Directing the first ever season of The Bachelor with a bisexual star is a huge career move for Louis. After throwing himself into his career, he finally has the opportunity to prove himself as a director with a unique vision.

For Harry, being cast as the first ever Bi Bachelor means finally putting his ex-boyfriend behind him and starting anew. He's taking a chance on finding love and determined to do it right this time.

They didn't exactly think this through.

[or, the BACHELOR AU where Louis directs his ex-boyfriend Harry in his season as America's first bi bachelor.]

so this here is my magnum opus. not only the longest thing ive ever written (67k in total) but my longest one-plot, one-thesis piece of writing. im pretty proud. i havent written fiction since i was 12, so i never thought id get here.

id like to send a great, big shoutout to my best friend anna, without whom, this story would not exist. she sat through 4-hour skype chats, edited every single day, encouraged me (and
sometimes would not text me back unless she knew i was making progress writing). she is not only the reason i was able to finish this, but also the reason i feel confident in the piece. id literally be sitting at work and getting emails from google docs telling me she was making comments, and just knowing we were both so focused and dedicated that we'd put in 6+ hours every day means so much. she is the best beta i could ever ask for, and i am so so SOOO grateful to have met her. she even wrote some scenes! ill point them out along the way. god, im so excited. thank you, anna. i couldnt have done this without you, you are going to make a great writer/editor. im so lucky to have you, and i wouldnt have spent my summer any other way.

id also like to thank taylor, because without her, i never wouldve even embarked on this journey, except she probs wouldnt get that joke, since she didnt watch the show as *cough RESEARCH cough* (....i definitely did not get super into this show while writing this.) thank you for encouraging me, thank you for brainstorming with me, thank you for editing and pointing out when anna and i were being stupid and not explaining stuff that a non-bachelor-viewer wouldnt get. youve been so excited about this throughout the process (wink wink, more bachelor lingo) and im so so happy. thank you for reading, thank you for editing, thank you for literally helping me to craft this story and being so upbeat this whole time. even when i didnt know i could do it, you did. and that's incredible.

also thanks to the harry's nut:our religion group chat for listening to me talk about this all summer. yall are the best.

finally, here's a link to the fic post.

title from james bay's "running."
August 2018

Harry firmly believes that he is fundamentally an optimist. Even if he drops a fresh batch of blueberry muffins, or his bread doesn’t rise, or if Mrs. Tottenmeyer spends another twenty minutes considering cupcakes only to remember her doctor has advised against sugar, he will still offer a cheery smile to anyone who walks in the door.

However, despite his overall positivity, lately he’s felt lost and completely defeated.

“Hey, Niall?” Harry asks, his voice muffled under the weight of the fluffy blanket he’s wrapped around his body and head. “Do you think I’ll ever find love like Hugh Grant?”

Niall groans and throws a handful of popcorn at him. Harry supposes he deserves it, interrupting a prime Love Actually scene and all, but. This is important.

“Nialllll,” he whines, taking another sip from the bottle of rosé Niall gave him, a gift for the two-day-old chocolate butter croissants he brings home from the bakery.

Niall’s a great friend. Harry can always count on him to fuel his drinking habits. A year ago, Niall dragged Harry out to the pubs with him every night and made sure he always had a drink in his hand.

But lately, since he’s moved from Niall’s couch to the spare bedroom, Niall’s made less of an effort to cheer him up, and Harry’s not sure if that’s from a lack of faith or Harry’s tendency to wallow in self-pity.

Harry glances at Niall, who’s staring back, looking quite exasperated. Niall opens his mouth like he’s about to say something, when his phone rings. Harry tilts his head curiously because who calls on a late Wednesday night. He watches Niall’s finger twitch, hesitant to accept, but then he stands, answering his phone with a raspy, “Hello?”

Harry pauses the movie and sits up, leaning over the couch as Niall walks towards the kitchen.

“Harry?” Niall repeats. Now that catches Harry’s attention. He glares at Niall, who’s puffy face is contorted in confusion.

A second later, Niall’s lips part. “Oh,” he says, stepping further into the kitchen.

Harry huffs and raises his brows at his best friend in a “what the fuck” fashion, the effect probably hindered by the blanket pressed firmly over his curls, but—whatever. Comfort is key.

Niall’s eyes bug absurdly far as he listens to the voice on the other end of the phone. Then he gasps, his abrupt inhale followed by a panicked squeak. Harry glares suspiciously before sighing and walking over to pinch Niall’s arm.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Calder. Please continue,” Niall says with a deep, drawling voice, very unlike his typical Irish brogue. He swats at Harry’s hand and sends him a stern look, motioning for him to shut the fuck up and stop abusing him.
Harry ignores it. “Why are you imitating my voice?” he asks.

“Shut up, you dick. I’m on the phone.”

“Niallll,” Harry whines, leaning closer.

He hears the phone voice cough. “Mr. James?” it asks.

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry.” Niall says, elbowing Harry in the gut. He starts to walk away, but Harry grabs his shirt and pulls him back.

He barely catches the voice thanking Niall.

“I look forward to receiving your audition,” it says.

Harry scoffs. Niall’s never auditioned for anything in his life. Sure, he’s played guitar at a couple pub gigs, but that’s usually by word of mouth. Is he branching out? Why didn’t he mentioned anything before?

“Okay, uh, thanks,” Niall stutters to the mystery caller. He hangs up and stares at the device in his hand.

Harry bites the inside of his cheek. “Okay, what the fuck was that,” he demands.

“It was, uh, nothing. Come on, we have to finish Love Actually.”

“Oh fuck that. I know you’ve seen it two million times. What did she want?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Niall scratches his neck and stares anywhere except Harry.

Harry rolls his eyes. Niall’s acting incredibly shady, and he doesn’t buy a word.

“Seriously—”

“Actually, um, I gotta go. I’ll see you later, Harry,” Niall says. He grabs his keys and rushes out the door. Harry blinks, eyes slowly adjusting to the vacant apartment, Yep, something’s definitely up. He yawns and burrows back into the couch. Harry giggles. Niall will be back soon enough. He left wearing his pajama bottoms.

After work the next day, Harry stretches out on the couch, book in hand, ready to relax and maybe nap. Then Niall bursts through their front door, practically collapsing under the weight of a huge light, fuzzy boom mic, professional camera, and Gemma’s make-up box. Harry sighs and closes the book, knowing he won’t be reading any time soon.

“Niall,” Harry says, nibbling his lip. “What is all that?”

Niall ignores him, laying it all out, trying to give the equipment some semblance of organization.

“Niall,” Harry repeats, tapping on the cover.

“It’s—well.” Niall winces. “I may have submitted an application for you to be on The Bachelor, and now you have to film an audition tape because they really liked you, which I think means you could possibly be on the show,” he rambles. “Please don’t be mad.”
Harry's mouth falls open. Niall squints and ducks like he’s awaiting a blow, but Harry can’t even comprehend the words he said, much less comment. Niall cautiously raises his head, face still scrunched defensively.

Niall hesitates. “Haz?” he asks, waving a hand in front of his face.

Harry shuts his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. Fucking hell. He silently counts to three, attempting to calm the heat coursing under his skin. No use. In their entire six year friendship, he’s never been this pissed, even when Niall told him he’d been secretly dating Gemma for months. The tosser’s fucking his sister for god’s sake, yet that somehow seems trivial in comparison.

“You’re fucking with me,” he says, voice dark and full of disdain.

Niall swallows. “Nope,” he admits, smiling sheepishly.

Harry inhales until his lungs can’t expand anymore. Sure, he’s been a little heartbroken these last few months, but to be desperate enough to go on an American television series just to find a girl? No way.

“You think I’m so pathetic that I need to go on a goddamn telly program?”

“No, Harry, it’s not that,” Niall says. “You’re bloody brilliant. Anyone would be lucky to have you. It’s just I thought this could be a fun adventure, yeah? Something to help get you back out there, out of your shell. You’ve been so closed off lately, Haz, how are you ever meant to meet anyone with that attitude?”

Harry frowns. So now he’s unlovable too? Splendid.

“Niall, I don’t need—”

“Haz. When’s the last time you left the house for somewhere other than the bakery? You do nothing but work and wallow, and I hate to see you like this. It’s been so long. I want you to get out of your head, out of your comfort zone.”

“And making a fool of myself on national TV is the way to go?” Harry snaps.

“There’s more to life than Louis fucking Tomlinson!”

Harry gasps, his heart clenching violently. He crumples, folding in on himself as he tries to stop the sharp throbbing in his gut. He knows Niall didn’t mean it, and yeah. It’s been over a year. Shit. Harry bites his lip. He’s the worst friend. He can’t believe he’s let his heartbreak overshadow their friendship. Pull it together.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Ni,” Harry mumbles, fingering the rings on his left hand. He looks down, feeling about twelve times smaller. “Sorry I’m such a burden to you,” he whispers.

He hears Niall sigh and shuffle closer. Then familiar calloused hands cup his wet cheeks.

“Hey,” Niall says. “I promise you’re not. You’re lovely, and I’m so lucky to be your best mate.”

Harry sniffs and wipes his face before meeting his best friend’s hopeful gaze.

“It’s hard to see you go through this. You’re normally so happy. Honestly, this show could be perfect for you. It’s a chance to meet some new people. Plus, this guy’s gonna be American. Nothing like Louis.”
“Wait, what?” Harry’s head snaps up. “Guy?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a guy?” He tries to keep his voice even, but then Niall grins, and he’s sure he’s failed.

“Yeah, it’s going to be a bi Bachelor, Haz!”

“That’s amazing.” Harry murmurs, a smile tugging at his lips.

Niall barks out a laugh and knocks Harry in the side of the head. “Yeah, you arse, that’s why I submitted your name.”

“I think it’s a fine idea. It, um, it could be really great for television. A bi Bachelor,” he mumbles, testing the words in his mouth.

“That’s the spirit, Haz. So you’ll do it?”

Harry hesitates. “Yeah, I guess. I’ll do it for you, even though you are the true love of my life,” he says wryly. While it’s not the best idea he’s ever heard, he’s willing to try anything for his best friend.

Niall claps him on the shoulders before turning to reach for the equipment he dropped.

“Okay, so, the audition tape is due tomorrow. Phone lady said you should record a two-minute clip about why you want to be on the show and then some other shit. But it’ll be super easy, I promise.”

Harry groans and rolls his eyes because whenever he says the word “easy” it’s always a fucking effort. “Alright. Where do you need me?”

Niall jumps into action, immediately setting up a stool in front of their apartment window, which looks out over the London skyline. For once it provides optimum natural lighting and aesthetic qualities. Harry listens to Niall’s direction, closing his eyes as he dusts a layer of foundation across his face. Harry pulls his shoulder back and tries not to think about the total insanity of this endeavor. He’s not exactly sure he’s ready for this, but he figures he might as well try.

“Okay, Haz. Tilt your head towards the right.”

Harry does.

“Yeah, that’s it. Now just so you’re aware, I submitted your last name as James, okay?”

“What? Why?”

“So they don’t go prying into your personal life, duh.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “You mean so the media doesn’t go after Gemma, don’t you?”

Niall shrugs, blushing. “My motive doesn’t matter. Just be thankful I kept your family in mind.” He presses a couple more buttons, then looks back up. “Okay, smile. You’re gonna charm the pants right off these executives, yeah?”

Harry blushes, eyes trained on his feet. “For the record, this is just to appease you, Nialler. I probably won’t get chosen anyway.”

Niall scoffs loudly. “Don’t say that. Of course you will. They’re gonna love you. Now c’mon, go
ahead. Be the ruggedly handsome prince that I know you are.”

Harry spots the blinking red light in the corner of the camera. He opens his mouth to introduce himself, but instead begins to giggle. This is absolutely fucking absurd.

“Haz, we haven’t got all day,” Niall groans, smiling and shaking his head.

“Wanker,” Harry quips but catches his breath. Then he swallows and focuses on the camera lens with a big and bright smile.

“Hi,” he croons, dimples lighting up his cheeks. “I’m Harry James, and I’m ready to fall in love on *The Bachelor.*”

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**September 2018**

Louis wrings his hands as he follows Eleanor through the halls of ABC Studios. Even though the higher-ups have taken a liking to him and given him a shot, he still has to face Simon, the man who created the entire *Bachelor* empire, and that’s more than enough to keep his palms sweaty and his heart thumping hard against his ribs. This show is Simon’s brainchild, and if Louis fucks it up, he can kiss the prospect of a Hollywood career goodbye.

Which is why he’s focusing on the clack of Eleanor’s Jimmy Choo’s instead of the words spewing from her mouth. She snaps at him, and he shakes his head. This isn’t the time to zone out.

“Pay attention, Louis. Corden set this up specifically for you. He wants to make sure you and the top candidate vibe well together, although Simon was so thrilled with him yesterday he almost offered him the job on the spot.”

Louis snorts. “Good to know I’ve been given so much control with my own show.”

Eleanor gives him a look.

“I’m sorry, El. It’s just these fucking nerves.”

“I know it’s a tense environment, but Simon knows what he’s doing. He’s lead twenty wildly successful seasons. Give him some credit.”

“Maybe, but he’s still never thought to bring in a queer star before. I mean, really. How is it that after twenty seasons, the new guy who’s just walked off a plane is the first one to even think about broadening the show’s horizons?”

Eleanor clicks her tongue, brows set in a deep furrow. “Okay, firstly, you moved here from London. That’s hardly a different world from Los Angeles. Have some perspective. Secondly, the show just started, Louis. You still have time to make your mark, and you’ll have plenty of influence in decisions. But Simon created this from scratch. You should learn to trust him.”

Louis scoffs, but Eleanor’s glare quickly stifles any response. She stops outside the conference room and hands him a manila folder full of information about the candidates.

“You’ll have to get used to giving up control to him sometimes,” she says.

Louis rolls his eyes and gives her a quick peck on the cheek.

“Wish me luck, love.”
Eleanor smiles and pats his chest. “You don’t need it, superstar. It’ll go perfectly, I promise.” She winks, then opens the door, leading him into the room.

“Tomlinson! So kind of you to join us,” Simon bellows from the head of the table.

“Simon,” Louis says, nodding to him. He takes a seat on Simon’s left next to James and opens his folder. What a flimsy illusion of power.

“Now Louis, I’m going to be happy at the end of this, right boy?”

Louis sighs and meets Simon’s gaze. “Give me a good Bachelor, and you’ll have nothing to worry about, sir,” he says.

James, Louis’ absolute favorite producer, lets out a sharp laugh to his left and claps a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Well you shouldn’t worry, Louis,” he says. “We’ve found the perfect boy. Handsome as they come and much more intriguing than any of the dim-witted tossers we’ve had on the show before. And he’s from our side of the pond, so you know he’ll be absolutely fantastic.”

“Yes, Corden,” Simon replies. “Harry does seem like he’ll fit right into what we’re looking for.”

Louis freezes. There’s no possible way. That would be bloody ridiculous.

“Harry James. I’m telling you Si. With a name like that, he’s got to go far. We have too many brilliant James’ working on this show for him to be anything short of spectacular,” James exclaims with an over-exaggerated wink at Greg, one of the other more involved producers.

Louis sighs in relief. Thank fuck. The man who shattered his heart just a year earlier is still MIA and not here to ruin Louis’ show. He’s the reason Louis finally moved to Los Angeles, the reason he’d been so ruthless coaxing just enough drama and tension from the high-strung contestants on the previous two seasons. And now he’s received the opportunity to direct the premiere of a season that might actually impact the LGBTQ+ community. This means everything. Harry wouldn’t show up to sabotage that, and anyway he’s probably still in London baking or singing or whatever. Louis is quite prone to staying in the practical realm, thank you very much.

“Well, sir,” Louis says. “I’ve had to deal with the ramifications of your decisions before, so we’ll see.” He smirks, sparking booming laughter and a wide grin from James. Louis tries to reciprocate despite the nerves.

“See Simon? He’s a firecracker,” James says. “This boy’ll take this season far. Honestly, it’s about time we got a nice, little shake-up, ‘cause if you ask me—,” James leans across the table to stage-whisper to Greg, “—we’ve had enough skinny blonde women fighting over hunky, lackluster boys to last a lifetime.”

Simon clears his throat and raises his eyebrows.

“Besides,” James continues. “I agree, the lad’s positively charming, an absolute dream. With him as the face of the operation, and Louis at the helm? There’s no way the show will fail.”

“Well, I’m glad you brought him up, Corden. I do agree, the boy will provide a freshness we’ve been looking for.” Simon steeps his fingers together and glances around the table. “Louis, today you’ll meet Harry and judge him against the other candidates we met with last week. It was a bit complicated, as we had to fly him from London. He originally applied as a contestant, but I believe I found something special in him. Once you’ve met, we can deliberate and hopefully walk away with
a final decision.”

James beams and claps his hands. “This is gonna be fun, right lads?”

Louis gulps again. James turns towards him.

“Oh, brighten up, Tommo, there’s no need to worry. After twenty seasons, the audience is already hooked.”

Simon coughs loudly and sends James a pointed look. “I’d appreciate it if you took this position seriously and didn’t take our audience for granted, Corden. One tiny slip up this season, and it could be the end for one—,” he glares at Louis, “—or all of us,” he finishes, leaning back to look around the table one last time. Simon’s eyes settle on James, but his message is clear.

Fuck. Louis swallows dryly. If this doesn’t go well, he’s toast. The rest of them might also be toast, but Louis is the crispy, shriveled, black shit that he’d presented to Harry the time he attempted breakfast in bed.

“Alright.” Simon claps his hands together. “Is everybody ready to meet our next Bachelor? Eleanor, if you please.”

Eleanor exits to retrieve the applicant. Louis wipes his hands on his thighs. This is it. He finally has the chance to prove himself, to prove that a popular dating show can showcase same-sex couples and bisexuality, all while being a successful, mainstream program. It’ll be hugely innovative for the media landscape.

Finally, there’s a sharp knock.

Louis exhales. Just one more hoop. He fixes a smile on his face as Eleanor waltzes in, holding the door for a man following closely behind her. And then everything stops.

Louis gasps when he recognizes the long, languid gait and familiar brown curls. Fuck. He can’t speak, no movement but slow motion blinks and a tightness crushing his head. There’s his Harry, frozen by the door, staring back at him with equally wide, equally terrified eyes.

Louis tears his gaze away and tries to compose himself, failing as every new wall he’s built in the last year crumbles, and all the memories he’s tried to forget force their way to the front of his mind. He’s boneless and exposed at the most important meeting of his career. Just his fucking luck.

Simon clears his throat. “Is there a problem?” he asks, glancing between them.

Louis attempts to form a sentence, but Harry speaks first.

“Sorry,” he rasps, eyes cast downward. “Just a bit of nerves.”

Louis’ skin tingles hearing the hesitance in his slow drawl, and he can’t help it. His eyes snap to Harry’s hunched form. It’s been a while, but he can still read Harry like a book, can see his lips twitch and his brows wrinkle. He’s never been one for lying.

Simon’s eyes narrow, but he nods and motions for him to continue.

“Right,” Harry says, plastering a shitty trademark smile on his face. Louis watches his chest expand as he scans the rest of the room. “I’m Harry James. It’s a pleasure to be here. I appreciate all of your efforts to meet with me today.”
Louis bites back a snort. The fucker keeps his composure remarkably well as he continues his obviously rehearsed greeting. He would almost believe Harry’s façade if it weren’t for the way his eyes dart quickly around the room. Louis can almost hear the muddled collection of curses tumbling around Harry’s brain.

Which, shit. At least that feeling is mutual.

Louis stares at his hands, which have become very interesting as Harry continues to smile and woo the executives. When he finally looks up, Harry fucking smiles at him too, strained in a way only Louis would notice. It hits him that he’s still so attuned to him, can still read his thoughts as if they haven’t been apart for a year, and goddamn, Louis needs a minute.

His chest tightens as he eyes Harry’s flowing peach button down and typical black skintight jeans as if he hasn’t just shocked Louis to his core.

He wonders if Harry can still read him, if he can sense how freaked out Louis is by his abrupt presence. But, honestly? Harry probably doesn’t even care. He’s the reason Louis came here to start over in the first place. Harry left him with nothing. He erased every trace of them and moved out, taking Niall and Anne and all of the other people who had become staples in his old life. He didn’t know who he was apart from Louis and Harry, and it took months to even begin to figure that out. And now, Harry has the audacity to waltz into Louis’ new life. Just doesn’t make any bloody sense.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, shoving those thoughts away and mentally preparing himself to put his foot down in front of Simon, when he feels a sudden, sharp jab in his side.

“Get up, you tit,” James whispers.

Louis reluctantly opens his eyes. Everyone in the conference room is standing and staring at him, questioning him, judging him. And then there’s Harry right in front of him, who has made the rounds of handshakes and is waiting patiently for him to, well, get his fucking shit together. Louis rises hastily, wipes his palm on his pants, and holds out his hand for Harry to shake.

“Nice to meet you. James, was it,” he sneers, hand gripping Harry’s a touch harder. Harry doesn’t react. Of course he doesn’t. He walked away once, and he’ll do it again. Completely unbruised.

Get it together, Tomlinson. He left you. You’re fine. You’re a professional. A fucking important member of the team behind the fucking Bachelor. Fucking act like it.

But then he meets Harry’s green eyes. Harry gives him a small smile, one that doesn’t crinkle his eyes or highlight his dimples. It faintly resembles the private smile he used to give only him, and Louis feels nauseous from the bittersweet nostalgia churning in his gut.

Shit, he’s well and truly fucked.

“Welcome to The Bachelor. I’m Louis Tomlinson, the bloke behind the excellent, and frankly, necessary, improvements to the show.”

“Nice to meet you,” Harry replies curtly, cutting the handshake short. “I think it’s an absolutely brilliant idea. Can’t wait to learn more about it.”

And isn’t that just a kick in the bollocks. After the initial shock of seeing Louis, Harry has recovered just fine. Louis wishes he could say the same, though he’s schooled his expression to calm indifference.

He watches as Harry easily impresses the rest of the crew with his ever-charming, ever-put-together self. Louis bites the inside of his cheek. He’s probably the only one who can tell something’s off. But
he knows Harry better than anyone. Or at least that’s how it used to be. An unpleasant emptiness feels his chest, and he sighs. He can’t ignore it. Harry really is the perfect candidate. He seems happy, healthy, and ready to find love on *The Bachelor*. Which is fine. It’s been a year. Louis is fucking fine.

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**October 2014**

“Harreh, get your flat arse in here,” Louis yells from his perch on the loveseat, legs propped on their coffee table.

“Be nice, Tommo, we can’t all be as well-endowed as you,” Niall snickers, prodding him in the thigh with his foot.

Louis rolls his eyes. “Oh, shut it, Niall. He knows I love him.”

“Does he actually, though?”

Louis kicks back, harder than necessary. “Shut the fuck up, will you? He could hear you.”

Louis sinks further into their loveseat. Harry found it at a flea market in central London a year ago and insisted they have it for their tiny dorm room. They didn’t have the heart to throw it away after moving into their flat, and Louis quite adores it now, though he’ll never admit that to Harry.

“Alright lads, let’s find Nemo,” Harry calls, padding in with popcorn. He smiles at Louis, nudging his arm to squish next to him.

“Fucking finally,” Louis says. He reaches for the bowl, but Harry turns before he can grab anything and leans against his chest. Louis bites back a grin. The kid always wants to be the little spoon. And Louis is the accommodating best friend. He reaches his arm around Harry’s waist and pulls him closer. Harry nuzzles into Louis’ chest, wholly content. Louis smiles. He wouldn’t be surprised if Harry began purring soon.

“So,” Niall drawls. He smirks, his brows raised. “Tell me again when I agreed to being third wheel to your disgusting little lovefest?”

Harry tenses against him. Louis can barely feel his stomach expanding enough to breathe.

“Niall,” Harry gasps, scandalized by the mere suggestion. Louis tosses a couple popcorn kernels at a laughing Niall, who picks them up and tosses them into his mouth.

“Well?” Louis taps Harry’s stomach. “I’d like to see the film sometime this century, love.”

Instead of taking the remote, Harry scrambles awkwardly out of Louis’ arms and onto his feet. His eyes shift, his mind scrambling to explain his odd behavior.

“I, um, forgot the soda,” Harry mumbles. And with that he’s back in the kitchen.

Louis glares, wishing his eyes could burn holes through Niall’s tongue.

“Nice going, arsehole,” he says.

“Innit,” Niall replies, shrugging before shoving more popcorn into his mouth.

“Piss off.” Louis rolls his eyes and sits up. Harry’s sudden, defensive reaction was unexpected. He
sighs, assuming he won’t want to cuddle in front of their friends anymore. He’d probably appreciate it if Louis just moved to the floor and gave him more personal space, something that rarely exists between them. But that’s just them. They have a very physical, tactile friendship, one a lot of their friends don’t understand.

Louis swears Harry hesitates when he comes back and notices he’s moved, but he doesn’t say anything. He just curls into the couch corner and presses play. Louis had been looking forward to movie cuddles, but he’ll survive without them. As long as Harry’s comfortable.

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September 2018

After meeting Simon and the other executives, Eleanor leads Harry into an adjacent conference room to wait for further instruction. The door closes, and he’s barely alone five seconds before he sinks to the ground. He inhales sharply, his first proper breath since he walked into the boardroom. Cold air rushes into his lungs as he presses his palms to his eyelids.

Never in a million years did he expect to be in LA for The Bachelor, let alone run into Louis. What are the chances of two entirely improbable events happening at once? Screw fate. Harry takes a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” to move on, only to be overwhelmed by Louis’ face, Louis’ voice, just Louis, before the show even started filming.

And fuck. He’d said nice to meet you like he wasn’t bothered by their unexpected meeting at all. The arse had brushed all their history aside with a simple greeting. Louis must have been prepared. At this stage, he had to have known, probably even watched his fucking audition tape. It was an just an impromptu contestant addition. Hell, Louis could have influenced their decision to choose him, and he didn’t even earn this opportunity fairly, and this is all just Louis playing a twisted game. But he wouldn’t do that, right? Harry still knows him, knows he’s a good person.

Harry leans his head against the wall. It doesn’t help that Louis looks so good. Slim, healthy, hair in a neat, professional quiff. And god, he’s glowing. The LA sun has makes his skin look like soft caramel, a strange contrast to Harry’s Louis, constantly shadowed by London fog. And he seems confident and capable, a sense of self-assuredness that is sure to intimidate his coworkers. He said this season was all his doing, so the execs must trust him, must think he’s valuable. He’s obviously doing really, really well.

Harry wonders if anyone else knows about Louis’ vulnerable side. Louis would probably never admit it, but Harry can recall countless memories of a younger, vulnerable teen with soft blue eyes and a gentle voice.

Fuck, he’s so much happier now. Harry laughs harshly. He still works in a bakery and reads Anna Karenina every weekend, and Louis has moved to another country, has a whole new life, and is directing a revolutionary season of a world-famous television show. Of course he wasn’t as affected by their split. Like most of their relationship, Harry was a melodramatic mess, and Louis was completely ace. He just wanted Louis to be happy. That’s why he broke it off in the first place, and now, even if it makes him a martyr, he’s proud of Louis’ success. He deserves it, deserves to be happy. Lord knows Louis wasn’t happy with him.

“Alright, everyone. Please take your seats.”

Harry tenses as Simon’s voice seeps through the wall. He met him yesterday and felt an immediate unease and distrust. He commands a room with an immense amount of authority, yet it seems sinister rather than empowering. Harry knows he’s won Simon over, but he can’t rely on his charm for much
longer. If he doesn’t comply to Simon’s will, it could end badly, and that will be more threatening once he’s under contract. Luckily, he thinks of Harry as just a pretty face, so quiet wit could be an asset.

Harry presses his ear to the wall.

“So, what did everyone think of Harry?” Simon asks.

Harry only hears generally positive murmurs.

“Really, no comments?” Simon sounds disappointed at the lack of dispute.

Harry shouldn’t be listening, but honestly, it’s too easy to eavesdrop. He dated Louis for Christ’s sake, so he can’t resist a little mischief.


Harry bites his lip. He really shouldn’t be listening, but he has to know.

Louis doesn’t speak, and Harry’s heart lurches with every sound.

“I don’t know. I don’t get a good vibe from this kid, if I’m honest. I think—what about that guy from last week, what was his name. Adam? I think we should bring him back in, he was really—”

“Louis,” James blurts. “Are you kidding me?”

“No. He’s not right for it.”

“In what way could he possibly not be right for it? He’s perfect. Charming, handsome, earnest.”

“I just—He’s too. I don’t know. Fake.”

“Louis, you can’t—”

“No, James, I’d like to hear this,” Simon finally replies. “Louis, please, voice your concerns. You felt Harry was insincere? Ingenuine? We like to ensure that we have chosen well, and if you think this man won’t be able to promote our show, ‘open his heart to love,’ so to speak, I’d like to know.”

“It’s not that. I’m sure he could.”

“Oh, come off it, Simon,” James snaps loudly, a stark difference from the friendly banter he’d used in Harry’s presence. “We both know that’s a load of bullshit. The point of this show is to get viewers, not to fall in love.”

Harry frowns. He suspected the show wasn’t genuine, but hearing one of the producers say it outright, and to be so blasé? Especially in front of Simon?

James has balls. Harry likes him already.

“Of course, James,” Simon says, seeming unperturbed, “but we want to make sure our contestants act well enough to convince our audience they’re here for love. If they can’t, we lose those viewers. Do you understand?”

The room is silent. Harry still feels intrusive and a bit shameful, but it’s too late to retreat.

“Louis, the fact remains. I do see that ability in Harry. I can see him easily charming America and the
future contestants, perhaps better than any of our previous men. And I don’t see any other reason for hesitation.”

Harry inhales deeply before getting to his feet. He paces a bit, considers grabbing a glass of water on from the conference table, but then stays in his place. This is killing him. He shouldn’t take the offer. It’s such a poor idea. But...Niall said this experience might help him move on.

Harry hears Louis’ voice again, unable make out the words, and scoffs at the sheer impracticality of the situation. Earlier, when he was waiting for Eleanor to bring him in, he recognized that voice and thought he’d been hallucinating. How pathetic to be attributing Louis’ voice to strangers halfway around the world. But there he was on the other side of the door.

“What’s excitement for a language, sir, but this guy’s a prick,” Louis says, louder than before.

Harry stiffens at Louis’ tone. He’s anxious and frustrated. Harry laughs darkly because he can still decipher Louis, even with a wall between them.

“You impressed us this last year,” Simon replies. “Enough that I felt comfortable handing you the reigns this season. But I’m beginning to question that instinct. Harry is perfect. If you can’t agree with our decision, if you don’t have the same vision as us with this season, perhaps you’re not the right person to be directing it.”

Shit. Harry’s eyes widen at the audible threat in his words. That’s proper grim.

Before he can hear Louis’ response, Eleanor is back.

“Mr. James?” she asks, walking inside. “They’re ready for you.”

When Harry enters, Simon has a tight smile on his face. James bounces in his seat, and Greg grins sheepishly from across the table. Louis stares at the floor.

Harry presses his lips together. He should just cut his losses and leave. Dealing with Louis for months in exchange for the slightest chance to fall in love? No thanks. But then again, why regulate decisions based on his ex. Louis made it clear he wanted nothing to do with him, so. If he wants to be the Bachelor, he’ll goddamn do it, and no one, not even Louis Tomlinson, can stop him.

It’s been a year. Harry can’t afford to be hung up anymore. Louis has obviously moved on. Hell, he was over it before they even broke up. And what better way to get over someone than with twenty eligible men and women competing for his heart?

“So, Mr. James,” Simon says from the head of the table, “Are you ready to fall in love?”

Harry scans around the table, pausing on Louis, who’s still avoiding him. He knows he should go. Instead he says, “Yes, I think I am.”

***

May 2017

Harry flops down beside Louis on the bed, pushing sweaty curls away from his forehead. He heaves out a sigh and half-heartedly holds his hand up for Louis to high-five. Louis does, weakly, then rolls over and stands up, pulling on the pants he’d discarded just minutes before.

“Wait, what?” Harry mumbles, reaching his hands out towards Louis. “Where are you—come spoon me.” He gives Louis his best pout, plumping up his kiss-bitten lips.
“Sorry, love, but I promised Stan I’d watch the football game with him and some of the lads. I gotta go.” Louis smiles sheepishly. “You’ve already made me a half hour late.”

Harry sits up and grabs Louis’ shirt hem, frowning slightly.

“But it’s Wednesday,” he snaps, completely unamused.

Louis rolls his eyes. “And here I thought you were my boyfriend, not my calendar,” he says, immediately regretting his harsh tone as Harry’s face crumples.

“Lewis. We always stay in on Wednesdays. Movie night.”

Louis sighs. Of course Harry’s making this a huge ordeal.

“Not tonight, bub. Next week, I promise.” He grabs his wallet and keys from the nightstand.

Harry’s lips pull into a tight line. “You said that last week, Lou,” he murmurs.

He releases Louis’ shirt and pulls the sheets over his body, suddenly feeling much too naked. He doesn’t want to beg anymore, and he knows Louis is too stubborn to give in. That’s how it’s always been.

Louis hesitates before brushing Harry’s hair back. He cups his chin and gives him a quick kiss. Harry’s lips are unresponsive.

“C’mon, babe,” Louis pouts. “Gimme a proper kiss. What if I crash on the way to the pub?”

Harry sighs, giving in to Louis’ warm mouth. “Come back to me,” he pleads.

“Of course, H. Always.”

Harry kisses him once more before rolling over, eyes drifting closed as their bedroom door shuts.

Louis returns four hours later horny as hell. United won with a penalty shot, and his blood hasn’t stopped pumping. He bites his lip, already thinking of all the ways he might make it up to Harry.

He heads down the hall and opens the door to their bedroom, pleased to see his boyfriend lying on his back. Louis admires Harry’s tousled curls and bare chest. Then he carefully rolls down the sheets, exposing the smooth dips of Harry’s hip bones.

Harry moans softly when he feels a warm tongue tickling his abdomen.

“Lou, what are you doing?” he asks, swallowing dryly, trying to get the taste of nap out of his mouth.

Louis smirks. “Want to make you feel good.”

Harry rubs his eyes and blinks, eyes adjusting to Louis’ head making its way down his body, leaving a trail of wet kisses along his stomach.

“I skipped dinner. Thought I’d get my fix now,” Louis says.

“You should’ve eaten at the pub.” Harry scowls, turning his cheek as Louis crawls back up and ducks to kiss him.
Louis laughs and settles himself on Harry’s chest, grinding their hips together.

“Wait, what? You’re going to let me starve?”

Harry rolls his eyes. “I don’t want head, Louis. If you can’t apologize, just leave me alone.” He scoots away from him and curls into a ball by his pillow.

Louis immediately softens, reaching towards Harry’s smaller figure, trying to coax him out of his shell. “C’mon, babe. I said I was sorry about the game. Let me make it up to you.” He slips his hand between their bodies, fingers brushing against Harry’s cock.

“Don’t,” Harry mumbles, grabbing Louis’ arm.

“Well, what do you want me to do?” Louis snaps.

Harry sighs. “I don’t know. Not that.”

Louis pulls back and sits up, perching on Harry’s thighs. “Just talk to me, Haz.” He’s being stern, but it most likely won’t work on Harry anyway. “I’m not a bloody mind reader. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

Harry’s lying, they both know he is, but Louis’ exhausted, and he’s not about to pry the larger issues out of him.

“Fine, don’t tell your boyfriend what’s wrong. See if I care,” Louis mutters, giving him a play-growl face as he rolls off his body and onto the bed.

“Look, I just don’t want to. Just because we’re dating doesn’t mean you can fuck me whenever you want, and then leave afterward like it doesn’t mean anything.”

“I do have a life outside our relationship. One that I’ve been neglecting in order to spend time with you.”

Harry glares before standing up. “Bullshit. Spending time with someone involves doing other things besides getting off.” He ruffles his hair and stands up.

“What are you doing?” Louis asks.

“You’re being a jerk, so I’m going to Niall’s.”

“What? Harry—you’re being unreasonable.”

“And you’re being an arse.” Harry pulls on a lavender sweater. “Just let me fucking go,” he mumbles as he reaches the door.

Louis’ eyes widen, and he sits back, too stunned to say anything as Harry walks out the door.

***

September 2018

Louis is tense as he waits for Harry to emerge from his hotel. It’s been a whirlwind week full of interviews, photo shoots, and preparations, but they’re finally ready to shoot. Everything in the past few months has led to this—the moment when Harry stands in front of the Bachelor Mansion to meet twenty single men and women all vying for his affection. It’s revolutionary, and Louis’s proud of the
hand he has played. So yeah, he’s bloody nervous.

But, also—it’s fucking Harry. Harry, who walked out on him a year ago, who prompted him to flee to California in the first place.

Louis nibbles at his bottom lip. Of course he dreads watching him, ready and willing to fall in love with any desperate fool that steps out of the limo. Honestly, Harry’s a desperate fool to even audition for this pageant show.

Louis shouldn’t be thinking that though. He’s guilty of a similar desperation accepting this job. He doesn’t even like the damn show. It’s just the first opportunity that presented itself, and sure, he finally has the chance to highlight queer romance, but it’s still *The Bachelor*, still wannabe celebrities pretending to fall in love for five minutes of fame. Definitely not the height of entertainment, if he’s truly honest.

Louis fiddles with his cufflink. It’s his own damn fault he’s in this mess. He should’ve fought harder against the idea of Harry, tried harder to save his own sanity. He replays their initial meeting—Harry’s wide, innocent eyes and flawlessly rehearsed answers and stupid sheer shirt. Fuck. He’s had days to get used to the idea of being around him, and he’s still shaking in his Tom Ford’s. Christ, he’s pathetic.

He doesn’t even know this guy. The Harry he fell in love with wouldn’t stalk a man he’d heartlessly dumped halfway across the world. That’s just fucking insane. Louis laughs darkly. He can’t believe this Harry James stranger.

Louis jolts when the side door of the limousine opens, revealing black skinnies and hands covered in large, silver rings.

Harry thanks the chauffeur holding the door, and Louis snorts. Always so damn polite. He holds his breath as Harry slides into the plush backseat. Then the door shuts, and they’re alone, eyes meeting briefly before Harry shifts uncomfortably and looks out the window, stiff-necked, chest barely rising. He keeps his eyes on the passing palm trees, and his hands clasped in his lap, his fingers toying with the ring around his index finger. Louis notes the familiar shapes etched into the band, the worn tarnish on the sides. Harry bought it from an antique shop by their old flat years ago.

“So,” Louis says. “James? Where the fuck did you get that from?”

He smirks when Harry doesn’t answer.

“I, uh—” Harry stumbles, clearly not expecting an interrogation.

Louis doesn’t care. “Why would you lie about your name to get on the show? Did you follow me here?”

Harry frowns, brows furrowed as he glares at him, and no, that just won’t do. He doesn’t get to act innocent and confused when he fucking followed Louis to California. Heat builds in Louis’ chest, and his eyes narrow before he continues his questions.

“Are you stalking me? How did you know I moved here? Where I work?”

“Louis—”

“Did you plan this?” Louis asks. He’s vaguely aware that he’s talking over Harry, accusations flying from his mouth at an impossible rate, but he honest to God hates Harry’s excuses. In fact, he’d be perfectly fine not hearing Harry’s hauntingly rough voice ever again. But fuck, he’ll have to for the
next two months.

Louis takes a deep breath. What a prick. An entire fucking year later, when he finally has some semblance of a functional life, and Harry Goddamn Styles shows up, messing with his head and his heart once again. He’s the one who walked out, up and left, taking everything but the fucking note stating that he couldn’t live like this anymore.

He wasn’t there to pick up the pieces. He didn’t see Louis cry until he couldn’t, drink until he was gagging in the shower, fully clothed yet completely stripped. Fuck, he couldn’t even sleep in their bed, couldn’t stand the smell of him on their sheets without wanting to crawl out of his skin.

“Honestly, Styles,” he says, voice traitorously low. “Haven’t you done enough?”

“Louis, shut your mouth for once and listen,” Harry says. He continues to turn his damn rings. “Niall signed me up. He thought it’d be a good stage name, you know, since that’s his middle name. And this way, Gemma and my mum and Robin aren’t bothered. I wasn’t trying to trick you.” Harry pauses to look at Louis with earnest eyes. “Honestly, I wasn’t. Niall just—it was Niall, I swear.”

Louis snorts. Yeah, that’s bullshit. He’s been working towards this for a year to prove himself in this shithole industry. This opportunity, this show, is his chance. He can’t and won’t accept such a cruel fate—one that throws his ex-boyfriend back into his life, and allows him to fuck up the only thing he has.

Fate’s not that cruel. But Harry is.

“Right, I’m sure it’s just a crazy coincidence that you showed up here after—”

“God, not everything is about you, Lewis. I forgot how selfish you are.”

“Excuse me, Harold?” Louis gasps. Fuck’s sake, he’s not the one who was selfish enough to leave without an explanation.

“Not everything is some conspiracy. The Bachelor is a dating show for interested parties to find a life partner. I’m an interested party, and I’m trying to find a life partner. It’s as simple as that. I’m not out to get you. I’m just trying to find someone. It’s not that complicated.”

Louis swallows dryly and searches Harry’s face for an indication that he’s lying. But he’s not. He’s just Harry, getting ready to “lay it all on the line” for love. Louis will have to get used to that.

He hastily grabs up the folder resting next to him. They’ve danced around the topic long enough.

“Alright, Mr. James. I’d like to review the plan for tonight with you before the madness begins,” he says, handing a similar folder to Harry.

“There are twenty contestants arriving tonight. We expect you to have a firm grasp on their personalities before the first rose ceremony. Filming begins at 7pm. You’ll be positioned in the drive, and each contestant will have thirty seconds to greet you. If we aren’t satisfied with a take, we’ll reshoot. Afterwards is the cocktail party. These usually go quite late, so be prepared for a long night. You need to talk with as many contestants as possible, so keep your interactions short. After the party, Chris Harrison will escort you to the mansion’s conference room where you’ll have a meeting with Simon, James, Greg, and myself, to discuss who’ll you’ll send home. Keep in mind that we have the right to override any of your decisions regarding contestants, but we do take your thoughts and feelings into consideration. Is that clear?”

If Harry’s confused by the sudden turn of their conversation, he doesn’t show it. Harry nods and
begins to flip through the contestant bios.

Louis continues on, the beacon of professionalism. He’s never met Harry Styles. He doesn’t know Harry Styles. This is Harry James, the first-ever bi Bachelor, and he is nothing more than the star of Louis’ show.

“After tonight, everything progresses quickly. You should focus on getting to know these contestants as much as possible. I can’t stress how crucial that is.”

“I get it,” Harry snaps. He stares, agitated, out the window.

“I don’t think you do, Mr. James. This show—”

“I get it,” Harry repeats, voice much deeper. “Please give me time to process everything. I’m about to meet the love of my life.”

Louis’ heart seizes. To hear Harry say that in such casual declaration hurts more than he cares to admit. It’s a sure sign he’s ready to meet someone, has easily moved on, and that. That stings.

Louis’ eyes fall shut because as much as he wants to, he hasn’t forgotten. He still remembers those hours before the sun rose, when a younger Harry coaxed him awake, soft, wandering lips moving up his spine, tickling as they whispered those same words against his skin before sucking a dark bruise into the crook of his neck.

Shit. His stomach twists. A weakness he wasn’t expecting.

“Haz,” he whispers, the familiar name falling from his lips. Fucking mistake. He doesn’t need to open his eyes to feel Harry’s heavy gaze or hear the slight intake of breath. Louis waits.

“Lou?”

Fuck. And now it’s there, suspended in the air, a heavy curtain, and Louis wants to go back. Back to the mornings when all he worried about was how awful he’d cock up dinner that night or how much Harry would chase him for leaving the laundry in the washer all day. But they aren’t HazandLou anymore, and he can’t give himself to Harry again. He won’t. Harry lost that trust when he walked out the fucking door.

Louis swallows, forcing the past away, and clenches his fists. Get a fucking grip, Tomlinson, before you lose your goddamn mind. He silently swears that from this day forward, his only job is to ensure that Harry connects with someone. Someone who will become his husband or wife. Louis has had enough time to come to terms with the fact that it won’t be him.

“Sorry. I lost my thought,” Louis says, finally raising his head to catch Harry’s unreadable expression before it disappears.

The limo turns, pulling up to the mansion’s gates. Louis checks his watch. A little over an hour.

“We’re here. Get to hair and makeup.” Louis gestures to the folder in Harry’s hands, still open to a random blonde contestant. “And look those over.”

“Okay,” Harry says. He hesitates like he wants to say something else, but then his jaw sets. Louis avoids his gaze as the limo halts and immediately steps out before he can utter another word. He doesn’t watch Harry disappear into the mansion and feels strangely proud of that small feat.

Louis exhales. He made a right tit of himself in front of Harry. Haz. Fuck’s sake, that was some shit.
He rubs his face with his hands before turning to the camera crew.

“Hey, Cal,” he says, motioning to the cameras facing the driveway. “I need these in primary ocular positioning.”

That’s not even a term, but whatever. Dammit, he needs to move. He paces across the cobblestone, back and forth, obsessively wringing his hands and avoiding all thoughts of green eyes and obscenely pink lips.

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Harry slams the mansion door behind him, causing some of the crew to jump, and heads up the stairs to the bedroom Lou has turned into a makeshift dressing room.

She waves from across the room as he enters.

“Evening. Take a seat, sweetie,” she says, gesturing to the tall chair in front of a line of lights and mirrors.

Harry lays his folder on the dresser and hops up, smiling politely.

“How thoughts on how I’m to deal with this mess?” Lou asks, fluffing his curls.

“I trust you,” he replies. “But scissors are off limits.”

“Of course, darling. Wouldn’t dream of chopping ‘em.”

Harry’s eyelids droop as Lou begins to brush through his hair, and he replays Louis’ bitter remarks from the ride over.

How dare Louis accuse him of trailing his arse to L.A. He’s the one who threw away their relationship. He has such nerve to accuse him of being a gross, obsessive stalker. He hadn’t even known Louis was in America. Obviously there’s less to be heartbroken about than Harry previously thought. He may have romanticized their epic love a bit. At least now he can stop holding back.

He’ll take full advantage of the show, be the best damn Bachelor ever, charm the pants off every contestant, and find his soulmate. Then at the end, he’ll propose to someone who’s a better fit for him. He closes his eyes and imagines someone with kind eyes and smooth skin. Someone that’s not Louis Tomlinson.

And if Harry wants to flaunt his new-found love in front of him, well. It’s not like he’ll care anyway. He demonstrated that much when he fucked off to LA without a word.

Harry sighs. It’s no surprise really. He was always the more committed one.

Fuck, this is such a mess. He swallows, wipes his mouth. He has to stop dwelling on his ex. The arsehole isn’t worth it.

In fact, he’s going to smile. And flirt. And kiss some people, and in the end, he’ll walk away with the love of his life. That’ll show Louis.

He picks up the red folder, flicking through some of the pages while Lou touches up his curls.

“Are you nervous, hon?” she asks, soft and comforting.

Harry shrugs, then immediately apologizes for jostling her hand. She smiles gratefully.
“I think there’s always going to be some anxiety, having my every move filmed for the public and all, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“That’s good. And you’ll be great. You shouldn’t worry.”

Harry smiles and turns the page. Michael Clifford. 20 years old. Guitarist. And according to his photos, he has an affinity for hair dye.

“Look at that bleached hair,” Lou comments from behind him. “Oh boy…”

Harry lets out a loud bark of laughter. He feels calmer already.

“Looks a bit unhealthy, doesn’t it?”

“Nothing like yours, dear. All long and luscious. Perfect to work with.”

Harry preens at her and gives each side a little flick. She laughs and holds him back in place.

“And goodness, that tattoo,” she says with a frown, pointing to the black bands wrapped around Michael’s elbow. “I suppose that’s a matter of taste though. Do you like ‘em, hon?”

Harry holds up his left arm, tattoos on display in his white t-shirt.

Lou chuckles and curls another lock.

Shit. He tries not to think about how long it’s been since he’s seen them on someone else, how his own are designed with someone else in mind, permanent ink etched on his skin, how he hasn’t touched that someone in over a year, and especially not how that someone’s skin answers every part of his.

Harry winces and returns his focus to the bio folder. He turns the page to find a woman, who looks as if she’s in her early thirties, flashing a dazzling smile at the camera. Caroline Flack. 38. Television and radio host.

“She looks a bit full of herself, doesn’t she,” Lou comments.

Harry snorts, flipping past other profiles for anyone he might even remotely like. He feels a bit bad judging them so harshly before they’d even met, but.

Caroline, really?

Maybe he should call Niall. They talked right before Louis picked him up this morning, but Niall said to call if he had any issues, and...well, actually meeting everyone with Louis twenty feet away acting like a giant arsehole? Harry thinks that counts as an issue. He’s so lost in thought he doesn’t realize Lou has stopped styling his hair.

“I’m done, sweetie,” she says.

Harry finishes perusing the last profile before graciously taking the mirror from her hands. If he really has trouble, he can sneak away and call Niall later. Even if it’s 3am in his timezone, Niall kind of deserves it for all the shit he’s pulled, so he’d only feel slightly guilty.

Harry cranes his neck left and right, watching his reflection do the same. His hair moves with him, like the soft curls are natural. He beams.

“It’s amazing. Thank you so much,” he says.

“I’m glad you like it,” she replies. Then she pats his shoulder and tells him to change quickly because
filming begins in ten. Harry slides from the chair and presses his palms together, bowing thanks to Lou before heading to the adjoining bedroom where his suits are laid out.

His eyes roam over patterned material and bright scarves. He wants to look classy, well-styled. He taps his lip with his fingers, straining to remember the last time he felt exceptionally fit, and finding it nearly impossible. It’s been years since his last proper date, and he can’t bring back those feelings now. They’re nothing but memories.

***

Louis stifles a groan when Harry and show host Chris Harrison finally emerge from the mansion. Chris always looks dashing, but he’s nothing compared to Harry.

Lou has obviously spent a lot of time on his hair, but it still appears as if he just ran his fingers through it. The sharp lines of his jaw and cheekbones are sure to impress the contestants, and his suit, dear god. Slacks that tight should be verifiably illegal. It’s a simple black ensemble, each item blending flawlessly into one another, an Alexander McQueen scarf adding a pop of white.

His blouse, however, is obscene, unbuttoned all the way down to his navel, showing off not only the sparrows along his collarbones— don’t think about the littler one, Louis, don’t you fucking dare—but also the butterfly on his stomach.

Louis can still remember when it was new, skin raised and tender along his abdomen. Harry thought he was so cute.

“I’ve got butterflies in my belly,” he announced with a proud smile. Oh, how he marveled at his lovely boy before kissing him silly.

Louis sighs. That time is long gone.

Now Harry’s just a stranger, wearing an obscenely low-cut blouse on national television. It’s inappropriate is what it is, and Louis won’t stand for it. It has nothing to do with the fact that he won’t be able to focus on anything all night with Harry’s tits hanging out in the open. Nope, he has a certain reputation to uphold on this network, and he’ll do whatever he needs to ensure it keeps respectable ratings.

“Alright, Harry, ready to go?” Chris Harrison asks.

“Mhmm,” Harry says, but it sounds awkward and choppy.

“Enough chitchat,” Louis demands. Then he leans toward Harry, close enough to smell his cologne. “I don’t care what your motive was for doing this, but from now on, you’re here to find love. Understood?”

Harry’s eyes shift to Chris, who’s staring down the drive, before nodding and nervously adjusting his shirtsleeves.

“And button your shirt. This is national television, not a trashy gay club,” Louis snaps, flicking Harry’s nipple in an antagonistic and completely non-flirtatious fashion.

Chris and Harry prepare themselves in front of the camera while Louis gives orders to the crew. Harry’s ready to find love, and, no matter what Louis’ heart says, he needs to be okay with it. He has no other choice.
Chapter End Notes

i'll probably be updating weekly!! the whole thing is written, but i still have to edit the last couple chapters and the semester is starting, so i'll have a little less time to devote to that, but i think a week per chapter is definitely do-able, maybe even twice or three times a week towards the end!

also im on tumblr at coffeelouis !
Harry jumps when Louis yells, “Action!”

All off-screen activity suddenly comes to a grinding halt. Then it’s just him and Chris onscreen. Louis furiously points behind the cameras like he’s trying to catch every angle. It’s a surreal experience.

Harry takes a moment to gather himself, clapping his hands behind his back to hide his fidgeting hands as Chris speaks directly into the camera.

“Welcome back to The Bachelor. I’m Chris Harrison, and this time, we’re trying out something different. We’ve invited male and female contestants to join us this season to take a shot at winning the heart of our first ever bisexual bachelor. Here with me tonight, all the way from London, is Harry James. Harry will get to know these contestants over the course of the show, and if all goes well, he’ll end the season with a romantic proposal.”

Harry swallows, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Hopefully no one else can hear it. Chris turns towards him, with a grin.

“Harry, are you nervous at all?”

“I’m nervous, yeah. Who wouldn’t be? Twenty people came here to meet me, and that’s a lot of pressure. But I’m also excited. I’m hopeful that one of the people I meet here tonight could be the person I spend the rest of my life with.”

“I’m hopeful for you, Harry. It’s going to be an incredible journey. Are you ready to start the evening?”

Harry grins. “I’ve been waiting a while, but I’m definitely ready to fall in love.”

“Well, that’s great to hear because I think I see the first limo coming up the drive. Have fun and good luck.” Chris shakes his hand and walks off-screen.

Harry takes a deep breath and glances at Louis, who’s standing straight and stiff behind the camera, a determined look shadowing his features. Through the darkness, he can see Louis’ white knuckles clutching a clipboard to his chest.

Harry’s brows furrow. Fuck. That’s not what this moment is about. He’s about to find the person he’ll spend forever with, and it’s not Louis. Not anymore. Unfortunately, no matter how much he recites those lines, he still has a hard time believing it.

Harry forces himself back to reality. A beautiful person is about to appear from that limousine, and he needs to be ready to welcome them with open arms. This person may be his future. Any one of the twenty profiles he’s meticulously memorized could be the one. Louis is his past. He needs to stop looking for him at every opportunity.

Harry squares his shoulders and smiles brightly when the door opens, and a long, tan leg emerges from the limousine. A tall, blonde woman in a sparkling red dress steps out, smirking as she approaches.
“Hello. I—uh, I’m Harry.” He grimaces. Fuck, she knows that already. Why’s he so bad at this?

She lets out a loud, bold laugh and hits him playfully in the chest.

“Paige Reifler. It’s wonderful to meet you. I can’t wait to talk to you inside, Harry. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Harry’s breath catches. She’s so confident, and he feels like he’s about to crawl out of his skin. Pull it together. Bumbling idiot does not make for good television. He glances towards the camera where Louis watches with tense, wary eyes. That’s all he needs to spur him along. Fuck Louis. Fuck his accusations. Fuck everything about him.

Harry reaches forward for Paige’s hand and lifts it to his lips for a soft, tender kiss while staring straight at the camera.

“I have a feeling we’re going to get along very well, Paige,” he croons, giving her a (hopefully) seductive smile. With how delighted the producers standing behind Louis look, he thinks he’s successful. Paige waves her fingers before she continues past him and into the mansion.

Louis yells cut seconds later, looking absolutely livid.

“Alright, can we get that once again without Harry looking at the goddamn fucking camera, please? A little professionalism would go a long way here. Thank you.” His voice goes up a little bit at the end, squeaking. He’s getting stressed.

Everyone resets, and Harry tries to ignore the sinking feeling in his chest, but his mind keeps drifting. It was Louis that solidified his role on the show and now he’s acting completely irrational and downright derisive about Harry’s presence. Louis doesn’t deserve any of his heart, and Harry’s not going to give it to him.

But he might give it to Paige. Harry watches as she quickly returns to the limousine in a blur of red and blonde. Lou rushes out to wipe the sweat from his brow, and he shakes his arms, finally grabbing hold of his emotions. He can do this.

This time when Paige steps out of the limo, he’s ready.

“Hi, Harry,” she says as she approaches. “I’m Paige. It’s great to meet you.”

Harry wraps his arms around her in a tight hug, lifting her slightly off the ground.

“Hello, Paige.” Harry smirks at her, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “I’m so glad you came out tonight.”

“Me too. How are you feelin’?” she asks.

“A little nervous, a lot excited.”

“I bet. Well, I’ll see you in there. Promise you’ll come find me?”

“I promise,” he says, sending her off with a cheeky wink and flirtatious smile.

Louis doesn’t interrupt this time, and Harry feels slightly cocky.

The next person out of the limo is a man about the same height as Harry with dark, curly hair, a scruffy beard, and a Packers jersey.
“Hey, Harry. I’m Jeff.” He walks up to him, tossing a football back and forth between his hands.

Harry smiles. Now Jeff looks like a guy he could get along with, and he’s glad to know that no matter what happens with the rest of them, he’ll be able to hold a conversation with at least one person.

“Well Jeff, I can already tell you’ve got great taste—in both football and men.”

Jeff laughs. “I heard from a little birdy that you and I both share a love for The Green and Gold, and I thought I’d let you know what I’m all about. I brought this football to help you remember that this is about having fun.”

Jeff tosses the ball to him, and even though it’s an underhand shot and they’re standing about a foot away, Harry still almost fumbles it.

“Your actual playing skills may need some work though,” Jeff adds, teasingly.

“Heeeey.” Harry frowns, throwing the ball back. “Either way, you’ve picked a good team, which is a win in my book. I’ll see you inside?”

“Definitely.” Jeff claps Harry lightly on the back and heads in.

The next woman, Caroline, gives Harry a hug and kiss on the cheek, leaving behind a big, red lip print. He tries to rub it off between takes but doesn’t have enough time. He drops his arm to his side as Nick, a lanky man with tall legs and an even taller quiff, steps out of the limo.

“Geez, I could’ve done way better than that,” he says, poking Harry’s cheek.

Shit, just what Harry needs—someone to call him out for the obnoxious mark.

“I guess I’ll let her know?”

“Actually, I’m gonna go find some lipstick so I can show her how it’s done.”

Harry chuckles. Nick seems more fun than anyone he’s met so far. He can already tell their interactions will be extremely entertaining.

The last person to emerge from the first limo is a short brunette woman with a long, form fitting, black lace gown. She immediately runs up to Harry, grasps him by the back of the neck, and presses her mouth to his. After a few seconds of sloppy kissing, they pull away.

Harry forces a smile. No one warned him about the handsy contestants, and that was…wow.

“I wanted to have the first kiss,” the woman admits.

“Well you got it,” Harry says tightly. “In front of everyone.”

She giggles and leans into him, her hands moving suggestively over his arms.

“I’m Danielle. I’ll see you soon, yeah?”

“Sure.” He nods, staring wide-eyed after her retreating figure. Apparently anything’s game, and that’s news to him.

“Well, that was unexpected,” he murmurs. His cheeks burn as he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and runs a hand through his hair, vaguely aware of Louis’ voice yelling, “Cut,” and the first
limo driving away.

Shit, Louis. Harry’s heart plummets. Louis just saw him kissing someone else. Fuck, he can’t even concentrate on these first arrivals without thinking of Louis in some way or another. Harry scratches his wrist, debating on sneaking another glance. It’s for sanity purposes, a way to clear his head so he’ll stop obsessing over what ifs.

As the crew prepares for the next limo, he can’t resist any longer. He looks back at Louis, who’s standing with his back turned, whispering furiously with the producers. For all his talk about controlling his every move on this show, Louis’ not even paying attention to what he’s doing. Granted, he’s not doing much except waiting for the next limo and chatting with Lou while she dabs more powder on his face, but still. Shouldn’t Louis at least feign interest in the star of his television program?

“Oi, people.” Louis claps his hands. “Second limo’s ready to go with the first contestant. Try not to cock it up.”

Harry rolls his eyes because Louis’ never been subtle.

On action, a blonde, red-lipped woman with sideswept bangs emerges. She’s wearing a gorgeous white dress.

“Hi, I’m Taylor,” she greets, giving him a chaste hug.

“Hey,” Harry says. “It’s great to meet you.”

“I brought you this,” Taylor opens her palm to reveal a tiny, light pink guitar pick. “I love to sing and write music, and I wanted you to carry a piece of me as you meet everyone else.”

“That’s so thoughtful. Thank you.” Harry pulls her in for another hug, tucks the pick into his breast pocket, and waves her inside. He appreciates the gesture. She’s taken the opportunity to stand out and share something about herself. That says a lot more than flashy tactics or stealing the first kiss.

Taylor is followed by a burly man in a well-suited tux. He flashes a warm grin, eyes sparkling as he approaches.

Wow, you look absolutely incredible,” he says, like he’s absolutely stunned.

“Thank you.” Harry ducks, pushing a loose curl behind his ear.

I’m Liam,” the man says and offers a tight hug. “I was thrilled when they told me it was you. I’m excited to see where this journey can take us.”

“Me too.” Harry takes hold of Liam’s hands and swings them back and forth. They’re soft but firm. He likes this man already.

“Are you nervous?” Liam asks.

Harry laughs. “More than I’ve ever been before, I think. I want this to go well.”

“I’m sure it will. Don’t forget, we’re all looking to find love just like you.”

Harry hesitates, momentarily forgetting about the cameras, mics, and crew surrounding them. Although it’s all a ruse, Liam sounds truly genuine, like he’s speaking from the heart, and Harry really respects that.

He leaves Liam standing by the fountain and heads to Greg and James, who stand just out of sight, bewildered expressions on their faces.

Huh. Harry thought he’d been giving pretty good content.

Louis storms over, cutting Harry off. “What the hell is this about?” he snaps.

“I want to give him the first impression rose.”

“What?” Louis looks like he’s ready to throw something across the drive.

“I want to give Liam a rose. Right now.”

“Harry, attaboy! Great idea,” James exclaims. “Here’s how we’ll do it.” He pulls Harry, Greg, and Louis into a huddle. “We need to re-shoot Liam’s entrance. Harry, you’ll leave him in the drive again, go into the mansion, ask Chris Harrison “permission” to give him the rose, and take it out to Liam. In the meantime, we steal Liam away for a confessional to get his take on the situation.”

From Harry’s perspective, the surprise is great. Liam feigns shock and excitement, Harry is fond, yet flirty, but he has a feeling it’s going to set a tone in the house— one he’s not eager to deal with.

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After another few hours of tedious 30-second meet and greets with the rest of the contestants, about half of which are reshot, the crew moves inside for the cocktail party.

Louis addresses the cast in the main common room, overviewing basic information about the structure of the evening, encouraging them to drink to keep themselves loose, and reminding them that the night will end with the first rose ceremony.

Then it’s back to filming. Louis meticulously organizes the couches, arranging contestants so that men and women are evenly offset.

“Harry—you’re in the front. Grab a glass of champagne. Molly, where’s Harry’s champagne?” Louis calls. Before he can move, a PA forcefully shoves a champagne flute into Harry’s hand and straightens his collar.

Louis exhales. He looks around, tucking his clipboard under his arm.

“Is everyone ready for the toast shot?”

Once everyone has a drink in their hand, and Louis is satisfied, he steps behind the camera and signals for Harry to begin.

Louis swallows when he feels an ugly twist in his stomach as Harry proceeds to give a charming smile and raises his glass towards the group of men and women sitting in front of him.

“Thank you everyone for being here tonight to begin this journey with me. I’m incredibly excited about each and every one of you that have come out, and I can’t wait to get to know you more.”

He sends an exaggerated wink to Nick, who responds with a laugh and a tilt of his glass. Harry tips his head a bit and licks the corner of his lip.

Louis frowns. Of course Harry’s trying to go for seductive, but it just looks awkward as hell. He’ll
have to make sure they edit that out, have the camera on the contestants rather than him.

“I think we’re going to have a really great show, and I’m hopeful that my spouse could be sitting in this room,” he says, glancing at Louis.

Christ. Louis ignores the pang he feels in his chest every time Harry’s done that tonight. Every five minutes. He doesn’t get why he’s doing it, but it needs to fucking stop.

Harry clears his throat, attention now back on the group. “So, let’s get started!” He lifts his glass, and the contestants cheer.

After literal seconds of everyone toasting and mingling amongst themselves, Paige breaks away from the crowd and grabs Harry’s forearm.

“Could I steal you away, darling?” she asks with a soft, undeniably fierce smile.

“Of course, love.” Harry grabs her hand, eyes roaming her body, as if attempting to convey he wants to ravish her before leading her out towards the back garden.

Louis shakes his head and follows them out, a camera operator on his heels.

After two hours of filming Harry’s interactions with contestants, Louis takes a break with Greg and James to replay some of the footage.

It’s mostly small talk, which isn’t awful to watch, but when Nick’s segment rolls, Louis scowls.

“Replay that bit again,” he instructs, motioning to the camera’s monitor. Cal obediently rewinds the tape.

On-screen Harry smirks and runs his finger down Nick’s arm, who then laughs and shoves Harry’s shoulder. Harry licks his lips before leaning closer and pushing a loose strand of Nick’s hair back into his quiff.

“You know, you’re really funny,” Harry rasps lowly, batting his lashes.

Louis’ lips twitch. He knows that fucking voice. Knows exactly how horny it can make a man. He’s been on the receiving end way too many times. Hell, if he wanted he could probably cite every time Harry used it against him. Fuck, and now watching him pursue another man—Louis grinds his teeth.

“What’s the problem? That was great,” Greg raves, annoyed at his pickiness.

“Can’t we move on?” James says. “I’d like to leave before the bloody sun rises.”

“No one’s fucking keeping you, Corden,” Louis snaps. Then he sighs, lips pursed, and recoils slightly. “Sorry—I just. I need it to be perfect, and this is absolute shit.”

Greg groans. “Louis, it’s the first night. So far he’s owning it even better than some of the previous ones.”

“No. Fuck, I need genuine. This is him—trying too hard, thinking he’s cute, but it’s just not good TV. He’s acting like a little slut.”

“Tommo, hey.” James grabs his arm and spins him around. “I know this is stressful and frustrating, but Harry’s good. He’s flirting shamelessly with all the contestants. That’s what we want.” He sighs loudly, running his fingers through his hair. “Greggie and I? This isn’t our first rodeo. I know tensions are high and that the dynamic is a bit different for you, but you have to lighten up. As far as
I’m concerned, Harry’s acting as natural as he would in real life. Let him do his thing.”

Louis gives him an irritated look but doesn’t bother correcting him. No, he has a better idea. He turns and scans the surroundings for the nearest contestant. Taylor and Nadine stand near the doorway to the terrace, nursing pinots and chatting quietly.

“Taylor,” he snaps, signaling the tall, blonde, leggy woman. “Go interrupt Harry and Liam. They’ve been gone for a while.”

Taylor nods, handing Nadine her glass before heading in that direction. Louis follows with James and Greg grumbling on his heels.

Harry and Liam are sitting together on a bench near the brick terrace when they arrive. Taylor waits next to the camera that’s recording their intimate conversation.

“Can you handle this, Cal?” Louis nods towards Taylor. The cameraman gives him a thumbs up and follows her with his camera.

Taylor interrupts flawlessly, approaching the men with a small, innocent smile.

“Would you mind if I steal him away?” she asks.

Harry glances at Liam, who smiles reassuringly. “It’s no problem at all,” Liam says. He stands, buttoning his suit jacket. Harry gives him a hug, squeezing the skin just above his bum. His eyes linger on his retreating form, but once Liam’s out of sight, he addresses Taylor with a bright grin.

“Hi there,” he says, encircling her in his arms.

“Hi, Harry.” Taylor smiles and kisses his cheek. “You look very dashing tonight.”

Harry laughs loudly, grabbing her hand and bringing it to his lips.

“Thanks, love. You look,” he pauses, his eyes boring into hers, “absolutely ravishing. Did you know that?”

Taylor giggles like a bumbling schoolgirl and bats at him with her free hand.

Louis feels like retching.


Louis snaps his fingers. “We’ve established she looks good. Now let’s have an actual conversation? We have a lot of people to get through this evening.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “It’s not exactly evening anymore, more like dead of night?” But he complies, focusing on Taylor once more.

“So.” Harry reaches into his jacket and pulls out the pick she gave him. “I remember you’re an aspiring singer. Do you write your own music?”

Taylor nods, cheeks reddening. “I do. Music is my emotional outlet. Everything I write comes from personal experience.”

“Fascinating. What’s the last thing you’ve written?” he asks, pocketing the pick and intertwining their fingers.
“Well.” Taylor stares at their hands. “I recently had a difficult breakup, so most of my newest lyrics have been about that. It was one of those madly-in-love romances, and I was blind to all the problems in it. I fell hard, and it was rough when it came to an end. But I’ve moved on, and now I’m ready to find something that’ll last.”

“Thank you for trusting me with that.” Harry gives her a shy grin. “I’m ready too. I’m glad you want to give this a shot. You seem committed to finding happiness. I like that.”

“I am so committed.” Taylor beams and straightens her back, still clutching his hands. “I can’t wait to be in love, Harry. Real love. You’re nice and sweet. I want the chance to see if I can find that with you.”

Harry smiles. “Can you wait here? I need to grab something, but I’ll be back.”

Taylor’s eyebrows raise, but she nods. Harry kisses her hand again before walking back up the way.

Louis rubs his temples. What the hell is he doing. The first impression rose has already been gifted. The whole premise of the cocktail party so far has been contestants ruminating about it. He calls for James through his walkie, demanding a reason for Harry’s disappearance, but James doesn’t respond. He disappeared to oversee confessional and hasn’t returned since.

Louis is about ready to stalk back into the house when Harry returns, a single red rose in hand. He takes a seat next to Taylor again, who looks on with wide eyes.

“Look, uh, I know it’s still pretty early in the night,” he says. Try 3am, but who’s counting?

“Obviously the first rose is already floating around, but I’m confident I want to explore this. I feel great about you being here. So Taylor, will you accept this rose?”

Taylor gasps before a shit-eating grin breaks out on her face, and she reaches for the rose offered to her.

“Of course, Harry. I’m honored.” She holds his cheek in her palm, and he leans in, brushing his lips against hers, lips curled in a slight smirk.

“Cut.” Louis barks, tearing his eyes away from their conjoined mouths. He checks his watch. “We still have seven contestants to go. Harry, lead Taylor back inside and grab someone else. Anyone you haven’t talked to will do.”

Harry complies, and by the end of the night, he’s given out another three first impression roses. One to Kendall, after a walk through the garden, one to Nadine, after he’d given her his coat to wear, and one to Nick, who he had specifically searched for in the mansion, saying he’d felt a connection from the moment they met. The number of roses is getting to be a bit ridiculous, and it’s nothing new since Sean did the same thing a few years ago, but it’s sure to bring in drama, so Louis will take it. Anything that will make the rose ceremony quicker so he can get the hell out of here.

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Unfortunately, the ceremony is the hardest part of the night. Harry stands at the front of the room, smiling, hugging and kissing eleven different people before asking if they would stay and share this experience with him. If they’d consider spending the rest of their life with him.

Louis needs a fucking drink. He’s watched Harry become more and more confident as the night
progressed, but his interactions with Danielle are by far the most disgusting.

Even though her time with Harry had been relatively quiet, she still has the nerve to accept her rose by grabbing his neck and pulling him in for yet another sloppy kiss.

“We didn’t even prompt that,” James whispers excitedly. “She’s put a target on her back, and we didn’t lift a finger. I think we have our first villain.” He claps Louis firmly on the back.

Harry doesn’t notice their exchange, just keeps going, each new contestant he calls—Jeff, Emma, Ben, Cara and Xander—making Louis feel worse and worse.

When Harry calls for Paige, he gives her a cheeky kiss on her cheek, and she returns with a flashy wink. Michael slaps Harry’s butt during their hug. Caroline kisses his face, giving him another red stain.

Fuck, Louis doesn’t know how much more of Harry’s smug face he can take. Everything hurts. There’s no denying the gaping hole in his chest and uncomfortable churn of his stomach as he hears Harry give rose after rose to potential spouses. He’s pretty sure this won’t be the first time his heart is broken throughout this process. It’s been a long night of heavy-handed, over the top, obscene flirting, and he’s ready a long shower and a glass of whiskey.

The worst part is Harry doesn’t seem genuine. He’s not stumbling over his words with flushed cheeks, something he does, or at least did before, when he was interested in someone.

But no one else seems to notice. James and Greg are thrilled with his performance. Louis has to squint against their beaming grins, which shine even in the dim light of the morning sun. He’ll just have to deal with it for now, even if he doesn’t like it.

Finally, Harry’s gifted the last rose of the night, and with one last champagne toast to the continuing contestants, the night is over. Rita, Cher, Doug, Patrick, David, and Luke go home, which isn’t surprising. The producers talked about it prior to filming and told Harry to keep his interactions with them brief. It was all quite diplomatic, and Louis could only hope for the same simplicity in the coming weeks.

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Lou has just finished fixing Harry’s curls when Louis storms out of the mansion.

“Are we done here?” he demands, giving Harry a once over and shooing Lou away.

Harry rolls his eyes, watching Louis march over to a dawdling cameraman. He was a right pain all through his first group date the day before. Caroline almost bitched Louis out when he made them redo their conversation three times, and Michael stomped around yelling obscenities at the crewmembers after Louis told Jeff to interrupt their segment. So it only figures he’d be an arse for his first one-on-one as well.

As the cameras prepare to record, Harry leans back against a vintage convertible, wondering if he looks suave against it. Niall always said girls like boys with cars. His shoulder slips against the side, and he stumbles to keep on his feet.

Thankfully Louis doesn’t comment, so Harry assumes he didn’t notice. He quickly repositions himself as he waits for Kendall to appear.

His date today is with her, a deliberate choice by the producers because their two-minute conversation on the first night showed promising “chemistry.”
He doesn’t mind though. Kendall seems like a sweet girl, genuinely friendly and easygoing. Actually he’s a bit excited to spend time with her because the first group date was unbearably awkward. He was overwhelmed by all of the attention being thrown at him, and he didn’t balance his time well at all. Louis was constantly snapping at him. Everything he did or said was unsatisfactory. It wasn’t his best, but luckily, Kendall is one of the contestants with whom he feels most comfortable.

A few minutes later, she comes out in tiny denim shorts and a tight, white tank top. Her hair flows around her shoulders, and she walks so lightly she looks like she’s skipping. Harry wonders how she’s mastered the perfect entrance without a fan set up behind the camera capturing her movements. He waits until she passes the massive fountain in the center of the walkway before greeting her, just as Louis instructed.

“Hiya, Kendall,” he says. And that’s the cue for the rest of the contestants to file out of the mansion. They gather at the edge of the driveway to observe the send off.

“Hey, Harry,” Kendall squeals when she reaches the convertible.

Harry hugs her, his hands around her waist. She wraps her thin arms around his shoulders, holding their bodies close before pulling back, face glowing.

“Ready for our date today?” he asks.

Kendall tosses her hair, her actions following their script to the very letter, and nods excitedly.

“Great,” Harry says. He moves to open the door, holding out his hand to assist her because he has to show America he’s a proper English gentleman. Kendall takes it, allowing him to guide her to the passenger seat before he settles into the driver’s side.

There’s a strained cheer from the crowd of onlookers when he revs the engine. Then he pulls out of the driveway, Kendall waving sweetly, acknowledging her competitors tastefully. Paige and Caroline look miffed, while others, namely Taylor, just seem disappointed. The majority though, is great at feigning excitement with bright grins and excessive hoots.

Thank god.

“Alright, so we’re going to play a game,” Harry says as they start down the long winding drive. “It’s like choose your own adventure. When we reach a checkpoint, we have to agree on a direction to take. Sound fun?”

“Hell yeah,” Kendall says, squeezing his arm.

There are two signs when they reach the bottom of the driveway.

Left or Right?

Harry turns towards Kendall. “How about right?”

“Sounds good,” she replies, nodding her head wholeheartedly.

Harry presses hard on the pedal, and they burst into the street, causing Kendall to gasp. He glances at her and eases up when he realizes she’s giggling.

“You’re not worried I’ll crash?” he asks, grinning widely.

“Ha, like you’re brave enough to go off script,” Kendall retorts. She throws her head back, hair
flying around her face in wild, untamed wisps.

“Is that a challenge, love?” Harry asks, taken aback by her clever wit.

“Oh, it’s a fucking dare, baby.”

Harry groans before cracking a smile. He’s missed good banter. Kendall returns it, the tip of her pink tongue peeking out from between her teeth. Then she reaches across the console and takes his hand. Her fingers press against his knuckles.

Harry thumbs over the smooth skin. It’s nice, touching someone again. Granted her hands are soft and thin, too delicate for his taste, but it’s comfortable enough. He looks over fondly at Kendall, whose cheeks are flushed.

“I’m really glad to be with you today, Harry,” she says.

He nibbles on his lip, knowing exactly how the producers want him to respond. *Me too. This is fun.* You know what? Screw the script.

Instead, he lifts their conjoined hands to his lips, giving her fingers a soft kiss. It’s not a cliche answer, but surely audiences will sigh at the affectionate gesture.

They follow a couple more signs marked *Left or Right* before approaching the coast. One side has rough cliffs leading up into rolling hills, and the other has a steep drop onto a sunny beach.

They stare at the final sign. *Sun and Surf or Trek and Turf?*

“Well, what would you rather?” Harry asks, turning his cheek to look at Kendall.

“Oh, definitely sun and surf,” she replies, eyebrows wiggling.

Harry beams. “You read my mind.”

They drive another mile down the road before they can park. Harry’s been instructed to roll the car onto the sand to achieve an aesthetic shot, which honestly sounds pretty bad for the car. But it’s not his. What does it matter if Simon and his studio lose money because there’s grain in the gears.

Harry steers onto the sand and turns the convertible off. Fuck, he can already feel the tight knot in his stomach. His eyes rake down the beach, immediately spotting the black SUV—Louis and the camera crew, waiting like sharks, ready to strike and kill at any minute.

“Are you alright?” Kendall asks. She rubs his shoulder.

“Fine. Shall we?” Harry musters a smile and hops out, Kendall following his lead. They approach a small surf hut a little ways down the beach.

Louis’ facing away from them, yelling obscenities with pointed fingers at the camera crew. Harry’s throat catches when he notices Louis’ black t-shirt. It’s large, draping just past his bum. Harry blinks. No, he wouldn’t have kept one of Harry’s shirts. Must be his new style.

Kendall threads their fingers and pulls him towards her, interrupting his train of thought. Focus, H.

“Do you know how to surf?” she asks.

Harry shakes his head. “I’ve never tried, but I’m quite clumsy. Not sure if I’ll be that impressive if I’m honest.”
“Well, I’ll try not to laugh when you’re face-flopping,” Kendall teases.

“Heeeey,” he says. “You’ll regret that. Maybe I’ll push you off in retaliation.”

Before Kendall can reply, Louis is there grabbing their arms.

“We’re not here to dilly dally,” he snaps.

Harry stiffens as Louis hauls them to the front of the hut, abruptly releasing them once they’re in front of cameras. Harry covers his skin, now red from Louis’ tight grip. It aches, and his stomach clenches when he sees the imprint of his calloused fingers.

“Alright, let’s roll,” Louis says, nodding to Cal.

A surf instructor stands in the frame with two wet suits.

“Hi, guys. I’m Jessie, and this is Surfing 101. First thing’s first. Suit up.”

Kendall pokes Harry’s ribs and hands him one of the wetsuits. Harry averts his gaze as she sheds her shorts and shirt. Yeah, she’s wearing a bikini, but it just doesn’t feel right to watch.

After about an hour of landlocked practice and safety tips, they’re ready to hit the waves.

As expected, Harry can’t balance for more than a few seconds. Every time he tries to climb aboard, he wobbles too much and crashes into the waves. Kendall giggles, taking his hands to help him stand before climbing onto her own board. Harry would’ve been perfectly content to stop after one take, but the crew insisted on a longer shoot.

Three hours later, Kendall is effortlessly gliding on top of the water, and he continues to struggle. His face is warm from the heat and embarrassment. He’s making a fool of himself on the first real date that doesn’t involve him being passed from contestant to contestant like a lukewarm beer bottle at a frat party, but oh well. There’s no shame in being a sucky surfer, and since he doesn’t live on a tropical island, he probably won’t be doing this again for a while, so fuck it. He’ll embrace it. Kendall sure as hell embraces her hyena laugh every time he falls off his board.

Finally, Louis blows a whistle, signaling for them to swim ashore.

Harry flops onto the wet sand, ocean waves lapping at his feet. Kendall lays down next to him, hands behind her head.

“So, you weren’t kidding,” she says breathlessly.

“Oh, fuck off,” Harry groans, hiding a grin behind his hands.

“I honestly thought you were pretending in the beginning to make me feel better after falling on my ass so many times as well.”

“When did you realize I wasn’t? Between my hundredth or two hundredth face plant?”

Kendall laughs so hard her entire body shakes. “You’re a good sport, Harry, but maybe you should stick to boating.”

“That sounds brilliant,” Harry replies. “Because the date isn’t over yet.”

Kendall’s eyes widen as he stands and grabs her hands, pulling her up. They return to the hut, thanking Jessie and stripping off their wetsuits. Then Louis ushers them into a speedboat, and they jet
toward a yacht that’s idling in the bay.

“Alright, so let’s talk about how the rest of the date will progress,” he says.

Harry sighs, tired of the particulars and the scripted lines. If the show wants drama, they should be filming Louis.

“Kendall, talk about your career, family, and anything personal that will allow the viewers to feel sympathy. Maybe reveal a bad breakup or a traumatizing experience. Anything that shows you’re opening up to Harry.”

“Harry, all you do is listen. We’ve already filmed your personal interviews, so it’s repetitive to share anything. Make it all about her. Then after Kendall has shared her story—” Louis consults his clipboard briefly and clicks his tongue, “—you’ll go in for a brief kiss that shows your appreciation, yeah?”

The boat slows to a halt near the yacht. Harry nods as the driver grabs the side of the yacht and ties them securely to the dock pad.

“Great, we’ll pick up in ten,” Louis says. Then he’s gone, scrambling onto the yacht to gather the crew, probably yell at them too.

Harry scratches the back of his neck, waiting for another witty remark from Kendall, but she remains quiet, staring over the ocean.

“Hey.” He nudges her arm and gives her a small smile. “What’re you thinking?”

“Um.” Kendall sucks air through her teeth like she’s readying herself to reveal a huge secret. “I don’t feel great about the whole kissing part.”

Harry hesitates, trying to find the right words. “That’s okay. I would never do something you aren’t comfortable with. Louis can fuck right off.”

Kendall smiles sadly, still tense.

Harry frowns. Shit, did he say something wrong?

“It’s not that I wouldn’t be comfortable with it,” she says. “It’s just—I’m sorry, but I have to be honest with you.” She takes a deep breath. “Harry, I have a girlfriend.”

“Oh,” Harry says, completely shocked. Almost as shocked as he was when he saw Louis in the conference room. But then, as he lets the news settle, he realizes that there were subtle clues he should’ve picked up on. Kendall was friendly, a blast to hang with, but she never seemed attracted to him in an intimate way. Not like some of the other contestants. Their entire date had been a companionable afternoon filled with friendly teasing and platonic touches.

“I’m so sorry,” Kendall says. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Harry shakes his head. “No, it’s alright, love. I’m not upset or mad at you. I was just taking it in.”

She grabs his hands, squeezing apologetically, unable to look up. “My mom doesn’t know I’m gay, you know? Lauren and I have been together for five months, but I just can’t tell her. She’s so set on helping me become a model that she’ll do anything to get my name out. She signed me up for the show. I’m sorry. I just needed to come clean. You’re a really sweet guy, and I don’t want you to develop feelings that I can’t reciprocate.”
“Hey.” Harry tilts her chin up, so that she’ll meet his gaze. “It’s okay. I appreciate you telling me. Now it’s my turn to be honest. I think you’re really cool. I feel like I can be myself around you. So, would you mind staying around a little longer? As a friend?”

At this, Kendall smiles and wraps her arms around his neck, tilting her head back. “Like you have a choice,” she snorts. “You’re not sending anyone home without that fat, happy guy’s approval.”

“Heyyyyyy. James is all round and in shape. A handsome fella. Very very attractive. Sort of wish he was on the show.”

“I can’t relate,” Kendall jokes, causing Harry to laugh.

“Oi, lovebirds,” Louis yells from the deck. “Save the giggles for the camera. We’re ready for you now.”

The rest of the date progresses much better. He and Kendall engage in get-to-know-you smalltalk, elaborating on Kendall’s prospective modeling and her half-sisters Kim, Khloe, and Kourtney.

As previously discussed, Harry gives her the rose and restrains himself from sending Louis the bird when he kisses Kendall’s cheek.

By the time they’re wrapping up, Harry’s mentally and physically exhausted. He sighs, sinking into the limo that will return him to his hotel room. If it takes this much energy for a one-on-one, he’s definitely not ready for the upcoming group date. He closes his eyes, praying it won’t be a complete shit show.

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James bursts into Harry’s room at the crack of dawn the next day, singing under his breath and ripping the window shades open. Harry curses as he bangs his knuckles against the headboard, trying to shield his face from the light.

“Harry,” James shouts. “Come on, love boy, just a quick meeting.”

He’s cheery and chipper, everything Harry hates right after waking up.

“I think you and Louis need to learn something about proper morning etiquette.”

James sits down next to his feet and shoves his legs. “It’s urgent. Just give me an answer, and you can go back to bed for another hour.”

Harry groans. “Fine. Let’s have it.”

“Right, what’s the most romantic meal you’ve ever had?”

“We really have to do this now?”

“Yes, it can’t wait,” James says. “Just one meal, mate. I’m begging you.”

“Um.” Harry rubs his face with his hand. “Mozzarella-stuffed chicken wrapped in prosciutto and mashed potatoes. I guess?”

“Brilliant. Thanks,” James says, getting up and heading back out the door.

Harry screams frustratedly into his pillow, tight dread trapped in the pit of his stomach. He’s such a bloody idiot. He can already imagine the look on Louis’ face when he discovers Harry’s fuck up.
Oh well, it’s done. He sighs and shuts his eyes once more. He’s barely asleep before waking to another sharp bang on his door.

“Oi, Harry,” a familiar voice yells.

Great, just who he didn’t want to see.

“Go away, Louis,” Harry rasps, voice still heavy with sleep.

He hears the card slide and cracks his eye open as Louis strolls into the room. His mouth drops when he spots him still lying under the covers.

“Fuck’s sake, you’re still in bed,” Louis says.

So much for James’ promise of more sleep. Harry grumbles and throws the sheets off, swinging his legs over the side.

“Jesus Christ,” Louis snaps, shielding his face with his hands.

Harry snorts. “Nothing you haven’t seen before.”

Louis stiffens at that, giving Harry a small victory.

“Well, the car leaves in a half hour, so get your arse downstairs.” And with that, he’s out the door.

Harry meets Nick, Liam, Taylor and Danielle in the kitchen of a prominent, 5-star restaurant. Before the enter, Harry is strategically positioned behind an industrial refrigerator that’s cold and hard against his back. He’s been there for a good twenty minutes while they get shots of the contestants entering and looking around, amazed. Finally, he’s signaled to emerge in an appropriately dramatic entrance, waving to all his dates. He’s a bit stiff from standing for so long and admittedly growing tired of this entire process, so he’s a little less bubbly and bright than he maybe should be.

He forces a grin, hoping it will keep Louis and the producers happy enough to continue filming. This is his first date with these people. He should look like he’s contemplating their futures. Instead, he’s dreading the afternoon.

“Hi guys,” Harry says, trying to muster up the energy to look excited for the cameras. “How are you doing today?”

The six contestants respond with a chorus of “good,” and smile back at him, even though their morning likely consisted of crowded mansion bathrooms and a packed limousine ride over to the restaurant.

Danielle speaks up. “How are you doing, Harry?” She smirks like she’s proud of her bravery.

Harry snorts softly, earning a narrow glare from Louis, and it takes an ungodly amount of energy to keep a composed face and feign being charmed by her antics.

“I’m great, Danielle. Happy to be here with all of you.”

The crowd perks up a bit at that, even though it isn’t very convincing.

“Did you have a good morning, Harry?” Taylor asks.
He looks around towards the cameras, a bit confused as to why they’re letting her go off-script when he’s specifically supposed to go into a spiel explaining the date now, but no one’s stopping her, so he continues on.

“Yes, Taylor, I did. Thanks for asking. I’ve been looking forward to this date.” He winces. It sounds a bit choppy like he’s rushing the answer, but it’s annoying making small talk not knowing what he should say. “Do you want to hear what we’ll be doing?”

Everyone claps, Nick lets out a loud whoop, and Harry forces another fake smile.

“Well, I love to cook. And that’s something I want my partner to enjoy as well. They don’t have to be an expert chef, but they should be ready to learn and experiment with me in the kitchen.” He surveys the contestants to gauge their reactions. Some are starting to look a bit wary, Taylor emanates a wave of confidence, and Nick just looks happy to be there.

“So today, we’re gonna be cooking. Everyone will prepare my favorite meal. Whoever’s dish is the most delish—,” he pauses for laughter and pouts when he receives none, “—gets some extra time with me tonight. Sound good?”

There’s a general murmur of approval, and everyone splits up to cook. Harry takes the chef hat offered to him, feeling a bit goofy as he steps up to the counter to explain the dish.

Harry directs his gaze towards Louis after dropping that particular bomb, but Louis acts completely disengaged, directing the scene with calm passivity, like he’s already plotting how to provoke the next dramatic meltdown.

Harry supposes that makes sense. He probably planned the date with James and was well aware of what they’d be cooking. Still, he’s miffed that James twisted “most romantic” meal into “favorite.” The effort of Louis’ attempt and the product itself clearly define that distinction.

Regardless of the slightly strange, random dish, everyone seems excited. Harry waits at the front of the room until Louis signals for him to start the clock. For the first few minutes, he sits on the side in his silly hat and watches the contestants prepare their ingredients. The cameras aren’t focused on him, which is a nice break from looking composed and cool, but just as he feels he’s gotten the chance to take a breath, Louis is jerking his arm.

“Go check on the cooking,” he instructs, jerking his thumb toward the busy workstations.

Harry sighs, then approaches Liam, who’s frantically trying to season sauce, stir potatoes, and flip chicken breasts.

“Hey, hey, Liam,” he soothes, placing his hand gently on Liam’s wrist to calm him. “It’s not a race. You don’t want too much pressure here. Just go slow, and focus on what you’re doing, okay?”

Harry grabs a fork, poking the potatoes to test their texture. “These are perfect. All ready for straining. Don’t worry, okay? It’s just me.”


Harry ducks and kisses Liam’s cheek, glancing out of the corner of his eye to see Louis standing still with wide eyes behind the primary camera.

When Harry reaches Nick, he’s cheery and bubbly, brushing a dollop of potato on Harrys’ nose. Harry grimaces, then smiles wide.

“Heyyyyy,” he grumbles, before sticking his finger in the sauce Nick has put aside and flicking it on
his face. Nick barks out a laugh, and Harry bolts away, seeking cover at Danielle’s station.

She steps back and holds her hands up.

“I’m done,” she exclaims, gesturing at the plate lying on the counter in front of her. Harry frowns at her creation, and Danielle flushes a deep red as she realizes the challenge wasn’t a speed competition. She might have screwed herself by rushing the recipe. Instead of fixing it, she leaves Harry’s side and flocks to Louis.

“How do you feel about my presentation?” she asks, curling a stray lock of hair by her neck. Harry notices her lean closer into Louis’ side and laugh obnoxiously and rolls his eyes. Louis does the same before he pushes her back in front of the camera.

Shit, they may still be more in sync than he realized. But then Louis barks an order at one of the PA’s, and Harry shakes his head. What a twat.

After another hour, everyone has finished their dish, and they’re all led into a private dining room for the taste test. The chef who filled everyone in on the details of the recipe comes out, and he and Harry sit at the head of the table, ready to try everyone’s dishes. Harry giggles as the first plate is placed in front of him.

“I’ve always loved watching cooking shows. Now it’s like I’m gettin’ to be a judge on one.” He flashes a cheeky grin around the table. Danielle smiles, setting her hand on his arm.

“Oh, you’re so funny, Harry.” She giggles.

She’s so fake. Is he really not supposed to see through that? It’s so cringeworthy.

He ignores her comment as best he can without being rude and digs into her dish. He attempts to mask his disgust, grabbing for a glass of water to wash the bite down. Her chicken is dry and slightly undercooked, the sauce has too much garlic, and the potatoes are barely seasoned. Harry gives her a strained smile and moves on. Hopefully the next plate is better.

Harry appraises Liam’s dish. He’s obviously worked hard and followed the recipe, but he forgot to add the garlic sauce. His presentation isn’t much better than Danielle’s, all haphazardly piled on. The moment Harry cuts into the chicken, the mozzarella seeps out into a wet puddle.

Nick’s is a complete mess. He’d gone for presentation over taste, shaping the mashed potatoes into a penis mound, and didn’t even try with the chicken, the plate half-covered in mozzarella. Nick points to the tomato sauce, which he has fashioned into a heart. Harry chuckles. He gets points for creativity.

Taylor’s dish is much more appetizing. She doesn’t seem particularly interested in cooking, but she’s definitely interested in Harry, and in making him interested in her. In her mind, winning this competition brings her one step closer to that happy ending. Harry’s impressed. It’s no doubt hers is the best, with soft, creamy potatoes and crisp, tender chicken. Harry hates to admit it since she’s been sucking up to him all day, but she really deserves this one.

Harry clears his throat and takes another sip of water before addressing the group. “Before I announce the best dish, I just want you all to know that I saw everyone working really hard in the kitchen today, and, I think, having fun. That’s what this date was all about, so with that, I consider everyone here a winner. But, there’s still one person who has earned a few special moments with me at the cocktail party tonight “So, the person who made the best dish is—.” He pauses for dramatic effect, knowing by his third date how revealing info should go. “—Taylor!”
She squeals in delight, and breathlessly hugs Harry while the rest of the contestants collect their plates in somber disappointment.

Louis calls cut, and everyone is asked to eat quickly before returning to the limos to prepare for the evening festivity.

Harry sighs, waving to the limos as they disappear into traffic. Logically, he should be given the opportunity to enjoy a meal with his four dates, but that’s not how this show works. He removes the hat and apron before heading into a meeting with Louis, James, and Greg to talk about who would receive a rose that night.

The issue, however, is that he still doesn’t know these people. How is he supposed to weigh in on this decision when he’s barely had a chance to connect with any of them? Although it’s primarily the producers’ decision, he still feels guilty. How sad for the poor souls who have put themselves out there on national television, only to be rejected before having a real conversation with him. Honestly, it’s amazing how little time he has with everyone. Some didn’t even get a date this week. It’s just not right.

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December 2014

“Haz — fuck!” Louis jumps back from the stove.

“Louis,” Harry sighs, taking the spatula and flipping the chicken breast from where it’s sizzling in the pan. “You can’t get scared of every little thing.”

“I’m terrible at this, Harry. I’ll never get it right, then we’ll have nothing to eat.”

Louis slumps, defeated, into a chair at the kitchen table. He’ll never be able to impress Harry with this shit, and it’s stupid that he even thought he could.

Harry grabs his shoulders and nudges him back towards the stove. Louis groans.

“Oh shut it, drama queen,” Harry says. “If you fuck up, we’ll just order takeaway. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Yeah, but how’s that for a holiday meal?”

Harry smiles fondly. “No matter what, it’ll be perfect as long as it’s with you, Lou.”

Louis feels his cheeks warming. He quickly plays it off.

“Oh, Haz. If you keep that up, I’m gonna start thinking you’re in love with me,” he says, pretending to swoon and clinging onto Harry’s arm.

Harry scoffs in what he hopes is a convincing manner and shakes him off, turning away to hide his flustered face. He grabs a fork and shoves it in Louis’ direction.

“Here. Poke the potatoes and see if they’re soft enough to mash.”

Louis sticks his tongue out. Harry’s so sassy in the kitchen, and it only makes him wonder if likes to tell people what to do in other circumstances.

Harry ducks into the fridge, feigning to look for something, shaky fingers moving leftovers out of the way. Fuck, that must’ve been way too obvious. He likes to think he’s ace at subtlety, but apparently
Louis can see right through him. Niall was right. There’s no way he can keep it a secret, but Louis
wouldn’t take it seriously. He jokes about about them having a secret relationship all the time. Obviously he thinks the idea of them being more is absolute absurdity. Harry pulls at his bottom lip with his teeth. Nope, Louis is definitely content to keep them as friends, always and forever.

Louis eyes Harry’s crouched form suspiciously. He’s been searching in there for a while now, and
it’s not like him to leave the fridge open too long.

“Oi, you looking for milk and butter?” he asks.

Harry jumps, his head hitting the freezer door.

“Shit,” he swears, rubbing the back of his head. “Um, yeah.”

“I already set ‘em out.”

Harry spins to face Louis, who hasn’t moved from his position by the stove.

“Harry—uh, how do you mash these?” Louis asks, poking warily at the potatoes (still in the boiling
water on the stove, god help him) with the masher he found on the counter.

Harry huffs. “Drain the water first, Lou,” he says.

He turns to grab the milk off the counter when he sees Louis pouring the water haphazardly into the
sink, about ready to dump all the potatoes in as well.

“Louis, no! Into the strainer.” He shakes his head. “I swear, you’re absolutely helpless.”

“Will you help me then, Hazza?” Louis pouts, looking endearingly lost next to the giant pot, masher
still in hand.

Harry’s annoyed that he falls for it.

“Here, a bit of salt, yeah? Then cut off a little butter, good, and some milk—no, fuck, Louis! That’s
enough milk. Now here…”

Harry stands behind Louis, guiding his hand on the masher through the potatoes. Louis leans back,
his body going lax. He knows he should be putting energy into the process, but he loves feeling
Harry behind him.

“Hey Lou,” he murmurs, close to his ear.

“Yeah?” Louis asks, lazily tossing his hand up and down as he works.

Harry rolls his eyes and takes control. He doesn’t mind. Louis has been working extra hard on this
meal.

“These aren’t cooked enough so there’s gonna be some big chunks of potato.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine...It’s fine.” Harry smiles, content to keep this up all evening, all week, for the rest of his
life: wrapped around Louis, feeling their bodies pressed together and their hands intertwined.

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There’s some divine god out for Louis’ blood. One that takes pleasure in bimbos clamouring for Harry’s affection while cooking Louis’ meal. The first meal he ever cooked. Fuck, Harry dubbed it his “most romantic” meal, which is quite a kick in the nuts. Of course, Louis had always considered it romantic, what with how desperately he’d been pining for Harry at the time, but he had no idea Harry thought it was too.

But that was his answer when James asked. It’s actually quite rude of Harry to bring up knowing he’d be involved in the date shenanigans. That he’d have to watch Harry’s new suitors unwittingly compete with him, clamoring to recreate a treasured memory. Hell, he shouldn’t be that surprised. True to every step of the process so far, Harry obviously didn’t care about Louis’ feelings.

“Hey, Louis.” Eleanor taps his shoulder, breaking his train of thought. “Come check the couch setup.”

Louis cringes. He’s not ready for another night of contestants hanging on Harry, and Harry effortlessly flirting like a loon, but it’s the job, and he has a deadline to meet.

The rooftop bar provides cheese plates and plenty of alcohol while everyone mingles. Louis calls contestants in for confessional, ready to move the night along. Liam tells a story about the ex-girlfriend who broke his heart, and how he’s come onto the show hoping to move on and find “the real thing.”

“I love it, Liam,” Louis says.

“You love that my girlfriend broke my heart?” Liam asks, betraying the cardinal rule of not addressing those behind the camera.

“Yes. We’re making a television show here. Or did you not understand what you signed up for? Should we get someone else in here? Give them a rose this week instead of you?”

“No,” Liam says. “I understand.”

“Good. When the date starts, talk to Harry first. Make sure you tell that story—everything you just said, don’t change a word—and there may be a rose in it for you this evening,” Louis promises, making a note of his story. Liam frowns but nods to Louis before returning to the couches.

When the date starts, Harry welcomes everyone and thanks them for spending the day with him. After a quick toast, he quickly grabs Liam, leading him to a secluded rose garden. Usually the vultures descend, Danielle always asking to take him first, but Louis already briefed him on the situation.

They follow Harry and Liam to a white wicker couch surrounded by tea lights and extra bottles of champagne. Harry unfolds a large blanket on the seat and drapes it over their legs before taking Liam’s hand.

“I’m glad you were so willing to try something new today,” he says.

Liam gives him a small smile. “I’m working hard to put myself out there. I figure if I don’t open up now, I might never fall in love again, and that’s something I fear even more than having my heart broken.”

The entire spiel is kind of shit, but Louis admits Liam’s pretty smooth. If he kept spouting cheesy lines like that, he’ll go far on this show.
Harry nods, unfazed by the cheesiness of Liam’s words.

“My girlfriend, Sophia, broke up with me a few months ago,” Liam admits. Harry looks down at their entwined hands.

“Cut,” Louis calls.

“What?” Harry says. “You can’t possibly have the heart to say that was bad—”

Louis cuts him off, not wanting to deal with Harry’s backtalk.

“Shut up.” He glares at him before giving Liam an encouraging smile. “That was great,” he says. “But Harry, when you’re looking down, the cameras can’t catch your face. Make sure you’re visible. We already lack good lighting.”

Liam raises his brows and nods, as if he’s ready to do this right, even though Harry was the one who fucked up the shot. “Great, can we do that bit again?”

The cameras keep rolling, and Liam and Harry reset their positions.

“My girlfriend, Sophia, broke up with me a few months ago. I was devastated. We were together for three years. I really thought we’d end up getting married, but then she met someone at work and realized he was it. I know this experience might end the exact same way, but I don’t know. I think I just, need to try, yeah?”

Harry smiles, squeezing Liam’s hands. Louis wants to gag.

“I think that’s really admirable, Liam. And I can understand. I’m also hoping this experience helps me get over an ex.”

Louis’ heart stops. He doesn’t even hear the rest of what Harry is saying. It feels like there’s cotton in his ears. Harry could be garbling about the merits of cheesy bread for all he knows. Harry’s getting over an ex? Fucks sake, it’s only been a year, and Harry’s had another relationship? One serious enough that he’d go on the goddamn Bachelor to get over it?

Louis and Harry were best friends for years, and during that time Harry went on a few dates, but they never amounted to anything. And now, right after leaving Louis, he was completely ready to get back on the saddle and have a serious relationship with someone else? This whole last year Harry had someone that he dated and fucked before this whole shitshow. Christ, he probably loved them too.

Liam’s voice breaks Louis’ thoughts. “

No, Harry, you haven’t been awkward. Not at all. It takes a lot to do this, and you’ve been wonderful. You’re trying, opening your heart, and that’s all I can ask for.”

Harry nods, a self-deprecating smile on his face. “Thanks, but you don’t have to say that. I know the dates have been terrible. I’ve been so out of it. Being here has brought up a lot of old memories, and I’m just—”

“Harry. You’ve been so amazing to me this past week. Everything I could have asked for. I feel a new sense of hope when I’m with you.”

Liam’s declaration is sappy and stupid and superficial, but despite that, Harry grins at him. He grasps Liam’s neck and leans in for a kiss.
Louis can’t fucking watch. He doesn’t want to see Harry’s rough hands winding through Liam’s short, styled hair, or his mouth melding with Liam’s, or the hitch of his shuddering chest. He doesn’t want to know, and yet he can’t look away. Fucking torture.

Harry gives Liam a soft, tentative smile when he pulls away. Then he takes his hand and leads him back to the others.

It’s obvious that Liam will receive tonight’s rose. And, granted, that was the original plan, but it still felt significant. Like Harry actually saw a future with him.

The rest of the contestants seem quite bored when he sits down among them and reaches for the rose on the table.

“While I feel I’ve gotten to know each of you even more tonight, there’s one person who really impressed me, not only with his effort on the group date, but also with our personal conversation. I’m excited to continue this relationship. With that being said,” Harry turns. “Liam, will you accept this rose?”

Liam grins. “Of course. Thank you.”

Taylor and Danielle look visibly upset as Harry gives Liam a warm hug before pulling back and addressing the rest of the group. “I had so much fun on the date today. I hope to see you all soon. Have a great night.” They say their goodbyes, and Harry exits the roof to wait inside until the contestants leave.

The two girls give great confessionals on their way out, Taylor playing up her disappointment at winning the date but not receiving a rose, and Danielle lamenting the unfairness of Liam getting it because she made a real connection with Harry and felt like he wasn’t validating that enough.

Louis finds Harry inside after they finish packing up for the evening. It’s his duty to voice his concerns, and after Harry’s conversation with Liam, Louis sees some huge problems that could definitely jeopardize the show.

“Hey,” he says. “We need to talk about your place here on the show.”

Harry sighs and rubs his temple but doesn’t say anything.

“This is The Bachelor. With the way you’ve been acting on your dates this week, I’m worried this is just a coping mechanism rather than an intimate journey to find your spouse. I mean, you can’t come on this show unless you’re ready for a relationship.”

“Okay, you’re fucking joking, yeah?” Harry cuts in. “That’s—can you even hear yourself right now?”

Louis continues on, unperturbed. “I’m worried you’re not ready for this, Harry. What you said to Liam tonight makes me wary of your motives for joining the show.”

“Oh, so you’re pissed I gave him a rose?”

Louis sighs. “You shouldn’t be using this experience as a way to get over an ex.” Fuck, he will not think about Harry using his show to get over his apparently life-changing relationship. He. Will. Not. Harry starts to respond, but Louis won’t let him.

“And the dates. These are the first dates you may be having with your future husband or wife. You
need to put your all into them. No more being distant and distracted. No one likes a moody Bachelor. That’s bad for ratings. We need you to be focused—no, I need you to be focused—on the big picture, getting to know the contestants.”

Harry opens and closes his mouth several times before he musters up the will to speak.

“I can’t believe you, Louis.”

“Okay, we’re going to stop that right now. I don’t care what your perception of me is, but. You’re wrong. Please just do your fucking job.”

“Right, look pretty and go on dates. Haven’t I done that?”

“You’re supposed to look interested in the, currently, fourteen people you’re dating, which you don’t. You’ve barely even managed to make a connection with one of them. You’re fucking up this show for yourself, for the contestants, and for me.”

“Sorry, didn’t realize you should be my first priority as I search for my future spouse.”

“You’re a fucking idiot. I am your director. My job is to guide you on this journey—hell, even make decisions for you. And my current decision is that you need to step up your game because right now, you’re the worst Bachelor we’ve ever had. Worse than Juan Pablo.”

“Are you fucking serious? He was a sexist pig!”

“Exactly. And yet, his season was better than the shit you’ve been giving me. Is that really what you want, Styles?”

“James.”

“Oh, fuck you. Why’d you even sign up for this if you don’t take it seriously?”

Harry balks, beginning to yell. “Niall—”

“Enough about Niall, Harry. You made this decision. You said yes. You came looking for love, yeah? Or, are you finally willing to admit you’re here just to spite me? Sneak your way into my show and tank it so you can ruin my career as well.”

“What? You had nothing to do with this, Lewis.”

“I don’t want excuses, James. Just fucking fix yourself. Act goddamn interested.”

“I—”

Louis sighs. “Just go home. Think about what you’re doing on this show.”

He stalks away, leaving Harry behind, and for the first time in this entire process, feels like he has the upper hand.

Chapter End Notes

im a bit busier than i expected, so i didnt get much editing done last week, but i think it'll start slowing down, so expect the same weekly schedule!
as i mentioned, im on tumblr at coffeeelouis !
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Harry rolls over in bed the next morning, fluffing the pillow behind him because shit. He’s about to do something huge. He glances at the disconnected hotel phone and snorts. The crew has done everything they can to make sure he stays quiet while they’re filming. He gnaws on his thumbnail, stalling horribly even though it’s a good idea.

Screw it. He throws on a hoodie and some joggers, and heads towards the elevator. He pulls the hood over his face in case there are any lurking crew members and sneaks down the back staircase to the hotel lobby. He saw an old pay phone in the back the night he moved in, and he only hopes that it’s still in service.

It is, thankfully, and Simon answers after three rings with a gruff “Hello?” sounding quite uninterested.

Harry pushes on anyway. “Simon. Good morning. I was wondering if I could talk to you about the direction of the show.”

“Harry. It’s a surprise to hear from you.” He pauses, like he’s speculating how Harry has access to a phone in the first place. “Where’s Louis?”

“He doesn’t know I’m calling, sir.” Harry’s palms begin to sweat. He just wants Simon to shut up so he can just get on with his pitch.

“Harry, this is—”

“Sir, I’d like to shake things up a bit.” He winces, knowing that interrupting Simon could have serious consequences, but if he just listened , he’d understand. “I want to forgo the rose ceremony tonight. I feel as if I don’t know the contestants well enough and could misjudge someone. My first week was rough. In the footage, you can clearly see that it was hard for me to connect on the dates. I know that, but I don’t want my stupidity to have negative consequence on my future.”

Harry bites his lip, waiting. The silence is almost unbearable.

“Well,” Simon says. “I like what you’re thinking, but it just doesn’t sound feasible.”

“I know I’d have to send more people home at the next rose ceremony, but this is something viewers aren’t expecting. After twenty seasons, don’t you think an opportunity for surprise could work in our favor?”

“Well, yes, but what you’re asking is a very complicated maneuver.”

“It’s really not. I’m prepared to send home four people next week. At least I’ll
Harry sighs, content about the case he presented. Now it’s just up to Simon.

“You know what, Harry? I like it. I like that you’re taking initiative, and that you’re invested in this process. I’ll let Chris and the crew know that there won’t be a rose ceremony tonight. However, we’ll still go ahead with a cocktail party, and you will give out another rose.”

Harry grins. “Great. Thanks, Simon. I promise you won’t regret it.”

“I’d better not,” he answers ominously before ending the call.

Harry sets the phone back on the hook and rests his forehead against the cold metal frame. He’s going to look so goddamn interested tonight. Take that, Louis.

***

Louis is fuming as he prepares the set that evening. Harry went over his head to talk to Simon, and now he’s the one paying for it, scrambling to reorganize for a week with extra contestants. At least there’s enough tension in the house. Everyone still thinks there will be an elimination tonight, which makes for good TV.

Once they’re ready to shoot, Chris gathers everyone on the couches to break the news. Harry waits off-screen for a dramatic entrance.

Louis nods to Chris, who rings a champagne glass with a knife. The room quiets.

“Good evening. I know you’re all expecting to see Harry for the rose ceremony soon, but tonight, he’s doing things a little differently. Harry realized that he still doesn’t know many of you, and he wants to change that. So tonight, he has decided to forego the rose ceremony. No one is being sent home. There is a catch though. Another rose is up for grabs, and this one will keep one of you safe for the next two rose ceremonies, which gives you another couple weeks to explore your relationship. If you already have a rose, I’m sorry, but you will not be eligible for tonight’s.” Chris pauses for dramatic effect. “Alright. Are you ready to start the evening?”

Everyone cheers. Louis signals Harry. He saunters from the hallway into a room of excited, nervous contestants. Hopefully Simon’s little rose twist will raise the stakes of the evening and spur some catfights.

***

Harry knows he has to make tonight exceptional. Simon gave him a chance to prove he’s committed to the show. He can’t fuck this up, so he keeps a gin and tonic in his hands at all times and hopes that’ll be enough to convince everyone he’s interested in the boring conversations he’s had so far. Michael and Caroline were underwhelming. He barely remembers what they talked about.

He perks up when he chats with Jeff though, who after five minutes of small talk about the current Packers lineup, suggests they do some shots in the kitchen. It’s not received well by Louis and the producers. It’s probably not compelling enough for their program, and after their second shot, Jeff gets called in to give a confessional.

Harry wanders the house, knowing anyone he passes will want to talk to him, but that won’t do. He wants someone he’ll have fun talking to, someone he really likes.

Instead, he finds a man with dark, spiked hair and tattoos marching through the sitting room and
towards the back patio, where Louis is consulting over footage with Cal. The man pulls Louis to the side, who seemingly yelps before pulling him into a hug. He threads his hands across the back of the man’s neck and pulls his forehead in to touch his own. Then he smiles widely and pushes the man away with momentum, eyes crinkling as he laughs.

So. That’s an interesting development. Louis brought his boyfriend to set. That man has to be his boyfriend, what with how Louis slaps his bum and fucking *smirks* after him. Just like Louis used to look at Harry when he’d run into the kitchen for beers in between rounds.

Harry sighs and returns to the kitchen to pour another shot, just for fun.

Kendall enters and eyes him warily.

“Hey, it’s still early, babe,” she says. “You sure you’re ready for that?”

“Born ready,” Harry answers, throwing another shot back.

She lets out a bark of laughter and reaches into the cabinet for another glass.

“Alright, let’s do this,” she says, sliding it to him.

Harry pours her a shot but doesn’t wait for her to cheers. He slams his head back, embracing the liquid burn, grimacing as it goes down. Then he takes the bottle again, tequila spilling on the counter. Kendall watches, her lips pulled into a thin line.

Harry glances at her glass, still full and untouched.

“Are you gonna drink that, or?”

Kendall reaches for his arm. “Harry, how many have you had?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbles. “Five or six?”

“Maybe you should slow down. We still—”

“I’m fine,” he snaps, reaching for the new shot.

Kendall grabs his hand, preventing him from picking it up, obviously concerned about how much he’s drank.

“What’s going on? Talk to me.”

“Nothing. I just want to have fun. Now, are you gonna do that one or not?”

“No. I’m going to bed. Just, be safe, okay? Can you do that?”

Harry nods, squeezing her fingers. Kendall hesitates before kissing his cheek and walking away.

Harry shakes his head. He can feel the alcohol coursing through his skin, light and heavy at the same time.

Ben walks in as he’s pouring his seventh shot.

“Hey, Harry. I’ve been looking for you.”

“Ben, perfect. Do a shot with me?” Harry gestures to Kendall’s abandoned glass.
Ben’s face lights up, and he nods. The cameraman who followed him inrealigns himself. Harry canalready tell this moment will definitely be used in a promo sequence for the show. Shit, his motherwill probably watch this.

“Ready?” Ben asks, fingers closing around the shot.

“Yeah, let’s do this.”

He counts down with Ben and takes the shot, wincing at the burn.

“What a rush,” Ben says. “Again?”

Harry laughs, knowing he shouldn’t. But fuck it.

Three shots of Patron later, he’s warm and cuddly. Then he notices Louis behind the camera,whispering with his boyfriend and pointing at something on the feedback screen.

Well, two can play that game. Harry flings his arms around Ben’s neck and pulls his face in close tohis.

“I would really love to get to know you, Benjamin. Do you want to hang out with me in thecabana?”

Ben nods enthusiastically, grabbing the bottle of tequila.

“That’s it, baby! You read my mind,” Harry says, ambling out of the room. “You know that’s a greatsign of compatibility.”

“Oh yeah?”

Once they’re seated at a table outside, Harry reaches for the bottle again, takes a big gulp, then turns to Ben. He can’t help but smile goofily, his veins all light and airy. And then there’s Ben, who practically glows under the dim lantern lights. Shit, how the hell has he not noticed the sheerperfection of his body.

“You look beautiful at night, Benjamin.”

Ben blushes, looking down at his lap. “Uh, just Ben.”

“I’m so sorry,” Harry slurs, wrapping his huge hand around the back of Ben’s neck and pressingtheir foreheads together. “Ben, will you accept my apology?”

Ben laughs heartily. “Of course, Harry.”

Harry lets out a huge sigh of relief.

“Thank god, Bem. Ben. I could never imagine you hating me. We’re like soulmates?” Harry nuzzles his face into Ben’s neck. He’s so soft. He’ll protect Harry. And be nice to him. Unlike Louis, who’s such a jerk.

Harry is on The Bachelor. Twenty people came here in hopes that he’ll fall in love with them.They’re great. All of them. Like Ben.

Ben pets his hair, twirling his fingers in his curls, and making him feel like a soft little puppy. Ben’s just amazing.
“Ben, you’re amazing.”

He chuckles. “Aww, thanks Harry.”

Harry sits up. He needs Ben to know that he’s serious. He probably thinks he’s being a bit dumb and slow right now, but he’s not.


Ben laughs again. Harry huffs. Why isn’t he being serious? Ben can be Harry’s boyfriend. Louis has a boyfriend. Why shouldn’t Harry?

“Sure, Harry. I’d love to be your boyfriend.”

“Yayyyyy. Ben the boyfriend.” Harry leans in and gives him a sloppy kiss. Ben giggles, pulling away from him and holding his face a couple inches from his own.

“You’re really cute, you know that?”

“Of course I know that! I’m the cutest! Everyone thinks—” he pauses, face scrunched in thought, “—thinks so. Even…” He catches a glimpse of Nick, watching from the entrance to the bungalow. “Nicholas!”

Ben may be amazing, but what he really needs is to give Nick a hug. He doesn’t want him to think he’s playing favorites. He scrambles up from the couch and towards Nick, barreling into him for a hug.

“Hi, Nick,” he whispers, hanging off his neck.

“Oh shit. Ben!” Harry flails back, takes a moment to right himself. He pats Nick on the head before stumbling back to Ben and giving him a nice kiss and pat on the head. Everyone deserves a pat on the head. It’s a highly underrated sign of affection.

“I love you, Ben,” he says. “Be good.”

It’s fucking weird though because Ben has two heads somehow, and both of them look confused and slightly disappointed, but it’s all good. Harry offers him a wide, closemouthed smile. Then, without another word, he bounded back to Nick, placing a sloppy kiss on his neck.

“Come on, Nicholas.” Harry tries to hold his hand, which ends up being a more difficult feat than he’d imagined, but eventually, Nick laces their fingers together.

“You doin’ alright there, Harry?”

“Oh, I’m just peachy,” Harry responds, sending a playful glare. “Absolutely perfect. Don’t be a jerk.”

Nick rolls his eyes, poking his finger into the dimple on Harry’s cheek, “Whatever you say, dear.”

“Heyyyyyyy,” Harry mumbles, “I am just fine. Don’t be so mean.”

Nick winks. “I’m sorry. I promise. You’re just so adorable.”

Oh god. Harry feels his cheeks warm, and he tucks his face into Nick’s. In the next second, he trips
over his feet, faltering until Nick pulls him back up.

“You’re the wonderfulest, Nicholas. You saved my life,” Harry breathes. He pulls Nick in for a kiss, which quickly turns into a very messy makeout. Wet spit oozes from his mouth, dripping down his chin, but he doesn’t pull away. Nick’s enthusiastic as ever, clutching at his love handles and pulling him flush against his chest.

Harry opens his eyes and peeks behind Nick, straight into the camera pointed at them. He notices Louis standing next to it, jaw set, eyes cold. Agitated.

Harry smirks, launching himself on Nick with newfound fervor. He wraps his leg around Nick’s calf and winds his fingers through Nick’s hair. After a few minutes though, his jaw aches, and they’re both out of breath.

Harry steps back, marveling at Nick’s sparkling eyes.

“You’re like a star. So so pretty.”

“Oh, so like a big ball of gas? Thanks, Haz. I’m feeling very loved up.”

Harry pouts, scrunching his face, but Nick just chuckles.

“Are you sure you’re coherent, Harry? You’re sounding a bit stupid.”

“Look, Nick. I am not stupid. I’m a catch, and you’re lucky to be here with me. Stupid people can’t see that. You’re not a stupid person, are you?”

“No Harry, I’m not stupid,” Nick whispers, leaning in for another kiss. Harry gets into it again, wrapping one arm firmly around Nick’s neck. He lowers his other and palms Nick through his slacks, squeezing firmly.


Harry cackles and takes off running. He can hear Nick hobbling after him, but he’s too giddy to be too concerned. The space ahead of him blurs, his mind buzzing.

There’s a figure up ahead, but it looks like a far away blob, and he’s going fast—he’s an expert runner, thank you very much. A great escape artist, but soon the blurry shape is right in front of him, and he can’t slow down enough to avoid a full-on collision.

Harry stumbles, body smacking into some barrier, knocking the wind out of his lungs. He feels hands? Then a voice that sounds like Jeff saying his name in a slightly panicked tone.

“Yeah,” Harry gasps. He tries to grapple Jeff’s face. He should tell him how lovely of a target he is. And that’s the last thing he remembers before falling.

Suddenly, his feet aren’t on the ground. He flies for a glorious second until he’s plunging under water. He closes his eyes as he sinks further and further, trapped and alone. Water presses against him, and he opens his mouth, gasping for air, but the cold pressure fills his lungs, and he chokes.

He flails, clutching desperately for something to pull him out. He grabs helplessly, feeling nothing but ripples, vibrating against his skin. Harry’s limbs twitch. His suit weighs too much, constricting his body. His skin is too cold, like he’s been soaked by rain.

All he wants is to be naked, wrapped with Louis in warm blankets, like after they were caught in a
thunderstorm and came home like a couple of drowned cats, shedding their wet clothes before snuggling close under the covers.

Harry’s head feels heavy too. He drifts. This is it.

Then arms wrap around his chest. He’s dragged up to the surface and guided to the side of the pool. Harry struggles to breathe, eyesight blurred. A set of hands reaches out towards him. He grabs them frantically, and soon he’s heaved out of the water and onto the deck.

Harry’s not sure how long it takes, but his stomach drops when his eyes finally focus on the blurry face hovering above him.

Louis.

Harry blinks. Louis’ clothes are drenched. Wet hair clings to his cheeks and forehead, and he’s staring down at him, chest heaving, eyes wide and darting, his lips parted, close enough that Harry can feel his shaky breath.

And, no. He doesn’t want that. Not at all. He uses all his energy to shove Louis away and falls back into another firm body crouched behind him. His hands cling to unfamiliar legs, and he pulls himself up, craning his neck to see Liam’s stern face.

“Harry, are you okay?” he murmurs.

“Liiiiam. Thank you Liam. You saved me.”

Liam clears his throat and scratches his neck. “No. It wasn’t—”

“You did,” Harry insists. “You were there for me. I’d be dead without you.”

“Harry,” Liam says, hand cupping his cheek. It’s a big hand, soft and rough on his face. “Are you okay?” he repeats.

Harry swallows. All he wants to do right now is giggling and kissing, but this sounds real important. He pats Liam’s face.

“Yes.”

Liam grunts, rising to his feet and almost upending Harry, but he’s surprised to find that Liam has balanced him. He leans heavily against his big, meaty body.

“I’m taking you to bed. Let’s go,” Liam says.

“Isn’t it a bit soon?” Harry murmurs.

He hears stifled laughter and snaps his head up. Most of the other contestants are gathered around, watching the entire scene unfold.

Harry stiffens. It’s like he’s in a fishbowl, everyone judging him as he struggles to walk in a straight line. Fuck, he needs focus. He’s an absolute mess. He tries to separate from Liam’s body, but each time he makes to stand like a fucking independent person, he stumbles. Liam’s strong arms pull him back.

“Harry, c’mon. Fucking walk.”

Harry gives in and leans heavily, allowing Liam to manhandle him into the house. He doesn’t
recognize where they’re going, but he can’t bring himself to care.

He feels a soft, warm mattress under him. Soft and warm. His favorites. He wants Liam to lie down with him, cuddle him to sleep, but then his mind drifts to the other man lingering outside, who he wants much, much more.

Harry sighs and scans the room, catching a glimpse of red, a blinking record light on the camera that followed them in here. And that breaks through his daze, pissing him off entirely.

Fuck the cameras that are always there. And the crew for profiting off his struggles. Fuck this whole damn show. Exploiting and manipulating human emotions. Fuck Niall for signing him up because it’s his fucking fault he’s in this mess dealing with fake fuckers. Harry clenches his jaw. And Louis. Fuck him for—well. Everything.

For growing tired of Harry and not loving him anymore and not lifting a finger to fight for them. They were once each other’s worlds. And now he’s lured Harry back, only to break his heart again as he instructs him on how to fall in love, as if he’s the fucking master now. And fuck him for being such a good pretender.

Harry burrows his head into the pillow. He hates that Louis saved him. That Louis is the reason he’s still breathing. Everything circles back to him. Even after all this time, Louis is everything. His whole life revolves around that boy. He pined for Louis, loved Louis, and now here he is a year later, still unable to forget him.

God, he was happy before. What happened to that. He allowed someone to peel back his skin, explore every part of him and it’s ruined him, turned him into someone who mopes and weeps, barely remembers how to survive.

Harry scoffs. Fucking Hemingway.

“Why, darling, I don't live at all when I'm not with you,” he whispers.

“Excuse me?”

Harry jumps, all but forgetting Liam was there. He looks at him with such a bewildered expression.

Louis had made the same face when Harry read him the quote that first night together, when they’d stayed up talking, kissing, breathing each other in. Louis had loved him then. He gazed at him with fond exasperation, as if to say, you talk such shit, but I love you, I love you, I love you.

Now, Liam just looks confused, annoyed and a little bit tired. Harry shrugs. He has a tendency to be a bit dramatic when he’s drunk. Everything just slips out, even some of his favorite quotes.

Liam sighs. “You should sleep, Harry,” he says, hand slipping under him.

For a brief, exhilarating, incredibly confusing moment, Harry thinks he’s reaching for his bum, but then he feels the comforter being pulled out, and Liam tucks it around him. “You’ll feel better in the morning, I promise. Just sleep.”

“I love sleep. My life has the tendency to fall apart when I'm awake, yeah?”

Harry closes his eyes and settles in, distantly aware of Liam chuckling.

“Sleep tight, alright?”
Harry nods, the alcohol coursing through his veins, simultaneously soothing him, and keeping his skin alight. He loves falling asleep drunk, the thrill and the calm of it. He’s still upset, but as he lies in bed, he can’t help but curl into the soft blankets and smile. He’s comfortable and soft and exhausted. So excited to sleep.

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“Louis,” Eleanor says, crouching in front of him. His entire body trembles, and he can’t stop. “Louis, just breathe.”

Fuck. Louis forces his lungs to work. All he can see is Harry’s still body submerged under the water.

“She.” Eleanor brushes a hand across his wet forehead, keeping his fringe out of his eyes and handing him water. Louis takes another shuddering gulp of air, before sipping from the glass, liquid sloshing over the side as his teeth chatter violently.

“Come on.” Eleanor hoists him up and leads him into one of the mansion bathrooms. He’s vaguely aware of clapping and cheering, but he really can’t give a fuck.

Eleanor begins to peel his denim. Louis bats at her hand.

“I’m not a kid,” he snaps as she raises his arms to remove his t-shirt.

“Don’t you dare give me sass,” she says.

Louis frowns but remains silent when she grabs a large towel and throws it around his shivering form. Then she stands, her hand on the door handle.

“Dry off while I find you some clothes,” she says. “Do you have extra clothes in the van?”

Louis shakes his head.

“I’ve got some,” Zayn mumbles, reaching for his car keys. “It’s out back by the garage. They’re in the trunk.”

She nods, “Okay, stay here,” she directs at Louis, standing and taking the keys from Zayn.

Louis sits in the edge of the tub as the door shuts. He squeezes his eyes closed, desperately trying to shake the image of a cold, dead Harry. But he can’t. Lifeless green eyes and pale lips assault his memory, and he can’t.

Zayn coughs from the doorway, watching him hesitantly. “Anything I can do, man?”

Louis shakes his head, burrowing deeper into the towel. This is all too much.

“I’ll uh...” Zayn doesn’t finish his sentence, but Louis hears his footsteps receding.

He doesn’t realize Eleanor has returned until she’s kneeling next to him.

“Hey,” she coaxes, rubbing his back. “What’s going on?”

Louis shakes his head, his breath ragged as his throat begins to close.

“I just can’t believe —I almost lost—Just a fucking disaster.”

Eleanor frowns. “Hon, don’t worry. Some of tonight’s events are salvageable. We can reshoot parts
of the night before the rose ceremony tomorrow. We’ll cut out most of Harry’s drunk antics. It’ll be fine.

Louis can barely concentrate on her words. How fucked up do people think he is? He doesn’t give a flying fuck about filming right now. What trivial shit.

Eleanor continues on. “And we won’t show Liam and Harry leaving, but we can save that to use later for dramatic purposes.”

“El, just stop,” Louis gasps, pinching the bridge of his nose. Hearing Liam’s name sparks a heat in his chest, burning thoughts of losing Harry into a pile of ash. Images of an out-of-breath, shivering Harry scrambling desperately away flash behind his eyelids. Louis jumped fully-clothed into a pool without a second thought to pull his deliriously drunk arse from death, and the only thing Harry cared about was fucking Liam. Christ, Harry’s probably in bed with him now.

Louis grits his teeth. No, that just won’t do. He stands hastily and pulls on the dry jeans and shirt Eleanor brought.

Then he sighs, finally facing her. “Thank you, but we should get back.”

Eleanor’s lips purse. “Fine. I’ll see you out there.” With one final nod, she leaves.

Louis checks his reflection, fluffing his hair. His eyes are red and puffy, but it’ll have to do.

As he emerges from the bathroom, he spots Liam coming down the hallway from the men’s bedrooms. He looks tired and a little bit smug. Okay, maybe Louis is imagining the smugness, but even if it’s subconscious, it’s fucking there.

“Payne,” he calls, striding over.

“Oh hey,” Liam greets. “I just put Harry to bed.”

Christ. Louis’ fists clench.

“I think he was quoting something? I don’t know. It was way too eloquent to have been his own thoughts. That’s a little weird though, yeah? Like, how’s he able to quote classic literature when he’s completely pissed? That’s an amazing talent,” Liam says. He smiles expectantly like he’s trying to fucking bond or something.

Louis snorts. Yes, he’s well aware that Harry’s a fucking nerd.

“What the hell are you playing at?” Louis asks.

“Excuse me?” Liam asks, polite as ever. Louis hates him even more.

“You had no right to take him in.”

“Are you serious? He was a mess. He needs to sleep it off.”

“He’s the fucking Bachelor, not a child. It’s not your place to take care of him.”

“Why do you even care?” Liam shoots back, standing his ground, which is actually quite surprising considering how much of a suck-up he’s been throughout this entire process.

“You —,” Louis splutters, searching for an excuse. “You ruined everything!”
“Are you kidding me? Did you see how messed up he was? He almost drowned!”

“You think I don’t know that?” he snaps, gesturing to his new clothes. “I’m the one who saved his fucking life while all of you stood around watching. You can’t credit yourself for taking care of him. That’s my job.”

Liam rolls his eyes. “Yeah. What a great job you’re doing, mate.”

Louis stiffens. “What the fuck does that mean?” he asks.

“I sure as hell wouldn’t trust a desperate Hollywood lowlife.”

“First off, I’m not desperate.”

Liam scoffs and crosses his arms. “You’re kidding, right? The only thing you give a shit about is your job. You saved him for profit, not because you care about him. Harry and the rest of us are just quality control.”

“That’s not true,” Louis stutters. “I care just as much as you.”

“Bullshit. If you cared, Harry wouldn’t have been wasted in the first place. I refuse to sit back and let you treat him like a fucking expendable,” Liam snarls. “Just stick to the directing, and stay away from my boyfriend.” He turns on his heel, leaving a stunned Louis behind.

Fuck. Louis pours himself a drink in the kitchen. So his hunch was right. Everyone thinks he’s a complete twat. He throws the whiskey back before venturing outside to find most of the crew packing up for the night. Without Harry, there isn’t much of a point to keep filming.

Louis really fucked up tonight. He should have known how much Harry was drinking, but instead, he let his emotions compromise his actions. Who knows how much usable material they have now. Probably not a lot.Fuck, Simon’s going to kill him.

All he wants is to go home, lie down, and forget about the curly freak sleeping his way towards a massive hangover. But he can feel the tug in his feet. He has to know.

Louis wanders through the bedrooms, walking in on more than a few contestants getting ready for bed, until finally finding Harry passed out on Liam’s bottom bunk. He looks miserable, pale-faced, and snoring loudly.

“He was pretty messed up,” Eleanor whispers. Louis jumps, spinning to see her head poking in.

“Yeah, well,” he mutters, kicking at the ground. “He shouldn’t have gotten so fucked up.”

“Look, Louis, I know he ruined the shoot today and that we’re royally fucked, and probably going to spend the rest of the week getting chewed out, but I just...I’m worried about him. I fear he’ll be puking his guts out all through shooting tomorrow.”

Louis scoffs. “If he is it’s his own damn fault.”

Eleanor fixes him with a look. “I know you have more sympathy than that.”

Louis huffs and looks at Harry, lying sprawled out amongst the made pillows, his mouth drooling the slightest bit.

“He really wasn’t doing well tonight, darling. Someone should stay with him.”
Louis sighs. “You want me to.”

“Well, you are the boss.”

“Well, you are the boss.”

“Ugh. Fuck. Fine. Send everyone else home. I’ll stay. Just make sure none of the contestants come in, okay?”

“That’s—Louis there are four people living in here.”

He raises his eyebrows at her. “El, he doesn’t deserve to be seen like this. By anyone. Just, promise me.”

Eleanor holds his gaze for a few moments, then relents. “Consider it done.”

She starts off down the hall, but then Louis calls after her. “And El?” She turns around, expectant, “Do me a favor? Get something shot tonight? I don’t care how tired they are, just some sort of inter- contestant drama. We need something we can use.”

“You’re going to kill us all, Louis Tomlinson.”

He smirks back at her. “Don’t I know it.”

He surveys the room as soon as she’s gone. There’s not many places to sit, so he hesitantly settles himself on the edge of Liam’s bed near Harry’s feet, rather than moving the mess of blankets, clothes and hair products off the other bottom bunk. The button down lying across the window looks like Nick’s from the date this afternoon, but he doesn’t want to take any chances.

Louis glances at Harry again, who’s twitching fitfully, lips set in a deep scowl. Fuck. He’s going to need something to get him through this.

Fifteen minutes later, Zayn texts him that he’s back, and Louis sneaks through the house toward the front door, hoping to avoid alerting any of the contestants. Some are passed out on the large couches in the common room.

“Here, I thought this could help you out,” Zayn says when he opens the door. Louis quickly shushes him and leads him back to Liam’s room.

Zayn’s eyes widen as he walks in. “So...that’s Harry?” he asks.

Louis nods solemnly. “Yep.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Zayn asks.

Christ, and there’s the ever helpful, emotionally distant best friend Louis needs but doesn’t want.

“No.”

“And you wanted—” He pulls a perfectly rolled joint out of his pocket.

“You’re a fucking angel,” Louis says, giving him a cheeky kiss. He places the joint between his lips and opens the window before digging his lighter out of his pants.

It’s going to be a long night.
Harry wakes with a pounding headache and a swirling stomach. He lies in bed for fifteen minutes, before realizes he doesn’t know where the hell he is. It’s definitely not his hotel suite.

As activity beyond the room goes from infrequent to near constant, however, he decides it’s time to face the music.

Harry stumbles out of bed, pleased to see that although his clothes from the night before are folded at the end of the bed, he’s still wearing pants. It’s the little things.

Danielle’s eyes narrow as she passes him in the hallway, clutching her toiletries bag to her chest, but Kendall offers a look of sympathy as she stands in the doorway to her bedroom, holding a steaming mug of coffee. He gives her a bashful salute. Hopefully there’s more coffee left over in the kitchen.

When he enters, he notices Liam at the island in his boxers, his coffee cup seconds away from teetering to the floor, as it hangs limply from his fingers. Harry sweeps in and saves it, taking a sip for his efforts. Liam shakes his head, giving him a severe look.

“Should you really be doing that? I’m a contestant, Mr. James.”

Harry just snorts and flicks his meaty shoulder. “Why weren’t you protecting it better?” he asks.

Liam coughs, splutters, and blushes a fierce red but doesn’t reply.

Harry raises his brows, about to ask how the night played out, when the fridge door slams shut, revealing Louis, who looks displeased by its contents. He turns to see him and Liam at the island, giving them a scowl.

Harry stares at Louis’ attire—a too-big white t-shirt and a pair of black joggers. He’s practically swimming in fabric. They maintain eye contact for a while, as if in a silent face-off until Louis caves, ducking his head and reaching for the cup of tea next to the fridge.

“I’ll have to get in touch with one of the PAs about stocking milk in here. It’s a travesty,” he huffs.

Liam looks like he’s about to respond, when a voice calls “Lou, are you dressed?”

Louis’ boyfriend wanders into the kitchen, running a hand across the light stubble on his face.

“Take it or leave it.”

“How the hell do I stand you?” Louis sighs.

“You’re one to talk.” The man winks and gives him a fond smile.

Louis rolls his eyes and passes him a cup of black coffee.

“Thanks, darling,” the man says, stealing an apple from the basket and taking a bite. “I’m gonna head out. You’ll be okay here?”
“Yeah, babe. See you soon.” Louis ruffles the man’s hair, who shoves him away and waves his arm behind him as he leaves the kitchen.

“Bye, dickhead.”

“I love you,” Louis calls after him, teasing. He jumps when his gaze lands on Liam and Harry, as if he forgot they were there.

“What?” he snaps.

When they don’t respond, Louis rolls his eyes for what feels like the fifteenth time this morning. “Cameras roll in fifteen. Look pretty.” And with that, he’s wandering down the hall to the staff area.

Harry takes a seat next to Liam and lays his head in his hands.

It’s one thing to bring your boyfriend to set when you know it’s going to be a long night but allowing him to sleep over? That’s serious. Harry briefly imagines them pressed against each other in one of the spare rooms for the crew, the man’s hands wandering down Louis chest. Fuck, he really doesn’t want to know.

Liam clears his throat. “Harry, listen.”

God dammit. Harry glares and raises his head, softening when he notices Liam biting his lip. He nods for him to continue.

“After, um, after you went to bed last night, some,” he pauses, looking around, “Uh—Well, Louis —” he trails off again, looking guiltily at his cereal.

“Just spit it out,” Harry snaps. Liam flinches, and Harry immediately feels bad. He places a hand on Liam’s bicep. “Sorry, I’m terribly hungover. Please, go on.”

“Well, um, last night you were pretty drunk, yeah? So I put you to bed, made sure you had some water, could sleep it off. And uh, Louis confronted me later and well. He kind of, yelled at me? Like —told me I shouldn’t have removed you from the scene, and that it ruined a night of shooting, and that I shouldn’t have taken care of you—”

Harry knows Liam’s still talking, but he doesn’t hear the rest. Everything’s fucking red. Louis what? That goddamn arsehole. He won’t get away with that fuckery, not if Harry has anything to say about it.

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it,” he says. He stands up abruptly, ignoring the rush to his head and stumbles a bit as he rights himself. Liam looks concerned, but Harry just leans against his shoulder for a second, takes a deep breath, then stalks down the hallway after Louis.

“Louis William Tomlinson,” Harry snarls, marching towards the mansion’s garage where the crew has established a base camp. His head still pounds, and he feels nauseous. Is this what hell feels like? Probably.

When he bursts through the door, he sees Louis sitting quietly at a messy table, watching clips from the night before on an overblown screen. Harry doesn’t bother with pleasantries. “You’re kidding, yeah?”

Louis jumps, his eyes widening and his chair screeching as it’s pushed backwards against the concrete.
“Harry? Fuck, you’re not supposed to be in here.” Louis rises and herds him out of the room, a tight grasp on his upper bicep.

Harry quickly pulls free as Louis pushes him into a spare bathroom and locks the door.

“You have a lot of fucking nerve,” Louis says. “Cast members are not—”

“Shut up.” Harry growls, raising his eyebrows at Louis. “What’s this about you telling Liam off last night? How dare you.”

“Have you seen the show, Harold?” Louis interrupts, “It’s about entertainment value, and that includes shots of you being drunk and vulnerable. Liam’s intervention was way out of line.”

Harry runs a hand through his hair. Louis’ talked a lot of shit since the show began, but never like this. “Where is your integrity? I was a mess last night. It’s a miracle I didn’t asphyxiate in my sleep. You’d rather I get so drunk I can barely walk than lose a couple hours of filming?”

“You do understand how absurd you sound, yeah? It was completely unprofessional for you to be so fucked up.”

“You’re such a bastard. Stop playing the victim. You know I’m a lightweight,” he rolls his eyes, “Or have you magically forgotten all the times you drank me under the table?”

Louis’ lips curl into a deep frown. “That has nothing to do with your behavior last night. I have grounds to fire you.”

Harry snorts. Louis doesn’t have quite as much control as he seems to think.

“Yeah, good luck with that. Finding a new Bachelor with enough time to finish filming would be a bitch, yeah? Besides, James and Greg love me. Have fun getting them on board.”

Louis slouches against the sink, as if standing is too much. Maybe Harry’s finally gotten to him. He watches as Louis runs a thumb over the black spade on his wrist.

“Well?” Harry prompts.

Louis continues to stare at his hands, jaw muscles tightening as he grinds his teeth.

“Harry,” he says, voice startlingly soft. “Do you understand how serious this is? You were completely trashed, and you almost drowned. If anything, they’ll pull you off for your own safety.”

Harry shakes his head. What utter horseshit. Louis doesn’t get to pretend like he cares.

“You control everything that goes on in this fucking mansion, yeah? So you were aware I was pissed, yet you did nothing to intervene.”

Louis clenches his jaw, all traces of softness gone. “Well, excuse me for believing you could be responsible for yourself,” he snaps.

“My tolerance has been the same since the day we met, and you know it.”

“Christ’s sake, Harry. I haven’t seen you for a year. I figured by now you’d learned to hold a fucking drink.”

Right, still as defensive as ever. How could he have forgotten. Harry throws his hands in the air. “Well congratulations, you got your footage,” he says. “I look trashy, you get your ratings. Mission
accomplished.”

“Oh, mission accomplished, what the fuck does that mean? I’m trying to do my best to sell you to American viewers as a classy, put together man ready to be married. Tell me, in what fucking world does the stupidity you pulled last night give the illusion that you’re worthy of love?”

Harry pulls back. His aching headache has subsided, replaced by knives that have taken to stabbing themselves viciously in his chest. His head swims with thoughts he’s too angry and tired to even begin to comprehend. All he knows is that Louis is a vicious, vindictive arsehole.

“Look, you may control some of the situations I’m in, but you have no control over who I fall in love with. I’m still an autonomous person.”

“Funny that, since you just lost it about my apparent negligence.”

Harry scoffs. Of course he twists his fucking words. Always has.

“You signed a contract,” Louis continues. “Your actions, your body, your relationships—anything relating to what’s portrayed on this series—belongs to me. How do you not understand this?”

“Get this through your thick skull, Lewis. You don’t control me, and you don’t get to be involved in my relationships.”

Louis’s nostrils flare. “Oh, give it a fucking rest. You already established just how well you can handle yourself. And you wouldn’t even have these relationships if it weren’t for me. You’re here because I allowed it.”

“You allowed it,” Harry says, shaking his head in disbelief. “Sure, and I guess you’re allowed to do anything you want, yeah? Screw everyone else, as long as you’re fine? That’s why you fucked off, right?”

Louis slams his hand against the sink, the sharp smack echoing harshly.

“You walked away, Harry. I was just smart enough to let you.”

“Right, but having a sleepover with your boyfriend at work is smart?”

Louis’ eyes narrow. “My life isn’t your business,” he snarls. “And for your information, I was off the clock. Yet I still have to stay overnight at work to make sure your drunk ass doesn’t die overnight.”

“My ass is fine, thanks. I think you’re well aware of that. What happened to keeping your personal and work life separate?”

Louis rolls his eyes. “Well, it’s a bit too late for that, innit?”

“So that’s what this is about? You’re mad I got drunk and flirted with a few men?” Harry raises his eyebrows tauntingly. “Get used to it, babe. You need to determine the best lighting for me to makeout with these lovely lovely men and women. Hell, maybe I’ll get a fuck in too? And you’ll get to boss me around, just like old times, yeah?” He purses his lips and stares at Louis, challenging him to say more.

“Get the fuck out,” Louis snarls, his forehead and eyebrows scrunched together. He unlocks the door and practically shoves Harry out. He stumble, alarmed by Louis’ forceful push.

“What? I’m just being honest. That’s what you’re looking for, yeah? An honest bachelor? An
earnest, charming man ready and willing to fall in love on national television?”

The door slams in his face. Harry feels like he’s won the argument, but wonders if that actually matters in the grand scheme of things.

***

November 2016

“Honey, I’m home,” Louis sings, kicking the door closed and setting the groceries down on the counter.

“Hi, baby,” Harry says. He’s by the stove holding a wooden spoon and wearing nothing but a pink apron.

“Baby. I could get used to that,” Louis purrs, eyes roaming the smooth plane of his back, lingering on the curve of his tiny bum. This boy will be the death of him.

He stalks closer and sets his hands on Harry’s waist. “You look really good. Pink suits you.”

Harry bats him in the chest with the spoon.

“Can you put the groceries away for me, love? The milk will get warm.”

“But Hazzaaa.” Louis pushes his face into the crook of Harry’s neck and nibbles on the warm skin, making Harry shiver in response.

“No Lou,” he whines. Harry spins around to face him and squeezes Louis’ cheeks with his palms, unable to contain his fond smile and scrunch up nose.

“You’re so full of shit, Styles. You think I’m adorable. You loveeee me.”

“That’s true,” Harry sighs. He kisses Louis’ nose before stepping away. “But I’ll stop loving you if you let the milk go bad.”

Louis gasps, clutching his chest dramatically.

“I’ll leave you for someone who appreciates cold dairy.” Harry teases before turning his attention to the stove. Louis just scoffs and pulls his boyfriend back into his arms.

“You would never,” Louis whispers against Harry’s ear. “Never ever leave me. You love me too much.”

Harry groans, eyes falling shut as Louis begins placing small love bites on his earlobe and down his neck. “No, I wouldn’t,” he agrees.

“I’m sorry I didn’t put the shit away, love. But can you blame me? You’re walking around with your perfect little arse out,” Louis says, squeezing Harry’s bum for emphasis before ducking down to capture his lips in a soft kiss.

Harry chuckles but indulges him nonetheless. “You sure are a charmer Louis Tomlinson, but you still have to put away the groceries.”

***
September 2018

Simon marches on set an hour later and demands to see Harry in the conference room.

“I’d like to talk about last night.”

Harry raises his head slowly, and for the first time, feels genuine fear in Simon’s presence.

“What about it, sir?”

“Harry, you acted extremely unprofessional yesterday evening. I’m absolutely appalled by the footage. I was excited by your audition, and I fought for you to be here, but I did not expect you to go off the handle like that. We provide alcohol to make you and your love interests more comfortable because we realize this is a difficult situation and one you might not be used to. It is not there for you to abuse.

“I trusted you yesterday, and you disrespected me, the show, and all our hard work. Hundreds of people dedicate themselves every day to make you look good, and this is the thanks they get? You’ve made this show a mockery.” He pauses, taking a deep, calming breath before continuing.

“You’re going to give me a rose ceremony. Tonight. And before that, you’re going to give me a pool party. You’re going to interact with these people, you’re going to feign like you actually care about them, and we’re going to continue making this show. My way. Do you understand that?”

Harry swallows, worried any reply will set Simon off again. “Yes, sir.”

“I’m trusting you not to screw me like that again. Or I could sue you for breach of contract.”

Harry nods meekly. Simon smiles smugly back at him, turns around and slinks out the door.

***

Simon’s presence casts a heavy mood on set. Everything is more intense. Louis tries to get genuine interactions from Harry and the contestants, and for the most part it’s going well, but Simon’s constant interruptions and over-the-top demands for more amped drama quickly get under his skin. As if the night before hadn’t been dramatic enough. To make matters worse, he keeps giving Louis shrewd looks when he catches Louis watching Harry for too long. Louis is just trying to do his job as director, he is totally justified in staring at Harry if that’s what leads to a great shot.

Everyone’s even more tense because they’re walking around in bikinis and boardshorts, and they’ve already had to dedicate two hours to filming nonsense pool party fluff scenes.

Harry’s camped out in the hot tub, with a line of contestants waiting to get their shot with him. There’s a table attached with glasses of champagne, chocolate covered strawberries, and the rose he’d neglected to award last night. “Great job guys, I think we have enough,” Louis calls says, as Harry and Paige pull back from an intimate kiss. She’d already gotten a rose on the first group date, so she doesn’t even eye the one next to them as she clears out and they call in the next contestant.

Cara slips into the water and slides up next to him. “Hi Harry. It’s great to see you.”

“Yeah, Cara,” Harry agrees, “I feel like I haven’t gotten the chance to talk to you this week, and I want to change that. It means alot to me that you’re here.”

She smiles and tucks her hair back behind her face. “I’m glad I get to talk to you after such a busy week. There’s so many things you don’t know about me.”
“I’m all ears,” Harry tells her.

“Good,” Louis calls. He turns to focus on the shot captured by Camera A, closest to the poolside. “Cal, can you focus in on her face?” Then he glances off-screen, can see Simon moving at the edge of the shot, where the rest of the contestants are waiting. “Alright Harry, listen to me. Put your arm around her shoulder, and I want heart eyes. Can you do that for me?”

Harry rolls his eyes but obliges. “Cara, I want you to feel comfortable, like you can tell me anything.”

“I do. And I want to. You see, I’ve struggled with—” She cuts herself off as Danielle marches into the shot, hovering beside the pool.

“So sorry Cara, do you mind if I cut in?”

Harry and Cara both look around, stunned, and Louis glances over at Simon. He’s watching from behind Camera B, with a serene and ominous smile, having sent her in for the kill, even though Danielle had already talked to Harry that afternoon. They had great footage of her declaring how much she felt for Harry and going in for yet another kiss.

“Just for a minute? I have something I need to talk to Harry about, real real quick,” Danielle promises.

Cara stands, giving her an icy smile. “Okay, fine. Go ahead.”

Danielle climbs in, swims over to Harry, and places her hand on his shoulder.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot, earlier this evening. I’m not usually like that, trying to push myself on someone and becoming wholly invested after one date, but...you make me crazy. I’m so scared of how much I feel for you, but so ready to let it consume me.” She’s obviously gunning for the rose on the table that will keep her safe until the third week.

Right outside the shot, Simon is grinning maniacally, and, although Louis hates being undermined, he has to admit, it’s good.

Louis watches Harry bounce his leg up and down as Lou powders his face for the third take. He’s been off for the whole confessional session, and Louis has imagined strangling him in different ways for the past hour.

They haven’t been alone together since Harry had come searching for him in the garage. Louis sighs and scribbles a star into the corner of his roster. That was a fucking disaster. He was completely unprepared for a pissed off Harry. And yet, it was the first time he actually recognized the man in front of him. Even now, as Harry runs his tongue over his teeth, Louis can feel the pull of familiarity under his skin.

“Hand me that water, Lou?” Harry asks, pointing to the glass sitting just out of reach. Louis’ fingers twitch as Lou hands it to him, and he immediately shakes his head. Of course Harry wasn’t talking to him.

“Oi, Harry,” Louis says, snapping his fingers. “You’d better hope third time’s the charm.”

Harry sighs. “I’m a man, Louis. Not a dog.”
“And I’m an unhappy director, yeah? So do it right this time,” Louis snaps, dismissing him with the wave of his hand.

Lou takes the empty cup and pats Harry’s shoulder. “You’ve got this,” she says.

Then the cameras are rolling.

“This has been a hard week for me. I’ve gotten to know a number of people a lot better—and I’m nervous about having to make a decision tonight. I think last night opened my eyes a lot to who I could trust, who I could see myself opening my heart to, and who I need to learn more about. I think tonight’s rose ceremony will be challenging, but I’m excited to move forward.”

Harry sighs, a contemplative look set in place, which quickly morphs into an expectant look. “Good?” he asks.

“Better,” Louis says. He gives him a thumbs up, checking him off his list of confessionals as Harry jumps up and exits the room.

Louis clears his throat and gets up to follow him out.

“Meeting in twenty, James. Be ready,” he calls after Harry. He glances down at his clipboard for the next interviewee. Danielle. He’s about ask one of the PA’s to grab her when he catches sight of Kendall comforting a crying Cara in the hallway.

“It’s okay, darling,” Kendall says. “I know. It’s hard, really hard, but he’ll see through it. He has to.”

“No, but,” Cara hiccups. “I didn’t even get a date this week. You have a rose already, so you don’t understand. That was my only chance to talk to him before the ceremony. He doesn’t know anything about me. How will he be able to make a decision about our future?”

“Oh, Cara, I know.” Kendall gives her a hug, and Louis groans. He’s going to feel like shit, but Simon will eat this up.

“Hey Cara,” he calls. “Will you come with me for a minute?”

Her tear-stained face looks great on camera as she bemoans her minute and a half of time with Harry before Danielle interrupted. “—And Danielle went on a date this week! She already had her chance to talk to him, on top of stealing him at the beginning of the cocktail party. This was my only time to make an impact. It’s not my fault she didn’t feel like she got enough time—I didn’t even get two minutes. I’m scared out of my wits for this rose ceremony tonight, and it’s all Danielle’s fault.”

Greg, who’d walked into her confessional halfway through, grins. “Do we have enough time to hear from Danielle before we have to meet?” he asks.

Louis shrugs. “This is the most drama we’re going to have for the night. We can be late if we need.” He nods to Eleanor, who ducks out to grab Danielle.

Then Louis turns back to the distraught Cara. “Thank you. I know that must have been hard for you, but we appreciate it. You’re free to get ready for the rose ceremony. We’ll begin in about an hour.”

“Yeah, screw you,” Cara mumbles, standing up and wiping at her eyes.

Danielle passes her in the hallway, giving her a mean-spirited smirk. Louis doesn’t even have to prompt her, barely has time to let her know that the camera’s rolling before she’s talking.
“I’m upset with how things went tonight. I think I got off on a really bad foot with Harry. He’s going to think I’m crazy, and I’m not, but I haven’t gotten nearly enough time for him to get to know the real me. Some girls may be mad at me for trying to get time with him, but I truly believe Harry is going to be the man that I marry. These first few weeks are a vital time to find things within ourselves that we love about each other. I need to have that time with him, and if I’m not getting it, I’m going to make that time, and if the others can’t do that as well, that’s their loss, not mine.” She finishes off with a smile and a flick of her hair, obviously proud of herself.

Louis resists the urge to glare. She’s so full of shit. She’s not going home this week, her little stunt with Cara has made her the biggest villain they have and they need her for promos, but he sincerely hopes she will be out of his life forever sometime soon.

But, because he’s a fucking professional, he gives her a sickly-sweet thanks, asks Eleanor to handle the rest of the interviews, and heads down the hall to the pre-rose ceremony meeting.

It’s already in session when he arrives, Harry arguing vehemently about keeping Cara on and sending Danielle home. Simon looks up and completely cuts Harry off when Louis enters.

“Louis. So glad you could make it.”

Louis levels him with a hard look back, “I was coaxing Danielle into giving us an honest confessional.”

“And?”

“She shows no remorse for her behavior this afternoon. She’s not nervous at all.” Which is precisely why Simon would never let her leave. Confidence is key, and he needs a contestant to be nervous and uncertain heading into a rose ceremony.

Harry’s jaw clenches. “But that’s exactly why she should go. It’s not right. She interrupted my only conversation with Cara, and now she doesn’t even acknowledge that it was a dick move?”

Louis knows it’s a lost cause. Danielle is the driving force of conflict to keep viewers interested into the next week. No matter how much Harry may dislike her, that’s how the show runs.

Simon holds up a hand, silencing him. “I’m sorry, Harry. But the second contestant to leave tonight must be Cara. You’ll just need to get to know Danielle better next week. I promise you, there’s no way she’s going home tonight.”

Harry stands immediately, ready to leave.

Louis rolls his eyes. Once Harry’s mind is set, that’s it, and at this point, he’s surely going to give Cara a rose instead of Danielle. And all that will accomplish is an extremely miffed Louis, and a frustrated crew that has to reshoot until Harry finally breaks.

Simon clears his throat as Harry is about to leave the room.

“So tonight, Emma and Cara will go home, just like we discussed. Is that clear?”

Harry nods again.

“Great. I’ll see you all next week. Dismissed.”

Louis needs to catch Harry before the rose ceremony, needs to say something that will make the night a little less painful for everyone involved. He knows Harry’s frustrated with the show, and
knows it’s his job to appease him. He moves to follow Harry out of the room, and realizes he’s already made great strides down the hallway.

“Harry, wait,” he calls.

Harry only stomps faster.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Louis says.

Harry hesitates, his strides much slower than before like he wants to hear what Louis has to say. Louis jogs after him.

“This sucks. I know that. The way the show works is absolute horseshit. If I could change it, I would,” Louis admits, surprising himself with how honest he’s being.

Harry turns, anger in his eyes. “Then why don’t you? You’re the boss.”

“I’m not actually in charge though, Harry. I only control where you stand. The actual logistics of the show come down to Simon because really, it’s all about making money. No one’s going to fall in love with someone like Danielle, at least not like this, but she’s what’s going to get ratings. That has to come first, or I could lose my job. You get that right? Really, if the show fails, we’d all lose our jobs. There have to be casualties.”

“So that’s all Cara is? A casualty?”

Louis rolls his eyes. “That’s not what I meant. All I’m saying is that this is the entertainment industry. So yeah, while it should be about finding love, the ultimate aim is money.”

“Yeah, it never really does come down to love, does it?” Harry mumbles, turning and stalking away.

Louis is nervous leading into the rose ceremony, but pleasantly surprised when Harry picks up the last rose of the night and calls Danielle’s name. He notices how Harry’s shoulders tense when Danielle wraps herself around his neck and kisses him on the corner of his mouth.

Chris Harrison stands in front of the contestants and clears his throat. “I’m sorry, Emma, Cara. You two did not receive a rose tonight. Please take a moment, and say your goodbyes.”

Emma gives Harry a brief hug and wishes him luck, exiting with ease. Cara, however, looks as if she’s about to burst into tears.

“Allow me to walk you out,” Harry says when she approaches. Cara nods, and he slips an arm around her waist.

Louis follows them into the hallway because he knows it’ll be killer footage. Before he can motion to the cameras, Harry stalls, his attention shifting to him.

“Please, Lou,” he begs. He looks tired and forlorn.

Louis’ throat catches. It’s not fair that his feet stop moving, that he can feel a strong throbbing in his gut when he’s met with Harry’s low rumble and pleading eyes and a permanent frown.

“Please,” Harry says again.

Louis pushes warm air through his nose. What the hell, Harry had just done what he asked. He
deserves at least this.

“Fine, but you owe me,” he says, thinking about when Harry had first begged him to come on a
double date with him their first year of uni. Louis had known it was a horrible idea to watch Harry
fawning over the cute boy from his English lecture for an entire evening, but hadn’t let himself think
about why. He does the same thing now, turns away and tries not to examine it further.
Chapter 4

September 2018

On the first day of Week 2, Louis feels good. The end of the last week had been a bit of a shitshow, but Louis is a good director. He can turn this around. He will. He’ll kick Harry back into shape, make sure he wins a couple rounds of bowling on the next date, and by the time the next rose ceremony rolls around, at least two contestants will be “developing real feelings for him.”

But Greg and James are waiting for him when he arrives on set and he knows it's not good news.

“Louis. Have a seat,” Greg says, motioning to one of the folding chairs in front of the monitors. “Look, we’ve been watching the daily footage, and we talked to Simon yesterday,” he begins, “We all agreed, we’re not happy with the way Harry acted last week. It's more than just the drinking—he’s disinterested. He gave us great stuff the first night, but barring his average one-on-one with Kendall, we haven't gotten anything even close to chemistry since. It's bad for ratings.”

They all know by now that when Harry had spoken to Simon, he’d been aware that he wasn’t delivering the interactions they needed. But even so, he hadn’t changed his behavior. Even when he gave the special rose to Taylor, it felt much more spur of the moment, than actual interest. He hadn’t even cleared the decision with any executives, but since they’d painted Taylor as Good Marriage Material, no one had fought him.

“I've spoken with him,” Louis admits. “Before the drinking incident and after the drinking incident. He’s been struggling to get a grasp on the structure of the show, but I think he’s starting to get it. He understands it’s not entirely up to him, and I made it clear that he has to change his attitude.” Louis can feel himself getting defensive and bordering on rude, but he knows this is an ongoing issue.

“And that's great, Louis. You’re a good director. We know that, Simon knows that. But right now, we really need you to come through.”

James cuts in, even though it's been obvious he's been trying to stay out of it until now. “Louis, we just want to make sure you understand the consequences they needed. But even so, he hadn’t changed his behavior. Even when he gave the special rose to Taylor, it felt much more spur of the moment, than actual interest. He hadn’t even cleared the decision with any executives, but since they’d painted Taylor as Good Marriage Material, no one had fought him.

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Greg and James pat his back on their way out, jostling his seat. Of course everything they said is
true, and Louis knows it. It's everything he'd been telling himself, but it's harder to hear spoken out loud, clear as day. He needs to get his act together and generate entertaining content. He can feel his control slipping, like it wouldn’t if he was working with any other Bachelor, because it’s especially hard to control Harry. He knows Louis, he knows his weaknesses, he knows how to get to him. He could ruin everything for Louis with the blink of an eye.

Louis had been ruthless in his previous two seasons. He’d work hard, do as he was told, and generate good content. He wasn’t thinking about the wellbeing of the Bachelor, because he didn’t care about the wellbeing of the Bachelor. He'd been brokenhearted and didn’t believe in love. He’d been emotionally unattached, and that was what he needed. That’s what it takes to do this job.

But here he is, getting far too invested in the wellbeing of his star, who’s here trying to get over the —apparently epic—relationship he’d had after Louis. Louis needs to get a grip, needs to stop treating Harry like shit, and needs to do his fucking job.

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Harry yawns as he saunters onto set. He hadn’t gotten much sleep last night, feeling guilty about the look in Cara’s eye as she left, asking him “Why?” over and over although they both knew he couldn’t answer. Even worse, his limo was late, so he arrived closer to noon than the producers had wanted, but whatever. He just needs some tea, and then he’ll be fine.

“Harry James! Lovely of you to join us,” Louis calls, catching him in the hall.

Shit. “Bite me, Louis.”

“Now that's no way to talk to your director, James. I want to speak with you before your date today.”

Harry rolls his eyes but turns around, looking expectantly at him.

“In private, please?” Louis motions towards the conference room on their left.

Harry doesn’t budge, so Louis takes it as his cue to continue talking.

“Can I be perfectly honest with you? As a friend?”

Harry scoffs. “Oh, so we’re friends now?”

Louis hesitates, but collects himself before Harry can say anything else.

“Look, I know this has been hard for you. You’re struggling to make connections with these people, and I get it. It’s a very fabricated situation, but...I’ll be perfectly honest,” he sighs, looking up at Harry, his eyes more open and honest than Harry’s seen in years. “This season is revolutionary. If I do it well, it means positive, truthful representation of queer relationships on television, something that is severely lacking, especially in the realm of reality TV. But, at the same time, if I do it wrong, if this season isn’t successful, or, fuck that, the absolute most successful season we’ve had yet, then representation of queer romance on television will be completely dismissed. If the show doesn’t sell, every network will assume bisexuality doesn’t sell, and it’ll be even harder to produce another show like this. You get that, yeah?”

Harry nods. He came on this show to help prove that bisexuality is valid and important and real. He knows he needs to step up his game so this season can live up to its potential.

“There’s something else, too,” Louis says. “If this is going to work, you can’t just hook up with anyone you find attractive. Forming a strong bond to establish a relationship is one thing, but sloppy
makeouts with men, like what you did at the cocktail party the other night, just supports stereotypical bisexual promiscuity. I know you don’t want that, and you’re just demonstrating the validity of your sexuality, but it’s important to think about how your actions will be perceived by the public.”

Harry nods again. He’s surprised that Louis, for once, is being civil, despite his blatant disrespect for Harry’s perspective these past few weeks. If underneath this hard, angry Louis-the-Director, there’s still an ounce of his Louis, Harry will do anything for him. Which means trying his hardest to fall in love, and do it right.

“I just—If you’re not prepared to be in for every part of the show and fully committed to making this the best, and possibly first good, season of The Bachelor, why did you even agree to be here?”

Harry laughs bitterly because the truth is more pathetic than anything else. Yes, he wanted to be a part of the frontier for bisexual representation, but even more, he’d come to get over Louis. Look how both of those turned out. Possibly ruining their ratings, jeopardizing future bisexual visibility, and still miserably attached to an ex, who doesn’t even care.

He takes a deep breath. “I understand, Louis. I’ll try harder. I promise, by the end of this week, I’ll be exactly what you need me to be.”

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May 2012

Harry has never regretted telling Louis anything until now.

Louis grins mischievously as he holds up a plastic bag from Tesco’s, winking and heading into the communal bathroom.

“Louis, you can’t. He’ll kill you,” Harry whines.

“I can handle myself against a bloody leprechaun, thank you very much.”

Louis lays all his supplies out next to where Niall left his. Harry jumps up on the counter and swings his legs in the air.

“But—”

Louis shushes Harry with a tickle in the side, and Harry squawks, loud and obnoxious, sure to attract attention from other people in their hall.

“Would you just hand that to me, please?” Louis rolls his eyes while Harry hesitantly passes him the lavender dye.

Harry bites his lip. “He won’t be too mad, you don’t think?”

“Nah. Honestly, he’ll think it’s funny. I promise.”

“But Lou—”

Louis grabs Harry’s cheeks, gripping his face with sincerity.

“I’m serious. He’ll find this fucking hilarious—” A grin spreads across Louis’ face. “—after a bit of yelling.”

“Louuuuu.”
“But it’ll be fun yelling, H, I swear. Just incoherent Irish babbling. And then I’ll buy him a pint or two, and he’ll get over it.”

Harry still looks unsure.

“Just think of how pretty Nialler will look with lavender locks,” Louis says. He empties an entire bottle of lavender coloring into the blonde dye Niall had abandoned before rushing across campus to turn in a late paper. Harry acts as Louis’ “lookout” but doesn’t accomplish much more than sitting and giggling.

Just as Louis replaces the cap on the bottle, they hear Niall laughing in the hallway with what sounds like Bressie, a guy from his econ seminar. Their voices recede for a few seconds, then get louder as they approach the bathroom. Harry has a look of pure fear on his face, but Louis just grins, absolutely ecstatic. He rushes towards a stall and hides inside as Harry stands, frozen and panicked in front of the sinks.


Harry quickly scrambles to lean against the counter, then changes his mind and tries to change positions, so he’s standing awkwardly between the sinks and toilets when Niall enters.

“Hey, Haz. You waitin’ for me?” He scans Harry’s face warily.

“Yeah,” Harry answers, much too quickly.

“Cool. Well, my friend Bressie’s gonna help us. You good with that?”

Harry nods jerkily, and Niall eyes him again. “You okay, weirdo?” he asks.

Harry nods again. Bressie looks concerned but stays quiet, so Niall just shrugs.

“Alright. We ready?”

“Sure thing,” Harry says, and Niall prepares himself at the sink, closing his eyes and leaning over, waiting for Harry to dye his hair. Harry’s heart beats a million miles a minute, his chest clenching as he tries to breathe normally.

He thinks of Louis, crouched in the stall, so dedicated to the prank, and he calms a little. Harry’s sure Louis’ smile will be worth it.

He slips his fingers into the gloves, the cheap plastic crinkling loudly. Then he grabs the bottle and shakes it vigorously. The dye begins to darken until it’s obvious the color in the bottle isn’t Niall’s normal bleach blonde. Bressie opens his mouth, but Harry gives him a severe look, and he shuts up, a slight grin on his lips.

Niall’s mostly quiet, just humming and shaking his head, which is actually a hindrance, but Harry’s not going to push his luck. He coats the majority of Niall’s tips, squeezing more dye than necessary onto the ends, then moves back to his roots—the only parts that really need to be done—but Niall hasn’t commented. Harry smiles. It’s going so well, he might be able to escape unscathed, but then a line of purple dye rolls down Niall’s cheek, dripping off his chin and into the sink.

“Umm...Harry.”

“Yes, Niall?” Harry says, his body tense.
“What the bloody hell is that?”

“Uh—”

Niall flings his head back to check himself in the mirror, his mouth dropping wide when he sees lavender hair and dark brunette roots reflecting back at him.

“You’re fucking kidding me,” he screams, his face turning red.

“It was Louis’ idea,” Harry blurs, pointing at the middle stall. Louis falls out then, laughing hysterically at the look on Niall’s face. Harry begins to giggle, and Bressie joins in, clapping him on the back.

“I look like a bloody flower!” Niall exclaims, hastily turning on the faucet and dunking his head under the water.

The other three boys continue to laugh. Louis meets Harry’s gaze and gives him a thumbs up. Harry grins. It is pretty funny. This was a great idea. He should listen to Louis more often.

“You look like a lavender menace,” he jokes. Louis laughs so hard he almost chokes. Niall’s face scrunches, his eyes deadly, but Louis is having a great time, and Harry’ll take it. He’d take anything for Louis.

***

September 2018

Kendall squeals as she and the rest of the contestants emerge from the house, and immediately runs towards Harry. He picks her up and spins her in a circle, her legs coming up to wrap around his waist. She pulls away and steps back so he can say hello to the rest of his dates for the day: Danielle, Jeff, Caroline, Nick, Ben, Paige and Xander. It’s the largest date he’s been on so far, and also the most important. Hopefully he’ll have enough time to connect with each of them. Harry winces, hating that his thoughts have transformed into a confessional. But at the same time, it may be a sign that he’s in the right frame of mind to really sell dedicated and attentive love interest.

They all pile into the back of a limo, toasting champagne and laughing on their way to the bowling alley. Harry likes to have fun, and be goofy, so he planned this date (or, the producers planned this date with his suggestions in mind) because he wants to be able to let go and just have a good time with his spouse, and there’s no better way to do that than with a friendly game of bowling. The producers also seemed to think the game could bring a competitive streak out of some of the contestants, but Harry chooses to ignore the reality show aspect of the date.

Once they arrive, they divide into two teams of four: Harry, Danielle, Jeff, and Caroline against Nick, Ben, Paige, and Xander.

Harry sits himself down in the middle of the group, hoping to get to know Caroline and Jeff a little better, as he’d neglected them during the first week. Jeff and Danielle are immediately really engaged in the game, but Caroline is much more interested in hanging off Harry’s shoulder and flirting in between turns. In fact, when it is her turn, Jeff has to call her name three times, and it isn’t until Danielle snaps at her that she finally notices.

“Oh, is it my turn now?” She asks, holding her hand to her chest like she’s completely shocked and thinks she’s being cute. “So sorry everyone, I was so wrapped up in my date, I hadn’t even noticed,” she slaps lightly at Harry’s shoulder before standing and sauntering over to choose a ball.
She stands in front of the lane for a few moments, considering her options, before turning around, “I was so shit at this on my last go, would you mind checking my stance, Harry?” She smiles, devilishly, and from her seat across the aisle, Danielle huffs and rolls her eyes.

“All right, ready, Car?” Harry whispers into her ear, brushing his lips against her earlobe and carefully guiding her hips.

“She’s going to actually have to take a shot at some point, you know that, right?” Danielle calls. Harry steps back to give Caroline room, and she shakes her bum out at him as she bends down.

After that, the date turns into madness. Danielle continues to take the game very seriously, carefully lining up each shot like her life depends on it, and snapping at her teammates when they miss. Nick, however, who’s designated himself captain of the opposing team, quickly thwarts her efforts.

“Hey Harry, you ever gone lane surfing?”

Harry looks up, excited, completely disregarding Danielle’s celebration as she’s made yet another strike. He glances over at the crew, but no one seems too concerned, so he grabs Nick’s offered hand and follows his lead, sliding across the lane.

Despite Danielle’s protests, that’s really the end of the game. Which is honestly better, since everyone is then invited to the cocktail party.

Harry’s impressed that the show continuously finds unique rooftop bars for each date night. The current location focuses on exposed, natural wood and feels incredibly masculine and sophisticated.

“I had such a good time getting to know all of you today. Some showed me that you would be a great partner to have on my team, while some taught me how to have fun again and that we could live a life of adventure. I’m definitely excited to keep moving forward with each of you. So with that, Nick, could I steal you away for a few minutes?”

Nick smiles, and Harry leads him to a predetermined location for his private conversations, a fluffy couch on the opposite side of the rooftop, surrounded by roses and small candles.

“I have to say, Nick, you really made this date for me today. You brought a sense of fun and silliness, and I appreciate that. I always want to be able to joke around with my partner, and I’m happy to see that the two of us could push aside our worries and have a good time.”

“You ready to stop being so fuckin’ cheesy?” Nick asks as they reach the couch and sit down together.

“Hey,” Louis cuts in from across the room. “Easy on the obscenities, will you? Think of the editors.”

Harry sticks his tongue out at him, but otherwise ignores his comment and focuses on Nick, trying to begin again.

“I feel like I can really be me with you, you know? Like I can be my best, most carefree self.”

“Layin’ the charm on pretty think, yeah?” Nick rolls his eyes and pulls Harry closer. “I get it, lover boy, I’m an incredible specimen, and you’re lucky to have me.”

“That’s my worry, though,” Harry starts, meeting Nick’s eyes to catch his attention. “That I won’t ever be able to be serious with you. We’ll spend all our time having fun, and there won’t be an opportunity to be real.”
Nick sighs and nods. “I see why you might think that, and I understand. I’ve faced a lot of hard times in my life, but I use jokes and teasing as a coping mechanism. It’s really hard for me to open up and be serious, so I always try to be the life of the party.”

“I guess my question for you is whether or not you could put that aside, and be there for me when times get tough.”

Nick holds Harry’s cheek, focusing in on his face.

“I’m not ready to completely open up to you yet, but I promise I’m getting there.”

Harry’s face breaks out into a smile, and he pulls Nick into a hug.

When they separate, Louis yells, “Cut,” with a pleased expression.

“That was great, lads. So much improvement. Really, really amazing. We might even have some great promo footage. Harry, please lead Nick back to the group. Nick, Eleanor will come get you for a confessional in a few minutes.”

When Harry and Nick approach the rest of the group, however, they find the rest of the contestants in the midst of a heated argument.

Xander stands on the couches, screaming down at Danielle.

“Look, you’re hot, babe, but Harry is too. Eating pussy won’t keep me from sucking his brain out through his dick.”

Harry stops, absolutely horrified by Xander’s comments. He feels violated and objectified, and now he’s supposed to be alone with this guy? Harry’s stomach twists painfully, and he tightens his grip on Nick’s hand.

“Oh, what’s going on here?” Nick demands, his hand settling on Harry’s waist. Harry appreciates the gesture, but he isn’t sure he wants to hear Xander’s answer, and more importantly, doesn’t want Nick involving himself in whatever this is.

“This fucking cunt——” Xander sneers, rolling his eyes to indicate Danielle, “—insinuated that Harry would be ‘picking a gender’ soon, and that he couldn’t possibly be interested in men and women.”

“That’s completely out of context, asshole,” Danielle says. “I was simply——”

“You were being biphobic. That’s all there is to it.”

Harry feels a sharp jab on his side and turns to see Louis standing next to him, a determined expression in his eye.

“Go say something,” he says. “Try to placate, but let them argue over you.”

Harry hesitates. “Are you sure?”

“Go.” Louis physically pushes him forward, and Harry trips over his steps before regaining his footing and coming in between the two of them.

He clears his throat. “Hey, could we, um.”

He looks to Louis for guidance, but Louis just shoots him a murderous glare, indicating that he’s on his own. “Could we talk about this? We’ll just, uh, sit down, and——”
“Do you really think Harry’s going to go for you, sweetie?” Danielle shouts at Xander, completely disregarding Harry standing in front of them. “You’ve been flirting with the crew every night! You’re just here to find an easy fuck, not a life-long commitment.”

Xander scoffs. “And you are? You’re just trying to get publicity to help your pathetic excuse for an acting career.”

Harry jumps when Louis makes a choking sound and throws a pen across the roof. Apparently this argument isn’t adequate content for *The Bachelor*.

“I am here because Harry is my future husband,” Danielle says.

“That’s rich, honey. Last I checked, I’m the one he eyefucked for an entire rose ceremony. You went off the handle because he wouldn’t even look at you.”

“Oh please. Do you really think he’s going to propose to a man? You’re just here to make the show look good.”

Harry clenches his jaw. That’s it. He rounds on Danielle.

“Okay, you’ve crossed the fucking line,” he snaps.

Danielle freezes with wide eyes as he continues.

“You’ve done nothing but disrupt the evening with your offensive comments and conceited attitude. You completely invalidated me and my sexuality. You want to know what I ‘go for’? Someone who’s supportive and understanding. And you’ve consistently shown me you can’t be either of those.”

“And you.” Harry turns to face Xander, who has crossed his arms. “I’m absolutely repulsed by your behavior tonight. Objectifying me and the other contestants—I won’t tolerate that, and I refuse to listen to it any longer. I want you gone.” Harry glances at Danielle. “Both of you.”

He hears the other contestants clapping behind him but doesn’t bother turning around.

“That was great, Harry,” Louis says. “Danielle, Xander, there’s a limo waiting for you downstairs to take you back to the mansion.”

“Wait, what? They’re going home.”

Louis sends him a serious look, and Harry knows he shouldn’t be doing this in front of the contestants, but. “Louis, are you serious?”

“We’ll talk about this later,” he says, an air of finality to his tone.

“Louis—”

“Later.”

Later turns out to be Simon storming into his hotel room that night, Louis and a frazzled PA on his tail. “What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing?”

Harry jumps where he’d been sliding into his trackies and abruptly falls over onto his arse, legs flailing in the air.
“What?” Harry mumbles, voice muffled by hair that’s fallen into his mouth.

“Do you think this is a game?” He whispers, harshly.

Harry scrambles up, grabbing the bed to hoist himself up.

“Um, no sir?”

Simon hardens his glare. “You are not at liberty to send contestants home from dates.”

“Well, actually, I was trying to send them home, period, but Louis—”

“Louis did exactly the right thing. He defused the situation and ensured that you would keep your job. You should be thanking him.”

Harry scoffs.

“I’m serious. That was absolutely inappropriate. Harry, we have a job to do here. There are crew members working on this show. This is how they make money to provide for their families. You cannot be pulling stunts like this. If we lose money on this, I’m fine, I don’t care. But those crew members are going to lose their jobs. Louis is going to lose his job—Louis’ arse is on the line this season, and if you keep pulling shit like this, he’s the one who’s going to pay for it.”

Throughout his speech, Harry has gone from rolling his eyes to watching Louis pensively, trying to find a hint of something.

All he finds is a guarded, dark expression. Definitely not looking out for Harry. Louis follows Simon out without a word, but the PA, Harry thinks his name is Daniel or Dave, is much slower, and he catches him before he disappears.

“Hey, um, can I borrow your cell phone?”

The PAs eyes widen. “That’s highly against protocol.”

“Please. I promise, I’ll be so quick. You won’t even notice it’s gone. I need to talk to my mum.”

“Your mother?”

“Yeah. I think hearing from her could really turn the show around. I’d be much more comfortable.”

“Umm…” He still glances around warily, like Louis will come back in and fire him, but he seems much closer to breaking. “I don’t know.”

Harry widens his eyes, puffing his lips up just a bit, trying to sway him with a defeated expression.

Daniel/Dave sighs. “I guess if you think it’ll help.” Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his iPhone.

“Thank you,” Harry says. He opens it and begins to dial, then looks back at Daniel/Dave, who is waiting by the door. “Could I have a little privacy?”

Daniel/Dave nods, embarrassed, and ducks out of the hotel room.

Harry climbs back in bed and curls up, pulling the blanket over his face. He feels bad about lying to the poor PA, but this is an emergency.

The ringing in Harry’s ear echoes as he waits for Niall to pick up, each one making him more tense.
It’s 8 AM in London, but Harry is tired and just wants to sleep, so Niall can get his arse up a few minutes early to talk to his best friend when he’s having a crisis. Especially since it’s Niall’s fault.

Finally, the ringing stops, and there’s fumbling on the other end.

“‘Lo?” Niall croaks.

Harry sighs as pitiful as possible so Niall knows how much trouble he’s caused him.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Ni.” He rubs a hand across his face, staring up at the ornate, small chandelier.

“What—Harry? What are you talking about?”

“The show, Niall.” He rolls his eyes at his best friend and how fucking dumb he can be in the mornings. “Wake up. I need you.”

Niall grunts, and there’s more rustling before he speaks again, much more coherently. “Okay, tell me what’s happening.”

“It’s all so much harder than I thought. It’s—the contestants, and the deception, and—Niall it’s just vile. It’s absolutely disgusting what they do here, how they’re willing to exploit us for views. And then there’s Louis—God, Niall, he’s everywhere. It’s torture.”

“Okay, Harry. We’re going to take this one step at a time, yeah?”

Harry makes a small noise of affirmation so Niall pushes forward.

“There’s not much you can do about the contestants. You just gotta find the ones you don’t outright hate, and spend time with them.”

That sounds reasonable. Harry nods, then realizes Niall can’t see him. He clears his throat.

“Alright,” he rasps.

“Okay, so. The deception part is more tricky. I know you signed an NDA and can’t tell me what’s going on, but I think for the most parts, you’re not going to be able to change the way a twenty-year-old franchise works, and if you try, you’re going to get sued, as much as that sucks.”

Harry agrees again, quieter this time.

“I know it’s probably tough to hear, H, but in your situation right now, there’s not much you can do. You have to accept that.”

“No, I know. Thank you. I need to hear it.” Harry sinks deeper between the soft pillows of the bed. “But what do I do about Louis? It’s not like I can just put him out of my mind and focus on a new person. He’s literally ten feet away instructing me on how to kiss!”

“That’s exactly it, Harry. This was a deliberate choice you made to try to get over him, and like it or not, he’s always going to be there, whether that be in your memories or right in front of you. There’s no point in staying if you’re just flirting with the contestants out of spite. You have to be there for them.”

“But—”

“Listen. You and Louis are never getting back together. Until you acknowledge that, you won’t be
able to move on. The truth of it is, he’ll be present throughout this process.”

Harry sighs, pulling at his lip. “You’re right, Ni.”

“I know, H.”

“He’s got a boyfriend though. He brought him to the house”

Niall’s quiet for a few minutes. “I’m really sorry, Harry.” Harry swallows. “He’s a arsehole.”

Harry shakes his head, “No, Niall’s he’s not. He’s just—”

“He is, Harry. That’s a dick move, to bring his boyfriend over when he knows you’re gonna be there.”

“No, I’m serious Niall. He shouldn’t have to police his behavior just because I’m around. He shouldn’t have to hide his boyfriend just because I’m not over him a year later, especially when we didn’t even date for a full year. I have to move on.”

“Well, yeah, H, isn’t that why you’re there?”

Harry nods again, though he’s not sure why exactly he keeps doing that, Niall can’t see him. “Alright. I have to go. I love you mate, thanks for taking my call. I really needed that.”

“Anytime, mate. Just maybe not so early in the morning next time.”

Harry laughs, thanks him again, and hangs up. He returns the phone to the PA then settles in bed again. He tries to imagine creating a life with someone like Nick, thinks about joking together, laughter and comfort throughout the rest of the show, what his proposal might look like, moving in together in London. Louis, however, is a roadblock in his mind. It’s been tense and awkward between them, but Harry can still imagine what their life might be like together, if times were better. Moving to L.A, attending galas at Louis’ side. He’s sure to have an ace directing career if this season’s successful. Harry could finally do something with his English degree or go back to school while Louis runs his own show. They could have a big house with a backyard and plenty of room to entertain.

Harry frowns. He can’t come close to a similar vision for even one of his suitors. This is getting to be a bit of a problem.

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Louis’ least favorite part of this entire process is the rose ceremony. Logically, he knows it doesn’t make sense. They often come straight from a meeting where Simon tells Harry who he should keep and send home each week, and Louis doesn’t have to watch Harry flirting or kissing anyone else, but when he thinks about Harry handing out roses—envisioning a future with these people—that’s what gets to him.

This week is no different. When Harry calls out to the favorites, the ones he actually might marry, Louis’ heart dies a little inside. He doesn’t want to hear the phrase, “Taylor, will you accept this rose,” or see Kendall’s smile when she gives him a hug and kiss on the cheek, or Nick’s smug look as he clutches his group date rose.

Thankfully, however, Louis keeps himself busy. Earlier that night, he’d sent Greg to talk to Danielle, promising her that Harry hadn’t meant what he said, and that he still sees a future with her. She fully expects him to get down on one knee at the end of this, hell, maybe even tomorrow, and has no idea
she’s about to be blindsided.

Ensuring Xander and Danielle that they were safe from elimination had been the first time Louis has felt guilty about lying during the show. Harry doesn’t want them here. Harry had done so well during his one-on-one date with Liam, and in stellar individual moments with contestants that assured them of his devotion. He’s been successful, and now it’s like he’s being punished.

Louis spends the evening orchestrating the best angle, making sure there’s always a camera tight on Danielle’s face to catch any expression when other contestants receive a rose before her.

Harry looks pained when he reaches the last three. Danielle, Xander, and Nadine all stand at the front of the room, each looking more nervous than the last.

Chris re-enters the room and delivers his line. “Harry, ladies and gentlemen, this is the final rose tonight.”

Harry nods to himself, closing his eyes like he’s really thinking about what he wants to do. Danielle stands up straighter, fixing her dress, and smiles tightly, exuding confidence. If he didn’t know how terrible of a person she is, Louis might feel a little bit bad about what’s about to happen. As it is, he just feels inner calm as Harry calls out, “Xander.”

Xander comes forward, a manic grin on his face. Danielle’s expression drops, her mouth open in shock.

“Xander, will you accept this rose?”

“Hell yeah,” Xander replies, pulling Harry into an abrupt, tight hug. Harry pulls back, nods and sends him a quiet smile. Xander returns to his place.

Louis glances over at Danielle again. Her entire face is twitching as she tries to keep it together during Chris’s final speech, but she snaps when it’s her turn to come forward and say goodbye.

“Are you fucking kidding? You kept him over me? I told you I wanted to marry you!”

Harry winces. “I’m sorry, Danielle. Allow me to walk you out?”

“No. Fuck you.”

He raises his eyebrows, giving her a stern look, but she pushes past him and out of the room.

“Follow her,” Louis hisses to the closest camera operator, who shifts the camera higher on his shoulder as he runs out.

“Camera A, close up on Harry.” Cal follows Louis’ instructions, focusing the lens on Harry’s face.

“Good,” Louis says. “Harry, can you look sad for me? So disappointed, you gave her a chance, and she let you down.”

Harry listens, looking past the camera with a pensive gleam in his eye while he pretends to consider the future that could have been. He makes eye contact with Louis behind the camera, and Louis feels unsettled for a moment, Harry’s acting skills have developed tenfold over the course of the week, he’s really selling the heartbreak.

“Perfect, Haz,” Louis praises, then follows Danielle down the hall. He trusts Eleanor to handle the toast with all the remaining contestants.
It's only once he's outside the mansion, wrangling Danielle for an exit interview, when he stops. He called Harry ‘Haz’ like they were still best friends. He called Harry ‘Haz’ in front of Harry, his co-workers, and all Harry’s suitors. He called Harry ‘Haz’ completely unconsciously, and Harry hadn't even flinched. It felt so normal.

Well, fuck.

***

On Wednesday, Harry meets Jeff, Ben, Xander, Michael, Caroline, Liam, Kendall, and Paige at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. He’s excited the producers have planned a footie date, even if it is only to invite two of the members of the US Men’s Soccer Team.

Harry waits on the field, sporting full Nike gear before greeting his dates for the afternoon. Paige runs at him this time, scooping him up in a hug, but Xander is the adventurous one who goes in for a kiss on-camera, and in full-display of everyone.

Of course. Now that Danielle’s gone, he supposes someone has to fill the role of inappropriate kisser.

Harry waves brightly. “Hi guys. Thanks for coming today. We’re going to have a bit of fun today. I’ve invited some guys who played at the World Cup earlier this year to teach us some soccer moves because I love a partner who knows how to play with some balls.”

“Cut,” Louis yells, smirking slightly, but overall trying to maintain an unimpressed, professional demeanor. “We’ll have to edit that out, you jerk.”

Harry smiles cheekily, while his dates, the crewmembers, and even the professional players laugh at the interaction. Harry winks, and Louis just rolls his eyes.

“Let’s just keep to the script, please? Thank you,” he says, narrowing his eyes.

Harry restarts the intro, explaining that the US players are going to teach them some basic moves, then they’ll divide into teams to play for Harry’s love.

From there, the professionals take the lead, which Harry is absolutely thrilled about, as they both look absolutely fit in their footie kits. Their bums are nice and firm.

He tries to refocus himself on the practice round, however, where Kendall has broken out as the star player. Michael and Ben both look disappointed and disheveled, obviously having given a valiant effort. There’s just something about Kendall though, she maneuvers the ball around the field with great ease, sliding in between some of the larger male players around her. Caroline, on the other hand, falls during drills and refuses to get back up, declaring football “too physically exhausting.”

She still gets assigned a team though. Harry announces the predetermined rivalry (which had been carefully orchestrated to provoke the most drama, obviously) and Kendall, Liam, and Jeff all groan at being placed with her, worried their chances of winning dinner with Harry will be jeopardized. Ben, Xander, Michael, and Paige, on the other hand, all look incredibly smug.

The US players wish them luck and remind them to use the moves they’ve just been taught before retreating to the benches to watch the game, while the contestants head into the locker room. Once everyone emerges in complementary red and white uniforms, everyone is called back into a group.

“Okay guys,” Harry calls. “We’ll be playing two twenty minute halves. The winner of the game goes out to dinner and drinks with me. The loser, unfortunately, heads back to the mansion. Are we ready to go?”
Everyone cheers, then breaks from the semi-circle they’ve formed around him to move into position.

After only thirty seconds, the game gets intensely competitive. Five minutes into the first half, Xander shoves Caroline roughly, and she tumbles to the floor, crying that she’s hurt her ankle. She’s obviously trying to get out of playing and simultaneously garner some sympathy, maybe sit on the sidelines with Harry, but he can’t call her out on it. Instead he asks the opposing team to trade out one of their players to make the teams even as they continue.

Harry’s getting a little tired of Caroline playing dumb to get more time with him. Last week it had been not knowing how to bowl, and now she was pretending to be miserable at football. She must not realize that she has to put forth at least a little effort into the dates he “plans” if she wants to win his heart, instead of just trying to win as much time with him as possible.

Michael sits out first. Xander is still far too intense, this time with Paige to back up any shot he isn’t able to make. They’re still no match for Kendall, though, especially now that her team has shaken Caroline. She, Liam, and Jeff easily play to one another’s strengths and cruise into victory. Liam is a strong defense, while Jeff is excellent at guarding Kendall, making sure she is free to not only steal the ball, but also that no one will attempt to block her shot as she makes goal after goal.

The opposing team periodically switches their players out, and Xander is on the sidelines when the match ends. At Louis’ cue, Harry blows the final whistle, and Kendall’s team is still up by two. Xander immediately stands and stomps childishly off the field, “Fucking Ben,” he shouts. “Should’ve put me back in, you dick, I would’ve won the fucking game.”

Harry rolls his eyes. Typical.

Unlikely, seeing as they’d only closed the gap between their scores while he hadn’t been playing and Michael had scored three consecutive goals, but Harry wasn’t about to point that out when he had a date to go on with three (four, technically, he couldn’t exclude Caroline because she was injured) people he really wanted to get to know better.

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April 2013

“I can’t do it, Lou,” Harry whines, dropping onto the field, his hair tangling in the dewy grass.

Louis rolls his eyes and sits next to him, resting the ball on his knees.

“Haz, you can’t pass me the ball if you’re lying down.”

“I haven’t made a shot all night.”

Louis chuckles. “No shit. Leave me to do all the fucking work. Where’s my pay?” He bounces the ball against Harry’s knee cap.

Harry lets out an exasperated sigh, lifting and dropping his arms once again, like a deformed starfish.

“I’m complete rubbish, and the game is tomorrow. We don’t stand a chance. I should just stick to watching the telly.”

Louis lies down and stares at the sky. It’s much easier to see the stars out on the pitch. Then he turns towards Harry, reaching his fingers out to brush against Harry’s forearm. Harry pulls it away quickly, rubbing at the goosebumps Louis leaves behind.
“Don’t you want to see Niall streak the library?”

“Yes, but we’re never going to win.”

“Oi, Bambi. Just because you have trouble coordinating your noodle limbs doesn’t mean you can insult my footie skills. I’m ten times better than that Irish fuck. I’ll just go for his weak knees, and then you can praise me like I deserve.”

Harry snorts and hits Louis in the chest.

“That’s cheating. Fuck, I’m going to have to do his laundry for a month.”

“You love doing laundry.”

Harry grimaces. “Not Niall’s. It’s gross and smelly. It’s boy laundry, Louis.”

Louis blanks at that. “Hazza, you do all our laundry. Are you aware that we are both boys? Is there something you’re not telling me?” Louis feigns astonishment. Harry’s not amused.

“Yeah, yeah, but there’s a distinction,” he mutters, flinging his arms over his face to hide his burning cheeks.

“And the distinction is?” Louis smirks.

Harry groans, grabbing the ball near Louis’ leg and kicking it towards the end of the field. Louis lazily watches it fly evenly into the goal. He lets out a whoop.

“Did that really just?” Harry asks, frozen in shock.

Louis stands, fist punching the air, and pulls Harry close, kissing his temple and rubbing the top of his head.

“We’re gonna win tomorrow, Hazza. Niall Horan had better prepare his balls for the East Campus Library!”

Harry sighs, but allows Louis to celebrate around him anyway.

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October 2018

Week 3’s rose ceremony meeting is a disaster. Louis’ surprised it took this long.

Harry makes demands the moment he walks in. He stands at the head of the table directly opposite Simon and lays his hands on the table.

“I want Xander gone. Now.”

Simon raises his eyebrows and sits back. “And what part of this process has given you the idea that that’s in any way your decision?”

“He’s abrasive, rude, openly hits on other contestants, and has objectified me on countless occasions. Whenever we’re not filming, he’s trying to get in with the producers. It’s obvious he’s only here to further his career.”

Working for The Bachelor is hardly anyone’s life dream, and most people on this set are only here as
a stepping stone in their careers, but Louis can read a room and doesn’t feel the need to vocalize that.

Simon’s lips twitch. “I understand you may not like him, but you were hired on a television show, we require at least the bare minimum of acting ability.”

“This television show is supposed to be about me finding love. I know I’m not going to find it with him, but I could with someone that I’ll have to send home so that he can stay. That’s not fair to them or to me.”

James cuts in, trying to diffuse the tension. “Harry, why don’t you sit down? We’ll get you a glass of water, and we’ll all talk this over.”

“We can be adults about this,” Greg agrees.

Simon clears his throat. “Harry, I’m not sure if you understand this, but the network has invested a lot of money into making you look good. Sure, maybe you find love along the way. Wouldn’t that be great? But the primary purpose of this show is to attract loyal viewers. Sending home those primed to create drama hinders that goal and jeopardizes the future of this enterprise. Would you like to be responsible for that?”

Harry’s jaw clenches. “I’d like to be given the chance to find love on a show about me finding love.”

“That’s a nice idea. Very admirable. But if it’s okay with you, I’d like to ask that you please join us once again in reality. You don’t get to fall in love here. You’re an attractive man being paid to fill a role. Don’t pretend this is anything more than entertainment value.”

Louis coughs quietly from his seat at the corner of the table.

Simon’s eyes shift, a stern look on his face. “Do you have something to add?”

This could be his chance to impress Simon, to shoot Harry down and completely take control of his show. He should make the right career move here, instead of dwelling on his ex-boyfriend’s feelings. He should take his position seriously.

But instead... “I think we should take Harry’s perspective into account. He needs to at the very least be able to feign a connection with these people, and if all he feels is outright disgust, that’s bad for all of us.” Louis swallows, ignoring the fact that he just essentially defended his ex-boyfriend’s search for “The One”.

Simon looks incredulous. “Really. That’s interesting.”

“Is it?” Louis squeaks.

“Yes. The result of this season falls on your shoulders. If Xander is voted out tonight, and we lose viewers, I will be fine. You, however...”

Louis holds Simon’s gaze, daring him to continue.

“I think you should think long and hard about what you’re doing, Louis.”

Louis glances at Harry, who’s gnawing on the corner of his thumb nail with mopey eyes.

Motherfucker.

Louis closes the folder of contestant profiles and stands. No going back. He inhales stares directly at Simon.
“This show relies on the illusion of authenticity.” Then he turns to Harry. “You do whatever you need to fulfill that. If that means sending Xander home, we’ll work with it.”

Without another word, he turns and exits the room, effectively ending the meeting.

Louis rides an adrenaline high as he prepares for the ceremony. He might have ruined his entire career, but Simon doesn’t have all the power anymore.

Louis had taken it. He’d followed his conscience, trusted that Harry would be able to deliver a compelling performance, no matter who he keeps, and he’s enjoying the moment, damn it.

Louis lines himself up behind Cal like always and organizes the men and women for Harry’s entrance.

Harry glows as he approaches the podium, smirking and sending a wink towards the camera, towards Louis.

Before Louis can react, Simon leans close, his hulking build pressed behind him. Louis’ gut clenches when he thinks of what’s about to happen.

“Don’t think for a second that you’re off the hook,” Simon hisses. “I will not allow this groundbreaking, game-changing season to be ruined because you want to impress your crush with your prowess.”

Louis rolls his eyes. Simon is a power-hungry bully, and he’s not scared of him. “Would you just trust him? He’s been good these last few weeks. Probably the best Bachelor we’ve ever had.”

Harry clears his throat at the front of the room and calls for Caroline.

Louis raises his eyebrows and glances at Simon. Simon looks pleasantly surprised but is still tensed, ready to pounce and make Harry re-shoot until the last rose has been gifted.

Chris comes in, announces it’s the last rose of the night, and Louis holds his breath.

Xander, Jeff, and Michael are still empty-handed.

Harry takes a deep, contemplative breath, closes his eyes, then opens them. From the monitor of Cal’s camera, Louis can tell he’s tearing up. This is going to be ratings gold.

“Xander,” Harry calls.

Simon lays a hand on Louis shoulder and murmurs, “He knew what was good for himself tonight, but don’t put so much faith in him. He’s just the talent after all.”

Louis pushes Simon’s hand off and watches Harry hug Michael and Jeff goodbye. He knows Harry’s sorry to see Jeff go. They’d had a great time in all their talks, but there had been no opportunity to even attempt a romantic connection.

Harry stalks off set as soon as they leave, not even staying to toast with the remaining contestants.

Simon pushes Cal roughly. “Follow him. Get this, you nitwit!”

“Yes, sir,” Cal says and hurries after Harry. Simon storms after them, and Louis races behind, hoping Simon won’t be too extreme.
Harry has just exited the mansion when Simon grabs him by the back of his suit and drags him inside.

“Confessional. Now,” he says.

“But—” Harry looks around desperately, his eyes searching Louis’. Louis’ heart clenches, but he stays quiet. When Simon is on the warpath, nothing can stop him.

Simon practically shoves Harry into the confessional room, and sits him down.

“This is how you make a show, Louis. I didn’t think I was going to need to do your job for you,” he grumbles, standing beside Louis now that Cal has set up and is ready to film. Louis feels a weight sink in his stomach, everything he’d worked for crashing down around him as Simon takes away Louis’ carefully-crafted control of the show. He turns to Harry, gleam in his eye, “Okay, Harry,” Simon instructs, “Talk.”

Harry gulps, coughs, then looks up at the camera. His eyes are still shining, and a tear has begun to fall down his cheeks.

“This, uh. Tonight has shown me that this is going to be much harder than I expected. Everyone in the mansion, everyone you’re with, at all times, I didn’t expect it to be this...Of course, um, I knew coming into it that it would...this is hard.” He sighs, looking around the room. Louis is almost ready to say “Fuck it” and try to help him, for the good of the show, of course, but in the next moment he blinks and refocuses, “The emotional toll this journey takes, each rose ceremony, thinking about who I want to spend the rest of my life with, it’s all hard. It’s something that I have to put a lot of care into, and each week I have to think about my future. I’m making life-changing decisions every week, and it’s draining, and frustrating. What if I get it wrong? What if I sent home my soulmate? But, hopefully, in the end, the result will be worth all the pain. I believe it will be. I think my soulmate is here, in this house, and I just have to put in the work to make it all worth it.” He has a slight smile on his face as he finishes, and Simon claps, obviously satisfied. He nudges Louis in the side, and Louis, blown-away by Harry’s confessional, feels himself stumble slightly.

“I’m pleasantly surprised,” Simon says, “Good job boys,” he nods once, then walks purposefully out of the room, followed by Cal.

Louis is at the door, ready to leave Harry to himself, when he hears a him let out a desperate sob. He turns around to find Harry’s shoulders shaking, obviously trying to hold back tears.

Louis stills, his fingers twitching, wanting to reach out and comfort Harry. This is a bad idea. They’d made so much progress. This is a supremely bad idea. He should leave the room right now, he can’t get himself wrapped up in his ex-boyfriend yet again.

“Harry, are you okay?”

Harry looks up, wiping at his eyes and smiling weakly. “Of course I am. It’s just for the cameras, right? I’m fine.”

Louis comes over and hesitantly sits next to him on the bench, gently rubbing a hand across his shoulders.

“Harry.” Louis takes a deep breath because he doesn’t really know how to follow that up. “I know it’s a frustrating process, and the show itself is...terrible, but, it could work, you know?” He pauses, bracing himself. “Please don’t give up hope. You deserve to find love, and I think you could find it here. You’re doing so great. Just don’t give up.”
Harry looks up, his eyes wet, his cheeks flushed. “Louis, you don’t—”

“I promise it’s going to work out for you, Haz. You have such a big heart. Always have. You’ll find someone.”

Harry closes his eyes, nods, then gives Louis a weak smile. He looks so hopeful, and it breaks Louis’ heart. All he ever wanted was for this beautiful boy to be happy.

“Thank you, Louis. Really. I appreciate that.” He takes another shaky breath, his tears finally slowing. “I think, um. I’m going to go back to my hotel for the night, if that’s all you need of me.”

Louis lets out a soft laugh. “Of course. Go. Get some rest.”

Harry squeezes his shoulder as he stands up and looks down at Louis before he leaves. “Really, thank you.”

With that, he strolls back out of the room, and Louis lets out a deep sigh, sinking in on himself.

Harry is perfect. He’s sweet and lovely, and he made a conscious decision to keep someone he loathes, because—Because? It couldn’t be because he wanted Louis to do well, Louis can’t let himself think that. Harry just wanted the “First Ever Bi Bachelor” to be a success, and that’s all. It doesn’t have anything to do with Louis. That sort of thinking was not conducive to their situation.

Harry’s the Bachelor. He’s here to find a husband or wife. Louis needs to stop being so hung up on him.

As Louis sits though, enjoying the relative silence for just a few minutes, he realizes that he may not ever be able to find someone like Harry ever again. It’s draining, watching strangers make Harry smile, wondering which person he’ll smile at for the rest of his life, wishing it was him. He’s going to go through life, seeing Harry and his spouse smiling on the cover of gossip magazines. Maybe Louis will find someone who doesn’t measure up, maybe not. But.

Christ, he’s being bloody ridiculous. He needs to reign in his feelings and get with the direction of the show because in just a few short weeks, Harry will declare his love to someone, and it’s definitely not going to be him. He has to be okay with that.

Chapter End Notes

ok, so fun things!! this is getting posted, and the next one is almost ready! then there'll be about one or two more after that! which is awesome, im finally getting a hold of this!! my optimistic view is that i get this all posted within the next week, as rehearsals are finally lightening up and im getting a bit more free time. who knows if that actually works out, but wish me luck!!

as always, im on tumblr at coffeelouis
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

shouts out to my very lovely best friend **anna** for writing the july 2017 flashback in this chapter. she is amazing and gorgeous and lovely, thank you soo much.

also sorry @ the real bachelor fans that i butchered the timeline a bit and there's only 5 people the week before hometowns. i hope you can forgive me (especially when you read the next chapter)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the beginning of Week 4 there are eight contestants left, and while, yes, Harry does lack a connection with most of them, he’s trying to be optimistic. He loves spending time with Liam, Nick, and Kendall, and is looking forward to going further with them for the rest of the season.

The end of last week had been messy, but he’s determined not to let that bring him down. Besides, Ed is visiting this week. Harry’s lucky to have his friend coming to give him advice on who would be a great match for him, but even luckier that Ed’s tour had coincided with filming.

The producers were far too happy to hear Harry was close enough to world-famous singer Ed Sheeran that he’d be willing to come by for a celebrity guest appearance on the show. Harry’s not going to question how it happened, he’s just glad he gets to spend some time with his friend.

When Ed arrives, Harry is carefully positioned on the couch, chatting with the contestants. Harry can hear Eleanor welcoming him in the entryway, but Harry’s not allowed to see him until the dramatic entrance is filmed.

Harry waits patiently, feigning interest as Taylor tells him about how eager she is to meet his “mystery” friend, since friends are sometimes a better judge of who’s right for you. Harry nods along, giving her a polite smile. She and the other contestants have no idea it’s Ed, and in fact, Harry’s supposed to act like he’s surprised as well, like Ed has stopped by for a surprise visit.

Louis cuts Taylor off after another minute, clapping his hands together for everyone’s attention.

“Great, so we’re ready to start filming. Chris is going to introduce Harry’s friend. Remember, no one knows who it is, so I want surprised, happy faces. You’re going to like them, I promise. Cal, can I have you on a wide shot?” Louis turns to address Chris, waiting in the other room. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Louis backs out of the shot as Chris enters from the sitting room.

“Hi everyone,” he says. “How are you all doing today?”

There’s general positive chatter, and then everyone quiets down, watching Chris expectantly again.

Chris laughs. “We have a surprise for you all. One of Harry’s close friends from home has decided to stop by for a visit, and he wants to meet all of you.”

The contestants cheer and clap, playing up the excitement.
Chris flashes another dazzling smile. “During the afternoon, he’ll sit down with all of you and Harry and weigh in on how he thinks the relationships are progressing. At the end of the day, he’ll choose who Harry should take on a two-on-one date for tomorrow afternoon. Sound good?”

Everyone claps again, a note of tension in the air at the mention of the two-on-one.

Harry figures they’re all gunning for a date with him as usual, but are especially nervous, as one person will automatically be going home during the two-on-one date.

“You ready to meet him?” Chris steps aside to make room for Ed to enter and calls out, “Come on in here. Everyone, meet Harry’s good friend, Ed Sheeran.”

Everyone explodes into different levels of gasps and excitement.

Taylor calls out Ed’s name like he’s a long lost friend.

Ed smiles, waves, and shakes the hand of everyone who approaches him. Harry is last, hanging back while the contestants swarm, finally giving Ed a smile and a hug with a firm pat on the back once the activity has calmed down.

“It’s nice to see you, man,” Ed says, and Harry grins back.

“Been too long.”

Ed looks around in astonishment at the mansion. “I can’t believe this. The Bachelor Mansion. It’s going to be an interesting day.”

“That it is,” Harry agrees. He knows what Ed is implying, that he’s floored Harry is even doing this, that he doesn’t believe any of this bullshit and knows Harry doesn’t (or shouldn’t) either, but Ed’s famous. He can turn that into genuine excitement for the cameras, because he’s been trained to appear “on” when there’s one around.

Ed continues to mingle with everyone for another hour, until the crew has gathered enough footage, then Louis leads him and Harry out to one of the pool cabanas.

The two of them are incredibly stiff and awkward as they walk, Ed sneaking glances over at Louis, while Louis looks straight ahead, his back tense. Their behavior makes Harry wonder when was the last time they’d talked. He knows Ed had been sympathetic after the break-up, had sat with Harry and listened to him moan and complain, but he didn’t think he and Louis had broken off all contact entirely. In fact, he’d half-expected to feel like a divorced parent today, sharing Ed between the two of them.

“Ed, sit in the chair on the right, Harry, on the couch,” Louis barks once they reach the cabana. Ed rolls his eyes and sits down, “Each contestant will come chat with you for about fifteen minutes. Try to keep the conversation focused on how your relationship has progressed so far, where you see your future going, big picture, romantic stuff like that, yeah?”

Harry and Ed nod, then Louis checks his clipboard.

“Okay, Ben’s up first. He’ll be over in a few, and then we’ll get started.”

He retreats back to talk to some of the crew, while Eleanor comes over.

Ed gasps. “Can I drink?”

Harry chuckles. “You’re encouraged to, mate.”

“Hell yeah, I’ll take a beer, if it’s not trouble.”

Eleanor smiles and walks away without taking Harry’s order, since his is usually dictated by the show.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this, H.”

Harry laughs awkwardly, nodding in acknowledgement.

“And with Louis directing? That’s rough.”

Harry shrugs. What is he supposed to say? No, it's actually not too bad? It fucking is.

Before he can form a coherent answer, a PA brings them two Coronas, and Louis returns with Ben by his side.

Harry and Ed tip their beers together in toast, celebrating their reunion and enjoying the moment for the cameras. After a few shots of awkward chatting made to look like two lads catching up, Ed prompts the beginning of the entire sequence.

“So Harry, when are you going to let me meet one of these dazzling suitors I’ve been hearing so much about?”

Good move, writers. Make it seem like Harry hasn’t had his phone taken away, like he and Ed are so close they require constant connection, and like Harry is so enamored he can’t stop bragging about his boyfriends and girlfriends.

On cue, Ben enters and smiles. “Hi, Ed. It’s great to meet you.”

Ed holds out his hand for a shake. “Likewise, mate.”

“Hi, Harry,” Ben says, kissing him lightly on the cheek. Harry gives Ben a welcoming grin as he sits down next to him on the couch.

“I want to dive right in, if you don’t mind,” Ben says, sitting up straighter and folding his hands in his lap. “I felt an instant spark with Harry. We’ve been on a few dates now, and after each one, I’ve only felt that connection grow. I can see a future with him, and I hope he can see one with me.”

Ben is an expert at staying on-script, his speech sounds incredibly practiced and prepared. Harry feels bad, he’s probably anxious and looking to make a good impression. After a few more hurried, robotic answers, Ben stands, kissing Harry again on the cheek. With one last nervous grin, he leaves to wait in the mansion.

Ed’s eyes widen before glancing at Harry. “Is he always that rehearsed?”

Harry shrugs, acting confused about what Ed’s getting at. “He’s very eloquent?”

“No, Harry. He knows what he’s supposed to say,” Ed says. He frowns at Harry as if he’s being particularly stupid. “He’s not right for you, mate. I could tell from the moment he entered. The two of you barely looked at each other, and you barely touched. Those aren’t signs of a blossoming relationship.”
Harry hums. Ed’s completely right, he doesn’t know much about the guy, and all of their interactions have been on-camera. He tries to school his face into a look of concentration, like he’s taking the advice seriously and reconsidering their entire relationship. He knows they’ll probably cut the first bit, but hopefully they’ll be able to just use Ed’s warning without having to re-shoot. After a few moments, he looks off-camera.

Louis sends him a thumbs up. “Great guys, I think that’s all we need. We’ll bring Paige in next.”

Paige is the completely opposite of Ben. She’s all over Harry throughout the entire interview, holding his hand, running her fingers through his hair, wrapping her arm around his shoulders and pulling him into her side. She goes on and on about how they’re “destined to be together,” and have “undeniable physical chemistry.”

Ed isn’t particularly impressed by Paige either, sharing that she seems like a shallow party girl, here to make a name for herself and have a good time, rather than to find a real romantic connection.

“I’ll be honest mate, I just don’t trust her,” he admits, giving Harry a sad, serious look. Harry nods, trying to school is face into concerned when all he feels is tired.

Ed isn’t particularly impressed by Paige either, sharing that she seems like a shallow party girl, here to make a name for herself and have a good time, rather than to find a real romantic connection.

Paige is followed by Xander, who’s much and the same, smirking at every question Ed asks, making sexual innuendos, and not taking anything seriously. More than that, he has a righteous bravado about how Harry’s going to choose him, saying he “knows in his heart what Harry wants, and that he’s not going to find it amongst the ones doused in flowery perfume all day long.” He’s objectifies and patronizes everyone and it’s all together gross and demeaning.

Harry tries not to retch as Xander saunters away, and Ed looks like he isn’t far off. Lined up in a row like this, Harry is starting to notice how wrong each of them is for him.

Caroline isn’t much better. She’s loud and boisterous, and although she seems to think she’s charming, Ed just seems alarmed. She flirts like mad, joking about being the “cougar” of the season, and how she’s got tough skin, willing to endure all the ridicule to be with Harry.

Ed sighs as she walks out when they’re done, then looks over at Harry with a defeated grimace. “What are you going to do, H?”

Harry sighs. “What are you talking about?”

“To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Harry knows Ed doesn’t hold back. He has no shame in his beliefs, and he’ll say what he means with no regard for subtlety. But right now, Harry has no fucking clue what he’s on about.

“These contestants, Harry. None of them are right for you. I haven’t been able to sense even one genuine connection.” He must have been studying some phrases to say on the drive in, because those are dead-on.

Harry sits back, widening his eyes. He looks over to Louis behind the camera, smiling excitedly at Ed’s criticism. He waves his arms wildly, indicating that Harry should play it up.

He catches on quickly. “What should I do, Ed? What if I can’t ever find someone to love me? What if I’m unlovable?” He’s unsure about how that will go over, but when he checks back, Louis is frantically whispering with the cameraman, and Eleanor is trying to direct his gaze back at Ed.

“Harry,” Ed starts, in a tone more serious than before. “You know that’s not true. There’s someone
out there who’s perfect for you.”

With that, Nick ducks his head into the cabana.

Harry glances over at Louis, worried he’d taken that seriously, especially since Ed had told Harry “Louis is perfect for you” so many times, especially after the break-up. He seems distracted though, reading through pages of his clipboard.

“Sorry lads, is this a bad time?” Nick interrupts.

Harry sits back, welcoming him into the space. Nick immediately presses his side against him. Harry beams as Nick takes his hand, keeping their interactions modest for the camera.

“So, Nick,” Ed says, “When did you know you and Harry had something worth exploring?”

“Well, uh, Harry quite literally fell for me,” Nick explains “It was so cute. He led me out back on the first night to finally get the chance to talk, and he just wiped out.” Nick laughs loudly at the memory and mimics Harry’s fall, flapping his arms and miming a distressed face. “Woulda been toast had I not been there to catch him and help the bugger up. Almost like he right swooned into my arms, wasn’t it, Hazza?”

Harry blushes and stares at his hands, then directs his red face towards Ed.

“It wasn’t exactly like that. Not quite as embarrassing.”

“Oh it was too, love. Didn’t even trip over anythin’, just the air. Clumsy lil’ thing. But it’s cute, I promise.” Nick ducks his head to focus on Harry’s eyes.

Harry blushes again, nuzzling Nick’s neck, and Nick reaches around, pulling him closer and kissing his temple.

Ed looks torn when Nick leaves.

“I liked him,” he blurts. “I did.”

Harry frowns. He can already hear the “but” waiting at the tip of his tongue.

Ed sighs. “But...I don’t know. There was something off about him.”

“Do you know what it was?” Harry asks.

“It’s just he doesn’t seem very serious about any of it, does he?”

Ed knows him too well. It figures he’d pick up on Harry’s hesitations about Nick.

“He’s silly, yes, but I think that’s good. My last relationship was filled with mischief.”

“I just want you to be careful. Your last relationship was fun and carefree, and you were heartbroken afterwards, I don’t want to see that happen to you again.”

Harry closes up a bit. He chances a quick glance over at Louis, but he’s not even looking; turned away, writing furiously on his clipboard and pressing a finger into his headset.

“I’m sorry. But you know it’s true,” Ed murmurs.

Harry keeps his eyes turned down. He knows Ed is looking out for his best interest, but he’s here to
play a part on the show today, not pass judgements about Harry’s relationship with Louis.

“I’m really sorry, Harry. I just think you need someone serious who’s going to be there for you through anything. Nick might be a bit of fun, but he doesn’t seem like the type to stay and fight for you.”

Harry winces. That’s exactly what had happened with Louis. Big, blowup arguments that fizzled into passive aggression and working late to avoid the dealing with it. He can’t handle another heartbreak like that.

His pensive thoughts are disrupted when Liam stumbles in like he’s being pushed by a member of the crew. He seems wary, but he smiles and greets Ed anyway.

Their conversation goes well. Liam is kind, respectful, and interested, both in everything Ed is saying and in Harry. He’s so genuine, and Harry is grateful he’s gotten to know him throughout the process.

Liam shakes Ed’s hand before leaving, the first contestant to do so.

“Now him, I really liked,” Ed says.

Harry sighs fondly. “Yeah, he’s sweet, isn’t he?”

Ed grins at him. “See? I was right, Harry. There is someone here who’s perfect for you, and I think you know who that is.”

He wiggles his brows at Harry, a meaningful gleam in his eye. He’s trying to make it seem like it’s Liam, trying to play it up for the cameras, but Harry knows he means Louis. Shit. And Louis is watching intensely from behind the cameras, once again holding his clipboard in an icon-clad grip. Harry fights to stay focused on Ed and the contestants. He’s here for the them, not for Louis. He’ll continue to tell himself that until he believes it, though he’s not sure if he ever will.

Nevertheless, he knows how to act the part, so he smiles for the cameras and hugs Ed at the end of the segment, confident they’ve just created a great episode.

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Louis is trying to find Paige for a confessional before everyone is brought back together, when someone reaches out and very aggressively pulls him by the arm into a storage closet. He’s about to start yelling, sure that it’s Harry looking for a word, when he looks up and finds Ed’s earnest but angry face.

“Just what exactly do you think you’re doing here, hm?” He barks.

Louis recoils. He’d known they weren’t on the best of terms, especially since he’d moved to LA and hadn’t looked Ed up, but he didn’t realize Ed was this angry with him.

“What exactly are you on about, then?”

“You know perfectly well what I’m talking about,” Ed growls.

“I honestly don’t, please elaborate.”

Ed studies him, narrowed eyes and pursed lips, but after a moment, he finds what he’s looking for, and pushes Louis away.

“You’re even dumber than I thought,” he mumbles, and pushes his way out of the room.
Louis looks after him, confused, then slumps down against the wall, and takes a moment to himself. He’s been running around all afternoon, and now that he finally has a moment to breathe, he feels lost.

That confrontation had been weird. He can’t even begin to gauge Ed’s behavior and why he’d been so rude. He thinks it might be because of Harry, the two of them had always been closer, but that can’t be it. He can’t be looking out for Harry, because Harry’s been over Louis for ages. Enough so that he had a whole other relationship.

And Ed had met that boyfriend, for Christ’s sake. Or at least, was familiar enough that he could refer to him when meeting Harry’s new suitors. Louis had been so shaken hearing that, had felt his heart constricting in his chest, knowing they’d been that serious.

But then again, of course they had, if he was the whole reason Harry was here. The whole reason Harry was brokenhearted.

Louis stood, took a deep breath, and tried to pull himself together. This was one of the biggest days of the season, he didn’t have time for this. He had to be a fucking professional. He had to get the fuck over Harry Styles.

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Once Ed has met each contestant, he and Harry film another hour of “chatting” about the contestants, for which Eleanor heavily preps Ed. Harry stands by, drinking a new Corona as he hears the specific descriptors meant to shape each contestant’s “character.”

They’re dehumanizing and make Harry slightly sick. Of course he had his suspicions about how the show is absolute shit, but the actual process was so much worse.

After Ed rips into Xander and Caroline and questions Harry’s connection with Paige and Ben, they’re led to the rose ceremony room.

There are no roses on the table, but it’s just as dramatic when Ed announces Nick and Xander as the two who will meet Harry for the two-on-one the next day. And with that, the day is over.

Harry had been looking forward to catching up with an old friend, but when the cameras finally shut off, and the day is officially over, he’s relieved. He hadn’t expected it to be the scripted, completely fabricated presentation that it was, or for Ed to so willingly play his part.

The crew packs up around them, gathering light equipment and ushering the contestants to their rooms. Ed has to leave for the next stop on his tour early in the morning, so he’s on a tight schedule back to his hotel room, but Harry still offers to walk him out to his car.

“So, this is a pretty different situation than when I last saw the two of you together,” Ed says.

Harry snorts, thinking back to him and Louis squashed in one side of a booth, Ed across from them, laughing together over a round of Guinness. Harry and Louis would sneak kisses whenever they thought Ed wasn’t watching. He was, and Harry received a lot of teasing smirks across the table. That was almost a year and a half ago, back when things were still good. Mostly good. But now they were here.

“I hate how far this has gone, Harry. I know I’ve told you I’m here for you and I’ll support you no matter what, and I will, Harry, but this show...I don’t know if it was the right choice for you. You’re hurting inside, especially with him here. It’s not good for you.”
Harry takes a deep breath. He was hoping he wouldn’t have to delve into this.

“There’s nothing I can do, it’s too late now,” he mumbles.

“Don’t give me that, Styles.”

“It’s.” Harry clears his throat uncomfortably. “It’s uh, James, around here. For the show. Just, privacy, you know? For my mum and my sister.”

Ed smirks. “And here I’d been wondering why Caroline’s walking around declaring herself the future Mrs. James,” he jokes. Harry shrugs.

“So Louis didn’t know, did he?” Ed says, completely shifting the conversation in a direction Harry isn’t sure he’s ready for.

“I thought he did. I thought he chose me in a sick way, but.”

Harry thinks back to how aggressive Louis had been in the beginning, how it seemed like he was floundering under pressure, but now that he’s seen Louis work more, he realizes he might be wrong. “I don’t think that’s the case though,” he continues. “I think he was just as surprised as I was.”

“It’s a bit messed up, innit? Your ex-boyfriend orchestrating your new love story?”

Harry snorts. Yeah, quite fucked.

Ed purses his lips. “Or really, ex-love of your life. That’s what you called him, yeah?”

Harry scowls, surprised Ed went there. “Not anymore,” he mumbles.

“Come off it, H.”

“I’m serious.”

“No you aren’t,” Ed says sternly. “The two of you were head over heels for each other, and now, you’re—what? You’re aggressive and rude with one another.”

“It’s how I’m coping. And it’s been better lately.” Ed rolls his eyes. “It has,” Harry insists, aware he wounds a bit petulant. “And anyway, we weren’t,” he says, sighing.

Ed glares, obviously fed up with his deflecting.

Harry’s eyes drop, and he wrings his hands. He hasn’t exactly been an easy friend to talk to throughout this conversation, but he’s already talked about his issues with Niall. He’s aware he’s making a mistake. He doesn’t need to hear it again now that he’s finally taken steps towards progress.

“You weren’t what?” Ed prompts. “Harry, I’m just trying to understand why I was called to help you find your spouse on a goddamn television program when the one you’re really supposed to be with is telling you how to position your goddamn head.”

“We weren’t in love with each other,” Harry snaps, kicking a stone in the drive.

“You weren’t? What—Harry, that’s absurd. I saw the way you looked at him. Hell, I see the way you still—”

“Fine, I misspoke.” Harry mutters, “I was, but he didn’t feel the same.”
It’s hard saying it aloud. He hasn’t in over a year. Try as he might, he can’t forget the past. He’s been under the illusion that he’s working towards alleviating the tension loving Louis caused, trying to come to terms with Louis not loving him back. But it’s not true. He’s just as broken as ever.

“I don’t believe you, Harry. That kind of love doesn’t come around every day. It was real.”

Harry sighs, tired of hearing that.

“He wasn’t fully there, Ed. It wasn’t a real relationship. I told him to call when he was ready to commit, and he never did. It was just over.”


Harry doesn’t respond. He presses his lips together, his mind racing.

“Ed,” Eleanor calls from the drive. A black car waits beside her. Ed waves to her and turns back to Harry.

“Look,” he says, “Don’t settle. I meant what I said. At the end of this process, you should be with the person you’re meant to be with, despite any hesitations, any contracts, and obligations. You come first, yeah? You’ll figure it out one way or another.”

And with that, he offers a quick salute, then ducks inside the car and disappears.

Harry, however, feels completely lost. Up until now, he’s thought settling was inevitable. He’d never, not on the show or outside in the real world, find someone who fits him as well as Louis. He starts to think back on their relationship, on the good times, the parts that worked—laughing together in bed, supporting Louis in following his dreams, even if directing low-budget independent films meant shit hours and even worse pay.

However, under the surface, is that doubt, the knowledge that it didn’t work before, Louis had left. So it wouldn’t work again, it couldn’t work again.

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July 2017

Harry knocks at exactly seven, and Louis forces down the nerves threatening to bubble over. It’s stupid, really. They’ve been on so many dates. It should be comfortable by now, but this feels different. Louis fusses with his quiff once more before answering the hotel room door.

Harry’s eyes rake over Louis’ dark jeans and light blue button up. He smirks when Louis lingers on the flat planes of his chest and abdomen. He picked sheer fabric just for this moment. It’s like they’re noticing each other for the first time all over again.

Louis’ fingers twitch. Christ, what he would give to push aside that fabric and smooth a hand down Harry’s ribcage, feel the muscles tense under his palm. Harry looks more handsome than he can remember. It’s been almost a month since they’ve seen each other, what with Harry stuck at the bakery in London and Louis filming a documentary in Liverpool, but god. He’s breathtaking.

“You look as good as the day we met. It’s insane,” Harry rasps.

Louis gives him a strained smile. It’s a simple compliment, but it doesn’t feel like it used to. Normally his cheeks flush, especially with Harry staring so fiercely.
“Shall we go?” Louis asks.

Harry swallows, eyes dropping. “Of course,” he says. He turns and walks down the hall. Louis trails behind, watching the flash of his gold boots.

It’s subtle enough, but Harry notes how Louis touches the car more than him, and that’s not how it used to be. He leaves his hand on the gear shift, hoping Louis will close the distance, but he never does. Harry’s fingers itch to reach for him, but he doesn’t know the rules now. Everything feels unfamiliar.

Harry holds the door at Il Forno, hesitating before laying a hand on the small of Louis’ back. Louis stiffens slightly beneath his palm, just enough for him to notice.

Harry sighs, dropping his hand as they’re led to a secluded corner booth. The waitress smiles politely and gives them menus.

Louis eyes his intently like he’s never seen one before, ignoring Harry’s burning gaze. He hasn’t even opened his.

Harry clears his throat. “Lou,” he says.

Louis’ grip tightens on the menu.

Harry bites his lip, heart twisting painfully at Louis’ obvious tension. He isn’t sure how to continue. Maybe he shouldn’t have come here. Louis told him to stay in London, but lately he’s been saying one thing and meaning something else entirely. So when Harry heard the strain in his voice over the phone, he figured Louis did need him. Or at least that’s what he thought. Now he’s not so sure.

Once their food arrives, they dine in silence. Harry doesn’t steal from Louis’ plate like he normally does, and Louis keeps his eyes on the steak.

Louis doesn’t eat much, and when it’s clear he won’t take another bite, Harry gives his credit card to the waitress. Then, they wait.

Louis watches as Harry toys with his rings, visibly more upset than when they arrived.

Fuck, it’s his fault. He knows it is. Harry traveled three fucking hours just for tonight. Louis should be enjoying the company of his gorgeous boyfriend. It’s not like they have nothing to talk about. Harry doesn’t know about the film he’s directing or what extended hotel living is like or how much he hates that demanding American fucker Chandler, who’s always late to set. He hasn’t heard much about London either, and he’s sure Harry has a couple tales to tell him about Niall’s pub adventures or Ed’s new record deal.

Louis huffs. The skin under his eyes feels heavy and tender, and he stares at the ceiling to keep the water in. It would be bloody foolish to cry here.

“Ready, love?” Harry asks, tentatively. He goes for Louis’ hand, hesitates, then pulls back, clenching his fingers. And that’s what does it.

A low sob escapes from Louis’ lips.

Harry’s eyes widen. “Lou? What is it?”

His voice is soft, and his eyes hold such concern, and Louis can’t take it. His shoulders begin to tremble as tears roll down his face.
“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he gasps.

“Oh, darling.” Harry reaches for him again, and Louis tightly threads their fingers.

Harry doesn’t let go of his hand until they’ve returned to the hotel.

Louis’ face is dry when he leads Harry to the bed and crawls into his lap, straddling his legs. He reaches for his shirt, but Harry grabs his wrist.

“Why?” Louis asks.

Harry winces. Of course he’s desperate to cradle Louis’ cheek and kiss away his frown lines, but it hasn’t helped them in the past, and while they haven’t explicitly said something’s wrong, he can feel it.

“Tell me why you were crying at the restaurant,” he says.

“After,” Louis whispers because this the only way he knows how to show Harry he’s still in this. He screws up with words, but fuck, if Harry won’t give him this, he’s not sure how he’ll be able to fix anything.

Harry picks at a loose thread on his shirt hem. He knows how this will end. Touching will lead to kissing, and kissing would will lead to fucking, and then he’ll take a train back to London, and Louis will pretend everything is fine until he comes home.

“Haz, please.” Louis tilts his chin until he can see Harry’s full-blown pupils and obscenely pink lips.

Harry studies Louis’ face too—his long eyelashes, full mouth begging to be kissed. He hesitates, taking a shaky breath. Maybe they both need this. Then he nods.

Louis wastes no time. He surges forward, capturing Harry’s lips. His mouth is soft and firm, and Louis tightens his hold on Harry’s neck, fingers sliding through his hair. He pulls softly, making Harry gasp with parted lips. Louis flicks his tongue across Harry’s, deepening the kiss.

“Fuck,” Harry murmurs as Louis presses him into the mattress. He sucks a dark bruise into his neck as Louis’ fingers work through the buttons on Harry’s shirt.

Harry follows, stripping Louis of his and kissing his exposed skin. Louis pushes him back down and licks along his collarbones before working on his belt buckle.

Harry moans when Louis’ fingers wrap around him, and then he’s gone, lost in the wet heat of Louis’ mouth, unable to focus on anything else.

It hurts how slow Louis opens him up, like he’ll break if he goes too fast. He massages Harry’s spot, drawing him torturously close to the edge over and over. When his legs are trembling, Louis kisses his swollen lips once more and slicks up his cock, groaning as he thrusts deep inside him, hitting his spot repeatedly.

“Lou,” Harry breathes, white light swirling behind his eyelids.

Louis comes first. “God, I love you,” he gasps.

Harry follows immediately, his heart ripping viciously at Louis’ words, and he hides his face in Louis’ neck, hoping Louis won’t be able to feel the hot tears running down his cheeks.

After they’re finished, Harry waits for Louis to talk. He strokes Louis’ chest, sleek with sweat.
Minutes pass, and still no words.

Louis remains silent because he doesn’t want to ruin the safety of the afterglow. He wants to cling to this moment—one where they fit together perfectly.

Harry sighs. It’s clear they aren’t talking tonight, and pushing it will just end with Louis closing up. He carefully extracts himself from Louis’ embrace and heads to the bathroom. Louis watches him retreat, his back red from Louis’ fingers.

Harry doesn’t invite him into the shower so Louis ignores the instinct to follow him. Instead, he lights a cigarette on the balcony overlooking the river, unaware of Harry, sitting under the shower head with his head in his hands, wondering how much longer they can endure this exchange, whatever it has become.

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October 2018

The day after Ed visits, Harry picks Nick and Xander up in a helicopter so they can hike to the Hollywood sign. Xander complains the entire walk, but Harry and Nick are surprisingly into it, chasing each other and laughing. Xander seems even more annoyed at that though, constantly making quips at Nick and trying to tear him down.

Harry tries to ignore him, and is grateful when they reach the top, since he’s only obligated to lay out the picnic table and pour three glasses of wine before he can pull Nick aside for a private conversation.

Of course, after only twenty minutes of joking and feeding each other cheese and crackers, Louis hurries them along, pushing Harry back towards Xander. To no one’s surprise, he spends most of his alone time complaining about the process and how he’s barely had any time alone with Harry. He then goes on to badmouth the other contestants still in the house, instead of opening up and trying to establish a connection. When the episode airs, Harry knows it will be perfectly clear who the right option is, and he’s so very glad the producers finally agreed to allowing Harry to say goodbye to Xander forever.

There’s a rush for him to give out the rose before the sun sets. They’d spent most of the day filming, and are losing good lighting. Louis also seems determined to take advantage of the golden light of the sunset casting a soft, calming effect over the valley.

Harry spends a good amount of time building up the tension, bullshitting about how wonderful each man has been, and trying to make it sound genuine, before finally presenting Nick with the date’s rose. Xander looks murderous, but thankfully doesn’t say anything on camera. He does, however, stomp off through some of the bushes, the camera crew trailing closely behind. They’ll obviously need their pitiful overhead shot of him standing angry and alone on top of a barren mountain. It’ll probably be absolutely hilarious, Harry thinks, watching as Xander kicking up dirt behind him as he paces in circles, stewing. His fit is going to be ratings gold.

The next evening, he holds another rose ceremony, and sends Caroline home. After everything Ed had said, he can’t exactly justify keeping her on. She does, however, act like a diva trying to monopolize Harry’s time at the cocktail party, so at least she goes out with a bang.

The remaining contestants look relieved afterwards, toasting over a glass of champagne that they’re about to begin travelling. Harry’s also celebrating those who’ve remained, as he genuinely enjoys spending time with most of them.
Before the episode ends, Harry announces their first destination of the season: a Dallas dude ranch. Everyone cheers, and Harry finds himself genuinely excited for their departure. He’s ready to leave this mansion, and all the drama it’s brought, behind.

Harry brings Taylor on the first one-on-one date in Dallas. They go to a bona fide, authentic hoedown, where she takes the stage and belts on a country anthem with an unknown, struggling Texas country singer who’s extremely keen to be featured on *The Bachelor*.

The next day, Harry rides horses with Liam, Paige, Kendall, and Ben. Paige is a bit shit, Ben ends up stuck with a tired, old horse who won’t go faster than two miles an hour, and Kendall is incredibly impressive, trotting along in front of the group.

Harry lags behind, wondering who signed off on this date. His clumsy limbs shouldn’t be controlling a horse. He realizes it must have been Louis when he sees him smirking off-screen.

Paige throws a fit when Nick is awarded the week’s last one-on-one since he had private time with Harry on a two-on-one the week before, but Harry couldn’t care less. That date had been soured by Xander’s bad attitude, and he wants some private time with Nick, who’s actually an entertaining person to be around.

He laughs when they meet at the hotel entrance, and scans Nick’s clothes—a plaid button-down, jeans, and cheesy cowboy boots.

“Nice boots,” he says as they climb into the back of an Escalade.

Nick chuckles. “I bought them from the gift shop yesterday. I regret it though. They’re fucking uncomfortable.”

Harry giggles. “But then I wouldn’t have a date with a big, strong cowboy, would I?” he teases.

Nick puffs out his chest. “Damn right, partner,” he jokes, in a terrible American Southern accent. “These here parts need a wrangler, and I’m spittin’ I’m fit ‘ter be that wrangler.”

Harry barks out an obnoxious laugh, one that was formerly reserved for Louis’ antics in Uni, and pushes Nick’s shoulder. “You’re fucking kidding me. What does that even mean?”

Louis groans from the front seat. “Harry, seriously?”

“Sorry, Louis,” Harry calls. He glances at his hands then back up again. “I’m ready now.”

“Good,” Louis grumbles as Harry murmurs, “I’ll be a good boy,” under his breath.

That sets Nick off again, cackling and flailing his arms. Harry smirks and squeezes Nick’s thigh.

“It’s good you’re a cowboy today, Nick,” he says, “I’m going to need one.”

“Oh, yeah,” Nick flirts back, “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise,” he croons, holding out the end of the word in a sing-song. “But you’re gonna love it, I promise.”

“How do you know that?”

Harry flushes. “Because you’ll be with me, of course.”
“Okay, I think we’ve got enough,” Louis cuts in. He turns to them, rolling his eyes. “Cal, you can stop filming. Harry, can you shift up here? I want to go over some of the logistics for today’s date.”

Nick frowns, questioning Louis’ rude behavior, but Harry just shrugs and complies.

It’s obvious Louis doesn’t like Nick. He’d fought for Ben to be on this date instead, but James and Greg agreed that they didn’t have enough chemistry to pull off the “fun couple” vibe.

Louis mood is fluctuating, making him impossible to read. He’s lighthearted and happy when directing Harry, then sharp and biting when Nick makes a joke. It drives Harry crazy that he never knows what he’s going to get when Louis opens his mouth.

Harry and Nick are instructed to stay behind in the car when they arrive while Louis double-checks the set so they can shoot a perfect entrance.

When they’re finally allowed to emerge though, Nick looks about ready to shit his pants. They’re at Reindeer Manor, a haunted house in downtown Dallas.

“You’re joking, right Harry? I thought we were pumpkin picking.”

“Of course not,” Harry exclaims as if Nick has just insulted his date-planning abilities, even though this one was entirely Greg’s doing. “This the main event.”

Nick clutches harder at Harry’s hand, hand shaking as a hayride comes to a stop for them to board. Of course, it takes five minutes for a cameraman to set up in the hayride before they can climb on, and then another twenty of organizing the perfect shot of their ride before they can leave, but finally, they’re settled on a blanket across a hay bale, glasses of champagne between them to epitomize the perfect fall afternoon.

“You’re really giving me a scare on this date, here, James,” Nick says, lips around his champagne flute. “I’m supposed to be the fun one, and now you’re making me out to be a scared, whiny baby.”

“How was I supposed to know you’d freak out?” Harry argues, pushing Nick’s shoulder back.

“Good,” Louis calls. “Nick, tell him about how he’s lucky he’s cute, then go in for a kiss.”

Nick rolls his eyes. “You’re lucky you’re such a hot date, James. Otherwise I’d be on the first limo out of here.”

Harry snorts and pulls Nick by the neck into a warm kiss.

“Good. A little more, Nick,” Louis mutters, sounding distracted.

Nick surges forward, prying his lips apart. Harry gasps and presses closer, deepening their kiss.

“Fuck, Harry, less tongue,” Louis instructs.

Harry smirks into Nick’s mouth, refusing to let up.

“Less fucking tongue, Jesus Christ. You’re not trying to suffocate him,” Louis scoffs.

Harry chuckles and pulls back a little before leaning his head against Nick’s.

“Are you at least glad you’re on the date with me today? Haunted house or no?”

“Jerk,” he mutters, shoving him again before sitting back and pretending to pout.

Nick just grins and reaches for his hand.

Nick wasn’t kidding though. He’s fucking shaking by the time they’re ready to enter the haunted house.

“You know you don’t have to do this, yeah? We can call it a day, get some ice cream or something,” Harry whispers.

Nick shakes his head firmly. “No, fuck that, Louis’d kill me. Just hold my hand, yeah?”

Harry threads their fingers. “Yeah, I got you.” He takes a deep breath, eyeing the entrance to the house. “I have to admit, though. I’m not going to be the bravest soul in there. I was hoping you’d be the one protecting me.”

Nick sighs. “Great, so we’re about to look like a couple of losers on national TV.”

“I think you’re letting this TV thing mess with your head, Nick. Just relax.”

Nick nods and squeezes his hand.

“Okay. You ready, babe?” Harry grins at him, and on Louis’ cue, they head inside.

Harry thought he’d be able to handle scares designed with 12-year-old guests in mind, but it’s fucking terrifying. Fake zombies jump out and grab at their clothes. Weird, hairy animals crawl around by their feet. Harry clutches Nick’s hand so hard he’s worried he’ll have to amputate it by the end of the night, but Nick doesn’t seem much better, judging by his tight grip around Harry’s bicep.

Louis seems to find it hilarious, giggling to himself as he follows them through.

Twat. Harry’s tempted to flip him the bird but refuses to let go of Nick.

He remembers when Louis dragged him through one of these their second year of uni, and Harry didn’t speak to him for a week. He suspects Louis may have had a hand in helping Greg with date ideas, especially when he reaches out and grasps Harry’s shoulder in the last room, eliciting a very manly scream.

He’s such a dick. Harry’s happy to be on this date with Nick instead of Louis.

Or at least, that’s what he tells himself.

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**February 2015**

*Bodies and sweat fill the floor. Harry barely has room to hold his beer above his head, and Louis has already spilled half of his, weaving expertly through the crowd towards the front.*

“Lou, hold up,” Harry yells, trying to reach out and grab a hold of him.

“What?” Louis answers, unaware that Harry’s gotten caught behind a giggling group of girls, his
body pulled forward by the music drifting from the stage.

“Wait,” Harry whines.

“Keep up, Hazza,” he sings, ducking past a two meter man, who stops and glares at Harry when he tries to follow.

“Sorry, uh, sorry,” Harry mumbles, trying to move past politely. Once he does, he’s lost Louis again. He rolls his eyes and keeps pushing through.

When he does find Louis, he’s right in front of the stage, grinding furiously with a tall, bulky man in a striped tank top. His eyes are closed, and he’s got a big grin on his face, like he’s completely gone but enjoying every moment of it.

“Louis?”

“Oh.” Louis looks up, his eyes glassy. “Hey Hazza.” His smile turns unabashed as his eyes drift, attempting to focus in on Harry’s face. “This is — ” He turns around, face scrunched in a confused expression, “What’s your name?”

“Ken,” the guy whispers, sensually, practically licking Louis’ ear.

“Ah Ken, that’s right,” he says, eyes drifting shut.

Harry’s jaw clenches as the stranger ruts against Louis’ arse.

“Louis,” he whispers, anger bubbling in his chest, “What are you doing?”

“Dancing. What’s it look like?” Louis replies, bright grin plastered across his face. “Come on, Haz.”

Louis pulls him in, tucking Harry against his chest. Then he leans his head back against Ken’s neck and continues to grind. It’s like he’s floating, swaying between two fit men.

Harry would be completely content if not for the rugged man’s hands clutching at Louis’ hips, digging into the bones. He can feel his anger brewing, and he’s not exactly sure why. He just knows he hates this, and that he’s ready to punch something. Or, more likely, someone. This is not what he’d planned on getting himself into when he’d agreed to come out tonight.

He thought it’d be him and Louis, like it always is, out on a Saturday night having a good time, just the two of them. He didn’t realize Louis was looking to pull.

It makes him feel uncomfortable, like he wants to crawl out of his skin, and he’s not exactly sure why. But he hates it. He knows he hates it.

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October 2018

The morning of rose ceremonies are generally quiet amongst the contestants. Louis usually grabs a couple people for confessionals and takes some nice filler shots of people cooking breakfast, lounging on the couches, or gossiping while they get ready.

This week is different as it’s their first rose ceremony while travelling, so he suspects he’ll record the same boring footage of them lying around their hotel rooms, like they’ve been doing for the past few days.
This morning, however, there’s a loud commotion from the girls’ suite.

Louis follows the rush of cameramen into the room occupied by Kendall, Taylor, and Paige. What looks like a lamp has been smashed on the ground between the beds, and Taylor and Paige both stand on either side of it, midway through a vicious fight.

Cal, who’d been stationed to follow them that morning, is crouched on the ground likely having scouted the best angle.

“You really think he’s going to choose you?” Taylor taunts. “He’s going to pick someone he can show off. Someone with class and sophistication.”

“What, and I’m trashy? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I never said that,” Taylor denies, but her knowing smirk says it all.

“Well, I’m glad you have those comforting thoughts to carry you through to tonight. It must be hard not knowing where you stand with him.”

“I know exactly where I stand with Harry,” Taylor shouts. “Harry loves me. He already told me,” she sputters.

Louis gulps, watching her lip tremble. If the manic edge of her voice is anything to go by, he’s almost certain she’s lying. He would have known if Harry had told her he loves her. He would’ve seen the footage.

Besides, Harry can barely stand her, and he’s not that good of an actor. If he’s going to pick a woman, it would be Kendall, not Taylor. Louis’ being irrational. And jealous. He’s been acting like that much too often lately.

Louis inhales deeply. He won’t think about any of it until he knows for sure what Harry’s thinking. Despite Taylor’s curveball, Paige recovers, maintaining her confidence.

“That’s cute, darling,” she sneers, picking at her fingernails like Taylor isn’t even worth sparing a glance. “It’s too bad he already told me I was the one.”

Taylor gapes but composes herself quickly. She shakes her head.

“He did not,” she says, but her voice wavers, and there’s a hint of fear behind her eyes. “He wouldn’t. Not with someone so trashy.”

Paige scoffs. “He did,” She promises. “In his hotel room after our date this week. Everyone saw him invite me up. He said he loved me and that it would be the two of us at the end.” She pauses, heaving a dramatic sigh. “But you know, I could be remembering wrong. I was feeling pretty fuzzy after the four consecutive orgasms he gave me.”

Now that’s an outright lie. Louis is positive. Or, 99 percent positive.

Paige shrugs. “I guess we’ll find out tonight.”

She smiles sweetly when Taylor opens her mouth to speak again, but doesn’t give her the opportunity to retort. Instead she pushes past the crew and out of the room.

Louis makes a note on his clipboard for the editors. This will be great for the episode promos, absolutely incredible, and he knows James and Greg are going to be happy to see that they’ve gotten
a genuine catfight.

If only it hadn’t made his stomach twist and turn, feeling guilty for being so jealous and concerned for Harry. These girls are bitches.

When Harry meets them in the lobby for the cocktail party later that evening, Louis isn’t surprised that Paige pulls him aside immediately. She leads him to one of the private couches.

“Harry, I swear, Taylor just attacked me. She came in going on and on about how I shouldn’t even try anymore, that our connection couldn’t even compare to hers, and that I wasn’t good enough to be your wife—because. Well, she called me a slut.” Paige sniffles, her wide eyes rimmed red. “I wasn’t even saying anything, I swear. She just—went off! It was so scary.” She breathes deeply like the next thing is going to be incredibly hard to say. “I just thought you should know. It’s important that you’re completely aware of who these people are.”

Harry nods. “Thank you for telling me, Paige.”

She sniffles again and buries her face in his neck. Harry strokes her hair before glancing at Louis. Fuck. Louis rolls his eyes. He’s been doing well these past couple weeks, but he needs to stop looking to him for reassurance about every tiny thing he does. Honestly, he has great on-screen chemistry with these people. He needs to trust it.

Harry clears his throat. “That was very brave of you. I’m glad you felt comfortable enough to talk to me.”

“Of course, Harry. I want the absolute best for you.”

Harry gives her a strained smile and strokes her cheek before pulling away.

“Let me walk you back,” he suggests, taking her hand and leading her towards the lobby. Then he grabs another drink before continuing to the cocktail party.

Louis pages Eleanor to ask where Taylor is, hoping to pull her in and hear her side next when there’s another crash from outside the building near the hotel entrance.

There’s chaos as Louis, Harry, the camera crew, and the contestants who’d been waiting in the lobby rush to catch the drama.

Taylor is sprawled on the asphalt, as Paige towers over her body like she’s ready to murder her.

“What happened here?” Harry demands.

Taylor and Paige erupt into screams, talking over each other as Taylor yells about how Paige pushed her, and Paige cries about how Taylor’s lying, trying to play the victim.

Harry shushes both of them.

Louis rolls his eyes. Of course the bastard won’t let a fight play out.

“Taylor, would you please talk with me?” Harry asks. She lights up as he helps her up and follows him back inside, confident in her stride.

“Are you alright?” Harry asks as they settle down on the couch.
Taylor sighs dramatically. “I just feel very attacked. I feel like, I’m just trying to be here and be my realest self with you, but there are other people who are making me doubt what we have together. Paige is trying to twist my character and make me seem like someone I’m not. She has this story she wants you to believe, but we can’t let her get away with it. We have a great relationship, Harry. I hate that they feel so threatened by me that they need to scheme against me and even go so far as physically harm me. I’m just here to fall in love—to see if I can fall in love with you.”

Harry pulls her into a reassuring hug.

“It’s going to be okay, I promise. No matter what, none of them can come between us,” he says. They pull back again, and Taylor wipes at her eyes.

Louis has to admit, the tears are a great touch. He’s very very impressed.

Harry stands with Taylor, and she wraps her arms around his neck, going in for a chaste kiss. Harry indulges her, then sees her off to the main room.

“Harry, we need a confessional, please,” Louis says, before he can grab someone else.

Harry doesn’t look particularly thrilled, but he follows anyway. Once the camera is focused, Louis signals for him to start.

“I don’t know who’s telling the truth, and that’s the hardest part,” Harry says. “I don’t know who I can trust. I’m hearing so many different sides, and I can’t be here at all times, so I don’t know which is the real story. It’s frustrating.” He stares off-screen pensively.

Louis sighs. He’s going to hate himself for this in the morning, but. Fuck it. He coughs.

“Guys, could we have a moment,” he asks, addressing Cal and a few PAs. They murmur in agreement.

Louis watches Harry as they file out. He sits stock-still, eyes scanning the room.

“Wait here, yeah? I’ll only be a minute,” he promises before heading towards the hotel’s back office, which the crew has commandeered into a production room.

Harry’s in the same position when he reenters, tense and fiddling with his rings.

Louis snorts. “You can relax, yeah? I’m not trying to hurt you or anything.”

“No,” Harry murmurs, nodding. “No, I know, of course not.”

Louis chuckles at him as he pops a tape into the camera.

“Come here,” he says, fiddling with the different buttons. Then he makes room next to him for Harry to squeeze in.

“Louis, what is this?”

Louis fast forwards through the early morning material of Taylor and Kendall making pancakes for the house, pressing play when he finds the right moment.

Harry moves close just as Paige throws the lamp to the floor, screaming obscenities at Taylor. He watches on in horror for a few minutes until the footage cuts out abruptly and refocuses on a tired Taylor picking her clothes off the ground around her and packing her suitcase as they’re instructed to do before each rose ceremony.
Harry remains silent, and Louis doesn’t want to say anything for fear of spooking him. But after thirty seconds without a response, he gently places his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

Harry jumps and steps backwards, staring at Louis with wide eyes. He opens his mouth but no words come out as he collapses into his seat with his head in his hands.

“How am I supposed to fall in love like this, Louis?” Harry asks desperately. “I don’t know these people. They’re one way around me, then completely different when I’m gone. How am I supposed to trust them?”

Louis winces as those knives return, lodging into his chest and tugging at his heartstrings. He can feel the words bubbling in his throat.

Then don’t. Don’t fall in love with them.

He swallows them down before that thought can go any further though. He can’t. Harry wants to do this, wants to fall in love with someone else. He just needs a push in the right direction.

Besides, Harry doesn’t want Louis anymore. He didn’t even want Louis then, really.

“How am I supposed to trust them?”

Harry sniffs.

“Harry,” he begins.

Harry sighs.

“Harry, look at me.” Louis gently tips his chin upwards to meet his eyes. “I promise, Hazza. This is a hard process, and I’m sorry about everything you have to endure for it, but you will find love. You deserve one of the people who are good, and kind, and genuinely here for you. Like Kendall. I can sense she really likes you, H. I can see a future there.”

Harry shakes his head at the mention of Kendall’s name, falling forward on Louis’ shoulder as sobs wrack his body. Louis frowns and wraps his arms around Harry’s back, rubbing gently. “Okay, so maybe not Kendall. But. I promise you’re going to find the right person, Harry. They’ll love you for everything, inside and out. I just know it.”

Fuck, it breaks his heart to encourage Harry to open his heart up for someone else when he’s right here, still fiercely in love with him, and ready to stay by Harry’s side for the rest of his days. He’s felt this pain before—the kind that creeps in when he realizes he’ll never be enough for Harry—but knowing that he’s lived through it and survived it once doesn’t dull the ache one bit.

***

Paige throws a fit at the rose ceremony when Harry doesn’t give her a rose, but he tells her that it’s “time for them to say goodbye” because he doesn’t have any romantic feelings for her.

Taylor looks smug, which makes Harry feel even worse. After her stunt with lying and victimizing herself for sympathy, he doesn’t much want her around either.

He has to grin and bear it though, pulling her and the rest of the final five into a champagne toast and announcing their next destination: Rio de Janeiro.

He hopes the new week and the new location will allow for a fresh start. After wrapping up in
Dallas, he meets everyone at Rio’s Hotel Fasano. James and Greg have decided he’s to take Kendall and Ben on one-on-one dates, and Nick, Taylor, and Liam on the group date.

Ben’s date is first, a trip to the Parque das Ruinas, a romantic dinner at the attached cafe, and an evening of dancing. Harry gets a little too tipsy and hangs on Ben’s neck as they dance, but he personally doesn’t think he’s to blame. Ben is boring and his nice-guy persona got old ages ago. It’s obvious he’s only here to make Hollywood connections. Why should Harry be expected to fake something when Ben’s not even putting forth a real effort?

Louis, however, has asked him not to send Ben home until the rose ceremony since there’s only one person who’ll be going home this week. So Harry deals with a boring evening in what could have been an exhilarating, romantic setting if he was there with the right person. At least there are no more one-on-one roses.

The group date is next. Harry takes Liam, Nick, and Taylor to see Christ the Redeemer. They all snap tons of selfies smiling and laughing, and drinking. Plenty of cocktails are passed around as they enjoy their touristy afternoon. He gives Liam the group date rose for continuing to be earnest, open, and friendly in every interaction. Besides, he’s the obvious choice as Nick received an early rose on their one-on-one last week, and despite keeping her around, he still can’t stand Taylor’s fakeness. She’s definitely playing up the All-American princess role, and he hates rewarding that.

Kendall’s date is by far his favorite. In the morning, they traverse the local shops and boutiques in Santa Teresa. It’s charming, fun, and allows them to interact with the locals. Harry has a great time hanging out with Kendall, who’s easily become one of his best friends. He hopes she’ll be willing to keep in touch with him after the show ends.

After an entertaining day, they’re sent back to their hotels to change before their dinner date.

Harry spends too long in the shower, only stepping out when Lou threatens to come in and remove him. He sighs and pulls on a white t-shirt and boxer-briefs, settling in a chair so she can start on his hair.

Louis enters just as she begins to comb through it. “Alright, we need to talk about your date with Kendall tonight.”

Harry sighs, “Can it wait ‘til I’m ready? You know, like it usually does?” He rolls his eyes at Lou, who gives him a soft smile in response.

Louis hums and hops up onto the desk.

“You saying you’re not happy to see me?” He jokes.

“Never happy to see you. Means you’re about to boss me around,” Harry grumbles.

Louis clutches his heart like a scorned lover, and Harry rolls his eyes.

“Oh, come off it, Louis.”

Lou just giggles and perfects one of Harry’s curls. “You sure you wouldn’t rather be on the show, Tomlinson?” she teases.

Harry freezes. That’s a little bit too real. He can feel cold water rushing through his veins, and out of the corner of his eye, he can see Louis is suddenly rigid as well. Lou had been kidding, of course he’d been kidding.
And, of course, Lou is kidding too, so he shouldn’t be taking it so seriously. It’s not that big of a deal. But it feels like too much, all of a sudden, and he doesn’t know exactly why.

Louis coughs awkwardly and picks up the clipboard he’d thrown down next to him.

“Okay, uh, so, your date tonight,” he says, and then it’s right back to business as usual. Just like always.

Dinner with Kendall is rocky, but it’s not her fault. Harry’s still reeling from the memory of Louis teasing him while he got ready, just like it used to be, so he’s a little off his game. But for the most part, the date’s really ruined because of technical errors. There’s loud noises of construction outside the hotel, cameras with full memory cards, and a PA who quits and flies back to California, leaving everyone else scrambling.

After forty minutes of starts and stops, Harry and Kendall are told wait in their respective rooms for the date to continue.

“I have a better idea.” Kendall smirks and takes his hand. Harry rolls his eyes, she never listens to directions, always coming up with her own fun.

It’s one of the reasons he likes hanging out with her so much. He follows her to the rooftop pool where they settle on the edge, dip their toes in the water, and lean back on their hands.

“So, only a few more weeks,” Harry says. “You excited to get home?”

“Oh god, am I ready,” Kendall groans, smiling wide. “I mean, no offense, you’ve been wonderful, sweetheart, but I miss Lauren like a limb. I can’t wait to see her again.”

“I’ll bet. I’m sorry you have to be away from her for so long.”

Kendall hums. “It’s not your fault, but thank you. I appreciate the sentiment.” She pushes a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “I’m glad I met you though. My mom may have pushed me into doing this, and this whole thing is such shit, but I love you so much, Harry.”

Harry strokes the back of her hand. “Maybe you can see Lauren during hometowns.”

Kendall gasps. “Mr. James, are you insinuating that I’ll get a rose tomorrow?”

Harry nudges her side. “Oh, you knew you’d be getting through, love. It’s been Ben for weeks.”

Kendall laughs harshly. “Honestly, I’m happy to have the confirmation. He’s been especially unbearable lately.”

Harry hums in agreement and kicks his legs out in front of him, creating tiny splashes in the water.

“Are you happy though? Do you regret coming on the show?”

Harry shrugs. “I came to get over an ex, but I think it’s made it a lot worse.”

Kendall nods, waiting for him to continue.

“He was my best friend. I’m trying to move on, but the rest of the world is just inadequate in comparison. It’s shit.”
Kendall doesn’t respond right away, like she’s allowing the weight of his confession to settle. She glides her feet through the water, her toes bumping against his heels.

Finally, she speaks, “I’m so sorry Harry.” She pauses, like she’s thinking over what to say next. “But if what you had was that wonderful, you can’t give up on it. Go after him. Screw the show.”

Harry smiles bitterly. “I wish it was that easy. The break-up was rough. No matter what I feel for him, nothing can change that.” He looks away. “He just got bored of me, and let it all go. I can’t go back just to have my heart broken again.”

The wind picks up then, and Kendall shivers.

“Besides,” Harry murmurs. “He has a new boyfriend.”

She sits back, tucking in closer and wrapping her arm around his waist.

“Did he tell you that? Have you been talking to him?” Her eyes widen, and she grabs his bicep, suddenly much more serious. “Harry James, do you have a contraband cell phone?”

Despite the heavy tension, Harry cackles loudly.

“No. I mean—Sorry. Just trust me, it wouldn’t work. He’s over me, and he’s seeing someone else, and I mean, he’s the one who ended it. It’s all just so...messy.”

Kendall sits back, taking it all in. “Well, I just know that if I loved someone with my whole heart, I wouldn’t let them get away. No matter what Eleanor or Louis or any of the producers say, the show isn’t the priority here, Harry. You deserve to be happy, and if this isn’t making you happy, fuck it. Go after what you want.”

Harry nods, with a small smile. “Thanks Kendall,” he says.

“I mean it, you—”

Kendall is cut off by someone storming toward them. Harry swings his head toward the noise.

It’s Louis. “There you are, you tits,” he calls.

Harry blinks as Louis crosses his arms. His hair is wind-blown, and he looks pale. He taps his foot on the deck.

“Well, c’mon then. We’ve got a fucking date to film.”

Harry stands and helps Kendall to her feet.

“Thank you, really,” he murmurs in her ear as they walk back to the set.

Louis brushes past them moments later, pushing them forwards.

“Okay, let’s go, let’s go. I know we’re having a wonderful time on our date, but I’d really love to get all that on camera,” he snaps.

Harry and Kendall don’t reply as they pick up the pace. In the elevator, Kendall catches his eye and gives him a small, encouraging smile.

Louis catches it and scowls.
He wishes he could take her advice and go after what he wants, but it’s never going to be that easy.

Chapter End Notes

i didn't actually edit as quick as id hoped cause i got very distracted, but im still hoping that with focus and determination, i can finish editing this fic this weekend!! keep your eyes out!!

as always, im on tumblr at coffeelouis
Chapter 6

November 2018

Louis is riding in a limo from the hotel to Holmes Chapel with nothing but Harry and a folder of plans for Harry’s home visit. But he would very much like to be anywhere else in the world. Like New England. He hears the foliage is quite nice this time of year.

Of course, he’s not in New England. He’s stuck in a vehicle that’s racing towards his doom. Louis swallows and wipes the back of his damp neck. He’s bloody terrified.

Soon, he’ll meet Harry’s mum, or re-meet rather, as he’d seen Anne several times when he and Harry were in uni — the day Harry moved in after they were emerging from the bathroom where they’d quite literally crashed into one another, before Christmas when Anne arrived while Harry was still giving him his birthday gift, the beginning of summer holiday, and, of course, the day they moved in together.

But, while yes, he’s met her as Louis Tomlinson, Harry’s slightly mischievous but ultimately kind-hearted best friend turned roommate, he’d never actually met her as Louis, Harry’s boyfriend. Anne is one scary woman, and he’d been much too nervous. So he’d dragged Harry to Doncaster for Christmas, and then had artfully avoided the subject every time Harry invited him home.

Fuck. Louis slowly unclenches his fists, eyes falling shut. He’s tense, and awkward, and should be going over logistics with Harry, but he can’t seem to will himself to open the folder. His stomach churns painfully as he pulls at his collar. It’s too stuffy. He feels like he’s suffocating. Christ, he needs air.

Harry flashes him wary eyes with a furrowed brow, fingers fiddling with his rings. Shit, he can tell. Louis knows he can. He’s always been good at reading him. Louis sighs and looks out the window, trying to ignore the obvious anxiety.

“Louis?” Harry asks, tentatively.

“Hmm?” Louis keeps his eyes on the scenery. If he looks at Harry, he feels like he’ll combust. Jesus, he’s about to meet Harry’s mum. As the boy who was too scared to ever actually introduce himself as his boyfriend. He thinks he has a right to be terrified.

“Are you okay?”

“Well, I’m freaking out, just a bit, Harold.”

From the other side of the limo, Harry snorts, prompting Louis to glare at him. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No,” Harry says. “Just, you don’t have much to be worried about, do you? You’re not actually
meeting the parents, the others are.”

“Oh fuck off, I’ve got a right to be stressed.”

“Well I think you’re gonna be fine. You’re practically an expert at avoiding my mother. I’m sure your job is still a perfectly valid excuse.”

Louis sizes Harry up, the boy suddenly the perfect image of nonchalance.

“Do I suspect a hint of sass, Styles?”

“No,” Harry responds, completely transparent and full of shit.

Louis narrows his eyes at Harry, “What are you playing at, Styles?”

“Nothing,” Harry responds.

He’s so full of shit.

“Well, you’re not my boyfriend anymore, so you shouldn’t be trying to psych me out about meeting your mother.”

“Exactly, you’re not my boyfriend, so you shouldn’t be nervous in the first place,” Harry shoots back.

“Touché.” Louis drums his fingers along his thigh.

“Honestly, Louis?” Harry sounds annoyed, and done with Louis, “She’s going to be so focused on meeting my dates that she won’t even be concerned with what my stupid ex-boyfriend is up to.”

Louis snorts and nods. “Maybe I just want to make a good episode of television.”

“Sure,” Harry mutters. “I’ll give you that.” Louis knows neither of them really believe it, but he’ll take it. “If you want, I’ll hold your hand,” Harry jokes, and Louis turns to glare sharply at him.

“Not funny.” Harry shrugs and looking away. “Just trying to lighten the mood.”

Louis leans his head against the window, watching the rain outside.

Harry’s quiet for a moment, but after a break of blessed silence, he snorts. “Plus, Niall’ll be there, and you haven’t seen him in ages.”

Louis sits up bolt straight, tension returning as he thinks about facing one of his ex-best friends, who he hasn’t spoken to in over a year.

Yeah, this is going to be fun.

Anne stares Louis down the moment he walks in the door. She walks towards Harry, pulling him in for a hug, squeezing him close to her, and narrows her eyes at Louis.

Fuck. He wants to crawl out of his skin. Sure, it’s never fun to interact with your son’s ex-boyfriend, but Harry’s not the one who got his heart broken. He did the dumping. She doesn’t exactly have much to be mad about.

Anne approaches him once Harry has stepped aside.
Louis sticks his hand out quickly. “Mrs. Twist, it’s wonderful to meet you. I’m the season’s director, Louis Tomlinson.”

“Oh.” Anne nods as if everything has begun to make sense. “You’re the director. That’s nice.” She grasps his hand firmly. “Welcome to my home, Mr. Tomlinson.”

There’s a bite to her tone that he doesn’t like, contempt oozing from every word.

Louis gulps. “It’s going to be a pretty standard day. I’ll set up some cameras in your living room, dining room for dinner, then maybe a bedroom for individual conversations. Nothing too taxing.”

As he speaks, the rest of the crew has begun to set up, but Anne just continues to glare at Louis, a tight smile plastered on her face. Harry’s hovering behind her, like he’s ready to interrupt her if she tries to say something too cold.

Louis wishes Harry would interrupt. He hates being the subject of Anne’s scrutinizing gaze.

He wants to scream, *Harry broke my heart! He. Left. Me. Back off!* But he doesn’t. What difference would it make anyway?

“So I get the chance to talk privately with each of Harry’s dates?” Anne asks.

Louis grits his teeth. She must know the answer to that. Eleanor sent her the list of questions she’d be required to ask weeks ago.

“Yes ma’am. But don’t worry. Two cameramen, my assistant, and I will be in the room with you. We’re there to assist if you have any trouble.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” she corrects. “I would like to speak with you privately too however, if that’s allowed.” Her tone makes it seem like she’s not giving him an option, but this is still Louis’ show.

He stiffens, desperately searching for a response when Eleanor comes in on the radio, asking him to deal with a situation in the kitchen.

“Actually, love, I’m quite busy running a show and all. My assistant, Eleanor, knows the ins and outs of this production. She can address any concerns.”

Louis looks down at his radio, ready to hightail out of this conversation.

“Um, it really was great to meet you, Ms. Twist.”

“Likewise,” she says flatly as he runs into the kitchen.

Once there, he turns off his radio and collapses in on himself, crouching on the floor and trying to breathe properly.

Shit. He’d been incredibly rude, to a woman he’d once thought would become his mother-in-law, though. That doesn’t justify his shit behavior, but. It’s going to be a hard day. He’s just trying to hold it together, and having to act composed, especially when she’s not even trying to mask her disdain, doesn’t help.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath in and then—

“Louis!” Harry shouts, then bursts into the kitchen. “Louis, could you please explain—” He sounds disappointed, and a little bit angry, but cuts himself off when he realizes Louis’ current state.
Louis looks up, and as soon as he makes eye contact, he jumps to his feet, trying to mask his panic with hard, angry eyes.

“Would you give me a fucking minute?” he snaps. “I know what you’re doing, Harry, but I’m in charge of a fucking television show here. I don’t have time for you berating me about how I was abrupt with your goddamn mother.” He immediately recoils, knowing he’s in the wrong, but too overwhelmed to do anything about it, to actually stop for a moment and apologize to Harry and Anne like he should.

Harry’s eyes narrow, studying Louis’ face. “Why do you do that?” he responds, completely ignoring Louis’ comment. “Why do you push back when you don’t know how to handle something?” He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and pinches his nose. “You get mean, Louis. It’s not fair to those around you,” he takes a deep breath. “You’ve always done it, and it drives me insane. It’s why—” He cuts himself off, closing up, and looking at Louis with hurt in his eyes.

Louis doesn’t have time to deal with Harry bringing up the past. He’s in over his head, and this is one of the most important days of the season.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, so quietly he doubts Harry can even hear him. “I’m a little overwhelmed,” he tries to gather the courage to look up, and finds Harry looking back at him, his brow furrowed. “But it’s no excuse, and I’m sorry.”

Harry nods. “Should we just focus on what needs to get done?”

“Yes,” Louis nods. “Yes, that’s excellent. I need to get you into confessional. We need a great line to let these very devoted, very serious fans know why we’re doing your hometown first. Then I want a shot of you and your mom baking before Gemma and Niall get here.”

“We can do that,” Harry nods again. “We can definitely do that. I’ll go find Eleanor, yeah?”

Louis nods, his mind already thinking about the thousand other things he needs to do to prepare for filming.

Just as he’d thought Harry had left and that he was alone again in the kitchen, he’s startled by a cough. “I, um..congrats, Louis.”

Louis turns around at the sound of Harry’s voice, “What was that?”

“You um, your job. You’re in charge of a television show.” He closes his eyes and shakes his head, like it’s hard for him to get the next bit out. “You finally got everything you ever wanted. And I’m glad. So congrats.” Harry turns and heads back into the living room, leaving Louis to stare after him, stunned.

He gathers himself for a few moments, then heads into the living room, where a very strategically designed, incredibly fake, set has been prepared behind Harry’s seat. “Okay Harry,” Louis starts, “I just need you to explain your reasoning for changing the order of the hometowns, and talk about how much today means to you. Then we can jump in. Please try to make it count, we’re already running late.”

Harry runs his hand through his hair and sits up straighter in his seat, preparing. Anne enters, watching her son talk with a small smile on her face as she lingers in the doorway. Louis tries not to let her presence distract him.

Harry collects himself, then lifts his head, directing his gaze above the camera, just like Louis had instructed, and like he’d finally caught onto after the third week. “I decided to switch things up a little
bit this week. We’re spending a few days in my hometown of Holmes Chapel, Cheshire, because family is very important to me. My mum, especially. I want to be 100 percent sure I have her support in this process, so I’ve decided to introduce her to Taylor, Kendall, Liam, and Nick. I want to hear her opinion, because I want to be confident in my relationships before I meet their families. That complicates the process, and I don’t want to hurt anyone by meeting their family when I just don’t see a future with them.” He sighs, allowing for a good moment to cut, then glances at Louis. “That good?”

“That was perfect. Can we get you and Anne in the kitchen for a shot of you baking before your sister gets here?”

“You know my mum hates baking, Lou,” Harry retorts. Louis feels his heart stop, and looks covertly over at Eleanor. “Is that really the best idea for stock footage?” Harry rolls his eyes, challenging Louis to respond while Louis glares back at him, staunchly ignoring the questioning looks he’s getting from Eleanor and the cameraman. Harry clues in though, “We went over this in the meeting yesterday,” he lies quickly. He’s full of shit, and it’s glaringly obvious, but no one says anything, and Eleanor stands and checks something off on her clipboard while wandering into the kitchen, so they’re probably in the clear.

Harry joins Anne in the doorway, and walks her into the kitchen, but not before she shoots another glance over at Louis.

One of the PAs has baked a pre-made tube of cookie dough during prep, so all Harry has to do is pull it out of the oven and set it on a cooling rack while Anne looks on fondly, like they’re working together.

Of course, because it’s Harry, it ends up taking three takes, as he almost drops them the first because the tin is so hot, and on the second, bumps his head on an open cabinet door.

By the time they’re finished, Gemma and Niall have already been waiting outside for fifteen minutes, instructed to stay where they are by a frazzled PA, who, after five, had begun frantically paging that Gemma is getting impatient.

Louis is watching one of the takes back on Cal’s camera when she’s finally allowed inside, and she immediately walks right up to him and grabs him by the sleeve. “I’m so sorry, I’ve got to talk to the director,” she directs at Cal, “You don’t mind, yeah?” She doesn’t even wait for his response until she’s physically dragging him into the back room. Before Louis has stopped walking, before they’re even fully in the room, she slaps him clean across the face.

He recoils immediately, his hand coming up to rub his warm, stinging cheek. “What the fuck?” He exclaims, looking up at her in rage.

“You’re a proper arsehole,” she answers.

He’s about to respond, with something good too, something incredibly witty, when he notices Niall in the doorway.

“Niall,” he says, lifting his head in a subtle greeting towards him.

“Hey Lou,” he mumbles, awkwardly. “How’ve you been?”

“Good. Good, very good,” he says. “You?”

Niall nods quickly in response. It’s quiet, stiflingly quiet, and Louis looks around desperately for something to add.
“You’re looking blonde as ever,” he jokes, hoping to ease the tension.

“Yeah, no thanks to you,” he rolls his eyes. “And I’ve got me ball and chain now,” he says, approaching Gemma and pulling her in close to his side. “She’s had lavender hair too, so you know, perfect couple.”

Louis laughs awkwardly, conscious of the glare Gemma is still sending his way, even as she’s tucked herself under Niall’s arm. Harry comes back into the room, and Niall immediately backs up. “Haz!” He exclaims, pulling Harry in close under his other arm, and now there’s a noticeable distance between the three of them and Louis.

“Fuck, I’ve got to prepare for your entrance” Louis realizes. He rushes out of the room to find Eleanor, glad for the excuse to escape that unbearably awkward situation.

As he leaves, however, he hears Niall whisper, “You say the word, H.”

But it’s fine. Louis doesn’t care. He knows he lost Niall in what was, undeniably, a divorce between him and Harry. Harry left, and he took everything they had together in London. Without him, there was nothing left for Louis, so he packed up, and moved to LA. He knows it was for the best, he knows it’s what Harry wanted, but it’s still hard to watch everything he thought his life could have been—an afternoon in Harry’s Cheshire home with Anne, Niall, Gemma, and the love of his life—and to know that that’s not what he’s ever going to have, all because he wasn’t good enough for Harry.

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“Alright, but seriously, Haz, is that how he’s been acting the entire season?”

“Yes, Ni, that’s what I’ve been telling you,” Harry groans, sinking onto the confessional chair. This day has already been so stressful, and they’ve barely started filming. Louis has been an arse since the hotel, but there’s absolutely no reason for him to be so petty. He’s the one who lost interest and moved to America, there’s no reason for him to be bitter with Harry’s family. The worst part is, he seems incredibly nervous, and he’s making Harry feel jumpy. Shouldn’t he be more worried about his own boyfriend’s family now, and leave Harry’s alone?

Gemma comes up behind him and hugs him around the neck.

“Has it gotten any easier?” She asks, pulling him close to her chest.

“A bit. That’s what’s tough—”

Eleanor peeks her head into the room. “Okay guys. We’re ready for you. Taylor’s about to arrive.”

Harry forces a smile and nods, standing up. “Ready to meet my future spouses?”

Gemma ruffles his hair as she follows him towards the front door, “Hopefully only one,” she jokes, which, luckily, Cal has caught on camera.

“Well,” Niall begins, smarmy grin on his face, “Who says he needs to pick just one?”

“Twat!” Gemma exclaims, shoving him sideways and laughing as he stumbles, brushing past him to stand next to her mom, as Taylor knocks on the door.

Harry approaches the door and opens it, pulling Taylor into a tight hug. When he releases her, he turns to the rest of their party, “Mum, Gems, Niall, this is Taylor.”
“It’s great to finally meet you, Harry has told me all about you,” Taylor gushes, offering a bundle of daisies that a crew member had supplied her with to Anne, and hugging Niall and Gemma.

Anne leads everyone into the sitting room, where glasses of red wine and a cheese plate have been set out on the table. A different course will be served for each contestant that visits throughout the day, but like all meals on The Bachelor, everyone is instructed not to eat while filming, as the chewing could interfere with the mics. So they’re expected to stare longingly at the cheese while sustaining themselves on alcohol.

“So Taylor,” Anne begins immediately, jumping into the list of pre-approved questions. “What made you want to go on this journey with Harry?”

Taylor takes a deep breath, “Wow, that’s a big question,” she says, obviously stalling. “I think in my last relationship, there was too much instability. We were on, and then we were off, and then back on, and that’s not what I wanted. I want someone who’s going to be there for me, always. I’ve dated good friends, I’ve dated best friends, but when it comes down to it, I want someone who’s going to be a partner to me, and I think that is what I’ve hopefully found in Harry. Someone who’ll be there through it all, and be at my side.”

Anne nods, taking in her answer. “And when was it that you broke off your last relationship?”

“My boyfriend and I broke up this past Spring.”
“Oh,” Anne and Gemma both sit back, ready to go on the defensive. “So still pretty recent.”

“Yes,” Taylor admits, “But very very much in the past. I’m so committed to this process, and to Harry. I just want to find my husband and have that be the end of it,” she smiles, reaching for Harry’s hand where it’s resting next to her on the couch, “And, I think I have,” she smiles, and Harry smiles back, reassuring.

“That’s awesome, Taylor,” Gemma agrees. “I’m glad to hear it,” she looks off-camera at one of the crew members, probably asking for the go-ahead to split the group off into smaller conversations. She must see something positive, because she then follows up with, “Do you want to come chat with me for a bit?”

The two girls leave, and Anne quickly takes Taylor’s seat on the couch, settling in close to Harry while the cameras readjust their angle.

“Harry, I’m not sure how I feel about this girl,” she begins.

Harry’s not surprised. Taylor knows how to turn on the charm and smile for America, but she’s incredibly insincere and they don’t work together as a couple.

“I’m worried about you,” his mother continues, “I don’t think she has the purest intentions on this show. The way she talks about her future, she sounds impatient to be married, like she would rather that happen now with someone who’s good enough rather than someone who’s right. You deserve someone who’s right for you, Harry. You deserve someone who’s everything.

“I want you to find something that builds on the passion of your last relationship, Harry. Someone who will be willing to go through anything and everything for you. I don’t get the sense that Taylor is here for you, as Harry, I feel like she’s here for you, as The Bachelor, as a potential husband.”

Harry nods. “This is very serious.”

“I just want you to be careful, love. This is such a hard, confusing process. I can’t even imagine what you must be going through.”
Harry nods. He wants to tell her how hard it’s been, especially with Louis watching everything he does, telling Harry where to stand, how to act, but he knows he can’t. The cameras are watching, Louis is watching, and he answers with the standard, “It’s tough. It’s really troubling to think that I could be making a mistake and this is my heart on the line. But I think—I hope—it could all be worth it in the end.”

That isn’t true. None of this is going to be worth it. He’s overwhelmed every day and can’t believe he ever agreed to this, that he was ever under the illusion that he’d be able to ignore Louis and focus on finding love.

Maybe it’s because he hadn’t realized how meticulously formulaic and scripted the show is, that he thought he’d actually get an opportunity to know the person behind every contestant, rather than the character they’ve been hired to play.

All he wants is to curl up in his mother’s arms and tell her about how hard it is, how the love of his life stands behind a camera every day, pretending to help Harry fall in love, and he feels so overwhelmed and lost that it’s all he can do to not break his contract and walk away. At this point, it’d be worth it, even knowing he’d get sued for all he’s worth, to never have to see Louis’ stupid face ever again.

He can’t even do that, though, because in between all the stress and anxiety and heartache, there are moments that remind him why it worked so well. Even knowing Louis has moved on, that Louis is dating someone new, that Harry himself is (theoretically) dating 20 new people, he still remembers why he fell so hard for his best friend. Louis is silly, and mischievous, and smart. And even if he’s just watching Louis do his thing, directing a scene, he’s still as enthralled as ever, watching him work.

He spends every day reminding himself why he spent a year drinking rosé and watching films on Niall’s couch. Louis is so captivating, and when they got past that initial awkwardness, they still fit. Harry’s family hates him, is treating him like actual shit, and Louis is still taking it in stride, still able to get his job done, and done well, even under what must be unbearable circumstances, given the awkward, hostile treatment, and his slight breakdown in the kitchen.

Harry’s astounded by how amazing he is, and he hates that even as he brings people home to his family, people like Nick who are serious about a future with Harry, he’s still feeling himself as hung up on his ex-boyfriend as he ever was.

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Watching the interactions between Liam and Harry’s family is by far the hardest. He has Anne charmed, Gemma is just about to propose, but Niall… Niall and Liam are a whole new level of torture. They get along like a house on fire, and Harry fits in perfectly. All three of them spend the meal laughing and joking with one another, like the best of friends, and Louis can tell it would take no effort at all for Liam to be integrated into their lives, to replace the position Louis himself had once held.

It hits home once again that Liam could win this. Even though this show is so so fake, he and Harry could have something real.

He’s packing up when he hears James and Greg giggling by the living room mantle. He looks up, and finds James pointing to a photo in one of the family photo books.

Louis coughs, clearing his throat. “You think that’s the best idea, lads?” He says, trying to stay calm, hoping they’ll just put it away before they find anything too incriminating.
Not that Harry’s family would even have any photos of Louis in there. They wouldn’t. They definitely wouldn’t.

Right?

Still, he’s better off getting them as far away from Harry’s past as he can.

“Yeah, I think it’s a great idea, Tommo,” James says.

“Lighten up, Louis, you’ve been a pain in the arse all day.” Greg adds. “Look, just, here he is at some graduation, isn’t that cute?”

Gemma enters then, from the kitchen, and she coughs too, though hers is much more graceful than Louis’. “Excuse me, boys. I have a few questions for you.”

Greg nods his head dutifully, and steps away, while James goes about closing the book. He stops suddenly though, pointing at a photo in the bottom corner of a page, and looking up with wide eyes and a slack jaw. Greg turns around in question, but Gemma pulls him quickly into the kitchen.

“Louis,” James gasps.

“What,” Louis snaps, packing his clipboard up in his backpack.

“What,” James hisses again.

“What,” Louis repeats, trying to play it off.

“Louis it’s—Louis, why are you in the family scrapbook?”

Louis winces. Of course. Just when he’d thought the day was finally over.

“It’s not me, it probably just looks like me.”

James closes the book, sets in on the mantle, and walks over, pulling Louis in close to him.

“I know you’re full of shit, Tomlinson, I know this is you. Why are you in their family photo album?”

Louis looks down and tries to get away with mumbling nonsense. James isn’t buying it.

“Louis, why are you in this photo album.”

Louis looks up, “Because I used to know Harry,” he exclaims, much too loudly, and much too overdramatic but. It’s been a long day, it’s been a long season, and Louis is tired.

“What?”

“We went to Uni together, we were friends. But we’re not anymore. Obviously,” he mutters, pulling away and going back to his bag. “So that’s that. Can we move on now?”

“Oh, like hell. What the fuck, Louis?” James asks.

“Look, it’s really not that big of a deal, it hasn’t affected my job performance at all. Please let it go.”

“Louis,” James hisses, but Louis just slams his laptop closed, and looks up again.

“Fuck off, James. I don’t want to talk about it.”
Greg and Gemma reappear in the doorway just then, and James shuts up, taking a step backwards.

“James, we should head out. Eleanor wanted to speak to us before heading back to the hotel,” Greg says, leading James out of the room.

Louis sighs, then looks down, tries to refocus on getting ready to go. All he wants is to head back to the hotel and prepare for the following day’s individual dates. Maybe take a nice bubble bath, something to take his mind off this terrible, terrible day.

“Are you okay?” Gemma whispers, from where she’s still standing in the doorway. Louis looks up, shocked, he hadn’t expected her to stay.

“Yes,” he answers, mostly to himself, as he tries to take a headcount of who’s still here. It appears most people have headed out, tired from a long day of shooting.

“So he knows?”

“He doesn’t know anything,” Louis mutters. “It’s nothing. It’s fine.”

“Louis?” Gemma asks quietly, and Louis jumps, because all of a sudden she’s standing right behind him.

This could be the moment he dies.

He turns around, “What, Gemma?”

He’s a little rude, and a little short, and a lot exasperated, but. Sue him.

“I wanted to apologize for earlier,” she says. “I was out of line.”

“Thank you. That’s very considerate of you,” he nods, thinking she’s going to turn around, return to Niall, and this will all be over, but she stays in place, hovering.

“It’s not excusable, and I know that, but I just want you to understand where I’m coming from,” she starts. “The past year and a half have been really hard on him, especially these last few months. And I know he hasn’t said anything to you, and I don’t want to speak for him, by any means. But, I just get so frustrated, to see him suffering like this and not be able to do anything about it.”

Louis doesn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” he tries.

“And...he misses you, Louis. More than he’ll admit. He missed you then and he misses you now. So just...please be gentle. I think he’s holding on to the past more than he’ll admit and I don’t want him to get hurt again.”

Louis nods his understanding, still looking down at his bag of supplies, then, when he registers her words, looks up confused.

“Wait, hang on—again?” He asks, bewildered.

Niall interrupts whatever Gemma’s about to say next, popping his head in, “Ready to go, babe?”

She turns, surprised, a smile lighting up her face. “Yeah, love.” Everything about her demeanor seconds before, guarded, serious, has melted as she smiles and follows Niall out the room.

She turns in the doorway and looks back at Louis, “Just be more careful this time, okay? I don’t want to be a wreck when he loses you again.”
And then she just walks away. Like she hasn’t just turned Louis’ world upside down, completely upended everything he thought was true about his entire world.

Harry missed him. Harry was hurt? What the hell did she mean by that. Surely she must have misunderstood. Harry left him. Harry packed up all his stuff and just fucking left one day while Louis was at work, no warning, no conversation, nothing. Nothing but a flimsy note that meant nothing.

This was all Harry’s fault. He was the one who’d broken Louis’ heart, who’d thrown away their future together. Gemma had no right to chastise Louis when he wasn’t the one who ended things.

Because he didn’t end things. It was all Harry’s decision.

But, he realizes as he tucks his clipboard away and stands, picking up his bag to leave, although that has been everything he’s believed for the past year and a half of his life, everything he’s staked his decisions on, he’s starting to think he could have been wrong.

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August 2017

Louis checks his phone again when he gets out of the Underground station. He doesn’t know why he expected a response, since he hasn’t heard back from Harry in two weeks, but those were the rare “Miss you! Hope everything’s good!” messages, and this was a “Home in 30 mins, can’t wait to see you xxx” message. He’s honestly surprised Harry hasn’t replied, but he tries not to think anything of it.

Harry’s probably just busy making a big “Welcome Back, Louis” meal or something.

Louis’ excited for that. Directing a low-budget film may be a good resume-booster, but the small amount of cash they have on hand means almost nothing in the way of craft services. Louis hasn’t had a nice, home-cooked meal in weeks. Harry’s probably cooking his favorite meal too. He’s excited to tuck in, share a bottle of wine, and finally fuck in their actual bed. He feels a little guilty, knowing Harry won’t be thrilled that all he’s in the mood for is food and sex, but he also knows he’ll understand. He’s just been stressed, Harry knows it’s not for any lack of love.

That’s actually one of his major stressors though, and it’s only been made worse by the radio silence these last few weeks. He’s so overwhelmed by how much he loves Harry, how much Harry is the most important person in his world, that he’s started to pull away emotionally. On the one hand, before he went away, he’d spent all his time with Harry, fucking Harry, that he’d started to neglect his friends and had felt overwhelmingly guilty for that, but he’d also been a pretty shit boyfriend. He knows Harry can’t be happy that he avoids talking, avoids visiting his mother, avoids, well, a lot of things. But Harry is so good, and so perfect, and Louis really doesn’t deserve him.

He’s just waiting for the day that Harry realizes that. He’s waiting, and he’s ready for it.

But in a much more real sense, he’s definitely not. He’s dreading that day.

He’s been a pretty shit boyfriend over the past few months, but now he’s got some time off, while he tries to find a new project, and he’s going to dedicate himself to making Harry happy. He’ll be the best goddamn boyfriend his boy has ever seen.

He smiles when he reaches their flat, unlocking the door, and setting his duffle down in the entryway. “Honey, I’m home,” he calls.
There’s no smell of Harry cooking in the kitchen, and, in fact, Harry’s not making any noise at all.

But it’s fine, he’s probably just taking a nap. He’d been taking a lot of early morning shifts when Louis left for Liverpool, and sleeping most of the afternoons away.

He pauses in the door to their bedroom, surprised that Harry’s not curled up in bed.

“Haz?” He calls, starting to get a bit worried. He ducks into the bathroom, expecting to maybe find him in the bathtub. He heads back through the living room, maybe he is in the kitchen, and just hadn’t heard Louis’ call.

He doesn’t find Harry in the kitchen, but he does find a carefully folded note, sitting in the center of the kitchen table.

He picks it carefully, but can’t bring himself to read it yet. He heads back out into the living room, and finally takes it in. Harry’s knick-knacks are gone from the shelves, and his carefully folded throw blanket, always so comfy and warm on Wednesday movie nights, is missing. The room is empty, absolutely devoid of life. He’d always made fun of Harry for the little things he and Gemma had picked up around London, which he’d left littered around their room, but now.

The room looks lifeless without them.

He opens the letter, scared of what he’s going to find, a pit of dread already forming in his belly. As he reads, the actual words on the page don’t register, only certain phrases like, ‘can’t live like this anymore,’ ‘when you’re ready,’ and ‘I’m sorry.’ His feels his heart breaking in his chest, knowing his worst fears are finally coming true.

He reaches down towards a side table, clutching at it for balance, and knocks over a picture frame. It topples to the floor and as he picks it back up, grimacing at their smiling faces in front of Harry’s freshman dorm, he realizes there’s a light layer of dust across the photo.

Harry’s been gone for weeks. Harry had come home one day, weeks ago, packed up his stuff, and left their apartment, their life together. He’d left Louis a note on the kitchen table, and for weeks, Louis has been living up in Liverpool, feeling like a fool that his boyfriend wasn’t returning his messages, when all the while there was a goddamn note on his kitchen table, telling him that they were quite the opposite.

That Harry couldn’t handle him, couldn’t handle the pressure, couldn’t handle what their relationship had become. Louis grimaces, because he’d known this day was coming, and yet he still feels so broken. So much like there’s water filling his lungs and he can’t breathe and he’s going to pass out at any second.

He’s weak, his legs are shaking, his mind is spinning.

Harry’s gone. And Louis feels like he’s dying.

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November 2018

When they’re finished with Harry’s hometown, Louis is nothing but confused. He’s spinning, absolutely dumbfounded by Gemma’s comments. Had he completely misinterpreted one of the biggest events in his entire life? Has he been missing Harry, tearing himself apart with his love for Harry, while Harry’s been doing the exact same for him?
Simultaneously, he’s wondering how this impacts Harry’s previous relationship, with the ex he’d come on the show to get over. Had that relationship been a rebound from Louis? If so, what allowed it to go so real that he’d need to come onto the show to move on? Why was Gemma still under the impression that Harry missed Louis when he’d had a whole other relationship after him.

He has entirely too many questions, and no way, or time, to answer them.

The next day, they’re back at the mansion for the next rose ceremony, for Harry to decide which three families he’ll be meeting. Eleanor catches Louis’ arm quickly, pulls him aside before filming can officially begin.

“Louis, I think you should take the week off,” she suggests.

Louis balks, raising his eyebrows but not daring to say a word to her.

“Let’s be perfectly honest, we really don’t need a director for hometowns, yeah? The contestants have consulted with James and Greg about their plans for the day, I can be there to make sure it all goes smoothly. If anything, this is going to be the most authentic part of the process. I think it’d be good for you to get some time off, take a breath.”

“You’re kidding me, right? This is my show.”

Eleanor sighs, “You’ve done a great job with it, Louis. But I think now’s the time to step back, let Harry do his thing, and trust that he knows what he’s doing. He’s the perfect bachelor, Louis. He’ll do a good job.”

“It’s not about Harry, El, it’s about—”

“It’s about making a good television series, Louis. And you’ve been completely distracted this week. You need to go home and take some time away from it all because we all need you on top of your game going into the finale.”

Louis glares at her, then notices James turning the corner.

“What are your thoughts James? Eleanor thinks—”

“I’m going to stop you right there, Tommo. She came to me about it earlier, and I think it’s a great idea. You’ve been working yourself to the bone all season, it’s time to take a break.”

“I’ll send you the footage every day, Louis. If you don’t like how it’s going, by all means, come back. But at least let us try.”

Louis looks helplessly between Eleanor and James, both steadfastly holding their ground, then turns and marches off set.

Which probably isn’t the most professional thing to do, but. Whatever.

He doesn’t do anything his first day at home. He makes himself a cup of ramen noodles, pllops down in front of the TV, and watches the all United games he recorded on his television but never watched because he spends so much goddamn time at work.

That night, Eleanor sends him a file with the footage from Kendall’s hometown. Her half-sisters, Kim, Kourtney, and Khloe, immediately ply Harry with wine and chat with him about his intentions.
They’re over-dramatic and extra and completely comfortable when called into confessional, allowing for just the right balance of wildness and acceptance of Harry. It’s perfect for the show, and Louis is so so glad they kept Kendall on long enough to get to this point.

Their mother, on the other hand, is a whole new kind of nightmare. Every moment of her on camera, she’s stirring up drama and lamenting the fact that there are still two other men involved, because Kendall may not be Harry’s top pick. However, instead of protective, it just comes off like she’s aiming for Kendall to be the next star of the series, as she’s continuously bragging about how attractive and personable Kendall is. Louis rolls his eyes, but will admit that overall, it’s successful footage.

Zayn comes over the next day, with a joint and a box of pizza.

“Thought you could use it,” he mumbles when Louis opens the door, and shrugs, even as Louis pulls him into a heartfelt hug.

“Thank you,” he whispers. He burrows back into his pile of blankets on the couch, while Zayn lights up next to him. Zayn even lets him get away with watching *Grease,* even though Louis knows he’d much rather watch a Marvel movie, and that in itself makes him the very best kind of best friend.

Eleanor’s email comes in during *We Go Together.*

“Would you, um—”

“You know I’m not going to say anything, mate. Watch it if you need to, I don’t care.”

Louis kicks his foot out of the blankets and pokes at Zayn’s thigh lovingly. “Thank you,” he whispers, opening the email on his Apple TV and starting the footage.

It was Liam’s family today, and the recording begins with Liam laying out a blanket in a field, explaining that he’s planned a lunchtime picnic with Harry. Zayn shifts uncomfortably next to Louis, but otherwise doesn’t say anything, even as Harry arrives and smiles lovingly at Liam’s set-up.

Louis hates how much natural chemistry the two of them have. Liam is very obviously the frontrunner, Harry is so comfortable and happy every time they’re together, and it kills Louis inside to see it.

He knew there was a chance that Harry would fall in love on the show, but he also thought about how orchestrated the entire process was, and how rare it is that the Bachelor fosters an honest connection. He supposes he’d been hoping for that, although, he’s still unsure about what he would have done about it. He realizes he’d probably prefer the long hours working with editors to create a story that isn’t there than watching from ten feet away as Harry falls in love with somebody else.

Zayn pulls out his phone and scowls, drawing Louis’ attention back to the screen, where Harry is first being introduced to Liam’s parents and older sisters.

“You good, mate?” Louis asks at where Zayn is grumbling down at his phone. He shrugs, but otherwise shows no acknowledgement of Louis’ inquiry.

Liam doesn’t tell his parents he’s falling in love with Harry, as suitors usually do during hometowns, but he still provides a quality evening. His mother dotes over Harry throughout dinner, and his father gives him a hearty embrace at the end of the night, indicating his wholehearted welcome into the family.

“I think this could be the real thing,” Liam admits in a confessional in his living room. “I came on
this show to find love, and I really think I have. I’m ready to explore these feelings in the real world, and see where they take me."

Louis is scowling, ready to turn off the recording, despite the remaining fifteen minutes of footage, when Zayn jumps up. “I have to go,” he declares, offering no further explanation or pleasantries as he shoves his phone into his pocket and rushes out the door.

Liam gives Harry a warm hug as he climbs in the car at the end of the night, while his parents wave from the front door. Louis sighs, picks up the pizza box, and folds it up to throw away. Harry fits perfectly into Liam’s family. Liam really deserves to win.

Nick’s hometown is much more low-key. There isn’t the drama and show of Kendall’s, nor the welcoming family dynamic of Liam’s. It’s just, him, his parents, and Harry, sitting around a dinner table, drinking wine and teasing one another. In some way it’s worse though, because after Harry drives away, Nick admits in a confessional that he’s in love with Harry, and he’s going to tell him at the next opportunity.

Which, unless he talks to him before the rose ceremony, which is unlikely, will be on his fantasy suite date, when he finally gets a night alone with Harry.

Fuck.

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November 2016

Louis knocks on the apartment door and Harry giggles from right inside.

“Just a minute,” he calls as if he isn’t putzing around in Louis’ own apartment, trying to be cute.

It’s working though. He’s very cute.

Louis hates how much he loves him.

“Hmm,” he muses loudly, “I suppose my date doesn’t actually want to go to dinner with me. Maybe I’ll just go out with the cute boy from the bakery instead.”

“No!” Harry gasps, and Louis can hear him stumble in a rush to open the door, like he’s not the cute boy from the bakery. “One second,” he mumbles, and then the door is opening, and he’s standing behind it, looking flushed and happy.

“Hi sweetheart,” Louis says, allowing himself to give Harry a once-over.

Once he does though, he can’t stop himself from bursting out in a laugh. “What the fuck are you wearing?”

Harry looks down, hurt, at his blue and green Hawaiian shirt. “What?”

“That’s a terrible first date shirt, Harry,” Louis laughs.

“Fuck you, Louis.”

“Harry, baby, we live in London, what are you thinking?”

Harry smiles, closes the door, and grabs Louis’ hand, leading him out to the stairs. “You called me baby.”
“That I did, baby. And I’m gonna do it a lot more. Now that you’re all mine.” He bites at Harry’s earlobe, and Harry tries to squirm away, but doesn’t get very far, his hand still clutching Louis’.

“Technically last week was our first date though,” Harry mumbles.

“No no, drunkenly making out at Niall’s Halloween party does not count as our first date,” Louis insists. “I will not allow it.”

“Well, really we professed our love to one another and made out all evening,” Harry corrects. Louis shakes his head firmly.

“Nope. I’m taking you out. I’m going to wine and dine you, and you’re going to be so weak in the knees, so easy to take to bed.” Harry giggles as Louis backs him up against the wall of their stairwell.

“Maybe we should just skip dinner? Head back upstairs, get straight to the good part?” He suggests.

“What kind of girl do you take me for, Harold?”

Harry shrugs, “An easy one.”

Louis gasps, and steps away from Harry. “I. Am. Offended,” he declares, heading down the rest of the stairs.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding,” Harry insists, catching up and grabbing his hand once again. “You’re very classy.”

“Thank you, baby.”

“I love you, Louis.”

Louis feels his heart expand with fondness for this boy, feels like he’s walking on air. Pining for the better part of four years has finally paid off, he and Harry are together. Harry is his boyfriend.

“I love you too, Hazza,” he promises. Harry is his, and now that he’s got him, he’s never letting him go.

Chapter End Notes

im so sorry for the delay! ive got about one chapter and an epilogue left though, and ill be working on them throughout this week and next weekend (im on break from college so i promise ill /actually/ focus.) in the meantime, i hope you enjoyed and that you don't mind it's a little bit short!

as always, please check me out on tumblr at coffeelouis !!
November 2018

Louis goes back to work at the end of the week, primarily because the biggest scene to direct is always the rose ceremony. He watches Harry send Kendall home, and feels slightly disappointed, because out of the final three, she was the one he hated the least. And because he knew Simon’s going to chew his ear off because he didn’t want Harry to end up with a man. The season’s tagline may be that he’s bi, but the show is still tragically heterosexual.

Kendall seems sad, but not heartbroken when she says goodbye to Harry. As they hug, she whispers something that’s not picked up by the mics, which is...interesting.

“Eleanor,” he barks into his radio. “I want that subtitled. Find out what she said by whatever means necessary.”

He then spends a good half hour filming interviews with Harry and the final two men but after awhile, Eleanor finally radios back to him.

“She was incredibly stubborn, but she finally admitted she said ‘Do what you need to. You deserve to be happy’,” she reports.

“Huh...okay. Well, thanks,” Louis nods, calculating how that factors into the episode. “Okay Harry, you’re good to go. I’ll see you at 7 tomorrow morning for your flight.”
And with that, the week is over, and it’s time to jet off to Costa Rica, and for Harry to invite his finalists into the fantasy suites.

Throughout the entire process, Louis had known this week was coming, but that doesn’t make its arrival any easier. He’s been with Harry every step of the way, and to know that Harry’s relationships are going to progress without the watchful eye of cameras this week scares the living shit out of him.

Not to mention, he still can’t get Gemma’s warning out of his head. What had she been playing at, telling Louis that Harry missed him? That he still misses him? What is she trying to accomplish, other than further confusing Louis?

He needs to ask Harry about it. The first chance he gets.

For a brief and wonderful moment, he thinks he’ll get his chance on the plane, and be able to get all of this over with before they arrive. He sits down with Harry, at the back of the jet. Harry’s been looking out the window, watching the clouds, because he still hasn’t been allowed internet access.

“Oh, Harry, we have something we need to talk about,” Louis says, sitting across from him and settling his iPad in his lap.

But then Eleanor rushes over, interrupting with “Oh, perfect! I was just looking to round you two up. We need to talk about Harry’s date with Liam tomorrow.”

Louis sighs, but sits back, and waits as Eleanor explains logistics: where they’ll be going, what they’ll be doing, how much time to allow before opening the fantasy suite card.

There’s no option of if he’d like to grant Liam the fantasy suite. It’s expected at this point. Partly because he’s the frontrunner, but more because the show wouldn’t be the show if there was no romantic night spent together under the camera’s watchful eye.

Harry watches him throughout El’s speech though, like he can tell that this isn’t what Louis had meant to talk to him about. Louis avoids his gaze, alternating between nodding at Eleanor and checking their itinerary on his iPad. He can get through this.

After they figure out their plans, Eleanor pulls him aside to meet with James, Greg, and Simon, to talk about goals for the finale’s narrative. James gives him a weird look across the aisle, studying him, but he’s been doing that for a week now, and Louis is starting to get good at brushing it off.

Things get a little crazy once they land, as they have to organize their equipment in the hotel rooms they’d rented out, coordinate with the locations where the dates will be taking place the following day, and corral Harry, Liam, and Nick into their respective rooms.

Louis tries to sneak away at one point, rationalizing that he just needs to ask Harry this one thing, and then it’ll be back to business, but it suddenly seems as if every person on the planet has a pressing issue for him to address.

He tells himself he’ll find the time, but he’s starting to lose hope. He just may be stuck wondering what the hell Gemma meant for the rest of his days.

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Harry has just finished buttoning his trousers when he hears Louis’ voice call, “Alright Styles, we need to talk,” as he once again lets himself into Harry’s hotel room uninvited.
Harry squeaks, grabbing his shirt from where it’s been lying on the bed next to him and uses it to cover his bare chest. “Louis,” he gasps. He turns, raising his eyebrows at Louis, who looks gorgeous in his t-shirt and jean shorts. His radio is pulling on his shirt, stretching it tightly across his chest. Harry can feel his nipples perking up in response, and he closes his eyes.

“You’ve got to stop barging into my room like that.” It’s not good for his mental state that his ex-boyfriend keeps coming in while he’s changing, especially not when he’s meant to be getting engaged to another man in a matter of days. Louis holds his hand over his eyes and smirks, while Harry puts on his shirt. He coughs when he’s ready, and Louis looks up. It’s infuriating how amused he looks.

“Are you properly clothed then, your highness?”

“Yeah, fuck off,” Harry mutters, folding his sleep clothes and packing them back into one of his empty drawers, knowing Louis is probably rolling his eyes because he still can’t let his laundry lay out on the floor. “You here to tell me if I should sit on Liam’s right or left side on our date today?”

Louis pauses. “No, actually.” There’s hesitance in his voice that catches Harry off guard.

He looks up, surprised by the sudden change in tone. Louis had gone from joking to serious in a matter of seconds, and now he’s watching Harry carefully.

“No, it’s not about the show, actually,” he trails off. “Your, um, your sister,” he tries again, and Harry looks away, feeling unsettled with the way Louis is watching him like he’s trying to get what he needs out of Harry without actually asking. “She said some very interesting things to me at your hometown.”

Harry narrows his eyes, walking over to Louis. His breath is coming shorter now, and he feels nervous and unhinged. “And what did she tell you?” He ventures. He knows it was probably something serious, what with how jumpy Louis’ been acting, but he still hopes it was inconsequential.

“She, uh” he stutters again, “she said you miss me.” Harry feels all the air rush out of his body at once. He’s on the edge of panicking, but Louis continues talking, “and she warned me not to hurt you again, or I’d have to face her.”

Harry opens his mouth, ready to respond, but he has nothing to say. Never in a million years had he expected Louis to choose today to finally acknowledge their history, to address how brutally he’d broken Harry’s heart.

“And I’m just wondering,” he continues, “why she would say that. Considering what went down. And considering—your ex-boyfriend.”

Harry cocks his head. “What?” Louis has thrown him completely for a loop. “What are you talking about?”

Louis steps in towards Harry. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t. I really don’t.”

Louis takes another step closer, poking his finger roughly into Harry’s chest. “You do. You said it yourself, Harry. You came on the show to get over your ex-boyfriend.”

Harry shakes his head, trying to think clearly. Maybe he’d readily admitted to some of the contestants that he’d been trying to get over Louis, and maybe he shouldn’t have done that, but he hasn’t
brought up past relationships in weeks, so he has no idea what Louis is going on about.

“I just want to know,” Louis continues, “Why Gemma would still be pissed at me—”

He’s acting absurd, and Harry is not amused. “I don’t know what you’re going on about, Louis,” he growls, “And I really don’t think you should be worrying about it, not with a boyfriend waiting back home.”

“— not the ex who drove you to come on a television program.”

They finish speaking at the same time, and Harry scrunches his face in confusion, “Wait...what are you talking about?”

“Boyfriend?” Louis asks, dropping his hand to his side. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“I don’t have an ex,” Harry counters. Louis freezes, and they stare at one another for a few moments.

“So, wait...let me get this straight — ”

“You’re single?” Harry cuts in, because, what? Louis wasn’t dating the model who kept hanging around the house?

“But...Gemma.”

Harry runs a hand through his hair. “She’s just looking out for me, you shouldn’t take anything she says seriously.”

Louis takes another step in, “So, you’re not...” he mutters, like he’s thinking something over. Then he huffs, mumbles, “Fuck it,” and surges forward, grabbing Harry firmly by the waist and pulling him in, pressing their lips together.

Harry’s frozen for a moment, trying to come to terms with what’s happening, his lips slightly slack, until Louis starts to pull away and Harry realizes, they’re kissing, they are kissing.

And no matter how much it fucks everything up, he wants this, and it’s obvious Louis wants this, and they can take a few moments to just revel in it before it all goes to shit.

Before Harry gets engaged to someone else. Fuck.

He’s going to enjoy this moment, and he’s going to take advantage of their chemistry, which is still as strong as ever.

The energy is so strong between them Harry feels like he’s suffocating. He feels like he can’t breathe under the weight of this want, of everything unresolved and unsaid between them.

He surges forward, clutching hard at Louis’ cheeks and pulling him forward into a hard kiss. Louis reacts immediately, his hands leaving his hips and winding through Harry’s hair and pulling, changing the angle how he sees fit. He bites firmly at Harry’s lips, and Harry stumbles backwards. He lands on the bed behind him and pulls Louis in by the back of his thighs. Louis leans over him, resting one of his knees on the fabric next to Harry’s hip, practically perched in his lap, breathing heavily into Harry’s mouth.
“Lou,” Harry whispers, grappling onto any and all parts of him he can reach.

“Haz,” Louis answers back, breathing his name out like it’s all he knows. Harry lets himself fall backward on the bed, pulling Louis with him, grinding up into him.

“Louis, please,” he pants. Louis’ pulled his head away and is nipping at Harry’s collarbone. Harry can’t breathe, he’s so overwhelmed, so turned on. He bucks up again, and just as he reaches up for Louis’ face again, to pull him in again, he hears a sharp rapping on his hotel door.

“Harry?” Louis jumps backwards at the sound of Eleanor’s voice, wiping the back of his hand quickly across his mouth. “The camera crew is here, we’re ready for your date with Liam,” Eleanor pauses. “Is Louis there? I can’t find him.”

Louis smoothes out his t-shirt, fixes his messy fringe, and clears his throat. “This didn’t happen,” he whispers. His eyes are blown wide, and he’s staring at Harry in fright. “And it can’t happen. Ever again.”

Harry nods, dumbstruck and hard, as Louis marches towards the door and rips it open, walking right past Eleanor and the crew, who push their way inside.

“Fuck, Harry, you look like a mess. You haven’t gone through hair and makeup yet?”

Harry shakes his head weakly, sitting up slowly and rubbing at the back of his neck. He feels like his brain (and heart, honestly) ran out the door with Louis, and his body is just going through the motions, rigid and unsure as he gets ready for his date. He has no idea what just happened, but he knows it’s going to throw him off for the rest of the day.

“Liam and Harry,” Liam reads, smiling to himself, “Welcome to the beautiful country of Costa Rica. I hope you are enjoying your stay. Should you choose to forgo your individual rooms please use this key to stay as a couple in the fantasy suite, Chris Harrison.”

Liam looks up at Harry, who watches him and makes sure to maintain a welcoming, encouraging look as Liam studies him hopefully. “So what do you say?” Harry asks.

“Definitely,” Liam answers, leaning in for a soft, tender kiss.

Louis calls cut, and they’re given a brief few minutes to rest as they head to the fantasy suite to begin filming again. Once there, Louis only asks for a couple of basic shots, them sitting on the couch with champagne, standing on the balcony watching the stars, and a few short minutes of small talk about how much they care about one another, before he allows them to dramatically shut the door and finally escape the camera’s watchful gaze.

“So,” Liam starts, as they sit back on the bed. “We’re finally alone.”

“We’ve still got our mics though, they can hear everything.”

“Oh come on, Harry. In a sense, we’re finally alone. What should we do?” Liam smirks at him, and Harry stutters, unsure what to say.

“Hold on, before you say anything, I brought something that might make the night a little more interesting,” he gets up and starts digging around in his bag, and Harry’s mind wanders nervously to everything he might have brought. A vibrator? Handcuffs? Something else similarly kinky and entirely too much for a first night together?
Harry really hadn’t expected Liam of all people to bring props.

“Here,” he says, tossing something onto the bed from across the room, and Harry flinches before he realizes. A deck of cards.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I thought we could play. Sound fun?”

“Yeah, definitely!” Harry shifts back, making more room for Liam to get comfortable, and smiles. “This is not what I expected,” he admits.

“It got me through all the downtime at the mansion,” Liam explains. “You wanna go first?”

Harry nods, smiling to himself because Liam has always made him feel so comfortable and knows just what to do to make him happy. He really is a great guy, and Harry is lucky to have him here.

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Louis wakes up to the sound of voices in his ear, laughing and arguing over who would get the last slice of bacon. He jumps up and realizes he must have fallen asleep on the couch, and now Harry and Liam have woken up again.

He then remembers Harry and Liam’s conversation from the night before and groans, feeling sick to his stomach once again.

Who would’ve known Liam would be so fucking kinky? Louis prays he doesn’t win because he honestly doesn’t think he could deal with imagining the sex they’d have for the rest of their lives.

Of course, Nick isn’t much better. Nick has been absolutely infatuated with Harry since the start, and is finally going to get the chance to tell Harry he loves him, and enjoy everything that comes with that.

Except...Harry had kissed him back yesterday. He’s still reeling from it from the fact that *Harry had kissed him back*. So, no matter how giggly he gets whenever Nick is around, he’d still kissed Louis. That has to mean something, right?

Only, it shouldn’t, because that was a moment of weakness, and it can never happen again.

But God does Louis want it to. It had felt so right, like coming home, and it’s so hard to push that down and ignore it. He’s having so much trouble going back to the way things were before now that he’d had a taste of everything he’s missing.

It doesn’t change anything though. Louis had been stupid, had been overwhelmed by emotion. And Harry is still, technically, dating two other men. Is sleeping with them, if last night is any indication, and going to propose to one of them in a matter of days. True, Louis and the rest of the crew are cornering him into that, but it’s still happening. And some of the couples actually end up following through on their proposals.

Louis needs to pull himself together.

Harry smiles as he emerges from the bedroom a few minutes later, Cal trailing him from where he’d been filming his and Liam’s breakfast. Harry’s waving a friendly hello to the crew that’s preparing to accompany him on his date with Nick. He looks relaxed and happy, fully sated and satisfied. Louis wants to punch something.
Either way, it’s none of Louis’ business. He’s not Harry’s boyfriend, he’ll never be Harry’s boyfriend, and Harry is about to propose to his actual (kind of) boyfriend. Louis needs to get a hold of himself.

Harry meets Nick at the entrance to a hiking trail, and the two spend the afternoon perusing the jungle and hiking towards a beautiful waterfall. When they arrive, Harry leads Nick onto a rock overlooking the water, grabs his hands, and jumps.

Nick screams on the way down, and again when he comes to the surface, gasping for air, presumably because of the water temperature, but he’s still laughing, a smile lighting up his face as he pushes Harry’s hair back and leans in for a tender kiss in the middle of a sparkling lagoon.

“You’re beautiful, you know that, right?” Nick whispers, and Harry blushes, then splashes him in the face with the cold water.

Louis groans, hoping the cameras were far enough that nothing was splashed on them.

After another hour or so of swimming and cuddling, they re-dress for their hike back down the trail so they can get ready for dinner. The dinner where Harry is going to present Nick with a fantasy suite card. Fuck.

Hours later, Louis is sat on a hotel couch, bag of crisps in one hand and clipboard in the other, while Eleanor flips through a magazine and makes sparse notes about the audio. One of the microphones crackles, followed by wet kissing sounds. Eleanor raises her eyebrows, making a note with a small smirk on her face and Louis wants to punch something. He hates that listening to his ex-boyfriend having sex is part of his fucking job. He never could have imagined being so unlucky.

“Wait, um,” Harry’s voice comes through. Louis’ heart stops. What’s he about to suggest? That Nick fuck him? That Nick call him Daddy? No, that’s absurd. He knows the crew is listening. (Oh god, would he ask Nick to call him Daddy even when he knows Louis can hear him?) Harry coughs before he speaks, and Louis hates his voice, he hates it, hates it, hates it. It’s gorgeous, and deep, and soothing, but holy shit is it slow and Louis needs to know what he’s going to say right fucking now. “Maybe we should, um, just talk?” Harry suggests, “Get to know each other? Everything we couldn’t say in front of the cameras?”

“You got any big secrets you’re keeping from me, H?”

“No,” Harry responds, entirely too quickly, “I’m just not sure I want to do this when everyone can hear us.”

“Aww, you want it to be special, yeah?”

Louis is ready to scream. Nick is an arrogant arsehole, to just assume that’s Harry’s reasoning. He’s so full of himself. Maybe Harry just doesn’t want to deal with his awkward, gangly limbs.

Then again, there’s no reason against Nick’s line of thinking. He has been dating Harry, in a way, for the better part of two months.

Harry’s voice comes through again, but it’s entirely too quiet and muffled to make it out. It sounds quiet, comforting, and entirely too loved-up for Louis’ liking.

“I need to take a break. Page me if I’m needed,” Louis mutters, standing up and heading out the door to take a walk down the beach and clear his head.
Even if they aren’t having real, penetrative sex, Harry is still spending the night with Nick, because he cares about Nick and might marry Nick, and Louis needs to comes to grips with that before the proposals start and he really drives himself mad.

**July 2017**

Harry looks proper pathetic when he rings Niall’s bell. Drenched from the rain with two duffel bags, a backpack, and a sodden, soggy box in his arms. Niall looks shocked to see him, and Harry just shrugs, “You mind if I stay here for a while?” He asks.

Niall doesn’t respond, just steps back and opens the door wider, reaching out to help Harry with his bags. “So what is all this?” He says, setting one of the duffles down next to the couch, where Harry flops down miserably.

“My life, packed up in boxes.”

“Alright, drama queen. That’s a bit melodramatic, yeah?”

Harry picks up a throw pillow and buries his face in it. “Niall, I left Louis.”

“Fucking shit, are you serious?”

Harry nods, the pillow moving with his head.

“What the fuck happened?”

Harry shrugs, looking up, tears lining his eyes. “It was a long time coming. We weren’t really dating anymore.”

Niall knocks him in the side of the head. “Harry, I’m sorry.”

“No I’m serious! We were more like fuck buddies than anything else, I can’t tell you the last time we had a proper cuddle. And when we have sex,” Niall winces, but doesn’t cover his ears like he usually does when they talk about their sex life, so Harry can tell it’s serious, “It’s quick and fast. Like a fuck rather than making love.”

“It’s just a rough patch, Harry, you can get through it.”

Harry sighs. “But that’s just it, I don’t think we can. I’ve been feeling like this for months. It’s like there was all this build-up, years worth, but in the end, we acted more like a couple before we were officially dating.”

Niall moves to sit next to him, putting his arm around his shoulders. “Harry, I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing you could have done, Nialler,” he buries his head in Niall’s neck. “But um…I told him to call me, when he was ready?”

Niall leans back a little, a questioning look in his eye, but doesn’t say anything.

“Yeah. So, like, when he gets back from filming, if he wants to give it a go, he’ll call,” he shrugs.

“You think he will?”

“I think he will if he really loves me.”

“That’s a lot of responsibility to put on him, H.”
“Niall, I’ve tried to talk to him. For months now. But he’s just blown me off. I feel like he doesn’t want to be with me, and I need to know that he really does. I need to trust that he’ll reach out for me. I can’t keep being the only one who puts in the effort.”

He stands, moving towards the door.

“Harry, where are you going?” Niall stands and looks after him.

“I have to go get the rest of my stuff from the flat.”

“It’s pouring out there, it can wait until tomorrow.”

Harry pauses as he struggles trying to fit one of Niall’s rain coats over his damp hoodie.

“I feel like I really need to do it now. I’ll see you later, okay?” He calls, marching out of the room without waiting for Niall’s answer.

November 2018

Harry sits cross-legged on his bed, looking across the room at Louis, perched at the desk. “Soo…” Harry starts, and Louis rolls his eyes.

“Initial thoughts, Harry, just, who you’re leaning towards.”

Harry coughs. “I’m sorry, I’m just not used to this.” He looks down at his hands, “Besides, I would have thought the final meeting would be the one Simon would really want to be present for.”

Louis laughs, crossing his legs beneath him and settling his clipboard on his lap, “The game is changing, mate. You’re proposing tomorrow, that’s a very intimate decision.”

Harry scoffs, “That my ex-boyfriend makes for me.”

“More like with you,” Louis corrects. “Besides,” he reaches out with his pen, taps Harry on the knee, “Stop that. This is serious.”

“I am being serious,” Harry huffs. “It’s strange for me that I have to plan who I want to propose to with my ex-boyfriend. It’s off-putting and awkward and I don’t know what to say or how to act.”

Louis is silent, studying him from across the few feet of space, and while a minute ago it had felt stifling, too close, it now feels like they’re lifetimes apart.

“Louis, we were in love. And now we’re this. It’s just—well you have to agree it’s awkward, yeah?”

Harry looks up, expecting Louis to be brushing him off, or rolling his eyes, but instead he’s still just staring quietly at Harry.

“I mean,” he eventually says, his eyes open and honest, “It’s obviously not ideal.”

“And with what happened the other day,” Harry adds, and Louis sits up straighter, finally setting his clipboard aside.

“We agreed we wouldn’t talk about that again.”

“No,” Harry argues, “You agreed. You decided. That’s what this entire process has been, you making decisions about our relationship for both of us.”
Louis sucks in a breath. “Excuse me, Harry? You’re the one proposing to someone tomorrow, you’re the one who came on *The Bachelor*, you’re the one who left me in the first place.”

Harry stills, and raises his eyebrows. “Excuse me?” He whispers, straightening out his legs and moving forward until he’s sitting on the edge of the bed, clutching the covers. “What did you just say?”

“Don’t make me repeat it, you asehole,” Louis mumbles.

Harry narrows his eyes. “I did not *leave you*, Louis. You’re the one who lost interest. You’re the one who never called.”

Louis looks up now too, the two of them staring at one another harshly. Harry is afraid of what he’ll do if he keeps staring, but he’s more afraid to look away. Louis isn’t speaking, so Harry keeps going, his anxiety propelled by Louis’ silence.

“I told you to call, Louis. ’Call me when you’re ready.’ And you never called.”

Louis raises his eyebrow, but still says nothing.

Harry takes a deep breath. If Louis doesn’t speak soon, he’s just going to keep rambling, and then he’s really going to regret something.

Louis doesn’t. Harry’s eyes dart away, focusing on the wall behind Louis’ head.

“Why didn’t you call?” His voice breaks on the last word, and suddenly Louis is up, out of his chair, and sitting next to Harry on the bed, cradling him while he breaks down crying, like a stupid, immature child. “Why didn’t you call, Louis? I thought you’d call,” he whispers, “You didn’t call.”

“Shh shh,” Louis whispers, running his hands over Harry’s curls, running fingers through his hair. “It’s okay, Hazza, it’s okay, I’m here.”

Harry shakes his head and looks away, focusing his eyes on Louis once again, who now looks remorseful and broken. “You broke my heart, Louis,” he admits.

Louis smiles pitifully at him, reaching a hand out to wipe away some of the tears and snot staining Harry’s face.

“I’m sorry, H, I’m so so sorry.”

Harry swallows, looking down at Louis who looks so beautiful, so sad, so regretful. And for the first time, he feels compelled to take Kendall’s advice. Louis had broken his heart, Louis has made his life a living hell, Louis is the reason he’s suffered so much heartbreak in the last year.

But no matter what, it all comes back to Louis. No matter what weird shit they’ve been through in the last year, Louis is the only thing that ever made him truly happy. It didn’t matter how broke or overworked they were, because they were together. Until they weren’t.

But even now that it’s awkward and stifling, he feels more himself with Louis than with any of the contestants, and that means more than anything. It’s just up to him to take that leap.

“I love you, Louis,” he admits, a new bout of tears starting up. This time, thankfully, they fall silently.

Louis shakes his head, subtle tears blooming in the corner of his eyes as well. “I don’t deserve you,
Hazza,” he whispers, reaching a hand out, stroking his thumb across the back of Harry’s hand. “I love you, but I really really don’t deserve you.”

Harry’s heart stops at Louis’ admission, he looks up, eyes shining, trying to search for a glimmer of hope in Louis face, but he just looks distraught. “You—”


Harry lets out another sob, snot exploding out of his nose, and Louis laughs, reaching across the duvet to grab a tissue from the side table. Harry shakes his head.

“I’m so disgusting,” he mumbles.


Harry snorts. “Stop saying that, please stop saying that.”

“It’s true though,” Louis answers, “I do.”

Harry tries to compose himself, sitting up and pulling away from Louis’ hands. Louis folds his legs together, settling his hands, still holding the dirty tissue, in his lap.

“That doesn’t change anything, though, Louis. You still left.”

Louis shakes his head. “No, Harry, I didn’t. You’re the one who broke it off.”

“No argue with me,” Harry insists, taking in a shaky breath. “You were pulling away for months. And it wasn’t because you were away filming a movie, it was more than that.” He sighs, wiping harshly at his eyes and looking up at Louis, who’s watching him tentatively. “I just couldn’t do it anymore, it felt like my boyfriend,” he snorts, “my best friend, didn’t care about me.” He wipes vainly at his eyes, looking at Louis desperately. “But I told you to call, Louis. I wanted you to call. And then you,” his voice breaks, and he tries to steady it because he won’t break down again, he’s lost control of himself too much already tonight. “You moved to America and just forgot about me.”

“No,” Louis says, sitting up straighter, and reaching out for Harry again. Harry jerks his arm away, and Louis pulls it back, “No, Harry, I didn’t forget about you, I could never forget about you,” he insists. “Never.” He runs a hand through his messy hair. “It’s just...you were too good for me, Harry. Our whole relationship, I was just waiting for you to realize how much better you could do. I was waiting for you to leave me.”

He takes a deep, shaky breath before continuing. “I was so scared, Harry. I’d pined after you for years, I knew how painful it was. And I thought.” He swallows. “I thought you were going to break up with me, that you’d find someone else. Someone better. That maybe you’d still want to be friends, but I just. I knew I couldn’t pine like that again, not after knowing what it was like to be with you.”
He lets out a sob, and Harry reaches out to stroke his forearm. He smiles a little and shakes his head, “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Harry. I never wanted to hurt you. I pulled away because I was afraid of you hurting me. I was never good enough for you, Harry.”

Harry’s crying again by now, tears streaming down his face. “How could you think that, Louis? How could you ever think that? Not good enough for me?” Louis shakes his head, looking down at his hands in his lap, “Louis, look at me,” Harry begs, “You were everything to me.”

Louis looks up, eyes shining, and smiles slightly at Harry.

“It broke my heart when I thought you didn’t love me anymore.”

“I could never,” Louis insists, reaching forward and grasping Harry’s hands again, “I could never stop loving you, Harry, I’ll always love you.”

Harry nods, trying to convince himself it’s true, then falls forward, wrapping his arms around Louis’ shoulders. Louis scoots forwards too, until he’s practically seated in Harry’s lap on the top of the bed, clutching Harry tightly. Harry pulls his head back from where it’s tucked into Louis neck and lifts Louis face, clutching at his cheeks. He studies Louis’ face for a few moments, which is so open, so honest. Louis nods at him, regret and shame clear in his face, and no, that just won’t do. Harry leans forward slightly, brushing his lips softly against Louis’.

“I love you, Louis,” he whispers, just slightly.

Louis nods again, his nose brushing against Harry’s cheek as he moves his head. “I love you too, H, so much.” He leans forward and brushes his own lips against Harry’s again, and Harry loses himself, savoring the passionate kiss. It’s soft, and tender, and so full of longing and love. Harry can’t imagine he ever lived without this, he can’t imagine what he had ever done, or would ever do, without Louis.

He falls backwards after a few minutes, collapsing sideways on the bed, but Louis falls with him. They lie next to one another, Louis slightly propped against Harry’s chest, running his hands through Harry’s hair and smiling down at him.

Harry traces his fingers across Louis’ cheek, then wraps his hand around his neck and pulls him closer for another kiss. It’s all so delicate, it’s so close to falling apart, but Harry would do anything to keep them together. “I love you, Louis,” he whispers, again. He feels like a broken record, but seeing Louis’ eyes light up, his tentative smile at the words, Harry would mutter that phrase and that phrase only for the rest of his life if it made Louis’ eyes shine like that forever, so full of hope and love.

He gently rolls Louis over onto his back, climbing into his lap, and holding his face between his hands. “I love you, I love you, I love you,” he whispers, peppering kisses across Louis’ face. “But I need it to be different, I need you to say this is going to be different,” he admits, settling his hands on Louis’ waist, playing with the skin just under the waistband of his shirt.

Louis sits up quickly, almost dislodging Harry from his lap, but Harry catches himself, settling back on his feet, kneeling over Louis. “Fuck, Harry, what are we doing?”

Harry feels his heart catch, anxious and twisting in his chest, his stomach in knots at Louis’ sudden turn, “What do you mean? Louis, I love you, and you love me, and, that’s enough, right?”

Louis shakes his head fiercely, running a hand over his face, and breathing heavily. When he finally looks up and makes eye contact with Harry, everything slows, and he lets out a sigh of defeat,
running a hand over Harry’s curls and brushing them away from his face. “No, Harry, it’s not enough.”

Harry stands, needing to put space between them, backing up until his thighs hit the desk. “What do you mean it’s not enough?” He breathes harshly, trying to get more air into his lungs, trying to wrap his mind around what’s happening, what Louis is saying, “It’s everything.” He blinks the newly formed tears out of his eye, sitting down in the desk chair. “It’s everything,” he repeats.

“No,” Louis says, “It’s not. It’s—Harry, we have responsibilities. To this show. This is my job, Hell, this is your job. You’re the star of a television show on a major network, you have to— we have to take this seriously.”

“But you’re right here, Louis. You’re here and you love me, that’s all I need, Harry insists. “This show is supposed to be about falling in love and I already have.”

“You’re supposed to be telling a story, Harry.” Louis shrugs. “And I’m not a compelling ending.”

Harry blinks back tears again. It feels like his heart has dropped into his gut. Louis sounds so hurt, so defeated, and just. How could Louis say that? How could he not know how important he is, how he means everything to Harry? “You’re the best ending, Louis. You’re the love of my life, you’re the only ending.”

“Harry, I need you to understand.” Louis begs.

“But I don’t. I don’t understand why we can’t be together. We love each other, that’s all that matters.” He doesn’t understand why Louis is putting this fucking show, that has brought them nothing but pain and resentment, ahead of their relationship. It’s absurd, it’s irrational, it’s. Exactly what he’d been doing before they broke up. His job would always be more important than Harry.

“Do you really think it’s going to be any different?” Louis asks, as if he can read Harry’s mind.

“It has to be, Louis, we love each other. It can be at we work at it,” he sighs, reaching out and trying to pull Louis close to him again. “I want to work at it.”

Louis shakes his head, “I can’t. Harry, I don’t—” Louis sighs, like it’s hard for him to breathe, and Harry feels his heart shattering in his chest. He doesn’t want to hear Louis next words, doesn’t want to hear him tell Harry that they’re not worth it. That he’s not worth it. “It won’t be any different, Harry. This is my job, and I can’t just.” He cuts himself off again, taking in another shaky breath. “Harry, you deserve someone who’s going to make you happy. I’ve seen how you fit with Liam, and I know how much fun you have with Nick, they could be good for you.”

“Louis, you created that. You orchestrated these relationships, you’ve been working so hard to tell this story for months now. Of anyone in the world how could you believe it’s real? It’s not.”

“But it could be.”

“But it’s not,” Harry insists. He feels desperate and scared, like he’d had a chance at everything he ever wanted, only to have it taken away. Again. He watches Louis, who’s folded in on himself, small and sad. He’s the opposite of everything he’s been since Harry met him, loud, bright, and self-assured. “You know what, you’re right,” he admits. “You’re right. I was being stupid, and this isn’t going to be any different.” Louis seems to deflate at that, looking at Harry, his face a mixture of relief and defeat. “You still don’t believe you could be enough for me, and until you realize that all I want is you, plain and simple, whatever you can offer and nothing more, this isn’t going to work.”
Louis nods. “Yes, see—”

“Please get out.”

Louis stands, lingering, his hand twitching towards his clipboard, placed next to Harry on the desktop. “I need—”

Harry glances down at it, at the two charts lying side-by-side, the narrative they’ll sell each option. The picture of Nick, in the upper right hand corner, and the doodles drawn around his head, like Louis had been frustrated, and taken his anger out on this tiny, insignificant image. He thinks about the hostility Louis has shown, what he now realizes was jealousy. He can feel the anger stewing inside his gut, and before he can think it through he just mutters, “I’m picking Nick. Now please leave,” and pushes the clipboard into Louis’ chest. He stands and retreats to the bathroom, splashing water on his face and breathing heavily.

He wants to break down and cry, feeling like his heart is broken all over again. And it is, isn’t it? He’d put everything on the line once again, only to have Louis stomp all over him, to prove once again that he doesn’t care about their relationship, doesn’t care about Harry, at least not as much as he cares about himself.

Harry feels so stupid, so ashamed. How could he possibly think he was worth it, when Louis has been working towards this his entire life? He hadn’t wanted Harry when he was working shit jobs in England, how could he possibly give everything up for Harry when he was finally directing a successful American phenomenon?

He swishes some mouthwash around his mouth and tries not to throw up, tries not to cry any more tonight. He’s embarrassed himself enough, and there’s nothing else he can do now. Not when he’d just…

But there’s nothing Harry can do now. He’d made a desperate bid for Louis, Louis had rejected, and now he needed to move on. Now he needed to...propose to Nick Grimshaw apparently. Fuck. Harry needs to go to sleep. He can’t handle all the thoughts bouncing around in his head right now, can’t handle the guilt and shame trying to eat him alive.

He turns out the light and reemerges into the bedroom. Louis is gone. He left. Again.

And Harry feels his heart break all over again.

Chapter End Notes

as always, im on tumblr at coffeelouis and you can find the fic post here!

oh, and also, im sorry louis is coming off as a major dick in the end of this chapter. i’m hoping to rectify that in the coming chapters!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

i’m sorry this has been such a mess, i hope this chapter makes up for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nick is practically jumping with excitement the morning of the final rose ceremony and Louis is close to smacking him around the head. It’s like he can tell Harry’s picking him in a few hours, and he’s absolutely impossible to corral, smiling and giggling with the crew as they try to help him prepare. Louis directs him to different pensive shots, looking over his suite balcony, sitting on the edge of his bed in his suit, but he’s losing focus. He won’t sit still for more than five seconds, and finally, once they’ve tried out a couple different shots, Louis gives up.

“Let’s just loop them if we need to, I can’t deal with this anymore,” he mumbles to Cal, looking up at Nick, who’s started bouncing his leg and checking his watch.

“Okay, Nick, can we get an in the moment?”

Nick nods and allows Louis to direct him to the stool they’ve set up in the corner. He takes a deep breath and looks directly ahead, a little above the camera.

“Alright, Nick. Exciting day. How are you feeling this morning? Question in the answer, as always.”

“I’m feeling great,” Nick begins. “I can’t wait to see Harry. He’s my best friend, and I’m so excited for it to be just the two of us. I’m so confident in what we have, I honestly couldn’t see either of us ending up with someone else.”

Louis closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He hates Nick with every fiber of his being, but he’s mature enough to admit that’s mostly because he knows Nick and Harry have a great thing going—they truly are great friends, and Harry has said throughout the process that he’s looking for a partner that he can also call his best friend.

He’s going to say that today. He’s going to propose to Nick, and going to tell him that he’s finally found his best friend...his best friend who he can spend the rest of his life with, Louis is going to have to hear him propose to his best friend Nick Grimshaw.

He’d come so close last night, so close to everything he’d ever wanted. But there’s still this debilitating fear, like he knows no matter what Harry says now, a year or two down the line, he’ll realize Louis just isn’t good enough. And why wouldn’t he? Harry is charming, and sweet, he’s America’s most eligible bachelor, for God’s sake, and what is Louis? A useless puppeteer on some exploitative reality show. Yeah, who wouldn’t be fawning over that shit?

Besides, he has a responsibility. He may not particularly like his job, but it’s still his job, it’s still everything he’s been working towards since uni. If he just gave it up for a boy—No, not just a boy, his brain reminds him helpfully, Harry—then everything would have been for nothing. The late nights, the long trips, the...neglecting his perfect boyfriend enough that he up and left him.
Louis feels so conflicted, his mind warring between self-doubt and self-blame, like one minute Harry left because Louis didn’t deserve his love, and the next it’s because Louis drove him away. And this is definitely not what Louis needs today of all days, on what is possibly the most important day of his career. If he delivers today, if he can pull this off, have a successful finale, then he’s set. He’s set for life, he’ll prove himself to Simon, that he’s a great director, and he’ll finally have everything he’s been working towards.

Except, it is really just a guaranteed position for another round of this bullshit, and, all things considered, of all the things people are going to be winning on set today, he supposes a fiancé is the much more desirable prize.

James ambushes him when he arrives at the proposal sight, dragging him away from Eleanor and her notes, and into a brush a good fifty feet away from the rest of the crew. It’s only when Louis’ jeans start getting caught on stray branches that he really starts to speak up, because honestly, they don’t know what could be in here. “Oi, Corden, what’s this about then?”

James stops, abruptly, and doesn’t reply, just pulls Louis in closer, and looks around to make sure they haven’t been followed.

“Look, I’ve got a proposal to get to—”

“Shut up, Louis,” James mutters, rolling his eyes, and ripping the cord from Louis’ radio.

“Hey, what’s that about then? There’s such a thing as personal—”

“I know you’re in love with Harry,” James spits out.

Louis shuts up.

He tries to laugh it off quickly, spluttering and mumbling, “What?” But he’s not convincing, and he knows it. James knows it. Hell, even the moon, peeking through the leaves and entirely unwelcome for early afternoon, knows it.

“Don’t play with me, Louis. I know you weren’t telling me everything back in Cheshire, and I know you’re in love with him.”

“James, no,” Louis splutters. “No, you don’t—Fuck. it’s not—”

James cuts him off again, slapping a hand over Louis’ mouth and leveling him with a sharp glare. “Don’t play with me, Louis.” He lets out a deep, exasperated sigh, and pulls his hand away from Louis’ mouth, to instead pinch his own nose. “I need you to understand, this show is not worth it. I don’t care what obligations you think you owe, you don’t. You don’t owe anyone anything, not even Simon, yeah? So anything you’re doing out of obligation to this shit show is just,” he pauses, looking around belatedly to make sure nobody’s listening in, “not worth it.”

He rolls his eyes a bit, then hits Louis playfully, but much heavier than is strictly necessary, on the arm, before turning around to head back to set. “Please don’t prioritize this show above anything else. It’s truly, truly not worth it.

And then he just leaves. Like he hasn’t just tried to convince Louis that everything he’d worked for was for nothing. Louis couldn’t just forget about the show. He couldn’t. He had an obligation, this was his career, everything he’d been working for for years. He couldn’t just do what he needed to (which was beginning to feel increasingly and terrifyingly like telling Harry to fuck The Bachelor
and fuck Nick Grimshaw, not in that way, and pick Louis instead.) But he couldn’t. He couldn’t. Could he?

Could he actually have Harry and his career?

He shouldn’t even be thinking about it, it couldn’t possibly be that easy. He needed to honor his commitment. He needed to finish this season, needed to get Harry engaged to—fuck him—someone that could actually love him the way he deserved. He needed…

He needed Harry.

***

The Hawaiian shirt was draped haphazardly over the back of Harry’s desk chair and Harry could not stop staring at it. He knew that wasn’t exactly what he was meant to be focusing on right now, knew there were much more, erm, pressing matters at hand.

But that was the first shirt he’d really splurged on, and it deserved to be folded carefully and neatly, not thrown across the room in the heat of passion. Louis had no respect for his —

He forgets all about the shirt as Louis inserts the first finger, his eyes fluttering shut and mouth opening wide, letting out a breathy moan.

“Please, Lou,” he begs, as Louis moves it in and out, nice and slow, whining like he’s about to burst from the teasing. His finger feels strange, Harry hasn’t had anything but his own fingers in what feels like ages, and Louis’ are more blunt and thick than his, but after a few minutes he’s whimpering, gasping, and asking for more.

Louis obliges, and leans forward across Harry’s back and kisses him. “You’re so tight,” he whispers.

Harry, floating in absolute bliss, still finds it in himself to snort and bat at Louis’ face. He pulls away a bit, watching his fingers going in and out of Harry as he scissors and stretches them. “How do you want to do this, baby?”

“Want, um. On my back. Want to see you.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” Louis agrees, turning Harry over gently and working the condom onto his own cock. “You think you’re ready?”

“Yeah, yeah, I need it, please,” Harry begs. Louis smiles, cupping Harry’s face and bringing their lips together as he presses in. Harry feels full and overwhelmed immediately, but after a few moments, he starts to adjust, and soon he’s grasping at Louis’ shoulders trying to push him further inside. “I can take it, just, please Louis.”

Louis smiles and hides his face against his neck. “I love you,” he whispers, peppering his skin with light kisses. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

“I love you too, now please fuck me,” Harry whimpers, feeling overwhelmed in the best of ways as Louis picks up speed and starts thrusting at a faster pace. Louis reaches his hand around and grasps Harry’s cock, jerking him off in time with his own rhythm, and Harry can’t hold on when he’s so sensitive. After only a few minutes, he’s spilling into Louis’ palm, across his chest, and Louis is following shortly after, collapsing on him and making a mess of both their abdomens.

“That was amazing,” Louis sighs where his face is pressed into Harry’s sweaty underarm, and
Harry wraps his arm around his back, hums back at him.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” Louis promises. After another minute or so, he sits up, kisses Harry quickly, then pulls out, ties off the condom, and gets up from the bed. “I’ll be right back, I promise,” he says, running his fingers through Harry’s hair.

Louis returns from the bathroom with a warm washcloth, and wipes Harry down, depositing it on floor next to the bed. “Louuu,” Harry whines, slightly concerned but altogether too lazy to encourage him to lay it out to dry in the bathroom. It might make a stain in the carpet, but Harry’s just been fucked within an inch of his life by his best friend, and that’s definitely the priority here.

“Hey, Harry?” Louis whispers, smiling into his neck.

“Yeah Lou?”

“I think I’m gonna marry you,” Louis says, pressing a kiss into Harry’s collarbone and smiling just slightly.

Harry smiles too, hugging Louis closer to him. That night, he falls asleep with an ache in his ass, a boy in his arms, and a lot of love in his heart.

***

Louis is late. Which is, unfortunately, the only thing Harry can focus on as he stands on a platform on the beach, the Caribbean Sea to his left and a thick brush of trees to his right. The crew is running around, frantically trying to perfect the shot, but Louis isn’t there.

Where is Louis?

He tries to put him out of his mind, tries to focus on anything else, like how happy Nick will be when he comes down the rickety staircase. Harry should be happy, he’s about to get engaged, and Nick is...good enough.

A wave of guilt roils through him, like it had been all morning. He feels ill. He’s so ashamed, partly that he threw himself so desperately at Louis, but more that he’s about to propose to Nick like last night had never even happened. And, to make everything worse, he first has to be a proper dick and break up with Liam on national television.

Harry is such a pathetic loser. Nick deserves better.

He shifts and looks around again, trying to find Louis, but he’s still nowhere to be seen. In his left pocket, the engagement ring is heavy and stiff, a steady reminder of his overwhelming shame. It’s for Nick, in only a few minutes Nick is going to wear it, but it doesn’t belong to him. He didn’t pick it for him.

He feels his stomach twist again, and looks around desperately, hoping to find a good place to run if the contents of his stomach decide to spill out of him.

Only a few hours earlier, Neil Lane had sat him down and showed him his ring options. Immediately one had stood out, one that looked exactly like the one Louis had given him for Valentine’s Day. He’d kissed Harry and placed the ring on his left ring finger, promising he wasn’t actually proposing, promising he wasn’t actually proposing, because that would be absurd after three months of dating in their early twenties, but that he intended to spend the rest of his life with Harry. Harry had removed it, slid it over to his right hand, and told
Louis about an article he’d read the year before, how gay couples typically wore their engagement rings there. Then he’d fingered Louis open with that hand, with the ring, and worn it every day for months, until Niall had confiscated it after their break-up, promising to return it once Louis called.

He realizes, now, that it’s probably still in a drawer in Niall’s bedroom, and that he’ll never actually wear it again.

His stomach lurches.

He hopes Louis notices the engagement ring he chose. There’s no way he won’t, not with the editing the crew are going to do on the final episode, zooming in on the ring as Harry and his fiancé embrace on the beach. That is, if Louis even shows up.

And then, suddenly, like he could read Harry’s thoughts and know that Harry can’t get his mind off of him, even when he’s about to propose to another man, Louis is there. Looking determined, and nervous, and like he’s about to make all of Harry’s dreams come true and profess his undying love for him.

Fuck Harry really needs to get a hold of himself. He’s being absurd even in his own head.

“Harry,” Louis cuts into Harry’s thoughts, catching his attention once again. He clears his throat and stands in front of Harry, straight as a rod. Harry tries to swallow down his nerves, and nods tersely, looking into Louis’ weirdly determined eyes.

Louis takes a deep breath before he speaks and Harry feels his heart catch in his throat. Is he—

“Can we get some more shots of you holding the rose looking pensive, and then a quick in the moment?”

No, of course not. He turns quickly, and leads Harry to the side where one of the PA’s has already set up a stool in front of some beautiful pink flowers. He taps nervously at his clipboard while Harry sits down, and Harry feels his heart sink. Louis is acting awkward and uncomfortable, but it was just like Harry to think it meant something. Of course it didn’t.

It’s not like Harry ever meant anything to Louis.

Harry gives a short speech about how this is the hardest decision he’s ever made, but he thinks his heart has finally led him to the right answer, and he just can’t wait to be out there, proposing. It’s a lie, and almost too cheesy for him to stomach, but it gets the job done, and Louis is nodding, smiling like he’s satisfied when Harry’s finished.

Harry wants to cry, and then he wants to maybe strangle Louis a little bit. He wants to cross the beach and tear the fucking clipboard from his grip. He wants to...He wants...

Louis.

He looks up again, and Louis is turned away, muttering fiercely into a headset. He needs to put it all aside. As absurd as it sounds, Harry doesn’t have anything to lose by getting engaged on national television.

It’s not like Louis would want him anyway. Louis made that very clear last night. Last year. Always. He may have residual feelings for Harry, but he’s always going to pick his career. The Bachelor comes first.

He cuts abruptly into Harry’s thoughts, barking orders at the cameramen to get ready. “Chris has just
met Liam at the road, and they’re standing by. Are you ready to go?”

Harry gives a weak nod, which he’s not even sure Louis even sees before he’s looking at the long, wooden staircase built into the hill.

The next thing he knows, Liam is walking down the pathway, smiling, and Harry feels like the worst person in the world. It gets worse when Liam gets closer and his smile, impossibly, widens, like he’s genuinely happy to see Harry, and not just doing his part for the cameras.

Harry wants to make a break for it. He’s pretty clumsy, so he can’t imagine making it far in the jungle, especially with the crew so close to the treeline, but he’s a pretty strong swimmer. He could maybe even make it all the way back to England. Right?

Liam finally reaches the platform, and reaches out to take Harry’s hands. “Hi,” he whispers.

“How are you?” Liam asks.

Harry bursts out laughing. “I’m nervous,” he admits. Nothing like Liam being sweet and respectful to break the tension. “But I’m okay,” he lies. Liam nods, and waits, like he knows Harry has more he wants to say before he begins his practiced speech. He’s such a nice guy—he’s played by the rules all season, been respectful of the process and everything the producers have instructed him to do, and yet, still. He’s defying their direct orders because he can tell Harry needs him to.

Harry’s a horrible person.

He sighs, so overwhelmed with fondness, and so grateful that Liam is breaking conventions so that he doesn’t have to bare his soul on national television and become an embarrassing meme on Twitter the morning after this airs. Like Harry surely will, when viewers realize that he doesn’t love Nick. At all.

“Liam, you are everything to me,” he begins. “You’re a great friend, I know I can trust you and that you’ll be there for me through anything. And that’s what I need—a friend, a partner.” he sighs. Liam’s eyes are so trusting, “So open,” Liam is so incredibly kind, and he doesn’t deserve this, he deserves so much better than this fucking public humiliation. “And Liam, every moment that we’ve had together has been so special,” he says, and he’s surprised to realize he actually means it. He enjoyed the time he spent with Liam, and he wishes this was real, because Liam has been there, Liam has had his back, Liam trusted him, and Harry wishes he could offer back one ounce of the dedication Liam put into this “relationship.”

Harry’s ready to break his heart, but, gently. Ready to apologize for everything he’s put Liam through, ready to try to make things right, only...Liam cuts him off. He’s ready to make an utter ass out of himself, in the hopes that it will make Liam look slightly better, but he has only said “But—” when Liam cuts him off.

“Wait,” Liam mutters, looking down at their entwined hands, like whatever he’s about to say is emotionally taxing, and he needs a moment of build-up. Harry’s heart stops, he can feel Liam about to start his speech, about to make a romantic declaration that Harry can’t return.

Harry wants to scream. Wants to do anything that can stop this trainwreck. Just save Liam his dignity, let Harry make a fool out of himself instead. God knows he did by going on this wreck of a show.

Maybe he should just propose to Liam right now. They haven’t filmed Nick’s segment yet, they
could very easily turn that into a break-up. If Liam’s about to make this colossal mistake,

Although, Harry supposes the real mistake was trusting Harry. Harry and his stupid, unlovable, broken heart that never belonged on this show in the first place.

“Liam, don’t,” he whispers, trying to warn him, trying to minimize the pain and suffering and humiliation.

“No, Harry, I need to get this out,” Liam steps backwards, looking lost and remorseful. Like he’s the one who has a reason to be ashamed. “I’m so sorry, Harry, I can’t do this.”

Okay what.

That certainly doesn’t sound like Liam professing his love for Harry, whose head is spinning as he slowly realizes he has no clue what’s going on here. “Liam, what?” He whispers.

“I’m sorry, Harry, but I can’t do this. This isn’t—you’re wonderful, really wonderful, but we aren’t right together. And we can’t, I don’t think I can do this.”

Harry’s jaw drops, and there’s absolute silence from the crew. Harry eyes flick about, between Liam and the crew, all standing still, like waiting for some clue for what to do. Louis’ frozen, his clipboard hanging limply from his fingers, and for the first time this season, looks like he has absolutely no clue what to do.

Moreover, Harry’s a little put off by the evident failing of his own acting skills. He’d worked so hard at coming across as genuine, trying to make the contestants believe that he actually held some semblance of interest, and yet, here was Liam, who, while a bit dense and idealistic, could see through everything.

Harry runs his hand through his hair, trying to come to grips with what exactly is happening.

“This journey with you,” Liam explains, “Has been amazing. But I feel like my heart’s just not in it, and I have a suspicion that yours isn’t either.”

Harry nods, trying to hide a smile, “I’ll admit, I understand where you’re coming from. You’ve been an amazing partner, and thinking back on all the memories we’ve shared, I’ll truly treasure them forever. But I don’t feel that great, romantic love that I’m looking for with you. I’ve felt it with someone else and I—”

Harry wants to say that he intends to follow it, to search for it with that other person, to imply he means Nick and keep the viewers interested, now that they know he’ll propose to Nick. Louis and the producers have trained him well, he knows his script. But.

That’s just not true. And with all the lying he’s doing today, all the lying he’s been doing all season...well, he can’t lie anymore.

Liam nods, “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me, Harry. It’s been an incredible experience. I wish you all the best.”

Harry smiles, genuinely smiles, because Liam is a peach and Harry is so sorry he’s dragged him through this, but happy at least he’s not leaving with his heart broken. “You too, Liam. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Liam smiles back, kicking his feet a bit at the platform, “So uh, what does this mean...”
Harry barks out a laugh, and pulls him in by the neck for a close hug, “You’re a great guy, Liam. Anybody would be lucky to have you.”

Liam laughs too, and pats Harry firmly on the back. “Hey,” he whispers, suddenly changing the mood from amiable-goodbye, to something much more serious. He presses mouth tightly up against Harry’s ear, where the camera’s surely can’t be picking up what he’s saying, and whispers, “Follow your heart, yeah? Not the producers, not the show’s narrative. Your heart. Please.”

He pulls away and winks. “It’s been quite the ride, Harry James.”

And with that, he’s retreating, heading back up the steps, smiling fondly as he waves back down at Harry.

For a full 10 seconds it feels like the bittersweet ending to a movie, where the main characters don’t end up together, but have reached a tender understanding. It feels like a weight has been lifted from Harry’s chest, and (almost) like he can breathe again.

And then the crew jumps into action, and Harry realizes why his life will never feel like a movie: he’s already living on a movie set.

“You doing okay, honey?” Lou asks, as she powders his nose and wipes some of the sweat from his brow. Making him pretty again. Making him pretty enough to propose. Oh god.

Harry nods, because his mouth feels full of cotton and he’s afraid if he tries to speak he actually will vomit.

“Two minutes until Nick’s entrance,” Louis calls, from where he’s stood with James and Greg at the bottom of the wooden stairs.

Harry takes a deep breath. He’s going to propose to Nick. Nick told Harry he loves him. He’s devoted to Harry. Most importantly, he’s willing to be there for Harry, to make sacrifices for Harry. That’s exactly what he needs right now. He’ll be with Nick, and he’ll forget all about Louis fucking Tomlinson.

They’re good together. They’ll be good together. Nick is funny and charismatic and the country is going to fall in love with his antics, and it’s going to be an incredibly successful finale. Nick is a going to help this show succeed, Nick is a good, safe choice.

And if Nick pisses Louis off and happens to make him the slightest bit irrational and jealous, well...that’s just a bonus.

Louise certainly looks pissed as he herds James and Greg behind one of the cameras, and motions for them to begin rolling again, for Nick to enter.

Good.

Harry’s so distracted by Louis’ erratic behavior that he almost misses Nick when he enters, grinning down at Harry, his face shining, like he’s overwhelmingly happy just to see Harry. Harry almost forgets to look adoring, and then he looks back over to Louis behind the camera, like he fucking always does, and refocuses. This moment is about proposing to Nick Grimshaw. It’s about giving everything to this man, who’s offered himself to Harry. Louis couldn’t share anything with Harry, but Nick can, he has, he’s what Harry needs. He’s so self-assured about it too, so open about giving his entire self to Harry.
Harry feels like he’s going to puke.

“Harold,” Nick greets, nodding at Harry and taking his hands between his own big palms, his long fingers wrapping around Harry’s wrists. His quiff is blowing in the slight breeze, and his cheeks are pink and wind-tinged, but he doesn’t seem bothered at all. No, just. Happy.

“Hi,” Harry whispers nervously.

“You ready for this? It’s going to be a cheesefest,” Nick warns, and Harry cracks a smile. The dread in his gut eases just a bit knowing Nick is still willing to poke fun at the show, and the speech they asked him to prepare, even when he’s this nervous. Harry offers a reassuring smile, hoping it’ll ease some of Nick’s anxiety.

Nick closes his eyes, like he’s psyching himself up, then begins, “I’ll admit, Harry, I was wary about this process. My mates signed me up as a joke and honestly, I thought you’d be a right wanker.” He pauses. “Can I say wanker on American TV?” Harry barks out a laugh, feeling more relaxed than he has all morning, and shrugs.

“You’ve said it twice now, might as well lean in.”

Nick wags his eyebrows twice, swings their clasped hands back and forth, then continues, smiling playfully back at Harry. “And then you weren’t, and it was nerve wracking. You’re so charming and bloody handsome, and honestly, Harry, for most of this I just wanted to cut and run,” he squeezes Harry’s hands in his, and finally makes eye contact, and Harry feels his stomach clench in guilt when he sees the truth and honest vulnerability written on his face. “But then I thought about you, and your smile, and your kind heart, and I realized I could never do that. Because as I’ve gotten to know you, I’ve become so sure, and I’ve never been more certain of anything in my entire life. You’re it for me, Harry. You’re my best friend.”

Harry’s breath stills at the words. It’s not the first time Nick has said them, but it’s the first time it’s made him want to chuck himself into the ocean with sheer, overwhelming guilt. Nick is being so honest with him, because he trusts him, and Harry threw himself at their director last night. He can’t do this to Nick. No matter how much sick satisfaction he might get from watching Louis’ face as he proposes to the man on set, possibly on Earth, that he hates the most, Harry’s not that person. He’s not that cold.

He glances over at Louis, and flashes back to the first night of shooting, feeling anxious and holding Louis as an anchor, even though he knew it was proper unprofessional to be looking off-camera every few seconds. Louis’ still there now though, just like always was on that very first day, just like he has been since, holding his breath and watching rapt from behind the camera.

He clasps the ring in his pocket to ground himself, but holding the velvet box causes nothing but stress and uneasiness to roll in his stomach. It’s unfair to propose to Nick right now and pretend that this has ever been about anything but Louis.

“Nick,” he begins, taking a deep breath and hating everything about this. Hating the fact that he’d changed his mind so last minute, hating how he’s about to break Nick’s heart, hating this entire goddamn show. “I’ve felt a connection with you from the very beginning. I can be myself around you. I know that no matter what, you’re probably going to make fun of me, but that you’re also always going to have my back, and be willing to share your life with me. I’m so, so grateful for that. But,” he pauses, trying to gather the courage, “I can’t offer you everything that you’ve offered me.”

Nick pulls his hands away immediately, taking a harsh step back. His face shuts down, his eyes
blinking fast and looking out towards the water.

“I’m so sorry, Nick,” Harry starts. “I didn’t—”

Nick shakes his head forcefully. “No, no, it’s fine. It’s uh—”

Harry shakes his head, determined to defend this decision, this fucking spur of the moment choice that somehow feels right. “I didn’t plan this, Nick, I swear. I didn’t want to hurt you, I would never want to hurt you,” he promises. “I just. I don’t think I love you—not in the same way you love me. And I don’t think I ever will.” He sighs, trying to make eye contact with Nick, but he’s just shut down entirely.

“Let me walk you out,” Harry offers, reaching for Nick’s hand, but Nick shakes his head and backs away.

“No, no, it’s fine, I’m fine.” He looks off-screen, running his tongue over his teeth, his eyes hard and closed off. “There’s a better way to do this, Harry,” he suddenly says. He rounds back on Harry, stepping closer and hovering over him. “If you knew it wasn’t me, there’s a better way to do this, to not leave me so,” he pauses, searching for the words, but he doesn’t finish the thought, he just steps back again.

“I know,” Harry says, mostly to himself, “I know, Nick, but I thought—I thought it was you. I’m so so sorry. I wish I had something better to offer you, I just...don’t. I can’t propose to you. I’m sorry.”

Nick nods again, then shakes his head, then taps his fists against one another. “Well I guess that’s it then. It’s been, uh, fun, Harry.”

He starts off towards the stairs again, and Harry’s heart lurches, “Nick,” he calls. Nick stills, but doesn’t turn around. “I really am sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. At all,” he admits, and Nick nods.

“Pretty unavoidable though, huh?” He continues on up the stairs and Harry feels his eyes well up. He feels so guilty, knowing he hurt Nick so much and so badly. It was easy to say goodbye to people like Danielle and Caroline and Xander and hell, even Kendall, who he knew weren’t here to find love with him, who he knew would walk away and be fine. But Nick actually loved him, and Harry had pulled him around.

And for nothing. He may have saved Nick the heartbreak of an empty proposal, but it’s not like he accomplished anything with this season. This was his last chance. He’d started with twenty men and women, and now he’s down to zero, and he’s still just as hung up on Louis Tomlinson as ever. Moreso, actually, if last night was any indication.

Everything stills for another moment, and Harry presses his hands up against his eyes, trying to stop the tears from tracking down onto his cheeks.

He feels so guilty, so terrible, but still, somehow, also much better. Lighter.

Nick wasn’t the one for him, and it was wrong for him to ever pretend he was.

***

Louis can hardly tear his eyes off Harry, standing still on the platform, a slight smile on his face, like he’s relieved at what just happened.

He probably is.
And Louis is happy for him. Harry has just absolutely trashed his career, but Louis doesn’t care. That probably means the worst for him, that Harry just made his life infinitely harder, and Louis’ just happy that he’s finally free.

However, relieved as he might be for Harry, that doesn’t stop the wave of dread rolling through his entire body, thinking about what happens next, what Simon’s reaction will be, what the editing will become.

That’s fucking terrifying.

Luckily, he doesn’t have too much time to think on it, as James is grabbing him tightly by the bicep, and pulling him up the wooden staircase to find Simon.

“What the fuck was that,” Greg mutters as he walks ahead of them, his feet landing heavily on the creaking wood. “What the fuck just happened?”

Neither James nor Louis responds, they just follow in silence and climb into the black Escalade, waiting to take them back to the resort, back to Simon’s suite.

When they arrive, Simon is, predictably, livid, pacing around his room furiously.

“What in the ever-loving fuck was that?” He demands, echoing Greg, and Louis’ own sentiment. But, for the first time in Louis’ career, he doesn’t cower, isn’t scared to do exactly what Simon wants.

“That was the Bachelor,” Louis says, “Making a decision.”

“This show isn’t for him to make decisions,” Simon growls, spitting his words in Louis’ face. “This show. This fucking empire is for me to make decisions, and for him to look pretty and play his part. Do you understand that, Louis?” He steps forward, jamming a sharp, accusatory finger into Louis’ chest. “You may think you’ve been pulling the strings this season, with your cute little, gay Bachelor idea, but do not forget—I control this machine. Not you, not that prop that we put on the posters. Me.”

Louis narrows his eyes, “Well, I’m sorry, sir,” he says, widening his eyes and blinking his eyelashes. “But I suppose this finale is going to have a new narrative.”

“That’s not fucking good enough, Louis,” Simon snarls. “You’re lucky I didn’t fucking fire you when he eliminated the last woman—I fucking told you, it’s one thing to have a progressive season, to bring viewers in by offering them this nice, new narrative, but this isn’t about some cute little gay love story, or some British asshole finding himself. This show is about fairytales. Marriage. A man, and a woman, getting engaged. And this shit?” He motions to the cameras set up around the room, still broadcasting. “This shit will. Not. Sell.”

“I’m afraid it will have to, Simon,” Louis nods, still going for innocence because he knows it’ll piss Simon off even more.

He’s right. Simon seethes, the vein in his forehead sticking out and his face going red, “5,000,” he responds, and Louis balks.

“Excuse me?”

“5,000,” Simon repeats, turning to James and Greg, “I believe that’s a good starting price. I’m willing to go up to 20,000—but that’s the max, do you understand? I’m already afraid of the losses we’ll take when this season airs.”
Greg nods, and ducks out of the room, but James stays behind.

“What the fuck was that?” Louis demands.

“Reparations,” Simon says. “The amount we’ll have to offer Nick to come back and re-film the ending, until we get what we need.”

Louis balks, his jaw dropping. “Excuse me?” He whispers. And, look, he knew Simon was a piece of shit. He knew he had no soul, would do anything to make money.

But he hadn’t imagined...this.

“He just had his heart fucking broken, you expect him to come back and re-film that? Who do you think you are?”

“I think,” Simon says, seething, “That I am the showrunner of this fucking franchise, and that I can do whatever I want.”

“And what about Harry? What sum are you offering him? 30,000? 50,000?”

“We’re offering him nothing, Louis. He owes this to us.”

“He doesn’t owe you anything.”

“He goddamn does. You can check his contract yourself.”

“Fuck your contract. This season was supposed to be about him finding love, and he couldn’t do that with any of the shit contestants you threw at him, who, meanwhile, were all just trying to get Instagram sponsorships, so that’s your fucking fault.”

“No,” Simon counters. “It’s your fucking fault. Don’t forget, this season was on your shoulders. And you’ve failed. So get back out there, get your puppet in position, and deliver a season finale that’s actually fit for television.”

Louis takes a deep breath, stares into Simon’s cold, dead eyes, and takes what is probably the biggest risk of his entire career.

“No.”

Simon raises his eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“No.”

Simon looks, bewildered, over at James, who just shrugs his shoulders, a slight smirk playing at his lips.

“I’m sorry, sir. But you hired me to direct my vision for this season. This isn’t it.”


He doesn’t wait for a response. Ultimately, he doesn’t need to; there’s nothing else to be said. Simon wants him to manipulate Harry, wants to break him down to nothing and force him to propose to someone he doesn’t love. And Louis can’t force him to do that, not after everything.
Not after, fuck, he’d told Louis he loved him last night. Louis’ heart clenches when he thinks about it, about how much he’d wanted to say yes, to fuck the show and run away with Harry.

He’d wanted to, but he felt an obligation to this franchise, which had finally taken a chance on him, finally given him what he’d thrown away their first relationship to accomplish. But that’s over with now. That drive to give up everything for his career, which has ultimately made him more selfish and petty, was honestly, pretty stupid.

And Harry had rejected Nick. He’d known how much it would break Louis inside to see him propose to him, and yet he’d still not proposed. Is it because he could see a future with Louis too? Even after Louis had been so heartless to him?

No, that was too irrational. Louis had lost his chance. He’d neglected Harry too many times. He didn’t deserve him. Not anymore.

Louis had been perfectly content to pack up his things and head straight for the airport. But something held him back.

Probably his fucking conscious. And his stupid, hopeful heart. That thing had always been a bit of a bitch.

So here he is, standing outside fucking Harry Styles’ hotel room door.

Louis hadn’t removed his radio, and the crew must not have gotten the memo to disconnect it, because he’d heard the whole thing as he packed up his own room; he’d heard the fights, the screaming, the resigned silence.

He’d heard Harry propose to Nick Grimshaw.

Now here he was. Waiting outside the door of a newly proposed man, hoping Nick wasn’t inside, hoping Harry could see past it all and maybe, just maybe, forgive him. Harry would have to keep up this fucking charade until (and after) the show airs, but they could make it work. After all, he’d had to propose to someone he didn’t love because of Louis. Because Louis hadn’t warned him from the moment he showed up in that conference room, hadn’t been looking out for him, hadn’t told him how soulless this entire show really was.

He owed Harry an apology. For everything he’d done—the lies, the manipulation, letting him get away in the first place. Everything was Louis’ fault, and the least he could do was apologize.

And then maybe beg Harry to take him back. It was worth a shot, at least.

He felt like his heart was in his throat as he knocked on Harry’s door, even though it certainly wouldn’t make any difference. He’d rejected Harry too many times, Harry would certainly have moved on.

But there was a little part inside of him, that had seen the look in Harry’s eyes last night, the unconditional love on his face, and knew he had to at least try. He just needed to get everything out there, needed to clear the air, needed to allow himself the chance, or at least closure he needed to move on.

After a few seconds of silence, Harry still hasn’t answered the door. Louis can’t hear any movement, and he wonders if Harry really came back here after the finale wrapped.
If he, perhaps, had gone straight to Nick’s room.

But, no, that would be absurd. Harry didn’t want to marry Nick, he’d made that abundantly clear last night. And he may have thought about proposing to him out of spite, had made it very clear that he intended to propose to him out of spite, but he’d never go through with that; Harry was too good.

Harry couldn’t be there, he had to be here. He just had to be. So Louis raised his fist, and knocked, again.

Ultimately though, this wouldn’t make any difference. Last night had been incredible, had allowed the bubble of hope to grow, which had taken him here to this hotel hallway instead of the airport.

But that was last night, and this was today. Today, he’d primed Harry to propose to a man he didn’t love. He’d manipulated him, just like he had all season. He wasn’t good enough for Harry. Sure, maybe his doubts about his worth to Harry had been unfounded when they were actually together, but now they’re completely valid, Harry deserves someone better. Louis had manipulated him and his suitors all season long, just to advance in his career. Harry deserved someone who would put him first.

Louis didn’t honestly think that quitting his job would mean winning Harry back, not by a longshot. But it did mean allowing himself to not be such a heartless villain anymore. It meant trying to be a better person, so being someone worthy of the unconditional love Harry could have offered him, if he hadn’t, stupidly, thrown it away.

And so, with what is clearly an empty room in front of him, he picks up his duffle bag, and slinks back down to find a car to take him to the airport.

It’s not like he really deserved to find love anyway.

Chapter End Notes

as always, im on tumblr at coffeelouis and you can find the fic post here!

as it says in the fic summary, there’s two chapters left. one where they (finally!) pull their shit together, and an epilogue. i’m sorry to those who’ve stuck with me and they haven’t gotten back together yet, but please trust what i’m doing, because i want this to be done Right, and harry deserves better than how louis has treated him so far. i want them to get back together in the most healthy way possible. so just hold on.

i know this probably means nothing, but i really am hoping i can pull those chapters together soon and get this all posted and done with. i started this fic a fucking year ago, it’s about bloody time.

but we’ll see. who fucking knows? i mean, this is me we're talking about.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

so it's been a year.....bet you never actually expected this did you?? but as ive been saying for 1.75 years, I DID NOT ABANDON THIS FIC! IT'S JUST BEEN TAKING ME A HELL OF A LONG TIME.

anyway, here u go.

also, THIS IS THE END! IT SAYS THERE'S ONE MORE CHAPTER TO GO BUT THAT'S THE EPILOGUE!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Filming a proposal to the man Harry had just rejected is probably the hardest thing Harry has ever done in his life. But going back to his job at the bakery in London like nothing ever happened, is almost the second. There’s another breakup wedged in between those that takes the cake.

His life is pretty much exactly as it was before filming; shifts at the bakery, spending evenings with Niall (and usually Gemma) and moping about his failed love life.

The only salient difference is that when his phone is returned, he has about 120,000 new followers on Instagram, and 80,000 on Twitter. And that he’s contacted to do promotional events. He knows as the show gets closer and closer to airing that he’ll have to comply soon. But god, he really doesn’t want to; and for now, that’s enough.

Eleanor has been his primary connection with the Bachelor world since filming wrapped, but she’s generally allowed him to be pretty low-key, which he appreciates. A smiling selfie posted on Instagram here, a picture of some fresh buns there, maybe a tweet about looking forward to the season starting to air. He knows it will be worse after the finale, that he’ll likely be expected to post cute pictures with Nick, whom he hasn’t spoken to since the proposal, to keep up the charade they’d filmed the last day in Costa Rica.

But for the time being, he’s grateful for Eleanor. Grateful that she’s letting him get away with doing so little, grateful that she hasn’t been pushing too hard.

Grateful that it’s her and not Louis that’s contacting him.

When he allows himself to think about it, it really is strange. He hasn’t heard a word from Louis, not since the first proposal to Nick, not since he had never reemerged with James and Greg, had never returned to yell at Harry about how he’d ruined his show, and give Harry the extra bit of motivation he really needed to spitefully film a successful finale.

Harry had been angry that afternoon, wishing Louis would just get on with it, force Harry to propose and allow him the closure he really needed, that Louis was, and always would be, an asshole that put his career first. But Louis hadn’t even allowed him that, and that was maybe the worst part. He’d never returned, and that just proved how little he cared.

After the proposal, Harry and Nick were herded into separate SUV’s and rushed to the airport,
instructed not to contact one another, to wait for members of staff to reach out to them, and to not reveal who won to anyone. Harry himself was only allowed to reveal one thing; that he was engaged. In fact, he was actively encouraged to reveal he was engaged, at any chance he got, to drum up interest in the upcoming season.

It all made him feel a little bit queasy, if he’s being totally honest.

But Harry keeps going. He keeps working, keeps baking, keeps trying. It’s not like he’s really that much worse off than he was before. Still pining, still miserable, only on a much more public scale now.

He’s working outside the bakery today, chipping off the paint he’d decorated the windows with the previous week, advertising a special weekend promotion. He’s bent over the window, trying to get at the stubborn blue bit in the corner, when he’s bumped into suddenly, and knocked to the pavement.

“Hey,” he complains, rubbing his head where it hit against the glass, and looking up at the figure looming over him.

“I, um, I’m sorry—” they say quickly, and Harry has to squint at the (rare, especially for January) London sun, but. That almost looks like Louis. Almost sounds like Louis too. “I’m sorry, mate,” he continues. “Didn’t see you there.”

“Louis?” Harry asks, squinting up and confirming that—Yep. That’s the ex-love of his life. And ex-ruiner of his life. Just when he thought he’d never see him again. Standing above him in a neat suit and clutching his iPhone like a lifeline. “What are you doing here?”

Louis looks speechless, his mouth hanging open slightly as Harry pushes his curls back off his face and stands, with no help from Louis. Asshole.

“I. I’m not stalking you, or anything,” Louis says, quickly. “I mean, I didn’t even think about it, like, that I was going through Mayfair, or anything. I just thought—I mean, it’s the quickest way from the tube, and.”

Harry shakes his head, “I didn’t think you were stalking me,” he clarifies, coldly. “But you did live halfway across the world, last time I checked.”

“Oh,” Louis replies, letting out a breath. “Right. I guess I did.”

“Mnhmm,” Harry raises his eyebrows, waiting.

“Right. Um. Well, James. He’s starting a new show, over here, I mean. Some late night thing, and he wanted to bring me on as a producer.”

Harry hums and nods, motioning for Louis to go on.

“So, I um, am. I’m on my way to a meeting now. To finalize everything.”

“Oh.” Harry licks his lips, processing. “Um. Congrats.”

“Thanks.”

Harry wrings his fingers, still thinking about what all this means. “So you’re um, moving back to London.”

“Yeah.”
“You’re not doing *The Bachelor*?”

“Uh, yeah?” Louis confirms, his brow furrowing. “Yeah, I quit.” He says, almost as if he expected Harry to know that little bomb. He opens his mouth and leans forward a bit, then closes it and steps back again. He must see the obvious confusion in Harry’s face, because he backtracks.

“Actually, um, during the, uh. During the finale.”

Harry furrows own his brow, and takes a step back, "During the finale?” He clarifies.

“Yeah, uh,” Louis swallows, raising his arm up to scratch the back of his neck. He sounds like he has more to say, but he just kind of ends there, whispers, “Yeah.”

Harry gives him a scrupulous look, trying to figure out what it is Louis’ not saying, but Louis just looks down at the ground, kicks his feet at the pavement a bit.

“Look, I uh, I’m late for a meeting,” he says, at the same time Harry starts, “I should get back inside.”

Harry sighs. “Yeah, of course. Um. It was nice seeing you though.”

Louis nods, takes a step back as Harry gathers up his supplies.

“Wait—” Louis says, just as Harry’s opening the door. “Wait, um. That’s not. I. I have some stuff I’d like to apologize for. I think...I think you deserve it. So, um. If you’d like, I mean, if you wouldn’t mind, would you like to grab a cuppa? My treat.” He blinks at Harry, his eyes big and, in a trick of the light, a bit watery. “I don’t want to make you do anything you don’t want,” he scoffs to himself, letting out a little self-deprecating laugh. “Not again, anyway.” He sighs. “I just. I’d like to apologize. If you’ll hear it.”

Harry’s watched him quietly as he rambled. Louis’ not usually this nervous, at least not in the time Harry’s known him, but, he supposes, he’s never had a reason to before. He’d never been as in the wrong as he has this past year.

“Look, Louis…”

“No, you’re right,” Louis cut him off. “It was a shot in the dark anyway. I’m sorry, I’ll just,” he gestured behind him with his thumb, and stumbled backwards a step or two. “I’m late, anyway.”

Maybe it was something about how lost and sad he looked, but Harry felt himself breaking. Louis looked truly remorseful and Harry was trying to move on and grow, and he’d never do that if he kept holding a grudge.

“Wait, um. Coffee sounds nice.”

Louis’ so shocked he drops his phone, and has to scramble to pick it back up again.

“I get off at six tonight. I’m not actually sure if anywhere would still be open then, but…”

Louis nods. “We’ll make it work. Figure something out. Yeah. Um. Yeah, six sounds good. I’ll swing back, pick you up.”

“Okay,” Harry agrees, with a sinking feeling that he’s making a huge mistake.

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Describing Louis as nervous would be a massive understatement. He could feel the anxious energy strumming through him as he paced a block away from Harry’s work, fifteen minutes before he was meant to meet him. He would’ve stopped in for a cuppa somewhere, but knew the caffeine would only wind him up more, especially if they did find an open coffee shop.

He fucked up. He fucked up so massively badly, and it’s been all he could think about the past couple months, holed up at home, first in LA, and later in the hotel room James put him up in, while the new late night show he’s starting helps him sort out a flat.

It was all his fault. Everything. Harry leaving him, Harry feeling abandoned, Harry going on the goddamn show in the first place. Not to mention everything he’d manipulated Harry into doing while he was Louis’ puppet. And, through it all, Louis still loves Harry. Desperately. Even though he knows he doesn’t deserve it. Knows he doesn’t deserve to even ache like this, with this unrequited love, because he had treated Harry so despicably, had neglected him so miserably.

He expects Harry to chew him out, but when he locks up the bakery behind him and approaches Louis, who’s waiting across the pavement at this point, but he’s just quiet, subdued. Even as they wander around, heading East until they settle in Soho Grind, which Harry promises makes a great flat white. It’s the first thing he’s said, actually.

Harry orders an avocado toast, because of course he does, and they settle down at a table in the back. There’s an odd crowd in here, one woman in the corner, working on her laptop, a couple empty coffee mugs surrounding her, obviously having worked here most of the day, but there’s also a couple pockets of friends, sipping cocktails. It’s a weird transitional period, an hour in-between the cafe being a coffee shop during the day, and popular drinks local in the evening. Louis feels uncomfortable, and focuses on the tea in front of him.

“So, um. How have you been?”

Harry shrugs, and doesn’t elaborate. After what feels like an eternity, but is probably only about 10 or 20 seconds, he says, “And yourself?”

“Well, you know, I lost my job,” Louis jokes.

Harry chuckles. “Yeah, that was always your thing, wasn’t it?”

Louis deflate. “Look, Harry I’m—” For some reason, the words just won’t come. He has so much he wants to say to this man, and he feels like he just...can’t. He doesn’t know how he can encompass it all, a simple apology doesn’t feel like enough. But, he’s got to try. “Harry, I’m really sorry. About everything. About our relationship, about the show, about...well, I’m just sorry. You deserved better.”

Harry stays silent for so long that Louis doesn’t think he’s not going to reply. But then, “You can’t even imagine how it feels to lose your boyfriend to his career...and then for his career to become, well, finding you a boyfriend. When I wasn’t even. I wasn’t even over you.”

Louis nods. “It was despicable. I know. And I hate myself every day for it. But Harry—”

“You just kept breaking my heart, over and over and over again,” Harry says, as if Louis hadn’t spoken. His hand is tight on his coffee cup, only a sip left at the bottom now. “And I hated you, for a long time. I still might.”

Louis snorts. “Understandable.”

Harry laughs. “Yeah.”
“You’re um. You’re really strong, Harry. I’m really impressed with you.”

Harry nods, still refusing to look up from his cup. “Thanks, Lou.” He whispers.

“That’s why I fell in love with you.”

“Please don’t.”

Louis sighs. Opens his mouth.

“No, I’m serious, Louis,” Harry says. He looks up at Louis, and he notices, for the first time, that his eyes are ringed with tears. “Please don’t. It’s not good for me. To hear...I’ll never move on if you keep saying that.”

Louis nods. Swallows.

It makes his stomach clench, to hear Harry talk about moving on. It makes him ache with dread, every inch of him hoping to reach out and grab Harry and never let him go.

But that’s not healthy. For either of them.

“Okay, I understand.”

“Thank you,” Harry says, in a very small voice.

They sit in silence for a few minutes, each finishing their drink. Finally, when they stand to leave, Louis imagining that this will probably be the end of it, once again, Harry says.

“I, um. This is probably a bad idea, and, completely unconducive to what I’m trying to do but...oh nevermind.”

“No, I—” Louis was about to speak over him, but he figures he needs to stop doing that. Needs to start waiting for what Harry wants.

“Look, I. I do miss having you in, um, in my life,” Harry says. “Not in a romantic way but...I mean, you were my best mate for...and. Well, Niall and I still do movie nights on Wednesdays. And I guess what I’m saying is that, well, I’d be open to you coming. Once or twice.”

Louis breathes out a sigh of relief by the time Harry (finally) finishes his thought. He knew he could never have Harry again, not in the way he wanted him, but he figured this was something. He missed Harry too.

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Yeah, Harry, that’s—”

”Not in a…” Harry says. His voice trails off, and he doesn’t finish his thought, but Louis understands him anyway. “Louis, I need you to understand. I’m really trying to move on, this isn’t giving us another chance. It’s just...giving us another chance. You know, at being friends.”

“Yeah,” Louis agrees, nodding his head slightly, a slight smile quirking on his face. “Yeah, I’d really like that.”

The first movie night is weird.

It’s awkward, and they stumble over almost every word, and Louis finds he can’t even focus on the
movie because he’s so aware of Harry across the room. He’s just sitting there, eating the ice cream he’d served himself, and just…

Well, his whole presence just throws Louis off.

Not to mention Niall, who’s sitting next to him on the couch, cuddling with Gemma which is still new, even if Louis did technically know, and he’s shooting Louis weird looks what feels like every thirty seconds. He’d had an odd reaction when Louis had first arrived, jumping up immediately, but then swaying in his spot across the room, like he wanted to run across the room and greet Louis, but wasn’t sure he was allowed. He’d settled for a jerky wave, and has been hovering around Louis all night.

Gemma’s been outright hostile. She’s glaring and accidentally spilled her beer on his pants at one point, and snorted at the, admittedly little, things he’s had to say.

So, all in all, not really a good night.

But between the awkwardness, Harry’s sending him these little smiles every once in a while. He’d offered Louis a beer when he was serving Gemma hers, and he just, overall, seems really happy to have Louis there. So Louis stays.

And comes to the next one. And the next one.

They get into a little routine, after that. Harry and Louis don’t hang out outside of the movie nights, but with each successive one, the distance between them heals just the slightest bit. Louis starts feeling comfortable enough to actually relax into the couch while they’re watching a film, especially because Gemma doesn’t come again for a few weeks, and Harry starts feeling comfortable enough to joke with him again.

It’s honestly going great. It’s a tentative truce, but it makes sense.

Until Niall fucks it up.

It’s at their fourth movie night, about a month into this weird stalemate, and only two weeks away from the live reunion show in LA. Louis’ out of the loop of the show, but from what he can hear from James, they’re not painting Harry well. Apparently they’d called him to Nick’s house recently, to film some break-up, so that they didn’t have to pretend to be engaged at the live finale, which, after how hostile Nick’s reportedly been to just the PAs contacting him, could not have gone well.

Harry hasn’t talked about it. Niall said it happened last weekend, but Harry’s been tight-lipped and tense all night, so he assumes Harry has forbidden Niall from bringing up the topic.

Doesn’t stop him from bringing up another topic though.

“Harry,” Niall calls into the kitchen, where Harry’s getting more beer from the fridge. “Harry, Jeremy messaged you again.”

Louis stills, tension running through his body. Harry, too, stands still in the doorway, his grip unnaturally tight on the drinks in his hand.

Niall, oblivious, continues on. “He said he had a great time on Monday night.”

Harry nods, “Okay,” he says, his voice straining. He approaches them slowly, serving Louis his beer while avoiding his gaze.
“And he wants to take you out again!” Niall says, reading excitedly.

“Wait,” Louis says, trying to get some semblance of a grip on what’s happening here. “Isn’t that your phone Niall?”

Harry nods. “Yeah, he runs a Tinder for me.” He rolls his eyes and smirks a bit in commiseration with Louis. Louis does not feel commiseration. Not in the slightest.

“Did you have a good time, Harry? Should I tell him yes?” Niall asks, excitedly.

Harry glances quickly over to Louis, then back to Niall.

“Can we talk about it later, Niall?” Harry asks, quietly. Niall picks up on his tone, though, looking up and between the two of them quickly.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, Niall, forget it.”

“No, that was something, what are the two of you hiding?”

Louis stands. “No, um, I just realized, we have an early meeting tomorrow morning, and I have to um, prepare.” He stops. Harry and Niall are both staring at him, taken aback at how suddenly this came on. “So I have to…go.”

Harry looks up with wide, slightly scared eyes. “We haven’t even started the movie.”

“No, I. It’s just this week. Getting busier. I’ll come back next week. I promise.”

And then he flees.

***

Harry stands anxiously inside a posh restaurant in Westminster, waiting for his date. Niall had set him up again, but this time hadn’t let him start out slowly with coffee. No, this time he had set them up at a real, honest to god, restaurant. Probably because Harry had been rejecting all the other ones before they could advance to dinner.

The worst part was, under normal circumstances, Harry would have really enjoyed this place. The Cinnamon Club served posh Indian dishes in a converted library, which is basically Harry’s dream, but he’s just too nervous to appreciate the scenery.

Not to mention that if anything actually did happen the way Niall was hoping, Indian was hardly the appropriate cuisine to inspire any sort of sexy mood.

But he lets the maitre d’ lead him to the table anyway, and sees that it’s thankfully empty. Another couple minutes to gather his thoughts before facing his date.

See, he’s not actually over Louis yet. He’s trying, this time, he genuinely is, moreso than he was before going on the show, but…

Well, it’s hard. It’s weirdly easier with Louis being around, because it helps Harry convince himself that they’re never going to work again, and the awkward tension in the air when there together helps with that. But it’s worse, because, well, Louis is there and he’s not going away and Harry is still pining. So, all in all, the whole getting-over-Louis thing is going a lot worse than he’s made it seem to Niall, having tried to brush it off and exaggerate how well he was doing. He doesn’t think Niall is
buying it.

Thus, the set-ups. There’s been six total now, including tonight. Which, to be fair, isn’t too bad. But Niall is nothing if not persistent, and Harry’s starting to get nervous about what his next few months are going to look like if he doesn’t hit it off with someone soon.

So Louis walking in, as he is right now, and fucking *approaching Harry’s table* is not helping, either. He stops in front of Harry, grips the back of the empty chair, and glares.

“What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Harry says. He waits a few moments, but Louis isn’t answering, so he continues, “I’m waiting for a date.”

Louis hardens. “Well, I *thought* I was meeting Niall.” He sighs heavily. Looks around. But he doesn’t see what he was looking for, because he just looks back down at Harry, defeated. “It appears as if we’ve been...set up.”

Harry rolls his eyes.

“We have not. This is a misunderstanding.”

Louis rolls his eyes back.

“Unlikely.”

Harry snorts.

“Please, Harry. This is Niall we’re talking about. You have met him, right?” Harry glares. “He doesn’t stop until he gets what he wants.”

“He doesn’t want us getting back together, if that’s what you’re insinuating,” Harry insists. “He’s been setting me up with other men for weeks.”

“And then bringing it up in front of me?” Louis challenges. “That’s three times now.”

Harry doesn’t have anything to say to that, patronizing at it is, so he just says nothing.

“Look, do you mind if I sit?” Louis asks.

Harry swallows. “If no one else is coming.”

“I’m almost sure that’s a no,” Louis says. He sits, and watches Harry across the table. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“Well,” Louis stops. Squints his eyes a bit, and reevaluates. “Well, you’re trying to move on, right?”

Harry shrugs.

“And you probably can’t with me...around. So I’m sorry.”

Harry shrugs again. “Couldn’t move on when you weren’t around, either. So it’s not like it really makes a difference.”

Louis doesn’t reply for a long time, and they sit there in silence, while the waiter comes and fills their
water glasses.

“I’m sorry, for what it’s worth.”

“You said that already.”

hear it again.”

“Thanks, then, I guess.”

“Look, Harry, Niall’s obviously gotten one over on us. Maybe we should just enjoy this meal? See if
that helps?”

Harry glances up, and really looks at Louis for the first time tonight. He looks earnest, a little bit
vulnerable, a tad nervous. He looks like he’s actually letting himself be real with Harry, and it’s the
first time Harry has felt this way with him in a long time.

Harry doesn’t know what makes him do it, but he nods. Just a little, tiny shake of his head. Louis’
always been there, and Louis always will be, there’s no use in fighting that. He’s been trying for the
better part of two years, and failing, every time. He’s never going to shake Louis off.

Louis smiles a bit too, shyly, down at his plate.

Harry takes a chance. He reaches out, holds Louis hand in his own. Louis’ still for a few moments,
then he glances up and his face breaks open, smiling widely at Harry and opening his hand up,
holding onto Harry.

It may not be perfect, in fact, Harry imagines it’ll probably be really really hard at first. For a while,
probably.

But it’s them. It feels so utterly inevitable that they’d find their way back to each other, because they
never really were going to be apart. Even in the fake, fucked up world of reality TV, and they only
had eyes for each other. That probably says something.

That probably says everything.

Chapter End Notes

ahhhh! what a shit ending!!! sorry it took so long... but it's over now! there's gonna be
one more chapter, an epilogue, of the live reunion show, and then it's CURTAINS ON
THIS FIC! bet you never saw that coming, huh?

i'm gonna save the getting emotional for later because i have one more chapter to go and
im leaving for dinner in 10 minutes so yeah. hope you enjoyed!!!

if you liked it, please reblog the fic post!!
March 2019

“Uh uh uh,” Harry grunts, shifting his weight a little, trying to give Louis a better angle. Louis, for his part, readjusts his grip on Harry’s waist and keeps thrusting.

“Closer?” He whispers. Harry nods tightly, his face screwed in concentration. Louis lowers one of his hands to Harry’s ass, tugging on his cheek and adjusting himself again. And then—

“Oh!” Harry shouts, his eyes widening.

“Got it?”

Harry nods weakly, “Got it.” He breathes out slowly as Louis doubles down on his pace, hitting the spot over and over again, Harry’s back weakly hitting the wall behind him with each thrust as he lets out little gasps with each thump.

“L-Lou,” he moans, letting Louis and the wall hold his weight as he relaxes and tries to let himself fall into the sensation. The tap-tap-tap of his shoulders hitting the wall repeatedly as Louis thrusts. Louis keeps aiming at his spot, hitting it about two-thirds of the time, and it isn’t long until Harry’s toes are curling, his stomach tightening. He’s ready to—

There’s a loud tapping, off-time with Louis thrusts. Harry was zoned out, exhausted, dripping in sweat, but as Louis moans of his name a sounding distinctly female, and further than expected (as in, not directly panted into Harry’s ear), voice reached him, and he perks up quickly. The knocking comes again.

“Harry?” Eleanor’s voice calls, and yeah, definitely not Louis.

Louis stills, holding Harry in place, and when Harry opens his eyes, he’s frozen and his eyes are wide.

“Harry, Liam’s segment is about to start, so this is your five minute call,” Eleanor says. Harry’s eyes widen, and he glares at Louis.

“You said it would be thirty minutes,” he hisses to Louis.
“Mate, I’m a fugitive here, I was taking a fucking guess.” Harry slaps him on the side of the head. Louis, with both his hands on Harry’s ass, is helpless to retaliate.

Harry groans. “Thank you five,” he calls back to Eleanor. Louis thankfully has the tact to wait until her footsteps fall away before thrusting again, harder and faster than before. “Come on, baby. Only a few minutes left.”

“I—fucking—know,” Harry breathes, his breath coming shortly as he tries to hold himself together. “I’m close, Lou. So—”

He groans loudly as Louis wraps his hand around his cock and hits his spot simultaneously. A wave of pleasure washes over him, and he feels, more than hears, Louis whine and let go inside him. They give it about ten seconds to come down, before Louis is lowering Harry to his feet, and Harry is frantically grabbing at his shirt, thrown across the dressing room couch, and a tissue, trying to wipe the come from his stomach.

“Fucking hell, Louis,” he pants, rearranging his hair as Louis fumbles for another tissue to mop up some of the sweat on Harry’s brow. “That was close.”

Louis smirks, “Exhilarating, innit?”

Harry rolls his eyes and pushes his shoulder, because he doesn’t want to admit that, yeah, it was pretty exhilarating.

He composes himself, then stands still for a moment, unsure and playing with the ends of his sleeves. He watches the little screen in the corner, where Liam is wrapping up his interview with Chris Harrison.

Liam’s at the end of an answer when Harry tunes in, ending with, “And, I met someone.”

There’s a loud gasp, then claps from the audience.

When they finally die down, Liam’s continuing, “I met him through the show, actually. Our, um, the show’s director set us up, it was his good friend.” Harry furrows his brow at that, turning to look at Louis.

“It’s just been a few weeks now, so we’re not ready to go public or anything, but it’s good. It’s been really really good,” Liam’s continuing.

Louis presses his face into Harry’s hair. “Zayn,” he whispers, by way of explanation. Harry gasps, and pulls away to slap at Louis’ arm.

“Zayn, your friend Zayn?” Harry screeches.

Louis nods, a tiny smile playing on his lips. “Yeah, he wouldn’t stop talking about Liam after he came by the house. And Liam walked away single,” he teases, with another nudge at Harry, “So I figured…”

Harry nods and contemplates the pairing, but doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t exactly have much of a capacity for too much talking right now, he’s too anxious about what happens once Liam’s interview is over.

Louis can sense this. “You nervous?” He asks. Harry nods, too worked up to say anything. The sex had helped, calmed him down a lot, distracted him. But now that it was over, all he could think about was that he was about to go out there and face America and continue to lie to them. It was a long and
hard season, full of lies—to his other contestants, but particularly to himself, and now, even with it all (almost) behind him, he still wouldn’t be free from the lies.

“Just be yourself,” Louis reassures. “They loved you all season when you were being yourself.” Harry nods, but doesn’t respond. He knows the situation is different now though, but he doesn’t know how to voice it. “It’s all going to be okay, and no matter what you want to do, I’m here to support you.”

“You know I don’t really have much of a choice though, you more than anyone,” Harry reasons.

“Hey,” Louis whispers, stepping up to him and kissing his hairline above his ear. “You always have a choice. I love you, okay? And I’ll be right back here, supporting you. I know it’s going to be hard, it might even be the hardest thing you ever do, but I know you can be brave, I know you can do it.”

Harry shakes his head slightly, burying his face in Louis’ neck. “Not the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

“No, love?”

“No,” Harry insists. “Missing you was.”

He can feel Louis’ smile against his head, and pulls back just a little, to knock their foreheads together.

“See then? Won’t be so bad. I promise.” Harry looks away again, but Louis grabs his chin and angles it to force Harry to look in his eye. “Harry, America wanted a love story. Just be honest, and tell them ours. Give them their love story, and I promise, everything will work out. Maybe not tonight but...in time. It will work out. I promise.”

Harry pulls away slightly. “You know I can’t—”

Louis sighs. “I know you think can’t, baby, I just want you to know you have a choice. You do.”

Harry nods, and leans in to kiss Louis again. Another knock comes, this time accompanied by an insistent rattle on the locked door. “Harry?” Eleanor calls again. “Harry, it’s time. Why’s this door locked?” She rattles it again.

“One moment! I’m ready,” Harry calls. He kisses Louis again, and Louis smiles, ducking behind the door frame, because he’s really not supposed to be here.

“I’ll be right here,” he says, pointing at the screen again, where Liam’s hot seat interview has ended, and Nick has just come on stage. Harry’s stomach jumps. This one’s going to be remarkably less heartwarming. In fact, it’s going to be tense as hell, what with having to pretend they’re still together, and Harry not being a very good actor (as judged by this entire season.)

Harry kisses Louis, just one last time, then pulls away and opens the door as Louis ducks out of sight.

Harry feels like he wants to crawl out of his skin as Eleanor leads him around backstage, to the space where he’s supposed to wait before joining Liam on stage. He’s so nervous, he’s sweating buckets again, and this time not because of any great sex.

For now though, he’s got to go out on stage and try to be as honest as he can before America, even while lying about everything in his life.
Nick’s on stage, telling a story about how far he’s come in his career since the show, what with a promotion at work and a new social media following.

“Well, Nick, it sounds like you’ve come a long way since your proposal to Harry,” Chris says, setting up the announcement in just about the worst way possible. Fuck, why would they even let him say that, Nick’s going to reveal it all before Harry gets the chance to go on stage. In fact, Nick opens his mouth to correct him, but Chris knows what he’s doing, and cuts him off, “He’s here tonight, are you ready to bring him out?” Chris asks.

Nick bites his tongue and sits back. Harry doesn’t hear the rest of his response, as the flurry around him is too heavy, with stage hands are barking orders and Eleanor pushing him out into the studio. He stumbles a bit, but rights himself before he comes into view, and strolls onto the stage, waving at the audience as he goes.

It’s a roaring cheer. Harry hopes he can be believable enough that he isn’t booed off the stage within minutes.

He takes a tentative seat beside Nick, who moves over slightly, away from Harry. It’s hopefully subtle enough to seem like he’s just making room on the couch, and not desperate to get as far away from Harry as he can.

“Hi Harry,” Chris greets.

“Hi Chris. Hello Nick,” he says, turning to smile at the man next to him. Nick stares at him blankly, and nods.

“Well, I’m sensing some tension here,” Chris observes. Fuck. Not off to a good start.

“Yeah, no fucking shit.”

“Yeah, we’re no longer together, Chris.” Nick says. Well then, straight to the chase then. This is not at all following their instructions of acting happy and in love throughout the special, so they could quietly announce a breakup in a few weeks time, once the spotlight had faded.

Evidently, Nick is not following their contract at all.

That, at least, seems to elicit a shocked response from Chris. “Oh. I’m sorry to hear that, you looked so happy up there a few minutes ago. What happened?”

Nick’s curt in his response, “Harry could not see his life with me,” he says, and Harry can still hear the traces of hurt in his tone.

“Harry, is this true?” Chris asks.

Harry takes a deep breath. This is it. He wasn’t planning to do this tonight, was still going to follow along with the script like his contract instructed, but Nick had already taken the plunge, and Louis had been so brave in Costa Rica, now it was Harry’s turn.

“Yes, Chris, it is.” There are collective gasps from the audience, and Chris seems genuinely taken aback.

“Well folks, this is a Bachelor first. This may actually be the most dramatic After the Final Rose ever,” Chris announces. “So tell me, what was going through you mind on that beach? And why couldn’t you commit to Nick after that romantic proposal?”
“Well,” Harry swallows, “I never should have been on the show in the first place,” he admits. “I met the love of my life in a dorm hallway six years ago, and I’ve loved him for as long as I can remember.” He turns to Nick, “Nick, I am so sorry. I never should have put you, or any of the wonderful people I met through this journey, through this when ultimately, it was me that wasn’t ready the process.” He pauses, to soak in the weight of the moment, and internally praises himself. Even as he completely fucks his contract, he knows the script he’s supposed to stick to, and he can at least give the show that, “The truth is that I broke up with my best friend, spent a year heartbroken, and thought that I could use the show as a tool, a means to an end to help me move on from my lost love.”

He looks around at the audience, who seem relatively receptive so far, and continues, “But the universe has a funny way of working things out. We didn’t break up for just one reason, multiple things weren’t working in our relationship, but the biggest was that I felt intimidated by his career, and how passionate he was about his work. In the end, it was his career that brought us back together. In fact, he was the director this season, and being with him throughout this journey made it all that much harder. I had the most wonderful group of people surrounding me, but I simply couldn’t see any of them, not with him there.”

He looks back to Chris, and to Nick, who’s staring at him, slack-jawed. “I want to apologize. I never should have taken advantage of the journey like this. But I fell in love years ago, and in a way, I felt the show’s process work for me, just not in the way you might expect.”

“It didn’t work out with Nick,” Harry admits, “Because I found my way back to the love of my life. And it’s nothing that Nick did, or didn’t do, I simply haven’t been able to look at anyone the same in all these years.”

Harry looks straight at one of the cameras, where Cal has come up on stage to get a close shot of his monologue. “I love you, Louis. I always have, and I always will. And I’m sorry, most of all, to you, that you doubted that for a while. But you’re my best friend and I love you so much. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

The audience swells in cheers around him, and Harry barks out a laugh, smiling softly, his gaze fixed on the camera, where he knows Louis is watching the live feed from the green room. *The Bachelor* may have been a sham, but it sure had worked for him.

***

Louis smiles up at the TV, his own grin matching Harry’s and lets his fingers play around the black box in his pocket while he watches and feels himself sigh, content. They’d gone through hell, but they’d come out of it and survived, together.

Chapter End Notes

WOOOOOOOOOOOWWWW. that was so unbelievably bad. i am so ashamed of that epilogue. but also like,

I'M DONE!!!! WHAT THE FUCK!!!! i started writing this fic a humble 2.5 years ago, on june 8, 2016. my roommates had dragged me to watch the bachelorette for the first time, and i walked away from that episode thinking "holy shit, someone has to write a fic of this." well, i got peer-pressured into being that person, and i am so so thankful that i did.
i want to apologize, for one, for doing so before i did all my research. i'll admit, we started working on the outline before i could backwatch seasons for research, and as i got completely addicted to this show through the course of writing this fic, i also realized how i got literally EVERYTHING wrong, so i'm really really sorry about that.

thank you so much for sticking this fic out to the end, though, genuinely, from the bottom of my heart. i put my heart and soul into this for the better part of a summer, and then for two and a half years while i was putting off posting, it was always there, i was always thinking about it and wanting to finish, so to those who have read along with me, or to those who are just finding this now, THANK YOU. it means so so much to me that you've taken the time out of your day to read my shitty little bachelor au.

AS A LITTLE EXTRA EPILOGUE: i like to think harry makes himself a little baking empire on social media and writes a cookbook (anyone?) and starts a food blog, while as chapter 9 mentioned, louis works on james' new show. those buds definitely get engaged, as is implied, and they live happily ever after and have lots and lots of babies.

also can i just say, when i wrote this fic, i was like "haha, november 2018, THAT'S NOT A REAL YEAR" and now here i am fucking publishing it in november 2018 and what kind of sick karma is that?

that's it for now! i'll probably think of more i have to say later and add it here, but you'll never know that, because i'll just edit this, lol!

if you'd like, you can find me here on tumblr at coffeelouis, and if you are so inclined, please give some love to the fic post (it's 2 years later and im still so proud of my photoshop/indesign skills on this). finally, i have an official playlist? you can find it here. thanks again for reading!!!!!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!