The New Teacher

by mmaree

Summary

Being a novice teacher is tough, but being a novice teacher at Payne Academy is even tougher. Fortunately for Zayn, the other teachers on the staff seem friendly enough…at first.

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Or the one where Zayn’s dream job slowly turns into his worst nightmare. And his worst nightmare may or may not be named Dr. Payne.

Notes
This is a rewrite/reimagining of a chaptered fic I wrote for another website a while back. This story is set in a fictional town in New England. The school system is American and so is Zayn/all original characters. The rest of the boys are English/Irish accordingly because that's how I roll, lmao.

Please be warned that there are some dark themes in here. Please read the tags, but if you have any specific questions/triggers, let me know and I'll do my best to address them.

Enjoy! ;) ~Maree

See the end of the work for more notes.
“We’re going to miss you, sweetie,” Zayn’s mom sniffed, hugging him close. “I can’t believe my little baby just graduated and is off to start a new job in a completely different part of the state. You know, you can still change your mind if you—”

“I heard that, Tricia,” Zayn’s dad admonished playfully. “Our boy gets his dream job, an opportunity of a lifetime, and here you are trying to convince him to throw it away just so he can be closer to home! You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“I know, it’s just that he’ll be hours from us, Yaser,” she complained to her husband, brushing off the make-up she left behind on her son’s shirt. “He’s never been away from home for more than a night—even throughout college. What if something happens? What if he’s unhappy and wants to come home like he did that time at camp?”

“Honey, he was ten. I don’t think he has night terrors anymore.”

Zayn couldn’t help but blush at the embarrassing memory. “Mom, I’ll be fine,” he reassured her with a confidence he’d been trying on for size recently. “I promise.”

The thing was Zayn’s mom was right: he’d never spent more than a night away from home, even throughout college. He was extremely sheltered; he knew that. His parents were perfect—if a little over-protective of their only child at times—and he was raised in a perfect neighbourhood in a perfect town. There was nothing more he could have asked for growing up, and he appreciated everything life had plopped in his lap.

Even now, it seemed life couldn’t get any better. He had landed his dream job right out of college—a teaching job at Payne Academy, one of the most prestigious private schools in the country. He couldn’t believe his luck when he was offered a position in the history department. History and education were his passions and being able to teach at a school like Payne Academy was an incredible opportunity. The only thing that made the job even sweeter was the fact that his best friend would also be teaching at the school.

“And don’t forget,” Yaser reminded his wife, “Niall will be there with Zayn. He won’t let anything happen to our little boy, right Niall?”

“Of course, Mr. Malik,” Niall replied with an easy smile. “I’ll take good care of Zayn and make sure he doesn’t get into too much trouble.”

“Yeah, you’ll have to watch him like a hawk,” Yaser laughed, playing along. “I still remember those rough days when he was a teenager. Well, you were there, too, Niall. You saw all of his wayward behaviour first-hand. Remember the time he came home a mere five minutes before his curfew?”

“Or the time when he asked me to give him a ride to that side of town…so he could volunteer in a food kitchen?” Niall joined in.

“Or the time I had to leave work and go to your high school because he won the Human Relations Award?”

“Or that time when he broke his arm during P.E. and said the ‘D’ word?”
“The ‘D’ word?” Yaser questioned, feigning alarm.

“Yes…‘darn.’ I was shocked and appalled, sir—to say the least,” Niall explained with mock horror.

“And there was the time he scored an 89% on an Honours Bio exam, and we had to console him for hours. He wouldn’t even eat Trisha’s samosas.”

“Yeah, you definitely know something’s up when Zayn goes off his feed,” Niall chuckled as Zayn rolled his eyes. He knew better than to interrupt his dad and Niall when they were ganging up on him though. “Oi, what about the time he bunked off school for a whole week because he had mono, but he insisted I bring his completed assignments to school every day?”

“Or the time when the soccer team TP’d the rival coach’s house the night before the big match, and Zayn wrote an apology letter, then cleaned up the mess at the crack of dawn…”

“…With my help,” Niall added, groaning. “And we even ended up doing a bit of landscaping for free.”

Yaser erupted into laughter, slapping Niall on the back. “Didn’t you guys plant a tulip garden on the guy’s front lawn with the West High School colours?”

“Don’t remind me,” Niall moaned.

“And we haven’t even begun to talk about Zayn’s wild college days….”

“Enough, you two!” Tricia reprimanded, somehow managing to get a word in edgewise. Yaser and Niall got along famously—so famously that Zayn half-suspected his dad wished Niall was more than Zayn’s best friend. True, Niall and him had been inseparable since they met in the fifth grade, right after Niall and his family moved from Ireland. Zayn would never forget that awkward, unsolicited “talk” a few years back where his dad explained that he’d love and accept his son no matter whom he loved. His dad didn’t go so far as to mention Niall’s name, but Zayn could read between the lines. Yaser, he knew, would take Niall as a son-in-law in a heartbeat, but what father wouldn’t? Niall was smart, funny, charming, and grounded. Unfortunately for Zayn’s dad though, the two best mates didn’t like each other that way…at all.

“Ready, Zeddy?” Niall kidded, blue eyes expectant. Zayn nodded in return before helping his father load the last suitcase into Niall’s Volkswagen Golf.

Niall brushed a damp strand of hair away from his forehead before carefully closing the trunk. The compact, white hatchback was so jam-packed, Zayn wondered how Niall was going to be able to see out of the rear-view mirror during the long drive upstate. It was a good thing they had loaded up the U-Haul last week when they paid the first month’s rent and security deposit for their cosy (tiny) two-bedroom apartment near the school. It would be worlds apart from the spacious, comfortable houses they’d grown up in, but they were ready to be on their own.

“You could always stay for lunch, boys,” Tricia coaxed even though it was still morning and they’d already eaten a full breakfast. “Niall, you and I could whip up something really quick and—”

“Tricia, let them go already. You don’t want them driving at night, do you?” Yaser gently scolded her. Still sniffling, Tricia gave Zayn one last squeeze, then went to say goodbye to Niall.

Yaser embraced his son with the same strong arms that picked Zayn up when he fell off his bike and skinned his knee, the ones that adjusted his backpack and straightened his tiny shoulders before he walked into his first day of kindergarten. “I’m going to miss you, beta, but I can’t even begin to tell you how proud I am of you. Take care of yourself and call us if you need anything—anything at all.
We’re only a few hours away.” When they pulled apart, Zayn could see the way his Father’s eyes were red and shiny, and he was sure they mirrored his own.

Zayn was quiet as Niall backed out of the drive, watching as the figures faded away, until he could no longer see the house anymore. He had spent his entire life in that blue Colonial with the black shutters, and it had given him countless warm, fuzzy memories. He’d had the happiest of childhoods, but now it was time to start a new chapter in his life.

“Man, I thought saying goodbye to my parents was rough,” Niall murmured, summer sun beating down on them even after Niall clicked on the AC to full blast. “That was pure torture.”

“You can say that again.” Zayn exhaled slowly. He felt restless, felt like going on a four-mile jog rather than a four-hour drive. “I thought I was going to lose it, man, when my mom started with the hysterics.”

“Well, I’ll admit for a second there, I was afraid you might change your mind about leaving,” Niall related with a nervous chuckle. “You had that look on your face, Zed—you know the one I mean.”

“Um…okay.”

Niall guided the car towards the onramp. “It’s that look you get right before someone guilts you into doing something you don’t want to do.”

“Well, what about you and my dad?” Zayn shot back. “It didn’t look like you guys were excited about transforming your bromance into a long-distance relationship any time soon.”

Niall smiled impishly. “Now then, can I help it if your father’s a solid bloke?”

“True,” Zayn agreed. “But in all seriousness, I’m glad we’re doing this together. I can’t imagine moving to a new city and starting a new job all by myself.”

“You were bloody valedictorian, Zed—you could do anything you set your mind to.”

“Alright, I’ll put it this way then: I wouldn’t want to do this by myself, and I DEFINITELY wouldn’t want to do this with anyone else besides you.”

“Aw, I feel the same way. I’d rather do it with you than anyone else in the whole world,” Niall replied before laughing at himself. “And I don’t mean that in the way it sounded because that’s just naff.”

“Yeah, totally gross,” Zayn snorted. “Like ‘ew’ gross, like used Band-Aid gross, like—”

“Okay, I get it already!” Niall exclaimed, poking the boy in the passenger seat in the ribs. “You don’t have to completely destroy my self-esteem, you know. Now, do you fancy turning on some tunes before I shove you out the passenger side?”

“I’m on it,” Zayn chuckled. He searched the stations and finally settled on Pharrell’s “Happy.” Niall belted it out as he drove, but the lyrics didn’t quite match the feeling in the pit of Zayn’s stomach so he just gazed out the window at the changing scenery as it flew by at seventy miles-per-hour.

“What’s wrong, Zed?”

“It’s…it’s nothing.”

“C’mon, tell brother Niall all about it,” he wheedled, resting an arm on his friend’s shoulder.
“It’s dumb.”

“Like this would be the first time you’ve told me something dumb,” Niall teased, ruffling his friend’s hair before placing his hand back on the steering wheel to manoeuvre a curve. “But for real, tell me what’s eating you, yeah?”

“I guess I’m just feeling a little apprehensive, that’s all. You know, we’re moving into a new apartment in a new city, and soon we’ll be starting our very first teaching jobs at Payne Academy—the Payne Academy. It’s just a lot, you know?”

“Of course it is, but let’s look at it as an adventure, yeah?” Niall suggested, saying the right thing at the right time as always. “It’s going to be brilliant, Zed; I know it is. So anything else got your knickers in a twist?”

Zayn hesitated for a second, not sure if he should tell Niall the next part because it made him sound even more paranoid and insecure than normal.

“Zed?”

“Yes…it’s Principal Payne.” Zayn frowned. “I-I don’t think he likes me.”

“That’s rubbish, mate,” Niall chided, giving a little shove to Zayn’s shoulder before resting it on the gearshift. “He wouldn’t have bloody hired you if he didn’t believe you were the most qualified teacher for the job. He must have seen the gobs of passion and potential you’ve got because you beat out hundreds of experienced teachers for the history position. Now, what I’m trying to figure out,” he quipped, “is why the bloody hell he hired me! Personally, I’m surprised I even made it past the screening interview for Payne Fecking Academy.”

“You got the job because you’re a culinary genius and everyone likes you,” Zayn responded like it was the easiest answer in the world—which it was. “I don’t know though…I still can’t shake the feeling that he doesn’t like me.”

“I don’t think Payne ‘likes’ anyone, Zed,” Niall contended. “The dude has to be strict because he’s running a large, respected institution. Don’t forget that he started Payne Academy from nothing and built it to what it is today in less than five years, and I don’t think he’s even thirty yet based on the research I’ve done. ‘Besides,’” he continued, “It’s not like we’ll be working closely with him or anything. He’s got more important things to do than to be knocking about with a couple of novice teachers.”

“Yeah…you’re probably right,” Zayn acknowledged, feeling foolish. He was glad he decided to speak with Niall about his concerns now. His friend had a knack for putting things into perspective, and this time was no different.

“This first year at Payne Academy is going to be one we never forget, Zed,” Niall declared with his easy assuredness, “just you wait and see.”

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Within a week, the two boys had settled comfortably into their new flat in the quiet, sleepy town of Wisteria Falls. By the time Sunday rolled around, however, nerves were beginning to set in (in Zayn’s case anyway). Students weren’t starting until Thursday, but teachers were to report to school...
on Monday morning. That gave Zayn exactly three days to get his classroom in order, learn the building, meet the staff, and gain a sense of the school community.

He was also nervous about the curriculum he was supposed to be delivering in just a few days. Granted, he knew his subject matter and the standards like the back of his hand, but he still wasn’t positive about how the Board and principal expected the material to be presented and to what extent he was supposed to be implementing technology into his lesson plans. He hadn’t even received a finalised schedule yet, for Pete’s sake.

Zayn tended to be high strung anyway, but his current stress levels were through the flipping roof.

He communicated as much to Niall as they sat out on the walled-in balcony overlooking the courtyard behind their apartment building. Tonight, a cool breeze gave them respite from what had been a swelteringly-hot August day. To offset the heat, Niall had whipped up a pitcher of lemon-mint iced tea which sat half-empty on the side table.

“I just don’t want to disappoint anyone,” Zayn concluded as the familiar feelings of inferiority crept up on him again. “Everyone’s expecting me to be this exceptional teacher just because I was top of my class, but I’m not sure if I can live up to their expectations, you know?”

“Zed, we’ve been through this,” Niall clucked, pouring another glass for himself, ice clinking into the glass. “I swear, mate. Those worry lines are going to be a permanent feature if you don’t quit being a right idiot.” Zayn stuck his tongue out at his friend but Niall just chuckled. “Come off it. You’re going to be brilliant, like you always are at everything you set your mind to. You’ll be a star teacher before the year’s out. Trust me on this one, yeah?”

Zayn nodded noncommittally and changed the subject. “So, how sick is it that you get to head up the new culinary programme at Payne Academy?”

“Oh man; it’s going to be ace! Can’t bloody wait to see the new fittings. I heard they just put in professional ranges and everything,” he said excitedly, licking his lips. “And I think I’m going to ask Principal Payne if we can start a student-run business at the school. What d’ya think?”

“What were you thinking?”

“Well, I fancied starting a bistro or bakery on Fridays run by upperclassmen in the culinary programme. Thoughts?’’

“Think you should totally go for it,” Zayn told him honestly. “It sounds like a lot to ask of high school students, but if anyone can get them to pull off something like that, it’s you.”

“Cheers, Zed. And you know me…always up for a challenge!” Niall took another sip of the tea and grimaced slightly. “Should’ve put something stronger in this.”

“You know I don’t drink, Nialler.”

“Yeah, you don’t do anything, do ya?” Niall teased, dodging an oncoming ice cube.

“I’ve got tattoos, haven’t I?”

“Oh yeah, you’re such a bad boy, Zed,” Niall teased. Zayn Malik was a lot of things; however, a ‘bad boy’ was not one of them. “Now where was I?” Niall asked himself, scratching his tawny hair.

“The bistro idea.”
“Cheers. Yeah, I’ll talk to Payne about it after I’m settled. I mean, I still have to teach basic cooking classes to the younger kids, but I think that’ll be good craic as well…as long as none of them burn the school down.”

“Speaking of burning the school down…remember that time when you almost set my family’s kitchen on fire?” Zayn asked, shoulders shaking. “There were a few flames coming from the range, and I was about to throw water on it, and then you made that big speech about how you’re not supposed to put water on a grease fire. Remember?”

“Well, you aren’t supposed to put water on a grease fire.”

“So then you put baking powder on it,” Zayn continued, ignoring his friend, “and it almost blew up the whole kitchen.”

“So I mucked up one teeny-tiny detail—”

“Yeah, the difference between baking powder and baking soda,” Zayn guffawed, wiping away tears from his eyes. “Thank goodness you’re not a chemistry teacher!”

“Yeah,” Niall smiled. “And thank Jesus, Mary, and Joseph that Yaser walked in before we burnt your gaff down.”

“You should have seen your face when my dad threw a towel over the flames and smothered the fire in about two seconds flat.”

“I’ve always said he was a solid bloke, your da.”

Zayn snickered into his hand. “Yes, just imagine where your culinary career would’ve gone if you were serving time in jail for first-degree arson.”

“Oi, prisons need chefs, too,” Niall retorted, making Zayn laugh even harder. “That was the distant past, laddie. My cooking skills have since improved, I’ll have you know.”

“Wasn’t that long ago. We were what…twelve? Thirteen? You’ll be teaching kids that age.”

“Crap, now I’m nervous about school tomorrow. Cheers, mate.”

Zayn stifled a giggle. “Sorry, Nialler.”

Niall yawned, stretching in his chair. “Well, I’m absolutely shattered, mate. We have a big day tomorrow so I reckon we ought to turn in.”

They cleared the table quickly. Before retiring to their respective rooms, Niall gave him one of his famous bear hugs, one of those hugs that always pulled you in, made you feel like everything was going to be golden.

“Don’t stay up too late reading!” Niall called before shutting his door on the opposite side of the flat. Zayn couldn’t help but laugh guiltily at that; Niall knew him so well.

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Zayn’s phone alarm began trilling at an ungodly hour, joining his alarm clock in a discordant
symphony. Ever since he could remember, he’d always set both, just to be on the safe side. He hated waking up early with a passion and didn’t always trust his subconscious brain to make good decisions. Niall, on the other hand, was an early riser. Zayn could already hear the shower running as he blurrily searched for his slippers.

Just over an hour later, Niall’s little VW pulled into the faculty parking of Payne Academy. Niall killed the engine, and they took a moment to just gawk at the impressive structure before them, the place that would serve as their workplace for the foreseeable future.

Payne Academy was a traditional light-coloured brick building. Ivy covered the exterior and tall, ivory pillars guarded the somewhat daunting entrance. It had the appearance of a place that had been around for decades—centuries even. As they walked in, Zayn couldn’t help but ponder whether the building had been used for a similar purpose (as an educational institution) before its current incarnation as Payne Academy.

For some reason, he got a creepy feeling from the place, as if someone had died here.

“Good morning!” a bright and cheery voice chirped, breaking Zayn out of his morbid reverie and causing him to stumble into his best friend.

“Morning!” Niall smiled back broadly at the young woman seated in the front office. He took Zayn by the elbow and steered him through the office doorway, ensuring he didn’t make an idiot of himself (again).

“How may I help you two?” the pretty brunette politely inquired, pushing her frames up her nose. They didn’t make her look mousy—far from it. The glasses complemented her heart-shaped face, made her blue eyes look impossibly large like an anime character. “Did you want to place your child on the waiting list?”

“We’re only twenty-two!”

“And we’re not married,” Zayn added, blushing.

“Well, I’m sure that’s none of my business,” the woman parroted back. She began typing, fingers flying over the keys, while the boys looked at each other bemusedly.

Zayn cleared his throat. “I don’t think—”

“Yes, dear—that’s what they all say,” the woman cut in with the pleasant languor of a Midland accent. “But no matter how young your child is now, the sooner you make plans for their education, the better.” She pushed her chair back and regarded them with sudden earnestness. “Our current wait time for entrance to the school—that would be the sixth grade—is just under four years. I would recommend filling out the paperwork if you think there’s even a chance that—”

“We’re the new teachers,” Niall interjected, cutting off her obviously well-rehearsed spiel.

“Oh my gosh, really?” Behind the frames of her glasses, her blue eyes widened to the size of saucers.

“Yes, really.” Niall flashed another thousand-watt smile. “The name’s Horan. Niall Horan. I’m the new instructor for the culinary arts programme.”

“And you’re Irish!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “You’re our first Irish teacher, too!”
Niall chuckled. “That I am.” He nodded towards his companion. “And this here is…”

“Zayn Malik. History.”

“I’m Joanna Hart, principal’s secretary. Sorry about the mix-up, but you two seemed so…friendly.”

Zayn nodded. “We’ve known each other since we were kids.”

“That explains it—silly me.” She bit her lip nervously. “By the way…I’d, um, prefer you didn’t tell Dr. Payne I just mistook you two for parents.”

“Your secret’s safe with us, love.” Niall winked back at her, and Zayn was almost sure the secretary swooned a bit. “So is Principal Payne available?”

She glanced apprehensively in the direction of the closed door on her left. “He’s on an important call right now, and he really hates to be disturbed—like, you have no idea.”

Zayn glanced at his best mate, the unsettling feeling from last night returning to him in full force. Niall didn’t notice though, too busy staring at the petite brunette in front of them.

“I’ll let Dr. Payne know you’re here the first chance I get,” the secretary prattled on. “I’m sure he’ll want to welcome you to Payne Academy. In the meantime, I have welcome packages for both of you.” She swivelled around in her chair and collected two large manila envelopes which she handed to Niall. His hand brushed against hers, and I noticed her blush slightly.

“Well, thank you, Ms. Hart,” he said with that captivating grin of his. “It’s very kind of you to have prepared these for us.” His eyes lingered on her for a fraction of a second longer than necessary and Zayn kicked him in the shin.

“Ow!”

Jo blinked up at them and it was all Zayn could do to keep a straight face. “What was that, Mr. Horan?”

“Wow!” Niall quickly recovered. “I hope you didn’t go through too much trouble on our accounts, Ms. Hart.”

“Oh, it’s nothing!” she gushed. “Just standard protocol, but I do like to make sure our teachers have everything they need. Speaking of which, let me make a copy of the building map for you and then I’ll let you go find your rooms. I’m sure you don’t want to stand around and chat with me all day!”

“Oh, I don’t think I’d mind that at all,” Niall returned flirtatiously as he leaned against the counter. She giggled, blushing furiously as she rose from her desk and trotted over to a backroom, high heels clicking against the hardwood floor.

“Seriously, Niall?”

“What?” he mouthed back, all innocent now when he was all-wolf a second ago.

“I know what you’re doing.”

“She’s kind of cute, isn’t she?” he mused, a faraway look in his eye.

“No.”

Niall snorted. “You’re lying, Zed.”
“No, I’m not; she isn’t my type.”

“Well, who’s your type then because if I remember correctly, you turned down every girl who asked you out in school.”

“They weren’t my type either,” Zayn huffed. “And how did this conversation get around to me? You’re the one who’s going to get a harassment case slapped against you.”

“You worry too much. She’s into me; I can tell.”

“Niall, she’s the principal’s secretary, for heaven’s sake,” Zayn hissed just as the sound of clicking heels came back into earshot.

Joanna Hart set the papers on the counter. “Here is a map for each of you with your room locations marked. I’d show you to your rooms, but I can’t leave the office, you see.” Her eyes shifted for a second, then she began to wave frantically at someone behind us. “Mr Tomlinson! Wait—Mr. Tomlinson!” She called loudly.

“Hiya, Jo!” the man cheerily returned in a scratchy, high-pitched voice as he strolled into office. “I’d ask how your summer was, but we just had drinks a weeks ago. And what’s with the ‘Mr. Tomlinson’ shtick? The little devils aren’t coming until Thursday—oh.” His eyes scanned the other two men curiously. “These the new recruits?”

“Yes, Louis,” Jo corrected herself. “This is Mr. Horan and this is Mr. Malik. I was hoping you might be able to show them to their classrooms?”

“Anything for you, love,” the returning teacher said with a wink that could have given Niall a run for his money.

Jo was about to open her mouth to speak again when the phone rang. “Oh, here we go again!” she muttered. “Excuse me—I have to take this. Oh, and I’m looking forward to working with you both,” she said speedily before picking up the receiver and rattling off a professional greeting.

“So what subject do you teach, mate?” Niall asked their new companion as the trio departed the school office.

“Theatre.” Louis Tomlinson looked every inch a theatre teacher, too. He wore a t-shirt with a sick graphic design, black blazer, no socks, and fitted trousers which were cropped at the ankles. It worked for him, but it was hardly an ensemble Zayn expected for a teacher at the prestigious Payne Academy. Then again, it was a teacher workday and, again, this dude was the drama teacher.

Zayn battled with his shyness as they ascended a large staircase. He never was one for small talk, usually relying on Niall in the past, but he had vowed to try a little harder from now on. “How long have you taught at Payne Academy, Mr. Tomlinson?”

“It’s Louis, and I’ve been here since the beginning—five years.”

Zayn figured the man must be in his late twenties although he had a much younger vibe. Zayn was quite the opposite, always having been labelled an ‘old soul’ for some reason. “Nice to meet you, Louis. I’m Zayn.”

“Zayn. I quite like that,” the drama teacher mused. “Pretty name for a pretty boy.”

“I assume we’re headed to Zayn’s room first?” Niall questioned abruptly.
Louis noticed Niall’s perturbed expression and seemed amused by it. “I’m engaged; don’t worry, mate. Just stating the obvious there.” Zayn reddened at that. “Sooo… I’m guessing you two know each other?”

“Yes, we do,” Zayn clarified, thankful Louis changed the subject. “Niall and I have been best friends for ages.”

“Well, that’s convenient,” Louis observed, quirking his lips. “It’s important to have people who have your back around here—massively important, if you know what I mean,” he added cryptically. Zayn didn’t know what he meant, but he kept his mouth shut and followed the other two boys around the corner.

“Well, here we are, lads! Room 235!” Louis announced soon after, and Zayn couldn’t wait to check out the classroom that would be his second home for the duration of the school year. In truth, he hoped it would be his for many years to come. “Niall, did you want to head down to your classroom now?”

“Nah, I’m good, mate. My room’s downstairs just off the main hall. It should be easy as tea to find.”

“Well, I’ll leave you two to get settled in then,” Louis said agreeably. “If you need anything, I’ll be hanging next door in 233.” He jerked his head towards the next classroom. “You’re lucky, Malik, because you’re neighbours with my best mate who also happens to be the best bloody teacher in the school.”

Zayn’s ears perked up at that. “Really?”

“Yeah, his name’s Harry Styles. I’ll introduce him to you in a bit if you’d like.”

“That would be great! Thanks a lot!”

“No problem, kid,” Louis replied with all the swagger of Boggart. “This is only Harry’s fourth year, and he looks like a child, but don’t let that fool you: he’s top-notch.” Louis snapped his fingers. “Come to think of it, I’m sure he mentioned something about how he was going to be a mentor teacher this year. Since Dr. Payne put you next door to him, I’ve a feeling you’re going to be his mentee or whatever the bloody hell you call it.”

Niall glanced at the closed door to Room 233, then back at Louis. “Does he teach history, too?”

“Nah, ELA—English language arts, that is.”

Zayn couldn’t help but brighten at that. “Oh! I started off as an English major in college, but then I fell in love with a World Civilisations class and the rest is… well… history!”

Louis snorted. “Yeah, you and Harold are gonna get along just fine.”

Zayn felt his tide of apprehension start to recede a little. “It’ll be sick to have someone close to my age. Wasn’t expecting it, actually.”

“What were you expecting, kid? Some old punter or a middle-aged woman who flirted with you even though she’s got a husband and five brats at home?”

Niall punched Zayn in the arm lightly. “This one wouldn’t know if a woman was flirting with him to save his life.”
“So you’re into dudes, then?” Before Zayn had a chance to respond, Louis was steamrolling ahead. “Yeah, that’s cool. So’s Harold.”

Zayn could feel Niall questioning him with those blue eyes, but he pretended not to see. Finally, the Irishman turned back to Louis. “So this Harry Styles…he the quiet, bookish type?”

“Not exactly,” Louis chuckled as if it was some kind of inside joke, “but you’ll meet him later.” He paused for a moment then asked with a sly grin, “hey, you sure there’s nothing going on between you two?”

“Niall’s just overprotective,” Zayn explained, still avoiding his best friend’s eyes for some reason. “He hasn’t gotten it through his thick skull that I’m a big boy now.”

“I should say you are,” Louis observed, piercing eyes raking over the history teacher.

Niall frowned. “Thought you said you were engaged, buddy?”

“Just a bit of banter, mate,” Louis replied with a half-smirk. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist.” He started walking towards the next door, turning to give them a salute. “Well, I’ll be seeing you around. I’ll bring Harry over once you’re sorted.” He disappeared into the room without a knock and Zayn turned to his friend.

“You alright, Niall?”

“Hmmm?” His brows were knitted together. “Oh. Yeah, I’m brilliant.”

“So Louis seems nice.”

“Humph.”

Zayn rolled his eyes. “Well, I like him.”

“You like everyone,” Niall grunted. “You only see the good in people.”

“Well, people have a lot of good in them.”

Niall shook his head. “One of these days you’re going to meet someone that even you won’t like, Zed, and I can’t wait to be around for that.”

“Highly doubtful, Nialler.”

“We’ll see,” Niall hummed in return. “By the way, you didn’t correct Louis when he said—”

“Can we talk about it later?” Zayn begged. He really didn’t want to come out in the hallway in front of his classroom on his first day.


“Because I’m not sure, and it’s not that important, and I really don’t want to talk about this now,” Zayn mumbled, glancing around. Niall still looked hurt, but Zayn knew he wouldn’t force the issue. (Not at the present moment anyway.)

Niall sighed. “I get why you don’t want to talk about it now but just know I’m here if you ever want to sort through it, yeah?” He reached out to grasp Zayn by the shoulder. “Now, let’s check out this classroom of yours, eh?”
A short while later, the two boys were working diligently on a bulletin board outside Zayn’s classroom. Zayn had been agonising over the theme all week, cruising Pinterest and other sites for ideas. They had made good progress thus far, having already put up the brown butcher paper and a few cardboard cut-outs. They’d come to a standstill though, arguing whether the letter “H” in “History” was in line with the other letters when—

“It’s definitely crooked,” someone rasped from behind them.

Zayn pivoted around to see a young man with striking green eyes. He was dressed to the nines in an ensemble that screamed “look at me!” On the other hand, there was also something so laidback and unassuming about the guy as well.

“Mr. Malik, I presume?”

Zayn just stared at the stranger for a few seconds. Then he saw Louis slide up beside him, and it all made sense.

“The name’s Harry Styles,” he announced with outstretched hand. “I’m the head of the English Department here at Payne Academy, and I have been given the fortunate assignment of acting as your mentor this year.”

Something about his manner made Zayn instantly at ease. “It’s a pleasure, Mr. Styles, and I’m really looking forward to learning from you this year. I hear you’re the best,” he added shyly with a sidelong glance at Louis who pretended to shush him.

“You don’t have to call me Mr. Styles unless the students are here. Actually, I’d prefer you didn’t,” he said warmly. “It’s Harry.”

“I’m Zayn, by the way—but you probably knew that,” the new teacher added sheepishly.

Harry smiled and dimples seemed to pop out everywhere. “Your students are going to adore you; I can tell.”

Niall dropped the letters he’d been holding and stepped closer to the group. “So is it customary for a new teacher to be given a young mentor?”

Zayn groaned. He’d barely admitted he might be gay an hour ago, and now Niall was convinced he needed protecting from every virile, young male in the building. “Niall.”

“Just because I was a baker, Lou, doesn’t mean I’d want to switch—”

“As much as the newbies are probably interested in the thrilling adventures of Harold the Baker;” Louis cheekily cut in, “I’m gonna stop you there. By the way, Zayn and Niall here are best mates,
and they, apparently, are not in love with each other.”

Harry chuckled as Zayn felt a blush cross his cheeks. “Good to know.” He then extended a hand to Niall who took it warily. “Nice to meet you as well,” Harry said pleasantly.

“Styles, why don’t you show Horan your other hand?” Louis suggested knowingly. “Think he might like that one better.”

Harry complied, holding up his left hand for all to see. At first Zayn wasn’t sure what Louis meant, but then he spotted the plain band circling Harry’s ring finger.

“Oh, are you married?” Niall asked, looking noticeably relieved for some reason.

“Not quite,” Harry responded happily. “We just set the date. I wear it as a symbol of my promise to her.”

Louis pretended to gag. “Please don’t start, Styles. I haven’t eaten breakfast yet, and you know I can’t bear to listen to this shit on an empty stomach.”

“Her?” Niall questioned, looking to Louis. “I thought you said—”

“He swings both ways,” Louis corrected. Harry raised an eyebrow at his friend.

“The ring idea…I think it’s beautiful,” Zayn admitted. Deep down, he was a softie, a hopeless romantic.

“Well, I think it’s bloody annoying, if you ask me.” Louis scoffed, scrunching up his nose. “Eleanor’s always going on about how I should get a bloody ‘engage-man’ ring as well.”

“Sorry, mate,” Harry replied, looking anything but apologetic as his gaze shifted back to the wall behind them. The smile froze on his face.

Zayn couldn’t help but notice Harry was studying his bulletin board again. “So what do you think?” he asked proudly, waving a hand towards the half-completed project.

Harry sighed deeply. “It looks lovely, but how should I say this?”

“The Big Payne’s gonna hate it,” Louis declared without hesitation. Harry didn’t disagree.

“You can’t be serious,” Zayn said, slightly irked. “It’s bright, fun, educational, and inviting. What more could you—”

“And what do you think you’re doing?”

Zayn stiffened at the sound of the booming, bone-chilling voice. He was afraid to turn around, especially when he saw Niall’s eyes widen.

“I am not accustomed to speaking to people’s backs,” the impatient voice continued, and there was no mistaking this time:

It was Liam Payne.

Zayn swallowed and quickly pivoted around. “I-uh…well, um, I was just….” He looked around helplessly at the other teachers. He could read an “I-told-you-so” smile tugging at Louis’ lips, and for the first time in his life, he longed to smack someone.
“You’re our new history teacher, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m history—I mean, I’m Zayn…um…Malik,” he managed, nearly forgetting his own name under the heated gaze from the principal he interviewed with several months before. “I teach…er…world history. And like, geography, too.” He took a shaky breath. “Well, I mean I’ll be teaching those subjects when, uh, school begins.”

Dr. Payne’s lips curled into a half-smirk. “Well, at least we can be thankful you’re not teaching English. Don’t you agree, Mr. Styles?”

Harry grimaced slightly at the cutting remark directed at his new mentee. “We apologise, sir, for the misunderstanding. I was in the process of informing Mr. Malik about the guidelines for bulletin boards when you arrived.”

Dr. Payne seemed pleased by his response. “Well, Mr. Styles, I am heartened to hear that someone is attempting to adhere to the code of this reputable institution.” He then faced the group as a whole. “I won’t have my teachers junking up the halls with bits of construction paper and cheap decorations. I like everything to be clean and pristine in my school—no exceptions.” His eyes narrowed in on Zayn. “Do you understand, Mr. Malik?”

“Y-yes, of course, Mr. Payne,” Zayn stammered as brown eyes bore into him.

“Dr. Payne, you mean,” he corrected with a disdain that almost knocked Zayn off his feet. “I have earned the title so I think it only appropriate you address me in the proper fashion, Mr. Malik.”

“I’m s-so sorry, Dr. Payne. I assure you I meant no disrespect.”

“I’ll let it pass this time, Mr. Malik…but don’t let it happen again,” he warned. “Mr. Styles, please make sure Mr. Malik here removes the offensive display. As his mentor, I will hold you accountable if this happens again.”

“Yes, I understand, sir.”

“Also, please make sure Mr. Malik and Mr. Horan receive their handbooks with the educator code of conduct.”

“Certainly, sir,” Harry responded swiftly like a soldier taking orders, and Zayn’s mind began to wander. He could almost see his principal in uniform, barking orders like a drill sergeant. It wasn’t hard to image, to be honest. Dr. Payne’s brown hair was shaved to a near buzz cut on the sides. His jaw was set in a firm line from what looked like years of practice, and even with a suit on, one could infer his fit, muscular build.

“It is not polite to stare, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne snarled. “Please refrain from doing so.”

Zayn could feel his bottom lip trembling as he mumbled out an apology. He kept his eyes down, didn’t even want to see the sympathetic looks from the other teachers at this point.

An awkward silence followed, but then Harry cleared his throat. “If I may, sir?”

“Yes, Mr. Styles?”

“Who is Mr. Horan’s mentor?”

“Well, I had contemplated asking Mr. Tomlinson to assume this role,” their principal began, and Louis puffed out like a peacock. “However, after much deliberation, I’ve decided against this course
of action.”

“Why?” Louis whinged.

“Because although you are a special subject teacher like Mr. Horan and although you have the necessary experience, I would not feel comfortable nominating you for a leadership role.”

“I take on leadership roles all the time, sir!” Louis protested. “I’ve directed countless productions for the drama department, I’m head of the social committee, I—”

“I will not argue with you here, Mr. Tomlinson,” Dr. Payne hissed scathingly and even Louis looked a bit apprehensive. “Directing ‘plays’ and wasting time on planning parties are activities in no way equal to mentoring our impressionable young teachers.”

“But, Dr. Payne—”

“There IS ENOUGH!” Principal Payne bellowed, losing his temper. A second later though, he was back to his calm but severe manner. “I will give some thought to this matter before I make a final decision and inform Mr. Horan. This has nothing to do with you, Mr. Tomlinson—do you understand me?”

“Yes, I understand,” Louis said stiffly.

“Now,” Dr. Payne continued, “I expect to see this gaudy display removed before I next make my rounds.” He twisted his nose up in disgust at the ‘offensive’ bulletin board. “One would think one is the headmaster of a primary school,” he muttered under his breath.

“Y-yes, sir. I’ll take it—the bulletin board—down immediately…Dr. Payne, sir,” Zayn promised, the words clumsily tumbling out of his mouth. He couldn’t believe he was making such a bad impression on his first day. Things like this just didn’t happen to Zayn.

Dr. Payne regarded the group sternly. “You are all dismissed. Please find an activity worthier of your time than lollygagging about in the hallways. And remember, the school board is not paying you to fraternise with the other faculty members.” Then without further ado, Payne Academy’s principal straightened up to his full height and marched off.

He’d barely turned the corner before Louis was rolling his eyes. “‘And remember,’” Louis mimicked, wagging his finger at all of them as he did an almost flawless impersonation, “‘the school board is not paying you to fraternise with the other faculty members.’”

“You’re a proper nutter, Lou,” Harry said, shaking his head but chuckling guiltily. He coughed and hid his laughter, though, once he realised the two new teachers were watching him. “Well, that’s Dr. Payne, you two. I’d suggest you steer clear of him as much as possible…until you learn the ropes, that is.”

Zayn didn’t see a problem with that advice. Dr. Payne scared the living daylights out of him.
Zayn sighed as he leaned against the closed door of his classroom and surveyed the bare walls surrounding him. He stayed there until his shoulder blades began to ache, until the ache grew stronger than that of his recent humiliation.

It took a while.

Eventually, he decided he needed to do something. He uncorked the storage tube he’d brought and began searching for posters, maps, and charts that dealt directly with the subject matter he’d be teaching. He then placed them around the room in a tasteful way. Dr. Payne might be more lenient with interiors of classrooms, but Zayn wasn’t about to take any chances. When he was satisfied, he tidied up the room and added a few personal items—his framed diploma, the lop-sided pencil holder Niall made him that was his favourite shade of green, and the ‘golden’ apple presented to him by the class he student taught for last term.

The hours flew by. Zayn had gotten so caught up with his room that it was well into the afternoon before he remembered he needed to set up his computer. He logged in using the username and password the secretary, Ms. Hart, had given him when he arrived that morning. He surveyed the home screen, the school’s main page, and it gave him a slight chill. There were photographs of hard-working students in rows of desks, photographs of smiling students involved in various activities.

But that wasn’t what caught his attention.

No, he was struck by the white background with crisp, uniform scarlet letters spelling out the words: “I love Payne.”

I love Payne.

Surely, he was the only person who would draw a negative reaction from the positive message about the school. After all, it wasn’t like Liam Payne could help having a name that sounded like that, could he?

Zayn continued on to the staff page and checked his e-mail, finding that he already had three messages. The first was a welcome message forwarded from the secretary with general instructions and necessary links. The second was also from Ms. Hart, but he skipped it for now in favour of examining the last e-mail. This one was marked “Important” and was sent from the principal himself:

If you are receiving this communication, you are a teacher on evaluation for this school year. Please meet in room 101 at 1400 hours today for an informational meeting where I will be discussing further requirements and specifics. Thank you for arriving promptly.

-LP
Zayn stared at the screen for a second, mentally converting the time. The evaluation meeting was at two o’clock. His eyes then danced down to the clock on his computer: 2:03.

He was three minutes late.

His heart beat rapidly even before he leapt from his chair and bolted out of the classroom. He took the steps two at a time, then broke into a sprint as soon as he reached the ground floor of the school. Frantically, he searched for room 101 and found it just off the main hall. Trying to still his racing heart and control his breathing, he took a moment to peek inside the meeting room where he could see his new principal addressing a moderately-sized gathering of faculty members. He waited until Dr. Payne’s back was to him, then opened the door and tip-toed inside.

He thought he’d made it, but apparently, his principal had eyes in the back of his head.

“Please be punctual next time, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne announced curtly as Zayn guiltily slunk into a chair. “My time is extremely valuable as is the time of the other members of this faculty. Lateness is a form of disrespect and disrespect is a quality I simply do not tolerate in my staff.”

“Y-yes, sir,” Zayn mumbled, beyond embarrassed to be called out in front of a whole room of teachers. To add insult to injury, he hadn’t even met most of them yet.

“What’s that, Mr. Malik? Could you please speak up?”

“Yes, I’m sorry, sir,” he tried a little louder. “I meant no disrespect to you, and I promise it won’t happen again, sir.”

Dr. Payne smiled tightly. “I believe you said something to a similar effect this morning when I caught you junking up the hallways of our school, Mr. Malik. You are quite fortunate that I’m in a good mood today.”

For some reason beyond him, Zayn almost barked out a laugh at that. It was the icing on the cake to the worst first day ever.

Dr. Payne, thankfully, seemed to forget about his problematic new teacher at that point as he resumed his evaluation speech. He detailed how everyone on evaluation had to schedule three observations this semester with the principal (shudder) in three different classes. The first observation would take place next month. As Dr. Payne gave detailed instructions on what style of lesson plan he expected, Zayn let his eyes wander about the room. (Zayn could write out that lesson plan format in his sleep.) After some hunting in the crowd, Zayn spotted his best friend in the middle of the second row. Niall must have felt Zayn’s eyes on him because he turned around briefly and flashed a reassuring smile.

Zayn tried not to dwell on how frustrated he was with himself, but it was hard. He’d done irrevocable damage to his reputation here, dug himself a hole so deep he doubted he’d ever climb out of it.

Worst of all, it was a position Zayn wasn’t accustomed to: he was the teacher’s pet, the valedictorian, the goody-two-shoes. He was not someone who got in trouble—ever. He searched out the back of Niall’s head again, hoping to get another dose of moral support, when—

“Excuse me, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne’s voice rang out suddenly. “If you wouldn’t mind focusing your attention up here on the screen rather than on Mr. Horan, it would be greatly appreciated.”
“I’m s-so sorry.  I—”

“Yes, we know,” he chided, twirling the remote he was holding into the air with a fancy flick of the wrist and catching it again.  “You meant no disrespect, and you promise it won’t happen again, right?”

There were a few nervous titters from the other teachers, but when the principal’s eyes swept the room, they quickly dissipated.  Zayn had a feeling that being on Dr. Payne’s bad side would not earn him any friends in the school.

“Mr. Malik?”

Zayn nodded dumbly, teeth digging into his bottom lip as he stared with glossy eyes at the screen in front of him.  He was grateful that half the lights in the room were turned off to save him any additional humiliation.

Dr. Payne seemed satisfied.  “Now, if I have everyone’s attention, I will resume the presentation.”

The remainder of the meeting dragged on.  Payne never asked if there were questions and no one asked any.  At last, Dr. Payne thanked them for their ‘attentiveness,’ and Zayn practically tripped over his chair in his eagerness to exit the stifling classroom.

But Dr. Payne wasn’t finished yet.

“The following teachers are still on temporary licences and need to remain after the meeting for additional instructions:  Mr. Sheeran, Mr. Horan, and Mr. Malik.”

If Zayn didn’t know better, he’d think the principal had been eating some bad sushi as he announced the final name on the list.  At least now there was no question that Dr. Payne disliked him.

The rest of the teachers shuffled out, and Zayn reluctantly made his way to the front row, standing beside his best friend.

“Ah, how refreshing,” Dr. Payne observed drily, and Zayn made the mistake of looking inquisitively up at the man.  “The fact that you arrived on time for this meeting, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne clarified, and Zayn wanted to crawl into a hole and stay there.  Indefinitely.  Instead, he just sat down quietly and stared at the floor while he waited for Dr. Payne to start presenting.  He felt Niall pat his knee, but it didn’t help.

There was a movement to his right, and he snuck a glance in that direction.  A ginger-haired boy with a friendly face sat two chairs down, and Zayn assumed it must be Mr. Sheeran.  Payne commenced soon after, reviewing the additional state guidelines for first and second year faculty.  Zayn assumed the other teacher must be returning for his second year because Zayn knew for a fact that Niall and him were the only newcomers to the staff.

Zayn forced himself to listen closely as Dr. Payne spoke, only taking a brief moment to catalogue the man’s confident, rich tone and impeccable speaking style.  Dr. Payne outlined the mentoring component required by the state and formally assigned mentors for the novice teachers (except Mr. Sheeran who evidently already had one).  Zayn was relieved when Harry Styles was officially named his mentor.  Harry seemed friendly and extremely knowledgeable, and Zayn needed all the help he could get on rectifying the less-than-stellar start to his teaching career.

Niall was assigned a mentor teacher they hadn’t met yet.  Her name was Patricia Cunningham, head of the arts department, and she had been teaching for over twenty years.  Doing the math, Zayn figured she had to be well into her mid-forties so there was no danger in Niall hitting on her.  Well,
little danger, anyway.

He foolishly began to think the meeting was going relatively well (compared with the rest of the day), but then Dr. Payne said something that made Zayn’s skin crawl.

“Before I dismiss you, I would like to remind Mr. Malik and Mr. Horan that they are on full Probationary Status for this academic year. It is entirely up to my discretion whether you receive your full teaching licence or not—even if you complete all other necessary components,” he disclosed ominously. “I will listen to the feedback and reports from your mentors, but again, you must meet my extremely high and demanding standards. Is that clear?”

*How could it not be?*

Zayn rushed out of Room 101 as soon as he could, not even bothering to wait for Niall. He knew his friend would understand; he’d witnessed Dr. Payne’s snide comments towards Zayn first-hand.

Zayn was just about to head back to his classroom when he heard announcement come over the intercom:

“Pardon the interruption, staff,” Ms Hart’s honeyed voice sounded over the speakers. “This is your reminder that the alarms and building security codes are going to be tested this afternoon. Any faculty or staff members still remaining at this time have approximately ten minutes to exit the building.”

Zayn blanched. Turning to the only other person in the main hall, he managed to rasp out, “she’s kidding, right?”

“No, I’m afraid she’s not,” Mr. Sheeran replied, eyes worried as he took in Zayn’s undoubtedly frazzled appearance. “She sent an e-mail about it, mate. Didn’t you see it?”

And yes, Zayn remembered seeing an e-mail from Ms. Hart in his inbox right before he’d made a mad dash to get to the evaluation meeting with Dr. Payne. He saw the e-mail, but he didn’t read it. Of course he didn’t.

Then, he thought of the countless things he needed to do to get his classroom in order by Thursday. Thursday, as in the first day of school. Thursday, as in *three days from today*.

“C’mere, Zed; it’s gonna be alright.”

Zayn let Niall pull him into one of his famous hugs. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves and put on a stoic face as he broke away.

The third teacher in the hall shuffled his feet awkwardly. “Well, it was lovely meeting you two….”

“But we haven’t properly met,” Niall corrected him, and the boy smiled. Niall sorted through all the necessary introductions while Zayn tried not to let his mood plummet further or his overactive brain propel itself into full on crisis-mode.

“Since we’re being kicked off the school grounds,” Ed, their new acquaintance, began, “what would you say to a coffee to get our minds off…well, you know.”

“Love to,” Zayn agreed as Niall seconded the idea. “Just let me grab my bag from my classroom, yeah?”

Zayn made the trip as quickly as he could. When he reached the office, he was about to wave at Ms.
Hart, but she seemed preoccupied, her gaze following Niall as he sauntered through the double set of doors, chatting casually with Ed.

“Earplugs, Miss Hart!” a voice barked from inside the office, and Zayn saw the secretary noticeably jump—but she wasn’t the only one.

He had just reached the first set of doors when the most awful cacophony of siren-like bells blared through the halls. Zayn staggered back as if he’d been electrocuted. He knew it was a test, knew the alarm was bound to set off at any moment, but still it rattled him to the core. Shaking off his shock, he quickly made his way outside where the ringing was just a faded wail, an echo in his oversensitive ears.

Of course he was the only teacher to be caught in the school when the alarms went off. If he were superstitious, he’d say it was a sign of some sort.

Fortunately, he wasn’t the superstitious type.

***

Espresso Expresso appeared to be the place to hang out on a Monday afternoon, and Zayn wondered if it was always this packed. The place seemed vibrant, bursting with life, from the swing music (thankfully not too loud since his ears were still ringing a little) to the giant murals colouring the walls. Zayn was glad they’d ordered when they did because the line was practically out the door now.

“So what’s your classroom like, Ni?” Zayn asked when they finally nabbed a table.

“It’s brilliant, Zed! The fittings are wicked, and it’s got all the mod cons….”

Zayn tuned out a little, soaked in the atmosphere, as his friend went on and on about professional-grade ranges and stand mixers. He grew nostalgic somehow, reminiscing about the countless study sessions over the years where Zayn would help Niall with maths and Niall would repay him in food. Zayn had served as Niall’s guinea pig, testing all of the other boy’s crazy concoctions and giving honest feedback as only a best friend could. Admittedly, the role became easier as they became older and Niall’s culinary expertise increased. Much easier.

“ORDER NUMBERS 37, 38, AND 39 READY AT THE COUNTER!”

Niall and Ed jumped up, and Zayn felt obliged to stay with the table, just in case. Ed took charge when they returned a minute later, divvying up everything on the trays as he carefully balanced them on one arm like a proper waiter. “Who ordered the quiches?”

“The Lorraine’s mine,” Niall said, pointing it out, “and the cheesy one is Zayn’s.”

“How about the chicken salad croissant?” Ed asked, lifting the plate carefully off the tray.

“That’s Zayn’s; it’s his favourite.”

“The jalapeño crisps?”

“Zayn again,” Niall answered, handing the bag of kettle chips to Zayn before taking the seat next to
his friend.

“What about the large Loco Mocha frozen cappuccino?”

“Me,” Zayn answered, moving his apple on to a plate so there’d be enough room to set the drink down. He was starting to feel slightly self-conscious with the way the plates were stacking up in front of him.

“Oh, then this banana cream pie must be yours, Niall,” Ed concluded, placing the massive slice of pie in front of the Irishman.

“Nope, that’s Zed’s again,” Niall sniggered, pushing the plate in Zayn’s direction.

Ed’s jaw dropped as he gave Zayn a once-over. A mixture of disbelief and admiration crossed his features. “You two are taking the piss, right?”

“Not a chance,” Niall replied, waving a hand over the collection of plates while Zayn fantasised about slipping under the table and crawling towards the exit unnoticed. “He’s got the metabolism of a hummingbird, lucky bastard. Personally, I think he stresses off the extra calories.”

Zayn had to hand it to his friend because that was a darn good theory. He was a born worrier; just like his mom.

“Oi, wait a tick,” Niall stated, checking his phone. “It’s only four. That’s an awful lot of grub for this time of day—even for you, Zed.”

Zayn didn’t say anything, just stared cross-eyed at the croissant he was shoving into his mouth.

“Ahem?”

Zayn caved; he always caved when Niall ahemmed him, dammit. “Alright, I forgot to bring my lunch, okay?”

“For the love of all things holy, Zayn Javadd Malik! I packed it for you and everything! I even wrote a special note for you inside.”

“Left it in the fridge, I guess,” Zayn apologised. “Look at it this way—now you don’t need to pack my lunch tomorrow, right?” Zayn attempted to sound cheerful but Niall just grunted.

“Yeah, but the note won’t make sense tomorrow,” he complained, digging into his quiche halfheartedly.

Ed’s curious gaze shifted from Zayn to Niall and back again. “You guys live together?” he asked with forced casualness.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Niall grumped and Zayn swatted his arm.

“Oh.” Ed frowned, but then just as quickly, his expression lightened. “So, uh, how long have you two been together?”

“Together?” Zayn echoed before it dawned on him.

“Pleeease,” Niall complained playfully, “I’m eating here.” Zayn just rolled his eyes at his friend’s typical response.

Ed’s eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. “You mean…you two aren’t—?”
“No, we are most certainly not,” Zayn shot back, starting to get a smidge annoyed by the question at this point.

“So you guys have never dated?”

“Never,” Niall and Zayn chorused.

“That’s ace!” Ed blurted out, and almost instantly, his cheeks reddened. “I mean, it’s…er…brilliant that you two are best mates and working at the same school together and all.” He coughed and took a drink of tea. “So Niall…that kitchen sounds fantastic. My classroom’s just down the hall from yours so let me know if you need anyone to test out any of your bakes, yeah?”

“Sure thing,” Niall replied with a wink. “I’ll put you down as a taster for my sixth grade Intro to Cooking class.”

“Oh, so you’re saying you’re a shit instructor, then?”

“Nice one,” Niall approved, and the music teacher gave a mini bow from where he was sat. “But being a music teacher has to be a good gig—especially at a place like Payne Academy.”

“Yeah, it’s great…mostly,” Ed admitted. “Especially when I don’t have to teach all the lame-ass classes like choir and shit.”

Zayn swallowed his last bite of quiche, washing it down with the mocha. “What classes do you teach, Ed?”

“Oh, I get a lot of the electives: Music Theory, Music Technology, and my personal favourite…Music History.”

“Those are electives?” Niall grimaced. “Thanks but no thanks. Any time you add ‘theory’ to anything, it’s an automatic joykill.”

Zayn rolled his eyes. “Well, I’d kill to have the opportunity to teach Music History, just saying.”

“Considering you’d have to kill me to teach it,” Ed chuckled, blue eyes twinkling, “I’d prefer you didn’t resort to that.”

“Ha, I’d watch your back then, mate,” Niall said easily, taking another forkful of pie—Zayn’s pie. “Zayn here fancies himself a singer. You should hear him in the shower crooning his arse off…and using up all the hot water while he’s at it.”

“That’s something I’d definitely like to see,” Ed said before smacking his head with a groan. “God, didn’t mean it like that.”

“Like what?” Zayn blinked, stealing his plate back when Niall wasn’t looking.

“Never mind, Zed. Don’t worry your pretty little head about it.” Niall tickled Zayn’s earlobe, and Zayn swatted his hand away. “Well, how was the pie?”

“The one you ate half of?” Zayn grumbled as Niall grinned cheekily. “Good—not as good as yours, though, if I’m being honest.”

“Oi, gonna get a big head if you keep saying things like that.”

“Too late,” Zayn returned before casting his attention on the music teacher once again. “So Ed, what’s the outline for that Music History class?”
Ed seemed thrilled by the question, and Zayn felt a warm, fuzzy glow inside. “Well, it starts off with the masters—you know, the ‘three B’s’ and all that.”

“The three B’s?” Niall repeated.

“Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven.”

Niall gave his friend a thumbs up. “Cheers, Zed.”

“And then,” Ed continued, excitement bubbling in his voice, “we get to cover early twentieth century music—especially the jazz standards.”

“Wow, sounds bloody riveting,” Niall said sarcastically, and Zayn nudged him in the side. “So what’s it end with? Katy Perry and Jay-Z?”

“No,” Ed guffawed. Zayn noticed he had a cute guffaw…as guffaws go. “We look at the history of rock ‘n’ roll, but I feel like I never have enough time to do that justice.”

An idea began rattling around in Zayn’s brain. “Hey, wouldn’t it be sick if you and me could teach a collaborative class?” he asked. “We could call it the History of Rock and Roll or something.”

Ed seemed intrigued. “Tell me more.”

Zayn felt shy all of a sudden, two sets of eyes trained on him, but he explained as best he could. “The objective could be to examine the socio-political and cultural implications of rock music in, say, the 1960s and 1970s.” He licked his lips. “The goal being to study its lasting influence on music and society today.”

Niall snorted. “‘Socio-political’ is an automatic joykill, too, but since you were so supportive of my student-run bistro idea, I’m not gonna shit on your parade.”

“Rain on your parade,” Zayn corrected.

Niall shrugged. “Same difference.”

“Well, I think it’s a brilliant idea, Zayn!” Ed smiled, and the way he said Zayn’s name almost made up for the ghastly day he’d had. “Yeah, I’d definitely be up for that. We should draft a syllabus and submit it to Dr. Payne for next term.”

Dr. Payne. Zayn had almost forgotten about him. “You really think he’d go for that kind of class?” he asked doubtfully, suddenly realizing that, of course, the principal would have final approval. It immediately crushed his budding excitement.

Talk about a joykill….

“Why not?” Ed replied. “He fancies anything that makes Payne Academy stand out from other schools. Niall’s idea, for example, sounds like something he’d eat up—no pun intended.”

“I love this guy!” Niall exclaimed, reaching across the table to high-five the other teacher.

“I actually have a similar pet project,” Ed admitted sheepishly. “I teach guitar lessons a couple of days after school, and the students perform at local shops…like this one. There’s not much that beats putting a guitar in a kid’s hands and watching how it changes his or her life.”

Zayn felt his heart flutter at the sweet sentiment.
Niall seemed equally impressed. “So how’d you convince the Big Payne to let you teach guitar?”

Ed raised an eyebrow. “I see you’ve met our theatre teacher,” he observed, obviously referring to Niall’s use of the unwise nickname. “I wouldn’t be copying his expressions though. Louis Tomlinson seems to get away with a whole lot more than everyone else at the school.”

“It didn’t seem like it earlier,” Zayn muttered, thinking of how hard the principal had come down upon the drama teacher in the hallway that morning. Ed looked curious so Niall and Zayn briefly filled him in on the bulletin board incident.

“Man,” Ed exhaled when they finished, “I wouldn’t have lived to tell the tale if I behaved like that in front of the boss. Dr. Payne does not take perceived challenges to his authority well.” He shook his head. “Believe me, anyone else but Louis Tomlinson would have been fired on the spot.”

“So, what do you think of him?” Niall asked carefully. “Tomlinson, that is.”

“Oh, he’s a bit full of himself, that one,” Ed confided. “He probably thinks he shits glitter—but please don’t tell him I said that,” he tacked on nervously.

Zayn shook his head to get rid of the unpleasant image. “So how does he get away with so much?”

Ed ticked off the list of reasons on his fingers. “Well, he’s tenured; he’s been there since the school opened; he’s good at what he does; and he’s best mates with Dr. Payne’s favourite teacher, Harry—”

“Styles,” Zayn finished, smiling. “He’s my mentor.”

“I thought I heard Dr. Payne say that at the meeting,” Ed told him. “Man, did you luck out. He’s bloody fantastic!”

“So we’ve heard,” Niall commented unenthusiastically.

“Yes, but I mean, he really is an outstanding teacher,” Ed said passionately. “I observed a few of his classes last year—you can do that as a new teacher, you know. Anyway, it’s like watching a bloody teaching master class; I was proper impressed.”

“Like I said,” Niall relayed, “we heard he’s good.”

“No, I mean, he’s the real deal,” Ed said fervently, sounding a tad star-struck. “Harry Styles even won the New Teacher of the Year award from the state a few years back. I wasn’t here, obviously, but Dr. Payne’s always going on about it with the parents.”

“New Teacher of the Year?”

“Stop drooling, Zed,” Niall teased, and Zayn blushed because his friend could read him so well. “He’s a bit of a try-hard, this one,” Niall explained to the music teacher. “He won every award at school.”

Zayn blushed deeper. “Not every award, Ni.”

“Just about.”

“Well, with Harry Styles as your mentor teacher,” Ed told him, “you’ve definitely got a fair shot at it.”

“So Ed,” Niall began, changing the subject (and not soon enough in Zayn’s opinion), “you going to tell us how you managed to gain approval for the guitar lessons?”
“Oh yeah, sorry. The Board liked that it didn’t really cost anything; I received a grant and donations for the guitars,” Ed relayed. “Dr. Payne liked that it was an academic motivator for students.”

“How so?” Zayn asked.

“They have to maintain a high GPA so Dr. Payne and the parents love that.”

“He actually likes giving students a positive incentive?” Niall questioned. “I would have thought he’d go for more of the punishment route. You know, locking underperforming students in the school’s dungeon, poisoning the cafeteria food, the odd bit of torture in the chemistry lab….”

“Niall!” Zayn scolded, timidly glancing around the café.

“Oh, come now, Zed; don’t be ridiculous!” Niall scoffed. “I highly doubt our principal is a frequent patron of Espresso Espresso.”

“One can never be too careful where Dr. Payne is concerned,” Ed warned. “But to answer your question, Niall, I overheard Harry Styles saying something once about how Dr. Payne is really into music. Rumour has it he even auditioned for a talent show when he was a kid.”

Niall and Zayn instantly burst into laughter. That had to be the wackiest idea Zayn had ever heard. There was no way Zayn could imagine the stern principal as a pop singer. No way at all.

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On Tuesday, there was a staff meeting ‘afterschool’—the faculty’s very first. Some, like the majority of the social science department, complained that it was pointless to have a staff meeting that afternoon when school wasn’t even in session yet. Zayn could see their point. Half the day had been filled with trainings and department meetings, and his head was already swimming with all kinds of plans and ideas. A staff meeting just seemed like overkill at this point.

“At least there’s cake,” Niall pointed out, finding the silver lining as always.

Zayn craned his neck from where they were stood in line, trying to decipher the writing on the massive sheet cake. “What’s the special occasion anyway?”

“My birthday,” Dr. Payne answered shortly, appearing out of nowhere. (He had a special knack for doing so apparently.)

“Oh…well…um…happy birthday,” Zayn managed, mentally kicking himself.

“Hardly,” Dr. Payne scoffed. “It’s merely an excuse for our social committee to pilfer our precious time under the guise of celebrating an inconsequential marker in my life. They ought to be celebrating an accomplishment of the school. Instead, they deem it necessary to mark an occasion as meritless as a birthday.” He snorted and marched off towards the front of the library. They watched as one of the aides offered him a slice of cake, but he just glared at her until she shrank away.

“So that just happened,” Niall muttered under his breath. Zayn couldn’t have said it better himself.

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“Thought you quit, Zed,” Niall tutted later that evening as Zayn lit up a cigarette on the balcony. 

Zayn had quit…mostly anyway. It was his one major vice (the occasional cigarette when he felt stressed or overwhelmed), one he’d kept hidden from almost everyone—except Niall. “Sorry, I’ll smoke it away from you. I just…needed one.”

“Why?”

“No reason,” Zayn shrugged, avoiding his roommate’s eyes as he blew a puff of smoke out into the humid night air.

“This have anything to do with a certain Dr. Payne?”

“Maybe,” Zayn sighed, taking another drag. “Maybe it has more to do with me though.”

“Don’t blame yourself for the bulletin board fiasco, mate; could’ve happened to anyone.”

“Yeah, but I could’ve read my e-mails earlier,” Zayn pointed out and Niall just hummed in response. “Then I wouldn’t have been late to the evaluation meeting.” Zayn couldn’t help but replay all the lowlights of the past two days in his head. It made him cringe, just thinking about all of his faux pas. He almost forgot about the cigarette he was holding until he felt a warmth at his fingers. He flicked the mountain of ash away and rubbed it out.

Niall cleared his throat. “You know you could’ve told me before, by the way.”

“Told you what?” Zayn searched Niall’s eyes for an answer and then it hit him. “Oh…that.” He couldn’t believe he’d almost forgotten about coming out to his friend (and Louis Tomlinson) yesterday morning.

Niall frowned, looking off at the sunset painting the sky purple and red. His voice became soft, softer than Zayn ever remembered it sounding before. “I know this isn’t about me, but it kind of hurt, your not telling me sooner, Zed.”

Zayn felt the sharpness of disappointment in his friend’s words. “What do you mean?”

“Well, just makes me feel shitty, like you thought I’d judge you or act like a dick if I knew.”

“No, Niall…it’s not that at all,” Zayn assured him, and it really wasn’t. “Look, it’s just…I don’t want to put a label on it or whatever. I think I’m attracted to guys more, but I’ve never really thought about—” he faltered, dipping his eyes, “—that aspect of a relationship. My dreams always sort of ended at ‘they kissed, then lived happily ever after.’”

Niall whistled. “Man, you really are a late bloomer. Well, I reckon we ought to make up for lost time then.” Niall sat up in his chair, and Zayn was already wary before his friend even opened his mouth. “So what did you think about Ed? Seemed like a solid bloke to me, and he was totally into you.”

“Seriously?” Zayn sputtered. “Are you trying to set me up with some guy we just met? You do realise that just because I ‘might’ be gay doesn’t mean I’m going to hit on every single guy I meet, right?”

Niall face broke into a roguish grin. “Why not? That’s my philosophy with women, and it seems to have worked pretty decently for me up ‘til now, if I do say so m’self.”
Zayn groaned, making a memo to himself to never talk about dating or relationships with his roommate again because honestly.

“Well, here’s to Dr. Payne,” Niall commented, raising his beer bottle. “Here’s hoping he gets laid for his birthday because Lord knows he needs it.”

“Do you always have to be so vulgar?”

Niall cocked his head to the side a bit drunkenly. “Just out of curiosity. D’ya think he’s fit?”

Zayn was taken aback by the question. “Why are you asking?”

“No reason. Just trying to get a feel for what you’re into, that’s all, and I heard a few of the female faculty talking about how fit he was.”

Zayn snorted, leaning back in his chair. “Yeah, Stalin was also a looker when he was young. Looks aren’t everything, Ni.”

“Fair enough,” Niall chuckled, hiccupping at the end. “And I know what you mean, Zed. Even if I were into lads, I wouldn’t ride him if he came with pedals.”

“That’s our principal you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Niall agreed, a gleam in his eyes. “Let’s talk about the principal’s secretary instead. Or, we can always go back to the subject of that ginger music teacher….”

Zayn groaned and rose from his chair. That was definitely his cue to leave. Besides, he had some changes he wanted to make to his first week plans before turning in. “Goodnight, Niall.”

“G’night, Zed,” Niall laughed following him a bit unsteadily back into the apartment. “By the way, you’re cute when you blush. I’m sure Ed would agree with me.”

“Shut up, Niall.”

“Love you, Zed.”

“Love you, too, bro.” Zayn smiled despite himself, and in that moment, everything didn’t seem quite as bad as it did before. After all, he had Niall, he’d been assigned a dream mentor, and he was starting to make some friends at the school.

In fact, if Dr. Payne didn’t hate him, everything would be perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the love on the first chapter and hope you enjoyed this one even though it
was a bit fluffy I guess? I don't want to give too much away, but there is the first (one-on-one) Ziam scene in the next chapter. Thoughts? Predictions? ~Maree xx
On the morning of the first day of school, Zayn was a complete and utter wreck. He hadn’t slept the night before; instead, he stayed up all night pacing and reviewing his lesson plans for the umpteenth time. He had chewed his nails to the quick as he battled self-doubt, wondering whether his students would like him, whether his college supervisor was right when she said he was born to be a teacher.

Zayn reminded himself it was normal to have nerves, that even as a kid he’d inevitably be restless, stay up longer than he should the night before the first day of the new school year. When Zayn saw Niall at breakfast, though, he looked his usual sunshine-y self, and it was really difficult not to hold that fact against him. Really difficult.

They arrived early and after checking his mailbox and giving a cursory wave to Ms. Hart, Zayn set on a direct route to his classroom. Dr. Payne was nowhere in sight yet, and Zayn thanked his lucky stars for that. The last thing Zayn needed was to have another unfortunate confrontation with him before his first morning as a real teacher.

Zayn had just rounded the corner when he saw Harry Styles fumbling with his keys. He was obviously struggling—a brown leather bag slung over his shoulder, several books cradled under one arm, and a crimson tumbler tucked under his chin. Zayn sprinted the last few yards to the English teacher’s door and grabbed the tumbler just as it began to slip.

“Cheers, you’re a bloody lifesaver,” Harry exhaled gratefully, adjusting the heavy bag he was toting so he could unlock the door. “Probably should’ve put something down,” he smiled self-deprecatingly. “I must’ve thought I was Superman or something.”

“Superman? No way,” Zayn scoffed. “You’d want a few more appendages, like Doctor Octopus, to manage all that.”

Harry seemed amused. “So you’re into comic books then?”

Zayn bit his lip and shrugged sheepishly. He didn’t mean to reveal his inner geek so early to his mentor, but at least Harry now knew what he was dealing with.

“Listen, I don’t judge, mate; I’m addicted to the Hallmark Channel, and I weep at commercials with mums, babies, or small animals. It’s a problem.”

Zayn chuckled. “Well, glad I could help anyway.”

“Like I said, you’re a lifesaver,” Harry said again. He nudged the door open with the tip of his boot, and Zayn quickly grabbed it for him.

Zayn ducked his head and waited for Harry to pass, a little embarrassed that the other teacher was making such a big deal over nothing.

But Harry wasn’t letting it go. He stayed there in the doorway for a beat until Zayn shyly met his gaze. His mentor had that amused expression on his face again, a mix between a smirk and a Mona Lisa smile. “You think I’m having you on, don’t you? Well, I’m not, I assure you. I’m an absolute
monster without my coffee, and the mysterious brown liquid in the teachers’ lounge doesn’t rate at all in my book. Have you tried it yet?"

“The coffee?” Zayn asked, stifling a yawn. “No, I’m not really a coffee drinker—unless it’s got loads of whipped cream and chocolate, that is.”

“Just wait until you’ve taught here a few months,” Harry clacked. “You’ll be mainlining it like the rest of us.” With that, Harry strode into his classroom, the image of quiet confidence, and set everything on his mahogany desk.

Not really knowing what to do, Zayn followed after him, still carrying the tumbler. While Harry powered on his computer, Zayn discretely examined the English teacher’s classroom.

It was extremely well-organised; everything seemed to be in its right place. At the same time, it was inviting and bulging with character. Patterned fabric covered the bulletin boards and the desks were arranged in a u-shape. On the wall behind the teacher’s desk was an oversized, framed poster of William Shakespeare. It wasn’t the stodgy-looking portrait one would expect in an English teacher’s classroom though. Rather, it was a tiled design of the bard painted with bright, graphic colours a la Andy Warhol. The caption read: Love all, trust a few. Do wrong to none.

“All’s Well That Ends Well, Act one, Scene one,” Harry supplied, and Zayn blinked at him in surprise, feeling sheepish again. He realised he was still holding Harry’s tumbler so he set it down quickly on the desk. The cup’s logo caught his eye: I Love Payne.

He shuddered. Maybe it was just him, but the slogan seemed to clash with the quote above it.

It was probably just him.

“But where are my manners?” Harry chided himself, and Zayn forced himself to stop reading so much into things. “Good morning, Zayn.”

“Good morning, Mister, uh, Harry.”

The amused expression made another appearance but that was it thankfully. Harry didn’t specifically call Zayn out on his awkwardness like Dr. Payne would have. “I have to say that you are certainly here early,” he said approvingly. “Usually I’m the first one in and last one out…in this wing at least.”

“Wanted to make sure everything was ready to go, you know?”

“Are you nervous?”

“Um, me? Uh, no, not really…well, maybe a little.” Zayn tried to sound nonchalant, tried relaxing the tension in his neck and shoulders. It was an epic fail.

Harry cocked his head to the side. “You know you don’t have to pretend in front of me, right?”

Zayn could feel his cheeks heat up. If he were being honest, he was slightly worried that Harry might tell their principal about his weaknesses. “Y-yes?”

“Well that certainly sounded convincing!” Harry re-joined before lowering his voice as if he were divulging a great secret. “I won’t tell anyone about anything confidential we discuss—including your feelings, doubts, and insecurities. If this is going to work—” he motioned between the two of them, “—you need to trust me, okay? I’m one of the ‘few’ Will up there was referring to.” His eyes once again found the Shakespeare poster Zayn had been admiring earlier.
Zayn returned his gaze to him and gave a shy nod. Zayn would have to take a chance on trusting him. Harry obviously knew what he was doing, and Zayn needed all the help he could get—especially after the disastrous last few days.

“Alright, then!” Harry exclaimed cheerily, clapping his hands together. “Do you need any last minute help before we open for business?”

“No but thanks for asking.”

“Remember—I’m right next door if you need me. Also, be sure to e-mail Jo if you find you’re missing anything. She’s always on top of things.”

“Ah, don’t you just love women who are on top of things?” a voice interjected. Zayn spun around to see Louis Tomlinson leaning against the doorframe, a sly grin upon his boyishly handsome face. “Or, maybe I should change that to ‘men who are on top of things,’ present company and all.”

Zayn could feel his cheeks heating up.

“Really, Tomlinson?” Harry scolded, pushing his friend out the door and wheeling him back down the hall as Zayn tagged along a few feet behind. “You are not going to be bothering Mr. Malik with your laddish behaviour when it’s his first time—”

“Well, geez, Styles,” Louis hooted entirely too loudly for Zayn’s liking. “Why didn’t you bloody tell me it was the boy’s first time?”

Harry rolled his eyes and shoved his friend away while Zayn tried his best to hide his horrified expression. The drama teacher feigned all kinds of theatrics before ‘falling’ down the stairs. When he reached the bottom, Louis cupped his hands to his face and shouted up to them:

“Happy first day of school, you two! Oh, and Zayn—don’t screw up, yeah?” He then saluted and marched off to torment his next victim.

“Please excuse his behaviour,” Harry said almost fondly. “I would call it temporary insanity, but unfortunately, he’s been acting like that ever since I met him.”

Zayn considered asking why they were still friends but figured he didn’t know Harry well enough to go there.

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “best of luck today—not that you need it, Mr. Malik.”

“Thank you, Mr. Styles,” Zayn returned, practicing calling his mentor by his last name for the students.

Soon after, those students began shuffling in for his first class, sixth-grade Ancient History. Zayn taught two section of this, and his younger students were well-behaved and just absolutely lovely in general. Of course, this was the first year at Payne Academy for all of them, and they looked about as scared and apprehensive as Zayn felt.

Zayn’s second hour class was World Geography. This was an effortless course for him to teach since geography was one of his strongpoints (as was anything that required rote memorisation). But even with a solid memory, Zayn still had to glance at his schedule after every hour to check which class came next. He wondered how long it would be before his teaching schedule became ingrained in him:
1st Hour: Ancient History (Grade 6)

2nd Hour: World Geography (Grade 10-12)

3rd Hour: Honours World History (Grades 11/12)

4th Hour: World History and Cultures (Grade 9)

(Lunch)

5th Hour: World History and Cultures (Grade 9)

6th Hour: Ancient History (Grade 6)

7th Hour: Plan

8th Hour: World History (Grades 11/12)

By the time lunch came, Zayn wanted to throw his hands in the air and sing the “Hallelujah” chorus. (Or better yet, crawl under his desk with one of Niall’s whisky bottles. Too bad he didn’t drink.) As he took in the organised mess before him, Zayn marvelled that other teachers actually found time to eat downstairs in the teachers’ lounge. The idea of being able to escape from his classroom even for twenty minutes seemed unfathomable to him at this point.

By his seventh hour plan time, Zayn was ready to lay his head on his desk and take a nap. He was exhausted, and his lack of sleep the night before wasn’t helping. The one thing that kept him going was the fact that Zayn couldn’t ask for better, more attentive students. They all seemed eager to learn, and their behaviour was certainly exemplary. He chalked this up to the overall school focus on respect and discipline. Perhaps Dr. Payne’s authoritarian rule really was for the best.

And then came eighth hour, his last class of the day.

To say these students were unruly was an understatement. Zayn tried every classroom management technique he’d learned in college but nothing seemed to work. They passed notes, texted each other on phones only semi-hidden under their desks, popped bubble gum, dropped textbooks and pencils, whispered and giggled loudly during his instruction, and ignored his directions when Zayn gave them a simple assignment.

It was a nightmare; one which Zayn was thoroughly unprepared for after having such a smooth ride up until that point.

He was ready the next day though.

Zayn decided to speak with his mentor on Friday morning before school. (Zayn had already commiserated with Niall on Thursday night, but since their subject matter was so vastly different, his friend couldn’t provide much help beyond his usual moral support.) Harry told him it was a bad combination of students but that most of them were really great kids. Zayn always thought the best of people, and it appeared that Harry evidently had a similar positive outlook.

His mentor’s advice was to go after the ringleaders of the group and gain their trust. Harry also gave him a few tips for reeling the class in once they started getting out of hand. He offered to come in
and speak with Zayn’s class if they didn’t get into line in the next few days, but this was the last thing Zayn wanted. In his mind, it was bad enough he had to ask Harry for advice in the first place.

The second week of school was much better. Zayn laid down ground rules and expectations for this class above and beyond his other classes. Even though Zayn just wanted to be the warm and nurturing teacher he always desired to be, he remained firm and resolute...and it worked. By the next Thursday, Zayn was sure he had nipped the majority of the disciplinary problems in the bud.

Then came Friday.

Derek, a seventeen-year-old varsity footballer and one such ‘ringleader,’ was flirting loudly with a pretty redhead in the class. When Zayn asked him to pay attention, the boy had cursed under his breath.

Zayn didn’t tolerate swearing in his classroom. To be honest, he didn’t much care for it outside of the classroom either. He’d been brought up with the notion that the prolific use of foul language was a sign of low intelligence. Yes, he did his best to tolerate the minor language Niall and some of their other friends used, but Zayn still didn’t like it.

Besides, Derek had directed the curse at him, and Zayn wasn’t going to put up with that, new teacher or not. He sent the boy to the principal’s office.

When Derek returned to class about twenty minutes later, Zayn began to rethink the hasty office referral. Derek’s usual demeanour was bold and brash. Now, he looked like a timid rabbit as he edgily tip-toed to his seat towards the back of the classroom. Derek’s face was an ashen white, and he kept wringing his hands nervously. In short, he appeared absolutely terrified.

Zayn wanted Derek to respect him and the school rules, but he didn’t want the boy to be scared out of his wits. At one point, Zayn called on him to parrot back a relatively easy response, but Derek just stared back at him wide-eyed, a line of sweat forming across his brow. It was as if he were shell-shocked.

From then on, Zayn decided he’d do his best to handle as many problems within the classroom as he could.

When Monday came and there wasn’t a significant change in Derek’s manner, Zayn began to grow concerned. He questioned the true cause of the boy’s change in attitude. Zayn had automatically assumed the transformation was a direct result of the office referral, but maybe that was only a small part of a bigger picture. Maybe there was something going on at home as well.

Whatever it was that was bothering Derek, Zayn felt like it was his duty to at least offer his assistance. And so, with that thought in mind, he asked Derek to stay after class. Reluctantly, the footballer agreed.

Zayn waited until the rest of the students had filed out, then called the student up to his desk.
“Derek, is there anything you’d like to talk to me about?”

“Oh, no…Mr. Malik,” the boy mumbled, shoving his hands in his large pockets and shifting back and forth uncomfortably. His eyes darted nervously towards the door.

“Derek, I asked you to stay after today because you just don’t, well, seem like yourself.” The boy didn’t respond so Zayn ploughed on, ever the optimist. “I want you to feel that my class is a safe learning environment. Don’t get me wrong—it’s important that you follow the expectations I outlined the first few days; however, I want you to feel like this class is a place where you can
express yourself and your ideas.”

“Yes, Mr. Malik,” Derek responded dutifully, still not looking at his teacher.

Zayn sighed. “Derek, if there’s anything wrong…anything at all…you do know that our school counsellors would be more than happy to help you work through any problem you may be encountering, whether it’s at home or school, right?”

The boy grunted, then carefully covered it up with a well-timed cough.

Zayn tried one last time. “Listen, if you are being bullied by another student or—”

Derek snorted before immediately clapping both hands over his mouth. His eyes peered back at Zayn with alarm, an expression on his face that could only be described as one of pure terror. He flung his hands on the edge of his teacher’s desk.

“Oh God, Mr. Malik—please don’t report me,” he begged, breath ragged. “I swear I didn’t mean to disrespect you just now. Please don’t say anything, I-I….” His voice trailed off as his wild eyes studied Zayn’s face.

Zayn was dumbfounded.

“No Derek, it’s fine,” he managed, and the boy visibly relaxed, taking a step back. “Please don’t worry so much, okay?” Zayn sighed in defeat as he straightened up to his full height. Even so, he was still shorter than the teenager. “And keep in mind what I said about talking to someone about your problems, yes? I hate to see any of my students this stressed.”

“Yes, Mr. Malik. I’ll keep that in mind,” the student obediently replied.

“Thank you, Derek. You may go,” Zayn said resignedly. The boy was out the door in a flash.

Hours later, one thing still nagged Zayn about the conversation. In fine, he couldn’t figure out Derek’s strange reaction to the suggestion he might be a victim of bullying at the hands of another student.

Apparently, some things about the lives of teenaged boys weren’t meant to be understood…even if Zayn was a teenaged boy only a few years ago.

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Before he knew it, it was time to schedule his initial observation with Dr. Payne. He had heeded Harry’s advice and had stayed away from Dr. Payne since school began. Aside from a couple of staff meetings (where Zayn hid in the back) and the odd hallway sighting (where Zayn would duck into random classrooms, closets, and bathrooms), he hadn’t had any contact with his principal at all.

And that was just fine by him.

Needless to say, Zayn was dreading the observation. He could envision Dr. Payne licking his lips like a predator about to pounce on its prey, delighted to have the opportunity to rip into the new teacher who couldn’t do anything right—in Liam Payne’s book at least.

Zayn signed up for one of the first time slots, wanting to get the unsavoury task over with. Still, the
date came faster than he could have imagined.

He felt relatively confident about the hour Dr. Payne would be observing (first) and the lesson he planned—especially after Harry gave his approval. In class, they’d been studying the Indus Valley Civilisation, and the lesson was a culmination of a week-long examination of the Caste System. The students would be forming two teams to debate the benefits and dangers of social hierarchies. His mentor had praised the lesson design and gave pointers and suggestions about what their principal would be looking for. Zayn had taken to heart every single one of them.

Still, it was impossible not to be nervous. It was his first observation after all, and what he did today could either make him or break him.

Zayn became aware of Dr. Payne’s presence while he was in the middle of taking roll. There was a marked change in the atmosphere, as if all the oxygen, warmth, and happiness in the room was suddenly trussed out like they’d just been overrun with Dementors straight from Azkaban.

Zayn timidly scanned the classroom until his eyes fell upon the corner of the room where his evaluator had planted himself. The history teacher attempted a smile in greeting. Dr. Payne looked up momentarily from his MacBook but didn’t smile back.

Zayn swallowed, took a deep breath, and began the lesson.

From what Zayn could tell from the few furtive glances he braved in his principal’s direction, Dr. Payne seemed pleased with the lesson. (Well, he didn’t seem completely displeased at any rate.) Zayn figured he enjoyed the topic—the Caste System. Dr. Payne liked a good social pecking order, and right now, Zayn was clearly at the bottom of said order.

Zayn started to relax. He lost himself in his lesson, no longer worrying about the man in the corner or anything aside from his students and the content matter. But then, about halfway through class, his evaluator closed his laptop and focused his full attention on Zayn.

It was hard to explain but Dr. Payne was staring at him—not in the usual observation kind of way—but actually *staring*. In fact, Zayn didn’t think there was a time when Dr. Payne took his penetrating gaze off him, even to watch the students. Zayn found himself fumbling over a word a couple times, and he hoped his nervousness wasn’t as noticeable as it felt.

When the bell rang to signify the end of first hour, Dr. Payne carefully tucked his laptop under his arm and marched towards the front of the classroom. “Mr. Malik, I expect to see you in my office today at fifteen thirty hours for your post-observation debriefing.”

Then, Dr. Payne gave an assertive nod and clicked his heels (or maybe Zayn just imagined that last part). He stopped just inside the doorway, letting the last few students duck past him. “Oh, and *please* be prompt, Mr. Malik. I am also meeting with Mr. Horan this afternoon, and we both know your reputation when it comes to punctuality.”

With that, he exited the classroom, leaving Zayn to wonder how in the world he was ever going to find the courage to survive a one-on-one meeting with his principal.

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Zayn took a shuddering breath and rapped softly on the door to the principal’s office. Ms. Hart shot him a sympathetic look, but instead of emboldening him, it just made Zayn feel like a sheep heading to slaughter.

“Come in!” Dr. Payne barked from the other side and Zayn nearly jumped out of his skin. Quivering in his boots, Zayn turned the handle and opened the solid wooden door. It gave a protesting, creaking sound that sounded like a sound effect straight out of a horror flick.

His eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness of the room he’d just entered. The outer office was bright and cheery with large windows that let in natural light. Dr. Payne’s office, however, was anything but. There was nothing decorative or personal about the space. One wouldn’t even know it was a school administrator’s office if the books on educational theory and assessment techniques weren’t visible on the plain, metal bookshelf. Dark panelling adorned the walls, and blinds covered the only source of light beyond the yellow glow of the green banker’s lamp upon his desk.

And that was where Dr. Payne was sat, head down, seemingly absorbed in the paperwork in front of him. There was a stately ebony and gold nameplate before him which read Dr. Liam Payne, Principal.

“Please have a seat, Mr. Malik,” he instructed without glancing up. Gulping, Zayn did so, finding a chair at the small hexagon-shaped table towards the back of the office. Dr. Payne soon rose from his desk and shut the door before joining the history teacher at the table. Zayn figured the closed door was customary since they were discussing confidential, personnel matters; however, this knowledge didn’t make him feel any more at ease.

“Shall we get started?” Dr. Payne stated more than asked.

Zayn nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak. He prepared himself for the worst as he waited for the man who held the fate of his teaching career to continue.

“You are a young, inexperienced, novice teacher; yet, I do not feel that you are without merit. Your...how shall I say it?” He leaned in closer. “Your potential is quite profound, Mr. Malik.” He paused for a moment to let his words sink in. “With the proper guidance from Mr. Styles and, well, myself, I think you could become an outstanding educator.”

Zayn sat there blinking for a moment, trying to process what he just heard. He had been all set with a ready apology, a promise that he’d do better next time. Now, he struggled for something to say in the alternate universe he’d just been transported into.

“Th-thank you?”

The corners of Dr. Payne’s lips curled up, and he pushed a paper towards Zayn. “I just need you to sign this then, indicating we both agree you are making satisfactory progress.”

Zayn glanced over the document, relieved more than he should have been to see the appropriate box checked, and signed it before his principal changed his mind.

“Please read over the observation notes I will be e-mailing you this afternoon,” Dr. Payne continued after Zayn handed the pen back to him. “They outline the small improvements I would like you to make before our next observation in the second quarter. You may choose to review these with Mr. Styles if you wish. In fact, I would highly recommend you doing so as he may be able to offer you additional insights.”

“Yes...yes, of course. I want nothing more than to improve as a teacher,” Zayn declared with
earnestness. “Is—is that all, sir?”

“No, I have one more matter to discuss with you, Mr. Malik.” He loosened the knot of his necktie a smidge before clearing his throat. If Zayn didn’t know better, he’d say the man was nervous.

But that was completely ridiculous.

“Remember, teaching is a noble profession and you want to ensure your appearance isn’t at odds with that notion.” Dr. Payne’s eyes scanned over him, and Zayn wished he’d put more thought into the outfit he chose for that day. “I would suggest wearing more…professional and form-flattering clothes. I’m sure those oversized polos and baggy khakis would do at university, but you are no longer a university student, Mr. Malik. You are supposed to be a role model to the students here at Payne Academy and that entails looking your best.”

Zayn was taken aback. He’d never gotten a comment like that before. “Am I not dressing professionally, sir?”

“I wouldn’t exactly say that, Mr. Malik,” he replied, massaging his chin thoughtfully. It struck Zayn then that Dr. Payne might almost be handsome if his jaw wasn’t always set in a scowl and his eyes weren’t routinely clouded with unkindness. “Let me put it this way…I have high expectations when it comes to the dress code at this school. I believe one should dress for success, as it were, and I believe you are selling yourself short.”

“Yes, I understand, sir.”

“Good,” he replied, clearly pleased. There was the ghost of a smile before the cold professionalism returned. “Thank you, Mr. Malik. You are dismissed.” He stood up brusquely and carried the signed document back to his desk. He seemed to forget Zayn was even there, immediately refocusing his attention on the files littered across the top of his desk.

Zayn barrelled out of the office, forgetting to watch where he was going as he collided with another body right outside Dr. Payne’s door.

“Whoa there!” a familiar voice chuckled, capturing Zayn in his arms.

“Sorry, Ni,” Zayn said sheepishly. “Didn’t see you.”

“That’s okay, long as you warmed him up for me, Zed,” Niall offered good-humouredly. Ms. Hart giggled in the background and Niall winked back at her.

“I uh….”

“Everything’s okay, right?” Niall whispered. He placed a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder, friendly blue eyes searching Zayn’s.

“Yeah,” Zayn admitted hesitantly. “Everything is…great?”

Niall grinned and gave Zayn’s shoulder a squeeze. “You sound like you’re a bit dazed, mate. You weren’t really expecting bad news were you?”

“I mean, I—”

“The time is now fifteen forty-seven, Mr. Horan. Please do not tell me that Mr. Malik’s unpunctuality is rubbing off on you,” Dr. Payne complained wearily. “I would suggest you step into this office if you wish to hear my assessment of your lesson today—that is, if you are still interested
in keeping your current position at this school.”

Dr. Payne’s gaze slowly shifted from Niall’s face to the lingering hand he had on Zayn’s shoulder. Zayn found himself stepping to the side, putting some space between himself and his friend. He didn’t want their principal to get the wrong idea.

With an impatient gesture, Dr. Payne ushered Niall into his office. Zayn almost tripped over his feet as he scurried to get back to his classroom as rapidly as humanly possible.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year, everyone! I’ve been travelling during the holiday (and just busy af), but I made a push to get this new chapter out to you because there were so many lovely comments on the last one. Sooo...let me know what you thought about the Ziam meeting in this chapter. Were you surprised at all? Any characters you particularly like or dislike? What do you think will happen next? ~Maree xx
"Where do you buy ‘appropriate’ work attire anyway?" Zayn stood in the centre of the shopping mall, completely and utterly out of his comfort zone. Usually he just let his mom buy clothes for him. It was easier, and she liked doing it. It made her happy.

Zayn liked making people happy.

But Dr. Payne had intimated that Zayn didn’t look professional enough, didn’t look the part of a teacher, and he probably had a point. Zayn’s wardrobe was too young and too preppy the more he thought about it; it needed an update.

“I dunno…fancy trying Macy’s?” Niall suggested, and Zayn figured it sounded as good as the next shop. Zayn let Niall lead the way because although neither of them had visited the mall since they moved to Wisteria Falls, his best mate had an innate ability to find his way anywhere—especially if it involved shopping or food.

They entered the store which was already terrifyingly decked-out in wreaths, ornaments, and other Christmas decorations. Once they managed to powerwalk past the perfume counters without being accosted, Zayn immediately spotted a rack of designer clothing that looked like it was straight out of Harry’s Styles’ close—all embroidered suit jackets and the like. He checked a couple of price tags and almost fainted dead away.

“You’re in the wrong section, bro,” Niall chuckled. “Those are for birds anyway, ya git. Men’s is upstairs.”

They spent the next hour perusing the different designs. Zayn decided to go for a tailored, sophisticated look, and a sales assistant helped point them in the right direction. Zayn tried on outfit after outfit, and Niall patiently waited outside the fitting room, giving his verdict on each and every item.

One time when Zayn stepped out of the fitting room, Niall handed him several pairs of jeans. "Try these on, mate.”

Zayn wrinkled his nose. “They’re skinny jeans. You know I don’t wear skinny jeans, Niall.”

“Well, it’s time you start. The ones you’re wearing now are total crap, mate; ought to be banned as a crime against humanity.”

“Hey, my mom picked those out!”

Niall wiggled his eyebrows. “My point exactly, Zed.”

Zayn couldn’t help but laugh at that. “But I can’t wear them to work so why bother?”

“Yes, you can. Tomlinson wears skinnier jeans than that every Friday without fail so don’t tell me you can’t. Besides,” Niall said, eyes twinkling mischievously, “you need to have something to wear for your date with Ed.”
“Date with Ed?” Zayn echoed, completely baffled.

“Yeah, the one he’s gonna ask you on once he finds the bollocks to do it.” Niall grinned cheekily. “Now, just try ‘em on already.”

Zayn did as he was told, almost dying of embarrassment when Niall declared that if Ed wasn’t already planning on asking Zayn out, the jeans would do the trick. He decided to buy a couple of pairs to make Niall happy and because, well, he didn’t look half-bad in them.

While Zayn dumped his new swag on the counter, Niall flirted with the young, attractive girl behind said counter. Zayn looked at her name badge: Lainey. She looked like a Lainey with her pouty lips and vivacious eyes. She also looked a few years younger than them—probably still in college. Zayn side-eyed Niall, but the man wasn’t paying attention.

“This is just a stepping stone,” the blonde told Niall, “my dream is to be on the stage one day.” She sighed wistfully, looking up with a dreamy expression as if she were imagining her name on some distant marquee.

“So,” Zayn started casually, “are you studying theatre at one of the local colleges then?” She seemed to notice him for the first time. “I hear Wisteria Falls Community College has a good programme.”

She giggled prettily. “No, I’m still in high school, but my school does have an awesome theatre programme. “I’m a senior at Payne Academy—ever hear of it?” she asked and the question immediately sent Niall into a violent coughing fit.

“Really?” Zayn responded with enthusiasm, ignoring the dirty look Niall was sending his way. “What a coincidence because we’re both teachers at Payne Academy!”

“Oh you must be Mr. Horan, then!” she exclaimed, beaming at Niall. “A couple of my friends are in your class, and they’re just in love with…um…your class,” she finished awkwardly.

“Well, hope they still feel the same by the end of the semester,” Niall cracked, loosening up again.

“You know,” Lainey said breathily, “I’ve always been wildly interested in the art of cooking.”

Zayn didn’t like where this was going. “Thought you said you were into acting,” he reminded her as he collected his shopping bags and receipt.

Lainey blinked sweetly. “Well, cooking has always been my secret passion. I was actually thinking about signing up for a class next semester—”

“Oh, Mr. Horan,” Zayn cut her off, “I just remember we have that urgent matter to attend to, you know the one….” Zayn gave him a pointed look.

“Oh…uh, yes! That’s right, Mr. Malik,” he responded after a beat. “Well, it was nice meeting you, Lainey,” he called as Zayn practically dragged him out of the store.
“Bloody hell, that was close,” Niall admitted. “I can’t believe she’s a student at Payne. Yikes.”

“Major yikes,” Zayn agreed as he found a bench and collapsed in it with his bags.

“Niall plopped down beside him. “Yeah, I want to be more careful, I suppose. Almost got myself into a proper mess there.”

“Yeah, the last thing you need is to be accidentally dating one of the students,” Zayn snorted.

“What? I was just—”

“…Being a complete flirt,” Zayn finished for him.

Niall was about to defend himself but then just shrugged and grinned sheepishly. “Yeah, basically,” he acknowledged, bursting into a laughter that became contagious. Before long, they were both doubled over on the mall bench.

After a minute, Zayn inhaled deeply through his nose and tried to calm himself. “You know, even though that was totally hilarious, it could have turned out really badly,” he said soberly. “I hate to say it, but you do need to grow up a bit, Niall. We are supposed to be role models for the students, after all.”

“Jaysus, you could be Dr. Payne,” Niall muttered. “In my evaluation meeting he basically said I was smashing it except.…”

“Except?”

“Except I need to make sure the students see me as a teacher and not as a friend.”

“Well look at it this way,” Zayn said light-heartedly, “at least you didn’t have to go out and buy a new wardrobe.” He was expecting Niall to laugh, but for some reason, his friend seemed to wax contemplative all of a sudden.

“What is it, Ni?” Zayn prodded.

“It’s…um…nothing,” Niall dismissed, running his thumb along his lower lip thoughtfully.

“Come on, tell me,” Zayn encouraged, scooting closer to him on the bench. His best mate seemed to be having an inner battle about whether or not he should divulge what was on his mind. “Niall, do you remember what we promised each other the summer after fifth-grade?”

“That was the summer we built the treehouse out back in the forest behind our houses, wasn’t it?” he mused fondly. They both paused for a moment, thinking back to the days when life seemed so simple and…perfect.

“Yes, but do you recall what we promised each other?”

“Yes, Zed, we…we promised we’d never keep secrets,” he answered hesitantly.

“Well?”

“Fine, I’ll tell you,” he caved. “It’s just…stupid, that’s all.” He swung his legs, scuffing his heels against the floor before facing his friend. “Zed, don’t you think it’s a little odd? You know, Dr. Payne asking you to dress a certain way and all?!”

“You’re just salty because you used to dress this way a few years back,” Zayn teased, confused that
Niall had been so averse to asking him something as banal as this. He’d expected much worse with the way the Irishman was carrying on.

“Yeah but my clothes at least fit,” Niall joked before frowning again. “But I meant more that I was surprised he’d say anything about the way you dress and all. It’s very personal, that critique.”

“Appearance is a category on the evaluation form so I would assume it has to be fair game, right?”

“You’re probably right,” he murmured absently, still not sounding completely convinced.

“Of course I am.” Zayn bounced to his feet, relieved there wasn’t anything of real import troubling his friend. “Now where should we go next?”

Niall shook off his brooding expression. “I say we get you a proper haircut and style.”

Zayn rolled his eyes. “Is this to help me look more professional or to help me get a date with a certain ginger music teacher?”

Niall chuckled wickedly, swatting at Zayn’s arm as he took one of his shopping bags. “There’s nothing wrong with killing two birds with one stone, mate. Not a bloody thing.”

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Ed’s cheeks reddened, clashing with his hair. “Um, so Zayn—I was thinking you could maybe come to mine after school today?” he proposed, scratching at the scruff on his chin. “We could plan that collaborative music history class we discussed a while back.”

They’d just found a table in the teachers’ lounge—Zayn, Ed, and Niall—when the music teacher made the suggestion. Zayn wasn’t in the habit of eating with his fellow teachers every day. Sometimes he found it difficult to pull himself away from his classroom in the middle of the day, but Niall was right: Zayn did need to get away from it all for at least a few minutes each day if only for his mental well-being.

“Well, what d’ya say?” Ed timidly prompted.

“I’d love to get started on that syllabus,” Zayn smiled, setting his lunch on the table. “What time were you thinking?”

“About four? Oh, and Niall,” Ed added almost as an afterthought, “You’re invited as well.”

“Am I now?” Niall questioned amusedly. “Something tells me I might be more like a third wheel, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh no, not at all!” Ed exclaimed, seemingly aghast. “I mean I certainly wasn’t suggesting that Zayn come over to my flat for any other reason than to…. He swallowed. “Shite, I’m making it worse, aren’t I?”

Niall laughed boisterously, slapping him on the back. “It’s alright, mate—whatever your intentions. Zed’s old enough to make his own decisions…well, most of the time anyway.”

Zayn was about to make a reproving remark when his eyes and ears were diverted to a sudden commotion in the doorway. That’s when he saw Louis and Harry walk in with trays from the
cafeteria. The two were practically attached at the hip, sniggering loudly about something or other—and Louis, obnoxiously so.

Although Harry was his mentor, Zayn still felt a little uncomfortable about conversing with the English teacher on a purely social basis. It probably stemmed from the fact that Harry was the superstar teacher around the school. It wasn’t hard to notice that the other faculty members treated Harry differently. He was special. He was the one who had won an award from the state. He was Dr. Payne’s “fair-haired boy.”

And Zayn was a novice teacher. He clearly wasn’t on the same plane as Harry…not yet anyway.

Zayn’s eyes followed his mentor as he ambled towards a table with teachers Zayn didn’t know. Louis stopped his friend just before he sat down:

“Hey, Styles, my boy…what do you say we join the newbies’ table?” Louis’ high-pitched voice pierced through the din despite the fact he was clear across the lounge. “Hey, newbies!” he shouted and everyone in the crowded lounge looked up. “You mind if we sit with you—Harold and I?”

Niall frowned slightly, but Ed looked beyond delighted as if he were honoured by the veteran teachers’ mere presence.

“Oh my Gosh, the Harry Styles is going to sit at our table!” Ed gushed, much to Niall’s chagrin.

Zayn had thought that teaching would be different from high school and even college where the popular kids ruled the roost, but apparently, it wasn’t all that different…at all.

The only real difference, as far as Zayn could see, was that now the school bully was the principal.

And admittedly, Zayn had received a more than decent review of his first observed lesson, but he knew he wasn’t out of the woods yet.

Louis sauntered over, not waiting for an affirmative response from any of the ‘newbies.’ The drama teacher placed his tray next to Zayn’s lunch, shoving Niall’s plate out of the way in the process. “Budge up,” he ordered.

Zayn was flabbergasted because there were three vacant chairs already on the other side of the large, round table. Harry was content to set his tray down and sit in one of these, but Louis evidently wished to sit between Niall and him for some inexplicable reason.

“I said budge up, Horan,” Louis repeated, and Zayn bit his lip nervously. For a moment, he was afraid Niall was going to refuse and make some snarky comment, but then the culinary arts teacher reluctantly obliged, scooting a few inches to the right. Louis grabbed a chair from a neighbouring table and boorishly lodged it into the narrow space.

If Zayn didn’t know better, he would swear that Louis was trying to wind Niall up. One glance at his best friend told Zayn that if doing so was Louis’ intention, his plan was working perfectly.

Just when Zayn thought the current circumstances couldn’t get any more awkward, their principal breezed into the teachers’ lounge. A hush immediately fell over the room at the unlikely visitor who, after quickly scanning the lounge, found his target.

“Oh, there you are!” Principal Payne bellowed, bee-lining straight for their table.

“Ten bucks says he wants to speak with Styles,” Louis stage-whispered, an irreverent smirk playing at his lips.
“Mr. Styles, could I speak with you for a moment?”

“Of course, sir!” Harry chirruped, immediately jumping to his feet and following their principal into the corner of the lounge by the kitchen area.

“Man, I must be psychic,” Louis joked, opening his soda can while unabashedly staring at Harry and their principal. Zayn followed his sightline and watched as Harry nodded his head, evidently agreeing to whatever Dr. Payne asked him. Zayn quickly turned away, however, as the pair started back towards the table.

“Mr. Horan and Mr. Malik!”

Zayn instantly looked up when he heard his principal address him. Dr. Payne seemed to do a double-take then, eyes laser-ing over Zayn’s changed appearance. It made the new teacher feel a little self-conscious, and he wished he hadn’t let Niall and that stylist gang up on him at the salon, convincing him he ought to get some trendy haircut when a trim would’ve sufficed.

Dr. Payne blinked but thankfully didn’t say anything negative regarding Zayn’s appearance.

“Right. You two will need to stop by my office today at your convenience to sign a few forms. It should only take a few minutes of your time.”

Zayn inwardly cringed but at least it sounded like something quick and painless.

Mr. Horan, Dr. Payne added almost as an afterthought, “just in case Ms. Hart has not informed you yet, you’ll have a new student starting this afternoon in your seventh hour class.”

“Oh?” Niall returned, jotting down a note to himself on a napkin. “Is the student brand-new to Payne Academy?”

“No, she is transferring from another class. Usually I don’t allow transfers at this point in the school year, but there were…uh…special circumstances involved,” Dr. Payne explained. “And although her father happens to be on the board, I want you to know that this fact did not weigh heavily in my decision process.” He straightened his already stiff collar. “We must make exceptions once in a while for the positive well-being of our students, mustn’t we? After all, one does try to be flexible, you know.”

Louis let out a barely audible snort but was wise enough to cover it up directly afterwards with a cough.

“Something caught in your throat, Mr. Tomlinson?” Dr. Payne questioned him, eyes narrowing.

The drama teacher smiled innocently. “Just a little tickle, sir.”

“Could you tell me the student’s name, sir?” Niall asked, ignoring the teacher next to him.

“Yes, her name is Lainey Anderson,” Dr. Payne answered, and Zayn dropped the spoon for his yoghurt. It clattered to the ground at the same time Niall spat out his water.

Lainey Anderson. It could just be a coincidence that Niall’s new student had the same first name as the checkout girl at Macy’s, the one Niall had been unknowingly flirting with. The blonde had said she was a senior at Payne so it certainly seemed possible that this was the same girl. On the other hand, the name wasn’t uncommon. Maybe Zayn was just jumping to conclusions.

But the uneasy look on his best friend’s face told him Niall was thinking the exact same thing.
Dr. Payne arched his brow lazily. “Everything alright, Mr. Horan? Mr. Malik?”

“Yes, sir,” they chorused.

“Well then, please carry on with your lunch.” Dr. Payne then stooped to pick up the utensil Zayn had dropped, clapping the handle between his thumb and pointer finger as if picking up a used tissue or some other undesirable object. He unceremoniously released it on the table in front of Zayn, sighed loudly, and exited the lounge.

“As you were!” Louis shouted as soon as he was gone and several teachers chuckled at his cheekiness. The normal level of chatter returned to the lounge as Louis turned his attention on Harry. “So what did the old boy want?”

“Nothing.”

“C’mon, Styles!” Louis whinged. “He dragged you away from your lunch, for crying out loud! It had to be something.”

“Fine, you’re right; it was something,” Harry acknowledged.

“Ha! I knew it!” Louis cheered triumphantly, eyes lighting up. “Well, what did he want then?”

“None of your business, Tommo,” Harry said good-naturedly.

Zayn couldn’t help but chuckle at that, and Harry peeked up, the hint of a smile on his lips as he winked at his mentee.

Louis’ hand flew to his heart dramatically. "'How sharper than a serpent's tooth to have a thankless’ best mate!"

“Stop butchering Shakespeare,” Harry chided. “Leave that to your students in your next production.”

The table burst into laughter—especially Ed—but the ginger ceased laughing the instant Louis gave him the ‘evil eye.’

Harry seemed to notice Ed for the first time even though he was sitting right beside him. “Hey, you’re one of the music teachers, aren’t you?” he asked, smiling. “Ed, right?” Ed just nodded and gawked at the English teacher like he was a celebrity…which he kind of was—in the school anyway.

Louis gave a long-suffering sigh. “You really do need to get with it, Styles. Maybe show up to a social committee meeting once in a while.”

“But I’m not on social committee, Tommo.”

“Details,” Louis declared, waving the ‘excuse’ off. “And Malik…I’ve been meaning to ask what the bloody hell happened to you?”

Zayn knitted his eyebrows together. “I’m not on social committee either—that I know of.”

“No, no, no,” Louis tsked. “Nothing to do with social committee, son. Strike the words ‘social’ and ‘committee’ from your brain for the present because we’ve far more important things to discuss.”

“Such as?” Harry prompted, voice laced with scepticism.
“Such as how Malik, here, looks like a changed man.”

“Changed?” Zayn echoed as all eyes at the table focused on him.

“Fit. Polished. GQ-esque, I’d venture,” Louis clucked approvingly. “And that quiff does wonders for your cheekbones, Malik. I thought your jawline was your best feature but apparently, I was in error. It’s definitely the cheekbones.” He pinched Zayn’s cheek before nudging Niall with his elbow. “Wouldn’t you say, Horan?”

“I’m sure you’re right, Tomlinson,” Niall grumbled back, scooting a few inches away in his chair.

“Well, um, thanks,” Zayn managed, feeling more than a little self-conscious again. “Niall convinced me to get it cut and helped me pick out some new clothes and stuff,” Zayn confessed.

“I’m sure he did,” Louis smirked, sharing an ‘I-told-you-so’ look with Harry who pretended not to notice.

Niall rolled his eyes. “Not to change the subject or anything, but I just found out we’ve got another observation coming up, Zed,” he declared and Zayn groaned inwardly. “Ed, guess you get to skip this one, ya lucky bastard.”

“When’s it due?” Ed asked, dipping a wad of French fries in the ketchup-mayonnaise combo he’d just whipped up. “Hey, could you pass the mustard?” Zayn handed it over and the man proceeded to squirt a yellow glob on top of the condiment concoction he’d already created.

“Lesson plan’s due by mid-October,” Niall revealed, distractedly eying Ed’s tray with dismay, “and the observation needs to be scheduled directly after that, I guess.”

“Crap, I didn’t realise the deadline was coming up so soon, Zayn,” Harry admitted, his brow furrowed. “They generally give you a bit of breathing room between observations, but this way, you’ll be able to get it over with faster,” he offered, trying to put the information in a positive light.

“No worries, Harry.”

“I feel like I’ve botched my job as a mentor—not catching that and all,” Harry tutted, clearly upset with himself. “Thanks for the reminder, Niall; Zayn’s lucky you’ve got his back.”

Louis snickered. “Oh, yeah, Horan’s DEFINITELY got that boy’s backside, if y’know what I mean.”

Embarrassed by the rude comment, Zayn stabbed a large piece of lettuce and shoved it into his mouth so he wouldn’t have to say anything or look at anyone—especially Louis Tomlinson.

Upon tasting his salad (strawberry poppy seed with slices of grilled chicken), all thoughts of Louis’ badgering disappeared. It was fantastic, just like everything his best friend prepared. “Niall, this salad is delicious. I could eat it forever, bro. Best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Louis cupped his hands to his face as he mouthed something across the table to Harry. The English teacher descended into a curious coughing fit, then took a deep breath, lips twitching mysteriously.

Louis looked satisfied with himself but didn’t say a word.

Wanting to avoid the awkward silence, Zayn turned his attention to the drink he’d brought—a freckled lemonade with honey and something else Zayn would have to ask Niall about later. He slurped it through the large straw, Louis and Ed watching him curiously for some reason.
“So, how’s it taste, Malik?” Louis inquired in an over-polite tone.

Niall shot Louis a glare. “Zed, don’t answer him.”

“Niall—don’t be so modest!” Zayn shushed him. It wasn’t like Niall to be so humble regarding his culinary talents, but Zayn figured he was probably slightly intimidated by the more experienced teachers. “It’s a freckled lemonade,” Zayn informed Louis. “It’s so sweet and refreshing. The honey slides down your throat and feels like nothing else. It’s like I just can’t suck it down fast enough!”

At that, Louis started laughing so hard his eyes began to water. Harry seemed to suffer from the same curious disease. He laid his head on the table, and his shoulders shook as he attempted to control his own laughter.

Niall’s face turned red; he looked absolutely furious as Harry finally picked his head up, eyelashes wet with tears. The English teacher took a deep, shaky breath but made the mistake of looking at Louis, and they both lost it again. Harry, at least, seemed to feel badly about whatever it was they found so hysterical and tried to cover his face with his hands.

One thing was obvious at this point: whatever the joke was, it was clearly at Zayn’s expense.

Niall, in full protective mode, spat out, “oi, why don’t you two get on yer trolley, then, if you’re going to whisper rude comments across the table.”

Louis snorted. “Aw, come on, man. We’re just having a bit of a laugh.”

Harry looked contrite now. “Tommo, let it be.”

Zayn went back to slurping his lemonade and tried to ignore the man next to him.

“Yeah, definitely the cheekbones,” Louis snickered enigmatically, and Zayn was so done with the drama teacher and whatever he was going on about by this point.

“Oi, Tomlinson,” Niall grunted, “you can go fly a kite—and yes, that also has a double meaning.”

Louis turned to Harry, cocking his head to the side as if he were amused. “This kid’s got some hutzpah—he’s growing on me, Styles. I mean, he’s growing on me like a wart, but there you have it.”


Harry’s eyes flicked back and forth between the two, then turned to Zayn. “Sorry about that. Anyway…why don’t you come to my classroom after school? I can help brainstorm some ideas for your next observation, point you in the right direction and all that.”

“No,” Niall replied obstinately, folding his arms across his chest.

“Niall, he’s my mentor,” Zayn reminded his friend. He had the tendency to be overprotective at times, but this was ridiculous.

“I promise I won’t allow this one”—Harry jabbed his thumb at Louis—“past the door while Zayn’s there, alright? Besides,” Harry confided, his voice taking on a more serious tone, “it’s my role as Zayn’s mentor to assist him with these things, and I would prefer not to have to tell Dr. Payne that you’re obstructing me from doing my job.” Harry and Niall glared at one another as if in an Old West showdown, and Louis let out a low whistle.
“Zed, I thought you were going to Ed’s after school today?” Niall put forward finally. Out of the corner of his eye, Zayn saw Harry raise an eyebrow, but he didn’t say anything.

Zayn slapped his forehead. “Shoot—I completely forgot! Harry, can we meet another day? What about tomorrow…or Friday?”

“Well, unfortunately, I can’t,” Harry replied. “I’m attending the board meeting tomorrow afternoon with Dr. Payne, and then I need to leave straight after school on Friday.”

“Harold is planning this ghastly, loved-up weekend with Liz—some kind of spa getaway or whatever,” Louis expounded, gagging. “Sounds utterly revolting, doesn’t it? I’ve been shitting bricks, worrying about when Eleanor’s gonna find out.”

“Sounds romantic,” Zayn offered.

“Hope so,” Harry said, smiling, “it’s our anniversary.”

“Yeah, but what Styles doesn’t get,” Louis complained, “is that Liz is going to tell Eleanor about how bloody wonderful it was, and then I’m going to have to do something comparable for our anniversary in December.”

Harry scrunched his nose. “I thought your anniversary was in November, mate?”

“Shit,” Louis cussed loudly, evidently forgetting they were in a school for a moment. “Is it really, Styles?”

Harry nodded, then shook his head. “As I was saying, Zayn, if we don’t get together today, I’m afraid it’s going to have to wait until next week.”

“Go ahead,” Ed spoke up when Zayn looked towards him for permission. “I don’t want to muck up your chance at getting a good evaluation. Our plans can wait.” Zayn silently thanked him with his eyes, and Ed shrugged it off.

“That would be sick if we could meet today, Harry,” Zayn told his mentor. “I mean, if you’re willing, I’d love to come!”

The bell rang, masking Louis’ obnoxious guffaws. Niall shot the man a look of pure repulsion as they cleared the table, but Louis just deflected it with a shrug, cryptically commenting:

“You really want to have a talk with him about that, Horan, just saying.”

***

(Liam’s POV)

From the moment he set eyes upon Zayn Malik last spring, Liam knew he had to have him.

Zayn was an exceptional teaching candidate—a valedictorian who had graduated with highest honours. Liam knew he would be sought after by many other administrators from across the state.

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Zayn was an exceptional teaching candidate—a valedictorian who had graduated with highest honours. Liam knew he would be sought after by many other administrators from across the state.
And though he was young, inexperienced, and well, *distractively attractive*, Liam decided to pounce on him. That is, Liam decided to hire him before some other less-deserving principal at some less-deserving school beat him to it.

Because, after all, Payne Academy deserved the *very* best.

His intentions from the beginning of the recruiting process had been to obtain the highest quality young teachers to fill the few positions they were adding for the fall. Niall Horan was an excellent addition to the Payne faculty. Moreover, hiring him almost guaranteed Zayn’s acceptance of the more-than-generous initial teaching contract offered to him.

Against his better judgment, Liam found himself slightly infatuated with Zayn. The young teacher’s innocence and intelligence attracted him equally. At first, Liam resisted this infatuation. He resented Zayn for producing these feelings in him, feelings that were so out of place for his position. Liam almost hated him for it.

Eventually, Liam resigned himself to watching and admiring the history teacher from afar. Even so, Liam couldn’t stand to think of him with another man (or woman). He couldn’t bear to imagine someone else touching that delicate, olive skin. The mere thought of another man kissing those pouty, sultry lips was unfathomable.

*Zayn was his.*

Indeed, Zayn had signed a contract stating he belonged to Payne…to *Liam*, hadn’t he? But now that Sheeran, the little insect, had stepped in, Liam knew he had to act and act quickly. He could no longer sit and watch from the side-lines.

Liam wanted Zayn. He wanted to raise Zayn up on a pedestal. This feeling, however, was almost as intense as his desire to wreck the boy.

He watched Zayn now as he filled out some paperwork in his office. Liam noticed how his tawny eyes flicked back and forth between the pages, the way he chewed on his lower lip as he considered his responses. It was mesmerising, and Liam would have given anything to take him on his desk right then and there. *Anything.*

But he knew he had to restrain his urges for now. It was too soon. Zayn wasn’t ready. Like everything else in his life, Liam had pre-planned and scheduled how he expected this to play out. Liam would slowly gain Zayn’s trust, slowly bend the young teacher to his will, slowly corrupt that innocent, child-like soul.

It would take time, but it was time Liam was more than willing to spend. Liam was a patient man—for the most part. He could wait a bit longer for a prize so coveted.

It would take work and commitment on his part, but that was only fair. After all, Liam was a demanding administrator. He wouldn’t let Zayn rest until he had proven himself in every way he saw fit. Liam licked his lips just thinking about all his plans for the young teacher.

The best part was that Zayn had no idea what was in store for him…and that was *precisely* how Liam wanted it.
Hello, lovelies!
This term has been kicking my arse, but I think I've got everything (mostly) figured out. For now, I'm going to plan on updating every other Sunday. This may change in a couple of months, but I didn't want to leave you guys hanging.

Someone asked how long this fic is going to be, and the answer is long. Over 100k. I'll keep you updated as we get further along.

Please feel free to ask me anything at all about the story. I answer every question/comment I receive (even if it takes a few days), and I love interacting with you all. Also, if you have a personal comment/question or just want to fangirl with me about Zayn/Liam/OT5, you can find the link to my tumblr below. :)

Finally, if you're bored waiting for the next instalment, you can check out my other (completed) chaptered Ziam fic: All this Delusion in our Heads. Let me know what you think if you decide to give it a go. Much love! ~Maree xx
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On Wednesday after school, Zayn met with Harry as planned. They went over the expectations for the next lesson plan and reviewed the comments Dr. Payne had sent after Zayn’s first observation. There seemed to be a never-ending pile of forms to complete, of information to examine, and they attacked it all vigorously.

Zayn didn’t realise how late it was getting until Niall called, nagging that dinner was getting cold and how Zayn should’ve rung him earlier. Harry thought this was hysterical—until he received the exact same phone call from his fiancée five minutes later. Zayn could hear her griping that Harry was going to ruin their weekend holiday if he didn’t get his a** home by eight.

(They wrapped up quickly after that.)

Harry kindly offered to drop Zayn at his flat, and they headed out to the nearly-deserted faculty lot. The lights of a white luxury car flashed as they approached, and Zayn’s jaw dropped.

“You have a Mercedes?” Zayn asked, stunned. “I can’t believe you can afford a Mercedes on a teacher’s salary.”

“It’s second-hand.”

“Vintage, more like,” Zayn scoffed.

“Well, I make a comfortable salary,” Harry admitted, looking more than a little embarrassed. “This is a high-profile private school, and the board can offer salary increases and incentives to the top teachers—just something to keep in mind.”

Zayn’s eyes drifted towards the only other car in the car park. “Well then, whoever else is still working at this hour must also be a ‘top teacher’ because that’s a freaking Porsche, if I’m not mistaken.”

“That’s Dr. Payne’s actually,” Harry informed him, nodding towards the sleek black sports car. “It’s new and don’t tell Tomlinson,” he chuckled, “just in case he gets any ideas if you know what I mean.”

“Dr. Payne’s car?” It never really occurred to Zayn that their principal had a car, or a house, or a life outside of Payne Academy. Then again, Zayn was one of those kids who’d always been convinced that their teachers slept in their classrooms at night.

In all fairness, Dr. Payne always seemed to be at the school. Zayn just assumed the administrator curled up on the couch in his office—or better yet, had some secret lair behind his bookshelf, Green Goblin style.

“Yeah, he stays here pretty late most nights,” Harry said, seemingly reading Zayn’s thoughts as the Mercedes’ engine purred to life. “To be honest, he doesn’t have much of a personal life. Payne Academy is everything to him; that’s an easy rut to fall into, as you know.” He shot a meaningful look at his mentee. “I’d wager we’re all cut from the same cloth.”
“What do you mean?”

“I simply mean that I think we all enjoy our profession, enjoy working hard, and enjoy the recognition and perks that go with being the best. Am I wrong?”

“No,” Zayn said guiltily.

“Well, it’s important that you try to find some balance, yeah? I found it with Liz; she keeps me from working myself into the ground.” Harry licked his lips and checked the rear-view mirror. “Maybe you have something similar with Niall?”

“We’re not dating, I told you,” Zayn said curtly.

“No, I’m just talking about someone who cares about you, that’s all,” Harry quickly recovered. “So,” he began after a moment’s pause, “have you ever been in a serious relationship, Zayn?”

“Huh?” To say that Zayn was taken aback by the direct, personal question would be an understatement.

Harry cleared his throat and stared straight ahead at the road. “Sorry, you don’t need to answer that; I was just curious, that’s all.”

Zayn felt bad now. Harry was just trying to make conversation, just endeavouring to get to know him better, and he was being a jerk. “No, no…that’s okay. The truth is there’s not much to tell,” Zayn sighed. “I was never really into girls when all the other boys were. I went on a few dates with the ‘right girls’ in high school and college, but they never really turned into anything more than that, you know?”

“I can tell you why,” Harry confided, glancing at the passenger seat as they stopped at a traffic light. “Because I’m gay,” Zayn deadpanned, and Harry’s eyes widened. “I figured Louis told you,” he explained, embarrassed.

“He did,” the other teacher acknowledged, “but I was going to say that nothing came of those dates because you’re a perfectionist and an over-achiever. I think that’s the best way to be—especially as you start your career.” He looked over at Zayn again and winked. “You’ll find someone one day who can accept that, someone who values the same things—pushes you even. In the meantime, just be patient…and don’t overwork yourself. You can’t be Superman all the time, yeah?” Harry chuckled, adding, “or that Dr. Octopus bloke you told me about.”

“I can’t?” Zayn asked cheekily. “That’s good because I’d want to be Iron Man anyway—or the Hulk; that’d be sick.”

“You really are a proper nerd, aren’t you?” Harry chuckled, and Zayn could feel his cheeks redden. “You remind me of someone else who’s an even bigger nerd I suspect.”

“Who?”

“Never mind,” Harry replied a bit enigmatically. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you anyway.”

They fell into a comfortable silence after that, Zayn gazing out the window for the rest of the short drive.

Zayn hadn’t even inserted his key into the lock when the front door to their apartment swung open.
“Why were you so late?” Niall demanded. “He didn’t pull anything, did he, that smarmy bastard? Because I promise ya, if that YSL-wearing toff even thought about—"

“Niall, don’t be ridiculous.” Zayn brushed past his over-protective roommate, haplessly dropping his keys on a chair. Niall immediately retrieved the fob and hung them on the proper peg next to the door. Zayn gave him a look that hopefully conveyed his thoughts: namely, Zayn didn’t need someone following him around picking up his keys and scaring off work associates who could further his career. “Harry’s a lovely guy, Niall, and he’s engaged. He’s not a wolf or whatever you were thinking.”

Niall pulled a face. “You sure?”

“Of course! Why is it that you have to think so lowly of everyone?”

“Because I’m not bloody naïve,” he returned, and Zayn couldn’t help but think it was a dig at him—intentional or not. “You’d tell me if he tried something, right?”

Zayn rolled his eyes. “Of course I would! Geesh, Ni!”

Niall exhaled slowly and closed the door before their neighbours complained about the noise. “I just…worry about you, that’s all,” Niall admitted softly, his back to his roommate still.

“Well, I can take care of myself,” Zayn huffed, plopping angrily on the sofa.

“I know but you’re just so…innocent, and there are so many gobshites who’d take advantage of that fact. I feel it’s my duty to protect you from all that.”

“You can’t protect me from everything, Niall.”

“Well, I can try,” he chuckled, taking a seat next to his best friend. He had that goofy grin on his face, and Zayn couldn’t help but slide over closer to him. “I love you, bro,” he spoke sincerely, bringing him in for a brotherly hug.

“Love you, too, idiot,” Zayn returned, resting his head on Niall’s shoulder. They stayed there for a while, and Zayn allowed his eyelids to droop shut as he contentedly thought back on his busy day.

“Shite, forgot about dinner!” Niall announced abruptly. He bounded to his feet, nearly sending Zayn flying off the couch in the process. Zayn couldn’t help but smile, though, as he followed his friend into the kitchen.

Niall put on the shamrock oven mitts Zayn had bought him as a gag gift last year and pulled out a delicious-smelling casserole from the oven. “Gotta let it cool. In the meantime, I was hoping I could get your advice on something. It’s about Jo.”

“Who?”

“Johanna Hart, our school secretary,” he clarified, looking at Zayn as if this were obvious. Knowing Niall, there was only one reason why he’d need advice about their pretty school secretary.

“Niall!” Zayn scolded. “Please don’t tell me you’ve been hitting on her again!”

“Well, I couldn’t help it. You see, I was sat in the office and….”

As Niall told his story, Zayn caught himself reflecting on how life hadn’t really changed all that much for Niall and him—well, not as much as they thought it was going to, anyway. Zayn must
have been a fool to worry so much at the beginning of the school year. After an admittedly bumpy start, things had slowly begun to turn around.

Before turning in that night, Zayn checked his phone and noticed a message from Ed.

---

Ed: *Hope everything went well with HS today! Lmk if you can still meet on Thurs but don’t feel you have to or anything*

Me: *No, I’m looking forward to it!*

Ed: *Brilliant! Sweet dreams :D*

Me: *Good night. :)*

---

Zayn couldn’t help but smile as he pulled the covers up to his chin to protect himself against the chilly fall evening. He felt like a giddy, twelve-year-old girl just thinking about seeing those blue eyes again. His mum would love Ed. His dad, too.

Yes, life was definitely looking up.

---

Thursday dragged on and on.

…And on.

Eventually, after Zayn had nearly given up all hope of ever escaping, the final bell rang. Without further ado, he ushered his challenging final hour class of juniors and seniors out of the room. For some reason, they didn’t seem to be in any hurry to start their weekend. Indeed, most of them (excluding the jittery Derek, of course) lingered in the aisles or doorway, chatting about a weekend party or the upcoming project in class.

After some encouragement, Zayn managed to evict every last one of the squatters and spent a few minutes tidying up his classroom. He kept eying the clock on the wall and once it approached 3:25, he bolted out the door, nearly forgetting to lock it behind him.

He’d made plans to meet Ed in the main hall at 3:30 so Zayn quickly made his way downstairs and towards the front of the school. Once there, he noticed his mentor conversing with his boss in hushed tones just outside the office. As he neared them, Harry froze before hurriedly turning back to tell Dr. Payne something.

If Zayn didn’t know better, he would have sworn they were talking about him.

Rather than loitering where he wasn’t wanted, he continued walking at a brisk pace towards the main doors. Besides, Zayn really didn’t want to get into a conversation with his principal—even if his mentor was there.

Zayn had just pushed open the first door when a voice boomed from behind:
“Eager to leave, aren’t we, Mr. Malik?”

Zayn stopped dead in his tracks, mentally trying to gather the courage to face the clearly unhappy man standing behind him.

“It is still 15:28 according to my watch,” Dr. Payne declared in an icy tone that sent shivers down Zayn’s spine, “and I do not recall granting you permission to leave early today, Mr. Malik.”

Timidly, Zayn turned to face his accuser. The man’s piercing gaze dared Zayn to say something, but of course he didn’t. He wasn’t *completely* stupid. Rather, Zayn just stood there, wilting like a shrinking violet. Harry shot him a sympathetic look while Zayn lamented not checking the office clock or his phone before speeding out without a thought.

“I didn’t realise it wasn’t, er, three-thirty yet, s-sir,” he stammered out. “I should have, like, checked the time before I walked out. I’m so—”

“Sorry?” Dr. Payne ventured with a mocking sneer and all Zayn could do was nod dumbly. “Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Malik,” his principal confided, “I’m sorry as well.”

Zayn thought about responding but figured he was already in enough trouble as it was.

“If nothing else,” Dr. Payne continued, “you are a bright and clever young man so I will let you work that out for yourself.”

Although Zayn had managed to put together a decent lesson plan for his first observation (with the help of Harry), it was blatantly obvious now that he was *never* going to succeed at impressing his boss, no matter how hard he tried.

***

At precisely 3:38—Zayn had set his watch to the office time, just to be on the safe side from now on—Ed exited the building. The music teacher was wearing a deep frown, but it disappeared the moment he spotted Zayn swinging his legs from where he sat perched on the brick wall along the walkway.

“Thought you forgot we were meeting today when I didn’t see you in the hall,” the ginger admitted sheepishly.

Zayn catapulted off the wall and brushed off the seat of his heather-grey trousers. “Sorry, I had a run-in with Dr. Payne just now and—”

“No need to explain,” Ed interrupted. “I saw him stomping about the office as I left, and I wouldn’t have wanted to be faffing about either. Looks as if he’s got the hump today.”

Zayn wouldn’t know if Dr. Payne had ‘the hump’ or not. The man hardly ever seemed to be in a good mood—not when Zayn was around at any rate.

When they reached the faculty parking lot, Zayn was happy to note that unlike Harry, Ed didn’t have a fancy ride. They loaded their books, laptops, and everything they needed for the planning session in his plain, white truck, and then Ed drove the short distance to his apartment.
Although Zayn had visited Ed’s place a few times with Niall, this felt different somehow. Ed’s apartment felt so much smaller and…intimate this time. Zayn tried to push those awkward feelings aside as Ed and him set to work on their joint class—*The History of Popular Music*, as they had now christened it. They were hoping to submit everything well before the deadline at the end of November so that they would have the best chance of Dr. Payne and the board approving their collaborative class for next semester.

The two teachers spent most of the night researching topics and fine-tuning their proposed syllabus for the course. Several hours in, Ed suggested ordering a pizza and Zayn seconded the idea straightaway. They made short work of the veggie lovers, and soon there was only one slice left. They both eyed the final piece with determination, as if it were the final move in a chess match. Before Zayn had time to react, Ed seized it, cackling when he saw the younger man’s appalled look.

“You twerp!” Zayn only half-kidded, swatting the music teacher with a stack of napkins. “You didn’t even give me a fair shot at it.”

“Stop whinging, mate. I’ve decided to give you this slice—but only because I like you.”

“Thanks!” Zayn replied, grabbing the cheesy, heaping slice and shamelessly plopping it on his plate.

“…Because I like you a lot, actually,” Ed added under his breath. Zayn inhaled sharply, his eyes widening at the unexpected confession. “I’m sorry—I-I shouldn’t have said that,” the ginger mumbled quickly. “Just forget it, yeah?”

“What if…what if I don’t want to forget it?” Zayn asked quietly.

Ed peered up at him, hope in his blue eyes. “Would you let me take you out some time, Zayn? I mean, where we could just have a chat and get to know each other?”

“I’d love that,” Zayn returned shyly.

“You would? No shit?”

“Yeah,” Zayn chuckled, feeling his cheeks heating up.

Ed beamed. “How about tomorrow night then?”

“Tomorrow?”

Ed furrowed his brow. “Too soon?”

“No, no…not at all,” Zayn rushed to say. “I’m just…surprised, that’s all. Friday night would be perfect.”

“Well blow me, Niall *was* right,” Ed commented as if awestruck. Zayn eyed him quizzically, and the ginger looked self-conscious again as he cleared his throat. “I might have asked Niall if he thought…y’know…that you might…well…not be completely opposed to the idea of…letting me take you out sometime…maybe.”

Zayn grinned. “Really?”

“Yeah, and I made sure he was cool with it and everything,” Ed reassured him.

Ed had to be the sweetest guy ever. Case in point: he even asked Niall if he could take his best friend out on a date. In the back of Zayn’s mind, though, a nagging thought plagued him. Zayn
wondered what would have happened if Niall had said no. Would Ed have risked Niall’s disfavour and asked Zayn out regardless?

And why was Zayn even thinking about irrelevant things like that?

“How, Ed—pass me a knife.” The other teacher looked confused but handed over the utensil anyway. Zayn cut the last slice of pizza in half, delivering the larger half to a delighted Ed.

“I knew there was a reason I fancied ya!” he burst out, and Zayn giggled at his unbridled enthusiasm. “Now let’s get this paperwork finished before I start receiving threatening calls and texts from your guardian, yeah?”

“He’s not my guardian, Ed,” Zayn corrected with a good, old-fashioned eye roll.

“Ah, that’s what you think, mate.”

“So, what do you think, then?” Zayn challenged, slightly perturbed by his answer.

“I think that, despite his size, he can be a tad bit intimidating when he goes all mama bear; that’s all I’m gonna say about that,” he impishly replied. “Now where were we?”

***

“How was your date, Zed?” Niall asked as they stood in front of the teachers’ mailboxes bright and early on Friday morning. “You got in so late last night I didn’t have the chance to ask you about it.”

“It wasn’t a date,” Zayn calmly corrected his friend. “And you could have brought this up in the car on the way here if you weren’t so busy telling me about your night.”

Niall had gone to some photography exhibition with Ms. Hart, and Zayn had certainly gotten an earful about it on the ride over. Part of him still felt it was wrong for Niall to be seeing the school secretary. Actually, all of him knew it was wrong. Mostly, Zayn was afraid of what would happen if Niall let Jo get her hopes up and the romance went south—as Niall’s romances unfailingly did.

It wasn’t that Niall was a cad exactly, he just…well, lost interest. He was more of a “flavour-of-the-month” sort of guy. He never let his relationships get too serious; it was all just good fun. Zayn only wished his friend wouldn’t mix business with pleasure.

“Bollocks, mate. No chance you two spent all that time at his flat working.”

“Well, we did,” Zayn insisted. “Sorry to disappoint, Ni.”

Niall snorted, shaking his head in disbelief. “You’re hopeless, mate. Bloody hopeless.”

Zayn bit his lip to hide the smile that was threatening to burst out at any second. He ducked his head a bit, but Niall was onto him.

“Out with it.”

Zayn tried to look nonchalant. “It’s nothing. Just…I might have a date with a certain music teacher lined up for tonight,” he stated like it was no big deal that Zayn Malik was actually going on a real date for once.
Niall looked positively exultant. “You little minx, you!” he hissed, slapping Zayn on the back. “And I can’t believe Ed worked up the courage to ask you out that quickly. I reckon that bloke’s got more guts than I gave him credit for. Damned impressive.”

“So Sheeran and you are a thing?” a voice asked out of nowhere. Zayn turned to see Louis peeking around the corner of the mailboxes, head disembodied *a la* the Cheshire cat.

“Sorry, we were having a private conversation,” Niall grunted at the newcomer.

Louis strolled over with his usual blunt boldness and wedged himself between the two boys. “There’s really no need to apologise, Horan. And budge up, yeah?”

“Why?” Niall asked testily, standing his ground. “Like I said, I was having a *private* conversation with my mate, and you—”

“Are merely trying to get at my mailbox,” Louis lamented, “which you couldn’t be blocking better if you were bloody David de Gea.”

Niall scowled but gave the older teacher some room. Zayn could hardly remember the last time he saw anyone challenge Niall. His friend might be easy-going as a rule, but he was all alpha once you glanced beyond the disarming surface.

Louis grinned, cat-like. “Cheers, Horan. Now kindly ‘get thee away to a nunnery’ and what-not because I have important matters to discuss with Malik here.”

“Guess Harry was right,” Zayn mused, scanning through the bulletins and junk mail he’d just pulled out of his mailbox, “you *do* like to butcher Shakespeare, don’t you?”

“C’mon, Malik—fess up. What’s going on between you and Sheeran?”

“Nothing,” Zayn fibbed, trying to keep his voice as even as possible. “We’re working on this course proposal, you see, and—”

“Sheeran’s working on you behind Horan’s back?” Louis supplied, eyes, glittering. Before Zayn could even begin to think of a decent response, the drama teacher vanished as quickly as he came.

“Brilliant,” Niall remarked with a disgruntled sigh, “now the whole school’s going to know about you and Ed.”

“Yeah,” Zayn agreed, but unlike Niall’s, his voice was completely devoid of all sarcasm. He was excited about his date that night, and he couldn't care less if the whole universe knew about it.

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“Are you having a good time?” Ed questioned for the third time that night, tugging nervously at the collar of his stiff, white shirt.

Zayn lowered his menu and looked directly at his date. “Yes, now stop asking me before I change my mind.”

“Sorry,” Ed blushed, “it’s just I don’t want you to regret accepting my invitation tonight.”
“I would have enjoyed myself no matter where you took me, Ed, but this place is...perfect.” Zayn’s eyes swept the authentic Italian restaurant once again as if to underscore his point. This gem on the other side of Wisteria Falls was elegant without being too pretentious and cozy without being too cramped.

In other words, it was exactly how Zayn had described it: \textit{perfect}.

And then he spotted Liam Payne.

His mouth went dry as he stared at the couple sat at a table in the corner. Once Zayn had gotten over the initial shock of seeing his principal, his gaze landed on the woman with him. She was a stunning brunette with legs that seemed to go on for days. Her Ferrari-red mini dress dipped low in front, showing off all her ‘assets.’ The couple clinked wineglasses as Zayn watched, the woman smiling flirtatiously at her date with lips as red as her dress.

“What are you staring at?” Ed asked, and before Zayn could say anything, the music teacher turned to look over his shoulder. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Zayn mumbled, taking a sip from his water.

“What are the odds that Dr. Payne would be at the same restaurant I chose for our date?” Ed wondered aloud, failing to hide his frustration. “I feel like I should apologise.”

“Don’t be silly,” Zayn told him, trying to smile and shake off the inevitable sense of impending doom he felt whenever his principal was close at hand. Ed gave a grateful smile and went back to studying his menu.

Zayn went back to studying the couple in the corner.

Dr. Payne was wearing a suit, of course, but he looked...different. The administrator had traded in his normal daytime greys and blues for a sleek black suit and tie. Suddenly, Dr. Payne turned his head ever-so-slightly, meeting Zayn’s gaze from across the crowded restaurant. Zayn knew he’d been caught red-handed, but he couldn’t look away; it was as if he’d been held prisoner by the confident, smug look in the other man’s eyes.

Even after Zayn broke eye contact, he could still feel the man’s penetrating gaze on him—watching him, scrutinising him, judging his every move.

The waitress returned to take their order, and Zayn made a concentrated effort to forget about the man (and his stupidly attractive date) in the corner. When the entrees came, Zayn picked at his plate. He’d been hungry when they arrived, but somewhere along the way, he’d lost his appetite. Regardless, he tried his best to make small talk and appear like he was enjoying being out with the music teacher because he was. He wasn’t even going to spare a single thought for the man in the corner who was—

“Zayn?”

“Sorry, Ed. Guess I’m just a little distracted,” he admitted, coming clean at last.

Ed nodded understandingly. There was no need to voice just what was distracting Zayn; they both knew. “We can leave if you’d like?”

“No!” Zayn practically screamed back at his date before composing himself. “I mean, I don’t want to ruin our date, and I don’t want Dr. Payne to think we’re leaving early because of him either.” Zayn worried his lip and looked down at his barely-touched plate. “You know how he feels about
“Don’t worry—it’ll get better,” Ed offered gently with a soft smile. “You just have to wait it out… like I did.”

Zayn glanced up in surprise. This was the first he had heard of Ed having trouble with Dr. Payne—well, more trouble than everyone else anyway. “You mean, you…?” Zayn stopped, not knowing how to continue. The last thing he wanted to do was insult Ed or completely badmouth their boss when the man was eating dinner just yards away.

“Yes,” Ed laughed uncomfortably. “From what I hear, he likes to select a scapegoat each year, a victim on the staff to bully, y’know?”

Yes, Zayn certainly did know.

Zayn cleared his throat. “So you’re saying that you were in this same position last year, Ed?”

“Yeah. It was bloody awful, but it’s been loads better this year, mate.”

“I’m not sure if I can hold out that long,” Zayn said glumly, twirling his fork around on his plate. “I’m just not used to being treated like…well, how he treats me. It’s so discouraging.”

“You’ll get through it,” Ed said encouragingly, reaching across the table to place his hand on top of Zayn’s free hand. “You probably won’t even have to wait that long—a whole academic year, I mean. He’ll lose interest or start respecting you as you gain confidence in your teaching skills.”

“And follow his rules,” Zayn added.

“Yes, that too, of course.”

“Besides, I have no choice, do I?” he mused miserably.

“Well, you do, but you’d be mad to waste an opportunity like this—at least until you receive your full teaching license.”

Zayn nodded. It was nearly impossible in this state to receive a full professional licence if you blew your mentorship year. He knew that as well (or better) than anyone. “It’s just not fair,” he groaned, searching Ed’s eyes for empathy. But instead of commiseration, Zayn found a cold, hard anger in the blue orbs.

“Don’t worry,” Ed declared assuredly, “Dr. Payne will get what’s coming to him eventually. Just wait and see.” Before Zayn could respond, the frosty look had disappeared. It was gone so quickly that Zayn wondered if he’d just imagined it in the first place. “Let’s get out of here, yeah?”

Zayn acquiesced at once. He peered over Ed’s right shoulder one last time, but Dr. Payne was focused on his date now.

Still, it took the full drive home for Zayn to shed the feeling he was being watched.

When they arrived back at Zayn’s apartment, Ed killed the engine, and they sat quietly for a minute.

“Zayn, I…,” Ed began before resigning to the dark and silent symphony of the night. Zayn glanced over at him and became captivated by the light of the stars reflecting in his light eyes as they studied the sky above.

Without thinking, Zayn leaned over and placed a soft kiss on Ed’s lips before drawing back. Zayn
then bit his lower lip and nervously gauged the other boy’s reaction. At first, Ed seemed stunned by his forward move, but surely, no more so than Zayn was. When the music teacher recovered, he smiled back at Zayn, then leaned in and returned the favour. Zayn sighed contentedly into the kiss as the other boy’s lips massaged his own, fingers gently sifting through quiffed hair. Before Zayn knew it, Ed was slowly pulling away.

“That was…nice,” Zayn breathed, not knowing what else to say.

“Yes, it was—and I’d fancy doing it again sometime,” Ed added puckishly.

Zayn ducked his head shyly. “Me, too.”

“Here, I’ll walk you to your door.”

Ed bid him goodnight, then Zayn floated up the familiar steps to his apartment. He couldn’t help but think how fortunate he was to have found a someone who was so sweet, genuine, and charming. The type of person his parents would love. The type of person Niall would love. The type he’d been dreaming of since he was a kid.

***

Zayn thought he’d be walking on air for days, but the euphoria had all but worn off by Sunday night. He couldn’t sleep…again. Inevitably, his mind travelled back to Friday night—back to the Italian restaurant with the red and green tablecloths, back to Ed’s warm smile, back to Dr. Payne’s dark stare, and back to…her.

Zayn wondered who she was, how long she’d been dating Dr. Payne. He wasn’t jealous of her though—just curious. He couldn’t be jealous because Zayn wasn’t attracted to his boss. Zayn wouldn’t be interested in that man even if it weren’t completely taboo for a teacher to be dating his principal (which it was).

Admittedly, Dr. Payne was an attractive man from most standards—okay, from any standard. He had classic good looks, was always well-groomed, and dressed impeccably. He was intelligent, too. But he was also pompous, belittling, manipulative, arrogant, chauvinistic, domineering, and hypercritical.

In sum, the man was not even close to being his type. Zayn wanted someone he could feel good about bringing home to his parents, someone who made him feel at ease, someone comfortable. Liam Payne was none of that.

Besides, Liam Payne was too old for him. (He was also too straight apparently.)

And, once again, he was Zayn’s boss.

Zayn thought about the restaurant again, about the exact moment when Dr. Payne had locked eyes with him. He hated to admit it, but it had made him feel something strange, an emotion he couldn’t quite put a label to or finger on. Something baffling and exhilarating all at once.

It was like Zayn secretly wanted Dr. Payne’s eyes on him and not his gorgeous date.
At the time, Zayn had chalked it up to his own people-pleasing tendencies. He was always striving to earn others’ attention and approval, always endeavouring to win authority figures over with a perfect essay, test score, or responsible decision. It was just his personality.

But this time was different. They weren’t even at school for starters. And yes, Zayn had felt self-conscious with Dr. Payne’s gaze trained on him during much of dinner, but he had also felt something else.

And that ‘something else’ was making him very uncomfortable.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed, lovelies. It’s been a bit tough lately (just lost my job, ho hum) but tried to get this out as quickly as I could under the circumstances. Anyway, just wanted to say that all the love I’ve been seeing on AO3 and my dash (from the Ziam community especially) has been overwhelming. Thank you for reading and supporting fics and fic writers. You’re all golden. xx

Oh, and next chapter will start the drama. Fasten your seat belts. ;)

By the time Monday morning rolled around, Zayn had all but dismissed the thoughts that had kept him awake most of Sunday night. They seemed so trivial, so silly in the daylight when he had no excuse but to be in a good mood. After all, his morning lessons were going well, his students were attentive, and he couldn’t ask for a better start to the day. Besides, he couldn’t help but look forward to his lunch and the opportunity to see Ed again.

To his relief, Harry and Louis were sitting at another table when Zayn opened the door to the teachers’ lounge. It wasn’t that Zayn didn’t enjoy Harry’s company (even if Ed did turn into a shameless fangirl whenever he was around) because he did. Rather, his objection was that Styles-Tomlinson was a packaged deal, and he wasn’t in the mood for any drama today.

When Zayn got to the table, he shyly greeted Ed and took a seat next to Niall.

“How, Zayn,” Ed returned before going right back into the heated exchange he was having with Niall about some sports team Zayn had never heard of.

Zayn set out his lunch and tried to act normal, like nothing had changed between Ed and him. He wasn’t going to think about the dinner or the kiss (or God forbid, seeing Dr. Payne on a date).

“Zed, stop biting your nails,” Niall ordered, and Zayn immediately dropped his hands to his lap.

“I’m sure your food tastes much better.”

Zayn could feel his cheeks burning. “That’s debatable,” he mustered, eying the unappetising school lunch in front of him. There were several setbacks to Niall ‘seeing’ the school secretary—not least of which was the fact that the culinary arts teacher neglected to make anything for their lunches today.

“Apparently,” Niall stated, glancing suggestively at the other two boys at the table, “no one’s going to bring up the elephant in the room.”

Zayn peeked across the table at Ed, and he looked just as embarrassed as Zayn felt. “Speaking of elephants…,” Zayn murmured, nodding his head discretely towards the door where Ms. Hart had just entered the lounge. The secretary paused for a moment, flipped her hair back off her shoulders, and removed her glasses with flare. The whole thing was such a mini-production that Zayn half-expected theme music to accompany her entrance.

A moment later, though, there was no doubt for whom that little performance was intended.

“Mr. Horan!” her cutesy voice rang out. As she meandered through the break room, she did another hair flip for good measure and batted her long eyelashes. Ed began to chortle before coughing awkwardly into his hand.

“Feel free to call me Niall, love. We’re in the lounge after all,” Niall said smoothly, standing up and placing a hand on the back of his chair. Ms. Hart looked up at him with a look of pure adoration.

“Thank you, Niall.”
“What can I do for you, Jo?”

“You… I… um…” She quickly set the papers she was holding down on the table and began to flip through them nervously. After a few seconds, she extracted a sheet from the stack. “I was going to e-mail you this information, but it just seemed so… impersonal, you know?” she sighed, her voice wispy and romantic.

“Well, Jo,” Niall began, gazing intently into the secretary’s big, blue eyes, “I appreciate your taking the time out of your busy day to hand-deliver this to me.”

Zayn exchanged glances with Ed and tried not to choke on his Frito pie as Niall turned the charm up another notch.

“Would it be alright if I rang you up this afternoon, love?”

“Yes,” she breathed, then practically skipped out of the room.

Zayn was thankful she didn’t stay. He was having a hard enough time getting down the cafeteria grub without the added nauseating factor of having to watch Niall’s flirtatious shtick.

“So, mate, what was so important?” Ed asked Niall curiously.

“I’m getting a new student—a transfer, actually,” Niall informed them, starting in on his neglected lunch.

“Another one?” Ed asked, dumbstruck.

Zayn snorted. “Bet it’s a girl.”

“Yeah, Zed. How’d you know?”

Zayn shook his head. “Must be psychic or something,” he joked, channelling Louis from last week. Niall rolled his eyes. “I’m sure it’s just a coincidence that—”

“… Every new student of yours is a girl?” Zayn finished teasingly. “Because I’ve been keeping track, and they all are, bro.”

“Must be his Irish charm,” Ed suggested with a cheeky grin and Zayn laughed.

“Shut it you two,” Niall retorted good-naturedly before examining the paper in his hands again. “Looks like it’s another senior—a Jessica Smethurst. Oi, I wonder if she’s any relation to the bloke our theatre’s named after. You know, Smethurst Auditorium?”

“I wonder,” Zayn deadpanned, and Niall shot him a reproving look. Even though he didn’t want to admit it, Zayn was sure Niall was well aware of the fact that all the new students in his classes were junior and senior girls whose parents were either on the board or had made significant donations to the school. Otherwise, there was no way their inflexible administrator would have approved a transfer this far into the semester.

“So Zayn,” Ed began, a smile playing at his lips, “do you think the birds are flocking to his classes to learn how to cook or because they fancy the fit culinary arts teacher?”

“So when’s your observation, Zed?” Niall asked abruptly.

“Nice one!” Ed observed with a twinkle in his eye. “I, for one, didn’t notice that you just
strategically changed the subject there.”

“Nope, didn’t notice a thing,” Zayn played along.

“Ugh, I’m not sure if I approve of you two becoming a thing anymore,” Niall grumped. “You’re ganging up on me, and it’s so not cool.”

“Sorry, Ni,” Zayn apologised, stifling a giggle. “And my observation’s scheduled for Wednesday, third hour.”

Niall nodded thoughtfully. “That your Honours World History class, Zed?”

“Nope, shouldn’t be hard to pull off a solid lesson with a class like that,” Zayn admitted honestly. “When’s yours?”

“Thursday. I’m having Dr. Payne observe an Intro to Cooking class with sixth- and seventh-graders. It should be fine as long as they don’t set the kitchen on fire.”

“Speaking of setting fire to kitchens…,” Zayn began, avoiding the look his best friend was giving him. “Hey, Ed, did I ever tell you about the time when Niall—”

“Ahh, saved by the bell!” Niall declared loudly, shooting up.

“I didn’t hear a bell,” Ed mumbled, scratching his head. A second later, the bell in question sounded, and Niall’s face broke out into a relieved grin.

“Hey, Zed, I must be psychic, too,” he cracked. “Got to wee something fierce so I’ll see you bastards later.”

Ed lingered behind. “Would you mind if I, um, walked you to class, Zayn?”

Zayn wanted to accept the other teacher’s offer; however, he knew it wasn’t the wisest thing to do. The more he had thought about it over the weekend, the more he realised the necessity for them to be professional about whatever was developing between them. Zayn didn’t want the students getting any ideas even if rumours were already circulating amongst the faculty (courtesy of one Louis Tomlinson, no doubt).

“Better not, Ed,” Zayn told him reluctantly, and his heart lurched at the other man’s crestfallen face. “I want to, it’s just that… I-I don’t want you to be late,” he added lamely.

“Yeah, I understand,” Ed said with a sad smile. “You’re right; it’s probably too soon.” He grasped Zayn’s hand for a moment, squeezed it gently, and left.

All of a sudden, Zayn heard obnoxious smooching noises, and he spun around to see Louis snarling. Before Zayn could say anything (or run out of the lounge with his face as red as a cherry), Louis let out a high-pitched, injured squeal and grasped his foot, cursing under his breath.

“Sorry, Tomlinson,” Niall smirked, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. Zayn looked down at the boots Niall was wearing and quickly put two and two together.

“Oh, you will be, Horan—sorry, I mean,” Louis snapped back at him, eyes blazing. The drama teacher recovered his usual swagger soon after and limped out of the lounge without another word.

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Five minutes before Dr. Payne was supposed to observe Zayn’s third hour World History class, Zayn received an e-mail from the man himself:

Mr. Malik,

Unfortunately, there was an incident with a student, and I am unable to observe you at this time. Since you are teaching the same course this afternoon, I will plan to observe you then.

-LP

Zayn’s heart dropped. He’d been mentally preparing himself all morning and now there was going to be a delay. Even worse, he had a totally different lesson planned for that hour. Zayn’s last hour was by far his least motivated and most challenging group—even if he’d basically won the power battle with them thanks to his mentor’s help earlier in the year.

Zayn couldn’t imagine a worse turn of events. Still, it wasn’t like there was much he could do about it except try to do his best under the circumstances. After all, good teachers had to be flexible and adaptable, right?

At the appointed hour, Dr. Payne settled himself at a table in back just behind Derek, the student Zayn had sent to the office earlier in the year. Zayn couldn’t help but notice how Derek turned three shades paler as soon as the principal walked in the door.

“Derek, are you feeling alright?” Zayn inquired discretely just as the bell rang to signify class had started.

“The boy’s fine; continue with your lesson, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne curtly instructed.

And so Zayn did, all the while pretending this was just a normal lesson on a normal day.

***

Zayn was scheduled to meet with Dr. Payne afterschool for his post-observation meeting. Since Dr. Payne had observed his last class, it meant Zayn didn’t have long to wait to receive his verdict.

All things considered, Zayn felt his lesson had gone well. But that didn’t necessarily mean Dr. Payne agreed.

Except it did. (In this circumstance anyway.)

Dr. Payne once again gave him a positive review—glowing even. He said he was especially impressed with how well Zayn had listened to and adapted the pointers and suggestions he had given him after his first observation. He even complimented Zayn on the improvement in his appearance, saying Zayn looked more ‘professional,’ more like a ‘Payne teacher.’
After Zayn had signed his evaluation forms, he mistakenly thought the post-observation was over. He waited for Dr. Payne to dismiss him in his usual fashion, but to his surprise, the principal did no such thing.

“One more thing, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne announced, closing his personnel file and setting it on his desk. Zayn looked at him curiously, wondering what other topic his administrator could possibly want to discuss with him. “It has come to my attention that you have been seeing Mr. Sheeran on a social basis—is this correct?”

“Why y-yes,” Zayn answered, completely stunned that his boss would bring such a thing up in a formal meeting like this. “I am friends with several of the teachers at the school, but I assure you, sir, that we fully respect your wishes to not socialise during the school day—”

“I am not concerned about your friendships with the other teachers in the building,” he interrupted curtly. “I am more than aware that you share a flat with Mr. Horan and that you regularly eat lunch with him and a few of our other teachers—including Mr. Sheeran, apparently.” He grimaced before continuing. “Mr. Horan assures me there is nothing improper occurring between the two of you, and I take him at his word.”

Dr. Payne paused to glance towards the main office door, and Zayn wondered if the man knew anything about his secretary’s ‘friendship’ with Niall. “As I was saying, I do not mind if you have friends on the staff. Rather, I am specifically referring to Mr. Sheeran,” he uttered distastefully. “I do not tolerate relationships between faculty members in my building, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn was speechless for several seconds. This was the last thing he ever expected his principal to say—especially during his review.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “But sir, I—”

“Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne cut in, “even if I hadn’t seen you with Mr. Sheeran myself—and after hours, shall we say—I still would have been leery of the relationship between you two.” He leaned back in his chair and interlaced his long spider-like fingers. “I know this staff thinks I don’t know everything that’s going on, but I can tell you that there is very little I miss around here—very little, Mr. Malik.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Zayn mumbled. It felt like he spent half his time apologising to his boss.

(Probably because he did.)

“I trust I can expect this inappropriate liaison with Mr. Sheeran to dissolve effective immediately, then?”

Zayn wanted to say no, that it shouldn’t matter what he did in his personal life. After all, he was extremely professional and so was Ed. They would never cross any lines at school. The situation was completely unfair.

But was it worth losing his position over? A coveted position at Payne Academy?

Because he liked Ed, but this was his career, his life’s dream. It seemed foolish to risk it all for a casual romance. Perhaps, Zayn was losing focus on what was really important. There would be time for distractions later—in the summer, maybe. Right now, Zayn just needed to make sure he didn’t do anything to jeopardise his future.

First and foremost, he couldn’t lose sight of the goals he had set for himself this year: Earn a full teaching licence and impress Dr. Payne (or at least mitigate the damage he’d already done).
Zayn took a deep breath and looked his principal straight in the eye. “Yes, sir. You have my word.”

Dr. Payne let out a satisfied sigh. “I am so glad you see it my way, Mr. Malik,” he said smoothly, a glint in his coffee-coloured eyes. “It would have been extremely awkward had you not.”

Zayn ignored the feeling of dread that suddenly came over him; he was always reading more into things than he should. He thanked Dr. Payne for his time and left the office, his head buzzing with half-formed thoughts and ideas.

***

Later, Zayn endured another sleepless night. He studied the cracks in the ceiling as he reflected on the bizarre twist to his post-observation meeting. It all stemmed from the crazy coincidence that Dr. Payne had taken his date to the same restaurant Ed had chosen for their first date.

Because apparently, there weren’t any other decent places to eat in the whole of Wisteria Falls.

Zayn’s thoughts were like a broken record, and they kept bringing him back to the same old song. The more he thought about it, it seemed almost inconceivable that Dr. Payne would be dining at nearly the same exact time and at the same restaurant…on the other side of town.

Maybe Dr. Payne knew about his date with Ed and went to the restaurant to spy on them. It seemed far-fetched but not entirely out of character. Even before school started, Dr. Payne had spoken at length in the pre-service about his expectations. Payne teachers were expected to have impeccable moral characters. Payne teachers did not do anything to embarrass the board or tarnish the reputation of the school.

Perhaps, Dr. Payne had gone to the restaurant to catch Zayn doing something he shouldn’t, something unbecoming of a Payne teacher. Still, it didn’t explain how Dr. Payne knew about the date in the first place.

Unless someone told him.

His brain immediately started generating a list of suspects. Unsurprisingly, Louis made the top of the list. Louis had eavesdropped on his conversation with Niall in the workroom on Friday morning when Zayn had told Niall about the details of his upcoming date with Ed. There was no way Louis had kept the juicy information about the ‘newbies’ to himself.

On the other hand, Zayn couldn’t see the rebellious drama teacher snitching on them to their authoritarian administrator. No, Louis avoided Dr. Payne nearly as much as Zayn did.

Then, Zayn remembered the secretive doorway dialogue Zayn witnessed on Thursday afternoon between his boss and his mentor, their private meeting in the teachers’ lounge, the countless other clandestine consultations between the two men.

Harry—the person Louis would have divulged the gossip to first. Harry—who had the ear of the head teacher and ample opportunity.

Harry—who Zayn trusted.

Zayn sat up in bed, gasping for breath as if he’d just awoken from a nightmare. He tried to rein in
his wild thoughts. He was letting his imagination run rampant again. Harry didn’t know anything about Zayn’s blossoming relationship with Ed, and he wouldn’t have said anything about it even if he did.

It was pure coincidence that Harry was speaking with Principal Payne the afternoon before Zayn’s ‘study date’ with Ed, that the English teacher appeared almost uncomfortable when he spotted Zayn. Surely, it was pure happenstance that Liam Payne showed up at the restaurant, the last place on the planet Zayn would expect him to be.

Or maybe it wasn’t.

Zayn wondered if he should talk to Niall about the whole thing but quickly vetoed that idea. Of course, that didn’t stop Zayn from feeling guilty about it. They had always promised no secrets between them, and here Zayn was purposely deciding to hide something from his closest friend, but there was no way he could tell Niall about his suspicions—not yet. Niall was already overprotective, and he’d undoubtedly freak out, assume the worst before Zayn even had a chance to speak with Harry.

Not that Zayn really wanted to confront Harry with his suspicions. In all likelihood, Harry wouldn’t even know what he was talking about. Zayn would make a huge a** of himself and probably irreparably damage his relationship with his mentor.

And Zayn didn’t even want to contemplate the other possibility….

For now, Zayn decided on a plan of watchful waiting. For the time being, he would be more careful around his mentor (and everyone else). He would limit the time he spent with Ed—both at school and socially. Zayn knew it wasn’t going to be easy since he was starting to like Ed, maybe even develop feelings for him. Moreover, Niall and the music teacher had become fast friends as well.

Zayn couldn’t not follow his principal’s request though, could he?

Out of nowhere, the quote printed on the Shakespeare poster above Harry’s desk flashed into his mind:

“Love all, trust a few. Do wrong to none.”

Trust a few…if only. There was just one person now whom he could trust: Niall. Unfortunately, Zayn didn’t even dare tell him everything.

Zayn was not looking forward to school tomorrow. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

Chapter End Notes

Know this was a tad bit shorter, but I wanted to get something out to you all (and this felt like a logical place to stop). Just to let you know, I should have some more time in the coming weeks here since I think I’ve just about gotten my job situation/life sorted.
Anyways, I'll plan on updating in about a week. :) Thank you to all who commented/sent well wishes here or on tumblr. You seriously motivated me to get this (and half of the next chapter) done when I felt like I was stretched in a million directions. Much love! ~Maree xx
The following school day, Zayn didn’t have a spare moment to think about his mentor, or his principal, or anything else. His day was packed with detailed lectures, historical artefacts, and unit assessments. By the time the final bell rang, Zayn was ready to take an aspirin (maybe even two) and lay his head down on his desk.

And so he did.

The relief was short-lived, however, because all the suspicions and doubts that had been left stewing at the back of his mind now boiled over.

He needed to know. Zayn needed to know if he could trust Harry or if the English teacher was simply using him to gain favour with Dr. Payne. He rose from his desk with the intention of visiting Harry’s classroom, telling himself over and over again that he was simply jumping to conclusions.

Ironically, just as Zayn was about to open his own classroom door, he heard his mentor’s customary, quick successive raps. Zayn turned the handle to reveal a quite stunned Harry Styles.

“Bloody hell, that was quick,” he whistled.

“I was just coming over to see you,” Zayn explained nervously. “I…wanted to ask you something.”

“Well, invite me in, then ask away.” Harry held up the book he was holding. “I was just bringing this over for you to peruse. It’s got some ace ideas on project-based learning you might want to try out.”

Zayn stepped aside, realising he was blocking the doorway. He accepted the book Harry gave him, then followed his mentor to their usual table at the back of his room.

“Everything alright, then?” Harry asked brightly, and Zayn felt sick inside.

He knew he would lose his nerve if he didn’t get straight to the point. “Harry,” he began, not able to look the other man in the eye, “you’ll probably think this is ridiculous, but…um…did you mention anything personal about me to Dr. Payne?”

“Personal? Like what?”

“Like the fact I went on a date with Ed?” Once the question was out, He forced himself to look up at the other teacher. Zayn was expecting Harry to laugh dismissively, to tell him he was paranoid and overworked, to look offended perhaps. Zayn was even ready for Harry to make some casual comment about how he didn’t realise Ed and him were even dating.

But his mentor didn’t do any of those things.

No, the English teacher just stared back at Zayn, his mouth set in a thin, worried line. “You want the truth, don’t you?”

“Of course I want the truth, Harry.”
“Then…yes, I did,” he confessed, looking down at the table like one of Zayn’s sixth-graders who’d just been caught fibbing about whether they read the assigned chapter the night before. “Louis told me about the date, then I…. ” Harry’s voice trailed off before he glumly added, “well, I told Dr. Payne.”

“How long?” Zayn sputtered.

Harry blinked. “How long what?”

“How long have you been relaying information to Dr. Payne?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it that—”

“I don’t really care what you’d call it,” Zayn interrupted, screwing his eyes shut as if to brace himself for whatever Harry was about to say. “Just answer me. Please.”

“I don’t know…a while,” Harry disclosed at last, and it was like Zayn could physically feel a knife blade stabbing into his chest—or his back, to be more accurate. Learning he was right, that this was just the last in a long line of betrayals, didn’t bring Zayn one iota of satisfaction.

“When?” he demanded.

Harry’s normally vibrant, green eyes dulled to an almost unrecognisable colour. “Since the day Dr. Payne asked to meet with me in the teachers’ lounge.”

“That long?” Zayn choked out. He remembered the incident well—primarily due to the fact that Louis had badgered Harry about it afterwards, and the English teacher had been unusually coy in answering. “So, what exactly was it he asked you to do, Harry?”

“Well, he simply asked me to…to keep an eye out for you.”

“Keep an eye out for me or spy on me?” Zayn scoffed, indignation heating his words now.

“You’re blowing this completely out of proportion; it wasn’t like that at all. I was only looking out for you and your interests.”

Zayn snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“Listen, Dr. Payne only asked me to keep tabs on you to make sure you were adjusting to professional life,” Harry insisted. “I felt like I should tell him you were seeing another faculty member because, well, it could be construed as an ethics violation.”

Zayn couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Wow. Thanks, man. That was super helpful of you to tattle on me to the principal when I may have broken an ethics rule.”

“Zayn—”

“No, I mean it,” Zayn cut in, sarcasm still bleeding through. “Of course, some might say it would have been more appropriate for you to come to me first with your so-called ‘concerns’ since I’m your freaking mentee, but yeah, you do you.”

Harry looked away, but even his profile had guilt etched into every feature. “Look,” he began quietly, “I know first-hand the stresses of teaching. I know first-hand what it feels like to be a perfectionist, to be constantly striving for excellence. It’s easy to burn out and even easier to lose focus.” He paused, allowing time for Zayn to digest his words. “I didn’t want that to happen to
you.”

It was a pretty speech, but the actions behind it were too ugly to be covered up by gilded words. Plain and simple.

“I thought you said I should find balance.”

“Yeah, eventually.” Harry acknowledged with a troubled sigh. “But maybe balance isn’t spending every night after school with the music teacher either. And if we’re being honest,” he tacked on a little too dismissively for Zayn’s liking, “practically half the staff knew about your date anyway.”

“Probably because your friend couldn’t keep his big mouth shut,” Zayn shot back. Suddenly, a new thought occurred to him. “Wait—how did you even know Ed was taking me to Fontana’s?”

Harry suddenly appeared uncomfortable—extremely uncomfortable. “I…well, I asked him.”

“Who?”


Zayn knew Ed would’ve told Harry anything. Hell, Ed was probably just flattered the popular teacher he idolised was even talking to him. “So what you’re telling me is that you went out of your way to find out where we were going so you could report back to the principal?”

“You make it sound so…so….” Harry gesticulated with his hands before dropping them in a frustrated surrender.

“Nah, I’m just keeping it real.” Zayn felt betrayed. What was worse, he’d been betrayed by his mentor, the one person he was supposed to be able to trust above all others in the school. Zayn wasn’t angry anymore, just exhausted and disappointed.

So incredibly disappointed.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Harry said stiffly, “but there’s nothing I can do about it now. If it upsets you that much, I would be happy speak with Dr. Payne in the morning and tell him we can no longer continue with this mentor-mentee relationship.”

“Yes, I think that would be best,” Zayn replied calmly, and Harry looked downright flabbergasted at his quick acceptance. In all fairness, Harry was a former new teacher of the year. He had received dozens of awards and plaudits. One simply couldn’t find a better mentor on paper.

However, Zayn needed a real-life mentor he could trust, and that certainly wasn’t Harry.

“Oh…okay then,” Harry mustered before donning a façade of professionalism. “I will speak with Dr. Payne about this matter tomorrow and request he assign another mentor to you at his earliest convenience. Would that be satisfactory?”

“Very.”

Harry gave a curt nod and rose from his chair. “Zayn, I would like to formally apologise to you. If I was out of line, which I may well have been….” He paused for a moment, licking his lips, considering. “Well, just know I never intended to overstep the boundaries of the mentorship or cause you undue stress. Again, I’m truly sorry.” Harry glanced back at Zayn then, a quiet pleading in his verdant eyes.
“Thank you, Mr. Styles,” Zayn responded coolly. “I thank you for your time and training up until this point and wish you the best for the remainder of the school year.”

Harry exhaled loudly, then left without another word.

Zayn stayed at the table for what seemed like hours. He had this niggling feeling that he’d done something rash, made some irreparable mistake. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a thing in the world he could do to rectify it at this point.

The die was cast, and that—such as they say—was that.

***

The next morning, things didn’t appear any brighter. They were obfuscated at best, cloaked in uncertainty, and swathed in a light that seemed to throw more shadows than illuminate.

Niall, in contrast, was his usual sunny self. He was whistling and flipping pancakes in their small kitchen, losing about one out of every three or four as he attempted flips with higher and higher degrees of difficulty (behind the back, left-handed, spinning, and a combination of all the above).

“Oi, reckon I can flip this one onto your plate, Zed?”

Zayn looked up just as a large pancake shot towards him like a Frisbee. His glass intercepted the flying disc before it got to his plate, however, spilling orange juice all over the place settings and table-top.

“Nice one, Ni,” Zayn deadpanned, regarding the mess with about as much enthusiasm as he regarded the work day ahead. “Think that was the last of the orange juice, too.”

“It was a quality toss—don’t know what happened,” Niall lamented, shaking his head as he set the frying pan down and went to mop up the mess with a kitchen towel. “Shouldn’t be drinking that stuff anyway, Zed. Aren’t you allergic?”

Zayn grumbled under his breath as he rinsed out his glass and placed it in the sink. He’d opt for coffee instead today. He opened the cabinet and was careful to choose a mug that looked sturdy enough to withstand a pancake attack—just in case.

Zayn spent the remainder of breakfast wading through his mountain of pancakes drenched with maple syrup and listening to his roommate prattle on about his date with the beautiful Miss Hart the night before. He was treated to a complete rundown of the evening but Zayn didn’t mind. It meant he wasn’t required to talk much, and that was a good thing.

Zayn hadn’t had the opportunity to tell his roommate about what happened with Harry the day before…and in all honesty, he wasn’t really looking forward to that conversation. At all. Zayn knew Niall was going to be majorly ticked off at what Harry had done. The Irishman had just been searching for an excuse to dislike Harry for weeks, and now Zayn was delivering one on a silver platter.

When they arrived at school, Zayn stealthily managed to avoid Harry (who was just leaving Dr. Payne’s office) by darting into the workroom. He then collected his mail, pretending to be wildly interested in a renewal subscription postcard from Smithsonian so Niall wouldn’t ask him any
questions. When he suspected the coast was clear, he wished Niall a good day, put his blinders on, and raced to his classroom.

Zayn was just checking his e-mail when a new message suddenly appeared in his inbox.

_Come see me. -LP_

It was short and direct (and more than a little unnerving in its ambiguity). Unfortunately, he didn’t have time to visit his principal at that second because he could already hear students’ voices and lockers slamming in the hall outside. They’d be shuffling in soon for his first class, meaning he’d have to wait until the afternoon to find out what Dr. Payne wanted.

A few minutes into his lunch break, Zayn found himself in front of the principal’s door. Truth be told, he didn’t mind missing part of his lunch to meet with his principal. Aside from not having told Niall about the Harry situation yet, there was also the fact that Ed would be there. Ed, whom his principal had warned him not to get involved with because it was against some employee code of conduct. Ed, whom Zayn still needed to break the news to without sounding like a complete jerk because he was choosing his career over love (which he basically was).

“Come in!” Dr. Payne barked, and Zayn involuntarily shuddered. He was barely seated before his boss got straight to the point. “It has come to my attention that you are no longer satisfied with the mentor I have provided you. Is this correct?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Dr. Payne arched an eyebrow but otherwise displayed no apparent emotion. “Did you wish to file any type of complaint against Mr. Styles, Mr. Malik?”

“Complaint?” Zayn echoed, a little baffled by the question. “N-no. I don’t want to do anything like that,” he rushed out. Yes, Zayn was upset with Harry, but it wasn’t like he wanted to get the man into trouble. He just wanted a new mentor.

“Would you care to provide an explanation, then, as to why Mr. Styles was unsatisfactory in his mentoring role?”

Zayn nervously shifted in his chair. He figured it would be best if he kept the real motive for his decision secret since Dr. Payne had been involved in the circumstances which caused Zayn to lose faith in his mentor.

“Well, Mr. Malik? I’m waiting.”

“I’m sorry…what was your question again?” Zayn stalled.

Dr. Payne appeared more than a little perturbed as he gave a long, drawn-out sigh. “I asked if you would care to explain why you no longer believe Mr. Styles capable of mentoring you.”

“No?” Zayn replied meekly. As soon as the word left his lips, however, Zayn could tell it was the wrong response.

“No?” Dr. Payne repeated as if the word were inherently distasteful to him. “You do realise, Mr. Malik, that requesting a new mentor at this point in the year is irregular—_highly_ irregular, in fact.”
He studied Zayn closely, and the history teacher could feel himself wilting once again under the man’s intense gaze. “I do not feel that it is unreasonable of me to expect some sort of explanation for this request.”

Zayn desperately searched his befuddled brain for a justification the administrator might deem acceptable. “Sir, I just don’t believe the current arrangement is in the best interests of either party,” he offered vaguely before biting into his lower lip to stop his teeth from chattering.

Dr. Payne’s intimidating, expectant look slowly transformed into an approving one, and Zayn was beyond grateful that the man didn’t push the issue. “Alright, Mr. Malik,” he purred as a look of contentment flashed across his dark eyes. “I will see about assigning you a new mentor in due course. Expect to receive an e-mail communication from me in the next day or two on the matter.”

“Th-thank you, sir,” Zayn managed as relief washed over him.

“No, thank you, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne smiled, cat-like. It was a smile that sent shivers down the young teacher’s spine, and Zayn practically tripped over his feet in an effort to leave the stifling presence of the head administrator’s office.

***

“There you are!” Ed gaily sang out as he accosted Zayn in the main hall after school.

Despite his best efforts to avoid the music teacher, he’d been cornered as he was returning from the library. “Oh, uh…hi, Ed,” Zayn greeted him, glancing around the hall guiltily. It wasn’t like Zayn wasn’t allowed to speak with Ed at all, but he still felt as if he were pressing his luck. It hadn’t been all that long since Zayn had been given a clear directive from Dr. Payne not to ‘fraternise’ with the music teacher.

And now here he was…fraternising. In the main hall. Out in the open. Where everyone and their mother could see.

“One would think you were hiding from me or something,” Ed said somewhat hesitantly.

Zayn smiled uncomfortably back at him, trying to look as natural as possible. “Hiding? Ha, that’s funny,” he said, forcing out a laugh. “Why would I be hiding from you, Ed?”

The thing was, Zayn didn’t want Ed to hate him. He cared about what other people thought about him—especially people he genuinely liked. Zayn had already decided he would talk with Ed after he had everything figured out, after he’d found the words to make him understand, to let him down gently.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t even close to figuring anything out.

Above all, Zayn didn’t want to hurt the other teacher’s feelings. He didn’t want Ed to resent him just because he valued his job as a teacher at Payne Academy and was trying to do the right thing.

“Good,” Ed declared, face breaking into a relieved grin. “Because, well, I was hoping we could—”

“Hey listen, man,” Zayn interrupted quickly, “I’ve got to set up a few…er…things in my classroom for tomorrow before I forget. Why don’t you text me later, alright?” The lie felt like it was burning
his tongue, and it wasn’t even a complete lie because Zayn did have things to do. He needed to have that talk with Ed soon because, clearly, his conscience couldn’t hold out much longer.

“Oh…okay,” the ginger responded with marked disappointment.

“Great!” Zayn returned, slapping the man’s back. “See you later, Ed!”

He sprinted away before Ed could respond. Zayn was in such a hurry to get out of the painfully awkward situation that he bulldozed right into Louis Tomlinson as he rounded the corner of the hallway leading to his classroom.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry,” Zayn said breathlessly as he knelt to sort through the books and papers they had dropped.

Louis crouched beside him. “I’m not sure what kind of game you’re playing, Malik, but I’m not falling for it,” he hissed before snatching his things from Zayn’s hands.

Zayn rose unsteadily, sent off balance by the pure viciousness of the older teacher’s words. He hadn’t meant to bump into Louis like that; it was only an accident. Zayn glanced around the hallway for backup, but soon realised he was on his own with a very emotionally-unstable-looking drama teacher.

“Game?” Zayn questioned, genuinely confused by the other teacher’s manner. “What are you talking about?”

“Just don’t mess with my mate, yeah? He doesn’t need some young know-it-all strutting his stuff and trying to make him look bad. He’s worked too bloody hard for that.”

Zayn’s eyes widened. “I wasn’t trying to make Harry look bad. I swear that’s the last thing in the world I ever intended to—”

“Save it, Malik,” Louis cut in, blue eyes blazing. “That innocent crap may work on others, but it won’t work on me—not anymore. I can see right through that act of yours.”

“Can I help you with something, Tomlinson?” Niall demanded out of nowhere, footsteps fast approaching like the Seventh Cavalry galloping to the rescue. Zayn couldn’t remember a time when he was happier to see his best friend.

“No, Malik and I were just discussing a personal matter,” Louis snarled, “but apparently, he can’t have a conversation without his minder present.”

“Piss off, Tomlinson. I can tell from Zayn’s face that he doesn’t want to continue the ‘conversation’ you two were having.”

“You fight all his battles for him then?” Louis scoffed, and Zayn could feel his face redden. Whether it was from anger or shame, he wasn’t certain.

Niall glared at Louis who glared back at him with equal ferocity in return. “Listen, if you expect me to stand aside while you act like a fecking tosser, then you’ve got another think coming.”

Louis laughed shrilly and something about the misplaced mirth echoing through the halls made Zayn’s skin erupt in goose pimplles. “He’s the one who started it, for fuck’s sake. You and him both, Horan—and don’t you bloody forget it.”

“Well,” Niall seethed, “just because you think you’re a big man at this school doesn’t mean you
actually are, Tomlinson—and don’t you forget that.”

“I’ll tell you what I don’t forget,” Louis smirked, seemingly revelling in the confrontation. The two men were at each other’s throats now, neither looking like they’d back down any time soon. “I don’t forget or forgive perfidies easily.”

“Perfidies?!” Niall ricocheted back. “You need to wake the fuck up, man, and realise we’re not living in some Shakespearean drama!”

“Niall!” Zayn reproached. “We’re in school,” he reminded his friend—and Louis as well. He couldn’t believe this misunderstanding had escalated to the point where threats and f-bombs were being bandied about in the middle of a school hallway.

“Sorry, Zed,” Niall murmured before zooming in on Louis again. “Look, I’ve no clue what you’re going on about, mate, and I’m sure Zayn doesn’t either. All I know is that you don’t like me, and let me tell you, the feeling’s bloody mutual.”

“You sure about that, Horan?” Louis smirked, tilting his head towards Zayn who wanted to crawl into one of the student lockers about now. “You might want to have a little chat with Malik here, just saying.”

“If you’re trying to suggest something, then just bloody spit it out,” Niall ordered through clenched teeth. “Or even better, piss off, why don’tcha?”

“Most happy to oblige,” Louis simpered, “but let me say this has been a most enlightening conversation.” His x-ray-like gaze fell upon Zayn, and the history teacher hung his head ashamedly, unable to say a word. “Guess Malik doesn’t tell his bestie everything after all.”

“Goodbye, Tomlinson.”

“Yeah, see you around, newbies!” Louis called, laughing again, as he strutted down the hall.

Niall’s hands were balled into tight fists at his sides. “Not if we can help it,” he mumbled under his breath. When the smoke finally cleared, he practically pounced on Zayn. “What was that all about?”

“I’m sorry,” Zayn sniffled, more shook up from the encounter than he had realised at first. “I should have told you. It’s just that I…well….”

Niall let out a breath. “Let’s go, yeah? Just leave whatever’s unfinished; I’m sure it can wait until tomorrow. When we get home, you can tell me all the things you’ve evidently been keeping from me, and I’ll do my best to help you sort it all out. Sound good?”

Zayn nodded obediently and quickly gathered the few things he needed from his classroom. He was about to re-join his friend in the hall when he suddenly froze. “Crap—I forgot to check my e-mail,” he cursed, smacking his forehead. “Would you mind waiting a minute, Ni? You know how Dr. Payne gets when we don’t check it.”

“You want to set it up on your phone,” Niall grumped. “Nah, on second thought, that’s a piss-poor idea; you’d never stop working then.” His gaze flitted down the hall before returning to his friend. “Oi, can’t you wait until we get home?”

“But what if I need to do something here, Niall?” Zayn whinged. “What if I forgot to turn in a form or something? It’ll just take a sec, I swear.”
Niall grunted and folded his arms across his chest. “Fine, but if that chancer decides to return before you’ve finished, I’m not responsible for my actions.”

With that in mind, Zayn immediately rebooted his computer. There was another message from his principal, the second of the day:

*I am pleased to announce that you have been assigned a new mentor. Please report to my office tomorrow morning before school for further instructions. -LP*

Zayn exhaled slowly, not realising how tense he had become after spotting the e-mail from his principal. As it turned out, Dr. Payne had good news to share with him for once. As he shut down his computer, Zayn couldn’t help but wonder who Dr. Payne had chosen to be his new mentor. Endless possibilities fluttered through his mind—some better than others.

Niall cleared his throat loudly, and Zayn quickly finished up. He didn’t want to keep his friend waiting—especially since Niall was understandably bothered by the run-in they’d just had with Louis.

Zayn would explain everything to Niall tonight at dinner. He was sure Niall would be on his side (after he finished scolding Zayn for not alerting him about the Harry situation earlier, that is). Niall would certainly concur that ending the mentoring arrangement was Zayn’s best and only choice.

And who knows? Maybe Niall could persuade him he’d made the right decision because even now, Zayn still wasn’t completely convinced.

Chapter End Notes

Zayn will get his new mentor next chapter...who will it be?
You can also expect some major drama (literally) as well as another glimpse of Liam’s POV.
(Just a side note, but there will be explicit content in the next one. You've been warned, lovelies. xx)
“Your ‘daughter’ has cholera, Mrs. Anderson?” Ms. Hart clucked, rolling her eyes in Zayn’s direction as he walked up to her desk bright and early the next morning.  “What a shame; I guess that means she won’t be able to make it for opening night of the play on Friday.  I’ll be sure to let Mr. Tomlinson know so he can tell her understudy, Jessica Smethurst, to be ready.”

She pursed her lips to keep from laughing as she listened to the frantic talking on the other end of the line.  “What’s that? She’s recovered?” Jo inquired sweetly.  “Will wonders never cease,” she deadpanned before adding a few parting words and hanging up.  “Sorry about that.”

Zayn waved off the apology.  “Just out of curiosity—do you often get calls from ‘parents’ saying that their student has cholera, Ms. Hart?”

“Jo, and no,” she answered with a laugh.  “Usually, I let Terri handle the call-ins, but she’s not here yet.  Also, they’re not all as creative as Lainey Anderson.  Then again, what else would you expect from the drama department?”

“I don’t know,” Zayn teased, “maybe a bout of influenza or a touch of diphtheria?”

“Followed by good-old consumption,” Jo snickered, playing along.  “But enough about the trials and tribulations of working in the school office of Payne Academy.  What can I do for you, hon?”

“Is he in?” Zayn whispered, sobering up as soon as he recalled his reason for being there.

“When is he not?”

Zayn nodded, took a deep breath, and rapped lightly on the door to the principal’s office.

“Come in, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn shot a confused glance back at Jo, wondering how in the world Dr. Payne knew it was him when the door was still closed.  She just shrugged one shoulder in answer to his unspoken question, then turned back to whatever was on her screen, fingernails clacking away as Zayn pushed the door open.

Dr. Payne looked particularly well-tailored today, dressed in a grey pinstripe with matching waistcoat.  He motioned the young teacher towards a seat at the hexagonal table while he half-sat, half-leaned against the front of his desk.

“Well, I will get straight to the point.” Dr. Payne looked at him squarely, as if wanting to fully gauge his reaction to the news he was about to share.  “I am pleased to inform you that I am going to act as your mentor for the remainder of the year.”

Zayn opened his mouth to speak but quickly closed it.  He had prepared himself for nearly any possibility—even Louis Tomlinson, but he hadn’t expected this.  Now, he had to be incredibly careful about how he responded; otherwise, he could say goodbye to his teaching career.
“What is it, Mr. Malik?” Dr. Payne asked, clearly perturbed by the less-than-enthusiastic response.

Zayn’s mind spun as he tried to think of a reasonable excuse. “I’m sorry, sir, but isn’t… I mean, isn’t it a… a conflict of interest for you to act as my mentor and my evaluator?”

Dr. Payne’s lips curled up in that supercilious attempt at a smile. “Not at all, Mr. Malik. In fact, I am looking forward to moulding you, shaping you into a Payne Academy teacher.”

“Oh,” he replied dumbly. He felt like the walls of the small office were closing in on him. Never did Zayn imagine this possibility when he requested a new mentor.

Never in a million years.

In fact, Niall hadn’t either—or if he did, he hadn’t mentioned it when they ran through the list of likely replacements the night before. As expected, Niall had agreed wholeheartedly with Zayn’s decision to ‘sack’ Harry after he told him everything—or almost everything.

“In any case, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne continued, bringing Zayn back to the conversation at hand, “there’s no reason why Mr. Styles’ name shouldn’t remain on your mentorship forms. I didn’t want to tell you this earlier, but it is severely frowned upon by the state to switch ‘horses,’ as it were, midstream.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise, sir.” It seemed Zayn was constantly making mistakes left and right. He briefly considered asking his principal if he could have Harry back as his mentor, but then, he figured that might not go over well.

“But don’t worry your pretty little head about that, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne stated graciously, “I am more than willing to serve in a mentoring role for you. I’d like you to think of me as… as a father figure. Could you do that, Mr. Malik?”

“Er…yes, sir,” Zayn responded, slightly bewildered by his bizarre request. Granted, his principal was a few years older than him, but he wasn’t old enough to be his father. Not by any means.

“Good,” Dr. Payne approved, looking more than pleased. “But let’s just keep the fact that I’m mentoring you on a need-to-know basis, yes?”

Dr. Payne’s eyes seemed to hypnotise like a snake charmer’s. As Zayn stared into the dark orbs, he felt a hand rest upon his knee. Zayn’s eyes widened as the hand crept a few inches farther up his thigh. Spider-like fingers fluttered against the thin material of his trousers, causing a tingling sensation to run up and down his leg.

“Well, Mr. Malik?” the other man prompted, coaxing an answer to a question Zayn had already forgotten. “Are you alright with our little secret? After all, it is for your own good.” He gently squeezed the fleshy part of Zayn’s thigh, causing the teacher to inhale sharply. Instantaneously, Zayn moved his leg away, his body repelling against the unexpected contact.

“Um, yes… thank you, sir,” he replied lamely, his mind spiralling. And Zayn must have imagined it—the tension, the inappropriateness of the touch, everything—because Dr. Payne seemed so completely unaffected. As usual, Zayn was simply being paranoid; it was all in his head.

Dr. Payne was just being fatherly, as he said.

“Good, I’m glad we’re in agreement, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne simpered, the satisfied smirk transforming his usually attractive features into something quite different—something almost unsettling.
Zayn could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he waited to be dismissed. Candidly, he didn’t understand why he was so uneasy. He just knew that everything suddenly felt wrong.

Very wrong.

***

“Zed, have you even heard a single word I’ve said?” Niall complained loudly from across the lunch table.

“Um, not really,” he acknowledged. “Sorry.” He forced himself to stop listing every conceivable adverse effect of having Liam Payne as his mentor. He’d already gone through the list several times now anyway.

“Hey, why don’t you eat something, Zayn?” Ed’s concerned eyes flicked across the history teacher’s untouched lunch tray.

“He has been eating something,” Niall retorted, “just take a look at his fingernails, why don’tcha?” Zayn instantly pulled his thumbnail from his mouth, wishing he could go back to his classroom almost as much as he wished his best friend would stop pointing out his bad habits in public.

“Niall, leave him be, yeah?” Ed scolded, coming to Zayn’s rescue. “He’s obviously got something on his mind.”

“He does have something on his mind,” Niall agreed, obviously referring to the mentoring situation, “but, as usual, he’s making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“Nothing’s bothering me,” Zayn grumped. “I’m just not hungry, that’s all.”

“Oh,” Ed replied, relieved. “So why’d you get a lunch then?”

Zayn noticed the ginger eying his cheeseburger and fries like they hadn’t just come off the production line of the school cafeteria. “I have no idea. I’m seriously not hungry at all.” He pushed the tray towards the other teacher.

“Stall the ball—never thought that day would come,” Niall scoffed. “And bagsy on the chips, Ed!” he shouted before grabbing for the carton.

Ed tugged it back. “Nice try, mate, but Zayn gave ‘em to me.”

“Oi, I called bagsy,” Niall protested as the carton ripped in half, spilling fries all over the centre of the table. Niall snatched up a handful and dumped them on his own tray. “Ha!”

Zayn surveyed the scene with antipathy. “I’m just going to pretend I don’t know you two.”

“So basically what you’ve been doing all week then,” Niall cracked with only a hint of sarcasm.

Even Ed caught on this time. “You two alright?” he questioned.

“Yeah,” Niall answered, “Zed’s just got his knickers in a twist over the fact that he’s got to start working with Dr. Payne.”
“Working with Dr. Payne?” Ed repeated, looking back and forth questioningly between them.

“Zed, you mind if I give Ed a rundown of the facts so he’s not completely in the dark here?”

“Yeah, sure,” Zayn returned absently. He listened with one ear as he glanced around the lounge for any signs of Louis, Harry, or—God forbid—Dr. Payne. Zayn wasn’t certain if he should be sitting with Ed or not after his boss informed him that he was aware of their budding relationship and that romantic relationships between faculty members were explicitly forbidden. Zayn had tried avoiding the lounge as much as humanly possible this past week, but it just made Ed and Niall ask more questions. He knew, sooner or later, they would start to get suspicious, and so Zayn finally caved and joined them in the lounge.

The annoying part of the whole thing was that he was just following protocol, just adhering to Dr. Payne’s reasonable request, but again, he knew Niall wouldn’t see it that way. He’d say something along the lines of…what happens out of school, stays out of school, Zed. And Ed, well, he seemed to really like Zayn. A lot. He probably wouldn’t understand either.

Luckily, Dr. Payne was nowhere in sight, but Zayn eventually spotted Louis and Harry (a.k.a, Dr. Payne’s main spy) sitting at a large table in the far corner. The pair appeared carefree, joking and conversing with the other veteran teachers around them.

Louis suddenly glanced in his direction, and the drama teacher’s expression instantly transformed into a scowl when he saw Zayn. After what seemed like ages, Louis broke eye contact, returning his attention to the lively conversation at his table as if nothing had happened.

“Zed, I thought I told you to quit biting your nails; they’re starting to look a right mess.”

Zayn slammed a hand down on the table. “I’ve got to go,” he mumbled as he got to his feet. Niall and Ed just stared up at him, mouths agape at his admittedly uncharacteristic action. Zayn didn’t get angry very often, and he showed his anger even less.

But today, his tipping point was dangerously low, and he’d had enough.

“Zed!” Niall called after him, but Zayn was already halfway out the door.

***

“Listen bro, I didn’t mean to be such an arse at lunch today,” Niall apologised once they had gotten back home after a long, silent drive from Payne Academy. “I shouldn’t have been harping on you like that, acting like a proper jackeren.”

“It’s fine, Ni,” Zayn slowly exhaled, relieved that his best friend was speaking to him again. The spat they’d had at lunch had been gnawing at him all afternoon. “I know you were just trying to help in your way. I shouldn’t have been so sensitive; I just…I don’t know what’s come over me lately.”

“You’re stressed, that’s all. It’s going to be alright though. Things will work out if you stop worrying so much…about EVERYTHING.” He exaggeratedly rolled his eyes, and Zayn playfully swatted at him. Niall grinned back at him before plopping on the couch and elbowing Zayn in the chest. “Oi, you want a night out, mate.”

“But it’s a school night.”
“Just listen to yourself, bro,” Niall tsked. “Why don’t you ring Ed, then?” he recommended and even the mere suggestion gave Zayn an ulcer. “I’m sure he’d love to hang out with you, and it’s not like you’ve anything better to do.”

“Maybe I do.”

“Wait—don’t tell me!” Niall teased, scratching his clean-shaven chin as if he were deep in thought. Then, he snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it: What is worry about work tomorrow?”

“You’re a dork,” Zayn snorted, flinging a throw pillow at him. “And tomorrow I actually do have a reason to be worried about work, thank you very much.”

Niall cocked a brow. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Well, I have to meet with Dr. Payne before school tomorrow for my ninety-day review.”

“That it?” Niall asked incredulously. “I have my ninety-day tomorrow as well, ya eejit. Jo said it wouldn’t take more than a couple of minutes. Ed, too. All Payne has to do is sign off on a couple of forms stating how we’re meeting professional standards as expected and what-not. It’ll be a doddle, mate.”

“Well, it still means I have to meet with him in his private office, doesn’t it?” Zayn whinged.

“You better get used to that if he’s going to be your mentor,” Niall advised with a chuckle. “Besides, from what you’ve told me, your evaluation meetings so far couldn’t have gone better.”

Niall snapped his fingers again, his face lighting up like he’d just had the best idea ever. “Oi, why don’t you come out with Jo and me tonight?”

“Um…thanks but no thanks.”

“You sure? We’re going to Fontana’s, and I know you haven’t eaten much today. What do you say?” he urged.

“No, I’m good,” Zayn assured him. “It was a generous invitation, but Zayn had no intention of being a third wheel. “I think I’ll just stay in and get caught up on a few things, heat up some leftovers or whatever.”

“Alright, but don’t forget we’re going to the school play tomorrow night,” Niall reminded him as he got up from the couch.

Zayn nodded; he hadn’t forgotten. Attending a school production wasn’t the most spectacular way to spend a Friday evening, but it was a great deal more exciting than what Zayn normally was up to (or not up to).

“Hey, Niall?”

“Uh-huh?”

“You’re serious about Ms. Hart…Jo, I mean. Aren’t you?” Strangely, Zayn felt as if he were crossing a line of their friendship by asking the question, but he felt like he had to know Niall’s true intentions. Zayn didn’t want any more people in the school hating them than absolutely necessary.

“Yeah, reckon I am,” he confessed, smiling as he removed his keys from the hook by the door. “And…I’ve a feeling I fancy her as much as you fancy a certain ginger,” he teased.
Zayn didn’t quite know how to respond to that so he didn’t. “Have a good time.”

“Always do,” Niall grinned before heading out for his date. At Fontana’s. The same restaurant Ed had taken him to. The same restaurant where he’d seen Dr. Payne. Zayn found himself wondering whether Dr. Payne would be there, whether he’d bring the same raven-haired beauty he’d brought the last time….

“Argh!” Zayn screamed at the walls of his empty apartment. He lay back on the couch and covered his face with a pillow, groaning in frustration at the way his mind kept wandering back to trifling, inconsequential matters.

*What difference did it make whom Liam Payne dated? What business was it of his?*

And for probably the tenth time that week, Zayn wondered what on Earth had come over him lately.

***

As students, parents, faculty, and other residents of Wisteria Falls shuffled into Payne Academy’s theatre, Zayn couldn’t help but gawk at the grandeur around him. With red velvet curtains, gold accents everywhere one looked, and Italian marble pillars, the Smethurst Auditorium had the timeless beauty of old Hollywood.

This was a massive event for Payne Academy, the opening night for the current season and, more precisely, opening night for the school’s much-anticipated production of Andrew Lloyd Weber’s *Evita*. Apparently, the fine arts played a huge role in the success and favourable reputation of Payne—a fact Zayn hadn’t fully realised until that night.

Louis stood proudly on stage, shielding the glare from the stage lights with one hand as he surveyed the fantastic turnout for that evening’s performance. He cut quite a figure in his perfectly-tailored dark suit and tie against the rich, red backdrop, hair conservatively swept back with styling gel. Even without knowing, one could immediately ascertain that he was the man in charge. The director clearly appeared to be in his element as he strutted about like a peacock, shouting a few last-minute directions to the orchestra pit.

When the house lights began to dim and the voices of the audience dulled to a low murmur, Zayn anxiously glanced back towards the main doors from his seat in the fifth row. Niall was nowhere to be found.

Even though they had arrived together, they had somehow become separated in the foyer: Niall being held captive by a few wealthy-looking Board members while Zayn was accosted by a gaggle of students. One girl indirectly asked if Niall and him were on a date and several of the group seemed elated when Zayn laughed it off. They obviously had their sights set on the boyishly-handsome culinary arts teacher who was (thankfully) smitten with the school secretary.

He’d have to remember to tell his clueless best friend to turn down the charm a notch and watch his step with Payne Academy’s newly-chartered and rapidly-growing Niall Horan fan club. Zayn wasn’t the least bit concerned that he could have a similar following though. For starters, he taught history, wasn’t half as out-going as Niall, and assigned way too much rigorous work to ever be labelled the ‘cool’ teacher. (And just for the record, he was *more* than okay with that.)

Another minute ticked by without a sign of Niall, and then Louis approached centre stage to address
the audience:

“Good evening, ladies and gentleman,” Louis greeted them smoothly, “and thank you for attending Payne Academy’s first performance of Andrew Lloyd Weber’s *Evita*.

“For those of you unfamiliar with the subject matter, this is based on a ‘true’ story of a beautiful, but calculating and ambitious, ingénue who rises to power through morally dubious and otherwise…questionable means.” He glanced meaningfully around the auditorium for effect, effortlessly capturing the audience’s attention with his natural ease and charisma.

“I’d like to dedicate tonight’s performance of *Evita* to a new teacher at Payne who, I believe, is in the audience tonight.” As he spoke, the director’s gaze wandered in Zayn’s direction, seemed to burn right into his soul. “And as a history teacher, I’m sure he would be the first to tell you how often history repeats itself.”

Louis paused dramatically as he scanned the audience with a smug confidence, almost challenging someone to disagree with him. “And so without further ado,” he announced with a puckish smirk as he lasered in on Zayn again, “Mr. Malik—this one’s for you.”

The overture started up, and Zayn began to fantasise about the possibility of spontaneous combustion. Between Louis’ scorching insults and the heat of embarrassment created by a thousand sets of eyes judging Zayn in the darkness, the idea was more than attractive.

At least he now knew where he stood with Louis. The man thought Zayn was ambitious, calculating, and power-hungry. And he had just broadcasted it to a packed theatre.

Time had seemed frozen, but now as Zayn returned his fretful gaze to the stage, it was as if the time-space continuum was no longer interrupted and events once again played out in real time. Zayn hazily watched as the drama teacher triumphantly strode out of the spotlight and back into the wings. A second later, someone rose from the front row and sprinted up the steps of the stage, disappearing right behind Louis. Zayn couldn’t be sure, but that shadowy silhouette seemed awfully familiar.

As the music swelled, Zayn closed his eyes tight and settled back in his seat. He wished he could just walk out, just forget this evening ever happened, but the last thing he wanted to do was draw any more attention to himself.

And then someone slid into the seat next to him.

“Sorry I’m late,” Niall whispered. “I got caught up with a possible donor; think she’s going to help me get that bistro idea off the ground. Did I miss anything?”

Zayn swallowed the lump in his throat. “No.”

“Brilliant! Hey, you know who’s playing the lead role, right?”

“Who?” Zayn inquired politely. He couldn’t care less at this point, but he didn’t want Niall to get suspicious either.

“Lainey. Lainey Anderson.”

“So she no longer has cholera then?” Zayn deadpanned.

“Sorry?”

“Never mind,” Zayn dismissed, training his eyes on the empty stage. “It’s not important.”
Niall seemed to accept his answer. “Glad I made it in time. Lainey said she’d be right gutted if I missed any of the show.” He sighed, shaking his head. “She’s been going through a lot lately—poor kid.”

Zayn didn’t know what was going on with the girl; she wasn’t even a student of his. Maybe that was why he had decidedly less sympathy for her than Niall. “Show’s about to start,” Zayn whispered. “We should probably stop talking now.” Even in the darkened theatre, Zayn could tell that Niall was surprised by his bluntness.

Sometime during the first act, Zayn saw the same dark figure that had followed Louis into the wings return to his seat. This time, Zayn was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that the mystery man was Dr. Payne.

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15:20. My office. Observation #3 overview. Limited time. Don’t be late. -LP

Zayn groaned so loud it echoed off the walls of his empty classroom. He hadn’t been looking forward to returning to school on Monday, not after what happened Friday night. Still, he hadn’t expected to be welcomed by an e-mail from his mentor/principal…and in snarky telegraphese, to boot.

He didn’t see anyone the whole school day—well, he saw his students, of course—but he didn’t leave his classroom and no faculty member wandered in. It made everything easier to hide from view, to pretend Louis hadn’t humiliated him in front of the half of Wisteria Falls. (And if his students were gossiping about any of it, at least they had the decency not to even mention the incident in front of him. It made him like them even more.)

He was in the office at the appointed time and about to knock on the principal’s door, when Jo stopped him.

“Someone just went in five minute ago.”

“Student?”

“Well, not exactly sure who it was so I don’t know how long they’ll be. I just know he had someone with him when he closed the door,” the wide-eyed brunette apprised him. “Do you have an appointment?”

“Yeah, three-twenty.”

“In that case, he shouldn’t be long. If there’s one thing Dr. Payne can’t stand, it’s when his appointments get off schedule,” she related with a goofy, exaggerated eye-roll. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

Zayn listened to her sunny chatter as he waited, guessing she hadn’t heard anything about Friday night. She was the school secretary though, the centre of the Payne universe, so he assumed it wouldn’t be long before she found out.
On the other hand, maybe he was doing precisely what Niall had warned him about—making a mountain out of a molehill. Maybe what Louis had said wasn’t quite the character assassination Zayn thought it was at the time. After all, he hadn’t heard a single person mention the incident since it happened….

“Zayn?”

“Hm?”

“I asked if you’d like to go out for drinks or a coffee sometime,” she smiled patiently. “I’d love to get to know you better since your Niall’s best friend and all.”

“With Niall?”

“Either,” she shrugged. “I bet you could tell me all sorts of embarrassing stories about him. Also, well, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you….”

“Oh yeah. Sounds great,” Zayn told her distractedly. It wasn’t that Zayn didn’t like her; he genuinely did. It was just that he was mentally preparing himself to be called into the principal’s office at any given second. She seemed more than pleased with his answer, though, and when she returned to her typing, Zayn returned to studying the hands of the clock on the wall.

That was when he heard it: muffled voices coming from inside the principal’s office. Normally, one couldn’t hear a peep coming from beyond that door. The room had to be sound-proofed—to some degree anyway—because the most one could hear, as a rule, was Dr. Payne’s bellow following a knock. But now, the volume and intensity of the voices therein rose and rose until there was little doubt that an extremely heated argument was playing out only a few feet away.

“Oh dear,” Jo murmured uneasily, “I wonder if I should stick my head in, make sure everything’s alright in there?” She looked at Zayn for approval—approval he certainly wasn’t going to give her. “Yes, perhaps you’re right,” she hummed at last, drumming her fingernails on the desk anxiously.

A moment later, the door burst open, revealing the last person Zayn ever expected to see quarrelling with Dr. Payne:

Harry Styles. Principal’s pet, Harry Styles.

Dr. Payne was glaring daggers at the English teacher, and Zayn didn’t even know what to think at that point. The world seemed to have gone all topsy-turvy.

“Mr. Styles,” the principal warned, tone as dark and sharp as an obsidian blade, “you need to have a good, long think about what your priorities are, and that’s the last I’ll say on this matter.”

Zayn stood awkwardly in the middle of the outer office, trying to wrap his head around the complete impossibility and preposterousness of the scene that was unfolding before him. He couldn’t help but sneak a glance at Jo. The secretary was wearing the same dumbstruck look that, surely, must have been plastered across his own face.

Harry noticed him first. His former mentor turned on him, eyes like an emerald fire as he spat out, “I hope you’re happy.” Then, without another word, he stomped away. The best Zayn could do was stare in shock at the retreating figure.

Dr. Payne cleared his throat, and Zayn whipped back around so quickly, he nearly lost his balance. “My deepest apologies for keeping you waiting, Mr. Malik. Under the present circumstances, I feel it best that we reschedule our appointment. Let’s shoot for tomorrow after the staff meeting,
“Oh, great! I mean…uh yes, that would be fine, sir,” Zayn recovered. Dr. Payne gave a sharp nod, then turned on his heel, shouting something to his secretary about not wanting to be disturbed before slamming the door behind him.

As Zayn left the office, he couldn’t help feeling like he’d just received a twenty-four hour stay on an execution from the governor.

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(Liam’s POV)

Another night. Another drink. Another unsuccessful attempt at keeping his mind off work.

Candidly, it didn’t help that Styles insisted upon acting like a child earlier, throwing a proper wobbly in his office. Perhaps, Liam had been too lenient with him, allowed him too many privileges to the point where he’d forgotten his place. Styles was the only person in the entire building who had earned his trust, the only one who deserved it…until today anyway.

In retrospect, maybe Liam should have thought twice about enlisting his star teacher’s help with Zayn. But Styles had served his purpose well—acting as a valuable mentor for Zayn as well as an invaluable reporter of the novice teacher’s ‘extracurricular’ activities. Of course, Liam never expected Zayn to find out about his little agreement with the English teacher. That being said, Liam couldn’t be happier with the result.

Except now, Harry Styles was becoming difficult.

Very difficult.

He was questioning Liam’s decisions, challenging his authority, and this type of gross insubordination was something Liam simply couldn’t tolerate.

Not even from his star teacher. (Especially not from his star teacher.)

Worst of all, the unfortunate incident prevented Liam from meeting with Zayn, thus setting his plans behind schedule. In truth, Liam could have squeezed Zayn in before his conference call, but he was afraid of doing something rash, of doing something that would ruin his weeks—no months—of careful planning.

He had to be patient just a little longer. He had to settle, and Liam Payne didn’t fancy settling. Not one bit.

Tonight, Liam had to make due with Francesca, the beautiful Francesca, who was sat at his feet, naked, and mewling like a cat in heat. She was fit—he’d give her that much—but she wasn’t enough to satisfy the overwhelming desires and urges that overtook him since the day Zayn Malik walked into his life. Rather, the Italian model was a means to an end, a way to get his mind off work for a handful of minutes or hours.
But that was all.

Liam regarded her now, willing and on her knees, and the scene barely affected him. His dick was almost flaccid when he began pumping it, coaxing it to semi-hardness. She looked pleadingly at him, and Liam generously granted her permission to take over. But even as her pouty lips enclosed the tip, the obnoxious sounds escaping her throat disgusted him to no end. The look in her eyes as his thick girth filled her repulsed him even more.

Francesca never got him going. He wasn’t stupid; he knew she was mostly in it for his money—his family’s money, really—and little else.

And well, maybe his dick. She seemed to be quite interested in that as well.

Liam closed his eyes and imagined Zayn’s full lips trailing down his length instead of the red-stained pair of his Italian ragazza. Liam felt his hardening member twitch as he pictured the young teacher in her place. Zayn was so innocent, so uncorrupted, so eager to learn. He was like a porcelain doll: perfectly-crafted, beautiful, and fragile. If one played too rough with a toy like that, it was sure to break.

But Liam wasn’t too bothered by that. He had always been the type to take good care of his toys so that they lasted a long time, so that he could get full enjoyment out of them.

And Liam planned to enjoy every inch of Zayn Malik.

With that thought in mind, Liam came—and came hard, shooting his first load down Francesca’s throat as she gagged and then began grunting like a satiated pig. Grasping the base of his dick in his shaking hands, Liam pulled out, painting white ribbons across Francesca’s features and pillowy breasts as he came a second time. Then, he lay back against the couch, contented for the time being.

“Keez me, darling?” Francesca cooed, attempting a sultry look.

Liam only felt contempt. She wasn’t Zayn, and maybe that wasn’t her fault, but it still irked him nonetheless. “Why don’t you take a shower,” he muttered back. “You look a right mess.”

She stood up abruptly, spitting and cursing at him. As Liam saw it, she was lucky he allowed her to stay over. She wasn’t deserving of his attention or his time, and Liam would have explained all this to her if her ugly, emotional display didn’t prevent him from doing so.

But apparently, there was no need.

Still fuming, she snatched her clothing from the floor. Liam watched in quiet amusement as she dressed hurriedly, scowling and hissing at him the whole time. Slinging her leather coat over a shoulder, she marched out into the chilly November night without so much as a backwards glance.

Good riddance to bad rubbish.

She’d be back…not that he’d take her back. He was done with unnecessary, trifling distractions; resolved to focus on things far worthier of his time. Tomorrow would be the beginning of bigger and better things. Tomorrow, Liam was going to have his first mentoring meeting with Zayn.

Tomorrow was going to be a great day at Payne Academy…of that, Liam was certain.
So how much do you all hate me after that? (Feel free to answer silently in your heads, lol.)

Anyway, many of you guessed that Liam was the new mentor so kudos to you! :) There'll be more on that next chapter. Also, Louis played a significant role in this one...any thoughts? :) Finally, I'd love to hear what you think about any of the other characters at this point (Harry, Niall, Ed, Jo, etc.).

Thank you for the overwhelming feedback. I've been working on another fic with a fast-approaching deadline, but your comments inspired me to finish this and get it out to you as soon as I could.

P.S. Money Moves, my submission for the Ziamficexchange2k17 has been revealed, so you might check that out while you're waiting for the next update--if you haven't already. (Also be sure to check out all the other fabulous fics in that exchange!) Cheers for now! ~Maree xx
“Well, blow me,” Niall declared as soon as they were all sat at their usual table. “Can you fecking believe he said yes?”

“Language,” Zayn hummed disapprovingly, glancing around the crowded lounge, “and who said yes?”

Before Niall could reply, his mentor teacher, Patricia Cunningham, touched his shoulder.

“Sorry to disturb you, boys,” she apologised, same sweet smile as always. “I just need to talk to Niall for one teeny-tiny moment.” And maybe it was just Zayn’s imagination, but her smile seemed to freeze briefly as her eyes fell upon him—not that Zayn had time to worry about that. No, he had other things on his mind.

Like chocolate milk, for example.

While the mature woman spoke with her mentee, Zayn frowned at his milk carton. He wondered how, with centuries of human invention, no one had been able to improve upon this particular design.

Or maybe it was just him. Maybe he was just a klutz, incapable of the simple task of opening a darn milk carton.

But somehow, he doubted it.

Thus, he sat there, studying the accursed vessel, trying to decipher a way to open it without spilling half its contents all over his shirt. His new dress shirt. His new Hugo Boss white dress shirt that he really shouldn’t have bought except he fell in love with the black piping details and Niall said it looked like it was tailor-made for him.

And honestly, it kind of did.

That was why he decided to wear it today along with his skinny fit black trousers. He had spent yesterday hiding in his classroom, quaking about whether there would be repercussions from the reputation-flogging he received on Friday night, courtesy of one Louis Tomlinson. Today, he decided to try a new tactic.

He wasn’t going to hide; he was going to stand his ground. He was going to dress to impress. After all, it was his first proper mentoring meeting with Dr. Payne today—Dr. Payne who lectured him at the start of the school year about making more of an effort on his appearance—and he would prefer not to attend it with chocolate milk all over his designer shirtfront.

“Need a hand, mate?” Ed asked, evidently sensing Zayn’s internal struggle.

“On it!” Niall chirruped, snatching Zayn’s milk carton and expertly opening it in three seconds flat without spilling a single drop. “You know I’m always here to save the day, Zed,” he winked, presenting the milk on his palm as if it were ambrosia from the Gods.
Zayn snorted as he accepted the ‘offering.’ “What would I ever do without you, Ni?”

“God willing, we’ll never find out,” Niall cracked, and Zayn would’ve elbowed him if he weren’t too busy chugging his chocolate milk.

“Just for the record,” Ed grumped, “I offered to open it first. But anyway, who said yes, Niall?”

“Payne—who else?” Niall returned, screwing his face up at Ed like it was blatantly obvious. “And I nearly shit myself when he did. I was like, stop the bleedin’ lights and repeat that, will ya, Payno?”

“You didn’t!” Zayn gasped.

Niall cackled, knocking Zayn in the shoulder fondly as he rose from the table, presumably to retrieve his food from one of the staff microwaves. “Course I didn’t, ya nutter. I’m not a complete eejit, now am I? Wouldn’t want to muck up an opportunity like this, would I?”

Zayn and Ed looked at each other, then erupted into laughter. They were still sniggering as Niall returned.

“Oi, you two taking the piss or something?”

“No,” Ed chuckled, “we’re just trying to suss out what you’ve been going on about for the last five minutes.”

Niall set his plate down and rolled his eyes good-humouredly. “So remember the school bistro idea I had?” Zayn and Ed nodded because of course they did. Niall talked about it every chance he got. “Well I spoke with Dr. Payne, and he gave the greenlight on it!”

“Oh my gosh—that’s fantastic news, Ni!” Zayn squealed, jumping up to give his best friend a hug. Niall returned the hug with his usual exuberance, somehow managing to lift the taller man off his feet while practically crushing his spine in the process, but Zayn was too ecstatic to care. He knew this was a goal of Niall’s for the longest time, and he was overjoyed that, finally, something was going right in their lives again.

“Ahem.”

Zayn turned to see Ed raising an eyebrow at them. Almost instantly, Niall’s hands dropped to his sides.

“Ed,” he said with some exasperation as he sat back down, “I thought we told you that there’s absolutely nothing going on between Niall and me.”

“I know that, but that doesn’t mean everyone else does,” the music teacher reminded them in a low tone.

Zayn scanned the room. He noticed several curious pairs of eyes on them and decided Ed might be right. Zayn was determined not to hide anymore, but that didn’t mean he needed to draw unnecessary attention to himself either. He turned back to Niall. “So…when does this whole bistro thing kick off?”

“I was planning to send home fliers tomorrow,” Niall informed them, digging into his lunch. “Could start as early as next week if I get enough interested students by then.”

“Don’t think you’ll have much trouble finding ‘interested’ students, mate,” Ed snickered, winking at the other boy. “You’ll be turning them away, I bet.”
Zayn silently agreed. Despite their short tenure there, Niall was quickly becoming one of the most popular teachers in the school—with the students at least. “So how many days a week are we talking?”

“Three…maybe four, but I haven’t sorted out all the details yet,” Niall acknowledged. “I reckon Friday’s going to be the late day since that’s when the bistro will be open to the public and all.”

“Well, you can count me in as a customer,” Ed grinned.

“Me, too.”

“Cheers, lads. Oh and Zed…,” Niall began a little apprehensively, “this bistro thing’s going to be murder to get off the ground at first. Even after it gets going, the time commitment’s likely to remain something fierce….”

“I get it, Ni, and I’d be more than happy to help if I can.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Niall replied, and Zayn waited for him to expound. “It’s just that this might throw a spanner in the works with our driving arrangement. I’ll be staying late nearly every day between meetings and this club.”

Zayn threw a grape at his friend. “Ni, you’re talking to me,” he scoffed. “Asking if I’d mind staying late after school is like asking a gambler if they’d mind hitting the jackpot.”

“Why do I feel like I’m enabling your worst qualities?” Niall wondered aloud, looking pointedly at his friend. Zayn smiled guiltily in return. “But speaking of working late, I’m going to need to get a few things sorted after the staff meeting this afternoon. I probably won’t be able to leave until well after five, Zed.”

“Hey, Zayn,” Ed spoke up, baby blues hopeful, “I’d be more than happy to take you home.”

“Thanks, Ed, but I’ll just wait for Niall.” The music teacher’s face fell, and it made Zayn feel like an awful human being and even worse friend. “I’m meeting with Dr. Payne about my next observation after school,” he explained quietly. Even though Ed and Niall knew about the mentor situation, it wasn’t exactly supposed to be common knowledge.

Ed seemed over the moon that Zayn wasn’t just blowing him off like he’d done more than once lately. “Oh! Well, just know that the offer stands anytime you’d like.”

“Not to change the subject,” Niall began, “but have you heard back from Payne on the course proposal you submitted—you know, the popular music class you two were gonna do together? It’d be grand if we all had something to celebrate.”

Zayn bit his lip. Something told him there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in ‘H-E-Double-Hockey-Sticks’ that Dr. Payne would approve of that particular collaboration—not after the principal warned him about spending too much time with a certain ginger-haired music teacher.

“Nothing yet,” Ed relayed, “but I’m still crossing my fingers and toes. And if worse comes to worse, there’s always a chance we can do it next year.”

Zayn smiled weakly back at the other boy. He couldn’t even begin to think about next year. For the love of everything good and holy, Zayn was just trying his best to get through the trials and tribulations this school year kept lobbing at him. The only time ‘next year’ ever crossed his mind was when he was daydreaming about how far away he could get from this place—and with his dignity still somewhat intact.
“Oh, by the way,” Ed whispered, leaning over the lunch table, “did you hear the news?” His blue eyes swept across the lounge as if checking for people eavesdropping on their conversation—not that anyone would. The vast majority of the staff could probably care less what a bunch of ‘newbies’ were discussing.

One thing Zayn knew for certain was that if anyone did care, it wouldn’t be Payne Academy’s celebrated English teacher who was currently glaring daggers at him from across the lounge.

“What news?” Zayn and Niall chorused together.

“The news about Tomlinson,” Ed divulged slowly as he continued to case the room.

Niall’s eyes bulged. “What about Tomlinson?” he demanded.

“Shhh!” Ed shushed him. “Harry Styles is looking at us, and I don’t want him to think we’re talking about him.”

“We are talking about him,” Niall deadpanned, rolling his eyes, “and who gives a shite about what that wanker thinks?”

“Niall,” Zayn hissed, but the boy next to him just shrugged.

“Just speaking the truth, Zed.”

Ed seemed torn. “I don’t think it’s fair to demonise Harry,” he told Niall, and Zayn could tell it was something he’d been wanting to get off his chest for a while. “Whatever Harry did, he probably had a good reason for it.”

“Bollocks,” Niall coughed into his hand. “He turned out to be a gobshite, just like his best mate.”

Zayn stayed quiet. He didn’t know how much Niall or Ed knew about what happened on Friday night. Luckily, neither of them had been in the theatre when Louis made his ‘dedication’ speech. Still, Zayn knew news travelled quickly around this place.

“Oi, so what’s this news about Tomlinson then?”

Ed leaned in closer, voice conspiratorial. “He’s been suspended.”

“He’s been what?” Zayn asked incredulously, jaw dropping to the floor. He looked to Niall, and the other boy appeared equally flabbergasted.

But then, everything started to make sense. So that was the reason Harry had looked at him with resentment raging in his expressive eyes. It was undoubtedly the reason Harry had been arguing with Dr. Payne in his office, endeavouring to plead Louis’ case before losing his temper.

Zayn just didn’t understand why Harry was so upset with him—well, about the Louis situation, anyway. As Zayn saw it, it was only a matter of time before the drama teacher’s carefree and rebellious soul clashed with their principal’s strait-laced, ordered universe.

“Well, to be accurate,” Ed clarified, “he’s on ‘personal and family leave’ or something.”

“Why?” Niall asked, and Zayn’s heart nearly skipped a beat as he awaited Ed’s answer.

“Don’t know,” Ed confided, and Zayn forced himself to breathe. “I heard all this from Jensen—the chemistry teacher, yeah? According to Jensen, the personal leave is just a cover-up. There’s a rumour going around that Louis is going to be suspended…indefinitely…if he doesn’t get in line
with whatever Dr. Payne asked him to do.”

Zayn felt positively rotten. No matter what Louis had done to earn the ire of their boss, Zayn didn’t want to see the veteran teacher’s career completely ruined. Teaching wasn’t like other professions. You couldn’t just pick up and get another job at another school if you were disgraced at one school —and especially an institution like Payne. If the drama teacher was formally suspended, it would go on his record as well. He probably wouldn’t lose his licence, but it would definitely be a serious mark against him if Dr. Payne decided to go ahead with the suspension.

And yes, Louis Tomlinson was far from Zayn’s favourite person right now, but Zayn didn’t want to be the cause of his suspension either. (And he had a sinking suspicion that what happened on Friday night at Evita might have been the impetus for Louis’ so-called ‘leave.’)

“What about the upcoming plays?” Niall inquired, and yeah, that hadn’t even crossed Zayn’s mind. “Weren’t there just auditions for a winter revue or something?”

“There’s a student directorial team,” Ed informed them, “and Harry Styles has helped oversee productions in the past so….” Ed shifted nervously in his seat. “Speaking of Harry…I’m not sure I quite understand why you’re no longer being mentored by him, Zayn.”

Zayn frowned. “I was under the impression that Niall already explained all that?”

“He did some, but…well, Harry Styles was your mentor. Man, I’d kill for a chance to be mentored by that bloke. I mean, have you seen him teach?” the ginger gushed. “It’s like watching a master class.”

“I am fully aware of how amazing Harry is as a teacher which is why he is still, in fact, my mentor.” Zayn’s heart beat faster as the lie left his lips. Technically, it wasn’t a lie because Harry still held that status officially.

Ed’s nose scrunched up in confusion. “But I thought—”

“It’s complicated,” Zayn cut him off, looking to Niall for support.

Niall cleared his throat. “What Zed is trying to say is that Styles and Payne are sharing the responsibility now—right Zed?”

“Yes,” Zayn affirmed, shooting a grateful glance at his best friend. “Dr. Payne is partnering with Harry, filling in for a while, and um yeah.” Zayn wrung his hands under the table. He disliked misleading the music teacher, but Dr. Payne was probably right about keeping Zayn’s whole mentoring situation on a need-to-know basis. It was better if Ed only knew half the truth for now—especially when he was apparently such a Harry Styles fanboy.

“Oh, that makes sense,” Ed stated, buttering his roll. “Harry certainly has his hands full. Besides mentoring you, he’s got his regular class load, responsibilities as chair of the English department, the extra administrative duties Dr. Payne gives him, and now, apparently, the winter revue. And to top it all off,” Ed added with emphasis and a sympathetic glance in Harry’s direction, “I reckon he’s worried that his best mate’s gonna get sacked.”

“Yeah, that’s got to be stressful,” Zayn observed sincerely. “And honestly, I feel bad—for both of them.”

“Really?” Niall snorted, eyeing the boy next to him with disbelief. “I’ve been waiting for you to burst into a happy dance since Ed told us the news. Jaysus, how can you not be overjoyed that Tomlinson’s piss-taking at Evita put him in the shitter?”
“Oh, you were there,” Zayn groaned.

“No, Zed, I wasn’t,” Niall returned a little snappishly, “but I did hear about it afterwards. Needless to say, I’ve been waiting for you to tell me about it,” he reprimanded, shooting Zayn a reproving look. “And let’s just say that the bastard was lucky I wasn’t present because I would’ve gone up on that bleedin’ stage and sorted him out, let me tell ya.”

Zayn closed his eyes for a split second and once again saw Dr. Payne running with purpose to accost Louis in the dark theatre. “Think Dr. Payne beat you to it,” he mused wryly, “and I’m sorry, Ni; should’ve told you what happened, but I was embarrassed.”

“S’fine,” Niall assured him, smiling around the words. “Just don’t keep shite like that from me in the future, yeah?”

“What did happen?” Ed questioned.

Niall’s face turned grim. “Oh, Tomlinson was starting something, as usual. Apparently, he’s ill set on making everyone think Zayn’s a conniving slag.”

Ed’s eyes widened. “Hey, you reckon that’s why he’s taking ‘leave’?”

“As much as I’d like to think so,” Niall replied, “it sounds a bit far-fetched. Wouldn’t doubt it could’ve been the straw that broke the camel’s back though….”

Zayn remained quiet. Recent events flashed through his mind, culminating with Harry’s livid accusation in the office:

“I hope you’re happy.”

Zayn felt sick to his stomach.

Undefined suppositions bubbling to the surface, Zayn staggered to his feet. It was still five minutes to the bell so he mumbled something about needing to prepare for his next class. He then left the table, half his lunch, and a pair of very surprised faces.

Right now, Zayn just needed to be alone to think. There was a lot to think about.

***

Jo was on the phone when Zayn entered the office for his meeting later that afternoon. He glanced at the clock and saw it was still relatively early—the staff meeting having been cut short for once—so he quietly took a seat in the vacant waiting area, his dismal thoughts keeping him company.

Specifically, Zayn ruminated on the rumour about Louis’ possible suspension. At lunch, Zayn had felt weighed down by the turn of events, by the fact that he might have been partly responsible.

But then, he changed his mind.

During his plan time, Zayn had come to the conclusion that he was overreacting (as usual) and that even if Dr. Payne was upset about Louis’ affronts, it was surely just the tipping point in a long list of trespasses by the drama teacher. Niall had practically said the same thing. And the more Zayn thought about it, the more he realised how foolish the idea sounded, presuming Dr. Payne would
suspend a teacher solely based on a few catty remarks in public. Heck, Dr. Payne, himself, had belittled and insulted Zayn on numerous occasions—also in public (albeit considerably less public).

And yes, maybe what Louis said was inexcusable. The veteran teacher had intimated that Zayn was ambitious and calculating before bringing his morals into question. Zayn could understand the ambitious part to a certain extent because Zayn was ambitious. He wanted to be one of the top teachers in the school—in the country, even. He didn’t think there was anything wrong with that as long as he was willing to put in the hard work it took to get there.

But he definitely wasn’t calculating. Crap, Zayn didn’t have a calculating bone in his body.

Zayn suspected it all came down to the mentoring melee. Louis had already accused Zayn of trying to discredit Harry to get a better standing in the school, but that wasn’t the case at all. Zayn had no idea as to whether Louis knew the full story or not, whether Harry had told his best friend that he was practically spying on his mentee for their principal. Either way, Louis was quick to judge, to assume Zayn had thrown Harry under the bus the first chance he got.

Even harder to understand, though, was that Louis could stand up on that stage and denounce Zayn’s moral character. Zayn was the consummate goody-two-shoes. He didn’t drink, didn’t curse, rarely smoked (and only when his nerves got the better of him), and he certainly wasn’t promiscuous—not that that was any of Louis’ business. At twenty-two, he was still a virgin, believing one should save themselves for the right person and preferably wait to be intimate until marriage. Zayn believed in fairy tales, white picket fences, love-at-first-sight, and happily-ever-after’s.

But above all else, Zayn believed in making a difference. This was why teaching was everything to him. This was why he was willing to put his personal wishes and desires on hold.

So when Louis intimated that his moral code was subpar in front of a large audience of his peers, students, and their families, it bothered him. A lot.

“Can I help you?” Jo asked, tone a little clipped (or maybe Zayn just imagined it).

Zayn pushed his thoughts back and tried to look as cheerful as he could. “Good afternoon, Jo. I was just waiting to meet with Dr. Payne; we had to reschedule our meeting yesterday, if you remember.”

“Oh, that’s right.” She spoke curtly, glancing up at the clock. Zayn followed suit and saw it was still a few minutes before four. “You could probably go in early, Mr. Malik. He doesn’t have anyone with him.”

“Why so formal?” Zayn chided. “The students have already left.” She smiled tightly back at him, and Zayn wondered if she was upset about something. He figured it had been a bad day in the office—something completely understandable with how closely she had to work with Dr. Payne every day.

He stood up, then hesitated as an idea suddenly flashed into his head. Even though Zayn wasn’t the most sociable person, Joanna Hart seemed like a genuinely nice person and Zayn needed all the friends at this school he could get. Moreover, Niall was obviously serious about her.

Bucking up his courage, he decided to go for it: “By the way, I was hoping I could take you up on that offer….” Jo looked up at him with a blank expression. “Your invitation for coffee?” Zayn clarified, shuffling his feet. Getting the normally garrulous secretary to respond today was like squeezing blood from a turnip. “Well, I’m available any day after school this week so, uh, just let me know, yeah?”
“I’m busy this week, Mr. Malik,” she answered brusquely.

“Oh, I…um, yeah,” Zayn stammered. “Yeah, that’s totally cool. Just, uh, let me know when your schedule lightens up,” he added, a warm flush visiting his cheeks. Zayn hadn’t expected her to react so negatively to the suggestion. She always seemed so friendly towards him…until today.

Great, someone else who despised him.

He was almost relieved when he entered the dragon’s den a minute later.

“Close the door and have a seat,” Dr. Payne directed without looking up from his computer screen. “And thank you for being willing to meet so late in the afternoon. I wouldn’t normally schedule a mentoring session after a staff meeting, but I felt it was imperative that we get your…personal development plan underway.”

“No problem at all, sir.”

Dr. Payne typed furiously for another minute, then concluded with one final key stroke, a grand flourish reminiscent of a concert pianist performing Tchaikovsky’s Concerto No. 1 in B Flat Minor.

Immediately upon looking up, Dr. Payne blinked as if caught off guard. “Is that new?”

Zayn felt a pair of dark eyes rake over him, and he suddenly regretted his decision to wear his present outfit. He worried he might have dressed too nicely for a mere mentoring meeting—even if it was their first official one. “Yes, um, it is.”

“I trust I’m not keeping you from dinner plans?” the principal remarked tersely, dark orbs flickering up to meet Zayn’s gaze. “Or, for that matter, any other plans you might have made for this evening.”

“Oh no…not at all, sir,” Zayn squirmed. “I’ve been trying to follow your advice—about dressing for success? And since this was our first mentoring meeting, I wanted to…to….”

“Make a good impression?” Dr. Payne supplied, the ghost of a smile playing at his lips.

Zayn blushed. “Um…yeah, basically.”

“Well, I’m happy to say that if that was your goal, you’ve accomplished it in droves, Mr. Malik.”

Inwardly, Zayn heaved a giant sigh of relief. “Thank you, sir.”

Dr. Payne rose and walked over to have a seat next to Zayn at the hexagonal table. He snapped opened a folder chock-full of papers. “Shall we begin?”

The first half of the meeting passed uneventfully. It was much like any other meeting he’d had with his former mentor—except Harry was a whole lot less intimidating than Dr. Payne.

They mutually came to the decision that Dr. Payne would observe Zayn’s World Geography course. His principal outlined what he would be looking for in the lesson without being too specific. He reviewed strengths from Zayn’s previous observations and encouraged him to maximise opportunities to learn wherever possible. When Dr. Payne closed the file folder and instructed him to submit his final lesson plan a week in advance, Zayn foolishly thought their mentoring session was coming to an end.

“Just two more things,” Dr. Payne announced, and Zayn peered back at him curiously. “Speaking as your mentor, I believe it is essential that we meet on a regular basis to establish an effective working
relationship, a relationship wherein you feel comfortable enough to discuss any questions or concerns you may have about your personal and professional growth.” He paused, seemingly to gauge Zayn’s reaction. “I am your acting mentor, and I do not intend to do a perfunctory job of it.” Dr. Payne leaned in closer, an almost conspiratorial note to his manner. “I would expect a similar commitment from you.”

“Of course.”

“Good.” The man seemed pleased, but really, Zayn was the one who should feel fortunate. Although it was customary for mentors to touch base with their mentees on a weekly basis (at the bare minimum), new teachers weren’t mentored by their administrators.

And yes, there was probably a good reason for that. At best, it was clearly a conflict of interests for the mentor and evaluator to be the same person—whether Dr. Payne acknowledged that fact or not when Zayn had brought it up last week. At worst, it might be construed as a violation of teacher-administrator protocol.

But, more importantly, working one-on-one with Dr. Payne gave him the chance to learn from another master educator. Plus, Zayn was hoping that by meeting with Dr. Payne on a more frequent basis, he might be able to conquer his fear of the man. For all intents and purposes, this could be the immersion therapy he needed to get over his phobia of the intimidating Liam Payne.

Dr. Payne cleared his throat, and Zayn snapped to attention. “I’ve reviewed my calendar for the remainder of the term, and I should be able to carve out some time on Wednesdays after school.”

“3:15 or 3:30?”

“Better make it 16 hundred hours—just to be safe.” Dr. Payne looked at him for confirmation, but Zayn didn’t know what to say. If they didn’t meet until four, that would mean the session wouldn’t end until five (or possibly, even later on occasion). “Will that be a problem, Mr. Malik?” his principal pressed, lips forming a tight line.

“Well, the fact is…,” Zayn stalled, trying to circumvent an embarrassing disclosure. “The fact is, I generally get a ride from Niall—Mr. Horan, I mean—since we share an apartment and expenses and all. And also, I, um….”

“Yes, Mr. Malik?”

“Well, I don’t really drive,” Zayn confessed, biting his lip ashamedly. It was a secret he hated to admit, but luckily, Dr. Payne didn’t seem to judge him for it. It was almost as if he knew, or at least, expected it. “Anyway,” he continued, “I wouldn’t want to assume Mr. Horan could stay that late on a weekly basis without speaking to him first.”

“Oh, is that all?” Dr. Payne inquired lazily, lips curving up at the edges as he leaned back in his chair. “I spoke with Mr. Horan this morning about his plans for an afterschool culinary programme. I think it’s a wonderful idea, and I granted him permission to start straight away. Perhaps, he hasn’t had the opportunity to mention it to you yet?”

“Actually, he did. It just slipped my mind for a moment there,” Zayn apologised sheepishly. He couldn’t believe he’d forgotten all about Niall’s excitement over Dr. Payne okaying his bistro idea. Zayn was certain that Niall would use Wednesdays for his club since it was the one day of the week (besides Friday) when meetings and events were seldom scheduled after school. “Wednesdays would be perfect.”
“You are quite sure you don’t mind the lateness of the time? After all, the office is technically closed then,” Dr. Payne reminded him.

“Well, I figure I might as well do something productive—I mean, if I’m basically going to be held captive here anyway,” Zayn answered lightly.

Dr. Payne’s lips quirked, an almost gleeful-glint in his eyes. “That’s an interesting way to put it, Mr. Malik. Very interesting, indeed.”

Before Zayn could respond, the other man straightened up, drumming his fingertips on the table as if to punctuate the conversation. “Well, that’s settled then, isn’t it?” he observed almost cheerfully. “One hour weekly. That should give us plenty of time—plenty of time. You would be amazed at how much I can accomplish in an hour—or even less.” Once again, it seemed the hint of a smile twitched at his lips and sparkled in his chocolate quartz-like eyes. “Now, I have one final matter to discuss with you.”

Zayn swallowed. It was becoming more and more difficult to meet the other man’s penetrating gaze.

“You see, Mr. Malik, I was hoping we could come to an…understanding.”

“An understanding?” Zayn echoed, more than a little puzzled.

“Yes, an understanding between two like minds,” Dr. Payne declared smoothly as he made his way back to his desk, flinging the file folder in the centre of it. “I believe you need me in many ways: you need me to approve your progress for the state so you can receive your full professional licence; you need me to help guide you as a mentor; you need me to provide the proper working and learning environment for you; and you need me to deliver a positive recommendation if—one the rare possibility—you ever decide to leave this school.”

Zayn waited for the man to continue because he knew all that. Of course he did. Every new teacher did.

“Additionally, Mr. Malik, you may find you need me for other things, things you don’t even know you require at this point…but I’m getting ahead of myself.” Zayn watched as he leaned back in his chair and swung one charcoal-trousered leg over the other. Dr. Payne peered at him from half-closed lids, his fingertips pressed together in that spider-like way of his.

Now, Zayn was downright baffled. “Um, sir?” he spoke up.

“Yes,” the older man susurrated, staring at Zayn in a way that made him lose all train of thought. Zayn bit his lip and studied the shadows that the setting sun and partially-open blinds cast upon the room. The striped effect made his mentor/principal appear almost sinister.

And well, maybe he shouldn’t focus on that. He was nervous enough as it was.

(But it was hard not to.)

“Well, Mr. Malik?” Dr. Payne prompted, leaning in. The shadows played tricks, making it appear as if the man were wearing a mask, further unsettling Zayn’s nerves.

“I’m s-sorry, sir,” Zayn stammered, fidgeting nervously with his French cuffs, “but I’m still not clear on w-what you mean exactly by an ‘understanding.’”

“Ah. I was simply outlining the ways in which you require my support and guidance before
revealing the fact that there is a great deal you can offer me in return.”

“Oh, like my teaching, you mean?” Zayn suggested a little unsurely. “Are you referring to raising student scores on the state-mandated high-stakes assessments?”

“Yes, of course,” he conceded, impatience creeping into his tone. “Payne Academy does have a reputation to uphold; however, that is not the only way in which you can…er…assist me.”

Zayn just stared at him, utterly confused.

“Mr. Malik, I know you are a first year teacher, but I believe you are one of my greatest assets in the building. You are extremely gifted, and I would be a fool not to take advantage of you…of that, I mean,” he hurriedly corrected himself, shifting slightly in his chair.

“Wow, thank you, sir.”

“No need to thank me, Mr. Malik. I am merely stating a fact,” he demurred, strangely detached even as he proffered glowing praise upon his novice teacher. “I am telling you all this because there may be times when I need to call on you as a confidante of sorts, as someone I can trust.” He leaned forward then, darkly-opaque eyes searching his. “I can trust you—can’t I, Mr. Malik?”

“Trust me? I, well, um…of course,” Zayn spluttered. Then suddenly, he had a revelation. “Oh, you mean you want me to serve in a role similar to Mr. Styles? Not that I’m even close to the teacher he is,” he swiftly added, “but, well, uh…you know what I mean…sir.”

Zayn couldn’t believe how badly he was fumbling over his words. He waited for his principal to make some derogatory remark, but the man simply regarded him with veiled amusement.

“Not exactly like Mr. Styles, but yes, you are on the right track.” For some reason, Dr. Payne seemed even more amused by the words he’d just uttered. “You may now leave, Mr. Malik. Thank you for your attentiveness.” And with that, Dr. Payne opened another file, his attention immediately absorbed by the top paper staring back at him.

Zayn awkwardly rose to his feet and crept towards the door, not wishing to disturb the man from whatever important matter he was now focused on.

“Oh, one more thing, Mr. Malik!” he called just as Zayn was nearing the safety of the outer office. Zayn gulped, then pivoted around to face his principal. “I don’t take kindly to people who are disloyal or who betray my confidence in any way—especially those whose careers I am advancing and otherwise taking an…interest in.”

Zayn wondered whether his boss was speaking in generalities or whether he was referring to a specific person (like Harry). Zayn didn’t dare ask though. He just nodded his head up and down like a bobble-head doll and waited to be dismissed again.

“Good,” Dr. Payne replied, satisfied. “And finally, please keep in mind that however I see fit to utilise you and in whatever capacity, I am still your superior and you are to treat me as such. Are we clear on that, Mr. Malik?” His voice was once again cold and stern, and Zayn was slightly taken aback by the sudden change from just minutes before.

“Of course, sir. I would never call your authority into question. I fully understand my position at this school, and I am grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to do what I love.

Dr. Payne seemed pleased—extremely pleased—with Zayn’s answer, and the history teacher was glad he actually did something right for a change.
“Thank you, Mr. Malik. You are free to go now.”

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Zayn escaped the claustrophobic confines of the principal’s office. He did his best to shake off his slight sense of foreboding as he exited the now-deserted outer office, Jo having already gone home for the day. He tried to focus on the positive, on how well his first real mentoring session with his new mentor had gone. The fact that Dr. Payne held him in such high regard—even considered him an asset—was a huge compliment. It was a good thing any way one looked at it.

*Wasn’t it?*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, but I hope you liked the longer chapter! I was working on a pinch hit for an exchange (both fics I wrote are posted & revealed now, fyi), and I’ve been doing some travelling across the Atlantic so this took a little longer than expected.

So what did you all think about the development with Louis? Does he deserve a rumoured suspension? Also, any new thoughts on Harry? Niall? Ed? Jo?

Finally, hope you liked the Ziam meeting at the end. ;) Poor Zaynie has no idea what he's getting into....

P.S. If you like, you can always just leave a comment with your favourite line from the chapter. I live for that shit. Seriously. xx
“Aha! I thought I’d find you here!”

Zayn froze. A sense of dull panic washed over him as he sat at his desk. He felt caught, like he’d been cheating on an exam (even though he’d never dream of doing such a thing, let alone need to).

But he did have a valid reason for feeling guilty, and that reason was currently standing in the doorway to his classroom.

“Morning, Ed. What are you doing on the second floor?” He winced at how the words came out, but luckily, Ed didn’t seem to notice.

“Came to see you actually,” Ed replied way too cheerily for a Monday morning. “As the saying goes, ‘if the mountain won’t come to Muhammad, then Muhammad must go to the mountain.’”

“That’s…great.”

“Hey, mind if I stop in for a minute?”

Zayn had been expertly dodging the ginger for a few weeks now, ever since Dr. Payne cautioned him against starting a relationship with another member of the faculty. (More precisely, ever since Dr. Payne cautioned him against starting a relationship with a member of the faculty named Ed Sheeran.)

“Oh…er…no. I mean, yes—yes, you can come in, that is,” Zayn spluttered, forcing a smile as the music teacher approached his desk. Zayn knew Dr. Payne probably wouldn’t approve, that the man already had suspicions the pair were disobeying the ‘no relationships’ rule without adding fuel to the fire.

Still, it wasn’t like Zayn could break off all contact with the other teacher—even if he wanted to (which he honestly didn’t). They worked at the same school; Niall and Ed were close friends; they all ate lunch together. However, Zayn had been careful not to be alone with Ed. He didn’t want anyone—especially their principal—to get the wrong idea. Even if Ed phoned him, Zayn would either let the call go to voicemail or invent an excuse for why he couldn’t talk. In truth, the first year teacher didn’t have to dig deep to come up with one—he was terribly busy, what with teaching and his upcoming observation.

But Zayn knew the excuses wouldn’t work forever. Eventually, he would have to come clean. Eventually, he’d have to tell Ed he wasn’t interested in pursuing a relationship with him—not at the moment, at least. Again, he just hoped Ed would understand, that he wouldn’t judge him too harshly for putting his career first.

“So what happened to our plan?”

Zayn looked up to find Ed standing in front of his desk with arms crossed, a litany of colourful tattoos peeking out from his rolled-up shirt sleeves. “What plan?”
“The one where you agreed to meet me in the workroom before school today,” he gently scolded. “Sound familiar?”

“Crap,” Zayn mumbled, internally kicking himself. “Sorry, Ed. I’ve been so focused on my observation today that I can barely remember my own name.”

“It’s Zayn, mate. Zayn Malik.”

Zayn snorted loudly. “Thanks, man.”

“Is that a smile I’m seeing?” Ed teased. “A genuine, one-of-a-kind Zayn Malik smile?” And as Ed cheekily grinned back at him, a small part of Zayn wished things could be different. For one, he knew his parents would absolutely adore the music teacher. (And the fact that Ed and Niall had become closer than butter on toast certainly didn’t hurt—in his father’s eyes, at any rate.)

Maybe in time, circumstances would be different. Maybe in time, they could try again—if Zayn didn’t screw everything up before it even began.

Zayn tried not to let on any of his thoughts as he looked up at Ed. “So what was it you wanted to discuss?”

“I was just gonna wish you good luck on your observation actually, tell you you’re going to smash it and all that,” Ed returned, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “So yeah…good luck!” He stood there awkwardly, hands now buried deep in the pockets of his khakis.

It wasn’t hard to see that the music teacher was looking for the right way to ask him something else. Nor was it hard to determine exactly what that ‘something else’ was.

Zayn sighed. It was time he put them both out of their misery. “Ed?”

“Yeah?”

“I just wanted to…er…apologise for, well, blowing you off lately.”

“Don’t be foolish, Zayn. You’ve done nothing of the sort.”

“Yes, Ed. I have.”

“Oh.” The boy’s face fell, his lips forming a circle as the full weight of Zayn’s admission hit him.

Zayn hurriedly endeavoured to qualify his harsh statement: “You see, the thing is that I really like you…as a friend, and maybe…maybe even more than a friend.”

Zayn looked away, teeth burrowing into his bottom lip. He had to be careful about how he let the other boy down, how he worded this. “But the thing is, well, I’m just not emotionally ready to begin a relationship now,” Zayn admitted somewhat truthfully. “This”—he waved his hand around his classroom—“is simply overwhelming right now. I’m sure you recall how crazy it was your first year.”

Ed nodded his head slowly. “I do,” he confirmed softly.

“Maybe things will change at the end of the school year, but for now…” Zayn stared down at his desk, tried to ignore the feeling in his chest that he was making a huge mistake. “For now, I think it would be better if we just remained friends.”

He breathed in and somehow found the courage to look up again. Ed smiled down at him sadly,
then stuck out his hand in an amiable fashion. Zayn was surprised by the gesture but accepted it gladly.

“Zayn, of course I’m okay with being mates for now,” Ed assured him. “I only wish you would have told me sooner so that I wouldn’t have put added pressure on you.” And if Ed’s unhesitating acceptance didn’t make Zayn feel guilty, his misplaced sympathy certainly achieved that unintended goal.

Zayn swallowed the lump in his throat. “I’m sorry I—”

“Don’t be,” Ed cut him off, shaking his head decisively. “Just please remember I’ll be here for you in whatever capacity you need me to be. I’ll always be here for you, Zayn. No matter what.”

“Thanks, Ed,” Zayn struggled out. If ever a moment felt bittersweet, it was this one. “I can’t even tell you how much that means to me.”

***

“Good afternoon, Jo” Zayn greeted the school secretary later that day.

Silence ensued, and for the umpteenth time, Zayn wondered what on earth he could have done to upset her. It was slightly unnerving to be ignored, but on the other hand, he guessed it was better than being publicly humiliated by Louis Tomlinson in front of a packed theatre.

Zayn was about to take a seat in his usual paisley-patterned chair when his knee collided with the end table beside it. It was only quick reflexes that prevented the vase on top of it from crashing to the floor.

“Please watch the Devil’s Ivy,” Jo sighed. “It just came in, and I don’t feel like telling Dr. Payne that his favourite new plant was ruined hours after it arrived.”

“Sorry,” Zayn mumbled back, dusting a bit of dirt off his hands as he reflected on how fitting it was that Dr. Payne had ordered some variety of plant named ‘Devil’s Ivy’ for the office. He was about to make a second attempt at sitting down when he observed how close the arm of the chair was to the table. He figured it might be a wise idea to move the table over a couple of inches to prevent another almost-catastrophe. As he did so however, the potted plant started to teeter back and forth again, and Zayn hurriedly steadied it with both hands. When the dang thing was finally stable, he took the next seat over (just to be safe).

When he looked up, Jo was staring at him with marked irritation. But then, something new on the opposite wall seized his attention. “What are all those for?” Zayn inquired, waving at the massive screen containing grainy images from various parts of the building.

“The new school safety initiative,” the secretary informed him without so much as a smile or other courtesy. “Dr. Payne and the Board felt the school required extra surveillance.”

Evidently, Zayn’s expression belied his thoughts because Jo immediately reassured him, “don’t worry. It’s merely a precautionary measure—nothing more.”

Zayn let out a breath. “Well, that’s good. Better safe than sorry, eh?” He smiled, but the action was far from being reciprocated.
He cleared his throat. “Are all those cameras really necessary? It seems like something of an overkill to me.”

“According to Dr. Payne, it’s not enough,” she recounted, her insatiable thirst for gossip clearly trumping whatever beef she had with the new teacher.

Zayn raised an eyebrow in wonderment because, honestly, there were a LOT of cameras.

“In fact,” she shared, lowering her voice another notch, “if Dr. Payne had his druthers, he would have installed cameras in several classrooms as well.”

Zayn frowned as he warily regarded the giant screen in front of him. “I mean, I don’t know much about this type of stuff, but that seems like it would be an incredible invasion of privacy.”

“Yes, that’s what the Board said, too,” she reported back. She opened her mouth to say something further, but then clapped it shut, apparently remembering the strong and sudden aversion she had developed towards anything Zayn Malik. Jo then went back to whatever she’d been working on before Zayn had disturbed her by entering the office.

Zayn watched the monitors as he listened to the secretary’s fingers clacking away at her keyboard in the background. There wasn’t much to hold his interest though. The area at the back of the school by the field house and locker rooms was bustling with activity, but beyond that, he could only see a couple of custodians and the odd staff member or student roaming the remainder of Payne Academy’s hallowed halls.

Then, on the bottom right screen, he spotted a familiar figure. Without doubt, it was Harry, dressed in one of his many designer suits and walking with his usual springy gait. Zayn felt slightly discomfited, watching his former mentor on the screen in a voyeur-like fashion, following his every move.

He was about to pull his gaze away when he noticed something that made him feel even worse.

Harry had just disappeared out of sight, and Zayn studied the black and white feed closely. Sure enough, the camera was focused on the hallway right outside his classroom. Indeed, Zayn’s door was perfectly visible from the camera’s fixed location; it was front and centre, in fact.

“Jo, do you know why there’s a camera pointed at my classroom door?” he asked, his voice sounding more flustered than intended.

“Hmmm…that’s weird,” she said, examining the screen. “I’m guessing the camera must have been placed there because you’re at one end of the 200 hallway. I can check with Dr. Payne, though, to make sure it was installed in the correct location.”

“No, no—that’s alright,” Zayn rushed to reply. He found it slightly disconcerting that anyone could just sit in the office and observe him as he entered and exited his classroom, but he didn’t want to annoy Dr. Payne with his paranoid concerns. Jo was probably right; the intention was probably to capture the end of the hallway. Besides, the camera would probably be shifted to a better angle whenever they made adjustments on these things. (An angle that didn’t point directly at Zayn’s classroom hopefully.)

The door to Dr. Payne’s office opened then, forcing Zayn to forget about superfluous things like angles of security cameras and why office secretaries disliked him. Instead, he focused on the feedback he was about to receive for his observation earlier in the day.

After all, that was the only thing that really mattered.
He wasn’t quite as nervous as he had been in previous meetings, primarily due to the fact that the World Geography lesson his principal had observed had gone off without a hitch. Moreover, Zayn had received stellar reviews during his first two post-observation meetings, and he didn’t see why this occasion would be drastically different. (He hoped it wouldn’t, at least.)

Not surprisingly, Dr. Payne got straight down to business.

“I’ll start off with your classroom management, Mr. Malik,” the administrator began once he joined Zayn at the small table. “It was clear that you had prepared your students well. The routines and procedures you’ve taught in the past were firmly in place because when the bell rang, your students were ready and waiting to begin.”

Zayn cleared his throat, and Dr. Payne acknowledged him with a brusque nod. “I’ve, um, been trying to focus on maximising opportunity to learn as you suggested in our first mentoring session.”

“I’m extremely pleased that our sessions together have produced such immediate effects,” Dr. Payne remarked before glancing at his open MacBook where, apparently, he had typed notes on the lesson. “Generally, you had a tight grip on them. You stroked their egos yet showed them you weren’t afraid of being in charge. You didn’t let the large size—class size, that is—overwhelm you.” He leaned forward, the light from his laptop illuminating his face from below. His eyes danced with an emotion Zayn couldn’t quite place his finger on. “But let me ask you, Mr. Malik: is size a concern for you?”

“Of course not,” Zayn answered firmly. “I understand that sometimes it is necessary to take on a little extra, to stretch one’s self for the good of the school and—are you okay, sir?”

Dr. Payne had gone into a coughing fit, and Zayn felt unsure of what to do. Then, he spotted a water bottle on the man’s desk and quickly went to fetch it. As he handed it over and his boss took a swig, he couldn’t help but notice the Batman screen saver flashing across the man’s open laptop.

“You like Batman?” Zayn asked, a bit stunned.

“Of course not. Why would you think I liked Batman?”

“Your screen saver….?”

Dr. Payne looked at his screen as if it had just betrayed him, and well, maybe it had. He struck a key, and it returned to the open document. “Not sure how that happened.”

Her didn’t clarify what he meant, and Zayn tried not to look too disappointed. It was silly—his excitement over a stupid screen saver. It was just that, for a fleeting moment, Zayn thought he had discovered something about his boss that actually made the man human.

But really, he should have known better.

“As I was saying,” Dr. Payne started up again, glancing back at his notes, “I’ve been looking at some of our numbers for next semester, and I’d like to add a few more students to your geography classes—if you think you can manage. I don’t want it to be overwhelming for you.”

“Don’t let my inexperience concern you, sir. Size doesn’t scare me. Not in the least.”

Dr. Payne blinked, and Zayn wondered if it was something he said. It wouldn’t be the first time—Zayn putting his foot in his mouth, that is. “Did I say something wrong?” he asked worriedly.

“Uh…no,” Dr. Payne replied, closing his eyes as he drew in a deep breath. Soon, the man’s
unflappable exterior was, once again, well in place. “To be perfectly honest, Mr. Malik,” he declared, eyes sparkling, “your answer was far better than I could have ever expected.”

Zayn resisted the urge to smile proudly; instead, he silently congratulated himself.

“But let’s transition, shall we, to your execution of the lesson plan.”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to this part, sir.”

“As am I, Mr. Malik,” the principal returned smoothly. “And I will begin by offering a suggestion: you might consider adding a teaser or similar motivation to the beginning of your lesson.”

Zayn wrinkled his brow. “You mean instead of just explicitly stating my objective?”

“Yes, Mr. Malik. There’s no need to be explicit all the time.” Something akin to a smirk momentarily danced over his ruggedly-handsome face. “Sometimes circumstances call for a little more… finesse.” He wove his fingers together and regarded Zayn with that piercing, concentrated gaze again, the one Zayn found so incredibly unnerving. “It’s a personal choice, and I hate to be… well, anal about this, but I find that the more you entice a participant, the more willing they become. Of course, it’s not necessarily essential that a pupil is completely willing at first. Sometimes you must persevere regardless because you know what’s good for them.”

Zayn shifted uncomfortably. “That sounds a little…”

“Go on, Mr. Malik. I don’t want you holding anything back from me. Ever.”

Zayn bit his lip. “Cringeey. I was going to say cringeey, sir.”

Dr. Payne untangled his fingers and sat back. “You must always remember that you have their best interests at heart. My background is in science so I will use that as an example.”

“Science, sir? I thought your background was in music?”

Dr. Payne seemed almost insulted. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“I, um, well—”

“You are wasting both our times, Mr. Malik.”

And before he could second guess himself, Zayn blurted out: “Someone told me you tried out for a talent show once.”

Dr. Payne arched an eyebrow. “And who, pray, told you that?”

Zayn wasn’t about to respond with the truth, to disclose that Ed was the one who had said it—even if it was way back at the beginning of the semester. Somehow, Zayn knew it would just ignite the principal’s ire. “I, um, can’t remember, sir. I just sort of heard someone mention it.”

Dr. Payne gave him a measured look, but luckily, didn’t press the point. “Whether or not I auditioned for the X Factor when I was fourteen has little or no bearing on what career path I eventually chose to pursue.”

“Of course not, sir.”

“Furthermore, the fact that I progressed well into the final stages similarly makes no difference.”
“Of course it doesn’t, sir.”

“Besides, there was a move to the states and military school to consider.”

“Of course there was, sir.”

“Now as I was saying,” he resumed with a severe look, “I’m going to give you a hypothetical case from science to illustrate my point.” He relaxed back into his chair, and the tension that had reached a fever pitch mere seconds before gradually eased. “Let’s suppose a student is not paying attention while a chemistry teacher is outlining laboratory safety procedures. Should that student be required to learn these procedures before participating in the lab—even if they express an unwillingness to do so?”

Zayn had to admit the answer was ridiculously obvious. “Without question.”

“Good. I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“Did you teach chemistry then, sir?”

Dr. Payne pursed his lips. “You are full of questions today—aren’t you, Mr. Malik?”

“You told me not to hold back,” Zayn reminded him, praying he wasn’t overstepping.

Dr. Payne nodded. “Fair point. I primarily taught the health sciences—not that it is pertinent to this discussion,” he added. “Unfortunately, my time as a science teacher was cut short because of the sudden, er, vacancy in the role of headmaster here at Payne Academy.”

“Vacancy?” Zayn questioned, slightly baffled. “I thought you founded Payne Academy, sir?”

“I rechristened it Payne Academy so you are not far wrong, Mr. Malik. Its original name was Wisteria Falls Academy, and technically, my father founded it,” Dr. Payne divulged, eyes turning a steely grey. “However, make no mistake: I am the one who made this institution what it is today.”

“Oh.”

“Yes,” Dr. Payne sighed as if relaying a tremendous burden. “It was an incredibly fortunate coincidence that I had just graduated with my master’s in educational administration at the time of my father’s rather unfortunate…accident.”

Zayn swallowed. “Accident?”

“Yes, he fell down the stairs,” Dr. Payne recounted, carefully wiping off a smudge on one of his cuff links with his handkerchief before returning it to his breast pocket. The man might have been discussing the weather with how unaffected he seemed. “No one discovered the body until Monday morning.”

“M-Monday morning?” Zayn stuttered out. “You’re not saying he died here, are you, sir?”

Dr. Payne gave him another of his long looks. “Did you think there were ugly non-slip treads on every step of the main staircase for purely aesthetical reasons, Mr. Malik? Why do you imagine there are so many signs warning against running in the halls?”—he lowered his voice—“signs you might do well to mind more in the future,” he admonished, and Zayn ducked his head guiltily. “As you well know, I like to run a clean and tidy ship; however, the safety of my students and staff is paramount to me. One must make exceptions for the greater good and all that.”
“Is that why there’s a new surveillance system?”

“Of course,” Dr. Payne returned instantly. “Why else?” The man’s decisive response put any crazy ideas lingering in the back of Zayn’s mind to rest. “Now if you don’t mind, let’s return to the lesson I observed this morning. After all, this is supposed to be a post-observation meeting, last I checked.”

Zayn blushed. “Sorry, sir.”

Dr. Payne waved off the apology. “Now where was I?” he mused, skimming over his notes. “Ah yes—lesson design. This was spot on, and I’m definitely a fan of the hands-on approach.” He shot a meaningful glance at his mentee. “Your guided practice and use of modelling was effective. I especially enjoyed how you took multiple…er…positions during the discussion, and when you chose a position, you really embraced it with full commitment.” He paused, and Zayn felt like he was expected to say something.

“Thank you for…uh…noticing, sir.”

“You are quite welcome, Mr. Malik.” Dr. Payne licked his lips. “Now for your presentation. I appreciated how you repeatedly drove the point of the lesson home with great thrust. Overall, I felt your knowledge of the topic was clearly evident, and your passion, infectious. Indeed, I had a very hard time taking my eyes off you.” With that, he snapped the lid of his MacBook shut.

“Is that all, sir?”

“Just a final piece of advice,” Dr. Payne declared, assuming his favourite pose with legs crossed, fingertips pressed together. “Never be afraid to have high expectations, to demand the most from your students. Challenge them. Don’t push them to their limit—redefine their limits.”

Zayn nodded vigorously, trying to absorb every last word.

“When they’re ready for more responsibility,” Dr. Payne continued, “let them take control—not all at once, mind you, but gradually. Guide them, coax them to new heights. Empower them, Mr. Malik,” he advised with a quiet intensity. “And remember, nothing can come close to the feeling you get from this type of release.”

He sat back, as if exhausted by his own monologue. “Do you understand what I am trying to tell you, Mr. Malik?”

“Yes, very much so, sir.”

Dr. Payne regarded him with scepticism. “I’m not convinced you do; not yet. However, I believe you are an extremely clever young man, and I am confident that I will be able to enlighten you in the very near future.”

“I hope so, sir.”

Dr. Payne shot to his feet. A few strides later, he was standing behind his desk. “Well, I believe I have kept you late enough. Anything we’ve neglected can wait until our mentoring session on Wednesday.”

“I’m looking forward to it, sir.” And he was. Because even though Dr. Payne’s mere presence unnerved him, Zayn also knew he could learn a great deal from this man.

“I am pleased to hear you say that, Mr. Malik. And by the way, I would suggest wearing something comfortable—but still professional—next time. Our focus this week will be on stress relief.
techniques.”

Zayn rose awkwardly. “Thank you, sir, and I’ll…uh…see you on Wednesday.”

“Yes, Mr. Malik,” the principal affirmed, a gleam in his coffee-coloured eyes, “you most certainly will.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm DYING to know your reaction to this one, lovelies. ;) As always, thank you to everyone who has left kudos/comments on this fic. You have no idea how much you inspire/motivate me.

Next update should be in 2 weeks (maybe less). I'm trying to figure out a good update day with my mad, ever-changing schedule so I'll let you know as soon as I figure it out myself. Come shout at me on tumblr in the meantime. If I don't get back to you right away, I'm either watching the World Cup or ogling Zayn's new GQ cover.

Just a heads-up, I've outlined the next chapter, and it's a doozy. Mind the warnings because things might be taking a dark turn....

Much love! ~Maree xx
Zayn paused at the foot of Payne Academy’s main staircase. The steps swirled in front of him, undulating like some demented accordion. His stomach churned. He gripped the railing tighter.

“You alright, Zed?”

Zayn couldn’t speak, too intent on righting the topsy-turvy image before him. He closed his eyes, but still he felt disoriented, off-balance.

“Sit down,” Niall ordered, and yes, Zayn could do that. Just barely. He pivoted around and collapsed on the first step, breathing heavily as he tried to collect himself.

Niall sat down beside him. “You alright, mate?” he asked, voice etched with concern.

“Yeah…think so.”

“Good. Had me scared for a minute there,” his best friend admitted. “I took one look at your mug just now, and I was dead convinced you’d seen the White Lady herself sliding down that bannister.”

“Didn’t see anyone—living or not,” Zayn joked, albeit a little shakily. “Just had a dizzy spell or something. It’s over now.”

Niall wasn’t persuaded. “Listen, I could take you home if you’re feeling poorly, Zed. If we leave now, I’d probably be back before the first bell. We could stop by the office on our way out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m fine,” Zayn insisted, not sure if he was reassuring Niall or himself. “In fact, you can go on to your classroom, if you’d like.”

“You know, there was a time when you didn’t lie to your best mate,” Niall chided, flicking Zayn on the shoulder. “Anyway, I was following you up to your classroom this morning because you promised to lend me a book for my mentoring assignment. Remember?”

“Oh, that’s right. We should get going then,” Zayn said, trying to pull himself up using the handrail. He had a lot to do that morning. (He had a lot to do every morning.)

Niall tugged him back down. “We’re not budging an inch until I’m sure you’re good and ready.”

“Someone will think we’re nutty, sitting at the bottom of the main staircase like this,” Zayn grumped. As if on cue, a couple of maths teachers walked by, sharing a curious look between them before offering a half-hearted wave.

“It’s a tad late to be bothered about your reputation, don’t you think?” Niall mused sardonically after the teachers passed out of sight.

The point wasn’t lost on Zayn. His reputation had been in tatters since the ‘Evita incident.’ Sighing, he slumped against his best friend and waited for the world to stay put, once and for all.

Finally, it did.
“I can make it now.” Once they reached the top of the stairs and rounded the corner of the 200 hallway, Zayn felt like a new man.

“Oi, if that happens again, text me.”

“Will do.” Zayn unlocked his door and headed inside his classroom, making a beeline for the bookshelf behind his desk. “Yeah, it was lucky you were there. Otherwise, I would’ve had to wait it out myself and all.”

Niall scoffed. “Like hell you would’ve.”

Zayn didn’t dignify his friend’s comment with a response. (Partly because Niall was probably right.) Instead, he thumbed along the spines of his textbooks, searching for the one Niall had requested.

“How’d your observation go yesterday, Zed? Totally forgot to ask.”

“It’s alright—you’ve been busy with the Bistro and everything,” Zayn shrugged. “It went really well actually. Dr. Payne seemed to love the lesson, and he had great feedback.” Zayn halted his search for a moment, suddenly recalling a macabre detail from the meeting.

“Oi, out with it.”

Sometimes, Zayn really wished Niall didn’t know him so well. “It’s just…I was thinking about something Dr. Payne mentioned at my post-observation meeting yesterday.” He looked up at Niall, took a second to organise his thoughts. “Apparently, his father died as a result of a fall from the top of the main staircase.”

The memory filled Zayn with a morbid unpleasantness. He expected to read a similar reaction on his friend’s face but maybe with the addition of shock or surprise. He saw no such thing. “You already knew!” Zayn accused.

“Yeah…I sort of heard the story from Ed.”

It was all Zayn could do to keep his composure. “When?” he snapped.

Niall shifted uncomfortably. “A while ago.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“No,” Niall admitted guiltily, “and I might have asked Ed not to tell you either.”

Zayn was flabbergasted. “Why?”

“Because I was afraid that something like what just happened would happen,” Niall declared defiantly. “I knew it would freak you out.”

Zayn clenched his jaw and turned back to his bookcase. It was ridiculous, Niall thinking Zayn’s temporary vertigo at the foot of the stairs had anything to do with the late Dr. Payne’s death. Absolutely preposterous.

“Here,” Zayn muttered, finding the book and shoving it at his friend. “Thanks for your concern.”

“Cheers,” Niall replied a little unsurely. “I better leg it, but um, I guess I’ll see you at lunch?”

Zayn just grunted in return. Luckily, Niall took it as an acquiescence and left. School was going to start soon, and Zayn needed to focus on teaching. He didn’t have time to worry about why his best
friend still saw him as the shy, fragile little boy he had been when they first met.

And honestly, he had even less time to worry about freak, tragic accidents or unexplained bouts of vertigo.

***

Wednesday started off bad, but then as the day progressed…

it got worse.

It all began when they arrived at school. Somehow, Niall managed to pull into the faculty lot at the exact same time as Harry, and really, Zayn should have immediately recognised that for what it was: an omen of things to come. The strangest part was that they were running late which meant Harry, by simple deduction, was also late.

And that was just plain weird.

The reluctant trio traipsed from the car park in a stiff, uncomfortable silence. When they reached the main staircase, Niall lingered a few seconds, presumably to make sure Zayn wasn’t struck by another vertigo attack (he wasn’t). Then, the two remaining teachers, accompanied by a palpable cloud of negative energy, made the trek to the second floor.

When they reached their classroom doors, Zayn summoned all his courage and called out:

“Have a good day, Harry!”

Harry stopped, glanced across at his neighbour with a look that could have been categorised as more tired than scathing. “Yeah, you too,” he grunted softly before pulling his door shut behind him with a decisive thud.

Zayn entered his own classroom with a heavy heart. He was already in a dismal mood, and the school day had yet to begin. (And honestly, if he knew in advance how the day would go, he probably would have packed it in then and there.)

During first hour, his document camera broke down in the middle of examining some primary source artefacts, the core of his lesson. During second hour, his Apple TV decided to stop working. About ten minutes into tinkering with it, an announcement arrived over the school’s intercom, revealing that the building was having “problems with connectivity.” This was promptly followed by an e-mail from Jo, informing them that the technology issues would most likely not be resolved until the next day.

At the earliest.

In other words, Zayn was going to have to scrap most of his remaining lesson plans since they all relied upon some form of technology. He’d have to do some quick-thinking and juggling if he didn’t want the day to be a complete wash. As a new teacher still learning the ropes, he couldn’t afford to get behind. Even the thought of possible (probable) snow days looming in the not-too-distant future was enough to instil him with acute consternation.

Needless to say, it was going to be a very long day.
At his lunch hour, Zayn texted Niall to let him know there was a slim to none chance he’d ever be leaving his classroom in the next millennium, and for once, Niall didn’t press the issue.

After school, Zayn had some time before his mentoring session, so he stopped by the library for some extra books and resources in case the school’s technology issues persisted on Thursday. Before heading upstairs, he decided to check in with Niall.

The door to his best friend’s classroom was ajar, and the afterschool culinary programme appeared to be in full swing. The students (primarily female, just as Ed and Zayn suspected) were stood at long tables, rolling out dough and generally prepping for whatever recipe they were about to execute. Niall was flitting about the kitchen, giving pointers and suggestions in his lilting Irish accent that easily carried over the din.

“Sorry to intrude, Mr. Horan,” Zayn apologised, peeking his head in, “but I was just checking to see what time—”

“Could I talk to you in the hallway, Mr. Malik?” Niall interrupted, tone brusque. Surprised, Zayn nodded and stepped outside while the other teacher delivered a brief set of instructions to his students.

“Ni, what is it? Is something wrong?” Zayn inquired as soon as Niall joined him.

“I don’t know, Zed,” his best friend deadpanned. “Is there?”

“I’m not sure what you’re—”

“Ed,” Niall butted in impatiently. “I’m talking about Ed. What the bloody hell did you say to him?”

Zayn gulped. “Oh, you, uh, heard,” he supplied lamely, diverting his gaze.

“Yeah, so at lunch today, I was going on about how Ed should take you out on another date when he informed me that you two had a ‘conversation’ recently in which you basically said you weren’t interested.”

“Yes, so?”

“So why didn’t you tell me you suddenly changed your mind, you twit?”

“It wasn’t sudden,” Zayn baulked. “I’ve been thinking about this for a while, Ni. I just don’t think it’s a great idea to be seeing another member of the faculty right now. Anyway, it’s against the ethics clause we signed.”

“Bollocks,” Niall snorted. “No one really bothers about the fine print on those contracts. They just don’t want teachers to be blatant, like snogging in the bloody hallways and such.”

“It’s still a rule. Besides, I happen to know for a fact that Dr. Payne—a.k.a., my flipping mentor—frowns upon relationships between faculty members.”

“Dr. Payne frowns upon a lot of things, Zed,” Niall observed drily, “but yeah, if you want to be a goody-two-shoes and follow the letter of the law, then I’m not going to say you shouldn’t.”

“Then why are you still angry?”

“Because you didn’t have to string Ed along this whole time, that’s bloody why,” he snapped. “You’re not the type to lead someone on—because that’s clearly what you’ve been doing these past
few weeks—and I just think it’s shit, okay?” Niall shook his head. “Jaysus, Zed. You should have seen the look on Ed’s face when he was telling me what happened. Looked proper gutted, he did.”

The comment sparked a glimmer of remorse inside Zayn, but it was quickly engulfed by his growing indignation. “You’re just upset because I didn’t tell you.”

“Not gonna lie,” Niall retorted, “you certainly could’ve mentioned you weren’t into him. I must’ve looked a right eejit egging on the bloke after you’d already rejected him.”

“I didn’t reject him,” Zayn insisted loudly before remembering the students on the other side of Niall’s door. “Look, I just told him I didn’t want to date while we were working together, that’s all.”

“Grand. You’re still stringing him along then. Bloody brilliant.”

Zayn let out an exasperated sigh. “It’s not like that, Niall. I’m just trying to show a little professionalism.”

“By being a dick. Yeah, I see.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” Zayn remarked coolly.

Niall narrowed his eyes. “Oi, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I mean, you are dating the school secretary, aren’t you?”

“That has piss-all to do with this. Besides, Jo’s not faculty; she’s staff. We’ve been through this already.”

“It still seems…improper somehow,” Zayn remarked because it did. “And not to change the subject,” he hissed, “but do you have any idea why she hates me all of a sudden?”

Niall shook his head bitterly. “Haven’t a bloody clue. She won’t talk to me either, mate. Won’t even reply to my texts.”

At that moment, Zayn wanted to take back everything he’d said. “Gosh, I’m sorry, Ni. I…I didn’t know.”

Niall attempted an ironic smile. “Apparently, we need to talk more.”

Zayn was about to respond when it suddenly occurred to him he had somewhere to be. “Crap, what time is it?” he panicked, shifting the library books he was holding to glance worriedly at his watch. He sighed in relief when he realised he still had three precious minutes before his scheduled session with Dr. Payne, just enough time to drop off the books in his mailbox if he hustled.

“I should get back to my Bistro kiddos,” Niall announced, still sounding a little distant. “I’ll text you when I’m wrapping up, yeah?”

“Yeah, I’ve got to run myself—mentoring session, you know,” Zayn said awkwardly, despite the fact he was talking to his longest and closest friend. “We, uh, good, man?”

“Of course, Zed,” was the instant response; however, it was clear from Niall’s demeanour that they were far from ‘good.’

And well, Zayn would have to be ‘good’ with that for now.
“As you are no doubt aware,” Dr. Payne commenced as soon as Zayn was seated, “stress is a normal part of a career in education. However, it is how we deal with the pressures of our positions that separates those who will rise to the top from those who will rest in the ranks of mediocrity.”

Zayn marvelled at the simple truth, the eloquent turn of phrase. “I never thought of it that way, sir.”

“Yes well, that is why I am here. But enough about philosophy. I can see you are battling a great deal of stress at this very moment—am I not correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Zayn acknowledged glumly. The argument he’d just had with Niall weighed heavily on him; it topped off an already taxing day. “I’ll be completely honest: the technology issues were a huge problem for me.”

“Problems are merely disguised opportunities for growth,” Dr. Payne countered smoothly. “It’s all about reframing things, Mr. Malik.”

“I’ll remember that, sir.”

Dr. Payne quirked his lips into a cryptic twist. “You don’t believe me.” Before Zayn could protest, the man rose from his chair and started making a slow, circuitous path around his desk. “Let’s apply this epithet to the ‘problem’ you just cited. What opportunities can you glean from today’s experience?”

Zayn was tempted to reply along the lines of ‘never use educational technology again,’ but he knew that wouldn’t go over well, especially considering technology integration was one of the school’s initiatives for the current academic year. “Um…perhaps I should have an arsenal of activities planned for each unit? Ones that don’t require technological components?” he offered up instead.

“Very good. What else?” Dr. Payne probed, sauntering around the table now. “Did instruction still go on? Did your students learn something today?”

“Yes, but—”

“Did you learn that you can ‘roll with the punches,’ as they say? That, as a teacher, you can adapt when necessary?”

Zayn was feeling frustration bubble in his chest as his mentor kept circling the small table, questions firing at him from all directions. “Well, yes, but it was stressful!”

Dr. Payne clucked sympathetically, and Zayn almost felt as if the man were mocking him. “Why was it stressful, Mr. Malik?”

“Because it was,” Zayn said stubbornly. “Because I felt like an inexperienced pilot lost in the clouds; I didn’t know which way was up.” And it was scary, he wanted to add.

Dr. Payne studied him from across the table. “Sometimes, it is necessary to embrace the unknown, Mr. Malik.”

“Are you telling me I shouldn’t bother with plans, sir?”

“Of course not,” the man scoffed. “Quite the contrary, Mr. Malik. I’m telling you to make more
plans. For example, you should have a contingency plan for technology outages, as you suggested earlier.”

Zayn was still confused. “No offence, sir, but what does that have to do with ‘embracing the unknown?’”

“Teaching, like life, is a chess game,” Dr. Payne posited, finally winding to a stop just behind Zayn’s chair. “The person who wins is the one who has strategically mapped out every possible move. One must be prepared for anything and everything, Mr. Malik,” his principal continued, “but one must also have confidence in his abilities to tackle whatever crosses his path. If one is ready for any prospect, then life isn’t nearly as frightening or nerve-wracking as it first appears.”

Zayn took a moment to digest everything his principal just told him. “When you put it that way,” he admitted, “I guess it does make a lot of sense.”

“Of course it does, Mr. Malik,” his mentor said calmly, placidly. “Now, sit back and relax. I want to try something.”

“Try something?” Zayn questioned, his apprehension returning in a sudden rush.

“Hush, Mr. Malik. Turn off that over-inquisitive brain of yours and trust me when I say I know what’s best for you.”

“What’s best for me?” Zayn echoed, craning his neck around so he could get a glimpse of the man still hovering directly behind him.

“Apparently, you’ve a knack for repeating the end of everything I say,” Dr. Payne observed wryly, and Zayn blushed as he snapped his head around to the front again. “But yes, I can unequivocally state that I know precisely what you need right now, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn swallowed.

“Now, relax.”

Zayn made an effort to do as he’d been instructed, to ‘embrace the unknown’ even though the mere suggestion practically made him break out in hives. His breathing had just slowed to steady, rhythmic aspirations when two hands touched his shoulders. He jolted at the unexpected contact.

“Sit back, Mr. Malik; I know what I’m doing.”

Zayn quickly did as he was told.

“You have an unhealthy amount of tension in your neck and shoulders, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne mused as sure hands prodded along Zayn’s muscles. “I’d suggest a warm bath to help alleviate some of the tightness in that trapezius. A heating pad to the area might also do the trick.” The principal kneaded the palms of his hands into the sore, tight muscles, and the ache that had seemed to take up permanent residence in the back of Zayn’s neck momentarily dissipated.

“How does that feel, Mr. Malik?”

“Feels really good, actually,” Zayn admitted, head feeling heavy and lids even heavier. He cursed the fact that he’d barely slept the night before. “And thank you for the tips, sir.”

“Of course. Now, why don’t you close your eyes, and I’ll continue to work on that knot in your neck?”
Zayn bit his lip, wondered what the protocol was for such situations. It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate the much-needed neck massage, because he did. It was more that he felt like he was overstepping…or something. “Actually, sir, I was thinking I might try that warm bath tonight. The thing is, I really don’t want to put you out and—”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Dr. Payne cut him off. “No trouble at all,” he repeated, accentuating each word with a slight pressure from his fingertips. Then, he delivered a small, synchronised pat to Zayn’s shoulders before retreating back behind his desk. “Now, how about a little music?” he asked, flipping open his MacBook. Seconds later, soothing, melodious sounds filled the small office.

Zayn watched as Dr. Payne discarded his suit jacket, hanging it carefully on the back of his desk chair. Next, the man began rolling up the sleeves of his white Oxford like a surgeon scrubbing in.

“Now, just sit back, Mr. Malik, and allow me to do my job.”

“Your job?” Zayn echoed, tensing a little.

“Yes,” Dr. Payne said patiently as he dimmed the lights, then strolled back to where he’d previously been standing behind Zayn’s chair. “Section 12.7a of the mentoring handbook states that it is an essential duty of the mentor to help his or her mentee deal with the pressures of being a first-year teacher.”

Zayn cleared his throat. “I, uh, didn’t realise that extended to massages, sir.”

“I believe the directive is open to interpretation,” Dr. Payne hummed. “I believe most everything is open to some interpretation,” he said smoothly, long fingers drifting up to tickle the hairs at the nape of Zayn’s neck. “And as I’m sure I’ve mentioned before, I prefer a hands-on approach, Mr. Malik. Now, relax.”

Zayn took a deep breath and endeavoured to clear his head of all the stressors of the day. Surprisingly, it wasn’t long before he found himself relaxing more and more into Dr. Payne’s expert touch. As a lilting chorus played through the crisp speakers of the MacBook, he yawned, his eyelids fluttering like a floundering fish as he fought to stay alert.

“Much better,” Dr. Payne cooed.

Zayn tried to keep his eyes open, but it was a lost cause, what with the dim lights, soft music, and cosy shirt and slacks he was wearing (his mentor had instructed him to dress comfortably, after all). The small office was warm for once, and his masseuse’s hands, even warmer. Soon, the ambience overtook him. He had relaxed to such an extent that he allowed a small, nearly inaudible moan to escape his lips.

Zayn drew a quick breath. He really hoped his principal hadn’t heard that.

Abruptly, Dr. Payne’s movements intensified, his palms pressing against the muscles of Zayn’s back, kneading his shoulders. His hands shot forward, fingers skimming over Zayn’s collarbone, then dancing up the slope of his neck. Dr. Payne’s course widened, massaging as far down Zayn’s back as the constraints of the chair would allow before soaring up and over his shoulders again.

When the tips of his mentor’s fingers brushed against his nipple, Zayn was embarrassed but didn’t think too much of it. (He was even more embarrassed when he felt a twinge down there.) When it happened for the second time, Zayn suspected it was no accident.

Zayn shot up from his chair. “I-I should leave,” he hiccupped, tripping over his own feet as he spun around to face his principal.
“Maybe you should,” was the enigmatic reply.

Zayn blinked, then glanced up at the clock to see they still had fifteen minutes remaining in the session. “Are we…are we finished?”

“Hardly, Mr. Malik. But if you would like to leave, rest assured, there’s nothing stopping you.”

Zayn wavered. His inner voice screamed at him to bolt but something held him back.

Dr. Payne ran his long fingers along the top of the chair Zayn had just vacated. “I agree, Mr. Malik. What’s the rush?” he purred as a self-satisfied smile curled over his lips. “We could continue the massage. After all, you did seem to be enjoying yourself.” His gaze dipped down to the front of Zayn’s trousers, and oh.

“Um, I should go.”

“Should you, Mr. Malik? Should you really?” Dr. Payne edged closer, and Zayn backed away clumsily until his hips collided with the edge of the desk. He felt cornered. He was cornered.

“Please, sir.”

“There’s no need to beg, Mr. Malik,” his principal remarked shamelessly, misinterpreting Zayn’s plea completely. (More likely, the man was toying with him, like a tiger with its prey.) Dr. Payne reached out, tucking an errant strand of hair behind Zayn’s ear. “You see, I am more than willing to give you whatever it is you need.”

And for once, Zayn didn’t need any help reading between the lines. He understood only too well what his principal was implying. “I don’t need anything, sir.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Dr. Payne licked his lips slowly, and Zayn found himself mesmerised by the simple action. His muddled brain wondered what it would feel like to have those full lips pressed against his, if they’d feel soft like the handful of girls he’d kissed in the past or safe like Ed’s.

No, he shouldn’t be thinking that. This was his principal, and he shouldn’t be thinking that.

“Mr. Malik, I asked you a question.”

“Yes, I’m not…I mean,” Zayn faltered, losing his train of thought. He didn’t know what was wrong with him, why he’d become so transfixed by the lips before him, lips that seemed to glisten invitingly in the twilit room. He felt dizzy, lightheaded. His senses were overwhelmed by the closeness of the office, by the closeness of Dr. Payne. “I…I don’t have any, er, needs.”

“Oh, everyone has needs,” his mentor murmured. He cupped Zayn’s cheek tenderly, and all at once, Zayn was assailed by the man’s strong, clean scent. “You’d be wise to stop fighting yours.”

And before he could reply, Dr. Payne’s mouth crashed into his.

Zayn stood petrified. His heart thundered in his chest, but that was the only muscle that seemed to function in his entire body. Dr. Payne’s lips didn’t wait however. They moved harshly, demandingly against his own as the man kissed him with a fervent, malevolent desire.

For a moment, Zayn felt as if he were suffocating. He turned his head a few degrees to the side and drank in a gulp of air. But teeth tugged at his lower lip, coaxing him back towards the illicit, lust-
filled kiss.

And then something shifted.

Caught up in the moment, in the rush of adrenaline, in the God-knows-what, Zayn kissed back. His lips parted, allowing the tip of the other man’s tongue to penetrate his already-abused mouth. Dr. Payne’s hands locked onto Zayn’s hips, his rock-hard body pressing up against the young teacher’s slighter frame.

Zayn pulled him in closer, the thin, cool material of the man’s silk shirt gathering in his fisted hands. He moaned, this time louder and with a reckless abandon he didn’t recognise. It shocked him, brought him back to his senses.

Zayn broke the kiss. Flattening his hands, he pushed back hard against the other man’s chest. Dr. Payne drew back slowly, his massive hands never vanquishing their tight hold on Zayn’s hips.

The principal regarded his young teacher with a whimsical fascination. “I’d wager you’ve never been kissed like that before,” he said with a smugness that made Zayn’s skin crawl.

It was true: no one had ever kissed Zayn like that. But whatever that was, it wasn’t a true love’s kiss. It wasn’t a storybook kiss. It was guttural and indecent and nothing like how a kiss was supposed to be.

No, it was something else entirely.

Working at Payne Academy had never been a fairy-tale, but now he felt as if he’d been plummeted into some twisted dark fantasy.

“Cat got your tongue, Mr. Malik?” Dr. Payne smirked, eyes afire.

Zayn just stood there for minutes, hours, days. Time no longer seemed to exist; it went out the window with right and wrong, with proper and improper. The only thing he was fully conscious of was the way the edge of the desk continued to dig painfully into his backside.

This couldn’t be happening. This could not be happening.

But it was.

When Dr. Payne’s hold on him slackened, Zayn didn’t waste any time. He ran from the office like the Devil was chasing him.

And for all Zayn knew, He well might have been.

Chapter End Notes

I struggled with this one, I'm not going to lie, so please let me know what you think.

Also, I apologise for the delay. If you check my tumblr, you might have seen that I've
been in and out of hospital for the past month. I'm back on the road to recovery though. xx Also, always feel free to send me asks/messages on tumblr or here.

Much love! ~Maree xx
Making a swift decision, Zayn veered left as he fled from the office. When he burst through the front doors of the school, the cold air rushed at him, and he remembered he had left his coat in his classroom.

But that wasn’t all he had left behind.

He didn’t have his laptop. He didn’t have his school ID. He didn’t have his portfolio with the ungraded quizzes. He didn’t even have his keys. Zayn didn’t have anything he brought with him that morning, but, at the moment, he couldn't care less.

Racing at full speed towards the nearly deserted staff lot, the heel of his shoe caught on a crack in the pavement. Zayn hit the ground with a forcefulness that took his breath away, the momentum flinging him several feet forward onto the hard cement. He lay there for an eternity, shivering in the fast-approaching twilight, wallowing in self-pity.

“Zed, what the…are you okay!?”

As usual, it was Niall. Niall to the rescue. Niall when he needed him the most. And despite their earlier argument, there wasn’t a face in the world Zayn would have preferred to set eyes upon at that moment.

His best friend helped him up, and Zayn silently assessed the damages. He had a few cuts on each of his forearms that would need bandages, but otherwise, his injuries consisted of normal scrapes and bruises.

“Can you walk?”

Zayn shifted his weight to his left leg and winced. “Yeah, I think I might have twisted my ankle when I tripped, though.”

“You sure it’s not sprained?”

Zayn tested walking on it. It hurt, but the pain was definitely bearable. “Yeah, it’s cool.”

“Good. Let’s go back in and get you cleaned up, then. Looks like you forgot your coat anyway.” Niall placed a hand around Zayn’s waist to guide him back towards the school’s front entrance.

“No!”

Niall blinked. “But—”

“No,” Zayn said hoarsely, “I don’t want to go back in there.”

“Why? You scundered about tripping or something?” Niall sighed when Zayn didn’t answer. “Oi, let me at least get a plaster for you, yeah?”

“I put a first aid kit in the glove compartment of your car back in August,” Zayn told him, thanking
his own foresight. “I’ll be fine—really,” he insisted. “I’m just a little banged up, that’s all.”

“Alright,” Niall agreed reluctantly. “Make sure you put something on those scrapes right away though—your lip as well. It’s red as a cherry and bruised something fierce; can’t reckon how you managed that.”

Zayn staggered. He wanted to crumble to his feet, wanted to blurt out what happened back in the office: how flagrantly Dr. Payne had disregarded all boundaries between them, how Zayn had lost his senses and encouraged the man, how Zayn had put his whole future into jeopardy in a single—

“Oi, let’s get you home,” Niall urged, and Zayn leaned against him for support as they made their way towards the car park.

Niall’s cherished, beat-up Volkswagen never looked so good.

***

_He should tell someone._

_He needed to tell someone._

_He had to tell someone._

“Aside from the obvious,” Niall began as they started their commute home, half a tube of triple antibiotic ointment and several Band-Aids later, “how was your day?”

“Fine.”

“And your mentoring session with Dr. Payne?”

“Fine.” Zayn squeezed his eyes shut tight, hoping it might erase the repugnant memories from earlier: the massage, the filthy insinuations, the kiss…

The kiss.

But it didn’t do any good. It was still there, every moment of it. The ignoble sequence played on a loop like some unrelenting Vine.

“Just ‘fine?’ That’s all I get?” Niall protested. He gently pinched his friend’s cheek, and Zayn swatted his hand away. “The fuck’s wrong with you?”

“I just freaking fell, and I don’t feel like having people touch me, okay?”

“Oh, so I’m ‘people’ now. Yeah, good to know. Cheers.” Niall gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Is it the Ed thing?” he blurted out at the next light. “Look, I shouldn’t have accused you of playing him; that was probably out of line.”

Zayn didn’t reply. He just stared out the window, grateful for every mile that took them closer to home (and farther away from Payne Academy). He could barely think, let alone remember the latest squabble he had with his best friend. (They were always squabbling lately, anyway.)

“Guess I was just disappointed,” Niall went on, unsolicited. “Ed’s become my closest mate—next to
you, obviously—and I was sorta hoping everything would work out between you and him.”

Ed….

Just the mere mention of the music teacher’s name was like a punch in the gut. Zayn wondered if Dr. Payne truly was so against inter-faculty relationships or if the ethics clause was merely a convenient excuse, a deceptive ploy meant to veil a much more personal reason for wanting Ed to back off.

*God, how could he be so naïve?*

“Zed, please don’t shut me—”

“Can we talk about this later?” Zayn choked out, wishing he could tuck himself inside the encroaching darkness. Maybe disappear for a while.

“Yeah…sure.”

“Sorry. I’m just tired, I guess.”

Niall nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. “You want to slow down. These long hours are going to catch up with you sooner or later.”

“A lot of things catch up with you…sooner or later,” Zayn mumbled under his breath.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

“Hey, you positive you’re alright?” Niall asked doubtfully. “You didn’t, like, bump your head or something, did you?”

“Like I said, *I’m fine*,” Zayn said as emphatically as he could manage. “I know you’re trying to be helpful or whatever, but please stop asking me, yeah? I’ll feel better once we’re home.”

Niall exhaled loudly. “Whatever you say, mate.”

Once home, Zayn cleaned his wounds (literally and figuratively) while Niall heated up some leftovers. By the time they sat down to eat, Niall seemed to have bounced back to his normal ebullience. Zayn wished he had half his friend’s resilience and resolved to push the day’s events to the back of his mind.

Niall made it easy, prattling on about this and that. The culinary teacher shared the funnier student mishaps from the past week: a cheese soufflé that never rose because the oven wasn’t turned on, a chocolate cake without the chocolate, and fairy cakes made with salt, not sugar. Zayn followed the steady stream of conversation as best he could, even mustering a small smile once.

“It’s about Dr. Payne, isn’t it?” Niall sighed, and the peas on Zayn’s fork tumbled into his mash.

“What…what do you mean?”

Niall rolled his eyes. “You’re only half-listening to me, so something’s definitely up. You’re usually pissing yourself when I bring out the kitchen fails.”

Zayn set his fork down and tried to think of a way to change the subject.
“Aha! So it has got something to do with Dr. Payne, then!”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t deny it either,” Niall re-joined before turning serious. “Oi, he didn’t cut you down or make you feel like a crap teacher, did he?”

“No.”

“Good. You weren’t put on probation or anything, were you?” Niall speculated, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“Of course not,” Zayn scoffed. “Why would I be put on probation?”

“I don’t know…maybe he found out you were gay.”

“So?”

Niall shrugged. “Well, he wasn’t too bloody thrilled when you started dating Ed, right? Maybe he’s a homophobic prick or something.”

“Yeah…he’s not a homophobe,” Zayn replied wryly. “Believe me on this one.”

They went back to eating, and Zayn mistakenly thought he was off the hook until:

“So what did you discuss at your mentoring session today?”

Zayn wracked his brain, trying to remember what happened before…well, what happened afterwards. He cleared his throat. “Um…we talked about stress and how to deal with it.”

“Well, fuck me. Feel like I should shake that man by the hand for choosing that topic for you.”

“Ni, please don’t swear,” Zayn reproached. “Clean language, clean mind,” he tacked on mechanically.

“Sorry,” Niall returned even more mechanically before carding a hand through his hair. “But you really want to loosen up a bit, Zed, just saying.”

Zayn tensed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, just”—Niall hesitated—“you’re strung so bleedin’ tight, lord help us all when you snap.”

“I’m done with this conversation,” Zayn huffed before limping off in the direction of his bedroom. “See you tomorrow.”

“If you’ve still got the hump, don’t bloody count on it.”

Zayn slammed the door. Taking a deep breath, he rested his back against the door and closed his eyes. He took a mental inventory of the day’s events: the technology issues that plagued the school day, his argument with Niall at school, the ‘mentoring’ session with Dr. Payne, the fall outside the building, his argument with Niall at home….

It wasn’t yet eight, but he decided to go straight to bed. With four hours still left in the day, he wasn’t taking any chances.
(Liam’s POV)

To be a great leader, one must admit their mistakes, and Liam had certainly blundered earlier.

With the massage, he had intended to provide his mentee with a pleasurable, stress-free experience. He wanted Zayn to grow more comfortable with his touch, with his physical presence. Liam should have been satisfied with that. He would have been perfectly contented if it weren’t for one thing:

*That damn moan.*

It was the sexiest thing Liam had ever heard. Moreover, it seemed so out of place in his private office. That one small moan had been the catalyst which ignited his desire. It surfaced an overwhelming need to show the novice teacher exactly who was ‘boss.’

And so he did.

Now, he was sat in a darkened booth at his favourite nightclub, nursing a vodka martini while deliberating over the best way to pick up the pieces.

*Club Jardin* was a forty-minute drive out of Wisteria Falls, but it was worth it. It was his escape whenever the idyllic town got a little too stifling. Here, no one expected anything from him. Here, no one knew his name, and if they did, they didn’t give a damn.

Liam gave a long, drawn-out sigh. Clearly, he had misread the signs. Before the kiss, Liam had been convinced he saw something in Zayn’s eyes—a curiosity or attraction maybe—but it was gone afterwards, replaced by a look of appalling revulsion. It was ironic, really, because Liam often relied on his ability to read people—like the woman at the bar looking for a chance to skip out on her tab, the businessman who walked out of the house after a fight with his wife (he’d be returning home later, tail between his legs), or the new cocktail waitress who was interested in a lot more from Liam than just a tip.

But when it mattered most, he had made a complete dog’s dinner of it. Zayn wasn’t ready. Not yet.

Or perhaps the problem was that Liam had gotten it *right*. Maybe there *was* something in Zayn’s eyes. Maybe he could read Zayn better than the boy could read himself. After all, Liam had felt that ‘something’ when they kissed: burning just below the skin, ever-present on Zayn’s lips, awakening in every muffled moan and exhalation.

And then, in the blink of an eye, it had vanished without a trace.

When Zayn ran out, Liam debated if he should chase the boy down. Ultimately, he concluded that such an action would be utter folly. Zayn was too shaken up to reason with, and it only would have produced the most undesirable of outcomes. Liam couldn’t risk creating a scene.

Still, as Liam watched the floor show at *Club Jardin*, he worried. He had made his move before explaining all the rules of the game to Zayn, a potentially fatal mistake. Even so, he doubted whether Zayn would have confided in anyone…except Horan, that is. Liam would have to keep an eye on him.
“Can I interest you in another drink, sir?”

Liam set his empty glass down on the table and gave the blonde a once-over. “That your best offer?”

The comment got the reaction he desired. She seemed flustered at first but then smiled coyly. “I don’t usually do this, but... I’m off at eleven.”

“I’ll be waiting.” Liam smiled, cocksure, oozing with practiced confidence. It came easy to him, this game. Second nature. (It just wasn’t as much fun as it used to be.)

He watched the blonde as she walked away. She wasn’t Zayn, but she’d do. She was something to tide him over until he got what he really wanted.

After all, he was a man, and he had needs.

(Needs that weren’t being met at the moment.)

It was going to take a while with Zayn. Liam had to be proceed carefully. He couldn’t be reckless, couldn’t make any more misjudgements. He had to keep his eyes fixed on the prize, and if that meant dialling it back for a while to regain his mentee’s trust, then so be it.

When it was time to proceed to the next stage, Liam would be ready. There would be no mistakes. (He would make sure of that.) He would show the young teacher that it was in his best interest to comply with his principal’s simple whims. Zayn would want to comply.

And if he didn’t... well, Liam would worry about that later.

***

Zayn was sick the next day—sick to his stomach with guilt, disgust, and uncertainty. He was also extremely sore from his fall. His ankle hurt. His muscles felt stiff. His arms and legs boasted an assortment of bruises in all sizes and shapes, ranging from deep indigo to purplish in colour.

Zayn told Niall he was staying home, and the other man didn’t seem the least bit surprised. After Niall left, Zayn went back to bed for the rest of the day.

At around half six, he was awakened by a tantalising aroma wafting into his bedroom. His stomach growling, he wandered out in his sweats to investigate.

The apartment smelled heavenly, and it was easy to spot the source. Niall was stood in their small kitchen, gently stirring something simmering on the stove.

“Made a pot homemade chicken noodle soup,” the Irishman informed him. “Well, it’s really more a good, old-fashioned stew,” he conceded, “like my nan used to make. Good for the stomach and better for the soul.”

It was obvious Niall had made the stew especially for him, and Zayn was touched by his best friend’s kindness. Food symbolised love to Niall, and the gesture was not lost on him. Moreover, Zayn knew the culinary arts teacher must have had a long day, and yet, Niall still made time to cook something special for him.
Niall set his wooden spoon on the stove and turned off the burner. “If you’re not hungry, I can—”

“Don’t be crazy,” Zayn cut him off. “Thanks, Ni. It looks incredible.”

Niall beamed. “What are you standing about for, then? Have a seat.”

They ate in silence—a good silence, a contented silence. The type of silence only the closest of friends can comfortably share. When they finished, Niall insisted on clearing the dishes, so Zayn grabbed his jacket and pack of cigarettes and headed outside. He didn’t bother with any shoes—his ankle still hurt like the dickens—but opted for a pair of woolly socks to keep his feet warm.

It’s a nice night—for November anyway,” Niall observed as he stepped out onto the balcony, sliding the glass door shut behind him. “Power Rangers—nice,” he teased, gesturing down at Zayn socks. “Those are new. Let me guess…your mum, right?”

“What are you talking about?” Zayn chuckled, wiggling the toes of his good foot. “These are sick, man.”

“I’m not sure if ‘sick’ is the right word for pink ranger slipper socks.” Niall shook his head and sat down. “God, I love your mum.”

“I could tell her to send you a pair next time,” Zayn offered, biting back a smile.

“Yeah…think I’ll pass. Cheers anyway.”

Zayn took another drag of his cigarette, and he could feel Niall’s eyes watching him.

“You really should quit, man.”

“Think you’ve told me that once or twice,” Zayn grunted, but he stamped it out anyway. He placed the half-smoked cigarette back in the pack. It hadn’t completely eased the itch beneath his skin, but it had taken the edge off enough for him to notice the orange and cerise hues of the sunset, to remember there was a whole world outside the scope of his problems (even if it didn’t feel like it).

“Spoke with Jo today,” Niall shared at last.

“Really?”

“That’s fantastic,” Zayn said, and he meant it, too. If Jo made Niall happy, then that was all that counted, all that should count.

“Yeah. She had this mad idea in her head about…well, it doesn’t matter. It was complete rubbish.”

“I’m glad you two worked everything out.”

“Me, too,” Niall agreed with a heartfelt smile. “You feeling any better, by the way?”

“I feel like a whole new man after that stew, bro. Thanks again.”

Niall waved off the compliment. “Sorry for acting the maggot yesterday.”

“No worries—we both said some pretty stupid things,” Zayn admitted. “It’s water under the bridge.”

“Well in that case, you can tell me why you were so upset after your mentoring session with Dr.
Payne yesterday.”

Zayn froze; he hadn’t been expecting the conversation to veer so quickly into dangerous territory. “Like I said, it was nothing,” he mumbled.

“C’mon, Zed. He must have said something.”

“Well, yes,” Zayn replied shortly, “he obviously said ‘something,’ Niall.”

“Bugger off, ya wanker. You know what I was getting at.”

“It wasn’t anything he said,” Zayn insisted, “not in particular, anyway.”

Niall kept staring at him expectantly, and Zayn knew he was fighting a losing battle.

“Fine,” he relented. “Dr. Payne suggested I look at problems as opportunities for growth, said the best way to reduce stress is to be prepared for anything.” Zayn pondered the irony of this last statement. He wondered if ‘anything’ included Dr. Payne kissing him during their mentoring session. There was no way Zayn could have been prepared for that.

Even if he had been thinking about it beforehand.

And maybe, that was what bothered Zayn the most: the fact that a small part of him wanted Dr. Payne to kiss him. For some inexplicable reason, he didn’t stop the man, didn’t speak up, even when he could have.

He had been beating himself up about it for the past twenty-four hours. Even sleep hadn’t offered any reprieve because he dreamt about Dr. Payne, dreamt about…nothing. He dreamt about absolutely nothing (or that’s what he kept telling himself).

“Quality advice, that,” Niall hummed approvingly. “Told you Dr. Payne would be an ace mentor, you lucky bastard.”

Zayn didn’t say a word.

“Hmm…I get it now.”

Zayn felt his throat constrict. “Get what?”

“Think I’ve sussed out why you’ve got the hump,” Niall said in his best impression of an analyst. He squinted as he regarded his friend, head cocked to the side, and Zayn felt as if he were being examined under one of Jensen’s microscopes. “You’re still convinced Dr. Payne doesn’t like you, that you’ll never be good enough for him and for Payne Academy, aren’t you?”

Zayn made a noncommittal sound.

“Well, I think he doesn’t dislike you as much as you first thought, and one of these days he’s going to make that clear.”

“I think it’s starting to become more than clear,” Zayn mumbled, dark irony staining his words. Fortunately, Niall didn’t seem to notice.

“Good! Just focus on what a golden opportunity this is, Zed. Hell, if I were you, I’d be counting the days to my next mentoring session.”

Next mentoring session. Those three words made Zayn want to curl up into the foetal position in a
He tried to think like Niall would, tried to filter everything through a positive light. Maybe Dr. Payne would apologise. Maybe Dr. Payne had a momentary lapse of judgment (like Zayn apparently did). Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe…

This was all a bad dream.

“That looks even worse than yesterday,” Niall murmured. Zayn was confused until he realised his friend’s gaze was focused on his cut lip, the one Zayn was currently pulling at with his thumb and forefinger. “Does it hurt?”

Zayn dropped his hand into his lap. “I don’t know…maybe a little.”

“Lemme see, yeah?” Niall was up in second, sliding a knee between his friend’s legs to get a closer look. Zayn was a good patient, sitting as still as possible. “You need to stop messing with it,” Niall scolded, holding Zayn’s chin up to examine the cut under the fading light. “Doesn’t look infected, but make sure you keep putting salve on it and don’t smoke. The fags will only make it worse, ya eejit.”

Zayn tried to roll his eyes, but Niall was so close it was making him cross-eyed. “You done yet? I’ve got a crick in my neck.”

There was a loud banging sound from inside the apartment, like a door slamming. They both jumped at the noise, Niall practically kneeing him in the groin.

“The fuck was that?” Niall hissed, cautiously peering inside. There was no movement within, so he cautiously slid the door open and entered the apartment. Zayn limped after him.

A quick inventory of the place told them there was nothing missing, and more importantly, that no one was there. The front door, however, was unlocked, and a framed picture on the wall next to it hung askew.

“Someone was here,” Zayn whispered, making the obvious conclusion. “Did you leave the door open when you got in, Ni?”

“Might’ve,” Niall admitted guiltily. “I was carrying a bag of groceries, so I kicked the door to shut it. Not sure if it actually closed all the way or not…” He shook his head. “Shit, I’m sorry, Zed. Some jackeen probably came strolling down the hall and slammed it.”

“Yeah,” Zayn returned, locking the door and bolting it. “Yeah, I’m sure you’re right.”

He thought that by saying it aloud, by agreeing the door was slammed by some random jerk, that it would make it true somehow. But the fact was, Zayn wasn’t convinced by Niall’s explanation. Since he didn’t have a better theory, however, he resolved to erase the mysterious incident from his mind.

For now, at least.
I'm going to start with something personal. Reading all your lovely comments about my writing was just the most uplifting thing. For those of you asking/concerned, I have an autoimmune disorder (similar to lupus). Although I am no stranger to setbacks in my health, they always affect my mood/mental health, so I can't tell you enough how much your understanding and sweet words here and on tumblr helped get me through a rough time. xx

So onto happier news! I've been incredibly inspired of late, working on some later chapters for TNT (over a 100k written now, woohoo!) as well as a long-ass epilogue for another one of my fics (but which one?).

Cheers for now. Best wishes and much love! xx
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Liam’s POV)

When Liam saw there was a substitute assigned to Mr. Malik’s classroom on Thursday, he quietly feared the worst. He didn’t panic—it wasn’t in his nature to panic—but he remained vigilant despite the fact that he’d had a late night and his alarm rang way too early that morning. He waited, lingered around the front of the office more than usual, but all the information he could get from Miss Hart was that Zayn ‘wasn’t feeling well.’

At 1100 hours, Liam decided to visit Horan’s classroom. (He needed to do a walk-through anyway, and he was happy to kill two birds with one stone.) The culinary arts teacher didn’t seem particularly bothered by his appearance, even seemed chuffed when Liam complimented his students at one point, so Liam assumed Zayn hadn’t told him anything…yet.

On Friday, Zayn returned to work. Liam watched from the outer office as Horan ran ahead to the second set of doors at the main entrance, propping a door open so his friend could hobble through. Liam’s mind briefly went into the gutter as he imagined how Zayn would be walking right after Liam had his way with him.

Or perhaps, he wouldn’t be walking at all.

The next thing Liam observed after the limp were the dark bruises. They appeared to meld into the boy’s tattoos on one arm, but the plasters accompanying them were harder to miss. Liam didn’t get long to look, however, because Zayn noticed his exposed arm and quickly pulled down his sleeve.

At first, Liam worried the bruises might have been caused by his overzealousness during the massage. Liam did have a tendency to get carried away at times.

Fortunately, this was not the case as he discovered later that day. It was just before he was about to lock himself away in his office for lunch, his only true break in the school day, when he overheard Miss Hart discussing the matter with Jensen. The chemistry teacher (who heard it from Sheeran who found out from Horan) revealed that Zayn’s injuries were the result of a bad fall in the car park—nothing more, nothing less.

Liam unpacked his lunch carefully, item-by-item, then opened the feed to the school’s surveillance system on his laptop. He liked to have the feed on in the background as he ate; he found it incredibly informative in a variety of ways.

Now, with his mind and body at ease, Liam could concentrate on a couple of loose ends. First, he’d have to meet with Horan and determine if he knew anything at all about what had transpired at the mentoring session on Wednesday. Also, Liam had a rather large ‘carrot’ to offer the culinary arts teacher—additional funding and resources for his Bistro.

And why not? The extracurricular programme had become an excellent addition to the school’s offerings. It generated great publicity and positive buzz during a time when Payne Academy’s principal was trying to keep everyone’s focus away from the normally highly-celebrated theatre department. Besides, the extra funding was more an investment than anything else because the
Payne Bistro was already starting to turn a small profit. Lastly, it would keep Horan happy and occupied.

As Liam saw it, it was a win-win situation for all involved.

The other loose end, of course, was Zayn himself. The question was whether or not Liam should give the teacher more time to ‘process’ the events of two days ago.

As he sat deliberating the matter, Liam spotted Zayn leaving his classroom for his own lunch break. Liam sat up and zoomed in on the black-and-white, grainy camera feed, watching as the history teacher turned around to lock his classroom door. Liam wished he could get approval to have cameras installed inside classrooms—well, one particular classroom anyway—but the Board was being mule-headed on that issue. For now, Liam would have to be content with the camera aimed at Zayn’s classroom door.

Liam couldn’t help but admire the view as Zayn turned his backside towards the camera. For several seconds, the teacher struggled to fit his key into the lock. Apparently, it was a tight fit, but, of course, those were the best kind.

The *very* best kind.

As Liam viewed the real-time footage, Zayn limped a few steps before stopping in the centre of the hallway. The teacher glanced up at the camera with an unreadable expression, paused, and then took another hesitant step. Then, pausing again, he stared directly into the camera. The thought that he might know Liam was watching was strangely gratifying.

Zayn moved out of view, but Liam’s eyes followed him as he weaved in and out of the different squares until finally disappearing into the teachers’ lounge.

Liam shut the lid of his laptop. He had come to a decision: he’d wait until their next mentoring session to speak with Zayn. It was best to stick to a routine, best not to rock the boat.

Besides, Zayn wasn’t going anywhere and neither was Liam.

“You can run, but you can’t hide, Mr. Malik.” Liam chuckled at his own witticism before setting aside the lunch he’d barely touched and returning to his ever-waxing stack of paperwork.

***

After the staff meeting on Tuesday, Zayn had to suffer through another awkwardly silent drive home with Niall. Of course, after enduring several such uncomfortable rides, Zayn was more than accustomed to the experience by now.

When they arrived home, Niall still wasn’t talking to him. Niall was still upset, still frustrated—so much so he nearly took the peg off the wall when he slung his keys on it. Then, his friend stormed into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him in a very un-Niall-like way. Zayn’s lower lip trembled, but he held in the tears that threatened to spill from his eyes. Instead, he curled up on the sofa, hugging a pillow to his chest as he reflected on the past few days.

It all started on Saturday when Zayn told a boldfaced lie. Ed had called and asked if Zayn would come over and proofread something for him. Ed offered to get pizza—veggie lovers with extra
jalapeno—as an incentive, but Zayn declined, saying he had already promised to help Niall shop for a present for his mother’s birthday.

It was the first excuse that popped into his head, and really, Zayn had no idea where it came from. Maura’s birthday wasn’t until January, and Niall never did anything more than a week in advance (without Zayn prodding him at least). Zayn could’ve just told the music teacher he didn’t feel well. Under the circumstances, no one would have blamed him.

It was a stupid lie because Niall found out the next day. Still, Zayn didn’t expect him to react quite the way he did. He exploded, zeroing in on the fact that even after their recent heart-to-heart, Zayn continued to act like a jerk to their mutual friend. Niall wasn’t happy Zayn used his mother as an excuse either. He kept harping on how “the Zed I know wouldn’t lie, not like that,” and Zayn couldn’t really argue with that.

Then, just when Zayn was convinced things couldn’t get worse between them, Niall accused him of ‘sabotaging’ his relationship with Jo. Apparently, Jo wasn’t speaking to Niall (again) even though they’d made up less than forty-eight hours ago. Furthermore, when Niall had asked Jo why she was ignoring him, she responded, “ask Zayn.”

Zayn insisted he hadn’t interfered, that he had no clue what Jo was talking about. Understandably, Niall didn’t believe him.

On Monday, nothing particularly bad happened. Then again, nothing particularly good happened either.

On Tuesday, Zayn attempted to make amends with Harry after the staff meeting. The English teacher led the meeting which focused on better communication among departments. Foolishly, Zayn had thought this was the perfect time to corner his former mentor. Zayn now understood how Dr. Payne was, how easily one could feel pressured into making a choice like the (wrong) one Harry had made.

Unfortunately, Harry managed to dodge him. Even when Zayn called after him, Harry brushed him off—in his politest manner, of course. Apparently, the openness Harry had encouraged during his presentation didn’t apply to any communication between the History and English departments (or, at least where Zayn and him were concerned).

In review: Niall was still mad at him; Harry was still avoiding him; Jo was still giving him the cold shoulder; Ed couldn’t be happy with him; and Louis, along with half the staff, surely blamed him for his forced leave of absence.

And then there was the situation with Dr. Payne.

Zayn’s thoughts were interrupted when his phone started ringing. A picture of his mom and him at his college graduation flashed on the screen. With every ring, his guilt set in a little further, until the call finally went to voicemail.

He’d call her later. Maybe after he had a smoke. Maybe then he’d be ready to talk to his family about how great his job was, about how he was smashing this whole adulting thing.

(Then again, maybe not.)

***
“Honey, we cannot tell you enough how proud we are of you!” his mom gushed later that night. She’d called three times that day alone, and Zayn couldn’t keep disregarding her calls anymore; it just wasn’t in his blood. “The last time Niall spoke with your father, he said you’ve managed to catch the eye of Dr. Payne himself!”

“Uh, yeah,” Zayn replied weakly as flashbacks of last week’s mentoring session assailed him. “Yeah, that’s, uh, one way you could put it.”

“And your father was right, dear,” she prattled on. “I shouldn’t have underestimated you.”

“Underestimated me?”

She exhaled dramatically, the star of her own personal soap opera. “I was afraid you wouldn’t be able to step out on your own so soon because we—because I’ve—sheltered you so much.” She sniffed loudly then, and Zayn really hoped she wasn’t going to start crying because there was a good chance he’d join her. “I’m happy to say I was wrong.”

“Oh.” Zayn returned blandly, reaching over to set his alarm. He didn’t want to be late for judgment day tomorrow. “Um…thanks, mom.”

They talked for another ten minutes or so…well, his mom talked, and he listened. When the conversation started to wind down, Zayn felt a sense of relief. It was tiring pretending everything was great when it really wasn’t.

“Give our love to our Niall!” she chirped, as she always did.

“Yeah, will do.” Zayn figured there was little point in telling her that Niall and him weren’t exactly on speaking terms at the present moment. It would probably freak her out as much as it did him.

“I love you, honey, and please stay in touch more, alright?” she gently scolded. “Your father says I need to give you your space, and I’ve been trying to, but I worry when it takes a couple of days for you to return my calls. At least text or send out a Tweeter thing so I know you’re alive.”

“Yes, mom. I will.”

“Thank you, sweetheart. Oh, and Zayn?”

“Yes, mom?”

“I just wanted to tell you one last time how proud we are of you,” she shared, starting to get all choked up again. “We’re proud beyond words.”

“Thanks, mom. Love you…bye,” Zayn managed before quickly ending the call and collapsing back on his bed. It really sucked lying to his mom, but he didn’t know what else to do. He was having the crappiest week possible, and it was about to get much worse.

Because tomorrow was Wednesday.

***
Zayn could tell there was something off about Dr. Payne the moment he walked into the man’s office for their regularly scheduled Wednesday mentoring session. His principal seemed bothered about something, distracted. Then again, it was probably expected under the circumstances.

Zayn himself was a nervous wreck. Time had not brought clarity, and Dr. Payne’s distance this past week had only made facing the music now that much worse. If anything, last week’s mentoring session had become more opaque, more inscrutable the harder he’d thought about it, details blurred by self-reriminations and resentment towards his boss for even putting him in such a situation in the first place. Zayn had gone so far as to draft a resignation letter a few days ago before ripping it up. He couldn’t give up on his dream, not yet. Not until he’d heard what Dr. Payne had to say.

“You may have a seat, Mr. Malik. I promise I won’t bite.”

Zayn contemplated the invitation. He was apprehensive about straying too far from his escape route. Besides, Dr. Payne had bitten him last week. Zayn’s bottom lip still showed the proof of that a week on.

“Mr. Malik, please.” With an impatient flourish, Dr. Payne indicated Zayn’s usual chair before stationing himself at the window a few feet away. The blinds were open for once, and it made the room appear slightly less ominous.

Zayn took a seat.

Dr. Payne didn’t speak for a long while, just peered out onto the well-manicured front garden, his countenance reflected in the window pane—first contemplative, then brooding, then contemplative again. Zayn followed his principal’s gaze. He marvelled at how there was barely a leaf in sight even though leaves had littered the grass and pathways at the beginning of the week. Zayn remembered trudging through the orangery russet quagmire with Niall only yesterday morning. He recalled the crunch and crackle of leaves underfoot, the damp, pungent organic smell.

(He also remembered a just-controllable urge of his to gather up a bunch and launch it at his friend. It’s something he would have done back when they weren’t teachers, back when they didn’t have to worry about things like dirtying their work clothes, back when they weren’t expected to act like adults.

Back, too, when they got along, when they weren’t constantly at each other’s throats or—even worse—not talking.)

But now the leaves were gone. Every last one.

Zayn wondered if they had all been collected by the groundskeeper, but it seemed like a tall job for one person in such a short span of time. On the other hand, perhaps the wind had simply blown them away.

Perhaps, she knew better than to ‘junk up’ the grounds of Payne Academy.

Dr. Payne turned towards him, and Zayn could tell the principal had resolved himself to something. “How’s your ankle?” he inquired.

Zayn tried to mask his surprise at the unexpected question. “Much better, sir.”

“And the rest of your injuries? I’d heard you had a bad fall.”

“Just bumps and bruises—mostly anyways,” Zayn told him. “But I’m feeling much better. Thank you for asking.”
Dr. Payne nodded. “Well then. I thought it would be a good idea to use this session as an opportunity to clear the air, as it were.” Dr. Payne cleared his throat. “Therefore, I would like to begin by apologising for what occurred last week.”

This was exactly what Zayn had been yearning to hear, yet the quick, straight-to-the-point apology still caught him off guard. “Really?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes, and I sincerely hope we can both be professional enough to move past it,” Dr. Payne declared with a cold, solemn intensity. “Furthermore, I would hope that the incident—like anything that transpires within these walls—is something we can keep between the two of us.”

Dr. Payne pivoted to face the window again, one hand toying coquettishly with the tilt wand. He twisted it one way, and the blinds closed. The room went dark. He twisted the wand the other way, and the blinds reopened, letting the afternoon light in again. “You haven’t spoken with anyone about our last session…have you, Mr. Malik?”

Zayn felt apprehension setting in again. The room began to grow stuffy as the events of last week’s session rushed back at him.

He licked his lips. “I…um….”

“Well, Mr. Malik?” Dr. Payne pressed, gripping onto the wand so tight that Zayn worried it might break off its chain. Zayn couldn’t see his principal’s face, not entirely, but the man’s voice belied a strained eagerness which contrasted sharply with his formerly calm and cool demeanour.

“No,” Zayn answered honestly, “I haven’t said anything about…about….”

He hadn’t finished his sentence, but apparently, he didn’t need to. His mentor’s grip suddenly slackened on the tilt wand, and Zayn could just see the corner of the man’s lips curl up.

“Ah, I knew you were a gentleman of good-breeding and discretion. Yet again, you have proven me correct.”

“Th-thank you, sir.”

Dr. Payne faced him square-on. “As I’ve mentioned before, my hope is that you’ll view me as a mentor, a sort of father figure,” he stated with his precise, carefully-crafted diction. “I believe I have a great deal of knowledge and experience to offer you, Mr. Malik, and you have much to offer your students. I think it would be a travesty to allow a silly misunderstanding to get in the way of that, don’t you?”

“Absolutely, sir,” Zayn agreed, nodding vigorously. If Dr. Payne was willing to forget the kiss ever happened, then he was more than on board with that.

“We are human after all—are we, Mr. Malik?”

“Yes, sir. Very human, sir.”

“And things…happen. Do they not?”

“They do, sir.”

“And sometimes it is necessary to overlook these, er, slipups—for the greater good, of course.”

“Of course, sir.”
“My thoughts exactly,” Dr. Payne crooned. “I am glad we are of the same mind, for I am quite certain our relationship could be mutually beneficial in countless ways.” He strolled towards his desk, spun his chair around the right way, and settled into it with an air of satisfaction. “Thank you, Mr. Malik. That is all.”

“Thank you, sir.” Zayn stood up to go, but then stopped. He wanted to ask a question, but he wasn’t sure if he should, if he’d somehow be trespassing where he shouldn’t be.

“Yes, Mr. Malik?”

“Next week,” Zayn started timidly, “we, uh, won’t be doing anything with stress relief again, will we?”

Amusement glittered in the administrator’s eyes. “No, I believe we covered that in depth at our last session.” He rubbed the palms of his hands together briskly. “No, I have something else entirely planned for next Wednesday.”

Zayn breathed a sigh of relief and debated if he should follow-up with the next logical question. As usual, his curiosity got the best of him. “If you don’t mind my asking, sir, what is the topic for next week’s session?”

“Discipline,” was the instant response. “Next week’s focus will be on discipline, and I think it will be a most productive session—most productive, Mr. Malik.” Dr. Payne turned his attention to the papers on his desk then, the ghost of a smile playing at his lips.

As Zayn exited the office, all he could think about was how he really wished he hadn’t asked that question.

Chapter End Notes

I'm rushing to post this before class, so I'll keep this short and sweet. Thanks for all the amazing feedback once again. You guys are the best. I'm a little behind on replying to comments, but I'll get to them soon, I promise. xx

Also, my fic Money Moves has been updated with an epilogue if you haven't seen it yet! Check it out, maybe? :) xx
(Jo’s POV)

A notification popped up on her screen, and Jo groaned. She really hated when Dr. Payne sent her messages that way. Half the frickin’ time, it froze her computer, totally interrupting whatever she had been working on. When that happened, she could almost count on Dr. Payne getting pissy with her because she hadn’t finished her duties “in a timely manner.”

There might be a worse boss than hers in the state, but if there was, she’d bet her dad’s farm in Iowa that Dr. Payne would come in a very close second.

It was a good thing she loved her job. She loved working in a school office, loved that every day was something new. She loved the teachers, staff, and students she worked with. (She could tolerate the parents and stodgy board members most of the time.) But the thing she loved best about her job at Payne Academy was simply being in the centre of a very unique ecosystem. As the principal’s secretary, she saw everything that went on in the school, and a selective private secondary school like Payne Academy had all sorts of interesting goings-on.

The message from Dr. Payne was still blinking on her computer screen, demanding her immediate attention, so she reluctantly clicked on it:

Message from the principal: Dear Miss Hart, please don’t bother me for the rest of the afternoon.

Before responding, Jo rolled her eyes in a completely juvenile way (something she particularly excelled at). To Jo, the rest of the afternoon consisted of exactly twenty-three minutes.

Would you like me to re-direct your calls to the answering machine on the main line when I leave, sir?

Message from the Principal: Yes. I need to meet with Mr. Malik in my capacity as his provisional mentor. Unfortunately, our new teacher requires a great deal of support.

Jo snorted, thinking that yeah, Zayn probably needed all the help he could get. She’d heard he was supposed to be some boy wonder before he got to Payne, graduating top of his class and winning a crap-ton of awards. But after three months of school, she still didn’t see what all the damn hype was about.

Of course, Jo had never seen the guy teach, but he didn’t seem like the master teacher type. For
starters, he was nothing like Harry. Most of the time, Zayn came across as shy and awkward, especially when his best friend wasn’t glued to his side.

Dr. Payne apparently wasn’t a fan either. From the beginning of the school year, he’d been complaining about the new teacher’s “woeful punctuality,” among other things. And now, Dr. Payne was forced to act as Zayn’s mentor because of the fight Zayn had gotten into with Harry, of all people. The principal respected his star English teacher far too much to officially assign another mentor, so now he was stuck with the unsavoury task of mentoring Zayn himself.

She almost felt sorry for him.

Jo shook her head at her own rudeness. No matter how she felt about Zayn personally, there was no reason to attack him as a teacher. He had to have some potential or Dr. Payne wouldn’t have hired him in the first place. Because even if Dr. Payne was kind of a ginormous asshat at times, he clearly knew what he was doing when it came to running a school.

With one eye on the clock, Jo returned to the student profile she had been updating. She’d barely brought it up, however, when the main line started ringing. With a sigh, she lifted the phone to her ear:

“Thank you for calling Payne Academy. This is Joanna Hart, principal’s secretary, speaking.”

“Is it safe?” the caller whispered back, stalker-like.

Jo blinked at the strange question. “Who is this?” she demanded. She was about to hang up when the person on the other end of the line laughed gaily—a laugh she sorely missed. “Oh my gosh, Lou! Is that you?!”

“Yeah, ‘course it is, love,” he chuckled back, “and I can’t believe you’ve bloody forgotten me already.”

“Oh, please, Lou. We miss you terribly;” she insisted. “This place isn’t the same without you.” It was true, too. Louis Tomlinson was one of her favourite teachers on the staff. He was always so full of energy, always had a smile on his face and an amusing story to tell when Dr. Payne wasn’t around.

“Of course Payne’s not the same bloody place without me,” Louis replied puckishly, “but cheers much for stating the obvious and all that.”

Jo giggled. “Of course.”

“So is the dictator—note the emphasis on dick there—around?”

“Lou!”

“Well, is he?”

“Wait—you’re not saying you want to speak to him, are you?” Jo gasped.

“Don’t be mad,” Louis scoffed. “I was just wondering if you could talk freely or not.”

“I mean…I guess,” Jo replied, glancing towards Dr. Payne’s closed door out of nervous habit more than anything else. Dr. Payne had had his office soundproofed a few years back, claiming the constant “chitter-chatter” in the office was distracting him from doing his job. “I’m still at work obviously.”
“Yeah, I should probably get your mobile number before we ring off here.”

“I’ve given it to you three times,” Jo admonished lightly. “Gonna have to give it to El next time.”

“Probably a good idea,” Louis admitted with a laugh that lacked its usual shine.

“So, how is El? I haven’t spoken to her in ages.”

“El? She’s great—bit sick of me though,” Louis replied with forced cheerfulness. “Swears she’s going to break off our engagement if I don’t get my shit together. You know—the usual.”

“I’m sure it’s just because....”

“I’m at the flat all the time now?” Louis chimed in, and Jo nodded, forgetting she was on the phone. She checked around the office to make sure she was still alone and that Dr. Payne’s door was still shut tight. (It was.) “Yeah,” Louis continued, “I’m bouncing off the fucking walls at this point, trying to think about something other than the shambolic state of my theatre department.”

“It’s not that bad,” Jo lied, trying to forget how Louis’ substitute asked her just yesterday if she knew what ‘stage left’ meant. “Harry’s been helping out as much as he can.”

“He shouldn’t have to,” Louis grumbled. “That’s my job...or it was anyway,” The drama teacher sighed. “El thinks I should go grovelling on my knees to the Big Payne and ask him for me job back.”

“Well, it probably couldn’t hurt—”

“Bollocks. Can you imagine how bloody intolerable my job would be if I gave in that easy?” He let the question hang in the air for a moment. “But I need to find out what’s going on—that’s why I called, yeah? I was hoping you could shed some light on the subject. Just give it to me straight, love: what are my odds of returning next term?”

“Well,” Jo started carefully, “he hasn’t forgiven you, if that’s what you mean. Also, I know the substitute was told this job would be a long-term assignment which could end up lasting a whole semester or...even longer.”

“Yeah, that’s what kind of I figured,” he replied, deflated. Jo understood. It had been tough for her to say those words and probably even tougher for him to hear them. “But enough about me, how’s everything going in the world of Jo Hart?”

Jo took a deep breath. “Lou, you were right,” she said miserably.

“Course I was, love, but give me details.”

Jo triple-checked that Dr. Payne’s door was closed before elaborating. “Niall,” she blubbered, trying to hold it together. “He’s a total player, and I should have listened to you when you told me to steer clear of him.”

“Hate to say I told you so, but....”

“I know,” she conceded, pushing her glasses farther up the bridge of her nose before propping her elbow on her desk and resting her cheek in her palm. The thing that was hardest to swallow about the whole mess was that she should have known better. Yes, she was young but not young enough to use ‘youth,’ ‘inexperience,’ or ‘naivety’ as an excuse. She’d left Iowa five years ago, and she’d seen a lot since then. This wasn’t her first time around the block, yet she had let herself be
bamboozled by an easy manner and an infectious laugh.

She really needed to start dating older men. Maybe that was the whole damn problem.

“Don’t let it get you down, darling,” Louis declared, breaking into her thoughts. “It happens to the best of us.”

“I know. It’s just that I completely misjudged…well, both of them, I guess.”

Louis snorted. “Yeah, Styles told me Horan and Malik were practically getting off in the lounge a few weeks back.”

“Harry said that?”

“Well not in those exact words, mind you, but you know it was blatant as fuck if Harold noticed it.”

“Yeah,” Jo replied glumly. She felt like a total dumbass. She had to be the only person in the whole school who didn’t realise those two were more than friends. “Lou, I didn’t want to believe all the rumours at first. I even asked Niall about it, and he said I was being ridiculous, but then….” Jo took a deep breath. She wasn’t going to cry. She was twenty-frickin’-five, and she wasn’t going to cry at work over a boy. “Then, I…I saw them.”

“What’d you see, love?”

Maybe Jo was mistaken, but he almost sounded angry. It shouldn’t have consoled her, but it did somehow. “Well first, I saw them sitting together on the main staircase. The monitors are shitty in here, but they were sitting super close, Lou. Niall had his arm wrapped around Zayn, and it was just plain weird.”

“Go on.”

“Then, I saw them at their apartment. I’d gone over to apologise to Niall—can you imagine?” she disparaged, shaking her head at her own stupidity. “I was actually going to apologise to that jerk.” She took a shuddering breath. “So I knocked but no one answered. I saw the lights were on and the door wasn’t closed all the way, and well, I just pushed it open.”

“And?”

Jo swallowed the lump in her throat. “I found them on the balcony, Lou, and…and I really wish I hadn’t. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“I warned you not to trust either one of them, Jo,” Louis said darkly. “They both need to learn their fucking place. I sussed out Horan from the start, but I’ll admit Malik took a little longer. Should’ve trusted my instincts because, bloody hell, no one could be that naive.”

“Zayn is,” Jo insisted, but then she thought about the balcony, what she saw….

What she wished she hadn’t seen.

“He’s a master manipulator is what he is,” Louis declared. “Just look what he did to Harry…and you…and that Sheeran kid…and me, for fuck’s sakes.”

“Lou, that’s kinda harsh, don’t you think?” Jo challenged, wondering why the hell she was defending Zayn when he had been fooling around with her boyfriend behind her back. “In all fairness, we don’t know what happened with that mentoring debacle. Harry said it was confidential
and that he wasn’t going to tell anyone the details—not even you.”

Louis made a noise. “Maybe, but I know what happened in my case and Malik was definitely to blame for that.”

Jo seriously needed to get her head checked because once again, she found herself coming to the defense of Zayn Malik. “You slandered him in front of a packed auditorium, Lou. I don’t see how that’s his fault.”

“It’s only slander if it ain’t true, darling,” Louis drawled. “Besides, it was just a subtle dig. People took it completely out of proportion.”

To be fair, Jo hadn’t been in the theatre that night. However, knowing Louis as she did, ‘subtle’ would be the very last word she’d ever associate with the drama teacher or any of his actions.

“What I don’t get,” Louis continued, “is why our dear old Payno was so cheesed off about it. I figured I’d get a warning or a slap on the back of the hand. Maybe even an extra hall duty…summat like that, y’know?”

“Well, what did he say?”

“He said, and I quote”—Louis cleared his throat and Jo guessed his infamous impersonation of Dr. Payne was about to make an appearance—“Slandering one Payne teacher in a public forum is tantamount to slandering the whole school, Mr. Tomlinson.”

Jo sucked in a breath. “What did you say?”

“Told him to stuff it.”

Jo nearly dropped the phone. “No way,” she hissed.

“I did actually. It was my greatest and worst moment all wrapped into one,” he sighed wistfully. “But enough about me. I know you’re probably trying to get out of there, but just tell me one thing: how’re you holding up, love?”

“I’m doing okay, Lou,” Jo answered, feeling anything but. She knew she’d get over Niall someday, but that day wasn’t today. “I just keep thinking of him…of them,” she admitted. “Niall was all over his supposed ‘best mate,’ and I’ve made myself sick wondering what the hell Zayn’s got that I haven’t.”

_Cheekbones, better eyelashes, an Uncle Dick…._

“MISS HART!”

Jo let drop the receiver this time, and it went clanging to the floor, nearly pulling the base of the phone down with it. She said a small prayer, then swivelled around to face her boss. “Yes, sir?”

Dr. Payne wasn’t happy with her but that wasn’t exactly breaking news. “Do you know what makes _me_ sick, Miss Hart?” he asked coolly.

“My inferior work ethic?” she offered after a beat, attempting to look more contrite than caught.

“Precisely,” he said gruffly. “Couldn’t have put it better myself.” (To give him credit, he _had_ said it himself. Many many times.) “Miss Hart, it’s evident you’ve been frittering away what could have been a productive afternoon on a personal call. Last I checked, the Board isn’t paying you to make
“I understand that, sir. It won’t happen again.” As she spoke, she could feel her dignity drop a few notches. She knew she was technically in the wrong on this one. She should’ve called Louis back after work. Still, she didn’t see why he had to be an asswipe about it, why he couldn’t simply reprimand her and move on.

“Apologies aren’t enough,” her principal said sharply. “I expect you to stay fifteen minutes later today to make up for the wasted time. Oh, and please remember to clock out at the correct time, so I don’t have to adjust your time sheet…again.”

“Yes, sir,” she parroted back, resisting the urge to add a mocking salute. She watched as he marched back into his office, door left open for his next appointment.

That’s when Jo recalled exactly who his next appointment was: Zayn. Just the person Jo wanted to see right now…not. She thought again about what Louis had said regarding Zayn. Perhaps, he was right. Perhaps—

Crap.

She’d never hung up the damn phone. She quickly dropped to the floor to grab it, but when she held the receiver to her ear, all she heard was the dull buzz of the dial tone. Groaning, she placed the receiver back on the cradle. The moment she looked up again, Zayn was standing in front of her.

She gave him a tight-lipped smile, then motioned towards Dr. Payne’s open door. Zayn paused briefly as if he wanted to say something, but she pretended to be absorbed in reorganising her desk caddy. She wasn’t in the mood to listen to whatever it was he had to say.

No, it still hurt too damn much.

***

“Tell me, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne began as soon as Zayn was seated, “how important is your job to you?”

To say Dr. Payne’s question surprised Zayn would have been the understatement of the century. It threw him off balance, made him worry—not that it took much to make Zayn worry. As Niall liked to say, if ‘worrying’ were an Olympic sport, Zayn would hold the gold medal record. He wondered if that was Dr. Payne’s intention, to make him worry, as the man’s piercing brown eyes studied him.

Zayn squirmed a little in his seat. “I, uh, thought we were going to be discussing discipline, sir.”

“In good time, Mr. Malik. Answer the question first,” Dr. Payne instructed before reclining back in his leather-padded desk chair. “But before you do, I’m going to ask you to think about it carefully. How important is your job to you?” he repeated. “Your answer is more important than you know.”

Zayn definitely felt like he was being tested now. “It’s…it’s everything to me. Teaching is my whole life; it’s all I ever wanted to do,” he acknowledged. “There’s nothing like standing in front of a classroom and delivering a solid lesson. I don’t know how to describe it,” he confessed, searching for the right words. “It’s…it’s a feeling like nothing else.”
Dr. Payne was staring at the ceiling, fingertips pressed together in that strange way of his. Zayn watched as the corners of his lips twitched enigmatically. After what seemed like an eternity, he sat up abruptly. “Yes, I thought as much,” he said decisively.

“Sir, I’m not sure what you—”

“Yes,” Dr. Payne said almost to himself, “your idealism is quite refreshing, but that answer is probably more self-aware than I would have suspected.”

“Sir, I—”

“That feeling you get as you stand before your class,” Dr. Payne cut in, “do you know what it is?”

Zayn blinked. It was hard following Dr. Payne’s quick shifts and jumps in conversation sometimes. “Um…no. I don’t think so.”

“It’s power, Mr. Malik,” his mentor stated. “Teaching is empowering. It is a nearly unparalleled high if one does it correctly and to the best of his or her ability. In actuality, there are very few things which surpass that feeling.”

Zayn wasn’t sure if he agreed with Dr. Payne’s explanation. He was sceptical that power was the root cause of the feeling he described. Teaching should generate positive feelings and thoughts, and Dr. Payne made it sound like Zayn was a power-hungry, attention-seeking junkie.

Dr. Payne must have noted his negative body language because he qualified his assertion: “I assure you, Mr. Malik, that there is nothing arbitrarily wrong with seeking power. Indeed, there is a time to seek authority and a time to bow to others’ authority. Different circumstances and arrangements call for different approaches. Do you understand?”

“I-I think so, Dr. Payne,” Zayn answered unsurely. He still had some doubts, but as usual, he had a difficult time expressing them to his principal.

“You don’t, but you will soon,” Dr. Payne returned, his usual cryptic response to such questions. “But let me remind you once again of the question I posed at the start of our session—you do recall my question, of course?”

“Yes, you asked me how important my profession—”

“No, that is not entirely correct, Mr. Malik,” he snapped, clearly irritated. “You have substituted the word ‘profession’ for the word ‘job.’ I had a very specific reason for employing the latter word.”

“But aren’t the two words interchangeable?” Zayn asked, frustration setting in. He wondered why his mentor was so caught up with semantics when they were supposed to be discussing discipline.

“In this case, they are not transposable,” Dr. Payne bluntly informed him. “In order to illustrate the difference, I will be more specific and restate the question: How important is your job at Payne Academy to you?”

Zayn’s heart sunk. “Oh, I see what you mean, sir,” he acknowledged. “The difference is quite, er, obvious now.”

“Then answer the question, Mr. Malik.”

Before Zayn could utter a single syllable, Dr. Payne had catapulted himself up off his chair. He paced the small office with staccato, turbulent strides. Then, the principal stopped suddenly and
shoved his hands deep into his trouser pockets. He began to speak, and the words flowed out of him in an almost stream-of-conscious sort of way:

“I want you to think about your job here at Payne Academy. I want you to reflect on the prestige that comes with such a placement, Mr. Malik. I want you to consider the doors a successful teaching stint here will open for you in the future. I want you to consider the pride that undoubtedly swells your chest whenever you tell someone you’re a Payne teacher.”

Dr. Payne paused to catch his breath, and Zayn took the opportunity to collect his thoughts. He figured he might as well be open and honest at this point because the only plausible reason Zayn could think of for Dr. Payne’s question was that the man was considering firing or suspending him.

And Zayn could not let that happen—not if there was any conceivable way he could prevent it.

A suspension or termination of a first-year teaching contract was the kiss of death to a career in education. And maybe Louis was right about him to an extent because Zayn did have ambition—he just wasn’t ruthless.

Zayn took a deep breath and forced himself to look up at Dr. Payne. “My job…at Payne Academy…also means everything to me.”

Dr. Payne smiled—well, as close to a smile as he would allow himself. “You have no idea how much it delights me to hear you say that, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn felt as if he’d just dodged a bullet. “Thank you, sir.”

Dr. Payne grabbed a file and a pen from his desk, then took a seat next to Zayn at the small octagon table. “Oh, before I forget,” he announced abruptly, “you must tell me how pleased Mr. Horan was with the news I shared with him.”

Zayn swallowed. He had no idea what his principal was talking about. “Uh…news, sir?”

“Yes, news,” was the clipped, impatient response. “I am referring, of course, to the additional funding for Mr. Horan’s student-run bistro. Mr. Horan seemed quite pleased about it when he left my office last week,” Dr. Payne disclosed, furrowing his brow. “I’m surprised he didn’t mention anything. You two are flatmates, aren’t you?”

Zayn frowned. “Yes, but we haven’t been…well, what I’m trying to say is—”

“It’s fine, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne quieted him. “These little disagreements will happen between good friends, won’t they?” He cleared his throat. “Not to presume, of course, but you two would call yourselves ‘friends,’ wouldn’t you?”

It was a weird question, but the way Dr. Payne was staring at him without blinking was even weirder.

“Yes,” Zayn answered, “and I’m sure he’ll tell me about the good news when we’re, uh….”

“Speaking again?”

Zayn blushed. “Um, yeah.”

“I see,” Dr. Payne returned, looking pleased again for some bizarre reason. “But we have lost enough time. Let’s move on to today’s focus which, as you recalled, is discipline.”
“Discipline,” Dr. Payne boomed as if he were delivering a lecture to a full classroom, “is a necessary component of power relationships and hinges on trust—trust, Mr. Malik,” he emphasised, clicking his pen to punctuate the point. “Simply stated, there needs to be an expectation that rules are to be obeyed and that if they are not obeyed, consequences will ensue.

“In addition,” Dr. Payne continued, “a pupil—or other subordinate, shall we say—should feel safe in the relationship. He should understand that the rules and punishments exist for his own good. Furthermore, the subordinate should know that even though he may not fully understand a directive, respecting the orders of his”—Dr. Payne hesitated—“superior is his best and only course of action.”

Dr. Payne folded his hands together on the table in front of him and peered deep into Zayn’s eyes. “Well, Mr. Malik—do you agree with my general philosophy? Do you think it is one that could guide you here at Payne Academy?”

Zayn tried to strip away the clinical coldness from his principal’s message. Overall, he agreed with the man—or at least, he thought he did. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. I would like us to try an exercise then.”

“An exercise?”

“Yes,” Dr. Payne said genially, twirling his pen in one hand as he began to speak in his soothing monotone. The pen wove through his fingers like a crimson ribbon: in-and-out, out-and-in; a crimson blur that Zayn found both distracting and mesmerising.

“Mr. Malik?”

Zayn shook his head and re-focused; it had been another long day. “Sorry, what were you saying, sir?”

Dr. Payne gave a tolerant, drawn-out sigh. He set the pen down—thankfully—and folded his hands together again. “I asked if you would address me by another name when we are in our private sessions,” his mentor related. “This name, of course, would have to be something outside the norm, just to demonstrate the importance of minding the rules no matter how nonsensical they seem. If you forget and/or refuse to address me in the proper fashion during our sessions, a consequence would follow, albeit a rather trifling one.” Dr. Payne seemed to reconsider his words. “Well, to begin with, at any rate,” he tacked on.

Something about all of this was making Zayn uneasy. Still, he couldn’t see the harm in complying with a silly exercise like the one his principal just outlined. “Sir, how would you like me to address you for this exercise?”

“First, you must agree to the terms.” Dr. Payne must have been able to read the lingering reservations in Zayn’s eyes because he added, “Remember, discipline is ultimately about trust, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn bit his lip. There was no way he could refuse now. “Alright, sir. I…I agree.”

“Excellent,” Dr. Payne murmured, crossing one leg over the other as he relaxed back into his chair. “Now, time to think of a name….” He pursed his lips and scratched his clean-shaven jaw. “Let’s try…Daddy.”

Zayn blinked. He must have misheard the man. “I’m sorry—could you repeat that, sir?”
“Daddy,” Dr. Payne confirmed, straight-faced. “I would like you to call me ‘Daddy’ for the purposes of this exercise, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn was at a loss for words. “Daddy?” he repeated, dumbstruck.

“Yes, Mr. Malik. I think it will be a good reminder for you that I am here not only as your administrator but also as your mentor. As I’ve told you innumerable times, this latter role can be a fatherly one.”

“But—”

“That is enough, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne cut him off, eyes flashing with annoyance. “I will expect you to follow this simple directive at our next meeting, as agreed, and if you do not, there will be consequences. Do I make myself clear?”

Zayn nodded resignedly. When he left the office soon after, he couldn’t help but wonder what in the world he had unknowingly gotten himself into.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so I'm dying to read what you thought about Jo's perspective. That was just a one-off because I like breaking the rules and doing the unexpected, but hopefully it explained some things about the way certain characters have been acting and gave you more insight into Jo's character.

Also, what did you think about the 'Discipline' mentoring session? Any thoughts about Dr. Payne's strange line of questioning at the beginning? Anyone catch why he brought up Niall (hint: check Jo's section if you missed it)? And of course, what did you think about Dr. Payne's little exercise? ;)

Finally, I've had a few people asking about updates. I have a rough update schedule for myself, so I'll share it with you. These are my goals but keep in mind that life happens. Also note that if a chapter is ready, I might post it earlier in the week, so your best bet is to subscribe to the fic (or to mmaree) if you want to read it right away. :)

Saturday, 13.10: Money Moves (Epilogue, Part 3)
Saturday, 20.10: The New Teacher (Chapter 15)
Saturday, 27.10: Money Moves (Epilogue, Final)
Saturday, 3.11: The New Teacher (Chapter 16)

Thanks for reading! Much love! ~Maree xx
Zayn glanced over at Niall on their ride home from school. His friend appeared tired, and Zayn figured the long hours of teaching and sponsoring an after-school club were finally taking their toll. Zayn understood that tiredness, felt it in his bones. Niall had the Bistro, but Zayn was still spending far too many hours grading and planning the perfect lesson.

In teacher’s college, they had been warned that the first year of teaching was always the worst, that if you could make it through the first year alive and in one piece, it would be smooth sailing from there. Zayn sure hoped that advice was true. Some days, that thought was the only thing that motivated him to keep going.

Like today, for instance. He had always suspected that Dr. Payne was a bit eccentric, but the Daddy exercise was just strange…and well, cringey.

“How was your meeting with Dr. Payne?” Niall asked suddenly, and Zayn was thankful he was buckled in; otherwise, he might have hit the windscreen out of pure shock.

“Fine,” Zayn answered quickly before Niall remembered that they weren’t really talking to each other. “It went well.” He didn’t elaborate. He remembered what Dr. Payne had said about keeping the sessions confidential. Besides, he didn’t think Niall would understand the discipline exercise. (Zayn didn’t quite understand it himself.)

“That’s good.”

Zayn thought of the news his mentor had mentioned. “Oh, Dr. Payne told me he found some extra funding for the Bistro. That’s fantastic.”

“Yeah, it’s brilliant,” Niall concurred, sounding almost like his usual carefree self again. “It’s really gonna be a massive help.”

“I can imagine,” Zayn replied. “Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask…what did Dr. Payne say about your second quarter lesson plan?”

Niall snorted. “Well, I got in trouble for using the ‘f-word’ so there’s that.”

Zayn tried not to let his expression reveal just how appalled he was. “Wait—you used profanity on a lesson plan you turned in to Dr. Payne?”

Niall lowered the volume on the radio. “No, I got chewed out for using ‘fun’ in my objective. As Dr. Payne said”—Niall traded in his Irish brogue for Dr. Payne’s West Midlands accent—“‘There is no place for “fun” in a lesson plan, Mr. Horan. Please change the “f-word” to something more appropriate and resubmit.’”

“I should’ve guessed,” Zayn chuckled. “So what did you do?”

“Changed ‘fun’ to ‘engaging,’ then re-sent it.”
“That’s vintage Dr. Payne right there,” Zayn mused, shaking his head.

“Yeah…,” Niall agreed, waxing introspective all of a sudden. “Zed.” he began as they waited at a red light, “be straight with me because I’m willing to forgive a lot of gobshite if you are. I get that it’s been stressful with everything that’s been going on, but did you or did you not try to sabotage my relationship?”

Zayn wanted to pull his hair out because he had already denied this before. “No, Niall. I promise I’m telling you the truth. I didn’t do anything—knowingly anyway.”

Niall nodded thoughtfully, eyes back on the road as the light changed from red to green. “I believe you,” he said simply.

It wasn’t much, but it was something. It was a spark of hope Zayn could cling to in a time when he needed it.

***

It was midway through Wednesday’s mentoring session, and Zayn was finishing a reflection sheet on the past week’s lessons. The session had been blissfully uneventful thus far, mostly because Dr. Payne kept getting phone calls he had to take. Zayn tried not to eavesdrop, but from the snippets of conversations he did overhear, the trouble had something to do with Payne Academy’s drama department.

“Mr. Styles,” Dr. Payne spoke into the phone, and Zayn was definitely listening in at this point, “I don’t know what else to tell you. I understand rehearsals aren’t going well—I’ve been hearing nothing else from parents and students for days.”

Dr. Payne glanced in Zayn’s direction then, and the new teacher pretended to be writing something down.

“I am well aware that Payne has a reputation in the arts to uphold; however, the Board assures me they will have a list of qualified applicants soon. Once I get that list, I will do my best to swiftly interview and select a suitable replacement who can steer the ship back on course.” There was a few second’s pause before Dr. Payne snapped, “yes, replacement.” Then, he promptly slammed the phone down.

Dr. Payne shut his eyes and started massaging his temples. The principal had not yet turned thirty, yet he looked like he was feeling every one of his years today (and then some). The weight of the world seemed to rest on his shoulders.

Zayn was too afraid to speak up, but he didn’t know how much longer he could pretend to be working on a double-sided reflection page either. “I’m…uh…finished.”

“Remember the exercise, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne barked, looking up.

“Sorry, sir…I mean, um, Father,” Zayn stammered.

Dr. Payne gave him a withering look. “Daddy,” he corrected, loosening his smart, grey and salmon-striped tie which coordinated perfectly with his white shirt and ash-coloured suit. For once, the principal wasn’t dressed in all dark attire, and it made Zayn feel a little less intimidated—well, if it
weren’t for the fact that the man’s recent phone calls had clearly left him in a bad mood.

“I’m sorry, sir, but isn’t ‘Father’ close enough?” Zayn tried. He felt strange calling his boss ‘Daddy,’ especially when he never even used the moniker with his own father.

“Mr. Malik, that wasn’t the directive.”

“I mean, they’re synonyms,” Zayn tried again. “So, I don’t actually see the difference…?”

“Really, Mr. Malik,” his principal disparaged, “you must learn the significance of specificity and exactitude in your word choice. I believe we have discussed this on numerous occasions.”

Zayn wondered if he should say it, wondered if it would be rude or inappropriate to bring it up in this setting.

“Spit it out, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne sighed.

“It makes me uncomfortable,” Zayn finally settled on.

“Good.”

Zayn’s eyes widened at his mentor’s dismissive response.

“Don’t look so affronted, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne tutted. “Remember, ‘uncomfortable’ is where learning takes place. You probably felt ‘uncomfortable’ when your parents took the training wheels off your bicycle; however, embracing that discomfort was a necessary step in the learning process. One must embrace the unknown and the uncomfortable in life. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Zayn was pretty sure his principal wasn’t completely grasping his objection. Then again, if Dr. Payne didn’t think it was weird for his mentee to call him ‘Daddy’, then Zayn certainly wasn’t going to make it weird. “Yes, sir—I mean, uh, Daddy.”

The corners of Dr. Payne’s mouth turned up. “Very good, Mr. Malik. And as I was saying, please remember the importance of exactitude in your word choice.”

“I will,” Zayn promised. “I’ll try to be mindful of what come out of my mouth in the future.”

“Yes,” his mentor approved, brown eyes almost glowing in the lamplight, “one should always be aware of what goes in and out of one’s mouth.”

“Oh,” Zayn chirped up, “I hardly ever have to worry about what goes in my mouth. Niall takes care of that.”

Dr. Payne started coughing violently then. After a bit, he took a long swig from his silver and red ‘I love Payne’ tumbler. Then, he ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. “Would you care to, er, expound upon your last statement, Mr. Malik?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Zayn replied, marveling at how much easier this Daddy thing became with more practice. “Mr. Horan prepares most of our meals. He always makes sure I’m eating well, getting decent nutrition, and all that good stuff.” Zayn felt a tinge of embarrassment after sharing that information with his boss. Then again, Niall was the culinary arts teacher; it should come as no surprise that the Irishman did the majority of the cooking and meal planning at home.

“Yes, of course,” Dr. Payne responded, looking well relieved. “I’m pleased to know that Mr. Horan is so attentive to your needs, Mr. Malik,” he stated, his upper lip twitching for some reason. “Even
so, I will try to show a greater interest in what goes in your mouth next term.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to trouble you on something that has nothing to do with school,” Zayn objected hurriedly because the last thing he needed was Dr. Payne involved in his personal life.

“Nonsense,” Dr. Payne dismissed with a wave of his hand. “I feel it is part of my duties as your mentor, Mr. Malik.”

“No, really, sir…er, Daddy,” he sputtered, quickly fixing his error. “Niall—I mean, Mr. Horan—does a more than adequate job of it.”

“I’m sure he does,” Dr. Payne granted. “On the other hand, sometimes ‘adequate’ isn’t enough, Mr. Malik. Adequate grades won’t get our students scholarship opportunities or admission to top schools. Adequate test scores do not convince donors to fill our school’s coffers. No,” he said adamantly, slapping his desk once for emphasis, “‘adequate’ will not do. We need to ensure that you are fully satiated on a daily basis.”

There wasn’t much Zayn could say to that. “Yes, Daddy,” he murmured back, hoping Dr. Payne would forget the whole conversation by the time next term rolled around.

Dr. Payne leaned forward in his desk chair. “And now, I believe it is quite clear that you have earned a reward,” he announced to his mentee’s complete and utter astonishment.

“A reward?”

“Yes, Mr. Malik. You have done very well on our little exercise in discipline.”

Zayn cleared his throat. “Does this, uh, mean I can refrain from calling you ‘Daddy’?” he asked, endeavouring to keep the unbridled enthusiasm he felt…well, bridled.

“No, you may continue using that particular title with me,” the other man stated as if that were a reward in itself. “Indeed, I would highly encourage you to do so. You may, however, also address me as ‘sir,’ as you would outside of my office.” Dr. Payne laced his fingers together. “Now, as for your reward, Mr. Malik, you are welcome to request anything you want…within reason, of course.”

Zayn could hardly believe his ears. The offer seemed too good to be true. He thought for a while, then asked, “Could I teach that collaborative class next semester? The course proposal was submitted well before the required deadline, but I haven’t heard anything back on it yet. I know how extremely busy you are, sir, so maybe you didn’t get a chance to—”

“The history of popular music one with Mr. Sheeran?” Dr. Payne interjected.

“Yes—that’s the one!” Zayn exclaimed, happily surprised that Dr. Payne even knew what he was talking about.

“No.”

Zayn frowned. “Would you be willing to—”

“No,” Dr. Payne repeated, jaw set. Zayn figured it wasn’t worth pursuing the matter further; more pleading would only serve to infuriate the man.

And so he thought for a while longer, stealing a glance in his principal’s direction from time to time. Dr. Payne waited patiently, fixedly studying him while tapping his fingertips together.
Suddenly, it dawned on him: there was a way Zayn could make everything better. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of it earlier. He cleared his throat, and Dr. Payne stared back at him expectantly.

“Sir, could you maybe consider giving Mr. Tomlinson his job back?”

Dr. Payne wore an unreadable expression on his ruggedly striking features. “Why?” he asked finally, voice reeking with displeasure.

“Because…because I think Mr. Tomlinson didn’t really mean what he said about me—if that was why he was suspended—and I-I think it was all just a misunderstanding.” Zayn didn’t add in how half the school more or less blamed him for Louis’ suspension. Even a number of students held a grudge, and it was becoming almost intolerable—especially when Zayn didn’t really have anyone to talk to about it.

He was feeling isolated, stigmatized, and his hope was that Louis’ return might be the panacea to all his troubles. (Well, he hoped it could be a start, anyhow.)

“Of course that wasn’t your fault, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne cajoled, clucking his tongue. “Mr. Tomlinson was the one who brought the ‘leave’ upon himself by slandering another Payne teacher. I won’t tolerate such complete disregard for the school and its teachers—its best and brightest teachers, may I add.”

Zayn could feel himself blush. “Thank you, sir—er, Daddy.”

“Thank you for your dedicated work, Mr. Malik.”

“A while ago you told me you valued my opinion,” Zayn began before he lost his nerve, “and my opinion is that you clearly showed your disapproval for Mr. Tomlinson’s actions by placing him on suspen—forced leave. And again, I assure you that I am in no way questioning your decision.” Zayn spoke this last sentence rapidly before the other man could object. “But couldn’t you find it in your heart to at least think about giving Mr. Tomlinson his job back?”

“This has nothing to do with ‘heart,’ Mr. Malik.”

“Well, then could you do it for the good of the school?” Zayn urged.

“I will deliberate on the matter, but let me stress that _if_ I make such a decision it will be because I have already reflected upon the matter myself,” Dr. Payne cautioned as he rose from his desk. He removed his suit jacket and hung it on the back of his chair almost lovingly. “That being said, I value your input, especially since you were indirectly involved in the incident which led to the disciplinary action.” His mocha eyes seemed to soften for a fleeting moment, but then the sensitive emotion quickly vanished. It reminded Zayn of watching hardening chocolate.

“I’ve forgiven Mr. Tomlinson,” Zayn shared, and he had…for the most part.

Dr. Payne soured suddenly. “I’m not convinced Mr. Tomlinson has earned the forgiveness you so willingly bestow upon him, but we shall see….” He glanced at the wall clock. “That is all for today, Mr. Malik. You can leave your reflection in my inbox there; I’ll review it later.”

Zayn did as he was told. As he turned to leave, he was surprised to see his principal standing directly in his path.

“This probably goes without saying,” Dr. Payne said in a low, hypnotic tone, “but just to ensure we’re both on the same page….” His principal took a step closer. Indeed, the man was so close,
Zayn could feel the heat radiating off his body as he leaned in to whisper in Zayn’s ear. “Everything we’ve discussed today, everything that occurs within these walls is strictly between you and me.”

“Yes, of course,” Zayn breathed.

It was then Zayn felt it—the dark, almost palpable energy hanging in the air between them. It burned, exhausting his oxygen supply, leaving him lightheaded…

Leaving him wanting more, whatever more was.

Dr. Payne straightened up, something unreadable in his eyes again. Then, without a word, he strolled past his mentee and towards the window. When he spoke again, his tone was brusque, business-like, detached:

“Thank you, Mr. Malik. That is all for today.”

Zayn recovered his senses and exited the principal’s office, shutting the door behind him. It was only then that he felt he could breathe again (that he felt like himself again). His sessions with Dr. Payne often left him emotionally and mentally drained, and this time was no different.

He was just about to leave the main office and head back upstairs to his classroom when—

“Zayn, before you go—”

Zayn nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard Jo’s voice. Normally, the principal’s secretary was long gone by the time his mentoring sessions with Dr. Payne ended. “Oh…uh…hi, Jo.”

“You’re probably wondering why I’m still here,” she began a little hesitantly, and yes, that was precisely what Zayn was wondering. (That along with why she was talking to him in the first place.) “I didn’t mean to scare you,” she apologised. “Sorry about that.”

“No, it’s fine. Guess I’m just extra jittery today.”

“Too much coffee?” the comely secretary inquired. Her tone and manner were pleasant, and Zayn let his guard down a little.

“Probably,” he admitted with a self-deprecating smile. “Harry told me I’d be mainlining black coffee before winter break, and he was bang on.” It was then he remembered himself, remembered he probably shouldn’t be dropping his former mentor’s name around in casual conversation. It made things…awkward.

Jo nodded. “I had to make up some time,” she explained in answer to Zayn’s unasked question. “Then I stayed a bit after that because…well, because I was hoping to catch you before you left today.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, I was hoping we could talk actually.”

“Sure…,” Zayn said carefully. “What was it you wanted to talk about?”

“Actually, I thought it might be better if we went somewhere else.” She gave a sidelong glance at Dr. Payne’s closed door, then shifted her gaze to the wall of monitors on the other side of the office. “I was going to invite you for a coffee, but maybe you’re all caffeine’d out?”

“No, sounds good. I can always get unleaded,” he quipped. He’d been astonished that she was
even speaking to him, so this turn of events was simply mind-boggling. It wasn’t long ago when his own invitation for coffee was shot down summarily. “When were you thinking?”

“Now? Today?” she suggested hopefully. “Unless you’re busy, of course. I can drive; I know you carpool with…with Niall,” she said softly.

“Actually, today would be great,” Zayn answered. “I’ll just text Niall, grab my bag, and then we can leave.”

“Awesome!” she replied with what appeared to be a genuine smile.

Not five minutes later, they left the school. As Zayn followed Jo to her car, he half-questioned his hasty decision to accept her invitation.

Then again, it probably wasn’t the worst decision he’d made that afternoon. Not by a longshot.

Chapter End Notes

So this seemed like a good spot to end the chapter. It’s a little short, I know, but it’s also a little early so yay.

Thanks for the brilliant feedback again. Your reactions to the Daddy exercise were a blast to read, but I’m especially loving the full gamut of emotions when it comes to Jo. Some of you are sympathetic, some think she’s being manipulated, and some want to tell her to piss right off. Amazing.

I’m writing the end of Money Moves (weep), but I’ll do my best to get the next chapter of TNT out to you guys on schedule. Fun fact: I always write endings first, so the very end is already written. :) Much love! ~Maree xx
“I don’t mean to sound like a jerk,” Zayn began, “but why did you, uh...?”

“—Invite you here?” Jo supplied helpfully.

“Um, well...yeah,” Zayn admitted, blushing. He didn’t want to come off as rude, but Jo’s request—to have coffee with him—was curious enough. He didn’t want to try to keep guessing at her intentions now that they were at a corner table at Espresso Expresso.

He looked around: some of the afterschool crowd still lingered, but this definitely wasn’t a peak time. Indeed, the coffee shop was quiet enough to where Zayn could hear the chatter of the baristas, the periodic grinding of coffee beans, and Frank Sinatra’s velvety baritone singing “Come Fly with Me.” It would almost be relaxing if he weren’t so anxious about why Joanna Hart asked him there.

“I might as well just come out and say it,” she said softly. Her eyes seemed to be following the sinuous grains of wood on the table, flickering everywhere except on Zayn. He had prepared for the worst, expecting some level of hostility or cattiness, but the secretary appeared apprehensive and vulnerable, and he wasn’t quite sure what to think. “It’s...about Niall.”

Zayn hadn’t really expected her to be so blunt. “What about Niall?” he asked guardedly, knowing this conversation could turn ugly at any moment. He scanned the coffee shop, double-checking there weren’t any students or teachers nearby.

“Well, I talked everything over with a...a friend the other day,” she said, and Zayn couldn’t help but wonder who this ‘friend’ was and if it was someone he knew. “And I was just thinking that, well, maybe there’s a chance that things aren’t exactly as they appear to be, you know? That there’s a chance I may have jumped to conclusions, I guess.”

“Jumped to conclusions about what?”

Jo looked embarrassed. “I maybe sort of walked in your guys’ apartment the other day—the door was open,” she quickly clarified. “I knocked first, but no one answered.”

Zayn could hardly believe his ears. He’d been coming up with all kinds of wild, paranoid explanations, and it had been Jo all along. “You were the mysterious door slammer the other day,” Zayn mused, and then suddenly, everything clicked. “You thought Niall and I were, uh, making out on the balcony, didn’t you?” he asked, and Jo didn’t answer, but the insecurity in her eyes revealed the truth. “Yeah well, I can clear that up in about ten seconds,” Zayn grunted. “Niall was examining my lip because I had, er, cut it when I fell the other day.”

And yes, half of that story was a lie, but the half that mattered wasn’t, and that was the important
thing.

At least that was what Zayn told himself.

Jo looked so relieved she might cry. “Your lip?” she repeated before her eyes lit up. “Of course! You were out on Thursday and when you came back you were all bruised up, and...oh my God, I’m such a dumbass,” she moaned. “Harry was sooo right.” She gasped suddenly, slapping a hand over her mouth as her eyes went wide. “Shit, I wasn’t supposed to tell you I spoke with him about this.”

Zayn was slightly surprised that Jo was close enough to Harry to confide such intimate details to him, but to be honest, he wasn’t really sure what he thought about the revelation. (He wasn’t really sure about much lately.) “So was that what you wanted to talk about?”

“Well...,” Jo started, looking uncomfortable, “I was hoping you could, you know, tell me how you feel about Niall. He’s assured me several times that there’s nothing going on between you, but before I try to work it out with him—if he even wants to work things out,” she added with a frown. “Well, basically what I’m trying to say is that I need to be sure you don’t feel something more towards him, Zayn.”

“We’re just friends, Jo.”

Jo didn’t seem convinced—or more accurately, she looked like she was trying to believe him but something was stopping her.

Zayn sighed, figured it was best to be completely candid. “Look, I don’t mean to sound cutting to Niall because he is my best friend, but”—Zayn hesitated a moment—“I don’t find Niall attractive in the slightest. He’s like a brother to me, always has been.”

“How can you not think he’s attractive?” Jo snipped. “Everyone thinks Niall is attractive, Zayn.”

“No, I just mean he’s not, like, my type.”

“Why?”

Zayn felt flustered, caught in a catch 22. “Well, he’s kind of boyish, isn’t he?”

“I like his boyishness,” she said a little indignantly. “I think it’s absolutely charming.”

“Maybe I’ll try this another way...,” Zayn said, measuring his words carefully as he stared down at his hands. “I look at Niall and see the boy who teased the crap out of me when we were in elementary school,” he shared. “I see the boy who shaved off one of my eyebrows for a laugh; the boy who put a lizard in my bed after I put a frog in his; the boy who beat up the first and last kid who tried to bully me; the boy who couldn’t solve the most basic of mathematical equations to save his life—unless they had something to do with cooking.” Zayn took a deep breath and continued, “I look at Niall now, and I see the boy who nags me worse than my mother ever did and the person I go to when I need a reality check. That’s how I see him, Jo, and if that’s inappropriate in any way, then I’m sorry.”

After he finished his speech, he braved a glance in Jo’s direction, and there was understanding in the secretary’s eyes.

“He sounds like your brother.”

“Already told you that,” Zayn chuckled ironically.
“Yeah, I think I get it now,” Jo acknowledged, shame-faced. “You didn’t owe me an explanation after the shitty way I acted and all, but I really appreciate that you gave me one anyway.” She smiled a smile softened with regret. “You’re…a really good person, Zayn. A lot better than people give you credit for. I’m sorry for being such a jerk.”

“No problem. I’m just glad everything’s cleared up.”

“Yeah, me too,” she agreed, picking up her neglected drink. “Joe” was scribbled on the cup, making it a perfect match for the “Zane” scrawled on his. “Crap, I just hope Niall can forgive me for being such a prize-winning idiot.” Jo shook her head, then gazed across the table at Zayn with humility in her blue eyes. “I can’t believe I listened to those shitty rumours about you. I’m sorry, Zayn; I really am.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Zayn returned, managing a small smile. It was nice to have someone on his side for once even though the reminder that the staff gossiped about him didn’t exactly make him feel warm and fuzzy inside.

They grew quiet, the burning topic of conversation having run its course. Zayn sipped his mocha, waiting for Jo to talk about the weather, or school, or plans for winter break. Maybe, she’d ask if he was ready to leave.

“Tell me,” she stated, peering at him as if this were the first time they had met, “what do you look for in a man?”

Zayn almost spit out his drink. “Excuse me?”

“Come on,” she teased, “you’re way too gorgeous to be single, Zayn.”

Zayn felt like there should have been a coda added to the end of that statement. ‘You’re way too gorgeous to be single and living with my boyfriend’ was probably closer to what she really meant.

He cleared his throat. “I’m, uh, not looking to be in a relationship right now.”

“Theoretically then,” she said, changing gears but looking at him just as intently as she had been before. “What do you look for in a guy—you do like guys, right?”

“Yes….”

“Well then?”

Zayn thought for a beat. “Invisibility,” he answered, and Jo snorted.

“So what about Ed Sheeran?” she prodded. “I know you guys hung around a lot first quarter. Any spark there or was it just rumours?”

“Yeah,” Zayn agreed. “I mean, he’s nice, but...”

Zayn felt a gentle tug at his heartstrings. He was so confused about his feelings for the music teacher. Ed had sweet, kind eyes, and Zayn liked him, he did. But Zayn was beginning to wonder if he’d wanted Ed more than just friends and co-workers.

Then again, maybe Zayn just liked the idea of someone like Ed—someone safe, someone sweet, someone he could take home to his parents. Ed reminded him of Niall in many ways—boyish, funny, and charming—but Zayn wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. It was comfortable. It was safe. In short, he needed more time with Ed, one-on-one, to decipher his feelings and determine whether they could be something more to each other than just friends and co-workers.
It was funny because Zayn had been so certain that Ed was what he wanted at first, but now he
wasn’t so sure. Everything seemed to get more mixed-up with every passing day, too. All Zayn
knew was that he felt…unfulfilled somehow. Still, he didn’t think it was wise to jump right into a
relationship right now—especially an off-limits relationship with another teacher.

“So, do you like him or not?” she pressed.

Zayn bit his lip. He wanted to be friends with Jo, but he was also wary of her position as principal’s
secretary and her reputation as a bit of a gossip. “Um, I like him as a friend.”

Jo rolled her eyes dramatically. “Beyond that, silly.”

Zayn studied his companion; she looked like she meant well. On the other hand, he’d never been the
best judge of character. He thought about Ed, about how whatever information he told her might get
back to him. If Zayn emphatically denied liking Ed, then that might damage any future chances he
had with the music teacher. (And who knew what could happen a year from now?)

“Beyond that,” Zayn told her, “I honestly don’t know.”

Jo hummed at his vague response. “Alright, let’s try this a different way: describe your perfect man.”

“Seriously?”

She buttoned the top button of her yellow cardigan, then folded her arms across her chest and leaned
back. “Yes. Shoot.”

“But I don’t know what my ‘perfect man’ would be like,” Zayn whinged. “Well, besides someone
my parents liked, of course…”

Jo twisted her face. “That was a lousy answer, Zayn. No wonder you’ve struck out so much.”

“Thanks.”

Jo didn’t let Zayn’s lack of enthusiasm deter her one bit though. “Try to think of the qualities you’re
attracted to,” she suggested.

“I haven’t got a clue, Jo.”

“Give it a go; you might surprise yourself,” she encouraged although Zayn highly doubted that.

“Alright,” he said reluctantly. “I guess I’d prefer someone who’s intelligent, that you could, like,
have interesting and in-depth conversations with.”

“Booorrring.”

“Shut up,” Zayn laughed. “Intelligence is important.”

“Yeah, yeah. And physically?”

“Physical attraction is superficial, don’t you think?”

Jo shot up in her chair. “Please don’t tell me you’re one of those people,” she sighed. “Chemistry is
everything, Zayn. If you don’t feel attracted to the other person, then what’s the point?”

“Isn’t that a little primitive?”
Jo tilted her head and pursed her lips. “Okay, let’s try this a different way. When you say you’re gay, do you mean you want to be in a romantic relationship with a guy, want to bang a guy, or both?”

Zayn could feel his cheeks heat up; he knew he must be beet red. “Jo.”

“What? Just trying to narrow down your preferences, so I hook you up with a good match.”

“You and Niall were made for each other,” Zayn murmured before taking a long swig of his lukewarm mocha, half to hide his embarrassment and half to keep his hands occupied. “Fine,” he relented when Jo just kept staring at him. “I guess I’d be interested in both…of the things you said. The romance…and the other thing.” Zayn coughed. “Eventually, I mean.”

Jo blinked. “Wow, you really are a virgin, aren’t you?” she asked in awe. “Have you even thought about doing the down-and-dirty before?”

“Can we talk about something else?” Zayn begged. He couldn’t believe the conversation had ended up in the gutter so quickly. He was absolutely dying inside because the fact was he had fantasised about that before—or dreamt about it anyway. He had dreamt about having sex in an inappropriate setting in an inappropriate position with a VERY inappropriate person.

(A VERY VERY inappropriate person.)

“Just a few more questions,” Jo stated like she was doing a survey. “Okay, what about age?”

“I guess I’d prefer to date someone who’s, like, mature.”

“You’re 22, right?” she inquired and Zayn nodded. Jo scrutinised him closely. “You’ve a good head on your shoulders and a set career path, and you need someone else with similar qualities and values, et cetera et cetera. Correct?”

“Yes,” Zayn replied, impressed. “You’ve basically nailed it, yeah.”

“Fantastic. So you’re looking for a sexy, intelligent older man then.”

“Ugh,” Zayn grimaced, “you make it sound so…ugh.”

She giggled at that. “Good news! I’ve figured out your perfect match.”

“Who?” Zayn asked doubtfully.

“Harry.”

Zayn paled. “Oh gosh, don’t even joke about that!” he moaned. Zayn hated to say it, but a small part of him did think the English Teacher was a good catch—from a purely theoretical standpoint. Zayn wasn’t head-over-heels for Harry or anything though. He just highly respected him and thought he wasn’t, well, unattractive. Zayn also knew Harry was engaged, and so he would never act on those feelings, however small they were.

Besides, there was the small fact that Harry hated his guts.

“Don’t worry, I know he’s off the market,” she remarked before he could start listing his objections. “I’m just trying to get a rough idea of the type of guy you’re into, hon.”

“I told you,” Zayn reiterated, “the invisible, non-existent kind.”
“Actually, you told me you like the Harry Styles-kind,” she corrected smarmily.

“Well, considering Harry loathes me, I’m not sure if that’s a good reference for you.”

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “Harry doesn’t hate you.”

“Yes, he does.”

“I know for a fact he doesn’t hate you, Zayn, because he told me so himself,” she revealed with a dramatic flair that would have made Louis Tomlinson envious. “Since I basically let the cat out of the bag earlier, I might as well admit I asked him for advice about Niall…and well, you.” She smiled sadly, tracing the lid of her cup with a careless finger. “Harry’s just a great listener, isn’t he? So I found myself pouring my heart out to him, and he told me that although appearances looked one way, I was a fool if I didn’t talk to you and get your side of the story. He says you’re not as—well, you know—as some people claim you are,” she finished uncomfortably.

It was a relief to know Harry didn’t totally despise him. In truth, it had taken a while for Zayn to let go of his own resentment towards the English teacher after the “spying” incident, but now he understood a lot more than he had in the past. Above all, Zayn now understood Dr. Payne’s silver tongue and his powers of persuasion.

Harry probably thought he was doing the right thing by keeping a watchful eye on Zayn. If the situations were reversed, Zayn wasn’t convinced that he wouldn’t have done the same exact thing.

All of a sudden, Jo’s phone lit up and began drilling against the café table like a sledgehammer. It propelled itself almost to the edge before she caught it and checked the screen.

“Oh my god!” she shrieked. “It’s Niall!”

“Well, answer it then,” Zayn prompted lightly, relieved it wasn’t an actual emergency. Jo blinked at him as if the thought hadn’t occurred to her before picking up the call.

“Hello?” she asked tentatively. Seconds later, she was apologising profusely to Niall, explaining she’d just had coffee and a “lesson in humility” from his “roommate and best friend.”

Zayn got out his own phone and answered a couple of questions from students on the latest assignment. Although he forced himself to tune out Jo’s conversation, he could tell by the tone and the endless cooing that all misunderstandings were forgiven and soon-to-be forgotten between the two lovebirds.

Maybe things were finally beginning to turn around.

Zayn watched Jo as she blushed, eyes lighting up at something Niall had said. He couldn’t help but feel a tinge of jealousy—not because he liked Niall or Jo in that way—but because a small part of him wished he had what they had. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t date Ed since both of them were teachers. Niall dating Jo still seemed innately unfair, but he wasn’t going to be the one to rain on his best friend’s parade. On the contrary, he wished both of them (and especially Niall) the best.

Zayn’s thoughts meandered back to the music teacher. Zayn had been grossly unfair to Ed if he were honest with himself. Niall had been right about that (and several other things). In fact, Zayn’s treatment of Ed had done real damage to two friendships.

And now, he was going to make things right.

Before he could lose his nerve, Zayn texted a simple greeting to the music teacher. To his surprise,
Ed texted back almost immediately:

*Ed:* Zayn!!! You alright :D

*Me:* Yes, just wanted to say sorry

*Ed:* For what???

*Me:* Being a crappy friend

*Ed:* Just your imagination

*Me:* No, it’s not. Lmk if there’s a way I can make it up to you.

*Ed:* You texting me just made up for everything :) 

*Me:* No, I’m serious. It would make me feel better.

*Ed:* I’ll keep that in mind :) Cheers mate

Zayn looked up from his screen, and the first thing he noticed was the happiness in Jo’s eyes as she chatted away with Niall. She paused briefly to glance across the table at Zayn, then beamed him her most heartfelt, grateful smile.

And in that moment, Zayn felt certain everything was going to work out just fine.

***

*Ed:* Remember how you said you owed me one…

*Me:* Yes! What do you need?

*Ed:* I’m doing this application for a music grant and was hoping you could proofread it and give me some suggestions

*Me:* Count me in :) 

*Ed:* Brilliant!!! Tomorrow after school?

*Me:* My classroom or yours?

*Ed:* Yours. Mine’s a bit of a mess ha. You need a ride after?

*Me:* Don’t think so. Niall has the bistro tomorrow so that should give us plenty of time. x

***
(Liam’s POV)

Forty-five minutes. It was enough to do his head in.

What the devil could they be doing in there for so bloody long?

Liam paced around his office, eyes darting back to the live feed on his laptop every thirty seconds even though there wasn’t a damned thing to see but a closed classroom door. He cursed the Board for not permitting him to install cameras in the classrooms. (Well, in one particular classroom at least.) He cursed his leniency towards Zayn, cursed himself for hiring Sheeran in the first place. Truth be told, Liam never much liked the music teacher.

As he always said, if it wasn’t one thing, it was Ed Sheeran.

Then again, Liam hadn’t expected Zayn to defy one of his directives in quite so flagrant a manner either. Liam cringed again, thinking of the warm way in which Zayn had greeted the ginger before letting him into his classroom and shutting the door behind them.

It was becoming more and more apparent that Zayn was seeing Sheeran again, and now, Liam would have to do something about it.

It was a shame because things had been progressing so nicely. After a couple of hiccups—namely, his uncharacteristic loss of self-control and Miss Hart’s unfounded suspicions regarding Zayn and Horan—Liam had managed to get things back on course. He was hopeful that with a little ‘gentle’ persuading, Zayn would eventually come around to his way of thinking.

Liam was used to people following his orders with few exceptions—especially new, probationary teachers. The principal had informed Zayn in no uncertain terms that romantic alliances between faculty members at Payne was strictly prohibited. He had even gone so far as to mention Sheeran by name. But today, Zayn had blatantly disregarded those orders (and in Liam’s own bloody school, to boot).

And needless to say, Liam wasn’t pleased.

Evidently, it was time Liam reminded Zayn who was boss. It was time Liam made his intentions crystal clear. It was time for the kid gloves to come off. It was time to introduce more…overt tactics.

Liam had waited long enough; the time for caution had passed.

Well…almost.

Unfortunately, final exams and winter break were fast approaching, and it would be unwise to push the young teacher too far before then. Liam figured it was best to let Zayn recharge among family and friends, then introduce the next phase at the very first mentoring session after school resumed in January.

Liam could stick it out a few weeks longer…probably.

He glanced at the camera feed again and made a quick calculation: Sheeran had been in the history teacher’s classroom for precisely 55 minutes and counting now. Whether he wanted to or not, Liam would have to address the Sheeran matter with Zayn again (and as soon as bloody possible).
There was no fucking way he could let that slide until after break.

In the meantime, Liam had a school to run, and it was time to get back to work. After taking a brief moment to ‘reset,’ he glanced down at the yellow post-it on his desk and carefully dialled the number he had had scribbled on it earlier. While he waited, he let out his remaining aggression on the paper, crushing it into a ball with one hand before pitching it into the closest bin.

“Hullo?”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Tomlinson,” Liam greeted his former drama teacher casually. He relaxed back into his chair, but his eyes remained transfixed on the unchanged image on his laptop screen. “I would like to set up an appointment to meet with you in my office at your earliest convenience….”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Happy Halloween!

So, I’ve had to work several extra shifts at work, and I’m not sure when I’ll be able to get the final chapter of Money Moves out if you’re waiting on that. (I should have a better idea in a couple of days, and I’ll post an update on tumblr.) I decided to finish this chapter instead since it was almost done and I’m so brain dead this week. Hopefully, you enjoyed the early update.

By the way, next chapter begins our descent into hell. Buckle your seatbelts, lovelies. ;)
xx
“No fecking way,” Niall stated adamantly.

“You’re being unreasonable,” Jo griped back.

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

Zayn wished he were wearing earbuds to cancel out some of the noise coming from the direction of the sofa. The couple had been ‘discussing’ dinner arrangements for some time now while Zayn, sitting at the kitchen table, attempted to finish grading the short essay portion of the final his world history students had taken earlier that day.

“Zayn,” Jo whinged, “tell Niall he’s being a stubborn ass.”

“Niall, you’re being a stubborn mule,” Zayn communicated obediently without looking up from the paper he was grading. He didn’t really want to get involved in the lovers’ spat, but apparently, they weren’t leaving him much choice.


Niall laughed merrily at his girlfriend’s distress. “Oh, don’t try to get Mister-Goody-Two-Shoes to swear,” he informed her. “He’s much too proper for that.”

Zayn set his pen down and peered straight at Niall across the room. “Niall,” he declared loudly, “you’re being a stubborn ass.” He couldn’t help feeling a tiny bit satisfied as his roommate’s jaw dropped and Jo burst into vindicated laughter.

“Stall the ball!” Niall exclaimed with mock horror. “Did Zed just utter a rude word? Is the sky falling? Is the end of the world nigh?”

Zayn felt his cheeks blush at Niall’s ribbing. “I was using ‘ass’ in the historical context, Ni.”

“Jaysus, he’s at it again!” Niall whistled. “Just look at him effin’ and blindin’ over there! Good thing his mum and dad aren’t around; it’d break their poor hearts,” he teased. Zayn rolled his eyes as Niall cackled at his expense. “Just taking the piss, Zed.”

“Maybe he’s grown a dark side,” Jo suggested, throwing a wink towards the kitchen table. “New year, new Zayn, right?”

“It’s still December but that’s never gonna happen,” Niall told his girlfriend. “Oi, Zed. She’s the
one corrupting you, isn’t she? Perhaps I should think twice before dating older—”

“Perhaps,” Jo cut him off, a note of warning in her voice, “you should think twice before you finish that statement, Niall dear.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Niall agreed, smiling angelically at the pretty brunette, only a few years his senior.

“Perhaps you two should get a room,” Zayn mumbled to himself, rubbing his forehead and trying to remember where the heck he left off in his grading.

“I heard that, Zed!”

“No, don’t do that, Zayn,” Jo insisted, springing up from the couch. “We were just leaving anyway.” She put her hands on her hips and glared meaningfully down at her boyfriend.

Niall sunk deeper into the couch like a toddler. “No, we weren’t.”

“Yes, we were.”

“No, we weren’t.”

“Yes, honey, we were,” Jo argued, kicking his foot with the toe of her shoe. “I already made reservations and everything.”

“Cancel them,” Niall grumped, not budging an inch.

She rolled her eyes. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Yes—”

“Ni,” Zayn interrupted, before he went insane, “why don’t you just go wherever it is she wants to go? It can’t be that bad, can it?”

Niall snorted. “She made dinner plans with Louis Tomlinson, Zed. What could possibly be worse than going out to eat with that obnoxious twat?”

“Well, I’m sorry not sorry.”

At least Zayn now knew what the point of contention was between the two lovebirds. He should have expected it had something to do with Louis because the naturally easy-going Niall only got like this when the drama teacher was brought up.

Jo shook her head. “Can’t you see you’re acting just like him?” she commiserated. “Louis is a great guy, and his fiancée, Eleanor, is super sweet. Why don’t you give them a chance?”

“Well…because he called my best mate a lying, power-hungry man-slag in front of the whole
bleedin’ town?” Niall offered, and Zayn looked down at his keyboard, embarrassed by Niall’s bluntness. “We’re talking about Zayn, mind you.” He thumbed back at his friend for emphasis. “Zayn.”

Jo frowned. “Louis didn’t straight-out call Zayn those awful things. He just…hinted at them,” she finished awkwardly, not looking at either of the two men. “Besides, I’m sure he didn’t mean it like how it came out.”

Niall wasn’t impressed. “He tell you that?”

“Well, no,” she admitted, “not exactly.” She shot an apologetic glance in Zayn’s direction. “You have to understand that Louis was upset about what happened between Harry and Zayn,” she explained. “You know, the whole mentor thing.”

Niall narrowed his eyes. “So I’m supposed to like Louis more because his best mate talks shit about Zed? That it?”

“No, Harry hasn’t told him anything. As a matter of fact,” Jo confided, “Harry hasn’t said a word to anyone, but, you know, people jump to conclusions….”

Yeah, Zayn definitely knew that. He’d been on the butt-end of said conclusions several times now.

Jo took a deep breath. “I’m sure he’s sorry. You have to understand that he’s like a mama bear with Harry: Louis knows how important Harry’s position and reputation is to him, and he doesn’t want anything or anyone to tarnish that.”

Niall still didn’t say anything, so Zayn decided it was about time he did something to resolve the hostility that had clearly gotten out of hand.

“I understand,” Zayn said quietly, and they both looked over at him in surprise. “You’re the same way with me, Ni. You’d attack anyone you thought was a threat to me without a second thought.”

“Thank you, Zayn,” Jo said appreciatively, radiating relief. “The last time I spoke with him, Louis told me he’s sorry the whole thing happened.”

“Bet he is,” Niall snorted. “I’m sure he’s proper sorry he almost got sacked.”

“Niall,” Jo said, exasperated. “He’s trying, okay? Sure, he made a few mistakes, but he’s sorry. Look, even Zayn’s forgiven him, and maybe if you and Louis would stop taking sides, coming to the ‘rescue’ of your best friends like you’re the damn Jets and the Dolphins from West Side Story, we all could get along a helluva lot better.”

“It was the Sharks, not the Dolphins,” Zayn corrected mechanically, “but otherwise, I think that’s a solid point. Ni, what do you think?”

Niall didn’t answer for a while, just sat stock-still, a sullen expression frozen on his face. Finally, he heaved himself up. “Fine,” he grumped, “I’ll go tonight if that’s what you all want. But let’s leave before I change my bleedin’ mind.”

***
Zayn went to bed directly after he finished grading his last final, so he didn’t hear anything about the dinner date until the next morning. Even then, he got few details about the event from an unusually quiet Niall. Well, except for one:

“He’s coming back,” Niall announced flatly as Zayn joined him at the kitchen table. He sighed, then set his usual mug of steaming breakfast tea down as if it were too heavy for him to hold any longer.

“Who?” Zayn asked, brain still foggy from all the essays he’d read through last night. Yawning, he grabbed a slice of buttered toast from the stack. It was the last day of school before winter break, and it was almost as if his brain decided to go on holiday early.

Niall tilted his head. “Who d’ya think?”

“Oh. Louis.”

“Can’t reckon what possessed Dr. Payne to give that chancer his job back,” Niall said, and Zayn tried not to look too incredibly guilty as he reached for the teapot. “He’s a bad one, that Tomlinson. Payne must’ve lost the plot or something.” Niall sat there shaking his head in wonderment. “Oi, Payne’s your mentor, Zed. Any thoughts as to why he changed his mind all of a sudden?”

“Ch-changed his mind?” Zayn sputtered. Suddenly, his left hand felt as if it were on fire, and Zayn realised he was pouring the scalding liquid directly onto his hand. He quickly set the teapot down. Then shakily, he examined the fleshy part between his thumb and forefinger to find it had turned an angry red.

Niall quickly took charge, attending to the burn—something he was more than used to in his chosen profession—while Zayn kept mumbling out apologies. Niall waved them all off, telling Zayn to finish getting ready while he cleaned up the mess.

Zayn was grateful when they were finally on the road and both their apartment building and breakfast were behind them.

Or so he thought.

“Zed,” Niall began hesitantly, driving carefully along the snowy roads, “that look on your face just before you spilt the tea...”

“I don’t know any ‘tea’ to spill,” Zayn quipped, congratulating himself on dodging the topic. He turned the heat up a couple of notches—not because he was necessarily cold but because it made it harder to converse.

Niall laughed. “Nice one. And yeah, Tomlinson’s probably the one with all the tea.”

...And your girlfriend, Zayn thought because well, it was the truth. Jo was a notorious gossip—not that she had malicious intentions or anything, but the fact remained that she liked to talk. A lot.

Niall turned the heat down one click. “Earlier, I was just asking if Dr. Payne had hinted anything about Tomlinson’s return.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought you were asking.” Zayn felt the knot in his stomach tighten.

“Well, did he?”

“Umm...” Zayn pretended to think. There was no way he could tell his friend what really happened, that he had asked Dr. Payne to reconsider giving Louis his job back as a personal favour,
to him. Niall wouldn’t understand why he did it. (Zayn barely understood why he did it himself.)

“Zed, quit chewing on your nails.”

Zayn dropped his hands into his lap. “Sorry.”

“Is there something bothering you?” Niall asked, rightfully miffed. “You’ve been acting strange all morning.” But before Zayn could reply, Niall answered his own question. “Ah, I bet you’re stressed because it’s the last day of the semester, eh?”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right,” Zayn agreed quickly. “Oh, and Dr. Payne—he didn’t bring Louis up,” Zayn said, and it wasn’t exactly a lie. After all, Dr. Payne hadn’t brought the topic up. Zayn had.

Instinctively, Zayn knew Niall would have a fit if he knew the truth. And after all the bad blood between those two, Zayn honestly couldn’t blame him.

***

The last day of school began as expected—slow. There were no students since it was a teacher work day, and the hallowed halls of Payne Academy were quiet, almost sombre. Zayn had finished grading the last set of exams the previous night, so it didn’t take him long to enter everything into his electronic record book and submit final grades.

Another reason the morning dragged along was Dr. Payne. In a Grinch-like move, the principal had discouraged all forms of celebration (because according to him, the preliminary winter testing data indicated they had very little to rejoice about). Moreover, without the head of the social committee—the absent, but still somehow ever-present Louis Tomlinson—no one had stepped up to take on the responsibility of planning a staff holiday party.

Candidly, Zayn didn’t mind the lack of festivities. He’d never been good at social events anyway, and he still didn’t have many friends in the school outside of Niall, Ed, and maybe Jo. Besides, it meant he could do some advance planning for next semester, and he embraced the opportunity to have some blissfully uninterrupted work time.

A little after noon, Niall sent a text to Zayn and Ed, suggesting they eat lunch in his room. Zayn quickly wrapped up what he was working on, then trotted down the stairs to the culinary classroom.

It was past one by the time he got back upstairs. To his surprise, he found a neatly-wrapped present sitting on his desk when he entered his room. He explored every inch of his desk but couldn’t find a card or tag indicating who the mysterious package was from. Zayn undid the sapphire-coloured ribbon, removed the the reindeer-themed wrapping paper, and lifted the lid off the gift box. Inside, lay a shiny silver plaque engraved with a familiar quote:

“Love all,

Trust a few.

Do wrong to none.”
As Zayn lifted the plaque from its bed of tissue paper, a piece of stationery fluttered out. He carefully set the plaque on his desk, then read the enclosed note.

Zayn,

I know you fancied this quotation when you saw it in my classroom, and I hope you will be able to find a place for it in yours. I sincerely apologise for not being the mentor you needed, but please never hesitate to ask if you ever need guidance or advice. I hope one day that I will, once again, be included in the chosen ‘few’ you trust.

Congratulations on a great first semester. Be proud of all you and your students have accomplished.

Happy holidays,

-H.

Zayn set the plaque on its stand, then slid it to a prominent place on his desk where it could be seen both from where he was sitting and from the door. He gazed at it for a long time, recalling what Jo had shared with him at Espresso Expresso about how Harry no longer hated him (if the English teacher ever in fact hated him). Absently, he wondered if Harry had discovered Zayn had gone to bat for his best friend, if that could be the reason Harry had gotten him such a beautiful gift. But then, Zayn figured that was highly unlikely. Dr. Payne would rather swim with a school of piranhas than give the appearance he was weak or easily influenced.

It occurred to him that he should probably thank Harry for his gift. Zayn had left a card in Harry’s mailbox that morning—an impersonal, generic greeting card similar to the one he left in his department chair Mr. Franklin’s box—but it paled in comparison to the personalised, thoughtful present from his former mentor. Unfortunately, when Zayn arrived next door, Harry’s door was locked, his classroom lights were off, and the English teacher was nowhere to be seen.

Now, he’d have to wait two weeks to thank Harry for his unexpected gift.

Zayn went back to his classroom. He scanned the room for a project to occupy his mind until it was time to leave and decided to reorganise his bookshelf. He set to work and was about halfway through when he decided his files could use some reorganisation as well. Switching gears, he emptied his file cabinet when his phone buzzed on his desk.

Niall: Just found out teachers are only contracted until 1 today ha!

Me: Who told you?

Niall: Jo. Ed forgot too
Me: No wonder the hallways are deserted, lol.

Niall: Yeah, since its 2 I thought I’d pick up those things we needed for the trip back home tomorrow. You ready to leave or you want me to pick you up later?

Me: Later. I literally just dumped all my file cabinets out.

Niall: Need help?

Me: No, I’m good. Thanks, Ni.

Niall: I’ll text you when I’m done :)

It didn’t take Zayn as long to complete the project as he thought it would. Soon, everything had found a place, and with time to spare. That’s when he remembered he still had one more card to drop off for a person who didn’t have a mailbox, and he couldn’t really procrastinate any longer. He grabbed the red envelope with the lengthy message inside and made the familiar trek down to the office.

***

(Liam’s POV)

Liam glanced at the clock: fifteen hundred hours. Of course, one would never know it was in the middle of the afternoon on a work day with how pathetically uninhabited the school building was. Leave it to the Board to grant the teachers something wholly unnecessary like a ‘Leave Early’ day right before a bloody holiday. Even Miss Hart had joined the mass exodus although he was fairly sure she was contracted to work her usual hours. He scribbled a reminder to himself to check up on that at his first opportunity. Liam ran a tight ship, and the minute one allowed a single thing to slide, the next thing one knew the whole bloody ship was sinking.

With a drawn-out sigh, Liam looked up from the agendum he was tweaking. He decided he might as well abandon work for the day. After all, everyone else had. Besides, he had the luxury of coming in any time he wanted over the break.

Yet another perk of being the man in charge.

Suddenly, Liam heard a knocking at the main office door. Intrigued, he wandered into the outer office to discover who was still inside the building.

He smiled to himself when he saw it was Zayn.

It was satisfying to know that his mentee had such a good work ethic. Even Harry had left early in order to catch a flight back home or some such rubbish. Liam didn’t pay much attention to the personal lives of his teachers, and he paid even less attention to his own. Personal lives just interfered with professional responsibilities.

Unless, that is, one strategically combined both. Then, allowances could be made.
Liam unlocked the door. “Come right in, Mr. Malik.” He led the way into his office, then closed the door behind them out of habit. “What did you wish to see me about?”

“I just wanted to…well, thank you for all your time and help this semester,” Zayn stated softly, running a nervous hand through his black hair. He quickly snatched his hand back, wincing a little as he examined it.

“Something the matter with your hand, Mr. Malik?”

“Burnt it this morning,” Zayn explained sheepishly, “with tea of all things.”

“You want watching, Mr. Malik.”

“Yes, probably,” Zayn admitted, and Liam had to press his lips together in order not to smile. Then, like a young colt who looked as though he might spook at any moment, Zayn lifted his other hand which was clutching a red envelope. “Again, thank you, sir,” he stated, handing Liam the envelope.

“Thank you, Mr. Malik,” Liam simpered as he placed it on his desk. “But believe me, the pleasure has been all mine.” Zayn smiled shyly back at him, and Liam had to hide his amusement. It was so easy to toy with the young teacher. It almost made him regret that their unofficial cat-and-mouse game would soon be coming to an end.

“Happy holidays, sir,” Zayn wished him before making a move to leave.

“Before you go—”

“Yes?” The young teacher gazed inquisitively back at him with those doe-like eyes of his.

“I have one more pearl of wisdom to offer you, Mr. Malik,” Liam disclosed. “There is also a certain matter I’d like to discuss with you. Please have a seat.”

“Yes, Dr. Payne,” he submitted, taking his usual chair.

Liam waited until he was settled. “He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he had failed,” he quoted. “William James, philosopher.” Zayn seemed to mull the words over in his head, chewing on his lower lip. “Tell me your interpretation of the quotation, Mr. Malik,” he urged, joining his mentee at the hexagon table.

“I-I think it means you should be ready and willing to make the most of a special situation when it occurs because if you don’t, it’s like you’ve lost something?”

“Very good,” Liam praised him. “As usual, you are correct—one should always be ‘ready and willing.’ And now for the matter I wanted to address with you.” Liam took a deep breath in, well aware he was about to tread on choppy waters. “Mr. Malik, I do not feel it is appropriate for you to invite certain members of the faculty into your classroom—especially when they have no cause to enter your classroom in the first place.”

“What are you referring to, sir?” Zayn asked, biting on his lip in a way that made Liam want to go easier on him…or harder, perhaps.

_Much_ harder.

“Dr. Payne?”

Liam composed himself; it was essential he stay focused, committed. “I am referring, Mr. Malik, to
the other day when Mr. Sheeran was in your classroom for over an hour...with the door closed...after school hours. Unless, of course, there are numerous other occasions I am unfamiliar with?" Liam added sarcastically.

“But...but Mr. Horan has been in my classroom countless times with the door closed,” Zayn appealed almost desperately. “Mr. Styles, as well. I don’t see what the difference is—”

“The difference is that Mr. Sheeran’s intentions are not quite so innocent as those of Mr. Horan or Mr. Styles. Moreover, I believe we have discussed this matter at length on a previous occasion. Am I wrong, Mr. Malik?” Reluctantly, the history teacher shook his head. “Now, Mr. Malik, what was my directive in regards to inter-faculty relationships?”

“They shouldn’t exist,” he returned obediently.

“That is correct,” Liam approved. “And what were my specific instructions regarding your interactions with Ed Sheeran, in particular?”

“That I should conduct myself in an appropriate, professional manner,” Zayn mumbled.

“Since it is clear that you’ve demonstrated a blatant disregard for these simple requests, I believe that a disciplinary action is required to prevent similar reoccurrences.”

“But sir—”

“Please stand, Mr. Malik,” Liam directed, cutting all protestations short, “over there, by the bookcase.” Zayn did so, a question in his eyes—a question Liam wasn’t about to answer, not yet. Liam followed him, clicking off the lamp on his desk as he skulked to within inches of where the young teacher stood, the very picture of ‘fear and trembling.’

Slowly, Liam lifted his hand to the boy’s beautiful face and traced over Zayn’s plump bottom lip with an index finger. Zayn flinched, and Liam could tell he was about to draw back. “Don’t move,” Liam growled harshly. Zayn obeyed like the perfect submissive Liam always imagined him to be. The boy’s doe eyes widened as his chest rose and fell rapidly.

It was then Liam knew he was well and truly fucked.

It was also then that he somewhat remembered himself. Liam hadn’t meant to go this far with the punishment, had only meant to communicate his displeasure about the Sheeran matter to his mentee, to ensure nothing like that happened again. But like a boulder tumbling down a hill, gravity and other forces beyond his control were taking over.

He would give the young teacher one last chance, but after that, whatever happened was no longer on his conscience.

“Mr. Malik, you may walk out of here if you believe you don’t deserve the punishment you are about to receive,” Liam said hoarsely, “that is, if you honestly believe you did not understand my direct orders regarding Mr. Sheeran.” Liam waited after that, finger pressed to the dimple below Zayn’s lower lip, but the boy didn’t budge (even though he probably should have).

Zayn’s lips parted ever-so-slightly then, and Liam took full advantage, dipping his finger between them. The young teacher’s tongue brushed clumsily over the invading foreign object, coating it with warm, wet saliva.

“Suck,” Liam ordered, his voice coming out in a strained whisper. He had waited so long for this moment. So very, very long.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Zayn’s POV)

“Suck,” Dr. Payne repeated more urgently, and as if in a trance, Zayn followed his principal’s bidding. It was as if his body craved this, as if his entire existence depended on it.

Inexplicably, the more Zayn sucked, the more he began to feel something down there. He longed to touch himself even though he knew it was wrong, even though he knew he shouldn’t.

“Always suspected you had an oral fixation,” Dr. Payne murmured—approving, smug. “You’re constantly biting your lip, your fingernails. Bet you smoke, too…on occasion,” he drawled, slowly guiding his long digit in and out of Zayn’s mouth in a way that felt obscene. Zayn’s eyelashes fluttered as Dr. Payne gazed down at him with hooded eyes, the man’s free hand caressing his hollowed cheek. “Bet you smoke when no one else is looking. Bet you do a lot of things when no one else is looking—am I right, Mr. Malik?”

It was then Zayn awoke from the spell he’d been under. He pressed his hands flat against his principal’s chest and pushed. Dr. Payne must have gotten the message because his finger immediately slipped from Zayn’s mouth, and he took a step back.

Then the office was silent, and that silence was deafening.

Zayn stared into dark brown orbs, but they were devoid of sympathy. They were devoid of all emotions except lust and a single-minded purpose. “Sir, please…,” he whimpered. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Before he knew what was happening, Dr. Payne had carouselled him around, backing him up against the wall. “Look in my eyes and tell me you didn’t directly go against my orders,” the man growled.

And well, Zayn couldn’t do that.

“My dear boy,” Dr. Payne sighed, head falling against Zayn’s neck, “why do you insist on disobeying me when we both know Daddy knows best?” Dr. Payne pressed against him then, his principal’s larger, more muscular frame effectively trapping Zayn in the vertex between the wall and bookcase. Fingers flirted with the hem of Zayn’s long sweater before inching the light wool material upwards. Zayn felt a cold rush of air before two fingers—one, still wet with his own saliva—clamped onto his left nipple.

Zayn nearly collapsed from the shock, from the sudden, intense pressure. “What…what are you doing?” he gasped. His body went rigid, causing the slight discomfort to sharpen.

“Do you want me to stop?”

The question was calm, clinical. It was a direct contrast to the way Zayn was feeling—a frenetic,
feverish mess. Zayn wanted to reply ‘yes.’ He didn’t know why he didn’t reply ‘yes.’ Seconds raced by, and then Dr. Payne twisted the sensitive nub, sending shockwaves throughout his entire system. He grunted as the pain started to transform into…something else.

“What was that, Mr. Malik?” Dr. Payne taunted almost merrily. “Cat got your tongue again?”

The very next moment, Zayn felt a sharp sting rip through him as a fingernail dug into the tender flesh. The pain was quickly erased as the man’s thumb brushed softly over the abused nipple. When Dr. Payne repeated the action, Zayn couldn’t stop his hips from bucking forward even though they had nowhere to go.

“You’re so responsive,” Dr. Payne murmured appreciatively. “So responsive and so incredibly, deliciously innocent.” His principal continued to pinch and tease, watching him with dark, hungry eyes. “I bet no one’s even touched you like this before, have they?”

“N-no,” Zayn stuttered out. He could feel a sheen of sweat covering his entire body now as he tried to control the betraying movement of his hips.

Dr. Payne leaned closer. “If you ask nicely,” he hissed in Zayn’s ear, “Daddy may keep the punishment to one nipple today.”

“P-please, sir.”

“Try again,” Dr. Payne dismissed, rolling the now too-sensitive nipple between his fingers as Zayn’s hips bucked forward again helplessly. “Remember the exercise, Mr. Malik,” he reprimanded, “the exercise in discipline.”

A million different thoughts rushed through Zayn’s head. “I don’t know. I-I can’t think.” He closed his eyes, willing his body to keep still. Then suddenly, he knew what the man wanted to hear. “Please Daddy…please no more,” he pleaded, and miraculously, it worked.

“Have I mentioned how much I love it when you beg?” Dr. Payne groaned, pulling himself away. “Daddy would do nearly anything for his good boy when he begs like that.”

Zayn began trembling then, and it was as if he couldn’t stop, as if he’d never be able to stop.

“Shhh, it’s okay, my little one—Daddy’s got you,” his principal murmured, tipping Zayn’s chin up to place a few open-mouthed kisses against his clammy skin.

Zayn wilted against the wall and tried to pull himself together. He took a few deep breaths and pressed the heel of his palms against his damp eyes.

“There, there…it’s over,” Dr. Payne cooed. “You took your first punishment so well, baby; you did so well.”

Zayn couldn’t believe his ears. He couldn’t believe his principal actually thought that whatever it was that just happened was an appropriate disciplinary action.

“Sorry to leave you without a happy ending,” Dr. Payne simpered, glancing down at the bulge in Zayn’s trousers, “but this is a punishment, Mr. Malik. Furthermore, I can assure you I am in just as uncomfortable a situation as you are at the present moment.”

Completely mortified, Zayn covered himself with both hands. Reflexively, his gaze dropped down to his principal’s crouch, and he nearly gasped at the massive outline stretching the front of the man’s trousers. It was obscene, and yet Zayn couldn’t stop staring, couldn’t stop wondering what—
“Don’t get too excited, Mr. Malik,” the man chuckled, mistaking Zayn’s horror for something else. “You’ll have to wait until after Christmas for that particular present. But don’t worry, when it comes,” he added with a mischievous gleam in his eye, “it’ll be a huge surprise that will be worth the wait—I promise you that.”

Zayn’s jaw dropped at the crude remarks, but his principal just sauntered back to his desk chair.

“Now take a moment to fix yourself up,” Dr. Payne directed, “and then you may leave. I have other, er, pressing business to attend to.”

Zayn wanted to say something. He wanted to confront the man, to scream and yell until his lips bled, but more than that, he just wanted to get out of there before his principal got any other ideas.

“Oh, and as usual,” Dr. Payne declared darkly as Zayn stumbled towards the door, “this stays between us.”

Zayn halted in his tracks but didn’t turn around. “No,” he replied staunchly.

The air turned to ice. “I think you may want to reconsider, Mr. Malik.” There was a movement behind him before hands gripped his waist; Zayn could feel the power and unleashed fury coursing through his body. “You don’t want to do anything rash, anything that might adversely affect your future here.”

“Are you threatening me, sir?” Zayn demanded, false courage in the form of adrenaline emboldening him.

“Of course not. I’m merely trying to prevent you from tossing away a very promising career, Mr. Malik.” The man’s grip tightened before eventually loosening and falling away. “We will discuss this…arrangement more in-depth when you return after break,” he continued, voice soothing again. “We’ll have a proper sit-down then, and all of this will make much more sense.”

Dr. Payne gently tucked a piece of Zayn’s hair behind his ear. “Now, as I was saying…you will keep this between us for now—won’t you, Mr. Malik?”

“Yes, sir,” Zayn answered softly. Then still shaking, he fled that hellish place as fast as his feet would carry him.

***

Niall and Zayn packed up the car for the winter holiday and left Wisteria Falls the next morning. During the entire drive home, Zayn grieved.

He grieved for his loss of innocence—not for his sexual innocence which was still intact (at the moment anyway). Rather, he wept for the destruction of everything he held dear: teaching as the noblest of professions, the goodness in others, trust in authority, the school as a temple….

In the blink of an eye, the world seemed infinitely uglier. He suddenly understood a multitude of things—truths he hadn’t fully grasped (or refused to grasp) before. Yes, it all made sense now, from the unorthodox mentoring exercises to the outrageous constraints on how he dressed and who he spent time with.
Zayn had been so gullible, so trusting, so conscientious and willing to please. He had done nearly everything his principal had asked of him without question, and now…

Now it had all come to this.

And there was no way in hell Zayn could ever go back to Payne Academy.

***

As was tradition, Zayn and his parents had been invited over to the Horans for Christmas dinner. As expected, Niall had done most of the cooking, pushing everyone else out of the kitchen or relegating them to sous chef duties (Niall’s mum included). It was probably for the best since the meal was cooked to perfection—well, according to everyone else at the table. For Zayn, he hardly tasted a morsel. In fact, he had a difficult time keeping up with the conversation—not that anyone appeared to notice. He was quiet by nature, a sharp contrast to the gregarious bunch seated around the table, and so the conversation flowed on just fine without him.

As soon as dinner ended, Niall’s dad went to search for some sports game on the television. Niall invited Zayn up to his bedroom, and Zayn’s dad and Niall’s mom exchanged a knowing smile. Zayn’s mother, on the other hand, had quite the opposite reaction:

“Zayn honey, make sure you boys keep the door open.”

“Uhh…sure, Mrs. Malik,” Niall returned.

“Mom, I’ve been in Niall’s bedroom a thousand times,” Zayn griped, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “Why are you wanting the door open all of a sudden?” His mom was taken aback by the small act of defiance, but Zayn didn’t apologise like he might have done before. He was sick and tired of people making up senseless rules, constantly telling him what to do.

“Yes, honey, but it’s…different now,” she explained hesitantly, and all of a sudden, Zayn was starting to regret coming out to his parents the first day he got home. “You’re both grown, and Niall is…..” She looked at her husband for help.

“Yes?” Niall’s mom pressed, amused. “What is Niall, Trisha?”

“Well…Niall’s a man,” she finished in a hushed voice. More than one person at the table snorted in response.

“I think that’s a matter up for debate,” Zayn deadpanned.

“Oi!” Niall laughed, tickling him in the side. Zayn shoved him back, and pretty soon they were tussling back and forth, nearly falling out of their chairs before they remembered they were at Christmas dinner with their parents.

“Trisha,” Zayn’s father started, shaking his head at his wife. “They’re both adults and they share an apartment together, for Pete’s sake. If anything was going to happen, it would have already happened.” Both he and Moira looked at the boys expectantly, as if they were hoping a confession would result from Yaser’s words. (It didn’t.)

“So,” Zayn’s mom said crossly, glaring at her husband, “you’re saying that it’s completely
appropriate for our son to be in a man’s bedroom—*with the door closed*?”

“Well, it’s not like one of them’s going to get preggers,” Moira joked.

Wisely, Niall and him managed to duck out of the dining room soon after.

***

An hour later they were lounged on Niall’s bed in his room—Niall’s *old* room. Not a whole lot had changed since they had left. Zayn embraced the warm familiarity: kelly green walls smothered by posters, dog-eared cookbooks stacked on the oak bookshelf Zayn’s father had built, dirty laundry piled in one corner and a half-strung acoustic in another.

Zayn grew wistful. He wished he could go back to August, back to the way it was before they had left for Payne Academy. He wished everything in their lives had remained as unchanged as Niall’s bedroom.

But it hadn’t. And the cold, hard truth was that nothing would ever be the same again.

That revelation hurt. It hurt more than the actions of his principal. It hurt more than the cruel whispers in the hallways and faculty lounge. He pinched the bridge of his nose and tried hard not to cry.

“Talk to me, Zed.”

Zayn bit his lip and blinked away the tears forming in his eyes. “Nothing. It’s…nothing,” he repeated as if trying to convince himself.

Niall put his phone down and stared at him from where he was sat on the bed. “What is it?”

“Ni, what would you say if I told you”—he took a deep breath—“that I’m thinking of not returning next semester?”

“Nice one,” Niall chuckled. “No, really—tell me what you were going to say because who knows when your mum’s going to break down the door to stop me from having my way with ya.”

Zayn didn’t respond. All he could think about was Dr. Payne, of what the man might do if he ‘had his way’ with Zayn, of how close Zayn had come to *letting* the principal have his way with him….

“Zed, you feeling poorly?” Niall questioned. “Is it that crud that was going around school? You got a bad dose of it or something?”

“No, I’m fine,” Zayn insisted, sitting up and resting his back against the headboard. “And I wasn’t joking; I’m really thinking about not returning to Payne.”

“What are you going on about then?”

“I just told you, Ni.”

“Bollocks. What you just told me was some drivel about packing it in mid-year.”

Zayn sighed as he studied his hands, hoping they somehow held answers to impossible questions.
“Why shouldn’t I?”

Niall made a couple of flustered sounds. “Because it’s not ‘you’ to quit on things,” he said at last. “Because this gig is what you’ve always wanted, Zed. I can remember you going on about how you wanted to become a teacher and ‘make a difference’ back when we were kids!”

“What if…what if I don’t want that anymore?” Zayn asked, voice cracking as he finally looked at his friend beside him—his very best friend.

Niall slung an arm around his shoulders and pulled him into his side. “Don’t think about school for now, yeah? I get that you’ve been bogged down lately, but things will look different in a couple of days. Just give it some time, yeah?”

***

But things didn’t look any different in a couple of days.

If anything, Zayn dreaded returning to Payne Academy more than ever, for even though he was miles away from **him**, Zayn still felt like his principal held control over him. He was torn between telling Niall everything that had gone on during the so-called ‘mentoring sessions’ and keeping his promise to Dr. Payne. The thing that truly prevented Zayn from confiding in his friend, however, was the fact that he didn’t understand why he had acted the way he did. Dr. Payne had told him he could leave, and yet, **he didn’t**. Zayn stayed.

Zayn stayed, and he still couldn’t figure out why.

“Alright, come out with it, Zed,” Niall demanded, taking a break from sorting through papers to get on Zayn’s case. It was two days before they were supposed to return to Wisteria Falls, and Zayn was helping his friend clean out his bedroom, something that hadn’t been done properly for years. The goal was to gather as many items together as possible to discard or donate to local charities, but this was easier said than done. Niall insisted that every book, every CD, and every article of clothing were “essential,” and Zayn had gotten distracted, hopelessly lost in his thoughts more than once.

“Come out with what, Ni?” Zayn asked nonchalantly. He went back to what he was doing, attempting to place a cracked, teal-glazed pot Niall had made in a pottery class in the trash.

“Oi, you can’t put that in the bin!”

“Niall,” Zayn sighed, trying to be as patient as he could because he understood the need to hang on to the past all too well. Still, there were limits, and a broken, dusty piece of pottery from middle school challenged those limits. “The thing’s cracked all the way up one side, chipped in several places, and it wasn’t even one of your favourite pieces to begin with,” Zayn reasoned but Niall wasn’t having it.

“Yes, but you can’t just pitch it like that!” Niall objected hotly, taking the pot from him and setting it back on the shelf as if it were a trophy. “Sure it’s banjaxed. Sure it’s uglier than Tomlinson’s soul, but it’s got sentimental value.”

“Fine, I don’t give a crap whether you keep it or not,” Zayn huffed, suddenly irritated. He ignored the pot and his best friend and started piling random books onto the crook of his arm. Just when he’d gathered a good amount, the tall stack was snatched from him and dumped unceremoniously onto the
Zayn glared at him. “I was sorting those!”

“Talk,” Niall ordered, crossing his arms over his chest in a way that made him look formidable even though Zayn easily had a couple of inches on his friend. “We’re not leaving here until you give me a proper explanation for the way you’ve been acting.”

Zayn moved a few books and plopped down on an open space on the bed. “It’s…Dr. Payne. He’s just….” Zayn exhaled loudly, searching his mind for the right way to say it without revealing too much. “He’s just really tough on me, that’s all.” He cringed at his own words, at the way he sounded like a whiny toddler who didn’t get his way. “I just feel a ton of pressure from him, and… and I feel like everyone at school hates me,” he added glumly.

“Zed, I thought we went through all of this before. Don’t take everything he says so personal, yeah?” Niall cleared his own spot on the bed before sitting beside his friend and punching him affectionately in the side. “And everyone doesn’t hate you, bro. I like you; Ed likes you; Jo likes you; and your students like you. I’m sure the rest of the staff will warm up to you if you let them see the real you, let loose a little.”

Zayn definitely wasn’t convinced. “You think so?”

“I’m dead certain but let’s move on to Dr. Payne. I’m guessing he’s the real reason behind all this?”

At first Zayn was startled by his words. On closer inspection of his friend’s unruffled expression, however, he could tell Niall didn’t know the whole truth. If he had, he wouldn’t be wearing that sympathetic half-smile on his face.

“What about Dr. Payne?” Zayn asked in a small voice.

“You need to quit putting so much bloody weight on his opinion,” Niall advised. “You just can’t please some people. Just toe the line, do everything the gaffer asks you to do, and leave off trying to get him to like you.”

Zayn nodded slowly because his reasoning was sound—well, except the part about doing everything Dr. Payne asked him to do. Niall would have a heart attack if he knew exactly what had been going on behind closed doors. “I know,” Zayn responded finally. “It’s just that I feel so alone sometimes, and Dr. Payne…he scares me, I guess.”

“He scares everyone, Zed. Harry Styles almost pissed himself the other day when Dr. Payne shouted his name in the hall, and Harry’s like the man’s…shite, what’s his name again?”

“Who?”

“That bloke from Shakespeare,” Niall replied, scratching his head. “Y’know, the evil henchman who’s jealous of Othello? He tells Othello that his wife’s shagging some other dude even though she isn’t.”

Zayn couldn’t help but smile as he asked, “Iago?”

“Yes, that’s the one! Harry is Payne’s Iago.”

Zayn furrowed his brow. “Niall, Harry’s nothing like that. He actually respects Dr. Payne from what I can tell. Besides, Harry may have made the mistake about the mentoring thing, but he’d never do something deliberately treacherous or underhanded like planting evidence or making up
stories about people.”

“Well, Tomlinson would, the chancer,” Niall snorted. “As a matter of fact, that’s the play he’s supposedly chosen for the spring production.”

“A-ha! Now I get why you’ve got Othello on the brain,” Zayn chuckled, forgetting his troubles for a moment. “How’d you know that Othello was the next production anyway? I haven’t seen an announcement about it anywhere.”

“Jo told me.”

Zayn resisted making a snide comment; he probably should’ve deduced that one. “Anyway, evil plots like that only happen in Shakespeare, Niall. A person wouldn’t go to those extreme lengths to make it look like some illicit affair is occurring right under everybody’s noses just because they’ve been overlooked for a promotion or whatever. That just doesn’t happen.”

Niall raised an eyebrow. “You sure about that, Zed?”

Zayn rolled his eyes. “In any case, Harry isn’t like that,” he stated emphatically. “Take his present, for example. The plaque was so incredibly thoughtful and just shows what kind of person he is.”

“Plaque?”

It was then Zayn remembered he’d forgotten to tell Niall about Harry’s present before they left. In all fairness, Zayn hadn’t been in the best state of mind after everything that went down with Dr. Payne. “Crap, I forgot to tell you. Harry, got me this wicked plaque with a quote from Shakespeare, the same one he has in his classroom. Remind me to show it to you when we get back. Anyway, he sent a really nice card with it and apologised for everything.”

Niall had never been too keen on Harry Styles for some reason and hearing about the gift apparently hadn’t changed his opinion of the man. Then again, Niall hadn’t read the letter like Zayn had, hadn’t witnessed that there was more hurt and regret in the English teacher’s eyes over the past several weeks than anger.

Niall rubbed the back of his neck. “Look, I’m not going to say another word against Harry because I can see you’re dead set on giving him another chance. And if nothing else,” he observed wryly, “getting back in the good graces of the Prince of Payne can only help your reputation among the faculty.”

Zayn hated to admit it, but in a pragmatic sort of way, Niall had a point.

“Still,” Niall cautioned, “I’d be careful around Harry Styles.”

Zayn rolled his eyes. “What is it you’ve got against Harry anyway?”

“Well, you have to admit he mucks about with a questionable crowd.”

“If you mean Louis, then I’m not going to argue with you,” Zayn granted, thumbing absently through one of the books beside him. “Then again, if we’re going to blackball people based on whether they’re friends with Louis Tomlinson, we could start with your girlfriend,” Zayn pointed out a little snarkily.

“Alright then. How about Dr. Payne?” Niall offered up. “You said yourself Harry and Payne are thick as thieves, and I’m not sure how anyone could be mates with someone like Liam Payne.”
“You can’t,” Zayn answered without thinking. “He’s a monster.” Zayn pushed away his black thoughts because now Niall was staring back at him with a curious expression. “I just think they, like, understand each other and that there’s a certain level of mutual respect.”

“I can’t believe I’m suggesting this,” Niall began, shaking his head, “but why don’t you talk to Harry about all this? He might be able to give you some insights on how to deal with Dr. Payne.”

Zayn thought about it, and the more he did, the better the idea sounded. “Yeah…think maybe I’ll try that.”

“Good. And keep in mind that we’re already halfway through the school year,” Niall stated, trying to cheer him up. “In six months, we can do whatever we bloody want. Dr. Payne will have signed off on us, and we’ll have full teaching certificates. The world will be ours, mate.”

“Six months…,” Zayn mumbled to himself. It seemed like a prison sentence.

And the way things were going, it would be a miracle if he got through the remainder of the school year unscathed.

Chapter End Notes

I saw this story had over 500 kudos, and I tried to get this chapter out as fast as I could because OMG WOW. I had a small health setback in December, so I'm still trying to finish up my other wip (Money Moves). I also have one other writing commitment, but after that, I'm hoping I'll be able to do planned, regular updates for this. Btw, if you have any questions on updates, etc., shoot me an ask on tumblr. I tend to get to those faster. xx

Side note: I Inserted "Zayn's POV" at the beginning of the chapter because there was a sharp shift in POV in the middle of the scene (from the last chapter to this one), and I didn't want to throw anyone off. Know that it's always Zayn's POV unless otherwise specified. ;)

Much love and hope 2019 is treating you well. Cheers for now! ~Maree xx
By the time Niall and Zayn had arrived in Wisteria Falls after a long, snowy drive, Zayn had settled several things in his mind. First and foremost, he was not going to let someone—anyone—bully him anymore. Second, he would request to have Harry back as his mentor—if the English teacher was willing to resume that role. Finally, Zayn would make sure he was never in a vulnerable position with his principal ever again, one where Dr. Payne could so easily take advantage of him.

In short, Zayn would be way less naïve and way more cautious.

And as he kept telling himself, Dr. Payne couldn’t do anything to him while other people were around.

(He didn’t think so anyway.)

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The first day back was a professional day, meaning they had a morning training on ‘school safety and emergency preparedness’ and time to collaborate with their teams in the afternoon.

The morning’s session was led by a trio of school resource officers; it was a valuable training, but what Zayn liked best about it was that Dr. Payne wasn’t there. Apparently, their principal was addressing the Board off site.

That, of course, was just fine by Zayn. It fit into his plan. The longer he could delay seeing Dr. Payne again, the better.

The training ended at eleven-thirty, and, the majority of the faculty left for lunch before their afternoon department meetings—everyone except the social science teachers, that is.

Frank Franklin, the head of the social science department at Payne, disliked department meetings and generally referred to them as a “frickin’ waste of time.” Therefore, Zayn wasn’t surprised when the veteran teacher (who taught American history and was probably around for most of it) gathered them together in the library directly after the morning training. Obviously, the department chair wanted to get his departmental ‘meeting’ out of the way as soon as possible.

Zayn scanned the table of teachers while he waited for Mr. Franklin to get organised, practising their names in his head and trying to recall exactly who taught what. All the various disciplines were represented: history, geography, psychology, government, sociology, and so on. Even though they were technically all in the same department, Zayn felt like he barely knew any of these teachers. Mr. Franklin certainly didn’t go out of his way to make them all feel like a team and the group never met for long enough to develop even a healthy professional relationship.

Mr. Franklin’s only item on the agenda was to deliver their updated teaching schedules (which Jo, in
turn, had delivered to him). The only ‘collaboration’ that occurred was when they all agreed to ‘keep their noses clean’ when in the presence of the principal and ‘not put up with any B.S. from the students.’

It was the same spiel he heard every time the department met, and as Zayn made his way back to his classroom, he couldn’t help thinking that Frank Franklin’s speeches were about as original as his name.

On the plus side, having his department obligations taken care of so early meant Zayn had the whole afternoon to get his classroom in shape for Monday. But before he started in, he had something he needed to take care of first. Glancing at his watch, he saw it was almost noon. He knew there was a good possibility Harry would be out to lunch at this time (like the vast majority of the faculty), but he figured it was worth a shot to check. After taking a deep breath to mentally prepare himself, he rapped hesitantly on the heavy wooden door of his neighbour’s classroom.

Harry answered seconds later, clutching a stapler and some grammar posters under his left arm. When he saw Zayn, he abruptly dropped everything on a nearby desk, then cleared his throat and motioned for Zayn to enter. Harry appeared stiff and uncomfortable, and for a split second, Zayn thought about making some excuse and retreating back to the safety of his own classroom.

Neither of them spoke for a full minute which only added to the awkwardness of the situation. Finally, Zayn summoned his courage and broke the silence.

“I wanted to thank you for the plaque, Harry. It was incredibly thoughtful. I-I wrote you a thank you note, but you can, you know, read it later.”

Harry flashed a relieved sort of smile and took the envelop from him. “It was nothing…really. But I hope you know I meant what I said—in the card, I mean.”

“I was hoping you did,” Zayn said softly, looking at his shoes.

“Was there…uh…something in particular I could help you with right now?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly how to say this, but…” Zayn bit his lip nervously. Why was it so hard to get out?

“Go ahead, Zayn,” Harry encouraged, easing his apprehension. “Like I said in my letter, you can feel free to come to me about anything.”

“Would you…. Zayn took a deep breath and looked the other teacher square in the eye. “Harry, would you possibly consider being my mentor again?”

“Are you serious?” Harry sputtered, and Zayn immediately felt stupid for asking. Of course Harry wouldn’t want to accept the role—not after what happened the last time. But back then, Zayn didn’t understand just how commanding and persuasive Dr. Payne really was. He didn’t realise how the man could pressure you into doing things you knew weren’t right. Zayn just wished he could explain all that to the teacher in front of him.

“I’m sorry,” Zayn apologised, feeling the sting of his wounded pride. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, I’m just—well, surprised, that’s all,” Harry returned, smiling. “I would have thought you’d want nothing to do with me, Zayn. Honestly, I’m chuffed you’re even speaking to me right now.”

Zayn felt like a giant weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “So, you’d be willing to be my mentor again?”
“Willing? Heck, I’m flattered.” Harry looked it, too, looked every bit the knight in shining armour coming to Zayn’s rescue as he stood there, sunlight shining brilliantly through the classroom windows behind him.

Momentarily, Jo’s teasing flashed in Zayn’s mind, how she was convinced he was attracted to the “Harry Styles type.” Zayn had done a lot of thinking over winter break, however, and he’d decided that there was another teacher at Payne Academy who he could see himself with, someone he hadn’t given a fair shake to.

Someone named Ed.

Zayn had let Dr. Payne’s iniquitous dictates sway him against his own true feelings—whatever they were—but he wasn’t going to let his administrator control every facet of his life.

Not anymore.

“Have you told Dr. Payne yet?” Harry inquired, stealing him away from his thoughts.

“No,” Zayn admitted, “not yet.” In truth, he hadn’t given much consideration to Dr. Payne’s reaction and all the possible repercussions. All Zayn knew for certain was that his principal was not going to be happy.

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be fine with the mentoring change,” Harry reassured him with that easy smile of his. “Technically, I’m still your official mentor, and he has to be relieved we’ve resolved everything. Besides, he’s got a whole school to run,” Harry chuckled. “Knowing him, he’ll probably be thrilled to have more time at his desk, strategizing ways to make Payne Academy the best school in the country.”

“Yeah….” Zayn tried to look convinced.

“So, when did you want to begin?” Harry ploughed on. “Weren’t we doing weekly sessions on Wednesdays before? That still work for you?

“Yeah, Wednesdays are great.”

“Sounds ace! You want to start this Wednesday or…?”

“Actually, that would be wicked, if we could,” Zayn smiled. “And don’t worry about having any sort of agenda or anything—I would really just appreciate the chance to talk to you about something that’s been…um…troubling me.”

“I have a few minutes before my department meeting this afternoon. We could talk now, if you’d like?” Harry offered, and Zayn hesitated, thinking it over. He wanted to confide in Harry right then and there, spill everything he’d been holding inside for far too long. He had a feeling Harry would understand, would help him make sense of it better than anyone else could.

But then his reservations returned. There wasn’t enough time to go into it all, and he figured he’d already sprung enough on the English teacher for one day. Besides, Zayn wasn’t prepared for that conversation yet. He had a lot to mull over in his mind first.

Besides, Zayn had a very important e-mail to send before he lost his nerve.

And so, he thanked his new mentor again, then retreated back to his own classroom. Heartened by his reconciliation with Harry, Zayn lost no time in e-mailing Dr. Payne, letting him know in clear, precise terms that he had spoken with Harry and that the English teacher would once again be
actively serving as his mentor.

Then he waited.

By four, Zayn still hadn’t received a response even though he had confirmed with Jo that Dr. Payne had spent the entirety of the afternoon working in his office. Zayn tried to get back to work, but his mind was elsewhere and his eyes kept darting to the corner of his monitor, waiting for a new e-mail notification.

After a few more minutes, he gave up on the idea of working anymore and exited out of his Word document. Then, he opened his mail and unapologetically stared at his empty inbox, refreshing it every thirty seconds or so. He knew Niall would be coming by his classroom any minute now, and Zayn didn’t want this hanging over his head all weekend.

“I trust you had a relaxing break, Mr. Malik. My apologies for not tracking you down earlier.”

Heart beating out of his chest, Zayn swivelled around to find Dr. Payne standing in the doorway of his classroom. Dressed smartly in a double-breasted navy suit, the principal was casually leaning against the doorframe, an almost mocking expression on his face.

Zayn scrambled to his feet. “Y-yes, it was fine. Did you, um, receive my e-mail, sir?”

Dr. Payne’s lips curled up in that unsettling way of his. “Yes, Mr. Malik, I did.”

His principal didn’t seem the least bit perturbed, and Zayn would be lying if he said he’d expected the man to react that way.

“You must be quite pleased with yourself, Mr. Malik,” the man mused with a rakish smile, his eyes combing over Zayn’s figure as he stood there. “Quite pleased indeed.”

Zayn shifted his weight, tried to dispel the nervous shake in his voice and in his knees. “Sorry, sir, but I’m not sure I understand—”

“Oh, I think you do, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne cut him off. “You’re a very astute young man.” He then strolled over to Zayn’s desk and bent forward to shut off the monitor. “I’d advise you to go home and get some rest this weekend, have a good think, and be ready for Monday.”

Zayn felt a palpable sense of impending doom. “M-Monday, sir?”

Dr. Payne regarded him with amused eyes. “Yes, Monday, Mr. Malik. Our students will be returning on Monday, or did you forget with how busy you were composing e-mails today?”

Zayn stiffened as his principal leaned closer, the other man’s breath prickling the hairs on the nape of his neck, as he whispered in his ear:

“You can run all you want, Mr. Malik, but you can’t hide.”

Then, Dr. Payne withdrew, pausing at the door to gaze meaningfully at the camera positioned directly outside Zayn’s classroom. “It gladdens me to know we have such excellent quality security cameras in this building.” The principal gave a satisfied sigh, then glanced back into the room. “Have a wonderful weekend, Mr. Malik. Rest up.” And with that, he was off, his self-assured footsteps echoing down the hallways of Payne.
Monday was the official start of the new semester, and Zayn was happy to be able to throw himself back into the mundane day-to-day responsibilities of his job. After the long winter break, Zayn sincerely missed his students (even the jumpy, too-cool-for-school Derek and the rest of his challenging eighth-hour class).

Zayn’s schedule was unchanged and so were his classes with one exception: he had a brand new set of students in his semester-long World Geography course. He did see a few familiar faces in class, one of which was Derek. (Zayn had discovered that Derek had been removed from the class early in the semester last year due to some conflict with Mr. Franklin who had previously taught the course. But knowing Mr. Franklin as he did, Zayn didn’t hold that fact against the boy at all.) In addition, Zayn recognised three students from Niall’s culinary club: Lainey Anderson, Jessica Smethurst, and Mariana Sanchez. The trio seemed to be a permanent fixture around Niall’s classroom, so it was hard not to know them.

As for Zayn’s best friend, his teaching schedule had a number of revisions for the new term. For one, Niall and him no longer shared the same lunch break. To make matters worse, Zayn discovered Ed’s lunch was also switched to a different time.

Zayn was suspicious about the reasons for these changes, but he kept his suspicions to himself. No one would believe him, not even Niall or Ed. They would say Zayn was being paranoid.

And maybe he was.

But with what went down in Dr. Payne’s office before break, Zayn highly doubted that.

Therefore, it was with some trepidation that Zayn stepped into the teachers’ lounge that first day of the semester. He hadn’t wanted to venture down into the lounge today, but Niall had made him promise he would, still convinced Zayn needed the break from work. Of course, his extroverted best friend didn’t realise that having to eat lunch with unfamiliar and possibly semi-hostile co-workers was more of a stressor for Zayn than a break, but it was what it was. He knew Niall had his best interests at heart (which was a heck of a lot more than he could say for some other people at the school).

Zayn scanned the crowded lounge and when he saw Jo, he started off in the direction of her table. He stopped dead in his tracks, however, when he realised who was sitting next to her…

Louis Tomlinson.

It was almost as if the drama teacher had never been gone with the way he easily seized the attention of everyone at the long, rectangular table he was seated at. Zayn watched as Louis gestured animatedly with his hands; his loud, piercing laugh slicing through the din. Harry was seated at the end of the same table, laughing along with his best friend and the others. Standing there clutching his lunch sack, Zayn was once again reminded of how little difference there was between being in high school and teaching in one.

And promise or not, there was no way Zayn was going to eat in the lounge that day.

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Unsurprisingly, Zayn still hadn’t gathered up the courage to eat in the lounge on Tuesday, but by then, he had other things to concern himself about.

Like Dr. Payne.

The principal had suddenly taken a fervent interest in the history teacher’s classes. The first time Dr. Payne ‘popped’ into his classroom the previous afternoon, Zayn had thought it was just for a quick visit, but then the man stayed for nearly the entire hour. Dr. Payne was back again on Tuesday and lingered throughout most of the morning. The constant observation made Zayn uncomfortable, especially since Dr. Payne wasn’t observing his classes discretely from a desk at the back. Instead, the principal leaned against the back wall, arms crossed over his chest, peering at Zayn with a look that made the novice teacher second guess everything he said and did.

It was nerve-wracking, to say the least.

When Dr. Payne returned after lunch, the man didn’t even pretend to be interested in anything else going on in the classroom.

No, his dark brown eyes were only on Zayn.

None of Zayn’s students seemed to notice. Then again, they had their backs to the principal and were all on their best behaviour. Zayn, on the other hand, couldn’t avoid the man’s penetrating gaze as he lectured at the front of the class.

When the bell signalling the end of sixth-hour rang, Zayn dismissed his students, then sunk into his desk chair and began shuffling stacks of papers around as he waited for the room to clear out.

Soon, it was quiet, and Zayn let out the breath he’d been holding. It was seventh hour now, his plan time, and he couldn’t be more relieved…that is, until he heard someone cough.

Zayn shot his head up to find Dr. Payne still leaning against the back wall of his classroom. While Zayn watched, the man propelled himself off the wall with the instep of his designer Italian shoes, then casually walked to the door and shut it.

“You’ve been avoiding me, Mr. Malik, ever since we returned from the holiday.”

“No, I just—”

“Yes, you have,” the principal stated impassively, “but I expected as much.” He strolled over to Zayn’s desk and picked up the plaque. “A gift from Mr. Styles, I presume?”

“Y-yes. It was a Christmas present, of sorts.”

“Interesting.” Dr. Payne regarded Zayn with a tight expression. “By the way, I forgot to mention how pleased I am that you and Mr. Styles have worked out your differences.” He glanced down again at the plaque in his hands. “However, I’m sorry to say the quote is misinforming.”

“It’s Shakespeare.”

Dr. Payne snorted. “You sound like Mr. Tomlinson,” he observed, clearly amused. “But Shakespeare isn’t everything, Mr. Malik.”

“Well, what makes you think the quotation is ‘misinforming’?”
“It reads: ‘Trust a few,’” the principal replied, running his finger along the bevelled glass edges. “This is incorrect. You shouldn’t trust anyone, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn had discovered in the past several months that there were certain people he shouldn’t place his trust in (Dr. Payne, for example); however, Zayn didn’t think the blanket statement was accurate. People were good…for the most part. Zayn wasn’t going to let Dr. Payne’s distorted view of the world rub off on him.

Zayn cleared his throat. “Don’t you think that’s a little cynical, sir?”

“Cynicism is an unpleasant way of saying the truth”—an American playwright said that,” the man responded, setting the plaque face down on the desk before moving on to the next object that arrested his attention, an apple. Zayn had saved it from his lunch, planning to eat it during his free hour—this hour, in fact.

“An apple for the teacher,” Dr. Payne chuckled condescendingly, “how fitting.” He picked up the shiny Red Delicious apple to examine it. “This one is quite perfect, isn’t it?” he admired, twirling the fruit around appreciatively. “Do you see how it sparkles and shines like it’s made of wax? It seems too good to be true—too perfect, in fact.”

Dr. Payne held the apple up to the light and squinted at it. “Yes, every line, every curve is flawless,” he murmured, gently running the tip of his finger down the side as if to prove his statement. “It seems like it would be a sin to ruin something so pure and beautiful, doesn’t it, Mr. Malik?”

Zayn swallowed. His principal’s tendency to talk in metaphors had always made Zayn feel ill at ease—and that was before he had begun to understand the true depths of the man’s depravity.

“What is that proverb about forbidden fruit?” Dr. Payne asked distractedly, balancing the apple on his palm.

“I’m, uh, not sure which one you mean, sir.”

“Ah, I remember now,” Dr. Payne declared, gaze still firmly fixed on the apple. “‘Forbidden fruit always tastes best.’” Then without warning, his teeth connected with the smooth flesh of the fruit; the sound, almost jarring in the quiet classroom.

Dr. Payne finished chewing, then stared pityingly at the apple. “Ahh, not so perfect anymore, is it?” he mused sadly before carelessly tossing the apple in the wastebasket next to Zayn’s desk and walking off. Zayn just kept staring at the apple in the trash, unable to look away. He didn’t know why, but he found the whole incident oddly disturbing.

“Oh, by the way…” Dr. Payne spoke up, pausing at the door. “I will be e-mailing you sometime this week to set up a time for us to meet. As I mentioned before break, we have something vital to discuss, and I really don’t think it would be wise to put off our little conversation any longer.”

Zayn’s spirits plummeted. His strategy of getting through the semester by evading his principal wasn’t going to work, and at this point, he didn’t have a backup plan.

Dr. Payne smirked at him from across the room—a smirk that told Zayn the man knew everything he was thinking (and probably a whole lot more). “Good afternoon, Mr. Malik. It’s so nice to be back at school, isn’t it?”

And with that, he was gone.
Sorry for the long wait guys! I was finishing up my other wip, Money Moves (Yay!), and then life happened. The good news is that I'm planning on doing regular updates for this fic now that I've gotten a few things off my plate. **The plan is to update every other Thursday, starting on 14 March. :)**

While you wait, you might check out the Liam POV drabble for Money Moves I just posted: **Almost**.

Or, check out my contribution to The Ziam Club's Valentine Gift Exchange: **That's Amore**. (So many great fics--read 'em all!)

And if you have a minute, please let me know what you thought about this chapter. (If you couldn't tell, shit's about to go down, ha!) Much love! ~Maree xx
“Alright, so what is it you have on your mind?” Harry asked as they sat at the table in the English teacher’s classroom. It was their first mentoring session since Harry had agreed to resume the role of his mentor, and even though Zayn had initiated this conversation, Harry’s question still made him feel a little queasy.

“It’s about Dr. Payne…,” Zayn started, pausing to gauge his mentor’s reaction.

Harry gave him a wry smile. “Dr. Payne, huh? I thought you’d give me a chance to ease my way back into this whole mentoring thing,” he cracked before turning serious again. “Sorry, go ahead.”

Zayn tried to pluck up the courage to go on. He silently reminded himself that he needed to talk to someone and that Harry was probably the only person who could give him any real guidance on the Dr. Payne situation.

Zayn licked his lips. “The thing is….” His voice trailed off again. All he could think about was what Niall had said over break. His best friend had encouraged him to talk to Harry about Dr. Payne, but Niall had also warned him against trusting Harry. Zayn felt torn. What if Harry told Dr. Payne everything he said? What if…?

“Whatever it is, you can tell me,” Harry assured him, green eyes comforting as Zayn wrestled with indecision. “I promise that whatever you say will be kept in complete confidence; I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

Zayn chewed on his lower lip. Harry seemed sincere, and Zayn didn’t see how it could hurt to confide in his mentor (just a little anyway). “I feel…threatened by Dr. Payne, and…and I don’t know how much more I can stand,” he admitted finally.

Harry frowned. “Threatened? That’s a strong word, Zayn. What exactly makes you feel that way?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Zayn answered, wringing his hands. “I guess it’s the way he treats me?”

“How does he treat you? Is he hard on you? Is he asking more than you feel you are capable of doing?”

“Um…yes?”

Harry seemed troubled by his answer. “Before we get into particulars—have you spoken with anyone else about this?”


Harry nodded. “What did they suggest?”

Zayn thought about what Ed told him at the beginning of the year. “Well, I heard from someone that Dr. Payne tends to pick out one teacher—generally a new teacher—as like a scapegoat?” He bit his lip and waited for Harry to tell him he was being ridiculous.
Harry sighed. “I hate to say this, but I have spoken with Dr. Payne about that. Our principal gets it into his head that someone needs ‘improving,’ and then he can be rather...harsh? It’s just his way of helping though,” Harry quickly amended, and Zayn tried to work out how Dr. Payne’s treatment of him could be construed as ‘helpful.’ “And what did Niall say?” Harry asked with a small smile.

Zayn tried not to look surprised. After all, it was only natural that Zayn would seek advice from his best friend and roommate. “Niall suggested I do my best to stick it out, that Dr. Payne doesn’t despise me as much as I think he does, but...”

“Yes?”

“But...he does,” Zayn finished lamely.

“Well, I happen to know that our principal holds you in great esteem,” Harry tsked. “Not only has he trusted you with a full course load this year, but he’s confided in me on more than one occasion that he believes you’ve got something special to bring to Payne. As a matter of fact,” Harry beamed, “he thinks so highly of your teaching ability that...actually never mind. I’m not supposed to say anything about that yet. Forget I mentioned anything, okay?”

Zayn looked at his mentor warily. Zayn wasn’t wild about surprises in general, but he really didn’t like surprises that had anything to do with Dr. Payne.

Harry chuckled at his expression. “Don’t worry—it’s something good,” his mentor reassured him. “It just hasn’t been finalised yet, and I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Harry, your keeping secrets from me like this makes me uncomfortable.”

“I promise it’s something positive, and believe me, I would tell you if I could and/or if I thought you should know,” Harry swore. “Like I said, I’m not going to make that mistake again. Anyway, you’ll find out soon enough from Dr. Payne.”

“Awesome; can’t wait,” Zayn said flatly, but Harry didn’t seem to notice.

“So,” Harry began, tone serious again, “tell me exactly what you meant when you said you felt threatened by—”

“Hiya, Styles!”

Zayn snapped his head around and watched as Louis came strutting into the classroom. The drama teacher froze, however, when he realised Harry wasn’t the only one in his classroom.

Louis scowled. “What the bloody hell is he doing here?”

Zayn hadn’t exactly expected a joyful reunion with Louis Tomlinson, but then again, he didn’t think the recently-returned teacher would be this hostile to him.

He stumbled to his feet. “So, um, thanks for meeting with me, Harry, but I, uh, better be going. I’m sure you have loads to do with the new semester and all, and I don’t want to take up any more of your time.”

“No, you’re good,” Harry replied loudly, shooting a look at his best friend who rolled his eyes and generally reacted in a juvenile fashion. “Zayn, you’re welcome to stay as long as you like. Besides, you were just telling me something important. As your mentor, I feel it’s my responsibility to—”

“What?!” Louis interjected, not even trying to disguise his disgust. “Are you shitting me, Styles?
You’re mentoring this tosser again after he nearly got me sacked? After what happened with you and—?”

“Louis, shut the fuck up,” Harry hissed, and Zayn’s eyes widened as he stared down at the English teacher. He was taken aback by Harry’s language and tone, and from what he could tell, Louis was as well.

No one said anything for what seemed like an eternity.

“Shall I wait outside?” Louis grumped at last, glaring daggers at Zayn.

“No, I should be going,” Zayn insisted. “I’m sure Niall’s probably waiting for me,” he fibbed, and Louis’ scowl deepened at the mere mention of the culinary arts teacher. “Thanks again, Harry, and I’ll…er…see you tomorrow morning.” Zayn smiled weakly at Louis as he passed him, then hastened out of the room before either of the other teachers could say another word.

Once Zayn was back in the sanctuary of his own classroom, he slumped into his chair and lay his head on the desk with a groan. He had been crazy to think Louis would be grateful to him for lobbying for the man’s return. Yes, Zayn’s conscience had been eased, but he wondered if it was worth it.

Zayn sincerely hoped that the popular teacher’s reinstatement was good for the school because it certainly wasn’t good for him…or Niall, for that matter.

Sighing deeply, Zayn lifted his head up and decided to check his e-mail while he waited to hear from Niall. Almost immediately, however, he regretted that decision when he saw there was an e-mail from his principal.

_Good afternoon, Mr. Malik,

As you are aware, I have been evaluating your job performance closely this past week. We have much to discuss about your future at Payne Academy.

I look forward to meeting with you in my office this Friday at 16:00. Please be prompt.

-LP_

After reading the e-mail twice, Zayn cradled his head in his hands and let out a pained wail. The message appeared innocent enough, but he couldn’t even begin to imagine what lay under the surface of Dr. Payne’s guarded professionalism.

Zayn thought again about his last encounter with his principal. Then, he thought about the confrontation he just had with Louis. He felt like he was constantly being tested, constantly under threat, and it was all too much to take.

He remained exactly like that until he received the text from Niall letting him know he was ready to leave. But even then, Zayn still wondered how he had ever allowed himself to be persuaded to return to this Godawful place.
It was nearly five on Thursday, and as Zayn trotted down the main staircase of Payne Academy, he realised he had somehow managed to avoid all contact with his principal the whole day. All in all, it had been a very good day.

“Zed,” Niall greeted him once he reached the bottom of the stairs, but his tone was hypercritical and his expression was anything but welcoming.

Zayn sighed as they began walking towards the main doors. “What is it, Niall?”

His friend’s mouth twitched with displeasure, but then he finally revealed what was bothering him. “I saw Jo earlier, and she told me you haven’t been in the lounge once this week, Zed? I thought we talked about this, and I thought you promised me that—”

“I just haven’t felt like eating in the lounge, okay?” Zayn snapped back at him.


“Niall, I’m fine,” Zayn insisted, thankful no one was around to hear them bickering. “You need to get off my back sometimes—you and my parents both.” Turning his back on his friend, he pushed through the main doors and started off towards the faculty parking lot at a brisk pace.

“Well, you weren’t fine over the Christmas holiday, Zed!” Niall shouted, chasing after him. “As I bloody recall, you kept going on about how you wanted to just sod off and—”

“Niall, stop lecturing me, yeah? I’ve had a very long week, and I’m not up to discussing this right now.”

“Sure, mate,” Niall grouched, catching up to him. “I won’t mention another word about how you lied to me when I asked you how lunch was with Jo the other day.”

“I didn’t lie to you,” Zayn argued, guilt starting to seep in.

“Yes, you did. I asked how lunch was, and you told me it was ‘good.’”

“Yes, that is exactly what you asked, Niall.”

“But you weren’t even in the bloody lounge!” Niall exclaimed, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

“You didn’t ask me where I had lunch,” Zayn pointed out, “so technically, it wasn’t a lie.”

Niall shook his head as he unlocked the doors to his VW. “You should have been a bloody barrister.”

“And you should have been a private detective.”

“Fine. Message bloody received. I’ll leave you alone if that’s what you want.”

“Well, that is what I want,” Zayn snapped. “I want you off my case for once.”
“Consider it done.”

Zayn quickly got in the car and slammed the passenger door shut. Niall, in turn, slammed his door even louder.

Zayn was still steaming as they pulled out of the lot. “I don’t know why you’re so worried about me burning myself out when you’ve been working late every single day since we got back. This Bistro is beginning to take over your life, and I’m surprised Jo hasn’t called you out on it yet.”

As they rolled to a stop, Niall looked over at him, a flash of hurt in his tired eyes. Zayn wondered how long the bags under his friend’s eyes had been there and why he hadn’t noticed them until now.

“She has,” Niall said softly, “but she gets it. We’re opening the Bistro for the semester next Friday and—”

“Wait,” Zayn stopped him, confused. “I read in the newsletter that it wasn’t opening for another few weeks?”

Niall grunted. “I wish. We—and by ‘we’ I mean Dr. Payne—decided to push the date up because it’s been so successful. He asked me the soonest I could have everything up and ready for the term, and I must have been mental because I told him next bloody Friday.”

Zayn felt horrible. He didn’t realise all the stress and pressure his friend was under. He’d only been thinking about himself. “What do you still need to do?”

“Gotta tweak some recipes, set up a new storefront, place final food orders, train a few more students at the till, and make posters. And we’ve only a week to get it all done.”

“Niall, why didn’t you tell me all this?” Zayn demanded, feeling like a crummy friend for the umpteenth time that school year.

“I didn’t want to burden you with anything extra,” Niall explained. “I know you’ve got seven classes plus the stress of having Dr. Payne as your mentor—or well, you did,” he qualified.

“I’m sorry, Ni,” Zayn sighed. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

“It’s alright, Zed.” Niall reached over while driving and pinched his cheek in that annoyingly sweet way of his. “I know it was just the stress talking. Anyway, I shouldn’t be pressuring you to eat lunch with my girlfriend if you’d rather not. I guess I’ve just got this silly idea that you two could become good friends if you got to know each other better and all.”

“Niall, it’s got nothing to do with Jo,” Zayn confessed. “It’s Louis. Jo sits at a table with Louis—right next to him, in fact.”

“Oh.”

From Niall’s clouded expression, Zayn could tell there was no need for further explanation.

They were nearly home when the thought struck him. “Hey, I’d love to help out with the Bistro opening, Ni—that is, if you think you could use me.”

“Absolutely. Fancy lending a hand next Thursday then?”

“Count me in.” Zayn smiled, eager to make up for his dreadful behaviour. Besides, he welcomed the distraction: it gave him an excuse to stop dwelling on what Dr. Payne’s next move could possibly
be. “Do you need me on Wednesday, too? Because I can cancel or reschedule with Harry and—”

“No!” Niall practically shouted.

“Are you sure because it’s really no—”

“No,” Niall insisted, cutting him off again. “I don’t want you there on Wednesday,” he added forcefully before qualifying it with, “your session with Harry is more important.”

Zayn was a little surprised by his friend’s emphatic response, but he chalked it up to good old Niall being concerned with the progress of his mentoring. Niall was extremely fortunate in that he shared the same planning period with his mentor, and thus, could meet with her whenever he wanted. As a cooking teacher, Niall probably didn’t need as much coaching as Zayn did anyway.

Zayn nodded. “Well, if you’re sure you won’t need me on Wednesday….”

“I am, but cheers for offering.” Niall parked the car in front of their building and turned off the headlights. “Now, let’s forget about Payne Academy for one night and enjoy the fact that tomorrow’s Friday. What do you say?”

“I say that’s one of the most brilliant ideas you’ve ever had, Mr. Horan.”

“Well, thank you very much, Mr. Malik,” his best friend returned, chuckling. Niall flashed that infectious smile of his, and suddenly, things didn’t seem as dire as they had before.

And then it hit him, what Niall had just said. Tomorrow was Friday. Zayn had an appointment with Dr. Payne after school tomorrow, and they were supposed to have that “talk” the man kept going on about.

“Everything alright, Zed?” Niall asked, peering at him.

Zayn forced a smile. “Of course. I’m just tired; ignore me.”

That night, before he went to sleep, he told himself that maybe the meeting wouldn’t be as bad as he thought, that maybe it would help to get things out in the open between him and Dr. Payne.

And he almost believed it, too.

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The electric kettle gave a low whistle as the water came to an angry boil. Its automatic switch toggled off with a loud click that sounded like a rimshot slicing through the thick silence. Zayn, ever on edge in his principal’s office, jumped at the noise. Dr. Payne, of course, didn’t flinch.

Zayn peered uneasily at the man sitting behind the desk. Zayn was still standing, one hand clutching the back of a chair. He was afraid to get too comfortable in Dr. Payne’s presence because he had witnessed first-hand how quickly his principal’s mood could shift from ‘tranquil sea’ to ‘rough swell.’

Dr. Payne leaned forward, hands resting on his desk, fingers laced together. “I think it’s about time
we got straight to the point…don’t you, Mr. Malik?”

Zayn blinked down at the man a few times, somehow resisting the urge to shake his head in utter disbelief. Zayn thought they had already ‘gotten to the point.’ Indeed, Dr. Payne had made his dishonourable intentions more than clear with what had occurred in this very office before break.

Zayn’s eyes followed his principal as he sauntered over towards the wet bar. He didn’t dare take his eyes off the man for even a second.

“Let me put it this way,” Dr. Payne began, easily reaching for a cup from the highest shelf. “You can either play the game my way, or you can kiss goodbye to your teaching career,” he informed the young teacher, making a cursory glance over his shoulder. “But don’t let me pressure you, Mr. Malik. The choice is entirely yours.”

“Game?” Zayn repeated hesitantly. “I-I don’t think I understand, sir.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you haven’t caught the gist of our little tête-à-têtes by now, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn wasn’t sure what he was more appalled by: the man’s obscene proposal or the casual manner in which he delivered it. “But…but that’s not fair.”

“Whoever said life—or teaching—was fair?” Dr. Payne politely reprimanded. “Tea?”

“Oh, no…thank you, sir.”

“I’ve a selection of herbal and green teas as well, if you’d prefer,” the other man said, pouring boiling water from the carafe into a teacup with a dainty rose design. “Mr. Styles prefers green in the afternoons; then again, nobody’s perfect, as they say. Personally, I prefer a classic cuppa.”

Zayn struggled to keep his composure. “No, I don’t want any tea.”

“Perhaps you’d fancy a cup of hot cocoa instead?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“I’ve a French press if you’re more of a coffee drinker?”

“No, thank you.”

“Biscuits, perhaps?”

“No, I don’t want anything!” Zayn snapped. “Please stop asking me!”

Dr. Payne shrugged, then walked back over to his desk, balancing a cup and saucer in his right hand. Zayn was surprised the man didn’t comment on his outburst, but maybe he could see how rattled Zayn’s nerves were at the moment. Unfortunately, the principal’s relaxed demeanour only seemed to be making them worse.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Mr. Malik?”

“I’m fine where I am,” Zayn returned sharply.

“Suit yourself.” Unbothered, Dr. Payne proceeded to drop a single sugar cube into his black tea. It quickly dissolved into nothingness when it hit the scalding liquid.

As if hypnotised, Zayn watched the man stir the cup’s contents in a deliberate fashion, the teaspoon
striking the side of the porcelain teacup as waves of steam curled around him. The slow tattoo of metal clinking against glass made Zayn feel increasingly agitated until he finally blurted out:

“I won’t do it.”

Dr. Payne slowly lifted his gaze from his teacup. For a moment, Zayn wasn’t sure if the man had forgotten his earlier ultimatum.

But of course he hadn’t.

“In that case, Mr. Malik, I’ll be forced to place you on suspension.”

Zayn’s jaw dropped. “For what?”

“Don’t worry,” the man tutted, “I’ll think of something.” Dr. Payne paused a moment, apparently waiting for him to object. Zayn couldn’t say a word, though, because he could barely believe what he was hearing. An administrator couldn’t just bandy threats about like that, could they? They couldn’t put a teacher on suspension without cause.

Right?

Dr. Payne ‘smiled’ patronisingly at the novice teacher. “You hold an initial teaching licence, Mr. Malik, and this is a select private school,” he said, eerily reading Zayn’s innermost thoughts. “I don’t really need a good reason for such a disciplinary action. In fact, I only need to cite a lack of confidence in your teaching abilities.”

Zayn stared back at his principal dumbfounded. He knew the man was right, knew there was a cosmic imbalance of power between them. He also knew there was no way he could imagine being anything other than a teacher. It was what he was meant to be. It was who he was, simple as that.

Zayn wracked his brains, searching for a way out. “But I could teach somewhere else, couldn’t I? Get whatever credits I needed, do another year or two of mentoring, and—”

“And what?” Dr. Payne asked, amused. “Even if you were eventually hired in some school off the map, would that satisfy you? To be a second-rate educator at a third-rate school in—where the devil is Miss Hart from anyway—Iowa?” Dr. Payne smirked. “Maybe I read you and your ambitions incorrectly, but I highly doubt it.”

“What exactly would you want me to do?” The words tumbled out of Zayn’s mouth before he could stop them.

“Ah, that’s much better.” Dr. Payne’s sick approval revolted him. “Not much would be required of you at first,” the man shared, taking a sip from his teacup before folding his hands on the desk again. “As we have already established, you would need to refer to me as ‘Daddy’ or ‘sir’ in private. In public, nothing would change, of course. In addition, I would expect to have the opportunity to—let us say—admire both your mind and your body on a weekly basis—just what you’re comfortable with to begin with. We can discuss particulars at a later date, of course.”

“Well, of course,” Zayn grunted back.

Dr. Payne frowned. “I sincerely hope that wasn’t sarcasm I heard in your voice, Mr. Malik. As I’ve stated countless times before, I do not tolerate insubordination. This…arrangement does not afford you special privileges. It does not provide an opportunity for you to act in a disrespectful manner towards me or the office I hold.” He leaned closer, eyes burrowing into Zayn’s soul. “Are we sufficiently clear on that?”
“Yes, sir,” Zayn replied tersely, “but maybe you’ve forgotten that I haven’t actually consented to anything yet?”

“No, I am quite aware of that fact,” Dr. Payne conceded with unmasked annoyance. “Now, if I may continue?”

Zayn folded his arms across his chest. “Do I have a choice?”

“Don’t be foolish, my dear boy. One always has a choice.”

Zayn had to bite his tongue in order to prevent saying something he’d surely regret later.

“Good. As I was saying, I will eventually ask you for some simple favours,” Dr. Payne disclosed, licking his lips in a cat-like manner. “Don’t worry though, I won’t ask you to do anything you aren’t ready for.”

Zayn almost snorted. He wasn’t ready for anything—well, anything along the lines his principal was thinking. Zayn had only been on a handful of dates and all with ‘nice girls’ (and more recently, boys). Girls like Wendy Johnson, who was president of his college’s abstinence club. Boys like Ed Sheeran.

“How can I trust you?” Zayn asked suspiciously. “What guarantees do I have that you won’t cross the line…again.”

“You have my word,” his principal answered smoothly. His long fingers curled around the rose-embellished teacup, almost strangling it. “Are you sure you don’t want to sit down, Mr. Malik?” the man asked, the ghost of a smile on his lips. “You turned rather pale all of a sudden.”

“I’m sorry,” Zayn managed, clutching the back of the chair again for support. “What were we talking about?”

“We were discussing our arrangement...oh, and the small matter of trust.”

“I thought you advised me not to trust anyone, sir?” Zayn challenged.

“Ah yes, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne replied, ever amused. “You are a wonderful pupil; it really is most gratifying.” He then stood up from his desk chair and offered an outstretched hand. “Shall we shake on it?”

Cautiously, Zayn accepted his principal’s hand, solidifying...well, something. It should have come as no surprise to him that Dr. Payne’s grasp on his hand continued long after what might be deemed polite by standards of etiquette. Seconds ticked by, and the man showed no signs of relinquishing his hold on Zayn’s hand; if anything, his grip tightened.

“S-sir.”

It worked because his principal immediately released his hand. Zayn drew back, cradling his hand to his chest as if he’d been burned.

Dr. Payne’s eyes danced wildly. “I feel so much better now that we have everything sorted—don’t you?”

Numbly, Zayn nodded.

“Excellent!” Dr. Payne announced, clapping his hands together decisively. “I will be contacting you
shortly then. Good evening, Mr. Malik.” Without another word, he settled behind his desk again and flipped open his MacBook, leaving Zayn to wonder what on Earth he had just unknowingly consented to.

Chapter End Notes

Dead knackered but wanted to get this out to you all. Next chapter is scheduled for 28 March, but it MIGHT be out earlier. Much love! ~Maree xx
Tuesday had been a crazy day (not unlike every other day at Payne Academy). It was particularly stressful though because of the update that morning from the state department of education on the upcoming assessments. Testing was less than three months away, and apparently, the state was now adding an essay component to the grades six, eight, and eleven social studies assessments. Zayn hadn’t really equipped his younger students with the tools to write an involved argumentative essay response comparing the Negative Confessions of Ancient Egypt and Hammurabi's Code, so his stress level skyrocketed upon hearing the news.

Needless to say, he was glad Niall hadn’t let him cancel his meeting with Harry that week. He needed all the help he could get from the English teacher on how to prepare his students for the new essay requirement.

Zayn was still reeling from the assessment bombshell when he realised the Tuesday staff meeting was about to start in exactly two minutes. He grabbed his bag and made a mad dash down to the library. He didn’t even want to think about the public—or worse, private—humiliations Dr. Payne would subject him to if he walked in late to a staff meeting.

He burst through the library doors at precisely three-thirty and was relieved to find that the meeting hadn’t started yet. His relief was fleeting, however, when after a minute of searching, he determined there wasn’t a single chair available.

“Hey, Zayn—over here!” Ed’s distinctive voice was easily discernible even through the loud chatter and chin-wagging around him. Zayn scanned the library for the music teacher and finally spotted him waving through the throng. Zayn wove his way through the tables until he reached the small, trapezoid one Ed had snagged towards the front.

“Saved you a seat, mate!”

Zayn smiled gratefully as he collapsed into the designated chair. “Thanks, man.”

Ed beamed. “Oh, and you can relax: they’re having technical difficulties up front. Niall took advantage of the extra time and went to fetch his tea.”

Zayn opened his notebook and rummaged through his bag for a pen. “Thought you generally sat with the other music teachers at these things?”

“Yes, but I haven’t seen you in ages and….” The ginger’s voice trailed off as he watched Zayn go through three pens, hunting for one that actually worked. “Here,” he chuckled, “take one of mine.”

“I swear I’m going to get my crap together one of these days,” Zayn replied with a sheepish grin before gratefully accepting the black ballpoint. He was about to write the date at the top of his notebook when he noticed the school slogan emblazoned across the pen he’d just been given.

*I love Payne.*

Zayn’s hand juddered and the pen dropped to the floor. Embarrassed, he reached down to retrieve it,
but before he could do so, a set of spider-like fingers snatched it up.

“You seem to be continuously dropping things in my presence,” Dr. Payne mused, twirling the pen artfully in his lithe fingers as if it were a baton before tucking it securely above Zayn’s notebook. “I hope I don’t make you nervous, Mr. Malik,” the man added, staring down at him with that usual mix of condescension and amusement.

“Yes—I mean, no,” Zayn corrected himself. “Of course not, sir.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Dr. Payne returned, lips twisting into an ironic smile. Then, his gaze wandered to the other teacher seated at the table, and the smile became a grimace. “Oh. Good afternoon, Mr. Sheeran.”

Ed smiled tightly. “Good afternoon, sir.”

The two men stared at each other for a long moment, expressions frozen, until Dr. Payne cleared his throat. “The music teachers are on the other side of the library, Mr. Sheeran.”

“I didn’t think we had assigned seats, sir,” Ed replied with a tone dangerously close to impudence. “I thought this meeting was focused on technology.”

Dr. Payne’s expression hardened, his eyes narrowed to mere slits. “Touché, Mr. Sheeran; however, I always think it’s a good idea to be seated with your department. You never know when you might need to confer with your team about a presented item.” He stared down at Zayn purposefully. “I would advise you both to keep that in mind for next week.”

“Why?” Ed challenged, and Zayn’s jaw dropped. “Are you making a seating chart for the faculty, Dr. Payne?”

The two men glared at each other for an agonisingly long time until Dr. Payne’s expression suddenly relaxed, and he stepped away, all tension melting with his withdrawal. “Gentleman, I’d love to continue this little chat, but unfortunately, I have a meeting to run.” He turned on his heel and left without another word.

A second later, Niall breathlessly slid into the empty seat, tumbler in hand. “Oi, did I miss anything?”

***

“And now for the final item on the agenda,” Dr. Payne announced after he had shut down the projector, and Zayn couldn’t be happier that the staff meeting was finally coming to a close.

“I have some rather exciting news to share,” the principal announced, looking pleased. “Although Payne Academy prides itself on its superior academics, we encourage students to have a rich, well-rounded education that includes sport and the arts. This latter area, I am chuffed to say, has had a particularly impressive showing for the school in recent years, and from all appearances, it will continue to be an advertisement for Payne Academy as an unparalleled institution of learning for years to come.”

“Niall,” Ed hissed, nudging the boy next to him. “Get ready to stand up, mate. You know he’s going on about the Bistro.” Niall shushed him, but Zayn could see Niall was buzzing underneath the
skin, ready to hear his name called.

Dr. Payne surveyed the room. “Please welcome back our very own Mr. Tomlinson, who—I’m happy to report—has just returned from his personal leave.”

“Wait—what?” Ed gasped, echoing all of their thoughts.

“Personal leave, my Irish arse,” Niall snorted, and Zayn was glad the enthusiastic applause covered his friend’s remark.

Dr. Payne clapped a few times himself, then his gaze drifted to Louis who was seated at a table with Harry, front and centre. (Apparently, the departmental seating thing was only an issue where the history and music departments involved.) “Mr. Tomlinson, I give you the floor.”

Louis stood up proudly and acknowledged their boss. “Well, ladies and gents,” he began in that soaring tenor of his, “I am thrilled to bits to announce that the New York Film Academy is going to be sending out representatives to attend our annual Spring Shakespearean production.”

There was another round of applause, and Louis gave one of his signature, over-the-top bows.

“Wanker,” Niall grunted, and Zayn kicked him under the table before he said something that got them in (more) trouble.

“As you all know,” the drama teacher continued, “the NYFA is a top institution of higher learning for the arts, so this opportunity is massive for our student actors. It could mean recognition, admission, and even scholarships.”

A teacher at the back raised her hand. “Which play have you decided on?”

There was a dramatic pause, Louis taking time to fully milk the moment. Niall appeared almost bored, slouched in his chair, but then again, Zayn and him already knew the Spring play, thanks to Jo.

“Othello,” Louis answered at long last to a chorus of approval. “Othello is one of Shakespeare’s finest tragedies, and it’s a proper good play to highlight the depth of talent in our department. It addresses subjects and themes that affect our modern world such as honour, jealousy, revenge, and corruption.”

Zayn couldn’t help but think the choice was perfect for Payne Academy.

“When will the audition process begin?” another teacher asked.

“Well, the competition for a role in this production will be fierce,” Louis admitted. “I’m holding tryouts all next week, and I’ll try to make my decision as quickly as possible after that. Keep in mind, however, that this is a massive opportunity for Payne Academy, and I am determined to select the right cast. As Dr. Payne said”—Louis smiled at their principal who was standing off to the side—“we want to show that we not only have the best academics at Payne, but the best theatre and arts programme in the state as well.”

Louis returned to his table in a hail of applause, receiving a fist bump from Harry as he sat back down. Ed seemed a bit miffed, Niall appeared as if he were about to gag, and Zayn…well, Zayn couldn’t help but feel like he made a humongous mistake when he advocated for Louis’ return.

The drama teacher had received a hero’s welcome, and Zayn tried to be happy for him. Zayn wanted to be happy for Louis. He wanted to be happy for his mentor’s best friend. Above all, Zayn
wanted to be a good person who could forgive and forget, a person who didn’t hold senseless grudges.

But no matter how much he tried to be happy for Louis, he just couldn’t manage it. Something kept holding him back: a sense of foreboding, Niall’s expression, the feverish enthusiasm from the rest of the faculty, the look Louis exchanged with Dr. Payne….

At that moment, Dr. Payne crossed to the centre of the room again, and the library once again descended into a respectful silence. “Thank you, Mr. Tomlinson. This news is quite satisfactory—quite satisfactory, indeed.” Louis beamed at the compliment, then smirked in Niall’s direction.

But then again, maybe Zayn just imagined it.

“Thank you, staff. You are dismissed.”

Niall seemed to be in a state of indignant shock. “You’d think Payne would’ve mentioned the Bistro’s reopening at the very least,” he huffed.

Dr. Payne clapped his hands together twice, and everyone quickly froze. “One more quick announcement. I’d almost forgotten that Payne Bistro is having its grand reopening for the Spring semester this Friday. Please promote the Bistro as much as you can with your students and in the community at large. I have been quite impressed with what our culinary arts students have ‘cooked up’ under Mr. Horan’s tutelage thus far”—he paused at the polite smattering of laughter—“and I see many exciting possibilities for this real-world learning venture. That is all.”

Everyone began to file out. “Bloody hell,” Ed said under his breath once they had exited the library and rounded a corner. “One would think he’d heard you, mate, the way he brought up the Bistro right after you did and all.”

“Payne was on the other side of the room,” Niall dismissed, completely unaffected. Then he turned to Zayn and groaned as soon as he saw the look on his best friend’s face. “Now look what you started, Ed. Zayn’s paranoid enough as it is without you giving him ideas.”

“Obviously there’s no way Dr. Payne could have overheard,” Zayn acknowledged, more for himself than the others. “But you know, I can’t help wondering if maybe…no, never mind.” He bit his lip and tried to convince himself that he was being absurd. The thought was ridiculous, utterly ridiculous.

“Here we go again,” Niall moaned, throwing an arm around his shoulders. “Go on, Zed. Tell us about the mad idea you’ve got stuck in your head now.”

Zayn shot him an annoyed look but found himself caving anyway under that knowing, brotherly gaze. “Okay…but not that I really believe this, but what if—now, mind you, this isn’t within the realm of—”

“Zed, spit it out already!” Niall ordered as Ed chuckled at their sibling-like banter.

“Fine. I was just wondering if Dr. Payne had somehow planted a listening device on one of us and”—

But Zayn couldn’t finish his statement because the boys were practically falling over themselves with laughter. At first, Zayn was peeved at their reaction, but soon, even he saw how silly the whole idea was and joined in. If nothing else, it felt good to laugh again in the company of two of his closest friends. It made him forget about the new assessment demands, about Louis, and about Dr. Payne and his ultimatums.
And really, what could be better than that?

***

On Wednesday, Zayn didn’t delay in heading over to his mentor’s classroom after school. The plan was for them to discuss the new assessment requirements, and Zayn figured it would take the majority of the hour (or longer).

That’s why Zayn was surprised to find the English teacher shoving stacks of papers into his well-worn briefcase the moment he entered the room.

Harry looked up apologetically. “Ugh, I’m sorry, but we can’t meet today. Dr. Payne asked me to attend a public session with the Board and I’m headed there now.” He zipped up his case and checked the wall clock. “He had something come up all of a sudden and Payne Academy needs to be represented at this thing. I was actually just coming over to deliver the bad news.”

Zayn’s heart sank. “No problem, Harry. I guess it can’t be helped,” he replied, even though a little voice inside his head suspected that it probably could have been helped. Regardless, Zayn knew it wasn’t Harry’s fault, so there was no point in blaming the man for this last minute change of plans.

“Thanks for understanding,” Harry said, looking relieved. “Same time, same place next week?”

Zayn nodded, then followed his mentor into the hall.

“Oh, bugger—I’m an idiot,” Harry exclaimed, slapping his forehead after he locked up.

“Forget something in your classroom?”

“No, I’m supposed to give you a message from Dr. Payne. He needs to see you today…something about a form, I think?” Harry screwed his face up, trying to recall the rest of the message. “He said for you to meet him in his office at four sharp, and I wouldn’t be late.” The English teacher lowered his voice. “He’s in a ‘mood’ today, and you know how he is about promptness.”

Zayn smiled weakly and thanked Harry for relaying the information. Then he went back to his classroom and waited. He graded some papers, checked his email, then graded more papers. He briefly considered not showing up to the appointment, but he knew that would only get Harry into trouble, so he swiftly nixed that idea (despite how tempting it sounded).

Finally, it was time to make his descent into hell.

Zayn entered the outer office to find it dark and deserted, which he probably should have expected. Jo was not the type to dilly-dally, and it was exactly four on the nose according to the office clock. Dr. Payne’s heavy wooden door was shut, but light seeped out from under it, producing an ominous effect. Zayn stood in front of the door, trying to collect himself, when a voice from the other side bellowed:

“Please don’t keep me waiting, Mr. Malik!”

Zayn quickly fumbled with the door handle and entered the inner sanctum. “H-how did you know it was me, sir?”
Dr. Payne, seated at his desk as usual, raised an eyebrow. “It’s the appointed hour, and I’d hope that you would have learnt the importance of punctuality by this time, Mr. Malik.”

“Yes, but how did you know I’d be standing there when you—?”

Dr. Payne released a weary sigh. “Lock the door behind you and come here, please. I will warn you upfront that I am not in the mood for idle chatter today.”

As the lock clicked into place, Zayn felt trapped, felt that awful sense of foreboding again. Somehow, he gathered up enough courage to walk over and face the man behind the desk. Almost immediately, Zayn deduced that Harry was right: their principal was in a “mood.” Zayn couldn’t help but wonder if the man’s distemper had anything to do with the uncomfortable exchange he’d had with Ed the previous afternoon.

“Alright then, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne began casually, and Zayn half-hoped this meeting actually was about some form he needed to sign, “please remove your shirt—and any other clothing items you wish—then undo my zip.”

“Excuse me?” Zayn sputtered. He couldn’t believe his ears. There was no way the man could have said what Zayn thought he’d said—and especially not with that unaffected expression on his face. Zayn must have heard him wrong. He simply must have heard him wrong.

Dr. Payne looked at him expectantly. “You’re forgetting something, Mr. Malik.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“Not a bad effort, but I think you could do so much better.”

Zayn folded his arms across his chest. “I am not calling you Daddy if that’s what you’re after.”

Dr. Payne narrowed his eyes. “We made an agreement, Mr. Malik,” he snarled, rising to his feet.

“Yes, the agreement,” Zayn echoed, anger emboldening him now. “I seem to remember that you promised you wouldn’t ask me to do anything I wasn’t ready for.”

“Well, if you don’t uphold your end of the bargain,” Dr. Payne snapped, “I certainly won’t adhere to mine.”

“Fine,” Zayn relented. “Excuse me, Daddy,” he amended, the final word repulsive on his tongue. “That better?”

“Profoundly,” Dr. Payne purred.

“So, Daddy, why in heaven’s name would you ask me to unzip your trousers?”

“Because, my sweet, innocent boy,” Dr. Payne replied with a lascivious grin, “Daddy is going to let you do something very special tonight.”

Zayn eyed his principal warily, wishing the man would just get straight to the point for once.

But then, unfortunately, he did:

“Daddy is going to let you suck his big, beautiful cock.”
The cliffhanger.... ;)

Anyway, thanks for being patient. In case you didn't see my update note on tumblr, life has hit me like a brick wall lately. I'm trying my best to work 18 hour days, maintain my health, and keep up with everything else. There is a light at the end of the tunnel here soon, but I just wanted to let you guys know. xx

That being said, I'm shooting to update again on 18 April. In the meantime, please let me know what you thought about this chapter. :)

Much love! ~Maree xx
“Daddy is going to let you suck his big, beautiful cock.”

“What?!” Zayn gasped, shirking at his principal’s crude suggestion. It was out of place in a school—after hours or not. (In Zayn’s opinion, the vile comment was out of place anywhere.)

Dr. Payne exhaled slowly, clearly trying to keep his annoyance in check. It was as if he’d just asked the teacher to do a mundane favour for him, like handing him the stapler, and Zayn had refused. “You heard me the first time, Mr. Malik.”

“Well, you’re crazy if you think I’m going to…to….”

Dr. Payne folded his hands together neatly on his desk, the ghost of a smirk at his lips. “To do what, Mr. Malik?”

“To do…what you just said!” Zayn finished, flustered.

“We have an agreement,” Dr. Payne reminded him. “You gave your word. Please don’t make me do this the hard way.”

Zayn gaped at his principal, trying to make sense of the surreal situation. The man was the epitome of ‘cool and collected,’ but there was the slightest hint of warning in his tone.

“Clearly, this is my mistake,” Dr. Payne sighed, getting to his feet. “I should have made it crystal clear to you, Mr. Malik, that when I ask you to do something, it is not an option, but a command. I am the one in authority here, and if you have not realised that yet, then evidently, the fault is mine.”

Something in the man’s dark eyes scared him, sent a shiver up and down his spine. Zayn side-stepped towards the door, but the other man was around the desk in an instant, blocking his path.

Zayn stared down at his shoes. “I want to leave, sir.”

“You haven’t been dismissed.”

Zayn looked up, more angry than afraid now. “But you promised!”

Dr. Payne wasn’t impressed. “As you stated, I promised you that we wouldn’t do anything you weren’t ready for. After much consideration, I have determined that fellatio would be a proper introduction to your—shall we say—sexual education?”

“Sexual education?” Zayn repeated, part dumbfounded and part horrified. “Fellatio?”

“Ah, there you go again, repeating every other word I say,” Dr. Payne lamented. “If teaching doesn’t work out, you could always search for a job as a human echo,” he remarked dryly before carding a hand through his perfectly-styled hair. “But in all seriousness, I think fellatio would be an excellent place to start.”

Zayn was appalled. This wasn’t what he had agreed to at all (at least he didn’t think so). “I don’t
“Suck my cock?” Dr. Payne supplied easily, and Zayn just stared back at him, repulsed by the man’s casual manner. “Yes, I suspected you might say that. It’s disappointing because we are behind schedule as it is,” he clucked. “To tell the truth, I was hoping we’d be much farther along at this point.” He shook his head as he leaned against the edge of his desk. “So how does a handjob sound to you?”

Zayn baulked. “It sounds deplorable.”

“Which—giving or receiving?”

“Both.”

“How about fully-clothed then?”

“No.”

“Fine,” Dr. Payne gritted out. “You can touch yourself, and I’ll watch.”

“No.”

Dr. Payne narrowed his eyes, then stepped in front of the teacher, fists balled at his sides. “See, this is why I always preach against the dangers of bargaining. I should have just made you suck my cock and moved on.”

Zayn swallowed uneasily. “So why didn’t you?”

“Because I’m not going to force you into doing anything you’re not ready for,” the man admitted grumpily, backing off. “Especially when I may have miscalculated your progress slightly.”

“Are…are we done then?” Zayn asked guardedly.

“Not unless you’ve chosen which of my generous offers you’d like to accept.”

Zayn gawked at him. “I told you. I don’t want to accept any of them.”

Dr. Payne gave a long-suffering sigh as he drummed his clear-polished nails on the desktop. “Yes, I was afraid you might say that.”

“Well,” Zayn snorted, “if you knew I was going to refuse, why did you ask me?”

“Oh, I wasn’t asking you, Mr. Malik,” the man answered with a cruel, twisted smile, “I was telling you what you must do, or rest assured, there will be consequences.”

Zayn bit his lip. He was a fool to think he’d be off the hook so easily. “What type of consequences?” he stuttered, fear returning in full force as all sorts of sick possibilities began to invade his imagination.

“My, my, my. Where ever did that rebellious streak go?” the principal chided, crossing the room to close the blinds the rest of the way. “Daddy knew this day would come and although I am disappointed you are not choosing to be obedient at the moment, I do have to admit that punishing you may be just as rewarding for me.”

Zayn wished he could see the man’s face, but he couldn’t, not from across the darkened room. He wanted to run, but he felt chained to the spot, chained to something he couldn’t explain. Even
stronger than his urge to run, however, was the urge to tell this man exactly what he thought of him:

“You’re a monster.”

Dr. Payne took a few steps toward him. He didn’t seem affronted; no, he was wearing that same damned amused expression again, the one Zayn wanted to claw off his face.

“You’re entitled to your opinion,” Dr. Payne mused flippantly. “Then again, it has never been my desire to be well-liked. As Machiavelli observed, ‘it is better to be feared than to be loved.’”

“I feel sorry for you,” Zayn said quietly, and for a brief moment, he was sure he saw something almost human pass over his principal’s features before they hardened again.

“I don’t need your sympathy,” he sneered, eyes darkening as he edged closer. “As a matter of fact, Mr. Malik, I want something quite different from you.”

“How can you be the principal of a school?” Zayn demanded, drawing back in disgust. “How can you be around children?”

“Come now, Mr. Malik. Teenagers are hardly children,” he scoffed. “In any case, I am one of the most successful administrators in the country because I know how to rule with an iron fist. I also know where to draw the line.” He edged closer still, and Zayn retreated until he had nowhere left to go. “But I am not interested in discussing the students right now.”

“Well, I am.”

Dr. Payne heaved a sigh. “Fine, let’s talk about the students,” he placated. “Did you have any particular student in mind?”

“Derek,” Zayn immediately shot back, thinking of the footballer in his last hour who turned into a shell of human being every time their principal approached. “I know you said something to him at the beginning of the year, threatened him or something.”

“You exaggerate, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne dismissed with a shrug. “Granted, I may have suggested the boy show you greater respect. I also might have informed him that if he chose not to follow my…er…suggestion, that I would take it into the highest consideration when I approved his status for the football team—which, with his grades, is precarious at best. We did have a little chat about how that would affect his college plans, et cetera, et cetera.”

“He doesn’t even want to play football, not really.”

“Yes, but his father wants him to play football, so there’s that,” Dr. Payne retorted. “Sometimes we have to listen to authority figures. Sometimes we have to do things we don’t like, Mr. Malik.”

Something in Dr. Payne’s words made him shiver again. “Well, you didn’t have to scare him like that.”

Payne Academy’s principal raised an eyebrow. “Yes I did actually. I prevented a popular student from derailing your authority early on, a mistake you would have struggled to recover from.”
“You went too far.”

“Perhaps,” the other man confessed. “Still, I don’t like anyone mistreating what’s mine. But like I said, I’m not interested in discussing the students right now.” Dr. Payne took a step closer, and Zayn flattened himself against the wall, wishing he could morph into it. He felt trapped. (He was trapped.)

Zayn wracked his brains for something to say. He inherently knew it was better to keep the conversation going, but it was getting increasingly harder to think with Dr. Payne hovering over him. “So, what are you interested in, sir?” he asked, almost kicking himself the moment the words left his mouth.

Dr. Payne smirked. “Haven’t you figured that out yet, Mr. Malik?” He slowly reached out a hand and placed it under Zayn’s chin, stroking the young teacher’s jawline before Zayn pushed his hand away. Dr. Payne’s smirk just deepened. “I am also interested in making this school the number one school in the state—in the country even,” he shared, eyes flashing with a ruthless determination before softening a little. “Then again, those two ‘interests’ aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you are one of the best and brightest young educators I have ever been fortunate enough to encounter,” the principal acknowledged. “The fact that I was able to capture you for Payne Academy when so many others wanted you is quite a feather in my cap, believe me.”

“Then why in God’s name are you treating me like this?” Zayn demanded. “Why are you asking me to do such awful things?”

“I’ve done nothing but show you how special you are to me, how special you are to this school,” Dr. Payne insisted, knuckles brushing lightly against Zayn’s cheek.

“Don’t!” Zayn shouted furiously, knocking the man’s hand away again. “I should report you to the state. I should—”

“You should do what?” Dr. Payne mocked. “No one would believe you, not with my reputation. It would all be hearsay. Besides, I haven’t done anything that would be particularly worth reporting—not yet anyway.”

There was something sinister in the way he seemed to be so nonchalant about the whole thing, as if it were one giant joke. “I want to leave now, sir.”

Dr. Payne didn’t budge. “You haven’t been dismissed.”

“I don’t care.”

The principal regarded him for a long moment, then turned abruptly and skulked towards the window again. “Go ahead, Mr. Malik. Leave now, if that’s what you truly want, but know when you walk out that door, our agreement is dissolved.” He stood there for a long time, silhouette imposing against the blinds before clearing his throat:

“If you think walking out that door is going to get you what you want, what you need,” the man added, gazing at Zayn with an intensity that cut through the darkness and distance like a laser beam, “then by all means, leave now.”

Zayn just stared back at him for several seconds. Then, he burst into laughter; he couldn’t help himself.
“Something humorous?”

Zayn snorted. “Yeah, actually. Hearing you talk about all this as if I have a choice.”

“You do have a choice; stop acting like a child.”

“Stop treating me like one then!” Zayn shouted back at him, and Dr. Payne cocked an eyebrow as if impressed by the novice teacher’s outburst. “I feel like you’re always watching and judging my every movement! I feel like I can’t take a step without getting permission from you!” Zayn ranted as he paced back and forth, tired of keeping everything inside. “You say I’m acting like a child, but with the way you treat me, how on Earth am I supposed to act?”

“I’m merely looking after you and your best interests, Mr, Malik,” the older man contended, closing the distance between them in the blink of an eye. “I’m guiding you, helping you to make the right choices.” He grasped Zayn by the shoulders and stared him straight in the eye. “I know what you want. I know what you need better than you do yourself.”

Zayn swallowed. He felt light headed, like he was falling and didn’t know which way was up. It was the way he always felt when Dr. Payne looked at him like that, when he whispered in his ear things that shouldn’t be true….

He shook it off and took a step back. “I don’t need you to look after me. I have my friends and family for that.”

“Yes, you do, don’t you?” the principal returned with an enigmatic twist of the lips.

Zayn frowned. “What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing. I just find it amusing that you think I’m the only person in your life who treats you like a child.”

“I…I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do,” Dr. Payne purred, leaning close enough so that Zayn could feel the man’s hot breath against his neck. “That’s one thing I think you are starting to realise….”

There was a grain of truth in the man’s words, even if Zayn was loath to admit it. When he was growing up, Zayn never minded the way his mother would coddle him. He never minded that other people made the decisions, that his father or Niall would often speak for him. He was lucky to have supportive people in his life.

He was lucky. (He was.)

“You feel controlled, Mr. Malik, don’t you?”

Zayn screwed his eyes shut. “Maybe,” he croaked out, wondering why he was admitting such a thing to this man, of all people. A man that would prey on his weaknesses, use them to his advantage until he finally got what he wanted.

“You only allow yourself to be controlled because you want to be controlled,” Dr. Payne contended, and Zayn hated how much sense the man was making. “You want to be controlled so much that you even set unrealistic restraints on yourself.” Eyes still shut, Zayn felt a hand run down his arm. “But maybe,” the principal continued, “it’s time you took some of that control back, figure out what you really want.”
“My parents, my friends…,” Zayn faltered, “they just want what’s best for me.”

“Most of them mean well, of course,” Dr. Payne acknowledged, “but not one of them understands you the way I do.” Zayn opened his eyes to find Dr. Payne in front of him now, hands trailing down the sides of his body before resting firmly just above his hips. “And boys like Ed Sheeran will never be able to give you what you need. They will never be able to make you feel the way I can make you feel.”

Zayn forced himself not to think about Dr. Payne’s words, about the explicit images they conjured in his mind, about the way the man’s hands felt around his waist—comforting, strong, possessive, demanding….

Zayn leaned back so that he could look into the other man’s eyes. “But that’s what you want as well,” he argued, heart and mind racing. “You want to control me, too.”

“I don’t want to control you,” Dr. Payne denied calmly. “I want you to submit to me and only in certain aspects of your life.”

“But that’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

“It isn’t. Not quite.”

Zayn was tired of thinking, tired of stupid semantics and Dr. Payne’s games. “I want you to leave me alone.”

The older man leaned closer, impossibly closer until his lips brushed against the side of Zayn’s face. “Tell me what you really want,” he urged. Zayn shivered as cold, calloused hands dipped under his shirt, fingers massaging rough circles against the smooth skin at his waist.

Zayn sucked in a breath and tried to disentangle the overpowering pull of antagonistic sensations. He felt hot and cold, desire and disgust, clarity and confusion, imprisoned yet free. Zayn felt free in a way he never felt before.

(He felt free in a way that scared the living daylights out of him.)

“I just want to teach,” Zayn answered finally, peeling the man’s hands off his waist and turning away. “All I ever wanted to do was to teach.”

“I’m going to help you become a great teacher, Mr. Malik; I promise you that.”

Zayn turned back around to look at the other man. He wished he could believe him, wished those were the only intentions Dr. Payne had for his bright young teacher. Then, he pushed his shoulders and looked the other man straight in the eye. “May I go now, sir?”

Dr. Payne nodded staunchly. If he was disappointed by Zayn’s question, by anything that had (or hadn’t) transpired in their ‘meeting,’ he didn’t let it show. “Yes, Mr. Malik. You may leave now. We will discuss your punishment another day.”

Zayn closed his eyes as a feeling of dread washed over him. He had almost forgotten about the punishment. “When?”

“Next week sometime,” his principal answered smoothly. “Don’t worry, I’ll be in contact with you.”

As he exited the office, Zayn consoled himself that whatever punishment Dr. Payne cooked up couldn’t be as awful as any of the sordid sexual acts he proposed at the beginning of the hour.
Besides, that was something for future Zayn to worry about.

Chapter End Notes

Ooh, I was nervous about posting this one.

Anyway, I know this update was on the slightly shorter side, but I felt like it was pretty intense, so I went with it. And good news, I'm going to try to update next Thursday (26 April) as long as my life stays relatively calm. xx

Niall, Harry, and Louis will all feature in the next one. Dr. Payne's punishment will be in the next chapter as well. ;) In the meantime, I'm dyinggg to know your thoughts/reactions to this chapter. Much love! ~Maree xx
Zayn was ashamed. He was ashamed he let Dr. Payne’s insinuations about his friends and family (and even himself) affect him, even momentarily. He was ashamed for letting anyone treat him that way, for letting the man dictate his actions as if Zayn were a marionette and he, the puppet master.

On the plus side, Zayn had somehow managed to avoid performing the indecent acts the principal had vulgarly proposed. He tried to focus on that and not Dr. Payne’s warning that there would be consequences for his lack of obedience.

And he was mostly successful.

Once again, it was as if that part of Zayn’s life didn’t exist as long as he didn’t see Dr. Payne. All day Thursday, the young teacher avoided the office or workroom in the odd chance he might run into his principal. Zayn feared the man might make an unannounced appearance in his classroom, but thankfully, that didn’t happen. Apparently, Zayn’s ‘leash’ had been extended because the administrator didn’t bother him for the entire day, not even through e-mail.

Regardless, Zayn wasn’t foolish enough to be lulled into a false sense of security. He was reminded that Payne Academy’s principal was always watching—or had the potential to—every time Zayn passed by the camera perched outside his door. He also knew that at the whim of an unscrupulous man, he could be plummeting back into that amoral abyss.

But he didn’t think about that…much. (He didn’t dwell on it anyway.)

Instead, he concentrated on the important things: school, his students, helping Niall with the Bistro. This last was actually more fun than he thought it would be. It had been so long since the two friends had worked closely together on anything. Moreover, helping with the Bistro’s grand reopening was a welcome break from the daily grind of planning and looking over his shoulder for the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Besides, he could learn a thing or two from watching Niall’s easy rapport with his culinary students.

Since it was a student-run business, Zayn did more of the heavy lifting than the heavy thinking for once. He knew quite a few of the students (mostly girls, to no one’s surprise), but it was refreshing to see them in a new light, taking on roles of responsibility with such confidence.

“You’ve done a fantastic job with them,” Zayn told Niall as they were taking a short break. “They practically run everything themselves.”

Niall grinned cheekily. “That’s the beauty of it, bro. The goal is that I won’t have to lift a bloody finger soon, just ‘supervise.’”

“Sure,” Zayn replied with a wink. “And the long hours you’ve been putting in over the past several months was all part of a master plan to get rich from the supplemental pay you’re receiving, right?”

“Yeah, how’d you guess?” Niall grinned. “Seriously though. There are definitely worse ways to earn some extra dough at this school. Like teach an extra class during the day, for one….,”
Zayn shrugged. “I don’t really mind that; it’s good experience, and I get decent compensation for it.”

“Still not worth it, mate.”

“I don’t know. I should have enough to buy a car by the end of the year—not one like Harry’s or Dr. Payne’s, granted, but a slightly better jalopy than yours.”

Niall pretended to be offended. “Oi, how dare you talk about my girl behind her back!”

“Does Jo know she’s got competition?” Zayn teased.

“Shhh. Haven’t told her yet,” Niall joked. “But about that car…I’m not holding my breath.”

“Why?”

“Because you’d have to learn how to drive it first,” he cracked, and Zayn smiled tightly.

It was true, Zayn hadn’t learned how to drive yet. Even though he’d always loved classic cars, he never really felt the urge to drive, not when he always lived so close to school or on campus. He scoffed at people who said driving was a rite of passage. There were more important things in life than learning how to drive. Besides, his parents never minded driving him places. Or Niall. In fact, all three always seemed eager to help, to list reasons why Zayn would be a useless driver or to point out the expense he was saving. (Right now, he paid for their gas, and Niall paid for his own insurance, and it worked. It was unnecessary for Zayn to get a licence when they lived in the same apartment and could carpool to school.

The system they had worked. It did.)

Then, an intrusive thought needled at him. He recalled Dr. Payne’s recent insinuation that the people around him treated him like a child. It wasn’t true. (It wasn’t.)

He felt another nudge in his side.

“Oi, you alright, mate?”

“Of course,” Zayn reassured his best friend, pushing the meddlesome thoughts to the back of his mind where they belonged. “Just thinking we should probably get back to work.”

And they did. After another hour or so, Zayn couldn’t believe the progress they had made, everyone working seamlessly together. That’s when he heard someone suddenly yell:

“Catfight!”

He searched the room and instantly spotted what all the commotion was about. Lainey (the pouty-lipped blonde they had first met at Macy’s) and Jessica (the auburn-haired beauty and daughter of a major benefactor) appeared to be arguing about the Othello auditions from what he could judge, their words more heated than the ovens they were standing in front of.

“Jess, you think you’re entitled to every part just because of your last name!” Lainey shouted, and Zayn recalled that Jessica’s surname was Smethurst, the same name that adorned the wall above the auditorium as well as the reading room of the library.

“Whatever, Lainey,” Jessica snapped. “The roles I get have nothing to do with my family.” She put her hands on her hips and glared at her ‘friend.’ “And I’m high-key done with your jealous ass.”

“Jealous!” Lainey scoffed. “Why the fuck would I be jealous of a talentless bitch like you!”
Zayn’s mouth dropped, and he looked over at Niall who was closer to the girls, expecting the teacher to react, but he seemed to be frozen in shock.

“Because I’m gonna be cast as Desdemona,” Jessica smirked, flipping her auburn hair over her shoulders.

“Over my dead body, Jess!” Lainey screamed as Zayn made his way through the crowd of onlookers to get to the girls. “That part was meant for me. This is my chance, and I deserve it after the performance I gave in Evita!”

“Girls, break it up!” Zayn shouted, parting the sea of students to try to intervene as quickly as possible.

Neither of the girls paid him any heed as Lainey stepped closer to her friend-turned-adversary. “That part is mine!” she continued, her eyes filled with a wild determination. “And I’m not going to let you or anyone else take it away from me!” Then she stalked off, banging the door closed with the toe of her designer boots.

“Did you hear that?” Jessica asked indignantly as Zayn finally reached her. “Did you hear what she called me?”

“Yes, unfortunately I did,” Zayn replied sternly. Before he could say anything else, Niall suddenly appeared at his shoulder.

“Lainey’s been going through a difficult time,” Niall stated, and Zayn couldn’t help but wonder why the other teacher felt he always had to make excuses for the girl. And if he noticed the favouritism, Zayn was sure Jessica did. Niall rubbed the back of his neck. “If Lainey were to apologise to you, Jessica, could you two move on and forget this whole thing ever happened?”

Jessica gaped at Niall, and Zayn couldn’t blame the girl. “But Mr. Horan—you heard what she called me!” she complained before turning to Zayn. “And even if you didn’t, Mr. Malik did.”

Niall eyed Zayn uneasily. “I’m sure she didn’t mean what she said.” He was replying to Jessica, but Zayn had the feeling Niall’s words were directed at him. “Besides,” he added, lowering his voice, “I’m certain neither one of you girls would be eager to discuss this incident with Dr. Payne.”

That seemed to do the trick, and honestly, Zayn couldn’t blame her for that either. No one, students or teachers, wanted Dr. Payne to become involved if they could possibly prevent it.

“Fine,” Jessica sulked, “but she has to come to me.”

Niall looked almost grateful, and Zayn was mystified why he was so dead set on getting Lainey off the hook when she was the only one who used foul language in the exchange. Whether or not Dr. Payne was going to be informed, Zayn felt Lainey’s language and behaviour should be addressed in some way.

Zayn sighed. “Guess I’ll go see if I can find where Miss Anderson ran off to….”

“No, I got it,” Niall volunteered quickly. “I’m sure she’s shut herself away in the girl’s loo,” he added as if that were a reasonable explanation for Niall going after her rather than Zayn. “Supervise the rest of the students until I get back, yeah?”

Zayn agreed and Niall went off in search of Lainey. The culinary arts teacher returned with his student almost fifteen minutes later, and the two girls exchanged icy apologies before going back to their individual tasks.
Niall made no mention as to whether he reprimanded Lainey for her language or behaviour before returning to the room and because Niall was technically the one in charge of the after school club, Zayn decided to let the whole incident slide. It wasn’t his place to tell the other teacher how to run his club.

***

Despite the drama from the drama students and the chilly temperatures outside, the reopening of the Payne Bistro on Friday was an unequivocal success. Niall was pleased with the massive turnout, as was Dr. Payne who made a brief appearance (and barely acknowledged Zayn’s presence).

Students, family, and faculty queued up to purchase the sweet and savoury creations crafted by the culinary students under Niall’s direction. Ed, Harry, and Jo all came to show their support, chat, and indulge while Niall beamed gloriously as he seemed to be everywhere all at once.

There was one notable absence, of course.

In all fairness to Louis Tomlinson, however, the theatre teacher did have a good deal going on, what with auditions and all. Indeed, the whole school was buzzing about them, and the excitement continued well into the following week.

Zayn (and the most of the faculty) looked forward to the day when Louis would post the final cast list on the theatre door so that the students would stop nattering about it. And Zayn got it, he did. This was an opportunity for the students to showcase their talents in front of industry professionals and college recruiters. But it was also becoming a colossal distraction, and with all the new testing demands and stipulations, a distracted student body was the last thing anyone needed.

***

Tuesday was a normal day (notwithstanding the fact that the entire student body was still preoccupied with the Othello auditions). At the Tuesday staff meeting, however, there was one major change in their usual routine: Dr. Payne declared that all faculty members were to sit with their departments until further notice...

No exceptions.

As Zayn unenthusiastically headed towards the social sciences table, he locked eyes with Ed from across the library. The ginger gave him a meaningful look, one that wasn’t hard to interpret. As he sat down, Zayn consoled himself with the thought that he wasn’t the only one who suspected the run-in between Ed and Dr. Payne was the major impetus behind the sudden assigned seating.

“Since we’re all together like this,” Frank Franklin began, “I say we get our monthly department meeting over now. Everyone agree?”

Zayn craned his neck to see Dr. Payne and Harry chatting at the front of the room while one of the technology teachers fiddled with the document camera. “I don’t really think we have time for a department meeting,” he told his department head as politely as he could. “As soon as they sort out
the technology issue, I think we’ll get—”

“Nonsense, Malik,” Mr. Franklin brushed him off. “Really, the only thing we need to discuss is who’s going to chair the geography bowl club this year.” The moustachioed man scanned the table, but no one was meeting his eye contact for obvious reasons. “Personally, I think Malik would be the obvious choice since he teaches a geography course and he has nothing else like supervision duties or leading a whole department on his plate.”

Zayn blinked at his department head. “No, I don’t have hall duty,” he replied edgily, “I have a seventh class to teach.” Zayn tried not to look too annoyed as he thought about how half of the teachers at this table either bunked off duty or took their work with them on days they knew Dr. Payne would have time to prowl the corridors.

“Well, since you teach so many classes, you surely won’t notice another little thing like the geography bowl,” Mr. Franklin suggested to a collective silent sigh of relief around the table. “Thank you for volunteering, Shane.”

“It’s Zayn.”

“Oh is it? Sorry, it’s so hard remembering these ethnic names,” he remarked as if it were the wittiest thing anyone ever said, and Zayn had to bite his lip until it hurt. “Thank you, Zayn, for volunteering to sponsor the geography club.”

Zayn plastered a fake smile on his face. It wasn’t worth arguing about because he was the new teacher and there was no way he was winning this battle with his department head. Anyway, he liked geography and figured it would look good on his resume. Also, he knew he’d likely do a better job than the majority of the teachers sitting around the table because, if nothing else, he gave a crap.

(Honestly, on days like this, he wished he taught in another department. Any other department.)

“Meeting adjourned, everyone,” Frank Franklin announced as Harry put a hand up to signify they were ready up front. “Keep your noses clean.”

Zayn really disliked staff meetings now. He really, really, really disliked them.

***

Unfortunately, Zayn made the mistake of casually mentioning this to Niall later that night.

“Well,” Niall mused, playing devil’s advocate, “I mean, it does make sense, us sitting by department and all.”

Zayn grunted as he stabbed at his peas. “That’s because you have a good department, Ni. You get to sit with Ed and your mentor, Mrs. Cunningham, who may be the sweetest teacher at this school. And you don’t even have to deal with Louis because he collaborates with language arts for some reason.”

Niall cackled evilly. “It’s the luck of the Irish, is what it is.”

Zayn rolled his eyes. “It’s unfair, is what is.” He sighed, setting his fork down. “I wouldn’t even
complain except that I really don’t think it’s fair we have assigned tables just because of what happened between Ed and Dr. Payne last week.”

“Ya hear yourself, Zed?” Niall guffawed. “Do you honestly think Dr. Payne would require the entire bloody faculty to sit by departments just because Ed had a momentary lapse of sanity and talked back to him once?”

Zayn wanted to reply, “yes.” He wanted to scream it, in fact, but he was pretty sure Niall’s question was meant to be rhetorical.

“Listen, bro,” Niall went on, grounding him with that easy smile and staid stare. “Don’t you think it makes more sense that the real reason behind the seating change was that Dr. Payne simply wanted us sat with our departments because we were discussing things relevant to our departments?”

“But we weren’t,” Zayn insisted, and Niall regarded him with scepticism. “Okay, not really. I mean, everything in the world could be construed as department-related on some level.”

“Give it up, Zed.”

“Give what up?”

“The paranoia,” Niall answered. “You’re starting to become one of those drama queens. Next thing I know, you’ll be best mates with Louis Tomlinson,” he ribbed.

Zayn laughed along with him, laughed at himself. Deep down, however, he knew his suspicions weren’t as preposterous as Niall made them seem.

***

Wednesday arrived, and Zayn met with his mentor as planned. He thought briefly about soliciting Harry’s advice again on Dr. Payne, but Zayn was in so deep now, he didn’t know where to begin.

So he kept it to himself. Despite how well things were going with Harry, Zayn wasn’t stupid. He knew he needed to watch what he confided to his mentor, especially in regards to Dr. Payne or Louis Tomlinson.

They were in the midst of their mentoring session, discussing the assessment updates, when Louis waltzed in with his usual carefree manner. Unlike the last time Louis had barged in on one of their sessions, the drama teacher was much more congenial when he spotted Zayn.

“Allright, Malik?” he asked amicably, pulling up a chair and straddling it backwards. “I was actually hoping you’d be here.”

Zayn stared at him open-mouthed for a few seconds before he managed to pull himself together and return the greeting.

“Louis,” Harry gently reprimanded, “I’m mentoring right now. Can it wait?”

“Like I was saying,” Louis returned, “I wanted to catch you both. And I’ve only about twenty minutes before the next round of auditions, rest in peace, me”—he crossed himself dramatically—“so I promise not to take up too much time.”
Harry smiled almost dotingly. “What do you say, Zayn? Should we let him stay?”

Louis gave them both puppy-dog eyes then, and Harry snorted.

Even Zayn couldn’t help but smile. “Sure.”

Louis started in right away, firing off a list of questions about the historical setting of *Othello* (Renaissance Venice and Cyprus as Zayn well knew). Louis seemed to hang on his and Harry’s every word as the theatre teacher typed notes and suggestions for further resources into his phone. Indeed, Louis was so pleasant that Zayn began to wonder if he had unknowingly entered into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

Just as they were finishing up, Harry received a call on his classroom telephone. From the immediate change in his tone and demeanour, Zayn instantly deduced it was their principal.

“Yes, sir,” Harry answered. “That’s not a problem. I can bring it down whenever you—”

Harry halted mid-sentence, obviously interrupted by their principal. “Now?” he asked, brow furrowed as he shot a glance in the direction of the other teachers in his classroom. Louis, who had his back to Harry, rolled his eyes. “Yes, of course. I can run it downstairs right this minute. Uh-huh…thank you, sir.” Harry replaced the receiver, but before he could say anything, Louis burst out with:

“Chop, chop, Styles! Master Payne-in-the-arse doesn’t like to be kept waiting!”

Louis shared a gloating look with Zayn as Harry grabbed a large paperback from his bookshelf and charged towards the back of his classroom. Before Zayn could guess what Harry’s intentions were, the English teacher thwacked his friend in the head with the book.

And Zayn tried not to laugh. He really did.

“You tosser!” Louis exclaimed while simultaneously protecting himself against another possible attack. “I spent twenty-five minutes getting me hair to look just-so,” he complained, fluffing up the matted-down spot where the book had hit him, “and you’ve gone and mucked it all up in a moment of unprovoked and unnecessary violence.”

Harry grinned and winked at Zayn. “If I’m honest, Tommo, I think it’s an improvement on that bedhead look you were sporting before my intervention.”

“Rubbish,” Louis snorted. “But at least Malik here got an opportunity to see your true colours—innit that right, mate?”

Both sets of eyes zoomed in on him. “Oh, I already know Harry’s true colours,” Zayn declared glibly. Harry stuck his tongue out at his friend and trotted off towards his desk.

Louis’ lips curled into a smile. “Do you now?” he murmured so softly Zayn wasn’t sure if he had even heard him correctly.

Zayn tried not to think too deeply about it. “Actually,” Zayn admitted lightly, “I am a little surprised you used a book to carry out your attack.”

“Oh, it’s just Melville,” Harry said dismissively, holding up the massive volume.

“Never mind,” Zayn replied, chuckling along with Louis as the cover of *Moby Dick* stared back at them. “Excellent choice.”
A minute later, Harry left to run his errand, a stuffed manila envelope under his arm.

The English teacher was barely out the door before the theatre teacher swung his leg off the chair and stropped to the door. Louis looked out into the hallway both ways, then shut Harry’s classroom door quietly. Next, he turned back around to face Zayn, and almost instantaneously, there was a distinct shift in the energy of the room. It wasn’t exactly hostile, but it certainly wasn’t welcoming either.

“Harry, bless him, feels that you’re a good egg,” Louis spoke up at last, playing with a couple of the whiteboard erasers before setting them down again. “Can’t say I agree with him, but I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt for his sake.”

Zayn had no idea how to respond to this, but he could tell the veteran teacher was expecting him to say something. “Okay….”

Louis seemed uncomfortable; it was a look the drama teacher didn’t wear often. “Harry swears you weren’t necessarily against my returning,” he stated carefully, eyes shifting everywhere but Zayn’s face. “That true?”

Zayn bit his lip. He wasn’t sure just how much he should tell Louis. If it ever got back to Niall—or Dr. Payne, for that matter—then he’d have some explaining to do.

He settled for shrugging non-committedly.

Louis gave a curt nod. “Alright then. That’s sorted.” Before Zayn could let out a sigh of relief, however, the theatre teacher added, “but just so you know, Horan is an entirely different matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“He needs to learn his place,” Louis answered coolly. “He stepped into Payne Academy thinking he owned the school, but that’s not how this place works.” He gazed meaningfully at Zayn as if he, too, should take the message to heart.

Louis needn’t have worried; Zayn already had.

“You should have seen him when El invited him and Jo over for dinner,” Louis grunted, skulking towards the back of the room. “The kid acted like a jealous lover every time your name was brought up; it was disgusting. Everyone was completely convinced he was secretly infatuated with you—even Jo whether she bloody owns up to it or not.”

Zayn couldn’t believe he still had to deal with this malicious gossip when they were already into the second semester. “I told you, Louis. He’s like a brother, that’s all. Niall’s just…overprotective.”

“He’s out of control, is what you mean,” Louis retorted, eyes narrowing. “I’m just waiting for the day when he does something really fucking daft. Your mate, he wants minding, and I’d suggest you step up to the plate.”

“Or?” Zayn prompted.

“Or else,” Louis finished, and it didn’t matter how cliché the threat sounded. It was clear the drama teacher wasn’t acting now. He meant every word he said and then some.

“Hullo, I’m back!” Harry called cheerily, panting slightly as he bounded through the door like a Labrador puppy. “Those stairs are pure, bloody murder.”
Zayn thought his mentor’s choice of words was unfortunate, recalling what happened to Dr. Payne’s father on Payne Academy’s main staircase, but he didn’t say anything. The subject was rather morbid.

Harry glided to the back table. “You two get along okay while I was gone?” he asked, half light-hearted and half suspicious.

Louis smiled superciliously. “We got along famously, Styles. As a matter of fact, I think Malik and I understand each other better now than we ever have….”

***

It was Friday, the day of reckoning, and ‘Future Zayn’ was worried.

In truth, he was more than worried. He was distraught, distressed, and disquieted. It had been over a week since his last meeting with Dr. Payne, since his principal promised a punishment for Zayn’s refusal to suck his…member, among a host of other things. (As if Zayn would do that, as if he would even think about doing something like that.)

Zayn was hoping their last meeting had been a fluke, that Dr. Payne had forgotten himself, forgotten his pledge not to demand more from Zayn than he could give. He told himself Dr. Payne’s boldness was spurred on by the confrontation he’d had with Ed at the staff meeting the day prior, that things would be different this time, that there was nothing to worry about.

But there was only one way to find out.

Zayn glanced at his watch: four-forty-five. Even the Bistro was closed for the night. He had messaged Niall a while ago that he was getting a ride home so he wouldn’t have to deal with any difficult-to-answer questions. The cooking teacher was probably cleaning up right now, getting ready to leave the building with all his student chefs and bakers.

It was late, especially for a Friday, and all the rest of the staff had gone home. They were eager, no doubt, to get a start on their weekend—a weekend that didn’t include worrying constantly about their job, a crazy drama teacher, an even crazier boss, and whether anyone was going to find out about something that shouldn’t be found out.

Zayn would have been on his way out the door, too, if he hadn’t received an e-mail that morning from Dr. Payne ‘requesting’ they meet at five (or 1700 hours, as he put it). And Zayn knew better than to ignore such an invitation.

Of course, Zayn didn’t mind staying late in theory. He had plenty of work to do in his classroom: exams to check, rubrics to create, plans to finalise, and grades to enter. Unfortunately, it was always difficult to concentrate when he was waiting to meet with Dr. Payne, and the minutes seemed to pass slower and slower the closer the impending appointment came.

When it was five minute of five, Zayn shut down his computer. He didn’t want to be late, but he certainly didn’t want to be early either.

As expected, he found the outer office shrouded in darkness. The door to the principal’s office was cracked open, a faint glow escaping from the room. He trudged inside, head bowed, like a doomed prisoner resigned to his fate…and then collided head-on with a tree.
“Please mind the bamboo plant!” Dr. Payne barked.

Zayn untangled himself from the branches and set the towering plant right again. “I’m sorry. I, uh, didn’t see it, sir.”

“Of course you didn’t,” the other man remarked snidely. “It’s only been there the entire year. You want to pay closer attention to your surroundings, Mr. Malik, but I’ll let it go this time.”

Zayn bit his lip hard to prevent himself from making a comment he knew he’d live to regret.

“Take your usual seat, Mr. Malik,” the principal ordered, gesturing absently towards the table. “You’ll be writing lines this evening.”

“Lines?”

“Yes, Mr. Malik—lines,” the administrator huffed impatiently. “I do believe I was speaking English.” He exhaled loudly and shut the textbook he’d been poring over with a loud clap. “Also, please keep the echoing to a minimum today, if you would. I’ve had an extremely trying week.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

Dr. Payne waved a hand. “Oh, it’s not your fault. It’s the Othello auditions,” he explained, massaging his temples. “Somehow they’ve transformed into The Hunger Games.”

Zayn thought back to the argument between Lainey Anderson and Jessica Smethurst last week and tensions only seemed to be increasing as they got closer to the deadline. (He could only imagine what the principal had to deal with.)

Zayn paused before sitting down. “So…that’s it?”

“That’s what?”

“That’s my punishment?” Zayn asked incredulously, words pouring out before he could stop himself. “You’re not, like, going to spank me or anything?”

“No, of course not, Mr. Malik. Spanking in schools went out of fashion several decades ago. It simply isn’t done. Why in heaven’s name would I spank you?” Dr. Payne peered at Zayn as if the teacher just made the most absurd suggestion he’d ever heard in his professional career. But then, the man’s lips twisted into that familiar smirk as he added, “would you like me to spank you, Mr. Malik? Have you been thinking about me spanking you?”

Zayn wanted to kick himself. “I was just…I mean…I wasn’t….”

Dr. Payne’s eyes gleamed with amusement. “Cat got your tongue, Mr. Malik?”

“No!” Zayn answered swiftly, pulling himself together before the principal got the wrong idea…again. “I-I think you chose the correct punishment, sir.”

Dr. Payne made a little humming sound. “You may change your mind after you begin.”

Zayn highly doubted that. “What would you like me to write, sir?” As he spoke, an image popped into his head. He saw himself writing ‘I shall not fraternise with other faculty members’ over a hundred times on a classic black chalkboard. He could almost smell the chalk, feel the residue on his fingers—

“The state standards.”
Zayn pulled himself out of his daydream. “You want me to write the state standards?”

“Yes, Mr. Malik.”

“Which standard?”

“No, Mr. Malik,” he smiled. “I would like you to copy ALL of them—all of the history standards for grades six through twelve, at any rate.”

Zayn couldn’t keep the disbelief out of his voice. “You want me to write all of the history standards by hand?”

“I want you to copy them three times actually.”

“But I’ll be here all night!”

Dr. Payne shrugged. “Then I would suggest you’d best get started. Everything you need is at the table.” He reopened his book, but Zayn didn’t budge. After a while, the principal looked up at him. “Don’t have a strop, Mr. Malik. If it gets too late, I’ll take you home and you can finish it this weekend at your leisure. Now,” he added, sounding slightly irritated, “if you don’t have any further reservations…?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Now, what do you say?”

“Thank you, sir,” Zayn grumbled as politely as he could under the circumstances, plopping down in his chair and searching for a pen in the caddy that didn’t say anything about loving Payne.

“Try again.”

Zayn wanted to snap at him; he really did. But he knew better, knew Dr. Payne had the power to make his life even worse than it already was at the moment. (He knew, too, that he had somehow handed that power to Dr. Payne on a silver plate.) “Thank you, Daddy,” he gritted out.

“You are most welcome, Mr. Malik—most welcome, indeed.”

***

Zayn spent the next four hours working diligently, copying the state history standards in his best (or at least legible) manuscript. He had tried writing messily at first with the goal of finishing the work as fast as possible, but the plan backfired. Dr. Payne just asked him to rewrite those portions. Zayn, quietly seething, did as he was told, the unspoken threat of another, far worse punishment looming over his head.

They worked side-by-side in silence: Zayn, with his thick packet, notebook, and pen; Dr. Payne, switching between his textbook and MacBook. Zayn couldn’t tell what he was working on, but whatever it was, it seemed to demand the principal’s full attention.

At nine, Zayn managed to finish his first set. Proudly, he delivered the completed pages to his principal, and Dr. Payne accepted them, reminding the teacher that there needed to be two more sets on his desk on Monday morning.
Then Dr. Payne drove him home, and that was basically that.

Candidly, Zayn had sort of expected the man to try something once they got into Dr. Payne’s black Porsche, but nothing happened. As a matter of fact, Dr. Payne didn’t utter a single word during the entirety of the drive. Zayn kept stealing glances at the other man during the short trip. He saw Dr. Payne’s firm lips set in a thin line as he focused on the road in front of him. He watched as the older man loosened his collar ever-so-slightly, then drummed his thumb against the leather-wrapped steering wheel as he drove.

About halfway home, Zayn realised he hadn’t given the man any directions to his apartment, hadn’t even told him the address—not that it mattered. Dr. Payne knew the way. Indeed, he acted as if he had driven this route a thousand times (and honestly, Zayn wouldn’t swear he hadn’t).

The Porsche pulled to a stop alongside the kerb about half a block from his apartment building. The door locks clicked open, and Zayn looked over at the driver expectantly, unsure if he should bolt out of the car or thank his principal for the ride.

Dr. Payne barely acknowledged him. He seemed distant, preoccupied, thumb still drumming away a rhythm to a song only he could hear. “Goodnight, Mr. Malik.”

“Goodnight, Dr. Payne,” Zayn parroted back before slamming the door a little harder than necessary.

As he made the short trek to his building, Zayn felt something rise in his chest, something he couldn’t describe and could even less place. He felt…ignored, unwanted.

And that made absolutely no sense at all.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed this one! If you get a chance, let me know your thoughts/reactions/predictions. Things are going to get very...physical next chapter. ;)

My goal is to update in 2 weeks, but next chapter's a monster. I'm not going to state a specific day yet because I've got a stressful time coming up with work and exams. I try to put update information on Tumblr when I remember, but you are ALWAYS welcome to shoot me an ask. ;)

Much love! ~Maree xx
“You said you’d be home by seven,” Niall declared as soon as Zayn had locked the door to their apartment behind him.

Zayn hung up his coat, then guiltily made his way to the sofa where Niall was sat, eyes glued to the television like he could care less that his roommate had come in over two hours late. However, the reproachful tone in the Irishman’s voice told a completely different story.

And so Zayn sat contritely beside the other boy and waited. Soon, Niall began muttering under his breath, saying he wasn’t going to be the one who called Zayn’s parents when the history teacher had a nervous breakdown.

“I’m sorry,” Zayn said softly, hanging his head. “I meant to text you, but I had my phone off and….” He trailed off, not knowing what to say. He should have texted his friend. He really should have. “Don’t hate me, yeah?”

“Oh Zed,” Niall sighed, bringing him in for one of his suffocating hugs. “I could never hate you… just promise you won’t forget next time.”

“I won’t,” Zayn promised, his voice muffled by his best friend’s shoulder. “But just for the record,” he added as he pulled away. “I am an adult now, and I can take care of myself.”

Niall cocked an eyebrow. “Sure you are, Zed,” he answered in a way that made Zayn wonder whether he was truly agreeing with him or not.

And it left a sour taste in Zayn’s mouth, no matter how much he tried to swallow it down.

***

The rest of the weekend crawled by. Niall went out with Jo on Saturday night, giving Zayn a chance to work on his “homework” from Dr. Payne. On Sunday, Ed and Jo came over for a game night Niall had planned (but forgot to mention). Although it was fun to hang out with friends, Zayn couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that he had another set of standards to write. Indeed, whenever it wasn’t his turn, he kept imagining dark possibilities of what would happen if he failed to complete Dr. Payne’s task.

And so Zayn begged off early, complaining of a headache. Locked away in his bedroom, he completed the third and last set. It went much faster this time, for even though the muscles in his hand ached, he found that he had whole parts of the text committed to memory now.

On Monday morning, he somewhat triumphantly marched into his principal’s office and slapped the folder containing his weekend assignment on Dr. Payne’s desk without a word. Dr. Payne didn’t even glance up—not that Zayn cared of course.
Zayn left the door slightly ajar, just as it was before he entered. Then he glanced over at Jo. The 
secretary was looking at him questioningly, no doubt wondering why he had just barged into Dr. 
Payne’s private office first thing on a Monday morning. Zayn rolled his eyes and mouthed, 
“homework,” and she offered up a compassionate grimace. She then crooked a finger at the teacher, 
beckoning him to come closer while keeping an eye on the door to their boss’s office.

“Why don’t you have lunch with us today?” she asked politely, keeping her voice low.

“Did Niall put you up to this?”

“Course not,” she scoffed indignantly, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “Niall, as much as I 
adore him, doesn’t get to decide who I eat lunch with.”

Zayn thought of the lounge at that time, how it was filled with teachers he barely knew, how Jo sat at 
the same table as Louis Tomlinson….

He cleared his throat. “Thanks for the invitation, but I’m fine eating in my room. I get more work 
done that way anyway.”

Zayn expected her to be put off—maybe even offended—but she seemed more motherly and 
concerned than anything. He couldn’t help but think Niall and her were perfect for each other.

“Listen, Zayn,” she clucked. “I know you’re a workaholic and all, but I think you’d enjoy working 
here a lot more if you actually made an effort to get to know the staff.”

“Why? They seem to have made up their minds about me already,” Zayn grumbled before he could 
stop himself.

“Harry likes you, and believe me, that speaks volumes in this place.” She smiled encouragingly at 
him. “It’s just lunch, Zayn. It can’t hurt.”

He hesitated, thinking of all the things that could go wrong in the span of thirty minutes. “I don’t 
know….”

“Why don’t you give us a chance, Zayn?” she pressed. “What’s holding you back?”

“I’m still not that comfortable around some of the teachers.”

Jo peered up knowingly through her glasses. “You mean Louis, right?”

“I feel like…like he still only tolerates me at best.”

Jo hummed. “Well, he doesn’t like Niall, that’s for sure.” Her bright blue eyes momentarily 
dimmed, but then she shrugged. “I figure Louis will get over it eventually—they both will. They’re 
just stubborn idiots; the popular boys used to getting their way.” She shook her head. “They’re both 
fighting to be alpha dog without realising that role’s already been taken.”

“By whom?”

She snorted. “Why Harry, of course,” she said like it was obvious (and maybe it was). “Harry just 
doesn’t flaunt it like—”

She halted midsentence, blue eyes filled with surprise as a shadow fell upon her desk. And even 
though his back was to the figure, Zayn could easily deduce just whose shadow it was. After all, it 
wasn’t the first time, the man’s shadow had crossed Zayn’s path and something told him it wouldn’t 
be the last.
“Don’t you two have better things to do than to stand about gossiping?” their principal reprimanded as Zayn slinked backwards so that he could face the man. “The Board doesn’t pay you to fraternise with other staff members, and I am quite certain this isn’t the first time I have told either of you that.”

“You can say that again,” Jo mumbled under her breath, making Zayn’s jaw drop. There was a pregnant pause, then in a scarily calm tone, Dr. Payne inquired:

“What was that, Miss Hart?”

Her round eyes grew to the size of saucers as she realised she had spoken out loud. “I, uh, just meant that we, uh, really should have learned our lesson by now,” she sputtered, nervously adjusting her frames before looking at Zayn apologetically.

“Yes, Miss Hart,” he replied coolly. “You couldn’t be more correct. Indeed, there are many things you and Mr. Malik should have learnt by this time.” Dr. Payne gave a long-suffering sigh. “And you may call me a hopeless optimist, but I believe there is still hope for you both.” Zayn could almost see the relief in Jo’s face when their boss didn’t fire her right there on the spot. “Now, get to work!” he barked before stalking back into his office and slamming the door behind him.

Later that day, Zayn did decide to have lunch with Jo at her regular table. Harry practically beamed when Zayn showed up, insisting his mentee sit beside him. And as Zayn ate, listening to the conversation and smiling whenever someone made a joke or a clever comment, he couldn’t help but think just how right Jo was about Harry’s opinion mattering at this school. Everyone was nice to him—even Louis. In fact, Louis was still acting like they were good pals, just as he had in Harry’s classroom last week. Even so, Zayn didn’t let his guard down, not completely. From experience, he knew the drama teacher could be as unpredictable and volatile as a volcanic eruption.

***

On Wednesday, Zayn was determined to focus on teaching and not let anything distract him. Unfortunately, an e-mail from Dr. Payne just after first hour instantly derailed his best intentions:

You are looking very professional today, Mr. Malik.

-LP

Dr. Payne’s message baffled Zayn at first because his principal seldom dared to comment on his clothing (publicly, at any rate). Yes, Zayn had made an extra effort today, pairing a navy blazer with grey, fitted trousers, but that was only because he had a few conferences lined up after his mentoring meeting with Harry.

Zayn read the e-mail again. It appeared innocent enough on the surface, yet Zayn was certain the man had some ulterior motive for sending it.

That’s when he remembered Dr. Payne wasn’t even in the building. The principal had gone to some administrators’ breakfast, making it impossible for him to have seen what Zayn was wearing that day.
Unless the breakfast was cancelled. That had to be it. Either that or it ended early for some reason. He decided to pop over to Harry’s next door and check.

Zayn had barely made it out the door of his own classroom, however, when he stopped dead in his tracks, inadvertently bumping into a couple of his students as they hurried to make it in the classroom before the bell. They looked at him inquisitively as they squeezed past, but he couldn’t explain. He couldn’t explain that he had been talking with Harry in the hallway that morning, laughing about something amusing from the staff meeting the day before. He couldn’t explain why there was a camera pointed directly at his door. He couldn’t explain how he was now certain the principal was spying on him offsite using the school’s security cameras. And Zayn couldn’t even come close to explaining how Dr. Payne had e-mailed him about his outfit, knowing he would put it all together, wanting him to.

And Niall thought he was being paranoid.

Zayn suddenly felt a chill run through him. It was an odd feeling, knowing you were being watched. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much he could do about it (aside from not loitering in front of the school cameras). At that moment, the bell rang and Zayn peered up at the camera.

“Not today, Satan,” he mouthed before closing the door.

***

On Thursday, Zayn got to school early, ready to put into action some of the strategies he had discussed with Harry at their Wednesday mentoring session. To his surprise, when he arrived at room 235, he found that his door was unlocked. He shrugged, figured the janitor must have forgotten to lock it after vacuuming or something, then went straight in.

“Good morning, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne greeted him pleasantly from where he was sat at Zayn’s desk. “So nice to see you arriving early for a change.”

Zayn bit his lip as his principal went back to doing whatever he was doing. The history teacher remained in the doorway, knowing it was safer. There was the camera, and besides, Harry—who unfailingly arrived early to school—was just a door down the hall. After a while, however, Zayn couldn’t take it any longer.

“What are you doing at my desk?” he asked flatly.

“Just leaving you a little note, Mr. Malik, which you may read at your leisure—assuming your leisure means today.” Dr. Payne winked at him, then ripped the top sheet of paper off the pad, folded it in half, and pinched the crease. “Have an educational day,” he added before leaving the room.

Zayn made sure the man had turned the corner before shutting his classroom door and making a dash to his desk. He seized the note and read:

Friday, 1800 hours

(Don’t be late.)
It was unsigned, but Zayn would have known who it was from even if he hadn’t caught the man in the act. Scowling, he wadded up the paper and pitched it into the trash can with a violence that surprised him. He knew what Dr. Payne was doing, and he was tired of the constant mind games.

And that’s when it hit him.

Maybe it was all a front. Maybe the man was just bluffing Zayn, bluffing everyone. The principal said himself that he wanted to be feared. Clearly, Dr. Payne was no saint, but maybe he wasn’t quite as depraved as he pretended to be. After all, he had given Zayn an ‘out’ on more than one occasion, hadn’t he?

Zayn glanced at the note again. Maybe, just maybe, tomorrow’s rendezvous provided the perfect opportunity to test his theory.

***

“Daddy is going to let you do something very special tonight.”

Zayn waited breathlessly for the man to go on. His Daddy was so good to him. So so good to him.

The older man petted his hair and smiled down at him. “Daddy is going to let you suck his big, beautiful cock.”

Zayn keened at the thought. His mouth began to water as he imagined himself choking on his Daddy’s dick. More than anything in the world, he wanted to know what it would taste like, wanted to feel the weight of it on his tongue, wanted to see the look on his Daddy’s face as Zayn swallowed him down.…

“Why don’t you get comfortable under the desk, baby?” the older, handsome man suggested, opening one of his desk drawers and handing Zayn a pillow for his knees. (His Daddy was just so good to him.) “And maybe next time if you’re extra good,” he continued, “Daddy will take his massive cock and bury it inside his baby’s tight hole.”

Zayn made a gurgling sound. He somehow was able to resist touching himself because he knew his Daddy wouldn’t like that—not yet, at least.

“How does that sound, baby?” the other man prodded, lightly stroking himself. “You want Daddy’s big cock buried inside you?”

“Yes!”

“You want Daddy to wreck your sweet, tight little hole?”

“Yes!”

“You want to be filled with Daddy’s hot seed? Want to come for Daddy like the good boy you are?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Zayn practically wept. He was shaking with arousal, his untouched dick throbbing painfully now.
“Well, one present at a time,” the older man chuckled, slowly unzipping his trousers.

***

Zayn awoke with a start. He was sweating, his heart was beating a mile a minute, and he was hard. He reached down to touch the front of his boxers and felt a damp spot in front, proof of his shame. With his other hand, he slapped at the alarm that was still blaring, then groaned aloud. He couldn’t remember exactly what he had been dreaming about, but he remembered enough to know it was wildly inappropriate. Shoving the sheets aside, he shot out of bed in a hurry, trying to ignore his inconvenient erection.

It was natural, he told himself as he grabbed a towel and bee-lined for the bathroom. Morning wood—that was all. It was natural. It happened to everyone. (Everyone with a penis anyhow.)

All he needed now was a cold shower and, ideally, the remnants of his recent wet dream erased, *Men in Black* style.

***

Zayn knew that eating lunch in the lounge would come back to bite him in the a** at some point. He freaking knew it.

And the funny part was that it had nothing to do with Louis or anyone else at his lunch table. It was the fact that he happened to be in the wrong hallway at the wrong time. Namely, just as Dr. Payne was passing by.

“Mr. Malik, what luck!” Dr. Payne announced, and Zayn couldn’t agree more as long as one inserted ‘bad’ right before luck in the principal’s sentence. “I’d like to have a word with you, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” Zayn replied weakly, moving to one side of the hall to let a few teachers pass.

“It’s a confidential matter, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn checked his watch. “Then maybe we should wait until later since I have class in a few minutes?”

“*Eight* minutes, to be precise,” Dr. Payne corrected, starting to get that impatient hitch in his tone. “It won’t take long. Just step this way,” he directed, motioning to a nearby door.

“But that’s a supply closet!” Zayn flustered out.

“Yes, it’s technically a storage cupboard; however, I think it will serve our purposes quite well today,” he replied smoothly. “After you.”

Zayn just stared back at the principal for a long moment. He wanted to protest but something in the older man’s hard eyes told Zayn he wasn’t about to take ‘no’ for an answer.

...
That’s when Zayn recalled his theory from yesterday, that Dr. Payne was using mind games to intimidate him, that the man would never actually make good on any of his threats (or the worst ones, at any rate). Somewhat reassured, Zayn entered the darkened supply room.

Dr. Payne switched on the light and one faint, yellow bulb glowed to life overhead. Zayn surveyed the room. It was bigger than he remembered, large enough to fit a few broken down pieces of furniture, a stack of surplus chairs, and shelves of seldom-used textbooks. He let out the breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“So,” Zayn began, trying not to look as nervous as he felt, “what was it you needed to discuss with me, sir?”

“Your naïveté really knows no bounds—does it, Mr. Malik?”

Zayn gulped. Suddenly, the room felt much smaller.

Dr. Payne took a step closer. “You’ve been so distant lately,” he purred into the young teacher’s ear.

“Well, so have you,” Zayn retorted before he could stop himself. “I-I mean you barely acknowledged my presence the last couple of times I’ve been in your office and—”

“I’ve had a lot on my mind,” Dr. Payne confessed, cutting him off. His eyes were clouded once again with that dark, distant look before he shook it away. “In any case, we’ll have to rectify that.” He reached out to cup the side of Zayn’s face in his large hands, and the teacher involuntarily shuddered.

Dr. Payne clucked his tongue. “We’ll have to do something about that as well.”

“Wh-what do you mean, sir?” Zayn quavered, backing away.

“I mean that I’m looking forward to the day when you will no longer recoil from my touch, when you’ll be begging for it instead.”

Dr. Payne advanced again, and Zayn retreated another few steps, backing right into a stack of chairs. The stack would have toppled over for sure if his principal had not reached out to steady it just in time, one arm on either side of Zayn, trapping him in.

Dr. Payne gave him a sly smile, like a fox surveying its prey, before slowly dropping his hands. “I’m looking forward to this evening, Mr. Malik,” he said with dark promise. “I’m hoping our meeting will be most…productive.” His eyes raked down Zayn’s body, settling on his black skinny jeans.

“Something wrong with the way I’m dressed, sir?” Zayn asked pointedly. “It is Friday, so I assumed jeans were acceptable.”

“Oh, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with the way you’re dressed,” Dr. Payne assured him, amusement licking at his lips. “As a matter of fact, I’d say you’ve been smashing it lately.”

“Er…thank you, sir,” he replied, making a mental note never to wear those jeans to school again.

“You are most welcome.” The passing bell sounded then, and Dr. Payne stepped aside to let him pass. “Until this evening, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn paused at the door. “Will it, uh, be lines again, sir?”
“No,” Dr. Payne answered, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Zayn found himself distracted by the movement, by the bit of stubble on the principal’s normally clean-shaven face; it made the man look more rugged, just slightly older than his twenty-nine years. “No lines tonight, Mr. Malik. I have something else planned entirely, something I think you’ll quite enjoy.”

Zayn didn’t even try to hide his scepticism.

“Then again,” Dr. Payne chuckled ominously, “I might be wrong.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm baaaaaaaaack :)

First off, thank you to everyone for being patient this past month as I tried to survive work and my exams. I was feeling overwhelmed and epically uninspired, but I'm doing much better now. So on to the good news...

I will be updating WEEKLY until further notice! It looks like my best day will be Friday, but I'll let you know in my author notes if that changes. :)

Sooo...what did you think about Zayn's new theory? Thoughts on any supporting characters? AND WHAT ABOUT THAT DREAM SEQUENCE asdfghjk? Next chapter will be the Ziam meeting, and there may be a surprise or two. :) Can't wait to share!

Much love! ~Maree xx
Zayn dropped by Niall’s classroom directly after school, hoping to catch the culinary arts teacher before the Bistro students arrived. Jo must have had the same idea because she was opening the door just as Zayn was running up.

“Guess you won,” Zayn joked, a little out of breath, as Jo politely held the door for him.

“You came from upstairs,” Jo granted, smiling, “so we’ll call it even. But it looks like Ed beat both of us.”

Sure enough, Ed was already inside the classroom, getting ready to place a frozen dinner inside Niall’s microwave. “Hey, Ed!” Zayn greeted him. “Are the microwaves in the lounge out of order again?”

“Nah. This one’s just closer, and it’s high-key a million times better than the antiques in the lounge. In fact, I’d say Niall’s microwave is the best-kept secret at this bloody school.”

(Zayn highly doubted that, but he kept the thought to himself.)

Jo curled up to her boyfriend and pecked him on the cheek. “Well, honey, now we know the real reason Ed is friends with you.”

“Yeah,” Ed grinned, playing along, “why else would I be mates with this Irish tosser?”

“Oi—watch it,” Niall warned, wagging his finger at the music teacher, “or you’ll lose your microwave privileges.”

Jo shook her head. “Honestly, I don’t know why there’s a microwave in the culinary arts room in the first place.”

“I’m with you there,” Zayn agreed with a laugh. “Niall’s microwave has got to be the most neglected thing in the whole building.”

Niall patted the appliance as if it were a dog. “Shut it, you lot. Just because something’s a wee bit neglected doesn’t mean you ‘eighty-six’ it.” He crossed his arms over his chest, his face breaking into a cheeky grin. “If that were true, Zayn wouldn’t need his todger, would he now?”

Jo and Ed both started to laugh—Ed, to his credit, looking slightly guilty.

Niall held up a hand before Zayn could get a word in edgewise. “Be respectful of the subject matter,” he scolded their friends. “This isn’t a bit of banter; it’s a right tragedy we’re discussing. Zed’s dick is the most neglected thing on this planet,” he declared solemnly as Zayn rolled his eyes, “and it’s a right injustice because the Good Lord blessed him with a good one, too.”

Zayn could feel the tips of his ears go pink. “Niall,” he muttered just loud enough for his best friend to hear, but the cooking teacher wasn’t paying the least bit attention to him. Zayn sighed, figured it was best just to grin and bear the teasing until his friends got tired of the topic and moved on.
Jo arched an eyebrow. “Talking about your best friend’s dick size? Really, Niall?” she tsked, laughing despite herself. “And you two idiots wonder why people get the wrong idea about your relationship.”

Niall slid an arm around the secretary’s waist. “We’ve been best mates since childhood, me and Zed, and well... Jaysus, let’s just say it would’ve been impossible not to’ve noticed.”

Zayn’s cheeks burned from layer after layer of embarrassment. And somehow, it was all made a little worse when he thought about what had happened that morning. (And yeah, he knew ‘morning wood’ was a completely normal phenomenon. So were wet dreams. And... God, he didn’t even like thinking about all that. He normally had better control of himself. He normally didn’t—)

“Leave off him, yeah?” Ed spoke up, coming to Zayn’s defence. The music teacher looked... annoyed.

Very much annoyed
Jo rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t act so damn scandalised, Ed,” she snipped. “Niall was only teasing, and as they say, ‘boys will be boys.’ Besides, if I were you, Zayn, I’d definitely take that as a compliment.”

Ed didn’t seem the least bit impressed by her argument. “I get that it’s meant to be banter, Jo, but Zayn’s not... well, he’s not like that.”

Niall chortled, winking at Zayn. “Not like what, Ed?”

“Not like you, ya rude bastard,” the ginger returned, finally cracking a smile.

“Oi, so what is he like then?”

Ed seemed unsure of how to respond. “He’s...uh...well, he’s pure,” he settled on, and Niall instantly snorted at the word choice.

“Yeah, like I was saying,” Niall repeated, “Zed’s dick is the most neglected thing on the planet.”

Finally, Zayn could bear it no longer. “It’s not neglected,” he snapped, fed up at being the butt of his friends’ jokes. “I use it every day, Ni—have to obviously.”

“Aye, but not to its full potential!”

At that moment, the microwave chimed.

“End of round one, folks,” Jo deadpanned, making them all laugh this time. The conversation was forgotten as the Bistro students started to wander in with all the boisterous energy of teenagers after school hours.

After Ed and Jo left, Zayn quickly took his best friend aside, but as usual, Niall got the first word in:

“You know I was just taking the piss, right? Was just having a laugh, yeah?”

“Yes, Niall,” Zayn said softly. “It’s always just a laugh, isn’t it?”

Niall looked at him funny. “You’re acting weird again.”

Zayn sighed. He wasn’t upset with his best friend; he was just...he didn’t even know. All he knew was that he wanted to get this conversation over with as soon as possible so he could stress out about
his meeting tonight with Dr. Payne in peace.

“Sorry, Ni. I just have a lot of grading and…other stuff to catch up on.” Zayn rubbed the back of his neck and forced himself to go on. “I…uh…that’s why I wanted to talk to you, uh…yeah,” he said, looking at his feet. “I, um, won’t need a ride tonight.”

“Why?” Niall asked, distracted by something the kids were doing at the front of the room.

“I’m working late with Harry; he’s, uh, gonna give me a ride.”

Niall seemed to accept the lie, and Zayn slipped out before his friend asked any more questions.

***

“Good evening, Mr. Malik.” Dr. Payne shut and locked the door after him. “Looks like there might be a storm headed our way,” Payne Academy’s principal remarked casually as he crossed the room to the window. It was still early evening, but the sky looked dark and ominous. “Oh, and I assume your phone is in your classroom since you’re not powering it down right now?”

“Did you want to strip search me?” Zayn asked snarkily.

Dr. Payne closed the blinds then, and the room turned pitch black. Just when Zayn’s eyes had almost adjusted to the darkness, the banker’s lamp on the desk was switched on. “You really do come up with the most intriguing suggestions, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne mused. The under-lighting gave the man an almost fiendish aura as he stood behind his desk, lips twisted in amusement.

“However, I assure you that there is no need for a strip search. And in any case,” he added rakishly, “it would be rather, er, difficult to conceal anything on your person with how tight those jeans are.”

“Can we get on with this?”

A smile teased at the other man’s lips. “Eager, are we?”

“Something like that,” Zayn grunted.

“Well, I just have a few more things to discuss with you, then we can proceed with tonight’s plans.” Still standing, the principal leaned over his desk, eyes penetrating Zayn’s soul. “What exactly did you tell Mr. Horan?”

“Does it really matter?” Zayn retorted. He hated lying to his best friend, but he hated being questioned about lying to his best friend by the person who was making him lie to his best friend even more.

“That answer was far from satisfactory for a variety of reasons, Mr. Malik,” the principal replied sourly. “If you need a refresher course on how you may and may not act in this office, I would be more than happy to squeeze that in somewhere in my busy schedule.”

Zayn cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “I just meant that it doesn’t really matter what I told Mr. Horan since he wasn’t really listening to me anyway.” He bit his lip. That wasn’t what he meant (not completely anyways). “What I’m trying to say is that Mr. Horan has been so busy with the Bistro lately that who I’m riding home with is probably the least of his concerns.”
“I see,” Dr. Payne observed, not unkindly. “Well, just so you know, Mr. Malik, I would be happy to take you home when we’re finished today.”

“I don’t want you to take me home,” Zayn blurted back. “I mean…I brought money for the bus.” (Even though Dr. Payne hadn’t tried anything on the drive home last week, Zayn wasn’t about to take any chances if he didn’t need to.)

“Suit yourself. As long as you are obedient, you should have plenty of time to catch the last bus.”

It took everything Zayn had not to roll his eyes. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“Now, since we have all that sorted, let’s get started, shall we?” Dr. Payne rubbed his hands together, clearly looking forward to whatever ghastly surprise he had in store for the novice teacher. “I’ve noticed you’ve been under a tremendous amount of stress lately, Mr. Malik, so I’ve decided”—he paused for dramatic effect—“to give you a massage.”

Zayn stared at the man blankly. “You, uh, already gave me a massage, sir.”

“Yes,” Dr. Payne conceded, “but that was a long time ago, Mr. Malik, and it was a rather quick one at that. And I think we both know that a ‘quick one’ is never as satisfying as it should be.”

Zayn coughed, cheeks heating up. “I, uh, wouldn’t know, sir.”

Dr. Payne regarded Zayn thoughtfully, scratching at the stubble on his chin. “You know I actually believe that. But back to the massage…I thought I’d go full out this time.”

Zayn eyed his principal nervously. “F-full out, sir?”

“Yes, I brought oils and everything to make the experience as relaxing and beneficial as possible,” he shared, looking pleased with himself. “As I believe I might have mentioned before, I do have some experience with physical therapy and the human anatomy”—he smiled to himself—“and well, other things.”

Zayn took a deep breath; he felt like he was going to pass out all of a sudden. “I don’t want a massage.”

“Let me put it this way, Mr. Malik: You either agree to the massage—and it’s just a massage, mind you—or there will be a punishment.” He narrowed his eyes, “and as I said earlier, it won’t be writing lines the next time.”

Zayn thought about choosing the punishment, thought about calling the man’s bluff, but somehow the risk didn’t seem worth it—not for a massage anyway. As long as Zayn stayed vigilant, a massage could be quick and painless. It could even be therapeutic. In fact, he could think of far worse things than a massage after a long week, and Dr. Payne did have large, strong hands….

“If you don’t have any further objections, Mr. Malik, please lie down on the cot.”

Confused, Zayn scanned the room. He had never seen a cot in the principal’s office before. (Most like because it was, well, the principal’s office.)

Then he spotted it: inconspicuous and unassuming, the cot stood almost hidden in the far corner, half-covered by what appeared to be a red tablecloth. On closer inspection, Zayn saw it was actually one of the school spirit blankets, the motto, ‘I love Payne,’ prominently displayed.

“You want me to lie down on that, sir?” Zayn questioned. “Is it even stable?”
“Of course it’s stable,” Dr. Payne scoffed. “It’s a standard school medical bed—I just ordered an extra one for our school nurse—and I thought we might as well christen it.”

Zayn looked at his principal. Then he looked at the bed again. Then he looked back at his principal. “I’m sorry but there’s no way I’m getting on that thing.”

“Why?”

Zayn could think of a thousand reasons, but he was pretty sure his principal wouldn’t like 999 of them. “Well, for starters, it’s meant for a student, isn’t it?”

“A secondary student,” Dr. Payne informed him. “I hardly think you weigh more than some of our upperclassmen, Mr. Malik,” he stated, eying Zayn’s slight build.

Zayn pushed against the side of the cot. It rattled a bit but didn’t move (not much anyway). After a few more tests, he figured it was safe enough. (Truth be told, Dr. Payne was way more dangerous than the cot, stable or not.)

“Well?” Dr. Payne pressed, impatient as ever. “If you still plan on catching the last bus, I would suggest we start soon.”

Zayn sucked in a breath and started to climb up on the cot when—

“You really should take your shoes off first.”

Zayn wordlessly removed his boots, then turned back to the cot.

“And your shirt as well, Mr. Malik. I would hate to see it ruined—from the oils, of course.”

Zayn bit his lip, faced the wall, then quickly unbuttoned his dress shirt, shivering a little as the cool air hit his bare chest. Then, he folded the shirt haphazardly and dropped it on top of his boots before swinging a leg onto the cot.

“And your jeans, Mr. Malik. Don’t forget to—”

“I am not taking off my jeans.”

Dr. Payne’s lips curved up on one side. “Relax, Mr. Malik. I was simply going to ask you to slide them down your hips a little.”

“I can’t,” Zayn muttered, a little embarrassed. “They’re skinny jeans—like super skinny jeans.”

Dr. Payne clucked sympathetically. “Might I suggest you unzip them then?”

“No.”

“No what?”

“No, sir,” Zayn gritted out, crawling onto his hands and knees before flopping down on the cot. “They’re low enough; it should be fine.”

“Of course, Mr. Malik. Whatever makes you feel the most comfortable,” he replied genially, “but if things get a little tight down there, feel free to—”

“I’ll be fine, sir.”
“Of course you will, Mr. Malik.” Dr. Payne flipped open his MacBook. “Classical or contemporary?”

“Classical or contemporary?” Zayn echoed.

Dr. Payne pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. “You’re doing it again, Mr. Malik,” he sighed. “Music. Which type of music do you prefer?”

“Oh yeah. Uh…probably not classical. Like, anything with lyrics is good, I guess?”

Dr. Payne smiled. “Excellent choice.”

As a slow-tempo RnB tune began to play, Dr. Payne pulled a couple of items out of his top desk drawer. Zayn recognised Usher’s voice on the track before too long, but soon Dr. Payne joined in. “Maybe you’re not used to someone who knows exactly what you want…,” he crooned in a rich, sultry tone.

Zayn watched as Dr. Payne hung his jacket over the back of his desk chair, loosened his tie, and headed towards the table. The principal removed his silver cuff links, watch, and signet ring with his usual systematic precision. He then wrapped the jewellery inside his white handkerchief and set it on the table, singing along with the track all the while; a devil with an angel’s voice:

 “…You got no need to be nervous
Because you are safe in my hands.
I'm sure you'll be needin' my service.
Baby, your wish will be my command…”

The man rolled up his sleeves, revealing the hidden ink and strong forearms that seemed to contrast with the uptight, erudite image he projected. It once again surprised Zayn even though it shouldn’t have, even though Zayn had a collection of tattoos himself. But the history teacher didn’t cover them up—not religiously anyhow; whereas, Dr. Payne was seldom without a suit jacket and tie, even when he was alone with Zayn in his private office.

Yes, the man’s muscular, tattooed arms were a paradox, as nearly everything about the man was.

Humming along with the music, the principal unscrewed the lid of a bottle—probably the massage oil he mentioned earlier—and poured a generous amount into his palm before rubbing his palms together vigorously.

Zayn caught a whiff of a subtly sweet, tart aroma. “Is that cherry?” he asked, curious.

“Pomegranate,” Dr. Payne answered, and before Zayn could dwell too deeply into the symbolism of that particular choice, the principal was giving him a new set of instructions. “Now relax those neck muscles, Mr. Malik, and try to lie in a natural position.”

Zayn did as he was told, trying not to flinch when he felt hands on his back. He had expected them to be cold, at least on first contact, but they weren’t. They were warm; very warm. Zayn’s body jolted in surprise, shaking the cot.
Dr. Payne chuckled, laying a steadying arm on his shoulder. “Probably should have warned you the oil heats up.”

Zayn grunted a response under his breath, but then did his best to find a semi-comfortable position again, resting his cheek against the soft blanket. The massage, the heated oil…all of it wasn’t too bad as long as he didn’t think about it. He closed his eyes and listened to the music, letting it take him somewhere else....

“…When you’re cold, I wanna be the one that keeps you warm.
I’ll make your body come to me, pull you back when you try to run.
Baby, I’ll go deeper....”

The hands returned. Warm hands that grew warmer by the second. Calloused hands, rough in all the right places. Large, powerful hands, kneading the tense flesh around Zayn’s shoulders.

“Breathe, Mr. Malik. Take in a long, deep breath,” Dr. Payne coached, voice taking on that hypnotic quality. The scent of pomegranates overpowered his senses, intoxicating and familiar. “Good,” Dr. Payne praised. “Now, let it go.”

Zayn exhaled, releasing the negative energy which had been stored up inside of him since August. Slowly but surely, the stress of the last several months seemed to ebb away as if Dr. Payne were a healer or sorcerer of old, drawing it from Zayn’s skin with his fingertips.

“…You ain't gonna want nothing but me.
You ain't going nowhere....”

After a while, the hands trailed downwards, as Zayn knew they inevitably would, massaging his lower back and lumbar area, spreading the oil until it burned in a good way. In too good a way because the same thing that happened during the first massage happened again. The only saving grace this time was that his principal couldn’t see the embarrassing evidence.

Not yet anyway.

Zayn took a deep breath. The situation was a little…uncomfortable, but it would go away. (Zayn would make it go away.) He trained his mind on the fact that he was at work, that he was in his principal’s office, that he loathed his boss more than any other human being he’d ever met, and that this was all wildly inappropriate.

But like all problems that involved his principal, this one just got worse.

Thankfully, Dr. Payne seemed oblivious to his growing dilemma. The man continued humming as he worked the muscles of Zayn’s back with his strong hands, never going off course once, never tiring.

Zayn felt his jeans become tighter, the crotch area stretched as far as the material would allow. For
not the first time that day, he wished he had chosen to wear a different pair of jeans or that Niall had never convinced him that these suited him. Right now, the way they were strangling his manhood probably (definitely) wasn’t healthy, but there was no way he could unzip them at this point. Praying Dr. Payne wouldn’t notice, he began to squirm his hips, discretely adjusting his position a centimetre to the right, then to the left, but nothing seemed to relieve the pressure.

And still Dr. Payne kept on. His touch became lighter, fingers tickling Zayn’s sides, before returning to concentrate on the small of his back. Suddenly, both of the man’s hands pressed down hard at once, practically pinning him against the cot. Zayn had to stifle a moan; it was everything he could do not to rut his hips against the flat surface.

And that was when Dr. Payne crossed the line…again.

Zayn felt a hard smack against his buttocks, and his eyes nearly rolled back into his head as he choked back a whimper. His right cheek tingled from the unexpected contact and his front throbbed. He was close—much closer than he would have thought possible—and he had to bite his lip and dig his nails into the side of the cot to gain control of himself.

“Probably should have warned you about that, too,” Dr. Payne admitted with a low, raspy chuckle. “But ever since you mentioned ‘spanking’ at our last session, I couldn’t get the idea out of my mind.”

Zayn knew that faux pas would come back to haunt him. He freaking knew it.

He sat up abruptly, grabbing the end of the blanket to cover himself. “Are we done?” he asked, not daring to look directly at the man in front of him.

“I don’t know, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne said playfully. “I was thinking you might want to, er, ‘finish’?”

“No, I’m good,” Zayn answered quickly, dying a little inside.

“Suit yourself,” the principal replied, wiping his hands with his handkerchief. “I’ll give you a minute to get yourself together then.”

As soon as the man’s back was to him, Zayn adjusted himself, grateful he wasn’t as hard as he was a minute ago. Then he slipped into his shirt, hastily doing up the buttons as the music stopped.

Dr. Payne closed his laptop. “One last thing before you go, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. “Y-yes?”

“You forgot a goodnight kiss.”

Zayn stared at the man in disbelief.

There was no way that was going to happen. Yes, Zayn had let himself be persuaded into an ‘arrangement’ with the principal because, as Louis supposed, he was probably a little too ambitious for his own good. He recognised that now. But Dr. Payne had to know that even though Zayn was playing along for now, they were not in a real relationship. Zayn didn’t like him. Zayn didn’t have feelings for him. Zayn didn’t want to be intimate with him. Zayn didn’t ask for any of this.

And Zayn was not going to kiss him.

“Well, what’s taking so long? You have a university degree, don’t you? You were the valedictorian of your class, weren’t you?” Dr. Payne chided as he fastened his cuff links. “You should be able to
understand and execute one simple direction.”

“No,” Zayn stated firmly, holding his ground next to the cot.

Dr. Payne’s lips formed a tight line. “That was not a proper explanation, Mr. Malik. Try again.”

“No, sir.”

Turning his back to Zayn again, the principal grabbed onto the edge of his desk. Zayn could see the man’s knuckles turning white, the pronounced muscles of his back tensing under his crisp, white dress shirt. When he spoke, however, all trace of emotion was absent.

“You know what I meant, Mr. Malik. Don’t try to be clever and do not play games with me unless you are prepared for the consequences.”

The warning was loud and clear, whether or not Zayn liked it. “Understood.”

Dr. Payne seemed satisfied, swivelling around to face Zayn again, arms folded over his chest.

“Now, please answer my question. I asked you to kiss me. Why are you refusing such a simple, trivial request?”

“Because I don’t want to kiss you,” Zayn said simply. “Isn’t that reason enough?”

Dr. Payne rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You’re scared,” he declared at last.

“Would it be crazy if I was?” Zayn challenged, chin high. “That’s what you want, yeah? For everyone to fear you?” He snorted. “Well, great news: the whole school’s terrified of you and for good reason. You’re a nutjob. It would be illogical not to be frightened of you.”

In a flash, Dr. Payne sprung off the desk and charged across the room. Zayn closed his eyes and braced himself for whatever was about to happen next.

(Nothing did.)

Nervously, Zayn reopened his eyes. Dr. Payne’s face was inches from his own and there was a dark ferocity in his coffee-coloured orbs. Furiously, the principal kicked at one of the wheels of the cot, making the metal frame shake. Zayn couldn’t help thinking he was acting like a little boy, throwing a tantrum because he didn’t get exactly what he wanted.

But then when Dr. Payne spoke, his voice was eerily calm: “Do not try my patience, Mr. Malik. This is your final warning.”

*He’s bluffing. He’s just bluffing…. *

Long spider-like fingers stroked the side of Zayn’s cheek, tracing the line of his jaw. Dr. Payne’s hand still smelled of pomegranate oil, sweetly dangerous. Zayn shuddered, and the movements stilled.

Dr. Payne looked smug. “See, you are afraid.”

“Screw you.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Zayn wanted to take them back. He had no idea how Dr. Payne would react, but he feared the worst. To his immense shock (and relief), however, the principal just started laughing. “Anytime, Mr. Malik,” he returned with a lecherous twinkle in his eye before straightening up. “Now, I’ll forget your lack of filter there if you thank me for the
Zayn’s first instinct was to tell him to go screw himself again, but that hadn’t exactly worked out well the first time. “Thank you, sir,” he mumbled instead.

“I think you can do a little better than that, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne clucked, stepping closer, “especially since you clearly enjoyed the experience.”

Zayn glared at him, too angry now to be embarrassed. “Thank you, Daddy,” he spat out.

“The pleasure was all mine, I assure you,” the principal returned before smirking again. “Well, maybe I shouldn’t say the pleasure was all mine because…well, never mind. I can see this topic is troubling you, and besides, you still need to give me that goodnight kiss.”

“I’m not going to kiss you,” Zayn repeated adamantly.

Dr. Payne seemed unbothered. “Because you’re afraid, I know.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but that makes zero sense.”

“Then allow me to be more explicit,” the principal purred. “You’re afraid of yourself, of what you might feel if you kiss me again. That’s what you are afraid of.”

Staring him directly in the eye, Zayn responded to the outrageous assertion. “I could never feel something for you, Dr. Payne. I loathe every single minute I am forced to spend with you.”

“You’re scared,” Dr. Payne taunted, eyes gleaming. “You’re scared of how good I could make you feel. You’re terrified at the thought you might enjoy this if you let yourself go for even a fraction of a second.”

“No, I’m not,” Zayn insisted, closing his eyes in a feeble attempt to combat the sound of that velvety voice, the feel of hot breath against his neck….

“Then prove it.”

It must have been temporary insanity because that’s the only way Zayn could explain what he did next. With an overpowering desire to prove the man wrong, Zayn grabbed his principal’s face, surged forward, and smacked their lips together.

At first Zayn figured he must have caught Dr. Payne off guard because they stayed there like that—lips ironed together, Zayn’s hands smooshing the other man’s face—for several seconds. That’s when it hit him.

Dr. Payne was waiting. Waiting for him to move first. Waiting for Zayn and his inexperience to take the lead. And so, timidly, Zayn began to suck on the man’s plump bottom lip.

Dr. Payne let out a low, satisfied moan, then began to respond. He didn’t immediately assume control (as Zayn thought he would); rather, he eased into it, letting his powerful hands rest loosely on his protégé’s hips. Unlike in the past, Dr. Payne wasn’t demanding something from him, something Zayn didn’t know if he could give. Instead, he was nudging the young teacher, encouraging him with touches and caresses that were surprisingly gentle, that were ‘just enough’…

Until they weren’t. And so Zayn took the other man’s lower lip between his teeth and bit down…hard.
It worked. Growling, Dr. Payne grabbed Zayn by the waist and hoisted him onto the cot. Pressing between his knees, the principal returned the favour, biting and tugging on the teacher’s bottom lip until Zayn felt himself getting hard again.

Zayn spread his legs wide and fisted the other man’s shirtfront, urging their bodies closer. Their lips slipped apart for a moment, rough stubble scratching his face, making him gasp, as a hand slipped inside the back pocket of his jeans. Zayn let out a choked sigh, drunk with sensations he’d never felt before.

And then his whole body went limp as he allowed Dr. Payne’s tongue to slide between his teeth. The kiss tasted bitter and sweet, like coffee mixed with dark chocolate and just as addictive. Zayn couldn’t think, couldn’t react. He imagined this was what it was like to be in an opium den, knowing the longer you stayed, the more lost you’d become in the drug-induced haze. It was poison, yet Zayn wanted more.

And Dr. Payne gave it. Willingly. Generously.

They kissed until Zayn’s lips felt bruised, until he felt a hand at his zip…and that’s when Zayn came to his senses. He broke the kiss and pushed the man away, breathing hard as he stumbled off the cot and onto shaky legs.

Zayn didn’t dare look at the other man, not right away. He gave himself a moment to catch his breath, then another to gather his courage. And then when he knew he couldn’t postpone the inevitable any longer, he turned to face his principal.

Dr. Payne was standing where Zayn left him, wearing a brazen expression, his eyes glowing in the dusk-like ambience. He smiled.

“That’s what I thought.”

Zayn felt as if he were going to be sick. He scrambled towards the door, not caring at this point whether there would be consequences, not caring about anything. He was burning with shame and humiliation and anger. His principal had goaded him into the kiss, goaded him into doing something he would never have dreamed of doing otherwise.

But it hadn’t meant anything.

(And it definitely hadn’t meant what Dr. Payne had insinuated it meant.

Except…maybe it had. A nagging voice in his head whispered that maybe Dr. Payne was partially correct. Maybe Zayn had been afraid of what he might feel…just a little. But whatever he had felt back there had nothing to do with his principal. It was just like what happened that morning when he woke up. His reaction to the kiss was a purely biological response—nothing more, nothing less.

And he needed to get a freaking grip on himself.)

Zayn tripped over the leg of a chair on the way out of the dark, outer office, and it brought him back to Earth.

He needed to get out of this place. He needed to leave now.

In hindsight, he probably should have checked the main corridor first. If he had, he likely wouldn’t have barrelled directly into another teacher at nearly seven on a Friday night.

He looked up at the other man and almost cried. This couldn’t be happening. This could not be
happening.

And just when Zayn thought things couldn’t get any worse.

Chapter End Notes

I know. That cliffhanger was cruel (even by my standards). BUT the good news is that you'll find out who Zayn bumped into first thing next chapter. In the meantime, I'd looove to read your predictions.

In case you're wondering, the song used in this chapter was "Lay You Down" by Usher. It's part of my inspiration playlist for this fic--yes, I'm that extra--and I've been wanting to use it for a while. ;)

My goal is to update on Friday (next but one). I know this one took a few extra days as I ended having to do some unexpected travelling, but I hope the wait was worth it. As always, thanks for the love and support both here and on tumblr. Much love! ~Maree xx
“Zayn? Why are you still here?” Ed scratched his head, then glanced down the deserted main hall. “Is Niall around?”

“What are you doing here so late, Ed?” Zayn deflected, trying not to sound as guilty as he felt.

“I was fixing up some of the instruments for the group music lesson I teach after school,” Ed answered slowly, his eyes wrestling with something that looked a lot like suspicion. “A couple of guitars needed to be restrung.” He hoisted the strap of the guitar case he was holding a little higher on his shoulder.

“Sick. Well, I was just leaving,” Zayn said hurriedly, glancing at the main doors. “Have a good weekend. I’ll see you on—”

“Why haven’t you left yet, Zayn?” Ed demanded, tone just shy of accusing.

Zayn looked down, examined the back of his hands as if they might hold the key to something. “I was…you know….” He licked his lips. “I was catching up on some grading, and well, you know how it is,” he said cheerfully. (A little too cheerfully.)

“Well….” Ed gave him a once-over. “So why did you just come from the office then? It’s been closed for hours.”

“Oh! I had to ask Dr. Payne something and—”

“Dr. Payne’s still here?” Ed interrupted, looking past Zayn into the office. There was a faint glimmer of light coming from under the principal’s door, but otherwise, it was completely dark. Ed narrowed his eyes. “What were you doing in Dr. Payne’s office at this time of night?”

The question almost knocked Zayn off his feet. “Oh. Um…like I was saying, I just had to ask him something. You see—”

“Yes,” Ed cut him off. “Yes, I do see everything now.”

Zayn bit his tongue, wishing he could deny the silent accusation but knowing he’d somehow just make it worse if he kept talking. He wasn’t good at this, wasn’t born for deceiving people, so he said nothing. His guilty conscience, however, clearly spoke volumes.

“We shouldn’t talk here,” Ed grunted as his eyes fixed on the door to the office. “You leaving now or do you have more ‘work’ to do?” he asked, and the sarcasm tore at Zayn’s insides. “Never mind. I gotta go.”

And with that, Ed stormed out the main doors of the school, Zayn hot on his heels.

“Ed, hold up!”

The ginger slowed a little but kept walking. “So how long has this been going on?” he asked once they were outside, his tone as chilly as the late winter weather.
“Nothing’s going on,” Zayn insisted. “I don’t know what you’re—”

The music teacher spun around to face him. “Well then, we’ve nothing to discuss, do we, mate?”

Zayn felt tears brimming at his eyes. It was so difficult to keep it together when Ed looked at him like that. “It’s not what you think…” It was a pathetic defence at best, but it was mostly true. He hadn’t asked for this thing with Dr. Payne to happen. But at the same time, Zayn knew he could have done more to stop it. (And he didn’t even want to think about what had just happened back there in the principal’s office, how he had acted….) “I swear it’s not what you think,” he repeated, trying to convince himself as much as the music teacher.

Ed stared back at him tiredly. “Isn’t it, Zayn?”

The words stung—especially coming from a person as nice and decent as Ed. And then suddenly, a thought struck him, nearly knocking him out cold. “Oh God. Please don’t…I mean, you can’t tell Niall.”

“Don’t worry,” Ed said flatly, “I wouldn’t tell anyone about this.

“It’s just, y’know, I don’t think he’d understand…..”

“You’ve got that right,” Ed scoffed. “Niall wouldn’t understand at all. He’d be proper gutted if he found out what you’ve really been up to with our head teacher all this time.” He shook his head, then readjusted the guitar case on his shoulder, and started off again. “Well, see you around, Zayn.”

“Yeah….” Zayn replied dumbly, trying to hold himself together for a little while longer. As he watched his friend walk away, he wondered what he could have done differently.

But then, when the music teacher was about twenty feet away, he stopped abruptly. “By the way,” Ed called out into the cold darkness, “you might think about doing up your zip and buttoning your shirt correctly before you go home—that is, if you don’t want your flatmate to suspect anything.”

Zayn looked down at himself. He felt betrayed by his own appearance. No wonder Ed suspected; no wonder he seemed so terribly certain. “Ed, wait up!” Zayn shouted, sprinting to catch up to the other teacher.


The other boy looked more pained than upset now, and in that moment, Zayn forgot everything he wanted to tell him. With a loud, impatient exhale, Ed resumed his trek towards his truck. Zayn traipsed beside him like a lost puppy, trying to muster up nerve to reveal even part of the secret he’d been harbouring for months.

Ed stopped to study him as they stood under the halo of a lamppost. “Where’s your coat?”

“I don’t know,” Zayn mumbled back. “My classroom probably.” It probably was. He probably hung it over his chair at his desk with his phone, and bag, and everything else. (And crap, he really hoped Niall hadn’t tried to text him tonight.)

“You should have brought your coat.”

“You sound like Niall,” Zayn told him. Earlier, he might have made the remark in an ornery, resentful way but not now.

“You want mine?” Ed offered, setting down his case. “It’s bloody freezing out here.”
As if on cue, Zayn felt a snowflake land on his nose. He brushed it away with a trembling hand. “I’m good,” he insisted. There was moisture on his cheek, too, but he honestly wasn’t sure whether it had fallen from the sky or his eyes. “I—I’m sorry, Ed—sorry about us, sorry for everything.”

“I don’t want your apologies, Zayn. It’s just...well, I don’t get it.”

“Get what?” Zayn asked in a small voice.

“Get why you of all people would do something like this,” Ed answered, pulling at a tuft of ginger hair. “I mean, I thought you hated him!”

Zayn hiccupped. “I do.”

“Then why?” Hurt blue eyes searched Zayn’s hazel ones, and that’s when Zayn knew he could no longer hold it all in. He broke down, crying hot tears into his cold, shivering hands until Ed pulled him against his chest.

And then, in the comfort of arms he didn’t deserve, Zayn wept. He wept for his stolen innocence, for his lost dignity, and for fate denying him any chance at happiness with the boy in front of him.

“I’m s-so sorry,” Zayn sobbed, shivering and desperate for Ed to understand. “And...and I w-wish it didn’t have to b-be like this. Believe me, I wish things were d-different.”

“Don’t, Zayn,” the music teacher shushed him, holding Zayn impossibly tight. “You’re right where you belong, right where you should be.”

Zayn was glad one of them seemed so certain because at the moment, he just felt hopelessly lost, wandering in the dark without a compass.

“I’m taking you home,” Ed said finally, breaking away. “Come on, let’s go. My truck’s right there.”

“No,” Zayn resisted weakly. “There’s a bus coming soon, and I don’t want to trouble you, Ed. I can just—”

“You can just get in my truck without saying another bloody word,” he finished, picking up his guitar case. “Unless, of course, you’d prefer I ring Niall and ask him to—”

“No!” Zayn pleaded. “I...I don’t want him to see me like this.”

“Then get in the truck, Zayn,” Ed ordered gently. “And don’t worry, I’m not gonna force you to talk to me. I just can’t leave you here like this.”

Zayn nodded, his need to get home and out of the cold outweighing his sense of guilt. Ed opened the passenger side for him, then stowed the guitar case in the back before going around to the driver’s side.

“Why does it smell like pomegranates?” Ed asked as he settled in the driver’s seat.

Zayn cleared his throat.

“Never mind,” Ed sighed, “I reckon I don’t really want to know.” The ginger started the engine and set the heat to full blast. Zayn was grateful because the near-deafening sound precluded any thought of conversation.

They were almost to Zayn’s apartment when Ed lowered the heat. It was too quiet, and Zayn sank deeper into his seat, knowing a question was about to come despite Ed’s best intentions.
“Zayn…I know it’s none of my business, and you don’t have to answer this, but…” Ed stared straight ahead, gripping onto the steering wheel like it was a life preserver. “Have you…I mean, have you and he, you know…?” Even in the cover of night, the other boy looked absolutely tormented. “Shit, pretend I didn’t ask that.”

“No,” Zayn answered anyway, watching the windscreen wipers moving back and forth. Back and forth.

“Is he…forcing you to do whatever it is you’re doing with him after school hours?”

Ed was getting way too close to home, but the fact of the matter was that Zayn had agreed to the arrangement with Dr. Payne. And now, it was too late to say something even if he wanted to. He’d look like a fool…or worse. He could only imagine what Louis would say if he found out, what they all would say….


“I don’t want to talk about it, Ed,” Zayn said, feeling an emptiness wash over him, “but it’s not what you think.”

Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and—

“Zayn, look at me, please?” Ed urged, and Zayn tore his attention away from the windscreen. “Just tell me if he’s harassing you, forcing you to do…things.”

Zayn swallowed. “Not exactly.”

“Not exactly?! What does that mean?!” Ed shouted as the car swerved to the right.

Zayn grabbed onto the door handle, heart racing faster than the wipers now. “Let’s talk when we get to my apartment, yeah?”

A few minutes later, they arrived home safely (and Zayn almost wished they hadn’t).

Ed kept the car running but shut the lights off. “Now tell me what you meant back there.”

“I mean…he’s asked me to do things, but I…I….” Zayn bit his lip hard and sank into his seat again.

They were treading on dangerous territory now, and he needed to shut this down before he made things any worse than they already were. “It’s not what you think, Ed.”

“Then what is it, Zayn?”

Zayn chewed on his bottom lip, and he could almost taste the coffee and dark chocolate, could almost taste him. “It’s…complicated.”

“Bollocks.”

“Ed—”

“He your secret boyfriend, then, or something?” Ed demanded. “Is that why you’re always so careful when we’re together, Zayn? Is it because you’re afraid your boyfriend might be watching?”

“He’s not my boyfriend. I told you…it’s not like that,” Zayn protested softly, unbuckling his seat belt.

“Well, he’s not watching now, is he?”
Zayn felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned around to face the other boy.

“I’d do anything for you, Zayn—anything,” Ed declared almost fiercely. “I don’t think you know how much I care about you. I don’t think you understand at all.” And then the boy leaned in, and briefly, all Zayn’s troubles melted away.

Ed’s lips were just as Zayn recalled them the first time they kissed: soft and supplicating. The kiss itself was sweetly satisfying, like a tall glass of lemonade on a summer day. Zayn’s heart fluttered, but it didn’t pound. When Ed’s hand gently brushed against his cheek, it felt nice, but his skin didn’t prickle. It didn’t burn the way it did with Dr. Payne’s touch.

And Zayn wasn’t certain what any of it mean. (And he wasn’t certain he wanted to know either.)

They pulled apart as the snow started to blanket the windows. Zayn smiled shyly at the other boy. “If we stay here any longer, we’re gonna get snowed in.”

Ed gazed at him with questioning blue eyes. “Would that be so bad?” he asked softly, longingly, before shaking his head. He reached up and switched on the overhead light. “Please don’t worry, Zayn. I don’t know exactly what’s going on between you and our principal,” he admitted, “but if it’s what I think it is…I’ll figure out something. I promise you.” There was a determined glint, a single-minded purpose in his eyes.

Zayn nodded, hand on the door handle. “I’m sorry…about everything and, um, thanks for the ride.”

“Want me to walk you to your door?”

Zayn peered out the window at the steadily falling snow. “Nah, just gonna run in. Goodnight, Ed.” Then he dashed out of the car and up the steps to his apartment.

To his relief, Niall wasn’t home. Zayn dusted off the snow from his shirt, realised it was still buttoned incorrectly, and with a frustrated groan, shucked it off. There was a note on the table from his roommate, letting him know there were leftovers in the fridge and that he’d gone out to dinner with Jo.

Zayn bypassed the kitchen and all thoughts of food. Instead, he took a long, hot shower, washing away the scent of pomegranate on his skin, washing away all traces of a night he wanted to forget. Afterwards, he went straight to bed, rejoicing as he crawled under soft covers smelling of ‘fresh linen.’ He lay there for hours, counting the cracks in the ceiling and trying not to think. Still, he knew that something had changed that night, that he had changed, whether he liked it or not.

(But that didn’t mean he couldn’t control it.)

Most importantly though, he was no longer alone. Ed knew his guilty secret—or guessed at it anyway. Zayn didn’t have to face everything alone anymore, and that had to be a good thing…

Didn’t it?

***

There’s a particular feeling one gets when they’re about to be caught in a lie. It’s a squidgy sort of feeling in the pit of the stomach that makes one regret every past decision they’ve ever made that led
up to that precise point in time.

And that’s exactly what Zayn was feeling on Monday morning when he went to check his mailbox in the workroom.

He’d been making an effort to put Friday behind him, to forget he kissed both Ed and his principal in the same night. And the more Zayn had thought about it over the long, snowy weekend, the more convinced he was that he was never going to extricate himself from this mess without: a) everyone hating him or b) ruining everything he’d worked so hard for all his life.

He just didn’t think it would all come tumbling down so soon.

“Zed? Can we talk for a minute?” Niall asked, and it took everything Zayn had not to duck out or confess everything to his friend on the spot. “I spoke to Harry a second ago,” Niall continued, “and he said he barely saw you at all on Friday? I thought you said you had a mentoring meeting with him?”

And so, because Zayn was nervous and guilty to the gills, he said the absolute last thing he should have said:

“What are you checking up on me now?”

“Actually, if you want to know,” Niall huffed, “I happened to bump into Harry at the copier. You’re always going on about how I should get to know him better, so I made a joke about how he should hit up the Board for a pay rise if he’s going to be working Friday nights. That’s when he told me he’d left early last Friday!”

“Um…yeah, about that….”

“Zayn,” Ed cut in, joining them out of nowhere. (Zayn hadn’t even seen the music teacher walk in.) “Mate, you might as well tell him.”

Zayn gawked at the other boy’s nonchalance, at the cavalier way in which he was about to reveal Zayn’s deepest and darkest secret in the middle of the workroom to the one person Zayn begged him not to tell. “Ed,” he warned, nervously checking out the room. There were several teachers there, but fortunately, no one seemed to be paying much attention to them.

But of course, Niall was all ears.

“Tell me what, Ed?” Niall questioned.

Ed smiled apologetically at the history teacher. “Zayn didn’t want to say anything, but he was with me all Friday night. Sorry, mate,” he told a very confused Zayn, “had to tell him.”

Niall’s eyebrows knitted together. “So why didn’t Zayn just say that instead of telling me he had a mentoring meeting with Harry?”

“I think he got his dates mixed-up, isn’t that right, Zayn?” Ed prompted, clearing his throat.

“Oh, um, yeah!” Zayn agreed, nodding vigorously, “yeah, that’s totally what happened. I got my dates mixed-up.”

“And then Zayn came to my classroom after he realised the mistake,” Ed fibbed. “We got to talking, and well, you know how it is.”
Zayn stared at the music teacher a little dumbfounded and a lot grateful. Ed didn’t even blink an eye as he fabricated a story to get Zayn out of a tough spot with his best friend.

“Anyway,” the ginger continued smoothly, “I took him home at about eight or so.” He smiled sheepishly. “Then again, it could have been later. I think we both lost track of time....”

Niall’s frown slowly transformed into a massive grin. He winked at Ed, then nudged Zayn in the side. “Well, it’s about bloody time,” he ribbed, chuckling. “Can’t believe you eejits thought you could keep it from me, not when it’s been blatant from the start.” Niall slapped them both on the back. “Listen, if you think you’d fancy a double date with me and Jo sometime, I’m sure we’d be up for it.” He was still chuckling as he collected his mail and exited the workroom.

Zayn tugged on the music teacher’s arm, pulling him off to the side. “Thanks, Ed—you saved my life,” he whispered gratefully before letting his gaze drop to the floor. “And about Friday night, what happened in the car....”

“You don’t have to go on; I understand.”

Zayn lifted his head up. “You do?”

“Yeah, you were vulnerable, and I shouldn’t have”—Ed glanced about to ensure no one was listening—“kissed you, under the circumstances and all. It’s obvious you’re dealing with a lot, and I’m sure that didn’t help.”

Zayn almost collapsed with relief. “Thanks for understanding.”

“Of course,” Ed returned with a smile, but even so, Zayn still detected a note of sadness the music teacher couldn’t completely chase away. “So, I’ve been thinking all weekend,” Ed began, changing the subject, “and I have an idea. It’s not perfect, but I think it’s got a solid chance of freeing you from your, uh, current situation. I was hoping we could meet up later today and talk about it?”

Zayn thought of the surveillance cameras everywhere. “It’s got to be outside of school.”

“I agree. How about Espresso Expresso?” Ed suggested. “We can meet here around four, then head over?”

“Sounds great.”

“Good. I’ll see you after school then.” Ed touched his arm reassuringly, and Zayn felt a glimmer of hope bloom inside of him.

Perhaps, Zayn had underestimated Ed. Perhaps, this boy could be a helpful ally. Zayn wasn’t placing any bets, but if Ed could somehow help him find a way out of the Dr. Payne situation, Zayn would be forever indebted to him.

That’s why the history teacher was feeling almost exultant as he trotted up the stairs to the second floor. But when he reached his classroom, his whole mood changed in an instant because for the second time in less than a fortnight, Dr. Payne was sitting at Zayn’s desk.

“It really is a particularly lovely morning, isn’t it?” the older man asked, reclining back in the chair. Zayn didn’t see what was so lovely about it. It was still snowing—it hadn’t stopped since Friday night—and now he had to contend with his diabolical principal, and it wasn’t even eight yet. And so, Zayn didn’t respond. He just closed the door behind him, lowered the small blind on the window, and went about his business, pretending the administrator wasn’t there.
“I see,” Dr. Payne clucked. “We’re going to pretend you didn’t kiss me on Friday.”

Zayn glared at him. “You forced me to, remember?”

“I asked you for a goodnight kiss, Mr. Malik. I would have been perfectly contented with a peck on the cheek.”

“You’re lying!” Zayn steamed. “You’re—you’re playing mind games with me again!”

“Am I?” the man returned, amused. “Or are you playing them with yourself?”

Zayn couldn’t look at him, couldn’t look at that smug expression one second longer. “Why are you in my classroom?” he demanded, back turned. “Don’t you have something better to do? Like, run the school or something?”

“Something better to do than you, Mr. Malik?” the principal asked cheekily, and Zayn wanted to hit him. “Hardly.”

Zayn could hear Dr. Payne rise up from the desk, but he didn’t turn around. Not even when he felt the man hovering behind him, literally breathing down his neck.

“I’ll be honest,” Dr. Payne confessed, tucking a loose strand of Zayn’s hair behind his ear, “I was entertaining a small flicker of hope that you might have had a breakthrough this weekend. But it looks we’re back to ‘one step forward, two steps back’ again, aren’t we?”

“Breakthrough?” Zayn repeated distastefully.

“Yes, I hoped you would have realised that no matter how hard you try, you can’t erase that kiss,” Dr. Payne murmured against his neck, hand encircling Zayn’s waist. “You can’t erase how much you wanted me then, how much you want me at right now....”

Zayn shivered, breath hitching as the man pressed up against him, still whispering lies into his ear. But this time, Zayn wasn’t going to give in. He wasn’t going to let the words of a prevaricating flatterer sway him. He couldn’t be weak, couldn’t let his defences down for one moment around this man.

Zayn stepped forward, breaking away from his principal’s grasp. “School will be starting soon, sir.”

Dr. Payne let out a frustrated noise. “You are unfortunately correct, Mr. Malik.” He strode past Zayn to the door and flung it open. “We will continue this conversation on another day, Mr. Malik.”

“I’m sure we will, sir.”

Dr. Payne just stood there for several moments, an enigmatic expression on his face, before glancing down the hall. “Ah, Mr. Styles—just the person I was looking for!”

The door swung shut behind him, and Zayn breathed a sigh of relief.

***

It was Tuesday morning, and they were running late. Furthermore, it had been Zayn’s fault—as Niall had reminded him several times during their rushed commute to work that morning.
And Niall wasn’t wrong. Zayn had probably stayed out later than he should have with Ed last night (especially on a school night); however, it had been beneficial in more ways than one. His relationship with Ed was in a good, if not exactly defined, place. Ed wasn’t mad anymore. In fact, the second year teacher had been extremely supportive. It was nice to have a shoulder to lean on, one that wouldn’t completely freak out (like Niall invariably would if he ever discovered one-tenth of what was going on).

Still, Zayn took the time to peek through the small window into his classroom before entering, breathing easier when he saw there wasn’t a principal in sight. He unlocked the door and headed to his desk, but on the way, something caught his eye. He glanced at the board.

There, written in red marker (Dr. Payne’s favourite colour apparently), was the following message:

\textbf{Some things aren’t easy to erase. Thursday, 16:00.}

It felt more like a warning than an appointment. Probably, because it was. Zayn immediately took note of the appointment time, then went to erase the board.

It didn’t work.

He wasn’t sure what kind of marker Dr. Payne used, but it wasn’t a dry erase marker because the ink wasn’t coming off. Zayn hoped to God it wasn’t a Sharpie or other permanent marker, then again, he couldn’t imagine his principal completely ruining a whiteboard just to get a message across.

(Then again, maybe he could.)

Glancing at the clock in dismay and realising school was about to start, he grabbed the first thing he saw—the poster for \textit{Othello}—and slapped it over the writing. He was just putting the last magnet on when the five-minute bell rang.

‘Some things aren’t easy to erase…,’ Dr. Payne had written, and Zayn had gotten the message loud and clear.

***

“I got it! I got the part!” a girl’s voice shrieked from the 200 hallway. It was right before second hour, and in Zayn’s opinion, entirely too early for that much enthusiasm. But just as he was about to open the door to his classroom to investigate, Lainey Anderson burst in and announced:

“I got Desdemona!”

In the midst of the congratulatory cheers and hugs, the bell rang. Zayn gave Lainey a minute to bask in the spotlight of her good news, then brought the class to order.

Later, while the class was busy with an assignment, he stopped by Lainey’s desk. “Well done, Lainey,” he congratulated her. “I can’t wait to see the play. I’m sure you’ll be an amazing Desdemona.”
“Thanks, Mr. Malik!” she gushed, lighting up. “Rehearsals start tomorrow—and ughhh, I need to let Niall know I’m gonna miss Bistro tomorrow,” she said, face falling momentarily. “I hate missing Bistro, but I know he’s gonna be super excited for me!”

“Niall?” Zayn repeated, trying not to frown. “Do you mean Mr. Horan?”

“Oh, I see,” Zayn replied, but he didn’t. He made a mental note to talk to Niall about Lainey’s slip. Dr. Payne loathed any type of informality, and this type of thing would drive him off a cliff—especially since it was a topic that had been addressed at one of Niall’s observations already. “Oh, by the way, Lainey…who will be playing the part of Othello?”

“Derek.”

“Derek?” Zayn echoed, glancing at the empty seat in the corner. According to attendance, the boy had an appointment and was excused for the morning. “Derek in this class?”

“Yes, Derek Johnson.”

“I didn’t know he was into theatre?”

“I didn’t either,” Lainey admitted. “I thought Jalen or Dante was gonna get it for sure, but Derek showed up out of nowhere and nailed the audition and call backs.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Who knew?”

Yeah…. Zayn certainly didn’t know the boy well, not after Dr. Payne had put the fear of God into him at the beginning of the year, and all because of a minor violation in Zayn’s class. And despite the fact that Derek was now in two of Zayn’s classes this semester, the teacher still felt like he knew next-to-nothing about the boy besides the fact he played football—apparently because his father wanted him to—and he was passing Zayn’s classes (barely).

Zayn realised Lainey was looking up at him strangely, no doubt wondering why he was still hovering over her desk. “Congratulations again, Lainey. I’ll let you get back to work.”

Derek was back for eighth hour, and Zayn resolved to find a time to talk to him during class. Derek was on the bubble in his class, and despite what Frank Franklin had said about how Zayn should be content with that, Zayn wasn’t. He knew the kid was capable of more, and the Othello thing was the perfect way to try to connect with the boy a little more.

Zayn got the opportunity he wanted when Derek moved to the back table during their quiet work time. The history teacher slowly meandered towards the back of the room, then sat down next to the boy. Derek’s shoulders immediately tensed.

“You need any help with the assignment, Derek?”

The boy shook his head and continued working.

“I, uh, heard you got the part of Othello.”

“Yeah.” The boy didn’t look up.

“I didn’t know you were into theatre,” Zayn pressed on, “but that’s sick—I mean, that’s really, uh, commendable, being good at both sports and the arts.” Zayn cringed at his own awkwardness,
wishing he had his best friend’s gift. “But I’d think it would be hard to juggle the play and sports and everything.”

Derek peeked over at him. “Football season’s over, Mr. Malik.”

“Oh, but I thought you did track as well?”

“Yeah,” Derek replied, sounding a little curious as he twisted his pencil around, “I ran track the past four years.”

Finally, Zayn felt like he was getting somewhere. “Heard you were quite the hurdler—wait, is that even what you call it?” he asked, laughing at himself. “Sounds weird saying it out loud.”

“It’s right though,” Derek grinned back. “I’ll save you the time of googling it.”

“Thanks, but I was actually just going to open the door and shout out the question to Mr. Styles next door,” Zayn joked.

Derek laughed despite himself. “Bet Mr. Styles would’ve loved that.”

Zayn gave the boy a friendly wink. “Guess we’ll never know. So, are you still doing track or does it conflict with the play too much?”

“Mr. Tomlinson said he’d be willing to work around my track schedule if I really wanted to do both, but I don’t. Mr. Tomlinson’s cool like that,” he added, nodding his head as if confirming what he’d just said. “Drama’s my favourite class and Mr. Tomlinson, he’s dope.”

Honestly, it was gratifying to know that Derek did get some joy out of school now—even if it was in Louis Tomlinson’s class. “So, what’s your favourite part about theatre, Derek?”

Derek hesitated. “Well, it probably sounds jank but….”

“Let me be the judge of that,” Zayn interjected with an encouraging smile. “Please go on.”

“Well, I like pretending to be someone I’m not,” the boy acknowledged, looking embarrassed. “Sometimes I just…get tired of being me all the time, of being the dumb jock or whatever it is people think of me,” he muttered, hanging his head. “I feel like everyone has these crazy high expectations for my future, like they keep piling on pressure. It’s cool, you know, to just…be someone else.” He lifted his head, staring back at the history teacher with a set of striking, but tired, mahogany eyes. “That probably sounds whack, doesn’t it?”

“Not at all,” Zayn reassured him. “I think we all would welcome a chance to escape from ourselves from time to time, from the labels and expectations people place on us….” Zayn bit his lip. The words rang closer to home than he would have liked, but he pushed it from his mind. “So, you worried about memorising all those lines?”

“Not really. It’s easy for me to remember shit—uh, stuff, I mean.” Derek tensed again. “I’m sorry, Mr. Malik. I didn’t mean to disrespect—”

“You’re good,” Zayn assured him. “Just maybe promise me you’ll apply your skill of memorising ‘stuff’ to my classes as well,” he winked.

Derek broke out into a relieved smile. “I will. You know, you’ve chilled a lot, Mr. Malik. And your classes aren’t as bad as some of my others—especially geography. Geography’s kinda cool—the way you teach it, at least.”
“I appreciate that, Derek,” Zayn chuckled. “High praise indeed from Othello himself. See you tomorrow and don’t forget about the quiz in Geography.”

“I won’t, Mr. Malik…and thanks.”

As Zayn walked back towards the front of the classroom, he felt heartened by the fact he was finally making some headway with Derek.

At least something seemed to be going right for once.

The final bell rang, and as the students put their chairs up and exited, Zayn’s mind drifted back to his personal problems. He had a few minutes before the staff meeting began, and he used it to tidy up and reflect on his ‘date’ with Ed at the coffee shop the previous night. Zayn hadn’t revealed everything to the music teacher—not even close—but he did share more than he had intended to. He had admitted the principal had made advances towards him but was careful not to go into detail, and somehow, Ed knew not to ask.

It felt good to talk to someone, someone who understood, at least a little. For even though Ed hadn’t experienced the same sort of ‘attention’ Zayn had been receiving from Dr. Payne, the music teacher had been the principal’s scapegoat last year, back when he was the new teacher at Payne Academy.

So when Ed suggested they try to beat Dr. Payne at his own game, Zayn knew it was the right thing to do. Zayn had listened closely as Ed outlined the plan, and he hadn’t felt guilty. (He hadn’t.) Zayn knew he had to act before it was too late, before he descended any farther on the slippery-slope of immorality his principal was leading him down.

He just prayed Ed’s deceptively simple plan worked.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts on this chapter? Do you feel it's a good or bad thing that Ed knows (a little of) what's been going on? FYI, Harry and Louis will be back next chapter. And of course, there will be THE meeting with Dr. Payne....

Until next Friday, lovelies! Much love! Maree xx
Wednesday turned out to be a blissfully uncomplicated teaching day. The only thing that broke up the heavenly routine was when Harry mentioned the “big announcement” he couldn’t wait to share with Zayn at their mentoring meeting after school. It made Zayn a little nervous (any surprises did really). It also served as a reminder that he still needed to clean off the message Dr. Payne had left on his whiteboard the day before. He’d gotten away with covering it with a poster the last couple of days, but he didn’t want to take any chances, especially since Harry had suggested they meet in Zayn’s classroom because the English teacher had novels stacked up all over his room.

That’s why Zayn was cleaning his whiteboard, scrubbing vigorously with a rag saturated with some cleaning solution mixed with alcohol, when a familiar voice surprised him:

“Well, hullo there, Lady Macbeth!”

Zayn gasped and dropped the rag, clumsily knocking the bottle of cleaner off the ledge. His heart was hammering in his chest as he bent down to collect the items off the floor. When he straightened up, he came face to face with Louis Tomlinson.

“A tad jumpy today—aren’t we, Malik?” Louis observed, wearing his usual smirk.

“I…um…no. I was just….”

“Cleaning a non-existent spot on your whiteboard?” Louis offered, folding his arms over his chest as he leaned up against the board.

“You can’t see it?” Zayn asked, disbelieving. “You seriously can’t see the red marker?” The history teacher peered at the board again. The marker was faint but still perfectly visible if one looked close enough. In fact, he could read the message even now: ‘Some things aren’t easy to erase. Thursday, 16:00.’

“No,” Louis drawled, “because there innit anything there, darling.”

“Well, there was something there.”

Louis cocked an eyebrow. “I’ve been watching you go at it for a while now, and I didn’t see anything on that board.”

“How long have you been standing there?” Zayn asked, half self-conscious, half indignant.

“How long enough to admire your surprisingly well-defined biceps and to come to the conclusion that you’d make a brilliant Lady Macbeth.” Louis stared down at his own hand. “‘Out, damned spot!’” he quoted with a dramatic flair only he could pull off before snorting.

“Thanks, but I got the allusion the first time,” Zayn replied drily. “And unlike Lady Macbeth, I don’t have any blood on my hands—or my board.” He glanced at the area he’d just been cleaning and ignored the fact that he could still see traces of red. “So could you please lay off the Lady Macbeth references?”
Louis gave a smug little smile. “You’re the one furiously trying to remove an imaginary stain, mate. Perhaps, we have a guilty conscience about something?”

“I don’t and the stain was there!” Zayn insisted, slamming the bottle of cleaner on his desk.

The drama teacher’s tone turned dark, almost sinister, as he responded to Zayn’s outburst: “I was just taking the piss, but apparently, I’ve struck a nerve.”

Zayn did his best not to react. Unfortunately, his brain kept going back to the message, to the fact that there were only twenty-four hours until his next meeting with Dr. Payne, exactly twenty-four hours until his first chance to execute Ed’s plan….

The last thing Zayn needed, however, was to make Louis Tomlinson angry or suspicious. He had already learnt from experience that the man in front of him could make his life a living hell just as easily as Dr. Payne could. “I didn’t mean to snap at you, Louis. I’m just worn-out,” Zayn apologised, shuffling a few things around on his desk. “To be honest, I haven’t been getting much sleep.”

“Why?” Louis tutted, feigning sympathy. “Horan been keeping you up all night?”

“We’ve gone over all this before,” Zayn sighed, rubbing his temples as he turned to face the other boy. “There’s nothing going on between Niall and me—never was, never will be—so I’d appreciate it if you could lay off the insinuations.”

“Touchy today, aren’t we?” Louis mused, completely unbothered.

“Well, Niall has a girlfriend—in case you forgot.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten he’s dating one of my very good friends,” Louis returned, eyes watching Zayn closely, “I just hope he doesn’t forget it.”

“Niall’s not like that,” Zayn retorted, though a part of him wanted to add, ‘anymore.’ Niall had been kind of a player back in high school and college—even Zayn had to admit that—but those days were gone. Niall had changed; he’d grown-up (when it came to relationships anyway). “And not that it’s any of your business,” Zayn huffed out, “but Niall’s been so involved with the Bistro lately that he wouldn’t even have time for anything like what you’re insinuating.”

Louis smirked. “Jealous, are we?”

“Please stop.”

“It was just a joke, Malik. God, you really need to lighten up.” Louis pushed himself off the wall and began meandering about in that way of his, touching and messing with everything in sight as if he were twelve. “The Payne Bistro…,” he repeated slowly, as if savouring (or loathing) each word. “It’s been quite a triumph for the school and its reputation, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, it has.” Zayn eyed him warily. Having a conversation with Louis Tomlinson was tiring. There was always an ocean of difference between what the drama teacher said and what he actually meant. Zayn half-wondered if the ability came naturally to the man or if he had developed the skill after working closely with Dr. Payne for so many years.

“Yes, the Bistro’s been a smashing success,” Louis declared, running a finger along the ledge of the whiteboard. “Everyone’s talking about it. It seems like one can’t go anywhere without hearing about how delectable the Bistro’s macarons are, how ingenious an idea it was for a student-run venture, how profitable it’s become….”
“Your point?”

Louis looked up innocently. “I was just making a few simple observations, Malik.” The theatre teacher examined the whiteboard again and his icy blue gaze fell on the Othello poster. He levelled it out, gazing at it fondly like a proud father. “Personally, I believe there are far more interesting topics to discuss such as the spring production of Shakespeare’s Othello and the fact that reps from the New York Film Academy will be attending opening night.”

And with that, Zayn had just about all he could take of Louis Tomlinson and his silly rivalry with Niall. “Louis, I don’t mean to be rude, but did you have a specific purpose for your visit?”

“Yes,” Harry answered loudly, and they both turned to find the English teacher standing in the doorway. “Tommo here was supposed to let you know I was on a call with Dr. Payne.” He gave Louis a long-suffering look as he marched up to join them. “Apparently, it slipped his mind.”

“It did actually,” Louis said smoothly, completely unapologetic.

“Why am I not surprised?” Harry muttered, shaking his head. The English teacher had been letting his hair grow out lately—or he simply hadn’t bothered to get a haircut—and his curls bounced every which way. “Anyway, I’ve been meaning to talk to you, Zayn. I ran into Niall the other morning, and he mentioned something about us meeting last Friday…?” Harry asked, brows furrowed together.

Zayn felt his mouth go dry. “Oh, yeah. Sorry about that. It was just a mix-up. I was with Ed on Friday night, and Niall must’ve thought I, uh, said your name.”

“Totally could see how that happened,” Louis said mockingly. “‘Harry’ and ‘Ed’ sound so much alike. I mean, they’re practically the same name. As a matter of fact, the first time I heard this kid’s full name, I bloody swore they said Harry Harry-ward Styles.”

“Can you not for once?” Harry scowled. “It was clearly an innocent mistake.”

Louis rolled his eyes. “Someone got up on the wrong side of their waterbed today.”

Harry ignored him. “Ed, huh?” he asked Zayn, looking nonplussed. “Didn’t realise you still had a thing with him.”

Zayn felt himself go pale. “I, uh, no,” he sputtered, not wanting Harry to get the wrong idea for a number of reasons. “I mean, we’re just, uh, good friends.”

“Okay…,” Harry replied. His mentor didn’t look completely convinced, but thankfully, he didn’t press the matter further. (Zayn wondered if it was purely because Louis was around.) “But anyway,” Harry went on, “I figured it was a mix-up, like you said, and I’m glad you and Niall got everything sorted.”

“Yeah, me, too.”

“Yep,” Louis agreed, popping the ‘p.’ “There’s nothing as awful as a lovers’ quarrel.”

“Tommo.”

“Yes, Styles?” Louis asked sweetly. “My tremendous intuitive powers are telling me you want me to drop that subject, so I’ll be a sport and comply. Besides, we have bigger and better fish to fry.”

Harry appeared completely uninterested as he asked, “such as?”
“Such as what you and the Paynemaster were nattering about.”

“Why don’t you go ask him yourself?”

Louis snorted. “Yeah, think I’ll pass on that. I’ll likely get it all from Jo eventually anyway.” He threw up his hands, palms forward. “But hey, as long as it wasn’t about me, I’m good.”

“It wasn’t about you,” Harry told him. “It was about my mentee, and regretfully, I can’t talk about it.” He turned to Zayn. “Remember how I said I had some exciting new for you today? Well, Dr. Payne asked me not to tell you anything yet. He said he scheduled a meeting with you tomorrow afternoon to share the news.”

Zayn’s eyes involuntarily flicked towards the board. “Yes,” he answered, feeling trepidation set in again. “Yes, I’m meeting with him at four.”

Louis sidled up to his best friend. “Well if he’s gonna find out tomorrow anyway, why can’t you just give us a hint or two, Styles?”

“Because Dr. Payne asked me not to tell him, Tommo,” Harry explained with an annoyed huff.

“Then don’t tell him,” Louis returned easily. “Malik, cover your ears.”

Harry shook his head. “Tommo, you’re insufferable.”

“Cheers, mate,” Louis returned with a cheeky grin and even Zayn couldn’t help but laugh.

Harry groaned but his eyes couldn’t hide the fondness he felt for his friend. He smiled apologetically at Zayn. “I knew I should’ve waited until this idiot was out of the room before I said anything.”

“I’ll go as soon as I’m done,” Louis said as he picked at a piece of fluff on Harry’s navy cardigan.

“Tommo, what in the world are you even doing?”

“You’ve cat hair on you, mate,” Louis answered, still picking at the cardigan. “I’m fixing it so you look smart—or less like a dog’s dinner at any rate.” He stepped back, as if assessing his work. “As your best mate, Styles, I feel it my duty to tell you that your style game has been rather appalling of late,” he declared sombrely.

Zayn felt compelled to come to his mentor’s defence. “I wouldn’t exactly say that, Louis,” he said, but then, he took a good look at Harry’s outfit. The English teacher was wearing an oversized navy cardigan with a wrinkled fawn-coloured shirt and plaid trousers. “He, uh, looks….”

“Like a crumpled, middle-aged professor who has a cat named Algernon and studies newts in his free time?” Louis suggested, and Zayn had to bite back a smile because the man wasn’t exactly wrong. “Honestly, Styles, I’m surprised Liz even let you out of the house looking like that.”

“Liz doesn’t own me,” Harry snapped, shocking them both. “I’ll wear whatever the bloody hell I want, Tommo.”

Louis lowered his voice, his expression turning serious. “Hey, everything alright between you and Liz, mate?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Harry responded dully, looking less than genuine.

Louis squeezed his best friend’s shoulder and stood directly in front of him until the taller man was forced to look down at him. “Ring me later, yeah?”
Harry appeared as if he were going to protest at first but then nodded reluctantly. The two friends shared a moment, and suddenly, Zayn felt like he was the one intruding.

But soon, the moment was over and Louis was sauntering towards the hallway. “By the way, I was only asking you to ring me, Styles, because I want all the details on Payne’s big news for Malik here.”

Harry snorted and the mood instantly lightened. “Keep dreaming, Tommo.”

“Fine, I get when I’m not wanted,” Louis returned, playing along. “Have a lovely mentoring sesh. I’m sure it’ll be dead interesting—whatever Styles planned for you two to discuss—but I think I might go watch paint dry or catch up on international curling.”

“Goodbye, Tommo.”

“Bye, Louis,” Zayn chimed in, secretly relieved the drama teacher was finally leaving.

“Ah, Malik,” Louis smiled, glancing at the board again, “happy cleaning and let me know if you need help with disposing the body.” And with that, the theatre teacher exited, stage left.

Harry stared after him for several seconds before turning his attention to Zayn. “Should I ask?”

Zayn felt his cheeks redden. “He…was just teasing me because I was cleaning the board when he came in.”

Harry scrunched his nose up. “Yeah, I still don’t follow.”

“I accidentally used permanent marker on the board and….” Zayn pursed his lips. “It’s silly, just… maybe could you tell me if you can still see any red?”

“Where?”

Zayn indicated the spot, but then he almost immediately regretted it because the writing seemed to be clearer than ever now, as permanent as an imprint. What if Harry asked him what it meant? What if he guessed who it was from?

Harry studied the area diligently before giving his verdict: “Mate, there’s nothing there.”

“You…you sure?”

His mentor was starting to look slightly concerned, and at this point, Zayn didn’t blame him. “I swear to you there is not a single mark on that board,” Harry assured him. “In fact, I’d venture to say that is the cleanest whiteboard I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Zayn blinked a few times, but the writing wouldn’t disappear. He shut his eyes tightly, and it still wouldn’t disappear. It was as if the message was emblazoned on the back of his eyelids: ‘Some things aren’t easy to erase….’

Harry gave him a pat on the shoulder. “There’s a scientific name for it—afterimage, I believe is the term,” he said, always seeming to have an answer for everything. “You must’ve been staring at the red on the white background too long. It should go away soon.”

“Yeah, that’s probably it…,” Zayn concurred, still uncertain. “Hey, Harry—would you mind terribly if we didn’t meet today?”

“No problem,” Harry answered straight away. “To be honest, I’m not feeling the greatest myself,”
he admitted, sliding a hand through his mess of untamed curls. “See you tomorrow, Zayn. And don’t forget to get some rest so you’ll be ready for Dr. Payne.”

Zayn felt a shiver of fear run through him. “Wh-what?”

Harry eyed him with concern again. “Dr. Payne’s big news for you? Ring a bell?”

“Oh, yeah…that,” Zayn replied, remembering how to breathe. “Yeah, don’t worry,” he promised, thinking of Ed’s plan. “I’ll be ready.”

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“Stop dawdling by the door and have a seat, Mr. Malik.” Without looking up, Dr. Payne gestured towards the hexagon table. “We have several vital matters to discuss, and I don’t want to waste any time.”

“Did you want me to shut the door, sir?”

“Yes, please do,” Dr. Payne returned distractedly, noisily organising the papers on his desk into crisp, neat stacks.

As he was about to pull the door closed, Zayn caught a glimpse of Jo getting ready to leave for the day. She pulled a face and mimed being hanged, and he couldn’t help but laugh under his breath as he shut the door. He felt almost elated because so far everything had worked, just as Ed guaranteed it would.

“Mr. Malik, I believe I asked you to quit dawdling.”

“Oh! Yes, of course, sir,” Zayn answered, nearly knocking over Dr. Payne’s bamboo plant in his rush to sit down.

“Really, Mr. Malik,” the principal complained, frustration etched into every line of his face. “That poor plant has stood there all year, and yet you insist upon ploughing into it every other time you enter this office. I am seriously considering finding the damned thing another home before—”

“I promise I won’t do it again, sir. I—I’ll be more careful next time, I promise,” he stammered, his heart pounding as he cursed his own clumsiness. “Just…just please leave it where it is.”

The principal regarded him curiously, and Zayn tried to keep his expression as blank as possible. Ed had instructed him to act normal and not raise any suspicions, and Zayn was already failing miserably.

“Have a seat, Mr. Malik,” the older man sighed at last, and Zayn did so, like a penitent puppy with its tail between its legs. Dr. Payne rose and unbuttoned his suit jacket before joining him, revealing a flash of crimson silk lining. It contrasted sharply with the grey serge; however, as the principal walked closer to him, Zayn could spy delicate crimson threads running through the fabric of the principal’s suit.

There was always so much more to the man than at first met the eye.

“My eyes are here, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne deadpanned, and Zayn blushed a shade to match the
lining of the man’s jacket. “Where’s your phone?”

“In my classroom, sir.”

Dr. Payne’s eyes examined his fitted shirt and trousers and nodded. “Did Mr. Styles say anything to you yesterday?” he asked, returning to full professionalism again.

“Only that you had some important news for me.”

“Excellent. Yes, I wanted to be first one to share the good news with you,” the principal revealed, eyes glimmering like smoky quartz. “Mr. Malik, I am pleased to announce you have passed all the preliminary qualifications and are now officially a candidate for New Teacher of the Year. This, as you know, is a state-wide and extremely prestigious award. At Payne, we have been fortunate enough to have another honouree—”

“Yes, Harry won,” Zayn interjected, feeling almost giddy. This nomination was everything he ever wanted and more. It signified he made it. It signified—

“That is correct, Mr. Malik,” the principal acknowledged with a hint of impatience. “I believe it is common knowledge that our very own Mr. Styles earned the award a few short years ago. I would appreciate, however, if you could refrain from interrupting me for the duration of this meeting.”

“Sorry, sir; I was excited.”

“As you should be,” Dr. Payne returned kindly.

“Thank you, sir.” And that’s when it hit him—the guilt. Zayn thought of Ed’s plan, the wheels already set in motion, and suddenly he wondered if he had done the right thing. Maybe he should have waited. Maybe he should have—

“It’s a tremendous honour just to be in the running,” Dr. Payne continued, “and it certainly doesn’t hurt the reputation of the school. However, I will say that both Mr. Styles and I believe you have a strong chance at being named this year’s New Teacher of the Year.” He sat back in his chair and loosened his tie. “Of course, we have little control over what happens from her on out. We submitted the paperwork, but the state selection committee had to approve you—which they did obviously. They would have been complete fools not to have done so, what with your transcripts, record, evaluations, teacher work sample, and student assessment results.”

“Assessment results?” Zayn repeated, baffled. “I didn’t think those were available yet.”

“Preliminary results for the first round are in,” the man divulged, looking like the cat who ate the canary, “and your students’ test scores are off the charts. Indeed, the Board is falling over themselves wanting to shower you—and yours truly, of course—with plaudits. It really is most gratifying.” He drummed his fingers on the table once as if it were an exclamation point to his disclosure.

“And the school?” Zayn asked. “How did the school perform overall?”

“I really shouldn’t say anything,” the principal confided, “but since I’ve already spoken to Mr. Styles about the results, I see no reason why I should continue to withhold the information from you. I will simply say that scores are good. They are very good indeed, Mr. Malik.” He leaned in closer as if he were relaying top secret government information. “In particular, the English, Science, and Math results are no short of outstanding.” He sat back and gave a smug smile. “In English, we were the top-performing school in the state.”
Zayn was almost afraid to ask. “And…Social Studies?”

Dr. Payne frowned. “Even with your sections pulling up scores, the Social Studies results were barely above average.”

“Oh,” Zayn replied, not knowing what to say.

“Exactly,” the principal muttered, expression hardening. “And I’m sure you can deduce my opinion of the word ‘average.’ To tell the truth, Mr. Malik, I’ve been harbouring the idea of promoting you to department head as early as fourth quarter.”

“Department head?” Zayn croaked. The fact was that he’d love to be department head…eventually. But sometimes, he still felt like he hardly knew what he was doing—New Teacher of the Year nomination or not—and he couldn’t even imagine running a whole department, especially one as broad and multifaceted as the social sciences department. Besides, Zayn was already despised enough in the school as it was. He didn’t need to add stealing his supervisor’s job three-quarters of the way through the school year to the list of charges against him. “Sir, Mr. Franklin is—”

“An ass,” Dr. Payne finished for him, and Zayn’s eyes almost shot out of their sockets. “Oh, come now, Mr. Malik. There should be no secrets between us—not when it comes to this school anyways,” he added enigmatically. “The only thing that idiot ever did correctly was to assign you to be the Geography Bowl sponsor. I’m certain you’re the best person for the job, and besides, it doesn’t hurt to have an extra-curricular activity on your New Teacher of the Year resume. How’s the club going by the way?”

“We’re just getting underway, but I think we’ve got a promising group of students,” Zayn answered. “But sir, about Mr. Franklin—”

“Mr. Franklin was a teacher my late father hired. A mistake—one of many, I might add—that I unfortunately inherited.” Dr. Payne slumped a little in his chair. “I’ve dealt with most of them already,” he confessed, steelying his fingers. “I’ve driven most of the bad eggs out of this school with high expectations and an iron fist, but a few, such as Mr. Franklin, still persist like cockroaches.”

“Well, at least there won’t be any, uh, mistakes anymore, sir.”

Dr. Payne hitched an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

Zayn tried to think of the most delicate way to point out that the man’s father, the former headmaster of Payne Academy, had suffered an unfortunate end at the bottom of the main staircase, and therefore, wouldn’t be making any more hiring decisions. “Um, well, your father isn’t in a position to, like….”

“Yes, of course, but no one is completely immune to mistakes, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne commented, forehead creasing as if he were deep in thought. “I made one massive error in judgement myself.”

“Only one? I would say that’s not bad—I mean, with all the people you hire and all.”

“It’s not bad; however, it’s not good either,” the principal remarked. “I should have corrected the mistake when I had the chance. Now….” His voice trailed off, eyes distant and chillingly cold. “But my hiring woes are of no concern to you, Mr. Malik. I’d much rather you tell me your thoughts on the possibility of being promoted to department head.”

“I’m flattered,” Zayn said carefully, “but I don’t think I’m ready for that position just yet, sir, and… and I wouldn’t want to make any waves.”
Dr. Payne seemed to be mulling over Zayn’s objection in his mind, his expressive brown eyes calculating a cost-benefit analysis of the problem. “Perhaps, you are correct, Mr. Malik,” he relented. “It might seem…ill-advised for a first year teacher to take over a department.” He rubbed his clean-shaven chin thoughtfully. “Yes, we will postpone any discussion of department chair until you feel you are ready—but please bear in mind that I am not willing to wait forever.” He gave the young teacher a hard, shrewd look. “And that goes for all matters, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn swallowed down the uneasiness the man’s words brought him. “Yes, sir.”

“Also, I plan to share the assessment results at our next staff meeting, so please do not disclose any of this information with the rest of the staff. That goes for the New Teacher of the Year nomination as well, just for the time being.”

“Of course,” Zayn replied. “And thank you, sir. I…I don’t know what to say except that I’m, well, honoured.”

The older man looked pleased. “Well, you have approximately two months to come up with a more elaborate response, but I wouldn’t put it off if I were you,” Dr. Payne advised him. “The selection committee gave incredibly positive feedback when they approved your candidacy, and you will be expected to make an acceptance speech at the awards dinner if you are chosen.”

“A speech at an awards dinner?”

“Yes, and everyone who matters will be there,” Dr. Payne announced proudly, and Zayn had to remind himself (and the butterflies in his stomach) that he was worrying about something that might not even happen. “Also before I forget,” the principal added, “you should thank Mr. Styles for his personal recommendation as well as his help in compiling everything for the application.”

“Yes, I’ll definitely do that, sir.”

“Good.” The principal tapped his fingertips together several times, and Zayn could tell a question was coming. “How are your mentoring sessions progressing anyway?”

“Oh fine—fantastic actually. Mr. Styles has been incredibly supportive. He really does have a wealth of knowledge on all aspects of teaching and learning.”

“Yes, he does,” Dr. Payne agreed, expression unreadable. “And he’s professional?”

“Always.” Zayn wanted to add, ‘unlike some people,’ but he held back the urge. Now wasn’t the time.

The principal gave his usual curt nod and stood up. “Now on to our second item of business. Unfortunately, I have to tell you that this is not nearly as pleasant a topic.”

“Oh?” The single syllable came out gargled somehow.

“Yes, I’m afraid I am going to have to give you another punishment,” Dr. Payne informed him with a heavy sigh as he walked over to lock his office door from the inside.

All of a sudden, Zayn felt like all the oxygen in the room had evaporated. “B-but why, sir?”

“You know why,” the principal replied coolly. “Is it really necessary for me to remind you of your actions last Friday?”

Reluctantly, Zayn reflected back on everything that happened the last time he was in this office. He
thought of the excruciatingly embarrassing massage, of Dr. Payne tricking Zayn into kissing him. And to be honest, he didn’t really understand why the principal was still mad. Yes, Zayn had been slow to acquiesce to the man’s demands, and yes, he had left the office hastily, but he didn’t think that behaviour warranted a punishment a week later.

As Zayn saw it, Dr. Payne had gotten his way; he had won, as usual.

Still, Zayn figured he was better off trying to appease his principal. “I’m sorry I didn’t follow your instructions immediately last week, sir, but I promise I’ll do better.”

“I should hope so,” Dr. Payne replied derisively. “You seem to be very adept at making promises in certain areas, Mr. Malik, and not as good at delivering on them.”

Zayn ignored the sleight. He needed to remain level-headed today of all days. “Like I said, I promise I’ll do better next time.”

“No, Mr. Malik,” the principal purred. “I am afraid that your positive intentions for the future in no way affect my need to address your past transgressions.”

And that’s when Zayn lost it.

“But that’s not fair!” he protested, rising to his feet so the principal wouldn’t have as much of a height advantage over him. “How can you talk about punishing me when you’ve just said I’m up for New Teacher of the Year? Like, in what universe does that even make sense?!”

Dr. Payne wasn’t moved by the young teacher’s outburst in the slightest. “The issues are entirely separate, Mr. Malik. As I’ve stated, I feel you are more than deserving of the award. Having said that, I cannot stand by when I see a blatant act of disrespect directed towards me, towards our arrangement.”

The mere way in which the man had spoken the word ‘arrangement’ sent chills down Zayn’s spine. It made the whole thing seem more disgraceful, more loathsome than it even was.

“Have a seat, Mr. Malik.”

Resignedly, Zayn dropped back into his chair.

“Now, as I was saying,” Dr. Payne resumed, hovering over him, “you will be undergoing a punishment for your reprehensible behaviour; however, the extent of your punishment will be entirely up to you.”

“Great.”

“Did I detect a note of sarcasm in your voice, Mr. Malik?”

Zayn bit his lip hard.

“Then let’s begin.” Dr. Payne leaned against the front of his desk, arms folded and eyes focused like an interrogator’s. “I’m going to ask you some questions, Mr. Malik, and I would advise you to give honest answers. If you don’t, please know there will be consequences. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Zayn grunted back.

“Good,” Dr. Payne approved. “Now, is there anything you’d like to confess, Mr. Malik?”

Zayn searched his mind and his conscience. There were a number of things he could confess, but he
decided to take his chances. “No, sir.”

“Let’s try again, shall we? Did you disobey any of my rules on Friday? Think hard, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn figured the man must be referring to something that happened after Zayn ran out of the office. He thought of his fight with Ed in the hall…and of course. Dr. Payne must have witnessed the argument on camera. Even so, there was no way the principal could have overheard the conversation, and if he somehow did, Zayn didn’t see how it would make a difference. Zayn hadn’t revealed anything of note to Ed (while they were inside the school at least).

“No, sir. I can’t think of anything.”

Dr. Payne sighed. “You disappoint me, Mr. Malik. That will be one set of standards.”

Zayn began to panic. He could see the sets piling up if he kept on this way, and really, there was no reason not to tell Dr. Payne anything the man could easily have found out on his own. “I, uh, bumped into Mr. Sheeran in the hall outside the office on Friday night. Is that what you’re referring to?”

The principal didn’t answer his question. “Did he suspect anything?” he demanded, watching the teacher closely.

“No,” Zayn lied, praying the older man couldn’t see through him. “I…I told him I hadn’t been feeling well.”

“And then?”

“And then, he, uh, drove me home.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Zayn confirmed, trying to steady his breathing. He tried not to think about how Ed had comforted him, how the music teacher had kissed him in a warm car in the middle of a snowstorm not even an hour after Zayn had kissed his principal.

(And a small part of him wanted to confess everything, to shout out loud that the kiss with Ed hadn’t meant a thing, that he hadn’t felt the same desires and urges he’d felt with the man before him. It horrified the young teacher that even now, he longed to taste Dr. Payne’s lips on his even though he knew it was wrong, even though there was no universe in which it could be right.)

Zayn didn’t dare meet his principal’s eyes. He waited, Dr. Payne’s laser gaze boring into him. Finally, the principal spoke:

“Are you absolutely certain that’s all that happened, Mr. Malik?”

“Yes,” Zayn lied again, and somehow, his voice didn’t shake this time. “Yes, that’s all that happened.”

Dr. Payne seemed satisfied at last, and Zayn knew he had dodged a bullet. “I’ll need two sets of hand-written standards on my desk by Monday morning. One for your initial ‘forgetfulness’ and the other for not adhering to the rules of our arrangement,” he detailed, uncrossing his arms and checking his watch in a way that suggested they might be done soon. “See what happens when you disobey me?”

Zayn nodded, fantastically relieved to be leaving with such a light punishment under the
circumstances. But his relief was short-lived when the absolutely worst thing that could happen happened:

Zayn’s phone started to ring.

“Why the devil is your device making that noise?” Dr. Payne snarled, growing more and more irritated the longer the ringtone lasted. “Do I need to remind you of every single one of my rules, Mr. Malik? My expectation is that you either power down the blasted thing or leave it in your class—wait a minute.” Confusion filled his eyes, and Zayn dreaded what was coming next. “I thought you said you left it in your classroom?”

Zayn felt as if he were going to faint. “I-I thought I did, sir,” he faltered, trying to look sincere.

“Where’s that racket coming from anyway?” Dr. Payne demanded, realising the sound was emanating from the opposite side of the room.

“I’ll uh, just go look and see—”

“Sit down, Mr. Malik!” the principal commanded, and Zayn swiftly did as he was told.

And then the awful factory-set ringtone stopped. Zayn had never bothered to change it because it wasn’t like he ever had his ringer on anyway. Besides, the new teacher was scared to death it might ring in class some time and Harry or their principal would hear it, so he almost always had it set to vibrate, just in case. Just before the meeting, he had changed the setting, intending to put it on silent, but he must have messed up somehow and turned the ringer on.

‘Turn your ringer off.’ Ed must have repeated the directive a dozen times. ‘Don’t forget to turn your ringer off beforehand, Zayn.’ The ringing started up again, and with it, Zayn could see all of their best laid plans start to unravel.

Like a bloodhound, Dr. Payne swivelled around and quickly determined the source of the sound. He lunged towards the bamboo tree and retrieved the device from where it was hidden just as the ringing ceased again.

“You have two missed calls from Mr. Horan,” the principal informed him, glancing down at the screen.

Zayn gulped. “Thank you, sir.”

“Mr. Malik,” the other man cooed in a way that made the teacher more than a little apprehensive, “have you any idea as to how the mobile phone you left in your classroom ended up in my bamboo tree?”

“I, uh, guess I must have forgot I had it on me? And then maybe I, uh, dropped it when I bumped into the tree earlier,” Zayn suggested, and for a fleeting moment, he thought all was going to be okay. But then, the principal swiped the pattern to unlock his phone, and Zayn’s jaw dropped. “Wait—how did you know my pattern?”

“It was a ‘Z’. Honestly, Mr. Malik,” he tsked. “I understand this device doesn’t have facial recognition capabilities as mine does; however, I would expect you to be a little more imaginative with your passcode, especially since you teach high school students.”

Zayn stayed quiet as Dr. Payne perused his open apps. He was out of excuses (not that his principal would believe any of them anyway). He closed his eyes and hoped for the best, but as soon as he heard his principal’s voice coming from the tinny speakers of his Android, Zayn knew he didn’t have
“Stop dawdling by the door and have a seat, Mr. Malik. We have several vital matters to discuss, and I don’t want to waste any time.”

“Did you want me to shut the door, sir?”

“Yes, please do.”

The playback halted, and Zayn opened his eyes, a sense of impending doom clawing at his chest.

“Very fascinating,” Dr. Payne remarked, looking down at the phone in his hand. “Let’s play some more, shall we?” He tapped the screen, and the audio came alive again:

“Are you absolutely certain that’s all that happened, Mr. Malik?”

“Yes. Yes, that’s all that happened.”

“I’ll need two sets of hand-written standards on my desk by Monday morning. One for your initial ‘forgetfulness’ and the other for not adhering to the rules of our arrangement. See what happens when you disobey me, Mr. Malik?”

Dr. Payne stopped the playback abruptly. “I couldn’t have said it better myself,” he mused with an ironic twist of a smile.

“I wasn’t going to do anything with the recording, sir, I swear.”

Dr. Payne exhaled loudly. “I’m sorry to say your word doesn’t mean very much at the moment, Mr. Malik.” He glided behind his desk, then bent down to open one of his bottom drawers. When the man straightened up, he was carrying what looked like a solid black bandana. “Ready or not, I think it’s time for a real punishment—in addition to the lines I’ve already assigned, of course. I think it’s time you learnt that it is not wise to try to double-cross me.”

And suddenly, Zayn knew the man wasn’t bluffing, that he had never been bluffing. Zayn knew he was in trouble, that no well-intentioned plan from Ed or anyone else could save him at that exact moment. “What are you g-going to do, sir?” he stammered, sliding all the way back in his chair as Dr. Payne started towards him, twisting the black material around and around his hand. “Maybe we could talk this out or—”

“Unfortunately, you are in no position to bargain with me, Mr. Malik,” the other man said darkly as he strolled behind Zayn’s chair. “You either accept your punishment or I’m sorry to say our agreement—and all the protections and benefits that go with it—is irrevocably dissolved.”

Zayn felt sick. He knew he should leave, but he kept thinking about everything he was giving up. And yes, the phone call felt a lot like karma. He shouldn’t have secretly tried to record his meeting with Dr. Payne. It had been Ed’s idea, but Zayn shouldn’t have gone along with it, especially with New Teacher of the Year up for grabs.
“Well, Mr. Malik?”

Zayn took a shuddering breath. “I’ll stay. I’ll…it’ll take the punishment.”

There was a pleased cluck behind him, and it almost made him want to change his mind. “Don’t worry, Mr. Malik, it won’t hurt.”

“Then how is it a punishment, sir?”

“Oh, you’ll see,” the principal mysteriously promised, making the young teacher shiver. “And you might as well relax because this might take a while.”

And then, all of a sudden, everything went black.

Zayn’s heart began to pound harder as his hands reflexively reached up to pull the blindfold off his face, but Dr. Payne caught them before he could do anything. Zayn attempted to struggle but the principal held him fast, having advantages in both strength and position.

“I wouldn’t recommend touching the blindfold, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne cautioned, “not unless you want to be handcuffed, that is.”

Zayn immediately stopped struggling and dropped his hands. It was useless. He had made his choice, and it was useless to fight against the tide now. As he heard the other man moving around the room, Zayn thought of all that happened in the span of an hour, from the news of his nomination for an award he coveted to Ed’s plan backfiring so horribly.

Dr. Payne moved closer, and Zayn could almost feel the weight of the man’s shadow on him. When the principal spoke again, his voice was eerily calm:

“What I need you to understand, Mr. Malik, is that I am doing this for your own good.”

And with those words, Zayn knew his fate was effectively sealed.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the long chapter this week! :) Thoughts on Harry and Louis? What did you think about Dr. Payne’s good news? And Ed’s plan...didn’t go so well, did it? :/

Thanks for reading, lovelies! Next chapter is going to be...intense. Much love! ~Maree xx
Chapter 28

Zayn heard a cacophony of noises as he sat blindfolded in his principal’s office. None of the sounds were cause for alarm—dampened footsteps, the rustling of fabrics, drawers opening and closing, the insistent ticking of the grandfather clock as time marched on—but they materialised as bogeys in Zayn’s imagination. The mundane sounds seemed to be amplified now that he could no longer rely on his sense of sight.

He wished Dr. Payne would say something. He wished the principal would get on with it, with whatever sordid punishment he had planned. Anything was better than waiting and picturing the worst.

Anything.

Finally, Zayn couldn’t take it anymore. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to begin by asking a few questions, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne answered from the direction of his desk.

“Then why do I need to be blindfolded, sir?”

“It heightens the senses,” the man replied matter-of-factly, “and this way you don’t have to look me in the eye when you try to lie to me.”

Suddenly, Zayn felt enraged. “Excuse me, sir, but I don’t have to explain every single one of my actions to you.”

“You certainly don’t,” Dr. Payne returned, and Zayn could hear that he was closer now. Much closer. “However, I do expect you to explain your behaviour on any matter which directly pertains to our arrangement.”

“You do realise this is a gross abuse of power, right?”

Dr. Payne hummed. “You’re the one who decided to stay.”

“Did I have a choice?”

“We always have choices, Mr. Malik.” The principal’s voice was coming from behind him now, and it put Zayn on edge. The teacher could practically feel the man’s toxic presence on his skin. “Yes, we always have choices, but sometimes, it’s easier to pretend we don’t.”

Zayn drew in a sharp breath as Dr. Payne’s lips ghosted his neck. He sat as still as he could, resisting the urge to tilt his head to the side to allow those poisoned lips better access. He felt dizzy from the principal’s pure proximity, from the way the man’s aftershave assaulted his senses.

He couldn’t let himself submit to it—not this time. He had to be on guard for whatever the principal had in store, had to keep his mind clear and focused. “I feel like I don’t…have a choice,” Zayn managed, shrinking away from the contact. “I feel like you haven’t left me with any.”
Dr. Payne sighed. “Fine,” he returned gruffly, a hand at the back of Zayn’s head.

Then, almost before Zayn knew what was happening, the bandana was whipped away, and he was left blinking. The room was hardly bright, but he was still blinded by the sudden, harsh transition.

“Go on,” the principal prodded. “Tell me why you felt like you didn’t have a choice earlier, Mr. Malik.”

“Because”—Zayn paused, unsure if it was wise to go on—“because you’d fire me if I chose to leave.”

Dr. Payne was quiet a long time. “I think it’s time to be real, Mr. Malik. I wouldn’t fire you. You’re too good of a teacher.”

“You wouldn’t?” Zayn whispered in disbelief. “And…and New Teacher of the Year?”

“As I’ve already told you, that decision isn’t in my hands, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn could hardly believe his ears. A massive weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and he felt like he should be jumping for joy. But then, mistrust crept in. “And the arrangement, sir?”

“Is still solidly in place,” the principal assured him. “I will do everything in my power to make your deepest desires come true, to give you everything you ever wanted in your career and beyond, and you”—the man leaned down to whisper in Zayn’s ear—“you will let me.”

Zayn’s heart started racing. “And if I simply walk out that door right now?” he asked, knowing he was walking the razor’s edge. Still, he had to know (and before it was too late).

Dr. Payne took a few measured steps before pivoting around to rest against the front of his desk. “Then our arrangement will be dissolved. But no matter what you decide to do,” he continued darkly, wrapping the black bandana tightly around his hand, “if you betray me again—if you even think about doing so—I promise you will regret it.”

The words sent a chill through the teacher’s veins. “I wouldn’t betray you, sir,” Zayn swore, guilt beginning to set in again as he realised he had betrayed the principal, even in a small way. Behind the scenes, Dr. Payne had been working diligently to secure him a nomination for New Teacher of the Year, and Zayn had repaid the man by breaking his trust, the one thing the principal valued above all else. “I don’t know why I did it,” he said softly. “I just…I think I just wanted….”

“Leverage?” the principal supplied. “Well, I’m sorry that didn’t work out for you, Mr. Malik. Unfortunately, you only made things worse for yourself.”

It hit Zayn then, how stupid the plan was, how ridiculous it had been even to attempt something like recording a meeting with his phone. Then again, the wheels had been set in motion so quickly that Zayn felt as if he hadn’t had a choice when Ed presented him with the idea.

(But that wasn’t true, not really. Zayn could have told Ed he couldn’t or wouldn’t go through with the plan for whatever reason. Zayn could have come up with an alternative plan. He could have decided not to bring his phone with him to the meeting with Dr. Payne.

He could have done any number of things, but he didn’t. And Dr. Payne was right: sometimes it is easier to pretend you don’t have a choice.)

“What have you decided, Mr. Malik?” the principal asked, interrupting his thoughts. If Zayn didn’t know better, he’d say the man appeared anxious—dark eyes piercing his own, jaw twitching almost
imperceptibly.

Zayn cleared his throat. He had a feeling he was about to make a terrible mistake, but for maybe the first time in his life, he felt like it was his mistake to make:

“I’ll stay.”

“You’re certain, Mr. Malik? There will be no leaving this room until I say so once you have made your decision.”

Zayn hesitated. The idea of being trapped (and likely blindfolded again) in a room with the chimeric Dr. Payne scared the living daylights out of him. Dr. Payne was a man of the world, infinitely more experienced than the young teacher in ways Zayn couldn’t even imagine.

The principal seemed to sense the reason behind his indecision. “I think it’s about time we introduced the concept of a safe word, Mr. Malik.”

“A safe word, sir?” The term sounded vaguely familiar, but he figured it was best to let the other man define it.

“Yes, I was going to wait a little longer,” Dr. Payne confessed, “but I think it would help you make your decision. A safe word is a signal word, really,” he explained, seamlessly slipping into teacher mode. “You speak the word to me whenever you feel like you’re being pushed too far—beyond your limits, Mr. Malik, not just when you’re uncomfortable—and I’ll automatically stop whatever it is I’m doing.”

“At once?”

“At once,” Dr. Payne agreed.

Zayn mulled the idea over. A safe word—it seemed like the panacea to all his problems, the reprieve to all his reservations. He could still benefit from having a special relationship with his principal, and yet, he could ensure the man never went too far. It was a good safeguard just in case the principal ‘forgot’ his promise not to do anything Zayn wasn’t ready for.

Dr. Payne coughed. “One caveat, Mr. Malik. If I believe you are abusing the privilege of a safe word, we will have to revisit the topic.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Well, then. Have you made your final decision?”

“Yes,” Zayn answered, more certain now. “I’ll stay.”

The principal’s eyes gleamed momentarily. “Any ideas on a safe word? It’s best if you choose something unique but also something you’ll remember.”

Zayn bit his lip, scanning his memory for words that would fit the description. His brain settled on one, and he went with it: “adamantium.”

Dr. Payne blinked at him. “Adamantium?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you’re sure you’ll be able to remember that?”
Zayn could feel his cheeks heat up. He was starting to think he should’ve chosen something else, something that didn’t come directly from a comic book. Then again, it was highly doubtful his principal had ever read a comic, let alone knew the names of fictitious metal alloys. “Yes, sir. I’ll remember it.”

Dr. Payne nodded. “And now, Mr. Malik, I’m afraid we can’t postpone your punishment any longer.” He pushed off the desk, carefully placing the black bandana over his forearm.

Zayn couldn’t help staring at it as the man approached him. And when the principal disappeared behind him, he knew what was coming. “Why do I have to be blindfolded?”

“As I explained before, it heightens the senses.”

“I don’t want my senses heightened,” Zayn panicked as everything went dark again. “I like them the way they are.”

Dr. Payne chuckled, fingers lingering by the nape of his neck. “I’m sure you do. However, as I told you months ago, it is important to embrace the uncomfortable and the unknown.”

Zayn recalled the advice but that didn’t mean he liked it. (Not in this context anyway.)

“Now, for the remainder of our session, you will refer to me as Daddy only,” Dr. Payne instructed. “I will begin by asking you some questions, and I need you to answer truthfully. It is extremely important that you tell Daddy the truth. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir—I mean, Daddy.”

“Very good. Let’s begin.” There was a staged pause, almost as if the man was an actor stepping into character. “First question: have you ever touched yourself?”

“Wh-what?” Zayn spluttered. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t that.

“Have you ever touched yourself, Mr. Malik?”

“No, Daddy,” he answered honestly, burning with embarrassment. And then it dawned on him that Dr. Payne might…might… “You’re not,” Zayn eked out, heart hammering in his chest, “I mean you’re not going to, like—”

“Shhh, you’re not ready for that yet. Besides, this is a punishment, not a reward,” the principal teased, and Zayn tensed up, shocked by the man’s bluntness. Safe word or not, Zayn realised he was in way over his head.

But then, fingers were in his hair again, delicately tickling his roots before strong hands began massaging his neck and shoulders. “It’s alright, baby,” Dr. Payne soothed in that velvety voice. “Now, tell Daddy why you’ve never pleasured yourself before,” the older man coaxed. “And don’t forget, you’ve promised to tell the truth, so if you’re lying about this, I will give you one more chance to change your mind. Daddy gets very angry when his little boy tells lies.”

“I’ve, uh, always been told that it’s wrong to…to touch yourself down there, I mean, so I…just never did,” Zayn confessed, glad the blindfold was on so he didn’t have to look at his principal as he spoke those words.

“You’ve been such a good, good boy for so long,” Dr. Payne praised, hands resting on Zayn’s shoulders now. “It’s a shame you had to act like such a slag the other night.”
Zayn swallowed the lump of fear in his throat. He didn’t like where this was going. (He didn’t like where this was going one bit.)

“Because you were acting like a slag, weren’t you, Mr. Malik?”

“I…uh…no.”

“What a massive shame,” the older man tsked. “I will give you one more chance, though, since this is the first time we have played this game.”

Game? He thought this was a game? Was he completely insane?

“I…I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Zayn croaked out, feeling a bead of perspiration forming on his forehead despite the coolness of the room.

Dr. Payne let out a disappointed sigh. “I am afraid that was the wrong answer. Now, whatever you do, do not move. Do you hear me?”

“Y-yes.”

“Yes, what?” the principal prompted.

“Yes, Daddy.” Zayn heard the sound of a drawer opening in the file cabinet. There were a few more sounds he couldn’t identify while he waited, body trembling. (He sincerely hoped that didn’t count as ‘moving’ in Dr. Payne’s eyes.)

“I’ll give you one last chance,” the principal began, standing mere inches away now. “Would you like to change your answer?”

The darkness suddenly became intolerable, but Zayn didn’t dare touch the blindfold. Even though he was now gulping down air, he couldn’t seem to swallow enough oxygen to fill his lungs. His mind overflowed with dark possibilities of what Dr. Payne might do if Zayn didn’t admit to whatever it was the man was accusing him of.

Zayn gripped the arms of the chair tighter. No promise or incentive was worth this. He wondered again what had motivated him to stay, whether it was from a sense of loyalty, or ambition, or just reckless curiosity. He wondered if he was the insane one.

“Breathe, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn did as he was told. He closed his eyes and breathed, relaxing his death grip on the chair.

“Better,” Dr. Payne murmured after a while. “Remember, I told you I wasn’t going to hurt you, and Daddy always keeps his promises. Now, because you are still having trouble with the game, I will assist you by being more direct with my questioning: Did you kiss Mr. Sheeran on Friday?”

Zayn couldn’t help the gasp that escaped his lips. He couldn’t lie now, not even if he wanted to. Dr. Payne’s voice hinted that the man already knew the answer, and even if it was only a suspicion, Zayn had practically admitted the truth by his reaction. “Y-yes, Daddy.”

“Good. Don’t you feel better now, baby?” the other man cooed, “telling Daddy the truth?”

It was probably sick, but Zayn did in a way. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Excellent. I hope you’ll remember that from now on, and just in case you forget,” the principal warned, “you might keep in mind that I see everything that goes on around here. I also see a good
deal of what occurs outside of these walls, too.”

Zayn thought of the cameras around the school, and he wondered if there were cameras outside as well. Maybe there were cameras in the parking lot. Maybe Dr. Payne had seen Zayn leave with Ed on Friday night and inferred the rest.

(Or maybe the principal had simply read the guilt on Zayn’s face earlier. Either way, Zayn knew he was in trouble.)

“Next question,” Dr. Payne announced, proceeding with his interrogation. “Have you ever kissed Mr. Sheeran before last night?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Zayn meekly replied. He could tell the principal wasn’t happy with the answer from the way the air in the room seemed to shift. But in fairness, the man had asked for the truth, and Zayn was giving him just that.

“Back to Friday night. Let me make sure I understand exactly what happened. So you got into a car with Mr. Sheeran and let him drive you home?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“And he drove straight to your flat?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Zayn answered, “the apartment I share with Mr. Horan, that is.”

“And where did he kiss you?”

“Like, the location?”

“Yes, Mr. Malik.”

“In the car.”

“He initiated it?”

“Yes.”

“And you let him?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Zayn opened his mouth but didn’t know what to say. Dr. Payne had been firing questions at him, questions that took little thought to answer, but this one threw him off.

“Well, Mr. Malik?” the principal pressed, beside him now. “Why did you let him kiss you? Was it because you were angry with me, angry with yourself, or because you felt like you didn’t have a choice?”

“I…” Zayn’s voice trailed off. The truth was he didn’t know why he had let Ed kiss him. He didn’t know why he had done anything lately, and this interview was just making him more and more confused.

That’s when it occurred to Zayn that it was just a kiss, that he didn’t have to explain himself to anyone. “Maybe I wanted him to kiss me,” Zayn suggested, growing a little obstinate. “Maybe
that's why I let him kiss me, because I wanted him to.”

Dr. Payne made a noise. “Did you?”

Zayn closed his eyes—not that it made much difference with the blindfold on—and took himself back to last Friday. He thought of how furious he was with himself that he’d kissed his principal. He thought of running away from the office, running away from feelings and urges he didn’t understand (and didn’t want to either).

Then, he thought back to bumping into Ed in the hallway. He thought of the snow falling against the windscreen. He thought of the windows fogging up, of Ed leaning in, the look in his clear blue eyes. Zayn thought of the kiss, of how he wanted to feel the same fire he had felt with Dr. Payne on another man’s lips. (A better man’s lips.)

Zayn gave a defeated sigh as he let his head drop forward. “I don’t really know anything anymore,” he mumbled.

“Ah…you’re doing so much better now,” Dr. Payne approved, and Zayn was thankful the man seemed to be content with his non-answer. “Now for the important question: Did you let him fuck you?”

“What?!”

“Answer the question, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn was flabbergasted. “No, of course I didn’t. I’ve never…I mean, I’m still a—”

“Virgin?” the principal inquired almost clinically.

Zayn nodded, fingers digging into the arms of the chair again. He wasn’t sure if it was a good or a bad thing that he’d just volunteered that highly personal information, but Dr. Payne didn’t leave him much time to dwell on the matter.

“Whose idea was it to record this meeting?” Dr. Payne fired at him, and Zayn almost wished the principal had continued the last line of questioning. “Yours or Mr. Sheeran’s?”

Zayn knew he had to take the blame for the failed plan. He didn’t want to drag Ed into this any more than he already was. Moreover, if Dr. Payne discovered Zayn had confided anything about their arrangement to Ed, both teachers would be in deep trouble. “It was completely my idea. Mr. Sheeran doesn’t know anything, sir.”

“Sir?”

“Daddy,” Zayn quickly corrected. “Also, I wasn’t planning on doing anything with the recording. I-I just wanted leverage, uh, like you said.”

Dr. Payne was quiet for what seemed like days. “What happened after Mr. Sheeran kissed you?”

“Nothing,” Zayn answered honestly. “I went up to my apartment.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Good. I think that’s enough questioning for today.”
Zayn almost cried with relief. He wondered what time it was, how long Dr. Payne intended on keeping him there. “May I remove the blindfold, sir?”

“No,” came the swift response. “It’s time for your real punishment, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn tried to remain calm, but he felt like he was being pushed to extremes, and he had a feeling it was only going to get worse. (Much worse.) “But Mr. Horan will be expecting me soon,” he whinged. “I’m sure it’s after five, and we’ve been meeting at the front doors at five-thirty on Thursdays.”

“Well, fortunately for us,” Dr. Payne declared, something supercilious in his tone, “you won’t be meeting him until six tonight—something came up with the Bistro,” he added as Zayn’s heart plummeted. “I assume that’s the reason Mr. Horan rang you earlier because he texted directly after about the change in plans.” The principal paused to let the information sink in. “Very thoughtful of him, don’t you think?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Zayn returned dutifully. It made no sense at all, but he felt as if Niall had somehow betrayed him…twice. He tried to remind himself that there was no way Niall could have imagined the implications of calling his best mate at the exact time he did, of staying after an extra half hour, today of all days.

And Zayn never seriously thought he was cursed with bad luck before, but now, he was beginning to re-evaluate.

Dr. Payne cleared his throat. “Before we start, I’d like you to tell me why you’re receiving this punishment.”

Zayn figured it was best to keep cooperating. “Because I recorded our conversation with my phone.”

“And will you ever try anything like that again?”

“No, Daddy,” Zayn said penitently.

Then all of a sudden, there was a click. Next, came a buzzing sound. It resembled the dull drone of some kind of appliance, and Zayn’s mind went to all kinds of household objects one could utilise for the purposes of torture.

“Please don’t.” A choked sound left Zayn’s unwilling lips. “I—I’m sorry for what I did, and I promise I won’t do it ever again.”

“Oh, I know you won’t,” the man returned with a devilish chuckle. “Why else do you think I’m punishing you?”

And then the infernal buzzing grew louder as the thing came closer to Zayn’s ear. When it touched his shoulder, he jumped, practically tipping the chair over and into the table in an effort to escape whatever torture tool Dr. Payne was holding.

The buzzing stopped.

“This is not going to work if you cannot stay still, Mr. Malik.”

“How do you expect me to stay still when you’re going to murder me with a chainsaw, you crazy mother—?!” Zayn slapped a hand over his mouth before he said something he’d likely regret in more ways than one.
“For the last time, hands down, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne commanded with a weary sigh as he placed whatever object he was holding on the table. “And rest assured, if I were going to murder you,” he scoffed, “I wouldn’t do it with a chainsaw in my office.”

Zayn half wanted to ask the man how he would plan to murder him then. In the library with a lead pipe? In the kitchen with a candlestick? (Or perhaps, in the hall with a push down the main staircase….)

“You’re thinking too much, Mr. Malik. Now, stay still and accept your punishment, or I will think of something worse, I promise you.”

Zayn didn’t even want to contemplate that. “You said it wouldn’t hurt, yes?”

“That’s correct.”

“And I can use the safe word if it gets to be too much, right?”

“Yes, yes,” the principal replied, becoming aggravated. “We’ve been through all this.”

Zayn took a deep breath. “Then handcuff me, please.”

There was a long silence. At last, Dr. Payne coughed. “You want me to handcuff you, Mr. Malik?”

“Yes, that way I won’t move…by accident, like,” Zayn said, figuring it would be the fastest way to get this whole ordeal over with.

“I knew I wasn’t wrong about you,” the principal mused as another drawer open and closed, and Zayn could almost hear the smile in his voice. “Now, make that request again, and don’t forget to use the proper address this time.”

Zayn wanted to roll his eyes, but he didn’t dare (not even with the blindfold securely tied). “Handcuff me, please, Daddy.”

“With pleasure, Mr. Malik.”

Dr. Payne grasped Zayn’s right forearm. There was a loud snap, and Zayn expected to feel cold metal encircling his wrist, but the bracelet seemed to be wrapped in a leather-like material. Next, he heard another snap, and Zayn realised he’d been handcuffed to the arm of the chair. The process was repeated on the other side because, of course, the man would be prepared with not one but two sets of handcuffs.

“Ah, you look so pretty like that,” the principal murmured, and Zayn could imagine the man leering down at him, admiring his handiwork.

And then without warning, the buzzing returned.

“What in God’s name is that thing?!” Zayn cried out, pulling at the handcuffs. He thought he could handle this, but as soon as the noise started up again, it triggered his worst fears. “What are you going to do to me, you sadistic—”

“Really, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne tsked, switching off the device. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you today—although it definitely wasn’t me,” he quipped, and Zayn almost gagged. “I hate to spoil a surprise, but I really don’t think we’ll get through this punishment any other way,” he sighed. “It’s a vibrator.”
“A vibrator?”

“Yes, Mr. Malik. Just a plain old vibrator—a pocket rocket to be precise.”

Zayn’s fright morphed into confusion. “But I thought a vibrator was only for…for….”

“Women? Don’t be sexist, Mr. Malik,” the principal scolded. “Vibrators are for men as well. Very much so.”

Zayn wasn’t aware of that, but then again, it wasn’t like he knew much (anything) about vibrators in the first place. They were one of those unmentionable topics. Vibrators were things other people used but not him. (Definitely not him.)

He tried to calm down. A vibrator couldn’t be all that torturous of an instrument, could it? Zayn was still fully dressed, and besides, as a man, it wasn’t like there was anywhere the vibrator could go that—

_Oh God._

“Ready or not…,” the principal sing-songed, and the device roared back to life.

At least Zayn was expecting it this time. “Where are you planning to put that thing?”

“Everywhere.”

Zayn gulped. “Everywhere?”

“No, not there,” Dr. Payne chuckled, reading his mind. “It isn’t that kind of a vibrator.”

Zayn let out the breath he was holding, but his relief was temporary because a new, just as terrifying, thought struck him. Trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, he began walking his feet together, closing the space between his legs. In retrospect, he probably should have asked for his wrists to be handcuffed together. At least that way, he could have covered his manhood.

“Not there either,” Dr. Payne continued, reading his mind again. “This device will pleasure you everywhere else though, so please sit comfortably.”

Zayn was struggling to understand how this was going to be a punishment—aside from the blindfold and inconvenience of not being able to use his hands—but he was smart enough to keep the thought to himself.

“Now, relax. No more talking for a while.”

“Unless I need to use the safe word, right?” Zayn checked. “Unless I say ‘adamantium’?”

“Yes, Mr. Malik, but something tells me you won’t be needing a safe word today,” Dr. Payne said with a sureness that succeeded in calming Zayn’s rattled nerves.

Zayn didn’t even flinch at the first touch from the device. He didn’t recoil as the vibrator grazed against his neck, rested on his shoulders, nudged gently at the inside of his elbow after Dr. Payne rolled up his sleeves. And to be honest, it wasn’t horrible, the light, fluttery touch from the device as it tickled his sensitive skin. Even with his shirt on, it made Zayn’s skin tingle in a way that was hard to describe but wasn’t unpleasant.

Then Dr. Payne began to press harder, and the sensations changed slightly. They were more intense, similar to a massager.
It didn’t feel bad at all. In fact, it almost felt good. The worst part had been the initial dread of not knowing what form Dr. Payne’s punishment would take, but five minutes in, Zayn was left more puzzled than ever as to how this experience could be classified as a punishment. Even writing sets of standards was worse than this.

But then, he slowly began to change his mind.

“Let’s do some exploring,” Dr. Payne declared as the vibrator trailed across Zayn’s lower abdomen, causing the teacher to yank at his handcuffs. “Let’s sort out where you like it soft and where you like it hard,” he murmured. “I want to know where you like it gentle and where you like it rough.”

The vibrator changed directions, travelling higher until the tip found Zayn’s nipple through his thin shirt. The teacher gasped and lurched forward, handcuffs rattling.

Dr. Payne chuckled. “Ah…a little sensitive there, are we?” There was another click but instead of the device turning off this time, the vibrations slowed. Zayn relaxed into the chair, biting down on his lip as the vibrator teased the area around one of his nipples before switching to focus on the other. He could feel them start to harden, his cotton shirt only making it worse as the material rubbed against the sensitive buds.

Don’t react. Don’t react. Don’t react.

Then the wand drifted over a pert nipple, and Zayn let out a moan. It was too much. His teeth began to chatter as he struggled to hold himself together. He felt himself getting hard down there and how was that even possible?

“It never ceases to amaze me how wonderfully responsive you are,” the principal admired, discontinuing his assault on Zayn’s abused nipples.

“Are…are we done?” he asked unsurely. He could still hear the demon device whirring a safe distance away.

“On the contrary,” Dr. Payne rasped as Zayn felt the vibrator suddenly prod his inner thigh, “we’re just getting started….”

Chapter End Notes

Anyone surprised by anything? Anyone think Zayn was mad to stay? What are you hoping to see next chapter? Do you think Zayn will use the safe word? (Do you want him to?)

It took me a few extra days to get this exactly how I wanted it, but I gifted myself the time since I knew I wouldn’t be able to post a chapter this Friday. (I'm flying to Chicago tomorrow morning.)

Next chapter will be out Friday, 19 July. FYI, it might be 20 July for many of you since I tend to post later in the day. xx Finally, I'd like to give a shout out to Liam Payne for blessing us all this past week with this and this. What a time to be alive. ;)

Until soon, lovelies! ~Maree xx
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

There’s a flashback later in this chapter. It's italicised and I think it’ll be fairly obvious when you get to that point, but I just wanted to give you guys a heads up. xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Mr. Malik, you alright?” a voice squeaked out.

Startled, Zayn lifted his head up from his desk (and the Friday pop quiz he was supposed to be grading). “Yes…yes, I’m fine,” he assured the young student who was peering at him strangely.

The boy, no more than twelve-years-old judging by his size and the fact that his voice hadn’t changed yet, scooped his sandy blonde hair away from his forehead to reveal a set of vibrant hazel eyes. Tucked under the other arm was a rectangular-shaped package wrapped in brown butcher paper. He looked vaguely familiar although the history teacher was certain he’d never had him in class.

“Oh, okay,” the kid replied, face falling a little. “You looked like you were dead or something when I walked in.” He seemed almost disappointed that Zayn wasn’t dead, like it would have been a bonus to an already fantastic day if he discovered the lifeless body of a teacher in a classroom.

Zayn did his best to shake off the morbid thought. “No, I just have a bit of a headache.” He tried to think of the politest way to inquire why the kid had wandered into his classroom in the middle of seventh hour (Zayn’s plan time) when he spied the tell-tale blue hall pass sticking out of the boy’s shirt pocket. “Is there something I can help you with, bud?”

“You know my dad gets those headaches a lot,” the boy blurted out, ignoring Zayn’s question. “Every weekend.”

“Liz is cool,” the boy went on. “She’s, like, closer to my sister’s age, and she’s got pink hair,” he added solemnly as if that proved it. “I met her once when I came home from school early but nobody’s supposed to know so don’t tell anyone, alright?” he added, turning serious. “My dad told me he’d get me an Xbox One X if I didn’t tell anyone about his friend Liz.”

Zayn wasn’t sure how to respond to that, but he was starting to think he should recommend this kid see a counsellor.
“But like, you should hear the way my mom goes off at him sometimes,” the boy continued, cracking himself up. “And then my sister completely freaks out at both of them; it’s the funniest thing. Like this one time—”

“What’s your name, bud?” Zayn interrupted, feeling more and more uncomfortable about discussing such deeply personal matters with a student he didn’t even know. On the other hand, the kid didn’t seem fazed in the least by his problematic family life. (Although to be honest, Zayn wasn’t sure if that was good or bad.)

“My name’s Logan,” the boy replied with a lop-sided smile. “Logan Anderson. And oh yeah—this is for you.” He set the box he’d been juggling down on Zayn’s desk.

Zayn eyed the package cautiously. “Thank you,” he said at last, remembering he was supposed to be modelling good manners. He pushed aside the quizzes from his last class and slid the brown box closer. There was a card affixed to the top, and his fingers itched to open it even though he knew it was much wiser to wait until he was alone.

“By the way, Mr. Malik,” Logan spoke up, “I think my sister’s in your class.”

“Oh?” Zayn studied the boy again, trying to make the connection.

“Yeah, but I’m not annoying like she is,” Logan laughed. “She’s so extra about everything. Like, all of a sudden she wants to cook all the time because there’s this guy she likes in her cooking class, and it’s driving my mom nuts.”

“Logan!” a voice screeched from the hall, and Lainey Anderson stomped into the classroom. The two students stood next to each other, and Zayn nearly keeled over when he saw the resemblance. No wonder Logan looked so familiar—the two were clearly siblings.

“Hey, Lainey,” Zayn greeted his student, the newly-cast Desdemona, “I didn’t realise you had a younger brother at Payne.”

“Wish I didn’t with the way he’s talking about me behind my back!” she spat out, and Logan shifted uncomfortably in his Nikes.

“Don’t be so hard on him,” Zayn gently admonished the girl, trying to ease the tension between the two siblings. “Someday, you’ll be thankful you have him.” Zayn offered up his fist for a fist bump, and Logan smiled, reciprocating. “Lainey, I can tell you that as an only child, I’m a little envious of you.”

“Envious?” she snorted. “You? Envious of me? Don’t make me laugh, Mr. Malik.” She flipped her sandy blonde hair. “Anyway, you have Mr. Horan, don’t you? Isn’t he like your brother or something?” she asked with a hint of sarcasm. “Isn’t that what you told Mariana and them?”

Zayn wondered what in the world was going on with her; she had seemed so boisterous the other day when she got the part in the play. He thought of what Logan had just revealed about their family life and wondered if she was upset about that or if it was something else—something with the play maybe, or a friend or boyfriend.

Still, he couldn’t let Lainey walk all over him. Zayn had to remind himself that he was the teacher, that he was the one in charge. After all, how many times had Harry told him to quietly reinstate his authority when challenged by a student?

Zayn sat up straighter, looking the girl in the eye. “Lainey, do you have a hall pass?”
“Yeah, of course,” she returned snippily, slamming the blue slip on his desk. It was signed by Louis, but unsurprisingly, the drama teacher failed to follow procedures because the rest of the form was blank.

“Where were you going?” he inquired calmly. “It seems Mr. Tomlinson forgot to fill out the destination.”

“To Mr. Styles’ room. I just happened to overhear Logan gossiping about me as I passed,” she answered, glaring at her brother. “Mr. Tomlinson needed me to return a book to Mr. Styles.” She removed it from her backpack and held it up as a proof statement. “I’d like to go ahead and do that—if that’s okay with you, Mr. Malik.”

Zayn had to bite his tongue. He had no desire to get into a power struggle with this girl. He looked away and his eyes fell on Logan. The boy was staring back at him with an expression that read: see, I told you she was annoying.

Zayn smiled tightly at his geography student. “Lainey, I’m sure Mr. Tomlinson will be wondering where you are, so I’d suggest you complete that errand without delay. Oh, and Logan, thank you for the delivery.”

Lainey nudged her brother to get going, but he didn’t budge. “Mr. Malik,” Logan whinged, “don’t you want to know who it’s from?”

Lainey rolled her eyes. “Let me guess…Mr. Horan?” she offered, voice dripping with sarcasm. “And it’s obviously a box of chocolates, Logan.”

Zayn picked up the package, and it rattled a little. He desperately hoped the girl was right, that it was something innocent like chocolates and that it didn’t come from the principal. (After yesterday, he’d be happy if he never got another package from his principal ever again, thank you very much.)

“I didn’t see what it was,” Logan told his sister, “but it’s not from Mr. Horan; it’s from Mr. Sheeran,” he remarked haughtily. “God, you think you know everything, Lainey,” he mumbled under his breath before turning back to Zayn. “Mr. Sheeran…he’s my music teacher. Anyway, he said he thought you might need this now, Mr. Malik—whatever that means.”

“Mr. Sheeran?” Lainey echoed, hazel eyes lighting up. “It’s from Mr. Sheeran? Wait—are you lying, Logan?” she demanded.

Zayn glanced down at the envelope, hoping to settle this once and for all. “Mr. Malik” was written on the outside, and he inspected the handwriting closely. “Yes, this is definitely Mr. Sheeran’s handwriting,” Zayn decided, glancing meaningfully at Lainey. “Now that that’s settled, you two should be getting back to class.”

Lainey looked so happy she might burst. “Well, how wonderful is that?” she chirped, suddenly all smiles again. “Come on, Logan. We should let Mr. Malik enjoy his chocolates in peace.” The older girl dragged her brother out of the classroom, Logan grumbling something under his breath about how he should’ve gotten a chocolate since he delivered them. Zayn couldn’t help but chuckle as he rose to close the door behind them.

This was his free period, after all.

Back at his desk, Zayn tore open the small envelope and at once recognised Ed’s familiar scribble on the simple yellow notecard:
Zayn,

*I hope everything went well yesterday. I was wondering if you had a chance to carry out what we discussed on Monday? Please call or text when you get a chance. I’ve been thinking about you. x*

~Ed

*P.S. Tell Niall to keep his mitts off these*

As Lainey had guessed, a box of fancy assorted chocolates was under the plain packaging. And somehow, Ed’s kind gesture made Zayn feel worse than he already did.

Zayn pulled up his shirt sleeve a few inches and guiltily examined his wrist. There was still the faintest of impressions from the leather handcuffs Dr. Payne had used on him yesterday afternoon, the handcuffs Zayn had asked for….

Once again, Zayn’s head felt as if it were going to burst. He couldn’t be thinking about any of that—not now, not in his classroom. He forced himself to focus on the quizzes in front of him. It was two o’clock on Friday, and he still had one more class to go before the end of the school day.

Besides, there would be plenty of time for self-recrimination over the weekend.

***

Niall drove them home after the Bistro closed. The cooking teacher prattled on about how many eclairs were sold that day and how Louis was a pr*ck for scheduling rehearsals on Friday afternoons when the drama teacher knew that several of Niall’s best bakers were in the play.

Zayn listened as best he could. He hadn’t had a chance to process what happened during the meeting (and punishment) with Dr. Payne yesterday, and it was getting harder and harder to block it out of his mind. After he had left the principal’s office on Thursday, he’d been emotionally and physically exhausted. He had eaten a quick dinner with his roommate before going straight to bed. Indeed, his head had barely hit the pillow before he was plunged into a thankfully dreamless sleep.

Today, he had somehow managed to make it through the school day. He hadn’t seen Dr. Payne and that definitely helped. After school, he had the remainder of the quizzes to grade, and that helped even more. But right now, as much as he loved his best friend, he just wanted time alone, time to think. (And time to write two sets of standards, due Monday morning.) There was so much to process through, from the news of his New Teacher of the Year nomination, to the changes in the conditions of the “arrangement,” to the punishment where Zayn—

No, he couldn’t think about that now, not while riding in the car with his best friend.

Finally, they made it back to the apartment. It was Friday night and Niall had plans with his girlfriend, but before leaving, the Irishman reminded him there were leftovers in the fridge. “Eat something,” Niall said, corners of his mouth turned down. “And you’ve been looking poorly—more than usual—so take a vitamin. Or ten,” he muttered loud enough for Zayn to hear.
“I’m fine, Ni,” Zayn stressed, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “Have fun with Jo.”

Niall wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Oh, you know I will, mate.”

“I’m gonna have to start a douchebag jar if you keep on with those douchey comments, just saying.”

“It’s nothing new,” Niall snickered as he swung open the door. “I’ve been making ‘douchey’ comments for years. The only difference is now you’re getting them.”

Zayn shook his head, wondering just how much truth there was in his friend’s statement. “Bye, Niall.”

“Bye, Zed. Don’t forget the vitamin.” Niall left, and Zayn rolled his eyes at the door.

He took the vitamin. Then, he smoked a cigarette. (Neither helped.)

After he returned from freezing his behind off on the balcony, he went to his bedroom, lugging his bag with him. Zayn realised he still had Ed’s present inside, so he took out the box of chocolates and set it on the duvet before flinging his bag over his chair. Then, for a reason he couldn’t understand, he squatted down and reached under the bed for the box Dr. Payne had given him yesterday.

Zayn placed the two rectangular boxes next to each other and nearly laughed out loud. The one on the right was everything Ed was: tooth-rottenly-sweet but also predictable if you read the chart just inside the lid. The smaller box was everything Dr. Payne was: sinful, stimulating… Tempting.

Zayn shook his head, angry at himself for thinking such thoughts, and grabbed the chocolates. He brought them and a few papers into the kitchen, leaving the box out on the counter for everyone to share.

Then, he started copying the history standards, a welcome task because it kept his brain occupied a little longer. Because now that Zayn finally had time to think about what happened in the principal’s office the day before, he suddenly realised he didn’t want to. After he finished a chunk of his copying, he ate a late dinner, scrolling through his phone and answering messages. He remembered to thank Ed for the chocolates and text the music teacher that he had decided not to go through with the plan. (He figured it was easiest that way.)

After his third yawn, Zayn decided it was time to call it a night. He put everything away, then went into the bathroom to wash up. Ten minutes later, he was back in his bedroom, stripped down to his briefs, when he saw it: the box Dr. Payne had given him. It was still there, sitting on the end of the bed, exactly where he had left it earlier in the evening.

Zayn was about to slip the box under the bed again when something stopped him. The weight of the last week seemed to hit him all at once, and he sunk down on the mattress. He lay back, closed his eyes, and suddenly, he was transported back to Dr. Payne’s office, back to the punishment that tested him more than he ever could have imagined:

“Please,” Zayn whimpered.

“Please what?”

His brain had stopped functioning properly a while ago, and he responded more on instinct than
anything else. “Please, Daddy.”

“Good. Now tell Daddy what you want,” Dr. Payne urged over the crude sounds of the vibrator now resting above Zayn’s knee. “Did you want to use your safe word? Did you want me to stop?”

“No!” Zayn screamed. He was in agony and stopping was the exact opposite of what he wanted. For what seemed like ages, the principal had been toying with him, teasing him to within an inch of his breaking point. Still blindfolded (and still fully-clothed), Zayn waited on pins and needles for Dr. Payne to return the device to that spot. Zayn wriggled his hips forward, scooting up in the chair in an effort to achieve the contact he so longed for.

“Then what would you like?”

“I-I want a release, Daddy,” Zayn choked out.

“You mean you want to come?” Dr. Payne asked, dancing the tip of the vibrator up Zayn’s pant leg. “Do you think you deserve to come?”

“I…don’t know. I just want this feeling to go away.”

“I’m sure you do, baby.”

The vibrator travelled higher up his thigh again, and Zayn almost sobbed in relief. But then, the humming noise cut off abruptly, and the teacher let out a frustrated whine. He had been pushed to the brink by Dr. Payne and this sadistic device, and he would have given nearly anything to take that final step off the cliff and plunge into the little-known abyss.

“Please,” Zayn begged; completely shameless, completely undone.

“The safe word is ‘adamantium,’ Mr. Malik—in case you forgot,” Dr. Payne remarked helpfully, but Zayn could hear the teasing smugness behind the man’s honeyed tone.

Zayn made a desperate sound. “I don’t want you to stop,” he managed to say, all self-respect torn to shreds. “I…I need more.”

“What do you say?”

Zayn inhaled through his nostrils. It was humiliating, having to beg, but it would be worth it if only….

“I need more, Daddy.”

And finally, Zayn seemed to get his wish. The vibrator was pressed to his hip now, inching closer to the stiffness in his trousers. Zayn bit down hard on his bottom lip as his erection pulsed, lurching towards the device as if wanting to meet it halfway. His testicles tightened. Soon, the vibrations teased at his head, leaving him breathless, so close, so so close….

And then everything stopped.

Zayn let out a howl, all pent-up frustration and need as he pulled at the handcuffs like a crazed animal. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to touch himself or strangle the man who was doing this to him.

“I am truly sorry,” Dr. Payne tutted, “but as much as I long to give you what you want, I must remind you that this is a punishment. Therefore, I am not going to let you come at this time.”
“If you weren’t going to let me orgasm, why would you get me to this point?” Zayn asked through clenched teeth. His entire body was aching with arousal, on fire in the worst way.

“Did you forget this was a punishment?”

“That wasn’t a punishment; it was freaking torture.”

“It’s called edging,” Dr. Payne stated, sounding slightly amused. “Maybe we’ll try it again one day…but with a different ending.”

Zayn had to bite back a moan as his still-hard length twitched, responding to the thought of being teased to this point again—then farther. He balled his hands into tight fists, digging his nails into his palms, in an effort to drive those undesirable thoughts away. He couldn’t think like that. He didn’t know what had come over him, but he couldn’t think like that.

“I’ll give you a minute,” Dr. Payne announced, immediately setting to work on removing the handcuffs. After they came off, Zayn could hear the man moving around the room, cleaning up, removing the evidence. “I’m going to take off the blindfold now,” the principal informed him, and Zayn readied himself.

Slowly, the teacher opened his eyes. He was too spent to move from the chair even after he had been freed. He felt shattered, completely shattered as he stared blankly at the opposite wall.

“Don’t despair, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne consoled him. “Because you did such a nice job with this punishment, I will let you keep the toy.”

Zayn examined the thing. He had expected it to be some monstrous, obscene device, but it was nothing like how he imagined. It was small, black, and unassuming. Zayn found it difficult to believe that this little gadget had brought him to his absolute limit only a few minutes ago.

Then again, in Dr. Payne’s hands, Zayn was beginning to believe anything was possible.

“I don’t want it,” Zayn mumbled, sounding like an ungrateful, ornery child. “I wouldn’t know what to do with it anyway. I’ve never….”

“Masturbated, I’m aware,” Dr. Payne said knowingly, twirling the black rod in his hands as he paced the floor. “I bought this toy especially with you in mind, Mr. Malik,” he shared, admiring the sleek device. “It’s a great starter toy. It’s also quite discreet and easily portable.”

Zayn chewed on his lip. “I was actually going to say that I’ve never had an…an….”

“Orgasm?” Dr. Payne asked in disbelief. “Can you really be that sexually repressed, Mr. Malik? Have you never ejaculated ever?”

“Well, I mean…just like, when I was asleep or whatever.”

“No wonder,” the principal muttered to himself. “Well in that case, Mr. Malik, you’ll want to use this as soon as possible.”

Dr. Payne went over a few instructions for operating the embarrassing item as he packed it away in a plain white box. “Two more things,” he said as he closed the lid and placed it on the table next to the teacher. (Zayn knew better than to refuse the ‘gift’ again.) “First of all, I want you to imagine my hands touching you as you pleasure yourself.”

There was no way that was going to happen—even if Zayn did work up the courage to use the
device…which again, was highly unlikely. “And second?” Zayn prompted.

“Second, I would advise you to wait until Mr. Horan is out of the flat the first time you use your new little toy,” Dr. Payne said, locking eyes with him. “Your first orgasm is a very personal experience, and in your case, with the edging and all else considered, it might be”—he patted his fingertips together—“overwhelming.”

“May I leave now, sir?” Zayn asked, standing abruptly. The conversation itself was becoming overwhelming, and glancing at the grandfather clock, he could see it was already a quarter ‘til six. Niall would be ready soon, and Zayn still had to run upstairs to his classroom.

“I must say that I find your feigned indignation most amusing, Mr. Malik. You were singing quite a different tune only moments ago.”

Zayn felt his cheeks redden. “May I have my phone back, sir.”

“Yes, here you are, Mr. Malik.” Dr. Payne quickly retrieved it from his desk drawer and set it on top of the box. “Now, you may go as long as you promise to practise everything we went over today at home. Oh,” he added as an afterthought, expression darkening, “and don’t ever think about pulling something like that again. From now on, I want you to hand me your phone when you walk through that door. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dr. Payne searched his eyes and then nodded. “In that case, we’re through for today. Please let me know if you have any questions over anything we covered this afternoon, Mr. Malik. I would be more than happy to model anything you need me to after you…er…get started. You need only ask,” he smirked. “And finally, don’t forget to have two sets of standards on my desk by Monday morning.”

“I won’t, sir,” Zayn promised, creeping towards the door just in case his principal changed his mind.

“Au revoir, Mr. Malik,” the principal called after him. “Congratulations again on your nomination and enjoy your present.”

Zayn opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling of his bedroom, heart pounding. There were voices battling in his head, voices he’d always assigned as good and evil, and yet, he was having trouble distinguishing between the two lately. The lines seemed blurred, irrelevant.

He glanced over at the box, then quickly pulled his gaze away.

It was wrong. He shouldn’t.

He sat up and was about to stash the box under his bed like a guilty secret when a conflicting voice whispered in his ear:

But no one would know, not even Dr. Payne.

Zayn lifted the lid, and a shiver ran through him. Dismissing all lingering doubts, he removed the compact, black vibrator and powered it on, switching it to the lowest setting as Dr. Payne had showed him. The buzzing sound alone was enough to make the hot coil in his stomach return.
After yesterday, he had had enough of teasing. Besides, his body was already burning from merely reliving the punishment in his head just now. Zayn fell back on his bed and pressed the tip of the vibrator just under the bulge in his briefs. A loud whimper escaped his lips, and he was grateful that his roommate wasn’t around to hear it. Gradually, he began to trace the outline of his growing erection, pressing ever-so-gently at first, then harder.

His whole body began to quake, stirred on by the vibrating wand. He was hard now, but something was blocking him. He didn’t know what he was doing—or he felt ashamed of it.

It was the same thing that had happened the handful of times he’d tried in the past. (Because the truth was he had tried to get himself off, even if he hated to admit it.) He would get worked up to a certain point, not even as far as Dr. Payne had led him yesterday, and then…nothing. That’s why he’d decided back in high school that it wasn’t worth the trouble, that his body was telling him something, that there were more important pursuits than wasting time and energy on jerking off.

Except now, his body was telling a very different story.

As Zayn closed his eyes again, his thoughts unwillingly boomeranged back to his principal. Zayn cursed his own inexpert hands and half-wished that Dr. Payne’s strong hands would take charge, that they would finish the devil’s deed.

Zayn nearly stopped breathing as the vibrator found his most sensitive spot again—that bundle of nerves curving up towards the smooth, flayed head. Grunting, he used his thumb to increase the speed of the vibrations, then pressed the device flat against the spot.

Soon though, even that wasn’t enough. With a groan, he tossed the vibrator aside and peeled back his underwear, sticky from sweat, and precome, and twenty-three years of waiting for this moment, this release. He didn’t need the distraction of the toy anymore because it was as if his body innately knew what to do. It was the same when he finally learnt how to swim that day at the lake—or more accurately, when his body realised he could swim. He didn’t overthink for once, didn’t struggle for control, he let go.

He let go.

Zayn muffled a moan into the side of a pillow as his fingers, slick with arousal, stroked his swollen length. He threw his head back, hips rutting as he thrusted into the warm, snug ring of his fist.

His mind went blank as he began chasing his first real orgasm. But then at the very last moment, just before the point of no return, he imagined Dr. Payne’s fist wrapped around him instead of his own. The man was whispering in his ear, telling him he’d been a ‘good boy,’ telling him he deserved this.

He deserved this.

Zayn’s hips bucked wildly a few more times before he came with a shout. Wave followed wave as he bucked and gasped and clenched and writhed in dizzying pleasure. It was euphoric; it was beyond anything he’d ever experienced in his life.

It was exactly what he needed. (It was everything.)

But as he came down from his high, Zayn realised just what he had done. It wasn’t the weakness of succumbing to a very human need that bothered him. It wasn’t even the self-induced shame at using a sex toy (although that niggled at him, just a little). No, it was something much more horrible than that, something that would keep him awake at nights.

The simple truth was that Zayn was horrified because thoughts of his principal had pushed him over
the edge.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Anyone else have a massive edging kink/headcanon? Were you surprised by anything in the chapter?

Also, I didn't leave off on a cliffhanger, so well done me, lol. By the way, the next chapter will contain a Liam POV; I know a lot of you have been itching for that! :) Until Friday, loves! ~Maree xx
Zayn couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t believe he was about to be late to another Tuesday staff meeting when it was Dr. Payne’s number one pet peeve.

He really ought to set a weekly timer for himself because this was getting ridiculous. He stopped at the library doors to catch his breath and check the time. He was exactly two minutes late, but that was only because Niall had texted him a few minutes ago to make sure he was on his way.

Thank God for Niall Horan.

Zayn slipped in as discretely as he could, gingerly closing the heavy library doors behind him. The lights were off already, so he tread quickly and softly towards the back, winding his way through rows of books and computers.

Earlier in the day, Dr. Payne had sent out an e-mail to the faculty explaining that the departmental seating had been suspended for the time being (probably due to the fact that the principal now felt assured Zayn would no longer sit next to Ed). Therefore, Zayn took the first open chair he found (or more accurately, tripped over) and collapsed into it. While he waited for the faculty meeting to begin, he did his best to control his ragged breathing, to pretend he hadn’t sprinted all the way down to the library. But he needn’t have worried because as Zayn scanned the dark library, Dr. Payne was nowhere to be found. He sat back and thanked whoever or whatever had delayed his anal, time-obsessed principal.

“I heard Shane Malik is getting some type of recognition today.”

Zayn’s ears perked up at the mention of his name (or the butchery of his name to be more exact). It was his department chair speaking, Frank Franklin, and the man was sitting just a few feet in front of him at a table with a few other teachers. Zayn could barely make them out since it was darker towards the back of the library, but it appeared Mr. Franklin was talking to Patricia Cunningham, the art teacher and Niall’s mentor.

Zayn was looking for a way to say something, to alert his department head of his presence in the least awkward way, when he lost his chance.

“Zayn Malik?” Patricia Cunningham corrected politely, and Zayn silently thanked her. “Who is he getting recognition from?”

“Payne, of course,” Frank Franklin reported, checking the door to ensure their principal hadn’t arrived yet. (He hadn’t.)

“Dr. Payne? Well, I’ll be,” the older woman remarked with a tinkling of laughter. “Niall, my sweet little mentee, is good friends with Zayn. He says the boy’s smart as a whip, so I guess I’m not surprised—well, except for the fact that Dr. Payne’s been hard on the new recruits this year, poor darlings.”

“He’s always hard on the new recruits, Patricia,” Zayn’s department chair responded, completely devoid of sympathy. “It’s good for them. You know, the whole ‘sink or swim’ bit.”
The head of the arts department sighed. “You’re probably right, Frank. It’s just that Dr. Payne seems to be especially hard on them this year—the first and second year teachers, in fact.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Frank Franklin said dismissively, “but did you see the e-mail Payne sent out earlier, the one about the assessment scores?”

“No, I’m not sure which one you mean,” Patricia answered after a moment’s consideration. Zayn knew exactly which e-mail the man was referring to, but he was too busy trying to evaporate on the spot to say so.

“It might have just gone out to certain departments,” Frank Franklin mused. “Anyway, Payne made a special mention of the results in Zayn’s classes. Apparently, his students performed extremely well—partly due to beginner’s luck and to the fact that he was given the cream of the crop to work with, mind you, but still admirable.”

“Very admirable.”

“And not to toot my own horn,” Frank Franklin confided, “but I’ve tried to be a second mentor to him—you know when Harry was too busy to work with him and all that.”

“That was very kind of you, Frank.”

Zayn tried not to gag as his department head shrugged off the compliment. “Well, you know how it is, Patricia. As department chairs, it’s necessary for us to keep an eye on our flocks whether or not we’re the official mentor.”

“Of course,” the art teacher agreed, and Zayn sincerely hoped she wasn’t believing any of the garbage coming out of the man’s mouth.

“Well, I knew Shane—er, Zayn—was top-notch from day one,” Mr. Franklin boasted, twisting his moustache. “Told Harry that, as a matter of fact. Even gave him some direction as to how I’d mentor the boy.” The man sat tall in his chair. “I don’t like to broadcast it around,” he declared, voice oozing with false modesty, “but between you and me, Harry is no stranger to my door.”

Zayn’s scepticism-o-meter had hit the roof with that last remark, but it wasn’t like he could chime in at this point, so he just sat there and bit his lip. Hard.

“Oh, I didn’t realise you and Harry were that close.”

“Like I said,” Frank Franklin ploughed on, “I don’t like to broadcast it, but Harry and I had a talk about Zayn Malik early on. Harry wasn’t sure whether he had time to mentor the boy or not, and I told him he should make time.” Frank Franklin leaned towards the woman as if he was confiding some great secret, and Zayn found himself leaning closer as well, trying not to miss whatever lie the man said next. “I told Harry—and these were my exact words: ‘He’s got a lot of promise, that one. You’d be crazy to pass up a chance like that, Harry old boy.’”

“Well, it seems like it’s been a good combination, Harry mentoring Zayn.”

“Yes,” Frank Franklin agreed with a sigh of regret, “but it’s too bad Harry’s relationship had to end because of it.”

Zayn nearly gasped aloud at the horrible accusation. His better judgement was telling him to ignore the rest of what came out of the foul man’s mouth, but Zayn couldn’t stop listening now even if he wanted to.
Fortunately, Patricia Cunningham wasn’t as willing to accept random gossip as the rest of the staff. “You really shouldn’t go around saying things like that,” she reprimanded.

“Oh, I’m just telling you what I’ve heard,” Frank Franklin weaselled, “and what Tomlinson’s been saying all along—although not recently, of course. You know how Payne gets whenever someone insinuates anything about the school or his teachers—especially about Harry.”

“Frank, what are you trying to say?”

“Nothing, Patricia. I’m just commenting on the fact that Harry and Zayn are awfully…close.”

Zayn wanted nothing more than to walk out of the library, then and there. He was beginning to think he’d rather face the wrath of Dr. Payne for missing a faculty meeting than listen to this nonsense. He sincerely hoped Niall’s mentor didn’t believe any of it.

“You shouldn’t be giving credence to a bunch of unfounded rumours, Roger,” the older woman admonished. “Harry’s happily engaged.”

“Oh, is he?” the man taunted, wagging his finger at the grey-haired woman. “Why don’t you ask Payne Academy’s favourite teacher why he hasn’t been wearing his engagement ring since last Friday then?”

Before she could respond (and before Zayn could pick his jaw up from off the floor), Dr. Payne was calling the room to order. Zayn’s mind was reeling from what he’d just heard. It was nothing new that such malicious gossip was circulating, but he couldn’t believe that Harry might have broken off his engagement, that there were rumours going around the school that Zayn was somehow to blame.

It seemed that no matter what Zayn did, people were going to think the worst of him. He wondered how things could get worse.

But then, of course, they did.

Someone switched on another light in the library, and Zayn shrunk against the wall, hoping not to be spotted after everything he’d just overheard. Dr. Payne was stood at the front, opening with a few announcements, when he stopped suddenly and rubbed his palms together, and that’s when Zayn knew. He just knew.

“And now, I have some exciting news to share with you all”—Dr. Payne paused in that showman way of his—“one of our very own, Zayn Malik, has been nominated this year for New Teacher of the Year! Please stand, Mr. Malik.”

With Dr. Payne leading it, the room burst into applause, the greatest reaction Zayn had received from any crowd since he had been named valedictorian back in college. Heart beating rapidly, the teacher reluctantly got to his feet, somehow managing not to knock anything over in the process. As expected, Frank Franklin and Patricia Cunningham seemed shocked at Zayn’s proximity to them, surely realising he must have overheard the majority of their conversation. But Zayn wasn’t angry—at the art teacher anyway. As for Frank Franklin…well, Dr. Payne had got it right when he said the man was an ass.

Zayn took his seat again, and the principal reiterated the details the majority of the audience already knew: that this was a state-wide honour, that the selection committee would make the final decision, and that “our very own Mr. Styles” had received the honour only a few years ago. Dr. Payne went on to highlight some of Zayn’s achievements, and the new teacher found the whole thing surreal, hearing his principal praise him this way in public when normally the man was overly critical of
every move he made. Zayn thought back to what Frank Franklin had just said about Dr. Payne and his policy of being ‘hard on the new recruits.’ Though he hated to admit it, Zayn suspected there might be more than a grain of truth to that statement.

While the faculty focused on their principal, Zayn searched out various faces in the crowd. No two had the same reaction to the big news: Louis seemed bored, Harry beamed proudly, Ed appeared dumbfounded, and Niall was smiling tightly.

Before Zayn could give a second thought to any of it, Dr. Payne transitioned to the assessment data. He brought up an overview of the preliminary results on the screen, then slipped off his suit jacket—a rare move for the principal outside of his office—and Zayn found himself daydreaming about what the man looked like without any shirt on at all. He wondered if the tattoos hiding beneath the white dress shirt reached all the way up his arms, if there were any on his shoulders or chest. Dr. Payne’s sleeves hugged his biceps as he gestured, and Zayn’s mind was suddenly flooded with inappropriate thoughts: flashbacks to Thursday and the punishment, flashbacks to Friday night when Zayn had touched himself while thinking about—

Zayn groaned inwardly and covered his eyes with his hand. He couldn’t be thinking thoughts like that now. (He couldn’t be thinking thoughts like that ever.)

Dr. Payne announced he would be delving into specifics according to subject areas, starting with math, and Zayn was glad he could tune out for a bit. (The less he had to look directly at his principal right now, the better.) When his phone buzzed softly in his pocket, Zayn discretely checked it under the table. There was a text from his best friend, and it made him curious at once, wondering what could be so urgent for Niall to text him in the middle of a staff meeting.

Niall: we need to talk

Zayn made sure the principal wasn’t looking in his direction before he hurriedly sent off a reply:

Me: ???

Niall: DON’T ??? ME ZAYN MALIK YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT

The thing was Zayn didn’t. He had no idea why his best friend seemed so pissed.

Me: I don’t actually, sorry

Niall: NTOTY

Me: NTOTY?

Niall: new teacher of the year and stop pretending like you don’t know what I’m going on about
Zayn gave a frustrated sigh as he glanced at his friend who was peering down at his phone several tables away. Dr. Payne was still prattling on about the math scores, so Zayn went back to texting.

Me: It’s only a nomination

Niall: only a nomination you’ve wanted all your life ya bastard and you could’ve mentioned it

Me: It slipped my mind

Niall: sure Zed

Me: It did

Niall: ok

Niall added a host of passive aggressive emojis to his last text, and Zayn rolled his eyes. His best friend could be so exasperating at times. Zayn had had a lot on his mind, and yeah, maybe he should’ve said something to Niall, but they were both so busy and it hadn’t crossed his mind. (Besides, it wasn’t like that was the only secret Zayn was keeping from his best friend….)

Before replying, Zayn peeked up at the front of the room again, but Dr. Payne seemed engrossed in his data, knee-deep in cut-off scores, cohort groups, and expected growth outcomes. Zayn went back to his phone.

Me: Why can’t you just be happy for me?

Niall: I am happy for you

Zayn snorted at that and a few heads turned in front of him—including his department head’s. Zayn smiled politely, then looked up at the PowerPoint, pretending to be engrossed in the information on the slides. When Mr. Franklin turned back around, Zayn started texting furiously.

Me: Well if you’re happy you have a strange way of showing it

Niall: just a bit miffed you didn’t tell me about it. seems like it wasn’t long ago we used to tell each other everything

Me: I said I was sorry. I don’t know what you want me to do.

Niall: nothing tbh, I’m just saying you’ve changed mate

Me: People aren’t allowed to change??? Haven’t we gone through all this before?
Niall: you know what I mean

Me: You’re being unfair! I was told not to tell anyone.

Niall: I’m not “anyone”

...

Niall: and I bet harry knew but wvr

Zayn was fuming. He felt like he was being attacked from all sides at a time when he should be happy. Apparently, he was the subject of more vicious rumours circulating around the school, and to top it off, his best friend was mad at him for an absolutely ridiculous reason.

Me: Why are you making this a big deal?

Niall: because I’m wondering what else your keeping from me

Me: Maybe I don’t have time to tell you everything? I hardly see you anymore between Jo and the Bistro.

Niall: omg look up

Me: ???

Niall: LOOK UP!!!!!!!

That’s when it dawned on him: Niall was trying to warn him. Zayn’s heart stopped as he suddenly realised the entire library had gone quiet. Swallowing uneasily, he looked up from his phone and into the piercing, critical eyes of his principal.

“I sincerely apologise, Mr. Malik,” Dr. Payne said superciliously, and Zayn already knew he was in a world of trouble. “Hopefully, I wasn’t interrupting something? Perhaps, you feel you are no longer required to participate in lowly staff meetings now that you have received a slice of recognition?”

Zayn thought fast. “I’m, uh...sorry, sir. It was a family emergency, but it’s been taken care of,” he lied, loud enough for the rest of the room to hear. “And I definitely value these meetings, sir. As you always say, our goal as educators is to seek improvement constantly, and the information obtained from staff meetings immensely helps in achieving that end. Zayn slipped his phone into his bag, half to appease the principal and half to remove the evidence that Zayn was not, in fact, texting about a so-called “family emergency.”

Dr. Payne’s lips twisted into a half smile for the briefest of moments, and though Zayn suspected the principal could see right through him, the man appeared almost pleased at his response. “Thank you, Mr. Malik. I will let it go this time, but please make certain you are following every word of our meetings in the future.” He turned to address the rest of the faculty. “Now, as I was saying, the Reading data indicate an upward trend in the overall….”

Heaving a massive sigh of relief, Zayn snuck a glance at his best friend, only to find Niall was
looking directly at him. As their eyes met, his friend’s expression gave him pause. It wasn’t filled with anger as Zayn had expected. It didn’t even contain disappointment. No, Niall was nodding his head as if he’d just been proven correct about something. It didn’t make sense, and Zayn didn’t have any time to worry about it, so he turned his attention back to the presentation.

After the faculty meeting ended, Zayn half-heartedly accepted the congratulations of the other teachers. In the back of his mind, however, he couldn’t help but speculate what they’d been saying behind his back. Frank Franklin seemed particularly eager to express his support as did various other members of the faculty who had largely ignored him until now. Ed ran up and gave him a quick hug, cheerily requesting that Zayn ring him later with the details. Niall didn’t say a word through it all, just maintained a stony silence that Zayn was now becoming oddly accustomed to.

Zayn breathed easier when they reached the security of Niall’s old VW. Even though the attention had been primarily positive, it was still exhausting, and Zayn couldn’t wait to get home. Niall seemed to have another agenda though. He just sat behind the wheel, staring straight ahead at the school building. Zayn began to feel impatient; he was about to say something about wanting to get home as quickly as possible when he noticed the deep creases marking his friend’s forehead.

Finally, Niall cleared his throat and Zayn tensed up, knowing inherently that whatever his friend was about to say wasn’t going to be good. “The lie you told Dr. Payne at the staff meeting…,” he began, “the one about a ‘family emergency’….”

Zayn felt his cheeks heat up. “Yes?”

“Yeah, that wasn’t cool, Zed.”

“It was all I could think of in the moment,” Zayn replied defensively. “Geez, get off my back for once, yeah? I wouldn’t have even been in that situation if you hadn’t tried to start something in the middle of a staff meeting.”

“The old Zayn never would have come up with an excuse like that. And even if he did, he wouldn’t have been able to pull it off—like it was easy, like it was nothing.” Niall turned to face him them, blue eyes ablaze with emotions Zayn hardly recognised (and didn’t want to). “You’ve changed, Zed; you’ve changed whether you like it or not.”

Zayn looked away and tried to pretend that his friend’s words didn’t hurt as much as they did. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Niall.”

“I don’t want you to say anything, I just….” Niall trailed off, and Zayn reluctantly turned back around to face his friend. “I just want my best mate back,” Niall said, voice catching as he gazed sadly down at the steering wheel. “I want the innocent small town boy I’ve known since I was ten-years-old to return. That’s all I want.”

And then without another word, Niall started the car, and they drove away. In the passenger seat, Zayn thought of a million responses, a million excuses. He didn’t share any of them, however, because the ugly truth was that he knew Niall had a point.

Deep down, Zayn knew his friend was right.

***
Liam took another sip of his vodka martini, but it didn’t make him feel any better; it didn’t erase the sting of failure. *Club Jardin* and all its ‘Earthly Delights’ usually eased his woes, but tonight he might as well have stayed home because no matter how hard Liam tried to lose himself in the music and mood lighting, it wasn’t working.

It wasn’t fucking working.

And that, plain and simple, was just the problem. *Nothing* was bloody working out the way it should have, the way Liam had so carefully engineered it.

And well…he wasn’t used to that. Things generally went his way, or he forced them to when they didn’t. Liam twisted and bent the inconvenient corners of life until they fit the bigger picture. Sometimes that meant biding his time, taking the path of least resistance, and other times, it meant forging a path in the wilderness. Either way, he was always prepared to do what was needed, what had to be done.

Moreover, he seldom acted without considering all possible outcomes, without measuring the risks and rewards. If nothing else, Liam was a careful man. He didn’t make rash decisions. He didn’t overlook obvious counter moves, and yet…

Zayn had played him for a fool.

(Well, *almost.*)

Because if it hadn’t been for pure, dumb luck, if Zayn’s mobile hadn’t gone off at the very end of their meeting, then Liam would currently have a situation on his hands.

He slowly finished off his drink, but the bottom of the glass didn’t offer any answers he didn’t already know. The fact was that he had been too lax with Zayn. Liam had deluded himself into believing they were making progress. He had thought a certain level of trust existed between the two professionals, that Zayn was honouring the Gentleman’s Agreement they had made weeks ago.

And then Zayn betrayed him. The very first opportunity he had, Zayn betrayed him by recording their confidential, personal conversation, by lying to Liam’s face and saying he had left his phone in the classroom.

And Liam…Liam was too blinded by his own bloody infatuation with the boy to think twice about anything that came out of that gorgeous mouth. Liam was a damn fool, letting himself be bamboozled like that. (But there was no way he was going to let it happen again.)

He exhaled loudly, picking up his glass before realising it was empty and setting it down with annoyance. He tried to console himself that things weren’t quite as bad as he was making them out to be, that perhaps Zayn’s betrayal was only a partial one. After all, when he interrogated the teacher, Liam was almost certain he was lying when he insisted he had conjured up the plan himself. Liam hadn’t pressed the question because he wanted sufficient time for the punishment, and besides, the principal was already fairly certain of the truth. Moreover, letting the issue go was a strategic decision. Liam knew he’d likely have to break the boy completely to get the truth out of him, and that didn’t suit his purposes. (Not yet anyway.)

Still, he’d lay even money that someone had put Zayn up to the idea. Maybe Horan. Probably Sheeran.
Liam’s eyes wandered around, searching for a distraction. On the other side of the club, he spied the little blonde cocktail waitress, the one he had tied up and fucked a few months back. She wasn’t the best shag he ever had, but he enjoyed her. (He enjoyed anything once.) Liam remembered how she called him kinky, how she agreed to be tied up when he told her what he was into. He also recalled how she complained about the restraints—even though they were just silk bands—until Liam was forced to loosen them to the point that they kept falling off.

When he finally started dicking into her, she started meowing as if she were auditioning for a low-budget porn version of *Cats*, and it was all Liam could do to stay hard. The only time she stopped was when he fucked her face. He came hard that night, spilling down her throat just like she asked him to.

But it wasn’t because of her. It was because he had imagined he was fucking someone else, feeding his dick to a certain someone with raven-coloured hair, doe eyes, and a lot less lipstick.

Afterwards, she had slipped him her number, and he had planned on ringing her up some time except….

Except Zayn.

He sighed wistfully. If he had any Goddamn sense, he’d take the blonde home right now and fuck her into the mattress in his guest bedroom. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could stand this waiting around, letting the chips fall where they may, denying himself one of the few pleasures he had in his overworked, overstressed life.

And for what? For piss-all.

But then Liam thought about Zayn again, about the way he looked receiving his punishment. The boy had been so responsive, so eager to please, so perfect. And fuck, Liam hadn’t even planned on using the handcuffs, but Zayn had asked for them. And at the end, when the young teacher had begged for Liam to let him come, it took all the discipline and military training within him not to give in. After all, as much as Liam yearned to give the boy what he wanted, it was necessary for Zayn to learn his lesson.

(But if Zayn hadn’t been blindfolded, if Liam had been forced to look into those pleading amber eyes, then the ending well might have been different. Very different)

All things considered, things had probably worked out for the best. Liam had made his point, namely that rules are to be obeyed, and that if they are not obeyed, consequences ensue. And as much as he wanted to witness the boy fall apart in his hands, as much as he longed to steal a part of the boy’s first true orgasm, it wouldn’t help his long game.

Because the thing was, there were so many more firsts for the young, doe-eyed virgin to experience in the near future—the very near future if Liam had his way. Zayn was clearly a sexual creature by nature, and he had denied himself for so long. It had been beautiful watching the boy start to come apart, start to realise his own needs and desires, start to realise what Liam could offer him if he only surrendered himself completely.

But they weren’t there yet. (Not quite.)

“Another drink, sir?” a waiter asked, interrupting his thoughts. It wasn’t the blonde this time (thank God), but a male waiter he’d never seen before—young, dark, and fit. The boy was looking at him
with interest in his brown eyes, interest that went way beyond whether Liam wanted another drink.

“No, I’m good,” Liam replied. “Long drive.”

The waiter made a move to pick up his glass and played the oldest trick in the book, brushing his hand against the back of Liam’s. “I could make it shorter,” the younger man suggested, licking his lips.

Liam raised an eyebrow. “Do you hit on every man in a suit that walks in here?”

“I like the strong, silent type.” He leaned down, and Liam got a whiff of his cologne; it was too much. “Besides, I hear you like it rough.”

“Maybe,” Liam returned non-committedly. Apparently, the blonde had been talking out of class. “What else have you heard?”

The waiter smirked, eyes flicking down to Liam’s crotch. “That you’re packing ten inches.”

“Wouldn’t know; never measured it.”

“I could always help you with that,” the young man suggested, biting his lip—not as Zayn would, but in a forced, overtly sexual way. “Tonight maybe?”

Liam looked at him a long time. If Liam had a type, the waiter fit it to a ‘T.’ Still, the boy was trying too hard, and Liam had always fancied more of a challenge. “I’m good,” he said decisively, shoving the empty martini glass into the waiter’s hand. “Bring the check if you would.”

The waiter bristled at Liam’s brusque send-off, seizing the glass before stomping away towards the back.

Liam figured he could have handled that better, but he honestly couldn’t be bothered. In any case, he really needed to stop shagging Club Jardin employees before someone noticed, before it became a thing.

Besides, he had other matters on his mind.

His phone buzzed, and as he dismissed the notification, his eyes fell on his Batman lockscreen. He thought of Zayn again (if he had ever stopped thinking of Zayn). It had been difficult for Liam to mask his surprise last Thursday when the teacher chose ‘adamantium’ as the safe word. Luckily, Zayn had assumed Liam’s surprised reaction stemmed from unfamiliarity with the word, but he couldn’t have been more wrong. (As if Liam didn’t know adamantium was the first metal used for Captain America’s shield, that it was the metal that coated Wolverine’s skeleton and claws.)

Fortunately, Liam had gotten away with it because revealing anything personal about himself was dangerous. It would mean showing a side of himself Liam didn’t normally show. It would mean acknowledging Zayn and him had something in common beyond their chosen profession, and that could only lead to trouble.

(Despite all this, he found himself ruminating on things even more inconsequential, things like which superhero was Zayn’s favourite and whether Zayn had been as obsessed with comic books growing up as Liam had been. He wondered if Zayn had depended on each new issue the way he had, as an outlet, as a way to escape. Comic books had always allowed Liam a glimpse into a world where the bad were punished, a world so different from the real world—or his little slice of it anyway.

Then again, even in comic books, retribution often took time. But sooner or later, it came, delivered
on sure wings like an avenging angel.

It came for his father…eventually.)

As if he were knocking back a shot, Liam guzzled down the rest of his water, hoping it might chase away the bitter taste of memories. He was becoming soft and that wouldn’t do. (That wouldn’t do at all.)

Last Thursday, Liam had revealed too many cards in his hand. He had unwittingly gifted Zayn with the leverage he had tried to achieve through other means. Namely, he had flat-out told the teacher he wouldn’t hold his job over his head, and yet…Zayn stayed. And for the life of him, Liam couldn’t suss out why.

It couldn’t have been pure ambition that made him stay (although that surely played a small part). Perhaps, it was some fucked-up reverse psychology that finally got the novice teacher to acquiesce. Or perhaps, the boy was just curious about the urges and desires awakening in him….

Still, Liam couldn’t have known Zayn’s answer, and that made it a reckless move. Another thing his father had taught him was never to ask a question you didn’t already know the answer to—especially when it mattered. Yet, in the heat of the moment, Liam had disregarded all of his good sense because it seemed so pivotal for the teacher to understand that he had a choice, for Zayn to choose to stay. (For Zayn to choose him.)

And Liam couldn’t keep thinking like that. It was dangerous. It would only lead to trouble.

‘It is better to be feared than to be loved,’ he reminded himself, repeating it over and over again in his head like a mantra, hoping it would stick, hoping it would sink in again like it used to.

At that moment, his phone lit up with another notification, and it sparked an idea. Maybe it was time to try a new tactic. Maybe it was time to take things beyond the walls of Payne Academy.

Liam smiled, chuffed with himself, as the waiter wordlessly dropped off the check. Liam left enough cash to cover his tab along with a sizable tip, then strode out with a renewed sense of purpose.

After all, the night was still young, and he had things to do.

Chapter End Notes

I’m flying back home to the UK and I’ll be doing a lot of travelling, etc., so there won’t be an update next Friday. I’ve been TRYING to work ahead, so I'm hoping I'll be able to update 2 weeks from now. In case you get impatient waiting, you might check out one of my other Ziam fics.

For an angst fest: All This Delusion in Our Heads

If you want more Boss!Liam: Money Moves (with added epilogues and a Liam drabble icymi)
For something short and fluffy: That’s Amore

Also, maybe leave me a quick note if you decide to read one of these? Honestly, my favourite thing in the world is to get a comment on an old fic (and especially the fics above). :) Much love! ~Maree xx
Chapter 31

Anonymous: Did you use it yet?

Zayn wiped his phone screen with the corner of his shirt and checked the message again. The same five words popped out at him. It was like a puzzle, but no matter how long Zayn stared at it, he couldn’t decipher what the mysterious sender was trying to convey.

It was a wrong number. Clearly.

Except the ‘anonymous’ thing was weird. (Very weird.) Zayn wasn’t even aware you could send an anonymous text. Then again, he wasn’t exactly tech savvy. The history teacher was adept at educational technology (thanks to the professors in his teaching programme as well as Dr. Payne and Harry’s gentle nudging), but he certainly wasn’t an expert. As a matter of fact, Zayn still got along fine with the basic laptop and android phone his parents had bought him his freshman year of college.

Zayn reread the cryptic text and decided it had to be a mistake. But just in case, he decided it was worth investigating further. After all, it might be from someone he knew. It could be his mom asking if he (or Niall) had used that pressure cooker she’d sent him for his birthday. It might be his father asking if they had finally installed the security-system-in-a-box he’d sent after the “break-in.” Really, the text could be from anyone.

Me: Sorry, who is this?

Zayn set his phone on the counter and went back to eating his boxed mac and cheese. It wasn’t exactly a Niall-calibre meal, the soggy, neon-orange noodles that he had somehow managed to overcook because he’d been grading and forgotten to set a timer. It was, however, about the best he could do when left to his own devices. After their argument following the staff meeting, Niall had gone out to dinner with Jo, and that was probably a good thing. The two roommates needed some space, some time to clear the air. And if there was one thing Zayn couldn’t stand, it was the recent frosty silences between them. Those were even worse than the disagreements themselves.

After dinner, Zayn changed into some sweats. He slipped on his cosy Power Ranger socks and made himself a cup of chamomile with milk and honey, just like his mom used to make for him when he was a kid.

Back then, his problems were so much simpler. Sometimes, he had needed cheering up because he hadn’t received the grade he wanted for a project or an assignment he had put his whole heart into. Other times, it was because a boy at school had called Zayn a nerd for knowing the answer when the teacher called on him or for having the latest Avengers or Spider-Man or X-Men comic stuck in the front pocket of his backpack. All that was before he became friends with Niall of course, before
Niall (who was most definitely not a nerd) told him he should ‘wear the badge with honour.’

And so he did. Zayn was a nerd and that was okay (because Niall said so).

Zayn let the steaming hot liquid soothe him as he reflected on how wonderful a friend Niall was, how wonderful a friend Niall had always been. And yes, maybe their friendship was going through some growing pains right now, but they’d work them out. (They always did.)

Zayn picked up his phone and was about to text his best friend when he received a new message instead:

Anonymous: You know who

The response was irritating. Obviously Zayn didn’t know who the anonymous texter was; otherwise, he wouldn’t have asked. It was probably Louis or someone equally annoying trying to scare him, and Zayn wasn’t going to take it. (Not anymore.)

Me: I’m not going to respond to another one of your texts if you don’t tell me who you are.

Zayn contentedly reread what he wrote. When there was no reply after a full minute, he threw on some shoes and a coat and carried his mug outside.

This was the first time in a while that the weather had been pleasant enough to sit out on the balcony —or close enough at any rate. Zayn loved their balcony. It set his mind at rest, but it also made him miss his best friend more. This was the place they would come to have their heart-to-hearts back in autumn, back when everything seemed exciting and new.

Zayn leaned back and gazed up at the starless sky. He wondered if things would ever be the same again, if there would come a time when they weren’t too busy for each other; he hoped so. He also hoped Niall would accept that he had changed without judging him for it. Yes, he wasn’t the same trusting, naïve little boy he once had been, but now, Zayn was beginning to wonder if he had ever truly been that person. He’d been so scared, locked up tight for years, and now…now he was beginning to see different facets of himself: the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, and a whole lot inbetween.

And maybe what was happening to him wasn’t truly a change. Maybe it was simply an awakening.

As if to punctuate this thought, a drilling noise cut through the calm night air. It startled him until he saw his phone rattling against the wrought-iron table in front of him.

Anonymous: Don’t play games with me. I’m the one calling the shots here.

…

Anonymous: Never forget that
Zayn felt a chill run through him that had little to do with the cold weather. Shivering, he pecked out the next response as best he could:

Me: Why are you texting me?

Anonymous: It seemed like the best way to reach you. You’ve been quite addicted to your mobile device of late.

Zayn’s thoughts immediately flew to a few hours earlier when Dr. Payne had called him out for texting during the staff meeting. It was the second time in less than a week that the principal had caught Zayn using his phone when he shouldn’t have been.

Hands trembling, he set his phone down on the table and somehow managed to light a cigarette. While he smoked, he kept glancing nervously down at his phone.

The mysterious texter couldn’t be Dr. Payne. They just couldn’t. Not when Zayn was at home. Not when he was supposed to be safe.

Suddenly remembering the cigarette burning between his fingers, he went to ash it and realised there was nothing there. With a frustrated sigh, he dusted off the grey ash covering his joggers and put out the cigarette. Then, giving in, he picked up his phone.

Me: Who are you?

Anonymous: Daddy

The device slipped from his hands, clattering to the deck. A few seconds later, it buzzed angrily against the wood. As he reached down to pick it up, the phone buzzed again, and Zayn drew his hand back as if it had been burned. He wanted to leave the phone there and go inside. He wanted to ignore it more than anything. (He wanted to, but he knew better.)

Anonymous: Change this contact name to ‘Daddy.’ You are to refer to me as Daddy and Daddy only in all future text communications.

... Anonymous: In case you get any ideas, this is not my personal number. You have 2 minutes to complete this task.

Of course it wasn’t the man’s personal number. Whatever number or application Dr. Payne was using would most likely be untraceable as well. The principal was too smart for that.
That’s when Zayn remembered he was being timed. Hurriedly, he changed the contact name in his phone to ‘Daddy’ as directed. Rationally, he knew it was highly unlikely the man would know either way. Still, Zayn felt compelled to follow the instructions to the letter.

*Me: Done*

*Daddy: Good boy :)*

A messed-up part of him glowed at receiving the praise, and Zayn had to push the feelings back to the dark pit they crawled out of. He didn’t quite understand what was going on yet, but he had his suspicions. If nothing else, Zayn already knew the principal’s motivations for texting him were far from virtuous.

*Daddy: Well, have you made good use of your present yet?*

Now there was no mystery whatsoever as to what the man was referring to. It was the little black vibrator, and really, Zayn should have deduced that from the start.

Zayn reread the seemingly innocent message. He considered lying, but somehow, it seemed pointless. Dr. Payne would only find out, and once again, Zayn felt strangely compelled to answer.

*Me: Yes*

*Daddy: Did you think of me? ;)*

Zayn stared in horror at his screen. He felt faint, desperately wracking his brains to figure out how his principal could possibly know his innermost thoughts. But then, he realised there was no way the man could know. Dr. Payne was simply guessing. That was all.

*Me: No*

*Daddy: Since I know this is all new for you, I will give you another chance to respond. Let’s try again, shall we?*

...  

*Daddy: Did you think of me while you used your present?*

Zayn bit his lip. He couldn’t believe what he was about to type, what he was about to admit to....
Me: I think so

Daddy: I know you did, baby. I know you better than you know yourself in a lot of ways.

Zayn glared at his phone. He wanted to hurl it off the balcony and watch it shatter into an irreparable mess on the pavement below. In fact, he wanted to do almost anything rather than continue this sordid conversation.

He decided he might as well get out of the cold while he decided on his next move. Zayn locked the balcony door behind him as if that would protect him from the intruder on his phone. Then, he put his empty cup in the sink and slipped off his coat before turning his attention back to his cursed device.

Me: What do you want?

Daddy: Are you alone?

Me: Why?

Daddy: Don’t patronise me. Are you alone? It requires a yes or no.

Me: Yes

Daddy: Completely alone?

Me: Yes

Daddy: You know what will happen if you are lying to me?

Me: I said I was alone

Daddy: Good. Let’s have some fun then. I will ring you in twenty minutes. Make sure you are comfortable. ;)

***

That was the last text he received. Zayn must have paced around the apartment for hours, waiting for a call, or a text, or anything.

By the time midnight rolled around, Zayn was furious. He didn’t even know why he was so angry; it made absolutely no sense. It wasn’t that Zayn wanted Dr. Payne to call because he definitely didn’t. (He didn’t.) It was simply that Zayn felt as if he’d been stood up, waiting around for a call that never came. That was the reason he was upset.

(That was the only reason.)
Call it a premonition, or second sight, or what you will, but Zayn knew with one-hundred-percent certainty that his principal was going to observe him on Wednesday. So, when Dr. Payne slid in the door just after the bell rang for sixth hour, Zayn didn’t even bat an eye. He merely got down to business and did what he did best—teach. He forgot about the other adult in the room and focused all his energy on his sweet sixth-grade class and the inventions of ancient China.

It wasn’t hard to do. A half hour in and Zayn was up to his elbows in water and bits of floating pulp. It was the second time today he’d made paper with a class, but it wasn’t getting any less messy (or any less fun).

“Will this really turn into paper, Mr. Malik?” Tommy asked as he squeezed between two classmates and plunged his tray into the pulpy water. Tommy, the smallest boy in the class (but biggest in personality), was standing directly across from the teacher, and Zayn couldn’t help but smile as he watched the enthusiasm with which the freckled-faced boy kept swirling his tray about, trying to get the exact colour mixture he wanted.

“Yes, as long as you make sure to cover the entire screen of your deckle—like so,” Zayn said, holding up his own tray to demonstrate what he meant to the group of students at the front table. “When you’re finished, let me know, and I’ll show you what to do next.”

Zayn dipped his tray back into the water and swished it around to let the pulp mix back into the tank. He was distracted momentarily, checking to make sure the other half of the class was working on the related assignment, when a wave of pulpy water suddenly sloshed over the side of the tank and onto his shirt.

“Sorry, Mr. Malik!” Tommy apologised, looking up sheepishly. “I dropped my tray, and I think I knocked the tub when I tried to reach for it.”

“Fortunately, I think you only got me, bud,” Zayn chuckled, assessing the damage. It wasn’t too bad: aside from his drenched shirtfront, there was just a small pool of water that another student was already mopping up with a large sponge. “Thanks, Garrett, and no worries, Tommy,” Zayn said, retrieving the fallen deckle from the bottom of the tub and handing it back to its owner. “Just be careful now,” he added with a wink, “I don’t think any of your classmates brought their swimsuits today.”

The kids laughed, Tommy loudest of all, and Zayn went over to help a student bring her tray to the drying area he had set up under the windows.

“Mr. Malik, do you think they’ll be dry tomorrow?”

“Might be, Jacinta,” Zayn answered the girl, taking a moment to survey the rainbow array of handmade papers lining the long counter. “We won’t be adding the Han characters until Friday though.” He could almost visualise how much the projects would brighten the classroom once he’d hung them from the ceiling with clothes pins and twine. (At least that way his principal couldn’t accuse him of “junking up” the hallways of Payne Academy.)

“Mr. Malik,” Jacinta asked thoughtfully, “do you think mine looks okay?”

Zayn crouched down to her level. “Don’t tell anyone,” he whispered to the girl, “but I think yours
might be my favourite.”

“You really think so, Mr. Malik? You don’t think the green looks bad?” she asked unsurely, playing with her skirt. “Chloe said I should have used pink instead.”

“I think yours is perfect, Jacinta. Absolutely perfect.”

The girl offered up a shy smile, and Zayn couldn’t help but chuckle to himself as he watched her practically skip back to her seat.

Standing alone at the window, Zayn took a moment to glance down at his polo. The damp material clung to his chest, and he was grateful he remembered to wear old clothes today and not one of his newer shirts. He picked off a few bits of pink and blue pulp, then gave up and started back towards the front table. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of his principal. Dr. Payne was watching him, as intently as ever, but there was something different in his gaze, something Zayn couldn’t exactly pinpoint.

“I’m ready, Mr. Malik!” Tommy sang out, and just like that, Zayn’s attention was seized by his sixth-graders (and that was more than okay by him).

***

At the end of the hour, Zayn had to shoo his students away from the drying area and out into the hall. It was nearly three minutes after the bell before he managed to clear out the room. The teacher shook his head fondly as he leaned against the closed door, taking a moment to catch his breath.

That’s when he heard it: typing in a rhythm he recognised immediately. He groaned inwardly and opened his eyes. Dr. Payne was still sat in the corner, click-clacking away as if this weren’t Zayn’s precious plan time, click clacking away as if absolutely nothing had happened the previous night.

Finally, the principal met his gaze. “Since this is your plan time, Mr. Malik, I trust you won’t my staying a few extra minutes to finish my notes on your observation? Feel free to work on whatever you need to; pretend I’m not here.”

And then without waiting for an answer, the principal went back to work.

It was easier said than done, pretending Dr. Payne wasn’t there. And of course the “few extra minutes” turned into fifteen, then twenty. Zayn tried his best to get something accomplished, but he was terribly distracted by the presence of his principal, by the memory of what had happened (and hadn’t happened) the night before. After half an hour, he couldn’t take it any longer:

“What was last night all about?”

“Just a minute, Mr. Malik,” the principal returned without looking up. “Let me finish this section, then I’m yours.”

So Zayn sat there. At his desk. Listening to the relentless clacking of keys. He supposed he should be more concerned about what the man was writing about him, but he wasn’t. (He was too pissed off about the previous night to care much about anything else.) Besides, Zayn knew he had done a solid job with the lesson, and if the principal wanted to knock him down for making the activity too fun or for not dressing professionally, then so be it.
Finally, the MacBook lid shut, and Dr. Payne regarded him calmly, hands folded and eyes attentive. “Now what was it you wanted to know, Mr. Malik?”

Zayn steadied himself. “About last night,” he replied tersely.

“I’ve no idea what you’re referring to,” Dr. Payne contended, rising to his feet. “But I will tell you that your lesson was extremely effective.” The principal began packing away his MacBook in his leather sachet, then paused. “You’re very good with them, you know,” he said at last, looking almost embarrassed.

“With whom?”

“The students, of course,” the man replied, tilting his head and gazing at the history teacher as if he were seeing him with new eyes. “It’s wonderful to watch—how much you’ve grown, how comfortable you are in the classroom now.”

Zayn was lost for words. He hadn’t been expecting that type of praise. “Th-thank you, sir.”

Dr. Payne cleared his throat. “Anyway, well-designed and -executed lesson, Mr. Malik. I will send you a copy of my comments by tomorrow. Good afternoon.” He picked up his case and was halfway to the door by the time Zayn remembered he had something he wanted to say.

“Wait, sir!”

Dr. Payne turned around with lazy interest. As he waited for Zayn to go on, he ran his fingertips against the dark stubble accentuating his square jaw.

Zayn’s eyes followed the movement. For some reason he couldn’t understand, Zayn found the man’s facial hair extremely distracting. He wished the principal would shave it off more regularly, like he used to do at the beginning of the year. At least then Zayn wouldn’t be wondering how the short stubble would feel against his own fingers, wouldn’t be remembering how it felt against his lips….

“I’ve decided to grow it out,” the principal replied to Zayn’s unspoken question, and by this time, Zayn had gotten used to the man’s telepathic abilities. “Mr. Tomlinson says I should let it grow. He fancies it makes me look more ‘distinguished.’” Dr. Payne walked a few steps closer to the desk. “What do you think, Mr. Malik?”

“I uh…I think you can never go wrong with a clean-shaven look, sir.”

“Do you really, Mr. Malik?” the principal asked amusedly. “Is that why you wear a beard yourself?”

Zayn didn’t really have a response to that. All he knew was that Dr. Payne with facial hair was literally the last thing he needed. Even the *thought* of Dr. Payne with a wispy goatee or the hint of a chinstrap did weird things to him. And although Zayn was almost certain Louis was only trying to butter up the principal with the compliment, he couldn’t help but reflect that this was yet another example of Louis Tomlinson sabotaging Zayn’s life (knowingly or not).

And then Zayn remembered why he called his principal back. “About last night, sir….”

Dr. Payne’s face was a blank canvas. “Yes?”

“You…you texted me last night,” Zayn declared a little doubtfully. He’d been so sure the anonymous texter had been his principal, but now….
“Did I?” the other man purred, peering down at Zayn in a way that made him feel self-conscious. “Did I really, Mr. Malik?”

“Y-yes, you did.” Zayn’s reply was met with laughter, and the teacher felt his blood begin to boil. “I’m glad one of us finds this entertaining,” he huffed, shooting to his feet. (He was too angry to stay seated.) “Let me remind you, sir, that you led me to believe you were going to call later—not that I was waiting for your call or anything,” Zayn added quickly, just so the man wouldn’t get the wrong idea.

“Of course you weren’t,” Dr. Payne agreed, clearly humouring him.

“It’s just that it was….” Zayn searched his brain for a synonym for ‘rude’ and settled upon, “discourteous. After your last text—”

“Mr. Malik,” the principal cut him off. “Why do you have this mad idea that I, Liam Payne, principal of Payne Academy, texted you, Zayn Malik, history teacher, last night? If I were to contact you after school hours, you know it would be via e-mail.”

Zayn just stood there gaping at him. He couldn’t believe Dr. Payne was trying to deny texting him, even when they were alone. But there he was, standing with that amused expression that Zayn wanted to wipe off his smug face.

“You seriously didn’t text me last night, sir?” Zayn asked, voice faltering a little. Now he was back to wondering if he had imagined the whole thing. Or perhaps, it really wasn’t Dr. Payne who had texted him last night. What if it were Louis instead, the first person Zayn had suspected when he received the initial prank text?

But then, Zayn thought of the content of the messages, of the mystery texter’s wish to be called ‘Daddy.’ He looked his principal square in the eye. “I know it was you.”

That’s when Dr. Payne smirked, and in that smirk was the answer to Zayn’s question (and a whole lot more besides). “Let’s just say that whatever happens outside these walls, stays outside these walls, Mr. Malik.”

“Well then, hypothetically speaking, sir,” Zayn began, narrowing his eyes, “why would someone text they were going to call later, then not do it?”

“Hypothetically speaking, they may have simply forgotten,” Dr. Payne replied, lips twitching. “On the other hand, it might have been a small… experiment.”

With that one word, Zayn’s anger reached a fever pitch. “Experiment? What the… heck is that supposed to mean?”

Dr. Payne set his leather sachet down on a student desk and closed the remaining distance between the two men. Zayn tried not to back down, tried not to shy away as the other man gently cupped his chin. “Maybe they wanted to see your reaction,” he stated, searching the teacher’s eyes.

Zayn found himself staring up into brown orbs that weren’t exactly warm but weren’t as cold as he remembered them either. He blinked and the spell was broken. Zayn pulled away from the man’s touch so quickly he nearly knocked into the tub of water behind him. “Well, now that you’ve seen my reaction,” Zayn scoffed, tired of hypotheticals and all his principal’s games, “did you discover anything?”

“I discovered something very fascinating actually,” Dr. Payne replied, voice oozing like extra virgin olive oil. “As a matter of fact, I’ve uncovered something extremely gratifying. Of course, I knew it
would happen eventually, but I am pleased all the same.”

“Care to share?” Zayn tried to appear unfazed by the older man’s cavalier attitude, but he knew he was failing. (Badly.)

“Oh you’ll sort it out soon enough,” Dr. Payne smiled, collecting his bag and heading towards the door just as the bell rang. “And when you do, you know where to find me.” And with one last infuriating wink, the principal was gone.

The man’s sheer audacity infuriated him. Zayn was sick and tired of being an “experiment,” a pawn in Dr. Payne’s never-ending mind games. Zayn was so incensed, he picked up the first thing he saw—a whiteboard eraser—and hurled it at the door.

And as luck would have it, a student happened to open the door at that exact moment, and of course that student was Lainey Anderson. Fortunately, the eraser just missed her, rebounding off the doorjamb and boomeranging back into the room. She stopped in her path, observed the peculiar occurrence, and quietly raised an eyebrow at her teacher.

“Sorry, I….” He took a deep breath and tried to collect his thoughts. “The eraser…I was cleaning it, and it, uh…flew away from me,” he finished lamely, fetching the eraser from off the floor.

Lainey sashayed past him and settled into her usual seat in the third row. “I thought the students were the only ones who hated him that much,” she remarked as she popped open a shiny black compact and started applying a new layer of hot pink lipstick. Zayn stared at her, a little dumbfounded and a lot speechless.

A gaggle of students entered the room, and Zayn reminded himself it was time to get back to work. This was no time to be distracted by the cryptic actions of his principal (or anyone else).

Zayn switched on the projector, then retrieved the stack of graded papers from his desk and began handing them back. When he came to Derek, he smiled before setting the geography exam on the boy’s desk. “Excellent work once again, Derek,” he told the boy, lowering his voice. “Please see my note at the top of your exam and let me know your answer as soon as you can.”

Zayn continued distributing the rest of the papers as the students worked quietly on their bell work. When the teacher returned to his desk to take attendance, he noticed Derek was holding his exam with both hands, a proud, dazed look on his face.

Zayn hoped the boy would say ‘yes.’ He could really use someone like Derek on his team.

***

After school, Zayn had his usual Wednesday mentoring meeting with Harry. Zayn could tell his mentor was trying to put on a brave face for him, especially since the New Teacher of the Year nomination had just been announced the day before; however, Harry’s appearance told a very different story. The English teacher still looked a rumpled mess, his eyes were puffy and red, and he never smiled big enough for his dimples to show.

But most significant (and as Frank Franklin had reported), Harry wasn’t wearing his engagement ring.
On Friday night, Zayn received another text.

_Daddy_: Miss me, baby?

Zayn pushed his phone away in disgust. He was not going to respond. Zayn was _not_ going to participate in whatever twisted game his principal had planned. In fact, it was crazy even to consider responding. When his phone buzzed, he turned up the volume on the TV.

It worked for about thirty seconds. He gritted his teeth and tried to recall what the movie he’d been watching was about. When he couldn’t remember, he switched off the set and sat up on the couch. He told himself there was no harm in reading Dr. Payne’s message. (He didn’t think so anyway.)

_Daddy_: Been thinking about you

Zayn wanted to reply with something snarky, but he resisted the urge. He wasn’t going to engage. Slipping his phone into the pocket of his joggers, he went into his bedroom to look for a book to read. When his phone buzzed again, he almost ignored it. (Almost.)

_Daddy_: I’d like to make up for last night.

Zayn didn’t care. He hadn’t cared then, and he didn’t care now. As far as he was concerned, the man could text him all night if he wanted to. Zayn wasn’t going to respond.

But then, it was as if his fingers had a mind of their own because before he realised what he was doing, he had tapped out a single word and pressed ‘send.’

_Me_: How?

And just like that it hit him: there was no going back. Zayn had made a decision to dance with the devil, and there was no going back.
Chapter End Notes

Reactions, predictions, favourite line(s)? xx

The next chapter will begin exactly where this one left off. ;) Much love! ~Maree xx

End Notes

Hit me up on tumblr: zqua1d

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