“I’ve heard you like Scrabble,” said Niall. He considered Harry. Maybe Louis was right and he and Harry would make good friends.

“Yeah.” Harry nodded enthusiastically, eyes lighting up. “I go to the Scrabble club at my library.”

“I think I’ve got a Scrabble set round my flat somewhere,” Niall told him. He shrugged and shot Harry a crooked grin. “If you don’t mind playing with a set that’s almost certainly missing a few letters.”

“Oh,” said Harry slowly, understanding seeming to dawn on him. A flicker of something Niall couldn’t identify crossed his face. “Um, that might- that might be a challenge. I’d better- I’ll probably stick with the sets at the library.” He gave Niall a sad, apologetic half-smile. “I should get back to, um, back to wardrobe.”

Up-and-coming model Harry Styles falls under the charms of his long-time celebrity crush, emotionally manipulative Nick Grimshaw. After some poking and prodding and meddling from his friend Louis, Harry befriends fellow model Niall Horan and soon realises that friendship—and maybe true love—should be a bit more like this.

Notes
First, please check out the wonderful artwork done for this fic by the very talented pastelfrio!

Thank you to the people who have been kind and patient with me as I've written this story. Writing has been a challenge lately and I'd have probably stopped writing if it hadn't been for the support and encouragement of my friend Cat, my lovely artist Monica (who has been incredibly understanding), my group chat, and my boyfriend (who asked me every day, "Have Niall and Harry met yet?" until I finally told him they had). Also, a thank you to the mods at The 1D Collab for being so patient and accommodating and generous and running this whole thing.

I built up the background story far more than I'd intended—my original outline started at what is now nearly the end of the first chapter—which led to a lot of frustration and discouragement. I think it's important, though, so please be patient! I promise you the sweetest Narry I can write!

I'd also like to mention that I don't think Nick Grimshaw is as I've portrayed him at all; he's been twisted into something ugly to fit my story. I think the real Nick seems like a truly wonderful, supportive friend to Harry and I believe he loves Harry and wants the best for him always. Like the first three-quarters of the first chapter, Nick wasn't even in the very first outline for this fic.

Title taken from the song Waiting by Jake Bugg.

See the end of the work for more notes.
all the time before i knew you

Harry didn’t really like going places where he didn’t know anyone, though it had been happening almost constantly since he had moved to London two months earlier. It made him anxious and uncomfortable.

It hadn’t ever really been a problem at home. He had his family—his sister Gemma was his best friend—and his friends and schoolmates he’d known since primary school. Holmes Chapel was a sweet little village where everyone knew everyone. Harry supposed the town felt even smaller for his family than it did for others because his mother and step-father owned the village’s only pub, The Purple Hare, which they’d lived above since Harry was ten. And Harry had started working at the village bakery when he was sixteen. He often saw people to whom he’d sold a bun and coffee that morning as they’d bustled off to work or the grocery at the pub for dinner and a pint later that night.

It wasn’t very common that he ever went anywhere where he didn’t know at least one or two people.

But London was completely different. He’d only become acquainted with a handful of people since he’d moved to the city and nearly all but the girl who owned the cafe around the corner from his flat were work acquaintances. He’d never really realised how difficult it was to make friends with people you hadn’t known very nearly your whole life.

Harry took a deep breath and finally pushed open the door of the restaurant he’d been standing in front of for about ten minutes.

The large dining room was filled with people. Couples sat at secluded tables and large groups were seated around big tables, waiters and waiter’s assistants filling water glasses and placing plates of food in front of diners.

“Hello,” came a voice from Harry’s right. He turned to look and saw a young woman about his age walking toward him. “Looking for someone or waiting?” she asked with a pleasant smile.

“Oh, um”—Harry furrowed his brow—“um, no. Neither.”

“Would you like a seat at the bar?”

“Oh. I’m here,” said Harry, shaking his head and suddenly feeling quite silly and very out-of-place. “No. There’s probably a different entrance,” he mumbled.

“I’m sorry?” asked the hostess politely.

“I’m here for the, um, for the Topman launch party?” he said, more a question than a statement. He hoped he’d not come to the wrong place.

“Oh!” said the hostess, understanding dawning on her. “There is a different entrance for the private dining room but I can bring you there.”

“Please,” said Harry, feeling a bit relieved that he wasn’t in the wrong place.

She picked up an iPad and tapped the screen a few times before looking up at Harry. “Your name?” she asked.

“Harry- Harry Styles.”
“Brilliant.” She smiled at him again. “Right this way, Mr Styles.”

Harry followed her through the restaurant’s main dining room to a set of sliding doors. “Here you are, Mr Styles,” she said as she pushed one door open and gestured him through. “Enjoy!”

“Thank you,” he said, a fresh wave of anxiety washing over him and for one brief moment, he wanted to ask her to stay with him. She looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to enter the private room, and he gave her a small half-smile before stepping through the door.

Harry looked around the room. He saw several faces he recognised—Antony Price, designer and stylist to nearly all of the great rock stars of the 1970s and 1980s, stood by the bar talking to a man Harry didn’t know and Nick Grimshaw, the man of the hour, sat at a table laughing with Fiona Hanlon—but hoped to find the one person he actually knew.

A waitress carrying a tray half-filled with flutes of Champagne approached him. “Champagne?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” said Harry. He took a glass from the tray and smiled a weak smile. “Thank you.”

She nodded and walked away, leaving Harry with a glass of the rose gold wine. He took a sip, glad to at least have something to do with his hands other than twist the rings on his fingers nervously.

“Harry, lad!” called a familiar voice. Harry looked around and saw Simon, his manager and the reason he was at this posh party, walking toward him. “So glad you came.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” said Harry, always mindful of his manners.

“Well, you are the face of the new collection. Of course you’d be invited,” said Simon with a grin. “Have you met Nick yet?”

“Um, no,” Harry told him, shaking his head. “Not- not yet.”

“Come on, then,” said Simon, placing a hand on Harry’s back. Harry nodded and allowed Simon to lead him toward the table where Nick was still sitting with Fiona.

Harry had developed a crush on Nick Grimshaw when the older lad was presenting Sound and it had only intensified when Nick started hosting The Radio 1 Breakfast Show. Nick had been the soundtrack of Harry’s mornings for the last two and a half years; he’d listened to the show every morning while he got the bakery ready to open—putting pastries in the displays, brewing coffee, and setting up the coffee and tea station with milk and cream and sugar—and all through the morning rush. To say he was nervous to meet Nick was an understatement.

“Nick, I’ve brought you someone to meet,” said Simon once they were standing beside Nick’s table. Nick looked up and Harry swallowed nervously. “Nick, this is Harry Styles, the model for your line. Harry, Nick Grimshaw.”

Nick eyed Harry appreciatively and bit his lip. “Top choice,” he said. Fiona swatted his shoulder lightly and Harry blushed. “Come sit with me, Harry. We should get to know each other.”

“Oh, yes. Um. All right.” He took a seat in the chair Nick pushed out. “Thank you.”

“I’d better get back to Louis,” Simon told Harry and he nodded, not wanting to let on that he had no idea who Louis was because, from the way Simon had said it, it seemed that he should know who Louis was. “Hope the lad hasn’t skived off on me.”
“You know, I think I’ll get a drink,” said Fiona with a smile. “Let you two get to know each other.” She stood from the table and walked toward the bar.

“Who’s Louis?” asked Harry.

“Haven’t you met him?”

Harry shook his head. “No. I don’t know anyone here except Simon.”

“And me,” said Nick, reaching out to tap his Champagne flute against Harry’s.

“Yeah,” agreed Harry, taking a sip of his wine. “And you.”

“Louis’s the photographer for the campaign,” Nick finally answered. “Reckon you’ll meet him on Monday. That’s when you start shooting, yeah?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah.”

“Looking forward to it?”

“Yes,” Harry told him, nodding. “Bit nervous too. This is- It’s my first job.”

“Is it?” asked Nick.

“Yes.” Harry grimaced and hoped Nick wouldn’t search out Simon and demand a model with some experience. “I just moved to London in April.”

“Well, congratulations, love!” said Nick cheerfully. “This calls for another glass of Champagne, I think.”

“Okay,” said Harry, fingers of his right hand twisting the rings on the fingers of his left hand. Another glass of wine might help to lessen his nerves, he reasoned. “Yeah, that would be nice.”

“Wait here,” said Nick. “I’ll be right back.”

“All right.”

A few minutes later, Nick returned to the table with two fresh glasses of Champagne. “Here you are, love,” he said, handing Harry one of the flutes.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Nick took his seat again and looked at Harry. “Now, tell me about yourself, Harry Styles.”

“Oh,” said Harry, blinking at the older man. “Um, well, my name’s Harry Styles. Obviously. You just said it.” He blushed and took a sip of his wine, missing Nick’s smirk. “I’m twenty-one and I’m from Holmes Chapel in Cheshire. I, um, I moved to London in April so I could try to be a model but I used to be a baker.”

“A baker?” wondered Nick, eyebrows raising in slight amusement.

“Well, I mostly worked the till but, you know”—Harry blushed again because that sounded far less interesting than actually being a baker—“I helped in the bakery too. With the pastries and, like, biscuits.”
“You are just too lovely,” said Nick.

It didn’t take much more than another glass of Champagne before Harry’s head was swimmy, the alcohol freeing him from his lingering nerves.

“I listen to your show every morning,” said Harry with a small smile on his plump lips.

“Do you,” said Nick, statement more than question.

“Yes.” Harry nodded. “I was so excited when I got this job.” He leant forward and said quietly, “You were my first crush, you know. Except Tommy Whitten, but he’s straight.”

Nick’s eyebrows rose, lips parting slightly in surprise at Harry’s confession. “Was I?”

Harry nodded again, lips quirking up into a grin. “Yup.”

“All right, lads,” came a voice from behind them. Harry turned to see who was talking and found a lad who looked to be around his age, maybe a couple years older, with blue eyes and brown hair slicked up into a quiff—he looked like how Peter Pan should look, Harry thought, if Peter Pan were a real person who had aged to his mid-twenties—and a large camera around his neck. “I’ve been sent to take some pictures before I’m allowed to leave. Got places to be and that so let’s get a move on.”

“Oh, Tomlinson,” said Nick, voice a bit clipped in a way Harry had never heard it before. He stood up. “It’s a pleasure to see you.”

“Mm,” grunted the brunette, lips pressed together in a thin line. He fiddled with the camera that hung from the strap on his neck. “Right. Let’s go, lads.”

Harry stood, feeling a bit anxious and maybe a little tipsy.

“Shall we stand in front of the pictures?” asked Nick, gesturing toward a wall covered in framed photos of himself wearing pieces from his collection.

“Oh, yes. By all means,” said the photographer with a sugary voice that did the opposite of covering his obvious dislike for Nick—Harry suspected it was intentional and deliberate—and waved them toward the wall of photographs. “Grimmy knows best.”

Harry followed Nick to their assigned spot and stood next to the older man. The photographer gave a bit of direction, snapping pictures of the model and the designer in a few poses before taking individual shots of Nick and then Harry.

“You can relax, love. It’s all right,” said the photographer, giving Harry a gentle smile, his voice much kinder and softer now that Nick had drifted off to talk with Pixie Geldof. “I don’t bite.”

Harry let out a nervous laugh, his smile and posture becoming much less stiff. “There’s a good lad!”

The photographer grinned at Harry. “Now I’ll just take two more shots. I wasn’t lying ’bout having places to be. Just getting Simon off me back before I skive off.”

“Oh,” said Harry, unsure what else to say.

The camera clicked twice more and then the photographer—Tomlinson, Nick had said, though Harry was sure Tomlinson was his surname—turned off the camera and said to Harry, “You’ll be great on Monday!” With a wave, he spun on his Vans-clad feet and walked quickly toward the door.

“As much as it pains me to agree with him,” said Nick as he returned to Harry’s side, “he’s right.
You’ll be great.”

Harry smiled, embarrassed and a little pleased by the compliment. “Thanks.”

“What do you say? One more drink before this party’s over?”

As Harry finished his last glass of Champagne, feeling a little drunk because it really didn’t take much to get him tipsy, Nick leant toward Harry. Voice low, he said, “Why don’t we exchange numbers? Next time you’re feeling lonely, you can ring me and we can hang out.”

Harry nodded because he really hadn’t made any friends in London and it would be nice to have someone to spend some time with rather than sitting in his flat with his cat Butterscotch watching the Great British Bake Off.

An hour later, Harry stepped onto the train headed back to Sutton. Harry hadn’t told Nick that his flat was in Sutton; he liked the town—The Rolling Stones had played some of their first gigs in the pub just down the street from Harry’s flat and that was enough for him—but the Borough of Sutton certainly wasn’t as posh as Kensington and Chelsea.

When the train arrived at Sutton Common Station, Harry alighted the train and began his short walk to his flat on High Street. He was looking forward to Monday, though he hadn’t been kidding when he told Nick he was also a bit nervous.

He wasn’t sure how he’d landed the job—he didn’t even really know how he’d been signed to Syco Models—since he’d only gone to Simon with a handful of headshots and no modelling experience.

He had though, and he was determined to do his best. His mum had been so proud and excited when he’d called to tell her he’d got a job. His step-father Robin had asked why “the guy from Radio 1” had his own clothing line, sounding rather confused, and his sister Gemma had teased him a bit because she knew he had a crush on Nick Grimshaw.

The next two days passed slowly, a lonely weekend spent watching New Girl and the Great British Bake Off—he offered the contestants advice and tips he’d picked up while working at W Mandeville—while he curled up on his sofa with Butterscotch.

By Sunday afternoon, Harry felt he was nearly suffocating under the strength of his nerves. He decided to head to the tearoom down the street. It was a cheeky little place called Black Treacle that he liked for its delicious fresh-baked pastries and sandwiches and quirky Afternoon Tea—mismatched china and a tea tray filled with things like “f*ck!ng awesome sweet potato-lime cake” and “bloody delicious curried chicken cream puffs”—and the petite tattooed girl who had welcomed him to the neighbourhood when she’d learnt he’d just moved there.

“Hiya, Harry!” she greeted him as he walked to the counter to order.

“Hi, Elora,” said Harry, giving the girl a little smile and wave. “How are you?”

“All right. How about you?”

“I’m okay, thanks. Could I please have- I’ll have a pot of chamomile tea, please?” he said, almost a question because he didn’t like to sound pushy.

“Not Earl Grey today?” she asked as she turned to fill a teapot with chamomile tea.

“No. I’ve got a nervy tummy,” he told her.
“Ya all right?” She turned back to him, eyebrows knit and a bit of concern on her face.

“Yeah, just nervous for tomorrow.”

Elora poured hot water over the tea and put the lid on. “What’s tomorrow?”

“It’s my first day of work,” Harry answered.

“Anything else?” she asked as she turned to Harry. “Just pulled some oat bread from the oven. Could make ya a sandwich?”

“Might not be good for my stomach.” Harry winced; he was hungry but his nerves really were getting the better of him.

“I’ve got a lavender goat cheese and ricotta spread. Do it up with a pour of bell heather honey.” She gave him a gentle smile, caring and kind, and Harry nodded. “Good lad. It’ll go nice with your tea.”

“Thanks,” said Harry sincerely because even though Elora was only maybe five or six years older than him, it felt nice to have someone like a mother looking out for him.

Elora sent Harry to sit at a table and appeared a few minutes later with his pot of tea and a plate stacked with toasted oat bread smeared with ricotta and goat cheese and drizzled with honey.

“So where are ya working?” she asked, pulling out the chair opposite Harry and sitting down.

“Topman,” said Harry.

“Just down the road?”

“Oh,” said Harry, shaking his head. “No. On Goswell Road. In Islington. I’m, um, I’m modelling.”

“That makes sense,” she said, unfazed, taking a bite of toast. “Is it your first model job?”

“Yes,” Harry told her. “It’s my first photoshoot, except my headshots.”

“You’ll be great,” she assured him with a smile. “Come by after so I can hear how it goes, yeah?” Harry nodded and she added, “There’s a good lad. Now drink your tea before it goes all cold.”

Toasts finished and teapot empty, Harry paid Elora and left the tearoom. He decided to go for a walk down High Street, passing The Winning Post—Harry wondered if the pub had looked the same when the Stones had played their first gigs there—and then Topman.

It was funny, he thought as he looked in the large windows of the shop, how the world worked; he’d saved money while he worked at the bakery so he could buy Topman clothes and he’d listened to Nick Grimshaw every morning and now he would be modelling Nick’s clothing line for Topman.

He made his way back up High Street and to his flat, making some more tea and settling himself in with Butterscotch to watch a few more episodes of *New Girl* before he went to bed. It seemed like an early night would be a good idea; he didn’t want to have dark puffy circles under his eyes the next day, though he supposed the makeup artist would be able to fix that.

Harry woke up bright and early the next morning, nerves rolling and bubbling in his stomach like a boiling pot. He showered and dressed, brushing his hair to make sure it wasn’t a tangled mess, and got ready to make the short walk to the bus stop. He liked Sutton but it could be a bit of a nuisance when he needed to travel into London’s more urban areas; the trip to Goswell Road would take a little over an hour from Sutton’s High Street.
After a short bus ride to Morden and a slightly longer ride on the Northern Line to Angel, Harry emerged from the Underground and made the walk to the neat, square brick building on the corner of Goswell and Percival. He made his way into the building and to the fourth floor, where he found a door with a sign that read “Guys & Dolls Studio” and a smaller sign underneath that said “Topman Photoshoot.” He knocked, unsure if he should just enter, and then, feeling a bit silly that he’d knocked because maybe he should have just walked right in, he pushed the door open and entered.

“Hi, Harry!” said a woman with long silvery-blond hair and bright red lips.

“Hi,” said Harry. He didn’t think he’d ever met this lady but he didn’t want to be rude.

“I’m Lou,” she said, reaching out to shake his hand. “Your makeup artist.” She seemed to notice the slight shake in Harry’s hand because she gave him a comforting smile and said, “It’s your first shoot, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Harry nodded and added timidly, “Don’t even know how I got the job, to be honest.”

“Because you look like a proper gorgeous model!” She smiled again and waved him to follow her behind a dividing screen. “Now come on, I’ll make you some tea and we’ll get started on your makeup. Louis’s not here yet.”

“Louis’s… the photographer, right?” asked Harry, following Lou to a tall swivel chair next to a table filled with makeup and hair products.

“Yeah. You’ll probably work with him a lot and you’ll learn quickly that he’s always late but you’d better not be because you’ll feel every ounce of his sass.”

“Okay,” said Harry. He made a mental note—don’t be late, not that he ever was—and asked, “Does he photograph for Topman a lot?”

“He photographs for everyone a lot,” answered Lou. “Been doing this since he was eighteen. Pretty talented photog—”

“Just pretty talented, am I?” came a voice that Harry recognised. “Bloody brilliant, I’d say. Award-winning even.”

Harry turned to look at the man behind him and was surprised to see the young photographer from the launch party.

“Also cocky and arrogant as hell,” said Lou, a teasing note in her voice.

“That too,” agreed Louis with a grin. “G’mornin’, Harry. Good to see ya again.” He walked forward and held a hand out for Harry to shake.

“Yes,” said Harry, shaking Louis’ hand. “I didn’t know you were Louis.”

“Didn’t introduce m’self proper, did I?” he mused with a hint of amusement at his realisation. “I’m Louis Tomlinson.” He moved to a chair near where Harry sat and watched as Lou began her work. “Had a date I was running late to. I didn’t even really want to go to the party but Simon practically forced me. Said something like, ‘Louis, you’re the photographer for this campaign, you’ve got to be there.’” He rolled his eyes to show what he thought of Simon’s insistence he attend the launch. “Blah blah blah.”

Soon Harry’s makeup was finished and his hair was styled—“Doesn’t take much, does it?” said Lou as she smoothed hair mousse though Harry’s long brown waves—and the fashion stylist had dressed
him in the first of the outfits he was to model.

“Right,” said Louis when Harry moved into the main section of the studio wearing black skinny jeans with holes ripped in the knees and an oversized black jumper with two cream-coloured stripes around the chest and arms. “We’re just starting with the pictures for the website. Be a bit boring, I’m afraid. Straightforward and that. Just you quite literally modelling the clothes.”

“Okay,” said Harry, moving to stand at the large X formed with black electrical tape on the floor. “So I’m just, like, standing?”

“Yes,” said Louis. “Hands by your sides, head to the… let’s go right.” Harry did as instructed, hands hanging by his sides and his head turned to the right. “You don’t have to be so stiff, love. Relax, yeah?”

Harry nodded and shook his arms, trying to shake away his remaining nerves.

“God, your posture is terrible!” exclaimed Louis with a laugh an hour and a half later. They were photographing the fourth outfit, the same skinny jeans—Harry had learnt they weren’t even part of the collection because the collection was just jumpers, jackets, shirts, and accessories—and a black shirt covered with what looked like white paint splatters. “You’re, like, casting a shadow on yourself with your shoulders.”

“Sorry,” Harry apologised, standing up straighter and lifting his shoulders up and back.

“Don’t be sorry! Just”—Louis gestured for Harry to move to the left a bit and face him—“relax. And stand straight. I’ve got to photograph the front of this God awful shirt so people know exactly what they’re buying and don’t get a nasty surprise when it arrives in the post.”

“‘God awful,’ you think, Tomlinson?” Nick stepped around the off-white backdrop that Louis had positioned Harry in front of and eyed the shorter lad from head to toe and back up. “I shouldn’t take it to heart, I suppose.” He sighed. “Trackie bottoms tucked in socks.” He sighed. “Where’s Alex Turner when you need him. Though you’ve not got classic Reeboks or Converse.”

“What are you doing here?” asked Louis, voice showing his irritation at the older lad’s presence.

“Thought I’d stop by my photoshoot and see how Harry’s doing.”

Louis swiveled around so fast Harry was surprised he didn’t fall over. “Your photoshoot? It’s not your photoshoot, you fucking wanker. It’s my photoshoot.”

“It’s my collection,” said Nick, sounding as though he felt that ended the discussion.

“Oh, yes,” said Louis, voice dripping with cold sarcasm. Harry watched, wide-eyed from where he still stood on the taped X. “I forgot. You worked with a team of real fashion designers to design a dozen ugly shirts and jumpers and now you’re King of the Fashion World.” He turned back around and looked at Harry. “Right, lad, a few more shots in this and then I’ll send you off for lunch, yeah?”

“Okay.” Harry got back into position in front of the backdrop.

“Don’t you think the off-white backdrop is a little bland?” asked Nick, though it didn’t sound much like a question. “It’s really not doing it for—”

“I don’t care if it’s doing it for you, Grimshaw,” spit Louis, spinning back around, fingers white around the sides of his camera. “These photos are for the product views on the Topman website and it’s how every item on their site is presented. I don’t care if it’s ‘a little bland.’ Your collection”—
Louis made air quotation marks around the word collection as if to emphasise exactly how pretentious he thought Nick sounded—“isn’t going to get special treatment or whatever the fuck you think it deserves. At the end of the day, it’s just more clothes for Topman.” He turned around and looked at Harry. “Two more, love.”

Ten minutes later, Harry switched the Topman shirt he’d been modelling for his own Topman shirt and grabbed his wallet from where he’d left it on Lou’s makeup counter.

“You ready for lunch, love?” asked Nick when Harry reemerged from behind the dividing screen. “There’s a coffee shop just down the street.”

Harry followed Nick to the cafe where they ate a simple lunch of sandwiches and coffee. Nick insisted he treat Harry—“A congrats for your first day as a model, love!”—and, a shy smile on his lips and a blush staining his cheeks, Harry let him.

They returned to the studio half an hour later.

“Okay, lad,” said Louis when they walked through the door, ignoring Nick. He stood from where he was crouched on the floor, surrounded by cameras, a bag of crisps, and a cup of milky tea. “Let Lou touch up your makeup and Other Harry’s around somewhere. He’ll sort you out with the next outfit.”

Harry thanked Louis, always polite, and walked behind the dividing screen to the dressing room with Nick close behind.

Lou settled him in her chair, making quick work of the little touch-ups that needed to be done, and then he went off to the stylist—the other Harry—for his next outfit.

“We’re doing the fringe jacket next?” asked Nick as Harry slipped his arms into the sleeves of a black velvet jacket with fringe across the chest and down the arms. “Thought maybe we could do the leopard print.”

“‘We’re’ not doing anything, mate,” came Louis’ irritated voice from the other side of the screen. “You’re not part of this photoshoot, in case you’ve forgot.”

“It’s my collection.”

“Don’t fucking say that again,” said Louis, walking around the screen and glaring at the man. “Sod off, Grimshaw. If you knew a tenth of how much you think you know about all of this”—Louis waved his arms around to indicate the studio filled with lights and backdrops and crew members—“you’d know that Lambert and I spent hours with my lighting crew deciding what order we’d shoot so we could figure out lighting setup and triggers and how natural light throughout the day would affect our lighting.”

“That’s why we’ve got this,” said Harry Lambert, looking annoyed, though not as annoyed as Louis. He handed Nick a paper that had a list of the items Harry was modelling accompanied by a rough timeline.

“All right, Harry?” said Louis, looking at the model. “We’ve got an ugly crushed velvet jacket to photograph.”

“Okay.” Harry went with Louis into the studio, moving again to his assigned X on the floor. Nick followed them out, moving behind Louis to watch.

“If you’re staying,” said Louis, lifting his camera and fiddling with the zoom, “don’t make any noise.
And don’t fucking say that it’s your collection.”

After several shots, Louis looked through the photos and decided he’d got enough good ones to
move on. “Off for your next, yeah?” he said to Harry. “Only five left for the day, should be easy.”
He gave the model an encouraging smile; days spent photographing for product views always felt
longer and more tedious than days doing the more creative shoots.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” said Nick, stepping toward Harry as the model moved to go to the dressing
room. “You’re doing brilliantly. Absolutely gorgeous.” He leant forward and kissed Harry’s cheek.
Harry blushed and Nick smirked. “Call me later, babe. I’ll take you out for drinks to celebrate.”

“Oh, um, okay,” said Harry, a little surprised. “I’ve got, um, I’ve got to go change. Okay?”

“Go on, love.”

“Yes, please,” sighed Louis, sounding exasperated and rolling his eyes. “Goodbye, Nick.”

“Bye, love,” said Nick to Harry. “I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, Nick.” Harry smiled a shy smile and turned to the dressing room. He gave a little wave over
his shoulder before disappearing behind the screen.

“Right,” said Louis to Nick. “You can leave now.”

Two hours later, Harry sat in the makeup chair. He took a sip from his bottle of water and looked at
Lou.

“Why do Louis and Nick- Why don’t they like each other?” Harry asked the woman.

“Ah, there was some stupid thing at London Fashion Week a few years ago that started it,” she told
him. “Just after Louis started in fashion photography. Nick didn’t have VIP access to the Burberry
show and Louis did and Nick was annoyed. So he vague Tweeted some shite about the Burberry
campaign Louis worked on and there was a stupid Twitter fued.”

“Why would Nick be annoyed that Louis had VIP access? I mean”—Harry’s brow wrinkled in
confusion—“I like Nick. I think. But Louis’s a fashion photographer? And Nick’s a radio show
host? Not—”

“Exactly,” said Lou. “Louis’s been in the fashion world since he was eighteen. Ever since Nick got
this line with Topman and they brought Louis on as the campaign photographer, Nick’s been trying
to tell Louis how to do his job.”

“You mean,” said Louis from where he stood behind the two, “Nick’s been pissing me off ever since
he pushed himself at Gordon enough that he finally agreed to put that twat’s stupid doodles on
oversized jumpers. Like he was the first person to wear a baggy jumper.”

They finished shooting for the day and Louis sent Harry home with the promise that the next day
shouldn’t be as long—they only had eight things left and three were accessories—and a genuine
congratulations on his first day.

A bit tired from his twelve hour day, Harry collapsed into a seat on the tube; he was ready for a
bubble bath—maybe he’d thrown in his Think Pink bath bomb and soak in the lavender and vanilla-
scented water—and a good cuddle with Butterscotch.

Back in Sutton, Harry remembered that he’d told Elora he would stop by the tearoom after the shoot
to tell her how it had gone. It was nearly nine o’clock, though, and the tearoom had closed hours earlier. He decided he’d stop the next morning on his way to the bus for a cup of tea and a pastry and would talk to his friend then.

Just as he unlocked the door to his flat, he heard his phone ding. He pulled it from his pocket and found a text from Nick. *You never called :(

No , Harry texted back. *I forgot I’m sorry! It was a long day and i’m just thinking about a nice bath and my bed!*

*I understand , responded Nick. I would have liked a phone call or a text at least!*

*I’m sorry , apologised Harry again. He’d really not meant to upset Nick at all; when Louis had told him they were done for the day, his mind had immediately gone to a nice, hot bath and his comfortable bed.  

*I was looking forward to seeing your pretty face tonight but it’s ok, babe , read Nick’s next message. Get a good night’s sleep and good luck tomorrow!*

Harry blushed; Nick had wanted to see him. And he’d called Harry pretty.

He walked into his flat and kicked off his boots just inside the door. Butterscotch greeted him, walking around his legs and rubbing up against his right shin.

“Hi, B,” he said to the cat. He moved to his kitchen and poured himself a small glass of Viognier—it was his new favourite white wine because it tasted like peaches and honeysuckle—and headed to the bathroom to run himself a bath.

They were starting a bit later the next morning, for which Harry was grateful because he didn’t really want to wake up at six o’clock. He would have time to stop by Black Treacle and tell Elora about his first day. He settled into the bathtub and sipped his wine.

He still couldn’t believe that Nick Grimshaw thought he was pretty.

Harry woke up at half past seven, excited for the day. He was looking forward to his second day working with Louis, Lou, and Harry and was eager to see Elora. He also hoped that Nick would stop by the shoot again, only maybe just to take him to lunch because he didn’t really like either Nick or Louis when they were around each other though he liked them both individually.

He left his flat an hour later and walked the short distance to Black Treacle. He was greeted by Elora, who looked busy behind the counter with the other barista; he imagined the baker was busy too, rushing around the bakeshop taking muffins out of the oven and glazing scones with milk and sugar to put in to bake.

He ordered a cup of tea and a strawberries-and-cream scone and sat at the coffee bar while he waited for Elora to finish with the line of customers.

“Hi, lad!” she said a few minutes later as the last of the morning’s rush left the cafe or settled at tables to eat and read the morning newspaper. She picked up her own cup of tea—a pale pink mug with the words “Treat People With Kindness” written on it in—and walked toward where Harry sat. “How’d it go yesterday?”

Harry smiled. “It was good. Long, but good. We didn’t finish until nearly eight o’clock.”

“Wow,” said Elora. “No wonder you didn’t stop by!”
“We did ten of the pieces for the collection,” Harry told her. “And we’ve got eight left but Louis—Louis’s the photographer—Louis said it shouldn’t be as late today.”

“That’s good.”

“And Nick Grimshaw stopped by the studio,” said Harry. He noticed Elora’s surprise and rushed to explain. “It’s- Nick designed the collection. So he- he stopped to see. And then he took me out to lunch.”

“Oh, how cool!” exclaimed Elora, Harry’s little blush not missed by her. “What’s he like?”

“He’s nice. Well, to me,” said Harry. “He and the photographer don’t really get on at all.”

Harry and Elora talked until he had to leave to catch his bus to Morden, walking to the bus stop in the drizzly grey damp of the day.

He arrived at the studio about an hour later and was greeted again by Lou. She got to work on his makeup and decided to put his hair up in a bun. “It’s a proper mess from the rain,” she said as she wound a hair tie around a neatly twisted bun. “Don’t you have an umbrella?”

Louis arrived just as Harry Lambert was setting out the first outfit for the day.

“Started fucking pouring as soon as I left the tube!” he announced as he walked into the studio.

Lou rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t anyone have an umbrella? We live in London!”

Harry changed into the clothes that had been set out for him to wear and Louis began to discuss lighting adjustments “to make up for this absolute shite weather” with his crew.

“Text your boyfriend,” said Louis, poking his head behind the dressing room curtain, “and tell him that we’re going to take lunch at one o’clock so if he’s going to come see you, do it then. I don’t want to see his annoying face for longer than it takes him to pick you up and bring you back.”

“He’s not- He isn’t my boyfriend,” stuttered Harry, embarrassed.

“Yet. Nick Grimshaw has the most infuriating habit of getting what he wants,” Louis told him before disappearing into the main area of the studio.

Harry didn’t text Nick. He didn’t want to seem presumptuous or clingy, didn’t want to seem like he expected Nick to take him to lunch every day.

He wasn’t really sure whether he should be surprised or not when Nick showed up at about half noon. He couldn’t help the shy little smile that quirked his lips when he saw the older man walk into the studio though.

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” said Louis, turning to see Nick and letting his camera hang from the strap around his neck. “You didn’t text him, did you?” He looked back at Harry with an expression of disappointment, not unlike one a mother might give her son who’d not minded her. He raised his camera again and waved a hand at Harry to imply that they were going to resume their work. “We’re not taking lunch until one so you can go somewhere else to wait for Harry.”

“Thought I’d watch,” said Nick calmly.

“Thought you’d come to tell me how to do my job, more like,” muttered Louis, snapping a few shots of Harry. “Just keep quiet. Don’t want to hear your voice. I’d listen to your show if I wanted to.”
Nick rolled his eyes and mimed zipping his lips and throwing away the key. Harry smiled and giggled.

“You’re distracting Harry, you twat.”

After one more outfit—Other Harry had given Harry a sand-coloured suede jacket with fringe to put on over the short-sleeved black and white animal print shirt he’d just modelled—Louis sent Harry on a lunch break before going to the small makeshift commissary to make himself tea.

Tucked into a booth at a restaurant a few blocks from the studio, Nick looked across the table at Harry with a grin. “Go out with me tonight, Harry. I’ll take you to Mahiki.”

“Oh,” said Harry, wide-eyed, a feeling of guilt washing over him as he said his next words. “I think—I’d really like to but I think I should probably get home early tonight. We’re shooting again tomorrow and I think, um—”

“Thursday night, then,” said Nick. “Don’t turn me down again or I’ll get a complex!” He laughed.

Harry blushed and said shyly, “Okay. Thursday night. That sounds”—he nodded and gave a small smile—“It sounds good.”

“Good! Can’t have the most beautiful boy I’ve ever laid eyes on turn me down three times. It’d be too much for me to handle.”

Harry took a sip of his water, blush tinting his cheekbones a deep pink, flustered by the compliment Nick had paid him and the look of pure want Nick was still giving him.

They returned to the studio forty-five minutes later. Harry went to change into the fifth and final outfit—the accessories were to be paired with the last shirt Harry was modelling—and Louis ignored Nick’s presence.

“Look at you,” said Nick, sounding awed, eyes roaming Harry’s body from head to toe. “You are absolutely gorgeous, love. Prettiest thing.”

Harry bit his lip as he tried to hide the pleased little grin that was breaking across his face. Nick’s flattery was quickly becoming an addiction; Harry kind of always wanted Nick to look at him like he was the most wonderful person he’d met.

Louis rolled his eyes and exhaled roughly through his nostrils.

“C’mon, Harry,” he said kindly; he knew it wasn’t Harry’s fault that Nick was lavishing him with attention or that he was enjoying it because most people would appreciate the attention and flattery from a celebrity. “Let’s get these last few pieces photographed so you can have an early day.”

“I’ll see you later, love,” said Nick, walking toward Harry and giving him a kiss on the forehead. “Text me when you get home. I want to know how my boy is liking his job.”

Harry was unable to stop the smile that spread across his lips and pressed deep dimples into his cheeks. “Okay,” he whispered.

Nick left and Harry moved to his spot, hands by his sides and shoulders back, trying his best to stand up straight.

At around five o’clock, Louis decided they were done for the day. He thanked Harry for another good day, telling him he was a joy to work with, and told him to meet him at the studio at ten o’clock
the next morning.

“It’ll be a bit more fun tomorrow,” he told the model encouragingly. “We’ll walk around the
neighbourhood, stop in some cafes and go to Spa Fields Park. Take a bunch of pictures that look like
candids but aren’t really candids. We’ll still have to come back here a few times to change you into
different outfits but we won’t be cooped up in here all day. We’ll have some fun.”

“I had- I thought it was fun to be in here, too,” said Harry with a small shrug.

“You’re a sweetheart,” said Louis, “but that’s probably because it’s all new and exciting. These
kinds of shoots will lose their charm after a bit.” He smiled. “I’ll see you tomorrow, love.”

Harry said his goodbyes to Louis and the crew. As he found a seat on the train, Harry opened his
messages and found the previous night’s conversation with Nick.

He felt more confident, a bit more assured that Nick really wanted to see Harry and talk to him and
spend time with him.

*I’m just leaving the studio and I thought I’d talk to you while I’m on the tube being lonely*, he typed
in the message bar.

*Aw :( don’t be lonely love, came Nick’s response. *Could always come over to mine ;)*

Harry ducked his head, hoping the lady sitting across from him hadn’t noticed his blush. *Thanks!
Maybe sometime but I want an early night again and I’m already on the train home.*

*Well any time you want we can just watch movies and drink wine if you like wine*, said Nick. *Doesn’t
have to be anything too exciting. I just want to see your pretty face.*

Harry could feel his cheeks aflame; it was amazing how much he was growing to like—crave—
Nick’s praises and compliments. He felt special.

*I like Viognier :)*

*So posh!* read Nick’s message. *I’ll make sure to have a bottle at all times just for you.*

Harry wasn’t sure but this seemed a lot like flirting. He hoped he wasn’t wrong because maybe
Louis was right and Nick did want to be his boyfriend. He was getting ahead of himself, he knew,
but it didn’t stop him from his wishful thinking.

Harry got off the train at the Sutton Station and made the short walk to his flat on the corner of High
Street and the Bushey Road loop. As he walked past Topman, it suddenly hit him for the first time
that at some point in the next few months, he’d be seeing pictures of himself in the large glass
windows.

He made his way up the stairs to his flat and unlocked the door. He sent Nick a message—*Home!*—
and entered.

Harry felt badly that he’d declined Nick’s invitation to go out with him for drinks, as well as the
older lad’s attempt to get him to go hang out at his place, but Nick hadn’t seemed too upset—
obviously not enough that he decided he was through with Harry—and Harry was tired.

He was glad he still had the bottle of white wine that he’d opened the night before. He’d found a
recipe for garlic shrimp linguine in the current issue of *Good Food* and wanted to try it out. Harry
liked to cook, found it relaxing, and it was a simple dish. He set about making dinner, Butterscotch
winding around Harry’s legs and nearly tripping him several times, and listened to Fleetwood Mac’s
*Rumours* on his little record player as he cooked.
Finally, after making it through all four sides of *Tusk*, Harry took a shower and got into bed. He found the copy of *Call for the Dead* that he’d borrowed from the Sutton Central Library—he’d recently watched *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and decided he wanted to read the book that had introduced George Smiley to the world—and opened it up to his bookmark. He read his way through three chapters before deciding to go to sleep.

When he woke up the next morning, he was glad to see that, though it was a bit overcast, it wasn’t raining. He didn’t fancy walking around Clerkenwell in the rain and fog.

It still wasn’t raining by the time he got to the studio at ten o’clock. He found Lou already there, ready to do his hair and makeup and drinking a mocha latte.

“You ready for your first on-location shoot?” she asked Harry as she powdered his nose. “Should be fun!”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I’m glad it’s not raining.”

“So am I,” agreed Lou.

“Are you coming with us, then?”

“Yup!” she said cheerily. “You’ll have to come back here to change outfits ‘cause Harry can’t carry the whole wardrobe round but I can take a little kit with me. Keep you from having to come back for every little touch up. Besides, it’ll be a bit of fun and I’m not missing fish and chips at Kennedy’s. Louis owes me lunch, the little shit.”

“Why does Louis owe you—”

“Hello, hello! Good morning!” called Louis as they heard the door to the studio open. “Good thing it’s not raining. I don’t want to postpone this last day’s shoot.” He walked around the divider and looked at Lou and Harry. “I’m so ready to be done with this collection and move onto the *GQ* spread I’m doing next. Not that you weren’t lovely. A proper delight, you were, Harry. Reckon you’re the sweetest person I’ve ever met.” He gave Harry a genuine smile. “Just your boyfriend’s a twat.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Nah,” agreed Louis with a nod. “He’s a narcissist and you’re just the pretty, innocent young lad that’ll—”

“Louis,” cut in Lou sternly, a look of warning on her face.

“What?” asked Harry, confused, his gaze shifting between Louis and Lou.

“Just watch yourself with Nick, Harry,” said Louis, though that only confused Harry more.

“Louis. Stop,” said Lou harshly. Harry turned to look at the woman, surprised.

“Sorry,” mumbled Louis, not sounding especially apologetic.

Harry tried to enjoy the day’s shoot. It should have been fun, as both Louis and Lou had promised it would be, but Harry couldn’t ignore the mixed feelings of concern and curiosity that Louis’ statement had stirred.

“What did Louis mean, I should watch myself with Nick?” Harry asked Lou while the older woman brushed his wind-tangled hair and twisted it up into a bun. He watched Louis set up his tripod in
front of the bandstand in Northampton Square Garden and bit his lip.

Lou’s fingers stilled at his bun. “He thinks that Nick is… taking advantage of your little crush on
him.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?” wondered Harry. He didn’t really like Lou’s phrasing but he didn’t see what was wrong with Nick knowing that Harry had a crush on him. “I mean, if Nick knows I like him, then—”

“He’s also worried that Nick’s interests are a bit more superficial than yours,” she added quickly, almost as though she didn’t really want to say it but felt she should.

Harry blinked, taking in the woman’s words. “What do you think?” he asked quietly, turning to look at her.

“I think- I think that Nick’s more of a casual relationship kind of person. More friends-with-benefits than anything else,” she said slowly, words measured and well-thought. “And I know that I’ve only known you a few days but I think”—she gave Harry a fond smile—“You wear your heart on your sleeve a bit, don’t you, and I think you’re more the type for a serious relationship.”

“Oh,” said Harry, reeling from that piece of information. He wanted to ask Lou why she thought that, if she had reason to believe that Nick preferred casual relationships, but said instead, “Okay.”

“I just don’t want you to get hurt.” She smiled kindly again and then looked toward Louis. “Neither does he. Now let’s get back to work, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he agreed and tried to focus on the photoshoot as they finished their day, allowing Louis to lead him around Clerkenwell for a few more hours as they took more photos at Spa Fields Park and Kennedy’s of Goswell Road before the photographer decided that he’d got all the shots that he needed.

Back at his flat, Harry set about making himself an easy dinner—a Caesar salad with chicken seared in the little cast iron skillet his mum had given him as a “housewarming” gift—and settled in for an evening watching Fresh Meat on Hulu.

He was distracted from the show by the ding of his phone. Grabbing his mobile from the coffee table, he found a text from Nick.

Hope your last day went well! Can’t wait to see you tomorrow night ;)

Harry smiled to himself and typed a response. It was good. Long. We walked around Clerkenwell and took pictures but we had to go back to the studio a bunch of times so I could change outfits because Harry couldn’t carry the whole wardrobe around with us. He sent it and then typed a second message, sure Nick would be offended if he didn’t and never wanting to offend anyone. Can’t wait to see you too!!

They texted a bit more while Harry watched Fresh Meat—he wasn’t sure why he’d never watched it before because it was quite funny—and made plans for their night out the following evening.

As he got ready for bed, he thought back to what Lou had said to him.

She hadn’t been wrong, he knew. He didn’t like the idea of being a friend who offered benefits of the sort the term suggested without receiving any kind of deeper emotional connection. He’d never been one to have the odd hook-up or one-night stand, though neither bothered him, but he didn’t like the idea of being in a pseudo-relationship with someone but not having all of them, not having their
He knew it was most likely that he and Nick would be friends and nothing more. But he also knew that if it seemed their relationship began to move in a less-than-platonic direction, he didn’t want to be just a fling or a casual relationship.

He really hoped that Lou was wrong about Nick.

Harry tried to push his concerns out of his mind as he went about his morning routine the next day. The more he thought about it, the more he realised that Louis had got him all worked up for no reason; Nick was just harmlessly flirting with him and nothing was going to come of it. As for Nick’s offer to hang out whenever Harry wanted and their plans for that evening, Harry suspected that Nick knew he was just lonely and would like a friend.

He went to Black Treacle for lunch at around one o’clock.

“So?” said Elora when Harry walked in, smile wide on her face. “How were your second and third days as the handsomest model I know?”

“No,” she admitted with a laugh, “but you’d still be the handsomest I knew if I did.”

Harry blushed. “Thanks.” He pulled out one of the high stools at the coffee bar and sat. “They were good. We just did the product views the first two days.” He caught Elora’s question before she could ask it. “The pictures for the website, you know. Like, for each item when you click to see it. But we just walked around Clerkenwell yesterday and took pictures in a chip shop and at the parks and while we were walking around. For, more like, for print adverts and to- to put in the stores.”

“How cool,” said Elora. “I’ll go into Topshop for some new jeans and there you’ll be!”

Harry giggled. “Yeah. It’ll be- it’ll be odd, I reckon.”

“At first.” She smiled again. “It’ll be brilliant.”

Harry ordered his lunch and Elora set about making his sandwich and tea, continuing to talk all the while.

“Have you seen Nick Grimshaw again?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Harry told her. “He came by on Tuesday and we went out for lunch.” He took a bite of the sandwich Elora had set in front of him, blushing, before swallowing and adding, “And we’re going for drinks tonight.”

“How exciting,” she said with a grin. “I’m sure you’ll have fun.”

Harry talked with Elora a bit more between the customers who trickled in—the afternoon was slow but fairly steady with easy orders like lattes and pain au chocolate that didn’t take Elora away from their conversation for too long—and told the girl about the concerns that the two Lous had expressed, including Louis’ warning that he should watch himself with Nick.

“What do you think?” asked Elora.

“I mean, I don’t know,” confessed Harry with an unsure shrug. “I don’t just want to be friends-with-benefits. With anyone, not just Nick,” he explained. “I like- I like real relationships. I like to feel like-
like I belong?” he said, sounding a bit uncertain. “And I don’t want to feel like I like him more than he likes me.”

“Do you feel like that?”

“Well, no,” said Harry. “But I only met him a week ago.”

“That’s true,” agreed Elora. She paused for a moment, taking a sip of her ever-present tea. “I don’t want to sound discouraging or anything but it might be possible that he only wants to be friends. Like, just friends.”

“Yeah, that’s— that’s kind of what I’ve been thinking,” Harry told her. “That just— He probably knows I’m a little lonely”—he blushed, embarrassed to admit that—“and that I haven’t really made any friends since I moved to London and—”

“Excuse me,” said Elora, sounding a little hurt but trying to cover it up with a smirk, “but what am I? Chopped liver?”

“Oh,” said Harry, surprised, brows raising and eyes widening. “Are we- Am I your friend?”

“Of course you are,” she told him. “I don’t sit and talk with all of my customers about their personal lives.”

“Oh. Okay,” he said, a shy smile appearing on his face. “Thanks. I mean, good. I’m glad we’re- I’m glad you’re my friend.”

“Me too.” She gave Harry a kind smile. “Happy we’ve got that cleared up!”

When Harry left the cafe an hour later, he felt much better about his situation with Nick. He thought, and Elora had agreed wholeheartedly, that he should go into his budding relationship with Nick expecting nothing other than the possibility of making a new friend. That way, they both said, if nothing more happened, Harry wouldn’t be let down but if their relationship did develop into anything more, it would be exciting.

With that in mind, Harry got ready for his night out with Nick that evening. He decided to wear a pair of black skinny jeans with a shirt and a scarf from Nick’s collection—he’d been given several pieces to keep after they’d finished shooting the day before—and his favourite pair of brown Chelsea boots.

He hung out at home, making himself a small dinner because he wasn’t sure if Nick planned to eat while they were out or if it was just going to be drinks. He received a text from Nick while he sat at his small dining table eating.

Meet me at Mahiki at 9?

Harry looked at the time at the top of his phone screen. He would have to leave soon but he could make it in time.

Of course! he responded and then sent a second message. i’m excited to see you!

Youre sweet :), read Nick’s reply. See you in a bit!

Twenty-five minutes later, after he’d brushed his teeth and double-checked his pockets for his wallet and keys, Harry stood at Stop H waiting for the bus. He made the trip to Morden and walked to the Morden Underground station. After a switch at Stockwell, Harry arrived at the Green Park stop and
walked to the club, passing the Ritz Hotel.

As Harry turned onto Dover Street, a wave of anxiety flooded him. He didn’t know how he was going to find Nick. He wondered if he needed to be on a guest list or if he needed to tell a bouncer that he was meeting up with Nick Grimshaw. He wanted to text Nick and ask him where he was or what, exactly, he was supposed to do to get in but didn’t want to seem immature or inexperienced and naive.

Instead, he sent a simple message. *Almost there!*

He received Nick’s text just as he arrived at the door. *In the Lanai Lounge come find me!*

Harry took a deep breath and approached the club, showing his identification to the bouncer and paying the hostess the ten pound cover charge.

“Um, excuse me,” he said nervously. “Excuse me, how do I get to- Where’s the Lanai Lounge?”

The hostess stared at Harry blankly and Harry blushed. “This is the Lanai Lounge,” she said, pointing to the door behind her, haughty and almost condescending. Harry felt a little silly even though he knew there wasn’t a reason to; he’d never been to the club before and had no way of knowing that he had entered into the Lanai Lounge, he told himself.

“Oh. Okay.” He gave the hostess a small smile. “Thank you.”

He walked quickly past her into the orangey glow of the lounge and was happy to see that there weren’t too many people in the lounge. There were a few tables with groups of people seated around them, eating and sipping on cocktails.

“Harry! Love,” he heard Nick’s familiar voice say and he suddenly saw the older lad on the other side of a cluster of about eight or nine women in, Harry guessed, their early thirties.

“Hi,” said Harry a bit shyly, moving toward the small round table where Nick sat. He was happy to see that Nick was alone; he was already a bit anxious because he wasn’t much into the whole club scene and he knew that meeting a whole group of Nick’s beautiful, famous friends would have only served to increase his nerves.

“Sit down, love,” said Nick, gesturing to the princess chair opposite him.

“Thanks.” Harry pulled the chair out and sat down, surprised by how comfortable the wicker seat was. He looked around the room, taking in the long bar lined with high bamboo chairs and the thatched ceiling. He turned back to Nick and caught the man looking at him, a smirk on his face.

“I’m flattered,” said Nick.

“What?” asked Harry.

“You’re wearing my clothes,” he said, nodding at Harry’s outfit.

“Oh, um. Yes,” agreed Harry. “Harry, um, Harry Lambert let me pick a few things after we finished yesterday. If I wanted.”

“So you don’t find it all as terrible as Tomlinson does, then?” he asked, smirk still on his face.

“No,” said Harry. “I like the collection. It’s a little different from everything else Topman has.”

Nick smiled at Harry, pleased. “What are you drinking, love?”
“Oh. I don’t- I mean, do you have any recommendations?”

“Try a cocktail,” said Nick, handing Harry a copy of the drinks menu. “They do some top custom cocktails.”

“Okay.” Harry gave Nick a sweet smile and looked at the menu in his hand. “There are a lot of choices,” he said, reading the list of about thirty cocktails with names like Jolly Roger, Zombie, and Wicked Wench. “I’ll have the, um, the Mustique Fizz. Please.”

Nick raised a hand to signal a passing waitress. “Another Sea Pearl, please,” he said. “And a Mustique Fizz for my lovely boy.”

“Of course, Nick,” said the waitress with a sly grin, looking between Nick and Harry. “I’ll be right back with those.”

“Thank you.”

Nick’s gaze returned to Harry. “Did you want anything to eat?” he asked Harry.

“Have they got- Is there a menu?”

Nick slid a copy of the food menu across the small table and Harry picked it up.

The waitress returned with their cocktails and, noticing Harry studying the menu, asked, “Something to eat for you, love? Or is it just the drink?”

“Maybe just the sweet potato fries, please,” said Harry.

“That’s it?” asked Nick from across the table, brows raised.

“Yes,” answered Harry with a nod.

Nick looked at Harry. “Do you eat meat?”

“Yes,” said Harry again.

“Why don’t you throw in two chicken sliders and an order of sticky ribs too,” Nick said to the waitress.

“Of course,” she said with a smile. “I’ll bring that all right out.”

“Thanks.” He turned his gaze back to Harry as he took a sip of his drink. “So how do you like being a model so far, love?”

“It’s very different from the bakery,” he said with a little grin. Nick laughed and Harry’s smile grew wider, pressing dimples into his cheeks. “It’s been fun so far. I liked being in the studio and I liked our day out yesterday.”

“What did you do yesterday?”

Harry told Nick about the previous day’s shoot. “Louis called it a field trip,” he giggled.

“You’re just too lovely,” said Nick, fixing Harry with a look of wonderment.

Harry blushed and took a sip of his passion fruit-flavoured sparkling wine.
The evening went on pleasantly and Harry was pleased—and a touch relieved—that they stayed in the lounge rather than moving to the party room downstairs, chatting and enjoying each other’s company.

“When did you know you wanted to be a model?”

“I didn’t, really,” said Harry. “I’ve always liked fashion, you know. Saved my money from the bakery so I could buy clothes. My sister—her name’s Gemma—my sister said I should study fashion design. She went to Sheffield Hallam University in, you know, in Sheffield and studied Genetics. She said they have a Fashion Design course and she thought that I should– that I should go there. But I’m not very good at art or any of that. So she said maybe I could study, like, the business side. They have a course, um, it’s called Fashion Management and Communication. But I don’t really think I’d be fit for management of any kind and I’m rubbish at communication.”

“So you didn’t want to be a model?” asked Nick, looking a bit like he was trying to work out what Harry had said.

“I do now,” said Harry, finishing up the sweet potato fries on the plate in front of him and smiling at Nick. “I really like fashion. I just don’t have, like, the skills to do anything else, like, fashiony. So maybe modelling is how I get to have fashion as my job.” He shrugged a shoulder up.

“I imagine you’ll do quite well,” Nick assured him. “You’ve certainly got the right look for a fashion model. Beautiful bone structure, perfect teeth, gorgeous eyes. Lips. I mean, you’re stunning.” He smirked at the blush spreading across Harry’s face and, leaning forward a bit and lowering his voice in a way that made his next words a little more salacious than they would have been otherwise, added, “And your body is just amazing.” He bit his lip and allowed his eyes to roam every inch of Harry he could see from the other side of the table.

“Thank- thank you,” stuttered Harry, flattered by Nick’s praises.

“Now, tell me, love. What do you get up to for fun?”

Harry’s eyes lit up. “I collect records!”

“Yeah?” asked Nick, amused by the excitement the mention of record collecting seemed to inspire in Harry.

“Oh, yes,” said Harry happily. “I’ve got over three hundred records.” Harry proceeded to tell Nick about his collection and his many adventures that his hobby had led to, including the birthday adventure that took him to twenty-three record stores throughout Manchester, Liverpool, and Sheffield in search of the unofficial release of twenty one pilots’ *Regional at Best* on white vinyl. Nick let Harry talk, asking questions about his numerous records and what bands he liked and what concerts he’d been to and which, if any, he was planning to attend in the upcoming months.

“Harry, I’m afraid I’m becoming an old man,” sighed Nick at around half past one. “I really should head home. I’ve got—”

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Harry, suddenly realising the time. “You’ve got your show in five hours! I should have let you leave ages ago. I’m so—”

“It’s all right, love,” Nick said reassuringly. “If I’m tired in the morning, it’ll be well worth it. I had a lovely time with you.”

Harry nodded. “Thanks, Nick. I- I had a nice time too.”
“Well, then we’ll have to do it again.”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

They got up from their table and walked to the door, thanking the waitress who had served them all night.

As soon as they stepped out onto the pavement, they were greeted by the flashing and clicking of cameras.

Harry blinked several times and looked around. “What’s—”

“Paps,” came Nick’s voice from his right as he slipped an arm into the crook of Harry’s elbow. “Come on.” He tugged Harry in the direction of an Addison Lee that waited at the curb and opened the back door for the boy. “In you get, lad.”

Harry climbed into the car and was followed a moment later by the older man.

“Sorry, love,” said Nick, turning to look at Harry. “Mahiki’s a pretty popular celeb hangout and the paps love to hang round waiting for them to leave.” He chuckled and, with a hint of false modesty that went missed by Harry, said, “Pity they only got me tonight. Nothing too exciting for them.”

“You’re a— you’re a celebrity,” said Harry, blinking at Nick.

“Only kind of,” said Nick. “I’m not, like, Beyonce. Now I’ll have the driver take me home and then he’ll drop you off at your flat, all safe and sound.”

“O-okay.” Harry looked around the car, unsure how much a trip to Sutton in an Addison Lee would cost. He wondered if he should ask Nick; if it was going to be as expensive as a regular black taxi, he would just get out at the next Underground station. “Do they take”—Harry leant toward Nick, blushing and embarrassed about the question he was about to ask—“Can I pay with my bank card?”

“You don’t have to pay at all, love,” Nick told him. “It’s all taken care of.”

“Oh.” Harry gave an embarrassed smile. “Thanks.”

“Your pretty little blush is the sweetest thing,” said Nick fondly.

Harry finally arrived back at his flat at just past three o’clock. He kicked off his boots and shed his clothes as he made his way through the flat to his bedroom. He’d not said anything to Nick when he’d said he was getting old because he didn’t want Nick to think he was childish or immature but half one in the morning was definitely a bit late for him too.

The truth was that Harry wasn’t much into the partying or clubbing scene. He preferred a quiet evening in with a friend or two, playing board games or watching telly and drinking wine, or a lowkey night at the local pub with an old jukebox filled with Bob Seger and Van Morrison. He liked cuddling into bed with a nice book and his cozy duvet and going to bed at a reasonable time.

He’d enjoyed the evening out with Nick, however, so maybe he would get used to it if Nick kept inviting him out.

Harry woke up a bit later than usual the next morning—he slept until nearly ten o’clock—and decided to go to Black Treacle after a shower.

Elora greeted him when he entered the cafe. “Did you listen to the Breakfast Show this morning?”

“Yeah, reckon you needed a lie in after your night,” she said with a cheeky grin. “That’s what Nick Grimshaw said this morning too. Could have used a bit of a lie in after his late night at Mahiki last night, he said. Earl Grey?”

“Please,” begged Harry, desperate for his morning cup.

“Did you have fun?” asked Elora kindly as she placed the teapot, teacup, sugar, and milk on the counter in front of Harry.

“Yes. It was nice,” he told her. “We just talked, really. He asked me about my modelling a bit. Like, when I decided to give it a go and how I liked it so far.” Elora nodded and Harry continued. “He asked me all about my record collection too. Wanted to know what I had and where I got them and he just- he just let me talk about it!”

“I didn’t know that you collect records!” exclaimed Elora.

“I don’t talk about it too much because I think some people find it a bit boring,” Harry told her. “Even some of my friends back home would say, like, ‘Harry, we’ve heard about the red Tame Impala EP from Record Store Day one hundred times already!’”

“You can talk to me about records any time you want,” said Elora. “I collect them too!”

Harry smiled. “Okay.” He poured himself some tea from the teapot and asked timidly, “Would you- Maybe we can go bin diving sometime?”

Elora gave him a smile, endeared to his shy nature, and said, “I’d love it.” She poured herself some tea from the pot. “So Nick listened to you talk about your collection?”

“Yes. And then we talked about concerts we’ve been to and who we want to see, like, coming up,” said Harry, clearly happy that Nick had talked to him about subjects that he enjoyed.

“That’s nice, Harry,” said Elora kindly. “I’m glad you’re making another friend.”

“Thanks. So am I.”

Harry stayed and talked with Elora a bit longer, the topic switching from Nick and their evening out the night before to records and the best places to bin dive—Elora told Harry about several good shops she loved to go to where she always seemed to be able to find something for which she’d been searching for ages—and their adventures in record collecting.

“Any other plans for the day?” asked Elora as Harry got up from his stool and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. She waved away the tenner he tried to hand her. “I drank the tea and I think I ate half your muffin.” Harry raised his brows and she nodded.

“Thanks,” he said, returning the bank note to his wallet. “I’m going to the library to return a book but, no, nothing else.”

“Well, have a good day, Harry.”

“Yeah, you too!” said Harry with a wave.

“I’ll see you later.”

Harry left Black Treacle and walked to the library, thinking about what book he should borrow next.
He’d got a library card as soon as he’d moved to London; as far as Harry was concerned, having a library card at your local library meant you were home.

As he walked into the library, Harry passed a board with all sorts of notices—signs advertising rooms for rent, Pilates classes and swimming lessons at the leisure center, an event called *Sutton Soup* at St Nicholas Church—pinned to it. In the bottom right corner, there was a paper that caught Harry’s eye. It read—

“New Sutton Central Library Book Club Forming
First Meeting Wednesday 24th June @ 6:30 p.m.
See Zayn (tattoos & silver hair) for more info”

Harry entered the library and dropped his book in the book return. He looked around, hoping to find Zayn—Harry thought he was the assistant librarian who had helped him set up his library card—because he wanted to ask him about the book club.

He found the lad in the Mystery and Crime Fiction section.

“Hi,” said Harry. “Zayn, right?”

“Yeah, hi,” said Zayn, looking away from the row of P.D. James novels he was rearranging. “Need help finding something?”

“Oh, no,” said Harry, voice quiet. “I saw the sign about the- about the book club.”

“You interested?” asked Zayn, turning to face Harry completely now.


“Simple enough, really,” said Zayn with a reassuring smile. “We’ll meet every other Wednesday in the Community Room. First meeting is the twenty-fourth at half six.”

“What’s the, um, what is the book?”

“We’re reading *And Then There Were None* and *Ten Little Indians* and discussing the two,” Zayn told him. “Have you ever read any Agatha Christie before?”

“Yes!” said Harry, excited and eyes wide. “I’ve read nearly all of her books! I own about half of them. They’re all still at home because I didn’t- I didn’t pack them when I moved to London.”

“Well, if you’ve already read them, maybe you could wait until the next book,” suggested Zayn. “I’ll post again when—”

“Oh, no! *And Then There Were None* is one of my favourite books!” said Harry, speech a little bit faster than usual in his excitement. “I’d love to- I’d love to talk about it! And, you know, and compare it to the play because the play is not so much my favourite.”

“Great!” said Zayn, pleased to see Harry’s enthusiasm for his first book choices. “Do you need to borrow them? If you left them at home?”

“Please,” said Harry and Zayn turned to a different shelf—Harry’s eyes shined with excitement at the long row of Agatha Christies—and took a copy of each down. “Or I could have my mum send my copies down. Like, if there won’t be enough for everybody.”
“I’ve got two more sets and I can borrow from some of the other Sutton libraries if I need to,” Zayn assured him. “And there are always eBooks too.”

“Okay,” said Harry with a nod. “Yeah, I’ll check them out then.”

“Brilliant,” said Zayn, leading Harry to the circulation desk.

Harry thanked Zayn and tucked the books under his arm. “See you soon!” he said with a wave.

He made his way back to his flat, dropping the books down on the sofa and heading to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. Just as he was pulling out his ingredients for a turkey sandwich—cheddar, mayonnaise, dijon mustard, and lettuce were the only proper accompaniments to a good roast turkey sandwich on whole wheat bread—his phone rang. He stood up quickly, startled by the sound in his nearly silent flat, and hit his head on the freezer door. “Ouch!” he exclaimed, rubbing his head with one hand and pulling his ringing mobile from his back pocket with the other. He considered letting it go to voicemail until he saw the name on the screen.

He swiped to accept the call and said, “Hi, Simon.”

“Harry, lad, how are you?”

“I’m all right, thanks,” said Harry. “How are you?”

“Good, good. I talked with Louis earlier,” said Simon.

“O-kay,” said Harry slowly, unsure why Simon was calling him and feeling a little nervous. What if Louis said the photos from their shoot were rubbish and they needed to redo them or, worse, that he wanted a different model?

“He called to let me know that Gucci needs a model for their product views,” Simon told him. “He’s the photographer for the shoot and he mentioned you to the casting director.”


“He said you were a joy to work with and your shots were excellent,” Simon answered. “He showed them a few of the pictures from the Topman shoot and they want to meet with you.”

“They do?” asked Harry, shocked and wide-eyed. Gucci, he felt, was a big deal.

“Yes. I just got off the phone with Leila. She’s the casting director for the shoot. She wants to see you in her office on Monday afternoon.”


“I’ll text you the address and all of the info you’ll need,” Simon answered his half-asked questions. “There are two other models meeting with Leila but Louis thinks you’ve got an excellent shot. He’s sure you’re a shoo-in.”

“Thank you, Simon. This is so… exciting!” said Harry, unable to hide his excitement any longer. “I- I love Gucci!”

“It’s all down to you, lad,” said Simon truthfully. “You impressed Louis. He’s a good one to impress too.”

“Thank you,” said Harry again.
“You’ll be great, Harry,” Simon assured him. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“All right. Bye, Simon.”

“Goodbye, Harry.”

Harry ended the call and stood in the middle of his kitchen for several minutes, the phone call with Simon replaying in his head. He was going to meet with a casting director at Gucci and it was possible he could end up wearing Gucci clothes and getting paid for it.

He returned to his sandwich, going through the motions of making his lunch while his mind fantasised about the designs he might be modelling.

Too excited to keep the news to himself, he texted Nick to tell him about the phone call before ringing his mother.

“Harry!” came Anne’s voice from the other end of the line. “Hi, love!”

“Hi, Mummy,” said Harry, wishing he could see her in person to tell her this news because he wanted to hug her and see how happy she looked because he knew she would be. “I have something exciting to tell you.”

“What’s that, love?”

“I might do a photoshoot for Gucci! I mean, I’m meeting with the casting director on Monday,” he said happily. “They’re meeting with two other lads but Simon thinks I have a good chance because the photographer I worked with before—Louis, you know—Louis is the photographer for this shoot too. And he recommended me to the casting lady.”

“Oh, Harry, baby, that’s so wonderful!” said Anne. She sounded so proud that Harry thought he could burst.

“I hope I get it,” he rushed out. “I love Gucci, Mum. Do you know how amazing it would be to model for them?”

Anne listened to Harry gush about Alessandro Michele and his bold new direction for Gucci’s designs, patient through his meandering rambles.

After nearly forty-five minutes, Harry and Anne said goodbye. Harry smiled when he saw a text from Nick. Congratulations love! We should celebrate!!

Thanks Nick! :)

Meet me at Mahiki tonight! read Nick’s response.

Harry bit his lip and looked at his phone. He didn’t really want to go to Mahiki again—he’d just been the night before and had quite a late night—but he didn’t want to tell Nick that he really just wanted a quiet night curled up with a glass of wine while he caught up on the last few episodes of Wayward Pines. He didn’t want Nick to think he was boring or lame.

Okay! what time? he asked.

10 sound good?

Harry frowned. Ten o’clock was exactly the time he hoped to be curling up with some Viognier and Matt Dillon. Again, though, he didn’t want to disappoint Nick.
Sure! I’ll see you there! typed Harry. He sighed and tapped the little blue arrow to send the message.

Brilliant! Aloha party room tonight!

Harry sighed again. “It’s the party room tonight, Butterscotch,” he told his cat. “I just wanted to watch Matt Dillon.”

A few hours later, Harry got off the Underground at Green Park. He was feeling a little anxious. Surely the Aloha Party Room meant a larger crowd and a lot more socialising and conversation—Harry knew he wasn’t an especially adept conversationalist, aware that he had a tendency to ramble about subjects only he found interesting but not realising he’d done so until he thought back to the conversation after it was over—and he was never really comfortable in large crowds.

The girl at the door seemed to remember Harry from the previous evening—or perhaps Nick had told her he’d be joining him—because she led him downstairs to the Aloha Party Room and to the table where Nick sat with two women Harry recognised at once.

“Harry, love!” called Nick as Harry neared the table. “Sit down with us!”

Harry joined Nick at the table, dropping to the leather-covered settee and allowing Nick to grab his hand and tug him closer.

“Harry, love, this is Alexa”—he pointed to Alexa Chung, who Harry recognised because she seemed to always be in the front row of every fashion show—“and this is Daisy”—he gestured toward the other girl who Harry knew to be Daisy Lowe—“and we are ready to celebrate!”

Harry gave Nick a weak smile that he hoped didn’t betray his nerves.

“Hi,” he said. “Um, I’m Harry. It’s nice- it’s nice to meet you.”

“What are we celebrating?” asked Alexa.

“Harry’s got a job modelling for Gucci!” said Nick.

Harry rushed to correct him. “Not- not yet.” He ran his fingers through his hair—a nervous tick that he didn’t think anyone realised was a nervous habit—and added, “I might get it. I’ve got- I’m going to meet with the casting director on Monday. But there are- there are two other lads up for the- up for the job too.”

“He’s going to get it,” Nick told Alexa and Daisy confidently. “I may dislike Louis Tomlinson with a passion but he recommended Harry and sent along some shots from the Topman shoot.”

“I’ve worked with Louis before,” Daisy told Harry. “He’s a top photographer. Really respected in the industry. It will definitely help he’s recommended you.”

Alexa nodded in agreement. “He’s really talented. You’re lucky to work with him, even if Grimmy can’t stand him. It’s a good job he mentioned you.”

“I’d like to- I’d really like to get it,” Harry told them. “I love Gucci.”

“I’ve never done any work for them but they’ve got some amazing collections,” said Daisy.

“And Alessandro Michele is just a genius,” said Harry, eager to talk to someone besides his mother about the genius of Alessandro Michele. “I think he’s going to bring an entirely new creative direction to Gucci. If you just look at- if you look at what he’s done with Gucci since he moved from
“So Harry,” interrupted Nick, “I was telling the ladies about your first job.”

“Oh,” said Harry, blinking at Nick. “Yeah?” He wasn’t sure what to say; he didn’t know what to add if Nick had already told them about it.

“Yeah. I told them how wonderfully you did.” He smiled at Harry. “Just brilliant. Couldn’t have asked for a more perfect model for my collection.”

“Thanks, Nick,” said Harry shyly, blushing from Nick’s compliment.

“How do you like modelling so far?” asked Daisy.

“It’s been fun,” said Harry. “I mean, it’s only been the one job so far.” He shrugged. “But I liked Louis and- and Lou. Teasdale, you know. And Harry Lambert. They were nice and they made it- I was nervous, at first, and they helped me to relax and to, like, to be more comfortable. So it was fun.”

Harry talked with Daisy and Alexa a bit longer about his photoshoot, telling them about the first two days spent shooting photos for product views and the third day’s “field trip.” Alexa repeated Louis’ words, telling him he would tire of the more tedious studio days, and Daisy agreed.

“How do you like London, Harry?” Alexa asked him when he was about halfway through his Mustique Fizz. “Grimmy said you moved from Manchester a few months ago.”

“Oh, no. Um, Cheshire, actually,” he said, though he wasn’t sure why he’d bothered to correct her; it obviously wasn’t an important fact if Nick hadn’t remembered it. “I like it. I moved here in, um, in April and it’s nice.”

“You’ve got a flat, then?”

“Yes. In, um, in Sutton,” said Harry.

“Oh, Harry,” said Nick, voice tinged with a hint of pity that Harry didn’t really appreciate. “You’ve got to move closer, love. You’ve got to move to Marylebone or Chelsea or something.”

“I- I like Sutton,” Harry told him, partly because it was true and partly because he didn’t want to tell Nick that he couldn’t exactly afford to move to Marylebone or Chelsea. “I like my flat and there’s a nice tearoom down the street and I like- I like the library. I’ve got a library card and everything.”

“A library card?” Nick looked at Harry and Harry was a little surprised to see that Nick didn’t seem to see the importance—or definitiveness—of having a library card.

“Yeah,” agreed Harry, feeling a little silly because maybe a library card wasn’t quite as important as he felt it to be; maybe it was childish or simple. “I think I’m going to join the book club.”

“You know everyone else will be footie mums looking for a reason to escape their little monsters for a couple hours, right?” said Nick, more a statement than a question.

“Maybe,” shrugged Harry. “But it’s the assistant librarian starting it and he’s about my age. So there’ll be him, at least.”

“What else do you do for fun?” Alexa asked the boy.

“Oh!” said Harry, excited again. “I collect records!”
“Harry is an adorable little hipster,” teased Nick. “I heard all about his record collection last night.”

“Yeah, I’ve got about three hundred.” Harry suddenly remembered what he’d said to Elora earlier that day—most people found it boring when he talked about his records—and added, “I won’t bore you with it though.”

The conversation soon turned to Nick’s best friend Pixie and her recent engagement to her boyfriend George.

“It’s about time!” said Alexa. “They’ve been together for what? Three years?”

“Oh, please,” said Nick with an eyeroll. “You and Alex were together for four years and nothing ever came of that.”

“Excuse me,” said Harry, increasingly aware of how awkward he felt in a conversation in which the names of people he didn’t know—all rather famous celebrities—were being thrown about so casually. “I’ve got to use the toilet.”

“Just round the corner and down the hallway a bit,” Nick told him. “I’ll order you another drink, yeah?”

“Okay,” Harry told him as he stood to leave the table.

Nick watched him round the corner before turning back to his friends. “God, he’s so boring,” sighed Nick. “At least he’s pretty.”

“Aww,” said Daisy. “He’s sweet.”

“Yes. And incredibly dull,” said Nick. “He wants to join a book club. I mean”—he rolled his eyes because words, he felt, couldn’t truly explain what he thought of the idea—“he’s a forty-five-year-old mum trapped in the body of a gorgeous twenty-one-year-old model.”

“He is very pretty,” agreed Alexa. “He’s just young and innocent.”

“And what do you suppose there is to do in a little village in Cheshire?” asked Daisy. “It’s probably a day trip just to go shopping for his records.”

“Oh, God,” sighed Nick, rolling his eyes again. “I had to listen to him tell me about his Record Store Day adventures,” he said, making air quotes when he said Record Store Day adventures. “Just a waste of an entire Saturday trying to find some David Bowie album.” He slid out of the settee and stood up. “I’m going to the bar. Want anything?”

Both girls shook their heads and Nick walked to the bar, ordering another Mustique Fizz for Harry and a Sea Pearl for himself.

As he waited for the drinks, he was struck with an idea, a way to convince Harry not to join the library’s book club without telling him outright not to join.

Nick returned to the table with their drinks and found Harry had returned from the toilets. He placed the glasses on the table and sidled into the empty spot on the settee next to the model.

“I’ve had an idea, love,” said Nick quietly, hoping only Harry could hear. “Let’s start our own book club.”

“Our own book club?” asked Harry, brows wrinkled as though trying to understand Nick’s meaning.
“Just you and me,” said Nick. “It’ll be the most exclusive book club ever. We can meet at my flat and drink wine. I’ll buy you Viognier for every meeting.”

“What’ll- what’ll we read?”

Nick gave him a lazy grin. “You can choose.”

Harry’s eyes widened and Nick knew he’d won. “Really?”

Nick nodded. He didn’t really intend to read more than the first few chapters of whatever book Harry chose. This whole idea was just an attempt to get Harry to forget about the library book club and to keep him from spending time with the assistant librarian—a lad who was Harry’s own age—and it was an excuse to get Harry to his flat.

“What kind of books do you like?” asked Harry.

“Whatever kind you like,” said Nick smoothly.

Harry smiled his big dimpled smile. “I’ll pick something really good,” he promised.

“Right, ladies,” said Nick, gaze moving from Harry to the two girls sitting on the other side of the table. “Harry and I are starting our own book club. And before you ask, no, you can’t join. There’s just no room for other members.”

After Harry’s third drink, Nick insisted they dance, taking Harry’s hand and leading him to the dance floor.

“I’m not- I’m not really a dancer,” objected a tipsy Harry. “I mean, I can’t dance. Like, I don’t know how.”

“Of course you can!” said Nick encouragingly. “Just move to the music. That’s all you’ve got to do, love.” He put his hands on Harry’s hips and began to guide him, swaying to the rhythm.

“Okay,” said Harry, swallowing and trying to do as Nick had told him.

“You’ve got it, love,” Nick told him a few minutes later, lips very close to Harry’s ear and breath warm and tickling the sensitive area. “Just like that.”

Harry blushed and tried his best to focus on the beat of the music, Nick’s closeness distracting him. “Yeah?” he asked nervously, hoping he was doing all right.

“Yup! My little dancing queen,” said Nick fondly. Harry giggled, forgetting that there were dozens of people who could be watching him, forgetting his nerves. Nick made him feel like he was the only person in the room, the only person who mattered. He felt special.

Daisy and Alexa came to say goodbye to them a bit later—Harry wasn’t sure what time it was but he was sure it was pretty late—and the two lads took that as a call to take a break from their dancing and drink some water and, at Nick’s suggestion, maybe another cocktail.

Finally, Harry’s fourth cocktail of the night finished, Nick decided they should leave.

“You look sleepy,” said Nick, brushing a strand of Harry’s hair behind his ear. “Probably shouldn’t’ve let you have that last drink. Why don’t you come back to mine?”

“Oh,” said Harry, head feeling a bit heavy with sleepiness and too much alcohol. “Um.” He tried to remember if he’d filled Butterscotch’s food and water dishes before he’d left but he couldn’t get his
thoughts together. “Um, okay.”

Nick led Harry up the stairs and out to the street, again passing paps with their clicking and flashing cameras as they had the previous night, before helping him into the backseat of another Addison Lee.

The car stopped in front of a rather posh-looking apartment building. Nick thanked the driver and took Harry’s hand. “All right, love,” he said to the model. “Time to get you inside, yeah. Past your bedtime, I think.”

Harry nodded. He didn’t need to know what time it was to know that it was hours past his usual bedtime.

They made their way into the lobby where they were greeted by the doorman and escorted to the lift that brought them to the eighth floor.

Inside Nick’s flat, the older man looked at Harry. “You look like a sleepy kitten,” he said fondly. “I can make up the sofa if you’d like. Or you could sleep in my bed.”

Harry blinked and licked his dry lips. “What do—what do you think?” he asked because he was very tired and everything felt heavy and he didn’t want to make any decisions right now. He just wanted to lie down. “I just want to lie down.”

“Come on, then, love,” said Nick, wrapping an arm around Harry’s waist and walking him farther into the flat. “Let’s get you in bed.”

Harry nodded, head against Nick’s shoulder. “Yes, please.”

Nick helped Harry take off his boots and get out of his button-up shirt. The younger lad blushed when Nick reached for the button on his skinny jeans, though, and mumbled bashfully, “I can do it.”

Wearing only his black boxer briefs and his socks, Harry curled up into Nick’s king-sized bed and was asleep within minutes.

When Harry woke up in the morning, he knew he wasn’t in his own bed—Butterscotch wasn’t standing on the pillow, pawing at his face and meowing for breakfast—and it took him a few moments to remember where he was.

He rolled over and found Nick asleep beside him, lying on his back with an arm draped across his stomach.

After a few moments spent watching Nick’s chest rise and fall with every breath, Harry decided he should leave. Butterscotch was probably meowing for her breakfast and Harry wasn’t there to give it to her. He really wanted a shower and some clean clothes and maybe a pastry from Black Treacle.

He slipped out of bed carefully and got himself dressed, quiet so not to wake Nick, and spotted his phone and wallet on top of the nightstand on his side of the bed. He found the bathroom and used the toilet before washing his hands and splashing his face with water a few times.

He was surprised to find Nick sitting up, leant back against the headboard, when he stepped back into the bedroom.

“Leaving?”

“Oh,” said Harry, a blush tinging his cheeks, a little abashed. “Yeah. Thought I’d get home and shower and get some- get some clean clothes.”
“Could shower here,” stated Nick. Harry was a little confused by the tone in Nick’s voice; he didn’t sound upset but he didn’t really sound happy and friendly either. “Think you could probably fit into something of mine.”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry. He didn’t think any of Nick jeans or trousers would fit him but they probably wore the same size shirts and pants. He thought of Butterscotch, pawing at the cupboard door trying to get to her food. “I’ve got to feed my cat. Butterscotch. She’s probably hungry. I don’t- I can’t remember if I gave her dinner before I left last night.”

“I wanted to take you for breakfast,” said Nick with a pout. “Treat my boy right.”

Harry felt a lurch of affection mixed with a sense of guilt, a combination of emotions that puzzled him. “I’m- I’m really sorry,” he said, feeling rather badly because he didn’t want Nick to look at him like that—like he’d taken a Christmas present right out of his hands—but he really did need to get back to his flat. “Another morning?” he asked with a hopeful smile. “I’ve just”—he shrugged and gave an apologetic half-smile—“Butterscotch.”

“All right, love,” said Nick, lips quirking into a gentle smile and his voice softening, “rain check. But come back tonight, yeah? I’m having a little party and you’ve got to meet my friends.”

“Okay,” said Harry, nodding. He didn’t want to upset Nick or make him feel that he didn’t want to spend time with him.

“Good lad. Now get back to your cat.”

Harry arrived at his flat about an hour later and nearly tripped over Butterscotch, who ran to the door as soon as she heard it open and weaved around Harry’s legs as he tried to walk to the kitchen.

Food and water in her bowls, Harry took a paracetamol and headed to his bedroom. He stripped himself of all his clothes except his boxer briefs and flopped down onto his bed, pulling the duvet over his body. He’d not told Nick but he had a bit of a headache; he never had more than a glass of wine or a beer, when he was in the mood for a beer, and hardly ever had hard liquor so his four cocktails the night before had been among his poorer decisions.

He woke up an hour and a half later, feeling considerably better and far less groggy. After a nice shower and a quick ten-minute meditation, Harry got dressed and made his way to Black Treacle.

He remembered as he walked to the tearoom that he’d not told Elora about the possible job with Gucci. He thought she might be proud to hear the news.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Elora asked him with a chuckle when he walked through the door and took a stool at the coffee bar.

“Fine now,” Harry told her. “I had a headache when I woke up but I took paracetamol and slept for a little longer and now I’m feeling better.”

“I imagine you had a headache,” she said knowingly.

“Why’d you imagine—”

“*The Sun* Tweeted some pictures of Nick Grimshaw leading his tipsy boyfriend out of Mahiki last night,” Elora told him. “You looked adorable.”

“There were pictures of me with Nick?” asked Harry with a little groan. “I don’t- I’m not Nick’s boyfriend.”
“I know that but The Sun doesn’t. They think you’re his ‘beautiful, young mystery boyfriend.’”

“Oh no,” said Harry. “I don’t want to be in- to be in, like, the tabloids.”

“I think that might happen occasionally if you spend a lot of time with Nick,” said Elora. “You know he’s always spotted out with his famous model friends.”

“I don’t want to be one of Nick’s famous model friends,” said Harry with a little pout. “I mean, not that I’m famous. But I don’t want to be famous because I’m Nick’s friend. If I’m ever- If I get famous, I want it to be because I’m a really good model or something.”

“Well, maybe if it happens too many more times, you should tell Nick it makes you uncomfortable,” suggested Elora, putting a large spoonful of Earl Grey tea into a teapot. “Maybe you could hang out in more private places.”

“He likes going to clubs though,” sighed Harry. “He goes to Mahiki so often that they all know his favourite drink.”

“He can go to clubs with his other friends,” said Elora with a shrug. “If he wants to be friends with you and he likes you enough, he should respect your feelings and be willing to spend one or two nights a week staying in with you.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, hoping Elora was right. He broke a piece off the strawberry banana muffin Elora had set in front of him and chewed it.

Elora hurried off to help Abby, the pretty blonde who worked with Elora in the bakery, leaving Harry with his muffin and tea while she made coffee drinks and teas. Harry watched the two girls move around behind the counter and remembered again that he’d not told Elora his news.

When she returned after the early lunch crowd had been taken care of, Harry swallowed the bite of muffin he’d been eating.

“I didn’t tell you my news,” he said.

“What’s your news?”

“I went to the library yesterday after I left here. To return my book, you know. And I saw a sign for a book club when I was there so I talked to the assistant librarian because, um, because he’s starting it. His name is Zayn and he has really cool tattoos and, uh, silver hair. So he sorted me out with the books for the first meeting,” said Harry, speech slow and rambling.

“So you’re joining the book club?” asked Elora, thinking that was Harry’s news.

“Maybe. Nick said it will be just footie mums trying to get away from their kids for the night,” Harry told her. “So I haven’t decided. We might start our own book club though.”

“So you’re not joining the book club?”

“I’m not sure,” said Harry. “But after I left the library, I went home and, um, and I was making myself lunch. Just a- just a sandwich. And I got a phone call from my manager. Simon.”

“Oh,” said Elora, the realisation hitting her that the library and book club and Harry’s sandwich really didn’t have anything to do with his news. “What did he say?”

“He said that Louis—he was the photographer, you know, for Topman—Louis is doing a
photoshoot for Gucci,” Harry told her. “For product views for their website. And they need a model so Louis mentioned me to the, uh, to the casting director. And he, um, he sent them some pictures from the Topman shoot and they want to meet with me.”

“Harry!” said Elora, eyes wide and jaw dropped. “That’s so awesome!”

“Yeah,” said Harry, a pleased smile breaking across his face. “It’s really exciting! I’m going- I’m going to meet with her on, um, on Monday.”

“Harry!”

“There are two other lads but everyone- but everyone thinks I have a good shot because, like, because Louis recommended me.”

“That’s wonderful!” exclaimed Elora. “A Gucci model!”

“Only if I get it,” said Harry.

“Even if you don’t get this job, it’s still awesome that they want to meet with you,” Elora told him and Harry was happy to know that Elora wouldn’t think him a failure if he didn’t get the job. “Did you tell Nick?” she asked.

“Yeah. That’s why- that’s why we went out last night,” said Harry. “To celebrate.”

“Of course,” said Elora.

“He wants- he wants me to go back to his flat. Tonight,” said Harry, “to meet some of his friends. He said I’ve got to meet some of his friends.”

“Do you want to?” wondered Elora; Harry knew he sounded a little hesitant and not entirely enthusiastic.

He exhaled. “I mean, I want to meet his friends. If he wants me to. It’s just,” said Harry, carefully considering his words, “I’ve been out two nights in a row. And that’s, like, that’s a lot? For me?”

“That’d be a lot for me too,” agreed Elora. “Why don’t you tell him you’d just like to stay home tonight? Tell him you’re tired.”

“I told him- I already said I’d go back. When I left his flat this morning,” Harry told her. “And I don’t want him to think I’m lame or, like, boring.”

“Do you really think he’ll think that?” asked Elora.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe.”

“I won’t tell you what to do,” she said. “Just… do what you feel comfortable with, okay, Harry?”

Harry nodded. He appreciated that Elora wanted him to feel comfortable but he wanted Nick to like him and he wasn’t sure that the two wants would always go hand-in-hand; Nick was forcing Harry to push his comfort zone a bit and, he thought, that was probably what he needed if he wanted to make friends and live a fulfilling life in London.

He left Black Treacle a while later, heading back to his flat. He would go back to Nick’s, he decided, and would try to get to know at least one or two of Nick’s friends.

It was just half past seven when Harry showed up at Nick’s flat. The older lad had told Harry that
everyone would be arriving at around eight o’clock and he didn’t want to be late.

“You’re early, love,” said Nick with a smirk when he opened the door for Harry.

“Oh. Yeah,” said Harry, a blush staining his cheeks. He supposed it was a bit silly, that being fashionably late was more expected—and maybe more accepted—at these types of parties. “Is that- Is it okay?”

“Of course it is,” Nick assured him. “I’ll never turn down a little extra alone time with you.” Harry’s blush changed, abashed embarrassment replaced by bashful gladness at Nick’s desire to spend time with him.

Harry moved into the flat and followed Nick into the living room, all white carpeting and sleek, modern furniture.

“A glass of wine?” Nick asked him from a marble-topped table that served as a bar. “Or some Prosecco?”

“I don’t think- I’d better skip alcohol tonight,” said Harry. “I don’t really drink that much and last night was, um, kind of a lot for me.” He felt small and immature, too young and childish to be invited to a party with Nick Grimshaw and his famous, chic friends.

“That’s all right, then,” said Nick. “It’s good you know your limits.”

“Yeah.” Harry shrugged almost apologetically and said, feeling rather ashamed of himself, “I had some stupid things before. Like, when I drank too much. And I just- I don’t want anything stupid to happen again.”

“Oh,” said Nick simply, looking at Harry blankly.

Harry wasn’t sure what Nick was thinking; maybe he’d oversharped and Nick felt uncomfortable now or maybe he thought Harry was an immature child. None of his “stupid things” had ever been major but they had been the irresponsible, carefree mistakes of youth.

Nick made himself a drink—a gin and tonic with a splash of cranberry juice—and moved to a long white linen-upholstered sofa.

“Sit with me, love,” he said, gesturing to the empty space beside him. “We can talk until everyone else starts to arrive.”

Harry moved to the seat next to Nick, a bit surprised when he felt Nick’s arm drape across the back of the sofa and his fingers brushing his neck.

“Have you thought about moving closer? To a different borough that’s not such a long commute?” asked Nick. “Get out of Sutton.”

“Um, not- not really,” said Harry. “I like Sutton.” He’d told Nick that the night before and he wasn’t really sure why Nick was asking him again if he had thoughts or plans to leave the borough; it almost seemed that Nick was trying to convince Harry that he should move or maybe he’d not believed Harry when he’d said he liked Sutton the first time.

“It’s just so far,” said Nick, a bit whiny, “and so pedestrian.”

“I don’t think it’s that bad,” said Harry, embarrassed and a little defensive. Again, he felt, he was showing his ignorance to everything fashionable and chic. “I know it’s not, um, posh or anything but
“It’s got some nice shops and things to do. My friend—my friend Elora owns a really good bakery on the High Street.”

“I’m sure it’s lovely,” said Nick, “but I think once you’ve made a name for yourself in the modelling world, you’ll want to be a bit more central and you’ll come to appreciate a certain lifestyle.”

“Oh.” Harry wasn’t really sure how to respond.

“You’ll come to expect certain luxuries that you can’t get in Sutton,” explained Nick.

“Maybe,” said Harry with a little shrug. He supposed that Nick probably knew more about how life changed for a person once they gained a little bit of fame than he did. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

“You’ll see,” said Nick sagely.

The doorbell rang and Nick went to open it, gin and tonic in hand.

Harry thought that nearly every British fashion model and famous child of someone even more famous walked through the door of Nick’s flat over the course of the evening. He was introduced to Pixie Geldof, Kate Moss, Millie Mackintosh, Caroline Flack, and both Raff and Rudy Law.

He was surprised to find himself in a conversation with Daisy, Pixie, Alexa and her boyfriend, and Nick.

“I’ve personally not got over True Blood ending,” said Pixie. “I know it’s been nearly a year but I was obsessed with that show.”

“I never— I didn’t really like True Blood very much,” admitted Harry. “I never really got into—”

“You hear that, Alex?” said Nick to Alexa’s boyfriend. “Harry didn’t care for True Blood. Guess he’s not a fan.”

“I— What?” asked Harry, turning from Pixie to Nick and then finally to Alex. “I just meant I didn’t watch it every”—he blushed, the realisation that Alexa’s boyfriend was Alexander Skarsgård hitting him—“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” said Alex with a smile. “I know True Blood isn’t for everyone.”

“What do you like to watch on telly?” Alexa asked Harry, brows raised and head tipped to the side as she waited politely for Harry’s answer.

“Oh.” Harry took a breath, aware of everyone’s eyes on him. “I’ve started watching— I’m watching this show called Wayward Pines now. It’s, um— Matt Dillon plays the main character.”

“Matt Dillon?” asked Nick.

“Yeah. He’s a Secret Service agent named Ethan Burke and he ends up in this town called Wayward Pines,” continued Harry. “It’s based on a series of novels and, um, and M. Night Shyamalan is one of the executive producers. It’s got a really cool— There’s a really brilliant twist. There are only, um, six episodes so far. I haven’t watched— I didn’t watch Thursday night’s episode yet.”

“It sounds fascinating,” drawled Nick, though Harry didn’t think he sounded terribly interested; he supposed he’d not really given Nick enough to pique his interest though.

“I didn’t— I mean, I don’t want to give away too much,” said Harry, hoping to explain why he’d not given more details about the show or its plot. “In case, you know, in case anyone wants to watch it.”
“Good idea,” said Nick with a nod and wink. Harry smiled.

Everyone had left Nick’s flat by around three o’clock, leaving Harry and Nick alone again.

“Could stay over again,” offered Nick, the suggestion innocent.

“I’d actually- Thank you,” said Harry, hoping to not offend Nick and wanting to sound grateful and polite. “But I think I’d like to sleep in my bed tonight.” He gave a boyish smile. “I think Butterscotch missed me.”

Nick gave Harry an appraising look—Harry wasn’t quite sure what Nick was looking for—and said, “All right, love. Let me call you a car.”

“Okay,” agreed Harry.

Nick called to arrange a car. “They’ll be here in ten minutes,” he told Harry as he hung up the phone. “Thanks.”

Nick sat back down on the sofa next to Harry. “Have you got any plans for tomorrow?”

Harry shook his head. “Not really. I’ll probably go to the tearoom near my flat,” he said. “And probably catch up on that episode of *Wayward Pines*.”

“It’s a good thing you’ve found me, then!” said Nick.

It was nice to have met Nick, thought Harry, and he was glad he had but he didn’t really know why it was a good thing he’d met him.

“Why’s that?” he asked with a grin, hoping he sounded playful rather than rude.

“You obviously needed someone to give you a social life,” stated Nick. “How else would you have made any new friends in London?”

Harry blinked three times, lips parted slightly. “Um, I guess I’d just have to go to that book club and, like, Scrabble night at the library. And talk to some of the people in Pilates classes at the leisure centre. Or meditation group.”

Nick’s brows raised as Harry spoke, disbelief etched on his face. “I meant interesting friends.”

Harry supposed that there may be a few people he didn’t find interesting but it seemed more likely that he would find people with whom he shared similar interests—they were attending the same activities, after all—interesting. Again, though, he felt he was showing exactly how ignorant he was to what was obviously considered interesting by the fashionable and chic.

“I don’t know,” said Harry finally, blinking again.

“See,” said Nick—Harry seemed to have proved his point for him—“it’s a good thing you met me.”

Harry gave the older lad a weak smile.

It was nearly half past four when Harry arrived back in Sutton. He’d told Nick before he left that he wanted a quiet day the next day, reasoning that it would probably be good to get some extra sleep and eat a few proper meals before his meeting with the casting director. To Harry’s relief and slight surprise, Nick agreed.
Harry spent most of Sunday hanging around his flat. He practiced a bit of yoga and did a short meditation—he’d discovered a YouTube channel with a bunch of guided meditations that he really enjoyed—before eating a bowl of cereal and drinking a pot of tea. He read for a while and listened to several records, finally taking a shower and getting dressed to go down the street to Black Treacle.

At the bakery, Harry talked to Elora about his meeting with the casting director for Gucci the next day, telling her he was nervous and rambling about what he was going to wear—something simple like a pair of black jeans, a plain white tee, and his new Chelsea boots—and that he thought he would pull his hair into a bun rather than wear it down.

He tried to avoid Elora’s questions about his previous evening, only telling the girl that he’d gone to Nick’s and had met quite a few of the older lad’s friends.

After laying out his clothes for the next day and making himself a simple dinner, Harry chatted to his mum for a bit and then sat down to watch the episode of *Wayward Pines* that he’d missed a few nights earlier. He went to bed soon after; his meeting was at half past nine on Grafton Street—he was surprised to see that the casting director’s office was just a short walk from Mahiki—and he knew an early night and plenty of sleep were the best ideas.

It was an hour-long commute to Mayfair, which gave Harry plenty of time to get himself properly nervous despite the chamomile-lavender tea Elora had insisted he take—she’d claimed it would help him stay calm but Harry was doubting that assertion now—rather than his usual Earl Grey.

He found a text from Nick as he walked to the Morden Station at half past eight, though that, too, did little to calm him. *I’ve just told everyone that my boy’s going to an audition for Gucci and said they should wish you luck!*

Harry wasn’t sure if Nick meant he’d told the others at work or if he’d mentioned it in the middle of the *Breakfast Show* to millions of listeners but both possibilities made him nervous. He appreciated that Nick was being so supportive and encouraging though.

He sat in a posh waiting room with expensive leather furniture and beautiful lamps that Harry suspected were made of gold and Tiffany stained glass with two other lads who didn’t seem very interested in talking to Harry and instead chatted to each other quietly.

When Harry was called into the room, he was greeted by a tall woman with dark hair and a pleasant smile.

“Hello, Harry,” she said. “I’m Leila Ananna.”

“Hello, Ms An—”

“Leila, please,” said the woman, taking Harry’s proffered hand and shaking. “It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard quite a lot about you.”

“Have you?” asked Harry timidly.

“Yes, of course,” she told him. “Louis has talked about you endlessly. Please.” She gestured toward an armchair covered with a burgundy velvet. “Sit.”

Harry sat and listened as Leila told him about the job, explaining that it really was just shots for product views on Gucci’s website. “Some models find that too tedious and are uninterested,” she said.

“I liked doing those shots with Louis. For Topman, you know,” Harry told her. “It was just fun to
model different clothes and to work with Louis and Lou Teasdale and Other Harry—Harry Lambert—and all of the crew. I really liked that I got to see how professional photoshoots run."

“I’m so glad to hear that you feel that way,” said Leila. “A lot of models just want to skip all of the work they consider boring when they’re first starting because they just want the flashy print advert jobs and a chance to walk runways.”

“Well, um, I’d like to do that too,” said Harry, nodding to show his interest. “But I’ve only just- I’ve only had one job so far. I’ve got to work up to all of that, don’t I?”

“It seems a lot of new models miss that memo,” she said with a grin. “Glad you didn’t.”

Leila pulled out a file filled with Harry’s portfolio—Simon had told him not to worry about bringing it along because he and Louis had already sent over all of his headshots and a majority of photos from the Topman shoot—and pulled out a few she’d marked with little sticky tabs.

“Quite often, models try to show their attitude, whatever that may mean for them,” she told Harry, giving a amused half-eye roll. “Of course, we’re looking for that when it comes to the print adverts and to a certain extent on the runway. But for the product views, we like a bit more of a blank slate, really just a step away from a mannequin. Gucci knows that their designs are usually inaccessible to a lot of people so they like to show the clothes on real models on their website to give it a touch of character, realness.”

Harry nodded. That made a great deal of sense, he thought. Gucci’s clothes were most certainly not realistic for everyday wear for most people and were perhaps a bit intimidating for the less bold fashion-conscious.

“However,” continued Leila, “they don’t want to take away from the clothes that are being modelled.”

Harry nodded again. “That makes sense. I always think it’s kind of- it’s a bit impersonal when it’s just a picture of the clothes when you’re looking to do a bit of online shopping. I always prefer it when it’s being modelled. It gives you an idea- It gives a better idea of what it actually looks like when you’re, um, when you’re wearing it.”

“Exactly,” agreed Leila. “These photos Louis sent me”—she pointed to the three she’d pulled from Harry’s portfolio—“demonstrate exactly what I’m talking about. You give the items a touch of personality, breathe a little bit of life into them, but don’t distract from the clothing itself. The focus of the shot is still the item you’re modelling.”

“Oh,” said Harry. He’d really just put on the clothes Other Harry had given him and had done his best to follow Louis’ directions. He most definitely wasn’t going to tell Leila that though. “Thank you.”

“I think you seem like a lovely young man,” Leila told him, “and I imagine you’ll do quite well in this industry.”

“Thank you,” said Harry again.

“I like your attitude as well,” she added. “Very different from your competitors.”

Harry wasn’t sure if he should thank her again so he chose instead to look politely engaged and nothing more.
“I’m inclined to offer you the job, especially given Louis’ high recommendations,” said Leila, “but just to be fair, I’ll review all three portfolios again before I make my final decision.”

“Of course,” said Harry, nodding his understanding.

“It’s been a pleasure to meet you,” Leila told Harry as she led him to the door.

“Um, yes. You too. I mean, it was nice to meet you.”

In the waiting area again, Leila said, “All right, gentlemen. I will review all of your portfolios and will contact you sometime in the next day or two to let you know what direction we’ve decided to go. Thank you for your time today.”

All three models thanked Leila, shaking her hand before leaving the office.

Harry pulled his phone out of his pocket as he walked out of the building onto Grafton Street. He pressed the home button and read the text from Nick that appeared on his screen. *How did it go?!

*Just got out!* responded Harry. *It went well I think! She said she liked the pictures Louis sent her and she thought my attitude was good and she said Louis recommended me highly.* He hit send and then, knowing what Nick’s next question was going to be, sent a third message. *She’s reviewing all three portfolios and she’ll be contacting us in the next day or two.*

*You’ll get it love I’m sure*, came Nick’s reply.

Harry hoped Nick was right.

His mother seemed to agree when he spoke with her, ringing her as he was walking through the door to his flat. She’d listened to what Harry told her—Leila had been pleased with the photos Louis had sent her, had liked his attitude and had appreciated his eagerness and willingness to do the jobs other models found tedious and boring, and had said Louis had highly recommended him—and thought that it seemed Harry was very likely to get the job.

Nervous excitement and anxious anticipation bubbled inside Harry’s tummy for the rest of the day, nearly keeping him awake with their growing strength.

By the morning, however, they had become so bad that Harry felt almost as nervous as he had the previous morning. He really hoped that he would hear from Leila soon because he didn’t want to feel shaky and sort of nauseous for too long.

It was as Harry was folding his laundry early that afternoon that his phone rang, a number he didn’t know lighting up the screen.

“Hello,” he said and then added, because just saying hello didn’t seem professional enough, “This is Harry.”

“Hello, Harry,” came a woman’s voice. “This is Leila Ananna. I’ve reviewed all three of the portfolios I saw yesterday and I’m calling you with a bit of good news.”

Harry’s heart leapt into his throat. He really hoped it was the best news and not just that she’d liked his portfolio and might consider him again for a job in the future.

“I feel that you’re the best candidate for the job and I’d like to offer it to you if you’re still interested.”

“Oh, gosh,” said Harry, a million different thoughts and emotions filling him. “Yes! Yes, I’m still-
I’m very interested!”

“Good,” chuckled Leila. “I was hoping you’d say that. I’ll need you to come back to my office at your earliest convenience to deal with the formal agreements and paperwork.”

They arranged a time for the following day and Harry said thank you for the hundredth time before hanging up the phone and calling his mother immediately.

“I got it, Mummy!” exclaimed Harry as soon as Anne answered the phone. “I got it and I’m going to sign paperwork tomorrow!”

“Oh! Harry, baby!” said Anne, overwhelmed with pride. “Oh, Harry! That’s so wonderful! I’ve been sick with nerves since yesterday!”

“Me too,” laughed Harry.

Harry and Anne spoke a bit longer, Anne’s pride and joy making both her and her son tear up.

Finally, Harry decided to walk to Black Treacle to tell Elora the exciting news.

He was glad that two o’clock on Tuesday was a slow time at the cafe because he didn’t want to sit and wait for Elora to finish a busy rush of orders before he could tell her that he’d got the job.

“Well?” she asked as soon as Harry walked through the door. “How did it go?”

“I got the job!” he exclaimed, a huge smile pressing his dimples deep into his cheeks.

“Harry!” shouted Elora, moving from behind the pastry counter to wrap Harry in a big hug. “Oh my God! That’s awesome!” She pulled back, hands still gripping Harry’s elbows, and said, looking around the cafe to the few customers who sat nursing their coffees and teas and picking at pastries, “My friend’s going to be a Gucci model!” She looked back at Harry and said, “I’m so proud!”

“Thanks, Elora,” said Harry, blushing and pleased that she was so excited for him.

“Now come eat something and tell me everything.” She tugged Harry’s arm and led him to the coffee bar.

Harry told Elora all about the interview with the casting director the day before, mentioning that she’d liked the photographs Louis had sent and that the photographer had talked only praises of Harry to her.

“She liked my attitude too,” he added.

“Of course she did,” said Elora.

Harry blushed. “She said it’s different from other models because they all- most models don’t want to do the less glamorous stuff like shoots for product views but I said I liked doing that.”

“Less glamorous?” chuckled Elora. “You’ll be modelling Gucci! That’s about as glamorous as it gets!”

Harry laughed and agreed.

“What did Nick say when you told him?” asked Elora.

“Um, I didn’t- I haven’t told him yet,” said Harry. “I called my mum as soon as I got off the phone
with Leila. And then I came here.”

“You’d better text Nick then!” Elora gave him a little grin. “He told everyone to wish you luck yesterday morning. On his show. He said ‘his boy’ was going to audition for Gucci.”

Harry groaned. “He did tell everyone then? I thought he just- I thought he meant just the people in the studio with him.”

“Nope! Now send him a text!”

Harry pulled his phone out and opened his messages. *I got the job! Going to sign papers tomorrow!* Nick’s response was immediate. *I knew you would love! Congrats! we should celebrate tonight ;)*

“He wants- he wants to celebrate tonight,” said Harry with a grimace. “I don’t- I don’t really want to go out tonight. Or anything.”

“You can tell him that, Harry,” said Elora kindly. “You don’t always have to go out just because Nick wants to.”

“It’s just- He’s happy for me and he wants to celebrate with me,” Harry told her. “And that’s nice. That he, you know, that he cares.”

Elora turned to Harry and looked at him, eyes studying his face. “It is nice,” she agreed. “But you don’t, like, owe him anything in exchange for him being happy for you and caring. You don’t owe him a night out partying.”

“I- I know,” said Harry with a little shrug. “I just want him to know that, um, that I am happy that he cares about me.”

Harry left Black Treacle a while later, heading back to his flat.

While he was walking down the High Street, he got another text from Nick. *so are we celebrating?!*

Harry bit his lip. Maybe he would take Elora’s advice. Or at least compromise. *Maybe just a quiet night in? he responded. a movie and wine and some takeaway would be nice :)*

*Oh that’s no fun! Let me take you out for dinner or drinks or somethig.*

Harry looked at the text message. He thought a quiet evening in sounded like a nice time. He didn’t know how to tell Nick that he really wanted to stay in without sounding ungrateful for Nick’s support or like a boring, friendless introvert.

He wished he could ask Elora what she thought he should say and realised that he didn’t have her phone number. He would have to ask her for it the next time he saw her.

*that would be nice too*, typed Harry and then, before he could change his mind, he sent a second message. *But i’d really like to just spend the night in with you! Maybe we could go for dinner another night.*

Harry sighed, relieved, when Nick replied. *If that’s what my boy wants it’s what we’ll do!*

Harry smiled, feeling his cheeks heat up, and sent Nick the blushing emoji face.

He arrived at Nick’s flat a few hours later—he’d wanted to bring a bottle of wine but Nick had
insisted he didn’t need to bring anything—and was greeted with an enthusiastic congratulations and a big hug.

They ate takeaway from an Indian restaurant that Nick told Harry was the best in London and then watched *Notting Hill*.

As the movie played and the two lads watched, Harry found it more and more difficult to focus on what was happening on the television screen. Nick, it seemed, was inching closer and closer to him with every passing moment, leaving almost no space between them. His right arm, which had started rested across the back of the sofa behind Harry, was now draped around Harry’s shoulders and his fingers were tracing over the exposed skin of Harry’s collarbone ever so lightly.

Still, though, Harry was surprised when Nick placed his other hand on Harry’s cheek and turned the model’s head to face him. Harry didn’t have time to get over his initial surprise before Nick leant forward and kissed Harry, firm and demanding, taking the younger lad like he wanted to claim him and own him.

Harry kissed back, tentative and nervous because Nick Grimshaw was kissing him—how many times had he fantasized about this very thing?—and he didn’t know how to put his flitting emotions and thoughts into his kiss.

And then Nick pulled back, a satisfied smirk on his face that was missed by Harry because the lad still had his eyes shut tight.

Harry thought about that kiss for the rest of the night, as they finished the movie and said goodbye—Nick didn’t mention the kiss and Harry didn’t either, unsure what to say—and as he made his way back to Sutton in the car Nick had called for him yet again.

As he lay in his bed that night, he felt Nick’s lips against his own, possessive and greedy. He’d liked that, he realised, because he’d felt wanted, desired. He’d never felt that way before.

He woke up early the next morning, flushed with excitement for his meeting with Leila and from his evening with Nick.

After a shower and making sure Butterscotch’s food and water bowls were filled—the cat seemed to be having a lazy day, lying in the pool of sunlight at the foot of Harry’s bed—Harry left his flat. He walked down High Street to Black Treacle, eager to tell Elora about Nick’s kiss.

When he arrived at the tearoom, Harry sat on his usual stool at the coffee bar and waited for his friend to finish with a big order of drinks and pastries for a rushed-looking woman who, Harry guessed, was charged with bringing breakfast for all of her coworkers.

Elora finally made her way to Harry, greeting him with a good morning as she made a pot of Earl Grey tea and pulled a marzipan and apricot-filled brioche bun from the pastry case.

“Did you go out with Nick last night?” she asked, not hesitant with her straightforwardness at all.

“Kind of,” admitted Harry. “We didn’t go out. I just went to his flat and we watched a movie and had takeaway.”

“Was that your suggestion or was it what he wanted?” asked Elora.

Harry missed the true question—had Nick done what Harry wanted to do or had he decided that’s what he’d like to do and had yet again got his own way—and answered her question. “I told him I thought maybe- that a quiet night in would be nice. He said that was no fun and we should go for
dinner but I thought of what you said and kind of- I kind of compromised.” He shot his friend a guilty little smile. “So I told him that I really wanted a night in just, like, just spending time with him. And he said”—Harry blushed as he said his next words—“he said if that’s what his boy wanted, it’s what we would do.”

“Well that’s good, then,” said Elora. “That you stuck to what you wanted.”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry. He paused for a second and added, “When we were watching the movie, he- Nick kissed me.”

Elora stopped pulling at the bit of bun she was tearing off and looked at Harry. “He did?”

“Yeah. Like, kind of… hard?” said Harry, unsure how to describe Nick’s kiss.

“Hard?”

“Like he- like he wanted me,” said Harry, feeling a little embarrassed at his confession to his friend. “Kind of… possessive.”

“Oh,” said Elora, suddenly understanding.

“But he didn’t say anything. Like, that he likes me or that he’s wanted to kiss me since we met or, you know, anything.”

“So nothing that you felt,” surmised Elora.

Harry nodded. “Like it didn’t happen. Or that it didn’t matter.”

“It did to you though.”

Harry didn’t want to admit it. Lou’s words—“I think that Nick’s more of a casual relationship kind of person.”—repeated in his head.

“I mean, yeah,” he finally said, quiet and ashamed. “He calls me his boy and he- it seems like he cares about me and he likes spending time with me. I think he likes spending time with me.”

Elora bit the inside of her cheek, lips pursed. “I don’t want to sound like a dickhead, Harry,” she said, attempting delicacy. “But maybe your friends were right. Maybe Nick is really just a friends-with-benefits kind of guy.”

Harry sighed, shoulders dropping, and nodded. “I know. I just don’t want it to be true.”

Elora took his hand in her much smaller one. “You don’t have to try to forget that it happened,” she said kindly. “You liked it and that’s important. But you should try not to build it up into something more than it was.”

Harry nodded again, lips dipped into a pout.

“Now cheer up, love,” she said with a little smile. “You’ve got a Gucci contract to sign.”

Harry entered the waiting lounge at Leila’s office at 3:15, telling the receptionist that he was there for his meeting with the casting director at half past three.

He was greeted by the woman fifteen minutes later and ushered into her office.

“Well, Harry. Congratulations!” she said, shaking his hand. “I’m pleased to welcome you to Gucci.”
“Thank you,” said Harry bashfully. “I’m- I’m honoured. Really.”

Leila smiled at him. “We’ve got a bit of boring legal talk to discuss,” she said, opening a red envelope on her desk. She read through the contract—she’d sent a copy to Simon, she told him, who had approved of everything from his end—and explained everything to him, making sure he understood and asking if he had any questions.

Contract read and signed, Leila informed him of the details of the shoot.

“You’ll start next Wednesday,” she said. “Louis’ finishing up a shoot for *GQ* with Niall Horan.”

“Niall Horan?” asked Harry, hoping he didn’t sound ignorant but unfamiliar with the name.

“Another fairly new newcomer,” she told him. “He’s done a few more shoots than you but he’s got the same attitude you’ve got. Two of the only models I’ve met in the last ten years who don’t feel any jobs I offer are beneath them.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Does he model for Gucci too?”

“No.” Leila shook her head. “I’m the casting director for Paul Smith, Armani, McQueen, and Burberry too. I just signed him as the face of Paul Smith’s new PS Tailored collection. He’s a very classic kind of handsome. The lad was born to model suits.”

“Oh. That’s- that’s good, then,” said Harry.

“I imagine you’d do quite well on the runway,” she mused. “You’ve got the right look. And long legs.”

“I’m actually- I trip over my own feet. Standing still,” said Harry with a self-deprecating laugh.

Leila laughed too. “You should consider talking to Simon about runway coaching,” she said. She raised a brow and added, “London Fashion Week is just around the corner and I’m always looking to bring new talent to the catwalk.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “I’ll- Maybe I’ll talk to Simon. Do you think- Does he know good places for that kind of… training?”

“I’m sure he does,” said Leila with a smile. “I like to recommend the London Model Academy myself.”

Harry thanked her for her suggestion and after learning the rest of the details of his upcoming photoshoot, the meeting ended.

“Remember,” she said as she led him to the door, “runway coaching.”

Harry considered Leila’s words over the next few days, thinking about what an interesting experience walking the runway for Gucci or Alexander McQueen would be and wondering if he would be able to do it; he’d not been exaggerating much when he’d told Leila he could manage to trip over his own feet while standing still.

Finally, on Saturday morning, Harry decided to mention the topic to Elora while he was eating a stack of whole wheat pancakes with fresh summer berries and whipped honey butter.

“El, I want- I need advice,” he said.

“What’s up, love?” she asked from where she sat at the end of the coffee bar, tying little red and gold
ribbons around bags of freshly made caramel popcorn.

“So when I met with Leila on Wednesday to, you know, to sign my contract, she said she thought I would do well on the runway,” he told her, “and that I should talk to, um, talk to Simon about runway coaching. Because she said London Fashion Week is coming up and she’s always looking for new talent.”

“What kind of advice do you want?” asked Elora. “Are you asking if I think you should do it?”

“Well,” said Harry with a shrug, “yeah.” He knew he was really terrible at making his own decisions.

“I think you should,” Elora told him. “It almost sounds like she was offering you a spot walking a runway during London Fashion Week. Or at least offering you an audition.”

“Really?” asked Harry, surprised that Elora had interpreted Leila’s suggestion as she had.

“Yeah,” said Elora. “I mean, I think she’s probably interested in hiring you to work as a runway model and she might be curious to see if you’re willing to put in the effort to train for an opportunity like that.”

Harry thought about what Elora said for a minute. “But I’m, like, the most uncoordinated person ever. I don’t- I don’t think I can do it.”

“I do,” said Elora confidently. “And I think you should find somewhere that trains models for runway shows.”

“Okay.”

Elora gave him a sweet smile.

Harry spent the second Saturday night in a row with Nick, this time at a restaurant called sketch in Mayfair very near Leila’s office on Grafton Street. It was a quite posh restaurant, the walls of the dining room in which they were seated—The Gallery, Harry learnt—painted a pale, powder pink and the chairs and banquets upholstered in a velvet the same shade of pink. Harry felt a little out of place and silly; this, he could tell, was where the premier of the fashion world, where the Alessandro Micheles and Clare Waight Kellers and Lady Gagas, came to enjoy an evening out.

It was quiet, though, and Harry was glad it was just Nick again tonight; he liked Alexa and Daisy and the others he’d met at Nick’s flat well enough but he just wanted to chat with Nick tonight.

They were just friends, he reminded himself, and he supposed some people in his situation might try to avoid being alone with the person on whom they had an unreciprocated crush but he liked spending time with Nick.

Harry told Nick about Leila’s assertion that he should consider runway coaching because she thought he would do well as a runway model.

“My friend Elora thinks I should do it,” Harry told the older man. “She thinks that it sounds like, um, maybe like Leila’s offering an audition or something. And maybe she wants to see if I’m willing to make the effort to earn a spot on the runway.”

“Of course you’d be an excellent runway model,” said Nick, ignoring everything Harry mentioned Elora had said. “The perfect face for the runway. And those legs are just sinful.” He smirked and raised a brow. “Sex on legs.”
Harry choked on the bit of food he was chewing, shocked by Nick’s bluntness, and took a sip of his water, his cheeks a deep red.

It was late when Nick finally decided to call a car to bring him home before driving Harry to Sutton.

Harry was confused, he realised as he made the trip back to Sutton, because he was sure that Nick had been flirting with him since they’d met at the launch party two weeks earlier—he called Harry his boy, told him he was beautiful, and had kissed him a few nights earlier—but he’d not asked Harry to be his boyfriend.

He knew it was naive to think that any of that meant they should be boyfriends. He supposed that if it was just one or two of those things, he wouldn’t feel this way but it was so many boyfriend-like behaviours all together that it felt odd to not tell people Nick was his boyfriend.

So Harry began to hope that Nick would realise the nature of their relationship leant itself more to a romantic one than just a platonic.

Harry spent the next few days waiting for his photoshoot with Louis. He passed a lot of time at Black Treacle, sitting and chatting to Elora—he’d made sure to get her mobile number one day before he left the tearoom—and sharing pastries and sandwiches that his friend didn’t charge him for because, Elora said, “It was my lunch anyway. You just stole some bites.”

On Monday, he went to the Cheam Leisure Centre to sign up for a swim, gym, and exercise class membership—something he’d wanted to do since he’d moved to London but hadn’t done yet—and saw that there was a Pilates class offered Monday nights and yoga on Sunday evenings. He registered for that evening’s Pilates class and told the lady at reception that he might be back for yoga on Sunday too.

Nick texted him at about five o’clock. I’d love to see my boy tonight!

:( Sorry Nick, responded Harry. I’m signed up for a Pilates class at the leisure centre tonight.

Nick’s message came quickly. You could skip one night ;)

Harry frowned. It’s my first class and i only signed up today.

Come by after then. Please? read Nick’s next text.

It doesn’t end until 9:30 and it would be late by the time I got to your flat.

that’s why you should move out of Sutton

Harry sighed. As special as he felt when Nick made it seem that he was just dying to see Harry, like he was desperate to spend time with him, Harry really wished Nick would understand that there were some nights when he just wanted to stay home.

I like Sutton , replied Harry. Im sorry Nick. Another night!

I see how it is , said Nick a few minutes later. Your sick of this old man.

Noooo!!! Harry sent the first message and then immediately followed it with a second. I’m not sick of you and you’re not old!

I’m just kidding love! Harry read Nick’s message, the feeling of guilt that had flooded him when he’d read Nick’s previous texts slowly flowing away. Have fun at Pilates!
Tuesday was a rainy, grey day and Harry decided it was the perfect time to sit with a pot of tea, curled up on the sofa with Butterscotch, and reread *And Then There Were None* and *Ten Little Indians* for the following evening’s first book club meeting. He hoped they would be out of the studio in time for him to make it back to the Sutton Central Library in time and thought maybe he could ask Louis at the beginning of the day if it would be possible to try to finish early enough.

With nervous excitement considerably less intense than he’d felt on either the morning of his first shoot or his first meeting with Leila, Harry left his flat for the studio the next morning.

Harry had expected to be returning to Guys & Dolls Studio but had learnt that Gucci had their own small studio in the same building that housed Leila’s office. He arrived early and was happy to see that both Lou and Other Harry were there again.

“Do you travel in a pack, then?” he asked the makeup artist with a grin when he saw her.

Lou laughed. “The three of us do seem to work together quite often. It’s nice. Like a little family.”

Harry agreed, feeling even more comfortable to be with people he already knew, and let the woman do his makeup and style his hair—a relatively neat bun today—before Other Harry set out the first outfit he was scheduled to model.

Louis arrived just as Harry Lambert was adjusting the collar of a pink button-up shirt under the neck of the knit wool tiger jumper he was wearing.

“Look at you!” said Louis by way of greeting. “Modelling proper fashion and not Grimshaw’s shite attempts!”

“Hi, Louis,” said Harry with a small smile. As much as he liked Nick—and he liked Nick quite a lot—and Nick’s line for Topman, it felt completely different to be modelling a one thousand-pound Gucci jumper.

The shoot started, Louis giving Harry direction as he photographed the outfit the model was wearing, and the first hour passed pleasantly with playful banter and chatting among the photographer, model, and the rest of the crew.

“Any plans after your first night as a Gucci model?” asked Louis while Harry changed into the next look.

“Actually, um,” said Harry slowly, “when do you think- what time do you think we’ll be finishing today?”

“It won’t be long days like the Topman shoot,” Louis told him. “We’ve got ten days to photograph the whole collection so we can spread it out. Why?” He grimaced. “You have plans with your boyfriend?”

Harry ignored Louis’ boyfriend remark and said instead, “No. There’s a book club starting at the library. Sutton Central Library. Tonight’s the first meeting and I- I’d like to go. It’s at half six.”

“Yeah, lad,” said Louis. “We’ll finish up in time for that.”

“Thanks, Louis,” said Harry with an appreciative smile.

Much to both Harry’s surprise and Louis’ dismay, Nick arrived at the studio at around one o’clock.

“Hi, love,” he said, walking to Harry and kissing his forehead. “Thought I’d see my boy on his first
day working in the Big Leagues.”

“Hi, Nick,” said Harry with a bashful smile, eyes cast down to Nick’s chest. “You didn’t have to come.”

“No, I didn’t have to but I wanted to,” said Nick smoothly. “Proud of you.”

“Grimshaw. A pleasure,” said Louis, tone clipped in a way that did nothing to hide his true feelings, though Harry knew he wasn’t even trying. “Why are you here?”

“Like I just said,” said Nick, sounding irritated, “I’m here to see my boy. I’ve brought him lunch.” He held up a paper bag that neither Harry nor Louis had noticed.

Louis rolled his eyes but said rather begrudgingly, “I s’pose it is time for lunch. Go on, then. Forty minutes.”

“Okay, Louis,” said Harry, nodding and turning to follow Nick out of the studio.

“Oi, lad!” called Louis. “Got to change first. You’re not leaving this room in a seventeen hundred-pound jacket. This is the real stuff.”

Harry and Nick ended up sitting at a small lunch table in the corner of the dressing area, choosing not to leave the studio after Harry had changed back into his own clothes, and ate the kale salad and quinoa chili Nick had brought along.

“We’re celebrating tonight, of course,” Nick told Harry matter-of-factly.

“Celebrating?” wondered Harry.

“Your first day, love!”

“Oh,” said Harry, feeling a little guilty. “Thank you but, um, but I can’t. I’ve got my first book club meeting tonight.”

“Book club?” asked Nick blankly.

“Yeah. I- I told you about it,” said Harry hesitantly, “last week. The first meeting’s tonight.”

“But then we said we’d do our own book club,” Nick reminded him. “You get to choose the books and everything.”

“We can- I can do both,” said Harry quickly, hoping to convince Nick of what he was saying. “Different nights. And we’ll have wine!”

“I just thought it could be our special thing,” said Nick coyly, a distinctly flirtatious grin on his lips. “Just for us.”

“It can be. But I can have another one too,” said Harry.

“With the young assistant librarian.”

Harry blinked at him. “He’s just running- he’s just running the club. It’s not like- I mean, it’s not like —”

“I’m just teasing,” said Nick.
“O-oh,” said Harry, voice faltering slightly. “Um, okay.” He smiled awkwardly because he should have known Nick was just teasing him.

“You should get to know my friends a bit better, though,” mused Nick. “Talk with them about some topics that are actually interesting, not just books. I understand that you’re just settling in and trying to make some friends but you’ve got me now, love. You don’t need book club or Scrabble or—”

“I like books,” said Harry, brows furrowed and expression tinged with hurt. “I think they’re interesting.”

“Of course,” said Nick, the attempt to soothe Harry ruined by the patronising tone in his voice. “I do think that it’s important that you start spending time with people who”—Nick squinted his eyes as though trying to choose the correct words—“fit into your new lifestyle.”

“My new lifestyle?” asked Harry, feeling very confused.


“Right,” came Louis’ voice from behind them. “You need to leave,” he said to Nick curtly. “It’s been forty minutes. Forty-five, actually.”

Nick stood from the table. “Meet me at Mahiki after?”

Before Harry could open his mouth, Louis cut in. “Didn’t you hear him tell you he’s got his book club tonight? Or were you too busy thinking about how you’ll get him to suck your cock?”

“Excuse me?” said Nick, eyes wide. “Stay out of this, Tomlinson. It’s not your place—”

“Oh, fuck off, Grimshaw. ‘It’s not your place,’” he said, mimicking Nick, voice dripping with anger. “It’s not your bloody place to tell Harry who he should hang out with and what he should and shouldn’t find interesting. But here you are, doing that. And I have to listen to it.”

Nick looked from Louis to Harry and blinked, obviously trying his best to act as though Louis hadn’t spoken. “Mahiki?” he asked again.

“I—”

“Harry, love,” said Louis kindly, deciding that if Nick could act as if he hadn’t said anything then he could ignore Nick. Harry turned to look at Louis and Louis thought he’d never seen anyone who looked as much like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights as Harry did in that moment. “Why don’t you find Other Harry and get sorted with your next outfit? We’ve got to finish up in time for you to get to your book club.”

Harry exhaled what sounded almost like a sigh of relief and said quickly, “Okay, Louis. Um”—he stood and looked at Nick, avoiding eye contact with the older man—“by, Nick.”

Louis glanced at Nick. Part of him wanted Nick to leave without saying another word but a bigger part of him didn’t want Nick to upset Harry any more than he already had, than he already would.

“Bye, love,” said Nick, stepping forward and dropping a kiss to Harry’s forehead. “Text me later and tell me all about your day.”

Harry nodded and gave a tentative half-smile. “I, um, I will.”
“Good lad,” praised Nick.

A half an hour later, Louis watched as Harry walked into the main studio area from the dressing room, wearing a dark blue puffer jacket with an embroidered wolf over a red and green plaid button-up shirt and a pair of loose-fitting light denim jeans.

“Excellent,” said Louis, clapping his hands. “Just straight on first and then I’ll have you turn round so we can see the embroidery on the back.”

“Oh, Louis,” said Harry, walking toward the taped X on the floor.

“Harry,” said Louis and Harry looked toward the photographer. “Please don’t forget who you are because Nick wants you to fit into his little mold.”

Harry blinked at Louis. He shrugged and said, almost defeatedly, “I just want him to like me.”

“I know, love,” Louis told him, “but there are people who like you the way you already are. Who don’t care if you fit a certain image.”

Harry didn’t say anything and Louis gave him a nod. “All right, lad. Let’s get a move on so you can be off for your first book club meeting.”

It seemed to Louis that Harry was not especially good at standing up for himself, that it made him uncomfortable to fight for what he really wanted when someone else wanted something different from him, so he decided he would do it for him.

And knowing that Nick didn’t want Harry to go to this book club made Louis even more determined to make sure Harry was able to go.

It was just around half past four when Louis announced them done for the day and sent Harry off to change out of the two thousand-pound outfit he was wearing.

“What book are you reading?” asked Louis, joining Harry in the dressing room with a cup of tea. “For your book club?”

“Oh. It’s two, actually,” Harry told him, explaining that they’d read the novel and play versions of the same story.

“Sounds all right, then,” said Louis with a smile. “You like reading?”

“Yes,” said Harry, blushing lightly. “I know it’s kind of boring and—”

“There’s nothing boring about reading,” Louis assured him. “People who don’t read are boring. What have they got to talk about?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Louis didn’t continue with his train of thought—Nick thought reading was boring and Louis thought Nick was uninteresting but he didn’t want to hurt Harry’s feelings in case he genuinely enjoyed spending time with Nick, didn’t want to do the same thing as Nick and convince Harry he wasn’t interesting or exciting because of what he liked to do—and said instead, “Reading’s a brilliant hobby. I’m glad you enjoy it. And I’m sure you’ll have fun at your meeting tonight.”

Harry left the studio and headed back to Sutton, saying goodbye to everyone on his way out, and Louis stayed a bit later to talk with Lou and Other Harry about the next day’s shoot.
“You’ve got to bite your tongue sometimes, Louis,” Lou said to him as they locked up the studio. “That dick-sucking comment wasn’t appropriate, you know?”

“It’s true though, and you know it too,” replied Louis.

“Doesn’t make it okay to say it,” said Lou.

Louis thought about the woman’s words as he made his way to his boyfriend’s flat. He just didn’t want Harry to get hurt and he knew that Nick would hurt him. He’d told Harry to watch himself but he didn’t think Harry had listened.

Although he’d only met Harry a few weeks earlier, he could tell the younger lad was too sweet for his own good—trusting and impressionable with a heart of gold—and was maybe a touch naive. It also seemed like he wanted to please everyone, craved approval, and was lonely and eager for a new friend or two.

Combined with his good looks and obvious talent for modelling, he was the perfect victim for a narcissistic social climber who, Louis suspected, would love nothing more than to be spotted with a beautiful young model on his arm.

Louis arrived at Liam’s flat a short while later, mind still filled with thoughts of Harry and, to his great irritation, Nick.

“Hey, babe,” said Liam as he opened the door for the photographer. “What’s wrong?” he asked, noticing the mildly irritated expression on the smaller lad’s face.

“Nick fucking Grimshaw, of course,” said Louis with a sigh, walking past Liam into the flat.

“Oh,” said Liam, a hint of understanding dawning on him.

“Yes,” said Louis. “And that poor, sweet boy’s going to get his heart crushed.” He continued, explaining the whole situation and telling Liam everything he’d seen and heard. He mentioned the multiple pap pictures, certain that was evidence that Nick was only pretending to care about Harry because it gave him a beautiful young up-and-coming model with whom he could be spotted at all sorts of fashionable places and events.

“Because,” exhaled Louis, frustration bleeding from his voice as he started to unload his thoughts to the younger boy, “Nick’s got himself a pretty little vulnerable puppy to follow him around.”

“So is Harry a puppy or a mouse?” asked Liam after Louis told him that Nick was going to destroy Harry like a cat with a mouse.

“Both,” said Louis. “Nick’s only going to break him. He’s going to tear him apart.”

Liam considered Louis for a moment. “Maybe you could help him find new friends. Like, different ones who aren’t just going to use him.”
“What?” asked Louis. “Like, set him up on dates or something?”

“I suppose,” said Liam. “I was thinking just friends. People who he actually has stuff in common with or at least, like, respect his interests and hobbies and don’t make him feel bad about them.”

“Do you think that’ll make him forget Nick?” wondered Louis, not sure that simply introducing Harry to a few new people would be enough to convince him that Nick was no good for him.

“I don’t know but you’ll never find out if you don’t try,” said Liam with a shrug. “Maybe you could ask him round to watch a movie with us some time. Show him that not everyone in the fashion industry goes out clubbing and partying all the time.”

“Don’t know that we’ve got the same status in the fashion industry as models and designers though,” said Louis. “A photographer and the editor of a fashion and lifestyle magazine.”

“Well, who do you think?” asked Liam.

“What about Niall Horan?”

“Niall Horan?” asked Liam.

“Yeah.” Louis nodded. “He’s a model and he’s got celebrity friends but he’s really lowkey about it all. I mean, he’s almost never spotted by the paps. Never in the tabloids. And he’s a really nice lad,” mused Louis. “Reckon he’d get on with Harry. Talk to him for hours about music and laugh at all of Harry’s weird puns just because he likes to make people happy.”

“Sounds good then,” said Liam.

Louis agreed and considered the idea for the rest of the night.

He decided it would be best to mention Harry to Niall first. He was sure that Niall would be eager to meet Harry—Niall loved to make new friends because, he’d told Louis once, friendships enrich everyone’s life—but Louis didn’t want to offer Harry a potential new friend only to come back and tell him they weren’t interested after all. He already had Nick making him feel that he was uninteresting and incapable of finding friends without Nick’s assistance.

Louis arrived at the studio the next morning, happy to find Harry already dressed in a pair of white denim pants covered in a floral print and a bright pink jumper with a large teddy bear embroidered on the chest.

“Excellent!” he said, clapping his hands to get the model’s attention. “Let’s get started, yeah?”

“Okay, Louis,” said Harry, as anxious to please as ever.

They started the day’s shoot, talking about Harry’s first book club meeting—there had been six people at the meeting and the discussion had been stimulating—and Louis’ quiet evening in with his boyfriend.

“I didn’t- I didn’t know you have a boyfriend,” said Harry. “You’ve never mentioned him before.”

“It’s a bit on-and-off,” said Louis easily. “You should meet him. He’s a proper sweetheart.”

“I’d- Yeah, I’d like that,” said Harry with a shy smile.

“We’re going to the pub near his flat tonight,” said Louis, adjusting the lens of his camera and focusing on Harry. “For dinner. Could join us if you’d like.”
“Oh, um, thanks,” said Harry, “but, um, I told Nick I’d go out with him tonight. Since I didn’t, you know, since I didn’t go last night.”

Louis bit his lip, remembering Lou’s words from the previous day—“You’ve got to bite your tongue sometimes.”—and nodded curtly. “Okay. Just… If you ever want a sort of chill night, like, just burgers and beer at the local or, like, some telly marathon, Li and I would love to have you round.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Louis. Maybe,” said Harry, nodding vigorously in a way that Louis knew meant he was just being polite, “maybe sometime.”

“Mmm,” hummed Louis, unconvinced.

Louis sent Harry off to find Lou and Other Harry for an outfit change and touch up.

“I didn’t know that Louis has a boyfriend,” said Harry to Lou as the woman powdered Harry’s face.

“Louis claims they’re ‘on-and-off’—”

“That’s what he said—”

“But I’ve never seen them have a proper off phase in two years,” Lou told him. “I think they’re both scared to tell the other that they’re in love so they just pretend it’s a bit more casual than it is. Prats.”

“They’ll realise someday,” said Harry. “I mean, if it’s been two years.”

“I hope,” sighed Lou. “Now what about you and Nick? Think he’ll realise—”

“Realise what?”

Lou searched Harry’s face for a minute and Harry wondered what she was thinking. “That you want something more serious,” she finally said.

“I don’t- No,” said Harry, shaking his head. “It’s okay. Whatever he wants.”

Lou sighed. “Yeah. That’s the problem.”

Harry wasn’t sure what she meant but didn’t have much time to think about it.

“Harry, lad,” called Louis. “Next look, yeah?”

It was half past six when they finished for the day. Harry still had two and a half hours before he was supposed to meet Nick at Mahiki so, not wanting to go back to Sutton only to return to Mayfair almost immediately, he found a Pret A Manger nearby that was open until half past ten and ordered a cup of veggie chilli and a chicken avocado sandwich.

He’d not told Louis that he was planning to sit alone at a cafe for two and a half hours while he waited to meet Nick for drinks that he didn’t really want at a club he didn’t really want to go to because he was certain Louis would have a few choice words to say about it.

So he ate his meal quietly, tucked away at a table in a corner of the restaurant.

He wasn’t sure why he wanted to please Nick so much, wasn’t sure why he cared what Nick thought about him as much as he did, but he really liked Nick. Nick was smart and funny and clever and attractive and famous and popular—none were qualities Harry had ever felt could be used to describe him, except perhaps attractive—and he thought Harry was beautiful and, for some reason, wanted to spend time with him.
Harry made his way over to Mahiki at nine o’clock and was led down to the Aloha Party Room. He spotted Nick at a booth surrounded by a group of people that included Pixie, Daisy, Alexa, Caroline Flack, and one of Jude Law’s sons.

He wished he’d gone for burgers with Louis and his boyfriend.

“Harry! Love!” called Nick and Harry knew it was too late to make any kind of escape now.

“Hi, Nick,” said Harry with a small smile.

Nick rearranged everyone on the settee, telling everyone on his side of the table to move so Harry could sit next to him.

Finally, Harry was settled in next to Nick with a Mustique Fizz that he’d not ordered.

Nick made a toast to Harry, voice projected loudly enough that Harry thought probably half of the people in the club could hear him. It was a bit over the top, Harry thought, as Nick went on about how proud he was of Harry and told everyone how hard-working and talented Harry was and how much he deserved this job with Gucci and all other jobs he would get in the future. “All because of me and my humble little Topman collection,” said Nick with a hint of false modesty.

Harry didn’t get a chance to think too much about Nick’s words—had he really only got the job with Gucci because of Nick?—because Nick sat back down beside him and, slipping a hand around the back of Harry’s neck, pulled Harry’s face toward his own and kissed him. It was hard and demanding and possessive, as it had been the first time Nick had kissed him a week earlier.

It was cheering that jolted Harry alert and he was suddenly uncomfortably aware of all of the people who had just watched Nick kiss him. Harry blushed a deep red and Nick pulled back.

“You’re beautiful, Harry,” he whispered, thumbing over Harry’s plump bottom lip.

“T-Thanks,” stuttered Harry, cheeks aflame.

“So tell me what it’s like to be a Gucci model,” said Nick, arm around the back of Harry’s neck and fingers tickling his collarbone.

“Oh. It’s really fun,” said Harry. He wasn’t sure what Nick wanted him to say; he’d already told the older lad several times that the job was fun. He’d told him he liked working with Louis, Lou, and Other Harry and that he was glad a lot of the crew who had worked on the Topman campaign were working on the Gucci shoot. He’d told Nick how exciting it was to wear Gucci clothes, that he’d always wanted to wear Gucci but had never been able to afford it and now he was modeling it. He’d told Nick he thought this job might help him get more jobs—maybe bigger, even more exciting things someday—and that he was trying to get a spot at a model training academy because Leila had suggested he do it.

He didn’t know what else to tell Nick. Nick must like to hear it, Harry reasoned, must find it interesting if he asked about the same thing over and over.

So Harry repeated himself, telling Nick everything he liked about working as a Gucci model.

“You didn’t, um- You… forgot to ask about my book club,” said Harry finally because Nick hadn’t mentioned it once in any of their texts the night before or at any point during the day.

“Right,” said Nick crisply, the flirtiness gone from his tone. “How was it, then?”
“It was so nice!” said Harry. He told Nick all about the discussion they’d had—he’d found it interesting that one woman had liked the play better than the novel because Harry thought that was just absurd—and about the other people who’d gone for the meeting.

“That’s great, Harry,” said Nick. “I’m so happy you had a good time.”

Harry smiled. “Thanks, Nick. It was fun.”

“Come dance with me, love.”

It was at around midnight that Harry told Nick he should leave and, after a few attempts on Nick’s part to get Harry to stay a bit longer, the older man gave in but insisted he call a car for Harry.

“I’ll walk you out,” he said after he received an alert that the car was waiting. “Got to make sure my boy gets home safe and sound.”

Harry blushed and allowed Nick to lead him up the stairs to the club’s main level, hand at the dip of Harry’s low back as he guided him along.

They were greeted, as seemed to be the norm whenever they were leaving Mahiki, by a small cluster of paparazzi with flashing cameras. Nick ushered Harry into the waiting car, leaning in to kiss him for the second time that night.

“Good night, love,” he said as he pulled back, closing the door and waving as the car pulled away from the curb.

Harry blushed as he thought about everyone who had seen Nick kiss him and hoped that the car door had blocked them from the cameras’ view. He knew Nick was used to a hundred eyes on him all the time but Harry wasn’t, at least not yet, and he certainly wasn’t used to paparazzi clicking their cameras every single time he left a restaurant or his flat.

He was glad, he thought as the Addison Lee came to a stop in front of his building, that nobody knew where he lived so he didn’t have to worry about the latter yet.

He thought it again the next morning, that he was lucky nobody knew where he lived, when he left his flat and headed to Black Treacle for tea and a bun on his way to the studio.

“He kissed you again,” said Elora as soon as he stepped to the counter.

“What?” asked Harry, a blush creeping up his neck and colouring his cheeks.

“He kissed you again,” repeated Elora, glaring at Harry.

“Oh no,” whispered Harry. “Was it—”

“All over Twitter?” Elora finished for him. “Yeah. The Sun and The Mirror had pictures of—”

“I didn’t want- I don’t want to be, like, in the tabloids,” said Harry quietly.

“Harry,” said Elora, tone softening as she looked at her friend. “I think it’s going to happen if you keep going out with Nick. Especially to Mahiki and places like that. Where celebrities go all the time. It’s the third time—”

“I know,” moaned Harry.

“Maybe talk to Nick,” said Elora with a shrug.
“Yeah,” said Harry, though he wasn’t sure how that conversation would go. Nick would most likely tell him that he would just have to get used to it all because it was part of his new lifestyle, whatever that meant. He’d probably not end up saying anything.

Harry arrived at the studio an hour later. Lou did his makeup and pulled his hair into a bun before Other Harry showed him his first look of the day, already laid out for him in the dressing room.

“Have a good time last night, did you?” came Louis’ voice from the other side of the dressing curtains. Harry wasn’t sure who Louis was talking to until he said again, his head poking between the curtains, “Did you?”

“Did I what?” asked Harry, blinking at the photographer.

“Have a good time? At Mahiki?” said Louis, sounding almost accusatory. He walked into the dressing room. “You make a nice bit of arm candy. I bet Nick can’t wait until the media finds out you’re a model.”

“What?” asked Harry.

“Don’t play dumb, Harry,” said Louis, frustrated. “You’re not dumb.”

“I don’t—”

“I saw the pictures, Harry,” explained Louis. “Leaving Mahiki with Nick again.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “He just walked me out to the car.”

“Hmmm,” Louis grunted, lips pressed together in a tight line. “He made sure the paps saw you together. Made sure it looked like you were leaving together, didn’t he.”

“What?” asked Harry, unsure what Louis was getting at. “Why?”

“Christ, lad,” said Louis. “He’s building it up, yeah.”

The look on Harry’s face made it obvious that Louis had done nothing to clear up Harry’s confusion. “What?” he asked quietly. “Building what up?”

Louis let out a long-suffering sigh. “The paps keep spotting Nick with a beautiful young man and it’s got all the tabloids wondering who Nick’s mystery boyfriend is. And they’ll start to figure it out soon, yeah, because if you think they won’t see that you’re doing product views for Gucci, you’re wrong.” He looked at Harry and continued, voice softening a bit, “Then you’ll be Nick’s up-and-coming model boyfriend—”

“I’m not his boyfriend,” said Harry quietly.

“You know that and I know that and Nick knows that,” said Louis, “but the tabloids don’t. And Nick is using that to make it look like you’re his boyfriend. Without actually committing.”


Louis considered Harry for a moment, lips pressed together as he thought about what he should say—if he should say it—and then nodded, mind made up.

“Right. I’ve never been good at biting me tongue. Get it off me mum, I guess,” he said. “I don’t know if you’re too naive or trusting or sweet or what it is, because I know you’re not stupid, so I’m just going to be blunt. Nick’s using you. Just like he uses all of his famous friends.”
“I’m not famous,” interjected Harry.

“Yet,” said Louis, “but you will be. And Nick knows it. And you’ll be the young Gucci model boyfriend to add to his collection of other beautiful famous people he keeps around to make it look like he’s actually as famous as he plays at being.”

“Nick’s famous,” said Harry, sounding like he was trying to defend the older man.

“He’s a social climber who’s worked his way up quite impressively,” corrected Louis. “He’s a bloody radio show host, Harry.”

Harry looked like he’d been slapped in the face and Louis felt a little bad.

“Finish getting dressed, yeah,” said Louis, voice gentler. “We’ll start shooting in ten.”

“Okay,” whispered Harry, looking down as he slipped his feet into brown leather ankle boots with embroidered dragons running up the sides.

Louis was glad that Nick didn’t show up at the studio; he wondered if Harry had texted him and told him not to come but, after a moment’s consideration, decided Harry would never do something that bold.

They ended early, only doing three looks and wrapping up at around half past one, because Louis had a meeting with Leila and Niall Horan about their upcoming photoshoot for Paul Smith.

“Right, lad,” said Louis when Harry finished changing back into his street clothes. “I’ll walk you out. I’m just going down the hall to Leila’s office.”

Harry gave Louis a shy smile and followed the older lad to the door, waving his goodbyes to Lou and Other Harry.

“Have you got any plans for the weekend?” asked Louis as they walked toward the waiting room that served as the main hub for the casting director’s office and the studios.

“Not-not really,” said Harry. Louis guessed that Harry didn’t really want to tell him that he’d probably just end up doing whatever Nick wanted him to do. “Maybe, um, yoga at the leisure centre on Sunday. And I’ll probably go to the tearoom near my flat that my friend owns.”

“Elora, right?” asked Louis and Harry beamed at him, obviously pleased and maybe a bit surprised that Louis remembered that little fact.

“Yeah,” agreed Harry.

“Louis, mate!” came a voice from the posh reception area.

Louis smirked to himself and turned around. “Niall! Lad! Good to see you.” He reached out and grabbed the sleeve of Harry’s jumper, tugging the taller boy forward, and said, “Harry, this is Niall Horan. Niall, Harry Styles.”

“Nice to meet ya, Harry,” said Niall, extending a hand to Harry.

“It’s, um, it’s,” stuttered Harry, shaking Niall’s hand and blushing, “it’s nice to meet you too. Niall.”

“We’ve just been shooting product views for Gucci’s Cruise 2016 collection,” Louis told Niall.

“Ah, yeh’ve got that right look for Gucci,” said Niall honestly, appraisal professional and courteous.
rather than Nick’s usual lascivious, lust-fueled appreciation. “Could pull off whatever wild, artistic haute couture they give ya, I reckon.” He smiled kindly. “I’m better suited to the more classic fashion. Paul Smith and Oliver Spencer.”

“Thank- thank you,” said Harry, blush deepening at Niall’s words.

“Harry’s got a short day today,” said Louis, clearly amused by the models’ interaction—and Harry’s reaction—smirk still on his face. “Should get to our meeting, yeah?” he added, looking at Niall.

“Louis Tomlinson, on time?” gasped Niall, teasing the photographer and sending a sly wink toward Harry.

“Ah, piss off,” said Louis as he watched Harry bite back a laugh. “Have a good weekend, lad,” he told Harry, “and I’ll see you on Monday morning, yeah?”

Harry nodded.

“See you around, Harry,” said Niall, giving a quick wave to the taller model as he turned to follow Louis to Leila’s office.

The meeting with Leila was short, just a brief chat about the collection Niall would be modeling and an overview of the shoot’s outline that Harry Lambert, the shoot’s artistic director Josie, and Louis had put together.

“Niall, lad,” said Louis as the two men were leaving Leila’s office a bit later. “Niall, I’ve got a favour to ask you.”

Niall rolled his eyes good-naturedly and asked, “What do you need, mate?”

“No,” said Louis, genuine. “Really just a favour.”

“What is it?” asked Niall, brows furrowed slightly.

“It’s Harry. Styles,” Louis told him. “He’s been in London for a few months now and he hasn’t really made any friends. He’s a bit of an introvert and—”

“Isn’t he always out with Nick Grimshaw though?” wondered Niall. “And that whole lot?”

“Yeah,” agreed Louis, “but Nick’s not- I don’t think Nick’s in it for the friendship.” He caught the confusion on Niall’s face. “I think Nick’s more interested in what he can get out of a relationship with Harry. Like, it would only improve his... social life or something if he’s dating the new, young Gucci model.”

“So what? You want me to ask him out? On a date?”

“It doesn’t have to be- Not a date,” said Louis. “Just invite him to hang out. Something lowkey. So he can see that he doesn’t have to change his whole lifestyle just because he’s a model.”

“Why would he think he’s got to change his lifestyle now he’s a model?” asked Niall curiously.

“Because Nick keeps telling him he needs to,” answered Louis dryly. “‘You should start spending time with people who fit into your new lifestyle. Beautiful people. Not assistant librarians and your Scrabble club,’” said Louis in a near-perfect yet unflattering imitation of Nick’s accent.

“He belongs to a Scrabble club?”
“Yes,” said Louis. “And he likes it a lot.” He gave Niall a look as if daring him to ridicule Harry’s hobby as Nick did so frequently.

“I love Scrabble,” Niall told Louis. “I’m absolute shite at it though.”

“Invite him over for a Scrabble night or something,” suggested Louis.

“If he’s dating Nick Grimshaw, I don’t want to, like, step on any toes or make Harry feel uncomfortable or anything,” Niall told the photographer.

“They’re not really dating,” Louis corrected Niall. “Nick would never make that commitment.”

“Still, mate…”

“Just think about it?”

“Yeah, okay,” the model told him.

Louis hoped that Niall would consider inviting Harry to hang out; just the Scrabble comment had convinced him that Niall and Harry would make excellent friends.

By Sunday evening, Louis had decided to mention Niall—to mention the possibility of a friendship with Niall—to Harry. If he hadn’t already been sure that Harry would enjoy Niall’s kind, easy-going personality and companionship very much, the numerous pictures of Harry spotted out with Nick that appeared all over Twitter and half of Britain’s celebrity gossip websites on Saturday morning and again on Sunday morning would have made up his mind. And he felt Niall’s promise to at least consider inviting Harry to hang out was good enough to go on for now.

“G’morning,” he called as he walked into the studio on Monday morning, a paper cup of milky tea in his hand and a pair of Rayban aviators pushed up into his messy hair. “Morning, Harry,” he said, sticking his head into the dressing room where Lou was doing Harry’s makeup. “I’d ask how your weekend was but I know what you did and I don’t care to hear about it.”

Lou gave the photographer an admonishing look and Harry blinked back his surprise. “Good morning,” he finally said and then, because he was polite, asked, “How was your weekend?”

“It was nice and quiet,” said Louis pointedly. “You’d have liked it. No paparazzi following me around taking my picture even though I’d rather they didn’t.”

“Yeah,” said Harry quietly.

“We’ll start in twenty,” Louis told Harry, taking a sip of his tea. “We’ve got four looks to shoot today. You still going to Pilates tonight?”

Harry’s mouth dropped in surprise, eyes wide. “You still- You remember about Pilates?”

Louis’ heart hurt at the realization that Harry was shocked that someone remembered a little detail about him, something he’d only mentioned once or twice.

“Of course I do,” he answered. “Friends remember things about people they really care about,” he added, emphasis on the word friends. “If it matters to you, it matters to me. Now, yes or no? Pilates?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Yeah. If- if we’re done in time.”

“We’ll be done in time,” Louis assured him with a smile.
The morning passed quickly, the first two looks photographed by lunchtime. There were no interruptions, though Louis wasn’t sure if that was because Nick hadn’t stopped by the studio at all or if he had and was told by Leila’s secretary in the main reception area that the shoot was closed to anyone without cast or crew identification cards like Louis had asked her to do.

As they ate their lunch—a large stack of sandwiches and a big tossed salad that had been brought in by catering—Louis watched Harry for a few moments.

“Hey, Harry,” he said, swallowing his bite of ham sandwich. Harry looked over to him, eyes wide, and Louis continued. “I think you’d really like Niall.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “He seemed nice.”

“He is,” agreed Louis. “You should hang out sometime. I could give you his number.”

“Oh.” Harry put his sandwich down and looked at Louis, eyes wide. “Um, I don’t know- I don’t know about that.”

“I just think you two would be good friends,” said Louis with a shrug, hoping he was pulling off innocence. “He likes Scrabble and he’s, like, really into music too.”

“Thanks for thinking of me,” said Harry, fingers of one hand playing with the rings on the other. “But I’ve got, you know, I’ve got friends.”

“Yeah. Right.” Louis tried his hardest to prevent the sarcasm that threatened to leak into his words. “It doesn’t hurt to have a few more who share your interests though.”

“I know.” Harry told him. “Just… Nick might not like it. He might think that I don’t, like, that I don’t think he’s enough. I don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

“Harry, how many times a day does Nick hurt your feelings?” asked Louis, gentle but curious.

Harry looked uncomfortable, Louis’ question hitting a little too close to home. “He doesn’t mean it,” said Harry a bit uncertainly.

“Oh. No.” Louis shook his head, unable to avoid the sarcasm this time. “Of course not.” Louis studied Harry, noting what seemed to be a look of acceptance and resignation that painted his features—Louis wondered if Harry was maybe realising there was some truth to his words—and added, “Niall wouldn’t hurt your feelings. If you wanted a friend who respects your hobbies and the things you like and, like, how you choose to live your life. Instead of telling you how you should live your life.”

“I- I have friends,” said Harry again. He sighed quietly. “I just want Nick to like me. I want- I want to be his boyfriend.”

Louis looked at Harry, his face softening at the almost forlorn expression on the boy’s face and tone in his voice. He bit back the question that threatened to tumble from his tongue—“Why?”—and exhaled, long and quiet. “Okay, Harry.” He chewed on his lip for a moment and then told Harry, “Ten more minutes, yeah, and then we’ll start back up. Finish so you can get to Pilates.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, Louis.” He finished his sandwich, placing his plate on the tray with the rest of the crew’s dirty china and flatware, and went to find Lou and Other Harry.

He had a hard time focusing for the rest of the day, thoughts returning to everything Louis had said to him at lunch—and the things he hadn’t said but made Harry think—and realised he wasn’t sure
what he would have said if Louis had asked him why he wanted to be Nick’s boyfriend.

He supposed he just really liked feeling like Nick couldn’t get enough of him, like he wanted Harry for himself. And though the idea of having a friend who shared some of his interests sounded nice, he didn’t think Nick would like sharing him. He knew that probably wasn’t a good thing—he could only imagine how Louis would respond to that—but he kind of liked feeling so wanted.

Finally, the last look of the day modelled and photographed to Louis’ satisfaction, the photographer let Harry go.

“Go enjoy Pilates, Harry,” Louis told him with a smile. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yeah, thanks, Louis,” said Harry. He waved his goodbyes to everyone and headed out of the studio and to the street.

His phone rang as he boarded the train back to Sutton. He looked at the screen, hesitant to answer because he really just wanted to go to Pilates.

He forced a smile onto his face, knowing Nick couldn’t see it but hoping it would make him sound a bit happier than he felt to be talking to the older man. “Hi, Nick,” he said after finally accepting the call.

“Hi, love!” said Nick. “How was your day?”

Harry told Nick about the looks they’d shot, leaving out any mention of Louis and nearly everything he had said to Harry that was unrelated to work.

“We’re going out for dinner,” said Nick a bit later, a statement rather than an invitation. “There’s a new wine bar that’s just opened in Bethnal Green and I’m dying to take you there.”

“Oh,” said Harry. He was surprised; Harry had told Nick that he liked wine so he assumed—hoped, maybe—that was why he was dying to take him there. The mere thought that Nick remembered a little thing like his love for wine threw him off for a second. “That’s- that’s really thoughtful, Nick. But, um, but I’m going to Pilates tonight.”

There was silence for a moment and Harry held his breath. “But you went to yoga last night,” Nick said, the pout obvious in his voice.

“Yes,” agreed Harry. “And, um,” he said, closing his eyes and thinking of both Louis and Elora, “and tonight’s Pilates.”

“Harry.” Nick sounded disappointed and Harry couldn’t help but feel he’d hurt Nick’s feelings. “Come out with me.”

Something Louis had said earlier crossed Harry’s mind—“If it matters to you, it matters to me.”—and thought that it might be nice to have a friend who respected the things he liked to do and didn’t try to stop him from doing them.

“I’m sorry, Nick,” he said, feeling reckless and nervous and bold and terribly mean, “but I’d really like to go to Pilates tonight. I’ve already signed up and- and paid for the class and I’m just… I’ve been looking forward to it all day.” He sighed.

There was silence again and then Nick said, voice a bit less friendly and flirty than it had been, “All right, Harry. I hope you enjoy Pilates.”
“Thanks, Nick,” said Harry quietly, feeling badly for upsetting the man. “I- I will.”

“Text me later and let me know how class went,” said Nick. “I want my boy to be happy.”

Harry was confused, considering Nick’s words as he got off the train in Sutton and began the walk back to his flat. Nick said he wanted Harry to be happy but he didn’t like it when Harry did things that made him happy unless he was involved.

Maybe it was just because Nick wanted to be the one to make Harry happy. Maybe he liked feeling that he was wanted, needed, appreciated.

Harry understood that feeling.
seems now so long

Harry walked down Old Bond Street, passing Alexander McQueen and Valentino on his way to Leila’s office.

The casting director had called him a few days earlier; she was beginning to cast and hold auditions for London Fashion Week and had learnt that Harry had taken her advice and had started model training at London Model Academy. Gucci wasn’t doing a runway show at this year’s Autumn Week, she’d told him, but she was casting for Alexander McQueen’s show and thought he would do quite well on their runway.

Harry had become quite well acquainted with the offices and small studios above Gucci’s storefront. After his shoot for product views for Gucci’s website in late June, Harry had done a small shoot for Yves Saint Laurent, who used studio space in the same building.

As he entered the reception area, his phone dinged. He pulled it out of his pocket and found a text from Nick.

Good luck babe! I know you’ll get it!

Thanks Nick! xx

He walked to the receptionist, tucking his phone back in his pocket. “Hi,” he said to the young woman at the desk, giving her a friendly smile. “I’m here- I’ve got an audition with Leila. At two o’clock.”

“Of course, Mr Styles.” She smiled back. “Leila’s just down in Studio 2. She’ll be out to get you in a few minutes.”

“Thank you.” Harry took a seat on one of the leather sofas and pulled his phone back out.

No hugs? read the newest message from Nick.

Harry’s lips quirked into a pleased little smile. Aren’t kisses better? he asked his sort-of boyfriend.

Harry had accepted that Nick was sort of his boyfriend. They spent nearly all of their time together now, going out for dinner and drinks and to parties and clubs and then going back to Nick’s flat to cuddle and make out. More recently—Harry blushed at the thought—other more intimate activities had been added to their repertoire. Nick was possessive, almost dominant, and Harry really liked it because, while he knew Nick would most likely never really be his boyfriend, the way Nick kissed him and touched him and made love to him made him feel like he belonged to Nick.

He didn’t think about how maybe Nick didn’t really belong to him.

Nick’s text brought him out of his thoughts. I’m a greedy old man and I always want more from my boy ;)

Fine! responded Harry. XOXOXOXO

That’s better!

“Hello, Harry!” The model looked up from his phone and found Leila approaching him.

“Leila!” said Harry, shoving his phone into his pocket and standing to greet the woman. “I’m so
happy to see you!”

“And I’m happy to see you! Glad you could make it,” she said with a grin, shaking Harry’s hand. “I was pleased to hear you’d taken my advice.”

“It was- it was good advice,” Harry told her, bashful. “I’ve been learning a lot. And not- not just about the runway.”

“Good.” She nodded her approval. “It’s wonderful to see new models making an effort to further their careers and not just expecting work to come to them because of one good shoot.”

Leila led Harry to a small studio he’d never been in, a low catwalk running down the length of the room with mirrors lining one wall and a video camera set on a tripod near where she stood at the end of the catwalk. Leila had Harry walk the runway and strike different poses, modelling the Alexander McQueen couture that he wasn’t wearing yet but, if all went well, he would be in a few weeks.

“All right, Harry,” she said after about a half hour of directing Harry up and down the catwalk. “I’m going to send your audition video to Barbara—”

“Barbara?”

“Barbara’s another casting director and we work together quite often on bigger projects,” Leila explained. “She’s directing McQueen’s show so the decision is ultimately up to her but I’m going to strongly suggest she hire you. Your audition was excellent.”

Harry beamed. “Thank you so much, Leila. I’m so- This would be so exciting!”

“You’re welcome, Harry.” She gave him a gentle smile. “It’s always such a pleasure to see you. I imagine I’ll hear back from Barbara by the end of the day and I’ll get in touch with you in the next day or two.”

Despite Leila’s encouraging words and promise to recommend him to Barbara, Harry was still surprised to get a phone call from Leila the next afternoon telling him that he’d got a spot on Alexander McQueen’s runway.

His mother was so overcome with emotion when he called her to tell her the news that she’d cried, telling him how proud she was and promising that she would come down to London to see him.

Elora was beside herself with excitement, drawing him into a tight hug and nearly squealing with joy. Harry giggled and blushed, happy that she was so proud of him.

Even more, though, he was happy that she still cared about him enough to get so excited. He’d been worried that she had become indifferent toward him, almost cool and unwelcoming whenever he’d seen her over the last few months, and understandably so.

Since his relationship with Nick had developed, he’d found himself spending less and less time at Black Treacle visiting with Elora and chatting with her for hours on end. Nick seemed to think that if Harry was going to spend a lot of time hanging around a cafe, it should be a posh place in Kensington or Notting Hill where people better suited to his new lifestyle—Harry still wasn’t quite sure what that meant—got their lattes and cappuccinos. He found those cafes overpriced, filled with less-than-friendly staff, and didn’t think their pastries and tea were half as good as Elora’s. He’d not told Nick that.

But her overjoyed eagerness to share a chocolate croissant and pot of tea while he told her all about his audition and the upcoming job set his mind at ease.
Louis’ invitation for celebratory burgers and beer at the local pub down the street from Liam’s flat was vetoed by Nick.

“Harry, babe,” Nick said after Harry told him his good news and mentioned Louis’ offer, “we’re going for drinks tonight. Just you and me. I’ve got to shower my boy with the praise and attention he deserves. We’ve got to do it proper!”

“You could- I know you don’t like Louis and, I mean, Louis doesn’t like you but maybe you could try to get along for one night,” said Harry, trying to convince his sort-of boyfriend to celebrate with a more lowkey dinner. “For me?”

“Harry, this type of celebration deserves more than burgers at some hole-in-the-wall pub,” said Nick, derision and maybe a hint of contempt in his voice.

It was after dinner at Alain Ducasse in Mayfair—probably the fanciest restaurant to which Harry had ever been—that Harry found himself cuddled under the duvet in Nick’s bed, a little drunk and freshly fucked. He felt guilty for wishing he’d just gone for burgers with Louis and Liam because Nick had treated him to what was almost certainly the most expensive meal Harry ever had eaten.

Harry wasn’t sure how the paparazzi always seemed to find Nick but they did and he was sure his face would be all over Twitter and the tabloids the next morning.

Rehearsals for London Fashion Week began the following Monday. Harry was filled with so much nervous excitement that he felt he was going to vibrate out of his skin.

He stopped at Black Treacle for a cup of chamomile-lavender tea, sweetened with a spoonful of acacia honey that Elora assured him would be very relaxing, and an apricot jam-filled brioche doughnut.

“You’ll do wonderfully, Harry,” she said quietly, giving his hand a light squeeze. “You always do.”

“Thanks, El.” Harry gave his friend a lopsided smile and took a sip of his tea.

“Now there’s a good lad.” She smiled back. “Just drink your tea and keep focused.”

Harry found his nerves settled as the days passed and, by the fourth day of rehearsal, he felt much more confident.

“Leila was right,” Barbara told him while he stood in wardrobe three days before the show, the tailor pinning the hems on a pair of trousers he would be wearing on the runway. “You’ve got a natural talent for all of this. I’d never have known this was your first time on the runway if she hadn’t told me.”

“Oh. Um, thank you,” said Harry shyly. “That’s- that’s very encouraging to hear. I’m just- I’m just trying to do my best. Work hard and, um, learn something new every day.”

“That’s the attitude Leila liked so much,” said Barbara with a smile. “Don’t see it much, now. Models seem to expect to just have work handed to them.”

“Leila suggested I go- that I do some training,” Harry said. He shrugged. “I’m from a small town and everyone- everybody works hard there. It’s just… what you do.”

“That will get you far in this industry, Harry.”

Harry smiled, keeping her words in mind and telling Elora everything the director had said when he
stopped by Black Treacle for a scone and tea on his way to the last day of rehearsal.

“Nervous for Saturday?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Harry honestly. “But my mum’s coming down tomorrow and we’ll probably just watch some movies and maybe have a bottle of wine.”

“That’ll be nice,” said Elora. “Any plans for tonight?”

“Nick wants me to go to his,” Harry told her. “He said he hasn’t seen me enough lately. Because I’ve been busy with rehearsals and wardrobe fittings.” He blushed and looked away from his friend and down toward his scone, sheepish and bashful. “So I’ll probably- I’ll probably spend the night at his flat.”

Elora studied him for a moment. “What’s up for tomorrow? What happens on the first day of London Fashion Week?”

“There aren’t any runway shows until, um, until Saturday but they have, like, all kinds of lectures and presentations.”

“Anything you’re going to?” she asked.

“I don’t- I didn’t get passes or anything so probably not,” Harry told her. “You have to request tickets to events and I wasn’t- I didn’t know how to request them.”

“Surely Nick knows how to get tickets,” said Elora.

“Yeah, he probably does,” said Harry, sounding as though the thought hadn’t even occurred to him. He pouted. “I think it’s too late now, though.”

“Maybe you could ask him.”

Harry shrugged.

Later that evening, as he was curled into Nick’s side watching some movie he hadn’t been interested in at all but that Nick had insisted he would love, he asked Nick if he had tickets to any Fashion Week events.

“Yes,” said Nick. “Of course I’m going to your show, love.” Harry blushed and Nick mentioned a few more shows and presentations he was planning to attend. “How about you?”

“Oh,” said Harry, blinking and suddenly feeling very stupid. “I didn’t- I don’t have any tickets. I didn’t know how to get them.”

Nick laughed and though Harry thought he didn’t intend it to be harsh or mean, he felt Nick was laughing at his stupidity or naivety or perhaps both.

“Simon probably has five or six passes to each event,” explained Nick. “All the agencies and designers and big press outlets get a few tickets to each event to give to whoever wants them. BBC always gets about four or five per so I get mine through work.”

“Oh,” said Harry again, feeling even more stupid that he hadn’t thought to ask his manager.

“You should call him up tomorrow.”

Harry woke the next morning in Nick’s big empty bed, Nick long gone to work, with his phone
ringing somewhere beside his head. He searched around for a moment before finding it under a pillow. He looked at the screen and was slightly surprised to see Louis’ name.

He cleared his throat and then swiped to accept the call. “Hi, Louis,” he said.

“Hey, Haz,” came Louis’ voice over the line. “What are you up to today?”

“Um,” said Harry, sitting up in the bed and licking his lips, “um, nothing. I mean, um, my mum’s coming down from Holmes Chapel later today but—”

“What time?”

“What time?” asked Harry, sleepy brain still trying to catch up to Louis.

“What time is your mum coming?”

Harry yawned. “She’s planning to get to Sutton by half seven.”

“Right,” said Louis. “You’re coming with me then.”

“What?”

“Liam and I both got press passes to Simon Homes’ presentation this afternoon,” explained Louis, “but Liam can’t come. Thought you might like it. Should be interesting.”

Harry knew he wasn’t expected to know every person in the fashion industry and was sure that Louis wouldn’t think any less of him if he said he didn’t know who Simon Homes was—he could, however, imagine Nick laughing and telling him that Simon Homes was only one of the most influential people in fashion at the moment—but he didn’t want to admit it.

“Okay,” he finally agreed. He supposed he would find out who Simon Homes was soon enough. “Um, what time is the presentation? And where?”

“It’s at one o’clock,” Louis told him. “They close the doors ten minutes early so don’t be late.”

“Bit ironic for you to be telling me that,” laughed Harry.

“Oh, sod off,” said Louis, chuckling too. “I’ll text you the address. Probably will take you an hour twenty from Sutton.”

“Shit,” hissed Harry, looking at the clock on Nick’s nightstand. “I’ve got to go, Lou.”

“Harry?”

“I’ve got to go home and change,” Harry told him.

Louis groaned. “You’re at Nick’s.”

“Yeah, and it takes forever to get to Sutton,” said Harry. “I’ll- I’ve got to go, Louis. I’ll see you soon.”

Harry rushed home, arriving at his flat at just after eleven o’clock. While he scrubbed his lavender shampoo through his hair, he realised he wasn’t sure what he should wear to the presentation. He assumed the jeans and faded, holey old Rolling Stones shirt he’d worn to Nick’s wouldn’t be appropriate so he called Louis to ask while he filled Butterscotch’s bowls with food and water and combed his hair.
After being assured by Louis that black skinny jeans and a nice shirt would be fine, Harry threw on a pair of clean jeans and a leopard print jumper. He slipped his feet into his new black leather boots—they looked smart but not too overdressed, he thought—and grabbed a black overcoat from the coat rack on his way out the door.

He arrived at the Ambika Show Space at the University of Westminster in Marleybone at 12:44, rushing to the studio’s door and finding Louis waiting for him.

“You made it,” said Louis.

“Yeah. Hi, Lou,” said Harry, breath rough from the fast pace he’d set from the Baker Street Station. “I’ve never seen you in anything other than trackie bottoms, I don’t think. Maybe jeans once,” he added, taking in Louis’ outfit.

“Oh, ha ha,” said Louis, tone implying he didn’t find Harry’s statement funny at all. “Nick’s rubbing off on you. In more ways than—”

“No,” said Harry sharply, surprising even himself. “I’m not- I didn’t mean it in a bad way. I just meant… you look nice. Honestly.”

Louis blinked. “Well, thanks, lad.” He gestured toward the stairs that led down to the underground studio. “Should find seats.”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry, following Louis down the steps to the rows of chairs.

“Does he ever go to your place?” he asked suddenly, stopping at the bottom of the staircase.

“What?” wondered Harry, thrown by Louis’ non sequitur.

“Does Nick ever go to your place?” he asked again, turning to look at the model.

“He says it’s too far,” Harry told him, voice quiet and tinged with melancholy.

“It’s the same distance for you,” Louis pointed out. “Why’s it fair you’ve got to make the trip and he doesn’t?”

Harry didn’t have an answer to that question so, hoping it would be enough for Louis—he knew it wouldn’t be—he said, “He’s allergic to cats too.”

Louis snorted in disbelief or disgust, or maybe both, and started walking again. “Niall!” he said happily as they neared the rows of chairs. Harry looked over to see the blonde model sitting in a seat toward the front of the studio.

“Hey, Lou!” called Niall, waving at the photographer. “Oh! Hi, Harry!” He stood as the two men got closer and extended a hand to Harry, shaking Harry’s firmly and saying, “Good to see you!”

“Hi, Niall,” said Harry, blushing. Niall’s hand was big and warm and he really liked how his own fit in it. “Um, hi. It’s- it’s nice to see you too.” He swallowed and took his hand out of Niall’s. “You’re here for the presentation too, then?” he asked and immediately wished he could take back his words. Of course he’s here for the presentation, thought Harry. He waited for Niall to chuckle, to laugh at his stupidity.

“Yeah,” said Niall agreeably, nodding. “Leila gave me the pass and she didn’t officially tell me I had to come but she said something like, ‘Simon’s the first-ever Creative Director for Paul Smith and he’s responsible for the men’s ready-to-wear so it might be nice if you went.’” He chuckled and said,
“Figured that was her way of unofficially telling me I had to come.” He shrugged. “The man was the one to give her the final ‘yes’ to bring me on as the new face of the label so I s’pose I owe it to him. Might be good to hear him talk about, you know, everything I’m representing.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, following Niall and Louis’ lead and sitting down in a chair. “I suppose- Yeah, that’s probably good.”

He was glad Niall hadn’t laughed at his silly question, hadn’t treated Harry like he was a stupid child who should have known that of course Niall was here for a presentation about the company he represented. And if he had suspected that Harry didn’t know who Simon Homes was or what the presentation was about, he certainly hadn’t let on.

The presentation started and Harry found it interesting, listening to Simon Homes talk about the creative direction in which he hoped to lead Paul Smith. He showed numerous designs in various stages of the creative process, introducing some of the new young designers he had hired since his appointment as Creative Director.

When the presentation was over and the three men made their way out of the studio, Louis mentioned that he was meeting Liam for lunch.

“Would you lads like to join us?” he asked both Harry and Niall. “It’s nothing fancy, just burgers and chips.”

“All right, then,” said Niall with a jovial smile. “Twisted me arm. As long as I can have a cheeky pint.”

“Yeah, yeah, Irish,” said Louis. “You can have your pint. How about you, Harry?”

Harry chewed his lip, looking nervous and apologetic. “Thanks for the- Thanks for inviting me, Louis,” he began, “but, um, but Nick wants to take me out before I go back to Sutton to meet my mum. He says- he says he won’t get to see me enough over the next week and he just—”

“S’pose he could join us,” offered Niall, turning the same jovial smile in Harry’s direction.

Harry gave an apologetic little smile and said, awkward and uncomfortable, “I think he just wants it to be, um, he just wants it to be us.” He grimaced, feeling quite guilty and truly sorry.

“Another time, then,” said Niall.

Harry nodded, though he wasn’t really sure Nick would like him going out with Niall or even Louis and Liam. He only just tolerated book club, yoga, Pilates, and Scrabble nights and still didn’t think Harry should spend time at Black Treacle with Elora.

“Maybe, yeah,” he said instead. “I’d better- I’d better go. Nick’s, um, he’s waiting for me.”

“Wouldn’t want to keep him waiting,” said Louis bitingly.

Harry ducked his head before looking back up to Niall and Louis. Without meeting their eyes, he said quietly, “Bye. Have a nice- have a nice lunch.” He gave a stilted little wave and walked away.

“Goodbye, Harry,” said Niall, watching the other model shrewdly and taking in the discomfort that shrouded the boy. He realised he felt uneasy, disconcerted himself by Harry’s reaction to the mention of his boyfriend; it almost seemed Harry didn’t really want to go to meet up with Nick and just that thought raised concern for him.
“Gone off like a good little lovesick puppy to let Nick use him to make it into *The Sun* with his model boyfriend tomorrow,” said Louis acidly. “And shag him stiff before he sends him back home to see his mum.”

Niall turned to Louis, brows furrowed. “What d’ya mean?”

“Nick only cares about Harry because he’s pretty and young and trusting,” Louis explained. “He’s not interested in Harry’s life unless it involves him. Don’t think he actually wants Harry to have a life that doesn’t completely involve him.”

“That’s shitty,” said Niall, frowning. “Doesn’t really sound like a... healthy relationship, does it?”

“Nah, o’ course it’s not,” agreed Louis, shaking his head.

“Well, why’s Harry stick around then?”

Louis sighed and Niall could see for the first time just how upset he was by the whole situation. “He thinks the sun shines out of Grimshaw’s arse for some fucking reason.”

“Does he love him?” Niall asked tentatively.

Louis sighed again and Niall noticed that he looked almost defeated. “I think so. I don’t know.” He shook his head and added, “I hope not. Because Grimshaw sure as shit doesn’t love him.”

Neither man spoke for a few moments.

“Right, lad,” said Niall finally, hoping to ease some of the pained tension surrounding them. “Let’s get that burger. And I believe I was told I could have a pint.”

Louis smiled. “Yeah. Li’s probably waiting.”

As they turned onto Baker Street, Louis looked at Niall. “You got any plans for tomorrow?”

“There are a few presentations I’m thinking I might check out,” said Niall. “The Menswear exhibit at Central Saint Martins should be interesting.”

“I’m doing a behind-the-scenes shoot at the McQueen show tomorrow,” Louis told him. “Want to join me? They gave me a VIP seat but I’ll be shooting during the show so it’ll just go to waste.”

“Sure,” said Niall with a shrug. “Behind-the-scenes and a VIP seat. Sounds all right.”

Niall arrived at the Store Studios at half past four the next day and easily found Louis outside the main entrance, leaning against a phone box and smoking a cigarette.

“Nasty habit,” said Niall by way of a greeting.

“Ah, sod off.” Louis stuck the cigarette between his lips and reached down to grab the photography kit at his feet. He swung it over his shoulder and pulled the cigarette from his mouth, turning his face away from Niall and exhaling the smoke. “Ready?”

“Yeah, mate,” said Niall, watching as Louis dropped his cigarette butt to the ground and stubbed it out with the toe of his shoe. “Littering too, I see,” he teased.

Louis glared and then said, “Take this before I change my mind.” He pulled one of the VIP Press Pass lanyards over his neck and handed it to Niall. “Liam was supposed to come but he can’t make it.”
“Is that what the behind-the-scenes shoot is for?” asked Niall, taking the lanyard and slipping it over his head. “Sue?”

“Yup,” agreed Louis, turning and leading Niall through the main entrance and in the direction of the BFC Show Space. “Gaga’s supposed to be here today.”

“Like, Lady Gaga?” asked Niall, surprised.

“What other Gagas do you know?” Louis showed his Press badge to the security guard at the door to the backstage area and Niall followed his lead, finding himself ushered into the green room.

Niall helped himself to a bottle of San Pellegrino while Louis opened up his camera kit, pulling out a small camera and fiddling with the lense for a minute.

“Right,” he said, hanging that camera on his neck and then taking a second slightly larger camera from the kit and hanging that from his neck too. “I’m doing mostly candids, everyone getting dressed and sitting in hair and makeup and all that. Not too much posing. You can follow me around if you want.”

Niall nodded and shot Louis a grin. “I’ll be your scout. Help you find Lady Gaga.”

“You do that.”

Niall followed Louis, interested to see what happened behind the scenes of a fashion show. He’d only done print work since he’d started modelling, not runway shows, so he’d never seen the smooth, organised chaos of the backstage. It wasn’t too different from being backstage before and during a play or concert, though, and Niall had done both of those many times.

“Oh! Louis!” he exclaimed a bit later, looking through the open door to a dressing room opposite the room the photographer was about to enter. There was a woman wearing a dress made from what appeared to be translucent red vinyl sitting in a makeup chair, a short blond wig being fitted on her head. “I think I found”—he turned to find his friend and collided with something hard—“Oof.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Are you okay?” came a concerned voice and the blonde turned a bit more, eyes landing on Harry. “Niall?”

“Oh. Harry!” said Niall, staring at the shirtless man in front of him. He blinked. “You have a lot of tattoos.”

“Y-yeah,” agreed Harry, blushing and looking down briefly at the numerous tattoos that covered his arms and torso. “Are you all right?”

“O’ course, yeah,” said Niall with a nod. He knew he was staring, knew he’d been looking at Harry’s very fit torso for too long, but he couldn’t help it. After a pause, he finally forced himself to look away and asked, “Are you walking today?”

“Um, yes.” If Harry had noticed that Niall had been staring, he didn’t seem bothered by it. “It’s my first- it’s my first runway show. I’m a little”—he exhaled and huffed out a nervous little laugh—“I’m really nervous.”

Niall gave him a comforting smile. “You’ll be great, I’m sure.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, blushing and looking down at a tattoo on his left arm—it looked like a naked mermaid and Niall wondered why he had a tattoo of a naked mermaid—before glancing back up to Niall. “What are you- Why are you here? Backstage, I mean.”
“Louis invited me,” answered Niall, deciding to ask Harry about the mermaid tattoo another time. “He’s doing a behind-the-scenes shoot for Liam’s magazine.” He held up the VIP badge that hung around his neck and showed Harry. “He gave me Liam’s Press Pass because—”

“Liam couldn’t make it,” Harry finished for him, face breaking out into a bashful amused smile.

“Yeah,” agreed Niall, a look of confusion on his face. “How’d you know?”

“He told me- When he asked me to go to the presentation yesterday, he said he, um, he and Liam both had press passes but Liam couldn’t make it.”

Niall laughed, bright and unrestrained. “That shit set us up! He’s been on me for two months telling me we should hang out.”

“Me too,” said Harry with a sweet laugh.

“Neither of you dickheads will listen to me, though,” came Louis’ voice from behind them, amusement and frustration lacing together in his tone. “Don’t know why because you’d be best friends. Niall’s the only person I can think of who would laugh at all of your weird puns and dad jokes,” he told Harry before turning to Niall and adding, “And nobody would… appreciate your knowledge of random music trivia as much as Harry would.”

“I’ve heard you like Scrabble,” said Niall, an eyebrow raised as he considered Harry. Maybe Louis was right, he thought, and he and Harry would make good friends.

“Yeah.” Harry nodded enthusiastically, eyes lighting up. “I go to the Scrabble club at my library.”

“I think I’ve got a Scrabble set round my flat somewhere,” Niall told him. He shrugged and shot Harry a crooked grin. “If you don’t mind playing with a set that’s almost certainly missing a few letters.”

“Oh,” said Harry slowly, understanding seeming to dawn on him and a flicker of something Niall couldn’t identify crossed his face. “Um, that might- that might be a challenge. I’d better- I’ll probably stick with the sets at the library.” He gave Niall a sad, apologetic half-smile. He looked behind himself a bit awkwardly and then, turning back to Niall with his eyes on the ground, said, “I should get back to, um, back to wardrobe. Other Harry’s probably—”

“Yeah. Right.” Niall nodded vigorously. “O’ course.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and said, hoping the hurt he felt wasn’t bleeding into his voice, “I should probably find my seat soon anyway.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later,” said Harry, giving a stilted wave and turning away from the two lads. “Bye, Louis. Bye, Niall.”


Niall supposed Louis was right, though the thought didn’t make him feel any better. It dulled the hurt of rejection but still twisted at his heart a bit.

He was led to his seat by an usher—he guessed it was an eager fashion student from Central Saint Martins who had volunteered for a chance to see the McQueen show—and found himself seated next to none other than Nick Grimshaw.

Niall had always been one to chat easily with people, whether he’d known them for years or had only just met them, but he found himself at a loss for words. He’d never met Nick before and while
that normally wouldn’t have stopped him from introducing himself and talking with him a bit while they waited for the show to start, he found he didn’t really want to talk to Nick. Everything he’d seen from Harry’s behaviour and heard from Louis about the man rubbed him entirely the wrong way.

So he sat and waited, looking through the glossy program the usher had given him.

“You’re Niall Horan, aren’t you?”

Niall looked up from the program and turned to the lad. “Yeah,” he said. “Nick Grimshaw, right?”

Nick nodded. “Do you know any of the models?”

“No,” said Niall because he didn’t want to say anything that might cause Harry any grief from his jealous, controlling sort-of boyfriend. “You?”


“Oh,” said Niall, playing dumb. “That’s nice you’ve come to support him today, then.”

“Well, our relationship’s evolved a bit more since then,” said Nick, cocky and more than a little suggestive. “Let’s just say I’ve seen him on his knees in various states of undress many times. Pretty as a picture.”

Niall was disgusted. He didn’t know how to respond so he chose not to say anything.

He felt certain, however, that Louis was right. The only reason Nick had to mention that he had a sexual relationship with Harry was to further establish that they didn’t simply have a platonic relationship; he wanted to make sure that everyone knew he was fucking the hot new upcoming model.

Niall went back to his program and was relieved when he saw Louis slip out a stageside door, two cameras around his neck and a third in his hands, a few minutes later. Sarah Burton made her way to the end of the runway a few moments after and began the show, talking about the collection and the dedication and hard work of all of the designers, seamstresses and tailors, models, and creative staff who had made it possible.

The models began to walk after her speech, womenswear presented first and then mens.

Harry modelled four outfits. Nothing in his walk, facial expressions, or body language hinted that this was his first fashion show. Niall couldn’t help but feel proud as he watched the young man—a young man who had seemed, every time Niall had met him, self-conscious and unconfident and nervous—walk down the catwalk with the easy airiness of the most practiced professional model.

“God,” came Nick’s voice from beside him as Harry came down the runway, wearing a pair of loose black and white tuxedo pants with white leather loafers and a white waistcoat, revealing his bare arms and part of his chest. “Look at his ugly tattoos.”

Niall was certainly looking, though he didn’t find them ugly.

“I think they’re unique,” said Niall, feeling rather insulted for Harry because his sort-of boyfriend was ridiculing his tattoos. “Not ugly.”

“Ah. Unique.”
As soon as the show was over, Niall stood from his seat and moved to the stageside door he’d seen Louis disappear back through moments before, VIP Press Pass still hanging from his neck.

He found Louis easily, sitting on the edge of one of the sofas in the green room and placing his cameras back into his kit.

“Saw Nick out there,” he said. Louis looked up from his equipment.

“Yeah?” asked Louis. “Didn’t try to collect you, did he?”


“Did he try to collect you?” said Louis again, words slow. “Add you to his list of beautiful celebrity friends.”

“No. Probably don’t fit his lifestyle,” said Niall with a wry chuckle. “He said about a dozen words to me and I don’t think I like him very much.”

“Attaboy,” said Louis, grinning and looking proud. “What’d he say?”

Niall told Louis what Nick had said—the mention of the evolution of Nick and Harry’s relationship, the crude comment about how pretty Harry looks on his knees, and the remark about Harry’s tattoos—and wasn’t surprised to hear Louis mutter, “Fucking twat.”

“Reckon you’re right about him. Using Harry,” agreed Niall. “I could tell he doesn’t really respect Harry just being round him out there.”

“O’ course he doesn’t respect him, Niall,” said Louis, sounding as though he found Niall’s surprise nothing short of crazy. “Perfect example? Harry told me before that Nick’s annoyed because he doesn’t want to go out tonight. His mum’s here visiting and he wants to go home and play Scrabble and drink wine with her.”

“So he’s annoyed?”

“Love, I’m just so proud of you. I want to take you out for drinks to celebrate! I just want to see you!” said Louis, his mocking imitation of Nick nearly perfect.

“Fucking twat. Oh”—Niall’s eyes widened as Harry entered the room, hoping he’d not heard what they’d been talking about—“hey, Harry!”

“Niall?” said Harry, sounding and looking surprised to see the other model. “Why are you still here? I mean- I’m sorry. That was- I didn’t mean it like—”

“Still have the pass,” Niall told him with a shrug and a small smile, pointing to the badge around his neck, “so I thought I’d come back and say congratulations! You looked great out there. I’d never have guessed it was your first runway.”

“Thanks, Niall,” said Harry, lips quirked into a pleased, bashful smile and cheeks stained a dusty pink. “Thanks for coming and everything.”

“O’ course!” Niall gave him a big, bright smile, blue eyes sparkling. “Glad Liam wasn’t able to make it.”

Harry giggled and Niall barely had a chance to think how adorable it was before the lad’s hand came up to cover his mouth, suddenly looking embarrassed.
“You done?” Louis asked, looking Harry over.

Harry was changed into his regular clothes—a pair of black skinny jeans that made his legs look miles long, a lavender-coloured knit jumper, and brown Chelsea boots—and seemed to be clean of any makeup.

“You’re going home now. It’s been a long day,” Harry nodded and gave a bit of a conflicted smile. “I’m going home now. It’s been a long day.”

“I’m sure,” said Niall. “Got any plans?”

“I’m going home and— It’s really boring,” Harry told him, looking embarrassed again.

“Probably not,” said Niall. “Not if you’re going to enjoy it.”

Harry exhaled, lips quirking up in what almost looked like relief, and said, “My mum’s visiting from Holmes Chapel and I’m just going home to watch movies and drink wine. And probably play Scrabble.” He looked nervous for a second before adding, a playful grin on his face, “I’ve got all the letters.”

“Cheeky bastard,” chuckled Niall. “Sounds like a nice night.”

Harry smiled and nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah. It will be. I like”—he blushed as though worried Niall would think him lame or unexciting—“I like quiet nights.”

“So do I,” agreed Niall. “Nothin’ wrong with a good quiet night in.”

Harry’s eyes widened and lips parted, staring at Niall as if he didn’t really believe Niall was real or that maybe he’d misheard him.

“You leaving, then?” asked Louis, breaking the silence.

Harry turned to look at him, a slightly dazed look on his face, and nodded.

“Is Nick waiting to see you?” asked Niall, sure his boyfriend would be eager to congratulate him before he headed back to his flat to drink wine with his mum.

“Oh, no,” said Harry, face falling. “He- He’s going out tonight so he, um, he left when the show ended. Since I’m not going with him.”

“He didn’t stick around to see you?” Niall felt a little indignant, hurt for Harry that his boyfriend hadn’t waited to congratulate him on, Niall felt, a quite large accomplishment. He’d only met Harry three times and he’d stayed to see him and tell him how well he’d done.

“No,” said Harry again. “He had- he has to meet his friends at Mahiki.”

“All right, lad,” said Louis gently, cutting Niall off before he could say any more—and wasn’t that ironic, Niall thought—“let’s get you home to your wine. I’ll call a car.”

“I’ll just take- I can take the train,” argued Harry weakly.

“We can share because I don’t feel like taking the tube with all this shite”—he gestured at his photography kit—“hanging off me shoulder.”

“Don’t have to thank me, love,” Louis told him with a smile. “Been a busy day for you.” He turned to Niall. “You want to join us? Drop you back in Kingston?”

“Sounds good,” said Niall. “I’m not going out tonight either,” he added, speaking pointedly to Harry. “Quiet night.”

Harry beamed, smile wide and dimples deep and Niall wondered what drowning felt like.

Niall and Harry stepped outside twenty minutes later, a text from Louis who had gone out to smoke a cigarette alerting them that their car had arrived.

Niall heard the clicking and saw the flashes of cameras as soon as they stepped out of the studio’s back entrance. He’d not had much experience with the paparazzi in his year of modelling, keeping mostly to himself and his small group of friends who, like him, kept to themselves and lived their quiet lives in Kingston and Kilburn and Morden.

It seemed Harry had enough experience for both of them, he thought as Harry grabbed his hand and said quietly, “Come on, Niall.”

Niall followed Harry to the car, head ducked down, and climbed in the open door. He slid into a seat opposite Louis and watched as Harry climbed in beside him, pulling the door shut.

“Don’t know where the fuck they came from,” said Louis apologetically, looking at Harry. “They weren’t there when I was smoking me cigarette.”

“Sorry, Niall,” said Harry quietly.

“Sorry?” asked Niall, a little confused. “It’s not your fault, Harry.”

“They probably thought”—Harry sighed—“they probably thought it was Nick. Coming out with me.”

“Too bad it was only me,” said Niall with a kind smile, hoping to cheer Harry up a bit.

A half an hour later, they’d dropped Louis off in Fitzrovia and were headed to Kingston upon Thames.

“What did you want to be when you grew up?” Niall asked Harry as they drove along Hammersmith Bridge Road. “Did you always want to be a model?”

“No,” said Harry. “Not really. I was a baker for a while. It was nice.”

“You were a baker?” asked Niall. “Can you make, like, all those fancy pastries and breads and cakes they make on Bake Off?”

“I, um,” started Harry, blushing and ducking his head to look toward his hands, fingers of the right hand fiddling with the rings on the left. “I really just- I just worked the till, really. But I helped in the bakery.”

“Bet you ate lots of pastry.”

“Just the broken ones. That were too ugly to sell, you know. Or sometimes I’d smush them putting them in the case and then”—Harry gave a sweet, crooked smile—“I got a treat.”

“You naughty boy!” teased Niall with a laugh. He was delighted when Harry blushed. “So how did you go from working in a bakery to modelling?”
“Well, um, I’ve always liked fashion a lot, you know. I used to- I saved my money from the bakery so I could buy clothes. I thought maybe I could study fashion design because my sister—her name’s Gemma—my sister went to Sheffield Hallam University in, you know, in Sheffield. Obviously. She studied Genetics. She’s studying PKU now. It’s this condition- It’s a genetic disorder that makes it so people can’t metabolise protein.”

Harry paused for a moment, brows furrowed—Niall thought he was collecting his thoughts, reeling them back in so he could figure out where he’d got a bit off track and straighten everything out—and Niall waited patiently.

“Sheffield Hallam has a Fashion Design course and Gemma thought that I should- that I should go there. But I’m not very good at art.” Harry pouted. “Or any of that, really. So then Gemma said maybe I could study, like, the business side because there’s a course- They have a course, um, it’s called Fashion Management and Communication. But I don’t really think I’d be fit for management of any kind and I’m rubbish at communication.”

“You might have ended up a rubbish fashion designer or been terrible at management and communication. I don’t know,” said Niall honestly. “But you’re a wonderful model. It’s good you found a way to work in fashion. Do you like it? Modelling?”

Harry nodded. “Yes.”

Niall smiled kindly. “I’m glad you found a way to be a part of what you like and that you enjoy doing it.”

Harry looked a bit surprised by Niall’s words, almost startled, and Niall didn’t want to think about what may have caused that reaction. He watched as Harry turned to look out the tinted window of the car.

There was silence for a few minutes and then Harry asked, timid and shy, “Did you always want to be a model?”

“No,” said Niall, chuckling. “Sort of happened by accident, if I’m being honest.”

“How did it happen by accident?” wondered Harry, curious.

“I moved to London a few years ago,” began Niall. “Bunch of me mates too. We’re all musicians—”

“You’re a musician?” asked Harry, sounding excited and impressed.

“Yeah. I play guitar and sang backing vocals. We were all in a band together,” Niall told him. “Moved here thinkin’ we’d get signed to some label, make a record. I thought maybe I’d find us a manager or something, right, and I called a few talent agencies. Got an interview with one.” Niall laughed, bold and bright and open. “Turned out it was a modelling agency. Burton was looking for someone to do product views for their website and they said I have the right look.” He smiled. “Apparently I’m a bit of the boy next door. Don’t know if that’s a good thing.” He shrugged. “Makes it sound like I’m a bit average, doesn’t it? But Wilhelmina signed me the next day and I started my first photoshoot a week later.”

“What about your band?”

“They got a record deal. They’re recording now, actually.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “That’s really- That’s so cool!”
“Yeah. I’m really proud of them,” said Niall. “John Bird and the Lovers. I still play with them once in a while. Small places like The Troubadour and The Purple Turtle in Camden.”

“My parents own a pub called The Purple Hare!” said Harry, eyes wide. “It’s like the tortoise and the hare. Only turtle.”

“That up in Holmes Chapel?” asked Niall, smiling at Harry’s silly observation.

Harry’s eyes widened even more. “How did you know I’m from Holmes Chapel?”

“You said it earlier,” Niall told him. “When you said about your mum comin’ down to visit.”

Harry looked at Niall for a moment, lips parted, and said, hushed and almost awed, “You remembered.”

“Ya only said it an hour ago,” said Niall with an amused smile. “O’ course I remembered.”

Niall asked Harry about The Purple Hare, delighted to find that Harry had lived half of his life above the pub. He told Harry about his own small town of Mullingar, back in Ireland, and discovered that they’d had similar childhoods.

It was close to nine o’clock when the Addison Lee arrived in front of Niall’s building in Kingston. Niall was a bit disappointed to leave Harry’s company. Louis, it seemed, was right in asserting that Niall and Harry would make great friends.

“Well, good bye, Harry,” said Niall. “It was nice chatting to ya. And congratulations again. You did really well.”

“Thanks, Niall,” said Harry, smiling bashfully and blushing. “It was- it was nice of you to come. Even if, um, Louis tricked you.”

“Glad I was there.” Niall opened the door and slid across the seat. Feet on the pavement, he turned to wave at Harry. “G’night, lad!”

“I don’t think- I don’t think you’re average, Niall,” said Harry quickly, face nearly glowing with his blush.

Niall softened and he wondered again what it felt like to drown.

“Thanks, Harry.”

Niall wondered about Harry’s words for the rest of the night. He supposed Harry may have just been talking about his looks, assuring him that the boy next door look wasn’t a bad thing. He’d not said it while they were talking about Niall’s approachable wholesomeness that had won him a modelling contract though.

He’d said it nearly a half an hour later, after Niall had talked with him about his mates and their band, Harry’s family and their pub in Holmes Chapel, and their childhoods.

After, Niall realised with a pang, he’d shown Harry a genuine interest in his life and had remembered something he’d mentioned earlier in the evening.

He was pleasantly surprised the next morning to find he was seated next to Harry at the Oliver Spencer fashion show.

“Harry!” he said, watching as the other lad was led to the seat beside him by an usher. He stood to
greet him with a handshake. “G’morning!”

“H-hi, Niall,” said Harry, sounding uncomfortable and nervous. “Good, um, good morning, yeah.”

Niall’s brows knit together, concern on his face. “Ya all right, Harry? Sleep well?”

“Yeah. I’m- I’m fine, Niall. Thanks,” said Harry, still looking nervous. Niall watched as he twisted the rings on the fingers of his left hand with the fingers of his right. “Um, good morning. How are you?”

“I’m all right. Had a good time with Netflix and some whiskey last night,” Niall told him distractedly. He didn’t really care about the social niceties right now because Harry looked truly distressed to see him. “I’ll be better when ya tell me what’s wrong, though,” he said gently.

“Do you- do you go on Twitter? Or anything?” asked Harry after a moment. “Like, did you go online this morning?”

“No,” said Niall with a shrug. “Not really. Checked the weather.”

“Yeah, I don’t- I don’t really check Twitter or anything. I’ve got a Twitter account but I just- I don’t really ever use it,” mused Harry. “I don’t even remember why I started it, actually.”

Niall sat and waited, patient despite his desire to take Harry’s hand and demand to know what was wrong. “I’ve got an account too,” said Niall, wondering if maybe saying something would draw Harry’s attention back to the real topic at hand. “Don’t tweet much though.”

“Nick does though,” said Harry.

“Oh?” Niall was confused, not quite sure what Nick’s Twitter use had to do with Harry’s nervousness and discomfort.

Harry finally looked at Niall, his green eyes meeting Niall’s blue, and said softly, “He saw the pictures.”

Niall looked at Harry blankly. ‘The pictures?’

“Yes,” said Harry, looking down to where his fingers still played with his rings. “Of us. Leaving The Store last night.”

“Oh,” said Niall, understanding dawning on him. “The paparazzi pictures?”

“Yeah. And I’m holding your hand and leading you to the car and Nick—”

“Nick what?” asked Niall.

“He didn’t like them.” Harry looked sad and Niall wanted to wrap him up in a hug but he suspected that would be exactly the wrong thing to do in this situation.

“You’re allowed to have other friends, you know, Harry,” he said instead. “Nick has other friends.”

Harry’s gaze returned to Niall and Niall couldn’t help but think how much he looked like a scared, lost kitten. He was quiet for a few moments before asking, small and childlike and insecure, “Can we be”—he blushed, embarrassed and awkward—“Can we maybe try to be friends?”

“O’ course,” Niall told him with a grin. “‘S long as ya don’t mind me Scrabble’s missing some letters.”
Niall was happy to see a small, shy smile quirking Harry’s lips. “Mine’s not.”

“Reckon we’ll have to go to your flat if we want to play Scrabble,” said Niall.

“Oh, I live in Sutton,” Harry told him. “You- That’s a long way to ask you to come.”

“Not really,” said Niall, frowning slightly. “I live in Kingston. It’s no longer to Sutton than it is to Marleybone or Kensington. Or here. I have a friend who lives in Morden.” He shrugged. “It’s not that far.”

“You’d come to my flat?” asked Harry, sounding shocked.

“Yeah,” said Niall with an amused smile, brows furrowed, surprised by Harry’s shock. “If ya wanted me to.”

“No one’s ever come to my flat,” said Harry simply. “Just my mum. And step-dad and my sister when I first moved in.”

“What’s nobody ever come?” asked Niall curiously. “You’ve got more than just Scrabble, right?” he teased, a half-smile tilting his pink lips at the corner.

“Yes,” said Harry. “I have a television and Netflix and lots of board games. And wine. And, um, and beer if you’d like beer better. And I have a turntable and records. And a cat.”

“You have a cat?”

“Yes. Her name is Butterscotch and she’s a tortoiseshell-and-white,” Harry told him. “You aren’t allergic, are you?”

Niall shook his head. “I love cats. Funny little things.” Harry smiled, apparently pleased with Niall’s answer, and Niall continued. “You said yeh’ve got records?”

Harry nodded enthusiastically. “Over three hundred. So far.”

The show started, though it did nothing to interrupt Niall and Harry. Voices lowered and heads tilted closer together, they continued to discuss records and music, the lads falling into a light and easy conversation that was interspersed with comments on the clothes the models walking the runway were showing.

Niall felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, alerting him of a text message, but decided to wait until after the show to check it. He didn’t want Harry to think he was bored of their chat and was more interested in a random message on his phone. He also supposed it might be considered rude to pull out his mobile in the middle of a fashion show at which he was seated front row.

When the show finally ended twenty-five minutes later, Niall looked around the showroom. “Think I’ll hang back a bit. Let the masses leave so I don’t get trampled in the stampede.”

“That’s a good idea,” agreed Harry, looking at the crowd of people making their way to the exit.

Harry pulled his phone out and found a group text from Louis, a second number he didn’t recognise in the recipient line. Swiping his thumb across the screen, he opened the message and found a picture followed by a short message.

“Oh no,” he whispered, eyes widening as anxiety crashed over him.

“You got it too, then?” asked Niall, voice a bit stilted and tentative.
Harry looked up from his phone to meet Niall’s steady gaze. “Y-yeah.”

“You’re allowed to have other friends, Harry,” Niall reminded him softly, repeating what he’d told the lad earlier.

Harry nodded. “I- I know.” He didn’t mention that, while he knew Nick would not be pleased to see pictures of Harry laughing and smiling beside Niall—pictures in which Harry looked happier and more relaxed than he’d felt in ages—splashed all across the internet, Louis’ message was what he found more troubling.

*Just seen this on Twitter what a nice looking couple,* the message read. *Have you got the first date planned yet?? Should get on that, lads! ;)*

“He’s just teasing, lad,” said Niall reassuringly. “We’re just mates.”

“Yeah.” Harry nodded again. “Okay. Well, there’s- It looks like it’s, um, like most of the crowd’s gone so I should- My mum’s back at my flat. So I should… get going. We’re meeting for lunch.”

Niall looked at Harry, soft and considerate, and said, “All right, lad. I’ll see you later, yeah?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Yeh’ve got me number now too,” he said, holding up his phone. “Can always send me a text or ring me if ya want to play some Scrabble or listen to records or anything.”

“Thanks, Niall.” Harry gave a little wave and walked toward the exit.

He made his way to the City Thameslink station and boarded the train to Sutton, finding a seat at the back of the car and tucking himself into the corner. He unlocked his phone and opened his rarely-used Twitter app. He wasn’t exactly sure how to find the picture that Louis had sent to Niall and him but he wanted to try; maybe it would be difficult to find, he hoped, and Nick wouldn’t have seen it yet.

As it turned out, it wasn’t that difficult. Harry only had to scroll through the #LondonFashionWeek tag for a few minutes before he found several pictures—there seemed to be more than just the one Louis had sent to Niall and Harry—of Niall and himself sitting in the front row of the Oliver Spencer show. They were nice pictures, Harry couldn’t help but think, because he looked happy and Niall looked like he genuinely enjoyed Harry’s company.

Harry was about fifteen minutes from Sutton Station when his phone rang. A feeling of dread washed over him when he saw Nick’s name on the screen.

“Hi- Hi, Nick,” he said, hand shaking slightly as he held the phone to his ear. “Hi.”

“Hello, love,” drawled Nick. “Have a good time at the show this morning?”

It was a loaded question, Harry knew, and he wasn’t sure how to answer it. He bit his lip and, after a pause, said, “Y-yes. It was good.”

“Have a good seat?” asked Nick and Harry was sure he’d seen the pictures.

“Um, yes. Yeah, I was- It was front row.”

“Right next to Niall Horan,” said Nick, not a question this time. “He seems to be around you a lot lately.”
Harry closed his eyes. “Does he?”

“Mmm,” hummed Nick. “I sat next to him at your show last night. He said he didn’t know any of the models but then he was seen leaving with you and—”

“I- I told you,” Harry interrupted quietly, feeling nervous and unsure, “I told you that he was with Louis. He had- Louis invited him and gave him his seat because- because he was photographing the show. So he didn’t need the seat. And then, um, when we were leaving, Louis asked us to share a car. That’s- that’s it.”

“Yes. Right,” said Nick, short and cold. “And then he was sitting right next to you at the show this morning.”

“I didn’t- I didn’t even know he was going to be there,” Harry told him truthfully.

“His next campaign is for Oliver Spencer, Harry,” said Nick, icy and accusatory.

Harry’s eyes widened with the realisation that Nick thought Harry had known that and went to the show hoping to see Niall. “I didn’t know that,” he said, feeling very small and stupid.

“Am I not enough for you anymore?” asked Nick, sounding pouty and hurt.

“That’s not- that’s not it, Nick!” exclaimed Harry, guilt flooding him at the thought that he’d hurt Nick’s feelings. “You are. Just”—he squeezed his eyes shut, fingers of his left hand pressed to his left eye—“I’m allowed to have other friends too.”

“Of course you are,” said Nick. “You just seem to be seeing them a lot more than me lately.”

Harry inhaled deeply. He didn’t think that was true but Nick must have thought it was. He hadn’t meant to make Nick feel neglected and unwanted; he remembered how that felt and it wasn’t pleasant.

“Maybe, um- My mum’s leaving tomorrow,” Harry rushed to tell him. “We can go out tomorrow night or- If you want. I can skip Pilates.”

“I wouldn’t want you to miss Pilates,” said Nick airly.

“I can- No, it’s okay, Nick!” said Harry, trying to assure him that it was fine. “I can miss one night.”

“No, love. Don’t skip Pilates on my account,” said Nick. “I have plans tomorrow night anyway.”

“Oh,” said Harry because Nick was allowed to have other friends too. “Okay.”

The train arrived at Sutton Station and Harry alighted, beginning the walk to Black Treacle to meet his mum for lunch and hopefully talk to Elora for a bit.

Harry greeted his mother with a hug at the entrance to the cafe and led her in. They found seats at the coffee bar and were given a friendly smile and warm welcome.

“Hiya, Harry,” said Elora happily. She turned to Anne and said, brows raised expectantly and the question clear in her tone, “Hiya, Harry’s mum?”

Anne laughed and Harry grinned. “El, this is my mum. Anne. And, uh, mum, this is my- my friend Elora. She owns the cafe.”

“So? How was the show? Were you amazing?” asked Elora a bit later. She looked at Anne. “Was he
amazing? Of course he was.”

Anne smiled. “He was amazing.”

Harry blushed and smiled wide, dimples deep. “It was really good. I didn’t trip.” He giggled. “It was so fun to model- to be a part of London Fashion Week and show new McQueen fashions and just- It’s just so incredible.”

“Knew you’d be great,” said Elora proudly, reaching out to take his hand in her smaller one and squeezing gently. “How’s that Niall lad?”

Harry groaned. “You saw the pictures?”

“Both sets,” she said with a nod. “But it’s different than with Nick, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry. “I think- I think Nick knows it’s going to happen a lot of the time. Like, he’s never surprised. But Niall- He didn’t know what to do.” Harry’s brows scrunched in thought. “Like he’d never- Like it’s never happened to him before. And he wasn’t expecting it. I had to- I grabbed his hand and pulled him to the car.”

“And this morning?”

“We didn’t know- Neither of us knew anyone was taking our picture,” Harry told her. “It was just- I don’t know who took them.” He sighed. “Nick’s not happy.”

Elora scoffed. “He’s got some nerve. The twat makes sure the paps see you every damn time you go out with him but then you’re papped without him and he’s upset.”

Harry knew Elora was right. Nick didn’t have a problem with Harry being photographed by the paparazzi, had never tried to keep Harry from being caught by the paps. He’d meant it when he’d told Elora that it seemed Nick often knew they were going to be spotted, that he was never surprised. It seemed, however, that Nick did have a problem with Harry being papped when he wasn’t with him.

He heard Louis’ words—“Nick’s using you.”—and wondered if maybe he was right.

He tried not to think about it, to put it out of his mind so he could enjoy his last day visiting with his mother.

Harry and Anne had planned to go for a late lunch with Louis the next day because Anne was eager to meet the man who had helped her son start such a successful modelling career; Louis had been pleased to hear that she wanted to meet him, excited to meet her, and had suggested a restaurant called The Buckingham Arms.

“I think he’s your best friend,” said Anne as they sat on the train to Westminster. “The way you talk about him. Or maybe Elora. I can see how much she cares about you and you love her too.”

“They’re my friends,” Harry agreed. “And Nick. He’s- he’s my best friend.”

Harry was surprised with the sharp look Anne cast at him. “Harry,” she said with the no-nonsense voice he’d heard enough times in his life to know she was serious, “Nick’s not your best friend. Nick doesn’t care about you like Louis and Elora do.”

“Mum?” asked Harry, stunned by his mother’s words.
“Do you think I don’t see those pictures in *The Sun* too?” she asked, tone a bit softer. “I don’t want my baby to get hurt.”

“Mum?” said Harry again, voice desperate, begging for an answer she couldn’t give him.

Anne gave him a small smile, almost sad, and took one of Harry’s hands in her own. She tilted her head to rest it on Harry’s shoulder and said, “Tell me about Niall.”

“Tell you about- about Niall?” asked Harry, confused. “What about Niall?”

“Tell me why you looked so happy in those pictures,” she said.

“He likes cats. And records. And he doesn’t think Sutton is too far,” Harry told her, thinking back to his chats with Niall. ‘And’—he paused, thinking of something he’d felt when he’d been with Niall—“and he doesn’t act like I’m a silly, stupid kid.”

That realisation had come to him Saturday night after Niall was dropped at his flat in Kingston.

Harry knew he wasn’t an excellent conversationalist and he’d spent most of the remainder of his ride back to Sutton replaying his conversation with Niall, finding every fault in his awkward stuttering, an unhealthy habit he’d had for as long as he could remember.

While replaying his chat with Niall, however, he’d realised that, though he’d stuttered and rambled and strayed too far from the topic before finding himself again, Niall had never made him feel stupid or silly. He hadn’t felt rushed to straighten out his thoughts and jump back into the conversation, hadn’t felt he had to hurry to say the perfect thing so he wouldn’t lose Niall’s attention.

Niall was patient and peaceful and he’d waited right there for Harry, steady and calm like a cool breeze on a warm night.

Harry told his mother this revelation, relating parts of his conversations with Niall and explaining how he’d lost track of his thoughts but Niall had waited, giving him time and not growing impatient or irritated. Niall had even helped, he told Anne, saying a few words that got him back to his original thought without pushing.

“He didn’t think the things I like are silly or weird or, like, unsophisticated. Just normal things that anyone might like,” he added.

Anne patted his knee. “I think you should invite him over for Scrabble or a movie night. I think you’d have fun.”

Harry wondered about Anne’s words for the rest of the trip to Westminster.

Anne left soon after they returned to Sutton from lunch, kissing Harry goodbye and telling him a dozen times how proud she was of him and how happy she was for him.

“Call Niall,” she said, pulling out of their hug and giving him an encouraging little smile.

“Maybe,” he said, avoiding his mother’s eyes.

But again, his mum’s words filled his thoughts as they had before their lunch with Louis. He thought she was right, that it would be nice to hang out with Niall, but he wasn’t sure if Niall had actually meant that Harry should call him or if he’d just been saying it to be nice.

He knew without a doubt, though, that Nick wouldn’t like it.
He wasn’t sure if he was surprised or not when he realised, as he walked into the Cheam Leisure Centre for Pilates, that Nick hadn’t called him or texted him at all during the day. Part of him thought—hoped—that maybe Nick had left him alone so he could spend his last day visiting with his mum without interruption. A bigger part of him, however, was sure Nick wasn’t too concerned about interrupting his time with anyone.

He was surprised to find that his thoughts kept centring not on Nick but on his mother’s suggestion that he call Niall and invite him to his flat for a movie night.

When Anne had mentioned her idea to Louis at lunch, Louis had beamed and, with the smuggest smile Harry had ever seen, told Anne that she was a genius.

Maybe it was because Harry knew just how much Louis wanted Harry to call Niall that, by the time Pilates was over, Harry had managed to tell himself that texting Niall probably wasn’t a good idea. Louis hated Nick and just wanted him out of Harry’s life so his suggestion was based on his pure anti-Nick/pro-Niall bias.

His mother, on the other hand, hadn’t met either Nick or Niall so she didn’t really know that Niall would care about him more than Nick did. Her suggestion, he tried to convince himself, was a little ridiculous.

But she was his mummy. She wanted what was best for him and his mummy always knew.

Louis texted him the day after their lunch. *Have you talked to Niall yet lad?*

*No*, Harry replied. *He was just being nice and you just hate Nick and my mum doesn’t know about any of it.*

*Sure she does, lad. And no he wasn’t*, responded Louis. *Youre just stubborn.*

Harry spent the next few days trying to decide if he should text Nick or not. He wasn’t sure what to say. He supposed he could apologise but he didn’t know what, exactly, he was apologising for because he’d not really done anything wrong. He didn’t want Nick to think that he was ignoring him or that he didn’t feel badly that he’d hurt Nick’s feelings though.

On Friday, Harry finally got up the nerve to send Nick a message.

*Hi Nick! i miss you,* he typed, sending it before he had a chance to think about it any longer.

*Hey love,* read Nick’s response. *I miss you too! Dinner tomorrow!*

It wasn’t a question and Harry knew that. He replied immediately. *Sounds good! :)*

He was just happy that Nick didn’t still seem to be upset with him.

Later that afternoon, just after he’d got back from a quick trip to the library to pick up a copy of the next book for book club— *The Town and the City* by Jack Kerouac, which Harry was looking forward to reading—and lunch with Elora at Black Treacle, Harry’s phone rang. He was pleased to see it was Simon, not expecting a call from his manager.

*“Hi, Simon!”* he said, sitting on the sofa beside Butterscotch and scratching between the cat’s ears.

*“Hello, Harry,”* said Simon. *“How are you?”*

*“I’m good, thanks,”* he told the older man. *“How are you?”*
“I’m doing well,” answered Simon. He continued, straight to the point, “I’m calling for two reasons.”

“Oh, okay,” said Harry, shifting on the sofa and allowing Butterscotch to climb onto his lap. “Um, what’s up?”

“First of all, I wanted to congratulate you on your debut at Fashion Week. You did an excellent job,” said Simon. “I’m proud of you. So’s Leila. Barbara was thrilled with your performance. So well done, lad.”

“Th-thanks, Simon,” said Harry, shocked and overwhelmed with Simon’s praise. “Thank you. I’m glad- I’m grateful for the, um, for the opportunity.”

“You deserved it, Harry,” Simon told him honestly. “A lot of new models don’t seem to think they need to put in any work. Just show up, have a couple good photoshoots, and then they’ll land a big campaign or a spot on the runway. But you put in the work. You asked me about runway coaching and did well in your lessons.”

“Thank you, Simon,” said Harry again.

“I’ve also called to tell you I’ve got another audition for you. Monday afternoon, unless you’ve got a conflict I don’t know about,” said Simon.

“Oh, um, no. Nothing,” Harry told him. “Nothing now that Fashion Week’s over and, um, and my mum’s gone back to Holmes Chapel.”

“Good,” continued Simon. “It’s for a magazine called Sue. For their April issue’s fashion section.” Harry could hear papers being shuffled and then Simon added, “‘Best Spring Looks for the Bold.’ Sounds about right for you. Louis recommended you again and they rang me to set an audition.”

“Thank you, Simon,” said Harry.

“You’re welcome, Harry.”

Harry got the information he needed—time, location, and what he should wear—and texted Louis as soon as he ended the call with Simon.

I just talked to Simon. Thanks for recommending me again!

You’re welcome lad, came Louis’ response. You’re one of my favourite models to work with and you’re a good friend!

Harry was pleased, excited to tell Nick his news.

I’ve got another audition on Monday!

Congrats love! you’ll get it of course, replied Nick. what is it?

A magazine called sue. It’s a photoshoot for their spring issue, Harry told him.

Nick’s message came immediately. Sue is Louis’ boyfriend’s mag. No way you won’t get it. I don’t like Louis but he likes you and he’s respected in the industry so he’ll always manage to get you jobs whenever you need them

Harry reread Nick’s last message a few times.

The problem with text messages was that you couldn’t hear the other person’s tone of voice, couldn’t
hear their vocal inflections, and you definitely couldn’t see any facial expressions. Nick probably hadn’t meant his words— *“he’ll always manage to get you jobs whenever you need them”* — to come across as Harry had read them; he’d most certainly just misinterpreted the message.

Because it felt to Harry that Nick thought Harry might need Louis to get him work, that his own talent and hard work might not be enough. He remembered Nick, just after Harry had got his first job modelling for Gucci, telling a table filled with his friends at Mahiki that he’d got the job all because of Nick and his humble Topman collection.

Maybe Nick was right. Maybe the only reason he was making a reasonably successful career in modelling was because of Louis and Nick.

Harry tried to distract himself, put the thoughts out of his head. He opened his book, trying to read but his eyes just scanned over the words, his mind not absorbing what he was reading.

He wanted to see Elora. He’d only just left Black Treacle an hour earlier but he needed to talk to someone. Someone who wasn’t Louis or Nick. He knew anything Louis would say about the matter would be fueled by his intense dislike for Nick; Nick would certainly only confuse him further by praising his talent and beauty and then telling him it was a good thing he’d had such a successful first shoot for Topman.

The door to Black Treacle opened with a jingle twenty-five minutes later when Harry entered the nearly-empty cafe.

“You’re back!” said Elora happily, looking up from where she was cleaning the espresso machine.

“Hi, El,” said Harry, feeling a bit downcast despite the fact that he had exciting news. “I know you’re closing soon but… I just wanted to see you.”

“What’s up, love?” she asked, eyes filled with concern and brows furrowed as she looked at him. She put down her bar mop and walked toward the counter that separated her from the tall boy.

Harry sighed and sat down on a stool at the coffee bar. “I think Nick- I think Nick thinks that I’m only- that I’ve just been getting jobs because of him and Louis.”

“What?” she asked, walking around and sitting on the stool beside Harry. “What do you mean?”

“He said today that, um, well. Well, first I should tell you that Simon called me before and told me he’s got me another audition. For a fashion spread in a magazine called *Sue*,” said Harry. “And when I—”

“Harry, that’s wonderful!” said Elora, face lighting up with joy and pride.

“Yeah,” said Harry, a half smile on his lips. “Yeah, it’s good. It’s on Monday and it would- It’s called ‘Best Spring Looks for the Bold.’”

Elora smiled back. “That sounds right, from the photos I’ve seen.” Her face became a bit more serious. “Now what did Nick say to you?”

“Oh,” said Harry. “He said, um, that Louis will always manage to get me jobs when I need them. Because he’s respected in the industry and he’s the one- he recommended me again. For the audition. Like, you know, like I won’t get auditions and, like, jobs unless Louis recommends me.”

Elora studied Harry, chewing at her bottom lip. “Harry, love, I don’t know much about modelling or any of that. But it seems to me that that’s how it works. You impressed Louis with your first
photoshoot for Topman so he recommended you to Leila for the Gucci job. And then she was pleased with your work so she got you the shoot for Yves Saint Laurent.” She reached out and took Harry’s hands, stilling his nervous fingers that twisted the rings. “You did your runway training like she suggested and she was happy you’d listened to her advice so when it was time to cast for McQueen, she auditioned you and recommended you to what’s-her-name—”

“Barbara.”

“Barbara,” said Elora. “And you got that job. I think that’s how it works. That you do a good job and work hard and, like, show that you’re willing to try any kind of job and then someone puts in a good word for you to someone else. Building connections and, like, a network.”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry because he knew she was right. “But Nick said- Back when I got my job with Gucci, Nick said it was all because of his line. That I got more jobs.”

“Well that’s bullshit,” said Elora matter-of-factly. “He didn’t have anything to do with you getting the job with Topman. Simon got you that audition and Nick didn’t cast you. He didn’t pick you. And the reason you got the Gucci shoot was because Louis put your name out to Leila and sent her the photos. She was impressed by the photos and she said she liked your attitude and thought you were lovely. Obviously. That wasn’t Nick. That was your talent and personality and your... whatever. Your willingness to do photoshoots that other models think they’re too good for. Not Nick.”

Harry considered her words. “Then why- why did Nick say that?”

Elora gave Harry’s hands a gentle squeeze. “Because he wants you to think you need him. Like you just won’t make it without him.”

Harry gave a small, sad smile. “You sound like Louis.”

“We should hang out,” said Elora with a smirk. “Bet we’d be best friends.”

“Probably,” agreed Harry. “Just don’t forget about me.”

“Could never forget about you, love,” she said honestly.

Harry stayed while Elora finished closing up the tearoom, one of the bakers—Elora’s sister, a pretty girl named Abby—finishing in the bakeshop, and walked out with them.

“Got plans tonight, Harry?” asked Abby, watching as Elora locked the front door.

“Um, no. I don’t- I don’t think so,” he told her. “I’m going out tomorrow but, um, nothing tonight.”

“Could come with us,” offered Elora, turning to her sister and Harry. “We’re going to The Nightingale for dinner and drinks.”

“Oh. No, that’s- Thank you, but I don’t want- I don’t want to crash or- or anything.”

“You wouldn’t,” Abby said. “You’re invited so you wouldn’t be crashing.”

“No, that’s- that’s okay,” he insisted. “Really. I’ll just- I want a quiet night, I think.”

Elora studied him. She didn’t want to force him into joining them at the pub, didn’t want to pressure him like Nick so often did. “All right, Harry,” she said with a soft smile. “If you change your mind, you can text me.”

Harry nodded. “Thanks, El.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and said, shrugging his shoulders
up and back down, “I should get home. Have fun tonight.”

“Okay, Harry,” said Elora. Nick, she decided, was the worst thing that could have happened to him. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “Probably.”

“Well, have a good night, love.”

“Bye, Harry,” said Abby, waving to the lad.

“Bye, Abby.”

Elora and Abby watched as Harry gave a little wave and turned away from them, walking down the street.

“Does he have any friends? Other than you?” asked Abby, not harsh or mean or judgemental but just curious. She’d grown up with Elora, after all, who was an introvert and a bit of a loner; Elora had never had a problem doing things or going places alone—preferred it, even—and Abby had always respected that in her sister, told Elora she thought she was brave and strong. “I mean, I know he’s dating Nick Grimshaw but—”

“Nick Grimshaw is the reason Harry doesn’t have any other friends,” cut in Elora. “He doesn’t like anyone to take Harry’s attention away from him. He doesn’t let Harry have other friends. Makes him feel bad. Harry’s always apologising to Nick, explaining himself when he spends time with anyone else. Even has to explain why he went to his book club or Pilates instead of going out for drinks with Nick,” she ranted. She took a breath and added, “Nick Grimshaw’s a jealous, controlling, manipulative dickhead. I can’t even listen to his goddamn radio show anymore.”

“Is that why he didn’t come around very much for a while?” wondered Abby.

“Yes,” said Elora with a nod. “Apparently we’re not posh enough or we don’t fit into his new lifestyle”—she made air quotation marks with her fingers as she said new lifestyle—“or something.” She rolled her eyes. “Harry’s impressionable and trusting and a little insecure. And Nick knows it. Just has to call him ‘my boy’ and tell him he’s pretty once in a while and Harry’s head-over-heels.”

“Poor lad,” said Abby. “He’s too sweet for that.”

Elora agreed.

Her anger with Nick, her frustration at Harry’s entire situation, and the hurt she felt on Harry’s behalf ebbed away, allowing her to spend a pleasant evening with Abby and their cousins Kate and Mack at The Nightingale.

All of those feelings flooded back into her consciousness the next morning, however, as she scrolled through The Daily Mail’s Twitter feed.

Her heart clenched and something like hatred seared through her as she looked at a picture of Nick Grimshaw leading a clearly very tipsy Harry to a car, pout on his full pink lips and curly hair a bit more disheveled and messy than usual. The caption above the picture read “Nick Grimshaw leads his young model boyfriend Harry Styles to their car after a night of partying at celeb hang-out Mahiki”.

There it was, thought Elora as she twisted her hair into a braid and pulled a sweatshirt over her head. The headline Nick wanted. Everything he wanted. He didn’t care that Harry looked unhappy, didn’t seem to have enjoyed the evening spent partying at Mahiki, as much as he did. He’d got what he
She made her way to Black Treacle, finding Abby already in the bakeshop with her assistant Carey, ovens filled with muffins and scones and croissants.

It wasn’t until a few minutes before one that Harry arrived at the tearoom, looking exhausted and slightly sick. He took a seat at the coffee bar and, without a word, Elora made him a pot of peppermint green tea.

“You look like shit,” she said softly, turning to put the teapot, cup and saucer, and a little pot of acacia honey on the counter. “Drink that, yeah? It’ll help.”

“You saw the pictures,” said Harry sadly, lips turning into a pout.

Elora nodded. “Yes.”

Harry looked like he was going to cry, lower lip quivering, when he said, “You’re mad at me.”

Her face softened, feeling almost like she was going to cry. “No, Harry,” she said. “I’m not mad at you, love.” She took one of his hands and thumbed over the knuckles. “I’m mad at Nick Grimshaw. I know you can’t see it but he’s- he’s awful, Harry.”

Harry dropped his head to the counter, hand still in Elora’s, and she wasn’t sure if he was crying but his shoulders were rising and falling in unsteady jerks.

“Harry, love,” she said, moving her other hand to tangle in the mess of wavy brown hair at the back of his head. Her fingers massaged his scalp and she said quietly, gently, “Sweetie, please breathe properly. You’re going to hyperventilate. Can you look at me?”

He looked up, though he didn’t meet her eyes, and her breath caught in her throat. His face was stained with tears, eyes red and filled with a pain that didn’t belong there.

Elora moved her hand to cup the side of his face. “Breathe in”—Harry did as instructed—“and out.” She continued until she felt his breathing had returned to normal without her prompting and he relaxed against her hand. “Drink your tea, love. Before it gets cold.”

She watched him as he poured himself a cup of tea, adding a spoonful of honey and stirring it in.

He took a sip and then said, quiet and embarrassed, “He’s mean to me. Sometimes.”

Elora took a sip of her own tea, finding the words on her mug—“Treat People With Kindness”—a bit ironic in this moment, though she supposed the kindest thing she could do was be honest with Harry.

“I know,” she said evenly. “Louis didn’t go about it the right way, maybe, but he’s been saying it since the beginning. Maybe not outright, ‘He’s mean to you.’ But it’s been there.”

“It’s only sometimes, though,” said Harry. “And it’s usually- it’s always my fault. Because I say something silly or stupid or, I don’t know, or I hurt his feelings.”

Elora set her jaw, anger coursing through her, and said, trying to keep her voice level, “Not a single word of what you just said is true. And I hope you know that.”

“He just wants- He wants what’s best for me,” Harry told her, sounding almost like he believed what he was saying. “Like, he wants to help me make friends and—”
“Help you make friends?” said Elora, just controlling the rising edge of anger that threatened to tint her tone. “Harry, he won’t let you make friends unless he’s controlling who they are! He was mad at you because you sat next to Niall Horan at a runway show. He made you feel guilty for talking to someone else! He was mad because the paparazzi spotted you with Niall but he has no problem with them spotting you with him. He doesn’t like your book club or Pilates or—”

“That’s just- That’s because he wants to spend time with me,” said Harry.

“No, Harry. It’s because he doesn’t want you to spend time with anyone that’s not him.”

“I hang out with his friends,” said Harry defensively.

“Yes. His friends,” she shot back, emphasising the word his. “And he’s always there, isn’t he?”

“Well- well, yeah,” agreed Harry, though Elora could tell he wasn’t understanding what she was trying to say.

“And he doesn’t like you hanging round here,” she added, waving her arms around the tearoom. “We’re not good enough. He doesn’t deign to let you socialise with such commoners.”

“You’re just- you’re just jealous,” said Harry, eyes wide as he looked at his friend. “Because you’re in love with me.”

Elora gave an incredulous gasp, eyes widened and jaw dropped in disbelief. “What?”

“You’re in love with me,” said Harry, though he sounded a bit less certain this time. “That’s what—”


Harry nodded, looking slightly abashed. “Yeah,” he agreed, voice so small.

“I’m not in love with you, Harry,” Elora told him honestly, because she wasn’t. “I love you as a good friend. As my best friend. But I’m not in love with you. Romantically.” She turned away from Harry and said, voice muffled, “I’ll make you some lunch, yeah. I’ve got a Cheddar mac and cheese with bacon breadcrumbs that’s really tasty.”

“Thanks- thanks, El,” said Harry, voice barely above a whisper.

Elora was stunned. She’d known for a few months that Nick manipulated Harry. The behaviours Harry described were spot-on for emotional manipulation—a type of emotional abuse she had experienced during a year-long relationship—but she hadn’t realised exactly how well-strung Nick had Harry.

Harry left a bit later, gone home to take a nap and cuddle with Butterscotch.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, a normal Saturday afternoon at the bakery, and at five o’clock, Elora said goodbye to Abby, leaving her sister to close up for the day.

“Enjoy the play tonight, sissy,” said Abby, giving Elora a smile. “I don’t know how you’ve never seen The Mousetrap.”

“It’s weird, right?” agreed Elora. She’d read every story by Agatha Christie multiple times, The Mousetrap one of her favourites, but had never seen the play. “You’re sure you don’t mind if I take tomorrow off?”

Abby rolled her eyes. “Get out of here or you’ll be late for St Martin’s.”
It was unusual that Elora took Sundays off and it felt strange to wake up at half eight the next morning. She lazed around her flat for several hours, drinking tea and listening to records.

It wasn’t until close to noon that she opened Twitter, a habit that sort of irritated her but that she figured was harmless enough so she’d not tried to break it. She scrolled through her feed, sipping her tea, and was equal parts surprised and unsurprised to see Harry, drunk and sad and watery-eyed, being guided to a car by Nick Grimshaw. She didn’t even bother to read the caption, closing Twitter and throwing her phone to the opposite end of the sofa.

“What the fuck.”

It was at around three o’clock that Elora’s phone whistled. She searched for it, finding it under her old copy of *The Mousetrap*, and found two text messages.

*Elora I’m sorry please will you come down,* read Harry’s first message. *I’m sorry,* said the second.

She sighed, eyes closed and head dropping, heartbroken. She didn’t want Harry to feel he had to apologise to her; he already apologised to Nick for everything, things that didn’t warrant an apology, and that was too much.

*ok love,* she sent back. *i’ll be down in 10 minutes. i’m still in my jammies. ask abby to make you some chamomile-lavender tea with acacia honey and have an apricot brioche.*

She got ready quickly, changing into real clothes and undoing the previous day’s braid and brushing out the tangles. Glad her flat was only upstairs from the bakery, she made her way down and found Harry sitting at the coffee bar, a pot of tea and a pastry in front of him, looking miserable.

“Sweetie,” she said gently, walking to him and wrapping her small, tattooed arms around his shoulders. His head dropped forward onto her shoulder and he reached out to wrap his own tattooed arms around her waist.

They stayed like that for several minutes, Harry’s breath tickling her neck and matching hers, slow and steady and calm.

“He makes me feel bad when I don’t want to go out,” he whispered. “Like I’m hurting his feelings and I don’t- like I don’t care about him and I’m doing it to be mean. I’m not doing it to be mean.”

“Of course you’re not,” agreed Elora.

“So I do it even though- even though I don’t want to,” he said, exhaling shakily. “So he’s not upset.”

Elora pulled back from Harry. She moved a stool over and climbed up, close enough that their knees were touching, and took Harry’s hands in hers. “Harry, love,” she said quietly, “that’s called emotional manipulation and it’s a kind of emotional abuse. He’s trying to make it seem like he’s the victim, like he’s the one who’s being wronged, even though it’s really you. He tries to make you feel guilty so you’ll do what he wants.”

Harry lowered his head, eyes fixed on his knees, and said, “Why?”

“Because he wants to control you. And he doesn’t want to lose you but for, like, the wrong reasons. Not because he’s in love with you or cares for you deeply but because you’re young and attractive and sweet and talented,” Elora told him. “Do you ever- Do you see the pictures of you with Nick? The pap pictures?”

“No,” said Harry, shaking his head.
“Could I show you?” she asked.

Harry looked conflicted and Elora thought he was probably beginning to understand something. Finally, he nodded.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and scrolled through The Daily Mail’s feed until she found the picture from the day before, starting with the one that broke her heart a little less.

“Here,” she said, handing him her phone.

Harry took it from her, looking at the picture. Elora tried to read Harry’s face, tried to pick out the emotions that played across his features, but didn’t think she could name them.

“I don’t- I don’t look very happy,” said Harry after a few moments. “I don’t like- I don’t like how I look when I’m drunk.”

“No. You look sad,” agreed Elora. She looked up at him and added, “I hate it. He’s not even- Nick’s not even trying to cover your face or stop it or- or anything.”

Harry handed her phone back and she took it, scrolling to find the picture from earlier that morning.

“This is- this is worse,” she warned, giving the phone to him again.

Harry studied the picture on the screen, brows furrowed. “No,” he said after several long moments. “It’s even worse that… I let him- I let him”—he leant forward and whispered his next words—“fuck me. Like that.”

Elora felt tears in her eyes, chin trembling as she tried to stop herself from crying. She pressed her fingers to her lips and blinked quickly.

“Harry,” she said, voice shaking, “that’s—”

“I know.”

They sat together awhile longer, Harry finishing his tea and bun while Elora traced soothing patterns at the back of his neck with her fingers.

“Would you like me to come over?” asked Elora finally. “I can make dinner. We can watch a movie and you can have an early night,” she suggested. “What time’s your audition tomorrow?”


“Of course I will,” she said sincerely. “If you want.”

“Nobody’s ever come to my flat,” he said quietly. “Except my mum. And Gemma and Robin when I first moved in.”

Elora stared at him. She didn’t want to bring up Nick again but she wanted to know why Nick hadn’t, at any point in their three month sort-of relationship, gone to Harry’s flat. “Why?” she asked, ambiguous enough, though she knew the answer would be about Nick because there was nobody else who Harry would invite to his flat.

“It’s too far,” said Harry. “And he’s allergic to cats.”

Elora and Harry left at five o’clock, Abby shooing them away with the promise that she and Carey
could close up just fine without her.

At Harry’s flat, Elora was surprised to find a well-stocked pantry and refrigerator, everyday basics and numerous unusual ingredients—Thai fish sauce, Calasparra rice, Sicilian salt-packed anchovies, curry leaves—filling them.

“I like to cook,” Harry told her with a shrug. “I haven’t much. Lately. Because I’ve been- I’ve spent a lot of time with—”

“Yeah.”

Elora made dinner and Harry, excited to have someone who would willingly—happily, even—listen to him talk about things he liked, asked her if she would like to watch *Wayward Pines* with him.

“Oh my God, Harry!” said Elora three hours later. “I can’t- I mean, I’ve got to go because it’s late and, like, I’ve got to be at the shop in the morning and you need a good night’s sleep and- We’re going to leave it like that? Until I come over next time? That’s such a cliff—”

“You’re going to come over again?” asked Harry, interrupting Elora’s ranting. “Really?”

“Only if you want,” said Elora carefully. The last thing she wanted was to make Harry feel like he had to have her over again. He didn’t need anyone else to pressure him into doing anything he didn’t truly want to do.

“I do!” he exclaimed. “I do! Please come again.”

She smiled, overwhelmed by the emotions in Harry’s voice. “I will. This was nice.”

Harry nodded and gave a happy smile. “It was. I had- It was a lot of fun. Thank you.”

“Thank you for having me over. Now get a good night’s sleep, yeah, love?” she said as she tucked a few strands of hair behind his ear. “And drink lots of water because I think your body probably needs it.”

“Thanks, El,” said Harry, leaning forward to give the girl a hug. Face pressed to her collarbone, he said, voice a muffled whisper, “I love you.”

“I love you too, sweetie,” she told him, rubbing a small hand over his back. “Now come to Black Treacle before your audition tomorrow and I’ll make you a nice lunch and give you some tea.”

“I will,” he said.

Elora left Harry’s flat and headed down High Street to her bakery and her little flat above it. She felt like there had been a bit of a breakthrough with Harry, like he’d realised that Nick wasn’t good for him, and she hoped he remembered that the next day and the day after that.

She needed to meet Louis, she decided.

When Harry arrived at Black Treacle the next day at just before noon, he was nervous but hopeful.

“You’ll do great, sweetie,” said Elora as she made him a cup of London Fog—the key, she’d told Harry one day, was to use lavender Earl Grey tea, not just regular, and add a touch of vanilla—and a bacon butty. “You’ve already got Louis on your side.”

Harry gave her a grateful smile. “Thanks, Elora.”
“And let me know how it goes! I’ll be anxious to know,” she said. “Don’t know how late you’ll be but you could always stop by when you’re back in Sutton. Like, my flat.” She placed his sandwich on the counter and added, “Oh, but you’ve got Pilates tonight! Will you be back in time?”

Harry looked up at his friend over the rim of his teacup. “Um,” he said, licking the foamy milk off his lips, “I think. I mean, Pilates is at seven. I should be back by then.”

“Well, just promise you’ll text me, yeah?”

Harry smiled. “I promise.”

It was at about twenty minutes to five that Elora got a text from Harry.

I’m just off the train. I’ll be there in five minutes!

see you in a few! Elora replied.

Five minutes later, Harry rushed through the door of the bakery, hair wet and limp from the late afternoon’s drizzle.

“How did it go?” she asked, taking a sip of tea and wiping the counters with a damp towel.

“Good,” said Harry, settling onto a stool at the coffee bar and stealing a sip of Elora’s peach tea.

She gave him a playful glare. “When will you find out?”

“I already- I know!” he said happily, smile wide and dimples pressed deep into his cheeks. “I got it!”

“Harry!” exclaimed Elora. “That’s amazing!”

“But it’s- it’s even better. I think.”

“What is?” wondered Elora, confused by Harry’s half-statement.

“There’s another model too,” said Harry. “It’s not just me.”

“Why’s that even better?”

“Um, because”—Harry blushed and Elora watched him curiously—“because it’s, um, it’s.” Harry exhaled and, with a bashful little smile, said, “It’s Niall.”

“How fun!” said Elora, grin wide. “I bet that’ll be so lovely. And Louis’ the photographer, yeah?”

Harry nodded. “I think- We think, like, Niall and me, we think that Louis set us. For the job.”

“Yeah?” asked Elora.

Harry nodded again. “It’s- Well, it’s a magazine called Sue. And, um, and Louis’ boyfriend Liam is the editor. And the casting director. And a lot of things because they’re still pretty new and, like, and they don’t have a big staff or anything. So Louis recommended both Niall and me to Liam so- I don’t think there was anyone else auditioning, to be honest.”

Elora decided she really needed to meet Louis.

“That should be fun then,” she said.

“Yeah,” agreed Harry. “And Nick can’t even be upset because, like, because we’re just working
together!”

Elora’s heart fell into her stomach. “Harry,” she said tentatively.

“I know,” said Harry with a sigh. “I’m allowed to have other friends. I’ll—”

“Harry,” said Elora again, sounding and feeling defeated. “You’re still- You’re staying with him?”

“What?” asked Harry.

Elora took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I thought, after the last- After Saturday and Sunday, I thought you were going to, like, break it off with him.”

“I thought maybe, I’d- I’m going to, like”—Harry looked sheepish and embarrassed—“I’m going to talk to him about how I feel. About everything. And maybe he’ll- maybe he’ll be a little nicer. Maybe he doesn’t realise—”

“He realises exactly how he treats you,” Elora cut in, voice strong and unwavering. “He knows, Harry, and he might act different for a little while but then it’ll go back to how it’s been and he’ll make it out like you did something wrong.”

“Maybe,” said Harry, sounding like he didn’t want to believe Elora even though he probably knew somewhere in his heart and mind that she was right.

Elora took the disappointment she was feeling and hid it down inside, hoping Harry wouldn’t see it because she really didn’t want to hurt him. “When do you start?” she asked, changing the subject to avoid saying anything else about Nick. “The photoshoot.”

“Oh,” said Harry, blinking himself out of his thoughts. “On, um, on Thursday. It’s all spring clothes, you know, for the spring issue. And it’s almost all outdoor locations. So they want to get it done before it gets too cold for us to be outside wearing, like, warmer weather clothes.”

“Do you know where you’ll be shooting?” asked Elora.

“Not yet,” Harry told her. “Louis just said around London.”

The conversation continued about ten minutes longer, both avoiding any mention of Nick, until Harry announced that he needed to leave so he could get to his flat and change for Pilates.

“Bye, sweetie,” said Elora, ruffling his damp hair. “Have a good night.”

“You too, El,” he said. He stood from his stool and headed to the door.

Just as he reached out to push the door open, Elora called out, “Harry.” He turned to look at her and she said, a gentle smile quirking her lips, “I’m proud of you, love.”

Harry beamed, smile so happy and genuine, and said, “Thanks, El. That means- that means a lot.”

“Now get out of here,” she laughed. “You’ll be late for Pilates.”

Harry grinned and waved, turning again to push the door open and step out of the bakery and onto the pavement.

He began his walk to his flat, surprised to feel his phone vibrate in his pocket. He pulled it out and saw Nick’s name on the screen. Part of him—an admittedly large part—didn’t want to answer but he didn’t want to be rude; he didn’t really have a good reason not to answer.
“Hello,” he said, trying to sound happy to get a call from Nick.

“Hi, love,” said Nick. “How was the audition?”

Harry bit his lip, struggling to decide how much he should tell the older man. “It went well. They, um, they gave me the job. So I’ll- I’ll start shooting on, um, on Thursday.”

“That’s great, Harry,” said Nick. “Certainly helps to have Louis on your side.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, I suppose,” he said, thinking of what Elora would say. Louis didn’t cast him, didn’t offer him the job. He’d only given Harry’s name to Liam.

“I’m proud of you, love,” Nick told him. It didn’t sound right coming from Nick, thought Harry. It had sounded warm and sincere when Elora had said it but it just sounded forced when Nick said it, like he didn’t really think or feel it but knew it was what Harry wanted to hear so he said it anyway.

“Yeah, thanks, Nick,” said Harry because he didn’t really believe him.

“What are you doing tonight?” asked Nick.

Harry rolled his eyes—he’d been going to Pilates every Monday night since July but Nick didn’t seem to remember or care—and said, “I’ve got Pilates.”

“That’s all you do,” said Nick with a huff. “Pilates. I’m starting to think that’s just an excuse to get out of spending time with me.”

“No, Nick, it’s—”

“I get that I’m not enough for you anymore, Harry,” interrupted Nick.

“That’s not”—Harry took a breath and thought of Louis and Elora—“I go to Pilates every Monday night, Nick. Once a week. It’s not- That’s not all I do.”

“Well, you certainly don’t spend the rest of your time with me,” said Nick, pouty and petulant. “If you don’t want to see me anymore, you can just say it.”

Harry inhaled sharply, stopping in his tracks in the middle of the pavement. It was an out, an opportunity to end this relationship with Nick without seeing him. He wouldn’t be able to do it face-to-face, he knew, because seeing Nick’s face would make it too real and harsh; breaking up with Nick over the phone would be less direct and more disconnected.

But it felt cowardly and cruel. Harry wasn’t sure if he was a coward but he knew he wasn’t cruel.

“I have a lot- I’ve got a lot of hobbies, Nick,” Harry said instead, continuing his walk to his flat. “I go to my book club twice a month and I have yoga on Sunday nights. And I go to Scrabble night at the library sometimes. I’ve got- I like to do other”—Harry sighed—“I don’t like to go out every night. To clubs and parties and- and stuff like that.”

“So book club and Pilates are more enjoyable than spending time with me?” asked Nick, whiny and childish.

Yes! screamed Harry in his head. “They’re just different,” he said out loud. “And I like quiet nights.”

Nick sighed, frustration and irritation obvious, and said, “Have fun at Pilates, Harry.”

Before Harry could say another word, the line went dead.
Harry tried not to let the phone conversation ruin his night, trying to think instead about the pleasant evening he’d spent with Elora the night before and the excitement of the upcoming photoshoot with Louis and Niall.

He focused throughout his class, concentrating on the different movements and his flow, pushing Nick and his petty self-centeredness out of his thoughts.

He arrived back at his flat at around half eight. After a relaxing shower, he put on joggers and an old tee and made himself dinner before sitting down to watch television.

Harry went to bed early and woke up early, making his way down to Black Treacle by nine o’clock.

He was greeted by Elora, busy behind the counter making coffee and tea and lattes and wrapping up pastries to go. “Sit down, love. I’ll get you your tea in a few minutes,” she said and Harry nodded, sitting on the only empty stool at the coffee bar.

“Hey, El,” he said ten minutes later as she set a pot of Earl Grey tea and a cup, saucer, and spoon on the bar in front of Harry.

“How was Pilates?” she asked while she added a bowl of sugar cubes and a creamer of milk to the tea setting on the counter.

“Good,” said Harry. “I like Pilates. The ladies are always friendly and the instructor is nice.”

“I’m glad you enjoy it,” she told him, searching for her own mug of tea before finding it beside the till.

“Nick isn’t,” said Harry, watching Elora’s reaction.

Her eyes squinted and brows furrowed in distaste, lips quirked down into a small frown. “What? Who cares?”

“He told me last night. That’s all I do, he says,” he said. “Reckons I use it as an excuse not to spend time with him.” Elora rolled her eyes and Harry continued, relating his entire phone conversation with Nick the previous evening to the girl.

“Why didn’t you tell him you don’t want to see him anymore?” she asked when he told her that Nick had given him the option.

“It seemed- I mean, I don’t know,” said Harry. “I’m not sure if- if I don’t want to see him anymore.” Elora sighed and Harry added, “It seemed mean to tell him, like, to say it over the phone.”

“You’ve got to talk to him, Harry,” said Elora firmly. “If you’re not going to end it with him, you’ve got to talk to him. Tell him you don’t like how he treats you most of the time and that he makes you feel guilty for things you shouldn’t feel guilty about. Tell him he makes you cry. Tell him you don’t like all of the pap pictures and that you don’t like clubs and parties and—”

“I told him that,” Harry cut it. “The- the clubs and parties part, I mean. I told him I don’t like to go out every night and that I like- that I like quiet nights.”

“Yeah?” asked Elora, looking at him with raised eyebrows. “What did he say?”

“He asked- he asked if I like Pilates and book club more than him.”

“And what did you say?” she asked.
“I said- I said they’re different,” Harry told her with a sigh.

“And?”

“He told me to have fun at Pilates and then he hung up before I- before I could say anything else,” finished Harry.

Elora’s eyebrows furrowed and she said, rather seriously and a bit offended, “That’s rude.”

Harry almost laughed. There was something almost funny about the way Elora was offended—and seemingly surprised—by Nick’s lack of polite telephone etiquette just moments after reminding Harry how badly Nick so often treated Harry; it was almost like she couldn’t believe someone could be both so mean and so rude.

“Would you like something to eat?” she asked after she took a sip of tea. “I think Abby’s just pulled some apple-buttermilk scones out of the oven.”

Harry stayed and ate two scones with apple butter and clotted cream. He finally decided to head back to his flat at around noon, a bacon butty Elora insisted he take for lunch wrapped up in a paper bag.

It was a damp, grey, overcast day and Harry didn’t feel like going out again. He spent the afternoon listening to records and doing chores around the flat. He ate his bacon butty and made himself tea, settling in to start reading his book for book club. The next meeting wasn’t until the following Wednesday but he wasn’t sure how much free time he would have once the photoshoot for Sue started so he wanted to get ahead.

Harry’s phone dinged as he was finishing the second chapter of his novel. He found it under one of the throw pillows on the sofa and looked at the screen. It was a text from Nick.

Please come over tonight love? we don’t have to go out just a quiet night at my flat. I’ve got wine and cheese and we can cuddle and watch a movie.

Harry’s breath caught, brows raised. Maybe Nick had thought about Harry’s words from the previous evening’s phone call. Maybe he’d realised that Harry might enjoy his time with Nick more if they spent more time together doing things Harry liked, like quiet evenings watching movies and sharing each other’s company, rather than just the things Nick liked.

Harry heard Elora’s voice, words she’d spoken just the day before—“He might act different for a little while but then it’ll go back to how it’s been.”—and pushed them away.

OK What time should I come?

he replied.

It seemed only fair, he thought, to give Nick a chance to show he’d considered Harry’s feelings and decided to make some changes. And Elora was right when she’d said that he needed to talk to Nick.

Does 8 work?

Harry looked at the clock. It was still early, only just past five o’clock, so he would have more than enough time to get dressed in something a bit nicer than the joggers and old hoodie he’d put on when he got back from Black Treacle and get to Nick’s flat.

Yeah! I’ll see you then, Harry texted back.

Harry made his way to Nick’s flat a few hours later and, just before the main entrance to Nick’s building, was greeted by the flashes and clicks of two cameras. He ducked his head and brought a
hand to his face to cover it as best as he could, continuing his walk to the door.

“Are you here to see Nick, Harry?” asked one of the paps, following Harry as he made his way down the pavement.

“Excuse me,” said Harry quietly, attempting to move past the men and make his way into the sanctuary of the lobby.

“Spending the night?” asked the other, stepping in front of Harry, camera still clicking.

Harry turned, trying to sidestep the two paps, but the first moved in front of him and blocked his path again. A flash went off. “Things must be pretty serious with you and Nick, yeah?”

“Mr Styles!” called a voice from the building’s entrance. Harry looked up and noticed the other men looking toward the voice as well. One of the doormen—Bernie, an older man with a gentle demeanor that always made Harry feel calm and safe when he arrived at Nick’s after a night out, more than a little tipsy and dizzy—stood just past the paps. “I’ll ask you gentlemen to leave or I’ll call the police and report you were harassing a tenant’s guest.”

Without a word, the two men hurried away down the street.

“Thank you,” said Harry, feeling close to tears. He tried to hide his face from Bernie, embarrassed by the overwhelming emotions he was feeling because he probably shouldn’t be feeling them; it was silly, he thought, because he was becoming famous now and he had to get used to it.

“Come here, lad,” said Bernie gently, reaching out and gripping Harry’s arm lightly. “Let’s get you inside.”

Harry allowed the older man to lead him into the lobby and to the lift.

“Tell Nick you don’t like it, Harry,” he said, giving Harry a stern look. “It’s not fair to expect you to just accept having your privacy invaded when you come out for an evening with him.”

Harry nodded and stepped into the lift when the doors opened. “Thanks, Bernie,” Harry whispered, waving as the doors closed.

When he finally made his way to Nick’s door, he was greeted by the older lad. “Harry! Hello! You’re”—he stopped, smile falling away as he noticed Harry’s pout—“What’s wrong, love?”

“Did you- did you know they were going to be there?” asked Harry sadly.

“Did I know who were going to be there?” Nick looked mildly confused.

“Those paps,” said Harry, feeling a little angry. “Did you know they were- that they were going to be outside?”

Nick looked irritated now. “Of course I didn’t know they were there,” he said coldly. “You’re famous now, Harry. The paparazzi are going to follow you around.”

“Except they don’t- Nobody”—Harry sighed—“nobody follows me around when I’m not with you.”

“Do you think I tipped them off or something, Harry?” asked Nick. “Is that what you think?”

Harry didn’t say anything. He did kind of think that—something about Bernie’s words had put that thought into his mind as he’d taken the lift up to Nick’s floor—but it would probably sound a bit
paranoid if he admitted it.

“They were probably just waiting for me,” Nick told him. “Waiting to see if I was going out or coming back or something.”

Harry knew that sounded far more likely. He exhaled and said quietly, abashedly, “Yeah. Probably.” He shot Nick an embarrassed little smile and added, “Sorry, Nick. I’m- That was stupid.”

Nick gave Harry a pleased smirk and Harry thought he was probably glad to see Harry hadn’t completely lost his mind. “It’s all right, love. We all think silly things sometimes.”

Nick opened a bottle of Viognier and joined Harry on the sofa, glasses filled with the pale gold wine and a plate of cheese with dried fruits and nuts on the coffee table.

Halfway through the movie they were watching—it was *Pulp Fiction* and Harry had never liked that movie, had seen it a handful of times and could never quite follow the plot—Nick pulled Harry closer to him, the model’s back pressed to his side and his lips against Harry’s ear.

“How’s this, love?” he asked. “A quiet night in with me? This what you like?”

Harry let out a slow breath, trying to relax a bit more into Nick’s arms, and said quietly, “Yes. This is- this is nice. Quiet and, like, just- just us and not a whole club of, um, not a whole club of people.”

“Good,” said Nick, lips still brushing the shell of Harry’s ear as he spoke. “Just want my boy to be happy.”

The movie ended and, as if Nick knew Harry was about to suggest he leave, Nick offered another glass of wine. “Don’t want to leave the bottle half empty,” he said with a pout. “Just one more glass.”

Almost begrudgingly, Harry smiled and agreed. “Just- just one more.”

Harry felt something heavy in his stomach when he woke up the next morning, alone and covered with Nick’s fluffy white duvet. He hadn’t intended to stay the night, hadn’t meant to drink two and a half bottles of wine with Nick, hadn’t planned to let Nick fuck him stiff.

Whether he’d planned it or not, however, it was exactly what happened.

He felt ashamed, embarrassed, guilty. He felt hot all over, feverish, and wanted to cry when he sat up and discovered just how badly his head hurt.

He found a bottle of paracetamol and a glass of water on the nightstand, a note in Nick’s handwriting beside it. *For your head... and probably your bum too ;) xo*

Harry got up and dressed as quickly as he could, checking for his phone, keys, and wallet before leaving Nick’s flat. He passed the morning doorman, a man named Charlie, and said a rushed good morning to him as he left the building.

He couldn’t go to Elora right now, couldn’t talk to her about this yet, and he definitely couldn’t talk to Louis either. He cursed himself for not having more friends, for not getting to know any of the ladies in his Pilates or yoga classes or any of his fellow book club members well enough that he could talk to them about his relationship problems.

He suspected they would probably say much the same as Elora and Louis, though.
Back in Sutton an hour later, Harry unlocked the door to his flat and walked in. Butterscotch greeted him, twining around his legs as he kicked off his boots and made his way into the living room.

“I’m sorry, B,” he said to his cat, feeling miserable. “I’m sorry. I’m- I let everyone down and it’s not-it’s not fair.” He filled her food and water bowls before filling a glass with ice water for himself. He drank the entire thing in one gulp and refilled it, carrying it to his bedroom and placing it on his nightstand.

Harry stripped to his boxers and slipped under the covers of his bed, warm and comfortable. Butterscotch jumped up onto the bed and moved to his head, nuzzling her face against his messy hair for a moment before flopping down onto the pillow beside him. He heard Niall’s voice—“I love cats. Funny little things.”—and thought that maybe he would text him when he woke up later.

When he got up a few hours later, he had a text from Nick. It said, 

*Hi love! Had fun last night! Come over again tonight and we can have a nice “quiet” evening in again. ;)*

Harry’s stomach churned. He really didn’t like the implication in Nick’s message. He rolled his eyes and closed his texts.

He stared at his phone unblinkingly for a moment, thumbs hovering over the screen, and then he reopened his messages and scrolled down to the message Louis had sent on Sunday with the picture of Niall and himself at the Oliver Spencer show. He opened the details of the message and, finger hesitating over the message bubble beside Niall’s number—still not saved in his phone because that seemed to Harry too much like a promise to himself that he would call or text Niall—for a few seconds.

He exhaled and tapped it, typing, *Hi Niall! It’s Harry Styles.* He knew it wasn’t anything risky, that he wasn’t really putting himself out there with an invitation to hang out, but he sent it quickly nevertheless, before he could change his mind.

Harry was surprised to receive a response not even ten minutes later.

*Hey Harry! What’s up mate ?*  
*Nothing*, replied Harry. *I just wanted to say hi and that I’m looking forward to tomorrow!*

*Yeah, should be good craic . Doing a shoot with Louis and you!* read Niall’s message.

Harry wasn’t really sure what to respond with but he didn’t have to worry because Niall’s next text popped up before he could start typing a response. *Doing anything tonight ? Could come over to mine and watch a movie or something! Just doing the “quiet night before a photoshoot” thing but I’d love you to join if you don’t have more exciting plans !*

Harry’s eyes widened. He hadn’t expected Niall to invite him over so easily, as if it was no big deal. He supposed it wasn’t really a big deal; he just overthought everything.

And worried about what Nick would and wouldn’t like too much.

*That sounds nice*, said Harry.

*But… ?* asked Niall.

*Nothing! It sounds nice*, he responded and then typed a second message. *If you’re sure…*

*Course I am mate! Come over whenever I’ll be home for the rest of the night.*
Harry was filled with nervous excitement at the idea of going to Niall’s flat. It was only half three and he was sure Niall wouldn’t want him that early but now that Harry was eager to leave, he didn’t just want to wait around his flat.

He decided to take a shower and go to Black Treacle for tea and a pastry before he headed to Niall’s. The bus ride from the Sutton Green stop to the Surbiton Crescent stop would take about an hour and Niall had told him that it was only about a two minute walk from the stop to his flat on Southsea Road.

“You look handsome!” said Elora when Harry walked into the bakery. “Where are you off to?”

Harry blushed, a bashful smile flittering on his lips. “Um, I’m going to, uh. I’m going to hang out with Niall.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Elora.

Harry looked at his friend, brows raised and shocked amusement on his face. “Why are you- What are you so happy about?”

“I just think he’ll make a nice friend,” said Elora with a shrug. She bit her lip, trying to stop a huge smile from forming, and then added, gushing with excitement, “And I think you’d made a really sweet couple.”

Harry looked exasperated but thoroughly amused. “You don’t even—”

“I saw those pictures, though, and you looked so happy sitting there together!”

“Anyway,” said Harry, rolling his eyes, “do I look- I don’t look, like, too… I don’t know. Too—”

“Handsome?” supplied Elora with a grin.

“—like, overdressed? Like, for just watching movies?” finished Harry. He looked down at his outfit, eyebrows furrowing as he considered his clothing choices.


“Like, in a good way or—”

“Like, if Niall doesn’t try the old arm-around-the-shoulder-yawn thing while you’re watching the movie, he’s showing some amazing self-restraint,” said Elora. “That kind of way.”

Harry blushed and drank the tea Elora had set down in front of him.

“What time are you going?” she asked.

“Niall said whenever because he’ll be home- he’ll be home the rest of the day,” Harry answered, “but I didn’t want to go that early and, like, wear out- wear out my welcome or anything.”

“I think you should go right now,” said Elora with a smile, playfully whisking away the plate of chocolate chip cookies she was setting in front of him. “Immediately.”

Harry stared at her, eyes wide, and she laughed lightly and returned the plate of cookies to the counter.

“I don’t think he’d’ve told you to come whenever because he’d be home for the rest of the day if he
didn’t mean it.” Elora shrugged. “Think he means he’d like you to go whenever.”

At five o’clock, as Elora was starting to close the cafe for the day, she packed up a box of leftover chocolate-peanut butter biscuits and a few sweet potato brownies. “For your movie night, love,” she said, sliding the box in front of him. “Now haven’t you got a bus to catch?”

Harry thanked Elora for the box of sweets and gave her a one-armed hug.

“Enjoy yourself tonight, Harry,” she said. “Just relax, yeah?” Harry nodded. “And good luck tomorrow. I expect to hear all about it.”

“About- about tonight or the photoshoot?”

“Both,” Elora told him with a gentle smile.

Harry left and made his way to the Sutton Green bus stop, taking the 213 to Surbiton Crescent and walking to Southsea Road. He found Niall’s building—Number 14—and found the door with a big brass C.

Standing in front of the door, Harry took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Courage summoned as best as he supposed it could be, he tucked the box of pastries under his arm and lifted his hand to knock.

The door opened a minute later and Niall smiled, warm and kind, and Harry smiled back shyly.

“Harry, mate!” said Niall jovially. “Come in!”

“Hi, Niall,” said Harry quietly. “Um, hi. I hope I’m not too early.”

“Told ya to come whenever, didn’t I?” It wasn’t a question but a reassurance and Harry nodded. “Now come in!” He stepped aside and gestured Harry through the open door.

“I, um, I brought sweets,” Harry told Niall, holding the box out a bit to show Niall. “You’re not allergic to peanuts, are you?”

“No, I’m not,” said Niall, taking the box. “But ya didn’t have to bring anything, mate.”

“Oh, um, okay. Sorry,” said Harry, feeling silly.

Niall frowned. “What are ya sorry for?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted with a shrug.

“Well, if ya don’t know what you’re sorry for, ya shouldn’t be sorry,” said Niall gently. “Yeh’ve got nothing to be sorry for anyway. It’s nice ya brought sweets. Just ya don’t need to bring things when we hang out. Unless ya want to.”

Harry’s lips twitched up into a tentative smile. “Okay.”

“No treats until after dinner, though,” said Niall with a smirk. “Naughty boy, ya are, trying to stray me away from my balanced diet.”

Harry blushed—something about hearing Niall call him a naughty boy made him feel flushed and overheated—and asked in a fit of boldness, “What’s for dinner, then?”

“Was thinking we could order pizza,” suggested Niall.
“Is that part of your balanced diet?” Harry asked with a grin, pleased by his own bit of teasing.

“Cheeky bastard,” laughed Niall.

Niall called to order a pizza from his favourite place—a large meat lovers with caramelized onions—and they settled in to watch television.

“Ya ever heard of a show called Wayward Pines?” Niall asked Harry as he arranged a bowl of crisps and a container of sour cream and onion dip on the coffee table.

Harry turned to Niall, eyes wide with surprise and excitement. “You know about Wayward Pines?”

“Yeah,” agreed Niall, nodding and taking a seat on the opposite end of the sofa. “Binged it last weekend. Ya know it, then?”

“That’s- It’s- Yeah,” said Harry. “I watched it every week. I love Matt Dillon. He’s”—Harry blushed—“he’s so dreamy.”

Niall laughed, loud and happy, and Harry realised that if that had been Nick laughing, he’d have felt embarrassed and a bit stupid but it didn’t feel that way with Niall. He wasn’t laughing at Harry, wasn’t making fun of him.

“I’m not into older men, meself,” said Niall. “But he’s definitely handsome. Even dreamy, I suppose.”

Harry smiled shyly.

“So ya want to watch it even though we’ve both seen it?” asked Niall. “Or ya want to find something different?”

“Oh, I don’t- I don’t mind,” said Harry. “Um, you can- Whatever you want.”

“Nah, mate. You’re my guest! You get to choose,” insisted Niall.

Harry tried to make up his mind quickly, not wanting to irritate Niall by making him wait for his decision, but was distracted from his thoughts by a knock at the door.

“All right, lad,” said Niall a minute later, returning to the living room with a large pizza box in his hands. “Ya ready?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Harry quickly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t- I got distracted and I didn’t decide yet.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Niall told him, setting the pizza on the floor next to the coffee table. “I’ll go get plates and napkins. Ya want something to drink?”

“Just- just water, please,” said Harry, hoping Niall wouldn’t insist he have a glass of wine or a beer.

“I’ll be right back.”
Niall returned from the kitchen a few minutes later, two plates and a stack of napkins in one hand and a glass of ice water in the other. He placed everything on the coffee table and opened the pizza box.

“I’d like to watch *Wayward Pines*,” he told Niall. “If that’s- if that’s okay.”

“Course it is,” said Niall, smiling brilliantly at Harry as he sat on the sofa, two slices of pizza on his plate.

An hour and a half later, the second episode ended and Niall paused the auto-play. “Got to use the toilet,” he said. “Want some more water or anything?”

“Um, yes, please,” said Harry. “Just water. But I can get it. If that’s- if it’s okay.”

Niall nodded. “There’s a pitcher in the fridge. Can help yourself to anything, if you’d like. I’ve got beer and some fizzy if ya want either of those.”

As the fourth episode of the series came to an end, Harry looked at Niall. “I should go home,” he said, though he didn’t really want to leave. It was nice with Niall, comfortable and easy to be around him; he felt safe and wanted and content. “It’s getting late.”

“Oh, wow,” said Niall, noticing the time. “How’s it ten o’clock already?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “But, um, Niall. This was- this was nice. Like, really. I’m glad- It’s nice that you’re kind of like- kind of like my friend.”

Niall gave him a soft smile. “You don’t have to say the ‘kind of’ bit, ya know. Can just say I’m your friend. Because I am. ‘S long as ya want me to be.”

“I do!” said Harry eagerly. He didn’t even care if he sounded desperate. “You don’t- you don’t make me feel silly. And it’s nice.”

“Why would I make you feel silly?” asked Niall, brows furrowed.

“Some people I know who I- People I spend time with sometimes make me feel like I’m, I don’t know”—he sighed, trying to think of what he was trying to say and how he felt when he was with Nick and his friends—“silly and childish and like I’m… unsophisticated because I don’t like posh things. And I don’t like to do a lot of things that- I guess that I’m supposed to like now.”

“You shouldn’t let anyone tell you what you should or shouldn’t like, Harry,” said Niall seriously. “Doesn’t matter how many photoshoots you do or how famous you get. You get to choose what you like and what you don’t want to do.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. He hesitated and then added, sounding like he was confessing something he’d kept hidden for a long time, “And they make me feel stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” said Niall, firm and so certain.

“I think it’s- I think it’s because of how I talk and, you know, just.” He sighed. “Like that. I just- I talk really slow and I kind of, like, I get lost in my head a lot and I just ramble and sound really stupid and—”

“You don’t sound stupid,” said Niall, sitting up and looking directly at Harry. “You don’t sound stupid at all. Yeah, ya talk slowly and ya ramble but that’s just you. And there’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just a little quirk.”
Harry stared at Niall, searching his face for signs that he was lying. “You don’t think I sound stupid? Really?”

“Really,” Niall told him. “It’s kind of nice to hear ya ramble. Special. Like ya want me to know what you’re thinking and feeling so you’re taking me along while ya figure it out. Like ya trust me enough.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” said Niall with a gentle smile. “Now get home and get some sleep, love.”

Harry’s lips quirked up. “Thanks, Niall,” he said. “This was really lovely. I- I had such a nice night. Just hanging out with you.” He turned to Niall, brows furrowed and face betraying his embarrassment. “I’m sorry if that was weird to say.”

“It wasn’t weird at all,” Niall assured him. “I had a really nice time hanging out with you too. I’m looking forward to spending the next few days shooting with you. You’re a sweetheart, Harry, and I enjoy your company.”

Harry left soon after and Niall watched him walk down the street, waving to him before he turned around and closed the door to his flat behind himself.

As he cleared the living room of dirty plates, glasses, and the remnants of their pizza and got ready for bed, Niall couldn’t help but think how much he’d enjoyed his evening with Harry. They got on so well and he was pleased to find that he and Harry had a fair bit in common. While they obviously had a lot of differences, they shared a lot of interests, enjoyed a lot of the same television shows and movies and music, and had similar opinions about most of the other topics they’d discussed so far.

He pushed aside Louis’ insistence that they were soulmates, though. The universe wasn’t cruel enough to send a soulmate who was already in love with another person.

In love with the wrong person, thought Niall. There was no way Nick was Harry’s soulmate because a soulmate wouldn’t treat their partner the way Nick treated Harry. Although Harry hadn’t said that it was Nick who made him feel stupid and silly and unsophisticated, Niall was certain it was. Not for the first time, he thought that Louis was probably right about Nick’s attraction to and the basis of his relationship with Harry.

It bothered him because Harry was too kind and sweet to be treated badly. Nick really had got lucky, Niall thought with a tinge of anger, when he met such a trusting, impressionable young man who was as beautiful as Harry.

He tried not to let it bother him, tried not to let it keep him from a good night’s sleep, and thought about the fun he would have with Harry and Louis over the next few days.

When Niall woke up the next morning, he found a text from Louis to both Harry and himself telling them to meet him at Rock and Rose Photography on Brighton Road in Surbiton. It was about a twenty minute walk from Niall’s flat and he was surprised that they would be working in a studio in South West London that, as far as Niall knew, was only a portrait studio.

He arrived at the studio at ten of eleven and spotted Louis standing on the curb smoking a cigarette.

“Hey, mate,” he said, walking toward the older lad.

“Nialler,” said Louis in greeting, exhaling a long stream of smoke and dropping his cigarette to the ground.
“Harry here yet?”

“Not yet. It’s a bit farther for him though,” said Louis. “Should be here soon.”

“What are we doing out here in Surbiton at a portrait studio?” asked Niall, the curiosity he’d felt since he’d read Louis’ text getting the better of him.

“It’s closer to location,” said Louis, shrugging a shoulder. “And I’m friends with the owners.”

“Where’s location?” asked Niall a little wearily.

Louis gave him a grin that Niall felt could only be described as shit-eating and said, “Today and tomorrow? Kingston and Twickenham.”

“And Monday and Tuesday?”

Louis’ grin widened and he said, self-satisfied smugness dripping from his words, “Sutton and Cheam.”

“You won’t give up,” said Niall, shaking his head, amused and exasperated. “Would it make you happy to know that we hung out last night?”

Louis’ smug smile dropped off his face and his eyes widened. “You did?”

Niall nodded. “Yeah. Harry came over mine and we had pizza and peanut butter biscuits and watched *Wayward Pines*. It was nice.”

“O’ course it was,” said Louis. “You’re soulmates.”

“We’re friends, Lou,” said Niall firmly. “Don’t try to make it anything it’s not.” He hesitated and then added almost resignedly, “He’s got a boyfriend.”

“Mmm,” grunted Louis. “Yeah, and he’s mean to him and treats him like shit. Don’t tell me it doesn’t—”

“Mornin’, Harry,” said Niall, talking over Louis.

“Good morning, Niall,” said Harry, giving Niall a bashful smile, cheeks tinted the most beautiful shade of pink, and waving his ringed fingers at the two lads. “Hi, Lou.”

“Hi, love,” said Louis. He clapped his hands together. “Now let’s get to work.”

The models followed Louis into the studio and, after a brief introduction to the owners—two upbeat women in their early thirties named Orli and Cate—were led to an area at the back of the studio with neatly labelled boxes filled with props and racks that, Niall guessed, usually were home to costumes but were currently lined with the outfits he and Harry would be modelling.

Harry Lambert waved to them from where he stood next to the rack with a sign that read “Niall” hung at the end, a paper in one hand. He returned to the clothes, shuffling hangers around as he double-checked the inventory.

“Hello, my loves!” came a voice from the other side of the rack and a moment later, Lou appeared from behind the row of clothes.

“Hiya, Lou!” said Niall, walking forward to hug the woman.
“Hi,” said Harry with a small smile, waving.

“Come with me, yeah,” she said, smiling and gesturing for them to follow her.

The two boys followed her past the racks of clothing to the tiny makeup and hair department.

“Harry first,” she said, nodding toward the chair in front of her little station. “You lads excited?”

“Yeah, should be good craic,” said Niall with an easy smile, settling onto a stool near Lou’s. “Spend the next few days with you lot. Wear some nice clothes, walk around Kingston.” He shrugged. “Sounds all right to me!”

“What about you, Haz?” asked Lou. “Looking forward to it?”

“Oh. Yes,” said Harry. “Doing a photoshoot with my friends.” He smiled at Niall bashfully, cheeks pink, and Niall grinned widely, so pleased that Harry had called him a friend. “And like Niall said, wearing some nice clothes. And I haven’t- I haven’t really been to Kingston yet. Before last night, I mean. So that’ll—”

“Last night?” cut in Lou.

Harry blushed a deep pink and Niall said, nonchalant and relaxed, “Harry came to mine to hang out last night. Watch some telly and have pizza. Had a nice time, didn’t we, lad?”

“Yes. We- we did.” Harry smiled. “It was nice to just- to have someone to, like, stay in. With.”

Harry was sent away to find Other Harry once Lou was finished with his hair and makeup and Niall moved to the vacated seat.

“So you invited Harry to your place,” she said.

“Yup,” said Niall as he sat back in the chair, unabashed. “Don’t make it anything it’s not. Louis already tried.”

“I won’t,” said the older woman. “I just think it’s nice.”

“It was. It is,” Niall agreed. “We had a good time chatting and watching telly. He likes Wayward Pines too. Didn’t know anyone else even knew about that show. He thinks Matt Dillon’s dreamy.” Niall smiled and, with a chuckle, added, “S’pose he’s right, if I’m bein’ honest.”

“That’s good, then,” said Lou. “He needs good friends.”

Niall’s brows knit, thoughts turning to something Harry had told him the night before. “He said- Harry told me last night that some of the people he spends time with make him feel stupid and silly.”

Lou shook her head sadly. “Poor baby.”

“It’s even worse, though,” said Niall, suddenly feeling a bit indignant. “He seems- He believes it. Thinks he sounds stupid when he talks and he doesn’t think he should like the things he likes because they’re, like, childish or something. Unsophisticated, that’s what he said.”

“That’s kind of heartbreaking,” said Lou, frowning.

Niall nodded. “Yeah. He’s too lovely for that. He’s too lovely.”

Lou looked at him shrewdly, an expression Niall couldn’t read on her face. “You like him,” she
stated, voice quiet and soft.

“Don’t make it more than it is,” said Niall. “He just- He needs friends.”

Lou nodded and continued working on Niall’s makeup.

Forty minutes later, Harry emerged from behind the screens that served as a private dressing cubicle within the larger makeup and dressing room. Niall’s lips parted and his breath caught, taking in Harry’s first outfit for the day. He’d never seen a man wearing anything as soft and sweet and romantic as the clothing Harry was wearing. A loose, billowy white cotton tee with the collar hanging low enough to reveal the swallows tattooed just below his collarbones was tucked into a pair of wide-legged cream-coloured trousers. Dusty pink socks peeked out from under the cuffed legs, a pair of buttery cream-coloured loafers on his feet. It was, Niall thought, the equivalent of a pretty, flowy sundress.

“All right, lads,” said Louis, walking into the room. “Ya ready?”

Harry nodded and Niall asked, hesitant and sure he had a good idea of some possible answers, “Where are we going first?”

Louis shot him the same shit-eating grin from earlier and said, “First, Niall, we’re going to have a lovely stroll around the Strawberry Hill House Gardens before we have a little picnic at the Shell Bench.”

“No way!” said Niall, shaking his head. People did engagement photoshoots at the Strawberry Hill House Gardens and rented the House and grounds for weddings, Niall knew. It was romantic through and through.

“Is that a problem, Niall?” asked Louis, feigned innocence dripping from his words.

Harry looked at Niall, brows furrowed in confusion. Niall didn’t want the other model to think his reaction had anything to do with him, at least not in the way he might assume—he was sure Harry had no idea his reaction was because of the implications associated with Strawberry Hill House—so he said, “That’s, like, a four mile walk, mate.”

“We’re not walking, you prat,” said Louis, though Niall knew the photographer understood the reason for his small outburst. “We’ve got cars.”

“Oh,” he said lamely. “Right.”

“And they’re waiting for us so come on,” said Louis, sounding like a tired parent trying to get his children off to school for the day.

As Niall settled into the seat beside Harry in the back of the Range Rover, Harry said, voice quiet and a rosy blush high on his cheeks, “You look- you look very handsome, Niall.”

Niall tried not to smile too big, tried not to show exactly how pleased he was to hear Harry say that.

“Thank you,” he said. “You look beautiful.” Harry’s blush deepened to an impossible pink. “And I love your tattoos.”

“Really?” asked Harry, eyes wide. “Most people- most people think they’re weird. And, like, some of them are kind of dumb and—”

“I think they’re unique,” said Niall, cutting off Harry’s self-deprecation. “They suit you. And I like
them.”

“Oh,” breathed Harry, green eyes sparkling. “Thanks- Thank you, Niall.”

“But I’ve got to know something, love,” said Niall with an easy grin.

“What’s- what’s that?” asked Harry, eyes still wide in disbelief.

Niall smiled. “Why a naked mermaid?”

Harry gave a nervous giggle, hand coming to his mouth as if to force the laughter back in and Niall really didn’t like that; he wanted him to laugh and not feel embarrassed to show his happiness. “Um, that’s- that’s one of the stupid ones,” he said, sounding like he thought he was agreeing with Niall before Niall could even tell him it was stupid.

“I don’t think it’s stupid,” said Niall. “D’ya like it?”

Harry nodded hesitantly.

“All right, then. It’s not stupid if ya like it,” Niall assured him. “So why’d ya get it?”

Harry shrugged and, with a shy smile, said, “I wanted to.”

Niall studied Harry, blue eyes soft. “I think I’d like to get to know that Harry. The Harry who does things because he wants to and not because, like, someone else wants him to.”

Harry inhaled sharply. “Yeah. I’d- I’d like that too.”

“Bet I’ll like him even more than the one I already know,” Niall told him with a kind smile. “And I already like the one I know quite a lot.”

Harry beamed, dimples deep and eyes bright and Niall knew now what it felt like to drown.

“Right, lads,” said Louis, turning around from the front seat of the car they were sharing—Lou, Other Harry, a lighting crewman, and bits of their wardrobe for the day were in a second Range Rover behind them—and then, a smirk slowly creeping onto his face, said, “Ooh. Did I interrupt something?”

The pretty blush returned to Harry’s face and Niall said, “Yeah. A nice chat that didn’t involve you, ya smug arsehole.”

Harry giggled again and Niall was happy to see he didn’t cover his mouth to hide his laughter this time.

Louis flipped them off and opened his door to climb out of the car. A moment later, Harry’s door was pulled open and Louis stood on the pavement outside, again looking like a tired father, and said, “Get out, ya dickheads. We’ve got to get to work.”

Two hours later, Niall flopped down onto the cornflower blue picnic blanket that had been laid out in the grass in front of the Shell Bench, their first walk around the gardens and grounds complete.

“It matches your shirt,” said Harry, looking down at the blonde from where he stood beside the blanket.

“Yeah. Reckon it does,” agreed Niall, looking down at the blue short-sleeved button-up shirt he was wearing and then to the blanket under him. “Now get down here”—he tugged the leg of Harry’s
wide-legged trousers—“and act hungry.”

“Act hungry?” asked Harry, bending down to sit next to Niall on the blanket. “How do I act hungry?”

“Oi! Louis! Mate,” Niall called to the photographer. “When are we eating? We were promised a picnic and we’re starving!”

“Christ, lad. Calm down,” said Louis. “Liam’s on his way with food now.”

“What’s he got?” asked Niall.

“Filet mignon and foie gras,” Louis deadpanned. He rolled his eyes. “It’s a bloody picnic, lad. He’s got sandwiches and pasties and sweets.”

Harry laughed, hands covering his face and Niall smiled, watching with a grin. “Sounds all right, then.”

Liam arrived ten minutes later, carrying a large wicker picnic hamper.

“Finally!” exclaimed Niall as Liam came close to their blanket by the Shell Bench.

“Nice to see you too, Niall,” said Liam, dropping the basket on the blanket.

“It’s always nice to see you, Liam. O’ course,” said Niall with a smile. “Especially when you’re bringing me food.” He made to open the basket.

“Oi, lad! Slow down!” said Louis. “That’s not just lunch. It’s part of our shoot.”

Niall grumbled and stuck out his tongue, earning a tinkling of giggles from Harry. He felt breathless for a moment, butterflies in his tummy, and he thought again that he knew what drowning felt like now.

A half an hour later, Harry and Niall were seated on the blanket, the picnic artfully spread around them as they ate their finger sandwiches and drank their bottle of Viognier.

“How did you know it’s my favourite?” asked Harry, shocked and wide-eyed.

“You told me one day,” said Louis with a shrug, kneeling beside the blanket to line up a shot. “And we’ll have pints at The Winning Post on Monday just for you, Irish.”

“Ya know me too well, lad,” said Niall with a wide smile.

“Let me guess,” said Harry playfully, grin crooked and teasing. “Your favourite is Guinness.”

Niall laughed, loud and happy. “Cheeky bastard!” he said, blue eyes sparkling.

Harry’s face lit up with his smile, dimples deep and eyes crinkled. Louis snapped a photo.

After their picnic lunch had been eaten and the hamper packed up, Harry and Niall took turns changing into their next outfits in the pop-up dressing tent that Other Harry and Liam pulled from the back of the wardrobe Range Rover.

“Sweet shirt,” said Niall as Harry emerged from the tent, pointing at the vintage Journey tee Harry was wearing with a pair of skinny black jeans.
“Thanks,” said Harry. He eyed Niall’s shirt. “We match!”

“What?” asked Niall, looking at his own outfit—a white tee with an anchor and rope printed on the front, a pair of dark blue skinny jeans, and a pair of brown ankle boots—and then back at Harry’s. He supposed they matched in a general sense, both wearing tees and skinny jeans and boots.

Harry held his left arm out and Niall noticed the anchor tattoo on his wrist for the first time.

“Aww!” said Louis, eyes twinkling mischievously as he walked by the pair. “Now let’s get over to the gold griffin and dog statues on the stairs.”

At the small staircase in one of the gardens at the side of the house, Harry and Niall stood on the bottom step, flanked by a golden griffin on one side and a golden dog on the other.

“Right. Put on your sunglasses,” instructed Louis.

Niall placed his brown, round cat-eye sunglasses on his face and looked at Harry. The other lad had oval sunglasses with chunky white frames.

“You look like an alien!” said Niall with a laugh. “I love it!”

Harry turned to Niall, eyes closed and mouth open wide.

“Make that face again!” called Louis from where he stood several feet from the bottom of the stairs. “Look at me and- Yeah.”

Niall looked at Harry, eyes crinkled as he laughed, open and happy and joy-filled. Louis’ camera clicked away.

They changed again, this time Harry in blue trousers—“Capri,” Other Harry had called the colour—and a white button down with carefully rolled-up sleeves and the top several buttons left intentionally undone. Niall wore a coral polo shirt with white trim at the waist, sleeves, and collar; grey checked slim-fit suit trousers; and black leather shoes.

“You always- you always look so handsome,” said Harry shyly, face a peachy blush, as they settled back into the Range Rover to head to their next shooting location. “It’s just, like, you’re just so handsome.” Harry’s eyes widened and he looked horrified by his words. He rushed out, “I’m sorry. I’m—”

“Ya know, I wish ya wouldn’t be,” said Niall kindly. “If ya say something and ya mean it, you shouldn’t be sorry. Especially if it’s a compliment you’re paying someone.”

Harry nodded and Niall smiled, soft and reassuring.

A few moments passed and Niall said, “I think you’re the loveliest person I know. I’m glad Louis kept tricking us into meeting and I think he’s right. That we’ll make good friends.”


“Dickheads,” hissed Louis from the front seat. Niall could imagine Louis’ eye-roll.

“It’s not polite to eavesdrop, ya Nosy Nancy.”

Harry laughed.
They arrived at Kingston’s High Street, taking pictures on the west side of the street by the blue plaque set into the stone of the parapet of the Clattern Bridge—one of the oldest intact bridges in England—and at the powder blue wrought iron parapet of the east side. They made the short walk to the Coronation Stone, Louis’ camera clicking the whole way, capturing Niall and Harry’s blossoming friendship in brilliant colours.

It was at around half past six that Louis decided to call it a day, tiredly herding everyone back into the Range Rovers to make the drive back to Rock and Rose. After changing back into their own clothes, Louis told the models that they would start a bit earlier the next morning.

“You had a good day, lads,” said Louis sincerely.

“Thanks, Louis,” said Harry. “It was- it was fun. Today.”

“Harry,” said Niall. Louis and Harry both turned to look at him, Harry surprised and Louis smug with brows raised as if waiting expectantly for the rest of what Niall had to say. “Ya want to go back to my flat? Watch some more *Wayward Pines*? Could order some takeaway if ya want.”

Harry smiled, shy and lovely, and because he had no reason to say no—he didn’t have any other plans, didn’t have Pilates or yoga or book club—and didn’t really want to say no, he nodded and said quietly, blushing like he always did when Niall was kind and sweet. “Yeah, I’d, um- That would be nice.”

Louis smirked and said, voice sugary sweet and infuriating, “Have a good evening, lads! I’ll see you tomorrow.” He blew them a kiss and then added, “Don’t stay too late, Harry. We’ve got work in the morning!”

Harry blushed and Niall laughed.

“Right, lad,” said Niall. “Ya all right with walking? It’s only fifteen minutes. Could take the bus but it doesn’t save much—”

“Walking’s fine,” interrupted Harry. “I mean, I don’t mind.”

“Great!” said Niall and, with a nod of his head, he pointed Harry in the right direction.

They walked along Penrhyn Road past Kingston University and Niall turned to look at Harry. “Ya know,” he said, glancing back at the pavement before looking at Harry again, “I didn’t look at my phone once today. After we got to the studio. I just left it in the car the whole time.”

“Me too,” said Harry. He exhaled, facial expression suddenly looking downcast and deflated. “I’ve probably got- Nick’s probably sent me a hundred texts and, like, called four times.”

Niall felt a stab of a mix of emotions that didn’t really seem to belong together. He shrugged. “Could check.”

Harry shook his head and said, “No. That’s okay. I don’t- I don’t really want to.”

“All right, lad.”

It was as they turned onto Southsea Road that Harry’s phone rang, in his pocket now and not the backseat of the Range Rover. He pulled it out and looked at it, sighing and clicking the lock button to silence the ringer.

“You can answer,” said Niall. “I don’t mind.”
“No. It’s okay,” Harry told him, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

Niall shrugged. “What do you want to eat? There’s a Nando’s that delivers. And Wan’s Chinese is good.”

“I don’t- I mean, I’d like”—Harry groaned, his phone ringing again—“Nando’s?”

“You should probably answer,” said Niall gently, looking at Harry. “He’ll just keep calling until you do.”

“I don’t want to talk to him though,” said Harry.

“Maybe you should just tell him that,” suggested Niall.

Harry looked nervous and Niall couldn’t help but reach out and take his hand, thumb brushing soothingly over the knuckles and rings of Harry’s hand.

“He won’t- he won’t like that,” said Harry, voice barely above a whisper. The phone stopped ringing.

Niall wanted to ask Harry who cared if Nick liked it, why he cared if Nick liked it, but instead said, “I don’t think what Nick likes is more important than how you feel.”

Harry sighed and continued down Southsea Road with Niall.

Just before Niall’s door, Harry’s phone rang for a third time.

“Answer it, Harry,” said Niall, a command presented as a friendly suggestion. “I’ll just step inside.”

Harry nodded resignedly and pulled his phone from his pocket. “Hi, Nick,” said Harry as he watched Niall unlock his door.

“Oh, love!” exclaimed Nick. “I was starting to think you were ignoring me.”

“I’ve been- I’ve been busy,” said Harry. “With, you know, with the shoot. And everything.”

“Does ‘everything’ include getting cozy with Niall Horan?” asked Nick, voice cool now.

“What?”

“You didn’t tell me you were doing the shoot with Niall Horan,” said Nick. “Forgot to mention it, I suppose.”

Harry’s eyes widened in horror. “How did you- How do you know it’s- I’m shooting with Niall?”

“Sue tweeted a candid of your little picnic,” Nick told him. “So adorable. It’s all very romantic, with the Shell Bench in the background and the glasses of wine.”

“Oh,” said Harry because there really wasn’t anything else to say.

“Mmm,” hummed Nick. “How was your first day, then? Tell me all about it.”

Harry was thrown, confused by Nick’s flip-flopping attitude. “It was… nice,” said Harry hesitantly. “We, um, we went to, you know, to Strawberry Hill House and had a picnic and walked around the grounds. And we went to, uh, the Clattern Bridge and the- the Coronation Stone. In Kingston.”
“Charming,” said Nick, tone flat and betraying his disinterest. “Come to mine tonight, love. We can just stay in, like you like.”

“Oh, um, I’d better- I’m just going to have an early night,” said Harry. “We’re starting at, um, at eight o’clock tomorrow and, you know, and I’d better have an early night.”

“Harry. Babe,” said Nick, the pout in his tone obvious. “Come—”

“I’m- I’m sorry, Nick, but I’m”—he closed his eyes, face screwed up—“I can’t come.”

There was silence for a few moments and Harry could feel his heart beating double-time.

“That’s okay, love,” said Nick. “Another time. Just don’t keep ignoring my calls and turning me down for dates or I’ll start to think you don’t care about me!”

It sounded like a joke, like Nick was teasing, but Harry knew he wasn’t; he was trying to make him feel guilty, like he was treating Nick badly and hurting his feelings.

“I’ve- I have to go, Nick,” said Harry.

Nick sighed. “All right, love. Have a good night.”

“Um, thanks. Yeah, you too.”

Harry ended the call and slipped his phone back into his pocket. He took a deep breath and stepped to Niall’s door, knocking.

“Come in, lad!” said Niall, swinging the door open. “I ordered from Nando’s. Don’t know what you like so I ordered a bunch of”—he noticed Harry’s frown, lips pouted and brow slightly furrowed—“What’s wrong, love?”

“He knows- he knows that we’re- that I’m doing the shoot with you,” Harry told him. “I didn’t tell him before and… now he knows. Because Liam tweeted a picture of us eating our picnic and he saw it.”

“Harry, you shouldn’t be made to feel bad because you’re working with another model. It’s part of your job,” said Niall. “And you shouldn’t feel bad about hanging out with other people. You’re allowed to have other friends.”

Harry nodded. “I know,” he said quietly.

“You don’t deserve to be treated the way he treats you. I know I don’t know you that well yet but—”

“You know me- I think you know me better than he does. Than Nick does,” admitted Harry. “He doesn’t care about the things I like or, like, or where I’m from or just, like, anything about me.”

“You deserve better. He should treat you better,” said Niall.

“You would treat me better,” said Harry. Niall didn’t say anything, mouth open as he stared at Harry, and Harry blushed, realising what he’d said and how it had probably come across. “I mean- I’m sorry- I didn’t mean—”

“I promise I will treat you better,” said Niall fiercely and Harry wasn’t sure how Niall meant that statement. “You’re my friend, Harry, and I respect you and care about you.”
Harry looked at Niall, eyes wide. The room felt different now, warm and heavy and sticky, but comfortable, like the fresh-baked honey-apricot buns and Earl Grey tea Harry liked so much.

“Thank you,” said Harry, voice barely above a whisper.

Niall smiled at him, warm and kind, and nodded toward the living room.

It was at around ten thirty when Harry arrived back at his flat, peaceful and content. He fed Butterscotch and got ready for bed, thinking of Niall and his smile and laugh and blue eyes that crinkled when he was happy and how he treated Harry like a friend and not a novelty.

Harry was still thinking of Niall when he arrived at the studio the next morning, a Thermos of Earl Grey tea and a box of pastries from Black Treacle in his hands.

“Hi, Niall,” he said, smiling bashfully at the other model where he was perched on the rung of a bicycle rack on the pavement. “Hi, Louis,” he added, looking at the photographer who was leant against the studio’s window smoking a cigarette.

“Morning, Harry,” said Niall, returning his smile with an easy one of his own. “What’ve ya got there?”

“Oh,” said Harry as though he’d forgot his hands were full. “I’ve got- My friend Elora made us some tea. And she gave me a box of pastries. For breakfast.”

“That’s sweet,” said Niall, moving to Harry to take the box from him. “Ya want to set it down inside?”

They set up a small buffet on a card table Orli pulled from a storage closet, the pastries and Thermos of tea beside a jug of milk and a sugar bowl and some mugs and napkins Cate had stored away.

Everyone tucked into the pastries and tea, helping themselves before scattering around the studio to begin preparing for the day’s shoot. Niall went with Other Harry for a few last-minute alterations on a pair of trousers he was set to model that day; Harry went with Lou to start on hair and makeup.

It was while he was sitting in the makeup chair, sipping his tea and chatting with Lou while she styled his hair, that he heard Louis’ voice from somewhere near the studio’s front door.

“Oh, Christ,” he exclaimed. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Harry turned to look for the cause of Louis’ outburst and saw Nick standing just inside the door.

“Good morning to you, too, Tomlinson,” said Nick coolly. “I just came to see my boy.”

“Harry’s busy,” said Louis, “and I don’t want you here.”

Nick rolled his eyes and ignored Louis, walking past the photographer and toward the tiny makeup department where Harry sat, staring at Nick with eyes wide and lips tipped into a frown.

“Hi, love,” said Nick.

“Hi, Nick,” said Harry, uncertain. He watched as Nick pulled a stool forward to sit. “What are you, um, what are you doing here?”

“I came to see my boy,” said Nick, repeating what he’d said to Louis. “Hang out with you.”

“That’s- that’s nice,” said Harry, voice quivery like he was nervous about what he was going to say
next. “But, um, but I don’t come to your job when you’re, um, when you’re w-working to hang out.”

“Harry, it’s different,” Nick told him dismissively. “You’re sitting drinking tea and having someone fuss with your hair.”

“And that’s part of his job,” said Niall from somewhere just behind Harry. “He’s working and you’re interrupting.”

“Ah, Horan,” said Nick, looking up at Niall and smirking bemusedly. “Pleasure to see you.”

“Not really,” said Niall, arms crossed, and Harry was shocked by the callousness in his tone. “You’re interrupting. Just because you don’t understand photoshoot schedules doesn’t mean they don’t exist or that Louis and Liam and the crew haven’t worked to plan it all out.”

“Please,” said Nick, rolling his eyes again. “You play dress-up and mess about for a few hours and call it a job.”

“That’s- that’s rude,” said Harry, brows furrowed and a look of hurt on his face.

“That’s demeaning,” Lou said at the same time, frowning.

“Could say the same about your job,” Niall told him with a shrug. “You just mess about for a few hours and call it a job. And then strut around like you’re on the A-list.”

Nick looked at Niall, some insult or retort on the tip of his tongue, but Louis spoke first.

“Get out,” he said firmly, pointing to the door. “Get the fuck out of here.”

Nick stood from the stool and looked down at Harry, face unreadable. “Come to mine tonight,” he said. “I think we need to talk.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed—they definitely needed to talk, no matter how nervous and uncomfortable he felt and how badly he would feel after—and nodded slowly. He heard Niall exhale deeply and saw him turn away, head shaking slightly. He hated that Niall was disappointed with him. He sighed defeatedly and said again, “Yeah.”

“Bye, love,” said Nick, stepping to Harry and dropping a kiss to the top of his head. “Have a good day, yeah, and I’ll see you tonight.”

Harry watched Nick leave, caught up in his thoughts—he really needed to talk to Nick, no matter how nervous and uncomfortable he felt and how badly he would feel after—until Lou said gently, “All right, lovey, let’s finish up your makeup so I can send you off to Other Harry.”

Niall joined them a few minutes later, sitting at the vacant stool beside Harry and giving him a smile. “Ya excited for today?” he asked, sipping his tea. “Louis told me where we’re going first and I think you’re going to love it.”

Harry smiled, glad Niall didn’t seem upset with him, and went off to find Other Harry.

They arrived at Lady Booth Road an hour later, parking in the Kingston Fairfield Car Park. Harry Lambert gave them a quick once-over, adjusting Harry’s blue neckerchief and re-cuffing Niall’s blue pants to show the teal socks he was wearing with his white hightop Vans.

They walked along Eden Street and then Clarence before turning onto Old London Road.

“It’s Out of Order!” exclaimed Harry happily, excitement clear on his face as he took in the curved
row of a dozen red phone boxes tipped against each other like toppling Dominoes. “I have- I had this on a poster in my bedroom at home. Like, in Holmes Chapel. I always thought it- It’s so cool!”

Niall laughed his bright, happy laugh and said, “Told Louis ya’d like it!”

Louis had them pose in front of the installation, the row of phone boxes a fun background for their forming friendship and their clear comfortableness and easiness with each other.

“Harry, stand like”—the photographer demonstrated how he wanted Harry to stand, casual—“yeah. And Niall, put your arm on Harry’s shoulder. Perfect,” he said, snapping photo after photo.

After about thirty minutes at the installation and fifteen spent taking photos under the Old London Road sign, they returned to the car park to change outfits—Niall into dark skinny jeans, a white polo shirt under a black jacket, and black Chelsea boots and Harry in head-to-toe black with tortoiseshell glasses—and then walked to Memorial Green; Louis took pictures the whole time, his camera clicking in a way so opposite the unwelcome, relentless sound of paparazzi cameras.

At Memorial Green, the models sat on a bench by the War Memorial while Louis took photos, the stone chapel of the Everyday Church and the small Tudor-style building that housed Jo Malone behind them.

The day passed with a few more outfit changes and photographs along the Riverside Walk and Kingston Bridge over the River Thames.

It was at around five o’clock when they returned to Rock and Rose.

Back in their own clothes, Niall asked, voice strained like he didn’t want to ask what he was about to, “So you’re going to see Nick tonight, then?”

“Um, yeah,” said Harry. “I know everyone’s, like, everyone’s upset with me because—”

“Not upset,” said Niall, though Harry wasn’t sure if he believed him. “Just worried, love. You deserve- Well, you know. I said it last night.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, nodding sadly.

“You deserve better,” Niall told him. “You can leave if he makes you feel bad, Harry.”

“I know,” said Harry. He wasn’t sure if Niall meant he could leave Nick’s flat later that evening if Nick was upsetting him or if he meant that Harry could leave Nick in the general sense; neither was a bad idea. He nodded again. “Yeah, I know.”

“Call me or, like, text me if ya want to hang out this weekend,” said Niall with a wide smile. “Could meet some o’ the lads if yeh’d like. Sure they’d want to meet ya.”


Harry arrived at Nick’s a couple hours later.

“Love!” exclaimed Nick when he opened the door, voice loud and jarring. “Come in!”

Harry walked into the flat, feeling uncomfortable and out-of-place. “Hi- Hi, Nick.”

Nick offered Harry a glass of wine, which he took only to be polite because he’d made up his mind on his way that he wouldn’t have more than half a drink.
“How was the shoot today?” asked Nick, sitting on the sofa and patting the empty space beside him.

Harry sat, though at the opposite end of the sofa, and answered, “It was fun. We- we walked around a lot and took lots of photos. Played dress-up for a few hours and”—he could feel Louis and Niall’s presence in his next words—“and called it a job.”

“Love,” said Nick, sounding exasperated. “You know I was joking.”

Harry shook his head and turned to look directly at Nick. “I don’t- I don’t think you were.”

“Harry.”

“I don’t think you really care about- about anything I do or—”

“That’s not true, Harry,” said Nick, sounding annoyed now. “I’m very proud of your job and all of your hard work.”

“My- my hard work? You think- You said I mess about for a few hours, Nick,” said Harry with a pout. “It doesn’t seem- I don’t think you respect my job or- or how hard I work at all.”

Nick scoffed. “A lot of my friends are models, Harry.”

“That doesn’t mean- that doesn’t mean you respect their job,” said Harry, bold and reckless and shaking with nerves. “It just means- it just means that you have- you’ve got a lot of model friends. Who you don’t respect. Or maybe they don’t care that you don’t- that you don’t respect their jobs. But I do. I care.”

“Harry,” said Nick, voice firm and stern.

“You only care about my job because I’m your ‘model boyfriend’ but you don’t- you don’t take my job seriously,” said Harry, face red and breath short.

“You don’t really believe that,” said Nick.

Harry nodded vehemently. “Yes. I do.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “You’ve been listening to Tomlinson too much.”

Harry exhaled, inhaled deeply, and then said, all rushed as though he wanted to say it before he lost his nerve, “You’re a hypocrite. You- you expect me to listen to everything you say and do- and do everything you want but when I listen to one of my other friends, you tell me- you say I listen to them too much. And you don’t have any problem with the paps spotting me with- with you but if I’m seen with anyone else, you get all annoyed and act like- like I don’t care about you.”

“You sound childish,” said Nick, “and you’re being—”

“I know. I’m being stupid,” cut in Harry. “I always feel stupid when I’m with you.”

Nick, Harry thought, had the decency to pretend to look like he was upset to hear that Harry felt that way.

“Harry, love,” he said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t- I’ve never meant to make you feel—”

“Yes, you did,” Harry told him. “You know- you know exactly what you’re doing. You always do. You’re manip-manipulative and- and mean. You hurt my feelings and make me feel silly and- and stupid whenever I talk to you.”
“Love—"

“No, Nick,” said Harry. He moved forward on the sofa, setting his glass of wine on the coffee table. “You take advantage of how stu- of how naive I am so you can have a pretty, young model boyfriend who follows you around like a lovesick puppy.”

“The only reason your career is going so well is because of me,” spat Nick. “You wouldn’t—”

“My career is going well because of Louis and Leila and Simon,” said Harry, face scrunched with a combination of emotions he couldn’t quite identify; anger, hurt, and annoyance were there but so were a few others. “It’s going well because I’m working hard. It’s not because of you and your fucking Topman collection.” He stood from the sofa and looked down at Nick.

“Harry.”

“I’m done with this,” said Harry, feeling tears welling in his eyes and his body vibrating with the force of his nerves. “I’m done with you being- being mean to me and treating me like a stupid child who needs- who needs you to- to tell me what to do and how to live my life. I’m sick of feeling guilty for doing things I like to do and”—Harry exhaled roughly and then inhaled deeply—“I hate going to clubs and I hate Mahiki!”

Harry turned on his heel and strode to the door, ignoring Nick’s calls for his attention as he turned the knob and pulled it open, stepping out into the hall.

He made it to the lift before he started crying, feeling silly and small and like he wanted his mummy.

The lift doors opened and Harry stepped out into the lobby. He’d barely walked three steps from the open doors when he heard his name. With shaky hands, Harry wiped tears from his eyes and looked up to see Bernie walking toward him from his post by the lobby doors.

“So you finally talked to him?” asked the doorman, face kind and gentle, concerned.

Harry sniffed and wiped his face again. He nodded. “Yes.”

“Good lad,” said Bernie, smiling softly. “It’s been lovely to know you and I’ll miss your pictures of Butterscotch. But you need a lad who treats you with kindness and love.”

Harry stepped toward the shorter man and hugged him. “Thank you, Bernie. You- you were very nice to me.” He pulled back a moment later and said, “I think- I think I’ll go to my friend’s house now. He always makes me happy.”

“Go on, lad,” said Bernie, patting Harry on the shoulder. “Go see your friend.”

It was at around nine o’clock when Harry knocked on Niall’s door.

There was no answer—Niall had probably made plans to go out with his mates and, really, Harry thought, it was a bit stupid to expect Niall to just be at home at nine o’clock on a Friday night—and Harry turned to leave and make his way back to Sutton when the door was pulled open behind him.

“Harry?” boomed Niall’s voice from the front stoop.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, hoping it wasn’t obvious that he’d spent the better part of his journey to Kingston crying, before turning to the other model.

“Hi, Niall,” he said, walking back to Niall’s front door. “Sorry to just”—he shrugged—“show up.
Uninvited.”

“Don’t be sorry. Come in!” said Niall, waving Harry into his flat.

Harry followed Niall through the door. “I left.”

Niall looked at him, brow furrowed in confusion. “You—”

“Like you said,” Harry told him. “I left Nick. I told him- I told him I’m done.”

Niall’s eyes widened. “Oh, love,” he said, stepping toward Harry and pulling him in for a strong hug. “Is that why you look all weepy?”

Harry nodded against Niall’s head and whispered, “I was so nervous.”

“Yeah, I bet,” said Niall, voice soothing. “Don’t have to be nervous, pet.”

Harry exhaled a shaky breath. “I’m not. With you. You don’t- You make me calm.”

Niall inhaled through his nose, overwhelmed, and forced himself not to ask Harry if he really meant it. Niall had thought—hoped, really—that Harry felt calm and relaxed when he was with Niall but it had been wishful thinking, he’d been sure

“That’s good, then,” he said, tucking Harry’s face into his neck and turning to rest his cheek on top of Harry’s head. “Don’t want you to be nervous anymore.”

Harry sighed. “Thanks, Niall.”

Niall pulled back a few minutes later and looked at Harry. “Ya want to pick something to watch? Could have some wine and watch Matt Dillon if ya want. I’ve not got that fancy kind you like though. Just some Chardonnay, I think. Or”—he paused, considering Harry for a moment—“I could make some hot chocolate. Think I’ve even got some o’ them tiny marshmallows.”

“We could- Maybe we could do both?” asked Harry, green eyes doe-like and hopeful.

“Too right, we can!” said Niall happily. “Come on, pet!”

Harry followed Niall into the kitchen. “I’m sorry. You’ve probably got- You probably had plans for tonight. With your mates. And I’ve just—”

“Yeah,” said Niall, opening the refrigerator and pulling out a bottle of white wine. He shrugged. “Plans changed though. I’ve got another mate in need of some proper hot chocolate showed up at me door and who am I to turn him away.” He gave Harry a kind smile and handed him the wine and a corkscrew. “Just you’ll have to open the wine. I always break the cork.”

“But Niall,” started Harry, placing the bottle and the corkscrew on the counter, “I don’t want to keep you from- I don’t want you to feel like you need to—”

“Harry, love, I don’t feel like I need to hang out with ya. I want to,” Niall told him. “I’m glad you’re here. Could invite the lads if it’d make ya feel better. Have ‘em over for pizza and a movie or something.”

Harry looked at Niall, a bit like a deer caught in the headlights, and said, “Um. Uh, I—”

Niall didn’t want to rush Harry, didn’t want to make him feel pressured to agree to anything with which he didn’t feel comfortable. He smiled gently again. “You think on that while I scald the milk,
Niall was glad when, only about five minutes later, Harry said, “I’d like that, I think. To meet- to meet your mates. If they want to come.”

An hour later, Harry and Niall sat side-by-side on the sofa watching *Wayward Pines* when the door to Niall’s flat opened and the sounds of three rowdy Irishmen broke the quiet of the room. Niall shot Harry an apologetic grin and paused the episode.

“Quiet, ya madmen!” called Niall. “Ya trying to scare Harry off before yeh’ve even been introduced?”

Harry covered his giggle with his ringed fingers and Niall smiled brightly back.

“Now get in here and let me introduce ya!”

The lads walked into the room and a large pizza and a four-pack of Old Speckled Hen Ale were placed on the coffee table.

“Special delivery for ya, Harry,” said one of the lads as he set a bottle of Viognier on the table.

“Thanks,” said Harry, stunned and eyes wide. “Um, I don’t even- I don’t even know your—”

“Bird,” said the lad, smiling warmly and extending a hand to Harry. “I’m John Bird. And these prats are Jake Curran and Conor Masterson.”

“Ya get used to ‘em, honestly,” Niall told Harry.

The evening passed pleasantly as the lads ate and drank, listened to records, and chatted about all things music. Harry seemed, Niall thought, comfortable and relaxed.

“Ya all right?” Niall asked Harry quietly, nudging him gently with his shoulder when Bird got up to use the toilet and Jake and Conor went to grab more beer and crisps from the kitchen.

Harry nodded and gave Niall a shy smile. “Yeah,” he said. “It’s nice. This is nice. I like your friends. They’re- they’re nice to me.”

“Course they are,” Niall told him. “They like ya. Yer very likable.”

“Thanks, Niall,” said Harry quietly.

“Don’t need to thank me, love,” said Niall, nudging him with his shoulder again.

It was well after one o’clock when Bird, Jake, and Conor said their goodbyes.

“I’d better, um, I’d better head out too,” said Harry, yawning and rubbing tiredly at his eyes.

“Could stay if ya want,” suggested Niall. “S’pose Butterscotch’ll be all right one night, yeah?”

“Um, yeah,” agreed Harry. “But you don’t have to- It’s okay, Niall. I’ll just go home.”

Niall didn’t want to pressure Harry into staying the night, didn’t want to make him uncomfortable— didn’t want to be like Nick—but it was really very late and Harry had had a long day.

“I’d like it if ya stayed,” Niall told him, hoping that didn’t seem too pushy or forceful. “I mean, it’s just that it’s late and ya won’t get back to Sutton ‘til nearly three o’clock. And ya had a long day.”
He looked at Harry, unable to read the lad’s expression beyond tired, and said quickly, “Or ya can go. Whatever yer more comfortable with. I just”—he shrugged—“I just want ya to be happy and safe, Harry.”

Niall was startled when Harry started crying.

“Oh, God!” he exclaimed, sitting up and moving closer to Harry. “Harry, I’m sorry! I just—”

“You’re so nice, Niall,” said Harry thickly, wiping tears from his eyes. “You even remembered Butterscotch.”

“Course I remembered Butterscotch,” said Niall, thrown by the surprise in Harry’s statement. “I’m hoping someday I’ll come round your flat and I can meet her.”

Harry looked at Niall, eyes so wide it was almost comical, and said slowly, “Can I- Could I just have a blanket maybe? Please.”

“There’s a good lad,” said Niall with a grin. “Can do ya one better and I’ll make up the fold out sofa. Give ya a nice fluffy pillow and everything.”

Fifteen minutes later, Harry stepped out of the bathroom, face washed and teeth freshly brushed with the spare toothbrush Niall had found in the cabinet.

“Niall,” he said, timid and hesitant, “can I—”

“What’s up?” asked Niall, looking toward Harry from where he was arranging blankets on the sofa bed mattress.

Harry blushed. “Nevermind. It’s- That’s stupid.”

“Probably not,” said Niall. “Can ask whatever it is. If ya want. Bet I won’t think it’s stupid.”

Harry exhaled, shoulders dropping. “Can I- Could I sleep in your bed? Maybe?”

Niall looked down at the neatly-made bed and frowned slightly. He turned back to Harry and said, “Yeah. I mean, you’re my guest. I don’t mind taking the sofa if—”

“No,” said Harry, surprising Niall with the determination and boldness in his tone. “Can I sleep in your bed with you?”

“Oh,” said Niall, eyes widening. He hadn’t expected that.

“I’m sorry!” said Harry frantically. “It was stu—”

“Yes.”

“W-what?”

“Yes,” said Niall again, nodding. He’d only known Harry a short time but he knew him well enough to know that Harry didn’t often speak up about the things he wanted and, when he did, he seemed hesitant. Now, however, he seemed more sure than he often did and Niall didn’t want to discourage that. “You can share my bed.”

Harry smiled shyly, cheeks a beautiful pink, and Niall was drowning.

Lights off and settled under the blankets on his bed, Niall was hyper aware of Harry’s presence
beside him. He could feel Harry’s body heat, hear the peaceful sounds of his gentle breaths, smell the remnants of Harry’s cologne and minty toothpaste.

Harry sighed a content little breath and, emboldened, Niall reached over and grabbed Harry’s hand. Harry’s fingers threaded with Niall’s and he rolled onto his side, face turned on the pillow toward Niall.

“Why?” asked Niall, voice a whisper. “Why did you want to sleep in my bed?”

With the faint light from the streetlamps, Niall could see Harry’s face scrunch up in thought. Niall waited, thumb brushing over the back of Harry’s hand.

“I don’t know,” he said. His face was still scrunched, though, and Niall knew that wasn’t his final answer. “I wanted to see how you make me feel.”

Niall’s thumb continued its soothing traces along Harry’s hand. “How do I make you feel?” he asked nervously. He wondered if he sounded as breathless as he felt.

“Different,” Harry told him.

“Different?” asked Niall, turning now to study Harry’s face in the dim light. He was surprised to see a tiny smile on Harry’s lips, eyes drowsy and soft.

“From him,” said Harry and Niall’s heartbeat sped up. “Like you care about me. All of me. You make me feel happy.”

“That’s— that’s good, then,” said Niall, still feeling breathless.

“Mnhm,” hummed Harry in agreement. It was silent for a few moments—relaxed, easy, soothing—and then Harry said, “Niall? Will you hold me?”

“Christ, yes,” said Niall, scrambling to pull Harry into his arms.

It was amazing, he thought as he drifted off to sleep with Harry in his arms and Harry’s face tucked into his neck, just how wonderful this felt.

When he woke up, the sun was streaming through the partially-closed blinds, chunky and bright yellow. Harry was still asleep in his bed, sprawled on his tummy with an arm thrown over Niall’s chest and his nose pressed to Niall’s ear.

He lay there, lifting a hand up to gently comb his fingers through the sleep-tousled waves of Harry’s hair, and thought.

Niall wasn’t sure what to make of the events of the previous evening, wasn’t sure what Harry had been thinking and feeling or if Harry had been thinking and feeling the same things Niall had. But Harry felt comfortable with him, happy, and that was the most important thing.

“Niall,” he heard a few moments later, Harry’s voice muffled against his face.

“G’morning, pet,” said Niall, resisting the urge to turn and press a kiss to the top of Harry’s head.

Harry nuzzled his head up into the hand still tangled in his hair and said quietly, lips brushing Niall’s jaw, “Good morning, Niall.”

“Sleep well, love?” asked Niall, biting back a moan. He could take Harry right now, flip him over and press him into the bed as he kissed his pretty plush lips until they were bruised and they were
both panting and gasping for breath. He could touch every inch of his beautiful body, pull off his tee and trace the lines of every tattoo.

But he needed Harry to know that he liked him for more than just his looks and beauty and sexual appeal. He needed him to know that he liked all of him.

“Mmm, yes,” said Harry. He pulled back slightly, head a few inches from Niall’s now, and blinked sleepily. “I- I slept a lot better with you.”

“Than with him?” Niall blurted before he could stop himself.

Harry blushed and turned away from Niall, gaze settled somewhere on the opposite wall.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Harry,” said Niall, heartbeat speeding up as he rushed out an apology. “I didn’t mean to make this awkward. Fuck, I’m—”

“I don’t know why I loved him,” said Harry quietly, still facing away from Niall.

Niall felt his heart drop. He remembered asking Louis just two weeks earlier if Harry loved Nick; Louis had told him he thought he did but that he hoped he didn’t because he knew Nick didn’t love him.

It was silent in the room and Niall knew Harry was thinking. He didn’t want to interrupt.

Finally, Harry spoke up again. “I don’t know if I loved him. I don’t- I don’t think I did.” He exhaled slowly and continued. “I think- I think I wanted him to love me. He didn’t though. He never meant to, I don’t think. I was stupid—”

“No.”

“—and naive.”

Niall rose up onto his elbow and turned to Harry, looking down at the boy. He was saddened to see tears in Harry’s eyes.

“It’s not stupid to want someone to love you, Harry,” said Niall, reaching with the hand not used to prop himself up to thumb away the tears and trace circles on Harry’s cheekbone.

Harry closed his eyes but nuzzled his face against Niall’s hand. “It is- it is when they’re- when they aren’t nice to you.”

“Still not stupid,” said Niall. “Can’t see the forest for the trees or something like that.”

It was quiet again and then Harry said, “You’re a really good friend, Niall. I’m really- I’m so glad Louis tricked us.”

Niall chuckled. “Me too,” he agreed. “Yer a sweetheart, Harry. Anyone who’s lucky to meet ya should try to be a good friend for ya. It’s what ya deserve.”

Harry’s eyes opened and Niall studied him, watching the changing emotions cross his face as his eyes widened with surprise and then softened as his lips twitched up into a sweet little smile. Niall threw caution to the wind and leant down, dropping a kiss to Harry’s forehead.

“Niall,” said Harry, voice hushed, and Niall leant back; panicked, he hoped he’d not made a mistake and overstepped any boundaries or made Harry feel uncomfortable.
“Love,” he rushed to apologise, “I’m—”

“Will you- Would you like to go get breakfast at Black Treacle?” asked Harry, looking hopeful and unbearably soft and lovely.

“Of course,” said Niall, nodding. “That’s the tearoom your friend owns, yeah?”

“Yes,” said Harry, smiling wide, so pleased that Niall remembered. “Elora! She’ll love to meet you. She thinks you make me look happy.”

Niall couldn’t contain the huge smile that broke across his face. “That’s all right, then.”

An hour and a half later, Harry and Niall got off the 470 at the Sutton Green stop.

“I’ve just- I’ve got to stop at my flat first,” said Harry as they walked down High Street toward Bushey Road, sounding apologetic. “I need to feed Butterscotch. But you can, like, you can go to Black Treacle and I’ll just meet you there if you don’t want to wait.”

Niall gave Harry a crooked grin and nudged the taller lad with his shoulder. “Told ya last night I want to meet Butterscotch.”

Harry smiled back and led Niall to his flat.

“This is the sweetest little flat I’ve ever seen,” said Niall five minutes later as he followed Harry through the door into the little living room.

Harry beamed. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Niall told him. “It’s sunny and warm and lovely and it’s just very you, isn’t it?”

Harry’s face turned a rosy pink. “Oh! This is Butterscotch!” he said, pointing at the kitchen door. Niall looked and found a pretty, slinky little tortoiseshell-and-white cat rubbing her sleek fur against the doorframe. “She’s probably cranky because I didn’t come home last night.”

“Can I pick her up?”

“You can try,” said Harry, walking into the kitchen to fill the cat’s food and water dishes.

“Oh, you’re just as pretty as your daddy with those big green eyes,” Niall cooed a few moments later and Harry turned to see Butterscotch cradled in Niall’s arms.

“She likes you!” said Harry happily.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” laughed Niall.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Harry told him. “Just we don’t get many visitors so she’s not really used to meeting new people.”

Niall wanted to ask if Butterscotch had liked Nick but decided not to; maybe he would ask another time, though he supposed he didn’t really need to know.

They arrived at Black Treacle twenty-five minutes later, Harry promising Butterscotch he would be back soon as he locked up the door to his flat.

Harry and Niall entered the tearoom and found seats at the coffee bar.
“Cute little place,” said Niall, settling onto the stool.

“Morning, love,” came a cheerful voice. Niall looked up to see a petite girl with long brown hair and lots of tattoos standing on the other side of the counter. She looked at Harry expectantly, brows raised as she waited politely for, Niall assumed, an introduction.

“Oh! Hi, El,” said Harry, smiling at the young woman. “Um, El, this is Niall. Niall, Elora. She, um, she owns the shop.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Niall,” said Elora, extending a hand to shake Niall’s; she looked pleased, grinning like the cat who got the cream, and Niall was reminded of Louis. “I see the pastries I sent yesterday worked.”

Niall laughed. “Harry asked me round for breakfast with him but, yeah, I s’pose I wouldn’t mind one of them gooey buns I had yesterday.”

Elora turned to pull three pastries from the case—a gooey cinnamon bun for Niall, an apricot brioche for Harry, and a raspberry cheese Danish for herself—and set about making a large pot of tea.

“How’s the shoot going?” she asked, pouring hot water over the tea leaves. “Having fun?”

“It’s been nice so far,” said Niall. “Went to the Clattern Bridge and the Coronation Stone on Thursday. Had a picnic, too, at—”

“Strawberry Hill House,” said Elora. “At the Shell Bench. I saw Sue’s tweet. It was very sweet. I bet Nick hated it.”

“He did,” agreed Harry, looking up from his brioche. “He said that- he said I must have forgot to mention I was doing the shoot with Niall. I didn’t forget. I didn’t tell him on purpose.”

Niall laughed and Harry looked startled by Niall’s reaction for a moment before smiling sheepishly.

“Is that why he showed up at the studio yesterday morning?” asked Niall. “To assert himself? Show me who ya belong to in case I was getting any ideas?”

“Maybe,” said Harry, face scrunched in consideration.

“Yes.” Elora sounded slightly exasperated. “Of course that’s why he did it.”

“Didn’t work out for him, did it,” said Niall with a chuckle. “Poor sod.”

“What?” said Elora loudly, nearly dropping the creamer of milk she was holding. She looked from Niall to Harry and back to Niall as though looking for an explanation.

“I, um, I broke up with Nick last night,” Harry told the shocked woman. “Well, as much as- as much as you can break up with someone who wasn’t, like, ever officially your boyfriend.”

“Harry!” exclaimed Elora, eyes bright and a pleased grin quIrking her lips. She sounded as though she’d just heard the best news all week and Niall figured it probably was the best news she’d heard all week, maybe even the best news all month; he could understand that. “What happened?”

“I went to his flat after- after work. And I told him that I’m done because, like, because he’s mean to me and he doesn’t respect me or the things I like or- or, like, my job and my friends. And I said he’s manipulative and treats me like a stupid child and- and I don’t like it.”

“Harry, love,” said Elora, “I’m so proud of you standing up for yourself like that. Really.”
“Ya didn’t tell me ya said all o’ that,” said Niall.

“I told him I hate Mahiki too,” Harry added with a smirk.

Niall and Elora laughed.

Breakfast passed pleasantly after that; nobody mentioned Nick again and they talked instead about the first two days of their shoot—“We went to see *Out of Order*, El!”—and the two remaining days coming up. Elora wanted to know about the clothes they’d worn, excited to hear every last detail.

It was at around two o’clock, after bowls of cheesy French onion soup—“It’s a bit of a dreary day, innit?” said Elora; Niall didn’t think it was but maybe he was a tad overwhelmed by Harry to notice or care about the drizzly grey day—and a chat about their mutual love of records and *Wayward Pines*, that Harry and Niall finally left Black Treacle.

“Would you- would you like to come to my flat?” asked Harry as they walked onto the pavement outside the café’s door. “If you want but you don’t have to if, you know, if you’ve got other plans or”—Harry bit his lip and exhaled—“I mean, I kind of ruined your plans last night so I understand if you don’t want to.”

“Harry, ya didn’t ruin my plans. Changed ‘em, yeah, but ya didn’t ruin ‘em. Made last night better, if I’m being honest,” said Niall with a gentle smile. “I want to hang out with ya. I think Louis may be right, ya know.”

Harry gaped at Niall, mouth open and eyes wide. “You think”—a blush pinked his cheeks, his voice a whisper—“you think we’re soulmates too?”

Niall shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. But I think he’s right that we’ll make good mates.”

“Oh,” said Harry. Niall couldn’t tell if he was disappointed by that answer or not. “So would you like to come to my flat?”

“Only if I can cuddle with Butterscotch.”

Harry nodded. “Okay.” He turned and Niall followed after him, walking back up High Street to Bushey Road. “You know,” he said after a few minutes, “Nick never came to my flat.”

Niall turned to look at him. “No?” he said, wanting to prompt Harry to continue but not distract him.

“He said it was too far,” said Harry. “And he’s allergic to cats so he- so he couldn’t come because of Butterscotch.”

Niall wondered if Nick was really allergic to cats or if he’d just used that as an excuse.

“He said that maybe he would come if I- if I got rid of Butterscotch,” continued Harry.

“Fucking prick,” said Niall. “Glad ya didn’t.”

“Me too,” agreed Harry. He shook his head. “I wouldn’t have, though. I love her.”

They arrived at Harry’s flat just before it started to rain. Harry made a pot of tea and Niall cuddled up on the sofa with Butterscotch, scrolling through Hulu to find *Wayward Pines*.

“Join me, love,” said Niall when Harry made to sit down on the armchair. “Plenty of room.”

“Don’t want to disturb your cuddle,” he said.
“Don’t have to disturb it,” said Niall. “Could join it though.”

Harry smiled bashfully and joined Niall and his cat on the sofa, scooching in until he was pressed against Niall and tucked under the lad’s arm.

It was several hours later when Niall said, “How did we finish that whole series?”

It was a bit ridiculous, he thought, that he’d spent the entire afternoon and early evening cuddled up in Harry’s flat watching telly and drinking tea. It was ridiculous and perfect and he wanted to do it as often as he could.

“Is there anywhere good for takeaway round here?” asked Niall.

Harry turned in Niall’s arms and looked at him with that wide-eyed hopefulness. “Yes. But maybe, um, I could make us dinner?”

“You want to make me dinner?” asked Niall, stunned. God, this boy was perfect.

“I like to cook but, um, but,” started Harry before he looked away, embarrassed.

“But let me guess,” said Niall, sure his sneaking suspicion was correct, “Nick never wanted you to.”

Harry nodded.

“Well, you can cook for me whenever ya’d like,” Niall told him, smiling.

At around midnight, Harry looked up at Niall from where he lay with his head in Niall’s lap and said over the soothing sounds of Pink Floyd’s *Obscured by Clouds*, eyes as soft and dreamy as the music, “Would you stay the night, Niall?”

“I’d love to, pet,” said Niall, stroking Harry’s hair.

They curled up in Harry’s bed, cozy under the fluffy blankets.

“Niall,” spoke Harry into the silence of the dimly lit room. He shuffled closer to Niall and tucked his face into Niall’s neck. “Can I tell you something?”

“O’ course, love,” said Niall, heartbeat speeding up. “Can tell me anything.”

Harry nuzzled his nose against Niall’s freckled skin and said quietly, “It’s embarrassing.”

“Probably not.” Niall lifted a hand and scritched the back of Harry’s head. “Don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to though.”

“I do want to tell you,” whispered Harry. He breathed into Niall’s shoulder, tickling him, and then spoke again. “I feel happy when I’m with you. And safe and comfortable. Like, you’re so nice to me and Elora and Butterscotch.” Niall could feel him frown against his neck. “That’s silly,” he said and Niall shook his head, hoping Harry could feel the movement against his own, but didn’t interrupt. “You don’t make me feel stupid or silly or ashamed of the things I like and it’s just so nice. I feel normal. I- Niall, I like you. A lot.”

Niall didn’t know which part to focus on. He wanted to know how much “a lot” was but asked instead, “That’s what you meant last night when you said I make you feel different, isn’t it?”

Harry nodded. “You treat me like you like me. But he- he never did. I don’t think- I don’t know if he ever even did like me.” He growled low, sounding like a displeased cat, and said, “I don’t want
everything to be about him. I just want— I just want to forget him!”

Niall didn’t say anything for a few minutes, just rubbed Harry’s head with his fingertips in soothing circles. He wanted Harry to forget Nick too; it wasn’t even for selfish reasons—at least not entirely—but because he wanted Harry to be happy and free from the insecurities and doubts Nick had planted in him.

It probably wasn’t the best way, he knew, but he said quietly, “I like you a lot too. A whole lot, actually.” He exhaled. “Fuck, pet. Can I kiss you?”

Harry lifted himself up and leant back, head a few inches from Niall’s and eyes wide. Niall held his breath, not sure what to expect, and then Harry gave three short little nods.

Niall breathed out shakily and pushed himself back to lean against the headboard. Slowly, he reached out and wrapped an arm around Harry, pulling him up the last few inches. His other hand slid into the wavy hair at the back of Harry’s head and he tilted Harry’s head toward his own. He separated their lips after just a few seconds but he kissed him again, a little more firm and filled with a longing he hadn’t realised had been there but still sweet and soft. He ended the kiss, lips dragging away from Harry’s as he leant back, and he wondered if he looked as awestruck as Harry did.

“Oh,” whispered Harry, eyes blown wide. “That’s how it’s supposed to feel.”

Niall smiled, soft and sleepy and content now, and said, “Yeah. Reckon so.” He moved his hand from the back of Harry’s head to cup his cheek and gazed at Harry’s face, green eyes sparkling in the pale light from the streetlamps. “Let’s go t’ sleep now, love.”

When Niall woke up, he found Harry wasn’t in his arms but he wasn’t alone in Harry’s bed; Butterscotch was curled up by his head, purring. He looked around the tiny bedroom, the early autumn sun streaming through the windows, and felt calm and peaceful. It was so very Harry—sweet and lovely and modest and a touch feminine—and so very perfect and he kind of wanted to lie here all day and the rest of every day.

Just then, Harry stepped out of the bathroom, the door just a few feet from the foot of the bed. His eyes landed on Niall and he said, lips quirking into a pretty little smile, “You’re awake.”

“Yeah. G’ morning, pet,” said Niall, voice rough with sleep.

“Good morning, Niall.”

“Now come here and lie with me, would ya,” said Niall, grinning at Harry. “Come on. I miss ya.”

Harry beamed, smile so wide his dimples cut deep into his cheeks, and he walked to the bed. He dropped down onto his hands and knees and crawled toward Niall, collapsing onto Niall’s chest.

“Hmmm,” he hummed and Niall wrapped his arms around him. He nuzzled his face into the lad’s neck, eyelashes fluttering against Niall’s skin, and Niall was drowning again. “I’m glad you’re still here,” whispered Harry.

“Me too,” said Niall. He turned his head and placed a gentle kiss to the top of Harry’s head.

Niall and Harry spent all morning lounging in bed while Butterscotch purred away. Niall let Harry talk, listening to everything the lad told him and prompting him to tell him more with gentle encouragements.
“I want to know everything about you, Harry Styles,” he whispered into Harry’s hair, fingers moving in soft circles across the skin of Harry’s lower back.

So Harry talked, slow and drawling and speech meandering, and Niall meditated in it and studied it all.

It was at around one o’clock when they finally got out of bed. It was a bit ridiculous, Niall thought just as he had the night before, that he’d spent all morning and early afternoon cuddled in Harry’s bed listening to him talk about Earl Grey tea and homemade marshmallows and his book club and his parents’ pub and why he loved The Clash. He didn’t think he could ever get enough of it.

They went for lunch at Black Treacle and if Elora noticed that Niall was wearing the same clothes as the day before, she didn’t mention it. She did give him a soft smile, though, and Niall thought she knew how he was feeling and what he was thinking.

“I’m not taking your money, lad,” she said when Niall tried to pay for their lunch. “Just keep him smiling like that, yeah.”

Back at Harry’s flat, they watched SE7EN and cuddled under a warm, well-worn blanket on the sofa. “It’s like And Then There Were None, Niall,” said Harry when the movie ended. “Only different. And it’s brilliant, how Wrath killed Envy. You should- you should read it, Niall. Please?”

“O’ course, pet,” said Niall. “It’s your favourite, yeah? Must be pretty good.”

Harry smiled and Niall was still drowning.

Finally, at nearly ten o’clock, Niall pulled Harry to lie on top of him, arms wrapped around Harry’s slim waist.

He sighed. “I’ve got to leave, pet,” he told the younger boy. He looked at Harry’s face as the lad pulled back from Niall’s chest, the pout on his perfect lips showing his displeasure. “Don’t give me them puppy dog eyes. That’s not fair. Should sleep in me own bed tonight. Besides, I need clean clothes. Can’t show up to the studio tomorrow in these same dirty clothes.”

With a sad little whimper and pout, Harry dropped forward onto Niall’s chest again. “I’ll miss you, Niall,” he said, lips brushing against Niall’s throat.

“Yeah,” agreed Niall, overwhelmed and dizzy and head spinning. “I’ll miss ya too. But I’ll see ya in the morning, love. Just the other side of tonight.”

“Okay,” whispered Harry. “Just the other side of tonight.”

Harry got up and watched Niall pet Butterscotch’s head for a few moments before he stood from the sofa.

“Good night, Harry,” said Niall as they stood at the door.

“Good night, Niall. I’ll see you in the morning,” said Harry. He bit his lip, nervous, and then ducked forward to place a quick kiss to Niall’s cheek. “Have a- have a good night.”

“Yeah, you too, Harry.”

Harry got himself ready for bed, brushing his teeth and washing his face, before stripping off all of his clothing.
Lying in bed, Harry thought of Niall. Everything the older lad did—every touch, every kiss, every smile and laugh—made Harry weak. It was silly and cliche but Niall made him swoon.

Slowly, he slid his hand down his torso and over the trail of hair on his tummy to wrap it around his cock. He wondered how Niall would fuck him—if Niall would fuck him—and how it would feel to be taken care of instead of just used like a toy.

He liked to be used, he thought as he began to drag his hand up and down his hardening length, and he wanted Niall to use him. But he wanted Niall to whisper praises in his ear while he used him, tell him he was lovely and that he felt so perfect and was such a good boy. He wanted to be good, wanted to make Niall feel good, wanted to let Niall use him.

Harry sucked on the fingers of his other hand and then brought them down between his arsecheeks, finding his hole with his wet fingertip and imagining it was Niall.

“Ya want to be mine, don’t ya?” said Fantasy Niall.

“Yes,” moaned Harry, wanking his cock and prodding at his hole.

“Do ya want me to use ya?” asked Fantasy Niall. “Are ya going to be good for me, pet?”

“Yes!” whined Harry. “Yes!”

“You’re mine, aren’t ya, Harry?” said Fantasy Niall as Harry pressed his finger into himself, beginning to fuck it in and out.

“Oh, yes, Niall!” whimpered Harry, head tossing from side to side on his pillow.

“Feel so perfect, pet,” whispered Fantasy Niall. “So lovely. You’re so beautiful.” Harry added a second finger to his hole and moaned. “So beautiful,” Fantasy Niall continued. “Wish you could see how perfect you are for me, pet. Do ya want me to fill you up?”

“Oh! Please- please, Niall,” stuttered Harry, arse fucking down onto his fingers and hand tugging his dripping cock. “Please fill me up! Want to be yours!”

“Yeah,” moaned Fantasy Niall. “Filling you up, love. You’re mine. You’re mine, Harry, and I’m yours. I’m yours, right, pet?”

“Yes, Niall!” Harry came with a cry, arsehole clenching around his fingers and cum covering his tummy and the hand wrapped around his cock. “Oh my God!” He slowly pulled his fingers from his hole, whimpering at the feeling of emptiness, and rolled over onto his stomach. He nuzzled his face into the pillow below him and smelled Niall.

“Hmmm,” he hummed contentedly and fell asleep.

He woke up the next morning feeling floaty and warm. He felt butterflies fluttering in his tummy—how cliche was that?—when he saw a text from Niall that said Good morning pet! See you soon.

Good morning! he replied before getting up to shower and dress, singing to himself as he went through his morning routine.

When he walked into Black Treacle a bit later, he was greeted by Elora at the coffee bar.

“You look happy,” she told him, smiling. “Did Niall stay over again last night?”

Harry’s eyes went wide, feeling like a child caught with their hand in the cookie jar, and he blushed.
“What? Did Niall- What?”

“Harry, love, I’m not that stupid,” said Elora with a fond eyeroll. “He was wearing the same clothes two days in a row and you were practically glowing.”

Harry sighed, shoulders dropping. “Yeah,” he said sheepishly. “He- he stayed over. Not last night. He wanted- he wanted to sleep in his bed but, um, but mostly he wanted to get clean clothes for today. But he stayed over on, um, on Saturday night. But we didn’t”—Harry’s blush deepened and he lowered his voice—“we didn’t… sleep together. Like that.”

“Okay,” she said simply and turned to fill a box with pastries.

Harry wasn’t sure if she believed him or not but she wasn’t angry with him so he supposed it didn’t really matter.

He arrived at Rock and Rose at ten of nine carrying his box of pastries and a Thermos of tea.

“Good morning, love,” said Niall, meeting Harry just inside the door. He took the box from him and moved farther into the studio toward the table Orli had set up on Friday. “Sleep well?”

Harry blushed, thinking of the night before and what he had done after Niall left. “Y-yes,” he stuttered, hoping Niall wouldn’t suspect anything. “I missed you though.”

“I missed you too,” Niall told him. “Thought about you all night.”

“Good morning, dickheads!” called Louis from the door, shoving his sunglasses up into his messy hair. He walked toward Harry and Niall, eyeing the pastries. “Have a good weekend?”

“The best,” said Niall. “You?”

“It was all right, yeah,” said Louis with a shrug. “Li and I went up to Wolverhampton for a visit.” He turned to Harry. “I didn’t see you all over Twitter. No pap shots in _The Sun_ or _The Mirror_.”

“No,” agreed Harry tentatively. He wasn’t sure if Niall wanted Louis to know they’d spent nearly the whole weekend together. “I had a, um, just a quiet weekend.”

“What, Nick went to, like, Majorca for the weekend and left his pretty toy behind?” asked Louis bitingly.

“No,” said Harry. “He didn’t leave me behind.”

Louis looked unimpressed. “Right.”

“He didn’t,” said Harry again. “Um, I- I- I broke up with him. As much as, you know, as much as you can break up with someone who isn’t, like, officially your boyfriend.”

“What?” asked Louis, voice clipped and filled with shock. He blinked. “You what?”

“I told him- I told him that I’m done with it. With, like, with how he treats me and just- and all of it,” said Harry. “And I left.”

Louis stared at Harry, eyes wide. “Harry, love,” he said, voice soft now. “I’m- Wow. Are you- are you okay?”

Harry nodded. “I- I, um, I spent the weekend with- with my friend.”
“Elora?” asked Louis.

“Um,” said Harry. He looked at Niall over Louis’ shoulder and Niall nodded, giving him an encouraging smile.

“Holy shit,” said Louis suddenly. He looked from Harry to Niall, swiveling on his heel. “You spent the weekend with Niall. I knew it! I fucking knew it!” He smirked, smug and cocky, and said, “I told you dickheads you’re soulmates!”
Harry looked across the grimy pub table at John.

“I can’t believe—You really think that Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young were a better supergroup than The Traveling Wilburys?” he asked, face etched with disbelief. “Why?”

“They played at Woodstock, Haz,” said Bird. “Do I need another reason?”

“John, they’re great musicians. I won’t—I’m not arguing that. But as a supergroup, I mean”—Harry shrugged—“they just weren’t on the same level as solo musicians as each of the Wilburys.”

“That’s my boy,” said Niall with a grin, settling back into the booth and wrapping an arm around Harry. “Can’t argue with that.”

“Yes, I can,” said Bird.

“Please don’t,” groaned Conor from where he sat beside Bird. “We can choose more than one song on the jukebox, ya know.”

Niall laughed, bright and loud and so happy. “Is that why you prats were talking about supergroups? I got up to get ya your wine and that’s what happens?” He laughed again and gave Harry’s waist a squeeze. “Harry’s right,” he told Bird, “but just let the poor lad choose some songs. Ya know the only reason we come here is because they’ve got a jukebox and Conor loves it.”

“Nah, it’s ‘cause they’re the only Irish pub in Cheam that’s got that wine Harry likes,” said Gerry with a smirk, teasing.

“We don’t— I told you we don’t have to,” said Harry, pouting. “We don’t have to come here. We can go wherever. I like other wines too. And beer. I can drink—”

“And we’ve told you we like it here just fine,” said Bird reassuringly. “Besides, I’m pretty sure it’s the only pub with a jukebox too. And look at that one.” He pointed at Conor, who stood at the jukebox choosing his songs. “Loves it.”

“Ah, looks like he agrees with Harry,” said Niall, grinning as George Harrison’s voice cut in with the beginning of “Handle with Care.”

At last call, the lads ordered their final pints of the evening and Harry, already feeling just past tipsy, declined Niall’s offer for another glass of wine. Harry had come to appreciate only weeks into their friendship that Niall never pushed him to drink, even on nights they went out for dinner or drinks.

They said their goodbyes outside the pub at just past one o’clock.

“Ya coming back to Kingston tonight, Niall?” asked Jake. “Or ya going to Harry’s?”

“Staying at Harry’s tonight,” said Niall, taking Harry’s hand and threading their fingers together. He gave it a squeeze. Harry smiled a bashful, pleased little smile, his cheeks a beautiful blushy pink.

“Would you like to meet us for lunch tomorrow?” asked Harry. “We’re going to Black Treacle at probably, like, at one. If— if you’d like to come.”
“D’ya think Elora would make me a Croque Monsieur if I asked nicely?” wondered Jake.

“I think Elora would make ya anything if ya asked nicely,” chuckled Niall. “Reckon she’s got a little crush on ya.”

“Harry, what d’ya know about that?” asked Bird. “What d’ya talk about at them girls’ nights?”

Harry smiled secretively and mimed zipping his lips and throwing away the key. Everyone laughed and Harry beamed.

“I think that’s a yes, mate,” Niall told Jake.

“I didn’t say that!” exclaimed Harry.

It was as they boarded their bus to Sutton, finally away from the lads, that Niall asked, “So does Elora fancy Jake?”

“A gentleman never reveals his best friend’s secrets,” said Harry with a crooked smile.

“So she does.”

“Please don’t tease her!” begged Harry, looking at Niall with big green eyes. “She’d be so embarrassed.”

“I won’t, I promise,” said Niall. “But they’d make a cute couple.”

Butterscotch greeted them at the door and followed them to the bedroom, curling up at the foot of the bed while Harry and Niall washed up and stripped to their pants. They joined her on the bed, Harry falling easily into place tucked up under Niall’s arm, head on the older lad’s shoulder and body flush against his side.

“Ya have a good time tonight, love?” asked Niall, fingers rubbing gently over Harry’s thigh where it was draped on his hip.

Harry nodded, wavy hair tickling Niall’s chin. “Yes. I always have a good time with you, Niall. And the lads.”

“That’s good, then,” said Niall.

“Yeah. It’s nice. It’s like- it’s kind of like they’re my friends too,” Harry said quietly, almost embarrassed at his admission.

“Ya don’t have to say ‘like’ they’re yer friends, pet,” Niall told him. “They are yer friends. They like ya loads.”

Harry was silent for a moment and then he asked, insecure and shy, “Really?”

“O’ course, pet,” said Niall. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“I don’t- I don’t know,” admitted Harry. “Just with- with, you know, with—”

“Nick,” supplied Niall.

“Yeah,” agreed Harry. Niall never seemed to get jealous when Harry mentioned Nick, though he would get quite upset and maybe a bit angry when Harry talked about the way Nick had treated him. “With Nick’s friends, like, they just always were Nick’s friends. Not my friends too.”
“I think that had a lot more to do with Nick than you,” said Niall.

“What?” asked Harry, sounding a little confused.

“It wasn’t that they didn’t like ya, love,” said Niall. “Nick didn’t want ya to have friends. He wanted ya to have just him.”

“But you want me to have other friends.”

“Yeah.” Niall nodded. “I want ya to have whatever makes ya happy.”

Harry sighed contentedly and nuzzled his face against Niall’s bare shoulder.

When Niall woke up the next morning, Harry was still asleep beside him and Butterscotch was curled up at their feet. He reached out and brushed Harry’s dark waves back from his face.

Harry had broken up with Nick almost two months earlier and ever since, Niall had started to make regular visits to Sutton. Harry would occasionally spend the night in Kingston and they often spent time with Niall’s friends John Bird, Jake Curran, Conor Masterson, Gerry Morgan, and Louis Querelle—Other Louis, Harry called him, because there were now two Louises in his life; sometimes they went for drinks at one of their favourite locals and other times they would spend the evening at someone’s flat, watching movies or listening to records and playing music. Once in a while, Harry and Niall would spend an evening with Louis and Liam.

And it wasn’t unusual for everyone to meet up at Black Treacle for a late breakfast or lunch on a Saturday or Sunday.

But Niall still hadn’t asked Harry to be his boyfriend. He didn’t want to push Harry, didn’t want to make him feel pressured into any kind of commitment.

Mostly, though, he wanted to make sure that Harry knew he liked him for every little part of him—his love for book club and Pilates and Scrabble, his long drawling way of speaking, the way he could chat to the lads about music for hours on end, how happy he would get when he talked about girls’ night with Elora and her group of friends, his intelligence and kindness and sense of humour—and not just his physical beauty. He wanted Harry to know that he would still like him even if he wasn’t a gorgeous Gucci model because a large part of his beauty was his personality.

“Mmmm,” hummed Harry, nuzzling his face against Niall’s hand where it still rested against his hair. Eyes closed and a soft smile on his lips, he said, “Good morning, Niall.”

“G’morning, pet,” said Niall, voice low in the sleepy stillness of the morning.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Harry, eyes fluttering open and watching Niall.

Niall’s lips quirked into a soft smile of his own. “Trying to decide if I want to get up and make us tea or stay cuddled up with you and Butterscotch.”

“Both,” said Harry. “Tea, then cuddle. We can drink tea in bed and be cozy.”

“Too right,” agreed Niall. He pushed himself up and leant forward, kissing Harry’s sleep-mussed hair before getting out of the bed and leaving for the kitchen.

“Irish Breakfast, please!” called Harry and Niall laughed.

It was a chilly walk to Black Treacle that afternoon, December just settling around them, and they
held hands as they walked down High Street to the bakery.

“I hope it snows,” said Harry happily as they opened the door. “It’ll be so pretty.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Niall rolled his eyes fondly, hand on Harry’s lower back as he led him to the coffee bar. “You just want an excuse to stay tucked up in your flat with endless pots of tea watching telly and cuddling with Butterscotch.”

“Maybe,” said Harry with a sly smirk. “I still think it’ll be pretty though.”

“What’ll be pretty?” asked Elora.

“When it snows,” Harry told her, sitting down on a stool. “I’ve never seen London in the snow before.”

“It’s pretty gross, actually,” she said. “Everything gets all grey and slushy.”

Harry huffed. “Well, thanks for ruining it for me.”


“Hey, Jake,” said Elora, blushing faintly.

Niall bumped his knee against Harry’s under the coffee bar and looked at the boy, eyebrow raised and an almost mischievous smile on his face. Harry stared back waringly, silently begging Niall not to say anything to either of their friends. Niall dropped a hand to Harry’s knee and squeezed lightly, reassuringly.

“Did you two see your pictures on Vogue’s Instagram?” Elora asked Harry and Niall a bit later.

“El, that spread went up, like, a week and a half ago,” said Harry, looking at his friend. “We talked about the Gucci reindeer jumper—”

“Not the real spread,” she said, sounding amusedly exasperated. “They posted behind-the-scenes candids from the shoot. They’re adorable.” She smiled and added slyly, “Everyone thinks you’re dating, you know.”

“What?” exclaimed Harry and Niall at the same time.

“All the comments,” said Elora. “Everyone says what a sweet couple you are. And that you look happy together.”

“We are happy together,” said Harry, brows furrowed at what he obviously felt was the implication that they might not enjoy each other’s company. “We’re”—he hesitated for a moment, looking at Niall tentatively—“best friends.”

Niall nodded, an encouraging smile on his lips, and said quietly, almost just to Harry, “Course we are.”

“Best friends don’t sleep in each other’s bed,” said Elora, brow raised and one side of her mouth tipped into a knowing grin.

“We- we sleep in the same bed sometimes,” said Harry, uncertain. “When I- when I sleep over sometimes.”
Elora patted Harry’s hand. “Yes, but we’re not attracted to each other.”

“Joke me something awful just like kisses on the necks of ‘best friends’,” sang Jake quietly into his teacup.

“Exactly,” said Elora, pointing at Jake.

Harry blushed a bright pink and Niall wondered what that blush meant.

The subject was dropped, though, and Bird and Gerry arrived a few minutes later, turning the conversation to their gig later that evening at The Half Moon.

“You lads are comin’, right?” asked Bird.

“O’ course we are,” said Niall and Harry nodded.

“What about you, El?” asked Jake. “You coming?”

Elora pretended to think about it for a few seconds and then said, “Yeah, suppose I will. Probably’ll bring Abby along.”

Jake smiled and Niall smirked.

“Come back to mine?” asked Niall as they finished up their lunch. “I’ve got to change. And we can head to Putney from Kingston later.”

“Okay, Niall,” said Harry and an hour later, they arrived at Niall’s flat on Southsea Road.

They lounged around for a while, Harry reading through *A Christmas Carol*—Zayn’s choice for their next book club meeting—and Niall made them hot chocolate with a cheeky bit of whiskey and sat at the opposite end of the sofa playing his guitar quietly, Harry’s wool sock-clad feet tucked under his thighs.

Harry and Niall met up with Elora and Abby at The Half Moon at seven o’clock, eating a quick dinner at the bar before moving into the small music venue. The four friends found seats at the front of the stage.

They all stayed after the show to chat with the lads, congratulating them on their performance.

“Your solos were brilliant,” Elora told Jake, cheeks tinted pink. “Just really- Yeah, just brilliant.”

The guitarist grinned, the shadow of a blush on his face too, and said happily, “Thanks, Elora.”

The group made their way to Putney High Street to the bus stop at St Mary’s Church, Harry and Niall leading the way with Harry’s mittened hand clasped in Niall’s. Elora walked with Jake, the two talking almost awkwardly, dancing along the line of flirting. Abby fell back with the others, leaving her sister with Jake and chatting with the lads about the upcoming writing and recording sessions for their debut album.

They boarded their different buses; Harry, Niall, Elora, and Abby took the 93 back to Sutton while the others waited for their buses back to Kingston and Morden.

The four friends talked about the photoshoot Harry was starting the next week, a four day trip to Edinburgh with Louis to shoot a holiday fashion spread for *GQ*’s website. Harry was excited, telling them he’d never been to Edinburgh and was looking forward to exploring the city with Louis; he was also happy because a lot of the looks he would be modeling were Gucci and McQueen.
Niall and Harry said their goodbyes to the sisters at the Sutton Green stop, waving as they alighted the bus and watching it continue down High Street.

Cuddled up in Harry’s bed with Butterscotch at their feet, Niall talked softly about their plans for the next day and played with Harry’s hair until his breaths turned slow and steady and Niall knew he’d fallen asleep.

When Harry woke up, Niall was still asleep behind him, spooned up against Harry’s back with his hand on Harry’s hip and his nose tucked into the nape of Harry’s neck. He felt around the bed, searching for his phone to check the time and found it under his pillow.

He pressed the home button and the screen lit up, showing several photos and a message from a number he didn’t recognize. Squinting his sleep-filled eyes at his phone, he slid to open the messages.

There were four photos of Harry and Niall leaving The Half Moon the night before, Harry’s hand clasped in Niall’s and the rest of their friends trailing behind.

It was when Harry read the message that he knew who had sent the photos.

*Seems I’m not the only one who enjoys the attention they get when they’re with you ;)*

He scrolled up and looked through the photos again. They were nice pictures, honestly, like the pictures of Niall and him at the Oliver Spencer show during Fashion Week. And like those pictures, he wondered who had taken these.

He looked truly happy, smiling wide at whatever Niall was laughing about. His cheeks were tinted a little pink, probably partially from the cold but also because he always blushed when he had Niall’s attention focused on him. His hand was in Niall’s, safe and warm, and Niall looked genuinely happy to be with him.

Nick was wrong, he tried to convince himself.

Harry got up, Niall’s hand falling from his hip and face turning to nuzzle into Harry’s pillow, and walked down the hallway to the little kitchen. He turned on the kettle and hopped up onto the counter, sitting on the cool laminate and scrolling through the photos again.

“Yeh’ve got the kettle on,” came Niall’s voice from the kitchen entrance, raspy with sleep.

Harry felt his attention drawn from his thoughts and back to the kitchen—back to the whistling kettle on the hob—and he looked up from his phone. Niall smiled at him from where he was standing just by the refrigerator, soft and fond, and then crossed the short distance to Harry.

“Mornin’, love,” he said, stepping between Harry’s legs and leaning forward to kiss his forehead.

Harry watched Niall step back and move toward the stove to turn off the kettle. “What d’ya want?” he asked, opening the cabinet filled with a half dozen tins of tea.

“Um, good morning, Niall,” said Harry. “Sorry if- sorry if I woke you up. With the- with the kettle.”

Niall gave Harry a half-smile and said, “Worse ways I could wake up.”

“I- I guess,” said Harry, uncertain. “Um, but, um, sorry.”

“Yeh’ve got nothing to be sorry for, pet,” Niall told him. “Earl Grey?” he asked, pulling the tin of
Earl Grey tea from the shelf.

Harry shrugged. “Okay.”

Niall turned back to Harry and frowned. “Ya all right, love? Sleep well?”

Harry nodded. “I’m- Yeah, I’m fine. Just, um, I just had a bit of a- I had a weird dream,” he said. He wasn’t sure why he was lying to Niall, why he wasn’t just telling him about the pictures and Nick’s message. “But I forgot it.”

Niall smiled, gentle and kind, and set about making a pot of tea.

They arrived at Black Treacle a few hours later, finding Jake sitting at the coffee bar chatting to Elora, and joined him.

Harry felt out of place, awkward and distant. He found himself tuning out of the conversation, his thoughts returning to the pictures and Nick’s message.

*Seems I’m not the only one who enjoys the attention they get when they’re with you*

It was silly, Harry knew, and Nick was wrong. Niall hadn’t known that they were being photographed any more than Harry had.

But The Half Moon wasn’t a celebrity hang-out and the paps didn’t really have any reason to be there unless someone had tipped them off. Nick had done that often when they were together, Harry was sure, and now, Nick’s text message still in his mind, he began to wonder if maybe Niall had done the same.

“Excuse me,” he said suddenly, interrupting Jake. “I’ve got to- I need the toilet.”

Niall reached out and laid his hand on Harry’s knee. “Ya okay, love?” he asked, voice low.

Harry nodded, jerky and quick, and said, “Yeah. I’ve just got to use the toilet.”

He stood from his stool and walked toward the toilet, Niall watching as he crossed the cafe.

“El,” he said, turning back to look at his friend, “can ya talk to him when he gets back? Please? He’s been off all mornin’. Just, like, distant and… I don’t know. Told me he had a weird dream but I don’t know. He’s just acting different. Kind of- kind of like he did when I first met him. Nervous and, like, insecure.”

Elora’s eyes widened. “Did you not see the pictures?” she asked.

“Did you not see the pictures?” she asked.

“The pictures?”

“I bet that’s what got him,” said Elora thoughtfully. “There were”—she pulled out her phone and tapped the screen a few times—“pictures. Here.” She handed Niall the phone.

Niall took it and looked at the screen. Twitter was open to *The Mirror’s* profile. He scrolled down and saw a set of four photos under a caption that read “Models Niall Horan and Harry Styles and members of indie band John Bird and the Lovers seen leaving The Half Moon in Putney with friends last night.”

The pictures were nice. Everyone looked happy, smiles wide and an easy friendship clear in their facial expressions and body language. He and Harry looked especially sweet, he thought, with Harry’s hand in his and his joy at being in Harry’s presence obvious.
Niall looked up from the phone and back to Elora. “I know he doesn’t like the paparazzi pictures and, like, it is weird and, I mean, I don’t really like it either. But it’s not like he’s got Nick to worry about anymore.” He shrugged and frowned. “I just- I don’t want him to worry about it.”

“Nick knew it was going to happen most of the time,” Elora told him. “He always took Harry to places the paps knew about. Like, ‘celeb hangouts’ or whatever. And sometimes he would tip off the paps just to make sure they’d get pictures.”

Niall’s face fell. “He doesn’t- D’ya think”—he sighed—“I didn’t do that, El. I would never do that. I’m- God, I fucking hate Nick Grimshaw!”

“Shh,” hushed Jake, gesturing with his head toward something. Elora and Niall looked and saw Harry walking back toward the coffee bar.

“I’ll take care of it,” Elora said to Niall, patting his hand comfortingly. “Or I’ll try.”

“Thanks, El,” said Niall, brows still furrowed in concern. He turned to Jake and let the lad steer them into a conversation about the lads’ upcoming studio sessions.

“Hi, sweetie,” said Elora, giving Harry a smile as he sat back down on his stool. “Everything all right? You seem out-of sorts this morning.”

Harry sighed and his shoulders fell, looking suddenly small and insecure. “There were pictures of- Nick sent me pictures this morning.”

“Nick sent you pictures?” asked Elora.

“Yeah. Of- There were pictures of us- of all of us leaving The Half Moon last night,” he explained. Elora nodded. “I saw them. Bit weird to be having The Mirror tweet pictures of you, isn’t it?” She looked at Harry, brows knit as she considered him. “How’d you know they were from Nick? You deleted his phone number.”

“Because the message said- It said that it seems like he’s not the only one who enjoys the attention they get from being seen with me,” Harry told her. “And, like, Nick’s the only one- He’s the only person who would say that.”

“Harry, love,” said Elora gently, “I was there last night. None of us knew we were being photographed. And I don’t think any of us especially enjoy having our nice evening with our friends splashed all over Twitter.”

“You don’t but maybe- but maybe Niall does,” said Harry, voice barely above a whisper. “Like you said yesterday. Everyone thinks we’re dating. So now I’m just”—he shrugged—“now I’m just Niall’s model boyfriend instead of Nick’s.”

Elora frowned. “Did you see the Tweet? Or just the pictures Nick sent you?” she asked.

“Just what Nick sent me,” admitted Harry. “I didn’t- I didn’t want to see the Tweet.”

Elora shook her head in disagreement. “I think you should see it. This is different from the ones with Nick.” She opened her phone and tapped the screen again, finding the Tweet and handing her phone to Harry.

Harry took it, looking at the photos and reading the caption above it.
“They didn’t call you boyfriends. They didn’t say that you’re Niall’s model boyfriend,” said Elora. “It just says exactly what it is. You, Niall, and the lads were seen leaving The Half Moon with Abby and me.” She shrugged again. “You’re all some sort of famous. It’s going to happen once in a while. Even, like, the most lowkey celebs who manage to stay out of the tabloids are seen, like, leaving the gym or Starbucks or something.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah. I know.”

“Now go talk to your boy.”

“He’s not my boy.”

“Right,” said Elora plainly. “He’s worried about you. You can talk to him, you know. He won’t get upset like Nick did.”

Harry smiled sheepishly. “I know.” He paused and then added, “Thanks, El.”

Elora smiled and then turned back to the other lads. “Jake, more coffee?” she asked.

“Please,” he said, telling Elora what he wanted.

“Hi, Niall,” said Harry shyly, looking at Niall on the stool next to him.

“Hi, pet,” said Niall quietly. “Ya all right?”

Harry nodded. “Yes. It was silly.”

“Probably not,” Niall told him. “Ya want to tell me?”

“At home?” said Harry, though it was more of a question.

Niall smiled kindly, soft and fond. He brushed a strand of wavy hair back from Harry’s forehead. “Yeah. Can tell me at home.”

An hour later, Harry sat on his sofa, cuddled back against Niall’s firm chest, and told Niall about Nick’s text message and his thoughts and concerns from earlier that morning.

“I thought that- Nick used to take me places where the paps- where there were always paps,” said Harry. “Like Mahiki and stuff. And sometimes, I think- I think he called them or, like, or tipped them off somehow to make sure that they’d, you know, that they’d be there. Like one time when I- I went to Nick’s flat and there were two- there were two men with their cameras outside and they wouldn’t leave me alone until the doorman Bernie- until Bernie told them he would call the police and tell them that, you know, that they were harassing a tenant’s guest if they didn’t leave.” Harry’s face scrunched up at the memory. “Bernie was really nice.”

Niall placed a gentle kiss to the ticklish skin behind Harry’s ear. “I’d never do that to you, pet.”

Harry nodded. “I know. You’re so nice, Niall.”

“I’m just tryin’ to treat ya how ya deserve,” Niall told him quietly, voice filled with genuine desire.

They made hot chocolate and watched *Home Alone*, curled up under a warm wool blanket on Harry’s old sofa.

“We have to get ahead on our Christmas movies, Niall,” said Harry seriously. “Because I’ll be away for the next five days and then you’ll be busy with your Oliver Spencer photoshoot the next week.
and we can’t miss any. Christmas isn’t right if you don’t stick to the traditions.”

“Okay, love,” said Niall, settling in to watch the film.

When the movie was over—Buzz had shouted at Kevin, wondering what he’d done to his room—Niall left, kissing Harry on the forehead and telling him to have fun at yoga and to enjoy his trip to Edinburgh with Louis.

Harry did enjoy yoga that evening, stopping at The Prince of Wales for drinks and a few sharers with some of the ladies after his session; they were all eager to hear about his upcoming shoot in Scotland and the clothes he would be modelling.

“How exciting! I’ve never even been into Gucci,” said Sarah. “Couldn’t pull it off, even if I could afford it.”

“Of course you could,” Harry assured her. “You’d look gorgeous.”

They separated after a few shared snack plates and a glass of wine each, Harry heading back to his flat on The Green and the ladies off to their homes in Cheam and West Sutton.

Harry woke up early the next morning. He was meeting with Louis at ten o’clock at the studios on Grafton Street for his final fittings for the week’s shoot.

He smiled when he found a text message from Niall. Good morning pet!

Harry took a selfie, his hair a mess of brown waves and mussed ringlets, creases on his face from his pillowcase. Good morning, Niall! he responded, sending the selfie with the message.

Christ you’re beautiful, read Niall’s reply. You excited for your trip to Edinburgh?

Harry and Niall texted back and forth while Harry got dressed and made his way to Mayfair, stopping at Black Treacle for a bun and tea before leaving Sutton.

The fittings took several hours as Harry changed from one outfit to the next and the tailor took measurements and pinned the legs of trousers. Harry took more selfies as they went along, sending them to Niall and receiving some of Niall at his own fitting for the following week’s Oliver Spencer shoot in return.

“If you’re nearly done flirting with your boyfriend,” said Louis with none of the bitterness that used to taint similar statements in the past, “maybe we can talk about the game plan for the next few days.”

“Sorry- sorry, Lou,” said Harry, slipping his phone into the pocket of the jeans he’d just pulled on. “I’m—”

“It’s okay, love,” Louis told him with a smile. “I quite like this one.” He studied Harry for a moment, brows knit. “Interesting, that.”

“What- What’s interesting?” asked Harry.

“You didn’t try to tell me he’s not your boyfriend,” Louis pointed out, smug smirk on his face. “Always used to deny it when I said it about Grimshaw.”

“He’s not- He isn’t my boyfriend but I know you won’t believe me if I say it so”—Harry shrugged —“I didn’t bother.”
“You’re right,” said Louis. “I don’t believe you. Couple of prats, you two are.”

Harry rolled his eyes.

Fittings complete and the overview of the four-day shoot discussed, Harry left Louis and headed back to Sutton to get ready for the trip to Edinburgh.

*GQ* was paying the travel expenses and Simon had convinced them to book a room for Louis and Harry on the Caledonian Sleeper from London Euston. They would be able to travel overnight and arrive in Edinburgh in the morning and wouldn’t waste part of their first day travelling, he reasoned, and they would have a good night’s sleep and breakfast so they wouldn’t be too tired or out-of sorts to have a productive first day.

Harry was excited because he’d never been on a sleeper train but the idea made him think of *Murder on the Orient Express* and that was one of his favourite Agatha Christie novels. Louis was happy because they’d be able to sit in the lounge car drinking gin and tonics and would have hot breakfast delivered to their room in the morning.

Harry packed his bag, double-checking that he had everything he would need for the trip, and filled Butterscotch’s food and water dishes before heading to Pilates; he made a quick stop at Elora’s flat above Black Treacle on the way, giving her the key to his flat so Niall could pick it up the next morning because Niall was staying at Harry’s flat while he was out of town.

Elora had offered to stop by his flat every day to feed Butterscotch and make sure her cat box was clean but Niall had offered to stay at the flat, claiming he didn’t want Butterscotch to feel too lonely without Harry. Harry had smiled a pleased little smile that he’d tried to hide behind his teacup.

He took the bus from the Cheam Leisure Centre, transferring to the Underground at Morden Station and arriving at London Euston at just before ten o’clock.

“Everything you hoped it would be?” asked Louis as they settled into their bunks that night.

“Yes,” said Harry, grinning up at the ceiling above him.

The four days passed pleasantly. It wasn’t too cold to spend most of the day outside wandering around the city and taking photos at the Scott Monument, Edinburgh Castle, and along Princes Street and the Royal Mile. Still, Harry certainly didn’t mind the afternoon and evening shoots spent drinking Scotch in the bar at The Balmoral Hotel or in front of the fireplace in his posh suite at The Witchery by the Castle—an excessively grand boutique hotel that *GQ* had agreed to pay for after Louis had argued that it would double as a remarkable location to shoot—though he thought he might enjoy it even more if Niall was with him.

At half past ten on Friday night, Louis and Harry finished their last photos in the Edinburgh Waverly train station and boarded the train, finding their room before heading to the lounge car for whisky and the final photos of the shoot. Harry’s red, black, and green tartan McQueen suit with a black tuxedo shirt and red neck bow attracted a bit of attention from other travellers joining them on the train as the departure time neared.

“Are you shooting for an Alexander McQueen campaign?” asked one young woman around Harry’s age as she joined them in the lounge car, Scottish accent heavy.

“A *GQ* website exclusive, actually,” Louis told her.

“Is it all right if I watch?” she asked. “I’m studying at the London College of Fashion at UAL,” she told them, “and I saw you walk at the McQueen show during Fashion Week. You were wonderful.”
Harry blushed and smiled, small and bashful. “Thank you.”

“That’s all right, then,” said Louis, watching as she took a seat at a cushioned bench on the opposite end of the car and placed an Old Fashioned on the end table. “We’re nearly finished though.”

She shrugged. “It’s still exciting.”

Harry arrived back in Sutton at around half eight the next morning, practically sprinting from the Sutton Green bus stop to his flat, eager to see Niall.

They’d texted every day, Harry telling Niall all about their adventures each day and sending pictures of the different places they went and things they saw. Niall told him about his fittings and tailoring sessions for his Oliver Spencer campaign and sent pictures of himself cuddling with Butterscotch on Harry’s sofa.

But he couldn’t wait to see Niall, to join him for a cuddle on the sofa.

He felt a bit funny knocking on his own door—he didn’t have a spare key but maybe it would be a good idea to have one made so Niall could have one—but he did, waiting for Niall to let him in.

“Welcome home, pet!” said Niall as soon as he opened the door, drawing Harry into a tight hug.

“Hi, Niall,” said Harry, pressing his face into Niall’s neck and taking in his scent, the warmth of his skin against Harry’s own wind-chilled nose, the stubble of his unshaved face. “Missed you.”

“Missed you too,” Niall told him, drawing back after a moment and letting Harry into the living room. “Was just going to make some breakfast. Ya want something? Or we can go down to Black Treacle if ya want to see El.”

“Maybe for lunch?” said Harry, closing the door. “I just want- I want to see you. First. I missed you.”

Niall gave him a fond smile. “Ya didn’t meet some Scottish lad who swept ya off yer feet then?” he teased.

“No,” said Harry with a bashful smile and a little giggle. Then, in a fit of boldness that surprised himself, he added, “I like Irish accents better anyway.”

Niall looked at him, blue eyes bright and lips quirked into a smirk. “Why you little… flirt.” He stepped closer to Harry and placed his hands on Harry’s slim hips. “Is that what you’re doing?” he asked, pulling Harry’s body to his own and studying his face. “Flirting with me?”

Harry gave a self-satisfied smile before biting his bottom lip. “Maybe.”

“Mhm,” groaned Niall. He leant forward and placed his lips against Harry’s ear. “Cheeky bastard,” he whispered.

He stepped away and walked to the kitchen, Harry following behind.

Harry hopped up onto the counter and watched as Niall set about preparing breakfast, turning on the kettle and cooking the eggs and sausage and popping bread into the toaster.

“Do you like that?” asked Harry curiously, head tilted to the side. “Me- me flirting with you?”

Niall turned to Harry, spatula in his hand, and said plainly, “O’ course I do, pet.” He crossed the kitchen toward Harry and stopped just in front of the boy. “Having the most wonderful lad I’ve ever
met flirt with me? It’s—”

“I’m the- Me?” asked Harry, eyes wide with surprise and a touch of disbelief. “I’m the most
wonderful lad you’ve ever met?”

“Harry,” said Niall, dropping a hand to Harry’s knee. “Pet, you’re as close to perfect as anyone can
be. There’s not a single thing about ya that I don’t like. I’m kind of”—he chuckled nervously—“I’m
kind of gone for ya. Have been for a while now, if I’m being honest.”

Harry stared at Niall. “Really?” he asked after a few moments.

Niall gave a little chuckle. “You’re me best mate, love.”

“Your best mate,” said Harry. “Not—”

“Don’t see me walking ‘round holding Jake’s hand or kissing Bird on the forehead, do ya?” said
Niall with a soft half-smile. “Not spending every other night in Gerry’s bed, am I?”

Harry giggled, hiding his wide grin behind his ringed fingers.

They ate breakfast and spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon playing Scrabble—Niall,
Harry had learnt, was a worthy competitor—and drinking tea and talking about Harry’s trip.

Harry wasn’t quite sure what Niall meant when he said he was gone for him. Niall liked him, he
knew, but he didn’t know if he wanted to be his boyfriend; he wasn’t sure if Niall wanted a serious
relationship with him. He didn’t think the friendship they’d developed over the past few months
counted as friends-with-benefits—it hadn’t felt like it—because they’d not slept together or even
really kissed, other than little pecks on the cheek or forehead.

Except for the first time Harry had slept in Niall’s bed and Harry had realised how kisses were
supposed to make him feel. Happy. Cherished. Like he was cared for and cared about.

When they entered Black Treacle a bit later that afternoon, Elora greeted them at the door, a tray
filled with dirty plates and teacups in her hands.

“Hey, sweetie!” she said, tilting her head up to give Harry a kiss on the cheek. “Glad you’re home!”

The two lads followed her to the coffee bar, taking seats on the stools as she moved behind it with
the tray of dirty dishes.

“I’d ask how your trip was but I already got daily updates from this one.” She gestured at Niall with a
nod of her head. “Sometimes twice a day.” She rolled her eyes good-naturedly and smiled fondly.

“Look at the view from his hotel room, El!” she said in her best imitation of Niall’s Irish accent.
“‘They’re at the Scott Monument today! Look how beautiful he looks in that jumper.’”

“Nialll!” said Harry, sounding equal parts embarrassed and delighted. He leant over and nuzzled his
face into Niall’s neck.

“I told ya I missed ya, pet,” said Niall, blushing slightly. He wrapped an arm around Harry’s waist
and dropped his other hand to Harry’s knee. “But I’m glad ya had a good time.”

“Maybe we can go to Edinburgh sometime, Niall,” said Harry sweetly. “It was so lovely.”

“Yeah,” agreed Niall, rubbing Harry’s back with gentle fingers. “Yeah. Yeah, we can, love.”

Harry beamed up at Niall.
Jake and Other Louis arrived a bit later.

“Ya lads have any plans for tonight?” asked Other Louis. “How about you, El?”

“I’ve- I have plans, yeah,” said Elora, cheeks a light pink. She turned away from the coffee bar and busied herself with making a pot of tea.

“Jake,” said Other Louis, brows raising knowingly as he turned to look at his friend, “have you got plans for tonight?”


“Interesting,” said Other Louis. He turned from Jake and back to Harry and Niall. “What about you two?”

Niall’s fingers trailed up and down Harry’s sides, faint and tickly, and Harry laid his head on Niall’s shoulder. “We’re just going to stay in tonight,” Niall told him. “Have a quiet night at Harry’s.”

“Niall’s going to make me hot chocolate,” said Harry, smug.

“O’ course,” agreed Niall easily.

Harry pressed a smile into Niall’s freckled neck.

Back at Harry’s flat, Niall made hot chocolate and the two lads cuddled together on Harry’s sofa under his favourite well-worn blanket to watch *White Christmas*.

“It’s a Christmas classic,” said Harry happily. “I always watched this with my mum and Gemma.”

“S’pose I’ll have to do,” said Niall, voice low and lips against Harry’s ear.

Harry shivered and bit his lower lip. “Yeah,” he said, a bit breathless, “you’ll- you’ll do just fine.”

“Good,” said Niall, pressing a feather-light kiss to the corner of Harry’s jaw.

Harry inhaled sharply, feeling suddenly weak, and melted against Niall, his back flush against Niall’s chest.

They stayed like that through most of the movie, Harry wrapped in Niall’s arms and Niall placing soft kisses to Harry’s ears and jaw and neck every so often.

It was during the rehearsal scenes—Bob, Phil, Judy, and Betty were singing and dancing with the rest of the cast of the fictional musical *Playing Around*—when Niall leant forward to grab the television remote from the coffee table. He paused the film and Harry turned around in his arms to look at him, puzzled.

“Why’d you—”

Niall threaded his fingers into the hair at the nape of Harry’s head and dipped his head forward, cutting off Harry’s question with a firm kiss.

It was chaste and sweet, Niall’s lips a bit chapped and Harry’s soft and plump. It only lasted a few seconds before Niall pulled back but it held so much in its depths.

“You taste like hot chocolate,” whispered Harry against Niall’s lips, eyes closed and forehead against Niall’s.
“So do you,” breathed Niall with a quiet chuckle.

Harry opened his eyes and leant back, looking at Niall. His face was questioning, unsure. “Niall?”

“Harry, love, I don't know how- I don't know how to ask this,” said Niall, sounding almost nervous. “I haven't wanted- I didn't want to make ya feel uncomfortable or, like, pressured into anything ya didn't want. And I want ya to know that I care about you. I really want to make sure ya know that. Ya- ya know that, right?”

“I- Yeah, I- I guess so,” said Harry shyly. He nodded, more certain. “I- Yeah, I know, Niall.”

Niall studied his face, searching for any signs that he wasn't sure, that he had any doubts. “I do,” he said. “I care about ya very much. So much.”

“Okay,” said Harry. “I- I care about you very much too.”

“Good,” laughed Niall. “Thought maybe I had it all wrong for a minute.”

Harry shook his head. “No,” he said. “What did- You don't know how to ask me what?”

Niall exhaled slowly. “Harry, pet, will you- Would you like to be my boyfriend? If- I mean—”

“Yes,” exclaimed Harry quickly. “I do. I want to be. I want to be yours.”

Wordlessly, Niall slid one hand into Harry’s hair and moved the other up to cup the side of Harry’s face, fingertips tracing the sharp corner of his jaw. Gently, slowly, sweetly, he brought Harry’s face toward his own and, dipping his head forward, kissed Harry.

Harry’s eyes fluttered shut and he moved his lips against Niall’s, tentative and shy until Niall captured Harry’s lower lip between his own. Harry exhaled roughly and brought his arms up to wrap around Niall’s neck. With a tiny sigh, Harry flicked his tongue against Niall’s top lip and was rewarded with a moan.

Niall’s hand moved down from the nape of Harry’s neck to his lower back and pulled him closer still, lips pressing more firmly to Harry’s. He sucked lightly on Harry’s bottom lip and nipped it gently with his teeth before pulling back to place several gentle, whispery kisses to Harry’s mouth, lips smacking quietly with each peck.

Niall leant back, blue eyes taking in Harry’s face, a content little smile on the boy’s lips and a dusty pink blush high on his cheeks. Harry opened his eyes slowly, cheek still cradled in Niall’s big hand, and blinked sleepily at Niall. He smiled sweetly and Niall slipped his hand under the hem of Harry’s jumper, fingers tracing patterns on his smooth skin.

“Was that- was that all right, love?” asked Niall, voice a whisper.

Harry nodded, nuzzling his cheek against Niall’s hand, and said, “Yes, Niall. It was- it was perfect.”

Niall grinned and thumbed over Harry’s cheekbone. “That’s- that’s good, then.”

“Mmhm,” hummed Harry in agreement.

When they climbed into Harry’s bed a couple hours later—they finished the movie because Harry wanted to see the scene with the General walking into the barn in his uniform—with minty breath replacing chocolate, Harry cuddled into Niall’s arms and peppered kisses along his neck.

“I’m so happy, Niall,” said Harry, settling his head on Niall’s shoulder.
“Yeah?” asked Niall, feeling breathless, his heartbeat speeding up. He was sure Harry could feel it. “Why’s- why’s that, pet?”

“Because I think- I feel like you- you actually want me. Like- like, all of me,” said Harry slowly, brows furrowed as he sorted out his thoughts. “Like, you don’t just want me because I’m- because I’m pretty. You like every bit of me. I think. Even- even the parts of me that I don’t really like that much.”

“I do,” agreed Niall, nodding against the top of Harry’s head, the fluffy ringlets tickling his throat. He brushed his fingers up and down Harry’s side under his sweatshirt, skin warm and so soft.

“And I feel like,” started Harry, twisting to hide his face in Niall’s neck again, “I feel like”—he sighed—“It’s embarrassing. Nevermind.”

“It’s probably not embarrassing,” Niall told him. “If ya want to tell me.”

Harry exhaled. “I feel like you- like maybe you want to be mine too,” said Harry, rushing out his words.

It sounded more like a question, Niall thought, and he didn’t want Harry to question whether he wanted to belong to Harry or not.

“I do, pet,” he assured him. “I want to be yours. I want to be yours as long as- as long as you’ll have me. Please.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “I want that- I want that too.”

“That’s good, then.”

“Mmm,” hummed Harry into Niall’s neck.

The next morning, Niall woke a sleepy Harry up with kisses across his face—his cheeks, his nose, his eyelids and forehead—and massaged his head lightly, fingers laced in his messy waves.

“Wake up, pet,” he whispered, lips against Harry’s cheekbone. “Wake up.”

“Don’t want to,” said Harry, lips quirking into the tiniest hint of a smile. “Just want to lie here all day.”

Niall had to admit that sounded like a dream.

“We’re meeting everyone at Black Treacle, pet,” Niall reminded him, tracing along Harry’s jawbone. “Said we’d see them for breakfast.”

Harry pouted, eyes still closed. “They won’t miss us.”

“Was thinking”—Niall swallowed nervously—“was thinking we could tell them all. About us.”

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Niall. “About us?” he repeated, though Niall knew he wasn’t questioning what he meant.

“Yeah,” said Niall, nodding and giving Harry a joy-filled smile. “That we’re finally boyfriends.”

Harry’s pout turned into the most beautiful smile Niall had ever seen. “Yeah, we’ll tell them.” He reached up and wrapped an arm around Niall’s neck. “Elora’ll be so happy.”
“Ya know they’re going to call us a couple o’ prats, right?” asked Niall with a grin.

“Probably,” said Harry, shrugging against the mattress. “Maybe they’re right.”

Niall laughed, big and bold and bright. “Yeah. Probably.”

When Harry and Niall were finally seated at the coffee bar with their friends—Jake, Bird, Conor, Other Louis, and Gerry seated on stools at the bar while Elora and Abby stood behind the coffee bar—Niall told everyone, Harry’s hand in his, that he’d asked Harry to be his boyfriend and that Harry had said yes.

The news was met with a variety of reactions, all positive; there were a few fond eyerolls accompanied by a muttered “Finally,” Abby’s eloquent exclamation of “Ahh!” and Jake’s “Ya probably are soulmates, lads,” and—as predicted—two exasperated “Prats!” from Elora and Bird.

A couple hours later, after the lads had left Black Treacle and Niall had gone back to Kingston to get a change of clothes for the next day, Elora sat with Harry at the coffee bar.

“Are you happy, sweetie?” she asked him. “With Niall?”

Harry nodded. “Yes. He’s- Yeah. He makes me happy. He said he wants to be mine as long as I’ll have him.”

“Good,” said Elora, reaching forward and giving Harry’s knee a gentle squeeze. She smiled at him. “I’m happy for you. He’s a wonderful lad and he’ll- I know he’ll treat you like you deserve.”

Harry couldn’t hide the grin that snuck across his face, pressing his dimples deep into his rosy cheeks.

“What about you and Jake?” asked Harry a few minutes later, swallowing a bite of the kiwi and custard tart he and Elora were eating. “How was your date last night?”


“El, I’m not that stupid,” he told her. “You both had plans last night and you both got all embarrassed when you told us.”

“All right,” she said, sighing and rolling her eyes. “We went to see The Vaccines at The London Brixton Academy.”

“Did he plan it?” asked Harry, eyes wide and hopeful.

“Yes.”

“He planned- he planned, like, the perfect first date for you, El!” said Harry, so excited for his friend.

“I know,” she said as she took a sip of her tea, a smile creeping onto her face.

Harry wanted to know everything about his friends’ date the night before, only ending his relentless questioning when Elora reminded him that he had to get home and get ready for yoga or he would be late.

Niall started his shoot for Oliver Spencer the next day. Harry woke him up much the same as Niall had woken him the previous morning.

“Wake up, Niall,” he whispered, kissing Niall’s cheek. He kissed his nose, his brows, his forehead.
“Wake up!” he said again, pressing kisses along Niall’s jaw.

“Hmmm,” hummed Niall, turning his head on the pillow and giving Harry access to his neck.

“You’ve got to get to Louis or he’ll be grouchy,” whispered Harry against Niall’s freckled neck.

“Should come with me,” said Niall, eyes still closed as Harry peppered his neck with soft little kisses. Harry sat up on his knees and looked down at Niall, lips parted slightly, and Niall opened his eyes.

“Really?” asked Harry quietly. “Do you- do you really want me to come with you?”

Niall reached out and dropped a hand to Harry’s bare thigh. “O’ course,” he said, watching Harry. “Louis won’t mind. ‘S long as ya don’t distract me.” He frowned thoughtfully, playful. “On second thought, maybe you shouldn’t come.”

Harry’s face fell. “Oh. O—”

“Harry, I’m joking, love,” Niall cut in, rubbing Harry’s thigh lightly. “You’ll definitely distract me but Louis’l just have to deal with it.”

Harry beamed and Niall was drowning.

They arrived at the Oliver Spencer studios above the shop in Bloomsbury at just before ten o’clock. Lou greeted them both, giving them each a big hug.

She made tea in the small commissary and then led them to the makeup department.

“Tell us all about Edinburgh,” said Lou as she started on Niall’s hair and makeup, Harry sitting on a stool next to them. “Lottie said she had a good time working with you.”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry. “She did a really good job. She told me- She said that you suggested she go to Edinburgh College to study Makeup Artistry.”

“Yup!” said Lou.

“She’s a bit like Louis, isn’t she?” said Harry. “She’s kind of—”

“Who’s like me?” asked Louis from the door of the dressing room. He looked at Harry. “What are you doing here, Harold?”

“Isn’t it ‘Bring Your Boyfriend to Work Day’?” asked Niall, trying to stop the grin from forming on his face.

“Your- What?” exclaimed Louis, voice nearly a shout. “Boyfriend?” he said, eyes wide as he looked from Niall to Harry. “We- Are you serious?”

“Yup,” said Niall with a smile while Harry nodded, blush staining his cheeks a lovely pink.

“We spent four days together and you didn’t think to tell me that?” Louis asked Harry, sounding almost hysterical. “‘Hey, Louis. You’re right. Niall’s my soulmate.’ Nothing! Unbelievable!”

Harry’s blush deepened to a rosy red and Niall laughed his big, bright laugh.

“To be fair, it’s only been since Saturday,” he told the photographer.
After a bit of celebration—“Cheers, lads!” said Louis, holding out his paper cup of milky tea—and gloating from Louis—“Told you two prats you’re soulmates from the start!”—they got to work.

The first day’s shoot passed easily. Harry sat with Lou most of the day, watching Louis and Niall work and stealing kisses whenever he could.

Two or three times, he earned an exasperated, “Harold! We’re trying to work!” There was no force behind the admonishments, though, and Harry only giggled.

They met up with Liam for dinner at a restaurant called Ciao Bella down the street from the studio after they’d wrapped up for the day. Liam was thrilled to hear Niall and Harry’s news, congratulating them with none of his own boyfriend’s cocky “told ya so” attitude.

“You’re sweet together,” he told them, eyes crinkled with his kind smile, “and you make each other happy. That’s the most important thing, isn’t it?”

The rest of Niall’s shoot went well, ending at just before lunchtime on Friday afternoon.

After the first day, Harry had stopped by the studio to have lunch with Niall, Louis, and Lou on Tuesday and Wednesday and had popped by on Thursday to visit, knit beanie and the shoulders of his jacket coated with a dusting of snow, after a morning of Christmas shopping.

Harry and Niall spent the weekend finishing their Christmas shopping—Harry, Niall learnt, wrapped gifts beautifully, with lovely wrapping paper and gold wire-edged ribbon that he tied into perfect bows—and packing everything they would need for a ten day trip to Holmes Chapel.

Harry had asked Niall a few nights earlier while they lay in bed, shy and hesitant and stuttering, if Niall would like to spend Christmas with him and his family at The Purple Hare.

“My mum said she would- she would love it and, um, and I think- I mean, I know Robin and Gemma would too,” he’d said nervously. “And, like, and it would- I’d love it too. If you came with me. But only if- I mean, I understand if you’d rather stay in London. With the lads or- I just thought I’d ask.”

Niall had kissed him quiet and told him that he couldn’t think of a better way to spend the holiday.

So the two models met their friends at Black Treacle for a late breakfast on Sunday, exchanging gifts and wishing everyone a happy Christmas, before making the trip to Euston Station, Butterscotch in her cat carrier with her favourite toy mouse.

They were greeted at the Holmes Chapel train station by Gemma and welcomed “home” by Anne, who cooed over Harry and wanted to know everything about Niall’s family’s Christmas traditions so they could try to incorporate some into their celebrations.

The holiday passed in a flurry of hot chocolate and whisky, candy canes and Christmas crackers, Christmas presents, warm wool blankets, Scrabble and Christmas movies, lunches in the pub with some of the locals, a few trips to W Mandeville, and a snow fight that wasn’t entirely fair—“That’s two against one!” Niall had yelled as Gemma and Harry had burredg him with snowballs—and left Niall shivering by the fireplace while Harry and Gemma giggled but brought him a warm quilt and whisky.

Harry and Niall were soon headed back to London, stopping at Black Treacle for a quick late lunch on their way back to Harry’s flat.

As the New Year came and went, Harry and Niall found themselves reasonably busy with
photoshoots; with spring just a few months off, it was the time of year to start shooting product views for online shops so they could start updating with the spring/summer collections. Magazines began to shoot spreads and write articles for spring fashion and designers started shooting for their newest advertising campaigns in January and February.

And for Harry, the third week of February meant the Autumn/Winter London Fashion Week. This time, Gucci did have a show and Leila had already contacted Harry, offering him a spot on the runway.

Harry and Niall settled into something of a routine, arranging their erratic work schedules with their regular activities—the things that kept them grounded, like nights at the pub with the lads, lunch at Black Treacle, and television binges—and making sure they were still able to spend as much time together as they could.

Niall spent most nights at Harry’s flat, though he usually stayed at his own flat in Kingston on Sunday and Monday nights.

Harry continued his yoga sessions on Sunday evenings and Pilates on Monday nights, often going for dinner or drinks with the ladies afterwards; one night, at Harry’s request, Niall had joined them at The Prince of Wales for drinks. “This is—this is my boyfriend Niall,” Harry had introduced him, bashful and sweet. Niall had been warmly welcomed and was happy to see how well they treated Harry. It was important, Niall thought, that Harry have his own group of friends; Harry would know that they liked him for who he was and not just because they were Niall’s friends and Harry was part of the package.

Harry also kept up with his book club, going to the Sutton Central Library every other Wednesday for meetings. Niall started reading the books too, keeping up with the list that Zayn had printed up and distributed at the first meeting of the year and Harry had hung from the refrigerator. He’d decided not to join the club, again wanting Harry to have something that was just his but wanted to show that he was interested in the things Harry liked.

Niall spent a lot of the time he and Harry were apart with the lads while they wrote for and recorded their debut album. They’d asked him if he would still be part of the writing and recording process and he’d agreed.

“Jake’s an all right guitar player,” Bird had said with a wink, nudging Niall’s arm, “but it’s always good to have a rhythm guitarist too. And it doesn’t make sense to try to find someone for the recordin’ sessions when we’ve got you.”

So when Niall wasn’t working his real job and Harry was—or was off at one of his activities or having girls’ night with Elora and Abby and their cousins Kate and Mack—Niall went to the studio with the lads to write and record.

On Harry’s twenty-second birthday—the first of February, a cold, dreary day—Niall arrived at Harry’s flat while Harry was still at Pilates, letting himself in with the spare key Harry had made for him.

He set about making dinner, chilling the bottle of Viognier he’d bought on his way to Sutton and checking that the twinkling fairy lights that wrapped around Harry’s headboard were lit.

While the French onion soup was simmering in Harry’s pretty lavender-coloured Le Creuset Dutch oven, he set the small dining table with mismatched silverware and put every candle he could find in the centre.
Niall was nervous because, although they’d been dating for over a month and a half, they’d still not had sex. Niall loved taking Harry's hard cock in his hand and wanking him until the boy came, whimpering Niall’s name and kissing him frantically, sighing into Niall's mouth, desperate, like he couldn’t get enough.

And as much as it pained Niall to admit it—only to himself because he would never say it to anyone else—Nick had been right when he’d said Harry looked as pretty as a picture on his knees in front of him. Harry gave the best blowie Niall had ever experienced, his plump lips and sinful tongue perfect on his own hard length.

But tonight, Niall hoped to go further than that.

He wanted to fill Harry up, feel his tight hole around his cock, whisper in his ear how beautiful he was and how wonderful he felt. He wanted to take care of Harry, wanted to learn everything Harry liked.

So far, Harry hadn’t really told Niall much about his preferences for sexual activities. He liked handjobs, he’d said, and that he had never topped before.

When Niall had asked him if he would like to try topping some time, Harry had shaken his head. “I don’t- I don’t think so,” he’d said. “I like- I like to be- I want to feel… used?” Harry had stuttered, blushing and looking away from Niall in embarrassment, sounding unsure. “Like I’m- like I’m yours. And you’re- I don’t know. I don’t think it would be the same.”

Niall had nodded and hadn’t pushed it any further. He didn’t want Harry to feel uncomfortable or ashamed of what he liked.

He couldn’t deny that he liked the idea of using Harry, of claiming him and making him his.

After Harry’s admission that he liked to feel used, Niall had started to be a bit rougher when Harry was blowing him, holding Harry’s head and fucking into his throat, listening to him gag as drool slipped from his mouth.

He’d asked Harry after the first time if that had been all right, if it was something he’d like to do again.

Blushing, Harry had nodded enthusiastically and said, “Yes. It felt really- Nobody’s ever done that to me before. It was- it was good. I liked it. A lot.”

When Harry got home from Pilates, he hugged Niall, kissing him deeply and thanking him for surprising him with a birthday dinner.

They ate their soup, gooey with melted Gruyere.

“I like- I really like when the toast starts to get a little soft from the broth but it’s still- it’s still kind of crunchy,” said Harry with a little smile. “It’s silly but it’s- I think it’s one of my favourite things.”

“Not silly if ya like it,” Niall told him.

Harry beamed, smile so wide and dimples cutting into his cheeks.

Once they finally made it into bed, Niall pulled Harry on top of him, their bodies pressed together. He moved a hand around Harry’s lower back to keep him steady and slid the other into Harry’s hair.

“Going to kiss ya, pet,” he whispered before claiming Harry’s lips in a firm kiss.
After a few minutes of kissing, their noses pressed together and Harry’s bottom lip between Niall’s nibbling teeth, Niall slipped his hand from Harry’s lower back to palm at his arse. Harry inhaled sharply through his nose but pushed his bum into Niall’s hand and Niall took it as an invitation to continue.

He rubbed Harry’s arse, fingers moving over the fabric of his boxer briefs. With a gentle tug to Harry’s hair, Niall pulled Harry away from his mouth, lips still brushing as he said, “I’m going to touch ya now, love. Under- under your pants, yeah?”

Harry nodded, forehead bumping against Niall’s, and Niall slid his hand under Harry’s pants. He kneaded Harry’s toned bum, fingers massaging the firm muscle, and kissed Harry again.

“Mmmm,” Harry moaned quietly when Niall’s fingers moved between Harry’s arsecheeks and squeezed his bum, his middle finger grazing Harry’s hole. “Niall,” he whimpered into Niall’s mouth.

Niall continued to tease Harry’s hole, fingers brushing lightly around it, tracing the rim and prodding gently.

“I’m- Pet, I’m going to- I’m going to finger ya,” Niall told him. “Okay?”

Harry nodded and Niall nudged the tip of his index finger in, just breaching the ring of muscle. He wiggled it, feeling the tightness.

“Got to get some lube, okay?” said Niall.

Harry nodded again and moved off of Niall, watching as he sat up against the headboard and reached for the nightstand. He grabbed a small bottle of lube and opened it, squeezing a bit onto the fingers of his left hand.

“Come on. Sit on my lap, love, all right?”

Harry pulled off his pants and kicked them to the floor before crawling forward and climbing into Niall’s lap, straddling the lad’s waist.

“Can lean against me, pet, put your head on me shoulder,” Niall whispered, giving Harry direction when the lad seemed unsure what to do.

Harry did as Niall told him, tucking his face into Niall’s neck, hardening cocks rubbing against each other, and Niall placed one hand at the small of Harry’s back and the other moved back to Harry’s arse.

Slowly, he pressed one lubed finger into Harry’s hole, past the first knuckle and to the second. He began to fuck it in and out at an easy pace, not too slow but not too fast.

“Another, love,” he told Harry a few minutes later, adding a second finger beside the first. He continued the same steady pace, pressing in deep before drawing back out to fuck in again.

Niall was surprised when Harry moaned, lips brushing against Niall’s freckled neck and breath tickling his skin. “More, please, Niall,” he whined.

“D’ya want me to stretch ya, love?” asked Niall. He felt nervous for his next words. “Get ya ready so I can fill ya up? Use ya? Make ya mine?”

“Yes,” whimpered Harry, sounding broken already, and Niall added a third finger. Harry shifted his hips back to meet Niall’s thrusting fingers and moaned.
“Got a hungry little hole, don’t ya?” said Niall, words not registering until after he’d said them. His eyes widened when he realised what he’d said though, hoping he’d not offended Harry.

But then Harry said, voice sweet and rough, “Only for you, Niall.”

Niall knew that if he hadn’t already been erect, that short little sentence would have made him hard.

“God, Harry,” he moaned. “Want to go four?”

Harry nodded, breathing rough, and Niall worked his pinkie into Harry’s hole.

Niall’s eyes fluttered shut when Harry sat back, taking all four fingers in up to the last knuckle. “Shit,” he groaned and Harry tipped his head back, lips parted as he began to work his hips in little circles, using Niall’s fingers to stretch his hole.

“Fuck,” said Harry, choked.

“Ya want to sit on my cock, Harry?” asked Niall, sitting up as best as he could to lean up and nip at Harry’s throat. “Fill up your little hole?”

“Yes,” whined Harry. “Yes. Please, Niall.”

Niall kissed Harry’s throat and pulled his fingers from his lube-slick hole. He twisted at the waist, leaning to the nightstand to find a condom. “Sit back for a sec, love,” he said, tapping Harry’s thigh. Harry moved back and Niall ripped open the condom, sliding it down his hard cock before slicking himself with a few drops of lube. “Come here, Harry,” he said, voice soft as he reached for the lad, pulling him back to himself. “Come on, love.”

Hands cupping the back of Harry’s thighs just below his bum, Niall lifted Harry up.

With one hand on Niall’s shoulder, Harry reached down with the other to hold Niall’s cock. He lined it up with his stretched hole and slowly—achingly slowly—sat back, taking Niall into his arse.

“Ooooooohhh,” he whined, long and drawn out, as he filled himself inch by inch. “Uhn,” he groaned when his bum finally met Niall’s groin, head dropping forward to Niall’s shoulder.

“Fuck, Harry,” groaned Niall. “Ya feel so good, love. Takin’ me all the way. Takin’ me deep.”

“Mmm,” moaned Harry, wiggling his hips a bit as if to get every last inch of Niall’s cock into his arse.

“Going to ride me, Harry?” asked Niall, hands on Harry’s bum. He slipped a finger between Harry’s arsecheeks and felt where Harry’s hole was stretched around his length. “Going to bounce for me, love? Show me how good you are?”

“Yeah, Niall,” said Harry. He lifted his hips, Niall’s cock dragging against his rim until only the head was still in his arse, and then dropped back down. “I’ll be”—he lifted himself up and dropped back down again—“I’ll be so good for you,” he told Niall, rising and falling along Niall’s length.

“Fuck. Ya are, pet,” said Niall as Harry pressed his bum to Niall’s groin, back arched dramatically, and started to move his hips in little figure eights. “So good.”

Harry pressed a hand to his stomach and groaned. “Can feel you, Niall,” he said. “F-fuck,” he slurred, continuing to swivel his hips.

Niall’s brows furrowed and then, understanding dawning on him, he slipped a hand under Harry’s
where it was pressed to his belly.

“Shit, Harry,” he hissed. The realisation that Harry knew exactly how to position himself and move his hips so he could feel Niall’s cock bulging his little belly hit him. “Ya like that? Ya like feeling me deep in your belly?”

“Yeah,” whimpered Harry. “Yes. Fuck. Filling me- filling me up.”

“Ah, fuck,” groaned Niall. He placed his hands just under Harry’s arsecheeks at the very top of his thighs and lifted him up. “Going to fuck ya proper, love. Give ya my cock like ya want.”

“Please,” sighed Harry and Niall growled low in his throat.

He guided Harry up and down, rough, pace harsh and fast.

“Ya like that, Harry?” asked Niall, voice gruff. He moved a hand from Harry’s arse to his hair and tugged him in for a kiss, deep and hard. Harry moaned against Niall’s mouth. “D’ya like how I’m fucking ya, pet?” he asked, rocking his hips up to meet Harry. “Good and hard? Using ya? Using your hole to get off?”

“Yes. Fuck, Niall,” cried Harry, precum dripping from the head of his cock onto Niall’s stomach. “Yes! It’s- Fuck!”

“So good, love,” said Niall. “So good for me. Letting me use ya like a good boy.”

“Oh! Fuck!” whined Harry. “Can I- Niall, I’m going to- Ohh!”

“Cum, love,” said Niall, looking at Harry’s face, eyes squeezed shut and head thrown back. He wrapped a hand around Harry’s cock and, after only two tugs, Harry came across Niall’s chest and stomach.

Niall stopped moving as Harry rode out his orgasm, afraid to overstimulate his boyfriend, but Harry dropped forward to rest against Niall and moaned, “Don’t- don’t stop, Niall.”

“Love, I don’t—”

“I- Please, Niall,” said Harry. “I- I like it.”

Niall growled and started thrusting again, hard and fast, and leant up to bite at Harry’s collarbone and throat. Harry sighed and Niall came, Harry’s hole clenching around his cock.

“Fuck, Harry!” he rasped. “So good, love.”

He gently lifted Harry off his cock and rolled him over. “Christ, yer amazing, pet,” he whispered, removing the condom from his cock and dropping it in the bin under the nightstand. He leant down to kiss a sleepy Harry.

Harry reached up with a shaky arm and wrapped it around Niall’s neck. “Thank you, Niall,” he whispered. “That was- It’s never been… like that. Before.”

“Yeah,” agreed Niall. “That was- Yer amazing.”

“But, like, you cared. About, like”—Harry blushed—“like, you wanted me to like it.”

“Yeah,” agreed Niall again, brows furrowed. “O’ course.” Niall paused. He didn’t want to ask but he wanted to know. Carefully, studying Harry’s face, he asked, “He didn’t care, though, did he?”
Harry shook his head. “No. He never even asked what I liked. It was always- it was always just, um, just on my back. And no- nothing else.”

Niall was quiet, brushing Harry’s floppy waves back from his forehead. “But ya know what ya like, yeah?” he asked. “The things ya want me to do?”

“I mean,” said Harry, blushing, “I know the things that I- that I think I’ll like.”

Niall’s brows knit, confused by Harry’s meaning. ”What do you mean, love?”

“None of the guys I’ve ever been with, like- They all just,” said Harry, face scrunching up in thought. “It was just… normal. Like, hands and knees or me, like, lying on my back. And no, like, not really any- any dirty talk or- or stuff like…” Harry trailed off, looking embarrassed to say what he was thinking.

“Stuff like with your belly?” guessed Niall. “Feeling me bulging your little tummy?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. Like that. Or the end when you- when you kept going after I finished.”

Niall stroked his thumb over Harry’s cheekbone. “So are these, like- D’ya mean you think you’ll like these things because they’re, like, things ya fantasise about or something?”

“Yes,” said Harry, nodding and blushing.

“Don’t be embarrassed, love,” said Niall consolingly. “I want to know the things ya like. Or that ya, like, want to try. I want ya to enjoy it when we have sex.”

“Yeah. I want- I want you to like it too.”

They cuddled up, Harry in Niall’s arms and back pressed to his chest.

After a few minutes, Niall asked something he’d been wondering since Harry had pressed his hand to his belly. “Harry, love?”

“Mmm?” hummed Harry, sleepy and soft, and he turned his head to look over his shoulder at Niall.

“How did ya- how did ya know how to sit? To feel me in yer belly?”

“Oh,” said Harry, a faint blush colouring his cheeks. He bit his bottom lip. “I do it with a dildo sometimes.”

Niall swallowed. “Christ, yer sexy.”

It was silent for a few moments, their breathing the only sound. Just when Niall thought Harry had drifted off to sleep, the boy said quietly, shyly, “I can show you sometime. If you want.”

“Fuck,” moaned Niall, feeling his cock getting hard against Harry’s arse. He could take Harry just like this, shove his cock into Harry’s lubed hole and wrap his arms around his waist. Without realising it, he rutted against Harry’s arse.

Harry pushed his bum back, arsecheeks parting slightly, and Niall’s cock slid between them.

“I’m going to fuck ya again, Harry,” Niall told him. “Like this.”

Harry nodded frantically. “Yes. Please.”
“Just got to get a condom,” said Niall, placing a kiss behind Harry’s ear.

“You don’t- I’m clean,” said Harry. “If- if you are.”

“Yeah, I- I am,” gulped Niall. “Are ya- are ya sure, love? I mean—”

“It’s- Yeah,” said Harry. “I want- I’ve always wanted to try it. I’ve never done it like- like that.”

Niall inhaled. “Are ya absolutely sure, Harry?”

“Are you sure you’re clean?” asked Harry. “I don’t mean… I just—”

“I was tested when we first, like, started getting intimate,” admitted Niall. “I wanted to make sure I wouldn’t- I wanted to be safe.”

“I’m sure, Niall,” said Harry. “Please.”

“Fuck. Yeah.” Niall propped himself up and reached to the nightstand for the lube.

With a few drops on his fingers, he reached down and slipped two into Harry’s hole, still loose from Niall’s cock.

“Hmmm,” moaned Harry, pleased.

Niall kissed the back of Harry’s neck and quickly pressed a third and then fourth finger in with the others. “Got to keep ya satisfied, love,” he whispered against Harry’s ear, moving his fingers in and out of Harry’s slack hole. “Don’t I?”

Harry nodded and whimpered.

“So desperate for it,” muttered Niall. He pulled his fingers from Harry, confident he was prepped enough, and wrapped a hand around his cock. He slicked it with some lube and then, lining it up with Harry’s arsehole, pushed in slowly. When he was in as deep as he could go, he moved his arms around Harry’s waist, hands pressed against Harry’s stomach.

It was slow this time, less rushed and sweet. Niall mouthed at Harry’s neck and the sharp corner of his jawbone, peppering his soft skin with openmouthed kisses.

“Yer just so lovely for me, pet,” whispered Niall. “So beautiful. Taking me so well.”

Harry whined. “Oh. Niall.”

“Yeah, love,” said Niall. “Is this good? Does it feel good?”

“Mnhm,” moaned Harry. “So good.”

“Christ, ya feel so perfect, pet,” Niall told him, moving his hips slowly, rocking himself in and out of Harry’s arse. “So perfect.”

Harry arched his back and pressed his arse to meet Niall’s thrusts.

“Oh, fuck,” growled Niall, throaty and deep. “Can feel it again, love. My cock bulging out yer little tum.”

Harry brought a hand up to place beside Niall’s on his belly. He gave a contented little whispy moan.
“Ya love that, don’t ya?” asked Niall.

“Y-yes.”

“Perfect. Yer perfect.”

It was quiet for the next few minutes, the only sounds their rough breaths and Harry’s little whimpers as Niall continued to rock in and out slowly.

“Niall. Can I… touch myself?” asked Harry. “I’m so, oh, I’m so close.”

“So good, asking me if you can touch yourself,” said Niall. “Go ‘head, love. Touch yourself.”

Harry wrapped a hand around his slick cock and began to stroke himself, using his precum to ease his hand up and down his length.

“Fuck!” he cried after a few more moments of Niall’s cock dragging in and out of his fucked-out hole and his own hand on himself. He came, cum splattering his tummy and hip.


“I want it. Please, Niall,” whined Harry, still high from his orgasm.

Niall groaned and pulled Harry to him, hips spasming against Harry’s arse as he came, filling him up.

“Amazing,” he said on a moan. “So fucking amazing.”

Finally soft, he pulled himself out of Harry’s arse and, dropping a kiss to Harry’s temple, whispered, “I’ll be right back, love. Going to get a flannel.”

“Okay.”

Niall dampened a flannel in the bathroom sink and wiped himself clean before rinsing it and going back to the bedroom. He moved to the bed, cleaning Harry’s own cum from his front and then, tapping his hip to get him to roll over, gently wiped his bum. Harry hissed, the rough fabric of the towel harsh against his used hole, and Niall reached out to pet at the base of his spine soothingly.

Dropping the flannel to the floor, Niall slipped under the duvet and pulled it over Harry and himself.

“Happy birthday, love,” he whispered.

“Good night, Niall.”

When Niall woke up the next morning, Harry was asleep beside him, lying on his stomach with his face turned toward Niall on his pillow. He looked beautiful, red lips parted slightly and wavy brown hair dishevelled. His arms and back were uncovered, the duvet only covering him from his waist down.

Niall slipped a hand under the duvet and palmed Harry’s arse softly, touch feather-light. He would wake Harry soon—it was nine o’clock and Harry had a meeting with Leila about the upcoming Fashion Week at half past noon—but he would let him sleep for a bit longer.

He couldn’t help thinking about the events of the night before, of how surprised he’d been by everything Harry had said and done. He’d never considered himself kinky but if Harry wanted to test out some of his fantasies, he would be willing and eager to try his best for him. They should
probably talk about some of the things Harry fantasised about, Niall thought.

“Morning, Niall,” said Harry, raspy morning voice drawing Niall from his thoughts.

“G’morning, love,” said Niall, leaning forward to kiss Harry, slow and sticky. “Sleep all right?”

“I always do when I’m with you,” said Harry, smiling sweetly, eyes still blurry with sleep.

Niall smiled at him, so happy at Harry’s words, and squeezed his arse. “How’s yer bum?” he asked.

“A little sore,” said Harry. He bit his bottom lip and added, cheeks pink, “And empty.”

“Cheeky bastard,” said Niall, smirking. “Is that a challenge, love?”

Harry shrugged against the mattress, hiding his grin in the pillow.

Niall moved his hand from where it laid on Harry’s arse to nudge his fingers between his arsecheeks. “Could stick me cock in yer little hole,” he said, prodding at Harry’s rim. “Fill ya up like ya like. Cum in yer arse and send ya off to Leila dripping in yer pants.”

Harry moaned, obscene and almost pornographic.

“Ya like that, don’t ya?” Niall asked, pushing the tip of his index finger into Harry. Harry nodded into his pillow. “Yer a dirty little thing.”

“Only- Ahh,” moaned Harry as Niall pressed his finger in deep, “only with you.”

“I’ll finger yer arse for a bit,” said Niall lazily, fucking Harry with two fingers now. “Get ya all stretched and used. But then yeh’ve got yer meeting to get to.”

Niall fingered Harry, adding a third. “Fuck. Yer still filled with my cum. All sticky inside.”

Harry moaned. “Yeah. Always- always want to be dripping full with your cum.”

“No time this morning,” said Niall, “or you’ll be late. Maybe tomorrow morning before I leave for my fitting.” He spread his fingers, stretching Harry’s rim, and said, “Or tomorrow afternoon before book club. Send ya off leaking me out yer fucked-out arsehole.”

“Fuck, Niall!” whimpered Harry, rocking his hips back and forth between Niall’s hand and the mattress, rutting his cock against the bed and pushing Niall’s fingers in deeper with every thrust.

Niall forced his pinkie in beside the other fingers. “God, I love yer hungry hole. Desperate to be used. I’ll make ya feel used. Fuck ya whenever I can.”

“Unh. Fuck!” cried Harry, body shuddering and arsehole clenching as his hips snapped forward one last time.

“Shit. Cumming just from my fingers. So good, love,” said Niall, dragging his fingers from Harry’s puffy hole and leaning down to kiss him. “So good. So good.”

Ten minutes later, Niall patted Harry’s bum.

“All right, love,” he said, voice sweet and honeyed. “Got to have a shower, yeah. I’ll go make some tea. What kind ya want?”

“Earl Grey, please.”
“You got it,” Niall told him with a smile. “Now up ya get, pet.”

“Get pet,” giggled Harry, sitting up.

He took his shower and dressed, finding Niall sitting in his pants on the stool in the kitchen with a pot of tea and a plate stacked with toast spread thick with butter and apricot jam.

“Ya won’t have time to stop at Black Treacle so I made ya some toast.”

Harry smiled. “You’re so nice, Niall.”

Harry found his boots and wrapped himself up in his wool winter coat and the Burberry scarf Niall had given him for Christmas, pulling a black knit beanie over his damp hair.

“Right, love,” said Niall, handing Harry a travel mug filled with tea—one sugar cube and a splash of milk, just how he liked it—and a sandwich baggie filled with toast. He leant up and kissed Harry. “I’ll see ya in a bit, yeah.” Harry nodded. “Have a good meeting. And say hi to Leila for me.”

Niall spent the next few hours lounging around Harry’s flat.

He watched a bit of telly with Butterscotch curled up next to him on the sofa and changed the sheets. The stain on Harry’s side of the bed showed that maybe he’d leaked a bit during the night. Niall wondered how Harry might feel about sleeping with a butt plug to keep Niall’s cum in his arse.

Hard and turned on by the thought, Niall masturbated in the shower, thinking about fucking Harry hard and shoving a plug into his loose arsehole to leave him stretched and full.

Curious, Niall looked through Harry’s dresser drawers but found nothing interesting. It was under the bed that he found not one but three shoeboxes filled with dildos and butt plugs of all different colours and lengths and widths, some made to look like real cocks and others phallic only in the general sense. He wondered how often Harry used them.

He stroked his hardening cock over his pants but decided to wait until Harry got home in an hour. Maybe the boy would fuck himself with one of the toys while he sucked Niall’s cock.

“Harry, love,” said Niall when Harry finally got home, cuddling up to Niall under the blanket on the sofa, “I have a question.”

“Yeah, Niall?” said Harry, looking at Niall with his big doe eyes, all innocence and sweetness.

“How often do you use yer dildo?”

“Um, a- a lot,” said Harry, face flushed a light pink.

“Like, a few times a week?” asked Niall.

“Um, uh, like… more,” said Harry.

“How often, Harry?” asked Niall with a growl, turned on.

“Like, um, like every- every day,” admitted Harry, blushing a brilliant pink now.

Niall was shocked. “What?” he asked. “How? I’m- I’m here all the time and I’ve never—”

“In the- in the shower,” Harry told him quietly. “I have- I’ve got a dildo with, um, with a suction cup. And I- I use it in the shower.”
Niall pressed a hand down onto his firm cock. “We’re going to- We’ll have to talk about your, like, your fantasies and the stuff ya want to try. Because I’ve got a feeling ya want to try some kinky things. But right now, love,” said Niall, voice deep and husky, “I want ya to get your dildo and then yer going to fuck yourself while I fuck your throat.”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat, eyes glazing over with arousal. “Yeah. Yes, Niall.”

He stood from the sofa and Niall patted his bum, watching him walk across the living room and through the kitchen to the bedroom.

He returned a few minutes later with one of the more realistic dildos from his collection—about seven inches and a bit thick with a suction cup at the base—and the bottle of lube.

“Take off your clothes, love, yeah,” said Niall, standing from the sofa and walking toward Harry. “Strip for me.”

Harry did, setting the dildo and lube down on the coffee table before stripping completely bare.

“Let me see your hole, love.”

Harry turned around and leant forward, arse on display, and reached behind himself to pull his cheeks apart.

“Yeah. Look at you. Perfect,” said Niall, picking up the lube from the table. “Going to make sure you’re stretched before you stick that dildo up your arse.” He opened the lube and dripped a little onto his fingers. Without another word, he easily pushed two fingers into Harry’s hole. “Still loose. Shouldn’t be surprised after all you’ve had in your hole since last night. I knew it was a hungry hole.”

“Yeah. I love”—Harry shoved back against Niall’s hand—“I love to be full. Filled, oh, filled up. And stretched out.”

“Did ya use yer dildo in the shower this morning?” asked Niall, curious if he’d still fucked himself just after Niall had fingered him for ten minutes.

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Fuck, Harry. I think”—Niall paused, hesitant for his next words, unsure if it might be going too far though he suspected it wasn’t—“I think you’re a little cockslut. Are you a cockslut, Harry?” Niall held his breath waiting for Harry’s answer.

“Yes, I’m a cockslut,” agreed Harry, whimpering as Niall continued to finger him with three fingers. “I love having cock up my bum and in my mouth. But just for you, Niall.”

“Yeah, pet. My pretty little cockslut.” Niall palmed his cock. “Right. Fill yer arse with your dildo and get on your knees for me, love. I need my cock in your throat.”

Harry did as instructed, getting to his knees and slicking the dildo with lube before lining it up with his hole and sinking down. He moaned, eyes closed, and Niall pushed his own boxer briefs off. He stepped in front of Harry and took his dripping cock in his hand.

“Open your mouth, love,” said Niall, tapping Harry’s cheek twice.

Harry did, parting his lips and allowing Niall to slip his cock in inch by inch until it hit the back of his throat.
Niall pulled out and pushed back in a few times before putting his hands in Harry’s hair and holding his head still. “I’m going to go hard, Harry,” he told the boy. “If it’s- if it’s too much, just”—he thought for a moment—“tap my leg three times, yeah, and I’ll stop.”

“Mmhm,” hummed Harry, mouth filled with Niall’s cock.

Taking that as confirmation, Niall pulled his length out of Harry’s mouth almost completely before shoving back in, hard and deep. He set a fast, near-brutal pace, fucking Harry’s face, and Harry started to choke and splutter. Niall could feel Harry’s spit and drool dripping down his cock and his green eyes watered, tears streaking his cheeks as he rocked his hips, dildo in his arse.

But he didn’t tap and Niall kept going.

It didn’t take long for Niall to reach the edge of his orgasm. “I’m going to cum, love,” he told Harry. “Ya going to swallow?”

“Mmhm,” hummed Harry again and Niall came, flooding Harry’s mouth, and Harry sucked around Niall’s cock, swallowing every drop. Niall pulled his length from Harry’s mouth and smeared spit and the last remnants of cum on Harry’s lips with the head of his cock.

“Come on, love,” said Niall. “Let me see ya cum on that dildo. Show me how pretty you are.”

Harry started to bounce up and down on the toy in earnest, hand wrapped around his hard cock. After about two minutes, he came, shaking and cum spurting from his tip as he nearly doubled over, head and shoulders dropping forward.

When he sat back, Niall saw the cum that streaked his chest and stomach and dripped onto his thighs. “Fuck, love. You’re a mess.”

“Do you want me to clean myself up?” asked Harry weakly, eyes fluttered half-shut.

“No, pet,” said Niall. “I’ll get a—”

Niall’s eyes widened when Harry drew his fingers through the cum on his chest and took them into his mouth, licking it off. He repeated the action, continuing to clean the cum off his body and feed it to himself.

“D’ya like cum, Harry?” asked Niall, voice barely more than a choked whisper.

“Mmhm,” Harry moaned around his fingers.

“Fuck. You’ll be the death of me, pet.”

They sat cuddled on the sofa several hours later, eating popcorn and watching Seinfeld while a light flurry of snow fell outside the windows of the little living room.

Harry leant forward to pick up his glass. He took a sip of wine and looked at Niall, nervous and timid.

“Niall,” he said quietly, shyly. “Can I- can I ask you a question?”

“O’ course ya can, pet,” said Niall.

“I was thinking, um. Well, you’re here all the time and you have a key and everything. So I was thinking- I was wondering if maybe- if you’d like to move in with me?” he asked, looking almost
“Oh. Harry,” said Niall, setting down his beer and looking at Harry. “I'd- Yeah, I’d like to. But, um, maybe we should wait, like, another month and talk about it again.”


“It’s just a big step, Harry,” said Niall. “Are ya sure yer ready for it?”

“What do you mean?” asked Harry. His brows were furrowed in confusion. “Am I ready for it?”

“Just after- I don’t want ya to rush into anything,” said Niall. “I want ya to be sure.”

“Niall, I am sure,” insisted Harry.

Niall was quiet for a few moments. “I think we should wait another month and make sure ya still want it.”

“Niall, you- Why do you always treat me like”—Harry exhaled through his nose and leant forward to place his wine glass on the coffee table—“Why do you always treat me like I’m- like I’m fragile?”

Niall frowned, upset. He’d never meant to make Harry feel like that. “Harry, pet, I- I don’t,” said Niall. “I—”

“Yes, you do,” said Harry, voice wavering slightly but determined. “You act like I’m… broken and you’re trying to fix me.”

“I don’t think yer broken, love,” said Niall quietly, soft. “I just don’t- I don’t want to hurt ya, Harry. Yeh’ve already been—”

“You won’t hurt me, Niall,” said Harry, looking earnest and almost concerned. “You’re so nice. But you act- You treat me like I’m- I’m damaged and you have to- you need to take care of me and, like, and protect me from everything and it’s nice that you care that much but, like, I’m- I’m okay and you make me feel like I’m”—he exhaled an almost frustrated huff—“you make me feel like I’m weak and- and stupid because I- because one time, I was in a, like, an abusive relationship for a little while.”

“Harry,” said Niall, eyes wide. He was shocked and felt a bit like he’d been slapped in the face. He knew he’d treated Harry a little differently from the rest of his friends, carefully, aware of what he said so he could avoid treating him in any way like Nick had, intentionally or not. But in doing so, it seemed, he’d made Harry feel the same way Nick had—stupid, silly, weak. “I didn’t know that- I’m sorry I”—he reached out and took Harry’s hand in his, lacing their fingers together—“I just want ya to trust me and- and know how much I care about ya.”

“I do trust you, Niall,” Harry told him honestly. “I wouldn’t have done the things- the things we did last night and- and today if I didn’t trust you. Or, like, told you some of the things I’ve told you. Or- or asked you to move in with me.”

Niall looked at Harry, lips parted. He didn’t know what to say to his boyfriend. He hadn’t changed his mind—he still didn’t think that moving in with Harry now was the right decision—but he didn’t want Harry to feel that he thought he was stupid or broken or fragile or any of the things he’d said.

“Harry, I just- Maybe I’m not ready,” said Niall. “Maybe I need to think about it for a- for a few days.”
“So you don’t want to move in with me.” Harry looked sad, eyes watery and bottom lip stuck out in a pout.

Niall shook his head. “I didn’t say that. I just need to think about it. Please?”

“Fine,” said Harry. “I’m going to bed.” He picked up the television remote from where it sat next to him on the sofa and handed it to Niall. “You can change it if you want.”

“That’s- I’ll just go back to Kingston for the night,” said Niall. “Let ya—”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Harry. “It’s cold and snowing. And you won’t even get home until, like, half two.”

“It’s fine,” Niall told him. “It’s not snowing that much and—”

“You have you’re fitting in the morning and you’ll be all grumpy if you don’t get a good night’s sleep,” insisted Harry. He shrugged. “You can sleep on the sofa.”

Niall watched Harry get up from the sofa and walk toward the kitchen, his heart pounding in his chest and blood rushing in his ears.

“Good night, Niall,” said Harry.

“G’night, pet,” whispered Niall, feeling a bit choked.

Harry flicked off the light and left Niall alone in the dark little living room.

When Niall woke up in the morning, the weak February sun was just starting to come up. He found his phone between the cushion and the arm of the sofa and looked at the time. He would have time to stop at Black Treacle for tea and a scone—and maybe a little chat with Elora—on his way to Mayfair if he got up now.

He tiptoed through the flat to the bathroom, passing Harry’s bed. The lad was curled up on one side of the bed, the side Niall usually slept on empty. He felt a pang in his chest. He should be there, feeling Harry’s body warmth and his hair and breaths tickling his skin.

But he’d done exactly what he’d wanted more than anything to avoid; Niall had made Harry feel stupid and childish just as Nick had done.

Niall showered quickly, slipping into the bedroom to dress. He checked for his wallet and keys before stopping at the edge of the bed. He looked down at Harry, soft skin a touch pink from the heat of the room, hair mussed and beautiful, plump red lips parted in sleep, and felt an overwhelming desire to kneel at the side of the bed and wake Harry up to tell him how much he loved him and didn’t think he could be happy if he ever had to try to live without him.

Not this morning, though. Hopefully another.

Instead, he leant down and brushed a frizzy ringlet from Harry’s forehead, pressing a lingering kiss to his warm head. “Have a good day, pet,” he whispered.

“Mmmm,” hummed Harry, still asleep and, Niall knew, not remembering his hurt from the night before.

Niall made his way down the High Street to Black Treacle, stepping into the warmth of the bakery from the street’s snow-dusted pavement.
“Morning, Niall,” said Abby happily as Niall took a seat at the coffee bar.

“G’mornin’, Abby,” said Niall with a half smile.

He ordered his breakfast—a cup of Irish Breakfast and a currant scone with butter—and watched as Abby put it together.

“Is El around?” he asked. “I’ve got- I need to talk to her.”

“Poor girl’s got the stomach bug,” said Abby, placing his tea in front of him. “Been upstairs sick since last night.” She looked at him, brows knit in concentration as though trying to figure out a crossword clue. “Everything all right?”

Niall didn’t know Abby as well as he knew Elora but he liked her, trusted her, and so did Harry. “I think I fucked up with Harry,” he said, sighing.

“Bet you didn’t,” she said with a little smile.

“Abby, I slept on the sofa last night,” he told her gravely.

He wasn’t sure if that admission raised a red flag or if it was just the seriousness in his tone but she said, “All right, love. Tell me what happened.”

“Harry asked me to move in with him last night.”

“Yeah, he said he was going to ask you soon,” said Abby. “He was waiting for the right time.” She looked at him. “I’m guessing you said no or you probably wouldn’t’ve slept on the sofa.”

“I told him I want to but I think that we should wait a bit to make sure it’s what he really wants,” said Niall. “Because, like, it’s a big step.”

“And he didn’t like that,” guessed Abby.

“No,” agreed Niall. “He told me- He said I treat him like he’s broken and fragile and that I make him feel weak. And that he feels- He thinks I think he’s stupid because he was in a bad relationship with Nick or something.” He frowned. “I don’t think that, Abby. I just want to make sure he’s happy and that we’re doing- that he’s okay with everything we’re doing. With our relationship.”

“Okay, love,” said Abby, moving around the coffee bar to join Niall on a stool. “First of all, I know you don’t think any of that about Harry and you don’t mean to make him feel like that. I know that and Harry knows—”

“Abby—”

“He knows that you don’t mean to make him feel like that,” Abby cut him off. “Doesn’t mean he doesn’t still feel it.”

“Yeah, I- I guess.”

“Now, second, I think it is what Harry really wants. Having you move in with him. He’s been talking about it for a couple weeks now,” Abby told him. “Saying how he loves waking up next to you and he hates going to bed without you and he loves how you make him tea just right and cuddle with him and Butterscotch. He really wants that, Niall.”

“Okay,” said Niall, still processing Abby’s insistence that Harry really wanted Niall to live with him. “Okay. But I don’t know what to do about the other thing. About, like, him feeling like I think he’s
stupid and damaged and all that. Like, how do I fix that?”

“I don’t know if you know this. She doesn’t talk about it much,” said Abby, stealing a bit of Niall’s scone and Niall was thrown by the non sequitur. “Ellie was in a bad relationship a few years ago. Dated this guy who was so terrible to her. Like Nick with Harry, really. Just mean and hurtful and, like, manipulative. All of it. Made himself the victim and made El feel bad about everything she did.” She sipped some tea and continued. “I didn’t know what to do for her while she was dating him but I tried my best. Wanted to beat the shit out of her sometimes, if I’m honest. So I found a support group.”

“Elora went to a support group?” asked Niall.

“No,” said Abby. “I did. It’s a group for the friends and family of people in abusive relationships. And some people were the partners of someone who had been in a bad relationship before them.” She took another sip of tea and Niall was reminded of how very similar she was to her sister.

“Oh,” said Niall. “Did it- Was it good?”

“Yeah.” Abby nodded. “The lady who runs the group, um, Debbie, is a counsellor for victims of abuse and she teaches everyone the best way to support abuse victims and give them a safe, happy environment. How to treat them and the things to say and not say. How to make them feel loved and respected without triggering thoughts or feelings from the abuse.” She thought for a moment and then added, “And it was good to have other people to talk to about your own emotions because it can be tough.”

Niall drank his own tea, considering Abby's words for a few moments. “I thought I was doing the right thing but it’s actually just hurting him. In a different way than Nick did.”

“Not everything, Niall. Not even most things you do are hurting him,” Abby tried to assure him. “You’re so nice and caring and kind and anyone who sees you and Harry together can tell how much you adore him. And he feels the same, love. I know he does.” She smiled and raised a brow. “Girls’ night, yeah?”

“He- Harry talks about me at girls’ night?” asked Niall, sounding and feeling rather surprised.

“What do you think we talk about, Niall?” she asked, gentle amusement in her voice. Niall shrugged and Abby told him, “Boys, clothes, and work, mostly.” She took the last sip of her tea and said, “You know, you should stop by a meeting and see what you think. Might be good to talk about everything.”

“Um, when- when is it?” asked Niall. “And, like, where?”

“Wednesday nights. At Holy Family. The Catholic church just down the street from Harry’s flat,” Abby said.

“I- Yeah.” Niall nodded. He looked at his phone and, seeing the time, said, “I’ve got to get off to my fitting.” He gulped down the last of his tea and pulled a tenner from his wallet, putting it on the bar next to his empty cup. “Thanks, Abby. You were”—he smiled—“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, love.”

Niall made his way to the bus stop and boarded the 164 to Mayfair.

He supposed that going to a meeting, as Abby suggested, might be a good idea. It certainly wouldn’t hurt, he reasoned, and if he didn’t like it, he didn’t have to go back. He took his phone out of his
pocket and, looking at the screen, realised that it was Wednesday. He’d have to decide in the next few hours if he wanted to attend or not.

He unlocked his phone and searched online for Holy Family Catholic Church, following the link to their website and finding the Community page. Niall read through the list of groups—Catholic Mothers Union, Choir, Parent & Toddlers—and saw at the bottom Affected Others Supporters Group. Guessing that was the group Abby had talked about, Niall clicked the link.

Meetings were at six o’clock at the Holy Family Community Hall and, according to the brief description, provided “a loving blend of peer support, guidance and strategies from a professional counsellor, and a safe place to express feelings, worries, and concerns.”

Niall arrived at the studio just before ten o’clock, the fitting passing easily as Other Harry chatted and pinned the legs of trousers and marked hems and cuffs to make adjustments before the shoot.

It was at three o’clock, when Niall was changing back into his own clothes, that he saw a text from Harry.

Are you staying in Sutton tonight? it read.

Do you want me to? he sent back. He was surprised, not expecting Harry to want him to spend the night. He’d been planning to return to Sutton to attend the meeting at Holy Family and then take the bus back to Kingston.

I always want you here, niall, came Harry’s response. That’s why I asked you to move in with me.

Niall thought of Abby’s words—“He really wants that, Niall.”—and typed his reply. Of course I’ll stay.

Thank you, said Harry’s next message.

don’t have to thank me love.

Niall arrived back in Sutton at about half past four, letting himself into Harry’s flat with his key.

“Hi, Niall,” said Harry, standing up from the sofa as Niall walked through the door. “Would you like some tea?” he asked, sounding almost nervous. Niall wished he didn’t. “Or- or hot chocolate. I’ll make us some hot chocolate.” He hurried past Niall to the kitchen. “It’s a bit cold outside, isn’t it?”

“Harry,” said Niall, following Harry into the kitchen. “Harry, love”—he moved to where the other lad had stopped just in front of the refrigerator and took Harry’s hand in his own, feeling it shaking slightly—“please calm down.”

“I’m fine, Niall,” Harry told him quietly.

Niall watched Harry. “Please look at me, love,” he asked, request near-pleading. “Please.”

Harry turned to Niall. His face was pale and he worried his bottom lip between his teeth. “Please,” said Harry, voice shaky and barely above a whisper. He lifted his free hand to wipe at his eyes with the sleeve of his jumper and Niall noticed the tears glistening on his cheeks, heart clenching at the sight.

“Harry—”
“Please don’t break up with me,” said Harry, letting out a broken little sob.

“Harry,” said Niall quickly, feeling almost frantic with his emotions. He pulled Harry toward him, wrapping an arm around his waist when he was close enough. “Pet, I’m not going to- I’m not breaking up with you. I’m not- Please don’t cry, love. Shhh.” He let go of Harry’s hand and brought his own up to dry Harry’s eyes. “I’m not breaking up with you. Why would you”—he stopped himself from finishing the question, not wanting to make Harry feel silly—“I’m not. I won’t.” He leant forward and pressed his lips to Harry’s, warm and soft and comforting.

Harry brought his arms up and around Niall’s neck and dropped his head forward to tuck his face against Niall’s throat, crying openly now. “I thought you didn’t want me anymore,” he said thickly, voice choked with tears.


Harry nodded against Niall’s freckled skin. “Yes.”

“Why don’t ya go get cozy on the sofa, yeah. Cuddle up with Butterscotch under the blanket, right, and I’ll make us hot chocolate,” said Niall. “And then we can talk. Okay?”

“O-okay, Niall,” said Harry, nodding again.

“There’s a good lad.” Niall turned his head and pressed a kiss to Harry’s hair.

While Niall scalded the milk and whisked in the chocolate mix—Elora kept them supplied with the blend she made at Black Treacle—he thought about everything Abby had said about being sure that Harry really wanted Niall to move in with him, that Harry had been talking about asking Niall to move in with him for a couple weeks.

And then he thought about Nick. Harry had never been given the opportunity to make decisions; Nick had always told him what they were going to do and when they were going to do it. Maybe one way he could start to fix his mistakes with Harry would be to let him make decisions, trust him to make the decisions that felt right for him. Not just little ones, like what film they watched or where they went for dinner, but big ones. Like if he was ready to have Niall move in with him.

Ten minutes later, Niall handed Harry a steaming mug of hot chocolate and then joined him on the sofa.

“All right, love,” he said softly. “I need ya to know that I’m not breaking up with ya.”

“Promise?” asked Harry, childish, a pout on his lips and both hands wrapped around his mug.

“Yeah,” said Niall. “I promise.” He inhaled and then exhaled slowly. “D’ya really want me to move in with ya? Yer sure?”

“Yes,” said Harry, nodding vigorously, the curls not clipped back from his forehead flopping around his ears. “I just- I want it to be our flat, Niall. Not just my flat. I want you to say, like, I want you to say that you’re coming home when you come here. It doesn’t feel like it’s just my flat and- and I really like that. It’s not the same when you’re- on nights you go to Kingston.”

Niall nodded his agreement. “I hate- I hate sleeping without ya. And wakin’ up all alone.”

“I know,” said Harry, eyes wide. He took a sip of his hot chocolate.

“I’m going to a meeting tonight,” Niall told him. Harry’s brows furrowed, questioning, and Niall
continued. “It’s a group for friends and family of people who were in abusive relationships. So I can-
I want to learn how to be a better boyfriend to ya."

“You’re a- you’re a really good boyfriend, Niall,” said Harry, looking confused.

“No, pet,” insisted Niall. “Not if I make ya feel stupid and fragile and broken,” he said. “Not if I
make ya feel like he did. Then I’m a pretty shit boyfriend.”

“You’re not a shit boyfriend, Niall,” Harry told him. “You’re- you’re wonderful. Maybe- maybe I
am. Broken.” He shrugged.

“You are not,” said Niall firmly. “You are not broken or stupid or silly or weak or- or anything. And
I made ya feel that way and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, pet. But that’s why I’ve got to go to these
meetings. I just-I want to learn how to treat ya right, Harry. Treat ya like ya deserve.”

“You’re so nice, Niall,” said Harry. “You’re- I’m so lucky.”

Niall leant forward and kissed Harry on the forehead, lips lingering for a minute. “I’m the luckiest lad
alive, I reckon. Got the most wonderful lad, a pretty little cat, the sweetest little flat I’ve ever seen, the
—”

Harry inhaled sharply. “Niall?”

“Yes, pet?”

“You said- You just said ‘the sweetest little flat you’ve ever seen’ and that’s what you said the
first time you came here,” said Harry.

“Mmmm,” hummed Niall in agreement. “I did.”

“Are you- are you going to”—Harry leant back and searched Niall’s face—“move in with me?
Here?”

“Are ya sure ya want me to?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Harry, nodding eagerly. “So much.”

“Then, yeah. I will,” Niall told him. “I’m here all the time anyway.” He gave Harry a little grin. “It’ll
be official the end of the month, yeah, since me rent’s paid through February.”

Fifteen minutes later, Niall got up from the sofa and bundled himself into his coat and hat. “Have fun
at book club, love,” he said, kissing Harry on the top of his head. “And tell me about it when I get
home, yeah.”

Harry beamed, bright and happy. “Okay, Niall.”

When Niall arrived at the Holy Family Community Hall at quarter of six, he was greeted by a kind-
looking woman.

“Hello,” she said cheerily. “Are you here for the Affected Others group?”

“Yes,” said Niall. “This is my first time here so I’m really not sure what I should do or if I’m
supposed to, like, bring anything.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “Just yourself!” She stretched out a hand and said, “I’m Debbie. I run the group.”
“Hi, Debbie,” said Niall, shaking her proffered hand. “I’m Niall.”

“Well, Niall, you can just settle into a seat and we’ll get started once we’ve got everyone,” Debbie told him with a smile. “We can do an introduction to the rest of the group if you’d like.”

“Um, okay,” said Niall.

“Only if you’re comfortable,” said Debbie. “And after that, you can just listen if you’d like or you can join the conversation. It’s completely up to you.”

“Okay. Thanks, Debbie.”

“There are biscuits and beverages over there, love,” she said, pointing at a table along the wall beside the door. “Help yourself to anything.”

“Oh, um, thanks,” said Niall, looking at the table. He made himself a cup of tea and picked out a chocolate chip cookie—it tasted exactly like the ones Abby baked at Black Treacle and Niall wondered if she maybe donated sweets to the group each week—before finding a seat next to a woman who looked to be in her fifties.

Debbie started the meeting a few minutes later, welcoming the group of six people and thanking them all for joining her.

“We have someone new with us tonight,” she told the group. “Niall, would you like to tell us a little about yourself? Maybe what brought you here tonight?”

“Um, sure,” said Niall. “I’m Niall.”

“Hello, Niall,” chorused the group.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m here because my boyfriend Harry was in a bad relationship before we met and, like, when we were just getting to be mates. I’ve been trying to treat him well. Better than his ex did, ya know? But he asked me if I would move in with him and I told him I thought we should wait to make sure he’s ready and he got upset.”

“Why did he get upset?” asked Debbie.

“He said I treat him like he’s fragile and broken and weak. Said I make him feel stupid because he was in a relationship with Nick and he let him treat him badly.” Niall sighed, brow furrowed in a combination of concern and thought. “I didn’t know he felt that way. And I didn’t mean to make him feel like that. I thought I was doing okay but I guess not. I’m just as bad as Nick. So I guess I’m here because I want to learn how to treat him well.”

“Just the fact that you’re here tells me that you’re not as bad as Nick,” said Debbie comfortingly.

“You just said it,” said the woman sitting next to him. “You didn’t mean to make him feel that way. If you were really as bad as his ex, you’d have known you made him feel that way. Probably would’ve been doing it to make sure he felt that way.”

“That’s right, Nora,” agreed Debbie. “In an abusive relationship, the abuser knows how they’re making their victim feel, what they’re making them think,” she told Niall. “Whether it’s to create dependency, nurture self-doubt, foster insecurities, or any other number of reasons, their behaviours are all intentional and calculated.”

“Okay. But I still make him feel the same way Nick made him feel,” said Niall. “I make him feel
stupid and like there’s- like there’s something wrong with him.”

“I think you’re being too hard on yourself, lad,” said a man from the opposite side of the circle. “Reckon you just need to sort out the things you do that might make your boy feel like he does and learn the right way to handle those situations.”

“That’s an excellent suggestion, Rick. We can certainly examine your behaviours, Niall,” said Debbie. “Perhaps we could give you sample situations and you could tell us how you might act in that situation. Then we could look to see what may be an issue or a trigger for Harry that you didn’t notice.”

“Okay,” said Niall, nodding. “Yeah. I think that could help.”

“Maybe over the next week you could try to think of things you do that you feel are the right way to approach a situation or a conversation with Harry, maybe things that you do specifically to avoid being like Nick, and we could go from there,” suggested Debbie.

Niall agreed to do that, thanking everyone for their thoughts, and then listened as Nora talked about her frustration with her best friend who, Niall learnt, was married to an emotionally and physically abusive man and had been for over twenty years.

At the end of the evening, the group said their goodbyes, wishing each other a good week.

As they walked toward the door, Rick, the man who had told Niall he thought he was being hard on himself, joined him.

“I think it’s wonderful that you’re coming to this group,” he told Niall, sincere, as they exited the church hall and walked down the road. “I see how my daughter’s boyfriend treats her and he’d never be sat in there talking about how he wants to learn to treat her better. He’s a proper piece of shit. You seem like a good lad and you’re so concerned about unintentionally hurtin’ your boy that you’ve come to these meetings. I think Harry’s lucky to have someone who cares so much about him. Wish my Becky could find someone like you.”

“Thank you,” said Niall. “I just want to treat him like he deserves.”

“Reckon you’ve got a good start already,” said Rick kindly, smiling and patting Niall’s shoulder. “We’ll help you sort out the rest. Have a good week, lad.”

Niall got back to the flat about twenty minutes before Harry did, making a pot of chamomile tea and settling under the blanket on the sofa to wait for Harry.

“Oh, you’re home,” said Harry when he opened the door to the flat.

“Yup, I’m home,” agreed Niall, not missing the smile that stretched across Harry’s face. “Made a pot o’ chamomile if ya want some.”

Cuddled under the duvet in their bed a couple hours later, Harry pressed himself against Niall, one leg thrown over Niall’s hips and head on Niall’s shoulder.

“I’m so happy you’re moving in with me,” said Harry, lips quirked into a sweet smile. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while now and- I’m just so happy.”

“’S long as it’s what ya want,” said Niall, hand rubbing up and down Harry’s thigh where it was laid on his hips. “’S long as yer comfortable and don’t feel, like, pressured into anything ya don’t want.”
“I do want it,” said Harry. He bit his lip and Niall watched him, head turned slightly toward Harry. After a few moments of quiet, Harry spoke up again, voice low and a bit shaky. “You don’t have to do- you don’t have to be so careful with me.” It sounded almost like a question and Niall wasn’t quite sure what he meant but he waited, Harry’s face scrunched up as he thought of, Niall knew, how to explain himself.

“It’s like- Sometimes it’s like you’re so worried you’ll do something wrong or that I won’t like that you overcompensate or something,” he said. “Like, you waited for two months after I broke up with Nick to ask me to be your boyfriend. And I know you- I know you wanted to make sure I was ready and that I knew you liked me for all of me and that you, like, that you weren’t going to be like Nick and that’s so nice, Niall. But you could have asked me, like, two days after I broke up with him. Because I already knew that you’re a better person than him.”

“Okay, love,” said Niall, blinking his surprise. He supposed that could be the first thing he told the group at the next week’s meeting because he thought he’d done the right thing by waiting to ask Harry to be his boyfriend but apparently Harry thought he was being too careful.

“Or, like, when I am ready for something, it’s like- it’s almost like you don’t believe me. Or that you don’t think I should make decisions for myself because I made a bad decision with Nick.” Harry frowned. “Can we just forget about Nick?”

“Yeah,” Niall told him, nodding. “We can.” His own brow furrowed as he thought, bothered by something Harry had just said. “Pet, I don’t- I don’t think that ya shouldn’t be allowed to make yer own decisions. That’s not- that’s not why I”—Niall sighed—“I just want to make sure ya don’t feel like I want ya to make a certain decision. I don’t want ya to feel pressured into anything. Like, I want them to be just yer decisions and not just for me.” He lifted a hand to stroke Harry’s hair and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “I want everything to be perfect for ya, pet.”

Harry hummed, eyelashes fluttering against Niall’s throat. “I know, Niall.”

Niall shared what Harry had told him a week later at the next group meeting.

“I thought I’d done the right thing, waiting,” Niall said to Debbie and the rest of the group. “I wanted him to know I like everything about him. Not just his physical appearance or that he’s a model or whatever shallow things Nick liked. I just really wanted him to understand that I think he’s kind and smart and funny and I love spending time with him. And, like, I wanted him to know that I respect him and everything he likes and just who he is. He’s really wonderful and… I wanted him to know that.” Niall took a sip of his tea, brows knit. “But I guess he just felt like I was being too careful and treating him like he was damaged. I don’t know.”

Rick raised his hand slightly and Debbie nodded toward him, encouraging him to share his thoughts.

“It seems like Harry’s a very smart lad. Very self-aware too. Knows what he’s feeling and thinking and can articulate it when he’s comfortable,” said the older man. “And I think that if he’s comfortable enough to tell you how he feels about something- Even if he’s nervous to do it, he’s still comfortable enough to talk to you and that shows that he trusts you.”

“That’s an excellent point, Rick,” agreed Debbie. “Niall, did you feel like you needed to gain Harry’s trust when you first got to know him? Did he seem like he had trust issues or…”

Niall shook his head, taking another sip of tea. “No. If anything, I think he was maybe too trusting. I think that’s part of what got him into the whole mess with Nick.”

“That does tend to be a trait of people who find themselves in abusive relationships,” said Debbie.
“Sometimes an almost childlike trust.”

“Yeah,” said Niall. “That sounds like - that sounds like Harry. Very trusting and, like, almost seems naive. Doesn’t seem to think people would be dishonest or untrustworthy.”

“But you still felt you needed to prove you were trustworthy,” pointed out Nora.

Niall frowned. “Yeah. I did. Thought he might start to be a little less trusting or, like, I don’t know… question people’s true intentions a bit. After Nick.”

“Did it seem that he did?”

“A little bit. First time he stayed at me flat he asked if he could sleep in me bed with me because he wanted to see how I made him feel,” said Niall. “But it was almost like he was trying to prove to himself that he was right for trusting me. Not like he was trying to decide if he could trust me.”

“Lad, it seems like your boy trusted you from the start,” said Rick, kind and sincere. “Maybe you could try to show him you trust him. Listen to him when he tells you how he feels and what he wants and trust that he means it.”

The next week and a half found Harry leaving their flat early in the morning to get to Mayfair for fittings and the Store Studios for rehearsals for London Fashion Week.

Niall spent two days working with Louis shooting product views for Thom Browne’s updated website, working through the suits and jackets. He filled the rest of his days with the lads, spending time in the studio with them. They’d written over twenty songs and had been rehearsing as well as recording a bit.

Niall took Rick’s advice to heart, pushing away his instinct to ask Harry numerous times if he was sure about a decision he’d made, if he was comfortable, if he truly liked something he’d told Niall he liked.

It felt strange, almost wrong because he wanted to be sure Harry meant what he said and wasn’t just telling Niall what he thought he wanted to hear. He knew Rick was right, though; Harry hadn’t spoken up with Nick, hadn’t told him he didn’t like things they did or asked if they could do certain things that he wanted to do because he wasn’t comfortable with Nick and didn’t want to upset him. He knew he could trust Niall, could tell him what he thought and felt and wanted without fear of upsetting him.

Niall, as Rick had suggested, needed to show Harry that same trust.

Harry and Niall woke up early on the morning of the Gucci show. Harry was nervous but, Niall knew, felt a bit more confident than he had before his first walk for McQueen.

“I’m glad Leila gave you a pass,” said Harry as he sat at the small dining table, drinking the Earl Grey tea and nibbling at the toast spread thick with butter and apricot jam that Niall had made him for breakfast. “I’m nervous, Niall,” he added quietly.

Leila had given Niall a backstage pass and front row seat to the show, for which Niall was thankful too because he knew how nervous Harry was and how much he wanted Niall with him. Though they’d never told Leila they were dating, Niall suspected she knew.

“You’ll do perfect, love,” said Niall, giving him a smile and dropping a kiss to the top of his head as he walked past him to sit in the other chair. “Ya did last time and it was only yer first walk.”
Harry gave Niall a shaky smile. “You’re so nice, Niall.”

“Just trying to give ya what ya deserve, pet.”

They arrived at the Store at half-past one, showing their passes to the security guard and making their way backstage. With Niall by his side, Harry went to the green room and introduced his boyfriend, bashful and blushing, to the other models.

Niall knew two of the lads walking with Harry from various auditions and overlapping studio time and was surprised to find a young lady with whom he’d worked on her first shoot for Vogue.

Everyone chatted for a bit, relaxing as they sipped tea and ate dishes of honeyed fruit—tossed with lime juice and a touch of cayenne pepper—from a large glass bowl before being greeted by Leila.

The models were sent off to get started on hair and makeup and Niall went along with Harry to the men’s dressing room, sitting with him while his makeup was done.

When the makeup artist sent him off to wardrobe, Niall kissed Harry on the cheek, careful not to ruin his makeup, and told him, “I’ll go find yer mum, love. We’ll be right out front.”

“Okay, Niall,” said Harry quietly, worrying his bottom lip. He reached out and took one of Niall’s hands in his own. “I’m glad you came with me.”

“Me too,” said Niall, smiling fondly and giving Harry’s hand a gentle squeeze. “You’ll be great, pet. Ya always are.”

“Thanks, Niall.”

Niall kissed him again and, with a final squeeze of his hand, turned to leave the dressing room.

He found Anne at the entrance and was greeted with a big hug.

“Oh! Niall, love, it’s so nice to see you!” she said, holding onto Niall’s arms as she looked at him, her smile so much like Harry’s.

“You too, Anne,” said Niall, smiling back at her. “We’re so happy yeh’ve come down.”

He led her to their seats in the front row, Anne’s small hand clasped in his, and found Liam and Louis already there. After Liam and Anne were introduced to each other, the four sat together, talking about how proud of Harry they were and discussing Niall’s decision to move from Wilhelmina Models to Syco.

“I’m grateful to them, o’ course. Wouldn’t have me career if they hadn’t signed me,” said Niall. “But my contact’s up and it’ll be easier to coordinate shoots with Harry if we’re both under the same management.”

“I think it’s wonderful,” said Anne, patting Niall’s knee. “I know how much he loves doing photoshoots with you.”

“He’s settled with you, isn’t he,” mused Louis. “Always calm.”

The show started not long after, Alessandro Michele introducing the Autumn/Winter collections.

Harry was, to nobody’s surprise, flawless, walking the runway with an easy grace that seemed to come naturally. Niall was so proud that he thought he might burst; Anne, he suspected, felt the same way, squeezing Niall’s hand whenever Harry walked down the catwalk.
After the show ended and all of the models made their way backstage for the last time, Leila came out the stageside door and headed straight for Niall. She said her hellos to Louis and Liam and then said politely, “You must be Harry’s mum.” She offered her hand to Anne and smiled. “I’m Leila Ananna.”

Anne shook Leila’s hand. “Yes. I’m Anne Twist.”

“Harry looks very like you,” said Leila with a smile. “Why don’t you come backstage? I’m sure he’d love to see you. All of you.”

So Niall, Anne, Liam, and Louis followed Leila backstage and to the green room. They waited for a bit, drinking some of the Champagne that Leila had offered them and picking at the last of the chocolate truffles on a silver platter.

Harry joined them in the green room about a half an hour later, changed back into his own clothes and clean of any makeup, hair an unstyled mess of brown waves and ringlets.

“Mummy!” he exclaimed, hugging Anne tightly.

“Hello, love,” said Anne, kissing Harry on the cheek. “You were wonderful.”

“Thanks, Mummy,” he said, smiling brightly, dimples deep. “I’m so glad you came.” He stepped back and moved toward Niall, who wrapped an arm around Harry’s waist and pulled him a bit closer. Harry smiled at Niall, a lovely little sweet smile that made Niall feel like he was drowning, and then ducked forward to kiss Niall’s lips softly. Blushing, he leant back and said quietly, “I’m glad you all came.”

“Glad we could come,” said Louis, smiling at the lad.

“I’m glad Liam could make it this time,” said Harry with a playful grin.

“The cheek on this one. Seriously,” said Louis and Niall laughed.

They made their way out of the studio through the back entrance, climbing into a waiting car just as they had five months earlier after Harry had walked his first runway, this time with Liam and Anne in tow.

After dinner at The Admiralty, Liam and Louis took a car back to Louis’ flat in Fitzrovia and Niall, Harry, and Anne took one to Sutton.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay on the sofa, Anne?” asked Niall as he fitted the cushions of the sofa with sheets and covered it with a duvet while Harry found some extra pillows he had tucked on the top shelf of his bedroom cupboard. “I could go back to Kingston for the night and you could take the bed. Harry could sleep on the sofa.”

“Don’t you dare leave my baby tonight. He doesn’t sleep well without you,” said Anne with a fond smile. She patted Niall’s cheek and told him, “I’ll be fine on the sofa, love.”

Niall crawled into bed a bit later, shuffling under the blankets until he was pressed against Harry, the taller lad spooned up in his arms.

“You were so good today, pet,” he whispered, lips brushing Harry’s ear. “So proud of ya. I know how nervous ya were but ya did amazing, love.”

Harry hummed and wiggled back against Niall, bum rubbing against Niall’s clothed cock.
“Oh, that’s not fair, ya naughty boy,” hissed Niall. “Yer mum’s on the other side of this wall.”

“I can be quiet,” said Harry with a teasing lilt to his voice. “Can you?”

“Fuck,” groaned Niall, eyes fluttered shut. Without another word, he slipped a hand between their bodies and into Harry’s boxer briefs. “This what ya want?” he asked, fingers moving between Harry’s arsecheeks and tracing around his hole.

Harry moaned quietly, muffled against the pillow, and nodded. “Please, Niall.”

Niall pulled his hand out of Harry’s pants and brought it up in front of the boy’s face. “Suck. Come on. Get ‘em wet.”

Harry parted his lips for Niall’s fingers, taking them into his mouth and suckling them, drool dribbling down his cheek onto his pillow as Niall began to fuck them in and out.

“That’s good, love,” said Niall after a couple minutes. He took his spit-slick fingers from Harry’s mouth and moved his hand back into Harry’s pants. “So good. Always ready for me,” he said as he easily slid his middle finger into Harry’s hole.

“Always want you,” hushed Harry. He whimpered as Niall added a second finger, pushing them in and out of his hole.

“I know.” Niall spread his fingers, stretching Harry. “Gagging for it. Stretch ya so good, don’t I, love?” He pressed a third finger into Harry and, voice low against Harry’s ear, whispered, “Make ya feel used.”

“Yes,” whined Harry. “Use me, Niall.”

“Yeah, I will, pet.” Niall pumped his fingers in and out of Harry’s arse. “Get ya nice and loose like ya like. Just a nice sloppy hole for me to fuck. Shove me cock in your arse and fuck ya hard ’til I fill ya up. Leave ya dripping me cum out your gape.”

“Uhn,” moaned Harry.

“Yeah.” Niall pulled his fingers from Harry’s arse and pushed the lad’s pants down to his bent knees. He pushed his own pants down to his hips far enough to pull his hard cock out. “Show me your hole,” he demanded.

With one hand, Harry reached behind himself and lifted his arsecheek, exposing his loose spit-slick hole.

“That’s good,” said Niall, placing his left hand on Harry’s lower back and pressing his thumb to Harry’s hole. “Know ya don’t like being empty,” he mused, pushing the tip into the first knuckle. He spit onto his right hand and reached down, wrapping it around his cock and slicking the spit down his length. “All right, pet,” he said. “Going to fuck ya good. Better be quiet, though. Told me ya could.”

“I will,” whispered Harry so softly as if to prove that he could be quiet.

Niall lined the head of his cock up with Harry’s stretched hole and pushed in slowly, sinking in inch by inch, and Harry turned his head to bite his pillow.

“So loose for me,” said Niall, lips pressed to Harry’s ear. He pulled his cock out and sank back in, moving to kiss Harry’s exposed neck. “Open up for me so good. Such a perfect little fuckhole.”
Harry whimpered and nodded into the pillow frantically. He began to thrust his arse back, meeting Niall’s ruts, desperate.

“Ya love that, don’t ya?” asked Niall a few minutes later, voice harsh. He took Harry’s earlobe between his teeth and bit, earning a hiss from Harry. “Just being a little fuckhole.”

“Y-y-yes,” whined Harry. Niall wrapped his right arm around Harry’s hips and began to fuck him roughly, pace fast. “Only- only, uhn, only for you.”

“Yeah,” grunted Niall. He rolled forward a bit, turning Harry onto his stomach more, and rose up onto his left arm. “Taking me like my perfect little cockslut. Such a good boy for me, aren’t ya, love?”

“Yes, Niall.”

“Fuck, ya feel so good,” Niall told him, kissing his throat. “All loose and hot. Fuck. Going to fill ya with me cum, pet. Ya ready?”

“Please, Niall. Please!” said Harry, near-begging.

With a few more thrusts, Niall came in Harry’s arse, biting Harry hard at the junction of his shoulder and neck. Harry made a guttural, strangled sound and Niall pumped a few more times, feeling some of his cum oozing out of Harry’s hole around his cock.

He pulled out of Harry’s arse and said quietly, “Roll over, pet.” He sat up and reached down to help his boy move onto his back. “Going to suck your”—he looked down at Harry and saw his softening cock dribbling cum and the stain underneath him on the sheet—“You came,” he finished, stunned.

“You bit me,” said Harry, almost accusing, eyes half-closed and lips quirked into a tiny smile.

Niall studied Harry for a moment, curious. “Did it hurt?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Harry, nodding slowly. “Felt so good.”

“Okay,” said Niall, filing that knowledge away for the future. He swallowed and then asked what had, over the last two weeks—since Niall had asked Harry if he wanted to try sleeping with a plug to keep Niall’s cum in his arse during the night and leave him stretched and ready for a quick shag in the morning—become a standard question. “Ya want a plug?”

“Not tonight,” whispered Harry, shaking his head against the pillow, eyes shut. “Want to feel you leaking.”

“Christ, you’re perfect,” said Niall as he leant down and kissed Harry softly, sweet and slow. Harry lifted an arm lazily and dropped it over Niall’s shoulders, keeping the older lad close to him as he kissed back.

“Going to clean up,” Niall hushed against Harry’s lips. “Ya want me to clean ya?”

“No,” said Harry, moving his arm from Niall’s shoulders so the lad could get up from the bed. “I want to be dirty.”

Niall nodded. “All right, pet.” He got up and went to the bathroom, wiping his soft cock and inner thighs with a damp flannel before heading back to their bed.

He cuddled under the blankets with Harry, pulling the lad back against his front and not caring that
his own cum was smearing along his groin and the tops of his thighs. “G’night, love,” he whispered, lips to Harry’s ear.

“Good night, Niall,” hummed Harry, placing his hands over Niall’s where they lay on his tummy. They drifted off to sleep soon after, wrapped up together, cozy and warm and content.

Harry woke up early, Niall’s arm draped over his waist and forehead tucked into the nape of Harry’s neck, and heard Anne moving around in the kitchen. He grabbed his phone and saw that it was just before eight o’clock. Careful not to wake Niall, he slipped out from under his arm and climbed out of their bed.

“Good morning, love,” said Anne as Harry walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

“Morning, Mummy,” he said, moving toward her and dropping a kiss to the top of her head.

“I’m making tea,” she told him. “And I’ll cook up some eggs and sausage. Or I could do pancakes if you’d like.” She smiled. “Use up those spotty bananas and make some banana pancakes.”

Harry gave her a sheepish half-smile and said, “I’ve got some chocolate chips too.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Anne said, ruffling his hair. “I’ll make you some banana pancakes with your chocolate chips.”

Harry jumped up onto the kitchen counter as Anne set about making breakfast, sipping at his tea and chatting to his mother.

“I think I’ll go wake Niall up,” he said after his first cup of tea was finished. “What time is it?” He looked at his phone and saw several Twitter notifications. Curious because he never tweeted and very rarely even opened the app—he’d only just put Twitter on his phone a month earlier—Harry slid to open the notifications.

He found several notifications in his mentions—The Sun, The Mirror, and London Fashion Week appearing in the list—which led to photos of himself, along with Niall, Louis, Liam, and his mother, leaving the Store the night before; there were also some of Niall, Anne, Liam, and Louis sitting in the front row at the Gucci show.

Both he and Niall had been mentioned. The photos posted by the London Fashion Week account in which Harry and Niall had been mentioned were of Harry walking the runway with Niall, Anne, Liam, and Louis in the background. The caption read “@Harry_Styles walks the much-anticipated @gucci AW16 catwalk at #LFW while mum and friends @NiallOfficial @Louis_Tomlinson and @LiamPayne watch.”

The Mirror’s photos were captioned similarly to the photos that had appeared in December when they’d been seen leaving The Half Moon after the lads’ performance; the caption read “Models @Harry_Styles and @NiallOfficial seen leaving the Store after Gucci’s LFW runway. They were accompanied by renowned fashion photographer @Louis_Tomlinson, editor @LiamPayne of Sue magazine, and Styles’ mother.”

Though the photos posted by The Sun were similar to those posted by The Mirror, the caption had a different tone. “@NiallOfficial was spotted front row at Gucci’s runway show with @Harry_Styles’ mum as the model walked for the designer and reignited rumours the two models are dating. A source confirms they’re boyfriends.” It was followed by a link to, Harry suspected, an article confirming their relationship status from a mystery source.
He stared at his phone, thumb hovering over the link to *The Sun*’s article as he chewed at his bottom lip, brows scrunched.

“Harry, love, what’s wrong?” asked Anne, placing her hand on Harry’s knee. Harry looked up from his phone, eyes landing on his mother. He blinked at her as though he’d forgot she was there and was surprised to see her standing in his kitchen.

He pouted and handed his mother his phone.

Anne scrolled through for a moment before placing the phone on the counter and taking Harry’s hands in her own. “Baby, you know it’s different this time.”

Harry’s eyes dropped from Anne’s face to their hands. He shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Harry—”

“Oh, fuck,” came Niall’s voice from the bedroom. “Harry!”

“Love, I know that you know it is,” said Anne. “Niall’s not like Nick. He treats you—”

“Harry! Pet,” said Niall, stumbling into the kitchen in a pair of joggers and no shirt. “Fuck,” he said, voice low, when he saw Harry on the kitchen counter, hands in Anne’s and pout still on his face. “Harry.” He crossed the kitchen to his boyfriend and Anne dropped Harry’s hands, stepping back to the stove to let Niall in.

Niall moved to stand in between Harry’s legs where they dangled off the kitchen counter. He put his hands on Harry’s waist and, looking right at the lad, said, “Harry, we’re going to talk about them pictures before ya get all wrapped up in that pretty little head o’ yours. I know what yer like.”

Harry looked down at his thighs but Niall lifted his left hand from Harry’s waist and placed it under Harry’s chin, gently tilting his head back up. “Look at me. Please, Harry. Want ya to see I’m not lying.”

Harry looked at Niall, green eyes wide and sad, and nodded. “Okay, Niall.”

“Thank you.” Niall dropped his hand back down to Harry’s waist and said, “Harry, I had no idea we were being photographed. During the show, yeah. Would’ve been hard not to since we were sitting front row.” He worked the fingers of his left hand in soft circles on the small strip of bare skin above the waistband of Harry’s joggers. “Don’t think any of us did. And I didn’t tip off the paps or whatever it is he used to do. Wouldn’t know how even if I wanted.”

“But—”

“But I don’t,” said Niall, cutting off any doubts from Harry. “We’re both already photographed enough. S’literally our jobs, being photographed. I don’t want any more photos that the world’s going to see than the ones we get paid to do. Any other pictures I just want to keep for us. But it’s going to happen, pet. Whether ya realise it or not, yer one o’ the hottest high fashion models in the industry now. All them crazy designers want ya. Course they do. Yer brilliant. And”—he shrugged—“I’m not doing so bad meself. Them paps are going to see us, pet. ‘Specially when we’re leaving things like photoshoots and runway shows ya walk.”

“Niall,” said Harry quietly, finally voicing the part that concerned him most about the pap shots and captions and mentions, “*The Sun* confirmed we’re boyfriends. I’m just- I’m just your boyfriend. Like —”
“Their ‘source’ is probably some Central Saint Martins student saw me there with ya before the show and then saw me finding yer mum. That’s all,” said Niall, fingers still moving soothingly across Harry’s soft skin. “But Harry, pet, we are- we are boyfriends. People are going to figure it out eventually. We can’t hide it forever. And I want- I’m in this for as long as you’ll have me. I- Pet, I love you. I’m in love with you.”

Harry’s eyes widened, lips parting, and his breath caught in his throat.

Behind Niall, Anne inhaled sharply and wiped at her eyes, brimming with tears.

“Really?” asked Harry breathily. He was stunned, almost hesitant to believe because none of the boys he’d been with before had ever, he suspected, even thought about saying those words.

“Yeah, pet,” said Niall, nodding. “I told ya- I told ya ages ago I was gone for ya. Didn’t realise how true that was until, like, a month ago. But I’m in love with ya, Harry.”

“I’m- Niall,” said Harry, speechless. He leant forward and kissed Niall, one hand on Niall’s cheek and the other wrapped around his neck. Niall stepped closer, hips pressed to the counter’s edge, and slid his left hand from Harry’s waist to his lower back, his right moving up to tangle in the hair at the back of Harry’s head.

After a few moments, Harry pulled back. Forehead still pressed to Niall’s, his lips quirked into a sweet smile and he said softly, “I’m in love with you too, Niall. I love you so much.”

Niall huffed out a nervous laugh and said, “I’m so glad ya said it back. Was scared for a minute.”

A bit later, Harry and Niall sat at the small dining table, Harry on Niall’s lap. Anne placed a plate stacked with banana and chocolate chip pancakes in the center of the table, adding it to the others filled with sausage and bacon.

She sat down across from Harry and Niall and said, smiling fondly at the lads, “All right, boys. Tuck in.”

“Ya know, I didn’t think that’s how I’d do it. Tell ya I love ya,” said Niall with a chuckle as they all filled their plates. “In the kitchen in our joggers with your mum there.”

“It was perfect,” said Harry, turning his head to look at Niall. “I’m so happy, Niall.”

At Niall’s meeting the next evening, he told the group about the previous morning’s incident. Everyone, it seemed, felt he’d handled the situation well.

“You were honest and straightforward,” said Rick. “You didn’t coddle Harry, didn’t sugarcoat anything. Told him the facts and didn’t promise him you would never let it happen again. I’m sure it will and I don’t see how you can manage to avoid it all of the time. Comes with the job, I imagine. But you did your best to let him know that you never know it’s going to happen and that you don’t set him up or anything. Just keep treating him like you do.”

“I think it’s important that you told him you love him,” said Nora. “You said Nick never told him that, right?”

“Right,” agreed Niall.

“They weren’t ever even officially boyfriends, were they?” asked Julie, a young woman who Niall guessed was about his age.
“No, they weren’t,” said Niall, shaking his head.

“Nick never committed to Harry. But you have,” said Julie. “You asked him to be your boyfriend. You’re in his life for real. Like, you’re friends with his friends and support his hobbies and interests and, like, his job. I mean, you’re moving in with him the end of the month. And you told him you love him with his mum right there in the room. I think that all proves that you’re not just hanging around him for the occasional spot in the tabloids or whatever.”

When the meeting was over, Julie caught up to him as he was leaving the community hall.

“I saw those pictures on Twitter,” she told him. “I hoped they wouldn’t cause any problems for you and Harry.”

“I think everything’s good with us. He’s not very good at hiding when something big’s bothering him and he’s seemed his usual self,” said Niall. “So I think it’s all right.”

Julie nodded and then said quickly, almost as though she was uncertain how Niall would take what she was about to say, “I understand why the photos upset him and I imagine it’s unpleasant to have paparazzi taking pictures of you without knowing but”—she gave a hesitant smile—“for what it’s worth, you both just look really sweet together. Happy.”

“Thanks, Julie,” said Niall, stopping in front of Harry’s building. “This is me,” he told her, gesturing toward the house behind him. “I’ll see you next week, yeah.”

“Yeah,” said Julie. “Have a good week.”

It was when they were cuddled in bed a few nights later, Harry in Niall’s arms with his head on Niall’s freckled shoulder, that Niall said, “Ya know, Julie said we look sweet together.”

“Yeah?” asked Harry, nuzzling his nose into Niall’s neck and fluttering his eyelashes against the ticklish skin.

“Yeah. She said we look happy.”

“We are happy.”

Niall nodded and lifted a hand to brush his fingers through Harry’s curly hair. “We are.”

A week later, Niall followed Bird up the stairs to the flat that was no longer just Harry’s but was now theirs, the last two boxes of records in their arms and Niall’s guitar in its case strapped to Bird’s back.

“It’s official now, lad,” said Bird. “Ya sold all yer furniture and all your stuff’s here. There’s no turning back now.”

“There never was, mate,” said Niall seriously. “Not from the start.”

Bird nodded, a kind smile on his face. “Yeah. I know. I’m happy for ya, mate. Both of ya. Yer sweet together.”

“Ya hear that, Harry?” called Niall as he and Bird walked through the open door of their flat.

“What?” asked Harry, stepping out of the kitchen into the living room.

“Bird thinks that we’re sweet together.” Niall set his box of records on the floor and moved toward Harry.
“We are,” said Harry, shrugging as if it was obvious. The flare of his nostrils as he tried to hide his smile, however, showed how pleased he was that their friend agreed with what he felt was obvious.

“Yeah,” said Niall, putting his hands on Harry’s hips and stepping forward to kiss the lad softly. “He’s right.”

Harry beamed, dimples deep and the old familiar feeling of drowning—a feeling he’d accepted long ago because it was pleasant, calming, relaxing, like drifting off to sleep on a blanket on a sunny day—tugged at Niall.

“Would ya like something to drink?” asked Niall after a moment, turning to look at Bird. “We’ve got beer. Or I could make—”

“Did you get Simon’s message?” interrupted Harry. “Sorry,” he said, looking between Niall and Bird, “but it’s— it’s exciting! Did you listen to it?”

“No,” said Niall, looking back at Harry and pulling his phone from his pocket. “Left me phone in the van when we were loadin’ up.” He looked at his phone and saw a missed call and voicemail from Simon. “Should I listen to it?”

“Yes!” said Harry eagerly.

Bird walked past the two lads into the kitchen and Niall swiped his finger across the phone screen, opening the voicemail notification. He played the message, listening as Simon’s recorded voice told him about a job offer from Armani and an opportunity for both Harry and him to be signed on as the faces of their new Men with Men formalwear collection.

“What’s up?” asked Bird, handing Niall a beer he’d pulled from the refrigerator.

“We’ve got— Harry, this is big,” said Niall, turning from his friend to his boyfriend. “We should— we should probably talk about it, yeah?”

“I can leave.” Bird stood back up from where he’d just sat down on the sofa. “If ya need to talk.”

“No. Not, like, immediately,” said Niall. “Just before we say yes.”

“Ya sure?” asked Bird, brows knit, and Niall wondered if his friend could feel his apprehension.

“Yeah.” Niall nodded.

“Armani’s got a new collection,” said Harry. “It’s like— Simon told me that they wanted to make a collection of formalwear for men. But, like, suits and tuxedos and things that, like, that coordinate. Because they said it’s easy for straight couples to find matching formalwear when they need it. For weddings and posh events, you know.”

Bird nodded and Niall let Harry go, continuing his rambling explanation.

“But it’s harder for, like, for gay couples because nobody has collections of coordinating formalwear for men,” said Harry. “So they’ve got a new collection coming out that’s called, like, the Men With Men collection or something. And they called Simon because they want— Simon said they want Niall and me to be the, like, to be the faces of the collection. And, you know, and do all of the adverts and everything.”

“Wow,” said Bird. “That is big.”
“Yeah!” said Harry, sounding so excited. Niall wondered if Harry saw the glaring concerns the job offer raised or if he was just being overprotective and cautious again. He didn’t think he was though.

When Bird left an hour later, Niall turned to Harry where they sat together on one end of the sofa. “Love, I think we should talk about this Armani offer before we call Simon back.”

“O-okay,” said Harry. “Do you want to do it?” he asked after a moment of silence, brows scrunched like he was uncertain what Niall wanted to talk about.

“Yeah,” Niall told Harry. “But I’m just worried because- Pet, the entire collection’s for same-sex couples.”

“I know,” said Harry, definitely sounding like he didn’t understand the point Niall was trying to bring up.

“I just think that it’ll start up the rumours and speculations about us again. More than, like, me being at some runway show yer walking. The Sun’ll have some ‘insider’ confirming we’re boyfriends.” Niall caught Harry’s green eyes with his own and moved his hand up to trace his fingers down Harry’s jaw. “I don’t want ya to worry again. Don’t want ya stuck in that pretty little head o’ yours thinking I don’t love ya.”

“Niall,” said Harry, “you’re doing it again. I’m not broken. You don’t have to be so careful.”

Niall nodded. “I know, Harry. But this is, like, a legitimate concern. I think. I mean, that just happened a week ago, you gettin’ all worried because The Sun ‘confirmed’ that we’re boyfriends.”

“Yeah, but we are boyfriends, Niall,” said Harry, reminding Niall of his own words from a week earlier. “And it’s like you said. People are going to figure it out eventually. Especially since we live together now.” The corners of his lips quirked up into the hint of a smile like he was trying to hide the wide grin that threatened to break onto his face. “And we love each other.”

Niall studied Harry’s face, his green eyes sparkling and his full lips tilted into a smile. He thought of what Rick had said at his second meeting—“Listen to him when he tells you how he feels and what he wants and trust that he means it.”—and asked, “You’re sure ya want to do this?”

“Yes, Niall,” said Harry, reaching forward to take Niall’s hands in his own. “I’m sure. I think it will be- it’ll be special. For us to do it. Together.”

Niall gave Harry’s hands a light squeeze. “Okay,” he said. “But can we wait until tomorrow to call Simon? Just so we can sleep on it and, like, make sure we’re both still okay with it. Our relationship is more important to me than a job and I want to be certain it won’t change anything.”

Harry bit his lip and nodded. “Yeah, that’s- I think that’s fair, Niall.”

On Tuesday afternoon, Harry and Niall went to Simon’s office to meet with Emilie, the Armani casting director who had contacted Simon the week before. She was excited to talk with them about the collection, showing them sample looks.

“As you can see, some of the looks are very classic, very tailored and handsome,” she told them, French accent strong, “and others are a bit unconventional and quirky. You both would be perfect for the campaign, of course.”

Niall couldn’t deny that it almost seemed the collection had been designed with Harry and him in mind, though he knew it was unlikely.
“It’s a very fun, playful collection,” continued Emilie. “If perhaps both men are in preference to the classic style, there are suits of that type that coordinate nicely and if both are preferring the less traditional, there are suits that coordinate. And if a couple is as you are, one who wears the very classic suit”—she gestured toward Niall—“and one who prefers the more unconventional”—she looked at Harry—“there are pieces like the patterned and coloured ties and pocket squares that coordinate with the patterns and colours of the less traditional suits and little details like cufflinks that match buttons of the suit jackets. And it’s a bit of mix-and-match because, unlike Armani’s regular suits, all pieces can be purchased separately, which is unique to this collection.”

Harry and Niall thanked Emilie for the meeting when they were finished and made plans to meet with her again the next afternoon once they’d discussed the offer.

“I love it, Niall!” said Harry, wired with excitement, squeezing Niall’s hand as they walked into the Underground station. “It’s so perfect! It’s like they made it for us.”

“Yeah, it is,” agreed Niall, leading Harry toward their train. “Thought that too.”

It was just after five o’clock when Harry and Niall got back to Sutton. They made dinner together—puttanesca with fresh linguine Harry had made one snowy day in early February—and ate at the small table, a bottle of Chianti opened to go with their meal.

“I really want to do it, Niall,” said Harry, cheeks flushed with excitement and maybe a little too much wine. “It’s just perfect and I love doing photoshoots with you and it’s Armani.”

Niall took a sip of his wine and then said, “Okay, love. We’ll sign the contracts tomorrow.”

Harry beamed across the table at Niall and finished his glass of Chianti.

They cuddled in bed a few hours later, Harry a bit drunk and spooned in Niall’s arms. He wiggled his arse against Niall’s groin and gave a desperate little whimper.

“Niall?”

“Yeah, pet?” asked Niall, voice low in Harry’s ear.

“I want you.”

“Ya want me?” asked Niall, feigning ignorance. “What do ya mean?”

“I want you, Niall,” whined Harry. “You know.”

“Say it, Harry,” demanded Niall.

“I want”—he groaned and grinded back against Niall more desperately—“I want you to fuck me. Please. Please fill my hungry hole.”

“God,” moaned Niall, already pushing Harry’s pants down, “such an eager slut.” He pressed the tip of his middle finger against Harry’s hole and wasn’t really surprised when it slipped right in. “Fuck. So loose. O’ course ya are, with all the shit ya shove up yer arse.”

With the help of some lube, Niall soon had all five fingers in Harry’s hole. “Ya want to go a fist next, don’t ya?” asked Niall knowingly and Harry nodded frantically. “Someday soon, yeah. When we’ve got time to work up to it and yer prepped proper. I’ve got to get me cock in yer arse though.”

He continued fucking Harry’s arse with all five fingers for a few minutes, twisting his hand and
spreading his fingers, teasing Harry.

“Right,” he said finally, pulling his hand from between Harry’s legs. “Hands and knees. I want to see yer needy hole taking me cock.”

Harry scrambled onto his hands and knees, arching his back so his arsecheeks spread enough for Niall to see his stretched lube-slick hole.

“I’m going to use ya like the good little fuckhole you are,” Niall told him.

“Please, Niall,” moaned Harry. “I want to be your fuckhole.”

“So good,” said Niall, rubbing Harry’s arse with one hand as he shuffled forward on his knees to kneel behind Harry. “So good for me. Always so desperate.”

Harry lowered himself down so he was lying with his chest and face against the mattress and reached behind himself to separate his arsecheeks even more.

“Beautiful,” mused Niall, continuing to rub his hand over Harry’s smooth arse. After a moment, he lifted his hand and slapped Harry’s bum hard, hard enough that he felt a stinging in his palm and fingers, and said, voice even and stern, “But I said hands and knees. Not desperate whore who can’t follow directions.”

Harry moaned, long and lascivious, and placed his hands back under himself on the mattress. He raised himself up, back arched, and whimpered.

“Ya liked that, didn’t ya?” asked Niall, pumping two fingers into Harry’s inviting hole, and Harry nodded his agreement. “Maybe I’ll start spanking ya.”

“Uhn,” whined Harry.

“Fuck.” Niall pulled his fingers from Harry’s bum again and quickly coated his cock with lube. He lined himself up with Harry’s hole, stretched and wet and used, and said roughly, “Ready?”

Without waiting for an answer, he fucked himself into Harry’s arse and set a fast, harsh pace, holding onto Harry’s hips as he rocked in and out.

“Feels so fucking good, cockslut,” said Niall after a few minutes.

Harry whimpered and began to thrust his hips back, meeting Niall.

“How’s it feel for you, cockslut?” asked Niall as Harry continued to fuck himself back onto Niall’s cock.

“So- so good,” he whined. “Used and full and- and so- oh- like I belong”—he blushed a deep red and ducked his head down between his arms—“like I belong to you.”

“Oh,” sighed Niall, feeling suddenly so fond and soft and in love. “ya do, pet. Ya do belong to me. And I’m yours, yeah.” He leant forward and pressed kisses to the back of Harry’s neck and shoulders. “I’m yours, love.”

“Please, Niall,” said Harry.

“Please what?”

“Please touch me,” begged Harry. “Please?”
“Ya going to cum, Harry?” asked Niall, voice a little rougher now. “Ya going to make a mess if I touch ya?”

“Y-yes,” stuttered Harry.

Niall moved one hand from Harry’s hip and reached around Harry to take his cock in his hand. He slid down the length, thumb circling the head to smear the dripping precum around, before settling into a smooth up and down, jerking Harry’s cock as he continued to fuck into the boy harshly.

“So perfect,” Niall groaned into Harry’s ear. “Such a perfect fuckhole. Shit.” He grunted, rocking in and out of Harry’s arse quickly. “I love you.”

“I love- I love you too,” whined Harry, sounding painfully on edge. He came a minute later, his hole tightening around Niall’s cock as Niall jerked and fucked Harry through his orgasm.

Niall squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip, willing himself to hold off his own orgasm until Harry had come down from his enough to appreciate the feeling of overstimulation while Niall fucked him a bit longer.

“Stay up,” said Niall firmly, holding Harry’s hips to keep him up when he felt the lad start to drop down to the bed. “Be good, yeah. Going to keep fucking ya until I’m done. Use yer fuckhole a little more.”

“Yeah,” said Harry weakly, placing his head on the mattress and stretching his arms toward the headboard as Niall continued to pound into his arse, pace a little slower and thrusts not quite as hard as they had been. “I’m yours, Niall.”

“I know, love. So good for me, aren’t ya,” said Niall, pulling Harry’s hips back to meet his groin on every movement. “How’s it feel, pet? How’s this feel?”

“I’m yours,” mumbled Harry into the mattress, eyes closed and a tiny blissed-out smile on his lips. “It’s- it’s so much. I’m- Feels- It’s so much. I’m just,” babbled Harry and Niall knew he’d drifted off too much to answer him.

“Perfect. Fuck,” groaned Niall, feeling his orgasm crashing over him. “Fillin’ ya up, love. Like”—he grunted as he came—“like ya like.”

Harry nodded drowsily, the small smile still quirking his lips.

When Niall finally pulled out, he moved quickly to find a butt plug from Harry’s assortment under the bed.

“Is it okay, love?” he asked as he pressed the smallest one—purple and sparkly and still bigger than anything Niall would want up his arse—against Harry’s gaping hole.

Harry nodded again and gave a tired moan of approval. Niall took it as the consent he was looking for and pushed it into Harry’s arse slowly, watching some of his cum leak out around the toy.

“Good night, pet,” whispered Niall, lying behind Harry and pulling him into his arms.

“Night, Niall,” sighed Harry. “I love you.”

Niall placed a soft kiss to the corner of Harry’s jaw. “I love you too, pet.”

When Harry woke up, the plug was still in his arse and Niall, awake behind him, was pressing it
deeper into his hole.

“Niall, what”—he yawned—“what time is it?” he asked, letting his boyfriend fuck him slowly with the plug.

“Half nine,” Niall told him lazily, pulling the plug out the tiniest bit before pushing it back in. “Don’t use yer dildo in the shower. Keep the plug in.”

“Okay,” said Harry.

“Going to pull it out when ya get out the shower all clean,” said Niall, nonchalant. “Fuck yer sloppy hole and fill ya even more. Let ya leak in yer pants all day.”


He rolled onto his stomach and Niall began to work the butt plug in circles.

“Christ. I love how loose ya are,” said Niall. “Ya just let me use ya. Fuck ya open and fill ya with me cum ‘til yer dripping with it. Like a proper cumslut.”

“Ni-all,” whined Harry.

“I know. I know,” said Niall softly, moving the base of the plug. “Gagging for it.”

He continued to move the plug, not fucking it in and out but pressing it against what he knew was Harry’s prostate before releasing the pressure and then doing it again.


“Don’t ya dare cum. I know what yer like,” said Niall sternly. “Cumming just with something up yer arse.”

Harry’s whimpers and whines continued until he sounded like he was on the verge of tears.

“Quit whining,” said Niall harshly, smacking Harry’s bum. “I’m going to fuck ya good after ya shower. Let ya cum all over yerself like a filthy cumslut and you can eat it all up. Maybe I’ll feed it to ya. Then have ya get dressed all sticky.”

Harry whined, long and high, and Niall smacked his arse again. He took his hand away from the base of the plug and said, “Go get in the shower, pet.”

Harry pushed himself up and stood from the bed, hard cock dribbling precum from the tip.

“Fuck, yer a sight,” Niall told him, eyeing Harry appreciatively. He turned harsh again, tone firm and stern, and said, “Don’t touch yerself in the shower except to wash up. Don’t want ya cumming before I get me cock in yer sloppy hole.”

“Okay, Niall,” said Harry quietly, eyes downcast. “I’ll be- I’ll be good.”

He showered, rushed but careful not to touch himself any more than necessary—he wasn’t sure why Niall wanted him to get clean if he was just going to make him a mess again but it was what Niall wanted so he would do it because Harry wanted to be good for Niall—and towelled himself dry, stepping out of the shower and returning to the bedroom, naked and plugged and cock still semi-hard.

Niall lay on the bed, naked and slowly stroking his own hard cock.
“Come here, love,” he said, sitting up and moving so he was at the edge of the bed, feet on the floor.

Harry walked toward him and stopped in front of Niall. Niall reached up and wrapped his hand around Harry’s cock, jerking him a few times before tapping his hip and telling him to turn around.

Harry turned around, arse right in front of Niall’s face, and reached behind himself to pull his cheeks apart.

Without warning, Niall pulled the plug from Harry’s hole and Harry moaned.

“Fuck! Look at yer gape,” said Niall. He leant forward and Harry gasped when he felt Niall’s tongue licking at his stretched rim.

“Oh, fuck, Niall!” groaned Harry when the tip of Niall’s tongue slipped into his loose hole. He thrust his arse back, still gripping his cheeks, and moaned and whined as Niall fucked him with his tongue.

“Ya taste so fucking good,” said Niall, moving his face back a few inches. “Ya want a taste?”

Harry’s sex-addled brain tried to figure out how he could taste his own arsehole but he nodded frantically because Niall must have an idea and, yes, he wanted to taste.


“What?” asked Harry, turning his head to look down at Niall where he sat on the bed.

“Take the plug,” said Niall roughly, pushing the butt plug into Harry’s hand.

Understanding dawning on him, Harry took the used butt plug and, with Niall watching him expectantly, brought it up to his mouth. He licked a stripe up the length of the plug and moaned because Niall was right; it tasted delicious, like sex and Niall’s cum and silicone.

“That’s right, slut,” said Niall. “Suck on that plug.”

Harry licked up to the tip and pressed as much of the toy into his mouth as he could fit. He nearly choked when Niall leant forward and started to tongue around his rim, prodding at his hole and fucking into him.

After about five minutes, Niall leant back and grabbed onto Harry’s waist, turning him.

“Get on the bed,” he said. “Face down, arse up. And keep sucking that plug. I know how much ya like having yer arsehole and yer pretty lips stretched around a cock.”

Harry whimpered and did as instructed, getting on the bed and lying with his chest on the mattress, head turned to the side, and arse up. He stretched one arm up beside his face and put the other under his tummy.

He knew that, in this position and at this angle, he could keep fucking his mouth with the used plug and would be able to feel Niall’s cock bulging his belly.

And he knew that Niall knew that too.

“All right, slut,” said Niall, harsh and almost cruel, getting into position behind Harry on his knees. “Yer going to be my pretty fucktoy, yeah. You can cum whenever ya want but I’m going to keep fucking yer arse ‘til I’m finished.”
Harry nodded, biting his lip while Niall drizzled lube onto Harry’s arse and then on his hard length. He traced the circle of Harry’s rim with the tip of his wet cock and then pushed in all the way.

Harry moaned and pushed the butt plug into his mouth. Behind him, Niall hissed out, “Fuck.”

After a few shallow thrusts in and out of Harry’s hole, Niall said, a bit softer, “Okay, love. Tap three times if it’s too much, yeah.”

Harry nodded again, mouth filled with silicone, and Niall began to fuck him with a fast, rough pace.

“Yeah, ya fucking slut,” growled Niall, fucking Harry hard, hands gripping his hips tightly. “Yer always so loose for me. Love yer fucking sloppy fuckhole.”

Harry moaned, muffled by the butt plug in his mouth, his hard cock hanging between his knees and the leaking head dripping against the sheets with each of Niall’s thrusts.

“Such a perfect- Fuck- Such a perfect boy, aren’t ya,” praised Niall, still rough and harsh. “So filthy. Ready for me cock all the time. Bend ya over whenever I want and stick it in yer hungry hole.” He fucked harder still and continued with his dirty talk. “Or shove ya down to yer knees and make ya suck my cock. Let ya choke on it and then ice yer pretty cheekbones with me cum.”

Harry moaned again, pressing a hand to his stomach and feeling Niall’s cock bulging his belly.

“You feel it, don’t ya, ya little slut,” said Niall knowingly. Harry nodded against the mattress, eyes squeezed shut in pleasure. “Take out the plug,” he said. “Let me hear them pretty sounds ya make.”

“Fuck, Niall,” whimpered Harry as soon as he’d pulled the butt plug from his mouth. “I can feel- I can feel your cock in my belly. Filling me with- Ooh- Filling me up.”

“Ya like how I stretch ya out,” groaned Niall.

“Yes,” agreed Harry, feeling nothing but absolute pleasure as his well-trained hole was used mercilessly, his belly bulging and jaw aching from the plug and cock dribbling precum onto the bed.

“Fuck, Niall. It’s too much,” he cried, though he didn’t tap the mattress. “I’m- I’m going to- Oh, f-fuck.”

“Yeah, come on, ya little whore,” grunted Niall, fucking Harry hard. “Cum. Make a mess on them sheets. Can lick it all up when we’re done. I know how—”

“Ni-Niall,” whined Harry, hole fluttering weakly around Niall’s cock as he came, cum streaking the sheets and his inner thighs.

“Did ya cum?” asked Niall, a hint of derision in his tone. “Yer so loose I can’t even feel ya tightening ’round me cock. Such a- Fuck- Such a cockslut.”

“Yes. Oh! Oh, fuck, Niall,” moaned Harry as Niall continued to fuck in and out of Harry’s arse.

“Yeah. I’m so- I’m so loose for you, Niall. I love you, Niall. You’re so good to me.”

“I love ya too, pet. Love how ya stretch for me.” Niall dropped forward, pressing Harry down onto the mattress completely and rutting into him. “Take me so well. Like yer made for me.”

Harry nodded frantically and nearly sobbed with pleasure. Niall grunted, hips stilling for a moment before he resumed his movements, thrusts slower and shallower than before, filling Harry’s gaping hole with cum.
After a few minutes, both boys’ breathing slowed and Niall raised himself up onto his knees, dropping a kiss to the back of Harry’s head. He pulled out of Harry and watched as a thin stream of his cum dribbled from Harry’s used hole down his perineum. He rubbed his hands over Harry’s arse softly, soothingly, before moving to stretch out beside Harry, lying on his back. He turned his head on the mattress, face to face with Harry, and kissed him softly.

With quietly smacking openmouthed kisses and dragging lips, Harry and Niall made out lazily, lost in each other.

Eventually, though, they had to get up and ready for their meeting with Simon and Emilie.

True to his word, Niall told Harry to get dressed, his inner thighs and bum still sticky with cum. And it was as Harry sat on the sofa drinking his tea and waiting while Niall showered and dressed that he could feel the seat of his pants beginning to dampen as Niall’s cum leaked from his hole.

He whimpered at the feeling just as Niall walked into the living room, asking, “Ya ready, pet?”

Harry looked up toward Niall, flushed and embarrassed, and a smug grin quirked Niall’s lips at the corners.

“Can ya feel it?”

Harry nodded. “Yes.”

“Good,” said Niall gruffly. “Can’t have ya forgettin’ what a slut you are, can I?”

“No, Niall,” whispered Harry, so embarrassed and turned on.

“Let’s go, love,” said Niall. “Don’t want to be late.”

They arrived at Simon’s office at one o’clock.

“Have you lads made a decision?” Simon asked while they sat in his office before they went into the meeting room to talk with Emilie. “As your manager, I have to say it would be an excellent campaign for both of you. Excellent pay, of course, and it would obviously open you up to other offers from Armani in the future. Maybe a runway for you, Harry. Suits and casualwear for you,” he said, looking at Niall. “But as someone who cares about you both, I’m telling you not to do anything if you’re not comfortable with it. You are so happy together and so sweet and I’d hate to see a job put a strain on your relationship.”

“We talked about that,” said Niall. “All of that. We know what to expect. Probably The Sun’ll have a field day with it and write loads of articles about our love life. But we talked about it.”

“Harry?” said Simon, looking to the other lad for his input.

“I want to do it, Simon. We- Niall and I - We talked about it a lot and I know there’ll be rumours and, like, the tabloids will be talking about us,” said Harry. “But it’s- We are boyfriends and it’s not- it’s not like Nick.” He gave Niall a bashful little smile and Niall smiled back, reaching out to squeeze Harry’s knee. “I trust Niall and I think this job will be really fun. I always- I love doing photoshoots with Niall.”

“We trust each other,” said Niall, “and I believe Harry. That he wants to do this. And, like, I want him to do things he wants to do.”

Simon looked at both lads. “Okay. If you’re both on board then let’s go talk with Emilie.”
An hour later, Harry and Niall had both signed their contracts and were officially Armani models. They learnt that Louis would be the photographer for the campaign, a fact both models were happy about, and that they would start shooting in a few weeks.

When they left Simon’s office, they headed back to Sutton. Both Harry and Niall wanted to stop at Black Treacle to tell Elora and Abby their news.

When they’d first told Elora about the offer, her reaction had been somewhere between Harry’s and Niall’s. While she was excited for them and thought the collection sounded wonderful, she could understand Niall’s concerns.

Niall had decided that he would trust that Harry really felt comfortable with the Armani offer when Harry had told his friend, “I love Niall and Niall loves me and it’s okay if- it’s okay if people start to figure that out.” Niall had become a bit choked up at Harry’s next words and Elora’s eyes had filled with tears. “Because it’s- This is as long as Niall wants me.” Niall had reached for Harry’s hand and squeezed reassuringly, hoping Harry understood that he felt the same. “Forever, maybe.”

Harry and Niall walked through the door into the cafe and Elora looked toward them from the coffee bar where she was setting tea for Patty, Elora and Abby’s grandmother who acted something like a grandmother to the rest of—as Patty had dubbed Harry, Niall, and the lads—“the ragtags.”

“Well?” she asked eagerly.

“We did it, El!” said Harry, bounding toward the girl like an over-excited puppy. “We signed the contracts and we’re Armani models now!”

“Oh, I’m so proud of you both!” exclaimed Elora, hugging Harry. “I remember when you first told me you were a model.”

Harry beamed and fell into place at Niall’s side, tucked up close with Niall’s arm around his waist.

They ate lunch and drank their tea, chatting and laughing with Elora, Abby, and Patty.

When they finally arrived back to their flat, Harry dove into the last chapter of his book for book club. “I can’t cuddle with your right now, Niall,” said Harry apologetically when Niall joined him on the sofa. “I have to focus on this chapter because I’ve got to finish it for book club tonight. Sorry.”

“You can’t cuddle and focus at the same time?” asked Niall with a chuckle.

“No,” said Harry seriously. “It’s very distracting to be in your arms, you know. Especially”—he blushed—“especially when I want you to fuck me hard but I don’t have time.”

“You little slut,” groaned Niall, imagining nothing other than bending Harry over the arm of the sofa and pounding into his abused arse hard and fast. “Haven’t been fucked enough in the last twenty-four hours?” he asked, tone mocking and laced with a hint of contempt. Harry blushed and Niall said, a bit kinder, “Later, yeah. After our meetings.”

Harry whimpered softly and wiggled his arse on the cushions. “Yeah.”

Niall left soon after, trying to temporarily rid himself of his dirty thoughts—images of his cum dribbling out of Harry’s used hole kept flooding his mind—before entering the church hall.

When Debbie asked Niall about his past week, he told the group about the Armani offer. He talked about his concerns and the subsequent conversations he and Harry had about the decision.
“Are you going to do it?” asked Nora curiously.

Niall took a deep breath, preparing himself for comments telling him he’d made the wrong choice, and said, “Yes. He- Harry told me he loves me and he knows I love him and that he really wants to do this.” He looked at Rick and added, “I thought of what Rick told me. That I should listen to Harry when he tells me what he wants and how he feels and trust him that he means it. I don’t want Harry to feel like he did when he asked me to move in.”

“I think it’s good you said yes,” said Julie from beside Niall. “I think it shows you trust him to make his own decisions. And it’s good you talked about it because then he knows that you’re both being open and honest with each other.”

“And he knows he can talk to you about anything,” added Nora.

Niall was happy to have the support of his group and felt reassured that he—and Harry—had made the right choice when they signed their contracts.

Later that night, together in their bed, Niall hovered above Harry and kissed him softly, sweetly. Harry returned the kisses just as sweetly, a hand in the hair at the back of Niall’s head as he held his boyfriend close to him.

“God, yer beautiful,” said Niall when he pulled back from Harry after a few minutes. He looked down at the lad, chestnut-coloured waves and ringlets fanned out against the pillow and red lips swollen from their kisses. “I’m so lucky.” He leant down and kissed Harry again, a gentle peck to his mouth. “Yer beautiful.”

Harry blushed under Niall’s gaze. “Could we- Can it be slow? Tonight?” he asked, sounding hesitant. “Like, not- It’s okay. Nevermind.” He turned his head to the side, looking away from Niall.

“Wait. Harry,” said Niall. “What d’ya mean? Like”—he paused, unsure how to ask Harry if he meant that he wanted Niall to make love to him—“not rough or hard or fast. Not like”—he shook his head—“not like usual when it’s… kinky and hot and we’re- we’re fucking.”

“It’s okay,” whispered Harry, still blushing and looking embarrassed. “It’s okay if- That’s not what you want. It’s okay, Niall.”

“Harry,” said Niall quietly, his heart sinking at the disappointment and embarrassment on Harry’s face. “I love ya so much and I want- I’d love to”—he swallowed, not sure why it was so difficult for him to say it—“I want to make love to ya. Want to show ya how much.”

“You- you always do, Niall,” said Harry, finally looking back toward Niall. “You always make me feel- I know you love me.”

“But it’s- it’s different, pet,” Niall told him. “I don’t reckon I can explain it but… I want to show ya in a different way.”

Harry’s eyes widened and he smiled a tiny, tentative smile at Niall. “Really?”

“Yes,” said Niall, leaning down to kiss Harry again, goosebumps spreading down his neck and arms when Harry’s lips pressed to his own.

They kissed for a bit longer, slow and sensual, and Niall began to grind his groin against Harry’s. He pushed himself up and said softly, “Turn onto yer tummy for me, love.”
Harry did, rolling over as Niall had asked.

“Yer so beautiful,” said Niall again. He leant down and kissed the back of Harry’s neck, mouthing his way down Harry’s neck and across his shoulder blades, down his spine to the dip above his bum. He kissed Harry’s arse and then, with gentle hands, pulled Harry’s arse cheeks apart.

Lowering his head, he licked between Harry’s cheeks from his balls to the base of his spine, repeating the movement three more times. Finally, he began to tongue around Harry’s hole, tender and abused from the previous evening and that morning. He pointed his tongue and began to push into Harry, fucking his arse with it.

Harry moaned and rubbed his face against the pillow under his head.

He was so exposed, so open and raw. Each swipe of Niall’s tongue drove him a bit more mad with desire but he knew Niall would take care of him.

“Ya taste so good, love,” said Niall after a few minutes, kissing the swell of Harry’s bum.

Harry felt two fingers enter his arse and he moaned again, wanton and needy, and thrust back. Niall worked him open, fingers pumping in and out, scissoring to stretch him—he didn’t think he really needed it but he certainly wouldn’t stop Niall—before adding a third.

Harry was relaxed, floating and comfortable, and he loved Niall so much.

“D’ya know why I love how loose ya are?” asked Niall, voice not rough or mocking but gentle and sincere. “How ya open for me?”

Harry shook his head against the pillow. “N-no.”

Niall continued to fuck Harry with his fingers and said, “It’s like- You’re comfortable with me. You’re relaxed and ya trust me and you can- you can open for me.”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry. Niall pulled his fingers from Harry’s arse and slicked himself with lube. He lined himself up with Harry’s hole and pushed in slowly, achingly slowly.

“Ya open for me so perfect,” said Niall, rocking his hips as he began to fuck into Harry’s hole. “It’s like yer body’s way- yer body’s way of telling me ya love me.” He dropped down, forearms on the mattress on either side of Harry’s head, and kissed Harry’s wavy hair.

“I do- Oh,” whined Harry as Niall hit his prostate, “I do love you, Niall. You’re- I love you.”

“Want ya to feel as good as you make me feel,” said Niall. He thrust into Harry slowly, rocking in and out. “Want ya to feel perfect.”

“I feel- I always feel”—Harry moaned, high and reedy—“I always feel- It’s so soft and- and everything is- It’s sunny like you, Niall.”

“Yeah, love?” groaned Niall, filling Harry over and over.

“Yes.” Harry gave a choked sob. “It’s- I’m- Niall, I’m going to—”

“Cum for me, love,” said Niall, dipping his head down to nip Harry’s earlobe. He bit softly, licking the sensitive flesh, and whispered, “Going to fill you up, pet. Let ya know yer mine.”

Harry whimpered and grinded his hips into the mattress.
“Niall!” he cried, cumming. “Niall, please. Please be- be mine.”

“Oh, fu- Shit,” breathed Niall, hoarse and choked. His eyes squeezed shut as he filled Harry with his cum, feeling Harry’s hole clenching and unclenching loosely around him, relaxed and used. “Christ, Harry. I love ya, pet.” Niall rocked in and out of Harry’s arse lazily, slow and shallow, and said, “I am yours, love. Feel how I’m fillin’ ya up? Leave ya dripping me so we don’t forget. Yer mine, yeah, and I’m yours.”

Finally, he pulled out of Harry’s arse, rubbing the tip of his cock on Harry’s bum and smearing it with cum and lube.

“I’m not pluggin’ ya tonight, pet,” Niall told Harry as he rolled him onto his back. “Yer little hole’s wrecked. Going to run a bath, love. Get ya all cleaned up and let ya relax in them bubbles ya like.”

“Oh, okay,” said Harry, drowsy. “Will you- Niall, will you take a bath with me? Please?”

Niall smiled, soft and fond and so in love. “Course I will, pet. Wash yer hair if ya want.”

Harry smiled back.

An hour later, Harry and Niall were cuddled in a freshly-made bed, smelling like lavender and vanilla.

“G’night, Harry,” whispered Niall, arms around Harry’s waist and chin hooked on his shoulder.

“Good night, Niall,” said Harry, lips quirked into a content smile.

The next few weeks were filled with odd jobs for Harry—product views for Burberry and Topman, which Louis thought was hilarious because Harry, as Louis reminded him, was a Gucci model now and didn’t need “rubbish” like Topman—while Niall spent lots of time in the studio with the lads.

The third week of March brought the first few fitting and tailoring sessions for the Armani campaign. Harry and Niall spent hours trying on jackets, shirts, trousers, and waistcoats while sleeves and hems were pinned and nearly every measurement the boys could think of was fastidiously taken by the excited young tailor named Darcy.

“I must seem like such a prat,” he said to Harry and Niall. “I graduated from Central Saint Martins last term and this is my first real job Armani’s had me do solo. I was so excited to see you’d both signed on for this campaign. I’ve wanted to work with you”—he looked at Harry—“since I saw you walk for McQueen last autumn. And your campaign for Paul Smith’s PS Tailored was just brilliant. You’re both very talented.”

“Thanks,” said Niall with a modest smile, “but we just put on the clothes, mate. It’s you lot who design them and make them that are the talented ones.”

Harry nodded his agreement with Niall’s words.

It was about a week later while Harry and Niall were cuddled on the sofa watching *The Great British Bake Off* that Niall said, “Pet, maybe we should talk about what we’re going to do when Armani announces the campaign. Because I’m pretty sure all them tabloids will go crazy with their rumours about us.”

“What should- what should we do?” asked Harry, turning to look at Niall. “What do you mean?”

Niall grabbed the television remote and paused the episode of *Bake Off*. “I was thinking- But, like,
only if yer comfortable with it- But I was thinking we could maybe beat them to it. Like, sort of make our relationship public before Armani announces the campaign. So it’s on our terms, yeah, not just, like, more speculation and rumours and then we finally confirm it just to get them to leave us alone.”

“How- how would we do that?” asked Harry, brows scrunched as he considered Niall’s words.

“Maybe we could tweet something. Not like- not like some formal announcement or anything,” said Niall, “but just something like a selfie of us doing something, like, boyfriendy. And caption it—”

“Like us cuddled on the sofa watching telly?” asked Harry shyly, a small smile on his lips. “And write that we love cuddling and watching Bake Off together?”

Niall gave Harry a crooked grin. “Yeah,” he said, pleased that Harry hadn’t said no to the whole idea and even seemed to be willing to do it. “Something like that.”

“Should we- Come on,” said Harry. “Cuddle me. Do you- do you have your phone?”

“What?” asked Niall. His eyes widened when he realised what Harry meant. “Now? Are ya- are ya sure, Harry?”

“Yes,” said Harry decisively, nodding and looking at Niall. “Yes. I’m sure.”

Niall looked at Harry, studying his face and finding only set determination. “Yeah?” he asked, looking for confirmation one last time.

“Yes,” said Harry softly, gently, as if he was trying to reassure Niall. “Now give me your phone and cuddle me so I can take a picture.”

Niall handed Harry his phone and leant back against the arm of the sofa, Harry falling into place with his back pressed to Niall’s front. Niall placed his chin on Harry’s shoulder and rested his temple against Harry’s cheek.

“Okay,” said Harry, holding the phone out. “Ready?”

“Yes,” said Niall, smiling for the camera—for Harry—and nodding.

“Okay,” said Harry again, smiling happily and snapping a few pictures.

“I like that one,” said Niall a few minutes later, scrolling through the photos on his phone.

“Yeah,” agreed Harry. “It’s cute with Butterscotch behind you on the back of the sofa.” He scratched the cat, who now sat curled up on his lap, between the ears and cooed, “Oh, you’re so pretty, lady.”

Niall opened Twitter and started a new Tweet, selecting the picture and adding a simple, understated caption. It read, “Cuddling with my amazing boy and our pretty kitty watching Bake Off is probably my favourite way to spend a Tuesday night.”

He showed Harry his phone and said, “Okay?”

“Yes, Niall,” said Harry, lips quirked at the corners in the tiniest smile as he looked at Niall’s phone. “Just post it already!”

Niall laughed and tweeted the photo.
“I know!” said Harry suddenly, surprising Niall. He jumped up from the sofa and ran the short distance to the bedroom, returning a moment later with his own phone.

Niall watched curiously as Harry sat back down on the sofa, peering over his shoulder as he opened Twitter.

“What are ya doing, pet?”

“Just”—Harry found Niall’s Tweet near the top of his newsfeed and tapped to Retweet—“doing my own Tweet.”

He added a comment to his Retweet, typing, “We’re so cute! P.S.- Candice is definitely going to win!”

Niall laughed, loud and happy, and said, “It’s going to be Andrew and you know it!”

“No way!” giggled Harry.

Niall wrapped his arms around Harry and pulled him back to himself, turning his head to press his lips to Harry’s ear. “God, I love you.”

Harry closed his eyes and nuzzled the side of his face against Niall’s. “I love you too, Niall,” he said quietly with a sweet, content smile on his face.

The next morning when Niall woke up, he was unsurprised to see a slew of Twitter notifications on his phone. With Harry still asleep beside him, his hair mussed against the pillow and his red lips parted as he breathed gently, Niall opened Twitter and scrolled through the notifications hesitantly.

There were a lot of Retweets. The Sun, The Mirror, and a number of other tabloids and celebrity gossip accounts, as well as some accounts called things like “Niall Horan Daily” and “Harry Styles Updates”—Niall was curious about those—had obviously seen their Tweets from the night before.

Both The Sun and The Mirror had retweeted and added little messages of their own. The Sun’s read, “@NiallOfficial and @Harry_Styles confirmed their relationship in the most lowkey way ever and it’s adorable.”

The Mirror’s caption said, “What a handsome couple! Models @Harry_Styles and @NiallOfficial put dating rumours to bed with a couple of sweet Tweets.”

Niall read a few more of the captions on Retweets. One gossip account added, “It doesn’t get any cuter than @Harry_Styles and @NiallOfficial watching Bake Off together with their kitty.” Another read, “Even @NiallOfficial and @Harry_Styles CAT is pretty! 😻”

The more Niall read, the more he realised that it seemed everyone agreed that they made a sweet couple. And not one thing—not one message added to a Retweet or one comment on the Retweets or their original Tweets—showed anything but support for both Harry and Niall and their relationship. Most importantly, nobody had devalued either Harry or Niall; not one comment had put either lad above the other, made one sound more successful than the other, or—Harry’s biggest concern, Niall knew—implied that one was using the other to bolster their own success.

It seemed that everyone was just happy because they were happy. And that everyone thought Butterscotch was a pretty cat.

“Good morning, Niall,” came Harry’s voice. Niall looked away from his phone to his boyfriend where he lay beside him on the bed.
“Mornin’, pet,” said Niall, placing his phone on his nightstand and turning to kiss Harry, slow and heavy in the warm sleepiness of the late winter morning. “Sleep well?” he asked, pulling back and looking down at Harry.

Harry nodded, an easy smile on his face. “Of course. I always do with you, Niall.”

Niall smiled back, drowning and so in love. He reached down and traced his fingers over the sharp planes of Harry’s cheek and along his jaw. “I love you, pet.”

“I know, Niall,” said Harry, blinking slowly. “I love you.”

Niall’s stomach growled and he laughed. “Glad we’ve got that settled. How d’ya feel ‘bout breakfast with El?”

“That sounds good,” said Harry, grinning wide, “because I’m hungry too.”

Forty minutes later, they walked into Black Treacle.

“You did it,” said Elora with a huge smile as they took their seats at the coffee bar.

Harry looked at the girl with furrowed brows but Niall nodded. “Yep,” he said, needing no further explanation from his friend. “We did.”

“Good,” she said, starting their pot of tea and pulling pastries from the case. “Now maybe they’ll stop with the rumours and just leave you alone.”

“That’s what we’re hoping,” agreed Niall. “Thought if we did it before the Armani announcement, they won’t take up with the rumours and speculation after.”

“You saw them?” asked Harry, sounding surprised. “Our Tweets?”

“Yeah,” said Elora. “I follow you both, don’t I.”

“Harry, love, did you see- Have you looked at yer phone yet today?” Niall asked Harry, a little worried by the fact that Harry seemed surprised their friend had seen their Tweets when most likely thousands of people had seen them. “Did ya see all them Twitter notifications?”

“I saw them,” said Harry, dropping a sugar cube into his tea and stirring. “I didn’t”—he looked at Niall and bit his lip, nervous—“I didn’t… look at them though.”

“You should, sweetie,” said Elora gently. “They’re not like you’re worried about.”

“They’re not?” asked Harry tentatively, grimacing.

Elora shook her head. “No. None of them have been with your two, have they.”

Harry took a sip of his tea and placed his cup back on the saucer. He picked up his phone, Niall and Elora watching as he unlocked it and opened Twitter. He scrolled through his notifications and mentions, stopping every so often to read a Tweet. Niall drank his tea and picked at his gooey cinnamon bun while Harry continued to read Tweets and comments.

“They just- Everyone just thinks we’re sweet together,” he said finally, placing his phone on the counter. “And that, like, that Butterscotch is pretty and we’re- we’re ‘couple goals’ because we are cute and watch- because we watch Bake Off together.”

“Yeah,” said Niall, a bit relieved.
“It’s not just the Bake Off bit,” Elora told them. “I get why you don’t pay more attention to Twitter but I do a little more than you two and, like, people want you to date.”

“What?” asked Harry.

“Like, the comments on all the Twitter rumours are people hoping that the rumours are true and you really are dating because you’d be so sweet together,” explained Elora. “Because whenever there are pictures of you from, like, after the runway show and the candid the paps get of you leaving, like, the studios and Simon’s office and stuff, you just look happy together. Like the kind of couple who goes from best friends to boyfriends.”

“We did,” Niall pointed out.

“I know that,” agreed Elora. “As an outsider—like, if I wasn’t your friend—your relationship is much more appealing than, like, whatever highly-publicised celeb couples you see in the tabloids and stuff. Because yours looks completely genuine and not at all for the publicity and press and that. I mean, as your friend, it’s more appealing too.” She shrugged and gave them a little smile. “But I don’t think of you as a ‘celebrity couple’ because you’re my friends. Just Harry and Niall.”

“Just Harry and Niall,” repeated Harry with a pleased smile, cheeks tinted pink.

“Yup,” said Niall, reaching out to put his hand on Harry’s knee. He squeezed lightly and met Harry’s eyes. “Just two lads in love.”

Harry’s smile widened, his dimples pressing deep into his cheeks, and Niall was drowning again.

At Niall’s meeting that night, Julie said, “You and Harry took a risk last night, yeah.”

“Yeah. We sort of confirmed that we’re Boyfriends. Like, not an official statement or anything but a couple Tweets,” he told the others, not sure that the older group members would be as conscious of social media as Julie.

He explained that he’d suggested to Harry they make their relationship public before Armani’s announcement about the Men with Men collection in an attempt to head off the almost guaranteed slew of rumours and speculations that would follow. “Harry agreed,” he said. “I didn’t even mean right that moment but he wanted to. Took the picture and everything. I asked him if he was sure and he said yes. Insisted, actually.”

“How did Harry react today?” asked Debbie. “I’m sure there were a lot of comments this morning. Did he seem to wish you’d not done it or get upset like he has in the past?”

“He was a little nervous to read any of the comments or look at his notifications at first,” said Niall. “But when he did, he realised they were all just people saying we’re a sweet couple and everyone seems to be happy for us. And our friend Elora told us that even back on them photos of us after the Gucci show, people were just saying we should date because we look happy together. Think that helped too.”

“That’s good, then,” said Rick. “That you trusted him and let him make the decision and that he sees your relationship is different from what he had with Nick.”

“Yeah, I think so,” agreed Niall.

The following Friday morning—the day of the Armani Men with Men launch party—Armani tweeted and posted a picture on Instagram. It was a photo from Harry and Niall’s first photo session that showed Harry standing on one side of a freestanding double-sided mirror wearing a white suit
with an all-over black floral pattern, a black buttondown shirt, and a black neckbow with a large silk flower at the collar. Niall stood on the other side wearing a Spanish grey plaid suit with a white buttondown, the top two buttons undone, and a white pocket square. Both were looking at their reflections and adjusting their clothes. It was captioned with, “Introducing our newest formalwear collection Men w/ Men. Available online and at select locations 6.5.16.”

The link included in the post led to the Men w/ Men page on Armani’s website. The page opened to a screen-sized photo of Harry and Niall from their second proper photoshoot for the collection. They were sitting on a velvet-upholstered Victorian-style sofa, Harry tucked to Niall’s side with Niall’s hand around his waist. Harry was wearing a dusty pink suit—the jacket was embroidered with large pink roses with long green stems—with flared trousers and a white buttondown shirt that was only half-buttoned. Beside him, Niall wore a navy blue suit with a dusty pink buttondown and a white linen pocket square embroidered with a long-stemmed pink rose.

Scrolling down revealed a brief description—the reason and inspiration for the collection’s creation, an explanation of the collection’s unique mix-and-match nature—and a list of Armani locations that would sell the collection.

*The Mirror, The Sun,* and nearly every gossip and tabloid account went wild with the news almost immediately. Numerous LGBT websites, as well as the Twitter and Instagram accounts of LGBT publications like *Out, attitude,* and *Pride life,* grabbed onto the announcement too.

Unsurprisingly, the reaction brought both Harry and Niall an influx of Twitter notifications.

Niall scrolled through them while Harry made a late breakfast, flitting around their kitchen with an anxious energy. Though he’d denied it, Niall knew Harry was nervous about the responses the announcement might bring.

Everyone, it seemed to Niall as he looked at Twitter mention after Twitter mention, was excited about a collection designed specifically for male same-sex couples. As for Harry and Niall’s involvement in the collection and its campaign, it seemed everyone was happy to have a true gay couple represent the collection.

Niall looked up at Harry from where he sat at the dining table, watching as he spooned brown sugar and cinnamon apple oatmeal into two bowls.

“Love,” he said softly, “can I read ya some o’ these Tweets?”

“Are they,” started Harry, setting a bowl of oatmeal down in front of Niall and then placing his own on the table, “are they okay? Like, nice?”

“Yeah, pet,” said Niall comfortably. “They’re all nice. Everyone’s just excited for the collection and they’re happy we’re doing it.”

“Okay,” said Harry, sitting at the table and looking at Niall.

Niall could see the nervousness still flickering in his eyes but started anyway. “Well, Sue tweeted,” he told Harry. “‘Congratulations to our dear friends @Harry_Styles and @NiallOfficial on their work with Armani! We’re so excited to see them both at the #Menw/Men launch party tonight!’”

“That’s- that’s nice of Liam,” said Harry, fidgeting with his spoon. “It’ll- Yeah, it’ll be nice to see him tonight. And Louis.”

“It will,” agreed Niall. “*The Sun* tweeted——”
“Oh no,” groaned Harry.

“@Harry_Styles and @NiallOfficial are the faces of the first formalwear collection designed entirely for male same-sex couples and we couldn’t be happier,” read Niall.

“That’s not bad,” said Harry, sounding relieved.

“No,” agreed Niall. “The Mirror said, ‘How lovely to have real-life couple @NiallOfficial and @Harry_Styles as the face of @armani’s newest collection.’”

Harry smiled shyly. “It- it is lovely.”

“Yeah,” said Niall, smiling back softly, heartened by Harry’s little smile. “It is.” He looked at Harry, so beautiful with his floppy waves pinned back at the top of his head with a plastic clip and his faded old KISS tee and his big green eyes. “And Out Magazine retweeted The Mirror and added, ‘In a world where LGBT people are so often portrayed by straight actors while true LGBT talent is ignored, Armani got it right. Congratulations to @NiallOfficial and @Harry_Styles!’”

“That’s- It’s just like- Everyone’s just happy. And, like, almost, like, proud of us,” said Harry after Niall read a few more messages, sounding surprised and almost unsure about his interpretation of the Tweets and comments.

“Yeah, pet,” said Niall. “It is kind of- It’s kind of a big thing. What we’re doing. The collection’s the first of its kind. And it’s important that- Representation matters, right? They could’ve just picked any two male models but they picked- they wanted us. They wanted us, love. A real gay couple.”

“Yeah.” Harry nodded. “It’s- I didn’t think about it like that.”

“I’m so happy I get to do this with ya, pet. It’s special.” Niall reached across the table and took Harry’s hand in his, thumb tracing along Harry’s knuckles, fingers free of his collection of rings for the time being. “I love ya, pet.”

Harry smiled, cheeks rosy pink and eyes twinkling. “I love you too, Niall. I’m- We’re so lucky. To be in love.”

Niall bit his lip, tears springing to his eyes as he was overcome with emotions. “We are. I’m so glad I met ya. So glad ya came into me life.”

“Don’t cry, Niall,” said Harry sweetly, though Niall saw tears on Harry’s cheeks. He gave a watery little giggle. “We’re so silly.”

It was a couple hours later when Niall walked into the living room where Harry was stretched out on the sofa reading his next book for book club—Mario Puzo’s The Last Don—and drinking a cup of tea.

“I’m going to head to the grocery,” said Niall. Harry pouted up at him but he continued. “You wait here for the suits, yeah? Simon said they won’t leave ‘em if one of us isn’t here to accept ‘em from the courier. And I don’t think it’d be good we show up to the party in Gucci and Paul Smith and not the Armani we’re bein’ paid to wear.”

“Okay, Niall,” sighed Harry.

“Dramatic,” said Niall teasingly, half-rolling his eyes as he bent down to kiss the top of Harry’s head. “I’ll be back in a bit.”
Niall left, leaving Harry on the sofa with Butterscotch. He wanted to take a shower—he was still a bit sticky from the previous evening’s activities and although he really liked the feeling of being drenched with Niall, it was beginning to get a bit uncomfortable—but he didn’t want to miss the courier.

He picked up his phone and found a dozen more Twitter notifications. He hesitated for a moment before swiping across his screen to open them. Everything Niall had read to him so far had been fine—good, even—and he was curious to see the most recent comments.

The first few were more of the same—people congratulating them, others praising the collection, some doing both—and one was a Tweet from Vogue. “Two of the loveliest young men we’ve worked with are the faces of Armani’s groundbreaking new formalwear collection. An honour for them and for @armani. Cheers @NiallOfficial and @Harry_Styles!”

One of the last of the newest notifications in his mentions caught Harry off guard, heartbeat speeding up and breath catching in his throat.

Nick Grimshaw had tweeted. “what perfect timing! i wonder if Armani told @NiallOfficial and @Harry_Styles to ‘casually’ confirm their relationship last week or if their publicist did. 😜”

Harry’s mind raced and he chewed his lip nervously.

Nick was wrong. Nobody had told them to confirm their relationship; it had been Niall’s idea.

Unless, Harry thought, somebody had told Niall to do it and he’d talked Harry into it.

His heart sank at the thought. Had it just been for the publicity, just to create a bit more excitement about the Armani collection when it was finally announced? It had definitely worked; Harry and Niall’s relationship had certainly been a big talking point in the discussions surrounding the Men with Men collection.

Harry shook his head, frustrated with himself. Niall would never do that, he knew. Niall wasn’t manipulative. He was kind and honest and genuine and he loved Harry.

There was a knock at the door and Harry dropped his phone to the sofa and pushed himself up. He crossed the room and opened the door, finding a lad about his age on the other side.

“Hello,” said Harry.

“Hi,” said the lad. “Harry Styles, right?”

“Yeah.” Harry nodded. “Yes, I’m Harry Styles.”

“Good. I’ve got a delivery for you and Mr Horan.” He handed Harry two heavy twill garment bags, one embroidered with HES and the other NJH, and Harry draped them over his arm. “And,” said the lad, stooping to pick up two shoe boxes, “these.”

Harry took the boxes and turned into the flat to drop them on the dining table. He hung the bags on the coat hooks and turned back to the courier. “Thanks,” he said with an appreciative smile.

“Just need a signature, mate,” said the lad. He gave Harry a wry grin. “Prove I didn’t just drop an eight thousand quid delivery without acceptance.”

“Oh, Yeah,” said Harry, signing for the delivery and thanking the courier again before stepping back into the flat and closing the door.
Suits hung in their small closet and shoes next to the bed, Harry got into the shower.

When he got out a bit later, he heard Niall moving around in the kitchen as he put groceries away. He pulled on a clean pair of joggers and his KISS shirt, clipping his wet hair back from his forehead and heading into the kitchen.

“Hey, love,” said Niall when he saw Harry walking into the room. “Saw the suits came.”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry, hopping onto the counter and watching as Niall put the fruit into the fruit bowl next to the sink.

“Stopped by Black Treacle,” Niall told him. “Got ya a hot chocolate.”

“Thanks, Niall,” said Harry, giving his boyfriend a tiny smile.

“El’s all nervous ‘bout tonight,” continued Niall. “Wants ya to go over to check what she’s planning on wearing. She’s worried it’s not posh enough.”

Harry was quiet for a moment, picking up the paper cup of hot chocolate from where Niall had set it on the counter and taking a sip.

“Was it really your idea, Niall?” he asked quietly, eyes cast down at the floor.

“Was what really my idea?” asked Niall, looking up from the canvas shopping bags he was folding.

“To confirm our relationship,” said Harry, voice low and eyes still downcast. “Like, on Twitter like we did.”

Niall’s brows furrowed and he placed the last bag on the counter with the others. “O’ course it was my idea,” he told Harry, looking confused. “Why?”

“So, like, Simon didn’t suggest it? Or, like, or Emilie or—”

“No,” said Niall, frowning now. “Nobody- What d’ya mean, pet?”

Harry inhaled deeply, deciding as he exhaled to tell Niall his worry.

“Did you see- did you see Nick’s Tweet?” he asked tentatively.

Niall exhaled roughly and shook his head, defeated and disheartened. “No.”

“He said- He tweeted that it’s perfect timing. The, like, the Armani announcement and our Tweets last week,” said Harry. “And he wondered if, um, if Armani told us to confirm our relationship or if our- if our publicist did.’’

“Fucking”—Niall bit his lip and turned his head away from Harry before looking back at the lanky lad sitting on the counter—“No, pet. Nobody told me to confirm our relationship, to do them Tweets. Simon didn’t say anything. Simon wouldn’t say anything like that,” said Niall, stepping toward Harry. “I mean, he was worried ‘bout us doing the campaign to begin with. And we don’t- we don’t even have a publicist, love. It’s just you and me. Harry, love,” he said, reaching out to take Harry’s face in his big hands and tilting it up so Harry’s green eyes met his blue, “d’ya really think I’d do that?”

Harry studied Niall’s face, finding hurt and sadness and a hint of heartbreak.

“No, Niall,” said Harry, voice barely more than a whisper. “No. I- I know you wouldn’t.”
“God, pet,” breathed Niall. “I’d never- I wouldn’t do that. You’re—”

“I’m sorry, Niall,” said Harry, trying to keep the shakiness from his tone. He closed his eyes and nuzzled his face into Niall’s hands. “I’m sorry. I just—”

“Harry, pet,” said Niall, leaning forward to kiss Harry. “Don’t be- don’t be sorry, love. Don’t be.”

“Why does he say mean things like that?” Harry whispered against Niall’s lips.

“Because he’s a manipulative dickhead who can’t get past the fact that you stood up for yourself and left him,” Niall told him, leaning his forehead against Harry’s. “And he’s still trying to manipulate ya.”

They stayed like that for a few minutes, foreheads tipped together and eyes closed as they breathed each other in, settled and grounded.

“I love you, Niall,” said Harry finally.

“I love you too, pet,” said Niall. He leant back and looked at Harry, a soft smile on his lips. “D’ya want to go see our suits?”

Harry nodded eagerly and slid off the counter, following Niall to their bedroom to open up their garment bags.

At around two o’clock, Harry headed to Black Treacle to see Elora.

“Hi, Abby,” he said as he walked in the door. “Is El upstairs?”

“Hi, Harry,” said Abby, greeting Harry with a kind smile. “Yeah, she’s upstairs freaking out about her dress. Please go up and tell her she looks beautiful. She thinks it’s not posh enough.”

Harry rolled his eyes good-naturedly, exasperated. “It’s a gorgeous dress. It’s Stella McCartney! I helped her pick it out,” he said. “Did you see it?”

“Yeah,” said Abby with a nod. “It is gorgeous.” She smiled at Harry, face soft and fond. “It was very nice of you and Niall to buy it for her, Harry.”

Harry shrugged, blushing. “We both- we both make- We have pretty good… incomes,” he said awkwardly, “and, I mean, we live in a little three-room flat above a computer consultant’s office in Sutton and we don’t really spend that much money. So we- we wanted to. Buy it for her.”

“You’re both wonderful lads,” Abby told him, still smiling fondly.

“Thanks, Abby,” said Harry quietly, blushing.

He made his way up to Elora’s flat, knocking on the door. He was greeted by his friend who stood in front of him in a pair of leggings, a Marilyn Manson tee shirt, and emerald green pumps.

“Are you sure it’s posh enough?” she asked as soon as Harry walked past her into the flat.

“El, it’s- it’s a gold lamé jacquard cocktail dress with a big bow that ties around your waist,” said Harry, trying to keep the incredulousness out of his voice. “It’s not just, like, a simple black cocktail dress.” He didn’t mention that it, together with the heels she currently had on, had been a two thousand pound outfit.

“I- I know,” she sighed. “I’m just- I never go to parties, let alone big posh Armani parties at the
Savoy Hotel. I’m nervous.”

“I know, Ellie,” said Harry, hugging his friend tightly. “But you’ll be with Niall and me. And Louis and Liam’ll be there too.”

Elora hugged Harry back, face pressed to his shoulder. “I’m excited,” she said after a few moments. “I’m happy for you and Niall and I’m glad I get to be there with you to celebrate.”

A bit later, Harry and Elora sat together on her sofa.

“Did you see,” started Elora hesitantly, “did you see Nick’s Tweet?”

Harry nodded. “Yes.”

“And?”

“And I know that’s not what happened,” he said. “I was a little worried that maybe, like, maybe Simon or Emilie or somebody told Niall to do it and he, like, he talked me into it. But- but I talked to him and”—he sighed—“I know Niall wouldn’t do that. He’s not manipulative like that. It was- It was our idea.”

“Good,” said Elora. “Harry, Niall really loves you. I think he has since that first night he stayed at your flat.”

Harry shook his head. “He just said it, like, a month—”

“Maybe he didn’t know it then but I did,” said Elora. “I could see it in the way he looked at you. How he laughed and smiled.”

Harry left Elora’s flat at about half-past four, promising her that they would pick her up at seven o’clock.

When he got home, Niall was in the shower. Harry considered joining him for a moment—shower sex with Niall was always hot and very pleasurable—but decided instead to paint his fingernails with the black polish Niall had brought home for him a few days earlier.

Nails dry, Harry returned to the bedroom and found Niall half dressed. He watched his boyfriend as he pulled a white undershirt over his head, slim-fit black trousers on and unbuttoned.

“Hey, love,” said Niall when his head popped out of the neck of the shirt.

Harry gave a shy smile and said quietly, almost embarrassed as though he’d been caught peeping, “Hi, Niall.”

“You’d better start getting ready, yeah,” said Niall kindly. “The car’ll be here in fourty minutes.”

Harry nodded and stripped down to his pants. He unclipped his hair and let it drop down in a fluffy crown of curled locks and waves, spraying it with a few puffs of his favourite Aveda hairspray. He smoothed on some of the nice face cream Lou had given him for his birthday.

Excited, he turned away from the mirror above their dresser and moved toward the closet where his suit hung. He unclipped the black trousers from the hanger and pulled them up before putting his arms into the sleeves of the sheer white buttondown shirt. He buttoned the bottom four buttons and tucked it into his trousers, zipping and buttoning the fly.

“All right, love,” said Niall from where he sat on the edge of the bed watching Harry and distractedly
tying up his black leather Oxfords. His white buttondown was on and tucked into his trousers, the top two buttons left undone, and his trousers done up. “Ya almost ready?”

“Yes,” said Harry, slipping his feet into his black velvet loafers.

Niall smiled and stood from the bed. “Jackets on, then?” he asked as he reached for his where he’d draped it on the headboard.

“Yeah.” Harry took his jacket—a pink velvet piece that looked a bit like Richard Madden’s Prince Charming jacket from the live-action version of Cinderella, with black lapels and sparkly gold beaded trim and accents—off the hanger and pulled it on over his shirt.

He looked back at Niall in time to see him putting his arms into his own jacket, simple and classic like his pants but with black beaded accents on the lapels.

“You look- you look very handsome,” said Harry, blushing.

“Thanks, love.” Niall stepped toward Harry and put a hand on the lad’s lower back, tugging him against his front. “You look absolutely beautiful. Stunning.” He dipped his head forward and kissed Harry, chaste and sweet. “Car’s probably here,” he said quietly, stepping back but leaving his hand on Harry’s back.

Twenty minutes later, their car stopped in front of Black Treacle and the driver got out to open the door for Elora.

“It’s a good thing this dress is so heavy,” she said as she slid into the seat opposite Harry and Niall, “or I’d be freezing.”


“Thank you,” said the girl, looking surprised. “But, like, you’re both models.”

“That doesn’t make you any less beautiful,” said Harry. “Niall’s right. You look gorgeous. I mean, you always look pretty. Even, like, even when you’re covered in flour and chocolate. But you look, like, especially beautiful tonight.”

Elora flushed. “Thanks- Thank you.” She smiled almost awkwardly and said, “It helps that I’ve got friends who bought me a dress that cost, like, eighteen hundred pounds.”

“Every girl deserves a little gold dress,” said Harry with a playful grin.

Elora laughed and then said, tone serious, “Thank you. Both of you. It’s- You’re both just so lovely. And not just”—she chuckled and gave a sheepish smile—“not just because you bought me a Stella McCartney dress.”

They arrived at the Savoy Hotel at eight o’clock and were welcomed by two doormen and a cluster of paparazzi, cameras flashing and clicking before the car had even come to a complete stop.

“Sorry, El,” said Harry as he grabbed her hand and let Niall, arm around Harry’s waist, lead them into the hotel lobby.

“It’s okay, Harry,” she said with a smile. “Kind of expected it.”

They were led into the Savoy Grill and showed to their table. They made their way to the bar, stopping along the way to introduce Elora to Simon and Emilie and talk to a few of the designers
who had worked on the collection.

The three friends finally found Liam and Louis by the bar.

“Congratulations, lads!” exclaimed Louis, hugging both Harry and Niall. “Elora!” he added. “I’m so glad you could come! You look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Louis,” she said, hugging him. “Hello, Liam.”

“Hi, Elora,” said Liam. “Lads.”

“Right! Now what’re you dickheads drinking?” asked Louis. “Not you, El, you’re lovely,” he amended as an aside. “Drinks are on me tonight!”

Everyone laughed and Niall said, “Nice try, mate, but we all know it’s an open bar.”

Drinks in hand, Elora and the four lads made their way around the large room. They were stopped many times as people congratulated Harry and Niall, as well as Louis for his work on the advertising campaign, and a few people—attitude’s deputy editor Cliff Joannou among them—asked Harry and Niall for interviews and photoshoots in the coming weeks.

Cliff talked to Harry and Niall for a while, telling them how pleased everyone at the magazine had been to hear they’d been signed to the campaign. “Whitewashing is an issue that we’ve discussed numerous times in articles and interviews in the magazine,” he told the models, “but we haven’t talked enough about the issue of the roles of LGBT characters being given to non-LGBT actors while actual LGBT actors and talent are so frequently overlooked for the parts. So it may not seem like much to you but the fact that Armani cast a real gay couple to be the faces of a collection designed specifically for male same-sex couples is- It’s a big deal to our community.”

“We- we saw that. This morning,” said Harry. “When we were reading stuff on Twitter. Like, Tweets and, um, and comments on Tweets.”

“It’s true that representation in media really is important,” agreed Cliff. “We’d love to sit down and talk to you about it. Do an interview. Everybody says what wonderful lads you are and it would just be such a pleasure to chat to you.”

“Thank you so much for the offer. Please get in touch with Simon,” Niall told him graciously, arm around Harry’s waist. “We like to talk about everything before we agree to anything.”

“Of course. Fair enough,” said Cliff with a smile. “I definitely respect that.”

When cocktail hour was over, everyone was seated for dinner. Before the starters—foie gras with grape chutney on toasted brioche—were brought out, Giorgio Armani talked to the crowd about the new collection. He thanked the designers who had helped bring the collection to life.

“This is an important collection to me, as a designer and as a bisexual man,” he told everyone. “It holds a special place in my heart because it was one my partner Sergio and I dreamt of over thirty years ago. We would never have been able to do this collection then because we would have certainly failed. Not just the collection but our entire company. But the social climate has changed considerably since then, though it may not seem like it at times.”

Giorgio paused for a moment. “When it was time to find models for this collection, the obvious choices were Harry Styles and Niall Horan, both young openly gay men who have impressed everyone they’ve worked with in their short careers and,” he added with a grin, “who both look excellent in a suit. Though we didn’t know when we reached out to their manager Simon that they
are a couple, we’d seen the number of photoshoots they’ve done together and agreed they had a wonderful chemistry and seem to enjoy each other’s company. And they look well together, if I may say so.” He smiled at Harry and Niall. “Learning that they are in a loving, committed relationship made it even more poignant.”

“We are proud to work with them and honoured that they accepted our request that they lead this campaign,” he said, raising his glass of Champagne.

Glasses clinked around the room as everyone toasted Niall and a blushing Harry.

“And we are pleased to have the talented Louis Tomlinson as the photographer and creative director of the advertisement campaign.”

Everyone applauded for Louis and then Giorgio finished his speech. “The response to this collection has been overwhelming already and we are excited for what the future will bring. Thank you all for celebrating with us. Now I am sure everyone is tired of hearing this old man speak and is looking forward to a delicious meal. Cheers!”

When the entree plates had been cleared and coffee and tea were served, Harry excused himself to the toilet before desserts were brought to the tables.

It was as he was washing his hands that the door to the men’s room opened behind him. He looked up into the mirror and saw Nick Grimshaw’s smirking face.

“Hello, love,” said Nick silkily.

Harry watched the older lad nervously as he moved closer to the sinks. “Why are you here?”

“No hello?” asked Nick, feigning hurt. “I was invited, obviously.”

“Leave me- leave me alone, Nick,” said Harry quietly, voice shaking slightly.

“It seems that old Giorgio is quite taken with you and Horan,” said Nick, continuing as though he’d not heard Harry. “I’m sure the collection will do very well with the two of you as its faces. Perfect little sweet, innocent couple,” he said, tone mocking. “So in love. So precious.”

Harry didn’t say anything, wide eyes trained on Nick. He felt a bit like a mouse backed into a corner by a hissing cat.

“It’s interesting,” mused Nick. “You were so quick to believe that I was using you for attention. Just my pretty model boyfriend, getting me into the tabloids. Keeping me relevant or whatever rubbish Tomlinson told you.”

“It wasn’t- it wasn’t rubbish,” said Harry, shaking. “You- you were. Using me. Because I was- I was naive and young and- and I fancied you.”

“It’s interesting,” said Nick again, “because now Horan is doing the same thing and you don’t even seem to realise it. I’d like to ask him how he’s getting away with it.”

“Niall’s not- Niall isn’t using me,” said Harry, bold for the first time since Nick had walked into the men’s room. “He’s not like you, Nick.”

“Of course he isn’t,” said Nick. “Not good Saint Niall. Such a gentleman. Stealing another man’s boy.”
“I was never- I was never really your boy,” Harry pointed out, suddenly feeling a little angry.

“I suppose I never really made it official, did I,” agreed Nick flippantly. He shrugged. “Do you really think Niall would have got an Armani deal if he wasn’t your boyfriend?”

“Yes,” said Harry. Niall was a talented model and, Harry thought, Giorgio had been right when he’d said Niall looked good in a suit. “He’s- he’s- he’s a suit model, Nick.”

“Right. What has he even done since you’ve been… dating that wasn’t with you?” wondered Nick, though he didn’t leave Harry time to answer before he continued. “Some product views? And let’s not forget that bland indie folk band he clings to hoping for a bit more fame.”

“He’s done- he’s done more than product views,” insisted Harry, head pounding. “And the lads’ music isn’t bland. They’re- they’re all really talented.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “Mmhm. Don’t you see you’re a package deal now, Harry? Niall would never get an Armani contract if he wasn’t your boyfriend.”

“That isn’t- That’s not true,” said Harry, hands gripping the marble sink behind him.

“Harry, lad,” came Liam’s voice as the door opened again. “You all right in”—Liam paused just inside the open door, eyes landing on Nick—“Grimshaw.”

“Oh!” said Nick, sounding delighted. “Tomlinson’s puppy dog!”

“Come on, love,” said Liam, crossing the room toward Harry. “Thought you fell in,” he teased, eyes crinkled as he smiled kindly, slipping his arm into the crook of Harry’s and linking elbows. “They’ve brought out desserts. Some dark chocolate mousse with raspberry sauce, I think. Elora’s very excited about it.”

Harry moved with Liam, allowing himself to be led from the sinks toward the door.

“Nice to see you, Harry!” said Nick, smirking, smug and self-satisfied.

“You all right, Harry?” asked Liam as they stepped into the small lobby outside the toilets.

Harry shrugged and looked at Liam, eyes shining with tears. “Please don’t- please don’t tell anyone about Nick,” he whispered. “Don’t tell Niall. He’ll think- He’ll worry too much.”

Liam nodded. “Okay, love,” he said comfortingly. “But are you all right?”

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. “Nick’s just- Nick’s really mean.”

“Yeah, I know,” agreed Liam and Harry wondered if he’d seen Nick’s Tweet from that morning. Liam smiled and said, “Let’s get you back to Niall.”

Harry and Liam returned to their table and Harry slipped back into his chair between Niall and Elora.

“Hey, pet,” said Niall, turning to Harry, concerned. “Ya all right? In the gents’ for a little while, weren’t ya?”

“My stomach,” Harry lied with a grimace. “I think it’s- You know I don’t eat red meat very often.”

“Ya feelin’ any better?” asked Niall, resting a hand on Harry’s thigh under the table, brows furrowed. Harry nodded and Niall said, “Was going to come after ya but Anna Wintour came over started talking to Louis and me. Wants a photoshoot with us. I told her to get in touch with Simon but...
she just kept talking. Thought she wasn’t supposed to be much of a talker.”

It was after one o’clock when Harry and Niall arrived back at their flat. Niall was about half a drink away from being properly drunk and Harry was a bit tipsy himself, though he thought his mental state had a lot more to do with his unexpected encounter with Nick than alcohol.

As they lay in bed, Niall fell asleep almost immediately—it had been a long day—and Harry was left with his Champagne-fueled thoughts while Nick’s voice echoed in his head.

“I’d like to ask him how he’s getting away with it.”

Harry huffed out a breath and turned onto his side. He shoved his hands under his pillow and studied Niall’s profile, streaked with patches of light from the moon and the streetlights outside their window.

Niall wasn’t using him. He knew that. Niall loved him and he loved Niall.

And Niall wasn’t clinging to anyone—not Harry, not the lads—to bolster his fame. That was Nick’s modus operandi, not Niall’s. Niall had his own fame, had earned his own fame, and Harry didn’t think Niall cared to have any more.

He thought of the Armani contracts and Nick’s assertion that Niall had only got the offer because of Harry. Harry honestly felt it was more surprising that he’d been given an Armani contract because Armani was classic, handsome, and polished—everything Niall represented in every campaign he’d faced and every photoshoot he’d done—but that wasn’t what Harry usually modelled.

Maybe he’d only been given the contract because of Niall. They were a package deal now, like Nick had said, and maybe Armani had wanted Niall and they’d ended up with Harry too.

His eyes widened.

Maybe people thought he was using Niall, thought that he’d moved from one famous man to another in the hopes that his career would continue to grow.

He rolled onto his back and stared up at the dark ceiling, eyes unfocused.

He didn’t want Niall to feel like he’d felt with Nick, how he’d felt in the few instances that he’d been worried Niall was using him. He wanted to be sure Niall knew he loved him.

Harry rolled back onto his side and faced Niall again. “Niall,” he whispered. “Niall, wake up.” He scooted closer to Niall, lifting a leg to drape his thigh over Niall’s hips and dropping an arm across Niall’s chest. He nuzzled his face into Niall’s neck and whispered again, “Niall. I need— Niall!”

After a few moments, Niall woke up, groggy.

“What’s the matter, love?” he grumbled, voice rough with sleep.

“Niall, I love you.”

“It’s- Yeah, Harry,” said Niall. He blinked his heavy eyes and looked at Harry. “I love you too.”

“I need you to- Niall,” choked Harry, eyes tearing now and voice wobbling as his emotions and concerns overpowered him. “I need you to know that I love you. You know, right?”

“I know, Harry,” said Niall, sounding not just groggy but confused too. “Pet, what’s- what’s wrong?”
“Niall,” whimpered Harry. He nudged his face deeper into the hollow between Niall’s collarbone and throat, tears smudging against Niall’s bare skin.

“Harry, love, what’s- Why are ya crying, pet?”

“I- I love you, Niall. You’re so- you’re so nice and- and I really love you,” cried Harry, tears wetting Niall’s neck as he weeped.

“Harry, pet, I- I love you too,” said Niall, concern bleeding through his tone. “Come on, love, shh. Come on.” He wrapped his arms around Harry and tugged him onto his chest, one hand slipping into his hair to massage his scalp lightly. “Let’s go to sleep, pet.”

“Niall.”

“Shh, love. Shh,” hushed Niall, rubbing Harry’s head soothingly.

Harry’s eyes grew heavy as Niall’s slow, steady breathing lulled him to sleep.

When he woke up, it was very early—the sun was barely out and the sky was the cool steel grey of an early spring morning, light pale and weak—and Niall was still asleep beside him.

Quietly, he slipped out of bed and walked the short distance from the bedroom to the kitchen. He turned on the kettle and dropped a sachet of chamomile tea into a mug before going to sit on the sofa while the water boiled.

Ten minutes later, Harry sat on the sofa curled up under a blanket, sipping his tea.

He should talk to Niall, he knew. He wanted—needed—Niall to know that he wasn’t using him. He loved Niall with his whole heart. He was his best friend, his lover, and his protector.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up from his tea and saw Niall standing just in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room.

“Love, what’re ya doing up so early?” asked Niall, walking toward the sofa.

Harry shrugged.

Niall sat down beside Harry on the sofa, slipping under the blanket with him. “Is everything all right, pet?” He looked worried, frown on his face and brows furrowed as he studied Harry.

“I love you, Niall,” said Harry quietly. “So much. And I just- You need to know that, okay?”

“Pet, I- Ya said it a bunch last night,” said Niall, sounding as confused as he had the night before. “I know ya love me. And I love you. It’s- I know, Harry.”

“Okay,” said Harry, dropping his head to Niall’s shoulder. He sighed. “I think I had too much wine last night.”

“Ah,” said Niall, sounding like he suddenly understood. “Makes ya all weepy, that.” He turned his head and kissed the top of Harry’s hair. “Come on, love. Let’s get back in bed. Cuddle up for a few more hours. It’s too early to be awake on a Saturday mornin’.”

By Monday morning, Harry felt a bit better about everything.
After Harry and Niall woke up for the second time late on Saturday morning, everything had seemed normal.

Niall had rolled Harry onto his front and fingered his arse for a little while, whispering how beautiful Harry was while he stretched him. He’d fucked into Harry, hard at first but thrusts becoming slower and more gentle as the minutes passed, and had wrapped his arms around Harry to hold him close while he mouthed along the lines of Harry’s neck and shoulders, kissing him and praising him.

“I love you, Harry,” he’d said, sincere and somber like a prayer. “Closest thing to perfect I’ve ever seen in me life.”

Harry had reached a hand back to cup the side of Niall’s face, fingers gentle against the scruff on Niall’s cheeks and jaw, and repeated like a chant, “I love you. I love you. Niall, I love you.” He’d not been able—hadn’t even tried—to stop the tears that left tracks down his cheeks.

On Monday afternoon, Harry and Niall sat side-by-side at the coffee bar at Black Treacle. They were eating an early lunch together before Niall headed off to the recording studio to meet with the lads and Harry went to the grocery.

“It’s exciting you’re actually recording now!” said Elora as she drank her tea, watching the two lads eat their sandwiches.

“Yes,” agreed Niall. “It’s getting close. There’s a set deadline now. Exciting and intimidatin’ at the same time, ya know.”

It was just after Harry got home from the grocery with a few things Niall had forgot when he’d done the shopping on Friday that his phone rang. He put the milk in the refrigerator and turned to grab his phone from the counter, Simon’s name on the screen.

He swiped to accept the call and said, “Hi, Simon.”

“Harry, lad, so glad you answered,” came Simon’s voice. “I’ve spent the morning on the phone talking with people about you and Niall.”

“Have you?” asked Harry.

“Yes. Aaron Hicklin called me. He wants you and Niall on the cover of Out and a short interview. I talked to Cliff Joannou and he’d love to have an interview with you lads, maybe a mini photoshoot,” Simon told Harry. “And Anna Wintour wants a full spread in Vogue with the both of you.”

“That’s- Wow,” said Harry, a little overwhelmed. “That’s a lot. I’ll, um, Niall and I will have to talk about it. It’s- Yeah.”

“He won’t see you until tonight though. So I thought I’d call and tell you, give you a little heads-up.”

Thanks, Simon.”

“You’re welcome, Harry,” said Simon. “Anna wants you both for a proper photoshoot. She’ll probably choose everything you’ll model. And I’m sure she wants you because she knows you’re both in-demand and trending on social media.”

“We are?” asked Harry, feeling his tummy clench with nerves.

“Of course you are,” Simon said matter-of-factly. “You’re two of the most requested male models.
Not just mine but across the board in the industry. And now there’s the whole LGBT focus on you and Niall and the Men with Men collection.”

“Oh,” said Harry.

He hadn’t realised that he and Niall were that sought-after or that the collection had made that much of an impression on the fashion industry and the LGBT community already. He felt deflated, worried that Niall would think that Harry had been so eager to take the Men with Men campaign offer to simply add to his resume, to use Niall to further his career and nothing more.

“The interview with Cliff for *attitude* won’t really be any modelling, just a chat about your relationship, what it’s like to work with your partner, how it feels to be the faces of this campaign. Maybe a few pictures to go with it but nothing too formal,” continued Simon. “Could see if they’d let you wear some of the Armani for the shoot. Get a bonus in your pay from Armani and give a little extra publicity for the collection.”

“No, that’s- We don’t need the bonus,” said Harry quickly. That would certainly seem dodgy, thought Harry, if he agreed to use an interview about their relationship and the importance of the collection and their participation in the campaign to make a little extra money.

*Out* would just be a short photoshoot to go with an interview about being gay men advertising a groundbreaking collection,” Simon told Harry. “Their artistic director’ll most likely have complete control over the shoot so no chance for an Armani plug anyway, even if you lads wanted to try for it.”

Simon and Harry talked for a few more minutes before saying goodbye. When Harry ended the call, he sat down on the sofa, mind racing as thoughts wove in and out of his consciousness.

Harry knew that he and Niall were models and were paid to wear clothes for photoshoots. It was their job and they’d always managed to keep the photoshoots that they did together and their personal lives separate as best they could.

Until the Armani offer, when the focus had become not just their individual work as models but their relationship.

Until Harry had been the one to insist they take the offer and sign the contracts.

And now all of the offers they’d been given for photoshoots seemed to have the focus of the photoshoot be their relationship—to have Anna Wintour’s interest be based on not just their skills as models but the fact that their same-sex relationship was creating such a buzz—and Niall certainly must believe that Harry had used him, was clinging to him for fame, that Harry couldn’t get his own jobs without him.

He realised that he was crying, tears streaming down his face.

He loved Niall, truly loved him with his whole heart. Niall was the love of his life, his soulmate. Nobody had ever come close to making Harry feel about himself the way Niall did—special, important, smart and interesting and talented, attractive, clever and funny—or feel so loved, cared for, protected and wanted and warm.

Niall made him the happiest he’d ever been, the most comfortable and confident he’d ever been.

And if Niall believed that Harry had been using him since the very beginning of their friendship, he would eventually, Harry felt sure, break up with him just as he had broken up with Nick when he’d come to a similar realisation about that relationship.
Harry found his phone and unlocked it, opening his contacts and scrolling to his mother’s name before tapping his screen to call her.

“Hi, love,” said Anne when she answered after a few rings.

“Hi, Mummy,” said Harry, trying to cover the fact that he’d been crying for the last twenty minutes.

It didn’t seem to have worked, though, when Anne said softly, “Harry, baby, what’s wrong?”

Harry didn’t answer but asked instead, “Can I come home? For a few days?”

“Of course you can, love,” said Anne. “Is Niall coming?”

“No, it’ll be just- Just me and- and Butterscotch.”

“Harry, is everything okay?” asked Anne, sounding worried.

Harry sighed, feeling tears springing back into his eyes. “I don’t know,” he told her honestly, sounding so small and broken. He sank back into the sofa cushions.

“Did you and Niall have a fight?” wondered Anne.

“No. Just”—Harry squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself to stop crying—“can I come home?”

“Yeah, baby,” said Anne kindly. “When do you think- When will you be here?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “I didn’t- I have to look at the timetable. I don’t know what- I don’t know when the next train leaves London.”

“Okay,” said Anne. “Just let me know, yeah?”

An hour later, Harry’s bag was packed with everything he would need for a few days away and he’d coaxed Butterscotch into her carrier from where she’d been curled up on Niall’s pillow.

He slung his bag over his shoulder and, deciding he should leave a note for Niall before he left for Holmes Chapel, dropped it back onto the sofa. He pulled his journal from where it was tucked in his bag and ripped out a blank page from the back.

“All the time before I knew you seems now so long and I cannot explain even if I tried. I love you. - H,” he wrote and left the paper on the kitchen counter.

Harry lifted his bag onto his shoulder again and picked up Butterscotch’s carrier, walking the short distance to the door and stepping out. Pulling the door shut behind himself, he locked it and started down the stairs to the street.

He felt sick by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs, nervous and sad and nauseous.

He should call his mother and tell her he wasn’t coming after all. He should go back upstairs to his flat—their flat—and throw away that note, make a cup of tea, and read his book for book club while he waited for Niall to come home.

He should talk to Niall and tell him everything he was worried about, everything he’d been thinking since he’d seen Nick in the toilet at Gordon Ramsay’s restaurant three days earlier.

Harry closed his eyes and bit his lip, brows wrinkled as he made up his mind.
He walked down the pavement and turned onto Bushey Road, heading to the bus stop.

At six o’clock, Harry boarded his train at London Euston and found a seat. He put his bag in the overhead rack and put Butterscotch, still in her carrier, on the seat next to him.

Harry took his phone from his pocket and sent his mother a text. I’m leaving Euston now so I should be in Holmes Chapel by 8.

A moment later, he got a message from Anne that said, OK baby. We’ll see you later. xo

Harry turned his phone off and shoved it back into his pocket.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience while I wrote this chapter! I hope you enjoy it.

I'm going to aim to post Chapter 4 in January. I know that with all of the craziness of the holidays, I won't be able to post in December.

As always, leave me a comment and tell me what you think of the chapter! And come find me on Tumblr!

End Notes

This story has four five chapters and pastelfrio and i are planning to post one chapter, along with a lovely illustration, each month probably every other month. So please subscribe and/or keep an eye out for updates!

You can find me on tumblr if you'd like to come chat (or remind me it's time to post the next chapter!).

Kudos and comments are always so appreciated and remind me why I keep writing, even when I might feel like giving up!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!