

Love is the Right Place

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Love is the Right Place

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Summary

They met when they were seven and five. Louis was a new kid in a new town and Harry was a blind kid in need of a friend. They hit it off immediately, each of them exactly what the other needed. Over the years, friendship turns to more. Just as their romance blossoms, however, Louis gets an offer which promises fame and fortune far from home. Will they be pulled apart or will their love survive?

Notes

First of all, thanks to the commenters on AO3 who gave me so many ideas about where I could take a blind!Harry, which led me to decide to write this. It allowed me, too, to explore, a little, famous!Louis and notfamous!Harry. I hope my experimentation is fun to read.

Deepest thanks to my artist, Kris ([birdstattoo](#)), who I was lucky enough to work with two years in a row. She worked tirelessly to make art which would really work for my story. I am so happy with what she created. You can see her graphic below and the playlist can be found at [Wish That You Knew](#).

I am incredibly blessed to have the best BFF in the world, [Cori Lannam](#). She not only encouraged me through every step of this story, but she also beta'd it in the middle of a very difficult time in her life. She's the very best! (Any errors left in the story are mine and mine alone.)

Thanks to the Big Bang mods for all their hard work in putting together this challenge.

Title taken from Bryan White's album and song of the same title. Thanks, Bryan!!

I greatly enjoyed working on this story, and it got my writing back on track after a time when it was very difficult to sit down and write. I am glad to put it out there for everyone to share, and I look forward to any thoughts you may have during and after reading.

On with the story....



August 1999

As he pushed Lottie on the swing, Louis wished summer could last forever.

This had been the first summer he'd had a sibling to play with. Even if Lottie had only just turned one, Louis still loved being her big brother. It was so much fun having someone else around, someone to take care of. His mum was always telling him what a big help he was. He couldn't believe she'd taken so long to get him a sister!

Lottie seemed to love just being pushed back and forth and back and forth in the little bucket swing. He stood right in front of her so she'd know where he was, just like his mum said to do. After a little while, though, his attention wandered, and he looked around to see who else was at the park that morning.

They'd moved to Holmes Chapel in Cheshire just two weeks earlier. His dad--well, technically, his step-dad--had taken a new job in Manchester. They'd wanted to live in a small town, however, so Holmes Chapel had seemed perfect.

As much as he wished summer would last forever, Louis was excited about school starting. He didn't know many other kids yet, and he was eager to make new friends.

Most of the kids at the park seemed to be younger than him, although he did see a girl who was probably about his age coming through the gate just as Lottie started to cry.

Louis took Lottie out of the swing as quickly as he could and walked her over to the bench where his mother sat.

"She must be hungry," his mum said. She pulled a bottle from the bag at her feet, and the moment she popped it in Lottie's mouth, she stopped crying. "Thanks, Boo. You take a break from being a big brother for just a bit."

"Okay," Louis agreed, his eyes already searching for the girl his age he'd seen just a few minutes earlier.

He found her over by the roundabout. She was helping a younger boy on and getting him situated between the bars. Louis walked over to watch.

Once the girl got the boy settled, she began to spin the roundabout slowly. The boy--her brother?--started laughing and calling for her to make the roundabout go faster.

Louis used this as a way in, and he stepped up to the girl's side. "Can I help?"

"Sure," she agreed, smiling brightly.

With his own big grin, Louis grabbed a hold of one of the rails and helped the girl spin the roundabout even faster. The small boy in the middle of the circle threw his head back and laughed even louder, clearly loving the motion.

After a few minutes, however, the boy called out for them to stop, so Louis helped the girl slow the roundabout down.

When the roundabout came to a halt, the girl climbed on to help the younger boy off. The boy gripped the girl's arm tightly with one hand and held the other hand out in front of him. Getting off the roundabout completely was a slow process, with the boy taking each step gingerly, though it didn't even seem like he was looking where he was going.

It took Louis a few long seconds to figure out why the boy was so methodical about his climb off the roundabout and why he seemed to be looking off into the distance instead of watching his step. The little boy was blind!

As the girl and boy made it back onto the playground pavement, Louis blurted out, "He can't see!"

"What about it?" the girl shot back, stretching herself to her full height, about three inches taller than Louis.

"N-nothing," Louis stuttered.

"You'd better not say one mean thing to him," the girl warned, pulling the smaller boy closer to her side, "or I'll...." She held up her fist.

It was very clear what she would do to him if he even tried to be unkind. "I won't. I promise."

"Good," she replied, though she glowered at him one more time for good measure.

This seemed as good a time as any to introduce himself. "I'm Louis," he said, sticking out a hand to the girl.

The girl hesitated only briefly before taking the proffered hand. "I'm Gemma, and this is my little brother Harry."

"Hi Harry," Louis greeted him brightly.

"Hi," Harry replied shyly.

"I'm seven," Louis went on to declare.

"I'm eight," Gemma returned.

"I'm five," Harry answered for himself.

"Is that your baby sister?" Gemma asked, tilting her head toward where his mum sat feeding Lottie.

Louis nodded. "Her name's Lottie. Charlotte. She just turned one."

"She's really cute," Gemma complimented.

Louis beamed. He loved when others loved Lottie as much as he did. "Thanks."

"Gemma, can we do the swings?" Harry interjected, perhaps bored with discussing a baby he couldn't see.

"Sure," Gemma agreed. She made sure Harry's hand was secure on her arm before she walked him over to the swings.

Not having much better to do, Louis trailed after them, settling into the swing to Harry's left as Gemma got Harry into the seat with a secure hold of the chains on either side.

"Not too high," Harry ordered his sister. Louis noticed that Harry's knuckles were white where he was gripping the chains.

Gemma assured him, "I know." It was clear that this was not the first time Harry had made this request.

As Gemma began to slowly push Harry on the swing, Louis got his own going.

"Kick your feet, Harry," Louis suggested.

It took him a moment to get what Louis was saying, but Harry was soon pumping his legs enough that it gave him a bit more lift as Gemma pushed him.

"You're really getting high now," Louis praised.

These proved to be just the wrong words to say as Harry instantly began to cry and beg Gemma to stop pushing him.

Louis immediately put his feet down to stop his own momentum, watching as Gemma pulled a sobbing Harry into her arms.

"I'm so sorry!" Louis burst out, hovering nearby. He felt awful. He hadn't meant to make Harry sad.

Gemma was whispering, "You're okay," into Harry's ear, and it seemed to be soothing him, thankfully.

"I didn't mean to make him cry," Louis insisted.

"I know," Gemma told him, peering at Louis over Harry's head. "He'll be fine."

"Louis!"

Louis turned around at the sound of his mum's voice. She was standing with Lottie in her arms, nappy bag slung over her shoulder. With her free hand, she gestured for him to come on. It was time to go.

He looked back at where Gemma was still cuddling a now-sniffing Harry. "I've got to go. Will I see you again?"

Gemma nodded. "We come here a lot, especially when school's out."

Louis reached a hand out to touch Harry's shoulder. "You were really good on the swing, Harry. Let's try again next time."

Harry scrunched up his nose. "Maybe," was all he was willing to give.

"I'll take it," Louis said. He started back towards his mum. A few metres away, he turned to wave at the siblings he'd befriended. "Bye!"

Gemma waved back. "Bye!"

As soon as Louis got within earshot of his mum, he asked, "So, when can we come back here?"

* * *

Louis dragged his mother and his baby sister to the playground in the park every day. Lottie loved Louis pushing her on the swing and playing with her in the sand box, but Louis always had an eye on the entry gate, hoping Gemma and Harry would appear.

The fourth time Louis begged his mother for a trip to the park, he was rewarded for his persistence. He hadn't been pushing Lottie on the swing for ten minutes when Gemma and Harry strolled through the gate.

"Gemma!" he immediately cried out, not even pretending to hide his excitement at seeing the only two people--apart from his family--he knew in Holmes Chapel.

Gemma grinned when she found the owner of the voice that called out to her, but it was Harry who responded, "Louis!"

Once they had made their way to where Louis was pushing a happy Lottie on the swing, Louis exclaimed, "You came!"

"Mum said we should come out since it's supposed to start raining tomorrow," Gemma told him.

"My mum said the same thing," Louis said, giving Lottie a gentle push before looking over at Gemma's brother. "Hi, Harry."

"Hi, Louis," Harry returned.

"Do you want to try the swings again or something else?" Louis asked.

Harry took a moment to think about what he wanted to do. "The roundabout first."

"Let me give Lottie to my mum." Louis stopped the swing and lifted his sister out, walking her over to their mother. "Can I play with Gemma and Harry?"

His mother nodded. "Of course. Have fun, Boo."

Louis wrinkled his nose at the nickname--he was getting too big for it, if you asked him--but smiled right after. "Thanks, Mum."

He ran over to where Gemma was guiding Harry onto the roundabout. "Should I ride or help push?"

"Help push," Harry demanded.

Once Harry had a good hold on the bars, Louis and Gemma stood on opposite sides of the roundabout and pushed it until it was going at a pretty good clip. Harry's giggles told them they'd achieved just the right speed.

It wasn't long, however, before Harry complained that he was getting dizzy. Louis and Gemma brought the roundabout to a gentle stop. They gave Harry a moment to reorient himself, and then they helped him off the disc.

"What next, Harry?" Louis questioned him.

"The slide?"

"Sounds good," Louis said.

Louis watched as Gemma nestled Harry's hand in the crook of her elbow, then led him over to one of the slides, going around to guide him to the ladder.

"You stand at the bottom, Louis," Gemma ordered. "If you say something from there, he'll know where the bottom is."

Louis did as he was told and moved to take up a post at the end of the slide. When Harry had climbed to the top and seated himself, Louis said, "Right here, Harry."

Harry grinned down at him and came down the slide, Louis catching him at the bottom.

"Again," Harry requested.

They repeated the slide a few times, until one time when Harry landed at the bottom and bravely announced, "I'm ready for the swing."

"All right!" Louis grabbed Harry's hand and walked him in the direction of the swings, Gemma following right behind. After helping Harry onto the swing, Louis said, "I have an idea to keep you from being scared, Harry."

"What?" Harry wanted to know.

"Gemma can stand behind you and push your back, and I can stand in front of you and push your knees. You should be able to tell that you aren't very high. Not if I'm touching your knees," Louis concluded, pleased with his plan, hoping that Harry went for it.

Harry thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Okay."

Gemma waited until Harry had a firm grip on the chains before beginning to gently push him on the swing. As promised, each time he swung forward, Louis tapped him on the knees.

At first, the look on Harry's face was a bit wary, as if he was expecting to feel like he had the last time he had been on the swing, but as he went back and forth from Gemma's touch to Louis', his features morphed into a much happier look.

It was Louis' mum who stopped the swing action this time, not Harry. She was toting a screaming Lottie when she walked up behind Gemma. "Louis, we have to go," she told him.

"I'll be right there," Louis assured her, though he was so sad to have to leave.

"I'll start back. You catch up," his mum said.

Between Gemma and Louis, they got Harry slowed down. When Louis went to help Harry off the swing, Harry threw his little arms around Louis' neck, hugging him tight. This caught Louis quite by surprise, but he only needed a second to hug Harry back.

When Harry let go, Louis asked, "What was that for?"

"You're my bestest friend ever," Harry replied guilelessly.

Louis couldn't help but smile widely at this declaration. "I like you, too," he told Harry. "I really needed a friend here, and now I've got you. And you, Gemma," he added, looking up at Harry's sister.

She smiled back at him. "See you here again soon?"

"Absolutely!" he promised. "I can't wait."

He ran, then, to catch up with his mum and sister, his heart full and a grin on his face he couldn't get rid of.

* * *

September 2003

The grass was prickly where it stuck him on the back of his neck. His body was half under the shade of the tree and half not. His head lay right next to Harry's, the both of them with their faces covered in the dappled light where it came down through the leaves above them.

"Do you have to go?" Harry asked, his voice shaky. It was clear he was trying not to cry.

"Yes," Louis replied, equally as sad. "I'm too old for the primary school."

Harry swallowed audibly. "I'm going to miss you lots and lots."

"I'll miss you, too," Louis said. "But I'll still come around lots, and I expect you to come to mine, too, after school and on the weekend."

"Gemma's going, too," Harry lamented, though it didn't sound--to Louis--like quite the same loss.

For three years following their meeting in the park, Gemma, Harry, and Louis had been like The Three Musketeers. Even though they were not all in the same classes at school, they met up at lunch or at break--whenever their schedules coincided. At the start of this past school year, however, Gemma had gotten to be close with some of the girls in her form, so more often than not, Louis and Harry had been left to their own devices.

This was absolutely fine with both Louis and Harry. They adored each other. Harry had found someone who enjoyed hanging out with him despite the challenges presented by his blindness, while Louis had found someone who idolised him and didn't give him a hard time about his silly antics. To the contrary, in fact. Harry thought Louis patently hilarious.

"Gemma will still be living in your house, Haz," Louis pointed out. "It's not like she's going off to college yet."

Harry shuddered. "You both will someday."

Louis bumped his shoulder against Harry's. "So will you."

"But I'll be here ages all on my own," Harry whined.

"That's why they have cars, buses, and trains, you doofus," Louis countered with a grin. "So we can visit. Besides, college is ages away, yeah?"

"Yeah," Harry reluctantly agreed.

"We still have a week until school starts," Louis noted. "What would you like to do?"

Harry took a long moment to really think about Louis' question. Finally, he answered, "I liked riding the horses."

Louis had made friends with a local on the edge of town who owned a stable full of horses. He both gave lessons and lent out horses just to ride on some nearby trails. In the middle of the summer, he, Harry, and Gemma had all gone over to take a couple lessons, since Louis' new friend, Mr. Logan, had offered a deep discount to The Three Musketeers.

Harry had never been on a horse before, though he had petted one at the zoo. He wasn't scared of being around the horses, but he'd been terrified at the thought of riding on one. They had found him a small pony called Onyx, and though it had taken some time, in the end Louis talked Harry into trying it. With Louis' encouragement, Harry had climbed on the horse and discovered he really enjoyed riding.

"We can definitely go back again," Louis promised. "Maybe even tomorrow. What else?"

Harry thought intently again. "Swimming?"

They had made ample use of the town pool during the summer days, going when it was too hot to attempt to do anything else. Harry was a decent swimmer, and loved nothing more than

racing with his sister and his best friend. He was a frequent winner, too!

"Swimming would be fun," Louis said. "And they'll close the pool right after school starts, too, so that's a good idea. Anything else?"

Louis felt rather than saw Harry's shrug. "Whatever you want to do," Harry told him.

"I'll think on it," Louis vowed. "Right now, though, I'm starving. How about you?"

He turned his head just in time to see Harry nod. "Me, too."

"We ate at mine yesterday," Louis remembered. "Yours today?" This had become one of their summer routines--taking turns at each other's houses for meals.

Harry nodded once more, immediately starting to lever himself up off the ground.

Louis followed suit, brushing dirt off his pants, then brushing the dirt off of Harry's. Once they were presentable, Louis slipped his elbow into Harry's waiting hand, a routine that was many years old. Louis was honoured that Harry trusted him implicitly to make sure he got from here to there without injury.

"Ready to go?" Louis checked.

"I'm ready," Harry confirmed. He pushed on Louis' elbow to make him go. They didn't have any time to lose.

* * *

Louis made setting up the horseback riding his top priority. They had had the best time when he and Harry had gone before, and it had been a true thrill to help get Harry over his initial anxiety about climbing on a horse.

The very next day after he and Harry had made their end-of-summer plans, Louis got up early and ran over to the stables and talked to the owner. He said that Louis and Harry could come any time, and he'd have someone take them out on a trail ride. He even told Louis they could ride later that morning, if they wanted.

Louis was so excited by this idea that he ran right to Harry's house, finding Harry and Gemma in the middle of breakfast.

"Harry! Harry!" Louis called out as he crashed through the back door and into the Styles' kitchen.

"Louis!" Harry called back through a mouthful of eggs.

"Hey, slow down there, Mr. Tomlinson," Harry's mother Anne ordered, though she smiled at his enthusiasm.

Louis skidded to a halt at her command. "Sorry, Mrs. S."

"That's okay, Louis. Do you want some breakfast?" she asked. "I'll bet you didn't stop to eat before you left your house this morning."

"I didn't," Louis confirmed.

"Eggs and toast?" Anne checked that Louis was okay with the menu.

Louis nodded vigorously.

"Then sit down and I'll get you a plate."

Louis sat down across from Harry and seconds later, he had a plate full of scrambled eggs and buttered toast. He took a few hungry bites before Harry interrupted his progress.

"What are we doing today, Lou?" Harry inquired brightly, clearly excited about whatever it was Louis had planned.

"Mr. Logan said we can go horseback riding today!" Louis revealed, grinning widely. He knew Harry could hear him smile.

"Yay!" Harry cheered.

"Do you want to come, Gemma?" Louis questioned Harry's sister.

"No, thanks," Gemma answered. "I'm hanging out with Cecelia today."

Cecelia Brand was one of the most popular girls in Gemma's form. Fortunately, she was also one of the nicest. Gemma had been beside herself with joy at being accepted into Cecelia's circle of friends.

"You sure you won't come?" Harry wanted to know. "Riding was so much fun last time."

"It was," Gemma agreed. "And I promise to go next time, okay? Cece invited me to her pool today."

Harry's bottom lip trembled just the tiniest bit at his sister declining his offer. Louis was quick to say, "It's going to be so much fun, Harry. Mr. Logan said we can maybe hike up the big trail this time."

"He did?" Harry said.

"He really did," Louis assured him.

Anne cleared her throat meaningfully. "Are you boys forgetting something?"

Harry cocked his head to mull her question over, while Louis just looked at her quizzically.

"Permission?" Anne prompted with a smile.

"Oh!" Harry's face lit up at the clarification. "Mum, can Louis and I go riding?"

"Yes," she replied. She looked pointedly at Louis. "As always, I'm trusting you, Louis. It'll be your job to take care of Harry."

Louis nodded seriously. "I know."

When Louis had first made friends with Gemma and Harry, it had been hard for them to trust Louis with Harry on his own, but by now, they trusted him to make sure Harry was okay, no matter what they were doing.

Even if Anne still reminded him of this most important task every time.

"Why don't you boys finish up your breakfast, then? The horses are waiting," Anne hurried them.

The boys did exactly as they were told. They ate the rest of their morning meal, then Louis went up to Harry's room with him so Harry could change into clothes appropriate for riding. Once Harry was clad in jeans, a t-shirt, and trainers, the boys went back downstairs to get their marching orders from Harry's mother.

"Just be careful, you two," Anne told them. "You have your mobile, Louis?"

Louis patted his pocket where the inexpensive mobile his mum had gotten him for his birthday the December before was nestled. "Got it."

Anne walked over to give Harry a kiss on the head. "Have fun, then, my sweet boy."

"Mum!" Harry squawked, embarrassed by his mother's open affection, as he had recently taken to being.

"Well, you are," Anne countered. She winked at Louis. "You, too, Boo."

Her use of Louis' mother's nickname for her own sweet boy made Harry giggle and Louis roll his eyes before joining in the giggling.

"Now scoot!" she told them.

They took the way to the stables that went through the small park where they'd met. Harry held tight to Louis' elbow, confident that his friend would guide him around any obstacle they might come across.

As they walked, the boys discussed not much that was important. It was summer, the sun was shining, they were hanging out together, and the conversation was easy.

It didn't take them long to reach the stables, nor long to find Mr. Logan, who was busy saying goodbye to the recipients of a morning lesson. Louis and Harry waited somewhat patiently for him to finish and tend to them.

"Louis! Harry!" he greeted them brightly as his last customers drove off. "It's great to have you back again."

"Hi, Mr. Logan," the boys chorused.

"So, Harry, Louis told me you enjoyed your last ride enough to try again," Mr. Logan said, bending down on one knee to be face to face with the younger boy.

"It was fun," Harry agreed. "Can I ride Onyx again?"

"I saved him just for you," Mr. Logan revealed. "And I was thinking Starlight for you, Louis. Just like last time."

Louis grinned. "Sounds awesome. Right, H?" He bumped Harry's shoulder with his arm.

Harry was grinning, too. "Right."

"So, I was thinking Jennie could take you boys out onto one of the trails. How does that sound?" Mr. Logan inquired. Jennie was his teenage daughter. She had helped out when Louis had come to the stables with Harry and Gemma earlier in the summer. She had been particularly aware of what Harry needed to be comfortable on a horse for the first time.

"That sounds great," Louis said on behalf of both he and Harry.

"Excellent. Let's go find her." Mr. Logan straightened up--taking a moment to stretch out his back--then led the way into the stables to look for Jennie.

Harry found Louis' elbow so they could follow.

Jennie wasn't hard to locate. She was busy feeding one of the smaller horses, Dumpling. When she heard the boys come into the stables with her father, she pet Dumpling one more time, then wiped her hands on her jeans.

"Louis! Harry!" she greeted them in the exact same bright manner as had her father.

"Hi Jennie," Louis returned.

"Dad told me you might be by," she went on. "You were interested in a trail ride?"

"Can we do that?" Louis asked.

Jennie nodded. "Sure."

"I thought we'd give them Onyx and Starlight," Mr. Logan interjected.

"Sounds good. Help me get them ready, boys?" Jennie requested.

"That okay, Harry?" Louis checked with the boy clinging tightly to his arm, slightly anxious in a place he didn't know very well.

"I don't know how," Harry protested.

"I'll show you," Jennie promised. "Come with me."

"I'll leave you in Jennie's capable hands, boys," Mr. Logan told them. "Stop by before you leave to let me know how the ride went."

"We will, Mr. Logan," Louis said before following Lucy down the stall that held a small, black horse.

"You remember Onyx, don't you, Harry?" Jennie inquired.

A smile played on Harry's lips, and he held out his free hand for Louis to place on the horse. When Louis had done so, Harry took his hand off Louis' arm so he could properly stroke the horse's neck. "Hi, Onyx," he whispered.

"We need to get his saddle and reins on so he's ready to ride," Jennie explained. "I'll go and get what we need."

Jennie collected a saddle, some reins, and a blanket, and she walked Harry through putting on the blanket, then the saddle, then the reins. It was a bit of a slow process, since Jennie let Harry do a lot of the work, but the look of pride on his face once Onyx was ready was worth the extra time.

Louis got his turn at getting a horse ready to ride when they moved down two stalls to where Starlight--a brown horse with a white, star-shaped spot on her forehead--was housed.

Harry waited patiently while Louis helped Jennie prep Starlight, and in a very short period of time, they were all set to climb on and ride up the trail.

Jennie got Harry onto his horse first, getting his reins in place, then she helped Louis onto Starlight. She led them both into the paddock, where her horse, Miller, was already saddled and ready to go.

Before she got on her horse, however, Jennie guided Louis and Harry around the paddock, reacquainting them with how to manage the reins and how to get their horses to move forward and, most importantly, stop. When Jennie was confident that the boys were in control of their respective steeds, she climbed on Miller and off they went.

Jennie took the lead, and she had Harry directly behind her, leaving Louis to bring up the rear.

Like last time, Louis was fascinated that Onyx was able to just follow Jennie's horse, and it didn't matter any that Harry couldn't see.

Harry was stiff at first, scared to relax on the horse, but as Louis began to describe the scenery along the trail, he began to loosen up.

"It's pretty along here," Louis said as they exited the stable's property and walked their horses onto a trail lined with trees. "It's just like under the tree in the park, Haz. The sun's coming down through the trees making all kinds of crazy patterns on the ground."

"Like lace?" Harry checked. This was how Louis had tried to make Harry understand what the light through the trees looked like. He had described it as lace, since Harry knew what

lace felt like.

"Yes, like lace," Louis confirmed.

"Are there many people out?" Harry inquired. "I can hear some people talking over there and some kids playing over there." He pointed to the places where he heard these noises.

"It is nice out," Louis stated. "So it makes sense there's lots of people out."

Before too long, they began to climb a little rise into a wooded area.

"There are so many squirrels around," Louis continued to narrate their trip.

"Are they getting ready for winter?" Harry wondered aloud. "They must need to collect a lot of nuts and acorns."

Louis watched the squirrels running around for a few long moments. "A few of them have nuts or acorns. Most of them are just running around crazy."

That made Harry giggle.

"All right, boys," Jennie interrupted their conversation. "We're going to take a turn here and head over to the lake."

"Which lake is it?" Harry asked. "The big one with all the trees?"

"Yes," Jennie answered. "I even have a little bread in my saddle bag if we want to stop to feed the ducks. Does that sound good?"

"Yes!" Harry cheered, causing Louis to smile and laugh.

It was just a short time later that they arrived at the area. There was a wide path which left plenty of room for both those on horseback and those on foot. Jennie led them to the far side of the lake, then urged them to get off their horses and allow them to drink from the lake.

Louis helped Harry pull Onyx right up next to Starlight and Miller to drink. Though they hadn't been out for very long, it was a very warm day, and the horses drank thirstily.

Jennie pulled a plastic bag from her leather saddle bag. "Here's some bread, guys."

Louis took the bag, then gave his elbow over to Harry. He walked them right to the edge of the lake, then urged Harry to kneel down, Louis kneeling right next to him. Louis handed Harry a small amount of bread, then took his hand to show him the best place to throw the food so the ducks would get it.

The ducks were ready. They immediately swarmed the area right in front of the boys, quacking happily about the treat.

"I can hear them!" Harry announced, delighted.

"Throw out more bread," Louis suggested, passing over another small handful.

The boys took turns throwing the bread out to the very happy ducks until they were out of food.

"Ready to keep going now?" Jennie wondered out loud. "We can still go up the trail through the woods."

"Okay," Louis and Harry readily agreed.

Jennie helped Harry back up onto Onyx, then helped Louis back onto Starlight. They got in the same formation as they turned away from the lake and up toward the wooded area just south of the lake.

As soon as they got into the small forest, Harry declared, "It's much colder now."

"We're in the woods," Louis told him. "Not very much sun coming in here."

"How tall are the trees?" Harry wanted to know.

In the years since he had known Harry, these had been the hardest questions to answer, these questions where he couldn't put Harry's hands on something to help him understand. It was difficult to make a comparison when Harry had no experience with the things he was comparing.

"Louis?" Harry obviously thought he did not have Louis' attention anymore.

"I'm thinking," Louis answered. After a moment, he went on, "You know that tree in my backyard? The one that would be perfect for a treehouse?"

"We climbed almost all the way up!" Harry remembered.

"We would have to climb like ten of those to reach the top of these trees," Louis explained.

"Wow!" Harry exclaimed. "Really?"

"Really," Louis confirmed.

"That's very high." Harry lifted his face to the sky as if he could see the tops of the trees they were discussing.

"Okay, boys, we're coming to a good place to start heading back now," Jennie interrupted their conversation.

"Already?" Louis asked, surprised they'd been gone long enough that it was time to turn around.

"Already." Jennie turned around to smile at Louis. "We've been gone almost half an hour."

Louis guessed the adults were right when they said "Time flies when you're having fun."

Jennie took them to the other side of the small wood, then down a small path that went through a meadow about the same size as the wood they'd just ambled through.

"I smell flowers," Harry commented. "And it's much warmer now. We're out of the woods?"

"We are," Louis agreed.

"What kind of flowers are they?" Harry questioned.

Louis looked down. "They're...yellow?" He lacked any other information he could share. Flowers were not something he'd ever taken much of an interest in.

"That's not very helpful," Harry stated, frowning.

"I'm sorry," Louis said.

"They're sunflowers," Jennie interjected. "You boys need to learn at least some flowers we have here in England. You might want to give some to someone one day."

Both Louis and Harry recoiled at her suggestion. "No way," Louis assured her.

"Yeah, no way," Harry parroted, always willing to follow Louis wherever he went.

Jennie just laughed. "Just you wait...."

The path they were on took them to a small country road they trotted all the way down. At the end of the road was the stable and paddock they'd set off from.

"We're back!" Louis called out for Harry's benefit.

"Already?" Harry echoed Louis' words from earlier in their ride.

"I'm afraid so," Jennie replied, moving to climb off her horse.

When he saw Harry beginning to pout, Louis promised, "We can come back at least once before school starts again."

"We can?" Harry sounded incredulously, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Of course, you noodle," Louis said, grinning widely, letting Jennie help him off Starlight. Together, then, he and Jennie helped Harry off Onyx.

The first thing Harry did when he was safely back on the ground was grab Louis to him for a hug.

Louis found himself a little embarrassed that Harry was hugging him in front of Jennie, but he just as quickly decided not to care. Harry gave wonderful hugs.

When Harry let him go, Louis questioned, "What was that for?"

Louis was taken back in time to the playground on the other side of town where he and Harry had first met.

Harry's response harkened back to that day, too. "You're my best friend."

* * *

February 2010

Harry awoke to the sensation of something tickling his nose. He swiped it away with his hand, but it reappeared almost instantly. He tried batting it away one more time, but the sensation returned, this time accompanied by a low giggle.

Harry couldn't help but smile. "Louis," he pinpointed the source of his wake-up call as he propped himself up on his elbows. Their schedules were different, so it was not every day that Louis was at his house to awaken him, although this wasn't the first time. Harry thought he knew what the occasion was this time.

"Good morning, Haz," Louis greeted him brightly. "Happy birthday!"

With the knowledge that he had guessed Louis' motivation correctly and a smile growing bigger by the minute, Harry said, "Thank you."

Harry sat fully upright, feeling Louis move back to give him room. "What was that on my nose?"

Something was pressed into his hand. "This."

Harry felt a soft, long, thin object. "A feather?" he guessed.

"A feather," Louis confirmed. "I found it on the ground out behind my house. I figured a bird feather in the middle of winter had to be good luck, so I decided it should be yours."

"Thanks, Lou."

"Now, you need to get up. Your mum is making breakfast, and I saw some presents at your place," Louis reported.

"Big boxes or little boxes?" Harry probed for more information.

"One of each."

"Intriguing." Harry pushed his covers back. "Are you staying for breakfast?"

"Yep. Then even though my lecture isn't until later, I'm walking you to school," Louis declared. "So, hurry up!" Harry felt Louis' weight leave the bed.

"I'll be downstairs in just a few minutes," Harry told him.

As Louis' footsteps retreated out of the room and down the hallway, Harry set about finding clothes to wear. After picking out his favourite comfy jeans and a sweater he knew was dark blue, Harry took a quick shower and dressed. He headed downstairs the minute he was done.

He paused in the doorway to the kitchen to try to sort out who was there. He could hear his mum talking from the area the stove was in, and he could hear his sister talking to their mum from her traditional spot at the table. He suspected Louis was also sitting at the table, and if he didn't miss his guess, his step-father, Robin, was probably also at the table.

Harry was just about to go ahead and step into the kitchen when a squeal from the table told him Gemma had noticed him standing there. "Harry!" Her footsteps sped toward him, and before he knew it, he was being wrapped up in a fierce hug. "Happy birthday, baby bro," she whispered in his ear.

"Thanks, Gem," he whispered back.

As she released him, it was right into his mother's arms.

"I can't believe you're sixteen," she declared as she squeezed him tightly. When she let him go, she held his chin in her hand and soundly kissed his cheek. "Happy birthday, baby."

He was a little embarrassed by the show of affection in front of Louis, but only a little. He smiled and said, "Thanks, Mum."

"My turn!" Robin announced from right behind Anne. He, too, grabbed Harry up into a hug. "Happy birthday, H!"

"Thanks, Robin."

When Robin let him go, he made sure to keep hold of Harry's hand long enough to guide him to the kitchen table and the back of his chair. Harry was grateful that just like his mum and Gemma, Robin had learned to help him out without any fuss.

"Hey, Haz, sit down and check out your presents!" Louis urged from the seat directly opposite Harry, which he had called his own many, many years ago.

Harry sat down and felt right in front of him for the presents Louis had mentioned twice now. His hands came across a small box first.

"That one's from me," Gemma told him.

Harry easily unwrapped the package, finding a smooth rectangular box underneath. He felt for the top and pulled it off before finally getting to the gift inside. He gasped as he felt the edges of the small object. "Is it an iPod?"

"It is!" Gemma confirmed. "It has way more space than the one you have, and the menu should be easy enough to use once you get used to it."

Harry got up out of his seat to give Gemma another hug. "It's awesome, Gem. Thanks!"

"Only the best for my baby brother," Gemma said, a smile in her voice.

When he sat back down, he hunted for the larger box Louis had hinted at.

"That's from Robin and me," his mum said. She was standing behind him now, clearly anxious to see his reaction to his gift.

The bigger box proved just as easy as the little one to unwrap. Inside, he found a square-ish box that, like the iPod box, had a lid to open.

There was tissue paper hiding whatever it was his mum and Robin had given him. Harry peeled it back and found a pair of soft, leather trainers.

"They're the ones you told us you wanted," his mum explained.

Harry's face split with a huge grin as he felt along the sides of his new shoes. The stitching was tiny and perfect, and the leather felt so amazing. Louis had a pair of these and did nothing but rave about them, so Harry was extremely excited to have his own pair.

"Thanks, Mum!" Harry stood to give his mother a big hug. "Thanks, Robin," he added, moving to give Robin a hug, too.

"We're so glad you like them," Robin said, his voice as happy as Harry felt.

"Now sit down for some breakfast, Harry," his mum commanded. "You don't want to be late for school."

Harry sat down once again, and his mother served everyone at the table with delicious fried egg, sausage, beans, and toast. Silence took over the room as Harry, his family, and Louis tucked in.

When there wasn't a speck of food left on Harry's plate, the first thing he did was slip into his new trainers. He stepped far enough away from the table in the hope that everybody else in the room could see his feet.

"How do they look?" he asked.

"Smashing!" Louis was the first to respond.

"What colour are they?" Harry inquired somewhat belatedly. He had been too excited just to have the trainers to worry about what colour they were.

"White," Louis again responded. "Just like mine."

"Excellent," Harry said.

"You need to get going, Harry," his mother jumped into the conversation.

"I'm walking you, remember?" Louis added.

"Okay," Harry accepted, trying to tamp down his excitement. It wasn't often Louis was free to walk with him in the morning, not with having to get to his own classes. Every once in a while, however, Louis would find himself with a free morning, and he almost always showed up on those days to walk with Harry to school.

After kissing his mother goodbye, Harry collected his jacket from the closet and his rucksack and cane from their respective spots near the front door. He waited for Louis to put on his own jacket, then he took Louis' elbow and let him lead him out of the house, down the front walk, and to the sidewalk, turning left toward school.

It was cold out, and Harry stopped in his tracks long enough to zip up his jacket tight right up to his chin. Once he got a hold of Louis' elbow again, they settled into a familiar rhythm.

"Are you coming tonight?" Harry asked Louis as they turned the first corner of their journey.

"Of course," Louis replied. "I have to give you your present, after all."

"Oh? What am I getting?"

"I'm not telling you. You have to wait."

Harry pouted and murmured a sad, "Aww."

"Not going to work, Haz," Louis stated in a firm voice. "You don't get to know until tonight after dinner."

"I have to wait until after dinner?" Harry questioned, appalled at the thought of having to wait so long.

"You do."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

Harry sighed, then stayed quiet long enough to negotiate the biggest street they had to cross between his house and school.

"So, how's it feel to be sixteen?" Louis wanted to know.

With a shrug, Harry answered, "Not much different from fifteen."

"Well, you're legal for a lot of things now," Louis noted. "So it should have its perks."

"I hope so." He sighed.

"What?" Louis sounded worried.

"I just wish I didn't have to go to school," Harry explained. "I'd rather spend the day with you."

"It's cold and gross out," Louis countered immediately. "We'd just have to stay inside. You might as well go and get educated. I have a lecture this afternoon, but I'll pick you up from school, and we'll have the rest of the day then."

"Promise?"

"I promise," Louis swore. He stopped walking just then, and Harry followed suit. "We're here."

The sound of his classmates filtered in through the bubble Harry had managed to cast over himself and Louis as they walked. "You'll be here at three-thirty?"

"Three twenty-nine."

Louis swiveled them around until Harry knew he was directly facing the front entrance of the school. "All set?" he asked, not willing to leave, Harry knew, until he knew Harry was oriented.

"All set." He dropped Louis' elbow and got his cane out, straightening it and putting it into position.

"See you this afternoon," Louis said. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Louis." It was with great reluctance that Harry left his best friend's side, then, to head forward on the path to school. He was already counting down the hours and minutes left until three-thirty.

* * *

The day seemed endless. Harry was glad he recorded his classes every day, because he would surely need to listen to his teachers' lessons again later. His mind drifted over and over into thoughts of the evening ahead with his family and Louis, celebrating Harry being--hopefully--another year wiser.

Harry had a small circle of friends at school, and each one of them wished him happy birthday. As a collective, they treated him to a divine chocolate cupcake at lunch time, procured from W. Mandeville, the best bakery in town. But the treat didn't focus him on being at school for very long.

His last class--maths, which he hated--dragged on and on, but eventually, of course, the bell had to ring.

Harry quickly gathered his belongings and grabbed his friend Jonny's elbow. This was a routine they'd gotten into since the beginning of the school year. Harry didn't mind using his cane at school, but if he could use a friend as a guide, that was always easier. As usual, he and Jonny made quick stops at each of their lockers, then headed out the front door.

They had barely stepped out into the frigid air when Harry heard Louis calling his name. He beamed at the sound.

"Louis!" he called back.

Louis' voice was much closer as he said, "Hey, Jonny."

"Hey, Lou. Got 'im?"

Jonny slipped his elbow out of Harry's hand, and Louis' familiar bony elbow took its place almost instantly.

"I got 'im," Louis confirmed.

"Happy birthday, H," Jonny wished for the second time that day.

"Thanks, J," Harry returned. "See you tomorrow."

"Yep," Jonny agreed, then his footsteps clattered down the stairs.

While Harry got his pack resituated, Louis asked, "So how was school, birthday boy?"

Harry shrugged. "Okay, I guess. I'm going to have to listen to all the lectures again. It was hard to concentrate."

"Of course it was," Louis declared. "You were distracted by the thought of an afternoon and evening with me. No one could concentrate under those circumstances."

Harry giggled.

Louis pulled the elbow Harry held forward. "Let's go."

They started down the stairs and onto the front walkway.

"So, what are we doing?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Well, if your birthday wasn't in the middle of the fucking winter, we could go horse riding or maybe take a walk somewhere, but since it is, we'll have to settle for something inside," Louis lamented.

"Inside's fine," Harry assured him. "Do you want to go to yours or mine?"

Louis guided Harry around a corner back in the direction of both of their homes. "We might as well go to yours, since that's where dinner will be. We even have time for me to give you your present before. That okay?"

Harry nodded. "What did you get me again?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Louis responded cryptically.

Harry could only fake pout for a very short time. He was way too happy to be in Louis' presence to pretend to be sad for more than a few seconds.

They walked briskly against the cold wind, and it didn't take long at all for them to arrive at the Styles-Twist abode.

Harry got his key out to open the front door, but found it already unlocked, not at all characteristic. His mum must have gotten off work early. Another birthday treat.

The boys tumbled inside and peeled off their jackets, scarves, and boots. When they were down to sweaters, jeans, and socks, they made a beeline for the kitchen, hoping for a warm drink to take with them up to Harry's room.

Harry's mum was in the kitchen when they got there. Harry assumed she had been sitting at the table doing something, because when Harry and Louis walked in, a chair squealed as she popped up to offer a kiss on the cheek to both of them.

"How was school, boys?" she asked.

"It was a long day, but I guess it was okay," Harry replied. "I did get a chocolate cupcake for dessert at lunch, though."

"Let me guess," Louis said. "Schuyler organised that."

"I think she did," Harry concluded. "She was definitely the loudest singer when they sang to me."

"That sounds very sweet," his mum commented.

Harry smiled, remembering the moment. "It was nice."

"So, could you boys use a cuppa?" Harry's mum wanted to know. Her footsteps began moving toward the stove as if she already knew what their answer would be.

"Yes, please," they chorused.

"Pick out two mugs, Louis," was Harry's mother's first order. "The sugar bowl needs refilling, Harry," was her second.

Harry and Louis immediately set about the tasks they'd been charged with, and in no time, they were in possession of two steaming mugs of tea.

Louis liked his with just a few sugars, but Harry liked milk and sugar both. Once he'd doctored his drink, he took a sip to make sure it tasted the way it should, then he handed it to Louis to carry up the stairs. He could do that himself, but it took a lot of concentration, and, even more importantly, it was his birthday. He knew Louis wouldn't mind.

Harry led the way up the stairs to his bedroom, Louis right behind him. Once there, they sat on the floor, their backs up against the long side of Harry's bed.

For a minute or two, they both sipped at their tea, warming up from being outside.

When his mug was halfway empty, Harry put it down, making sure to set it right next to the leg of his night table so he could find it again without knocking it over.

"So," he began, turning toward Louis. "I was promised a present."

He heard Louis swallow a sip of tea quickly. Seconds later, he said, "You were."

"Is it in your pack, or did you come back here this morning to hide it?" Harry asked, already trying to think of the best place to search for his gift in the event Louis had hid it.

"Nope," Louis told him, popping his "p."

Harry frowned. "You brought it over before today?"

"Nope. I have it with me."

Harry stretched his hand out to feel for Louis' waist. "Is it in your pocket?"

Louis sidled out of reach, but he didn't go far. "No, it's not."

Sighing, Harry gave in. "Fine. I can't figure it out, then."

"Impatient!" Louis teased.

"You always give the best presents," Harry said defensively. "Can you blame me for wanting to find out what you got me this year?"

Louis laughed. "No, I guess I can't."

Louis really did give great gifts. For Harry's twelfth birthday, Louis had given Harry a hard drive with, literally, thousands of songs on it. He said he was doing his part in growing Harry's musical knowledge.

On Harry's fourteenth birthday, Louis had gotten him the first Harry Potter book in Braille--all four volumes--after Harry had said he wanted to *read* the book, not listen to it. Even if Louis did say Harry was a big, giant nerd.

There had been other gifts along the way, for Christmas and his birthday, along with more than a few just-because presents, and each one reflected Louis' thoughtfulness and the deep level at which he understood just who Harry was.

All of which was why Harry could hardly wait to find out what Louis had gotten him this year.

"You really think you're ready?" Louis inquired, a hint of challenge in his voice.

Harry didn't know what to make of that hint, but he nodded nonetheless, holding his hands out in anticipation of Louis putting a present in them.

Instead of a box or a bag, however, Louis put his hands in Harry's, squeezing them tight before lowering them until they were resting against Louis' thigh.

"I don't under--" Harry started to say, but Louis cut him off.

Louis cut him off by placing his lips on Harry's. Harry instantly pulled back, not quite knowing what was going on.

"What--" Harry was again cut off.

"Shh," Louis ordered.

When Louis' lips touched Harry's for a second time, Harry was prepared. Without even consciously thinking to, Harry catalogued every sensation, storing each one away to study later.

Louis' lips were soft, warm, gentle. They tasted of tea and chocolate. Each press of Louis' lips on his sent shivers down Harry's spine and, not surprisingly, into his dick. He felt hyper-focused, like nothing else existed beyond this: him, Louis, and their lips.

Harry processed all of this in a matter of seconds, then decided, finally, to join the kiss, nipping and tasting with purpose and abandon. He had never imagined a kiss could be like this, tender and hot all at the same time. He never wanted it to end.

Eventually, however, they had to stop to catch their breath.

"I... That was...." Harry tried to form words, but his brain wasn't really working properly anymore.

Louis' next words came in a whisper. "I've wanted to do that for a very long time."

"You have?" Harry's voice squeaked just a little in surprise.

"I have," Louis confessed, still speaking softly. "Because...I love you."

Harry could hardly believe his ears. "You do?"

"I do," Louis confirmed.

Louis had been Harry's best friend since Harry was five years old. They'd met on a playground not long after Louis had moved to Holmes Chapel. Harry had idolised Louis from the start. There were so many reasons to look up to Louis, but the most important to Harry was that Louis had always treated Harry like he was normal. There was literally no other person in Harry's world who did that, outside of his family.

There was no other person Harry wanted to be around more than Louis. He lived every school day for the dismissal bell because it meant he could hang out with Louis, doing homework, playing video games, or listening to music. The weekends meant more time with Louis. They could go to the movies, horse riding, or play football. It never really mattered *what* they did, just that they did it together.

Harry had been worried that when Louis went to secondary school first, then, later, to the sixth form college first, he would find other friends he preferred to spend time with. But while Louis did, indeed, make new friends, he never once threw Harry over to be with them. And even though Louis did have outside interests--he loved both football and theatre and took part in both as often as he could--Harry was always his number one priority.

Harry had always just accepted that Louis chose to be with Harry, even if that didn't always make sense. It did now.

"Harry?" Louis interrupted Harry's speeding thoughts. "Say something."

"I-I..." Harry stuttered, still not feeling entirely in charge of his brain. All of a sudden, however, he realised what all those years of idolisation and best friendship had grown into, and he knew just what to say. "I love you, too."

"You do?" Louis repeated Harry's earlier query.

Harry smiled shyly. "I do."

"That is very good news." Louis' voice was just about as happy as Harry had ever heard it. He went on, "So, that was your first kiss, right?"

Heat raced up Harry's neck as he nodded. "You know it was." A kiss was definitely something he would have told Louis about.

"How was it?" Louis wanted to know, sounding just a little bit nervous. It was very unlike the confident Louis Harry was familiar with.

"It was amazing," Harry assured him. "I couldn't imagine a better first kiss."

"What do you say we try for an even better second kiss?"

With no more preamble, Louis let go of Harry's hands, then, and they reappeared on Harry's cheeks. Louis used the leverage to pull Harry in for another kiss.

It started off much like the last one, Louis' lips soft on Harry's, slowly getting used to each other in this brand new way. It wasn't long, though, before they both wanted...needed more.

Louis was the first to make a move, taking the tip of his tongue and pressing it in between Harry's lips, begging for entry. Harry was momentarily taken aback, but he allowed it, even tentatively let his own tongue move between Louis' lips.

Right in the midst of the boys doing an extensive study of the insides of each other's mouth, Harry's mum's voice disturbed the bubble they'd built around themselves. "Harry! Louis!"

They sprang away from each other as if they'd been shocked, neither wanting to be caught. It would be nice to keep their new status a secret for just a little while.

"Harry!" his mum called, her voice now coming from much closer. She must have been at the bottom of the stairs now. Her next move would be to come upstairs.

Harry cleared his throat before calling back, "Yes, Mum?"

"Come on downstairs! Your dad's come by with a present!"

That was almost as big a surprise as Louis' declaration of love.

"Be right down!" Harry told her. More quietly, to Louis, he said, "Can we continue this later?"

Louis stood and reached a hand down to help Harry stand. "I'm counting on it."

"Good." He started for the door, but then stopped in his tracks, turning back to face Louis. "You just gave me my favourite present."

"You don't think your dad will do better?" Louis teased.

"He can't," Harry stated, grinning widely. "I guarantee it."

* * *

They decided to keep their newfound romantic feelings for each other a secret. They needed time to figure out exactly how to adjust their relationship from best friends to boyfriends. They'd been best friends for so long, it was definitely different to, say, greet each other with a kiss or spend their time together making out as opposed to just listening to music or the television. It was a lot to get used to.

When they would arrive at whoever's house they were spending time at, they would play best friends in front of their families, saving their more amorous actions for when they were alone in their bedrooms.

This became a routine, and about two weeks after Harry's birthday, they had settled into it nicely. It was a Friday, and they had a weekend with no plans in front of them. Louis met Harry at school, and they decided to spend the evening at Harry's house. It was always easier to hang out where Louis' little sisters didn't demand attention every minute until bedtime.

They drank a cup of tea with Harry's mum and sister, filling them in on how the day had gone for the boys.

"So, what did you learn at school today, Harry?" his mum asked.

Harry took a sip of his scalding tea before replying, "I learned that my teachers don't talk to each other."

"Oh?" his mum encouraged more information.

"I have, like, three different projects due at almost the same time," he explained. "I'm not sure how I'll get them all done."

"I'll help," Louis and Gemma offered simultaneously.

Harry grinned. "Thanks so much. I will probably take you up on that."

"You should try to get some done this weekend," his mother noted. "No point in getting behind."

"I know," he assured her, though to be honest, he wasn't so interested in studying History during the weekend as he was in studying Louis' curves.

"I'll make sure he works on his projects," Louis told Harry's mother, ever the suck-up.

"Thank you, Louis," his mum said, a smile in her voice.

Harry could hear everyone taking a sip from their cups, so he worked on his own. When he'd drunk half of his tea, he said, "Want to go on up, Louis? We can outline what I have to get done this weekend."

"Sure." Louis' answer was followed by the sound of Louis' chair being pushed backwards.

Harry stood, too, and automatically handed his mug over to Louis. He excused himself from the kitchen and made his way toward the stairs.

Once they were in his bedroom, Harry closed the door behind them, giving them some much needed privacy.

"Bed or floor?" Louis questioned.

"Hm," Harry hummed. "Bed."

He listened as Louis put Harry's mug on his side of the bed, then his own on the other side. Harry crawled onto the bed, and Louis immediately joined him, nestling into Harry's side.

"You're very warm," Louis commented, stroking Harry's forearm with his finger.

"Just warm?" Harry joked. "Not hot?"

Louis chuckled. "You don't even know what hot looks like."

Harry recognised that Louis was not teasing him. All the kids at school who had spent lots of time teasing Harry had taught him the difference.

"But I know what hot feels like," Harry countered, working a hand up under Louis' jumper.

Louis hissed at Harry's ministrations, giving Harry permission to seek out Louis' lips.

Louis met Harry's lips most willingly. Although they started off with gentle nips, they very quickly moved on to something dirtier, something much more passionate. This had not taken long at all to become Harry's favourite extra-curricular activity.

Soon, Louis' hand was venturing underneath Harry's jumper. Harry was just arcing his back at a particularly indelicate twist one of his nipples when someone gasped. Someone who

wasn't either Louis or Harry.

Harry yanked his hand away from Louis' chest and withdrew his lips from Louis'. Louis did the same, at the same time as he identified the intruder to Harry and Louis' private moment. "Gemma!"

"Harry!" Gemma cried.

"Gemma, get out!" Harry ordered, the heat of embarrassment not nearly as pleasant as the heat he had been feeling at Louis' touch.

"Absolutely not," Gemma returned, digging in her heels. "Not before I get answers."

Harry sighed heavily. He wasn't often annoyed with Gemma, but this was definitely one of those times. "Fine. Whatever will get you out of my room."

"How long has this been going on?" Gemma demanded to know.

"Since my birthday," Harry told her.

"That was two weeks ago." Gemma's voice was filled with incredulity. "You've been keeping this a secret for two weeks."

"Yes," Harry answered, quite proud of the statistic. He wasn't necessarily known to be the best at keeping secrets.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Gemma went on to ask. "This is really big news."

"Well...", Harry began hesitantly, struggling to find the best words. He cleared his throat before trying again. "We wanted a chance to get used to the idea of this ourselves before we told anyone else. Right, Louis?"

"Right," Louis agreed.

Gemma paused very briefly, then said, "You have to tell Mum."

A protest was on the tip of Harry's tongue, then Louis piped up. "I'll tell mine, too."

"But..." A finger to his lips stopped Harry from continuing. Had to be Louis'.

"They'll figure it out anyhow, Harry," Louis pointed out.

"This does explain all those looks Louis' been giving you recently," Gemma commented. "I thought they were just *he's my best friend in the world looks*, but I guess they weren't. Didn't think either of you had this in you."

Harry sighed yet again. "Fine. I'll talk to Mum."

"We'll talk to her," Louis corrected. "She needs to know my intentions."

"What are your intentions?" Gemma inquired. Harry recognised the tone in her voice. It was her *give me the right answer or I'll kill you* tone.

"My intentions are to be the best boyfriend Harry could ever ask for," Louis responded, his voice filled with conviction.

"You better not ever hurt him," Gemma commanded.

"I promise," Louis instantly replied.

"Good," Gemma said. "I will kick your ass if you hurt him."

"Gemma!" Harry exclaimed, horrified that Gemma would threaten Louis. "It's Louis."

"I know," Gemma assured him. "Doesn't mean I won't kick his ass."

"I promise to be good to Harry," Louis repeated. "I love him."

Harry could tell Gemma was smiling when she stated, "Good. And...congratulations."

"Thanks," Louis replied.

"Thanks," Harry echoed.

"Now, don't you two have someplace to be, boys?" Gemma questioned them. "Like downstairs in the kitchen telling Mum you're together."

With one more sigh, Harry nodded. "We'll be right down."

"Excellent." And with that, Gemma's footsteps left the room.

"Ready to go face my mum?" Harry asked Louis.

"As ready as I'll ever be." Harry felt the mattress lift as Louis climbed off the bed. "Shall we, Haz?"

Harry took Louis' outstretched hand. "We shall."

* * *

Unlike Gemma, it turned out that Harry's mum had them figured out. Harry asked her if he and Louis could talk to her, and when Anne said sure, they all sat around the kitchen table. Gemma, thankfully, stayed away. Louis was intimidated enough about breaking this news to Harry's mum, much less in front of Gemma.

It didn't end up mattering.

"So, what's up?" Anne asked as soon as she'd provided tea for Harry, Louis, and herself.

"We wanted to tell you something," Harry started the conversation.

"Oh?" Anne raised her eyebrows in curiosity, looking from Harry to Louis, then back again.

"We.... Louis and I...." Harry could not seem find the words to tell his mother what he needed her to know.

"You what, darling?" Anne rested a gentle hand on Harry's arm. It was a move meant to relax Harry, but Louis could tell that it didn't really work.

"I gave Harry a present for his birthday," Louis jumped in to try to help.

"Yeah. He said you gave him some vintage band t-shirts," Anne said. "Though I haven't gotten to see them yet. He said he put them away for summer."

"That wasn't exactly what I gave him," Louis informed her.

"You didn't?" Anne seemed a little confused now.

Louis shook his head. "His present was a truth."

"A truth?" Anne parroted.

After nodding, Louis pulled in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I told him that I was in love with him."

Immediately upon getting this information out into the open, Louis reached for Harry's hand, grasping it firmly and holding on tight. Then he focused on Anne to see if he could gauge her reaction.

At first, her face was frustratingly neutral, neither happy nor unhappy. But seconds later, a hint of a smile played on her lips before blooming into a giant grin. "Is that all?" she queried.

"Mum?" It was Harry's turn to be confused.

"I've known you two were in love for a little while now," Anne admitted.

"You have?" Harry sounded surprised,

"Oh, honey, if you could see the way he looks at you," Anne said softly. "And you, Louis, you should hear how he talks about you when you aren't here. Louis this, Louis that."

Louis felt the familiar heat of embarrassment fly into his cheeks, only heartened by the fact that Harry was blushing, too.

"I'm glad you told me what was going on," Anne went on.

"You're okay with it?" Harry checked, his voice quaking just a tiny bit. They were almost in the clear, just this last hurdle.

"I am," Anne answered, still smiling. She fixed her gaze on Louis. "Be good to him, Lou." The look in her eyes spoke of what she would do to Louis if he didn't follow directions.

"I will," Louis responded. "I swear."

"Good." Anne's gaze softened. "Does your mum know yet?"

"Not yet," Harry reported.

"Well then, you'd best get going," Anne directed firmly, lifting her cup for a sip of tea.

"You think we should tell her now?" Louis confirmed.

"I won't keep it a secret for you," Anne warned them. "So unless you want her to find out from someone else, you'd best get going. I'll hold dinner for you."

Louis was surprised when Harry didn't argue, but rather just got up from the kitchen table. Then again, Louis guessed that an argument would not have done any good. They did need to tell his mum. No time like the present.

The boys shrugged on their jackets, yelled goodbye to Anne, and headed back out into the cold air. It was time for Truth Telling: Round Two.

* * *

The first thing that had to be done when Louis and Harry reached Louis' house was that Louis needed to help his mother get his sisters occupied so he and Harry could speak with her privately.

Lottie was sleeping over at a friend's house, and Fizzy had just bought a new book she was reading with vigour. So that took care of the older set of girls.

Their mum promised the twins that they could watch television in her bed. Phoebe and Daisy were so excited they raced each other upstairs to get to the bed first.

Once a Disney movie was playing for the younger set of girls, Louis' mum sat down with Louis and Harry in the lounge. She took the easy chair, leaving the couch for the boys. As they had done at Harry's house, they all had steaming cups of tea in hand.

"So, boys, what's up?" Louis' mum began, unknowingly echoing Anne almost exactly.

Harry's hand tensed where it lay right next to Louis' leg; Louis wanted nothing more than to grab that hand in his own. He forced himself to bide his time and took a fortifying sip of his mother's strong Yorkshire tea.

Fortunately, his mum was a patient woman, and she didn't push. She just gave Harry and Louis the time they needed to share their news.

After giving it some extra thought, Louis decided the best strategy was going to be just laying it all out there for his mum to process. He pulled in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. While looking his mother straight in the eye, he did what he had wanted to do mere moments earlier. He took Harry's hand in his, laying their joined hands on his thigh.

His mum raised her eyebrows curiously, once again having the same reaction as Harry's mum. She still said nothing, waiting the boys out.

"Mum," Louis finally said, "Harry and I are together." He instantly held his breath, waiting for her reaction. He could feel Harry's tension flowing from his hand into Louis', and Louis squeezed his hand comfortingly.

"Together?" his mum repeated.

Louis nodded, biting his bottom lip nervously.

"As in dating?" she went on to clarify.

He nodded again.

His mum nodded, too, slowly and deliberately, then she smiled fondly. "I was wondering if this was coming."

"That's what my mum said, too," Harry told her, speaking up for the first time since they'd settled down in the lounge to talk.

"Are you okay with this?" Louis wanted to know, still not quite sure what his mum might be feeling.

His mother took a moment to compose her thoughts. She smiled softly as she answered, "You boys have known each other a long time, so I know you didn't just rush into this. If this is what's going to make you happy, then I'm happy for you."

Louis sighed with great relief, and Harry finally relaxed at his side.

Louis' mum wasn't done, though. "You know you're family, right, Harry?"

Harry startled a little at the sound of his name. He recovered swiftly, though, and said, "Yes. Thanks so much."

"You always will be," Louis' mum continued. "You can come to me or anyone in this house for anything."

While Louis watched, Harry's cheeks turned a very bright red. It made Louis smile.

"Thanks," Harry repeated. "That's how my family feels about Louis."

Louis knew it, too. Anne and Gemma were like his second family, and he knew he could count on their support through whatever came his way.

"Thanks for letting me know what was going on," his mum concluded.

"Gemma busted us," Louis revealed. "She made us tell Anne, and Anne told us she'd tell you Harry and I were together if we didn't. So here we are."

His mother chuckled. "Well, I'll have to remember to send Gemma a thank you card."

"We'll tell her you're grateful," Louis promised.

"Now," she said, clearly about to change the subject, "Have you boys had dinner?"

Louis and Harry both shook their heads.

"My mum told us she'd hold dinner for us," Harry added.

"Well, then, you'd best head back," his mum suggested. "Do you want a ride?"

Louis remembered just how cold it was outside, and he nodded. "That would be super."

"You two get your coats back on, then, and I'll go tell Lottie to keep an ear out for the twins." She didn't even await any kind of agreement from Louis, she just headed upstairs.

Before Harry could make a move to stand up to fetch his coat, Louis placed a hand on his thigh to stop him. When Harry paused his upward motion, Louis leaned in close for a kiss.

"Mmm," Harry murmured happily. "Not that it wasn't lovely, but what was that for?"

"We did it," Louis said, unable to keep a smile off his face. "We told our families we're in love."

Harry's grin was just as big as Louis'. "We did. Well, mostly you did," he corrected himself.

"We did it together," Louis countered. "Got it?"

Harry nodded. "I got it."

"I can already hear my mum heading back downstairs. We should get going now. I'm starving," Louis announced.

"Of course you are," Harry teased.

Louis gently backhanded Harry's upper arm. "Hey!"

"I love you, Louis," was all Harry said.

"And I love you back. Now let's get going," Louis insisted. "I really am starving."

Harry just laughed as he stood to go.

* * *

Harry's mother served a simple beans and toast for dinner, but it was amazing nonetheless.

After they ate their fill, Harry and Louis joined Gemma in the lounge for a Friday night movie night.

This was an event they held as often as possible. Louis and Gemma would take turns picking a movie, then they would each try to do the best job describing the action to Harry. Harry would choose a winner at the end of the movie. There were no prizes for winning, just bragging rights--and Harry's undying gratitude.

It was Louis' turn to pick, and he chose the original *Die Hard*, but even though Louis tried his best, Harry still chose his sister as the best visual interpreter. He said she made the movie funny, and that was challenging to do.

Louis was too exhausted by the long week to try to take the title away from Gemma, and he headed home. After, of course, promising to come by the next day to spend time with Harry.

The boys shared a quick goodbye kiss right outside Harry's front door, then Louis jogged home in the windy cold, not wanting to drag his mother back out so late.

As it happened, she was still awake when he raced through the front door into the warm house.

"Hey, Boo," she greeted him.

Louis jumped in surprise at the sound of her voice, but rebounded straight away. "Mum! You scared the shit out of me!"

She pursed her lips and pointed a finger at him from her seat on the couch. "Language, Louis."

"Sorry," he said, even if he wasn't feeling particularly sorry.

"I was hoping to catch you coming in before I passed out," she went on. "Take off your jacket and join me." She patted the empty spot on the couch next to her.

Louis did as she asked, and was soon settled on the couch, sharing the warm, fuzzy red blanket with his mum.

"Girls all asleep?" Louis asked. After all, it was past eleven.

His mother nodded. "Fizzy may still be reading, but Lottie and the twins were out like a light over an hour ago."

"Good."

"So, did you and Harry have a good time tonight?"

"We watched *Die Hard* with Gemma. It was fun," he told her, smiling at the recent memory.

"I'm glad." She paused for a moment, but it was clear to Louis that she had more to say.

"What's up, Mum?" he inquired, hoping it would encourage her to share.

"Well, baby, first, I just wanted you to know how proud I am of you for coming here with Harry to tell me you two are together," she said, reaching an arm around his shoulder to squeeze him tight. "I'm so glad you trust me."

"I do," he said.

"I did have a few questions," his mother went on.

"Okay." He tried not to be nervous about what she might ask, but it was just a little bit difficult. He pulled in a deep breath to calm himself.

"It's nothing bad," his mum assured him.

Louis nodded and repeated, "Okay."

"You didn't tell me how you ended up dating," she began her questioning.

"Oh. Right." Louis had already forgotten they'd told Harry's mum how they'd gotten together, but not his own mum. "I told him on his birthday. It was his present."

His mum smiled. "That's very romantic."

"I'm just glad he feels the same way," Louis confided.

"Oh, I could have told you he did," she said. "Harry's been crazy about you since you met."

It was Louis' turn to smile. "The feeling has always been mutual."

His mother paused for a moment of thought before continuing. "Are you sure you've thought all this through?"

Now Louis shook his head. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you're eighteen, but he's only sixteen," she reminded him. "You're almost done with school, and he's not."

Louis shrugged. "That's okay. We'll work that out."

"All right." She regarded him carefully. "And you've thought about what it means to commit to someone blind?"

"Mum!" Louis was deeply horrified. "It doesn't matter to me that Harry can't see."

She pulled him in tight again. "Just one of the many things I love best about you. I know it doesn't matter to you. But you know what?"

"What?"

"Not everyone would be as understanding or willing to look past Harry's disability," his mother pointed out. "I'm sure Harry knows that."

Louis frowned. "What are you getting at, Mum?"

"You need to take care of his heart. Don't break it," she warned.

"I promise I won't," Louis vowed. "But aren't you worried about my heart?"

She pulled into a tight hug. "I know you'll be fine no matter what."

"I love him, Mum," he whispered into her ear.

"I know, baby," she whispered back. "I am so happy for you."

Louis was happy for him, too.

* * *

Four weeks in, and Harry was blissfully happy, even if he was still trying to figure out exactly how to be in this relationship with Louis. It was not always easy transitioning from best friends to more than best friends.

The start of March had brought with it bitter temperatures in advance of spring's (hopefully) warmer weather. These were days for hustling to school and back, but spending the rest of your time indoors.

As they always had, Harry and Louis alternated between Harry's house and Louis'. Fortunately, they were provided privacy at either location, so there wasn't much in the way of negotiating for one place over the other.

Harry knew Louis' room just about as well as he knew his own. Louis had long since worked hard at keeping his room clean so Harry could move about without the threat of getting hurt, and he made sure to not relocate anything Harry might need, so Harry would always know where those things were.

It was Louis' turn to host one Friday afternoon when the bitter air and icy rain caused Louis and Harry to speed back to the Tomlinsons' quickly enough after school that Harry slipped a couple times on the slick pavement.

Safely ensconced in Louis' warm room, they spent the first part of their time together fooling around on the bed. They hadn't progressed a whole lot farther than kissing and some above-the-waist touching, but Louis seemed to be okay with taking it slow if that's what Harry needed.

When they took a break, Louis moved to check his email while Harry took a moment to simply be, enjoying the feeling of knowing he had two whole days before he had to go back to his responsibilities. Not to mention two whole days to enjoy some quality time with Louis.

Harry was mid-zone-out when Louis let out a little yelp of surprise. Immediately alert, Harry questioned, "What? Is something wrong, Lou?"

He listened as Louis padded back across the carpet, then Harry felt the bed move as Louis climbed back on. Louis was silent the whole time, causing Harry no small amount of worry.

Louis sidled up to Harry and took his hand.

"What is it, Louis? What's going on?" Harry asked anxiously.

"It's nothing bad," Louis tried to assure him, though for some reason he couldn't pinpoint, Harry did not feel assuaged.

"What, then?" Harry pleaded for more information.

"Well...", Louis began slowly. "In January I applied for *The X-Factor*."

Louis' words did not track for Harry straight away. "I'm sorry. What?"

"I decided to try out for *The X-Factor*," Louis further explained.

Harry was mightily confused. "You did?"

"I was talking with some of the kids in Theatre, and we all decided to try for it. It was just a bit of fun," Louis told him.

"Okay," Harry said, sensing there was more. "And...?"

"I didn't think anything would come of it, but I just got an e-mail. I've been invited to come to the auditions in Manchester next month," Louis announced, his tone pretty equally balanced between happy and wary.

Harry didn't even know what to make of this information. He hadn't had an inkling this was something Louis was particularly interested in. He'd had fun doing the plays at school, particularly *Grease*, but Harry had thought it was just a fun pastime, not something Louis wanted to pursue in a larger forum.

"Harry?" Louis sounded worried now. "What are you thinking?"

"I...", Harry started, though he had to stop to more properly collect his thoughts. He pulled in a deep breath before trying again. "I had no idea you had a dream to be on television. To sing on television."

"We just did it as a lark," Louis said.

It was clear to Harry that Louis was trying to downplay the fact that he applied for something that could end up a really big deal without involving Harry. Harry had been under the impression that they talked about everything together; he couldn't quite believe he'd been wrong.

"It may not amount to anything," Louis continued earnestly. "I could go there and not get through the audition round."

"Then why go?" Harry asked. He didn't mean to be playing the devil's advocate, but one of them should be realistic. Shouldn't they?

"It sounds like you don't want me to," Louis noted, his tone defensive.

Harry sighed. "It's just a surprise. Why didn't you tell me you were thinking about applying?"

The rustle of Louis' shirt made Harry think Louis was shrugging. He was pretty sure he was correct when Louis admitted, "I don't know. I guess I didn't think anything would happen, and there was no point in bothering to mention it."

"Well, it looks like you were wrong," Harry pointed out. It came out a little bit harsher than he intended, but he couldn't help himself.

"Harry, do you not want me to go?" Louis requested clarification.

Harry heaved another sigh. "That's not what I'm saying."

"What are you saying?" Louis countered. If Harry didn't miss his guess, Louis was edging close to anger.

That wasn't Harry's intention. "I'm sorry, Louis. I didn't mean to make you think I don't want you to do this. I do. I just.... I just wish you had told me you were thinking about applying."

Louis puffed out a tiny bit of air, as if the wind had just taken out his sails. "I'm sorry, too," he told Harry in a soft voice. "I didn't mean to leave you out."

"Don't do it again," Harry demanded. He was trying to keep his voice light, but he meant Louis to take the demand seriously.

"I promise," Louis agreed. After a brief pause, he had another query. "So, are you okay with me going?"

Harry also took a brief pause, but finally, he nodded. "I am."

Next thing Harry knew, Louis' lips were on his, pressing firmly. Once he'd soundly kissed Harry, Louis said, "Thank you. I'll never keep anything from you again."

"Good," Harry said, smiling. "You're going to kick ass, right? Win the whole thing?"

The grin on Louis' face was all in his voice when he concurred, "Absolutely. The whole damn thing."

* * *

Louis felt like he was going to throw up. He stopped four times on the way from his house to Harry's just because he thought he was about to hurl. At least the early June morning was dark, and no one saw him walking along as if he were drunk.

When he reached Harry's house, he went straight to the bathroom, but his meagre breakfast continued to stay put.

Harry was waiting worriedly outside the bathroom door when Louis staggered out. "Are you okay, Lou?"

"I will be," Louis answered weakly.

"You need to calm down," Harry ordered in his firmest voice, reaching out to find Louis' hand, squeezing it tightly. "You are going to rock your audition."

"Promise?" Louis asked, even though he knew Harry could do no such thing.

"I know you're going to do your best, and if the judges don't put you through to Boot Camp, then they're insane," Harry declared.

"I hope you're right." Louis walked into the living room and sank into the sofa.

Harry followed behind and dropped expertly to Louis' side. Louis grabbed for Harry's hand and held on tight. He needed to be grounded right then.

"Are you still coming with me?" Louis wanted to know.

"If you still want me to," Harry said.

"Of course I do!" Louis insisted, his entire spine going hot at the thought of Harry not coming.

"Then I didn't get myself out of bed early for nothing," Harry noted.

Louis sighed with relief. "Thank God. I couldn't do this without you there."

"So, what time are we hitting the road?"

"My mum should be here any minute. She was just making sure the girls were settled," Louis told him. "You ready?"

"I think so."

Louis was glad to hear that, especially when a honking car horn piped in from outside. "I guess she got the girls sorted."

Harry's mother Anne appeared from the kitchen. "Was that a horn I heard?"

"Yes," Louis answered. "My mum's here."

"Big audition day!" Anne grinned widely. "Are you nervous, Louis?"

"Incredibly," Louis admitted.

"You're going to do a great job," she assured him. "I'll be rooting for you."

Louis offered her a wan smile--the best he could do at that point. "Thanks."

The horn sounded from outside again.

"You two had better get going," Anne urged.

While the boys busied themselves rising from the sofa, Anne walked to the front door and opened it to wave to Louis' mum, letting her know she'd been heard.

Louis handed Harry his jacket and cane from the rack, then Harry accepted a kiss from his mum--Louis got one, too--and took Louis' elbow.

And with that, they were on their way.

* * *

Manchester was huge. Louis didn't get into the city that often, and neither did Harry, so Louis passed the time in the car to the audition venue describing the city to Harry. It was shaping up to be a beautiful, sunny day, and the city looked amazing. Of course, that could also be his excitement about singing for *The X-Factor* producers.

Before they knew it, they had arrived at Old Trafford, and Louis was beside himself being on Manchester United's home turf. Harry wasn't quite as big a football fan as Louis, but he was happy about Louis being so happy.

It wasn't too hard to find the sign-in table. Once he got his number, it was time to get in the already very long queue of *X-Factor* hopefuls. He thought he would go crazy if he kept going over and over the *Hey There Delilah* lyrics in his head, so he was grateful that his mum and Harry were there to distract him. His anxiety was building by the second, the more he thought about what he was about to do.

"So, are you looking forward to being on TV?" his mum wondered aloud.

Louis shrugged. "It's kind of nerve-wracking, isn't it? So many people watching."

"That would make me nervous," Harry threw in.

Louis took a look around at the other people in line. It was pretty easy to tell who was there, like him, to audition, and who was there to support someone who was auditioning. The pale faces and anxious bouncing around were big giveaways. He was sure he looked just as obvious as everyone else. It helped, a little, knowing he wasn't alone.

"There's a guy about ten people behind us who's practicing his song," Louis told Harry.

Harry tilted his head as if listening intently for the line singer. "I hear him! He's singing that McFly song, *All About You*. He's not bad, but he's not better than you."

Louis chuckled. "Thanks." A vision of trying to hit a high note and cracking went through his head at that moment, and a wave of nausea spread through him.

He must have gone pale, because his mum was suddenly wrapping her arm around his back. "You okay, baby?"

Louis closed his eyes and pulled in several deep breaths before nodding. "I'm okay."

"You sure you want to do this?" she checked.

"I do," Louis insisted. He nestled into his mum's embrace for a long moment before slipping out of it.

At first, it had been a lark, just like he'd told Harry. He and a few of the other kids in *Grease* had decided they would apply to *The X-Factor*; maybe a couple of them would get lucky. It would be fun to audition and be on television. If they got as far as Boot Camp or Judges' Houses, they might get a little notice. They'd loved being in the spotlight in the play. This would be an even bigger spotlight.

Louis hadn't been able to keep from imagining how it would change his life to win. He could take care of his family, buy a big house and a new car for his mum, get all the toys his sisters could want, pay for college for himself, maybe Harry, too. This audition could be life changing.

Knowing there were such high stakes involved did not help dampen the nausea. He hauled in another couple deep breaths.

"How long is the queue now?" Harry asked.

Louis craned his neck to look around behind them. "The queue wraps around and around the sidewalk. It looks like a very long snake. I can't even see where the queue ends. There must be hundreds of us here to try out."

"You'll beat them all." Harry spoke with confidence. Louis felt incredibly lucky to have picked someone so supportive.

"Do you get to sing for Simon Cowell this time?" Louis' mum inquired.

"I don't think so, not unless he's here and curious to see what the competition is like this year," Louis said. "I think I'll have to make it to Boot Camp to sing for Simon."

"Isn't he pretty mean?" Harry scrunched up his nose adorably. It was one of many things Louis loved about him.

"He's just honest," Louis answered.

"In a mean way," Harry tacked onto the end of Louis' statement.

"I guess he can be," Louis acquiesced. "It's fun, though, to watch."

"It won't be fun if he's mean to you," Harry pointed out.

"How could he be mean to me?" Louis said, grinning all the while. "He's going to love me."

"Everyone does," his mum agreed, not at all biased. She wrapped her arm around his back again, squeezing him tight. He had the best mum ever.

Louis noticed a small gap between his party and the party in front of them. "Oooh, we're moving up."

Harry reached out a hand for Louis' elbow so Louis could guide him forward.

"You can't even imagine some of the clothes people are wearing to try out," Louis told Harry.

"Like what?"

"There's this girl about twenty people ahead of us who's wearing a full-on ball gown. It's all silver sparkles," Louis described. "Very pretty, but not exactly what one should be wearing at this kind of audition."

"You mean you're not wearing your ball gown today?" Harry teased, making both Louis and Louis' mum laugh.

"It was at the cleaners, so I had to settle for these jeans and Oxford shirt," Louis mock-lamented.

"Oh well. Any other outrageous outfits?"

They had to move up in the queue again, then Louis reported, "About twenty people behind us is a guy in his pyjamas. Striped pyjamas."

Harry giggled. "Maybe he was late getting up and didn't have time to change into some real clothes."

"Who knows?"

They passed the next hour or so with Louis and Jay people watching and filling a curious Harry in on what they saw. Louis' mum stepped out of line for some food, then, and they were able to pass some time eating, even if Louis could barely swallow down his sandwich.

When they got close to the entrance to where the auditions were actually happening, they made friends with the small group in front of them, trading stories about why they were there and wishing each other luck.

Before Louis knew it, it was time to sing.

* * *

Harry went backstage with Jay to wait for Louis to audition. They weren't allowed to be in the room when Louis sang, but there was a monitor set up so Jay could watch, and Harry could listen.

He would have automatically assumed that Jay was nervous, but he was left with no doubt when she grabbed his hand and held tight, just about cutting off the circulation to his fingers.

"He's going to do great," Harry tried to assure her. "He's spent weeks practicing. He knows the song cold."

"I know," Jay returned, though her voice was less than confident.

"Is he on stage yet?" Harry wanted to know.

"Not yet," Jay answered. "No wait! There he is." She gasped.

"What?" Harry asked,

"He looks amazing." Pride seeped through Jay's voice. "The outfit he picked out looks good. He looks very handsome."

Harry smiled. "I'll bet he does."

From the direction of the monitor, Harry could hear Louis introducing himself to the judges, then clearing his throat to begin to sing.

Louis sounded fantastic. Those weeks of practice were definitely paying off.

Harry had learned very young that wishing he was able to see was a waste of time. There was nothing that could be done to fix his eyes. He'd learned to cope, and by all accounts, he managed to get along incredibly well in a sighted world.

On this day, however, Harry did wish he could see. He wished he could watch his best friend--his boyfriend--try out for the biggest opportunity of his life. There weren't many moments like this that a person got to experience, after all.

Harry shook the melancholy off and focused back in on Louis' voice. He was just finishing up the song.

There was applause from the judges and the collected production people in the room Louis was performing in.

Applause also broke out backstage. Jay and Harry enthusiastically joined in. They silenced themselves quickly, though, to listen in on the judges' verdict.

Louis got three very firm yeses from the judges. He was off to Boot Camp!

It wasn't very long at all before Louis was escorted back stage. He received cheers as he walked up to join Jay and Harry.

Jay got to him first, and Harry not-so-patiently waited for his turn to hug and congratulate Louis on his accomplishment. He no doubt looked silly standing near Jay and Louis with a huge grin on his face, but he didn't care.

"So, Haz, what did you think?" Louis inquired. The smile in his voice was unmistakable. He was obviously proud of himself--as he should be.

Harry grabbed Louis up in a tight hug. When he let Louis go, he said, "You sounded great. I knew those judges would have no choice but to put you through to Boot Camp."

"Boot Camp," Louis repeated in an awed tone. "I can't believe I'm going to Boot Camp."

"I'm really proud of you," Harry continued.

Louis dropped his voice low enough that his words could be for Harry only. "Thanks for coming with me. I could never have done this without you."

Harry felt a blush creep up his cheeks. "I think you could have," he countered. "But I am happy I could be here."

"So, boys," Jay broke into their conversation. "How about we go find somewhere to have a celebratory dinner? It isn't every day that my boy makes Boot Camp on *The X-Factor*. And I know Manchester has some great restaurants."

"Sure," Louis replied. "Now that that's over, I'm starving! What do you say, H?"

"Sounds good to me," Harry said. "I'm pretty hungry, too."

"Then let's get this show on the road," Jay commanded.

Harry took a hold of Louis' elbow, ready for a victory meal. Louis more than deserved it.

* * *

Summer brought with it lazy days and warm nights. As soon as school was done, Louis and Harry spent every moment they could grab together.

Boot Camp was scheduled for July, and Louis was preparing by practicing both some singing and some dancing. Both would be equally prevalent at Boot Camp, and Louis wanted to be ready.

Harry made a good vocal coach, giving Louis advice about his singing and helping him pick songs good for his voice. It became Gemma's job to be Louis' dance tutor, helping him rehearse some moves.

A week before Louis was leaving for London found the boys walking through the park where they'd met. When they became bored of walking, they found a nice, shady tree to lay under, holding hands, occasionally kissing.

When Harry stopped the kissing suddenly, Louis knew something was up.

"Harry?" he questioned. "Is something wrong?"

Harry sighed. "I'm just going to miss you while you're gone."

"I know," Louis told him. "I still wish you would come with me."

"That would make no sense," Harry reminded him. "You're going to be busy, and you'll need to focus on getting through to the next round. I'd be a huge distraction."

"You could never be a distraction," Louis assured him, figuring it was just a little white lie. Harry was almost always a distraction, but in the very best way.

Harry laughed, though, catching Louis in his lie. As he always did. "You know I'm right."

"Okay, you can be a little bit of a distraction," Louis allowed. "But we can text all the time, and I'll call every day. I won't even be gone a week. We'll make it work."

When Harry fell silent, Louis knew there was more going on than just anticipatory loneliness. "What's going on, Harry?"

"I told you what's going on," Harry protested weakly.

Even if Harry couldn't see it, Louis couldn't help shaking his head. For Harry's benefit, he said, "No, that's not all."

This time, Harry's sigh was even deeper. Slowly, hesitantly, he explained, "What happens to us if you make it to Judges' Houses, then on to the live shows?"

Louis was genuinely confused. "What do you mean what happens with us?"

"I mean us. This. What we have," Harry explained, though his explanation did not do much to clear up Louis' confusion.

"Nothing happens," Louis said slowly, hoping he was offering Harry the reassurance he so obviously needed. "We're together. We'll stay together."

"You won't mind owning up to your blind boyfriend?" Harry went on to ask, a hint of bitterness Louis had never heard in his voice.

The question drove Louis up into a seated position. "I can't believe you'd say something like that."

Upon hearing the change in direction of Louis' voice, Harry hoisted himself upright, too. "Well, it's not exactly cool."

"Harry," Louis found himself working hard to stay calm and collected. "I have never, not from the moment we met, cared one little bit that you're blind."

"I know," Harry acquiesced. "But what if the media make something of it?" Harry's chin trembled, and his hands were shaking.

Louis paused for a moment, then grabbed Harry's hands in his own, squeezing them to calm Harry down. "Harry, I love you. I have loved you for as long as I can remember. I love every part of you. You are perfect for me exactly how you are. And anyone who doesn't get that can fuck off as far as I'm concerned. Understand?"

Harry nodded, though his chin was still trembling. "I won't hold you back?"

"No," Louis said emphatically. "The opposite. I need you, or I won't make it."

"If you're sure...." Harry didn't appear to be completely convinced, but Louis thought he'd made a good bit of headway.

"I'm positive," Louis said, throwing every ounce of firmness he could muster into his voice. For good measure, he leaned over and sealed his promise with a kiss.

* * *

July 2010

Louis traveled to Boot Camp on his own. After all, he was eighteen. He had tried once more to convince Harry to go with him, but Harry had steadfastly declined, though he swore to be reachable by phone twenty-four hours a day, either to talk or to text.

His mum had wanted to come, too, but Louis turned her down, wanting to do this on his own.

It was all very overwhelming, checking into the hotel by himself, then going over to Wembley Arena, where Boot Camp would be conducted. There were hundreds of people milling about when he arrived, all hoping--just like Louis--that they would be the next big thing.

They were kept busy all day every day, practicing songs and dance moves. Dance moves didn't get them eliminated, but not singing a song well did.

He bonded with a few of the boys who had made it through to where he had. In particular, he had gotten close to an Irish boy called Niall, and a boy from Essex called Matt. Having friends--even new ones--helped keep him centred and calm.

Louis hung in there, avoiding elimination, right up until the last performances which would decide who went to Judges' Houses and who didn't.

He was awoken the morning of the final performance by a knock on his hotel room door. Rubbing at his eyes, he blearily made his way to the door, ready to beg the maid coming way too early to clean his room later. He was greeted, however, not by a hotel employee, but by his mother and Harry.

He was awake instantly, and he threw himself first into his mother's arms, then Harry's.

"I can't believe you're here!" he cried happily, holding open the door to let them inside.

Once the door was closed behind her, his mother explained, "I couldn't let you go to the final round of Boot Camp without me being here, and I talked Harry into joining me, figuring you two would enjoy some time together."

"I thought you were worried you'd be a distraction," Louis teased, reaching out to take Harry's hand and lead him over to the desk chair.

"I decided to run the risk," Harry told him.

"And my mum can be very persuasive," Louis added knowingly.

"And your mum can be very persuasive," Harry agreed, taking the seat Louis offered.

Said mother chuckled. "Louis, what time do you need to be to the arena?"

Louis checked the schedule he'd been keeping on the bedside table. "Looks like ten."

"Then there's plenty of time for breakfast and a look round the area to pass the time until you need to sing," his mum stated.

"Sure," Louis agreed. "I just need to shower and change."

"Do you want us to wait in the lobby?" she asked.

Louis shook his head. "No. I'll just take everything into the bathroom. Won't be long."

Without waiting for any affirmation from her, Louis dug into his suitcase for a clean outfit, then made for the bathroom.

He got ready in what had to have been record time, as far as Louis was concerned.

They all went down to the hotel restaurant to eat, even if Louis wasn't sure how much he'd be able to eat, given his growing nerves.

Louis took charge of reading the menu to Harry before the waiter came to take their order.

In deference to his stomach, Louis ordered a light breakfast, just eggs and toast, while his mum and Harry ordered something a little more substantial. Harry promised to share his sausages if Louis felt like he could handle some extra protein.

While they waited for their food, they sipped tea and chatted.

"So, are you really nervous, baby?" his mum wanted to know.

"Super nervous," Louis admitted. "Everyone is so talented. Even the people who were eliminated already were all really good."

"Well, I'll bet you're the best one there," Harry said, loyal as always. "There's no way you won't make it through to Judges' Houses."

"Oh, there's a way," Louis countered. "My voice may not be strong enough or be what they're looking for."

"You just need to be your confident self," his mother urged. "If you get up there and believe you'll be put through, that will go a long way."

"I will give it my very best," he promised. The support from his mum and his boyfriend gave him an incredible shot of energy.

"You said on the phone that you've made a few friends," his mum went on. "What are they like?"

"They're pretty cool. Niall is from Ireland, and Matt is an Englishman, like me. Niall plays the guitar and leads these singalongs so we can all practise. Matt is very serious; he takes everything pretty seriously." Louis smiled thinking of his new friends who were also his competition. "I hope we can all make it through."

The waiter brought their food, then, and they tucked in.

Talking things out had eased Louis' nerves just enough that he did steal a sausage from Harry's plate and a piece of bacon from his mum's.

When they were done with their food, Louis signed for it to be charged to his room, then the three of them headed out to explore the neighbourhood.

It was a pretty day. The sky was very nearly clear. There were a few wispy clouds out, but nothing even remotely threatening. The temperature was not too hot, so it was quite pleasant to be out for a stroll.

They ended up walking along the river, Harry holding tightly to Louis' elbow, and Louis' mum on Louis' other side, seeming perfectly okay with being a third wheel.

Since the day they'd become best friends, Louis had taken great joy in being able to describe things for Harry. The Thames on that warm July morning was no exception.

"There are a ton of boats out," Louis told Harry. "Some of them are tour boats--pretty boring--but there are a few cargo boats, and even some sailboats."

"I would love to go on a sailboat one day," Harry said wistfully. "I imagine it would be fun."

"I've never been on one either," Louis noted. "When I win *X-Factor*, I'll buy a sailboat, and we'll take it out on the ocean."

Harry smiled. It was Louis' favourite thing in the world: making Harry smile. He was pleased to be starting off the day with such sweet success. Maybe that was a sign he would end the day with some success, too.

"The day is so clear, I can see the Tower of London not far away, and Tower Bridge, too," Louis continued with his description of the local sights.

"I've been to the Tower of London before," Harry commented. "Remember that trip my mum and I made with Gemma last year to look at universities?"

"Yes," Louis replied. "I was totally jealous of you, getting to come down here."

With a smirk, Harry went on. "We went to the Tower then."

"I think I remember you saying that."

"My mum arranged it so I was allowed to touch a lot of the stuff," Harry explained. "It was really cool."

"You didn't tell me that," Louis pointed out. "That *is* really cool."

"Maybe we can find somewhere else like that tomorrow, before we head back home," Louis' mum piped up. "Someplace where you can touch the artifacts."

"That would be fun," Harry allowed. "But don't go to any trouble."

"You are not trouble," she said firmly. "All right?"

"All right," Harry repeated.

Louis pulled his phone from his pocket to check the time. "It's nine-thirty."

"Time to head back?" Harry inquired.

"Nice as it is out here, I think so. I don't want to be late," Louis said.

The three made an about face to head back toward the arena, making it there in plenty of time for both his mum and Harry to wish him the best of luck before sending him backstage to prepare for his last sing.

Even though they weren't out in the audience, knowing Harry and his mother were backstage rooting for him made it easier to go find Matt and Niall to prepare for their turn at singing one last time in hopes of making it through to Judges' Houses.

It was over before he knew it. He, Niall, and Matt were all in the same line. They took turns singing, then there was nothing more to do but wait for the judges to hear the other boys, then the girls and the groups. After all that, they would make their final choices.

Louis introduced his mum and Harry to Niall and Matt, then Niall and Matt drifted off to hang out until they were called to the stage for eliminations.

When lunchtime came, Louis' mom took them back to the hotel for a lunch of sandwiches and crisps, then they went back to the arena to wait, finding an empty corner in one of the lounges. Harry and Louis' mum sat on the slightly dilapidated couch, and Louis paced.

"I'm going to get eliminated," Louis stated, suddenly absolutely sure of what was going to happen.

"Baby, you can't think like that," his mother chastised him. "You sounded amazing."

"Everyone else sounded good, too," Louis insisted. "What if they think the others were just... better?"

"Then they should have their ears checked," Harry chimed in.

Louis chuckled. "I'll make sure to suggest that to them."

"You should," Harry urged with a smile.

"All boys to the stage!" a production assistant called from just outside the lounge.

Louis hauled in a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "I guess it's time."

His mum and Harry both jumped up from the couch, each of them taking a turn at embracing him and whispering him good luck. His mother added that she and Harry would be waiting for him backstage, no matter what happened on the stage.

Louis had never in his life been more nervous than he was standing up on stage on the line of *X-Factor* hopefuls. He might have tried out for the show as a lark, but now he wanted nothing more badly than to make it through to Judges' Houses.

He held his breath as Simon Cowell called the names of the boys who were through. By the time Simon announced, "That's it," Louis had not heard his name. He was done. Eliminated. Out.

For a minute, the disappointment was so heavy he couldn't move, and he wasn't the only one. One by one, though, the boys who weren't going any further in the competition shuffled off the stage. Louis followed suit, and went backstage to find his mum and boyfriend. Surely they could make him feel better or, perhaps, commiserate with him.

It was clear that his mum and Harry had already heard the news. The minute he appeared backstage, they wrapped him up in a hug so tight it took his breath away. In a good way.

When they let him go, his mum was quick to say, "Those judges don't know what they're doing. Not if they let the best singer in the competition slip through their fingertips."

Louis sighed. "Thanks, Mum."

Harry reached out a hand to him and Louis grabbed it like it was a lifeline. Harry pulled him in for his own hug. In Louis' ear, Harry whispered, "I love you." He may have heard the worst words of his life a few minutes earlier on stage, but he felt lucky to be hearing the best words right after.

Louis wanted a few minutes to say goodbye to some of the friends he'd made over the last few days, and his mum and Harry were happy to give him that time. His mum said when he was done, she would take him and Harry out to dinner to celebrate Louis' accomplishment. He was very grateful she wasn't disappointed in him.

He was just moving toward Niall and his kin when a production assistant came into the room and made a pronouncement. "All boys and girls who were eliminated are wanted on the other side of the stage!"

"What for?" Niall called out the question on everyone's mind.

"Go to the other side of the stage and find out," the PA called back.

"I wonder what that's about," Niall said.

Louis shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Maybe they want to see who's crying and interview them," Harry suggested.

"Guess there's no other way to find out," Niall stated, grabbing at Louis' elbow. "Come on, Lou."

"Be right back," Louis yelled to his mum and Harry as Niall dragged him out of the room.

All the boys and girls who had just had their hearts broken not too long ago were gathering nervously in the space directly behind the stage. Niall and Louis joined them, everyone murmuring about just what was going on.

They didn't have to wait too long to find out. The same PA who had come around to fetch them cleared his throat and said, "When I call your name, you need to head back out to the stage for an announcement."

The assembled group hushed down to listen for the names. Louis didn't know whether to hope his name was on the list or not.

The PA called out four girls' names, then called four boys' names. Miraculously--or not?--his and Niall's names were among them, along with two other boys Louis vaguely remembered, Liam Payne and Zayn Malik.

Before they had any time to contemplate what might be going on, all eight of them were hustled out onto the stage, the girls in a line on stage right, the boys on stage left.

Louis thought he might have a heart attack waiting to find out why they'd been summoned back.

The judges kept them in suspense for a bit--Louis was sure this would make for excellent television--then Nicole Scherzinger stood up and began to speak. Eight nervous contestants held their breath as one, hoping for good news, but bracing for bad.

"Hello. Thank you so much for coming back. I know, judging from some of your faces, that this is really hard. We thought long and hard about it, and we've thought of each of you as individuals, and we just feel that you're too talented to let go of. We think it would be a great idea to have two separate groups."

Simon Cowell himself added, "We've decided to put you both through to the Judges' Houses."

There was complete pandemonium an instant after Simon spoke. The girls all hugged and kissed each other, while the boys jumped up and down ecstatically, thumping each other on the back.

"Guys!" As Simon's voice rang out, the celebration on stage lessened enough that the judge could be heard. "Guys, girls, this is a lifeline. You have got to work ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day, every single day, and take this opportunity. You've got a real shot here, guys." A wink in their direction concluded his statement. And they were left with their joy.

"I can't believe it!" Niall shouted.

Louis could not stop grinning. "That was amazing! I never thought he'd make us a group."

"A boy band," Liam corrected.

Louis had not had more than a brief encounter with Liam Payne during their days at Boot Camp, but he regarded him seriously now. "You think he means for us to be like a boy band, like Take That or The Backstreet Boys?"

Liam nodded. "I do."

"That's awesome!" Niall exclaimed with a level of enthusiasm Louis usually associated with World Cup Football. "I love boy bands!"

"It's sick," Zayn quietly agreed.

"We should go tell our families, yeah?" Liam advised. "They'll be wondering what happened."

The other three nodded and filed off the stage quickly. When they were about to split off in four different directions to share the great news, Louis stopped them, asking, "Should we plan to meet to talk about getting together to practice before Judges' Houses?"

"That's a good idea," Liam agreed.

"And you lads?" Louis looked over to Niall and Zayn.

Niall nodded. "Sounds like a good idea."

Zayn succinctly said, "Sure."

"Hotel coffee shop tomorrow morning?" Louis proposed. "Ten a.m.?"

"Works for me," Niall was first to say.

"I'll be there," Liam answered.

"Me, too," Zayn told them.

"See you tomorrow, then." Louis threw his new bandmates a quick wave before heading to the lounge to let his mum and Harry know what had happened.

He found his mother and boyfriend seated on the same sofa they'd been sat on earlier in the day. As Louis approached, he heard his mum whisper to Harry that Louis was back, and she and Harry both stood up quickly.

"So, what was that about?" his mum inquired without preamble.

"They put me and three other boys together in a group. We're going to Judges' Houses!" he declared, still over-the-moon excited about it.

"Really?" his mum said, her eyes lighting up.

"Really truly," he swore.

She wrapped him up in a fierce hug. "I am so happy for you, baby!"

When she let him go, Louis hurled himself into Harry's waiting embrace.

"Congratulations," Harry wished him, though his tone was guarded. Louis made a mental note to ask him about it later. Now, in front of his mother, was not the time.

"Thanks," Louis returned, pulling back from Harry when the hug was over. "I'm really happy. It's not what I expected to happen, but I'll take it."

"Who are the other boys?" his mum asked.

"Niall, the Irish boy I told you about, and two other guys called Liam and Zayn," Louis reported. "We're all meeting in the morning about getting some practice in before Judges' Houses."

"That's a good idea," his mother said with a smile. "Might as well see if you sound good together."

"Yep."

"So, shall we head out for that celebratory dinner?" his mum questioned. "We have much more to celebrate now."

"What do you think, Harry?" Louis inquired of his quiet boyfriend.

Harry smiled softly. "I think that sounds great." He reached a hand out for Louis' elbow, and Louis was happy to lend it.

"All right then, rock star, let's go find us a place to toast to your success." His mother headed for the door of the lounge.

"Ready, Harry?" Louis checked.

Harry nodded. "Let's go."

* * *

The sounds in the hotel room were unnerving. At home, he was used to the sounds of the creaky heater, his mum walking around the house when she couldn't sleep, and the occasional car passing outside. The wind blew through the tree just outside his bedroom window, and the sound often lulled him to sleep.

He could hear people walking up and down the hall outside the hotel room, but they were too far up in the building to hear any of the traffic on the street outside. He also wasn't used to

hearing someone else breathing in the room, although he was grateful Jay had agreed to let Louis and Harry share a hotel room unchaperoned.

Harry wasn't sure what time it was, and he didn't want to check his phone, lest the sound wake Louis up. It was probably early, however. It had been a restless night for Harry, the worry of what Louis' advancement to boy band member would mean for his and Harry's relationship keeping him tossing and turning.

Louis had been adamant that nothing would change, that he and Harry would remain exactly as they were, best friends who happened to also be boyfriends. Harry was sceptical, though. He didn't know if he thought it was possible for Louis to enter the glamorous world of television and *The X-Factor* and still want to hang out with Harry, a blind sixteen-year-old who would not fit in well in any fame scenario, not in his opinion anyhow.

He couldn't bear the thought of losing Louis. Louis was everything. If Harry was honest, when Louis wasn't individually put through to Judges' Houses, he was a little relieved. Things could go back to normal. Then the judges' decision put an end to that.

Harry wanted to be happy for Louis. He really did. It was just hard, when he believed it was a very good possibility he would lose Louis to this competition.

"Stop thinking so hard," a voice interrupted Harry's thoughts.

"Louis!" Harry's voice was shaky, taken aback by the sudden intrusion of his reverie. "You're up."

Louis' hand tugged on Harry's, and Harry smiled as Louis lifted Harry's hand to kiss the back. "Good morning, Haz. What are you thinking about?"

Harry shrugged. "Just how exciting it is to be in London and how exciting it is that you're going to be in a band."

"You were worrying," Louis countered.

"I wasn't," Harry insisted.

"Liar," Louis called him. "I can see the look on your face. You were worrying."

Harry sighed, recognising that he'd been busted.

"What were you worrying about?" Louis asked kindly.

"Nothing important," Harry fibbed. He tried to change the subject by inquiring, "What time is it?"

"It's eight o'clock," Louis informed him. "Now tell me what you were worrying about."

Harry had to admire Louis' persistence. He pulled in a deep breath. "I was thinking about you and your new band."

"Nothing's changing with us, H, just because I was put in a band," Louis stated. "I told you that last night."

"I know," Harry said.

"Do you want to come to our meeting?" Louis invited.

Harry didn't hesitate a second to shake his head. "No. That's not my place."

Louis puffed out a frustrated breath. "What can I say that would convince you nothing's going to change? I'm just going to be singing in a band. We may not even make it to the live shows."

"I'm just...." Harry paused, not quite able to put his concerns into words. "It's just.... I'm having a hard time imagining how I can fit into your life if you get through Judges' Houses and move to London for the live shows."

"Well, if that happens, you'll visit, yeah?" Louis' tone was genuinely hopeful.

"As often as I can," Harry promised. "If you want me to."

"You're not usually this thick," Louis pointed out, frustration creeping back into his voice. "I will be truly mad at you if you don't visit me if I make it to the live shows."

"Mad at me?" Harry repeated.

"Horribly mad," Louis emphasised. "I can't do this without you."

"Okay, then," Harry relented. "I will come visit you as often as I can convince my mum to let me come."

Louis pressed his lips to Harry's gently. "Thank you," Louis whispered. "Now stop worrying. Everything's going to be okay."

"I guess I'll have to take your word for that," Harry said drily.

"My word is king," Louis returned. "So, I think that's wise decision."

"Thanks."

"So, I don't have to leave to meet the lads for another hour and a half. How should we use the time?" Louis wondered aloud.

Harry didn't answer aloud. He simply snaked a hand behind Louis' neck and pulled him down for another kiss. This time, it was not so gentle.

* * *

Not much time passed between Boot Camp and Judges' Houses, and Louis spent most of that time being distracted.

He would still spend time every day with Harry, but Harry could tell that Louis wasn't entirely there. His mind was on his new venture, his band, and what they needed to do to make it through to the live shows.

One Sunday afternoon about a week after Boot Camp, Louis and Harry were hanging out in the park, sitting cross-legged across from each other under one of their favourite trees. As always, Louis was thinking about *The X-Factor*.

"Marbella, Spain," he said. He had recently found out that that's where the groups were going to sing for Simon Cowell. "Can't believe I'm going to Spain."

"It should be fun," Harry agreed.

"I wish you could come with me," Louis commented.

"Me, too," Harry lamented. "But my mum was never going to let me go to a foreign country on my own."

"You wouldn't be on your own, though," Louis argued. "You'd be with me."

Harry shook his head. "You'll be busy. It's just as well I can't go."

A beep sounded, a noise Harry knew meant Louis had received a text.

Louis was silent for a moment, then he announced, "Liam's found us a place to meet up and practise. Some friends of his family have a house just outside London, and they're going to let us use it for a week to get ready for Judges' Houses."

"Awesome," Harry returned, even though this wasn't actually what he thought, not when it meant Louis being away for an extra week on top of everything else.

"Hopefully we'll all sound good together," Louis went on, oblivious to Harry's reticence. "It would suck if they put us all together, but we sounded horrible as a group."

"You'll sound good," Harry tried his best to be supportive. No matter what happened, above all else, he wanted Louis to be happy. "The judges wouldn't have put you all together if they didn't think you'd sound good."

"I hope you're right."

"When are you going to this house to practise?" Harry asked.

The pause before Louis responded told Harry he was checking his phone. Finally, Louis said, "Liam says we can come this Sunday."

That was three days away. "So soon."

"Might as well get started," Louis pointed out. "Judges' Houses is less than a month away."

"Right."

"You'll drive down with Mum and me to the house, right?" The intensity in Louis' tone was not uncommon. It was there any time Louis felt something deeply, when he really meant what he was saying.

Nevertheless, Harry had to inquire, "Really?"

"Really," Louis confirmed. "I want to spend every minute I can with you, and I know you've met Niall, but I want you to meet the other lads, too. I think you'll really like them, and I know they'll love you."

Harry hauled in a deep breath. "If you're sure, then okay, I'll come with you. As long as your mum says it's okay, too."

"She will," Louis stated with absolute certainty in his tone now. "But we have tomorrow and Saturday before I have to go, and we can do whatever you want."

"Maybe we can go riding," Harry suggested. It was one of their favourite things to do and had been ever since that first summer when Louis made friends with Mr. Logan and got them both horse riding time.

"Absolutely," Louis concurred. "In fact, we might not have to wait until tomorrow. It's early yet. Why don't we go over there right now?"

Before Harry could voice his opinion on this idea, Louis was grabbing his hand and pulling him up off the ground. "Come on."

As always, Harry was happy to follow Louis wherever he led.

* * *

Louis' heart felt like it was going to pop out of his chest. He was beyond excited about going to meet up with Liam, Niall, and Zayn, and he was excited to hear how they sounded when they sang together, not to mention getting to join them on such a great adventure.

At the same time, he was anxious on many levels. He was worried that they wouldn't sound good together or, worse, that his voice would be the problem. He was worried that they would end up not getting along. He was worried that no matter what they did, they wouldn't make it through Judges' Houses.

In addition to all his excitement and anxiety about all things *X-Factor*, he was concerned about leaving Harry behind.

Harry was everything to him. He intended for him and Harry to be together forever, and he was reasonably sure Harry felt the same way. Up until now, they hadn't had to fight for their relationship; it had come pretty easy. Now, though, they were going to be separated, first for this Lads' Week, then for Judges' Houses, and, if the band were lucky, for the live shows. And even though all of that was temporary, that didn't keep it from being scary.

Louis was so happy that Harry had agreed to drive down to the house of Liam's family friend. Not only would it give them a few more hours together, but he very much wanted Harry to

reacquaint himself with Niall and meet Liam and Zayn--and vice versa. He wanted Liam, Niall, and Zayn to know about the most important thing in his life, and he wanted Harry to know that Louis intended to include him in everything he was doing, and there was nothing to feel anxious about. No matter how well (or unwell) *X-Factor* went, Louis and Harry were end game, full stop.

The drive took about three hours and, as always during long drives they took together, Louis described the scenery for Harry. At first, it was all countryside, with crops and animals as far as Louis' eyes could see. The closer they got to London, the more towns they drove through, with old rickety buildings and interesting people to imagine the lives of.

When they pulled up to the address Liam had sent, Louis' mum told Louis and Harry to go on in. She was going to run to a local Tesco to pick them up some food to have in the house. Louis argued that he was pretty sure Liam's mum would have taken care of that, but Louis' mother insisted she wanted to make sure they had all the staples.

Louis could tell Harry was incredibly nervous because when he took Louis' elbow as they got out of the car, he held it so tight his knuckles turned white.

"It's going to be fine," Louis tried to reassure him. "They're going to love you."

"I don't know how you can be sure of that, but I appreciate the ego boost," Harry said, his voice a little shaky.

They walked up to the front door and Louis rang the bell. Less than ten seconds later, Liam opened the door, a big smile on his face. "Louis!" he greeted him brightly.

"Hi Liam," Louis returned. When Liam's gaze shifted quizzically to Harry, Louis went on. "This is Harry...my boyfriend."

Louis had not mentioned that he was gay when he'd met with the band right after Boot Camp, so he watched Liam's face intently to see if there would be any reaction to Louis announcing he had a boyfriend. Luckily, Louis saw nothing but Liam's smile growing bigger.

Liam did eye where Harry's hand tightly held Louis' arm, but he stuck out his hand and said, "Hi, Harry. It's nice to meet you."

Louis jiggled his elbow just the tiniest bit, a silent signal to Harry that Liam had held out his hand. Harry got the hint and held out his hand. Liam, bless him, grabbed Harry's proffered hand and shook it firmly. "Come on in," he urged, stepping back to let Louis and Harry through.

The front door opened up into a small hallway. When Liam moved to walk down the hallway, Louis followed, and found Harry and himself in a lounge with a couple sofas and a couple easy chairs, all facing a large television.

Niall and Zayn were seated on one of the sofas, and they both looked up as Liam, Louis, and Harry walked into the room.

"Louis!" Niall echoed Liam's earlier enthusiastic greeting.

"Hi, lads," Louis returned brightly.

Niall popped up off the sofa. "Hey, it's Harry, yeah? I'm Niall. We met at the end of Boot Camp."

"Right," Harry remembered. "Congrats on getting through to Judges' Houses." It was Harry who got his hand out first this time, and Niall pumped it happily.

Zayn got up next to amble over to Harry. "Hi, Harry. I'm Zayn." Like Liam had, Zayn held out his hand.

Harry held out his own hand, and Zayn took it. "Hi, Zayn."

Pleasantries over, Liam pointed to the sofa Niall and Zayn had not been occupying. "Have a seat. Unless your mum is waiting outside...?"

Louis shook his head. "She's getting groceries for us, actually."

"My mum shopped, too, but the more the better," Liam commented as Louis guided Harry to the sofa.

Niall reclaimed his seat on the other sofa. With a grin, then, he asked, "So, Harry, did you come to be our fifth?"

Louis thought the blush that crept up Harry's neck and into his cheeks was adorable.

Harry shook his head. "Singing in public is Louis' thing, not mine."

"He just drove down with Mum and me to keep me company," Louis explained.

"So, have you guys been together a long time?" Liam inquired.

"Together?" Niall echoed, as if he'd just been presented with a gift. He pointed from Louis to Harry. "You guys are together?"

Harry's blush intensified as Louis answered, "We are. Six months now."

"That's awesome," Niall told them. "Congrats."

"Thanks," Louis said.

"How'd you meet?" Liam continued the questioning Niall had started.

"In a park when I was seven and he was five," Louis recounted.

"Wow, you've known each other a long time," Liam said.

"And he's still not sick of me," Louis pointed out proudly, reaching out to take Harry's hand. "Or are you?"

"Not most of the time," Harry joked.

Louis tugged on Harry's hand playfully. "Hey!"

"So, Louis, I assume you've heard we're going to Spain," Liam changed the subject.

"Yeah," Louis confirmed. "I Googled it. His house is right near the beach."

"Sick," Zayn commented softly.

"I wonder if we'll be too busy to even see the sea," Liam mused.

"I hope not," Niall said. "I'm not going all the way to a place where there's a beach and not get in a few swims."

"Will you be coming to Spain with Louis, Harry?" Liam questioned.

"No," Harry replied. "Louis' going to be so busy, I don't want to distract him."

"You should come," Niall insisted. "It's Spain."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know if my mum's going to be happy about me going, but I'll think about it."

The doorbell rang just then.

"I'll bet that's my mum," Louis declared, already moving to stand up. Since he still held Harry's hand, Harry got up with him.

Liam got up, too, and Louis and Harry trailed him to the door, which did, indeed, have Louis' mum behind it. She held three bags of groceries. "Hi boys. I come bearing sustenance."

Liam went to take the bags off her hands. "Thanks so much, Mrs. Tomlinson."

"Mum, this is Liam," Louis made introductions.

"Nice to meet you, Liam. The groceries were no problem," she told him. "So, Louis, ready to be left to practise?"

"Come in and meet Zayn and say hi to Niall before you go," Louis suggested.

His mother nodded her agreement, so while Liam took the food she'd bought to the kitchen, Louis and Harry took her into the lounge and introduced her to Zayn and reacquainted her with Niall.

"Well, boys, you have a lot of work ahead of you," Louis' mum noted. "Harry and I should leave you to it."

Louis sighed. He knew they were there for a purpose--and that they needed to get to it--but he did hate to see his mum and, especially, Harry go.

"I'll be right back," Louis informed his new bandmates, then he slid an elbow into Harry's waiting hand and walked him and his mother back to the front door.

"I'll go start the car," Louis' mum said, not too subtly giving Louis and Harry privacy to say goodbye. She kissed Louis' cheek. "Good luck, baby."

"Thanks, Mum."

Louis waited until his mother was halfway to the car before cupping Harry's face in his hands and giving him a chaste kiss. They had privacy, but not *that* much privacy. When he backed up again, he said, "I'm going to miss you so much."

"I'll miss you, too," Harry whispered, his voice small.

"You can text and call me any time you want," Louis assured him. "And I'll be done in a week. Will you come with Mum to get me?"

"If you want me to."

"Of course I do."

"You should probably get back in there or they'll think you're ignoring them," Harry pointed out.

"Right," Louis agreed. "I'll walk you to the car."

They made the short journey to the car, and Louis saw Harry carefully into the passenger side of the car. He gave him one last kiss on the cheek, then closed the door.

"See you guys next week!" he called out as they pulled away, hoping Harry heard him through the open window. He waved for his mother's benefit.

After the Tomlinson family car turned into a speck at the end of the road, Louis turned around and went back into the house, finding Liam, Niall, and Zayn all chatting in the lounge.

As soon as he walked into the room they all stopped talking.

"You held out on us, man," Niall said, his tone teasing.

"I'm sorry?" Louis batted back.

"You didn't tell us you had a cute boyfriend," Niall explained, grinning. "Or that it was Harry."

"Oh." Louis shrugged. "It's not the easiest thing to fit into a conversation with new people."

"I can imagine," Liam sympathised.

"Can I ask a question?" Zayn joined the conversation.

"Sure," Louis allowed, sitting down on the sofa next to Liam.

"How long has he been blind?"

"He was born that way," Louis answered.

Niall whistled. "That's rough."

Louis shrugged again. "He really doesn't know anything different. He has no idea what he's missing. He's amazing."

"He seems it," Liam agreed.

"So...", Louis ventured. "So, any of you have any problem with me being gay?" He looked from Liam to Niall to Zayn, challenging them to have an issue with something that was simply ingrained in him.

"Nope," Niall replied immediately.

"None," Liam added.

"Me neither," Zayn completed the set.

"Thanks," Louis told them, grateful he'd been put together with boys who seemed easygoing and accepting.

Niall cleared his throat. "So, should I get my guitar? See if this singing thing is going to work?"

"Sure," Louis returned. "Let's get started." After all, that's why they were there. It was time to get down to business.

* * *

September 2010

It felt like he was in the eye of a hurricane.

Where he sat in the middle of Louis' bed was calm. All around him, Louis was chaos.

"I don't know what to take," Louis whined for the hundredth time. "I don't know if they'll give me clothes to wear on the show, or if I'll need to wear my own."

Harry shrugged. "I guess take a few things you could wear on the show. And your mum could always bring down more clothes on the weekend, if you need them."

"That's true. Good point."

Harry listened as Louis rummaged through his closet. Occasionally, there would be the sound of an item of clothing being tossed into the bag sat at the end of the bed.

"So, will you all share a room there?" Harry asked.

"I think so," Louis answered. "I can't imagine the house is big enough for all four of us to have our own room."

"Hopefully they aren't all as messy as you," Harry commented with a smile. Despite Harry's need for things to be organised and neat, Louis had always had a problem being tidy. It just wasn't in his nature to keep things in place.

"Ha!" Louis chuckled. "If they are, that room's going to be a disaster."

"So, are you guys keeping the name you decided on when you were away at Liam's?" Harry wanted to know.

They had decided to call themselves Midnight Memories, after the nights they stayed up through the middle of the night to practice singing together during that week at Liam's. They knew, though, that they had to get the okay from Simon to go ahead and use the name--it needed to be catchy and TV-friendly.

"Simon approved it yesterday," Louis reported. "We're good to go."

"Excellent."

The sound of more things hitting the suitcase--and a few not quite hitting the suitcase--filled the room.

"You can't take everything, Louis," Harry reminded him.

"I might be in London through December, if we make it through to the final," Louis said. "That's almost four months."

Harry knew very well how long Louis could be away; it made him a little queasy to think about, if he was honest. He pulled himself together and took a deep breath before saying, "Surely they'll have a washing machine there."

Louis let out a puff of air. "You're right. Thank God I have you here to be sensible."

Louis' rummaging became a little more purposeful, and not too much later, Harry heard the zipper of Louis' suitcase being closed.

"Think you'll make it with one duffle bag of stuff?" Harry inquired.

"Well, I have the backpack, too," Louis pointed out alongside a thud by his bedroom door where he'd set down either the suitcase or the backpack in question.

"Right."

"I'll be fine," Louis assured him.

The bed dipped down just then, as Louis sat down right next to Harry, grabbing his hand. Harry adjusted himself so they could sit opposite each other.

"You'll be down every weekend, yeah?" Louis checked.

Harry nodded. "I will."

"Good." Louis paused for a moment. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"You're going to be so busy, you won't have time to miss me," Harry countered.

"I could never be too busy to miss you," Louis did his own countering.

"Are you excited?" Harry changed the subject.

"I am," Louis admitted. "But I'm also super nervous."

"You're going to be great," Harry insisted. "Singing on live TV is going to be a breeze."

Louis laughed. "Sure. It's not going to be intimidating at all to sing for millions of people."

"Nope, not even a little," Harry joked.

"Louis!" Jay's voice carried up the stairs and into Louis' bedroom.

Louis clambered off the bed and walked a few feet away to call back, "Yeah, Mum?"

"Tea's ready!"

"We'll be down in a minute, Mum!" The next time he spoke, his voice was directed at Harry instead of the hall. "Ready for some food, H?"

Harry shuffled off the bed. "Sure."

"My last tea in this house for a while," Louis noted wistfully. "Maybe a really, really long time, if we win big."

Louis' words were like a dagger to Harry's heart. They were exactly what Harry feared most. That Louis might win big. And that he might never come home.

* * *

The entire drive down to London was nerve-wracking. Even the chatter from Louis' two older younger sisters, Lottie and Fizzy, and his own sister, Gemma, didn't distract from the butterflies having a party in Harry's stomach.

He hadn't seen Louis in over two weeks. He'd texted him, and they'd talked on the phone, but Louis was incredibly busy. He had singing rehearsal, dancing rehearsal, photo shoots, and interviews. More than once, he'd had to cut his conversations with Harry short to run somewhere. Harry understood, of course, but that didn't stop it from hurting.

It was the weekend of the first live shows. Harry was traveling down to London, just as he'd promised Louis, to be there for his first live performance. Even though he was back in school, Harry was staying in the city through Monday.

He couldn't help but be worried about what it would be like to be around Louis again.

"He's going to be so excited to see you," Gemma tried to reassure him, reaching from the back seat to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. It was scary sometimes how well she could read his mind.

"I hope so," Harry said.

"I don't think there's any hoping needed," Gemma countered. "That boy adores you."

Harry felt a blush creep up his neck and into his cheeks. He was painfully aware of Louis' mum driving the car in the seat next to him. "Gemma!" he hissed.

"Well, it's true," she said smugly. "I know you can't see it, but everyone else can see the heart eyes whenever he looks at you."

The heat in Harry's cheeks grew even hotter at Gemma's reveal. Somehow, he hadn't known that Louis was quite so obvious. If he was honest, it was nice to hear.

"Are you and Louis going to get married?" Fizzy asked. She was ten years old and had recently become quite the little romantic.

Harry's blush was never, ever going away. "I don't know," he told her over the sound of Jay's chuckles.

After getting her giggles out, Jay helped Harry's case. "Fizzy, Louis' only eighteen, and Harry's just sixteen. They have plenty to do before considering being married."

"Thanks, Jay," Harry said softly.

Jay patted Harry's knee. "Any time."

It wasn't that Harry hadn't ever thought that he and Louis would get married, it was that it seemed like a fantasy or, at the very least, something that wouldn't happen for a long, long time. He didn't even know if it was something Louis would want. It was best, in fact, to just put it to the back of his mind; he had a weekend in London to get through.

The rest of the drive was passed listening to Gemma, Lottie, and Fizzy singing along to the songs on the radio. It did a lot to relax Harry, and when Jay announced that they'd arrived at their hotel, he was feeling pretty good.

They didn't stay at the hotel long. After putting their things in one room for Jay, Lottie, and Fizzy, and one room for Gemma and Harry, they piled back into the car to go over to the *X-Factor* house. Jay had texted Louis. He'd reported that he was back at the house after rehearsals, and he was anxious to see everyone and show them the house. Jay had promised to take them all out to dinner to celebrate Louis' first live show.

The butterflies returned to Harry's stomach as soon as they were underway to where Louis waited. He didn't know what to expect when they got to Louis' temporary home.

Jay parked near the front of the house, and then they all walked toward the front door.

They had not even made it halfway before Harry heard Louis' voice, along with footsteps running toward them. "Mum!" Louis' voice rang out.

Their whole little party stopped on the walkway for Louis to hug everyone. He saved Harry for last, pulling Harry tight into his arms. Into his ear, Louis whispered, "I missed you more than anyone. I'm so glad you're here."

Harry whispered back a fervent, "Me, too."

As if they'd never been apart, Louis secured Harry's hand on his elbow before bringing them all into the house. The first thing Harry noticed was the crazy amount of noise inside. There were many people talking and laughing in the lounge they walked into. Harry could hear singing coming from not too far away, as well as the sound of a television set playing somewhere.

Louis took them on a tour of the house, naming a practice room for singing, a game room, the kitchen, and, upstairs, many bedrooms. Jay gasped when Louis announced the room he and his bandmates shared and opened the door. His sisters laughed, and Gemma joined them.

"This is a mess, Boo," Jay declared.

"We cleaned!" Louis protested.

"Then you should never choose maid as your day job," Gemma commented with a snicker.

"Is it as bad as his room at home?" Harry wanted to know.

"Times four," Jay answered his question.

"We cleaned," Louis repeated, sounding a little deflated.

"I'm sure you tried," Jay assured him. "I guess a leopard doesn't change its spots that fast."

"Where are the other boys?" Lottie asked.

"Off with their families," Louis told them.

"Excellent," Jay said. "So, shall we join them and head out for dinner?"

"Sounds good to me," Louis agreed.

"Any suggestions about where we should go?" Jay went on.

"There's a Pizza Express not too far away," Louis replied. "I was thinking that would be both nice and inexpensive."

"Works for me," Jay stated. "Girls? Harry?"

They all nodded and made noises that added up to "yes."

Choice approved, they all headed out to the car and made their way to the restaurant.

After they ordered three pizzas and some dough balls to be shared around the table, Jay asked Louis a big question. "So, we've all heard bits and pieces, but now we want to hear all about your first week at *X-Factor*. Every detail."

Louis pulled in a deep breath before beginning. "It's been so crazy, you have no idea. Every minute of the day, they have us doing something. We get up every morning around seven, and when we get home, it's after eight or nine."

"You must be exhausted," Harry commented.

"You have no idea," Louis shot back.

"Tell us more!" Lottie implored with newly-twelve-year-old impatience.

Louis laughed at her energy. "Well, we practiced singing our band's song over and over and over and over, then we practiced our group number over and over and over and over. We gave interviews, did some photoshoots, filmed an advert and bumpers for the show. It was non-stop."

"But was it fun?" Jay inquired.

"It was," Louis admitted. "Even if it was exhausting."

"What's your first song?" Harry questioned.

"I guess it doesn't matter if I tell you, since we've been talking about it in interviews," Louis guessed. "We're doing Coldplay's *Viva La Vida*."

"Good song," Harry stated. "Did you get to choose it or was it chosen for you?"

"We had a list to pick from," Louis explained.

"That makes sense. I'll bet it sounds great," Harry said, smiling.

"I sure hope so," Louis wished.

At that moment, their waiter appeared with their pizza, and the hungry crew spent the next few minutes staving off their hunger.

As he bit at his first hot slice of pepperoni pizza, Harry's mind spun thinking about what Louis' week had been like.

Harry had spent the week at school. It was their first full week back, and Harry's first full week of proper college. He was not used to being at school without Louis, as Louis had been

in college before trying out for *X-Factor*, and even though the college was housed in a different building, Louis had always found a way to see Harry throughout the day, including lunch time.

The week just past had been a huge adjustment for Harry. He knew the college buildings, but not by heart, so he found himself having to learn all the ins and outs of the campus at which his classes were held.

Thankfully, though Louis was both best friend and boyfriend, Harry did have other friends at school, most notably a girl called Chloe, who took it on as her sacred duty to be around as much as she could to help Harry out, including making sure he didn't have to navigate lunch on his own.

His classes were going to be okay--or so he thought--even if he did have to educate a whole new set of teachers about the accommodations he required to be on an even field with his classmates.

To say he was stressed and exhausted by the time Jay and Gemma picked him up a little early from school would have been a massive understatement.

Yet it sounded like his week paled in comparison to Louis'. Though to be fair, Louis' week sounded like it contained about one hundred percent more excitement than Harry's. Harry wasn't being regaled by reporters or filmed for advertisements. And this was just the beginning....

"Penny for your thoughts," Louis whispered into Harry's ear, startling him into a coughing fit.

Harry reached for his drink first and sucked some down to ease his cough. Louis' hand on his back helped a lot, too. When his lungs had recovered, he needlessly pointed out, "You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry, babe," Louis said with utmost sincerity. "You looked so serious, though. I wanted to know what was going on in your head."

Harry pulled in a deep breath and took one more sip of his soda before answering, "I was just thinking about how different my week was from yours."

"You sent texts all week, but you never really said how your first week back was," Louis told him.

Harry shrugged. "It was okay. It was school, but at a different place. And with no you."

"Did you miss me?" Louis asked, a cheeky grin very evident in his voice.

Since they were sitting side by side, it was easy for Harry to backhand Louis' thigh. "Of course I did, you bugger."

"Mum! He hit me!" Louis mock-complained.

"Settle down, you two," Jay requested, though her tone was not even a little harsh. "The pizza's getting cold."

Harry and Louis concentrated on finishing their share of the pizzas that had been brought to the table. It didn't take all that long for both boys to be stuffed. Jay paid the bill while all the kids finished up.

"We should probably get you back to the house, eh, Boo?" Jay checked, clearly speaking to Louis, since she was using Louis' very favourite nickname. "We got down here a little late, and you have a big day tomorrow."

Louis sighed. "I guess."

"We'll be here all weekend," Jay reminded him. "We can come over to the studio tomorrow whenever we're allowed."

"We can't have anyone watch the rehearsals, but you can be backstage," Louis reported. "We're supposed to be over there by ten."

"Gemma has offered to take the girls around London a little, but Harry and I can meet you at the studio at ten," Jay said.

"Excellent," Louis returned. Harry heard him yawn, then.

"Yeah, it's definitely time to go," Jay proclaimed.

They all proceeded out to the car and piled in once again. Jay drove the short distance back to the *X-Factor* house, getting them all there in good time.

"I'm glad you're all here," Louis stated, his voice breaking just a little with emotion.

Harry heard Jay give Louis a kiss on the cheek before Louis climbed out of the front passenger seat. Next thing Harry knew, there was a knock on the window to his left. Harry lowered the window.

He felt Louis' breath on his ear milliseconds before Louis whispered, "I'm especially glad you're here." Louis followed his sweet words up with a kiss to Harry's cheek.

A little louder, for the benefit of the rest of the car's occupants, Louis said, "Good night, everyone! See you tomorrow!"

Gemma, Lottie, and Fizzy all called out good night wishes to Louis, then Louis patted Harry's hand where it rested on the still open window frame and issued a final, "Bye."

Harry presumed the time between Louis leaving and Jay started back toward the hotel was Jay waiting to make sure Louis got inside okay.

Harry missed him already.

* * *

Harry had breakfast with his sister and all the Tomlinsons. When they were done stuffing themselves at the hotel's buffet, Gemma, Lottie, and Fizzy headed off for a trip to the London Zoo, and Harry and Jay left the car at the hotel and hopped into a cab to head over to the *X-Factor* studio.

When they arrived at the studio not too long after ten, they were directed backstage and into a room where family and friends could hang out while their loved ones rehearsed for the first live show. The production assistant who greeted them said Louis would meet up with them as soon as he could.

Jay guided Harry to some chairs that had been set up in the corner of the waiting room, then engaged him in some almost-distracting small talk.

The production assistant had, thankfully, not been wrong. Harry and Jay had not been chatting more than fifteen minutes when a breathless Louis found them.

"You made it!" he exclaimed.

Harry felt the weight on the couch shift as Jay rose, presumably to hug Louis, so he followed suit, giving Louis a hug of his own.

"How are the rehearsals going?" Jay asked.

"Good," Louis answered. "We haven't been at it very long, though, so I expect it will get more exhausting as the day goes on."

"Are you getting excited about tonight?" Harry wanted to know.

"I am. I think we're as ready as we're going to get," Louis stated. "I am also a little nauseated, though. Just the thought of singing to that many people...." Harry imagined Louis might have shuddered a little at the picture in his mind of millions of people watching his performance.

"Are you and the other boys getting along okay under all this pressure?" Jay posed another question.

"We're good. It's definitely a little tense today, but we're getting on." Louis added, "They're actually the reason I'm back here so early. They all wanted to see Harry, and I got permission to bring him out to the rehearsal."

"Really?" Harry was truly surprised. This was not even remotely expected.

"Really," Louis confirmed, his voice bright with joy. "Will you be okay here alone, Mum?"

"I'll be just fine. I can introduce myself to some of the other mums," Jay told him. "You go, Harry, honey. Have fun."

"Ready, H?" Louis inquired.

Harry hauled in a deep breath, then held out his hand for Louis' elbow. "I'm ready."

Louis led him from the backstage area through what sounded like a long hallway and then into the auditorium proper. The sound of someone singing on stage reverberated through the large space and got louder as they got closer to the stage.

"That's Matt Cardle, right?" Harry asked.

"Yep. Good ear," Louis complimented.

"I've paid attention to the show," Harry said, smiling. He'd never actually paid any attention to *The X-Factor* before Louis got on, but now he watched it with Gemma religiously or, more precisely, listened to it.

"We're coming up on some steps," Louis warned him a few seconds before they ascended them.

Matt finished his song and applause echoed through the room as Louis guided Harry across the stage.

"We're directly backstage now," Louis explained as they walked into an area teeming with people, all moving around them at brisk paces.

They came to a stop not too long after entering the busy backstage area.

"Harry!" a voice Harry recognised as Louis' bandmate Niall called out.

"Niall," Harry returned with a smile. He knew how much Louis had grown to care for his bandmates.

Next thing he knew, he was being wrapped in a hug. He stiffened in surprise at first, but relaxed when, close to his ear, Niall said, "It's good to see you, man."

When Niall released him, Harry returned, "You, too. So to speak."

Niall chuckled over Liam's greeting, "Hey there, Harry."

"Hi, Liam."

"Glad you could make it," Zayn joined the conversation.

"I'm excited to hear you all sing," Harry told them.

"That'll be in about ten minutes," Niall commented. "We're up next."

"Are you nervous?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Not so much for the rehearsal. We've done this a hundred times already. But the live show? Yeah. Scared shitless," Niall admitted.

"I'm sure you guys will be great," Harry tried to offer reassurance.

A new male voice spoke up nearby. "Boys, you ready?" Harry assumed this was another production assistant.

It was Louis who answered, "Yep."

"Come on, then," the assistant urged. "We need to check the lighting before you sing."

"We'll be right there," Louis told him.

Harry listened as Liam, Niall, and Zayn walked toward the stage, all three of them whispering lyrics.

"I thought I'd take you down to a seat to listen, Haz. That okay?" Louis checked.

"Sure," Harry said, taking a tighter grip on Louis' elbow.

Harry was pretty sure they were retracing their steps when they walked across the stage--where Harry could hear Liam, Niall, and Zayn chatting--and down the small flight of stairs to the auditorium seats.

Louis took Harry's hand from his elbow and placed it on the back of an aisle seat which Harry was quick to ascertain was in the front row. "Will this be okay?" Louis inquired.

"Excellent." Harry sat himself down. "Go be great."

Louis leaned down to press a quick kiss to Harry's cheek, then his footsteps moved away and back up the steps to the stage.

It was a cliché, Harry knew, but his hearing was a little more acute than most of the people around him. It had nothing to do with heightened senses, but rather with his ears having to compensate for his lack of eyesight.

Since they'd met way back when Harry was just five and a half, Harry had particularly been tuned into the sound of Louis' voice. It was mesmerising, it grounded him, and it was often the calm in a storm. Therefore, it was no surprise that Harry was able to hone right in on Louis' voice as he and the rest of Midnight Memories waited for their turn to sing.

"So, lads, we ready to go?" Louis asked brightly, ever the cheerleader.

"Ready," the other three responded simultaneously.

"Niall," Louis went on, "you look a little peaky. You sure you're up for this?"

Niall must have nodded, because Louis' voice was next to speak. "Good lad, good lad."

"Liam?" Louis continued. "You ready for your solo?"

"I think so," Liam answered, though his voice was a bit shaky.

"You'll be fine," Louis assured him. Harry could picture Louis putting his hands on Liam's shoulders, a classic Louis move to offer support.

"Aren't you going to ask me?" Zayn joined the banter, cheeky Bradford accent and all.

"You good, Z?" Louis acquiesced, equally cheeky.

"I'm good," Zayn told him.

"Boys!" a PA yelled from not far from where Harry sat. "Ready to go?"

"As ready as we're going to get!" Louis yelled back.

The music kicked in shortly thereafter, and the boys started to sing one of Coldplay's biggest hits.

Not twenty seconds in, however, someone's voice cracked spectacularly. Harry couldn't be positive, but he thought it might have been Liam.

The next thing he heard was Louis yelling, "Stop! Stop! Stop!"

The music came to a screeching halt.

"Get it together, boys!" a male voice--one Harry didn't recognise at all--called out. He didn't sound angry, but he did sound rushed.

"Give us just a minute," Louis requested.

Harry could just make out the sound of someone's hitching breaths. Either someone was about to cry or someone was about to have a panic attack.

"Liam," Louis said in a calm, even voice Harry knew well. Louis had used it many, many times to help Harry through rough moments. It was odd to hear him direct that voice at someone else. "Liam, it's fine. You're fine."

"Oh my God, Louis, what if that happens tonight?" Liam asked, his voice becoming increasingly squeaky with every word.

"It's not," Louis returned emphatically. "It hasn't happened any other time we've sung this song. This is just nerves."

Harry heard Liam haul in a deep breath.

"Liam, you can do this. You're an amazing singer," Louis praised. Harry was familiar with this tone, too, this gentle, encouraging tone.

Something twinged in Harry's heart. He didn't immediately realise why, and he tried hard to shake the feeling off before it could take hold.

"You are going to do us so proud tonight," Louis continued. "Us and your family."

"Not if my voice breaks again," Liam countered.

"Even if your voice breaks again," Louis proclaimed.

That's when it hit Harry.... Louis had found three other people to focus all his love and attention on. People with whom he shared a devotion to singing. People who were all in on this amazing adventure with him. They had bonded. They had each other's backs.

So where did Harry fit in now?

By the time Harry had pulled in a few deep breaths in an attempt to hold off a panic attack of his own, the music was starting up again, and Midnight Memories was trying their song again.

This time they made it all the way through the song without any cracking voices. They sounded really good, a fact which only served to magnify Harry's anxiety. The band had a real chance. Louis might never be coming home.

A shake of his shoulder jolted him from his reverie. "Harry?"

"Hey, Louis." Harry stood up, assuming they were about to leave.

"What did you think?" Louis sounded eager for Harry's opinion.

At least Harry could be truthful; he would have lied to save Louis' feelings, of course, but he was just as happy he didn't have to. "You all sounded amazing. You're going to kill it tonight."

Louis pressed his lips to Harry's quickly. "Thank you," he whispered as he pulled away.

"What now?" Harry inquired.

"Well, we have to go to wardrobe and pick out anything we might want to add to what we've brought to wear, then we have a few interviews to give," Louis explained. "Will you be okay to wait with my mum again?"

"Sure," Harry agreed, even when his stomach dropped at the thought of being separated from Louis at this moment when Harry felt like Louis might well slip through his fingertips as the competition moved forward.

"Are you?" Louis checked. "You're a little pale, and you're not usually quite this quiet."

"This is all very overwhelming," Harry told Louis. Again, not a lie, if not the entire truth. "I'll be fine with your mum. You should probably get going." He held out a hand in anticipation of taking Louis' elbow.

As they made their way back to where Jay waited, Louis rambled a little about all of the things they had to do to be ready for the live show. Harry just nodded and made noises of agreement and sympathy, and that seemed to be all Louis needed just then.

"Mum!" Louis greeted her when they walked into the room Harry was pretty sure they'd been in earlier.

Harry could hear Jay's voice and another female voice that clearly belonged to someone Jay was talking to. Both voices stopped at the sound of Louis' voice.

"You're back!" Jay cheered. "How'd it go?"

"A little shaky at the start, but I think we've got it," Louis reported. "I have to go meet the lads in wardrobe. You and Harry will be okay on your own for a little while, yeah?"

"Absolutely," Jay replied. "You go. We'll see you when you get a break, maybe try to get some food."

"You okay, Haz?" Louis said softly.

"I'm good," Harry answered in as bright a tone as he could manage. "See you later."

"Not if I see you first," Louis joked. Then his footsteps rushed away.

Almost immediately upon Louis' departure, Jay asked, "Harry, are you okay?"

Harry sighed. It was so unfair that people could read him so easily, and he couldn't do the same.

"What is it, honey?" Jay immediately pressed on.

"It's nothing," Harry told her, not wanting to unburden himself on his boyfriend's mother. "I'm just nervous for Louis."

"Oh, me, too," Jay confided. "But they sounded okay?"

"They did," he said. "They sound really, really good together. I can't imagine they'll be eliminated early."

Jay sighed with relief. "Oh, good." She paused for just a moment before going on, "Now, since Louis seems pretty busy, why don't you and I go find something to snack on while we wait for him to be free."

It was as good a plan as anything, Harry guessed, and maybe it would even take his mind off all his worries. "Sure."

With an ease born of many years of being around him, Jay slipped her elbow into Harry's hand. "Let's go, then."

Harry allowed himself to follow her lead. Maybe he could put all his concerns to the back of his mind for a little while. He didn't truly think he could, but there was always hope. Right?

* * *

November 2010

Louis had had a feeling for weeks. Something wasn't right.

It had nothing to do with *The X-Factor*. That was going amazingly well. They had made it to Week Six with relative ease, never being in the bottom two ever. They were getting along really well. Well, he and Liam had the occasional tussle, but for the most part, they were all getting on, and he thought, especially, that their performances improved every week.

There was so much that was exciting about being on *The X-Factor*. They got to go to movie premieres, meet celebrities (who often knew who they were), and the closer they got to the finale, the more it seemed like they had a real chance to win.

One of the best parts, though, was that they had fans. Fans who were constantly at the studio, holding Midnight Memories signs and screaming any time any of the four of them came into view. Right at the moment, the group was composed of mostly girls, but there was always a smattering of boys in the crowd, too. It was simply amazing to have such support. Louis, Liam, Niall, and Zayn all recognised that these fans were the reason they'd made it so far, and they vowed to do their very best to make their fans feel they weren't wasting their efforts on an ungrateful band.

There was one fan, though, who seemed awfully distant. Since he'd been Louis' fan since Louis was seven, that fact was wildly disconcerting.

Harry had dutifully come down every weekend to be there for Louis during the live shows. He and Louis' mum were constant attendees. Lottie and Fizzy came occasionally, as did Harry's mum and sister. Louis was usually way too busy to spend much time with them, but it was still wonderful to see them in the audience, and it made him feel calm just knowing they were there.

Louis had not expected Week Six to be any different. The text he received Friday morning from Harry was still, however, not entirely surprising.

Can't come this weekend. Too much homework. Sorry. Good luck!

Sat in the audience while some of the other acts went through their paces, Louis just reread the text over and over and over, willing it to change. It remained stubbornly the same.

"What's up, Lou?" Liam asked, his presence coming out of nowhere.

After jumping what felt like a metre from the intrusion on his phone time, Louis sighed and held the screen up for Liam to see.

"Wow," was Liam's initial reaction. He dropped down into the seat next to Louis'.

"Yeah," Louis shared Liam's sentiment. He sighed.

"Do you think that's true, that he has too much homework?" Liam wondered aloud.

Louis shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, he does have to work a little harder than everyone else, but he's a quick study, and homework has never kept him from something important."

"So, you think he's lying?" Liam inferred.

"I don't know," Louis repeated. "I hope not, but I have this feeling...."

"Did anything happen last weekend?"

Louis needed a moment to think back to the weekend before. His mum and Harry had been there with Gemma, Lottie, and Fizzy. They had all screamed and yelled for Midnight Memories during their performance on Saturday, and they had all cheered on Sunday when the band made it through to another week. Louis had been able to have breakfast with all of them on Sunday morning, and everything had seemed fine. Harry had been quiet, but he often was in larger groups, so Louis didn't really think anything of it. Now, though, he wasn't so sure anymore.

"I didn't think so," is what he told Liam. "Everything seemed okay."

"Then maybe it is just homework," Liam postulated.

Louis shook his head slowly. "No, I don't think it is."

Liam stared into Louis' face intently enough that it made Louis squirm and say, "What?"

"You have a theory about why he's not coming." Liam said in a suspicious tone.

Louis sighed once more. "Last summer, he was really worried about me coming on the show."

"Why?"

Before Louis could respond to Liam's query, Aiden Grimshaw stepped on stage to perform, and Louis knew there was no way Liam would be able to hear him. He stood and gestured for Liam to follow him backstage, and they found an empty room with a couple sofas in it. They settled themselves on the one that looked comfiest to continue their conversation.

"So, why was Harry worried about you coming on the show?" Liam prompted Louis to tell him more.

"He wasn't sure there would be any room for him in my life if the band did really well," Louis explained.

Liam nodded. "I can see how he would be worried about that. This is pretty intense, and it's a whole different world from being at home and at school."

"Yeah," Louis easily agreed.

"So, you think he's still worried?"

"I think he might be," Louis lamented. "And I don't know what to do."

Liam reached a hand out to pat Louis' thigh. "You really love him, yeah?"

Louis nodded emphatically. "I can barely remember a time when I didn't."

"Then you'll figure it out," Liam predicted with a confidence Louis wished he felt.

"But how?"

Liam stopped for a moment to think. Louis guessed that he really didn't have any ideas, but he was sweet to be so supportive. Louis was just about to let him off the brainstorming hook when Liam asked, "He'll be here next weekend, right?"

"I hope so," Louis replied. "But who knows.... I thought he was coming this weekend, remember?"

"Well, when he comes, you need to take him out, go to a nice restaurant, then go back to his hotel with him. Show him how much you love him," Liam suggested. "Assure him that nothing's changed and nothing is going to change."

Louis was quite surprised. "That's a really good idea, Li. Thanks."

"Any time," Liam told him, grinning wildly.

Louis was pulling his phone from his pocket to text Harry back when Niall burst into the room. "There you two are! It's our turn!"

Liam immediately rose from the sofa to follow Niall. Instead of rising, too, Louis held up his mobile. "I'll be thirty seconds behind you."

Niall and Liam nodded, then left Louis to his texting.

It didn't take Louis long to figure out what to say.

I'll miss you like crazy, but good luck yourself with the homework. If we make it through to next week, I expect to see you next weekend. It's been too long since I've had you all to myself. Be ready. I plan to fix that.

* * *

On Friday morning, Louis got confirmation from his mum that Harry was coming down to London with her, along with Lottie and Fizzy. Louis was overjoyed that the plan he'd been pulling together throughout the week could go on as planned.

He'd clued his mum in on what he had planned, so when they all arrived in London, she dropped Harry off at the *X-Factor* house, then took the girls on over to the hotel for dinner.

Louis had managed to convince all ten of his housemates to go out for dinner and a spot of bowling, leaving him the house for some alone time with Harry.

It took Harry about two seconds to divine that there was no one else in the house. "Are we alone?" he checked, sounding quite surprised.

"Yep." Louis replied, popping his 'p.' "All the better to do this." He pressed his lips to Harry's.

Harry only accepted the kiss for a moment before backing away.

It was all the action Louis needed to know he'd been correct a week earlier. Something was definitely wrong.

"We need to talk," Louis insisted, placing his elbow right next to Harry's hand, brushing against it ever so slightly so Harry would know it was there.

The fact that Harry took Louis' elbow and allowed Louis to lead him to one of the sofas in the lounge showed Louis that, at the very least, Harry wasn't angry with him.

Louis encouraged Harry to sit down first, then asked if he wanted a drink. Harry wanted some water, so Louis fetched them both a bottle, then sat down next to Harry.

"I asked all the others to go out tonight so we could have some time," Louis explained, watching as Harry unscrewed the lid on his water, playing with the lid in his hand.

"You got them all to leave just for me?" Harry asked, his voice a little incredulous.

"I did," Louis confirmed. "It's been too long since you and I had time all to ourselves, so I begged them to let us have the house, and they were kind enough to agree."

"That was really nice of them," Harry noted, taking a sip of water. His hand shook as he lifted and lowered the bottle, belying his anxiety.

"I was going to take you to a nice restaurant, but then I thought just staying here would be cosier." Louis paused for a brief moment before going on, "I missed you last weekend."

Harry coughed and took another sip of water. "I had a few projects all due at the same time."

"I know how that is," Louis said. "But I did really miss you."

"I missed you, too," Harry admitted softly.

Louis pulled in a deep breath, then went for broke to ask, "Is that all that kept you away last weekend?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but stopped himself. He, too, hauled in a deep breath before trying again. "No," he said simply.

"Harry, please tell me what's wrong," Louis implored.

"It's nothing," Harry tried to insist.

"Haz, I've known you for over ten years," Louis reminded him. "I can tell when there's something wrong."

Harry sighed. Louis could tell Harry would rather do anything other than talk about what the real issue was. Louis pitched his voice soft and low to say, "Please, Harry, talk to me."

Harry sighed again, but then he reached his hand out to find out whether or not there was a table in front of the sofa.

"It's about twenty centimetres in front of you," Louis verbally guided him.

It was all the help Harry needed to successfully locate the table. He set his water bottle down on the table top before straightening back up and facing in Louis' direction.

Louis waited patiently as Harry cleared his throat to begin. "It's all so big," Harry said.

"What is?" Louis was confused.

"Everything," Harry tried to explain. "All this. This house, all the contestants, the show."

"I guess it is," Louis agreed, even if he wasn't yet completely sure what Harry was getting at.

"You fit," Harry went on. "It all suits you."

"What do you mean?" Louis probed, needing to get on the same page as Harry.

"You and the band, you're doing so well," Harry pointed out. "And you're perfect together. You all seem to get on, and you've almost made it to the end. You're sure to get signed."

"Is that why you didn't come last week?" Louis wondered aloud.

"I don't know where I fit," Harry lamented, his voice as small as Louis had ever heard it.

Louis reached out to take one of Harry's hands in each of his. This was both an alternative to eye contact and an effort to ground Harry. Luckily, Harry did not pull away.

"With me," Louis told him, imbuing his voice with as much gravitas as he could muster. "You fit with me."

"How?" Harry questioned helplessly. Louis was worried Harry had already convinced himself that their relationship wasn't going to hold up.

Louis once again hauled in a deep breath before beginning what felt like the fight of his life. "Harry, it doesn't matter how much success we have on the show. I don't want anything more than I want you."

"But how will that work?" Harry inquired.

"We'll make it," Louis said. "I'll make it work."

"I'm just not sure it's that easy," Harry countered.

"I'm sure it won't be," Louis agreed. "If we win--or get close to winning--there'll be a tour, an album, and a lot of press. I'll probably have to move to London. But I don't want any of it to keep you and me from being together."

"I still don't understand how we do that, especially if you have to move down here," Harry persisted. "I still have school."

Louis sighed. He'd known he had a bit of an uphill climb to fix whatever the problem was, but now.... "I was going to do this after dinner, but I guess now's the time."

"For what?" It was Harry's turn to be confused.

"Wait right here." Louis squeezed Harry's hands before letting them go.

He raced into the kitchen and threw open the cabinet where he'd hidden a small black box earlier in the day. Unless Harry knew it was there, Louis could have kept it in plain sight, but he had nosy housemates, and he figured hiding it among the canned veggies was pretty safe.

Harry was nervously worrying the edge of his jumper when Louis returned to the lounge and reclaimed his seat.

Harry wasn't the only one who was nervous. Louis knew he needed to plough ahead, though. Get them through this part.

"Hold out your hand," Louis ordered.

Harry did as he was told and held his left hand out, palm up. It shook a little, but no less than Louis' did when he lifted the box and put it in Harry's waiting hand.

A quizzical look overtook Harry's face as he used both hands to feel the dimensions of the box.

Louis didn't even wait for Harry to ask questions, he just urged Harry to, "Open it."

Hesitantly, Harry opened the box and felt inside for what its contents were. "A ring?" His voice squeaked as he tried to confirm what he'd discovered in the box.

Louis blew out a breath to calm himself, then explained, "Obviously, we're way too young to get married. It isn't an engagement ring." When Harry's face relaxed a bit, Louis went on. "It's a promise ring."

Softly, Harry repeated, "A promise ring?"

"As in, I promise I love you. I promise I want no one else. I promise that no matter what happens on *X-Factor* or with the band, I'm with you. And I promise to make this work, even when it's hard," Louis concluded the list he'd been compiling all week.

Harry fish-mouthed just a little, clearly unsure of what to say.

"Will you wear it?" Louis requested.

After the briefest moment of thought, Harry nodded and offered a smile. "Yes."

Louis reached out to take the box back from Harry. Before he moved to put it on Harry's finger, however, he had something more to say. "If I have to move to London, I want you to come to London, too, to live with me. You can come right away and finish college here or finish college at home, then move down. Once we're settled, maybe I can turn this into an engagement ring."

Harry blushed at the intimacy of Louis' words, the red intensifying as Louis slipped the simple silver ring onto Harry's left ring finger. Once the jewelry was secure, Louis leaned in to whisper, "I love you," before pressing his lips to Harry's for the second time since Harry had arrived.

Harry didn't pull away this time.

* * *

Epilogue: February 2012

"Are you sure I look okay?" Harry asked anxiously, fiddling with his cufflinks.

Louis walked over from across the room to stand right in front of Harry and fix his bowtie. "You look amazing."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Harry posed another question.

Louis knew exactly what Harry was referring to. "Absolutely. I cannot wait to introduce you properly to the world."

"Most of the world already knows who I am," Harry pointed out.

"No. They *think* they know who you are. Hints and rumours," Louis reminded him. "Today, they get to know the truth."

"And what's that?" Harry grinned widely.

"That you are a cheeky bastard," Louis teased. After a pause, he added, "Who I love more than anything in the world."

"Tell me what's going to happen again," Harry requested.

"The limo will drop us off at the end of the red carpet," Louis explained, not for the first time, but very patiently nonetheless. "We'll go from interviewer to interviewer and pose for some pictures. We'll answer the same questions over and over, then we go inside for the awards."

"The other guys will be there?" Harry checked.

"Yep." Louis appraised Harry carefully, trying to gauge if he had more concerns about the event.

Sure enough.... "Do you think they'll ask a lot of questions about me being blind?" This question was new, but clearly weighed on his mind.

"If I'm honest, I'm guessing they might," Louis answered. "But I'll be right there to help, and if it gets uncomfortable, I'll change the topic. Okay?"

"Okay," Harry repeated, though Louis could sense his hesitancy.

"Any other questions?" Louis wanted to know.

Harry had one ready. "What award are you up for again?"

Louis smiled just thinking about their nomination at the prestigious Brit Awards. "Best British Single."

"I think you'll win," Harry predicted, his smile matching Louis'.

"I hope you're right." Louis kissed Harry soundly, as if sealing the wish.

When they parted for breath, Harry sucked in a nervous breath.

"Anything I can do to make you less worried?" Louis inquired, pitching his voice low and gentle in an attempt to calm Harry down.

Harry shook his head. "I won't be less worried until we make it through this."

"It's going to be fun," Louis promised. "We get free drinks, and there will be loads of famous people there."

"You're a famous person, too." Harry smirked.

Louis felt a blush crawling up his cheek Harry couldn't see. "Well, people who are more famous than me, then."

"I won't pay mind to any of them except you," Harry assured him.

"Even if you get to meet one of the Rolling Stones?" Louis questioned his devotion.

"Well, in that case...." Harry stopped speaking when Louis playfully punched his arm.

A horn honked outside at the same moment Louis' phone emitted the sound alerting him to a text message. He guessed that the text message was telling him that the limo was there. A peek at his mobile confirmed his guess. "Car's here. Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Harry said, sucking in a huge breath.

They both threw on coats to ward off the February chill outside, well aware that they would have to leave the coats in the car to walk the red carpet. Then Louis hurried them out of their flat and into the waiting limousine.

Harry immediately reached for Louis' hand as the limousine began to make its way to the venue for the evening's awards.

Louis got a few texts all in a row, the sound of his notifications echoing through the car.

"Liam, Zayn, and Niall?" Harry hazarded a guess as to the senders of the texts.

"Yep," Louis confirmed. "They're all on the way. They should get there just about the same time as we do."

"Excellent."

The rest of the ride was silent, but it was a comfortable silence. When they arrived, the driver opened the door, and it was show time.

As planned, as they approached the first interviewer, Louis whispered to Harry, "ITV." They had agreed that it would help Harry to be prepared for who they'd be talking to.

"Louis! Hi!" the interviewer, a woman named Jane Fitzroy, called out.

"Hi," Louis returned, inwardly sighing with relief. He'd spoken with Jane many times before, as she worked for the same network that owned *The X-Factor*.

Once they were close enough, Louis gave Jane a kiss on the cheek. "How are you doing, Jane?"

"I'm just fine, Louis," she replied. "And who is this you're with tonight?"

Louis felt Harry's hand tighten around Louis' elbow. Louis placed his free hand over where Harry had his death grip going as he responded, "This is my boyfriend, Harry."

"Well, hello, Harry," Jane greeted him.

"Hi," Harry said softly.

"Is this your first red carpet?" Jane asked.

Harry nodded. "It is."

"Well, you look amazing, and I'd wager you have the best date at the awards tonight," she told him, grinning.

Harry offered her a soft smile. "Thanks, and I know I do."

"So, how long have you been together?" Jane went on.

"Officially, two years," Louis answered. "Unofficially, eleven years."

Jane's eyebrows rose at this information. "Eleven years?"

Louis nodded. "Yep."

"Well, good for you," Jane commented before continuing, "So, first Brits tonight, Louis?"

"Yep," Louis repeated. "It's very exciting."

"And you and the rest of Midnight Memories are nominated for Best British Single," Jane noted, as if he might have forgotten why he was there.

"We are," Louis said, unable to keep from beaming. "It's a real honour."

"I'll bet," she agreed. "We all love the whole album, too. Was it fun to work on?"

"It really was," Louis replied. "We had a really good time, and we're very proud of how it turned out."

Jane turned her attention back to Louis' date. "Harry, you must be very proud of Louis."

"I am," Harry assured her, still speaking softly, but a little more confidently than earlier. "He and the other boys have worked so hard to get here."

"Absolutely." She smiled widely, then said, "So, before I let you go, who are you dashing young men wearing tonight?"

"Alexander McQueen," Louis informed her. "We were very lucky they offered to dress the whole band--and our dates."

"Well, you look wonderful," she praised. "Have a great time tonight. Both of you."

Louis kissed her cheek again, then wished her, "You, too."

Jane had already turned her attention to the next act coming her way while Louis was guiding Harry back to the middle of the carpet.

"There. That wasn't so bad, was it?" Louis whispered into Harry's ear.

Harry shook his head. "Nope."

"BBC One is waving me over. Let's go," Louis suggested.

They continued to make their way slowly down the red carpet. It seemed everyone wanted to talk to Louis, and Louis was completely happy to be use the opportunity to introduce Harry to everyone.

The questioning went well, and it was their fourth interview before anyone really tried to delve into Harry's eyesight.

It was a reporter from *Time Out* magazine, a gentleman called Gavin Frith.

After Louis made his introductions, Gavin opened his interview much as his predecessors had, with greetings and well-wishes about the nomination Midnight Memories had received. It was when he turned his attention to Harry that he veered off course.

"So, Harry, what do you do?" Gavin asked.

Harry had gotten a little bit more comfortable being the subject of some questions with each passing interview, so he took this one in stride. "I'm finishing up college now, and I'm applying for university in the fall."

"Really?" Gavin sounded genuinely surprised. This immediately raised Louis' hackles and put him on alert.

"Yes," Harry said simply.

"What are you planning on studying?" Gavin went on, a sceptical look on his face.

Harry, thankfully, did not yet seem concerned by Gavin's tenor. "I haven't completely decided yet. Maybe physiotherapy, maybe law. I'm still considering all the possibilities."

"And you're doing all this blind?" Gavin questioned.

Gavin's incredulous tone finally seemed to catch Harry's attention. Bravely, Harry simply gripped Louis' elbow a bit tighter and gave another simple, "Yes."

"That seems like a lot to take on." Gavin's tone ventured into condescension.

Harry finally seemed a little perplexed by where this was going. Louis decided it was time to step in.

"Harry is amazing," he gushed, smiling proudly over at his boyfriend. "He's going to rock whichever university he picks. Mark my words." Louis glared at Gavin to make sure he was taking heed of his intentions.

Gavin appeared unsure of what exactly was happening to his interview, but then shook his head ever so slightly and shifted the conversation to the band's first CD and the clothes Louis and Harry were wearing. Louis gave clipped responses, then gladly led Harry away from Gavin and onto the next reporter.

Fortunately, the rest of the interviews went relatively smoothly, and when they reached the proper entrance to the venue, they met up with the rest of Midnight Memories and the entire group was escorted to their table together.

They got drinks and chatted while they waited for the awards to start. Louis was thrilled at how comfortable Harry was with his bandmates. Harry had been around them many times over the past year, and they'd all become close. Niall, Zayn, and Liam were all almost as protective of Harry as Louis was.

When the awards started at last, Louis grabbed Harry's hand in an attempt to calm his nerves. This was their first major award, and Louis desperately wanted them to win it. It would go a long way toward establishing Midnight Memories as more than just an *X-Factor*-produced boy band.

Harry squeezed Louis' hand and leaned over to whisper, "You're going to win. I know it."

Louis smiled at the encouragement and squeezed Harry's hand back.

Their award was near the end of the ceremony, so it was a very long time to wait, but eventually, someone got up on stage--it was all a blur to Louis--and announced that the winner of Best British Single for 2012 was...Midnight Memories!

Without thinking twice--and despite there being cameras focused right on him--Louis kissed Harry soundly in celebration. "I love you so much," Louis whispered, holding Harry's face in his hands. He kissed Harry one more time, then followed Niall, Liam, and Zayn up on to the stage.

They had agreed beforehand that Liam and Louis would speak for the band, and Louis let Liam go first. Liam took care of thanking their management, Simon Cowell, and the songwriters who had made it all possible.

It was Louis' job to thank their friends and families for hanging in there with them and supporting them every step of the way. So he did that before branching off on his own personal thanks. He knew the boys would forgive him the unplanned addition.

"I want to take just a moment here to thank someone I would not be standing here without. My boyfriend Harry." He looked down to where Harry sat in time to see a stunned look cross his face. "He has been there for me in ways I don't even think he knows, and I wanted to say in front of everybody how much he means to me. Harry, to quote five-year-old you, you're my bestest friend ever, and I can't wait for the rest of the journey with you."

Even from way up on stage, Louis could tell that Harry was blushing. His work was done.

They were led backstage, and they stayed there long enough to give a quick interview, then they were escorted back to their table for the remainder of the awards ceremony.

As Louis reclaimed his seat, he reached for Harry's hand. Leaning over, he whispered, "You were right. We did win."

Harry smiled softly. "I'm pretty sure I won, too," he returned.

Louis' grin matched Harry's. "I meant every word I said."

"I'm really your bestest friend?" Harry clarified, still smiling widely.

"Forever and ever," Louis promised. "If you'll have me."

Harry reached a hand out to find Louis' face, planting a kiss right on his cheek. "There's nothing else I want more."

"It's you and me forever, then," Louis whispered.

"I like the sound of that," Harry whispered back.

Louis had nothing else to say. He just sealed his promise with a kiss. There was nothing else he wanted more.

End (20 March 2017)

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