i know the shape of your hands (i watch them when you talk)

by el_em_en_oh_pee

Summary

Louis is on top of the world. She's in what's probably the biggest girlband in the universe. She's got a fun boyfriend, and even if they're not properly in love, he's still very good at pleasing her. She gets to travel the entire world with her four best mates.

If only she could stop developing this pesky crush on her Zayn.

Notes

from this prompt on the zouis ficathon

you know the saying 'it takes a village to raise a child'? the same thing goes for my fics. so thank you to my village: sam for the wonderful britpick, brady and kristin for looking over some of my joe scenes, molly for helping me figure out girl direction's makeup looks, val for a very detailed beta of the first half and helping me through writer's block, and, as always, cait and bee for the hand-holding and encouragement and beta and feedback throughout the entire process. this fic wouldn't be finished without you guys :* :*:*

disclaimer! this is obviously a work of intense fiction.

See the end of the work for more notes.
At the club, Louis drinks until she’s got an invincible buzz humming through her veins, setting the world all soft and beautiful around her. She sits comfortably at the VIP table they’ve set aside for her and the girls, looking over the balcony railing to the dance floor below, where Niall and Liam are egging each other on into increasingly complex and ridiculous dance sequences.

Harry leans over her to peer at the floor too, a messy tumble of curls falling all over Louis’s chest. "Haz," she complains, shoving at her until Harry tips over to the side.

"Hey," Harry protests, tossing her hair back. "What was that for?"

"Your hair's in my face," Louis says, pouting. "Shove off and find your own bit of rail to look over."

Harry twitches her hair towards Louis deliberately as she straightens up. "Sorry you don't have luscious curls like I do," she says, but she's grinning, mouth wide and red with drink. She hauls herself up. "I'm going to go find a bloke to trick into having the pleasure of buying drinks for me."

"Good luck with that," Louis says, looking around for Zayn.

She finally spots her, downstairs but out of the way of the pulsing lights and the people dancing. She's almost unrecognizable – probably would be to anyone who doesn't know her as well as Louis does, because her face is obscured by some redhead with impossibly long and straight hair that falls halfway down to her curvy hips, but there's Zayn's hand tangled in it at the girl's neck, a tiny smudge of dark close to the wrist that, if Louis had her glasses on or were any closer, would prove to be Zayn's bird tattoo, and there's the high-rise of Zayn's quiff, light glinting against the streak of pale blue that Zayn re-dyed into her hair last time she and Perrie had one of their weekends together winding its way up and over her elaborate hairdo.

Also, the way that she's pulling the redhead closer to her, stroking a hand down her back to her waist and kissing her like there's nothing else that matters is pretty telling. After over two and a half years of knowing Zayn as intimately as Louis does – sharing buses and hotel rooms and stages with her, going out drinking and dancing in every country they've visited – Louis has learned to spot her seduction technique really well.

Louis frowns, the pleasant thrum of alcohol dulling down. Zayn really should be more careful who she hooks up with, especially in public. Like, yeah, it's her prerogative and all, but. Anyone could get pictures.

She takes out her phone, texts Joe *It's been 2 long since oman. I miss you. Xx* and, shoving her phone in her pocket, goes to join Liam and Niall on the dance floor.

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Zayn brings the girl back to the hotel, and Harry mentions something about sneaking down to the room of a guy she met earlier. Louis is about to suggest Liam and Niall come by her room to watch tv – she's still trying to get the rest of them into Homeland – but Joe texts her back, *I've got an hour off if ur still awake <3*, so she makes her excuses and, changing from her club clothes into the boxer shorts and vest top she wears to sleep in, pulls out her laptop and logs into Skype.

She's migrated from sitting up at the desk in the corner of her room to lying back on her bed, legs bent and laptop resting against her thighs, hair tangling under her head by the time the conversation shifts from her teasing Joe about the lyrics of his newest single again – "You love me like a kid loves a milkshake, Joe? Really? Hasn't the milkshake thing already been done?" – to Joe's favorite topic.
"So, Louis," he says, startling her out of inspecting the way that her eyeliner has smudged under her eyes, and not in the sexiest way. She refocuses on his face. He's scratching the side of his nose, looking entirely too innocent. "I was reading one of those Larry Stylinson fanfictions today."

Louis groans and sticks her tongue out at him, then moves closer to the built-in camera on her laptop so that her tongue is all that he can see. "Must you persist in reading that shit?"

"Well, it's awesome, so... yeah," Joe says. "This one was great, you were a tiny waitress in a small town diner and Harry was a famous solo artist twice your size whose car broke down outside and there was inexplicably no mechanic anywhere nearby and you —" He breaks off, registering the look on Louis's face. "Did a lot of those things you told me never to tell you about in detail."

"Thanks," Louis says, dryly. She doesn't like to think about going down on Harry for hours on end. It's weird. "Because Niall's showed me a fair few of those things where you and Nick—"

"I get it," Joe says, hurriedly. "I'll stop."

"You won't," Louis says, because it's true and she's accepted it. She sighs. "I literally have no idea why they're so adamant about me and Harry. I mean, Zayn is actually gay, and she and Niall had that thing with Justin and Selena after the VMAs." She had got the whole story from Niall, about how Justin invited the two of them back to his house after everything and he and Niall had apparently hooked up on his kitchen worktop when they were cooking pasta or something while Selena rode Zayn's face in one of Justin's guest bedrooms, and there had been a couple of posts on gossip sites the following morning with blurry photos of the four of them captioned 'Double Date?' "Wouldn't the two of them make more sense?"

Joe laughs. "Nothing makes sense," he says, and Louis is grateful that he doesn't point out that people made assumptions about her and Harry long before Zayn came out. And then, "I mean, I get the general idea, because our industry is so incestuous—"

Louis can't help but laugh, laptop jiggling with the way her stomach convulses, because that is certainly an interesting word choice, given their conversation.

"Ugh," says Joe, rolling his eyes. "Stop it. I'm done. I'll stop reading stories where you and your best friend fu—"

Louis starts singing la la la over and over again, loudly and deliberately off-key, until Joe throws his hands up and closes his mouth. Good. "Anyway," she says. "Moving on. Do you want to get off?"

Joe's eyes widen, and she's really not sure why. Skype sex is the closest they can come to intimacy, most of the time. "Always," he says, voice dipping lower, so she moves her laptop onto the bed next to her and rolls onto her side, slipping a hand down the front of her boxer shorts.

"Do you want me to go first?" she asks, watching as he pushes his rolly chair back from his desk and stands up to open his flies. "I can tell you all about how if I were there I'd go down on my knees under your desk and like, push your legs apart and wrap my hands over your thighs and swallow you down."


"I wouldn't suck you all the way off," she tells him, trailing her hand lower until she can crook her index finger against her clit. She doesn’t move it in earnest, really, just pushes down for the pressure and slowly moves it back and forth, just to maintain her arousal. "Just part of the way."

"Can I finish on your face?" Joe asks. He's got his cock out properly now, and it's swollen and
purple at the head. He licks his hand – he never generates much precome – and palms it roughly. She can tell that he's fighting not to let his head loll back, and is struck by a sudden burst of fondness at the way that he's still trying to maintain eye contact for now.

"No," she says, wickedly, licking her lips slowly. "I'd get you all worked up until you were gasping for it and I'd let you dig your hands in my hair but when you started to pull it I'd back off completely."

"Tease," Joe says, voice low and heavy and accusatory. He's gripping himself properly now, slowly twisting his hand up and down the length of his cock.

"You love it," Louis reminds him. She uses her free hand to flick her hair out of her face, starts slipping her finger over her clit a little faster, bites her lip. "I saw your latest youtube video."

"I sent you the link," Joe manages. He pushes a hand under his top – it's a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, and Louis vaguely remembers him texting her that morning about playing some ball with Nick – and raises it high enough that Louis can see his stomach. *Excellent.*

"Your arms look fucking phenomenal," Louis says. "So after I crawl out from under the desk, I'd let you hold me up against the wall."

"You are pretty tiny," Joe agrees, winking at her, because he knows that she gets indignant about her height. Except it does come in handy sometimes. Like, say, on the rare occasion when they're actually in the same city and he can fuck her against a wall. "I'd get you ready with my hands first. Two fingers inside with my thumb on your clit."

"Against the wall," Louis insists. She closes her eyes briefly, pinches her clit, sharp and tingling and good, then opens them again and smiles predatorily at Joe. "With those huge biceps of yours holding me up."

"And then," Joe says. He's getting really into this, his face flushed, the colour spreading down his neck, and hand *snicking* steadily over his cock, but his eyes are bright and engaged. "I'll push those sexy little legs of yours wide open –"

"I'll wrap them around your waist," Louis says, desperately, pressing her middle finger against her clit too and beginning to move them in earnest, fast and hard and sure. "Line your cock up with my hand so you can push in quickly."

"You're so fucking hot when you're desperate," Joe says, and he groans. His eyes fall shut, and even though he forces them open again, Louis knows they're done with talking. But then – "Let me see you," he adds, so she pushes her boxer shorts down and hikes her own top over her tits and rolls a nipple in between her thumb and forefinger and does her best to push her folds open enough with her thumb and ring finger that he can watch her working her clit.

"Fuck," he breathes, and as she watches, he twists his hand over the head of his cock one more time and comes in spurts that fall, thick and milky against his tanned stomach.

Louis screws her eyes shut and envisions the scenario they created, pushed up against a wall with Joe fingerling her fast and thorough. But then the Joe she's picturing looks up at her and it's not him, it's someone else with dark hair and a determined expression, but just as she's faltering and trying to place the face, her fingers slip off to the side of her clit in a way that jolts her orgasm out of her.

When she opens her eyes, Joe has let his top fall back down to cover the mess on his belly and he's grinning at her. "Doing okay, Tomlinson?"
"I'm great, Jonas," she says, and takes a moment to admire his biceps, pixelated and mostly out-of-frame though they may be. "Smug arsehole."

"The smuggest," he tells her, and stretches, t-shirt pulling tight against his chest.

"I miss working out with you," Louis tells him, watching the way his muscles pull across his arm and chest as he stretches, because it's true. Their relationship isn't the most conventional, in that they've been officially together for over a year and it's still more of a friends-with-benefits situation than anything else. There's lots of sex and hanging out, and a bit of someone to go to when they're feeling lonely or overwhelmed with recording and promo and performing. There's the bit of an excuse to leave the hotel when they're in the same city, to go out and try new restaurants and bars, and there's an element of having someone to talk to about taking on the role of Most Outrageous in their bands to help protect their bandmates (mostly Nick and Harry) and make them laugh when they're overwhelmed, but neither of them have professed to being in love with each other.

Louis does love Joe. She just feels like she should also be in love with Joe, but she isn't and he isn't, either. Since it hasn't become a significant issue yet, she tries not to question it too deeply.

"Me too, Lou," he says, smiling slightly. "Next time we're in the same city, we should go paintballing."

"Are you sure you're ready to face a humiliating defeat like that?" she asks, then frowns, because there's a knock at the door. "Hold on," she says, and she's sitting up to pull up her boxers and tug the vest top back down over her tits, but she freezes when there's the beep of a key card in the door and Zayn is pushing it open and walking in. She's wearing slouchy trackies rolled up at the waist and a cut-off vest top, showing off her belly button ring, and she's got a heavy canvas bag slung over her shoulder. Louis is still mostly naked, but she's also still pretty tipsy, so she doesn't much care.

"Hey," Zayn says, and then takes in the sight, her eyes widening slightly. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Didn't you bring that girl back to your room?" Louis asks her, a little stiffly. She jerks her top down, covering her breasts up again in a movement so strong that it almost pulls the neckline over one of her nipples, anyway. Ugh. Whatever.

Zayn smiles, a tiny little pleased smirk. "Finished with her. Left her sleeping. Came to see what you were up to." She walks over to the bed. She's got a distracting smudge of lip gloss on the side of her neck that barely covers up the way that she's already got a love bite forming. It's obscene, actually, and Louis almost hands her a tissue to wipe it off. "And now I see. Hi, Joe."

Joe looks out through the computer screen. His face is unreadable, but that may just be the pixels from his shitty webcam. "Hey Zayn, what's up."

"Tongue piercings," she says, smirking, and he lifts his eyebrows at her, impressed. Louis is about to say something loud to bring his attention back to her, but he focuses back on her before she can say anything.

"I'll let you go, Lou," he says, a little quietly. "Nick is probably wondering where I am, anyway."

Louis takes a deep breath, lets it out. "Bye, babe," she says softly, waving at her camera. "Remember what I said."

"I know," Joe says, rolling his eyes. "No more fanfiction. I'll do my best."

And then the connection goes dead.
Zayn looks entirely unbothered by everything. She hoists herself up onto Louis's bed, dropping her bag over the edge, and lies down next to her. "Smells like sex in here," she says, pushing her hands under her head, elbows out.

"Does not," Louis says. She hesitates, doesn't quite let herself relax next to Zayn. "Shouldn't you like... not leave that girl alone in your room?"

"Don't have anything for her to take in there," Zayn says. "That's all in my bag. And you know I don't like sleeping with the girls I fuck."

"So you come to me, instead."

"I'm not fucking you, am I?" Zayn asks. She yawns. "Put on an episode of Top Gear," she says, and closes her eyes.

"Are you going to end up sleeping here tonight?" Louis asks, but Zayn doesn't answer – doesn't need to – so Louis just pulls up an episode and puts her computer off to the side, curling up against Zayn, one arm wedged under her own head, one arm slung across Zayn's stomach. To be honest, she's a little relieved that Zayn is in here with her instead of the girl from the club. Louis always sleeps better when she has an actual body to cuddle up to, and Zayn's is better than most.

She falls asleep quickly.

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Touring is such a rush, always, but by the sixth or seventh week, they always seem to hit a wall. They've got their official hair and makeup and wardrobe rooms all properly maintained and managed by Lou and Caroline and their bevy of helpers, but by week six, Louis's personal makeup stash has got eyeshadow ground into the seams of her cosmetics bag and her mascara is drying out and somehow one of her bottles of nail varnish seems to have exploded all over everything and, for all that she can send her clothes out to get them washed in whatever hotel they end up in for the night, everything starts to look a little faded and lacklustre and old. She's just – she's getting a little restless, is all.

"I don't see why you won't let me just wear the stupid thing," she tells Niall, standing in front of the mirror in just her sports bra and work-out shorts, holding one of Niall's many, many sports tops. She's desperate for a run, and she's also desperate to wear something she hasn't already worn four times in the past six weeks.

Niall glares very obviously at Louis's chest. "Because you'll stretch it out with those fucking tits of yours," she says, and, right.

Louis looks down at herself. "They are nice, aren't they?" she says and, making up her mind, tosses the top back at Niall. "Might as well give Edinburgh a bit of a rush, yeah?" And, ponytail swinging, she saunters on out into the hall and down to Liam's room, where she pounds on the door until Liam comes out, tying her hair up as she lets the door fall shut behind her.

"You know that really massive cliffy hill in the middle of the city?" Louis says, as they walk to the lifts.

"You mean the one you literally can't miss?" Liam says, dryly, nudging Louis with her elbow. "The one with the castle?"

"Shut up," says Louis. They reach the lifts, so she jabs the 'down' button. "How upset do you think Paul will be if we run it?"
Liam frowns, thick-plucked eyebrows furrowed and fat lower lip jutting out adorably. Louis almost wants to pinch her cheek. "Isn't that meant to be like, three miles away?"

"Over lots of hills," Louis says, happily. The lift arrives and they enter, Louis limbering up as it lurches down. She's already done most of her warm-up stretches, but it doesn't hurt to do more. "It should be a good workout."

"Ten kilometres there and back," Liam says, and Louis is almost certain that she's going to say no but she grins and nods instead. She takes out her phone and taps something out. "I'm texting Paul and Harry just so like, no one thinks we've got kidnapped," she explains, and then zips it into a pocket.

"Ugh," Louis says. "I suppose that's a good idea."

"Of course it is," says Liam. They reach the ground floor. As soon as the lift doors pull open, Liam pulls one of her disastrous attempted winks at Louis and says, "Race you," darting out immediately and heading for the front doors.

"Cheater!" Louis calls after her, but she picks up her pace and follows.

Their fans – and the paparazzi – find out about the run almost immediately, because of course they do, and by the time they reach the Royal Mile Louis has heard the sound of a hundred cameras over her own breath and the pounding of her and Liam's feet on the pavement.

Briefly, she regrets going out on the run with just her sports bra on – certain corners of the internet will have a field day with the pictures of her soft stomach, and comparing it to Liam's ridiculous abs – but she shakes off the thought as they pound on.

By the time they make it back to the hotel, a little over two hours later because they stopped to get water before they turned around, Louis's legs are throbbing and her lungs are burning and her hair is drenched with sweat and she feels better than she has in days.

Her phone has several text messages on it when she takes it out to check, bent over double and breathing hard in front of the hotel as Liam stretches over to the side, working out kinks. They're all from Joe, filthy little texts about how she looks in her bra with her sweaty hair sticking to her forehead and clinging to her neck.

Liam wraps an arm around Louis's neck and peers at the screen. Louis considers shoving her away, or putting her phone back in her pocket, but she doesn't actually mind. "Your boyfriend is proper filthy," Liam says, squeezing Louis close for a long moment. She pauses contemplatively. "I wonder if Dev is going to download any of these pictures to his phone."

Louis hugs her back, then pushes her away, ignoring Liam's last comment because of course Dev will; he practically worships Liam's body. "You're sweaty," she says instead, and then, to be fair: "I am too."

"It was a good run," Liam says, grinning and pushing her hair over her shoulder. Her grin turns the slightest bit wicked. "Tumblr is going to be full of people talking about our latest bro-date. Sister-date. Whichever."

"Let's give them something to talk about," Louis says, because there are always paparazzi in front of their hotels, and smacks a sloppy kiss on Liam's cheek before darting inside. "Bags first shower!"

"We have different rooms," Liam points out, following her inside, rolling her eyes good-naturedly as she scrubs at her cheek.
"Don't care." Louis walks straight to the lifts and pushes the up button, reaching up to tug the bobble out of her hair as she waits for it to arrive. "I'll still get in first."

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"I'm sore," Louis tells Zayn later that day, perching on the counter in front of the mirror because she definitely does not want to stand on her legs and lean in to see what she's doing with her makeup.

"I have absolutely no pity for you," Zayn says, lips barely moving as she carefully tries to line her false eyelashes up properly and stick them down. "You ran ten bloody kilometres before lunch and sent the internet into a tizzy about your sporty date with Liam."

"I like my sporty dates with Liam," Louis says. She uncaps her lipstick – today, since they've got a full concert rather than a televised performance, they get to put their own makeup on, and she's going for a bright pink-orange to match the costume switch-up she has planned for their third set.

"So does Tumblr," Zayn says. "And Twitter. And half the gossip sites out there."

Louis pouts her freshly-coloured lips at Zayn. "Don't be jealous, babe," she says. "The green would clash terribly with your eyeshadow."

"M'not jealous," Zayn says, but her lower lip juts out a little as she nudges her eyelashes a tiny bit down until they're precisely in place, and takes out her mascara.

"You are," Louis says, and she scoots forward as best she can without dislodging any of Zayn's epic cosmetics set-up. "Don't worry, they'll get pictures of you kissing another one of those girls of yours soon and everyone will go into a tizzy again about whether or not you're going out with them, or Perrie, or one of us, or the bloody Queen."

"I wish I could go out with Beyoncé," Zayn says, reverently.

Louis throws a dirty sponge wedge at her. Beyoncé is not the queen she meant. "My point," she says, stretching her left leg out and wincing at the way her muscles ache, "is that you should take pity on your poor pained friend and do my eyes for me."

"You brought this on yourself," Zayn mutters, but she stands up and walks over to Louis, pressing in close and reaching for Louis's eyeshadow compact. Louis knew Zayn would do her eyes. Zayn generally does. "Lilac today?"

Louis gives her a stern look. "My lips are practically orange," she says. "Clearly I want electric blue."

"Oh, of course," Zayn says, rolling her eyes like she doesn't do this almost every day and getting out her brushes. "Okay, but if I do this, you have to be the one to remind Niall that she owns mascara."


"Close your eyes," Zayn instructs, so Louis does, breathing in deep and slow. Zayn smells faintly of cigarettes underneath her perfume, which this week is spicy and invigorating. Louis can feel the heat of Zayn standing so close to her, which is – well. Nice. Zayn's is a warm and reassuring presence.

And then there's the soft touch of a brush to Louis's eyelids, flicking over and out and up, followed by the gentle press of a finger to wipe away smudges. Zayn is always so good about pressure and not using too much of it, even when she switches to her eyeliner pencil. Louis can tell by the feel of it that Zayn is winging her eyeliner up at the corners, which isn't how she usually wears it. But she
trusts Zayn. The eyeliner is waterproof and won't sweat off when they're jumping around performing.

Which reminds her. "Fuck," Louis says. "I'm going to have to run around on these legs for two hours tonight."

Zayn laughs, a low rumble that used to always surprise Louis because it's so different from her speaking voice. "Should've thought of that before you went running halfway across the fucking city, especially with a girl who was bound for the Olympic trials" she says, with far too little pity in Louis's humble and very unbiased opinion.

Louis sticks her tongue out at Zayn but tries to stay steady, because Zayn has moved onto her other eye, working eyeliner on in short little strokes. Then there's the quick and firm brush of Zayn's thumb at the corner of one of Louis's eyes before the pressure stops completely.

"Right," Zayn says. "Open your eyes and tell me which mascara you want."

"The navy one, please," Louis says, opening her eyes wide and waiting expectantly.

"You've always got so much stuff going on with your face," Zayn says, and then falls silent, tongue poking out of the corner of her mouth as she opens the mascara and brushes colour onto Louis's eyelashes in vertical strokes. Eventually, she adds, "So many colours. It really shouldn't work as well as it does, you absolute clown wannabe."

Louis grins at her as Zayn caps her mascara and puts it down on the counter. "I am a trendsetter, and anyway, I like it," she says, and twists around to look in the mirror.

Fuck, she looks good.

"Fuck, I look good," she tells Zayn. Her eyes look as blue as they possibly can get without the liberal application of Photoshop, and the liner is soft and expertly applied. Her lashes are thick and long and luscious. She leaves a smacking smudgy kiss on Zayn's cheek and then slides off the counter, wrapping an arm around Zayn's waist and checking the both of them out in the mirror. "We look good."

"As always," Zayn says, a smile slowly unfurling across her face. She reaches up as if to wipe Louis's lip print from her cheek, but lets her hand drop instead. "Are you going to put that glitter spray shit in your hair again tonight?"

"As if I would let a day go by without my hair sparkling like my personality," Louis says, reaching up to mess up Zayn's blue streak. "You should do it too."

"I'll pass, babe, thanks," Zayn says. She shifts from foot to foot. "Think I'm going to have one last smoke before we go on." A pause, then: "You don't have to run around and jump all over the stage if you're really that sore, you know."

"I know," Louis says, just as seriously. She grins, though, because she's not going to take it easy, not even for just one night, especially not when she's got her head back in the game after such a great morning. "I suppose I have to go find Niall now, huh."

Zayn smirks. "Try to get her to wear something that wasn't just four pounds at the nearest Boots."

"Contrary to popular belief, I'm only human," Louis tells Zayn.

Zayn's laugh follows her out of the room and down the hall.
Another interview.

Madame Tussauds has reached the next stage in their wax figures and, since the girls have the day off in London, they actually go in for the final measurements for their bodies. They get to poke around the frames, which mostly means that Louis and Niall feel up the casts of their own tits and Zayn tries to bribe her sculptor into actually giving her a bum, and then they all sit down in a circle and have a bit of a filmed reaction sequence.

Halfway through, the representative from the museum who is interviewing them leans forward and, with a lascivious smile, asks them, "Right, girls. Now that you've got up close and personal with all of your bodies, tell me. If you were a bloke, who would you most want to go out with in the band?"

They freeze, all of them. "Sorry, we haven't got that question in a long time," Liam says, eventually, tugging at the end of her ponytail and glancing sideways at Zayn. "I expect none of us has thought about it for a while."

Louis finds her voice. "Yeah," she drawls, loudly. "Most people got too uncomfortable to ask us after Zayn here came out." She flicks her eyes up and down the interviewer's body, dismissively. "How very... daring of you."

"Louis," Zayn murmurs, almost warningly, and she moves her hand over a few inches to press hard against Louis's thigh.

"Sorry," Louis tells her. "But it's true."

"Anyway," Niall interjects, grinning. Her smile is a little too bright and it doesn't completely meet her eyes, and Louis's heart goes out to her. "I'd choose Liam, I expect she's really, uh. Athletic."

"Well," Harry says, slowly. "I'd pick Niall." She makes this ridiculous kissy face at her, leaning in to plant a sloppy one on Niall's cheek. "She's too cute to handle."

Niall shoves Harry back, wiping at her cheek with the back of her hand. "Buy me flowers, then we'll talk."

Liam chips in that she'd go out with Harry, "Because we've both got these fixations with touching our mouths so we'd probably develop a really great one for touching our mouths together, too," and then, even though the interviewer is turning his head towards Louis, Liam turns to Zayn. "What about you, babe?" she asks.

"I'd go for Harry too," Zayn says, voice flippant but eyes grim. She forces a smile and reaches out to tug at Harry's hair. "Just look at all these curls!"

"You all suck," Louis says. She mostly doesn't really mean it, because she knows it's all in fun, but she also does feel inexplicably crushed that no one picked her. "I'll just go out with my wax figure, then."

"You can't do that," Liam says, so Louis rolls her eyes and shrugs.

"Fine," she says. "I'd go on a date with Liam. We could go white water rafting, babe, how about it?"

"Ooooh," Liam says, leaning forward to focus on Louis. "Wait. We actually should go rafting."
The interviewer clears his throat. "Next question," he says, pointedly, looking very much like he
regrets asking in the first place. Good. Maybe they'll even cut the question from the final video. "What's been your favourite part of this process?"

After the interview is done, while they're packing up to head back out onto the road, Zayn physically bumps into Louis's side. "You didn't have to make it a Thing," she says. "The whole, you know. Him asking the question thing."

Louis frowns, turning to face Zayn properly. "But it is a Thing," she says, a little startled, because she and Zayn have often talked about the things that people outside of the band turn into Things, and the best way to deal with them. "It was like, the most common question in the book that we used to get but we haven't been asked it once since the photos of you and Perrie first leaked."

Zayn frowns, rocking back on her heels. "Does it make you uncomfortable?"

"What," Louis says, a little confused, because she and Zayn regularly talk about the way their interviews changed after Zayn was outed, too. "You mean the question being asked again now?"

"Yeah."

"No. " Louis slings an arm around Zayn's shoulders. "Zayn, babe, you know I'm like, the last person who would be personally bothered by questions like that." Zayn grunts, but she doesn't say anything, so Louis squeezes her a little. "You know that, right?"


"Good," Louis says. She pokes Zayn in the ribs. "I'm only uncomfortable with the fact that you didn't pick me."

The corner of Zayn's mouth tightens, and for a single terrible second, Louis is convinced that Zayn is going to frown. But she grins instead, a pure honest smile that crinkles the corners of her eyes. "Sorry, babe," she says. "I've heard enough stories from Joe. You'd be an absolute terror to go out with."

And then she's pulling free of Louis's hold before Louis can protest and running up to jump on Liam's back. Louis stares after her in consternation for a full ten seconds before she comes to herself and continues on her way.

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During their next break in shows, since he has an extended weekend off that lines up with One Direction's brief time off, Louis flies out to meet Joe again, this time in Costa Rica. They spend more time having sex than on the beach, but occasionally they spend time having sex on the beach – there's a well secluded area just a twenty minute walk from the resort, and they've got a tarp to protect them from the sand – so it isn't like Louis doesn't get her tan in.

Harry swings by mid-Saturday, because when they're not touring Harry is still always all over the place – literally – flying from London to LA to Sydney to Cape Town to wherever else whim and the prospect of new friends takes her.

Costa Rica is a blip between LA and New York for her, a little over one day in the tropical sun with her best friend, but she tells Louis – her suitcase in one hand and a funky backpack she must have got in California slung over her other arm – that she's managed to land tickets next to Louis and Joe's on their flight out.

"I win," Louis says, triumphantly, when Harry tells her this. She's a little surprised, honestly, as she
wasn't expecting to see Harry at all, but here Harry is, sweet-talking reception into giving her a room for the night, hair curling up even more wildly in the humidity.

"Win what?" Harry asks, as they make their way up the single flight of stairs to drop Harry's bags in Louis and Joe's room until Harry's room is ready.

"Well, I actually get to see you during our time off and the other girls don't, so," Louis says – gently, because she doesn't want Harry to think she's upset with her.

"Oh, shove off," Harry says. "I'm going to be in London for at least three days."

"Oh wow," says Louis, holding her hands up in mock-defeat. "Three whole days."

But Harry laughs, and Louis laughs, and they don't hear the click of the camera as Louis twists her key in the lock and pushes the door open and Harry follows her inside.

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By the time they make their way back to the beach, Harry in a cute purple bikini and jeans that she's cut off about half an inch from the crotch and Louis in her same blue suit that absolutely accentuates all of her curves, Joe has got a pitcher of drinks by their sun loungers.

He's also dragged a third one over.

"It's almost like you were expecting our Harriet," Louis says, glancing around.

"Harry," Harry interjects, but tiredly, because they've been over this a million times before. "Harriet isn't even my name."

"I did," Joe says, ignoring Harry's comment. He pushes his sunglasses to the top of his head and sits up, chest glistening with sweat and salt water and the sun cream that Louis rubbed on earlier. It's a very nice sight, and Louis takes the opportunity to check him out. Well. Until she notices that he's holding his phone up. "Twitter made it extremely evident."

"Oh, fuck," Harry says, sitting down on the chair farthest from Joe's. "I didn't think about that."

She never does, though, and it's honestly really endearing and one of the reasons Louis loves her so much. Harry is very media-conscious almost all of the time, but she's got a blind spot the size of Jupiter when it comes to spending time with her friends. "Is Harry here for me or here for you this time?" she asks Joe.

"Eh," Joe says. "There's a lot of fighting about which it is, really." He runs his thumb over his phone, switching the screens. "We have a very intriguing relationship, apparently."

"I'm sorry," says Harry, lower lip jutting out a little. She reaches over to pour herself a drink from the pitcher.

"It's okay," Louis says, honestly, getting herself a drink as well. It's not like she minds people questioning her sexuality, especially as she wonders about it sometimes, too. Well, okay, she does mind, because people are also questioning the validity of her relationship to Joe (and that's something only she should be able to question), but there are a hundred thousand worse things to be called than 'gay.' She just doesn't like it when people accuse her of being a liar. She's a joker, yeah, and she spins ridiculous yarns in interviews, but she's not a liar. "As long as Joe here doesn't start going on about how he's living in one of those fanfictions."
"Damn," Joe says, mildly. "And I was so hoping that you'd start groping each other in front of me."

Louis throws her cup at him.

"I really am sorry," Harry says, and when Louis looks over, she's gnawing on her lower lip.

"Shut the fuck up," she tells her, reaching one hand out to Harry and one to Joe. "I've got my boyfriend and my best friend on the edge of paradise. I literally wouldn't have it any other way."

(Pictures of the way Harry smiles at her after she says that make it onto the internet, too. They're really cute, actually, and in some of them, Joe is right next to her, holding her hand. Even the twitter alerts that do get through to her phone aren't too bad.)

Louis closes her eyes and lets the sun beat down on her face, still holding Harry's and Joe's hands. She half-listens as Harry starts talking about her latest plan to seduce that Michael guy from their supporting act – something about him being a lot of fun to hang out with even though he can be a bit of a dickhead, and how she wants to see how much fun he'd be, fucking her against the mirror in his backstage dressing room while his bandmates are all off doing whatever – and as Harry and Joe start talking about how much they'll overlap when both the Jonas Brothers and One Direction are touring in America in the summer. Thinking about the way that the pictures of her and Harry and Joe are probably spreading all over the internet faster than wildfire, Louis has a moment of missing Zayn, brief and fierce. Zayn, who is actually gay and actually out and who is really the best person to talk to about this kind of stuff – the media attention, and the stories the fans tell, and the way Louis sometimes misses kissing girls the way she used to before she got famous, and what it all means. Navigating relationships and sexuality in front of, like, a hundred million gossip-thirsty people is something that Zayn seems to be really good at, and Louis wishes she had her wherewithal.

But Zayn is in London with Perrie and Ant and Danny and Louis is in Costa Rica with Joe and Harry, so she forces herself back into the present. She opens her eyes and lets go of everyone's hands and pushes herself to her feet. "Race you to the water," she says, and runs, fast and wild and kicking up sand, to the pounding surf.

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In bed that night, gauzy curtains blowing in the breeze coming in through their open windows, Joe pushes all the blankets off the bed and presses Louis's legs wide open and licks over and over her clit, teasing her with his teeth and rocking two fingers in and out of her steadily until she pulls his hair and comes three times in a row: once gasping, once moaning, and once screaming.

Then he kisses his way up her body, sucking a nipple into his mouth and biting lightly at her collarbone before kissing her hard, letting her taste herself on his lips and tongue until he pulls away, gasping.

She jerks him off onto her stomach, hard and fast, and rubs his come into the skin on her torso because she really doesn't feel like getting up long enough to wipe it away, and then he drops down by her side and tugs her close to his torso with one massive arm.

Sleepily, Louis says, "So what's it like?"

"What's what like?" Joe's voice is a rumble that Louis almost feels more than she hears.

Louis yawns. "Going down on girls."

A long pause, and then Joe bursts into laughter. "Babe," he says, finally. "Really?"
"What?" she asks, indignant, pushing herself up a little bit so she can twist to look at his face. "I'm curious!"

"Well," he says, grinning toothily at her. The scant light in the room glints off his teeth. "If you really want to know, Harry is just a few rooms away and I'm sure she'd be willing to help."

Louis slaps at his (lovely) chest, even though she's pretty sure he's right, that if she were to experiment with anyone, Harry would be the best option because Harry wouldn't turn it into a Thing. "This isn't one of your bloody fanfictions," she tells him. "I'm just. Curious."

"Well," Joe says, and he tightens his arm around her, stroking gently at her side until she settles down a little. "I obviously fucking love it."

"Yes, thank god," Louis says, pressing a kiss to his shoulder, which is closest to her face, and then blowing a raspberry because she can. "My last boyfriend didn't and that was the worst two months of my life."

Joe laughs, another low rumble. "I dunno how to describe it, Lou, it's just like, good."

"Thanks ever so," she says, dryly.

A pause, then: "What makes you curious? Is it – I mean." He clears his throat. "I know you told me you were an equal opportunities kisser before you got famous, but you never said it was more than that."

"It never was," Louis says, honestly. She's still open to everything above the belt, regardless of gender, and she's still not particularly interested in sex with girls. (Most girls. She may make an exception for someone as gorgeous as, say, Rihanna.) She's also not interested in explaining that to anyone she isn't really close to, so she just hasn't kissed any girls since she got onto the X Factor, crossing her fingers that no one took pictures of the few times she did kiss girls back when she was still at school. "It's still not, I don't think. I was just wondering."

"Well," Joe says, seriously. "If you decide you are interested, I am totally and completely willing to be there to talk you through it."

Louis laughs and shoves at him again. "You utter shit," she says, fondly.

"I try," he says, and she's suddenly struck again, both with an overwhelming sense of fond affection for Joe and with the thought that she's not in love with him, because if she were, now would be the perfect time to tell him. She doesn't want to think about why she's not in love with such a great guy, though, so instead of dwelling on the matter, she crawls up his body and starts kissing him again, gentle and languid, until they fall asleep.

+++ By the time Louis gets back to London, she's all golden and glowy again. She's uninstalled all of her twitter apps, too, because there's been a whole rash of pictures and gifs of her and Harry walking through JFK together, before they parted ways. And like, Louis loves Harry. Harry has been her first and best friend since this chapter of her crazy life started. She's one of the most important people in Louis's entire world and when people are mean to her, Louis feels properly homicidal. She just doesn't need to see the same pictures of herself squeezing Harry's upper arm and pulling her in for a hug thirteen hundred times in a row. Then again, she wouldn't want to see that many pictures of her and Joe parting ways, or even that many of just herself. Anything over, like, five would be more than enough.
She texts the rest of the girls while she's waiting for her car to pick her up, *Back in ldn lets hang out!!* and then texts Zayn a load of two-heart emojis, because that's their batsignal, their indicator that a heart-to-heart is necessary.

Zayn doesn't respond, because she's the absolute worst person about actually checking her messages that Louis knows, but Ant tweeted a picture of a pile of empty food containers on Zayn's kitchen worktop while Louis was in flight, so she sends him a quick message asking him if she can pop by after she's slept off her jet lag, but he texts her back quickly and apologetically, saying he's gone back up north with Danny for their mum's birthday.

And then she goes home and tumbles into bed. She got rest in Costa Rica and she did sleep on the plane, but she's completely drained after a long weekend of sex and drinking and sitting in the sun.

"What a tough life, Tomlinson," she tells herself, and turns the ringer up on her phone in case someone texts back and drifts off to sleep.

Over the next few days, Louis busies herself, waiting for Zayn to get back to her. She goes out with Liam on Tuesday, rock climbing at a place that they manage to rent out entirely so that they can climb in peace. Louis loves it, the way that they're tethered to each other by a rope and a set of harnesses, hooked onto the floor with a strap and a karabiner. It takes a lot of trust, and Louis wouldn't let just anyone be responsible for making sure she doesn't plummet to her death or dismemberment – or twisted ankle; it's not like the walls in this place are *that* high.

She definitely wouldn't want most of the girls in the band on the other end. Like, she loves Harry, but Harry is not the most coordinated of women.

After they've worn out their arms and Louis's shorter legs have been stretched to the utmost of their capacity, they go for lunch down the road.

"I like rock climbing," Liam decides. "We should do more of it."

"We should get really good at it and then like, do it properly," Louis agrees. "Like, outside. We travel enough, I'm sure there's some good places near where we have off days in America."

They fall silent for a while, munching on their sandwiches, before Louis asks if Liam has heard from Zayn lately.

"I mean," Liam says, eyes darting to the side. "Me and Niall were over at hers on Saturday night."

"She hasn't texted me back," Louis says, hand automatically drifting to touch her phone and make sure that's still true.

Liam laughs, but it seems a bit forced. "Well," she says. "You know our Zayn, always tough to get to." She shrugs. "She's probably found some girl to distract her for a little while."

For some reason, the idea of Zayn not answering Louis's texts because she's with some girl feels rancid to Louis, almost like the very thought is curdling on her tongue. "I suppose," she agrees, and changes the subject.

On Wednesday, she meets up with Niall and several of Niall's friends at her house, where they watch films until someone mentions beer and everyone migrates to a pub.

Being with Niall is a little like being with Joe – fun, busy, and not too emotionally taxing. Niall and Joe are both larger than life, in very different but equally compelling ways, and they're both charismatic as fuck, and it's easy for Louis to just *be* around both of them, even when Niall is in one
of her moods where it's like she needs to get away or she'll either punch you or jump out of her skin. Of course, Louis would also kill anyone who dare be mean to Niall and she doesn't quite feel the same way about Joe – he can take care of himself, has done since Louis was still slogging her way through school, dreaming of something bigger, and like, Niall can take care of herself, too, of course she can, but it's just different.

(But that doesn't bear thinking about, either, because Louis doesn't think that one of her favourite things about her boyfriend should be that he isn't emotionally taxing.)

Louis is just getting up to get another round for everyone, feeling loose and happy and for once not worrying about the way that Zayn still hasn't got back to her, when her phone buzzes in her bag.

**sorry babe been a bit busy come on over if u want to x**

Louis buys for everyone but herself. She crowds in close to Niall, whispers in her ear, "Going to go see Zayn," and starts looking around for the jacket she knows she brought with her.

"Be careful, yeah?" Niall says, pushing her hair out of her face, which – that's just so weird that Louis pushes it out of her mind entirely.

"Come over to mine soon, all right?" she says, and kisses Niall on the cheek and rushes out the door.

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"Hey, stranger," Louis says, when Zayn answers the door in slouchy trackies that are far too big to belong to her – they're falling down at the waist, held up only by the double-knotted drawstring – and a sleeveless top and probably no bra on underneath. Her hair is in one long messy plait, but it's artfully messy and her makeup, though muted, is still definitely there. "Did you get all tarted up for me?"

"Shut up," Zayn says, but she pulls Louis into a tight hug. "I'm in mourning."

"Wait," says Louis, frowning. She feels like she should know about Zayn being in mourning.

"What? Why?"

"Got a text from Selena about an hour ago," Zayn says, pushing the door wider open with one arm and guiding Louis inside. She slams it shut behind them. "She and Taylor are back together."

Louis pulls Zayn in for another, tighter hug, but – "I'm sorry babe. I um. Didn't realise you had an emotional connection there," she says, delicately. As far as she knows, Zayn and Selena only hooked up the one time.

"Well," Zayn says. "I did have a very strong, though fleeting, emotional connection to her mouth." The corner of her mouth pokes up briefly, then turns back down. "And her excellent red carpet makeup suggestions."

Okay, good. Zayn isn't really torn up about it. "Need I remind you, babe," Louis says, pressing a kiss to Zayn's cheek. "You were voted one of the top trendsetters in the UK not too long ago."

"That's true," Zayn says, brightening up. She breaks free of Louis's hold, leads the way into the kitchen. "Tea?"

"Cheers," Louis says, flicking on the kettle herself and rummaging around for tea bags and mugs because while Zayn has about a zillion positive attributes, making a really good cuppa is not one of them.
"How was Costa Rica?" Zayn asks, as they wait for the water to boil. "Joe?" She pauses. "Harry?"

"Harry was surprising," Louis says, ticking off on her fingers as she talks. "But welcome. Joe was, hmm." She pauses, then lets a wicked smile unfold on her face. "Joe was excellent. Costa Rica was beautiful, but I'll be honest with you, I didn't see much of the island."

Zayn nods and leans against the worktop, head tipped forward, plait falling over one shoulder. She's a vision of loveliness. "And the paparazzi?"

"Less welcome," Louis says. "But not unexpected."

"Yeah," says Zayn, and she smiles with her teeth. "I heard all about how Larry Stylinson had a clandestine romantic retreat going on over the weekend."

"I don't know what's worse," Louis says. "The fact that you said 'Larry Stylinson' or the fact that you were following all that gossip."

"Hey," Zayn says. "Just because I lose my phone for days and never respond to texts doesn't mean I don't care what's going on with you guys."

"Oh, I'm sure," Louis says, but she's mollified. The kettle starts boiling, so she pours water in each mug. "Oh wait, no, I have worked out the worst part."

Zayn goes to the fridge and gets the milk out. "Hm?"

"You used 'clandestine' in a sentence," Louis says. "You actually know how to pronounce clandestine. Stop knowing things, it's gross."

"Um," Zayn says, and then she starts laughing, hard. She puts the milk down on the worktop and pulls Louis in for another, tighter, hug. "Missed you, Lou."

Louis hadn't even realised that there was a tightness in her belly, but then it suddenly relaxes as Zayn holds her close. "Missed you too, babe," she says, softly. "Missed you more."

+++Louis doesn't leave Zayn's house for like, two straight days. They curl up under Zayn's duvet on her couch and play FIFA for about eight hours in a row one day, stopping only to eat the Chinese takeaway they ask Niall to bring by. Niall hangs around for a few hours, but then she's off to go and see Jay-Z with Liam at the O2 and it's just Louis and Zayn again, remembering what it's like to live so close that they practically breathe each other's breaths.

Zayn goes off at some point to shower and Louis takes the opportunity to have a wash, too, in Zayn's extra bathroom, and then after that they sit cross-legged on Zayn's bed and Louis brushes her hair, stroke after stroke after stroke until it's smooth and straight and drying at the ends. The streak in the front of Zayn's hair is yellow now, a rich buttercup colour that glints when wet like it's been gilded over under the shine of Zayn's bedside light.

And then Louis weaves Zayn's hair into a plait so that the yellow-gold of her accent streak is displayed prominently, chattering all the while. "So we have America next," she says, fingers working – not quite deftly, but not poorly, either – carefully shaking out the few knots that try to form while she weaves the strands of Zayn's hair over and under and together. "Harry's going to be sad that 5 Seconds of Summer aren't going to be our supporting act there; she's got this whole seduction planned for Michael, but I expect you're pleased. You and Perrie are on again right now, right?"
"Yeah," Zayn says, but the way she's holding herself is a little tense. She shrugs. "I mean, it'll be nice that I won't have to like, constantly look for girls who won't sell any stories about how good I am with my tongue to any massive gossip rags, at least, with her there."

Louis leans forward and wraps an arm around Zayn's stomach and squeezes, briefly. "People are the worst," she says, and Zayn leans back into her touch gratefully.

"We're going to be in the same towns as the Jonas Brothers a couple of times, right?" she asks, eventually, once Louis has finished up with the plait and they've switched positions, Zayn gently working through the knots that have formed in Louis's hair, holding hanks of it in her fists just above the knots so that it doesn't pull when she brushes them out.

"Yeah," Louis says. "Maybe I'll only wear through the batteries on my vibrator, like, four times this tour."

Zayn barks out a laugh. "Sounds like wishful thinking to me, babe," she says. "Didn't you go through like, ten sets of them last year?"

"Last year I wasn't having sex with Joe Jonas," Louis says, primly.

"There's no way that boy's dick is that good," Zayn mumbles, and Louis feels her fingers separating strands of her hair and then feels a slight tug as she starts manipulating them. So Louis is getting plaits, too. Okay. Cool.

"I don't judge men on the skill with which they use their cocks," Louis tells her, which is true. Most of the guys she's slept with over the years haven't really known what to do with their dicks besides thrust, which, well. Maybe that's what they're for, but whatever. Penetration has never been her number one favourite activity anyway. "I judge them by the skill with which they use their tongues."

"Oh my god," Zayn says. "Do you remember when we were first put together in a band and Liam said she thought oral sex was probably gross?"

"The poor uneducated girl," Louis says, clucking her tongue. She and Zayn had spent at least an hour in the bungalow telling the other girls precisely how good oral could – and should – make or break a relationship. "Oral sex is truly the only proof I need that there's some kind of power out there that loves me."

"You're weird," Zayn says, but the cuddles Louis close and says, "But I agree."

Louis sighs. "I tried to get Joe to tell me what going down on girls is like last weekend but he wouldn't say."

Zayn suddenly stiffens, but only incrementally. "Have you recently developed an interest in going down on girls?"

"A curiosity," Louis corrects. "And no, I wouldn't say that I've recently developed anything of the sort." She shrugs. "I've always kind of wondered. I mean, since I demand it of everyone that I'm with, at some point or another..."

Laughing, Zayn relaxes a little. "Well," she says. "If you ever decide you do want to find out, let me know. I have connections; I can hook you up with someone."

And like, Louis knows – she knows – that Zayn doesn't intend it the way she takes it. She knows that Zayn means that she has a lot of female friends who would probably jump at the chance to have Louis Tomlinson go down on them. But like, her brain takes her to a place where Zayn means that
Louis could experiment on *her*, and she's completely thrown off by this sudden rush of heat in the pit of her stomach.

That's interesting.

But it doesn't bear thinking about, so she changes the subject completely, to whether Zayn has started thinking at all about their next album.

That night, she snuggles in closer to Zayn than she should as they drift off to sleep, relishing the warmth of Zayn's body and the soft weight of Zayn's arm across her waist, and for the next two days, if she sits close enough for her thigh to press hot against Zayn's own leg while they marathon old One Tree Hill episodes and dissolve into the familiar old argument about whether Chad Michael Murray or Sophia Bush is hotter, or if she holds Zayn's hands a fraction too hard for a beat too long when they're doing each other's nails (Zayn's a matte emerald, Louis's a fluorescent yellow shimmer), well. She's not going to make a big deal out of it.

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America happens, and it keeps on happening. Louis falls quickly and easily back into the rhythm of living out of the pockets of her four best friends, all of them falling asleep in improbable tangles on the tour bus couches, doing splits competitions during the twitter questions sections of their shows – Louis and Liam are, naturally, the best, but Niall is shockingly good at them too – and generally wreaking havoc across the country as they churn America under the wheels of their tour bus, one hot and dusty mile at a time.

It's nice, having Little Mix in the bus behind them, occasionally being able to switch from bus to bus and maybe hang out with Leigh-Anne, talking jewellery and nail decals and blue lipstick when the weird heat that Louis has been feeling deep in her stomach whenever she and Zayn end up wrestling around for the tv remote or their shared bag of makeup-removing wipes for too long starts to overwhelm her. Of course, sometimes Perrie and Zayn get onto one of the busses first as they leave their venues for a night of driving to the next city and the rest of the girls end up crowding onto the other to give them their privacy, but at least Zayn is getting laid, right?

Louis vividly remembers the tour they were on before Zayn decided to fuck it and not deny the rumours after she and Perrie were photographed and just be out, how unbearable she would get when she went too long without getting off with someone else, and it wasn't a pretty sight. She'd get shorter and snippier and hole up in her bunk whenever the rest of the girls were talking about the boys they were sleeping with and stare at girls in clubs, nervous and longing. Louis had actually toyed with the idea of offering to fuck her once or twice, just to bring her back to the calmer, happier Zayn they all missed, but she wasn't sure that she'd be able to go through with it, or that it wouldn't mess up the band dynamics, so she'd never said anything. Now, Louis is pretty sure she might actually be able to more or less follow through if she offered to sleep with Zayn, but she's still not sure that it wouldn't mess up the band dynamics, so it probably really is for the best that Zayn is with Perrie.

Harry complains about missing Michael long enough and often enough that Louis starts to think that their thing might be more than just a passing fancy on Harry’s part, and so she tries to play the role of the dutiful friend and lend an ear, but sometimes it's hard to pay attention when Zayn comes rolling out of her bunk at half noon, hair thrown back in a messy bun because she inevitably hasn't found her hairbrush yet, basketball shorts rolled up three times around her waist and vest top tight and clinging, and jesus, Louis is just in so much trouble.

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Chicago is one of the cities where they're performing twice with a day's break in between. Conveniently – thanks to some heavy campaigning on the part of their respective management – the Jonas Brothers have a show in a different venue on their off day, so Louis gets to meet Joe for some hardcore shopping and a very nice lunch, followed by some even nicer sex.

It's so nice, so pleasant, but apart from the earth-shatteringly fantastic forty minutes while Joe brings her to the edge several times before he finally lets her come, that's all it is. After not seeing her boyfriend for weeks and only having Skype and texts and phone calls to keep them connected, being with him in person is nothing more than pleasant.

After she slips out of his hotel room to let him get ready for his show, and heads down to where she's meeting the rest of the girls for dinner before they all go to watch him and his brothers perform, she finally starts to let herself think about she does love him, but.

But she's not in love with him.

But, although she's perfectly happy going out with him, she can't see herself starting up a family with him, getting married, filling a house with all the children she's dreamed about since she was just a kid herself.

But he's more of a friend than a boyfriend, apart from the whole sex thing.

But she's been in a relationship for over a year with a wonderful guy who, though he can be kind of an knobhead sometimes, like when he jokes about all that fanfiction stuff, completely respects who she is and what she does for a living and treats her so, so well, telling her about all of the pitfalls he's experienced with his fame and letting her talk about how fiercely protective she is of her girls and sharing his own stories about being that way with Nick and, to a lesser extent, Kevin. Thirteen and a half months, and she knows she could be perfectly content continuing to go out with him for years to come – despite his tumultuous dating history, he's never shown a sign of, say, dumping her in a twenty-seven second long phone call – but by now she also knows she will never, ever feel that spark of being truly into him.

It's kind of hard to enjoy his concert after she starts thinking about that, even though she's side stage with the rest of her band and all of Little Mix. She watches the girls as Niall dances around, mouthing along to all of the songs – Niall's always been a big fan of the Jonas Brothers – and Liam sways happily, an arm slung around Harry's shoulders.

Louis also likes their music. It's catchy and, for all the shit she pretends to give Joe about how stupid the lyrics to Pom Poms are, she actually loves the song a lot. She likes the music and, even though she doesn't love him, not in the right way, she likes her boyfriend a lot, too.

But she still spends most of the concert watching the way that Perrie and Zayn have their arms wrapped around each other, eyes drawn to every shift of Zayn's hand on Perrie's waist, even when Joe is shaking his hips in her direction.

Out of the corner of her eye, she registers that Leigh-Anne is looking in the same direction as she is.

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she feels like she should.

In Phoenix, she and Liam go rock climbing properly, and Louis scrapes her hand when it slips off a rock. She makes a big deal about it in their concert that night, talking about her battle wounds and how luckily Liam, who is her princess-knight in shining armour, came to her rescue with a well-timed first aid kit, and the crowd in the arena shrieks.

In Denver, she and Harry sneak out to a tattoo parlour when they're supposed to be fitted for some kind of swimsuit photoshoot and get little anchors tattooed just above their ankles – "Because," as Harry points out when she proposes they do it, "Boyfriends will come and go but you will always be my anchor in this crazy life."

"Awwww," Louis says, pulling her into a one-armed hug and scuffing her hair up with her other hand, her heart swelling up a little because all of her girls are equally important to her at this point but Harry does have the distinction of being her first favourite, and the one who she's still most comfortable just existing with, when it comes down to it. So, yeah. Anchors. "Haz. The fans will have a field day with this."

"I know," Harry says, shrugging, and yeah. Fuck the fans, this is about her and Harry, and she's so very pleased that Harry is always willing to remind her of that.

In Las Vegas, Zayn proposes that the two of them try their luck out at the blackjack tables. Louis, high roller that she is, ends up winning about a hundred American dollars once all of her losses are accounted for.

Zayn wins just enough to buy Louis dinner at a cheap little Italian restaurant. Louis is of age and they're both famous – and famously British – so when Louis orders a bottle of wine for the two of them to split, no one really bats an eye.

They debate about the best lyric changes they've made in recent shows – Zayn makes a case for the time Harry managed to ramp up the double entendres in Live While We're Young even more and Louis argues for the time that Niall literally made Gotta Be You about food – and it's all very innocent and fun, laughing and throwing bits of bread at each other, but every time that Zayn passes the pepper or wraps her lovely little fingers around the neck of the wine bottle to top them both off, Louis feels this pesky little hum of intrigue throughout her body, because she would develop a minor attraction to one of her best friends when she's twenty-one and otherwise on top of the world.

In San Francisco, Niall nabs Louis and they go to see a baseball game and spend most of the time getting drunk on cheap beer and trying to work out why Americans like the sport so much. Niall gets like, three crab sandwiches and a load of garlic chips and rolls her eyes when Louis asks her if she should get peanuts and cracker jacks instead.

"I don't think that's a thing, Lou," she says, pushing her hair back under her new San Francisco Giants snapback and wiping sweat off her forehead with the back of her wrist. "And even if it were, how could I possibly get full off that?"

"I was just asking," Louis says, faking a pout, and she has Niall take a picture of her posing next to a picture of a baseball bat so she can send it to Joe, because he actually enjoys this sport, the weirdo.

+++ 

The last concert before they get to LA is in San Diego. San Diego is hot and sunny – all of America is hot and sunny in July, but San Diego especially so – and a poll in the hall outside their hotel rooms after their concert reveals that everyone is starting to feel antsy from being on the road so long.
Little Mix are headed on to LA that night; they've got early-morning interviews to help establish their hold on the American market, but One Direction have a little more wiggle room and they unanimously decide to stay put for one more night.

As soon as the rest of them get to the hotel, Liam announces that she's going to swim lengths in the hotel pool to cool off and then Skype with Dev for the rest of the night. Niall goes off with Harry in search of late-night beers and bowling, but none of that appeals to Louis.

"I need to move," she tells Zayn, who is the only one left standing with her in the hall. "And be around lots of people. Fancy going to a club with me?"

Zayn smiles this little inscrutable smile and nods. "Always," she says, so Louis pops into her room to get an outfit that's good for dancing and heads over to Zayn's room, where they break into the minibar and drink tiny little bottles of gin as Louis puts on Zayn's makeup and Zayn puts on Louis's, a routine that's so familiar Louis can't quite focus on it enough to ignore the way her stomach shifts when her hands brush against Zayn's face, and vice versa.

Louis is already tipsy by the time she pulls on her clothes – a loose, semisheer vest top and jeans cut off so high they barely cover her arse, plus platform gladiator sandals – and rubs a shimmery lotion all over her arms to offset the tan she's got in the States even better. She curls her hair with Zayn's biggest curling iron as Zayn squeezes into a bandage-tight dress that goes down mid-thigh and shows off her flat stomach and makes her tits look bigger than they are but does nothing at all to downplay the narrowness of her hips. A spray of hair stuff so that her post-show tangle is all pushed artfully to one side of her head and then she's grabbing a bag and wrapping an arm around Louis's wrist and pulling her out the door.

The club Paul finds for them is loud and hot, air conditioning totally ineffective in the face of all the bodies pressed tight and sweaty against each other, and Louis grins with all of her teeth, because this is precisely what she needs.

They get drinks at the bar, strong ones that are more alcohol than mixer, and dance, pressing into the tightest tangle of people that security lets them, Zayn's body pressed close to Louis's back. Louis feels hot all over in a way that she isn't sure is entirely due to how crowded it is, and she breaks away to get another, stronger drink.

It's nice, not talking at all, just writhing to the music in a way that doesn't demand any of the choreography that escapes them, and being with Zayn goes a long way to helping Louis feel like she's letting herself fly free, but in a safe way, and there's a tiny part of Louis that is secretly satisfied that Zayn is hanging onto her and just her instead of finding some girl to kiss, even though logically she knows that it's probably due to the fact that they'll be back with Perrie in the morning.

By the time she's ready to tap out, she's so drunk that she needs to cling to Zayn to make her way through the bodies and the music to the door of the club. The security guy with them calls their car and Zayn leans against the door to the outside, chain-smoking while they wait. Louis leans against Zayn and peers up at the sky, trying to find stars. "I can't see any stars," she tells Zayn, and then twists her head so that she can see Zayn's face and the glow of her cigarette. "Now I can." She giggles. "Get it? We're stars."

Zayn laughs, and Louis doesn't tell her that Zayn's eye are also like stars.

Finding her room is too confusing when they get back to the hotel, and the grip Zayn has on her waist kind of precludes searching too hard, so Louis lets Zayn pull her into her room and tumble onto the bed.
"I'm so fucking drunk," Zayn says, and then again like she's got something to prove: "I'm so fucking drunk."

She's so fucking lovely, too, with her makeup smudged and her hair sticking, sweaty to her forehead. "You're a mess," Louis tells her, reaching over to ruffle her hair up. It's damp and it should be gross but Louis is pretty damp and gross too – and drunk – so she doesn't mind. "I love you," she adds, easily, because she doesn't want Zayn to get the wrong idea.

"You too, babe," Zayn says, falling back on her bed and laughing harder. "God, the room is fucking spinning."

"What time is it, even?" Louis asks. Her phone is – somewhere; she'd dropped her bag as soon as she got into the room. Zayn's is still close by, though, so she reaches into it and takes her phone out to check the time, which is half two.

And then she notices Zayn's background, which is a picture of her from her run in Edinburgh, sports bra damp with sweat underneath her breasts rising up into a little triangle pointing up her cleavage, hair in her face and arm muscles practically popping with the angle and the way she was moving them right when the picture was snapped. "Hey, Malik," she says. "What's with the phone background?"

Zayn freezes, which Louis feels more than she sees, so she pushes herself up onto her elbows and looks more closely at Zayn's face. It's tough to focus, as far gone as she is, but it's worth the effort because Zayn has got a lovely little flush on her cheeks. "Oh, you know," she says, rolling her eyes. Louis sits up a little more. "Do you have that to blackmail me?" she asks, scandalised.

"Yes," says Zayn, rolling over to face Louis better. Her hair falls into her face, so Louis reaches forward to brush it back. "That's precisely it but now you've worked it out so I won't be able to use it anymore." She sighs dramatically.

"Sorry," Louis says, unapologetically. She kind of wants to find more alcohol to drink, which is a pretty good sign that she shouldn't actually do that. She cuddles into Zayn more. Because she misses the heat of the club. Yeah.

"Is my face as messed up as yours?" Zayn asks, reaching up to trace the migration of Louis's eye makeup with a soft fingertip, and she knocks her forehead against Louis's. "Zap, you and me are the most radical grungecore sensation in the world and we tour around changing lives just the two of us."

"What the fuck," Louis says, laughing. "What even is grungecore, Zayn? You're so weird." She doesn't pull away though, just tangles her hand in Zayn's messy hair and smiles. "I do appreciate how so many of your alternate lives for us are just you and me," she adds, honestly, because Zayn comes up with scenarios for if they weren't in One Direction almost every single time the two of them are drunk on their own, and Louis feels a little thrill of happiness every time the scenarios are alternate-Zayn-and-Louis scenarios instead of alternate-One-Direction scenarios. It makes up for all the times Zayn has picked someone besides Louis to date in alternate worlds where the girls actually want to date each other.

"Harry and Liam and Niall are clearly the punk band we travel with," Zayn says, rolling her eyes. "But they're not grungecore."

"Still don't think that's a thing, babe," Louis says. She tries to tangle her fingers in Zayn's belt to stop the room from swaying around her, but Zayn hasn't got a belt on, just her tight tight dress, so tight
that Louis's fingers hardly even find purchase in the fabric.

"We should probably drink water," Zayn says, after staring down at Louis for a very long moment. "So it won't taste like anything died in our mouths in the morning."

"I have it on good authority that I'll still be drunk in the morning," Louis says, because whenever she's this drunk after two, she generally is. "So I won't actually care."

"I will," Zayn says, though. She extricates herself from Louis's hold, and Louis shivers at the sudden absence of Zayn's body heat.

"Come back," she says, plaintively, trying to peer after Zayn, but the spins are getting worse so she falls back to the bed and closes her eyes and focuses on breathing until the side of the bed dips from Zayn's weight again.

"Sit up a bit, Lou," Zayn says, gently, working a hand under Louis's head and helping her lean up. "I brought you a drink."

"Goody," Louis says, taking the glass and drinking the water down. A pause, then, "Can we sleep now?"

"Yeah, babe," Zayn says, wrapping an arm around Louis's waist as they lie back down. "We can sleep now."

Louis smiles sleepily at her and tries to land a kiss on Zayn's cheek. It mostly lands on the corner of Zayn's mouth. "Love you," she mumbles, closing her eyes and smiling as Zayn's arm tightens around her.

The drive the next morning is horrendous, of course. Louis has got a splitting headache and the sun is hot and intense, even through the windows of the tour bus.

And it's compounded by the fact that at the end of the ride, they're in LA. They only have two shows in LA but they're there for a full week, squeezing in recording time for their first songs on their new album.

And Joe is also back in LA.

+++ She's been to LA with Joe before, and to New York, and to Texas, because Joe loves showing off the places that he loves, but one of the great things about Joe is that he's always got more to share. And, since they have off on their second-to-last day in the city, she spends the day with him.

It's honestly a great date. Joe takes her to the beach and they go surfing – Louis texting Liam pictures the whole time to make her jealous, because Louis is nothing if not a great friend – and then, when she's properly worn out and a little bit bruised from falling off her board and getting buffeted by the waves so many exhilarating times – he drives the long, salt-crusted drive back to his sprawling house in the Hollywood hills and they shower off together. Louis goes down on him, the cool spray of the water hitting her back as she swallows around his cock, gripping his thighs tight and holding him against the wall, and when they're drying off, he spreads her towel out on the bed and pushes her down on top of it, kissing and nipping up his thighs until she's fucking herself against his tongue, clawing into his back with her lavender-painted nails.

Afterward, she puts on a sundress with no underwear underneath it and he pulls on a pair of his athletic shorts and they attempt to cook together, but their rice burns onto the bottom of the pan and
Louis accidentally spills half a tin of pepper onto the salmon, so they end up with just a salad and some leftover store-bought roast chicken and crisp, sparkling wine.

Louis is so, so content with him. "This is like, the best day I've had in forever," she tells him, because if she had a show tonight, it would be precisely the way she wants to spend the rest of her life – doing something sporty in the morning, having a lot of really great sex with someone she gets along with well, having a nice early dinner together, and then running out on stage and singing her heart out with all of her very best friends.

Of course, it would be nice if she were in love with the person she's having all that sex with.

Joe grins at her. "It's nice, isn't it," he says. "Having a break from all the touring and just having fun."

"Yeah," she says, and she plays with the stem of her wine glass for a few minutes, then swallows the rest of the contents down. "I really like being with you."

Joe blinks, then sets his fork down. He takes a deep breath. "I obviously like being with you too," he says, slowly. "You're a lot of fun."

"What are we doing?" she asks, forcing herself to meet his eyes. He deserves for her to look him in the eye.

"We're having dinner," he says, promptly, eyes held purposefully wide. "We are having a conversation during dinner after a long, exhausting day of doing absolutely no work and it's been beautiful."

"No," she says, rolling her eyes at him and smiling, because he's always so good at lightening her moods. "You idiot. I mean, what are we doing?"

"Having fun," he says.

He doesn't say 'biding time,' but Louis is pretty sure they both know he means it that way. "I know," she says, grinning. "You're honestly one of the most outrageous and exciting people I know."

"Well, thanks, Lou," he says. "You, too." He takes a long sip out of his wine glass, and reaches across the table to take her hand. His face is resolute. So they're on the same page, then.

"But like," she says, and finishes her wine. "You're not in love with me. I'm not in love with you."

"Yeah," he says, and Louis distantly registers that having her suspicion confirmed – that Joe is not in love with her – rankles a little bit, but only because she honestly believes that everyone should be a little bit in love with her. "I mean, that's probably why our relationship has lasted so long, though, to be honest with you. I'm not very good at being in love with people."

"Awwww, Joe," Louis says, and she pulls their joined hands up so that she can kiss his fingertips. Keeping his hand at her mouth, allowing her lips to continue grazing it as she talks, she says, "You're probably one of my best friends at this point, you know."

He grins, but it's bittersweet. "I know. You're definitely one of mine, too."

"I've always known that we have an expiration date," Louis says, and she waits, watches him carefully. He nods, so she nods, and continues. "But maybe we should move it up and just like, end things now while we've got it so good, yeah? So that it doesn't get drawn out and messy and so no one ends up getting hurt or resentful or anything."
Joe is quiet for a really long time, and then: "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, that sounds good to me." He pauses. "Is there – do you have someone else that you um. Want to be with?"

"Not really," Louis says, honestly, because maybe she's been thinking about touching Zayn a little more lately, but that's basically all it is. She grins, and it's mostly genuine. "You won't have to worry about there being any break-up scandals from me."

"Good," he says. He pauses, then pours them both a little more wine, finishing off the bottle. "Um."

"What?"

He grins at her, cheeky and bright, and she can't help but grin back. He's such a good guy to her. "Can we still have sex if we're like, in the same place and not like, seeing anyone else?"

She laughs, harder than she would have expected to. "God, Joe," she says, finally, and then, "Yeah, obviously we're sexually compatible."

"Sexually compatible," he says, releasing her hand to make air quotes. "Sexually compatible."

"Oh, shut the fuck up," Louis says, and throws a chunk of carrot from her salad at him. "I love fucking you."

"I love fucking you too," he says, pressing a hand to his heart dramatically like he's overcome with emotion, and she feels another rush of affection at the way that he's not letting this breakup get at all depressing. "I'm sorry I couldn't fucking love you, though."

"Same," she says, and she gets up and goes to sit on his lap and kisses him a bit, because why not? She pulls away eventually and offers to ring for a car to take her back to his hotel, but he shakes his head and promises to drive her back himself, so she kisses him again and again, one last time. "Anyway," she says, pulling away when their kisses start to feel like more of a goodbye than a promise. "I have nothing against revisiting your cock, babe."

"Good," he says, firmly, and spanks her bum when she gets up to clear the dishes.

They don't talk while he drives her back. Joe just turns up the radio and they sing along, mucking up the lyrics on purpose and trying out all sorts of crazy accents, putting runs where they don't belong, scat singing when they don't know any of the words. It's fun, but also a little weird, because he doesn't reach for her hand over the console like she's used to.

"Don't be a stranger," she tells him, when they've pulled up in front of her hotel. He leans in and kisses her over the console. "Keep me updated on everything, okay babe?"

It's got to be the most anticlimactic end to a relationship ever.

She and the girls have got a fancy suite in this hotel, multiple bedrooms connected to the same kitchenette and sitting area. Harry is on the couch, texting someone furiously. She looks up when Louis comes in. "Didn't expect you back so early," she says, frowning. "It's only half seven."

"Yeah, well," Louis says, shrugging. "Joe and I broke up, so I thought I might as well come back to you guys."

"Wait," Harry says, fingers suddenly flying even faster over her phone, which means she's probably texting the rest of the girls. "What? Do I have to put a hit out on the Jonas Brothers, because I
absolutely will."

"It's not like it's a big deal," Louis says, and the thing is, she's being honest, but Harry pulls her into a tight hug, anyway.

Louis lets her. It's always nice to be held.

+++Louis keeps insisting that she's fine – she is – but the girls keep mollycoddling her anyway. Harry slumps beside her on long tour bus rides, wordlessly passing her half of her headphones as she plays whatever songs she and Nick Grimshaw are texting about that day. Liam drags Louis out early in the morning for runs that are more of a slow jog than anything they've ever done, trying to chat the whole time about how Louis feels.

"I feel fine," she keeps saying. "I broke it off with him."

But Liam just gives her a pitying look and pats her sweatily on the arm and lets her pick the routes they take back to their hotels.

For one glorious day, Louis revels in the fact that Niall hasn't noticed once that she's been filching her crisps whenever she's up getting something from the kitchen or swapping out One Tree Hill discs in their DVD player, until she realises that Niall has been letting her take her food, which, honestly? Louis is rather offended by that.

The one to take Louis's breakup with Joe the worst is Zayn, who avoids her for three hours and then crawls up into Louis's bunk, squeezing next to her, breathing hot against Louis's neck. "I didn't even know that you weren't happy with him," she confides, quietly, dismally.

"Hey," Louis says, frowning, because it sounds worryingly like like Zayn is blaming herself, hurt that she didn't know. "Stop. We were dreadfully happy, that's why I had to end it, see?"

Zayn gives her a look that is mostly unreadable but a little judgemental. "You broke up with him because you were happy."

"Well, yes," Louis says, in her absolute most logical tone of voice. "We were getting along great and neither one of us wanted to end up resenting each other so we stopped it before that could get started."

Zayn stares at her for a moment longer before she rolls her eyes and stifles a snort. "God," she says, but her voice is fond and soft. "You're ridiculous. You both are. That is one of the stupidest things I've ever heard of in my life. How do you know you'd end up resenting each other?"

"We were having a great time," Louis says, snuggling in close to Zayn. "But we weren't in love."

"Oh," Zayn says, in an entirely different tone, and she's quiet for a long moment, but then she pulls Louis even closer and even though the air in the bunk is hot and stagnant and oppressive, she hugs her and kisses her, closer to her ear than her cheek. "Oh, Lou."

"It's okay," Louis insists, and she changes the subject, talking absolute rubbish, doing her best to make Zayn laugh, because the way that Zayn says 'oh Lou' makes her shiver inside in a way that she definitely does not plan to think about.

It takes some time, but eventually, Zayn is giggling and then, suddenly, throwing her head back and cracking up at the ridiculous things Louis is saying. Maybe it helps that she's punctuating her jokes
by digging her fingers into Zayn's ribs, tickling her aggressively, but whatever. Louis has never claimed to be above cheating to get a laugh out of someone.

The way that Zayn laughs when she gets caught up in it, though. Louis watches the way that Zayn's cheek flush and her eyes squint shut and her tongue pushes up against her teeth as she gasps for air, and fuck. She totally wants to sit on Zayn's face, and while the urge to do so in general is something Louis has felt before, about a number of different people in her life, the way that she also wants to push her hand down the front of Zayn's skinny jeans and pants and lick the taste of Zayn from her fingers and maybe give her an orgasm in the process is totally new to her.

"Let's go out tonight," she says, abruptly, pulling her hands away from Zayn's side and knotting them tightly together because she does not know what to do with these urges. It's a travel day but they're going to be in a hotel for the night – Seattle, Louis is pretty sure; they've got a show tomorrow and then they're moving up into Canada – so a club won't be out of the question. "All of us, Little Mix, everyone."

"Okay, babe," Zayn says, finally catching her breath, and Louis is about to push out of her bunk and distance herself from all these confusing feelings, but Zayn digs her head into the curve of Louis's neck, lips brushing against her collarbone. Louis is, after all, regrettably only human and she's got this instinctive drive to pick at things that confuse her until they fall apart into manageable, comprehensible little pieces, so she stills and lets Zayn cuddle her until, finally, she can relax into her hold.

(At the club that night, Louis gets very, very drunk off gin and tonics and watches Zayn and Perrie dance closer and closer together. Everyone else is off somewhere or other, dancing or pulling boys or getting more drinks, but Leigh-Anne is right there with her, tugging her out of her seat because Louis is beginning to look as maudlin as she's feeling, probably.

Louis throws herself into dancing until she's sweaty and spinning, but the image of Zayn and Perrie won't go away, and during a break, when she's convinced Leigh to get just one more drink with her, she ends up muttering, "Do you ever just get really confused? About things?"

And she can't help but notice that Leigh-Anne follows her gaze, can't help but see the way her eyes widen and she nods, slowly, carefully. "Yeah," she says, barely loud enough to hear over the pounding music. "I do, too.")

+++ By the time they reach Vancouver, Louis is beginning to miss Joe. Twofold, because she misses hanging out with him, because he's always good fun, but she also misses the idea of having a boyfriend. The media somehow haven't got wind of the fact that they've split, outside of the usual rumours, probably because neither of them have been pursuing anyone else and they've done nothing to indicate that they aren't still together, but Louis knows that when they find out, the paparazzi will be circling her like a horde of sharks and interviews will become minefields, the way she answers every question telling millions of people whatever it is they want to believe about the breakup.

Studiously ignoring the way that Zayn's arm brushing against hers is beginning to feel like a brand, Louis belly-flops onto her bed. "I'm bored," she says, because even though she's totally okay with fucking Joe still, calling him to get off over Skype during her down time feels a bit not on. "Harry is off on the phone with Michael and Liam and Niall are like, exploring the bloody city and I'm bored."

"I'm sorry," Zayn says, from where she's styling her hair in front of a mirror. She's got a lot of texturising pastes and gels and waxes and a curling iron and straighteners and about ten thousand brushes and she seems to be plaiting her hair up the sides of her scalp and curling and pinning the
loose ends into some kind of something. Louis doesn't really get it, the way that Zayn and Perrie are always on about doing their hair up in new and wild ways. She tends to keep her hair long and loose with the little bit of natural wave that she has, unless they've got a photoshoot or an appearance, but she's been thinking about dyeing a hot pink streak down the side or maybe getting an undercut above her left ear. She's not sure.

"Me too," Louis says, pouting, and then: "I miss having a boyfriend."

Zayn immediately puts down her tub of goo and comes over to Louis's side. "Oh, babe," she says, wrapping an arm around Louis's shoulders. Some of her hair flops over the side of her head and smacks against Louis's shoulder. "I was wondering when it would hit you."

"Shut up, I don't want to talk about it," Louis says, because she can't handle the tenderness in Zayn's voice or the way that her hand on Louis's shoulder is so fucking gentle. "Tell me about your love life instead. How's Perrie?"

Zayn tenses, then sighs. "You realise that Perrie and I aren't like, a thing, right?" she says.

"No," Louis says, rolling over onto her side and peering up at Zayn's face. "You're off again? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Um," Zayn says, and she frowns. "No, I mean. We've never really been a thing."

"You definitely seemed like a thing that time that I walked in on you with your hands up her skirt," Louis says, slowly, frowning slightly because she is just not able to follow what Zayn seems to be getting at here. "You've been practically inseparable all tour."

"Yeah, but," Zayn says. "I mean, obviously we f**k around a lot. She's hot, I'm hot, we're both pretty fucking gay, and we're good friends, like, I trust her, so it makes sense that we get off together." A noticeable pause, then: "Sort of what you've been making your thing with Joe sound like, but with less dick."

"I mean," Louis says, a little prickly. "I knew you obviously weren't totally serious about each other, since you've clearly never been exclusive, but it seemed like you were kind of getting to be that way on this tour."

"You realise that you can be serious about someone without being exclusive, right?" Zayn asks. She sits up and piles her hair on top of her head again, holding it there with one hand. "You've been practically inseparable all tour."

"Yeah, but," Zayn says. "I mean, obviously we f**k around a lot. She's hot, I'm hot, we're both pretty fucking gay, and we're good friends, like, I trust her, so it makes sense that we get off together." A noticeable pause, then: "Sort of what you've been making your thing with Joe sound like, but with less dick."

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"You realise that you can be serious about someone without being exclusive, right?" Zayn asks. She sits up and piles her hair on top of her head again, holding it there with one hand. "But no, we've never been."

"I had no idea," Louis says, frowning. She feels like she should have known.

"Yeah, well," says Zayn. "I never had any idea that you and Joe weren't like, completely made for each other because it definitely seemed like you were."

"Okay, yeah. Fair enough," Louis says, but she still feels a little bit hollow, a little queasy, over how she didn't know this. She takes a deep breath. "So you and Perrie aren't a real thing?"

"Yeah." Zayn shrugs, glances in the mirror, and sighs, pulling a bobble off her wrist and wrapping it around her hair, fashioning it into a loose and messy bun. Wiping the product on her hands off on her jeans, she says, "We both, um. Like other people, but I think they're like, pretty straight, so. It's just easier. We get on."

And that's like a punch to the gut. Louis is torn between indignation that someone dare not like Zayn back, sorrow that she didn't know any of this, and a deep, gut-wrenching pain that, if she doesn't like
Perrie that way, Zayn still likes someone else, and – oh.

Maybe that's why she and Joe never really worked out.

Louis hauls herself up into a seated position and reaches out for Zayn, brushing her fingers against Zayn's waist and then hooking them in her beltloops, tugging her in. "We're a right pair," she says, trying to push down her hurt in order to be there for Zayn, who also seems to have a tragic unrequited crush going on.

Zayn sits down on the edge of the bed and leans in toward Louis, who steels herself and plants a smacking kiss on Zayn's cheek. "Cheers," Zayn says, quietly, glancing back at her, so Louis bounces about on the bed until she's right behind her. She reaches up and takes Zayn's loose bun out and starts finger-combing her hair out, weaving it into an elaborate headdress.

"Love you, Malik," she says, as lightly as she's able to, as Zayn tilts her head back to give her better access.

"You too, Tomlinson," Zayn says, reaching up around to the back of her head and touching her hair lightly with just the palms of her hands, fingers extended outward, to check Louis's progress.

Louis lets her hands brush against Zayn's briefly, fingers tangling over Zayn's updo. "Are you happy?" she asks, after a long, loaded silence.

"Yeah," Zayn says, and she twists around, dislodging Louis's hands from her hair. Some of it tumbles free, but most of it stays in the fancy plait Louis has twisted it into. She smiles at Louis. "I mean, I've got you, haven't I?"


+++ Later that night, Zayn goes out to a restaurant she's heard about with Jade and Liam, something about compare it to her mum's cooking.

Louis seeks out Leigh-Anne, vague memories of Leigh-Anne's sweaty limbs pressed close against her, dancing in that club. "So," she says, leaning against the door frame, watching the way that Leigh applies her lipstick – purple this time. "Can I borrow that when you're done?"

"'Course," Leigh-Anne says, gesturing Louis inside. "How are you doing, Louis?"

"Mmm," Louis says, taking the lipstick when Leigh proffers it and smearing it on. It doesn't look great against her skin tone, but doesn't look bad, either. "Remember when we went clubbing a few days ago?"

"Yeah, of course," Leigh-Anne says. She frowns a little. "Why?"

Focusing exclusively on her own face in the mirror, Louis says, "What did you mean when you said that you get confused, too?"

"You remember that," Leigh says, quietly. She looks at Louis's face, also through the mirror. She clears her throat. "You were looking at Perrie when you asked me."

"Zayn," Louis corrects, tone purposefully light. She wipes her palms, which are sweating, against her skirt. She's not entirely certain what she's aiming for with this conversation. She pauses, takes a few deep breaths, laces her fingers together. "Were you looking at Perrie?"
"Um," Leigh-Anne says, but she also nods, incrementally. Louis barely catches it. She takes another deep breath.

"You realise they're not actually in any kind of relationship," she says, slowly.

Leigh's eyes dart up and meet hers in the mirror. "What?"

"Zayn told me. They like other people."

"Oh." Leigh-Anne is quiet for a long moment, but she doesn't look away from Louis's face. And then, almost sadly: "Oh."

"I know," Louis says, and pauses. "Um. Are you... confused because you're jealous?"

"Um," says Leigh, and she's quiet again. Studying her face, Louis realises that Leigh is just as nervous as she is, which is honestly reassuring, so she tries for a smile. Leigh smiles back, tremblingly. "Also because I'm not used to girls making my stomach flip like this, to be honest with you."

"Yeah," Louis says, turning to look at Leigh-Anne directly. "I think." She pauses, trying to sort out what exactly it is that she thinks. "I think that I was hoping you'd say that."

Leigh-Anne raises an eyebrow at her. "Why, do you want to like, experiment with me or something?"

"Well," Louis says, "I mean, I kissed girls before the X Factor but that was about it and I never quite felt about them the way I do about – well. I suppose I just wanted to see if it's all Zayn or if it could be any girl in general."

"I don't know," says Leigh-Anne, but she pushes her hair back over her ear and leans in to press a very light, very quick kiss to Louis's lips. "Maybe."

"We don't have to like," Louis says, and frowns. "You know. Fuck. Or anything."

"Yeah," Leigh says. She sighs heavily, twisting back and forth in her seat, before nodding to herself, decisively. "I dunno. Kissing can't hurt, can it? Everyone likes kissing."

"Exactly," Louis says, smiling a little bit. This is so against everything she's ever done for the past almost-three years. This is so nerve-wracking.

But Leigh reaches forward and brackets her hands around Louis's waist – not quite boldly, but not timidly, either – and tugs her down until Louis is straddling her lap, and then she's burying her fingers in Louis's hair. "I don't know what I'm doing," she whispers, and then guides Louis's head forward and kisses her, a little longer and a little harder this time.

When Louis pulls back, she takes a moment to marvel at the way that her lipstick looks as good as ever. Her head is so muddled that she can't tell whether she properly likes this or not, but she does know that it's good to be kissing someone again, so she leans back in and kisses Leigh with a little more focus, licking into her mouth after a few moments, biting her lip gently, tasting the waxy flavour of the lipstick and the sweet spearmint of Leigh-Anne's chewing gum.

It's not bad, but it is a little awkward, just coming into Leigh's hotel room and having such a stilted, circumspect conversation and then planting one on her, and she ends up laughing into the kiss.

Leigh sits back in her chair. "I don't mind this," she says, slowly. "But I think that's enough for
"For now," Louis parrots.

"Yeah, I don't know." Leigh-Anne shrugs. "We could try again later, maybe, just to check."

"Yeah, okay," Louis says. Tonight is just so weird. She still feels a little nauseous that Zayn isn't even with Perrie but she still has no chance. But like, Louis has never shied away from trying to face challenges, and her bicurious feelings are no exception. Anyway, she's pretty sure that she doesn't do well without someone to kiss. She's always hated being single, and like, she doesn't really have interest in going out with Leigh – it would be fair to absolutely no one – but kissing? Kissing she can do. She blinks. "Want to watch a film?"

"They've got HBO," Leigh-Anne says. "We could watch Game of Thrones."

"Fair enough," says Louis. She climbs off Leigh-Anne's lap, then pauses. "Um. Did I make anything weird?"

Leigh considers this for a moment, then laughs. "Yeah," she says. "I reckon you did, but like – maybe that's not a bad thing?"

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Leigh-Anne avoids Louis for almost all of the following day, but as they start to wind their way back east, she starts popping up more and more frequently.

At first it's just to borrow more lipstick, or powder, or hair bobbles, but then Leigh starts resting a hand heavily on Louis's shoulder for a little too long, or brushing a hand against Louis's leg, almost like an accident.

Louis steels herself, mentally preparing to ask Leigh if she wants to maybe try kissing again, but the next time that she drops by – just after they've got back to their hotel after a performance, asking if Louis has any moisturiser to spare, this time – she darts in and kisses Louis thank you.

Louis kisses her back, long and sweet, but she slowly moves her hands around to the back of Leigh's head and pulls her in closer when Leigh doesn't show any signs of pulling away.

Suddenly, Louis feels the slight brush of Leigh-Anne's tongue against the seam of her lips and then slowly, tantalisingly, Leigh starts licking her way inside of her mouth.

By the time Leigh pulls away, it's only slightly, and they're both breathing hard. Louis doesn't feel the same thrum of arousal deep in her stomach that she felt with Joe, and her skin doesn't buzz or burn with Leigh's touch the way that it does with Zayn's, but she registers the way that her nipples are hard in her bra and she wants more of Leigh-Anne's touch, and pastes on a winning smile. "So," she says, brightly. "That's fun."

Leigh-Anne bites her lower lip, teeth denting the plush jut of it. "Yeah," she says, and pauses. "This isn't a thing, right?"

"I'm not going to fall in love with you," Louis says, and it sounds cruel once she's said it, but she meant it as a promise, so. "I just want to work some things out."

"Me, too," says Leigh-Anne, and she settles herself on Louis's lap, moving in to kiss her again, lips moving against Louis's mouth slowly and very intriguingly before she shifts and starts kissing her way down the column of Louis's throat.
Louis lets her hands fall to Leigh’s hips, holding in close as Leigh-Anne sucks kisses to the edge of Louis's neckline, fingertips digging into Leigh's waist as she tilts her head back to give Leigh better access.

"You're gorgeous," Louis breathes, running her hands down to Leigh-Anne's lovely thighs, running her thumbs across the top and wrapping her fingers across the sides. It's only partly because she feels like it's something she should say, only a little bit because she's trying to convince herself of the fact; mostly, she's completely into the curve of Leigh's body, breasts into tight stomach to thighs, skin soft and in such contrast to Louis's own all over. Leigh-Anne is wearing baggy trousers and a tight, midriff-bearing basketball t-shirt that looks almost like Liam shrunk one of her lounging-around t-shirts in the wash.

"Mmmmm," Leigh-Anne says, dragging a deliberate hand down Louis's front, resting it on the little round jut of her belly that she can't seem to exercise flat no matter how many sit-ups she does, and then moving her hand up high enough to swipe over one of Louis's breasts. "You are too."

"Hey," Louis says, moving a hand up and running a finger under Leigh's chin until she lifts her face up, and then moves in, pressing her other hand against the flat of Leigh's back, guiding her closer and ducking up to lick her way back into Leigh's mouth, a hot, slick slide of lips and tongue.

Louis is just starting to work a hand under the hem of Leigh-Anne's top in the back, riding it up with some kind of hazy objective of taking it off, but her phone buzzes with a text and Leigh-Anne startles back, scooting off Louis's lap and standing up, stretching as she does so.

"That was fun," she says. "We should try it again soon."

"Absolutely," Louis agrees, wiping her mouth off with the back of her hand. Her lipstick is smudged, so she runs a thumb around her lips, rubbing out the colour. "Did you still need that moisturiser?"

"Cheers," Leigh says, and takes the bottle Louis tosses at her.

Louis wanders out of her room to go and see if anyone is still awake – she could use a good cuddle – and runs into Niall, who seems to be smuggling a six-pack back into her room.

"Want to come by?" she asks, holding the beer up like an offering.

Louis does.

It's nice, finding a football match on one of the hotel's zillion sports channels. It's a recorded match, Fulham against Aston Villa, but it's still a nice little bit of home in this big, far-away Canadian city, and splitting the beer with Niall is so familiar and nice that Louis starts to feel settled for the first time all day.

She hadn't even realised that she was feeling particularly unsettled, but there.

At some point, Niall reaches across her to get at some crisps and pauses. "Uh, Lou," she says. "You realise you've got lipstick on your neck?"

"Oh," says Louis, hand flying up to cover the spot where Leigh had been sucking kisses just half an hour earlier. "Huh."

Niall gives her a long, quizzical look, but Louis turns the volume up on the match, so she drops it.

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But Niall doesn’t drop it for long. Their next night off comes after a sunny warm day that is their next-to-last in Canada. They have an interview in the morning, but their afternoon is entirely free. Liam and Harry decide to go off golfing together in these cute little almost-matching posh golfing outfits, and Zayn elects to catch up on rest.

Louis is about to say something about finding someone to do a bit of shopping with her, but Niall wraps an arm around her waist and says, "Come to the zoo with me."

Her tone makes it clear that she really doesn’t want Louis to decline, so Louis shrugs and says yes.

It’s when they’re at the ape enclosure, watching an orangutan swing its way up to a platform in its fabricated trees and licking at the ice creams Niall insisted they get that Niall brings it up again.

"So," she says. "You're moving on from Joe."

"I suppose," Louis says, stepping closer to Niall and knocking their arms together, companionably. "In a way."

"With someone who wears lipstick."

When Louis glances sideways at Niall, she's staring directly into the enclosure, watching a bird try to dart in and take some of the orangutan's food. "I reckon I just missed kissing girls," she says. Quietly, because they are in public.

"Okay," Niall says, shrugging, and she turns to smile at Louis. "Just wanted to make sure you were doing okay, Lou."

"You're an absolute angel," Louis tells her, and then: "I have a problem, Nialler."

Niall frowns and switches her ice cream to the hand furthest away from Louis, linking her now-free arm with Louis's and pulling her along as she walks to the next enclosure, which has those monkeys with the funny bums. Louis can't be arsed to actually check what they're called. "What is it?" she asks, quietly.

"Think I might be a little bit, like, half in love with Zayn, is all," Louis says, which – well. It sounds so true to her now that she's saying it out loud. Fuck.

"Is that who – ?"

"Leigh-Anne," Louis says. "We're in the same boat, it would seem."

"Oh, Louis," Niall says, and she pulls away from Louis incrementally, then launches herself at her, catching her in a huge bear hug.

Louis drops her ice cream in surprise. Registering the way that Niall has both of her arms wrapped all the way around her, she says, "Babe, did you just get your ice cream in my hair?"

Niall hugs Louis even tighter, leaning over her shoulder to check. "Yup," she says, voice incredibly cheerful, and pulls back far enough to leave a fast and sloppy kiss on Louis's cheek.

"Great," Louis says, but she can't stay mad at Niall ever, so she just holds her hand out and looks at Niall expectantly until she passes over her hair bobble so that Louis can put her hair up in a messy bun and pretend that the smudges of chocolate aren't there at all.

"Hey," Niall says, eventually, as they walk along towards the giraffes and elephants. She nudges
Louis with her elbow. "I'm never going to pick sides between the two of you if something goes down, yeah?"

"Of course," Louis says, startled. "I would never ask you to."

"I know," Niall says, smiling over at her. "I wouldn’t expect you to. But I'm always here to talk to if you need to, you know that, right?"

"Oh, Nialler," Louis says, and she pulls Niall into another hug. "You're my actual favourite."

"I'm not," Niall says, but she says it comfortably and with a wink. "Zayn is. It's okay. No offense, Lou, but I don't want you to want to like, go down on me. I wouldn't want to be held responsible for your death and I have it on good authority that I taste so good that you'd probably die."

Louis gapes at Niall for a full thirty seconds while Niall darts away, laughing, but then she comes to herself and runs after Niall, slugging a punch at her arm, but gently.

"Anyway," Niall says, fluffing her hair out after they’ve had a bit of a scuffle, Louis pushing at Niall and Niall getting her arm around Louis's neck and pulling her into a headlock, rubbing her fist all over Louis's hair and making it even messier in the process. "You're not my favourite either."

"I am so!" Louis says, indignant.

"Am not," Niall says. "Harry is. All those lovely luscious curls. She could probably handle me in bed."

"Curls are not an indicator of sexual prowess," Louis says, grumpily, but she feels infinitely better about the whole Zayn situation anyway.

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She seeks Zayn out when they get back to the hotel.

Zayn is in her room, lying on her bed, laptop propped up on her knees. She's got some kind of film that Louis has never seen before playing, so Louis flops down on the bed next to her, nudging close.

"What are we watching?"

Zayn glances at Louis. "I'm watching this great film, I Can't Think Straight. Dunno what you're doing."

"Watching I Can't Think Straight," Louis says, as if it's perfectly obvious. On the screen, two women are dancing very, very closely together. "What's it about?"

"A girl from Jordan and a British Indian girl falling in love and coming out and navigating culture and shit," Zayn says, not looking away from the screen, where the two women have begun to kiss.

"Fuck," Louis says, watching along for a moment. "That's really hot."

She feels Zayn's head twitch slightly, turning to look at her and then returning to the film. "Okay," Zayn says, eventually. "You can watch with me if you want, but you have to be quiet, this is a really important film to me."

And like, the thing is, Louis can absolutely see why, so even though long silences tend to make her anxious, she takes a deep breath and curls up, her head on Zayn's shoulder, and tries to breathe through the heat of Zayn's body setting her on fire at every point of contact, and watches with her.
She doesn't even have to interrupt to ask for clarification, because when she lifts her head slightly and turns to Zayn to ask about the fiancé guy one of the characters keeps talking about, Zayn preemptively gives Louis a long, serious look, then restarts the film.

Louis is getting tired from being out in the hot sun all day, and feels sticky and grimy from the ice cream and the dirt she picked up, wrestling around with Niall at the zoo, but she balls her hands into fists so that her nails dig into her palms and forces herself to watch the film all the way through with Zayn without falling asleep or interrupting and, as the film goes on, she finds herself relaxing a little more into her own skin until she's totally comfortable – or at least, as comfortable as she can be – just lying there with Zayn.

As the film credits roll, with that one song about kissing girls by the person who isn't Katy Perry playing, Zayn reaches up and shoves Louis off her shoulder.

"Hey," Louis says, frowning. "What was that for?"

"Your hair is itchy," Zayn says. "Why do you smell like chocolate?"

"Niall put her ice cream in my hair," Louis says, and then laughs as Zayn scrambles away from her.

"And you got it onto my bed?"

"I mean," Louis says. "You could always sleep with one of us tonight if you're that offended by it."

"Oh yeah," Zayn says, rolling her eyes. "I'll just like, make sure to get really sweaty and gross and lie spread-eagled on your bed and take up most of the room all night long."

Louis knows that Zayn is making fun of the way that she's done the same thing in the past, back during their first tour when the two of them, as the oldest ones in the group, would go out drinking right after performances and collapse into bed together without even showering. She knows that.

She gulps anyway, because it's way too close to what she wants from her life right now.

"Uh," she says. "Or not."

Zayn smirks at her. "Thought so," she says, tossing her hair over her shoulder, and then stands up, stretching, and walks to the mirror to investigate herself. She's wearing these leggings that show off what little bit of arse she has and a tight t-shirt, cropped an inch or two above her navel piercing, that looks an awful lot like something Louis has seen Perrie wear. The tips of her long hair, which is in natural waves from where she's been lying out on her bed all day without doing it up, brush against the skin just under her top. She tugs her yellow-dyed streak forward and holds it an inch or two up.

"Should I go purple?"

"Go pink," Louis says. "I'm thinking of getting a chunky pink streak, we could be twins."

"Hmmm," Zayn says, and then pushes her hair back from her face. "Maybe." She stares in the mirror for a minute longer, then turns back to Louis. "Go wash your fucking hair, you slob."

"Hey!" Louis says, offended. "My stuff may be literally all over the place but I am not a slob."

"Says the girl who got into my bed with ice cream hair," Zayn says, holding a straight face for as long as she can before breaking out into a smile.

Louis's heart breaks into approximately ten zillion tiny fragments with it. "Fine, fine," she says, trying to affect an exasperated tone, but she's got an even worse poker face than Liam, so she knows
her fondness is shining through despite herself. So she pushes herself up off the bed and nudges up close to Zayn, burying her face in Zayn's shoulder and wrapping her arms tight around Zayn's body. Zayn's hands come up to bracket Louis's back, as if automatically, and Louis allows herself one deep, dizzying breath of the smell of Zayn, clean and sweet and spicy and so intrinsically Zayn that it makes her heart break again.

"Hey," Zayn says, quietly, and Louis can feel her body tensing to draw back and say something that will probably be devastating and sweet and upsetting, so she holds on even tighter.

"Love you, Zayn," she mumbles, face still burrowed against Zayn's front.

Zayn rests her chin on Louis's shoulder. "Love you too, babe," she says, just as quietly, and doesn't let go.

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"So let me get this straight," Joe says, laughing hard into his phone's camera. Louis FaceTimed him as soon as they got back into the States, because she's still determined to retain him as a friend. "Or rather, not straight at all. You're in love with Zayn?"

Maybe Louis won't keep him as a friend after all. "Yeah," she says, a little petulantly, because it is not a laughing matter. She doesn't bother correcting him on the depth of her feelings, because that's not a conversation she wants to get into. "Shut up, it hurts."

"Aww, Lou," Joe says, sobering up. "I'm sorry."

"You don't mind?" she asks, worrying her lower lip between her teeth.

Joe frowns for a moment, considering. "Nah," he says, finally. "I mean, I do, because I want you to be happy, but I don't like... feel replaced or anything."

Louis nods, relieved. She could spend time worrying that Joe is lying, but she's pretty sure that he's not, so. "Good," she says, seriously.

Joe nods too, moving his phone a little farther away from his face. "So are you going to do anything about it?"

"Um," Louis says. Embarrassingly, she feels her cheeks heat. "I'm hooking up with Leigh-Anne to distract myself."

"Wait," Joe says. "What?"

"I'm not going to say it again," Louis says, rolling her eyes. "I wouldn't want to like, experiment with Zayn or whatever even if she were available. I just. Wouldn't do that to her, okay? Leigh is fit as fuck and she's basically in the same place I am right now."

Joe laughs out loud again. "You sure do know how to pull the hottest people around," he says, smiling smugly.


"I miss you too, babe," Joe says. He squints at her. "You've got probably one of the best bodies I've ever had the pleasure of being intimately acquainted with."

"Pig," Louis says, but she's smiling. She's honestly a little bummed that it couldn't work out between
the two of them; he's always been so good at making her feel better.

"You adore me," says Joe, tone lofty.

"I do," Louis says, quietly, and then she grins, wickedly. "I'd say you're like that hot older brother who's always got an eye out for me, but we've had entirely too much sex for that to be appropriate." Her smile widens. "Though a lot of those, uh, people who write fanfiction about you would be happy to hear me say it."

"Hey," Joe says, but he's grinning back at her, proudly, and something unknots in Louis's chest.

"I'm glad we had this talk," she says, very seriously, and his smile softens, grows more fond.

"Me too."

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"Hey," Leigh-Anne says, coming into Louis's dressing room on the next-to-last show of their American tour. "Do you have any, um. Pink eyeshadow?"

It's an extremely thin excuse, but then again, their covers have got flimsier and flimsier lately. Part of it, Louis thinks, is the way that they've got over their uncertainty with this thing they've got going on. Louis has always been good at having sex with friends when that's all there is between them – going out with Joe for over a year is a perfect example of that. It's just when she starts to feel things about (Zayn) the friend in question (Zayn) that things start to get all muddled with her, to the point where she can't possibly pursue anything because she's so consumed by uncertainty (Zayn Zayn Zayn Zayn Zayn). And now, after the fifth or sixth time they've ended up hooking up, Louis would definitely consider Leigh-Anne a good sex friend.

"You know I do," she says. She's got a full palette of pink eyeshadows. "Do you want me to apply it for you, too?"

"How kind of you," Leigh says, pushing the door closed behind her and coming up to straddle Louis's lap. "I might just have you do that."

So Louis spins the wheeled chair she's sat in around, pulling the eyeshadow closer to her and picking up a brush. "What kind of pink strikes your fancy today?"


"You've come to the right place," Louis says, voice low, and Leigh leans in for a quick kiss, scooting even closer. Louis rests a hand on one of Leigh's thighs, squeezing lightly, massaging her thumb into the flesh of it as she fumbles her eyeshadow open with her other hand. "Close your eyes," she adds, and Leigh complies, deliberately resting a hand on one of Louis's tits as she does so.

Louis bites her lip hard and squeezes some primer onto her ring finger, dabbing it carefully, gently, on Leigh's eyelids. She can feel the hot puff of Leigh-Anne's breath against her wrist. She digs her fingertips into Leigh's thigh harder, pushing her hand up higher one slow, tantalising inch. "Okay," she breathes, and runs her brush through some of the hottest pink eyeshadow she's got – almost neon-bright, with a good amount of microglitter that will glint like crazy in the stage lights. "Okay, here we go."

And she brushes the colour onto Leigh-Anne's eyelids and pushes her hand up the rest of the way, resting it hot and heavy on Leigh's crotch before flicking the button on her jeans open and pushing her hand down as far as she can, watching the way that Leigh's front teeth drag little lines into her

"There's a good girl," she says, running the eyeshadow up just past the crease and picking up a lighter, more orangey shade to fill in the rest. "Pink is a good look on you." She crooks her fingers, feeling her way down to Leigh's clit, wincing at the angle of her wrist – she'll have to hold her microphone with just her right hand tonight, maybe – and curls her right hand up over Leigh-Anne's forehead so she can start doing her other eye without smudging too badly.

"Shut up," Leigh says, as Louis reaches further with her middle finger and – oh, yeah, there it is. She flicks against Leigh's clit, staccato, and grins as Leigh-Anne squirms closer.

"You'll wreck your eyeshadow," she chastises, and then pulls the brush back fast as Leigh-Anne opens her eyes.

"Fuck the eyeshadow," Leigh-Anne says, knocking Louis's hand away. She takes Louis's chin in hand and tugs her in for a wet and wild kiss. "I'll have Kenny do my makeup from scratch again."

"Rude," Louis mumbles, grinning into the kiss, and then, "Raise up a bit."

Leigh, bless her, understands exactly what Louis means by that and cants her hips back, leaning into Louis's chest and running her tongue over and over the seam of Louis's mouth, probably smearing her lip gloss something awful. Louis parts her lips, letting Leigh slip her tongue inside, and takes advantage of the way Leigh-Anne is now sat on her lap to push her hand further under the denim of her jeans and elastic of her pants, getting two fingers firmly on Leigh's clit.

"You're so hot," Louis mumbles, because she's got a lap full of gorgeous girl and it's a little staggering, to be honest. She's still getting the hang of everything – getting other girls off is not terribly different from taking care of herself, but Leigh's got this whole different method from Louis and it's been a bit of a learning curve, figuring out that pinching is absolutely, totally out of the question when it comes to Leigh-Anne's clit and remembering that she likes long, desperate drags of Louis's fingers more than she likes tight little circles.

Louis just reaching around to tangle her hand in Leigh's curls when, inexplicably, she hears the click of the door latch and Zayn's voice saying "Hey, Lou, do you have a mo-"

The voice breaks off and the door slams shut and Louis realises that well, maybe it's not so inexplicable after all, considering they're at the fucking venue and the girl she's quite possibly in love with has just seen her with her hands down the pants of one of their friends. "Fuck," she whispers, pulling back, jerking her hand free of Leigh-Anne's crotch and whirling the chair around.

And Zayn is on the inside of the door, still in the room.

"Fuck," Louis says again, and Leigh looks around and scrambles off Louis's lap, doing up her jeans again as she climbs free.

"Hey, Zayn," she says, wiping her mouth off with the back of her hand and reaching up to check her hair. "All right?"

"Fine," Zayn says, but she doesn't take her eyes off Louis, who is sat there on her chair still, eyeshadow brush on the floor next to her, fingertips of one hand damp with Leigh-Anne, lipgloss smeared all over her mouth.

"Uh," Leigh-Anne says, stumbling to the door. She turns around, making a massively apologetic and freaked-out face at Louis over Zayn's shoulder. "Thanks for doing my eyes, Lou."
"Yeah, yeah," Louis says, hoarsely. She manages a smile for Leigh-Anne. "Uh, good luck with your, um. Lipstick."

"Cheers, later," Leigh says, and she scurries through the door like her bum is on fire.

Louis doesn't blame her. The look on Zayn's face is terrifying – the last time she saw Zayn this livid was when Zayn deleted her twitter for a few days last summer. "Hey, babe," she says, weakly, wiping her fingers off on the rough fabric on the side of her chair.

"What the fuck, Louis?" Zayn says. Her voice is calm, quiet, and fumingly furious. She's in her first-set outfit already, hair done up and she looks so, so lovely, her lips a dark matte red and her eyes rimmed dark and eyelashes out to her elbows, practically, and Louis is so fucking into her that she feels like vomiting.

"Uh," Louis says. "What do you mean?"

"How long has this been going on?" Zayn crosses her arms, red-varnished nails tapping impatiently at her own elbows. "This – this sex thing."

"Canada," says Louis. Her voice is palpably tiny. She's just reeling so hard from this, because while logically she knew they might be found out at any point, she didn't expect anyone to walk in on them. Especially not Zayn.

She also didn't expect Zayn to be angry about it when she did find out.

"Canada," Zayn says, flatly. "Lou, we were in Canada for a while."

"Two weeks ago," Louis clarifies. She tucks her hair behind her ear, nervously. "Zayn..."

Zayn's face shutters dark. Her mouth tightens and she shrugs, twitching her hair back without even touching it. "I see."

"Why are you so mad?" Louis asks. She means it seriously – she doesn't understand why Zayn looks like she's set to kill, hands clenching into impotent fists and eyes flashing with so, so many emotions.

Zayn's mouth works for a moment, knuckles turning white with how hard she's clenching her hands, and then, forcibly, she relaxes. "I just," she says, still deadly calm. "I didn't – you didn't – Leigh-Anne, Lou?"

"I don't understand what you mean," Louis says, as calmly as she's able to, which is not very calmly at all.


"I just," Louis says, in a very small voice. "I thought that if anyone would be supportive, it would be you."

But Zayn's already gone, and Louis feels like crying her eyes out, but she's already got her makeup done and the show must go on, so she plaits her hair so tightly that the pain of pulling her own hair makes tears prick in her eyes in an entirely different way, and then she blinks them away and brushes her hair out and there.

Sorted.

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"Hey," Leigh-Anne says, when Louis comes out of the dressing room, an extra coat of waterproof mascara on her eyes, the gloss smeared around her mouth cleaned up, and her lips redone in a deep berry. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," Louis says, brusquely, but then she shakes her head. "I mean, I don't know, Leigh."

"I'm sorry," Leigh says. She tugs at the end of one curl, anxiously. "I didn't mean for –"

"Stop right there," Louis says, putting a hand on Leigh-Anne's shoulder, because even though she feels all shrivelled up inside she's not going to go blaming Leigh for something she doesn't quite understand, herself. "Babe, I don't regret a minute of anything, okay?"

Leigh-Anne's eyes dart back and forward as she reads the expression on Louis's face. "Are you quite sure?"

"Promise," Louis says, and she presses in, leaning up to brush a kiss to Leigh-Anne's cheek. "I don't know why Zayn is like, so angry, but we'll sort it out. We always do."

It's funny, that she's using these words to reassure Leigh-Anne when she's not convinced of them herself, but Leigh seems satisfied. "Okay," she says, and takes a deep breath. "Okay. Hey, Lou?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"The tour's almost over," Leigh-Anne says, and oh, right. Little Mix won't be following them to Australia. "Let's call it quits while we're ahead?"

That sounds reasonable. "I had fun," Louis says, managing a smile at her even though she's pretty sure it's almost twisted beyond recognition. Her mum raised her to be polite, and it is the truth. "Learning how to make you squirm." Her smile turns sharper, slightly happier. "Sorry we were interrupted."

"No, babe, it's okay," Leigh-Anne says. "Kinda lost the mood at the end there, didn't we?"

"A little," Louis agrees, and she hugs her, and god, she ought to get a fucking medal for how good she is at neatly wrapping up sexual relationships.

When one of their people comes around looking for Leigh-Anne to get her on stage, Louis pats her bum. "Go get 'em, tiger," she says, smiling sadly after Leigh-Anne, and then she goes to find Zayn, because if she can sort things out this easily with Joe and with Leigh, she can absolutely sort things out with Zayn. Right?

+++ Zayn avoids her leading up to the show, and then sings as if nothing's wrong during the entire concert.

After, Louis follows her onto the bus and back into the bunks. She hesitates while Zayn climbs into hers – if Zayn closes the curtains, Louis will have to respect Zayn's wish for privacy; it's the one rule they all established at the very beginning of everything and continue to maintain – but Zayn just rolls over, back to Louis, so Louis decides that she's open to talking now and gets in after her.

"Zayn," she says, but Zayn doesn't respond at all, so she says, "Zayn," again, poking her on the shoulder repeatedly.

"What?" says Zayn, finally rolling back to look at Louis. "What is it?"
"Well, about four hours ago you stomped out of my dressing room and you haven’t said two words to me since, so I thought we should probably talk about it," Louis says. Her stomach is roiling – she’s not quite certain that she wants to have this conversation, because she’s so invested in the way that it goes, but she knows she also wouldn’t be able to bear going through another few hours of not knowing why Zayn got so angry about her and Leigh-Anne. She clears her throat, pauses. "Are you mad because I didn’t tell you?"

"We did have that one conversation recently," Zayn points out. "Last time we were cuddled up in one of these and we established that you would talk to me about your life. Lou, it's hard to be your best mate if you don't tell me things."

"I didn't know how to tell," Louis whispers, closing her eyes because she doesn’t want to see whatever look is on Zayn's face.

"How about, hey, Zayn, I've decided to start getting with women now that I'm no longer going out with the middle Jonas and I thought I'd let you know because you also get with women and might have a bit of advice?"

"Is that the whole reason you're mad?" Louis blurts, because she has to know. However rude abruptly changing the direction of the conversation may be, however terrible it might be that she hasn't apologised yet for anything, she just. She needs to know.

Zayn is quiet for a very long time, so much so that Louis is beginning to think that she's going to kick her out, when Zayn finally says, haltingly, "I suppose I should ask. Do you, um. Do you like Leigh-Anne?"

"I mean," Louis says. Her tongue feels too thick in her mouth. "I obviously like her enough to put my hand down her pants at a venue."

"Okay, fair enough," Zayn says, slowly. "But you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Louis agrees. She wets her lips with a quick swipe of her tongue, swallows. "You know how you and Pezza are like, biding time? Or whatever? Because you both have things for idiots who are too stupid to like you back?"

"Um," Zayn says, and Louis feels the bunk shake a little with Zayn's started, suppressed laughter. "That's one way of putting it, I reckon."

Louis relaxes, because if Zayn is laughing, it can't all be that bad. "Well, it's kind of like that."

Zayn tenses next to her. "Who do you like that isn't into women?" She shifts, turning over to face Louis. Louis opens her eyes again when she feels the hot puff of Zayn's breath across her cheek. "Is it Joe? Is that why you didn't work out?"

"Um," Louis says, and starts laughing, hard. Out of the corner of her eyes, which are squinted almost shut with mirth, she sees Zayn's face slowly darkening. She pinches herself, hard, because she doesn't want Zayn to get angry all over again, thinking that she's laughing at her or anything. "Trust me, babe, Joe is absolutely not gay." She pauses, takes a few deep breaths to calm herself down, then says, "It's less to do with sexual orientation and more to do with availability."

"The fuck does that even mean," Zayn says, a little prickly.

"I dunno, Leigh was there and up for it and I wasn't opposed and we decided if you and Perrie could do it, we could too," Louis says. She's losing track of the thread of their conversation. It's late. She's tired. She's been on an emotional roller coaster for the past four hours.
"I see," Zayn says, and she's quiet for a long time. "Why didn't you guys tell us?"

And Louis is not going to tell her that. Leigh's reasoning isn't hers to tell, for one, and anyway she's just managed to get Zayn to talk to her again after four terrible hours. She doesn't want to jeopardise anything – their relationship, her heart, anything – by confessing her deep gay love for Zayn. "I mean, we were just figuring stuff out together."

Zayn nods, but her mouth tightens. "Anyway," she says. "That's why I was mad."

Wait, what? "Wait, what?"

"Fuck," Zayn says. "This is just – this changes everything."

"What, because you're not the only member in the band who kisses girls? You've always known that I kiss girls."

"Theoretically," Zayn snaps. "You never kissed girls the entire time I've known you."

"So?"

"So nothing," Zayn says, and she rolls over, turning her back to Louis. "Only I'll feel obligated to tell Perrie what I saw and she'll want to talk to Leigh-Anne because now she's got hope and if anything comes of that I'll be shit out of luck and even if it doesn't it will be weird between me and Pezza and I'll be back to pulling random girls who are more likely to sell stories to the Sun then they are to work out how to fuck me properly and like, whatever. It's nothing."

"Perrie likes Leigh-Anne?"

"None of your business," Zayn says, scooting as far away from Louis as she can in the limited space they've got in the bunk.

"Leigh will be happy to hear that," Louis says, slowly, and then, biting her lip so hard it almost draws blood, "Zayn, if they get together, there's always – I mean." She takes a deep breath, fisting her hands until her nails bite into her palms. She's scared to suggest this, terrified of how Zayn might respond, but she's Louis and even if she weren't half in love with Zayn, she'd probably make the offer, so like. She's got to.

She's got to know.

"I mean," she repeats. "If they hook up or whatever, there's always – there could be, you know. You and me."

"No," Zayn says, so immediately and so harshly that it feels like she's stabbed Louis right in the stomach.

Well.

She wanted to know.

Right?

"Right," Louis says, and she knows that her voice is all tight and fragile, but like, whatever. Zayn is obviously repulsed by the thought of her, and it feels like her heart is breaking, so she's allowed to be a little upset. "Fine. Of course." She crawls out of Zayn's bunk. "I'll let you be," she says, and closes the curtains behind her.
And then she finds a tiny corner far away from the rest of the girls and curls into a tiny ball and cries.

+++ 

Go get ur girl I hear shes interested she texts Leigh-Anne that night from her hotel room, after she's calmed down a little bit, and then she pulls up Joe's number and taps her nails against the side of her phone for a few minutes, weighing talking to Joe face-to-face versus what the gossip sites, which are just beginning to spread rumours of the end of their relationship, will say, before nodding decisively.

See u after MSG she sends, and allows herself to distract herself from the sorry state of her private life right now by remembering that they're playing MSG for the second time in eight months tomorrow and this is actually her life.

Zayn may not want anything to do with her, physically, and Louis may feel so low about that, but she and her girls are basically on top of the entire world right now, and that's got to count for something.

R u sure? Paps will have a field day, Joe texts back, so Louis resends her previous message to him and stares at herself in the mirror for a long time. She needs some kind of change.

And then she's pushing out of her room and banging on Liam's door.

"What?" Liam asks, pushing the door open. She's got her makeup washed off and her hair is up in a ponytail and she's in cosy clothes, like she's settling in for the night.

"We're getting tattoos," Louis says, because that's a familiar kind of body modification and she's not really prepared to do anything drastic to her hair.

"Wouldn't Harry or Zayn be better for that?" Liam asks, but she's leaning down to toe her ballet flats on and grabbing her bag as she talks. "You know I like to plan them out first."

Which means she misses the stricken look Louis is sure she's got on her face when Liam says Zayn's name. "Haz and I got tattoos in, fuck," Louis says, frowning, because she can't remember where. "Utah? Colorado? Something. So we're all caught up."

"And Zayn?" Liam asks. She slips out of her room, closing her door behind her.

"I'd rather do it with you," Louis says, tersely, and Liam nods, brow furrowed slightly. "You don't have to get one."

"No, I will," Liam says, shrugging. "Something small. Why not?"

"Why not indeed," Louis says, texting Paul for a car as they walk to the lifts.

As they ride down, Louis stares at Liam, trying to decide whether Zayn will say anything to her about Leigh-Anne, or about Louis propositioning her, or – anything, really.

If she's honest, she wants to get to Liam while she still can. Because if Zayn says anything to Liam, it won't really matter that, at this point, they're all pretty much on equal footing friendship-wise. Every time there's been any kind of serious tension in the group before, every time two people are at odds, they end up falling into old patterns. Harry is Louis's girl, all the way, and Louis knows that if she were to tell Harry that her heart is broken, Harry would curl up next to her for as long as she needs her, glaring at Zayn across the room whenever the corners of Louis's mouth turn down.

Liam is Zayn's girl, full stop. Louis knows that Zayn hasn't told Liam what happened between Louis
and Leigh-Anne yet, because Liam is going out with her right now instead of cuddling Zayn close all night long.

(Niall, bless her, is generally a go-between. Liam is her girl when it comes down to it – they have actually known each other longer than anyone else in the band – but it usually doesn’t come to that.)

"Zayn walked in on me kissing Leigh-Anne," she blurts, as the numbers flick closer to the ground floor. "She's really mad because I didn't tell her about it beforehand."

Liam raises her eyebrows. "You've been kissing Leigh-Anne?"

"For convenience, yes," Louis says.

"Okay," Liam says, and she nudges in close to Louis and wraps an arm around her side. "I'll go check on her when we get back."

"Love you, Li," Louis says, dropping her head onto Liam's shoulder.

At the tattoo parlour – a place that they've used before and that isn't opposed to squeezing them in last-minute – Louis and Liam stare at the stock tattoo sheets. Liam finally picks a tiny, five-petaled flower, for just under her left breast and to the side, and Louis kisses her on the cheek because the amount to which Liam loves the five of them together is humbling and so, so beautiful.

"Fuck it," Louis says, a little bit later, and tells her artist to give her stocking seam tattoos, all the way up the backs of her legs.

"We do have a show tomorrow," Liam points out, and Louis shrugs. She's performed with fresh tattoos before. She just won't let the girls knock into the back of her legs.

"So," Liam says, when her tattoo is done and wrapped and Louis is lying on her stomach in just her pants and her top, the tattoo artist just outside the room, getting more ink. "Zayn saw you kissing Leigh?"

"Uh," Louis says, quickly and quietly, gaze darting around. "Well. Technically I suppose it would be accurate to say that I was fingering her at the time, too."

"Oh," Liam says, and she frowns. "Louis, that's really – "

"The thing is," Louis says, glancing at Liam. "I really wanted to be kissing Zayn instead but she's not interested and she made that perfectly clear when I talked to her earlier so I'm a little upset."

"Oh, Lou," Liam sighs, and she reaches over to squeeze Louis's arm. She's got the weirdest look on her face, almost, but not exactly, like she's biting down on a smile. They hear the footsteps of the tattoo artist returning, though, so Louis can't ask what it is.

"Whatever," she says, shrugging as well as she can, considering how she's lying down, and closes her eyes in anticipation of the needle.

+++

"Hey," Niall says, knocking on the open door frame of Louis's dressing room in Madison Square Garden. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Louis says, scowling at her reflection. Getting made up for a show isn't the same without Zayn, and like, while she thinks that Zayn probably wouldn't kick her out of her dressing room,
Louis doesn't particularly feel like facing her with the knowledge that Zayn absolutely does not want to hook up with her. "I can't pick what makeup to wear."

"Don't wear any," Niall says, walking in and sitting on a chair, belly to the back of it. "Be more like me."

Louis gives her a long, disgusted Look, and Niall cracks up.

"So," she says, scooting the chair closer to Louis. "You've been a bit withdrawn, haven't you?"

"I just," Louis says, picking up a mascara and putting it back down again. She reaches for a lipstick. "I suppose."

Niall gives her a long, measured look, and then nods, decisively. "Right," she says. "I'm not going to like, pussy-foot around it. Liam told me what you told her."

"Oh," Louis says. She drops her lipstick, and it lands in her lap.

"Also Zayn thinks that you're mad at her."

Louis frowns. "I'm not mad, really, I just – She said that she doesn't want to be with me!"

"I know, babe," Niall says. She reaches over and rests a hand on Louis's arm. "You've just got to take time and lick your wounds."

"Exactly," says Louis, because even though she probably wouldn't phrase it that way Niall's essentially got the right idea. She makes a face at herself in the mirror and picks up the nearest eyeshadow palette and starts brushing the first colour she sees onto her eyelids. It's bright lime-green and it looks hideous with her skin tone. Oh well. "Why is everyone telling you all this stuff?" She pauses. "I didn't mean that in a mean way."

"I know," Niall repeats. She grins. "People like talking to me, you know that."

"True," Louis says. She fumbles around for an eyeliner. The one she grabs is purple – she's going to look a right mess on stage tonight.

"What I haven't managed to work out," Niall says. "Is how exactly you lot established that Zayn doesn't want to kiss you."

"I mean," Louis says. "I offered when she said she would be out of luck, sexually, if Leigh and Perrie got together."

Niall is quiet for a moment, frowning slightly, tugging on the ends of her hair. "Right," she says, suddenly, shaking herself a little bit and getting up from her chair. "Oh, Lou."

"What?" Louis asks, prickling a little bit, but Niall just reaches out and tugs at Louis's hand until Louis stands up, and then pulls her into a tight hug.

"Okay," she says. "So this isn't actually my business unless you make it my business. I just wanted to make sure that you're not depressed or anything, because like, tonight is massive, yeah?" Her hug tightens, and Louis fancies that she's grinning. "We've sold out Madison Square again."

"I know," Louis says. She forces herself to smile. "I know." And as Niall rubs her shoulder, it feels like her smile is getting a little more solid, a little more real. "Thanks, babe."

"Yeah," Niall says. She pauses, then leans in closer to Louis's ear. "Listen, I'm not going to tell you
what to do or anything but maybe think about talking to Zayn again when you're both calmer? And tell her everything. The worst thing she could do is tell you she's not interested."

"No, the worst thing she could do is tell me she's not interested again," Louis says. "Because that was actually a terrible experience."

"Louis," says Niall, and it's simultaneously soft and reassuring, and stern. "Just – maybe there are multiple reasons someone might say no to that kind of offer."

Louis pulls back looking at Niall suspiciously. "Do you know something I don’t know?"

Niall shrugs unconcernedly. "As I said, it's none of my business. I just don't like to see you so far apart from the rest of us."

"Awww, Nialler," Louis says, leaning in to smack a kiss to Niall's cheek. "I love you."

"Love you too, Lou," Niall says, grinning at her. "Just think about it, okay?"

"Ugh," Louis says, rolling her eyes. "Fine. Stop being wise, it's weird."

"I've always been really good at people," Niall says. "You talk a lot about how you're the only one in this band who's good at reading and understanding people, but actually, it's me. I am."

"Blasphemy!" Louis cries, but she scuffs a hand through Niall's hair to show her she doesn't completely mean it.

"Now redo your makeup," Niall says, ducking away from Louis's hand and heading back to her door. "You look like a clown."

Louis sticks her tongue out at Niall's retreating back, but she picks up her eyeshadow again and starts brushing a yellow on top of everything to soften the harshness of the green, anyway.

+++ 

"Hey," Harry says, when Louis is washing off the sweat and streaked makeup from her face after the show. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Was going to see Joe," Louis tells her, wiping carefully under her eye. "He's in town."

Harry pauses. "Is that a good idea?" she asks, finally. "I mean, you broke up."

"We're still good friends," Louis says, turning to look at Harry. "There's something I've got to talk to him about."

"Right," Harry says. She tugs on a curl, then nods, decisively. "I'm going with you."

Louis blinks at her, setting her flannel down. "What?"

"Unless you're actually going to try out some kinky sex thing I don't want to know about," Harry says, waggling her eyebrows at Louis. Louis rolls her eyes dramatically. "That way there's less of a drama if your breakup is confirmed and the paps catch you going into his hotel."

That's not necessarily accurate, because the media have always gone wild when Harry and Louis have both gone to be with Joe in the past, and anyway, although there are certainly rumours spreading about how Louis and Joe may have broken up, no one has confirmed anything yet, so they're just that: rumours. Also, Louis hasn't exactly told Harry about the whole Zayn thing yet –
which is ridiculous, it really is, Harry is her best friend in the entire world, but telling Harry would make everything absolutely real and Louis isn't sure that she's ready for that.

But Harry is getting that obstinate look on her face, jaw jutting out from where she's set her mouth to show how she's absolutely not going to back down, and Louis melts a little inside. Harry is so cute. She rarely makes a point of asserting herself strongly, especially to Louis – Harry is generally completely easygoing with Louis – which means that Louis is going to ultimately let Harry have her way. Still, she abides, because she's so fond of how serious Harry can get when she has her mind set on something.

"If it's something you don't want me to know about," Harry says, almost in full-on pout mode. "Then I can hang out with Nick while you and Joe talk."

"Fine," Louis says, shrugging. She loves Harry so much. She takes a moment to wonder why it is she couldn't fall in love with Harry instead. Harry would be absolutely the nicest person to go out with, except for the fact that she's straight. "Come on, then."

They get a car together, just the two of them, and Louis directs the driver to the hotel the Jonas Brothers are staying at.

"So what's this about?" Harry asks, tentatively. Now that they're out of Madison Square Garden, she's lost a bit of her fierceness, and her face is all soft and shadowed by the patches of streetlight that make it into the car.

"Zayn," Louis says, carefully, forcing herself to keep from looking away from Harry's face.

"The fight you two had?" says Harry. "You haven't spoken to me about it at all."

"Sorry," says Louis, guiltily. "But essentially, yes." She takes a deep breath, bites her lip, and then mutters: "Also how I'm basically in love with her."

"Oh," Harry says, and she's quiet for a long moment, considering. And then she's unfastening her seat belt and clambering over, splaying her long limbs all over Louis and hugging her tight. "Babe."

"Hey, starfish," Louis says, laughing a little because Harry is the sweetest, patting her on the back. "Cheers." She pauses for a long time, then says, "You can come in with me when I talk to Joe."

"Love you, Lou," Harry says, quietly, into Louis's sweaty hair.

"Love you too, Harriet," Louis says, and laughs a little more when Harry elbows her.

She texts Joe that she's downstairs, and he texts her back a room and floor number, so they take the lifts halfway up the building. Louis fidgets, picking at her nail polish the whole way up, and both she and Harry studiously ignore the stares they're getting from the people they pass in the lobby and along the hall as they walk, together, down the hall.

"Sugarscape is going to have a field day with this," Louis mutters, because it's her and Harry going to see Joe again, and this will certainly stir up some more rumours on the gossip sites that are insisting that she and Joe are no longer an item.

Harry nods, worrying at her lip with her teeth. "Lou," she says, double-checking. "Should I go find Nick now?"

Louis considers the offer seriously, but then – "No," she says. "No, I'd like to have both of my best friends with me for this talk, I think."
Harry smiles brilliantly at her, and Louis knocks on Joe's door.

"So I've been thinking," he says, and then pauses as he gestures her and Harry inside. "Hey Harry, how's it going?"

"Yeah, great, you?" Harry says. She flips her hair over a shoulder and moves into the living room of his suite, pulling out the desk chair and dropping into it.

"Fine," Joe says. He turns to look at Louis quizzically.

She hugs him, leaning into his body. "Hey, babe," she says, kissing his cheek, relishing the way that his hand tightens, gripping at the base of her back. It's familiar and comfortable and, yeah, still a little titillating. She realises that her attraction to Joe hasn't diminished at all, it's just been – hmm. Supplanted, maybe, by her thing for Zayn.

Maybe that shouldn't come as a relief, but it does.

"Okay," she says, and she smooths her hands down the trackies she pulled on under her skirt right after their last set and sits on the edge of the couch. She takes a deep breath, decides to get right to the point. "So you both know how I have a thing for Zayn, yeah?" She shoots a glance at Harry that she hopes conveys well enough that she promises to explain more later.

"Yeah, actually, I was thinking about that," Joe says, dropping down onto the arm of the couch next to her, propping one leg up on the cushions and letting the other dangle over the edge of the armrest. "I think that I should get to have the corner of the Zouis Malikinson fanfiction market." He pauses, then turns to Harry. "Stylinson is a better last name than Maliklinson, but I think Zouis is more fun to say. Sorry."

Harry looks at him for a moment like she's completely lost, but then awareness dawns on her face and she lets out a bark of surprised laughter. "I'm not offended, I promise," she assures him.

Louis rolls her eyes. "Whatever," she says. "Take over whatever markets you like." The corners of her mouth tug down. "Zouis... Malikson? Will probably stay just as fictional as Larry Stylinson."

"Hey," Joe says, snapping his fingers. "Don't give up, babe, you told me that one where the two of you ate cookies in the bath together was actually not far from the truth."

Harry laughs outright, and Louis glares. "We were tired," she says. "It's a very dull story and I'm sure in that fanfiction there was a lot of sex."

"Yes," Joe says, patiently. "That's why I said 'not far' instead of 'exactly true.'" He turns to Harry. "Harry, babe, do you want to write a Zouis Malikinson fanfiction with me about – " he pauses, glances at Louis. "Why do you say it'll stay fictional?"

Louis sighs, picking at her nail polish some more. A large chunk flakes off. She'll need to ask Zayn to do a touch-up later, if she stops feeling so weird around Zayn. "Right," she says. "I offered to take over for Perrie if she needed someone to get off with and she made it perfectly clear that she has absolutely no interest in doing that."

"Okay," Joe says, and he's quiet for a long moment. "Harry, we can write a fanfiction where they have a talk about whether Zayn said no because she's been crazy in love with Lou for years and years and she thinks that Louis is joking with her or whether she's genuinely uninterested."

Harry's gaze darts to Louis's face, and Louis knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Harry will quash this line of conversation and speculation in a heartbeat if she thinks that Louis is truly upset by
it. God, but Louis adores Harry.

She must not find anything to particularly dissuade her from going along with him, because she
laughs a little. "I've never tried writing fanfiction before, mate," she says, waggling her eyebrows.
"But Louis tells me you're an old hand, so maybe I'll give it a try."

"Excellent," Joe says and he holds out his fist for Harry to bump, which she does, looking a little
bemused. Louis is secretly pleased. The three of them have hung out before – Harry insisted on
getting to know him when Louis first got together with him, and they've obviously gone on holidays
together – but it always makes her happy that they both made such an effort to get on with each
other.

"Have you quite finished?" she asks, though, because they're beginning to sound a bit like Niall and,
if she's honest, she was hoping to wallow a bit more than this.

"Sorry," Joe says, and slides off the arm of the couch to cuddle around her, and Harry comes up to
her other side and then Louis is in the center of a pile of people who love her and it's very nice.

"What should I do?" she asks, quietly, and Joe's arm tightens where he's slung it around her waist.

"I'm not going to say talk to her again," Joe says. "Because you're good at talking everything into
exhaustion, so I don't need to remind you of that."


"Lou," Harry interrupts. "You know I'm here for you, yeah? Like I love Zayn, but if you guys
suddenly get all awkward and we're all together I'll tell Michael to fuck off in Australia and cuddle
you to sleep every night."

"Love you," Louis tells her, leaning into her shoulder, and then tells Joe, "You too, babe. Maybe I'll
tell the paps that catch us leaving here later that you're like my big brother now, make all those
people who write that fanfiction Niall has shown me about you and Nick happy."

"Tell you what," Joe says. "If you do, I'll be godfather for yours and Zayn's hundreds of babies and
I'll tell them all sorts of terrible stories about you."

"Cheers," Louis says, smacking a sloppy kiss on his cheek. She's so glad that Joe gets her so well,
that they're just so well connected on a mental level. She lets her tone grow more serious, then says,
"I mean it, though; you always know what to say."

"That's why my next album will outsell yours by millions," he says, grinning, and doesn't even
protest when she pinches his nipple hard through his shirt, twisting it painfully.

+++}

"So," Harry says, in the drive back to their hotel. Louis's eyes are still blinded by the flash of
paparazzi cameras as they slunk out of Joe's hotel. She tenses slightly, because Harry has spent the
past hour finding out a lot of stuff about Louis that Louis had neglected to tell her before today, but
Harry just asks, "What were your plans for this break we've got?"

"All four days?" Louis asks, because yeah, they've got Australia in two and a half weeks, but they've
also got interviews for the single they're going to be dropping next month and some more recording
to do for their next album before then. It doesn't strike her as strange that Harry's just now asking; all
of them are prone to making last-minute travel plans literally the day before they go off and doing
something. Like when she and Liam went to Sweden for a day, or the time that she and Zayn
sneaked off to Milan for a weekend on a whim. "Was just thinking about going home for a bit and sleeping a lot. Spending time with my sisters and Stan and that. Why, what about you?"

"Was thinking about spending time with your mum and sisters and Stan and that for a few days, too," Harry says, taking out her phone and tapping through. Louis peers over. She's looking up plane tickets.

"Haz, you don't have to," Louis says. "Really. I know that you don't like sitting still for long. You've got that whole home is other people thing that you do whenever you can."

Harry gives her a withering look. "You say that like you were never the first person who was home for me," she says. "You're trying to work stuff out so I'll help you." Her face softens a bit, and she smiles. "And if I get too fed up with you whining on about Zayn, I'll just make you help me come up with ways to get Michael to do more than paw at my tits whenever I try to kiss him."

"I do not whine," Louis whines, twisting in her seat and putting her legs up on Harry's lap in protest. "But that sounds lovely, Haz, thank you."

"I'm only in it because I think Stan fancies me," Harry says flippantly, resting her hand on Louis's leg, right above the anchor tattoo. She squeezes lightly when Louis sticks her tongue out at her.

+++ Buoyed up by the concert earlier and her time with Joe and Harry, Louis goes straight to Zayn's room instead of her own. She knocks on the door sharply – she doesn't have Zayn's spare key tonight; she thinks Liam does – and then, suddenly, thinks what if she's got a girl in there and almost turns around to go.

But Zayn is yanking the door open and leaning out of Louis's way. "Hey, Lou," she says, holding a hand out to gesture her inside. "What's up?"

Louis takes a deep breath, because she hasn't considered what she wants to say to Zayn. Which is ridiculous, she's never had to have a point of visiting Zayn before. It's always for the comfort of her company. Quickly, she says, "Was hoping you'd touch up my nail varnish," and holds out her hands to show how the way that she's picked half of it off since they finished the show. Vaguely, she remembers that, according to Niall, Zayn thinks she's mad at her, so maybe Zayn will take this as a peace offering.

"Yeah," Zayn says, after a beat. "Yeah, okay."

So Louis goes in and sits down on the bed, holding her hands out while Zayn retrieves her massive bag of nail varnish from her suitcase. "I find it funny," Louis says. "You can forget to pack more than one change of clothes when we're flying across the world for awards shows but you still have a full array of makeup on hand. Even though Lou goes with us."

"Whatever, you appreciate it," Zayn says, smiling up at her through her hair, which is still damp from her post-show shower. Her face is totally washed clean, and she looks tired but still so much more beautiful than anyone Louis has ever met before in her life. "Especially when your favourite highlighter powder explodes all over the inside of your cosmetics bag."

"I never said I didn't," Louis says, and then Zayn takes one of Louis's hands up, cradling it with one of her own, palm against soft palm and thumb resting delicately and tantalisingly over the back of her fingers. She loads a cotton wool ball with acetone with her free hand and starts wiping Louis's remaining nail polish away, warm fingers damp with the sharp-smelling varnish remover brushing
against Louis's nails distractingly.

"You've trimmed your fingernails," she says, which – yeah, okay, so Louis shortened them when she started hooking up with Leigh-Anne.

"I'm sure you can work out why," she says, carefully, and Zayn freezes, but doesn't look up from where her head is bent forward, making sure she's getting every speck off.

"I suppose I can," she says, and Louis can't read her tone, not at all, and then Zayn falls silent for a while and Louis can't think of anything to say. But then Zayn shrugs this little full-body shrug and tosses her hair out of her face without touching it and looks up directly at Louis. "So where did you and Harry disappear to after the show?"

"Went to go see Joe," Louis says, forcing herself to meet Zayn's piercing gaze and not look away. "Since he's in town and everything."

"Oh," says Zayn. She looks at Louis's hand, which is now totally devoid of any nail varnish, and tosses her cotton wool at the rubbish bin in the corner of the room. She drops Louis's hand and readies another bit of cotton wool, then starts in on Louis's other fingers. "Miss him already?"

"It's complicated," Louis says, because it is. She does miss him, but not in the way that Zayn means. She also misses Zayn, and Zayn is sat right in front of her wiping off her nail varnish with heartbreakingly delicate little strokes that she can feel throughout her entire body.

"You get it," Zayn murmurs, rubbing at a spot that doesn't seem to be coming off. "Don't you? Now that Leigh's with Perrie. It's rough not having someone to just, you know. Let off steam with whenever."

"I'm not getting back with Joe," Louis says, firmly. "I wasn't out there to get off with him. That's done with."

"Okay," Zayn says. "I was just wondering."

"I mean," Louis says, pointedly, because she's never been good at being quiet when she should let well enough alone. "It is nice to have someone to get with to let off steam whenever, though."

Zayn's head jerks up, fast. "Don't," she says, warningly, something unreadable flashing in her eyes. "Don't go on about us like that again. It would be a terrible idea."

"Why?" Louis asks, a little desperately. "It's me and you, it couldn't possibly be a bad idea. We're the terrible twosome."

"It just would," Zayn says, with such a tone of finality that Louis almost runs out of the room again. She forces herself to sit still, though.

"Well," she says. "I just thought –"

"Trust me," Zayn says. "I know we're both apparently good at sustained casual flings, but." She falls silent for a long moment, long enough to take out her base coat and start painting it onto Louis's nails. After she's finished three, she says, "It would just be too messy, within the band."

It wouldn't be causal for me is at the tip of Louis's tongue, but she's pretty sure that would make things even messier, so she bites her tongue. She tries to sort her thoughts as Zayn finishes her first hand and murmurs for her to give her other. "I mean," she says, finally, watching the way that Zayn's eyelashes are so dark and long against her cheek even though she's not wearing any mascara at all.
Her stomach is in knots. She's got to learn how to stay best friends with Zayn with this huge unrequited love thing, and fast. "I suppose."

"Okay," Zayn says, relaxing slightly. "Which colour varnish did you want?"

"Surprise me," Louis says, quietly. She must sound sad, too, because Zayn's head darts up again, and her face softens.


"I know," Louis says, and she forces herself to adopt a sunny tone. Zayn finishes with the base coat, and Louis takes advantage of her hands being free to toss her hair behind her shoulders, tucking it back with her palms, fingers held stiffly out so that she doesn't get any of the stuff in her hair. She pouts elaborately – if she's extra ridiculous with her face, Zayn won't realise that her expressions are real. "You've got that mystery girl you're massively in love with and you're afraid that I'd be too hot to handle."

A weird expression crosses Zayn's face, but she ducks her head again to dig through her nail bag, coming up with a deep, oxblood purply red, and Louis doesn't have enough time to read it. "Trust me," she says. "I know you'd be too hot to handle, babe."

"I would," Louis says, and bites her lip hard, because she doesn't want to think about how Zayn will probably never know how true that is. "I'm going to miss you, Malik."

"For the four days you won't be seeing me?" Zayn asks, laughing. "I'd have thought you'd be glad not to have all my hair shit all over the place."

"That was during the X Factor tour," Louis says. "I've grown accustomed. What will I do if I run out of leave-in conditioner tomorrow? Who will I steal it from?"

"Is that where it's been going?" Zayn asks, shaking the varnish and taking one of Louis's hands up again, thumb pressing into Louis's wrist. Having Zayn do her nails might just be the worst idea she's had in a while, because each point of contact still feels like a brand, and she's uncomfortable in her own skin, the way that she keeps buzzing with the hot little puffs of Zayn's breath across her hand when she's bent over it. Or perhaps it's the best, because she's inoculating herself against the effect Zayn has on her. Maybe.

Zayn uncaps the varnish and starts brushing it onto Louis's thumb. It looks great, matches Louis's mood perfectly – dark and red, a little hurt, a little angry, a little aroused, a lot in love. "Maybe," Louis says, wide-eyed and innocent.

"Thanks," Zayn says, rolling her eyes, and then adds, "Hey, want to stay here tonight?"

"Awwww, will you miss me, too?" Louis teases. So maybe she'll need to adapt a mantra of overwhelming Zayn with normalcy so that she doesn't slip up and reveal her true feelings. So what? She can do it. She did it with Adam, back in lower sixth, for the four months that she had a thing for him, before Marcus asked her out and then encouraged her to apply for the X Factor.

"No, I'll enjoy the quiet," Zayn says, finishing up the first coat and taking up Louis's other hand. "I just don't want you to get too sad."

"Thanks," Louis says, dryly, and Zayn laughs. Louis tries not to watch the way her throat looks, curved back with the way that Zayn has tossed her head back, the way her body is shaking with her laugh, and fails.
"Anyway," Zayn says, eventually. "You'll have to shower first, because you're pretty fucking rank and your hair is shedding glitter everywhere, but yeah. I'd like that."

"Cheers," Louis says. "I'll borrow a set of whatever pyjamas you've stolen from me back for the night. I hope you realise we're going to raid the minibar and watch lots of cartoons before we fall asleep."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Zayn says, and her hand is warm against Louis's palm as she continues stroking on the colour.

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Louis sleeps most of the flight home. She and Harry stop by Harry's flat in London for about ten minutes – long enough for Harry to grab the keys to her convertible – and then drive up to Doncaster, windows rolled down the entire motorway but top of the car still fastened on so that they don't lose any of their massive bags of washing. They talk about nothing things, mostly watercolour tattoos and whether baby Lux could feasibly be a sixth member in a few years to keep their look and sound fresh and exciting.

When they get home, Louis's mum offers to make up the guest bedroom for Harry, but Harry refuses, instead dragging her suitcase into Louis's room and bags-ing the side of the bed closest to the wall. "So that if you kick I can push you out."

"Cheers," Louis says, and she drops her bags on the floor and flops, stomach-down, on her bed. "Good luck with that, I feel like I'm about to turn into a rock and sleep until we have to be back in London."

"Might go see if your mum needs any help doing any of your washing," Harry tells Louis. "You're useless when it comes to domestic things."

"Yeah yeah yeah," Louis mumbles, more to her pillow than to Harry. "You'll be a great wife and mum someday." She turns her head so that her words are a little less garbled by fabric and pillow stuffing. "I will too, but that's why I became a pop star, isn't it? Now I can afford to hire people to do all the cooking and cleaning for me."

"I knew you weren't in it for the fame," Harry says, sighing a little and then climbing over Louis to cuddle up next to her side. It's kind of funny, honestly, because Harry is so much longer than Louis is but she curls up until she's small against Louis's side. "Just the fortune."

"What gave it away?" Louis asks.

"All the gold-digging," Harry says, slinging an arm over Louis's middle and rubbing her thumb along her hip in these soothing little circles to show that she's not exactly serious about what she's saying. "Going out with high-profile rich celebrities like Joe and Zayn. No respect for shagging fans like the rest of us."

"Ew," Louis says, and she rolls onto her back. "Anyway, I don't think me and Zayn will ever date."

Harry's hand stills. "What makes you say that?" she asks, and pauses. "How did that conversation you had after we saw Joe go?"

"I mean," Louis says, pushing her hands behind her head and lying with her arms outstretched, bent at the elbows. "It was a very ordinarily nice conversation but she made it pretty fucking obvious that she's not interested in sex or anything. Like, I offered a casual sort of deal, because she likes sex and I like sex and I like her and that's better than – " she breaks off, takes a deep, shuddery breath, then
continues – "better than nothing, at least."

"Oh, babe," Harry says, squirming in to press a very wet kiss to Louis's cheek. "You've got it bad, haven't you?"

"I've got it so bad," Louis says. She rolls over onto her side so that she can face Harry directly, props herself up on one elbow, and looks Harry in the eye. "Haz, tell me that I'm not in love with Zayn. Please, tell me that I can't possibly be."

Harry purses her lips, and Louis knows then that Harry isn't going to say anything of the sort, because Harry, bless her, never lies to Louis.

But instead of saying anything like 'but you are,' Harry just frowns and says, "You know what I find interesting, Lou?"

Louis hums, closing her eyes because she's not sure she wants to see the pity and honesty in Harry's expression. "What's that?"

Harry is silent for a while, so Louis cracks her eyes open. The expression on Harry's face is deadly serious. "Granted, I only just learned about this thing you have for Zayn, but so far, you haven't once – not once – mentioned how the media might react if they found out that you were in love with her."

"Oh, shit," Louis says, sitting bold upright. "Fuck, I hadn't even thought about that. Harry, they'd eat us alive."

"That's not my point," Harry says, steadily. "My point is – Lou, you're the most media-conscious one among us. It's not a bad thing; it's probably very good, actually, because even if you don't do or say anything about our publicity to us, we need someone to be aware of all of that." She smiles. "Joe was good at helping you stay on top of our image with all that stupid talk about, you know."

"Larry Stylinson?" Louis offers, quietly.

Harry laughs. "Yeah. That kind of ridiculous thing. It's mostly harmless, yeah. I mean, imagine how awful it could be if we were in a boyband instead." She sighs. "I mean, I obviously don't know for certain but I imagine things would get even more intense, because, let's face it, more of our fans are interested in boys than girls, sexually." She shakes herself. "I'm getting off track," she says, and pushes herself into a sitting position so that she can scoot next to Louis again. "What I mean is, you pay attention to that kind of stuff, and you know that it exists, and it is always on your mind more than it is for the rest of us."

"It's because I'm so controversial," Louis says, flippantly, but she's feeling a bit grim about this whole conversation.

Harry rolls her eyes. "You do like to present yourself that way," she says. "But you absolutely are not controversial to us, and isn't that what matters?"

"I suppose," Louis says, and she leans her head on Harry's shoulder. "Yeah, I mean, probably."

"Anyway," Harry says. "You do put a lot of thought into how you're presented to the public and yeah, maybe you're a bit ridiculous, because you're Louis, but you're aware of it all. And the fact that you haven't seemed to put that kind of thought into any potential relationships with Zayn just shows me how distracted you are by her." She pauses. "How little everything else matters when she's what's on the line."

"Fuck," Louis says, quietly, tears pricking at her eyes. She's known, on some level, that everything
Harry has just said is true, but she doesn't try to consciously think about it, usually. "Fuck, I'm absolutely in love with Zayn and I haven't got a chance with her at all."

"Now that is ridiculous," Harry says, and she reaches over and tugs Louis's legs across her lap, cuddling her close, creating a Harry-cave with her body that Louis can lean against and take comfort from. "If anyone's got a chance with Zayn, it's you, gorgeous girl that you are. Even if she doesn't like you like that, I'm sure you can present your case and you can get a pity fuck or two out of her."

"That's not what I want at all," Louis says, a little miserably, and she shoves at Harry, who laughs and pulls her in to stroke her hair.

She starts to feel a little better at that, but not by much.

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Unfortunately, the break comes to an end, as all breaks do. At the end of it all, Louis feels actually, completely rested, for the first time in almost months – more so than when she went to Costa Rica with Joe, more so than when she spent two days curled up in Zayn's house, more so than after their week of just staying in LA. It's good to see her sisters again, and to be with her mum, and to sit with Harry huddled around Harry's mobile, composing texts to Michael together like it's 2011 again and they're in their first flat, trying to craft the perfect messages to send to the celebrities they'd admired for years, whose numbers they now have access to. It's good to lie in till noon and not have a photoshoot the next day, to drink, like, thirty cups of tea without worrying about needing to get up to wee in the middle of an interview or concert.

It's also nice to go see the rest of her girls, though, because by this point Louis feels incomplete without Liam to work out with in the morning, without Niall to catch the game with on the telly. Without Zayn, whose streak is now hot pink, to curl up next to and share makeup with and just talk to.

Of course, as soon as they're back together in London, media attention picks up and there's a bit of a hubbub on the internet when yet another gossip site posts a speculation post about which of them will end up knocked up first – Louis is voted as most likely, and there's a picture of her holding Lux up as she talks to one of their male security, but it's nothing she hasn't heard before. But overall, it's nice to crowd into the studio and properly record some of the songs they've been writing on the road and start making decisions about what their next single should be.

Towards the end of their tour hiatus, right before they head out to Australia and, to Harry's adorable excitement, back to 5 Seconds of Summer as their opening act, they record a series of interviews for British tv stations to play leading up to the release of their first single off the new album.

Louis is thrilled about the track; it's a departure from their usual relationship fare. Which, generally, she doesn't mind at all – she honestly does love it – but after touring with Little Mix and listening to so many of their independence songs, she's ready to help contribute to a new wave of girl power and all that.

So it just makes her angry when, in their longest interview that's destined to be aired at an extremely lucrative time spot on a very popular programme, the interviewer starts trying to pit her and her girls against each other.

Granted, she goes into the interview already annoyed, because the night before they record it, someone finally leaks a very obvious blind item about her breakup with Joe that sort of confirms every rumour that's been floating around ever since LA, and by the morning of the interview a zillion gossip sites are posting pictures from when she and Harry went to visit him after MSG and a few
shitty photos fans got of her with Harry back home with captions like *Louis leaves Joe – for Harry??*

And she's feeling a little out of sorts because Zayn pulls her aside and actually says, "Maybe try not to play up the rumours this time," which – what?

"You know better than anyone that I don't intend to draw that kind of attention," Louis snaps, because she does try to draw the focus of the media with ridiculous antics when her girls are out of sorts and can't handle the weight of it, but she never wants to drag people into her actual personal life, and then she goes off to find Lou to fix her makeup.

The woman conducting their interview is new to the show, very excited to get to have such a lucrative assignment, and she seems to think that she's going to get some kind of scoop no one has ever got before. "Surely you girls fight," she says, leaning forward, long glossy nails tapping against her knee.

"Oh, yes," Louis says, a little nastily. Even the interviewer's face is annoying her. Even the brooch she's wearing on the pocket of her shirt. "I'm not meant to reveal this, but – we've actually started a fight club just between the five of us and we spend hours after each show beating each other bloody backstage."

"That's not what I meant," the woman says. Louis has already made a point to forget her name because it's obvious she's no one worth note. "I just –"

Liam lets her hand drift over to Louis's side and pinches her, hard. "We don't, actually," she says. "We've got a great rhythm between the five of us and we all have our own important place within the band and within our friendships and we get along really well."

And that should dissuade the woman, but she latches onto part of what Liam says. "Have any of you ever doubted your place in the band, then?"

Louis is about to exchange a *didn't we cover this two years ago or something??* look with Harry when she notices that the woman has just angled her torso towards Zayn. Zayn, who has been singled out for ages for being gay and half-Pakistani and tweeting vaguely Muslim things on occasion.

Louis is not about to let some self-important reporter imply anything like that about her Zayn, so she forces a loud laugh and says, "Do you know, when we first started off I once read an article that I had no actual singing talent and I was just put in the band for people to look at." She pauses, noting the way that the rest of the girls are twisting to look at her in astonishment out of the corner of her eyes, because this is something she actually had been concerned about once upon a time, and as such, she's never made a point of bringing it up in an interview before. Winking, she adds, "Because I've got bigger tits than the rest of these girls, you know."

The look on the interviewer's face darkens, and Louis grins. It's not even forced, because she knows that they're going to have to edit the interview significantly now that she's said tit, which maybe even means most of the awful bits will never make it to the light of day.

Niall must catch on, because Niall says, "We knew all along that was rubbish, though. Louis being put through because of her body, ha." She manages to make it sound like the absolute most ridiculous thing that has ever been suggested. Louis loves her.

"Yeah," Louis says. She gestures down at her breasts and smiles even wider. "I mean, if I were given things on account of how excellent my tits are, I'd be the Queen of England right now."
"Um," Harry says, and then she dissolves into laughter, collapsing onto Niall, and Niall cracks up, shoving Harry away, and then they're all laughing and the interviewer has lost total control of her situation. Louis feels Liam's hand rest heavily and comfortingly against her side even as Liam laughs, head thrown back and eyes squinting with mirth, and when she looks over, she sees that even Zayn is grinning.

"You know," Zayn says, as they start to settle down, and she scoots her chair slightly closer to the interviewer. "As the resident expert on breasts in the band, I can one hundred percent confirm Louis's claim." She grins, wrapping one arm around Niall's neck and one around Liam's. "Sorry, girls, but Louis has definitely got the best rack of all of us."

"Hey," Harry protests, frowning. "I've got quite nice ones as well."

"Yes, they're very shapely," Louis says. "But see, size matters and mine are biggest."

"Plenty of boys like mine fine," Harry says, petulantly, and Liam chimes in, "Yes, but your page in our Vanity Fair spread being most bent up in the 5 Seconds of Summer dressing room doesn't count."

"Then neither does the Newsroom makeup trailer keeping their One Direction calendar open to the same month the whole time they were shooting last season, Miss November," Harry says, pointedly.

"They're all just jealous of me, actually," Niall tells the camera. "I've got practically no tits so I don't have to wear a bra unless I feel like it."

"She never feels like it," Louis says, mournfully. "Nialler, you may think I'm jealous but honestly I'm mostly resisting the urge to twist your perky little nipples in public."

This entire interview is totally ruined. As Niall launches herself forward across everyone's laps to get to Louis and drag her hair into a scuffle, Louis lets herself smirk at the way their interviewer's face is growing redder and redder.

"There you have it," Zayn says. Louis glances at her; she's got a look of smugness at the way the interviewer's jaw is working that probably mirrors Louis's own. "One Direction's first fight, all on camera."

Harry's still fake-pouting over the insinuation that her tits might not be the best, and Louis raises her eyebrows. "Actually this may be the end of us all," she says, and turns to face Harry. "Harriet, you can leave the band if you don't acknowledge my body as the absolute hottest."

"That's it, I quit," Liam says, and she gets up and walks over to put her hand in front of the main camera.

The interviewer has got her head cradled in her hands. Louis reaches across Liam's empty seat to low-five Zayn. Sorry, she mouths, because here she is, not fifteen minutes after Zayn accused her of playing things up for attention, playing things up for attention.

Zayn shakes her head slightly, eyes wide and happy. "Love you," she murmurs back, too quiet for the cameras to pick up.

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They end up needing to re-record the entire interview. It's the same interviewer, but she doesn't try to stir the pot this time, so Louis almost even behaves this time around. Or, well, she still derails everything except for talk about the actual single they're releasing, but she does make an effort to
keep it more or less appropriate for television.

The worst she gets is when they're asked for details about the upcoming single. Niall answers every single one promptly and expansively, leaning forward in her seat, hands folded together and elbows on her knees. Her eyes are glinting and she's so adorable that Louis simply can't leave it alone.

"You would know all of this, Niall," she says, fondly, and she rolls her eyes at the camera. "Niall spends, like, all of her free time updating these spreadsheets on her computer," she says. "Her latest one has got everything about our new album on it – release date, track listing, which tracks she likes best and which lyrics each of us wrote – it's massive."

"She's also got the tour one," Zayn points out.

"Yes," Liam says. "Every show we play gets its own entry. And afterwards she records the lyric changes we do and the twitter questions and rates how loud the audience screams are."

"It's so that twenty years after we've stopped touring, if one of you lot pisses me off, I can sell every bit of your story to your least favourite tabloid," Niall says, fluffing her hair over one shoulder, and dissolves into laughter when Harry tugs her sideways into a hug, messing her hair all up.

The last interview they have is on Chatty Man, and it's set to air while they're in-flight to Australia the next day, which makes it the first interview that's set to air after rumours that she and Joe broke up started that either of them are recording, so she rings him before they go on and asks if he thinks they should go public with it.

"I mean," he says. "There will be a world of conjecture if we're seen together again after this."

"Yes," she says. "Which, honestly, could be a bit fun."

Joe laughs, "You know," he says. "For all that you complain about the rumours the fans spread, you totally like to instigate them."

"I was a troll on the internet before I got famous," Louis says, primly, which – well, it's not entirely true, but it might as well be. She doesn't particularly like the theories about her personal life that get splashed around in the Sun and on Sugarscape and Tumblr and any number of tabloids, but since they're already there, she might as well play with them.

"You would be," Joe says. He's quiet for a moment, then: "If you confirm that we've broken up, no one will accuse you of breaking my heart when your big gay love for Zayn comes to light."

"They'll call you my beard though," Louis says. "Not that they haven't already done, but they'll say it with even more conviction now."

"I know," Joe says. "I've read that fanfic."

Louis rolls her eyes. Of course he has. "One of these days," she says, "I'm going to write a fanfiction where you get eaten by a bear and no one misses you."

"I'll probably read it," Joe says, very seriously, and then he laughs. "Go ahead and say we're single, then I won't need to worry about girls asking me if I'm cheating on you when I try to pick them up at bars."

"Slut," Louis says, affectionately, and rings off.

In the interview, only Liam raises her hand when the Alan asks who's got boyfriends – "Or
girlfriends," he adds, with a wink to Zayn.

He raises his eyebrows at Louis, but doesn't go off-prompt, just asks Liam a few questions about Dev and pops a face morph photo up to show her what their babies would probably look like, and yeah. There's a reason Louis likes Alan Carr more than she likes most people.

"People are going to go mad about that," Zayn whispers to Louis as they walk off the set and prepare to play Loved You First.

"Like they're not going to buzz all about how Zerrie is off again, too," Louis whispers back, but she sighs a little and tilts her head onto Zayn's shoulder while they get into place. "Joe and I just thought we might as well come out with it."

Zayn pushes her away a little bit as one of the backstage help hands them all their microphones. As the Louis straightens, Zayn leans in and quickly whispers, "Two hearts."

Louis has just enough time to nod before the lights come on and the music starts.

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As it turns out, neither Zayn nor Louis have packed at all, though, and their flight is in the morning, so they don't get a chance to sit down and talk until they're on the plane. Zayn snags the seat next to Louis and pulls a blanket over the two of them, all the way up until it's covering their heads and their faces are close together in the dark, stuffy warmth. Noise still leaks in under the blanket – Niall is shouting about something, and someone is fumbling with luggage – but everything is muffled and distant.

Louis digs her fingertips into her knee to keep her heartbeat steady, focuses on breathing slow, because her stomach is twisting over on itself, and god, it's so inconvenient, these unbidden responses to being so close to Zayn.

Friends, she thinks to herself. Nothing more than friends. Zayn doesn't want anything so I've got to drop that idea right now.

"What's up?" she asks Zayn, once she's more or less got herself under control. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, I wanted to ask you just that," Zayn says. She leans her head on Louis's shoulder and reaches between the two of them to push the armrest up, then tugs Louis's hands into her lap and tangles their fingers together, and Louis has to spend another few breaths trying to settle herself down. "I'm worried about you, Lou."

"What?" Louis says, honestly surprised. "Why?"

Zayn takes an audibly deep breath, releases it. "I feel like we haven't had a good conversation for a while," she says, quietly, hands tightening around Louis's.

One of the biggest differences between Louis and Zayn is that while Louis is one of the most confrontational people she's ever met, Zayn absolutely is not, so she knows that Zayn bringing this up, even with someone she's known and been best mates with for years like Louis, is a big and difficult step. So Louis feels a stab of guilt that things between them have got to a point where Zayn is driven to actually say something specific. "I mean," she says, but she falls quiet when Zayn releases one of her hands and holds a finger up to stop her.

"Let me finish," says Zayn. She lets her hand drop back down onto Louis's. "I want to tell you how
I've seen things for the past few weeks, okay?"

"Okay," Louis says, and pulls a hand free to mime zipping her lips shut.

Zayn smiles – Louis can see the curve of her lip even in the dark under the blanket – but then her face turns serious, and she twists to face Louis more directly. "Right," she says. "So I think maybe it started when you broke up with Joe and I was totally taken by surprise."

"I thought we already – " Louis starts, but Zayn digs her fingers into Louis's wrist, so she bites her lower lip and quietens.

"I just thought it was the kind of thing I would have seen coming," Zayn says. "But anyway. So you ended a relationship with the guy, but you've still gone to spend time with him since the breakup so it all seems very... nebulous, yeah? And don't get me wrong, I understand precisely why you did it, but --" She breaks off, shakes her head firmly. "Never mind. Anyway. So that's something I found out about after it happened. Then you started hooking up with one of our supporting act."

"A girl."

"Okay, but you did know that I also – with girls," says Louis, quickly, quietly, because she and Zayn have absolutely had this conversation before.

"I knew that you'd been with girls, yeah," Zayn says. "Before you got famous. I also know that you said you'd probably stop because you're perfectly happy with boys." She looks down at her hands for a long moment, then tilts her head back up towards Louis's. "Lou, you know I don't blame you for wanting to keep that private. I don't regret coming out and doing all those interviews with gay magazines and being the Fresh Young Face for lesbian celebrities all over the place and everything, but if I had a choice in the matter – if the paps hadn't caught me and Pez at it – I probably would have kept it private, too." A beat, then: "Louis, you're the last person I'd expect to risk being outed with someone who you're not serious about, but you basically told me that Leigh-Anne was just – a stopgap measure."

Louis wonders how many times Zayn's rehearsed this speech in her head, but she doesn't ask. After Zayn falls quiet for a while, though, she does ask, "Is that it?"

"Just," Zayn says. "It seems to me like you've been getting really reckless lately."

"I'm a reckless person," Louis says, a little defensively. "Have you met me?"

It's too dark to tell for certain, but Louis is pretty sure that Zayn gives her a withering look at that. "Not like this, you aren't," she says. She sounds a bit short. "You're outrageous and effusive, babe. You aren't reckless with your private life." She laughs, a twisted, strange laugh. "Even your casual sexual relationships have lasted up to over a year, Louis, do you see what I'm saying here?"

"I suppose," Louis says, and then: "I'm okay, I promise. You needn't worry about me."

"See, that's the funny thing about this stupid band," Zayn says. "Not worrying about you girls is easier said than done." She sighs a little. "Do you at least know what you're doing, Louis? Because I absolutely don't, and that's why I'm worried."

Louis's heart twists painfully in her chest. She's so in love with Zayn that Zayn's well-intentioned intervention, or whatever it is, physically hurts her, all the way down to the tingling in her fingertips. She just wants to touch, to kiss. Maybe even to cry a little. "When you put it that way," she says, and laughs harshly for a moment.

Zayn curls in closer, as close as their seatbelts allow, tugging Louis's legs up and across her lap. She
wraps a hand around Louis's calf, thumb stroking up over her shin distractingly. "What's going on, then?"

"I mean," Louis says, and she takes a deep breath. "It wasn't just Leigh having a thing for Perrie."

Zayn's thumb stills. "You've got a thing for Perrie?"

"No," Louis says, and she giggles a little bit, almost hysterically. She really should probably just come right out and tell Zayn that she's in love with her. They can have a bit of a laugh over how ridiculous it is and she'll be a bit heartbroken for a while and Zayn will act awkwardly around her, probably, but at least it won't be this big secret that Louis is keeping from Zayn, a secret that is consuming her all the time.

She won't, though. She can't bring herself to say the words.

"I mean," she says. "It wasn't just Leigh that had a thing for someone." She sighs, tilting her head back against her seat and closing her eyes. "There's someone that I've gone and fallen for, and like – she isn't interested, like at all, but." She bites her lip for a moment. "If she were – sorry, Zayn, I don't really have plans to be um. Out and talking about it to people or anything anytime soon. Leigh-Anne and I were also, you know. Just exploring our sexuality together. But I'm still working things out and I'm not ready to not be private about it, you know?"

"I know, babe," Zayn says. She squeezes Louis's leg comfortingly. "I don't expect you to do anything about it. Didn't we literally just go over this?"

"Yeah," Louis says. "But anyway. The girl I like. She's, um." She takes a deep breath, does a quick inventory of her emotional state – her hands are sweating and she's nervous, so nervous, but she thinks she's telling the truth, so. "She's worth the risk."

Zayn is quiet for a long time. When Louis risks opening her eyes and looking at her, Zayn is looking away from Louis, brow furrowed, lower lip sucked into her mouth. It's too dark and smudgy under the blanket to see anything in any kind of definition, but Louis knows Zayn well enough to be able to picture the pensive look on her face.

Finally, with a deep, almost shuddery breath, Zayn turns back to Louis. "Babe," she says. "I don't understand how there could be a girl who isn't interested in you, especially when you feel this strongly about her." She pauses. "Is she straight?"

"No," Louis says, shrugging miserably, because isn't that so ironic? Zayn looks almost mad that someone might dare to not be in love with Louis, and yet.

And yet.

"Okay," Zayn says, quietly, going back to stroking Louis's leg, like the universe is playing some kind of cruel joke on Louis. "Tell me about her."

"She's absolutely the most gorgeous and sexy girl I've ever seen in my life," Louis says. "She's funny and nice and smart and talented and sweet. And fun. And cool."

"Can't be that cool if she doesn't appreciate you enough," Zayn says, tersely, and reaches over to take Louis's hand and squeeze.

"I'll have you know," Louis says, mentally flashing the two-finger salute at the entire universe, opting to take her usual route of falling back on humour even though she absolutely does not feel like laughing. Not even a little bit. "Considering you're in the same boat as me with regards to that
mystery girl of yours who doesn't appreciate you enough, either, I am trying very hard not to proposition you again."

"I appreciate it," Zayn says, laughing a little, almost mirthlessly. She sighs. "We really are a right pair, aren't we?"

"We really are," Louis agrees, and hauls the blanket off the top of them, effectively ending their little conference.

When Zayn falls asleep half an hour later, she does so curled into Louis's side.

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It's springtime in Australia, so it isn't too hot for Louis to go outside and have a bit of a kickabout with the others before shows – Niall and Liam, usually, but Harry and Zayn sometimes join in, Harry constantly trying to get her hair to stay put in the ponytail she tries to wrangle it into as she attempts to kick the ball, Zayn sort of half-heartedly swinging her foot at it and then going off to sit in the shade and watch, sunglasses on and hand shading her eyes from the remaining glare of the sun.

"You okay?" Niall asks, at one point, when it's just the two of them, sweating heavily, Niall pressed hard against Louis's front because at some point they lost the football and have ended up just kind of trying to wrestle each other to the ground.

Louis is quiet for a while, and Niall gives a little jump, up and forward, so that she's clinging to Louis's back, arms around Louis's neck and legs around her waist. Louis almost overbalances, but she manages to get her arms under Niall's thighs and staggers forward, stumbling until she's steady. Victoriously, she starts to run – or, well, walk fast; Niall is too heavy for her to full-out run – around the bus. "Um," she says, finally, because the fact of the matter is that she's sort of forced herself into finding a way to coexist with her thing for Zayn, but. It's not very effective, given how she still catches herself watching Zayn when Zayn is doing a quick change backstage, drawing her dresses and tops over her head, staring at the way the black of her bra cuts across her back, bisecting several of her tattoos, the way the cups curve over the soft swell of her lovely breasts. The lace of her pants stretched over her tiny little bum. The way her hair swings down, long and wavy and gorgeous, once it pulls free from her top.

It's unfair and it's opportunistic and Louis isn't pleased with herself for doing it. She's similarly not pleased with the little biting remarks she can't help making about the people Zayn gets close to, or the way that one night, when the five of them go out to a club in Melbourne, she does absolutely everything she can to wreck Zayn's game with the tiny brunette girl she's chatting up against the back wall of the VIP section, ranging from interrupting to ask if Zayn's got any tampons to flat out telling Zayn that she feels ill and can Zayn take her back to the hotel, please.

Zayn doesn't seem to be very pleased with Louis now – Louis doesn't particularly blame her – and Louis knows that she'll have to stop sabotaging Zayn's attempts to get laid at some point soon, before everything comes to a gross and terrible head. She knows that she's probably the reason that Zayn has got her head tilted against Liam's more often than not now, the way that they've sort of sequestered themselves to the back of the bus together, whispering furiously to each other and falling quiet whenever they catch sight of Louis.

"I feel like a bit of a bitch, if I'm honest," Louis says, seriously, because she knows she's antagonising Zayn, getting in the way of her pulling girls, and watching her change, and taking all of her sexual frustration out in little sharp comments that always make Zayn's face fall the tiniest bit when she bites them out, but she can't quite bring herself to stop.
Niall's arms tighten around Louis's chest, a sort of backwards hug, so Louis tilts her head back and does her best to press her cheek against Niall's without overbalancing. It doesn't really work, and she ends up tipping backwards and quickly dropping Niall down so that she doesn't topple them both to the ground. "Cheers," Niall says, once she's firmly on the ground, rolling her eyes.

"Not my fault that you overbalanced me," Louis says, and Niall slugs her on the arm. Nicely, though; she doesn't put all of her weight behind the punch. Louis still tries to drag Niall's head under her arm and knuckle at her scalp, though, regardless of Niall's few inches on her.

"Anyway," Niall says, pointedly, once Louis has given up on trying to capture Niall's head. "To tell you the truth, Lou, you have been a little bit of a bitch lately. Which is understandable, don't get me wrong, but it's probably not understandable to Zayn seeing as you still haven't told her that you're fucking in love with her."

"Shut up," Louis says, a little miserably. She didn't want Niall to confirm that she's been less than pleasant to be around. "I know. I'm terrible."

"There's an easy way to fix it," Niall says, but Louis just kind of stares woodenly ahead because she knows there is, she just doesn't like it, so Niall sighs and shrugs and adds, "I'm not going to meddle, though. It's your business."

"Just," Louis says, interrupting Niall mid-repetition. "I don't want to ruin everything between us," She sighs. "I don't want to like, throw off the band's dynamic."

"Newsflash," Niall says, spinning around to face Louis head-on. She pokes Louis's chest just under her collarbone, hard, and Louis mouths 'ow' and presses a hand to the spot. "These little snide comments about Zayn and everyone she gives more than two seconds of her attention to? This way that you and Zayn keep like, fucking staring after each other all the time with confusion and longing and hurt and exasperation and what the fuck ever lately? They're already doing a bloody good job at throwing off the band's dynamic." She swears, scrubs a hand through her hair, takes a deep breath. "Sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to yell at you or anything. I honestly do want you to be okay. But Louis?"

"Yeah," Louis says guiltily, when she realises that Niall is looking at her expectantly, waiting for her to dignify her commentary with some kind of response. She doesn't say anything else, though, because she's honest-to-god reeling from the fire in Niall's eyes and the words she was using.

"Just – make a decision and stick to it," Niall says. "Talk to her, don't talk to her, I don't fucking care. It's your business. But you're making it our business when you glare at Liam for ten minutes for talking to Zayn in the back of the bus or like, get jealous of me when Zayn and I share her headphones for a song or whatever, so you need to work that out. Okay?"

Louis hadn't noticed that she's been glaring at Liam or getting jealous of Niall, honestly, and she winces a little. "I didn't realise – sorry," she says, and sighs. "Okay. I'll work it out."

"Okay," Niall says, calmly, and she throws her arms around Louis and pulls her in for a hug. "Love you, babe," she says. "Stop needing so much tough love."

"I promise," Louis whispers, and she lets her eyes close as she sinks into the hug.

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"I don't get it," Zayn hisses at Louis in her Sydney hotel room. It's almost three on a blindingly sunny afternoon. According to Liam, it's lovely out, perfect for a bit of sunbathing on their balconies after a
nice taxing run or for sitting by the hotel's outdoor pool.

Louis wouldn't know, though. Louis's curtains are closed because she is extremely hungover. Not because she went out to a club with Zayn and the girls – and Michael, who Harry dragged along – she definitely skived out on that one, pre-emptively claiming an upset stomach because she knows that watching Zayn try to pull other girls is more than enough to make her feel nauseous – but because she tracked down Calum and Luke and convinced them that streaming the better part of a season of H20: Just Add Water ("Because we're in Australia, duh") and making up a drinking game to go along with it would be a great idea.

Whatever, she absolutely didn't want to focus on the very high probability that Zayn would be able to pull without her there, either. She just – she's trying to be less of a pain to be around, basically, and if that means totally removing herself from Zayn's presence for a few hours, so be it.

Of course, that would mean –

"How the fuck is it appropriate to ring me at two in the morning and ask if I've fucked anyone yet?" Zayn asks, crossing her arms and glaring at her.

-- not doing that very drunkenly after twelve highly emotionally volatile episodes of the show.

"Just looking out for you," Louis blusters, wincing at the absolute volume of Zayn's voice and the weight of her anger. "Making sure you, you know, get some. And live while you're young."

"Right," Zayn says, drawing the word out into, like, three full syllables. "Never mind that the phone call could have interrupted any such... activities."

"You didn't have to answer it," Louis says, raising her eyebrows at Zayn and immediately wincing, because using her face expressively hurts.

"Of course I did," Zayn says, dismissively. "What if you needed me?"

Louis's heart hurts, and she's pretty sure that's entirely unrelated to her hangover. "Sorry," she says, quietly.

Zayn sighs and flops down onto Louis's bed. "Lou," she says. "Are you mad at me?"

"What?" Louis says. She's sort of expected this question – it's not like she's been anticipating it, but she's not surprised by it at all – but she does her best to act startled. "Why would you even think that?"

"Just," Zayn says, pushing a hand through her hair and closing her eyes. "You're acting so differently lately." She pauses, frowning deeper, picking at a loose thread on the duvet of Louis's bed. "Almost like you're punish – never mind."

"No, almost like what?" Louis asks. She forces herself to sit up straight and twist to look directly at Zayn.

"No, it's nothing," Zayn says, still frowning in the direction of her knees. "Just forget about it."

It's hard for Louis to sort through her thoughts properly, her headache is that bad, but she's still pretty sure that she's rapidly approaching the point of no return, that she's getting close to wrecking their friendship irreparably, and guilt lances through her. She's never had this much difficulty at separating the friend from the crush, and it, quite frankly, kills her that she's having so much trouble now. Zayn doesn't deserve it.
It's just hard, because she's pretty sure if she's cruel enough to Zayn, Zayn will leave her alone and she won't have to deal with how in love with her she is.

She really should just tell Zayn the truth. Zayn could reject her and she could avoid her for a few weeks and everyone would understand and by the time they need to go into aggressive promo for their next album, it could all be behind them, a funny thing to joke about when they're all punch-drunk from flying from radio station to radio station all across the UK, running on red bull and paracetamol and the weak tea and muffins the stations offer while they're waiting to start recording.

She just doesn't want to look at Zayn's face and see the pity there.

"Sorry," she says, a little stiffly, rolling over onto her stomach, burying her face in her pillows. Safely hidden from the entire world, she mumbles, "I suppose there is something going on."

Immediately, she feels the bed rock a little as Zayn stretches out and puts a hand on her back. "That much is obvious," Zayn says, quietly, and Louis winces, completely unrelated to her hangover. "What is it? Is it a like... identity crisis thing?"

"Sort of," Louis says, and she rolls over onto her back. Zayn's hand drags across her middle as she turns, and she has to bite her lip to keep from making some kind of noise at the way that feels, even though it's literally just because she's twisting around. "You could say that."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Zayn asks, carefully.

Louis closes her eyes tight, takes a deep breath – and realises she's not ready to be rejected yet. "I'm just trying to get through to the end of the tour without thinking about it too much," she says. "We have three more weeks."

"So," Zayn says, quietly. "You're saying you want me to drop it till then?"

"If that's okay?" Louis says, and she sighs, twisting so that she can bury her face into Zayn's shoulder. She's so absolutely fucked. She can't even keep herself physically away from Zayn. She craves the way her stomach swoops and her skin prickles ever time she's touching Zayn to much to stop.

So much for her self-preservation instincts.

Zayn sighs, loudly, and Louis risks squinting her eyes open long enough to see that Zayn looks – resigned, maybe? – and then closes them because she doesn't want to see the way Zayn's lips move, pursing and curving and twisting when she says, "If you insist, Lou."

"Sorry I'm such a bitch," Louis mumbles, and Zayn's arm tightens on her waist. She draws her in closer.

"Apology accepted," she says, coolly. "As long as you promise you'll tell me what's up as soon as you can, okay?"

Louis is the absolute worst. "I promise," she says, in a voice that is precisely as tiny as she feels.

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functional.

Which is to say she doesn't manage to balance the two things at all, but at least instead of making biting remarks about the girls she catches looking at Zayn and the girls that catch Zayn's eye directly to Zayn, she makes them to Joe in a series of highly volatile texts that could probably ruin her if anyone (Zayn) were to see them.

There's a holding pattern for almost a week, and they fly from Sydney to Auckland. Louis sits beside Harry, a row back from Liam and Zayn. She can feel the weight of Niall's stare from across the aisle, and when she looks over, Niall's got this considering sort of frown as she looks between Louis and Zayn. Louis makes a face at Niall, sticking out her tongue, and Niall blinks and smiles back, then goes right back to frowning.

Louis knows that she's not getting used to the way that every time Zayn does, like, anything. She's overwhelmed with a rush of fondness and affection, or the way that her stomach fucking flip-flops every time Zayn's hand darts out to grab her wrist, and every time Zayn's top rides up when she stretches, cracking her back, and every time her neckline slips across too far on one shoulder, baring part of a bra strap. She needs to work out how to control herself around Zayn, how to keep from lashing out – with frustration or with lust – every time Zayn happens to exist within her bubble, basically, but it's hard to get the opportunity to do that on tour because Zayn is literally inside Louis's bubble all the time, except maybe for when they sleep in separate rooms.

But even then, Zayn somehow manages to infiltrate Louis's dreams. And it's hard. It's hard to look Zayn in the eye over tea and room service porridge in Niall's hotel room when they're all gathered around, having a bit of a group lie-in on a day when they don't need to be anywhere till after noon, cartoons on the telly and Liam painstakingly painting Harry's toenails a bright turquoise to prove a point because Louis proclaimed that no one could apply nail varnish as well as she and Zayn could, a window open so that Zayn can smoke without going out and getting photographed on the balcony, after some of the dreams Louis has had about Zayn recently, but here she is. Her gaze drifts automatically over to Zayn to exchange eye-rolls when Niall makes a crack about New Zealand commercials that makes Harry crack up and accidentally kick the bottle of varnish over, spilling it across Niall's blankets, but the wicked gleam in Zayn's eyes when she meets Louis's expression reminds Louis, painfully, of the look that dream-Zayn had in her eyes as she was lowering herself down Louis's dream body, sucking kisses across her stomach and down, down to her clit. Even pushing herself forcibly up to break eye contact and take a few steps away just to gather herself, accidentally knocking her own tea into the whole mess on the bed in the process, doesn't help.

It's a problem, and it's distracting, but the show quite literally has to go on, so. Louis does her best to deal with it and not snap at Zayn every time she gets close to getting laid – or, more accurately, every time she gets close to any girls who smile at her too brightly.

She bites her tongue so many times that she develops a proper sore, and when that doesn't work, she digs her nails into her own thigh until the urge to say something scathing – well. It never goes away, but she does manage to work past it, more or less.

There's this one day in Christchurch where Zayn is talking to one of the stage tech team, a girl with vivid red hair and a twinkle in her eyes, and Louis has to actually shut herself up in her dressing room and claim a stomach ache in order to keep her mouth shut, but at least she doesn't say anything. Right?

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Their second-to-last show in Australia before their new single drops is in Perth. Perth, and then back to Adelaide for the final performance and a bit of recording for their next video, and then there's a
round of promo in Melbourne and Sydney for the new single, and then it's off to Tokyo for the last two shows of the entire tour, and Louis is ready to drop. Trying to hold her tongue when all she wants to do with it is either stick it in Zayn's mouth – or other places – or make snide comments until Zayn shuts her up by sticking her own tongue into Louis's mouth is exhausting, and trying to finalise plans for the music video, which they'll be filming in Adelaide and then releasing just as they reach Japan, and put on hours-long high-energy shows nearly every day on top of that... well.

Louis is ready to go to sleep for a very long time, basically.

So she's not at the top of her game by the time the twitter questions come around in Perth.

"What's the best and worst thing about each other?" Hayley in section 115, row G, seat 10 asks, and Liam says something about how it's great that Niall is laid back about everything but that it can be a pain when she's so laid back that she wears the same pyjamas on the bus for a week straight without washing them at all.

And then Zayn straightens up and says, "Louis is hilarious but sometimes her humour can be a bit cruel," which frankly feels a bit like a punch to the gut, so Louis tosses a haughty look in Zayn's direction to cover up her hurt.

"Well," she says, loudly and a little cuttingly, over the screaming of the fans. "You're one to talk." She looks out across the crowd. "Zayn is like, the most gorgeous girl in the entire universe," she says. "Which is great when you go out and everyone is flocking to the girls with the really fit friend, but it's also a bit cruel, as it's incredibly distracting and totally unfair to the rest of us. I mean, we have to look at that every day." She waves her hands expansively in Zayn's direction.

The other girls laugh, but Zayn's face goes dark and stormy, which... Louis doesn't get it, because yeah, she didn't phrase it in the best way, but that was actually more of a compliment than anything anyone else said in response to the question.

But Zayn pulls away from her during the rest of the songs, jumping up onto Liam's back and dancing with Niall and draping a sweaty arm around Harry's shoulders and not singing into Louis's microphone with her at all. Which should be nice, because Louis has been pretty sure all along that she'd be able to focus better on not accidentally forgetting the lyrics if Zayn's smell didn't crowd her nose every time they have a verse together, but Zayn's distance is just as distracting as when she's in close proximity to Louis, so it's all kind of a wash, actually.

"What was that all about?" Louis asks Zayn, after the show is done and the five of them are walking back to the dressing room to rinse off and change into tracksuit bottoms and old t-shirts and rush off to the hotel for a few scarce hours of sleep before their flight back east.

"I could ask you the same question," Zayn says, tightly. "What the fuck are you playing at, Louis?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Louis says, honestly, because – well. There are a lot of things Zayn could be talking about, but Louis could swear that she's been better lately, that she's been managing to rein it in enough that her jealousy isn't affecting the rest of the girls as much.

"I was joking when I said that your humour can be cruel, Lou," Zayn says, flatly. "You didn't have to try to prove my point."

"What," Louis says, thinking back. "All I did – I complimented you!"

"Yeah, well," Zayn says, hands balling into fists. "Considering some other conversations we've had, you did a bit more than that. I can't believe you."
Louis thinks back, frantically, and with a sinking feeling remembers the time she told Zayn that she was falling for the most gorgeous girl in the world. "Zayn," she says, hollowly, because it's one thing for Zayn to turn her down when she thinks Louis is just propositioning her for straight-up sex and quite another for Zayn to be angry that Louis is in love with her. She feels rather like crying. "Zayn."

"I just," Zayn says, running a hand through her hair, messing it up more than throwing herself around stage for a couple of hours ever did. She stops walking completely, so Louis stops, too, vaguely registering that the rest of their bandmates are hanging around the edges of the conversation, staring. "It's not funny, Louis, and I don't see how you could think something like that would be."

"I didn't mean it to be funny," Louis snaps, glaring at Zayn. She puts her hands on her hips. "You of all people should know that."

"Oh, so you were just being completely vicious and cruel, I see," Zayn says, perplexingly, and she turns to stalk off to their dressing rooms, which doesn't sit well with Louis because however much she wants to sit down and cry into a big bowl of mashed potatoes, she also needs to have the last word.

"Fine!" she shouts after Zayn, who doesn't even acknowledge her.

"Louis," Niall says, quietly, insistently, and when Louis looks over, swallowing the urge to throw up, she sees Liam and Harry and Niall in a wide-eyed huddle. Liam is whispering something to Harry, her sweaty hair falling into her face. "Have you told Zayn yet?"

"Obviously not," Louis snaps, and, to her horror and disappointment, she starts to cry.

"Right," Liam says, after a long moment of silence, and she strides forward and grasps Louis's arm by the elbow. "This has gone too far."

"Liam," Niall says, but Liam shakes her head, decisively.

"I'm calling a band meeting," she says, and Louis is about to protest but then she notices the determined set of Liam's mouth, the fire in her eyes. The last time she tried to cross Liam when she looks like this, she got a very stern lecture and then woke up the next morning to all of washing freshly done – and shrunk too much to ever fit around her thighs again.

So Liam marches Louis down to the room Zayn has sequestered herself in, Niall and Harry trailing behind them. She pounds on the door when they get there, calling, "Zayn? It's me, Liam."

"Don't wanna talk," Zayn says, voice sullen through the thick door. "Liam, please."

"Open the door, Zayn," Liam says, sternly. "I - we - need to talk to you. Band meeting."

Zayn cracks the door open. "Don't want to."

"Tough," Liam says, wedging her foot in the door and shoving it open. She stops before pushing her way inside, catching Zayn's eye and holding her gaze for a very long moment, till Zayn nods and stands back, and then she pushes the door the rest of the way open.

Liam stands by the door, arms crossed, and she glares at Louis until Louis files in behind Harry and Niall. Defiantly – and protectively – Louis very carefully takes a seat by the well-lit mirrors that doesn't have her looking directly at Zayn, because – well. She feels bruised, is the thing.

Nothing happens for a few minutes, so Louis looks up. Niall is frowning at Liam, who is giving her an urgent look right back – some kind of silent conversation, then. Zayn is deliberately staring at a
wall off to the side, and Harry –

Harry flops down next to Louis, half on her lap, half on the folding chair next to Louis, and drapes a comforting arm around Louis's back, so Louis shrugs in closer, tilting her head over and resting it on Harry's shoulder. They sit, silently, for a long moment, before Liam clears her throat and latches her hands together behind her back.

"Okay," she says. "I call this Official Band Meeting to order."

Louis wants so, so badly to tease Liam, because she can practically hear the capital letters in Liam's words, but Liam has her serious face on, and even though Louis's default defence mechanism is to turn things around by poking fun at other people, she gets the feeling that her bandmates don't deserve that kind of response. Anyway, to be honest, she doesn't much feel like joking right now.

"Okay," Liam repeats. She runs her hands through her sweaty, stage-tangled hair. "Me and Harry and Niall swore an oath to each other –"

"Did you do it while Oath was playing?" Louis asks, interestedly, because she is only human, after all, and she's often full of noble intentions that don't quite hold up when faced with actual interpersonal interactions.

Liam gives her her sternest look. "Louis, this is serious. Behave, please."

"Sorry," Louis says, and the thing is, she actually is.

"Right," Liam says. "Yes, it was. Anyway. We got together in London and swore an oath to each other not to meddle too much in this whole thing that's going on with you, Zayn and Louis. Niall insisted, and me and Harry agreed, that we needed to just let you two work it out." She sighs, tugs on the ends of her hair, which is getting very long. "But this is actually getting so fucking stupid."

"Liam," Zayn says. There is both reproach and shock in her voice, and Louis gets the feeling that it's not entirely because Liam has been driven to swear. Probably because she can completely identify with Zayn's tone – she's trembling all over now, and only part of it is from the adrenaline from the concert and her fight with Zayn. Most of the nervous energy squishing around in her stomach is completely from Liam dragging all of this out into the open.

"Zayn," Liam says, matching her tone exactly. She sighs a little, and, more softly, says, "Louis. Zayn. You two need to talk to each other. About everything. And be honest. Trust me. I promise, it will go okay. Okay?"

It's Louis's turn to say Liam's name, a little desperately. Liam smiles back at her reassuringly, and, bless her, Louis actually feels a little reassured, a little less like her blood is going to boil out of her veins.

"I'm sorry," Liam adds, frowning a little. "That I broke the promises I made both of you not to say anything about this, but I mean. The circumstances were a little extreme, to be honest with you."

Niall rolls her eyes and pushes herself up away from where she's been slumped against the counter. "Now that Liam's gone and meddled," she says, raising an eyebrow at Liam, and then twisting around to give the same look to Louis and Harry and Zayn. "I think it's time we all go back to the hotel and Haz can go off and f*ck Michael or whatever it is she does every night and Liam can take me to the hotel bar and talk about how much she misses Dev and help me find a hot older guy who isn't terribly married or the father of a fan to try and pull and the two of you should go into Zayn's room – sorry, Lou, but yours is probably too much of a tip – and like. Not leave until you're both
thoroughly on the same page, okay?"

"One might even say thoroughly satisfied," Harry drawls, and Niall rolls her eyes and pelts her with a scrunchie someone has inexplicably left lying there in the dressing room.

And, okay, the fact that the rest of the girls have sat them down goes a long way towards giving Louis hope again, but she still takes a corner seat in the van back to their hotel, opposite of where Zayn sits down, and puts her head down on her arms and closes her eyes and thinks long and hard about what she wants to say to Zayn when they get back to the hotel.

They've been driving for about fifteen minutes when Harry leans over and presses a very cold nose against Louis's neck. It's all she can do not to jump in shock.

"Lou," Harry whispers, insistently, quiet enough that Louis is reasonably sure Zayn won't be able to hear what it is that she's saying. Only that she's saying something. "Listen to me."

"What is it?" Louis asks. She manages not to sound petulant, but just barely. She's deep in the middle of muddling through exactly how honest she should be – should she tell Zayn everything about the breadth and depth of her feelings, or should she just make her interest more explicit? Which would be the safer route to go? – and she doesn't want to be interrupted.

"Sorry," Harry says. "But I just thought you ought to know – Zayn absolutely won't pity you. Okay, Lou?"

Louis freezes, and she turns and opens her eyes to stare directly at Harry. "What?"

"You told me you didn't want a pity fuck," Harry insists, her voice rising minutely. Luckily she realises that almost immediately, and her eyes grow comically round. Quieter, she adds, "I know you, Louis. You're probably already trying to think your way out of this in case Liam's wrong or whatever, which she isn't. I just want you to make the most fully, er, educated choice you can."

"Cheers," Louis says, still staring, and she wraps a hand around the side of Harry's face and tugs it in close so she can smack a kiss to her cheek.

And then she hazards a glance at Zayn, who is staring out the window, worrying at her lower lip with her teeth as the lights of the city flash by in bright patterns across her face, and she just – well. If Liam says it's all right and Harry says it's all right and Niall implies that it's all right, too, then maybe – maybe she should just let Zayn know how completely fucking head-over-heels in love with her she is.

Because oh, she is.

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In the end, though – "I'm sorry," Zayn says, when they get to her room, and she – well. She doesn't really lie down on her bed. It's more like she sags down, collapsing and melting onto the duvet. She keeps her eyes open and trained on Louis, though.

"Me too," Louis says, sitting tentatively on the side of the bed. "I – Zayn, I've been so unfair to you."

"Yes," Zayn says, bluntly, and it cuts Louis to the quick, it does. "But I haven't been very fair, either, have I?"

"I promised to tell you everything that's been going on with me," Louis says. She folds her hands
together in her lap. "But there's this one big thing I haven't been telling you and it's ruining everything, probably."

"I shouldn't have asked of you what I couldn't give myself," Zayn says, pushing herself back up into a seated position, and Louis almost laughs, wildly, because that sounds so much like the beautiful bullshit Zayn used to tweet, before the media found out about her and Perrie and she more or less went off Twitter. "Like, that was really unfair of me."

"Shut the fuck up, Zayn, jesus," Louis blurts, which – well. It's a bit mean, but Zayn stops still and stares at her in shock, so it does do the trick. "Stop trying to put the blame on yourself, I'm trying to tell you that I'm sorry."

"Well, that's a really good way to go about it," Zayn says, raising an eyebrow, but Louis is pretty sure that she's more amused than she is offended. "Telling me to shut the fuck up so you can talk."

Louis refuses to blush. She absolutely draws the line at that. She feels her cheeks flushing anyway. "Sorry," she says, ducking her head down briefly and then looking Zayn in the eye. "For that and for like, punishing you for things you couldn't help."

Zayn's face softens, but she also looks weirdly nervous. "You've been going through a lot lately," she says, quietly, reaching out and covering Louis's knotted fingers with a gentle hand. "Sexuality crises and that. I, um." She clears her throat and nods once to herself. "Lou, the thing is – those comments you've been making. About you and me."

"I know the ones," Louis says, after it's clear that Zayn doesn't plan on starting to talk again anytime soon. "The propositioning."

"Yeah," Zayn says. She takes a deep breath. "I just – I'm not entirely sure what Liam and Niall and Harry expect us to establish, precisely, but I just –" she breaks off and pushes her hair behind her ears. Louis takes the opportunity to take a good look at her. They've neither of them showered, and Zayn's makeup is smeared all over her face and her hair is tangled. It's no longer sweat-damp, but it's clumpy and greasy and she's got a bit of eyeliner on her nose from where she must have rubbed at her face on the ride back from the venue. Zayn has never been more beautiful in her life, and Louis has to close her eyes to be able to focus on what she's actually saying. "Louis, it seemed an awful lot like you were taking the piss."

Louis's eyes fly open. "What do you mean," she says. "I don't – how?"

"I mean," Zayn says. "Isn't it obvious?"

"I wouldn't ask if it was."

"Fair enough," Zayn says, and she laughs a little, mirthlessly, before looking up and into Louis's eyes. There's so much naked emotion there that Louis feels bowled over and, for the first time in weeks, properly hopeful. "Just – you're apparently really good at fucking your friends." She purses her lips, then says, "You know what I mean."

"Joe and Leigh," Louis says, to confirm that she actually does know what Zayn is getting at. She's pretty sure she knows what Zayn means, but if Liam was fed up enough to call a band meeting about her and Zayn's feelings, she better be crystal clear. "And how I fucked around with both of them for a while in a friendly-sexy way."

"Yeah," Zayn says, and she lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug. " Anyway, it seemed pretty obvious, how I feel about you. I mean, Liam worked it out in about two seconds flat."
"Wait," Louis says, biting down on her tongue hard to keep from asking 'so how do you feel about me, then?' and wincing when she draws blood. "She did?"

"Yeah, ages ago," Zayn says, frowning. "She confronted me about it when you and Joe were in Costa Rica. So – yeah. I assumed you knew and you were like... I dunno. Not really serious."

"When have I ever not been serious?" Louis demands, stung, and then she thinks about what she said. "Oh. Wait. Yeah. Uh."

Zayn, to her eternal credit, laughs helplessly. It's obvious from the way that she sinks her face into her hands and grimaces through the laugh that she doesn't necessarily want to laugh, that she just can't help it, and Louis is torn between pity and pride.

And that's when Louis realises that she won't be able to play this cool. No matter how, precisely, Zayn might feel about her, no matter how much Louis still wants to turn and run from this conversation or at least joke her way through it, because if she doesn’t tell Zayn how much she likes her, maybe she has a chance of protecting herself from feeling the full weight of Zayn maybe not loving her back in the same way, she just – well. Zayn is sat in front of her, face collapsed into a giggle-grimace, black mascara smeared all across her face and lipstick mostly worn off from where she's been worrying at her lips with her teeth, hair a veritable bird's nest, sticky-stiff with gel and sweat, one sleeve of her vest top pulled to the side so that Louis can see the strap of the ratty bra she changed into after the show, a white that's gone grey from so many washings. She's still a bit flush from their show and the heightened emotion of their present situation, but the sweat on her chest has dried up since the dressing room. This is probably as ugly as Zayn has ever been, her face wrinkling up from her expression, makeup sweated off enough that Louis can see the beginnings of a spot right above one of Zayn's carefully-threaded eyebrows, but, annoyingly, it's also the most beautiful Zayn has ever been to Louis, and, dangerous though it is, Louis just.

She needs to give Zayn everything that's welling up inside of her.

"I'm seriously –" she starts, and then she breaks off, because if she follows that up with 'in love with you' there's a chance Zayn will take that as Louis just quoting Legally Blonde to be funny. And if there's anything Louis doesn't need right now, it's for Zayn to think that she's taking this lightly enough to quote a line regarding an ultimately-failed relationship from such a work of cinematic genius. "Not-not serious," she finishes, lamely.

"That hardly makes sense," Zayn says, frowning, so Louis sits up straighter and, using every ounce of courage inside of her, reaches forward to rest a hand on Zayn's hand. Zayn freezes underneath her, stiffens, but she doesn't pull away.

"You know me," Louis says, simple and intent. She catches Zayn's gaze and holds it, forces herself not to look away. Zayn doesn't, either, and Louis starts trembling harder. "Zayn, honestly, would I take the piss out of you if I knew you had feelings that I didn't return?"

"I didn't think you would," says Zayn, slowly. "But I've been questioning that lately."

"Well," Louis says, and she's quiet for a moment. "Zayn. I wouldn't do that." She's quiet for another long moment, and Zayn doesn't say anything, so she sighs and says, "Zayn. You know me. What do you think I'd do if I thought the situation was flipped?"

"You mean if you had feelings that I didn't return?" Zayn says, frowning. "You'd – you'd..." She trails off, eyes widening. "Joke about it so I wouldn't know how serious you were about it."

"But I'd still sound you out just in case," Louis says, quietly.
"Okay," Zayn says. "But what would I do? If I had feelings and I thought that you didn't?"

"You'd put up walls," Louis says, promptly. "You wouldn't let me in because you wouldn't want it to get worse."

"I mean," Zayn says. "That's precisely what I'd do with people who don't mean as much to me as you do."

Louis literally rocks backward when it hits her. "So," she says. "That's why you've been holding me back and pushing me forward at the same time?"

"That's why I've been trying to make sure that you're okay," Zayn says, voice hushed and tight with some kind of emotion Louis can't precisely decipher. "Pull you close and keep you away."

"Me too," Louis says. "That's why I've been pushing you so hard to get some kind of like, definitive reaction, one way or the other."

"Louis," Zayn says, and she takes a deep breath, turns her hand over in her lap so that it's now pressed palm-to-palm to Louis's hand. "How, exactly, do you feel about me?"

Louis winces. "Um," she says, and puts every ounce of her will and strength into not turning away from Zayn and hiding her face from this moment of truth. "Zayn, I'm so fucking in love with you that it feels like I'm drowning."

"Oh," Zayn says, and she's quiet for five terrible seconds that feel like years. Centuries. Millenia. "Well, fuck, Louis. I didn't realise –"

"Zayn," Louis interrupts, digging her free hand into her thigh until her knuckles and the indents in her flesh from her fingertips are both white with tension. "How do you feel about me?"

"Here I was thinking it was bloody obvious," Zayn says, smiling, face softening more than it has in weeks – since Louis broke things off with Joe, or maybe even since Louis started going out with Joe – and she's still so beautiful.

"You have," Louis breathes – blurts – and she flops back onto the bed on her back, legs still folded under her and hand still pressed against Zayn's. "Fuck, Zayn. You didn't say anything."

"Do you blame me?" Zayn asks. Her voice is still a little tight, so Louis squeezes her fingers around Zayn's hand. "You didn't say anything, either."

"Well, it's been well-established that I'm an impulsive idiot," Louis says, shrugging as best she can. "You're meant to be the smart one."

Zayn chuckles, low and rumbly, and Louis feels her heart leap into her teeth, choking her up with emotion. Relief, and worry, and love, and happiness, and anxiety – and more, but those are the most overwhelming. "Okay," Zayn says, lying back next to Louis. "So what does this mean?"

"Well," says Louis. "If you don't want to take it slow, and you just want to take me home..." she
breaks off, laughing, as Zayn shoves at her.

"I'm serious," Zayn says, rolling over and then pushing herself up and over so that she's straddling Louis, one leg on either side of Louis's waist, propping herself up with her hands. Her dirty hair swings forward and practically smacks Louis in the face. It's so gross. It's so perfect. She has a determined expression on her face, and the hint of a smirk, but Louis knows Zayn. She can read the worry behind Zayn's eyes, so she moves a hand up and flattens it – reassuringly, she hopes – against Zayn's waist. "What does this mean?"

"I mean," Louis says, and does her absolute best to keep from singing any Taylor Swift lyrics about getting married and having ten kids. It's a struggle, but she comes out on top. "All I know is that I'm crazy about you, Zayn. I never really, you know. Thought past that." She closes her eyes for a moment, then opens them and moves a hand to Zayn's chin, tugs it until she's looking directly into her eyes again. "I meant what I said before."

"You've said a lot of things, babe," Zayn says, softly.

"Sorry," Louis says. "What I said about – I'm not really ready to, you know. Be out. Let the public have that part of me, you know? If we – if we, you know, I want to keep that to just us and the girls, yeah? But." She takes a deep breath. "If that's not what you want... you're worth it. Going public."

"No," Zayn says. "I wouldn't want you to come out unless you were absolutely ready to do it. Being forced out of the closet – it's shit." She's quiet for a long time, and Louis feels like it would be inappropriate to say anything, so she just sort of strokes at Zayn's cheek and wonders if it's okay to kiss her. Just when she's about to lean up, though, Zayn purses her lips and says, "Anyway, I'd want to keep you to myself for a while." She smiles, and the smile is bright but there's caution behind it. "I can – I can keep you to myself, right?"

"Babe," Louis says, "I've been all yours for weeks."

"Joe," Zayn says, reminding her. "Leigh-Anne."

"Perrie," Louis counters, raising an eyebrow at Zayn. "All those girls in all those clubs."

"Yeah, okay," Zayn says, ducking her head down, forehead bumping against Louis's chin, so Louis uses her fingers to nudge Zayn's face up a little bit.

"Zayn," she says. "I'm yours." And she strains upwards, pushing herself higher with her elbows, tugging Zayn's face forward until she can press her lips soft against Zayn's, unmoving and still, and then she holds steady.

She's not used to kissing like this. With Joe every kiss led to something else – a joke, or raspberries blown onto his chest and the hollows of his neck, or a bite, or a blowjob – and with Leigh-Anne, every kiss was tentative, feeling out an unfamiliar and new playing field, re-learning what it was like to kiss girls, passing back and forth more like dares and explorations than anything else.

This – this is just holding steady. It's like all the kisses the entire band exchanges, smeared on cheeks and foreheads and shoulders, a solid press that doesn't escalate beyond the initial brush of lips. But this one is landed on Zayn's mouth, which is new, and in it –

This kiss, Louis realises, is a promise. Of course it's unlike any other kiss she's had before; she's never felt so willing to give herself entirely to someone else, emotionally. And the thought should terrify her – there's so much that could go wrong, especially because they're both in the same internationally famous band – but mostly, she can't quite bring herself to care about that.
She draws back slowly, watches as Zayn's eyes flutter open. "Do you see now?" she asks, cautiously.

Zayn smiles, slow and big and bright. "Yeah, okay," she says, and then, almost as an afterthought, "I'm yours too, Lou," and then she nudges her way back down and presses tiny little pecks to Louis's lips, little fluttery brushes of her mouth, over and over like she's trying to drive her point home.

And then the mood shifts, suddenly, the promises made, and Louis parts her mouth a little, returning Zayn's pecks with pressure, sliding her lips against Zayn's in abortive little movements. She can't get enough of the taste of Zayn's mouth – salty, from sweat, and a little bitter-stale from all of the cigarettes she's had through the day, and waxy in the spots where her lipstick hasn't completely smeared off – and sucks Zayn's lower lip in between her own teeth, nibbling lightly to get at the base of all the flavours.

Kissing Zayn is a little like setting herself on fire, in a good way. Louis thinks of Joe and the way his kisses were sexy and comfortable, the way she always felt warm and twisty all the way through when they were together. She thinks of Leigh-Anne, and how confusing and forbidden and intriguing it all was.

Every point of contact with Zayn prickles with awareness, and it would be annoying, the way her skin is buzzing in so many places, if it weren't such a pleasant kind of buzz, lighting her up all the way through. She's beginning to feel sweaty again, at the palms of her hands and her hairline at the back of her neck and where Zayn's legs are brushing against hers, and she can't quite catch her breath with how overwhelming it is to be kissing someone she just plain likes as much as she likes Zayn.

She starts to lick her way into Zayn's mouth, but Zayn holds herself up and off far enough that Louis can't quite manage. Louis whimpers in protest, but Zayn just smiles at her – it's too soft to be a smirk – and licks at Louis's earlobe.

And then she pulls back and makes a face. "Louis," she says. "I've got a proposition for you."

"If the proposition is sex, my answer is yes," Louis says, seriously, and Zayn laughs.

"Good," she says, reaching forward and brushing Louis's hair back. "But I was actually going to suggest that we both shower off first, get rid of all the concert grime. Don't take this the wrong way, but you're a bit rank and I bet I'm the same. Also I want to put my hair in order while it still can be put in order."

"Or you could just get dreads," Louis suggests brightly, but Zayn does make a good point. Louis whimpers in protest, but Zayn just smiles at her – it's too soft to be a smirk – and licks at Louis's earlobe.

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"Or you could just get dreads," Louis suggests brightly, but Zayn does make a good point. Louis shifts back a little, scooting up the bed until she can sit up. "Yeah, okay, let's get rid of all the dried sweat, make room for more."

"Perfect," Zayn says, rolling her eyes a little, and leans in to kiss Louis on her cheek. Louis twists her head at the last second, though, and the kiss lands on her lips. She can't help but smile into it, because this is allowed now. As her eyes drift shut, she feels Zayn smile back.

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They end up showering separately, and Louis is secretly grateful for it, because now that they've got this all more or less sorted and she's scrubbing the glitter out of her hair rinsing it down with her shampoo under the hot spray, she starts feeling very nervous.

"This is ridiculous, Tomlinson," she tells herself sternly as she's towelling off, squinting to try and
see herself through the fog on her bathroom mirror. "Zayn isn't going to suddenly decide you're not worth it if you're not good enough in bed."

She fumbles around for her phone as soon as she finishes winding a towel into a turban around her hair and flicks to her favourite contacts, dialling the first bandmate her thumb lands on. No, not Harry, Harry is probably in the middle of fucking Michael right now. The second bandmate, then.

"Lou?" Liam says on the other end. "Is everything okay?"

"Zayn isn't going to decide I'm not worth it if I'm a bad fuck, right?" Louis blurs, jamming her glasses on because she doesn't feel like putting contacts back in so close to bed and rummaging around for pyjamas that aren't just her old ratty trackies and one of Joe's old hoodies. Boxers and a vest top. That will have to do.

"Of course she won't, Lou," Liam says, after a pause. There's a lot of noise behind her, and Louis dimly remembers that she and Niall were going to go to the hotel bar. And then: "Does this mean you've worked things out?"

"Ask me in the morning," Louis says, and then Niall's voice is crowding in her ear, too.

"You're an idiot," Niall says, fondly. "You know you're awesome in bed; you've told us enough times. Go get some, babe. And don't give us details."

"Ugh, fine, cheers," Louis says, and she rings off and dresses quickly, wringing the towel around her hair one last time before pulling it off and letting her damp hair swing down her back. She sits still for a moment, collecting herself, and then launches off her bed and goes back to Zayn's room.

She's got Zayn's key card, but it feels weird not to knock first, so she does, twice, before going ahead and opening the door anyway.

Zayn comes out of the bathroom right as Louis walks past the door to it. She's wearing pyjamas that actually match, cute little polka-dot shorts and a tiny ruffled top, but her hair is thrown back in a messy bun at the nape of her neck that's dripping down her back. "Thought about doing my makeup," Zayn confesses with a small smile. "But it would've been weird, putting it on without you there."

"You look fucking beautiful," Louis says, taking everything in. Zayn still has a bit of eyeliner on that hadn't come off in the shower, and her tan line from all the times she's sunbathed at the pool whenever the rest of girls have gone swimming across America and Australia all summer is visible, a line of pale skin peeking out right next to where her sleeves start at her shoulders.

"So do you," Zayn says, reaching forward and tugging a strand of Louis's hair over her left shoulder. She squeezes, and a drop of water falls down and lands right above Louis's nipple. Her hand hovers, but ultimately falls to Louis's upper arm. "Are you, um. Nervous? At all?"

"Absolutely bricking it," Louis confesses, forcing a smile that's a little too wide to be natural. "You?"

"Yeah," Zayn says, and uses her hand on Louis's waist to draw her in closer. She leans down slightly and, after carefully pulling Louis's glasses off with her free hand and hooking them over the neckline of her vest top, cups her hand around the base of Louis's skull, tangling her fingers in the roots of Louis's wet hair. "Me too." She smiles slightly and leans in, walking Louis back against the wall and pulling her head back with the hand threaded in Louis's hair, using the angle to kiss Louis, a slick slide of her mouth, lips dragging against Louis's deliciously until Louis lets her mouth open slightly.
Instead of taking advantage and licking into Louis's mouth, though, Zayn pulls back and rests her forehead against Louis's. "I think we'll be okay."

"Good," Louis says, and tilts her face back up so that she can kiss Zayn properly, pushing off the wall and settling her hands at Zayn's hips, walking her the three steps to the loo's doorjamb, kissing her insistently. When she's doing instead of just thinking, her nervousness dies down a little, distracted as she is by Zayn's mouth, hot and slick against her own. She slides her hands up, leaving one rested at Zayn's waist, and drags her other hand up Zayn's side, letting her thumb swipe over the blunt curve of Zayn's breast with deliberate slowness, listening interestedly to the hitch in Zayn's breath, before moving that hand around to press against Zayn's back, splaying her fingers wide. She crowds against Zayn, licking into her mouth with tiny little swipes of her tongue, desperate for more of Zayn's taste.

Zayn tastes a little minty, so she must have cleaned her teeth. The bitter taste of stale cigarette smoke is more or less gone, and so is the sweat and the lipstick, and it's just – it's nice, the way that Zayn is tightening her hand in Louis's hair and pushing back against Louis just as hard as Louis is pushing up into Zayn.

She has to break away to collect herself eventually, though, and she takes in great ragged breaths with her head resting in the crook of Zayn's neck, trying to calm the racing of her heart so that she can stay on top of her game here.

"Lou," Zayn says, quietly, tugging at Louis's hair again until Louis looks up – and that's interesting; Louis has never considered being led around by her hair before, but as it turns out, she's not particularly opposed to the idea now.

"Hmm," Louis says, blinking up at Zayn. She presses in again, brushes a quick, reaffirming kiss against the corner of Zayn's mouth.

"Leigh was your first girl, yeah?" Zayn asks, brow furrowed slightly. "Apart from kissing."

"Yeah," Louis says, rocking back on her feet slightly so that she can see Zayn's face more clearly, even with her glasses off.

"How far did you get?"

"Um," Louis says, shaking her head slightly to clear it from the haze of lust she's currently caught in, trying to focus. "Hands, mostly. I was – we talked about more but never really got around to it." She regrets that, kind of; she doesn't want to be bad for Zayn. But then, who knows if Zayn would even like any of the same things Leigh would. It's possible that, like with fingering, each girl likes a different approach when it comes to oral sex.

"Okay," Zayn says, pursing her lips. "So what are you comfortable with? Like, tonight."

"Anything," Louis says, immediately. "I've wanted to taste you for months now, Zayn, so – if you're willing to talk me through it, I'd love to –"

"Let's just see how it goes," Zayn says, but she's pulling harder at Louis's hair, so Louis is pretty sure she likes the idea.

"Shall we – bed?" Louis asks, nudging Zayn with her knees. "If I stand much longer I may just fall over."

"Yeah," Zayn says, and she stumbles backward, pulling Louis with her until they tumble over onto the bed, hands disconnecting as they do. Louis lands half-on Zayn, so she pushes herself up and
shifts over until she's straddling Zayn the same way Zayn had been hovering over her not forty minutes gone, holding herself back from actually stretching out against Zayn so that she can get a good look at Zayn, first.

"Hey," Louis says, and when Zayn looks at her, she grins. "I love you," she tells her, drunk on the way that she can finally say it and mean it, the way that she's filled with a flush of warmth at the words. She's never thought of herself as the kind of person who just does that, just throws the words around like that, but then again, Zayn is one of her girls. Louis has been throwing love at the girls for years now. There's only a slight shift in her meaning now, and it feels natural, and good.

Zayn's eyes darken and her smile grows a little predatory. "Love you too," she says, and slides a hand down over the curve of Louis's arse, then drags it over the front of Louis's thigh and then up between her legs, where she lets it rest. She runs her thumb up and twiddles it through the gap in the front of the boxers. "These Joe's?"

"No," Louis says, smirking. "I bought myself a pack in LA because I like them so much." She feels her smirk grow into a proper wicked grin. "Easy access and all that."

"Fuck," Zayn says, reverently, hooking her thumb in the bottom of the slit and dragging it down. Louis can feel the tip of it brush against her. She's a little bit in need of a wax, or at least a shave, she knows, but Zayn doesn't seem to mind like some people Louis has been with have done. "Be easier access if you took it all off, though," she says, but Louis leans down and kisses her instead, her still-wet hair pooling into little piles on either side of Zayn's head as she lowers herself down.

This – being with Zayn – isn't anything like coming home, or any kind of romantic swill like that, and Louis doesn't know what kind of time limit they'll have, but those are thoughts for another time. Not for when Zayn is breaking the kiss and reaching up and bracketing one of Louis's cheeks with a hand, thumb stroking down over her mouth, dragging her lower lip down. Not when she's got fingers firmly wrapped around the waistband of the boxers Louis is wearing, blunt tips of her short nails brushing against Louis's hips. Not when Louis can lie down flush against Zayn, so that they're touching all over, her entire front a mass of clean, damp warmth, and kiss her way from Zayn's lips across the corner of her mouth to her ear, where she tugs Zayn's earlobe into her teeth, teasingly, before running her tongue over and over Zayn's industrial piercing, feeling the way the cool tangy metal of the bar meets the warm peach-fuzz flesh of the curve of Zayn's ear.

"Enough," Zayn says, finally, pushing at Louis, so she moves on, sucking kisses into the curve of Zayn's neck – never hard enough to leave marks; she'll have to hold on till after swimsuit season for that – and biting, gently, at her collarbone, teeth grazing over the hard jut of it. Zayn moans, soft but distinct, and Louis smiles.

"Like that, do you?" she asks, and pushes herself up so that she's straddling Zayn's waist again, pushing a hand up the front of Zayn's top, resting her palm hot and heavy in the middle of Zayn's belly, fingers brushing under the swell of Zayn's breast. "Like it a little rough?"

"Not usually," Zayn admits, squeezing her eyes shut and then opening them, bright and shining directly at Louis. "Usually I'm more for – rough-gentle."

Louis nods, taking that in, then says, "Let me know if I push too far?"

Laughing, Zayn says, "Lou, you always push too far. It's part of why I like you so much."

"Yeah," Louis says, sitting back even more. "But you know what I mean, Zayn, yeah?"

"I won't let you do anything I don't want you to do," Zayn says, firmly, and Louis feels an intriguing
rush of warmth in the pit of her stomach at the thought of Zayn clearly dictating all of her needs like that.

All she says, though, is "Good," and she pushes Zayn's top up with her wrist, nudging it further and further until Zayn rolls her eyes and scoots back a little, almost knocking Louis off-balance, so that she can pull it over her head.

And then it's only fair for Louis to pull her own vest top off, right? So she does, first unhooking her glasses from the neckline and tossing them toward the pillow as gently as she can, and then pulling the entire thing over her head with a move she perfected after months of practise in front of an excited, chuckling Joe, using just one hand at the hemline as she draws it up and off. Her hair swings free and hits her back with a damp *splat*, and by the time she's sorted all of that out, reaching behind her to scoop her hair into her other hand and holding it out of the way while she tosses her top in the vague direction of off-the-bed, Zayn is entirely topless and staring at the way that Louis's tits are jutting forward, swaying with the way that she's got her arms behind her head.

Well. That wasn't planned, precisely, but it *is* a happy accident.

"I like it when you pinch them," Louis tells her, and Zayn's eyes widen slightly. Louis is a little cowed, because Zayn has seen *so many* sets of breasts in her life already, and she's still looking at Louis's chest like her mouth has gone dry, like she's finally found a drink of water to quench her thirst.

"What about biting?" Zayn asks, breathlessly, licking her lips and oh *yeah* Louis is the queen of sexual metaphors. Similes. Whatever. Zayn would know, but now is not the time to ask, because, well—

"Yes please," Louis says, arching her back a little so that her breasts stick out even further, going for comic-and-sexy, but it's lost on Zayn, who settles her hands on Louis's waist and scoots back a little further so that she can bend in and lick a distressingly slow stripe up from the base of one of Louis's breasts, over the nipple, and then higher, her tongue an inflammatory drag against Louis's skin.

Louis is just about to point out—breathlessly—that Zayn mentioned something about biting when Zayn smiles up at her, dirty and slow, and her teeth close around the very tip of Louis's nipple, and she tugs slightly, and the combination of the pull and the sharp dig of her teeth has Louis gasping, head lolling back as she instinctually pushes her chest even further forward, seeking more of the sensation.

"Interghughuh," Zayn says, around her mouthful of tit, and then she releases it, straightening up to look Louis in the eye. "Interesting," she clarifies, and curves a hand over Louis's other breast, lining it up so that when she presses her thumb against the side of her index finger, it catches Louis's nipple between the two in a tight little pinch. And then she just holds her hand there, fingertips stroking lightly back and forth toward Louis's side, over the tiny little broken infinity symbol Louis got tattooed there after the last Brit awards, when everyone was asking who they thought the Cheryl of the group was, or the Beyoncé, to remind herself that this isn't necessarily forever unless she and the girls *work* on making it so.

"I am," Louis says, and she cups a hand under one of Zayn's breasts, feeling the weight of it against her palm. "What do you like?"

"Try me," Zayn says, with another dirty smirk. "I'll tell you if you're hot or cold."

Louis loves games, especially in sex, so she lifts an eyebrow and pushes a hand at Zayn's shoulder until she's lying down again, and dips in to kiss Zayn. She's more confident now, working Zayn's
mouth open with a combination of nudging kisses and lip-nibbles, but when Zayn's tongue brushes against her lips, Louis draws back and scoots lower, down Zayn's body. She presses a kiss to a mole Zayn's got just to the side of a nipple, and then licks over it, lightly, again and again until Zayn pushes her weight up on her elbows slightly, seeking more pressure. Louis sucks her nipple into her mouth, careful not to graze it with her teeth as she swirls her tongue over and around it, feeling it pebble and harden as she does so.

"Warm," Zayn gasps. "Very warm."

Louis smiles to herself and lifts her head up and away from Zayn's chest. Zayn makes a protesting sort of noise, but Louis just rests a thumb against Zayn's other nipple, pressing it in slightly and moving it in tiny little circles as she shifts further down Zayn's torso, pausing at her belly button to lick over and around the barbell there, feeling the way Zayn's stomach quakes under her tongue, the difference between the softness of her skin and the body-warm metal of her piercing.

"Cooler," Zayn says, fitting a hand around the base of Louis's skull and pressing her fingers in, like she's trying to guide Louis's hand back up, but Louis is having none of that so she cups her free hand over the front of Zayn's pyjama bottoms, feeling the warmth of her crotch and letting her wrist sit heavy enough that Zayn shifts her hips up slightly, seeking more.

Louis props herself up on an elbow and surveys Zayn, the way her skin, already golden from all time she's laid out by the pool, is completely gilded in the light from the bedside lamp, the way her breasts are heaving slightly with the intensity of her breaths. The way her hand looks spread against Zayn's chest, the bright green varnish of her thumbnail against the darkness of Zayn's nipple.

Zayn is breathtaking, eyes dark in her face, her eyelashes just smudges against her skin as she cranes her head up and forward, staring down at Louis. And it's the look in her eyes – heavy with want, and yet brighter than Louis has seen in weeks now – that decides Louis, so she hooks her thumb through the waistband of Zayn's pyjama bottoms and tugs them down, moving her other hand from Zayn's breast so she can guide her hips up enough to pull the bottoms down over her bum, shoving at them until Zayn starts kicking her legs, pushing at the pyjamas with her feet till they're far enough down that she can kick them off.

Zayn isn't wearing any pants, which is really, really hot, so Louis sits back on her heels and looks her over for another moment before dragging two fingers down from Zayn's navel, through the soft curls, which Louis knows from nights cuddled in bed with the girls, talking over shit telly, that Zayn hates waxing, down until she can spread Zayn open, pushing her fingers apart and staring at the dusky pink of Zayn's cunt.

"Warmer," Zayn says, blinking down at Louis, and Louis smiles at her. She tries to smirk, but it comes out all soft and promising instead.

And then, holding Zayn's gaze as long as she can, she leans down and carefully, tentatively, licks between her fingers.

She knows immediately that she's not using enough pressure, because even though Louis has never gone down on a girl before, she's had plenty of people eat her out, and she knows the difference between someone who is just tentatively tasting and someone who is really determined to bring a girl off. So she frowns, nudges Zayn's legs farther apart, and spreads her fingers wider before moving back in. She presses her tongue hard against Zayn's clit, licking tiny little swipes back and forth over it, feeling the way Zayn's hand comes to rest at the back of her head and tangle in her hair as she does so.

"Fuck," Zayn says. "Louis. Hot." And Louis smiles, inwardly, but her only response is to pull back
just long enough to move a hand down so that she can rest two fingers just below Zayn's entrance and then work them in together, gently scissoring them open and closed as she funnels the tip of her tongue into a hard point and starts flicking it rhythmically over Zayn's clit.

The thing is, though, that Louis is very new to this, and she's not used to using her tongue like this, and she has a sneaking suspicion that she could use a lot of improvement, so she switches to long, feathery-light licks up from where her fingers are moving inside of Zayn, tasting of the moisture gathering at her knuckles, all the way up till she's swirling her tongue around Zayn's clit once more, and then she starts kissing her way up Zayn's body, sucking tiny little marks into Zayn's skin as she goes that are light and gentle enough that any redness will fade by the morning. As she shifts upward, kissing over Zayn's belly button again, and her full soft breasts, and the tendons in her neck, she adjusts her hand so that her thumb is firmly on Zayn's clit, rubbing hard little concentric circles on and around it.

And then Louis reaches Zayn's mouth, so she kisses her, teeth tugging at Zayn's lower lip, the taste of Zayn's mouth mingling with the taste of Zayn's cunt on Louis's tongue as she slips her fingers out of Zayn, dragging moisture with them up to Zayn's clit.

"How do you like it?" Louis mumbles, mostly against Zayn's mouth.

"This," Zayn says, eyes screwed tight shut now, mouth working openly, silent, as Louis tweaks her fingers in a half-pinch, half-twist up over Zayn's clit, just under the little hood there. "This is. Good. Hot."

"Good," Louis says, and she kisses Zayn again and again until Zayn's mouth falls slack under her own and she gasps brokenly, hips rolling up into Louis's hand, grinding against her palm and her fingers.

"Lava hot," Zayn manages with groan, and then she's shuddering against Louis's hand, hips falling back onto the bed. Louis slows her hand, runs her thumb soothingly over Zayn's clit a few more times, then wipes her fingers off on Zayn's thigh with soft little strokes.

Zayn's eyes blink open, and she grins, loose and happy, at Louis. "That was fun," she says. "You didn't have to – I mean – I know you've never..."

"Wanted to," Louis assures her. She's not entirely sure of the protocol here, now – she and Leigh-Anne never quite made it past working around the clothes they were wearing – but she's so wet that she's pretty sure she's soaking through the cotton of the boxers she's wearing, so she just sits up and shimmies out of them as best she can, throwing them in the same direction that she threw her top earlier. "Can't get better at it if I don't practise, can I?"

"I see," Zayn says, and then: "You're not bad at it, though," and then: "Would you like me to show you how I like to do it?"

"Um," Louis says, her brain whiting out for a second. "Yeah, that would be – that would be nice, cheers."

Zayn sits up and nudges at Louis's shoulder till she lies down and then swoops in for a kiss, her breasts resting heaving against Louis's chest as she moves her lips slowly and slickly, licking in past Louis's teeth and running a hand up and down Louis's side, from the swell of her breasts to the curve of her hips, nails digging in lightly as she passes the dip of Louis's waist. "Like this," she whispers, pulling back far enough that she can form words but close enough that her lips still brush against Louis's mouth as she speaks, and then she's gripping Louis's hips hard, thumbs digging into the flesh just above her hipbones, holding her down. "You like it a little rougher, don't you?" she asks,
"Yeah," Louis says, propping herself up on her elbows so she can stare down at the dark of Zayn's heart with the shock of the faded bright-pink streak running through it, rendered dark by how wet Zayn's heart still is, as Zayn takes one of Louis's nipples between her teeth and bites, just a shade too hard, and then runs her tongue over it, soft and sweet, in a way that has Louis gasping and pushing her chest forward. "Rough is. Good."

Zayn smiles up at Louis, and then bites her way down Louis's front, hard little bites where she tugs Louis's skin up with her teeth until Louis is biting her lip hard with the sheer force of the pain and the pleasure of it all, and then brushing the softest kisses over the throbbing flesh, until she's situated firmly between Louis's legs.

And then she ducks her head down and presses her tongue flat against Louis's clit, licking over it in broad stripes for a few moments, before sucking it in between her lips and clamping them down in a very interesting way that's so different from the nibbles Louis is used to, flicking her tongue at it in a quick and hard staccato rhythm that has Louis squirming up for more.

But Zayn doesn't change her angle, or her suction, or the way her tongue is positively thrumming against Louis's clit. She just moves her hands so that she can push Louis's thighs open wider, kneading at the flesh once they're spread more, scratching the sensitive inner flesh with the tips of her fingers but almost no pressure. It's maddening, and tantalizing, and Louis can't help but thrust her hips up off the bed in a way that has Zayn gripping her thighs like a vice, flicks of her tongue morphing into more deliberate swirls and drags.

When Zayn finally moves her head down so that she can push her tongue inside of Louis with a hard little thrust, dragging a hand up Louis's leg until she can press her thumb against Louis's clit, more pushing it down into the surrounding flesh than stroking it, Louis loses complete track of what Zayn is doing and just lets the pleasure of everything overwhelm her. She rides the electric sensations of the way Zayn is licking into her, holding her thumb steady so Louis can grind her hips against it, almost mindless with how good and right it all feels. Louis is only just distantly registering that the sharp litany of swears in the background are coming from her when she feels the intensity of her arousal come to a peak, and then she's shuddering with release, the twisting arousal gathering between her legs winding down as she starts to catch her breath.

"Well," she says, when she's finally found the ability to speak again, and she's about to say something about how Zayn has certainly set the bar high, but then Zayn is stretching out alongside Louis, pushing a trembling hand into Louis's hair and brushing it back from her face, using the hold to tilt Louis's head so that she can kiss her, heartbreakingly softly, gently moving her lips against Louis's, not even trying to deepen it at all.

"Love you," Zayn says, once Louis has caught up with herself enough to return the kiss.

"Love you too," Louis says, buzzing with the fact that she can say the words and mean them and back them up with sex on top of everything else.

It's after they've cleaned their teeth again, Louis stealing Zayn's toothbrush halfway through, knocking their naked hips together as they rinse it out, unable to stop smiling at each other through the bathroom mirror, that Louis realises Zayn is guiding her back to the bed.

"Thought you didn't sleep with the girls you fuck," she says, overcome with sudden uncertainty, but Zayn just hooks her chin over Louis's shoulder.

"I don't," she says. "I always sleep with you after I fuck girls, don't I?"
"Oh," Louis says, and she lets herself be dragged into bed, and when she curls into Zayn's side underneath a heavy pile of blankets, she drops into an easy sleep quicker than she has in weeks.

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They're meant to be at the airport by noon to catch their flight to Adelaide, and Louis had planned on waking up by nine, to pack up and fit in a run with Liam, but she wakes up before her alarm. There's sunlight coming in around the edges of the window curtain, and Zayn is a warm mass next to her, snoring lightly, and it's so lovely that Louis can't help but lean over and kiss Zayn's nose, feather-light so as not to wake her.

She's far too awake to fall back asleep, so she pulls away to check her mobile, wincing at the way her skin separates from Zayn's – a hazard of falling asleep tangled in someone's arms when you're both still a little damp, from showers and from sex-sweat.

There's a flurry of messages from Liam. Some are directly to Louis, cancelling their workout plans, and some are group texts to the rest of the girls, calling a follow-up band meeting over breakfast in Liam's room.

Louis considers her options. It's an unspoken rule within the band that you don't wake the other girls up unless they're running risk of being late somewhere, especially when the girl in question is Zayn, but if she nudges Zayn awake now, they may have just enough time to fool around a little before the meeting.

She goes for the second option, but as it turns out, they're late anyway. Having an extremely heated snogging session in the shower that turns into Zayn pushing Louis against the shower wall and fingerling her until she's clenching around Zayn's fingers, gasping swears into the wet skin of Zayn's shoulder, and then Louis giving oral sex another go halfway through getting dressed will do that, apparently.

By the time they make it to Liam's room, the food Liam has ordered is already there. So is Harry, lounging about with a thin, draping vest top and visibly no bra on underneath, the darkened mark of a love bite peeping out from under one sleeve, the utter tart, and Niall, who is looking very, very relaxed for a tour that is this close to wrapping up.

Interesting.

"So," Niall says, mouth full of something that, at a glance, appears to be an omelette sandwiched between two croissants. "How's the sex? Is Zayn going to leave you behind because you're so inexperienced?"

"What?" Zayn says, and Louis frowns, drops down into a crouch next to Niall and shoves at her shoulder.

"I said that in confidence, Horan," she announces, and very pointedly does not elaborate.

Zayn looks between the two of them, frowning slightly as she takes a seat next to Louis, and then her face softens. "Nah," she says. "Louis was quite satisfactory."

"I don't want to hear about it," Liam says, loudly, but she's smiling happily at the two of them. "Keep your deviant sexual practises between the two of you."

"You mean you don't want to watch?" Louis asks, raising an eyebrow at Liam as she leans over to grab an orange. Peeling it deftly, she adds, "Remind you of everything you're missing whilst Dev is busy filming his show?"
"Absolutely not," Liam says. "God knows I'll have to hear you enough times on the bus as is."

"Oooh," Zayn says, and she nudges Louis, eyes bright. Louis isn't sure how much of it is Zayn teasing Liam and how much of it is actual interest in having lots of loud sex on tour busses, but she can't really complain either way.

"Anyway," Harry drawls. "Did you two sort everything out?" Her words are lazy, and she sounds for all the world like she knows the answer without either Louis or Zayn saying anything, but there's a little line of worry between her eyes that makes Louis smile fondly.

Louis glances at Zayn, who raises an eyebrow right back at her. "We uh," Zayn says, and clears her throat, reaching out to take Louis's hand. "Probably have more to talk through, but yeah. We did."

Liam literally *cheers*, while Harry grins and Niall grins and says, "Thank fuck, I don't have to listen to you two pine over each other for hours on end anymore."

"Hey," Louis says, even though she understands that Niall only minded it because they were unhappy.

"No, seriously," Niall says. "Even hearing you tell us about all of the sex you're having in disgusting amounts of detail would be preferable to all that depressing longing shit." She pauses, then winces. "Christ, wait, that was *not* an invitation."

Louis can't even tease, not right now, she's smiling too wide to say anything at all.

Liam is looking around the room with a dismayed expression. "Fuck," she says, and Louis looks at her, shocked. "I need to ring Dev, like, *right now.*"

"Um," Zayn says, but Liam's pout is coming out full force.

"Everyone else got laid last night," she continues. "Except me. You're all terrible."

"Heyyyyy," Harry says, setting her tea down and leaning forward to pout right back at Liam.

Zayn leans over Louis, using the leverage she's got from holding Louis's hand, and high-fives Niall. It's very difficult for Louis to ignore the way that Zayn's breasts brush against her thighs, what with her angle and the way she's stretching. "Who?" Zayn asks.

Niall smiles. "He isn't even a dad," she says, triumphantly. "He's only got a niece who knows about us, but he's thirty and here on business and fucking *fit*."


"He's learning," Harry says, smiling smugly as she tucks a curly strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm training him well."

"Good," Louis says, approvingly, and then jumps as Liam smacks her hand down on the bedside table.

"Enough!" she says. "Stop talking about sex or else I'm going to kick you all out to ring Dev and make you leave *all the food in here with me.*"

"Kinky," Louis murmurs to Zayn, who giggles against her shoulder.

Louis just can't stop smiling.
Louis is in the middle of updating Joe – through covert text messages, as Lou is crouched in front of her, fixing up her makeup for the next scene of the music video – when they're called back to set.

She sends one final message, something about how Joe should absolutely pursue a relationship with Union J's George Shelley, because she's heard that he's probably the only person as interested in fanfiction as Joe is, and then puts her phone down and heads out to the pool they're shooting in, adjusting the strap of her bikini as she goes.

The scene is going to coincide with the verse about having a lot more fun spending time with mates than with boys, which is something Louis can truly appreciate, and by the time she gets to the pool, Harry is already shouting lyrics into the echoing room, sat at the edge of the pool and kicking the water up in great big splashes.

It's when they're all in place – Harry on Liam's back and Niall on Zayn's, because if she gets knocked off at least Zayn won't get knocked under, with Niall and Harry shoving at each other while Liam and Zayn try to keep anyone from falling over and Louis splashes everyone she can reach – that she recognizes that the warmth swelling in her chest is contentment.

She can't say anything about loving the rest of the girls when they're meant to be singing quietly to the lyrics, ready for the final track to be dubbed over, but she's just so overwhelmed by happiness that she can't help it.

It's not precisely out of character for her to launch herself at a bandmate in the middle of filming a music video, and it will look great in the outtakes so when Niall gets a really good grasp on Harry's arms and tries to drag her off Liam's back and into the water, Louis abandons the refereeing position she's meant to be taking and swims directly at Zayn, bumping into her and inadvertently knocking Niall off her back when she throws her arms around her.

She's careful not to let Zayn go under, treading water until they're both upright and Niall is resurfacing, spluttering, to Harry loudly asking, "Does that mean me and Liam have won? Excellent!"

A splash fight erupts behind her, but now Louis only has eyes for Zayn, and the way she's blinking back the water droplets are clinging to her eyelashes, which are thick with waterproof mascara. She pushes her face up close enough that the cameras won't be able to pick up the movement of her lips and whispers, as quietly as she can, "I love you, Malik."

"You too," Zayn whispers back, and Louis can't kiss her the way she wants to, not with this many cameras around, even though she's fairly certain they'd destroy all of the evidence if she asked nicely enough, so she settles for smacking a loud and demonstrative kiss on Zayn's cheek.

"Oy!" she shouts at the rest of the girls, once she's twisted around to see how the splash-fight behind her is progressing, and when they pause to look at her, she grins at everyone and pushes away from Zayn in a very splashy front crawl.

"Race you," she calls over her shoulder, and dives under the water, still grinning.
fic title comes from the song that also served as like.... the plot for the first half of this fic, gray or blue by jaymay

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