

Through a Mirror Dimly

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Through a Mirror Dimly

by [LadyLondonderry](#)

Summary

Louis Tomlinson, in his third year at university, does not expect nor want the roommate that is being assigned to his room.

Harry Styles, in his first year at university, has just been kicked out of one dorm and doesn't want to deal with yet another snobby, rich roommate.

They don't get along, and that's just how it is, until circumstances force them to reevaluate.

Notes

Okay, the tags are a bit scary, so I hope I haven't scared you off with them. Hello! I wrote the first outline of this fic three years ago! (it looked very different then than it does today).

My lovely, supportive, *wonderful* artist [Shanelleo](#) did the art for this, which can be found in chapter 3!

Also, listen. Read the tags. A lot of people don't, and then they say "I should have read the tags." I won't blame you if you read the tags and then decide not to read the fic. It's okay. But read the tags. This is the exception to my many fluffy fics. It is, in comparison, more dark. Read the tags.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Early September Part 1

When the alarm on his phone starts going off at nine, Louis snakes out a hand from under the deliciously warm down comforter and attempts to swipe the screen to turn it off. He doesn't succeed, not quite, and the phone ends up on the floor for all his efforts. Horrible.

Classic FM becomes a little muffled by the pillow he throws on top of it, but it does little to silence the last few notes of *The Lark Ascending*. He groans pitifully, hoping against hope for a cancelled class. It's not going to be cancelled. But he can hope.

A few minutes of listening to tinny announcers before a new song starts and Louis thinks he might be ready to face the world. He gives a heartfelt sigh and lifts the covers off of his face, the darkness turning into dazzling morning sun.

The floor to ceiling windows to his right have the drapes flung wide open. He likes them that way: it's much easier to wake up in the morning and better to let in a breeze. He had managed to snuggle himself so far under the blankets last night, however, that he hadn't even sensed the sun rising today.

It's a cloudless sky, which is unusual for England in September, but he'll take it. As someone who never remembers to bring an umbrella anywhere, a day where he doesn't end up soaked is a good day to have. There's light birdsong filtering in, but mostly he can hear the sounds of students much more diligent than himself walking the campus grounds

Slowly, he gets out of bed and stretches. Classic FM is playing something new now, maybe Bach but Louis was never good with telling composers apart. His mum has to only listen to a handful of notes to have the composer, title, and time period of the piece, but that's what he gets for having a music major for a mum.

Dressed only in his vest and pants (the top floor of the dorm means privacy even with the windows flung open), he makes his way over to the closet. The closet's about half the size of his childhood bedroom and he hasn't done anything to tidy it in about a week so clothing is strewn everywhere. He stands on a pile of rejected shirts from outfits earlier in the week as he picks out his new one, scrunching his toes in the fabric absentmindedly. Settling on skinnies (not his favourite pair because they need a wash) and a striped shirt, he wastes no time in dressing and grabbing a pair of chucks lying by the door. Judging by how long ago his alarm went off, he supposes that if he stops for coffee he'll be about ten minutes late to lecture.

As he exits the room he walks through the common area to find one of his dorm mates asleep on the couch. Typical. Niall rarely makes it to bed if he was drinking the night before (and he definitely came home shit faced). The fact that he has all limbs on the couch this time is still better than most nights. Louis gives a fond sigh and takes a moment to cover Niall with a blanket before he goes.

He stops at the Starbucks just off campus (adding five minutes there and five minutes back to his walk) and gets to class ten minutes late with a skinny caramel macchiato.

“Tomlinson,” his professor drawls. “So good of you to join us. Maybe next time we don’t need to add the coffee if it means making it to class on time, yeah?”

Louis finds his chair at a table full of girls already diligently following class procedure. “While that could be true,” he counters, “Wouldn’t you rather have late and awake students than early and drowsy?” he angles a pointed glance towards Perrie who, after less than a month of class, has already gained a reputation for how loud she snores when she falls asleep at her desk.

Their professor drops the subject, simply handing Louis a packet with a shake of his head. Louis takes a long sip of his caramel macchiato and begins diligently copying the work that others at his table have already done.

“Louis,” Jade says reproachfully. “Are you actually going to do any of this work?”

“Of course I am,” Louis argues. “Just, you know, after I’m done with my drink.” He takes another long sip, practically letting it pour down his throat, and feels it all but scald his mouth. Tea is better, and would be much preferable really, but Starbucks makes the worst tea.

The girls at his table all roll their eyes, but after patiently explaining to him what the assignment is about, conversation switches quickly (as it generally does) to Perrie’s boyfriend’s stupid decisions, and Jade’s hunt for a man, and Leigh Anne’s favourite Netflix shows.

Then back to Perrie’s boyfriend’s stupid decisions again, because Louis insists on revisiting the subject.

“You’re too good for him, you know,” he offers up with a shrug.

“If I’m too good for him, then why aren’t there guys good enough for me lining up at my door?” Perrie asks as she attempts to properly read the blue gel appearing in the blood type kit they’re trying to decipher.

“Any guys good enough for you aren’t going to be lining up at your door while you’re with another guy! Christ, Pez, that’s a dick move.”

Jesy lightly slaps his arm. “Language!” she chides. “But he’s got a point, Pez. You weren’t all up on Christian’s junk when he was dating that girl.”

“We don’t talk about her!” snaps Perrie. “But of course not, I would have looked like such a ho.”

“And any guy that tries to come on to you while you’re dating another guy is going to look just as much like a ho,” Louis concludes. He cocks his head. “Except guys aren’t called ho’s, are they? Well. Sluts, then. Wankers. Whatever. They’d look bad.”

There’s a round of giggles at the idea of calling a guy a slut. Louis cracks a smile and sits back, taking another look at the blue gel and changing most of Perrie’s answers on their sheet.

Harry: I hate this school

Gems: What happened this time

Harry: My roommate hates me

Gems: Again? Little bro. This can't be all their fault.

Harry: IT'S NOT MY FAULT! Everyone hates me from the get-go. It's like they've never met someone who doesn't own their own yacht before

Gems: I highly doubt every single person in your school owns their own yacht.

Harry: Wanna bet?

Gems: Sure. And when I win, you're going to stop complaining, you little shit. Not everyone gets these opportunities! Stop being such a stick!

Harry: A stick?

Gems: In the mud. You're supposed to be the smart one, catch up.

Gems: But listen. I'll Skype tonight, like 7ish?

Gems: Maybe later depending on work but catch u later, yeah?

Harry: Fine. I'm just going to spend all night packing anyway.

Gems: Are you

Gems: Trying to tell me

Gems: You got your arse KICKED OUT

Harry: Just of the dorm! Jesus, don't flip!

Gems: Where are you staying??? What the fuck, Haz, you can't just actively make enemies around there!

Harry: Well sometimes shit happens

Harry: I'm getting a new room assignment tomorrow. I just got kicked out of this one because my dormmate's dad is a member of parliament or some shit

Harry: Like I fucking care. He's still a wanker.

Gems: I'm forwarding these to mum so she'll send you some soap to wash that dirty mouth out with

Gems: I really do have to go, but don't think we won't talk about this tonight. I'll come over there and kick your arse myself if I have to

Harry: I'd like to see you try. I've got a blackbelt you know

Gems: You bought that at the charity shop.

Harry: Well

Gems: Tonight, baby bro. Love u

Harry: Love u too

—

“Lou please stop stealing my chips.”

Louis laughs and pops another chip in his mouth. Niall will get close to violent if you take food from him, but the most Liam does is get huffy and give you sour looks for a while.

“You’ve literally got your own chips on your plate,” Liam argues.

“Yeah but yours aren’t spicy,” Louis argues.

“Mine aren’t – you literally put those spices on there yourself!” Liam pulls his basket of chips to his chest as Louis reaches for another one. “Go get some more, and leave mine alone!”

Louis sticks out his lower lip and sits back in his seat. “Fine, if you really don’t love me any more...” he turns to Niall, who’s devouring chicken like he’s never seen food before. “Niall, switch chips with me?”

Face full, Niall shrugs and pushes his basket of unseasoned chips toward Louis. With triumph Louis exchanges them and pops another unseasoned chip in his mouth.

“You literally just – Niall! Why would you do that? Those chips have almost an entire container of seasoning!”

Niall swallows the last of what’s in his mouth with a loud gulp. “I like things spicy.”

“And he’s a true friend,” Louis adds.

Liam looks like he’s about to have a fit. A convulsion. “At least give me some of your chips now,” he reasons.

“Never!” Louis hoards the basket to himself just like Liam is currently still doing. “My precious!”

Liam looks unimpressed. Niall has more chicken in his mouth.

Louis sighs. “Fine. I’ll give you some chips. *If* you answer my question!”

“Is this going to be whether I’m a boxers or briefs person again because you’ve literally seen me-“

“None of that!” Louis waves the basket tantalisingly in front of Liam’s face. A few chips fall out. “I want to know... Who you’re interested in.”

“Who I’m-“ Liam’s eyebrows draw together. “You mean who do I like?”

“Precisely,” Louis says. “We all know Niall’s head over heels for that girl in his music theory class, but I haven’t heard you pipe up about potential soulmates in an awfully long time.” He sets the basket down. “I find it suspicious. Spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill!” Liam argues. He reaches for the basket but Louis drags it back. “Really! I just haven’t really met anybody lately, we’ve been back less than a month, and maybe I just want to focus on my homework!”

“Focus on your homework?” Niall chimes in. “Liam, I’ve seen your homework. It’s stuffed under your mattress. The only focus you’re putting into that is focus on how little you can turn in and still pass your class.”

Liam looks affronted. Louis takes pity and offers him a single chip, which he takes.

“He needs help,” Niall says to Louis. “I’ve got a girl in my life now and I think he’s taking the loneliness pretty hard-“

“You’re not even dating her! You’ve seen her twice at parties!”

“-I think he needs to be set up. Work some of your Tommo magic and get our boy out on a date.”

Louis nods sagely. “I’ve got just the girl for you, Liam,” he says.

“I don’t need a girl,” Liam moans into his hands. Nobody is listening.

“She’s a redhead in my Literature Theory class. Likes to smoke and I think she plays the saxophone-“

“This girl definitely doesn’t exist.”

“Don’t interrupt me, Liam. Anyway as I was saying, plays the saxophone. Getting a degree in Veterinary Science. Big animals, she says. Think elephants.”

“I need to get to class,” Liam mumbles, but he doesn’t get up.

“You want me to set you up on a blind date? I can do that! We can make it somewhere nice like at a Nando’s or a McDonalds.”

“Now you’re just making fun of me,” Liam says, as if Louis was not making fun of him before now.

“Of course not!” Louis flaps his hands. “Just because the first time you or Niall ever tried Nando’s was because I dragged you here when we first met, and you told me that McDonalds was for people who couldn’t afford actual food-“

“Kill me,” Liam buries his face in his hands.

“-Thus showing that you were the two poshest S.O.B.s I had ever met-“

“The McDonalds comment was pretty insensitive,” Niall mused.

“True, thank you Neil. Anyway, Liam, my point is, I’m here for you mate.”

“Sometimes I wish you weren’t.”

—

Harry doesn’t even have that much stuff to pack, seeing as how he’s been on campus less than a month, and he’s been all but expecting this to happen at some point.

Really, it’s not *his* fault that Colin is so sensitive. Because that’s what he is – sensitive. Running to his parents as soon as Harry says anything remotely impolite and getting them to complain to the school. Honestly, it’s really a shock they haven’t brought up losing his scholarship over this, but maybe since he’s the only student in his year to earn one they’re trying to keep their image up and keep him in.

The unfortunate thing is that Colin is currently in the room with him, blatantly staring at him as he arranges his clothes back into his case.

“Don’t you have a class to attend,” Harry grits out. He’s been trying to ignore Colin but, *really*, he’s just sitting there staring and it’s rather creepy. Very creepy.

Colin shrugs. He’s reclining back on his four-poster bed, as even the first years in this university are treated to the best of the best. Harry hates it. “Just admiring my hard work,” Colin says. “Do you think this means I’ll get the room all to myself now? With a father like mine I think I should have gotten my own from the start.”

No first years get their own room, as their dorms are the smallest on campus. Smallest, yet still nicer than any home that Harry and his family lived in when he was growing up. Harry rolls his eyes and manages to keep his mouth shut as he stacks his textbooks. He’s considering sleeping in the library tonight instead of dealing with one last night with Colin.

Speak of the devil. “You know, I hear people who get scholarships here tend to have some sort of mental disorder. They say the school takes pity on you to improve their reputation. What’ve you got then, bipolar? OCD? A bit touched in the head?”

It’s a ridiculous comment and Harry’s all but certain that he’s made it up on the spot, but it still takes all of Harry’s waning patience to bite his tongue from making a comment back about the daddy issues of someone with absent parents.

He knows that in the end he’d get his words back to him in a letter from the Dean about how inappropriate his behaviour is. Eventually those letters get forwarded to his parents and then he gets a much more strongly worded phone call from his mum, which is enough to quiet him.

Only three weeks of class and he’s already got this routine down pat.

It's the last class of the day, and Louis's only got about fifteen minutes left before he's home free. Lecture can be great for getting studying done (because the professor only ever reads off the power point anyway, so what's the point in paying attention?), but Louis's just so ready to get in a good stretch and eat his fill of whatever he can grab from the canteen (probably some sort of fancy pasta dish with salmon).

When they're finally dismissed, Louis grabs his bag and makes a beeline for the door. He likes to sit up front so that he doesn't have to wear his glasses, so even heading straight for the door means passing by just about everyone else in class.

"Louis! Up for a drink tonight?"

Looking to his right, Louis sees Ed jump out of his seat to keep pace beside him. "My mate's laid claim to the common room in Brunswick dorm and we're planning on doing some betting on who's the first one to get so sloshed they break a lamp."

The lamps in Brunswick dorms have glass bodies, in order to properly match the décor of the room (which Louis thinks is ridiculous. This is university. Everything is going to look horrible by the end of the year), and it's become a running joke to break the lamps on an almost weekly basis. The upside of going to such a well off university is that the lamps are always mysteriously replaced in the night, as if house elves are in charge of keeping the place looking ship shape.

"I'd love to," Louis says. "But I've got a date with a textbook and a good night's sleep for once so I'm gonna turn this one down, yeah?"

Ed gives him a look like he must be a bit thick but Louis's used to it at this point. There are some places where if you're rich enough the grades don't really matter (and Ed, as humble as he is, is due to inherit his father's international recording company so he doesn't have much to worry about in the long run).

They walk out of lecture together, Louis saying his goodbyes to several people he's in a group project with and Perrie, whom he blows a kiss to and promises to "talk more about that boyfriend of yours later" while Ed is engrossed in a game of what looks to be solitaire on his phone.

"Oh, I gotta meet up with Nora in ten," Ed says when the little alarm on his Apple watch starts going off. "Reconsider the party though, yeah? It's always a bit more fun when we've got someone who's guaranteed to start dancing on the table after drink number two."

Louis rolls his eyes and smoothly ducks out of a sideways hug from Ed. "That's not a compliment!" he calls after Ed as they turn in opposite directions.

It's just gone six thirty as he makes his way past the looming stone buildings that make up central campus. While the dorms for the older students are new and fancy, with sky high windows and designs surely compiled by some up-and-coming architect with a penchant for metal columns and high ceilings, the buildings that classes reside in are, as Ed would say,

“old as balls” and draughty in every season. They cut an imposing figure as Louis strides across the central square and toward the less inhabited south end of campus, where Beeker dorm (his own) is located.

His shadow casts long and lean under the lampposts and the sound of crickets are beginning to make themselves heard over the fading din of students. For a Friday evening it’s peacefully quiet, probably because everyone who’s chosen to go out tonight (which sometimes seems like it’s most of the campus) is either in their dorm getting ready or already out on the town (it’s a bit of a trip down to London for the real parties so campus tends to clear out quickly on Fridays and Saturdays to make way for the fun of the weekend).

Just as he’s turning onto the pavement two dorms down from his own, another set of footsteps makes itself known as someone hurries to catch up with him.

It’s almost instinct at this point to recognize the light footed gait. Louis wants to speed up, to outrun and get back to his dorm but he’s got far enough to go that it would end up being glaringly obvious who he’s running from.

He considers doing it anyway, honestly.

“Louis!” Robert shouts. He jogs the last bit and ends up right next to Louis, steps in tandem.

Louis keeps his eyes straight ahead. He’s not up for this tonight. It’s been a good day. He doesn’t want to have to deal with this right now.

“Listen- I was wondering,” Robert starts. He reaches out a hand and brushes Louis’s arm – Louis jerks away, almost as if he’s been burned, and but quickly catches himself in the act and forces his arm to remain still at his side. Robert’s clearly noticed but he doesn’t say anything.

“I just wanted to say – you know it’s nothing personal between us, right? You and me?” he looks almost pleadingly to Louis, who absolutely refuses to meet his gaze. “Like, I know this thing with our dads is tough, but-“

“He’s not my dad,” Louis grits out before he thinks.

Shit.

Shit.

He can’t do this, he’s already fucked up this simple interaction. Robert hasn’t provoked him in any way. But he can’t do this.

“I have to go,” he says bluntly, moving into a jog and angling toward Beeker dorm, cutting straight through the grass. He doesn’t hear Robert move to follow him, but he’s so intent on making it in the doors - somewhere Robert can’t follow - that his senses aren’t exactly at their most alert.

His arm burns where Robert brushed it. He feels dirty. Tainted. His hand shakes as he puts his numbers in the pinpad to unlock the door. When it buzzes and he hears the faint click of the

lock moving, he wrenches the door open and all but falls inside, letting the door fall closed behind him.

Dirty.

Shivering, he rides the lift up, anxiously pacing in the small space. The spot on his arm where Robert touched him feels like it's burning, like a poison that's spreading. He doesn't want to touch it, feels like his insides are bubbling.

When the door slides open, he jumps out and walks quickly down the short expanse of hallway. *Calm. Order. Calm.*

With shaky fingers he types in the code to his door and pushes it inward, letting out a breath when he sees the common room is deserted. After letting the door swing closed behind him and hearing the latch click, he takes off at a run for his room, opening that door and letting it slam behind him before turning the lock himself.

His room. *Safe.*

He shucks off his trainers and socks, throwing them off toward a far corner of the room. His arm feels like it's on fire, like he can feel the exact spot where Robert brushed against him. He can. Of course he can. He'll never be able to get away entirely. With frantic movements he tears off his shirt and shimmies out of his skinnies and pants, all of them going onto the floor; anything to get them away from him.

Clean, he thinks to himself, almost in a chant. *Clean. Clean. Clean. It'll be okay. Just get clean.*

He runs into the attached loo and heads straight into the shower, turning the taps as far as they can go. It's got dual showerheads, one on each side, and for a minute he's standing under two streams of freezing cold water as it takes time for the pipes to cycle through.

He stands in a daze under the beating streams as they go from freezing to so hot that his skin feels like it could melt away.

Clean.

Shakily, he grabs for the soap and goes to work furiously on his skin, starting at that spot *that burning spot* on his arm and working until the skin is raw red, working down and up his arm before going on to the rest of his body. *Clean.*

Most showers would turn ice cold by the time an hour has gone by but this one, part of the fancy new dorms, is hooked up to a system that stores so much that everyone in the building could take hot showers simultaneously and still not end up in an ice bath, as explained when Louis first moved in. This is one of those days that he takes full advantage of that fact, spending almost an hour scrubbing every part of his body until it's raw and aching and he's almost emptied an entire bottle of soap. The water, steaming hot, feels almost like it's scalding his skin and fills the room with steam until it's difficult for him to breathe. In his

haste, as normally happens, he's forgotten to switch on the fan to help clear the air. But he barely notices. He barely notices any of it.

Finally something clicks, and he steps out, rather groggy but feeling some sort of different. The towel hanging next to the shower feels dirty though, as if he's touched it. As if he's touched everything in the room. He goes for the loo closet and pulls out a fresh one, wrapping himself in it and still feeling a residual heat from the shower where the towel touches his skin, but that just means he's clean. Right?

There's clothes everywhere. Clothes on the ground in the loo, on the ground in his room that he spies as soon as he opens the door to let the steam out. Everything is dirty, things aren't where they should be. Things need to be where they should be. That's what makes everything okay. *Clean*.

Working like a man possessed and with a bit of a tremor he makes his way around both rooms picking up every piece of clothing, dumping them in the basket. Every shoe gets picked up and put in his closet, neatly. His clothes hanging in his closet are a mess as well, out of order and hanging haphazardly as he's pulled at them and flung them back up when he picks different outfits. *Straighten. Clean*. He moves them and adjusts them and puts them in an order] that make sense to him, if not to anyone else that would look in. Shoes standing tall in order by the front of the closet. Clothes straight, in order. Footie kit emptied of the clothes, placed in the basket, and the ball run under hot water in the sink until all the dirt is off. It can't be dirty. He's dirty. He can't be dirty.

His desk is terribly out of order; assignments are everywhere, textbooks thrown all over the place. It's not okay he has to do better, has to be better, has to show that he's *clean* because that's what makes things okay. Meticulously, still in his towel, he moves things around. Recycling papers, tossing food wrappers, putting the books in order from class to class. It's all necessary. It must be organized.

He hooovers. He knows he's the only student, in the whole dorm if not the whole school, with a hoover because that's what the staff is for, but it's necessary. It has to be clean *now*. One, two, three times until he feels there's nothing left of what he was earlier.

Finally, his bed. Stripping the sheets, because they somehow feel the dirtiest of all. New, fresh sheets and a new comforter and new pillowcases, with all the old going in the overflowing basket. Everything needs to be clean. He needs to be clean.

Now, with a clean room (it is clean, right?) and a basket full of laundry, Louis hangs the towel up. He fluffs his hair and puts on a pair of clean, soft pyjama shorts.

They're hidden away in a drawer in the back of his closet; three sets of completely clean and fresh pyjamas for days like today. He knows by now that this is what he needs – something completely untouched. Something his. Something clean.

On the ground floor of the dorm in a back corner is a room full of washers that sit entirely unused by the student population. Staff door to door to pick up laundry that's been left outside or sent down the chute, and who would do their own laundry with a tempting offer like that?

But that's part of the reason Louis feels so free to go to the laundry room on days like tonight. It's deserted and positively silent and now, as he loads everything into the washers and hits the start button, he's able to just sit. Breathe.

It's okay. Clean. It'll be clean. You are clean.

You are clean.

He moves to close all the curtains, because the view of the campus grounds is lovely but he doesn't want to draw attention to himself. Wants to just disappear for the night.

Especially doesn't want to be found again.

It's always inevitable. Robert knows where he is, has known all along and has made it no secret. But most of the time doesn't try to approach him. Just a few more years and he can disappear from them forever.

He sits and watches the clothes spin. It's quiet and he's clean. As clean as he can hope to be.

A little over two hours later, as he makes his way back to his own room with a basket of clean clothes and sheets, he finds a letter just inside the door to their common room.

It's still deserted, his two roommates out with whatever friend groups they've deigned to show up to, and as he puts down the basket and picks up the letter he rather wishes that they were back.

The letter is addressed to him. *Mr. Louis Tomlinson*. He slits it open and pulls out a formal looking letter that bears the school's symbol.

Mr. Louis Tomlinson,

This letter is to inform you that starting 04/10 you will be experiencing a change in rooming requirements. Another student has experienced a need to change their housing situation and as such they have now been assigned to share your room.

This student is in a class a year below yourself, and while we realise this is unusual, we insist that this is a special circumstance and that no other housing could be made available in such a short timeframe.

We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause and would like to remind Mr. Tomlinson that counsellors are available to speak to during class hours at Brunswick Hall every weekday.

Sincerely,

Dean Hartswitch and staff of Saint Albert University.

There's a scribble under the name that is very clearly done by printer rather than pen.

The date given on the note, Louis realises as he reads it, is tomorrow. Tomorrow! They've given him less than a day of warning, and expect him to be okay with it?

Shit, they don't even list this guy's name on here, he's going to know nothing about him except that for some reason he's being booted out of his old dorm. He's probably a little shit who got in a fight with a roommate who has a father with more power.

Louis has successfully avoided getting a roommate for years now and he doesn't particularly want that to change now. How is he going to function on nights like tonight when there's someone else in the room?

He's not. Shit, shit, shit.

He drops the letter on the coffee table with the assumption that Liam and Niall will stumble across it at some point when they get home. His thoughts are still racing with the information but he absolutely doesn't know what to do with it, especially not late on a Friday night – none of the staff will still be on campus at this point (which is almost definitely why they've delivered the letter so late), and this newcomer could arrive at any time tomorrow - he's probably known about this for days already. Louis curses. The feeling of being clean, separate from everything, is already fading and he doesn't want to have to face anything else this daunting tonight.

Instead he picks up his laundry and heads to his room, trying to find something else to refocus himself on.

While hanging things up in his closet he surveys the space, thinking about how two more people could honestly fit their clothes in this closet with his own, and as nice as the large space of his room is, with the empty area next to the large windows that he likes to prance around on a good day can easily fit the second bed that was removed the day after he moved in. Only people in their last year at Saint Albert University tend to be able to get singles, even with parents who will threatened and pay out the nose for their precious offspring.

Louis was lucky to have gotten a room all to himself three years ago when he started Albert Prep (from which St Albert Uni gets most of its first year students), because of a roommate with a substance abuse problem dropping out in the first month in order to switch to private tutors instead.

Niall and Liam had been there from the beginning, the three of them requesting to room together in every instance since, and it could be that the institution has a particular fondness for his stepfather Dan, or it could be that this is the only request Louis has ever pushed, or some combination of the two with a dash of pure luck, but he's spent the last three years as one of the few lucky ones with a space determinately his own.

It had to end sometime, he supposes.

Early September Part 2

Early the next morning Louis wakes up naturally from the sunlight streaming in the open windows.

Two days in a row of sunshine, he thinks as he lets out a mighty yawn and rolls over until his sheets are drawn around him in a tangled mess. *How unnatural.*

Saturdays are the best because so much of campus is spending the morning recovering from hangovers, and the early afternoon preparing to go out partying again. Louis thinks it's nice to have a routine.

He shucks off his sheets and gets out of bed, stretching and feeling the joints in spine pop.

Not bothering to get out of his pyjamas, he shuffles into the common room where, as usual, Niall is laying face-down asleep on the couch. He's snoring something terrible and Louis wonders if the fact that he's face-down is making it rather difficult to breathe.

Considering Niall's probably still rather drunk Louis takes pity on him. "Come on Neil," he says, moving in front of the couch and pushing at his shoulder to try to get him to roll over. "I don't want you to vom all down the side of the couch, let's just change positions a little, yeah?"

Niall lets out a groan that might have involved a few Irish expletives and after a moment complies, letting Louis roll him over onto his side, and immediately throws an arm over his face to block the dim sunlight filtering into the room.

"Thought that Irish blood of yours was supposed to prevent hangovers like this," Louis says. Niall doesn't deign to answer, which honestly isn't too surprising, so Louis figures the best thing to do is to let the poor boy sleep it off alone.

He moves to the small kitchenette separated by half a wall, only to find Liam there, leaning against the counter and watching the kettle like a cat waiting for a mouse to show signs of life.

"It not boiling for your fast enough, Liam?" Louis asks. Liam jumps and turns to him.

"Louis," he says, with his serious face. Liam gets a serious face that looks makes him look like a concerned father, but one who is trying to relate to his children by being young and hip.

"Liam." Louis says, trying to mimic his expression.

"Have you seen this?" Liam asks, and that when Louis notices the letter clutched in one of his hands.

Ah yes.

“I might have,” Louis says, trying to act a bit nonchalant about the situation. “Last night while you were out on the town with some mysterious stranger, you know.”

Liam doesn’t laugh, although Louis personally thinks that’s hilarious – Liam wouldn’t be caught with a mysterious stranger even if you paid him.

“So they literally just sent it last night? What the hell?” Liam looks outraged. The kettle starts to whistle behind him and Louis wonders for probably the thousandth time why rich people insist on using actual kettles on the hob instead of just plugging in an electric one like a normal person.

Louis shrugs. After a good night’s sleep he’s feeling sort of numb to the situation. It’s too late to fight it, he figures, and maybe a roommate won’t be as bad as he’s fearing. Right?

A roommate who was almost definitely kicked out of his prior arrangement. Oh god.

“Listen,” Louis says. “I know you’re concerned because you love me, Payno.” He pats him reassuringly on the shoulder. “But it is what it is, yeah? I’m just going to head to the library for a bit. Get some studying done. Avoid that awkward first meeting with the new guy.”

He turns off the burner under the kettle, since it’s going to whistle itself right out of water at this point, and picks out a travel mug from the cabinet. It’s one of a fancy set of Starbucks mugs, black with gems on the side, that Liam had gotten for Christmas the previous year (Louis had looked them up – they were 100 quid each), and adds a tea bag before pouring in the water from the kettle. Poor Liam. He only made enough for one cup of tea.

“You should really estimate water better,” Louis tells him as he sets the kettle down. He puts the lid on his mug and walks away, leaving Liam with no water and looking like he has a lot more to say.

Louis hadn’t actually had plans to go to the library, but now that he’s said it, it doesn’t feel like too bad of an idea. So he changes into some moderately appropriate clothing (an old band shirt that he found stuffed under his bed yesterday, now neatly washed and hung up) and fills up his bag with his laptop and a few relevant textbooks.

—

The letter delivered to Harry on Friday night by a runner from the main office (honestly why can’t they just e-mail like normal people?) gave Harry his new dorm address and the key codes he would need to know. No talk about who his new roommate was going to be or what time he should move in or anything of that nature.

So he waits until noon, Colin continuing to give him death glares when he deems Harry worthy of being interacted with at all. Harry just rolls his eyes when he sees Colin looking in his direction. What is it about money that makes people convinced they’re exempt from maturity?

The dorm looks to be over on the other end of campus – the nicer end, where everything is much newer and not as draughty. It’s odd because he assumed that those dorms were for

the students who had been here longer but he's not going to ask questions.

After he makes himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch (he's the only one who has any food in the shared kitchenette besides beer), he grabs his bag and the larger of his two suitcases and sets off. The sky is starting to grow cloudy and dark – so much for that nice sunny morning – and by the time he's gotten to the west end of campus it's started to drizzle. Lovely.

The letter with the pin pad codes is stuffed in his back pocket and he has to set down his bag to grasp it, feeling the rain seep into his clothes. He keys in the number combination and hears the lock click, pushing it inward and holding it open with his foot while he gathers his bags back up. He was right, these dorms are definitely some of the nicest on campus and that's saying something. It looks like there's only three suites on each floor, and considering how huge the building is, he thinks that means one suite must be the same size as his childhood home.

Idly, as he rides the lift he wonders exactly how long it's going to be before he's kicked out of this room as well. His last roommate wasn't too bad until he learned that Harry was there through a scholarship, and if he's having to move all the way across campus to what looks like the dorms of people in their second or third year, he wonders if there are even going to be many more options for him if he ends up getting kicked out of this one too.

Still, he figures perhaps he's being too hard on himself – he's only been kicked out once so far and maybe his roommate was just more of a dick than most of them.

The lift doors open and he's met with a spacious hallway, the sound of rain is rhythmic as it beats against floor to ceiling windows to his left, while to his right are three doors spaced widely apart.

He rolls his suitcase after him down to the first door and stops for a minute – should he knock? He has the code and this is technically his dorm now so it hadn't occurred to him until now but – it would be super weird if he just went in, wouldn't it?

He shucks his bag higher onto his shoulder and knocks three times on the door, avoiding the use of the gold lion-shaped doorknocker that's so entirely unnecessary.

He waits but no one opens the door, and he doesn't think there's any sound from inside at all. Finally he gives up and punches in the numbers for the door to unlock and pushes inside.

The first thing he notices is that it's definitely more spacious than his old dorm. The kitchenette to his left looks like it's actually used from time to time, which is a nice change, and straight in front of him is a common room that's minimally furnished with a large TV, two couches with a plush chair between them, a coffee table, and another long table up along the wall behind the far couch, with a few textbooks, teacups and a beer bottle. There's yet another floor to ceiling window with the curtains drawn wide to show that nice British rain pouring down.

The only sound in the room besides the buzz of the refrigerator is the soft sound of snores, from two boys stretched out on either couch. One has a bottle of beer on the carpet in front of

him while the other has an entirely full cup of tea.

Well that's two of three dormmates accounted for. Now the only question is which of the two doors opposite each other leads to his room?

Setting his stuff down, Harry goes first to the door on his left, pushing it open slowly in case there's someone sleeping inside. The room is dark but after letting his eyes adjust for a moment he sees two unmade beds and heaps of clothes and books all over the place, scattered from the two desks over the floor and even piled on what look like small landslides emerging from under one of the beds. Hopefully, he thinks, this isn't his room.

Letting that one close behind him he goes to the other side of the room – the two boys on couches not even stirring – and just as quietly opens that door. The room he sees this time around could not be more opposite than the other – there's only one bed but it's made neatly, the only reason it identifiably belongs to someone is the football themed pillowcase and sheets. There's two desks, one so neat it could be on display in a showroom and the other empty except for a sheet of lined paper on it.

Walking over to it, Harry picks up the paper (because this is his desk, right?) covered in messy pen scribbles.

To our new dorm mate in case we miss you

Welcom Hello! We're your new doorm mates! Your roommate is Louis and Niall and Liam me (I'm Liam) are in the other room!

We don't have a bed for you yet but you can just have yourse brought Niall says you can call the front desk and they can get you one. Sorry, we weren't axpecting you because we only heard about you last night.

Pleese Please make yourself at home!

Liam

Harry frowns as he read the letter. He has to call the front desk for them to bring him a bed? The front desk of where, the dorm? How has he ended up in a room without a bed?

Well, that confirms this is definitely his room at least. Harry moves back to the front hall and brings his bags in, placing them around his desk. There's definitely more than enough space for a second bed, it's just weird why they wouldn't have one in the first place. No one has a need for this amount of space, but especially not whoever this guy is – ridiculously clean bloke, that's for sure. Harry hopes they're not going to get in spats over spare socks being left around.

He double checks that the letter from earlier is still in his pocket so that he has the pin numbers available when he gets back, and makes his way out of the room. He'll make an attempt to find wherever the front desk is, and then go back for the last of his stuff. If he's unlucky he'll end up sleeping on one of those couches tonight, he figures.

After keying in the code to their dorm with his pinkie, Louis kicks the base of the door until he wedges it open enough to shoulder his way inside; his arms full of disorganized textbooks, papers, and a Starbucks cup, he walks in backwards and waits for the door to close before dropping everything (except the cup) in the doorway and continuing on into the common space.

Liam and Niall are both there, stretched out across the two couches with *Project Runway* playing on the screen. Neither of them bother looking up, and Louis huffs in annoyance. They are his *roommates*, and should definitely be showering him with attention at this point. It's a rule.

"Honey, I'm home!" he announces in a singsong voice before jumping over the back of the couch Niall is laying across. Below him, Niall groans and, with a curse, attempts to push him off but Louis is ready and snakes his arms around Niall's chest, latching on like a baby koala. A vicious, sharp-clawed baby koala.

"No, Lou, get off! I want to know who's leaving!" Niall complains, struggling as Louis tries to shimmy up to block his view.

"No such luck, Neil!" Louis shouts as he moves one arm up to try to stroke Niall's hair. He knows how Niall hates that. "I have not gotten a decent amount of attention today and that is what *you* are here for!"

Niall kicks out at him and Louis barely dodges a kick to the balls. "Go bug Liam, then! He's not done anything all day, at least I went to class! I deserve watching these models getting torn apart!"

Liam mumbles something in response and Louis looks over to see that he is more or less asleep (or at least faking it), face down on the couch. Louis rolls his eyes and extracts himself from Niall. "Yes but you take the love so much better than he does." He picks up a cushion from Niall's couch and throws it at Liam; it hits him square in the face and bounces off, but Liam's only response is to roll over so that he's facing away from them, and mumbles something else that is just as unintelligible. Louis rolls his eyes. "Also, the both of you have been sleeping all day. I'm finally freshly energized and it's only taken two cups of tea to get me here."

The response that he gets from them is minimal at best, which is about what he expected. Shaking his head as if he's somehow above their own lazy behaviour (he's not truly), he grabs his nearly-empty cup and continues into his room.

For a moment he questions if it really is his room when he enters. There's *two beds* for one thing, and two open suitcases on the ground between them. Clearly, the mysterious roommate has arrived.

His happy feelings from the caffeine buzz dissipate a little and he finds himself a little anxious. This was exactly why he had left, to let the new person get in and claim their space

without him to make things awkward, but also because someone invading his room feels more than a little intimate in ways that make him extremely uncomfortable.

Still, he knew this time would come. He sets down his cup on his desk – he notices the two desks have been moved so they once again sit against separate walls, unlike the *mega desk* he had created when he moved his stuff in a month ago – and kicks off his shoes before sitting on his bed and drawing his phone out of his pocket. With all these suitcases here, where is his roommate?

Almost instantly he gets his answer, when the closet door is opened and out steps a boy with curly hair and an armful of hangers.

The stranger stops when he notices Louis, who likewise freezes, his hand in the act of typing in his passcode on his phone.

“Hi-“ Louis starts. He’s rarely at a loss for words but in the moment all he can think of is a coming-out-of-the-closet joke and *shit he doesn’t know I’m gay this could go south so fast*.

The boy stumbles forward a little and manages to drop the hangers in his arms absolutely everywhere as he does so. “Oops,” he says rather apologetically. His voice is deep and doesn’t at all match his face, Louis thinks.

“Sorry,” the boy says, although there’s nothing to be sorry about, these are not heirloom hangers by any stretch of the imagination. Still, the boy squats and gathers them up quickly before placing them on the other bed. “I’m Harry,” he says then, turning to Louis. “I’m, um, I assume I’m your new roommate. If you’re Louis, that is.”

He pronounces it like Lewis, which makes Louis cringe. He hasn’t been referred to that way in a long time. “I- yeah. It’s Louis, actually,” he says, accenting the *-ee* sound. He doesn’t want to sound like a prat but there’s only one person who uses that name for him, and that’s a person he doesn’t want to ever be reminded of.

“Oh,” says Harry and there’s a smog of awkwardness filling the room at this point. “Well, it’s nice to meet you then Lou- *ee*,” he says, sticking out his hand for a handshake.

But now Louis’s spent a moment too long lost in his own thoughts, so when Harry sticks out his hand Louis visibly flinches back. It’s only a second before he realises what he’s done and he’s attempting to correct it, but Harry’s already seen, already registered him acting weird for no reason whatsoever.

And when Louis belatedly tries to put out his hand to shake Harry’s waiting one, Harry instead pulls his hand away and when Louis looks to his face he sees his expression has totally closed off. *Shit*.

Harry backs up and goes to his own bed, beginning to rifle through his suitcases and pull clothes out. “You know,” he says, and there’s no awkward openness to his voice like there was a minute ago. “Just because I’m not a rich twat like the rest of you doesn’t mean I’ve got some sort of poor people’s *disease*. You’re not going to get an infection just by *touching* a scholarship student.

Scholarship student? Louis frowns. Does Harry think this is something Louis already knew? “I didn’t-“ he says before Harry interrupts.

“Yeah, I saw it was fucking instinct,” Harry practically growls. “You rich cunts here think you’re better than the rest of us. You disgust me.”

“What the fuck?” Louis breathes, staring incredulously at Harry. Is this kid for real?

He’s gathered a handful of clothes and most of the hangers from his bed now and he storms into the closet. Louis watches him drop everything and then turn around to wrench the door closed behind him.

Shit.

—

Harry’s absolutely fuming, is the thing.

He’s tired, and that might be what’s lead to this, but he’s had a long day of moving his stuff back and forth across campus, of locating the front desk in the dorm (because the “front” of the dorm was a total misnomer in the end) and having to explain the issue, and having to move around all the furniture in the bedroom so that he has his own desk and so his own bed can fit (what sort of twat doesn’t even move his stuff when he sees someone new is moving in?), and throughout all of this the two guys who were asleep on the couch when he came in are *still* asleep although at some point some point apparently one of them woke up to turn the television on because he can hear it softly coming through the door.

And then this guy comes in and after scaring Harry half to death has the audacity to act like he’s somehow *better* than Harry, and that shit was why Harry got in rows with his last roommate. Why is everyone so quick to judge him?

He snaps off a text to Gemma about how she shouldn’t expect him to stay in this dorm too much longer either – Gemma really is his saving grace on days like these – and stomps around the closet for a while angrily moving things aside to put up his own clothes on one side. He doesn’t feel bad if maybe he makes one or two of them a little wrinkled.

Gems: if you get kicked out of school you’re not moving in with me

Harry rolls his eyes and pockets his phone. They’re supposed to skype in about an hour, he’ll talk her ear off about it then.

—

Louis doesn’t know what to do. He wants to make himself scarce, and by that he means just sort of hide under his bed (since the closet is taken) and never come out again. But he’s got to room with this guy for at least the rest of the year at this point, so he can’t just avoid him forever, as much as that sounds like a good idea right now.

He takes a deep breath to prepare himself before he gets up off the bed. Feeling like an idiot he walks over to his closet and knocks on the door.

“Um- Harry?” he says uncertainly.

“What,” comes the flat reply from inside. It makes Louis shiver, hearing someone angry like that makes him want to cower and run all over again.

“I- um, I didn’t know you were a scholarship student?” Louis tries, and curses himself for not having prepared something better to say, but in his defence he didn’t know anyone could sound like a prick so fast. “I just mean, like, that’s not why I, you know-“

Harry bursts out of the closet, causing Louis to jump back and catching his foot a bit in the process, making him grunt out a curse.

“You mean you could tell just by looking at me?” Harry grits out, his voice cold. “Because I’ve heard that one before, believe me. I’m so *fucking* sorry that I don’t wear designer labels, I *so* hope you’re not going to be *ashamed* to have me as my roommate.”

Louis takes another step back, his stomach dropping as he watches Harry work himself up. “No, that’s absolutely not what I was saying,” he argues weakly. He’s just so flustered, watching Harry puff up in anger is making it rather hard for him to figure out a way to diffuse the situation, if there even is a way at this point.

“Listen Louis, just-“ Harry cuts himself off, taking a breath and turning toward his suitcases again. “Just give it a rest. Let me unpack my shit in peace and maybe we can just ignore each other this year, alright?”

Louis nods. He steps back, and then again, and then hightails it out of the room. He tried, and that’s what counts, right?

When he makes it out in the common room, he finds Liam and Niall both sitting on their respective couches, and both turned – Niall practically 180 degrees – to stare at him. Shit.

“Um,” Louis wavers, a bit unsure. “So. Who won Project Runway?”

The other two continue to stare for a second before Liam says. “Not sure, to be honest. We switched to The Chase when Niall started getting angry at their use of colours.”

“It was horrible,” Niall mutters with a reflective frown. “They couldn’t tell the difference between olive green and military green.”

Liam looks like he’s seriously contemplating Niall’s words on the subject but Niall apparently has already gotten over the slight as he hops up off the couch and wanders past Louis. “Come on Lou, I’m making you an Irish Breakfast cuppa. Your favourite.”

Louis actually sort of hates Irish breakfast. It’s one of the few teas that definitely only gets worse with milk and that only says bad things about the flavour. Still, he knows that Niall only willingly makes him tea when he thinks Louis needs some comforting, which really only confirms that the two of them heard absolutely everything that went on between him and Harry.

Unfortunate.

They stand in silence in the kitchen as Niall fills the kettle (the ridiculous non-electric kettle) and sets it on the hob. He busies himself for another minute turning on the fan above the hob and getting out a mug from the shelf and a bag of his special Blarney Irish Breakfast tea.

Louis leans against the counter and thinks about the dishes in the sink that he needs to do. He wonders if Harry will find a way to yell at him for that too.

Finally Niall turns to him. "So."

Louis nods. "So."

Niall rolls his eyes. "Seems a bit... stick-up-the-arse, I'd say."

Louis cracks a smile. "Is that a technical term, Nialler?"

"It certainly is," Niall says with utmost seriousness. "Come on mate, what has him all angry? I haven't even met him yet but I feel like I need to be prepared."

"I don't-" Louis sighs. He realises the fan above the hob might be more so that they can speak without the whole dorm hearing them, and appreciates the fact that Niall thought of it. "I don't know, honestly. I think he sort of- assumed I was going to be like his last dorm mate? Who is probably a total dick, after listening to Harry talk about what he seems to think I'm like. But then I just kept making it worse! And you know me, I'm not much of a... touchy person to start with."

"Emotionally touchy? You definitely are. Could cry at anything. Physically touchy? You've got a point." Niall nods sagely. "I remember when you slapped me the first time I tried to share a bed with you."

Louis's full on smiling now. "Yeah well, you also snore. So."

Niall grins. "Don't think that's why you pushed me out of bed, but nice try. Anyway, so you're telling me all that yelling was just one big misunderstanding?"

Louis pauses. "I- I think so, yeah. I tried to make it better though, and just managed to piss him off even more now. He might barricade himself in the closet soon."

Niall gives Louis a look like it's physically paining him not to crack a joke at that.

"I know," agrees Louis.

"Well," says Niall. "Just give him a few days. I'm sure he'll cool down. Sounds like he's just got a bit of a temper going on."

Mid September

Harry does not cool down.

To the contrary, he seems to stay at about that exact level of anger for days, at least when he sees Louis, and Louis starts to beg for their interactions to simply be silent ones instead of ones where Harry interprets yet another one of his actions as some sort of affront against the common man.

It's as he's coming in the door after a full morning of class that he overhears Harry talking to someone in their room.

"I dunno Gems, he just really hates me, okay? I don't know what the hell I've done to make him hate me."

Louis lets the door shut quietly behind him. He remembers Harry huffily going out to the common room one night when someone called him on Skype, and from the bit of conversation he heard then, this Gems might be the same person.

A tinny voice sounds says something next that Louis can't make out, and then Harry's saying, "No, he's definitely just as bad as Colin was. Just as much of a stuck-up prat. The only difference is Louis hasn't called his daddy on me. Yet."

Louis rolls his eyes so hard he might sprain something. He hates Harry, does he? Well he might start to, if he hears much more of this.

He tries to drown Harry's conversation out as he goes to put the kettle on, and only catches snippets of the things that Harry is raging on, before whomever is on the other line manages to redirect the conversation to his classes. Harry's clearly happier on this subject, and starts a long monologue on the best parts of the history class he's just come from. Louis hears bits and pieces of how the expansion of the Ottoman Empire affected the rise of Christianity but for the most part he's drowning out the conversation with reading BuzzFeed articles on his phone as he waits for his water.

Just as the kettle is getting fussy, the beeps of the pin pad go off and the door is being flung open with an exuberant Niall entering the room.

"I'm home!" he singsongs, before turning and spotting Louis to his left. "Hey! Guess what we learned to do in class today? Well honestly I don't really know what we learned but I managed to hack my way into the P.A. system in Bronx House next door – you know, the new one that was just built last year – and I played fart sounds over their speakers for almost ten minutes before I got kicked out!" he laughs uproariously, slapping Louis on the back, and proceeds to grab a bag of shrimp crisps from the cupboards behind him.

Louis shakes his head, taking the kettle off heat and finally pouring the cup for himself.

“Niall!” Harry calls from the other room, startling Louis into almost pouring water on himself. “Niall, get in here! You promised you’d teach me how to remix my voice! Get in!”

Louis frowns. Since when did the two of them get so buddy-buddy? How did Niall manage to bypass Harry’s anger at what Louis is starting to think must be everybody on campus?

“Yeah Harry, just a second!” Niall calls. He turns to offer Louis a shrimp crisp from his bag, which Louis turns down (regretting ever showing Niall that international shop because the common room perpetually smells like shrimp now). “We’ll continue this later,” Niall tells him with a serious face, as if their conversation had been more than talk of farts.

He takes the bag with him into Harry and Louis’s room, which makes Louis want to gag because this means his *room* is going to smell like shrimp too.

He doesn’t really feel like hanging around much now with two different people in his room, and he’s only got about an hour left until his next class anyway, but he doesn’t want to spend more money eating out and his stomach is being quite demanding.

He goes through the refrigerator looking for something edible. He hasn’t gone to the shops for anything since the first week of classes and so it’s mostly full of Liam’s takeaway boxes at this point (because Niall has never *not* finished his food), and some expired milk, which is why he’s taking his tea black at the moment. He really needs to go shopping.

Pulling out the drawer at the bottom in hopes that he’s still got at least an apple or something he discovers – to his surprise – that it’s full of fresh fruit! That’s definitely not his. Liam eats almost nothing but takeaway and when Niall cooks at home he usually gets Blue Apron delivered.

Which means this must be Harry’s. It figures, really. He keeps going on and on about how he’s a scholarship student, so it would make sense that he doesn’t have the money for the fancy meals that the school offers or the constant restaurant dining that most students go for.

Well, unlike with Liam and Niall, Louis thinks taking something of Harry’s would mean sudden death if he were to ever find out. Come to think of it – he closes the drawer with a bang, just in case Harry unexpectedly walks out and gets the wrong idea. It would be just his luck, really.

He can hear Harry and Niall talking excitedly in the other room. Niall’s Music Tech classes are all that he’s ever wanted and Louis figures having someone to talk excitedly about them with is a gift from heaven for him. He’s just still sort of... surprised? And maybe disappointed that he’s made friends with Harry so quickly. Harry’s his own roommate after all. Maybe he can convince Liam to switch with Harry so he can have a roommate who doesn’t have some sort of death wish against him.

In the end, he grabs the last half-empty box of Weetabix out of the cupboard (because it’s his last-resort cereal after eating through all of his Coco Pops) and tea mug and heads out the door.

“Who was out there with you?” Harry asks. He’s sitting at his desk with his beat up old clunky laptop on his legs as Niall lounges on his bed. Niall may have finally stopped laughing about the fart prank, but he seems to remember again and burst into another round of giggles about every ten minutes, so it’s hard to tell.

“Hm?” Niall asks distractedly. He’s got his Alienware laptop in front of him and has been messing with a recording of Harry’s voice to make him sound like Adele ‘for science’. “Oh, in the kitchen earlier? That was Louis. Didn’t say much, come to think of it.”

Harry rolls his eyes. Louis has turned out to be an absolute tosser, but at least these days he’s been ignoring Harry more than anything, which Harry can deal pretty well with.

He realises he’s got a sort of sour expression when he looks up from his tablet to see Niall staring at him.

“You know he’s not a bad guy,” Niall says. “I mean, I’ve noticed you two don’t seem to really get along, but like, I think there’s been some sort of misunderstanding.”

Harry shakes his head. “I doubt it. I think people just really show their true colours when they have to interact with people who they see as below them, you know? He’s just a self-absorbed twat is what he is.”

Niall looks like he’s got something to say on the subject but he’s taking a minute to think about how to word it. When he opens his mouth again Harry interrupts.

“Just trust me on this,” Harry says. “I’ve had a whole lot of experience in the past month and a half with people thinking they’re better than me. It’s just what happens.”

Niall shakes his head, a frown etched on his features. “I really think you should have a heart to heart with him, is all I’m saying.”

Harry doesn’t want to argue but he’s *really, really sure* a heart to heart isn’t going to help this. He’s only been rooming with Louis for two weeks now but he’s pretty sure that’s enough time to form a solid character opinion.

—

Louis’s shaking. He honestly should have expected Robert to show up sooner rather than later, and two weeks seems about right but *why*, why oh why can’t he just leave him alone?

He’d caught him behind the canteen, because the bastard would never approach Louis when there are other people around, and was trying to deliver a letter that Louis refused to take. He can’t believe he refused, that’ll probably just make it worse later. Won’t it?

He’s looking down and not really seeing where he’s going, narrowly avoiding some people going the opposite way on the path, and he’s not really thinking complete thoughts besides the fact that he needs to get out of these clothes - *dirty* and *disgusting* and *traitor, you’re a traitor* playing in his mind.

He rides the lift up to his floor and when he gets to his door he has to type in the pin three separate times before he's got it right and the door clicks open.

Niall's on one of the couches playing something on a loop on his laptop and it's *loud, loud, loud* to Louis's ears, grating and filling his head. He runs for his room and closes the door, locking it behind him.

Clean, the mantra in his head goes. It's just falling into ritual at this point as he strips in a rush on his way to the shower. Robert didn't manage to touch him at all this time but that doesn't stop Louis from feeling *dirty*.

Disgusting.

He's in the shower until he's out of soap again, and beginning to feel a little woozy from the heat. By the time he shuts off the water, he's no longer thinking *dirty, dirty, disgusting* and he's managed to replace it with *clean. Clean. It'll be okay when you're clean, just get clean.*

He's focusing on taking deep breaths, standing dripping in the shower, for a solid ten minutes before he gets out and grabs the fresh towel from his closet. The closet, the room, the bathroom all feel wrong. Shit, he doesn't know how he's supposed to handle this now with a new roommate, because everything needs to be *clean*, and he's done this ritual for so many years that he truly isn't sure what to do next now that there's a change. Harry's a change.

He grabs a pair of pyjamas from the drawer and takes another minute for deep, calming breaths before he leaves the closet and grabs the basket for his dirty clothes. He tries at first to pick up only his own clothing and throw it in, but he keeps finding Harry's clothes as well and without thinking adds them to the pile. Somewhere in the back of his mind he tells himself that he'll get it all done before Harry gets back – this is a late class night for him, right?

Everything in the closet straightened, this time including Harry's neatly arranged on the left and his own on the right, he gathers the empty teacups and papers thrown halfway to the bin and straightens his desk to a cleanliness level it hasn't seen in two weeks. But he's getting itchy and anxious, seeing Harry's desk there across the room from his own, a strewn mess of papers and pens. It's not *clean* and he needs it to be clean. If everything is clean, then everything's okay.

Shit. Harry's going to kill him for this. He can't get out the hoover until the desks are tidy, he just can't...

Quickly he goes to Harry's desk and stacks the textbooks, organizes the papers into what he hopes are by subject, and caps all the pens before putting them in the cup with the rest of them. There's a few crumpled up papers on the edge of his desk that he sweeps into the bin next to it, then winds up the charger cord for his tablet and sets it in one of the drawers. Okay. That's enough. He steps back and takes a deep breath – Harry can't get upset about things being put in the right place, right?

He hoovers and uses spray cleaner and keeps himself busy with the finer aspects of cleaning until his mind is blank and the thoughts have slowed. Storing all the supplies away he takes

the basket of clothes and heads out, his bare feet soundless on the wood floor.

When he opens the door from his bedroom Niall's gone and Liam's taken his place. "Tommo!" he calls when he hears the door open. "We're having movie night down in the screen room! I've got the new Batman and Niall said he was meeting Harry after class to grab enough Nando's for the whole floor. You're up for it, right?"

"Might join you later," Louis says, although he knows he won't. "Have to get my kit washed for tomorrow, it's soaked from that practice game."

"Your loss!" Liam calls as Louis sidles out the door.

The laundry room is quiet and peaceful as ever. He has to spend a slightly awkward lift ride with a boy from two floors down who's immersed in his phone, but in the quiet and peace of the room as the machines he's filled are running their course and it's a calming noise. The curtains are drawn and the steady humming of the machines paired with the soft lighting is safe. Familiar. Nothing is different about this part of the process. He zones in and out for a while, feeling more at ease than he has for days.

—

To his surprise, Harry has begun to find people that aren't complete and total arseholes. For one thing there's Niall, who doesn't seem to have a mean bone in his body and is always up for Nando's (although Harry has to limit himself to one trip a week because his job isn't exactly lucrative). Liam seems nice, even if he always has something or other he's worrying about. How he can find *anything* to worry about and yet doesn't ever have a care about his grades is beyond Harry, but he has learned not to question it. There's a number of people in his classes that he'd consider pretty alright, including a guy named Josh who's invited him to a party on the weekend that he's actually considering going to.

Today has found him spending hours in the library working on a group project with two guys who, while easily distracted, seemed actually willing to do their part. It was a nice surprise, and as Harry's walking back to his dorm he's in a pretty alright mood, all things considered. He's starting to think maybe he did just find the few arseholes at the school right at the beginning, and that the rest of his time here is looking up.

After exchanging a few messages with Niall, he veers toward the car park where students are allowed to keep their vehicles. He's pretty sure that Nando's is close enough that they could easily walk, but Niall insists that they're going to be getting more than they could carry back.

"Hazza!" Niall shouts when Harry gets to the entrance of the building. Harry glances up to see Niall sitting there in a bright red car that is definitely worth more than his house.

"That's gaudy," Harry tells Niall with a straight face as he goes over and opens the passenger side door. The car is already running, and the second Harry has the door closed Niall puts his foot on the gas so fast that the car jumps forward and Harry bangs his head against the headrest.

Right. Seatbelt. Don't die.

Niall grins. “Knew you would hate her. Her name’s Claudia! Now tell her she’s pretty.”

“I’m not gonna-”

Niall puts his foot on the brake and the car lunges to a stop, Harry losing his breath as he’s thrown against the seatbelt.

“*Tell her she’s pretty*,” Niall intones again, looking him straight in the eye with a mutinous expression.

Harry coughs. “You’re - very pretty, Claud.”

Then they’re off again, zooming down the road that leads to the center of town with Niall cackling out the window. Harry is pretty sure he’s going to avoid riding with Niall ever again.

—

“Movie night” quickly devolved into “Binge Watch *Game of Thrones*” night, and Harry finds himself staying up much later than he had originally anticipated. He sleepily makes his way up to their dorm along with Niall and Liam sometime after 3, and marvels at the fact that they really did devour all of that ridiculous amount of Nando’s that Niall had bought.

Niall slaps him on the back before heading off toward his own room, and Liam is in some sort of zombie-like state (Harry is rather convinced he’s sleepwalking) as he wanders off into his and Niall’s room, leaving Harry to shuck off his shoes by the door and head to his own room alone.

It occurs to Harry that Louis hadn’t been at the movie night, and he’s fairly sure that Louis’s going to be asleep, so he tries to open the door slowly (not that he *cares*, since Louis and he aren’t exactly friends), but he finds to his surprise that the overhead light is still on in their room.

For a moment he’s puzzled as to what Louis is doing awake at this hour, but after opening the door all the way he finds that’s not actually true - Louis is lying on his bed, the covers thrown to the side as if they’ve been kicked off, snoring softly.

Then his attention is drawn to the rest of the room - which is immaculate. This is what Louis did instead of watching a movie with the rest of them? He... cleaned?

The room had been about this clean when Harry had originally moved in, and he’d quickly learned that that wasn’t the norm, as Louis was constantly throwing his clothes and books all over the place. Harry has only once met the maid that comes in and tidies up Liam and Niall’s room - he knows that the cleaning service is something offered to students after their first year - and when she didn’t come into his and Louis’s room, Harry didn’t think much of it. Now, though, it seems a bit off.

Maybe it’s because Harry’s tired. Probably, he’ll wake up in the morning and not think anything is off at all.

He considers whether to shower or not, but ultimately decides it's too late at night. He'll do it in the morning. His bed is calling, after all. Stripping off his shirt as he walks, he pulls open the closet door and steps inside to find the pyjama bottoms he had left lying on the closet floor that morning.

Only, he finds that there's nothing at all on the floor of the closet. Looking around, he finds it just as sparse and clean as the rest of their room. His side of the closet has all of his clothes hung neatly by color, mirroring Louis's clothes on the other side.

Harry's tiredness is starting to turn into grumpiness. Why did Louis think he was allowed to just rifle through all of Harry's things? Come to think of it, a fair amount of the clothes that had been on the floor in their room had been Harry's - what had he even done with those?

He'll take it up with Louis in the morning, Harry thinks to himself. He's mad, but not enough to wake someone up in the middle of the night. He's not *heartless*.

He walks back into their room, shirt still in hand, figuring he'll just strip down to his boxers to sleep. Going over to dump his clothes in the laundry basket, he finds that earlier questions have been answered, and new ones need asked - because there in his laundry basket are, folded neatly, all the clothes that he's stripped off and left around the room for the last few weeks.

Right on top of the pile are his pyjama bottoms, and Harry drops the clothes he's holding in order to pick them up. Did Louis just grab all of the clothes off the floor and stash them in the laundry basket?

He brings the pyjamas up to his nose and instead of that sleep-worn smell that they start to collect after being worn without being washed in a few weeks, they instead smell sort of sweet, a scent that Harry startles to realise he connects with *Louis*.

He slips them on, wheels turning in his head as he adds up the facts; Louis cleaned the room, organised his clothes, and then washed everything that was dirty and left it neatly folded in his laundry basket.

What the fuck, is what he thinks to himself. Louis doesn't even *like* him. Is this some sort of fucked up peace offering? Or is it Louis's passive aggressive way of telling Harry that he should keep his stuff cleaner?

Honestly, Harry has no idea. He also doesn't think he's going to get any closer to answers by dwelling on it tonight.

He goes to flip off the light switch, throwing the room into shadow. The moon is out tonight, casting soft blue light into the room from behind the curtains, bright enough that Harry can find his way to his bed without trouble, but dark enough that closing his eyes brings total darkness.

He's drifting fast, it's been a long day and the duvet he's so carefully wrapped himself in is warm and plush and soft. Still, something keeps taking him from sleep right before he drifts off.

It's a quiet noise, but in the dead silent room it might as well be coming through a loudspeaker. Harry rolls over and peeks over the top of his duvet, because it sounds like Louis is... sleeptalking?

Harry props himself up on an elbow, coming back to full alertness as he realises that the sound he's hearing is Louis *whimpering*.

Louis has curled himself up with his knees to his chest, much more vulnerable looking than it ever occurred to Harry that Louis could look. He's got his hands drawn up to his face and the little noises that he's making are getting louder, although it feels almost echoing in the silence of the room.

Thinking Louis is having some sort of nightmare, Harry continues to watch him, assuming that he'll snap out of it and fall back to a deeper sleep in a moment.

It doesn't happen though. Instead, Louis starts just barely shaking his head, his hands clenching into fists as words start becoming audible. Harry hears "No," and "Please," repeated as his voice gets stronger, and then "Stop, don't!" that finally has him tumbling out of bed and over to Louis.

He's not sure exactly what he's doing, but he's certainly not getting any sleep this way, and clearly Louis is unhappy, even if he's not going to remember this tomorrow.

Harry drops down at the side of his bed. "Louis..." he tries, softly. Then, after no response, "Louis, wake up."

Louis is completely unresponsive to Harry's attempts. He's shaking a little, Harry realises, and he reaches over to put his hand on Louis's shoulder, try to calm him down. That's what really sets Louis off - he jumps back, flailing blindly in his sleep, and he gets louder. "No, stop! D-don't come *near* me!"

Harry's legitimately afraid that Louis is going to injure himself - or injure *Harry* - and reaches out to grab one of his hands, trapping one clenched fist right before it hits the headboard.

Harry makes shushing sounds, tries talking in a soft voice to calm him down, lowering their hands back to the bed, and using his other hand to try to pry open Louis's fist, relax the muscles.

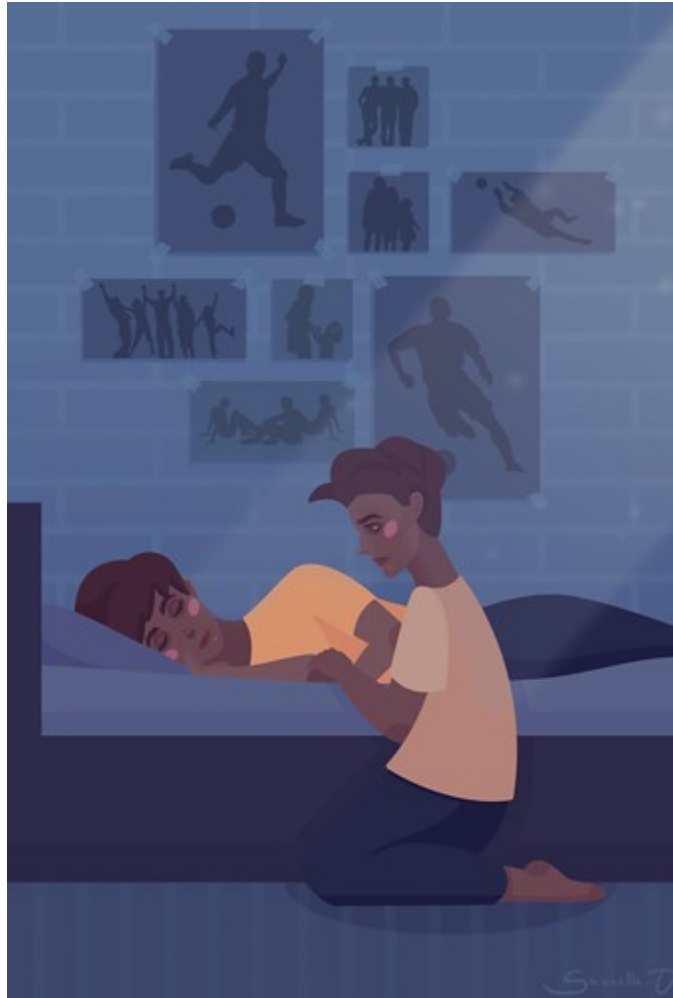
As soon as Harry starts whispering - little things like "Hey, it's okay, you're okay" - Louis begins to calm down, collapsing back onto his mattress and quieting down to just the quiet whimpers again. Harry massages open one hand and then the other, wondering just what was going through Louis's head that caused all this.

The adrenalyn that Harry belatedly realises was pulsing through his veins dies down, leaving Harry exhausted sitting at the side of Louis's bed with his dainty hand clasped in Harry's larger one.

Dainty, that's not a word Harry had thought to associate with Louis before. But now, in the dead of night with Louis's features sleep-soft, it fits.

He's not sure how long he lingers there, but by the time he gets up again, Louis has fallen into a deeper sleep, only making a small noise of distress when Harry lets his hand go as he rises.

The sleep Harry falls into that night isn't as deep as it could have been, more questions than answers swirling around in his head.



Louis isn't sure what to make of it - that Harry doesn't mention the clean room. Maybe Harry was caught off guard, because he honestly acts sort of weird and distant all the next day. At least, more weird than usual; staring at him when he think Louis doesn't notice (he does) while they're both in the common room studying, and he doesn't make his usual snide comments when Niall asks him if he wants to go into the city over the weekend to check out the new Gucci fall collection (he doesn't).

But he's also groggy all day, making double the amount of tea and then forgetting where he's put down the cups until long after they've gone cold, so he figures maybe *he's* the one who's

acting weird, and maybe Harry's picking up on that. Either way, it feels like sort of a nice reprieve, even if he is sort of waiting for Harry to start snapping at him again any minute.

Early October

“Lotts,” Louis sighs. “What’ve you done to your hair?”

Lottie’s Skype camera freezes for a minute and all he gets is a screen of silver hair while Lottie offers up a sarcastic response about being a modern woman.

“Drop the sass and try that again,” Louis tells her sternly.

Lottie huffs. “Amy was doing it for everyone at her birthday last week. At least I didn’t get hot pink like Sandy did!”

Louis rolls his eyes. “And what do your teachers think of this new look?”

“They don’t care,” Lottie replies testily. “I’m not a kid any more, you know. I’m adult enough to make my own decisions.”

Louis pinches the bridge of his nose, taking a mental step back before he ends up going on a rant about how Lottie is very much still a child. “Just tell me before you go out and get yourself tattooed, yeah?”

“Actually...” Lottie says, and Louis must look like he’s about to have a heart attack because she immediately bursts out laughing. “Of course not, Lou! Don’t be ridiculous!”

Louis glares at the camera with his most deadly look, but it doesn’t seem to faze her in the slightest. She brushes the feathery wisps of silver hair out of her face and twirls a bit around her finger.

“But... you do like it, don’t you?”

Louis softens considerably. “Of course I do. Makes you look like stardust, yeah?”

Lottie smiles in that way Louis loves where she pushes her lips up in the middle and the edges at the same time – the same funny little smile she’s had since they were little.

“Thanks Lou,” she says softly before abruptly changing the subject matter. “So about that new iPhone.”

“No,” Louis says automatically.

“Come on,” Lottie whines. “Mine’s almost a year old! You don’t want me to be the only one with an old relic like this, right?”

“Builds character,” Louis states flatly. “You’ve got a weekly budget. Maybe try saving for it yourself?”

Lottie frowns. She pouts. She pulls a face like thunder. *Is she really going to throw a tantrum at her age?* Louis wonders.

“Louis,” Lottie says very seriously. “We can afford it. It’s not like I’m asking for a car.”

“Which you wouldn’t get either, since you’re not old enough to drive,” Louis points out. “Just because Dan could buy you a castle doesn’t mean you should go looking up which ones are for sale. It’s not about what we can afford, it’s about keeping your feet on the ground.”

Lottie lolls her head to the side, the bored expression on her face a reaction to how many times she’s heard this speech before.

“Is this what you tell Daisy and Phoebe too when they ask for things?”

“Nah,” Louis shrugs. “I say they can’t because I’m their brother and I say so. They’re seven. They go for that.”

Lottie snorts. “I’m sure. I’m sure they’ve never thrown any sort of fit about that.”

“I make good use of the mute button,” Louis tells her.

He moves the subject to her grades (fair), the boy she likes (cute but dim), and her plans for the weekend (nothing much because revising is consuming her life and leaving her an emotionless husk of a girl).

They sign off after making heart signals at each other with their hands and Louis closes his laptop with a contented sigh. Skype sessions with his sisters always manage to improve his mood, even when they do stupid things like dye their hair impractical colours. It’s still better than the time he logged on to Fizzy wearing a realistic (but ultimately fake thank God) nose ring.

—

The more Harry has adjusted to St Albert, the more he’s learned that there are a large number of people who are, more or less, lacking a stick up their arse. The best discovery he’s made, though, has been the basement of the library.

The library, as Niall once so quaintly described to him, is “old as balls and smells like it too,” and it’s clearly gone under years of intense renovation and restoration, because even with the beautiful brick exterior and rows of books tall enough they come with rolling ladders, it’s free of cobwebs and the wifi signal is still pristine.

Until you get to the basement.

The basement feels sort of normal. It’s all white walls and dim lighting and the chairs look just a bit worn. Large and plush but like something Harry’s grandmum would own. The stacks down here are only along the walls and they contain a collection of books from the nearby public library - so the sort of books someone might *actually read*. It’s become Harry’s favourite study spot, even though it does smell a little musty sometimes.

He's situated himself in a corner with a textbook, fitfully dozing as he tries to get through the boring parts, when his phone lights up with a text which is, for once, not from Gemma.

Eddieward: Party

Eddieward: My place

Harry rolls his eyes and tucks his phone back between the arm of the chair and his thigh. Ed's been trying to get him to hang out ever since they exchanged numbers during an impromptu footie match on the commons. He's a pretty cool guy, from what Harry's learned, but Harry's pretty sure he's never studied a day in his life. Still... It would be nice to blow off some steam, perhaps. This class isn't until Monday and Harry could do with a drink.

Harry: Where's your place?

Eddieward: Thought you'd never ask! 2nd floor Beeker. Bring urself and mates.

Harry: ...we're literally in the same dorm

Eddieward: That.

Eddieward: is.

Eddieward: CRAZY! I'll know where to find you then.

There's a good chance, Harry thinks, that Ed is probably stoned right now. He's also considered that perhaps Ed is always stoned though, from the way he talks whenever Harry runs into him.

He shows up half an hour later, worried for only a moment that he won't be able to find the door, since Ed never replied to Harry's text asking for a room number. It becomes glaringly obvious though when he reaches the first door down the hallway and hears Ed's smooth croon coming from inside.

He pushes open the door and finds a common room almost identical to his own. The big difference being the crowd of people lounging on every surface, Ed perched on the floor in the middle with his guitar, and a heavy haze hanging in the air.

"Harry," Ed shouts when he sees him, cutting off whatever song he was in the middle of singing. "My guy! You came!"

He holds out an arm and Harry picks his way through the crowd, who are mostly engrossed in their own conversations.

"Sit, sit," Ed motions. Harry plops down onto the carpet next to him and is pulled into a one-sided hug.

"Seems pretty calm for a party," Harry notes and Ed laughs.

"It's only eight," he says. "Wait for midnight maybe, it gets a bit crazier around here once the party-hoppers show up." He motions to the hand still wrapped around the neck of his guitar, a spliff balanced between his fingers. "Want a hit?"

“I’m good,” Harry says. “Pretty sure I’m gonna get whatever that is just by breathing the air around here.”

Ed laughs and pats him on the back - heavy thumps that catch Harry off-guard and make him lurch forward.

“Knew I’d picked a good one with you,” Ed drawls before taking a hit himself. “Don’t do drugs, Harry, you’ll speak even slower and people will forget the beginning of the sentence by the time you get to the end.”

Harry frowns but apparently Ed isn’t expecting a reply because he’s already onto the subject of introductions, pointing to people and rattling off names. Harry gets a couple of smiles and waves from people who’s names he definitely won’t remember later as Ed points around the room.

“And that guy in the doorway over there is Nicholas. Nick, grab me a beer from the kitchen on your way in!”

Harry turns his head just in time to see a tall man give Ed the two fingered salute as he heads into the kitchen. When he comes out a moment later he’s got two beers in one hand, and a girl’s hand in the other.

“Ed!” Nick says. “Found Fifi in your kitchen. Did you know she was there?”

“Course I did, I know where everybody is,” Ed says, taking one of the beers from Nick. “Hey Fifi!”

“Hiya,” she says. “I ate the leftovers from your refrigerator. Was proper starving.”

“Think those were months old, Fi,” Ed shakes his head. “Don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

“Feed me something besides old Chinese food next time,” Fifi says.

Harry, who’s been watching this interaction quietly, is caught off guard for a moment when Nick offers his hand out.

“Haven’t seen you around before,” he says. “I’m Nick. That’s Fifi.”

“Hiya,” says Fifi again.

“Harry,” says Harry, shaking his hand.

“Fifi here’s not homeless,” Nick apparently feels the need to clarify. “She’s just environmental. Doesn’t want shit to go to waste.”

Fifi shrugs. “Planet’s dying. Eat the Chinese food.”

Nick nods sagely and then turns to Harry and gives a look that means she’s clearly crazy. Harry snorts a little.

“So Harry,” Nick says, taking a swig from his beer. “What brings you here? Haven’t seen you around before.”

“I literally live in this dorm,” Harry deadpans, starting to wonder how all of these people have never seen him. Is he really that much of a recluse? “This is my first year here though.”

“Ah, probably why. Fifi here I’ve known since she was in nappies.”

“That’d be a whole year, then,” Ed cuts in and Fifi smacks him.

“I’d say most people around here have known each other for forever,” Nick goes on, ignoring them. “Since Albert Prep more or less filters into Saint Albert University. Nice to see a fresh face now and again! Especially a cutie like you.”

Harry thinks he was maybe about five years old the last time someone had pinched his cheeks, but that’s what Nick does.

“You stick with us,” Nick says. “We’ll take you under our wing. Give you the best Saint Albert experiences.”

“Nick would know,” Ed whispers conspiratorially. “This is his fifth year here.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, my dear Sheeran,” Nick objects. “It’s my *sixth*.”

—

Louis has gotten used to Harry coming home fairly late, between movie nights and other things that Niall tends to drag him to, and the load of books that he brings back which signify he’s just come from the library.

He fell asleep alone in their room (not that he was waiting up for Harry or anything), only to be startled awake by the sound of the door hitting the wall with an almighty *slam* and then a small “Oops,” following.

He grabs blindly for his phone, and when he finally managed to locate it the screen reads 4:15. What the everloving fuck. The door to their room swings open next, this one at least not hard enough to dent the wall, and Harry’s silhouette stumbles in. He makes an awful mess trying to get to his bed, and even from across their room Louis can smell the alcohol on him.

Harry more or less faceplants into the bed, and Louis watches as he struggles to shimmy the rest of the way onto it. Just how drunk is he?

Pretty drunk, Louis decides a minute later when soft snores start coming from Harry’s bed. He’s completely clothed and both his legs are still hanging over the side.

Louis sighs. Fully awake now, he groans and rolls to his feet. Padding over to Harry’s bed, he takes a moment to admire just how twisted around Harry has made himself in an attempt to get all the way onto the bed. Then he shoves him.

“Come on Harry, you’re going to have one hell of a backache tomorrow if you sleep like this,” he says. Really, he says it more to himself, trying to tell himself exactly why he’s wasting so much time trying to get his roommate *who doesn’t like him* onto the bed. Lifting Harry’s legs, he manages to get him to move over enough that only his feet are sticking over the edge, and he pops off Harry’s ridiculous boots and drops them on the floor. He’s not touching the socks. They probably stink.

He does grab paracetamol and a glass of water from the bathroom though, setting them on the side table next to Harry’s bed. Hangovers are nasty, and Harry would probably just take out that nastiness on Louis.

That’s definitely the only reason he does it.

Mid October

The nightmares, it turns out, are becoming a regular thing. At least, Harry *feels* like they're a regular thing, happening about once every week or two. Each one sticks in his mind, the way Louis, while he's asleep, is so susceptible to whatever dark thoughts must be silently plaguing him during the day. More than that, though, is the thought that sticks in Harry's mind about how Louis always, *always* stills at his touch. What's happened to him, for this to be a regular occurrence? And what happened when he roomed alone? Did the nightmares still come?

He still hasn't talked to Louis about them, and Louis's not yet woken up from them, so he feels at a crossroads.

One rainy afternoon finds Louis laying on his bed with an array of textbooks stacked around him. They're there for effect, he reasons. Learning through osmosis. It's definitely not because he's reading any of them, because he abandoned that pursuit hours ago in favour of several snapchat conversations between Daisy, Phoebe and Fizzy simultaneously. He's got his headphones in, but he keeps having to adjust the volume for the different levels of screeching from each of his girls. From what he's been able to gather, Phoebe likes a boy from the school across the street. but Daisy's best friend told her that Phoebe only likes this boy because he looks like someone from some Disney movie that Louis' never heard of. Of course that made Phoebe wildly upset, because the first thing Daisy did was tell Phoebe that her friend said this, while Phoebe argued that that was *absolutely not why she liked him*, it was because his hair was soft and he bought her a cornetto once (which sent Louis into protective brother mode, because his sisters were *much* too young to be speaking to *boys*, especially ones who buy them *cornettos*).

Fizzy, on the other hand, has just lost her favourite necklace – the one with the bird and cage, you know – and she had started out sending pouty faces and sad faces but now the snaps have bloomed into angry rants about the girls in her class who could have possibly taken it. There's Dana, Maya, Jordan, Alexandria... Louis has stopped trying to keep track about who she's ranting about and why she hates this or that particular classmate, but he thinks he may need to have a talk with her about compassion at some point. She's becoming a tough little firecracker.

Harry's been sitting at his desk for a while now, and the few times Louis has glanced over he's been furiously typing away on his phone instead of on the half a page of essay that's up on his computer screen, once in awhile letting out a frustrated growl at whatever the person on the other end of the screen must be saying.

Eventually he reaches what must be his boiling point, because with one final growl he slams down his phone and yanks his computer from the charger that's keeping it tethered to the wall, and goes to his bed, laying down on his stomach with his computer up against the headboard.

His voice is almost jarringly loud in the room a minute later when Louis, who has so far been trying to act like he hasn't noticed Harry moving around, hears Harry whine, "But you *promised!*"

"I know, Haz, but something's come up, and-"

"It's that guy you've been going on dates with, isn't it? You're not slick, and you sure as hell can't be blowing me off just to be with *him-*"

"You're not listening to me! And I don't know what you've got against me going on dates, little brother; I've seen the pictures you tweet when you've had a night out."

Harry's been out more with Ed and his friends lately, Louis's noticed. He absolutely does not open twitter to search for Harry. That would be none of his business, nope. He also doesn't know his twitter handle.

"Fuck off," Harry says, sour faced. "At least I'm not getting kicked out of things any more. But you promised we could spend all weekend together! I'd picked out a play to drag you to and everything!"

"I'm sorry, baby bro. But I'm not going to be available to come get you until Saturday night and one day isn't really worth it. Next time, okay? I promise."

"Whatever."

Harry closes his computer with a thunk and flops his face into the mattress. Louis, still in the middle of three different snapchat conversations that were starting to pile up, couldn't help but feel sympathy. Family was terribly important.

"You know," Louis says slowly as Harry's face is still buried in his duvet. "If you wanted, I could give you a ride down to London this weekend. Just, you know, if you were really desperate."

Fuck, that started out sounding helpful and ended up making him sound like a right prick. Good job, Louis.

Harry turns over and gives him a look. "Thanks?" he says, sounding wary. "I mean, you sound like an asshole but I think you were trying to mean well. So."

Louis feels his face heat up. "Sorry, yeah." he says, wishing that there wasn't something about Harry that made him lose all proper decorum in a moment's notice.

Harry shrugs and that's that. Another awkward conversation ended and no progress feels like it's been made.

—

Gemma has just been continually blowing him off lately, is the thing. She's got a new boyfriend in her life, which is *fine* and she can date whoever she *wants*, but it would be nice

if she would at least stick to the plans they make. But if she wants to play it this way, that's just fucking *fine by Harry*.

He sends a text to Ed knowing that Ed is always free to hang, probably is already hanging with a group of people that Harry can just tag along to. He's got a free weekend now, since his sister clearly doesn't care what he gets up to.

Eddieward: Sorry man, I'm with my girl tonight

Well. Fuck Ed, then. Harry's murderously close to throwing a tantrum. The *throwing useless things around the room* kind.

Eddieward: but I think Nick and Fi are heading to a club tonight. Want his #?

Okay, that's something. More often than not, Nick is at Ed's place when Harry pops by, and he doesn't seem half bad. Doesn't seem to intent on graduating, but that's none of Harry's concern. His phone pings again and Harry looks down to see Ed's sent him Nick's number without even waiting for a reply. Sweet. Anything's better than being stuck in the room with Louis all weekend, who has been pretending that Harry doesn't exist all afternoon, the prick.

—

"Louis! My love! My dearest!"

Louis jumps, startling out of sleep as a pair of shoes hits his back. What the fuck?

"Come on, Lou, we're getting Asian!"

"What does that... even mean?" Louis asks, his mouth feeling like sandpaper. He hates accidental naps, which is apparently what he just took. He looks over to find Niall sitting on Harry's bed, and Harry nowhere to be seen. How long was he asleep?

"It means I have a craving for Itsu and you've been holed up here all day! We miss you! Now come on, I've already made Liam stop eating so he's grouchy."

"Sorry, you made Liam stop eating so that he can go eat with us?" Louis asks. He's slipping on his shoes, although he can feel the way his hair has flattened against his head in a way that's going to scream *I took a nap and couldn't be arsed to care afterward*.

"Of course I did, eating alone is for old people and cats. Now let's go, I'm—"

"I'm driving," Louis cuts him off sternly. "I don't feel like dying tonight, Neil. We're taking Minnie or we're not going at all."

Niall frowns as Louis walks past him into the common room (sure enough, there's Liam looking grouchy). "You know it's completely unoriginal to name your Mini Cooper Minnie. Like, that's terrible."

"Hush," Louis grabs his keys. "She's a saint of a car and I won't have you judging her."

Niall and Liam follow him out; Niall happily, Liam still looking like someone spit in his oatmeal (Louis sincerely hopes Niall didn't spit in his oatmeal).

"We're going to get there just in time for everything to hit half price," Louis says, looking at his phone as they ride the lift down.

Liam looks bewildered. "Isn't that what they do when food has gone bad?" he asks tentatively. "Does that mean it's not safe to eat?"

Louis rolls his eyes. "Yes Liam, they definitely sell us food that's gone bad. That's an excellent marketing strategy."

"Well how should I know!" Liam squeaks, and Louis pats him reassuringly on the back.

"It's okay Liam, that's why you have me, your normal, everyday person. To teach you how the world works."

"And me," Niall adds happily.

"You're a rich motherfucker, Niall."

"Yeah, but I spit in his food so he has to come with us."

—

"Harry, I do believe I can tell you with confidence that you are a spectacular drunk."

Harry pouts. "Too many words, Nick," he says. "Less talk, more dance."

They've been alternating between taking shots at the bar and dancing to the more recognizable songs for what feels like hours to Harry's slightly intoxicated mind.

Well, maybe more than slightly. He's always had a pretty high alcohol tolerance but Nick's been paying for drinks all night and keeps buying Harry the fruitiest ones - his absolute favourite. Anything kiwi-flavoured is his ultimate weakness.

Fifi was with them up until the third round, Harry thinks. Or maybe the fourth. She wandered off at some point and left her shoes - the last time Harry glimpsed her, she was snogging the face off of a ginger bloke that looked like Ed with an eyepatch.

"Nick, where's Fifi?" Harry asks. They're sort of swaying together, more than dancing at this point. Nick's front is plastered to Harry's back and he's got his arms wrapped firmly around Harry's middle (which may be what's keeping him upright, as his own legs feel a little on the wobbly end).

"Pretty sure she went home an hour ago, Love," Nick tells him. "Why? Am I not enough for you, Young Harold?"

Harry giggles. "Of course you are, Old Nicholas."

Nick scoffs at him. “How rude. You want to lose your dance partner?”

“Noooo, I’m sorry!” Harry giggles. “Please keep me!”

He can feel Nick’s hands graze the bottom of his shirt (a colourful button up that he’s already undone the top three buttons of thanks to how hot the club is). His fingers don’t feel tentative in the way they slide up his stomach, making Harry shiver.

The beat turns to something low and thrumming, and Harry feels overwhelmed, the way Nick’s hands are everywhere while grinds against Harry from behind with clear intent. Nick says something that Harry can’t really make out, and the next thing he knows there’s a pair of lips on his neck and oh, Harry’s *very* into this.

He’s not a virgin by any stretch of the imagination, but he’s spent the last few years with his head in the books more than anywhere else, so besides a few intermittent boyfriends it’s been quite a while since he’s had any sort of action. Nick is good looking, to say the least, and he’s spent all night buying drinks for Harry which, in the heat of the moment, Harry thinks is quite romantic.

When the song ends it’s a disappointment how Nick separates from him, even as his hands never leave Harry’s sides. Nick’s clearly had as much to drink as Harry leading them off the dance floor in fumbling movements, and he giggles when he feels Nick nuzzle into his hair.

With fumbling hands, Harry feels Nick tug his hips and turn him so they’re face to face. Nick’s lips meet his with a bruising intensity and Harry feels his back hit a wall that he hadn’t noticed.

Things feel like a blur the way Nick is everywhere and somehow not enough of anywhere, and Harry feels like he loses hours as his hands fumble for a grip against Nick’s clothes.

At some point they break contact long enough for Nick to call for an Uber, and after what feels like too long and not long enough there’s the notification that it’s waiting out front.

They make it through the trip with minimal PDA only because Nick says he doesn’t want his Uber score to go down, but Harry does feel Nick’s hand appear under his shirt and massaging his back in a way that makes Harry squirm.

When the car stops and they fumble out, Harry realises that it’s his own dorm that they’re in front of, and then realises that he’s not even sure which dorm Nick is from, but then Nick’s lips are on his again and it’s hard to think of anything at all. Nick tastes like lime and gin, and Harry thinks as they wait for the lift that there are probably worst things to taste like.

There’s a brief thought in his mind that he’s forgetting something as he fumbles to put in the code for his dorm, but as soon as the door is open Nick has him up against it and they’re grinding together in a way that definitely has Harry only thinking of *bed* and *less clothes* .

He pulls Nick and they stumble into his room, onto his bed just across from the door. He giggles and hopes Nick’s packing a few condoms, because he doesn’t have any of his own within reach.

He doesn't notice the slam of the door.

—

The man's name is Nick, that's what Louis learns the next morning.

He's standing at the hob when the stranger stumbles out of his and Harry's room, dressed in little more than boxers and a vest.

"Lo," the stranger tells him. "M'name's Nick. You the roommate?"

Louis nods, holding back a yawn. He doesn't feel the need to give Harry's fuck buddy the time of day. After they came stumbling in the night before he left to sleep on the couch - Harry was probably drunk enough that he didn't even notice Louis being there. He doesn't want to have a talk about bringing guys home and *privacy* and all that, but damn that couch was uncomfortable and he doesn't want to have to sleep on it again.

Nick grabs a glass, filling it with water from the tap. "Sorry we woke you up," he says.

Louis shrugs.

"He's still out of it, but I've got to get going," Nick says. "If he asks, tell him I had to get to class, yeah?"

"Isn't that what texting is for?" Louis mumbles, concentrating resolutely on his tea. Nick laughs, though.

"You're a funny one. Bet I'll see you around, roommate!"

He leaves with a wave of his fingers, the glass of water still sitting on the counter when the door shuts behind him.

Louis spits in it.

Halloween

Louis has always had a bit of a soft spot for Perrie, even if she does tend to have horrible taste in boyfriends.

“She’s finally fed up with him,” Jesy tells him at lunch. They’re in the dining hall because it’s right next door to the ethics class that Louis and Leigh Anne attend on Wednesdays, although Leigh Anne is nowhere to be found, having texted Louis ten minutes earlier (at noon) that she’s only just woken up.

“I wouldn’t say I’m fed up with him,” Perrie argues. “I’m just starting to think maybe he’s not the one for me, you know?”

“He hasn’t been the one for you since day one, Pez,” Louis tells her. “And you absolutely know it. Now why are you still together then?”

Perrie groans. “Because he’s such a good kisser. You know how most guys are like, really average when it comes to kissing? They are. But Andrew... He’s got the mouth of a sinful angel.”

“I am incredibly grossed out,” Louis says. “Sorry, it’s been months and you haven’t broken up with him because you want to keep kissing him? That’s just ridiculous.”

“Well...” Perrie looks sheepish. “I mean, there’s also the parties. Like, have you seen him move those hips?”

“No.”

“He’s got an ass on him like you have never *seen*.”

“I’m feeling offended now.”

She rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean. Back me up, Jesy, you’ve seen him.”

“Think my ass is a hell of a lot better than his,” Jesy mumbles with venom before sticking another chip in her mouth.

“Of course it is,” Perrie pats her reassuringly (Jesy does not look reassured).

“So break up with him,” Louis says. “You can stare at my arse all day, I don’t mind.”

“That’s kind of you, but I was thinking I might just wait until after all the Halloween parties this weekend,” Perrie muses. “I mean, we’ve got complementary costumes and everything. It’d be such a waste otherwise!”

Louis rolls his eyes. “Pez. If you spend what I assume will be six consecutive parties grinding on each other and making out in dark corner you *know* you’re not going to want to break up

with him. I'll tell you what, rip the bandage off now and I'll wear his half of whatever your weird couple costume is to the party with you."

Perrie seems to be seriously considering this. "You'd wear the costume and everything?"

"What's the costume?"

"Angel and devil. I'm the angel, of course."

Louis scoffs. "Of course I will. You break it off with him before this weekend and I'll wear whatever hideous skin-tight red leotard you've bought for him."

Perrie and Jesy have cheshire cat smiles on their face that look like Louis has somehow fallen into their trap. It's true he turns down most of their party invitations, but he figures one or two nights out glued to Perrie's side shouldn't be *too* bad.

—

Generally when Harry comes home he's prepared for one of two scenarios; either Louis is in the room or he isn't.

And, okay, technically this falls under scenario number one, but it's definitely not something Harry is prepared to deal with. Coming home, dropping his books on the couch in the common room with a wave to Niall and Liam, and then opening the door to his own bedroom to see...

Louis Tomlinson, from behind, in red spandex, donning a pair of devil horns.

There's a girl too, all in white with fluffy wings that seem to be shedding all over the floor. She's got a slightly crooked halo on and has a can of hairspray in her hair that she's liberally applying to Louis's fringe.

Louis, facing toward the window, doesn't notice him at first (which is good, because Harry knows he is *not* being subtle about the way he's absolutely drinking in Louis's figure. Because, since when? This is what his roommate looks like under those footie jerseys and loose fitting shirts? Like, okay Harry knows he's never looked particularly closely at Louis (because he's a prick, he reminds himself weakly), but how could he not have noticed he was hiding an arse like... like *that*?

The girl with the hairspray is the first one to notice him, and the way she raises her eyebrow when she catches Harry's eye makes him feel exposed. Not that there's anything to expose! He just never realised how apparently attractive his roommate is. That's all.

"Okay Lou, I think that should hold you until the end of the night." the girl says, putting the spray can on his desk and then aiming another smirk to Harry, who drops his gaze and tries to think about. Something. Why is he here again?

"Pez I'm pretty sure this should hold me until Christmas-" Louis says as he turns toward her before catching sight of Harry standing in the doorway like an idiot. "Oh, hey. Sorry, we're just about to leave."

Harry's never really thought to wonder before on Louis's sexuality, but now seeing him in what looks to be pretty clearly a couple's outfit with this girl (Pez?), he's realising that Louis is probably straight. And he's feeling... disappointed? Which is ridiculous because he doesn't even *like* Louis, and he's pretty sure the feeling is mutual.

Thank God he's heading out somewhere with Nick in an hour, he needs something to get whatever is happening here in front of him off of his mind.

He mumbles something about it not being a problem and then, because for some reason he can't think of anything to do with his *hands*, he wanders out of the room again, and into the kitchen.

Liam's leaning against the counter when he rounds the corner, and he's drinking ribena straight from the bottle - the concentrated kind.

"Where'd you get that?" Harry asks, although he has a sneaking suspicion.

"Oh, um..." Liam looks caught in a trap. "The refrigerator. Is it yours? I was going to leave money. I was just really thirsty and it looked good?" He looks terribly sorry for it and Harry can't help but crack a smile. This is such a weird day.

"I think it's actually Louis's," Harry says, because he knows by now that everything besides leftovers in the refrigerator either belongs to himself or Louis. "But you know you're supposed to add water, right? Like, you're basically drinking jam right now."

Liam frowns. "Oh..." he eyes the bottle suspiciously. He's drunk most of it. "I mean, it's pretty good this way..."

"I'm not sure I want to be around when that sugar rush hits you," Harry says.

Just as Liam is taking another swig, Harry hears the door to his room open and shut again, and Louis and his friend talking on their way out.

They pass the kitchen, and Harry catches a brief flash of a pointed tail now attached to Louis's outfit. When the girl *once again* catches Harry unabashedly staring she pops her head into the room and holds out her hand.

"Perry," she says. "Friend of Louis's." Then, very pointedly, "*Only* a friend."

Harry stutters out his name and gives her a limp handshake (because *what* does that mean?), and then she disappears through the door again as Louis calls "Pez if you don't hurry up I'm taking the tail off again!"

The door slams behind the two of them and Harry looks back at Liam, who once again is drinking straight from the bottle. He once again looks like he's been caught in a trap.

—

Louis really should have expected this, but they've been at this party for less than an hour and Perrie has gone missing.

It's a hotel just off campus - the kind that parents tend to stay in when they're in town for their child's graduation, so very high society and probably belonging to the parents of one of the people in the university.

The place is absolutely packed and Perrie had split off from him looking for drinks not too long ago, but clearly has gotten sidetracked, probably with someone she knows. Still, that means he's been left on his own in a sea of unfamiliar faces who don't have a sense of personal space.

He swerves into a side room to avoid a group of girls in matching black cat outfits and finds himself in a drinks room, with not one but three bartenders taking orders. Feeling a little unsure of being on his own in this party fairly far from his own dorm (and Perrie has his phone goddamn it, since this outfit couldn't possibly fit pockets), Louis opts for a non-alcoholic fruity drink, something that at least makes it look like he's having a good time at life.

He wanders around the outskirts of rooms looking for those white fluffy angel wings as he sips at the drink that, conveniently, matches his outfit. Jesy, Jade *and* Leigh Anne are supposedly somewhere here too but it looks like most of the university is here so it's a toss-up whether he'll ever find any of them.

How is it that he's gone to school with these people for so many years and yet recognizes none of them?

"Louis!"

Shit.

Louis turns and makes his way toward where he's hoping the exit is, surging through groups of people and hoping against hope that he'll see Perrie, Jesy, Jade... *anyone*.

Then, against all odds, he does see Perrie - arms wrapped around someone in an Elvis Presley outfit.

"Pez," he says, trying to gently break her from her makeout session with a hand on her shoulder. "Pez, we have to-"

Perrie breaks her face away from Elvis to frown at him. "We just got here," she says. "You promised me a whole party, it's barely been an hour!"

"Yeah, and you left me twenty minutes ago!" Louis says exasperatedly, even while knowing this is not the time. "Look, will you just-"

"Listen, Zayn said he'd show me where the *good* drinks are, so I'll be back soon, alright? Then I promise I'll not leave your side," she says, and suddenly she's gone, lost in the crowd, and Louis is increasingly aware that he been in one space long enough for Robert to have caught up to him.

“Hey Lou,” Robert’s voice appears over his shoulder, and Louis whirls around, barely refraining from spilling his drink all over him.

“I was just thinking maybe we could go outside? And talk?” Robert asks, gnawing on his lower lip. Louis takes a step back.

“I’m good right where I am, thanks,” he says.

They’re right near a set of large panel glass door that are open to the gardens that grace the back of the hotel, close enough that Louis can feel the cool breeze spilling in. Everything in him is screaming not to go outside with Robert, but he’s not at all sure how to lose him.

“I just, you know, I really miss you,” Robert says, and he always was good at sounding authentic. Louis knows exactly how good he is at playing a role, and that’s just what’s made him so dangerous.

“You don’t miss me,” Louis grits out. “And I would very much appreciate it if you would leave me alone now.”

Robert looks hurt and something inside Louis twinges, but he bites it down with disgust that he would even feel that way.

“I know that our dads sort of ruined what we had...” Robert starts but Louis cuts him off.

“We never had anything. You can’t fake a whole relationship with me and then blame your father for it.”

"Come on, Lou! Don't let them come between us, between what we have."

Louis shakes his head vehemently. They don't have anything. They can't.

"He just wants to know how you are, you know? He cares about you."

“He doesn’t give two shits about me,” Louis yells. A few people take notice and move farther away from them, but the music bouncing through the rooms is loud enough that most aren’t bothered.

“He doesn’t care about me, and you don’t either,” Louis says. He wants nothing more than to throw his drink in Robert’s face and follow it with a punch, but he knows Robert has enough friends around that it would be caught on video instantly, and Robert’s nefarious enough to do anything with that footage to get what he wants.

Instead he takes a breath and calculates exactly what he needs to do to get out of here unscathed, and without Robert. He’s shaking somewhat, and he knows it’ll erupt into a full blown panic attack before too long and he doesn’t really desire for that to happen anywhere besides his own room.

In an attempt to calm down he puts his glass to his lips, thankful that he went with non-alcoholic. Just as he goes to take a sip though he sees Robert staring at him raptly from the corner of his eye. The drink hits his tongue and it tastes - odd? Almost salty.

His mind rushes to a P.S.A. flyer outside of one of his classes about how women should never drink something at a party if it's ever left their sight or if it tastes-

"What the fuck," Louis screeches, throwing the glass at Robert. *"Did you fucking drug me?"*

Robert tries to dodge it, and manages for the most part, although it does stain a significant portion of the tuxedo he's wearing a bright red. "Are you crazy?" he asks, rubbing his shirt where the drink hit it.

Louis might be.

But he also knows how Robert acts when he's been caught in something, how he never reacts quite *enough* if he doesn't mean it and the way he doesn't make eye contact, and watching Robert now just confirms that Louis has to get *out of here*.

He turns and runs, trying to wrack his brain - *did* he drink any of his drink since he ran into Robert? He doesn't think so, but if he's going to be passing out somewhere, he's sure as hell going to be sure it's not going to be anywhere near him.

He barrels through group after group of people, not hearing them if they complain, searching for the front door, for Perrie, for *anything* but all he can hear is Robert calling out behind him. The room spins and Louis isn't sure if it's from paranoia or something else but he just knows he needs to get *out out out*, his body burning like it's been lit on fire.

Robert touched his drink. He was close enough to touch Louis's drink because Louis let his guard down and that can't happen - because then what else could Robert do? *Shit*. He checks his pockets - or, tries. He doesn't have pockets. Perrie has his phone because goddamn it she insisted, probably thought that it would make him stay longer, fuck *where is Perrie?*

It doesn't matter because he's not staying around long enough to find out. Robert's voice is getting fainter, but at the same time everyone's voices are starting to sound like his, and Louis is getting dizzy because *why is this hotel so big?*

But it's not, because there's the desk, which means he's made it to the front room. It's more crowded here, and he catches a few glimpses of people he recognizes but it's too late for any of that, he just hopes that Robert has lost him in the crowd by the time he gets outside, sending up a prayer to *someone, anyone* even as he stumbles on the stoop of the front door.

He lands on all fours in a bit of a slide along the rough pavement, and can feel several eyes on him as he takes a deep breath before hauling himself back up onto his feet. The palms of his hands sting and when he looks down he's not in the least bit surprised to find rips in both of his knees. There's blood beginning to bead on the palm of his hand and the dizziness hasn't gone away, and he can't do it anymore - he leans over and vomits right into the bushes next to the entrance. It's burning and he has to take deep breaths not to do it again from the smell alone, but some part of him feels lighter, knowing that now at least, there's no part of Robert inside of him.

Everything feels like too much, too dark and too bright and a few people come over to try to help but he shrugs them off, their touch just reminding him of *him*.

There's taxis waiting out front, compliments of the hotel, and Louis stumbles his way into one, keeping his head down and concentrating on staying steady. Rattling off his university building to the driver, he winces at the smell on his breath.

Glancing out the window as the taxi takes off (with a jerk that almost makes Louis vomit all over again), he sees Robert just reaching the doorway. The taxi's windows are tinted but Louis knows, *he knows*, that Robert's seen him.

Just sitting in the taxi makes Louis's head thrum with nervous anxiety. Robert's seen him, but he wouldn't dare follow him, would he? But then again Louis would never have thought that Robert would attempt to *drug* him, and it's only now sitting in the back of this taxi and looking like any other drunk off his arse university student that Louis thinks about what that means. Did Robert really think that he would sign something while drugged? Would he have? And if that wasn't his end goal, then what was?

He feels dirty in every sense of the word, and every time Robert touched or even got near him comes back into his mind now, making his skin burn and his thoughts race. *Unclean*. He feels unclean. He needs to be clean. He needs *out* of this godforsaken outfit that's now covered in rips and smears of blood. *Clean*.

Clean.

He repeats it to himself as he cautiously makes his way out of the taxi, not saying a word to the driver but keeping an eye on the road as if Robert will appear behind him at any moment. He repeats it to himself as he stands waiting for the elevator, and he repeats it as he enters the code to his dorm, opening the door to the dark common room inside.

But when he goes to enter his own room he finds the door locked.

No.

It's locked. It can't be locked. He doesn't know what he's going to *do* if-

There's sound coming from inside. Harry's in there. He's not alone.

They're fucking.

Louis stumbles back as if burned. This can't be happening. Harry can't be doing this to him. He can't just take away the last place Louis has for a home.

He's been unsteady on his feet, shaking since he first saw Robert tonight. But what can he do? What can he- he's *not clean* and now he *can't be* because he can't even get into his own room.

Harry. He knows Harry doesn't like him, but he's never taken him for someone purposefully malicious. Something in the back of his mind is telling him that Harry doesn't know, that he wouldn't do this if he did, but he's never given Louis the chance to find out, and in this moment all Louis can think about-

Is how much he wants his mum.

Underneath it all, every layer that Louis has added to build himself up, to make himself function, to survive at all, underneath all of that is just this one desire.

And he won't stop shaking now, he can't, he has no way to solve this situation without being able to access his room. But every second that goes by brings Louis closer to the edge of something, and his legs feel weak, so he collapses onto the couch, the closer one that smells faintly of the beer Niall spilled on it last week. He lays there and prays that he'll stop shaking, that he'll stop feeling dirty and untouchable. And he cries.

He cries because his room is his sanctuary, but now it's been taken from him. He cries because he's never been kissed, while his roommate fucks in the next room. He cries because it's all so mercilessly unfair, how Harry hates him for something he's not and even the poor scholarship student has more than Louis ever will; a home and a complete family and a sense of belonging, a love life that uni students are supposed to have, a free spirit that comes with not having to grow up too fast, too suddenly. He would trade all the money he's ever had for the life that Harry lives.

At some point he cries himself into a fitful sleep, waking from nightmares every couple hours that seem worse than they have in months.

Mid November

To go along with the increased frequency of cleaning, Louis has started getting more vocal in his sleep. Harry's almost worried that he's going to wake Niall and Liam soon, and they're going to come barging in because it sounds like Harry is *attacking* him.

Louis has started yelling now, and it always sounds like the same dream – yelling at something or someone to “stay away” and “stop!” and, the one that always makes Harry's heart clench painfully in his chest, “Please let her go.”

He tries, once, to ask Louis about the nightmares.

“Did you sleep okay last night?” Harry asks, sitting at the dining table in the living room with his usual breakfast of toast and eggs.

Louis pauses momentarily in the act of making his morning tea at the counter. “Why?” he asks warily.

“No reason,” Harry says, trying to sound like he means it. “Just, you were tossing and turning a bit last night, that's all.”

Louis nods as if deep in thought. “Well-“ he says eventually. “It happens.” He picks up his mug and leaves the kitchen, not even making eye contact with Harry.

And okay, that sort of pisses Harry off a bit. All he's trying to do is show concern, and Louis just brushes him off.

For a minute he thinks, *fine, see if I comfort you the next time you're getting nightmares*. But even as he thinks it, he knows he doesn't mean it. No matter his opinion of Louis during the day, the Louis he knows at night who's small and quivering and crying in fear, he knows he'd do anything for that Louis.

—

After the second night of the same week spent cleaning the room top to bottom, Louis starts going out less. It's not even always connected to Robert at this point, it just becomes an overwhelming urge after he thinks about what happened too much. It's not like he had much of a raging social life to start with, mostly just the library and Niall dragging him along on jaunts. Perrie has still been trying to get him out to the club with her, but so far Louis has evaded that offer - he honestly wouldn't be against a night of dancing and drinking, but he also knows he's a terrible lightweight and would suffer for it the next day.

Plus, being out in the club means being surrounded by more strangers than he would like, and that seems like something he'd just rather not deal with at the moment.

So he's started staying in the dorm a little more, is all. Not in the group rooms, with their walls of ground floor windows, but up in the safety of his own common room with Liam and

Niall. Liam is as dedicated a friend as he is irresponsible with his school work, and tends to join Louis whenever he sees him in the common room. Niall likes to take it as an invitation to drag Louis places, which is mostly fine, because “places” tends to refer to restaurants or obscure clothing stores that Niall discovers. Louis’s more tired these days, and he’s graduated from three teas a day to something more along the lines of seven, just to keep himself awake through the boring parts of classes.

It’s fine.

Harry isn’t around much, coming in like a hurricane at one or two in the morning and sometimes waking Louis up (but often he isn’t *really* asleep yet). They don’t cross paths often and they interact even less, but it’s not too bad this way. At least Harry’s not yelling at him and at least he’s not snapping back.

It’s *fine*.

—

Sometimes, Harry thinks about how great it would be to be an only child - if only because that way he wouldn’t have to deal with *a certain sibling who refused to give him a straight answer*.

Gems: We can talk about this in person

Harry: We’re talking about this now

Gems: I really don’t have time for this, Harry

Gems has declined your Skype call

Harry: Pick up the call

Gems has declined your Skype call

Gems: I’ll be out of work in an hour. Call me then.

Gems has declined your Skype call

An hour later finds Harry scowling in the general direction of the television as Gogglebox plays on low volume. Liam is playing some sort of game on his phone, and the sound effects are just loud enough to conflict with the show.

The second his phone flashes with an incoming Skype call he swipes to connect. Gemma’s platinum blond hair comes into view and she’s clearly just got off of work because Harry knows she likes to take all her makeup off the second she gets home.

“Why aren’t you coming?” he asks in lieu of a greeting.

“Hello to you too,” she says. “I’ve had a lovely day, thanks for asking.”

“Come on Gemma, you know what I mean,” Harry huffs. “I’m finally, *finally* coming home for a weekend and you’re not even going to be there? What the hell?”

“I’ll be there for part of it,” she argues. *“I told you I’d drive you home, didn’t I?”*

“That doesn’t fucking count and you know it. What’s going on? It’s that douche of a boyfriend you have, isn’t it? If you’re too ashamed to even have him around the family then I don’t see why you’re even dating him-”

“I’m not ashamed to have him around the family you idiot, I’m ashamed to have my arse of a little brother around him,” Gemma snaps back. *“Haz you have been absolutely insufferable for months now, and at this point you’ve clearly just built your biases. You think because Scott grew up with more money than we did that he’s a total prat but what you seem to have forgotten, dear brother, is that being rich isn’t a defining characteristic of who you are. And until you look past your fucking ridiculous grudge against Scott, and probably every poor student at your school who has to put up with you, I’m going to keep bringing Scott home on weekends when you aren’t there, got it?”*

Harry feels his cheeks heat up as he realises that Liam’s game has now gone silent. “That’s ridiculous,” he says, albeit without any fire. “I’ve made friends here! I’ve talked to you about Ed, and Nick-”

“The stoner and the guy who’s failed out of his first three years of classes? Try again, little bro. I’m glad you’ve made friends but I think you’re just proving my point.”

Nick has deemed their friendship “strictly platonic” after Halloween anyway. He told Harry that he’s just too old for him, and will admire him from a distance from now on.

Fuck Nick Grimshaw.

“Niall and I just last week spent three hours making a remix of Shawn Mendez songs-”

“Harry, if you’re arguing with me about this then you’re definitely missing the point. Maybe think about that guy that you’ve been complaining about to me since you moved in with, because I’m pretty sure he’s not half as bad as you think he is.”

“He-” Harry started but then deflated. Louis actually hadn’t been too bad lately. Quieter than normal and sort of... avoiding Harry in general. “Yeah, alright,” he said instead, which meant *you’re my big sister and I know I’m not gonna win an argument with you anyway.*

“Love you, Haz. I’m about to get on the tube so signal’s gonna cut out. Let me know when I can finally bring Scott to meet you, yeah?”

Harry rolls his eyes and signs off before giving a deep, heartfelt sigh and sinking further into the couch. He looks over at Liam, who’s very clearly trying to pretend like he didn’t hear every single word of that conversation.

“You know she didn’t... mean you, right?” Harry checks, realising just how bad it all probably sounded.

Liam nods, chewing on his cheek. “We all know you and Lou don’t get along,” he says. “Just, go easy on him. Okay? He’s had a bit of a tough time.”

Liam looks instantly like he thinks he’s said too much, but the more Harry thinks about it the more he sort of thinks he might have already known it. He’s an asshole.

Louis’s sisters have given him a cactus.

Well that’s not entirely correct; it’s a *succulent*, according to Fizzy. She said they’re supposed to be impossible to kill (he’ll see about that), and Lottie says it should brighten up his dorm.

His dorm doesn’t need brightening up, how ridiculous.

It’s all because the week before, the first week of November, four of his six siblings had shown up at his door for a visit.

“Lou, can you get that?” Liam had called – immediately suspicious because Liam is always very prompt with important things such as *opening doors* and *greeting obtrusive strangers who should not show their faces on Saturday mornings*. Still, Louis had groaned as he rose from his spot on the couch and went over to open the door to their dorm.

Lo and behold, four angelic faces stared back at him! Surprised, all Louis could think to say was, “How did you get here?” before he was being attacked in a massive hug from Lottie, Fizzy, Phoebe, and Daisy.

“We took the train you numpty,” Fizzy told him.

“Lottie picked us up!” Daisy said with excitement.

“Yeah, she hired a *hoo-ber*!” Phoebe added.

Louis shot a concerned look at Lottie, who rolled her eyes in a way that assured him that she knew they were going to have a talk about her taking a *hoo-ber* later. Still.

“It’s not my birthday!” he said. “But welcome! Come in, I suppose! Liam!” he called as an afterthought. “Niall! You’d better be decent, there are little-uns in the house!”

Liam was sitting on one of the couches with a bowl of scrambled eggs and salmon from the canteen next door. He was fully clothed, and had been since long before Louis came to join him. Niall was probably still dead asleep.

The girls all shuffled in, gazing around his dorm in awe. It occurred to Louis to wonder who gave them the key code to get in downstairs.

“What’d you like then,” Louis asked, falling into big brother mode. “Have you all had breakfast? I’ve got cereal. And tea. Or we could go to the canteen, they’ve got whatever posh nonsense Liam’s eating over there.”

He flapped his hand in Liam's direction and Liam, mouth full, raised his hand to wave at the four girls. "H'lo," he said, cheeks like a bunny. "'M L'm."

Phoebe and Daisy waved. Lottie gave him a rather scouring look. Fizzy looked equally unimpressed.

"We were thinking," Lottie told Louis, "that we could get a tour of the campus. See everywhere you hang out, yeah? We never get to see you, after all."

"And we've made the trek all the way here, so you can't very well say no to us anyway," Fizzy added bluntly. Louis rolled his eyes fondly.

"You're little terrors, the lot of ya." He told them. "How do you know I'm not busy all this weekend? I might have very important university things to attend to. Maybe I've joined a sport. Or a fraternity."

"Does this place even *have* fraternities?" Lottie asked skeptically.

Louis shrugged. "I assume so."

"Plus, we have our sources. We know perfectly well that you don't have anything going on all weekend," Fizzy informed him. Louis looked over his shoulder at Liam, who was suddenly quite interested in his food. The traitor.

"Well," Louis said. "Regardless. It's not even noon, you're lucky I was awake. But come on, we're heading to the canteen so I can find you all something relatively more healthy than Coco Pops."

—

They followed him around all that Saturday, from a tour of his dorm to a tour of his campus, his own little gaggle of geese, as he showed them where all his classrooms were, and took them to the closest Nando's for lunch, and when Phoebe got tired of walking took them back to his dorm for chill time to pile all on the couch together to watch a few episodes of Come Dine with Me and mock the contestants.

Niall and Liam were there for bits of it, sharing the other couch and eating Chinese takeaway. At one point Harry walked in, and he didn't share the common room with them but he lingered long enough that Louis felt the need to make introductions; "Harry, this is Lottie, Fizzy, Phoebe and Daisy," and "Girls, this is my roommate," which earned a round of waves from the girls, and a short "Hello," from Harry before he disappeared into their room. It could have gone much worse, all things considered, and Harry seemed in no way hostile to any of them, which was really counted as a plus in Louis's book.

When the sun sets he gets the four of them up again (Daisy and Phoebe getting grouchy, Fizzy and Lottie engrossed in texting mates from their own schools) and takes them down the way to where everyone parks their cars while they're on campus. He piles them all into his mini cooper (they fight over who has to sit in the middle and Daisy ends up losing) and

drives them back to their own schools, Lottie and Fizzy at secondary and Daisy and Phoebe to primary.

When he got back to his own dorm that night everything felt rather quiet without their constant chatter. There was takeaway containers from when they eventually gave into temptation and ordered Chinese like Niall and Liam had, and when he walked into his room he was hit with what a mess it was. He honestly hadn't even noticed when he was showing the girls around but the place was really covered in clothes – his and Harry's – and textbooks, footie equipment, and odds and ends that had ended up all over the place. It had been almost two weeks since he'd cleaned, which was a silver lining in a way to the mess of his room laid out in front of him.

Louis still hasn't found out how long they had been planning that trip, but he cornered Liam the day after and he had admitted to helping Lottie get into the building and making sure they did it on a weekend Louis was free, although he pointed out that was pretty easy since Louis is almost always free these days. He says that Louis has seemed down lately, and he only wanted to help, is all.

Louis would rather be described as “aloof” personally.

Mid December

He's limping, is the thing.

Somehow, even after everything, Louis finds that he often tries to forget why he and Robert broke up. Something inside him tells him that it's easier – to try to live without the knowledge that the one man he ever dated was only in a relationship as a mole for his father.

He remembers the day he found out. Robert had mentioned his father upon occasion, but somehow until that day it had never clicked that Mr. Thicke worked in the same bank that his own father owned – mostly because it wasn't something he ever purposefully looked into. His birth father was dead to him in every way.

He was only a child when he and his mother had left; vague memories surface when he tries to think of it of riding in the back of an SUV with his stuffed bunny in his arms and two suitcases on the seats next to him – a large one and a small one for his mum and him. He remembers the flashes of lights as they sped under streetlights in the dead of night, seemingly the only ones on a deserted road. He remembers his mum explaining to him over the next few months with careful words that his father was not a good man. He had done some bad, bad things and so the two of them weren't going to live with him any more. He found that his house was downgraded from the near mansion he remembers living in, with a separate room for his toys and a bedroom with French doors leading to the outside that were always locked and he had to ask permission to open, to a two bedroom flat next to a mulch factory, that only smelled good if the wind was blowing in your favour.

They lived there for a year before moving in with a man named Mark who lived next to an Indian restaurant. That's where he spent a lot of his childhood growing up and acquiring four new sisters. By the time Phoebe and Daisy came along the flat was quite crowded and there was always laundry being done, which meant that he spent much of his time running through drying garments and dirtying them with grimy hands fresh off of footie practice (as he was quite good at falling in the dirt).

If life had continued like that forever Louis doesn't think he really would have minded. He loved the flat next to the Indian restaurant that always smelled a bit like curry. He loved being crowded everywhere in their beat-up old minivan and eating dinner around the table together at the end of the day.

But eventually the quiet whispered arguments that Louis (and Lottie and Fizzy) would hear behind closed doors grew louder, and one day his mum gathered them all up again and told them gently that they were moving, but that no, Mark wasn't coming with them. Louis cried like he doesn't remember crying for his birth father, and he held tightly to the four girls as their world came crumbling down. They left in the beat-up old minivan with suitcases and carry bags and promises that Mark wanted them to visit all the time, and it wasn't that he didn't love them because he did very much but sometimes adults just had to live apart like this.

Mark did ask for the girls to visit often. He picked each of them up individually for father-daughter day trips to make sure they still felt loved.

He never asked after Louis.

It was nearly six months in the new little flat that Louis's mum rented before Dan came into their lives. He was someone that Jay had known from a long time ago, she explained, and their whirlwind romance was only three months this time before they were being herded out of the tiny flat to Dan's *house*.

House was an understatement, really. It was bigger than Louis even remembered his first house being. It was full of bright skylights and bay windows, with individual rooms for each of them and a yard with an actual swing set and trampoline, just as good as the one at the park.

It sort of made up for the fact that although Dan was clearly trying, he had no idea what to do with older kids. He doted on Daisy and Phoebe in buying them toys and letting them "do his hair", but Louis found they didn't really connect. He knew it wasn't antagonistic. Dan just didn't know how to interact. At least, that's what he hoped.

That's when the final additions to the family came along – Ernest and Doris, two little bundles of joy and Louis's first brother. He made a vow the first time he held Ernest's little squirming form to make sure that he always had a big brother to look up to who would treat him the very best, like he deserved the world. Brothers had to stick together, after all.

But that's when *it* happened.

—

He's limping, but that's actually a bit of an understatement. The wall he's leaning against is doing more work than he is, to be perfectly honest. He's taken a shortcut through the chemistry lab because it's always unlocked and feels safer than being outside, plus taking the elevator down instead of the steep decline in the walkway outside seems like an easier option.

He's pretty sure that he's only two buildings away from his own dorm, and if he can just make it there he'll be okay. He bargains with himself that he'll take a bath this time, instead of a shower. It might not be too easy to stand up by then. At least, judging from his struggles right now it won't be.

It's strange that pain really can cloud your vision. He sort of had thought that was just something people wrote in books, to make it sound poetic and shit. But now, with one eye swollen shut and the other one thrumming hazily with his heartbeat – or with his footsteps? – he can confirm that it's getting more and more difficult to see.

It doesn't help that it's dark in here. Louis had come from studying at the library. Not because he's avoiding Harry – because Harry's been downright cordial to him lately and it's been a great break from their usual hostility. But sometimes he just wants a bit of peace and quiet that only shelves of books can afford him.

The library is open all night, but the coffee shop on the ground floor (all organic fair trade coffee of course) closes at 1am, so that's when Louis started to make his way home – because it's a little eerie once the grinders and ovens are turned off. The place gets silent enough that even the sound of a page turning alerts the masses, and since he had forgotten his headphones Louis thought that was a good time to call it quits.

Of course it being a Tuesday in December, with a bit of chill in the air, the outdoors are all but deserted. The only person he passed in the beginning is a girl outside her dorm smoking her way through a pack and staring tearfully at her phone. Poor girl.

That's when Robert had shown up of course. Like he always did – late at night when no one else is around to make inquiring questions. The way he sidled up besides Louis made him wonder if Robert had literally been waiting for him to leave the library. It made the pit of fear and anxiety in his stomach tighten like a knot of coiled snakes.

“Hey Lou,” Robert said casually. Louis bit his tongue. He wanted to be home. He didn't want to have to go through his ritual tonight, already feeling heavily drained from a day of classes and studying.

Robert jogged up in front of Louis on the path to cut him off. “Listen, Lou,” he tried to look him in the face but Louis kept his eyes firmly on his shoes, trying to move around him – but to no avail.

“This is *important*, Louis!” Robert said, raising his voice as he moved to grab Louis's arm. Louis stepped back hurriedly but Robert still managed to grab his upper arm, his grip like iron. “Louis, Love, look at me-“

“Let me go,” Louis spat, all semblance of calm gone. Really, all semblance was gone over a month ago when Robert *tried to drug him*. He stepped back, trying to twist out of Robert's grip and only managing to get a nasty burn as his arm twisted in Robert's grip. “You don't get to call me *Love*, you don't get to *talk to me* -“

“Oh shut up!” Robert shouted, and there it was. The part of Robert that it took Louis way too long to see. The part that wasn't at all in love with Louis, even as Louis had fallen head over heels for him.

“Your dad contacted mine,” Robert said, and Louis could feel the bile rising up in his throat. “He says he needs your signature before the end of the year. This is our last chance-“

“This isn't our last chance for *shit!*” Louis screeched, still twisting as Robert tried to secure him in his grip, but then the next second that bile that always tasted so much closer at times like this finally overcame him, and he let it all fly all over himself as well as Robert.

Suddenly he wasn't in Robert's iron grip any more, instead he found himself on the ground, his hands scraping the harsh pavement as he stumbled, the tangy taste thick in his mouth and

smell in his nose. Everything was terribly disorienting and out of nowhere a sharp pain bloomed in his side. His legs folded under him, landing him face down and he faintly registered the sound of Robert yelling.

He groaned and tried to roll over onto his side, the smell of his own sick so overpowering now that he fully splayed out on the pavement – oh god, it was probably all over him.

As his senses cleared a little, he tuned back into what Robert was yelling at him;

“Shit, you absolute *freak*, I can’t believe I *kissed* that disgusting mouth-“

What felt like an explosion happened in his stomach as Robert landed a kick right to his abdomen, and again to his leg as he curled in on himself in protection.

“I’ve tried so fucking hard to be *normal* with you but you obviously don’t deserve it. Listen. Listen, listen, listen you ungrateful little cunt-“

Louis felt himself rolled over roughly, and then Robert’s breath was hot on his face as he loomed over him.

“You’re going to sign those fucking papers, and I’m going to finally be free of you forever, so I never have to see your ugly little rat face again. You got that? I’m coming back, and when I am we’ll settle this once and for all. Hell, maybe I’ll get lucky and you’ll finally land yourself with that shite whore you call a mum.”

He left long before Louis could even register that he had, and it takes much longer than that before Louis finds himself able gain control of his movements enough to stand, and try to make his way home before Robert got back.

—

So he’s limping, but he doesn’t get that far, in the end.

After breathing in the cool, sterile-smelling air of the chemistry lab he had carefully picked his way over towards where the lifts were located. This late at night there’s generally only one or two really dedicated students somewhere in the building, but if they’re here now Louis hasn’t seen them.

That’s why the pounding of the footsteps behind him are all the more terrifying.

He tries to move into a side classroom in the hopes of closing and locking the door behind him, but he’s barely got the door closed behind him when Robert’s forcing it open again.

“You didn’t think you could actually get away from this, did you?” Robert asks, and Louis sees that this time he actually has the stack of papers in his hands. It enforces the idea that Robert is an utter madman, because he really thinks he’s going to get Louis to sign something for him after what he just did?

But then Robert grabs him by his wrist and drags him away from the door. Louis gasps out in pain and his knees give out under him, but Robert still doesn’t relent. He drags him all the

way to the opposite wall, in front of the row of windows that have been flung wide open for ventilation.

Robert's saying something, yelling something, but Louis can't actually make out that much of it. He sort of feels like things are moving in slow motion, the way Robert tries to shove him against the wall with an arm across his neck, the way the anger and hatred in his eyes makes Louis's blood run cold, and the way the latch to the window he's backed up against breaks under his weight, and he falls backward with it.

So everything hurts. In a sort of all-encompassing pain that washes over him in waves. Any time parts of him shift he feels scratches getting deeper where his body is laying pressed against what - if he had the ability to think straight - he might realise are rose bushes.

He doesn't want to move. Moving means pain, and there's already so much of that. Maybe, maybe if he just lays here eventually it'll lessen, or if he falls asleep he can wake up in his bed and this wouldn't have happened at all.

He can smell the vomit, even in the worst of it all lying here and unsure if anything has broken, he has an acute awareness of the reeking smell of vomit on his clothes, in his mouth, even splattered in cooling patches on his neck and arms.

It feels like he lays where he's fallen for an eternity, the rustle of the branches prominent in his ears and their movement stinging his face and arms. There's a stillness to the world around him broken by the pounding in his head that makes him feel like it could crack open any moment, leave him in two pieces on the flowerbed.

That eternity, he's told later, doesn't actually last longer than maybe a minute or two. He's aware after a while that the pounding in his head has actually turned into the pounding of footsteps on the pavement, and with a groan he turns his head just enough to see that there's someone else there, someone running towards him in a way that makes him want to cower back into the bushes he's landed in to avoid being seen - but it's much too late for that, and even if it wasn't he's still not sure he could move enough to do that.

"Hey! Hey, are okay?" a voice is accompanying the pounding footsteps and Louis recognises that voice, doesn't he? Shit.

"I saw you fall, what- *Louis?*"

"Arry," Louis croaks. He doesn't want to be seen like this by anyone, but especially by Harry. Something makes him feel like being seen by Harry is too exposing; anyone else would brush off Louis's life with pretty little lies and reassurances. But Harry - Harry wants to know the truth, and he is quick to see the negative part of whatever Louis is doing.

"Louis-" Harry is leaning down now, his face looming into Louis's admittedly spotty vision. "What the fuck- here, let me help you up."

Louis feels Harry's steady hands under him, and the throbbing sort of numbing pain gives way to waves of it as Harry tries to help him up. The thorns from the rosebushes claw against his skin and leave lines like he's been marked by a wild animal. He can't help but cry out, embarrassed even then at how loud he is.

He feels himself momentarily dropped again, and is briefly aware of Harry speaking above him, much faster and higher pitched than his normal slow drawl. His normal slow drawl is comforting, Louis finds himself thinking.

"Come on, Louis," he can hear Harry saying. He's got his arms wrapped around Louis, and half of Louis's chest feels like it's on fire. "You need to help me out, I can't-"

Then there's another voice making itself known, and Louis starts to panic because- because he recognizes that voice.

"Hey! What are you doing with him? Get your hands off of him!"

Louis whips his head around so fast that he's fairly sure he's going to vomit again. Dimly he registers that he's standing now, held up by Harry's surprisingly strong embrace, and he's aware that he can only really open one eye, yet he spots Robert in a second.

"What?" Harry asks, confused and a little angry sounding. "Who are you? How do you even know Louis?"

They're talking over Louis but at this point he's just doing his best to stay alert and tuned in. He's feeling dizzy, now that he's upright, and the smell of vomit hits him again every time the wind shifts.

"He fell," Robert says, and Louis recognises that the masks is back on his voice; he sounds worried, plaintive. "We were working on a project for end of term and he's was just so tired-" he sounds scared, almost.

Louis really and truly believes that if Harry hands him over then Louis might not survive the night. He whimpers and tries to grab at Harry's shirt, almost overbalancing the two of them.

"Whoa, hey," Harry says, trying to stay upright and still keep hold of Louis. "No offence, but I've never met you before in my life, and I'm pretty sure since Louis is getting his degree in History that he's not even in a chemistry class right now, so I'm just going to take him home if you don't mind."

"No offence, but Louis's never mentioned you *either*," Robert says with venom, and Louis flinches.

"Don' make me," he mumbles out, trying to get as close to Harry as possible. "Wi' him. Don' leave me."

Harry's grip on his waist tightens for a moment and Louis lets out a whimper from the sore spot he's squeezing, but at the same time it's reassuring.

“He doesn’t want to go with you, so I think that’s that,” Harry says. “And if I see even one hint of you following us you can bet I’m calling campus police over here immediately. Should have called them already, really.”

“Yeah?” Robert says calmly. “And who are they going to believe? The scholarship kid who comes from nothing and will always be nothing? Or the son of one of England’s best lawyers?”

Harry stiffens, Louis can feel it. “They’ll probably believe the guy who’s been attacked so bad he can barely move,” he says in an equally calm voice. “And I don’t know if you know this, but he seems to not be on your side.”

Harry turns rather abruptly and Louis stumbles, gritting his teeth when Harry has to haul him upright again. “Almost back,” Harry says in a soft voice. “Come on Lou, you can do this.”

—

They move without speaking down the path, as Harry carefully holds Louis up as if he’s made of porcelain (on a night like tonight that’s not too far off), and Louis tries his best to not let the black spots at the corner of his vision take over completely. There’s some sort of irony that, of all the people to find him out here, it had to be Harry.

When they make it to the back door to their building, Harry has to carefully remove his arm from around Louis to enter the code with one hand and turn the handle with the other. For the ten seconds that Harry’s not touching him Louis staggers and finds just how close he is to simply collapsing on the pavement again. He never would have made it back on his own.

Harry moves to support him again and Louis sucks in a breath as his arm brushes the spot that Robert’s foot made contact with earlier. Instantly Harry draws back, a stricken look on his face.

“Louis what do I – what do you need me to do? I don’t want to hurt you more!” He says, clearly terrified of breaking Louis any more than he has been.

“You’re good,” Louis grits. “Was jus- jus a sore spot.”

Harry looks dubious and anxious all in one but goes to support him again, moving even slower this time. Louis braces himself but Harry’s angled himself so that he misses the worst of the area.

They make it slowly up the lift and down the hall, with Louis having to pause only once to catch his breath.

His brain isn’t working at full capacity, which is why he doesn’t think about how the other two boys in his dorm are both night owls and very likely in the common room.

It only appears as a half-formed thought as Harry keys in the code and opens the door, manoeuvring around to move sideways with Louis, making sure the door is held open for him.

“Harry!” someone calls from inside and Louis dimly registers the voice as Liam before he continues. “What’s that rank smell, have you- *Holy shit*, Lou? What the fuck is going on?”

Louis flinches back at the way Liam is yelling, his head already throbbing.

“I don’t know, Liam, I found him this way,” Harry hisses at him. Louis thinks things might be getting fuzzier, but he is aware however briefly that Liam has gotten right up in his face and is examining him.

“Shit,” Liam breathes. “Lou, what the fuck happened?”

Louis attempts a shrug because he doesn’t want to subject anyone to whatever’s in his mouth. He’s running out of things to say anyway.

When he focuses again on Liam’s face he sees a deep frown set, and becomes aware that Harry is still holding him up. Shit.

“M gonna take a bath,” he says, trying to shrug off Harry and duck down under Liam’s gaze (neither happens).

“You’re going to pass out any moment,” Harry tells him matter of factly. “You’re not taking a bath.”

“Smell like vom,” Louis says by way of explanation. Harry probably does now too. Their whole dorm is going to smell like it soon.

“You actually should be going to the hospital. Liam, can you dial-”

“No!” Louis croaks. “No way.” The second he’s in the hospital Robert will know.

“Louis-”

“Don’ you dare,” Louis tries to growl, even if it comes out much more pathetic sounding.

He’s vaguely aware that Liam and Harry are exchanging meaningful glances. Maybe they’re saying things too. Louis’s beginning to sort of lose his concentration.

“What about a shower?” Harry asks softly. “You can barely stand but if you really want to I can help hold you up.”

Louis thinks about it and nods. He feels like everything is sort of sideways, and when he tries to rectify it he almost tips over again. Harry puts his arm back around Louis’s waist and leads him in the direction of their room, and Louis tries not to pass out with the movement.

He almost isn’t aware of what’s happening, honestly. All he can think is that he needs to shower, it’ll be better after he takes a shower. Apparently he tells Harry this too, because Harry keeps softly saying “Yeah, okay Lou.”

He’s aware dimly when his feet hit the tile, and when his shirt is carefully taken off of him because of the pain to his shoulder like a lightning bolt when he tries to move it. Then there’s

the shower itself, and when Louis is led into the shower it suddenly occurs to him that Harry's still here and - is he naked? He looks down to find that no, Harry left Louis' boxers on.

Looking down also makes him realise the state of his torso. With only one good eye he doesn't have the best view but it's obvious that by morning he's going to be horrifically black and blue. He looks back up to Harry, who won't meet his eye but his face says it all - and he looks sad in a way that Louis hasn't seen him before, even on the days when his sister had promised to show up and then canceled last minute.

Then Harry turns the water on, and everything is sort of a blur of pain and wetness. Harry's clearly trying to make sure the water's not too hot but it still burns his scrapes and cuts. But in some horribly cathartic way it feels good, just like every time he's stood in the shower after trying to escape from Robert and rubbed himself red to get the feel off of him from his skin. This is no different.

He can't really do more than apply soap with one hand but at the moment the only important thing is getting rid of blood and vomit, and he can do that well enough by just standing under the spray.

Time doesn't feel like it's passing but it also feels like ages later that Harry turns off the spray and helps him step out. It's only as Louis is gripping tightly to his shirt that he realises that Harry never took off his clothes and is completely soaked through. He feels grateful and also terribly embarrassed.

"You c'n go change," Louis says, the slurring from his mouth already sounding a bit better. "I c'n do it fr'm here."

"No way," Harry says in a no-nonsense voice. "I'm not doing anything until you're lying in bed like you should be, now come on."

Louis shakes his head vehemently, even though doing so makes it pound like all hell. "Need t' brush m' teeth," he says.

"Louis-" Harry sighs.

"Need to clean. Do laundry."

"There's *no* way you're-" Harry starts and then stops himself. Louis stands still against him, shivering and cold, feeling fear creep into him, the way Harry sounded so angry all of a sudden. He doesn't understand that this is what Louis *needs*-

"Louis," says Harry slowly. "Is this what happens? When I come home and the room is clean? Is this why this happens?"

Louis can't say yes, but he also can't say no. How could he possibly explain it? Explain that this is how he's been surviving for so long? That this is what he has to do to survive?

So he doesn't say anything at all. He stares at the floor and waits for Harry to make his own conclusions, whatever they might be. They're none of his business anyway, Harry's just his roommate.

Eventually, Harry sighs and relents, helping Louis limp over to the towel racks. He goes to reach for Louis's blue towel but Louis shakes his head. "Need a new one," he whispers out, feeling ashamed of himself for even suggesting it, for pushing Harry this far.

Harry frowns but complies, he instead makes sure Louis is safely leaning against the counter before leaving the room and returning momentarily with a new one from the stack in the closet.

And, in a way, that's a precursor for how the next hour goes. Louis doesn't know what he's done to deserve this, doesn't know where Harry's patience comes from, but he also barely has the heart to care - Harry waits patiently while Louis brushes his teeth, and listens when Louis says he generally cleans the bathroom and then the bedroom.

Louis always had an idea at the back of his mind that it was going through the motions himself that made him feel alright at the end of the night on nights like this, but Harry makes him sit on his bed, propped up against the headboard, and tries his best to carry out all the tasks Louis tells him, and in some ways it feels the same. Granted, in some ways it feels radically different because with each task Louis tells Harry about he's worried that this'll be the one Harry gets upset about, but it never happens. Eventually, all that's left is the laundry, and that's the one thing that Harry alters a little.

He's been cleaning mostly in silence up until that point, only looking to Louis for the next step, but when all that's left is taking the laundry down to the machines, he speaks up.

"How about I make Liam do that?" he asks, and Louis would think he was joking but Harry's face looks like he's anything but.

"I don't really want you out of my sight."

Louis flushes, feeling like a small child that's in trouble even if he's not sure what he's done wrong. He clears his throat and then just nods, looking down at his hands. One of his wrists is swelling and now that he's come down from the height of his adrenalyn it's started aching quite badly. He tries to massage it while Harry takes the basket into the common room where Liam is no doubt waiting for an update, since he's probably worried himself half to death by now.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

No one was supposed to know.

December was supposed to pass and it would all turn out okay and he was going to be able to move on with his life.

He doesn't realise he's squeezing his wrist rather than massaging it until two larger hands gently pry his apart.

“Stop that,” Harry says. “I’ve brought you something for the pain, and Liam’s physician is on his way.” He hands over a glass and a handful of pills while Louis gapes.

“Liam’s-”

“It’s not a hospital,” Harry reminds him firmly. “He’s promised to keep things on the down low, and you’re not getting out of this, especially since this window is too high to fall out of.”

Louis’s eyes snap to Harry’s and Harry raises an eyebrow.

“We’re talking about this,” he tells Louis. “I want to know what the hell has been going on. But I’ll wait until you’re well enough to speak. Consider yourself warned.”

—

When the physician arrives, Liam is still downstairs with the laundry (which Harry had to tell him how to operate). Harry shows him into their room and gives a brief introduction, then excuses himself to wait out in the common room, feeling like he should offer Louis at least this privacy.

He can’t figure out what happened, how he didn’t notice. Sure, the nightmares were unsettling, but lots of people have them. He’s always been a bit aloof but something still isn’t adding up. Who was that guy? He looked rather familiar, like someone Harry’s seen around campus, but he could be just that.

He can’t help replaying the last few months in his mind, especially the way Louis withdrew after Halloween. It didn’t seem significant before. Is it significant now?

He thinks himself in circles until Niall comes home, and then is totally at a loss for what to say to Niall.

“He came home... hurt,” is what he settled on, and Niall is immediately up in arms, wanting to barge into the room that the physician still hasn’t come out of.

“Do you know what happened?” Harry asks him as he tries to barge past, grabbing Niall’s hand to keep him from going in. “You and Liam are always so defensive of him. Why?”

Niall huffs. “Because he’s the best friend a guy could have and he deserves better!” He pulls his hand out of Harry’s grip and stomps over to a couch, sitting down with a thump. “When I first met Louis,” he begins as Harry sits next to him. “He would cry at the drop of a hat. Anything would set him off. And he never admitted to it, but we could hear him having nightmares in his room every night, it was terrible.

“It took months to get him even a little bit out of his shell. Anytime anyone touched him it was like he’d been burned he’d jump away so fast. You don’t start out like that, Harry, that shit’s learned. We shared a dorm back in sixth form and me and Liam, he clearly didn’t trust us. All he cared about were his sisters - not that that’s changed - and if you ever dared say a bad word about his mum, joking or not, he’d absolutely flip.

“Then he started dating a guy and everything changed. This guy, Rob or some shit, was a total asshole but for some reason Louis just couldn’t see it. He started going to parties, hanging out late with us, and that’s great and all but the second he left the room Rob would completely change, started talking shit about him. I assume Louis eventually found out because he broke it off with him a couple years later, but when he did he stopped going out all together.”

Niall sighs. “He’d do anything for a friend though, let me tell ya. The guy hates spending money, I think he feels like he hasn’t earned it, but the second Liam or I or any of his girls need a favour he’s right there for them. Even that ridiculous halloween costume he had on this year, Perrie told me that was part of a deal for her to break up with her idiot of a boyfriend at the time.

Listen Harry, I know you don’t like him, and I still feel like that’s sort of your mistake, but he’d do anything for his people, and I don’t think he’s had enough people willing to do things for him.”

Harry sits and lets everything Niall said sink in. Wishes Niall had given him this talk months ago, but at the same time knows he probably wouldn’t have listened.

—

The physician appears again before Harry thinks of anything really to respond, and Harry jumps up to see what information he can get.

“You are Harry, right?” the man asks. He’s a tall man with a thick moustache and a briefcase and Harry wonders how Liam’s physician has apparently transported here from the eighteen hundreds.

“Mr. Tomlinson has given me permission to share his status with you,” he says, and maybe he shouldn’t be, but Harry’s a little shocked by that.

The man hands him a number of bottles of pills and denotes their use, how often they should be taken, and why. Mostly they’re for different kinds of pain relief and swelling, and Harry is thankful when he’s handed a sheet of paper with all the information on it as well because there’s no way he would remember.

Louis hasn’t broken anything, he’s informed. There’s a number of smaller injuries and a lot of swelling is from that but he should make a full recovery given enough rest and relaxation. He shouldn’t be on his feet for the next week at least, and a physician should be called in again at a later date to review his improvement.

Something tells Harry the only reason they got a physician in *today* is because Louis was half dead and couldn’t fight him on it, but he doesn’t mention it.

When the man leaves and the door shuts behind him, Harry lets out a deep breath and then turns around and suddenly remembers that Niall was in the room the whole time, and is now giving him *a look*.

“There’s more that you’re not telling me,” Niall says. “More than ‘he came home *hurt*.’”

Harry nods. “There is,” he says, “and I’ll absolutely tell you. After I check on him.”

He opens their bedroom door and slips in before Niall can protest, letting the door close behind him and throwing the room into darkness.

There’s no movement from Louis, and when Harry makes his way over he sees that Louis’s deeply asleep, lying in the middle of his bed and looking frail and small.

He’s covered in bandages and there’s more left on the table next to his bed. That being said, with the way he was acting earlier, Harry’s pretty happy to not see him on a breathing machine.

He reaches out and runs a hand through Louis’s fringe. He thinks about the hours he put into cleaning the room they’re in tonight. Thinks about Louis doing this on his own without anyone ever knowing. Thinks about how annoyed he was by it.

The sun starts to rise and light up the windows of their room, and Harry thinks about how he wants Louis to never get hurt again.

—

It takes a while when Louis wakes up for the hazy memories of the night before to come back to him. There’s a general sort of pain in his arms, his chest, his face... When his muddled mind does manage to piece things back together, he groans.

He was such a *fool*.

Robert’s going to come back for the both of them now, that’s for sure. And - what the hell was he thinking, asking Harry to do all that for him last night? The two of them have only just gotten on more or less friendly terms, and now Louis has gone and ordered him around like, what, a servant?

Fuck, Harry is going to crucify him.

Louis tries in vain to roll onto his side - his preferred sleeping position - in order to try and get back to sleep and put off whatever confrontation will happen when he leaves this room. When he does so though, he manages to overextend his arm past what it was apparently willing to do and a sharp pain blossoms through him, making him cry out in surprise.

The next second he knows, there’s suddenly a crowd of people in his room, and a lot more light. There’s a chorus of “Are you okay?” and “Did you just wake up?” and “Holy shit, Tommo, you scared the fuck out of us!” and Louis finds a handful of pills being placed gently into his hand.

“Take these,” Harry says, “And here’s water. You should have taken them an hour ago but I didn’t want to wake you.”

He looks so serious and concerned and Louis finds himself faintly remembering telling the physician that he could share everything with Harry. Shit.

Liam, Niall and Harry are all standing next to his bed now, looking awkward and concerned. Not one for the limelight, Louis upends the pills into his mouth and takes the water from Harry, swallowing them down in faster than he probably should have and then having to work to pretend like he's not about to choke from swallowing too many in one mouthful.

He coughs a few times into the glass anyway as he downs the rest of the water.

"Slowly, yeah?" Niall says with concern, and Louis feels Harry's hand come to settle on his shoulder, rubbing small, tentative circles.

He hates it.

He hates the attention, something he's shied away from for so long. He loves Niall and Liam and how they include him in their lives, but it's been a long time since he's been the subject of undivided attention (that's not malicious), and he doesn't know what to do with it.

"I'm fine, lads," he says, even as his voice betrays him. His throat feels thick and one cheek is still swollen enough that talking is a bit... slurred. "Don't need to worry about me, this isn't worse than that footie injury from year twelve, yeah?"

It's meant to make Niall and Liam laugh (he'd tripped in the mud and ended up flat on his back hard enough to knock a tooth out, needing to be rushed to the nurse to have it put back in), but neither of them even crack a smile.

It's been a long time since someone really worried about him, and right now he doesn't know what to do about it.

It's Niall first who seems to find the words to say something. "You're a fucking mess, Lou," he says. "And I don't like that we had find out Rob's still around by him beating the piss out of you."

Liam punches him in the arm and Niall hisses, "Well it's true!"

Louis looks down at his lap, noticing for the first time that one of his arms has a few large, fancy looking bandages wrapped around them. Robert used to go on to Louis about how family was everything, that friends aren't your true friends unless they know everything about you, that Niall and Liam would leave before too long once they found out the truth about Louis's mum. He told Louis that he was lucky that Robert could look past all that.

Looking back, it feels crazy that Louis hadn't seen it earlier, but in the moment he had almost thought Robert was right. He was waiting for Niall and Liam to finally give up on him.

"What Niall's trying to say," Liam reasons. "Is that we kind of wish we'd been paying more attention. Before this happened."

Louis (sort of) shrugs. With one shoulder. "If wishes were fishes," he says. It's what he says to his sisters when they're being mooney.

Niall snuffles and runs over to the far side of Louis's bed before climbing in, bouncing Louis a bit as he does so, and then very gently wraps an arm over Louis's torso. It aches a bit the way he presses on it but Louis thinks it's better not to mention that.

"I'm not leaving you," Niall says. "Never. You're never getting out of my sight again!"

"You're never following me to the toilet," Louis tells him. "I draw the line there."

"Niall please be careful," Liam chides, looking a little stricken.

"I'm fine, Li. Not made of glass. Plus, whatever drugs Harry gave me are kicking in, I think. Not gonna feel much of anything at all soon."

Louis glances back at Harry, who's been silent so far. He's still standing there, looking worriedly at Louis, like he wants to say something but doesn't know how.

It's all a bit too much, and Louis does the only thing he can think of to swerve the situation.

"I love you too, Nialler, but I really have to piss. So if you could..."

"Yeah, course mate," Niall scrambles off of him and Louis counts it a win that he flinches only a little when Niall knees him in the stomach.

"Do you, um, need-"

"If you're about to ask me if I need help, I'm going to have to let you know that our relationship is *never* going to be at that stage."

Niall looks sort of relieved at that, and Louis hauls himself into a sitting position. He feels a little dizzy when he tries to stand up, and immediately Harry - *Harry?* - is rushing to his side to try to help him but Louis waves him off.

"I'm fine, just needed a moment," Louis says and he's definitely unsteady but it's only a handful of steps over to the restroom, and when his feet hit the tile he flips on the light and shuts the door behind him, sagging against it gratefully.

He really does need to piss, but he also just wanted a second to collect himself. He walks by the mirror and sees just how much of a mess the rest of the boys must see him as - bruised and swollen face, bandages all down one arm and discolored skin blooming just above his collar.

It feels like everything's come apart now and he hates it all but at the same way he just feels terribly *lost*. He doesn't know what to do now.

There's a week left of classes and he has to make it through this term; the sooner he graduates, the sooner he can stop using up Dan's money and make his way in the world, as far as possible from his biological father but close enough to his siblings to help them grow. Saint Albert has been the safest place for him up until now, offering protection in the form of higher learning; a rich student population means they'll stamp down on any suspicious

activity fast and security is unlikely to let anyone who's not a student onto the grounds to start with.

The fact that his father managed to weasel his lawyer's son onto the campus with Louis was the ultimate move, and Louis's been running from him for years now, feeling like he's in a slow motion chase because Robert is well aware of the rules and what will get him in trouble but so is Louis. Now, in the last month, Robert's finally snapped, and Louis almost, *almost* feels safe going to the police about it.

But he doesn't, not really.

Because now there's other people involved in this; Niall and Liam and *Harry*.

They're too many factors. Louis's spent all these years making sure he was far enough away from his sisters that it never occurred to his father to use them as leverage, but now there's three more names in the mix.

Something inside him says that it's too late to the limit, this was Robert's last big attempt, but he's also too scared to believe it. After all this time there has to be more.

Louis pees, because he really did have to, and washes his his hands slowly, taking deep breaths to try to calm himself.

When he opens the door, the only one still left in the bedroom is Harry, sitting awkwardly on his bed with his phone in his hands. He startles when the door squeaks and jumps up, pocketing his phone and walking over to Louis.

"Let me, um, help you."

"I can walk just fine," Louis brushes him off, not unkindly. "I'm just a bit stiff, is all."

The medicine is actually making him feel rather gangly and loose, actually, but that's not something Harry needs to know. Louis carefully makes his way back onto his bed and lowers himself into it.

"Do you need anything?" Harry asks, standing in the middle of their room and looking lost. "Like, are you hungry? Or I could get you an ice pack?"

"Really, I'm fine," Louis tries to assure him. "Look, I know you saw a lot yesterday, but. It's okay, really. It's not your business."

Harry frowns, looking hurt. "It sort of *is* my business though," he says slowly. "It's Niall and Liam's business too, at this point. I'm the one that found you last night, and Liam's the one that convinced me not to call for an ambulance. And Niall's the one who filled me in on what's going on." He sits down on his own bed, looking at his hands. "And I'm your roommate. I think- at this point, that counts for something."

Oh.

Louis swallows. "I'd really rather not," he starts, and then huffs out a breath and tries again. "Listen, I just. I don't want to involve people."

"It's a bit late for that," Harry says. "Plus, I think people would disagree and say that they wish you would have involved them in the first place. I'm not saying you have to tell me everything right this minute," he gives an almost pleading look to Louis. "I just want to know how I can help."

It feels like a peace offering.

"Um," Louis pauses, "If you have it, an ice pack would be... nice."

Harry obliges and practically rushes out of the room, coming back in momentarily with two ice packs that Louis definitely doesn't remember seeing in the freezer. He takes them both gratefully though, laying one on his wrist and holding the other to his swollen eye.

"Anything," Harry says. "Anything at all. Just let me know."

Louis doesn't really want to, but he doesn't want to deny Harry this. "Yeah, course," he says, his voice coming out a little hoarse.

—

He's still only got half the puzzle, but Harry continues to feel like he's piecing it together with every interaction he has with Louis.

The next one falls into place when the nightmares come back. It's not the middle of the night this time; it's four in the afternoon and Harry has been sitting on his bed trying in vain to study as Louis twitches in a fitful sleep. After the physician's visit he had slept like the dead, probably thanks to whatever drugs had been given to him, but now he's starting to toss and whimper, which is probably only exacerbating the pain from his injuries.

Harry is quick to jump from his bed and rush to Louis's side, feeling dread pool in his stomach as he thinks about the number of times this scene has played out before him, and how each time he wondered why it happened, if maybe Louis had always grown up with night terrors.

Now, though. He thinks about the cleaning, and how the nightmares happened often but especially, one hundred percent of the time, after Harry came home to a clean room.

He takes Louis's hand - the one he knows not to be hurt - and cradles it, trying to soothe him without making anything worse. It feels like everything he does is make things worse.

Louis thrashes and cries out, a jumble of words and something about "Don't take her," and "Please leave us alone," and then just "Please," everything sounding somehow more desperate than it ever has before, although Harry convinces himself that could be only in his mind.

Still, the stark difference between now and other times, is that this time Louis wakes up.

His eyes snap open and focus on Harry, who's still holding his hand and doesn't want to let go.

"What-" Louis pants. "What are you-"

"You, um," Harry just. He doesn't let go of his hand. "Nightmare. You were having a nightmare."

Louis blinks at him. "So you were... Holding my hand?"

"Yeah," Harry says, acting more confident than he feels. "It's, um, it happens sometimes. It helps."

Louis's eyebrows shoot up and he slides his hand out from Harry's. Harry's hands feel cold.

"Sometimes?" He squeaks, and in some ways it's nice to be hearing Louis sounding much more normal. "Sometimes like, multiple times?"

Harry sort of shrugs. "Like, a couple times a week? It's been... more, lately."

"And you never thought to tell *me*?" Louis asks, and he doesn't sound angry, thank God, more just incredulous.

"I sort of tried, once," Harry admits. "And you didn't take it well, so I just, sort of, dropped it?"

"Oh," says Louis.

"Yeah."

"M sorry," Louis mumbles after a moment's silence. "Probably woke you up and shit. Not the best roommate."

He looks small and Harry hates that, doesn't want him to look small (just a bit short, sometimes), and on impulse he reaches out and grabs Louis's hand again.

"I don't mind," he says. "I mean, I did. At first. But that's just because I was being a prat. And I didn't trust you, because I just assumed you were an arsehole, like, on principle? But you can't help it, clearly, and I'd hate for you to be, um," he glances down. "Alone?"

Louis doesn't say anything for a while, but he doesn't pull his hand out of Harry's either. Eventually, it's a very quiet, "Thanks, Harry," and a sort of attempt at a smile.

And that's not bad.

—

It's a weird kind of difference now, and Louis doesn't know what to do with it. He doesn't know what to think of Harry, who apparently has been helping him without Louis even knowing for months now, pretty much since the beginning.

He's awkward around Harry, like a new acquaintance that he's trying to test out the waters with rather than a roommate he's known for months. It's neither bad or good, and it's both the closest and the furthest from a clean slate he's ever had with anybody.

It's two nights later that he wakes up again to Harry holding his hand, stroking down his fingers. He hasn't been back to class, shooting an email to his professors that he suspects he'll be out with the flu through the weekend, and he's spent his time mostly sitting in his room and worrying. There's so much to worry about and not enough answers to go around.

Still, when he wakes up covered in sweat after another dream about his mum, finding Harry there next to him is a sort of reprieve, even if it is also awkward and both of them end up with pink cheeks and awkward conversation.

Harry brushes off his apologies and says "I could barely sleep anyway, Lou. Really, it's the least I could do."

Lou.

Harry goes back to his own bed before Louis falls asleep, but he sort of still feels like he's there.

The next night it's the same thing, but this time it's Harry shushing him and calming his insecurities before Louis can even attempt apologies. He briefly thinks about his dreams, about telling Harry where they come from. He thinks Harry deserves to know. He hazily remembers Harry asking; "*We'll talk about this. Consider yourself warned.*"

This time, he drifts off before Harry's even left.

Late December

Harry let Louis rest for a week before he demanded an explanation.

(Not about the nightmares, of course, because he's been terribly respectful about those, but about everything else. Robert.)

It was longer than Louis expected him to wait, honestly. Ever since that night Harry has barely left his side. He's been making sure Louis takes all of his medications exactly when he needs to and has kept Louis within his line of sight for as long as physically possible to make sure he's not overexerting himself.

Louis thinks he might, maybe, finally be ready. To share it with someone. Some part of him feels like he'll never be ready, but he's been thinking about it through the last week, hiding in his room and getting delivered food by Niall and Liam, both walking on tiptoe (metaphorically and physically) and attended to by Harry in any way Louis will let him. He doesn't feel like he can possibly have barriers up anymore. At least, not in the way he did before.

A lot of details of that night are fuzzy to Louis, but he remember Harry holding him up. He remembers Harry making sure Robert couldn't do anything. He remembers every time he woke up Harry was there.

So a whole week was a lot more than Louis was expecting, honestly.

"So," Harry hands Louis a mug of tea and puts a bowl of what looks like muesli, yogurt and berries (what he's made for Louis every morning this week whether he wants it or not) on the table next to the bed, "I think it's time you told me what's going on."

"My biological father is a sociopath," Louis starts with a deep breath.

"My mum divorced my dad when I was really young. Like, I didn't really know it at the time, but they were both pretty wealthy. But in the divorce my dad had the better lawyer. And he took everything.

"So we didn't grow up with much, which was fine. I had my mum and later I had my sisters and we didn't have a lot but it was so good, you know? I didn't know how good.

"But then my dad lost everything right at the beginning of the financial crisis, and for some reason he blamed my mum because it was originally her money. I don't think he even really believed that, I think that's just what he told himself.

"But my grandad on my mum's side had just passed away, and left her his house. It was huge, I remember playing in it as a kid. We hadn't been over in years because my grandparents had abandoned my mum when she got divorced, but apparently her father still wanted her to have it.

“I don’t even know how my dad found out about it,” Louis frowns at his tea. “I mean, he’s crazy enough that it’s not a surprise, but like... He demanded that she hand over the house, that since he had gotten their house in the divorce he should have right to this too.”

Louis remembers the late night conversations, listening in on his mum and Dan discussing the threats that his biological dad was sending. It was terrifying, especially knowing that that was the man he came from, not the one his mum actually loved.

“S-so, he um... He planted e-evidence,” Louis stumbles through and sips his tea to try to calm down. “Harry, you have to promise this doesn’t leave us,” he says.

Harry nods, raptly. “Of course, but I’m sure it’s not that bad-”

“He *killed* someone, Harry,” Louis chokes out, and then he’s sobbing and Harry’s taking the tea from his hands and wrapping his arms around Louis and Louis sobs into his shoulder because he’s never told anyone this, no one should ever have known.

“He- I walked into the house a-and, I recognized her, I think she was a friend of my mum’s, but she was on the floor and she wasn’t... and then the police were there, and there were so many people everywhere and no one would tell me what was going on, but,” he takes a deep shuddery breath and rubs his face with his hands as Harry draws circles on his back, soothing.

“He knew mum and Dan never married, so he doesn’t have any claim to my grandparents’ house,” Louis says quietly. “And apparently with the charges and the evidence... He told her that this was going to happen, said that it would all stop if she gave him the house but she never took him *seriously*! I mean, who would take you seriously if you said you were going to frame them for murder?”

“But then when she was arrested it was too late, because if he were to ever confess it would mean he’d go to jail and of course he’s not going to- to do... that.”

“But then he- he kept going. I think he must know someone on the police force because he knows I was there that night, that I walked in on... the body being found. Him and his lawyer have been trying to get me to sign these papers that state that as a witness I saw my- my mum do it, and it could keep her in jail for the rest of her life.”

“There’s no way,” Harry interrupts. “Right? There’s no way that’s legal!”

Louis hiccups something like a laugh. “Legal doesn’t matter that much when you’ve got the right lawyer and people on the inside,” he says. “He- he told me that if I sign it then everything else goes away. My name can be erased from all the searchable police records and the rest of my family won’t get the backlash from it.”

Harry gapes. “He can’t possibly think that’s worth it!”

“I told you, he’s a sociopath.” Louis shakes his head. “He doesn’t understand, I don’t think. Not really. But there’s a limit. The case is closing - because there’s not enough evidence

linking her for her to be in jail for more than another year - and they have through the end of this year. It's- Robert. The guy you saw that night?"

Harry nods.

"That's his lawyer's son. He's been trying to get me to sign the documents for almost five years."

Louis watches the confusion etch over Harry's face and wonders if this is the moment when he finally gives up and leaves. The story sounds crazy. It sounds like a movie. It definitely doesn't sound like something that would happen in real life.

"But- but I just have to get through the end of this month. I've almost made it, I'm so close," Louis says and there's desperation in his voice that is probably the reason Harry snaps out of whatever trance he's in.

"What do you need?" Harry asks and Louis looks at him with a frown.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what do you need? Protection? Do you need me to get the police here?"

Louis splutters. "N-no! He's got people somewhere on the inside. He'll know the second I do that."

"Well," Harry muses, deep in thought. "You're not on your own anymore. And you're not going anywhere on your own from now until January."

Louis thinks Harry doesn't know what he's getting himself into, but there's only two weeks left so... What has he got to lose?

—

Harry's pretty sure Louis doesn't want him to tell Niall and Liam everything.

So he doesn't.

But he does tell them the important bits.

Because the thing about Harry is that he's a scholarship student, and he doesn't have a lot of money, but he's starting to realise that it's not a bad thing to have friends that do. For instance, friends that are willing to bring food back to the room on a daily basis and convince their shared professors to let Louis email in his homework for the next few weeks due to a very real looking fake doctor's note. Friends who are able to call on friends in high places when a weasel of a man named Robert has exhibited stalker behavior.

It's really, really not bad to have friends like that.

The swelling around Louis's eye and mouth has gone down, and his bruises have moved from yellow and purple to maroon blossoms. He's graduated from sitting on his bed throughout the

day to sitting in the common room and pretending to watch television. Harry thinks he knows why, too. He figures it out in the way that Louis's eye is on them from the second they come in the door, clearly trying to be subtle when he asks if they had a good class, if anything happened.

He's not sure if it happens as much with Niall or Liam, but when Harry walks in the door he's keenly aware of the way Louis's eyes sweep over his body, and normally he'd take it to mean someone is interested in him, checking out his body (which Harry will admit he's proud of), but with Louis Harry thinks it has more to do with checking that he's okay, that he hasn't been touched in any way.

He finds it sweet, but also terribly, horribly sad.

So he makes a special effort to sit next to Louis on the couch, make himself visible, show him that nothing's happened. He also makes it a point to distract him if Niall and Liam have disappeared into their room together in the middle of the day, because they think they're sneaky but they're really *not*.

Louis has been spending more time with his siblings too, in any way possible; Facetime, Snapchat, texting... Harry has ended up in more than a few Snapchat stories and the first few times are horribly awkward because he has to act like he's never met them before, because he still hasn't admitted to Louis that only a few weeks ago he had conspired with Liam to get them all down to visit.

(Gemma had been right, Harry had been a total arse, and coming home only to see Louis glowing with happiness after his sisters left had really been confirmation that it had been the least he could do).

"Harry, make a face," Louis tells him, snapping Harry out of the Eastenders episode that's playing in front of them. He turns and finds Louis's phone pointed at him, and pulls a face of disinterest. He doesn't *like* Snapchat, would much rather just text, but Louis has been finding more and more joy from using the filters. Sure enough, when Louis lowers the phone back to his lap, Harry sees his own face (looking disgruntled) pulled out of proportion, with chubby cheeks and rabbit ears.

"Who's that for?" he asks as Louis dashes off a caption and sends it.

"My sister Lottie," Louis says. "The oldest. She says you're cute."

"Tell her I'm better looking without the filter."

Louis makes a face at him. "I'm not going to lie to her!"

Harry gapes, and a moment later Louis bursts out laughing, at him. Did Louis just make a joke? About Harry? He feels something warm in the pit of his stomach and wonders how he never noticed before just how much Louis walked on tiptoes around him.

Well, he knows how he never noticed. But still, this is something he now thinks he wouldn't give up for the world.

It's just at that moment that there's a beeping at the door that signifies someone is entering the code, and Louis is immediately on the alert, sitting up as tall as he can to look past Harry at the door.

It swings inward only to reveal Liam on the other side, phone pressed to his ear as he walks in and shucks off his muddy boots. He's listening to someone on the other end that Harry can only barely hear jabber on, and he walks through the room, coming up to ruffle Louis's hair (a weak protest is made), and then into his room. Just as the door shuts behind him Harry can hear Liam say, "No, I want it as long as possible. Life. Whatever you have to do."

Harry turns back to Louis to see him frowning. "What is he on about?" Louis asks, chewing his cheek. "Liam isn't that serious about *anything*, he doesn't even give his homework that much thought."

Harry shrugs, trying to keep it light. "Maybe he's got a date," he says.

"What," Louis snorts. "He wants his *date* as long as possible? I didn't know Liam was such a size queen."

Harry cracks a smile. "He's a mysterious one, though. Do we even know his type?"

"Apparently well-hung," Louis muses. "I never did set him up. Wonder if he's interested in blokes after all, maybe that's why he turned down my saxophone redhead."

"Your *what*?"

—

Everything feels like the eye of the storm, is the thing.

Harry doesn't hate him anymore. He's actually been sweeter than sugar lately, and not just in a *I feel sorry for you* sort of way (or at least, that's how it seems at least).

His professors have each told him that they're willing to conduct his finals remotely, providing he has someone vouch for him (he has three people who are jumping at the chance, thankyouverymuch).

Liam and Niall have been bringing home food for him every day (which he actually sort of wishes they would *stop* doing because he does have the ability to order delivery himself, but Niall especially always seems so proud of himself).

His sisters have also been putting up well with his extra attentiveness, even Fizzy, who normally starts to ignore his calls when she starts to feel like she's being babied.

(They all ask about Harry a *lot* he notices, which is a little weird but Harry is quite good looking, and, well, maybe all the Tomlinsons have similar taste).

(What?)

But even with all of that, he's just waiting for the storm to hit again. Robert is still out there somewhere and he's not going to give up, he's been too persistent for too long for that.

It's bound to happen eventually and the waiting is killing him.

—

Harry's sort of left Niall and Liam to their own devices. He knows they're doing *something*, he just doesn't know what.

A lot of students at Saint Albert stay up until the week of Christmas, depending on how unlucky they are in their exam schedule. The campus remains open for students through the holidays, although it more or less becomes a ghost town.

It's December 22nd, the last day of exams for most students, and Harry's only just gotten out of his Stats exam (which he's confident on, although he will definitely be checking the website every hour for the next week until it comes up with his grade). It's uncharacteristically cold for Britain in December, and there's even a few flakes falling.

When he makes it into Beeker, he sheds his coat before even pressing the button for the elevator (rich people and their wasteful heating). His phone was off during his exam (not because he was a good student but because he forgot to charge it), and he takes it out of his pocket before putting it back in, a weird dead weight that he keeps wanting to fidget with.

After walking down the hallway to his room (and wishing his phone wasn't dead so he could get a picture of the snow outside the window), he keys in the door code and opens it, only to come face to face with Liam.

"*Shit*, Harry you scared me! Where have you been?"

Liam's ushering him inside fast enough Harry sort of runs into the wall and he shuts the door none too gently.

"I've been at class with a dead phone. What's happened?" Harry shoots a concerned glance to him.

"Rob texted Louis," Liam tells him, voice low. "We don't even know how he got his number. Told him this was his last chance to do it willingly or some shit. He's completely terrified, I've never seen him like this!"

Somehow, Harry thinks he's seen Louis like this before. He drops his coat and heads for his room, opening the door gently because he *just knows* that anything more than that could scare Louis half to death (which he probably already is at this point).

He doesn't see Louis at first, but he hears him; the soft whimpers he's so used to waking up to in the night.

"Louis?" he asks tentatively, scanning the room and coming up empty. When Louis next makes a noise though, it's to his left, and Harry turns. The door to the bathroom is wide open and it's clearly empty, but the closet...

“Lou, I’m going to come in,” he says, putting his head up against the door. The nickname slips off his lips naturally at this point.

Inside, the closet is dark. Harry doesn’t turn on the light, just walks in and closes the door behind him, standing still afterward and letting his eyes adjust to the darkness.

Louis, when Harry is finally able to see him, is huddled in a back corner, underneath hanging clothes and covered in a blanket. Harry dimly registers that it’s *his* side of the closet that Louis chose, his clothes that he’s hiding behind.

“Hey,” Harry says, like he’s talking to a frightened child. “I’m going to come sit next to you, okay?”

Louis doesn’t respond but Harry takes that as an affirmative, crouching as he makes his way under the rack to sit so that his knees touch Louis’s. Louis’s face is buried in his arms, but he doesn’t seem offput by Harry’s presence, which is nice.

Harry doesn’t know how to help, really, but he knows that he *wants* to, so he lets his mouth run a bit, resting the back of his hand gently against Louis’s knee.

“He’s not going to get to you,” he says. “Or whatever shit he’s trying to say. He’s the lowest sort of life form imaginable and I don’t know how he got your number but that doesn’t mean you’re not safe, or that he’ll actually be able to do anything because he *won’t*. He just wants to scare you because he knows he’s lost.”

“He’ll never be gone,” Louis says, quietly enough that Harry feels if anyone else were in the room they wouldn’t have been able to hear him. “He’ll never leave me alone, even after this. Even if I do manage- manage to avoid him.”

“Yes he will,” Harry says, mustering up all his confidence into his voice. “He’s only human, and there’s nothing he can do to make himself otherwise. Don’t overestimate him because you’ll underestimate yourself. You’re so much stronger than that scum will ever be, and you’ll survive today and tomorrow and keep surviving long past whenever that bastard has been forced to give up.”

“I’m not strong,” Louis says. “Not at all.”

“You are the strongest person I know,” Harry says without hesitation. “And I don’t know what it’ll take for you to believe that, but it’s the truth so I’ll just keep telling it to you.”

Louis starts shaking and then cries in the sort of sobs that bring up all the buried bits of emotion at once, and Harry grabs ahold of his hand, because that’s how he’s given Louis comfort during nightmares before, and that’s what right now feels like. Just another nightmare that’s going to be gone when the sun rises.

—

It’s later that night when Robert really does show himself. Harry’s managed to coax Louis out of the closet and into the common room, and he, Niall and Liam have surrounded him on the

couch. They're eating curry and watching Elf, even if no one is really paying attention.

Liam's phone starts blaring something awful, making them all jump, and he snatches it before muttering a curse and running for his room, answering it under his breath.

Harry's on one side of Louis and Niall is on the other, and when they hear the door code being entered on the other side, both of them simultaneously try to block Louis from whoever's on the other side. Harry has no idea what's going on, but he's not going to let Louis get hurt again, whatever's happening.

The door comes flying open and slams against the wall. It was dark the one time Harry saw Robert but there's no mistaking that's who this is. He looks livid and insane, and stomps in without regard for the three people staring at him from the couch.

"*Fuck you,*" he spits when he sees Louis. Both Harry and Niall get up to block him as he comes closer. "*Fuck you* and whatever the fuck you've done to my family! Who do you think you are? You're a fucking *nobody* piece of *shit*, and you should feel blessed I ever fucking pretended you were worth dating! You've been a piece of fucking shit on my shoe for too long, and now I'm *done*."

Harry's eyes widen as Robert draws a *kitchen knife* from his pocket. He's literally insane. He can't actually mean this.

"My dad's been *arrested!*" Robert screams at him. "And it's *you're fault!*"

He runs at them, still screaming, and Harry barely has a second to process before Niall has him on the ground, wrestling the knife from him.

Everything only gets more confusing from there, because the next minute there are half a dozen policemen streaming into the room and surrounding Niall and Robert, pulling them apart and restraining Robert, who's spitting curses even as they handcuff him.

In the confusion of it all, Harry feels someone grab his hand and he looks down to find Louis's fingers firmly wrapped around his. He squeezes back heaves a sigh of what he thinks might be relief.

—

Liam tells Louis later that there's always someone higher up that you can go to in the police force, if you just know where to look. For instance, Liam's grandfather is acting head of the London Special Forces Unit.

Robert's father has been arrested on multiple charges of fraud and two charges of abuse that have recently been brought to light. Robert himself is under investigation for allegations of stalking (which Liam been gathering evidence for).

Louis's own father is being investigated for multiple charges, he's told, but what exactly those charges are has not yet been revealed.

None of them have attempted to contact Louis.

There's a sense of safety that Louis feels right now that's unlike anything he's ever known. He feels empty in a way, the worries plaguing him for so much of his life having practically gone up in smoke. There's freedom on the other side, and confusion because he sits down sometimes and feels like he *should* be doing something, worrying about something, but it's just not there.

He's free.

May

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Louis doesn't know how he survived all those months living in the same room as Harry and not being on the receiving end of his hugs.

Harry gives amazing hugs.

The last twelve hours have been filled with more of them than the last three months of dating Harry combined, and still, he doesn't want to let go.

They're only going to be apart for two weeks because Louis has organized a trip to the seaside with his family starting in June that may or may not include Harry tagging along (it does, it definitely does), but they've spent the last few days packing up their dorm room and it seems so big and empty now with everything in bags and suitcases ready to go.

Louis wanders out into the common room so he doesn't have to look at their empty room any more and finds Harry speaking on the phone with someone. When he notices Louis come in he bids the other person on the line a hasty goodbye and turns around with open arms to embrace Louis in yet another life-altering hug.

Louis still feels weird about a lot of physical touch. After dating Robert every touch felt dirty, felt like it was a lie in disguise, and from most people it still feels that way. But Harry - who held his hand long before he even knew he could need comforting that way - Harry always seems to be the exception.

"Mmph," Louis says into his shirt. "Who were you talking to?"

"Would you trust me if I said you have to wait and see?" Harry asks, erupting into giggles as Louis pokes at his sides.

"Absolutely not," Louis says. "You are entirely untrustworthy. And I hate waiting."

Harry smiles that big dopey smile again and gives Louis an extra squeeze. "Come on, let's leave the bags here and let the magical house elves figure out which ones belong to whom."

"I don't think you can refer to the maids as house elves, Harry," Louis chides as Harry takes his hand and leads him toward the door.

"I actually meant your little siblings," Harry says and-

"*What?*" Louis asks just before Harry swings open the door to their dorm and six children who were clearly working very hard to stay quiet tumble into the room and erupt into a mixed number of cheers as they crowd as close around Louis as possible.

Louis stands shocked for a moment, unable to process that all of his family has made the trip up here to see him when he's about to go home to meet them, when Dan follows them through the door as well with a friendly wave.

"Hey Louis," he says when the small crowd around Louis has migrated to Harry instead, Fizzy and Lottie leading the interrogation.

"Hey Dan," Louis says, a little awkwardly.

"We were just thinking that you might want to come along on our little expedition today," Dan says, looking like if he grinned any wider he'd split his face in two. "See, we're on our way to pick up the last missing member of our family and thought you might want to be along for the ride?"

Louis looks at him in shock, and then whips around to stare at Harry, who's doing something a little weird with his face as he's trying (and failing) not to smile.

"I-" Louis falters. "I thought she wasn't due home until the end of the summer!"

Dan smiles softly at him and then goes to ruffle his hair before he seems to think better of it. "She's been let out early because of recent information found and a new court ruling. We didn't want to bother you in the middle of your exams because we didn't think it would go anywhere but..." he shrugs but he clearly looks like he's won the lottery. "She'll be home tonight."

Louis thinks he might cry. Harry seems to recognise this. Louis quickly finds himself wrapped in Harry's arms again.

"Mind if I come with?" Harry whispers, as if the other seven people in the room can't hear (which they definitely can). "I told my mum I might not be home for a few days..."

Louis intertwines their fingers. "I'm going to be crying like a baby for the next twenty four hours *minimum*," he warns.

"I'll bring tissues," Harry says.

Louis takes one last look around them, at the dorm that was supposed to just be the place he lived through the end of the year before fading into a hazy memory like all the others. He grabs hold of Harry's hand and squeezes, already feeling the first tears threaten to leak.

He's so happy to be going home.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaand thank you for sticking with me, I can't believe you read all that.

Here's [the fic post](#).

End Notes

Visit me at [LondonFoginaCup](#) on tumblr! And [here's the fic post](#), if you consider it worth a reblog.

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