at Harry when he catches his eyes over the top of his menu.

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Louis analyzes his menu, his body in conflict. His stomach is writhing, pleading for food, but his throat is itching, begging him not to eat, reminding him of how much he’s going to hate himself. He thinks maybe he’ll get chicken kabobs with greek salad on the side, because it will save him from the carbs that weigh the heaviest in his stomach. He inwardly cringes at how acidic he knows the
dressing will be coming back up though. He can only pray they all decide to go home as soon as they're done eating so he can purge. When Louis states what he plans on ordering Liam and Zayn look at him with a frown.

“That’s all you want Lou? Did you eat something earlier?” Liam asks.

“No he didn’t. That’s not much food Lou,” Zayn frowns, “just salad?”

“They’ve got amazing roasted potatoes here, that might be more filling for you?” Harry offers.

Louis plasters on a smile, “I’m just craving a greek salad, I haven’t had one in ages,” he says.

“God now I can’t decide between the potatoes and salad,” Niall whines dramatically.

Everyone laughs and Louis is extremely thankful because the attention is shifted off him. The conversation flows freely around him while they wait for their food. Liam and Niall have returned to talking about football and Louis knows Liam must love it because he could talk about football for hours. Zayn and Harry are deep in conversation and Louis tunes into it, interested in whatever makes Harry’s eyes light up like that when he talks.

“Like absolute perfection, completely like- what’s the word- immaculate,” Harry says, “like professional level, so beautiful.”

Zayn nods vigorously, “I know, you should have seen the gown he made last term as his finishing piece. It was like black but he did this thing with the fabric, I don’t even know how, but it looked like he had sewn together liquid or something, the way it flowed. It was the most beautiful—”

“Stop,” Louis says quietly when he realizes they’re talking about him, his cheeks heat up and he hangs his head.

“Lou we can admire your work, Harry’s just saying how much he loves the things you’ve—”

“Don’t,” Louis says, meeting Zayn’s eyes, “thanks guys but please don’t,” he adds a smile at the end so he doesn’t sound rude.

Zayn sees the pleading in Louis eyes though and he presses his lips together and nods, “he’s a little shy about compliments,” he adds jokingly to Harry.

Louis is thankful for Zayn making a joke of it to ease the tension, and he’s even more thankful when Zayn puts an arm around his shoulders. Louis presses closer into his side but smiles at Harry to show he isn’t mad or anything. Harry gives a small smile and nods.

“Yeah I know,” he says a little quietly, “so what about you Zayn, what are you doing school for?” he asks.

Louis is thankful for the subject change as Zayn starts in on explaining his classes. Harry listens intently and nods at all the right parts but he glances over at Louis, watching the way Louis pretends to be listening to Zayn too, as he tears up a napkin absentmindedly. Louis is really glad the four of them get on so well. Niall definitely has kind eyes, Louis decides, Niall has kind everything really.

The food comes and Louis smiles and says how good it smells along with the others, but he kind of wants to run away. He uses every trick he knows, picking at his food, spreading it around on his plate, talking with his fork in his hand so it looks like he’s taking bites. The guys are loud and happy and Louis acts happy too and talks along with them. If he wasn’t thinking about the food on his plate he’d be able to appreciate just how funny Niall is or how easily Harry has clicked with Liam and
Zayn.

Louis thinks Niall is a little bit amazing though, because Niall ended up ordering roast potatoes so when the others are talking and Louis offers him half his greek salad Niall accepts the offer without even questioning if Louis is sure he doesn’t want it. He doesn’t protest when Louis dumps more than half of it on his plate either, just says a happy thank you and digs in. Nobody notices but Harry, who just looks at him questioningly but doesn’t say anything. Louis placates him with a smile.

Eventually it gets to the time where the others are getting close to being finished eating and Louis actually has to put food in his mouth or they’ll notice he hasn’t eaten anything. Harry’s eyes fall on Louis while he’s chewing a piece of his chicken kabob, trying to will himself to swallow it, and he offers a smile that Harry returns.

Louis thinks the worst part of this dinner might be eating in front of Harry. He knows he has to act like he loves food so Liam and Zayn don’t worry, but he feels disgusting eating sitting across from this boy who has a body that looks like it was carved by the gods. All the things that he knows Harry must be thinking run through his head with every bite. ‘If Louis had self control like me maybe he wouldn’t be so overweight.’ ‘Louis definitely doesn’t need to be eating that chicken, he should have stuck to the salad.’ Harry is too kind to say any of it out loud of course, but Louis doesn’t blame him for thinking it. He shouldn’t even be eating the salad, let alone the chicken too.

Louis is so thankful when the waitress finally comes back and gathers their plates without Zayn or Liam noticing his is still half full. Louis stomach drops though, when they all order another round of drinks and Niall asks to see the desert menu. Louis should be happy they’re all getting along so well that they want to sit and talk longer but he can’t be happy, because his stomach is heavy and his skin crawls at the thought of the food he’s eaten being digested.

Louis tries to wait it out, hoping maybe they’ll decide against dessert and get the bill but then Niall chooses some greek pastry when the waitress comes back. Louis cant even pretend to keep up with the conversation now because he knows if he doesn’t get this food out of him soon he’s fucked. He kind of feels like he’s panicking. He wants to ask them if he can leave but he looks around at them and they’re all so happy and he can’t. But he can’t let this food sit in his stomach, he can’t. He needs to get it out.

“Just going to run to the loo,” he says cheerily, “budge over Li.”

Liam stands to let him out and he makes his way to the restroom, fighting the urge to sprint. When he steps in he takes a quick scan of all the stalls, thankful to find they’re all empty. He knows he has to be quick so he locks himself in the biggest stall and goes to the toilet.

He doesn’t let himself kneel, so if he hears someone come in he can stop and flush the toilet. He bends over as low as he can and then takes one long deep breath. He opens his mouth and reaches two fingers in, stroking at the back of his throat with practiced ease. He only gags twice before the first round of vomit comes rushing up. It splashes as it lands in the water but he keeps his gags silent. Again and again he draws up the contents of his stomach, over and over, without even giving himself time to properly breathe. Tears are streaming down his face from the burn of it, but he doesn’t have time to wipe them away. He needs to hurry or they’ll notice he’s taking too long.

He purges until nothing comes up anymore and then he tries a few more times just to be sure. He hasn’t seen blood yet but he knows he needs to stop. He lets himself cough a few times to itch the rawness of his throat and then he spits into the toilet before finally flushing. He uses some toilet paper to dry his eyes and dab at his mouth, clears his throat and then steps out of the stall.
His heart drops and he freezes mid step, his mouth hanging open in a stupid ‘o.’ Harry is leaned back against the row of sinks along the wall, big green eyes huge and filled with worry. Louis’ heart pounds and his cheeks burn as he hangs his head. He steps around Harry to the sink and runs the cold water, bending down to scoop some up in his palm and swish it around his mouth. He straightens up and washes his hands, not meeting Harry’s eyes in the mirror.

“Lou, are you alright?” Harry asks softly, standing behind Louis with a warm hand on his shoulder.

Louis grimaces a little and meets Harry’s eyes, “yeah, I don’t know, like, I was feeling a little iffy before, at the soccer game and then I think that dressing on the salad just put me off or something. I’m okay now though I just felt kinda sick,” Louis says.

Harry frowns, eyes searching Louis face, “why didn’t you tell us Lou?”

Louis looks in the mirror, trying to rub away some of the redness in his eyes, adjusting his hair so he doesn’t look dishevelled.

“Because Zayn and Liam would have made us go home, I didn’t want to worry them and I wanted to go out to celebrate for Liam,” Louis explains.

“How are you feeling now?” Harry looks so concerned and sweet and caring as his thumb brushes the back of Louis’ neck gently.

“A bit better, I’ll make it until everyone is ready to leave. Don’t worry okay?” Louis says, forcing a smile.

Harry still frowns, “Lou-“

“Lets go back, I’ve been in here too long. Please don’t say anything Harry, I really don’t want them to worry. I promise I’m fine, okay?” Louis says softly, turning around so he’s looking up at Harry.

Harry was close behind him and when Louis turns around their chests almost brush. Louis can feel Harry’s breath on his cheeks when the younger boy lets out a sigh. Louis looks up at him, his eyes are pleading but he puts what hopes is a reassuring smile on his face. He squeezes Harry’s forearm lightly, Harry’s eyebrows are dipped with his frown but he gives a minuscule nod.

“Promise you’ll tell me if you’re not okay?” he asks.

“Promise,” Louis agrees, breathing a sigh of relief.

He leads Harry out of the bathroom with a hand still on his arm and they slip back into the booth. Louis smiles brightly and Harry barely manages to hide his frown.

“Alright?” Liam and Zayn ask, almost in sync.

“Yeah, good,” Louis smiles.

Harry’s eyes don’t leave Louis for the rest of the time they sit and talk, but Louis acts bright and happy and okay to try and ease the worry he can see in Harry’s eyes. His stomach is empty once again, Harry believed his lie, and his best friends approve of Harry and Niall, so everything is good. He can’t help feeling a little guilty for causing Harry worry though, and he promises himself he’ll never put Harry in that position again.
Harry texts Louis on Sunday asking how he’s feeling and Louis says he thinks he had a bit of a twenty four hour flu, but that he told the boys he was feeling poorly and they’ve taken care of him. That seems to placate Harry, and Louis expects him to stop texting but he doesn’t. He tells Louis about how he’s thinking of getting a part time job and Louis tells him about this really horrible job he had at the movie theatre once. Harry tells him how much he loved working in a bakery and Louis admits that he used to be a horrible cook. Harry says one day he’d like to cook Louis dinner and Louis says that would be nice, even though he has absolutely no intention of ever letting that happen. They end up texting back and forth all day and then when Louis is lying in bed dozing off he thumbs out a goodnight text.

Harry replies with a ‘sweet dreams Lou. xx’

Louis finds himself looking forward to second period and he enjoys every minute of it with Harry, even though the fashion show is quickly approaching and they actually have to spend their time finishing up the alterations to Harry’s garments. The conversation comes easy as ever though, and a few times Louis has to tell Harry to stop making him laugh or his stitches will be all crooked. Harry just takes that as instruction to be more of a goof though, and Louis thinks it’s nice to have his stomach hurt from laughing so hard instead of because it’s empty.

Louis devotes a lot of their conversation into coaxing Harry to sing for him, but the boy still gets a shy about it. Louis will turn music on his laptop and sing purposely off key to Harry’s favourite songs. Harry laughs so hard his eyes water when Louis doesn’t know all lyrics and he just makes up something to fill the void. Harry doesn’t sing though, just does silly endearingly awkward dances to make Louis giggle while he works. Sometimes Louis will catch him humming while he types up his notes but as soon as he notices Louis’ attention he blushes and looks away.

Finally on Tuesday night, when they’re texting before bed, after two days of Louis relentlessly begging to hear him sing, Harry texts him saying, ‘Tomorrow I’ll sing for you okay? Sweet dreams Lou. xx’

Louis replies with quite a few smiley faces and a bunch of exclamation points and ‘literally cannot wait. Have a good sleep mate. x’

Louis enters the studio bubbling with excitement because he just knows Harry has got to be good. He’s got that deep, warm voice that somehow manages to be rough and smooth at the same time and Louis just knows he’s going to be good. He sits at the workstation waiting for Harry but he definitely did not expect Harry to show up with Niall and a guitar in tow. He lets out a surprised little laugh and Niall grins and waves behind Harry, who is looking extremely sheepish.

“I don’t know how to play guitar and I figured if you were going to hear me sing I might as well put forth my best effort,” he shrugs, grinning as he gnaws on his bottom lip.

Louis claps, “excellent!” he exclaims.

Harry’s cheeks colour a bit as he sets two stools side by side in front of the work station. Louis comes around the table and lifts himself up onto it so his legs dangle over the edge.

“Niall I hope you’re not missing class for this, did Harry bribe you with pints?” he says.

Niall laughs, “he didn’t have to bribe me, I’m pretty sure if we’re keeping track of who owes who
favours I’m still about twenty seven down on Hazza.”

“Always the giver,” Louis teases Harry and he grins and blushes.

“He never sings in front of people you should know,” Niall tells Louis with a grin, “except me of course but I practically had to hold a gun to his head.”

“So I should feel special then,” Louis laughs.

“You really should mate,” Niall nods, sharing a small smile with Harry whose cheeks are a lovely shade of pink.

Niall hops up on the stool and fiddles with his guitar a bit. Harry rests on the edge of his stool, long legs stretched out to the floor, hands toying with the hem of the cozy grey jumper he’s wearing. His head is hung so his curls obscure is eyes from view but Louis can see his bottom lip pulled in between his teeth. Louis realizes then that maybe Harry really is shy about his singing and that it isn’t something he’d ever like to do in front of crowds, that it’s something he does just for himself. Louis feels a little thrum in his heart because Harry really is trusting him with this, Niall wasn’t teasing, Louis really should feel special.

“I really do,” Louis says earnestly.

Harry finally looks up and meets Louis’ eyes, a soft smile on his lips, “I’ll try not to be shit,” he says.

“Harry you couldn’t be shit if you tried, don’t put yourself down,” Louis says gently, giving Harry a smile.

Harry’s cheeks change from pink to red and he clears his throat before batting at his curls. He shakes his fingers through his hair on either side of his head and then he swoops the front up and to the right, in a move Louis has seen him do about a million times. He clears his throat again and gives a little nod to Niall.

Niall starts to strum the guitar and Louis knows which song it is instantly. When Harry raises his eyes to meet Louis his eyebrows are pulled together a little in the middle and his tongue slips out a bit to wet his lips. Louis doesn’t think he could break the gaze if he tried. Harry’s eyes are so wide and so green as his lips part.

“It’s a little bit funny, this feeling inside. I’m not one of those who can easily hide. I don’t have much money, but boy if I did, I’d buy a big house where we both could live,” Harry sings.

His voice is warm and deep but crystal clear and smooth like velvet. Louis knows he has amazing control of his vocal chords because the word ‘live’ holds the perfect amount of vibrato. Then he’s starts in on the next part and his voice is so strong and unwavering but somehow still soft and beautiful. He doesn’t look away from Louis at all. Louis’ eyes can’t help flitting down to watch the way Harry’s lips form the words, but only for a second before his eyes are drawn back to Harry’s.

“And you can tell everybody, that this is your song. It may be quite simple but now that it’s done, I hope you don’t mind, I hope you don’t mind, that I put down in words, how wonderful life is while you’re in the world,” he sings.

Louis is a little bit in awe as he listens to Harry. He cannot believe how amazing his voice is, how effortlessly it can flit between lows and highs and hit every note with such amazing clarity. He can’t get over of the warmth of it, the smoothness of it. His eyes land on the vein in Harry’s neck and travel down the muscles of Harry’s arms; clenching as he presses his hands together in his lap. He notices the way Harry tips his chin up as the words come out, though Harry’s eyes never leave
“Anyway the thing is, what I really mean, yours are the sweetest eyes I’ve ever seen,” Harry’s voice raises goosebumps on Louis arms.

The words are laced with vibrato again and the note is so silky and beautiful and Louis swallows past a lump in his throat. Louis realizes then, that the thing that hits him most is the look in Harry’s eyes. They’re wide and soft and there is so much sincerity in them that it is almost startling to Louis. Louis knows Harry is probably the most genuine person he has ever met, the most sincere, but this is different. Louis feels like he could drown in the emotion in Harry’s eyes. He doesn’t quite know what emotion it is, or what feeling this song brings up for Harry but he knows that singing really is Harry’s passion.

“I hope you don’t mind, I hope you don’t mind, that I put down in words, how wonderful life is while you’re in the world,” Harry finishes, holding the note until the crystal clear end.

The silence left by Harry’s song is thick and palpable. Louis thinks maybe he’s been rendered speechless because that was just so intensely beautiful that he really doesn’t know if he can say anything that would properly convey how he feels after that. He thinks maybe he can’t. Harry’s eyes haven’t left him but they’re showing his nervousness again now, though that usual hopefulness is there as well. If it had been anyone else Louis would have teased them about the song choice, would have teased them for dragging Niall in and holding an impromptu concert, would have teased them for taking it so seriously. He would never tease Harry for any of that though because he loved the song choice, and he loved how much it clearly meant to Harry. Louis still has goosebumps from the song and his words are still stuck in his mouth, so he does the only thing he can think of.

He spreads his arms open where he sits on the edge of the table and Harry’s eyes light up as he pushes himself up off his stool. He goes into Louis arms so that his hips press up against the table between Louis’ legs and Louis wraps his arms around Harry and pulls him in closer. Harry’s arms envelop Louis shoulders and Louis’ buries his face in Harry’s jumper, feeling Harry’s cheek pressed to his head. Louis vaguely notes the slight sweetness to Harry’s cologne and some other fresh scent.

“That was really, really beautiful Harry,” Louis says, his breath rebounding off Harry’s neck, “you’re an amazing singer and that was so, so beautiful.”

He goes to pull back from the hug but Harry holds him a little tighter, nuzzling slightly against Louis’ hair. Louis rubs his back a little and smiles against Harry’s shoulder. Harry finally pulls back, his cheeks pink. He doesn’t move from where he’s standing between Louis’ legs, he just smiles and Louis finds himself smiling back.

“I mean it Harry, that was amazing, you’re amazing, and I’m really glad you let me hear you sing,” Louis says truthfully.

Harry looks down, rubbing the back of his neck ,”glad it was alright,” he says, biting back a smile.

“Alright? Alright?” Louis says indignantly, making Harry laugh, “unfortunately for you though, now that we’ve had the grand reveal you’ve unknowingly signed a contract that you have to sing to me all the time now.”

Harry blushes but smiles, “s’pose I would be okay with that. Just only when it’s just us, yeah? Not in public.”

“Sure Harry, not in public. Makes me feel more privileged that way anyway,” Louis says cheekily.
Harry huffs out a laugh, his breath warm and minty on Louis’ cheeks, “deal,” he says.

“Well I’ve got to get back to class,” Niall says cheerily, hopping down from the stool.

Louis had almost forgotten Niall was there, “thanks so much Niall, you’re great at guitar,” he says as Harry steps back.

“Thanks mate, we’ll all have to get together again soon yeah?” he says.

“For sure, yeah,” Louis agrees.

“See yah Ni, thanks,” Harry calls as Niall waves over his shoulder and leaves.

Louis hops down from the table and brings the two stools back over, sitting himself down on one. Harry takes the one beside him and pulls his textbook out of his backpack.

He never really gets to do any work though because Louis spends the rest of the period picking random songs and coaxing Harry into singing them. It seems now that Harry has gotten over the initial nervousness of singing for someone he’s okay. He jokes around and sings off key just to make Louis laugh but somehow Louis thinks his voice is still beautiful even when he’s purposely hitting notes wrong and being a goof.

“Hey Louis,” Harry asks a few minutes before the bell rings as they’re packing up their things.

“Yeah?” Louis asks absentmindedly as he searches for the cap to his favourite pen.

“Would you- do you want to maybe go for lunch with me?” Harry asks.

“Sorry Haz, I can’t. They’re starting to set up for the fashion show and I have to go and select lighting and give them my music and stuff. My appointment with the girl is over lunch hour,” Louis says truthfully, though he wouldn’t have gone with Harry for lunch regardless.

Harry frowns for a second, “oh,” he says, “can I come?”

Louis’ eyebrows raise, “it’s going to be boring.”

“Nah, I want to see the whole process! I’ll grab a sandwich or something. I promise I’ll keep quiet and not distract from your meeting.”

Louis laughs when he sees that Harry looks hopeful, “sure then, I guess, if you want.”

“Great!” Harry beams.

“I’ll meet you outside here at lunch then and we can walk over to the auditorium?”

“Yeah sounds perfect,” Harry nods excitedly.

“Okay, see you in a bit,” Louis says as he and Harry leave the studio.

“See ya Lou!”

Louis doesn’t even get all the way to class before Harry is texting him some random little thing just to keep the conversation going, but Louis doesn’t mind. Harry asks if Louis wants him to bring him a sandwich but Louis says he’s eating in this period so he doesn’t have to eat during the meeting. Harry doesn’t question it and Louis is thankful because he doesn’t want a replay of the mocha and scone situation.
His next class passes easy enough and then he heads back to the studio to meet Harry. Harry is
leaned up against the wall the exact same way he was the first day Louis ever saw him; one foot
rested back on the wall, hips jutted out slightly in a slouch. Louis is reminded just how amazing
Harry’s legs are, as if he could ever forget.

“You shouldn’t stand like that or you’re going to have weird boys coming up to you and asking you
to model for them,” Louis says, when he approaches Harry.

Harry lets out a laugh and raises his eyebrows, “that’s actually the sole reason I stand like this, if you
must know. Although my first few offers seemed a little sketchy so I was extremely glad when you
came along.”

Louis laughs out loud, “I hope you know about stranger danger Harry.”

“Of course Louis, don’t be silly. I draw the line at full frontal.”

Louis laughs so loud he has to cover his mouth and shakes his head, “classy,” he giggles.

Harry beams down at Louis with both his dimples on display. Louis is a little surprised when Harry
gently winds his arm around Louis’ shoulders, and he thinks maybe Harry is a little surprised at
himself too, but Louis doesn’t mind. He lets himself put an arm around Harry’s lower back, the same
way he would with Zayn or Liam.

Louis’ got all of the alterations done for Harry’s outfits and he has all the girls garments figured out
as well. After this meeting he doesn’t have to worry about anything until Monday when he gets to do
his run-through with all his models.

“So on Monday we have the rehearsal for the show after school, and the show is on Wednesday, you
haven’t forgotten?” Louis says as they walk through the hall.

“Course not Lou, Niall’s even kept himself free so he can come see too,” Harry replies.

“Okay I’ll tell Zayn and Liam to save him a seat,” he says, “and guess what?”

“What?” Harry asks excitedly.

“I changed around my music for the show with stuff from your playlist,” Louis tells him.

“Seriously? That’s sick. What songs did you pick?” Harry asks excitedly.

“You’ll see,” Louis shrugs and Harry just grins and nods.

Harry keeps his arm around Louis shoulders as they make their way into the auditorium. He looks
around in awe of all the rigging being set up for the runway and the lighting. There are people
running around, trying to organize and plan and assemble. Louis has always loved the chaos of it.

“Wow there is going to be a real runway and everything,” Harry says.

“Yeah the school spends a lot of money on their fashion program. They go all out because people
from the community pay to come to the show and it helps increase interest in the program,” Louis
explains.

There are a few people milling around in the projection booth when they get there and they look up
when Harry and Louis step in. Two of the girls Louis doesn’t know but they still wave and say hi.
Mia is bent over the switchboard but she looks over her shoulder and straightens up.
“Louis!” she exclaims, reaching out for him.

He plasters on a smile and she pulls him into a hug, practically wringing him around the neck as he pats her on the back a few times. She is one of the friends he made when he acted loud and happy and funny and he had a million people always asking him what he was doing on the weekends, always trying to get in with him, hangout with him. She’s been to a few parties at their flat before Louis dropped off the face of the earth and stopped bothering to act social. He remembers she has a strange penchant for taking her clothes off when intoxicated. She also always handles lighting and sound for the fashion show.

“Hey Mia,” Louis says, “how are you?”

She pulls away and her eyes are locked on Harry who is smiling sheepishly, “and who is this?” she asks, completely ignoring Louis’ question.

“This is Harry, I’ve got three mens outfits this year and he’s agreed to wear them,” Louis explains.

Harry grins and nods, “nice to meet you,” he says politely.

Mia smiles at him but looks to Louis, “is he-“

“No,” Louis says quickly, because he knows what she is about to ask and he doesn’t want to make Harry uncomfortable.

“So then is he-“

“No,” Louis says quickly again.

Harry looks bemused but he maintains his smile. Mia knows Louis is gay. Her first question was going to be if Harry is Louis’ boyfriend. Her second question would have been asking if Harry is gay. Mia looks pleased with the information and Louis tries to ignore the way she looks Harry up and down.

“Well Harry, it’s nice of you to join us then,” she says and Louis thinks maybe she’s fluttering her eyelashes a little excessively.

Harry smiles a little brighter, “I’ll stay out of the way for your meeting,” he says.

“Oh no worries at all, you can have a seat while Louis and I sort everything out,” she coos.

She gestures to the couch in the corner where one of the other girls is already seated scribbling something on a notepad. Harry looks to Louis and smiles before ambling over and depositing himself on the couch. Louis follows Mia to the switchboard and gives her his music list and then they begin discussing the type of lighting he wants. He’s in the middle of explaining how he wants only white lights because he doesn’t want to distort the colors of the fabrics when Harry’s voice catches his ears,

“Er Hi Cass, I’m Harry,” he says politely in his warm voice.

“You’re in Professor Holt’s biology yeah?” she asks excitedly, “I sit like two rows back from you.”

“Oh yeah,” he says, “how are you finding the class?”

Louis doesn’t even know why he’s listening. He should be paying attention to Mia going over different shades of white lighting, not whatever small talk Harry is making with some random girl
from his class. He turns his attention back to Mia and he is focused on the light patterns when Harry’s laugh catches his attention. It’s a real, full, big laugh and when Louis glances over Harry’s got a hand over his mouth and his head thrown back. Then he sees the girl has her hand on Harry’s shoulder.

Louis is about to turn back to the switch board when Harry’s huge hand comes down from his mouth to lightly pat the girls bare knee. Why she is wearing a skirt in January Louis has no idea, but Harry’s hand completely spreads across her leg, his long fingers cupping her knee cap.

“You’ll do fine, you just have to remember about the chromosomes,” Harry says, smiling brightly at her.

Her eyelash fluttering puts even Mia to shame and her hand has come to rest on top of Harry’s on her leg. Harry extricates his hand from under hers and clasps it around the strap of his backpack but he continues to listen to what she’s saying. Her voice is low and soft and obviously flirty because Harry lowers his head and bites on his lip, like he’s biting back a grin.

“So like, you just have to decide which tempo you want the lights to flash at,” Mia tells Louis, drawing his attention back to the switches.

Louis is able to focus on describing to Mia what he wants until Cass laughs, shrill and high pitched, and then Harry’s laugh joins hers. Louis’ eyes snap back over to Harry and somehow Cass has gotten closer to him on the couch and is twirling her hair around her finger. She’s babbling about something and Harry is listening intently and nodding along with a smile on his face.

Louis tries to pretend that his stomach is writhing because he’s hungry. He knows though, that the way he feels right now isn’t from hunger pains, because hunger doesn’t explain the heaviness he feels in his chest. He knows what jealousy feels like, he’s not an idiot. He knows he’s feeling jealous right now and that isn’t okay. It isn’t okay because he can’t even try and pretend he doesn’t have feelings for Harry now, can’t even pretend his friendship with Harry is like his relationship with Zayn and Liam. Louis has never once felt jealous when they’ve had girls hanging all over them, when he’s walked in on Zayn with his fingers in someone, or when Liam’s had someone attached to his neck all night at one of their parties.

He knows he has feelings for Harry because he’s already been trying to ignore them. He’s been trying to ignore the way he notices things about Harry that he’d never notice about Zayn or Liam. The bow of his lips or the fan of his eyelashes or the outline of his cock in his boxer briefs when he strips so unabashedly in the studio. He’s been trying to ignore how much he wants to feel Harry’s lips against his. How kind and sweet and funny and smart Harry is. How badly he wants to call Harry his. But he can’t ignore it anymore and that isn’t okay.

He finishes everything that he needs to with Mia, trying to ignore the way his throat itches, while he tries his best to ignore the purr of Cass’ voice and the rumble of Harry’s. Mia stands to give him another hug and says she’ll have everything ready for the run-through on Monday. Harry sees that they’re done and he hops up. Louis glances at his phone and breathes a sigh of relief when he realizes the bell is about to ring, because he really doesn’t think he can talk to Harry right now.

“Er see you around Cass,” Harry says going to Louis side, as Louis heads to the door.

“Bye Harry,” she says excitedly.

Louis’ skin crawls a little. In his peripheral vision Louis sees Harry’s arm lifting to scoop him in again, but he sidesteps it. Louis ignores the look of confusion on Harry’s face after his arm drops back to his side. He smiles at Harry so he doesn’t think Louis is mad at him or something, but he just
can’t have Harry touching him right now. He used to be okay with it because he told himself it was the same way he cuddled with Liam or Zayn. It isn’t though, because now Louis is thinking about how much he wishes it meant more.

“Thanks for waiting for me, sorry I wasted your lunch. You never even ate your sandwich,” Louis says, working to hold onto his smile.

“It wasn’t a waste,” Harry says warmly, “I’m slowly getting closer to you letting me take you out for lunch.”

Louis almost grimaces at the statement because he can’t go for a fucking lunch with Harry. Then he would have to eat and then he would have to purge. Then he still wouldn’t be good enough for someone like Harry and he’d be sitting across the table from him, wanting something he’s never going to get. Even Louis isn’t that masochistic.

“Bell is going to ring any minute, I’ll see you later Haz,” Louis says, trying to sound light and cheery.

“Sure Lou, have a good rest of your day yeah?” Harry says smiling down at Louis.

Louis just nods because he can’t handle all of Harry’s teeth or both of Harry’s dimples or the million different shades of green in his eyes. He just can’t handle Harry right now. Louis forces himself to back up and back away and turn around and go in the other direction. He goes straight to the front doors and across the campus to where his car is parked. The second he’s in the car with the doors shut he deflates. His forehead falls against the steering wheel and his arms wrap around his middle, trying desperately to hold himself together.

How could he be so fucking stupid. How could he let himself start liking Harry of all fucking people. Harry, who he could have been such good friends with, Harry who made him feel comfortable again, happy again. Harry who Louis had thought maybe, just maybe, understood him a little bit. Now he’s gone and fucked it up. Louis knows himself, he knows how he thinks and how he feels, and he knows he can’t just be friends with Harry now.

He hates himself so fucking much for ruining things. He cant even have Harry as a friend now and it’s his own fucking fault. It’s his own fault for being gay, for being attracted to Harry instead of just being able to be his friend. It’s his fault for being so disgusting that even if Harry weren’t straight he would never want Louis. It’s his own fault for letting Harry in, because before he had no idea what he was missing, but Louis knows that Harry is the kind of person that will leave a void when he’s gone.

Louis knows he can’t be friends with Harry anymore. When you already hate yourself so much, when you can’t fucking stand a single part of who you are, the worst possible thing you can do is let yourself like someone who is never going to like you back. Louis knows he isn’t strong enough for that. His phone vibrates in the cup holder and Louis’ chest feels so heavy when he sees the text from Harry.

‘I found a new song for you,’ it says and below is a link to The Dead Sea by the Lumineers.

Louis doesn’t know why he clicks the link but he does, then he puts the keys in the ignition and backs out of the parking stall. He needs to go home and take care of the itch at the back of his throat. The car fills with the strum of a guitar and a raspy voice and Louis shakes his head. Harry music taste jumps from this folksy shit, to hip hop with weird lyrics, to alternative rock, to pop, and yet Louis has loved every song.
'Oh I need somebody, needed someone I could trust. I don’t gamble, but if I did I would bet on us. Like the dead sea, you told me I was like the dead sea, you’ll never sink when you are with me, oh lord like the dead sea.’

He can’t stop thinking about how amazing this song would sound in Harry’s voice. He can’t stop thinking about Harry. He can’t stop thinking about Harry and he fucking hates himself for it.

‘I’ve been down, I’ve been defeated, you’re the message I was heeding, would you stay, would you stay the night?’

He hates himself for a lot of things. He thinks maybe too many things to count.

‘Whoa I’m like the dead sea, the nicest words you ever said to me, honey can’t you see, I was born to be, to be your dead sea.’

Louis listens to the song on repeat all the way back to the flat but he doesn’t reply to Harry. He can’t reply to Harry. He drags himself up the stairs and toes off his shoes when he’s through the door to his flat. He doesn’t bother turning on the shower or the music as he slowly peels off the layers of his clothes and kneels down in front of the toilet. The boys won’t be home for hours.
Chapter 12

Louis doesn’t even bother trying to keep himself quiet. It feels good to gag and sputter and cough as the vomit splashes into the toilet. It gives a sound to what he’s feeling. The burn that he feels in his throat is much more rewarding than screaming would be. It feels good not to be contained. Not to be vomiting out of necessity. He’s vomiting because it hurts, it burns his throat and it makes his stomach writhe and he needs that pain right now.

He rests his forehead on his arm where it’s wrapped around the toilet bowl and lets himself breathe for a moment. He’s trembling, partially from being naked on the cold floor and partially because his body is protesting. His eyes are damp and he’s not even sure if it’s from throwing up or because he’s crying. Somewhere between the sixth and eighth time he shoved his fingers down his throat the gags began to be broken up by sobs. Louis hasn’t cried while he’s puked in a long time.

Usually it’s all clinical. Get the food out before it digests and without the boys noticing what you’re doing. Now he’s in no rush and his stomach was almost empty before he began. Right now he just wants to hurt. He reaches his slobbery fingers back into his mouth and strokes, gagging around his fingers as his stomach contracts in an attempt to expel its contents. There is nothing left though; no matter how hard he tries he just keeps dry heaving because he’s empty. That just won’t do.

Louis spits in the toilet and hauls himself to his feet on shaky legs. He drags himself to the sink and leans his full weight on it as he turns on the tap and fills his cup. Six times he fills it with water and chugs it, six times is enough to make him feel like he is going to burst. It isn’t even about Harry anymore. This is about him and how disgusting he is and how wrong he is and how fucked up he is and he just wants to tear himself apart.

This time when he kneels back down and draws up the contents of his stomach he’s rewarded with the rush of the water and the stomach acid. It burns as it pours out of his mouth, it burns so good. Louis isn’t sure when he starts sobbing but by the time even the water is gone his shoulders are shaking with the sobs racking his body. He doesn’t bother trying to stifle himself, it’s been far too long since he’s just let himself feel. Since he’s let all the shit he’s pent up inside of him out.

He always has to stay composed, he has to try and act okay, for Liam and Zayn. He pukes quickly and quietly because he doesn’t want them to find out and stop him. Why would he want them to stop him when he feels like his throat is ripping apart and it feels so good. His voice is cracking and breaking as he cries, one fist clenched and digging into his stomach, the other arm clinging to the toilet bowl. He sounds and looks disgusting but he doesn’t even care because he looks disgusting at the best of times and it just feels so good to hurt.

He shoves his fingers down his throat again, more roughly that he usually does, trying desperately to get something more out of himself. His stomach clenches and his throat rises and he gags, but there is nothing. He doesn’t stop though. He gags himself over and over, dry heaving between choked sobs. He heaves until blood starts coming, mixed in with his saliva, and even then he keeps going. His nails scrabble at the back of his throat, trying desperately to get rid of that itch. That itch to empty himself, that itch to hurt himself, that itch to remind himself just how little he is worth.

He goes until every breath he takes feels like it’s tearing him to shreds as the air grates on his inflamed throat. He goes until his stomach is spasming, too weak to even properly clench anymore. He goes until he’s seeing stars behind his eyes and his grip starts slipping on the edge of the toilet. When he inhales his breath rattles and then he’s coughing, coughing so hard he can’t even breathe. He lets himself fall back from the toilet onto the cold tile, his back up against the wall and the toilet paper holder digging into his shoulder. He doesn’t even bother testing his voice, he knows it’s gone.
He’s glad it’s gone, he’s glad his throat is on fire, he’s glad his body feels as bad as his mind does.

He manages to get himself into the shower but he just sits on the floor of it as the water pours down on his head. When he coughs into his hand there is blood. More blood than he’s seen in a while. He finds himself holding out his palm, mesmerized by the way the shower water slowly dilutes the red against his skin until it’s all washed down the drain. When he’s close to passing out in the shower he forces himself to shut off the tap and wrap a towel around himself. He gathers his clothes and straightens the bathmat on the floor before making his way to his bedroom, leaning against the wall for support.

He puts on a jumper underneath one of Liam’s big warm hoodies, and slips into Zayn’s thickest pair of sweatpants before he climbs under his covers and buries his head. He falls asleep thinking of green eyes and a beautiful voice and kind words mixed in with the list of things he hates about himself, they parts of him he wishes he could just drag up from his stomach and expel.

He wakes up to two bodies beside him, two sets of hands stroking and holding him. He blinks blearily up at Liam and Zayn, and he is met with two sets of worried eyes and furrowed brows. Liam has his hand on Louis’ forehead, Louis’ hand is held in between Zayn’s, his lips touching the knuckles softly. The room is dark except for the bedside light, which they must have turned on.

“Baby what’s wrong?” Liam asks, his voice a panicked whisper, “you haven’t answered either of our texts or calls all day and-“

“All the lights were off when we got home and you look so sick love,” Zayn says, voice mirroring Liam’s hushed tone, “have you been crying?”

Louis opens his mouth to tell them he’s okay, just feeling a little poorly. Except all that comes out is a pitiful rasp that sounds as bad as it feels and he winces a little at the burn. The sharp intake of breath catches on his raw throat and he coughs, but all that comes out is a dry hacking wheeze. Zayn’s eyes bulge, Liam’s eyebrows almost touch his hairline and they both gasp.

“Shit, Lou your throat, are you okay? Can you breathe properly?” Zayn asks and Louis nods.

“Did you come home early from school sick?” Liam asks, stroking Louis’ hair as he nods his head again.

“Why didn’t you text us, we would have come home!” Zayn exclaims.

Louis looks sheepish as Liam frowns at Zayn, “s’okay babe, we’re here now we’re going to take care of you.”

“Do you want some cough medicine, some soup?” Zayn asks,ghosting his thumb across Louis’ cheek.

Louis shakes his head and tries to say water, “water?” Liam asks and Louis nods, “okay Lou, Zayn will stay in here while I go get you some water and put on some comfy clothes and then Zayn will go get some comfy clothes too and we’ll crawl into bed with you, okay?”

Louis nods and Liam nods, bending down to press a kiss to Louis’ forehead. Zayn scoops Louis up so that Louis’ head rests on his shoulder and cards his hand through his fringe. Louis slots his fingers in with Zayn’s and tries not to cry. Not because he is in pain and not because he just lost Harry as a friend, but because he doesn’t deserve Zayn or Liam. He’s so fucked up and so pathetic yet here they are, always trying to hold him together. He kind of wishes they had disowned him too. It would have been better for both of them, he’s nothing but a burden.
He hates himself for it but he burrows into Zayn’s neck and tries to swallow past the jagged edges in his throat. Zayn whispers soothing things against Louis’ hair and holds him close until Liam returns. Louis drinks the entire glass of water and then Liam switches out positions with Zayn. Louis wants to say he’s sorry for not making dinner but Liam tells him not to try talking. Zayn comes back and tucks himself in on the other side of Louis. He’s cocooned back against Liam’s chest with Zayn’s arms around him and the guilt tugs at his gut. They shouldn’t be shut in his room with him like this.

He opens his mouth to talk but he is quickly shushed by both of them, he’s handed a phone though. Zayn’s opened his iPhone to the notepad. Louis blushes a little, because he feels weird typing out what he wants to say, but someone’s lips press to his hair and fingertips brush softly against his neck and he begins to type.

‘You guys need to eat dinner, I’m really okay I’ve just lost my voice, I’m not dying. I’ll be fine in here,’ he types.

“And we’re not leaving you in here by yourself. We’ll have a bit of a cuddle then I’ll go make dinner and we’ll eat in bed,” Liam says.

“We just got home, we haven’t seen you all day and you’re sick, we want to be in here with you,” Zayn adds.

Louis begins to type again and they read over his shoulder, ‘I can come out to the living roo-’

“No we want to keep you cozy, stop worrying love. Now when did you start feeling sick?” Liam asks softly.

‘Just this morning, my throat was hurting all day so I came home and then I just woke up with no voice,’ Louis lies.

“We’ll take you to the doctor tomorrow. I have a test I can’t miss first thing in the morning but I’ll come home straight after that,” Zayn tells him.

“I’ll stay home in the morning and then I just have to go back for last period and practice,” Liam adds.

‘No, you guys aren’t missing school for me. I’m sure I’ll be fine tomorrow I’ll just let my voice rest,’ Louis taps quickly onto the notepad.

“We’ll see tomorrow, stop worrying. Are you sure we can’t get you something, you must be hungry. I’ll run to the store and get some medicine and some soup or something,” Zayn says.

‘No, I had a big lunch before I started feeling really sick and I don’t need any medicine, but thanks,’ Louis types, ‘I’m just tired…’

“Okay babe, c’mere, just close your eyes,” Liam says gently, holding him a little closer.

Zayn’s arms tighten, “I’m sorry you’re not feeling well Lou,” he says so softly.

Louis buries back into Zayn’s neck, twines his fingers with Liam’s and tries to focus on their hands stroking and soothing and comforting. He doesn’t deserve this. He doesn’t deserve them. He feels a lump of emotion pressing against the raw edges of his throat and he begs his body not to betray him, not to let the tears out. Louis and his body haven’t been on good terms with each other for a long time though, and before he knows it he can feel the tears, hot and wet behind his eyelids. He presses his eyes shut tighter but Zayn must feel the wetness on his neck because he pulls back.
“Lou-” he says, catching sight of Louis with his eyes rammed shut and tears still escaping, “oh no Louis, why are you crying?”

“Louis please don’t cry,” Liam pleads.

Louis lets out something between a whimper and a wheeze and then the dam is broken and he’s full out sobbing. He sounds like a dying animal because his throat is incapable of the correct noises as he tries to drag air into his lungs. The tears are coming too fast and too thick and they stream down his face and drip off his chin, wetting the collar of his shirt as he shoves the heels of his hands into his eyes. He folds forward, drawing his legs up to his chin and hiding his face against them. It’s too much; he hates himself so much that it’s exhausting. He feels like a rope being drawn so tight that little threads of him are snapping apart one by one.

In an instant he is completely enveloped by the both of them and their voices alternate between begging to know what is wrong and telling him it’s going to be okay. It isn’t even about Harry. Harry is just another thing on the list of things Louis has ruined by being himself. Just another thing he’s ruined by being gay, and fat, and gay. Just another person he’s lost because his brain is wired wrong and he’s disgusting. Here he is sobbing like the pitiful creature that he is and he hates himself for it, but that just makes him cry harder. Every breath feels like he’s trying to swallow sandpaper or nails or something and the pain doesn’t feel good anymore.

Less air starts reaching his lungs with each breath he takes between each jagged sob. His throat is so swollen and inflamed and he feels like he can’t breathe, but the tears won’t stop. The more desperately he tries to pull air in the less seems to come and that just scares him more. Soon he can’t even sob he’s just clinging, trying desperately to hold himself together and drag air into his lungs.

Louis is dragged back by his shoulders, out of the little ball he’s formed himself into, and laid back against the pillows. Liam and Zayn work like a team without having to exchange a word. They each grab one of Louis’ wrists and cross his hands across his chest. Louis’ hands fist in the material of the sweatshirt he’s wearing. They drag the covers up to Louis chin and then wordlessly they begin tucking the blankets in. They tuck him in under the shoulders and then tuck him in all down his body until he is completely cocooned in the duvet. Silently they take their respective positions. Liam lays himself on top of Louis, wrapping his leg and his arm across him, and allows his entire weight to rest on Louis’ body. Zayn grabs a million tissues and begins catching Louis tears as they fall, his upper body curled around Louis head on the pillow.

If anyone were to come in they would think the three of them were completely insane. Liam attempting to squish Louis, Louis sobbing like a strangled cat, and Zayn near tears himself, hunched over Louis. Normal people need space to breathe when they’re crying, normal people don’t want to feel trapped when they’re upset. Louis is not normal. When Louis is upset, when he’s hyperventilating like this, he feels like a bomb on the verge of blowing up. He feels like he’s seconds away from exploding apart, sending shrapnel in every direction, destructing into a million little pieces. He can’t let that happen though, he can’t let himself break apart because he knows damn well that he’ll never be able to put himself back together. He’ll never be able to find all the pieces, he’ll never be able to reassemble himself.

He needs to keep himself together, he needs to keep himself from exploding. It’s why he wraps an arm around himself when he’s sad or lost or hurting, it’s why his first instinct is to curl into a ball. Its why Liam is laying on top of Louis now, trying to make himself cover as much of Louis as he can, to make himself as heavy as he possibly can. Liam knows that when it all gets too much and Louis feels like he can’t hold himself together he needs Liam to help him. It’s been that way since they were kids and Zayn learned quickly, finding his place by Louis head to help Louis feel even more encompassed.
Louis can hardly breathe under the weight of Liam and the wall that Zayn’s body forms, but he doesn’t feel claustrophobic, he feels safe and protected and compressed. He can’t stop crying but he stops sounding like he’s being choked by the tears. As he feels the weight of Liam with each breath, he finds that each breath comes easier. He’s not going to break into shards, he’s not going to explode and float away into the air like ash. When he’s finally breathing his ears pick up their voices whispering soothing things, and he knows they’ve been doing it the whole time, even if he couldn’t hear it.

He knows they need to know what’s going on. He may not tell them about his diet and he may do his best to act like he’s okay, but he’s never not told Liam why he was upset. Liam knows everything that has ever hurt Louis. He just doesn’t know that Louis still holds all those things inside of him, like kerosene keeping the fire of self loathing in his gut blazing. He can’t tell them right now though, and they understand that because when he shuts his eyes and takes a long, shaky breath they just tell him they love him. He’s empty and exhausted and he falls asleep thinking about horrible words, that start with the letters F and Q, being thrown at him while he’s told exactly how much of an abomination he is.

When he wakes again the weight of Liam is gone from his chest but there is a hand stroking his hair and a warm body on either side of him. He looks over to see Zayn sitting up with a textbook in his lap, his hand moving absentmindedly across Louis’ fringe while he reads. There are dirty plates on the bedside table meaning they ate dinner in here with him even if he was sleeping. Louis turns his head and sees Liam on his other side typing on his laptop, pressed as close along Louis’ side as he can get.

“Hey babe,” he says gently, when their eyes meet.

“How are you feeling?” Zayn asks.

Louis nods and swallows thickly. Instantly Liam is holding a glass of water near his chin and Louis raises his head to drink through the straw that Liam has provided. He lets the room temperature water slide down his throat and it’s some relief from the incessant burning. He lets his head flop back on the pillow when he’s done and Zayn’s hand goes back to his hair. He’s still swaddled in the blankets and he has to free an arm to rub at his eyes.

“M’sorry,” Louis manages to croak, though it’s barely audible and sounds as painful as it feels.

“You have nothing to say sorry for,” Zayn says instantly.

“Nothing,” Liam confirms, “and keep resting your voice,” he adds, handing Louis his phone, open to the notepad.

Louis lets out a huff but shuts his mouth and types instead, ‘I’m sorry that you two are always stuck holding me together.’

Liam slams his laptop shut and puts it on the floor, turning to look down at Louis, “we are not stuck, we are here because we want to be here and we always will,” he says so sincerely and so earnestly.

“Louis we love you, you’re our best friend,” Zayn adds gently, fingers still moving in Louis hair.

‘I like Harry,’ he types and seeing it written out feels like a swift kick to the gut, ‘and he’s straight and I can’t be friends with him anymore now.’

Zayn and Liam read what he’s typed and they exchange one of their silent looks over Louis head. They know what this means. They know why Louis can’t be his friend anymore. They know that
Louis isn’t strong enough to like someone who could never like him back. They don’t know exactly how fragile he is, but they know he definitely isn’t strong enough for that. They also know that Louis’ breakdown wasn’t about Harry, it was about the list. They have Louis’ list memorized too. They know every single thing he’s lost, because they’re the ones who stuck by him through every loss. They know Louis has just added Harry to the list and they know that the list tears Louis apart. Louis knows they want to be able to tell him not to be upset, that maybe it doesn’t have to be like that, but they know it does. They know it’s better to have Harry on the list now, rather than later when he takes a piece of Louis with him.

“Oh Lou,” Liam hums, sinking down to scoop Louis up.

Louis just nods as they both press in closer, “It’ll be okay,” Zayn adds softly.

Louis nods again. He can’t even think about it right now. They spend the night in Louis’ bed and after Zayn and Liam are done their homework they turn on Louis’ TV and snuggle up under the covers. Liam and Zayn stay pressed close to his sides all night and eventually Louis dozes off with his legs tangled up with Zayn’s and his face buried in the crook of Liam’s neck, two sets of arms wrapped around him.

When Louis wakes up Zayn is gone to his morning class but Liam’s fingertips are drawing nonsensical patterns on his back. Louis’ voice is back but he sounds like an eighty year old smoker and his throat still burns with every word. He argues with Liam that he shouldn’t be missing school but it’s in vain because Liam just tells him he’s not going anywhere and drags him out to the living room. He tries to get Louis to eat some oatmeal but Louis says it hurts too much to swallow and Liam brings him tea instead. Louis knows he won’t be able to get away with not eating for long, but the thought of purging with his throat so raw is not appealing.

Liam doesn’t talk about Harry and Louis is thankful. Louis found his phone in his jacket pocket and there were five texts from Harry, the first two just making small talk, the third saying goodnight even though Louis had never replied, one asking where he is because its second period and Louis isn’t in the studio, and the last one sounding very worried. Louis doesn’t reply, he doesn’t even let himself think about it.

He’s dozing on the couch when Zayn gets home, in that place between sleeping and alertness, and he listens to the sounds of Zayn coming in. He hears Liam say a quiet hello and ask how school was, Zayn says it was fine as they move into the kitchen and Louis can’t hear them anymore. His eyes are closed and he’s turned facing the backrest of the couch as Zayn and Liam sit on the other sofa, their voices whispers now.

“How is he doing? Zayn asks softly.

“He can talk a little but it sounds like it hurts so much,” Liam says sadly.

“Has he said anything?”

“No, nothing. I can’t stand seeing that look in his eyes again, he was doing so well,” Liam sighs.

“Harry tracked me down to ask about him, looked worried out of his mind. It sucks because he’s such a good kid, and I can tell he really cares about Lou,” Zayn’s voice is sad and low and Louis feels his heart sink.

“I haven’t seen Lou look genuinely happy like that in so long,” Louis can hear the frown in Liam’s voice, “now he’s going to start beating himself up all over again.”
“It’s okay Li, we’ll get him through it,” Zayn says and Louis can hear him shifting closer to Liam.

“I know, I just like- he’s the best person I’ve ever- he just- he shouldn’t be hating himself for something he can’t change.”

“I know,” Zayn breathes, “I know.”

Louis can feel the tears pricking behind his eyes but he works to keep his breathing steady. Louis sometimes thinks he wouldn’t really believe how much Zayn and Liam love him if it wasn’t for the conversations they have when they think he isn’t listening. He’d never be able to comprehend two people caring about him so much, he’d never be able to accept their love, because it’s his natural instinct to doubt that love is real in any shape or form. Except they have these conversations when they think he’s not listening and the things they say, they help him believe that they really do love him. He knows he doesn’t deserve it, he knows he’s a burden to them, but he genuinely doesn’t know what he would do without them.

Eventually he hears Liam leave for his last class and he pretends to wake up when the door closes. Zayn presses close to him on the couch and he doesn’t mention Harry either, until Louis’ phone buzzes three times on the coffee table, half an hour between each message. Louis sighs and finally checks the texts and lets Zayn read over his shoulder.

‘Ran into Zayn he told me you’re poorly, I’ve been worried about you, hope you’re okay.’

‘I missed you today, it’s weird not talking to you.’

‘Sorry I know I’m being annoying, I’ll leave you alone, call me if you need anything.’

Zayn hums softly, a sad sound, as Louis tosses the phone back on the coffee table. He wraps his arms around Louis from behind and pulls him back against his chest. He nuzzles into Louis’ hair a bit and Louis laces their fingers together. Zayn doesn’t ask and Louis doesn’t tell, he hasn’t quite figured out what he’s going to do yet. The worst part is that he knows how lonely Harry is. He remembers Harry quietly admitting once that he had regretted moving to London before Louis spoke to him, because he only had Niall and Niall is great but he had been lonely. Louis had told him that it was better to be lonely because you don’t know anyone, than to be lonely because people leave. Harry had looked at him kind of sadly for a moment and Louis had quickly changed the subject, but he doesn’t want to leave Harry lonely again. All the more reason to hate himself, he thinks.

He and Zayn watch crap TV until Liam gets home with take away. He’s brought chicken noodle soup for Louis and Louis actually allows himself to drink some of the broth because he felt like he was going to pass out on the way from the living room to the kitchen. Liam and Zayn are just glad he ate something. By bedtime Louis voice is raspy but stronger than before, and his throat doesn’t hurt as much. Harry texts him before bed again, wishing him sweet dreams and telling Louis he hopes he feels better. Louis ignores it, but it makes his raw throat itch a bit. Liam and Zayn sleep with him again, he tells them they don’t have to but they just shush him and follow him to bed.

In the dark and in the quiet Louis practically whispers that he’s going to try and be okay with Harry until after the fashion show and then he’ll have to take a step back. Liam and Zayn seem to think it’s the best idea but they still press closer and their hands move to comfort him. Louis falls asleep thinking about plush red lips, long slender fingers and alabaster skin, mixed in with four little girls crying when he wasn’t even allowed to say goodbye.
Chapter 13

Louis has a hard time explaining away his sore throat when it was doing so much better and then they make him eat oatmeal for breakfast and when he comes out of the shower his voice is raw and scratchy again. He tells them the steam loosened the phlegm in his chest and he coughed and that’s why its raw again. He doesn’t tell them that his throat is raw again because he purged his breakfast before he got ready for school. Liam insists that Louis rides with them to the university. Zayn and Liam always drive together but Louis goes alone because they have stuff to do after class, Liam has football and Zayn hangs out with his friends and usually wanders home around dinner time. Liam’s football is over though, and Zayn always sticks close to home when he knows Louis is feeling down.

The ride to school is quiet; Louis sits in the back seat with his head pressed to the window, Zayn and Liam exchange worried glances in the front seat. Louis spends his entire first period wondering if he should just stay away from the studio to avoid seeing Harry. He knows Harry will go to check if he’s back at school, even though Louis hasn’t replied any of his texts. The last thing Louis needs is to bump into Harry after avoiding him during second period and have to explain that as well as why he’s been ignoring Harry’s texts. He’ll have to go, he’ll have to act like everything is fine. There is always a chance Harry won’t show up at all, Louis didn’t get a text in the morning like he usually would so maybe Harry won’t check the studio.

The bell rings after first and Louis gathers his things to head to second, hoping maybe Harry won’t come. He unpacks his things at the work station even though he has nothing to work on. He ends up folding his arms and putting his head down, hoping to just sleep through the period. It isn’t long before there is a large hand on his back though, rubbing softly up and down. Louis clears his throat and raises his head. Harry is sitting on the stool beside him, backpack still on and a crease between his brows. Louis offers a weak smile and straightens up, Harry’s hand stays on his shoulder. Harry looks at him for just a moment before he’s reaching forward, pulling Louis into his arms.

Louis only tenses for a moment before he lets himself sink into the hug a bit, accepting Harry’s arms wrapped warmly around his shoulders and wrapping his own arms around Harry’s waist. Louis expects him to ask about the texts or something but he doesn’t. He just holds Louis for a little longer and then holds Louis at arms length as his eyes search Louis face.

“How’re you feeling?” he asks gently.

“M’alright,” Louis says, but his voice is still raspy.

Harry frowns, “throat still hurt?”

“A little,” Louis shrugs, “m’okay.”

He nods and pulls a stool over, sitting beside Louis. Louis puts his head back down on his arms and he’s thankful when he hears Harry taking out his textbooks. Louis appreciates it because he thinks maybe he doesn’t want to talk right now, but as he listens to Harry’s pencil lightly scratching at the paper he feels guilty. It’s not Harry’s fault Louis can’t control himself, can’t keep himself from being attracted to Harry. He doesn’t deserve to be ignored when he’s been nothing but nice to Louis.

Louis is going to have to get his shit together and maybe he can introduce Harry to some of the girls at the rehearsal on monday or something so Louis doesn’t have to feel so guilty for not talking to him after the show. Louis raises his head and finds Harry with his curls falling out from under his beanie as he scribbles in his notebook. He reaches out for a highlighter and notices Louis’ head isn’t down anymore. He offers Louis a small smile as he uncaps the highlighter and drags it across a line in his
“Did you know we went to the same college in Donny?’’ Harry asks after a while.

Louis eyebrows shoot up, “no, did we? I thought you said you were from Cheshire?’’

Harry nods, “yeah I am, but we moved to Doncaster before I started college when my step dad got a promotion. I was in first year when you were in your last year,'’ he explains.

“Oh wow, I- I’m sorry for not remembering you,’’ Louis frowns.

“No don’t be silly, I’d never expect you to. We never like, talked, I just knew you because everyone knew you, didn’t they. You were just like that, nice to everyone and so like, outgoing. Then I came here and I saw you one day in the hall when I was with Niall and I remembered you. I wanted to say thank you then, but he told me you would think I was a creep. Then when you asked me to do the show for you I actually couldn’t even believe that for whatever reason you noticed me, but I’m glad because now maybe I can say thank you without sounding like a total creep?’’ Harry says, with a small hopeful smile.

Louis shakes his head though, “I don’t understand Harry, what do you have to say thank you for?’’

Harry laughs softly, “because you came out that year Lou. I remember coming to school and everyone was talking about how Louis Tomlinson came out as gay. I remember some people being assholes about it and it was like big news for a while but I remember seeing you and you just didn’t care. You had Liam and Zayn and you just- you didn’t change, you never apologized for it, you were proud of it and you didn’t take any shit and- yeah. It sounds dumb but I had noticed you before that because you were just so happy and friendly and cool, but then after that Lou- like I don’t know that was just like- the best thing I had ever seen, how you handled that.’’

Louis searches Harry’s face and he’s met with so much sincerity. Harry knows he’s gay and he doesn’t mind, he isn’t put off, he isn’t going to shove Louis away in disgust or call him names, he doesn’t hate Louis. Louis knows that Harry never seemed like the kind of person who would put Louis down for his sexuality but he was still scared, it wouldn’t have been the first time Louis was wrong about someone. Louis has thought a lot of people were too kind or too nice to put him down, but he’s been wrong every single time except two; with Zayn and Liam. Here is Harry though, telling him that when they were younger he looked up to Louis for coming out. Louis almost feels relief but then he feels a twinge in his gut; a lot has changed since then.

“I still don’t understand what you have to say thank you for,’’ Louis says slowly, shaking his head.

Harry laughs then but its a gentle sound, not mocking, “because I always thought there was something wrong with me. While all my friends were taking about tits I had to focus on trying not to get hard in the change rooms when they were all taking their clothes off. And all I knew was that if someone called someone else gay it was an insult and if someone was different they were going to get torn apart. I just knew I was supposed to keep my mouth shut about whatever was wrong with me- that I couldn’t tell anyone. Then you came out and like- I can’t even explain to you how much I needed to see that. To see someone being so proud of how they were, to actually say it out loud and not be ashamed. And like, I know it can’t’ve been easy for you and I know some people were rude, but it just showed me that it could be done. I saw how Liam and Zayn stuck by you and I remember that time Liam beat the shit out of that other kid for being rude to you and I remember Zayn cussing out anyone who said a bad word about it and I saw how you handled it when people were rude and you were just so- like happy still, and still, just like, you. So I knew then that like, yeah maybe I would lose some friends and have to put up with some assholes but the important people would stick around and that there wasn’t anything wrong with me. I looked at the people I had around me, at my
friends, and I knew which ones would stick around and I let myself stop caring about the ones that wouldn’t, and so when I was finally ready to come out I wasn’t hurt when some people fucked off. And like I wasn’t ready- I didn’t come out until second year of college but when I did it wasn’t the end of the world and I felt so much better and just like- I don’t know. I just wanted to say thank you for being brave enough to do that because even though you had no clue who I was and I never expected to ever see you again after you were finished college you- you really helped me. Like, you helped me more than you even know. So yeah. That’s what I wanted to say thank you for.”

Louis can’t even look at Harry, his eyes are trained on his lap where his hands are wringing. He doesn’t even know what to say, he’s just trying to process. Harry is gay too. Harry is gay and Louis helped him, in some vague way, helped him feel like it was okay for him to come out. All Louis can think about is the fact that Harry came out and is actually thankful that he did, that Harry’s world didn’t fall apart.

“What did your family say?” Louis asks softly.

“My mum has always been amazing and my sister is great. They just told me they were proud of me for coming out and that they loved me. I was a bit worried about my step dad but he just clapped me on the back and said thanks for telling him and good on me and went back to watching the football game,” Harry shrugs.

Louis just nods. He’s happy for Harry, he really is. He’s glad Harry had a good experience with coming out, he’s glad Harry has a family who loves him, who doesn’t make him feel like there is something wrong with him. He’s happy that Harry is happy, that Harry doesn’t hate himself for being gay. Louis thinks back, something he doesn’t let himself do very often, and he remembers when he came out. It had kind of sucked watching people he thought were his friends turn their backs but he really had been okay, he had Liam and Zayn. He had felt free and relieved and like he could actually breathe for once in his life.

It had all been good until Stan, the one person he’d been friends with longer than Liam, the kid he had grown up next door to and had considered his best friend since before he could form coherent sentences, let Louis know what he thought about him being gay. Stan didn’t really say much on the subject actually, he let his fist against Louis jaw do the talking. He stated how he felt with every kick of his shoe to Louis’ ribs. He showed just how bad he thought it was with the gob of spit he shot at Louis’ face before he walked away, leaving Louis bleeding on the concrete. But Harry wouldn’t know about any of that because Louis stayed away from school until the bruises healed.

Even after that though Louis had still been okay, because Louis really was a happy person and he felt so much better being able to be true to himself. Yeah, what Stan did hurt a lot more emotionally than it did physically but Louis was okay, he had Zayn and he had Liam and he was okay. Yeah, maybe his Mum got more upset when she found out that Liam had beaten up Stan than she had when Louis dragged himself home bleeding from Stan’s fists, and yeah maybe his Mum’s fiancé had muttered that Louis deserved every shot he got but Louis was okay. He was free and he was true to himself and he was happy with who he was.

The rest of the year passed by just fine, people got over it and he stayed away from Stan and the guys from the football team and he had Liam and he had Zayn and lots of other people who still liked him even though he was gay and he was perfectly fine. Home wasn’t so great, but his sisters didn’t treat him any differently and he was thankful for that. Everything was okay and Louis was Louis; loud and friendly and outgoing and yeah he was gay but he was happy too. And then as soon as Louis finished college everything was blown to shit and he was ripped apart and then suddenly Louis wasn’t Louis anymore and Louis wasn’t happy, he was just gay and it wasn’t okay anymore.
“I’m really glad it worked out for you Harry,” Louis manages, forcing a smile.

Harry frowns though, “are you okay Lou?” he asks softly.

Louis clears his throat and attempts to make his smile more convincing, “of course Harry, I mean-like you don’t have to say thank you for that but I’m glad that you’re happy,” he says.

Harry nods but his eyes stay locked on Louis. Louis tries to meet his gaze and smile but he feels his chest aching. His eyes trace the line of Harry’s eyebrows, the curve of his cheeks, the dimple that is present only because he’s chewing on the inside of his cheek, the arch of his upper lip, the plushness of his bottom one, the striking colour of his eyes. Louis thinks maybe he had it easy before. It hurt less to tell himself that he had to stop being friends with Harry because Harry was straight and he is gay and he can’t do the whole unrequited feelings thing. It hurt, yeah, but it was easier than this. Easier than knowing he still has to stop being friends with Harry because Harry will never look at him the way he looks at Harry.

Louis doesn’t have an ice cubes chance in hell of ever having Harry like him back. Even when Louis was in his prime; fit and tanned before he had to quit the football team so Stan didn’t have the team beat the shit out of him, even then Louis would never have had a chance with a guy like Harry. Harry is fucking gorgeous and even if he didn’t look like he was manufactured by the gods his personality alone makes him a ten. Now Louis can’t blame it on sexuality, he knows it’s just because of him, how shit he is.

“I just wish you were happy,” Harry says so softly that Louis almost doesn’t catch it.

Louis blanches and his eyes snap up to Harry, “what? I am happy.”

Harry’s eyes soften and he frowns a little, “are you though?” he asks and his voice is so gentle, “because I know you spend a lot of time acting happy, and like, I thought sometimes you were happy but then I kind of realized that maybe your version of happy is just- like- maybe when whatever is hurting you just isn’t right at the front of your mind. Because even when you’re smiling and even when you’re laughing, it’s just like- I don’t know. Are you happy Louis?”

Louis kind of feels like he’s choking. He can feel Harry dragging the emotion out of him, physically reaching into Louis’ chest and tugging at each stitch that Louis has so carefully sewn to hold himself together. He’s tugging on the strings, testing the strength of the seams, and they’re weak. The stitches have always been so fucking weak and they’re just there to hold Louis together, they’re not strong enough to withstand tugging and prying.

He doesn’t understand why Harry is doing this to him, why Harry is trying to pull him apart. He doesn’t understand how Harry has seen past his carefully crafted display. Louis has got smoke and mirrors down to a science, he knows how to deflect and he knows how to act and he’s managed to keep people at arms length so nobody would ever question how the magic works. He’s got his relationship with Zayn and Liam down to an art, how to give enough so that he doesn’t have to lie to them, but able to keep them from knowing how close he is to the edge. Yet here is Harry, ready to unravel everything Louis has sewn together. Louis knows he should lie. He knows he should be telling Harry to back off, to leave him alone. He feels the tears prickling at the back of his eyes and he hates himself for it.

“I’m not that person you saw in college anymore Harry. That isn’t me. Everything doesn’t always work out the way you think it’s going to. Things don’t always work out,” Louis says, and he has to look away from Harry because Harry’s eyes are just so fucking wide and earnest and it hurts.

“I’m sorry that things didn’t work out for you Louis, I’m sorry that you’re hurting,” Harry breathes
and Louis sees his hand coming out of his peripheral vision.

He flinches away from it and shakes his head, “you don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says but his voice is shaking.

“I know I don’t Lou, I’ve only known you a couple weeks and it was like pulling teeth to get you to tell me your favourite colour. But I’m here, yeah? I want to know about you. I want to be someone you can talk to,” Harry talks to Louis like he knows Louis could bolt at any second, could tell him to fuck off and get out of his studio.

Louis thinks maybe he should, “why?” he asks instead, because thats all his voice can manage without breaking.

“Because I want to make you happy. If anyone deserves to be happy it’s you,” Harry says, his voice low and warm and all of the things Louis used to like when Harry spoke, but now it just feels wrong.

“Where the hell is this coming from- I don’t-” Louis shakes his head, “I don’t get what you want from me.”

Harry frowns, “I- I don’t want anything from you Louis. Like, I completely understand if you don’t like me that way and it’s okay I can handle it I just- I’m not saying this just because I’m attracted to you, and I’m not saying this because I’ve had a crush on you since I saw you play Danny in Grease, and I’m not saying this just because I want to be with you- I just- you deserve to be happy.”

Louis kind of feels like his head is under water, “I was in Grease before I even came out,” he mumbles stupidly.

“Lou-“

“I don’t know what you want me to say Harry- I don’t know what- you’re not making any fucking sense,” Louis sighs, rubbing his eyes because he suddenly feels so tired.

“I am Louis, you’re just not listening. I want you to give me a chance-“

“A chance to what Harry?”

“A chance to make you happy-“

Louis scoffs, he can’t even help it, “you can’t just make me happy-“

Louis misses the hurt that flashes across Harry’s face before he smooths out his features, “a chance to be with you,” he says softly.

Louis laughs then, even though there is something like a knife twisting in his gut, “you don’t want to be with me Harry. Why are you fucking around?”

Harry can’t hide the hurt from his face this time as he lets out a long shaky breath, “is it really that hard for you to believe?”

Those words, the look on Harry’s face, the sincerity in his voice, it’s like Harry takes a stitch ripper to every patch Louis has sewn in his chest cavity, like he’s dragging each thread out one by one. Because yeah, it is hard for Louis to believe. Louis doesn’t understand why Harry is trying to break him. He doesn’t get why Harry is dragging out all of his scars, holding his tattered heart up to the light to examine every pucker, every pull, every uneven spot where a chunk has been ripped out and never returned. Like Louis, with all his issues and all his imperfections, is a fucking science project
for Harry, something for Harry to try and fix.

“This isn’t some romantic comedy. I’m not some damsel in distress,” Louis says, and he wishes his voice sounded harsher but he just sounds shaky, “I’m a bloody mess Harry, you can’t just make me happy.”

“I can try,” Harry says and his voice is quiet but sure, “if you give me a chance.”

Louis knows how this shit works. He isn’t an idiot. Louis knows he is a pathetic disfigured mess, inside and out, and he knows the novelty of trying to fix him won’t last long. When Harry gets tired of Louis, gets tired of pretending to like the broken thing, gets tired of trying to fix something irreparable, he’ll leave. Louis also knows that when Harry leaves he’ll be taking parts of Louis with him. Like a plaster that’s left on too long and the scab starts to mesh with the gauze. When it’s yanked off the scab is ripped away too, leaving the wound more gaping and raw than it was before.

“And what happens when you can’t,” Louis asks, finally meeting Harry’s eyes.

There is a line between his eyebrows and his eyes are wide and sincere, “you’re still beautiful when you’re not smiling Lou,” he says.

Louis isn’t really sure how to respond to that, his throat feels half closed. Things like this don’t happen to Louis. People like Harry don’t like Louis. Except then Harry is reaching out, reaching out for Louis like he’s scared Louis is going to spook and flinch away. But Louis is frozen, still trying to comprehend what the hell is going on, trying to understand why Harry is saying these things.

Harry’s hand comes out to cup Louis’ cheek and Louis feels like every single one of his nerve endings has migrated to the patch of skin just under Harry’s palm. Then Harry brushes his thumb across Louis’ cheekbone and he leaves a trail of sparks along Louis’ skin. Louis’ breath catches in his throat when he meets Harry’s eyes, he can’t even get over how soft they are, how kind. Harry leans in and Louis definitely isn’t breathing when Harry’s nose nudges softly at his cheek. Harry’s lips ghost across the skin, testing, waiting for Louis to jerk away, to shove him off. Louis eyes close and he finds himself leaning into Harry’s touch, even though he knows he shouldn’t. Harry pulls back, but only a fraction of an inch, his hand still cradling Louis’ cheek.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers and his breath is warm against Louis’ face.

Louis keeps his eyes closed and fights the urge to shake his head, terrified if he moves whatever is happening right now will stop. He doesn’t understand, he doesn’t get it, but Harry’s hand is so soft on his cheek and his lips were so gentle on his skin.

“Babe,” Harry breathes.

Louis lets out the shaky breath he was holding in. Harry’s nose nudges at Louis cheek again and Louis tips his chin up the tiniest bit. When Harry’s lips touch Louis’ it’s soft and hesitant. Gentle. Warm. Everything else falls away. He can’t feel the emptiness in his stomach or the burn in his throat, he can’t even feel the weight that is always resting on his shoulders, trying to press him into the ground. He feels weightless. Harry’s lips brush against his again. His lips are so plush and so soft and Louis doesn’t think he’s ever been kissed like this. Tenderly. It’s sweet and it’s slow, and it’s sincere.

When Harry pulls back he doesn’t straighten up, he rests his forehead against Louis’, his thumb tracing the line of Louis’ cheekbone. Louis is blessed with a few more seconds of weightlessness, the feel of Harry’s lips still lingering on his, the warmth of Harry hand against his cheek, one of Harry’s curls tickling his forehead where they’re pressed together. And then everything comes crashing
“I don’t understand,” Louis manages, and the burn in his throat is just a reminder of just why this isn’t happening.

Harry pulls back and his face falls when he sees the confusion in Louis’ eyes. His hand drops from Louis’ cheek and the spell is broken. Louis shakes his head and pulls back, slipping down off his stool and backing away. Harry looks like he wants to reach out, his hand comes up but Louis shakes his head again and he lets it fall to his side.

“Lou-“

Louis can’t, he doesn’t have any more to give. He doesn’t have enough pieces to spare. He knows, maybe Harry likes him now, for god knows what reason, but Louis doesn’t get to keep nice things. Nice things are ripped away from Louis every time, and they take a little bit of him with them when they go. Louis doesn’t have enough extra fabric, there isn’t enough thread in the world, there is no way Louis would be able to hold himself together after Harry rips him apart.

Harry watches silently as Louis grabs his bag and slings it over his shoulder. Louis hates the look of confusion on Harry’s face, but he can’t stand the hurt. He wants to say sorry but he isn’t sure what for. He wishes it were different, maybe that he were stronger, or maybe that he was allowed to have good things, but he isn’t. Harry has sunken back down on his stool and his hands are clenched around his knees, his knuckles white. He’s looking up at Louis and his eyes are pleading and that hurts, that kills, but Louis doesn’t know what Harry is asking of him. He doesn’t understand.

Louis leaves the room and pretends not to hear his name coming from Harry’s lips, sounding broken and confused. He walks until he’s out the front doors of the school and the wind is biting at his face. He makes it to the café on the corner because second period is less than half over and he orders a tea. When he collapses into one of the chairs by the window he feels spent. He raises his fingers to his lips, chasing the feeling of Harry’s pressed there, warm and soft. He can feel the tears pricking behind his eyes, he can feel the itch at the back of his throat. He can feel the hate, coiling hot and low in his stomach. He doesn’t hate anyone but himself.

He sips at his tea and it helps with the ache in his stomach and soothes the burn in his throat but he feels kind of like falling apart. He draws his knees up to his chest, wraps his arms around himself and holds himself together until its time to go back to the school for third period. Louis makes it through the rest of the day in a bit of a blur, trying desperately to avoid eye contact with anyone lest, they see that he’s falling apart at the seams.

When the bell finally rings at the end of the day Louis is already waiting by Liam’s car when Zayn crosses the lot towards him. When Zayn is close enough one look at Louis’ face tells him everything is not okay. Wordlessly he scoops Louis into his arms and Louis crumples a little, his hand fisting in Zayn’s shirt. They stand like that until another warm body wraps around both of them.

“What’s going on,” Liam asks Zayn softly, tipping Louis’ chin up and brushing his deflated fringe off his forehead.

“I don’t know he hasn’t said anything,” Zayn replies.

“I’m not in a catatonic state or something,” Louis sighs, burying into Liam’s chest and tightening his grip on Zayn.

“Tell us what happened,” Zayn says gently.
“I’ll tell you in the car,” Louis says.

He feels two kisses planted to the top of his head and when he slides into the backseat Liam shoves Zayn in beside him. Liam starts the car and backs out of the stall and Louis waits until they’re out of the parking lot before he lets out a sigh. He doesn’t even really know where to start, he hasn’t even had a chance to catalogue all the information because he forced himself to focus on his classes just to get through the day.

“Harry kissed me,” he says, because that seems like the most prominent thing at the moment.

There is a moment of stunned silence as Liam meets Zayn’s eyes in the rear view mirror. Louis can tell they don’t really know how they’re supposed to be reacting to this information. Zayn puts an arm around Louis’ shoulders and Louis lets out a groan and sinks into his side. Louis lets them have their silent conversation over his head as he tries to get his own thoughts in line.

“We thought Harry was straight,” Liam says first.

“So did I. Apparently he was at college with us in Doncaster, when we were in third year he was in first. He remembered me, remembered when I came out. He came out the year after we left I think- I don’t know. He’s gay too. I don’t know,” Louis mumbles, trying to remember anything other than Harry’s lips on his.

“But Lou,” Zayn frowns, “this is good, yeah?”

Louis shakes his head, “how could this possibly be good,” he scoffs.

“Because you thought you had to stop being friends with him because you liked him and he was straight. Except now you know he’s not and he likes you back,” Liam says, like he thinks he’s stating the obvious.

Louis tries to swallow past the tightness in his throat and shakes his head again, “it doesn’t work like that,” Louis says quietly, “you know it doesn’t work like that.”

“Lou-“

“No Liam. It doesn’t work like that for me.”

“Bebz you-“

“Stop Zayn please,” Louis sighs.

They exchange another look through the rearview mirror but Zayn just holds Louis a little tighter as Liam drives, “why don’t you just tell us what happened, yeah?” Liam says.

Louis sighs and rubs his eyes but he knows he needs to get it all out of his head, “he came into the studio and whatever and then he just told me he had been at college with us and that he wanted to say thank you for something. I asked him for what and he told me because I had come out and I was so proud about it, and I just stayed true to myself even when people were assholes,” Zayn holds him a little closer because he knows how hard it was for him, “and I still didn’t understand, why he wanted to thank me for that. He told me he was gay, he was gay and thought something was wrong with him and I showed him that there wasn’t. I don’t know, he came out. He came out and it wasn’t the end of the world and his family didn’t disown him and he wanted to say thank you for showing him it was okay.”

“Louis,” Zayn says softly because he can hear Louis’ voice shaking, “Louis thats so good. You
helped someone. I know - I know it wasn’t easy for you but you helped someone.”

Louis sniffles a bit and gives a small nod, “I told him I was happy for him, glad that it worked out for him. Then he told me- told me that he had a crush on me since he saw me in Grease and that he wanted to be with me- wanted a chance to be with me.”

“What did you say back love?” Liam asks as he drives.

“I- I argued- didn’t understand,” the tears are prickling at the back of his eyes now and his throat is tight, “then he kissed me.”

“Oh Lou,” Zayn sighs.

“Did he just pounce on you Louis? Did he force the kiss on you,” Liam asks suddenly, looking over his shoulder when they stop at a red light.

Louis shakes his head, “no he was- was so gentle. It was so sweet,” he explains, his voice catching.

“Then what happened?” Zayn asks, thumbing away the tears on Louis’ cheeks.

“I- I left,” Louis sighs, sinking back into Zayn and burying his face in his hands, “stuff like this doesn’t work out for me.”

Zayn sighs and holds him closer, the seat belts straining at their chests. Louis shoulders shake as he runs his hands up and down his back. He murmurs soothing things as he holds Louis, his eyes meeting Liam’s in the rearview mirror and seeing the frown lines creasing Liam’s eyebrows. They don’t say anything else as they drive home and when they pull up out front of the flat Louis climbs out of the car with damp eyes. Liam pulls him close to his side and brushes away the tears before he leads them in the house.

They get Louis settled on the couch with a cup of tea and go into the kitchen to make dinner. Louis knows that just means they’re going in the kitchen to discuss him. He can hear their soft voices but he doesn’t even bother trying to make out what they’re saying. He just settles into the corner of the sofa and pulls the blankets tight around him. He wishes things were different. He wishes he deserved someone as sweet and as kind as Harry. He hates himself for that look in Harry’s eyes when he left, he hates himself for hurting Harry.

When dinner is ready Louis joins them at the table and picks at his food. He makes it through dinner by asking them about their days and distracting them while he struggles to swallow some food. They’re worried about him he can tell but when they finish eating he clears the plates and escapes to the bathroom. He doesn’t understand why Harry would want to be with him. Every time his fingers stroke the back of his throat he questions every word that Harry said. After, when he stands under the shower head and the water scalds his skin he tries to forget how Harry’s lips felt on his. After he’s purged his supper and showered Louis finds himself wedged in between Liam and Zayn on the couch with the TV playing some reality show they’re not even watching.

“Louis you can’t keep doing this to yourself,” Liam says suddenly.

“You can’t keep isolating yourself because you think you don’t deserve people Lou,” Zayn adds, his voice softer than Liam’s.

“We get it, we understand why it’s hard for you to let people in, believe me we get it. We understood why you had to distance yourself from Harry when you thought he was straight and you were developing feelings. This doesn’t make sense though. You like him and he likes you. Why wouldn’t you give him a chance. Why wouldn’t you give yourself a chance to be with someone who
obviously makes you happy,” Liam’s voice is strong and smooth but his eyes are soft as he runs his fingers through Louis’ damp hair.

“We know you’re scared Lou, we know everything you’ve been through and we get it love, we really do. But you deserve to be happy. You just have to let people in,” Zayn says gently.

“We wouldn’t be telling you this if we didn’t think Harry is a good guy. I saw the way he looks at you Lou, I saw it at dinner that night. That’s why I was so disappointed when you came home saying he was straight, because I thought for sure I saw something there,” Liam states.

“And he cares about you too, he was so worried about you when you were home sick from school,” Zayn adds, “he’s sweet with you Louis. He tucked you inside his jacket and he looks at you like you’re the most beautiful thing in the world and he’s sweet with you. You deserve sweet and you deserve gentle.”

Louis is shaking his head, his throat is rough from vomiting and thick with tears, “no-“

“No Louis. Stop. You always do this. You always go with the assholes, the ones who treats you like shit. You deserve so much more than that. Harry is a nice guy and he likes you and we’re not going to let you cut him out because you think you don’t deserve him,” Liam says firmly, scooping Louis up and holding him close.

Zayn is brushing the tears off Louis’ cheeks now, “just give him a chance Lou,” he says softly, “I know you’re scared about what will happen if it doesn’t work out but you’ve got us. No matter what you’ve got us. And some things are worth the risk.”

Louis is shaking his head but Liam’s hands are on either side of his face making him look him in the eye, “I love you yeah? I can’t watch you do this to yourself anymore. You deserve good things,” he says, his voice gentle.

Louis swallows past the jagged edges of his throat and leans into Liam’s touch. Liam’s thumbs brush across Louis’ cheekbones and Louis sees the love and softness in Liam’s eyes even though his jaw is set. Liam hasn’t liked a single one of Louis’ boyfriends, he’s never thought they were good enough for Louis.

“I just text him Louis. He kissed you and you left, at least text him,” Zayn says quietly.

I twinge of guilt rolls in Louis’ stomach when he thinks about the hurt in Harry’s eyes, “it will be okay,” Liam soothes.

“I’m going to go to bed,” Louis says quietly, “love you guys.”

“Love you too,” Zayn says, pulling him into a hug and nuzzling into Louis’ hair.

“Love you Louis,” Liam says, brushing his fringe out of his eyes, “I just want you to be happy okay?”

Louis nods past the lump in his throat, “I know Li,” he says.

When Louis gets to his bed he finds himself scrolling through his text messages with Harry. He scrolls past the things Harry said when they were talking about everything and nothing, the times Harry made Louis laugh, the things Harry shared with Louis, the random pictures they sent back and forth, the songs Harry sent him. He thinks about the times they spent sitting in the studio, just being in each others company and getting to know each other. He thinks about Harry’s dimples and Harry’s smile and Harry’s eyes. Kind eyes.
Louis curls himself up into a ball. His whole body hurts. Every single one of his joints aches and his spine creaks. He’s used to the body aches. He’s used to the pains in his stomach that are bad enough to make him tremble. He’s shivering under his two blankets even though he wears his thickest old jumper over his pyjamas. His heart is fluttering in his chest but not in a good way, it just feels tired. Exhausted. Just like Louis.

He doesn’t text Harry but he falls asleep thinking about soft lips and gentle kisses, he falls asleep wishing he could be better.
Chapter 14

Louis wakes up way too early, but he knows there is no way he’ll be able to get back to sleep. He groans, trying in vain to stretch out the aches that plague every inch of his tired body. He runs a hand through his hair and sighs, he hardly slept last night and the bits of sleep he did catch weren’t restful at all. He sits up and slips on a pair of slippers before padding down the hall to the kitchen. He busies himself making breakfast for the boys, trying to ignore the string of HarryHarryHarryHarry running through his mind. His stomach twists at the smell of the bacon in the pan but he quiets it with a few sections of an orange and two glasses of water while he cooks.

When the breakfast is ready he puts the eggs and bacon on two plates and pours two mugs of coffee before throwing the remainder of his orange in the bin. He sets the food on the table and goes down the hall to Zayn’s room. It’s pitch black inside because of the dark curtains and it smells a bit like oil paints and a lot like Zayn. Louis can just barely make out Zayn’s sleeping form in the dark, wearing only boxers and sprawled out across his covers. Zayn sleeps like the dead so Louis goes right to his bedside and gives his shoulder a gentle shake.

“Zayn wake up love, your breakfast is on the table, it’s getting cold,” Louis says gently.

Zayn slowly opens his eyes and smiles up at Louis blearily, “thanks, love you, be up in a second,” he murmurs.

Louis leaves the door open on his way out and crosses the hall to Liam’s room. Liam is laying in bed, face first in the pillow and wearing his rattiest old t-shirt.

“Li,” Louis calls softly from the doorway, because Liam is a light sleeper.

Liam groans and stretches before raising his head, “morning babe,” he breathes, flipping onto his back and stretching again.

“Your breakfast is on the table, make sure you drag Zayn with you when you get up so it doesn’t get cold. I’m going down to get the mail,” he says.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Liam asks, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

“I did already while I was cooking; some toast, some bacon and a bit of an orange. I was too hungry to wait for you guys to wake up, sorry,” the lie falls smoothly off his tongue.

“Oh okay. Don’t forget to check the big package slot because I’m expecting that shipment of protein powder,” Liam says dragging himself out of bed, “thanks for making breakfast,” he adds shuffling over to Louis and planting a kiss on top of his head.

“No worries,” Louis says, going to his room to put on some trousers while Liam wakes Zayn.

Louis switches his pyjama pants for a pair of sweatpants in case he runs into someone on his way down to the lobby of their apartment complex. He can hear Liam prodding Zayn as he goes to the front door and slips on a pair of espadrilles. Louis makes his way down the stairs and to the wall lined with little numbered letterboxes. He opens the box for their unit and fishes out Zayn’s monthly art magazine, their bills, a letter addressed to him that is probably another acceptance notification for one of the internships he applied for, and the key that the mailman put in their slot so they could open the large mail box. He uses the key and grabs the cardboard box containing Liam’s protein powder before leaving the key in the large letterbox for the mailman to retrieve.
He makes his way slowly up the stairs, his heart fluttering in his chest and his knees aching. He almost makes it to the top but his head starts spinning a bit. It’s nothing he isn’t used to but he sits down for a second anyway because he can’t afford to fall down the stairs backwards and have to explain to the boys. When he’s feeling a little steadier he hauls himself up and carries on. When he gets back to the flat he can hear Liam and Zayn in the kitchen. He sets Liam’s protein powder on the counter and hands Zayn his magazine, Liam takes the bills because he’s their money manager, and Louis sits down with his letter.

“Breakfast was great thanks bebz,” Zayn says.

“Another letter from an internship?” Liam asks pointing to the letter in Louis’ hands.

“No problem Zayn, and yeah I think so,” Louis replies.

He runs his finger along the seam of the letter and reads that it is an acceptance. He’s applied with a lot of designers and they’ve all readily accepted him, even though he just applied with pictures of his designs and they haven’t even seen his transcripts yet. When Louis tells them that, yes, it is an acceptance, they still react the same way they have with each of the letters. He looks between them as they cheer and clap him on the back and he wonders how he got so lucky to have them on his side. To have their support.

Louis smiles and says thank you and puts the letter in the drawer with the others. He doesn’t know what he’s going to do. He’ll either take an internship or he’ll do a shortened business course in the hopes of one day creating his own label. He has to wait and see what the boys are going to do, maybe they’ll leave him, go off to live their own lives without all his baggage. He’d never blame them for that, he knows they deserve so much better than him. His original plan was to take the business course and stay here with the boys while they do their things; the internships are back up plans. If the boys leave he’ll leave, take an internship in France, or America, or Italy. Somewhere he can get lost.

“Lou,” Zayn says, “lets go play hockey today.”

“Yeah Lou please, it’s the last weekend the rink is open before spring,” Liam says excitedly.

Louis really doesn’t want to play hockey, he’s tired and he’s sore, except Liam’s been asking if they could strap on their skates for weeks. Louis supposes it shouldn’t be too bad, at least it’s warmed up a bit outside so Louis won’t be as cold. They’ve only gone to the campus rink a few times all winter and Louis feels guilty for it. It is the last weekend too, so he has to go.

“Yeah sure sounds good!” he says matching Liam’s excitement.

They get all excited and split off to go get changed. The thing is, Louis knows he’s not going to be able to be on the ice playing hockey if he can hardly make it up the stairs without almost passing out. Which means part of an orange isn’t going to cut it today. His stomach writhes at the thought of it but as the boys disappear to find their skates he opens the pantry and grabs Liam’s loaf of whole grain bread. He’s thankful that Liam is such a health freak because Zayn only eats white bread which is the worst type of carbohydrate, the body absorbs it too fast and it raises your energy quickly but only for a short time. Liam has this hearty brown bread which is a slow release carbohydrate and Louis knows it will be absorbed slowly and keep his energy up longer.

He removes one slice of bread, his throat already itching at the thought of it. He leans back against the counter and chews the bread slowly, trying to focus on swallowing. He hates it, he can’t stand the feeling of the sticky dough slugging it’s way down to his stomach. He is always trying to avoid carbs, even when he eats meals with the boys, and now he knows he can’t purge this. He fills a glass
of water while he’s still chewing and downs it, hoping it will help him force the food down. When he’s eaten it he chugs another glass of water and rushes to the bathroom to brush the taste, and hopefully the urge to throw up, out of his mouth.

He puts on a pair of long johns under his sweatpants because he knows he’s going to be freezing. Under his jumper he has another thinner cardigan, and under that a t-shirt over a henley. He puts on two pairs of socks and grabs his hockey skates out of the closet before pulling on his denim jacket. He carries his skates to the bathroom and tries to ignore the screaming urge he has to bend himself over the toilet and get the disgusting heavy ball of carbs out of his gut. He combs through his fringe and pulls on his favourite beanie with the pom pom.

When he goes to the kitchen the boys are all bundled up and waiting. Liam is wearing a hoodie under the hockey jersey Zayn and Louis got him last Christmas, dark blue and white with his name stitched across the back, with some sweat pants. Zayn is wearing a hoodie under his leather jacket and a pair of loose fitting yoga pants because he doesn’t really care what anyone thinks and they’re comfy. They all sling their skates over their shoulders and Liam rummages around in the front hall closet for their hockey sticks and a couple of pucks, because Zayn has a penchant for shooting them over the boards never to be found again in the snow.

They take Liam’s car and Louis sits in the back trying to forget about the bread weighing down his stomach and making his throat itch. He kind of feels disgusting. He laughs along with the boys though and he can tell they’re so excited. The rink is located at the back of their university campus and the boys either play a three player game at one end of the rink or they join in on a pick up game with the others on the ice. There is another piece of ice about the same size as the rink off to the side where there is a man made pond in warmer weather, but the boys don’t like it as much because the ice isn’t as even and there aren’t any nets. The pond is usually occupied by girls and people on dates.

When they pull up at the school all three of them open their doors and sit with their legs outside the car so they can put on their skates. They’ve got skate guards over their blades so they can walk over to the rink because Liam doesn’t like leaving their shoes by the bench, he’s weird about stuff like that and Zayn and Louis just go along with it. There are a few people already on the ice playing a game at one end of the rink so they’ll probably just play pick up.

As they make their way down to the rink though, Louis’ ears pick up a familiar Irish accent as the owner of the voice bellows at one of the other players. Normally Louis would be happy to see Niall, he likes the guy, except now he’s scanning the four other players looking for a tall lanky frame, because he knows if Niall is here, Harry will be too. He has a brief second of relief because none of the players are Harry, until his eyes fall on a mess of curls when Harry’s head comes up from the bench on the other side of the boards.

“Did you know they would be here?” Louis hisses as they walk down the path.

Liam and Zayn look around and notice Niall for the first time and then their eyes fall on Harry and they look just as surprised as Louis feels. He doubts they have the tension in their stomach that he’s feeling though.

“No of course not,” Zayn says quickly.

“You know we wouldn’t ambush you like that,” Liam says, “sorry mate- we can leave if you want.”

Louis knows they wouldn’t do this to him even if they did tell him to text Harry, they hadn’t nagged him about it when he told them this morning that he hadn’t ended up texting him after all. They’d never force him to see Harry or trick him into running into him, but Louis is still frustrated.
“Lads,” Niall suddenly exclaims, having caught sight of them.

Louis feels his cheeks heat when Harry’s eyes snap up and fall on them approaching, but he’s too far away to read Harry’s facial expression. Niall skates excitedly over to the boards and Louis tries to form some semblance of a smile as Liam and Zayn look at him worriedly.

“It’s fine,” Louis says softly, “had to talk to him sometime, yeah.”

They nod and Liam gives his shoulder a gentle squeeze as they get up the boards wrapping around the rink. Niall is flush cheeked and grinning, though Louis notices the concern that flickers in his blue eyes when their eyes meet.

“Hey guys, hey Louis, alright?” he says and Louis knows the alright is directed at him.

“Yeah mate, good to see you,” he says.

“Can we play pickup with you?” Liam asks, waving over Niall’s shoulder at one of his friends from the football team.

“Yeah, awesome,” Niall exclaims excitedly.

“Erm you guys go ahead, I think I’ll go say hi to Harry,” Louis says, trying not to let his reluctance seep into his voice.

Harry hasn’t done anything wrong, he doesn’t deserve to be ignored. Louis knows they have to talk, he was just hoping it would have been later, after he had a chance to process his thoughts. He can practically feel Harry’s eyes on him though, and the relief that flickers over Niall’s face tells Louis that he knows about the kiss.

He gets another squeeze to his shoulder from Liam and a clap on the back from Zayn before he starts around the rink to the benches on the other side. Liam and Zayn just hop over the low boards and leave their skate guards on the side before they skate to the middle to divvy up teams. Harry’s eyes follow him all the way around but Louis determinedly keeps his eyes on his feet, trying to steel himself for the awkward conversation.

Only when he’s almost at the bench does he look up and his eyes instantly meet Harry’s. Harry looks as nervous as Louis’ feels but he looks a tiny bit relieved when Louis gives him a bit of a weak smile.

“Hey,” Louis says hesitantly.

“Hi Lou,” Harry replies, his eyes still searching Louis’ face.

“Why’re you sitting over here by yourself?” Louis asks, noting the skates strapped to Harry’s large feet.

“Because I’m absolute shit at skating and we’ve only been here an hour and I’ve fallen so many times that I can’t feel my ass. I think it’s gone into shock or something,” Harry says with a weak laugh, looking sheepish and shy.

Louis laughs, if only at the adorable crease between Harry’s eyebrows as he grimaces, “you own skates but you don’t know how to skate?”

Harry shakes his head, “nah these are Niall’s friend Charlie’s from across the hall or something, he has the same size feet and let Ni borrow them for me,’ he shrugs, “I’m hopeless though. I can hardly
walk without tripping over my feet, don’t know why Ni thought I’d be able to skate.”

Louis feels a little twinge in his chest at Harry’s self depreciation and before he really thinks it
through he’s talking, “let’s go to the pond, I’ll teach you,” he says.

It would have been so easy to just say hi to Harry and get on the ice to play with the guys, he could
have told Harry no hard feelings about the kiss and maybe they could have dropped it. He could
have told Harry they’d talk about it later and left him to sit on the bench by himself. Except Louis
wouldn’t be Louis if he did that, and maybe he’s held onto a bit more of the old Louis than he had
thought.

Harry still looks hesitant but that familiar hopefulness is in his eyes. Louis doesn’t understand why
it’s always directed at him and he doesn’t understand why Harry has so damn much hope, but it
makes him feel like he should at least try for Harry, try to make it so all of his hope isn’t completely
unfounded. When Harry still hasn’t moved Louis holds out a hand, sheathed in a mitten, and then
Harry breaks into a small smile.

Harry takes Louis’ hand and hauls himself to his feet, wobbling a little on his skate guards. Louis is
going to let go but Harry takes his first step and looks like a baby deer fresh from the womb trying to
walk. It’s so pathetically adorable Louis just finds himself putting a guiding hand on Harry’s elbow
as they toddle over to the pond.

It’s empty because the ice is shitty, but Louis is glad because he won’t have to worry about people
listening to the awkward conversation he is sure is to come. There is a bench beside the pond and
Louis sits Harry down. He wordlessly bends to pick up Harry’s skates one by one, and remove each
skate guard. He attributes the slight blush on Harry’s cheeks to the cold. He takes off his own guards
and then goes over to the edge of the pond and steps down easily on the ice.

“Well come on then,” he says gently to Harry.

Harry nods and heaves a great sigh before standing up and taking his first hesitant step. Louis’ heart
leaps into his throat at least three times because Harry keeps losing his balance and almost falling,
even on the trip down the rubber mat to the ice. Finally, when Harry is at the edge of the rink Louis
reaches out for him again.

“I’m really, really shit,” Harry mumbles as a warning before he takes Louis’ mitts in his gloved
hands.

“S’okay just focus on staying up, we’ll get you used to being on the ice before we teach you any
tricks, yeah?” Louis teases gently.

Harry grins sheepishly and focuses on keeping his ankles steady as his skates clink against the ponds
surface. Carefully Louis does a few pushes with his legs moving himself backwards and pulling
Harry along with him. Harry wriggles a bit, trying to get his balance, as Louis continues to stride,
pulling him along.

“Christ Louis, do you have to make it look so easy,” Harry says exasperatedly

“Sorry, just focus on keeping your ankles straight. Stop turning in your toes,” Louis says, watching
as Harry’s knees start to drift too close together.

“Sorry I’m trying, they just do that,” he mumbles, wobbling a little as he tries to right his feet.

“S’okay just bend your knees a bit- yeah like that- now just try to keep your feet straight- yeah-
okay,” Louis coaches until Harry is in a suitable position and Louis feels like he’s steady enough not
to fall over, “good, see you’re doing good.”

Harry smiles a little, but there is a look of pure focus on his face, as if it is taking all of his brain power to school his body into staying upright. It’s strange, Louis thinks, that even though things should be ridiculously awkward all he can feel is Harry’s warmth. It isn’t the warmth of Harry’s hands in his, it’s just something Harry carries around him. He finds his eyes memorizing Harry’s features as he works his legs, pulling them around the rink. Harry is looking down at his feet, his eyebrows drawn in concentration, his lip held between his teeth while they glide around.

“Louis I’m so sorry,” Harry blurts suddenly, almost throwing himself off balance when he raises his eyes to Louis’, “I shouldn’t have just forced myself on you like that, I didn’t mean to upset you, I- I understand if you don’t feel the same I’m just- I’m really sorry and I’m just- so worried I’ve scared you off.”

Louis can’t meet Harry’s eyes so he looks at some point over the taller boys shoulder, “Harry it isn’t that, okay? You didn’t, like, force yourself on me and I’ve not been scared off. I’m sorry I just left, that was really rude of me,” he says softly, feeling his cheeks warm, “but it wasn’t because I don’t feel the same.”

There is a quick intake of breath and Louis glances to Harry to see that his eyes are gleaming with hope, “you- you like me?” he asks as if it’s the most far fetched thing he’s ever heard.

“Yeah Harry. I think I have for a while,” Louis says, steeling himself for the next part, “but that doesn’t change anything,” he adds quietly.

Confusion flashes across Harry’s face, “what?” he asks softly.

“It doesn’t change anything. This,” Louis says slowly, gesturing between them with their joined hands, “wouldn’t work Harry. Just like- you’re great, and this just wouldn’t work.”

Harry frowns and shakes his head, “I don’t get it, if you like me and I like you, why wouldn’t it work?” he asks, sounding completely bemused.

“I think you’ve got the hang of being on the ice now. You can still use me for balance but I’m not going to move my feet and you push me along, okay?” Louis says.

“Lou,” Harry says, but he does as Louis tells him.

He holds tightly to Louis’ hands as he begins to push with his legs, pushing Louis back a little shakily at first and then slowly getting an more even stride. Louis’ knees are aching but he focuses on Harry’s warm hands in his as Harry guides them in a slow loop around the pond.

“It’s not that simple,” Louis says, “because you think you like me but- like, I’m a mess. I’m just not- you’ll realize- you deserve- I’m just not what you’re looking for Harry and you’ll realize I’m not, and it’s not going to work out and I just- it wouldn’t work.”

Harry’s eyes are sad when Louis looks up and he shakes his head, “you don’t know what I’m looking for Louis. If you don’t like me there isn’t much I can do about that, but I can’t just say ‘alright oh well’ if the reason you’re saying no to me is because you think you’re not what I’m looking for. Because you are- you are what I’m looking for.”

Louis cheeks are hot and he’s shaking his head before Harry’s even finished his sentence, “Harry I’m sorry-“

“Lou the thing that makes me the saddest is that I can see it in your eyes that you want to, but you’re
scared of something and I don’t know what. I just- I really hope you’re not scared I’m going to hurt you because I wouldn’t- I couldn’t,” he says and he’s using that gentle voice again, like he’s afraid to spook Louis.

That kind of makes Louis’ throat tighten and he looks down at the ice moving under his feet as Harry pushes them, “I don’t think you would hurt me intentionally Harry, but things like this, things like you, don’t work out for me,” he can’t meet Harry’s eyes so he watches Harry’s feet take their shaky strides.

“Lou I want to work out for you. Just give me a chance. I mean like look, we went to the same college but I never got up the balls to talk to you, you changed my life so much and you didn’t even know. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. And now we’re here-“

“Harry it isn’t exactly some strange coincidence we both came to this university, lots of people from Doncaster are here,” Louis interrupts.

“Okay fine but think about this; you went the whole beginning of the year without ever seeing me or noticing me, and you probably never would have. Except you needed a model. You needed a model and you just coincidentally happened to see me. Out of all the tall people at our school you saw me. And you could have found someone else sooner or I could have been slouching over or I could have been wearing trackie bottoms and a sweat shirt and you never would have looked twice, but I wasn’t and for whatever reason you picked me-“

“Harry I seriously don’t know what kind of whirlwind fairytale romances you’ve experienced in your life but stuff like that, stuff like fate, doesn’t exist. Everything is coincidence,” Louis says, trying his hardest not to sound bitter.

“I haven’t,” Harry says, wobbling a little as his skate goes over a bump in the ice.

“You haven’t what?” Louis asks looking up to see Harry with a calm expression on his face.

“I haven’t experienced romance like that, nor seen it really,” he shrugs.

“Then I don’t really understand why you’re such a hopeless romantic,” Louis scoffs, “tell me about your relationships.”

“Well-“ he begins but he narrows his eyes, “hold on I know this trick you’re going to get me to spill my guts and then when I ask you the same question you’ll give me some vague answer like you always do.”

There is a joking note to Harry’s voice now, and Louis thinks he can definitely handle this better than the conversation that was treading too close to home before, “you tell me about your relationships I’ll tell you about mine,” he shrugs.

Harry seems satisfied with that and he nods as he skates them around, “alright well first was Jamie. We started the summer after I came out between second and third year. It was great, he was great, but I guess I should have noticed that we spent our whole summer basically hiding out because I was a little more shocked than I should have been when he dumped me right before third year and begged me not to tell anyone he was gay.”

Harry gives a light laugh then, and Louis would have expected it to be a cover for how much it hurt him but there isn’t a single hint of bitterness or anger or sadness in the laugh or in Harry’s eyes. It’s the same laugh you would use if you were telling a friend some stupid story, like yeah maybe it didn’t turn out, but it was fun while it lasted.
“Then after that was Meeka. I was in third year then but he was a year older and taking a year off to work before Uni. Construction. I used to drive over to his construction site during lunch period and bring him a sandwich. He’d kiss me right in front of everyone and he’d hold my hand when we walked down the streets and I thought it meant something because I wasn’t his secret. Turns out I read a bit more into that than I should have, because I was a bit surprised the day I walked in to find him balls deep in some other bloke. Apparently I thought we were a bit more serious than we actually were,” Harry shrugs, he doesn’t laugh this time but there is still no pain in his eyes, “oh and my dad left my mum when I was little so there’s that.”

Louis frowns and digs the blades of his skates in to bring them to a stop, “let go of one of my hand,” he says gently, “you’re doing really good,” he adds when Harry looks hesitant.

Louis still holds onto one of Harry’s hands, tugging him along a bit until Harry gets his stride. They go slower than Louis would because Harry is still a little wobbly on his feet but they skate side by side. Occasionally Harry puts his foot down wrong and he’ll flail a bit but Louis just holds tight until Harry balances himself.

“You tell me yours now,” Harry says.

“I was with Max in first year, Liam thought he was pretentious, I guess he kind of was. We just went to parties together and stuff really. We broke up because he decided to go to the States for his second year of uni and I didn’t want long distance. Then there was Hunter, he was kind of an asshole I suppose, I don’t know. I didn’t really care, he was kind of just there, kept me busy. ” Louis doesn’t say that the main use of Hunter was keeping his mind off of things, “Liam and Zayn couldn’t stand him, they made me end it. Which was fine he didn’t really matter. Then there was Mitchell after that, he was alright. I don’t know, we didn’t see each other that often, then I just got tired of going through the motions.”

Harry is quiet for a while and then he looks over at Louis, “those relationships are why you’re so cynical about love?” he asks gently.

Louis laughs but his, unlike Harry’s, is full of bitterness, “no Harry I was cynical before I even got around to dating,” he says, brushing off the ache he feels in his chest, “what I don’t understand is why after two boyfriends who treated you like absolute shit and a divorce, you still believe that there is some happily ever after,” he says lightly, even though his heart feels like a lead weight in his chest.

Harry tries to stop then and his feet almost fly right out from under him but on instinct Louis reaches out and grabs the front of Harry’s peacoat, holding him until he gets his feet in line. Harry blushes and Louis laughs a little because Harry really is ridiculously uncoordinated. They’re stopped now though, facing each other, and for some reason Louis doesn’t let go of Harry’s hand or the lapel of his coat.

“You said before that being a hopeless romantic is a luxury Lou,” Harry says quietly, his eyes soft on Louis’ face, “it’s not a luxury, it’s a choice. I choose to believe my step dad isn’t going to break my moms heart and I choose to believe that things didn’t work out for me before because someone else is meant to come along.”

Louis takes in the gentle smile curving Harry’s lips and he remembers the feeling of them pressed against his, “someone else is meant to come along for you Harry.”

“Maybe it’s you,” Harry says slowly, “we’ll never know if you don’t give me a chance.”

“It isn’t Harry, I don’t believe in love and I don’t believe in fate and you’ll realize I’m not what you’re looking for,” Louis says evenly, even though his heart is racing in his chest.
“Come on Lou,” Harry says reaching out to cover the hand that still hasn’t let go of his coat, “what’ve you got to lose?”

Louis looks up into the big green eyes, so full of sincerity, and it scares the absolute shit out of him. He has everything to lose. He’s barely holding on by a few strands of tattered thread, stitches that Harry could pull out with one tug. With one word. And he will. Louis knows he will. Things like Harry don’t stay with him. It isn’t a matter of if Harry is going to leave, it’s when. With the last shred of self preservation he has left Louis steels himself.

Louis doesn’t even have to say a word, Harry must see it in Louis’ eyes because then that hopefulness that Louis has come to love isn’t in the green eyes anymore. Harry bites his lip and his eyes search Louis’ face for a moment longer before he lets out a sigh. Louis hates himself for the hurt that grows in Harry’s eyes, hates himself for the way Harry’s gorgeous lips turn down in a frown, for the way his eyebrows knot together. But Harry nods, and doesn’t say a word.

Harry’s hand drops from where it was covering Louis’ on his lapel and he slowly pulls his other hand away as well. Louis feels his heart clench as his hand falls from Harry’s jacket and when Harry backs away it feels like he’s taking Louis’ breath with him. Harry looks at him one last time and there is one last flicker of that hope, but Louis looks down at his feet before he can see it disappear. Louis listens to the scrape of skates on ice as Harry backs up further and manages to turn around. He looks up and watches Harry go, slowly and shakily towards the bench on the far side of the pond.

He doesn’t deserve Harry, he knows that. The itch at the back of his throat reminds him of that, the ache in his knees, the constant writhing of his stomach. He is shit and Harry will realize that soon enough. Except Harry doesn’t know that yet, and all Harry is feeling right now is rejection. After he’s laid himself on the line twice, poured his heart out, Louis has shot him down both times and Harry doesn’t realize Louis isn’t doing it to hurt him. Louis’ heart is doing something painful in his chest as he watches the boy wobble across the ice, taking a painfully long time and looking absolutely pitiful with his shoulders hunched.

Louis has never let himself be with someone he actually cared about before, because the ones you care about are the ones that take pieces of you with them when they go. Louis knows that Harry’s smile, and Harry’s hands, and Harry’s eyes, and Harry’s words have the ability to break him. He also has zero doubt in his mind that eventually Harry will break him, it’s inevitable. He just hopes when that time comes he’s strong enough to hold himself together, because Louis may not deserve Harry because he isn’t good enough, but the last thing Harry deserves is to feel is like he isn’t good enough for Louis.

“Harry,” Louis calls out before he has a chance to change his mind.

Louis strides forward, suddenly desperate to get to Harry. Harry glances back at the sound of Louis’ voice and the scrape of Louis skates on the ice as he glides quickly forward. Harry goes to stop or turn or something but then his feet are flying out from under him and it would almost be comical the way he flails except Louis’ heart leaps into his throat. Harry’s ass hits the ice with a sickening thud and Louis hears the wind get knocked out of his lungs with an ‘oomph.’

“Shit, shit, shit,” Louis groans as he speeds the distance to Harry’s side.

He digs the blades of his skates in and sends a shower of shredded ice into the air as he stops. He drops to his knees at Harry’s side and Harry’s eyes are pressed closed in a grimace. Louis’ sheds his gloves and reaches out, his icy hand cupping Harry’s warm cheek. Slowly Harry opens his eyes and Louis can’t be sure if the flush of his cheeks is from the cold or from embarrassment, but Louis thinks it’s the latter with the way Harry hangs his head.
“You okay?” Louis asks gently.

“M’fine,” Harry mumbles, drawing his lip between his teeth as he pushes himself up into a proper sitting position.

Louis sighs and his thumb ghosts across Harry’s cheek, searching out the dimple he knows is hidden under the frown. Harry looks so vulnerable in that moment and Louis knows it isn’t from the fall, he’s done that to Harry and he hates himself for it. Harry’s eyes finally flicker up to meet Louis’ but Louis can’t find the words. How does he tell Harry how fucking terrified he is without also telling Harry how weak he is, how pitiful? He can’t find the words, so he doesn’t say any.

Louis leans in, slowly and hesitantly, and he hears Harry’s surprised intake of breath. When his lips meet Harry’s it’s soft and timid but it’s the best he can manage. He hadn’t realized how much he missed the plushness of Harry’s lips until they’re moving back against his, gently and tenderly just like the first time they kissed. When Harry’s hand slips up to Louis’ jaw it isn’t to hold him in place or to draw him closer, it’s just barely there, like he just needs to feel Louis’ skin beneath his palm.

When Louis pulls away and he opens his eyes Harry’s are still closed, his eyebrows drawn together. The boy lets out a slow and shaky breath and it’s warm on Louis’ cheeks because Louis hasn’t pulled away very far at all. Louis can still feel the aching in his gut and the burn in his throat telling him he’s handing Harry a loaded gun and painting a target on his own forehead, but the warmth of Harry’s lips is still lingering on his and he tells himself he’ll be strong enough to sew himself back together when Harry obliterates him.

“Open your eyes Harry,” Louis says softly.

“No,” Harry says and his voice is hardly above a whisper, “I don’t want to see the sorry in your eyes.”

Louis swallows around the lump in his throat, “babe,” he murmurs.

Harry’s eyes flash open at the name and the tiny glimmer of hope in them is enough to momentarily quiet the itch at the back of Louis’ throat. He leans forward again and Harry kisses back, just as tenderly as both times before. When they pull apart Harry opens his eyes and they search Louis’ face. Louis feels completely transparent and he doesn’t know the last time he felt this scared, but then Harry’s face lights up because Louis’ answer is clear in his eyes.

“I’m going to take care of you Louis,” Harry breathes, thumb feather light across Louis’ cheekbone.

Louis smiles and kisses Harry again but he knows this isn’t some fairytale romance, this is a liquid dream, unsubstantial and impossible to hold onto, and now Louis is just waiting for the bottom of the bucket to drop out.
Chapter 15

Louis thinks kissing Harry was the stupidest thing he's ever done. It was easy to ignore the voice screaming in his head about what a fucking idiot he is when Harry had a gentle grip on his hand as they made their way up from the pond to see the other rink. It was easy to ignore the voice when he was snuggled up next to Harry on the bench while they watched the other lads playing hockey. It was easy to ignore the voice when Harry was giving him a tender kiss as they said goodbye after the guys finished their game. It is not easy to ignore the voice now that Louis is laying in his bed the next day, staring up at the ceiling and thinking about all the ways Harry is going to shred him apart. Liam came in a few hours ago to say bye to Louis before he left for the library, he's got some ridiculously complicated essay due soon that he's been stressing about. The bass of the music coming from Zayn's room tells Louis Zayn must be painting. Louis hardly slept last night because the second he was in the car with Zayn and Liam and Harry was pulling away in his truck with Niall, his mind would not stop analyzing all the ways he's setting himself up to be destroyed. It's almost one in the afternoon now, but he hasn't left his bed.

All that skating yesterday was not a good idea, every one of his joints hurts and his leg muscles burn with every movement. It had been nice though, after the kiss. They had taken off their skates and sat on the bench and Harry had put his arm around Louis' shoulders and held him close. Louis wasn't sure if it was because he was shivering or because of whatever is going on between them now, but it felt nice. It was also nice when Louis felt Harry's lips press against his beanie, when Harry twined their fingers together, when Harry brushed his lips against Louis' knuckles. All tender things, all sweet things, all nice things. Louis doesn't deserve nice or sweet or tender though, so it was all wrong.

Louis hears the music shut off in Zayn's room and his feet padding down the hall. He doesn't knock before he comes in and when he crawls under the covers with Louis he has paint dried on his knuckles and a bit smeared across his forehead. Louis rolls over when Zayn's arms snake around his shoulders and he snuggles close. Zayn's fingers trace up and down Louis' back and Louis reaches up to wipe away the drying paint with the sleeve of the ratty old sweatshirt he's wearing.

"How you feeling bebz? You tired today?" Zayn asks gently.
"Yeah a little tired I guess," Louis says, "what are you painting?"
"Inconsistency, fickleness."

Zayn always paints vague things that Louis never fully understands, but the emotion is clear on every canvas he touches. He isn't in school for his art, he just does it as a way to express himself, but Louis and Liam think everything he paints is gorgeous.

"Can I see it?" Louis asks.
"Of course, but I ran out of fuchsia paint so I need to get some and finish it first. Caitlyn wanted to meet up for coffee and to study though, do you think you'll be okay home alone for a bit?"
"Caitlyn, she's the one with blonde hair right?" Louis asks and Zayn nods, "she's cute."
"Yeah she's a sweetheart. I'm kind of pretending to be worse at Economics so she'll help me," Zayn shrugs shyly.

Louis laughs, "as if you need to do that, love. Just ask her out."

He scrunches up his nose, "I don't know if she likes me….you know how I am."

"I know babe, though I'll never get why you're so shy. You're very loveable and gorgeous and sweet," Louis says seriously, because he knows Zayn needs to be reminded sometimes.

Zayn chuckles but his tan cheeks colour a bit, "you have to say that."

"No I don't. If studying goes well I want you to ask her out. Like for dinner or something. Okay?"
"Yeah?" Zayn says hesitantly and Louis nods, "alright, if you say so."

Louis hums, running his fingers through Zayn's hair, "you've got a little paint on you, wash your face before you go and have fun."

Zayn grins, "thanks Lou, call me if you need anything, yeah?"
"For sure, love you."
"Love you too," Zayn says, squeezing Louis before he crawls out of the bed.
Louis listens to the sounds of Zayn going to wash his face and change before gathering his things to leave, then he hears the click of the front door closing behind him. Louis rolls over to bundle himself up in the duvet and buries his face into his pillow to try and get a bit more sleep. He must have dozed off because next he’s waking up to his phone ringing on his bedside table. He scrabbles around for it without opening his eyes and raises it to his ear, fumbling to answer it.
“Ello?” he says, his voice raspy from sleep.
“Er hey Lou, it’s Harry. Y’alright?”
Louis’ eyebrows scrunch up and he forces his eyes open slowly, “hi, alright yeah, you?”
“Yeah I’m good.”
“This is weird, you’ve never called me before. Your voice sounds even deeper on the phone,” Louis says, rubbing his eyes.
He hears Harry’s deep chuckle, “so does yours though,” he says.
Louis clears his throat, “yeah but that’s because you just woke me up.”
“It’s like half two in the afternoon,” Harry laughs again.
“Hmm, but it’s also the weekend so anything goes,” Louis argues, staring up at the ceiling and letting Harry’s chuckle warm him a bit through the phone.
“Good point,” Harry says, and Louis tries to tell himself the flip-flopping of his stomach is from hunger and not from how nice it is to hear Harry’s voice.
“But let me guess you’ve been up for hours and have already gone for a run and probably even did some homework,” Louis says.
“Well I went for a run, yeah, but I don’t think playing video games with Niall counts as homework.”
“Sure it does, that’s foreign relations that is, since he’s an Irishman and all.”
“Good point,” Harry says and Louis can hear the smile in his voice.
“So what’s the reason for the phone call at this ungodly hour of the early morning,” Louis teases.
“Have you changed your mind about giving me a chance?” Harry asks, and Louis can tell he’s trying to sound like he’s joking, but he’s not fooling anyone.
Louis knows he should say yes, that he doesn’t think it’s a good idea, but it’s too late now. He’d never hurt Harry like that.
“No Harry,” Louis says, “have you changed your mind about wanting one?”
“Not going to change my mind about that Lou,” he says, “I was calling to see if you’d let me take you out for lunch?”
Louis’ stomach lets out a pathetic groan which he silences by digging his fingertips into the soft spot above his belly button.
“I already ate a huge breakfast, Liam made a full English before he left for the library.”
“Thought you just woke up?” Harry says.
“He says breakfast is the most important meal of the day and nobody is allowed to miss it, which means he woke me up and dragged me to the kitchen. Then I came back to bed.”
Harry laughs, “alright then, maybe a movie?”
Louis groans, “Harry, Sunday is the day to sleep till two and do absolutely nothing,” he protests.
“Oh,” Harry says, trying and failing to keep his voice light, “okay… I- so- okay. Well I guess I’ll see you Monday then?”
Louis wants to just say yes, wants to just have a day to himself and not have to worry about whatever this Harry thing is. Except Zayn and Liam are gone and he knows he’ll just be sitting alone worrying anyway. Plus Harry sounds like he thinks he’s being rejected right now and the whole point of giving this a chance was to avoid Harry feeling bad.
“Why don’t you bring a movie to the flat and we can be lazy together?” Louis suggests, trying to sound at least a little enthusiastic about the idea.
“Yeah?” Harry asks and Louis can practically see both his dimples on display just from the tone of his voice.
“Sure,” Louis says, feeling himself smile a bit, “just give me like an hour to shower and I’ll text you
the address?"
"Sounds great," Harry says, "I'm going to stop at Starbucks on the way, can you tell me what you actually like so I don't get you something you hate this time?"

Louis is about to ask what he means before he realizes he's referring to the time he brought Louis a mocha. Clearly Harry is more observant than Louis gave him credit for and he noticed Louis never took a single sip. He feels his cheeks heat even though Harry can't see him and he forces out a laugh. "Er, sorry about that," he says sheepishly.

Harry laughs, bright and sincere, "no it was sweet of you to pretend to like it to avoid hurting my feelings, I'd just rather get you something you'll enjoy this time."

"I'm more of a tea with a splash of skim milk kind of guy," Louis says.

"Alright. And I'll hunt through my abysmal DVD collection and scrounge something up," Harry says, sounding far too excited for a boring movie day with Louis.

"And I'll try not to fall asleep in the shower and text you the address when I'm done," Louis says.

They hang up and Louis yells out a groan to the empty flat because he doesn't know why the hell he is doing this to himself. 'Oh you bugger off,' he grumbles petulantly at the incessant butterflies in his stomach. Sure, it feels good now, knowing Harry is coming over to see him, but he tells himself not to get used to it because Harry will realize soon.

He doesn't actually need to shower because he had one last night after dinner, but he has one anyway because his hair is sticking up at the back and he doesn't want to look like complete shit for Harry. He lets his damp hair fall in a fringe and puts on a pair of light grey sweat pants and his coziest blue jumper. He wishes he could look better but he knows its hopeless so he just texts Harry the address and tidies up the flat a bit while he waits for the boy.

When the buzzer goes Louis feels a rush of nervousness but he knows it's stupid because since the first week in the studio with Harry he's felt more comfortable around him than he has with anyone since Zayn or Liam. This feels different though. He doesn't know what this chance entails but even though he knows it isn't going to work out, he's going to try his best not to fuck it up. He hits the button to open the main entrance for Harry and waits by the front door.

Louis wonders if Harry's cheeks hurt from how big he's smiling when he steps out of the stairwell at the end of the hall. He's carrying two Starbucks cups and has a DVD tucked under his arm but that doesn't stop him from wrapping the other arm around Louis' shoulders and pressing a kiss to Louis' hair when he gets to the door. Louis lets himself sink into the hug a little and then takes the coffee cups so Harry doesn't drop them.

"Thanks for letting me come over Lou," Harry says happily, following Louis into the flat.

"Thanks for coming," Louis says, leading them to the living room and setting the cups on the coffee table, "thanks for the tea."

Harry tosses the DVD onto the couch and holds his arms open, "c'mere," he says.

Harry's arms wrap around his shoulders and Louis wraps his around Harry's hips. Louis freezes a little when Harry's hand comes up and his thumb drags softly along Louis' jaw. Louis doesn't really understand how someone's eyes can be so bright and so soft at the same time but he feels his lips tugging up to mirror Harry's smile.

"Can I kiss you?" Harry asks quietly.

"You don't have to ask," Louis says and he isn't sure why the hell he says it but the way Harry's eyes light up makes it worth it.

Harry's thumb is soft on Louis' chin when he raises it up a little and tips his own head down. His lips are soft and warm and gentle and Louis' first thought is 'I could get used to this' and his second thought is 'I'm going to miss this when he's gone.' His cheeks are a little warm after the kiss when he takes a step back and offers Harry a shy smile. Harry's smile is a little shy too, but both his dimples are out.

"Here sit, I'll go grab us a blanket," Louis says.

Harry situates himself in one corner of the sofa while Louis goes to the hall closet for Liam's favourite blanket. It's black with little batman symbols but it's thick and fleecy and warm so they always use it for the couch. He unfolds the blanket and spreads it across Harry's lap.
"Which movie did you bring?" Louis asks.
"Titanic," Harry says, completely unabashed.
Louis can't even hold in his laugh, "are you serious Harold?"
"What," he drawls, slow and deep, but somehow childlike, "it's a classic."
Louis rolls his eyes, "I absolutely hate Rose," he grumbles, but he opens the case and puts the disk in the player anyway.
"Why?" Harry laughs, "what's wrong with Rose?"
"Oh jesus, don't even get me started. She is an inconsiderate, self centred brat! She killed Jack and I'll have you know I took it pretty hard when she pried the cold dead wrist of the most beautiful man I had ever seen off of that door and let him sink into the ocean. She said she would never let go!"
Louis exclaims, grabbing the remote and clicking past all of the previews to the DVD menu.
Harry is laughing at him but his eyes are fond, "what was she supposed to do Lou, drag him along when she went for the whistle?"
Louis scoffs, "he shouldn't even have been dead!"
Harry lets out a laugh again and lifts up the blanket to invite Louis under, "I don't think I follow your rant."
"Well I wouldn't expect you to, now would I Harry. You're all caught up in the romance of it! Completely unable to think rationally and assess the situation for what it is," Louis says, trying to act very serious.
Somehow, and he genuinely isn't sure how, he ends up pressed against Harry's side. Harry's arm is around his shoulders and he's leaning back on Harry's chest a bit, with the blanket spread across both their laps. It's ridiculously comfortable though, and Harry is warm, and Louis kind of likes the way Harry's fingers brush absentmindedly up and down his arm.
"And what, pray tell, is the rational side to the situation, which I am clearly too thick to notice?"
Harry asks with laughter in his voice.
"Well for one," Louis says as he hits the play button to start the movie, "the entire plot is completely preposterous. They know each other one day and suddenly they're completely in love?"
"Well sometimes you meet someone and you just know," Harry protests.
"No Harry, she was having a pre-mid-life-crisis because she was feeling smothered and she hopped on the first guy who shot her a wink. I bet you if Fabrizio, or whatever Jack’s friends name was, had caught her trying to swan dive into the ocean she would have thrown herself at him too. It was a game for her," Louis says.
Harry hums, "you really think she would have climbed off that lifeboat for Fabrizio?" he asks.
"Fabrizio is a bad example I guess, because he is nowhere near as good looking as Leo," Louis amends.
"Okay let me rephrase the question. You think if it was a game Rose would have gotten off the lifeboat?" he asks, and unlike Liam, who gets ridiculously indignant when Louis argues with him about Titanic, Harry's voice is sincere and questioning, not trying to argue, just trying to understand.
"No of course not, but the point I'm making is that the plot is completely unrealistic. You don't just suddenly become willing to die for someone you've known a few days," Louis says.
"We'll have to agree to disagree on that one babe," Harry says, pressing a kiss to Louis' temple.
Louis smiles a little even though he wants to roll his eyes at how much of a sap Harry is, "fine," he says, "for arguments sake lets just say they were legitimately madly in love. Rose is still completely responsible for Jack's death because she was a selfish spoiled cow."
Harry lets out a crow of a laugh, "how do you figure that?"
"I watched Myth Busters on it Harry. There was totally room for two people on that floating door. They tested it, and if Rose wouldn't have been such a useless priss both of them could have gotten on the door and not only would Jack have been out of the water but they also could have shared body heat."
"But the door kept tipping, it's hard to balance on things like that in the water. Jack just wanted to get Rose warm, he was willing to stay in the water so Rose didn't have to be in the water any longer," Harry argues, but his voice never stops being gentle.
"Myth Busted Harry. They even tested it in water and it would have been completely possible. And also, thats very chivalrous of Jack and all, but if Rose really loved him that much she wouldn't just be like 'oh sure thanks I'll just get cozy up here on this door. You alright? Looking a little chilly. Thanks for giving me the door babe, you're such a good boyfriend' and then he's dead and she's like 'oops' and lets him sink to the bottom," Louis says.

Louis is a little surprised to look over and see Harry grinning softly at him. By this point in the argument Liam is usually tugging on his hair exasperatedly and telling Louis all about how hard that must have been for Rose and how she had to drop him in the water to give him a better burial than his corpse bobbing around like a cork in the water. Then Louis would argue about how at least when they came back to clean up the bodies he could get a proper burial instead of becoming fish food. Harry isn't arguing though, and his fingers aren't tugging on his own hair, they're brushing Louis' fringe softly off his forehead.

"Would you like to watch a different movie, love?" Harry asks, trying and failing to hide his smile. Louis rolls his eyes and settles back against Harry to hide his own smile, "no it's fine, I know unrealistic romance is your thing, we can watch it. I'm just saying."

Harry’s chuckle rumbles against Louis’ back, “I still think it's romantic,” he says playfully.

“Oh you would,” Louis groans, but he finds himself smiling and there is absolutely no venom in his voice.

After that Louis has to admit, as much as he despises Rose, Harry is right; Titanic will always be a classic. Louis will occasionally throw in a comment about how even if they had survived Rose and Jack never would have stayed together anyway because she is used to being pampered and Jack doesn’t have two pounds to rub together, or how Cal is an absolute psychopath because he’d rather shoot at them then just let Rose go and save himself. Harry just smiles at him with that fondness that Louis cant quite get used to. Other than that Louis just quietly enjoys the movie. He enjoys Harry’s arm around his shoulders more though, and he especially enjoys it even more when Harry laces their fingers together.

It's weird being like this with Harry. Louis never had this with the other guys he dated. He never just spent time with them just to be together like this. Max just picked Louis up and brought him to parties, Mitchell was hardly ever around and when he was it was usually just for sex. Hunter would never have just sat and held Louis while they watched a movie because something Louis would have done would have annoyed him and he would have made Louis sit at the other end of the couch. Harry though, Harry is tender and sweet and Louis doesn’t really know how to feel about it. On the one hand he’s never felt more comfortable around someone who wasn’t Zayn or Liam. On the other hand he really doesn’t think it's fair of Harry to be nice to him like this because he knows how much it's going to hurt when Harry leaves.

Louis’ phone rings just as the ship is going down and Louis has to dash to his room where he had left it. It turns out to be Liam checking in on him and Louis tells him that Harry is over and they’re watching Titanic. Louis can hear Liam’s smile through the phone as he coincidently remembers that he actually has some errands to run and wont be home for a couple more hours. There isn’t a single doubt in his mind that Liam is dialling Zayn’s number two seconds after they hang up.

When Louis returns to the living room Harry is very clearly making a valiant effort not to cry. He gives Louis a watery smile and promptly jabs a finger into the corner of his eye, possibly in the hopes of shoving the tears back in. Louis looks between the screen where the old couple laying in bed together as the water rushes in around them and the damp eyed boy sitting on his couch and finds it nearly impossible not to smile.

“S’alright Harry, even I can admit this is a sad part. The mom telling her kids a story always gets me,” Louis says, trying to mimic the gentle voice Harry always uses with him, because it's soothing. Louis slips back under the blanket and this time Harry’s arms snake around his middle to pull Louis gently back against his chest and hook his chin over Louis’ shoulder. Suddenly every single one of Louis' reflexes is screaming at him to jump up and rip Harry’s arms off of him. Harry can absolutely not touch Louis around his middle. The thought of Harry touching the part of himself that Louis hates the most, Harry feeling Louis’ bulbous stomach under his hands, makes Louis feel like shoving
his hand down his throat and ripping out his own esophagus. Harry must feel Louis’ body lock up though, must feel Louis go cold and stiff and scared under his hands, because right away he freezes too. Slowly his arms loosen until they’re hovering above the fabric of Louis’ jumper, not touching him but not pulling away either. The burn at the back of Louis’ throat and the nervous clenching of his gut are almost unbearable. Every muscle in Louis’ body is telling him to jump up, to leave, to go to the bathroom. The silence between them is so thick it’s suffocating. Louis doesn’t know if Harry froze because he could feel Louis’ discomfort or if he froze because he felt how disgusting Louis’ body is under the concealing material of his jumper and wants nothing to do with it.

The seconds that pass are so tense it’s unbelievable; Louis is frozen, fighting every instinct he has to flinch away from Harry. Slowly, like he can tell Louis is one wrong move away from bolting, Harry moves his arms away from Louis’ stomach. Louis’ heart is racing and he feels like his mind has glitched and is locked half way between fight or flight. Then he feels Harry’s left hand carefully enveloping his and then his right arm comes up and hesitantly wraps around Louis again. This time though, his right hand crosses over to Louis’ left shoulder so his forearm rests across Louis’ chest. He gently pulls Louis back, counteracting the tension in Louis’ body until Louis is leaning back against his chest again. Louis vaguely wonders if Harry knows his chest is a safe zone because he’s hugged Louis from behind across the chest before. The blood is still thumping in Louis’ ears as Harry’s massive palm covers his racing heart, his breaths slow and steady against Louis’ back. Slowly Louis feels himself unfreezing, as Harry’s warmth seeps slowly into him. Louis can handle this, Harry’s arm gently across his chest. He can handle Harry’s hand curled around his. He’s not touching Louis’ stomach anymore but he wasn’t so repulsed that he pushed Louis away either. Louis can handle this. Slowly he feels himself relaxing, feels himself sink back against Harry, feels his breathing regulate. Even when his skin stops crawling he can still feel the itch at the back of his throat but he hasn’t even eating anything today so he’d have nothing to purge anyway. He focuses on Harry’s hand over his heart and Harry’s chest against his back and tries to ignore the voice in his head telling him he’s fucked. Finally when Louis squeezes Harry’s hand Harry lets out a long breath that sounds a lot like a sigh of relief and Louis feels Harry’s lips press softly against his cheek.

With that one soft kiss they both turn their attention back to the screen where Rose is desperately blowing the whistle, trying to signal a lifeboat. Louis knows what it feels like to be seconds away from Harry. Slowly, like he can tell Louis is one wrong move away from bolting, Harry moves his arms away from Louis’ stomach. Louis’ heart is racing and he feels like his mind has glitched and is locked half way between fight or flight.

Then he feels Harry’s left hand carefully enveloping his and then his right arm comes up and hesitantly wraps around Louis again. This time though, his right hand crosses over to Louis’ left shoulder so his forearm rests across Louis’ chest. He gently pulls Louis back, counteracting the tension in Louis’ body until Louis is leaning back against his chest again. Louis vaguely wonders if Harry knows his chest is a safe zone because he’s hugged Louis from behind across the chest before. The blood is still thumping in Louis’ ears as Harry’s massive palm covers his racing heart, his breaths slow and steady against Louis’ back. Slowly Louis feels himself unfreezing, as Harry’s warmth seeps slowly into him. Louis can handle this, Harry’s arm gently across his chest. He can handle Harry’s hand curled around his. He’s not touching Louis’ stomach anymore but he wasn’t so repulsed that he pushed Louis away either. Louis can handle this. Slowly he feels himself relaxing, feels himself sink back against Harry, feels his breathing regulate. Even when his skin stops crawling he can still feel the itch at the back of his throat but he hasn’t even eating anything today so he’d have nothing to purge anyway. He focuses on Harry’s hand over his heart and Harry’s chest against his back and tries to ignore the voice in his head telling him he’s fucked. Finally when Louis squeezes Harry’s hand Harry lets out a long breath that sounds a lot like a sigh of relief and Louis feels Harry’s lips press softly against his cheek.

With that one soft kiss they both turn their attention back to the screen where Rose is desperately blowing the whistle, trying to signal a lifeboat. Louis knows what it feels like to be seconds away from sinking below the surface of the water, freezing and alone and scared. Louis kind of wishes he had a whistle to blow, to call someone back to save him, because he isn’t sure how much longer he can stand this, except Louis isn’t even sure he’d blow the whistle if he did have one.

“This is the other reason I hate Rose,” Louis says later, when the movie is almost done and hundred year old Rose is standing on the deck of the boat in her night gown.

“Why babe?” Harry asks gently, his thumb brushing softly at Louis’ knuckles.

“Because she has this ridiculously expensive necklace, that she could sell to the historians and use the money to make sure her lovely granddaughter, who has taken care of her all this time, would never have to worry about money a day in her life. Except she knows she’s only got about thirty more minutes left to live so she doesn’t care, and would rather toss it into the ocean for god knows what reason,” Louis says, but this time he can’t find it in himself to sound indignant about it, “I don’t get what that is supposed to represent.”

Harry is quiet for a while and his hand comes up to card through Louis fringe, “she’s sending her heart into the ocean to be with Jack,” Harry says softly and follows it up with a kiss to Louis’ temple, “because even though she remarried and even though nobody even knew about Jack her heart had always, always belonged to him. And she died happy because finally someone else knew about Jack, knew how in love with him she was. She carried on like she promised him she would, but her throwing that heart into the water was her way of telling him that she had still always loved him.” Liam has never explained it to Louis like that, he’s always just argued that she didn’t want to use the necklace because it was from Cal and it was her way of showing Cal that she had never wanted him. Louis never understood that though. He didn’t get how if Rose was so in love with Jack and just...
spent her day telling everyone their love story, why the last thought she had before she died was to spite the fiancé she hated.

When he looks back at Harry his eyes are huge and shining but there is a small smile on his lips and Louis thinks maybe he gets it a little bit. He still doesn't believe people fall in love that fast and he still doesn't believe that kind of love exists in real life, he still doesn't think their love would have been enough to keep them together if the ship hadn’t sunk and they had tried to start a life together in America, but maybe he gets the part about the necklace a little better now. He can certainly relate to carrying on even if it feels like your heart is at the bottom of an ocean.

“Oh,” Louis says quietly, more to himself than to Harry, “okay.”

Neither of them say anything as the credits roll, but Harry’s hand is still running through Louis’ hair so Louis can’t really bring himself to get up. Eventually though, the DVD menu starts playing on loop and Louis thinks if he hears ‘my heart will go on’ one more time he’ll hang himself. He isn’t sure why he does it but when he sits up to go take out the DVD he turns around and presses a kiss to Harry’s lips. Harry’s eyes widen for a second before they flutter shut and his hand comes up to Louis’ cheek.

Harry never grips Louis the way Max always did or clenches a hand around the back of his neck like Hunter always had, his hand is soft and barely there, just feeling. Louis likes it. His own hand slips into the curls at the back of Harry’s neck and they’re just as soft as he imagined they’d be. When Louis’ fingers twine in the curls Harry hums a little against Louis’ lips. The kiss is still slow and gentle but less hesitant than any of the kisses before.

When Louis pulls back Harry’s eyes meet his and Harry bites down on his lip to hide his smile, Louis doesn’t bother hiding his. He dips down and gives Harry another peck before he stands and goes to the DVD player. Harry stands too and Louis hears him stretch and crack his back while Louis puts the DVD back in the case. When Louis straightens up and turns around Harry's hand is under the hem of his t-shirt scratching lazily at his hip. Louis' eyes skim the strip of milky white skin above Harry's belt before he hands Harry the movie.

"I have to head out, I promised Niall I'd meet him at the library to help him study," Harry says and Louis can clearly hear just how little Harry wants to leave.

"Okay, I should start dinner for the lads anyway," Louis says, but really he doesn't want Harry to leave either.

"Was it complete torture?" Harry asks, dimple showing in his grin.

"Was what torture?" Louis asks, but he's already grinning back.

"Watching Titanic with me."

Louis scrunches up his nose, "I'll choose the movie next time," he teases, "but no, it was actually nice Haz. I enjoyed it," he adds earnestly.

Harry’s face lights up and both his dimples come out, "yeah?" he asks.

"Yeah," Louis confirms.

Harry follows Louis to the front door and hesitates in the doorway. Louis still feels weird under that look that Harry gives him, he still isn’t used to the softness in those green eyes. Louis leans on the doorframe as Harry's big hands fumble with the DVD case.

"So I'll see you Monday then?" Louis says, "don't forget we have the rehearsal after school."

"I won't forget," Harry says with a smile.

"I won't be in the studio second period, I'll be at the first years show. Everyone in the fashion program is excused from classes to watch. You'll find out on Monday if your professors are excusing classes for the show, some do and some don't," Louis explains.

"Okay well if my professor lets us out I'll text you and I'll meet up with you? And second period I'll come. How long is it?" Harry asks.

"It's like an all day thing but it's set up so people coming and going won't disturb the show," Louis says, "but yeah, text me."

"And I'll text you after I finish helping Niall study?"

"Sounds good," Louis says and he can’t help but notice that there isn't much space between the two of them now.
Harry reaches out, the backs of his knuckles brushing softly at Louis' cheek. Louis lets his eyes flutter shut as Harry's thumb ghosts across his cheekbone. When Louis opens his eyes he's met with Harry's gaze. One corner of his mouth is pulled up in a gentle smile and his eyes are so soft. Louis doesn't think anybody has ever looked at him the way Harry does before, and he feels his cheeks warm as he bows his head. He doesn't know how to handle the warm touches or the soft looks because he knows he doesn't deserve warm or soft. Harry's hand slips down, a few fingers gently raising Louis' chin until Louis meets Harry's eyes again.

"You're beautiful," Harry says.

Louis' breath catches in his throat and his body's first instinct is to shrink away from the compliment because it isn't true and Harry shouldn't be saying stuff like that, but then Harry is there. Harry tips his chin down and presses a soft kiss to Louis' lips. Louis closes his eyes and focuses on the warm press of Harry's lips, he unfreezes and lets his lips move back against Harry's. Harry's hand has left Louis' chin but Louis' hand finds its way up to those curls at the back of Harry's neck. Louis doesn't think he's ever had this many kisses without a tongue being forced into his mouth but somehow these slow, gentle kisses mean more.

When Harry pulls back Louis instantly misses his lips. He's smiling and Louis can feel himself smiling too. He can feel the warmth that Harry has left pooled in his chest. Harry leans forward again and this time places a sweet kiss on Louis' forehead. With that, he turns and heads down the hall to the stairwell, waving over his shoulder before he steps through the door. Louis closes the front door behind him and leans back against the wood. The flip flopping of his stomach is mixing in with the hunger pains, and the fuzziness from the kiss is mixing in with the light headedness from not eating all day. Louis feels like a complete mess but all he can think about is the way Harry's lips feel against his.

He's almost in a daze as he starts dinner for the boys but he can't even pin down a single one of his thoughts to analyze. HarryHarryHarryHarry plays on repeat between his ears and he knows it's dangerous but he can't even think clear enough to stop it because HarryHarryHarryHarry.

He has some almonds and half an apple for dinner before the boys get home and then when they come in he serves them the mushroom chicken he's made, claiming he ate before they got there. They ask him for details about his day with Harry but all he can really tell them is that it went good and that Harry is nice. He makes it through the evening by asking Liam how his essay went and talking about the date with Caitlyn Zayn has in a couple days. Harry does text him and it's nice but Harry's warmth left the flat with him and Louis is already almost drowning under self doubt. The second he is alone in his bedroom at the end of the night it all comes crashing down and he hates himself for getting himself tangled up in this. Harry is too good and too sweet and Louis is shit and he's never going to be enough for Harry.

'Sweet dreams babe. xx.' Harry texts.

'Night. See you tomorrow. x.' Louis sends back.

He sets his phone aside and curls in on himself, pulling his knees up to his chest and swallowing past the itch in his throat. He figures he might as well enjoy whatever this is with Harry now, because soon it will be over and Louis will be left to pick up the pieces.
Louis can tell Harry is nervous. It’s clear in the way his hands shook as he fumbled with the zipper on the black thin legged trousers. It’s clear with how many times he’s shaken out his hair just to swoop it back into the same arrangement again. It’s clear because his fingers have been fumbling with the same button on the pea coat for so long that it’s getting slightly sad. Harry’s skin is pale and his lip is clamped between his teeth. His eyes are wide and flitting around, watching the models and students bustling around and getting ready for the show.

Louis carefully zips up Hanna’s black cocktail dress and slips the leather jacket onto her thin shoulders. He lets her balance on his shoulder while she slips on her black high heels and then he straightens out her long auburn hair. He turns to Sadie and adjusts the waistband on the black trench coat before combing out her fringe with his fingers and helping her into her heels. Finally he turns to Harry and sees the boy has completely stilled, fingers frozen on one of the brass buttons. The music has started playing through the speakers, signalling the start of the show.

“You look like you’re completely freaking out,” Louis says, pushing Harry’s fingers away to do up the last couple buttons himself.

“I am freaking out,” Harry mumbles, “there are so many people out there! There weren’t this many people when we watched the first and second year shows!”

“Yeah, people take the third year show more seriously so more people come. What are you even worried about though, you did so good at the rehearsal,” Louis says, rearranging Harry’s fringe and straightening the lapels of the jacket.

“I- theres so many people- what if I look like an idiot- what if I trip-” he groans, scrubbing his hands down his cheeks.

“Harry calm down. All you have to do is walk straight, stop at the end for five seconds with your hand in your pocket, turn round and come back. You’ve got this, you look amazing, you’re going to do great,” Louis says softly, as Harry’s thumb sneaks up to brush across Louis’ cheek.

“Promise you won’t hate me if I fall flat on my face?” Harry frowns.

“Yes, don’t be ridiculous,” Louis scolds, but it comes out more sounding fond than he would have preferred and Harry just gives a lopsided smile.

“Can you run me through it again?” he asks hesitantly.

“We’re last in line so all three of all the other students models are going to walk the first looks then Hannah will go, then Sadie, then you. When you come back the three of you will change into your second looks and everyone will walk again in the same order. Then same thing for the third looks. Hannah has the gown so she has to walk a fourth time but you can change back into your normal clothes after the third look. Each students name is on the backdrop when their models are walking so people know who’s designs are who’s,” Louis explains to him, the same way he’d explained it all on Monday.

“This is why I don’t sing in front of people,” he grimaces, “once, when I was like eight, I tried to be in my schools talent show and I threw up on stage.”
“You’re going to do great Harry,” Louis says gently.

He tries not to coo at the thought of poor baby Harry sick with stage fright. Mia calls out the first students name and Louis does last minute checks of the girls and then Harry again as the line slowly moves forward. The music and lights change with each set of three models, depending on each students preferences. The first models rush back after their turn to change, as the line inches forward. Louis’ phone vibrates in his pocket and he sees a text from Liam.

‘We’re front row right at the middle, can’t wait Lou! Zayn and I love you and Niall says tell Haz to break a leg.’

Louis doesn’t think it’s a good idea to tell Harry that, considering he’s gone back to chewing on his lip. Louis types out a quick reply and then reaches up to pinch Harry’s chin and drag his lip out from between his teeth. Harry hangs his head and smiles sheepishly, catching Louis hand and slotting their fingers together. Louis doesn’t pull away even though his cheeks warm a little bit. He isn’t used to this, these unabashed touches in public.

Sure he and Max snogged at the parties they went to and people saw, and Hunter would hold his hand in public if he felt Louis looked presentable enough that day, but this is new. On Monday Harry met Louis to watch the first years show and sat close with his arm around Louis’ shoulders, pressing occasional kisses into his hair. When Hannah and Sadie asked if they were together at the rehearsal Louis instinctively said no and Harry just as quickly said that he was trying to win Louis over. Louis was surprised he didn’t pass out right then and there from all he blood pooling in his cheeks. Then Harry held Louis’ hand as he walked through the halls and out to Louis’ car. On Tuesday they watched the second year show together and then Harry kissed Louis right in the middle of the parking lot for everyone to see at the end of the day. Louis doesn’t really understand why someone like Harry would want people to think they’re together.

The line shuffles forward and Harry’s hand tightens on his, so Louis brushes his thumb across Harry’s knuckles in an attempt at soothing him. Harry groans and stoops to hook his chin over Louis shoulder, whining softly and nosing at Louis’ cheek. Louis can’t help the giggle that escapes him as he stays still, not wanting to displace Harry’s warmth from behind him.

“You’re not nervous at all?” Harry asks quietly.

“My first year I was, but I’m used to it now,” Louis shrugs.

He instantly regrets shrugging, thinking Harry will pull away, but he stays put and presses his cheek to Louis’. Of course Louis is a little anxious about whether the people will like his designs or not but he’s had five months to worry about that while he worked on everything. Now there is nothing else he can do, they either like his stuff or they don’t, and he knows the show will go smoothly as usual. As long as Harry doesn’t faint first. They’re close to the front of the line and Harry finally straightens up as Louis does final touches and helps Hannah up the stairs behind the curtain so she’ll be ready to walk when the other students model comes off the runway.

The other model comes around the curtain and Louis hears Mia say his name across the speakers before The Arctic Monkeys start playing. Hannah gives him a smile and struts confidentially around the curtain as Sadie steps up into position. From his angle, where he can see the runway but nobody can see him, Louis watches as Hannah walks, all long legs and long hair. She looks great and Louis can’t find anything to pick apart about his design.

As she starts back towards them Sadie gets ready and Harry steps up the stairs to wait his turn, though he’s almost dragging Louis with him in his reluctance to release his hand. Sadie’s a little shorter than Hannah but just as willowy and she looks amazing as she starts down the runway. Louis
straightens Harry out one last time as Sadie makes the turn at the end.

“You’re going to do great,” Louis says.

“Kiss for luck?” Harry asks, looking adorably hopeful.

Louis has to rise up on his tip toes to join their lips but Harry’s eyes flutter shut and his hand comes up to softly cup Louis’ cheek. Louis sees Sadie coming and pulls away but he doesn’t mind when Harry steals one more chaste peck. Harry smooths his grin into something more casual and lets out a huff before facing the curtain. Louis gives him a pat on the shoulder to tell him to go and Harry starts forward.

He looks just as amazing as Louis knew he would. His relaxed gait and long legs make him look like he was born to walk runways. He keeps his face neutral just like they practiced in rehearsal and when he gets to the end he shoves and hand in his pocket and angles himself just the way Louis showed him. He pauses for the exact right amount of time and then turns and starts back. He looks even better walking towards Louis with the lights behind him like a halo around his curls.

The clothes look good, yeah, but Harry. Harry looks like sex on a pair of endless legs.

Then Harry’s coming back behind the curtain and he instantly goes from sex to adorable when he releases the muscles of his face and he morphs back into the hesitant doe eyed boy from before. Louis just grins at him and gives him the hug he’s searching for, Harry burying his nose in Louis’ hair.

“Perfect,” Louis tells him, “absolutely perfect.”

“I couldn’t see all the people because of the lights,” Harry breathes, sounding relieved and following Louis over to the clothing rack.

“You did great,” Louis says, “and you girls too. Perfect,” he calls to Hannah and Sadie where they’re getting into their second outfits behind the changing curtains.

Harry strips down in front of the curtain and when all three are in their second outfits Louis busies himself; straightening Hannah’s skirt, adjusting Sadie’s top, arranging the cowl neck of Harry’s sweater.

They wait in line again while everyone shows their second looks and when it’s Harry’s turn to go again he steals another kiss. Louis doesn’t mind at all. Harry’s second lap is just as good as the first and the tweed trousers look better than Louis could have hoped for.

Harry’s third look is the jeans with the t-shirt and blazer and Louis feels something like pride in his chest because everything really turned out perfectly. Harry looks amazing standing next to the girls in their outfits; Hannah’s dress a bustier with the skirt skimming her hips and flowing longer in the back than the front, and Sadie in a sleek dress with painstaking detail.

Louis finds himself looking at Hannah and Harry as he preens them, thinking about what a lovely couple they would make. That’s who Harry should be with, a tall, thin, gorgeous girl who is able to match his beauty and would look amazing on Harry’s arm. Not short, fat, plain Louis who looks like something Harry could have scraped off his shoe.

That thought weighs heavy in his empty gut and the back of his throat burns, instantly he’s regretting the quarter of that grapefruit he ate for breakfast. Harry pulls Louis close then, while the line shuffles forward, so that Louis’ back is against his chest and his arms fold across Louis’ chest and shoulders. Louis lets himself relax back into Harry a bit but he still doesn’t understand why Harry is so sweet to
him, or why Harry kisses him so tenderly before he goes for his third trip down the runway.

After, Louis tells Harry how great he did while Harry carefully steps out of Louis’ clothes and slips back into his own tight black jeans and oversized jumper. Harry hugs Louis close, telling him how amazing all his pieces were and how amazing he is. Louis just blushes, as usual, and mumbles a thank you into Harry’s shoulder. Harry excuses himself to use the loo as Hannah steps out from behind the curtain for her last walk.

“You two are so adorable together Lou,” she says as Louis helps her zip up the gown.

Louis feels his cheeks heat as he smoothes out the silk organza of the dress, “he’s adorable,” Louis corrects, “I don’t know what he’s doing with me. Bit out of my league don’t you think.”

Hannah clucks her tongue and shakes her head, “Lou I’ve known you three years now and I’ve never seen you with someone so perfect for you. He looks at you like you’re something precious, and you are and you should be with someone who knows that,” Hannah pauses while Louis brushes out her hair, “I know you said you didn’t care but like, Hunter didn’t come last year because he said Fashion was a waste of time, and then now here is Harry, walking for you even through his stage fright.”

Louis sighs and tries to ignore the clenching and unclenching of his stomach, “I know he’s such a nice guy Hannah. That’s just another reason he’s too good for me. He just hasn’t realized how much better than me he can do yet,” he says quietly as he helps Hannah up the stairs for her turn.

She just shakes her head at him again, “how someone as amazing as you can think so lowly of himself I’ll never understand,” she says.

Louis hardly has a chance to blush before his name is being called and Hannah is stepping past the curtain in the flowy beaded gown. He watches her walk and then meets her at the other set of stairs on her way down. Ms. Schinnour is up on stage thanking everyone for coming to see her students as Louis goes back to the clothing rack with Hannah to pack away all his garments. Ms. Shinnour comes back as some of the students are leaving with their designs and pulls Louis into a hug telling him how spectacular everything was.

Louis is packing away the gown after saying goodbye to Sadie and Hannah when he is enveloped by Zayn and Liam. They press kisses all over his head and squeeze him tight and tell him how perfect everything was. Louis blushes and thanks them for coming but really he means to thank them for loving him. When they finally release him Niall bounds over and gives Louis a hug too, only then does Louis wonder what’s taking Harry so long. His unspoken question is answered when Harry comes over with flushed cheeks and hiding something behind his back.

“Why are you out of breath?” Louis asks, raising an eyebrow at whatever Harry is concealing.

“Had to run out to my truck,” Harry says.

Louis is about to ask him why when he brings out what he was hiding behind his back. It’s a bouquet, long stems and deep red coloured cala lilies, bound by a simple grey ribbon. Louis’ mouth hangs open as Harry holds the flowers out to him with a sheepish grin on his face.

“Sorry they’re a little wilted from sitting in my truck all this time, and I know it kinda looks like a wedding bouquet but the boys said cala lilies are your favourite and I just thought like- I knew you’d do amazing, just thought you should know, how glad I am you picked me and also- just like how amazing you are,” Harry rambles as Louis steps forward and accepts the flowers, mouth still hanging open.
“Thank you,” Louis says, but his voice comes out small and insignificant.

Harry doesn’t mind though and he scoops Louis into his arms, his cheek a little cold from outside when it presses against Louis. Louis holds the flowers in one hand, keeping them out of the way so they don’t get crushed but he hugs Harry back as tight as he can.

“Why are you so sweet to me,” Louis breathes, burying his face in Harry’s shoulder.

Harry just laughs like he thinks Louis is joking but when he says, “because you deserve it,” Louis shakes his head.

Harry doesn’t realize that it was a very real question. Louis legitimately doesn’t understand. He doesn’t get it. It makes no sense to him. He’s completely confused. Louis knows it’s too good to be true and he’s just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

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The next two and a half weeks pass by, and as Louis stands in the shower on a Saturday he finds himself thinking about Harry. It really isn’t much of a surprise that his thoughts have wandered to the beautiful boy but it is still extremely frustrating. One would think that, considering Louis has spent every day of the past two weeks with Harry, his time alone would belong to him alone and he’d be able to focus on other things not involving Harry. That isn’t the case though, because Louis’ mind manages to relate every single thing back to the guy.

He’s somehow gone from thinking about the merchandising homework he has for the weekend to thinking of the way Harry hooks his chin over his shoulder when he’s watching Louis sketch out store layouts during their spare period in the studio. Now he’s thinking of the way Harry’s breath ghosts over his ear, the way Harry turns to press his lips to Louis’ temple.

It isn’t even just in the solitude of the studio that they’re that close either. It seems like Louis’ is most comfortable when he’s encompassed, with Harry’s arms wrapped around his shoulders from behind, as he leans back against Harry’s chest. Harry doesn’t hesitate to hold Louis close in the middle of the hallway, while they’re standing talking to Liam, Zayn and Niall between classes.

He walks Louis to his car every day and gives him a kiss even if they’re going to be meeting up at Louis’ flat in five minutes, if they’re heading back to Harry’s dorm room, or if they’re going on one of Harry’s ‘dates’.

Louis had turned him down for dinner jokingly saying that dinner was the lazy mams date and that Harry would have to be more creative than that. Louis had expected Harry to give up and stop asking but instead Harry came up with other things for them to do instead. Old black and white movies at the cheap theatre downtown, trips to the coffee shop followed by walks through the park, the art museum on the weekend when there was freezing rain and they were too bored to stay in.

If they feel like being alone and Liam and Zayn are at the flat they’ll go to Harry’s dorm and snuggle up on his bed to watch films, since Niall never comes home straight after school. Other days they’ll just hangout with the boys. Some days Liam and Zayn will be out and they’ll end up pressed close together on Louis’ couch. Sometimes they just do homework, other times they play video games, sometimes they just talk, other times they make out until their lips are swollen. It’s nice. Louis never knows what they’re going to do but Harry always seems to want to be with him and that’s such a change from Mitchell who always just showed up, fucked Louis and left. It’s a really nice change.

None of Louis’ boyfriends have ever wanted to be with him for anything more than sex, none of them have cared how his day went or cared what he had to say, cared how he felt. Harry actually
listens, more than that, he actually places value on what Louis has to say. Harry knows little things about Louis that Louis doesn’t even think about himself. It’s so strange because it isn’t about sex for Harry and Harry hasn’t gotten sick of Louis the way Louis was sure he would. It’s both bad and good. Good because for once Louis actually feels like maybe he’s got someone else who actually cares about him. Bad because now Louis knows it’s going to hurt ten times more when Harry inevitably leaves.

Louis would have already gotten his kit off if he were seeing anyone besides Harry, but they haven’t gone past heated snogging. Louis is scared. Mitchell was the last person to see him naked and Louis has been a lot stricter with his diet since then but there is still so much fat, so many disgusting soft spots. He’s really just gross looking and he’s terrified that when Harry sees him it will all come crashing down, that Harry won’t be able to look past his awful form, won’t want to stick around. Harry is good and sweet and kind so Louis knows he would never comment on Louis’ rolls the way Hunter did, but Louis also knows it’s impossible to be with someone you’re grossed out by, and Harry can do so much better.

Harry seems to sense Louis’ uneasiness though and he has never pressured Louis for more. It only took Harry a few times of Louis flinching away when he reached out to touch Louis’ side or hips to learn that there were boundaries that Louis couldn’t explain. He never asked why, he just adjusted himself to not make Louis uncomfortable. Now Harry will lace their fingers together, or wrap his arms around Louis’ chest or shoulders, reach out to cup Louis’ cheek, play with Louis’ hair. His hands almost never leave Louis but he never touches Louis’ stomach or hips and Louis is so thankful for that. It works out fine anyway because Harry is so much taller and Louis loves how easy it is for him to wrap his arms around Harry’s waist or lean back against Harry.

It’s still so strange to Louis how comfortable he feels around Harry, how easy the two of them seem to fit. They could talk for days and Harry can make Louis smile even on the days Louis feels like his stomach is trying to digest itself or when the pain in his joints makes him cringe. He’s got Harry’s hand to hold now when he’s feeling dizzy and Harry just takes Louis holding a little tighter as affection, not realizing sometimes Louis needs him for actual support.

It’s also worked out perfectly because Louis almost never has to eat a full meal and then purge anymore, and already he’s noticing his throat is less raspy and his teeth are less sensitive. He tells Harry he has to be home for dinner because he always eats with Liam and Zayn and of course Harry totally understands. Then he tells Liam and Zayn he already ate with Harry and they’re just so happy things are working out that they don’t mind at all. He’s been able to stick to his diet completely and he doesn’t have to throw up.

Louis has never let himself care about anyone other than Liam and Zayn before. He wasn’t dumb enough to think any of the three guys he was with actually cared about him, so he also wasn’t dumb enough to let himself start caring about them either. He didn’t mind though because them not caring meant they didn’t ask questions. They were distractions and that was all he needed, he’s never believed in love anyway. He still doesn’t believe in love, he knows he never will, but he does care about Harry.

He likes hearing about Harry’s day, likes running his fingers through Harry’s curls while they watch telly, likes it when Harry hums absentmindedly as they study, likes when Harry texts him even though they just saw each other five minutes ago. He likes how Harry is always spread wide open with him, never holding anything back, never denying Louis’ any part of him. Louis cares about Harry, there is no denying it with the warmth that spreads through him because of the boy. The warmth that seems to linger now, even after Harry lets go of his hand, or heads home for the night. Louis thinks maybe it lingers because Harry somehow always feels so close now, even when they’re not together.
Louis tries to tell himself he’ll be okay when Harry leaves but he knows the likelihood of that decreases each day, because each day he cares about Harry more. Louis figures he should just enjoy Harry for whatever limited time he gets to have him. He’ll just try his very hardest not to do anything to make Harry get sick of him before it happens naturally.

Louis finishes rinsing the conditioner out of his hair and turns off the shower before grabbing one of the plush towels off the rack to dry himself. The boys aren’t home but he prefers to get dressed in the bathroom while the mirror is foggy anyway, instead of going to his bedroom and accidentally catching sight of himself in the mirror there. He doesn’t really know how he could ever ask Harry to accept his body when he can’t even stand to look at it himself.

Liam and Zayn won’t be back until tomorrow because they’re going to a party a few hours outside of London and they don’t want to drive home drunk so they’re crashing at a friends. They left just over an hour ago and Louis tidied the flat a bit before getting in the shower. It’s nice to shower just to get clean, to let the hot water ease the tension he carries with him everywhere, instead of showering to make sure he doesn’t have any splashed back vomit in his hair. When he’s dressed he combs his hair so it will dry in a fringe and brushes his teeth. There is a knock on the front door when he’s only finished brushing one side so he leaves the toothbrush in his mouth and pads down the hall.

Harry grins down at Louis when he opens the door, cheeks puffed out with frothed up toothpaste. Louis attempts a smile around the toothbrush as Harry’s hand comes up to cup softly around the back of Louis neck. He stoops down and presses a kiss to the tip of Louis’ nose.

“Hey babe,” he says, pressing another to Louis’ forehead.

Louis hums and squeezes Harry’s hip in response, trying not to dribble toothpaste down his chin. He goes back to the bathroom to finish brushing and when he comes out Harry is laying on the couch with an arm draped over his eyes. Louis pads over and slips easily into the space between Harry’s side and the back of the couch, sliding an arm under Harry’s back and wrapping the other around his middle. Louis’ cheek rests on Harry’s chest and Harry’s arm comes up to wrap around Louis, his hand brushing softly through Louis’ hair.

“You tired?” Louis asks, drawing patterns against the cotton of Harry’s t-shirt.

Harry groans, “yeah, Niall came home at like four last night drunk as a skunk, bumping into shit and then laughing at himself. He finally found his way to bed but you know how I can’t get back to sleep once I’m awake,” he sighs.

“Awe,” Louis coos, “so you’re running on three hours of sleep or did you get an afternoon nap in?”

They had gone to a movie last night, the latest showing of a romantic comedy that Louis thought was a little cliché but Harry had loved. Harry had dropped him off at home just after twelve and Louis knows he won’t have gotten to sleep until after one because his goodnight text came at quarter to.

“No I had to go to the library all day because I’m really worried about that bio-chem exam on Monday,” he says.

Louis raises his chin and scoots up to look down at Harry. His eyes are a little puffy and the milky skin underneath is tinged violet from lack of sleep, but he smiles up at Louis with both dimples. Louis reaches out and cards his fingers through Harry’s curls. Harry lets out something resembling a purr and leans into Louis touch, letting his tired eyes fall shut. Louis massages at Harry’s scalp, pressing occasional kisses to his forehead, his cheeks, his nose.

“We can just relax tonight, we’ll pop in a movie and if you fall asleep, you fall asleep,” he says
Harry’s eyes open and he frowns, “no I’m fine, I want to spend time with you, not pass out on you,” he says.

“It’s really fine, I’m tired too,” Louis admits.

“How come you’re tired love?” he asks, looking worried now, his thumb brushing softly against Louis’ cheek.

“ Weird dreams,” Louis lies, “can’t remember about what though,” it was the hunger pains that kept him awake last night, like knives twisting in his gut.

Harry frowns but nods and presses his lips to Louis’ cheek, “what movie should we watch?” he asks.

Louis doesn’t answer, instead he leans down and presses his lips to Harry’s. Harry hums against his lips and kisses back, his hand slipping into Louis’ hair. Harry’s tongue brushes at Louis’ lip and Louis deepens the kiss, letting Harry’s tongue in. Louis loves the way their lips slot together so perfectly, Harry’s so big and full and Louis’ thin.

Harry’s lips are always so tender on Louis’. The hesitance is completely gone by now but he’s still so gentle. There is a passion there that makes Louis feel wanted, like Harry can’t get enough. Louis doesn’t understand it, but it feels good. Louis likes how Harry’s hand can cradle his whole head, cup his cheek so gently, span almost all of his back. He likes the little noises Harry makes, likes the way Harry always smiles after they pull apart, the way Harry rests their foreheads together or nudges his nose against Louis’ cheek.

“Minty,” Harry whispers, nuzzling into Louis neck.

Louis laughs, “you taste like strawberries,” he says, thinking about the bag of Jolly Ranchers Harry keeps in the glove compartment of his truck.

“Well I know how much you hate green apple,” Harry murmurs and Louis can hear his smile.

They decide on some movie called One Day with Anne Hathaway and some actor neither of them have heard of. Louis isn’t really following along with the plot, he usually doesn’t when Harry chooses sappy movies like this. He focuses on Harry’s fingertips brushing softly up and down his back, Harry’s soft breaths on the top of his head, their fingers twined together against Harry’s chest.

They only make it a quarter of the way through before Harry’s passed out. His breaths are coming in little puffs followed by tiny snorts and his hand has stilled, tucked under Louis’ arm. Even in his sleep Harry holds Louis so gently, but so close. Louis can feel himself tangling up with Harry so easily, without even thinking about it, as easy as breathing. He knows it’s dangerous, but he can’t bring himself to care.

Louis doesn’t know when he dozed off but he’s pretty sure it was the sniffling that woke him up. He raises his chin, which is made difficult by Harry’s fingers twined in his hair, and looks up at Harry. The boy looks down when he realizes he woke Louis up and the movement of his eyes causes all the tears he was trying to hold in to slip out, marring his porcelain skin with tear tracks. He sniffles and wipes his nose on the back of his hand before offering a watery smile.

“Harry I’m not going to let us watch these movies if you’re going to cry in every single one,” Louis says, not doing a very good job of covering the fondness in his voice with exasperation.

“Sorry, it’s just- she got hit by a bloody truck on her bike,” he mumbles, sniffling again.
“Babe you fell asleep, how do you even get attached to the characters after just watching the opening credits?” Louis sighs, reaching up to thumb away the tears.

“Well it’s still sad, I woke up because the crash was loud and then she was just lying there and now he’s going to be heartbroken,” his bottom lip trembles and Louis has to bite back a coo at how adorable he is.

“Alright no more sad movies, I’m going to read the synopsis of everything first,” he says instead.

He scoots up so he can dab at Harry’s eyes with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. Harry is beautiful when he cries, his cheeks get all rosy and his eyes lighten to pure jade green. Louis combs Harry’s fringe to the side with his fingertips and kisses away the wetness on his cheeks. Harry smiles and Louis’ finger slips into his dimple.

“I can’t watch horror movies either, I get nightmares,” Harry says, leaning up to join their lips.

“God Harry you’re such a baby,” Louis grins into the kiss.

“Maybe I just make myself cry so I get your loving,” he retorts.

“Something about the snot that was running down your chin makes me doubt that this was fake crying,” Louis laughs.

Harry’s cheeks tinge pink, “what can I say, I’m very in touch with my emotions,” he mumbles.

Louis laughs, “that is the understatement of the year babe,” he says playfully, pinching Harry’s cheek.

Harry scrunches his nose, “I can’t help it,” he whines, “my mum and sister wanted another girl!”

Louis lets out a burst of laughter, “Princess Harriet,” he says.

“Shut it,” Harry laughs, giving Louis another kiss, “I have to go blow my nose,” he grins, groaning as he peels himself up off the couch.

Louis watches him go, his thin hips swinging a little with his easy gait. He reaches out and shuts off the offending movie before standing and stretching. He goes to the kitchen and gets a glass of water, chugging it and then refilling his glass. It helps with the clenching and unclenching of his stomach. He hears Harry come padding into the kitchen and lets himself sink back against Harry’s chest when he wraps Louis up in his arms.

Harry presses soft kisses to Louis’ hair, “babe I wanted to talk to you about something,” he says.

Louis stomach drops and it’s almost instantaneous how fast that itch at the back of his throat comes. This is it. Harry’s done with him. He’s going to try and let Louis down gently, like putting a lame horse out of its misery. Harry is kind like that. Louis swallows thickly and nods, stepping out of Harry’s arms and wandering to the couch. He sits down in the far corner, folding in on himself a bit, but Harry reaches out for his hand and brushes his thumb across Louis’ knuckles. He looks a little nervous, bottom lip pulled in between his teeth as he looks down at his lap.

“So like Louis, I know you were really hesitant about giving me a chance at all. And I get that, I do, because I know your boyfriends before were assholes and like, you’re not big on romance, I get it. But like- I think- er- I was thinking that things have been going really good yeah? Like I’ve been having such a good time with you and like- I thought- I hope you’ve been having a good time too? I don’t know, I mean, I feel like I’ve known you a lot longer than I have and like….. we get on so
well. At least I was hoping you felt- er- feel that way too. Because I care about you a lot Lou, like I think you’re amazing, and like- I know you only agreed to give me a chance but I was like really hoping that maybe… erm that maybe you’d want to be my boyfriend?”

“Wait, what?” is all Louis manages, as he gapes at Harry incredulously.

“I mean- sorry- I don’t want to like pressure you… I don’t even know if you feel the same because you know me, I’m always like wide open and obvious and like- but like- you’re not like that. You’re so hard to read Louis and like I love that about you- I’d spend all my time getting to know you better if I could- I just- it kinda makes it hard for me to tell if we’re on the same page here- if you- if you like, want me…?” Harry stutters, rubbing the back of his neck but finally meeting Louis’ eyes.

Louis kind of feels like he’s been hit over the head with a shovel. Not only has Harry been happy with him, and isn’t sick of him, he wants to call Louis his boyfriend. Louis never understood how Harry was okay with being openly seen with him, but now he doesn’t mind people actually knowing they’re together. It doesn’t really seem possible.

“I want you Harry,” Louis breathes, “don’t be ridiculous of course I want you. You’ve been amazing. So good to me,” way too good to me, he thinks.

“Louis, I just-” Harry squeezes his hand, reaching out with the other to cup Louis cheek, “can I call you my boyfriend?”

Louis looks in Harry’s eyes, wide and sweet and earnest, and he finds himself nodding, “yes,” his voice comes out small, “yeah, if you want to Harry.”

Harry’s face lights up brighter than Louis’ ever seen it and he surges forward and captures Louis’ lips, both hands coming up to slip into Louis’ hair. Louis’ hands fist in the back of Harry’s t-shirt as they press into each other. When they pull apart they’re both breathing a little heavier, Harry dropping his lips to Louis’ neck and sucking gently on his pulse point, more kisses than love bites.

“Lou I know I’m over the top with like, feelings and emotions about everything and I know you hate that-”

“Harry no,” Louis interrupts, “I don’t hate that stuff. Not even a little bit. I really really like that you wear your heart on your sleeve. It shows how strong you are. I wish I could be more like that,” he says earnestly.

Harry pulls back and meets his eyes, “babe I’ve noticed you opening up so much though, you know? Like when we first started talking you wouldn’t even tell me if you were having a bad day because it was so much easier for you to say ‘I’m good how are you?’ And like, now you actually tell me what you’re thinking, how you feel about stuff, you share stuff with me, little bits about you that I’d never have known. I know it’s just small stuff but it means something to me. It means a lot to me.”

Harry has no idea how hard those small things have been for Louis. How much he’s had to push himself just to open up to Harry as little as he has. He knows that every little thing he gives, Harry will be taking with him when he goes. But he has tried, because Harry gives so much and Louis didn’t want to be the kind of person who just took. Harry has noticed though, and it means something to him and that means the world to Louis.

“Harry you’re so patient with me and like, I appreciate it so much,” Louis says softly, not quite meeting Harry’s eyes.

“Louis I know you can do so much better than me but I want to be what you need. What you
deserve,” Harry says gently, cupping Louis’ cheek.

Louis’ eyebrows furrow and he meets Harry’s eyes, “what do you mean Harry? You’re so much more that I deserve. You could get any guy you want, I’ve never- I still don’t understand why you would want to be with me.”

Harry frowns and shakes his head, “it’s okay Lou, it’s okay that you were hesitant to give me a chance. I know I wasn’t what you were looking for-“

“No Harry. No. I wasn’t- I’m not what you were looking for. Please don’t ever think that the reason I was so hesitant was because of you. You’re amazing Harry. You’re perfect. I just- when you said you wanted to be with me my first instinct was to question it because I didn’t understand…. I still don’t understand why you want to be with me,” Louis murmurs, Harry’s hands carding through his hair.

“Oh sweetheart,” Harry says softly, “I wish you could see.”

“What?” Louis asks, hiding his face against Harry’s neck.

“How perfect you are to me,” he says, pressing a kiss to Louis hair.

Louis disguises the lump in his throat with a laugh, “that was the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard,” he doesn’t pull away though because he doesn’t want Harry to see how damp his eyes suddenly are.

Harry’s deep chuckle vibrates at Louis’ temple, “cheesy but true,” he says, “boyfriend.”

Louis wonders if Harry can feel his cheeks heating against his neck, he doesn’t want Harry to see how nice that feels, hearing Harry say that. He raises his head and presses his lips to Harry’s. He can’t tell Harry how much it means so he’ll show him. He deepens the kiss, raking his hands through Harry’s curls, Harry’s hands are soft on his back. Louis pulls back, latching onto Harry’s neck instead. Harry lets out a breathy moan when Louis’ teeth graze his collarbone, when his lips follow the scoop neckline of his t-shirt.

Harry’s hands come up to Louis’ hair as Louis presses kisses down his never-ending torso over the cotton. He hears Harry’s breath catch when his fingers slip under the hem of the shirt. He pushes it up, his fingertips dragging along Harry’s sides and making Harry’s abs clench. Louis kisses at the exposed skin, the ridges of his abs. His lips brush at the fine smattering of hair from Harry’s belly button down to his jeans.

“Lou,” Harry breathes, “god Lou,” he groans when Louis’ lips brush at his nipple.

When Louis rolls the nipple gently between his lips Harry lets out a tiny moan. His breath hitches when Louis’ thumb presses at his other nipple and he whines when Louis’ teeth graze the other ever so lightly. As Louis trails kisses down the centre of Harry’s chest his hand goes down to palm Harry through the material of his sweatpants. He’s already half hard and he twitches under Louis’ hand, letting out a breathy whine.

“Babe,” Harry groans.

Louis works his hand against Harry’s cock, and it doesn’t take any coaxing before Harry’s is straining against his sweats. Louis undoes the drawstring and pulls them down, Harry’s dick tents his boxer briefs. Louis looks up to Harry, he has only a thin ring of green around his lust blown pupils. He’s biting on his lip, hand reaching down to cover Louis’ on his thigh. Louis’ other hand wraps around Harry’s dick through his boxers, moving until the material is damp with precum.
Harry takes in a deep breath when Louis finally pulls down the boxers, letting his cock out into the open. Louis vaguely notes that Harry has quite a pretty dick; smooth, not too veiny, flushed and leaking against Harry’s toned porcelain stomach. Louis thumbs at the head, spreading the precum and making Harry moan. He slides his hand down to the base and then dips his chin, taking Harry’s head in his mouth. Harry gasps and his hand clutches on the leather of the couch. Louis swirls his tongue around the head, Harry’s cum tastes more sweet than salty and Louis’ knows it’s from the copious amounts of fruit the boy eats. Harry is panting as Louis takes more of him in his mouth, sinking down until he feels Harry nudge the back of his throat.

“Lou,” Harry whines as Louis moves up and down, “christ.”

Louis breathes in through his nose and swallows around Harry, taking him down deeper. The practiced ease comes from so long of having to use the muscles of his throat just to get food down, the same muscles he uses to bring the food all back up. He swallows Harry down further and the boy is writhing under him now, the muscles in his leg flexing under Louis’ hand. When his nose is grazing Harry’s tidily trimmed pubes he works his throat moving up and down on Harry’s cock. Harry’s hands are in Louis’ hair now, but his fingers aren’t tugging on his hair, aren’t pulling or pushing or putting any pressure at all. He’s just touching; the pads of his fingers almost massaging at Louis scalp. Louis has never given someone a blow job and not had them buck up against his throat, not had them pound into him, not had them fuck his mouth. But Harry isn’t. If the muscles clenching and unclenching in his legs and his abs are any indication it’s taking a lot for him not to thrust up, but he doesn’t do it.

“So good Lou- Fuck I’m gonna- I’m- going- to-” he pants, voice so husky and deep.

Louis just works his throat, bobbing his head as Harry’s breath picks up even faster, nothing but panting now. Then Harry is chanting ‘Lou’ and all it takes is Louis looking up through his eyelashes and meeting Harry’s eyes before all of Harry’s muscles clench and he cums. He hits the back of Louis’ throat and Louis drinks him down, sucking lightly to let Harry ride out his orgasm. He pulls off of Harry with a small pop and Harry lets his head fall back against the couch, his curls tousled across his forehead.

Louis gets off his knees and pulls Harry’s boxer briefs back up along with his sweatpants. Harry lets out a long sigh and holds his arms open for Louis. Louis lets Harry’s arms wrap around him and lets himself sink into Harry’s embrace, nuzzling softly at Harry’s neck. Harry tips his chin up and presses kisses to every inch of Louis face before capturing his lips in a deep, slow kiss.

“Louis that was- fuck- that was amazing,” Harry breathes softly against Louis’ lips.

“You’re amazing Harry,” Louis replies, kissing Harry back.

“Let me babe,” Harry says, his fingers reaching out for the hem of Louis’ black sweatpants.

Louis resists every urge he has to flinch away from the touch, to jump back across the room so Harry won’t feel his bulbous stomach or graze his chunky hips. Instead he remains calm and reaches out to take Harry’s hand in his before he touches Louis, and forces a smile. He raises Harry’s hand to his lips and kisses each one of his knuckles.

“I’m tired, you’re tired, lets go to sleep,” he says, “the boys won’t be home til tomorrow afternoon, you’ll sleep over, yeah?”

Harry’s eyebrows raise a bit because he’s never stayed the night before but he nods, “sure sweetheart. Yeah. I’ll make you breakfast in the morning.”
Louis even finds himself smiling at that, even though he knows he’ll have to purge, because Harry is his boyfriend, and Harry is fucked out from his mouth, and Harry is going to spend the night, and for the first time in a long time Louis isn’t going to be alone when he closes his eyes.

“Come on,” Louis says, standing and taking both of Harry’s hands in his.

Harry stands and tips his chin down to kiss Louis softly and sweetly, before Louis brings him down the hall to his bedroom. Harry’s been in his room before when Zayn and Liam and Niall were watching football and the two of them escaped to be alone together, or when they were playing video games and Harry and Louis spread out their homework on the bed and laid side by side to work on it. Louis is thankful he’s pretty much already in his pyjamas, so he just crawls under the covers.

“Love, do you mind if I take off my sweats, I can’t sleep in them?” Harry asks hesitantly.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” Louis says, “hurry up, I’m freezing.”

“You’re always freezing,” Harry says but he strips out of his sweats and Louis holds the blanket open.

Louis buries himself into Harry’s side, Harry’s huge hand completely encompassing his shoulder as Louis’ cheek rests on his chest. Harry turns his head and kisses Louis softly, brushing his lips across Louis’ before moving on to his cheeks, then his nose and his forehead.

“Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?” Harry asks softly.

Louis is thankful the room is dark because his cheeks flush, “you tell me every day.”

“Hmm and do you believe me yet?” he asks, lips brushing against Louis hair. Louis lets out a small sigh and hides his face against Harry’s neck, “I’m going to keep telling you until you believe me Louis. My beautiful boyfriend.”

Louis cheeks are on fire but he finds himself smiling, “roll over, my ridiculously cheesy ridiculously sweet boyfriend,” he says quietly.

Louis can see Harry’s grin even in the dark as he turns onto his side and Louis scoots up closer behind him. In order for him to be the big spoon he has to move up on the bed but his knees don’t hook behind Harry’s because Harry is so much bigger. Louis doesn’t want to be the small spoon because he’d be paranoid having Harry’s arms wrapped around him through the night, in case he accidentally felt how repulsive Louis’ body is. Harry’s back is flush with Louis’ chest though, and his head is tucked under Louis’ chin. His fingers lace with Louis’ as Louis slips his arm under Harry’s and wraps it around his middle. Louis tangles their ankles together and buries his face in Harry’s curls. Harry gives a contented hum and pulls Louis a little closer. Harry raises their joined hands to press a kiss to Louis’ palm and Louis kisses the shell of Harry’s ear.

“Sweet dreams baby,” Harry says so softly.

“Sweet dreams,” Louis replies.

Louis doesn’t think he’s ever felt more safe, or warm, or at home. He doesn’t want the feeling to end.

Chapter End Notes
thank you so much to everyone reading and thank you for all the lovely comments and kudos!!
They're together over a month before Harry finally asks Louis why he'll never let Harry reciprocate any of the handjobs or blowjobs Louis' given him. Louis thinks the question would have come up a lot sooner if it weren't for Harry’s complete unwillingness to ever doing anything to make Louis uncomfortable. The last month has been amazing, it still unnerves Louis how easily their lives have intertwined. They sleep together most nights now. Harry has had to stay after class to do a series of labs for his chemistry course but he comes over after dinner and spends the night. Liam and Zayn are extremely enthused about it, because Harry makes amazing breakfasts in the morning and they're just about as attached to him as Louis has become. Louis doesn't really enjoy forcing the greasy food down his throat every morning but it’s worth it to see Harry with sleep rumpled curls, foggy green eyes and that deliciously gruff morning voice. Luckily he gets to slip into the bathroom to purge and get ready before they head out to school together.

Louis thinks maybe it's weird that he did a load of his boyfriends laundry this evening when he got home from school, but Harry usually just leaves his clothes from the night before behind and then they get crinkled. Louis knows Harry has to go all the way to the laundromat to do his washing and he also remembers the time Harry ran his wallet through the wash in the pocket of his jeans and ruined his parking pass. It was definitely worth being a little domestic for the way Harry's eyes lit up when Louis handed him the clean pile of clothes when he came over after dinner.

To look at Harry Louis has to go a little cross-eyed because their faces are so close together, but Harry is even more beautiful up close. Louis’ cheek rests on Harry's bicep, his arms are wound around Harry's waist. The hand of Harry's that isn't under Louis’ head is carding through Louis' hair. Harry’s cheeks are still flushed from the blowjob Louis just gave him and Louis can't help but reach up and brush his thumb across the spot where his dimple hides.

"Lou?" Harry almost whispers in the moonlight.

"Mhm?" Louis hums.

"If I ask you a question will you tell me the truth even if it isn't something you want me to know, if you think the answer isn't what I want to hear?" Harry asks quietly.

Louis' heart picks up its pace because of the way Harry's eyebrows are a little furrowed and his deep voice is serious. He reaches up and gently pushes his fingers through Louis’ fringe, before leaning forward and pressing a kiss to his forehead. The thing is, Louis really will try to answer honestly if he can, he really hates lying to Harry.

"Yeah. Is everything okay love?" he asks quietly, trying to sound calm despite how nervous he is.

"Yeah, of course. Just- you know I care about you right?"
"Harry just spit it out," Louis says, because he really can't handle the suspense.

"Louis do you cut yourself?" Harry blurts in a rush and Louis vaguely notes that it may be the quickest Harry has ever said something.

"What?" he scoffs, instantly sitting straight up in bed, "No! Why would you even ask me that?"

Harry sits up too, looking painfully sheepish, "I'm sorry please don't get mad. I just- if you do you can tell me, please tell me that you know that I'd never judge you."

Louis shakes his head, he's completely caught off guard, "yeah- yeah Harry I- okay I know you wouldn't judge me- but no. No I don't cut myself," Louis stammers, "why on earth would you think that?"

Harry reaches out and takes one of Louis' hands, looking down at it instead of meeting Louis' eyes, "you remind me a lot of my sister," he says so softly Louis doesn't almost hear, "just- she used to be like you. Any time someone would compliment her it was just so clear she didn't believe it, and like, she was so self depreciating."

Louis shakes his head though, "I don't understand," Louis says quietly, "what does that have to do with self harm?"

"She used to cut herself Lou. I thought maybe that was why you never like- never let me see or touch your legs or your hips or your stomach. Her wrists were always clear but like- she didn't wear shorts for two summers in a row and I never even thought about it, but then I found out she had been like, slashing herself on her legs and her hips because she didn't want anyone to see. And like- she used to be loud and outgoing just like you were in college and then one day she just wasn't anymore and I didn't know but that was when she had started cutting herself. I just- I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if you were doing something like that and I missed the signs with you too."

Louis can see the emotion in Harry's eyes, hear it in his voice, "you never told me that before," he says softly, any anger he had at the question dissipating.

"She's better now so I never thought to bring it up but I was just- I'm sorry I feel stupid now for asking it's just been eating me up for weeks," Harry lowers his eyes back to their joined hands.

Louis frees one of his hands and uses it to raise Harry's chin, "I dont- I don't cut myself okay? I swear. I-m just," he fumbles, he doesn't know how to explain it to Harry, "I'm just not comfortable."

"With me?" Harry mumbles softly, his big eyes wide with sadness.

"No Hazza, it's not you. I'm not comfortable- with like- with my body. I'm just shy. I just. I'm sorry I know its weird, I'm just not comfortable-"

"No Lou, you don't have to apologize. There is no rush at all, please don't think that. I was just worried about that. I'm sorry I just had to ask, because I never asked with her and I should have noticed sooner and I couldn't make that mistake again," Harry says quietly, "please don't be mad at me Lou- I just care about you."

"Shh Harry. I'm not mad, I promise. It- it means a lot to me that you cared enough to ask okay?"

Louis says truthfully, because his heart is aching a little at how much Harry cares for Gemma and maybe a little for Louis too.

"Okay," he mumbles and Louis leans forward to give him a kiss so he knows Louis really isn't mad.
"C'mere," Louis says gently, laying back and pulling Harry back down beside him.

They lay face to face again and Louis links their hands between them, his disappearing in Harry's. Harry leans forward and presses his lips to each one of Louis' knuckles.

"Baby what do you mean you're not comfortable with your body?" Harry asks after a little while, his eyes searching Louis'.

Louis can't meet his gaze as his throat starts to itch, "it's a little hard to be comfortable when I'll be comparing my body to someone who looks like he's been chiselled by the gods," Louis tries for humour, poking Harry's rock hard abs playfully.

Harry doesn't buy it though, "babe please tell me you don't think I'm shallow like that," he says quietly.

"No Harry," Louis soothes, smoothing his hand down Harry's side instead, "it's just me, okay. I just-I'm not as comfortable being naked as you are."

“Do you trust me?” Harry asks softly.

Louis hesitates, because yeah he does trust Harry as much as he can trust someone who isn’t Zayn or Liam but like, that doesn’t mean he’s ready to get his kit off yet. The thought of Harry seeing the way Louis’ skin is taut over the fat on his hips, or seeing the bulbous pouch that is his belly, is enough to make Louis’ throat burn. He does trust Harry not to do anything that would make him uncomfortable though.

“Yeah,” Louis says quietly, a little surprised at how true the answer is.

“Let me take care of you then, Lou. I promise I wont look or anything. Just trust me yeah? I promise I wont make you uncomfortable. Let me make you feel good?” he murmurs quietly, his lips brushing softly against Louis’ neck.

“Harry,” Louis says, but he cant help but tilt his head back, letting Harry move up his neck to his jaw.

“I want to make you feel as good as you always make me feel Lou,” Harry breathes, teeth grazing softly at Louis’ pulse point.

Louis can’t help the noise that rumbles in his throat, it's been so long since anyone has touched him that way. Harry’s hand is so gentle where his arm is curled around Louis, his fingertips massaging the back of Louis’ head, the way he know Louis loves.

“Trust me please,” Harry asks and it's the tiny hint of pleading in his voice that makes the decision for Louis, the fact that Harry so genuinely wants to make Louis feel good.

“Okay,” Louis mumbles, "okay I do."

Harry seems to breathe a sigh of relief, his breath warm and minty against Louis’ cheek. His one hand doesn’t leave Louis’ hair, cradling Louis’ head where it was resting on his bicep before. He shifts himself so he’s on his side leaning over Louis. Louis thinks maybe he should feel intimidated the way he used to when Hunter loomed over him like this, but it's Harry so of course he doesn’t.

Louis’ skin prickles a little with anticipation because he really doesn’t know what Harry is going to do, but he feels no urge to stop him because Harry knows Louis isn’t okay with being touched in certain places and he knows Harry would never make him uncomfortable. Harry’s lips feel so good
where they gently brush at his neck, so light and soft. His huge hand is just as light and soft when he reaches down to let it graze Louis’ bulge through his thick fleece pyjama pants.

His touch is tentative until Louis lets out a whispered sound that isn’t much of anything, but it’s all Louis can manage. Harry’s hand gets more sure as Louis body responds, his dick slowly filling up under Harry’s palm. Louis has never been one to make a lot of noise, his arousal is only noticeable through the uneven pace of his breaths. His breathing comes to a full stop for a second when Harry’s touch on his cock syncs up with his teeth dragging lightly along Louis’ collarbone.

“Okay?” Harry asks, voice as gentle as he look in Louis’ eyes.

“Mhm, yeah,” Louis breathes.

It’s so strange to Louis that Harry’s eyes are locked on him. Harry’s green only leaving Louis’ blue for a second to flit around the features of his face before locking on Louis’ again. At first Louis thinks Harry is just trying to show Louis he's not looking at anything Louis doesn't want him to, but then he realizes Harry is watching his face change as he gets more and more turned on and the realization makes his cheeks flush even more. Harry’s gaze is so tender though, and his hand feels so good that Louis has to bite down on his lip to keep himself from rutting up against Harry’s palm.

"Can I?" Harry asks softly, fingers just barely brushing the tie of Louis’ pyjama pants.

Louis falters a little but he forces himself to give a jerky nod, "okay," he mumbles.

Harry slips his fingers under the waistband of Louis' boxer briefs as well as the pyjamas and carefully pulls them down only enough to free Louis' cock. He keeps his eyes locked on Louis' the whole time though, because Harry knows Louis isn’t ready for his eyes on his body yet. It means so much to Louis but he still can’t stop himself from reaching to tug his sweatshirt down, making sure none of his stomach is exposed. There is no judgement in Harry's eyes at the movement though.

He leans in to kiss Louis at the same time his hand wraps around Louis’ dick and Louis gasps a little in Harry's mouth. Harry's hand is dry but he works Louis’ cock gently until Louis is leaking precum. He thumbs lightly at the head and spreads the cum so when he starts to pump again the movement is smooth and Louis keens under his touch. Harry swallows the sound Louis makes, his tongue soft in Louis' mouth as he works Louis up.

Louis has analyzed Harry's hands so much that he knows every vein and every callous, that freckle on the pinky of his right hand, the little scar from when he burned himself at the bakery. He knows Harry's hands back and front and he's thought about them wrapped around his cock every time he's gotten himself off this week. He couldn't have imagined this though, the way Harry twists a little at just the right moment, the way his thumb presses at the vein on the underside with each upstroke.

Louis has never been one to make much noise but he can't hold in his soft moans when Harry sucks gently at his neck. Louis knows he's close, it’s been a long time and it's Harry and there is something in Harry's eyes that Louis doesn't quite understand but it all feels so good. It feels so good to have someone concerned about making it good for him, giving instead of just taking. There is a tenderness in Harry's eyes that Louis still hasn't gotten used to outside of the bedroom, but that look right now, with Louis so close to the edge, has Louis knotting his fingers in Harry's curls and connecting their lips in a crash. Louis pants into Harry's mouth and Harry must know Louis is close because he picks up the rhythm and kisses Louis deeper.

Then suddenly Harry's lips are off of Louis' and Louis lets out a gasp when Harry’s mouth wraps around the head of his cock. Louis presses his eyes shut because it’s just too much in the best way possible as Harry swallows him up, those plush lips sinking down. Harry only bobs his head a few
times before Louis is cumming hard down his throat and he sucks steadily, letting Louis ride out his orgasm. After, when Louis is still laying with his eyes pressed shut and panting, Harry pulls Louis' pyjama pants back up and brings the blanket up around them.

"Harry," Louis breathes as the lights pop behind his eyelids, "Harry."

"Here babe," Harry replies and his arms come out to pull Louis close.

Louis buries into Harry's chest as his arms wrap around Louis' shoulders and his hand comes up to stroke through Louis' hair. They lay like that for a while, the moonlight shining in through the window and casting shadows across Harry's pale chest. Louis feels languid and safe. It's a foreign feeling for him but the ache in his bones has subsided for a moment and the lightness in his head is from the orgasm Harry just gave him instead of hunger, and it's amazing.

"So good," is all Louis manages as his breathing slowly steadies.

Harry presses a kiss to Louis' hair, "I really like the sounds you make," he says quietly.

Louis feels his cheeks heat and Harry laughs when Louis groans and nuzzles into his neck in embarrassment. Eventually Harry turns over so Louis can wrap his arms around him from behind. Louis is sleepy and fucked out and Harry's curls smell amazing against his nose. Louis always lets Harry fall asleep first; the soft snores that he makes always lull Louis to sleep. Tonight though, Harry's breath doesn't even out and Louis realizes something is keeping him awake. For a minute Louis panics, thinking maybe his shirt rode up and Harry saw him or something, but then he realizes it must be the Gemma thing. He doesn't know if its something Harry is going to want to talk about or not, but Louis just wants to make sure Harry knows he cares.

"Harry," Louis says, giving him a soft kiss behind his ear, "I'm sorry about Gem."

Harry sighs softly but pulls Louis' arms a little tighter around him, "it's okay, she's good now," he says, but Louis gets the feeling that maybe Harry needs to say more about it.

"What happened?" Louis asks gently, pulling on Harry shoulder a little so he rolls over and they’re face to face.

"She was um- she was raped by her boyfriend. She never told anyone and she blamed herself for it," Harry says and his eyes flash with an anger Louis has never seen before, but he knows it’s not directed at him, "he was drunk and she didn't want to- didn't want to have sex that night and he-yeah. I would have killed him Louis, I swear, but he moved away for uni before I even found out."

Louis bites his lip and slides his hand through Harry's curls because he knows it's soothing for the younger boy, "poor Gemma," Louis breathes shakily, feeling his stomach churn at the thought of it.

"Yeah. She broke up with him right away but she- she didn't think anyone would consider it rape because they were dating. So she just took it on herself. And I never noticed Louis. I noticed she was quieter but she said she was just growing up, mellowing out. I'm such an idiot. Two fucking summers she didn't wear shorts and I didn't even think it odd. I don't even know if I ever would have found out if I hadn't come home early from school one day. Neither of us thought anyone would be home so she hadn't locked the bathroom door and I just walked in," Harry's voice shakes then, and Louis realizes he's on the verge of tears, "she was fucking sitting in the bathtub in a pair of shorts and I remember they were light blue and I could see the dried blood on them as if they were the same pair she wore every time she cut herself, like she had some kind of ritual or something. Which I guess she did. And there were these three slashes just above her knees. By her fucking knees, because she had run out of skin on the rest of her thighs. And she was just letting the blood
run out of them, wasn't even trying to stop it."

Tears have slipped out by the time he's finished and Louis reaches out and pulls him close, feeling his heart ache for Harry. Harry lets Louis cradle him, burying his face in Louis' sweatshirt. Louis strokes his hand up and down Harry's back pressing a kiss to his hair.

"It isn't your fault you didn't realize sooner Harry, you can't beat yourself up for that," Louis says softly.

"No Louis, I should have known something was wrong when she got distant. We were always so close," he mumbles and shakes his head, "she begged me not to tell Mum but I was only thirteen, I didn't know what to do. I had to tell. She got sent away to rehab because she wasn't eighteen yet and I thought for sure she was going to hate me."

"But she didn't," Louis says softly, keeping his hand moving on Harry's back.

"No she didn't. She thanked me for getting her help, after when she got to come home. But I could have done it sooner Louis. If I had just opened my fucking eyes," he groans, his hands fisting in Louis' sweatshirt.

"Is that why you call her every day?" Louis asks.

Harry sniffles and nods, "I hope if she ever gets sad again I'll be able to tell from her voice. It's hard when she's so far away."

Louis has witnessed the daily calls Harry has with Gemma because he calls her every day at five. He can tell just by the way they talk how close they are. He tells her every detail of his day and then he's quiet while he listens to hers. It's usually just a quick little chat so Louis never really realized the importance of it before now, he always just thought it was sweet. He also couldn't help but love the way Harry would say 'Oh Lou and I just went for a walk, it was really nice, yeah he's great,' or 'I have an exam coming up so Lou is helping me cram for it, yeah he's great, everything is amazing.' It was nice to know Harry had obviously talked freely about Louis before, that Louis was important enough to be discussed with his sister.

"You're an amazing brother Harry," Louis tells him, "you did the right thing, you told so she could get help. It isn't your fault you didn't notice sooner, you got her help and that's all that matters."

"You're the first person I've ever told about that," Harry says quietly, after a bit of silence, "when my friends asked where my sister went I told them she was on vacation. I've never told anyone how shit I feel for not noticing sooner."

Louis presses a soft kiss to the tip of Harry's nose and he's rewarded with Harry's small slightly watery smile, "thanks for telling me love. And thank you for checking on me. And for being patient with me," he says softly, and he means every word.

"You're beautiful," Harry says, as if that's a normal response to what Louis just said.

Louis thinks maybe it’s a test, to see if he reacts the way Gemma used to, but he's been getting used to those words from Harry anyway. Maybe he used to react like Gemma but he feels like he manages to keep his blush under control these days, and he doesn't automatically drop his gaze down from Harry's anymore. It's strange that it doesn't feel like a blatant lie anymore. Louis maybe even believes that for some reason Harry isn't completely repulsed by him at least. Beautiful is way too generous of a word, but maybe Harry actually does think Louis is alright looking. It just sucks that maybe his face is slightly redeemable but he knows that won't matter when Harry sees him naked. At least
Louis doesn't automatically get the urge to protest when Harry calls him beautiful anymore.

"Not as beautiful as you," Louis says, nuzzling at Harry's cheek as Harry scoops him in closer, his huge hand cradling the back of Louis' head tenderly.

"You're beautifuller," Harry protests, planting kisses exaggeratedly all over Louis' face.

"Beautifuller is not a word," Louis giggles, melting a little under the onslaught of kisses.

"Most beautiful then," Harry corrects, his lips brushing lightly at Louis' jaw.

"Agree to disagree. Are you going to be able to sleep now sweetheart?" Louis asks gently, "if not I can make you some warm milk with cinnamon and we can talk some more."

Harry hums and presses a kiss to Louis' cheek, "no I feel better now, I'll be able to sleep. Thanks baby, and thanks for letting me tell you about Gems."

“You can tell me anything Hazza,” Louis replies.

“I know,” Harry smiles softly.

Harry gives Louis a long, sweet kiss before rolling over and wiggling backwards so he's flush with Louis' chest. It's their usual sleeping position now, their bodies curling around each other. Harry laces his fingers with Louis' and pulls Louis' arm tighter around him before sighing contentedly. Louis nuzzles into the familiar curls, wondering how he's gotten lucky enough to have a month with this boy and also wondering how much longer it is going to last.

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They've been together three months when Harry tells Louis he loves him. Louis has never had a boyfriend like Harry who is so proud to hold his hand in the open or kiss him in public so he never really had to form an opinion on public displays of affection. Now that he’s with Harry though, he knows he loves it. He loves the way Harry always has a protective arm around his shoulders, or how their fingers stay laced together, or how Harry will steal a kiss every now and then, just because, and not even care who is watching. It makes him feel wanted and that is something he hasn’t felt in a really long time.

The people at their university don’t care, they’re not the only gay couple there and Louis thinks maybe their generation really is becoming more tolerant. Louis gets so comfortable with Harry, he finds it so easy to stand on his tiptoes and give Harry a kiss, he fits so easily against Harry’s side when they're walking through the halls. Louis gets so comfortable that he forgets maybe the real world isn’t as tolerant as the people their age at their university are.

He forgets until the word ‘faggots’ is being spat at them in the hardware store one day. They came for a wrench because the taps at the flat have been leaking and Harry is going to fix them. He says he’s handy with tools because it used to be his job to fix things around the house for his Mum, before she met his stepdad when they couldn’t afford repairmen for their dilapidated house in Cheshire. Louis had known money wasn’t abundant for Harry but he hadn’t really known the full extent.

Harry had told him that money was really tight for a while when it was just him, Gemma and his Mum. His first growth spurt hit right at the time when money was the tightest and even though he promised his Mum he was okay with wearing pants a little too short she had insisted on getting him the new trousers or shoes he needed. He always felt so guilty because he thought Gemma should have something new, or his Mum, and he knew they couldn’t afford it. He had wished to stop growing.
Harry explained that his step dad is a really good guy and he takes care of them all now, but that guilt still lingers. Harry is at school on a full scholarship but his stepdad helps with the extra expenses. It means a lot to Harry, because he can focus on school instead of having a part time job, but the money consciousness has never left him and he’s still very careful of his spending because he’s more concerned about his Mum and Gemma having what they need.

They had ended up talking about how Louis was at school on a scholarship too, but Harry had asked how Louis afforded his share of the rent and groceries and other things. Louis had explained about the trust fund his grandfather had left him. Liam and Zayn have great relationships with their parents, who happily pay their share of the rent and expenses so the boys don’t have to try and do work and school at the same time. Louis has to be very careful with his spending though, because the inheritance is literally all he has until he can start making his own money after he’s done school.

When Louis is explaining this to Harry he leaves out the fact that his Grandpa passed away before Louis came out as gay, because Louis would have been instantly cut from the will if his Grandpa had known. The conversation had drifted uncomfortably close to his family after that, but Harry hadn’t even blinked when Louis quickly changed the subject. Harry is very good about letting things go when he can tell Louis doesn’t want to talk about them, and Louis is thankful for that.

Louis has done his absolute best to be honest with Harry, because Harry is just so completely bafflingly honest with Louis about anything and everything. There are some things he can’t be honest about of course, like when the last time he ate was or what he was doing in the bathroom, but Louis feels so bad for lying about those things that he makes sure to be honest about everything else. He just sometimes leaves out the negative parts when he’s telling Harry things.

They’re walking down the window decoration isle in Home Depot and Harry is making Louis laugh talking about how atrocious the curtain patterns are. It’s a typical Sunday for them, they don’t really do anything overly exciting, but they do almost everything together these days. Harry’s arm is around Louis’ shoulders and Louis has his hand in Harry’s back pocket. Harry is making extravagant hand gestures and exaggerated faces as he holds up different curtain fabrics and Louis is burying his face in the knit of Harry’s jumper to stifle his giggles, but that doesn’t stop either of them from hearing the “faggots” hissed at them from behind.

Louis’ head jerks up instantly and he watches the smile drop off of Harry’s face. The word feels like ice in Louis’ veins, like a knife in his ear, but he tries to keep his face expressionless. They both look over their shoulders at the man walking away down the isle as if he’s said nothing at all. He’s wearing a plain black jacket and some jeans, probably in his mid thirties, average height and build. He’s half way down the isle now, and if he wasn’t the only other person around it wouldn’t even be clear that he was the one who said it. Except then he looks over his shoulder and his hate is visible in both the scowl on his face and the glare in his eyes.

Apparently that does it for Harry because suddenly he isn’t at Louis side anymore; he’s storming down the isle after the man who’s continuing around the corner as if he didn’t just spit a derogatory term at them. Louis’ heart jumps into his throat and he lunges forward and snags Harry’s arm before he gets too far. Harry doesn’t even notice until Louis digs in his heels and uses all the strength he has to pull on Harry’s arm. It doesn’t pull Harry back but Harry at least halts when he notices the somewhat feeble tugging. Harry turns around and sees Louis clinging to him. He looks confused and frowns, like he doesn’t understand why Louis has stopped him.

“Please don’t Harry,” Louis says, “it isn’t worth it.”

Harry’s frown deepens, “Louis people like that-“

“People like that are assholes and nothing you say or do is going to change that. Please just--
Louis: "don’t. Let’s just get the wrench and go,” Louis pleads.

Harry: "Harry’s eyes search Louis’ face for a second before he sighs and he stops frowning, “okay love,” he says, tipping down his chin to give Louis a soft kiss, “alright.”

Louis: "Louis returns the kiss but now he’s fighting the urge to look over his shoulder to make sure nobody is watching and he hates that. When Harry reaches for his hand Louis shoves his hands in his pockets, and after that he cant quite look Harry in the eye. Harry lets out a soft sigh but he doesn’t comment and Louis is thankful. Louis doesn’t see the confusion or the hurt flash across Harry’s face because his eyes are locked on his shoes.

They don’t say anything as Harry selects the wrench, they don’t say anything as they go through the checkout, they don’t say anything as they walk to Harry’s truck, and they don’t say anything as they drive home. Harry doesn’t try to reach for Louis’ hand as he drives like he normally would, and Louis doesn’t mess around with the radio dials like he normally would. The word is crawling around in Louis’ head, like a parasite, awakening thoughts and feelings that he has fought long and hard to shove down.

They get back to the flat and Liam, Zayn and Niall call 'hi's' from where they're spread across the living room playing video games. Niall has fit seamlessly into the group so he's over a lot. Louis makes sure to always sit by him at dinner because he'll take half the food off Louis' plate without question if it’s offered. Harry says hi back and they don't notice that his voice is off but Louis does. Louis mumbles a hi and sets the wrench in the kitchen before grabbing Harry's hand and leading him to the bedroom. He hears a catcall from Niall but he ignores it and shuts the door behind them when they're in the room. Harry doesn't say anything, he just goes and sits on the edge of Louis’ bed.

Louis: "Louis goes over and crawls across the bed so he's behind Harry. Harry doesn't move, keeping his back is to Louis. Louis doesn't really know what to do or say but he knows he's hurt Harry. He knows it probably wasn't the first time Harry's been called a faggot either but of course Harry didn't take it out on Louis, he was ready to run off and defend them. He feels that familiar guilt in his stomach, the guilt that Harry gives him so much, opens up to Louis so much and Louis doesn't in return. Louis can't. It's so hard for him, because he feels weak every minute of the day but Harry never looks at him like he's anything less than perfect and he really doesn't want that to change when Harry realizes how fucked up he really is.

He can't do this to Harry though, he can't have that dejected slope of Harry's shoulders be caused by him. Louis scoots forward on his knees until he's right behind Harry and then he slips his legs out, so they rest alongside Harry's with Harry sat between his thighs. He slips his arms around Harry's waist and presses as close as he can until there isn't an inch of space between them. He feels small and insignificant behind Harry like this, because he can't just scoot up on the bed to make himself higher like he can when they're laying down. Sitting back to front like this Louis hardly comes up to Harry's shoulders and the way the younger boy is slouched Louis wouldn't even be able to see over his shoulder if he tried.

Louis still doesn't feel close enough to Harry, and he can't stand the fact that Harry hasn't melted into his touch the way he usually does. He slips his hands up under the hem of Harry's jumper, spreading his fingers across the smooth warmth of Harry's stomach. The muscles of Harry's abs jump a little and Louis knows it's because his hands are cold but Harry doesn't protest. Louis rests his cheek against Harry's back and tries to find a way to explain without opening the whole can of worms that is his past.

"I'm sorry Harry," he says softly, holding him a little tighter, "I'm not used to what we have. I haven't been in a relationship like this before, where I had to worry about affection in public and stuff. But I
do want that with you, I love that with you. I love how you don't mind people knowing we're together, I love it when you hold me close or kiss me in public or whatever, and nothing is going to change that. I don't care about what some asshole said. I wouldn't care if every time we went out we had to deal with that shit. It isn't that, it's just like-

"Louis it's okay you don't have to explain," Harry sighs.

It's typical Harry, never wanting to make Louis uncomfortable, but it only shows Louis how much Harry deserves for him to open up for once. Harry's arms come up to overlap Louis' arms and when Harry laces his fingers around Louis' it solidifies it for Louis that he has to let Harry in. He knows he's just handing Harry pieces of him to take when he leaves at this point, but he tells himself it's worth it because he can't stand hearing Harry sigh. He thinks it's better that he’s hiding behind Harry’s back, maybe it will be easier to talk about this stuff without having to look at Harry.

"When I came out my friend- we’d been friends forever because he was my neighbour- erm Stan. When I came out he jumped me when I was walking home from work one night. He erm- beat the absolute shit out of me to be blunt. So yeah- I like got myself home and I guess I passed out because the next time I woke up I had missed school the next day and Liam and Zayn were standing in my bedroom freaking out. They er, took me to the hospital and I had a concussion and a couple broken ribs and I had to get stitches under my chin.

You wouldn’t know about that because I didn’t come to school until my face was healed. But because I couldn’t go to practice for over a week Stan got the majority of the football team to sign a petition to get me demoted from team Captain. They told coach it was because I didn’t show up but it was really because I was gay; a few of them were kind enough to tell me they didn’t want me checking out their junk in the change room. So I quit the team. Liam wanted to quit too but I didn’t let him. Liam also wanted to kill Stan and I begged him not to do anything but he caught up with Stan one day and put him in the hospital with a concussion. I wasn’t there but apparently Zayn had to drag Liam off, I don’t know.

After that Stan and the team left me alone for the most part and I still had my friends who didn’t care that I was gay and basically everyone except those guys treated me the same, but I never dated anyone that year because I knew it would just stir up all the shit again. Then when I came to uni my relationships weren’t out in the open like ours is and I’ve never really been with someone who wanted to hold my hand or give me kisses or any of that in public.

So like- it’s just been a long time since anyone called me a faggot I guess, not since college really, and it just caught me off guard I think. But I shouldn’t have reacted stupidly like that and I hope you still want to hold my hand and give me kisses because I love that. I’m sorry for being a twat. I don’t want you to say anything back or say anything about the Stan thing because it's in the past and I don’t want to talk about it, I erm- I just felt like you deserved to know why I kind of froze up. But I promise I’m not going to react like that again and I still want to hold your hand if you’ll let me and I’ll still take your kisses if you want to give them to me and yeah. I’m sorry Harry.”

A silence hangs in the air after Louis finishes his speech but it isn’t uncomfortable. Harry hasn’t let go of his hand or unwrapped his arms from where they overlap with Louis’ around his waist. Louis can feel Harry’s steady breaths with the rise and fall of his hands on Harry’s stomach under his jumper and he’s okay to just sit for a moment in the silence. He hasn’t talked about the shit from college in ages. The closest he’s come to the topic was when Harry gave his speech about his coming out and even then he hated thinking back to that time.

This feels different now though. Like the exhalation of a breath he’s been holding in way too long. Saying it out loud to someone after he’s buried the memory so deep for so long is oddly freeing. He
slowly realizes that the slur being tossed at him by an ignorant stranger hurts a lot less than when it was hurled at him by people who he thought were his friends, or when it was muttered about him in his own home where he was supposed to have family that loved him. He can handle strangers being assholes, it's worth it to be with Harry.

"Lou," Harry breathes, moving to turn around in Louis' arms.

Louis knows that tone of voice though and he just tightens his grip so Harry can't turn around, he doesn't want Harry's sympathy, just his forgiveness.

"No Haz please just- I don't want to talk about the Stan thing anymore if- if thats okay- please. Just-do you think you can forgive me for being an idiot?" Louis asks quietly.

"Sweetheart I was never mad at you," Harry says, "I thought you were going to tell me we couldn't hold hands in public anymore or something- and I just- I'd hate that because if I'm honest when we're not together it feels like I can't fully think straight and I think I'd go mad if I wasn't able to reach out and touch you once I get you in my sights," he gives a little laugh but his voice is soft.

Louis buries his smile into Harry's shoulder and shakes his head, "nah babe, I don't want to change a thing about what we do okay?"

"Okay," Harry says and Louis can hear the grin in his voice, "am I allowed to turn around and cuddle you now?"

Louis laughs and loosens his grip, scooting back on the bed to lay on his side. Harry's smile is soft when he turns around and lays down next to Louis so they're facing each other. Harry scoots closer and hooks their ankles together before reaching out and wrapping his arms around Louis' shoulders to pull him close. Louis happily buries his face in Harry's chest and winds his arms around Harry's waist. He spreads his hands under Harry's jumper, across the warm smooth skin, and lets Harry's heat leech into him. He feels Harry press a kiss to his hair.

"So warm," Louis mumbles, because Harry's like his own personal heater, always chasing the chill out of his aching bones.

"I know thats the only reason you keep me around Louis Tomlinson, because you're perpetually freezing and I'm so warm and toasty," Harry says, pretending to sound hurt.

Louis just wiggles closer, slipping his knee between Harry's thighs and tipping up his chin to press a kiss to Harry's pulse point. Harry's long fingers stroke through Louis' hair absentmindedly and it feels so good and so familiar.

"That is one of the millions of reasons I assure you," Louis whispers.

They don't say anything for a while but that isn't unusual for them. It is still strange to Louis how he feels like he learns just as much about Harry in their silences as he does when they're talking. He knows his time with Harry must almost be up by now, it's been three months after all, surely Harry will tire of him soon. He knows he can't possibly be lucky enough to have Harry much longer, so he uses these silences to commit Harry to memory. He memorizes the slow relaxed way that Harry breathes, the steady expansion of his ribs beneath his muscles. He memorizes the way Harry's fingers feel trailing across his shoulder and how they feel slipping through his hair. He memorizes the lines of Harry’s body and the sounds that Harry makes. But even more than that he tries to memorize the way Harry makes him feel. So that maybe when Harry leaves he can cling to the memories, as pathetic as that sounds, to get him through until he can build his walls back up.
Harry makes him feel weightless. Weightlessness is something Louis has been striving for the past three years. He wants to take up as little space as physically possible, he wants to be able to slip through the cracks in the floorboards so nobody has to waste any time on him, so nobody has to pay him any mind. He wants to be as small and inconsequential on the outside as he feels on the inside. He wants to be weightless so he can float away from the pain. Except everything just weighs down on his shoulders no matter how hard he tries to make himself lighter. The things that hurt him and weigh him down hang off of him just like the fat on his hips and the bulge of his belly.

Harry makes Louis feel weightless because when he's in Harry's arms, when Harry's lips are pressed to his, when Harry's smile is on him, everything else falls away for a while. The weight that is constantly dragging him down is lifted for a while and he lets himself float away with Harry. He wants to remember what that feeling is like, because he knows the pain that Harry leaves behind when he goes will be added to the weight, pressing him down into the cement like an insect that needs to be crushed beneath someone’s shoe. Maybe if he can remember the feeling of floating with Harry he won't have to regret it later, when Harry lets him drop.

"You know the story about what that piece of shit Stan did to you is the very first thing you've ever opened up to me about since I've met you," Harry says softly, his lips brushing against Louis' hair as he speaks.

Louis gives a soft sigh and nods, "I know," he says, "and I'm sorry for that, sorry that it takes me so long. You're nothing but open with me and I'm shit at opening up. I don't want to shut you out it's just- I don't know, I'm sorry."

Harry shakes his head quickly, "no Louis. Please don't say sorry. Seriously. I know how hard it is for you, so it means so much to me that you told me that," he pauses and presses a soft kiss to Louis' temple, "Love, I will wait as long as it takes, for whatever you're willing to give me."

Louis feels a lump of emotion lodge in his throat and he has to swallow past it over and over before it finally goes away. He'll never get used to the earnestness in Harry's voice, the sincerity. It almost makes it possible for Louis to believe Harry.

"Why are you so good to me?" Louis voices the question he asks in his head a million times a day.

Harry gives a little shrug and nuzzles softly at Louis' fringe, "because I love you, Louis," he says easily.

Louis' breath catches in his throat and his eyes widen even with his face pressed into Harry's neck. His heart starts rabbiting in his chest and his mouth feels like it's full of cotton. Harry has never said that to him before and Louis has no clue how to react. He isn't an idiot, he knows Harry is wrong. Maybe he thinks he loves Louis, but that isn't actually even possible. Louis is the farthest thing from loveable. He doesn't have a single feature worthy of love, especially not Harry's. He's accepted that a long time ago. He tells himself he doesn't believe in love at all, but really he just doesn't believe in love for himself.

How could someone love someone like him. How could someone like Harry love someone like him. He couldn't, it isn't possible. Harry just thinks he does because he has this romanticized image of Louis he's formed for himself, but none of it is real. Harry doesn't even know Louis. Harry doesn't know the demons that sit on Louis' shoulders and stoke the fire of self hate in his gut. Harry doesn't know the mess that is Louis' past, the fact that Louis' own family couldn't even love him. Harry doesn't know that under the baggy sweaters and loose pants Louis is fat and repulsive. Harry doesn't know that on the inside Louis is just as pathetic as he is on the outside.

No, Harry does not, can not, love Louis. Poor Harry, with his desire to find a love story in
everything he sees and everywhere he goes, always seeing the best of people, the fairytale behind
everything. He's looking at Louis with his distorted view of love and he's mistaking Louis for
something desirable. Louis knows he should pull away from Harry, try his best to explain to the poor
boy that he can't truly love Louis, that he is confused and eventually he'll realize Louis is not worth
his love. Louis knows he should, but he's still frozen because nobody besides Liam or Zayn has told
him they loved him in so long, and the worst part is that it sounds so good coming out of Harry's
mouth, it sounds so sincere.

"Don't panic," Harry says gently a tiny bit of a smile in his voice, "I know you don't believe in
romance or love stories or any of that, and that's okay. You never have to say anything back at all,
but I'm still going to tell you because you deserve to know you're loved."

Louis manages something like a small squeak to at least let Harry know he heard, but it's taking all
his restraint not to tell Harry how wrong he is. Louis knows this isn't going to be anything like when
Harry tells Louis he's beautiful. Even though he still doesn't believe it he's slowly gotten used to
hearing it, he doesn't even flinch anymore when Harry tells him he's beautiful. This isn't the same
though, he'll never get used to Harry saying 'I love you.'

~

They've been together four months when Louis decides he needs to let Harry see him; all of him. He
was right when he thought he'd never get used to hearing Harry say 'I love you'. No matter how
many times the words roll so easily past those cherry lips they still hit Louis like a freight train every
time. He finally snaps one day when he almost says those three words back. They're in Harry's dorm
room and one of the windows is cracked open because the rain from spring is letting up and it's
starting to warm up.

Louis is beginning to worry, because he won't be able to get away with wearing loose jumpers for
much longer and t-shirts don't do much to hide arm flab or protruding bellies. Harry gets Louis off
just as often as Louis does Harry now, but he still never does anything to make Louis uncomfortable.
He doesn't complain that he's never seen more of Louis' body than the gap between his trousers and
his jumper when his pants are pulled down to free his cock. He doesn't complain that he still isn't
allowed to touch Louis' hips or his waist. He's so patient and so sweet and he tells Louis he loves
him all the time, so freely like it's no big deal at all.

They're laying in Harry's bed, Niall is out somewhere, probably with Liam and Zayn at the flat. They
have a movie on in the background but they aren't really paying attention to it. Harry's been fawning
over Louis for a while now, just tracing the lines of Louis' eyebrows with his fingertips, testing out
the angles of his cheekbones with his lips, feeling the texture of Louis' fringe against his palm. Louis'
eyes are closed, because even though Harry often has these moments where he just explores the parts
of Louis he's allowed to touch, Louis still isn't really used to the attention. Louis isn't sure; maybe it's
the softness in the touches, maybe it's the tenderness in Harry's eyes when Louis finally lets his own
eyes open, maybe it's the smile on Harry's lips that Louis knows is reserved just for him. He doesn't
know, maybe it's everything combined, but for a moment he can imagine a world where Harry could
love him, and it isn't very hard at all to imagine that he loves Harry back.

"I love you, Lou," Harry says in that moment, like he's said a million times before.

Except this time Louis' lips part on their own accord and he feels the weight of the words on his
tongue, can hear them bouncing around in his head, can imagine how Harry's face would look if he
finally found the courage to say those three words back. He comes so close, so painfully close to
saying 'I love you too,' before his brain finally catches up with his heart and his body and stops the
words in their tracks. He swallows the words back down and forces his mouth to close and form a
smile, the same smile he gives Harry every time he says the words. Louis thinks maybe Harry knows he was about to say it back, because there is a twinkle in his eye when he presses a kiss to Louis' lips but, of course, Harry is kind enough not to say anything.

Louis decides right there and then that he can't keep this up, it isn't fair to Harry and he isn't strong enough to continue it. He isn't strong enough to let himself actually love Harry, because that is something he knows he won't be able to recover from when Harry falls out of love with him and leaves. He needs to put an end to this right now. He knows he has to let Harry see him naked, he has to show Harry just how flawed he really is, how unlovable he is. He knows it will hurt when Harry takes one look at him and realizes he doesn't love Louis anymore, that he never really loved Louis in the first place, but Louis also knows it will hurt a lot less than if he lets himself fall in love with Harry Styles.
Louis is a little bit off tonight, Harry can tell. He was quiet when Harry came over, he gave a small smile without any crinkles by his eyes, he's been fidgeting with his fringe all night, and when Harry asked if he was alright his voice did that thing where it went a little too high pitched and the words came out a little too quick as he said he was fine. So Harry waits, because he knows Louis, and he knows if he presses Louis will just shy away further. Harry tells Louis he loves him, just so he knows, and as usual Louis just smiles with his lips pursed together. Harry doesn't mind though, because he thinks maybe the pursed lips are to hold back the words that Louis' almost said last week. Lips pressed tight to hold back the 'I love you too.'

Louis has nights like this sometimes, where he's just a little further back in his shell than usual, but Harry just works to coax him out. Harry has known that Louis has a lot of walls from the very beginning, and he’s also known that behind those walls Louis is fragile. It was so obvious in the way Louis sometimes struggled to make eye contact, the way he wilted away from compliments, the way he’d listen to Harry talk for an entire period but then when it came his turn to speak he looked like he was being asked to walk through an active minefield. The very first time Harry saw Louis smile though, really smile, eye crinkles and all, he knew he had to be the cause for that smile again.

Louis is tucked into Harry's side, between him and the back of the couch. His arm wraps around Harry's middle and his little hand has slipped up under Harry's t-shirt, fingertips tracing nonsensical patterns against Harry's skin. Harry's arm is wrapped around Louis' shoulders, his wrist bent so he can card his fingers through the back of Louis' hair. He presses a kiss to Louis' forehead and Louis tips his chin up and gives a soft smile before he presses a kiss to Harry’s lips. Harry steals another kiss before Louis' settles his cheek back down against Harry’s chest.

Harry doesn’t know what’s bugging Louis today but he’s only been at the flat for an hour so he’s hoping Louis will tell him eventually. Harry left Louis' in the morning because he had to drive to Manchester to pick Niall up from the house party he crashed at last night. On the way back Niall insisted they stop for brunch and then it had been afternoon before Harry finally got time to work on his physics homework. It was even later before he had time to eat dinner.

He knows Louis has been alone in the flat all day, because Liam made the trip home to Wolverhampton for the weekend and Zayn slept at Caitlyn’s last night. Harry didn’t want to leave Louis and he asked him to come pick up Niall with him, but Louis had just given him a playful smile and insisted he’d survive without Harry for the afternoon. Harry had asked if he could pick him up and take him out for supper but Louis had already eaten by then and he just told Harry to come over after he'd eaten.

Louis says he likes his alone time, but Harry doesn’t like thinking about Louis sitting alone in the empty flat, letting his mind drift off to that sad place he goes sometimes. There are so many layers to Louis, he is so complex, that Harry doesn’t know if he’ll every truly figure him out, but he’s trying. He can read Louis better now and he knows how to take care of him and make him feel comfortable. He also knows how to make Louis smile and laugh and he'll never forget the day Zayn said thank you. Harry had asked what he was saying thank you for and Zayn's response had been ‘for making him happy.’

It was never hard for Harry to understand why Liam and Zayn are so protective of Louis. Not only because Harry had that same desire to protect since the day he met Louis, but also because it is so
clear that Louis needs it. Needs someone to hold him up sometimes, needs someone to make sure
he’s okay. Liam and Zayn have explained that they think Louis might have an undiagnosed anxiety
disorder, that they think maybe that’s why sometimes he seems far away and why sometimes he
needs to be comforted. They had explained about the anxiety one night when Louis got stressed after
dinner.

The four of them had gone out to eat and after they finished they were just sitting around talking, but
Louis started getting more and more antsy. Finally he had desperately told Liam that he needed to go
home. Harry had been scared he had done something wrong but Louis had held tight to his hand on
the way home and asked him to stay while he had a shower. While he showered Liam and Zayn had
explained that sometimes Louis just gets a little overwhelmed, and even if they don't understand
what's upsetting him they just do whatever they have to do to help him feel okay. They think it's
anxiety but they know it would hurt Louis if they brought it up so they just do their best to make him
feel better. A lot of times he just needs to escape into the shower and he comes out back to normal.
They think the water relaxes him.

Harry doesn’t know much about Louis’ past, because any time anything about back home is brought
up Louis’ eyes go kind of blank and he almost radiates pain. Harry would rather saw off his own left
arm than make Louis uncomfortable or upset, so he never pries, but he figures maybe Louis’ past is
where his anxiety comes from. He hopes one day maybe Louis will tell him, just like he hopes one
day maybe Louis will say ‘I love you’ back, but Harry would never ask for more than Louis is ready
to give. He's just happy to be a part of Louis' present, and if he's lucky, Louis' future. So tonight
Harry will wait, and if Louis wants to tell him why he's feeling off, then he'll do whatever he can to
fix it. If Louis doesn't want to talk about it Harry will just hold him and make sure he knows he's
loved.

"Babe?" Louis says after a while of watching TV.

"Yes love," Harry replies, nosing softly at Louis hair.

"Did you love Jamie and Meeka?" he asks quietly, resolutely avoiding Harry's gaze.

Harry shakes his head, "No. I mean, with Jamie I was too young I was just kind of caught up in
finally being able to express how attracted I was to someone. I didn't really think about love then.
After Jamie I was kind of erm- like hesitant I guess. You know 'once bitten twice shy' and all that. I
definitely wasn't ready to love Meeka because I was scared he'd- y'know- hurt me like Jamie? Which
he did, so I'm glad I didn't like throw myself in head first," he explains, fingers twisting
absentmindedly in Louis' hair.

Louis bites his lip and furrows his eyebrows for a long time before he speaks again, "so I'm-

"The first person I've loved like that?" Harry supplies, "yup."

Louis shakes his head slowly and lets out a sigh, "Harry."

Harry presses a kiss to Louis' temple, "I'm pretty sure you were my first ever crush too, just so you
know. You dancing around on that stage in your Danny Zuko costume gave me some sort of gay
epiphany," he says playfully, because he knows he has to lighten things up before Louis starts over-
thinking.

Louis lets out something between a laugh and a scoff and shakes his head, "sure Harry," he says
sarcastically.

"Not even joking Lou," Harry says earnestly, his lips ghosting across the shell of Louis' ear.
Louis shivers a little and turns to bury his face in Harry's neck. Harry holds him a closer and traces his fingers up and down Louis' back. Louis is quiet for a while, his fingers pulling softly at Harry's sparse arm hair. Harry knows it's a nervous habit, Louis doesn't even notice he's doing it, so Harry just waits because he knows Louis has something on his mind.

"Do you ever just feel- have you ever had a time when you just felt-" Louis lets out a sigh, "have you ever been self conscious?"

Harry nods, "of course Lou. Every day," he says honestly.

"Why?" Louis asks skeptically, but his voice is quiet, "what do you have to feel self conscious about?"

"Louis, I'm literally the most awkward, gawky person alive. My limbs are too long and my nose is too big and I've got dimples that make me look like a jumbo baby," Harry answers, and he's only half joking.

Louis puffs a breath against his skin, "jumbo baby," he chuckles a little, "but you've got that scowl that you do with your eyebrows when you're trying to be serious that counteracts the dimples I think."

"I do not scowl," Harry grumbles playfully.

"I can tell by your voice that you're scowling right now," Louis says and Harry is glad to hear the smile in his voice, "and I like your nose," he adds softly after.

"Thanks love," he says smiling against Louis' hair, "but yeah I do. Last week when I had that pimple on my chin I didn't even want to show you my face," he admits.

Louis pulls away then with his eyebrows knotted, "Harry don't be ridiculous, you know I wouldn't care about some spot."

"Louis your skin is flawless and that thing was huge. Obviously I know you'd never even think anything mean about it, but I still felt self conscious."

Louis gives a small nod and bites on his lip again, "I feel self conscious all the time," he says eventually, and Harry has to strain to hear his voice, "even in my clothes. And I want to be with you- in that way- so bad, but the thought of you seeing me out of my clothes-" he just shakes his head, face burying back into Harry's neck.

Harry hesitates a little, because they haven't talked about Louis' aversion to Harry seeing his body since Harry asked about self harm. Harry hasn't wanted to push anything, so he treads carefully on Louis' boundaries, never ever making Louis uncomfortable. It means a lot to Harry that now Louis doesn't even flinch at all when Harry reaches out for him, because he trusts Harry not to touch him anywhere outside his very limited comfort zone. Louis' hand and Louis' mouth are the best Harry's ever had and he's allowed to take care of Louis now too, so that has been enough. Now though, Harry knows Louis wants more. It just makes his heart ache that the only thing holding Louis back is being uncomfortable in his own skin. Harry tells Louis how beautiful he is a hundred times a day but it hasn't made any difference in how Louis sees himself.

"Louis," Harry sighs, he knows how big this is, that Louis is opening up about something, "baby I-"

"It's just- I've never been thin Harry. Even when I was playing football and working out every day and running constantly I've always had, like, this fucking tummy and I just- I've got all these chubby bits and then there is you with your fucking v-line and your fucking abs," Louis sighs, his breath
warm against Harry's skin as he keeps his face hidden.

Harry is shaking his head before Louis finishes his sentence, "Louis I love every bit of you."

"Harry you haven't seen every bit of me," Louis says, sounding exasperated, "I'm so- I'm so soft."

Louis spits the word like it's the worst possible thing to be and Harry hates it. If Harry could describe Louis in one word it would be 'soft', and that's one of the reasons Harry loves him. He loves Louis' soft eyes and his soft lips. He loves how Louis' voice is soft, and his breathing is soft, and his touches are soft. Louis is all soft oversized sweaters, and soft hair, and soft skin. Harry loves that when his arms are wrapped around Louis and his palm rests above Louis' heart, even the beat is soft. Harry loves that Louis is soft and if his body is soft too he'll love that just as much.

"Good," Harry says, "I like soft. And I like you. Whether you're soft or not. I love you actually, if you didn't know."

Louis pulls back and his eyes meet Harry's. Harry doesn't know what Louis is searching for as his eyes rove Harry's face, he doesn't even know if Louis believes that he loves him. He hopes though, that even if Louis can't say it back yet, he at least knows that Harry means it.

"I don't want you to stop," Louis whispers.

"Stop what?" Harry asks, "Loving you?"

When Louis nods it sends Harry's heart up into his throat, "when you see."

Louis has never really acknowledged that Harry loves him. One time he said thank you but it was so awkward that he never said it again. Other than that Harry gets a tight lipped smile or a blush or a kiss. Harry doesn't mind though, because even if Louis can't say it back, he just needs Louis to know. This is different though. This is Louis saying he knows that Harry loves him, this is Louis saying that he does want to be loved by Harry.

"Sweetheart love doesn't work like that. Love doesn't just stop," Harry says softly.

"It does," Louis groans, and the pain in his voice makes Harry's chest ache, "it just stops all the time."

"Mine won't Louis. I'm not going to stop. Especially not whenever you're comfortable enough to show me every part of you. I'll love every single bit," Harry whispers, hand coming up to cup Louis cheek.

"You don't know that," Louis sighs, not meeting Harry's gaze.

"Hey," Harry murmurs, raising Louis' chin so their eyes meet, "I do know that. You just have to give me a chance to show you."

Louis' eyes are soft and earnest and the look in them breaks Harry's heart. He can see it in Louis' eyes that he is struggling so hard to believe Harry. Harry can't stand knowing how hard it is for Louis to believe that he is loved, to believe that Harry isn't just going to walk away if he doesn't have the perfect body. It's really hard for Harry not to take it personally, that Louis thinks maybe Harry is so shallow that his feelings would change. He knows though, that these concerns that Louis has stem from something a lot deeper, something that maybe Harry doesn't know about yet. That pain in Louis' eyes is real and it's visceral and Harry doesn't understand it, but he hopes one day he will. He hates that something or someone has made Louis feel so insecure, but Harry will do everything in his power to take as much of that pain away as he can.
"Yeah," Louis breathes, leaning into Harry's touch, "yeah I'm going to. Going to give you a chance."

Harry's heart is racing just from the words and then Louis' lips are brushing against his with a hint of desperation. His fingers knot in Harry's hair and he shifts without separating their lips. Harry moves up, his hand still cradling Louis' cheek as Louis' eyes flutter shut, and he deepens the kiss. The breathy little sound Louis' lets out against Harry's lips sends shivers down Harry's spine. Louis' hands drag down the back of Harry's neck as he sits back and Harry sits up with him, not wanting to disconnect their mouths.

"Lou," Harry hums when Louis' teeth graze lightly along his jaw.

"I want- Harry I want to," Louis says, dragging his lips away from Harry's skin for a second, "want to."

"Tonight?" Harry pants as Louis' teeth tease softly down his earlobe.

"Now," he whispers, his breath warm against Harry's cheek.

Louis' hand slips down Harry's chest, across the cotton of the t-shirt over his stomach. His little hand palms Harry's cock through his sweatpants and Harry lets out a huff of breath, his dick twitching under Louis' hand. Louis' hand works over Harry's sweatpants while their lips drag across each other, Harry licking into Louis' mouth. Harry is hard right away, his dick straining up against Louis' hand, his hips chasing the friction.

"Babe," he groans, hand slipping into Louis' hair.

"Harry lets," Louis says, nuzzling at Harry's cheek.

Harry swallows thickly, pulling back to look in Louis' eyes, "are you sure?"

Louis doesn't answer out loud but he backs up off the couch, knots his fingers with Harry's and tugs. Harry pushes himself up off the couch, his dick bobbing between his legs. The sight of Louis in Harry's favourite sweatshirt always does something to him, but right now it's making his cock throb. The sweater was even a little big on Harry before he gave it to Louis, so Louis is literally swimming in it. It almost hits his knees and even with the sleeves rolled over five times they're still slipping down his hands as he pulls Harry down the hall. The black is so faded that it's almost grey and the neck is fraying, but Louis looks absolutely fucking adorable in it.

They get to Louis' room and Harry reaches for the light switch but Louis stops him. Harry sees that familiar hesitance in his eyes as he gives a little shake of his head. Harry just nods because he doesn't expect Louis to be comfortable just stripping down in the brightly lit bedroom. Louis reaches out and slips his hands up under the hem of Harry's t-shirt and stands on his tiptoes for a kiss. Harry tips his chin and joins their lips, his hand slipping up to it's familiar spot cradling the back of Louis' neck.

He wants to reach out and pull the sweatshirt over Louis' head, he wants to lay Louis back across the bed, he wants to touch every inch of Louis, he wants to kiss away every doubt Louis has about himself. He hesitates though, because the boundaries are so engrained in him and he doesn't want to make Louis flinch away. Louis' fingers tug at Harry's t-shirt and they separate as Louis pulls it up over Harry's head, tossing it aside and leaning forward to press kisses against Harry's skin. Harry sighs softly at the feeling of Louis' hands dragging down his sides, Louis' lips brushing across his pecs.

Louis tugs the drawstring of Harry's sweatpants and then pushes them down his hips until they pool at his feet. His hand slips past the waistband of Harry's boxer briefs and wraps around Harry's length,
pumping slowly and drawing a moan from Harry's mouth. When Harry's boxers join his sweats on the floor, and Harry is completely bare, Louis wraps his hands around Harry's biceps and pushes him gently over to the bed. Harry sits on the edge with his dick grazing his stomach. The room is dark but Harry can see Louis in the pale moonlight coming through the sheer grey curtains on the windows.

Harry looks up at Louis but he's barely lower, even sitting on the bed. Louis stands in front of him, hands hidden under the sleeves of the sweater, hair mussed at the back from Harry's fingers. The moonlight is casting shadows from Louis' ridiculously long eyelashes and making him look soft and almost angelic. There is hesitance in Louis eyes and Harry just wants to kiss it away, but he waits because he just wants to go at Louis' pace.

"You're beautiful," Harry tells him.

Louis bites his lip and looks down at his feet, his fringe falling in his eyes. Harry's fingers are itching to reach out, and fix, and love, and hold, but he waits. He'd wait forever for Louis, he thinks. The confidence Louis had when he was pressing his lips to Harry's on the couch is gone now. The heat in his eyes has fogged up with uncertainty and insecurity. His hands start to move and Harry realizes he is pulling his arms out of the sleeves of the sweater so the sleeves hang empty at his sides.

"Just-" Louis frowns, "I just need you to not say anything I think. Please."

"Lou are you sure, I just- I promise I can wait. I just want you to be comfortable," Harry says gently.

Louis shakes his head, "Harry I don't know if I'm ever going to be comfortable standing in front of you naked but I want this- I-" he falters and his eyes drop down to his feet again, "do you not-"

"Of course I do baby. Of course. I just want you to be sure. I want it to mean as much to you as it does to me and I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"I am sure Harry. I- I trust you," Louis says, meeting Harry's gaze and giving a tiny nod, "just please don't say anything?"

"Okay love," Harry says, "I love you, okay?"

Louis' eyes search his for a silent moment before he gives a small nod and lets out a tiny sigh. Harry watches as Louis' arms move under the sweatshirt and Harry knows he was untying his pyjama pants because they fall around his ankles. Harry barely has time to take in Louis' legs before Louis is moving again, but his breath catches in his throat. Harry knew Louis had a gap between his thighs but when his legs aren't covered in loose trousers or baggy jeans the gap seems too wide.

Harry's eyes snap back up to Louis' face but Louis' eyes are trained on the ground as his arms twist under the sweater, grasping the hem and lifting it up over his head. He's got a t-shirt underneath but it's way too big and it does nothing to hide how thin his arms are. The knobs of Louis' elbows jut out and Harry realizes that Louis' biceps are maybe thinner than Harry's forearms.

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Harry's seen Louis' wrists, he sees them all the time when Louis pushes up the sleeves of his jumpers to sew. He watches Louis' tiny hands flit across his sketchbook with a pencil, designing the beautiful things he'll sew later. He's pressed his thumb against that little bone of Louis wrist a million times when their hands were intertwined. Now though, Harry can see that Louis doesn't just have dainty wrists, Harry can see that there isn't enough flesh on Louis' arms.

Louis has dropped the sweatshirt to the floor now and he stands in front of Harry in a too-big t-shirt and a pair of boxers that gape around his thighs. Louis won't meet his eyes and Harry is partially glad because then Louis would see the utter confusion in them, he can't connect those too-thin arms and
too-thin legs to his Louis. Louis steps out of his boxers and his t-shirt hangs to his thighs but Harry can see the end of his cock and it's flaccid because Louis is so nervous.

Harry can't stop the sound that escapes him when Louis finally reaches down and drags the t-shirt up and over his head. Harry's breath comes out strangled. The t-shirt crumples on the ground and it feels like Harry's stomach falls to the floor right with it. Louis is not soft.

Louis is skin pulled tight over jagged edges, and Louis is a concave stomach, and Louis is bones. Harry can see every single one of Louis' ribs, as if they're straining against his skin, trying to abandon their job of holding his lungs in. Louis' stomach is nothing but a sunken valley below his ribcage, completely hollow before it connects with the jutting peaks of Louis' hip bones. The collarbones Harry used to press his lips to when Louis' jumper would slip to the side just look drastic and sunken, and they connect with too-bony shoulders. Harry can see the ridges of Louis' ribs where they connect with his sternum in his chest.

"Oh baby," he whispers and he almost chokes on the words because, no.

Every bone in Louis' body is out on display and every bone is mocking Harry. All this time the oversized sweaters and the layers upon layers have been hiding this. It doesn't make sense. Louis still hasn't met Harry's eyes but when Harry speaks Louis lets out something like a whimper and instantly his arms cross across his body. His arms do nothing to hide the fact that there is no flesh between his paper skin and his hipbones, or the way his stomach sinks in between the two points of bone.

Harry feels like he's going to cry. He can feel the lump in his throat choking off his air and the stinging at the back of his eyes. He's scared and he's confused and he doesn't understand how the emaciated form in front of him is his boyfriend. The thing that terrifies Harry the most is the way Louis' words are playing on a loop in his head, how chubby he is, how soft he is. Harry can see it as Louis stands in front of him, he can see that Louis is trying to hide the tummy he thinks he has, he can see that Louis is wilting away from Harry's gaze. Louis doesn't see what Harry sees, and that's the scariest part of it all.

"I'm-"

"Louis, fuck, come here," Harry mumbles, fighting to choke back a sob.

Harry pushes himself to his feet and closes the gap between them. His hands reach out for Louis and he's never held him, never touched him without clothes, never touched him outside the comfort zone before. His arm wraps too easily around Louis' shoulders and his other hand slips up into Louis' hair. He pulls Louis close and in an instant Louis is burying his face into Harry's bare chest. Harry's hand is in his hair, cradling his head, and Harry's arm is around him, holding him closer.

It isn't enough though, Louis doesn't feel close enough for Harry. He has this overwhelming urge to scoop Louis up and never let him go. He is terrified that if he doesn't hold tight Louis is going to float away. Louis' arms cling around Harry's middle, his dull nails against Harry's skin. Harry is thankful for the dark, and thankful that Louis' head is tucked under his chin, because his eyes are pooling and his jaw is clenched to hold in a million questions.

"I love you Louis," Harry says and it comes out as more of a groan but it's better than the cry he's holding in.

Louis doesn't feel close enough, Harry can't hold him tight enough. He reaches down and scoops Louis up behind the legs and it brings bile up in his throat how easy it is to lift Louis. Louis lets out a squeak and tries to squirm but Harry's arm supports his bum and he buries his face as deep as he can against the bones where the flesh should be, between Louis' shoulder and neck. Louis doesn't
struggle long and soon his legs wrap around Harry's hips, his arms wrapping around his neck. Harry just cradles him in his arms and tries not to think about the fact that Louis can't possibly weigh more than seven stone.

"I'm too heavy," Louis protests against Harry's temple.

Harry fights every urge he has to scream, "don't say that please, Louis. You're not. Please never say that," he begs.

He can not handle Louis thinking he is heavy, when Harry is genuinely terrified Louis is going to turn to dust in his arms and blow away. They stand like that for a long time. Louis wraps around Harry and Harry tries to get control of himself in the crook of Louis' neck. His hand spans Louis' back and he can feel each rib move beneath Louis' skin as he breathes softly. Louis eats. Harry has seen Louis eat. There is no way Liam or Zayn would be letting Louis skip meals. Harry doesn't understand.

"You still-" Louis pauses, taking a deep breath, "you still want me?"

"Yes Louis. I still want you. I love you so much. Please tell me you know that," Harry's voice shakes so badly he doesn't know how Louis heard him.

Louis pulls back though and Harry is thankful he's kept his eyes dry because Louis' are searching his, "still?"

"More every day," Harry whispers.

Louis' eyebrows press together a little but for the first time he doesn't look like he's fighting the urge to argue with Harry. He doesn't break their gaze as he leans forward and brushes his lips softly against Harry's. Harry matches his kiss with a level of desperation. His mind is going a mile a minute and Louis' lips have always been a welcome distraction. Louis instantly deepens the kiss, his tongue slipping in alongside Harry's as his hands fist in Harry's curls.

Harry doesn't stop kissing Louis as he turns and lowers Louis onto the bed, laying down with him but holding himself up because he's terrified Louis will break underneath him. Louis' legs stay wrapped around Harry's hips and Harry is softer now but their cocks brush together and it sends shivers through both of them. Harry gasps into Louis' mouth when Louis ruts his hips up. Harry's fingers drag softly down Louis' side, down the ridges of his ribs. His fingertips curl around Louis' hip but he keeps his touch featherlight because Louis is paper skin and fragile bones and he's more delicate than Harry ever imagined.

The thing is, he loves Louis so much, and everything about him is beautiful to Harry, but Harry is scared, because Louis is so thin that it makes Harry's stomach knot. Harry can feel Louis' stomach fluttering under his palm and his heart aches wondering if Louis is hungry right now, if he ate dinner when he told Harry he did. He breaks away from Louis' lips because his lungs are begging for air and Louis focuses his mouth onto Harry's neck.

Louis' hips are moving slowly against Harry's and Harry can feel his dick filling up next to Louis' but he can't drag his eyes off of Louis' bones. Slowly and hesitantly he lowers himself down and ghosts his lips across the sharp line of Louis' collarbone. He presses kisses along the skin, following the line down Louis' chest, pressing a kiss to each of the ribs. Goosebumps raise on Louis' skin and his fingers tighten a little in Harry's hair, but he doesn't protest.

Harry dips his chin and noses softly at the smooth skin of Louis' sunken stomach. He brushes his lips against every single inch of skin and Louis lets out a tiny sigh that sounds a little bit like a whimper.
Harry focuses on Louis' hip bones, softly suckling a pale bruise onto each sharp wing of bone. Louis shivers when Harry's lips reach the crease between his thigh and his hip. He whines a little as Harry moves down his right thigh and then kisses down the left as well. When he comes back up Louis' cock is flushed red and leaking against his stomach and Harry wraps his fingers around it as he presses one last kiss to Louis' belly button.

"I love you Louis," he whispers, meeting Louis' eyes in earnest, "please just know that."

It's a while before Louis speaks but he hasn't broken the gaze as he says, "I know."

That’s all Harry needs to hear, because Louis has never said it before, that he knows Harry loves him. Harry is worried, and he’s confused, and Louis is nothing but bones below him, but can’t react properly right now. He needs to hold in whatever he is feeling. He knows that if, after how hard it's been for Louis to finally lay himself bare, he flinches away it will break Louis. He wont know that Harry is just worried because he’s too thin, too fragile. All he’ll feel is rejection and Harry can not, will not, do that to Louis.

Harry shifts himself up to meet Louis’ lips, his hand working slowly around Louis' cock, coaxing out precum. Louis licks into Harry's mouth and tightens his hands in Harry's hair, rutting up into Harry's fist. Harry focuses on Louis in his hand, and Louis' tongue in his mouth, because if he thinks about Louis' bones his heart sinks. It isn't long before Louis is squirming beneath him, letting out breathy little whimpers that go straight to Harry's dick. Harry is hard, rubbing against Louis' leg while he works Louis up.

"Want you inside me Harry," Louis pants against the shell of Harry's ear, "want you to fill me up."

Harry cringes and has to hide his face against Louis' chest because all he can think about how empty Louis is, how empty his stomach must be. Harry can't stand the fact that he is the only thing that will be filling Louis up tonight. He wants Louis so bad, of course, he's been waiting for this for so long. He loves Louis whether he is three hundred pounds or ninety pounds, but he's just still so freaked out. Louis' chest is hard and bony beneath his forehead and it hits Harry that the reason Louis' heartbeat has always been so soft is because he's malnourished. That word bounces around inside Harry's head as he kisses down Louis chest, following the dip of his stomach, the hollows on either side of his hips. Louis is malnourished.

"Louis," Harry sighs against Louis' smooth skin.

"Harry," Louis whines quietly, his hand reaching down to wrap around Harry's dick.

Harry is thankful for Louis' hand because there is so much going on in his head he's worried he's going to go soft again. He focuses on Louis' smooth skin under his lips and Louis' baby blue eyes locked on him, half blown out and dark with lust. Louis whimper a little when Harry's hand leaves his dick to reach in the bedside table for lube, but his hand keeps stroking Harry's dick. Harry slicks up his fingers and thinks about how long he's wanted to be with Louis, how long he's been waiting to have Louis' body. Louis is too thin, but at least Harry knows now and he can try to fix it. He will fix it. Harry needs to show Louis he loves him no matter what. Harry really just needs to make love to him right now.

Louis takes in a sharp breath when Harry's fingers graze his hole, his fingers tightening around Harry's arm. Harry is slow and gentle because Louis is clenched tight. While he works Louis open they kiss slow but deep. Louis' lips get quicker and more desperate when Harry slowly slips in a second finger and carefully starts scissoring him open. Louis, hot and pulsing around Harry's fingers, has Harry's cock leaking against the bed, as he lies on his side next to Louis. His pulse is thrumming in his ears, mixing in with the soft little moans Louis is making.
"So good Haz," Louis groans, "another please."

Harry gets a third finger in, crooking them at just the right time to hit that spot. Louis lets out a small cry and buries his face in Harry's chest. Harry's lips press to every inch of Louis body as his fingers move. He whispers 'I love you's and 'you're beautiful's onto Louis' skin with a sense of urgency. Harry hits the spot over and over until Louis is trembling beneath him, his fingers dragging down Harry's back, his breaths heavy and shaking in Harry's ear. Harry's dick is throbbing between them, twitching and aching every time it drags against Louis' skin when he squirms beside Harry.

"M'ready Harry, fuck, ready," Louis pants.

Harry doesn't remove his fingers as Louis fumbles around for the lube, "condom?" Harry asks, but Louis shakes his head.

"Want to feel you," Louis gasps, as Harry nudges his prostate.

Louis' hands shake as he spreads lube on Harry's dick. Harry kisses along the line of his neck while he works his fingers. Harry doesn't know what he is going to do, the idea of being on top of Louis scares him. He's scared to put too much weight on Louis, he's breakable and fragile and Harry is so scared to hurt him.

"Can you- Louis can you- want you on top, love," Harry asks.

Louis frowns, his hands stilling on Harry's cock, "Harry."

"I can do it- do the work- I just- can you be on top?"

"Isn't about the work- I can- I can do that, I just-" Louis bites his lip, "I'm going to be too heavy and- and I'll be- erm- you'll be looking and-"

"Baby," Harry interrupts, trying to talk around the lump in his throat, "don't say you're too heavy, please. You weigh nothing. Please just trust me?"

Louis' eyes soften a little and he swallows thickly before he nods, "yeah. Okay. I do trust you. Okay."

Harry breathes a sigh of relief and brushes his lips against Louis, "thank you sweetheart."

Louis whines when Harry's fingers leave him, as Harry shifts to lay back on the pillows in the middle of the bed. Louis crawls so he's on his knees straddling Harry. Harry's eyes rove over every inch of Louis' skin, pulled taut across his bones. He raises his hands to Louis' hips, not really holding, just touching. Louis reaches back and both of them gasp a little when the head of Harry's dick nudges against his hole.

Harry's hands are gentle on Louis' hips as Louis guides Harry in and slowly lets himself sink down. They're both covered in a thin sheen of sweat already, their breathing matched in pace as Louis takes in more of Harry's dick. Harry can feel every inch of Louis wrapped so tight around him, hot and clenching as Louis stills to let himself relax. Harry's thumbs rub soft circles into the peaks of Louis' hips, where the pale bruises from Harry's mouth linger. He's careful not to move as Louis breathes deeply and steadies himself. Their eyes are locked and Louis' palms are flat against Harry's chest. Louis' hair is a mess and his cheeks are flushed, but his eyes are so bright and Harry thinks he is so fucking beautiful.

"You're beautiful," Harry tells him, "so beautiful Louis," Harry's voice is ragged but Louis flushes under the words.
When Louis starts moving Harry loses his breath, because Louis is just so tight, and it feels so good, and it’s Louis. His Louis. Louis who is beautiful and kind and smart and funny. Louis who has all this sadness inside of him but will instantly put it aside so he doesn't worry anybody else. Louis who used to smile like he'd forgotten how to be happy, who still looks a little surprised at himself every time Harry coaxes out a laugh. Louis who wanders around his flat in Harry's ratty old sweatshirt, but dresses like he's just off a runway for the newest winter clothing line every day at school. Louis who will say nice things to Harry a million times a day, but still blushes every single time he receives a compliment.

His Louis. The Louis he wanked over in the shower when he was finally ready to admit that girls didn't do it for him. The Louis who made him feel okay about himself without even having a clue who Harry was. The Louis who gave him a chance for his fashion show, and unintentionally let Harry into his life. The Louis that Harry fell in love with despite all his walls. The Louis who's smile makes Harry feel like he has purpose.

Louis' hips roll and it draws a moan out of Harry. Louis' fingertips press into Harry's chest as he angles himself. Louis thrusts up and down, back and forth, and the heat building in Harry's groin is overwhelming. Harry's hands span Louis ribs and brush down his sides, feeling Louis' warm skin. Louis is always the quiet one, Harry can never hold in his sounds, and he lets out a long moan as Louis swivels his hips. Louis gets the right angle and Harry can tell when he's hitting Louis spot because Louis whines and picks up his pace. They're both panting as Louis thrusts, Harry's hands on Louis' too-thin thighs and his head pressed back against the pillow.

Louis' chest is heaving and his cheeks are flushed as he rolls his hips expertly. He is so good, it feels so good, but Harry can tell he's getting tired. It kills him to realize that Louis' stamina is low because his body is running on empty. Harry can't let himself recall that time Louis looked like he almost passed out from standing up too quick, or the hundreds of times he made a joke about being an old man to cover up the fact that the toddled up the stairs to the flat so slowly.

Instantly his hands go back to Louis hips and he holds them this time, supporting Louis. He tries not to cringe at the fact that he can hold Louis' hips up without a single bit of strain. Louis doesn't protest as Harry supports him though, and Harry realizes he must have been getting exhausted. Louis can move his hips so well, but Harry knows how tiring riding is. Harry digs his heels into the mattress and he fucks up into Louis as he holds him up. It feels so good he can hardly breathe and Louis it letting out these short-of-breath little moans that are driving Harry crazy.

"Harry-" Louis whines, "Haz- gonna"

"Can you cum just like this baby?" Harry pants, eyes locked on Louis, "Can you cum without me touching you?"

Louis lets out a moan and nods jerkily, "can yeah- so good- fuck Harry- soon."

"Okay beautiful, cum for me love," Harry coaxes breathlessly, "so beautiful. Cum for me."

Louis lets out the most beautiful cry Harry has ever heard and then he is cumming in a hot white spurt all over Harry's stomach, his fingernails dragging down Harry's chest as he shudders. His hole clenches sinfully around Harry's cock and that, combined with the beautiful way Louis' face contorts with his orgasm, has Harry cumming hard with a cry of Louis' name. Louis slumps forward against Harry's chest trembling, and panting, and smearing the cum between them. Harry lays there through the aftershocks, and revels in Louis' almost non-existent weight on top of him.

Harry pulls out carefully and Louis squirms at the feeling before burying his face into Harry's neck. They lay like that for a while, sticky, over heated, and strengthless. Harry traces his fingers up and
down Louis' back and represses a shudder when he realizes he can feel every knob of Louis' spine, can feel each of Louis' ribs around his back too. As he comes down from the high of his orgasm the severity of the situation pounds into him over and over. Louis is not well. He is emaciated, and he is broken, and Harry doesn't know what he's going to do. The feeling of tears prickling at the back of his eyes is becoming way too familiar tonight, but he swallows the feeling down because he can't do anything about it right now.

"You're so perfect Louis. So good. I love you," Harry murmurs into Louis' hair.

Louis raises his chin, his eyes heavy lidded and misty. He doesn't say anything but his little hand comes up to Harry's cheek and his thumb presses at the place where Harry's dimple hides. His eyes search Harry's face as his fingers twist through Harry's sweaty curls. The look in Louis' eyes speaks a thousand words. Harry thinks maybe, just maybe he can see love there. He doesn't expect Louis to say it back though. He knows Louis' aversion to the L word runs deeper than just hesitance. He just gives a quiet smile after Louis leans forward and kisses him long and soft.

Harry eventually forces himself to get up and go down the hall to the bathroom to clean himself up. He brings the wet facecloth back to the bedroom. Louis has his knees pulled up to his chest as he lays on his side but he smiles at Harry all the same. Harry sits down on the edge of the bed and gently pulls Louis' arms away from his knees and carefully tugs Louis' legs so he spreads out. Louis still shies away from Harry's gaze, but he doesn't protest as Harry runs the warm cloth across his chest and stomach to clean him up. Harry reaches between Louis' legs and tenderly wipes his sensitive bum, getting a whine from Louis as he cleans away any left over lube or leaking cum.

After they're clean Harry pulls back the covers and Louis shuffles under, reaching out for Harry. This time Louis doesn't flinch away when Harry's arms wrap around his bare body. Harry can at least be thankful that he's allowed to touch Louis now. That has been the hardest part; holding himself back every time he wanted to reach out and wrap his arms around Louis from behind, having to stop himself every time he wanted to scoop Louis up in his arms. Harry wonders, if he had asked why Louis was so scared to be touched, if maybe he would have found out that something wasn't right sooner. Surely he would have felt the bones.

That thought makes his chest ache so he focuses on Louis in his arms. Louis' nose nuzzles up against Harry's neck and his fingertips curl around Harry's collarbone. Harry's arm wraps around Louis, holding him flush against his chest, and his other hand cards slowly through Louis' mussed up hair. Louis' breathing is steady now, still as soft as ever. Harry tries not to wonder if Louis' heart would have just stopped one day, if nobody ever noticed he was so underweight. Harry thinks Louis has fallen asleep, but then Louis raises his head and looks in Harry's eyes with uncertainty.

"Harry?" he asks, so softly.

"Yes sweetheart?"

"Will you be here when I wake up? I mean, do you still want to- to be with me?"

Harry's breath chokes off and he swallows thickly, "of course I'll be here Louis. Of course I still want to be with you."

Louis lets out a little sigh of relief, "I don't know how I got lucky enough to have you," he says softly.

"I'm the lucky one," Harry says seriously, silently willing Louis to believe him, "I don't know what you see when you look in the mirror Louis, but I love you so much."
Harry knows he's said I love you far too many times tonight, but he can't stop. He needs Louis to know. Louis nuzzles back into Harry's neck, Harry holds him closer and hides his face in Louis' hair.

As he lays in the dark every sign he should have seen runs through his head. Always cold because he has no flesh to keep him warm. The lightheadedness because his body is running on empty. The hesitance to be touched, to be seen. The little comments that Harry always protested against, but never clued in about.

He thinks about every meal he's ever had with Louis and for a while he can't think of anything out of place. He doesn't eat with Louis very often, because Louis always says he's eating with Liam and Zayn. Now Harry doesn't even know if Louis has been eating at all, he could have been telling Liam and Zayn he was eating with Harry.

Suddenly one image flashes through Harry's mind. Louis stepping out of the bathroom stall at the greek restaurant, their first time ever hanging out together outside of school, and rinsing the vomit out of his mouth. Harry had listened to Louis throwing up, had heard him gagging himself, but he had believed it when Louis just said he was ill. It's only then that Harry realizes he can't think of a single time Louis didn't go for a shower after they ate dinner. His stomach churns when he realizes the real reason Louis got antsy that time they were all out for dinner, the real reason he needed to get home to shower.

Harry has done it again. All the signs were there and he was too fucking stupid to notice. He's let Louis down just like he let Gemma down. He could have helped them both sooner but he's too fucking oblivious. He wants to scream. He wants to punch something. He wants to slam his head against the wall. He wants to wake Louis and beg him to explain why he's doing this to himself. Beg him to stop. Beg him to eat.

He doesn't want to fuck this up though, doesn't want to steal the peacefulness or the contentedness off of Louis' face. It's eating away at him as he lays there with Louis in his arms, but he doesn't want to break the spell of their first time together.

Harry doesn't know what he's going to do tomorrow, but he's not going to let Louis do this to himself anymore. He needs to fix this, needs to help Louis heal. Because he loves Louis, and he's never felt this way about anyone before, and somewhere along the way Louis has become the light in Harry's life, and he's not going to watch Louis fade away.

It isn't until long after Louis is snoring softly against his neck that Harry lets himself cry.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for the comments and kudos!! please let me know what you thought of the pov switch :)}
Harry wakes up with Louis shivering in his arms. They’re both still naked and Louis has tucked himself into Harry’s side, subconsciously chasing Harry’s warmth in his sleep. His face is pressed into Harry’s neck, and he’s wedged his legs between Harry’s. Harry didn’t let go of him in his sleep, his arms are still wound around Louis’ tiny waist. He knows he gives off a lot of body heat, Louis has told him before, but Louis usually wears a sweater and pyjama pants to bed and without any flesh to insulate him his teeth are almost chattering in his sleep.

He glances at Louis’ alarm clock and realizes he’s only slept a few hours, even though the sun is already shining through the sheer curtains. He laid awake listening to Louis’ breathing; let his fingers slot in the spaces between Louis’ ribs so he felt every inhale and exhale. His mind ran through every single thing he should have noticed, every single way he failed Louis. He’s traced it all the way back to the very first day in the studio when Louis didn’t drink the syrupy sweet coffee Harry brought and just picked at his scone.

Harry couldn’t keep in his tears last night, but even with letting them out the knot in his chest hasn’t loosened. All night he felt like he was trying to hold onto thin air, like Louis was seconds away from slipping out of his grasp. He’s just so tiny, so frail, so thin. Harry doesn’t know what he’s going to do yet. He’s terrified to confront Louis because he knows how easy it is to send Louis cowering back into his shell. He also needs to make sure he’s right about Louis, before he asks.

He’s going to make Louis breakfast, just like he would any other morning, but this time he’s going to properly watch, like he should have been doing all along. He brushes his fingers across Louis’ back, feeling the goosebumps on the skin pulled tight across his shoulder blades. He presses a kiss to Louis’ hair and slowly untangles himself. Louis lets out a little whimper when Harry carefully moves his head from his shoulder to the pillow, but he doesn’t wake.

The blankets pool at their hips when Harry sits up and it still makes him suck in a sharp breath when he sees Louis. Harry can’t decide if seeing Louis in the light is better or worse. It’s worse because now he can really see just how thin and jagged Louis is, he can really see, in comparison to his own thigh, or his own arm, just how tiny Louis is.

Harry thinks maybe it's less terrifying this way though, without the moonlight casting shadows in the hollows where flesh should be. Without the shadows making Louis look more like a skeleton. It’s beautiful in some way, how fragile, how delicate Louis is. His skin always holds that slight hint of gold and when his face isn’t twisted with hesitation he looks a little softer. Harry knows though, that even if he’ll always be able to find the beauty in Louis, this isn’t okay. Those bones aren’t okay.

Harry slowly slips out of bed and pulls the covers up around Louis, tucking around the edges to cocoon him in. Next to the bed is the electric heating blanket Harry bought for Louis; it hasn’t been being used because Harry is over every night and he usually keeps Louis warm enough. He plugs it in and turns up the temperature dial, before draping it carefully over the too-small lump that is Louis under the covers.

Louis sighs contentedly in his sleep, his face relaxing where Harry has tucked the blankets up to his chin. Harry pulls on a fresh pair of sweatpants from the drawer Louis gave him to keep some clothes in. It meant a lot to Harry when Louis offered him a drawer. Like maybe, even if he couldn’t say it out loud, Louis was offering Harry a little bit of permanent space in his life. Harry knows sometimes
he tends to read too much into things, but he has hope.

Harry goes to the kitchen and starts gathering the ingredients for pancakes. He was hoping cooking would give him a distraction from his thoughts but that isn’t happening. All he can think about is how much Louis always says he loves Harry’s pancakes. Now Harry can only wonder if it was always a chore for Louis to eat them. If Louis resented the pancakes Harry made him. If he had to force himself to swallow them. He feels like an idiot for how much he’s always loved cooking for Louis, when Louis has really hated his food this whole time.

Harry is deep in thought when Louis pads into the kitchen, but he hears bare feet on the tile and turns around. Louis is wearing his favourite sweatshirt with pyjama pants, and Harry realizes now that he could fit about eight of Louis in that sweater. Louis rubs the sleep out of his eye with his fist, just barely peeking out of the sleeve. He gives Harry a hesitant smile, like he’s not sure whether to believe Harry is really still there, and it breaks Harry’s heart a little.

“Morning beautiful,” Harry tells him, giving him a soft smile.

Louis smiles a little more and steps forward when Harry reaches out for him. Louis stills slightly when Harry wraps his arms around Louis’ waist, instead of his shoulders like he usually would, but he doesn’t protest. His arms go up to lace around Harry’s neck, his fingers slipping into Harry’s knotty curls. Harry has to stoop over to bury his face against Louis’ shoulder, but he lets his body curl around Louis and holds him as close as he can.

"Hi baby," Louis says quietly, and Harry feels a kiss pressed to his hair.

"I love you," Harry says.

Louis doesn't say anything, but when Harry goes to straighten up his arms tighten around Harry the tiniest bit. Harry just nuzzles closer as Louis' hand strokes through the back of his hair. They just stand like that, tangled up together, until they smell pancake burning.

Harry tries his best to act normal while he finishes the pancakes but he feels like he's going through with some lie. Like he's being dishonest with Louis by omission, because he's not talking to him about what's going on right now. Harry feels like he's keeping this huge secret that Louis doesn't even know he's shared with him, and it just doesn't feel right. He has never once been dishonest with Louis and he can’t stand the knot in his chest.

They sit down to breakfast, and for the first time Harry actually watches Louis eat. He watches the way Louis cuts his food into perfectly even, far too small pieces. He'll stab a few pieces and wave his fork around a bit while he talks, but none of it actually makes it into his mouth. He takes the pieces off of his fork with his knife and cuts them smaller in the process, so they're barely noticeable on the edge of his plate. More cutting, more waving around of his fork, more dissecting of his food.

Harry keeps conversation up so Louis doesn't notice him watching, but he hasn't even gotten any food into his own mouth because he's so distracted observing Louis. He watches as Louis grabs the syrup and drizzles it on his plate, but he isn't putting any on his pancakes, he's using it to disintegrate the mushed up pancake he's got hidden on the edge of his plate. Harry's stomach churns at how fucking innovative he is, how resourceful he is, just to hide his food.

Louis takes his first real bite when Harry is half finished his plate and they've been sitting at the table for twenty minutes. Harry watches him raise the tiny little piece of pancake to his mouth and take it off the fork. He doesn't cringe like Harry expected him to, and Harry wonders if that's just good acting or a testament to his pancakes. He hopes, probably in vain, for the latter.
Louis chews that one little piece for such a long time and then he takes a long drink of water. Harry wonders if it's because he has to force even that tiny bite down. He watches while Louis eats; slow and deliberate, small bites chewed far too many times.

When Harry's plate is empty Louis stands up and offers to take the dishes. If Harry wasn't looking for it he wouldn't have even noticed that Louis' plate was still half full, before he put Harry's plate on top of his own and carried it over to the sink. His movements are practiced as he discreetly scrapes the rest of his food into the bin and then puts the dishes into the dishwasher.

"Delicious Harry, thank you," Louis says brightly, going over to where Harry's still sat at the table.

He bends down for a kiss but Harry reaches out for him instead, "come here sweetheart," Harry asks gently.

"M'too heavy," Louis squirms, as Harry pulls him down onto his lap.

"Babe you've gotta stop saying that, you're breaking my heart. You're not too heavy," Harry says softly, snaking his arms around Louis' waist.

Louis sighs and gives in, wrapping his arms around Harry's neck, but Harry can tell he's doing his best to hold himself up on his toes where they're touching the ground. Harry doesn't have it in him to say much else as he hides his face against Louis' neck. He's fighting the anger rising up the back of his throat like bile, the anger at himself because he's been with this beautiful boy over four months. He's been with Louis almost five months, and he never fucking noticed him hiding food in plain sight and using distraction after distraction to eat as little as possible.

Louis' fingers twist in Harry's hair for a while and he doesn't even flinch when Harry's hand slips up the back of his sweatshirt and spans across his back. Harry brushes his fingers down the knobs of Louis' spine and represses a shudder. Harry wonders how long he'll be allowed to hold Louis here, before he has to go purge.

He gets his answer when Louis starts fidgeting, only a few minutes later. Harry thinks maybe Louis is trying to stay just a little longer, but he keeps softly clearing his throat like it's itching him or something. Harry's arms tighten around Louis and he finds himself praying he's wrong, praying that Louis isn't about to excuse himself to go shower and throw up everything he just ate.

"Sweetheart, I'm going to go shower," Louis says, and Harry's heart sinks.

"Okay," Harry says, trying to talk past the lump in his throat, "I should head back to the dorm and finish up that assignment. Will you be okay until Liam and Zayn get home?"

"Yeah I've got a spreadsheet I have to get finished for marketing, I'll be fine," Louis says, tugging out of Harry’s arms and standing up.

"Okay I'm just going to go find a t-shirt, you can shower, I'll let myself out," Harry says as they go down the hall.

Louis pauses in the doorway of the bathroom, "are we- is everything okay?" he asks, looking down at his feet.

Harry closes the distance between them and tips his chin for a kiss. His thumbs rub soft circles against the too-sharp peaks of Louis’ hipbones. Louis hums against his lips and his little hands clench around Harry's arms as they kiss.

"We're perfect baby; nothing is going to change that. And just please know I love you with all my
heart and nothing is going to change that either,” Harry says softly, pulling back to make sure Louis meets his eyes.

Louis' eyes soften and a tiny smile pulls at his lips, “okay,” he breathes.

Louis disappears into the bathroom, after giving Harry another chaste kiss, and Harry goes down the hall to the bedroom to get a t-shirt and find his phone and keys. When he walks back down the hall he hears the shower running and the sound of Louis playing music off his iPhone. It sounds completely normal, because this is what Louis does all the time. Harry stops though, with his back against the wall beside the door, and lets himself sink down to sit on the floor.

He listens to the sound of his boyfriend, who he loves with everything he has, gagging. The noise is just barely audible over the combined sounds of the water and the music. He listens as Louis draws up the contents of his stomach over and over, in a steady rhythm with hardly any coughing or sputtering at all. He listens to the sickening sound of vomit splashing in the toilet over and over, with barely any time for Louis to even be breathing in between. He listens for as long as he can before he has to push himself up and force himself to leave the flat. When he gets down to his truck the sound of Louis' sickness is ringing in his ears.

Harry makes it three quarters of the way back to the dorm before he snaps, which would be more impressive if the dorm wasn't less than twenty minutes from Louis' flat. He does okay for the start of the drive, not thinking about it, not thinking about it, not thinking about it. Except then Sway by The Kooks comes on his iPhone and plays through the speakers. It's just the lyrics, and it's the way he's always related the song to Louis, and it's shitty timing, and a shitty draw on the shuffle setting, and he breaks. In seconds he goes from biting his lips raw, to full-on ugly sobbing, barely being able to see past his tears well enough to drive.

Harry has always been a crier, and much to his dismay, he's also possibly the most unattractive crier alive. He is bloodshot eyes, and snot running down his face, and contorted features, and loud wracking sobs mixed in with whiny little whimpers. It's pathetic really, but the dam has broken and he's basically fucked, because there is no stopping it now, until he literally dries up.

Somehow he manages to make it to the parking lot with his vision clouded and sobs racking his chest. He parks in his stall next to Niall's car and stumbles out of his truck. People stare at him as he crosses the courtyard up to the dorms, and he knows he looks like a complete mess but he can't help it.

He storms up the stairs, trying in vain to wipe away his tears or at least to stop the pitiful sounds escaping his mouth. He slams through the door to his dorm room and throws himself down on his bed, burying his face in the pillow and finally letting himself sob.

He's been with Louis for over four months and he didn't have a fucking clue, he missed all the signs. At least with Gemma he was young. Maybe a kid his age wasn't expected to pick up on his sisters self harm, maybe then he had no way of knowing. This is different. He knows the signs. He knows the things people will do when they're that sad. He knew Louis was sad and he worried about self harm, but he never even thought about Louis' eating habits once. The signs were right in front of his face but he was too dense to put them together. He’ll never forgive himself.

He feels the edge of his bed sink down and then a hand is rubbing gently up and down his back. He can't stop himself from crying though. It's too much, Louis is too sick, he doesn't know what he's going to do. From day one all he has wanted to do was take care of Louis and he couldn't even manage that. The walls of the room are paper thin and he's sure the people in the rooms next to theirs can probably hear his strangled sobs, but every time he tries to calm himself down a new wave of tears rushes forward. He just forces himself to focus on the palm rubbing up and down his back,
breathing in when it gets to the top of his spine and breathing out when it gets to his lower back.

"Alright big guy, let it all out," Niall says gently, his hand continuing it’s soothing movement.

Niall is patient as Harry tries to get himself together. Harry's breathing slowly steadies until he's just letting out the occasional whimper and sniffing pitifully. Niall rolls Harry over on the bed and cringes a little when he takes in his red, wet face. He stands up and goes to the desk, grabbing a handful of tissues and coming back to Harry's side.

Harry accepts the tissues and blows his nose, but it never stops running after he's cried. Without a word Niall rips a tissue in half and proceeds to stuff a half up each of Harry's nostrils. Harry knows he must look like an idiot with tissue hanging out his nose but he can't be arsed to care. Niall used the same method to staunch the flow of snot the first time Harry came home crying, when Louis had run out after their first kiss. Niall dabs at Harry's eyes next, wiping away the tears. When Harry is dried off Niall sits cross-legged next to him and gives his shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Alright Hazza tell me what’s happened, and we'll see if we can fix it," Niall says.

You wouldn't expect it looking at Niall, because partying is in his blood, he's always up for a laugh, and being serious isn't his strong point, but when Harry's needed him he's always been there. He actually has a tendency to coddle Harry, even though they're almost the same age and Harry is definitely bigger. Harry stares blearily at the ceiling of their small dorm room for a while because he doesn't want to say the words out loud.

They've been bouncing around in his head all night and all morning, because he knows what Louis is, he knows the clinical term for it. He just can't stand the fact that he has to associate those words with his Louis. Niall just waits patiently; he's stroking Harry's belly like a cat and it's strangely comforting.

"Louis and I erm- we like, made love last night," Harry says, and Niall is kind enough not to scoff at Harry for not just saying sex like he normally would, "and when he took off his clothes-

The lump comes back in his throat and does it's best to choke Harry off again. Louis is burned into the back of his eyelids, he can see each ridge of bone, every hollow. He can see Louis' beautiful face too though, hesitant smile and endless blue eyes, and that makes it worse. It makes it worse because Louis is so perfect and so beautiful, but he's doing this to himself and it's so wrong. Harry knows the words, they burn on his tongue, he just wishes he didn't have to use them to describe Louis.

"Yeah?" Niall prompts softly.

"He's bulimic Niall. He fucking throws up everything he eats. He might be fucking anorexic, I don't know, maybe he doesn't eat unless he has to so that we don't notice he's starving himself, and then just throws it up later. He's just bones. He's skin and bones and he doesn't even fucking know it. He thinks he's fat!" Harry spits the last sentence like venom because it's just so fucking wrong and he can't handle it.

He looks for Niall's reaction and he isn't surprised to see him looking completely confused. Louis has such angular cheekbones and it looks like amazing bone structure but now Harry knows it's because his cheeks are hollow. He wears so many layers all the time but it never looks out of place because he looks so fashionable; it's the way he styles things, the way he puts outfits together. The oversized sweaters were so in style this winter that nobody would think it strange that all his clothes hang loose on him. It was all an optical illusion that he designed to cover the fat he thinks he has, but really it just stopped the people who love him from realizing how scarily thin he is.
"I've been eating his food," is the first thing Niall says, completely aghast with his eyebrows furrowed.

"What?" Harry sobs.

"When we hangout he always shares his food with me. Like- if we were at a restaurant he'd let me try some of whatever he ordered, but also if we were hanging out at the flat he always shared with me," Niall frowns, scrubbing a hand down his face, "just thought he was trying to win me over with food or summat."

Harry lets out a strangled little groan, "shit."

"I'm so sorry Haz, I- I didn't- I should have- I'm sorry," Niall says guiltily.

"No Niall it isn't your fault. I'm his fucking boyfriend I should have fucking noticed," Harry says, losing his battle with the tears stinging the back of his eyes.

"I'm just having a little trouble understanding like- he looks so normal," Niall says slowly, "he's like thin?"

Harry tries his best not to get frustrated, but he feels like he's losing his mind, "does he though Niall? If you really think about it, does he look normal? Because now that I know, all I keep seeing are things I should have noticed before," he takes a deep breath, "he's so fucking tiny. You can see every single rib Ni. He's like, I don't even know- there isn't a fucking ounce of fat on him."

Niall goes for more tissues. He pulls out the soggy bits from Harry's nostrils, with only a slight look of disgust, and puts them in the bin beside the desk. He wipes away at Harry's face again and then shoves some more tissue up his nose. His hand goes back to petting Harry's stomach as he chews on his lip, still trying to wrap his head around it all.

"What did he say when you confronted him about it?" Niall asks.

Harry shakes his head, "I didn't. I couldn't. It took him five fucking months to be comfortable enough to get his kit off in front of me and the first thing I'm going to say is 'what's wrong with you, why the fuck are you so skinny?' He's so- it's so hard for him to believe that I love him, he thought I was going to think he was too fat. It wouldn't have mattered if I was worried about how thin he is, he would have just thought I was like- like turned off by him or something."

"So he has no idea something is wrong?" Niall asks incredulously.

"No. Fuck. I don't know what I'm going to do. How the fuck do you ask someone about that?"

"I don't know mate, but you've gotta do something," Niall sighs, "I'm here, you know that. Whatever you need me to do."

Harry nods, "I know thanks Ni," he mumbles, "I think- I think I should call Gemma- maybe she'll-"

"She was on Skype earlier when I was using your laptop, maybe she's still on," Niall says, patting Harry's tummy lightly, "I've gotta shower anyway, so I'll give you two some privacy."

"Thanks Niall."

"And I'm sorry mate, that y'know, Louis isn't well," he adds sadly, as he grabs his towel and shower gel.
Harry just nods and watches him leave. He needs Gemma. He grabs his laptop off the bed and he almost cries with relief when he sees that she's on. He hits the call button and turns up the volume so the dial tone chimes through the room. Her screen comes to life and she smiles brightly at him for about three seconds, until she sees the state he's in and concern mars her features.

"H, what's wrong, why've you got loo roll up your nose?" she asks, as she leans a little closer to the screen, "oh bud, have you been crying?"

"Oh," Harry says, quickly removing the tissue he'd forgotten about, "are you- do you have time to talk?" he choked out, trying so hard not to start crying again.

Gemma nods quickly, "of course. Is it Louis? Tell me what's wrong. Oh shit did he lie to you about cutting himself?" she asks, because Harry had told her how he worried about Louis.

Harry whimpered and shakes his head, "no, it's- but-" he scrubs his eyes and takes a deep breath, "Louis is bulimic. Or maybe anorexic. I don't fucking know. He's- I saw him naked- he's... he's fucking skin and bones Gemma. And he doesn't know it. He thinks he's fat. He- I don't even know if he eats or not but when he has to eat he fucking- he says he's taking a shower and he goes in the bathroom and he- he pukes it all up."

It doesn't hurt any less the second time saying it out loud. He's crying again by the time he finishes and he silently curses himself because he should be dried up by now, he feels like he's been bawling for years.

He can't even look at the screen because all he sees when he looks at Gemma is the sister he let down, listening to him tell her about the boy he's let down. He buries his eyes in the heels of his hands and lets his shoulders shake.

"Oh H," he hears Gemma sigh, and he wonders what she's thinking, if she's disappointed he failed again, "you haven't confronted him about it yet, have you?"

Harry shakes his head, "thought it would have made things worse. Didn't know what to do," he mumbled.

"Yeah it would've done," she says slowly, "he's not bulimic though."

Harry's head raises and he frowns, "I heard him throwing up this morning Gems," he argues.

"I know, but someone who is bulimic binges and purges, like stuffs themselves so full and eats so much, and then throws it up. Louis doesn't just randomly sit down and eat three thousand calories in a sitting does he?"

"No," Harry shakes his head.

"People who suffer from anorexia do purge when they're forced to eat more than they would normally allow themselves. Or use laxatives, which I really hope he isn't doing because those things destroy your insides," Gemma explains, "I met a friend, in rehab, she was anorexic and she purged when she was forced to eat too. We were pretty close, we used to talk a lot."

"How is he even alive Gemma?" Harry sobs, "he's so fucking thin, and sometimes he seems so faint and I never fucking clued in."

"Harry you've been together for four months and this has to have been going on before you met him too. I know if he was one way when you met him, and then there was some drastic change, you would have noticed. You can't blame yourself, he's been doing this a long time so he knows how to
hide it. Liam and Zayn have been his friends for years and even they don't know. Just- you know now, so you can do something about it. You can't blame yourself for not noticing," Gemma replies gently.

"But-

"No Harry. No blame game," she says firmly, "Now, what he is probably doing is allowing himself a very strict amount of calories a day. He'll be spacing them out throughout the day and eating them when he's alone probably. Leanne used to wait until she felt like she was going to pass out, or the hunger pains got too much, before she'd eat. He most likely eats something small, something he deems healthy, just to tide him over, to keep him going. He'll have been lying to everyone and saying he's eating all the time because if he admits he's on a diet he knows people will worry and start watching him."

"I don't- how can he not see how thin he is?" Harry chokes out, trying to take in everything Gemma is telling him.

"Because he's got this completely fucked up image of himself now. I remember Leanne talking about how disgusting and fat she was, and she was so thin. Once they start losing weight it's just never enough. But you have to understand this isn't just about his weight. He didn't start starving himself because he thought he needed to lose weight, even though that'll be what he tells himself. It's- theres something in his life that he can't control, or something else about himself that he hates. He's getting the control he lacks through controlling his food and whatever it is that he hates, he's taking it out on himself by doing this. Except he doesn't think he has a problem. Leanne always told herself she was just on a diet and that she was in control, but she wasn't. And Louis isn't," she explains.

Her voice is gentle but the things she's telling him are just freaking Harry out more. Harry hates that she knows so much about this shit. He hates that she learned it while in rehab because she was doing the exact same thing with cutting herself. Seeking the same control, punishing herself for something that wasn't her fault, by slicing her skin.

"So what do I do?" Harry moans, finally looking up through his blurry eyes.

Gemma sighs then and his heart sinks, "Leanne was seventeen, her family could force her into rehab. Nobody can make Louis go if he doesn't want to. He might- you have to be prepared for him getting angry or trying to push you away. But it isn't because he doesn't care about you, it's just a defence mechanism. You're going to have to tell Liam and Zayn because you can't fix this all on your own. You can't be with him all the time, and he's going to need to be watched or else he'll purge anything you get him to eat. But you can't sit him down and make him eat a whole pizza to himself. Not only will it be torture for him but his stomach- it'll- his body won't be ready for that much food.

You'll have to start out slow. He needs protein and whole wheat carbohydrates but he'll hate it. Leanne used to cry when they'd make her eat, because she associated food with something horrible for so long. It's going to be really hard for him to keep the food down H," she pauses to let her words sink in and Harry scrubs his hands across his cheeks, "You're just going to have to do your best to get him back up to a healthy weight but that's really all you and the lads can do.

The rest, like, changing the way he looks at food, dealing with whatever pain is making him do this, you can't do that. No matter how bad you want to help him and no matter how much he trusts you, you're not a psychologist, you can't fix that stuff, bud. You just have to try and get him physically healthy so he's not in immediate danger, and try to get him to get the help he needs."

"What if he won't eat Gemma? What if he won't let us- what if we can't get him to eat," Harry stutters, still trying to understand.
"I don't know. If you take him to the hospital he can check himself out. You won't even get his foot in the door of a rehab without it being his choice," Gemma bites her lip as she thinks, "you've just gotta show him you love him. Just beg him if you have to. You're the reason I got help Harry, and I'll never stop being thankful for that. I know I had to go to rehab because I was young enough to be forced, but your face. Seeing how much I hurt you. You're the reason I actually wanted to get better. Just knowing how much you cared. How much you care. Just- he's lucky to have you H, and it isn't going to be easy but if you love him I know you can help him."

"I do, I love him so much Gemma," Harry whimpers.

"I know bud. But you just have to be prepared because he's going to be really defensive. And you have to tell Liam and Zayn because it's going to take all of you to help him," she says softly, she lets out a small sigh and gives a hesitant smile, "I'd really like to meet him, you know."

"I know, I've asked him. He just gets anxiety about that stuff," Harry sighs and then he frowns, "maybe he thought you'd think he was too fat or something," he adds bitterly after, but the moment the words are out of his mouth he regrets them, "fuck I-"

"Didn't mean that, I know love. It's okay. I can't imagine how you're feeling. I'm really sorry," her voice is gentle and kind and he knows how much she truly means it, but it can't take away the knot in his chest.

"Thanks Gems. Thanks for everything," he mumbles.

They talk for a while longer and Gemma eventually gets Harry calmed down. She tells him that even if Louis tries to push him away, she knows Harry will be able to make him see how much he cares. She tells him everything will be alright. He has to believe she's right, because he is so out of his depth it isn't even funny, and he doesn't know how he's going to keep Louis afloat if he's floundering himself.

After he can breathe a little smoother Harry asks how she is, partly because he always wants to know how she's doing, and partly because he wants to stop thinking about Louis starving himself for a few minutes. She tells him she's doing great and then reassures him again about Louis, because she knows him well enough to know thats all he can think about right now.

"Call me if you need anything okay?"

"I will, yeah I'll call you. Love you Gems."

"Love you too, baby brother," she says, just before her screen goes blank.

Harry closes Skype but he doesn't put his laptop away. He loses himself in the internet, googling every possible thing he can think of regarding eating disorders and anorexia. It really frustrates him that there is so little information about men suffering from eating disorders.

Eventually he finds an article in GQ about male anorexia, and by the time he reads it start to finish he's sobbing again, because it's just so much and it hurts. It would hurt if he were just reading it for no reason, because it's tragic and scary what the men are going through, let alone when he's relating every single thing to his boyfriend. The article writes about four different men suffering from anorexia and the parallels to Louis make his head ache.

It makes Harry sick that it's a fact that less than half the clinics for eating disorders will admit men. He gets his first vital piece of information when the first guy says in his interview that his mom showed him a picture of himself and it helped him see how thin he really was. After reading that
Harry starts taking notes.

He grabs a pad of paper and jots everything down. He writes 'anxious, obsessive, perfectionistic, desperate to please, hypersensitive to rejection.' He cringes because he's describing his boyfriend. He reads that something like eighteen percent of male anorexics are gay. He learns that anorexics exist in a state of near-constant panic, and that panic attaches itself to food. His heart clenches in his chest when he reads that twenty percent of recovered anorexics die before reaching their life expectancy.

Harry has to take a break at the third story about a twenty-one year old who weighs fifty-five pounds and is basically on his death bed. He's lost even the fat that cushions his inner ear, and has to open and shut his jaw just to close his ear canal, so he doesn't hear a constant rushing of air. He can't handle the way the boy describes being unable to feel loved. It breaks his heart because it's how Louis is, how hard it is for Louis to accept Harry's love. There is a quote at the end of the article that makes Harry's chest ache. The interviewer asks the last man if it's possible he might feel differently if he had a partner who loved him. The man's response was "it's kind of like saying 'once you're on the moon, what's it going to be like to look back at earth?' Ask me when I get there." Harry tortures himself by wondering if Louis will ever believe that Harry loves him, and if he does, if it will help at all.

Harry finds out about something called refeeding syndrome and he knows it was what Gemma was talking about when she said they couldn't get Louis to eat too fast. Louis' liver will have slowed down to try and conserve muscle and tissue, and if he eats too much too soon his blood sugar will spike. Louis' heart is already weakened from lack of nutrients and it could be too much for his body to handle. Harry takes notes from every website he finds about caloric values and meal sizes, so he knows how to help Louis work his way back up.

He writes down everything he finds about recovering from eating disorders, because he refuses to go into this unprepared. He is going to do this right for Louis. He looks up treatment centres in the area and he's desperate to find one that takes men, even though he knows Louis probably won't agree to go. Harry finds a lot of photos of people who are a lot worse off that Louis, and comparing pictures helps him in some morbid way. 'Oh, Louis' face isn't as gaunt as that.' 'Oh, the back of Louis' hips aren't digging through his skin like that.' 'Oh, he hasn't got that fine hair all over his body, yet,'

It helps because it's slowly decreasing the irrational fear he has that he'll go back to the flat and find Louis already dead. Except then he finds a picture of a boy with the exact same body as Louis, and learns that the boy had been maintaining his weight for years, restricting to the point where he was barely making it through the days, and then allowing himself to put on just enough weight to survive, before restricting again. The boy went into kidney failure.

Somehow Harry stumbles upon something called a thinspo blog which leads him to something called a pro-ana forum and he almost loses it. There are people on their blogs competing over who is the most emaciated, giving each other tips on how to avoid eating, requesting advice on how to lose more weight. Harry prays that Louis doesn't look at sites like this, because those blogs scare the absolute living shit out of him.

Harry researches and takes notes non-stop, and his eyes are puffy and swollen by the time Niall gets back to the room.

"Oh Haz," he sighs softly, sitting down next to Harry.

Harry shuts his laptop and pushes it away, but puts the notepad into Niall's hands. Niall reads in silence for a while, turning through the almost four pages full of notes. When he finishes he lets out a long suffering sigh and hands the pad back to Harry. They sit in silence for a while and then Niall slings an arm around Harry's neck. Harry sinks into Niall's side with a groan.
What’d Gemma say? he asks.

“That he’s anorexic, not bulimic. I looked it up and she’s right; bulimics are characterized by cycles of over eating before they purge. He’s anorexic but he purges when he has to eat too much,” Harry says, his voice sounds a little numb but inside his stomach is churning.

“What did she say you need to do?” Niall asks gently.

“That I need to tell Liam and Zayn and we need to get him back up to a healthy weight, slowly. I don’t know. Isn’t much else we can do. He needs to see a proper doctor, and like…a psychologist probably, but I doubt he’ll agree to that. I don’t even know if he’ll let us try to help him.”

“And those notes?”

“From the internet. I’ve been looking up everything I possibly can,” Harry sighs, “now I’ve just got to ask him about it. Gems says I need to be prepared for him to freak out.”

“When are you gonna ask him bout it?” Niall asks, “and when are you gonna tell Liam and Zayn?”

Harry scrubs his hands down his face and sighs, “I was thinking about going over there now?”

“Really?” Niall asks sounding surprised.

“Yeah. If I don’t just do it I’m going to go crazy,” Harry grimaces.

“Yeah that’s understandable Haz,” Niall sighs, "I have to head out, but you’ll text me and let me know how it goes, yeah?”

“Yeah for sure,” Harry nods solemnly.

Niall gives him one last hug before gathering his things and heading out. Harry stares at his phone for a long time before he even opens his contacts. He knows Liam and Zayn will be home by now, and he doesn’t know if it’s better to ask Louis to come down to the truck or something, or just have the conversation in the flat. His stomach is in knots thinking about every single way this could go wrong.

He gives his head a rough shake and hits Louis’ contact. Harry’s favourite picture of him comes up while the phone rings; Louis laughing, nose scrunched up and crinkles by his eyes. Louis tried to make him change it, but Harry had refused. Louis' picture for Harry’s contact in his phone is a picture of Harry grinning with his hands folded under his chin, a pink satin bow, that Louis made out of scrap fabric one day in the studio, tied up in his curls.

“Hi love,” Louis says, picking up on the second ring, “everything alright?”

Harry doesn’t like the tone of Louis’ voice. It’s like he’s caught half way between being excited Harry called at all, and being worried that Harry is calling him to end things or something. It makes Harry’s chest ache, because Louis is still so hesitant that Harry is going to leave him. He’s so scared to confront Louis and have Louis pull away from him even farther.

“Hey babe, what are you doing?” Harry asks, trying for casual.

“Nothing, Zayn and Li are home now we’re just watching crap telly,” Louis replies.

“Nialler’s gone out, d’you think I could head over?” Harry asks, like he would any other day if he were bored.
“Yeah,” Louis says, and the happiness in his voice makes Harry’s stomach turn, “yeah, that’d be great.”

“Okay sweetheart, do you want me to pick anything up on the way, for you or the lads?”

“No, we’re good,” Louis says, “see you soon.”

“Love you,” Harry says, before he hangs up.

The drive back to Louis’ is painful, because the traffic just gives Harry’s stomach more time to contort itself into knots. He doesn’t even know what he’s going to say. He parks in front of the flat, but it takes him a few minutes before he can force himself to go into the building. He knocks lightly on Louis’ front door and he can hear Liam laughing inside.

Louis throws the door open and beams up at Harry like he’s Christmas come early. He’s wearing a thick grey wool sweater with some black trousers, and if Harry didn’t know better there would be no telling how underweight he is, because the pants are loose but not so baggy that it looks wrong. Louis reaches up and wraps his arms around Harry’s neck. Harry curls himself around Louis and presses a kiss to his neck, breathing in his familiar scent and trying to calm himself.

Part of him just wants to sit and hang out with the boys, to put off the conversation a little longer, but he knows he can’t. When they pull apart Louis stands on his tiptoes and gives Harry a soft kiss. Harry’s runs his fingers through Louis’ hair and rests their foreheads together for just a second, just long enough to draw air into his lungs.

“Can we go in your room babe?” Harry asks softly, brushing his lips against Louis’.

Louis hums quietly and nods, “course love.”

“Hey guys,” Harry waves when they pass Liam and Zayn playing FIFA in the living room. They both grin over at him and call their ‘hello’s’ and Harry wonders if Louis told them about last night. Louis tugs Harry down the hall to his bedroom and closes the door behind them. Harry goes over to the bed and sits with his back resting against the headboard. He opens his arms and Louis crawls across the bed and into them, tucking himself into Harry’s side. Harry just holds him close for a while, his fingers brushing through Louis’ hair as Louis snuggles in closer.

It’s the calm before the storm and Harry just wants to hold tight to Louis before the ship capsizes. He thinks maybe it will be easier with Louis’ head tucked under his chin, so he doesn’t have to watch the contentedness leave Louis’ beautiful face. Harry feels like he’s holding some sort of intervention. He’s watched that TV show. He knows how these things go. He is not prepared.

He feels like this should be such a happy time; Louis has finally trusted him after so long, has finally let Harry in, and now Harry has to set them back. He knows he has to do it though, because he can’t let the boy that he is madly and irrevocably in love with starve himself to death.

“Louis we need to talk about your eating disorder,” Harry says, and somehow he manages to get it all out in one breath.

He feels Louis freeze in his arms, he doesn’t move, he just stiffens completely, “what are you talking about?” he says after a beat too long, forcing out a shaky laugh.

Harry takes a deep breath, ”I know that you have been like, drastically restricting what you eat, and I know you make yourself throw up if you have to eat too much,” Harry sighs, ”please don’t lie to me, and please don’t get upset, I just want to talk.”
He isn't even sure about the calorie restriction, because that's just based on what Gemma knew about Leanne. He knows it was a correct assumption though, based on the sharp intake of Louis' breath and the way he somehow goes even more rigid in Harry's arms. Harry knows he has to go about this calmly and rationally, because if he starts accusing Louis of starving himself Louis is going to get defensive and they aren't going to get anywhere.

"Harry," Louis says, his voice is measured and cool and Harry hates it, "I don't know what it is you think you know, but this isn't something we're going to talk about."

Harry tries to steel himself before he speaks again, "This is something we're going to talk about Louis, because I love you. I don't know what you see when you look in the mirror, but you are wasting away. There isn't an ounce of fat on your body and I am not going to let you starve yourself anymore," he says.

He's trying for firm but gentle, but he thinks really he just sounds like he's on the verge of tears, which isn't anywhere near far from the truth. Louis is silent for a moment and Harry's heart is pounding. He vaguely wonders if Louis can hear it, where his cheek is still pressed to Harry's chest.

"Fuck off Harry," Louis says, pushing himself up and out of Harry's arms, "seriously fuck off. You don't have a clue what you're talking about."

He won't meet Harry's eyes, but he hasn't stood up from the bed at least, "Louis please. I just care about you. I love you. I hate myself for not noticing sooner, but you have to know that how much you're eating isn't enough. How many times have you almost passed out just from standing up too fast? I can't even imagine what the hunger pains must be like. Please Louis, you can't keep doing this," Harry pleads, and he isn't above begging if he has to.

"Harry, you need to stop being so melodramatic. I'm on a diet I'm not starving myself," Louis says, and Harry has never heard his voice so cold.

He fights against the tears prickling at the back of his eyes, "Lou you're skin and bones. You're always cold. You're always lightheaded. Your joints are always hurting. Your body can't take this, you can't live off of so little food."

"Harry, you've fucking seen me naked you know I'm not skin and bones," Louis hisses and Harry feels his chest constrict, "I don't know what the fuck you're playing at, but if you don't want to be with me anymore just fucking say it, stop mind-fucking me," he backs away on the bed so he's sitting on the far corner.

Harry doesn't think he's ever felt this horrible. Louis is curling in on himself, slapping down bricks and laying down concrete as he builds his walls back up around him. He thinks Harry's fucking with him, he thinks Harry's just trying to make excuses to end things. Harry feels like his heart is slung up in a noose; the circulation being cut off bit by bit, as Louis gets farther and farther away. Harry needs to close the distance between them, but when he moves closer Louis pushes further away, standing up from the bed with his arms crossed tight over his chest.

"Louis you've- you're-. What you're eating isn't enough and your body is wasting away, and I just- I love you and I need you to be healthy. I can't watch you fade away Louis, please," Harry begs, blinking past the tears clouding his eyes.

"You need to leave," Louis snaps, turning away from Harry completely.

"No Louis," Harry protests shakily, "I'm not going anywhere. I'm not going to let you push me away. You can be mad at me for bringing this up, shit, you should be mad at me for not noticing
sooner. You can be mad at me, I can take that, but I'm not leaving you."

"Stop!" Louis almost shouts, "just stop. This is bullshit. You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. Just leave!"

"No Louis," Harry says again, and he's trying his absolute hardest not to cry, "don't try to shut me out. I love you and I want to help you, I'm not going anywhere."

"Get out!" Louis yells, loud enough that the TV mutes out in the living room, "I don't need your fucking help Harry, I told you! I fucking told you before all this started," he gestures roughly between them, "I'm not some fucking damsel in distress and I don't fucking need you to save me. You can't fucking save me, so just stop acting like you care!"

Harry can't help the whimper that escapes him, "How can you say that to me? How can you say I don't care? I'm here, right in front of you, and I'm telling you I love you and I'm not going anywhere. I'm confronting you about this because I care. You have to know this isn't healthy, you have to know that you're torturing your body," Harry's cheeks are streaked with tears as he shakes his head. He can't handle the panic in Louis' eyes. He can't handle the way Louis' jaw is set and his arms are wrapped around himself like he's trying to hold himself together. Louis is terrified, and angry, and hurt, and Harry never wanted any of that, but he's done it. Louis looks like a caged animal who's fight or flight instinct is in overdrive, but he feels too trapped to even move. Harry wants to push himself up off the bed to close the growing distance between them but something tells him he needs to stay seated. He wouldn't feel right about towering over Louis right now, even if he'd never ever mean to be intimidating, he doesn't want to make Louis feel more cornered.

"Harry for fuck sakes, get the fuck out of my room!" Louis cries out, and when Harry see's he's fighting back tears too it kills him.

Harry doesn't have a chance to react before there are footsteps pounding down the hall and the bedroom door is being thrown open. Suddenly fists are clenched in Harry's sweatshirt and he's being hauled to his feet. His back is slammed against the wall, the two fists ramming into his shoulders and his head hitting off the wall. He blinks away his tears and he's met with the seething face of Liam, inches from his.

"What did you do to him?" Liam hisses.

He's shorter but he's strong and angry, and he and Harry would be pretty evenly matched but Harry doesn't even try to fight back. He looks over Liam's shoulder to where Zayn has his arms wrapped tightly around Louis, whispering to him, trying to find out what happened, find out what's wrong. He doesn't mind the fists digging into his chest, doesn't mind the wall digging into his back, doesn't mind the dull throbbing at the back of his head. He deserves it all, because Louis is crying because of him.

"Liam let him go," Louis says shakily, from where Zayn has him tucked up in his arms.

Harry feels Liam's hands slowly loosen from his sweatshirt and he wobbles on his feet a little as Liam steps back. He still positions himself between Louis and Harry though, like he expects Harry to lunge at Louis or something. Zayn is looking at Harry like he'll never forgive him for hurting Louis, and Harry's stomach churns wondering what they think he did.

"What the fuck did you do?" Liam's voice is rough and cold, and Harry can feel two sets of brown eyes cutting into him.

Harry can't take his eyes off of Louis though, "Louis I am begging you right now, please don't make
me tell them like this. If you're going to make me leave I have to tell them," he pleads softly.

Louis' eyes flash, "you wouldn't," he snaps, "you don't even know what you're talking about. You have no fucking right!"

"Louis please. Just. Please just- lets you and I talk, don't- I don't want to tell them like this," Harry stutters, "but I will. If I have to, I will. Because I'm not going to let you keep doing this to yourself. I love you too much."

"What are you talking about Harry?" Zayn asks hesitantly, "Lou, what is he talking about?"

"Harry needs to leave," Louis says quietly, "he just needs to leave."

Harry feels Liam's fingers close around his arm but he can't let himself be moved, "Louis please," he begs one last time, scrubbing the back of his hand across his cheeks to try and compose himself, "please just-"

"He wants you to leave," Liam says coolly.

Harry sees Zayn's and Liam's eyes locked, having one of those silent conversations Harry's grown used to. He sees confusion in Zayn's eyes, disappointment, concern. He's holding Louis so gently, but Harry notices he doesn't touch outside Louis' comfort zone either. He wonders if the two of them have been conditioned to know Louis’ boundaries, just like he was. Harry knows how easy it would have been to know something was wrong with just one touch to Louis’ waist. The sharpness of the bone and the hollowness of his stomach are impossible to ignore now that Harry is allowed to touch there. All it would have taken was one touch, and maybe one of them would have realized sooner. Maybe Louis wouldn’t have been this far gone. Except they never wanted to make him uncomfortable, so they didn’t press. Harry wonders if that would be considered ironic.

Harry has never resented how impossibly close Liam and Zayn are to Louis. He’s been completely thankful that Louis has two people who love and understand him so well, who take such good care of him. He’s never minded if Louis snuggles up between them on the couch because as soon as Harry comes in the door Louis relocates to his arms. His urge to protect Louis has been so strong from the jump that he’s always been so glad that Louis has two people, with just as strong of an urge to protect, who can be there when he can’t. Even though it turns out that the three of them weren’t enough to keep Louis healthy.

Harry tries not to be hurt that Liam is so quick to throw him out. He knows they're friends, he knows Liam doesn't hate him, but he also knows that Liam's protective instinct for Louis overrides everything else. Harry can't leave without them knowing though. His biggest fear is that Louis will push him away and shut him out, and then even if he manages to tell Liam and Zayn, Louis will talk his way out of it and never get the help he needs. Louis won't meet his eyes and his heart is pounding in his chest, but he knows what he has to do.

"Louis is anorexic," Harry says, and his voice is low and shaky but the words hang in the air, impossible to be unheard.

The silence that fills the room after that is palpable. The silence weighs down on Harry's chest, and he feels like he's suffocating beneath it. He hears the breath leave Liam’s lungs and feels his hand loosen the grip on his arm. He sees Zayn’s hands still where they were moving, trying to soothe Louis. When he looks at Louis it feels like a swift kick to the gut. He doesn't think he'll ever forget the look of complete and utter betrayal in Louis' glistening baby blue eyes.
thank you so much for all the kind comments and the kudos a new chapter will be up next saturday
"Lou, what’s he talking about?" Liam asks slowly.

Zayn's eyes are trained on Harry, but Harry can only look at Louis. Louis won't meet any of their eyes though, as he slowly untangles himself from Zayn's arms. Liam steps forward and reaches out for him, but Louis flinches away, and Liam looks like he's been kicked. Louis backs away, and Liam and Zayn freeze with confusion all over their faces. Harry wants to tell them not to corner him, but they've known Louis longer and it isn't his place. Harry hovers by the door, unable to take his eyes off Louis' face as he fights back the tears in his baby blue eyes.

"Lou-" Zayn starts, and his voice sounds shaky, "Harry?"

Louis' eyes flash up to Harry's, and Harry feels Liam and Zayn's eyes on him too, "I need all three of you to get out now," Louis says, his voice small and pained, "please just leave me alone."

"Babe," Harry chokes out.

"Get out!" Louis cries, and this time it isn't angry, just broken and panicked and Harry thinks that hurts worse.

"Louis, what is Harry talking about?" Liam asks, reaching out for Louis, only to have him shrink away further.

"Please leave!" Louis sobs, his arms wrapped tightly around himself, "all of you, please!"

Harry doesn’t think he can handle this. He’s seen Louis cry a couple of times in movies, or once when a terribly sad commercial for sick kids came on the telly. It was a few tears that trailed down his tan cheeks for just a moment, before Harry was able to kiss them away. Even then it killed Harry to see those gorgeous eyes wet and sad. He never in his life wanted to see Louis properly cry because he was hurt or upset. Now, Louis is crying because of Harry, and Harry hates himself for it.

"Lou-" Zayn tries.

"Go!" Louis yells, "Get out! Get out! Get out!"

"We're not leaving until we know what the fuck is going on, Louis!" Liam shouts, gesturing angrily between Harry, and Louis' cowering form.

"Stop," Zayn says quickly, as Harry's mouth opens to say the same thing, "yelling isn't going to help, Liam."

Liam instantly hangs his head, "I know. Lou, I'm sorry, please just- please just tell us what's going on."

Louis finally looks up from the floor and his eyes are wet and pleading, "please," he says, almost a whisper, "please just get out of my room, I'm sorry."

The silence is tangible as Louis lets out a shaky breath and wilts back into the corner of the room. Harry's chest is aching, because all he wants to do is rush forward and scoop Louis up, but he knows
he can't. He sees Zayn reach out and put gentle pressure on Liam's arm. Liam hesitates for only a moment before he lets out a sigh. They turn away from Louis, looking just as downtrodden as Harry feels. Zayn reaches out for Harry too, and his hand on Harry's arm is so much softer than Liam's was, but the message is the same.

They slowly file out of the room and Harry casts one glance back, before Louis is rushing forward from his corner, and slamming the door in Harry's face. Harry lets out a shuddery breath as Zayn pulls him gently to the living room. Instantly they turn to him, standing side by side with a million questions in their eyes; a united front, like always.

"Explain," Liam says roughly, Zayn's hand goes up to Liam’s shoulder, gentle pressure telling him to calm down.

"Louis-" Harry has to stop and clear the unshed tears from his throat, "I saw Louis naked last night, and I knew something was wrong. He doesn't have a single bit of fat on him, you can see every bone. I heard him throwing up the breakfast I made him, and I thought maybe he was bulimic, but I talked to my sister and I researched it and he's- er he's anorexic."

Liam is shaking his head before Harry even finishes talking, "no-" he says, "no, because he eats dinner with you almost every night before he comes home."

Harry lets out a choked sob, because he knew it, he knew that must have been how Louis was avoiding eating, "Liam, he tells me he has to be home to eat dinner with you two every night. The only time I eat dinner with him is when all of us have a meal together."

"I don't understand," Zayn says, "if he's not eating and he's throwing everything up-"

"He eats a little. Little things to keep him going through the day. But it isn't enough, he's literally wasting away," Harry mumbles, trying to hold back his tears.

"No," Liam says again, "there is no way in hell that I wouldn't have noticed."

"Li, he hides it so well," Harry sighs, "he has all these tricks to hide his food that I never noticed before, but I saw what he does when I watched him eat this morning. He hides under layers of clothes and baggy sweaters because he thinks he's fat, but he's so fucking thin. Why do you think he's light headed all the time, why do you think he's so cold?"

Harry feels like he's going to scream. Liam looks like he's been hit by a freight train. Zayn looks like he's going to cry. Liam is pacing with his hands fisted in his hair and Harry knows he's still trying to put together the pieces. Harry isn't surprised Zayn's already figured it out, but he hates the way Zayn's sunken into the sofa and he's got his face in his hands.

"What are we going to do?" Zayn asks, voice muffled against his palms.

"I've- Gemma knows a lot about this stuff, and she helped, but I also- erm I've been taking notes, er-looked stuff up on the internet," Harry fumbles in his pocket and pulls out the four pages of notes in his messy, panicking handwriting, "about how to get him back up to a healthy weight, if he refuses to go to the rehab facility I found. I just wrote down everything I could about anorexia in general… I don't know."

Zayn looks up at the sound of the crinkling paper and reaches out to take the notes from Harry's hands. His brown eyes are damp and he wipes the back of his hand under his nose. His eyebrows knot together when he starts to read. Harry watches as Zayn pushes himself up from the couch and goes down the hall. He leans against the wall next to Louis' bedroom door and sinks down to the
Liam turns to Harry and his eyes are wet, but he looks angry, "how long has this been going on?" he asks roughly.

"Since before I met him," Harry says softly.

"No," Liam snaps, "there's no fucking way. I would have known."

"The very first day I went to go see him in the studio he didn't eat a single bite of the scone I brought him, and he wouldn't even have a sip of the coffee, because it was too sugary. So you tell me when it started," Harry says shakily, "remember that time he almost had an anxiety attack at the Jamaican restaurant, and we came back here and he had a shower? He was purging, Liam. He was panicking because he needed to throw up all the food he ate, and we were taking too long to leave the restaurant."

"No," Liam breathes, "he always- fuck sakes, he always showers after we eat."

"I know. He showered after I made him breakfast this morning and I could hear him puking," Harry groans, rubbing his eyes.

"What- what does he look like Harry?" Liam's voice is rough, low, and scared.

Harry draws in a shaky breath, and he can't even meet Liam's eyes, "like a fucking skeleton, Liam."

Harry nearly jumps out of his skin when there's a huge crash, and his eyes go flying to the remote for the TV. It's lying shattered in pieces on the floor, beneath the wall Liam just whipped it at. He bellows out a curse and Harry flinches. Liam starts pacing again, his hands dragging through his hair and his shoulders hunched.

"How the fuck would I not know!" he yells almost at the top of his lungs, "there is no fucking way!"

The tears leak past Harry's eyelids and he wraps his arms around himself, thinking about Louis hearing this in his bedroom. He looks to Zayn, the sheets of notes are scattered around him where he threw them. His shoulders shake as he tips his head back and looks up at the ceiling, tears streaking down his face.

Harry lets himself sit down on the far corner of the couch, away from Liam's pacing, and away from Zayn's crying. Harry can't stand that Louis is tucked away in his room, probably hating him so much, and there isn't anything he can do about it. Liam lets himself sink to the floor against the wall in the living room, and he bangs his head back against the wall a few times. Not hard enough to brain himself, but hard enough that the bangs ring throughout the flat.

"Louis, we're going to get you help, love. We're going to get you into rehab, and everything is going to be okay," Zayn says softly, but loud enough for Louis to hear.

"I don't need to go to rehab!" Louis cries from inside the room, "nothing is fucking wrong!"

"How can you say that, Lou? You told us you were eating dinner with Harry every night, and you told him you were eating with us. Since when do you lie to us? How many times have I told you how much it worries me how unsteady on your feet you are? And you told me you went to the doctor, and that he said it was just a balance issue and nothing to worry about. You didn't even go to the doctor, did you? It's because you're starving." Zayn's voice is soft but Harry can feel every ounce of pain in it, "why are you doing this to yourself Louis? Why did you stop eating?"
"I eat Zayn. Fuck, I eat. Just- I just need to lose a little weight," comes Louis' soft reply through the door.

Zayn lets out a shuddery breath, "Louis, no you don't. You've never needed to lose weight. The last time I saw you naked was just before you ended it with Mitchell, remember you, Li, and I went skinny dipping?" Zayn's voice is low and wistful as he runs his hands through his hair, "you were healthy Louis. You've always had a perfect body."

"Fuck off Zayn, you know that isn't true. I've always had this fucking gut no matter what I do, these disgusting, thick thighs," Louis hisses, and Harry feels his heart aching.

Liam shoves himself up from the floor and storms down the hall to the door, "don't say that shit, Louis! You've never had a gut or thick thighs, you were perfect! And you sure as fuck don't have either of those things now, because you've been starving yourself and you're nothing but skin and bones!" Liam yells, his forehead resting against the door, "tell me why you're doing this to yourself, Louis!"

There is silence for a long time, before Harry hears a choked sob, "because I'm fucked up! Because I'm so fucking fucked up, and pathetic, and disgusting, and everybody leaves, and I fucking hate myself! Is that what you fucking want to hear, Liam? Is that what you want to hear, Zayn? For fuck sakes!" his voice is watery and shaky and pained, but angry.

Zayn and Liam are stunned into silence and Harry rakes his fingers through his curls, trying to keep himself from sobbing. Liam lets out something like a growl and Zayn releases a shaky sob. Harry pulls his knees up to his chest and fights against the tears burning the backs of his eyes. He needs to tell Louis how sorry he is, he didn't want it to go like this. He should have gotten Louis to come down to the truck.

"You are not fucked up, or pathetic, or disgusting Louis! And we fucking care!" Liam yells, his voice somehow gentle despite the volume.

"Louis," Zayn says softly, "are you doing this because of them? Because of her?"

Harry's eyebrows furrow, because he has no idea what they're talking about. Liam's sharp intake of breath indicates it's something major though. They're completely silent for a moment, waiting with bated breath for a reply. All Harry can hear is Louis' soft crying, muffled through the walls. Harry's skin is prickling, anxious to know what they mean.

"Fuck Louis, you can't fucking torture yourself like this. I thought we were done with this after all the partying, and letting guys treat you like shit! Haven't you beaten yourself up enough for something you can't control?" Liam cries, "She’s the scum of the fucking earth Louis, she doesn't have the right to make you feel like this! You're so much better than that," Liam starts crying for the first time after that, and Harry is completely lost.

"Lou, please," Zayn groans, his voice thick with tears, "you need to stop punishing yourself. We're going to get you help. Please, just open the door."

Harry holds his breath because the sobs have stopped from inside Louis' room. Liam and Zayn are completely silent too, except for the occasional sniffle. Harry hears the click of the door opening and his heart leaps into his throat, because he thinks maybe Louis is letting them in. Before he can even stand up from the couch though, Louis is shoving feebly past Liam and Zayn in his doorway, and storming through the kitchen.

Harry can't see Louis from his place on the couch until he gets to the front door, and Harry realizes
he's got a duffle bag slung over his shoulder, and his jacket and shoes on. He's out the door before Harry can even call out his name. Harry jumps up, as Liam and Zayn come rushing down the hall. Liam lunges towards the door, but Zayn tugs him back.

"Li, you're too upset to go after him. Harry, please, can you go get him," Zayn says frantically.

"He's furious at me," Harry says, but he's already at the front door shoving his shoes on.

"We shouldn't have asked about them, he isn't going to want to talk to us now, please just go," Zayn says.

"Please Harry," Liam nods, "Fuck. He left because we brought her up. You need to go get him!"

Harry has no idea who they are or who she is, but he nods quickly and yanks the door open. He bolts down the hall to the stairwell and goes thudding down the stairs double time. He briefly panics, thinking about Louis falling down the stairs because he's trying to run away. As he rounds the first landing of stairs he catches sight of Louis' heel, just as he's rounding the corner to the second landing.

"Louis," Harry calls, his voice thick with desperation, "Louis, please wait!"

He's has to dig in his heels and grab the railing to stop himself from slamming right into Louis, where he's frozen on the second landing. Harry thanks every star he didn't run into him, because all he can think about is tiny little Louis falling down the stairs and breaking every one of his bird-like bones. Louis is looking up at him with wide, wet eyes, and his eyebrows knotted together.

"Harry?" he asks, through his tears, "I- I thought you had left- left me already."

"I'm not going anywhere, Lou, when are you going to get that through your head?" Harry says softly, his voice begging Louis to believe him.

Louis lets out a choked little sob, "I'm so mad at you," he says, but it comes out more like a whimper.

Harry fights back his tears and nods, "that's okay. You can be mad, I can handle that. I'm so sorry that it went like this."

"You've completely overreacted, Harry," Louis sighs, scrubbing his hands down his face, "I'm not starving myself."

"Louis," Harry pleads, "you have to know how much you're eating isn't enough when your body is wasting away. Even if you can't see how thin you are, you have to feel hunger pains, you have to know that this is why you're so cold, and so sore, and so unsteady on your feet."

"They hate me now," Louis says shakily, gesturing up the stairs and completely ignoring Harry's statement.

"They'll never hate you Louis, they love you. I love you," Harry says earnestly, "we're just furious at ourselves for not noticing sooner."

"Not noticing how fucked up I am?" Louis chokes out.

"You're not fucked up babe, you're just- just not well. We want to help you get better. We want to help you stop doing this to yourself. Because we love you so much. I love you, and I need you, and I need you to be healthy," Harry says softly.
Louis lets out a whimper and hangs his head. Harry can't hold himself back any longer. He closes the distance between them and wraps his arms around Louis' shoulders, pulling him close. Louis freezes in Harry's arms and doesn't hug back, but he still buries his face against Harry's chest. It breaks Harry's heart when Louis lets himself cry; full sobs that shake his shoulders and wet the front of Harry's sweatshirt. Harry just holds him closer and runs his hand through Louis' hair, trying desperately not to start crying himself.

"You shouldn't have told them," Louis cries, his words muffled against Harry.

"I'm sorry Louis, I didn't want to tell them like that, but I had to tell them," Harry sighs, "we need to get you better, I can't do it on my own."

"Harry, they're going to want me to move out, now that they know how fucked up I am," Louis sobs.

"Oh my god Louis, no they're not. They love you and they want to help you. They would never want you to move out," Harry says firmly.

"Why the hell are you even still here? Why haven't you gone running and deleted my number from your phone?" Louis asks, voice pained and wet against Harry's sweatshirt.

"For Christ sake Louis, because I love you. I love you with all my bloody heart. That isn't going to change because you're ill!" Harry says.

Louis scoffs suddenly, trying to pull out of Harry's arms, "stop saying that, you make it sound like I'm dying or something! I'm on a fucking diet."

Harry just holds him closer and shakes his head, "People don't purge on diets, people don't feel the need to lie about eating on diets. Anorexia isn't a diet Louis; it's an eating disorder."

"Please stop," Louis whines softly against Harry's chest.

"You have to let us help you."

"I don't need help."

"I'm not asking you if you need help, Lou, I'm telling you that you're getting it. You can hate me all you want, but I'm not going anywhere and you're not staying on this diet," Harry says firmly, sarcasms thick on the last word.

Louis’ quiet for a long time before he speaks, "could never hate you," he mumbles, "but this is bullshit."

Harry sighs, "bullshit or not, we're getting you healthy," he says, "Can we please go back upstairs?"

Louis shakes his head quickly, "no, I- I can't- I need to stay away for a night- at least... I've let them down," he stutters, tears clogging his voice again.

"Where were you going to go?" Harry asks softly.

"Motel," Louis shrugs.

"You're coming with me."

"M'still mad at you."
"That's fine. I still love you," Harry replies.

He lets Louis out of the hug, and Louis looks down at the ground and bites his lip. Harry gently takes the duffle bag from Louis' shoulder and slings it across his own back. He reaches down and takes Louis' hand and says a silent thank you when Louis doesn't pull it away. He leads him carefully down the stairs, hyperaware of the way Louis clings to the banister for support and moves slowly. When they get out to the parking lot Harry holds open the door to his truck, and Louis climbs in without protest.

"I've gotta call Liam and Zayn, they're worried sick about you," Harry says.

"Tell them I love them and- and I'm sorry?"

"Why don't you just talk to them, love?"

"I can't, they brought up- I just can't right now," Louis mumbles hanging his head.

Harry wants so desperately to ask what this horrible subject is with 'them' and 'her', but he doesn't, because he knows the only reason he has Louis in his truck is because he isn't going to bring it up. Instead he reaches out to cup Louis' chin, and makes Louis meet his eyes. He gives Louis plenty of time to pull away but he doesn't, and their lips brush softly. Louis doesn't kiss back much, but his eyes flutter closed and he lets Harry give him a gentle kiss. Louis keeps his eyes closed and rests his head back against the seat when Harry pulls away and closes the door.

He dials Zayn while he's still outside the truck and leans on his front bumper, "is he okay?" Zayn asks frantically when he answers.

"Shaken up and mad at me. Still won't admit he has a problem. He er- he won't go back up to the flat, so I'm taking him to my dorm," Harry says.

"Right now he's probably more mad at us than you, to be honest, but I don't care as long as he lets you take care of him," Zayn says sadly.

"Why is he so mad, why did he freak out when you asked about her? Who's her?" Harry asks hesitantly, feeling immensely guilty for prying.

Zayn sucks in a sharp breath, "he hasn't told you about- about that?"

Harry's heart sinks, "I don't think so?" he says shakily.

Zayn sighs, "I'm sorry man, it's just- it's not my place to tell you. Just- I read on your notes that this isn't really about his weight, that he's beating himself up for something or he's trying to get control by controlling his food and just- you're right Harry. And I'm so sorry I can't tell you what it is but it's- it's why he did nothing but party all first year and why he let guys treat him like shit all second year. It's why he got anxious and reclusive this year but we- Li and I- thought maybe that had stopped when you two got together. We've- we thought he was doing so well because of you," Zayn takes in a shaky breath, "I'm sorry I can't tell you Harry, but we're so thankful Louis has you. Just, please take care of him?"

"I will," Harry says, mind reeling from Zayn's words, "of course I will. I think we'll stay home from class tomorrow I- I'm going to try and get him to eat something and talk to him, but I'll keep you guys updated, yeah?"

"Thanks Harry, and thank you for telling us," Zayn pauses, "and for noticing something was wrong when Li and I couldn't," he says quietly.
"You don't have to thank me for anything, I love him too," Harry says softly.

"I know. We know you do. And we're so thankful for that," Zayn sighs, "here mate, Liam wants to talk to you."

"Hey man," Liam says, before Harry has a chance to reply to Zayn.

"Hi," Harry says, still a little shaken from Liam's anger being directed at him.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have slammed you against the wall like that. I'm sorry I was so quick to assume you were in the wrong when I heard you and Louis arguing. I'm sorry for losing it at you after you told us. I'm sorry for being a dick in general. I'm just- he's just- I'm supposed to be the one to take care of him. I was supposed to take care of him and I failed and- I'm sorry you didn't deserve that, Harry. You're the best thing that's happened to the three of us because you're the best thing that has happened to Louis. Zayn and I love you man, we really do, and we just- we're just protective of Louis, but I was wrong and I'm so sorry. I'm so glad he's got you. So, so glad," Liam says, voice choked with emotion and tears.

Harry swallows past the lump in his throat and nods even if Liam can't see him, "no, I completely understand Li, but thank you. I love you both too, and I love Louis with everything I've got, and we're going to help him get better, okay?"

"Okay," Liam says shakily, "please let us know what's going on."

"Of course mate, of course. And I'll bring him home as soon as I can."

"Just- tell him how much we love him. Please."

"I will, and he asked me to tell you both he loves you and he's sorry," Harry frowns.

"He's got nothing to be sorry for," Liam protests.

"I know," Harry sighs, "I'll talk to you guys later."

"Okay," Liam says, before they hang up.

Harry pockets his phone and opens the door to his truck to climb in, "do they hate me?" Louis asks, sounding terrified.

"They love you, and they say you've got nothing to be sorry for, and they want you to come home," Harry replies.

"It's just a diet," Louis mumbles, more to himself than to Harry.

"It's not," Harry says.

"Shut up," Louis snaps.

"Okay," Harry sighs, starting the truck and pulling out of the parking stall.

"I'm sorry," Louis whispers, and when Harry looks over at him his eyes are wide and glistening.

Harry's heart clenches, "I'm not letting you go," he says, reaching out and hoping Louis will give him his hand.

Louis looks at his hand hesitantly but slips his fingers between Harry's, "you will, eventually," he
says softly, as Harry's hand envelopes his.

"Never," Harry says simply.

The rest of the ride is silent, until Harry pulls up in front of a Starbucks. Louis looks out the window warily, as Harry parks the truck. Louis picks nervously at a loose thread on his jumper, as Harry grabs his wallet out of the cup holder between them.

“Come on babe,” Harry says.

“What are we doing here?” Louis frowns.

“We’re getting something to eat,” Harry replies carefully.

“I already ate today,” Louis protests.

“I sincerely hope you’re not counting the pancakes that I made you and you purged,” Harry says slowly.

Louis’ cheeks flush but he shakes his head, “no, I ate after you left; before Liam and Zayn got home. I do eat Harry,” Louis mumbles, “I just can't eat three thousand calories worth of pancakes and still look perfect, like you can.”

“Louis, you’re already perfect to me, you'll always be perfect no matter how you look. I just need you to be healthy,” Harry says softly.

Louis carefully avoids his gaze, “I already ate today,” he says again.

“What did you eat, babe?” Harry asks gently, “and please don’t lie to me.”

“I never want to lie to you Harry! You think I get off on lying to you or something? I hate lying to you, but you wouldn’t understand. You don’t fucking understand, so I had to,” Louis sounds angry, but then his voice cracks, “I’m sorry Harry, I- just- I’ve been honest with you about everything else. I just need you to know that. I hated that I had to lie to you about my diet so I was always, always honest with you about everything else.”

Louis is getting upset again. He’s got his head hung, he’s biting that pretty pink lip of his, and Harry hates it. He gets out of the truck without a word, and Louis whimpers when he hears the door shut. Harry opens the passenger door though, and Louis looks up with wet eyes. Without a word Harry wraps his arms around Louis’ middle and holds him close, one hand slipping up under Louis’ coat to softly rub his back.

Louis lets out a little sob and buries his face against Harry’s shoulder, even though he doesn’t reach out and hold Harry in return. Harry can't stand this. He hates how perfect things were, just yesterday, before he knew. They were so happy, and they were so good together, and everything was amazing. Now they’re left to pick up the pieces, and Harry still doesn’t know if he’s going to have to fight Louis every step of the way or not.

“Hush, sweetheart. I know you hated lying, okay? And I believe that you’ve been honest about everything else,” Harry tells him truthfully, “but from here on out full honesty, okay? Even if you know it isn’t what I’m going to want to hear?”

“You’ll leave when you hear the truth!” Louis sobs into Harry’s neck.

“Hey,” Harry says, pulling back and tipping Louis’ chin up so their eyes meet, “I’m not going
anywhere. I’ll tell you that a million times a day if I have to. I love you and we’re going to get you through this; but the only way we can do that is if you swear you’ll tell me the truth even if it isn’t— isn’t good news, yeah?”

Louis sniffs as Harry gently thumbs away the tears on his cheeks, “you make it sound so simple,” he mumbles.

Harry shakes his head, “none of this is going to be simple Louis, but I’m in this for the long haul and all I’m asking for is honesty. Can you promise me that?”

Louis leans against Harry’s palm and closes his eyes, but he nods slowly, “I’ll try.”

Harry knows that has to be good enough for now, so he just nods. He ghosts his thumb across Louis’ thin, soft lips and Louis’ eyes slowly open to meet his. Again, Harry gives him time to pull away but Louis doesn’t. Harry leans forward and gives him a soft kiss. Louis lets out a small sigh when Harry pulls back and rests their foreheads together. Louis’ little hand reaches out and lays lightly against Harry’s hip. Harry breathes a small sigh of relief because it’s the first time Louis’ voluntarily touched him since the fight.

“Can you tell me what you ate, please?” Harry asks, not wanting to move and displace Louis’ hand.

Louis heaves a long suffering sigh and nods, “I had cheese on toast and a bunch of almonds and celery,” he says quietly.

“Celery takes more calories to chew than it contains,” Harry says slowly, “how many almonds?”

“Thirteen,” Louis says.

“Were you planning on eating anything else today? Any protein?” Harry asks.

“There's a lot of protein in almonds,” Louis says.

“In comparison to other nuts, Lou. Not as a substitute for your daily intake of meat,” Harry sighs, “how have you been living off that?”

"I would have had some of Li or Zayn's meat when they had dinner. I was just going to tell them I had a big lunch, and then it would be okay if I only had a little bit of meat,” he admits quietly.

"Love, that isn't enough," Harry frowns.

"Some days I eat more," Louis protests quickly, “the other night I made dinner for Zayn and Liam and I ate almost half a chicken breast and some asparagus. And today I had cheese and bread, which is dairy and carbs. Which I shouldn’t have been eating anyway, but I thought maybe we were going to have sex again tonight and I didn’t want to be too tired,” he mumbles the last bit and his cheeks flush, as he looks anywhere but Harry’s eyes, "clearly I'm an idiot though, because you're too turned off by me to ever want that again."

Harry lets out a strangled noise, "oh my god Louis, how can you say that? Please tell me you don't seriously think that!"

"Well you say I'm not fat, but you also say I'm skin and bones, and since when is that attractive? It's fine Harry, I don't blame you for being disgusted, I'm disgusted by myself too," he says softly, "just-fuck. I knew this would happen."

Harry has that all too familiar prickling at the back of his eyes as he shakes his head, "Louis," he
groans, pulling back, and making Louis look in his eyes, "Louis, I'm not turned off by you! I- fuck-making love to you was- Christ it was so good, you were so good, felt so good. And it was you, who I'm madly in love with, and who I've wanted for so long, and who I fucking fantasized about in college. Don't you ever think that it didn't mean the world to me, or that it wasn't amazing, because it did, and it was. And you are amazing.

I literally find you so beautiful, I'm so fucking attracted to you. You being too thin doesn't matter to me because I love you so much; just like you being fat wouldn't matter either. But regardless of how attracted I am to you, my brain knows that when I can count every single one of my boyfriends ribs something is wrong! You think I want to be fighting about this with you right now? No! The boyfriend that I love with all my heart has, after five long months, finally trusted me enough to show me his body, to let me touch him. You think I want to have to call you out about your eating disorder? You think I want to break your trust like that? No! So yeah, it would be so easy for me to ignore this and just love you the way you are, because I do, unconditionally and irrevocably I do, but I can't! I can't because if you keep starving yourself like this you're not going to be around for me to love Louis!"

Harry is crying by the time he's finished, and as the tears slip past Louis' eyes too, he crumples. He folds himself forward so his face is buried against the knit of Louis' jumper and Louis' arms come up to wrap around his shoulders. He can feel Louis crying, because his chest is shaking under Harry's cheek. The thought of Louis not being around anymore is just too much for Harry as his mind flashes back to all the terrifying things he read on the internet, about long term liver damage and decreased life expectancies.

"I'm not going anywhere, I promise," Louis chokes out from above Harry, "I promise, I'm fine."

Harry wrenches out of Louis' arms, "You're not fine Louis! You're anorexic!" he cries, and he'd get down on his knees and beg Louis to understand if he thought it would help.

"And you're going to leave me if I don't stop my diet?" Louis asks, roughly wiping the tears off his face, "is that what you're saying?"

Harry scoffs and shakes his head, "I'm not going anywhere, but you not stopping this diet isn't even an option. You don't have a choice anymore. Liam and Zayn and I will do whatever it takes to help you get well. You can fight us, you can fight me every single step of the way, but we're not giving up on you and I'm not leaving you."

"I don't know what you expect of me, Harry!" Louis snaps.

Harry sighs and shakes his head, resting his hands on top of Louis' too-thin thighs, "I want you to come with me into Starbucks and pick out something to eat. I'm getting a sandwich and a coffee. Just please get a sandwich, or a pastry, or a bagel, or something. You don't even have to eat it all. I just- please just try."

Louis looks at Harry with bleary, red-rimmed eyes and sighs, "I don't even fucking understand why you're still here," he hisses, turning away from Harry.

Harry watches silently as Louis pulls down the sun visor and tries to fix himself in the small mirror. Harry knows that means he's coming into Starbucks and he breathes a sigh of relief. Harry scrubs his fists under his eyes to try and get rid of his tears. Louis looks at Harry and rolls his eyes but Harry catches the poorly concealed fondness there, as Louis reaches out and rearranges his curls carefully.

"I'm here because I love you," Harry tells him, "and I'd do anything for you. And if that means making you eat even though you'll hate me for it, then I'll do it, because I need you to be healthy."
"Whatever Harry," Louis sighs, "I'm sick of sitting in this parking lot and crying like an idiot. Can we please just get this over with?"

"Okay," Harry nods, offering Louis his hand.

Louis takes it with a frown, and hops gingerly out of the truck. Harry wants to pull Louis into his side, like he usually would, but he figures he's getting lucky with a hand hold right now, and he doesn't want to push it. Harry knows that this isn't going to be easy.

He's never seen this angry, snappy side of Louis before. He's seen quiet, timid, melancholy Louis. He's seen happy, giggly, playful Louis. He's seen smart, sweet and tender Louis. He hates seeing Louis upset, defensive and mad. He knows this isn't his Louis though, this is Louis' defences in action and Harry can't blame him for that.

They make their way into the Starbucks and it's mostly empty because it's Sunday night. There are two baristas behind the bar and one of them says hi and asks what she can get them. Louis looks completely on edge and his hand tightens around Harry's.

"Just give us a minute," Harry says, with a kind smile.

The girl nods and leans back against the counter. Harry tugs Louis gently towards the pastry case and bends down to select a ham and swiss sandwich. He watches as Louis' eyes flit across all the pastries for a brief second, before he drops his gaze to the cooler bistro section underneath, where all the sandwiches and snack boxes are. There are a few bananas sitting on a tray and Louis reaches out for one.

"Not enough, love," Harry says quietly, so only Louis can hear.

Louis looks up at Harry pleadingly and Harry wants to just say yes, because he can't stand saying no to those wide blue eyes, but he has to. He gives a tiny shake of his head and Louis' minuscule pout shifts into a minuscule scowl as he turns back to the food. He reaches down for one of the bistro boxes that has apple slices, cheese and crackers, almonds and cranberries. He turns it over and stares at the nutritional information for a long time, like he's doing calculations in his head.

Harry realizes he's not going to get Louis to attempt a sandwich tonight, but he also knows cheese and crackers isn't enough. He bends down and selects a different bistro box with a hard boiled egg, a mini pita, a couple triangles of cheese and some peanut butter, along with grapes and apples. He gently pricks the first box out of Louis' hands, and gives him the second box instead.

"You need some protein sweetheart, please," he says gently, keeping his voice quiet even though he can feel the girls behind the counter watching them.

Louis turns the box over to the nutritional information and sighs. He just shrugs though, and lets Harry lead him back over to the counter. Harry orders his coffee and Louis orders his tea. Louis doesn't let go of Harry's hand while they wait for Harry's sandwich to be heated and his coffee to be made. The ride back to the dorm is completely silent, and Harry is thankful Niall isn't there when they get in.

Louis kicks off his shoes and sits on Harry's bed with his back against the wall, tucking his legs under the blankets. Harry sets Louis' duffle bag next to the bed, and puts down the tray with their drinks, and the bag with their food. He hands Louis his tea and the bistro box, and then he sits down on the bed across from him with his sandwich.

"So this is it then? This is you trying to fix me? Telling me what to eat, making sure I eat it?" Louis
asks quietly, staring at Harry over the lid of his tea.

“If that’s what I have to do, I will, babe,” Harry says softly, reaching forward and opening the bistro box for Louis, “none of us are going to ask you to sit down and eat a burger and chips. I didn’t ask you to get a sandwich or a brownie. You picked a box and all I asked was that you got one with more protein.”

“Just because you didn’t force feed me a burger tonight doesn’t mean you’re not going to try to tomorrow, or the next day,” Louis says coolly, as he reaches down and picks up a grape.

Harry watches him roll it between his fingers a few times before he finally puts it in his mouth, “no I’m not Louis. You can eat only healthy things if you want, that’s fine, you just- you’ve just gotta eat more and you have to keep it down.”

Louis looks in Harry’s eyes for the briefest of seconds before he glares back down at his food. Harry forces himself to take his sandwich out of the bag and start eating. He watches while Louis eats, painstakingly slowly. Harry has finished his sandwich by the time Louis is done with his grapes. Harry doesn’t comment, he just stands and flicks on the TV to give them some back ground noise.

“Love,” he prompts gently, when he notices Louis picking apart the mini pita and not getting any in his mouth.

“I’m eating, stop rushing me,” Louis snaps, hanging his head as his cheeks colour.

Harry sighs and nods, but reaches out and peels the top off of the peanut butter, hoping Louis will dip the pita into it. He doesn’t; the pita lays ripped apart inside the box. Louis takes the apple slices and dips them in the peanut butter instead. It’s hardly a dab, but Harry just takes it as better than nothing.

“Can you stop staring at me please, Harry,” Louis groans, “I really fucking hate it when you watch me eat.”

“Okay, sorry,” Harry mumbles quietly, trying to focus on the TV.

He tries to be more discreet after that, but he watches Louis takes a tiny bite of one of the cheese slices. He stops eating for a while, just slowly sipping his tea. Harry doesn’t nag him this time though. Eventually Louis picks up one of the halves of the hard boiled egg. Harry watches as he carefully peels the egg white away from the yolk and slowly nibbles on the white. Harry really hopes Louis is going to eat the yolk next, but instead he separates the white from the other half of the egg, and only eats that.

When he’s eaten the white he lets out a sigh, “I’m done Haz,” he says softly.

Harry takes a steadying breath and tries to stay calm, “Lou all you ate was the fruit,” he says slowly, “that’s- it’s not enough.”

Louis’ eyes flash up to meet his, “the only reason I ate any of it was because you guilted me with those fucking eyes of yours, Harry. I’m not eating more.”

“Babe, there isn’t even four hundred calories in that whole box,” Harry protests.

“Do you know that when I met you I had been eating four hundred calories a day, for a week straight?” Louis says icily, “and then you just waltzed into my life. You were always there and I couldn’t just go home and sleep until the boys came home anymore, because I was always with you. I had to start eating more, and I even started eating carbs because I needed energy to fucking keep up
with you, Harry. So I really don’t appreciate you making it seem like four hundred calories is just nothing because yeah, to you it's nothing, because you’ve got the metabolism of a race horse, but to me four hundred calories is fat that’s going to show up on the scale later!”

Harry is silent as he turns Louis’ words over in his head. No wonder he almost passed out that day, if he was eating less than four hundred calories. Harry tries not to be hurt that Louis said he just waltzed in, like Harry was some burden Louis had to put up with. He tries to tell himself Louis is just angry about the calories. He tries not to take the coldness in Louis’ voice personally. It still stings though.

“When did this start Louis?” Harry asks shakily, “when did you start your diet?”

He wants to ask why instead, but he knows he wont get a straight answer. Louis glares at Harry for a moment before he hangs his head. He’s got an arm wrapped around his waist and his shoulders are slouched, dejected. He’s already started clearing his throat, and Harry wonders if he’s trying to clear away the itch to purge. Harry doesn’t know how he didn’t notice the throat clearing before.

“Oh you want to eat something, Louis. Just tell me what else I need to eat, to get you to stop,” Louis says quietly.

Harry sighs, he kind of feels like pulling out his hair, “either that pita with the peanut butter, or the yolk of your egg and the cheese,” he says finally.

When Louis meets Harry’s eyes his are wide and pleading. “Harry, I already ate cheese today, please just- can I just eat the yolks, please?”

He just looks so frustrated, and tired, and sad, and Harry hates this. He hates doing this to Louis, no matter how well Harry knows that it’s for Louis’ own good. He knows if he says no Louis will just fight him on it anyway, he cant force feed Louis. Harry’s research told him to give Louis choices, so that even though he’s being told how much he has to eat or what he has to eat, he still feels in control. Harry knows he’s never get anywhere if he tells Louis what to do, his best bet is to ask and compromise. Tonight is only the first night, so Harry tells himself it’s better than nothing.

“Oh alright,” he says finally.

After Louis has eaten the yolks Harry stands to throw away the garbage. Louis gets out of bed and rummages around in his duffle bag until he pulls out a sweatshirt, one of Harry’s, and some pyjama pants. He strips down quickly, facing the bed and away from Harry, and steps into his pyjamas. Harry’s eyes graze Louis’ bony back as he hunches over, and he tries to keep the sadness off his face. Louis pulls the sweatshirt over his head and leaves his other clothes in a pile on the floor.

“I just want to go to sleep,” Louis says quietly.

“Okay,” Harry sighs, even though it’s barely eight.

Louis crawls into the bed and lays down without another word. He curls up in a tight little ball and faces the wall. Harry turns off the TV and strips down, pulling on a pair of pyjama pants and a t-shirt. Normally he’d sleep in only boxers, but right now he doesn’t think he should. Harry slips into bed behind Louis. He isn’t sure if he’s allowed, but he reaches out for Louis anyway.

Louis has his arms wound tightly around his stomach and his knees drawn up to his chest. Harry overlaps his arm around Louis’ waist and curls around him so his knees fit behind Louis’. His other arm slips under the pillow beneath Louis’ cheek. Louis lets out a long sigh, but doesn’t pull away. Harry breathes a sigh of relief and holds him closer, doing his best to cocoon Louis in his arms.

“We’re going to stay home from class tomorrow,” Harry says softly.
“Oh joy, something good has come of this,” Louis says sarcastically.

“Lou-"

“No Harry. Don’t bother,” Louis says, “and I’m not going to rehab.”

“We’ll talk about this stuff in the morning,” Harry replies.

“I’m not going,” Louis snaps.

Harry doesn’t say anything else, but Louis’ words play in a loop through his head. How Harry waltzed into Louis’ life. He thinks about how much Louis must resent him. He finally opened up to Harry, and Harry’s reacted like this. He knows Louis doesn’t understand that it’s for his own good. Right now Louis just feels attacked.

“Louis?” Harry asks quietly.

“What Harry?” Louis says, letting out his breath in a huff.

“D’you- Do you wish I’d never like- waltzed into your life?” he mumbles.

Louis sighs, and after a while he slowly laces his little fingers in between Harry's, "of course not Harry," he says, "I just really wish I'd never gotten my kit off."

That hurts, but Harry understands, "I love you Louis, I'm so sorry," he says softly.

"Then stop trying to change me," Louis mutters.

"Louis, I don't want to change you!" Harry exclaims, "I just need you to be healthy!"

"You don't know what's best for me."

"Clearly you're the one who doesn't know what's best for you, because you refuse to acknowledge the concept of calorie intake versus bodily function, Louis!"

"I don't need your condescension. Just because you're a science major and I'm in fashion doesn't mean you're smarter than me," Louis spits.

Harry sighs, "Louis that isn't fair, you're putting Hunter's shit on me. You know I don't think I'm smarter than you. Shit. I'm sorry I even said that, I wasn't trying to be condescending," he says carefully, "I just refuse to watch you fade away Lou. Your body is giving up."

"If you don't want to watch you're free to leave," Louis says quietly.

"Do you really think that, Louis? That I'm trying to change you?" Harry's voice shakes a little, as his breath ruffles Louis' hair.

"You don't want me like this, you say I'm too skinny. Then I'm going to get even fatter, and you're not going to want me then either. So basically I'm fucked."

Harry swallows past the lump in his throat and shakes his head, "babe, I love you unconditionally, do you know what that means? I'm not trying to change you, I'm trying to get you healthy so I don't have to worry about my boyfriend passing out or- or going into kidney failure. I'm not leaving."

"Just go to sleep Harry, I've had enough for today I think," Louis says quietly, effectively shutting down the conversation.
"I love you, Lou," Harry says, but it comes out as more of a whimper.

"Mhm," is all Louis replies.

Harry has to focus all his energy on not crying. He's fucked everything up. Louis was so close- so fucking close to believing Harry loved him. So close to saying it back. Now they're back at square one and Louis is sure Harry is going to leave again, and Louis is doubting everything Harry says. Harry bites the inside of his lip until he can taste blood, to hold in the sob lodged in his throat. He has to get Louis healthy, but that means he also has to accept that Louis is going to completely resent him. It fucking kills him.

Louis hasn't separated their twined fingers or pulled out of Harry's arms, so Harry just holds him closer and tries to keep his breathing steady. The room is silent except for the occasional soft clearing of Louis' throat. It's a small sound, just the little scratch of Louis' vocal chords, but it's incessant, like he doesn't even have control over it. Harry wonders how much Louis' aching to go purge, and his arms tighten around Louis a little more at the thought.

Neither of them fall asleep. Harry's mind is going a mile a minute and his chest is aching. Louis' breathing hasn't slowed, nor has he stopped clearing his throat every couple minutes. Harry wonders if it's the food in his gut that's keeping Louis awake. Maybe it's his anger at Harry. The latter just makes Harry's chest ache more. The prickling at the back of Harry's eyes persists, even after he shuts his lids and hides his face against Louis' hair.

When Louis still isn't asleep after half an hour Harry curls his arm up around the pillow, so his fingertips can brush through Louis' fringe. He scratches softly at Louis' scalp the way he knows Louis loves. His fingers twist the hair softly as he brushes it back. Eventually Louis lets out a small sigh and softens in Harry's arms a tiny bit. Harry knows playing with his hair always puts Louis to sleep, and it isn't long before Louis' breathing is even and steady. Harry doesn't stop even after Louis' fallen asleep, because if he stops he'll think, and if he thinks he's going to get tears in Louis' hair.

Harry is still awake when Niall slips into the room a couple hours later. Niall is quiet coming in, so Harry knows that means a late night study session with one of his friends, not a pub night. He doesn't move to acknowledge Niall, because he doesn't want to wake Louis. Harry hears him strip down behind his back and slip quietly into his bed.

Harry freezes when Louis snuffles a little, and starts to stir. His eyes are still closed when he rolls over in Harry's arms though, and he huffs a sigh, but doesn't wake. He buries closer to Harry in his sleep, his nose nuzzling into it's familiar spot right under Harry's chin. Louis sinks into Harry's arms and Harry just holds him closer, hooking their ankles together and pressing a soft kiss to Louis' hair.

There isn't an inch of space between Louis' tiny body and his own, but Harry feels like they're miles apart, and he doesn't even know which direction to start running in, to get Louis back.
Chapter 21

Harry wakes up when the sun starts slipping through the blinds, and shining across his face. The usual sense of calm washes through him, the feeling he always gets when he wakes up with Louis beside him. It only lasts for a few seconds before he remembers that everything has gone to shit, in the span of twenty four hours. Louis is still tucked under his chin, his hand fisted around the cotton of Harry's t-shirt. Niall is snoring softly on the other side of the room. Harry extracts himself carefully from Louis’ grasp, and slips out of bed.

Louis snuffles a little and curls around himself; Harry tucks the blankets back around him. Harry gently tips Niall onto his side, so his snoring doesn’t wake Louis, and then stretches out his back, his spine cracking a few times. He goes to the mirror and runs a brush through his hair, before slipping on his headband to keep his curls out of his eyes. He strips down and pulls on his running shorts and a sweatshirt, before lacing up his trainers. He brings his toothbrush and face wash to the communal bathroom to clean up, and then slips back into the dorm room to grab his iPhone, with his jogging arm band and his earphones, and a bit of cash.

Harry goes for a run almost every morning and Louis is used to it by now, so Harry doesn't have to leave a note. He'll probably be back before either Louis or Niall wake up anyway. The second he's out of the building and the crisp air is on his cheeks, Harry starts running. His feet pound the pavement and he cranks up his music; Bleeding Out starts to play.

The familiar burn in his lungs and the ache of his legs is welcomed, like his body is finally expressing the ache Harry is feeling inside. He pushes harder, chasing the pale sun just edging up over the horizon. Normally running is his escape, but it doesn’t do much to distract his mind today. There is a beautiful, albeit broken boy waiting for Harry in his bed, and he doesn’t even know if all the pieces are there for him to put back together.

By the time he gets back to his dorm building he's sweaty and hot, his legs and his lungs smouldering. He revels in it though, because it feels good to take some of his frustration out on his body. He stops at the kiosk on the main floor. The food there is simple, for people who don't have time to go all the way to the campus dining hall. He wants to grab Louis a breakfast sandwich, but he knows he won't eat it. He gets vanilla yogurt, a berry cup, and a bran muffin; hoping Louis will eat at least a bit of each. He grabs a breakfast bun for himself and Niall, and hands the elderly lady his cash.

When he gets back to the room Niall is dressing, his hair wet from the shower. Harry notices that the duvet off of Niall's bed is draped over Louis, on Harry's bed. Louis is frowning a little in his sleep, his hair fanning across the pillow.

"Woke up to the poor bloke's teeth chattering," Niall sighs.

"Yeah, he gets really cold," Harry frowns, keeping his voice low.

"Gotta get some meat on his bones," Niall adds softly.

Harry nods, swallowing past the lump in his throat, "here, got you sausage."

"Thanks a million mate," Niall says, when Harry hands him the sandwich, "so what's going on?"
"He hates me basically; he's furious at me and the boys. Got him to eat a little last night. I don't know. We haven't talked very much."

"He doesn't hate you, Haz. He'll see how much you love him, and that you're just doing this for his own good," Niall says, clapping Harry gently on the back.

"He doesn't- I don't even know if he can believe that I love him… and like, maybe he was about to, but now I've fucked it up. He won't even admit he's got a problem."

Niall lets out a long sigh around his mouthful of sandwich, and holds his arms open as he chews. Harry is sweaty and gross but Niall doesn't mind, as he somehow folds the taller boy into his arms. Harry lets out a shuddery sigh, and the tears he was trying to run away from finally catch up with him and pool in his eyes. Niall just rubs his back and Harry can feel him take another bite of his breakfast bun, but it doesn't defeat the comforting effect of the hug.

"Y'know, I was thinking last night. It's kinda like my uncle Bruce. He'll deny he's an alcoholic until he's blue in the face, even with the docs telling him his liver is shot, and he'll still drink til he blacks out, every night of the week. It's-like- it's okay to drink a bit, but if you drink too much you're an alcoholic, and it's okay to diet a bit, but if you stop eating you're anorexic. It's like the fact that their vice in moderation is okay, makes it easier for them to tell themselves they don't have a problem. Like 'I'm not an alcoholic; I'm just having a few pints', 'I'm not anorexic; I'm just watching what I eat'.

Like a crack addict can't say, 'well I'm just having one hit', because crack is crack; no matter how much you do it's bad. But with things like alcohol and food, it's easier for them to deny they have a problem," Niall says quietly, "and I know I'm rambling, but I was just thinking ya know? And like, they don't want to admit they have a problem, because that means they need to fix the problem, and they don't want to do that."

Harry sniffs and turns Niall’s words over in his head, before nodding, "so what do I do?"

"Dunno mate, but I don't think he'd be here in that bed if he hated you, and I'm kinda thinking maybe the reason you were able to get him to eat something last night was because some small part of him doesn't want to disappoint you? Like how my uncle always tries to cut back when me mam asks him to, because he loves her. I mean, obviously it isn't going to be easy or uncle Bruce wouldn't drink anymore, but if Louis is willing to listen to you even a tiny bit you've gotta use that, yeah?"

Harry nods again, "I'm going to try and get him to eat some breakfast. We're not going to class today," he says quietly.

"Yeah, good. I've gotta go or I'll be late, but call me if you need anything, Haz," Niall says as Harry straightens up out of the hug.

Niall looks down at his shirt, it’s splotched with a little of Harry's sweat, and he just laughs. Harry mumbles a 'sorry', but Niall just grins and brushes him off. He tugs the t-shirt over his head and throws it in the hamper, before he pulls a new one on and grabs his backpack.

Niall leaves and Harry tucks Louis in a little better, before he takes his shampoo and a towel to the bathrooms to have a shower. He lets himself stand under the scalding hot water for a while, the stream from the shower head doing nothing to wash away the tension along his spine.

When he gets back to the room Louis is still sleeping. He pulls on a t-shirt and a pale blue button up, with some black jeans. He sits on Niall's bed and spreads his textbooks out, to get some work done while Louis sleeps on. Liam and Zayn text him, asking how things are going. Harry tells them Louis
is still sleeping, but he ate a bit yesterday; and he tells them he’s going to try and get him to eat some more today. Harry gets one of the labs from his chemistry class written up before Louis finally stirs.

He lets out a breathy little moan in his sleep and then, "Harry?" he whimpers quietly.

"M'here babe," Harry says, pushing his books aside and jumping up.

He perches himself on the edge of the bed and pulls back the mountain formed by the two duvets, to reveal Louis' head. Louis looks up at him sleepily, and a little hand snakes out of the blankets and wraps around Harry's wrist. Louis tugs lightly, and he doesn't even have to ask out loud for Harry to know what he wants. Harry slips under the covers next to Louis, and Louis curls up in his arms, his hand fisting in Harry's t-shirt.

Harry knows Louis is still half asleep, and probably doesn't even remember how mad he is at Harry, but Harry will take what he can get. He holds Louis closer and Louis presses a kiss to Harry's neck. For a little while everything feels okay. He's got Louis in his arms, and they've got the day off, and Harry can pretend it's just another one of the days they've stayed home from school to cuddle all day.

"M'still mad at you," Louis says eventually, reminding Harry just how not okay things really are.

"I deserve it," Harry says tiredly.

That must not have been what Louis was expecting, because he tips his chin up and frowns at Harry. Harry reaches out and cups his cheek, thumb ghosting over Louis' cheekbone. Louis doesn't say anything else. He doesn't protest or pull away when Harry leans in and brushes their lips softly. They lay like that for a while before Louis eventually pushes himself up so he's sitting, and scrubs his hands down his face.

"I got you some fruit, yogurt, and a muffin," Harry says, trying to keep the hesitance out of his voice.

Louis frowns, "fuck Harry," he sighs, "can't eat all that."

"Try?" Harry asks softly, "please?"

Louis looks at Harry for a long time before he finally gives a curt nod. He unfolds himself from the bed and goes to sit at Harry's desk with the food, his back turned to Harry. He peels the top off the yogurt, dumps it on top of the berries, and begins to eat without a word. Harry is surprised, to say the least, that Louis isn't putting up a fight. He starts to eat his breakfast sandwich, and the thick silence hanging in the room is only broken up by his own chewing, and Louis' plastic spoon tapping on the side of the fruit dish while he eats.

Louis is barely half done the berries and yogurt by the time Harry is finished eating. Harry doesn't comment; he just goes back to Niall's bed and tries to take notes from his textbook, to keep himself from staring at the back of Louis' head. He watches Louis' movements from behind though, because he can't help himself. Louis tears off the top part of the muffin and sets it aside, before beginning to slowly pick at the crumbly bottom half.

When Louis is almost done the muffin Harry gets up and grabs him a water bottle from the mini fridge that he and Niall splurged on, their first week together in the dorm. Louis accepts the water with a mumbled 'thanks', and chugs more than half of it in one go. Louis doesn't flinch away when Harry runs his hands down his shoulders, or when Harry bends down to press a soft kiss behind his ear.

“Thank you,” Harry says quietly.
Louis shrugs as Harry gathers the part of the muffin he knows Louis has no intention of eating. He throws it out, along with the mostly empty fruit cup; just a little bit of yogurt and a couple blueberries left over. Harry doesn’t know how much Louis usually eats for breakfast, but he knows for Louis to eat that much without argument is something.

“I don’t have an eating disorder Harry; I was just on a diet. It isn’t a big deal,” Louis says coldly.

Harry understands then. Louis is trying to show Harry that he’s fine. That it isn’t an issue for him to eat, that he isn’t anorexic. Harry weighs his options. He knows it isn’t true, he knows it isn’t simple for Louis to eat so much in one sitting. He can tell because Louis is already starting to clear his throat. He doesn’t know if he has the energy to argue right now though, and at least Louis is eating.

“Okay, well thank you for not fighting me on it. I just want you to be healthy,” Harry says softly.

“Yeah,” Louis’ reply is short, as he stands up from the desk.

“The boys will have left for class, do you want to go back to your flat?” Harry suggests.

“Yeah,” Louis says, “I just have to use the loo, I’ll be back.”

Harry frowns, “er- yeah, I have to have a wee too, so I’ll come,” he says, trying and failing to sound casual.

“Jesus Christ Harry, do you really think I’m going to go purge in your dorms communal bathroom?” Louis snaps.

Louis states Harry’s fear like it’s completely absurd, but Harry knows there wont be anyone around because class is going on, and he knows Louis is itching to empty his stomach. He wonders if it’s become more of a compulsion than a necessity now. If maybe Louis feels like purging even if he hasn’t been forced to eat too much. He wonders if Louis likes the burn of vomit in his throat, the same way Gemma liked the drag of a blade across her skin.

“No Lou, I just actually have to have a wee,” Harry says carefully.

Louis just glowers at him, and the look in his eyes tells Harry his concern wasn’t unfounded, “fucking prat,” Louis mumbles as he walks past Harry and out the door.

Harry just sighs, and follows a safe distance behind to the bathroom. He tells himself Louis doesn’t mean it. It’s like a scared animal; cowering in the back of it’s cage, but lashing out whenever anyone gets too close. Like a dog that’s been beaten too many times to remember what it’s like to have someone pet it gently; who will try it’s best to attack the vet, no matter how badly it’s hurt. He knows Louis feels trapped and cornered and Harry hates pushing him, but someone has to mend the broken bits. No matter how terrifying it is to Louis, to have someone so close.

After the loo they don’t say much, as Harry packs up his laptop and textbooks to do homework at Louis’. Louis changes into trousers and a jumper, pulling his denim jacket on over top. He uses Harry’s brush to tame his fringe and then slings his duffle bag over his shoulder. Harry takes the duffle bag from him though, and slings it over his shoulder along with his own backpack.

Louis doesn’t say anything as they go down to Harry’s truck, and he just stares out the window the entire drive to his flat. Harry can just hear the soft clearing of Louis’ throat, over Lana Del Rey crooning through the speakers. Harry wonders if it’s because he’s itching to purge, or just a symptom of vomiting all the time.

The tension between him and Louis tugs at Harry’s heart. Like their hearts are joined by a rubber
band and Louis keeps backing farther and farther away, pulling the rubber band tight. It hurts.

Louis pads silently along behind Harry up to the flat, and then unlocks the door without a word. Harry barely has time to set down the bags, before Louis is kicking off his shoes and going down the hall towards his room. Harry goes to follow but Louis glares over his shoulder.

“Can I like, have some privacy, or what?” he snaps.

All that Harry can think about is the garbage bin in Louis’ room that he could purge in, “why baby?” Harry asks sadly.

“For fuck sakes, Harry, I just want to be alone,” Louis grunts.

“But- I was hoping- If you don’t want to do anything we could just cuddle in bed or something. We don’t have to talk, I won’t bug you,” Harry says softly.

He reaches out for Louis, his hand brushing gently down Louis’ shoulder until he catches Louis’ hand in his. Louis’ eyes follow Harry’s hand and then drag slowly back up to meet Harry’s eyes. Harry almost expects Louis to shake off his grip, but he doesn’t. His eyes search Harry’s face for a beat, before he gives a small frown.

“Fucking hate it when you do that,” he mumbles, shaking his head a little.

“Do what?” Harry frowns.

“Look at me like that. With those fucking eyes,” he grumbles, but his hand gives Harry’s a tiny squeeze.

“I just- I need you to stop pushing me away,” Harry almost whispers, because he can’t make his voice come out stronger.

Louis is quiet for a while, as they stand in the hallway. Louis’ body is half facing his room, ready to turn away, but he’s still holding Harry’s hand. He lets out a small sigh and hangs his head. He drops Harry’s hand but turns to face Harry proper; folding his arms tightly across his chest and curling in on himself a little. Harry’s hand feels empty so he reaches up, and Louis doesn’t flinch away when he carefully brushes Louis’ fringe out of his eyes.

“Haz-” he starts, pinching the bridge of his nose tiredly, “babe, I just- I’m sorry for- I’m sorry. Just- Fuck. Everything feels fucked up. I don’t want to do this with you- have to fight about what I eat, and what I do- And I don’t know how to make you understand that I’m fine.”

Harry swallows past the lump in his throat, “I don’t want to fight with you about that shit either, Louis. Fuck, I hate this. But you’re not fine, and I need you to eat, and I need to make sure you’re okay.”

“I fucking ate breakfast, Harry,” Louis groans, glaring down at the floor, “and I’m not planning on throwing up in my sock drawer.”

Harry’s cheeks flush, and he shakes his head, “isn’t about that, Lou, I- I know you’re mad at me and you have a right to be but- like, please don’t hate me? Because I really love you, and I know you’re mad but- just please don’t hate me.”

Louis’ breath hitches in his throat, and he looks up at Harry with wide eyes, “fuck, Harry I don’t- I couldn’t hate you,” he shakes his head.
“Lou just- I don’t want you locking yourself in your room by yourself-”

“I won’t Haz, just like- give me five minutes, yeah? Then we can watch a film or study or do whatever you want, okay?” Louis asks carefully.

"Why?” Harry protests, "what do you need to do for five minutes that I can't be in the room for?”

Louis opens his mouth like he's about to say something, and then he glares back down at the floor, "just fuck it. Never mind. Let’s watch a film or something.”

Louis tries to step past Harry to get to the living room, but Harry gently catches his arm, "Lou you-you promised you'd be honest with me…. can you please just tell me what you wanted to do?"

Louis shakes off Harry's grip, but won't meet his eyes, "it's nothing- it's stupid."


Louis looks up slowly to meet Harry's eyes, and frowns, a tinge of pink gracing his cheeks, "I just- I-fuck, Harry," he heaves a sigh, and shakes his head, "I just needed to weigh myself, and I would really prefer to do it in private."

Harry's stomach churns, as he tries to think of the best way to string his words together, "Lou- baby, starting now, I think- ehm.. you're going to have to stop weighing yourself, okay? Because we need to get you better and you're not going to be able to do that if you're panicking over the scale,” Harry says carefully.

Louis' eyes flash, "oh, so now you're telling me I can't fucking weigh myself? That's ace!"

"Louis how many times a day do you weigh yourself, honestly?”

"What?” Louis scoffs, "what the fuck does that matter?"

Harry sighs, "how many times?"

Louis won't meet his eyes, "a few."

"Three? Or more than that?"

"More,” Louis mumbles.

"More than five?"

Louis just nods. Harry sighs and he doesn't even think he wants to know the real number. He read about this. He knows that every time Louis steps on the scale he's probably dreading it. He knows no matter how low the number is it probably never feels good enough to Louis. He knows stepping on the scale and seeing that number rise is going to send Louis into a panic.

Harry knows any extra weight Louis will see today will just be water weight; his body fluctuating and trying to get adjusted to the food he consumed yesterday. He knows Louis' body won't even really be capable of holding onto weight, for at least a couple of digestive cycles. He also knows that Louis’ digestion has been drastically slowed due to his malnutrition; and where the average person takes a little over an hour to digest, Louis' body will take more than twice as long.

He knows all these facts, because he retained everything he read when he was researching, but the facts do nothing to make him feel better about Louis looking so broken standing in front of him.
"Lou" Harry says, gently raising Louis' chin so their eyes meet, "I can't have you obsessing about how much you weigh anymore, okay? This is about getting you healthy, not what some scale says," Louis opens his mouth to protest but Harry keeps talking, "I'm going to take your scale with me, it doesn't need to be in this flat. I-

"Harry don't be ridiculous. I'm not obsessing- I just- no. Just no. You're not taking my scale," Louis argues, "I'll stop weighing myself so much, you- no," Louis stutters, shaking his head roughly.

Harry knows where the scale is, he's noticed it at the bottom of Louis' closet before. At the time he thought nothing of it, of course, because he's an idiot and couldn't put two and two together. Harry goes to step around Louis, and Louis reaches out and clings to his arm. Harry looks down at him sadly and shakes his head. Louis' eyes are a mix of anger, frustration, and panic, and it tears at Harry.

“Lou,” he sighs.

He hates himself for it, but he just keeps walking, even with Louis tugging feebly on his arm. Louis probably wouldn't have been able to stop Harry if he was thirty pounds heavier and had an abundance of energy, because he's so small compared to Harry. As it is now though, Louis barely even made it up the stairs to the flat. Even as he tries to use all his strength to hold onto Harry's arm, Harry hardly feels it. Harry is careful; not wanting Louis to get hurt trying to stop him, but he makes it to Louis' room without a problem.

"Harry stop being a fucking prick! You can't just go in my room and steal my scale! This is utter bullshit!" Louis cries out angrily, tiny fingertips digging into Harry's bicep.

"I'm sorry," is all Harry says.

"Harry!" Louis shrieks, as Harry opens his closet.

Harry pauses when he sees the scale, sitting under one of Louis' clothing racks. There is a brown leather journal sitting on top of it, which Harry has never seen before. He bends down and picks up both the scale and the journal. Louis gasps when he sees the journal in Harry's hand and lunges for it, but Harry jerks it out of Louis' reach. He hates himself for the look of betrayal that flashes in Louis' eyes.

"What is this?" Harry asks slowly, scale tucked under his arm, and journal held in the air above Louis' head.

Louis reaches up for it, his hand clutching at Harry’s arm, as he tries to pull it down to grab the journal. Facts Harry read on the internet flash through his mind. He knows a lot of anorexics also have suicidal thoughts, but he’s told himself a million times that Louis doesn’t. He can’t even let himself think about Louis thinking those things. Now though, he’s looking at the inconspicuous journal, and Louis’ reaction to Harry having it, and all he feels is fear.

"I fucking hate you for doing this Harry," Louis hisses, "because I'm fucking smaller, and weaker, and I can't reach? How can you fucking do this to me?"

Harry falters and he feels sick to his stomach, tears prickle at the back of his eyes. Louis hates him, and at the moment Harry hates himself too. Silently Harry hands Louis the journal, and Louis snatches it away and holds it to his chest like a lifeline. He never would have read Louis' journal without permission, he was never going to open it, but the terror in Louis' eyes when he thought Harry was going to, shakes Harry to his core.

"I wasn't going to read it Louis. I- I'd never break your trust like that," Harry half whispers, his voice
shaking, "I'm sorry I shouldn't have- I'm sorry."

Louis glowers at him, and shakes his head, "this is so fucked up, Harry. Give me back my scale."

"No Louis. Because you need to gain weight, and if you see it on the scale you're going to freak out," Harry sighs around the emotion wedged in his throat, "does Liam or Zayn have a scale?" he asks, knowing he'll have to take those too.

Louis shakes his head without lessening his glare, "you can't just take that."

"I have to. I'm sorry."

"You don't fucking have to, Harry! You don't fucking have to do any of this!"

"Yes I do Louis! You have an eating disorder! You aren't thinking straight! You're fading away!"

Harry cries, the tears finally winning their battle and slipping past his lashes, "I'd rather have you hate me and be alive, than love me and be dead!"

Louis freezes, looking like he's been slapped. His eyes follow the tracks the tears are making down Harry's cheeks. Harry sees his fingers twitch, like he wants to reach out for Harry, but then his hands ball into fists. His chest is heaving, and there is a vein along his temple that's raised and angry. Even when he's getting mad though, he still looks so beautiful. His huge blue eyes flash with anger, but they're still so stunning. His pretty lips are turned down in a scowl, but Harry still wants to kiss them. His stance is angry and defensive, but Harry still just wants to hold him.

"Harry, stop being so bloody overdramatic!" Louis shouts.

Harry just whimpers and looks down at the floor, because he can't handle how upset he's made Louis. He doesn't know if he should stay, and try to calm Louis down, or if he should leave the room, and give Louis a breather. He scrubs uselessly at his eyes with a fist.

“I'm not being overdramatic Louis, I've done the research, you can’t live like this,” Harry says, in lieu of saying ‘if you continue this you’ll die’, “but I don’t want to fight."

Harry holds up his hands in surrender and backs away, the scale still tucked under his arm. Louis watches as Harry leaves the bedroom. Harry hears the door slam behind him, as he trudges down the hall to the living room. He tucks the scale in his book bag, and gets out his textbooks with the intention of trying to get some work done. He ends up just leaving his books on the coffee table and laying on the couch, curled up as small as he can go, facing the back of the sofa.

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Harry isn’t sure when he dozed off, but he wakes up to the couch shifting beneath him and a bony knee against his hip. He opens his eyes blearily, and watches silently as Louis lowers himself down over the back of the sofa. Wordlessly Louis tucks his tiny body in, with his back against Harry’s chest, and it just shows how tiny Louis is, that he fits so easily in the space between Harry and the back of the couch.

Harry just breathes a sigh of relief, and winds his arm around Louis’ waist, pulling him closer and bringing his knees up behind Louis’ to cup him in. Louis slips his little fingers between Harry’s and lets out a long, soft sigh of his own.

“Thought you had left- like left the flat,” Louis murmurs, “left- er- me.”

Harry sighs, and holds Louis a little tighter, “I’m starting to wonder if that’s what you want,” he says,
talking quietly.

Louis tenses, his fingers tightening a little around Harry’s, but he doesn’t say anything for a while. Harry wonders if maybe he’s thinking about whether that is what he really wants, or not. Harry frowns and rests his cheek against Louis’ hair. He isn’t going anywhere regardless of what Louis says, but it never feels good to be somewhere you’re not wanted.

“I don’t. Fuck Harry, I don’t want that,” Louis breathes finally, “I just need you to like- back off. Please. Like about my diet and stuff.”

Harry shakes his head, “I can’t do that, Louis. I’m not going to do that. I meant what I said, babe, you can’t live like this. You’re blood pressure is so low; you’re at risk for heart failure, kidney failure, osteoporosis, seizures. Your body can’t run on what you’ve been feeding it.”

“Harry, that is for people who don’t eat,” Louis protests, “I eat.”

“No Lou, that’s for people who are consuming significantly fewer calories than they burn. Do you know someone our age is supposed to consume a minimum of twenty five hundred calories? And those calories that you’re not getting create a deficit that your body fills by eating away at itself.”

“I know all that,” Louis snaps, automatically on edge again, “you’re not the only person who can use Google.”

“So if you know that, and you’re trying to use that knowledge to lose weight, that means you’re starving yourself on purpose,” Louis opens his mouth to argue, “Yes starving, because you’re purposely consuming fewer calories than your body needs. That is an eating disorder, Louis.”

“Maybe my diet isn’t the healthiest, but I’m not- I’m not anorexic, Harry. People who are anorexic are rail thin and I’m-”

“Jesus Christ Louis, what the do you see when you look in the mirror? There isn’t an ounce of fat on your body,” Harry sighs, his hand easily spans from one of Louis’ jagged hipbones to the other, “you weigh yourself a hundred times a day, you must know however much you weigh isn’t a healthy number.”

Louis drags in a shuddery breath, “it doesn’t fucking matter what the number on the scale says. I’ve got fucking eyes, I can see my gut, I can see the cellulite on my thighs, I can see the fat on my hips.”

“Do you know that a symptom of anorexia is distorted body image? They’ve done studies comparing the brains of anorexics, and people with diagnosed body dysmorphic disorder, and there are so many similarities it’s scary. You’re not seeing yourself properly, baby. You don’t have any fat to lose. None.”

Louis just shakes his head, “I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” he says sharply.

Harry heaves a sigh, but eventually nods, “fine Louis. But I’m not going anywhere, and you have to eat. You can yell at me and be furious at me all you want, but you need help whether you want it or not.”

Louis doesn’t say anything. He just turns around in Harry’s arms, until his nose is tucked under Harry’s chin. Harry holds him closer and hooks their ankles together, his hand goes up to card softly through the back of Louis’ hair.

“You never told me you loved me before you left my room. You always tell me you love me, even when we’re fighting.”
Louis’ voice is so soft and so broken that Harry physically feels his heart clench in his chest. He gets a sick sort of pleasure to know that if he stopped saying I love you Louis would miss it, even if maybe Louis doesn’t believe it, and even if he can’t say it back. The pleasure doesn’t last long though, because he hates himself for giving Louis even that moment of doubt.

“I love you, Louis. I love you. I love you so much it fucking hurts,” Harry whispers, pressing a kiss behind Louis’ ear after each pause, “nothing is going to change that, yeah? I love you.”

Louis doesn’t respond, except to snuffle a little and slip his hands up under the hem of Harry’s shirt. Harry holds him closer and presses a soft kiss to Louis’ cheek. They lay like that for a long while, and Louis dozes off but Harry’s mind is racing.

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Louis wakes up a little while later, and they decide to do some school work. Harry gets distracted watching Louis sketch for a while. His tiny hand flits across the page of his sketchbook, connecting lines and adding detail that Harry doesn’t understand, until the picture starts to come together. Louis has so much talent, so much creative genius, he should be so proud of who he is. It kills Harry how little Louis thinks of himself, when Harry looks at Louis and sees the whole world.

Eventually Harry feels hungry and he wonders how much of a fight lunch is going to be. It’s anything but easy, but Harry finally convinces Louis to eat some salad with tuna and cheddar cheese. He makes himself a tuna sandwich, and they eat sitting at the kitchen table together. Louis called him an asshole during the argument about lunch, but he doesn’t pull away when Harry hooks their ankles under the kitchen table.

“I love you,” Harry reminds him, after Louis eats the last bite of dressing covered tuna from the bottom of his bowl.

“Why, because I ate all my food like a good little boy?” Louis spits sarcastically.

“No Louis. I love you even when you call me an asshole, and I love you even when you push me away, and I love you even when you’re angry. But thank you for eating.”

Louis scowls, and wraps his arms tightly around his stomach, “I’d really like to go to my room and be alone right now,” he says coolly.

Harry sighs, “I’ll work on my biology review in here Lou, you can be by yourself in the living room so you can watch a film, or sketch, or whatever,” Harry offers instead, “don’t want you shut up in your room.”

Louis frowns but shrugs, and pushes himself back from the table to pad into the living room. Louis turns on the TV and settles himself in the corner of the couch, as Harry grabs his notebook and textbook to bring back into the kitchen. Harry sits at the kitchen table with the sounds of the TV and the soft clearing of Louis’ throat as background noise while he studies. He doesn’t know how to make this easier; he doesn’t know how to make this right.

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“What are you doing sitting in here?” Liam asks, when he and Zayn come through the front door, and into the kitchen that evening.

Harry sighs and closes his textbook, ”he's mad at me, and I didn't want him being cooped up in his room, so I told him I'd do my work in here to give him space.”
“Why’s he mad at you?” Zayn asks quietly, giving Harry’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

“Because I made him eat breakfast and lunch. And I took his scale,” Harry explains, “he can’t be weighing himself all the time. Do either of you have a scale in the flat?”

Liam nods, “yeah, I have one for when I’m trying to slim down for football,” he says, “I’ll grab it. Are you just taking it to your dorm?”

Harry nods, “yeah I guess,” he says, “did um- did Louis know you have a scale?”

Liam nods, “yeah, I used to keep it in the loo, but Zayn kept stubbing his toes on it in the night.”

Harry sighs and hangs his head, “Lou lied to me about that then, when I asked if either of you had one. Was probably hoping he could use yours, I suppose.”

Zayn and Liam frown at each other, and Liam lets out a heavy sigh, "he isn't a liar Harry, truly," Zayn says gently, "he's just-

"Trying to hide a bloody eating disorder," Liam supplies, sounding frustrated, "fuck, how did I not know."

Neither Harry nor Zayn say anything, because they know exactly how Liam feels, and they know nothing they say will take away that guilt. It’s the same guilt that shoves hard and incessant against Harry’s diaphragm, making it hurt to breathe. Harry wonders if Liam will ever get over that guilt, if Zayn ever will. Harry still carries the guilt of taking so long to find out about Gemma around with him, every single day of his life. He figures it will be the same, if not worse, with Louis.

"I’ll start making dinner, while you guys go talk to him,” Harry says quietly, "He was doing course work last time I checked."

Zayn nods and squeezes Harry's shoulder one last time, before holding onto Liam's arm, as they go towards the living room together. Harry clears away his books and gets the chicken breasts out of the fridge, along with some broccoli. He starts preparing the chicken with basic allspice, and sets a pot of water to boil for the brown rice.

Their voices are soft at first, mostly Zayn talking; Louis' replies murmured. Slowly Louis’ voice escalates, arguing with whatever Zayn is gently saying. Liam’s voice cuts in then, louder and firm. When Louis’ hears the word ‘rehab’ he snaps out, telling Liam to fuck off.

“If you don’t want me here, if you don’t want to deal with me, just say it, I’ll get out of your way. But I’m not fucking going to rehab!” he shouts.

“Louis don’t even say that,” Zayn says, voice smooth and calming, “we would never, ever want you to go anywhere, we’re sticking by you through this. But you have to accept our help, or I swear to god, Li and I will tie you up and drag you to the hospital.”

“You cant force me to be admitted to the hospital,” Louis spits.

“We’ll tell them you’re threatening to kill yourself, and they’ll hold you there on psychiatric watch. And they’ll shove a tube down your nose and pump you full of food,” Liam says sharply, “and if you think I’m fucking joking, you don’t know me as well as I think you do.”

The silence in the other room is so thick, Harry wonders how any of them are even breathing the air. He tries to focus on getting the broccoli in the steamer, but his heart hurts because he can hear the pain in Louis’ voice. He doesn’t fully understand their dynamic. Zayn is always the calm one, soft
spoken and soothing. Liam is the firm one, fiercely protective, with a bit of a temper. At the same time though, somehow Liam is even more tender with Louis than Zayn is.

“You wouldn’t do that to me,” Louis says, so quietly Harry has to strain to hear, “I do know you, and I know you would never, ever do that to me.”

“If it came down to it Louis, we’d do whatever we had to do to keep you alive,” Zayn says softly.

“We just need you to get better Lou. Please,” Liam says then, and Harry realizes his voice is choked with tears.

“You need to eat, bebz,” Zayn begs, sniffing slightly, “please, let us help you.”

“I ate breakfast and lunch,” Louis protests, his voice is shaky, and Harry knows all three of them are crying.

“And Harry is making dinner, and you’ll eat that too, yeah?” Liam asks, though it isn’t much of a question.

He hears Louis sigh and say something softly, Harry can’t catch the words. He’s hardly paying attention to the chicken breasts he’s turning over in the oven. There is more soft talking from the other room, Zayn’s and Louis’ voices tangling together in hushed whispers.

“He doesn’t hate you Louis, the kid loves you so fucking much,” Liam says, and he’s trying to whisper too, but his voice carries.

There is something that sounds like a protest from Louis, before Zayn speaks, “we’re not going to let you push him away Louis, he’s exactly what you need. And we’re not going to let you push us away either, because we need you, just as much as you need us,” he says softly.

“We love you so much,” Liam sighs, “and we’re so fucking sorry for not realizing you needed help sooner, I should have noticed, and I’ve let you down, and I’m so sorry.”

“Stop Liam, don’t say that,” Louis protests weakly.

“We are Lou,” Zayn says, “we should have known, we should have seen the signs. And it kills me to think that maybe you thought we didn’t care enough to notice.”

“No,” Louis mumbles, “Just stop. I don’t even know where I would be without you guys.”

There is more soft murmuring, and Harry breathes a sigh of relief. He doesn’t want them fighting; it goes against nature. He’s never seen people as close as the three of them, and he’s so glad Louis has that, he doesn’t want them fighting. He leaves the chicken in the oven to finish cooking, and adds the rice to the boiling water to cook, while they continue to talk softly in the living room. He hears his name a few times, but can’t pick up much else. He doesn’t even think he wants to know what they’re saying.

Harry sits at the table while he waits for the food to cook, because he doesn’t want to interrupt them. He feels the rubber band around his heart strain when he thinks about the fact that Louis still thinks Harry is going to hate him. Even after all this, after all the times Harry has begged him to believe in his love. He still thinks Harry could hate him. Harry’s deep in thought, chewing absentmindedly on the back of his knuckle, when arms wrap around his shoulders.

“You’re too good to me,” a little voice says; face burying in the crook of Harry’s neck.
It isn’t said like Louis is trying to say thank you to Harry, for being good to him, the playful way most people would say it. Harry knows that Louis genuinely believes it, genuinely believes he doesn’t deserve the way Harry treats him. Not even mentioning the fact that Harry was just awful to him, made Louis feel so bad, and fought with him over a scale and his journal.

“No I’m not,” Harry says.

“You are. I’ve been a massive twat. You have every right and reason to tell me to go to hell.”

“I’d never do that.”

“I don’t know why not,” Louis sighs, “but I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Harry protests.

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for.”

“I held your journal over your head like a bully in grade school,” Harry says, the guilt trickling down the back of his throat like ice water.

Louis doesn’t say anything, but his arms leave Harry’s shoulders. Harry watches him leave the kitchen and disappear down the hall without a word. He sighs and scrubs his hands down his face because he knows he’s said something else wrong now.

Before he has time to beat himself up about it though, Louis comes back. The brown leather journal is held tightly in his arms. He sits down next to Harry, and his knuckles are white where he grips the edges of the book. He clears his throat a little and Harry searches his eyes. Eventually Louis sighs, and pushes the journal across the table to Harry.

“It’s not- not like a diary or a journal or anything. Just- I write down my erm- my numbers. I weighed myself when I went to leave to the motel last night, and I- er- forgot to put it away I guess. It’s just-”

Louis sees Harry hesitating to touch it, and reaches out to open the journal for him. Harry’s eyes fall to the page. The numbers are written in neat lines, and he figures out that the first number is a weight, followed by three measurements. It’s meticulous and neat, and each page has set after set of numbers and measurements, written in perfectly straight lines.

The weights aren’t dated but they decrease slowly at first, and then quickly they get smaller and smaller. Harry feels tears stinging the back of his eyes, but he holds them in, because he knows how big this is, that Louis is showing him this. Louis is looking at him nervously, watching Harry try to keep his expression composed. Harry almost loses it when he sees the weights on the page drifting lower, towards double digits. He doesn’t even want to turn the page and see the numbers decrease. He swallows past the lump in his throat and nods, resolutely reaching forward to close the book, before he crumples.

“I just- I didn’t want that to be another thing I’ve kept from you,” Louis mumbles, eyes fixed on the journal, “maybe it’s a little fucked up, and maybe it’s not healthy but I- I’m a- I’m fucked up and you haven’t run yet, so I figure maybe I owe it to you to- to let you see- let you see it all, so you can- erm.. make an informed decision?”

“An informed decision about what?” Harry asks, voice rough with unshed tears.

“Leaving.”
Harry sighs and reaches out for Louis’ hand, “m’not leaving,” he says earnestly, “but thank you for showing me.”

Harry knows Louis doesn’t believe it, but Louis nods and gives Harry’s hand a little squeeze, before letting go. Louis looks almost hesitant as he bends down and brushes his lips softly against Harry’s in a kiss. He disappears back to his room, with the journal clutched to his chest. Harry wonders what he’ll do with it, and if it’s healthy to let him keep it.

The oven beeps and Harry pushes himself up, with his thoughts jumbled, and sets about getting the food together. Louis comes back in the kitchen after putting away his journal, and Harry almost misses the frown that crosses his face when he sees the food. Harry plates his, Liam's, and Zayn's food first; large portions like they're used to eating. Louis hovers beside him, his fingers curled lightly in the back of Harry's shirt. Harry realizes he's nervous.

Harry knows it's because this is the first real dinner Louis is going to eat with them that he has to keep down. Harry wonders when the last time Louis had a proper dinner was, without purging. Harry tips his chin and plants a soft kiss to Louis' hair. Louis gives a little sigh and rests his cheek against Harry's arm. Harry knows he has to start small, not just to avoid making Louis uncomfortable, but also because Louis' body can't handle so much food. Today will be the first time he's eaten three square meals in a long time.

Harry selects the smallest chicken breast, but he doubts Louis will be able to eat it all. He puts two scoops of broccoli on the plate, and only one scoop of brown rice, because he knows carbs are the hardest for Louis to stomach. Louis frowns and sighs, but accepts the plate when Harry hands it to him with a soft ‘thank you’. Harry calls the other two into the kitchen when their plates are set at the table. They take their seats as Harry pours them all milk, getting a water bottle for Louis.

"That's all you're going to eat?" Liam asks incredulously, as Harry sits down next to Louis.

Louis stiffens from where he was looking despairingly at the food in front of him, and Harry hates it. He's already struggling so much just to take his first bite. He already had to force himself to swallow his lunch, and then spent hours after, resisting the urge to vomit. He's sitting at the table with the intention of eating dinner, and not purging, and Harry really doesn't think it’s fair to ask anything else of him. He knows Liam isn't trying to be rude, but he clearly doesn't understand.

"We're taking things slow, Li," Harry explains, "he's not going to purge any of it, are you babe?"

Louis shakes his head, but keeps his eyes locked on his plate, "no," he mumbles, "I won't."

"Yeah but- like- how are you going to put on any weight if you're eating so little. You should be having like, two chicken breasts and more rice," Liam argues.

"Liam it's better for him to eat less, and keep it down, than to stuff himself, and sneak off to throw it up," Zayn tries to explain calmly.

Louis winces at the words though, and Harry knows it's from Zayn saying he'd be sneaky. Zayn understands that they can't rush Louis, but he's just made Louis feel like crap, when he's already so anxious about eating. Harry doesn't know how to protect Louis from this, from his best mates, who really only have his best interests at heart. He just doesn't want Louis' first dinner experience to be so stressful.

"Well, he just said he's not going to puke it up, so he should be eating way more," Liam replies Zayn.
"Liam, he's barely been eating anything before now," Zayn says, "I know it's not much-"

"Actually, Louis' done really good today," Harry cuts in, because he can't watch Louis wilt away anymore, "he had a really good breakfast, and a really good lunch, and he's eating dinner. He'll have eaten three full meals without purging, and that's really good. He's doing good."

Harry doesn't miss the almost imperceptible look of gratitude that Louis sends him, before Louis' eyes fall back on his plate. Harry starts eating then, and thankfully Zayn and Liam follow suit, without further protest. He watches as Louis slowly starts to cut at his chicken. He still cuts each piece habitually, even and small, but he puts each piece in his mouth now. It's slow, but at least he isn't hiding his food on the edge of his plate. He spears a broccoli and nibbles at it slowly, and then chews a forkful of rice for a long time. Harry is used to the slow pace, he's just glad Louis is eating.

The tension around the table is thick. Normally they talk and laugh. Harry realizes now that a lot of it was Louis keeping them all talking, so they wouldn't notice him not eating, but still. The only sounds are the scrape of knives on plates, and muffled chewing. Louis is completely uncomfortable to be eating, let alone at a table with three people watching his every move. Harry wishes Liam and Zayn would stop staring, and frowning like they're both itching to reach across the table and spoon feed Louis, but he knows he isn't much better.

"Louis, why are you cutting the pieces so small, just eat normally," Liam says.

Harry can tell it's meant to be a gentle tone of voice, and he knows Liam is just stressed and worried, but Louis freezes, his fork half raised to his mouth. Harry kind of wants to strangle Liam, because he just doesn't get that he's making this so much harder. Louis' hand shakes as he lowers his fork back down to the plate with a clatter. Without a word he pushes himself back from the table, and stands up.

"Lou, where are you going?" Zayn asks quickly.

"I just don't want your food getting cold mate," Liam tries to say, "sit back down, you need to eat."

Louis eyes flash, his knuckles white on the edge of the table, "I was fucking eating. But it wasn't fucking good enough," he says, and there is anger in his voice but Harry hears the pain too.

Louis turns on his heel and storms out of the kitchen, his bedroom door slamming shut behind him. Liam lets out something reminiscent of a growl, and slams his fist down on the table, hissing out a curse. Zayn squeezes his bicep and mutters for him to stop. Harry sighs and looks down at his plate. His, like Liam's and Zayn's is half empty, Louis' is barely touched. He's pissed off at Liam for being so dense, so tactless. The look Zayn is giving Liam shows that he feels the same way.

"You know, it's really, really hard for him to eat, when he knows he isn't going to be able to purge later. I- I know it's hard, because you just want to stuff him with food to help him gain weight, but we can't do that. It's in his head Liam, he's hated food for a long time and avoided eating it as much as possible. It's hard for him to just eat," Harry says, trying to keep his voice calm, "he really is trying."

"I'm sorry, I just-" Liam groans and scrubs a hand roughly down his face, "I'm so fucking angry that it's gotten this bad, and I just want it fixed now."

"I've been friends with these two for years Harry, they'll fight and they'll yell, because both of them are hot headed and stubborn, but they always figure it out," Zayn says, looking pointedly at Liam, "but he listens to you, and- you know the most about this stuff. So just please, tell us how to help, because clearly tough love isn't the right way to go," Liam hangs his head under Zayn's meaningful
glare.

Harry sighs and nods, standing up and grabbing he and Louis' plates, and Louis' water, "we just have to be patient with him. If we push too hard he'll stop trying all together," he says slowly, "I'll go try and get him to eat."

Liam and Zayn nod, Liam looking as guilty as Harry thinks he should feel. He knows Liam didn't mean it, but he also knows Louis is trying, and they don't need any more setbacks. Before he's halfway down the hall he can hear Zayn's voice, low and frustrated, telling Liam off. Liam doesn't even argue back. Harry pauses outside Louis' door, and he can't knock because his hands are full.

"Baby, it's me, can you come open the door, please?" he calls softly.

He hears sniffling and the mattress creaking, followed by the padding of little feet, before the knob turns. When Louis opens the door his eyes are puffy and wet, his fringe a mess from burying his face into the pillow. He looks up at Harry sadly, as he steps aside to let him in, and then closes the door behind them. Harry sets the plates on Louis' desk, and reaches out for the small boy whose shoulders are shaking.

"I'm fucking trying," Louis spits, as soon as he's in Harry's arms.

"I know sweetheart, I know you are," Harry replies, gently leading Louis to the bed.

Louis tucks himself up on Harry's lap, "like it's so fucking easy for me to just stuff my face! Because Zayn could eat three cheeseburgers a day and still be model thin, and Liam takes extra protein to bulk up! But if I sit down and I eat anything it all fucking glues itself right to my gut, and my hips, and my ass, and my thighs!"

"Love, they didn't mean any harm-"

"I've felt so fucking full, all fucking day! The minute I stopped feeling stuffed from breakfast I had to eat lunch, and I just stopped feeling bloated from lunch, and then I'm eating again! But sure, just make me eat two chicken breasts and more rice, Harry, I need more rice!" he says angrily, mocking Liam's words.

"They're just worried about you, honey, they don't understand just yet," Harry tries.

"This is such bullshit Harry! I don't need them hovering over me, telling me what to eat, and when to eat, and fucking how to eat!"

"But you need to eat," Harry interjects quietly.

Louis lets out an angry huff, and hides his face against Harry's neck, "I'm fucking trying."

"I know sweetheart, I know."

Louis sighs, long and shaky, and stays tucked up in Harry's arms for a long while, without another word.

Eventually Harry coaxes him into eating his dinner, and Louis manages almost all of his chicken breast, most of his broccoli, and half of his rice. It takes him a long time, but Harry waits patiently, pretending to watch the telly as he sits next to Louis on the bed. He finished his dinner long ago, so he keeps a hand busy, tracing nonsensical patterns up and down Louis' back while Louis eats.

After Louis is finished, Harry sets the plates aside and Louis lays across his chest. Harry's fingertips
continue their meaningless path around Louis' back, with the TV playing in the background. The clearing of Louis' throat is the only sign he's still awake as he lays perfectly still, his tiny fingers curled loosely around Harry's collarbone. Harry pretends to watch TV, Louis pretends he isn’t dying to go purge.

"Thank you for eating so well today," Harry says later, after they’ve gotten ready for bed, cuddled up, and on the verge of sleep.

"Stop thanking me like I'm some toddler who managed to behave," Louis mumbles, but his voice isn't sharp this time.

Harry frowns, "I love you, okay?" he says instead.

Louis just says, "Mhm" but it isn't disbelieving, or sarcastic, or cold; just tired.

Chapter End Notes

seriously guys your comments and kudos mean the world to me thank you so much, i dont reply the comments because i dont want to clog the thread but you guys are way too kind and thank you for reading. for more fading stuff my tumblr is tothemoonmydear.tumblr.com <3
Harry is digging around in the fridge when he hears footsteps padding into the kitchen behind him.

“Hey mate,” Liam says, when Harry looks over his shoulder.

“Morning Li,” Harry says, giving a small smile.

“Listen, I’m really sorry about last night. I was a complete arse. I should have just kept my mouth shut,” he says, “honesty like- literally thank god for you Harry, because clearly I don’t know how to help Louis. You’ve managed to get him to eat three full meals, and all I’ve managed to do was hurt him more.”

Harry shakes his head, “I’m honestly just as out of my depth with this as you are, man. But I know you just love him, and I know how you feel. It’s frustrating, this whole situation is shitty.”

“I’m just so angry. I’m so mad at myself for not noticing,” Liam swallows thickly, “and what terrifies me the most is….like- fuck Harry what if you’d never come along? What if you two never got together, or Louis never got his kit off with you. What if we had never noticed, and one day Louis’ heart just stopped, and we didn’t fucking know why, until the paramedics cut off his clothes, and he was nothing but bones. I can’t- I’ll never fucking forgive myself for failing him like that. I’m supposed to keep him safe. I swore I’d keep him safe.”

Liam’s voice is shaking by the time he’s finished, and Harry knows how that feels. He knows what it’s like to play every ‘what if’ scenario over in your head, and add guilt to your heap, with each way you’ve failed. He knows what it feels like to realize you’ve made a mistake with someone else’s life, just by not being observant enough. He reaches out and pulls Liam into a hug. Liam squeezes him tightly, and buries his face in Harry’s chest, breathing in shakily.

“You can’t think about that, mate. At least now we know. You just have to remember how hard this is for Louis right now. He feels like he’s losing control, and he’s going to lash out and we can’t- we need to be the calm ones. We need to show him that it’s going to be okay,” Harry tries to explain, “because if we push Louis too hard and he just says ‘fuck it I’m not eating at all’ then what are we going to do? Force him into the hospital and have him hate us? Watch him shrivel up and die? Just think about how little he was eating before; anything he eats now is progress.”

Liam sniffles and nods, "okay," he says, "okay."

"Okay," Harry agrees.

It's quiet for a while before Liam speaks, "you know Haz, I've never seen Lou look at anyone the way he looks at you," he says quietly, "that's how I knew right away that you were good for him. Because he'd seemed so numb for so long, but his eyes always lit up when he talked about you, even when he didn't let it show on his face. And then we met you, and I saw the way you looked at him, and I never questioned it after that."

Harry lets Liam's words wash over him and he feels his heart clench, "I love him so much," Harry says softly.

"I know you do. And I know he hasn't said it back, but you've gotta know that he cares about you so
much, Harry. It scares him how much he cares. He's never even come close to feeling like this about somebody before, he's never let himself before. The fact that he's putting himself out there like that, for you, is worth so much more than three words," Liam tells him earnestly.

Harry nods, swallowing hard past the emotion in his throat, "I don't need him to say it. I'm just glad he lets me stick around," he says honestly.

Liam nods, "I'm glad he does too," he says, "Now I need to go apologize."

Harry nods, hoping Louis will be okay with that. He's seen Louis and Liam bicker before, but never really fight. He doesn't know if he should tell Liam to give him some space still; he saw in Louis' eyes how hurt he was last night. Liam gives Harry a last squeeze, and then pads down the hall, knocking lightly on Louis' door.

Harry busies himself at the stove making eggs, but he listens to make sure their voices stay soft. He knows Liam and Louis are family, and he knows he should stay out of it, but he doesn't want them yelling at each other. Not long after, he hears Zayn's door open down the hall, and Zayn slips into Louis' bedroom too.

Harry makes a stack of toast and a heap of scrambled eggs, because he knows Liam and Zayn are just as hungry as he always is in the mornings. He sets the plate of eggs and the stack of toast in the middle of the table for the boys to serve themselves. Harry plates Louis' breakfast for him though, because he knows it will be easier if Louis doesn't have a chance to argue over how much is put on his plate.

He cuts up some fruit and arranges it neatly on Louis' plate, next to one slice of lightly buttered toast and two scoops of eggs. He knows Louis would blanche at more than one piece of toast, so the fruit has to make up for it.

"Breakfast is ready," he calls down the hall, before going to put the kettle on.

He hears three sets of feet coming into the kitchen as he's pouring Louis' tea. He turns around and finds Louis in between Liam and Zayn, tucked under their arms. All three of them are smiling softly, talking quietly amongst themselves. Liam says something and presses a kiss to Louis' sleep mussed hair, Zayn kisses Louis' temple. Louis pulls Zayn a little closer, and nuzzles into Liam's neck.

Harry thinks maybe he should be jealous of how close they are, but he never has been. He sees the dynamic between the three of them. They really are like a family in the purest sense of the word. Zayn is the gentle, doting matriarch; Liam is the protective, but loving patriarch. Louis had made a joke about them babying him once, but Harry knows it's true. It's the way they talk over Louis' head, the way they exchange looks of concern. It's in the fondness in their eyes when they look at him. They love him purely and honestly, and Harry could never be jealous of that, he's just thankful that Louis has that.

It's also hard to be jealous when the second Louis' eyes land on Harry, his entire face softens and he gives Harry that special smile reserved just for him. It still makes Harry weak in the knees. Louis disentangles himself from the boys and comes over to Harry, wrapping his arms around Harry's waist, and nuzzling into Harry's chest. Harry presses a kiss to Louis' forehead, and Liam and Zayn beam at him behind Louis.

Louis' face falls a little when Harry hands him his plate, but he sits down between Harry and Liam at the table, without any argument. This time Liam and Zayn do their absolute best not to stare at Louis while he eats; they even manage to keep up a pretty decent conversation about exam prep. Nobody comments on the time Louis takes nibbling on his fruit, or how the forkfuls he takes of egg are so
small. Harry is happy when Louis takes decent sized bite of his toast, even if he does chew it an unnecessary amount of times.

The boys finish eating before Louis is even half done, and they linger for a bit. The atmosphere gets uncomfortable quickly, because Louis can feel them watching him. Liam and Zayn look to Harry, Zayn subtly nodding his head towards the door, silently asking if they should leave. Harry gives a tiny nod and a reassuring smile, because it is definitely best for them to go.

"Bebz we've got to head to school, gotta stop at the library," Zayn says, standing up and bringing his plate to the sink.

"Thanks so much for breakfast mate," Liam says to Harry.

"Yeah, thanks Haz," Zayn adds.

"No problem," Harry replies, "see you guys for dinner."

Liam goes to Louis, and bends down to plant a kiss on his forehead, "love you, Lou," he says softly.

"Love you too," Louis replies, managing a weak smile.

"You're doing so good, love," Zayn murmurs, smoothing down Louis' tousled fringe.

"Love you," Louis says.

"Love you too," Zayn smiles, "see you guys later, text us if you need anything."

"Oh Harry, invite Niall over for dinner, yeah? I've seen him in the cafeteria eating crap food all week," Liam suggests.

Harry laughs, nodding, "yeah, will do," he says.

The boys gather their backpacks and laptops, and leave the flat. Louis breathes an audible sigh of relief once they're gone. Harry watches as some of the tension leaves his shoulders, and he picks up his nibbled at piece of toast again. His eyes meet Harry's, and Harry hopes Louis can see how proud he is of him. He thinks maybe Louis can, because he gives a small smile and takes a larger bite of his toast.

"You alright with that, babe? Niall coming to dinner?" Harry asks.

Louis shrugs, "yeah, I mean, you've told him about- my issue, yeah?"

Harry nods, a little sheepishly, "yeah, sorry..."

"It's fine, Harry, I figured you would," Louis rolls his eyes, "yeah, invite the kid. He always keeps Liam and Zayn in a good mood."

"Alright. Everything is okay with you three then?" Harry asks, as he sips his milk and tries not to watch Louis chew.

Louis swallows and nods, "We've never had a fight last longer than a day," he says softly, "they're all I've got. I'm really lucky that they put up with me."

Louis' words hit Harry like a smack to the face. He doesn't want to be petulant, but it hurts. It hurts that Louis doesn't even acknowledge him. Maybe he isn't jealous of when the other boys snuggle Louis, or give him fond kisses, but it's a bit more of a struggle not to get jealous of how freely and
easily Louis will tell them he loves them. Harry knows the three of them have been together forever, even before things got hard for Louis, so he understands that it isn't the same for Louis to say the three words to Harry.

He gets that, he really does. And he meant what he said to Liam about being happy to be in Louis' life at all, about not needing to hear the words. It just hurts when Louis won't even acknowledge Harry as a person who is there for him. A person he has in his corner, a person who cares. Because Harry cares so fucking much.

He doesn't say anything, but his shoulders droop a little, and he doesn't bother brushing his hair away when his curls fall in his eyes. The silence lingers at the table as Louis eats a bit of egg. Harry tries to compose himself, he doesn't think he should be surprised that Louis doesn't count him, but it still stings.

"Babe? What's wrong?" Louis asks eventually.

"I mean- you've got me, Louis," Harry says sadly, finally meeting Louis' eyes, "I just- I wish you realized that you have me. They're not all you've got. I'm right here."

Louis only looks confused for a moment, before understanding crosses his face, and he sighs, "I know you're here," he says quietly, "thank you."

The 'here for now' goes unspoken, but Harry knows Louis still doesn't really believe he has him. He doesn't really believe that Harry is something permanent. Harry just shrugs. It doesn't really feel like enough, but he can't really ask for more either. He just tries to ignore that pathetic throbbing of his heart. They're quiet as Louis forces himself to eat.

When Louis is done Harry stands up to take the plates to the sink, and scrapes Louis’ left over crusts into the bin. He goes back over to the table and sits down, reaching a hand out to Louis. Louis looks at it and frowns, but eventually places his little hand in Harry’s. Harry tugs gently, pulling Louis up and over, into his lap. Louis still squirms a little, but he doesn't protest. He winds his arms around Harry’s neck, and rests a cheek against his curls with a huff.

“I’ve gotta shower before school. Are you going to make me leave the door open, so you can make sure I don’t purge, or are you just planning on listening through the crack under the door,” Louis says dryly.

Harry runs his fingertips up and down Louis spine, “I was hoping maybe we could shower together,” he says slowly.

Louis completely freezes in his lap, and Harry is pretty sure he’s holding his breath, “Harry-"

“Please, babe. Just trust me. I’ve already seen your body, and I love you. I want to be close to you again. I want you to let me back in,” Harry asks softly, lips bruising lightly at Louis’ neck.

“I let you in once, and you diagnosed me with an eating disorder, told my friends, and started force feeding me,” Louis says coolly, his fingertips fidgeting nervously in Harry’s hair.

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“Louis, I’m so sorry. I wish- I didn’t want to have to do that after the first time you finally let me see you. I can’t stand that you think I’m turned off by you or something, because I’m not. I love every single inch of you, I just need you to be healthy. I don’t- I don’t want us to move backwards. You still let me hold you, let me touch you, just- I can’t stand it when you try to hide yourself when you’re changing, or cover yourself up in bed. Just- please let me have you. I want all of you.”

Louis draws in a shaky breath, it puffs against Harry’s hair when he exhales, “I’ve never showered
“It will be lovely, Louis. Let me take care of you. We’ve got plenty of time before school,” Harry asks, not even caring that it sounds like he’s begging.

“I feel bloated and disgusting,” Louis says, so quietly, punctuated by the soft clearing of his throat.

“I can make you feel good,” Harry says, just as quietly, punctuated by a soft kiss to Louis’ collarbone.

Louis makes a tiny keening sound, and nuzzles his nose against Harry’s hair. Harry’s hands move to his hips, his thumbs rubbing soft circles into the sharp bones. He kisses along Louis’ jaw, his lips extra soft behind Louis’ ear, tongue brushing softly at his earlobe. Louis’ fingers tighten incrementally in Harry’s hair, and his head tips back, exposing the thin column of his neck to Harry’s lips.

Harry kisses up his neck, slowly, sucking softly at the skin, until he reaches Louis’ lips. He kisses tentatively at first, not wanting to move too fast for Louis. Louis responds, kissing back slowly, his fingers sliding through Harry’s hair. When Louis’ lips finally part Harry licks gently into his mouth, Louis’ cheek cradled in his palm.

Louis sighs into Harry’s mouth, pushing forward to deepen the kiss. Harry aches for it; it’s been way too long since they’ve kissed proper. Since the morning after their first time, all the kisses they’ve shared have been chaste and a little stiff, weighed down by all the shit going on between them. Finally the passion is between them again, lighting Harry on fire.

“Okay,” Louis hums, “okay but- okay.”

Harry doesn’t say anything else, just keeps their lips joined. He slips his arm behind Louis’ knees and lifts him, far too easily, with his other arm behind Louis’ back. Louis squeaks and pulls away from the kiss, worry flashing in his eyes. Harry doesn’t want to hear what he has to say about being too heavy, so he surges forward again, kissing him deeply, as he carries his tiny body down the hall to the bathroom.

“I love you,” Harry murmurs, his lips moving to Louis’ neck as he sets him down on the counter next to the sink, “fuck Louis, I just love you so much.”

Louis’ eyes flutter closed, and he tips his head back, letting Harry suck at his pulse point. He freezes a little when Harry’s hands slip under the hem of his jumper. Harry slowly and carefully lifts the sweater up, exposing his skin. Louis draws his arms out of the sleeves, but they wrap protectively around his middle right away. Harry breaks away from Louis’ skin to get the jumper over his head.

“Harry,” Louis whines softly, and Harry knows he’s uncomfortable being bare.

“Oh okay baby, it’s okay,” Harry coos, giving Louis a soft kiss.

Louis watches silently, with kiss bitten lips, as Harry drags his own t-shirt over his head and steps quickly out of his boxers. Harry turns the shower on, making sure the water is just the right temperature to warm Louis’ bones. He goes back to Louis where he is sitting with his arms crossed tightly in front of him, shrinking in on himself, because he’s exposed. It breaks Harry’s heart.

“M’cold,” Louis whimpers, and Harry doesn’t miss the way he’s pinching the skin of his arm between his finger and thumb.

“I’ll warm you up love,” Harry tells him softly.
He reaches out and gently stops the movement of Louis’ hand, pulling it away from his arm. Louis blushes, and Harry knows he didn’t even realize he was doing it. It scares Harry the way Louis will pick at himself like that sometimes, like he’s absentmindedly trying to cause himself pain or something.

Louis won’t meet his eyes, but when Harry steps close he lets his forehead rest on Harry’s shoulder. Harry reaches out and gently lifts him off the counter, setting him carefully on his feet. Louis’ forehead doesn’t leave Harry’s shoulder as Harry reaches down, and unties the drawstring of Louis’ pyjama pants. They drop, and pool around Louis’ ankles.

Harry slowly and softly slips his hands down the back of Louis’ boxers, sliding them down Louis’ bum, until he’s naked. Louis lets out a shiver, and presses himself closer to Harry; his elbows bent and his fists tucked under his chin, against Harry’s chest. Harry wraps his arms around Louis, and presses a kiss to the top of his head.

Behind Louis’ the mirror stretches along the wall. Harry sees Louis’ back, hunched over, where he’s tucked himself against Harry. Each vertebrae in his spine pops out beneath his skin, he can see each rib moving as Louis takes in small breaths. Harry knows how small Louis is compared to him, but seeing it like this, reflected back to him in the mirror, takes his breath away.

Harry has to pry his eyes away, as he gently leads Louis over to the shower, pulling back the shower curtain and letting out some steam. He holds Louis steady as he steps over the edge of the tub, because he’s eating now but he’s still unsteady on his feet. Louis looks up at him with sad eyes, standing away from the spray of water as he waits for Harry to step in.

Harry gets in, and gently guides Louis under the spray; after double checking the temperature on his own arm. The water hits Louis’ skin, and he breathes out a sigh of relief as it chases away the cold. Harry watches as Louis tips his chin back, letting the water wash through his hair and down his back, but his arms stay wrapped around himself protectively. Harry steps forward and presses his lips to the wet skin of Louis’ neck. Water splashes onto his face but he doesn’t mind, as Louis’ fingers wind through his hair.

“So beautiful,” Harry whispers against Louis’ skin, “Louis, you are so beautiful.”

Louis makes a broken little sound, and Harry feels the vibrations under his lips. Harry moves across Louis’ collarbones, down his chest, and back up, before nipping and sucking a bruise into the junction of Louis’ neck and shoulder. Goosebumps raise on Louis’ skin despite the warm water, and he hums softly, barely a breath, when Harry’s teeth drag lightly.

Harry straightens up, and runs his hands through Louis’ hair, tipping Louis’ head back gently to wet it again. Louis watches silently as Harry squirts some shampoo into his palm. He reaches out and begins to work the shampoo against Louis’ scalp, his fingers almost wrapping completely around Louis’ head. Harry massages and scrubs, nails scratching softly.

Louis closes his eyes, releasing a soft moan as he steps closer to Harry. His arms wind around Harry’s waist, and he sinks against Harry’s chest. He nuzzles his nose into the hollow at the base of Harry’s throat as Harry continues to massage.

“Feels so good,” Louis whispers, barely audible over the running water.

“Hasn’t anyone ever washed your hair for you baby?” Harry asks softly.

“Just the barber, but not like this,” he murmurs.
Harry works the lather though Louis’ fringe, “I’ll wash your hair for you every single day, if you’ll let me, Lou,” he offers.

Louis just keens, and his fingers drag down Harry’s lower back a little. He whines softly when Harry stops massaging his scalp. Harry tips Louis’ head back under the water and delicately rinses out the suds, careful not to get any in Louis’ eyes.

Harry spreads a bit of conditioner between his fingers and drags it softly through Louis’ hair. When Louis finally opens his eyes, they’re soft, and he looks soothed, his head lolling a bit to the side. Harry tips his chin down and steals a kiss, lingering with their foreheads pressed, before kissing Louis again. Louis looks up at him with a sad little smile as Harry reaches beside him for the loofa, and the body wash.

Harry lathers up the loofa under the spray of water, and then slowly begins to slide it across Louis’ skin, washing him gently. Louis flinches a little when Harry runs the loofa across his sunken stomach, and around his hips, but he doesn’t protest. Harry folds to reach Louis’ painfully thin legs, his movements gentle as he scrubs softly at Louis’ skin.

Louis holds onto his shoulders when Harry lifts up each foot, and scrubs between Louis’ toes, massaging while he cleans. Louis loves foot massages, and Harry loves the way one of Louis’ feet is about the same length of his hand, from the base of his palm to the tip of his middle finger.

When he straightens up again he turns Louis around, so the water is on his chest. Carefully and slowly, Harry works his fingertips into Louis’ shoulders. It’s nothing like a massage he’d give anyone else, because Louis’ skin is paper thin, and there is no flesh to cover his bones, so he has to be careful. He rubs softly, tracing lines and swirls across Louis’ back and shoulders. Louis releases a long suffering sigh and melts under Harry’s hands, murmuring softly while Harry massages carefully.

While Louis is still pliant and relaxed, Harry lowers himself down to his knees, and turns Louis back around. When Louis opens his eyes he looks down at Harry with his lip drawn between his teeth. He’s half hard already, and Harry can see the dark tinge to his baby blue eyes. Harry feels himself slowly filling at the sight of it, at the sight of Louis’ swollen pink lip whitening, as he bites down on it.

Harry leans forward, pressing his lips softly to Louis’ hip bone, “you’re perfect,” he whispers against it.

“Harry-” Louis whines softly.

“You’re beautiful,” Harry says, sucking against the other hip bone, where the bruise from their first time is just beginning to fade.

“No,” Louis whispers.

“I love you with everything I’ve got, Louis,” Harry says, as he slowly brushes his lips just below Louis’ belly button.

Louis goes to squirm away, but Harry gently holds him steady, his hands cupping Louis’ hips and bum. Harry runs his lips over every inch of skin on Louis’ stomach, pulled taut between his hipbones. It's still terrifying how thin Louis is, but even with his cracks, and his flaws, and his weakness, Louis is still the most beautiful person Harry’s ever seen.

Louis’ fingers tug a little at Harry’s hair, and Harry can feel how quick his breaths are coming
beneath his lips. He doesn’t protest though, as Harry’s mouth travels down the crease between his leg and his groin. He keens when Harry kisses at the inside of his thigh, when Harry's tongue slides up the crease of his hip joint.

Louis is fully hard, flushed and straining at his foreskin, by the time Harry gets to his cock. Harry licks a stripe up the underside, his tongue dragging along the vein there. Louis makes a heavenly sound, and Harry can feel him tremble. When he takes Louis into his mouth Louis gasps, and his hands fist in Harry’s damp curls, not pulling or pushing, just holding on.

The soft little noises that Louis makes, while Harry swallows him down, have Harry’s dick swollen and raised up against his stomach. Harry works his hand around himself, while he does all the things he knows Louis loves. He wants to make Louis feel good, not have Louis take care of him after.

He can tell when Louis is close, because he whispers Harry’s name like a prayer. His name coming choked out of Louis’ mouth is enough to have Harry spilling into his hand, as Louis cums hard down his throat.

After, when Louis is a little dazed and boneless, he just clings to Harry like a koala, arms wrapped tight around Harry’s waist. Harry accepts Louis' barely-there weight as he leans on him. He quickly shampoos his own hair, without separating Louis from him. After he’s given his body a quick scrub he shuts off the water, and steps out of the shower.

He helps Louis out, wraps him in one of the big fluffy towels, and steals a few more kisses; before they go down the hall to Louis’ bedroom. Louis tugs feebly at Harry’s hand, and Harry easily follows him over to bed. They lay together for a while, Louis swaddled in the towel, and Harry’s around his hips, both completely sated.

It isn’t until after, when they’ve gotten dressed and Louis is doing his hair, that Harry realizes Louis hasn’t cleared his throat once since they stepped into the shower.

Louis wears two t-shirts, grey under black, underneath a beige cardigan, covered by a light grey jacket. It's warming up outside, but Louis still gets cold. The fashionable layers still keep the rest of the world from knowing just how painfully thin Louis really is.

They drive to school and Louis seems like he’s in a good mood. He raises their intertwined hands to his lips, and presses kisses to Harry's knuckles. The music plays softly in the background and Harry is brought back to the months before, when everything seemed easy and carefree. When nothing but kind words had been exchanged between them. When Louis called Harry a fucking twat with fondness in his voice, while Harry was teasing him lovingly. Not yelling it at him when Harry tries to get Louis to eat.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you, when I said that those two are all that I've got," Louis says softly, voice barely heard over Only Love playing through the speakers, "I know how lucky I am to have you. I don't understand why you put up with me, but I know how fucking lucky I am that you do."

Harry sighs, and looks over at Louis sadly, "that's the problem, innit babe. You don't understand why I'm here, so you're just waiting for me to leave."

Louis frowns and fish mouths, like he wants to say something but isn't sure what, "I just-" he huffs out a sigh and looks down at his lap, "I wouldn't blame you if you did," he mumbles.

Harry keeps his eyes on the road and tries to ignore the sinking in his gut, "yeah, well, I'm not going anywhere," he says simply, because he doesn't quite have the energy to argue at this point.
Neither of them say anything else as they pull into the parking lot. Harry still reaches out for Louis, and Louis still tucks himself into Harry's side as they walk down the hall, but Harry can feel the dull sting in his chest. He wonders if Louis will ever believe how much Harry loves him. He wonders if Louis will ever know that sometimes he feels like his heart is beating just for Louis.

They stop outside Louis' first period class room, and Louis stands in front of Harry, "I'll see you for spare?" Harry asks, hands gently on Louis' hips.

Louis' hands slip up, his palms cupping both of Harry's cheeks, "hey," he says softly, looking in Harry's eyes seriously, "I'm going to need you to give me a smile."

Harry holds in a sigh and forces a smile. Louis shakes his head and raises an eyebrow. His thumbs ghost over Harry's cheeks where the dimples are buried. Louis stands on his tippy toes and brushes his lips softly against Harry's. Harry's hand slips to the small of Louis' back as he kisses back, soft and gentle. Louis' thumbs press a little harder at the creases in Harry's cheeks, and he sticks his bottom lip out in a pout.

It's honestly the most adorable thing in the world, and Harry knows he made a big mistake when he let Louis figure out that he could get Harry to do almost anything by putting on his pouty face. He fights the grin threatening to break his face for as long as he can, but then Louis very deliberately flutters his ridiculously long eyelashes.

Harry is a goner. He gives in and he feels Louis' thumbs sink into his dimples as he smiles, full on, and all for Louis. It's worth it when Louis smiles right back, and Harry sees that fondness, the fondness he needs from Louis more than he needs oxygen. The fondness that reminds him that Louis does care about him. It's enough for now.

"I love you," he says, tipping his chin down to kiss Louis softly.

"Harry-" Louis says quietly, a little line forming between his curved eyebrows, "you mean a lot to me, okay?"

Louis reaches up and adjusts one of the curls in front of Harry's face with a small smile. He stands on his tip toes and presses a kiss to Harry's cheek. He noses softly under Harry's jaw as Harry wraps him up in a hug. He turns on his heel, and wanders into his class with a little wave over his shoulder.

It's no 'I love you too,' but Harry thinks it's more than enough. Harry heads off to his first class and time seems to drag on before the bell finally rings. He makes his way through campus towards the studio, just like he does every day.

"Haz!" Niall calls from down the hall, waving to be seen through the crowd.

Harry grins, and starts over, "hey," he says, "you have a study date lined up for tonight?"

Niall nods as he walks beside Harry, "yeah, not until eight though. Why what's up?"

"Come to the flat for dinner, I think I'll make stew," Harry says, "the lads miss you."

A huge smile splits Niall's face, "aces mate, I've been living off that shit in the caf!"

Harry laughs, "I know, Liam's been worrying about you."

Niall laughs, "Alright then laddy, I'll head over for six?"

Harry nods, "see you then."
Niall gives a salute, and heads off in the direction of his class. By the time Harry gets to the studio, Louis has his fabric spread out. He looks up, smiling around the pins between his lips.

"Hi, baby," he says.

"Hey, love," Harry replies, shrugging out of his backpack.

Louis goes right back to what he's working on, as Harry sits down across from him at the work bench. It's Louis' final project before the end of the year. Harry can't even believe that it's been almost six months since he first stepped hesitantly into Louis' studio. It feels crazy that the school year will be done in just over a month. He's working on review constantly, trying to prep for exams. Liam and Zayn have been living in the library, and Niall has switched from shagging girls to studying with them.

Before all the shit hit the fan he and Louis had been spending a lot of time just tangled up on Louis' bed, studying in silence. Sometimes they'd get a little distracted, and lazy kisses would turn into messy blow jobs with textbooks pressing into their backs. They were a little more careful after the one time Harry had to rewrite a whole page of notes, because the paper was smeared with cum.

Thinking about that now though, only makes Harry feel so stupid for not clueing in about the way Louis would obsessively make sure his jumper was covering his stomach, every time Harry would pull his pants down, just enough to get his cock out. Harry focuses on spreading out his textbooks and grabbing a notebook from his backpack, to keep the disappointment in himself out of the forefront of his mind.

"Honey, can I take some measurements?" Louis asks, just after Harry's found the correct page in his textbook.

"Sure, Lou," he replies easily.

He goes to stand on the little platform Louis does all his measurements on. He knows Louis' final project is menswear, because he's been using Harry's dimensions, but Harry doesn't know much else about it. Louis is quite private with his design process. He shoos Harry away when he tries to peek at sketches, and Harry doesn't understand pattern making enough, to interpret what Louis is making from the wispy sheets of pattern paper he's using to cut his fabric. Harry doesn't know how all the pieces will come together, but the fabric Louis has chosen is exquisite and expensive looking.

After Louis has measured him, they go back to the work station and Harry starts on his review. Well, he tries to start on his review. He gets a little distracted by the way Louis' tongue sticks out the tiniest bit, as he focuses on cutting his fabric. He gets a little distracted by the way Louis' fringe falls past the frames of his glasses. A little distracted by the way Louis' delicate little hands wield the heavy fabric scissors with such care. He's gorgeous.

He's spent over five months in this studio, since Louis approached him for the first time at the beginning of January. The late spring sun, shining through the windows of the studio, is warm now, instead of cool, the way it was in the winter. He's watched that sunshine dance across Louis' cheekbones almost every day for the past five months.

Harry knows he never stood a chance. He was so far gone the very first day he stepped into the studio, and found Louis looking tiny, perched on a stool, with a hesitant smile, and weary baby blue eyes.

They've been working in silence for a while when Harry feels arms wrap around his waist from behind. He hadn't even noticed Louis get up from across the table. Harry turns around on his stool
and Louis slots himself between Harry's knees. Harry links his fingers behind Louis' neck and smiles down at him.

"You look so focused," Louis says, "are you going to pass everything?"

"Hopefully," Harry grins, nosing softly at Louis' cheek, "I'd ask if you're going to pass, but we all know the answer to that."

Louis blushes softly, "hopefully," he says, as if he isn't the top student in all his classes, "merchandising is a lot easier than bio-chem."

"Yeah, well, designing and making a garment is a lot harder than filling in a multiple choice sheet," Harry replies, "I feel like all we do lately is study."

Louis whines softly, and nods, "can't even remember the last time you took me to see a film," he pouts.

Harry presses a soft kiss to Louis' nose, "We'll go to one this weekend, love. And maybe before we could go out for dinner? A proper date? You could order something small?"

Louis frowns a little, "I take so long to eat, we'll miss the movie," he says.

Harry ghosts a thumb across his cheekbone, "we'll go early. Let me take you somewhere nice?"

Louis meets his eyes and he looks apprehensive, but he nods, "okay, baby," he says, giving a small smile.

Harry beams and kisses Louis, "Excellent," he murmurs, against Louis' lips.

Harry manages to get one unit done for his study notes before Louis starts packing up his supplies for the bell. Harry walks Louis to his next class, and they plan to meet at Harry's truck for lunch.

Harry's class is boring and slow, but he feels better as soon as he sees Louis crossing the parking lot to get to his truck at lunch time. Louis' smile is small, because he knows he has to eat, but he still gives Harry a kiss.

They decide to go to the deli at Tesco, and it's a bit of a fight but they finally compromise on splitting a turkey sandwich; Harry has tomato soup with his, and Louis has a salad. Harry parks at the far edge of the parking lot and they eat in the truck, with all the windows down and music softly playing.

"How do you even decide how much I have to eat in a day?" Louis asks, taking a sip of his water bottle, "do you just make it up as you go along?"

He sounds only slightly annoyed after the argument over his lunch, and he's looking at Harry curiously. Harry finishes chewing the bite of sandwich in his mouth. He shrugs and takes a sip of his pepsi.

"I erm- I looked up meal plans for recovering anorexics, and like I just go by the portion sizes I found online. I um- I downloaded an app on my phone that tells me the calories of different foods so I can make sure each meal is enough," Harry explains hesitantly.

"An app?" Louis asks, frowning slightly.

"Yeah...like I'd put in turkey sandwich, then it asks portion size, and it estimates the calories. Or
whatever."

"So like- you researched?" Louis pokes at his salad, not meeting Harry's eyes.

"Yeah, babe. Before I confronted you about it. I went home and looked up as much as I could. I found a rehab facility but I didn't know if you would agree to go so I had to- had to figure out how to help you get healthy if you wouldn't," Harry says carefully, he can't tell if Louis is mad or not.

"Oh," is all Louis says, taking another small bite of his sandwich.

He doesn't say anything else, so Harry doesn't either. They end up cutting it pretty close because Louis eats so slow, but he finishes almost all of his half of the sandwich, and most of his salad. They get back to the campus and Harry puts the car in park, but his stomach is in knots.

"Lou..... are you going to leave class to purge?" he asks quietly.

Louis' smile falls off his face, and he looks down at his lap, "no," he says quickly.

"Louis, this is serious. I don't want to have to wait outside your class to make sure you don't leave to the loo," Harry sighs, hating that he has to even threaten that.

"Don't be stupid Harry, you don't need to skip your classes to keep tabs on me," Louis says sharply, "I just said I'm not going to purge."

"I'm not trying to be a dick, but I need you to promise me you're not going to," Harry says quietly, "please, babe."

"For god's sake Harry, I promise I'm not going to throw up!" Louis snaps.

He throws open the door and it slams behind him, before Harry has a chance to say another word. Harry groans and rubs his eyes, leaning forward to rest his forehead on the steering wheel. He's tired of this, tired of having to be the bad guy. No wonder Louis hates him. He doesn't even believe Harry loves him, and all he sees is Harry being an ass over how small he is, or how much he eats.

Harry nearly jumps out of his skin when there is a small tapping at his window. Louis is looking at him through the glass with a slight frown. Harry had thought he had stormed off. Harry clears his throat and steps out of the truck, coming face to face with Louis.

"Sorry," Louis mumbles, "shouldn't have been a prat. Can't really fault you for not believing me."

Harry breathes a sigh of relief and tips his head to bury his face in Louis shoulder, wrapping his arms around Louis' waist, "I just want you to be healthy," he murmurs.

"I know, Haz," Louis sighs, "I promise I won't purge."

"Thank you," Harry breathes, as Louis hand strokes through the back of his hair.

Harry walks Louis to his class, and they share a kiss before Louis disappears inside. Harry spends his entire next class just worrying. He's got a sinking feeling in his stomach. He wants to believe Louis so badly, he wants to believe that Louis is accepting help, that he's trying to get better. That Louis won't purge, because he promised Harry. But Harry knows that Louis is ill, and he knows the most important thing to Louis right now is controlling his food intake.

By the end of class Harry is completely anxious. He goes straight to Louis' class, but as everyone files out it becomes painfully clear that Louis is not in the room. He can feel tears lodging in his
throat. He feels like punching something. Harry sees Hannah come out of class, talking animatedly with another one of the girls.

"Hannah," he says quickly.

"Oh hey, Harry, how are you, love?" she says happily.

"Good thanks, sorry, where is Louis?" he asks.

Hannah frowns, "he asked to go to the loo," she says, "but he never came back."

Harry tries to keep himself from cursing, "oh, er, when would you say he left class?"

"About half an hour after it started," she replies, "d'you think he's okay?"

"Hopefully; he's had a bit of a stomach bug. Don't worry though, see you later Hannah," Harry says, forcing a smile.

"See you around, tell Lou I hope he feels better!" she calls after Harry, he just waves over his shoulder.

"Went to meet you at class, where ru?" Harry texts to Louis, with shaking hands.

'Teacher let me out five mins early bc I forgot my sketch book in the studio, just went to grab it. meet you at the truck. xx.' comes Louis' reply.

That hits Harry like a ton of bricks, because fuck, Louis just blatantly lied to him. How fucking stupid does he think Harry is. How little does he care about Harry that he would do that. Harry feels sick. He should have waited outside Louis' class. He should have taken Louis away after lunch, kept him distracted. He's fucking failed again.

He wanted so badly to trust Louis, even though in his brain he knew that he shouldn't. It hurts so much to know that he made a stupid choice by giving his boyfriend the benefit of the doubt. That by trusting Louis he's just set Louis up for failure. Louis made it through a full day yesterday, without purging. Now he is back at square one.

Harry tries so hard to tell himself that he cant blame Louis, that Louis is sick, that Louis wouldn't lie to him normally. The cold fingers of doubt are curling around his heart though, cutting off the circulation. Louis lied to him for the first four months of their relationship. Harry forgave him for that, actually, he never even held it against Louis at all. Now though, he begged Louis to be honest with him, and Louis promised not to lie anymore. Louis is still lying though.

The worst part is, Harry knows if Louis had admitted to cracking, admitted to sneaking off to purge, Harry would have forgiven him instantly. Louis is sick, Harry would never blame him for succumbing to his eating disorder. Harry would never expect Louis to be able to be perfect the second day of his supposed recovery. Harry feels like an idiot for even hoping Louis would be able to keep his lunch down, when Louis hasn't even admitted to being anorexic yet. So yeah, Harry blames himself for that, for giving Louis the benefit of the doubt about that.

Except Louis didn't reply to Harry's text with 'I went to the bathroom, I couldn't keep it down' or even an 'I'll meet you at the truck' so they could have just talked about it in person. No, Louis typed out a very blatant lie and sent if off to Harry, without any hesitation at all. That's what hurts the most. Louis can just lie to him so easily. Maybe Harry is an idiot for trusting Louis about anything at all.

Harry has never once lied to Louis about anything. He's never even withheld information. From day
one Harry has zipped himself open right down the middle, and laid himself out for Louis to see. Everything about him, every flaw, every secret, every trait, every quirk, every fact about his life, has been spread in front of Louis. This whole time Harry has laid himself bare, just begging Louis to accept him, to take him as he is. And he has, Louis has accepted him, he's taken all the quirks, and the flaws, and he's let Harry be in his life. But he's never given anything back.

Everything about Louis is still a complete mystery to Harry. Harry knows Louis' quirks, and he knows Louis' flaws, and he knows all the things he loves about Louis, but none of that information was handed to him easily, Louis was never open about any of those things. Harry had to figure all that out for himself.

He hasn't minded all this time, he'd spend a lifetime trying to get to know Louis if it took that long. But now it isn't just trying to break down Louis' walls, it isn't just being patient and hoping Louis will open up. Louis is lying. Louis is lying, and Harry is getting tired of handing Louis every single part of him, and getting nothing but lies in return.

Harry gets out to his truck first, and he leans against the front bumper, eyes scanning the throngs of students leaving campus. Louis is small and feeble, and he can't just part the crowd the way Harry can, so Harry waits.

Finally he meets Louis' blue eyes through the crowd, and Louis gives him a smile and a little wave. Harry waves, but he's thankful for his Ray-Bans because his smile is thin and forced. He holds Louis' door open for him, like always, and he tips his chin down for a kiss, like always, but he doesn't say much. Louis gets up into the truck, Harry closes the door, and goes around to the drivers seat.

He doesn't say anything, as he starts the truck and backs out of the parking spot, and it doesn't take long for Louis to know something is wrong. Louis keeps looking over at him with a small frown, but he doesn't say anything either. When Louis reaches for his hand Harry knows he's testing the waters, seeing if he's right in thinking something is wrong with Harry. Harry takes Louis' hand in his without a word, because no matter how upset he is, he would never reject Louis reaching out like that.

Louis' thumb brushes his knuckles absentmindedly, and he bites on his lip, "what's wrong?" he asks finally.

Harry sighs but doesn't take his eyes off the road, "We'll talk when we get home," he says, "er- I mean back to your flat," he corrects himself.

Louis runs a nervous hand through his fringe, "did something happen in class?" he asks.

"Louis."

"Or is it me?" he interrupts, his voice sounding hesitant.

"We'll talk about it when we get up to the flat."

Louis nods, but he removes his hand from Harry's, and rests his head against the window. Harry just sighs, and thinks maybe it's easier this way, because it's so hard not to crumple with Louis' tiny hand in his. They ride in silence and Harry knows Liam and Zayn won't be home until later because football is starting back up for Liam, and Zayn spends his afternoons at the skatepark when it's nice out.

When they get to Louis' complex Louis toddles up the stairs ahead of Harry, and unlocks the door without a word. Harry goes straight for the kitchen and opens the fridge. He takes out the left over
chicken, and puts two slices of bread in the toaster, while he cuts the breast into strips. Louis lingers in the doorway, with a deep set frown, and watches. When the toaster pops Harry spreads mayonnaise on the toast, and puts the chicken in between, with some lettuce.

"Will you eat this please," Harry says simply, setting the plate on the table.

Louis looks at it with both confusion and distaste, "I already ate breakfast and lunch," he protests.

Harry can't help the hurt that flashes across his face, "and are you going to tell me you kept your lunch down?" he asks, his voice soft and sad.

Understanding washes across Louis' face, and then he hangs his head, "Harry," he sighs.

"Louis, are you going to tell me that you kept your lunch down?" Harry repeats, trying to keep his voice even.

Louis fidgets with the hem of his shirt, still not meeting Harry's eyes, "I tried to," he says softly, "I really, really did."

"And then you stopped trying, and left class to go to the loo," Harry sighs, "Hannah told me, there's no point lying."

When Louis looks up his eyes are a mix of tears and anger, "it's harder when you're not there. Harder to keep it down," he says.

"So then you text me Louis! You text me, and I come out of class, and I make it easier on you. I'd help you!" Harry replies exasperatedly, "you lied to me!"

Louis flinches, and looks down at his feet, "I'm sorry."

"No, Louis!" Harry snaps, "First you promised. You promised me you wouldn't puke. Then you broke that promise. You should have known I would have understood, if you texted me after and told me. I wouldn't have been mad, Louis! But now I'm mad. I'm mad because you broke your promise, and you lied to me. All I fucking want to do is help you! Why can't you see that?"

Harry isn't mad at Louis. He isn't mad at Louis at all. He knew this was going to happen. The minute he watched Louis walk into the classroom. He knew that Louis would do this. He knew as soon as he sent that text asking Louis where he was, that he'd get a lie in return.

He's mad at himself for trusting Louis, even when he knew he shouldn't. He's mad at himself because he wanted so badly to believe that Louis was actually going to try. He's mad at himself because some stupid, idiotic, naive, part of him hoped that maybe Louis would do it for him. That maybe Louis would keep the food down, for Harry, because he promised. Harry is an idiot.

Harry isn't mad at Louis, he's mad at himself. And he's hurt. He's hurt because his own boyfriend doesn't trust him enough to count him as someone steady in his life. Harry doesn't even make the list of people Louis feels like he can rely on. Liam and Zayn are all Louis' got, and Harry is just there. Harry is just there, handing Louis every part of him and begging Louis to take it, and Louis just looks at Harry and lies through his teeth.

"I don't want your fucking help, Harry," Louis spits, "why can't you see that?"

Chapter End Notes
seriously your comments and kudos mean the world to me thank you so so much for reading and being so kind!! for more info my tumblr is tothemoonmydear.tumblr.com and my twitter is @tothemoonmydear :)

Harry knows Louis doesn’t want his help. He knows Louis doesn’t think he has a problem. He knows Louis doesn’t realize that the thing he started doing to feel in control of his life, has spun so far out of control, that Louis couldn’t stop it on his own even if he was willing to try. So yeah, Harry can see that Louis doesn’t want his help. Louis just doesn’t get a choice in the matter.

“Well that really sucks,” Harry sighs, “it really sucks that you don’t want my help. It really sucks that you clearly don’t want me here. And it also really sucks that you don’t want to be honest with me. But that’s just too bad Louis. Because I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere, and you’re getting my help whether you want it or not.”

“Harry! I don’t like lying to you, and I do want you here!” Louis argues, sounding exasperated.

“Yeah, as long as I don’t care about your wellbeing, and I continue to allow you to starve yourself, and let you throw up everything you eat,” Harry argues.

“Just stop. I fucked up. I get it, okay? I’m sorry for lying to you! I just knew you would react like this!” Louis shouts.

“React like this? Because my reaction to finding out my boyfriend spent his class purging in the loo is so abnormal? How should I have reacted, Louis?”

“For god’s sake Harry it’s only my second day! I kept everything down yesterday, and I tried again today. But I fucked up.” Louis voice is still angry, but his eyes aren’t anymore.

Harry sees a flash of remorse in Louis’ eyes, and it makes his retort to die in his mouth. Louis holds his gaze with his jaw set, but Harry hates the sadness pulling down the corners of his lips, and settling between his eyebrows in a crease. Harry sighs, and scrubs his hands down his face, taking a deep breath.

“I’m- I would have understood, if you told me that you purged. I know it’s only the second day, and I know it’s going to be hard, and I’m not expecting you to be perfect. I am so fucking happy that you tried yesterday, and I was so happy when you tried for breakfast and lunch. I would have understood that the urges haven’t just stopped. I know it’s uncomfortable for you to have food in your stomach. I get that,” Harry says quietly, “I just- I wish you would have trusted me enough to text me. I wish you would have trusted me enough, to give me a chance to help you,” Harry rubs the back of his neck, trying to keep the anger out of his voice, “but you didn’t. And then instead of just being honest with me, you lied.”

Louis hangs his head, “I’m sorry,” Louis says, “I told you, I’m sorry.”

Harry sighs, “you’re not sorry that you lied, or that you purged. You’re sorry that you got caught.”

Louis’s eyes flash, “No. I’m not sorry I purged. I felt fucking disgusting, and it’s my body.”

Harry scoffs, “Great-

“But,” Louis cuts him off, meeting Harry’s eyes, “I am sorry for lying to you.”
Harry closes his mouth, and sighs through his nose, “I appreciate that,” he says slowly, “but that doesn’t change the fact that you just don’t trust me.”

Louis frowns, “I do trust you!”

“Louis, lets be real here, you don’t trust me as far as you could throw me. You’re counting down the days until I leave you. You don’t trust me that I love you, you don’t trust me that I’m here from you. You don’t trust me with any part of you,” Harry says sadly, stepping past Louis to put the kettle on.

Louis is silent behind him, as he reaches into the cupboard for mugs. The silence hangs in the air, as Harry tries to keep his hands from shaking while he makes tea. It sits heavy in Harry’s heart that Louis can’t even deny any of it. Even if he tried, Harry would know it isn’t true.

His boyfriend, who he has handed his heart to, without a second thought, genuinely doesn’t trust him. Not even because of anything Harry’s done, because Harry hasn’t done anything to break Louis’ trust. Louis doesn’t trust Harry because of some trauma in his past, which Harry isn’t even allowed to know about, because Louis doesn’t trust him.

He turns around and Louis hasn’t moved. His arms are still folded just as tightly across his chest, and he’s still glaring at the floor in front of him like it’s wronged him. Harry sighs, because he thought maybe Louis would have something to say to that, but his silence just reaffirms how true Harry’s statement was. He sets Louis’ tea next to the chicken sandwich.

"Please eat the sandwich," Harry asks quietly, he's tired of it all.

Louis shifts his glare to the plate, "No. I'm not going to. I'll eat dinner, but I'm not eating right now."

"Louis, that isn't enough. Please eat the sandwich, dinner won't be ready for a few hours, I'm making stew," Harry says.

Louis shakes his head, "stop Harry. I'm not fucking eating it. I'll try again tomorrow!"

Harry frowns, "Why don't you just try right now? Yeah, it sucks, you purged. But you can start over right now, just eat the sandwich, to make up for the calories you lost."

Louis glares at Harry, "I sat in my classroom trying so fucking hard not to give in, Harry. For you. I tried not to purge, for you. And yeah I failed, because I fail at everything, but I fucking tried."

"So keep trying, Lou," Harry pleads, "You tried for me, now eat the sandwich for me. Please!"

Louis shakes his head though, and takes a defensive step back, "no. I'm not eating it. I'll eat more at dinner."

"Why?" Harry groans, "why won't you just eat it?"

"Maybe I don't want to feel stuffed like a pig twenty four seven!" Louis snaps.

Harry's stomach sinks, "that's what this is about? Because you threw up your lunch so your stomach feels empty? You're enjoying feeling hungry aren't you?"

"I'm not fucking hungry," Louis says.

"You're enjoying feeling empty" Harry says slowly.

The way Louis’ cheeks flush is answer enough. Harry drags his hands through his hair, and heaves a sigh. He knows Louis can't help it that the hunger pains feel good for him; he can't help it that being
full makes him hate himself. He's ill, he's got an eating disorder, and he's addicted to the feeling of being empty.

"Baby," he says gently, because he's always scared Louis will spook, “you wanting to be empty is part of your anorexia. And you're not going to get better if you let yourself enjoy that feeling. It's just going to make it harder to get food down, and keep it down next time.”

“Just drop it. I’m not eating it,” Louis grumbles, fidgeting with the hem of his jumper.

“Please Louis,” Harry asks slowly, “please just eat the sandwich. If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for me?”

Louis just shakes his head, "no, Harry. Stop."

Harry sighs, and scrubs his hands down his face. He's so tired of this. He can't stand arguing with Louis. Every instinct he has about Louis tells him to coddle, and comfort, and care for him. All he wants to do is give Louis every ounce of love in his heart. He doesn't want to fight with him, he doesn't want Louis to look at him like he wishes Harry would get out of his face.

"Louis, if you don't eat the sandwich I'm going to call Liam and Zayn," Harry says quietly.

Louis' eyes flash up to his, "no," he snaps.

Harry shrugs, "If you won't do it for me, maybe they can make you eat."

"Harry, don't! Just- please don't! We just got on track again!"

"Yeah, and you just got on track with your eating, and now you're refusing food again," Harry replies.

"I'm saying I'll eat more at dinner!"

"And I'm saying that isn't enough; your stomach can't be empty for the three hours until dinner is ready. Eat the sandwich, or I'm calling them."

Harry feels stupid for threatening Louis, like a misbehaving child he's babysitting. Like if he doesn't do what Harry says, Harry is going to call his parents. Which isn't far from the truth. Without a word, Louis shoves past him and crashes down into the chair at the table. Harry feels even more stupid when Louis starts furiously ripping the crusts off the sandwich, and then takes a small bite.

He doesn't say anything, and he doesn't look at Harry, as he chews slowly. Harry feels stupid because he literally just begged his boyfriend to eat for him, and he refused. But Louis will eat the sandwich he refused, just so that his friends don't have to worry, so that his friends won't get upset. Harry doesn't think he's ever felt more insignificant.

Harry has been told, by the first boy he ever let himself care about, the first boy he kissed, the first boy he had sex with, that he was just an experiment. That he was just a phase. That he didn't matter in the big picture of that boys life. That hurt, but it didn't feel like this.

Harry has walked in on the second boy he trusted, the second boy he took a chance on, the second boy he let himself get attached to, fucking someone else. He was told by that boy that he was great, but that he just wasn't enough. That there was so much more out there, other than Harry; too much more out there for that boy to be with only Harry. That hurt too, maybe a little more than the first time, but it wasn't like this.
Harry looks down at the very first boy he has ever loved. The very first boy he's made love to. The very first boy he's handed his beating heart to. He looks down at Louis, and he sees that he doesn't care that it's breaking Harry's heart to see him wasting away, that he doesn't care that Harry would saw off his own arm before hurting him. He sees that Louis cares more about what Liam and Zayn think, than how he's making Harry feel.

He stands where he is, in the middle of the kitchen, and watches as Louis slowly and tediously eats the sandwich. Louis' hands shake ever so slightly, as he raises his tea to his lips, and takes a long sip. Harry thinks it should be a sin that Louis can look so painfully beautiful while being so angry. His thin cheeks puff out with sandwich, his eyelashes fan across his sharp cheekbones as he glares down at the plate.

Harry doesn't know how long he hovers there, before Louis finally finishes. When Louis is done he stands, shoving his chair back roughly, and still not looking at Harry. He dumps his crusts in the bin, and sets his dishes in the sink, before grabbing a water bottle from the fridge, and storming into the living room. Harry folds his arms across his chest, because he feels strangely empty with his heart walking away from him, and into the next room without a word.

It isn't long before Louis comes back, looking around the wall and into the kitchen; taking in Harry still standing there uselessly. Harry feels stupid, as he swallows thickly past the emotion obstructing his vocal chords. Louis stares at him for a while, jaw set, but eyes questioning.

"What is your issue?" he asks coolly, "why are you just standing there?"

"Do you know how much I love you?" Harry asks, even though he knows Louis has no fucking idea, "do you know how much it hurts me, to watch you go through this. To watch you do this to yourself?"

"Harry, stop."

"But you don't care. You don't care that it kills me to see you hurting."

"I ate the fucking sandwich, Harry!"

"You ate the sandwich for Liam and Zayn. I am so bloody thankful that you ate it. But you wouldn't do it for me, Louis. Even though I begged. Because you don't care that I care. You don't care about me," Harry's voice shakes, barely coming out loud enough for Louis to even hear.

Louis looks like he's been slapped for a moment, before his face hardens, "if you fucking think that I don't care about you, why don't you just leave! Just fucking go, Harry! Nobody will blame you!"

Harry blanches at Louis' words, "you know that isn't what I meant!" he protests.

"Take your fucking Mother Theresa Syndrome somewhere else!"
“What is a Mother Ter-“

“Your fucking insatiable need to help the downtrodden and the damned! I’m not a fucking charity case!”

“No, Louis, you’re my boyfriend! My boyfriend who I love with all my heart. I fancy keeping you alive! So sue me!”

Louis just stares at Harry for a long time, his lips pursed tightly together, and his eyebrows creased. Harry bites the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood, because if he doesn't keep his mouth shut, he isn't going to be able to keep himself together. Tears prick the backs of his eyes, but Louis' eyes are dry, so he holds them in.

Eventually, Louis storms past Harry to the front door, where Harry has left his backpack and Louis' book bag. Louis snatches his bag, turns on his heel, and goes into the living room. Harry watches in silence, as Louis wraps himself up in a blanket, and gets out his sketchbook. Harry watches Louis sketch for a moment, every second of silence weighing heavy in his lungs.

Finally, he realizes Louis has nothing else to say. His hands shake as he gets his textbooks out of his backpack, and his shoulders sag as he sits himself down at the kitchen table. He opens his textbook, but the words on the page blur, under the sheen of the tears in his eyes. He can't think right now, so he plugs in his earphones and turns on his music, hoping for a reprieve from the burn at the back of his eyes. The Lumineers hum softly in his ears, and he buries his face in the crook of his elbow.

~

Liam and Zayn get home a little while after Harry has pulled himself together. He knew studying was hopeless so he put his textbooks away, and started dinner. He's cubing the beef tenderloin for the stew when they come into the flat; Liam still in his practice jersey, and Zayn with his skateboard tucked under his arm.

"Hey mate," Zayn says, coming over and stealing a chunk of carrot off of the cutting board.

"Hey guys, how was school?" Harry asks, manufacturing a smile for his face.

"Was shit," Liam laughs, "found out I missed a question on a practice exam so my whole multiple choice sheet was off by one and all my answers were fucked."

Harry groans, and shakes his head, "that blows, how much was it worth?"

"It was just counted as an assignment, so not much, but now I have no idea how I actually would have done. I'm going to ask the prof to let me rewrite," he replies.

Harry nods, "and you?" he asks Zayn.

"Was alright for me, I'm not an idiot I know how to correctly fill in bubbles on a sheet," Zayn says casually, but Liam crows in indignation, and promptly gets him in a headlock.

Harry laughs along with them as they scuffle, but the smile doesn't linger on his face as he goes back to cutting. Liam lets go of Zayn to go say hi to Louis, but Zayn stays in the kitchen. He stands beside Harry, and Harry can feel his gaze but doesn't look up, because he's never been good at keeping emotions off his face.

"What happened?" Zayn asks.
Harry sighs and shrugs, "he's mad at me for making him eat, but what else is new," he says quietly. "Have you been crying?" Zayn asks, his fingers curling gently around Harry's jaw to bring his face up for observation.

Harry shrugs again, but his chin trembles, "tell me how to make him believe that I'm not going to leave."

Zayn sighs, "oh Haz," he says softly.

He grips the back of Harry's neck and drags him down into a hug, rubbing up and down his spine. Harry lets himself sink into it for a moment. He thinks maybe he's being too emotional, but when isn't he. Everything is misconstrued and he hates himself for being so weak. Loving someone so completely, and not even knowing where you stand with them sucks. He tries to replay Louis saying that Harry means a lot to him, he tries to replay Liam telling him how much Louis cares, but the memories are muffled by Louis telling him to go.

"Do you know how many times Louis has told Liam and I to leave? Any time we fight, it's his instant reflex to tell us to get out, to leave him. And then after, when he's stopped being angry and he's just sad, he cries and he asks us why we're still here. It's- he doesn't tell us to leave because he wants us to. He tells us to leave because he thinks it will be easier to push us away, than to watch us walk away on our own.

He tells us to leave because he's terrified we will," Zayn's voice is smooth and soothing, just loud enough for Harry to hear, "Harry, Liam's been with Louis since day one, and I've been here for years, and he still thinks we're going to leave him. He- he doesn't just believe that everybody leaves for no reason, he's been shown that it's true. He doesn't think that he deserves love, that's why he can't just accept that you're completely fucking head over heels for him," Zayn pulls back to look Harry in the eyes, "the only way you can make him believe that you're not going to leave, is by staying."

Harry nods, rubbing the heel of his palm against his eye, "I'm not going anywhere."

"I know," Zayn smiles sadly, "fuck Harry, I just wish- I wish you could have known Louis when he was like the sun. He used to burn so fucking bright that he lit up everyone around him like a life force. He would have been able to love you so good... back then."

Tears prickle the back of Harry's eyes again, but he isn't going to cry, "you think maybe some day he'll be able to love me back?" he asks quietly.

Zayn takes in a slow breath, "fuck, I really hope so Harry," he says, "but you've gotta know that he's doing the best that he can with what he has right now, I know maybe it doesn't seem like enough, but he's giving you all he's got."

They're interrupted by Louis calling Zayn from the living room. Zayn gives Harry another hug before he goes in to see Louis. Harry decides right then that it's enough. He'll take whatever Louis can give him, and he won't ask for more. He isn't too blind to see that maybe some pieces of Louis have been stolen from him, that Louis isn't completely whole. The last thing he wants to do is take more.

Harry gets the stew all prepared to slow cook, before he makes his way into the living room. Louis is tucked up between Liam and Zayn on the sofa, so Harry sits down on the love seat. Louis doesn't even acknowledge Harry coming into the room. Harry sees Zayn nudge him, but Louis just sinks closer to Liam. Liam and Zayn exchange a look over Louis' head, and Liam shoots Harry an
apologetic look. Harry tells himself he deserves the cold shoulder, he never should have asked Louis for more than he can give.

Harry gets up periodically to check on the stew, while X-factor plays on the telly. He forgets that Niall is coming for dinner until there is a rambunctious knock on the door. He gets up to open it and Niall barrels in, and claps him on the back. He starts rambling about his day before Harry can even get out a 'hey,' but Harry needs the energy that Niall brings with him right now.

"Y'alright mate?" Niall asks eventually.

"Yeah, were kind of fighting," he shrugs, "glad you're here."

Niall smiles softly, and messes up Harry's curls fondly, "it'll be alright," he says, and Harry nods.

Niall follows Harry into the living room, and bellows out his 'hello's' before going straight to Louis. He dog piles on top of the three of them, and hugs Louis tight around the neck. Harry catches Louis grinning a little, against Niall's shoulder. Louis pats him on the back, and gives a little laugh as Niall straightens up.

"Alright?" Niall asks simply, beaming at Louis.

Harry feels relief wash through him when he sees that Louis' smile is real, "Alright, yeah," he replies.

Niall grins, and plunks himself down on the love seat next to Harry, instantly starting to catch up with Liam and Zayn. Harry is so glad that Niall has fit in so seamlessly with the boys. He just completely brightens the room with his toothy laugh. Harry watches Louis as he talks with Niall. They're talking about Niall's class, and Harry is thankful Niall isn't bringing up anything about Louis' eating disorder. He knows Louis is thankful too. Niall just knows how to act around people, he'd never make anyone uncomfortable.

Louis is smiling with crinkles by his eyes, nodding along to Niall's story. His fringe falls in his face, and Harry watches as his delicate hand reaches up to readjust the hair. Louis' eyes flicker to his in that moment, and they lock. Louis' smile falters for a fraction of a second, before he looks back to Niall. Harry gets up to check on the stew.

~

When dinner is finally ready Harry calls them all into the kitchen. Louis meets Harry's eyes, and gives a mumbled thank you when Harry hands him his bowl, and a bun. He still sits next to Harry, but the tension is thick between them. Zayn and Liam keep exchanging worried glances, and Niall shoots Harry sympathetic looks. Louis is right beside him, but he feels so far away. The other three keep the conversation going through dinner; Louis is silent while he eats, and Harry tries not to get caught watching.

When everyone is finishing up, and Louis still has half a bowl of stew and a picked apart bun, Harry can sense him starting to get uncomfortable. He reaches out subtly under the table, to lay his hand on Louis' knee like he normally would, but Louis flinches, and jerks his knee away. He shoots Harry a look that is both angry and hurt, and Harry doesn't know what to do with it. He retracts his hand, and tries to hold in a sigh.

When Louis is finally done eating they all go back to the living room. The night drags on for Harry. Niall plops himself down on the couch between Liam and Zayn while they play video games, so Louis is stuck sitting beside Harry. He tucks himself right into the corner of the love seat, bringing his knees up to his chin, and wrapping himself into a little ball. He won't look at Harry, won't talk to
him, and it's killing Harry.

He's itching to reach out, and pull Louis into his arms, but Louis clearly wants nothing to do with him. He can tell Louis is completely on edge for a long time, sitting rigid and stiff. He waits until he sees Louis relax a little before he reaches out. He just reaches out a hand, hoping against hope that Louis will take it, and let Harry come closer. He doesn't. He flinches away, and glares down at Harry's hand, not even meeting Harry's eyes as he shrinks further away, and goes stiff again.

Harry is at his wits end by the time the boys are ready to call it a night. He's been stuck in his own head, so scared that Louis has had it with him, that he's not going to let Harry back in. He doesn't know what to do. He asked Louis quietly if they could talk, and Louis had given a blunt shake of his head, and continued to ignore Harry. He doesn't know what to do, he can't stand being so far away from Louis.

"Alright lads, I've got to head home, early morning study sesh," Niall says, standing and stretching.

"Wait for me, we can walk down together," Harry says quietly, pushing himself up from the couch.

A little hand wraps around Harry’s wrist, while Liam and Zayn say bye to Niall, “where are you going?” Louis asks, with wide eyes.

“I’m going to sleep at mine tonight,” Harry replies hesitantly.

Louis scrambles up from the couch, and follows Harry over to the door. Liam and Zayn bring Niall to the kitchen, to pack up left over stew for him. Harry and Louis stand alone by the front door, and Harry bends down to pull on his shoes, before standing and meeting Louis’ eyes.

“You’re- you’re leaving?” Louis asks, and Harry thinks maybe he sees a flash of panic in his blue eyes.

Harry shakes his head, “I'm not leaving your life. And I’m not leaving this relationship,” he says softly, “but I can tell you don't want anything to do with me right now, and the last thing I want to do is make you uncomfortable in your bed.”

“I- Harry, I-” Louis stutters.

“I’ll come over before school tomorrow,” Harry says gently, looking around the doorway into the kitchen, to see if Niall is ready to go.

“Don’t,” Louis says suddenly, and Harry looks back at him, “Don’t go.”

Harry frowns, “You've been pushing me away all night; I thought you wanted some space."

Louis shakes his head quickly, “No. No, don’t go. I’m telling you I want you to stay,” he says softly, “I need you to stay. Even if we’re fighting,” he looks up at Harry, eyes pleading, “I can’t sleep without you anymore.”

Harry sees it in Louis eyes, the same ache he’s feeling in his own chest. It physically hurts him to think about sleeping without Louis tonight, and the look on Louis’ face shows that he feels the same way. There is a sincerity in his voice, and a little bit of the sadness and frustration seeps into his words. Harry thinks maybe there is hope after all, that even though things suck right now, Louis doesn’t want him to go.

“Okay,” Harry nods, as Niall rounds the corner with a container of stew, “you go on mate, I’m going to stay here tonight,” he adds to Niall.
Louis breathes a soft sigh of relief, and Harry thinks maybe Zayn and Liam do too, where they’re standing behind Niall. Niall gives a huge smile and nods. Harry gives Niall a hug, and Niall drags Louis into his arms for a hug before he goes. When he’s gone Liam and Zayn head back to the living room.

Louis and Harry hover in the doorway, and it's awkward, but Louis is blocking the way, so Harry waits. He wants to reach out, and pull Louis into his arms; kiss the hesitance, and the stress off of Louis’ beautiful features. He doesn’t though, because they’re stuck in this territory that neither of them understand. Harry can’t just back off, he can’t let Louis keep harming himself like this, but Louis is going to fight him every step of the way.

“I’m sorry,” Louis says.

Harry sighs, “I’m sorry too.”

Harry holds his arms open, and Louis steps into them, his arms winding around Harry’s waist. Harry holds Louis close, resting his cheek against his hair. Louis buries his face in Harry’s chest, and sighs. Harry doesn’t think sorry is enough for all the things he wants to fix, and he doesn’t even know what Louis is saying sorry for, but Louis is in his arms, and he can breathe properly again.

"I want to go to bed," Louis mumbles softly against Harry's chest.

"Okay sweetheart," Harry breathes, pressing a kiss to Louis' hair.

They say goodnight to Liam and Zayn, and the relief is written across both of their faces. They brush their teeth side by side, and Harry hates the way Louis glares at his own reflection in the mirror. As soon as Louis’ mouth is rinsed, Harry pulls him gently away from the bathroom, and to the bedroom. Louis hides himself as he changes into his pyjamas, and Harry hates it, but he doesn't comment because he's just so thankful Louis is letting him stay. Harry strips down to his boxer briefs, and follows Louis into the bed.

He isn't sure if he's allowed to touch, to hold; so he sticks to the side of the bed that has become his. Louis reaches out for him though, his small fingers curling around Harry's waist, tugging him to show Harry that he wants him closer, because Louis couldn't move Harry if he tried. Harry scoots over, and opens his arms. Louis backs into them so Harry's chest is flush with his back, and curls in on himself. Harry tucks his legs up behind Louis’, cradling him in and holding him close. His nose finds his favourite spot at the hair behind Louis' ear, and he breathes a sigh of relief.

"I love you, Louis," he whispers.

Louis sighs, but laces his fingers between Harry's, "you deserve so much better, Harry. I shouldn’t have asked you to stay."

“Louis, don’t ever say that. You’re so much more than I deserve, and you’re everything I want. I didn’t want to go, I was so relieved when you asked me to stay. I just- you pushed me away all night, I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Harry says softly, he hesitates, “why did- babe why were you pushing me away?”

Louis doesn’t say anything, and Harry wonders if he shouldn't have asked. He slips his hand up under Louis’ fleece sleeping jumper, his fingers easily spanning Louis’ narrow chest, his palm flat over Louis’ heart. He can feel each fluttering beat, soft and steady. He can feel Louis’ ribs expanding with each small breath. He nuzzles softly behind Louis’ ear, and presses a kiss there. Louis sighs.

“I can't give you what you need, Harry,” Louis says quietly, “I can't be what you deserve.”
“Louis, that isn’t true,” Harry protests.

“You deserve someone who can love you right,” Louis mumbles, “You think I don’t care about you, I’ve broken your trust, and I’ve hurt you. You should leave,” he draws in a shaky breath, “but then- I don’t know- I just- I need you here.”

“Oh, baby,” Harry sighs.

With gentle hands he turns Louis over in his arms. Louis instantly tucks himself under Harry’s chin, and wraps his arms around Harry’s waist. Harry intertwines their legs, but he pulls back and reaches out to tip Louis’ chin up; so Louis is looking him in the eyes.

“I shouldn’t have said the things I said, I shouldn’t have reacted like that. I understand why you purged, nobody expects you to be perfect your second day of recovery. I just hope next time you’ll trust me enough to tell me, or even better, ask me to come help you. Because I would, I will always help you, Lou,” Harry says gently, "And what I said about you not caring wasn't right either. That was me putting my shit on you, and it wasn't fair."

Louis frowns, "what do you mean, what shit?"

Harry sighs, "I've always kicked myself for being so naive with Jamie and Meeka, for assuming they cared when they didn't. I just worried that maybe I was doing the same with you? But I was being stupid I- like I know you care, I just- I know it's hard for you to trust people, and that we need to take things slow, and that's okay, I swear that's okay. As long as you know how much I love you," Harry fumbles, trying to explain without making Louis feel guilty for something he can't change, "I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart. You're so much more than I deserve, and you're everything I want."

Louis is silent for a moment. He reaches out, and brushes his hand through the front of Harry's hair absentmindedly. Harry traces patterns against the small of Louis' back, fingertips bumping across the knobs of his spine. Louis' eyes are wide and searching, his teeth press against his bottom lip.

"It isn't how it was with Meeka, or Jamie, Harry. I could never, ever hurt you like that," Louis says softly, after a while, "I really hate them for hurting you."

Harry has long since moved past the pain that he felt after both of them, but hearing Louis say that, that Louis feels defensive of Harry, means a lot. It means enough to have a lump lodging in his throat, that has nothing to do with the assholes he's been with before. He can't stop himself when he tips his chin down, and brushes his lips softly against Louis'. Louis' eyes flutter closed, and he kisses back softly.

"They don't matter baby," Harry breathes, lips against Louis' cheek, "they were just things I had to learn before I found you."

Louis' thumb drags along Harry's jaw, and he hums, "one day I'll get used to how cheesy you are."

Harry laughs softly, "babe, the cheesy shit I say out loud is about one eighth of all the cheesy shit I think in my head about you."

Louis' laugh is quiet, but he presses his lips to Harry's, and then tucks his head back under Harry's chin. Harry cards his hand through Louis' hair. He breathes Louis in, and holds him closer. He has so much he wants to say, but he knows he can't say it all. He wants to tell Louis he'd cut the moon out of the sky, and hand it to him if he could. He wants to tell Louis that he thinks about later, when Louis is well, getting down on one knee and asking Louis to be his. But he knows he shouldn't even be thinking things like that, when Louis isn't yet ready to say those three words.
"I hate the people who hurt you," he murmurs against Louis’ hair, and he isn't even sure if he meant to say that out loud.

Louis stills in Harry's arms, "babe, those other guys, they didn't- they didn't matter enough to hurt me," he says quietly.

Harry takes a deep breath, "I'm not talking about them," Harry says, voice barely over a whisper, "I'm talking about whoever made you hate yourself, whoever made it impossible for you to see how perfect you are."

Louis goes rigid in Harry's arms, and Harry knows he's crossed a line. His arms tighten instinctually around Louis, because he's terrified Louis is going to bolt. He realizes that Louis is trembling, his hand shaking where it's tucked under Harry's arm. Harry runs his fingers through Louis' hair, silently begging Louis not to snap.

"Please," Louis' voice is so small.

"Okay," Harry breathes, "okay."

Harry shouldn't have said anything. It's a long time before Louis relaxes in Harry's arms, a long time before his breathing steadies. Just before Louis falls asleep Harry whispers an 'I love you,' against the sharp edge of his cheekbone. Harry lays awake for a long time after that.

~

Their alarm goes off in the morning, and Louis sits up with his hair a mess, and sleep in his eyes. Harry looks up at him, and the sun is blazing through the sheer curtains behind him, lighting Louis up like the angel Harry thinks he is. Harry still gets gobsmacked sometimes, at how beautiful Louis is, he has to focus not to let his jaw hang.

"I don't want to go to school," Louis sighs, his neck cracking as he tips his head side to side.

"Then lets not," Harry says, "lets go back to sleep."

"Harry, I don't want you missing school," he protests.

"All we're doing is review, I promise I'm not missing anything. I've just got to go at five, for that study group I signed up for. What about you? Will you miss anything important?"

Louis shakes his head, "no, nothing," he says, smiling softly, "let me go tell the boys."

Louis slips out of bed, and pads softly across the room to the door. He comes back a while later, and climbs back in, next to Harry. Harry cuddles him up, and presses wet kisses all over his face, relishing in the little giggles Louis emits. They fall back asleep for a few hours, until the sun is hot on Harry's bare back.

He carries Louis into the shower, his thin legs wrapped tightly around Harry's hips, his face buried in Harry's neck to muffle his protests at being carried.

After, Harry makes breakfast. Louis eats two sausage links, and two eggs. Harry knows they must be cold by the time Louis finishes, but he waits patiently.

They spend the day doing homework, tangled around each other. Harry gets Louis to eat three of the crisps that he's munching on while they study; he counts it as a win. They have sandwiches for lunch, and Louis eats everything but his crusts. Everything is going well until Louis says he's going
to get a sweater, and he doesn't come back for a while. Harry gets up, and goes down the hall to Louis room.

He doesn't see Louis at first, but then he hears something from the walk in closet, that sounds painfully like a sniffle. He goes to the closet, and feels his heart sink to his stomach. Louis is standing in front of the body length mirror at the back of the closet, wearing only his too-loose boxers. He doesn't notice Harry.

Harry watches as he clutches desperately at the skin clinging to his hips. His hands move to his stomach, and Harry can see in the reflection, that Louis' fingertips dig in so deep, that the flesh goes white. He drags his fingers across his waist, leaving the skin red under his nails. He claws at the spot beneath his belly button, pinching at it, even though there is nothing but skin to grab.

"Louis," Harry sighs.

Louis winces like he's been shot, his arms instantly flying up to wrap protectively around himself. Harry's heart breaks when he realizes that Louis' eyes are shining with tears. Harry steps forward, and wraps his arms around Louis from behind. He slips his hands under Louis', locking their fingers. Louis whimpers when Harry ghosts their hands over the raw skin, that Louis had been scratching at. Harry runs their hands softly across every tortured piece of skin.

"I'm so disgusting," Louis says suddenly, eyes pressing tightly shut, "don't look at me," he sobs.

Harry wonders if Louis can hear his heart stuttering, "no baby," he pleads.

He spins Louis away from the mirror, and pulls him into his arms. Louis doesn't hold him back, but he hides his face against Harry's chest. His shoulders shake as he sobs; tragic little whimpers that stab at Harry's heart. Every once in a while Harry catches Louis' strangled words, and he hears the word 'fat' so many times that it kills him.

"Louis, I need you to trust me, please?" Harry begs, "can you do that? Just for a minute."

Louis doesn't respond, but Harry needs to do this, he just prays it will help. He pulls Louis gently out of the closet, and guides him over to the bed. He sits Louis down, and Louis instantly curls in on himself, dragging his knees up to his chin, and wrapping his arms around them. He hardly even notices when Harry hurries out of the room, because his face is hidden against his knees.

Harry comes back with Louis' phone in hand. Louis' fingers are curled around his thin bicep, his nails digging in. Harry reaches out and carefully pulls Louis to his feet. Louis looks up at him with confused, red rimmed eyes. He bites down on his lip, his arms tight around his body. Harry runs his hands gently down Louis' arms, bringing them to his sides. He presses a kiss to each collarbone, and thumbs away Louis' tears. Louis hangs his head, looking down at his bare feet.

Harry steps back, and opens the camera on Louis' phone with shaking hands. Louis doesn't look up, until he hears the artificial shutter sound. Confusion flashes across his face, but it quickly shifts to betrayal. He runs past Harry into the closet, and goes to slam the door. Harry gets there before he can though, putting his shoulder in the way so Louis can't lock him out.

"Wait Louis, let me explain," Harry begs, "I read in this article that this guy's mom took his picture. He was anorexic, and he thought he was so fat. But in the picture he could see what he really looked like. I took it on your phone so you don't have to worry about me having a picture like that of you. I just- I need you to look at the picture. I need you to see how thin you really are, because I can't stand the fact that you think you're fat."
It's a long time before Louis finally backs away from the door, and Harry is able to step in. Louis sinks down to the floor, and Harry drops, right next to him. He crosses his legs, and pulls Louis into his lap, cradling his tiny body. Louis buries his face in Harry's shoulder, his fist clenching around Harry's shirt.

"I don't want to see it," Louis whimpers.

"Please Louis," Harry asks, "just look."

He holds out the phone, the image bright across the screen. The camera is supposed to add ten pounds, but Louis looks so emaciated. Louis groans, and glares up at Harry, but his eyes are so sad. He takes his phone with shaking hands, holding it in front of his face without a word. Harry watches Louis look at the picture, but his face is completely unreadable. He stares at it for a long time in silence, and then he presses the lock button, making the screen go black.

Louis stands up slowly, his knees creaking with the movement. He digs around in one of his drawers for a pair of sweatpants, and one of the hoodies Harry gave him. He's swimming in the hoodie, and Harry stands, and rolls up the sleeves a few times, so his hands can poke out. Louis won't meet his eyes, as Harry cradles the back of his neck.

"Lou-"

"Don't," Louis says firmly, "please, just don't."

Louis locks his fingers with Harry's, and leads them out of the room, and to the living room. He sits down on the couch, and picks up his merchandising textbook. Harry waits for a long time, hoping Louis is going to say something, but he doesn't. Harry doesn't know what Louis saw when he looked at the picture; maybe it didn't work for Louis the way it did for the guy in the article, maybe all he saw was fat. Maybe he's so shocked by the picture that he can't talk about it. Harry has no idea what Louis is thinking, and it drives him crazy.

"Louis, can you please talk to me, tell me what you're feeling?" Harry asks gently.

Louis looks over at him with sad eyes, but he gives a small smile, "right now I feel like I need to study. Okay?"

Louis' voice is strained and stiff, "Baby," Harry sighs.

"Okay?" Louis repeats though, giving Harry that look that begs him to stop.

So Harry stops. He drops it, and just hopes that maybe Louis saw how thin he really is. He hates it so much when Louis does this, just shuts down, but he knows the harder he pushes the further Louis will recoil. Harry doesn't say anything else, but he pulls Louis closer with his textbook, and puts his arm around Louis' shoulders. Louis lets out a little sigh, and buries deeper into Harry's side. Harry grabs one of his own textbooks off of the coffee table, and opens it to the page he left off. He has no idea what Louis is thinking, or feeling, and he doesn't know if he should have taken the picture or not. He doesn't know.

They study in near silence, until Liam comes home. Zayn went to the skatepark after school, and now he's studying with Caitlyn, so he isn't with Liam. Liam sprawls across the love seat, and tells them about his day. Then he and Harry play a couple rounds of Fifa, Louis plays with Harry's hair.

"Babe, don't you have to go to that study group?" Louis asks eventually.

"Shit, yeah I almost forgot," Harry groans, checking his watch, "are you going to be okay?" he asks
as he packs up what he'll need for the group.

"I'll be fine," Louis rolls his eyes.

"I'll make dinner, and save some for you and Zayn, for when you two get home," Liam says.

"I'd just skip it, but the professor organized it, and he had us confirm we'd be coming because he's going to be giving us special study guides," Harry groans.

Louis pulls back, and rubs his thumb over Harry's hiding dimple, "love, I'm going to be fine," he says, "I can survive without you for a few hours."

Harry juts out his lip, and furrows his eyebrows, "you could at least pretend you'll miss me," he pouts.

Louis laughs, because he knows Harry is joking, "you know I will," he says quietly, pressing his lips to Harry's, "now go get an education."

Harry laughs, and gives him another kiss. Liam claps him on the back, as he heads over to put on his shoes. He pulls his backpack on, and grabs his keys and wallet. Louis already has his feet in Liam's lap, as they set up a new game of Fifa. Harry doesn't like leaving him, especially when he still doesn't know how Louis is doing. He found Louis, crying in the closet, but now Louis' acting like nothing is wrong.

"Bye, love you," Harry calls.

"Bye, baby," Louis says.

"Byeee, love you tooo," Liam calls obnoxiously.

Harry laughs, and leaves the flat to the sound of Louis slapping the back of Liam's head. The drive to the campus is slow because of after work traffic, but he gets to the library on time. He walks in and says hi to his friends from class, before checking in with the professor. His thoughts never leave Louis.

He gets a text from Louis, saying 'study hard, sweet cheeks,' and his friends from class tease him for smiling like an idiot at his phone.

~

Harry is sitting in the library arguing with Jeff about genealogical patterns, when his phone vibrates. He takes it out of his pocket to check it, without pausing his sentence, but when he reads the words on the screen he freezes, frowning. Jeff takes that as a chance to state his point, but Harry isn’t listening.

'Harry, please call me,' says the text from Liam.

Immediately Harry's heart is racing as he pushes up from the table without an explanation to anyone. He walks a ways away from the study group, and hits the call button. It only rings once before it's picked up but he hears rustling for a while before Liam speaks.

"Harry can you come home please?" Liam asks in a hushed voice, "It's Louis."

Harry is storming back to the table, and shoving his things in his backpack, before he even takes a breath, "what's wrong?" he asks, quickly apologizing to the professor, before he dashes out of the
"I don't know," Liam groans, "he did so good at dinner, he ate so much, and I didn't even have to force him to. But then he got really quiet after, and now he's upset. He's like sick or something, he's like near tears. I don't know what to do."

"What did he eat?" Harry asks, as he jogs out to his truck.

"I made spaghetti, and meatballs," Liam explains, voice still hushed, "he ate so much Harry, but I promise I didn't guilt him into it, he ate it on his own."

"Fuck. It's the carbs, his body can't handle that much carbs. I'm on my way, tell him I'm coming."

"He'll be mad I called you," Liam says.

"It's okay," Harry says, "just- I don't know- I'll be right there."

He hangs up, and climbs into the truck, jerking the key in the ignition, and slamming the gearshift into drive. His iPhone automatically syncs with his Bluetooth, which connects to the speakers. He wishes the song that came on wasn't Black Flies though, because it's anything but relaxing right now.

He makes it to the flat in record time, and all but sprints up the stairs. The TV is playing in the living room, but nobody is in there. Harry drops his backpack, and hurries down the hall to Louis' bedroom. Louis is barely visible, curled up under the duvet. Liam is sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing his back. Liam looks up, with relief flashing across his face when he sees Harry.

Harry sits down on the other side of the bed, on the side Louis is facing. Louis looks up at him with a furrowed brow, and bleary eyes. Harry reaches out, and pushes Louis' fringe back from his eyes.

Louis lets out a whine, and somehow curls up even smaller.

"Call me if you need anything, Lou," Liam says, and Louis nods as Liam stands, leaving the room.

"Baby, what's going on?" Harry asks, when they're alone, "tell me what you're feeling."

Louis groans softly, "I feel like I'm going to explode."

"Why did you eat so much, Lou?" Harry sighs.

Louis whimpers, and presses his eyes closed, "it hurts Harry."

Harry knows Louis' body isn't equipped to digest so many carbs, so suddenly. He knows they weigh heavy in Louis' stomach. His body stopped producing the things it needs to digest, because it was trying to prevent flesh and muscle deterioration when Louis was starving himself.

When his body switched over to using body stores for energy, it essentially forgot how to properly digest food energy. His body has been slowly relearning how to digest the food Louis is getting now, but he's only been eating better for three days. A huge serving of pasta and meatballs is too much, too fast. His stomach and intestines are trying their best to work on the food, but the extra effort is making everything unbalanced in Louis' body.

Harry presses his fingers up under Louis' jaw at his pulse point, feeling the weak, irregular fluttering of his heart beat. He doesn't know what to do, he searches his brain for everything he learned about refeeding syndrome. It's rare, and Harry knows that probably isn't what Louis is experiencing, but he's not about to take chances with Louis' health. If he's wrong, and Louis is actually having RFS Louis' body could go into shock.
Even if Louis isn't having refeeding complications, he can see how much pain Louis is in; it's written over every inch of his face. Louis' stomach has shrunk from lack of food, it's why he feels so uncomfortable every time he eats. Eating an average sized meal for Louis is like if Harry sat down and ate three cheeseburgers and fries. He doesn't know if he's making the right choice, but the last thing he wants is Louis being in pain.

"D'you- do you feel like if you purged it would help?" Harry asks hesitantly.

Louis' eyes flash open, and he frowns, "Harry-

"Would it help, baby?"

Louis bites his lip, but nods, "of course but- fuck, Harry, I'm so sick of disappointing you," he mumbles, his eyes welling up.

"Is that why you did this?" Harry asks slowly.

Louis scrubs the hand that isn't clenched around his stomach, down his face, "I just- I want to be good enough for you Harry. I wanted you to be proud of me. To know that I am trying for you. And that fucking picture- I couldn't stop looking at it- and I don't know what the fuck I'm even supposed to feel about it because like- fuck, I don't know. I just- fuck."

"Shh baby," Harry says softly, pressing a kiss to Louis' temple, "You are perfect for me, whether you weigh ninety pounds, or three hundred. It means so much to me that you tried."

"I'm so fucked up," Louis mumbles.

"You're not, don't say that."

"I am," Louis groans, "and I feel like my fucking stomach is going to rip."

"No, come on, love," Harry says gently.

Louis looks at him confusedly, as Harry reaches for his hand. Harry gently sits Louis up, Louis cringes, and wraps his arms around his stomach. Harry pulls him gently to his feet, but Louis stays half hunched over, his fingertips digging in, on either side of his bellybutton. Harry guides him down the hall to the bathroom, and Louis frowns.

"I- why are you letting me do this?" Louis stutters, body rigid with the pain in his gut.

"You're hurting, Louis," Harry says, "we'll try again tomorrow, yeah?"

Louis looks up at him with wet eyes, "I'm sorry," Louis says, "I'm so sorry."

"Stop, don't say that," Harry sighs, "just- do what you need to do, it will be okay."

Louis frowns, "I can't do it with you here."

"You're going to have to, there's no way I'm letting you lock yourself in here alone. You're not alone in this anymore, Louis."

"Harry, it's disgusting, I don't want you to see me like that," Louis whines.

"Louis, who do you think takes care of Niall when he gets carried away at the pub. It's just puke," Harry says easily, even though he knows it isn't going to be easy at all.
He knows Louis is terrified. He's hidden this part of him away for so long, he's never let anybody see this side of him. He can't let Louis do this by himself though, because then they really will be back at square one. He is letting Louis purge because he is in physical pain; the moment he leaves the room it just becomes Louis punishing himself again. He thinks maybe this is the stupidest thing he could possibly be doing, letting Louis purge like this, but he can't stand the pain creasing Louis' eyebrows, and making him wince.

"Harry," Louis whimpers.

"Come on sweetheart," Harry replies softly, going to sit on the edge of the tub, right next to the toilet.

Louis looks like he wants to argue, but he just ends up digging his fingertips deeper into his stomach. Harry watches as Louis locks the door, and goes to wash his hands. Louis casts him one last glance, before he pulls off Harry's hoodie, and folds it neatly on the counter. When he's just in sweatpants and a grey t-shirt, he lowers himself to his knees in front of the toilet.

Harry has rubbed Niall's back while he's puked quite a few times since they've shared a dorm. With Niall it's always loud, hacking gags, and muffled curses, as his stomach contents force themselves out his mouth. Niall, like most people, hates puking, and he always fights to keep vomit down, until he can't anymore. Then he heaves into the toilet, cussing between rounds of puke. Harry rubs his back, and then brings him back to their room, and pumps him full of paracetamol and water.

It is so much different with Louis. Louis' thin fingers reach into his mouth and he strokes the back of his throat, almost delicately. With a practiced ease that makes Harry cringe. He hardly gags at all, before he's leaning forward, and the vomit is rushing out of his mouth, into the toilet. His knuckles are white, where he grips the porcelain of the bowl. His hand shakes, as he reaches back into his mouth. Harry's hand rubs slowly up and down Louis' back; and he murmurs words of comfort that he knows are useless.

Tears prick the back of Harry's eyes, because he can't stand seeing Louis like this. Crumpled and broken on the bathroom floor, making himself throw up, with tears streaming down his face. It hurts even more because Louis is so fucking good at it. He's got so much control that he hardly has to touch his throat before he can drag up what's inside him. Louis' whole body is shaking by the fourth time he goes to shove his fingers down his throat. Harry reaches out, and catches Louis' thin wrist.

"Enough," he says, "that's enough."

Louis' cheeks are as red as his eyes, when he looks up at Harry, "I'm not empty yet," he protests, sounding choked.

Harry winces, "good. You're not doing this to get empty, Louis. You were too full, so you had to get some out. You're not meant to be empty. You need to stop."

Harry stands and wets a facecloth. He pulls Louis gently to his feet, and away from the toilet, before he flushes it. He wipes the saliva and vomit from between Louis' fingers. He uses the clean half of the cloth to wipe Louis' mouth clean. Louis is trembling, looking blankly at some point just over Harry's shoulder.

As Harry goes to catch the tears on his cheeks with a bit of toilet roll, Louis breaks down. His face crumples and he buries his eyes against the heels of his hands. He cries out, his entire body shaking with the sobs. His knees buckle, but Harry catches him, scooping Louis up into his arms, and sinking to the ground with his back against the wall. Louis' fist clenches in Harry's shirt, as he tries to muffle his sobs against Harry's shoulder.
"It's okay baby, you're going to be okay. You got enough out, you'll feel okay in a minute," Harry says softly, rocking Louis gently back and forth.

"It isn't enough," Louis whimpers, his voice shaky and jagged and raw, "it's never enough."

That night, after Harry gets Louis bundled up, and comfortable in bed, after Louis' crying has stopped, and his breathing has slowed, after Louis has finally fallen asleep, Harry lays in bed with him tucked tight in his arms, and nothing but Louis' words playing on a loop in his head. It's never enough.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who is reading and for all the kudos and your comments are amazing thank you so much

I just need you guys to know that unfortunately Louis getting better isn't going to be this simple. People suffering from anorexia have many phases where they accept they have a problem and say that they want to get better, but unfortunately it isn't that easy. Louis has a lot of ups and downs to come in his recovery, seeing one picture and deciding for one day that he wants to be better, isn't going to be all it takes for louis to get well. I want this fic to be as realistic as possible and unfortunately recovery isn't that easy. more will be explained in chapters to come.

thanks for reading!!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It has been three full days since Louis has purged. Three and a half, including the breakfast he choked down, and the lunch that is sitting heavy in his stomach right now. He lets the searing water of the shower rain down on him, as he sits at the bottom of the tub. He's already washed his hair, and his body, but he isn't ready to get out yet. His knees are drawn tight up to his chest, because it's the only position he can be in without his stomach feeling like it's ripping apart. He can feel his stomach clenching, and unclenching, against the unyielding lump of food in his gut.

It hurts so bad. When he stretches out, he swears he can feel every inch of his stomach stretching, and aching. Harry made him eat scrambled eggs, fruit, and toast for breakfast, and that was hell; but it was nothing compared to the chilli that Liam made him for lunch. Harry had to leave after breakfast to do a weekend lab for his chemistry class, and Liam puts way too much meat in everything. Louis can't say that though, because he doesn't want to see that look on Liam's face. The look that says that Louis is both a sickly creature to be pitied, and a mental patient banging on the walls of his padded room. They don't even look at him the same anymore. They're constantly watching him, waiting for him to argue against the food, or sneak off to purge. He can feel their eyes raking over his body, looking at him like he's some medical experiment gone wrong. He can see the worry etched in every one of Zayn's features. He can see the guilt in Liam's.

That's another reason he can't tell Liam that he can't stand all the meat; he knows Liam blames himself. He can see the anger burning behind Liam's eyes. He can see the anger blistering Liam's knuckles, because when he's mad he takes it out on the punching bag at his gym, without gloves on. Louis is only just starting to realize that it isn't anger at him, Liam's anger is directed at himself. He hears Liam talking to Zayn, when he's in his bedroom and they're out in the living room. Liam is furious at himself for not noticing, for letting this happen in the first place. Like Louis has some disease that they could have prevented if they caught the symptoms quick enough.

They exchange glances over his head, silently discussing the way he eats, or the way he looks. Zayn is always calming Liam; a soft hand on his shoulder when he can tell Liam is itching to beg Louis to eat more, a firm look when Liam tries to heap Louis' plate too full. Zayn's eyes are soft, and sympathetic when he looks at Louis. His hands are gentle, and comforting, when he rubs Louis' ankles, when he runs his fingers through Louis' hair. Louis doesn't want his sympathy though, and he doesn't want his comfort either.

He wants to go back to the way things were, when nobody saw, when nobody noticed. He doesn't want Zayn to cry at night, he doesn't want Liam to cut open his knuckles, or bite his lips raw. He doesn't want them to care. He can feel the toilet, calling out to him from the other side of the shower curtain; mocking him. The door to the bathroom is wide open though; the rule for when Harry isn't here to shower with him. Louis rests his forehead on his knees, and kneads his fingers into the bulge of his stomach. His skin crawls, because he knows in a couple of hours he'll be shoving more food in.

"Hey Lou, you okay in there?" comes Liam's voice, from just outside the door.

"Leave him be," protests Zayn, in the background.

"Yeah mate, I'll be out in a sec," Louis calls quickly.
He tries to hold in his sigh, as he reaches out to shut off the shower. When he pushes himself to his feet he feels the stretch of his stomach, heavy and aching with food. He holds in a groan, and bites against the inside of his cheek to balance out the pain. It's nothing like he felt that night with the spaghetti and meatballs though. That night he thought he could feel his stomach ripping at the seams.

Louis reaches outside the curtain for a towel, and dries himself off. He grabs the fluffy bathrobe off the rack, and wraps it around himself, while still standing in the shower. He had said something about how he couldn't stand showering with the door open because it was so cold when he got out, and that night, when Harry showed up at the flat, he had the softest bathrobe Louis had ever seen, wrapped up with a bow. Louis steps carefully out of the tub, and gathers his discarded clothes.

"Y'alright bebz?" Zayn calls from the living room, when he steps out of the bathroom.

"Yeah, I'm good," Louis says, "just going to go decide what to wear."

He's developed this tone of voice, to keep their worry at bay. It's light and casual; not too bright to be believable, but bright enough that they think he's feeling okay. He doesn't step out of the hallway, because even though the robe falls to the middle of his shins, he doesn't want them seeing his legs. His ankles swell during the day. Harry says it's to be expected; fluid moving as his body tries to adjust to the food. Louis doesn't even feel comfortable wearing the cuffs of his pants rolled up anymore, because his ankles, the only bit of skin he'd ever show before, look like slabs of ham now.

He goes down the hall to his bedroom, and shuts the door behind him. Another one of the rules is that he isn't allowed a waste bin in his room anymore, so they at least trust him with the bedroom door shut. He tells himself it is a stupid precaution, because he never would have stooped low enough to purge in a wastepaper bin. He doesn't even know if that is entirely true though, so he couldn't even fight them on taking it out.

He sits down on the edge of his bed, and feels around in the covers for his phone, 'can't wait for tonight, I'll be there in an hour,' says the text from Harry.

Louis thumbs out a reply, and lays down on his side, tucking his knees up under the robe, and closing his eyes. He feels so fucking disgusting. He thinks about leaving all the time. Just packing up, and going somewhere, where there is nobody to care what he eats. He laid awake thursday night in Harry's arms, just thinking. He could get a room at a cheap motel, drive himself to school every morning, get to class just before the bell so he wouldn't run into the boys, leave before they even knew he was there. He could take his exams, finish school, take one of the internships far away; and he wouldn't have to eat.

He had it all planned out, and then he realized what he was thinking of. Leaving Liam, whose been there since the beginning when Louis was too loud, and obnoxious, and bossy. Liam whose been by his side every single day since, has never faltered, has always been his grounding force. Liam, who picked up the pieces of Louis' life, and carried him to London, before doing everything he could to put Louis back together again.

Leaving Zayn, who he's always connected with on a whole different level, because Zayn was so in tune with the quiet side of Louis, the contemplative side, that hardly ever came out because Louis was always on full blast back then. Zayn, who hadn't know Louis half the time Liam had, but was right there when Louis' life came crashing down, ready to pack up to London, and try to mend Louis, without question.

He could never do that to them, after everything they've done for him. They are everything to Louis.

And then there is Harry. Harry who looks at Louis that way. That way that Louis doesn't understand,
can't explain, can't define. Nobody has ever looked at him like that, and Louis doesn't know what it is. Harry treats him so fucking good, and Louis doesn't know why. He gets it a little bit with Liam and Zayn, because once upon a time he was a good friend, even if he's useless now. He doesn't get it with Harry. All Harry has ever seen is this fucked up shell of him, and yet Harry has never been anything but kind. Harry is sweet, and tender, and Louis has never had that before. He's never felt someone's eyes on him, and then looked over to find them smiling at him so softly; Harry does that. He's never had someone notice things about him, that he doesn't even notice about himself, and then point them out like they're the most adorable things in the world; Harry does that.

'I love that little freckle on the right side of your forehead.' 'I love the way you walk on our tip toes whenever you go in the kitchen, because the tile is cold on your feet.' 'I love the way you hum to yourself sometimes when you sketch.' 'I love the way you cover your mouth with the back of your hand when I make you giggle.' Stupid little things that Louis doesn't understand why Harry likes. Louis doesn't understand why Harry likes anything about him.

He doesn't understand Harry. He doesn't understand why Harry likes him. He doesn't understand why Harry is still here. But he is; and that night Louis looked up at Harry, fast asleep, his arms wrapped around Louis, and he knew then he couldn't leave Harry either. He can't blow whatever he has with Harry. He'll hold onto him as long as he can, before Harry gets tired of playing Mr. Fix It and leaves. So he stayed.

Sometimes he still thinks about leaving, just getting away and purging and fasting, and trying to get rid of the heaviness in his gut; but he can't. He can't leave the only three people who give a shit if he lives or dies. He feels fat, and repulsive, and disgusting, but they're still here, and Harry is still picking him up in an hour.

He has to try and ignore the bulge of his stomach, and the swelling of his ankles, and try to make himself good enough for them, and for Harry. He pushes himself up from the bed, cringing against the ache in his abdomen, and crosses his room.

Louis stands in his closet for a long time, trying to decide what to wear. He knows wherever Harry is taking them is fancy, and he really just want to look okay. He knows Harry is going to look perfect, and he just doesn't want to ruin that. He doesn't want to be the disgusting thing clinging to the gorgeous guys arm. He doesn't want everyone looking at them and wondering why the hell someone like Harry, is with someone like Louis.

Louis' never had enough control over how he looks. No matter how much weight he loses he's still too short, too curvy, too small. He's got disgusting wrinkles by his eyes, and a pudge nose. One of his teeth on the top has a chip, and one on the bottom is pushed behind the others; he's also got vampire fangs. His eyes are pale, and dull. His eyebrows are too rounded, his hair is a disaster. Then there is his gut, his hips, his thighs.

He is a mess. He can't change his features, or his body, but he can dress himself. That is what Louis uses his clothes for; to try and make up for what he lacks in every other department. He may be disgusting, but he knows how to dress himself. His fingers trail along the rows and rows of clothes hanging in his closet. He hates that it's getting so warm out. He still gets chilly outside if there is a breeze, or inside if the air conditioning is on; but it's only spring so most places don't have AC, and he gets too warm in all his layers. The last thing he needs is to be sitting across from Harry at a fancy restaurant with a sheen of sweat across his face, flushed cheeks, and a wilting quiff.

He's completely at a loss for what to wear when his fingers catch the crisp cotton of one of his button ups. He reaches for the hanger, and pulls it out. It's a Burberry dress shirt he splurged on last spring. The thread count is so high, and of such good quality that it feels almost silky. It's base colour is a
very pale blue, the expanded check pattern is two different shades of only slightly darker blue, focused more on the right side, and less concentrated on the left. The pattern is quiet and understated, like Louis prefers; the pale lines thick and overlapping.

It's always been his favourite shirt, Liam and Zayn say it brings out the blue in his eyes. He always loved it, because even when he was at his heaviest the tailoring was immaculate, and it skimmed him perfectly, without hugging any of his bulges. He hasn't just worn a button up by itself in ages, he's always covered in a cardigan, or a jacket. Something to mask the roundness of his hips, something he could cross over his torso, when he sat and his stomach rolled. It's too hot for any cover ups now though, so Louis just hopes his faithful shirt can work it's magic, and make him look decent. Harry loves Burberry.

He takes the shirt off the hanger, and grabs a black pair of trousers; without rolled up cuffs, to hide his bloated ankles. He leaves the closet, and spreads the outfit across his bed. He reluctantly removes the fluffy bathrobe. He instantly feels painfully exposed, even though he is alone in the room. Looking down he can see the bulbous line of his gut, protruding from the food. The bulge of his stomach is constant now. Before, at least he could suck in, and try to disguise the layer of fat he'll never lose. Now though, there is absolutely nothing he can do about the bloated beach ball. He hopes the shirt will hide it.

He steps into the trousers, and then unbuttons the shirt. It's smooth and soft as he pulls it on his shoulders; still pressed from when he had it dry cleaned after wearing it months, and months ago. He feels a swell of relief when it hangs a little loose on his shoulders. His fingers work on the buttons, and the fabric isn't stretched against his skin, so he has hope that it will look okay. He hesitates before going to the full length mirror in his closet.

His eyes scan critically over himself, taking in every inch. He almost sighs in relief when the shirt fits without clinging to any part of him. The collar is a little loose, and it looks just a little bit oversized, but he knows he's lost weight since the last time he wore it, and he's just so glad it isn't pulled tight across the swell of his stomach. His hair is still damp and undone, but he leaves the room to ask the boys if they think it's okay.

"Guys," he says, going over to where they're sprawled across the couch, both studying, "erm- does this look okay? You know… for tonight?"

Louis doesn't know what he was expecting, but it wasn't for Liam's face to crumple, "oh fuck, Lou," he groans.

Louis flinches, "What?" he asks, wrapping his arms across his middle in defence.

"Fuck," Liam says again, scrubbing his hands down his face, "you haven't worn that in so long."

Louis is completely confused, looking between Liam and Zayn; Zayn is biting his lip, eyebrows furrowed, "What's wrong?" he asks, voice shaking.

Liam stands and steps towards him, Louis resists the urge to step away. Liam's eyes are wide and sad, but that anger is blazing at the back of them. Louis doesn't understand. He knew he didn't look perfect, but he had thought it looked okay. Liam reaches out and his hands circle around Louis' biceps easily, his hands sliding down Louis' arms to his wrists. Next Liam pulls at the fabric on either side of Louis' ribs, his hands fistling in the excess fabric, until Louis can feel the material pull across his skin.

"Your so tiny," Liam almost whimpers, "fuck, Louis, this shirt is at least four sizes to big on you now. Two of you could fit in there."
Louis struggles away, loosening Liam's grip on his shirt, his cheeks burn with embarrassment, "you could have just said it looked bad," he says, trying to keep his voice steady.

He stumbles away, hurrying down the hall, shame twisting in his gut. He slams his door with more force than necessary, and goes straight to his closet. He stands in front of the mirror, hands shaking as he pulls at the fabric, holding onto the loose material. He knew he shouldn't have even attempted just a button up, even Liam thinks he looks disgusting.

There is a soft knock at the door, and he's about to yell for Liam to leave him alone when Zayn speaks, "Can I come in please?"

Louis sighs, "fine," he says quietly.

Zayn enters the room, and then appears in the doorway of the closet, "Lou-

"I didn't think it looked that bad," Louis whimpers, not taking his eyes off the shirt in the mirror.

Zayn sighs, and steps forward, his hands gentle on Louis' shoulders, "It doesn't Louis, you know we love that shirt on you. It's just-" Zayn frowns, trying to find the words, "when Harry told us about your eating disorder he had seen you naked. We haven't. We just had to take his word for it what you looked like. We could see it after that, under all your layers, how small you had become. We could see the looseness of your clothes that we never thought twice about before.

But this. Seeing you like this, in a shirt that used to fit you so well. Seeing the contrast between then, when you filled the shirt out perfectly, and now, when you're literally swimming in it. Shit. Harry's been trying to explain to us how you don't see what we see when we look at you, but you're so fucking tiny now, Louis. It's just- this is the first time Li and I have really been able to see how….drastic… it is, because you hide it so well. It was just a shock. Liam didn't mean to be an arse, but like- it was just a shock."

Louis tries to swallow past Zayn's words. He tries to remember the picture that he has saved in his phone, of him standing naked save for boxers. The picture still gives him that weird swooping feeling in his stomach, and he still has no idea how to feel about it. It is so hard to connect that picture with the image he sees when he looks in the mirror.

The picture shocked him. He isn't blind, he could see that he's bony, but that isn't actually how he is. He can physically grab every bit of fat on his body, he knows it's there, regardless of a picture. Maybe the picture showed him that he looks thin, but he knows that he isn't. He can feel that he isn't, isn't thin enough. He'll also never, ever admit to the small sense of pride he feels every time he looks at the picture.

It had scared him at first, because he could see so many bones, and it was so hard to realize that the image was him. It had scared him enough to get him to eat so much that he nearly exploded. But then he had gone back to his mirror the next day, maybe expecting to see those bones reflected back at him, but the image wasn't the same. He was just as disgusting as ever. Now, when he pulls up the picture, with nobody around, his eyes skim the bones, aching for them really to be that visible. Harry keeps telling him he has a distorted image of his body, but that doesn't explain the fistfuls of fat he can grab when he touches himself.

He doesn't know what Zayn sees, but he's looking at Louis with sad eyes in the mirror, "I have nothing to wear," Louis says quietly.

"You look good, Lou, we love this shirt on you. It's just a little big," Zayn says gently, "can't you pin it a little or something, just so it isn't quite so loose?"
"Then it will cling," Louis protests, "I like it loose."

Zayn's hands are soft as he holds a bit of the fabric, "what about just like this," he suggests gently.

The way he holds the fabric behind Louis takes a little bit of the excess off the sides, but doesn't pull it too close to Louis' body. It does look a little better. Louis pinches the fabric around his arms, maybe he could bring that in a little too. He analyzes himself for a while longer, before he sighs.

"I don't have time, Harry will be here soon," Louis frowns.

"Okay, come on," Zayn says, taking Louis' hand.

He brings Louis down the hall to his room and switches on the light, bringing Louis over to his closet. Louis waits outside for only a moment, before Zayn emerges with a shirt in his hands. The dress shirt is grey, dark charcoal at the bottom, slowly fading up to a light grey at the shoulders and collar. He hands it to Louis with a smile.

"Wear this, it'll look great on you."

Louis shakes his head, "Zayn your clothes won't fit me, you're two sizes smaller than me," he argues.

Zayn's smile falters, "not anymore, Lou," he says softly, "that's going to be loose on you."

"Zayn-"

"Can you just try it on please? Here, I'll turn around, I promise not to look," Zayn insists.

Louis sighs, as Zayn turns his back. He feels vulnerable taking his shirt off, even with Zayn's back turned, because Zayn could turn around and look at any second. He promised he wouldn't though, so Louis starts on the buttons. When he gets his shirt off he hurriedly pulls Zayn's on. He's surprised that it isn't tight on his arms, doesn't pull taut across his shoulders, like Zayn's clothes used to. Zayn's always been so much smaller than Louis, and Liam. He's got a ridiculously fast metabolism, and if he doesn't eat a lot he drops weight so quickly. Louis has always been so jealous of him for it.

Louis gets the shirt on, and he's genuinely shocked when he's able to get all the buttons done up, without any tightness. He goes over to Zayn's mirror next to the door to look, because he doesn't want Zayn to see him in it if it looks disgusting. It goes well with his pants, and the colour is nice, and understated. He likes the ombre of the fabric. It fits. He can't find a single place it clings. He can admit that it looks better than how loose his shirt was.

"What do you think?" he asks hesitantly.

Zayn turns around, and looks him up and down, he smiles, but it doesn't quite meet his eyes, "it looks so good," he says.

Louis frowns, "what's wrong?" he asks, because there is something in Zayn's expression.

"Nothing Lou, it's perfect," Zayn says, making his smile bigger, and straightening the collar of the shirt.

"Zayn," Louis whines.

Zayn rubs the back of his neck, "I promise you look so good in it Louis, I just- you're just so tiny," he says quietly.

Louis' cheeks flush, and he looks down at his feet, "no."
Zayn sighs, "want me to do your quiff?" he asks.

"Could you?" Louis asks, looking up, "I can never do it as good as you."

"Sure bebz, here come sit."

He brings Louis over to his bureau. Liam teases Zayn because it's kind of feminine. It's like a desk with drawers on either side, one side devoted to art supplies, the other to hair products. There is a low stool in front of it, and a large mirror at the back. Zayn sits him down so he's facing the mirror. He rumbles around in the drawer for the hairdryer, and plugs it into the extension cord. He makes quick work of drying Louis' hair with a rounded brush, pulling the hair up, and back. When it's dry he gets out his comb, and his styling product.

Louis focuses on Zayn instead of looking at his own reflection. Zayn's eyebrows are furrowed in concentration, his tongue sticks out the side of his mouth as he works his magic. Zayn is just finishing up when there is a soft knock at the door. Zayn meets Louis' eyes, and raises an eyebrow, silently asking if he can let Liam in. Louis shrugs.

"C'mon in," Zayn says, reaching for the hairspray.

Liam peeks his head in the door, looking sheepish, "hey," he says quietly.

"Finished," Zayn says, stepping back from Louis.

Louis looks in the mirror at his perfectly styled quiff, and smiles, "thanks, mate," he says, standing up.

"You look great, Lou," Liam says.

Louis frowns, "thanks," he mumbles, feeling his cheeks warm, because he knows Liam doesn't really think it's true.

Liam steps forward hesitantly, "I'm sorry. I've put my foot in my mouth again," he says quietly.

"S'fine," Louis offers.

"It isn't," Liam frowns, "and I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"C'mere?" Liam asks.

Louis steps forward, and Liam quickly envelopes him in his arms. He presses a kiss to Louis hair, his big palm rubbing gently up and down Louis' back. Louis sinks into the hug, he breathes in Liam's familiar comforting scent. It isn't long before Zayn wraps around them too, and Louis feels at home. They both tell Louis they love him, and he tells them he loves them too. The boys go to the living room, and Louis goes to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

He looks at himself in the mirror for a while. He definitely looks better than he normally does, Zayn's shirt looks good, and he's managed to make Louis' hair look good, thankfully Louis skin is clear today.

He'll still look like some creature who crawled out from under a rock next to Harry. Harry with his mile long legs, and a smile that could stop anyone in their tracks. Harry with his charm, and his beautiful eyes, and his square jaw. Harry, who should not be with someone like Louis.
will realize soon enough, that he can do so much better. Louis rubs at the dark circles under his eyes, and takes a deep breath. He might as well have a nice date with Harry while he can.

Louis goes to the living room, to wait with the boys until Harry comes. He lays with his head in Liam's lap, and his ankles crossed in Zayn's. Liam's thumb rubs tiny circles against Louis' wrist absentmindedly, as he reads his school book. Zayn rests his textbook on Louis' legs while he takes notes. Louis tries to relax, but his insides are in knots, and not just from the chilli stewing inside him. He's nervous for the date. He's nervous to sit down with Harry, and eat a full meal. He has to force down the food, and try to look normal while doing it, so people don't think Harry's date is ugly, fat, and weird. The first two things he can't help, but he doesn't want people noticing how slow he eats. He knows he is being paranoid but he really hates people watching him eat.

Louis almost jumps out of his skin when there is a light knock at the door. He doesn't know why Harry is knocking, because he's had his own key for a while now. He pushes himself up from the couch, and fixes himself as best as he can in the mirror by the front door, before opening it. Harry is standing on his doorstep, with a bouquet of roses. He's wearing a black blazer with the sleeves rolled up, and a white t-shirt that shows his porcelain collarbones. His black jeans are sinfully tight, and he's wearing his best pair of leather ankle boots.

He grins sheepishly, "hi, love," he says, "you look amazing."

Louis blushes to the roots of his hair, as he opens the door to let Harry in, "you look perfect," he says truthfully.

"These are for you, I figured since it's our first real date in the while I should pull out all the stops. Sorry, the florist I went to didn't have any cala lilies," he holds the pristine bouquet out, looking nervous like he isn't sure they'll be good enough.

Louis' smile stretches his cheeks, as he buries his face against the silky petals and inhales, "they're gorgeous," he says, "thank you so much."

"You're gorgeous," Harry says.

Louis' face flames again, "why did you knock?" he asks, as Harry pulls him into his arms.

"It's a date, I've got to pick you up proper, yeah?" Harry grins.

He tips his chin down, and presses his lips to Louis, long and soft, his thick lips pulling gently at Louis' thin ones. Louis' free hand winds around his waist, as he stands on his tip toes to deepen the kiss. When they pull apart Louis takes his hand, and leads him to the kitchen to put the flowers in a vase. Harry pokes his head out of the kitchen to call a 'hey' to the boys.

"Harry brought me roses," Louis tells them, carrying them into the living room.

"Wow," Zayn says, "nice job Haz!"

"What a gentleman," Liam laughs.

Harry beams, "have to win over the parents," he says.

Liam lets out a hoot of laughter, "Harry, what are your intentions with our son?" Zayn asks, in mock seriousness.

"I plan to win him over, in the most respectable of fashions, treat him like the prince that he is, love him tender for the rest of his life," Harry drawls.
"We're leaving," Louis says exasperatedly, because he's sick of blushing beet red.

They all laugh as he drags Harry towards the door, "have him home by ten, not a second later, or I'll be waiting with my shotgun!" Liam howls, as Louis closes the front door behind them.

Harry is still laughing, and Louis swats his shoulder, "hilarious," he says dryly.

Harry shrugs, and pulls Louis into his side, "I was speaking the truth," he says, pressing a kiss to Louis' head.

Louis just hums noncommittally as Harry brings them downstairs to his truck. He holds Louis' door open, and then goes around to the drivers side. Harry's iPhone syncs, and one of Harry's hipster songs comes on. Harry pulls out of the parking lot, and gets on the main road. He holds his hand out for Louis', and it disappears when Harry closes his hand around it. They don't say anything, because they never have to, and Harry raises Louis' knuckles to brush his lips across them softly.

"Did you put this song on my phone?" Harry asks, when Stay comes across the speakers.

Louis blushes, because he wanted Harry to listen, not to have to discuss it, "erm yeah, I know it's pop shit, and you probably hate Rihanna, but um… this song- like it makes me think of you," he says sheepishly, not meeting Harry's eyes, "put a couple of other ones on there too, when you were having a nap yesterday."

Harry is quiet for so long that Louis finally looks over; his smile is so tender, "I love this song then," he says quietly, "thanks."

Louis blushes, and looks down at their joined hands, "okay," he says shyly.

"I love you," Harry tells him.

Louis is grateful when Harry hits replay to start the song again, so he doesn't have to respond. They pull up in front of a small restaurant, but they have to loop around the lot before they find a parking spot, so Louis knows it's busy. Harry hurries around to his side to open the door for him, offering his hand to help Louis down from the truck. They walk hand in hand to the restaurant, where Harry holds the door open for him, and guides him in with a soft hand on the small of his back. He joins their hands again when they're both inside.

"Reservation?" the girl asks, behind the stand holding a heavy looking reservation book.

"Styles," Harry says, with a polite smile.

She leads them to nice little table, and Harry pulls out Louis' chair for him, like the true gentleman he is. Louis sits down, and takes a sip of the water already waiting on the table. They open their menus, and Louis' stomach churns. Everything sounds so rich, and heavy, and Louis is still stuffed from lunch. His eyes scan over everything, his anxiety creeping up by the second. Harry decides what he wants, and closes his menu. He reaches out, and takes Louis' hand across the table. His thumb brushes Louis' knuckles softly, but he remains silent, letting Louis analyze the choices.

"If what you order turns out to be too much, you don't have to eat it all," Harry offers gently.

Louis swallows thickly, and nods, "thanks," he mumbles.

There is chicken, beef, lamb, fish; everything he could possibly think of. It's overwhelming. There are vegetarian options, and he thinks one of those might be best, because he's so full of meat already, but all of the vegetarian plates are loaded with carbs, and he doesn't want that either.
He looks up at Harry, completely stressed. Harry gives him a soft smile, and lifts Louis' hand to press a kiss to it. Harry reopens his menu, and his eyes flit across the page. Louis can't look at the food names anymore, but when he looks up he's distracted by all the happy people around him, digging easily into their food. He catches a man glaring at their intertwined hands, and feels his cheeks flush. He's used to the glares by now, the main reason he's uncomfortable is because someone is watching them, watching him panicking over a food menu.

"Babe, why don't you have the salmon? We can ask for it baked so they won't add butter for grilling, and it comes with rice and broccoli, instead of pasta," Harry suggests, pointing to the description on Louis' menu.

Louis glances down at it, and nods, "okay," he breathes, relief washing through him, "yeah, I can eat that."

Harry smiles, and gathers he and Louis' menus to set on the side of the table. Louis is infinitely thankful. He hadn't even seen the salmon, because he was so overwhelmed by all the options. Chicken that would either be battered or cooked with too much garlic butter, pasta that would weigh heavy in his stomach, steak that would be way too much. He doesn't know how Harry does it, how he always knows what Louis needs.

"Y'alright sweetheart?" Harry asks softly, as Louis raises his water glass with a shaking hand.

Louis takes a sip, and nods, "better now, thanks," he murmurs.

Harry smiles, "you're gorgeous," he says.

Louis blushes, and looks down at the pristine plate and silverware in front of him. The waiter comes over, and introduces himself. He can't be much older than Louis, and he looks bored out of his mind. Harry hands him the menus, and asks for a bottle of sparkling water. Louis orders his salmon, stuttering a bit when he asks if it can be baked instead of grilled. The waiter isn't phased though, and Harry orders a steak. When he's gone Louis feels relieved, because he has a bit of time before the food will be here. He feels himself relax as Harry starts up a conversation, talking happily about how excited he is for school to be done.

Louis is always so thankful for how easy things are with Harry; how safe and comfortable he feels. Harry smiles across the table at him, his dimples accentuated by the warm lighting of the restaurant. He asks Louis about his final project, and Louis tells him how it's going without giving too much away. He wants it to be a surprise for Harry. He'll never understand why Harry hangs on his every word, his green eyes alight with interest. Louis is boring, and stupid, and Harry is interesting, and brilliant. He doesn't get it.

Louis is almost completely relaxed, until he sees the waiter approaching with their plates. The dishes are huge, and he vaguely thinks they've just given him a plate with a whole salmon on it when his is set down in front of him. It's the biggest filet he's ever seen, and the anxiety creeps up the back of his throat. Harry sees though, and gives his hand a squeeze, before releasing it. Louis watches as Harry takes his knife, and reaches across the small table. He cuts a line, right down the middle of the salmon, splitting it exactly in half. He pushes one half to the side of Louis' plate, and then does the same for the rice, and the broccoli.

"Just half baby," he says quietly, "isn't so much is it?"

Louis offers a small, thankful smile, and nods, "no," he says.

Harry stays silent while he lets Louis works himself up to start eating. It's a bit of a process inside his
head. His mind screams at him not to eat it. He knows the salmon half has to be at least two hundred
calories, thirty in the broccoli, and at least two hundred calories in the mound of rice. His body used
to hate the food, because it was trained enough to know it would be coming back out his mouth later.
Since he's started keeping food down though, he's started getting hungry again, and he hates it. He
doesn't understand how his stomach can yearn for the food, when he still feels so bloated, and
disgusting.

He has to force himself to pick up his fork, and take a piece of the salmon. He has to force himself to
put it in his mouth. He has to force himself to chew. It's delicious, he can appreciate the taste of the
food, but he knows every bit of it will latch somewhere on his body, and cling there, just adding to
his layer of fat.

Even though he wants to push his chair back from the table, and leave the restaurant, he forces
himself to swallow. He looks up, and finds Harry's eyes on him. Not judging, or worrying; just
gentle, and maybe even happy. He forces himself to smile, and it's worth it when a grin splits Harry's
face. It's enough to get Louis to spear a piece of broccoli, and put it in his mouth.

It continues. Louis forces himself to bite, to chew, to swallow; even though every mouthful makes
him hate himself more. He looks across at Harry when he needs motivation. Harry's smile is ever
present, soft, tender, and encouraging. When Louis is finished his broccoli, he sees nothing but pride
in Harry's eyes.

Louis doesn't understand it, how Harry can be proud of him, when he's clearly so pathetic. He isn't
normal, he isn't okay, he's taking ages to eat, and he hasn't said a word since the food came; but
Harry is proud. He looks at Louis with pride for him eating, while Zayn just looks at him sadly, and
Liam just looks frustrated. Harry is infinitely patient, and understanding, and supportive, and in all
honesty Harry is the only reason Louis is eating.

He can't fucking stand the sadness that comes into Harry's eyes when they fight about what Louis
eats, he can't stand knowing that he's letting Harry down, disappointing him. He tries to tell himself
that the happiness in Harry's face, and the pride in his eyes, is worth the pain in his stomach. He still
hates himself for every bite though, because he knows exactly what is going to happen.

He's going to eat what Harry asks him to, he's going to put on weight, he's going to get even more fat
and disgusting, and then Harry's job of fixing him will be done, and he'll leave. And Louis will be
left in pieces, just like he's known he would be from the start. Except now, those pieces will be
flabby, and gelatinous; even more repulsive and undesirable than before.

"How is your dinner?" Louis asks, both to be polite, and to give himself a minute to breathe.

"It's really good," Harry says, "how is yours?" he asks.

Louis nods, and pushes a bit of rice around on the plate, "it's good, yeah."

Harry smiles, and pours him a glass of the sparkling water, "you're doing really good, babe."

Louis forces a smile, "thanks for being patient with me."

"Thanks for agreeing to this date out. I know how nervous you were about it."

Of course Harry would know how nervous Louis was, without Louis saying a word, even with
Louis trying to hide his hesitance. Harry always just knows. Louis' throat feels thick with the food
he's swallowed so far, but his smile is real when he meets Harry's eyes.

"You're too good to me, you know that?" Louis says quietly.
Harry reaches across the table, and takes Louis' hand, "I'm not Louis, I just try and treat you how you deserve," he says softly, "you know this is our first ever dinner date? We've only ever been out to regular restaurants with the boys. You'd never let me take you out to dinner and a movie before."

Louis blushes, and looks down, "I'm sorry about that," he says, "because this is nice."

Harry is beaming when Louis looks up, "don't say sorry, I'm just so glad you're letting me now. I'm glad you're having a nice time, because I am too."

Louis smiles, and Harry grins, and Louis tells himself this is worth how awful he feels on the inside. After that they chat while they eat. Louis has the suspicion that Harry is purposely eating a lot slower than normal, because he'd usually be done eating, and waiting for Louis to finish by now. Harry almost has the same amount of food left as Louis. It means a lot to Louis, because if anyone were to look over nobody would know that Louis is lagging behind, struggling to force food down. It just looks like they're taking their time, enjoying their meals.

With Harry chatting happily, and Louis not feeling the pressure to hurry, he's able to get most of the half of his food down. He's only got a couple forkfuls of rice from his pile, and the other half of the food that Harry split left when the waiter comes back. Harry's plate is empty and the waiter takes it.

"Are you still working on that?" the waiter asks, not unkindly.

"No, I'm finished," Louis says politely.

"Would you like me to box it up to take home?"

Louis looks to Harry, who gives a small nod, and a soft smile, "yes please," Louis says.

"Okay. Should I bring over the desert menu?" the waiter asks both of them.

"No we're okay thank you; just the bill," Harry says, and Louis is so thankful.

The waiter nods, and gathers Louis plate, before leaving. With the table clear Harry reaches out, and takes both of Louis' hands in his. He does that thing that Louis loves, where he drags his thumbs slowly down each finger, massaging Louis' hands absentmindedly. Harry is smiling down at their hands, but Louis' eyes are trained on him. Harry is just so fucking beautiful, Louis doesn't understand why their hands are intertwined, why they're together on this date, why Harry calls himself Louis', why Harry is even in his life at all.

Harry looks up, and catches Louis staring, but his smile just brightens, "I love you, Louis."

Louis smiles, and feels his cheeks warm, "You're-"

"Louis!" someone says, from beside the table, and Louis is caught off guard.

His eyes flash up, and his throat dries when they land on Mitchell. He looks almost the same as Louis remembers. His dark skin is smooth, his hair is still all shaved off. He's wearing jeans, and a dress shirt, and he looks good. He looks almost as surprised as Louis feels, though his bright white teeth are showing in some semblance of a smile. He's tall, maybe taller than Harry, and his muscular, broad shoulders almost strain his shirt.

"Mitchell," Louis says slowly, his brain still trying to catch up, "hi."

He feels timid, and meek. He and Mitchell's relationship was purely sexual, Mitchell would show up when he pleased, fuck Louis, and leave; but he still insisted on calling Louis his boyfriend. He was
never cruel to Louis, but when Louis had told him that he didn't want to do it anymore he had been angry. That was the last time Louis had seen him.

"Who's this?" Mitchell asks, eyes finally falling on Harry.

"Harry," Louis manages, "this is my Harry," he realizes after that he probably sounds like an idiot, but he isn't thinking straight, he feels intimidated.

"I'm Mitchell," he says, offering Harry a hand to shake, "Louis' ex-boyfriend."

Harry is clearly reluctant to let go of Louis' hand, but he shakes it anyway, "Hey," he says, not overly politely.

"So you're letting your boyfriends take you out now, Louis?" Mitchell asks, his grin conflicting with the cold question.

Louis flushes, he wants to retort, tell Mitchell that it isn't like he ever cared about anything other than sex anyway, but he's shrinking under Mitchell's gaze, "Our relationship is very different from what ours was, Mitch," he says instead, inserting a laugh to play it off as a joke, the 'Harry is a lot different thank you were' goes unspoken.

"Hm," Mitchell says, noncommittally, "what the hell has happened to you anyway? You're skin and bones, you used to be curvy! You're not ill are you?" he says brusquely, and it's very clear that he wouldn't be overly concerned if Louis were ill.

Louis freezes, Mitchell's words hit him like a freight train. He says it like Louis looks absolutely terrible now, while simultaneously pointing out just how round, and disgusting Louis was before. Louis hates himself for being so affected by it, but his dinner is already itching back up his esophagus, and tears are suddenly stinging the backs of his eyes. He wonders if they can hear how shaky his breaths are. Harry's hand tightens around his, and it's the only thing that keeps him from crumpling.

"Listen mate, it was nice to meet you," Harry says, his voice uncharacteristically firm, "but you can be on your way now."

Mitchell looks surprised, but his fake look of concern quickly shifts to a sneer, "oh yeah, you think so, mate?" he asks coolly.

"Yeah, I think so," Harry says, his eyes flashing, "are we going to have a problem?"

Mitchell's glare is contemplative, as he sizes Harry up. Louis' heart is pounding in his chest as he fish-mouths, trying to figure out what to say. He doesn't even want to be thinking about it, but he's looking between the two of them, calculating what would happen if they fought. Mitchell is taller, but Louis knows his muscles are from the steroids he takes, and that he's got no stamina. Harry is leaner that Mitchell, but he boxes when he works out, and he's quick and strong. Harry looks like he's ready to snap Mitchell's neck.

"Why don't we ask Louis what he thinks," Mitchell says, his voice sharp.

Louis feels their eyes on him, and he forces himself to look up at Mitchell, "goodbye, Mitch," he says, and he's so relieved when his voice doesn't shake.

Mitchell stands there for a moment longer, scowling between the two of them, "yeah, good luck with him bro, he's always been a mind-fuck," he says to Harry, before turning on his heel, towards a table of people Louis recognizes as his friends.
Louis doesn't even have a second to recoil from the impact of Mitchell's words, before Harry is reacting. The hand of Harry's that isn't holding Louis' clenches into a fist, and he pushes his chair back, and stands up. Louis' fingers tighten around Harry's, but Harry's arms are long enough that he doesn't even have to let go of Louis' hand to be able to reach out, and grab Mitchell's arm. Mitchell spins around and his face is inches from Harry's. Mitchell's fist is clenched too, and for a moment Louis panics, thinking they're about to get in a fight in the middle of the restaurant.

He watches in stunned silence, as Harry leans in, until his mouth is an inch away from Mitchell's ear. He's talking, his jaw moving stiffly, but his voice is only a low indistinguishable murmur to Louis' ears. As he speaks Mitchell's face changes from defensive, to cold, and Louis can see his jaw clench. When Harry is finished speaking, he releases Mitchell's arm, and Mitchell instantly steps back. He casts one last glance at Louis, who feels like a deer in the headlights, and then he walks away, without another word.

Harry sits down calmly at the table, and nobody around them has even noticed the exchange. The waiter comes over with the bill, before either of them say anything. Harry hands over his credit card without letting go of Louis' hand. After they've paid, and thanked the waiter, Harry picks up Louis' box of left overs, and comes around to pull out his chair. Louis is perfectly capable of standing up himself, but he doesn't have the energy to protest right now.

Harry holds his hand as they leave the restaurant, and then helps Louis into the truck. They pull out of the parking lot in silence, but Harry instantly takes Louis' hand again, like he's scared to let it go. Louis doesn't mind. He rests his head back against the seat, and tries not to cry. Mitchell's words bounce around his head on a loop. He's an ugly, disgusting, mind-fuck. He's holding the hand of a boy he doesn't deserve. He's always known it, but hearing it said by someone else makes him want to scream.

His stomach is churning; clenching and unclenching, as it wages war against the food. His heart is still racing, because he's never seen Harry that angry. Even when they've fought, he's never had hatred in his eyes. When Harry looked at Mitchell he was quiet and contained, because he didn't want to make a scene, but he looked ready to kill. They drive in silence, and Louis wants to beg Harry to pull the truck over, so he can throw up on the side of the road, but he'd never actually ask for that.

When they pull up outside the flat, Harry shuts off the truck. Louis opens his eyes, and watches Harry walk around to his door. Harry opens the door, but instead of letting Louis out, he scoops Louis up in his arms, and climbs into the passenger seat himself. Louis protests weakly, but Harry just closes the door, and cradles Louis closer in his lap. He buries his face against Louis' neck, and breathes in and out; slowly and deeply. If Louis ignores the fear of being too heavy on Harry's lap, he can feel just how encompassed, and completely safe he feels. He lets himself sink into Harry, presses his nose to Harry's curls, and tries to breathe.

"Don't want that fucking scum bag to ruin our date," Harry whispers, after a while.

"He didn't," Louis lies, "I promise. Tonight was perfect. It was lovely. Thank you for dinner."

"I'm so sorry he was so awful to you," Harry groans.

"He wasn't," Louis replies quietly, "everything he said was true. I was fatter when I was with him, and I do look disgusting now, and I am a mind-fuck."

"Don’t even say tha-"

"You cant honestly tell me there haven’t been times when you’ve wished I was normal,” Louis
mumbles, “that I wasn’t so…. emotionally… stunted. You deserve someone who can tell you they love you, and make you happy, and who you don’t have to nurse.”

“Louis listen to me,” Harry says gently, pulling back and making Louis look him in the eyes, “I deserve you. I want you. I swear to god, I don’t care how long it takes, I’m going to get you to believe that you deserve me too. And fuck Louis, you make me the happiest I’ve ever been in my life.”

Louis sighs, but holds back his protests, “weren’t we supposed to be going to a film?” he asks quietly instead.

Harry frowns a little, and nods, “yeah, that was the plan, but I figured now you might prefer coming home and watching one? I could give you a massage?”

Louis cringes at the thought of Harry’s hands on his body right now, when he feels so bloated, swollen, and disgusting. He appreciates how well Harry knows him though, because the thought of sitting in a theatre for a couple of hours is so unappealing right now.

“Thanks Harry,” he says, running his fingers through Harry’s curls.

They go to the flat, and Louis is thankful that Liam and Zayn are both already in their bedrooms. He’ll tell them about Mitchell tomorrow. They grab a DVD off of the rack, but Louis doesn’t even notice what Harry chooses. They brush their teeth, and then go to Louis’ room.

Louis is thankful when Harry doesn’t say anything about him changing in his closet. He comes out in his pyjamas, to find Harry stripped down to his boxer briefs. He allows himself to commit the image to memory; Harry scratching lazily at his hip, his hair mussed up from pulling his shirt over his head, looking perfect and gorgeous in the moonlight from the window. Then he finds himself questioning why Harry is with him, and he has to look away.

Harry has the movie playing on low, as he crawls into bed, and holds the blankets back for Louis. He instantly pulls Louis close, and doesn’t protest when Louis buries his face in his chest, instead of turning to watch the film. Louis is finding it harder, and harder to be seen naked by Harry. It was so hard for him at first, before Harry knew, and then it was even harder after because things were so tense between them. Now though, Louis is almost getting to the point where he can’t stand it.

They have their showers in the morning, and Harry’s hands and his lips, are so gentle all over Louis’ body, his eyes are so kind and non-judgemental; but Louis is constantly fighting the urge to pull away, and cover himself. He never would, because he knows it hurt Harry so much, but it’s a constant battle not to.

He feels repulsive. He can literally see his gut growing by the day, and it’s hard and firm, and no matter how much he sucks in, it still protrudes. It takes so fucking long for the food to move. Harry says because his digestion has slowed so much, but he just feels constantly full. He’s retaining water like crazy, and he just feels disgusting.

“What did you say to Mitchell?” Louis asks quietly, as Harry’s breaths puff softly against his hair.

Harry is quiet for a moment, his fingertips slow across Louis’ back, “told him that it’s pretty pathetic if he couldn’t see that you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to him, but that he blew his chance, and now you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Harry says quietly, “so I wasn’t going to let him disrespect you like that, and that we could either take it outside, or he could keep walking, and mind his manners next time, if we ever had the misfortune of running into him again.”
Louis is stunned into silence, remembering the last glance Mitchell had cast at him, before he left. It’s so unlike Harry. His gentle, warm, sweet, kind Harry. He’s never felt more completely protected, than he did when Harry stood up for him. Harry knew before the words even registered to Louis that they had hurt him, he had shut down the attack in and instant, and then when the threat didn’t leave he had stood up, without a moments hesitation, and taken care of it. He had been ready to physically fight, just to protect Louis’ feelings.

“Where did that come from,” he asks, sounding a little in awe.

“I’m protective of the people I love,” Harry says simply.

Louis wants so badly to be better for Harry, to be good enough for him. But at the same time, it completely terrifies him. He isn’t quite sure what scares him the most; putting on weight, and looking disgusting, or the fact that he’s losing control of the last thing in his life he could change. He’s losing control to the beautiful boy whose arms are so gentle around him. It scares the absolute living shit out of him, because it feels like the more he cares about Harry, the better he tries to be for Harry, the more he hates himself.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much to everyone for reading. my tumblr is tothemoonmydear and if you follow @tothemoonmydear on twitter i post sneak peaks and update information. all you comments and kudos mean the world to me so thank you. there will probably be 29 chaps plus an epilogue :)

"Are you okay?" Harry asks softly, as they stand between Liam's car, and his truck.

"Yeah," Louis says quietly, "see you tonight?"

"Lou, tell me what's going on? I can tell you're off. I should skip the study group…"

"No," Louis shakes his head, "I'm fine, I'll see you later."

Harry frowns, and his thumb comes up to brush softly at Louis' cheekbone, "you've been quiet all day…"

"Harry," he sighs, "m'just tired. I'm going to go home, and have a nap. I'll see you tonight."

"Okay," Harry replies, clearly reluctant, "I love you."

Louis accepts the soft kiss that Harry gives him, and then pulls gently out of his arms. He gets into the back seat of Liam's car without looking back. Liam and Zayn wave to Harry from the front seats. Harry watches, with his hands shoved deep in his pockets, as Liam pulls out of the parking stall. Louis closes his eyes, and rests his cheek against the window, as Liam gets onto the road.

"What's wrong?" Zayn asks, turning around in his seat to look at Louis.

"Tired," Louis says, not opening his eyes.

The rest of the ride is silent. Louis doesn't say anything as they make their way up to the flat. He goes straight to his room, and shuts the door, before laying down on his bed. It's been another week of eating, and Harry has slowly been increasing his calorie intake. Louis has figured out that Harry only asks if he purged after fourth period, because it's the class right after lunch. Louis hasn't even tried to sneak off, because for all he knows Harry could have the boys taking turns checking he's still in class that period, or he could be checking up on Louis through Hannah.

Louis has learned though, that Harry never asks after first period, so he never has to lie. Harry assumes since they take a long shower after breakfast, and spend the morning before class together, that Louis won't purge; so he never asks. If Louis goes to the bathroom during first period, he can get at least half of his breakfast out, and then he isn't as full when Harry makes him eat again at lunch.

If Louis goes to the bathroom during fifth period instead, he can get half his lunch out before he has to eat more at dinner. His digestion is so slow that most of the food is still in his stomach an hour later. It's better than when he was just completely full all the time, but it still isn't enough. He and Harry only have a fifth period class every second day, and even then only half comes out. He's started gaining weight, he can feel it. He was just completely bloated at first, but now the food is distributing across his body, and filling him out.

He feels guilty for still purging, but he just can't not. He can't handle being stuffed full all the time. He needs the burn in his throat, the contraction of his stomach. He's nervous for the weekend though, because he won't be able to sneak off. If Harry were to randomly ask if Louis has purged, since that time with the spaghetti, he tells himself he wouldn't lie, he couldn't lie to Harry again; but Harry doesn't ask, so Louis doesn't tell. He feels like shit for breaking Harry's trust, but he feels like shit
twenty-four hours a day so it isn't much change. Louis isn't a good person.

Louis is almost just waiting for the day Harry finds out, and loses it on him. Louis knows he'll get so mad that he'll leave. Maybe it will be a relief, because then he won't be dragging Harry down anymore. Maybe everyone will just let him go. No matter how good he does, he's never going to deserve having the three of them in his life. He might as well give them a reason to hate him, so they'll stop feeling obligated to help him. Then they can be free of him.

Louis pushes himself up off the bed, and goes into his closet. He strips down slowly, throwing his clothes from the day into the hamper. He steps in front of the mirror, holding his breath. He bites the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood, because he's cried in front of this mirror too many times this week, and he isn't going to let himself cry today. He sucks in his stomach, but it makes no difference. The swell of it protrudes out obscenely, rounding out to join with his flabby hips. The spaces between his ribs are full of flesh, his thighs are thick and gelatinous, his face is so round, and swollen. His nails dig into the fat of his belly, but he barely feels it. He just wants to rip it off. Rip all the fat off, strip by strip. He wants to see his bones.

He's been running on auto pilot all week. Going through the motions, and acting fine, so the boys and Harry wouldn't worry. Harry is so happy because Louis is getting a little faster at eating, and he hasn't complained in a long time. He's resisted every urge to hide his body from Harry too, because it would just hurt him if Louis pulled away. Harry spends so much time every night, just kissing at all of Louis' disgusting bits, like they're the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. It makes bile crawl up the back of Louis' throat, but he acts like he enjoys it. It's worth it to see Harry's eyes light up, because he is so eager to believe that Louis is getting better.

Louis isn't getting better. He feels like he's drowning. Every morning it takes more and more will power to drag himself out of bed, more will power to paste on a smile. It doesn't help that Louis knows Harry is completely turned off by him. He'll spend so much time kissing at Louis, working him up, and getting him off, and it's great. Harry's blow jobs and hand jobs are great, and they help relieve some of the tension in Louis' body, they help him feel momentarily better. Except Harry hardly ever lets Louis take care of him, and they haven't had sex again since that first time. Louis knows it's because Harry is disgusted by him, and Louis doesn't blame him. He's disgusted with himself too.

Louis can feel the tears clogging the back of his throat, and he's so sick of it all. He's so sick of feeling like shit all the time. He wants a break. He wants to breathe. He feels like he's trapped in the frame of his mirror, like he'll never be able to escape the reflection. Even when he tries to look past the ugliness on the outside, all he sees are the flaws that are woven so deep into every fibre of his being.

Louis simultaneously aches for Harry to be closer, to be with him right now, and wishes for Harry to go away, and never come back. Harry has become like his morphine. All it takes is a smile, a kiss, a word, to dull the pain, even if just for a minute. But Louis knows what withdrawal is like, and he'd rather Harry just leave now, before Louis is left to fall apart like a junkie without his fix. Louis is drowning, and he knows there is no point in even trying to swim.

His skin is too tight as he glares at himself in the mirror, his flesh is too heavy. He needs to get out. He pulls on a pair of sweatpants and a black long sleeved t-shirt, before slipping into his jean jacket. He goes down the hall, and finds Liam and Zayn talking quietly in the kitchen. They look up when he comes in, and he sees concern hidden behind their smiles. He puts on a smile and shoves his hands in his pockets, so they don't see his hands shaking.

"I've got to run to the fabric store, do you guys need me to pick up anything while I'm out?" he lies.
"Nah bebz," Zayn says, and he looks relieved that Louis seems okay.

"Drive safe," Liam says, "dinner will be ready when you get back."

Louis maintains his smile, and nods, "see you in a bit."

He slips on some shoes and grabs his keys, taking a deep breath once he's out in the hall. The first thing Louis does when he gets in his car, is dial through to his voicemail. He changes the greeting to say that he’s fine, and not to worry, that he’ll be home soon. He knows the three of them will be the only people to call him, and his phone will be off, so he doesn’t want them to panic. As soon as that is done he shuts off his phone, turns up his music, and pulls out of the parking lot.

He drives through the winding streets of London, focusing on the colourful clothes of the people walking on the sidewalks, or the taillights of the cars in front of him. He focuses on anything but the thoughts bouncing around in his head. He doesn’t even know where he’s going until he arrives.

The parking garage looms in front of him as he pulls up to the barricade. It’s four stories tall, and goes down another four below the ground. It’s right next to one of the tube stations so it’s usually packed, but right now it’s after the evening commute, and before all the people park to take the tube to the clubs on a Friday night. Parking is free after four so Louis presses the button, and the barricade post raises without giving him a payment stub. The warm sun is cut off as he pulls into the concrete garage, and he takes a right. His car winds slowly, around, and around, climbing the levels of the parkade. When he gets to the top, the level is empty, save for some garbage, and the possible remnants of a homeless persons sleeping spot.

It’s vast, and empty, and high enough up that the sun seeps in, even though there is a roof. He drives to the farthest corner of the lot, ignoring the stall markings painted on the cement. He parks right in the corner, and gets out of his car. The walls of the parkade come up just above his hip, the roof is connected by cement pillars every six feet. The space between the roof and the walls is open, letting the sun in. Louis vaguely wonders if anyone has ever jumped from here. He doubts it, because four stories isn’t high enough to get the job done.

He leans against the cement wall for a while, his fingers curling around the ledge. He looks down at the city, and he can see blocks over. People bustle around on the street below him; cars whiz by in the traffic circle, careless of the other drivers. There is a light breeze, but he’s warm in his jean jacket, with the sun on his face. Eventually he pulls himself up onto the ledge of the cement barrier, leaning his back against one of the pillars. He stretches out a leg, letting the other hang over the edge, and dangle above the street below.

He tries in vain to keep his mind blank, trying to focus on the bustle below, instead of the thoughts whirling around in his head. It's useless though, because the thoughts are too loud. He gives in, and rests his head back against the pillar. As soon as he closes his eyes, he sees her face. He remembers how she used to smile at him, like she thought he was perfect. He remembers how her voice sounded when she told him how much she loved him, that he was the best thing that ever happened to her. When she told him it was her and him against the world, that she wouldn't change a thing.

He remembers looking in her eyes, and seeing the love there. He remembers feeling it in his bones. He remembers thinking that nobody in the world could ever love him as much as she did. He genuinely believed that she was his constant. That no matter what else happened, at least he would have her, that at least she would love him. He was wrong.

She didn't love him. That looks in her eyes wasn't love, she didn't mean it when she said those three words. If she didn't mean it, how can Harry, how can Liam, how can Zayn. They can't. They don't. He doesn't know if love really exists, but if it does, he is one hundred and ninety percent sure he,
Louis, doesn't deserve it. He'll never be good enough, because he is fucked up on some basic level. Fucked up in some irreparable way. And he didn't even realize it, until she told him.

Now he'll never be able to forget. He'll never be able to pretend that he's okay, that he's normal, that he's worthy. It's etched into every fibre of his being, it might as well be stamped across his forehead. He is fucked up, and he is wrong, and he is the definition of unlovable. No matter how good he is at designing, no matter how he tries to be a good person, no matter how thin he gets, he will never be worthy, he will never be whole.

He'll never be good enough for Harry, because Harry is the best person Louis has ever met. Harry deserves perfection. Louis is the furthest thing from perfect ever to walk the face of the earth. He knows Harry is trying to make him better, healthier, happier, but Louis will never be any of those things. Harry has no idea that Louis' imperfections are in his DNA.

Louis doesn't even realize his fingers have subconsciously clenched around the fat on his stomach, kneading and pulling at the excess. Every day he tries to be better for Harry, he is just getting worse. He's been desperate to make the outside of him good enough, to make himself look better, so maybe his detrimental flaws won't be so visible. Maybe is he was thinner, maybe if he looked better, he'd be passable. He'd be able to get by, be able to hate himself a little less. It never worked, he never hated himself less; but this is worse.

He hates himself more and more every day, with every inch of fat he can see himself gain. He'll have bruises from his own hands later, but he doesn't even realize that he's pulling himself apart physically, because all he can feel is the tearing on the inside. He doesn't notice the time passing, the sun moving in the sky. He doesn't move, even though his bum is cold against the cement, and his back aches against the pillar. He vaguely registers that he's missing dinner, he knows the boys will be worried, but he just can't. This head space is familiar, inside this bubble of self hatred is where Louis is most used to being. Everything else feels like an act, but this, being alone here to remind himself of how revolting he is, feels familiar. Familiar, and deserved.

He doesn't snap out of it until he hears the engine of a car, until the headlights come into view over the ramp, and onto the level of the parkade. Louis draws his knees up to his chest protectively, watching as the car approaches. It pulls in next to his, and the engine silences. Liam gets slowly out of the car, and he's alone. Louis didn't know he was crying until his hands fly up, to try and wipe the tears off his cheeks before Liam sees. His eyes do that awful puffy thing when he cries though, and he knows that Liam knows right away.

Liam takes out his phone, still standing by the car, his eyes on Louis, "yeah, I found him," he says into the phone, "I'll bring him home, tell Harry to relax."

Louis cringes, because now he'll have hurt Harry again. He can see the hurt on Liam's face, even from the distance, and he knows he's hurt Zayn too. Liam approaches him like he's some sort of wild animal, ready to bolt. Louis doesn't feel far off. Neither of them say anything as Liam steps closer, his hand closing gently around Louis' ankle. Louis lets Liam pulls his legs down, so that he's sitting on the ledge.

Without a word Liam steps between Louis' thighs and wraps his arms around Louis' back. Normally Louis would cringe away, because nobody but Harry is allowed to touch his soft spots, but he just doesn't have the energy. Liam buries his face against Louis' neck, and holds onto him so tightly that Louis can hardly breathe. It feels good. He lets himself wrap his arms around Liam's square shoulders, his body heat instantly seeping into Louis' cold flesh. Liam's hand slips up to knot in the back of Louis' hair, holding him impossibly closer.

"How did you find me?" Louis asks, voice muffled against Liam's shoulder.
Liam sighs, "you've been here before," he says simply.

Louis' mind drifts back to that night, and it's like a knife to his chest. The feelings come rushing back so quickly. He had found this place that night, in a moment of hopelessness. He had been driving around, looking for an escape that alcohol, and drugs, and meaningless sex couldn't provide anymore. He had sat up on this same ledge, with the rain pouring down, and the lights of the city twinkling back at him blearily. That had been the night that he realized what it meant to feel dead inside. Liam had found him then too. How though, out of all the places in the city, Liam had found him here that night, Louis still doesn't know.

"It's quiet up here," Louis says, as a reply.

Liam hums, and pulls back from the hug a tiny bit, "I knew this was going to happen," he says softly.

"What?" Louis frowns, sniffling a little.

"I knew you were headed for a- erm, for a bit of a breakdown," there is no judgement in his voice, as his fingers card through Louis' hair.

"What do you mean?" Louis asks, voice choked.

"Everything has been going too smoothly this week. But I've seen it in your eyes," he explains quietly, "you haven't complained about eating once. You're still purging, aren't you."

It isn't a question. Louis' breath hitches in his throat, and his eyes dart away from Liam's gaze. He wants to lie, to deny it, let them think he's really doing better. Except it's Liam, and even if he lied, Liam already knows the truth. He sighs, and shrugs. Liam nods, and sighs, his hand moving to rub Louis' back.

"When?" he asks.

"First and last period," Louis mumbles, "but not much comes out anyway."

Liam hums, and nods again, "I'm not going to be able to let you get away with that anymore, you know that right?"

"Just please don't tell Zayn, or Harry. Please," Louis begs, finally meeting Liam's eyes, "Please?"

Liam nods, "I won't, but you have to promise me you'll stop."

"It's hard, Li," Louis groans, "and I'm still gaining weight, I'm still eating. I just- I get so full, and then I have to eat again. I just-

"I know it's hard, but you have to stop. I swear to god Louis I'll get a feeding tube put down your nose, you know I will," Liam says.

Somehow, despite his words, his voice is tender, and caring. Louis shudders. Liam strokes the chills away, with his palm against Louis' back. Louis hides his face against Liam's neck. He's royally fucked now. He needs to purge. He isn't even sure if he needs the lightness it causes in his stomach anymore. Maybe now he just needs the burn, the ache, the pain. Needs the scratching of his nails at the back of his throat, the clenching of his stomach; to focus the hurt on his body, instead of letting it fester in his mind.

"Liam-"
"Promise me, Louis. Til six feet under promise," Liam says.

Louis' thoughts are drawn back to a simpler time. When he and Liam were carefree kids, with scrapes on their knees, and missing teeth. When they made promises about stupid things, and swore to keep them until they were both dead and buried, six feet under the ground. As they grew 'til six feet under started to mean more, and they only brought it out when promises really mattered. Neither of them have ever broken a 'til six feet promise. Neither of them have ever refused when asked to make one either. Louis can't.

"I promise 'til six feet," Louis breathes.

Liam pulls back, and searches Louis' eyes. His thumbs ghost across the shadows under Louis' eyelashes, his thick eyebrows furrowed to match Louis' thin ones. Liam lets out a sigh that sounds like relief, and he nods. Louis just hopes he can keep the promise, because Liam will never forgive him if he doesn't. They're quiet for a long time, Liam's palms still cradling Louis' cheeks.

"You've never broken a promise to me before," he says eventually.

Louis frowns, but nods, "I know. You've never with me either."

"Remember that time at the lake?" Liam asks.

Louis nods, because of course he does, "how old were we? Twelve? Thirteen?"

"Twelve," Liam says, "and you dragged me up that huge hill to the edge of that cliff?"

Louis lets out a watery laugh, and nods, "still can't believe we jumped."

He remembers it perfectly. Standing next to Liam, both of them in only swim shorts, the sun beating down on their backs. Things were blissfully simple then, their biggest worries were their upcoming footie matches, and who had the coolest shoes. He remembers staring down at the blue-green water twenty feet below them, as they balanced on the edge of the rock face. He remembers the fear in Liam's eyes, the nervous excitement thrumming through his own veins.

"There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that we were going to die. I knew it. I was saying my final prayers," Liam says, completely seriously.

"Why did you jump with me then?" Louis asks, with a wistful smile.

Liam rolls his eyes, like the answer is obvious, "because I knew you were going to jump, whether I jumped with you or not. And you six feet promised me that we'd be fine."

"But you didn't believe me, you were sure we were going to die?"

Liam nods, "yeah I was absolutely sure, but I didn't want you to die alone."

He says it so simply, like it was the easiest decision of his life to make. Louis' breath catches in his throat. He searches Liam's eyes, turning the words over in his head. They were twelve, and young, and stupid, but it's clear in Liam's eyes that he means every word. Louis doesn't know what to do with that.

"Li-"

"Not this time though, Louis," he says suddenly.

"What?"
"I'm not going to hold your hand, and jump off the cliff with you this time. I'm not letting you throw yourself over the edge. Back then you knew what was best for me. You knew that we'd be okay, and that I'd never forget that feeling of flying. Now though, now I know what's best for you, and it sure as fuck isn't starving yourself to death, because you're blaming yourself for something you can't change. So if I have to metaphorically tackle you to the ground to keep you from jumping off the cliff this time, I will. You're going to get better."

Louis doesn't know what to say to that, but he can't pull his eyes away from Liam's. They're the same wide eyes that Louis first connected with in primary school. The same kindness makes the dark brown so soft and warm. His eyebrows are curving up, pinched in the middle, as he gazes at Louis imploringly. Louis nods, because he doesn't know what else to do, but better isn't an option for him. No matter how much weight he puts on, he'll still be defective.

"Let's get you home, before Harry's hair goes grey with worry," Liam says gently, swiping any residual tears off Louis' cheeks gently.

"You didn't get him out of study group did you?" Louis asks quickly.

"No, I knew you wouldn't want us to, but he was panicking when he got to the flat and I had to tell him that you'd been gone two hours, and that your phone was off."

"I changed my voicemail so you wouldn't worry," Louis says sheepishly.

"Very considerate of you, it completely calmed all his worries," Liam says dryly.

"Sorry," Louis sighs.

"I know I've been shit lately, and I always say the wrong thing, but you know I would do anything for you, Louis. If you need to get away you can tell me. That way I don't have Harry worried sick. Zayn and I know sometimes you just have to leave for a little bit, but Harry doesn't know that," Liam says gently.

"Can you please not tell him I was upset?" Louis asks.

"He knows you were upset babe, he got to the flat and Zayn and I were debating who should go drive around the city to find you," Liam says slowly.

"I know but- just act like I got bored of studying, and went for a drive or something. Please? He's going to think I was like, running away," Louis pleads.

"You were running away," Liam argues.

"He doesn't need to know that," Louis whines, "just like play it off as you and Zayn worrying too much, or something. Please, just- lets just act like I'm fine."

"Zayn will know you're not fine."

"You know if we go home and laugh it off Zayn will go along with it. You can explain to him later. I don't want to worry Harry, he thinks I'm doing so good," Louis doesn't even care if he sounds like he's begging, "please Li?"

Liam frowns deeply, but Louis knows he's won, "promise to tell me before you go awol next time?"

"Promise," Louis nods quickly.
"Fine, but if he doesn't buy it, it's not my fault."

Louis nods again, "he'll buy it."

"Yeah, he will," Liam sighs, "you know he's fucking gone over you, right?"

"Don't say that," Louis protests.

"It's true, Louis," Liam says quietly.

Louis shakes his head, and frowns down at his lap. Liam just sighs, and tugs Louis' hand. He helps Louis down off the edge of the wall, and pulls him into a hug. Louis sinks into it, his back aches from sitting against the cement for so long. He feels Liam press a kiss to his hair.

"I love you, Lou," he says quietly.

"I love you too," Louis murmurs.

"No detours on the way home," he says sternly.

"I'll follow you."

Liam pulls back and nods, pressing a kiss to Louis' forehead. He holds open Louis' car door, and Louis gets in the drivers seat. Louis waits for Liam to lead the way, as Runaway plays through his speakers, drowning out the remnants of Louis' thoughts. He knows Harry would change the song right away, if he were in the car, but Louis can't listen to his playlist right now, he feels guilty enough for making Harry worry.

Louis follows Liam home, and parks beside him at their flat complex. Liam waits for him, and they walk up together, Liam's arm slung around Louis' shoulders. Liam plasters on a smile and Louis does the same, as they open the door. Harry jumps up from where he was sitting at the kitchen table with Zayn. Louis barely catches Liam giving Zayn a loaded look, before his face is squished against Harry's chest.

He squeezes back, and forces a laugh, "babe, everything is fine," he says quickly.

"I think we panicked for nothing," Liam adds, "he just got bored of studying, and went for a drive."

Harry pulls back with concern clouding his eyes, and a frown, "what? Where did you go?"

Louis shrugs, "just went for a walk," he says, "I was bored at home without you."

"We thought you were upset?" Zayn says, and Louis knows Liam has already got him playing along.

"We thought you were upset?" Zayn says, and Louis knows Liam has already got him playing along.

Louis gives an innocent frown, "no, why would I be upset?" he asks, feigning confusion, "I changed my voicemail so you guys would know I was fine?"

"Yeah but-" Harry huffs out a grunt, "thought that was like- when you say you're fine but you're really not?"

Louis shakes his head, and squeezes Harry's hips gently, "babe if something was wrong I would tell you," he says softly, "I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to worry you. I just turned off my phone because I was trying to work out this kink with my final project in my head, and I needed to focus. I'm sorry."

Harry is still frowning, his eyes searching Louis', "I was worried," he says quietly.
"Sorry Haz, that's probably my fault," Zayn says, "I should have known better; he shuts his phone off and goes for walks sometimes. I just worried because of everything lately, but I shouldn't have."

Harry frowns over his shoulder, and then looks back to Louis, "so you're okay?"

Louis smiles and nods, "yeah baby, I promise. I'm really sorry for worrying you. I won't do it again, I just lost track of time."

"Don't worry Harry, we panicked for nothing. He was perfectly chipper when I found him," Liam says.

Louis feels like absolute shit for lying to Harry, but it's worth it when the line smooths from between his dark eyebrows, and he gives a hesitant smile. Louis forces a smile in return, and stands up on his tip toes to join their lips. Harry's arms wrap around his waist as he deepens the kiss, with a desperation that conveys how worried he was. Louis is a terrible person.

"You still have to eat dinner," Zayn says, after Louis and Harry pull apart.

Louis knows it's Zayn's way of subtly scolding Louis for worrying the shit out of him. He quickly agrees without any protest, and apologizes again for missing it. All through dinner all three of them cast him worried glances, all for different reasons. Liam is worried because he knows Louis eating isn't as easy as he's managed to make it look lately. Zayn is worried because Liam hasn't been able to explain yet, and he knows they're lying to Harry. Harry is worried because he always worries about Louis, and Louis wonders if maybe his instincts are still telling him something really isn't right.

Louis is thankful for Liam and Zayn though, because they act completely normal, and eventually Harry relaxes. His hand doesn't leave Louis' thigh under the table, but Louis doesn't pull away. After dinner they all go to the living room, and Louis snuggles up in Harry's arms. Harry holds him tight, and presses kisses to his hair. Louis' guilt weighs heavy in his gut, and he wishes he could purge it almost as much as he wishes he could purge the chicken he just ate.

After the four of them watch a movie, Liam and Zayn decide to call it a night. Louis hopes they can see how thankful he is for them in his eyes, when he tells them goodnight and that he loves them. When they're alone in the living room Harry stretches out, and cradles Louis against his chest. Louis tries not to feel too uncomfortable laying on top of Harry, but all he can think about is Harry struggling to breathe under his weight.

"You scared me," Harry says quietly, after a while, "thought I had done something wrong."

Louis sighs, and shakes his head, "no love, I promise. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry you."

"You know, if you ever need a break from me-"

Louis' breath catches in his lungs, "do you- do you need a break from me?" he asks, because all he hears in Harry's question is that maybe Harry is the one who wants space.

"No," Harry says instantly, "god, no, Louis. I just- I could tell you were off today, and then you just left, I thought- I was sure it was something I had done…"

Louis frowns, his hand cupping Harry's cheek, "I really was just tired after school. I had a nap, and then went for a walk. It wasn't anything you did, I promise I was fine."

"Okay," Harry breathes a long sigh, "I love you so much."

Louis smiles, hoping Harry can't see the guilt in his eyes. He doesn't know what to say, so he surges
forward and presses his lips to Harry's. Harry murmurs against Louis' lips, his hand coming up to cradle the back of Louis' head. His plush lips work back against Louis', pulling softly, and opening Louis' mouth with ease. Their lips press wet and open against each others for a while, before Louis slips his tongue in beside Harry's. Harry hums into Louis' mouth, his hands slipping down to cup Louis' arse.

Louis pushes his hips forward ever so slightly, his connecting with Harry's. Harry lets out a low moan without disconnecting their mouths. Louis squeaks against Harry's lips when Harry sits up with Louis in his lap. Louis squirms when Harry stands up from the couch with ease, his arms under Louis, holding him up. Louis instinctively wraps his legs around Harry's hips, even though he's inwardly panicking about being carried. He doesn't argue though, because Harry already has them half way across the room towards the hallway.

When they get to Louis' bedroom, Harry closes the door behind them, holding Louis up with one arm. Louis' lips work softly at Harry's neck, to distract himself from how obese he feels in Harry's arms. Harry lays him down on the bed so gently, and then switches off the light, because he knows Louis can't stand it when it's on. Harry's huge hands slip up under Louis' shirt, and Louis keeps his face neutral as he carefully pulls it off, leaving Louis bare and exposed on the bed.

Louis' hands go to cover his gut, but Harry lifts them above Louis' head, stretching Louis' arms and tucking his hands under the pillow. Louis could easily move them back down as soon as Harry lets go, but he doesn't. He shivers when Harry's lips press softly to the swell of his stomach. They trace lightly around Louis' belly button, and in Louis' mind it feels like torture, but the soft press of Harry's lips is working for Louis' body. As Harry's thumbs drag softly along his hips, his mind screams about fat, but his hips rock up, chasing the touch.

Harry works at the drawstring of Louis' sweatpants, before pulling them slowly down Louis' thighs. Louis wants to hide under the covers, but he doesn't move as Harry gently strips off his boxers. Louis lays naked on the bed, his hands tucked under the pillow above his head, and his legs spread on either side of Harry where he's kneeling. He feels vulnerable and disgusting, and it takes every bit of self control not to cringe away from Harry. Harry's eyes are so soft though, so infinitely tender. Louis still isn't used to that look.

"You're so beautiful," Harry whispers, tipping his chin and pressing kisses to Louis' chest, "please don't ever leave me."

Louis' breath hitches, and he keeps his lips firmly pressed together to remain silent. Harry's tongue kitten licks softly behind Louis' ear, at the spot that makes Louis keen. Louis' fingers tangle in Harry's curls as he feels the heat pooling in his groin. Harry's hand slips down to gently palm at Louis' bare cock, coaxing it easily to hardness. Louis' hips chase the friction, as he moans quietly against Harry's cheek.

"So perfect to me," Harry murmurs, his teeth grazing Louis' collarbone, "love you so much."

Louis' brain knows it's all lies, he knows how repulsive he is, but his body betrays him, because Harry's words thrum through his veins, feeding the warmth spreading through him. Every whispered lie, every 'you're beautiful,' every 'I love you,' just works Louis up more, until he's whimpering and thrusting against Harry's palm.

"Harry," he moans softly, when Harry's thumb nudges at the head of Louis' dick.

"So pretty," Harry whispers, "so gorgeous."

Harry kisses Louis, long and hot, and Louis whines when Harry pulls away. Harry trails kisses down
Louis' skin, and then Louis gasps when his cock is enveloped in the wet heat of Harry's mouth. Harry's cheeks hollow as he swallows Louis down, and Louis groans and tries not to thrust up into Harry's throat. Harry's mouth sends waves of heat crashing through Louis' body, and all he can think about is HarryHarryHarryHarryFuckHarryHarryHarryHarry. And then Harry hums around Louis' cock, and Louis lets out a strangled groan as a warning, but Harry just swallows him deeper. Harry's hand slips to the crease of Louis' groin, right between his pelvic bone and his hip joint, and the pressure of his thumb in that ridiculously sensitive spot always instantaneously sends Louis right over the edge. He cums hard down Harry's throat with a choked sob, and Harry draws every last drop out of him, his mouth soft around Louis.

After, as Louis lays, dazed and boneless, Harry slips off his own soft oversized jumper, and slips it over Louis' head. It's huge on Louis, as he tucks his arms through the sleeves, but it smells like Harry. When Harry is stripped down to his boxers he crawls under the covers, and pulls Louis into his arms. They lay there for a long while, until Louis' thoughts get back in line, and he finally thinks of Harry.

"Let me take care of you," he asks, hand slipping down to Harry's boxers.

Harry is almost completely soft though, "I'm fine baby," he says gently, giving Louis a kiss, "you must be tired, lets get some sleep."

Louis doesn't say a word, as shame seeps through his veins. His boyfriend is so disgusted by him, that he doesn't even want Louis touching him. Harry is so turned off that he wants to go to sleep. He takes care of Louis because he is sweet and kind and wants to make Louis feel good, but he is so repulsed he doesn't even want anything in return. Louis lets Harry cocoon him close, and press kisses to his hair, but all he can think about is how pathetic he is, and how much better Harry deserves.

~

At first Louis isn't sure what woke him up, and he lays still in the darkness, feeling Harry's arms around him. For a minute he thinks they've fallen asleep on the remote for the TV, and it's now pressed into his back. Then he realizes that one of Harry's thighs is slipped between his, and the thing digging into his back is most likely not the remote. He freezes, feeling Harry shift slightly behind him. It is definitely not the remote. Harry lets out a breathy moan, and Louis cranes his neck to look back at him. His eyes are pressed firmly shut, his mouth open just slightly.

Louis' cheeks flush, as Harry moans again. His arms tighten a little around Louis, and his hips moving just enough to jab Louis again. Harry is sound asleep, and he is hard as a rock. Louis' heart sinks, because now he knows for sure now, that the reason Harry won't let Louis get him off isn't because he isn't horny. Clearly Harry is horny enough to have a dirty dream. That means that Harry is just so turned off by Louis, that he just doesn't want Louis to take care of it. Harry moans again, his hips moving again, and it ties a knot in Louis' chest.

Slowly and shakily, Louis extricates himself from the tight circle of Harry's arms. He slips down to the far corner of the mattress, because he doesn't even know what he's supposed to do right now.

Harry's eyebrows furrow when Louis is gone from his grasp, and instantly he turns onto his stomach. Louis watches his hips roll against the mattress, his cock searching for friction in his sleep. Louis swallows past the lump in his throat as Harry moans. He hates himself for being turned on at the sight of Harry thrusting slowly against the duvet. Harry's soft moans go straight to Louis' groin, but at the same time it hurts so much, because Harry's sounds aren't for Louis.

He aches to know what Harry is dreaming about, even though it kills Louis to know it isn't him. He watches for a moment as Harry's huge hand fists around Louis' abandoned pillow, his ass clenching
as he breathes heavily. Louis is at a loss. He doesn't want to wake Harry up, because he doesn't want to see the embarrassment on Harry's face. Louis knows it will be so awkward, because they both know Harry isn't dreaming about him, and he doesn't even want Harry to feel like he has to explain himself. Louis can't blame Harry for this; he can't even look at himself in the mirror without being disgusted, how can he even hope for Harry to be turned on by him.

Louis pushes himself up from the bed. He'll go crawl into bed with Zayn, and hope Zayn is too tired to ask for an explanation. He can't sit in here and watch Harry have a wet dream, and he can't wake Harry up and face the awkwardness. He kind of feels like crying. Maybe he should go sleep on the couch in the living room, he doesn't want to have to explain to Zayn that his boyfriend is so turned off by him that he has to get off in his dreams. He's ashamed.

"Lou," Harry says, and Louis freezes with his hand on the doorknob.

He turns around slowly, trying to steel himself for the awkwardness, because now Harry's woken up with a boner to find Louis trying to slip out of the room. When his eyes fall on Harry's form in the moonlight, he realizes Harry's eyes are still pressed shut, his cheek still pressed against the pillow. Louis watches for a second as Harry's hips grind against the mattress, and he moans. It's a soft sound, but it's long and drawn out.

"Lou," Harry breathes again.

Louis' mouth hangs open, and his eyebrows knot together in confusion. Harry lets out a low whine, his breathing heavy as he searches for friction in his sleep. The third time Louis' name comes out of his mouth Louis finally realizes that maybe Harry is dreaming about him. His heart is racing as he watches Harry's mouth move in his sleep. He realizes belatedly that he's already half hard, just from the sight of Harry. What hits him the hardest is the way his name is a needy groan, from deep inside Harry.

Louis tiptoes back to the bed, hesitant, and unsure. He sits down on the edge, and it squeaks a little as Harry thrusts against it again. Louis' own dick twitches in interest, and his hand reaches out for Harry's shoulder. As soon as he touches Harry, the younger boy groans and thrusts at the mattress again. Louis' name comes out muffled as Harry's face buries in the pillow. Louis blushes.

"Harry," he says, he's hard under Harry's jumper as he watches Harry's shoulder muscles flex, "babe?"

Harry moans again, his hand clenching and unclenching in the pillow. Louis doesn't know what he's doing as he shifts on the bed, but he leans forward, his palms dragging along Harry's flushed skin. He feels Harry's bicep bunch under his hand, and Harry moans.

"Harry," Louis hums, leaning forward to press his lips to the wing of Harry's muscular shoulder, "wake up love."

Harry whines again, his knee pulling up towards his chest and his ass clenching. Louis' lips press behind Harry's jaw, and his fingers slip up to pry Harry's away from the pillow. As soon as Harry lets go of the pillow is fingers lock around Louis', and his bum pushes up in the air slightly. Louis swallows thickly at the sight.

"Harry," Louis whispers, right against the shell of Harry's ear.

Harry's quick, shuddery intake of breath tells Louis the moment he finally wakes up. His whole body freezes, and then he moans again. Slowly he rolls over, his eyes finding Louis' face. Louis can see how red Harry's face goes even in the dark, as his eyes widen. He doesn't let go of Louis' hand but
his eyes travel down to his painfully hard cock.

"Louis," Harry whimpers, his hips twitching up at the air, "I'm sorry I-

"What are you dreaming about?" Louis asks, and his voice coming out rough.

Harry's flush spreads across his chest, but his hips are still searching for friction, "you," he moans, "you."

Louis blushes then, but the words go to his dick, "tell me what you need," he says, "tell me what you want."

Harry doesn't even think about it for a second before the words blurt out of his mouth, "you inside me," he pants, "need you inside me."

Louis is shocked to say the least, but he's also fully hard at Harry's words, and he doesn't have to think twice. Harry looks wrecked and sleep rumbled beside him, and his ass is clenching like he's aching for it. Louis is aching for it too. Harry reaches up and pulls the oversized jumper over Louis' head. Louis doesn't say a word as he reaches in the drawer beside the bed for the lube, but Harry shakes his head roughly when Louis pulls out a condom.

"Fill me up," Harry says, and Louis thinks it's possibly the hottest thing he's ever heard in his life.

The first time they had sex Harry was slow, and gentle, and tender, and Louis will never forget that night. Even though everything went to shit the next day, Louis will never forget it, because he had never ever been treated like that before. Louis doesn't believe in love, and he definitely doesn't believe Harry is capable of loving him, but he can honestly say he felt like Harry made love to him that night.

Now though, Harry is gagging for Louis' cock inside him, and Louis doesn't think he wants anything more than he wants that right now either. Louis wastes no time slicking up his fingers, and their moans match when he presses them against Harry's hole. Harry is so tight, but it only takes him moments to relax, and it's a testament to how much he wants it. Louis is careful even as he works quickly to open Harry up, he'd go slower, to savour the heat of Harry wrapped around him, but Harry is literally begging for it, so he makes quick work.

When he's got three fingers in, he crooks them, and Harry makes the most delicious sound when Louis hits his spot. Louis can't resist stroking Harry over and over, until Harry is panting, and whispering, and whining for more. Harry looks absolutely destroyed as he writhes on the bed, with Louis kneeling between his legs. His dick is rock hard and flushed against his stomach, as his hips chase Louis' fingers.

"Please Louis," Harry cries, "please."

Louis could never deny Harry that, especially when his own cock is curved up and grazing his stomach. Harry whimpers and bends his knees up to his chest, spreading his ass. His eyes are as big as saucers, and completely lust blown. He looks so fucking pretty; wide open for Louis like this, his hole slick with lube, his hair matted with sweat against his forehead.

When Louis presses into Harry he feels it in every centimetre of his body, and the sound Harry makes raises every hair on his skin. He thinks if that were the last sound he ever heard, he would die happy. He fucks into Harry, quick and hard, just like Harry begs him to. Every cliche for mind blowing sex he's ever thought of races through his head, the fireworks, the shooting stars, the explosions. Every corner of his mind is occupied by the overwhelming feeling of Harry clenched
tight around him. He can't drag his eyes off the beautiful boy underneath him, and Harry hasn't looked away once. Even as he cries out Louis' name, their eyes stay locked.

It isn't soft, and it isn't gentle, but Louis has never felt closer to anyone in his life. Harry is wide open and all access all the time with Louis, but like this, laid bare and being fucked open, Louis swears he could crawl into Harry's heart, through his wide open eyes, and make a home there. It's an insane, and contradictory thing to think, while he's wrecking Harry like this, but it's true.

Louis surges forward and connect their lips. Harry moans into his mouth, his fingers tangling in Louis' hair. They kiss with a burning hunger, as Harry's hips move in time with Louis'. As Louis leans forward to kiss Harry, he can feel Harry's cock rubbing between their stomachs, and it makes Harry start whimpering.

"Close," Harry whines into Louis' mouth, "fuck Lou- gunna."

"Alright, Harry," Louis says gently, locking their eyes, "now."

Louis can't even believe it when Harry comes on command, spurting thick and warm between their bodies. Louis' brain short circuits as Harry clenches insanely around him, and in an instant he's shuddering through his second orgasm of the night, buried deep inside Harry. He almost collapses with the force of it, because he's got more energy from all the food, but he's still so out of shape.

Harry is completely destroyed underneath Louis, but his arms still come up to hold him close. Louis ignores the cum being smeared across his chest as Harry pulls him closer, and just lets himself be held. The sex was a little rough, but after is gentle, and tender, and sweet. Harry presses lazy kisses against every inch of Louis' face, and murmurs things like 'I love you' and 'so amazing,' against his hair.

"Harry, why didn't you tell me you wanted that before?" Louis asks quietly, after a while.

Harry is quiet for a moment before he sighs, "because I broke your trust last time we made love," Louis tries not to cringe at Harry calling it that, "after I called you out about your eating disorder, and fucked everything up. I didn't want to ask for that because I knew I had to earn your trust back first," he explains sheepishly.

"You'd hardly even let me get you off," Louis protests.

"At the start of our relationship it was always you getting me off more, I just- I just wanted to take care of you…make you feel good… without you feeling like you had to do anything in return," Harry replies.

Louis turns Harry's words over in his head, and he can't even describe the relief that washes through him. Harry isn't disgusted by him. Harry was just reduced to a horny teenager having a sex dream, from wanting Louis so bad. Now, after, Harry is looking at him, completely wrecked, and with stars in his eyes. Maybe Louis doesn't understand it, how someone like Harry could be attracted to someone like him, but at least it quiets one of the voices of self hate in Louis' head, and he can breathe a little easier.

"Thought you were turned off by me," Louis almost whispers, hiding his face against Harry's neck.

Harry pulls back though, meeting Louis' eyes with a look of complete disbelief, "you've gotta be kidding me?" he groans, "fuck Louis, I've been- I've wanted it so bad, for so long."

The desperation is clear just in the way he says it, and the honesty in his eyes, "oh," Louis murmurs, "well."
Harry lets out a breathless laugh, and rolls his eyes fondly, "well c'mon then, lets go have a shower before we get crusty. Then we can sleep in late."

"Maybe tomorrow you could fuck me, again?" Louis asks innocently, "y'know, if you wanted?"

Harry smiles softly at him for a moment, "tomorrow I would absolutely love to make love to you, if that's what you mean," he says.

Louis groans, and rolls his eyes, "you've gotta stop saying that, you sound like a complete tosser."

"No," Harry grins, "that's what I'm always going to call it with you."

Louis tries not to blush, "what, you didn't call it that with the others?"

Harry shakes his head, his thumb brushing softly against Louis' cheek, "only you."

"Oh," Louis breathes, "well."

Harry just smiles, and gives a soft laugh, easily lifting Louis as he sits up. Louis wiggles and protests, when Harry stands up from the edge of the bed with Louis in his arms, but Harry won't put him down. He sited the cum having glued them together as an excuse, which is insanely untrue, and disgusting. Eventually Louis gives up whining and just clings tight to Harry, his legs wrapped around his hips. He lets himself be carried to the bathroom, and set on the counter.

Harry kisses him softly, standing between his thighs. Harry's hand reaches for the light, flicking it on. They both keep their eyes pressed shut for a moment, getting used to the light while they kiss. Harry stops kissing him, but Louis keeps his eyes pressed shut for a moment longer. Harry doesn't move or say a word though, and eventually Louis opens his eyes to see what Harry is doing.

He wasn't expecting to see Harry looking so completely broken. His eyes are locked on Louis' stomach, and Louis' reflex is to cover his gut, but he's confused by the indescribable sadness in Harry's eyes. His eyebrows are pulled tight together, and Louis thinks maybe his eyes are shining with tears. He follows Harry's eyes down to the swell of his stomach, and then he understands.

There are purplish lines, criss-crossing across his skin. Red lines, angry and raised, tangle with the forming bruises. The bruises from his fingertips, and the scratches from his nails overlap across his stomach and his hips. He hadn't realized how hard he was grabbing earlier, hadn't realized that he was torturing his flesh. Harry's hand shakes as he reaches out. His fingertips brush Louis' skin feather light, but Louis has to focus to stop himself from flinching away. When Harry finally meets Louis' eyes he looks so hurt, so shaken.

"You said you were fine today," he whispers, broken and quiet, "this isn't fine."

Chapter End Notes

you guys are so amazing thank you so much for your amazing comments and kudos. if you have any questions or want update info and teasers follow my twitter @tothemoonmydear or follow me on tumblr at tothemoonmydear. thank you so much for reading and being so kind. sorry i suck at smut.
"How was your exam, love?" Harry asks softly, nuzzling against Louis' hair.

"Alright, it was the easy one," Louis replies, breathing in Harry's smell.

"And how are you feeling?"

Louis opens his mouth, and he's point five of a second away from telling Harry he's fine, but Harry pulls back and looks him in the eyes. It only takes one look and Louis is brought straight back to that night, two weeks ago, when Harry saw the self inflicted scratches and bruises, marring his stomach and his hips. The memory is still painfully fresh in Louis' mind, he can still feel the knot he got in his chest when Harry crumpled in front of him.

~

"It's just a bad habit, Harry," Louis had whimpered, "I really was fine, it's just a bad habit."

Harry had shaken his head and backed away, dropping down onto the closed toilet lid like a sack of bricks, "I'm such a fucking idiot," he had groaned, "I'm so fucking stupid!"

"You're not, Harry! Don't say that," Louis protested.

"I look in your eyes, and every single day you look like you're fucking drowning! And I keep thinking I'm getting you into the lifeboat, I keep thinking I can bring you to shore; but you're in the middle of the fucking ocean, and I can't even fucking get close to you!"

"Harry-"

"Don't Louis! Stop lying to me! Please, I am literally begging you," Louis' breath had hitched in his throat when Harry sank off the toilet, and down to his knees in front of him, "Please stop lying to me! I can't fucking do this if you're going to lie to me, and hide things from me! I can handle it if you feel like shit, I can handle it if you're pissed off. You don't have to act okay for me! But I can't handle you lying to me! This is never going to work if you keep shutting me out!"

Louis had forced himself not to flinch away from Harry's hands holding onto his hips, "if I- if I tell you what I'm really feeling you'll- you're going to leave either way!"

Harry's eyes were pleading when he looked up at Louis, "I've told you a million times, I'm not going anywhere! But I can't- I can't keep doing this if you're going to lie to me, and hide things from me! I can handle it if you feel like shit, I can handle it if you're pissed off. You don't have to act okay for me! But I can't handle you lying to me! This is never going to work if you keep shutting me out!"

The hairs on the back of Louis' neck had bristled, and his instant reflex was to throw Harry's hands off of him. To scream in Harry's face that he should just go then, because they were never meant to work out anyway. Except he didn't. He didn't push Harry away, and he didn't raise his voice. Harry had looked up at him, from his knees on the floor, his eyes searching Louis' face.

"Okay," Louis sighed.

Harry had groaned, low and guttural, "see! You don't even give a shit! You don't care if I'm telling you that we won't work out if you lie, because you don't care if we work out!"
"No," Louis said quietly, "I'm saying okay to- to the things you said before."

Harry's face had twisted in confusion, "what things?"

"I'm saying okay, I'll stop lying, I'll stop hiding. I'll tell you when I feel like shit, and I'll tell you when I'm dying to tear the fat off my bones," Louis had mumbled, ignoring Harry's flinch at his choice of words, "okay, I'll stop shutting you out."

Harry had fish mouthed for a minute, looking for the words, before disbelief had clouded his features, "yeah, you say that now, but you'll just find other ways to hide things from me."

Louis had sighed, and scrubbed his hand across the back of his neck. He knew it was his fault Harry didn't trust him. He'd meant it though. He had known that Harry is going to leave him either way; he didn't want Harry to leave because he wasn't trying hard enough. He had known that Harry is going to get overwhelmed and leave, when he opens up and shows how fucked up he is, but he'd rather that, than to always wonder what would have happened, if he'd just given Harry a chance.

Looking down at Harry, crying at his feet, Louis had finally made the decision that he'd rather be able to say 'I told you so' when Harry leaves because he's too much to handle, than have to say 'what if' when Harry leaves because he isn't trying enough. He knew that taking down his walls meant leaving himself defenceless, but it wasn't a hard decision to make when he saw the pain in Harry's eyes, the pain that he caused.

"I mean it, Harry. I'll- I'm going to be open with you…..but when it- when I get to be too much- t-to handle, please, just be straight up with me….don't draw it out. I'll understand when you want to go."

Harry's face had softened so much, but the sadness was still trapped in his eyes. Louis had sunk down to his knees, to be on Harry's level. Harry's arms had wrapped around him instantly, as he crossed his legs and pulled Louis into his lap. Louis doesn't remember how long they sat there, tears falling down both their faces. He does remember Harry's words though.

"I'm not going anywhere, Louis, I love you with everything I've got."

~

So Louis looks at Harry, into Harry's impossibly soft eyes, and he swallows down the lie. He hides his face against Harry's neck, because it's still hard to say how he's feeling out loud. He's so used to acting okay, he's so used to telling everyone he's fine. He feels weak enough on the inside, without telling everyone about every insecurity, every feeling of inadequacy.

"I feel like shit," Louis says quietly, "I feel bloated and disgusting, and-" he lets out a sigh, and shakes his head.

"What is it, love?" Harry prompts softly.

"And in class today Hannah told me that I was looking good," Louis mumbles, "and I know she meant it nicely, she said it was because my hair has been looking healthier, and my skin looks brighter, but like- it just…"

"Just what?" Harry presses a kiss to his temple.

"It just reminds me that my body is changing because I'm eating so much, and I know I'm putting on weight, and I'm fucking freaking out," Louis' voice is hardly a whisper.

He doesn't tell Harry that her comment almost sent him running down the hall to the bathroom, after
two full weeks of not purging. He had already been feeling awful, because it's getting warmer so he can't get away with layers anymore, and he doesn't feel comfortable in anything. She had said it so kindly, had asked him what he was doing differently because he was looking healthier. He had made something up about always starting to feel better in the spring, because winter always runs him down, and she had bought it. He had felt like screaming.

Harry sighs softly. He stands in between Louis' legs; Louis is in the passenger seat of the truck, turned to the side, with Harry standing next to the open door, his hands on Louis' thighs. Even as Harry frowns at him, Louis can see the gratefulness in his eyes, he's always so thankful every time Louis is open. Louis doesn't understand how Harry can enjoy listening to him whine, but he knows Harry can tell how much it takes for him to even tell small things.

"Oh sweetheart," Harry says softly, "even though I know she meant it in the nicest way, I'm sorry she made that comment if it upset you, and I'm sorry that you're feeling like shit. You have to remember though, that you don't see yourself properly love. She's right, your hair looks healthier, and it's even softer when I run my fingers through it. Your skin looks better because there is some colour to your cheeks, and you're not so pale from being cold all the time. You do look healthier, but not in the way you're thinking. It's only been a few weeks, it isn't like you've suddenly put on a bunch of weight."

"You don't understand," Louis whimpers, because Harry doesn't get that Louis associates healthy with heavy.

"I know baby, I'm not trying to pretend I do. I just know stuff like that is really triggering for you, and I'm so proud of you for not going off to purge," Harry pauses, "you didn't...did you?" he asks hesitantly.

"No," Louis sighs, "I didn't. But I wanted to," he admits in a whisper, terrified for Harry's inevitable disappointment.

Harry sighs softly too, "fuck babe, I'm so proud of you for not doing it."

Louis frowns, "you're not mad at me for wanting to though?"

Harry shakes his head, "of course not. You're recovering Lou, those feelings don't go away over night. But you didn't give in, and I'm so proud of you. And it means so much that you've told me how you feel," Harry's lips are soft, as he dips his chin to kiss softly at Louis' neck.

Louis breathes in deeply, letting his head roll back, "I'm scared."

Harry's lips stop, and he pulls back to look at Louis with a frown, "of what?"

"I'm scared you'll not want me, when I've gained all that weight back... I was really heavy before. Mostly because I drank so much, and I- I've never been one for working out," Louis admits sheepishly.

Harry looks in Louis' eyes for a moment, before his thumb comes up to ghost across Louis' cheek, "babe, I've creeped your Facebook a million times over. I know you haven't used it in almost a year, but you never deactivated it. I've been through all your pictures, and I've seen those shirtless pics of you the summer before this year. Your body was perfect. I'm not just saying that Louis, like before I even met you, if I had to describe my ideal guy, it would be you. And I know all the bits I loved about you, are probably all the parts you hate. I would have spent days sucking at the curve of your hips, weeks kissing along your tummy, months wrapped up in your thighs. You'll always be perfect to me, even like this, when you don't have an ounce of fat on you, but like that too, at a healthy
weight, or heavier, or anything. I've seen you already, and I love you all the same."

Louis' cheeks are warmed with blush, thinking about Harry seeing those pictures of him, thinking about Harry's lips on his bulbous tummy, thinking about his humungous thighs heavy around Harry's waist. It isn't a pleasant thought, because he looks back at those pictures now and cringes; but it isn't an unpleasant one either, because Harry's seen him at his heaviest, and he isn't turned off.

"Well...we'll see," he murmurs quietly.

"You'll see," Harry says, smiling softly, "I know you've had kind of a crappy day, but are you still feeling up to hanging out with Niall? Zayn's exam will be done in half an hour you could just wait for him, and chill out at home instead? I know Niall's pretty high energy."

Louis shakes his head, "no Zayn has a thing after his exam, but I don't mind, I want to see Niall. He always makes me feel better."

Harry grins, "I'm so glad you like him. He loves you and the boys."

"He's my favourite," Louis says, "sometimes I think he forgets about.... my eating thing."

Harry laughs, and rolls his eyes, "he legitimately does. The other day I came into the room happy, and he asked what was up, and I told him that we had upped your calorie intake and that you were doing good, and he asked me what the hell I was on about."

Louis smiles, and lets out a little laugh, "that's why I like him."

Louis really is looking forward to seeing Niall. They haven't been able to have him over to the flat as often because everyone is studying like mad for exams, so Louis has missed him. Niall is the only one that Louis feels normal around, and it actually is because Niall just doesn't think about Louis' eating habits. If it's just the two of them Niall follows Harry's rules about how much Louis has to eat, he never lets Louis get away with anything, but other than that he doesn't even think about it. When Louis is with Niall, he feels the most like himself.

Zayn and Liam are getting better, but there is still that knowledge that they're watching him, worrying about him. With Harry he knows that his eating is at the forefront of Harry's mind, and it's a lot of pressure. There is no pressure with Niall, there is no worry in his eyes when he looks at Louis. They always have a great time because Niall is so laid back and he lets Louis feel normal, lets Louis get out of his head.

"Hey lads," Niall bellows, hanging out the window of his car as he drives over from across the parking lot.

Harry steps aside and helps Louis hop down from the truck, shutting the door behind him. Niall pulls into the parking spot beside them, with a huge grin on his face. He hops out of his vehicle and pulls both of them into a hug, because he is a hugger.

"Hey mate," Harry says, "I've got to go, I'll see you later, yeah?"

"Sure bro, good luck on your exam," Niall says.

Harry grins, and gathers Louis up in his arms, "have fun, and I'll text you as soon as I'm done," he says softly.

Louis smiles, "okay love, good luck on your exam, I know you'll do great," he says, standing on his tiptoes to steal a kiss.
"One more kiss for luck?" Harry asks.

The kiss turns into a snog, and Niall climbs back into his car to give them a moment alone. Louis waves as Harry pulls away, to drive to the other side of campus to write his exam. Harry leans out his window and blows a kiss before he rounds the corner. Louis climbs in the passenger seat beside Niall.

"So how did your exam go?" Niall asks.

"Alright I think, it was an easy one," Louis replies, "how was yours?"

"I think I did okay, I've sure as fuck been studying enough, I feel like that's all I've been doing!"

"Yeah I know what you mean, how many more do you have?"

"Two," Niall groans, "but fuck it, lets go get drunk to celebrate this one being done!"

"Drunk?" Louis asks, his mind screaming about all the empty calories in alcohol.

"Yeah mate, it's a beautiful day, lets go sit on a patio, get some pints, some burgers!" Niall says excitedly.

Louis cringes internally, this is the only downside of Niall sometimes forgetting, "sounds like a lot of calories," he says quietly, and this is one of the moments he wishes he could just eat normally without hating himself.

Niall realizes what the problem is, and understanding crosses his face, "Alright well you can do a salad and some shots, you'll get your calories and you'll get drunk!" he says after with a shrug.

Louis knows if Harry ever heard Niall suggest he substitute normal calories for alcohol he would lose his shit. Louis hasn't been drunk in ages though, and he's had a shit day, and the idea of just getting tipsy, and having something light to eat for lunch sounds completely amazing. He hopes Harry won't be too mad, but if he is he'll argue that he was just trying to have fun, and hopefully Harry will understand that he needs this.

"Sounds sick," Louis grins, nodding.

"Wey Hey!" Niall exclaims, clapping his hands, and Louis doesn't know what that means but he laughs at Niall's enthusiasm.

Niall cranks up the radio and backs out of the parking stall. Some hip-hop song that Louis has never heard blasts through the speakers. It turns out apparently he doesn't mind hip-hop, because he's feeling pretty gangster as Niall sings along, and teaches Louis how to bob his head the proper way.

"You like this?" Niall asks, when the song ends.

"Never knew I liked hip-hop," Louis laughs.

"Oh my fucking god I've got to show you this song! Harry is always giving me shit about listening to hip-hop and rap, and then one day the bastard comes in, and tell me he's found the perfect song for me," Niall says, laughter in his voice as he scrolls through his playlist, "so he plays this song, and I fucking instantly love it, because the beat is sick."

A snapping base starts playing through the speakers, along with a guys voice sing-rapping, "so I'm fucking playing it all week, blasting it in my car and shit! And then finally one night Harry gets in
my car, and the song is playing, and he starts killing himself laughing. And then he tells me to listen
to the fucking lyrics!"

Just as Louis starts listening the man singing says 'he really wanna cuddle, the fever in his eyes, he
wanna suckle on my muscle,' and Louis gets it. Suddenly the lyric from the beginning of the song
'I'm the kind of john closet dudes wanna go steady on' makes more sense. The guy is gay, and he's
rapping about 'wut is wut.'

"I'd been going around all week blasting literally the gayest fucking song in existence, thinking I was
complete badas! I thought Harry was going to die, he was laughing so hard when he showed me the
YouTube video and there is this huge black guy twerking all over other dudes laps, wearing girls
clothes!"

Louis has tears in his eyes he's laughing so hard, "why do you still have it on your iPod then?" he
manages through his laughter.

Niall just shrugs and cranks it up, "it's a fucking sick song! Who gives a shit if he's gay! I don't worry
about blasting songs about drug dealing, even though I'm not a drug dealer."

That right there is one of the other reasons Louis loves Niall. He's never met someone so
unequivocally accepting. When the song is over Niall hits replay, and promises one day he's going to
teach Louis how to twerk. When they pull up at a pub everybody seems to know Niall, and they get
a table out on the patio, under a brightly coloured umbrella.

Niall orders the biggest burger Louis has ever seen, along with the darkest pint he's ever seen. Louis
gets a vodka tonic, because he knows it will have the least calories, and a salad with some grilled
chicken and the dressing on the side. He'll decide how much of the chicken he can eat, based on how
much alcohol he drinks. Niall and Louis talk while they wait for their food, and Louis loves how
easy, and usually hilarious, their conversations always are.

When the food comes Niall decides they need to order some shots, because he's finished his pint, and
Louis has finished his drink. Louis can't really feel his vodka-ton, and he's just been nibbling his
salad, so he doesn't protest. Somehow one shot turns into three, and as Niall slaughters his burger,
Louis finds himself giggling as he eats his salad.

Niall is telling some outrageous story with food in his mouth, and Louis can't feel his lips, but he's
laughing harder than he has in a while. He's the one who suggests the fourth shot, and the fifth,
because he's enjoying the way the alcohol quiets the voice in his head telling him to stop shoving
salad in his mouth. He's eating chicken by the time Niall offers him a sip of his pint, and Louis ends
up drinking half of it in one go.

He's having so much fun, and he just loves Niall so much. He hasn't drank in so long, and he is a
ridiculous light weight as it is, so he figures he should stop drinking. He stops drinking, but he finds
himself eating his chicken salad still, and Niall notices and congratulates him excitedly on being such
a 'champ.' Louis isn't sure how he'd feel about that normally, but right now everything feels fuzzy
and wonderful, so he just grins sloppily, and has another bite.

"Oh my god, what song is this? Issogood!" Louis exclaims, pointing at the speakers blasting the song
out to the patio.

"My lord mate, do you live under a rock? It's Mirrors by Justin Timberlake, it's been playing on the
radio for a good month!" Niall laughs.

Louis giggles, "shut up! I used to only listen to the radio and top forties, but Harry has been
"educating me," he does exaggerated air quotes around the word educating, "about good music, so now I'm always just listening to his hipster shit."

Niall laughs, "that boy listens to the weirdest fucking music."

"I have to send him this song!" Louis says, "the words man, the words are just lovely."

Maybe he is a little drunk, and maybe Mirrors isn't a song he would normally send to Harry, but he clicks through to iTunes anyway, and downloads it with minimal finger fumbling. Niall knows the words of course, and he bellows them out to the patio at large. It's a testament to how much people love Niall that everyone just grins at him fondly, instead of being annoyed.

'Just heard this sing, i kno its pop shit but made me thing of youuuuu, do good on ur exam babyboi xoxox9x0xox0,' he manages to type out, grinning stupidly, and almost forgetting to attach the song.

He realizes belatedly that Harry won't get the text until after his exam, but he decides not to let that dampen his grin. He also realizes, when he rereads the text after its sent, that it barely makes sense, but he just giggles and shrugs to himself. Niall grins at him and flags the waitress over for a pint for himself and Louis, and Louis doesn't even argue.

"So, what's it like?" Niall asks, his cheeks are rosy, though he is definitely less drunk than Louis.

"What is what like?" Louis asks, and he vaguely notices that his words are a little slurred.

"To have someone love you as much as Harry does?" Niall asks, grinning sheepishly, "I've always wanted someone to like-love me like that y'know? Unconditionally?"

Louis' cheeks are on fire. He wants to argue with Niall, tell him there is no such thing as unconditional love. He can't quite form the words though, and he isn't sure what the warm feeling in his stomach means. He blames the alcohol.

"I- I don't know," he stutters.

"Well you've got to know how over the moon he is for you, Lou! You're all he thinks about. You should hear him talk about you when he Skypes with his mum and sister. I've never seen someone love someone else so much!"

"I'm a shit boyfriend," he mumbles, the 'shit person' goes unspoken, "don't know why he'd love me."

Niall literally scoffs, "don't be daft! You two are perfect for each other! You guys are freaking adorable. I've never wanted to like-settle down- but you've got me wanting to find a nice girl! Somebody help me find a nice girl!" he hollers to the patrons on the patio, and there are a few 'shut up Niall's' and an 'I volunteer.'

Louis giggles into his pint glass, but Niall's words bounce around his head, "what does he say about me?" he asks sheepishly.

"Honestly mate, we don't have time to cover it all, but the gist of it is that he thinks you hung the bloody stars. I'm pretty sure he'd chop off his own arm before he'd hurt you," Niall says simply, "he'd do anything for you, bro."

Louis blushes, and normally his skin would be crawling, but maybe the alcohol is preventing that, "everything he says can't be good Ni," Louis protests, "half our relationship has been a shit show, because I'm so fucked."
He knows his words aren't very clear, but Niall seems to understand, "you're not fucked Lou, don't say that. You've just got some issues, everyone does. You're getting better, look you've eaten your whole salad!"

Louis groans, and pushes his near empty bowl away, "s'not just that though, I'm all wonky up here,“ he says, tapping a finger to his temple.

"Well it doesn't help when you keep your every thought under lock and key you tosser! Sometimes you gotta let people in! If you should let anyone in, it's Haz. He's the best person I've ever met, he knows more about me than people I've been friends with my whole life, and he's never judged me once!" Niall picks up a few pieces of lettuce from Louis' plate.

Louis slouches in his seat dramatically, "he'll leave."

Niall lets out something between a laugh and a groan, "Lou I'm pretty sure you could tell Harry that you're a robot who prefers human flesh to normal food, and he'd still be like a smitten thirteen year old; all blushing and shit when he talks about how perfect you are," he says.

Louis rolls his eyes, "now that's a hyper- hyperball- what's that," he snaps his fingers as he thinks, "what's that word for a ridiculous exaggeration? Hyper-something?"

"A hyperbole?" Niall supplies, laughing.

"That's a hyperbole if I ever heard one, I was gunna say," Louis says, almost completely forgetting what he was talking about before.

Niall just grins and shakes his head, "ya twat," he says fondly, Louis giggles, and throws a piece of salad at his face.

The subject has been dropped, and Louis is thankful for that, but he can't stop thinking about it. His thoughts are hazy because of the alcohol thrumming in his veins, but it's a good kind of hazy. Niall is talking about some girl in one of his classes and Louis is acting attentive, but his mind is running. It's a good kind of hazy because it's letting him think about things that would normally make him ache, without too much pain. He's able to think about that look that Harry always has in his eyes, that softness that Louis can't understand. He's able to think about how much Harry has already stuck by through. He's able to think about what it would be like if Harry really was something he could keep.

He's drawn from his thoughts by a text message, 'Hey baby, I'm done my exam, I love that Mirrors made you think of me, are you drunk? xxxx.'

Louis' fingers are a little more inept at this point, but he's smiling as he hits the call button, "Hey honey," he says when Harry picks up, "yes I am drunk, thanks to your wanker of a best friend. What's this place called again?" he asks Niall, who points to the sign over the patio with a grin, "we're at The Crow, will you come?"

Harry's laugh is warm, and it makes Louis tingle, "sure sweetheart, I'm driving over now, have you eaten?"

"Yes, had a grilled chicken salad and some vodka," Louis says happily.

"Are you having fun, babe?" Harry asks, and Louis can hear the smile in his voice.

"So much," Louis says, laughing hard as Niall does a spot on imitation of Harry shaking out his hair and sweeping his curls to the side, before coughing in his hand.
"What are you giggling at?" Harry chuckles.

"Niall is my favourite," he says.

"Is your favourite going to be okay to drive home?"

"Probably definitely not," Louis replies solemnly.

"Alright, you two get the bill and I'll be there to grab you both in a couple minutes?"

"Sounds lovely!"

"Bye, love you," Harry says, even though he'll be seeing Louis in a few minutes.

"Love it when you say that," Louis slurs, and he definitely wouldn't have said it if he weren't drunk, but he doesn't necessarily regret it.

"Do you?" Harry asks, and Louis blushes at the disbelief in Harry's voice.

"Hmm, and not just when I'm drunk enough to tell you," Louis adds, trying for cheeky and just sounding highly inebriated.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," Harry says, happiness clear in his tone.

"Yeah, yeah, just ged 'ere," he says, and he's taken back by the fondness in his own voice, but he doesn't regret that either.

"Coming baby cakes," Harry laughs, and disconnects the call.

Niall and Louis split the bill, and then Niall says goodbye to all the people he knows as they go to his car. They're just grabbing his textbooks out when Harry pulls up. He gets out and comes around, taking Louis in his arms and pressing kisses on his face until Louis is giggling.

"How was your exam?" Louis asks, as Harry helps him up into the truck.

"It went well I think," Harry shrugs, taking a proper kiss.

"Thanks for helping me into the truck," Niall shrieks indignantly.

"Oh sorry mate," Harry says sarcastically.

Niall squawks when Harry picks him up under the armpits, and tosses him into the back seat with no strain at all. Louis giggles in the front seat while Harry and Niall bicker. Harry takes his hand across the seat, and Louis sinks down, and puts his knees up on the glovebox. Harry's thumb is soft, brushing across Louis' knuckles, as he drives and chats with Niall. When they get back to the dorm Niall hops out, and he sways on his feet a little, but he insists he'll be fine to get up to their room.

He plants a wet kiss on Louis' cheek, and thanks him for a lovely afternoon. Louis ruffles his hair, and fondly informs Niall that he is his favourite. That last pint is hitting Louis, so his words come out a little more slurred, but Niall understands. Niall squeezes Harry's ass as thanks for the ride, eliciting a less than manly squeak, and then stumbles off towards the building.

Harry climbs back in the truck, "so, I've never seen you drunk before," he says, as he pulls out of the parking lot.

Louis giggles, "haven't been like this in ages," he says, "used to be like this all the time though!"
"What do you mean?" Harry asks, holding Louis' hand again.

"When we first came to London all I did was party, for the first two years really," Louis replies, closing his eyes because watching the scenery fly by is making him dizzy.

"And why'd you stop?" Harry asks, his voice sounding far away.

The alcohol is fermenting in Louis' blood, hitting him a little more by the minute, "because- er- I just-" he swallows thickly, remembering why he stopped, "just stopped."

He prays Harry will let it drop, because he's in such a good mood, and he doesn't want to think about what happened to make him stop. Harry must sense his discomfort because he squeezes Louis' hand gently, before raising it up and pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

"S'alright love, I'm glad you had fun. You're adorable when you're all giggly like this," he says softly.

Louis muffles a giggle, and opens his eyes to look at Harry, "you're adorable all the time," he says, deciding it's easier to be happy if he keeps his eyes on Harry.

Harry grins, "do you get affectionate when you drink?" he asks playfully.

"I'm affectionate all the time," Louis protests, pretending to be miffed.

Harry laughs, "okay," he says, "so what did you and Niall talk about all this time?"

Louis shrugs exaggeratedly, "school, football, you," he says, and he still hasn't taken his eyes off Harry.

Harry's eyebrows raise, "what about me?" he grins.

"Mostly your music taste," Louis replies coyly.

Harry chuckles and squeezes his hand, "is that all?" he asks.

"Basically," Louis shrugs, "fuck, I feel really drunk," he adds, his head feels foggy and the feeling makes him giggle.

"Don't worry love, we'll get you home and you can have a nice nap," Harry says gently.

"What are you going to do for the summer?" Louis asks suddenly when the thought pops into his head, "Niall said he was going back to Mullingar?"

Harry hums, keeping up with the random change in topic, "yeah, they make us give up the dorm room for the summer, but we've put in to be able to room together next year too. Erm- I'm going to have to go back to Donny, stay with mum," Harry says.

Louis' frown is a millimetre away from a pout, but he doesn't care, "so I won't see you much?"

Harry frowns too, "we haven't really talked about it, I don't even know what your plans are," he says.

"Erm, the boys always go back home for August, and they don't like leaving me at the flat alone, so I stay with Li and his family for a couple weeks, and then stay with Zayn and his family for the other two, but other than that we stay at the flat," Louis explains, and his words are a little jumbled, but Harry seems to understand.
"Oh," Harry says, "so maybe when you're in town in August we could spend time together? Maybe I could drive back sometimes to take you out in July too," he says hesitantly.

Louis nods slowly, and he hasn't taken his eyes off Harry, because he's trying to be happy, "you practically live at the flat anyway..... you could stay with us sometimes," Louis hesitates, because maybe he wouldn't have said that if he were sober, "I mean- I know you wanna go home, you must miss your family so much- I'd never expect you to want to stay- I totally get it- I just thought I'd offer- just want you to know you're welcome- to er- at er-," he says, as quickly as he can manage with his slurring.

"Babe, I'd really like that, like a lot," Harry says though, with a soft smile over at Louis, "and also….. I've been meaning to ask…. my mum and sister have been dying to meet you?"

Louis blanches a little at the thought of meeting the people most important to Harry, "er- yeah- I mean, sure," he stutters, he worries his bottom lip between his teeth, "and if they hate me?"

Harry full on laughs, and shakes his head, "Louis they're going to love you just as much as I do," he says earnestly, "that I can promise you."

Louis blushes, but he lets himself feel relieved, the alcohol quiets the voice in his head saying they'll hate him. They're quiet for a while, and Harry raises their intertwined hands, brushing his lips back and forth across Louis' knuckles. They've hit evening traffic so the usual ten minute drive to the flat is taking longer. Liam and Zayn won't be home until later, and Louis is kind of drunk-turned-on, but he's also kind of drunk-sleepy, so he doubts he'll be in any shape to do anything.

Their sex life has been amazing lately. Louis has learned that sometimes, no matter how much he hates having Harry look at his body, all his agonizing thoughts seem to fall away when Harry is slaving over him. He treats Louis' body like a temple, and when they make love Louis feels so zipped open and vulnerable, but Harry fucking worships him. Sometimes Louis thinks feeling full of Harry, is almost like feeling whole, and he craves that feeling.

"What are you doing after the summer, Lou?" Harry asks, drawing him from his thoughts.

Louis hums, trying to get his thoughts in line, "haven't thought about it much, to be honest. I mean- Li has a job lined up, and Zayn is doing an apprenticeship, so if they stick around and want to keep the flat, then I'll stay and take a business course at the uni, and start looking into starting a clothing line. I mean, I know it's a pretty unrealistic dream, but I've still got enough in my savings, and I figure I might as well give it a go."

"It's not unrealistic babe, if you make a clothing line you'll be rich, everything you design is amazing," Harry says seriously, "so that means you'll be staying, and going to school for at least another year?" he asks slowly.

Louis nods, "yeah but- that all depends on if the boys want to stay or not. If they want to leave, or if erm- if they don't want me around anymore, then I'll take an internship in like Italy, or France, or America or something," he says, and the alcohol just barely manages to numb the twisting in his gut at the thought of the boys wanting to leave him.

"What do you mean, love? They've both said they plan to stay at the flat with you, no? Why would they want to leave you?" Harry asks softly.

"Um…well I just applied at the internships as back up plans, in case they changed their minds. Erm- in case they didn't want to babysit the basket case anymore, and they wanted to go live normal lives without me weighing them down," he's trying to make a joke of it, but even in his drunken haze he
can't tell he falls short.

Harry frowns across at him, "you've been making back up plans for when your best friends, who love you with all their hearts, get sick of you?" he asks incredulously.

Louis just shrugs, "it's bound to happen eventually," he says simply.

"Why do you say that?" Harry asks, not taking his eyes off Louis as they stop at a red light.

"Everyone leaves me eventually," he says, "facts of life young Harold," he adds, forcing a smile and reaching forward to crank up the radio, hoping to end the conversation.

He's suddenly feeling drunker, but also a lot less happy. The thoughts in his head are harder to ignore and he's being reminded of just how shit he really is, that he had to make those back up plans. That he's so fucked up that he knows even his best friends will leave. Suddenly he's second guessing inviting Harry to stay in the summer. As if they're still going to be together. Maybe Harry is going to use the distance to break things off. Maybe the day Harry leaves back to Doncaster will be the last time Louis hears from him. Or maybe Harry will just slowly drift away, to try and make it easier on Louis.

Harry pulls the truck in at the flat complex, and puts it into park. He looks like he wants to say something, but instead he opens his door and comes around to help Louis out. Louis tries to hop out gracefully like he normally would, but the earth kind of sways a bit, and he sways right along with it.

"Whoa there," Harry says, reaching out to steady Louis, "dizzy?"

"A little," Louis mumbles.

"Here," Harry says, crouching down in front of Louis.

"What are you doing?" Louis asks confusedly.

"I'm giving you a piggy back, hop on," Harry says simply.

"Harry-"

"If you say you're too heavy I'm going to carry you like a bride; so you can hop on willingly, or you can be carried by force," Harry says, and his tone is light and playful.

"There is no way in hell you're going to be able to carry me up three flights of stairs," Louis argues, but he clamours awkwardly onto Harry's back.

"Thank you," Harry says.

He straightens up with Louis on his back. His arms are hooked under Louis' knees, and Louis arms wrap across his chest. He turns his lips and puckers them, until Louis leans forward to give him a sideways kiss. Louis feels ridiculously high up, and he keeps himself busy thinking about what it would be like to be as tall as Harry. Then his thoughts drift to how much nicer his body would look if he were long and lean, as opposed to short and fat, and he silences his mind. He can't even deny how nice it is to be carried like this, and he can't deny how shocked he is that Harry isn't dying. He isn't even breathing heavily, or struggling to hold on, or leaning forward to counteract Louis' weight.

"You weigh less than my backpack," Harry says when he gets to the top of the stairs, and he doesn't sound winded at all.
"Tosser," Louis mumbles fondly.

He's been lulled into relaxation by the steady movement of Harry carrying him, and he barely notices when Harry's arm wraps back around his bum to hold him up with one arm, while he opens the door to the flat. Harry kicks off his shoes and pads down the hall to the bedroom. He turns around and sits on the edge of the bed, Louis lets go of him and flops back against the mattress.

Harry reaches down and removes Louis' shoes, and then he starts unbuttoning Louis' trousers. He pulls them down and Louis doesn't even bother covering himself. Harry gently pulls off Louis' long sleeved t-shirt, and then pulls off his own t-shirt. Louis reaches out and Harry pulls him into a sitting position. Louis holds his arms up, and Harry pulls his t-shirt from the day down Louis' arms, and over his head, mussing up his soft fringe.

Louis absolutely loves when Harry gives him the shirt that he's worn all day. He loves the way Harry's shirts are so loose on him, how they fall down to his thighs. He loves the way the fabric is still warm when he pulls it on. But mostly he loves the way they smell so much like Harry, not just his cologne, but whatever that smell is that is purely Harry. Louis vaguely notices Harry opening his mouth like he wants to say something and then closing it again, before he finally speaks.

"I was thinking Louis, I know that Liam and Zayn are never going to leave you, so I know the three of you will keep the flat, and I'm really glad you'll be at school with me again next year," Harry says, sitting down next to Louis on the bed, "but I just want you to know that if, for some crazy reason, they do decide they don't want to keep the flat or- or for some reason you can't live with them anymore…I was thinking you and I could always get a flat together. I know it's soon, but that way you could stay in London, and do your clothing label, and you wouldn't have to leave- erm- leave the country… I just want you to know that even if you didn't have them, which I know you always will, but the point I'm trying to make is- you have me too, okay? I'd love to live with you….and I just want you to know that I'm here too, alright?" Harry's voice is hesitant and shaky.

"Don't do that Harry," Louis mutters, scooting up on the bed to the pillows.

"Don't do what?" Harry asks, tucking Louis' legs under the covers.

"Don't talk about the future with me, like you're planning on sticking around," Louis says exasperatedly, "frankly it isn't very nice, and I don't much fancy the idea of getting my hopes up for something, that we both know is never going to happen."

He can tell Harry is frowning down at him but he isn't exactly sure which of the two identical faces looming over him is the real physical Harry, and which is the product of a few too many alcoholic beverages. He feels the bed creak down beside him, and he accidentally lets out an unattractive hiccup. His mood has plummeted, because for a minute, while Harry was talking, his heart warmed. Warmed at the thought of a LouisandHarry flat, just the two of them, having Harry every day to himself. He is so stupid for even letting that thought into his mind.

"Why do you think that isn't going to happen?" the Harry's ask, and Louis feels fingers drag gently through his hair.

Louis rolls his eyes, but instantly regrets it because the room spins, "because everybody leaves Harold, everybody leaves me eventually."

"See, you keep saying that Lou, but it doesn't make any sense to me," Harry sighs.

"Well of course it doesn't make any sense to you, because who would leave someone like you," Louis says, reaching up to pat Harry's cheek and missing, "but nobody sticks around for people like
"I find it hard to believe, because I could never imagine wanting to leave you," Harry says, and Louis sighs at the tenderness in his deep voice.

"Well that, my dear, is because you really don't know me very well at all!"

Louis hears Harry hum, and it's a sad sound, his fingers stop moving through Louis' hair, "well that sucks, considering I'm in love with you and all, and considering you know everything about me," Harry says quietly.

Niall's words about opening up to Harry, are bouncing around in his head. The words are on the tip of his tongue. He tells himself this is like the 'being open about his feelings' thing; Harry is going to leave either way, he might as well lay all his cards on the table. Everything is just numb enough from the liquor that it seems like a fantastic idea.

"Yeah it does suck, I suppose," he sighs, but then he lets out a giggle that turns into a snort, "just thought of something funny."

"What funny thing did you think of, love?"

Louis giggles again, "you know that saying 'a face only a mother could love'?" Louis asks, Harry murmurs a yes, "well I haven't even got that!" Louis laughs, "haven't ever told you about my mum, now have I?"

"No babe, you haven't," Harry says quietly.

"She's really lovely, you know," Louis says, kicking his feet under the blankets so he isn't tangled in the sheets, "my father fucked off almost right after I was born. She was really young, too young to be stuck with me probably, but she loved me. Always said I was the best thing that ever happened to her, always said she wouldn't change a thing. You might think I wouldn't remember, but I do, I remember her singing to me. She always said it was me and her against the world. She was lovely, you know," Louis smiles up at the ceiling, Harry's fingers are moving in his hair again, "then she met Mark, and she had the girls. Mark didn't like me the same as the girls, but who can blame him for that? I wasn't his, and the girls were so lovely. I can't blame him for that. He still fed me the same as the girls, and bought me clothes for school, and mum was happy. He didn't really like me, but it was okay because Mum was happy, and the girls were so lovely," Louis picks at a loose thread on the blanket absentmindedly.

He doesn't tell Harry about how sometimes Mark got angry when he was drunk, and even though he was only seven, it fell on Louis. After the second time he saw Mark hit his mum he learned. He learned that if he was a brat, and if he pissed Mark off when he was mad and plastered, then Mark would hit him instead, and leave his mum alone. His mum had begged him to stop doing it, to stop misbehaving and let her deal with Mark, but that was never an option for Louis. Louis knew from a very young age that he would gladly take a bullet for his mum, so he could handle deflecting her husbands rage for her. It was never anything too terrible, a slap here, a kick there, a lot of yelling. Louis didn't mind, because after, when Mark was passed out on the couch, his mum would come in, and kiss all his sore spots, and sing him to sleep.

"I know you love the girls, Lou, you've told me about them before," Harry says softly, drawing Louis' attention back again.

"You asked me once why I was cynical, Harry. I was cynical before any of this other shit happened. I was cynical before I was even old enough to know anything about relationships. I could never, ever
understand how, if someone as amazing, as kind, as beautiful, as sweet, and loving, as my mother could be alone, and not have anyone to love her, how could love be real? If anyone deserved it, it was her. I never believed in love, because if she couldn't have it, how could I?"

"Lou-"

"It was my fault Mark left you know, just like it was my fault my dad left before that," Louis says, frowning slightly as he flops over onto his stomach, "I was kinda hyperactive, a bit of a shit really, not good like the girls. I fucked it up for Mum, Mark hated me and he left us, left the girls behind because of me too. I fucked it up for everybody."

Louis had always blamed himself for not finding some balance, between being bad to protect his mum, and just letting his hate for Mark show through all the time. As he got older his attitude towards Mark got worse, and they were constantly butting heads. He ruined it for his mum. She said she didn't blame him, but Louis had to look at the girls when they cried because they missed their dad, and look at his mum who was once again alone, and he knew it was his fault.

"You-

"After that I promised I'd be better. I got a job and I helped out Mum, helped her take care of the girls. Things were okay for a while," Louis says, wiggling closer to Harry, "and then she met Dan. But I fucked that up too. She met Dan and he was willing to take care of all of us, and my mum had another shot at being happy, but I fucked it up."

"How? I don't believe that," Harry says.

Louis lets out a cold laugh, that rings in his own ears, "because I was a faggot, Harry."

"Babe-" Harry gasps, and Louis can see his shock, even though his face is blurry.

"I was so good with Dan, he and I got on so well. We were finally fucking happy, all of us were happy. Dan and I even used to play footie together, he actually liked spending time with me. We weren't struggling for money, he let me quit my part time job because he made enough money to support us all. It was fan-fucking-tastic, Haz! And mum and the girls were so fucking happy, and I was too," Louis looks up at Harry, "And then I decided that it would be a good idea to come out."

"What happened then?" Harry asks gently, and Louis squints his eyes to try and focus on his face.

"Well nothing for the rest of the school year I suppose. I knew Dan wasn't happy. The footie games stopped that's for sure, the talking stopped, unless it was him muttering shit under his breath at me. I wasn't an idiot, I wasn't expecting them to throw me a coming out party, or anything," Louis says, flailing his arms around for emphasis, "figured it would take them some time to get used to. I was more worried about the people at school, didn't really think too much about what mum and Dan would think, to be honest."

I sure clued in when Stan beat the shit out of me, and Dan flat out told me I deserved it. It was pretty clear he hated me then. I should have known when mum watched me drag myself bleeding up to my room, without saying a word or asking if I was okay, that she wasn't very impressed either," Louis feels the twinge of hurt in his chest but he ignores it, forcing out a laugh instead, "It sucked yeah, and things were shit at home, but I just spent more time at Li's and Zayn's," Harry's face comes into focus for a second, and Louis rolls his eyes again, "oh please Harry, don't look all sad about that. Do you know how many kids deal with parents who aren't okay with them being gay? I was bloody lucky. Only half the school hated me, and I had two best friends who didn't give a shit that I was gay. Not to mention both of them had parents who took me in, and treated me way better than I deserved!
That's a lot more than most kids get, yeah?"

Louis doesn't want Harry to know how much it killed him. What it felt like to have his mum, who he would have killed or died for, just completely stop talking to him. He didn't let the Dan thing hurt as much, because he was used to the men in his mothers life hating him, but his mum wouldn't even look him in the eyes.

Harry sighs softly, and Louis sees his blurry frown, "then what?"

Louis shrugs, "I've told you some of this before, darling. After Liam beat the shit out of Stan, everyone mostly left me alone. I finished up school, just stayed away from home. When I was home neither of them talked to me, except Dan's colourful names for me, I suppose. It sucked that mum basically pretended I didn't exist, but I figured it would blow over; that they'd forgive me for being gay eventually, and things would be okay," Louis laughs, "then when school was over they told me I had three days to get my shit out of the house."

"What?" Harry stutters, sitting up with confusion on his face.

"Dan told me that I was required to get my queer faggot ass out of his house, and never to contact his family again. It's funny how quick they went from being my family to his," Louis laughs and shrugs again, the alcohol is still managing to smooth out the edges of the memory so it doesn't cut as bad, "Mum just stood behind him when he told me, just looked right through me like I wasn't even her son."

Louis shudders at the memory, because he can feel exactly how cold he felt that day. Crying and asking his mum if she was really going to let Dan do this. His cries had gone unanswered, and he'll never forget the look on her face, like she didn't even know who he was.

"What did you do?" Harry whispers.

Louis shrugs, "I was lucky, I had that trust fund my grandfather left me. Luckily I didn't come out until after he was dead, and the money was in my name, or I definitely wouldn't have seen a cent of that. But anyway, I had the trust fund and a scholarship to uni. So I got my shit out of the house and I planned to come here, to London. Liam and Zayn decided to come with me," Louis says, fondness colouring his tone, "to this day I don't know why. Why they gave up everything to come with me, but they did. I was lucky again Harry, I had the two best friends in the world, I had enough money to get by, I got to come to school."

He remembers the day Liam and Zayn helped him get everything out of the house. He wasn't allowed to take the furniture, but they helped pack up his clothes when Louis was simultaneously too sad, and angry, and numb, to do it. He still remembers the way Liam told his mum that she was the scum of the earth for letting Dan do this to her son, before they left. Zayn had to lead Louis out, and then go back to drag Liam out.

"But your mum just let him kick you out like that?" Harry asks angrily, "that isn't right."

"Harry what the fuck do you expect?" Louis snaps, getting frustrated at him for being so naive, "she was on her third fucking husband, after I ruined the first two for her! If I hadn't come along her and my dad could have stayed together, maybe until they were older, and ready for a kid. If it wasn't for me she could have been happy with Mark, the girls wouldn't have lost their dad. She had to choose between Dan or I, I could never blame her for choosing him! And you think I'm the first person in the world to be kicked out for being gay?"

"That doesn't make it right," Harry protests.
"Yeah, well I'm not going to deny I was angry. I came with the boys here and I partied it away," Louis chuckles, "that's what I meant when I told you I spent those two years drunk, and keeping myself busy with Max, and Hunter, and Mitchell. It was fine. Everything was fine."

Everything wasn't fine. Louis remembers hating himself even then. He remembers how much it killed him. But that was easier, so much easier to blame Dan. He was furious, and hurt, and let down, but he could never blame his mum. He hated Dan for doing that, for making her choose, but he never blamed her for choosing Dan. He knew his mum had loved him, and he understood that she just needed to keep Dan around. He couldn't blame her for that.

"Told myself it was Dan's fault. I told myself he was just homophobic, and hateful, and ignorant. I was angry, but I was just angry at him. I could never blame her. How could I blame her for being desperate to make her third marriage work, to keep things okay for the girls? I could never blame her for that. And I could handle the anger. I was pissed off, but I knew I wasn't the first person ever to be kicked out of a family for being gay. I knew I wasn't the first person to be disowned over their sexuality. Whatever, it was fine. It fucking sucked, and I was angry, and I hated him for it, but it was fine," Louis explains quietly, his brow furrowed but his eyes closed.

Harry's fingers are soft where they brush through his hair, "you didn't deserve that Lou. She should have told Dan to go fuck himself," he opens his eyes and realizes Harry has tears running down his cheeks, "she's your mum, she has to love you no matter what."

Louis tries to laugh, but it comes out as more of a pained sob, "why are you crying, Harry?" Louis scoffs, his voice cold and shaking, "we haven't even got to the best part of the story yet!"

Harry lets out something like a whimper, "it gets worse?"

Louis shrugs, "depends whose side you're looking at it from," he says dryly.

"Yours," Harry mumbles, "of course yours."

When Louis lets himself think back to that day, it feels like someone punches straight through his sternum, shattering the bone, and dislodging each rib. He feels a fist clench around his heart, like a vice, and he feels the ripping, the tearing, as his feebly beating heart is dragged out of his chest cavity. It hurts to breathe, it hurts to think, so he shuts it off. He remains silent, until he can get himself into some semblance of calm.

"Was right after the start of term," Louis says, "I came home and made myself a cup of tea, and sat down in the kitchen to sketch. I didn't notice that Liam was even home until he came out of the bathroom and sat back down in front of his laptop in the living room. I was going to say hi but then he started talking, and I realized he was on a Skype call with his mum. He always does that, just leaves Skype running when he's talking to her, instead of calling her back after he uses the loo. I don't know why he does that, poor Karen just has to stare at the back of the sofa while he goes off for a wee, or a cuppa, or whatever."

"Karen is his mum's name?" Harry sniffs, and Louis is brought back to focus.

Louis nods, "I stayed silent in the kitchen because Li had been worried about me, and so by extension Karen had been worried about me, because she had taken me in as her own. I didn't want to deal with her fawning over me, being all worried. So I didn't tell him I was home, I just kept sketching while they chattered on."

Louis can feel the alcohol slowly wearing off and he kind of wishes he could have a few more shots. It hurts, so fucking much, but he knows he's started now, and it's too late to stop. Harry looks like he
wants to scream, and Louis almost laughs through his drunken haze, because Harry is just so fucking empathetic.

"And then what happened?"

"And then I heard my mum's name. Karen said that she had a run in with Jo, and of course my fucking ears perked up while Karen told Li the story. Karen had heard that they had divorced, that Dan had moved out, and she said she hadn't believed it, but then she drove by mum's house and there were moving trucks outside. I could tell Karen was getting upset as she was telling Li the story. I didn't know anything about them divorcing, and I knew Liam didn't either. So Karen tells him how she stopped, and stormed out of her car because she saw mum in the front yard directing the movers. She told Liam she hadn't talked to mum since last time when Patricia and her had that argument with mum at the grocery store," Louis sighs.

"Who is Patricia?" Harry asks softly.

"Zayn's mum. The three of our mum's used to be best friends, but after Dan kicked me out they- they're um- really protective of me. I guess they were together, and they had seen my mum at the grocery store one day after the boys and I had moved here. I guess they just lost it on her, for letting Dan kick me out," Louis says softly, "Anyway. So she told Liam about how she stormed over to my mum on her lawn, and demanded to know if it was true that they had divorced. They had," Louis takes in a shaky breath and rubs at his eyes, "And it was so fucking stupid, because I remember sitting in the kitchen, and for a second I thought about going home. I thought maybe with Dan gone, she would let me back in," Louis lets out a laugh, but he knows he isn't going to be able to hold in his tears much longer, "apparently Karen thought the same thing.

Karen said she had asked mum if that meant she was going to apologize to me, for turning me away. Liam had asked what her response had been. I could hear Karen crying then, and I knew. Apparently my mum's exact words were 'why the fuck would I want that disgusting faggot in my house.' Turns out it wasn't just Dan who wanted me gone. I remember Liam hollering 'she said what!' and throwing something at wall. He gets his temper from his mum so I remember hearing her saying she almost slapped my mum, right then and there. I listened to the rest, the rest of the things my mum had said about me. How I wasn't her son, and how she didn't give a shit what happened to me, how she was taking the girls away, and how she hoped she never had to see me, that queer, again. And I remember how angry Li and Karen were, on my behalf, but I don't remember being angry anymore, which was a change, because I was so fucking mad before," Louis is glad his face is hidden because it's wet, "And I didn't know what to do so I just left."

“Oh baby,” Harry breathes, and Louis can hear the tears in his voice.

It's worse when he hears the pain in Harry's voice. The pain that is there because he feels so much for Louis. He wants to snuggle in with Harry, and forget it ever happened, but he can't. He can't because his skin is crawling, and talking about that day is turning up the volume on the voices in his head, screaming that he doesn't deserve anything. That he doesn't deserve Harry's fingers carding through his hair, or the empathy in his voice.

“I just- I didn’t understand. Before it hurt me that she let Dan make me leave, and I knew she was mad at me. But I thought she was mad that me coming out had fucked things up with Dan. I had thought she just had to make me go, to hold onto Dan for her and the girls. It never even crossed my mind that- I’m a fucking idiot but- I never thought she actually- never thought she hated me for being gay,” Louis can hardly talk through the tears.

“She shouldn’t have Louis, that’s so wrong. She isn’t a good person,” Harry says shakily.
“Don’t say that!” Louis snaps, “you don’t fucking know her! She isn’t the fucking problem, Harry! I am! I was a shit son! I fucking drove away everyone who ever loved her just by existing. I ruined her fucking life! Mark probably fucking knew I was gay, that’s probably another reason he hated me so much. I was such a bloody fairy even back then, fucking prancing around, being so fucking camp! No wonder he left! And then Dan. Now I can't even just blame him for kicking me out, when I know it was actually my Mum. Because she saw what I was, what I am. How can I blame her for hating me for that! I lost my dad, I lost my stepdads, I lost my sisters, and I lost her, the one person I ever thought loved me, because I’m gay!”

That conversation Karen had with his mum had obliterated Louis. It had felt like somebody shoved a grenade down his throat, and he exploded from the inside out. He didn't know who he was anymore, he didn't know what was going on. He had loved his mum with everything he had, and even when she kicked him out, he had genuinely believed that she did love him. But she hadn't. He made her hate him, by being gay. He realized then that he had no fucking clue what love was, and if it even existed he definitely didn't deserve it, would never have it.

“Louis that’s so wrong! She is so wrong for treating you that way because of your sexuality! There is nothing wrong with being gay!”

“There is!” Louis bellows.

“Why because some fucking bible, that god didn’t even write says so?” Harry asks.

“It has nothing to do with that, Harry! She wasn’t even slightly religious! It wasn’t about God, it wasn’t about heaven or hell, she just fucking- she just fucking hates me for it! And I cant fucking blame her, because me being gay has ruined everything!”

“You being gay hasn’t ruined anything! You being born into a family of homophobic, ignorant, horrible people is the only reason those things have happened to you! There is nothing wrong with being gay!”

“How can you fucking say that to me when I lost everything I ever cared about just because I like dick? The one thing I cant change about myself cost me everything!”

“Louis their closed mindedness and hatefulness cost you everything, and you’re better off without people like that!”

Louis’ skin is too tight, his chest is too small, he can feel the pain rushing through him like fire. He wants to scream, he wants to cry, he wants to find the tallest building and throw himself off of it. He wishes he never told Harry any of this. Now that he’s opened the compartment of his brain that he’s worked so hard to keep closed all this time, it's like it's all hitting him again.

“Better off?” Louis cries out, shoving away from Harry, “how can you fucking say I’m better off when I feel like this!”

“Is that why you’re doing this Louis? When Liam and Zayn asked if you were punishing yourself, is that what this is!? Is your anorexia you punishing yourself for being- because you’re gay!?” Harry’s voice is shaking, and he’s barely holding back a sob.

Harry’s statement is like the hammer hitting the nail right on the head, and driving the nail right into Louis heart. He’s never told anyone this. Liam chased after him that night when he heard Louis leaving the flat, but Zayn had been borrowing Liam’s car, and Louis drove away leaving Liam on the curb. That was the night he found the random parkade.
He had sat there for hours, with his mother’s words festering inside his head. He could hear her voice, like venom, disintegrating all of the stitches he’d carefully placed in his heart, to hold himself together after being shunned and sent away. He had taken two years to try and mend himself, to lick his wounds, and numb them with alcohol. Only to find out that it wasn’t as simple as a homophobic step dad and a desperate mother.

Only to find out that there was something fundamentally wrong with him in his core. Something about him so terrible, and so disgusting, that even his own mother couldn’t love him anymore. Not even just couldn’t love him, but couldn’t fucking stand him. She hated him with everything inside of her.

The memory of those hours he spent, sitting on the ledge of that parkade, is burned into his mind. He will never be able to forget that night, because that was the night he realized he didn’t want to be alive anymore. The night he realized that he didn’t deserve to be alive. Nobody would ever love him, no matter how hard he tried, nothing could make him good enough. He was detrimentally flawed, ruined by something deep inside him that he couldn't control. He watched everything he had ever believed disappear, washed away by the pouring rain, and his mother’s words.

He wished he could go back, never breathe a word about fancying guys, he could act normal, flirt with girls, not be a fag. He could still be his mum’s son, he could still have the girls, he could still have a family. He could still have love.

He had tried for a moment, to tell himself his mum was homophobic, and that he couldn’t change, and that it was her fault for being hateful. Except he knew it wasn’t. His mum had always been so loving, so tender, so kind to him. She had loved him once upon a time, Louis knew it. Except she couldn't after she knew he was gay. That wasn't her fault, it was his.

Somehow Liam had found him there, and Louis had just acted angry, like he was mad at her for hating him. Well it was more like Liam acted angry and promised Louis she was the scum of the earth, and that he was so much better than that, and Louis pretended to agree. And then he pretended to be okay. And then he went home. And then he spent the night thinking of the best way to kill himself.

Looking back now he tries to tell himself he shouldn't have been suicidal over his mum calling him a faggot, but she was everything to him. It destroyed him at the core, knowing that she would never again call him her son, never again tell him she loved him. He had felt so pathetic that he had been holding out hope for two years, hoping she'd give him a chance to come home again eventually. She hates him, and he doesn't know who he is if his own mother can't even love him.

He had spent the weekend in his bedroom, begging Liam and Zayn to give him space. That was the first seventy two hours Louis ever went without eating. He hadn't done it on purpose, he had just been too busy sinking into the blackness, too busy fantasizing about offing himself, to notice that he was hungry. He got out of bed for school on Monday, and he acted like he was fine, like he just needed a weekend to get over it. Except the suicidal thoughts didn't leave, and he also didn't eat. He broke up with Mitchell that night, he stopped talking to people in class, went to bed as soon as he got home, and he didn't eat.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," Louis says quietly, "it wasn't like I sat down and decided, I'm fat and my mummy doesn't love me, so I'm going to stop eating."

"So what happened, baby," Harry sobs, and Louis doesn't fight it when Harry gathers him up in his lap.

Louis is sobbing now, drunk and messy and breaking, it hurts, "have you ever gone two days
without eating Harry? Three, four, seven? Have you ever felt hunger pains, so strong that it feels like your stomach is ripping apart?" Louis draws in a sharp breath, remembering the feeling, "it's the best fucking feeling in the world."

"What?" Harry sobs.

"I wanted to die Harry. I was thinking about killing myself. But then I felt that tearing, that ache inside, and it was like- it was like the pain just wasn't in my head anymore, and I could feel it in my body, and it just felt so fucking good. I wanted to hurt myself Harry, and that hurt. Starving myself hurt. It hurt so good."

Harry is quiet for a moment, but his arms just tighten around Louis, "like how Gemma cut herself," he says, so quietly Louis almost doesn't hear.

Louis blanches at that, but he can't bring himself to deny it, "I just- it was so much easier to focus on how hungry I was, than to focus on…. on how much I wanted to be done."

Harry is full on crying against Louis' hair now, and Louis is crying silently too, "how did it turn into this- this hating your body. When did it stop being about the pain, and start being about how you looked?" Harry asks shakily.

Louis breathes out a shaky sigh, "I hadn't eaten for seven days, and I almost blacked out coming up to the stairs to the flat. So I ate some toast with butter, and I just felt so disgusting after. So I was just eating the tiniest things I could get away with to keep myself from passing out, because I needed to feel hungry. And then a couple weeks later a couple of people just said in passing that I looked like I had lost weight, that I looked good. And then I was thinking about all the things Hunter used to say to me, about my tummy, and my thighs. I realized that if they thought I looked better, it meant I didn't look good before. And I went back and looked at pictures.

And I fucking realized how repulsive I was. How fat I was. I had the hugest gut Harry, and I've always had a fat ass and huge thighs. I was disgusting," Louis shakes his head, "and it was just more motivation to keep not eating. But then Liam and Zayn noticed that they hadn't had a sit down meal with me in ages. So they planned a big family dinner. I told them I was on a diet so they wouldn't expect me to eat as much. They like argued with me and told me I was perfect the way I was and all that, but even when I ate less food I felt like shit after. So I started lying about eating huge meals before they came home, so I wouldn't have to eat in front of them, but so they also wouldn't worry about me dieting. And it was winter so they never noticed me losing weight, and I found a balance, so I wasn’t starving myself, but so I was keeping the weight off, and losing," Louis sniffs, and rubs at his eyes, "And then I met you."

Harry pulls back and his eyes are wet, and the deepest shade of green Louis' ever seen them, "I'm so, so sorry, Louis," he says shakily, and Louis can feel it in his voice.

"I'm sorry- I'm sorry that I can't be what you deserve," Louis says.

Harry pulls back so quickly that Louis almost flops over, "Louis, listen to me. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. You have no fucking idea how much it means to me that you finally told me all of this. But I need you to know, that everything you feel about yourself; all of that self hate, that voice inside your head telling you there is something wrong with you, it's all wrong. You are a beautiful person and I love you with all my heart, and we're going to get you through this," he says, not taking his eyes off of Louis', even though they're both still crying.

Louis wishes he could tell Harry, 'okay I believe you that things are going to be okay, and I love you too,' but he can't. He can't because things aren't going to be okay. Even if he puts on weight, even if
he acts happy, even if the boys and Harry never leave him, it's never going to stop the pain.

"I'm tired," he says quietly.

Harry nods, "okay sweetheart," he says, his voice infinitely soft, "you sleep as long as you need."

"Will you stay with me?" Louis asks sheepishly.

"Of course love," Harry says.

He's already out of his t-shirt because Louis is wearing it, so he just pulls his legs out of his skinny jeans and crawls into bed beside Louis in his boxers. Louis buries his face against Harry's chest, and lets Harry's arms envelop him. He doesn't know if Harry is even going to be here when he wakes up, he wouldn't blame Harry for leaving after he just confessed all his pathetic little secrets. He doesn't know where they go from here. He doesn't know if he's going to be able to pull himself together tomorrow, when all his thoughts keep drifting back to her, and how fucked up he is. He knows he's fucked. He's broken, and wrong, and he knows he's unlovable. Because if she couldn't love him, how could anyone else. He just misses her so fucking much, and he misses the girls, and he misses knowing who he was. Right now he kind of just wants to die.

Chapter End Notes

im sorry this chapter was such a monster, i took a poll on twitter and tumblr and everyone said to just post it all at once even though it was huge. fading will probably be 29 chaps plus an epilogue and from now on i will be updating every sunday at canadian mountain standard time. im pretty sure everyone knew who she was, i thought it was pretty obvious from the start, unfortunately in real life people develop eating disorders because of things a lot smaller than what louis went through, i hope you thought it was okay. thank you so much for being so kind and for all the comments and kudos. my tumblr is tothemoonmydear and my twitter is @tothemoonmydear, i post teasers on twitter every week along with update info. thanks for reading darlings
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

VERY IMPORTANT MESSAGE
I have recently had a lot of trouble with people taking Fading and posting it on Wattpad without my permission. I do not want it posted on there and it is really hard to be motivated to write when all I can think is "why am I writing this chapter I'm just giving people more to steal" Fading has been stolen a total of seven times. This is my message that I will be putting on tumblr too I DO NOT WANT FADING POSTED ON WATTPAD OR ANY OTHER SITE OTHER THAN MY TUMBLR ACCOUNT OR MY AO3 ACCOUNT YOU DO NOT HAVE MY PERMISSION TO POST FADING ANYWHERE AND IF YOU DO IT IS PLAGIARISM. Now everyone who reads fading is fully aware that I am not okay with my story being posted anywhere else I really hope I wont have to be paranoid about finding stolen versions everywhere anymore. thank you to all of the amazing and kind people who actually show respect and are so sweet to me about my writing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Louis wakes up the room is dark, and he is completely alone. He has that familiar cotton-and-shit taste in his mouth, and the pounding in his head clarifies that he's hungover. He stares up at the ceiling for a while, listening for sounds in the flat, but there are none. He tries to remember the last time he woke up alone in the middle of the night, and he can’t. Instead he remembers coming home from the bar. He remembers slurred words, painful confessions, and the look of horror and pity on Harry's handsome face. Suddenly it doesn't seem so confusing that he's waking up alone.

Panic slowly starts to claw at the back of his throat, but he pushes it down, because he doesn’t want to freak out if Harry’s just gone for a wee. The bed next to him is cold, there is no lingering body heat. He takes a deep breath, and when he pushes himself up onto his elbow his head spins. He grabs his phone first, and sees that it's half two in the morning.

He realizes they let him sleep straight through, even though it was barely evening when Harry picked him and Niall up from the pub. He wonders what Harry told Liam and Zayn, to explain why he wasn’t going to eat dinner. The room is only lit by the moon, coming through his sheer curtains, and casting shadows. Even so, he can clearly note the absence of Harry’s jeans, which were laying crumpled on the floor next to the bed when Louis fell asleep.

Louis tries to tell himself maybe Harry just woke up in the evening for dinner, and put them on to go eat with the boys. He must have also grabbed a new shirt from his drawer in Louis’ dresser, because Louis is still wearing his shirt. Except when Louis sits up more, and cranes his neck to look over at the hamper in the closet, the jeans aren’t hanging over the edge, like they would be any other time Harry took them off to come to bed.

He sits up fully and his head hurts more, but not as much as his chest hurts when he realizes Harry’s iPhone isn’t plugged in and waiting on the desk, like it would be any other night he slept over. Harry never takes his phone to the loo with him, because he dropped it in the toilet once somehow. That, coupled with the fact that Louis has already been awake longer than the average wee, rules out Harry having slipped to the bathroom.
Louis checks his phone again, but there is no text explaining that Harry had to go back to the dorm, for whatever reason. Louis lets himself fall back against the mattress, and he listens with all his might. He can hear Liam softly snoring in his room down the hall, he can even hear the music Zayn always leaves playing on the lowest volume while he sleeps. He doesn’t hear Harry in the kitchen making a cuppa, or in the shower, or watching TV in the living room, though it wouldn’t make sense for him to be doing any of those things at two thirty a.m. anyway. The walls of the flat are paper thin, but Louis doesn’t hear Harry, and that means he’s gone.

Cold washes over him, and suddenly he’s fighting back tears. Harry is gone. Harry has left him. He knew this was going to happen, but he never let himself think about what he would do when it actually did. He had thought he’d feel numb at first, he’d figured it would take a while to hit him. He at least assumed he’d have time to wrap his head around it first. He doesn’t though, it hits him instantaneously; a crushing weight pinning him to the mattress and making it hard to breathe.

Harry is gone. Louis has fucked it up. There is no other reason Harry wouldn’t be in bed with him right now. He would never leave without letting Louis know where he was going. He knows Harry isn’t the type of person to just leave and stop talking to him, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’s gone now. Louis knows that Harry will be infinitely kind about the breakup, because that’s just how Harry is. He’ll do it gently and maybe slowly, and he’ll do his best not to hurt Louis.

Louis knows that if he calls Harry in the morning, and asks where he went, Harry will make up some excuse, and then ask to meet up. When they meet up Harry will give him the talk. The ‘it’s not you, it’s me,’ the ‘I still want to be friends,’ the ‘you’ll be okay, it just wasn’t working out,’ talk. Except it isn’t Harry, it’s Louis who is fucked up, and they won’t be friends, and Louis won’t be okay.

He had told himself that saying ‘I told you so,’ when Harry left because he was too much to handle, would be better than saying ‘what if,’ when Harry left because Louis wasn’t trying hard enough. He was so, so wrong. The extra time he would have had with Harry before he got sick of him and left, would have been infinitely better than this. This waking up in the middle of the night with Harry gone without a word, this is hell on earth.

The worst part is, Louis hadn’t even realized how much of his heart he had given to Harry until it’s been ripped out of his chest, gone, along with the most beautiful boy he’s ever known. He had thought he was keeping himself safe, only giving Harry how much he could afford to lose. He kept so much of himself back, held onto pieces of him so tightly, so he would have something when Harry left. It wasn’t enough though, he gave too much.

Not even just the thing about his mum. He realizes now that the most insignificant parts of him have become Harry’s along the way. The way he likes his tea every morning, that’s Harry’s now; tainted by the way he’d wake Louis up with a cup and a kiss every day; morning tea will never be the same. The way Louis’ always escaped to his room, gotten cozy in his bed, and killed time studying, or just listening to music and sketching. That’s Harry’s now too, because it will never be the same, without their ankles tangled under the covers, without Harry humming along softly to the songs that played.

Harry has claimed the way Louis talks, the way he laughs; just by pointing out that he’s memorized every one of Louis’ tones, by stating how much he loves Louis’ laugh; those things are Harry’s now. He’s even taken over the way Louis dresses; because the minute they’re in the flat Louis is out of his clothes, and into something comfy of Harry’s. Even when Louis gets dressed for school in the mornings he knows every single one of Harry’s favourite outfits. He knows that Harry loves it when he wears cardigans, and keeps his fringe down, he knows Harry loves it when he wears that one baby blue shirt, with his glasses, he knows Harry loves it when he wears black, with his hair in a quiff.
Nothing of his own belongs to him anymore. Harry holds it all. Harry holds it all, and he's just walked away with it. Louis had thought he was being so careful, not letting himself get attached, not letting Harry fully in. He's in though, he's in so bloody deep that Louis can't even think about breathing if he knows Harry is gone. He can't think of getting out of bed without hearing that deep rough voice saying his name so softly. He can't think of driving to school without that ridiculously large hand to hold across the gearshift.

He needs the stupidly funny texts he receives throughout the day. He needs the patient eyes smiling at him during lunch. He needs the wide open arms, cuddling him up after a long day of class. He needs the warm body beside him, drawing nonsensical patterns on his back until he sleeps. He needs that boy with the easy smile, so bright it forces a matching one out of Louis. The boy with the gentle hands, and even softer lips. The boy who is so good, and so pure, and so kind, and lovely, to everyone he comes in contact with. The boy who will always try to see the good in everyone, the good in every situation.

Louis needs the kisses, he needs the gentle words, he needs the love. Louis needs the boy who always tried to see the good in him, the good that isn’t there. He had so much hope for Louis. That hopefulness in those beautiful green eyes was what drew Louis in, made Louis want to be better for Harry. Harry genuinely believed that Louis was a good person, a person worthy of his love and attention. Harry had tried his best to love Louis, and he had come so close, he had made Louis feel so cared for.

It's all fallen apart now though, because Harry has finally realized that Louis is impossible to love. He’s finally seen the nasty, broken part, inside of Louis. Just like Louis knew it would be; it was too much. Or maybe Louis isn’t enough. No matter how hard he tries, Harry will never be able to love that detrimentally twisted part of Louis. Nobody ever will.

Louis lays in his bed trying to tell himself that it’s better Harry realized it now, and left before he was holding everything Louis had to give. Except they’re already there. Harry is already holding every part of Louis, and he's going to walk away with it all when he tells Louis it's over. Louis knew this was going to happen, he tries to remind himself that he's been preparing for this day since the very first time Harry kissed him. He should be ready to let Harry leave by now, he's already been lucky enough to have had Harry so much longer than he deserves.

He didn't deserve Harry as a friend, when they were just hanging out in the studio at the beginning. He didn't deserve to have Harry when their relationship was easy, and Harry was just patient and sweet and nice to him. He sure as hell hasn't deserved Harry all this time, while he's been trying so hard to help Louis with this eating thing he has, while he's stuck around through Louis being an absolute mess. It makes sense that everything is coming to an end now.

Louis' past, is too big, and too ugly, and Louis is too ugly, too. Not just on the outside, but on the inside as well. He isn't whole, he's missing so many pieces; and the ones that he has left are repulsive, and wrong, and flawed. Harry’s finally seen that. Louis regrets so much being the one to open his mouth and lay all his shit out on the table, because it was the final straw for Harry. He knows that even if he hadn't though, Harry would have seen it all on his own eventually. He would have seen that Louis is fucked up beyond repair.

Either way, Harry has reached his limit, and he's done now. He tried his best to help Louis, to take care of him, to make him happy, just like he promised on that ice rink all those months ago. He tried; but just like Louis had said, he isn't fixable, and Harry sees that now. So tomorrow they'll have the awkward conversation, with Harry breaking it off, and then Harry will be gone from Louis' life forever. He knows though, that somewhere along the way Harry became the only thing holding him together, and he doesn't know what he's going to do when he's gone.
He'll let him go though, of course he'll let him go. He could never ask Harry to stay, he could never make Harry feel bad for leaving. He knows Harry is inherently kind, and it might even hurt him to end things with Louis a little, if only because he feels guilty because Louis is so pathetic. Louis will let Harry go, and he will genuinely wish for all the amazing things in the world to happen to him, because Harry is an angel for putting up with him so long, and he deserves the world. Louis wishes so badly that he could be enough for Harry, but he can't, so he'll let Harry go.

Louis thinks maybe he should be crying, but he isn't. He feels like he's being crushed, and ripped apart at the seams, at the same time. He lays in bed staring at the ceiling, trying to remember how to breathe. He remembers struggling to breathe before Harry came along. He'd be sitting in the studio, and the hunger pains wouldn't be enough to keep the thoughts at bay. His chest would get tight and he'd have to hold onto the cutting table for dear life, and try to breathe. Sometimes it feels like he's got a punctured lung, like her words stabbed a hole in between his ribs, and now, no matter how deep he breathes there is never enough air, he can never hold it in long enough.

Harry helped him breathe. Harry took away the pain long enough for Louis to feel happy. Now Harry is gone, and Louis thinks maybe losing Harry is going to feel like withdrawal from morphine. Louis can feel a twisting in his stomach, bile rising up the back of his throat. He doesn't know if it's from all the calories he ate at the pub, or all the alcohol in his gut, or because he's losing the best thing that has ever happened to him, but Louis feels like he's going to vomit.

He pushes himself up from the bed, and tries to untangle himself from the blankets. The entire room spins and he has to sit for a moment, to steady himself. The pounding in his head is only relieved when he presses the heels of his hands hard against his eyes. He sits for a moment, with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, trying to push down the feeling of sick rising up the back of his throat.

When he finally feels like he can stand he finds his feet, his knees wobbling only a little. He takes one last glance around the room, looking for any sign of Harry, but there isn't one. When he leaves his room he goes straight down the hall to the living room, even though he knows better than to hope Harry has just gone to sleep on the couch or something. The living room is dark, and the couch is completely unoccupied. At the same time as his heart sinks, the vomit decides to start crawling up his throat. Harry is gone.

He stumbles back towards the bathroom, fully ready to expel the contents of his stomach, when he notices the door is closed. He hesitates, because nobody in the flat ever closes the bathroom after they've left. He's about to open the door when he hears a sniffle. His heart starts racing because.....Harry. There is another sniffle, and something like a shaky murmur, and he knows it's Harry. He's frozen in place.

"I know, Gems," he says, his voice so small it's no wonder Louis didn't hear him before, "his own fucking mum. I don't even know- like I don't even know what I would do if mum made a rude comment, let alone kicked me out. Even Robin- if Robin was mean it would hurt so much. But mum? That would fucking shatter me, it's no fucking wonder he's like this."

Louis stands in stunned silence as he listens to what Harry's saying, obviously on the phone with his sister. He rests his back on the wall next to the door, and lets himself sink silently the floor. He doesn't know what this means, that Harry hasn't left the flat yet, maybe Harry is talking to Gemma about leaving.

"He put up with so much shit at school. One of his best friends beat the living shit out of him, and he went home and had his step dad tell him he deserved it, and his mum left him alone in his bedroom. Nobody took him to the hospital until Liam and Zayn went to check on him the next fucking day. He
hadn't showed up to school, because he was passed out in his bed, bleeding, with a concussion, and broken ribs," Louis can hear the tears in Harry's voice, and that alone knots a lump in his throat, "The people that were supposed to be protecting him, and loving him, were beating him down, and tearing him apart, and then they just threw him out. How do you do that to your son?"

Louis scrubs at his face, he doesn't want to think about this shit again. He doesn't want to hear it repeated back in Harry's beautiful voice. Harry hasn't left yet though, and even if they're separated by a door, and Harry is just pitying Louis, at least he's here. His chest aches as he listens.

"I know, me too," Harry says, to whatever Gemma must have said on the other line, "for two years he had to act like he was fine, that he was okay on his own, and that he wasn't hurt. And then he fucking finds out his mum said those things? That she wanted him out! I can't even- I can't think about mum ever doing that to me, it makes me sick to my stomach, and he's been living with that all this fucking time."

Harry is struggling to keep his voice quiet, the more upset he gets. Louis is struggling not to cry, because he can't handle the sadness in Harry's voice. He draws his knees up to his chest and rests his forehead on them, his hands locked tight around his ankles.

"Exactly. And it must be even worse because it's like- it's not even about religion. He has absolutely no idea why his own mum hates him so much for being gay, why she thinks it's so wrong to be gay. But it's fucking engraved in him now. It's been burned into him so deep how wrong it is, how wrong he is," Harry's voice cracks, "he hates himself for it. There are so many people in the world who will instantly hate us for being gay, and he's sitting there, hating himself, every minute of the day."

His voice breaks on the end, and he muffles a sob. He sniffls as Gemma talks. Louis can just barely hear the tinny hum of her voice, and he realizes Harry must be sitting with his back against the door. There is no light seeping through the crack under the door, so he must be sitting in there in the dark. Louis can't stand it.

"He kept saying how wrong he was, how it was his fault she hated him. It fucking kills me to hear him say that. I can't fucking fathom a universe where Louis could deserve any of this. He deserves the fucking world Gems," Harry is crying hard now, and tears are stuck in Louis' throat, "he deserves to be reminded every second of every day how amazing he is. But every time I try to remind him, try to tell him, he doesn't believe me. All he can see is how awful he is, how wrong he is. Because of her."

Louis is completely torn. Even now the voice in his head is telling him Harry is about to leave. He'll realize that Louis can never love him properly, that Louis is unlovable, and he'll leave. He doesn't understand why Gemma hasn't told Harry to cut his losses and run yet. She will soon though, Louis is sure.

"I don't know, Gem. I don't know what to do anymore. I don't know how to help him with this. He's eating now at least, but like, now I know all the shit thats in his head all the time. He hates himself so much that he was starving himself. Like I don't know- I don't know how to help him," Harry sounds so shattered, Louis' tears slip past his eyelashes and trail down his cheeks, "he thinks I'm going to leave him. He'll probably wake up in the morning, freaking out, because he'll think now that he's told me I'm going to leave him."

Louis frowns, and swipes away his tears with shaking hands. His head kind of feels like it's under water. He's having trouble piecing together the one sided conversation. He's just waiting for the world to drop. He's waiting for Harry to say he's leaving.
"Because he thinks everyone is going to leave him. Fuck, the whole conversation started because he thinks Liam, and Zayn, the two people in this world, besides me, who love him with all their hearts, are going to leave him too. He doesn't realize that they'll be there until the day he dies, and I'll be here until the day he pushes me away. And even then like- I don't know Gemma, I've never- I've never loved anyone like this before. I just- I want to be with him forever," Harry whispers, his voice shaking.

The words bounce around in Louis' head, but they're not sticking. They don't make sense. He'd never push Harry away intentionally; he doesn't deserve a single minute with Harry, he's not going to cut his time with him short. He can't comprehend that one word, it just doesn't make sense to him. Forever. Why the fuck would Harry want forever with him.

"Even if he doesn't say it Gemma- I know he can't say it- but he cares. I know he cares about me. I don't need him to tell me he loves me. I don't need those three words. He- he looks at me like I matter. Like I mean something. I can see it in his eyes. He- he cares about me. It's enough that I get to have him. That he's in my life. He makes me so Happy. And even if he can't love me back, I love him with everything I've got, so I'm not letting him go. I just- I wish I knew how I could help him stop hating himself."

Louis doesn't understand. Harry isn't leaving. He isn't done with Louis. He's locked himself in the bathroom to talk to his sister, because he's said a hundred times before that Gemma is the person he relies on. He isn't asking her for advice on how to let Louis down gently, he isn't complaining about how fucked up Louis is. He's talking to his big sister about how much he is hurting, because Louis is hurting. Because he cares about Louis. He cares about Louis, and he isn't freaked out or put off.

"I know- I know I can't fix all that hurt. He won't go. I know he wont. When we first found out we asked him to go to treatment and he said no. He doesn't need to go to rehab anymore I don't think-like he's been keeping food down. And now I know it's not- it's not all about the food, it's about what's hurting him inside," Harry pauses, and Louis' mouth goes dry, "like a psychologist? I don't think he'll- did yours help you after rehab?" he murmurs, and she says something, "I don't think he'll agree to see anyone. Even just a psychologist, without going to rehab, I don't think he will."

The sadness in Harry's voice makes Louis' breath catch. Like he wants nothing more than for Louis to get help, but Louis is denying him that. Louis suddenly feels like he's letting Harry down. Harry has given him so many chances. Over and over again he's proven that he isn't good enough for Harry, but here Harry is, accepting Louis over and over, and saying he loves him anyway. Harry isn't leaving, but he has this wish, this hope, that Louis will get some kind of help. He only wants Louis to get help because he wants Louis to be happy.

Louis thinks back to that day in the studio. The day Harry asked for a chance. A chance to make Louis happy. Harry's words bounce around in Louis' head as he sits there, 'you're still beautiful when you're not smiling.' He hadn't had a clue what Harry meant by that at the time. He thinks maybe he gets it now. Harry has stuck around while Louis' kept secrets from him, while Louis has lied to him, while Louis has been a complete and utter mess, while Louis has treated him like shit.

He didn't want to be with Louis to try and fix him and leave, because he doesn't even think he'll be able to help Louis right now. He's still here, even though Louis is utterly fucked. He's talking about trying to get Louis to accept help with his sister, but he's said he isn't going to leave even if Louis won't accept the help.

"I don't know, Gems. I don't know. I'll ask him I just- I don't think he'll say yes. I just can't handle- I can't fucking stand him hating himself," Harry says softly, before a pause, "listen, I'm so sorry for calling you so late. You must be exhausted, I'm such a fucking twat. I just- he's slept all night and
after the boys went to bed I couldn't sleep. Thinking about everything."

Not thinking about leaving Louis, not making an escape plan. Louis can hardly believe that, can hardly swallow that Harry isn't going to end things with him tomorrow. None of it makes sense.

"I love you. I don't know what I'd do without you," Harry murmurs, before she says something, "in all the mess I forgot to tell you he's agreed to come stay with us for a while on hols- I know, I'm excited too," his voice is momentarily soft and happy, despite the roughness of his voice from crying.

Louis sniffles and wipes his cheeks. He just wants to be good enough for Harry. He wants to deserve the happiness in Harry's voice.

"Love you too, get some sleep, I'm sorry for- okay, love you too- thanks," Harry says and Louis hears the lock sound of Harry's iPhone.

He doesn't know if he should stand up and go back to bed, and pretend he didn't hear, or if he should knock on the door and say something. He doesn't know what he'd say if he did. I'm sorry I'm such a shit boyfriend. I'm sorry that I'm so overwhelming that you have to lock yourself in the bathroom and call your sister. I would do anything to keep you. Please don't leave me. He knows he can't say any of those things though, so he goes to push himself up from the floor.

He's thinking about waiting up in bed for Harry, and not telling him he heard the conversation. He wants to tell Harry how perfect he is. He wants to press himself as close to Harry as he can, and just hope he's still there in the morning. He's about to go to the bedroom, when he hears a sob. The sound is so strangled, like Harry is trying his best to muffle it, and it's a thousand times more heartbreaking because of that.

He hears Harry take in a shuddery breath on the other side of the door, and then hears another burst of stifled sobs, followed by a sniffle. Louis' heart aches in his chest, because he fucking caused that. He pushes himself up and presses his palm to the door, tapping his knuckles softly.

"Baby it's me, open the door," he says softly.

Harry's breath hitches, he lets out a loud sniff, and clears his throat, "okay," he says meekly.

He hears Harry pick himself up off the floor and the light flicks on, seeping under the crack in the door. Slowly the door creaks open, and Louis is met with a snotty, puffy eyed, Harry, tear tracks still lining his cheeks. He looks down at Louis with a nervous expression. Louis doesn't remember that he's been crying too, until Harry is reaching out and thumbing the tears off his cheeks. Louis bites his lip and reaches for Harry's cheeks, wiping them too.

"Did you hear."

"Yeah, some of it," Louis replies.

Louis rushes forward and presses himself close to Harry, winding his arms around his waist and burying his face against his bare chest. He's wearing his jeans, which explains why they weren't in the hamper. He runs his hands up and down Harry's spine, just trying to soothe him. Harry's crying again, curled over to press his face against Louis' neck, his shoulders shaking as he sobs.

"Why are you crying love?" Louis asks softly.

Harry Chokes out something like a cough, "because I'm sick to my stomach about what you've been going through, Louis," he cries, "and I don't know how to fix it!"
"Shh, it's not your job to fix it, babe," he says softly.

"I want you to be happy," Harry sobs, "you deserve to be happy."

"I am. When I'm with you I am. You make me happy," Louis insists.

"I don't want you to hate yourself anymore! Because I love you so fucking much, and it fucking kills me that you hate the person that I love the most!"

Harry I-" Louis shakes his head, and runs his fingers through the curls at the nape of Harry's neck, "I don't know how to fix that, I'm sorry- but- but it isn't your job either."

Harry whimper and holds Louis impossibly closer, his knees bent to bring him even closer to Louis' level. Louis just strokes up and down his back, holding him tightly. He doesn't know how to respond to Harry hurting this much over him hurting. His brain is warring with itself, half telling him it shows how much Harry cares, the other half telling him he's a horrible person for letting this amazing, caring boy be hurt by his shit life.

"Louis I'm going to ask you for something, and please just think about it before you say no right away, okay?" Harry mumbles, not moving his mouth away from Louis' neck.

"Okay Haz, ask whatever, just please stop crying," Louis says, pushing Harry back a little, just enough to wipe under his eyes, before letting him curl around him again.

"I want you to consider- would you please think about maybe- like talking to someone? Someone besides me, or the boys. Someone professional? Someone who can help you feel better, who can help you see how good you are, how amazing you are? Just- somebody other than us needs to tell you that this isn't your fault, so that you'll believe it. I don't mean, like, rehab because you're eating okay now, but maybe a psychologist? Just someone you could meet with once a week or something? Just to talk- just to help you. Please. My sister saw a psychologist after she got out of rehab and she says it helped so much. Just- before you say no just please think about it. You could just go to an appointment once a week, just to try it, and if it doesn't seem like it's helping you can stop. Just please think about it?" Harry rambles on, his face hidden against Louis' skin, sounding hesitant and unsure.

Louis barely has to turn the words around for a second before he's nodding, "okay," he says.

Harry breathes the longest sigh of relief Louis has ever heard, "thank you," he murmurs, "take all the time you need to think about it, just please really consider it. I promise I'll do all the work, I'll find you a doctor who will be good, who can really help-"

"No Harry, I'm saying okay, I'll see a psychologist," Louis breathes, voice shaking a little.

He feels Harry freeze in his arms, and then slowly he pulls back. His cheeks are as red as his eyes, and his hair is messed up from rubbing against Louis. There is a look of pure disbelief on his face and his eyes are so wide, and so hopeful, like Louis' seen them a million times before.

"What?" he asks quietly.

"I'm saying I'll see a psychologist. But please not a psychiatrist, those are the ones who give you meds right? I don't want to go on medication. But I'll talk to someone, I'll see someone," he says slowly, trying not to let himself second guess it.

"You will?" Harry almost cries, "really?"
Louis nods, swallowing past the lump in his throat, "when I- when I woke up I thought you had left me. Left me because of what I told you. And I- I just don't want you to leave me," Louis mumbles, and he can't help the tears that slip past his lashes, "I just- I'm tired of making you worry about me. I'm putting all my burdens on you, and I never want to see you crying over my shit again and just- I know how fucking lucky I am to have you and I don't- I don't want to ruin it."

Louis is full on crying by the time he finishes, because how he felt when he thought Harry was gone is rushing back to him. He needs Harry. He can't let Harry go. And if that means going to a psychologist he'll do it without question. He wants to be better for Harry. He wants to deserve Harry. He wants to be good enough for Harry. Harry lets out a whimper and scoops Louis up into his arms, before sliding down the wall beside the door to the floor. Louis doesn't protest to being cradled in Harry's lap like a baby, because he thought he had lost this, and he would crawl under Harry's skin just to be closer, if it were possible.

"Listen to me Louis, please. I would never, ever leave you. It kills me that you thought that even for a moment. I just couldn't sleep and I needed to talk to Gemma, because I'm worried about you. I would never leave you for opening up to me, and I will never leave you, whether you see a psychologist or not. I worry about you, I would worry about you if you had a perfect life, and I will always worry about you, because I love you. I always want you to be the happiest you can be, and I never want to see you hurting. You aren't putting your burdens on me. I am your boyfriend, we are in this together, and I would take every single burden off of you if I could. You aren't alone anymore Lou, I'm here for you, because I want to be, and nothing is going to change that. You opening up to me means the world. I'm the lucky one Louis, I thank my lucky stars every day that you're in my life, and I am going to stay right here as long as you'll let me," Harry says, and Louis hates himself for whimpering, but he's trying so hard to believe what Harry is saying, "but- serious baby, if you- if you really mean it we'll find you the best doctor, someone who can help. Please- please tell me you mean it?"

Louis chokes back a sob and nods, "I mean it Harry. Fuck I'm just- I'm so fucking tired of feeling like this all the time. It's exhausting. I just want to feel okay."

Harry makes a strangled noise and pulls Louis in tighter, "I love you, I fucking love you so much, and it's going to be okay, you're going to feel okay. You're going to be happy. We're going to get you help. I love you so, so much."

Harry carries him to the bedroom, and they go to bed tangled up tighter than ever. Louis falls asleep thinking about what it would be like to be able to tell Harry that he loves him.

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When Louis steps out of the building, he sees Harry straight away. He’s parked a little crookedly in one of the stalls, with his windows down and music playing softly. He's reading a book, slouched in the seat. Louis had told him to go meet Niall for lunch or something, to kill time. He had insisted Harry didn’t have to wait, but Louis doubts he listened. As he gets closer to the truck he notices that the book is upside down, which means Harry has been sitting in the lot for a while, probably stressing, and pretending to read to look busy. Louis walks over to the passenger side, and opens the door to climb into the truck.

“Enjoying your novel?” he asks, as Harry chucks the book over his shoulder into the back seat.
“Hmm? Yeah... erm no, wasn't really focusing,” he admits slowly.

“How long have you been waiting?” Louis asks.

“Since I dropped you off,” Harry says, “I was worried you’d want to leave early or something; wanted to be here if you needed.”

“Thanks love,” Louis says quietly, bringing his knees up to his chest on the seat, and taking a moment to breathe.

“How did it go, baby?” Harry asks, taking Louis’ hand in his.

Louis sighs, “dunno, it was pretty weird. We didn’t really discuss anything. He just asked me a ton of questions, but like, really randomly. Like first he made me tell him about what had... well basically I told him the compressed version of what I told you. And he wrote it all down. Then he’d ask me a question about mum, then jump to something about how I’m doing in school. Then he’d switch to my eating habits, then back to my past, then ask something else random. I don’t know, it was weird.”

“Have you been crying?” Harry asks softly, his thumb brushing softly under Louis’ eye.

“A little,” Louis frowns, “still weird to say it all out loud.”

Harry nods, “so you- er you told him everything, and answered all his questions?” Harry asks.

Louis nods, “I figured I might as well, it’s his job, right? And I promised you and the boys,” he says quietly, “don’t really think I feel any better though...” he admits hesitantly.

“No love, of course not. Not right away. And I bet he was just asking questions so randomly to get the most honest answers, without giving you a chance to think about the best way to reply. But the next sessions won’t be like that, and of course it’s going to take time before it starts helping,” Harry says gently.

“Has he gone over the treatment plan with you or something?” Louis asks, playing with Harry’s fingers absentmindedly.

Harry looks down at their intertwined hands, “when I talked to him I just wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to do anything too extreme. I knew this was kind of a one shot thing, and if you had a bad experience you weren’t going to want to go back. He just gave me like a brief idea of how he works,” he explains.

Louis had spoken to the psychologist on the phone once before he was set to come in for his first appointment. Dr. Chen had just introduced himself, and discussed the process for starting treatment. He had to get Louis’ confirmation that he wanted the appointment, because up until then he’d only spoken to Harry, who could only do so much because of confidentiality.

As the doctor explained about the way the office worked, Louis had been thinking about Harry. It hadn’t taken much thought to decide that he wanted Harry to have full access to his file. The doctor had been pleased, explaining that patients usually did better when they had someone at home for him to contact to discuss progress, and to explain how to help the patient outside his office.

When Harry had heard Louis telling the doctor that he was to be put on the file, his eyes had welled up, like Louis was giving him some huge honour. It was an obvious choice for Louis. Harry had worked so hard, calling psychologists, reading reviews online; he was so determined to find the absolute best doctor for Louis. Harry cares more about Louis’ well-being than Louis does, so Louis
figures if anyone should know what’s going on, Harry should.

Louis doesn’t know how he feels about Dr. Chen’s techniques yet, after only one slightly confusing session; but he had been waiting to gauge his first real impression of the doctor, and it had been a good one. Dr. Chen is friendly, but not in a fake way, he’s straight forward, but not abrasive, and he isn’t cold. He remembers Harry vetoing two doctors because they sounded way too cold on the phone.

“Thank you, Harry,” Louis says.

Harry looks confused, “for what, babe?”

“For caring? For dealing with this stuff?” Louis replies, for sticking around, for trying to love me, he thinks.

“Louis, I’m so proud of you,” Harry says softly, “I’m so proud of you for accepting help.”

Harry reaches out, and cradles the back of Louis’ neck. He leans across the seat to press a kiss to Louis’ forehead. Louis leans into the touch, finally feeling his stress decrease after the session. When they pull back Louis can actually see the pride in Harry’s eyes.

“I would have been proud of you if you went to the appointment, but had to leave halfway through. Or if you went and refused to say a word, or answer any questions. At least you’d be taking the first step. But look at you; you went in there and you laid it all out on the table, and you answered questions. I can see how hard you’re trying and I can’t like- I can't explain how much that means to me, how proud I am of you.”

Louis’ cheeks are flushed by the time Harry closes his mouth. He smiles softly, and presses a kiss to each of Louis’ pink cheeks. Louis lets his eyes flutter shut, and he doesn’t open them even when he feels Harry’s forehead press to his.

“I just want- I want to be fixed,” Louis says quietly, “you’re telling me you’re proud of me and all I can think about is how if I wasn’t so pathetic in the first place I wouldn’t have to be doing this.”

This is a new thing for them; Louis saying how he feels, even without Harry asking. It was hard at first, it didn’t come easy, but Louis feels lighter because of it. It’s nice not to have to analyze everything he admits before he lets it out of his mouth. It’s nice to just share how he’s feeling, even though it’s usually bad stuff. Harry usually knows just what to say, and doesn’t treat him differently.

Harry makes a sad sound, but Louis doesn’t open his eyes, “Louis, you don’t need to be fixed. You’re not broken, you’re not defective, and you’re not pathetic. You’re hurt. You’ve been so, so hurt, and now you need a little help to heal. There is nothing wrong with that, you just need to heal okay, love?”

Louis nods slowly, trying so hard to believe Harry’s words. It’s hard though, when deep down he knows it isn’t true. He is broken, and he is defective, and he is pathetic. Maybe he can heal, but like a broken bone that isn’t set properly, the pain may go away, but he’ll always be twisted, deformed.

“Oh, okay,” he breathes, just relishing in being so close to Harry in the moment.

“I love you so much Louis,” Harry says quietly, his breath warm on Louis’ cheeks.

Louis has been wondering a lot lately what it would be like to finally be able to tell Harry he loves him. The words jump to his lips every time Harry says it, and sometimes even when he doesn’t. He can’t say them though, because he knows he’d regret it instantly. The doubt, and terror he’d feel after
saying that to Harry, would eat him alive. He can look at it objectively, he can love the way Harry takes care of him, he can love the way Harry makes him feel, he can love being with Harry. He can not love Harry, in the complete, all encompassing, unconditional way he knows he should.

He's told himself three million times that Harry loves him, that the look in his eyes is love, that the words he says are true, that he acts the way he does because he loves him. He's tried to believe it three million times too, but he just can't. Any time he tries his mind floods itself with all of the reasons it's impossible for Harry to love him. Floods with all the reasons it would be absolute suicide to love Harry.

"Can we go home?" he asks softly.

"Of course love, of course," Harry says, pulling back and pressing a soft kiss to Louis' lips.

Harry puts the car in reverse, and gets out of the parking lot. Louis opens his eyes, and reaches for his hand, pressing them together with the heels of their palms lined up. Harry curls his fingers up, easily overlapping the tips of Louis'. It's still ridiculous to Louis how big Harry's hands are.

"I love your hands," Louis says quietly.

Harry smiles that special little smile he always gets when Louis uses the word love to describe something about him. This is new for them too; Louis using the word as more than just a pet name. He might not be able to tell Harry he loves him, but he could list about a billion things that he loves about the boy. It's like each comment Louis makes, means the world to Harry. He gets all blushy, and smiley, and happy. Sometimes it's hard for Louis to say the things he thinks out loud, but it's worth it to see that look in Harry's eyes.

"I love yours too. I especially love them when they're in mine," Harry says, after a while of just biting back a smile.

Louis smiles softly, and watches Harry drive for a moment. If he's honest he's feeling completely drained from the session with Dr. Chen. Repeating the story felt like taking a stitch ripper to his heart again. It was a physical struggle to push the words out. He's tired, and he feels like shit, so he counts the freckles on the side of Harry's face to distract himself. He doesn't have a sprinkling of them, there are just little random ones, spread out. He's got a tiny bit of stubble, mostly above his lip, and a little along his jaw. He keeps it shaved all the time though, usually sweet talking Louis into doing it for him in the shower, because he always nicks himself when he does it himself. His eyelashes catch the sun, and Louis swears he's an angel. Harry smiles because he feels Louis' eyes on him, and then smiles even brighter when Louis leans over to kiss his cheek.

They get home and Harry makes them dinner, Louis sitting on the counter and watching. They eat alone, with their ankles hooked under the table. Louis has been trying his best not to think about the food anymore. It isn't that simple though, so he's thankful Harry found him a psychologist who has experience dealing with eating disorders, and will be helping him with that too. He doesn't remember when he finally started calling it an eating disorder, but he likes to think maybe it gives him a little bit more power over it, if he can admit to having it. He feels completely powerless to it most of the time, so he'll take any extra control he can get.

The boys get home and ask how the appointment was. Louis had asked if Harry was going to tell them about how much that Skype call affected him, if he'd tell them how Louis' been feeling all this time. Harry had said no, that the only reason he had told about Louis' anorexia was because he couldn't help Louis all on his own. Those secrets, the feelings that Louis trusted him with, he had promised to keep those to himself forever. Louis is thankful for that.
When they told Liam and Zayn that Louis would be seeing a psychologist they had both cried, Zayn clinging to him for dear life, and Liam spinning him around the room in a bear hug. Louis tells them his first session was okay, and thankful they drop it. Although they tell him about six times each how proud they are of him.

The four of them watch a bit of telly, and then Harry and Louis head to bed. Louis has been putting on weight, there is no denying it now. He can see it, he can feel it, and it's there. He carries it around with him, every minute of the day, and it feels like it's dragging him down, back into the black hole he came from. It's hard to focus on that though, when Harry is worshiping every inch of his skin. Louis can't even think straight when Harry is making him quiver, by opening him up with his tongue. His brain can process nothing but HarryHarryHarryyyyy when Harry is rocking into him steadily, hitting his spot every time. Louis is almost able to believe it when Harry whispers 'I love you' and 'you're beautiful' against his sweaty skin, as they lay tangled up after.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to all you wonderful people who read and dont steal and thank you for all the kudos and your amazing comments. from the beginning it has been extremely important to me to make this story as realistic as possible and from the beginning i knew that with all the trauma louis has in his past there is no way he could truly heal without some professional help. no matter how much harry loves him, or how much people love other people with eating disorders, it doesnt change how the person feels inside at the core level. Only a professional can help with that. I really hope anyone who is suffering from and ED will consider seeking help too. That being said I think fading will be 30 chapters plus an epilogue now because there is some more stuff I want to happen and I've got 3 more chaps planned out. thanks so so much for reading!! <3
"Alright, Louis, we've only got about twenty minutes left for today. I think today went well, what do you think?" Dr. Chen says, in his smooth warm voice.

Louis swallows a little thickly and nods, "okay, yeah. I think it went okay," he says.

"I'm going to ask you another question, and just answer with the first thing that comes to mind, okay?"

Louis nods, "alright," he says, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt.

"If you could go back to before you came out, and be straight, would you?" Dr. Chen asks slowly.

"Yes," Louis answers immediately, without hesitation, yes he would.

Dr. Chen nods, and marks something down in his notebook, "even though it would change the way things are now?"

Louis meets Dr. Chen's eyes, and nods again, "Especially because it would change things. I'd have my mum and my sisters," he says quietly.

"Even though it would mean you wouldn't be with Harry?"

For the first time Louis hesitates. He feels a twisting in his stomach when he thinks of those big green eyes, those soft lips on his, the way he makes Louis feel. Louis wants to change his answer, he wants to say Harry is worth it, he'd finally be with someone who deserves him, who is good enough for him," Louis replies, "I'd choose to be straight."

Dr. Chen hums, "why do you say that he'd find someone better? You're not good enough for him, you don't deserve him?"

"You're- you're not going to tell him any of this are you?" Louis frowns.

"Louis when you signed Harry onto your file it just meant that I will keep him updated on how you're progressing, and give him advice on how to help you keep recovering between appointments," he explains, "I'll never discuss specific details of what we talk about."

"Oh," Louis says, "okay."

"So why do you say that?"

"Because I'm not- he deserves so much better than me," Louis frowns.

It's felt fairly easy to talk to Dr. Chen so far. The last session they discussed the things that Louis wanted to work on. Number one had been being able to love Harry. Number two had been being a better friend to Liam and Zayn. Number three was being less of a burden, getting his shit together so he wasn't such a mess.
Dr. Chen had asked him to keep it down to four things, so number four had been learning how to not hate himself so much anymore. Dr. Chen had written them all down, but the very first thing he said was that they were going to focus on number four first. He said if they did that, all the other things would be easier to work out. So Louis has been trying his best to be open about everything, even if it hurts to say the words out loud. He's hoping the more open he is, the sooner the doctor can fix him, and send him on his way. Things like this are still hard to open up about though.

"What exactly about you isn't good enough for him? Because it seems to me he is more than happy to be with you?" Dr. Chen asks gently.

Louis sighs, "he doesn't- doesn't agree with the fact that he deserves better than me," he says slowly, "but there's like- inside I'm not- I don't feel….I don't feel whole, or like….right?" Louis mumbles it like a question, "and he doesn't deserve someone who is- erm- who's messed up like me."

Dr. Chen looks across at Louis for a long time, and Louis avoids his gaze, "from what we've talked about before it's become clear to me that the part of you that you think is broken, the thing inside you that you think is wrong, is the fact that you're gay," he says, using that calm tone that always manages to keep Louis breathing steady when he should be uncomfortable, "is that correct?"

Louis' throat tightens a bit, and he looks determinedly down at his lap, "yes," he says quietly.

"That part of you, the fact that you are homosexual, is essentially the root of all the things you dislike about yourself. Would that be a correct statement as well?"

"I- I don't know…maybe?" Louis frowns.

"It would seem that way," Dr. Chen says, with zero judgement or malice in his tone, "but then I ask you, that part, the piece of who you are that you see is flawed, you're aware Harry has that too, right?"

Louis' eyes flash up, "what do you mean?" he asks confusedly.

"The part of you that you hate is the fact that you are gay. But Harry is gay too. So by your explanation he would have a part to hate as well. Do you hate him for that?" Louis can tell Dr. Chen is trying to make a point but he doesn't get it.

"Of course not," he protests, "I don't hate Harry for being gay, and I don't think he should hate himself."

"So you don't have a problem with gay people in general, just with yourself for being gay," he states.

"I don't have a problem with other gay people at all, no, of course not," Louis insists, one hundred percent truthfully.

Dr. Chen nods, and then falls silent for a while. The only sound in the room is the scratching of his pen on the paper. Louis tries not to over analyze the things they just said, he's suddenly worried he said the wrong thing, maybe he isn't making sense, he doesn't know. He wishes Chen would say something.

"Louis let me ask you; when you realized you were gay, before you had come out to anyone besides your best friend, sorry I've forgotten his name?"

"Liam," Louis supplies.

"Right, Liam. When Liam was the only person who knew, but you had realized you were gay, how
Louis frowns, "erm- I was confused I guess. But then- like I had always known I was different but it- it was nice to have a definite explanation as to why? It was nice to have a name for it?" he hates that he sounds so hesitant, but he doesn't know where the doctor is going with this.

"And for a long time it was just you and Liam who knew. How did you feel about yourself right before you came out? What made you finally decide to do it?"

Louis barely has to think back to remember, "I just got sick of hiding. I knew it wouldn't be easy but I just- I decided to say fuck it and if people didn't like it they could fuck off," he hesitates, "sorry for swearing."

"So you were confident enough, and comfortable enough with yourself to decide 'fuck it, you can take me or leave me, I'm going to be who I want to be,' correct?" Dr. Chen asks.

Louis nods, "yeah, basically," he says.

"And after you came out, and people at school reacted poorly, how did you feel then?"

Louis frowns, "I mean- it was really shit for a while, but I had Liam and Zayn, and some other people who didn't care. It just made me feel like 'fuck it' even more; I didn't let myself care what they thought."

Louis can tell Dr. Chen is getting to the point because he presses his fingertips together, and surveys Louis over the top of his glasses. Louis tries not to squirm under his gaze, because he still doesn't understand what Chen is getting at. He's answered everything completely honestly. Finally he meets Dr. Chen's eyes, resisting the urge to raise a questioning eyebrow.

"And that feeling of confidence, of self assurance, completely disappeared when you realized your mum and step dad weren't supportive of you," he says.

It isn't a question, it's a statement, because they both know it's true. Louis feels the knot in his stomach tighten. His hands shake a little as he twists the hem of his t-shirt. He doesn't realize he's biting the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood.

"When- when I could tell they didn't like it I just thought- I thought Dan was homophobic and my mum was just mad at me for making things bad with Dan," he says quietly, "I still kind of tried to think 'fuck it' and I just stayed out of the house, because I thought they would get over it."

Dr. Chen nods slowly, "before you decided to come out, you thought that you would be doing it with the support of Liam, Zayn, and your parents, didn't you?" he says, and his voice is very gentle.

"Yes," Louis says.

His response comes out as more of a whimper though, and suddenly he's fighting back tears. His hands are shaking harder because he never, never in a million years thought this would happen. He thought about coming out for months before he actually did it, and not in a single one of the scenarios he ran through in his head, did his mum feel differently about him after finding out his sexuality. He had been literally blindsided.

"But it didn't blow over, and they told you that you had to leave. That is when all self assurance you had before vanished. Right?" Dr. Chen asks.

Louis bites down hard on his lip, and nods jerkily. He had spent the first two years of university after
that trying his best to hide how confused he was about himself. How much he hated himself. He hid behind being loud and funny, and partying constantly. Inside though, he was angry and hurt, and he was slowly starting to hate himself.

"And after that you were angry at Dan, but never your mum."

"It wasn't her fault, I fucked up her third marriage by being fucked up," Louis manages, his voice choked and his eyes pooling.

Dr. Chen writes something down, "that statement is inaccurate, but we'll talk about that another day. Now, after that you still had enough self assurance to feel anger towards Dan for having wronged you, for being homophobic and cruel," he pauses and observes Louis closely again, "but when you found out your mum was also homophobic and cruel, it manifested itself as a self hate so deep that it drove you to an eating disorder."

"I- er- I-," Louis stutters, and he can't get anything else out, because the tears he's holding back are choking him.

"Louis do you know what internalized homophobia is?" Dr. Chen asks quietly.

"N-no," he mumbles.

"Basically, there is a person inside of you, not much unlike the boy Stan, who jumped you, inside your head. Yelling at you, and calling you all those derogatory names, and beating you down, every single day. And that voice in your head has also decided to start telling you that you're fat, and that you're a bad person, and that you're not good enough. It's internalized homophobia, and it's self hate, and it's because the one person in your life that you thought you would always have, turned on you," Dr. Chen scoots to the edge of his seat, and hands Louis a tissue for his tears, "It's going to take time, and it isn't going to be easy, but if you stick with it, I want to show you that that voice inside your head is wrong. Those people turned on you because there is something wrong with them, not because there is something wrong with you. And I know you don't believe me now, and we're out of time for today, but if you give our sessions a chance they will help you to see that.

Sometimes parents are not good people, and that is in no way indicative of the quality of the child. You don't get to choose your family, but you get to choose who you are. I know it's cliche Louis, but things do get better. You've already taken the first step, just by being here, and you're doing such a god job of opening up."

Louis meets Dr. Chen's eyes, and blinks past his tears. He nods slowly, his lip clenched between his teeth. He stands up, because he knows their time is over. Dr. Chen stands too, and follows Louis towards the door. Louis feels exhausted, just like he did after the session before this one, and his first session as well. It's tiring dragging everything up, reliving it all every time he repeats it, or thinks about it.

"Th-thanks doctor," he says, having to clear his throat.

"Alright Louis, I'll see you next week, yes?" he says, clapping Louis politely on the shoulder.

Louis nods, "yeah, for sure."

"And use those techniques I told you for while you're eating, alright?"

Louis nods, "I will, thank you."

"Have a nice day," Dr. Chen says, holding open the office door.
"You too," Louis replies.

He waves to the receptionist on the way out, and then takes the elevator down to the main lobby. He steps into the bathroom, to try and fix himself up. He's presenting his final project to Ms. Schinnour in an hour, and Harry had his last exam this morning. He was upset he couldn't drive Louis to his appointment, but they'll meet up in the studio before Louis presents. He kind of wishes he could talk to Harry right now, or even just be held, but hopefully Harry will be done his exam when Louis gets there. When Louis has done his best to cool down the redness of his cheeks and eyes by splashing his face with cold water from the tap, he heads out to his car. He's got a text from Harry asking how it went, but Louis doesn't reply, he'll wait until they meet in the studio.

He gets in the car in and turns on his music. There is a plastic baggie of crackers and cheese in the cup holder that Harry put there. He's trying to get Louis to start snacking between meals now. It's horribly frustrating. He'll never say anything when Louis doesn't eat the snacks, but Louis always catches the flash of disappointment on his face when he notices they haven't been eaten at all.

Dr. Chen's words play in his head. They spent the first half of the session talking about his eating disorder, and small ways to help him overcome it. He says Louis is already doing better, and once they deal with the root of the problem it will be easier, but he knows it's still hard for Louis. Focusing on what Dr. Chen told him, he opens the plastic baggie and takes one cracker and one piece of cheddar cheese, and forces himself to eat it.

He drives to the school, and heads straight to the studio. Harry is waiting for him there, sitting on the edge of one of the work tables. He isn't doing anything, he was just staring expectantly at the door. His face lights up when Louis walks in. He hops down off the table, and scoops Louis up right away. He presses kisses to Louis' hair, and then pulls back to look at his face. Louis knows Harry can tell he was crying again. He's always prided himself on not being much of a crier, but clearly that isn't the case anymore.

"How did it go, love?" Harry asks gently, fingers stroking softly at the hairs at the back of Louis' neck.

Louis sighs, "beginning was okay, just talking about like- eating and stuff. Then he er- asked me about how I feel about myself, and how I felt about myself before and after I came out and stuff. We- we talked about mum a bit," Louis shrugs, "it was okay I think, he's- he makes me feel like it's okay to talk? I don't know. I don't feel like he's- judging me?"

Harry nods, "that's good, baby," he replies, "I was worried I'd find you a doctor who dealt with eating disorders, but turned out to be a homophobic asshole or something. Or someone who was great at helping with those issues, but had no idea how to handle an eating disorder."

"Still can't believe how much thought you put into it," Louis mumbles.

"I'm just glad you like Dr. Chen," Harry says earnestly.

Louis just nods, because this is all he needed. Just Harry's arms around him. He lets Harry hold him for as long as he can, before he has to pull back. He has to get his outfit on Harry to present to Ms. Schinnour. Harry whines when he steps away, so Louis stands on his tiptoes and kisses him. Harry smiles softly against his lips, his big hand cradling Louis' cheek, his thumb skimming his cheekbone.

"Oh, how was your exam?" Louis asks.

"It went well I think," Harry nods.
"That's good," Louis smiles, "did you bring your dress shoes?"

"Of course," Harry nods, shucking off his backpack and pulling them out.

Louis smiles softly when he notices Harry even polished them for the occasion. He goes over to his corner where his last garment bag hangs. Zayn had helped him clear out his little corner of the studio the other day. Today will be the last day Louis is in the studio as a Fashion student at the university. It's bittersweet that where all his projects used to hang, there is nothing but a single black bag. His little cart where he kept all his utensils; his pins, and tracing paper, and fabrics, is completely empty. He grabs the bag containing his final project, and carries it over to the worktable next to Harry.

"I'm so excited to see, I can't believe you haven't showed me all this time," Harry says, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

It still astounds Louis how much Harry cares about his work. He thinks maybe they've come full circle. They met because Louis knew Harry would fit easily into his designs, and this time Louis designed his project specifically for Harry. Harry who was so kind to even agree to model for him in the first place. Harry who didn't get sick of him. Harry who literally fought to be part of his life. Harry who found Louis' darkest secrets and still tells him that he loves him every single morning.

"Wanted it to be a surprise," Louis says quietly, "made it for you."

Harry hesitates, "for me?" he asks, sounding in awe.

"Yeah. You can have all of the things I made for that first project if you want. The only reason I had to keep them before was because I thought I might have to submit all my work for an internship, but since I'm staying here- yeah. But this one- just- I made it with you in mind," he says quietly, and he doesn't know why he's blushing, "like designed it for- for you."

Harry lets out a long breath, and when Louis looks up his eyes are wide and they've got that infinite softness pouring out of them. He murmurs something that sounds like Louis' name, and pulls Louis close. Breathing deep against Louis' hair. Louis sinks into him and gives a soft laugh. He thinks he hears Harry hum a thank you.

"Y'havent even seen it yet. You might hate it,"

Harry scoffs, "right."

Louis feels his cheeks warm again, and he steps around Harry. He slowly draws down the zipper on the bag, and carefully removes the garment. Harry lets out a murmured 'wow' as he hovers right next to Louis. Louis unbuttons the jacket, removing it from the hanger, and then pulls the pants off after. Off of the second hanger he removes the crisp white button up.

"Oh my god, is that-"

"Yeah," Louis says, "do you like it as much in a suit as you did at the fabric store?" he asks hesitantly.

He remembers one of the many days Harry came with him to the fabric store. He had wandered off to find thread, and when he came back Harry's fingers were brushing at the exquisite silk wool blend. It was a beautiful ink blue colour, unique enough that not everybody would appreciate it, which was why there was a full roll of the fabric still on the rack. 'How come there are never any suits made of this,' Harry had said, 'everyone just likes black. This is so nice.' Louis had been able to picture it, even then, how good it would look on Harry.
"It's gorgeous," Harry whispers, biting on his lip to contain his grin, "I can't even believe you remembered me saying I liked it. That was what- three weeks after we started dating?"

Louis just nods, "I er- it wouldn't have looked right if I made the whole suit in the blue, it's too intense of a colour," he explains, gesturing at the black pants, and the white button up.

"I can't wait to get it on," Harry beams.

He's already stripping out of his jeans and t-shirt, standing in all his glory in front Louis. Louis can't stop himself from reaching out and dragging a thumb down the cut of Harry's v-line. It's much different than the first time Harry was in his studio stripped down to his boxer briefs. Goosebumps raise on Harry's skin, and he presses subconsciously against Louis' touch.

"I love you," Harry says quietly.

"Thank you for modelling for me," Louis replies.

"Of course babe-"

"No, I mean, the first time. You didn't have to, and if you hadn't- I'm just- just so glad you did," Louis stutters.

A soft smile splits Harry's face, "the day you asked me to model for you I thought I was dreaming," he laughs softly, "thank you for asking me."

Louis smiles, fingertips brushing softly down Harry's bare chest, "come on baby, can't be late," he says.

Harry hops to it, carefully stepping into the slim fitting dress pants. The crease up the front of each leg falls exactly in the right place, and the waistband fits perfectly on Harry's hips. He gently turns Harry around, with a hand on his waist. The back fits perfectly on Harry's small shaped bum, hanging just the right length for when he puts his dress shoes on.

Harry pulls on the dress shirt, and Louis steps forward to do up the buttons and straighten the collar. Harry tucks in the shirt, but Louis' small hands follow his and do a better job of it. Louis adjusts the cuffs of the sleeves, and smooths his hands down Harry's sides. The shirt is perfectly tailored for Harry. Made for his wide shoulders and his narrow waist, skimming precisely across his broad chest.

Louis reaches back in the bag for a narrow black tie. Louis has hand stitched three thin diagonal stripes near the end of the tie, in the same colour as the jacket. Harry smiles down at him as Louis ties it, pressing a kiss to his forehead when he's done. Louis helps him into the jacket and he lets out the breath he'd been holding in. He hadn't been able to try it on Harry, because he didn't want to give away the surprise. He had crafted the jacket based solely on Harry's measurements. Measurements, and the permanent picture of Harry that Louis has engraved in his mind.

The colour and the fabric looks just as amazing on Harry as Louis knew it would. His fingers brush over the two black buttons as he does them up, and then he smoothes out the lapel. His hands fidget, as they always do, adjusting, fixing, perfecting. He leads Harry over to the full length mirror, and his response is what he'll use to gauge how well he's done.

The look that comes across Harry's face when he sees himself makes Louis feel a sense of pride that he would never be capable of feeling just looking at his own work. When he analyzes what he's done he's always critical, always finding flaws. When he sees his work through Harry's eyes though- he feels like maybe he can be proud of himself. Harry doesn't stop talking about how perfect it is, all the while Louis ties up his dress shoes and adjusts him one last time. He doesn't stop talking about
how much he loves it as they go down the hall to Ms. Schinnour's main studio.

"I'm glad you like it sweetheart," Louis says outside the door to the room.

"She's going to love it," Harry says, giving Louis a kiss.

They knock lightly on the door and Louis hears Ms. Schinnour call from the inside. They open the door, and she smiles up from her desk. She's examining another one of the students garments; probably whoever had the appointment before Louis'. She jumps up when she sees them and her smile splits her face. She embraces Louis and he hugs her back tightly.

"Louis, Harry," she says fondly, having grown attached to Harry too after seeing him in the studio with Louis so much.

"Hi Ms. Schinnour," Louis replies.

"Hey Ms. S," Harry adds.

"Wow Louis," she murmurs, looking Harry up and down, "here, step over here," she instructs Harry.

Louis hovers hesitantly as she gets Harry to stand on the platform in the middle of the room. She observes Harry in silence. Harry stands perfectly, his hands at his sides, and his eyes straight ahead. He even does his best to keep his back straight, and not hunch like he normally would. Louis' heart thuds as she analyzes every tiny detail with her critical eyes. Lifting up the fabric, walking around Harry, checking every seam.

It's a long time before she speaks, "alright. Tell me what we've got here," she says, straightening up.

Louis steps forward, "I've done women's clothes so much, I wanted to do mens apparel for the final project. For the winter show I stayed more casual. Here I wanted to show attention to detail, and focus on tailoring. This was designed specifically for Harry. If I end up having my own fashion line, I'd like to be able to do custom tailoring, along with personal designs. For this particular garment I designed a custom suit, but I wanted it to have another purpose. I made the lapel thin enough, and lined it with matching blue silk, so that Harry can roll the sleeves up to the elbow. This way the jacket is casual enough to be paired with blue or black jeans, and a t-shirt," Louis explains, as he'd rehearsed because he knew Ms. Schinnour would ask for an explanation.

"Demonstrate the sleeves," Ms. Schinnour asks.

Louis steps forward and opens the buttons, loosening and removing the tie from Harry's neck. Next he carefully rolls up each sleeve, and then undoes the top two buttons of the dress shirt. He meets Harry's eyes for a brief second, and sees so much pride in them that he can't help but smile. Ms. Schinnour steps forward again, and analyzes the way the fabric was stitched so it would fold at the sleeves perfectly.

"You've outdone yourself, Louis," she says after a long time of analyzing, "and I have zero doubt in my mind that you will have your own fashion line."

Again, it's the huge smile that splits Harry's face that tells Louis it's okay to feel pride at his comment, instead of shying away from the compliment. He smiles softly and murmurs a 'thank you so much.' Ms. Schinnour walks around Harry again before she tells him to step down. She tells them to go get Harry out of the outfit and bring it back for marking, and Louis catches her giving Harry a wink.

Harry is absolutely ecstatic when they get out to the hallway, "you never told me it converted to a blazer. This is so amazing Louis I- god you're so talented. She loved it. You're going to get a
hundred percent,” he babbles as they walk, "I am so, so proud of you baby."

Louis blushes, "thank you, Harry," he says quietly.

Harry changes quickly, and Louis packs the outfit back into the garment bag. They hurry back to her main studio, and she is waiting behind her desk. Louis lays down the bag for her and she stands up and comes around the desk. Harry stays back, and Louis is thankful, because he's feeling a little emotional. Ms. Schinnour has gotten him through a lot in his three years studying fashion under her. When he was struggling, and confused, and hurt, he always had fashion, and he always had her steady direction.

"Louis this piece, like everything you've ever made, is beautiful. I'll go over it but you and I both know it's perfect," she says, her voice quiet and kind, "I'm not going to get all emotional because I fully expect you to come visit me while you're doing the business course, but I just want you to know what a pleasure it's been teaching you these three years."

Louis swallows past the lump in his throat, "I'll come see you all the time of course. Just- thank you-for everything you've done for me. You have no idea how much having you as my teacher has meant," he says softly, meaning every word.

She smiles, "you have so much talent Louis, there is no doubt in my mind I'll be watching you blow up the industry. I'll be telling all my students that I taught you," she says.

Louis blushed, "if that happens you get full credit," he says earnestly.

She shakes her head, "no, that is all you," she says, pulling him into a hug, "and I also want you to know how happy it makes me to finally see you happy. I know it was hard there for you for a while, but I knew it wasn't my place to ask. I'm just so glad that you've found something besides designing that makes your eyes light up," she says it so softly that Harry won't be able to hear, and Louis knows she's referring to the lanky boy hovering beside the door.

He feels wetness at the back of his eyes, "thank you," he says quietly.

She nods, "you have a great summer, and I expect to see you as soon as term starts."

He smiles, "when I start on my designs for my line I'll be coming to you for advice, just so you know," he jokes.

She laughs, "absolutely, anything you need," she says, "now get going my next student will be here any minute, and I don't want to make it any more clear that you've always been my favourite."

Louis grins, "okay, see you."

"Bye dear," she says, "see you next year Harry, take care of my prodigy," she calls over to him.

Harry's chest literally puffs up with pride, "I will. Have a good summer Ms. S!"

They leave the studio and Harry puts his arm around Louis' shoulders, "you're amazing, you know that?" Harry asks.

"I'm glad I don't have to go to Italy," he says quietly.

"Me too," Harry murmurs, kissing softly at Louis' hair.

They both know technically Louis never would have had to go to Italy for an internship, but they
both know he thought he might have to, if nobody wanted him around anymore. He'll stay, and he'll
take his business course; a few classes a day, three days a week. He'll set up a studio in the flat to
work on designs for his line. He won't have to run away, and he won't be alone.

They get home and have dinner with the boys and Niall. Harry brags the whole time about how
amazing Louis' work was, how amazing Ms. Schinour thinks he is. Louis' cheeks are flushed all
through dinner, but there is also a smile on his face. Before he would have been so uncomfortable
under all their praise, but he thinks maybe he can allow himself this. He can allow himself to accept
their pride in him.

Later, when they're laying in bed Louis steadies himself for what he's about to ask, "I don't want you
to leave," he says quietly, as Harry holds him to his chest and runs his fingers through his hair.

"I'm not going anywhere," Harry says softly.

"Er- I mean like- you and Niall have to clear out your dorm next week, I don't- don't want you to go
back to Doncaster," he mumbles, "I was talking to the boys and er- I was thinking maybe you could
stay with us? Until the end of June. We've decided to go see their families in July instead of August.
We could go back to Donny together at the beginning of July, and I'll be staying with Liam for two
weeks, and then Zayn for two," Louis takes a deep breath, "I totally understand if you want to go
home next week, you must miss your mum and sister so much, I just- it's just an idea; it's okay if you
don't want to?"

When Harry pulls back, Louis can see how wide he's smiling in the moonlight, "I'd love that," he
says instantly, "I've been dreading leaving."

"Your- your mum won't mind?" Louis asks.

"Not at all, she knows how much I was going to miss you, I've been whining about it for weeks.
And then when you're staying with the boys I'll get to see you all the time," he says excitedly, "oh
Lou, thanks for letting me stay."

Slowly Louis smiles, so relieved at Harry's answer, "yeah?" he says quietly, "yeah, great."

Harry kisses the tip of his nose, "so you'll come stay with me in August then?" he asks, "for a couple
weeks?"

Louis nods slowly, "yeah babe, if you still want me too, and if your mum is okay with it," he says,
"Li and Zayn will be happy to stay home for another couple weeks before we go back to the flat for
the end of August then."

Harry makes a happy sound, and holds Louis closer. They lay together for a long time, Harry's
fingers playing in Louis' hair. Louis can't really believe he's got this boy who genuinely wants to
spend all their time together. It's a really nice feeling.

"I love you, beautiful," Harry murmurs, close to sleep, and content.

"You're beautiful," Louis whispers, raising his chin to kiss each of Harry's closed eyelids.

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Louis slams his finger into the button for the elevator, and nearly jams his knuckle, but he refuses to wince. Finally the doors ding open, and he steps in and starts prodding furiously at the button for the lobby. He's half way between furious, and on the verge of tears. Of course Harry is parked right in front. The windows are open in the truck, and his head is tipped back with his mouth wide open, which means he's sleeping behind his sunglasses. Louis would normally admire how the adorableness of Harry sleeping, contrasts with how sexy he is in that bro tank and backwards snapback. Except right now he just wants to punch something and cry really hard, not necessarily in that order.

He pulls the door to the truck open with so much force that Harry almost chokes on his tongue when he's startled awake. It takes a moment for him to get his bearings, as Louis clamours into the truck. He blinks wide and confused, until his eyes land on Louis fuming in the passenger seat, and he lets out a sad little gasp. He reaches out for Louis instantly. Louis feels the familiar ache to be held, but his skin is crawling. He doesn't flinch away when Harry's hand rubs soothing circles into his back, but he doesn't lean closer like he normally would.

"What happened, baby?" he asks softly.

Louis leans forward, and rubs at his eyes, "he's- he asked me all this shit about my mum. From like before, when I was young. And I told him everything and then- then he fucking used it against me!"

He can hear Harry's quick intake of breath, "he what?" he says quickly.

"He started pointing out all of this shit that my mum had done, twisting everything I had told him around to make her sound like a bad mum!" Louis snaps, "since like the earliest fucking memory I'd told him! She was a good mum, okay! She treated me better than I deserved!"

Harry sighs, but his hand doesn't stop rubbing Louis' back, "sweetheart, did you ask him why he was doing that?" he asks carefully.

"Yes," Louis grunts, "his exact words were 'I'm just trying to help you see your relationship with your mum, and your mum as a person, from another perspective. So that maybe if you see that she had flaws, it will be easier for you to accept that you weren't the problem,' in his stupid posh accent."

Harry doesn't say anything for a while, his fingers moving up to card through the back of Louis' hair. Louis lets himself lean into the touch a little, because it soothes him whether he wants to be soothed or not. He's angry. He's angry that Dr. Chen pointed all that shit out. He's even angrier that the shit Dr. Chen pointed out won't stop bouncing around in his head.

"Louis, love, I'm sorry that todays session made you uncomfortable. I'm so sorry," Harry says gently, "but I don't think he was trying to- to use the information you gave him against you. He's on your side."

Louis lets out an angry huff, and scrubs the heels of his palms into his eyes, "she was a good mum," he mutters.

"What sort of things did he point out?" Harry asks.

Louis fidgets with the hem of his shirt, "like- like how much responsibility I had when I was younger...and like how things were with my first step dad, and how I kind of felt like-" he pauses and frowns, "but she was only fucking twenty when she had me, I don't know what she could have done better! Sure I took care of myself a lot, but she had to work didn't she? And then after Mark left she needed help with the girls. She- she treated me better than I deserved."
"Babe, you need to stop saying that. I don't know how she was when you were younger, but she didn't treat you better than you deserved, Louis. You deserved so much better than what she gave you," Harry's voice is so soft.

Normally Louis would flip on Harry, tell him not to talk about her like that. He'd tell Harry he doesn't know what he's talking about, tell him to drop it. Right now though, for some stupid reason, Harry's gentle voice brings tears so his eyes. Then he's cracking, and the dam is bursting, and the first thing he does, his basic instinct, is to reach out for Harry.

Harry somehow gets Louis across the seat, and into his lap, without any strain. He cradles Louis in, holding him close. Louis fists a hand in Harry's shirt, and the tears won't stop. Harry murmurs soothing things against Louis' hair, his hand stroking softly under Louis' shirt at the base of his spine. Louis tells himself he's angry, that these are angry tears, but suddenly all he can think about are Chen's words.

He remembers being ten and coming home to an empty house, because his mum was working. He'd do his best to make some dinner, to have on the table for when she got home from work. She'd eat, change her clothes, and go to her second job. He remembers being infinitely lonely. It was a feeling that only went away when she'd lay in bed with him and sing, on the nights she had the short shift at the grocery store. He'd be so exhausted, but he'd force himself to stay up those nights. He needed her so bad it hurt, and he knew if he was sleeping when she got home he'd miss his time with her until next week, when she had the short shift again.

Even then Liam's mum was always having him over, so he and Liam could play. Louis knows now that she felt sorry for him, that she thought he was too young to be so alone. He's always had that loneliness that could only be stopped by her. When she met Mark she didn't lay in bed with him anymore, and he told himself he was too old anyway, but he still yearned for that half an hour of undivided attention, of what he thought was love. Then the girls came and he took care of them while his mum and Mark worked. He loved them with everything he had, even though Mark started coming home drunk after Lottie was born. The girls filled the loneliness, and gave him something to care about. Mark's anger continued after Felicity, and then for some reason worsened with the twins. Louis discovered that an unanticipated upside to taking Mark's beatings was that his mum laid in bed with him again, and sung, while she tended to his bruises and cuts.

When Mark left, Louis got a job and he barely managed to pass classes with working, and taking care of the girls. Sometimes his mum yelled at him when the girls laundry wasn't done, or if the house was a mess when she got home, but he always made sure to do better next time, to be better next time. Even if it never felt like enough for her. Things got better with Dan, and then she was happy again. Happy until Louis ruined it. She was a good mum, she treated Louis better than he deserved.

"Can we go home?" Louis mumbles, sniffling against Harry's chest.

"Yes. I love you," Harry says.

Louis moves back over to the passenger seat and slouches down, putting his feet up on the dash and closing his eyes. He reaches out blindly for Harry's hand, as soon as they're on the main road. He needs to get himself together before they take Niall out for his 'back to Ireland sendoff.' Harry's thumb brushes Louis' knuckles while they drive, and it's soothing. He just can't shake that feeling of being seven and looking up at his mum and wondering if he'd ever be good enough. He can't shake the feeling of being thirteen and wondering if he was good enough yet. He knows he'll never get rid of the feeling of being nineteen and knowing he'd never been, nor ever would be good enough.

They get back to the flat and Liam and Zayn are already ready to go. Louis and Harry have just
enough time to change before Niall arrives. Niall and Harry packed up their entire dorm room yesterday, deciding to keep everything in a storage unit until next year. They'll share a dorm when they get back, and neither of them needed any of the furniture that they had bought for the room over the summer. One of Harry's suitcases lays open in Louis' closet. It holds enough clothes to get him through the two weeks before they all head home to Doncaster.

It hasn't been much change having Harry around all the time, he always was before too, but sometimes Louis finds himself imagining what it would be like to split the closet right down the middle and keep Harry always. Harry is extra sweet and loving while they change into jeans and nicer shirts, because he knows Louis is still upset. He comes up behind Louis, and kisses up his bare neck, easing some of the tension out of Louis' shoulders with his fingertips.

Louis still avoids looking at himself in mirrors. He's gained weight. He isn't where he was before his eating disorder started when he had his tummy from drinking too much, he hopes he never will be again because he really wasn't comfortable with himself then. He's almost at an average weight though, Harry says. Not quite, but close. The weight has spread out now now, so his ankles and face aren't bloated with water weight anymore. It's just an even layer of flesh, filling in the spaces that uses to be empty before. Louis tries to tell himself he's starting to look healthy, tries to ignore the voice that associates healthy with fat. He tries, but he's only human, and it still helps not to analyze himself in front of mirrors too much. He just hopes one day he'll feel comfortable in his own skin, and not have the urge to run away and stop eating every time he catches sight of himself.

"Are you going to be okay sweetheart?" Harry asks gently, carefully pulling a t-shirt over Louis' head.

Louis nods, "yeah I just- I get what he's doing. Like why he's pointing out her- her flaws or whatever- but I just- it doesn't change the fact that-" I'm a shit son and I ruined everything by being gay, he thinks, but he doesn't say it out loud, because Harry would protest.

Harry knows him well enough though, "it does," he insists seriously, "because what she did wasn't your fault, and he's trying to help you see that," Louis opens his mouth to protest, but Harry shakes his head, "I know you don't believe it but you've got to give him a chance. Just keep being open, and try to listen to what he tells you, please?" he asks softly, his hands cupping Louis' cheeks.

Louis is once again roped in by that hopefulness in those eyes, "yeah, I will," he says softly, "let's just- I don't want to think about it anymore tonight. Let's have fun for Niall."

"Okay babe," Harry nods, pressing a kiss to his forehead, "you look so good, I love that shirt on you."

Louis looks down at the pale blue t-shirt Harry's put him in with his black jeans, "is it clinging?" he asks hesitantly.

"Nothing to cling to," Harry murmurs, kissing softly behind Louis' ear, "can you pick me a t-shirt?"

Louis decides on a black v-neck that looks good with the jeans Harry's wearing, and he stands on his tiptoes to steal a kiss before they go out to the living room. Niall has already arrived so they all head out to a bar that he picked. Within five minutes of being in the truck surrounded by the four of them Louis starts to feel better. He's made it a rule that he does his best not to think about his sessions after they're finished, and it's easy to forget when the boys get him laughing.

It's bittersweet, because after splitting three pitchers of beer they're all in fantastic moods, but they're also emotional because they're not going to see Niall for two months. Louis is tucked close to Harry's side, whose fingers are playing with his hair absentmindedly. They're all listening to Niall's stories
about home. He's excited to be going back, it's obvious. He misses his family, and his mates, and he says the beer is better over there.

"My god Niall, you could at least act like you're going to miss me!" Louis says indignantly, not even bothering to hide his grin.

"Oh shut it Lou, you know I'm going to miss you like crazy! You had better expect a play by play of my day via text message," Niall laughs.

"Your text messages are completely illegible!" Louis protests.

"And I'll be ass over tea kettle drunk most of the time I'm there too, so you'll probably have to get Haz to translate, he's got me figured out," he says, pouring more beer in Louis' pint from the new pitcher the waitress has brought.

Louis has a perfect buzz right now. He's figured out that drinking beer is worth the extra calories, because it just leaves him feeling fuzzy and happy. He gets emotional on hard liquor. They're all talking about Ireland, and then it switches to what they'll all do together when they get back from summer. It's very clear the five of them have become a package deal. Louis is just content listening to them all talk until Liam's words jar him into focus.

"Y'know Ni, the dorms are shit. We were thinking; if Louis and Harry decide to get a flat together, we'll have an extra room," he says casually.

Louis sputters into his pint, "what! We've never even once for a second talked about getting a flat together!" he gasps, looking at Harry, who looks just as nonplussed.

"We know that," Zayn says, "but it's been pretty clear the past week just how much you two enjoy living together. Not that it wasn't when Harry was over every single day before that, but the point is, you two have been adorably domestic," he shrugs.

Louis blushes, and feels Harry hold him closer, "has been nice," Louis admits shyly, shrugging as he raises his pint to his lips.

"You're not allowed to go far though," Liam insists, "we'll find you a flat in our complex, there are always vacancies in our building. I need to be able to see my Lou every day."

Harry sighs, "oh damn, so no keeping him all to myself then?" he teases, making Louis laugh a little.

"Who are y'kidding mate, you're the best cook out of all of us, we'll be over at yours every night for dinner," Zayn grins across the table at them.

"It'd be the same price to split rent as those stupid over priced dorms, Ni," Liam says.

"That'd be wicked," Niall nods.

"We'll be like Friends how they lived across the hall from each other. Harry you're Monica, she's the worrier and the cook," Louis says jokingly.

"Sounds good baby," Harry hums, pressing their lips together.

They all continue on after that, talking and laughing. Forming hypothetical scenarios where Harry and Louis actually do move out together. Suddenly Louis is fighting down the worry inching up the back of his throat. They definitely haven't talked about moving out together. He's internally freaking out, because what if he's freaked Harry out looking that far into the future. Louis doesn't even know
if he and Harry are going to last the summer.

He doesn't know if Harry is going to get sick of him, if Harry wants that much commitment to him. Right now Louis is a burden, but Harry can walk away any time. Why would he want to be tied into a leave with Louis, stuck with Louis. He feels like he's drowning in self doubt; he should have told the boys not to talk about that, instead of going along with the joke.

He talks and laughs along with the others, but it feels stiff and fabricated. He's resisting the urge to run away before he manages to put his foot even further in his mouth, and scare Harry off more. Harry senses that Louis is tense, of course he does, and he doesn't draw attention to it, but he's extra tender as they sit at the table.

Liam ends up giving Niall a piggy back up to the flat at the end of the night; Harry is driving him to the airport in the morning and he's crashing on the couch. They all make their way to their rooms, after they've taken their turns getting ready for bed in the shared bathroom. Louis falls into bed next to Harry, and he's still a little tipsy but comfortable, tucked with Harry curled around him from behind. He's still trying to ignore the panic that maybe for once he's let himself think too far ahead with Harry. The room is dark and quiet, and Harry's fingertips brush softly at the skin of his thighs.

This week shouldn't really have made a difference to Louis, because Harry has stayed over almost every night since they started sleeping together. He doesn't know why, but it feels different. Like Harry isn't just spending the night. Harry is living with him. If only for the two weeks until July. Zayn was right, it feels so domestic, and it makes Louis think.

He thinks about what it would be like to have a place of their own, that they made together. Half Harry, and half Louis, and theirs. A cozy little flat, maybe one of the smaller ones on the floor below, with two bedrooms. Or a loft. Louis has always dreamed of a little open concept flat with a bedroom up high in the loft, and he knows their complex has some like that on the highest floor. He imagines Harry's things spread throughout the flat, mingling with his own. A workbench for his designs, a desk for Harry to do school work.

He knows Harry would live completely naked if he could, and suddenly Louis is thinking about porcelain skin in the mornings, wandering around making breakfast. He's thinking about christening every surface of their imaginary little flat, and truly making it theirs. He's thinking about Harry carrying him up the stairs to their loft with too many blankets and pillows, and making love on the plushness of their imaginary bed. He wants that. He just doesn't know if Harry does.

He doesn't realize he's hard until Harry's hand is reaching around him from where he was spooning behind, and his hand is slipping down Louis' boxers. Harry's own erection is pressing into the crease of Louis' ass, and Louis grinds back on it as Harry fists his cock. Harry's lips and teeth are raising goosebumps along Louis' neck, as he kisses and sucks teasingly.

"Tell me what you want, baby," Harry hums, breath warm against Louis' ear.

Louis doesn't even think before he answers, "I want to get a loft together," he whispers, thrusting into Harry's hand.

And then he freezes. Because, fuck, he just said that out loud. And fuck, that was not what Harry meant. And shit, Harry's hand isn't moving on his dick. And holy fuck, is Harry even breathing behind him. And shit Louis wants to pull away and slam his head into a wall because, fuck, why did he just say that. The silence stretches on too long, and Louis wants to take it back, he needs to take it back.

And then Harry breathes, "you'd- you want that- with- you want that with me?" Harry stutters.
Louis releases his lip from between his teeth when he tastes blood, "yeah," he breathes, because there's no point lying now, "yeah, I really do."

Harry pulls back from Louis, and Louis' instinct is to curl in on himself. Harry is there though, straddling Louis before he can get his knees up to his chest. He's holding his weight up off of Louis' hips, Louis can see the muscles rippling in his thighs. Louis forces himself to look up and meet Harry's eyes. Harry's hands span Louis' ribs underneath Harry's oversized t-shirt, and his eyes are wide. Louis realizes belatedly that the look in his eyes could be described as excitement.

"I want that so bad," Harry says, his dimples forcing their way out as he tries to bite back a smile.

"Really?" Louis asks, "I mean- we've got all summer to think about it I just-"

"Yes, yes, I want that," Harry cuts him off, leaning forward to join their lips.

Suddenly Louis is on fire with relief, and excitement, and maybe even something like hope, "Okay," he breathes, when Harry pulls back for air, "okay," he pants, as Harry's lips trail down his chest, "okay," he moans, as Harry's fingers brush against his hole.

Chapter End Notes
	hank you so much to everyone for reading and being so kind and so lovely and thank you for all the comments and kudos, i dont reply comments because i dont want to clog the thread but i read each one and they mean so much to me!! I'm pretty sure there is only going to be two chapters and an epilogue left so im a little sad its almost over! thank you again and you can follow my twitter for teasers and update info @tothemoonmydear :)
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So do you think that the little old lady you see sitting on a park bench with her husband of fifty years looks at her husband and thinks 'yeah, I know exactly why he's loved me this long, because I am flawless, and he had better know how lucky he is to have me,' then?" Dr. Chen asks, and Louis can tell he's about to make a point, even without being able to see him.

Louis frowns up at the ceiling, "well no," he says.

"Do you think maybe there is a chance that she looks at her husband and wonders how on earth she got so lucky, and maybe sometimes she wonders why he's put up with her for so long?"

Louis sighs, "yeah, I guess so."

"And do you think maybe sometimes the husband looks at the wife, and wonders the exact same thing?" says Dr. Chen, and Louis can practically picture him pressing his fingertips together.

"Probably," Louis says, "I'd imagine so."

"So then if you could imagine so, for a couple who's been together fifty years, is it not plausible to think that, even if you don't understand why Harry loves you, maybe he does? Maybe he's looking at you and wondering how he got so lucky too?" Dr. Chen asks, "It would certainly make sense, considering even a couple who has been together fifty years could occasionally wonder that about each other."

Louis rubs his eyes, chewing absentmindedly on the corner of his lip, "It's not really- that's not the same thing," he protests.

"Louis, I know you say you don't believe in love, and that Harry can't love you, but I think you know just as well as I do that you do believe in love, but that maybe you're just scared because you don't think you deserve Harry's," Dr. Chen says gently, "or anyone's for that matter."

Louis swallows thickly, and he's glad Dr. Chen can't see him, "I know everything you've said about my mum, and I'm trying to- to consider that maybe that wasn't- that it wasn't my fault. But like-" he huffs out a sigh, because a lump of emotion has worked it's way into his throat.

"But how could Harry possibly love you, if your own mother couldn't," Dr. Chen supplies, hitting the nail right on the head as usual.

"Yeah," Louis squeaks, turning on his side and positioning the phone between his ear and the pillow.

He thinks maybe he can hear the faint scratching of the pen across Dr. Chen's paper, "Louis we've got about five minutes left, but I want to give you something to consider until we talk next week, okay?"

"Okay," he replies.

"Your mother not loving you the way you deserved had absolutely nothing to do with you as a person. You do deserve to be loved, and you do deserve to be cared for; even if she couldn't do that for you because of her own flaws," he repeats the phrase like a mantra, like he has done for Louis a
thousand times before, "That being said, Harry has seen you at your absolute lowest point, and he is still in your life, by his own choice. You've said before that he makes you feel more cared for than anyone in your life has before. Louis, Harry doesn't need your permission to love you; he doesn't need your opinion on whether it makes sense for him to, or not. Whether you believe it or not, if he loves you, he does. The laws of the universe don't prevent it from happening, because you, like every person on this planet, deserve to be loved. It's just a matter of accepting that now."

"Aren't psych doctors usually telling patients to stay out of relationships until they're more comfortable with themselves or something," Louis squeaks, because he doesn't know how to respond correctly.

"Now why on earth would I tell you that, when the thing you struggling with most is feeling unworthy of love, and you already have someone who loves you so unconditionally? It's a lot easier to help you believe something when there is proof right in front of you" Dr. Chen replies simply, but it makes Louis' breath catch in his throat, "that's all for tonight, Louis. Think on those things we talked about, and work on that habit with your eating, alright?"

Louis clears his throat, "okay, I will," he murmurs, "what time am I supposed to call you next week, again?"

"Eleven thirty," he answers.

"Thank you for doing these phone sessions, Dr. C," Louis says.

"You're very welcome, Louis. I'm glad you decided to continue treatment while on vacation," he replies earnestly, "talk to you next week."

Louis lays on his bed for a long time after they hang up. He can hear Liam and his sisters bickering in the den down the hall, and he can smell dinner cooking in the oven. Dr. Chen's words circulate in Louis' mind, playing over and over. He's been at Liam's for over a week already. Liam and Zayn drove to Doncaster together, and he drove with Harry.

He's seen Harry every day, whether Harry has met up with him and the boys, or has come over to the Payne's for dinner. They haven't had much alone time though, because Louis isn't ready to go meet Harry's family yet, and he isn't comfortable doing anything in the bedroom that has become his at the Payne's over the years. Harry has taken him out for dinner, and they've fooled around in the back of his truck, but Louis misses being able to curl up in Harry's arms at night and fall asleep. He misses it so much that it hurts. He'll never admit it to the boys, because he'd never hear the end of it, but he and Harry have fallen asleep on the phone together every night since they got to Doncaster.

Tonight will be the first night they can't do that though, because Harry is going with his family to visit his grandmother in Cheshire for a few days, and he'll be sharing a little bedroom with Gemma. Louis feels pathetic, but he almost cried when Harry dropped him off back at Liam's after their date this afternoon. They had spent the day sharing ice cream cones, and laying in the sun. Louis refused to acknowledge the fact that he wouldn't get to see Harry for three days, and would hardly be able to talk to him for as long.

Now though, he misses Harry so much, it's like a sharp twinge in his gut every time he thinks about it. He wishes he could call Harry, just to hear his voice, but he knows he'll be in the car with his family on the way to Cheshire. He goes to send a text to Harry, but he already has one in the inbox from him.

'I miss you already,' is all it says, but the lump of emotion hasn't quite dislodged from Louis' throat after his conversation with Dr. Chen, and the simple little message adds to it.
'I miss you too, love,' he types back, resisting the urge to type a paragraph about just how much, 'when was the last time we went a day without seeing each other?'

Louis laughs out loud when he reads the response, 'those were dark times Louis, I have tried to block them from my memory,' and just like that he's smiling again.

'Send me nudes,' he says, preferring the light hearted conversation.

'We're in the car you perv!' comes the reply, and then two seconds later, 'wait till I get to Grammy's, I'll find some prvcy :).'

'Will that pretty cock of urs actually be hard this time?' he sends back, giggling into his hand.

'Heyyyyyyyyy,' Harry's message says, and Louis can practically hear that whine he does, 'that was one time, and u know u liked it anyway.'

'Course I did," Louis replies, not even bothering to deny it.

'How was your session?' Harry asks next.

Louis sighs. He reaches to the bedside table and plugs his earphones into his iPhone. He needs to unwind for a bit before he leaves his room. The first half of the session was focused on his eating again, and Dr. Chen was right when he said Louis would slowly start to realize that it isn't about the food, and isn't even really about how he looks. He still feels fat, and disgusting, but he's accepted now that he could have gotten down to ninety pounds and he still would have felt that way, because the problem is inside.

They talked about his mom some more, and he knows they will every session, because that's the root of it all. Dr. Chen talks about her in the middle of the conversation, because usually whatever he wants to discuss at the end is directly relevant to how he feels because of her. He mostly asks questions when it comes to her, but somehow Louis always knows the point Dr. Chen is trying to make without him even having to say it. Then there is this concept that Dr. Chen is trying to get across, that maybe Louis isn't as hopeless as he feels sometimes. Louis is still struggling with that a bit.

'It was okay,' Louis says, not telling Harry the way Chen is rooting for him, trying to help Louis comprehend his love.

'Wish I could call you,' Harry replies.

'Me too,' he texts back, 'babe I'm going to shut my eyes for a bit before dinner, text me when you get there safe?'

'Okay sweetheart, I love you.'

There it is. Those three words that Harry hands over so easily. Louis turns up the music on his phone, and scrolls through his songs. He selects Demons to play, and he tries not to think about how much he associates the lyrics with how he feels about Harry. It's where my demons hide, don't get too close, it's dark inside. He's dark inside. Harry can't love him. It's woven in my soul, I need to let you go, your eyes they shine so bright, I want to save their light. He doesn't want to drag Harry down with him, and he doesn't know if he'll ever get out of the dark.

He's trying. He really is trying. It feels like such a slow process though. He doesn't understand why Harry is still here, after it all. He had still harboured the fear that they might drift apart when they weren't sleeping together every night, but he swears Harry's eyes get softer every time they see each
other. The way he clings to Louis and breathes him in leads Louis to believe that he isn't the only one who hates the distance. He tries to consider a world in which Harry could really love him, and it's a really lovely thought.

He must have dozed off listening to music, with the sun shining through the window and warming him up. He wakes up to Liam shaking his shoulder gently, from where he sits on the edge of the bed. Louis yawns, and smiles up at him. He flops over onto his stomach, and Liam takes the hint and kneads his hands into Louis' shoulders in a massage. Louis groans as Liam's big hands work out all his usual knots.

"Alright, mum has made your favourite for dinner you spoiled brat," Liam says fondly after a while.

"Shepherds pie?" Louis asks.

"Yeah," Liam nods.

Louis actually feels a twinge of a craving in his stomach. There was a time he'd physically wrestle the last piece of Karen's shepherds pie away from Liam. It feels weird that maybe he is a little excited to taste it. Maybe he doesn't want to devour a whole piece and have all those calories sticking under his skin, but he can almost taste it in his mouth right now, and it's delicious.

"Alright, lets go," Louis says.

They go down the hall to the dining room where Karen has a full spread, set up with every side dish Louis could imagine. Nicola and Ruth call out their hello's as he and Liam sit down, and Ruth pours them both juice. Geoff comes out of the kitchen and takes his spot at the head of the table.

"You boys should invite Zayn and Harry over for a footie match tonight. I was cleaning out the shed today and I found those old goal posts for the back yard," he says.

"Harry's gone to his grandmothers in Cheshire, and Zayn's little sister has a dance recital," Liam explains, passing the bread basket to Geoff.

"You should play with us Geoff. Li can be keeper, and you and I will go head to head," Louis suggests, smirking.

Geoff lets out a hoot of laughter, "yeah right," he scoffs, "ye' little shit," he adds fondly, tossing a chunk of his dinner roll at Louis' head.

Louis laughs as Karen comes in, carrying the massive dish of shepherds pie, "Geoff," she shrieks, leaning around Louis to set the dish right in front of him, "don't throw things at my baby," she adds, stooping down to press a kiss to Louis' cheek.

Geoff just chuckles and accepts the kiss Karen bends down to give him, before she takes her seat on the right. Karen tells them all to dig in, and Louis serves himself based on how much he knows Harry would want him to eat if he were here. Liam looks pleased, so he focuses on that, instead of how heavy the meat and potatoes feel in his stomach. It is delicious though, and Karen beams at him when he tells her so.

Liam hasn't told his family anything about Louis' eating disorder, and Louis is so glad, because he knows Karen would literally strap him into a bed and force feed him. As he listens to the happy conversation bubbling around him, he thinks about how lucky he is to have this family that has taken him in since day one. He remembers family dinners with the Payne's when he and Liam were in grade school. He remembers sitting at this same table and wondering why he and his mum couldn't have family dinners like this. He'd try his best to cook better, and he'd ask his mum to sit down and
eat so they could talk about their days. He was hoping to recreate the happiness he always felt at Liam's, but she was always too busy.

If he can make himself stop thinking about her, and just think about how at home he feels at this dining table with this family, when he laughs and smiles along with the conversation it feels real. He always feels like a burden when Liam and Zayn drag him home, and he insists he'd be okay staying at the flat while they visit their families. They’d never let him though, and both of their moms called to lecture Louis the one time he tried to stay at the flat for Christmas. Inside he knows he’d be lonely as hell by himself in London though, and he always feels so good to be surrounded by these people.

Harry texts him after dinner when he’s sitting wedged between Karen and Liam on the couch watching telly. Later, when Geoff turns on football, the girls and Karen go off to watch a movie in the upstairs loft. Louis and Liam crack a beer and watch the game with him. Zayn wanders over when he gets home from his sisters dance performance and they all hang out; watching the game like they always do when the boys are home from school.

Louis has been texting Harry all night, but it just isn't the same. He's already accepted that he probably isn't going to get any sleep tonight. He hasn’t heard Harry's voice since he gave him a kiss on the porch this afternoon, and told him he loved him. He wonders when he became so codependent, when he started needing Harry like the air that he breathes.

'I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight :(,' he sends to Harry, as he goes to grab everyone another beer from the fridge.

'Yes you will, don't worry babe. I have surprise for you,' comes Harry's reply.

'Surprise? What is it?' Louis texts.

'You'll get it before bed. Please save me, my granny is making me hold her ball of yarn while she knits.'

Louis snorts to himself, the boys ignore him because Harry's been making him chuckle all night so they're used to it. He can picture Harry sitting on the floor at his grandmothers feet, listening politely to her rambling on, with a big ball of yarn wrapped around his paws. He'd never complain even if he wasn't enjoying himself, but Louis knows how much Harry loves his grandma and he knows Harry is probably secretly loving the time he's getting to spend with her.

'Well if that doesn't sound like such a cute picture,' he replies, smiling to himself, 'but seriously, can you please tell me what the surprise is?'

'U r a total brat. I'm not telling you. Granny is knitting you a scarf,' Harry's text says.

Louis feels his cheeks warm a little, 'you told your grandma about me?'

'And shown her every picture of you in my phone. She loves you just as much as mum and Gems now.'

Louis blushed even more at that, a confusing mix of feelings in his stomach. He doesn't know what he's supposed to say to that. Part of him is uncomfortable because he's already so worried about meeting Harry's family. He knows he won't be meeting Harry's grandma, but Harry's family is just so intimidating. They're all so close knit and Harry values their opinions so highly. Louis is terrified they're going to hate him.

Not to mention how sad it makes Louis that he doesn't have the option to show Harry off to his family the way Harry deserves to be shown off. He'd love to have a family he could brag about
Harry to. It's confusing. He finds himself thinking that maybe he should talk to Dr. Chen about that next week. It kind of hits him then, that this whole therapy thing might actually be working a bit. He finally feels like he has someone who can help him sort out all the thoughts and feelings in his head. It helps make things feel less overwhelming.

'Did I say something wrong?' Harry asks, alerted by Louis taking so long to respond.

He bites down on his lip, and stays honest, 'just nervous about meeting your family, and kinda sad that I don't have a family to show you off to…'

He chews on the corner of his thumb nail while he waits for a response. He wishes they could talk on the phone, but he doesn't want to be interrupting Harry's family time. Harry's response comes in a series of pings from his phone, meaning it's coming through in multiple parts. He should have known Harry would type him a novel.

'Please don't be nervous about meeting my family, I swear to you they're going to love you. They already do, just from what I've told them. Mum is so excited to have you over, she talks about it all the time. One day you'll meet granny too, and she'll love you just as much. They just want me to be happy, and and they see how happy you make me, so they love you. You've nothing to worry about,' comes the first part, and Louis can picture his long thumbs taking ages to type all that out.

He bites down on his lip, as he feels warmth spread throughout his chest. Harry has said the same thing to him a million times, has reassured him over and over, but sometimes he just needs to hear it again. He makes Harry happy. Harry's family isn't going to hate him for being gay with their son. Harry's family is okay with him being gay, and is okay with Louis being gay with Harry. Louis is so glad. His phone starts pinging again, as the second batch of texts come through.

'Baby, I just want you to know how much it meant to me when you brought me over to Liam's. I wasn't sure how comfortable you would be showing our relationship in front of them, because I didn't really know how their family was with that stuff. So I was prepared to tone it down, because I didn't want to make you uncomfortable. But the way you held my hand the whole time, and introduced me as your boyfriend, meant so much to me. And that first time we had dinner with Li's family, and they were asking me questions, and you kept adding in little things about me that I didn't even know you had noticed. You were even bragging about me. That made me feel so good. And maybe they aren't your blood, but when I saw you all interacting at dinner, I knew that you fit into that family just as well as Liam does. So in a way you've already shown me off to your family, and now I can't wait to get home and show you off to mine.'

The message part comes in four parts, and Louis feels the emotion building in his throat bit by bit. It means a lot because he is so desperate for Harry to know how lucky Louis knows he is, how thankful Louis is to have Harry. He had known he was bragging about Harry at dinner with the Payne's, because he genuinely thinks Harry is the best thing to walk the earth. What means the most though, is what Harry said about Louis fitting in with the Payne's.

With Dr. Chen's help Louis has been working on finally letting himself realize that both the Payne's and the Malik's accept him as family. It's always been so hard for him to believe, because he's always felt like a burden on everybody. Except Harry just said he thinks Louis fits in. All Louis has ever wanted was to have a place where he fit. Maybe Louis has a family to show Harry off to. Maybe Louis has two families actually, because the Malik's have taken him in just as much as the Payne's.

He skims his thumbs over the screen for a long time, but a text isn't enough to tell Harry thank you for what he's just said, 'How do you always say what I need to hear?' is all he can think to text.

'Because you always just need to hear the truth,' comes Harry's reply.
Louis sniffs, trying to bite back a smile, and keep his eyes dry at the same time. Instantly Liam and Zayn are looking at him, checking to make sure he's okay. He gives them a smile, so they know he's good. He tries to think of something to say but Harry often leaves him at a loss. He used to be confused by all the overly sweet or deep things Harry used to say. He's still confused by them, but now instead of making him uncomfortable those things make his heart swell.

'I miss you :(,' is the truest thing he can think of to say back.

'I miss you too, sweetheart,' Harry replies.

Eventually Geoff goes to bed, and Louis gets cuddled up with Zayn and Liam on the couch. They slouch, tangled up together, and play Call of Duty, until it gets late. Liam and Louis walk Zayn home, because he's just a block over. They decide they'll all go to the mall tomorrow, and Louis is glad he'll be out of the house and hopefully able to keep his mind off the curly headed brat who consumes his thoughts.

When Louis climbs into bed he sends a text to Harry, 'I'm in bed, what are you doing?'

'I'm in bed reading. Gems is snoring, and not cute little snuffles like you do, like full on snoring. Kill me,' comes Harry's reply.

'I do not snuffle!'

'You also drool a little. It's cute.'

'Says the guy who sleeps with his mouth open so wide I could fit my fist in,' Louis types back.

'That isn't saying much, you have tiny hands,' Harry counters.

'Wanker,' Louis says, even though he's smiling like an idiot.

'Are you ready to go to sleep?' Harry asks randomly.

'Yeah, I'm sleepy but I hate sleeping alone now…. :('

'Do you want your surprise?' Harry's text says.

Louis' face lights up, he had forgotten about the surprise, 'what is it'

'I'll send it over now, get comfy in bed with your lights off, first. Love you baby.'

'Okay… sweet dreams babe,' Louis says, so excited for whatever it is.

'Sweet dreamssss xxxxxxxxx,' Harry sends, and then a moment later another text pings in.

It's an audio file, and he realizes Harry must be sending him a song that is meant to help him go to sleep. He reaches over to turn off his bedside lamp, and snuggles under the covers. He plugs his earphones into his phone, because his room is right next to Ruth's and he doesn't want to disturb her. When he is all settled in he hits the play button.

"Hi, baby," Harry's voice says, softly into his earphones, "I knew I wouldn't be able to call you tonight, so I recorded this before we left for granny's. I haven't even bloody left yet and I already miss you so much, just thinking about how much it's going to suck not falling asleep on the phone with you. Sorry if this sucks, but I hope you like it, and I hope you have sweet dreams. I Love you Louis."
Louis' hand is covering his mouth to stifle the 'awwww' that is fighting to come out. Harry recorded a little bedtime message for him. He thinks it's the sweetest thing ever. He gets to hear Harry tell him he loves him right before bed.

He's about to replay it, to listen again, when Harry clears his throat and Louis realizes the recording isn't done. What he hears has his heart suddenly going a mile a minute. At first Harry is just humming, setting up a tune like he always does before he sings to Louis; and then he is singing.

"When the rain is blowing in your face, and the whole world is on your case, I could offer you a warm embrace, to make you feel my love," he sings, his voice soft, "when the evening shadows and the stars appear, and there is no one there to dry your tears, I could hold you for a million years, to make you feel my love."

He keeps his voice quiet, but it holds that rocky tone that comes from deep inside him, smoothing out at the edges like silk. Louis shuts his eyes and it's like Harry is there, laying beside him. It's acapella and the way he's just singing into the tiny mic on his phone makes it sound so raw, and intimate.

"I know you haven't made your mind up yet, but I would never do you wrong, I've known it from the moment that we met, no doubt in my mind where you belong." Louis doesn't think he's heard this song before, but as the lyrics, and Harry's voice wash over him, he feels it in his core, "I'd go hungry, I'd go black and blue, I'd go crawling down the avenue, no there's nothing that I wouldn't do, to make you feel my love."

Harry sings the next verse and it hits Louis, just how much this really means to him. This isn't Harry being a cheesy romantic. This is Harry knowing how hard it is for Louis to sleep without him, and this is Harry coming as close as he possibly can to being there for him. This isn't Harry singing Louis the cheesiest song he could think of. This is Harry telling Louis again, in his beautiful singing voice, that he isn't going anywhere until Louis knows how much Harry loves him.

"I could make you happy, make your dreams come true, nothing that I wouldn't do, go to the ends of the earth for you, to make you feel my love," Harry's angelic voice shakes a little on the last words, sounding beautifully honest, "to make you feel my love."

Louis hits replay, and sniffs into his pillow. He falls asleep thinking of big hands holding him, green eyes smiling at him, and the voice of an angel. He falls asleep thinking that maybe he can feel it. That maybe he's been able to feel it all along.

~

Louis is sitting on the couch, braiding Safaa's hair as she sits cross-legged at his feet. He switched over to Zayn's house yesterday, after spending the first two weeks at Liam's. Yaser and Patricia are laughing in the kitchen, Waliyha has her head resting in Zayn's lap, and Doniya is reading by the window.

"LouLou, does Harry drive a truck?" Doniya asks, absentmindedly.

"Yeah, why do you ask?" he replies, putting a ponytail at the end of Safaa's long silky braid.

"I think he's just pulled up out front," Doniya answers.

"What!" Louis shrieks, "he's not due back until tomorrow!"

He leaps up from the couch and bolts to the window. Sure enough, Harry's truck is in front of the house, and he's climbing out. Louis sprints through the house and flies out the front door. Harry's entire face lights up the moment he sees Louis and he spreads his arms. Louis launches himself at
Harry and then he's in the air, Harry spinning him around in a circle and clinging to him. Louis' legs wrap around Harry's hips and he buries his face in Harry's neck, breathing in that smell he's missed so much that it hurt. They had ended up agreeing to stay a few extra days at Harry's grandmothers. Louis had been so sad when he found out Harry would be gone even longer.

"You're early!" Louis giggles, as Harry nuzzles at his jaw.

"Gemma faked sick for me so we could leave, so I could come see you," Harry says, still not putting Louis down.

"Fuck, I missed you," Louis groans.

Harry pulls back, and their eyes meet for a second before their lips are crashing together. They taste each other like they're each others last meal, like they'll never get to kiss each other again. Louis finally feels whole again. Like Harry took a piece of him when he left, and he's just returned it back. Louis thinks maybe that piece is his heart.

"I missed you too. I love you," Harry says, when they pull back panting.

Louis realizes he's still wrapped around Harry like a koala bear, and he unwarps his legs. Apparently Harry is not ready to put him down though, and he still easily holds Louis up with his arms wrapped around his lower back. Louis laughs and rolls his eyes as Harry peppers his face with kisses. Finally Harry puts him down, but Louis can't stop himself from standing on his tiptoes to steal one more kiss.

"I have a surprise for you," Harry says, "Can you go put on some sweats, a t-shirt, and a hoodie and then come with me for the night?"

Louis raises his eyebrows in surprise, "for the night?" he asks.

"Yeah, don't ask questions, it's a surprise. Just come with me?" Harry replies, grinning mischievously.

"Alright," Louis nods, biting back his own grin, "you going to come meet Zayn's family?"

"Yes, I'm going to come meet your family," Harry says, and Louis blushes.

Louis leads Harry up the path, and the skittering of feet when he opens the door tells him everyone was at the front window watching their exchange. He doesn't even mind. Patricia is leaning a little too casually on the mantle, and everyone is sitting unnaturally still, as they try to look like they were just hanging out in the living room. Louis tugs Harry in by the hand and rolls his eyes at all of them.

"Don't bother pretending you weren't creeping from the window," he says, and they all laugh, "guys this is Harry. Harry this is Doniya, Waliyha, Safaa, and Patricia, Zayn's mum."

Suddenly the babble of the four women's voices fills the room, all of them talking a mile a minute. Harry just grins bashfully, and Louis waits for them to get it all out. They already know all about Harry from what Louis has told them. Harry blushes beet red when Patricia calls him handsome, and when Safaa tells him he's got cool hair. Waliyha tells Harry she likes how he's big enough to protect Louis. Louis blushes more than Harry at that.

"I'm going out for the night with Harry, I'm just going to go change," Louis says, leaving Harry with the girls and Zayn.

When he comes back down in his sweatpants and hoodie he finds Harry being fawned over by the Malik women. Zayn comes out of the kitchen and claps Louis on the back. They stand unnoticed in
the doorway together for a moment. Patricia is showing Harry Louis' graduation picture, which they keep on the mantle next to Zayn's and Doniya's grad pictures, and Safaa and Waliya's school pictures.

"You're going to like your surprise," Zayn says with a grin, "your boyfriend is like a bloody disney prince or something."

Louis just grins from ear to ear, "I know, it's wonderful," he says dreamily.

Zayn just snorts, but it draws the attention from the living room. Harry smiles at Louis like the disney prince he is, and Louis' heart pitter-patters in his chest. The girls let Harry stand up from the couch, and he comes over to Louis. They all come give Harry a hug, and Patricia makes him promise to stay for dinner tomorrow night, after he and Louis get back from the surprise. Louis can't wait to find out what the surprise is.

Louis is bending over to pull on his shoes when Yaser comes out of the kitchen. Yaser is just naturally intimidating, he's got a serious face, and a strong build, and when he frowns he looks like he could rip somebody's head off. He's frowning at Harry, looking him up and down. He's a full head shorter than Harry, but his chest is puffed out, and he somehow looks ten times bigger. Harry stands with his hands behind his back and smiles nervously. Harry has no idea that Yaser honestly has the gentlest heart, and is so ridiculously kind.

Louis tries to keep a straight face, because it's hilarious watching Harry squirm, "This is my boyfriend Harry," Louis tells him seriously, "Harry, this is Zayn's dad Yaser."

Yaser reaches out a hand, and Harry hurries to shake it, "really nice to meet you, sir," Harry says, his voice coming out a little squeaky.

Yaser doesn't smile, and Louis wonders how hard he's squeezing Harry's hand, "you better be planning on taking good care of my boy," he says, in his gruff voice, nodding at Louis.

"I do sir, I will," Harry insists, nodding his head so hard his curls bounce.

Louis can hear the girls starting to giggle in the living room, because they know just as well as Louis does how much of a softie their dad truly is. Louis is fighting down his own laughter, so he drags Harry towards the front door. Yaser grins at him and winks when Harry isn't looking. Louis yells a 'goodbye' to everyone, and they yell one back. Harry politely calls out a 'nice to meet you' before Louis pulls him out of the house. The sun is just getting ready to set as Harry holds open the passenger door for Louis.

Harry breathes a heavy sigh when they're both in the truck, "Yaser is fucking terrifying," he says.

Louis bursts out laughing and shakes his head, "Yaser is the nicest dad I've ever met, he was just fucking with you babe," he sniggers, "you'll see when you come for dinner."

Harry looks scandalized, "is that why the girls were laughing?"

"Yeah," Louis laughs, "you looked like you were going to wee in your pants!"

"Mean!" Harry whines, as he pulls onto the road, "I don't know if you deserve your surprise now."

"Harry!" Louis whines right back, putting on his best pout.

Harry takes one glance over and laughs, "put that bottom lip away before I crash the truck trying to kiss you."
"Do I get my surprise?"

"Of course," Harry says, reaching out and taking Louis' hand, "get comfy, we've got a bit of a drive."

Louis is so curious he thinks he might die, but he stays quiet because he's just so happy to be sitting next to Harry again. He finds himself re-memorizing every detail of Harry's profile. Harry smiles softly under Louis' scrutiny, without taking his eyes off the road. Music plays quietly in the background, and Louis thinks if they drove all night without talking it would still be a perfect night.

Harry tells him about his visit with his grandma, and Louis tells Harry about Liam and Zayn. They're laughing about something when Louis finally realizes the sun has set, and they're driving in the middle of nowhere. Harry drives along a dirt road, his headlights illuminating the trees lining the path. Finally the trees open up and they're staring at an open field with very tall grass.

The moonlight shines across the huge field, showing that there is nothing but trees surrounding the patch of open land. Harry's truck drives easily through the tall grass. Louis looks at him with a million questions, but Harry just grins. Louis is even more confused when Harry drives in a small circle in the middle of the field so they're facing back the direction they came.

"Alright, put this on please," Harry says, reaching in the back seat and handing Louis a simple black eye mask.

"What the hell are you doing Harry?" Louis asks, but he takes the mask and puts it on.

"Just trust me. Please don't peek until I tell you," Harry asks.

"Alright," Louis agrees, feeling something like a kid on Christmas.

He listens, unable to see anything, as Harry gets out of the truck. He hears the back door being opened and Harry's legs swishing through the grass. He can't pinpoint what Harry is doing by the noises he hears. It feels like forever before the back door closes, and then Louis feels his passenger door open.

"Okay, don't peek. Here let me help you out of the truck," Harry says, taking Louis' hands.

Apparently helping him out of the truck means picking him up and setting him on the ground, but Louis only complains minimally. He can tell Harry is leading him through the grass to the back of the truck. He complains about how he hates being blindfolded, but Harry just presses a kiss to his head. When they stop, and Harry pulls off his blindfold, Louis' heart jumps up into his throat.

In the back of the truck, underneath piles of blankets and pillows, is an air mattress. On the roof of the truck, shining a soft glow into the bed of the truck, is a battery powered lantern. On the folded down tailgate sits a cooler, with a bottle of wine and two glasses sitting on top. The bed Harry has made in the back of the truck looks so plush, and cozy. The moon is shining down on them, mixing with the soft glow of the lantern, and the sky is glistening with a million stars.

"Oh my god," Louis whispers.

"We're going to sleep under the stars tonight. I know you're not ready to sleep at mine, or have me stay at Zayn's, but I just needed to sleep with you. I just wanted it to be perfect," Harry says quietly, "I checked the weather, it's going to be warm enough."

"Harry it is perfect," Louis says, turning and looking up at him with awe, "this is so absolutely perfect."
A smile splits Harry's face, "I missed sleeping with you," he says softly.

"Me too," Louis agrees.

"I brought some snacks and stuff because you said you've eaten dinner, right?" he asks, and Louis nods, "and I got that wine you like."

"Are you even real?" Louis asks, reaching up to wind his fingers through Harry's curls.

Harry blushes, and Louis doesn't protest when he scoops Louis up under the thighs and lifts him over to the tailgate of the truck. He stands in the v between Louis' legs, and joins their lips, his big hand coming up to cup Louis' jaw. Louis deepens the kiss, wrapping his legs around Harry's hips to draw him closer.

Their hands roam each other like they've been separated for years. They keen into each others mouths, whimpering each others names. Their hips buck against each other, Harry's hand slips up the back of Louis' shirt. Louis deepens the kiss, and then their hands are moving in a flurry, pulling at each other, as their hips rut. Before Louis knows what's happening, Harry's knees are up on the tailgate, so he's looming over Louis. Louis' legs stay wrapped around his hips, as Harry loops an arm around Louis' back.

Louis squeaks when Harry lifts him, so he's hanging off Harry like a baby gorilla under his mums tummy, and somehow scoots them further back into the truck bed. Harry lowers Louis down onto the air mattress, and the plush blankets are soft against his back. Louis' hands pull at Harry's pull over sweatshirt until Harry breaks the kiss and lets Louis pull it off. Louis sits up against Harry's chest so Harry can tug off his hoodie too.

Harry's hands fumble with the drawstring of Louis' sweatpants, while Louis pulls off his t-shirt. He shivers a little at the warm breeze, but it isn't too cool. He drags Harry's t-shirt up, over his head, and then works his sweats down his ass. When they're both in just their boxers, Harry's chin dips and he starts kissing at Louis' chest.

"So beautiful Louis, fuck I've missed you," Harry murmurs, his lips tracing the column of Louis' neck.

Louis feels his skin flush, as he tips his chin back, exposing more of it for Harry. Harry's hands reach behind him and palm Louis' ass, his huge hands easily cupping each cheek. Louis had never realized how much of an ass man Harry is, but now that his is filling back out, Harry is completely mesmerized by it. He tells Louis about ten times a day how perfect his ass is, his fingers are always trailing down, stealing touches of it.

Harry drags off Louis' boxer briefs, and pushes him gently further up on the air mattress. Louis' hands fist in Harry's hair, as he hooks Louis' legs over his shoulders and tips his head down. His hands knead Louis' ass, his thumbs pressing into the crease of Louis' hips. He licks a thick strip up the underside of Louis' dick, his tongue tracing the line between the base of his shaft and his balls. Louis keens, and presses his head back into one of the pillows.

"So perfect," Harry coos, pressing kisses to the inside of Louis' thighs, "can't stand being away from you."

"Me neither," Louis whines, trying not to grind his hips towards Harry's face, "need you."

Harry's eyes meet his from between his legs, "need you too," Harry whines, "want this forever."

Louis knows it isn't a question, he knows Harry is stating it, but he answers anyway, "yes. I want
this forever," he moans, as Harry's hot mouth envelopes his cock.

Harry's thumb brushes softly at Louis' hole and he whimpers, "want to taste you," Harry groans, when he lets Louis out of his mouth.

Louis keens, his cock twitching in interest, "okay," he pants.

Harry's lips trail down the crease of Louis' thigh beside his dick. His palms lift Louis' ass with ease, and he slips a pillow under, propping up Louis' hips. When Harry's tongue traces the puckered rim of Louis' hole, Louisgasps a breath, his hands tightening in Harry's hair. His whole body quivers as Harry's tongue works him open. Louis whimpers Harry's name when he presses in, warm and wet. Harry keeps going until Louis is trembling, and panting, his hips canting as his cock searches for friction.

"Harry please," Louis begs, "please."

Harry presses a last kiss to Louis' hole, and then comes up and reaches to the back corner of the truck bed. He comes back with lube, and he's slicked up and lined up with Louis' hole in seconds. He pauses though, hovering over Louis, with Louis' legs on either side of his hips.

Louis looks up at Harry and his breath hitches. Harry's mouth is bright red and wet with his own saliva, from working Louis open. His pupils are blown with heat, and his chest is heaving. Harry reaches out, and when his hand cups Louis' cheek his touch is so infinitely gentle that Louis feels frozen in the moment. When he leans down, and presses his lips to Louis' the passion is there, but the kiss is so soft, and so tender, it almost feels.....reverent.

"Louis," Harry says, his voice rocky with lust, "you are the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Louis can see it in his eyes. That soft look, that wraps him up, and buries beneath his skin. That softness that makes him feel so cared for. Nobody has ever looked at Louis like that. As Harry presses into Louis, with their eyes locked, and his radiating that softness, Louis thinks maybe that look in his eyes is love.

Harry's hips roll, his arms circle Louis. Louis' fingers curl around Harry's biceps. Harry rocks into Louis, over and over, making Louis pant. He tips his chin forward, his lips finding Louis' tummy, his chest, his hips. He kisses and kisses, murmuring 'I love you' and 'you're so beautiful' and 'you're perfect'. Louis can't find it in himself to care that he can see his thighs giggling around Harry's hips, because Harry is worshipping every inch of his skin, and Louis thinks he sees love in his eyes.

Harry hits Louis' spot and Louis cries out his name, making Harry cry out as Louis clenches around him. Louis looks up at the sky, at the stars shining down on them, and he wonders when this became his life. He has no fucking clue why this earth bound angel loves him, but he thinks maybe, for some insane reason, he does. Harry loves him.

It's in the way he says Louis' name, it's in his eyes, it's in the words he says, but also the things Harry does. It's been right in front of Louis the whole time. Harry has been showering Louis with love since day one, but Louis just couldn't see it. He was too scared to see it, too scared to believe it; because if he did he knew it would be taken. He feels it now though. He feels Harry's love for him in his bones. It washes over him like a tidal wave.

Harry presses their lips together, his tongue caressing Louis' as they kiss. Louis whimpers into his mouth as Harry hits his prostate over and over. It's insane to Louis how Harry can be pressing into him, working Louis up from the inside out, and yet his thumb is so gentle as it caresses Louis' cheek. Louis realizes that this truly is making love. Then Harry pulls back, and looks down at Louis with
that look in his eyes.

"I love you so much," Harry breathes.

That, coupled with a perfectly aimed thrust, has Louis cumming harder than he ever has before. His dick hasn't even had a single touch, but he's shooting so hard some of it hits his neck and he cries out Harry's name at the top of his lungs. Harry lets out a guttural moan of Louis' name, as Louis clenches around him. Then he's cumming too, filling Louis up with wet heat. As he rides out his orgasm, Harry leans forward and laps up all of the cum striping Louis' neck.

After, when they've regained their ability to breathe and move, Harry produces a towel from somewhere and wipes off the cum on Louis' stomach and chest, and then tenderly dabs at Louis' red and flushed bum. He presses kisses to every inch of Louis’ skin again, dotting Louis with his love. Louis lets Harry redress him, his hands so gentle and careful, and then he watches Harry pull his own clothes back on. He watches Harry pour them both a glass of wine. He takes in the love shining from Harry's eyes as he gathers Louis in his arms, and they clink their glasses together before taking a sip.

"You really love me," Louis says softly.

Harry meets his eyes, and he's quiet for a moment as he turns over the implications of Louis' words, "I do," he says finally, "with all of my heart."

"With all of your heart," Louis repeats slowly, letting the words wash over his skin, and finally, finally letting himself feel them.

"And I will forever," Harry says, his thumb brushing Louis' cheekbone.

"Forever," Louis mumbles, focusing on allowing himself to believe it.

"Do you believe me?" Harry asks hesitantly, not breaking their gaze.

"Yeah," Louis says, completely honestly, "I do believe you. I believe that you love me."

Harry's smile after Louis says that, is brighter than ever star in the sky above them.

Chapter End Notes

omg only two more chapters left!!! you guys have been so amazing thank you for reading and for the comments and kudos <3
Whoever said that falling in love happens slowly and gradually is a bloody fucking liar. Louis doesn't know if it's because he's postponed the realization for as long as humanely possible, or if it really just happened all at once, but it hit him like a bloody fucking freight train. Two weeks after he finally, finally let himself accept the fact that Harry bloody Styles is head over fucking heels in love with him, he gets slapped across the face.

He's laying in bed at Zayn's, trying desperately to avoid the sun shining through the blinds, when he hears his bedroom door open. He almost cusses at Zayn to leave him be, but then he remembers that sometimes the girls like to hop in bed and wake him up. He decides to bury further into the bed and try to fall asleep. His phone is smooshed against his cheek still, from falling asleep with Harry last night. His chest is a little sticky from the hushed phone sex that took place before. Everything seems hotter when you have to keep your voice down.

He hears the intruder padding around his room, but his curiosity doesn't outweigh his desire to stay in bed. It could be the girls, planning an ambush, to jump on him. It could be Zayn stealing something to wear out of his suitcase, or trying to think of the most obnoxious way to wake him up. He's going to meet Harry's family today, and he wants to make himself as presentable as possible, so he probably should get up now, but he's just so cozy.

He's expecting to be tackled, he's expecting to get a slobbery finger shoved in his ear, he's expecting to be beat by pillows, he's expecting to have the blankets ripped off him; he's expecting to be tortured awake by either the girls, or Zayn. He is not expecting what actually happens.

The edge of the bed sinks down, and he holds his breath. The blankets are pulled back from his head, so his bare shoulders are exposed, but he keeps his eyes shut and his breathing steady. His muscles are coiled to tackle if it turns out to be Zayn fucking with him, and he's ready for a tickle fight if it's the girls. Except then there are lips pressed against his shoulder. Soft, and warm, and just a little moist, as the lips graze his skin.

His heart clenches and he almost breathes out Harry's name, but he's enjoying it too much. The lips trace up the line of his neck, even though it's scrunched at an awkward angle. When Harry's lips press at that sensitive spot behind his ear, his breath rushes out of him. Harry pretends not to hear. A hand slides across Louis' stomach, and up his bare chest, a thumb teasing softly at one of Louis' nipples. Harry suckles lightly along Louis' jaw, and Louis has to bite back a whine. None of it is meant to be sexual; all of the touches are tender and sweet.

The mattress creaks, as Harry crawls over him, onto the other side of the bed. Harry isn't very graceful as he slips under the covers next to Louis, but he manages to wedge himself in between Louis' body and the wall. When Harry is under the covers his arm loops easily around Louis' middle, and pulls him closer. Louis whines and rolls over, keeping his eyes closed as he snuggles closer. Harry's arms wrap around him, and Louis tangles their legs together. Louis feels completely encompassed.

He's wide awake now, but also completely relaxed and content, so he has even less desire to move. Other than burying deeper into Harry's arms. He knew how much he's missed falling asleep next to Harry all vacation, but he'd never thought about how much he's missed waking up next to Harry, until now. It isn't quite the same, because Harry doesn't have his morning smell; that sweet muskiness
that comes from him getting warm in the night but refusing to let go of Louis, but it's still amazing to
wake up in Harry's arms.

Harry's fingertips knead softly at Louis' scalp, and Louis is about two seconds away from purring.
He finally pries one eye open, and the very first thing he sees in the morning is an angel. This angel
has ridiculously full red lips, and the longest eyelashes Louis has ever seen. The sun is shining on the
back of the angels luscious curls, like a halo. Then, the angel opens his eyes, and when blue meets
green, and the angel smiles, Louis realizes that he is a fucking bloody goner.

It hits him like the ground when he's skydiving and his parachute doesn't open. It hits him like the
boards when he's playing in the NHL and someone twice his size bodychecks him. It hits him like
the rafters giving out on the burning building he's in. It hits him like the dirt when he's bucked off
and then the bull turns around to trample him. It hits him like he's driving a hundred miles an hour at
a brick wall and his brakes are shot.

It leaves him breathless, like someone has tied an anvil to his ankle and tossed him over the side of
the boat. He's breathless like he's sinking, down into a rift in the ocean floor. So deep that the
pressure feels like it's collapsing his lungs. The water is heating up as he gets closer to the centre of
the earth, and there are freaky fishes with big teeth and lights hanging from their heads, watching him
sink. He's drowning in it, choking on it. It's strangling him.

He is in love with Harry. He loves Harry with every fibre of his being. His mind reels through every
single thing he loves about Harry so fast it leaves him spinning. It's everything. He loves everything.
Every single bloody thing about Harry. Every fucking thing. He loves Harry as a whole, with all his
quirks, and his flaws, and his gifts, and his perfect parts. He loves Harry bit by bit, every little thing
laid out separately and analyzed. He loves the things about Harry that should drive him crazy. He
loves the things about Harry that Harry doesn't even know about himself. Louis loves Harry. Harry
loves Louis. Louis is in love with Harry. Harry and Louis are in love.

Louis' eyes snap shut, and he almost head-butts Harry with how quickly he tries to hide his face
against Harry's chest. Louis thinks maybe he would be hyperventilating if he could even breathe at
all. Harry feels him tense, but all it takes is a few gentle strokes of his huge palm, down the middle of
Louis' spine, and Louis is unwinding in his arms again. Louis wants to be freaked out at Harry's
innate ability to soothe him, but all it takes is a few more strokes and Louis is breathing again, so he
can't complain.

Louis just focuses on that hand smoothing the tension out of his spine, and the touch slowly
steadying his rabbiting heart. He thinks maybe once upon a time, he would have just bolted out of
Harry's arms faster than he could spell love. He knows for sure that once upon a time his brain would
be caving in with fears about being inadequate, about being abandoned, about being torn apart. He
keeps his eyes closed and waits for those feelings to pull him under and crush him, but they never
come.

He's sunk to the bottom of the ocean, and the air has been stolen from his lungs, but it doesn't hurt,
and it isn't scary. It's like he's so deep in the water that he's cushioned. The depth and the pressure
makes everything silent. Makes everything so quiet he can hear the blood pounding in his ears. It's
like he can feel his love for Harry pumping through his veins; something thick, and tangible, and
real.

He swallows past the pressure in his throat and raises his face out of where he's burrowed in Harry's
skin. He props himself up on his elbows so he's over top of Harry, and slowly peeks his eyes open.
Harry is smiling up at him like he's the biggest weirdo in the world, but there is so much love in his
eyes it's electric. Louis feels a smile working itself across his face, and he wonders if Harry can see
the love in his eyes. Surely he should be able to see if now, should be able to feel it. Because Louis can sure as hell feel it radiating off of him in waves.

Harry just keeps smiling softly up at him though, as his hand raises to brush Louis' fringe off his forehead. Louis leans into the touch, and lets himself memorize every pane of Harry's face. He smiles bigger when one of the corners of Harry's mouth pulls higher, revealing his teeth and a dimple in his crooked smile. Harry puckers his lips and Louis tips his chin down and kisses him, long and deep.

Louis pulls back, his bare chest flush with the cotton of Harry's t-shirt. He wants to say it. He wants to watch the way Harry's face changes when he hears that finally, finally, Louis loves him back. Louis kind of hates himself for taking so bloody long to figure it out. He's wanted to say it for so long, so many times the words have been right on the tip of his tongue. He couldn't though, because he knew in his heart that the minute he said those words he would have been sent into a tailspin. He wasn't strong enough then, to love Harry the way he deserves to be loved. He didn't trust himself enough to trust Harry enough to love him. It had nothing to do with Harry not being loveable. It had to do with Louis not believing he deserved Harry's love, and not believing it was okay for him to love someone. It was a potent cocktail of self loathing and Harry didn't deserve to be added to that mix, more that he already was. If Louis had said those three words before he was ready he would have been completely on edge, completely paranoid, because in his mind it wasn't even an option for him and Harry to be happy together in that way.

He would have either run away, or he would have pushed Harry away until he broke. It was stupid but Louis needed the security of telling himself Harry didn't love him, and that he didn't love Harry, to let himself be with Harry. If he could say, 'it's fine, we're not in love,' he could let himself just be with Harry and be happy with what they had. Louis knows that all his talks with Dr. Chen have helped him with this love thing, but it honestly doesn't just come down to that.

Realizing that Harry truly does love him, was one of the most freeing things Louis has ever experienced. To finally be able to accept that someone takes him, just the way he is, made him feel so free. Like he didn't have to put on an act anymore, like he could finally be himself. Except when his eyes were open to that, he finally realized that he wasn't acting with Harry anymore. He finally saw that Harry is the one person in the world, who opened him up, and held him open, and looked upon all the twisted and gnarled parts inside of him, and still loved him.

Louis doesn't know when it got to the point that Harry was seeing the completely true, completely unaltered essence of who Louis is, but he does know that Harry never faltered. Every time Harry has said I love you since that night in the truck the words have gone straight to Louis' heart. Louis has realized that he isn't the only one responsible for stitching his wounds anymore. He doesn't need to tuck himself away and try to piece himself back together on his own anymore. Harry is there, shining his light, steadying Louis' hand, adding threads, and stitches, and patches of his own. He helped patch Louis up until the cracks were filled, and the holes were closed. He's patched Louis up with his love.

Now it's like Louis' heart is finally strong enough not to leak if he makes a wrong move. Now his heart is finally able to hold something in it, to keep something in. The love that has been building in his heart for Harry isn't slipping through the cracks anymore, isn't seeping out faster than it can be replaced. It was like a bucket with a hole right at the bottom. No matter how much the love built up, how easy it should have been to feel full of love for Harry, Louis was always leaking faster than his heart could be filled.

But now, with the holes patched, the love has built up like it should have in the first place. It's built up so much that it's overflowed. Louis feels full, and whole, and heavy with the love that he has for
Harry. He wants to scream it in Harry's face, he wants to bite it into Harry's skin. He wants to tell him those three little words that the beautiful boy has been waiting so long to hear.

Except Harry deserves so much more than that. He deserves more than a sleep confession, in a messed up bed, with morning breath. He deserves an airplane writing it in the clouds, he deserves a song sung across the radio, he deserves the world. Louis doesn't just want to murmur it at him as they lay here on an average day, not even in their bed. Harry deserves flowers, and chocolates, and romance. Something astounding and perfect and sweet, so that when Louis finally says the words, he'll know how much Louis has thought about this, and he'll know how much Louis means it.

He realizes they haven't even said a word to each other yet this morning, and he realizes that they haven't even needed to. Louis leans forward and joins their lips again. Harry holds him closer and deepens the kiss. Louis vaguely thinks that this must be love if Harry doesn't mind that his mouth probably tastes like a rubbish bin. When Harry palms Louis' ass and almost gives him a case of morning wood, Louis has to pull back, because they can't do anything at Zayn's house.

"Guess what?" Harry says, breaking the silence.

"What?" Louis asks, running his fingers through Harry's hair and scratching lightly at his scalp.

Harry is momentarily distracted, letting out something like a purr. He leans into Louis' hands, and Louis massages for a bit longer. He can't handle how cute Harry is when he's pliant and cuddly like this. His entire face relaxes and he looks younger than ever, and so at peace. Louis loves that he can do that to Harry. Finally Harry's eyes flutter open.

"We get to sleep together tonight," Harry sing songs, "and I get to fall asleep and wake up to you every morning."

Louis smiles, and the words weigh heavy on his tongue, but he'll save them for later, "I can't wait," he says, I love you, he thinks.

Harry goes to hang out with Zayn and the girls while Louis has a shower. He agonizes over what to wear because they're hanging out for the day and then going to Harry's for dinner. He'll be meeting Anne, Robin, and Gemma. He's nervous as hell, but he's also strangely excited, and he feels hopeful. They must be good people to have raised such a beautiful boy, so hopefully they'll like Louis.

It was a big step for Louis to start wearing shorts and t-shirts. When he was at his thinnest the thought of wearing shorts, and a t-shirt was literally terrifying, so it isn't exactly comfortable now that he's gained weight. Harry says he could gain some more, but Louis is just within normal weight range now. He works out a little with Liam and Harry these days, and it helps him feel better that he's getting firmer and stronger. Harry is cautious though, because Dr. Chen has warned that recovering anorexics can develop exercise addictions.

Louis feels okay though, he works out with the boys because it's fun, and he can actually keep up in football again. Liam is over the moon to play with Louis again. The teams are always divided Zayn and Liam versus Louis and Harry. Zayn doesn't care much about football, and Harry has so many coordination problems that he's borderline hopeless, but it works because Liam and Louis are so evenly matched.

It's still a little strange to wear shorts and a t-shirt, and sometimes he still critiques himself and has dark thoughts, but he's getting better at dealing with them, and they aren't crippling anymore. He chooses a pair of light wash denim shorts, and a plain white t-shirt with a v-neck. Harry is wearing black basketball shorts, and a green bro tank. His hair is a little bit extra curly at the sides, because he left the house with it damp.
Louis calls Zayn in to do his quiff, so his fringe doesn't get sweaty in the heat, and the style will last all day until they get to Harry's. He looks at himself in the mirror when he's put together, and part of him still wishes there was more, that he was better, but he doesn't let those thoughts linger long.

Zayn and Liam are going for a bike ride, and Harry and Louis decide to go to get lunch on a patio. They walk down the street instead of driving, and Harry keeps Louis tucked into his side, pressing occasional kisses to his hair. While Harry babbles on about all the things they'll do when Louis comes to stay at his house, Louis makes a plan. After dinner with the family he'll ask Harry to come for a walk with him. He'll drive them to the pathway that he found that one day when he was young. He'll bring Harry to that copse in the trees that he's never shown to anyone else. He's going to have to get Liam and Zayn to distract Harry for a bit before they go to his house, so he can get some flowers or something. Harry is so much better at this romance stuff, but for Harry Louis will try.

"Babe?" Harry asks.

"Huh? Sorry love, I zoned out," Louis says, shaking his head, I love you, he thinks.

"I was just asking if you wanted to try that new greek place. It's got a patio and they'll be playing the football game," Harry repeats, smiling down at Louis fondly.

Louis smiles and nods, "the first place we ever went together outside of school was a greek restaurant," he says.

Harry grins, "you know I almost went into cardiac arrest at that damn football game when you let me tuck you all up in my jacket. Felt like I had died and gone to heaven," he says.

God, I love you, Louis thinks, "jesus Harold, don't be so cliche," he says, standing on his tip toes to give him a kiss.

"It's true! You're bad for my health! I've been meaning to go to the doctor," Harry says, stooping down to nuzzle at Louis' jaw, "you make me feel all wonky inside. My head spins every time you're around. My heart is so enlarged it leaves me breathless every time I look at you. Is it possible to die from being so in love?" he asks, his voice a dramatic hushed whisper.

Louis snorts and rolls his eyes, "you're so fucking ridiculous it isn't even funny," he groans, I love you, he thinks, "how do you even come up with this shit!"

Harry laughs, "your beauty makes me feel like writing sonnets," he adds loudly, throwing an arm across his head in a swoon.

"Shut up Harry! People are going to hear you," Louis says to disguise his giggle, fuck I love you, he thinks.

"I love-" Louis cuts him off with a palm over his mouth.

"Shush you tosser!" Louis shrieks, giggling.

Harry wrenches away from his hand, grinning beatifically, "I love Lou-

"Come here!" Louis squawks, even though they're walking next to a main road that connects two of the main shopping plazas, and there is nobody around to hear them anyway.

Harry prances just out of Louis' grasp with a huge smile, "I love Louis Tomlinson," he bellows, hopping backwards, "he has the nicest ass I've ever-"
It happens almost in slow motion. Louis watches as Harry takes one little skip too far backwards, and his foot slips down off the curb. It's clear he didn't realize how close he was to the end of the block because his arms flail as he stumbles backwards more. A horn blares just as Louis lunges forward, seeing the truck too close to stop.

His fingers close around the cotton of Harry's shirt, and he yanks backwards with all his might. He drags Harry forward, and throws him to the ground just as the truck rips by. He vaguely realizes how lucky he is that he isn't emaciated anymore, because he wouldn't have been strong enough to pull Harry back before.

"You fucking asshole!" Louis cries, heart racing in his chest and anger bubbling to the surface, "you fucking moron what were you doing!"

Louis straddles Harry's hips where he lays panting in the grass, his little hands swatting halfheartedly at Harry's chest, "I'm sorry," Harry gasps, clearly shaken.

"You cant fucking do that to me! You can't make me love you and then almost get yourself killed," Louis shrieks, "before I even have a fucking chance to tell you! Watch what you're doing, you- you idiot!"

"I'm sorry I wasn't paying attent-" Harry hesitates, his eyes going wide where he's pinned under Louis, "wait what did you say?"

Louis blushes. The anger was really only a defence for how freaked out he was, because he's pretty sure he almost saw his boyfriend get splattered on the sidewalk. The anger is fading though, and now that he isn't panicking he realizes his heart is racing for an entirely different reason. There goes his big romantic plan, but the way Harry is looking up at him now, like he's almost afraid to hope he heard correctly, spurs Louis to speak.

"I said that I love you," Louis says, not breaking his eyes off of Harry's.

The way Harry's face changes would be comical if it didn't make Louis' heart swell so much. His mouth goes completely slack for a moment, before it shifts into the dopiest, dreamiest, most blissful smile Louis has ever seen on his face. Louis swears he sees Harry's eyes mist over, as he lays on the grass pinned under Louis' bum. If Louis thought the look Harry gives him on normal days is special, this look is enough to send shivers up his spine.

"Did you realize that just now, when I flailed into the street?" Harry whispers, like he's terrified he'll break the moment if he talks too loud.

"No. I wanted to tell you this morning, but I wanted to make it romantic and special for you," Louis whispers back, blushing a little, "I was going to take you to a special place after dinner and tell you. But you kind of scared it out of me first."

Harry's hand reaches up to cup Louis' cheek, his eyes searching Louis' face, "say it again," he whispers.

"I love you," Louis replies, his voice soft but sure, "I'm sorry the first time I told you I was cussing you out, but fuck Harry, I love you with all my bloody heart."

Louis definitely sees tears in Harry's eyes now. Harry sits up beneath Louis, and his other hand comes up to cup Louis' other cheek. Their eyes stay locked for a moment, before Harry is surging forward. The kiss isn't rough or desperate though. It's deep, and soft, and tender, and unwavering; just like Harry's love. Louis doesn't think his heart has ever felt so full.
Eventually they realize that they're sitting in the grass, making out at the side of the road as cars pass by. Louis doesn't even care though, because Harry keeps looking at him like he's an angel in a dream, and Louis knows that feeling because it's the same way he looked at Harry this morning. They make it to the greek restaurant and order, but while they wait for their food Harry just stares at Louis dazedly. He holds both Louis' hands across the table, that dizzy smile still plastered on his face.

"I love you," Harry says slowly, like he's testing the waters.

"I love you, too," Louis replies easily.

Harry literally beams, "I feel like I'm dreaming," he says.

"You're not," Louis replies, "I'm sorry it took me so long to get here Harry, but I do, I love you so much."

Harry shakes his head roughly, "Louis, I would have waited forever to hear you say that. I would never have wanted you to say it before you were ready," he says earnestly, "but I swear to god today is the best day of my life."

Louis shakes his head and laughs, even though his cheeks are on fire, "I think maybe me too," he admits.

They make it through lunch, probably being absolutely sickening to the people around them. They say those words so many times that they should have lost some meaning, but it feels like each time they say it to each other it solidifies the love more.

They meet up with the boys for a bit before they're supposed to go to Harry's, and Liam and Zayn almost cry when Louis tells them that he loves Harry. They know how huge of a step this is for him. Again, Louis is struck by how insanely lucky he is to have these people in his life. The nerves don't hit him until they're in Harry's truck, driving to Harry's house to meet his family.

Louis will be staying with them for two weeks, before he, Harry, Zayn and Liam head back to London. He knows that Harry's family is amazing; they have to be to have made Harry. He talked to Dr. Chen about how nervous he was, and Dr. Chen helped him get over the fear that they would hate him. He's still nervous though. Nervous he'll do something stupid, nervous he won't fit in, nervous he'll embarrass Harry. He just knows how important Harry's family is to him, and he doesn't want to fuck this up.

Harry parks the truck in front of a pretty two storey house with a beautiful garden. There is a fat black and white cat lounging on the fence, and Louis recognizes it as Dusty from pictures Harry has showed him. Louis doesn't notice he's biting his lip until Harry reaches over, his thumb gently dragging Louis' lip from between his teeth. Louis sighs and offers a hesitant smile.

"Please don't be nervous baby, they're going to love you as much as I do," Harry says, "my mum has been so excited all week to have you."

Louis makes his smile brighter and nods, "okay. I love you."

Harry's face lights up just like the first time, "I love you too," he beams.

They get out of the car and Harry takes the suitcase Louis has been lugging between the boys houses for vacation. Louis reaches out to stroke Dusty's head as he passes, and the cat purrs and arches it's back into his touch. Louis counts it as a good start. Harry puts an arm around Louis' shoulders, and plants a kiss to Louis' hair as they go up the walkway to the front door. Louis holds his breath while
Harry opens it and gently guides him in.

"Mum we're home," Harry calls into the house.

Louis hears footsteps and then Anne's head peeks around the doorframe, "Hello," she says excitedly.

She comes hurrying over and Louis smiles at her, trying to hide his nerves. She's taller than him, and she's absolutely gorgeous. She has a beautiful smile, and her black hair is a little messy but it frames her face perfectly. She has such kind eyes and Louis can literally feel the warmth that she exudes. Louis is a little taken aback when Anne scoops him into her arms.

She hugs exactly like Harry, stooping over even though she's taller, and fully encompassing him. Her hand goes up to cup the back of his neck the same way Harry's does, and she rocks back and forth a little bit the same way. It puts Louis at ease instantly, and his arms go up to hug her back. He tries to remember the last time he had a hug from his mum that felt like this, and he isn't sure if he ever has. He's never met this woman in his life, but he already feels comfortable hugging her so closely.

"I am so happy you're here, Louis," she says, not pulling away, "it's so good to meet you."

"Thank you so much for having me Ms. Cox, I'm really happy to finally meet you too," Louis replies honestly.

"Anne," she says, backing up to hold him at arms length, "oh, you are just gorgeous."

Louis feels his cheeks heat, "mum let him breathe," Harry says, and the fondness is thick in his voice.

"Sorry," she says, giving Louis one last squeeze before letting him go.

Louis had expected to feel uneasy for a while, until he got comfortable with everybody in the house. He can already feel himself relaxing though. He realized a long time ago that Harry feels more like a home than anywhere he's ever been, and he thinks maybe that's why this house instantly feels so homey, because this is Harry's place.

Anne ushers them into the kitchen where she has little homemade cakes to go with tea. Louis had prepared himself for stilted conversation and awkward silences. He had not been prepared for how genuinely lovely and funny and kind Anne is. He should have known though, because she raised Harry on her own and he's the spitting image of her. He feels completely comfortable talking with her about school, and the things he and Harry have done together.

It makes Louis feel a little bit good inside that when Harry starts bragging about his designs, and what an amazing designer he is, he doesn't flinch away from the praise. He still blushes beet red but he doesn't cringe and he doesn't feel uncomfortable. He talks with Anne about his designs, and his plans for after the summer. Eventually he's able to shift the conversation back to Harry. Harry squeezes his hand under the table because he knows it still isn't exactly easy for Louis to accept compliments from people who aren't him. Harry and Louis are telling Anne about their trip to the zoo two weeks ago when the front door is thrown open.

"Is he here?" a pretty and excited voice shrieks.

"God Gem, tone it down a notch," Harry says fondly, squeezing Louis' hand again.

The girl that comes bounding in the room is absolutely gorgeous. Its uncanny how much the three of them look alike; the same gorgeous dark hair, the same big light eyes, the same full beautiful mouths. She smiles brightly when her eyes meet Louis, and Louis' face instantly returns the gesture. This is
another person who knows everything about him, and has accepted him so far. He really wants that
to continue now that they're meeting in person.

Gemma goes straight to Louis and reaches out to hug him. Louis stands up from the table to hug her
back, and she stoops over the same way Harry and Anne do. The hug isn't awkward or stiff. She
feels like some long lost friend he hasn't seen in years. He knows so much about her from Harry, and
she exudes the same warmth as Anne.

"Jesus it's good to finally meet you," she says, "I feel like I know you already."

Louis laughs, "you too, and me too," he says, feeling himself blush.

She goes to mess up Harry's hair next, and Harry pouts to hide his grin. As they all sit down to talk,
Harry head-butts Louis' shoulder until Louis rakes his fingers through the curls, to straighten them
after Gemma's attack. Gemma and Anne look at them like they're a couple of adorable little lovebirds
preening each other. Louis loves talking to Gemma about the masters degree she's working on at
Manchester University. Gemma is beautiful and sweet, and he feels a connection with her.

He thinks maybe it's the connection formed when you sense a kindred spirit, someone who knows
the things that you know. They've both fallen apart, and they've both made it through, and they both
have a different view on the world than someone like Harry would. He can see the ghosts in her
eyes, but they're faded. Her scars have long since healed. His are healing. They're both happy. It's
nice to know that even though they've both felt their lives spinning out of control, they can sit here
together and talk about simple things, and they can genuinely feel happy.

Robin gets home from work as Anne is starting to cook dinner. He is stout and jolly looking, with
ruddy cheeks and a bright smile. At first Louis wonders how someone as gorgeous as Anne is with
someone with a pot belly and a receding hair line, but then Louis sees the way he looks at her, and
the way she looks at him, and it makes sense. After he's kissed her hello, he turns straight to Louis.
Robin hadn't thought much about meeting Harry's stepdad but his heart starts to race, because fathers
aren't typically as accepting as mothers.

Robin just grins at him though, and drags him into a hug like Louis is his long lost son, "So this is the
boy that has Harry's pants all in a knot," he says, and the fondness is clear in his tone.

Harry grins, "this is my Louis," he says.

Robin claps Louis on the back, "good to meet you son," he says.

"Good to meet you too," Louis says, finally relaxing.

Robin turns out to be hilarious, and it's clear how well he and Harry get along. When dinner is ready
they all gather around the table in the dining room, and the conversation flows easily while they eat.
Anne is telling a story about the summer Harry spent basically being a slave for their elderly next
door neighbour when he was eleven. She tells Louis about how Harry had come home one day and
told her that he was going to help Mrs. McGuinty with some chores around the house. He spent the
whole next day weeding her yard, and mowing her lawn. She had offered to pay him but he had
refused.

She sent him home with a tin of cookies instead. Anne tells Louis how Harry just kept offering to
help her, and she told Louis how maybe Mrs. McGuinty took advantage a little bit. She got Harry to
clean her gutters, and paint her fence, and help her plant her flower gardens. When the outdoor
chores were done, she invited him inside with a promise of more cookies. He vacuumed her carpets,
dusted her shelves, and helped her clear out her attic.
Harry just kept going back, and offering his services. She was old and frail, and her husband had died a few years ago. Harry never complained that he was spending his summer working for free. He never even had the heart to tell her that he hated peanut butter cookies, because those were her favourite to make.

"One day, I sat him down. I told him how proud of him I was for being so lovely to Mrs. McGuinty, that he was such a wonderful boy and I was sure she must be so thankful. Then I told him that it would be perfectly okay if he stopped doing chores for Mrs. McGuinty, because I wanted him to enjoy his summer too," Anne says, her eyes soft as she smiles at Harry, "but he just said that Mrs. McGuinty was nice, and she had really cool stories to tell. He worked for her all summer. When she got too old to live alone and went back to Ireland so her family could take care of her, she left Harry a beautiful heirloom body length mirror that he had helped her polish."

"It's up in my room, you'll see it," Harry says shyly, "I didn't really have any friends that year anyway, so I didn't mind."

Louis looks at the beautiful boy sitting beside him, and squeezes his hand under the table. Harry is so unwaveringly kind, so loving, so giving. It's buried deep in his core to care for others, to give every bit of himself. It opens him up for so much damage, but he still never hesitates to give. It clenches at Louis' heart, it wraps around him like a blanket. This amazing person is his, they are each others. He is the luckiest man alive.

"You're so wonderful," Louis says quietly, momentarily forgetting they aren't alone in the room, "I love you."

Harry smiles like Louis is the only person in the world, "I love you too, Lou," he replies softly.

Louis' smile falters when he remembers where they are, and he realizes the table has fallen silent. He wonders if he's overstepped the line, maybe Harry's parents don't want to hear stuff like that, maybe he's messed things up. Except when he turns to look around the table with red cheeks, he sees them all smiling. Robin is just grinning as he chews, Anne is smiling so brightly with a clear sheen of pride in her eyes. Gemma's eyes are lit up and she's smiling so wide, because she knew that Louis hadn't said it before today.

Harry is still grinning at him dazedly when Louis turns back to Anne to ask for more stories about Harry. The rest of dinner goes perfectly, and any nerves Louis had before have completely evaporated. He can talk about football with Robin, about school with Gemma, about Harry with Anne. They're all so warm, and so welcoming, and Louis is laughing at himself for ever being so worried.

After dinner Harry helps put away left overs, while Robin and Anne wash dishes side by side. He and Gemma are in the dinning room gathering the placemats and the glasses when she pauses. Louis has noticed that she hardly ever smiles with her teeth showing. He isn't sure why, because she has the same beautiful smile as Harry and Anne, but she always smiles with her lips pressed. When she smiles at him now though, her perfect teeth are showing, framed by her dimples.

"You told him you love him?" she asks quietly.

Louis blushes as he smiles, and nods, "just before we came over today. It just- it finally felt right, you know?"

She nods, and gives his hand a gentle squeeze, "I'm so happy for you, Louis. You're doing so well and you two are so wonderful together."
He squeezes her hand back, "Gemma thank you so much for everything you've done to help us get here. Thank you for not advising Harry to run for the hills when he found out how… messed up I am," he says earnestly.

She shakes her head, "Louis, you never have to thank me for that. I want to thank you. I'm so glad Harry has finally found the person who deserves all that love he has to give. You're so good for him, I hope you know that," she tells him softly.

Louis' cheeks warm again, "thanks Gemma," he says quietly.

She grins, "I'm so glad you're here," she says, "now lets get this finished and then you can tell me about all the weird shit my baby brother does, so I can make fun of him for life."

Louis laughs, just as Harry comes back in the dining room. Gemma winks at him and excuses herself, before Harry brackets Louis against the table with his hands on either side of Louis' hips. He tips his chin down and presses soft kisses along Louis' jaw. Louis' thumbs rub circles into the line of Harry's hips, his chin tips back to give Harry access for kisses.

"I love you," Harry says.

"I love you too," Louis smiles, stealing a proper kiss before slipping under Harry's arm to take the glasses to the kitchen.

After dinner they all watch TV but mostly it's just a continuation of their dinner conversations. Harry's family are talkers, and Louis loves it. Harry keeps Louis tucked up against his side on the couch. Louis melts when Harry occasionally presses kisses to his hair, or twines their fingers together. Dusty chooses Louis as a pillow, and curls up in his lap. Dusty is Anne's baby now that the other two have gone off to school, and it's pretty clear how pleased she is that Dusty approves of Louis.

When they go up to bed Harry's room is exactly how he expected. There is a poster of shirtless David Beckham on his wall, along with a retro poster of a kitten hanging off a branch that says 'Hang in there!' Louis almost laughs at Harry for it, but it's just so cute that he just ends up kissing Harry breathless instead. The bed is a little smaller than their queen mattress at Louis' flat, but they're also used to sleeping on the single in Harry's dorm together, so it's fine. Harry's feet just hang over the edge a bit.

After Harry gives Louis an enthusiastic blow job, Louis jerks Harry off with the other hand over his mouth, because Harry isn't very good at keeping his sounds in. It's fast and gritty but it's perfect when they collapse into bed, sated and finally together. Louis thinks home is most definitely where the heart is.

~

It's their second week at Harry's house and Harry and Louis are sprawled across a blanket in the backyard, pouring over the laptop in front of them. They're joined completely, Louis' right ankle hooked under Harry's left, Harry's left arm looped around Louis' right. Their sides press along each other, and Louis leans into Harry's shoulder, with Harry's curls tickling his cheek. They told the landlord of Louis' complex that they were looking into renting another flat in the building, so he sent over the floor plans of the flats that they have available. There is a couple of the two bedroom layouts, one single, and a loft.

Louis wants the loft so bad. The main floor is like a studio; bright and open concept with only a breakfast bar dividing the kitchen from the living area. Up a set of corkscrew stairs is the bedroom,
open to the room below except for a railing. There is a bathroom off to the side next to a closet, and then there will be just enough room for a king sized bed. Louis has it all planned out in his mind. Half the living space would be for the couch and TV, the other half for Harry's desk for school, and Louis' worktable and sewing machine for when he starts designing.

It would be their little place, full of them. Louis loves how open everything is. He loves how he could lean over the edge of the bed and watch Harry making breakfast in the kitchen from the bedroom. He loves how he could be at his work table and Harry could be watching TV, but they wouldn't be in separate rooms. He can see them there, he can picture their life there. He doesn't want to push his choice on Harry though, so he's kept in how much he'd prefer the loft so they can make a decision together.

The sliding glass door opens, and Anne comes out onto the porch, "baby, do you think it would be okay if I talked to Louis for a mo?" she asks.

"Sure Mum," Harry says, "I'll make some lunch you can come over here."

"Okay love, two seconds, I'll grab Lou and I a soda!" she calls, stepping back inside.

Louis has no reason to feel nervous, Anne has treated him like a second son all week. He's just curious what she wants to talk about. Harry untangles himself from Louis and rolls on his back to stretch like a lazy dog. Louis reaches out to rub his tummy and Harry melts into the touch. Harry reaches up to twist his fingers in Louis fringe.

"I like the loft the best," Harry says, "I like how open it is."

A smile splits Louis face, and his heart clenches in his chest, "me too," he says, "that's exactly what I was thinking."

"We can call the landlord when I come back out," Harry grins, "what do you want for lunch?"

"Grilled cheese?" Louis asks, "we're meeting the guys at seven, right?"

"Yeah, Liam says if we forget to bring the spare controllers he'll kick my ass. He's super stoked."

"It will be like a five player Call of Duty Reunion," Louis laughs, "Niall knows what time to come online to play?"

"Yeah," Harry grins, "Zayn's getting his laptop all set up so we can Skype him."

"Perfect, it will be just like he's in the room," Louis snorts.

Anne comes out onto the patio again, and Harry gives Louis a kiss, "Love you."

"Love you too," Louis smiles, watching Harry give his mum a kiss on the cheek as he passes her.

Anne comes over and sits down on the blanket next to Louis. She stretches her legs out and hands Louis a soda, as he crosses his and smiles over at her. She reaches out and runs her fingers through his fringe, and he leans into the touch. The whole family is very hands on. The first time Louis was slotted between Harry and Anne on the sofa as they watched a movie, he had been completely surprised when she began petting his hair, the same way she always did with Harry.

At first he had thought she had been reaching for Harry, but she hadn't stopped. After that it was no big deal for her to pet his hair, or pull him in for a hug, or link arms with him while they wandered around the mall waiting for Harry to decide between a black v-neck t-shirt, or a black scoop neck t-
shirt. She touches him the same way she touches Gemma and Harry. Louis hadn't even realized how much he was lacking simple motherly touches until she touched him like that.

Karen and Patricia have always been so good to him, but even with Liam and Zayn neither of them are particularly cuddly. Anne, Gemma, and Harry are cuddly. It's clear that all the time that they spent just the three of them surviving together has made them as tight knit as strands of a braid, weaving in and around each other seamlessly. The way they've so easily included Louis in that means more to him than words can say. Anne's gentle touches mean so much to him.

Louis pulls the tab on his can of soda, and Anne does the same. After a sip she sets it in the grass and lies back on the blanket. Louis has a drink of the cola and does the same, laying down next to her. It's quiet for a moment but Louis doesn't mind. He wonders if Harry is watching them from the kitchen, it's been no secret how much he loves how close Louis and Anne have wordlessly become.

"Harry used to lay out her all the time by himself. There is something to be said about a boy who is content watching the clouds for hours on end," Anne says, the love clear in her voice.

"He's so mellow. I don't know how he doesn't get annoyed with me bouncing around all the time," Louis laughs.

"He loves it when you bounce around," she says, and he can hear her smile even as he looks at the sky, "thank you for making him so happy, Louis."

He turns his head to face her, "honestly Anne I'm so lucky to have him," he says earnestly, "thank you for raising him how you've done."

She turns and smiles at him, "he's always needed someone who would let him be himself. I was so scared he'd go out in the world, and get crushed by people who didn't appreciate the way he is. But you…. you nurture him in the sense that you don't just let him be himself, you encourage it. You're so good for him."

Louis feels himself flush as she repeats the words Gemma told him days ago, "I really- I'd do anything for him Anne."

She strokes the back of her hand across his cheek, "I know love, and he'd do anything for you. He's always been such a hopeless romantic and I knew he'd get his fairytale eventually," she says smiling, "you know, Harry has always been soft. He'd always rather read, or colour, or play with animals than roughhouse with the other kids. He'd come home crying because they'd tease him for tripping over his feet in soccer. He'd come home crying because his best friend decided he wasn't cool enough to be best friends with anymore. He came home crying once because he'd set up candles on a bridge for a girl he thought he fancied, and she turned him away."

Louis frowns, and rolls onto his side. He props his head on his fist so he can look down at Anne better. She sits up though, crossing her legs and facing Louis. He gets the feeling he should sit up and face her too. He and Anne have talked constantly since he got to her house, but never about anything like this. Of course Harry has shared with Louis his feelings of being awkward, and a little dorky. He's told Louis about how he got bullied a bit when he was younger, how he never really felt like he fit in. It's different to hear it from Anne though.

"I never minded that he was soft though. If he had been a rough and tumble little guy who always wanted to be getting dirty and climbing things I would have let him. He wasn't though; he was gentle and sweet and soft and I never wanted that to change because he was my baby. I just made sure to show him that even if other people didn't understand, he needed to stay true to himself because how he felt was the only thing that mattered," she tells Louis quietly, and he nods, "The church we used
to go to was gossipy, unfortunately. Everyone was always talking about how Harry was too soft. Then he came out as gay, and they blamed me. They said he turned out gay because I had raised him soft; because it was just me, him, and his sister, with no man around to raise him properly."

Louis swallows thickly, "d-did you-" he clears his throat, "did you think you had done something wrong?"

Anne looks at him long and hard before she smiles sadly, "of course not," she says, reaching out and taking one of Louis' hands away from where it was fidgeting with the hem of his shorts, "I knew being gay doesn't work like that. I also knew that there was absolutely nothing wrong with Harry being gay. I was so proud of him. For being himself, for being such a good, sweet boy. I was proud of him for coming out. I told them all that, in quite a few more words, and then we left that church and I never looked back."

Louis feels a weight in his chest as he meets Anne's eyes, "really?" he asks shakily.

She nods slowly, "Yes Lou, because he's my son and I love him, and I'm his mother and it's my job to protect him," her voice is gentle, and she reaches out to take his other hand, "and I am so sorry that you didn't have someone to protect you like that. What she did was so wrong, Louis, and I am so sorry as one mother on behalf of another."

It hits Louis like a tonne of bricks. Her words are so gentle, but so heavy, and Louis feels the weight of them on every inch of his body. Anne doesn't know how much what his mum did affects Louis, because Harry hasn't told her about Louis' anorexia. Harry hadn't even told her about his mum until a week after they got back to Doncaster for vacation. He hadn't meant to tell her, but she had been talking to him about Louis, expressing how happy she was for them, and he broke down because it hit him how lucky he was to have a mum like Anne.

He had told her how awful Louis' mum was, and how guilty he felt that Louis didn't have support like he had. He had called Louis that night, feeling bad for telling her, but Louis understood. He hadn't realized before, but he should have known that Harry would feel guilty for having support when Louis didn't. Louis had promised him it was okay that he'd told Anne, that he wasn't mad. He had been nervous that it would change the way she looked at him, but he hadn't been mad. Now, with her bringing it up, it hurts, but it isn't uncomfortable having her talk about it. What she just said means more to him than Dr. Chen repeating it a million times, because Anne is a mother who did the right thing, a mother who still loves her gay son.

"Baby, I know it doesn't help but I want you to know that I am so proud of you for coming out, and for staying true to yourself even after she was so horrible. I think one of the reasons I was so adamant about letting Harry and Gemma be themselves when I was raising them was because I've known far too many people in my life who are trapped in the shells of what people expect them to be. It breaks my heart to think about all of the kids whose parents shove them back in the closet, and tear them down piece by piece until they fit into some box. It kills me to think about people you and Harry's age, who are going through their days trying to fit into a mould, lying about who they are because they think they're wrong," tears leak past Louis' eye lashes when she tugs him into a hug, her own eyes glistening, "so even though it was horrible and you deserved so much better, I'm thankful that you got away from her, instead of trying to change to fit what she thought you should be."

Louis is crying as Anne strokes his back, peppering his hair with kisses. He turns her words over in his head, and he really thinks. He used to think that if he could he would do anything to go back before he came out. He'd be normal, he'd date girls, he'd never tell her what he was, and he'd never lose her. He'd be the exact person that Anne is talking about, trapped inside a shell, always acting, always lying. He'd be in a box, with some girl who he could never really love, maybe with a mother
who had never properly loved him in the first place. So even if he fit in that mould, he wouldn't be any better off because he still wouldn't have the thing he needed. Love.

"Louis, you are such a beautiful boy. You are sweet, and funny, and smart, and talented. You are a good person. Even if I didn't love you for how amazing you are to my son, or how wonderfully you treat him, I would still love you because you are such a sweet boy, such a good man. I'm sorry that you didn't have the family that you deserve, baby. I know we haven't known each other long, but you are the love of my boys life, and that means you're part of this family. We're lucky to have you, and we love you."

It's almost too much for Louis; he's struggling to keep himself from sobbing as her words wash over him. Dr. Chen has told him time and time again that he deserved better, that he isn't unlovable, that his mother was wrong. He's realizing now that being told that by a doctor is nothing compared to being held by a mother and told those things. Anne just runs her fingers through his hair and holds him close, and it's like a knot is loosening in Louis' chest.

When Louis has calmed down Anne wipes away his tears, kisses him on both cheeks, and pulls him to his feet. The thank you he whispers doesn't feel like enough. She gives him a hug, and leads him towards the house for lunch. Harry is worried when he sees Louis' red eyes and flushed cheeks, but he doesn't say anything as they go to play Call of Duty with the boys. Harry waits until they're alone in bed that night before he asks. As Louis repeats what Anne said, Harry holds him and just listens. He doesn't mention the way Louis' voice still catches with emotion, or the way he's blinking more than normal. He knows how much her words mean to Louis.

When Louis is done telling him, he rolls over so Louis is bracketed beneath him, "you're my family, Louis," he says quietly, pressing soft kisses to Louis' face, "you're my home."

"I love you so fucking much, Harry," Louis rasps.

"I love you with all my heart, Lou," Harry replies.

~

The sun beats down on Louis' back, and the sand beneath his feet burns. The sink of the sand strains his calves as he sprints after Liam, but the traction helps when he twists around Liam and effectively steals the football from his feet. Liam squawks as Louis dribbles it away with the side of his foot, and then bolts back up the beach to the makeshift goal they marked with drift wood. He scores, and throws his hands in the air, pretending to circle the field like he's playing for the FIFA cup.

Liam just laughs and shoves him in the sand when he passes. Louis bounces back and throws himself at Liam, tackling him to the ground. They tussle for a moment before Liam rolls off him, panting and wiping at the sweat on his face. Louis lays in the sand next to Liam, feeling like he's cooking. He glances over to find Harry watching him, with a soft smile on his face.

Harry sits on the very edge of his beach towel, his sweaty hair held back by a headband. He's spent the last hour meticulously building very intricate sand castle. Zayn lays next to him, reading a book. While Harry and Louis smile at each other Liam pushes himself up and drags Zayn towards the water. Niall is already in the surf, floating on a blow up mattress with a beer. It's their last week of summer before Niall, Harry, and Louis start school, Zayn starts his apprenticeship, and Liam starts his job.

Niall, Zayn and Liam living together has been going perfectly, and Louis and Harry's loft has become referred to as The Love Nest. Louis can honestly say he's never been happier in his life. He pushes himself up from the sand, and revels in the fact that Harry's eyes still brighten every time
Louis approaches him. Louis steps carefully over Harry's masterpiece of a sand castle and Harry reaches up for him.

Harry pulls him down so Louis is sitting in the V of his legs, with Louis' back against his chest. Louis relaxes into it, his head lolling back against Harry's shoulder. Harry presses a kiss behind his ear, and breathes him in. Louis is sweating right through his t-shirt, but it's intimidating for him to be on the beach surrounded by a bunch of people who look way better in a swim shorts than he does.

Niall, Liam, and Zayn are all shirtless, and Louis has a sneaking suspicion that Harry is wearing his stretched out bro-tank just so Louis doesn't feel like he's standing out in his shirt. Harry's fingers trace absentmindedly up and down his arm as Louis tips his chin back for a kiss.

Louis is doing better. He still feels like he's forcing himself to eat most of the time, and he still cringes when he looks at himself in the mirror, but he has no qualms about walking around their loft naked. Even if he isn't quite on good terms with his body yet, he at least believes that Harry thinks his body is perfect. He still meets with Dr. Chen every week and they still talk about his mum, and how he feels about himself, and how it manifests itself in how he feels about his body. He's still working on things.

He knows it's going to be a long road. Nobody gets over years and years of self hate, in a matter of months. Nobody recovers from anorexia after a few months of eating better and a few sessions with a psychologist. He knows it's a long path, and he knows he has to work on it. He isn't going to give up though, because he's finally starting to realize that he's worth it.

He deserves to feel better, he deserves to be happy. Louis has people in his life that care about him, and he has someone who loves him with all his heart. He doesn't wake up wishing he could sleep life away anymore, and he doesn't fall asleep feeling alone. The first thing he feels in the morning is love, and the last thing he feels before he falls asleep is love. Sometimes in the hours in between he regresses, and feels shitty, or upset, but it doesn't send him cowering away from the people that care about him.

That day in the studio Harry told Louis that he wanted a chance to make Louis happy. Louis was right when he told Harry he couldn't. It isn't that simple. Being loved by someone doesn't just make problems, and feelings, and hurt go away. It's a constant process for Louis to slowly work through his pain, so he can be a little bit happier every day. He's getting there though, he's happy more often than he hurts, and every single time he smiles it is one hundred percent real.

Louis still remembers what Harry said after that though; that he still thought Louis was beautiful, even when he wasn't smiling. Louis knows in his heart that Harry meant it when he said that, even though Harry didn't know anything about Louis at the time. Louis feels it every time Harry scoops him up and just holds him when he's sad. He feels it every time Harry is patient when it takes Louis a little bit more convincing than normal to eat his dinner. He feels it when Harry can take one look at him and instantly know what he's thinking. He feels it when Harry rubs his back and sings him to sleep on particularly rough nights.

It's a process and it's a long road to wellness but Louis is on the path, and he can feel the changes happening inside him. He can feel the weight of his past slowly leaving his shoulders as he learns to let things go. He knows he'll never see his mum again, he knows there isn't going to be some fairytale reunion where she sees the error in her ways. He's working towards being okay with that. One day he'll realize that he doesn't need her approval to be happy with himself. One day he'll have his own family with Harry, and he'll thank her for teaching him exactly what he'll never do to his children. He'll never make them feel like they're not good enough. One day, hopefully someday soon, he'll realize that he is good enough.
Louis wiggles out of Harry's arms, and turns around to press a kiss to his lips. He kneels in between Harry's legs, and reaches forward to pull off Harry's tank top. Harry raises an eyebrow, and smiles cheekily, but he doesn't protest. When he's got Harry's tank top in his lap, he takes a deep breath and reaches down to grasp the hem of his own t-shirt.

As quick as he can, he pries the sweaty t-shirt off his body, and tosses it aside. He feels his cheeks warm as he thinks of all the people on the beach who might see him shirtless. Quickly he pulls Harry's tank over his head, and straightens it on his body. Harry looks at him with a soft smile, and pride in his eyes.

Maybe Louis isn't ready to be shirtless on the beach yet, but Harry's stretched tank doesn't leave much to the imagination. The arm holes droop down below his ribs, and the neck shows the centre of his chest and his collarbones. It feels good to let his skin breathe though, and the tank covers his tummy, which is what he's most self conscious about. It also smells like Harry, so it's easier not to let himself stress about wearing something so revealing.

Louis reaches out and he and Harry stand up together. Harry brushes sand off his shorts and then brushes off Louis' bum for him too. Harry knows that it's a big step for Louis to steal his shirt and be comfortable on the beach with his sides, back, and chest showing. He doesn't have to say how proud he is though, Louis can see it in his eyes when he leans forward to kiss him.

Louis shrieks and giggles as Harry hoists him over his shoulder, and bolts towards the ocean with the boys chanting, "Throw him in! Throw him in!"

~

Harry steps out of the shower, and wraps a fluffy towel around his waist. There is a little monogram in the corner of all of their linens, an H and an L twined around each other in cursive; one of the housewarming gifts from the boys. He runs a brush through his hair and wanders out of the bathroom to get to the closet. The bed is still ravaged from their morning romp. He's distracted by humming coming from over the railing, and he steps over to the edge to look down into their flat.

Louis is standing in front of the long wall of windows, pinning something to one of his mannequins and humming to himself. He turns the mannequin around and analyzes the dress he's working on from a different angle, stooping over and scratching absentmindedly at his mussed up hair. He's naked except for his black boxer briefs, and Harry feels want surge through him, still just as strong and heady as it's always been when he's looking at Louis.

Louis' thighs that used to be miles apart are muscular now, since he's joined a rec football league with Liam. His hips that used to be jagged and sharp have rounded out enough to hide the bones. Louis' chest isn't caved in anymore, you can't see where his ribs connect to his sternum. Harry can only see Louis' ribs when he stretches to the side, or raises his arms above his head now. His biceps have rounded out with muscle, from finally having enough energy to work out.

His stomach isn't hollow or concave anymore, he has the tiniest hint of a tummy paired with the soft grooves of abs at the top. His ass was never fully flat, even when he was so thin, but now its round and perky and perfect and Harry will easily admit he's obsessed with it. His palms were made for a handful of that ass. Louis has always been perfect in Harry's eyes, but everything about Louis' body as he wiggles his bum to the tune in his head, makes Harry's mouth water.

It's never been about how Louis looks though, it's always been about what's inside. It hasn't been easy being with Louis, and some days are still harder than others, but Harry is ready to spend the rest of his life helping Louis realize that he's good enough. Helping Louis realize that he's perfect just the way he is. He looks down at that boy, and he sees the change. Before, Louis could be so happy
when he was surrounded by the boys, or when he was with Harry. Except as soon as he was alone, or he thought nobody was looking, it was like the light left his eyes, the mask came off, and he dropped the act.

Right now Louis has no idea Harry is watching him. He's just off in his own world, doing his own thing. He's not putting on an act. He's just dancing around in his underwear, working on his designs, and singing to himself.

In this moment Louis is just genuinely happy, and that's all Harry has ever wanted.

Chapter End Notes

Just the epilogue left now guys! I really hope this ending is okay. From the very first day I decided to write this fic I decided I was going to do my absolute best to make it as realistic as possible. I know some of you were hoping for a fairytale quick fix but unfortunately that isn't how it works for people in real life suffering with self hate or eating disorders. I didn't want anybody to think that falling in love suddenly cures peoples problems.

I really hope I've done an okay job of portraying the things in this story. your guys' opinions on the ending would mean so much to me so if you take the time to tell me what you thought good or bad, thank you. hopefully the epilogue will tie everything together nicely for you guys.

i just want to thank you guys so much for reading and being so amazing to me and so kind about my writing, thank you. and the epilogue will be posted next sunday :)
"Louis!" Harry shrieks, and Louis hears him bursting through the front door.

The dog looks up at him from from the ground. Her tail thumps the floor in excitement but they adopted her when she was already past her prime so at this point she doesn't have much 'get excited when someone comes to the door' left in her. Louis has no idea why Harry chose the big old Basset Hound when there were plenty of puppies at the shelter, but something about her dopey expression as she pants happily up at him reminds Louis of the idiot who picked her.

Louis is rinsing the toothpaste out of his mouth just as he hears Harry's heavy footsteps thumping up the stairs. Harry comes bursting into the room with a huge grin on his face and a stack of magazines in his arms. Louis pokes his head around the doorframe of the en suite bathroom and raises an eyebrow at him.

"Babe what are you hollering about?" he asks.

"The magazine came out today! Did you forget?" Harry asks jerkily holding out the multiple copies he's currently in possession of.

Louis smirks, "no, I didn't forget. Why are you freaking out? I already told you everything the interview said," he says.

He goes to Harry and stands on his tiptoes, Harry still has to turn his chin down to give him a kiss though, because he didn't stop growing until he was twenty-one and six-foot-three. Harry swats his ass as he passes to get to their dresser for a pair of pyjama pants.

"I'm freaking out because you've just been named Designer of the Year by fucking Vogue Louis!" Harry exclaims, stooping to give the dog her customary belly rub, "and there's a difference between you telling me what questions they asked and seeing your answers typed out on a three page spread!"

Louis crawls up onto the bed and bends over to help he dog up onto it as well. Harry plunks down on the mattress and fans the pile of magazines across their bed spread, like he's trying to choose which of the identical copies he wants to read.

"Why did you buy so many copies?" Louis asks, fondness seeping into his tone.

"If you think I'm not going to be handing these out to everyone I know, you don't know me as well as I thought you did," Harry grins.

"Don't be ridiculous, Harry," Louis scoffs.

"I'm serious! And I was talking to Mum on the way home and she's bought like twice as many to show to all her friends!"

"Harry," Louis groans, throwing an arm over his face to hide his blush.

Harry doesn't reply, and Louis peeks past his arm to see what he's doing. He's got one of the magazines open as he lays on his stomach next to Louis, and he's smiling beatifically down at the
page. Harry looks up and meets Louis’ eyes when he shifts onto his side. Louis squeaks when Harry surges forward and kisses him deeply.

"Can I read it to you?" Harry asks.

Louis rolls his eyes, "you'd do it whether I agreed or not," he says.

Harry just grins, and begins, "Louis Tomlinson first stepped into the industry two years ago via a purchased time slot on one of the catwalks at London Fashion week. The hour he had to show his collection was enough to have interns running to their publicists, and assistants running to their celebrities, and dragging them over to catch the tail end of his show. He got his big break when a dress that he designed was chosen by none other than Emma Watson to wear on the red carpet, the night she accepted her Oscar. Since then he has become a household name; dressing the most noted male and female celebrities of our generation, not just on the red carpet but in casual wear as well," Harry is barely containing his glee as he reads, and it's enough to make Louis' heart race with excitement too.

"We catch up with Tomlinson in his favourite coffee shop, across from the upper floor of a warehouse that has become his main design studio. Tomlinson is already waiting for us when we arrive, chatting amicably with the girl behind the counter. He's very clearly a regular, and he recommends the chocolate scone. He leads us to a set of chairs in an empty corner and explains that one of the reasons he like the place is the fact that it's mostly clear any time after eleven a.m. He's dressed impeccably as you would expect a fashion designer to be, and he shrugs off his leather jacket to reveal a lush forest green cable knit jumper," Harry reads, using a movie narrators voice.

"I don't know why they wrote it like that. Like describing everything that happened," Louis frowns, "I figured they'd just put the question and answer part in," he says, as he strokes one of the dogs silky ears.

"They're setting the scene. Now they're starting the q and a. They put V next to her questions and LT next to your answers," Harry explains, clearing his throat.

"V: So Louis how does it feel to be named Designer of the Year only two years after your first fashion show?

LT: It's pretty insane. It actually took a lot of convincing from the people in my life to get me to finally take a risk and apply for a spot at Fashion Week. It could have been a total waste of money if nobody came to watch my showing, or if the people who did hated it. It was just pure luck that there were people in the audience who liked what they saw, and that the garments attracted some attention. The fact that anybody is interested in my designs is amazing, but to be named Designer of the Year, especially by the magazine I've been hiding under my bed since I was ten, is just insane to me."

Harry pauses his reading to glance over at Louis, "it wasn't luck, your designs were amazing," he says sternly.

"Just keep reading," Louis replies fondly, shuffling over to tuck himself into Harry's side.

"V: What do you think was the real turning point for you? You've developed quite the following over the past couple of years, but just this spring you had your first ever show just for your designs. The attendance included both A-list celebrities, and A-list designers alike, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. What do you think took you from an up-and-comer to a trend setter?

LT: I think when I started out I was very much trying to design based on what I thought people would like. I was nervous to step outside the box and test the waters so I just made things that fit with
the current trends, added my own little twist, and hoped people would like them. When people started taking notice of my designs I finally started designing based on what I liked, as opposed to what I thought others would like, but I was still hesitant to do anything too out there. I think the major turning point for me was when I finally just got confident enough that I just wanted to design for me. Of course I still hoped people would like my stuff, but I didn't let myself base any of my designs on what I thought people would like. I just designed what was in my head without censoring. The collection I put out for that show was basically just me designing and not second guessing myself. I knew there was a chance people would hate it, but I was more proud of the finished product, and the reception was so good. You can't design things based on what you think will be a future trend, it's just a matter of taking a chance, and if people like it enough it will trend."

"Do I sound totally pretentious?" Louis asks, nibbling on the skin beside his thumb.

Harry glares at Louis, "you sound intelligent and modest," he says.

"V: You have stores open all across the country now, and half of your celebrity clientele is in America, are you thinking of opening up shop over there?

LT: That's the plan eventually. For now my business manager and I have to look at handling the expansion here. Our business model has always been geared around the small boutique stores for the public, and providing for our celebrity clientele who put in special orders. Now we'll be changing our business model to provide for the demand here and also preparing to expand in the future. I don't want to rush anything though, I'd rather put out a quality product than be concerned about trying to get things out too quickly."

Louis squirms himself under Harry's arm so he's looking down at the magazine too. Harry's fingers reach up to stroke through his hair, and he presses a kiss to Louis' temple.

"V: Your designs are almost equally divided between menswear and womenswear, when typically we see designers start with womenswear and branch out into mens, or vice versa. Are you more comfortable with designing one or the other, or do you just not have a preference? It's quiet impressive that you're equally as talented on both fronts since that isn't usually the case.

LT: I enjoy designing each for different reasons. I like the way you can experiment with womenswear, and be a little over the top. I like the way menswear is all about the subtleties, and the intricate details.

V: And what do you think are some of your defining design traits for each?

LT: I'm never going to be a designer who adds a clump of feathers or a splash of metal just to be avant garde, I think for both sexes my policy is just a classic base with modern touches and subtle points of uniqueness."

"I'm pretty sure I didn't actually say subtle points of uniqueness, does that even make sense?" Louis groans.

"Yes it makes sense Louis. You've answered all the questions perfectly," Harry insists.

"V: How do all of these plans tie in with your personal life? In the other interviews you've given you only talk about the designs, but we can't help but notice the handsome bloke who's never too far from you. He's been front row at every catwalk your designs show at, including when you went to New York Fashion Week, and there were pictures in The Mirror last month of the two of you having lunch on a patio with one of your models Cara Delevigne, and the singer Rita Ora.
LT: That would be my fiancé, Harry Styles. We've just recently moved into a new house, from the loft we shared together. He's in med school, he's going to be a pediatrician.

V: How long have you two been together.

LT: Since when I was studying Fashion Design at University. He actually agreed to model my garments for one of the class fashion shows we had, while he was getting his Bachelor of Science Degree. I actually wouldn't be where I am today without him.

V: Because he was your first model?

LT: No, nothing to do with that really. He met me when I was in a really bad place and in all candidness he saved me in every way a person can be saved.

V: Is this related to the eating disorder organization that you designed and auctioned six garments to raise fund for last spring?

LT: Yes, and I plan to do more fundraising for that organization, because it's a subject that's very important to me.

V: Do you have a date set for the wedding? Are you in the process of planning?

LT: I only proposed last month, and we're not in a rush, but Harry wants a spring wedding.

V: You designed the groom and best man's tuxes for the Hoechlin wedding, will you be designing the tuxedos for your wedding?

LT: *Laughs* Harry hasn't given me an option, he won't wear anything else."

"Oh my god I completely sound like the woman in this relationship. You proposed to me, I want a spring wedding, I'm dictating what we'll wear," Harry groans, but he's barely concealing his grin.

"You're lucky I didn't tell her you're shopping around for florists already," Louis replies, kissing Harry softly on the cheek.

"I can't believe it's printed in fucking Vogue that I get to be your fiancé," Harry says dreamily, nosing at Louis' cheek.

"I can't believe I get to have you as my fiancé," Louis says, "I was smiling like a loon when we were discussing this."

"I love you," Harry whispers.

"I love you too. Now hurry up and finish reading," Louis replies shouldering Harry playfully.

"V: Well you've had a busy two years, and even busier ones to come with the direction you're heading, and the success you're experiencing. Where would you like to see yourself in five years?

LT: That's a really hard question to answer because I'd honestly never pictured myself where I am today until I got here. All I know for sure is that I'd like to start a family and I'd like to keep designing. Hopefully people just keep enjoying what I design."

They're quiet for a moment as they both look at all the pictures selected for the article. There's a shot from Louis' runway show, and pictures of his designs being worn on the red carpet. Down in the bottom left corner is a picture from their lunch date with Rita and Cara; Harry's arm around Louis' shoulders and both of their heads thrown back in a laugh. Harry's fingers trail over the picture and
the smile hasn't left his face

"Do you know how proud of I am of you?" Harry asks softly, turning to meet Louis' eyes.

Louis nods, and smiles, "do you know how much I love you?"

Harry grins and opens his mouth to reply, but he freezes and his eyebrows furrow. He turns back to the article and his pointer finger skims the page until he pauses. Louis realizes what he's going back to read, and he has to bite down on his lip to try and stifle his laughter. He was wondering if Harry would notice. He had struggled to keep a straight face during the interview because he had thought maybe the interviewer would recognize what he said and think he was strange. Harry's finger taps the paper.

"Louis," he says suspiciously, "did you seriously just quote Titanic about me in your Vogue interview?" he asks, his voice lilting up with awe.

When Harry looks over at him with wide eyes Louis is grinning, "you mean about how you 'saved me in every way a person can be saved'/?" Louis asks coyly, "I wasn't sure if you'd notice."

Harry looks at Louis in complete disbelief, "but you hate that movie."

Louis reaches out and twists the gold band that rests around Harry's ring finger, "but you love it," he says quietly, "and maybe it isn't so unrealistic after all."

"I fucking love you," Harry says, shit eating grin in place as he dives in to attack Louis' lips.

~

Louis remembers his first runway show ever. He remembers almost having a panic attack as his models rushed around, and only being able to breathe properly again when the last model was finally off the runway. There are no nerves like that anymore. He's calm and collected as he adjusts minuscule details on each girl before getting them in line to start the show. It's been a while since he actually had to run around back stage and organize things for his shows, he has people who are hired to do that for him now. He's still always the last person to see each girl before he sends the look down the catwalk though.

Time rushes by as it always does, with the girls each taking their turn down the runway. Before he knows it the crowd is applauding at the end of the show. Geneva, one of his favourite models, takes his hand and leads him out onto the runway. People clap louder as Louis gives his customary wave and says a thank you even though nobody can hear him. Geneva looks like a million dollars standing beside him in the finale gown that he crafted by hand, and everyone in the crowd that he can see past the overhead lights is smiling and clapping.

He's only searching for two faces though, and when he finds them his heart clenches and his smile turns real. Harry stands at his front row seat to the left of the runway, wearing the suit that Louis picked out for him before work that morning. His curls are pushed back from his forehead in what he calls his adult hair style, and his jaw is lined with a bit of stubble. His smile is the exact same as it was the day Louis met him though, breathtaking and bright, and flanked by those dimples. These days the laughter lines linger after he's done laughing, but his eyes still hold all of his youth.

He holds Mia on his hip, in her little black ruffle dress, with her caramel coloured curls pulled back with a bow. Mia flaps her chubby little hand up at Louis, and Harry just grins up at him, unable to clap because his hands are cradling her. He doesn't need to clap, because the pride and the love in his eyes says enough. People could be boooing Louis and screaming about how horrible everything he's
ever designed is, but looking down at Harry from the runway Louis knows it wouldn't even matter to him anymore. He's got what he needed.

~

"What the hell is this Liam?" Niall squawks, jabbing a finger at the softness of Liam's stomach, "I thought for sure you'd be the last of us to get a beer belly!"

Liam just grins and rolls his eyes, "Christ sake Ni, I sit behind a desk all day, I don't have sixteen kids to chase around like you do," he argues.

Niall just laughs, "I only have four, and it isn't my fault they keep coming out in pairs," he says.

"And it's not even a beer belly, it's still flat," Zayn protests, reaching overt pat Liam's tummy.

Louis rolls his eyes and takes another swig of his beer. There was a time when his skin would be crawling just at the mention of someone else's weight. He'd be panicking, comparing himself to Liam, thinking about all the horrible things they must be saying behind his back if they're teasing Liam to his face. He'd be so triggered it would take every bit of his strength not to run upstairs and scratch the back of his throat out, just to throw up the blueberry waffles that Harry made for breakfast, and the nachos he and the guys have been munching on all afternoon.

He has more important things to worry about now though. Like when their son is going to stop picking his nose and eating the boogers, and how he's supposed to feel about Zayn's son constantly tucking flowers in Mia's hair. Also, he knows Niall and Zayn would like Liam if he was three hundred pounds, and he also knows that they'd all love him if he was three hundred pounds too.

He's a grown ass adult but there are still times when he second guesses himself, and he looks at the extra cheesy lasagna Harry's made for dinner, and he asks himself if he really needs all those calories. Except when that happens now Louis just has to look across the table to where Matty is watching him with big green eyes, already so eager to mimic everything his daddy does, and it's easy to eat his food and actually enjoy it.

Sometimes he still doubts himself but he never hates himself anymore. He's proud of who he is, and he's proud of what he's done. Sometimes he wakes up in the morning stressed about work, or because the kids have the flu, but he always wakes up happy and he always wakes up loved.

"When are you going to have kids Liam?" Niall nags, "Charlotte has her heart set on Matty, now you need to make someone for the other three!"

"Niall even if we have kids I'm never going to be able to breed enough spawn to marry them off to yours when you keep multiplying at twice the rate," Liam argues.

"Alright you two, shut up," Zayn says fondly, "Lou, where's Harry?"

"He's upstairs taking his red velvet cake out of the oven," Louis replies, "I should go up and put the steaks on the barbecue."

Niall grins, "I can't even get my wife to touch the oven and you've got fucking Betty Crocker in your kitchen."

Louis grins, "he's got the ruffled apron and everything," he says.

Louis leaves the guys down in the basement rec room watching the football game. Boys night turned into fathers night somewhere along the way, but it still consists of food, beer, and football. Louis
makes his way up to the kitchen and he passes the open french doors leading to the back yard. Matty sits out in the sandbox surrounded by four heads of curly strawberry blonde hair, Mia lays in the grass pointing at clouds and Louis watches Zayn's son tries to subtly scoot closer. Harry turns around when he hears Louis' bare feet on the hardwood and a smile splits his face.

He's got cake batter smeared on his cheek and Louis grabs a face cloth to dab it off before Harry stoops down for a kiss. Harry backs him up against the counter and boxes him in, with his hands beside Louis on the edge of the countertop, and his hips pressed flush with Louis'. Louis smiles into the kiss and runs his fingers through the tiny bit of silver that's starting to show at Harry's temples.

Harry pulls back and meets Louis' eyes with a shy smile on his face, "you know, when I realized I loved you, I pictured our lives together."

Louis raises an eyebrow and smiles, "and what did you picture?"

"This. Us. Kids running around, and dogs barking, and kissing you in the kitchen," he replies simply.

Louis reaches up and cups Harry's cheek, his thumb dragging down the stubble, "you're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Chapter End Notes

I know this epilogue is short but when I'm reading I always prefer some ambiguity at the end because it gives you room to imagine what happened to the characters and put things together for yourself. I just wanted you guys to know that they are happy and healthy and successful and that the boys are all still together and that they have a beautiful family. I hope that was enough.

I honestly cant even find words to say thank you to you guys, you have been so amazing about this fic and so amazing to me and your kindness has been completely overwhelming. For everyone who gave this story kudos, who posted a comment, who made a piece of art, or recced the fic to their friends, and even if you didnt do any of those things but you read it, just thank you so so much.
Authors Note

Chapter Summary

Just a quick note

I have agreed to post a Spanish translation of Fading to my account, you can find it here 
http://archiveofourown.org/works/2758454/chapters/6184127 the translation is done by Melanie Coloma.

Please read this to understand why I am hesitant about translations 
http://tothemoonmydear.tumblr.com/post/79805850683/tothemoonmydear-tothemoonmydear-thank-you-so
If you want to translate Fading to another language you MUST ask my permission first and I reserve the right to say no. Nobody is allowed to post or translate Fading without my permission and I will not let anybody else post Fading on any other accounts. Please message me at tothemoonmydear.tumblr.com or my e-mail kelseynicole@live.ca if you have questions. DO NOT TAKE OR TRANSLATE FADING WITHOUT MY PERMISSION.

I also just want to take the time to say thank you to all of you. You have no idea how much it means to me that Fading is still the One Direction fic with the highest kudos and that I still get kind messages about it on here and tumblr and also that you guys still make art for Fading. You amazing people make all the work I put into Fading worth it. Thank you so much for reading and for being so kind, you're all wonderful.

I have a couple ideas for Fading oneshots but people keep stealing Fading and posting it without my permission and I lose motivation to write. Hopefully one of these days I will be able to get something new to you guys.

THANK YOU SO MUCH I LOVE YOU GUYS honestly I would reply all your comments on here if I could please just know that I read every single one and every single one means so much to me. Thank you <333

End Notes

I just wanted to add on here the link to all the amazing art that has been made for this silly fic of mine and say thank you to everyone for reading and being so kind <3

tothemoonmydear.tumblr.com/fadingart

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!
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