Fools, and Worthless Liars.

Summary

Louis and Liam decide to go work a winter season in a snow resort in the Alps during their gap year. They get placed in Austria, where they meet a bunch of familiar faces including Zayn, Harry, Niall and various others you're bound to recognise doing the same thing!

Featuring our old favourites angst, pining, self discovery, ot5, and a side helping of a haunted hotel & gorgeous alpine scenery.

Notes

This is the first lengthy piece i have written in the LONGEST time. Its also the first thing I've posted & allowed anybody else to read in a very, very long time indeed. Please be gentle with me!

In the meantime, hope you like it and where it's going. I actually started this fic in January 2016, but lost direction (no pun intended haha) with it a bit and stopped writing. Then it was
summer and it felt wrong trying to write a winter fic! Now its the right season again, and i want to reignite my failed resolution of last year to get back into my writing properly.

The title is stolen from a Deaf Havana album, which hosts my favourite song of theirs on it. (Keep an eye out for it in the story, it'll make an appearance). I chose it mainly because I listened to this band obsessively while i was doing my own season - but i also felt like it fit.

ANYWAY - enjoy! x
a Long Awaited Journey.

*LOUIS.*

“Its fucking freezing in here, lad!”

“Lets get some coffee then.”

“We’d bloody better. There’s nearly two hours until we have to be at the coach. Honestly Liam, why you felt the need for us to get here at such an advanced hour is beyond me!”

“Well it would hardly do to miss the transport. Again.”

There was a pointed inflection on the word ‘again’ here.

“That was one time!”

“Actually, it’s happened three.”

“Sod off and get the coffees then. I’ll guard the bags at this lovely table here.”

Said table was already sporting 2 coffee cup rings and a torn open bag of cheese and onion crisps, which Louis peeled off the tacky feeling table and disposed of on it’s neighbour with a grimace.

After months of planning and awkward organisation, Louis and Liam were finally embarking on their first real adventure abroad. Real as in working and actually living, as opposed to drinking madly for two weeks and hooking up with people under embarrassing circumstances in clubs with unsubtle titles.

It had all began back at in the spring, when Liam had confided to his best friend since the days of batman pajamas and putting your hand up to ask to go to the bathroom, that he hated his university course. Not that Louis hadn’t been expecting it. Just because they were at different universities now, and living in different cities, did not prevent them speaking at length most days – even if it was just via text. And Liam’s flagging interest in Engineering was not a candle of conversation to be put out.

He had picked the subject to please his parents – but even they quickly realised he was never going to excel in something that held so little interest for him. By general consent he had finished his first year and done reasonably in his exams – even if it was just via text. And Liam’s flagging interest in Engineering was not a candle of conversation to be put out. He had picked the subject to please his parents – but even they quickly realised he was never going to excel in something that held so little interest for him. By general consent he had finished his first year and done reasonably in his exams – but that was it. He had then applied, and been accepted, to follow Louis to the University of Manchester (where he was studying to become a Drama teacher) and focus on Sports Science. Which somebody without eyes could still have seen was a significantly better fit for him, after ten minutes of conversation.

Louis was absolutely loving both his degree and life in Manchester. It was easy to get home to his family in Doncaster, but far enough to feel the first joys of independence. It would be even better with Liam there, he reckoned, which was partly why he didn’t want to be entering his third year when Liam went into his first. He was also wildly jealous when his mate told him he had decided to go travelling in the year he had spare before starting over again. This may have resulted in some drunken arguments in which Mr L Tomlinson may have accused Mr L Payne of avoiding both his responsibilities and the inevitable – but wound up in his deciding to take a year out after the summer as well and go away too so they could both ‘grow up’ and ‘return more worldly’ to continue their studies together. With academic permission there wasn’t much his family could do to stop him – and that was how Louis Tomlinson found himself in Reading train station; on a cold, bright day at the
end of November waiting to move to the Austrian alps and work a winter season in a chalet hotel.  

“Oouf,” huffed Liam, falling down into one of the hard metal chairs, “here’s your coffee.”  

He placed two smallish cardboard beakers with plastic lids down on the table, and Louis took one gratefully.  

They had travelled down via train exceptionally early that morning – first to London, then to Reading – and even if it was only 1pm he was knackered.  

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By the time they had to get a move on, Louis had got better acquainted with Reading’s primary train station than he had ever hoped to be. He had eaten some dodgy sandwich from one place, drank coffee at a rickety table of another, used the loos several times for something to do (especially standing under the hand dryer for longer than was necessary to warm up), and gone for a few cigarettes.  

The latter had turned into the most interesting exchange, as the individuals joining him on the curbside, behind a rather large plumber’s van, seemed to be of quite a friendly nature. An elderly couple returning from their holidays with prior knowledge that their house had been flooded via a faulty washing machine were particularly insistent on engaging with him. Louis desperately wished they could have just come out to smoke together, but it was a fuss with so much baggage – somebody had to look after the stuff after all. Additionally, Liam found chatty travellers to be an exciting distraction from his nerves; Louis found he was actually too distracted being nervous to pay proper attention to anybody.  

“Sorry, there’s some road works on. I’ll just do a little detour,” the driver of the black cab was saying, waving generally in front of him at the traffic jam.  

“That’s alright, don’t worry,” Liam replied, with a sunny smile.  

Louis raised his eyebrows and turned his head a little, to insinuate that time is actually quite important in this instance, but Liam had anticipated this and already rolled his eyes.  

“The bus isn’t going to leave without us Lou, relax!”  

“You’re usually the uptight one!”  

On hearing this Liam produced one of his giant, crinkly eyed smiles that won so many people over, and winked.  

“I’m turning over a new leaf. No-one here will know me but you. I can finally get rid of all those ‘Grandma Payne’ jokes that have plagued me since primary school….”  

“Look, I have said I was sorry about that, I didn’t think it was going to stick-” Louis began, tinged a bit pink.  

“Louis; you made a song up to go with it!” Liam’s eyebrows had jumped enthusiastically high to emphasize his point.  

“Do people usually complain when people who care about them write them songs?” Louis replied, arching his own eyebrow and feeling a sense of relief wash over him as the Reading football stadium car park was finally coming into view.
Half an hour later their bags (both equipment and cases) had been deposited in a rather large metallic looking trailer, to be pulled behind their coach; and the childhood friends were hovering in the entrance way to the vehicle.

The sounds of already-rowdy co-seasonaires floated down the small stairway. Liam was suddenly looking a little less Mr. Confident and a little more Mr. Nervous; so Louis magnanimously suggested they sit downstairs. They were both extremely tired from having such an early start compared to their southern counterparts, and he secretly suspected they would make a better impression well rested.

“What, the irrepressible Louis Tomlinson choosing to not head immediately up top to become the centre of attention?!” Liam joked, but he was smiling gratefully. That was another part of their friendship. They’d always just sort of got one another, without having to spell things out.

“Shut it, Grandma,” Louis found himself saying, while shoving Liam forwards to prevent them causing a blockage.

The bottom floor of the bus conveniently housed the only bathroom cubicle on the entire vehicle (another secret reason Louis wanted to sit there), as well as three small tables with four seats around them and then a cluster of three seats of two.

“Well Limo, it looks like we have a bit of a choice on our hands here… risk a table, and the potential to have some weirdos join us – or smoosh ourselves into a two and play cozy for the next bazillion hours.”

He was standing in the middle of the floor with his hands on his hips, giving all the seats a scrutinizing once over from under his fringe.

“Lets just risk a table, and not be entirely antisocial,” Liam replied. He threw his rucksack onto said table on the left hand side of the bus, and shimmied in after it.

Louis fell into the seat opposite him, popping his own bag down on the aisle seat as well; before beginning to empty it and make himself at home.

“Louis – what are you doing?”

“Settling in, Liam.” Was the terse response.

There was a few beats of silence as Louis filled the table with a litre bottle of Coke, a giant bag of bacon flavoured crisps known as Frazzles, three Mars bars, a pack of ancient playing cards, three battered looking books, his glasses case, a tiny bag he insisted on carrying everywhere housing varieties of medicines for every occasion and finally a fuzzy looking blanket he had smuggled off a long haul flight home the previous summer. The latter he cocked his eyebrow at, before placing it down on top of the bag next to him.

“What?”

“Nothing!”

“What??”

Liam just laughed, and dug his own homely looking iPod out and placed it quietly in front of him while Louis attended to making his pile of entertainments as neat as possible.
By the time this was achieved the lower floor had filled up. He noticed Liam, who was facing back and could actually see things, people watching with interest – so he shuffled a little to the side himself.

Four girls had taken the seats of two apiece, and two having discovered they were from neighbouring towns had begun an excited conversation over the top of the chair backs between them. The big table behind them had seen someone official looking, with a clipboard and big pen, sit down amongst lots of bags and papers in disarray. Must be somebody in charge, Louis thought, somewhat put out that they were now sitting somewhere they could be so closely monitored.

Just as Louis was wondering how many people were left to come, the man sat behind them stood up and introduced himself as Greg. He worked for the snow company they were going to be working for, had himself done five seasons in the Alps, that sort of thing. He assured them the journey was usually quite fun and went by quicker than you thought 12 and a half hours would do.

“Is that everyone here then?”

“Nearly. Leaving in 15 minutes.”

Greg proceeded to walk off the bus again after this, soon replaced by three boisterous lads who made an immediate beeline for the vacant table across from Louis and Liam. Their accents sounded a bit off, and drew Louis’ immediate attention as he began to attempt to work out how to place it.

“Duuuuuude,” the one with the darkest hair announced, “this is sick. I didn’t think they’d have tables!” He instantly followed this up by launching himself into the seats facing back toward the doorway.

“I told you it didn’t matter what time we arrived,” somebody with loud blue hair replied, slipping in opposite him with a big smile.

The third member of the party looked like he couldn’t decide which seat to sit on, before announcing loudly that he was, “Going in next to Michael here,” because he was liable to get motion sick if he faced the other way.

Louis was sure he saw Liam twitch out of the corner of his eye at that.

“Hello! Are you going to Austria as well?” the first boy suddenly said, turning to face Louis. He realised with a blush that he had been staring. Well, more accurately squinting.

“Hello! Yeah. I think everyone on this bus is going to the Austrian bit…” he tailed off, before adding; “where are you from?”

“Australia!” all three answered at once, with great enthusiasm.

Louis tended to note that with Aussies. They were always very proud to say so. It was probably what came of having a continent home to palm tree rainforests, blue oceans with barrier reefs, interesting creatures and amazing adrenaline sports. Coming from Great Britain, people tended to be less jolly to advertise their history of unfortunate world interference and colonization, followed by embroilment in awkward foreign affairs and a tendency to have to frequently apologise to visitors for the weather – even if after braving it there was quite a lot of nice scenery and old stuff floating about.

“We’re from Sydney,” the bloke with the lightest hair added, sitting nearest to Louis. He shot his hand over the aisle to shake, adding, “I’m Luke. And that there is Calum and Michael.”

“We just did a winter season back home, and thought we’d use the rest of the gap year to come see
Europe properly,” Michael explained.

“Well I’m Louis, and this is my friend Liam. We’re taking a year out of uni to do some soul searching,” he joked, shaking Luke’s hand back.

Before long the five boys discovered a significant amount in common, and were chatting away like old friends. They cheered when the bus took off, and didn’t shut up until Greg announced they were approaching ferry boarding in Calais. And even then, the pause was more of a merry ‘woop!’

In their complete immersion with their new friends, neither Liam nor Louis noticed the last people to board their bus. They had only just met outside, held up for two completely different and disparate reasons; which had caused them to bond immediately in embarrassment. One of them was tall, gangly, and had a head of extremely curly hair. He was concentrating so hard on not falling back down the tiny staircase he didn’t really notice the others either. But his slightly shorter companion – raven quiffed, and impossibly good looking, found his attention drawn to the front of the deck and toward a crinkly eyed smile and Batman t-shirt; with an unexpectedly warm feeling.

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It was only 2 and a half hours drive from Reading to the ferry crossing at Dover – but Louis had come to the conclusion things were off to a great start. The only thing that bothered him was the knowledge that he and Liam had just met three pretty awesome lads, who were unfortunately not scheduled to be working in the same resort as them.

Fingers crossed everyone else they would meet would turn out to be such great craic. Or there was a bus service he could escape on for visits, worst case!

“Are you coming?”

Louis realised his internal monologue on the irritation of work destinations had caused him to miss an entire conversation, and instantly felt bad.

“We were just saying we should hit up the bar,” Liam explained, kindly.

“Oh! Right. Well I’m obviously in for that,” he had agreed, shaking his head and standing up.

Their little group traipsed across the dining hall they had been eating terrible canteen food in, and deposited their trays and empty plates at the rubbish station.

The menu had looked so sad Louis had only had a bowl of chips (and if he was honest, he was too excited to actually eat much more) – but he had worked his way through rather a lot of juice.

An urgent need to use the bathroom suddenly over whelmed him, and he grabbed Liam’s arm to hiss that he was going to nip to the loo.

“I’ll meet you up there in a second,” he added, dashing off as quickly as he could.

It was nice to have a quiet moment. As soon as he had taken care of business, Louis immediately made to text both his mum and sisters to let them know how the journey was going. This was partly why he hadn’t wanted any of the others to come with him. New friends didn’t need to know what a mama’s boy he was this early in their acquaintance!

Messaging home made him feel a bit sad all of a sudden, so he pulled some funny faces back at
himself at he fiddled with his hair in the mirror and smoothed out his t-shirt.

“Right, time to go back out and make sure Liam hasn’t been eaten alive by those Aussie lads,” he chuckled to himself.

Remembering that Liam was here; and in exactly the same boat as Louis himself, made him feel exponentially better. Okay, so it was weird to be leaving his close knit family to go live somewhere for six months at a time without the possibility of a weekend visit home. But his mum had been really encouraging (possibly she felt he was too reliant on running home every time something upset him at university, but he didn’t want to admit that to himself currently), and Lottie had been madly jealous. She was adamant she was going to follow in his footsteps already, which was hardly surprising. But it was going to be good for him in the end. Self-sufficiency of the emotions, as well as of the literal living!

Or so he kept telling himself.

It took him a moment after waltzing out of the loos to realize that he didn’t actually know which bar the other boys had gone to. There were three on board. None of them looking obviously nearest to the lobby he was now standing in.

He looked around nervously. Obviously the thing to do was to text Liam. The worrisome thing about texting Liam was that Liam had gotten onto a bit of a rant about international messaging tariffs back on the bus, and had mentioned something about turning his phone off over the course of their dinner in the canteen. Hmmm.

He dashed off a quick,

Paynooo! Which bar are you in??? There’s 3 and I’m lost! :( x

And began a slow amble up the steps and in the general direction of one of the bars, dubbed on the ship’s map as a ‘Finnegan’s Irish Pub’.

By the time he hit the next deck he had no reply. Grimacing to himself about this unfortunate situation, he took a sudden right turn out a door onto the ship’s outer area. He could have a cigarette and wait for Liam to text him back out there. Even if it was already dark, he could have a peek at the water and see if he could see the lights of Calais yet.

It wasn’t exactly quiet outside, but at least he didn’t feel like a weirdo for having a smoke by himself. He began by taking himself for a slow wander, taking in the faint salty smell of the English Channel mixed with that unique ship smell that seems like a mixture of metal and oil and general working things all together. He wasn’t on ferries very often, so he found this all quite novel, and paused with his forearms leaning against the barrier flicking his ash out into the inky waves.

His solitude and peacefulness was soon disturbed by a duo somewhat further down the decking from him. It was difficult to see in the shadows, and because they appeared to be desperately hugging the wall behind him. Louis realised they must have just popped out the door next to them, and the loud protestations of the shorter of the two was what had caused him to jump a little. He inclined his head ever so slightly to try and get a better look at them.

“…sure you’re okay?” somebody was saying.

“I’m alright. Besides, where else am I going to smoke?” his companion answered.

“Wait until we get to the other side?”
A short laugh.

“I think you’re hoping to catch another glance of Sexy Batman Guy, don’t pretend you didn’t see him go up those stairs when I did!”

This omission was followed by a choking sound, and what Louis thought might be the most beautiful laugh in the world.

Why wouldn’t they move forward, he thought irritatedly, there was simply no way to get a proper look at them where they were standing. Well, without looking rude and obvious that was.

These were perhaps two words Liam might have confidently used to describe his best mate in a variety of given circumstances, if asked. However on this occasion – alone, and feeling more than a little disjointed and a tiny bit homesick – he was more than happy to stick to blending into the background.

“There. Let’s go back in.” Voice number two croaked.

“Good idea. I’m freezing my balls off out here!” came the hearty reply, swiftly followed by the unmistakable sound of the door closing.

Now that was interesting. Not just because Voice Number One sounded sexy and alluring, and laughed like twinkly stars (what was coming over him?!) – but because Louis hadn’t seen too many people aside Liam wandering around that ship in massive batman logos. Perhaps it was too much of a coincidence to dwell on, but Louis couldn’t help laughing at the thought that some random dude might be wandering around the ferry lusting after his straight as an arrow friend Payno.

A little while and a short walk later, Louis discovered his new group huddled in one of the booths of the Irish pub. As predicted, Liam had shut his phone off, but there was a pint sat on the table waiting for Louis that more than made up for the fact some extremely loud actual-Irishman with bright blonde hair had set up shop in the corner with his guitar and was playing an effervescent rendition of ‘Wonderwall’ to an enthusiastic audience.

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The hotel the coach finally arrived at in Austria was not the actual hotel Louis and Liam were going to be working in. It was called St Wolfgang’s, and it resided in the flagship resort of Austria – St. Anton.

Snow sports enthusiasts the world over would immediately recognise St Anton as a sibling of resorts they themselves had been to in various other countries. It was in a big valley, with beautiful wooden chalets and apartment/hotels dotted all over and at various gradients. It was also known as the premier Austrian party resort, with a significant number of clubs and pubs as well as ex-Pats working and general youthful holiday makers to fill them.

It was exactly what Louis had wanted when they signed up, and it was Liam’s nightmare. By pure chance they had wound up assigned somewhere monumentally smaller, so Louis hoped they would get the chance to explore St. Anton properly before being asked to hop back on a bus and get deposited in the middle of nowhere.
Pretty swiftly they were herded into the deserted lobby of the Wolfgang, while a lot of important looking people with clipboards whispered together by the desk.

Louis couldn’t help but feel he’d rather be working somewhere bustling and loud like this. Part of him felt quite convinced that going to a small resort was going to lead to an over population of weirdos. He kept telling Liam as much, but since his friend was prone to periods of worrying he tried to keep it to a minimum. Payno was only just over the terror he would be in a resort where they would force him to go clubbing every night and spoil his already non-fully-functional liver. He didn’t need to transform his relief to concern he would be working with deviants and oddballs for the next half a year.

As it happened, nothing exciting was on the cards for most the rest of the day. The boys made the most of their Aussie mates, and began chatting to some other faces as they all spread out across the generous sized lobby. There were squishy sofas and deep armchairs, pillows galore; and a large log fire blazing away under a huge gilt framed mirror. Postcard perfect, or whatever the notion was. Louis found himself making a face as he took it all in, while knowing he and Liam were going to have to pick up sticks and move somewhere likely to be less winter wonderland and more Winterfell if he knew his luck.

After lunch – which they had all had en masse in the hotel restaurant – some of the clipboard wielding crew had announced that they were going to be broken up according to which resorts they were headed to. From there they would begin getting to know one another, and be led off to acquire the parts of their uniform they hadn’t been required to bring with them.
Chapter Summary

POV change! Introducing the Ziam perspective.

In which we arrive in Austria, bonds are formed, weird stuff goes down in the hotel and we are introduced to the majority of the rest of the cast :)

Chapter Notes

I'm posting this at the same time as chapter 1 since I've got a lot written down already.

Originally wanted to do a one shot, but eventually realised posting something and maybe getting some feedback would encourage me along a bit rather than just me thinking about it vaguely!

anyhoo, i hope chapter one went well...

ZAYN.

It wasn’t an utter disaster, probably. It was just he was expecting there to be… well, more people.

When the folder-wielding types, in company bomber jackets of unforgivably bright colours, had called, “Kühtai!” Zayn had expected at least 20 people to scramble to their feet.

After all, Hinterglemm, Ischgl and Sölden (other resorts in the area) had seriously depleted what had been a small army of seasonaires crammed into the Wolfgang’s main lobby.

So when only 7 of them stood up and walked forward, a feeling akin to accidentally swallowing one of those giant ice-cubes usually found floating in summer’s day soft drinks appeared in his belly.

“What the hell?” he hissed at Harry, as they shuffled over the room, hands deep in the pockets of his black jeans. It was difficult to know how candid to be, he was yet to know the gangly boy next to him a full 24 hours yet. But he was the closest thing to a best friend he had here, and the disparity in situations surely needed to be called to attention!

“Yes, this is a bit weird isn’t it?” was his reply.

Harry had an odd habit, Zayn was noticing, of somehow always sounding cheery. He made the fact their team seemed more like a year 5 sleep-over than chalet staff list seem like a vague novelty rather than something horrifying.
Not that Zayn was himself one for large groups, or being the centre of attention. It was rather his
embracing anonymity. In a large staff base he had hoped to share a dorm room with Hazza, make
small talk on shift with a variety of ever changing faces (while avoiding anything he considered
intrusively deep), and thus be free to vanish for the remainder of the evening whenever he fancied –
either snowboarding alone, reading his books, drawing some pictures, or potentially Skyping his
family. A small hotel with less staff would involve everyone getting rather chummy, and thus
produce a greater difficulty in evading people when socialising got a bit much. Or if everyone was
just permanently peculiar.

Not that Harry would know all that. Yet. Obviously Zayn would wind up divulging some of his
craziness to his new friend, would have to if he was going to employ his help in being a tad
antisocial now and then; but right now there was no reason for anyone to get why Zayn was so
monumentally put out. So he harrumphed to himself, and followed Harry around the corner back into
the dining room.

It was deserted, except for the small table where people in various levels of dishevelment from
sleeping on a bus, and not showering afterwards, were pulling out chairs & making themselves at
home.

“After you?” Harry chuckled, holding out a seat for Zayn and beaming widely.

Somehow the banter between them felt more comfortable than a single day usually afforded, and
Zayn found himself fondly rolling his eyes at Harry’s exuberance before letting out an audible sigh
and sitting down.

To his right was a girl with violet hair peeking out from under a green beanie. She had that sleepy
look particular to people who have had a lot of eye make-up on, slept in it, and not washed their face
afterwards. She was busying herself making sweater-paws, and sneaking furtive glances. It was an
assumption, but he secretly hoped she would be a bit artsy on the chance of their having something
in common.

Next to her was a stocky bloke who looked like he enjoyed working out. Zayn cocked an eyebrow
up at his giant lion tattoo and felt a trifle more hopeful about things. He noticed the lad was already
laughing with the girl on his own left. She was wearing a lot of black and had impressively long hair.
He wondered idly if they had met on the coach.

On girl’s other side a short guy with very long dark hair and a clipboard was manically writing notes,
and was clearly working for the company.

Next again, Zayn noted, was one of the boys from the bottom floor. He remembered clocking them
as he and Harry had finally got punted onto the bus back in England. It was the shorter of the two,
sitting arms crossed over a slouchy grey t-shirt; one leg of his slightly rolled up jeans crossed over onto his opposite leg. There was a sort of haughty superiority that Zayn felt a stab of irritation with, and which was exacerbated extremely by the fact the boy was staring right at him with an unreadable expression. Well, this was rude! He found himself returning it with an enthusiastic scowl. Sadly this seemed to have the opposite effect as intended, because the floppy haired individual broke into a mammoth grin, and turned to whisper in his friend’s ear.

Ah-ah-ha. His friend. Otherwise known as the most painfully handsome being Zayn had ever came across? He didn’t want to be caught looking, but he couldn’t help letting his eyes settle a moment on the muscular boy next to Mr Stares With No Subtlety.

He was sheathed (it seemed an appropriate word for Zayn, because it was so tight) in a faded black tee with an old looking Batman logo on the front, though there was a red zip-up hoody hanging over the back of his seat. His hair was a little shorter on the sides than on the top, and he had a light dusting of facial hair that made him look a little older than he potentially was.

On the bus Zayn had caught him mid-giggle, his eyes almost lost in the endearing crinkles around them; a gigantic smile on his face with his shoulders pulled up around his ears. It was the most adorable thing Zayn had ever seen, and he had replayed the moment (and the laugh) over in his head several times since.

While Harry made small talk for them with rowdy strangers on the top deck. When he came downstairs for a piss in the middle of the night twice. And of course when he was trying to sleep himself. He hadn’t hoped they would be placed in the same hotel because he didn’t think he was living in a romantic comedy. Or maybe because the thought of having to actually DO something about liking somebody was entirely off putting to him. Of late he had found himself much more a subscriber to the ‘love from afar’ and ‘perpetually unrequited’ varieties of affection.

He felt like it suited him well. He liked to draw, and he was going off to art college in London after his gap year; but he also enjoyed writing. He had been scribbling in journals for as long as he could remember, and a lot of the later ones were filled with what Zayn himself described as ‘flowery prose on feelings’ and what a couple of his sisters might have more to-the-point-edly called ‘angsty, self indulgent crap’.

He was well aware his family took that view, as well as the probable fact that a large majority of strangers might as well. The problem came from growing up a) being a bit of a mummy’s boy in a neighbourhood where that was about as well received as a present with a dog shit inside it, and b) spending most of his formative years internally struggling with his sexuality, while being surrounded by heteronormative knobbags whose idea of a fun Saturday night was to pounce on the ‘gay’ looking kids coming back across the park from cinemas and things. Probably while drinking such teenage classics as two litre ever-on-offer bottles of Frosty Jacks cider. Hence the notebooks full of thoughts that he never intended anybody to ever see or hear.
Sure, school was over, and he had made it through relatively unscathed. He had found acquaintances to pass the time with in his classes or lunch breaks, interspersed with a fond enjoyment of hiding in the library. Hardly anyone ever came in there, since the quiet rules tended to prevent loudly making fun of anyone trying to concentrate, so it became his kind of refuge. Avoiding super close friends also meant avoiding in depth conversations about who you fancied, or potentially even worse – what you thought about what you overheard the bullies loudly shouting at other people.

Luckily his family had been unconditional in their love and understanding, otherwise he wasn’t sure what he’d have done. It was embarrassing to look back on the one and only Big Conversation about Anything Serious he’d ever had with anyone ever – the Great Coming Out Friday Night.

There had been an almost disappointing lack of surprise, looking back on it, and after some simple reassurances everyone’s weekend carried on like normal. His mum may have made a few comments about how he would ‘bloom’ at university, which offended his pride slightly, but that was it.

The next day Doniya took him to a gallery opening with her and snuck his 14 year old and immensely underage self some of the freebie wine. It didn’t taste very nice, but he appreciated the gesture. That evening his dad ordered in take away and they watched Star Wars movies in the marathon they had planned all week. He boldly proclaimed Han to be substantially attractive just to test the waters, but all that happened was his mother, Doniya and Waliya all agreeing vehemently before going back to trying to not share the popcorn. Sunday he read Oscar Wilde ostentatiously while lying on the big sofa, and tried to appreciatively laugh in an obnoxiously loud way now and again. Again, testing the waters. His dad told him he had really enjoyed reading the same book at school as he walked past. Safaa asked what was so funny, and Zayn wasn’t sure how to answer anymore. It was at this point he realised his family really had known all along, and truly hadn’t given a crap about it. Obviously this was a relief, fucking amazing actually, but it made all the angst-ridden self-reflection - coupled with dark predictions he had been making in his journal for months – seem a bit silly in retrospect.

“My name is Kenneth,” a booming Welsh accent broke through his private, if brief, walk down memory lane, “I’m a Work-a-Season rep. Basically, I’ll just be sorting you out with your uniforms and some paper work before getting you on the bus to your own resort!”

Zayn decided he sounded needlessly upbeat about this.

Hadn’t he just spent 12 hours on the bus too? On second thoughts he looked altogether too clean. He must have already been here. Bastard.

Unfortunately what ol’ Kenneth did next did not help his standing with Zayn any, as he asked everybody to introduce themselves with a little individual backstory.

“I’ll go first!” Harry had not-so-helpfully suggested, earning him an rather dark look from his new companion, “My names Harry and I’m 18. This is my gap year, obviously I love skiing…” he trailed off a bit with his nose scrunched up, “… erm, oh! I love photography! I brought a couple of my
cameras with me. Basically, I’m sort of documenting all the adventures I’m having this year into a sort of art project. So like, who knows, you might wind up in it!” he finished, with a sort of innocent wink only people with genuinely nice intentions ever manage to pull off.

Zayn felt if he tried to emulate this sunny disposition he might accidentally come across as some kind of homicidal maniac just waiting to flip. At least he was spared from speaking right away, as Purple Haired Flora Hat coloured girl let out a hum of appreciation and lent forward.

“T’m Perrie,” she announced, “and I just graduated from art college this summer. Digital media was my area, so Harry, if you need any help with your project I love that kind of thing.”

Great. Friend competition already, and they hadn’t even got to the hotel yet.

Harry would probably think the world of her, and want to have her multi-coloured artful babies, and dance off into the Austrian sunset forever; leaving Zayn behind to awkwardly peek at Batboy from behind conifer trees with lots of snow on them.

“That sounds awesome! I’m studying music next year, but art college was my other choice.” Harry excitedly replied, leaning forward himself so his chin was perched on his wrists as he leant against his skinny jean clad knees.

It was altogether too earnest a scene for poor Zayn, who wanted to be pessimistic and grim and more importantly be those things with his new and only friend!

“Looks like we’re off to a good start here guys,” Ken interrupted with a beaming smile, “somebody did their homework on you lot.” He had the audacity to wink as well.

“Guess I may as well throw my ten cents in now then,” Impossibly Long Haired Maiden decided to add, shrugging her shoulders in an exaggerated manner probably resultant of nerves.

“I’m Sophia and I’m a fashion graduate. I just spent a super intense three years never sleeping, and worrying about being well dressed all the time – so I decided to come out here and perfect my skiing, while wearing joggers and hoodies all the time where no one will judge me!” she sounded a bit surprised at the amount she had said there, and let out an artificial sounding cough as she sat back and added thoughtfully, “but y’know. Obviously I love art projects too.” And laughed a little.

“’Well I’m Josh and I don’t give a rats arse about art!” announced Gym Buff Lookalike.

This raised a small to medium smile from everyone.

“I play the drums in a band, and I finished sixth form last summer and still don’t have a clue what I want to do. Help out at my dad’s garage at the moment, and I know I don’t want to do that anyway! But my older brother did a season in France years ago, and he suggested I come out.”

This was more like what Zayn had expected. People who did not give a shit about arty stuff. Also,
“On that note – my name’s Louis. Sorry to take it back to artsy crap, but I’m a drama student.” There was a mock groan from Josh, which he seemed to take good naturedly.

“I just finished my 1st year at Manchester and I love it. However,” he stopped to gesture to Batboy and Zayn felt an annoying flutter in his chest, “this here is my best mate Liam. Been together since we were five or something. He was coming out here and I couldn’t very well stay behind while he was off having adventures!” he gave his friend a very fond look, and patted him on his ginormous bicep.

Liam, as it appeared Batboy was actually called, had gone a rather endearing shade of crimson and was chewing his plump bottom lip rather expertly. Zayn wanted to help him.

“So…” Kenneth encouraged, eying the two of them up.

“I’m Liam,” squeaked the apparently gentle giant, “I was studying engineering but it was rubbish so I quit. I’m moving to Manchester to do Sport Science with Louis next September, but until then I thought I’d finally take that gap year…” he trailed off a bit, then smirked at his light haired companion, “Louis here is a bit needy so naturally when I decided to go off as a young man with the world at his feet, he decided he’d rather die than be left behind.”

With that he elbowed said-Louis rather forcefully in the ribs, and giggled. Giggled. Just like on the bus.

Zayn felt a little light headed, which happened at a very inopportune moment because he realised he was now the only person who Had Not Spoken Yet. Balls.

“So that just leaves…”

Damn you Kenneth, you charmingly accented arsehole! He thought. For some reason, while thinking this, he found himself doing an awkward sort of jaunty wave.

“Hi. Erm. I’m Zayn. I’m also on a gap year…” awkward throat clearing, “and boringly I’m also going to art college next year. Well. Probably. Never been to a snow resort before, so you know, really looking forward to learning.”

Thankfully any residual disappointment Liam and Josh may have had at having so many artistically inclined coworkers was deterred by everyone jumping in to discuss their snowboard or ski prowess. Or lack there of entirely.

After which Kenneth got to his feet, gesturing that they should do likewise, and asked them to follow him out the room.

A couple of hours later, and they were back in the lobby waiting to go. Apparently there was some issue with transport to their resort – which was the highest and most awkwardly placed in the area. Everyone else had left, and all of the Wolfgang employees had been taken off to settle into their staff accommodation.

Zayn and the small band of individuals he was going to be working with were now the only ones lounging around in front of the fire.
The uniforms had been a major disappointment. For someone as passionate about appearance as Zayn was, he felt he had been dealt a personal blow. He tried to tell himself the worst of it wasn’t the fact that Batboy was going to see him dressed like such a twat, but that was a blatant lie. As a general Hotel Assistant, Zayn’s days would be split between restaurant service as a waiter and room cleaning as a housekeeper. For the latter they had been asked to bring their own plain black trousers and shoes, but had been provided that morning with sky blue t-shirts with company logos on. For the evenings the boys had been required to bring formal dress trousers and other black shoes (though oddly enough the girls were given skirts), but were presented with wholly unattractive, baggy light blue shirts and navy ties to wear as well.

If the number of colleagues had been no cause for concern, this unequivocally was.

He found himself continually looking down at the package of uniform essentials in his hands, and wishing he could toss them out the window and into a snow drift. It was clearly the best place for them.

“This is horrendous. I’ve never looked like such a prick in my entire life as I did in that bloody restaurant gear!”

“You always look like a prat.”

“Fuck off! You’re only saying that because you have a different uniform!”

Louis, who was lying like a cat on the floor in front of the fire with his head on Liam’s lap, clearly felt the same way. Zayn felt himself warm toward him slightly.

“Zayn,”

He looked up in surprise at being so suddenly address by somebody he was currently thinking about, “Yeah?”

“You’re the only other bloke here who was getting the same uniform as me. Isn’t it fucking dreadful?”

Must think of a good reply, he thought desperately, Liam is listening!

“I thought you looked handsome in it,” Harry butt in suddenly.

It wasn’t clear if he was referring to Zayn or to Louis, but they both whipped their heads around incredulously to look where the curly haired co-worker was perched on the windowsill.

“It made me look about 12,” Zayn cried, “and there’s a tie.”

“You definitely don’t look 12,” a new voice chimed in.

Turning to look he realised it was Liam who had spoken, and who currently looked a bit surprised at himself for doing so.

“Oh. Well. Thanks I guess.” Zayn huffed, a wry smile breaking out in spite of himself, “but I agree with your mate here. Your uniform is way less offensive than ours.”
Louis grinned at him merrily, “we can have daily competitions of who wore it shitter?” he added, thoughtfully, “you’re really hot though so I suppose it’ll always be me.”

It was such an unexpectedly candid thing to say that Zayn went about 20 shades closer to being a tomato, while emitting a sort of squawking sound in protest.

“No, no, its true. You look like a model mate. You’re quiffs still up after that bus journey and everything. It’s alright. I have a really great personality! Well, so my mum says…” he cut off with a frown, and eventually a laugh.

“You do,” Liam reassured him, tickling him in the ribs.

Zayn fervently wished to know what it would be like to have Liam tickle him in the ribs. Or anywhere else, for that matter, but tried not to because it seemed somehow inappropriate.

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Eventually, of course, things swung into motion and the group was ferried onto their coach. The trip was largely uneventful, though Harry went green with car sickness on the windy roads, and Liam managed to somehow work into conversation everything he had been worrying about potentially going wrong – which caused everyone else to abruptly focus on all the manners in which their adventure could go pear shaped. Needless to say this left a rather painful silence in its wake.

After an hour and a half Zayn, who had been dozing for some time against a soft jumper smooshed up against the window, was jolted into wakefulness.

Harry, who had been leaning against his other side, had shifted his weight and left a cold spot in his place – leaning forward to shove his iPod and bottle of water into his bag.

“Are we here?” Zayn asked, blinking out the window owlishly.

“Yeah,” Harry replied, sitting back and peering over Zayn’s shoulder to join him in an observational moment.

“Erm… so that’s it, is it?” Zayn continued, a dubious note creeping into his voice, “it looks a bit…”

“Creepy?” Harry supplied.

The two turned to look at one another, mirror images of uncertainty on their faces.

“Are you lads coming?”

A short but loud Doncastrian head had appeared over the front seats at the top of the stairs, looking a bit stern, and breaking the somber moment apart.

There was somewhat of a muddle at the back of the coach, where the driver had over enthusiastically deposited everybody’s luggage with all the grace of a fitting monkey.
Louis, Josh and Perrie had waded forward in the exceedingly high snow to voice their displeasure, but it was uncertain to anyone whether or not the gentleman in question spoke enough English to really follow the tirade of indignant howls.

In any event, he lumbered past everybody to get back on board and drive off without any outward sign he had acknowledged a word of it.

“Well that was bloody rude!”

“What a wanker.”

“My bag has a chip in it!!”

Zayn, who was struggling to up-right his own rather large case, looked up at this point to note an incredulous looking Louis tilting a similarly sized bag at a 45 degree angle, with a hearty frown.

He looked back down in time to jolt his things over the snowy curb, and thus missed the fact that Harry patted Louis on the shoulder reassuringly, or that somebody in a snug-fitting Batman shirt was over to the side giving him a strange sort of wistful look.

It was difficult, Zayn felt, to pin point what about the Hotel Elisabeth was off. It was shaped like an enlarged alpine chalet, complete with uneven slanting roof. It was painted what once must have been a bright white to rival the mountains surrounding it, but was now faded. A large blue circle with gold writing announced the hotel’s name and 3 stars, and the front was completed with wooden slatted balconies. All rather ordinary fare for an alpine hotel.

The lowest floor seemed to consist of a series of garage doors, and some steep stone steps up to the entrance. To the left of that was the glass front of the restaurant, and the outdoor seating area – currently completely covered in a thick dusting of white powder.

Honestly, perhaps it was the sort of forlornness about the place. All the curtains were shut tight, giving it a closed off and unwelcoming appearance. That, and all the bloody lights were out.

“Do you want a hand with your bag?” turning with a jump, he realised Batboy was standing close by and looking earnest.

“What?”

One eye-brow rose slightly, and he gestured with his head to the stairs they would all need to tackle in order to settle in.

“I don’t think that bag is going anywhere without two people having a go at it,” he chuckled, with a wide smile.

“Oh, I see what you mean, that would be great. Thanks. I mean, you... I could always…. Hey where’s your bag?” he rambled.

Liam waved a dismissive hand in the general direction of the hotel, “I already took it up. C’mon then! Its freezing out here,”
“That’s what happens when you’re determined to wear slinky t-shirts,” Zayn found himself teasing before he could stop himself.

Well, that wasn’t the plan.

How had this occurred?
One moment he was awkwardly attesting to the fact the hotel was probably uninhabitable inside or full of ghosts, the next he was attempting to flirt with a hot co-worker before the season even began. Good grief.

Liam looked momentarily taken aback with the announcement, but he eventually let out quite a loud laugh while going slightly red.

And with that, they took an end of Zayn’s case each and struggled with it up to the entrance, complete with subdued mutters and the odd grunt when someone’s fingers slipped.

Zayn arrived completely unsure what had just passed between them. But he did now know that Liam had a wonderful laugh, and that it made him pathetically pleased with himself for creating it.
is *that* the bathroom??

Chapter Summary

In which our musical heroes get to grips with their new life style, Hazza and Louis have an unusual encounter with the staircase, and we see inside their flat.

LOUIS.

How he had lost Liam, and found himself straddling his suitcase alone in the Elisabeth’s foyer, he did not know.

But it was happening.

It wasn’t very graceful, and was a posture he had arrived at thanks to having already tripped over the thing.

He was now standing with his hands on his hips, surveying the scene in an attempt to locate his best friend.

“You look like some sort of old timey explorer, standing like that,” said a low voice playfully, and unexpectedly close to his ear.

Suppressing the urge to jump out his skin, he noted the tall hippy type was standing by his side, and smiling down at him.

“In case you hadn’t noticed Curly, that’s exactly what we are here,” he gestured in front of him in a flamboyant fashion.

“I beg your pardon?”

Despite feeling that his point was obvious, and that the fault was entirely with the gangly idiot by his side, Louis felt his face flushing just a tiny bit.

“Well. It is a bit of an adventure coming here, isn’t it?” he added, feeling a bit lame.

Luckily at that moment he heard a rather loud bang, and turned just in time to see Liam and the raven-haired lad from the bus career through the doors and right towards him – an out of control suitcase in their midst.

It took him all of about three seconds to realize the way he had positioned himself around his bag was an impediment to his getting out of the way, but that really was all there was time for as the smaller of the two careening individuals smashed into him and sent them both flying onto their backs on the marble floor.

Not exactly the entrance he had been hoping for.
“Argh, shit! Shit, shit, shit! Fuck. Sorry!”

“Are you two alright?” bright haired girl from the coach asked, but she sounded like she was suppressing a laugh.

Before any further comedy slapstick could ensue, or anyone could lean down to help anybody up, an authoritative cough resounded from the front desk area.

“You must be the rest of the team, then. Apologies for the wait, I wasn’t aware of your arrival until a moment ago.” There was a pregnant pause here that suggested the noise may have had something to do with this, “My name is Simon, and I’m the manager here.”

What an unfortunate meeting, Louis lamented, struggling to his feet at the same time as his compatriot in falling offered him a hand up; face beetroot.

“I trust you had a,” he paused to squint at them, “pleasant enough journey. This,” he pointed to his left, “will be the rest of your team. They arrived a month ago to work as extra help during our preseason period in St Anton, and will be able to show some of you the ropes here since they arrived five days ago.”

Four individuals waved awkwardly at them.

The first, skinny with a dark quiff and a northern accent stepped forward and introduced himself as Nick; he would be their assistant manager. Louis wasn’t sure what to make of him.

Afterward a girl with long hair and a big smile stated she was Cher, a kitchen hand who seemed like a good laugh.

The next was a smarmy looking, tubby bloke with short hair and an awfully insincere smile that instantly set Louis’ teeth on edge. His name was Dan, and he would be their chef.

Finally a nondescript chap with scruffy hair introduced himself as Greg, another kitchen hand, and before they knew it they were being ushered away from the bag heap and toward the main hallway.

Just in front of the entrance to the guests lounge was a heavy door leading into a tiny hallway. Immediately to the left was the entrance to the kitchens, and straight ahead lay the grand entrance to the flat they would all be living in for the next 6 months.

Well, most of them. Flat aside, there were 3 other rooms designated to staff in the Elisabeth hotel.

One suite on the first floor was taken up by Simon, and thankfully was no-where near anywhere anybody else was likely to be hanging out.

The other two were on the third and top floor, round the corner at the top of the staircase. The foremost contained bunk beds and a single, the one on the inside was a double room with an en suite and in use by the friendly seeming assistant manager Nick Grimshaw.
Even the vaguest of notions of being forced to live in a room a few floors up from everyone else was too much for Louis to bare - and there was a terrible moment all round when they unanimously realised they couldn’t all necessarily fit in the flat.

“Isn’t it so bad up there?” Nick was valiantly trying to persuade them, as he took them on the Grand Tour of the tiny pad.

Simon shrugged, evidently he couldn’t care less who slept where.

“If you want to select who is abiding where, I will go and see that Dan is getting the dinner along alright. We’ll have a big staff dinner in the restaurant in an hour or so. If you want to freshen up.” With that he walked off briskly, taking some the tension nobody had realised had built up away with him.

“So as I was saying,” Nick continued, leading them all further into the flat.

“This is rather 70s,” Josh announced, head peeking into the loo.

Standing on his tip toes to look around him, Louis noted grimly that the tiling and carpet décor was excessively brown.

“Oh my god, this is not the bath?!” Sophia was wailing.

This created a minor stamped, whether you cared about baths or not, because it was such an interesting statement.

As it turned out, probably in the interests of space as far as Louis could tell, the ‘bath’ was more of an over-large sink. With steps. It actually sat at two different levels. But at least there was a shower, and most importantly a shower curtain – without which, as everybody knows, it is impossible to enjoy or succeed in getting yourself dry afterwards.

Considerately there was also a towel rack, and a huge shelf running all the way around the bath at shower level, in a U shape, allowing for the probably significant amount of wash products.

“This is seriously going to affect my relaxing bath nights,” Sophia was continuing, but it seemed light hearted.

“What do you do on relaxing bath nights?” Josh asked, curiously.

Suddenly Perrie cut in with a slightly wistful look, and offered up the answer of reading with candles and a glass of wine.

Louis felt a little sorry for her in that moment, and wondered if she was feeling a bit over whelmed and homesick.

In any event, his moment of thoughtfulness led him to decide some sort of distraction was in order.

“I brought some bath shit with me actually,” he found himself saying loudly.

“Oh, did you?” Though it was Sophia who answered, Perrie’s eyes followed over to him.
“Yup. You probably thought you’d only be fighting the other ladies for a quiet soak,” he continued primly, “but I’m afraid you were mistaken.” He finished with a sort of ‘final nod’.

Liam, in a friendly gesture, nodded enthusiastically along as Louis spoke.

“God yes. We’ve been going on holiday with each other’s families for years, and there’s always at least one evening where Louis just pisses off for hours and everybody’s dying for a wee.”

“Yes, thank you for that Liiiii-am,” Louis retorted.

“The toilets separate here,” a deeper voice joined in.

“Yes. I can see that. Thank you, Harry.”

Harry was looking at him appraisingly, and it was definitely making him uncomfortable.

Was the guy judging him for liking a good lie in the bath every now and again? He felt irrationally irritated, and wound up giving the other boy an odd look in return.

“Aaaaaaaanyway, moving on!” Nick interrupted, rolling his eyes and shoving everybody around the corner and under the arched corridor, “there are the three bedrooms down here.”

He pushed the first open on a large twin room, with lots of cupboard space and a big window with a balcony door. Next door was a significantly smaller twin, that also had a door onto the shared balcony space. And finally the biggest room of all, which had had a gigantic chest taking up one wall, a private smaller balcony, bunk beds and finally a single frame.

Obviously Louis knew where we wanted to be, but it was going to be difficult discussing how to divide themselves up.

Nick was still in the room, which Louis found somewhat annoying. Why couldn’t he go and watch that weirdo Dan guy cook or something? He thought with an eye roll.

“So,” he began, raising both eyebrows expectantly, “I’ll leave you guys to it.”

On that happy note, Louis was about to dive forward and suggest some kind of rock paper scissors affair to unbiased-ly work out who should go out of the flat, when an unlikely occurrence… well, occurred.

“So, Greg and I have actually got to be pretty close for this last little while. We’ve been sharing the bedroom upstairs next to Nick’s already,” Cher announced, surprising everybody.

Greg grinned next to her and scratched the back of his neck, “Yeah – so anybody worrying about how not to wind up there can relax!”

“Only if you don’t mind us constantly appearing down here though,” Cher added with a bright laugh.

Louis wanted to kiss them.
Deciding this would be terribly awkward at so early a juncture in the season he settled for swinging his arm around Liam’s shoulders and pulling him into his side.

“Make for that first room,” he whispered in his friends ear.

Liam snorted, and swung his own arm around Louis’ waist, but he kept his eyes somewhere else.

As it turned out, there wasn’t much fight needed. The remaining girls, naturally, fell into the room for three and excitedly dashed off to get their cases.

That just left the four boys standing in the narrow hallway.

“Well, lads, I guess this is what coin flipping was invented for!” Louis announced, holding out a pound coin he had dug out of his pocket from the ferry trip.

“Tails,” the impossibly handsome one called Zayn instantly announced, narrowing his eyes, “for the bigger one.”

“Heads – we win!” Liam was excitedly announcing a second later, though he looked immediately embarrassed about it, and offered up a sincere apology to the other two.

“That’s fine. Your rooms bigger, that just means its more likely to be the hanging out place!” Harry answered, with a cheeky smile and jaunty sort of tongue click.

Zayn snorted at that, but still looked a little put out when he eventually wheeled his bag into the smaller room some minutes later.

***

The first week went by in a flurry of inductions.

Inductions to housekeeping. Inductions to restaurant service. Training on wines, and how to hold the bottle when you poured them. Notes on not only individual roles, but also everyone else’s and how they tied in with your own.

From day 2 they had been required to wear their uniforms for this, despite no actual guests coming for a whole week – which caused a stream of vulgarity from Louis so detailed it made Liam blush, but caused Zayn to poke his head around the door and heartily agree with him.

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Zayn was also a HA (hotel assistant), and with Louis every day to receive the same training. It was pure luck they struck it off so fantastically.

Zayn laughed heartily at Louis’ bombastic nature, and though he was certainly quieter than his new chum – Louis found him to be equally crude, intelligent and hilarious as himself in his own ways.
He was also just as vain, which was something Liam found the most shocking of all. While Louis could spend thirty minutes alone fiddling with his fringe, Zayn could spend forty-five on his quiff. As the week went on, it became widely apparent they were the longest every single day in the bathroom. A fact they giggled and bonded over later in the day in the pub. Which was also great, because they were equally enthusiastic drinkers – if different in their approach. Louis liked to loudly order as many varieties of things as possible (apparently unaware of the old wives tale that one should never mix their drinks), and dance wildly. Zayn preferred beer and rum, was difficult to persuade toward anything else, taking a great deal of encouragement and sneaky coaxing onto the dance floor regardless of the circumstances.

So, just like that, 6 days had flown by and it was the dawn of the last morning of the last day of training week.

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The first guests were set to arrive in the morning, and Louis was putting the final touches to the suite on the top floor he had just finished preparing.

As it turned out, while he was rather messy in his own room (and heartily despised the concept of being a bloody cleaner to a bunch of strangers), he had rather taken to the art of perfecting other people’s places.

Never let it be said that Louis Tomlinson was poor at his job. Even if he didn’t like it.

Liam secretly thought that it was the ultra competitive side of Louis, tamer now than in younger years, which led him to attempt to prove himself as best at everything he hates as well as everything he likes.

Louis had over heard him chuckling about this with Sophia while setting up the bar the previous day, and had haughtily refuted this claim to much general laughter – which might have offended his pride, if he hadn’t been so pleased to see Liam settling in on his own accord.

While it was evident they were, both, now actual adults and had been at the very least doing a rudimentary impersonation of ‘Adulting’ for the last year at university – he still felt like the 8 year old who had smacked another lad in the face by the swings for making fun of his best mate’s unfortunate haircut, while said best mate went red and still as a statue.

There were various incidents like that over the years. Not frequent, but more often than Louis would have liked – where a cutting remark was made, or a lofty judgment – and he found himself wading in with sharp words, and once or twice a choicely placed fist, to teach somebody some manners.

As his hands nimbly corrected his attempt to bundle the duvets into a more symmetrical Austrian Roll, his mind wandered back to one of the worst incidents of this.

It had been Liam’s 16th birthday. He hadn’t wanted to do anything, but his parents had insisted. It was one of those occasions where out going parents don’t seem to see the fact their kid is, in fact, not the splitting social double of their butterfly ways.
They threw a supposed garden party, ordered food and a special cake, and got his sisters Ruth and Nicola to decorate the garden and part of the house with balloons, bunting and old photos.

The only person to attend outside of the Payne family circle was Louis and his own family, which was at least a big group; if mostly all the wrong ages.

In the end they snuck into Liam’s bedroom to get drunk, and Louis had spent the next week telling misleadingly lively stories of the event to anyone who would listen – while simultaneously threatening to fight anybody who contradicted him – and feeling horrendously sorry for the embarrassment his friend must have been suffering.

His own 16th some months before had been an almost awkwardly lively affair by comparison. His extra-curricular activities meant he had a wide circle of friends to call upon – his football team, his drama group and the school orchestra – on top of his wide number of siblings and aunts, cousins, uncles and grandparents.

As it was winter there had been no garden party, in fact it had been a Christmassy themed ‘do with tinsel and seasonal music and lots of red, green and white everywhere. He still remembered it fondly as one of his best age related celebrations yet; which meant the disappointment he felt for Liam’s was exacerbated by what he felt was rightly felt guilt. It did not occur to Louis that Louis’ party was not necessarily Liam’s idea of the best night ever; or that while he may have felt a shade embarrassed that nobody accepted his birthday invites, that actually the only person he wanted to spend it with was right there with him doing exactly what he had hoped to do anyway.

And there in lay the perfect description of their long standing relationship.

Liam - ever quiet, cautious and unlikely to go blurring out feelings left right and centre. Louis - the opposite. Loud, daring, and occasionally prone to declarations of extreme emotion (especially after wine nights). And so they carried on, never quite realizing as much about the other as they thought.

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“Halloooool!” a voice called.

“In here!” Louis replied, giving the end of the duvet a satisfied pat before looking up toward the doorway.

“Luncheon is served!” Harry, who was now standing in the doorway, announced. Before adding,

“So I’ve been sent to tell you to stop fussing and come down and join us!”

He quirked an eyebrow at the term ‘fussing’, but gathered up his bucket of cleaning things, “Now then young Harry, there’s no call to be jealously impugning my good work!”

“Those were Zayn’s words, not mine,” he replied, holding his hands up in front of his chest in a gesture of surrender.
He was still smiling.

“You look very pleased with yourself.”

He couldn’t help it. Harry brought out weird feelings in him.

At first he had just been fascinated by Harry’s extensive music tastes and his quirky dress sense. As the week went by he realised he was actually rather funny, too.

Both these facts made him irrationally angry with both Harry and himself.

Liam seemed bent on the idea he was getting some feelings for this first time in a long time. Louis had hit Liam so hard on the arm for this comment one night together he had actually got him to say ‘ouch’ which was not a common thing – and thus produced feelings of satisfaction in him usually associated with academic prowess.

The fact of the matter was that everyone he had ever spoken to about working a snow season had gone on to tell him what a notoriously terrible idea getting with anybody you had to work with always turned out to be.

Drama. Awkwardness. Arguments. Other people being unfortunately involved. Terrible working atmospheres.

Harry, being younger and probably not in the know of anybody who had already been abroad to work, appeared to have missed that memo.

“Simon says if everything’s set up after lunch we can head out on the slopes at last,” Harry was explaining.

“About bloody time,” he found himself replying, although he was smiling.

That was when it happened. Harry and he had just been sauntering down the stairs, nothing dangerous, when all of a sudden Harry seemed to lose his footing and go flying forwards; landing in a heap at the small landing just ahead with a loud thump and declaration of ‘ow’.

“Oh my god, Hazza, are you alright?” Louis found himself exclaiming, pausing near the top of the flight with a horrified expression.

Harry righted himself so he was sitting, before shakily pulling himself up to his feet. He was staring past Louis and back up the stair way to the second landing, and didn’t seem to have heard.

“Harry,” he tried again, “are you okay?”

“Yes,” he didn’t seem convinced, but rather determined to shake the incident off. Perhaps he was embarrassed, “I’m fine Louis. Er, that was weird.”

He scratched his neck, cocked a hip, and continued to gaze up the stairs in a strange way.

“What was? You tripping over your massive feet to near death? I’ll warrant that’s a pretty regular occurrence around you mate!”

Everyone had come to know that Harry was somewhat clumsy. Not in the kitchen, right enough, but when it came to everything else. Drunken Harry, they had discovered, was exceptionally prone to falling over. For instance. And while this tumble down stairs had given Louis a scare in how serious it might have been, it hadn’t occurred to him it was anything other than ordinary accident prone-ness.
“But I didn’t.” He looked pained.

“What? C’mon,”

“Really. It felt like someone …” there was a tense pause here, where it looked like Harry was trying to decide whether to plough on or not.

“Somewhat what?” in spite of himself, his curly haired chum’s behavior was unsettling him now.

“Like somebody pushed me, alright?” he finally met Louis’ gaze.

“That’s nonsense! There’s nobody here but you and me!”

Honestly he had expected Harry to laugh and say he was having him on, then shake his boots or something to indicate he was always falling over his own feet.

No such luck.

“Fine then, believe what you like. But I DIDN’T trip,” Harry scowled darkly at him, before turning and barreling off down the remainder of the stairs by himself.

Well. That had been peculiar.

Louis turned around, suddenly feeling a bit uncomfortable, and looked at the dark second floor – where absolutely nobody else ought to be, as they hadn’t any guests yet.

Goosebumps. Harry’s stupid story had given him goosebumps.

He shivered, and ran down after him.

***

The restaurant had now been fully arranged for the impending guest service, so after filling their plates up in the serving section of the kitchen the team spread themselves over a couple of booths in the corner by the window-wall.

Louis had taken an extra lengthy time plating up because he felt so unsettled by his and Harry’s recent experience with the staircase. Frankly, he didn’t want to face H again so soon when he had clearly caused him some offence. And certainly he couldn’t bring himself to be apologising for stating the obvious : that there’s no such thing as ghosts!

“What did you do to Hazza?” an accusatory voice over his shoulder asked.

“Argh!”

A slice of beef tomato splattered rather spectacularly over the white floor. Louis looked down at it sadly.

“Sorry,” Liam – the owner of the unexpected voice – said, before breaking out into a giggle, “you shat yourself!”
“Funny that happening when you sneak up on people!” was the cool retort, “and before you insinuate – I did nothing. Nothing! Young Harold and I remain perfectly civil.”

“Why does he look so upset then?” Liam was leaning against the counter and watching Louis mop up the tomato-juice-mess with a confused face.

“Look Liam, if Harry wants to believe in nonsense that’s his business. But there’s not such thing as ghosts, and I’m going to call anyone telling me otherwise out about it!”

He slammed the lid back on the bin and scowled at his friend.

“Harry told you the hotel is haunted?”

Wearing an expression of extreme bafflement, this was clearly not the response Liam had been expected.

“He fell down on the way to lunch and told me he was pushed. But there wasn’t anybody else there!”

Liam looked a trifle worried at that.

“Liam, please don’t tell me you believe that nonsense?”

“Come speak to Cher,” was all he said, before walking back out the slidey doors.

Thinking he would much rather eat all by himself back in his and Liam’s bedroom, he slapped a couple of fresh slices of large tomato onto his plate next to continental sliced meats, cheeses and a small garden salad.

Never let it be said that Louis ate poorly.

Back in the restaurant Liam was sat next to Cher, who was holding court in the booth table in the glass corner.

While it had spectacular views of the pistes and town centre, Louis felt he wouldn’t be enjoying his meal much.

Harry was sheepishly putting a roll together and studiously not looking up.

“Hi,” Louis warily announced, sitting down on the end opposite Liam.

“So, Liam mentioned you and Hazza had a bit of a weird experience?” Cher began, eyeing him over her cup of coffee.

“Well I…”

“I’ve been saying all week that there’s a strange atmosphere about this place,” she carried on as if he hadn’t spoken, “but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I thought I might be imagining things…”

“Cher. Harry must be mistaken. Ghosts don’t exist. This hotel isn’t even that old! Its just a misunderstanding after being the only people in a giant building for 7 days by ourselves.”

Louis was rather pleased with his non-aggrieved response. He had grown up reassuring younger
sisters that there was nothing to worry about as regarding the supernatural.

He had literally never had a moment he considered he might have been in the wrong.

“‘I felt hands, Louis,’” a low rumbley voice from the other end of the table announced. Prior to hiding its face behind a giant sandwich.

“‘When I see it, or feel it, I’ll believe it,’” Louis shrugged, “but until then I think you’ve all got a bad case of over active imagination.”

Cher rolled her eyes, “if its true then you’ll know it before long.”

Well THAT was ominous sounding.

If he was wrong he’d much rather nobody mentioned it ever, thanks, if its all the same to them.
I cannot see it, because i have shut my eyes.

Chapter Summary

In which Zayn and Hazza's friendship blooms and Liam and Zayn have a bonding moment over some laundry!

ZAYN.

Arrivals day had suddenly arrived – and nobody was feeling all that chill about it. First guests were due at 8am, and everybody aside Liam was up involved in some sort of preparation relating to breakfast cooking or service.

Liam was curled up in his Austrian twin bed next door, and was all exceptionally bad tempered feeling Zayn could think about as Harry gently woke him up at 7am to get ready for their shift.

“Just five more minutes, H,” he mumbled from underneath a pillow. Visions of snug Liams, and how warm and cosy they would be to snuggle, were dancing on the edge of his dreams.

“Zayn, if you don’t get up now you won’t have time to have a shower or do your hair. And you will look like crap all day.”

With this, the dark haired boy sat up with a slightly manic look on his face.

Harry chuckled, naturally the sunny tempered chap was already out the bathroom and running a hair dryer over his longish curls.

The fact Harry was so easily a morning person, and one who could party out until 4am at that, was a trait Zayn felt would have rubbed him up the wrong way in almost anybody else. Somehow his new chum just made him grin in spite of himself, and get on with things in a less painful way that he would have alone.

If Zayn was honest, Harry was helping him a lot in ways he didn’t really want to think about. Harry’s complete acceptance of himself, with no apparent second guessing or obvious anguish, was a state of being Zayn had been aspiring to ever since he realised gay, artsy, and introverted intellectual were not every other persons ideas of how young men should be.

Harry worse un-ironic nail polish. He tied jaunty scarves around his neck indoors if he felt like it, and owned a frankly astonishing number of hats. This was a person one could emulate, if one could get past the habit of negative thinking and general fear that everyone else had a very important and extremely negative opinion of him.

“Do you think Louis would like scrambled eggs today?” Harry was saying, breaking Zayn out of his brief thought process.

“What??”

“I think he said they were his favourite the other day, I over heard him telling Cher.”
Zayn squinted at his friend as he climbed out of bed and grabbed his towel from where he habitually hung it on the door of their shared wardrobe (which was resultantly permanently cocked slightly ajar, possibly to an internal agony of Harry – who liked neatness).

“Why are you so bothered about making Louis his favourite eggs?”

Zayn thought he knew, because he had both eyes and ears, but he wanted to see what Harry would say about it.

He coughed, “Louis’ cool,” was the response.

“And you’d like to do the ‘no pants dance’ with him,” Zayn supplied, laughing out loud, “well good luck. He seems like a nice guy. A handful, but fun.”

Harry blushed profusely, which was unusual for him, and turned around to tug on some trousers.

An hour later and a sleepy team of HA’s were awaiting their first arrivals. Simon had told them their job was to be on hand to carry bags up the flights of stairs, due to the fact there were no lifts.

This had caused a few raised eyebrows, but as Simon was stood there with them in a suit nobody said anything out loud.

“Do you feel like an tosspot? I feel like a tosspot,” Louis was hissing, plucking at his blue work shirt unappreciatively.

“We all look as ridiculous as each other,” Zayn muttered back.

“You are kidding right?” Sophia exclaimed, “you guys look like super models compared to us!”

Zayn’s expression may have best been described as incredulous, with Louis’ more of a mutinous sibling; somewhere to it’s side.

“I honestly don’t know why you’re making those faces,” Perrie added, “have you seen yourselves? Look at these skirts!” she tugged on the side of the navy pencil skirt that was required dress for the restaurant service, “its one size fits all - bollocks!”

It was an unfortunate truth that the compulsory skirt-age hit an unflattering point on the leg for the shorter team members.

“There is like, no point in time ever where this skirt length was in vogue,” Sophia continued, shaking her head woefully.

Well, she would know.

The morning passed with relative ease. Head chef Dan, who seemed to have a passionate hatred for all humanity already, had lead the kitchen team of Harry / Josh / Greg and Cher in a wide spread of full Englishes – as well as optional pancakes or omelets. By noon assistant manager Nick Grimshaw was taking them all into the village to hire gear and attain lift passes.

The Elisabeth team could finally do what they liked for the day. Or at least until 6.30pm.

This had initially led to an extremely long queue for the only shower, which Zayn had managed to
secure a second place in with a bit of forward planning. He was pleased to find the mood of the flat really upbeat – it was evident everyone was excited to be finally starting their jobs proper.

To mark the beginning of his second week living in the alps, Zayn had decided to clear up Harry and his bedroom somewhat. It had begun to feel a little too lived in when he discovered his hair dryer under a pair of Hazza’s pants and some (empty) Pom Bear packets the day before, compounded by his discovery that Harry was wearing his favourite t-shirt.

And, while he was secretly pleased at how quickly Harry and he had become fast friends, he had simultaneously came to the conclusion it was probably time to do some washing.

Thinking most people would be hiding out in their rooms until they could shower, he jammed all the pieces of random clothing from their none-too-massive floor space into a large plastic bag; and began the journey to the washroom.

This was located in the very basement of the hotel, a couple of floors below them. It required passing through the small lobby that led to the kitchen, into the guest’s entranceway, down a flight of stairs opposite, and going left along a long mustard coloured corridor. Happy days after your room-mate won’t stop going on about being pushed down the steps, Zayn thought to himself wryly.

The bag, given it was encasing a weeks laundry for two fashion conscious teenage boys, was understandably rather on the large side. Zayn had wrestled it into his arms and in front of his face, but it was difficult to both keep a hold of, and see or use his hands at the same time.

Just as he had struggled out into the hall with some creative arm jimmying, he heard a familiar voice from the other side of the Giant Laundry Bag.

“Are you alright?”

“Liam!” Zayn exclaimed.

Nothing followed up. He had been so engrossed in what he was doing that it hadn’t occurred to him that his crush might materialize out of nowhere and give him a heart attack.

A silence that lasted a beat too long ensued, which Liam finally broke by offering to lend a hand.

“Its not all mine!” came Zayn’s helpful announcement.

Chuckles. Zayn imagined the squishy eyed smile, though all he could currently see was black bin bag in extreme close up.

“I grew up with Louis, that’s actually quite modest for two,” he replied – before peeking around the side of the bag, “are you doing laundry? Me too.”

A more moderate sized white Nike bag waved round the side under Liam’s face. It also looked like its actual purpose was to transport dirty clothes from the wash basket to the washing machine. Harry had simply acquired a bin bag from the kitchen the previous evening after dinner, and warned Zayn not to load it so heavy it ripped on the stairs.

“You can grab the doors for me then. Great!” he tried to wink, but wasn’t sure if Liam could see him around the bag.

“It’s the gentlemanly thing to do,” Liam laughed, “c’mon.”
He shuffled along the corridor after Liam, who proceeded to hold open both doors from the flat to the main hallway, before falling into step with Zayn to head down stairs.

“You don’t have big hair today.”

“I beg your pardon?”

It was such a bizarre conversational gambit that Zayn found himself stumbling slightly as he started his stair ascension.

Liam’s arm shot out and helped steady him around the waist.

Well, that was welcome.

Even if it did short circuit his brain and cause all coherent thought to go out the window.

“You know. You usually have a big flicky bit at the front,” he took his hand back to gesture enthusiastically at the front of his own head.

“The quiff?” Zayn supplied, finally catching on.

“Yeah. Its cool. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without it before now? Remember, even at St Wolfgang’s Louis pointed out how yours was the only hair that still looked right?”

He smiled.

Sadly, the implication of Liam’s words had finally hit Zayn. He hadn’t expected to see anyone on his dash down the stairs with the washing. He had simply thrown on a pair of ill fitting joggers belonging to Harry, a white t-shirt which had been crumpled at the bottom of his bag, and a red and black checked flannel shirt he had stolen out of Harry’s section of the closet. It certainly wasn’t the more stylish outfit he had worn, but then Liam himself was was only wearing a grey jumper and jeans.

What was altogether much more concerning was the fact that Zayn had done absolutely zero work to his hair. His hair was his favourite feature. He loved to sculpt it, and fiddle with it, and change it up with a frequency which disturbed his mother. Currently it was flicking out in all directions, and flopping down onto his face.

Instinctively he blew up out the corner of his mouth, and scowled.

Liam, however, seem blissfully oblivious to the distress his comment had provoked.

He actually used his free hand to stretch out and ruffle Zayn’s hair playfully, “you look all soft.”

What? What was this now?

For the life of him Zayn couldn’t tell where Liam was going with this. He had rarely had conversations with other guys where they complimented his hair, or mentioned his appearance at all – let alone reached out and touched him. Aside Louis; who had announced that the best word to describe him in week one would be ‘flamboyant’. So there was that.

“Soft?”

“Yeah,” Liam continued, holding the final door open for them as they had now reached the washroom, “you look younger. A bit less moody and brooding, you know,” his arm appeared behind Zayn to usher him forward slightly by his back.
Gentlemenly to the last?

“I shall pretend not to be offended by the insinuation I look like a pretentious git half the time here, Leeyum!”

That brought on the crinkly eyed laugh again, and Zayn felt warm inside as he stooped in front of one of the machines and attempted to figure out how to use it.

“Do you know what you’re doing? Cher told me her and Greg lost a whole load of washing putting it on too high a temperature,” Liam continued to his left.

“Oh, really…” said Zayn vaguely, still squinting.

While these were nothing like the normal family washing machines the Malik’s used back home, he refused to be bamboozled by an industrial sized brother of it while in front of somebody else.

With an air of false confidence, he stepped forward and twisted a couple of knobs to the side and made an ‘aaaahaaaa’ noise knowingly.

“You do realize that’s a tumble-dryer, not a washing machine. Right?”

“Yes, Leeyum,” was the confident response, “I always dry my clothes before washing them. Don’t you?”

Liam giggled some more, so Zayn continued to ramble, “yes it’s an old local tradition – back in Bradford. First you wear the clothes and get them dirty. Second, you pop them in a dryer and loosen the dirt…. Thirdly you shove them in a washer and let it un-dry those stains right off!”

As he did so Liam had lent down to take his bundle out of the wrong machine, and deposit it in the correct one, all the while laughing to himself.

“That all sounds great, but I think over here its better to do things the ‘old Payne way’ instead.”

He turned over his shoulder to see Zayn looking at him with raised eyebrows.

“Wear them first, dump them in water second, dry them off clean last,” he explained as he closed the lid, “now look here a minute and I’ll show you how to do it properly so you don’t shrink you and Harry’s clothes the next time you swing down here.”

“I’ll never remember that, you’ll just have to keep taking me and going over it,” Zayn found himself saying.

He had no idea if this counted as flirting either, but he found he was grinning stupidly at his companion as he said it all the same. Hopefully Liam would find this endearing, or at least amusing, and most definitely hopefully not creepy.

Just as he had begun to anticipate what sort of answer Liam could give to this, the lights cut out.

There was still a gentle hum from the machine Liam had just turned on with his own washing, but the room had been plunged into total darkness.

“Zayn? Why did you turn the lights out?”

“What do I look like I have two meter long arms, Liam?”

In the wake of this sentence came the most loaded pause Zayn had ever experienced.

Both of them knew neither of them could have reached the light switch. Zayn was now recalling his
room-mates story from the stair’s the other day, and he felt fairly sure Liam must have been doing the same.

“Was it this cold in here a moment ago?” came Liam’s thoughtful voice from the void.

“No. No, no, no, Liam. Do not do that.” Came the firm reply from the darkness.

“Zayn….”

“Liam.”

Recalling Harry’s story had brought out an unexpected ‘fight or flight’ syndrome Zayn had also never felt before. He had gone chilly, and stiff as a statue - but was certain the slightest change in atmosphere would send him careering for the hills ala Usain Bolt, London 2012.

“Seriously, Zayn, can you feel that?”

The hair on his arms was standing up, the back of his neck was prickling like when you stand behind your bedroom door as a child and contemplate the midnight dash to the toilet in the dark.

“Liam. I cannot see anything, because I have shut my eyes.”

“Where are you?”

“Here.”

“Where’s here?”

“I don’t know, and I amn’t bloody moving to find out!”

Suddenly a warm hand grabbed his arm.

“Arghhhhh!!”

“Shush, its only me,” Liam whispered, shuffling closer.

Even more suddenly his hand vanished and reappeared grabbing Zayn’s own.

“Zayn. Please. Just look over there and tell me what you can see.”

“No! No, no, no, no!”

But over powering curiosity got the better of him. Probably Liam could see some sheets hanging up, or a snowboard lying at a jaunty angle (the wash room also doubled up as the team’s drying room for snow equipment).

“If I open my eyes and see something weird, Leeyum,” he left the statement hanging, and cracked his left eye open a tiny fraction.

Just as he was beginning to focus, the lights suddenly shuddered back into life and all to abruptly the desire to run into the alps and never come back was gone.

“Soouoo, um, what was that you were going to show me?”

Zayn was desperately aiming for levity, but the ‘so’ came out rather squeaky and belayed he had been unsettled. As if he could hide it, after the conversational exchange they had just had!
Raising his free hand, Liam pointed across the room toward the windows, and opened and closed his mouth a couple of times like a silent fish. His other hand squeezed Zayn’s tighter as he did so.

“Liam, are you okay?”

“We should turn your washing on,” was the final reply.

Liam let go of his hand, and lent forward to fiddle with the dials on the front of the machine.

Zayn looked down to watch him, and then squinted back toward the window. He couldn’t see anything at all. No sheets, no weirdly shaped snow equipment, no drying full body suit. Nothing at all to easily explain away confusion in the dark.

Just as he was considering stomping over to prove to himself everything was fine, he felt a firm grip take over his left hand again.

“I think we should go, Zayn.”

“Oh. Uh, yep. Sure. Eh, when will this be done?”

It was difficult to focus now that Liam was holding his hand again. If he had hoped for a romantic intonation from it he was, however, sadly mistaken – as it appeared Liam had just grabbed the easiest appendage with which to drag him quickly towards the door and back up to their flat.

“We’ll come down in a couple of hours,” he was saying flippantly, “do you want to come out on the slopes?”

They were reaching the top of the staircase, and once again Liam had let go of his hand to turn and address him.

“I haven’t had my first lesson yet,” Zayn replied, immediately feeling grumpy and frustrated.

“Oh, yeah, okay. Sorry,” they had now reached the flat corridor. “See you later then, Zayn,”

And with that Liam disappeared into his and Louis’ room to get changed.

***

Inside his own room, Harry was flat on the bed listening to his iPod. Although they had been shut when he entered the room, his eyes flew open as Zayn came in and he sat up a bit.

“Where have you been?”

“Me and Liam went to put our washing on,” he answered cagily.

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked like the was going to Say Something, so Zayn pushed on with a recount of the Weird Moment with the Lights.

“So you really think Liam might have seen something down there?” Harry asked. He had gone a tad pale.

“I really don’t know, Hazza,” Zayn sighed, stretching out on the bed next to him, “the lights came
back on and he could have been looking at mark on the wall for all I know.”

“Liam doesn’t look like the type to get worked up over nothing.” Harry mused.

“Nobody with muscles like that gets worked up about anything, I imagine.”

“You fancy him.”

“Harry.”

“Just admit it. I saw the way you looked at him on the ferry.”

Harry turned on his side, so he was lying facing into Zayn in a manner that was altogether too indicative of a ‘deep and meaningful conversation’.

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

What was he going to DO about it?!

The very notion!

“Harry,” he began, turning his own head to face his friend – while keeping the rest of his body firmly still.

“Oh my god, am I being presumptuous? Are you not out yet? Shit, fuck, I’m so sorry!” by this point he was struggling to sit up right, and Zayn felt the need to both laugh and plant a firm hand on his friend’s stomach.

“It’s fine. Yes, I’m out – incase you hadn’t noticed I’m not exactly hiding here. But, well – Liam’s clearly [he waved his hand about in a knowing gesture]...” He tried to say it like it didn’t matter, “Sure he’s lovely to look at” (inserted snort by Harry), ”and seems to have a really great personality. But I’ve only known the guy a week. And by all accounts, of his own and his best friend, Liam seems to be very much a boobs and sans-penis type of guy.”

“Shit.”

“Its okay. Honestly,” he knew a Concerned Look when he received one! “Haaaaaz. Please don’t say anything. It’ll just make everything uncomfortable. It’s just a crush. Whatever.”

“But he seemed sort of… I dunno, keen? That’s why I asked…”

Harry’s voice trailed off and he frowned up at the ceiling, “he helped you with your bags. And he said you looked fine in that awful uniform.”

“You said the HA uniform wasn’t that bad!” Zayn cried, sitting up himself in indignation.

“I lied. It’s hideous. You look primary school kids.”

At least Harry seemed to have cheered up and become simultaneously distracted from Zayn’s doomed love life, so he forgave him this moment of depressing honesty.

“Want to go for a coffee somewhere in the village?” was what he said instead.

***
The next couple of weeks went by quicker than Zayn could have imagined, in a flash of cleaning fluids and awkwardly held plates. His and Harry’s room gradually grew in decoration as they printed out photographs on a day trip to Innsbruck to make collages, and stuck up bits of interesting wrapping paper or promotional posters for foreign beers.

Work had fallen into a routine as well. He no longer felt faintly nauseous before going out with plates of food in front of strangers, and the awkward weirdness of going into people’s hotel rooms and clearing up around their dirty pants or used nappies began to merge into unsurprising expectation.

In fact the latter was fast becoming a quality entertainment factor, as the team had had a good chance to properly get to know one another by this point.

As it happened, it was a couple of days before Christmas when Zayn found himself merrily fonding over these facts - whilst shoveling excess snow off one of the top floor balconies.

A sudden influx of the cold white stuff down the back of his t-shirt brought this pleasant contemplation to an abrupt end.

“Arghhh! Louis, what the fuck?!” he bellowed, jumping a foot in the air.

“You weren’t listening! I’ve been lamenting my disastrous Secret Santa situation for the last ten minutes and you haven’t made a sound that made sense!”

His new friend was scowling at him from under his long fringe, with his arms folded defensively across his chest.

“Sorry?” Zayn offered, trying to smile through the horror of brushing out the snow from his clothing.

“Seriously Zayn, you have a weird habit of drifting off miles away when people are speaking. Has anyone ever mentioned that to you before?”

“Well if they hadn’t, consider it noted now,” he rolled his eyes.

Only Louis would be so forthright.

“Give me a hand with this bottom layer of snow, its really solid,” he added to Louis, who had been making beds inside, “help me chip some of it off or you’ll be moving into the next room by yourself.”

Louis, who was actually quite fond of snow removal, shrugged his shoulders and grabbed the other shovel.

As he began whacking the icy under-layer with an unexpected enthusiasm, he began to speak again.

“I was trying to tell you I still don’t have a Secret Santa gift. I don’t know what ill fated nonsense it was for me to get bloody Dan! I don’t even know the guy. The only time we’ve spoken for more than two minutes was that ridiculous argument in the bar about how old Hitler would have been in the fifties if he wasn’t dead!”

Zayn eyed Louis’ handiwork dubiously as he tipped some of the powder layer over the edge of the balcony, “Yes. That did rather escalate, didn’t it?”
“I mean, who did he think he was assuming no one else had heard of the Man in the High Castle!” Louis continued ranting, jabbing slightly harder at the floor, “I was in a stage adaptation of that in college, thank you very much sir!”

“I wouldn’t hit the ground like that, its only wood,” Zayn was attempting to advise.

“I can’t stand him! He thinks he knows better than everyone, and his cooking isn’t even any good! Frankly, its bloody atrocious. No wonder I’m looking so lean these days – I barely get to eat anything!”

“Louis…”

“And now I have to buy the wanker a bleedin’ Christmas present as well?! Maybe I should get him a cook book. In German. Hah-hah!”

On that note a large wedge of solid ice came free and fired across the space between them, and right into Zayn’s left shin.

“Arghhhhh!”

“Ops, sorry! I wasn’t really looking at what I was doing. I was imagining Dan’s stupid face….” Louis looked a bit sheepish.

“Not cool mate,” was the reply, as Zayn slowly rubbed his leg better.

“Its just shit, because he’s obviously going to hate anything I get him cause its from me.”

Louis was now kicking the last of the snow off the edge grumpily.

“Just buy him some crap from Harrod’s next door,” Zayn said waspishly, carrying the shovels back in doors and locking up behind them.

“I suppose so. Who do you have again?”

“Perrie.”

“She’ll be easy to buy for! God, that’s so unfair.”

Zayn mustered up the cheekiest wink he could manage, as he shoved Louis back out onto the top landing in front of him. They still had several rooms to get through, and he wanted to finish by lunch time.

“Where are you going?” Perrie asked in some confusion, “we don’t have to be there until half 6 do we?” she looked a bit alarmed.

“No, no. I-”

Having quietly checked the time, Josh let out a laugh and announced that it was time for Liam to start setting up.

“Ahhh, so that’s it. I should have realised,” Perrie was chuckling.
“Why didn’t you just say, Zayn?” Harry was grinning at him.

“Look, Leeyum has nothing to do with—”

“How do you always find a reason to dash back in the first half an hour of his shift then?” Josh butt in, eyes twinkling.

“I do not!” he could feel his face flushing a horrible, incriminating crimson.

“Knock it off Zayn, you spend every minute Liam’s at work hovering in orbit around his bar. It’s adorable!”

He didn’t know what to say to this, so he just stood there getter redder and redder and silently fuming.

“In case everybody isn’t quite finished,” he hissed, “Liam and I are just good friends. He’s a nice guy,” there was an inflection here no one could miss.

On that note he stomped back along the road to their hotel, silently cursing everybody in sight for his own humiliating obviousness.

That was – until he pushed open the glass fronted doors of the Elisabeth, and Liam’s head popped around the corner.

“Zayn! I was wondering where you were,” he began happily, “I thought you might have finally found something better to do than watch me set up.”

“Not likely, babe,” he answered, flashing the warmest smile he could manage. And just like that, the irritation from the café melted away and it was just him, Liam and a quiet couple of hours to talk endlessly and find excuses to keep moving into what should have been Liam’s personal bubble.

First of all he teased Liam senseless for the ridiculously awful bar menus he had created.

“Seriously Leeyum, what happened here?” he was waving the paper about in front of his stool as Liam chopped limes in front of him and popped them in metal beakers under cling-film.

“Can’t you tell? Someone let me lose on Microsoft Paint, and that wonderous piece of art in your hand there was the beautiful result.” He shrugged and gave Zayn his best crinkley eyed smile.

To be fair to him – it really did look as if someone who didn’t know what they were doing had been let lose on Paint.

“Omg, babe, let me help you with this, yeah? I’ve got my laptop with me. We can make one together.”

“Really? That would be great. To be honest I was feeling a bit embarrassed by that one…”

Warm excited feelings appearing out of no-where…

“Can we work on it in your break tomorrow?” Liam carried on, “I know you probably don’t want to do work-work between shifts, but I’m sure we can make it fun?”

Oh, if only you knew Liam… thought Zayn, shaking his head.

“Of course. I’ll put on some music and the time will fly by!”
What he didn’t say out loud was that actually the time probably *would* fly by – as all time spent with those we like secretly does.
the Chaos and the Calm.

Chapter Summary

in which an inappropriate snow-family is built, Niall is introduced, and Larry get things off to an awkward start in a club toilet.

Chapter Notes

I feel less confident in this chapter, not least because writing a realistic 'moment' between two people is something I am not fully confident in my abilities with! Be gentle, and have low expectations? ;) x

LOUIS.

After moaning to Zayn at length about his secret santa problem, Louis found himself next door purchasing 20 cigarettes and a 4 pack of local lager Zipfer. He knew Dan liked both a smoke, and a drink, so it was unlikely to cause offense.

“You know, those might have been cheaper to get in Innsbruck,” a voice behind him stated.

He didn’t have to turn around to know it was Harry.

He kept appearing.

Louis sighed, “I didn’t think of it till this morning. Otherwise I wouldn’t be in Harrod’s, would i?”

Harrod’s was what they had taken to calling the small corner shop next door due to its manically inflated resort pricing.

“I’m getting crisps.”

“That’s nice, Hazza.”

“Come build a snowman when you’re done?”

Louis spun around on his heel, tucking the beers into his right hip.

Harry was standing slightly further down the aisle clutching an over sized pack of Ruffles, and wearing a slouchy purple beanie hat. He was smiling.

What was he always so happy about in a shop with these sorts of prices, anyway?!

“Okay…”
“I’m round the back by the nursery slope.” With that he sauntered off.

And herein lay the problem. Louis considered himself a lone ranger, in the relationship sense. His parents hadn’t got off on the best footing and he had seen what heartbreak had done to Liam a couple of times over the years.

He had never wanted any part in it.

Dancing with fit guys in clubs? Yes. Going home with hot chaps he met on booze cruises in Greece for the night, then stumbling home at 10am to find Liam and get a McDonald’s? Even more so.

But cosy dates, meeting the parents, going home with the same person more than thrice ever? Not a chance.

Liam might have confirmed to an observant individual that there had been a time where Louis had liked all those things and more. A time when he had snuggled in the cinema with someone other than Liam and his sisters. A point when he stole someone’s jumpers and enjoyed that they smelled like them, and sent fluffy texts and looked forward to seeing someone again.

He wanted to blame his father leaving, but his mum had remarried pretty happily after and he called his stepfather ‘dad’ – so the story Louis liked to tell himself didn’t really make any sense.

But…. Well, that was first year of uni. But it may as well have been a life time ago.

Harry was in danger of spoiling all the protective walls he had spent the last 18 months putting up. They weren’t from the same city, they weren’t the same age; and likely they would be going in entirely different directions once their season in Austria ended. What was the point in setting himself up for disappointment?

So he continued to be friendly to Harry one minute, almost flirtatious the next, and stand offish and rude in the final. The triumvirate of behaviours he couldn’t help moving through every time he spent extended periods with his be-dimpled colleague.

Somehow, in spite of this, he found himself wrapped up twenty minutes later peering around the side of the hotel.

Harry was there, but so were Perrie and Josh.

Josh appeared to be putting the final touches to a very female-looking snow person, Harry was taking a photo of their first masterpiece, and Perrie had begun rolling.

“Mr Tomlinson!”

“Mr Devine,” he nodded, “what a sight. Should she be wearing a bra?” he laughed, wading forward unsteadily.

“Are you alright?” Harry’s concerned voice floated over the snow.

“Yes, Haz, I think my tiny little boy legs can manage to walk over the big bad snow field thanks,” he replied sarcastically.

“Make yourself useful and start on a new snowman? I’m doing the dad so you and Harry can do
some kids.”

Typical. Of course people wanted Harry and him to work together.

As much as he wanted to find it annoying, deep down he felt a bit warmer at the thought. Harry was thoughtful and gentle in both his snow-rolling and his decoration of the little snow boy and girl.

Louis was somewhat more ‘gung-ho’ in attitude, but it worked. He energetically made the bodies to work with, and Harry slowly but deliberately sculpted the outline of long winter coats – before adding a spare scarf and hat from inside his pockets, and marching off and back with some well selected stick arms.

God, what a sap.

“Brilliant!” Perrie was laughing.

“Whose idea was it to have them having a slap fight?” Josh asked.

“Louis’,” Harry said, sounding almost fond.

“Things were looking a little too sentimental!” Louis explained, “this adds the all important realism.”

By this point the lure of hot chocolates, or tea’s with sneak brandy shots from Liam’s bar had begun to be discussed and it wasn’t long before the group found themselves trudging back toward their hotel.

While the sight of Zayn in his usual spot at the bar was to be expected (it was, after all, called his Usual Spot) – the sight of someone else on the other side of it was less so.

In a confusing moment, Louis paused awkwardly just inside the door as he watched a very blonde and Irish stranger; adorned in the company uniform; energetically mixing a drink behind Liam’s bar – while Liam himself was leaning back against the work top with a gigantic smile and approving nod. To his side Zayn appeared to cackling, certainly not a usual habit for him at five in the evening!

Unfortunately, whatever amusing story was causing the happy scene was spoiled in an accident reminiscent of their arrival day.

“Ooouf!”

“Goddammit!”

“Sorry….”

“What the craic over here then?” the stranger’s voice bellowed.

“Louis! Guys! Come meet Niall!” Liam enthusiastically shouted.

From his prone position on the tiles, Louis looked up to see Liam waving them over.

Harry, who had characteristically not been paying attention, had bashing into the back of Louis and somehow tripped over his own two feel in the process – bring down Josh, somehow, with him; into a mess of limbs on the ground.

Sighing, he offered Harry a hand just as Perrie held one out to Josh – and lamented internally that
they were all falling altogether too often off the piste for his liking.

“Whose Niall when he’s at home?” Harry was shouting keenly.

*Typical,* Louis thought, *assuming someone new is automatically a friend!*

They all shuffled forward, and took a turn of shaking the new boy’s hand in a mock formal affair. “I was working at Hinterglemm, but they were over staffed as it turned out. I signed up a bit late for the season, see, so they decided the team here was small enough to take on another. So they moved me.”

“So you’re going to be working here?” Josh asked, squinting, “please god tell me you aren’t an artist!”

He laughed as he said it, but Perrie still punched him on the arm anyway.

“No…”

“He does have a guitar with him though,” Zayn announced, happily.

“Really? Oh my god,” Harry’s eyes had lit up.

“It’s a hobby,” said the Irishman with a shrug.

By this point Louis felt altogether too long was going by without him having said anything at all, so he cleared his throat and made a sweeping gesture with his left arm.

“So I *suppose* dear Liam, or Zayn, has told you all about us then?”

New Boy laughed, “in a matter of speaking.”

And just like that they were onto the introductions. His name was Niall, he was also a school leaver; though he made no indication of what he wanted to do now. He loved the snow, which was why he’d decided to do a season, and his hobbies seemed to include music playing and in the summer months, golf. He was currently sharing a room with Nick, which wasn’t ideal.

“This,” Louis announced at the end of Niall’s abbreviated life story, “calls for a *proper* night out. A welcome to Kühtai sort of affair.”

“What do you mean ‘proper’ night,” Perrie laughed, making air quotes, “we go out every night!”

“But this has an *occasion* behind it! Its special,” Louis pouted in return.

“What you are failing to realize about Louis here, is that he absolutely *loves* both having a Thing, and organisaing Things for Stuff,” as he was speaking Liam lent over the bar and ruffled Louis damp hair affectionately.

“Leave it to me guys.”

Was the last thing he said, before he imperiously marched back to the flat to shower.

By the end of service that evening, it was clear Niall was a great addition to their team. He was an extra hand in the kitchen, where his sunny seeming disposition was most welcome – in stark contrast to the grim atmosphere Dan worked so hard to achieve.
While the others had started to get worn down a bit by the constant moaning and rudenesses, Niall was new and kept a steady stream of both light hearted banter and jokes going the whole way through the evening. Even the waiting staff were appreciative, as he was stationed at the kitchen front near the area they stood waiting to collect the dishes.

The entire evening seemed to pass quicker than usual, and before long Louis felt he had to admit this lad seemed alright.

“There’s to you Niall, the New!” Louis cried loudly over the music, while lifting his beer in a toast, “I think you’ll be alright.”

Niall clinked his own glass against it and laughed, “Glad you think so, Tommo,”

Louis wasn’t sure where the nickname had came from, but he was enjoying it. Niall was one of those easy, confident people that somehow manage to call you weird things from the first meeting without your really questioning where the familiarity had came from.

They were in the local club Kaos, which inside was as eclectic as the boys bedrooms had became back in the flat. It was all wood, with wooden benches lining the walls as well as elevated wooden tables with benches filling all the corners. In an effort to make things cosy-er, sheep skins had been flung over some seats and beer posters and old ski equipment hung about the place adding some niche decorations that Louis loved.

Frankly he just loved the whole place – from the extremely friendly bar staff, to the bizarrely eclectic play lists Ronnie the DJ put on.

Barely a night went past that they didn’t wind up in here after service, but it was nice to have more of a purpose to it that evening.

“Everyone seems really nice,” he suddenly realised Niall was talking, “I was worried about arriving just after everyone had settled in.”

“You? Worried? That doesn’t seem likely!”

“You’ve only known me ten minutes,” Niall winked at him.

“True. But it feels like longer, already,” Louis replied, with a smirk.

“What’s up with Zayn? He looks a bit down,”

“Does he?”

Louis’ eyes flitted over to the bar, where Zayn was queuing for another drink. His head was turned back over his shoulder, and he was watching the dance floor with some drunken degree of intensity.

“He’s watching Liam.” Niall said knowledgably.

“What?” Louis was beginning to feel like he was missing something.

His eyes moved over to the small dance floor section, where Liam and Sophia appeared to have got a bit close; somewhat to the side of Harry, Josh, Perrie and Nick.

“I think you’re imagining things there Irish – he’s probably bored just standing there on his own.”
“You’re kidding me right? He looks hacked off.”

Truthfully Zayn’s expression did seem somewhat more annoyed than bored. But he’d had a few drinks and the connection wasn’t coming. There was nothing on the dance floor to cause Zayn to look like that – was there?

“Mate, you are blind as a bat,” Niall chuckled, and he turned away; clearing continuing to scope them all out.

Following his eye line brought him back to Harry. Harry, who he was trying very hard not to think about or look at. Harry, who was causing his resolution to remain a heartless bastard all season to waver slightly. Harry, who it appeared was a very enthusiastic but clumsy dancer. But of course.

Just as he was deciding he’d had enough alcohol to request some 80s cheese and energetically dance his concerns away, up popped Liam and Sophia to their little both – effectively blocking his exit.

Sophia grabbed her purse and made for the bar, but Liam picked up his glass and downed the rest of it plonking himself on the bench next to Louis.

“Are you giving her the old Payno charm?” Louis laughed, elbowing his mate in the ribs.

One thing that couldn’t help but be noted was how close Liam and Sophia seemed to be that evening.

“Louis…” the warning tone.

“Just saying – remember the rules! Everyone said, stay away from season romances.”

“We’re just having fun, I’m not trying to get in her pants,” Liam rolled his eyes, and attempted to change the topic by asking Niall how his first day was going.

Louis narrowed his eyes, and worried he was too keen to have this conversation with Liam because of his own fear that if he gave in, he could be quite in the way for inappropriate dancing with Harry himself.

“I haven’t seen you all evening.”

A tall Certain Somebody had appeared behind him on the dance floor and decided to speak into his ear.

“What a shame,” Louis rolled his eyes, and continued to wobble about to a German dance track.

“Actually, I think it is.”

As he said it, Harry moved in front of him and gave him his widest, toothiest smile. He looked young, and a little coy, holding out a shot.

“Its Jager.”

“I love Jager.” Louis said, making no attempts to take the tiny bottle out of his lanky friend’s hand.

“I know.”

“You know everything,” was the slightly sharp response.
Harry looked a tad deflated by this, so his reply of, “for goodness sake do you want it or not?!” didn’t seem entirely out of the blue.

“Oh go on then.”

He felt bad about hurting Harry’s feelings, but likewise felt it was the only way to keep things strictly platonic between them.

He spent the rest of the night trying to avoid getting close to Harry, when in actuality what he was doing was running around next to him linking arms and whispering like school kids.

If Louis went to bed that night telling himself that was how he behaved with everyone, then forgive him. He can be an idiot, as Liam would say with enthusiasm.

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That same Liam was responsible for the unexpected rattling motion he awoke to the next day, extremely hungover.

Thank the lord it was their off day, he thought hazily.

“Liam. If you don’t stop shaking my shoulder I am going to slap the shit out of you in a minute.”

“Sorry…”

He peered at his watch. 6:43am. Frankly, a time not to be seen on your day off. He felt a rush of extreme annoyance.

“Do you have any ibuprofen?” Liam asked, looking none too apologetic.

“Urghhhhh!” Louis found himself making a hitherto undiscovered noise and waving his arm desperately out from under the covers towards his wardrobe, “its on a shelf.” Came the muttered response.

“Thanks. Sorry, by the way. I was trying to get by without so I wouldn’t have to wake you, but i feel too much like shit.”

Louis peered over the edge of his covers, and watched Liam shuffle about in the dark of their room, “nevermind its fine.”

“What happened to you last night? You vanished for ages just before the end. I couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“Did i?” he let out a forced laugh, as his mind flashed through a series of images of the previous evening.

Dragging Zayn onto the dance floor looking grim; Niall singing along to everything in English at the top of his voice; Perrie slipping on her arse on the walk home; singing a show tune to himself out loud in the toilet and feeling horrified when somebody walked out one of the stalls.

“I thought you’d drank too much and went off for a tactical chunder,” Liam laughed, cosying himself back into bed and sighing contentedly as he pulled his duvet back up.
In five minutes Liam was sound asleep and softly snoring, but the damage had been done.

Louis was wide awake, with dread pooling at the bottom of his stomach. What on earth had he been doing when Liam couldn’t find him?

He particularly hated blockouts after the time, a month after the fact, an ex had responded (politely) to an exceptionally drunken email Mr Tomlinson had sent while getting smashed in a theatre back at the uni. Having had no memory, due to the drunken insight to ‘delete sent’, of said attempt to get back in touch; he was mortified and in now constant vague fear Drunk Louis would take things too far one day and betray him again.

After an hour of tossing and turning, and failing to either remember or stop thinking about it, he got up to fill a bottle with cold water and have a pee.

Just as he turned around from locking the loo door – on the off that some sleepy flatmate might wander in mid flow – an extremely detailed flash back from the previous night came to him; causing his legs to go weak and his eyes to nearly pop out his head.

A toilet. A toilet cubicle to be more exact. In the club the night before. A locked door; giving on to a tiny private space.

Harry, on his knees in front of him.

*Jesus fucking Christ,* he thought in horror. He had had to sit himself down on the toilet while he came to terms with the memory.

He had been dancing away, holding in a pee for an inordinate amount of time because Harry had been waltzing with him and he hadn’t wanted to let go. He had ran along the corridor laughing, and been standing in front of a huge mirror preening when Harry followed him in five minutes later with a certain look on his face.

He had simply walked up to Louis, put a hand on either side of his waist, met his gaze in the mirror and said, “you look really fucking hot tonight.”

If he was honest with himself this had led him to let out a small whimper, completely at odds with the cool and aloof exterior he thought he had been building up for himself since arriving.

It also clearly gave Harry a go-ahead, because he sounded a bit breathless before spinning Louis around and crashing their lips together. At least it hadn’t been romantic. Desperate, full of longing; yes. Tender, perhaps not.

That was probably what stopped him stopping *it*, if he was honest. He must have assured himself it was just a physical thing – he could forget Harry was sweet and kind when his tongue was moving against his own, and his hands were grasping his bum.

In a moment of what he was now regretting as both weakness (it *had* been a while, okay) and madness, he had pulled them apart long enough to push Harry towards a cubicle at the end and dash in himself.
“Jesus, Lou,"

“Don’t you want to come into the toilet with me, young Harold?” he had asked, cheekily flashing a wink.

How he was even stringing sentences together he no longer could account for. All he had been thinking about was the strain of his jeans between his legs, and how best to relieve it.

Luckily Harry seemed to be thinking the same thing, because he pushed Louis forward and slammed the door shut behind him.

“Forceful, I like it,” Louis had joked, trying to ease the tension.

Everything seemed to have come to a rather unexpected, and heated, point. Harry’s chest was visibly going up and down under his white t-shirt, and he ran one hand through his curls to move his fringe from his face; before grabbing Louis by the waist for the third time that evening and shoving him roughly up against the door in his place.

In a blur of long fingers, more dexterous than had been expected, his buttons and zip were open and his trousers were partially down.

He fervently wished he hadn’t chosen this day to be wearing his Minions underware, but it was too late for that – and if he saw Harry allow himself a tiny smile about it, he chose to ignore it and screw his eyes shut. Seeing Harry kneeling before him, undoing him, made his stomach jump up and down and his throat go dry.

And so the first tentative lick came as a surprise. He had barely registered that Harry had pulled him out, before a long thick stripe had been licked on his underside causing him to gasp, and his eyes to fly open.

There Harry was, eyelashes fluttering as he slowly took down as much as he could, while gently humming.

“Ahhhh, ahhh, ahhhhhh – fuck Harry,” seemed to be streaming out his mouth at top volume, “oh god oh god – H-h-h-Haaaarry.”

A hand flew out to steady himself, locking into the curls now bobbing in front of him. An accidental tug received an unexpectedly warm welcome from below, as Harry let out an appreciative groan of his own.

Right. Well. Pulling Harry’s hair while receiving a blow job in a club toilet was definitely not a romantic situation, so he decide he could allow things to progress.

“Well young Harold, this was very out the blue,” he strangled out, a tiny un-killable part of him still determined to keep things ‘chill’ as possible even in the lead up to what was possibly going to be the most intense orgasm he had had in months.

Harry pulled off, his mouth making an obscene popping noise, and winked, “this is what I like about you. Your sassy nature.”

And with that said, he launched himself back to work twisting his tongue around the tip one minute and massaging his balls the next. It could certainly be said he knew what he was doing.

Maintaining his cool was becoming more and more of a struggle every second. It had been a while since anybody had got in his pants, and it was killing him holding back for so long.
“Harry, are you going to keep me in here all night?” he finally faintly grunted, tugging on a fistful of curls as hard as he could.

He saw Harry quickly push down between his legs at that, and felt him elicit a deep moan that vibrated up through Louis to the top of his head and caused him to cry, “Haaaaaarrry!” much louder than he would like to have done at this moment.

Oh good lord, he thought to himself, now cradling his head in his hands as he sat on the toilet. What had he done?

And who had knowledge of him having done it?

It was probably too much to be hoped that Harry was too drunk to remember, but it wasn’t entirely out of the question.

There was nothing for it, but to get a huge drink of water and crawl back into bed where he could close his eyes and for another few hours delay any actions that involved Dealing With the consequences of his ill-advised Bathroom Dalliance. Which is exactly what he did.
If I lie here, will You take Me home?

Chapter Summary

In which Zayn is all of us on a grumpy night out when we see the person we like talking to someone else, that corridor makes another unearthly appearance and Ziall's friendship gets cemented :)

ZAYN.

The afternoon post café had started off rather well. Zayn had joined Liam at the bar as usual, and while they had been seated there bantering about menu designs a truck had pulled up and deposited a blonde haired, hyper new employee.

Ordinarily he would have wildly resented any sort of interruption to his and Liam’s one-on-one time – but this was different. Niall seemed to win him over almost instantly with an unassuming, slightly embarrassed nature at having turned up a few weeks into season to knock the dynamics off.

He could certainly relate to the uncomfortable feeling the new boy was exhibiting, so in an uncharacteristic move he made to be as welcoming as possible from the off. He told Niall to pull up a seat next to him; willingly told him his life story (the short version); told Liam to rustle him up their favourite cocktail of the moment (amaretto sours) and got his giant bar of Milka chocolate from the bedroom to share without being asked.

Liam, of course (because he was wonderful), stepped it up as well. He rambled on about him and Louis’ lead up to coming out there, and gave hilarious back stories to all the friends they had made since coming.

“Thanks for taking me under your wing, anyway,” Niall eventually announced through a mouth-full of chocolate, “I thought I might get a bit of an icy reception. This has been more fun than I had the whole time in Hinterglemm!” he lifted his drink in a ‘cheers’ gesture as he said it.

“Was it so awful there?” Liam asked, voice full of concern.

He had been flicking through a cocktail book attempting to pick out what to do as that evenings pre-dinner aperitif.

Niall shrugged, and took a sip of amaretto, “they just weren’t my cup of tea. Holy shit man, that’s awesome!”

Zayn started, and squiggled a little on the blackboard.

Liam, who we have established as not the most artistic, had taken to getting Zayn to doodle up the days drinks deal menus and drawing around the writing.

He had been hunched up at the bar drawing a piste with a little skier flying down the slopes with a martini in one hand and a beer in the other. The little skier looked quite a bit like the bartender, but Niall already knew better than to comment on that.
“I like art….”
“And I cannot draw for shit,” Liam laughed, “thanks Zaynie. That looks amazing! It could almost be me, haha.”

Zayn went slightly pinker and prayed (uselessly) that Niall wasn’t picking up on any of this. It looked like the lad was going to be good company, he didn’t want him asking awkward leading questions about his feelings for their colleague as well.

If the banter of the afternoon wasn’t enough to cinch it, the continued good humour and gentle rambling throughout that evening’s service certainly did.

By the time the shift ended Zayn couldn’t believe how they had been getting along without the cheerful knew-comer and his up-beat conversations.

“So Niall’s pretty awesome then,” Harry announced whilst wriggling free of his unpleasant work trousers in the corner.

“Yeah man, it seems a shame he’s stuck upstairs in that weird room with Nick,” Zayn replied as he rummaged around in their wardrobe for his red jumper (it was difficult to find because he had put it in in such a way as to make it unlikely that Harry would notice it while it was still clean).

“Nick’s alright you know,”

There was a slightly defensive tone to his voice, which had Zayn apologizing, because unlike Louis who seemed contemptuous of his every more – Zayn actually didn’t mind their assistant manager.

“Can I borrow your speakers?”

“What?” came the muffled wardrobe reply.

“I’m going for a shower.”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

He wasn’t alone in the room long, however, before someone with purple hair and a beanie appeared brandishing an amaretto sours to start the night off.

“Cheers, Pez. How are have you got ready so quickly!!”

Zayn, who was still hot and sticky from rushing around setting the restaurant up for breakfast service in the morning, was standing in his uncomfortable shirt and trousers whilst waving about his clean clothes with the hand not currently clutched around a cup.

“First come first served, Zaynie,” she laughed, clinking her glass against his before flumping down on his bed, “sooo Niall’s cool,” she continued, “I’m really excited about tonight.”

“I’ll feel excited when I don’t smell like polish and red snapper,” was the grumpy reply.

As she made herself at home flicking through the Spotify app on his phone, he jumped onto the bed next to her and lay down facing the window (which happened to have a fantastic view of the slopes behind, especially on a night skiing evening).

As they settled in to wait for a break in the shower (Harry was becoming notorious as the longest evening washer) Perrie went through his playlist admiring the obscure, laughing at the popular and
playing tinny tunes for them to tap their feet to as they discussed how good a landscape Austria was proving for art.

“Like, seriously, I have this great idea for a photography project with the whole team and the mountains here,” Perrie was explaining, waving her hands about in front of her merrily, “there’s so many different backdrops. We just need people like you to get proficient enough to come up to the good bits.”

She had shoved him on the arm as she said it, making him chuckle.

“I’ve got my first lesson booked for Christmas,” he assured her rolling his eyes.

“Seriously Zayn, its great up there. When things feel stressful down here, firing down the slopes is the best way to get over it,” she nodded, sagely.

At this moment the door flew open, though it wasn’t Harry on the other side of it. It was Liam, in his white work shirt and smart trousers, looking flustered.

“Liam!” Perrie had exclaimed, handing Zayn’s phone back to him and smiling, “what are you doing un-chained from the bar?”

“I-” there was a strange faltering note in his voice, and his eyes swept between the two of them lying together on the bed rapidly. “Erm, Haz said he had some Sudacrem in here I could borrow. My hands are really cracked and sore using the washing machines all the time. And… you know, from the altitude…. He trailed off looking determinedly at the pile of books Harry had balanced precariously on the tiny side table jammed at the end of the bedframe by the door to the balcony.

“Sure, its on the dresser next to you,” Zayn said, sitting up to turn around and point, “hows it going?”

He did seem to find around Liam he developed an awkward sort of verbal diarrhea, best described as a bubbling feeling in his stomach that could only be appeased by attempts to keep Leeyum speaking to him.

“Oh fine, you know.” He was facing the mirror propped up on the table, and studiously rubbing cream into his hands.

“Is everything alright?”

“Of course it is. Why wouldn’t it be? Its quite quiet actually, just a couple of dad’s having a drink. Sophia’s entertaining them with stories about our coach trip while I dashed off here.”

Liam finally turned around, having replaced the lid to the Sudocrem, and offered them a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. He then did a weird, aborted sort of wave and dashed back out.

Perrie immediately started cackling, and unlocked Zayn’s phone again to find a suitable next song.

“What’s so funny?” Zayn himself had lain back down with his hands behind his head, and was scowling.

“Liam. Did you see his face?”

“He looked upset.”

“Exactly! How ridiculous,” she added, pressing play on ‘Take Me Home’ by Jess Glynne, and
grinning down at him.

“What are you playing that for?!”

Knowing look.

“If I’m lying here, will you take me home. You’re lying here.”

“Perrie, stop talking in riddles alright. There is nothing weird going on between Liam and I. He came in looking for bloody Harry, probably felt awkward taking his stuff in front of us, and left. End of story.”

“Mate, he took one look at me and his face fell. He totally thinks there’s something going on, and it bothered him.”

She looked smug.

“Pez, Liam isn’t into blokes.”

“Just because he had a long term girlfriend at one point, and occasionally likes to admire some boobs, does not mean he can’t also appreciate getting rogered sideways by a handsome chap, Zayn.”

This caused poor Zayn, who was uncomfortable enough as it was discussing this topic, to splutter profusely and choke on his own saliva. The notion of rogering Liam sideways?!

He could feel his cheeks heating up and betraying him again, but he soldiered on, “I admit bisexual people exist, and that having once enjoyed one thing does not necessarily preclude a person from enjoying other things.”

“Privates!” Perrie interrupted, laughing loudly.

“Yes, private-things, alright. But seriously. Louis is camp as Christmas, he’s already said he never had to come out any closets since he was blatantly never even in any. And he’s been Liam’s best mate for years and years. There’s literally no way at some point along that journey of adolescence, Liam wouldn’t turn to his buddy and say ‘hey you know I think I like a bit of cock action my self by the by’. The thought of him being merrily around LGBTQIA stuff with Louis for all these years, and never once having said anything about it relating to him personally is pretty suggestive to me.”

It was the something he had been trying to avoid saying out loud, because it sounded miserably final and awful.

He had been staring at his feet as he said it, but he chanced a look up at his friend now.

Perrie was looking thoughtfully at the doorway, “Sometimes people have epiphanies.”

“False hopes cruel Pez,” Zayn forced out a laugh, and before they could continue the conversation a very wet and be-toweled Harry burst into the room singing Davie Bowie and lightening the mood.

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After a quick shower and 40 mins drinking rum and amaretto’s in the flat for predrinks; the team headed out to show Niall the town.
It was evidently much smaller a resort than he had been used to, but since he had already seen it coming in there wasn’t much to say on the topic anymore.

Zayn was busy jabbing away at the keys to the cash machine when he heard Josh make a loud announcement behind him.

“We can’t go right to Kaos. We need to show him the Nail Game first! C’man, we have to go to the Alte Stube first.”

He was pointing enthusiastically at a bar down the road a little to their right, white washed walls and a squat wooden roof.

As the start of the season usually involved most places remaining shut, it had been their only option for drinks on week one – unless they trecked most of the length of the village to the Dorf Stadl, which was lovely and huge but expensive and far away.

Alte Stube was cosy inside. It was filled with older Austrian and German tourists, had a propensity for live entertainment in the form of Andy und Heinz (a Tyrolean musical double-act in traditional Leiderhosen), and was slightly cheaper than the alternative.

It was mostly wood-cabin-like inside, with a bar with a small stage jutting out to the side of it. Directly opposite the bar by only a few feet was an opening with a couple of steps, leading to a smaller room and then two bathrooms. Inside this room was one high seated small table, two barrels acting as tables with ash-trays on them, and a third barrel with a huge, thick piece of chopped wood on top – the kind one might balance a Christmas tree in.

Next to this lived a hammer, and a box of nails.

The gist of things was that everyone crowded around the barrel, selected a nail and popped them shallowly in various places around the log. The group would then pass the hammer around, taking it in turns to whollop their nails as hard (or as gently) as liked. It was one shot per turn, and the winner was the first to completely whack their nail in.

Although it sounded a bit dry on paper, and it had been a bit weird the first night Nick had taken them there and encouraged them to play their first game; but as the drinks flew by it was really quite an engaging and competitive game.

That first night Zayn had lost count of how many rounds they went through, although he had hazy memories of grinning like an idiot at himself in the mirror as he washed his hands (merrily thinking how well things had started going) – as well as images of Harry falling down the steps to the bar and dropping a beer glass; Liam winning the Nail Game and looking adorable and Louis falling over on the walk back.

“What’s that then?” Niall asked, curiously – and there was certainly no denying it was his sort of game.

So, first point of call: Alte Stube.

“This is a fucking fix! How is my nail so much longer than everyone else’s? This is totally ridiculous!” Josh was frustratedly bellowing.

“Your aims all over the show,” Harry was drunkenly attempting to explain – aside his own aim was fairly wonky by this point, so nobody was listening.
Zayn had missed the start of this round, having waited an unusually long time in the bar queue, so had positioned himself at the stool table in the corner to have a cigarette and observe until the game finished.

Niall had surprised him by coming out the toilet a moment later and plonking himself down opposite.

“This is awesome, I can’t believe we didn’t have one in ‘glemm.”

Zayn raised his eyebrows as he let out a thin stream of smoke, “I assumed they had these everywhere.”

“Nah, must be a local thing. We have to come back one of the nights those musical guys are on though, they sounds wonderful,” Niall was laughing.

Zayn thought back to Harry, Josh and Perrie dancing on stage with them toward the end of their first group night out and grinned.

“When does Payno get to join us then?”

“Oh, Leeyum? He has to work until everyones finished drinking, then close up properly. It depends how long people want to stay out. Sometimes its quite late, I guess…”

“That’s annoying.”

“It is.” Zayn agreed.

There was a quiet moment when he felt sure Niall was considering Things, but nothing more was said, and he to distract himself he took a healthy drink of his Zipfer.

Three hours and many, many rounds later and they had found their way to the only club in town.

Niall had taken to the place immediately, and after dumping their stuff doing shots of Jager everyone had hit the dance floor. Even Zayn, in a peripheral manner, had bobbed about to the eclectic playlist whilst gripping a bottle of Desperado.

But then Liam had arrived. Late, unsurprisingly, but with Sophia is tow. How had he not noticed she wasn’t with them earlier?!

They came in laughing away, and barely looking at anyone else. Made straight to dump their coats on the group table, and ran off to play catch up at the bar.

He felt so inexplicably annoyed that Liam was cosying up to Sophia instead of him that he ignored the pair of them from the off, and went on to dodge them around the club as subtly as he could manage while off his face.

At one point he had found himself alone, queuing for another Desperado and watching Liam dance ever closer to their friend. If the start of the night had left him cross, by now things were reaching despairing. Booze, being a depressant, was escalating the rejected feelings he knew he shouldn’t be having because he was sure Liam had absolutely no idea that he had feelings for him.

Remembering Liam was not attempting to rub his straightness in his face, or make him jealous flirting with their colleague, had however become a tougher and tougher battle.

The wait at the bar was long, and he found himself constantly turning around to stare at the dance
Liam laughing and whacking into Sophia playfully with his hip. Sophia shoving him back, then grabbing his hand and making him ballet twirl underneath he fingers.

Sure, as a group they were bonding quite nicely. And even he had to admit people were flirting all around the place, really.

But still.

It was difficult to know what to do after he ordered his drink, but he stumbled back over to the table where Louis and Niall were talking and sat facing away from the dance floor.

By 3am his mood was beyond repair, and he decided to take himself home to bed. Harry would probably wake him up when he came in anyway and fill him in on anything that he missed, so he figured it didn’t matter. It would shut in an hour or two anyway.

In an attempt at avoiding any awkward conversations, he slipped on his ski jacket and sidled around the dance floor and out the door as slyly as possible – and without a word to anyone.

It was snowing heavily, and he let out a little shiver as he hunched his shoulders, lit a cigarette, and began his march up the road homeward.

It was a bit spooky looking – there was dim, yellowy street lights adorned with the compulsory Christmas decorations. But everywhere was shut, and quiet, and it was a bit unsettling battling through the blizzard on his own.

Once he arrived at the Elisabeth he jiggled the garage door open, and stormed inside. The only open entrance after night fall had forced him through a small door back into the wash and boot-room corridor in the basement.

Of course none of that had came into his head as he had waded out the club in a mood, but now he was standing here alone he realised this was in fact the creepy area he and Liam had experienced that awful Incident in.

This was exacerbated when he couldn’t find the light switch, and was forced to stumble along the edge of the corridor towards the dim light through the doors at the end of the staircase.

Was it unusually cold down there? It was still freezing, but he was actually inside now.

Best not to think about it…

He was half way along the corridor when he noticed someone directly ahead of him through the doors.

At first he assumed it was Nick, who hadn’t came out that night, and was about to shout on him so they could carry on together – when the figure, without moving, completely vanished into thin air.

If Zayn’s eyes could have got any wider they might have fallen right out of his head – the shock left his mouth genuinely gaping, his hair standing on end, and froze him to the spot.

The thought of moving was horrendous. What if it was still there, but simply making itself invisible?! What if it reappeared as he went past? What if it touched him as he went past, and no-one ever saw
him again ever?!

So as it happened he was stood there, peering ahead and breathing heavily, when a series of creaking noises began to come from behind. More specifically, a bang-y sort of sound; quickly followed by rustle-y unfamiliar sound.

This time he let out an audible, “Fuuuuuuuck,” whilst screwing his eyes shut and willing his legs not to give way.

As someone who had laughed at friends needing accompanied to the toilet after The Ring, and watched Paranormal Activity on a Sunday afternoon on his own when he was bored; the irony that he was now whimpering like a small child and flooded with a hitherto un-experienced level of adrenaline was not lost on him – even then.

Just as silence had reigned long enough for him to pull himself together and begin to move forward again at a determined pace, the sound of a door behind him echoed out and the game was up.

Zayn let out the loudest shout of his life, and burst into a spirt he didn’t know he was capable off while howling, “FUCK OOOOOOFF! ARGHHH!” at the top of his lungs.

“No-wait,”

Oh good lord, the Thing had a voice. It was trying to communicate with him. A familiar sounding voice though, wasn’t it? A little voice in his head was suggesting, but by this point he had reached last few steps – only to feel a hand grab his wrist.

“Nooooooo!!!”

“Zayn, shit, wait!”

But it was too late. Before the sight he had spun around to address had really began to process, his fist had made contact with the face of whatever it was.

Whatever it was turned out to be an incredibly startled looking Liam. He was standing there with a heavily confused look on his face, inspecting the blood now running onto the hands he had cupped under his chin.

“Leeyum?!! What the fuck are you doing here? You scared me senseless!”

“Yeb. Sobby about dat. I dibn’t think. Wabts going ob?”

“Holy shit, I didn’t mean to hit you! Are you alright? Come inside, Harry has a medi-kit we can borrow,” he babbled, cheeks burning.

“Ibs okay,” Liam assured, trying to smile but wincing, “you pab quite a punch Zayn,”

“For all the good that would do me with an actual ghost,” he replied, rolling his eyes and ushering Liam into his bedroom with a hand on his back.

“Ghobt?”

“Yes,” he nudged Liam toward the edge of the bed, and turned away to pick up the small box from under the dresser, ‘one minute there was some guy at the other end of the corridor – a shadow, like, but definitely solid looking. I thought it was Nick. But then it was suddenly fucking gone, and then you appear out of nowhere making an unearthly racket! I thought you were some hotel monster,” he
chuckled, dabbing at Liam’s face gently with cotton wool, “here. You probably want to hold a lot of that under your nose for a minute,” he grimaced.

One minute he had been fuming with Liam, then he worst moment of his life had happened, and somehow Liam had appeared into the midst of it and got clocked by the one and only punch Zayn had ever been induced into throwing.

“Are you alright?”

“Trust you to be asking me, after I hit you,” Zayn rolled his eyes, “but frankly no! That was terrifying. I need a drink,” at he turned around to grab a beer from their stash in the corner, “want one?”

“yes please,” was the muffled reply.

After handing it over he found himself leaning against the wall, heart still hammering, willing himself to calm down. Also: Liam was in his room. And the flat was empty. An unlikely thought to calm it down.

“Why did you sneak off like that?” he suddenly realised Liam was speaking, and sounding cross.

“What?”

Liam’s nose was no longer gushing, and he was dabbing it gingerly with the cotton wool.

“You heard me. You just took your coat and snuck off! Why did you do that? Are you alright? Was it something I did?”

Alarmed, “why would it be something you did?! Why would there be a something at all???” “Because you’re so easy to read,” Liam shot back, “you looked miserable all night. Every time I tried to speak to you, you snapped at me! Can’t you just tell me if I pissed you off?”

“Liam, I’m not angry with you,” he lied, “I’m just really tired. I didn’t want to bring everyone down being all introverted and I knew you’d tell me to stay if I told you I was leaving.”

“I would have offered to come with you,” Liam replied, frowning, “besides. Something might have happened to you in the snow. Seasonaires get found dead in snow drifts all the time after nights out!”

Zayn had to laugh at this, he was drunk but he didn’t think he was likely to have lain down in a ditch and called it a night.

“You seemed to be having a good time,” he felt himself add, sourly.

Liam seemed to know better than to acknowledge this, and simply asked Zayn if he fancied watching a film on the laptop or if he was planning on going to bed.

“I’d love to watch a film with you,“

“Great. You owe me for punching me in the face,” Liam continued, and with that he chuckled his bloody tissue at Zayn and hopped under the covers.

“hey!”

“I believe setting everything up falls under the remit of making amends?” he winked, and stretched out on the bed, “this bed is awesome Zayn. How is it so cosy?”
Like in his and Louis’ room, Zayn’s bed had started life as a single framed Austrian twin. But it was poorly put together, and after a particularly enthusiastic session of Harry jumping on it before a night out whilst air-guitarring; it had collapsed. It was now a wooden cot frame about a foot high around two single mattresses squashed together on the floor. And although it was technically two beds, with two sets of bedding, Harry was a cuddly sleeper and the area had become like a giant nest of all their stuff.

“Theres wooly blankets, and a hot water bottle, and four duvets. Two at the bottom and two on top,” Zayn explained as he plugged his hard-drive in and opened the movie’s folder.

“This is sick!”

“It is,” he agreed, double clicking on Batman with a wry smile, “hope you like the apology choice?” he laughed, and without trying to over think it he yanked the covers back and wriggled in next to his friend.

Without warning Liam threw and arm around his shoulders and hauled him a bit closer, “If you can snuggle Hazza every night you can cheer me up with a cuddle after wholloping me in the face!” he laughed.

Zayn’s stomach swooped and he found himself squirming about to get comfortable against Liam’s side. He didn’t want to allow himself to get too comfortable – lest he give himself away whilst Liam was just being friendly. So he settled for resting against him, but kicking his legs out to the right so only their side’s were actually touching.

The beginning credits began, and Liam was sighing contentedly beside him.

“You know you can talk to me, right?” he said suddenly, as if he couldn’t help it from bursting out.

They were so close Zayn was reluctant to turn his head and look at him, so he merely patted Liam on his tummy and rolled his eyes in an attempt to make light of it.

“Yes, Leeyum, if I ever need you to jump out and grab me in a creepy corridor again I will be sure to let you know.”

“You know what I meant,” Liam grumbled, but after a sideways look he let it go and settled in to watch the film and enjoy his beer.

Of course dear readers, I’m sure we can all relate to poor Mr Malik at this point. A Moment with the one we secretly pine over has finally come! A chance, unexpected encounter at the end of a long night already written off – bringing with it fluttering butterflies, the seemed speeding up of the clock and a desperate need to make the every second count.

The fact these Moments often happen at the end of a long night, when we are both drunk and tired, can cause some problems.

Currently Zayn was finding this out, as he fought valiantly to stay awake and make witty comments throughout the movie.

At the start there had been a lot of back and forth, prodding and poking in the ribs, and even a moment where he became aware Liam was – seemingly absentmindedly – stroking his upper arm where his hand fell.
That woke up him a bit, and led to an uncomfortably tight feeling in his jeans (which he now regretted not changing out of before coming to bed), but eventually Liam seemed to realize what was going on and stop – and Zayn’s eyes started to feel droopy again.

He was well acquainted with the movie, which was not helping.

He kept telling himself he could rest his eyes and see the rest in his head. The trouble was this obviously resulted in his falling asleep, jerking away, and pretending to Liam that wasn’t what was going on at all.

“Well, well, well,” announced a suspicious sounding voice from the doorway.

“Shhh, you’ll wake him!”

“What are you doing in my bed, Mr Payne?” a second voice asked, but it sounded amused.

“It’s a long story. Here, hold on,”

And with that Zayn felt the warm body he had sleepily made himself at home on, move. He blinked one eye open, and turned to look at the doorway – where a rather rumpled Harry and Louis were standing.

“You can stay there if-” Harry was beginning.

But Louis interrupted him, “C’mon Liam! I’m shit faced and stole a bunch of stuff for our walls from Kaos. Come help me put it up!” and with that he disappeared from sight, leaving Harry frowning after him.

Liam sighed, “sorry they woke you. Have a good sleep, Zayn,” and he patted him on the shoulder as he climbed out the bed and went round the corner himself.

“What was that all about?” Zayn asked, groggily squinting at Harry and rubbing his eyes. There was something off about his and Louis’ demeanor.

“Nothing, I don’t want to talk about it,” was the unusually firm reply.

Zayn shrugged and wriggled back down so only his head was visable, whilst waiting for his friend to undress and get in beside him.

He was disappointed he had fallen asleep and missed time with Liam, but as he had never expected Liam to stay with him all night anyway he didn’t mind so much that Louis had stolen him back. The memory of watching Batman was already giving him fuzzy feelings, and he was replaying the moment he noticed Liam’s hand on his arm in his head when Harry hurrumphed down next to him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you. Its been a weird night. Can we put something else on to fall asleep to? I don’t want to think about anything.”

“Sure. Pick something off the hard drive?” Zayn agreed.

Ten minutes later and they were both slowly drifting off to the background sounds of an episode of Jeeves and Wooster – a typically Harry choice.
In which we hit the pistes, xmas is coming, and Louis has a birthday.

**LOUIS**

The following days were the tensest as yet experienced at Hotel Elisabeth. Louis was diligently pretending nothing untoward had occurred between Harry and him; and Harry had not dared to contradict him.

Nobody could miss there being a ‘bit of an atmosphere’ though.

The first Louis was compelled to even remotely *allude* to the toilet incident was when him and Niall were riding the chairlift up the piste one lunch time a week later.

He had been enjoying the view, since it was a bright sunny day, and was itching to hop off the lift and zoom off into the distance where nobody gave him side-long looks and it was impossible to feel guilty because you were too busy concentrating on not falling off a precipice or taking out another snow sports enthusiast.

“Sooooo, things have been a bit funny lately,” Niall was suddenly saying.

“Huh?” Louis replied, loudly.

He turned to face his friend, who was a sporting pink cheeks and a red nose from the cold. His neon orange Adidas goggles were perched on top of his black helmet, and his blue eyes were resting thoughtfully on his new friend.

There was also a distinctly worried pinch to his eyebrows that Louis didn’t like one bit.

“Do you think its cause of me?”

“What?”

“Well, everyone seemed to be having a ball before I turned up. Did I do something, or say something, on that night out last week? What’s going on?”

“Jesus, Niall, of course its nothing to bloody do with you! Have you been thinking this all week?!”

Niall shrugged, and Louis felt compelled to whop left arm around his shoulders (as comforting as that could be both padded in snow gear).

“Oh my god. Jesus, alright, fine, I’ll tell you exactly why the funny atmosphere has absolutely nothing to do with you with you coming. But you can’t tell anyone else, alright? Not even Payno.”

Niall’s eyebrows raised comically.

“Fucking hell, I am *going* to tell him. Eventually. He’ll just be all judge-y about it, and I don’t want
to deal with that yet.”

Louis took a deep breath, braced himself for a bit of disapproval, and launched into as light-hearted a rendition of the Toilet Affair as he could muster.

“Basically, young Nialler, you *may* have noticed that old Curly and I have some strange Thing going on.”
“I have eyes,” the Irishman snorted.

“Ahem,” he cleared his throat theatrically, “well. As you may *not* know, I’m not really a relationship-y sort of person. Can’t be doing with all that mushy stuff.”

He didn’t notice, but Niall had made a slight face at this, because he had averted his gaze into the alps as he spoke.

“I think Harold is absolutely that sort of person, because he is still too young to know any better. Anyway, one thing led to another after a few and an *incident may* have taken place in the Kaos bogs that we needn’t go into; but *may* have given off the incorrect impression to Hazza that I was open to that Sort of Thing. When I am not.”

“You had sex in the bathrooms?”

“Jesus Niall! No!” he cried, punching him as hard as he could in his thick gloves on the arm.

“Hah!”
“Seriously, though. It was just a blowjob.” He cast his eyes down into his lap, feeling weird saying it aloud. Especially after 8 days forcing every memory or thought of it out of his head.

“I don’t know any of you very well yet, man, but he seems pretty taken with you. That was possibly a bit shitty.”

“Yes Irish, I may have just worked that out. Hence my extreme guilt and embarrassment, and week trying to give Harry some space.”

“You don’t care so much about giving Hazza space, you’re just really awkward.”

It was as blunt as the sort of reply Liam would eventually give him, but it didn’t sound as judgmental. It sounded like a statement of fact; which it essentially was. He hung his head a bit further down.

“Look, if you really, really don’t want anything serious then go back to being friendly with him. But for god’s sake don’t sneak off to play with each others privates again, he doesn’t seem the sort to take that kind of thing lightly.”

“Are you an Oracle or something?”

Niall winked, “I just say what I see. Harry’s a romantic, just look at him with his bowties and shirts and books of poetry! You, my friend,” and at this Niall jabbed Louis in the chest with his own be-gloved finger, “do not seem as far removed from this as you might think. You love musicals with romantic undercurrents, you told me your favourite book was Wuthering Heights, and Liam keeps making fun of you for being a sap on numerous occasions throughout your childhoods. If I was a *betting man*.”

At this Louis scowled.
“I would guess something happened to make you like this, and just possibly if you chilled the fuck out a bit you might actually enjoy being with Harry. If that is indeed what said Harry wants himself.”

“For fuck’s sake Niall, where the hell did all that come from?!”

“Nowhere. My head. Its common sense, Tommo. Now come on,” he replied, lifting the bar above them, “we’re at the top.”

With that the drop off point at the top of the mountain twinkled in Louis’ eyes, and he shuffled his bum forward slightly getting ready to slide away.

Going back into work that evening in the wake of Niall’s chat left him feeling a little queasy. He knew he had treated Harry badly, and that Niall was quite right – Haz did seem a sensitive sort of person.

However, he tried his best. He went back, if somewhat awkwardly at first, to including Harry in his banter again. He called him ‘Harold’, which he felt was friendly-affectionate (not flirt-y affectionate), and even chose to sit next to him during the staff meal when he could have chosen Josh.

Although, quite understandably, Harry seemed confused and continued to act withdrawn – by the end of service at 11pm he had began to take a tentative step back toward being chummy.

After all, it wasn’t really in anyone’s interests in a town so small to be having feuds.

“So you’re talking to me again, then?” he eventually asked, quietly, catching Louis unawares as he came out of the bathroom soaking wet and sporting only his towel.

He must have been coming back into the flat from the kitchens.

“Geez, Harry, you scared me.”

“Sorry.” He sounded it, actually, which reminded Louis he was supposed to mending bridges – not burning them.

“No, no;” he flapped his arms about wildly, “its okay. Its fine. Erm, sorry. About before. I was being a dick. I suppose I was just a bit, um… embarrassed.”

Harry’s cheeks were burning, but he mumbled, “well that makes two of us.”

“Not that I didn’t have a jolly old time. In that bathroom,” he waffled on, still over gesticulating, “I just don’t usually do things like that. With people. Randomly.”

“Neither do i.”

“I know that, Harry,” Louis replied sadly, “friends again? I really am sorry I hurt your feelings.”

Harry shrugged, but he was wearing a small hint of a smile, “I’m sure I’ll live.”

With that Louis scuttled off to his bedroom, where he gratefully shut the door and sat down with his head in his hands – feeling over whelmed and frustrated that nothing with Harry Styles ever seemed to be as simple as it should be.
Rather than according them a change in circumstances, this apology simply led Louis and Harry back round to Square One – where there was endless flirting, innuendo, and following confusion.

Harry seemed to shake off the whole affair and bounce back with the sort of gusto that only the young and un-spurred can manage.

At least, that was what Louis kept telling himself.

He was currently back up the mountain with Niall, Sophia and Josh – making the most of the time off between their shifts.

It also happened to be Christmas Eve.

“Guys, guys!” Josh was waving his arms up ahead, and had pulled into the side of a wide slope, “lets have a seat this time!”

Without waiting for any of them to signal they knew what he was saying, Josh had snapped his boots free of his board and was sticking it end up in the snow bank.

Louis followed him on his skis, and came to a stop next door to where Josh was now emptying his backpack of several cans of Zipfer.

“Nice one, lad!”

“Ooooh you brought road beers!” Sophia cried, coming to an abrupt stop next and spraying them both with powder.

“Errgh, Soph!”

“Sorry not sorry,” she laughed, kicking off her skis and grabbing a can, “thanks.”

A moment later Niall came careering over, landing slightly less gracefully on his rear.

“Think these will make me any better on this thing for the rest of the way down?” he cackled, shimmying over to pick a drink up.

“No,” said Josh, honestly, with a giggle.

“Well this is a shit view,” Louis announced to general laughter.

It was by general omission one of the best views going in the mountain range – originally discovered by Liam and Louis on a night ski mission to see who could get down the mountain quickest. The run in question was a narrow jaunt to the right of a much wider piste, snaking its way off to the side through thick alpine trees and powder banks. However about a third of the way down you came out of the foliage, with thick snow on either side still; and a breathtaking view down into the Kühtai village valley bellow. They could even see the twinkly lights from their hotel, and people milling about the roads and lower mountains.

In had fast became a favourite spot with the group to stop for a drink, or road beers, or to have a fag and a chat.

After a moment where they were all lost in their own thoughts, Niall could hold it in no longer and
began rambling about his Secret Santa woes.

“Honestly, I haven’t been here long enough. It feels weird.”

“Mate, you’ve been here most of the time we have. You came in week 2, not week 20,” Louis replied for the hundredth time, with a massive eye roll.

“I don’t have you, Louis,” Niall snapped, clearly genuinely concerned, “otherwise I’d give you Harry Styles wrapped up in a big ribbon and wait for you to thank me!”

“Niall!” Louis gasped, genuinely scandalised.

Everyone laughed.

“That would be a terrible present for me, for your information,” Louis quickly went on, “because I am notoriously bad with pets. Ask Liam.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Sophia asked.

“It should, I definitely seem like the caring animal sort,” Louis frowned, leaning out to see her better down the row.

“No, you seem too self involved to be interested in pets. Maybe other people’s pets, but never your own. I bet you’d hate cat or dog hairs everywhere for a start.”

This was somewhat of a truth, but not one he was terribly pleased about having made so obvious.

“I love Liam’s dogs,” was what he said, sourly.

“Ooooh, they look adorable!” Sophia burst out, “I can’t wait to meet them. I’ve never been able to have any of my own, so I just try and steal time with everyone else’s and pretend.”

She laughed.

“When are you going to meet them, like?” Josh asked, turning round to look at her as well.

“Oh, whenever we’re back in England,” Sophia smiled, “he was showing me pictures on his phone last night. They’re super cute. I don’t know how he could bare to leave them behind.”

Louis, who had actually had to witness the blubbling mess Liam had been when he bade farewell to Loki and Watson, felt himself wondering just how chummy these two had been getting.

He was beginning to feel a tad guilty. Had he been so wrapped up in the ridiculous non-thing with Harry that he had failed to notice his best mate romancing up?

“You and Liam are pretty close these days,” Niall asked at that moment, raising his can, “anything we should know about, young Miss Smith?” he waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Liam’s a good mate. And I used to work in a bar back at uni, its fun to help out sometimes,” and with that she up-ended her beer.

“But its more than that. You guys are always hanging out together, and being all exclusive!” Louis added.

“Feeling left out are we Tommo?” Josh winked.
“No! Well, alright, maybe a bit – I just thought he’d have told me if he was involved with anybody here…”

“Louis… for the last time, we are not involved!”

“Maybe if you weren’t so busy-”

“Niall. On pain of death, and I will hurl your little Irish body down this mountain without a second thought, do NOT finish that sentence!” for emphasis he slammed his can down on the snow and made a face.

“Alright, alright. But getting back to Secret Santa, does anyone know what I should get Nick?!?” was the urgent accented reply.

“Mate, that is getting seriously old. Just buy him a dirty magazine out of Harrods and have done with it!” Josh burst out.

This caused Louis to laugh hysterically, and choke a little on his Zipfer.

Although it was indeed Christmas Eve, it was also another special day. It was Louis’ 20th birthday. Ordinarily he would have planned something specific, but thinking about it had made him homesick so he had simply not bothered to tell anybody it was coming up at all.

Of course it was a bit weird, half way through the day, to have had nobody acknowledge it but Liam (he had sneakily blocked off his facebook wall to all his new friends so they wouldn’t see the messages pouring in from home, which were a comfort at least).

Shaking his empty can a moment later, Josh suggested they carry on down the mountain – to general approval.

The whole journey down Louis couldn’t stop wondering if there really was something going on with Liam and Sophia. It was the first time in ages he felt like he was properly concerning himself with something other than his own dramas, and he had to admit that since meeting Harold he hadn’t been the best best friend ever to Liam.

He kicked off his gear in the staff boot room, determined to head up stairs and have a heart to heart with said friend about his romantic life. Or at least interests.

This was, however, delayed.

Louis had taken an inordinate amount of time taking off his ski boots – a ritual Liam found so infuriating from their childhood that he simply wouldn’t stay and wait any longer. But that Niall, on the other hand, was less bothered by. He had stood in the corner eating a Mars Bar from his coat pocket and ruminated on who he thought had who for Secret Santa as his friend wrestled with his clips and thick socks.

“Can we go yet, Tommo? I’m dying for a piss,”

“Calm down Nialler, I’m done,” Louis replied, standing and brushing his legs off, “after you?”

And so there was a moment of normality as the pair headed to the doorway, Niall grabbing the handle and stepping out; and before either of them knew what was what : the door slammed shut.
Perplexed, Louis stood staring in front of him feeling a great reluctance to either move or look away. Niall, who had felt a shove forward, called back, “Lou! Are you alright?” he sounded shaken.

“No! Yes! I don’t know!” he stumbled forward quickly and grabbed the door, yanking it opened and dashing forward in a haze of limbs and profanities.

“Fuck me that was weird,”

“Remember what Zayn said about this corridor?” Niall mumbled, eyes darting about them in the dim lighting.

“Can we please never think about what Zayn told us about this corridor ever again please?” he sounded slightly hysterical, even to himself, “I just want to go upstairs and never come back down here.”

Without thinking his hand shot out and grabbed Niall’s, and they marched back along the corridor in a determined but slow fashion.

“Why are you holding hands?”

“What?”

“Eh?”

“You’re holding hands,” they had reached the top of the staircase, and Harry was standing outside the door to their flat; pointing.

His face was unreadable.

Louis felt Niall let go, with a jump.

This, currently, seemed to Louis simply unacceptable. He had just experienced something creepy, and him and Niall had probably only kept their cool by giving one another a bit of support. Why did Harry have to appear and somehow make it all about him again?

Instead of saying any of that, he merely sighed and said, “we had a Zayn moment down there. If you must know.”

Harry’s eyes widened, but Louis had already pushed past him to walk back into his room alone. It was time to call home and have some birthday frivolities.

“Louis, dear, I think you need to cut this Harry some slack. It sounds like the only thing he’s guilty of is liking you.”

“Mum! You KNOW I don’t do that sort of thing anymore!”

“That’s the most childish response imaginable. You’re twenty now, Louis. You need to start realizing not every guy you meet is going to be another John. And that’s pretty youthful to be deciding to spend the rest of your life as a spinster.”

“This is not great birthday chat, mother,” he replied.

“No, it isn’t, but it is good advice. Now, what are you doing for your birthday? Surely my little boo-bear has roped everyone in to celebrating all things Tomlinson for the day,” Jay was laughing.

“I went skiing all day, that was really nice. We stopped on the hill and took some beautiful pictures.
I’ll put them up on facebook tomorrow.”

“Do! We really miss you. I’m glad you’re off doing your own thing though.”

“With Liam,” he laughed.

“Will it ever not be you and Liam?!?” she joined in, “I know you guys will always take care of each other.”

She knew him all too well, because it was this point she added; “I know you’re feeling guilty about him because you think you missed him getting really into this friend yours, Sophia. But I know you Lou. And I know him. If he needed to talk he would have, and maybe there isn’t actually anything going on there after all. You know you can be a bit off reading people sometimes, sweetie,”

“Mum!” he replied, in horror, “that’s just plain rude now!”

But, he thought, it did touch on some points. He just worried the reason Liam hadn’t needed him was because he had been replaced by somebody else, not because he didn’t need to talk at all.

Ten minutes after he had hung up the phone (after being passed across to each of his siblings), while he lay on the Austrian twin bed contemplating how much he missed home right now, a soft knock came at the door.

“hello?”

“Can I come in?”

“Liam. This is your room too. You don’t need to knock.”

“But you were on the phone.”

Bless his sweet, thoughtful friend to the last.

“Come in you oaf!”

Liam came in quietly, and pushed the door shut gently, before sitting down on his own side of the bed. It was the start of his bar shift, and he was decked out in his unnecessary shirt and tie; so Louis knew he couldn’t be staying long.

“Firstly, happy birthday again. Properly.” He grinned, “secondly, here.” At with that he ducked down over the side of the bed, and pulled out a small neatly wrapped box.

“Payno!” Louis gasped, in genuine surprise, “did you get me a present? We never do presents! What the fuck!”

Despite the swearing he was genuinely touched, if perhaps even more guilt ridden than he had been before.

“I knew you’d be really missing your mum and the girls today. And your dad. So I thought I’d step up and make sure you got a gift on the big day, especially after all your nonsense about not wanting to tell anybody here about it.”

He blushed, thinking how ridiculous it now seemed to want to pretend it wasn’t happening.
He tore open the present, which appeared to be in a cardboard box wrapped in old receipts from the bar Selotaped together (creative, he thought, sensing Zayn’s input).

In the box was a piece of paper with his friends large scrawl on it, baring the words ‘pending’.

“What does that mean??”

Liam laughed, his big crinkly eyed smile breaking out, “it means it’s a surprise. You won’t get it until later on.”

And that he didn’t.

He got through the shift burning with questions; which were impossible to act upon because Liam was working back in the bar. If he loitered about by the entrance to the kitchens and caught his mate’s eye he would sort of smile and twinkle at him- or worse wink- but that was it.

Coupled with the fact he had told Liam not to mention it was his birthday to anyone, which obviously prohibited any asking around; it was infuriating!

The last hour dragged particularly badly.

The guests had teemed out of the restaurant and into the bar, so Liam had his work cut out for him mixing cocktails and pouring pints. Perrie was enthusiastically working her way around the room hovering and humming. Sophia had a fist full of knives and was dashing her way from table to table placing them out, while Louis worked back the way with forks and Zayn darted between them putting napkins into breakfast glasses with a flourish.

The only thing that made the process bearable was Liam’s Christmas playlist, and he belted out a ‘hell yes!’ of excitement as Fairytale of New York (his favourite Christmas song of all time) came over the speakers; and everyone joined in singing it at the top of their voices (some more enthusiastically than others, but the ever demur Zayn was getting pretty into it).

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But finally it hit half 11. He was itching to go for a drink and find out what on earth Liam had hidden away for him. He was also deeply regretting thinking he would be too homesick to want to celebrate his birthday, and was just beginning to think it likely he would let the cat out the bag as it were after a few drinks later on – when things started to go awry.

They had joined the guest party crowded round the bar for a post shift drink of choice, and were sat on the stools by the end chatting away, when Perrie announced she had to head off to Skype her mum. Louis thought this was a bloody weird time of night to be speaking to your parents, but he didn’t know much about her family so couldn’t really say anything.

“Oh, that reminds me I had to call my brother back,” Josh announced, and the pair of them walked off.
“Boring!” Louis cried, polishing off his glass of amaretto, “are we gonna get showered and head out?”

“Actually we were thinking of having a quiet one,” Cher started, “since its Christmas tomorrow and all. We can get up early then have a big one at night.”

Was this really happening? People wanted to have a night in on this, of all motherfucking nights? Seriously?
But apparently it was true, as a murmur of agreement went down the group, and Niall energetically nodded whilst discussing how he expected everyone to be up at dawn to open family presents and have a prosecco.

Unable to point out why, exactly, this was so unfair, Louis seethed quietly and did his best to agree and nod along.

Inwardly he blamed himself for creating the worst birthday known to man; but also the universe for sticking him with a bunch of obvious party-poopers.

Gradually everyone began to mill back to the flat.

The only bonus was that nobody was in the bathroom when he went back himself, so he stalked in and locked the door with flourish. He might not be able to moan to anyone, but he could sit in the shower and feel cross!

Thankfully his phone had been in his pocket, so he opened Spotify up and found a non-seasonal party playlist. He could dance in the shower, at least.

Thirty (soggy and wrinkling) minutes later, and Louis emerged from the shower room in a cloud of steam and heat.

The flat was still subdued, so he went into his room (playlist now blaring out Saturday Night by Whigfield) and shimmyed into a pair of soft grey joggers and a holy old Adidas t-shirt that was too big for him.

“Knock, knock?”

“Its opeeeen,” Louis bellowed above the 90s Eurovision classic.

Harry’s face appeared in the crack, “Hey there,”

“Hello Harold.”

“Are you going to bed?”

He honestly didn’t really know, he had been sat on his bed rolling a cigarette and wearing his pajamas.

“Well I’ll be going out onto the balcony at least,” he gestured with the cigarette toward the doorway in the corner.

“Do you fancy going to play the Nail Game for a bit after that fag then?” Harry asked, actually coming into the room and revealing he was wearing a black pair of jeans with a white shirt and a blazer with the sleeves rolled up. He looked adorable.
“Restless?” Louis asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Oh you know. I always do something on Christmas Eve at home – with friends and family or whatever. It’s just a bit too weird to stay in,” Harry replied airily. He was busy admiring the weird paraphernalia adorning the walls.

“Can you grab our coats while I finish this?”

“Sure.”

Standing out on the balcony alone with Harry wasn’t as stressful as he had worried it might be. Harry didn’t try to stand too close, or flirt with him. He was just being a friend. Perhaps it was his secret birthday too, Louis thought with a wry smile and a puff of smoke.

He was sat at the plastic picnic table on the other side of the huge windows, one leg on top of the other, watching Harry.

Harry, who as a non-smoker came out here a bit less than him, had wandered right up to the balcony edge and was craning over one minute, and looking up the next.

“We’re so lucky to be living out here,” he said finally, “can you believe this is the view outside our flat?” he turned and gestured, smiling widely. He looked particularly young with his floppy hair and brightly coloured ski jacket.

“You’re not wrong,” Louis allowed, flicking some ash into the tray balanced in the middle, “I can’t believe tomorrow is Christmas either. It’ll be weird not seeing family.”

“Ah, but you will be seeing your new seasonaire family – which will have to do for the day. Obviously Simon is the terrifying Grandfather, with the giant will, who has gathered us all here accordingly to read it out and piss us all off,” Harry replied with energy – he even walked back from the edge and plonked down opposite Louis; who was cackling.

“Oh my god yes. And Nick is the eldest, desperately trying to appease him!”

Harry frowned a little, but let it pass, “clearly Liam is the golden child. If this was an Agatha Christie Simon would get bumped off, and he would be suspect numero uno because he was expecting to inherit it all-”

“And he really needed all the money because he’s lost all of his own on the stock markets!” Louis interrupted gleefully, his cigarette burning away forgotten in his right hand.

“Yes! Sophia would be his gold digging wife… and Perrie their mad estranged daughter, back from doing charitable work abroad. She’ll be a suspect because she needs the cash to save some village or other, but obviously since it’s the 30s her family are dead against it and all…”

“Zayn would be some penniless artist child, estranged and living in Europe doing weird naked paintings everyone disapproves of and therefore got disinherited… suspect only for revenge – not because of the will…Niall is too good an egg, a natural Hastings if ever I saw one,” Louis continued, “so he definitely wouldn’t have done it.”

“You’d be the prodigal son, just returned to the fold. Everyone suspicious of you and your motives!” Harry announced, with a shit-eating grin.

“And you would be the petted baby of the family, who everyone thinks is really fragile but secretly actually did it for a perverse reason if his own that’s strikingly noble.” Louis shot back.
“Touché Mr Tomlinson, touché. Shall we go hit nails into a piece of wood and flesh out this murder mystery a bit better?” he stood up as he said it, and held an arm out back toward the doors.

“Sure,” said Louis, stubbing the cigarette out, “its already far, far too much like Hercule Poirot’s Christmas not to be sued for copyright as it is!”

“You’ve actually read some?” Harry asked in surprise, following Louis throw the glass door back into the heat of the biggest bedroom.

“Sure. I read them all. I told you I love mysteries,” he mumbled, “now let me get changed so we can head out.”

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The fact Harry had forgotten he mentioned how besotted he was with Agatha Christie novels cheered him up slightly.

Also, he was the only person willing to do something social and boozy on his birthday; so he was earning brownie points by the second.

So twenty quick minutes later – which saw Louis decked out in his favourite maroon trousers, braces and a stripy T-shirt – and they were warming up in the cosy comfort of Alte Stube.

Which was quite busy, as it turned out to be one of the weekly nights Andy und Heinz were playing.

“I’ll get the first round,” Louis announced cheerily, “what do you want?”

“Just a beer, please,” said Harry, who had sat down on a stool and was watching the middle aged group dancing enthusiastically in front of the stage.

Although it was his birthday, Louis felt so grateful that Harry had wanted to come out at all that he felt he deserved to get the first drinks. Plus he was now doing something cultural and unusual (if it could be called that) for the occasion which he would never be doing anywhere in the world outside of Bavaria (at least, not authentically anyway).

“Guten Abend, guten Mensch!” Lou bellowed above the music, as he leant over the bar, “Zwei große Bier, und zwei Jager bitte.”

The bartender laughed at his terrible accent, but nodded and vanished down the bar to pour.

“This is so awesome. I think we should have a dance later,”

“Really?” Louis cocked an eyebrow, “and how exactly does one dance to folk music?”

“Like they are?” Harry laughed, “however you like I suppose.”

“Here’s your drinks H,”

“Cheers!” he clinked their glasses together gently, “So. Here’s to a jolly Austrian night of it!”
And so it became. Instead of worrying about motive, and end games, and the past; Louis found himself genuinely enjoying Harry’s company.

Unlike Liam, who would have enjoyed watching the musicians but been hesitant to get up and do a boogy to them until nearer the end of the night – Harry was game from the get go. In fact, in was he who suggested it. A fact that caught Louis, used to being the instigator of such things, rather off guard.

But happily so – and after only two beers and three little bottles of Jager shots, the pair were up and dancing in amongst all the middle aged couples.

They were so enthusiastic, in fact, that they had the room cheering them on – and were offered free ‘ski shots’ at the end from the musicians.

“What’s a Ski Shot when it’s at home?” Louis asked, curiously.

Andy waved a small scale wooden barrel at them, “Alcohol,” he began, then gestured towards his friend Heinz – who was had taken a large old fashioned ski off of the wall.

“Holy shit!” said Louis.

At the exact same moment Harry breathed, “Awesome!”

The wooden ski had a groove about a cm wide down the length of it, and the implication was clear – and to much applause each of them succeeded in downing a shot that had slid down the ski towards their faces

Eventually though, it hit 1.30am and Harry made a startled face as he looked at the time.

“What? Do you need to be somewhere before you turn into a pumpkin, young Harry?” Louis inquired.

He kept his voice light, but he was genuinely concerned his night was about to be cut abruptly short.

“As a matter of fact, you’re not far off. If we don’t get a move on I will most definitely be in trouble,” he grinned and tapped his wristwatch.

“Oh, alright. But I want you to know I’m completely and utterly against the plan of not having more drinks and challenging some grandparents to the Nail Game.”

He grumbled as he shoved his arms into his ski jacket and rammed his maroon beanie back onto his head.

“Follow me, and close your eyes,” announced Harry, once they were outside in the snow, as if it were the most usual thing in the world.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Trust me?”

He wasn’t sure why, because he certainly didn’t trust himself around Harry, but he trusted Harry himself absolutely.
How odd.

He shut his eyes, and held out a be-mittened hand.

“Well, I’m hardly going to be able to follow on with my eyes shut if you don’t guide me – am i?” he archly remarked.

Harry’s now familiar laugh rang out, and he felt the awkward embrace of another gloved hand take his own and lead him gently along the road.

“Why are we doing this, Harold?”

“Reasons.”

“Harold, I will not be silenced with such vague answers!”

“Shut up and slow down, we’re about to go down a slope.”

“Argh!”

“I said slow down, Louis!” in a high octave alarm.

“Spoil sport,” Louis himself laughed.

“Okay we’re here. Er, don’t open your eyes yet.”

He heard Harry pushing a squeaky door open, and the sound of him stomping in his boots to get the powdery snow off, before his hand was re-taken and he was led forwards and into the warm.

He was just about to either asked if he could finally open his eyes, or just do it anyway and jump on Harry’s back in an unexpected attack – when suddenly he was startled by the sound of party-poppers going off, loud whooping and a large number of people shouting ‘Happy Birthday’ all at once.

As he had started to suspect on the slope, they were in Kaos.

But a Kaos which was decorated with multi-coloured streamers and balloons. A Kaos filled with his new friends, some particularly nice hotel guests, and welcoming locals. All of whom were raising a glass to him, and beaming. There was even a home-made sign hanging above the DJ booth that read ‘Happy Birthday Boobear’ in beautiful script and surrounded by doodles and smaller writing (no doubt the primary art work here had been done by Zayn).

He was so taken aback and over whelmed that before he could stop himself, his eyes were leaking and his hands had come up to cover his mouth.

“Surprise!” Liam shouted, rushing forward from the right where he had been stood leaning on the bar.

“Oh my god Liam, was this my birthday present?! And why aren’t you back in the bar??”

“Of course – do you like it? And in case you hadn’t noticed, half the bar has come here with us. I explained it was my best mates birthday and he was being a homesick grump, and here we are,” he shrugged with a grin.

If surprise parties were not hugely up Liam’s street, he knew 100% they most definitely were up his friend’s.

Instead of saying anything he jumped into his friends arms, for a massive hug and babbled thank
yous which made everyone laugh as they sang happy birthday in German and clapped merrily.

Once this was all over, and the shock wearing off, Louis and Harry found themselves crowded in at the bar with everyone else.

“You were on distraction duty all along, then?”

Harry grinned sheepishly, “not that I wouldn’t have enjoyed myself anyway. You’re a great adopted-Bavarian,” he chuckled, dimpling and melting Louis’ heart in the process.

It wasn’t fair.

“Thank you, then. It was the best way to spend the start of my birthday night out.”

And if the start was good, the evening only got better. Josh had too much whiskey and attempted to pole dance, landing face first on the floor in process. Niall tried to take a decorative guitar off the wall to play along to Oasis, to the chagrin of the owners who had to manhandle him off the elevated seating and distract him with a free glass of beer. Nick embarrassed himself by hitting on one of the married guests, and spent the rest of the night obsessing over the faux pas with Sophia in a corner table – who luckily had got to that ‘motherly’ stage of plastered that she actually didn’t mind. Cher and Greg started a waltz, which encouraged Louis to grab Harry and insist on his spinning around like a ballerina under his hand. Liam was so happy to be free of work unusually early and so drank the most he had all holiday, and clung to Zayn to hold him upright for most of the night whilst telling anybody who would listen what an angel he was. When he said it he repeatedly patted Zayn on the face with a fond look, which caused his drunken mate to blush profusely. Zayn simply wandered around with heart eyes and prayed that the night would go on forever.

And he wasn’t the only one, the night actually ending on an exultant high as Ronnie the DJ played Country Roads Remix (an a level period party favourite of Louis and Liam’s) and the friends gathered together in a circle, arms over one another shoulders, in the heart of the dance floor and belted out the words at the top of their lungs; swaying gently from side to side.
what day is today? why today is christmas day!

Chapter Summary

In which Christmas day dawns with hangovers, and everyone gets well acquainted with the second floor cleaning cupboard.

Chapter Notes

thought i'd hurry up and get this chapter out to cheer us up after the annoyance of Cham's baby-based article. <3 hang in there all!

ZAYN.

The next day was probably the most hungover Christmas morning most of the team had yet experienced.

Josh woke up in the tiny toilet room, where he had fallen asleep chundering the evening before. There was a large glass of water some kind soul had placed next to him by his right hand, and the door was slightly ajar as if someone wanted to keep an eye on him but couldn’t actually fit in the room with him.

Cher and Greg, who mostly kept to themselves, had had a spectacular row when they got in and woke up not speaking.

Nick was still engulfed in shame from hitting on the married man, and promptly decided his Christmas Day managerial duties were going to take a distinctly back-seat role as a result. Preferably close to a bathroom, and as far away from guests as it was possible to get away with.

Sophia was still clutching a large packet of salt and vinegar Lays crisps when she woke up, fully dressed including her shoes, on top of her covers.

Perrie had actually made it under the duvet, and into her jammies; though the t-shirt was on back to front and she still had tights on under her bottoms.

Niall had not fancied a wander back to the other boy’s room upstairs, and was now curled up between Liam and Louis on their Austrian twin; blinking in utter confusion as Louis’ alarm went off and the unfamiliar room came into focus.

Louis himself was groaning face down in his pillow on the right, and Liam (who did not have to get up until considerably later) was muttering profanities about turning the bloody thing off.

Zayn awoke happily in his own bed, with one of Harry’s arms flung over his stomach and an expected headache.
“Haz, that’s your alarm,” he groaned, lifting his left arm slowly to cover his eyes from the faint light streaming in the giant window at the bottom of the bed.

“Urghff,” said Harry.

Unfortunately it was the duty of the kitchen staff to be up first to set the kitchen right, at least forty minutes before waiting staff were expected to appear.

Although in this instance there had been general approval of a big staff Christmas breakfast first thing…

“Don’t you want breakfast? Washed down with paracetamol…”

“I want to die. If I move I’m going to be sick,” Harry’s croaky voice floated out from under the curly mop.

Harry himself, who was face down much like a certain someone else next door, wriggled further into the covers.

“That’s probably the eleventh shot of Jager making itself known,” said Zayn, knowledgably, “seriously though. You told Dan to have a Christmas lie in so he’d be less grouchy later, so you’re gonna have to move.”

“I didn’t know about Lou’s birthday at that point!”

“No, I imagine you wouldn’t have offered otherwise,” replied Zayn, as a smile spread across his face, “c’mon. We can get everyone up and have hair of the dog before the management comes down and spoils everything. Proper sick Christmas breakfast, just us lot, yeah?”

In truth he would have gotten up regardless to gobble some Cocodamol tablets from his medicine bag, but Harry didn’t need to know that as he heaved himself up and poked his friend encouragingly on the shoulder.

“Fine!”

As Harry unhappily pulled on a white chef’s jacket and some checkered trousers, Zayn hopped over the side of the bed and discovered although he had taken his top off before bed; he was still wearing a pair of jeans.

“Why did I go to bed in these?” he asked, bewildered.

“You weren’t feeling well, I think you just gave up.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Where are you going?”

“To pick up the dog.”

“What?”

Zayn rolled his eyes, and shuffled his way to the bottom corner of the small room. Behind a rarely opened curtain, there was a door with a window looking out on to the communal balcony. For some reason the only entrance anyone ever used was the one next door in Louis and Liam’s room, so it was a bit stiff as Zayn jiggled the lock and opened it up.
“Zayn!”

“Hold on,” he shushed, leaning down just long enough to grab a couple of bottles of Prosecco he had picked up in Innsbruck, “I just wanted to get these. For ‘breakfast’,” he grinned, making air quotations with his free fingers and waving the bottles about jauntily.

“I really do think I’m going to be sick,” Harry quietly lamented, but he didn’t turn down a glass.

The pair of them meandered, still not sober, through to the kitchens so Hazza could get things sorted and Zayn could organise the table for staff food.

“Okay, first things first,” Harry decided after flicking a few switches and taking his phone out, “breakfast playlists?”

And with that Band Aid’s ‘Do They Know its Christmas Time?’ blared out at high volume.

They both began to sing along, Zayn helping by setting the small staff table in the kitchen recess with cutlery and glasses and a stack of plates. He added a jug of orange juice (to dilute the fizz), and orchestrated with Haz a menu to take to encourage the others along that included bacon, eggs, pancakes, fried tomatoes and mushrooms, continental meats and cheeses, and warm fresh bread.

Because it was easier, the first door he knocked on was the girls.

“Pez! Soph!” he shouted, bursting in, “breakfast tiiiiiname! Oh, and Merry Christmas!”

“Oh my god, this is awesome news,” Perrie exclaimed, sitting up too fast and groaning, “let me get dressed and I’ll see you there.”

“Me too,” said Sophia, “although apparently I don’t even need to get dressed,” she chuckled.

And with that she stood up and stumbled out of the room to brush her teeth, only exclaiming in loud shock as she came across Josh – who had attempted to go back to sleep on the floor by the toilet.

This just left the Other Boys Room, which was both exciting and terrifying.

Louis’ birthday with Liam had been a warm, and lovely time – where Liam had seemed glued to his side, and everything for a short period had been looking roses. He was almost scared to speak to him again and spoil the memory with more mundane interactions.

But, obviously, that wouldn’t do, so he knocked loudly and pressed his ear up against the door.

“Wha’ the fook??”

“Get your leg outta my backside Irish!”

“I’m stuck, Muscles here is taking up too much space!!”

“Sod off!”

“Liam, are you sleep spreading unfairly on Nialler and i?!”

“Did someone knock?”

“Yes, Liam, its Santa.”
With an eye roll and a fond smile Zayn pushed open the door a crack, letting in light and causing Louis to hiss like a vampire.

“Malik! Shut that door this instant!” he shrieked.

“Shut up you old fart. Harry and I are sorting breakfast out. And theres bucksfizz for anyone that wants it!”

From behind him the cheery notes of Santa Baby wafted through, along with Harry’s enthusiastic singing-along; to which Louis visibly perked.

“Don’t’ call me that,” he answered without venom, before adding, “whats for breakfast?”

“I’m starving!” announced a blonde head from the middle, “get me a plate!”
“Liam?” Zayn asked, tentatively, “I know you don’t have to be up for ages, but if you want some food I can bring it through for you or put it aside?”

Just as Louis had opened his mouth and began to mock Liam for moments previously having insisted he was going back to sleep, Liam himself sat up smiling.

“No, I’ll get up. Eating with everyone else will be much nicer, and besides – I can come back to bed after,” he laughed.

“Why are you wandering around half naked?”

“What?” said Zayn, suddenly looking down and realising he had never gotten around to putting a t-shirt on, “oh! I just woke up and forgot when I went off to get drinks,” he replied honestly.

Louis wolf whistled, but at least he wasn’t looking at Liam- who had gone a tad red.

Worrying he had perhaps drunkenly done something weird the night before, which was causing the flustered look on his mate’s face, Zayn excused himself back to his own bedroom – where he pulled on a clean pair of jeans, an a festive feeling red cable-knit jumper.

Back in the kitchen things were livening up.

The place smelt amazing, and before long there were many bleary eyed faces swarming around in various states of hangover and attempted helpfulness.

Josh had taken a seat at the back of the booth, and was resting his head against the wall with his eyes shut; the biggest glass he could find in front of him – containing water and ice.

Sophia was energetically scrambling some eggs, while Harry flipped bacon, and kept a beady eye on the music. They were both boogying a little on the spot.

Liam had made himself busy making an endless supply of orange juice and fizz, which he decorated with unseasonal mini umbrellas from the bar with a chuckle.

Niall and Pez were already sat at the table, guzzling said drinks and recounting funny bits of the evening before – while Zayn and Louis stood to the side, keeping an eye on the warming loaves of bread.

“So you had a good birthday then?”
“Oh my god, Zayn, it was amazing!” he actually looked a tad misty eyed for a second, “it may have been my best birthday yet?”

“Wow. That’s amazing. Still can’t believe if it wasn’t for Leeyum we’d never have had any clue it was an occasion at all!”

Louis blushed at that, adding, “to be honest I think I’d have cracked. Or one of you would have found me crying in my room, getting drunk on my own, and came to see what all the fuss was about.”

At that they both laughed, before jumping to attention at Harry’s orders that the bread was ready to come out.

This, then, was how Simon found them an hour later. Squished in around the little wooden table, several empty Prosecco bottles (Liam may have added a couple of his own to Zayn’s pair), a empty jug of orange juice, crumbs, and the clatter of knives and forks against plates as second and third helpings made their way down. Harry had left his playlist blaring, and at that moment the famous Slade song (Merry Christmas Everybody) was in full swing – and with the added chorus from our seasonaires, definitely noticeable from some distance away. Harry and Louis had actually slung their arms around one another, and were practically singing to one another. Josh had managed to attain some colour in his face. And Zayn. Zayn was tucked into Liam’s side, swaying every so slightly as the bigger boy led the way, singing and grinning to his heart’s content.

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“This is fucking terrifying!”

“No it isn’t. for Goodness sake Zayn, you survived that lesson with Wolfie. You have to keep at it or you’ll never be any good.”

“I hate you, Perrie,” Zayn deadpanned.

They were together on the nursery slope behind their hotel, where Pez was attempting to further her friend’s snowboarding education. And although Zayn was a difficult student, and currently hating life, he had to admit he that if he ever wanted to impress Liam and scoot along next to him through the beautiful mountainous scenery – he would actually have to get good at this first.

“You’re welcome,” she snorted, “now. I really think you’re getting it. Shall we take the chairlift right to the top for a last go, you leaf down heel-edge half way. Then turn about, practice tow-edge, and come into a turn when we’re at the gentlest section right before the bottom?”

“Right. Yes. Lets go.”

Whilst on the chairlift he couldn’t stop his heart hammering as he watched the distance to the ground beneath their feet grow ever larger and larger – but once he got to the top he felt full of determination (even if Perrie did have to hold his hands and pull him along with her as they slid of the seat at the top).

“Ready?” she asked five minutes later, after they had snapped their back feet back into their
bindings.

“Yep. Lets fucking do this!” he answered, standing up quickly and wiggling his toes a little to check his foot was secure.

“Follow me then,” she announced, kicking off and zooming away.

“Ahhh, oh my god, oh my god, that was so sick!”

“You totally nailed it, Zee!”

He was so ecstatic at his impressive journey down the mountain (minimal mistakes, no falling over, less wild arm waving) he hadn’t noticed anybody else join them until he had jumped into Pez’s arms for a congratulatory hug.

“Woah, Zayn, you’re actually getting there,” said a voice laden with surprise.

Louis, decked out in his bright 80s inspired ski gear, was holding skis over his shoulder and looking impressed.

Liam was next to him, snowboard tucked behind his back, with an unreadably blank look on his face.

Before he could even remember the conversation from the previous week, where Perrie had pointed out Liam’s weird behavior when getting the hand cream, she had jumped away from him and rested the hand nearest on her hip.

“Won’t be long before we can drag him up the ordinary pistes with the rest of us,” she said, “now how about we head back and argue over the shower for a bit?!”

“We were already on our way home!” Louis cried, in indignation, and the two of them picked up speed towards the hotel – pushing and shoving all the while.

Zayn fell into quiet step next to Liam, who had patiently waited for him to unclip his remaining foot from the board.

“You really do look like you’re getting the hang of it now,” Liam eventually said, “are you enjoying it now?”

“I’ll enjoy it more when I can do it properly,” said Zayn, with an eye roll.

Liam responded with one of his giant, crinkly smiles at this, and held open the garage door for Zayn at the same time.

To whit Zayn felt the by now all too familiar blooming of warmth in the pit of his stomach. Liam kept doing adorable things like this, was the trouble.

Encouraging his snowboarding was just the tip of the iceberg.

He was always holding doors like a Georgian gentleman, or noticing Zayn’s drink was nearly done and replacing it before he could ask. One time he even grabbed Zayn’s washing out the tumble-drier so he didn’t have to come down alone later and left it folded up on his bed while he was doing house-keeping.

The latter may have caused him to privately gush to Harry about what great husband material Liam
was for so long even the most good natured of his friends was forced to threaten to stuff one of said clean socks down his throat lest he mention the incident again.

And all the while it made it far, far too easy for Zayn to imagine Liam might actually reciprocate his feelings, and there was a cosy future ahead where he came home every day to familial niceties from Mr Payne.

Which, he knew, was unhealthy and terrible and all the bad things.

As supported by Harry, who had now dubbed Liam as one of those people who were simply quite nice without having any idea how their actions may otherwise be interpreted.

This was, perhaps secretly, cemented by the fact Harry had had his share of being into straight friends before, and was all the more prepared to prevent Zayn making the same mistakes he had.

“Are you ready yet?”

“No!”

“This is unacceptably ridiculous!”

“What’s going on?” asked Zayn, following the raised voices out of his own room (where he had been styling his hair in front of the mirror) and along the corridor.

Louis was standing outside the bathroom, and he turned around sharply looking a trifle wild-eyed, “Sophia has been in there for nearly forty minutes – and I need a shower!” he emphasized the latter by banging his fist against the locked door.

“LOUIS!” a muffled, but irritated, voice returned, “piss off and let me finish shaving my legs!”

“Arghhh!”

Zayn smiled to himself, and followed Louis back to his own room. It was somewhat more compact since in the last week, Niall had decided to move in.

He had clearly quite enjoyed his foray into flat life after Louis’ birthday – and a spare single bed had been found and dragged in to go along the wall at the foot of the Austrian twin, to the side of the door way.

In addition, since it was now a truth universally acknowledged that this room was the primary flat hangout, Louis and Niall had raided the disused staff room in the basement for a large, engraved wooden table to put at the head of Niall’s bed – and directly to the left of the doorway in. Here, they had taken to laying out extra food from meal times and large quantities of booze and cups.

Entering now, and Louis was flopping back onto the big bed crossly, while Niall was sat on his bed pouring himself a vodka and Red Bull.

“What’s up?”

“Wassup, Malik,” Niall replied, lifting his glass, “want to grab one?”

“Sick, thanks blondie.”
“Oi, its Nialler or nothing!”

“Or Irish,” mumbled Louis from the pillow he had mushed his face in, huffily.

“Or Irish,” Niall conceded, with a nod, “anyway wire in. Its New Years, we’re finished for the day, and if we don’t pregame I won’t be as devastatingly drunk as I intend to be right now for the rest of the evening!”

“You just want to fire into that Scottish girl on holiday with her family,” Zayn mused, uncapping the vodka, “and if you don’t get really drunk first you’ll be too embarrassed to do anything when we see them in Kaos.”

“Got it in one, Zaynie,” he knocked back half his glass, before pointing under the desk, “Red Bull cans are under there.”

At that moment Sophia popped her head around door to announce the bathroom was finally free, and Louis ran off in a blur.

After that a general excited, pre-party feeling began to permeate the apartment.

Niall was playing upbeat party classics from a battered old iPod and some speakers he had brought down and wired up on the Treats Table, as he and Zayn made their way through his bottle of Żubrówka. Harry plonked down next to Niall eating an orange, occasionally looking at Louis’ side of the room wistfully.

Sophia, Josh, Perrie, Cher, Greg and Nick decided they were fed up of waiting and going to head on down to Alte Stube immediately to get a couple of Nail Game rounds in before hitting Kaos.

“I guess we should really wait for Louis,” Zayn was saying, as Nick rolled his eyes and made a snarky comment about divas.

“What’s his problem?” Niall asked, in genuine confusion.

Zayn looked at Harry, who simply shrugged and delicately took a sip of his drink without meeting anyone’s eyes.

It wasn’t a bad start to the night, Zayn was thinking. He didn’t really mind if the others had gone on ahead. It was peaceful predrinking in a slightly smaller contingent, and it felt a little less squashed than usual in the bedroom.

The only problem was that Liam wasn’t going to be able to join them until the last guest had done with the bar – and new years eve was a night people tended to want to over-do it. He couldn’t help feeling slightly concerned that Liam would most definitely miss midnight – but most of the rest of the night as well. And while he knew better than to hope for a new years kiss, he had hoped to give Liam a crushing hug conveying wordlessly how happy he was to have met him to see out 2016. But perhaps that was the vodka talking, he thought, squinting into his drink with his left eye screwed shut.

He was vaguely aware of Louis rejoining them, and wiggling about in his towel selecting clothes, but his mind was mostly elsewhere wondering what on earth he was going to do about his useless crush come 2017 and the cold, stark new year.

So, him and Liam had been getting closer as the season progressed. But so what? He was close with everyone now, really, so that it was difficult to tell if what he had with his sunny-dispositioned
colleague was merely the same as with everyone else, or something special.

How many times had he gone over this in his head?

Liam and Louis were very close, but they had had a lifetime together to get to that point. They were always slinging arms around one another, sharing food off one another’s plates, or stealing a drink or an item of clothing off of the other. It wasn’t a useful comparison.

With people in general he had concluded, via covert yet enthusiastic observation, that Liam was friendly but slightly distant. He laughed along with people, he was welcoming, he rarely got cross unless it was with Louis bringing up an embarrassing childhood story.

But he didn’t seek out physical closeness with any of the others, and he didn’t seem to hunt them down for heart-to-hearts either.

*That* was most very definitely Zayn’s remit.

While he set up the bar with Zee’s company, Liam would worm into conversation things he was worrying about and they would talk them out. Like the day he confessed he was scared he wasn’t good enough to run the bar on his own and do all the figures and was terrified of being discovered a fraud and fired.

Zayn had given him a relaxing shoulder massage to calm him down, while going over all the reasons he must have been offered the job in the first place – until Liam was smiley again, and had finished with the account book for the day.

Otherwise, he really did feel Liam chose to sit next to him more often than anyone else whenever he finally did make it to Kaos. And even though it was evidently rather loud in there, Liam was always smushed right up against his side and talking right into his ear in a way nobody else did.

But perhaps he just felt closer to Zayn in a friendly manner?

He frowned deeper into his glass, and sighed.

“Dude, it is *new years eve*. Cheer the fuck up!”

Zayn looked up to catch Niall giving him a Knowing Look, and laughed, “Sorry Irish.”

At this moment Louis chose to burst back into the room singing Whitney Houston’s ‘I Wanna Dance With Somebody’ at full volume brandishing tobacco, and accidentally roundhouse kicked Zayn’s half full can of Red Bull onto the floor.

Minor chaos ensued.

Zayn was tipsily indignant about the waste of his mixer.

Harry was giggling loudly, but trying to stifle it, and Niall looked unimpressed.

“Sorry guys,” a pink faced Louis announced, “anyone want to chum me upstairs to the cleaning cupboard so I can clear up?”

Silence.

“Guys. Come on. Zayn needs his hand held every time he goes down to the basement these days, Harry won’t venture to the upper floors without – like – *three* of us at a time. This. Is. A. Fucking. Weird. Hotel. Don’t make me go up to the closet on my own. Please?”
Which was how ten minutes later the four of them could be found hesitantly making their way out the flat and up the main staircase.

“What on earth are you going up there for?”

“Argh!”
“Calm down, Hazza, it’s only Liam,” Louis’ authoritative voice announced, turning around on a few steps up, “we need to go to the cleaning cupboard. There was, erm, a bit of an accident with the Red Bull…”

“On your side of the room!” Niall had announced.

Liam’s eyes narrowed a little, “Louis?”

“In my defense Zayn here put his can down in a stupid place.”

“Hey!”

But something in Liam’s face lightened, and he actually chuckled, “you idiots. Well, I need some blue roll for the bar anyway so I’ll come with you.”

“Oh thank god Liam, just what we needed. Your strong arms to protect us from all the ghosts up here!” Louis cackled.

But Zayn’s heart was fluttering again from the close proximity, and the fact Liam was flashing him his biggest, friendliest smile as they fell into step ascending the stairs.

“The guests this week are really lovely. I think they feel sorry for me being stuck here on my own, cause they’ve all agreed to head off by 1am!”

“That’s sick, Liam,” Zayn exclaimed, with private exultance.

The second floor landing was dark, and it was a slight struggle to actually open the door to the little room just off the main landing.

“Okay, move aside,” Louis had imperiously announced, after Liam had finally yanked the door open.

He pushed his childhood friend forwards, and they both disappeared into the tiny room.

“I’m not waiting out here, thank you very much!” Harry had then declared, and rushed forward with a stumble.

“Come on Zayn, I feel like its important to follow the crowd in such times as there,” Niall had said, waving him forward.

What Zayn suspected was that Niall was as unnerved by the creepy dim corridor as he and Harry were, but didn’t like to admit it. Which was frankly fine with him so long as they all got inside that damn closet and stopped alluding to the Ghost Business.
Once inside it was a bit of a tight squish.

The wall to the left was covered in shelves, on which sat bedding. Bed sheets, duvet and pillow covers, and mattress protectors; skyhigh.

On the right there was a table with equipment for house keeping on it – blue roll, dusters, bleach, mops, and a hoover tucked into the corner for good measure.

“This is somewhat disappointing as adventures go,” Harry’s low drawl rang out. Zayn giggled.

“Its not meant to be an adventure, Haz, we just wanted to get stuff to clear up,” Niall replied – the roll of his eyes almost visible in his voice.

“Can someone turn the light on, then?” Louis asked.

“I am,” Liam said, sounding uncertain, “or I mean I have been. Flicking the light switch. Nothings happening.”

“What?”

“Calm down Harry,” Louis instructed, and Zayn felt someone brush past him in the dark – quickly followed by the sounds of someone pushing down on the light switch repeatedly.

“Why don’t you just open the door and let some of the light from outside in?” Zayn asked.

Thus followed a series of noises that could all be described, confidently by any of them, as categorically not being the door opening by any stretch of the imagination.

It was Liam’s voice that finally broke the silence, announcing the obvious; “So the door won’t budge.”

A very long and poignant feeling pause followed this, before everybody starting exclaiming at once all on top of each other.

Louis started pounding on the door enthusiastically, shouting “help”.

Niall’s sensible tones had cried, “surely not” before he was pushing forward next to Liam and vigorously jigging the door-handle.

Harry, who was in the far back corner now, had quietly slumped down to sit upon the Henry Hoover with his head in his hands; muttering “why me” over and over again.

Zayn had unabashedly found Liam’s arm in the dark and was now gripping onto it fiercely, “Liam? Whats going on?” he hissed.

“Its fine. The lock must have slipped. We’ll get out of here fine.”

He pulled his left arm free from Zayn’s vice-like grip, but slung it out around his waist instead, pulling him into his side.

“I don’t like small spaces!” Niall was now howling, still jimmying the handle uselessly.

“Ni, this is not the time to think about that!” Louis was wailing, “help me shout for help!”
Harry snorted at this from the corner, but his eyes were still screwed shut in alarm had anyone been able to see them.

“There isn’t a lock on this door, Li,” Zayn eventually whispered, belatedly realising what Liam and Harry – not being housekeepers – couldn’t possibly have known.

“There what?” he felt Liam’s breath extremely close to his ear, and fervently wished it was under almost any circumstances but these.

“These doors don’t lock. There aren’t any keys. This shouldn’t be able to happen.”

“I don’t think this is the time to be talking about that, then,” was Liam’s firm reply.

To Zayn he sounded insanely calm given the information he must have been processing.

“Lets, erm, just wait it out patiently,” at this point he raised his voice slightly, “we can’t be locked in here forever guys! Lets just have a seat until somebody comes to rescue us?”

“Rescue?”

“Yes, Nialler, as in kick the door in. That’s all. Its all fine!” Louis was rambling, attempting to sound comforting.

“What if we run out of air? There are literally five of us in here!” the sound of Niall’s panicked, quick breathing was apparent to all.

“The high ceiling will make it fine,” Louis meandered on.

“Exactly,” Liam agreed, “lets just pass the time somehow.”

“Why don’t we play a game?” Louis quickly agreed.

It was easy to see how they were best friends. The way their conversation flowed on from each other – or in this instance, Louis clearly sensed that Liam was attempting to defuse the situation with a distraction. And had jumped on the bandwagon.

“Why don’t we play Never Have I Ever?” Harry piped up.

Well that’s a loaded suggestion, Zayn found himself thinking; and since no-one could see him: he raised his eyebrows exceptionally.

“Excellent! I love that game, Harold.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” said Zayn, wryly.

“Shut up, Malik, it’s a very insightful game. Lets all sit down in a circle?”

There was a bit of shuffling, and Louis had to take Niall by the shoulders and encourage him down towards the ground.

By this point everybody’s eyes had began to grow accustomed to the dark, and shadowy outlines of one another and the contents of the cupboard had began to come into focus.

Zayn, who found himself between Niall and Liam, patted his Irish friend’s leg as encouragingly as he could. He remembered Ni having told him and Liam in the bar the other evening about getting trapped in a closet at his Grandma’s house for several hours by his older brother as a kid, leading on to extreme fear of enclosed spaces as an adult.
“I’m sure ten minutes into this game and you’ll be learning far too many horrible facts to worry about the door so much, Nialler,” he added, sagely.

“Right, since you suggested the game I suggest you go first Lou,” Liam began, with a loud throat clear.

“Fine by me! If we work out how to actually play this without booze. We can’t very well take a drink to indicate we have done something if we don’t have anything to drink, can we?”

“I suppose we could just raise our hands?” Harry suggested.

There was general consent to this as about all they could do, and so they began.

Louis started them off.

“Never have I ever…. Had sex at school!”

Harry and Niall raised their hands, and Louis wolf whistled, shouting, “Details!”

“I used to meet my girlfriend in sixth form in the math corridor toilets for during class rendezvous,” Niall told them, fondness in his voice began to take over the panic, “Orla was great…”

“I was seeing an older guy on the rugby team for a bit,” Harry said, throwing in his ten cents, “he wasn’t out yet and we didn’t have many friends in common so we hardly saw much of one another. But we used to sneak into the gym showers a few times a week when no-one else was about.”

He didn’t sound as wistful as Niall, and Zayn felt a stab of pity for his roomie. He himself had diligently avoided trying to date anyone actually at school, but he had met people in MSN chat rooms and at a local under 18s alternative club night which at the very least had allowed him to lose his virginity before finishing school – and experiment a bit where no-one could recognise him.

“My turn,” Liam said, loudly, at this point, “never have I ever had a wank with friends in the room.”

Zayn, Harry and Niall immediately contorted their faces, but Louis (if it had been light enough to see clearly) had gone red and begun to scowl.

“Liam, when are you going to stop bringing this up!” he seemed genuinely pained.

“Never!” Liam replied gleefully.

Louis half put his arm up, grumbling loudly, before tacking on, “FINE! When I was on holiday with Liam’s family in the countryside we were staying in this cottage, right. And we had our own room. Anyway, I was 13 and had recently decided I was madly in love with this guy who was, like, 17 and in the cottage next door to us. We’d literally spent the whole day outside doing activities, with him sunbathing topless right in my eye line, and when we went to bed that night I just couldn’t help it.”

Everyone burst into laughter, wondering how Liam knew about this. Luckily they were not held long in suspense.

“As it turned out, I had not fallen asleep at all. But my iPod had run out of battery. Suddenly all I know is there’s a loud rustling noise and Louis muttering ‘Toooooom’ over and over!”

he was literally shaking with giggles.
“This wanker waited until I was literally finishing before turning over and going ‘LOUIS?!’ – causing the worst orgasm of my young life!”

“That is the most fucked up thing I have ever heard,” Niall said solemnly.

“I hope you didn’t get anything on the bed,” Harry asked, eyes twinkling.

“No. Even under stress I have excellent aim,” answered Louis, without missing a beat.

The game went on much like this for both Harry and Z’s rounds (‘never have I ever cheated on someone’ – no hands, ‘never have I ever wanked on a plane’ – surprisingly Liam).

It wasn’t until the turn landed to Harry, who asked ‘never have I ever had romantic feelings for a friend who didn’t know’, that things got heavy.

It was the sort of question Zayn usually exerted great effort to avoid, but he was several drinks down now and feeling a bit ‘fuck it’. He raised his hand.

Louis looked a bit sheepish, but his also went up.

Harry’s and Niall’s remained resolutely down, but Liam’s was now tentatively going up as well; and Louis was looking at him searchingly.

Of course, in the course of the many, many people Liam had met in his lifetime that could be literally any one of them. The fact Louis looked confused simply meant at some point Liam had not mentioned to his best friend that he fancied another friend. Not at all uncommon, even among close mates, if someone thinks they have no hope at reciprocation. But still. He couldn’t help the butterflies that had taken flight as a tiny corner of his mind drunkenly shouted ‘it could be you it could be you’, whilst simultaneously silencing the one whispering ‘he likes girls’.

Probably to direct attention away from himself, Liam asked Niall and Harry how they could possibly have their arms down.

“Always tell them, don’t I?” Ni shrugged.

“Even if I don’t tell them, they always no,” Harry lamented.

Which was easy enough to believe. He certainly worse his heart on his sleeve enough around there.

“Oh I have a good one!” Niall suddenly burst out, “never have I ever had an identity crisis over someone I liked!”

“It’s not your turn, Irish,” Louis was primly replying, but he put his hand up, “and obviously the first time I liked anyone – it was Philip back in reception year by the way – I realised I was different. So I had a minor what the hell moment before moving on with my day.”

“That’s true,” Liam nodded, “he told everyone he was going to marry Phil one day after we saw Amy and Paul in the year above doing it in the playground. Obviously our teaching assistant was a bit taken aback and told him he had to marry a girl.”

“I wonder what old Phil is up to now?” Louis asked, laughing, “completely unaware he was my first romantic interest! Also oi! Why are none of you raising your hands?”

Harry raised his, and told a similar story – he heard people talking about marriage and love as little kid, but knew he only liked other boys and got a bit upset.
Niall shrugged, and waved his hand about in the universal sign of ‘sort of maybe’ – explaining his experience in relation to a crisis of character, rather than sexuality.

Zayn obviously also raised his hand, telling the unfortunate story of how his first crush had also turned out to be unpleasantly homophobic at an early age.

What caught everyone off guard was the fact Liam had, once again, quietly raised his hand – but seemed reluctant to go into anything about why.

Even Louis was looking confused, and slightly annoyed.

“Come on Payno, we’re all friends here,” Harry was saying, nudging him in the ribs.

“I’d rather not actually,” Liam was replying with a small smile.

This sent Zayn’s now slightly sobering head into over drive.

Could he literally maybe possibly hopefully mean *him*??

Or, a realistic and depressing side to his brain, added, could he mean something unrelated to gender preferences and be actually talking about one of their colleagues – hence the reluctance to discuss it openly with so many new friends??

He turned to look at Liam more fully, and saw he was staring right back at him. Zayn forced out an encouraging smile, which he got returned with a shrug.
Innsbruck, ich muß dich lassen!

Chapter Summary

In which we visit the Bibliotek with Larry & they have a run in with an intimidating older gentleman.

Featuring apple strudel, wines, out-door plaza drinking, some sick scenery, poor time-keeping, a shabby but well loved Gasthaus, the Inn river and of course the town of Innsbruck <3

Chapter Notes

Stolen the chapter title from a classical song, mainly because its very fitting to Louis & Harry's situation :') - if you want to check it out, here's a youtube link

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95Yi0wNCQ4E).

LOUIS.

As New Years Eves go, 2016 was turning out to be a bit of a ball ache as far as Louis was concerned.

So far he had been forced to work late on breakfast set up duty; shoved into last place in the shower (a fact which had caused him no considerable distress, as he liked to get in there early and take as long as possible on the actually getting ready part); he’d booted over an almost-full can of soft drink on his bedroom floor; and now he had found himself locked in an un-lockable cupboard.

It was difficult to concentrate fully on the game Hazza had suggested when he was primarily attempting to explain to himself how on earth the door could be doing this in the first place.

Eventually ’Never Have I Ever’ had run a bit dry, and people were losing track of time. It had been around 90 minutes, and Niall was starting to get angst-y again.

He was currently tucked into Zayn’s side, where Zee was distracting him quietly with funny stories. It was quite adorable, Louis had thought when he first noticed; how the blonde boy had brought out the Bradford Badboy’s protective side.

Liam had decided to try and do something practical, as was his wont, and was currently rummaging through the supplies in the hope of finding anything useful to their escape. He was letting go a stream of commentary as he did so, along the lines of ‘what’s this for? No use…’ and so on.

Harry had shuffled forward, and was now leaning against the exit with Louis. He was hyper aware of Harry’s arm, only covered by the thin material of his shirt (dark blue, covered in little white
hearts), against his own grey and be-shirted one.

“Are you alright?” he found himself whispering.

“I heard Liam and Zayn talking before,” Harry whispered back.

“So?” It seemed a bit odd for that to bother him.

“Zee said the door doesn’t have a lock. That, like, we literally should not be able to be trapped in here?”

They turned to look at each other in the dimness, and Louis inclined his head ever so slightly.

“I knew it! It was outside here that I first got pushed over,” Harry carried on a hushed tone, “what the hells going on here, Lou?”

He sounded genuinely upset, which tugged at the braces’ wearing boy’s heartstrings harder than he would have liked.

“I’m sorry Harry,” he replied, uselessly.

He looked forward again, trying to think of something upbeat to say and squinting into the dark at the back of the cupboard, when he felt a soft, gentle hand pick up and hold his own.

Harry squeezed his hand, and he found himself doing so in return.

“We’ll get out of here, Haz, whatever’s keeping the door shut can’t stay there forever.”

“I did some digging around,” was the unexpected, guilty sounding reply, “you know – to see what was going on around here?”

“Harry…” Louis said, in a warning tone.

He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear what the other had to say.

“Everybody knows there’s something weird about this place,” he ploughed on, “I’ve mentioned it to loads of locals and they think its something to do with some old witch – or Hex, as they say here – who used to live in this valley. This hotel must be built on top of where her house was!”

“Harry, that is surely the biggest load of codswollop either of us have ever heard! They just say these things to unsettle foreigners and children.”

“Why is this door locked then?”

“Its not locked, its just stuck.” He kicked one of his legs over Harry’s at this point, and tucked their hands on top of his thigh.

“If you say so.”

A further five minutes past before someone softly wrapped on the door; causing both Louis and Harry to jump about a foot in their air with surprise.

“Hello?” Liam asked, cautious sounding.

He was still standing up, and had paused with his hands above his head balancing a duvet he had been about to pull down to sit under.
“I heard you were stuck in here,” a faint voice said.

Immediately, despite everything in his entire life suggesting that a belief in the supernatural was nothing other that complete silliness, upon hearing that voice he felt every hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand up.

It didn’t sound menacing, it didn’t sound angry, it just sounded off.

Harry had made an audible gasping noise, which suggested he felt it to, and as he peered around at the others he noted Niall’s saucer like eyes bugging, and the fact that Zayn had screwed his tight shut.

The sentence how could you know that? began to float around Louis’ head, which was thoroughly disagreeable and alarming.

They had been calling for help, after all. That someone had put two and two together about getting locked in should hardly have been shocking. And yet he felt a thorough desire to keep the door firmly between whoever, or whatever, was on the other side to them.

“We’re quite alright in here,” Louis called, silently pulling himself forward from the door, “thank you anyway.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said the voice sharply, “now listen to me. It isn’t safe. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Well, alright, we know Liam’s missing work and everything – but we are staff,” said Louis.

He had begun to feel a trifle queasy, and entirely unsure why it was he that was answering the unknown voice. Aside, perhaps, from the fact that most of his friends looked completely unable to.

“What? Whose Liam?”

Liam, he now noted, was frowning furiously at him and gesticulating assertively. He simply shrugged.

“I run the bar,” he eventually called out, “I need to get back to it. I thought someone might come upstairs looking for me and help us get out of here? Are you staying in the hotel?”

“No.”

Ominous silence.

“Y-you aren’t a guest at Hotel Elisabeth?” Harry asked, hitting a new octave.

“Elisabeth?” replied the voice, “what do you know about Lisabet?”

By this point Zayn’s eyes had reopened, and he was mouthing ‘what.the.fuck’ at Louis with a creased brow.

Niall looked like he was trying to clamber onto Zee’s lap, and had clamped his left hand over his mouth so firmly his knuckles had turned white.

“It’s the name of the hotel?” Liam called back, “look I don’t know what’s going on here but we’d very much like to get out of this cupboard now. It must be nearly midnight.”

“It is after midnight.”
“You are kidding me?!” Louis bellowed, forgetting himself for a moment. Had they really been in there so long they had missed the guests walking past to bed, or the bells ringing out for 2017 on the clocks?

“It is half past 2.”

“That’s bollocks,” Louis shouted, “we’d have heard people mulling about. They’d have heard us shouting for help!”

“Stay away from this place,” the voice carried on, with little inflection but a great deal of feeling.

And with that, and a soft click, the door swung open an inch.

Harry looked ready to pass out, and launched himself forwards toward Liam as quickly as he could, stumbling to his feet.

Louis, who was still closest to the door, stood up and pushed it wide before anybody could stop him or he could talk himself out of it. Thankfully, and to his great relief, there was a woman standing there.

She had long, flowy blonde plaits down to her waist, and she was wearing a serious expression.

“Thanks, I think,” Louis said, dusting down his bum and trying to smile and look normal.

Liam followed, and came to stand close by his side, “Yeah. Er, it was nice of you to help out. I don’t really understand how you sorted it….” He trailed off, sounding hopeful she might explain.

“It was never really locked you know,” said the strange figure.

She appeared to be wearing a Dirndl, traditional Bavarian dress often trotted out for special occasions.

Louis wondered if she was working in one of the German speaking hotels near by, or if she was simply wearing it because of where they were. Her voice was heavily accented.

“Guys, can you hold the door?” Zayn’s shaky voice suddenly filled the silence, “Nialler’s a bit unsteady on his feet and I could use a hand.”

Liam immediately leant backwards and pulled the door as wide as it would go, and in the split second that he turned to look at what was going on the girl they had been talking to had completely vanished. Without a sound.

***

Naturally, their extended disappearance took some explaining.

Simon was primarily furious with Liam about the unattended bar, and he was taken aside for what the others guessed was a pretty enthusiastic dressing down.

The rest of the team were merely confused that they hadn’t turned up at Kaos until so late in the day.
(Let it be said a significant amount of alcohol was still consumed however).

Some of the guests claimed to have gone on a hunt for them when they hadn’t returned to the foyer, and everyone with rooms near by had claimed to hear nothing by means of calls for help.

Altogether it was a very odd, and unsettling evening.

Not to mention the fact nobody had a bloody clue who the woman in the Dirndl had been.

And so January got off to a somber start.

Nobody went upstairs alone, and the housekeeping team ensured they worked every room in solid pairs; lest anything anyone be caught alone with something weird happening to them.

Simon didn’t want to hear anything about it, and resolutely berated them at the mere mention of the abnormal.

Thankfully as the month went by, so did the skiing or snowboarding abilities of those who had arrived as novices improve.

Louis found himself rallying ever increasingly sized groups to the piste between shifts, and generally settling into exactly what he had hoped life in the mountains would be.

Their bedroom had taken on a life of its own as the Lounge for the flat. The addition of Niall to their space may have reduced the physical area, but it had added exponentially to it otherwise.

In conjunction to the silly pages torn out of magazines that had already adorned the walls (professional snow sports competitors from the winter Olympics primarily), Niall had brought a stuffed dog from home that his friends had gifted him at his leaving party.

Eoin was brown and white, and was now sat atop of a broken light fixture above the Austrian twin bed. Louis had drunkenly added a navy snapback of Ni’s, as well as a wooden tie they had found left behind in one of the guest rooms.

Niall was also resourceful, and had discovered a dodgy miniature TV better accustomed to teenage bedrooms in the late 90s, complete with VCR. It never showed anything in English, but it provided both an enjoyable background noise and occasionally programs that were unexpectedly engaging and forced them to improve their shaudy German language skills.

This now had pride of place on the cabinet under the windows on Liam’s side of the room, but everyone had noted the angles were best positioned for the blonde’s bed.

The space above Ni’s actual bedding was now enthusiastically covered as well. On top of the abstract 1920s painting that had been hung there on arrival he had begun to place little bottles the Jager shots came in. They were now onto the second tier, and actually looked pretty cool.

Next to that he had torn out a couple of nature pictures from under the ocean, disclosing a hitherto unknown love of animals; so that a floating giant turtle and some whales were perennially watching them. Next to there were novelty beer mats in German, a postcard one of his school friends had sent him from Peru, and some crude drawings of the silly or the bizarre that various members of the hotel team had done (usually while pissed).

All in all, Louis now felt the room was complete.
It had been nice sharing with just Liam, and he had been slightly worried at the old adage of ‘threes a crowd’, but that just didn’t seem to apply to Niall.

He kept up with Lou’s exhausting commentaries, always had a sharp reply, and gently needled Liam into being less self reflective and more light hearted. He may have been rather messy, he was forever accumulating more goods from the kitchen than could comfortably fit on the Treats Table by his bed, but it was endearing more than annoying. (Aside from the time Liam had been forced to hoover up a lot of Victoria Sponge cake that had unceremoniously been smushed into the carpet after wine night).

And so, in the bliss of finding the job easy and the living good fun, he could almost entirely forget about the Harry Styles business.

Since the festive period Louis had attempted to drink less on nights out, and set clearer boundaries. But it was difficult.

At first Harry had seemed a touch saddened at the distance he was putting between them (for his own good as much as his own, Louis was constantly reminding himself).

But Harry hadn’t even started uni yet. And Louis knew he was harbouring a secret desire to backpack around Australia with the rest of his gap year because he had over heard him telling Zayn so once in Alte Stube.

Louis and Liam had made a loose plan to also spend the following six months before classes started again backpacking – only traveling east across Europe. And in that time, moving about and meeting so many new people; how could anything he and Harry started now hope to last it?

It would be painful. Somebody would lose interest first when they met some hot, toned, funny fellow traveller and that would be it. Texts, emails and Skypes would abruptly stop.

Somebody would be left listlessly checking their phone every two seconds, having spent a small fortune for it to access internet data plans abroad expecting cute messages.

And of course when he said ‘someone’ in his head, he really meant himself.

Harry was younger, Harry was brighter and cheerier and smilier. How could anybody not be drawn to him?

He was full of interesting stories, he dressed in sweet quirky styles and didn’t seem to care much what anybody thought of him. Also, he had a sexy low voice and great hair and was tall… and so on.

Louis felt short, squeaky and inadequate by comparison.

So what if he had a penchant for braces, colourful trousers and button up shirts actually buttoned up to the top? What was wrong with floppy fringes and exuberant gesticulating! Even if lots of other young men across the country were equally fond of them.

He eventually explained as much to Liam, on a private BFF (best friends forever) slope run.

Liam, his oldest friend, had noted something was up as the month went on – and Louis had felt it was finally the right time to mention the bathroom bj and mixed up feelings on a particularly lengthy chair lift ride.
“Oh Lou…” Liam had said, head shaking.

Louis had gone on to inform him that it was simply too messy and ridiculous to attempt to make something work, and even if it made him a little sad now it was nothing to how awful it would be when he and Harry parted ways in April – possibly forever.

He had expected Liam, ever more of a romantic than himself, to defend the point in ‘giving everything a go’.

But he did not.

“You know, you’re onto something there. The possible pay offs not worth the long term risk.”

He appeared to be staring intently off into the middle distance as he said it, watching a ski school train weaving in and out of a bunch of conifer trees, and it seemed to Louis that he was actually weighing up his words very carefully.

He frowned.

“So, you aren’t going to tell me to go for it with Harry anyway? Love conquers all, the usual old romantic Payno bullshit??”

“Nope.”

He watched his friend’s profile out the corner of his eye, certain his words were being influenced more by something going on his own life than by whatever he thought of what was going on in Louis’.

He flushed a little remembering his Christmas period suspicion that Liam and Sophia were closer than mere friends.

Reflectively, while they certainly seemed close, it was more in the style of confidants than lovers. And the intense conversations they seemed to frequently be having were probably about something, or someone, else than themselves.

Also Sophia had drunkenly admitted to Louis to hooking up with Josh in the disused staff room filled with junk the previous day off; finally putting a nail in the coffin of his suspicions. If there was anything going on with Liam and she had done that, she certainly wouldn’t have told him about it!

He had begun to notice how much time Liam seemed to spend with Zayn. They would be deep in intense seeming conversation in the pub several beers down. Zee would sit at his side as he opened the bar up most days, and make him laugh chucking around slices of lemon and clean napkins. And they had taken to making Recovery Thursdays (as it was the day after their one night off a week) their movie night – where they would tuck themselves up in Zayn’s and Harry’s giant floor bed with popcorn, Milka and Zipfer and giggle to themselves. Harry had spent one evening attempting to defend his half of the room and join them, but half way through had literally wandered off to loo and never came back – to the complete ignorance of either of his mates.

Now, to you or I dear reader, with our wider spectrum of knowledge – we could probably piece together what all this was suggesting. Certainly Zayn might have privately smiled at where even the most inobservant of en lookers minds must wind up.

However poor Mr Tomlinson was working with incomplete facts. Namely that Mr Payne was 100%
arrow straight, that Zayn was too grumpy seeming to be liking anyone at all at the moment; and finally he firmly believed in the incorrect assumption that Liam was confiding secrets to Mr Malik that he himself was not privy too – making him feel both replaceable and neglected.

***

February was dawning and there had been minimal weird incidents since that of new years eve. Probably because hardly anybody was going anywhere on their own anymore.

Nick was convinced something was in his room with him, and a few evenings was solidly certain he had woken up in the dark to feel a pair of light eyes on him.

Perrie, Cher and Greg had spent one drunken evening ‘investigating’, and had wound up experiencing a weird moment in the washroom where all of the snowboards / skis fell down at once and the room went cold – which generally put an end to any further notions of exploration.

“Louis, what are you doing with your day off tomorrow?”

It was the end of service, and Louis was dumping a pile of used plates, cups and crockery next to Harry at the dish washing machines.

“I don’t know,” he replied, warily eyeing up the rinsing hose in H’s hands.

“Will you come with me to the library in Innsbruck then?”

He looked genuinely worried, but it was impossible to tell if that was because it was an odd request or due to the fact they hadn’t been spending much time together lately.

Feeling a smidgeon guilty, he agreed as readily as he could, and watched Harry perk up as he wandered back into the restaurant.

Knock, knock.

“Ughhhhh!”

“Good morning, lads!” Louis called, bursting into the smaller room.

The curtain remained closed, and Zayn was barely visible under a rather large pile of blankets and pillows – one of which was tucked under his arm, with most of his face planted in it.

It was clearly he who had let out the groan.

Harry, on the other hand, was smiling broadly at him from the corner by the door – where he was bent over his bookstand holding his JanSport backpack.

His curly hair was getting longer, and he was dressed in a loose white T-shirt under a soft looking red and white striped open shirt and jeans.
He felt his heart stutter a bit at how genuinely handsome he was, even at 9 o’clock on a Wednesday morning.

“Everything alright?”

“Oh! Yes, quite alright!” squeaked Louis, realizing too late that he had been caught gauping, “erm you look good.”

“Thanks,” he seemed to accept the compliment on face value, leaning down to stuff a bottle of water into the bag, “you don’t look too awful yourself.”

‘he himself’ had opted for a black tshirt with a fleece lined denim jacket he was particularly partial too.

“Thanks,” he couldn’t help preening.

He may or may not have spent an extra 20 minutes fiddling with his fringe for just the right windswept look, but definitely not because it was Harry who had asked him to go somewhere.

After all: it was not a date.

There wasn’t even the hintiest hint of that.

Harry simply needed to visit a library. He needed someone to do it with him, and he knew Louis loved exploring their nearest city.

It made sense.

“Are you two seriously insane? Why the fuck are you even up at this time- let alone showered!?” Zayn had lifted his head up from the blanket fort, and was peering up at him with beady eyes, rumpled hair and a pillow-creased face.

He shook his head a little, even in this state (with the faint smell of alcohol permeating the room) Zayn could be un-nervingly good looking.

“I don’t know, actually, Zaynie. You’ll have to ask Harold here.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets as he spoke.

“Oh, its just another little Innsbruck adventure. We’re getting the first bus. C’mon Lou – lets leave sleeping beauty here alone.”

As he spoke he lent down to ruffle his roomie’s hair, and walked past Louis into the hall; where he grabbed a black jacket of his own.

“See you later, Zee,” Louis said, waving as he turned.

“Yeah, yeah, lovebirds. Shut the door when you leave;”

Was the slightly disconcerting parting shot he was pretty sure he heard Zayn mutter as he closed the door.

Pink cheeked, he followed Harry’s receding shape quietly along the brown corridor and through the
blue entrance door.

Harry’s multi coloured JanSport bag was resting against the wall, but he himself had nipped through the open doorway to the right – straight into the kitchen.

“Harry?”

“Sorry, here-”

He had two portable coffee beakers on the counter, and was just putting the lid on the second, which he held out.

“I thought the journey might be a bit pleasanter with some caffeine?”

“You, Mr Styles, are a genius,” he took the cup and ‘cheersed’ it against Harry’s own, before raising his eyebrows and looking towards the way out.

“Right! Lets go, the bus will be here shortly. Best get to the stop.”

Fortune being on their side, the coach arrived momentarily and prevented their hanging around in the snow while dressed for the city. And being the first stop they had their choice of seating, selecting a couple vaguely near the back with excellent legroom.

“So, H,” he asked after they had settled into their cosy seats, “when do I get to hear what we’re going to a library for?”

“Oh, right,” he said sheepishly, “don’t be mad alright?”

“Well that’s bloody ominous!”

“It’s for research. Nick and I have been speaking to some more of the locals, the older ones, about the weirdness that’s gone on in this hotel.”

“Harry!” Louis exclaimed, slightly horrified.

He had almost managed to suppress all thoughts on the dangerously antagonizing matter of the Happenings.

“Hear me out, hold on,” Harry carried on, coffee-free hand help up in supplication, “i’m not suggesting we have a séance and contact the spirits or something! But Rudi told me there’s an excellent local folklore section in the town library that was worth checking out.”

Rudi was the owner of the club Kaos, and the hotel that it lived in the basement of. And he happened to be particularly partial to sitting in the bar, drinking and getting to know his guests.

“I suppose you didn’t want to widely advertise the fact this was what you wanted to go investigate,” Louis laughed, relaxing into his seat and side eye-ing Harry – who was smiling more easily now he could see Louis wasn’t about to hop off at the next stop and run home.

“Exactly. Headphone?”

And with that Harry produced a headphone splitter in the shape of a heart, and Louis popped one in. He had taken the inside seat, and found himself leaning against the window as he popped in the spare ear-bud. “Thanks.”

A second later and his right ear was filled with the Offspring’s ‘Pretty Fly (for a White Guy)’.
“You have a really eclectic taste in music, you know that?”

Harry, who had closed his eyes and was smiling softly to himself, simply hummed in agreement and appeared to zone out or fall asleep.

Louis smiled in spite of himself, and closed his own.

The hour and ten minutes ride through craggy mountains, tiny alpine villages, and snow en-crusted trees went by unusually quickly. He awoke the first time to notice he had shuffled to his right, and was now leaning with his head against Harry’s shoulder.

Fat, oblong snowflakes were hitting the glass outside and not for the first time he considered just how really lucky he was to be here at all. He dozed back off, unmoved, fervently thanking Liam’s parents for initially encouraging him towards engineering in Leeds.

The second time he awoke he had slid further down the chair, was pushed more cozily in toward Harry, and ‘Love is Only A Feeling’ by the Darkness was blaring in his eardrum.

Eventually, however, arrive in the Tyrolean town they did.

Though the bus station was in a rather less glamorous part of town (1960s concrete, a Burger King), the walk afforded the pair an ever more beautiful European meander.

When they approached the beautiful Triumphal Arch leading onto the town centre, Harry pulled his bag around his shoulder and grabbed Louis by the arm.

“Wait here a moment, I actually remembered my camera for once!”

And with that he pulled out a 1980s film SLR he had picked up from an old school photography shop in Holms Chapel prior to leaving home.

“Does that old thing even work?” Louis found himself teasing.

“Of course! You work and you’re old too, aren’t you?”

“Oi!” squawked Louis.

“Don’t worry baby, the rude old grump didn’t mean it!”

Harry was now petting the camera fondly, and grinning.

“Stand in front of the arch way and look intellectual,” he carried on, waving vaguely behind them and cocking his head to one side.

“Okay…”

Louis shuffled toward the curb slightly, and took a quick look over his shoulder. It really was a pity this was going to be a printed shot, he thought; because he could have used a more recent Facebook profile photo.

The archway itself was a mixture of granite coloured stone, with two grand columns and three entranceways – one large one, for traffic, and two smaller ones on pavements for pedestrians. Otherwise there were large engravings, all with a backdrop of the stunning and gigantic mountain range that encircled the city. On a clear day, a on this occasion, it was particularly beautiful with blue
sky and wispy clouds floating along on top like whipped candy floss.

“You ready yet, Haz?” he called, turning back around.

“Maybe. Give us your model face!”

He stuck out his tongue, and the SLR clicked away happily.

“Beautiful,” Harry said, laughing as he replaced the lens cap, “now – on to the lib!”

As it turned out, Harry was not the world’s greatest navigator – and Louis had not only never been to the library before, he also had never seen a map indicating the direction it lived in.

They had been wandering, apparently aimlessly, for forty minutes when Louis (who was starting to get rather fed up) finally called them to a stop on the edge of the Inn river.

They were standing next to a stone bridge, and the grey water was deep and bubbling merrily past them – completely unconcerned with their hunt for Biblioteks.

“H, I think this is probably the appropriate time to admit we need to download some foreign data and use Google Maps.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

Harry, looking grumpy, acquiesced grudgingly.

“Well don’t look at me, Curly! This expedition is all on you!”

And with a laugh, he turned to lean on the wall and look across the water. Of course the breath taking mountains were still visible, the backdrop to everything in the whole city really, but the chocolate box quaint apartment buildings lining the street below them were each intricately individual. Pink, green, yellow, powder blue – all with immense detail on the windows and balconies.

It was about as far removed from England as he could hope to get – and utterly centrally European.

And as Harry squinted at his phone, working out how to connect to an Austrian phone network to use the internet, Louis allowed himself a satisfied smile that he was actually living in this wonderful place. As he did so he snapped a few photos of his own – on his iPhone of course, but he captured the colourful housing with imposing nature behind it; and a couple of sneaky ones of Hazza with his Concentration Face on to boot.

“Oh, right, I don’t think its too far from here actually,” Harry finally exclaimed, looking up grinning, “do you want to follow the map or shall i?”

“Give it here, you fool.”

And with an unceremonious grab of the telephone they set off at pace, Louis holding Harry’s phone unfortunately close to his face as he had forgotten his spectacles.

Probably a bit of a mistake if they were hitting up a library, he thought wryly.
Twenty minutes later and they were stood on the other side of the river, in front of a sandy coloured modernist building with lots of glass. The entrance declared it to be the ‘Stadtbücherei’ and the walkway inside was shielded somewhat from the elements by a metal indented roof jutting out.

“Shall we?”

“After you, Styles. Also,” he added, as they wandered up toward the automatic doors, “this is your show, right? Which means you can go try out your embarrassing Deutsch skills on the front desk.”

Harry laughed at this, but he seemed unconcerned.

In fact he came up to the semi circular desk with some speed, announcing, “Guten Morgen!” at some volume as he did so.

Louis raised his eyebrows behind him.

“Morgen…” replied the slightly startled looking Austrian girl behind the counter, “Kann ich Ihnen helfen?”

Louis scuffed his shoe nervously on the carpet slightly to the side. Now that it came to it, he didn’t really know what Harry was going to say. And he felt a strong aversion to coming across as an ignorant foreigner believing in children’s stories.

“Ja, bitte!” Harry had gone on, “Wir mögen Bücher auf der Folklore von Tirol?”

The receptionist, whose name-tag declared her as Hanne, looked puzzled, “die Folklore?” she asked.

Harry nodded encouragingly, “Ja, ja. Wir arbeiten in einem Hotel. Hotel Elisabeth – in Kühtai?” he shrugged a little awkwardly, “Es ist seltsam dort…” he waved his hands about, clearly trying to think of the right words.

“Entschuldigen Sie meinem Freund,” Louis found himself blurting out, “er ist seltsam selber!”

At this Hanne burst out laughing, in the manner any one of us who have done a spell in public facing roles can relate to.

“So – who knew you spoke such effortless Deutsch?” Louis found himself asking, curiously.

Although improving second language skills had been a factor in several of the group’s reasons for seasonaire work, it was difficult to put into regular practice working in the only British hotel around.

Louis himself had loved German classes at school, after a particularly brilliant holiday he had had with his family and Liam in early primary. He had gone on to do well in his A Level, and deliberately picked a foreign language module at university - so he was particularly excited any time they went into Innsbruck and the opportunity for conversing in another language was afforded them.

“Why do you think I wanted to work in an Austrian resort?” was Harry’s dry response, eye roll
included, but he was smiling, “my grandmother is German. I used to be really good at it when I was little, but I’ve forgotten loads of it now. Oma’s not getting any younger, and I really want to be able to chat to her in her own language again.”

Well.

Louis felt his chest constrict a bit with how adorable this was, causing him to goldfish a moment without responding.

“Oh look, its here,” Harry said filling it instead.

“Right. Sure. Lets get in.”

“You’re obviously quite good yourself, or you wouldn’t have known what was going on there,” Harry was musing, looking thoughtful.

“I’m a big fan of German. Sadly, no interesting family connection,” and as Harry was looking as if he felt more of an explanation was needed he added, “Liam and I had the best city break ever there with my family when we were twelve. In Berlin. It was the most interesting trip ever – we did museums, the zoo, went up the TV tower, had a picnic by the Spree, cycled to Wannsee – I came back totally besotted with the place.”

“Sick.”

“Anyway, turned out I wasn’t too shabby with the language. Liam came to lessons with me for a bit, but he wasn’t really interested so he dropped out. I kept at it, got a pen pal – been back loads of times since, clearly.”

“My Oma’s from Düsseldorf.”

“Went to a wedding there once. Lovely river-front bars.”

At this point a ping went off, and they stepped out onto a well-lit and sparsely populated corridor.

“I’m glad you approve.” Said Harry, who strode off in the direction of the floor map to the side.

Louis followed slightly slower, frowning.

How had he not known that Harry’s grandmother was German? Clearly there was more to moving here than mere whim, or simple adventure. It made Louis feel guilty. What kind of friend didn’t know these things after 3 months?!

It wasn’t like he didn’t spend every single fucking day working and socialising and living with the boy!!

In that moment he threw all his cautions out the window unconsciously, and unknowingly decided to learn all that he could about the charming and elusive chap next to him.

“Lou? You still with us?” he realised Harry was waving a hand in front of his face, and blushed.

“Yes! Folklore, right this way!” he pointed down the green carpeted walkway flanked by shelves of books.

“Nach dir?” Harry laughed, holding an arm out.

“Vielen Dank!”
There was hardly anyone about, but whispers definitely seemed the most appropriate means of communication.

The folklore and local history section was right at the end, taking up more room than Louis had expected, right in a corner where the glass walls met.

“What’s the plan then, Herr Leader?”

“Just try and find anything about the Kühtai valley, I guess. Anything about the Hex Ruddi kept talking about.”

With that, Harry dumped his rucksack on a small leather stool and flung his jacket over the top of it, then grabbed a thick green book off the shelf and started flicking through it.

Of course, it hadn’t occurred to Louis the books would be in German. His skills were definitely passable for ordering dinner, or even good enough to make a cheeky comment at Harry’s expense or two – but reading academic texts?

He grimaced a little to himself, before selecting an easier looking binding with the title ‘Geiser von Tirol’ and sitting down on the floor with it.

“If you find anything relevant write it down in this.”

“I bed your pardon?”

He looked up to see Hazza holding up a small moleskin notebook and a pen. He had obviously just taken them out of the bag.

“If you want anything to drink there’s also water, and some crisps if we get peckish. Just, you know, be quiet about it. We don’t want chucked out before we’ve begun!” he winked.

“I’m a very quiet person in general, I will have you know Harold. Not shut up and read your Kinder book!”

The day passed pleasantly as the two boys scribbled notes in German, and ransacked the crisp packet.

Louis had found some weird information about random hauntings, fears of wandering alone in the mountains – that kind of thing.

He wasn’t sure how much of it was actually useful or relevant to them. But it wasn’t as dull as Louis had expected.

Harry, who had been writing furiously, seemed even happier with the selection than expected. He kept pulling at his hair, and he’d rolled the sleeves of his stripy shirt up.

It became somewhat of an internal struggle not to watch him working away, slow deep breathing and the soft scent of strawberries wafting at him every time Harry swept his hair about.

“I’m not sure about your fringe,” he found himself saying at one point.

“Was ist das?” Harry replied, mechanically, eyes slowly leaving the page.
He couldn’t help himself. The fact Harry was so immersed in what he was doing that he had actually answered in German was thoroughly swoopy-stomach inducing.

So, from a place in the brain allowing us to act without considering the consequences, he leant across the leathery stool between them to where Harry was kneeling over on the other side – pen clasped in his right hand – and ruffled his curls a little.

A crimson blush immediately began to creep along his cheeks, and he huffed a little in protest before running his own fingers through the offending hair and sweeping it slightly to one side again.

“Much better,” said Louis with a smile.

“I bow down to your superior hair knowledge,” Harry laughed, “come on. I’m starving, shall we go get some lunch?”

It had already hit 1pm, and Louis was more than happy to go along with this plan.

“But did you get everything you wanted?”

“Ooooh yes. I think between us we’ve got plenty. And besides, I know where it is now. I can always come back.”

Just as they had begun tidying up their section, somebody cleared their throat. Turning slightly, Louis noted it was an elderly gentleman who had been sat with a newspaper in a stiff looking chair over in the far corner. He had thick hair sticking up, a mixture of white and iron grey, and a bristly looking mustache.

“Entschuldigung,” began the man gravely, “was machst du gerade?”

An awkward moment followed, before Harry simply said, “Lesen,” and went back to stuffing things into his bag.

“Lesen von Geistergeschichten, sind wir?”

“Ja.”

“Hazza, whats going on?” Louis hissed, trying to hide his mouth moving as he pulled on his denim jacket.

“Ein gefährliches Hobby. Ich würde sie allein lassen, wenn ich Sie ware.” He was scowling, and he had completely put down his paper to stare unencumbered at them.

The entire exchange was utterly absurd to Louis, who was swiveling his head between his companion and the stranger with growing confusion.

There was no earthly reason for this stranger to be annoyed at their research – surely if the area was restricted Hanne would have mentioned it when the arrived?

“Danke für die Warnung,” said Harry coldly, “zur Kenntnis genommen. Come on Lou, we’re going.”

And with that he slung the bag over his shoulder, and stalked off towards the lift again.

“Well. Er. Auf weidersehen then,” Louis added, with a half wave.

He immediately scurried after Harry, who had already got in the lift and had nearly abandoned him
with the weirdo in his haste.

“Harry. What the fuck!”

“Sorry about that,” said a more normal sounding Harry, “didn’t you see how that old man was watching us the whole time? He didn’t want us reading about the village. It’s so weird.”

“I don’t think I want to know anymore about this until i have food in front of me,” said Louis, paling.

“Good idea,” Harry agreed, striding out of the lift quickly.

They exchanged some brief ‘danke’s with Hanne at the desk, before hurrying away into the chilly outdoors again.

A virtually silent walk back to the Old Town later, and the pair found themselves eating in one of the many local cafes peppering the under-arches of the flat blocks.

They had both ordered varieties of savory strudel, with salad and crisps, and were waiting for them to arrive with a couple of hot drinks. Harry had a large flat white, Louis was feeling unsettled so had gone for a cup of tea – and was now stirring his spoon around in it sadly, lamenting privately to himself how disappointing all tea was outside of the UK.

“Phew,” exhaled Harry, finally breaking the quiet, “well that was an interesting morning!”

“I don’t feel like I’ll ever be sufficiently fortified with hot drinks to cope with whatever the reason for that old man’s interest in us was,” Louis confided, pulling a face and looking up from his mug.

Harry laughed.

“Do you have any idea what that was about then? You seemed really angry…”

At that point the strudels arrived, and Hazza had a moment to collect himself before answering.

When they had thanked the waiter and turned back to each other Harry was looking more serious again.

“It just weirded me out after something I read in one of those books. About a guardian of the area, someone whose family is connected to the spiritual. It just sort of clicked in my head, that might be what he was doing. Watching the section, pretending to read that newspaper, stopping people getting involved. It annoyed me. Obviously. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” Louis repeated, “what on earth for? Some old duffer spies on us, gives us an honest to god Sinister Warning and then tried to make us feel bad for reading in a sodding library!”

Thankfully his flowering speech had brought a small smile back onto his friend’s face.

“That dude will be sorry if we ever run into him again,” Louis went on, “because I will personally tell him to shove his shit chat where the sun don’t shine.”

Harry actually laughed aloud at that one, choking a little on a half-chewed crisp as he did so.

“Jesus Lou!” he spluttered, gulping down some apple juice.

“Aren’t you glad its me that’s here? No-one else would be making you laugh after that encounter. Li
would probably have pissed his pants. Zayn would have given him the Broody Face and gone in a mood. Niall would possibly have run off down the corridor in a panic…. We don’t live with the most gung-ho crowd now, do we?”

“I don’t know about that. Liam held it together pretty well on new years,” Harry countered, fork of pastry and lettuce hovering halfway to his mouth.

“Shut it, Styles. I never want to think of that night ever, ever again.”

“Fair play.”

“Tell me about your Oma,” Louis inquired, abruptly changing the subject, “when did she leave Germany?”

“Oh she left on the Kindertransport in the 1930s. Her family was Jewish.”

“Oh my god, Harry!”

“What?” said Harry back, with his mouthful.

“She – was – but, I mean, the Kindertransport was…”

“Refugees of the Nazis. I know.”

Louis’ eyes were like saucers, “were your family in the Holocaust?” he went on, in a hushed tone.

(Of course,” went on Harry as if they were talking about the weather, “it was Kinder transport, not Familien transport you know,” he added with a roll of his eyes.

“Doesn’t that upset you, though?!”

“Of course it does.”

Louis waved an arm about, “why on earth would you want to come over here then?! Seventy years ago they’d be throwing you into Auschwitz!”

Harry’s eyes widened, and darted about the small café in some alarm; checking no-one had overheard. Then he snorted.

"What are you on about Lou? The war was a really long time ago and the worlds a totally different place. Also, keep your voice down saying things like that, you sound like a git."

At this, Louis had the good nature to look ashamed.

“Anyway - her and her younger brother went to a really great home in London. They loved their adoptive family, they got two older sister’s and some parents who loved them. That’s pretty sick, and i’m really grateful. They’re an ace bunch – I met them at a family reunion, like two years ago – but of course I’m still fascinated by our actual German heritage. Oma says they weren’t a particularly religious family. She still had some pictures of some of them, you know.”

“Jesus, Harry.”

He found himself furiously trying not to react over-emotionally to Harry’s family story. After all, it was the same story a great many families had with relatives from that era.
But somehow knowing what a lovely soul H was, and imagining it all happening to him or to them instead made it all the more real.

He sniffed, “its really awesome that you’re over here. Wanting to improve your language skills again and things. Not everyone would make the effort.”

He bopped shoulders with Harry, and went back to being extremely interested in his luncheon.

“Thanks, Lou,” he thought he heard Harry whisper.

After lunch Louis decided everything so far had been a tad maudlin. The paranormal investigation in the library. The weird man. The melancholic lunch fest, and family history.

“Lets do something fun. There’s still ages to go until the coach. Lets get drunk and do something silly!”

“Okay….”

“C’mon. There’s a plaza round the corner, everyone sits outside with blankets and outdoor heaters. We can get a drink, and ramble on about what astounding scenery we’re having!”

He winked, and thoughtlessly slung his arm through Harry’s – much as he would often do to Liam when leading him somewhere.

Ordinarily he avoided this level of close familiarity with Harry. But caution seemed forgotten after the morning they had shared.

Harry tightened his own arm against Louis’, seemingly pleased, and shortened his strides to match those of his shorter companion.

They walked along the riverbank, by the glittering water, and only ten minutes later were presented with the bustling outdoor square Louis had noticed on their walk from the bus station.

One side was completely empty, as the Inn flowed by it, and opposite that was quite a busy road and pavement. But either side was full of bars and cafes, and more than enough out door seating to satisfy the midafternoon rush on a mild Alpine day.

So there they drank for the remainder of the afternoon.

Louis, on a mission to actually get to know the Real Harry the more intoxicated he got, asked question after question.

What did his parents do? [a teacher and the owner of an engineering firm] How had the felt about the divorce? [positively, it put a stop to all the disagreements] Did he get on with his step-father, Robin? [very well] When had he realised he was gay? [when he first watched Titanic with Gemma & realised they were both crushing on the same character] How did he come out? [awkwardly aged 12 on a family holiday to Cyprus] What was his relationship like with his sister? [extremely close] What sot of friendship group/s did he have back home? [a solid group of school friends he was in regular touch with at uni via social media].

Harry, who was enthusiastically guzzling wines, happily answered them all and fired back a good many of his own as the sun shone and the light got duskier, and nobody thought anymore about the funny business that had caused the day to start on such a peculiar note.
They simply enjoyed one another’s company, and eventually a light dinner of schnitzel and potatoes to soak up some of the drinks.

“Jesus, look at the time!”

“Guten Abend, Uhr!” Harry giggled, raising his almost-empty glass to the wrist-watch.

“I’m serious Harold!” cried Louis, unsteadily getting to his feet, “we have to get to the Bushaltestelle immediately or we’re going to get stranded!!”

“When was the last coach again?” asked Harry, pulling a face.

“Like nine. No, half eight. Its at half eight. I think. And now, its like…”

“Louis. Sit down. Its ten. Ten pm.”
He fell back into his seat with a humph.

“Are you kidding me? Are we stuck here? Oh my lord, this is a disaster!”
Harry merely hiccupped, before picking his phone up from the table and opening up the internet.

“Yeah. I have a bunch of messages here, actually… shit.”

Somehow, in the wine haze, it didn’t seem as serious as it probably should have. It seemed amusing.

And lord only knows, thought Louis, how badly he felt like a night away from the hotel.

“You know what this means, right?” he suddenly blurted.

“That we have to spend a small fortune finding somewhere else to stay tonight?”

“Well, that too. But we’re free! Free to stay out all night and go clubbing somewhere new?! Free to walk about rivers, or go into random bars, and wake up and have someone serve us breakfast! This is amazing!”

“Simon’s going to be so furious…”

“Harry. What’s the worst that can happen? We’ll be back by lunchtime. Someone will have to have covered for us until then – big wow. Come on, I’ll text Li to let him know the situation. You look up a hotel.”

“Go on then.”

Hey Payno! Bit of a change of plan. Hazza and I had too many wines and may or may not have missed the Kühtai bus… :( ok, def did. SOZ! Tell Nick we’ll be back first bus tmro. Meanwhile, we are freeeee & it is sick. Love you, you muscly bastard Lxxxx

Send.

“Okay, here’s one. Its just over the river there – Gasthof Innsbruke.”

“Lets go. I’ll feel better once we book somewhere, then we can enjoy the rest of the night.”

And with that they scraped their seats back, and headed back towards the stone bridge from the start.
of the day – which the budget hotel Harry had found looked onto.

It was peach coloured, and one of the confectionary-esque buildings Louis had been admiring earlier. The entrance was on a cobbled side street, and looked a trifle battered.

They looked at one another, shrugged and went in.

The first point of note was the smell: strong tobacco – as Austria was one of the last remaining bastions of indoor smoking.

Harry coughed a bit, and even Louis wrinkled his nose as they made their way through a dark oak paneled foyer toward the reception desk.

Without too much difficulty they explained the situation, paid for a single night, and were shown up to a basic bedroom. An Austrian twin that may as well have been a double bed with two single duvets, two small rough towels, a sink, and a wooden cupboard met them on arrival.

An ill humoured maid roughly shoved some keys in Harry’s hand and took off back down the staircase without a backward glance. She had pointed out two bathrooms on the landing – one loo, one both a shower and toilet – to be shared.

As hotels went it was basic in the extreme.

Certainly not comparable to where they were working / living.

But it was a novelty none the less. And they had landed a front facing room on the top floor – with a beautiful view of the river and part of the old town across the way.

“What a glamorous find this is,” Louis wryly announced, “which side of the bed do you prefer, Curly?”

“The right,” was the firm response.

As he said it Harry made straight for that side of the room, depositing his coat on a peg on the wall; and beginning to empty his bag. It was minimal, as they hadn’t been expecting an over night trip, but he did have a long sleeved t-shirt (thrown at the pillow), bottle of water (nightstand) and a small copy of one of the Schultz Peanut’s books which he chucked onto the matress.

“Make yourself at home why don’t you!”

And with that Louis added his mobile to the bed, and yanked his jacket off to put on the peg by his own side.

“Okay, lets get on the wifi and plan ourselves an impromptu sick evening on the town!” he yelped, throwing himself onto the bed with gusto and laughing mirthfully.
Chapter Summary

In which jealousy runs rife, nobody knows what the hells going on anymore, and Liam is all of us when we turn up expecting a good night out but see our crush hanging off the arm of somebody else!

Encountering slope runs, a night in Kaos, and confusing emotional situations including Mr Payne and Mr Malik.

ZAYN.

January had passed Zee by in a bit of a haze.

Much like everyone else he spent the first half worrying about the weird New Years Eve incident, and the second half in almost-too-good-to-be-true-relief that nothing much like it had occurred since.

However, things could not be said to be going so swell on the ‘Getting Over Liam’ front. Quite the contrary.

Although he had promised himself (and a rather earnest Harry) that he would start to put some distance between himself and the boy with the deep brown eyes; it just never seemed quite the right time. One minute he’d be contemplating asking Harry to have an LGBTQIA film night with him, or asking Niall to teach him guitar, or seeing if Perrie fancied working on her photography project with him. The next Liam would ask if he fancied a superhero film, or a cosy comic swap night in. And he always thought ‘what can it hurt?’ or ‘next time I’ll say no’.

But he never did.

And it was evidently what had led to the unwelcome heart to heart Harry had decided to have with him half way through a day on the pistes in late January.

They had been stopped between runs, squinting hard through a blizzard at a huge piste map printed on a large wooden sign by the tree line – arguing slightly because Harry’s sense of direction was infamous (after an incident where he had absently wandered off and got himself lost for 4 hours in early December).

Zayn had just been expressing as politely as he could that he thought they were actually at a completely different juncture to where Harry was planning their continued route from, when his friend abruptly aborted the topic and asked if he wanted to sit down for a minute anyway before carrying on.

“Oh. Alright then,” Zayn agreed, swinging his backpack round to the front and yanking out a bottle of water, “sip?”
“Ah. Thanks,” Harry said, taking a swig. As he handed it back he asked, “so how are things going with Liam?”

It caught Zayn off guard, causing him to splutter a little.

“Jesus H!” he coughed, “cut to the chase why don’t you.”
“Sorry. I just thought… well, its never going to be a good time is it? To ask that, I mean.” He looked regretful.

“Nope.”

“You’re still spending a lot of time with him….”

“For god’s sake, Harry! He’s one of the people here I’m closest friends with – of course we spend a lot of time together! So do you and I! So does everyone! So do you and Lou! And I know you like him as more than a friend, Haz, don’t even bother denying it.”

Harry was staring at his hands, which he had clasped between his knees as he sat.

“For the record, there’s nothing going on between Louis and I. That’s half the reason I’m saying this.” It looked like it was costing him quite a bit to say it, and Zayn felt bad, “I made a complete fool of myself at Christmas time – throwing myself at him like some love-sick child. Now we only ever speak if other people are about. And it’s shit. In fact, its shit and Louis’ gay. There was actually a chance he may have liked me back. Which he doesn’t, by the way - because I think he might be devoid of a heart at all, but anyway. Liam doesn’t like boys. He likes girls. So it’ll be even more awkward if he finds out you like-him-like-him, because there’s no way he can return it.”

“Mate, this is getting seriously bleak. I’m sorry about you and Lou though.”

Zayn put his arm around his mate’s shoulders, and wrinkled his nose at the busy slope in front of them.

“I know, I know, alright? I don’t actually think he’s going to turn around and ask me out one day. I just want to enjoy what we do have.”

Harry sniffed, and in that moment he realised this was a lot more about H himself than it was about him and Liam.

Harry was miserable because things weren’t working out with Lou – but he did have a point.

Surely if Li knew how he felt, he wouldn’t be so quick to cuddle up to watch films in the same bed? Or ask Zayn to keep him company every evening – alone – as he set his bar up?

He obviously wasn’t worried that Liam would be upset in a homophobic way. Just in the way that anyone is when they learn a friend they aren’t into is into them.

It inevitably changes things.

In that moment he made a decision: he needed to actively try to move on, so that he could have a normal friendship with Liam.

Standing, he tugged his curly-haired friend up with him.

“C’mon Hazza. I’m having an epiphany. We need to find ourselves some hot men and stop moping! Apres is clearly the answer!”
Harry laughed, dusted the powder off his bum, and agreed.

“Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!” he agreed.

As they began their descent, Zayn still somewhat tentative on the red runs, he thought his plan over.

Getting out there and meeting some new people surely couldn’t hurt? It *was* half the reason he was travelling after all.

With Li around he never paid much attention to anyone else.

But today Sophia has asked Liam to accompany her into Innsbruck for some shopping and lunch, and they hadn’t asked anybody else.

He had heard them talking about it from his bed and had to wait an extra 15 minutes before getting up so as to be able to pass as just tired and not just pissed off when he finally saw them.

Instead of huffing about inside, he had asked Harry to do a gentle tour round the easier slopes in the neighbouring valley of Hochoetz with him, and eat lunch at the top of a mountain.

Be damned if Liam was going to out-date him on these non-dates!

And in actuality this had gone rather well, as distractions go. He was new enough that he had to concentrate rather hard on steering, and whenever they paused to admire a view or have (in his case) a sneaky cigarette – they drifted in and out of companionable silence or lighthearted joking.

They were in no rush to reach the half way down point, where a wooden chalet bar with outdoor park benches was awaiting them – but meet it they did.

Here, they kicked off their board and skis; and added them to the overflowing railings by the door.

“After you!” Zayn smirked, finally getting in there first with the door, and following H inside.

It was humid and toasty, heat radiating from a real log fire right in the heart of the seating area. It was all pine, with cosy deer skins thrown over the larger seats, and there were old skis and shoes and sledges covering the walls and ceiling.

The pair made their way up to the bar, thanking themselves for picking such an unusual hour to pop in.

It was quiet enough to walk straight up and get served.

“Hallo. Was möchten Sie trinken?”

“Hi,” said Zayn, rummaging in his pocket for his wallet.

“*Wir brauchen etwas Alkohol, bitte!*” Harry answered with gusto, “*Es war eine lange Woche. [here he made an enthusiastic arm gesture] Ich möchte einen großen Gösser, bitte. Und meinen Freund – was möchtest du Zayn?’”

“I’ll just have a large Fohrenburger?”

“Coming right up,” said the bartender in Austrian accented English. He was smiling at Zayn, but when he looked to Harry to take his euros he added in German, “*Sie hast einen sehr hübschen*
Zayn was too busy going through cent coins to notice his name being mentioned, so after shooting him a searching look Harry replied, “Nein. Zayn ist mein hübscher Einzelner Freund,” and winked.

“So – you are on holiday here?” the bartender asked, looking between them as he began pulling the first glass of beer.

“We’re working in a British hotel,” Harry followed in English, “aren’t we Zee?” he elbowed him.

Zayn, who had finally found 6 euros 90 cents to hand over to his friend, looked up slightly lost.

“Huh?”

“I was just telling…”

“Tobias.”

“… Tobias here we were working here, not on holiday.”

He felt a slight kick to his shin, but knew better than to ask Harry outright why the hell he was booting him in the leg while the newcomer was still about.

“Oh right. Yeah, its pretty sick,” he rambled for something to say.

“And you are liking it?”

When Zayn simply nodded Harry kicked him again, slightly harder.

Oh good lord, he thought, was H trying to get him to flirt with the nice barman??

His first reaction was to be utterly mortified. He surely wasn’t so desperate that the first person they came across could be encouraged into his pants, was he?!

“Are you a local then?” Harry carried on.

“Ja, my family have a chalet in the mountains,” Tobias explained, “I’m studying in Innsbruck but here I work on the weekends.”

“That’s cool! Do you ski or board?”

“Both,” Tobias chuckled; as he popped Harry’s drink in front of him and began on Zayn’s.

First flush of embarrassment aside, he could see the Tobias was an attractive guy. He had longish light brown hair flicking out around his ears, crisp blue eyes, and he was both tall and solid looking in his tight long sleeved T-shirt and baggy trousers.

“That’s pretty impressive,” Zayn interjected, “but I’m sure we’ll all be doing it by the time we leave.”

He hoped he was sounding cheeky rather than rude, but Tobias simply burst out laughing.

“You are which yourself?”

“Snowboarder. Well. Amateur, but…” he trailed off, wondering what the German meant.

“I bet you look very attractive sliding down the mountain.”

Harry’s Gösser went down the wrong way at this, and he had to wipe beer off his face.
While an entirely innocent sentence, there was a heavily flirtatious overtone to it that caused Zayn to blush.

Not to be outdone, he responded with, “You can bet on it,” before winking and walking off back towards the doors.

Harry grabbed his glass and hurried after, with an incredulous but amused expression.

“Zayn – what the hell was that?”

“What?” asked a deliberately vague Zee, as he sat himself down at the table nearest another roaring fire – this time inside a stone fireplace.

“All the innuendo and flirting! He was really into you. And you totally encouraged it!”

“I’m not a monk, H.”

“No, but you’re usually not Mr Throwing It All About either.”

“You told me to stop focusing so much on Li, didn’t you? Well, there we go. Here’s a hot local dude. May as well give it 100%, yeah?” took an enormous gulp of beer to bolster his confidence.

Truth be told, it had been a while since he had tried to chat anybody up – or vice versa. The few months since turning 18 before leaving the UK had seen him hit up a few local LGBTQIA nights however, where he had discovered a great deal of people found him attractive; and quite a lot of them wanted to sleep with him. While it had been quite different to how school had been, he was under no false impression of the majority of these people’s intentions.

But he found, shy as he often felt, when he was certain of someone’s interest it was a lot easier to put on a brave mask and fake it till you made it as it were (or at least, until you made it back to their bedroom and they took your clothes off).

And so that was how they spent the remainder of their afternoon. Whenever Harry went up to the bar, Tobias would ask him about Zayn and they would chatter in German.

Whenever Zayn went up they would speak in English, and gently flirt a bit.

Eventually, it was getting late, and while Zayn was paying for their last round he confided that they were about to call it a day.

“Its was lovely to meet you, though,” he’d added in.

“Ah, surely you cannot go already!” Tobias had wailed comedically.

“I’m sorry. It’s a bit of a journey back, and we promised to meet friends back in the village for dinner.”

“You go out after your meal?”

“Sure. We’ll be in Kaos later on.”

“Maybe I’ll see you there? You can show me how well you slide,” Tobias cheekily suggested, his hand brushing against Zayn’s a little longer than was necessary as he returned his change.

“If you’re lucky.” Zayn laughed, before walking out.

He wasn’t sure what he was doing – his head was foggy from the Fohrenburgers and the
uncomplicated interest from the bar tender. It hadn’t occurred to him Liam would be around in Kaos later too, most likely, or how it might make him feel to lose Z’s attentions for the night to a fit local snowboarder.

But, as the pair jammed their helmets back on their heads to hop back on the piste, he decided he didn’t owe Li anything. They were only mates after all. And while he had shared many an intimate or intense moment with Liam; none had been as openly sexually charged as the past few hours with Tobias.

***

It was a strange evening, getting ready to head out after dinner. Liam and Sophia were yet to return from Innsbruck, which merely secured Zayn’s notion that hinting to Hot Austrian Dude to make an appearance was a totally sound idea.

He had had another large glass of beer with his dinner (a rather unforgiving and complex salad featuring chicken strips), which probably hadn’t helped (and certainly did nothing to soak up all the alcohol he had already consumed); and now he was in the flat scowling at his wardrobe while Harry scrolled through his iPod.

“Z, whatever you put on you will look good. Stop agonizing over there as if you don’t know it!”

“Now, now!” Zayn sighed, grabbing dark jeans and a white shirt, which required some concentrated minutes getting the rolled up sleeves to look Just So.

“Monochrome chic?”

“Yes, monochrome chic. Unlike you, who may be described as Children’s Chic?”

They both laughed.

Harry was wearing ripped jeans, a pastel green t-shirt with Daffy Duck on the front, and a plaid shirt in red.

“I’m the antithesis of your broody nature,” his friend laughed back, hitting play on ‘I Would Walk 500 Miles’ by the Proclaimers, and rolling onto his back, “are you going to hook up with that Tobias chap later?”

“Harry!” exclaimed Zayn, incredulously, as he did and undid the top button several times attempting to decide which was the best way to wear it.

“What?” H snorted, “it’s not like it wasn’t obvious enough what was going on earlier. I’m only asking so I can categorically state do not bring him back here. I will actually kill you if you have sex on our bed. And no, before you ask, that is not simply because I am jealous that you actually have a chance at getting naked in here. Not at all.”

“Harry. I can honestly say I have no plans to have sex with anybody in here. Tonight, or ever. I just want to have some fun, and stop pining over Liam for ten minutes.”

“Is that all it takes? Must have been a while,” replied Harry, cheekily.

“You wanker!” Zayn exploded, making eye contact via their dresser mirror, “I only meant I was going out to have expectationless fun.”
“I’m sorry. I know,” he sat up and swiveled round on the mattress so he was looking at Zayn, “you’re doing the right thing you know.”

“What?” Zayn had now moved to the side, and had half vanished inside the wardrobe hunting for some aftershave he had misplaced.

“You know,” Harry went on, more seriously, “putting yourself out there. It’s for the best. Once you like someone else your life working with Liam will be loads easier.”

Zayn tried not to scowl at this – because, frankly, the thought of life with Liam without romantic overtones still sounded brutally miserable. Somehow things as they were seemed better, but given Liam himself had spent the day as far as he knew in a hotel shagging Sophia sideways; he decided tonight was for him.

At half past midnight, as if on queue, the team from Hotel Elisabeth made their half cut appearance at Kaos.

Harry and Josh had been deep in disagreement about whether the Beatles or the Rolling Stones were better, and sauntered off towards the bar immediately heads still bent together.

Perrie and Zayn had been discussing art projects with Nick, who seemed a little down.

Liam and Sophia had got back late, and remained holed up back at the flat with Louis catching up on the day’s gossip and knocking back brandies.

Zayn told himself he didn’t care.

“Is that your boy?” Perrie asked lowly, as they shuffled round to the less crowded side of the bar.

Sure enough, sat at the end and all alone was the attractive Ausrian gent from earlier.

For the first time in a while, Zayn felt his stomach swoop with genuine anticipation. Not for a brief touching of arms, or an unexpected snuggle during a Marvel movie. Honest to goodness, he might actually pull swoops. It was nice.

“I’ll leave you too it,” she hissed, rolling her eyes fondly, before saying in a louder voice; “Come on Nick! I want to pre-request some of the usual songs!”

As the two of them wandered off to the DJ booth, Zayn made his way slowly towards the quietest end of the bar.

“Hi,” he chirped, immediately worried he sounded too keen.

Tobias didn’t look put off though – on the contrary, he looked extremely pleased with himself. He actually stuck his hand out to shake with a big grin, “Hallo again, Zayn. How are you?”

“I’m pretty good thanks.”

“What would you like to drink?”

And with that he ordered them two Desperados, and two shots of tequila.

“I don’t often do shots,” Zee admitted, after knocking back his with a headshake.
“I don’t often go following attractive strangers off the piste in the evenings,” Tobias joked, easily, before taking a long sip of beer, “So Herr Malik. What made you take a year out in the Alps?”

And with that, the rest of the bar may as well not have existed. They talked about school, or in Tobias’ case university – as he was three years older. They discussed what it had been like coming out in their respective towns, and what the LGBT scenes were like in each. Tobias talked about a holiday he had had to Oxford to visit friends, and Zayn told him that was a bit different from where he grew up in Bradford.

Conversation meandered down more upbeat topics and general flirtatious ribbings there-after. Harry watching them all the while out of the corner of his eye, much to the amusement of Perrie and Nick (who secretly thought their friend’s protectiveness adorable).

Zayn was so intoxicated as the night went on (Dutch courage and so forth) that he didn’t notice when Li, Soph, and Louis finally turned up.

If he had been paying attention, he might have noticed the slight to-do that went on as the rest of their contingent made themselves at home at their usual table.

Unfortunately, he remained quite clueless, and when Tobias grabbed his hand and pulled him onto the dance floor he had no second thoughts about following him.

Frankly, drunken Zayn thought to himself as he let go of all inhibitions on the dance floor, he was owed this.

He had spent the last ten weeks pining and lusting after Liam Payne like it was going out of fashion. At first he had worried about boundaries; and even tried not to think about him – or situations involving him – during his Private Times in the shower.

That had only lasted 3 weeks, before he completely caved and just had to hope there was no way anyone could tell the X rated shows featuring his colleague that he was imagining every time he stepped under the shower stream.

But this! Finally, he could get off (maybe…) in peace and forget about actual feelings for a few hours.

Honestly his feelings for Liam were strong enough that this had taken rather a great deal of alcohol consumption to even achieve. His head was swimming every time he shut his eyes for an extended period – so that he was forced to come to a stand still and shout in Tobias’ ear that he was just going to the bathroom.

He nodded, and indicated he would be at the bar.

Stumbling down the extraordinarily long corridor to the gents, he was a million miles away humming ‘Ignition’ by R Kelly to himself; when Sophia burst out of the ladies.

She seemed quite out of it herself, and just as he was about to say hello she pointed at him accusingly.

“You! You!”

“Hello to you too?” he confusedly responded.
“What the hell are you playing at?” she carried on, unphased.

“Er. Going to the loo?”

“I mean with him. Old creepy features next door.”

This raised his shackles a bit. Tobias might be unfamiliar, but he wasn’t creepy. And he hadn’t done anything Zayn hadn’t wanted him too.

“What are you on about?” he managed to ask, struggling to keep her in focus. The walls had started to wiggle.

“I didn’t realize you were so calculating, Zayn,” she hiccupped herself, “well fuck you! Fuck you and your Austrian sugar daddy.”

And with that she stomped off.

Bewildered, Zayn spun on his heel to shout, “he’s only 23!” after her – before barreling into the bathrooms to throw up in a cubicle.

He sat there goodness knows how long, hunched on the ground and grimacing at the toilet seat, chundering up a great deal of the booze he had recklessly consumed throughout the day.

And it was as he was mumbling things like ‘bloody weird girl’, ‘who she think she is’ and ‘fuck em all’ between heaves that he didn’t notice the door open.

“Zayn?”

“Urgh…” splash.

“Are… are you sick?”

“No, Liam, I just love hanging out in club toilets on my knees.”

Having realised what he had just said he started to giggle.

“Jesus, you’re in a right state,” Liam pointed out, before turning away to take a pee, “having a great old night are we?”

“Not currently. Yourself?” he wiped at his face with some tissue.

“Was until I came along and saw you.”

“What are you even talking about, Liam?”

Having finished his business, Liam came to stand in front of Zayn’s cubicle.

“You. Throwing yourself at that Austrian bloke. Its painful to watch.”

“Is that the problem? You think I’m acting like a big slut?” Zayn cried, incredulous, turning to narrowing his eyes, “well I’ve got news for you Liam Payne! This is it.”

Far from being sober himself, Liam simply frowned back and balled his fists, “what does that even mean?”

“It means I’m not a nun. So I like hooking up with people now and then - so fucking what? You knew I was gay, do you have a problem with Tobias because he’s another bloke Liam??” he asked
“No,” Liam fumed, knuckles turning white, “how can you even say that?!!”

“I don’t know. From where I’m sitting you look pretty fucking judgmental. Now piss off, I don’t feel well, and you’re making everything worse.” He could feel his eyes stinging, and the very last thing he needed was for Liam to see him crying.

“Do you want Tobias to come in?” Liam replied, looking pained.

“What? What on earth for?! No! Just leave me alone. I haven’t done anything wrong, you haven’t any right to be angry with me.”

He sniffled, and tried to cough over the noise to disguise it.

There was a loaded pause before Liam forced the conversation onward, “I wasn’t suggesting you should behave like a nun. I don’t know where you got that from. I just…” he sighed audibly, “He’s all wrong for you.”

“The hot snowboarder with the cool accent who you don’t know is all wrong for me?”

He couldn’t help himself.

Liam humphed, “Yes. The random bartender you picked up with Harry this afternoon is all wrong for you.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Pardon?” the absurd derailment of the conversation seemed to have taken Liam off guard.

“You’re talking about pairing up with people. Isn’t that what you were doing with Soph today – going on a date? Its not like you have to tell me,” he found himself announcing unplanned, “its not like we always spend days off together or anything. Just piss off first thing, don’t message-”

“We’re not joined at the hip, Zayn,” Liam snapped, rolling his eyes and folding his arms.

“A good bloody thing too! I bet you can’t wait to run off with your perfect woman and have the perfect bloody life, where nobodies boozily hooking up with anybody in bars!” Zayn wailed, the floodgates now unfortunately opened; as he pictured the traditional and happy life Liam was bound to be moving towards.

While he was destined to perhaps love him from afar forever, filling the void with lame club hook ups and too many foreign lagers.

“What are you even on about?” Liam asked, sounding less angry and more curiously baffled.

“What?” snuffled Zayn, tearing off more loo roll to blow his nose.

“The thought of me settling down hacks you off?” Liam persisted.

The sound of nose blowing filled the moment, lessening the serious vibes somewhat.

“No. I didn’t mean that.”

“Why say it then?”

“Why are you angry at me for chatting up that snowboarder guy?” Zayn countered.
Liam’s mouth opened and closed, but he seemed to come to some sort of decision.

“You’re wasted. Do you want to go home?”

Zayn shrugged. He was still upset with Liam, and although he wanted nothing more than Li to swing him over his shoulder and carry him back to the flat – he wasn’t about to say so too readily.

Liam offered him a hand up, pulling him into his side protectively. “Do you need to say goodbye to that guy?” he asked, through gritted teeth.

“No. I’d rather not…”

Liam seemed to perk up at that, and somehow managed to lead them back to the table with their friends without Tobias seeing.

“Maaaate – is he alright?” Louis asked, immediately.

“No. Found him being sick in the loo,” explained Liam as he wrestled Zayn into his outdoor jacket, “I’m just taking him home.”

“Home,” Zee agreed, struggling with his left armhole.

“You’ve not been here long,” Harry interjected, looking worried, “I can head back with him instead if you like.”

“No.” said an extremely resolute sounding Liam.

“Liam’s my hero,” Zayn mumbled through his drunken haze.

“Sure he is, babe,” Louis agreed, patting his arm and looking at his best mate, “make sure he doesn’t choke on his own vomit or something. What a mess!”

“How many times have I done this for you?” Liam replied, arching an eyebrow, “we’ll be fine. Enjoy the rest of the night.”

If anyone had been looking, they might have noticed Liam and Sophia exchange an important Look at this point.

But Zayn was too busy hanging off Liam’s side, and once he had tugged his own coat on they headed out the door.

“You really are a nightmare, aren’t you?” Liam was saying as he helped Zayn along the snowy road, “you do realize that there’s nothing going on between Soph and I, don’t you? Nothing like that anyway.”

“I thought you were having a date without me,” said Drunk Zayn, rather too candidly for Sober Zayn.

Liam laughed, “and would that be a problem?”

“Yes,” Zayn patted Liam’s arm, “you’re mine. We’re partners in crime. You can’t be bringing third wheels into the partnership, Payne.”

“Good to know. Might want to listen to your own rules then, huh?” and with that Liam jabbed a gentle elbow into Zee’s ribs.

“Harry told me to.”
“Harry’s a git, who means well but doesn’t always know what he’s talking about.”

“You’re really awesome. Did you notice? When you aren’t shouting at me in club toilets I mean. I’m glad we met.”

“Thanks Zee. When you’re not trashed and making me furious with you, you’re pretty special yourself.” Liam responded merrily.

At this point they reached the garage doors, and Liam yanked them open.

Zayn was beaming at him, “you think I’m special?” he was repeating in an undertone.

“Probably not in a way that you’d like, right this second,” Liam fondly laughed as they traversed the stairs up to the flat.

He went on to hang their coats up in the corridor, and fill two large bottles with water to take through to the bedroom.

While he was away Zayn, who was so drunk he was no longer sure he was really following the events of the day properly, yanked his clothes off in favour of some shorts and a comfortable t-shirt to sleep in. When Liam returned he was cross legged on the bed trying to select a film off the laptop – a feat that was proving difficult, as he was forced to squint quite spectacularly in order to get the words into focus.

“What are you trying to do?” asked his companion, indulgently.

“You were mad at me. But you didn’t have any reason to be. You’re my favourite. And I’m going to show you, by putting on a film that you like.”

“Why don’t you just lie down? I’ll sort the movie out.”

“I feel sick.”

“I bet you do. Come on, lie down,” and with that he put his arms out and tugged Zayn back so that he was moving towards the pillows, “get comfortable.”

“It is very comfy down here…”

Liam fluffed the pillows up for him, and Zayn wriggled under the covers and contemplated why his life had to be so fucked up.

He had set out to move on, get some action; leave Liam alone.

What had happened instead was a bit of a mad event in which he had hacked Liam right off – and yet still wound up coming home with him?

“Harry’s going to be so pissed off when he comes back,” he laughed.

“Why’s that then?”

“I can’t tell you. Reasons!” he hummed to himself and waved his arms about in front of his face energetically.

“Sometimes I wish you weren’t such a cryptic person,” Liam lamented, and though Zayn was too drunk to hear it – there was most definitely an implication that this thought went beyond relevance just to the current conversation.
And after a loud double click on the keyboard he launched himself up towards the head of the bed.

“Ow, you’re squashing into me!”

“Tough. Move up. We’re watching the Lion King. I need cheering up after the weird night you’ve put me through.”

“You’re my Nala…” Zayn rambled, sleep over coming him even as his crush was shuffling under the covers with him.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“What are you doing? Why are you moving so much? I’m tryna sleep here!”

Instead of the usual quiet lying still, Liam was moving around an awful lot and disturbing his sickly peacefulness.

“Well I’m not going to sleep fully dressed, Zayn,” was the jolly reply, “so you can bloody well shut up.”

And with that a pair of ripped jeans and white t-shirt went flying onto the floor in front of a guitar Harry had borrowed off Niall.

“Much better,” Liam announced to the quiet room, settling down into the cosy pile of bedding in his stripy underpants.

“Night night,” Zayn mumbled, on the cusp on sleep.

“Sleep tight, you silly sod.”

Under normal circumstances, having a near-naked Liam next to him in bed of his own volition would have all but entirely prevented Mr Malik from procuring any sleep at all.

But these were special circumstances.

So he awoke early, the light filtering through the curtains still pale, and got the shock of his life.

Face flooding with rouge at the mere memory of any number of points of the previous day, Zayn immediately groaned and pushed his face as deep into the pillow as it would go.

He really, really, really did not want to get up for work.

“Shhh, babe,” an unanticipated, groggy voice behind him was suddenly saying, “go back to sleep.”

It took a little moment to realize the voice was Liam’s, and that they were spooning.

“Its only six,” Big Spoon Liam was continuing, “too early. Shhhh…” he trailed off as if he had nodded off again mid-sentence.

This was supported by the fact a gentle hand had begun to run through his hair a bit, but stopped as abruptly as it began.

Despite feeling ragingly hungover, and as dehydrated as a desert, sleep seemed unlikely given these circumstances.
Liam was behind him – right behind him, with his arms around him and he was only in his boxers. Fireworks of surprise, headache and adrenaline were attempting to all go off behind his eyes at once.

And as he lay there wondering where in god’s name Harry was sleeping, and if he was mad at him wherever it was, something began to occur to him.

What the hell was Liam playing at?

It wasn’t as if Zayn had never had platonic friends before. He knew the score, particularly with the vast majority of sporty straight guys.

They did not get mostly naked and hop into bed to spoon you. Ever.

There just seemed no explanation at all for what was afoot here.

His mind was swimming with self-inflicted nausea already, but he was hard pushed to fully notice this in the wake of adrenaline the sleeping circumstances had stirred up.

Under almost any other circumstances under the sun, Zayn would have – at this point – began to assume he might actually be in with a chance with whoever he was spooning.

After all, the dots lined up. He had gone off with a random, Liam had got annoyed (jealous..?), they had argued about it (like an old married couple in the toilets), he had got sick and Liam had insisted on taking him home despite Harry’s offer – and this was the real cincher. He had put a film on, taken his actual clothes off, and hopped into bed next to Zayn. Not only that, but he had cuddled up to him. PROPERLY, the excitable teenage voice in his head was screaming. Not in a friendly ‘bro’ way AT ALL. In a cuddly, snuggling, close way reserved usually for people whose genitals you’d like to get up close and personal with.

How could this be happening?

It was exactly the sort of event Harry had told him categorically would never happen, and to stop holding out for.

What the fuck.

A tiny part of him genuinely worried that Liam had either no memory of the night before, or would misremember things and wake up expecting to be with Sophia and get the fright of his life when he realised it was Zayn – another boy – that he was intimately sleeping with.

What if he woke up, went mental, and then didn’t talk to him again? You didn’t ask Liam to come to bed, he told himself firmly, there is literally NO reason for him to wake up mad and blame you for this.

“Stop it,” said a warning voice out of the blue.

“Bloody hell, aren’t you asleep?!”

“I can literally hear the wheels turning in your head. Quit thinking. Go back to sleep. Everything’s fine. I’m not mad at you anymore – I’m sorry for being mad in the first place. Harry came in, I offered to move but he was happy to sleep next door- no surprises there. He’s not mad with you either. And you don’t have to get up for another HOUR, so silent times now.”

With that he took the hand he had been carding through Zayn’s hair and tucked it around his belly,
giving him a gentle squeeze.

“Are you a bloody mind-reader or someshit?”

“I am when it comes to you. Goodnight, Zayn.”

Giggling, “night Li,” he said, burrowing into Liam and the covers as much as possible – he had no intention of falling back asleep and missing this though. This, he wanted to savor.

***

The wake of The Best Sleep Ever night was an interesting period.

Harry stopped trying to persuade Zayn to get over Liam, and Zayn stopped pretending to try.

In his own head he had resigned himself to the situation as it was, and occasionally torturing himself about what on earth sleeping with someone like that could possibly mean.

Him and Harry discussed it, him and Perrie discussed it – no stone was left unturned in terms of possibility. But without more to go on there wasn’t much to be said on the matter, when it came down to it.

Maybe Liam liked him as more than a friend. Certainly there was evidence to suggest this was a distinct possibility. For all they knew Liam was dismissing his manner with Zayn as a silly crush, as BBFs, or simply didn’t see it for what it was at all – possibly never having considered another bloke as a romantic possibility before.

Whatever, Zayn wasn’t about to broach the issue with him; despite his room mates multi angled attacks suggesting he do just that.

“I’m telling you, just get into a serious conversation and *ask* him what that night was really all about,” Harry hissed as Zayn handed him an unforgivingly large pile of dessert bowls to rinse.

“Shhhh!” cried Zee, alarmed that someone might hear.

“Its not like everybody doesn’t know anyway,” replied Harry, sullenly, “why cant you just let me ask him? At least let me ask if he thinks he might be bisexual.”

“H, what on earth would that prove? Leave him alone,” and with that Zayn picked up the top tier bowl and shoved it into Harry’s hands with some force.

“This is bigger than you now!” he went on, “I need to know now! Is Liam bi? Is he interested in you and your trouser snake?! Who knows! It’s a mystery.”

“That is the weirdest thing you’ve said yet, Styles.”

“It really isn’t. Ask anyone, watching your pining and his confused jealousy is getting old now. Someone needs to take matters into their own hands again.”

“Again?”
Harry winked, “don’t you have tables to clear Malik?”

Zayn’s brow crinkled, and he stalked back through the automatic doors into the restaurant.

As he passed the entrance to the bar he caught Liam’s eye, and nodded.

Liam broke into a huge smile and waved at him.
What Do I Know?

Chapter Summary

Featuring!

Flash backs, jealous! Louis, and a bloody terrible piste catastrophe!

Chapter Notes

Fun Facts:

1. The incident that happens to Louis at the end of the chapter is basically a re-telling of something that happened to me on the mountain once! :'(

2. I stole the chapter title from a song off the wonderful Ed Sheeran's new album (everyone go listen, i cant stop playing it). Partly cos i love all of the stuff on there, but mainly because it reflects Louis' state of mind going up the chairlift.

3. these weren't actually that fun, sorry! haha ;)

LOUIS.

The wake of the impromptu Holiday Night in Innsbruck was not the merriest for our paranormal investigators.

Naturally Simon was apoplectic, taking them both to task in the office for a full on 40 minutes of rantage regarding responsibility, trust and recklessness.

It might have worked better coming from a manager who was less prone to taking advantage of them, or speaking to them already in unduly harsh words; as it happened they merely felt bad for their friends having to cover for them on the morning shift – a situation that could be fairly easily paid back.

And as far as Louis was concerned it had been worth it.

As he did his best to filter out Simon’s grim tones, his mind floated back to the city they had just left behind and the fantastic night out him and Hazza had wound up having there.

They had began the night in a restaurant / bar – Mexico Arriba - enjoying varieties of Margarita, including Blood Orange and Mixed Berry.

It was a random choice, primarily based upon the fact it was on the riverside with an upper level
consisting of beautiful views through conservatory seating. Being the guest rather than the server for a change was extremely pleasing, and it was evident Harry wasn’t too sorry to be away from the kitchen either.

Having discussed their mutual enjoyment of Mexican food – and their coupled lamentation that they had already eaten before descending upon the place – they moved onto conversations about what other cuisines they liked, and naturally as a by-product where in the world they had been or would like to visit.

“I always used to go to French resorts on family ski trips,” Harry was laying forth, wobbling margarita glass in his left hand, “so I feel like I know their food pretty well. It was the first stuff I started copying at home when I knew I was into cooking; fondue and so on.”

Louis made keen agreement noises, “You can make fondue? Good lord, you’re a keeper. How about raclette? Its my favourite…”

“Easy. Got a raclette grill at home.”

“Right, you’re fucking making it for me some time! Its amazing, I’ve never had it when I wasn’t on holiday before.”

Harry grinned, clearly preening a little under the compliments, and went on to discuss perks of French supermarkets compared to British ones (more fresh food out all over the place, no unhealthy lunch deals shoved in your face as you enter etc).

“Okay, so we agree France knows what it’s doing. Austria and Germany, we know all about anyway – it’s bloody good too. Though I feel as though I may have turned into a schnitzel by the time we’re heading home, haha…”

Harry giggled, “Maybe you should stop ordering them everywhere we go then…”

“Shut up,” Louis went on imperiously, “and Italy’s antipastos are simply the shit.”

“No question - olives, bread with a bit of garlic and sun-blushed tomato,” Harry interrupted merrily, kissing his fingers in an elaborate gesture.

“Exactly, exactly,” Louis warbled on, “and you don’t like sushi as much as me – that’s annoying. Sushi’s really under appreciated in the UK you know,”

“So sue me – raw fish is dodgy territory,” Harry frowned.

“I think you just tried to make some once and made a pig’s ear of it,” replied Louis, with a smirk.

Harry’s face contorted at that, and he corrected the assumption with a reference to a particularly bad bout of gastroenteritis he had suffered a couple of years previously at the hands of some maliciously inclined salmon.

Louis tried very hard not to laugh, and failed.

“What do you think of Australia?” Harry had suddenly continued, as Louis had been peering at his margarita glass to wipe up salt.

“Oh, er,” was his intelligent reply.

This was an unwelcome gambit on H’s part.
Was he about to introduce the topic of his summer plans?

Louis didn’t want to hear about that, especially not now they were getting on so well again.

However, if Harry noticed any reluctance on his part it didn’t show.

“I hear mixed reviews,” was what he settled on.

“Really? They’re in such a great location for unique recipes though! Kangaroo, crocodile, weird-ass seafood…”

Harry’s face had completely lit up as he went further down the avenue of outdoor barbeques, and incredibly well-priced steaks.

This caused depressing feelings enhanced by the now rather quite large consumption of alcohol that had been going on all day.

Now, dear friends, I am sure we have all been here.

Desperate to enjoy some quality alone time with our secret beau. Everything is going well. Food, drinks, light-hearted conversation. But then, before you know it, they have brought up a topic that is quite out of left field. Usually it involves either an activity or a person perceived as somewhat of a threat to your relationship with them.

A person they like more than us? A place that is going to steal them away from us? An activity we cannot share in?

I am sure you can relate! (if Zayn were here, he would be nodding enthusiastically over my shoulder).

This was the conundrum Louis found himself in at Mexico Arriba. He could cut Hazza off; and seem rude or too self absorbed to listen. He could endure and feign jolliness as things went on.

(possibly not doing a very good job of it in the process, and killing the mood).

Or he could interrupt, sneakily, and as soon as possible, to derail things in a subtler manner.

And such an opportunity presented itself 5 minutes later (during which H had waxed lyrical about prawns and crab), when breath had to be drawn and a long sip taken to wet the parched throat.

“Well I still think crab stuffed avocado sounds delightful,” Louis was forcing himself to say, when the pause presented itself and he could jump at the chance, “speaking of delightful, we’ve run out of drinks. And I’m getting itchy feet. Why don’t we go for a dance or something and get drinks elsewhere?” he clanked their glasses together, smiling.

There was a moment he was worried he had been discovered. It was only ten thirty, perhaps somewhat early for them to hit a club; and prior to Harry’s mention of Oz he had been contemplating sitting in the Mexican for another hour or so.

Harry gave him a searching look over the top of the cup, more knowing than Louis was used to receiving from anyone other than Liam and his mum – but a second later he his face brightened, and he was pushing his chair back to grab his coat.

“Okay. Lets settle up.”
A small google and wander later, and they found themselves in a club recommended by a waiter in
the previous establishment – an LGBTQIA night called Bacchus, fairly near the train station and the
Triumphal Arch they had taken pictures at earlier in the day.

It was a bit of a stumble, and Louis may have felt the need to point out on several occasions that this
was actually in the opposite direction from the hotel they were staying at.

But Harry’s cheeriness was infectious.

If he didn’t mind a slightly longer jaunt home at the end of the evening, then Louis found himself not
minding either.

And the club definitely seemed worth the exertion, on first impressions. It had been so long since any
of them had been anywhere other than Kaos, Alte Stube or Dorf Stadl in the evening that they had
really forgotten what an actual club in a city was like.

There were several rooms, a variety of music genres and clientele that seemed frankly mind-boggling
this far into the season.

“Oh my lord,” Louis gushed, gripping H’s arm so that his fingers dug in, “is this not heaven?!?” his
eyes were shining.

Harry had wriggled his arm a little to loosen the grip, but not shook it off completely, “sure you can
still handle a mad bar queue?” he quipped, with a lopsided grin.

“I think I can hold my own, Harold,” he replied, and without waiting for Harry to follow him he took
off towards the stairs and the higher level.

Sadly, captive audience, there was nothing too telling to dwell on for the rest of the evening. Louis
and Harry remained close, flirtatious even, but nobody was willing to push the new boundaries too
far.

They danced. Closely. But never actually touching.

They bought rounds, and didn’t really pay attention to anybody else – but they almost weren’t
paying 100% to each other either.

In Louis’ case this could be accounted for by his internal quandary not to allow a repeat performance
of the Kaos Bogs Misdemeanor.

His cheeks still burnt with horrible awkwardness at the memory, and aside it being a bit grotty he felt
H deserved better than someone who only acted on their feelings when intoxicated in public spaces.

This required a great deal of concentration, because the drunker he got the more his inner
monologue centred around Harry’s cherubic face / Harry’s breathy tones or Harry’s unco-ordinated
but alluring dance-wiggles.

He wasn’t looking too closely at H, but if he had he would probably have noted himself in mirror;
because Harry’s distraction was a direct reflection of his own.

At one point, quite late into the night (Bacchus having a license until 6am, something next to unheard
of in half of the UK), when it was Louis’ round and he had staggered to the bar during one of
Hazza’s many pee breaks – a bloke sidled up next to him.
“Wie Gehts?”

“Hmm?”

“Wie geht es Ihnen?” said the chap a little louder.

It took him a moment to remember he was actually in a gay club, and that somebody was evidently trying to chat him up in German.

“Oh – mir geht es gut, danke. Gute Nacht?”

The boy looked him up and down appraisingly, “Ja – es wird besser,” he replied merrily.

Ordinarily this was the sort of cheeky banter that sent Louis’ heart racing in clubs back home. The guy (longish blonde hair, piercing blue eyes) was pretty hot, and the entire encounter reeked of the sort of one night stand he frequently enjoyed back home.

However. However, however, however.

Not that he had came away with the express intent of changing his sexual habits, *per se*. And not that other people’s judgments had ever really got him down – he liked having sex with randoms now and then, so did a large % of the world’s population, so what?

It was just after a year and a half it had got a bit… boring?

If he was honest he had begun to notice a routine in both the chase and the actions themselves – which was letting the fun out of it.

Of course Kühtai was simply too small a place for that sort of thing to really fly anyway, unless you were diddling guests left right and centre – a habit nobody wanted to get entangled with.

And then along came Harry.

Somehow, even if he hadn’t been sharing a room with Harry and on a trip for 2 that would render any attempt at bailing the utmost level of dickery, the thought of even leading Blondi along for a bit did not near enter his head.

So he snorted, and with a set smile replied, “Vielen dank. Mein Freund sagt mir, ich kann ein Zimmer aufleuchten!” he added a wink for good measure.

“Hast Sie einen Freund?” Blonde Guy rolled his eyes theatrically, “Typisch!” he picked up a large glass of beer to walk away, “Er ist ein Glücksmann. Kommen Sie zu mir, wenn es nicht klappt? Du hast wirklich einen fantastischen Arsch!” with that he winked and sauntered off into the crowd.

“So was that?”

In the moment he had been chuckling to himself, and swelling a little internally at the compliment, he hadn’t noticed a gangly, curly haired individual materialize at his right hand side.

“Haz!” Louis cried, throwing an arm out to tug him closer into a half sort of hug, “I’m just waiting to be served!”

“Who was that guy?” Harry persisted, looking back over his shoulder with a pinch between his eyebrows.

“God knows, he didn’t give his name. He said I had a nice arse, though.” He gave it an experimental
wiggle, as if to illustrate the fact.

“Well observed, I suppose,” Harry chuckled, with a loud exhale.

“Don’t worry I told him I had a boyfriend.”

“Why would I be worried?” said Harry, with faux nonchalance.

“Well, we are sharing a room tonight. Wouldn’t be very gentlemanly to try and bring any old tom dick or harry back – would it?”

Harry laughed more easily, “Right. This Harry is okay, tho?” he jabbed a finger into his own chest at that.

“Exactly! You’re stuck with me all evening,” Louis was continuing, and he turned to look H in the actual face (at the unfortunate expense of being served next), “unless you actually want to hook up with someone? I didn’t think. If someone’s caught your eye…”

He meant it, too.

Because it would be easier to move on if Harry moved on first, he kept telling himself. Obviously this was nonsense.

“What? No! What on earth gave you that idea?”

“Nothing, actually,” Louis shrugged, trying desperately not to acknowledge the intense relief coursing through him at this moment.

Luckily Harry had turned back to the front, because he managed to catch a barmaid’s eye and put in an order for 2 shots of Jager, an amaretto sours and a mojito.

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“Are you even listening to me, Tomlinson?!” Simon was barking.

He suddenly came back down to earth with a bump.

“Sorry, yes sir.”

“Now get out my office the pair of you!”

And with that they traipsed back into the flat feeling both ashamed and fiendishly pleased with themselves.

Back in his room he found Liam lying on his side of the bed watching Die Hard with German subtitles, and Niall rolling a joint.

“Aftrnoon lads!”

“Hello, you wanker,” answered Niall without looking up.

“Have an awesome time with Harry in Innsbruck did we?” said Liam in a pointed fashion, his eyes trailing off the movie to land upon his friend – who had began to strip off the clothes he had now
spent 2 days and 1 night encased in.

Au d’Sweat had began to take root, if truth be told...

“It was great. We hit up that LGBT night we read about back home, you’d have loved it Liam –
there was a whole hour of r’n’b stuff you’re always playing in the car at uni.”

As he spoke he yanked his black t-shirt over his head and threw it towards his wash-mound in the corner.

“Really?” Liam perked up at this, as Lou knew he would. Liam had been lamenting the focus on rock, pop and dance in Kaos intensely of late.

Harry, who had appeared in the doorway from his own room en route to the washing machines bellow, paused to agree.

“It was awesome. I think the time that was on was a bit lost on Lou and me,” he half shrugged apologetically as Liam winced, “which just means next time you’ll have to get stranded with us and make the most of it!”

Zayn, who it seemed had followed his roomie out into the corridor, appeared on Harry’s right nodding with a big grin.

“What you say, Li? Give it a couple of weeks till my late start Thursday, and we could give it a go?”

It made sense, because Liam always started late but seldom had people to spend his mornings with. Until recently, when later start days had slowly began to be introduced based on the fact over time everyone had got more efficient at their jobs.

“Yes!” he actually bounced to sit upright at this, grinning from ear to ear, “god can you actually imagine a night out with a different set list of songs for a change?! Lets totally do it!”

Zayn looked surprised, pleased and scared all at the same time.

The cause of which Louis still had not clicked into.

Instead, he felt a small pang of jealousy at the two.

Sure, he was ‘into into’ Harry – and a night away just the two of them, platonic as it had been, was very welcome.

But Liam was his best mate, his BFF – the only person who really knew him 100% outside of his mum.

And the thought he might be being replaced with the Bradford Badboy had him feeling a little wan.

The only thing for it, he decided, was to remind Liam what a super friendship they had once and for all. Then Li would remember not to chose Zayn above him every time he needed someone to talk to on this bloody trip, and everything could go back to normal.

He blamed himself fully, assuming Liam had found comfort elsewhere while he had been a little self preoccupied.

He did not consider that Liam’s interests might be quite down another lane; and utterly unrelated to him at all.

Thinking that things that were entirely nothing to do with him might actually be to do with him could
have been said (probably by Liam) to be one of his biggest flaws, come to think of it.

“Okay lads, calm down, its just a club night – not a fucking lottery win!” he bellowed, trying to drown out the worrisome thoughts, “moving on! I move to propose we have a group piste session? There’s a black I’ve been meaning to conquer further down the valley toward the dam – whose with me?”

Liam, Zayn, Niall and Harry all agreed keenly.

Harry was used to blacks, and an extremely proficient skier- in fact he had already done the run himself (this may have made Lou all the more determined to complete it in one go).

Liam was an excellent snowboarder, and hadn’t done a black since coming to Kühtai – which made him keenest of all.

Niall and Zayn had both only been boarding for a little while. But Niall’s reckless nature propelled him to follow where the others lead, regardless of the sense; and Zayn. Well. On the outside it may have seemed like he simply wanted to push himself, not get left behind. But really, you and I know that he just wanted to impress Mr Payne wink.

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This was how, 40 minutes later, they found themselves on the top of the Dreiseenbahn run.

Louis had felt even further put out when they found themselves breaking off into 2 distinct groups for the chairlift – Liam choosing to hang back and come up with Zayn, whilst Louis was pushed ahead onto the first chair with Harry and Niall.

He had secretly hoped to get on the 2 with Li himself, and it hadn’t occurred to him Liam would actively chose to pair off with anybody else.

“Are you okay, Tommo?” Niall asked, to his right.

“What?” he was kicking his skis back and fore over the footrest crossly, and resented being forced to look up again.

“Well you have a face like thunder for starters, mate,” Niall went on with a grimace, “and we’re kind of stuck together for an age on this giant lift. Thought we might as well address it!”

“Urg, sorry. I was miles away,” he apologised, plastering a small smile in place of the grumpy expression.

“Everything all right, then?”

He wasn’t sure what encouraged him, it was an embarrassing admission at the best of times - jealousy or feeling left out – but somehow he just knew Harry was there on his left hand side; not saying a lot but absolutely thinking that whatever had gone on to piss Louis off was entirely his fault. And he couldn’t have that.

(in actuality Harry was no where near as acutely sensitive as Louis currently had him pegged for, and while he was quiet it was more because he happened to be appraising his ski boots against a new pair he had seen in a shop in town – and was considering whether or not if he purchased them they
would go with his snow trousers, rather than anything to do with his friends).

Regardless, Louis found himself having an outburst.

“its just Liam,” he exclaimed, pounding a balled up gloved fist on the hand rail in front of them, “we’re supposed to be best friends! Since we were four! We had all the In Jokes, and know each other’s families inside out, and we’re supposed to turn to each other when things are difficult!”

Harry, who had been rather rudely knocked out of his boot dilemmas, didn’t say anything at all. He just squinted at his friend appraisingly.

Niall let out a knowing grunt.

Louis continued, hands now thoroughly gesticulating by his face, “and now its all about bloody Malik,” he adopted a silly high pitched voice that sounded a tiny bit like an over-excited Liam, “Zaaaaaynie, will you watch Marvel with me? Zaaayn, I’m setting up the bar – come with me so I can tell you secrets you get that Louis doesn’t! Oh Zee, why don’t we go to Innsbruck together and have secret japes?! It isn’t fair!!”

A loud pause ensued, where Harry stifled a smile into the chin guard of his ski jacket and couldn’t trust himself to open his mouth.

Niall, recognizing it would fall on him to respond to this, cleared his throat, “well. That’s to the point.”

“You did ask,” huffed Louis in return.

“That I did,” his blonde chum continued, “so I suppose its down to me to say something…” he noted Harry nodding furiously behind Louis’ head.

“There’s nothing to say,” went on Louis, with the air of the unimaginably injured, “if he wants a new best mate he can have one. I’m not going to chase after him like some old maid, desperate for some crumbs of affection!”

“No, wait – what? Louis, you’ve got this all wrong. Liam isn’t trying to replace you at all.”

“Niall, not to be rude, but you cannot possibly know that.”

“I can, actually,” said Niall, who was not to be deterred by snubs, “and if you were a bit less wrapped up in yourself you would see what’s really going on just as clearly as I do.”

“What’s really going on here?” Lou repeated, sounding it out like an alien language.

“Yes,” Niall rolled his eyes, “its not entirely your fault though. You’re just looking at things the way you’re accustomed to. Or have been accustomed to. Its only natural…”

Here he trailed off, and Harry thoughtfully took up the baton.

“Its like anything – if you’re always told one thing, and that thing never does anything to show that its not the thing it says it is, and everyone else says it is- how can you be expected to know that deep down it had the potential to be something else as well?”

At this point Niall was now fervently nodding, leaning out over the handrail to better see Hazza; while Louis felt utterly bewildered.

“You know what I’m talking about, evidently,” Niall finished, sitting back in his seat contentedly and
Harry patted Louis’ knee consolingly. “I know you feel kind of shitty right now. But trust us, you know really don’t have anything to worry about there.”

“Can’t you just tell me why you think you know that?” Louis begged, frustration at being out the loop looming.

It was bad enough he felt sure Liam was moving on without him, but to have 2 people who had known each of them a fraction of the time they had known each other telling him what was what was simply too infuriating to be endured!

“It isn’t our place to tell,” said Harry simply, turning away to face forwards again.

“Exactly,” Niall agreed.

“I hate you all,” Louis finally sighed, throwing his head back and glaring up at the blue sky above.

Harry laughed, and Niall exhaled fondly.

They were nearly at the top.

“Right, I think we should try and keep together as much as possible for the first go,” Liam was laying forth as they stood slightly to the side of the chair lift.

Zayn was peering down with a look of trepidation, as Niall stood by his side (hands on hips) with a confident sort set to his jaw.

“But we’re all at mad different levels?” Louis was grumbling, stuffing his hand into his backpack looking for suncream.

“So? Its safer then, the experienced folk keeping an eye on the novices,” at this he caught Zayn’s eye and threw him a mischievous wink.

Zayn and Niall squawked in protest, but Louis suspected they would both appreciate a distant level of monitoring should they get into difficulty.

“Gentlemen of the boards, can you get buckled back into your bindings so we can stop staring down the precipice and go?” Harry urged. He was already standing close to the edge, clearly champing at the bit.

The night out of town seemed to have done him some good. He looked perkier.

As he rubbed Piz Buin factor 20 over his nose and cheeks, Zayn, Niall and Liam stomped their back feet into place and shuffled to the edge of the piste.

“Wait, what are you doing?” he suddenly cried, mild panic surging up from nowhere.

He rarely came up the mountains alone, as while skiing is irrefutably a solitary sport he found little enjoyment in it when he wasn’t racing friends, or stopping half way down the slopes for a smoke and a chat.

“I’m gonna guide these guys down if they have trouble,” Liam called with a grin, “see you at the bottom Pro!” and with that he kicked off, quickly out of sight.
Niall followed almost immediately, with Zayn a few beats later.

“See you at the bottom!” Harry threw over his shoulder before zooming off at speed himself.

Suddenly, there he was – plan organiser – all alone at the top of the piste. With Liam still picking Zayn over him at every given bloody opportunity. It made him mad, to the point he struggled to close up his bag again – leading him to stamp his foot and swear colourfully to himself.

Well fuck it, he thought peering down after the now barely visible others, and fuck all of you too! This is shitting easy, I’ll get down here in no time and piss off to a different lift by myself.

He was full of hot wrath, and indignant embarrassment at the perceived slighting.

Why in holy hell couldn’t somebody have waited for him?

As it turned out this section of the hill was a lot harder than he had anticipated. And Louis simply wasn’t up to the concentrating.

It was full of moguls, and in his rage he had started off too fast – leading to a painful fall high up the slope that profoundly affected his confidence.

Luckily his skis had stayed on, but he had winded himself and was feeling the beginnings of a mild whiplash on his neck.

Sod it, went his internal commentary, though it was decidedly painful and his eyes stung.

Struggling to his feet, he realised that his friends were no longer in sight. It dawned on him Zayn and Niall were coping better with the black run than he was, resulting in the first flush of hot tears spilling over onto his cheeks.

This is stupid, nobodies trying to leave you behind – pull yourself together Tomlinson.

He struggled back up to his feet, wobbled, nearly fell back down, stifled a small sob and pushed himself back off with his redundant seeming poles.

The sun was blindingly bright, and he began to question whether or not he had put the right lenses in his goggles.

These had been super on the cloudy, snowy days – now he found he was forced to screw his eyes up to try and see the lumps and bumps of the piste in the glaring sunshine. It wasn’t fun, and after a few metres began to feel like he was going too speedily for how poor his visibility was.

On the other hand, he mused, the others were still extremely far ahead. He could just make out Hazza’s green helmet as a speck in the distance, although he admitted it could also have been a small shrub.

Zoom, zoom, swish, swish.

Jagged, cracked mountain tops danced by – peppered with dark green conifer trees, dusted with thick layers of snow, as well as the odd little river bubbling merrily on its frosty way.

He carried on picking up speed, and toppling over, in front of it all.

He simply couldn’t reconcile the need to go slower with the fact he was lagging behind beginners.

But each fall knocked his confidence back further, and left him aching in both limb and ego.
For someone who was a pretty damn good skier from childhood, it was all getting a bit too much. Frustrated tears began to flow freely underneath his goggles, and he was profoundly glad that none of the experts zipping by him (few and far between to be fair, blacks are never mad busy) could see as a result.

It was not until he was considerably further down that he hit a bump wildly off balance, he had been blinking furiously to get the tears out of the way and looked off to the side whilst doing so; leading him to perform a sort of accidental cartwheel – loosing his left ski in the process.

Ordinarily the faint cheering from a far-off chair lift would have appeased him after such an embarrassing incident.

Today, it was insult to injury, and he lay unwilling to get back up as full-on sobs made themselves both known and unstoppable.

His chest was heaving, he was snuffling, and his goggles were steaming up with salty tears. Oh, and one of his beloved skis was god knows where!

“I want to **die**!” he wailed dramatically, wrongly assuming that there was no-one about.

“Oh, please don’t do that. I left my phone in the flat, and I have **no** idea how I’d get your body back down the mountain on my own!”

He jumped up into a sitting position, cheeks flushing furiously, “Harry?!” he incredulously accused.

“That’s me!” said altogether-too-cheerful-Hazza, “and I believe Mr Ski here may belong to you?”

He realised Harry was brandishing his missing equipment over his shoulder as if it was no big deal. To which he was internally grateful.

He wasn’t sure what he expected of Harry.

An awkward cough?

For him to chuck the ski down at his feet and fire off again?

What he did not expect was Harry to shuffle (with some difficulty) back up the piste, abandon his own skis (well, take them off carefully anyway), and bum-shuffle over beside him.

“Lou? Lou, **breath**,” he instructed, throwing his arms around him and bringing him in for a cuddle.

“I – I – I – you left me behind!” he howled, “and it was too bright for my fucking goggles, and I couldn’t see but I had to try and c-c-c-catch up,” he hiccupped here and sobbed harder.

“Shh, its okay,” said H in a friendly tone, no indication of the emotional breakdown going on evident whatsoever. “I’m really sorry about that. That wasn’t cool. We’re sorry, okay? Nobody should be left alone on the black.” He patted Louis’ neck softly with one hand, “you know Liam’s fallen over like four times as well?”

“Liam doesn’t care!” Wail. Sob.

“right, sorry. Probably not the best example there!” H chortled, “but don’t you see? It’s a really difficult run. It is. Liam told me he’s never got down a black without cabbaging himself. I’ve only managed this run once without falling over.”

“mnmmbgh,” mumbled Louis into Harry’s soggy shoulder.
“Its our fault for not waiting for you with your bag,” he carried on mollifying, “it wasn’t the sort of run for playing catch up. But look. We’re really close to the bottom of this area, see?” he pointed down the hill a bit, toward a corner, “now we’re gonna take it really slow together for the rest of the run. Okay?”

“And then we can go home?” asked Lou in a tiny voice.

“Well, no…” for the first time H’s voice took on an awkward quality, “we need to go down a red and then a little blue to get back to the hotel…”

This was unwelcome news. Louis found himself beginning to hyperventilate a bit at the thought. He was completely shaken from his battering down this run – he knew his concentration was shot, and he was sore and disoriented and humiliated.

How could he be so far from running off the mountain and into a hot shower?!

“I can’t! I’ll just live here now. Forever.”

But he had stopped shaking, and the tears were coming less thick and fast.

“If you really want. You could become the abominable snowman?” Harry quipped, but before Louis could reply he had shuffled in front of him and grasped him by each shoulder to look him dead in the eye.

“We really do need to carry on to get home, okay? It won’t take too long, and we’ll be together the whole of the way.”

Louis nodded, sniffling.

“Do you need a hanky?” inquired Harry, as an after thought, procuring one from the depths of one of his jacket pockets.

“Thank you,” said Louis in his Small Voice, “and okay. You’ll stay with me?”

“I promise,” answered Harry sincerely.

He stuck out his hand to shake on it, which made Louis smile faintly again. He then struggled up to his feet and pulled Lou up to his own at the same time.

“All we have to do is shove these bloomin’ skies back on and smash it down to hot chocolates and brandies!”

“Hell yes, Curly!” said an invigorated sounding Mr Tomlinson.

As Harry checked his bindings, Louis blew his nose a final time and shook his head – clearing it of all the negativity.

Harry had waited.

Harry had been looking out for him.

His chest swelled a bit. Okay, quite a lot.

“Shall we go?”

“Yes… but first…”
It was a bit awkward because they were both now reattached to their skis, but he felt he had to give it a go anyway; and launched himself into his green-eyes chum’s arms for a hug.

“Thank you,” he whispered into the curly hair.

“Don’t mention it,” he heard back.

And with a squeeze, they both turned around to start their descent.
Crazy Laughter in Another Room; and she Drove Herself to Madness with a Silver Spoon.

Chapter Summary

Featuring:- a long awaited attempt at a date, an alternative Valentine's, a Witchy Woman, uncomfortable snuggles and Harry using his noodle.

Chapter Notes

title stolen from the wonderful Eagles song Witchy Woman <3333
so much love of this band! go check it out :')

ZAYN.

Despite the excitement of recent days (quietly deemed by Louis “the Notorious Incident of the Nefarious Schwarz Run”), there was a mostly up-beat feeling in the Elisabeth.

Zayn, Liam and Niall were suitably ashamed of dashing off down the piste, and made it up to Louis as best they could that evening with Milka chocolates and some delicious French wine (their new favourite, Mâcon Village) chipped in for together at Harrod’s next door.

And while Lou may have pretended to be aloof at first, he was actually rather touched and may have had to dash to the bathroom afterwards for a quiet happy-sob.

Harry was the hero of the day, and he and Louis seemed to anyone else looking closer than ever before; probably because they were.

Nick had Tinder matched with a waiter down the road in the Dorfstadl - Peter - and thus was spending most of his time texting or floating on Cloud 9.

Josh and Sophia seemed to be engaging in drunken hook-ups, but to the dismay of their colleagues neither seemed to be becoming too attached to the other - aside of the end of the evenings. Zayn worried this might change down the line, but mostly just enjoyed using them as an example to Louis that it was perfectly possible to have sex without feeling and still see people again afterwards.

As for Zayn himself, he was preoccupied with the fact that Valentine’s Day was up-coming pretty fast and he still didn’t know what the fuck was going on between him and his crush.

There was still no word on what Liam had meant by spooning him that evening; in fact that entire debacle of a night had never really been addressed by either of them.

Zayn wasn’t sure if that was a problem or not.
Nothing had happened since, but he felt that was largely because a situation where it might hadn’t presented itself.

As it was, if they all returned in a group from the bar they would simply all head to bed in their respective bedrooms. If he came back with Harry, they would get into their cot-bed together and stick a film on to go to sleep; clearly prohibiting anybody from popping their head around the door if they came in afterwards.

He was out on the balcony smoking, watching a ski school class attempting to get on the chairlift and contemplating these facts; when someone came up behind him and gave him a scare.

“Zaynie!”

“Argh!” he had been so enraptured by his own musings that he had been quite oblivious to the door opening and the individual coming through it attempting to address him.

“Leeyum!”

“How’re you?”

Liam was in his white work shirt and slightly-too-big blue tie, meaning he was about to start work and couldn’t stay long.

Zayn smiled, “Good. Just enjoying the shit view, y’know.”

Liam laughed, and grabbed Zee’s packet of cigarettes off the plastic picnic table, “mind?”

“Go ahead.”

Liam didn’t smoke as much as Zayn or Louis, he was about to embark on a Sports Science degree after all and was valiantly trying to quit for good- but hanging around smokers in a country with no smoking ban was making it impossible to turn his back on his habit completely.

He wandered to the edge of the balcony and leant against the railings next to Zayn, cupping his cigarette against the wind for a second before leaning forward and looking off to the left at the chairlift himself.

For a moment they just enjoyed a companionable silence, watching the world go by, and thus Zayn was caught slightly off guard when Liam finally spoke again.

“Erm,” he began, flicking his ash off into the air, “I was just wondering what you were planning on doing Valentine’s night?”

Immediately Zayn could feel his stomach flip from side to side.

“Oh. Its on Tuesday isn’t it?” he replied, stalling for time.

“Yeah. In a couple of days. Nick mentioned there’s that Karnival - Start of Lent party in Kaos….”

“Oh right,” Zayn said stupidly, vaguely remembering being told about this and thinking how it sounded like a fancy dress version of every other night in the bar they primarily frequented.

“Are you that bothered about it?”

“Huh? I was hardly planning on staying in by myself, Li!”
“Ahhh, no, sorry, I amn’t wording this well.”

They lapsed into a strange silence, where Zayn furiously tried to work out what his mate was playing at.

“I thought that might be a cool night to go down and check out that night in Innsbruck, that’s all. Nick’s going down with his new guy, Peter – I was talking with him about it earlier. He asked if I wanted to go, and since it’s our day off Wednesday we could all stay over?”

“…. With Nick? At Peter’s apartment?” Zayn attempted to clarify.

“No!” throat clearing, “ahem. No… well, I mean we could. I don’t think Peter would mind, but we haven’t any sleeping bags….“ he frowned and looked down at his smoking hand, “I had actually thought about checking out that budget hotel Lou and Haz stayed at? I mean, give the happy couple some space and all….”

Finally he looked up at Zayn, with a fairly convincing attempt at nonchalance on his face.

Swoopy backflips had made way for full on trampolining butterflies by this point.

Determined to keep his cool while he was still so unsure of Liam’s motives, he allowed himself a lop sided smile.

“Well, I’m not sure I want to spend a night watching Nick neck that dude from down the road – but otherwise it sounds like a sick plan. Let’s do it.”

Here he bumped Liam’s shoulder with his fist.

“Sweet,” said Liam as he crushed the remainder of his cigarette out on the balcony edge, “and I’m sure we don’t have to spend the entire night ogling Nick like a couple of curious school children.”

At that they both laughed.

“Hey,” Zayn resisted, “I credit my curious childhood for all the wild, and unimaginable things I now know about!” and with that he winked as flirtatiously as he could manage.

Inside he was terrified. If Liam had simply adopted him as a BFF, or decided to experiment with a vague notion of bisexuality on him – this would be an embarrassing misstep.

As it was Liam flushed a colour Zee thought of as an exquisite rouge, before responding with a squeaky, “Oh yes?”

Somehow, despite looking like he was about to turn into a Tomato of Embarrassment, his eye contact didn’t falter once.

“Absolutely.”

“In that case, maybe instead of looking at Nick I should be looking to you all night for some educative pointers?”

Although he was still blushing, he had regained a swagger-some tone and slightly cocky smile to boot that had Zayn’s heart fluttering.

“That would be wise.”

Liam laughed aloud at that, before turning to walk back towards the ashtray.
“I genuinely look forward to that Zee. I’ll speak to Nick and book us into that Gasthaus over dinner.”

He waved and stepped back in through the door to his, Lou & Niall’s bedroom.

“Ouch!”

He flinched, dropping the fiery end to his cigarette over the edge by accident.

In his effort to remain calm and collected he had allowed his cigarette to burn down to the filter and singe his hand.

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Tuesday, the day of St Valentine, dawned with a brisk and cloudy white-out. Blizzards were raging outside, and there was a brief spell where the foursome were concerned they wouldn’t be able to get down from the mountains at all.

“Peter’s pretty sure his snow chains will be enough,” Nick assured them as he and Zayn crowded around the end of Liam’s bar mid shift.

“Well okay…” Liam, who had not entirely shaken off his Grandparent-like tendencies, dubiously agreed.

Frankly, Zayn was happy to push Peter’s car down the roads the whole way if it got him into the city and out to a real club night for the evening – but in an effort not to appear desperate, he said nothing and just hummed.

“Look, just be ready for collection at 10.30pm,” Nick ordered, before turning on his heel and marching back into the kitchens – where he was supposed to be over seeing things.

“Chill out Leeyum, its all going to be fine. A night away will be totally worth a slightly wild car journey!” Zayn remarked, patting Liam’s arm in what he hoped was a reassuring manner before walking back to the restaurant (where he was supposed to be waiting on people) himself.

The evening seemed to drag on, much as any day does when we are extremely excited about something we are going to do in the evening.

Zayn may have used the word ‘torturous’ – but he was prone to exaggeration in these sorts of circumstances.

Eventually their shifts ran toward close.

Niall, who had done a brief stint working in a bar back home in Ireland, appeared to cover the second half of Liam’s shift; and the pair disappeared into the flat to ready themselves for Peter’s pick up in forty minutes.

Zee managed to nab the first shower, and it was only when Liam had hopped in second and was scrubbing away (or whatever it was Zayn was trying not to think about him doing in there) that he suddenly realised the top he wanted to wear was hanging up to dry downstairs in the laundry room.
A conundrum ensued, as he knew he ought to go down and collect it now while there was plenty time. This simply wasn’t going to happen though, not after everything that had been going on in the Elisabeth since their arrival.

So he pulled on a green jumper in the mean time, and sat down on the bed to double check he had packed everything he wanted. Wash-kit and clean t-shirt for the morning, plus some deodorant and hair gel had all been lobbed into Harry’s infamous floral JanSport bag (which he had reluctantly agreed to lend Zayn for the evening). There wasn’t much more to do until he heard the door to the shower opening again.

At this point he stuck his head out of the door and called, “Leeyum?”

“Eh – yes?” Liam had paused outside his own door, glistening and wearing a towel around his waist.

Zayn forced his eyes to stay on Liam’s face and explained the basement situation.

“So you want me to come down with you to get it?” he clarified, with a little smile.

“Don’t judge me – nobody goes down there alone anymore!”

“Fair point. Just let me get dressed, yeah?”

Ten minutes later Liam had reappeared, and they were making their cautious way down the main steps.

“Let’s just dive in and out, yeah?” Zayn was muttering, “I’ll grab the t-shirt, you – like – follow close behind me as I do it, so if there’s any Funny Business again we aren’t… y’know… far apart…”

“God, you’re just filling me with confidence Zee!” Liam giggled, leading the way through the lower floor swing doors.

“Shut up. Its best to be prepared.”

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

They had come to an unacknowledged stand-still just before the wash room door.

“You’re focusing on all the weird shit that’s been happening in this corridor.”

“Well now I am!”

Liam rolled his eyes, and shoved the ominous door forwards, “I want to go to Innsbruck Zayn. So let’s make this quick.”

Not wishing to be alone in the corridor any more than he did the washing room, Zayn zipped in behind Liam as fast as humanly possible and rammed right into his back.

“For the love of the wee-man Zayn!” the taller boy exclaimed, stumbling slightly and turning around.

“You’re not fucking leaving me!” Zayn barked, one hand reaching out to grab a fistful of the blue plaid shirt Liam had put on – causing him to laugh.

“So, what one is it you want?”

Now that he was looking, he realised with a weird feeling that the grey and red bomber jacket / top-thing he wanted was nowhere in sight.
“It was that red and grey summer jacket thing…” he trailed off, with a frown.

“Well where did you leave it?”
“It was hanging up next to Ni’s board. I put it there specifically so I wouldn’t lose it.”

Liam walked down the room a little towards the Irishman’s green and white snowboard, which was leaning all alone on a low table in the corner.

“There’s nothing over here?” he pointed out, waving his arms around either side of it comically before turning back to his friend, “maybe someone took it up for you?”

Before Zayn could register that Liam had walked out of arm’s reach, or even articulate that he had what Shaggy of Scooby Doo fame might have called ‘A Bad Feeling About This’; out went the lights.

A “Oh, for fucks sake…” emitted grumpily from the direction of Liam.

Zayn held his breath for a second, before the lights flickered and came back on; albeit at a lower wattage than usual.

Liam strode back over as fast as he could, but stopped half way with a high pitched squeak.

“Leeyum?” it came out a whisper, albeit a very loud one, in the still silence that had erupted around them from nowhere.

“I told you, you are not supposed to be here,” said an ethereal and feminine sounding voice.

“Oh god, Leeyum, who the fuck is that?!?”

Li, who was paused at a fork in the room where a small square of space went off with a bunch of windows to his left, turned to look at him with popping eyes and mumbled, “that woman’s back.”

“No, she isn’t.” Announced Zayn, resolutely.

She couldn’t be.

They had only came in the fucking door moments previously, and the room had been empty. It was simply an impossibility of physics, he thought, for Voice Lady to appear out of nowhere in a corner that didn’t have any entrance to it.

But before he could refuse to accept what was going on any further, the Dirndl Lady from New Years Eve had floated into view in the dim yellow-y lighting. She didn’t look transparent, but she wasn’t particularly solid looking either. Why hadn’t they noticed that before? He wondered.

Without really thinking about poor old Liam, or anything really, Zayn spun on his heel and launched himself at the door, shouting, “Follow me!” at the top of his voice as he did so.

Presumably this was aimed at Liam, and not at the terrifying specter that was hovering in the midst of them.

Later he would try to tell himself he was going for reinforcements, but in reality he didn’t have any such plans. He was merely terrified and attempting to go as far in the opposite direction as possibility would allow. Burgeoning romances be damned!

But just as the door was opening an inch it slammed shut again, and omitted a disturbing clicking sound that Zayn felt forced to acknowledge was probably a lock.
He gave the handle a couple more useless tugs before tentatively turning back.

“In such a hurry?” said Floaty Woman.

“Oh… no…” Zayn rambled, “I think I left a tap on upstairs…’”

Liam raised an eyebrow.

“This is your last warning,” she went on as if she hadn’t heard, “you cannot remain here.”

Liam, pale but still rooted to the spot closest to her, cleared his throat, “Look. It’s all very well saying that…”

Typical Liam, thought Zayn rather fondly given the circumstances; he was trying to be reasonable with a whatever-she-was.

“You don’t understand!” she snapped, eyes darting over to the door with a worried look.

“We’re not afraid of you, you know,” Liam continued, a little more forcefully, “so this is ridiculous. We don’t even know who you are, you can’t just tell us to piss off!” he was raising his voice slightly, presumably in the hope of sounding more confident than he felt.

Zayn racked his brains for something useful to add, but found most of his thoughts had turned to gibberish or horrified exclamations like ‘oh no’, ‘oh god’ and ‘help’.

“It isn’t me you should be afraid of,” the woman went on, looking back to Liam, “useless children. I am trying to protect you!”

Suddenly, and without warning, the door behind Zayn began to rattle violently on its hinges, and he turned again – this time with his eyes like dinner plates.

“Stand aside!”

“What – closer to you? I don’t bloody think so!” Zayn cried, recoiling slightly.

“Zayn, for Christ’s sake, just do as she says!” snapped Liam, his own eyes bulging as he looked back at the entrance-way.

“Stay away from the door!” Austrian ghost-lady ordered, slightly more urgently.

“I suppose something beyond my wildest nightmares lies on the other side of it?”

For some odd reason he couldn’t fathom his shock had moved onto some sort of mythical plain of existence, where instead of actually being useful he was drawn into making sarcastic and unhelpful comments like a moody teenager being asked to dance on the beam during an unwanted PE session.

“This is not the time, Zee!” Liam finally exploded, marching across the room to grab his elbow and forcibly drag him back across the room towards Niall’s snowboard.

Once they were as far from the way in as could be, Liam turned back around to ask for a few more explanations – only to be confronted with darkened window frames and empty space.

Oh, apart from the customary fluttering curtains.

Nice touch.

“Oh nooo…” moaned Zayn, who had noticed this at about the same time.
“Erm. Hello? I’m sorry, but I don’t think we were quite finished…” Liam called, lamely.

The door carried on banging in its frame, as if someone very strong was bringing down some heavy blows upon it with either something very large or a pair of incredibly meaty fists.

Both of them gave it a wary look, neither wishing to meet what was on the delivering end of such a racket.

“Oh, I don’t mean to be dramatic – but I’m going to get under this table now,” Zayn announced to no-one in particular, “in the hope that whatever the fuck is making that racket might not see me when it batters through.”

Liam watched Zayn crouch down and crawl under a lofty wooden table they sometimes dumped helmets and ironing on; before curling up with his knees to his chest in the back corner.

“Room for 2?” asked Liam a moment later, only he didn’t wait for an answer before diving under himself and squishing up as closely as was physically possible.

He appeared to have grabbed somebody’s large ski jacket en route, which he proceeded to throw over their legs in an effort to keep warm.

“This is not what I had in mind for the evening when you asked if I wanted to hang out,” Zayn said finally, breaking the silence.

Liam laughed a little, but cut it short when scratching noises joined the banging on the other side of the doorway.

“No. But then if you could have just got your bloody shirt in the day time like a normal person…” he shook his head fondly, before taking Zayn’s hand under the coat and squeezing it.

It said a great deal for the situation that while Zayn certainly appreciated the gesture, it was for supportive rather than romantic reasons.

“What do you think is going on in this place, exactly?” was what he said, instead of apologizing.

He felt rather than saw Liam shrug next to him, “Ghosts? Some mad haunting? Devil worshippers in the basement?!”

“It’s kind of weird that that woman keeps reappearing.”

“Zayn, we’ve met her twice. I’d hardly count that as constantly appearing,” Liam remarked, but he added, “she does seem to want to help though… right?”

“She’s still a creep.” Zayn answered, firmly.

Liam chuckled a little again, “She might be a creep, but she’s probably the only thing between us and whatever the hell’s on the otherside of that door.”

“Do you think that’s where she’s vanished to? To fight it… y’know, off?” Zayn found himself dropping his voice even lower as he suggested it, because he reasoned invisible people could be listening at any time.

The battering and scratching noises against the door were still going on, but straining the ear allowed one to notice sort of scuffley noises as well.

“I bloody well hope so,” Liam cried, “after all that!”
Conversations faded a bit again, as they both desperately followed the strange series of noises from the corridor. A couple of times it even sounded a bit like a wild animal was being thrown into the mix, causing them both to jump and Liam to bash his head against the top of the table.

“Ow! Christ almighty…” moaned Li, rubbing his head.

The noises abruptly came to a halt, and the boys unconsciously held their breath in horror / anticipation.

Zayn eventually cleared his throat as quietly as he could, and whispered directly into the shell of Liam’s ear, “You don’t think whatever is it heard that do you, Leeyum??”

There was heavy implication that it had, and that that was probably a bad thing. Liam blushed and pulled a face.

“Sorry.” He hissed back.

After a moment the door started rattling again, and Zayn felt himself drain of what little colour must have been left in his face.

He was freezing, even under the ski jacket blanket, and absolutely terrified. Nothing could have prepared him for the utter horror of being locked in a basement room with a teacher-like ghost woman appearing and disappearing, and some sort of Behemoth throwing itself angrily at them from the other-side of the only exit.

“Oh, you’re going to have to distract me,” Zayn finally announced, turning to look Liam in the face instead of gazing blankly at table legs.

“What?”

“Distract me. Us. Ourselves. Whatever, can we just not sit here in silence waiting to die?” he delivered the final sentence as pointedly as he could.

If he was going to go out of the world that night, he may as well enjoy Under the Table Time with his crush as best he could with such a violent soundtrack.

“Urgh. Okay…”

“Well. This may be a bit dramatic, but it could be our last night on earth soooo…”

“Zayn! This is not our last night on earth! Fucking hell.”

He grinned, “Sure its not. But just in case. What’s your biggest secret?”

“I beg your pardon?” replied Liam, rather primly given the circumstances Zayn thought.

“You can’t die without confessing your deepest, darkest secret Leeyum!” cried Zayn, nodding along with himself, “they always do it in films. C’mon. There must be something.”

“Why aren’t you going first if that’s the case?” Liam slyly replied.

“I asked you first!” he squawked.

“Nonsense. That just proves you know we’ll get out of this mess. If you really thought otherwise you’d just say.”
“I hate you. Tell me all your secrets!” Zayn laughed.

He could almost forget, in their silly banter, that they were stuck down there because of weird supernatural incidents.

Almost.

Because a second later there was an almighty shriek, and two panes of glass behind them broke into a thousand pieces with a spectacular bang.

A very cold wind swept through in their absence, which was no surprise really as it was -12 outside and the Alps.

Neither boy wanted to be the one to break the silence, so they simply stared at one another; listening to their shallow breathing for what seemed like an eternity.

It took longer than it probably should have for Zayn to even register that the noise from the corridor had gone.

Just as he had began to think it might be safe to move (out the window was going to be his first choice), the strangest thing that had happened yet took place.

Music began to fill the room, quietly at first; but rising ever so slightly in volume every second so that it eventually reached quite a crescendo. At first it sounded like a simple melody, only very loud. Some kind of folk music, perhaps. But it became apartment there were some sort of lyrics as well, and a somebody female singing in soprano.

Zayn lent forward every so slightly, and squinted in the dimness to attempt to see if he could see any legs.

He could only assume the music was coming from the Dirndl Lady, but she still seemed to be nowhere in sight.

It bothered him that that didn’t bother him as much as it should.

He leant back in toward the wall, and was startled to discover Liam’s face much closer than he had expected. Or would have usually been considered normal.

He was white as a sheet, and still a bit wild eyed, but he managed to hiss, “I don’t think we should move.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Zee groaned, “Li – this is terrifying. I literally don’t think I’ll wash another item so long as I live I’m so traumatised. Please. Please, just agree to dash out the window with me.”

“No. It doesn’t feel right. There’s still something there.”

“Behind the door maybe!” Zayn argued, scowling, “but not out the window.”

“He’s right, you know.” Said a disembodied, but now familiar tone.

“Oh Christ not you again,” muttered Zayn.

“I can only hold the gate for so long. But now is not the time to pass. You must wait for morning, to be safe.”

Zayn shuddered and pressed his face into his knees.
Liam gave one hand a reassuring pat under the ski coat.

“I suppose it’s useless asking what’s going on here?” he called out.

At this point the door gave another almighty shudder, and the voice seemed to leave them again.

“This is the worst night of my life,” Zayn muttered.

“Mine too,” Liam agreed, “what a disaster. Do you want to snuggle up a bit? I’m chilly.”

“Hmm?” despite being in the grips of mad terror, he still somehow found a little voice in his ear telling him to play it cool with Liam.

Liam, who did not wait for an answer but shoved Zayn further into the corner and leant out towards the room himself; throwing a quick, “I’ll just be a second!” back at him.

“Li!” exclaimed Zayn, in some shock, but it was short lived.

Liam quickly dived back into their table-fortress carrying an armful of other ski jackets and brandishing them enthusiastically, “Scoot up a second. We can put one down as a sheet, use another as a big pillow, and these three for covers.”

“I could kiss you right now,” Zayn joked, and Liam turned pink.

“Do you want the inside?” he asked, pretending it hadn’t been said.

“God yes.”

After a moment of rearranging, the boys found themselves lying down (legs tucked up of course) under the table, and trying their best to get comfortable enough to sleep.

Zayn turned on his side, facing the wall in the hope of seeing nothing else at all out of the ordinary. Without warning Liam tucked himself in right behind him: as the Big Spoon.

“Comfy?” he asked, lowly.

“No,” Zayn snorted, “but it’s better than sitting up.”

He wasn’t sure what he had expected, but Spoonage Sesh Number 2 had definitely not been it. Nor had Liam pushing himself so cozily up against him he was sure he could feel the outline of his penis as well as his thighs been on his list of expected outcomes to this situation.

Everything has it’s perks.

Of course, Zayn reasoned sadly, that was probably out of abject terror. Liam was sleeping on the outside after all. He had also thrown his arm over Zayn’s stomach again, and was digging his fingers gently into his tummy with a lose grip. Probably so he can grab on if something tries to pull him away, Zayn thought wryly to himself.

Why couldn’t the universe just give him nice things without all this extra baggage? he wondered, not for the first time that trip.

“Zee – are you awake?”

“What is it Liam?” he sounded a bit exasperated, but really he was just trying to hide the fond.
“If I really thought we were in danger I would have told you.”

“What’s that?” he was drifting on the cusp of sleep – it had been a long night, sans dinner – and his burly friend’s confession confused him.

“You told me people tell each other their Big Secrets when the end is neigh,” Liam went on, a bit dramatically, “and I told you I wouldn’t. Well, you wouldn’t go first – so I knew you didn’t really think we wouldn’t make it.”

“Uh… I suppose that’s right…”

He both heard and felt Liam clear his throat against his neck, “Ahem. Well. I know that it’s weird, and obviously this situation is horrendously not ideal – but I never thought for a second we wouldn’t get out of it. But if I had, I just wanted you to know I would have told you my darkest secret.”

“Oh…. Thank you, Leeyum,” said Zayn back, slightly lost for words, “although you just admitted that you have one. I’m going to have to try and orchestrate some dangerous situation now so that you’ll tell me,” he added, with a chuckle.

Liam squeezed him tighter, but laughed himself, “oh I think you’ll know it before too long anyway… at least, I hope so. Anyway it’s dangerous enough here without you engineering crazy stuff as well, Bradford Badboy!” and at that he poked Zayn rather hard with one of his fingers.

“Ow!”

“Night Zee.”

“I’d have told you as well. Er, if I really felt… it was the end…” he trailed off a bit, “anyway – night night!”

“Hmmm,” said Liam to this, and no more.

He seemed to doze off right away, if his heavy breathing and light snoring were anything to go by. Zayn on the other hand lay awake for a good 20 minutes in mortal anguish over what on earth Liam’s darkest secret could be.

As you are all correctly guessing, and as we would all be doing in our fair hero’s place, he was considering with some intensity if having feelings for him might be Liam’s biggest secret – and trying to add up the dots to see if this seemed likely.

Unfortunately it had been a very long day, and after 2 points in favour and 4 against he fell into a fitful slumber, where confused Liam’s danced just out of his grasp singing songs in German about estranged lovers and curry wurst.

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“Urghhh, what the hell is going on?” bleated Zayn, groggly.

It took a second for the full events of the previous evening to come flooding back, but when they did he sat up with a startle – immediately wide awake and taking in the room.
Naturally, cool light was now flooding in the broken windows – and the atmosphere seemed to have returned to something that could be described as ‘usual’.

Aside for the noise.

Liam, who was still lying down, huffed slightly at being nudged over with Zayn’s sudden movements- a sure sign he had spent the entire night wrapped around him like parcel paper.

He frowned and rubbed his eyes, “what time is it?”

“Don’t have a clue. My phone’s upstairs.”

They looked at each other uncertainly for a second, before the door suddenly burst open and slammed into the wall on it’s other side. Thankfully the only faces to emerge through it were familiar ones of their friends and colleagues.

Josh was at the front, probably because he was the strongest and most likely to have kicked the door in – but Niall, Louis, Harry, Perrie, Sophia and Nick were all close behind.

“Oh my god, guys!” the blonde Irishman cried, his hands flying up to his face.

“Hello,” said Zayn awkwardly waving, just as Liam went ‘sup’.

“What the fuck happened in here?” Nick demanded, coming forward. He looked like he hadn’t slept, and Zayn remembered that they were supposed to go to Innsbruck with him and his boyfriend.

“Shit – we’re so sorry about last night, Nick. We got locked in and some seriously weird shit ensued,” he went on to explain.

Liam began to crawl out from under the table while adding, “I don’t think I’ll be able to come down here ever again,” with no trace of exaggeration to it.

“Are you okay, though?” Harry asked, his face was creased with worry and he too looked like he had been up all night.

“Physically yes. Mentally, I may never recover,” said Zayn dramatically, following Liam out from their makeshift nest.

There was a tense pause while everybody in the room sort of looked at each other, and the two boys coming out from under the table suddenly took in the state of the place about them.

Skis and snowboards seemed to have been piled up behind the door like an unpredicted barricade.

Boots were lying around randomly like someone had picked them all up and chucked them all about.

Clean washing was discarded all over the shop – hanging off equipment and seasoning the floor space.

Even a bottle of washing detergent had been up-ended, leaving a sad blue puddle on the otherwise brownish floor.

A crisp wind fluttered through the smashed windows, and there was a universal shudder.

“We definitely did not do this,” Liam declared, opening his arms wide and gesturing to the complete mess around them.
“Really,” Zayn agreed.

“Was it…” Niall stuttered, clearly unsure how to finish the sentence.

“It was the New Years Eve lady,” Liam assured him, steadily.

“Jesus Christ…” Sophia whispered, “we need to get you back upstairs.”

She turned to move her arm towards the open doorway.

Our Basement Heroes didn’t need telling twice, and began to hurry out as fast as their stiff limbs would allow.

Louis, however, had other ideas.

He had been standing at the back, unusually quiet; goggle-eyed and pale. Dark circles under his own eyes added to the conclusion the team had been up searching for them all night.

He thrust an arm out, and pinched Liam’s arm just above the elbow – stopping him in his tracks with a sharp intake of breath.

“Lou?”

“You were in here all night?” his oldest friend clarified, his eyes searching looking.

“Yes?”

“Trapped?”

“Of course.”

A sensitive moment passed, where Louis’ lower lip wobbled and his eyes began to swim; before he suddenly launched himself into Liam’s arms shouting, “I thought I’d lost you, you fucking prick!” and bursting into tears.

The outburst of emotion seemed to snap the rest of the group out of whatever weird trance they found themselves in, and everyone let out some degree of relieved laugh.

Liam patted Louis on the back, a touched but slightly bemused look on his face – maybe because such displays of affection were rarely for anyone else to see. Or expected without wine…

Zayn and Perrie led the way back up to the flat at a brisk pace.

“What the fuck happened last night, mate?” Pez asked once they were a few paces ahead of everyone else.

Her eyes were red-rimmed like she’d been crying, and she wasn’t wearing any makeup. He immediately felt bad.

Although him and Liam had been panic-stricken, he hadn’t spared a thought for all their friends upstairs who must surely have spent the night worrying over where they might be.

He reached out to put an arm around her shoulders as they began to climb the stairs, pulling her in for as reassuring a hug as he could manage.
“God, I’m so sorry Per. Last night was awful. We went in looking for a shirt of mine, and the door just locked on its own – then that fucking weird woman from New Year came back right out of nowhere, had a bloody go at us for not having cleared off yet, then told us it wasn’t safe to go when we tried…” he trailed off, “and that door. It was banging and rattling on his hinges all night. It sounded like a wild animal was trying to get in.”

They had reached the door to the flat, and he finally noticed the squint on her face.

“What?”

“Can you come with me a minute,” she said, grabbing his hand and dragging him down to the girls large room at the end.

“Okay…?”

“Have a seat,” she ordered, waving her hands about toward the beds.

He did.

“So last night you guys vanished, and obviously there was a huge to-do. Nick had to cancel on Peter, and we made a search party up once we realised you weren’t just kidding about,”

He grimaced at the thought anybody had believed they were playing a bad prank on them.

“I’m sorry but it seemed to make more sense than… this,” she shrugged before carrying on, “anyway Harry eventually said we should try the basement because a lot of funny stuff happened down there and he knew for a fact you still had some washing hanging up.”

He inwardly praised H’s talents for observation.

“So down we went, thinking about all the weird stuff that’s gone down in that area of course. That’s when we saw it. Or heard it. Both, really.”

“Saw what?” he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” she replied simply, looking apologetic, “the door was moving in the entrance and making a hell of a noise. We could hear it from the staircase. At first we thought you were just banging for help, but then we realised we could hear you having some sort of conversation on the other side with a female voice. Everyone started freaking out, but it was like there was some weird dark force field around the actual doorway. We just couldn’t get anywhere near it, and it was make some bloody funny noises every time we tried too.”

Zayn felt himself lean forward and cup his head in his hands.

“What does that mean then?”

“No-one but Harry seems to know. He looked like he was about to faint through the entire thing, and Louis was just wailing unhelpfully in the background. I think they’d had a few drinks to be honest, weren’t in the best way for it.”

“What’s the best way to inadvertently become a ghost buster?” Zayn asked, rolling his eyes.

“I just wanted you to know things from our side,” she assured him, sitting down next to him on the bed for a hug, “we were so worried! Nick’s already talking of moving all our washing to the hotel next door.”
This brought out a small titter from Zayn, who had leant back into the cuddle gratefully, “I don’t
need telling twice. You’ll find me hand-washing my shit like a 16th century washerwoman before
you see me in that basement ever again!”

At that point a curly haired head popped around the side of the door with a pinched expression.

“Hi, H,” said Perrie.

“Oh! Hi, Pez. I was just looking for a Zayn…”
“Well you seem to have found one,” she replied cheerfully, “I think your roomy wants to check
you’re alright for himself. Then you need a shower, and we’ll all go out for a big lunch?”

Zayn stood, nodding – all that sounded great. He felt grotty from his sleep on the floor, and starving
after missing dinner the previous evening.

But first things first, he followed Harry back to their own room; where he was promptly engulfed in
a bear-hug.

“Oh my god, Zayn, I was worried sick!” he mumbled into his hair.

Zayn patted his friend on the back, cheeks burning, “Its okay H. Liam and I are fine. Scarred for life,
probably, but no harm done really.”

Here Haz lent back, holding the smaller boy’s shoulders, and peered at him.

“I should have said. I’ve done lots of research on the paranormal phenomena around here, with
Lou’s help. Things seemed to have stopped happening so we didn’t want to bother anyone by
bringing it up again, but I guess in light of this we really should have…”

Well this explained the pair’s more emotional response to the situation than their peer’s.

“Its not your fault,” Zayn said gently.

“I think you should sit down.”

They both looked at the inviting mattress and duvet fort, and took all of five seconds to decide to
dive right in and get comfortable even though it was already 11am.

“Give me a sec,” he ordered, shimmying into some black Nike joggers instead and hopping over the
wooden edge of the bedframe, “okay. Go ahead?”

Harry, who he realised was also in a somewhat disheveled state, plopped down next to him on the
covers and pursed his lips.

It looked like he was debating how to begin, which was understandable to Zayn because they were
about to embark on a conversation he would have regarded 6 months previously as being led by bat-
shit insanity.

Even now, having lived through he Night of All the Noises, he wasn’t sure he was ready to believe
the mountain pass was haunted by dual sided specters fighting out a battle of good and evil behind a
veiled curtain.

“I dragged Lou to the library in town with me the other week,” Haz began seriously, “and we spent a
good few hours doing readings in the local folklore section. It’s not just us – people have been commenting on how weird this section of Tirol is for years.”

Zayn raised is eyebrows and nodded to encourage Harry to keep going, a fact he was sure by the end of the chat he would come to regret.

“The basic gist of it seemed to be this…” here Harry took a deep breath and tried to plough on as quickly as possible, “it appears that an, erm, older lady lived in this valley. You know, away from the rest of the villagers. They were much lower down, cos of the altitude – Kühtai was only founded much later. As a resort location? Hundreds of years ago there was a walking party from a nearby village who came across her house… cottage, whatever. They claimed to recognise her from the weekly markets, where she had a sort of apothecary stand? Anyway, people thought she was a bit of a weird old spinster, but the odd person would use her potions for sickness or whatever when other things didn’t work.”

“They’re going to accuse her of witchcraft, aren’t they?” butt in Zayn, unhelpfully.

“Alright Rambo the Interrupter! Yes, that is exactly what they did. They saw her weird little hut, and apparently a bubbling cauldron and all that nonsense – and condemned her to hanging.”

The two boys looked at each other awkwardly.

Neither quite able to compute the fact they were having to take this several hundred year old Grimm’s Fairy Tale so seriously.

“And then what?”

“Well obviously they came and took her away,” Harry carried on, “they thought she was hurting people. I suppose she was just helping people have safe abortions, or giving them cures for their weird old time-y diseases…”

“Is this about to take a distinctly Hocus Pocus turn of events?” Zayn once again interrupted.

Harry sighed and pulled a hand through his hair, “of sorts. Will you shut up a minute?!”

They both chuckled.

“The villagers took her into the town and had a sort of show trial. Obviously everyone knew she was guilty because of the weird shit she had going on at her house, and that funny stall she took to the market every week. So, right before she’s hung, she shouts some funny incantation that causes half the congregation to lose theirshit right there and then; essentially claiming the valley would always be her’s.”

This was a bit heavy for first thing in the day, so Zayn took this moment to lie down and wonder how offended his new friends would be if he politely booked himself on the next available flight back to Bradford.

“And you think it’s her that’s doing all this?” he asked carefully, “you do realize that nobody’s seen a wicked old crone anywhere. And that the only person we have seen is young, blonde, and looks like an extra from a propaganda video made by Josef Goebbels right?”

Haz shoved his shoulder and groaned, “its not as black and white as that! Some of the books mentioned some sort of group of witch hunters who look over the region to make sure the curse never comes to pass. I’m sure Lou and I met one in the library. He warned us not to read anymore about the local history.”
“Maybe he just thinks young men have better things to be doing that geeking out at the back of the library on their days of?” said Zayn with a wink.

“Fucking off!”

The smaller boy rolled onto his side to better glower at his room mate, “go on then?”

“Dirndl Woman is probably on their side. That’s why she’s creepy, but trying to be nice,” here Harry threw his hands up like he expected an applause.

“Um..”

“It stands to reason. This hotel must be where the witches cottage was. She’s trying to resurrect herself, possibly kill all of us in the process, and the descendants of the witch hunters and their own magic are trying to protect us!”

“I really, really don’t want you to be right about this.”

“Why not?” Harry pouted, he was clearly proud of himself for digging up all this info and putting the pieces together in a way that sort of made sense of everything.

“Because! Who wants to get caught in the middle of all that?!”

“Maybe we won’t have to. Lets just all agree to stay away from the basement, the second floor stairs and that cupboard unless we’re in big groups – yeah?”

“You don’t have to worry about me, Haz. I wouldn’t be doing any of those things anyway, even if you paid me.”

“Do you want to go for your shower yet? I think Liam must be out by now.”

"So very badly," he teased, standing up and ruffly his friend's hair.

Truth be told that was a lot to digest, and when it came to that sort of thing Zayn's usual reaction was to nope the hell out of there until things became laid back again.

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Showering turned out to be quite the cathartic process. He grabbed his mobile – which happily had been left on charge all night – and opened Spotify up before hopping under.

If ever there was call for a cheer up playlist, now was it, he lamented.

He settled on one Liam had made him recently with all their songs of the season so far on it, and a bunch of stuff he thought his new chum might like; hitting play and driving the volume up as loud as it would go in the process in the naive hope he might actually stop replaying the unpleasant events of the night before over and over again.

It didn’t really help, the incredulous voice in his head pointing out if he told anybody back home they were being terrorized by a three hundred year old angry witch he might finally hit a point at which their understanding ran out.

The thought made him giggle a bit, resulting in an eyeful of shampoo.

‘You alright in there??’ came Harry’s worried tones through the door, making him laugh harder.
Haz must have heard him curse, which meant he had protectively stationed himself outside of the door.

“Harry! Are you listening to me through the door?!”

“You have a nice singing voice…”

“Liar! You’re worried I’m going to start crying and fall over!” he shouted back, still trying not to laugh too loudly and hurt his well natured friend’s feelings.

“You haven’t locked the door have you? I don’t think Josh is up to knocking another one in in the same day…”

“Hazza! For the love of god, do not try and come in here! Of course I bloody locked the door, you numpty. Now piss off and let me wash in peace. It’s really weird thinking of you standing right there while I’m washing my privates!”

“Whose washing some privates?” a third voice joined in, from a slight distance.

“Lou?!” Zayn shouted.

“Zaynie! Are you alright in there?”

“Yes, now fuck off the lot of you!”

There was some distinct cackling from the corridor – a sure sign Louis was back to himself again, but Harry called a last ‘shout if you need me!’ as he was dragged away.

“Love you too H!” Zayn returned, shaking his head with a smile.

Now that he was truly on his own he felt a bit weird.

Somehow with Harry there he could act as a sort of foil to his seriousness. So long as his room mate was worried, he could pretend to be aloof.

But alone with the splatter of the showerhead, and the dulcet tones of Drake, in the bathroom – he felt forced to admit to himself that he was upset.

And so cockiness subdued, he plonked himself down on the upper step of the ‘bath’ he was stood in; covered his eyes with the palms of his hands; and began to cry.
Life With You.

Chapter Summary

In which Louis learns we can still be surprised by our oldest friends, Liam had a confessional, and some familiar faces make a cameo on the Elisabeth's guest list :) 

chapter title stolen from the Proclaimer's song of the same title. the lyrics kind of make me think of Liam's rambley feelings for Zee :') <3

Chapter Notes

Quick apology note on how bloody long its taken me to get this next portion up! :( 

I am ashamed to say having some crappy times at work left me so drained i constantly put off writing anymore because i felt so tired all the time. This was stupid, because writing (esp this fic) always cheers me up when times get bad!

also i had some writers block where i knew where i wanted to take the story, but i didnt really know how to get there. hopefully this works! ;) and i promise to be more regular with my updates henceforth.

enjoy! x

LOUIS.

Well, [hopefully still] captive audience – if we thought the wake of the loo incident, or the aftermath of the New Years Eve cupboard incident, was a wild time it was nothing compared to what followed Liam and Zayn’s unwanted over-night Valentine’s stay in the basement.

Simon was over come with anger about the whole thing, most likely because deciding to believe something fishy was going on would require actually doing something about it.

It had became clear as the season trundled on that the only things Mr Cowell was interested in – aside from himself, and [oddly] personal grooming – was maintaining the status quo, or carefully conceived image of the hotel.

This mostly involved forcing everyone to wear their hideous uniforms at every available opportunity, telling certain individuals to ‘tone themselves down a bit’ in front of the guests, and wandering around pretending to be a decent human being to anyone who was paying him money.

Essentially, paranormal investigator or exorcist did not come into this remit.
“Something has to be done about this,” Louis found himself laying forth in the Alte Stube, three days later and post dinner service, “Simon evidently doesn’t give a shit and we can’t spend the next two and a half months living in terror of the bottom floor. I’m afraid to go anywhere by my fucking self anymore!!”

He raised his eyes comically as he said this, and waved his arms about.

It was post service, and he and Harry were tucked away at the end of the bar where they had sat what now seemed like an age ago, back on Louis’ birthday.

“Agreed…” came the wary answer.

“You know Liam had to come to the bathroom with me this morning?” Louis was rambling on, now tinged slightly pink, “I woke up in the middle of the night and had to get him up as well. That is some seriously unnecessary shit to adopt at this point in life.”

“Can’t argue with that,” chuckled his curly haired companion into his rum and coke, “but I amn’t really sure what the next step should be. Aside possibly all going home.”

“What?! No!”

He actually found himself slapping the counter at this point, in frustration.

“What did we hide out in that library for all day if we weren’t going to do anything about it?!”

Harry looked conflicted, “I was interested in understanding, not combating…”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you faint heart never won fair maiden?” Louis grumbled.

Harry grinned, and poked his shorter friend in the ribs, “Are you seriously quoting Robin Hood at me and making out that you’re Maid Marion?” he looked delighted.

“No.”

“Yes, you were!”

“Quite laughing at me, and help work out how we can get this weirdness to piss off so we can enjoy the rest of the season without wetting our pants every ten seconds!” with that he downed the dregs of his Zipfer, and looked at the bar taps hopefully.

“Okay. Say, hypothetically, just for a second, that we do actually decide to DO SOMETHING, as you so eloquently put it. More than avoiding the basement and so on. What’s in it for us?”

“Relaxing. I’m tense right now just knowing we have to go back there. I want the rest of the season to be stressful in the USUAL sense only. Do you want another drink?”

“It’s my round… thanks for pointing it out.”

Lou grinned cheekily, “Why thank you for remembering Harold. Get some drinks in, and we shall conspire!”

With this he stood regally, and tipsily sauntered off to the bathrooms.

While he was in there he tried to feel positive about forcing this topic of unwelcome conversation back up again.
Although most people were quite content to steer clear of the aforementioned dodgy areas, move about in packs, or sleep with one eye opened in mild-terror: Louis felt decisively that he could not.

For a start, he had never been the ‘one eye open’ kipping kind of person. He needed the full benefit of every hour he was in bed; no questions asked. Being tense was putting a spanner in the works for a start.

He was now finding himself lying down with an uneasy feeling every night, and frequently rolling over to check he could hear both Liam’s soft breathing or Niall’s earthy snuffles several times a night for fear something may have happened to one or other of them whenever he actually did shut his eyes.

He had even taken to leaving random booby-traps around the room to ‘catch’ anything trying what he dubbed Funny Business; as if reading from an Agatha Christie novel.

Niall, particularly, was adverse to this after an uncommonly heavy book had landed on his toe; causing him to turn the air blue with curses and wails.

On top of that, he could almost feel the crackling air between Harry and him every time they were alone together.

Altogether that ‘situation’ felt like it was coming to some sort of head, and he was determined not to let it.

Harry wanted to go to Australia and photograph hot surfers and the Barrier Reef. Harry wanted to go to a concert in rural Queensland, and drive a pickup truck in the dessert with other backpackers, and get a video of himself sky-diving somewhere [that he would spend the next couple of years forcing new acquaintances to watch of off his laptop after a few drinks in his flat].

Louis had promised to traverse Europe on trains with Liam.

In principle this idea was fantastic to him. His family holidays had primarily been made up of beaches growing up and the pair had agreed they were now keen to actually see something more of the places they were visiting than sand and sea.

Or night clubs and bedrooms, if last year in Tenerife was anything to go by…

He had spent a great deal of time daydreaming to Spotify playlists about him and his oldest friend back-dropped by some of the most famous scenery in the world – Eiffel Tower, the Coliseum, the Acropolis, the Berlin TV Tower, Anne Frank’s house and so on.

It made him genuinely angry that Harry had come along and altered the genuine thrill this plan had given him.

He wasn’t a dick, he wouldn’t abandon Liam to try and chase a boy to the literal other side of the planet.

He had some dignity left!
Even if Liam had questioned this outside the bathroom last night at 5am.

When he returned he noted their party had expanded to include Niall, Zayn and Perrie.

Everybody was looking a tad uncomfortable.

“Everything alright over here?” he asked anyway, settling himself down behind the rather large lager
Harry had bought for him in his absence.

“It’s been a bit of a weird day for Zaynie,” Perrie explained, patting their friend on his arm consolingly.

Now that she mentioned it, Zayn was looking rather off colour.

And he had been exceptionally quiet ever since the new group of guests arrived at 6am that morning…

Louis felt a twang of guilt about having been so blinkered, but he supposed his fervent planning of ways to bring the hotel back to normalcy had clouded his judgment.

“Oh, what’s up Zee?” he asked, raising the glass to his lips.

In place of a response Zayn simply shook his head, and lowered it onto his arms on the bar.

Louis glanced around at their other companions in some confusion.

“Remember that ginger guy that arrived with his family this morning? He was wearing a Stones t-shirt and it got Harry all hot and bothered?” Niall finally asked.

“Er, yes?” said Louis, after a moments pause.

He did remember the guy. Harry had popped his head out the kitchen at the end of service and accidentally caught site of the guy in the cool band tee. They had proceeded to engage in a twenty minute chat in the hallway before Dan dragged Hazza back into the kitchen, but only after he had secured a promise from the dude to hang out with them later in the day.

If Harry’s interest in him hadn’t been so apparent he might have felt put out, but as it was he genuinely believed the guy just seemed to have a lot in common with him.

Musically, at least.

“What’s this got to do with anything?” he added, setting the glass back down in front of himself.

“His names Ed.”

“Huh?”

“HizzNAMEZed!” came the muffled shout from Zayn’s forearms.

“Mate, you’re gonna have to enlighten me here.”

“His name is Ed. He’s the dude Zayn was seeing before he came out here,” Perrie explained.

“We weren’t an item or anything,” Zayn suddenly clarified, head shooting up, “he didn’t even live in my town. We met online, had a few dates or hook ups – whatever. Then he said I was moving away so we shouldn’t carry on anymore,” he was furiously blushing by now, “which was super embarrassing cause – like – I had actually quite liked him up till then.”

“God, so he’s chased you out here to ask you to get back together with him? Or first-time-together with him?” Louis cried, eyes widening in horror.

“No, Lou, that’s ridiculous!” Harry interrupted laughing.
“Is it?”

“Zayn said they were barely even a thing! That would be ludicrous,” he carried on chuckling even as Zee glared them both down over the roof of his Desperado.

“He’s on holiday with his Aunty and his cousins,” Niall went on to clarify, “and its just incredibly bad luck.”

“Its mortifying is what it is!” Zayn bellowed, “a big complicated fiasco!”

“Did you talk to him?”

Zayn nodded, “a bit before dinner service. It was proper awkward, his family have no idea who I am – he isn’t even out with them – so thankfully I was spared any group chat. But he caught me on the way back from the loo to say hi.”

“Well aside from it being a little unexpected I don’t really see the problem here…” Louis felt compelled to say.

It was a bit uncomfortable seeing one night stands roaming about campus again, fair enough. But it had been months since Zayn had seen this Ed guy – and by all accounts he just seemed civil rather than troublesome.

Niall, Harry and Perrie gave him three extremely Knowing Looks down the bar, causing him to throw up his hands and shake his head.

Two hours later and they had managed to distract Zayn from his woes with a large amount of Jager shots and many rounds with the locals of the Nail Game.

Zayn had actually won two games, one of which only beating Niall to it by a hair’s breadth – causing a rather loud and sweary walk home.

It was, by this time, 2am and the lights were still on in the bar as they came up the stairs.

Louis had been in the middle of a conversation with Zayn and Perrie about horse riding of all things when their quiffed companion had suddenly paled, muttered something about needing water and dashed off ahead into the flat without a backward glance.

“Huh. That was weird.”

“Was it?” Perrie echoed, rolling her eyes.

“Hey guys!” called Liam as the rest of them rounded the corner and came into view of the whole room.

A chorus of greetings echoes down the room, where it became apparent that Liam, Ed and Ed’s cousin were the only people still up.

Louis immediately made his way to sit by his friend, who seemed to be in the process of shutting down the bar while the other two finished their drinks and chatted with him.

“Hi,” said the auburn Londoner immediately, “you must be Louis?”

They shook hands laughing, “it can only be ominous if you can put that together already! And you
A blonde girl, extremely tall, stood up next to him.

“I’m Ed’s cousin Taylor,” she said by means of introduction, “our mum’s are sisters and we basically grew up together.”

At this point Lou realised only Niall had followed him over.

Harry and Perrie must have followed Zayn.

The thought gave him pause, but hopefully not one long enough be noticed.

“I’m Niall,” Niall had continued the introductions, “I hear you guys have impeccable music tastes!”

And with that they settled into easy conversation about bands they liked, gig venues and before long general places they had been on holiday and wanted to go to.

As they talked Liam swept and mopped the floor, washed and put away most of the glasses, covered up all the fresh lime and lemons for the night, and had just began to wipe down the bar taps for the evening when the conversation finally rolled around to Zayn.

“So, what happened to the rest of your flatmates tonight?” Taylor was asking, “I thought seasonaires usually moved around in big packs!”

It seemed immediately obvious that she was fishing, causing Louis to doubt Ed was still in the closet to everybody in his family.

“We had quite a big one last night,” Niall was shrugging.

His ability to look suspicious even when something was entirely nothing to do with him was quite impressive, Louis thought.

“I thought I recognized someone at breakfast…”

Well, at least there wasn’t going to be any beating around the bush. That would have been frustrating, thought Louis with a wry smile.

“Oh yes?” he said outloud, instead.

“Zayn. I knew him back in the UK.”

“Oh.” Niall nodded.

Taylor snorted and rolled her eyes, “what he means is that they had a bit of a Thing going on before Ginger here realised the dude was moving away and was about to get his feelings hurt,” she paused to punch him on the upper arm then, “so he dumped him. And now he’s all worried it’s going to be an awkward week.”

There was what was in actuality probably only quite a short pause.

But it was quite a heavy one.

Ed looked utterly mortified, and had begun to turn the colour of his hair with unwanted enthusiasm. He was fish mouthing helplessly in a manner that only highlighted the truthfulness of his cousin’s sentiments.
Niall looked like the very thing he was hoping to avoid had just taken place; leaving a sort of resigned grimace on his face.

Liam, who had had his back turned at the moment this was divulged, dropped a handful of lime slices with an unpleasant ‘thwack’ on the tiled floor.

“It wasn’t quite that black and white, Tay,” Ed had began to gabble, “I met Zayn in the summer and we were sort of seeing one another on and off until the autumn. But they he told me he was going away, and I knew I was in danger of quite liking him if I didn’t put a stop to it…” he trailed off a bit, “people don’t come out to seasons like this in committed relationships.”

Well, it was a solid fact really.

“So it’s just a coincidence you wound up here? In the same hotel as him?” Niall attempted to clarify.

“Of course!” Ed squeaked, at the same moment his cousin burst into hysterical laughter.

“We had this booked long before I’d ever heard of Zayn,” she explained for everyone else’s benefit, “and my dad pulled out at the last moment for a work thing. We asked Ed to come along, and he only told me all about your friend this morning when we got out onto the piste.”

“Jesus, mate,” Louis commiserated.

Ed nodded sadly, and picked up his beer.

“Do you still like him?”

Louis suddenly realised it was the first time in a while that Liam had spoken, and that it was to ask a rather rude question at that. If he had been on the right side of the counter he would have jabbed Liam in the ribs for that – even he knew it wasn’t the time or the place to be giving strangers the Romantic version of the Spanish Inquisition.

“What? No! Maybe! I don’t know…”

“Is he still single?” Taylor ventured.

“Surprisingly so,” Louis admitted, wondering why Niall’s foot had made painful connection with his shin, “Ni – what are you doing?”

The Irishman gave him a withering look before turning, with a sunny smile, back to their guests, “Zayn’s a pretty private person. I doubt he’d like to think of us sitting here jabbering away about him! Speak to him yourself while you’re here, or something.”

Somehow he made it sound like helpful advice, rather than the warning which it blatantly was.

“Sure. I’m shattered anyway, bedtime Tay?”

“You read my mind Eee. Night, guys.”

And with that they grabbed their things and walked off into the gloom of the staircase.

“So that guy knows Zayn?” Liam asked, in a strangled sort of voice Louis had rarely heard him use before.

“Guess so,” said Niall, in what Louis suspected to be purposefully vague terms.

“They don’t seem like a likely couple at all.”
Liam had finished tidying up, but seemed to be rooted to the spot staring blankly down the hallway to the guest floor access – still quietly polishing a glass as if he wasn’t aware he was still doing it.

“Of course they aren’t. Why do you think Zee’s never mentioned him, like, ever? And he’s told us loads about his life before coming here,” Niall was saying in soothing tones, “don’t you remember him saying his area was a bit of an LGBTQIA blackhole? He probably only got involved with that bloke cause he was lonesome.”

Louis felt confused.

“I’ve never heard him mention he was seeing someone ever,” Liam stated in a quiet voice. He looked perplexed.

“That’s because it wasn’t serious,” Niall quickly followed, nodding along with his own words.

“Or because it hurts too much to talk about?”

“Don’t be silly, Liam,” tutted the blonde, “lets just get back to the rom. You done here?”

Liam nodded, and slowly beginning to put his tea-towel down as if on autopilot.

The whole exchange had left Louis thoroughly frustrated.

Why on earth would Liam give a shit if Zayn had dated this Ed guy? Why did it matter if he hadn’t been mentioned in previous conversations? As far as Louis could see, Zayn had probably still been a little hurt at the start of the season (and thus understandably reluctant to discuss the matter), and as time had gone by had simply gotten over it (meaning their no longer was any need to discuss it anyway). Why this should get Liam’s knickers in a knot was frankly beyond him.

But he meant to get to the bottom of it, if only to prove to Harry and Niall that he could.

And secondly, and perhaps more importantly to his own peace of mind, he feared this was another symbol of Liam’s increased replacement of him with Zayn. If Liam was annoyed that his ‘new best friend’ hadn’t told him absolutely flipping everything of his life prior to meeting them in Austria – well. Louis would simply have to remind him he was supposed to be his BFF in the first place.

***

And if young Mr Tomlinson thought that first interaction was bizarre, he was left completely unprepared for how the rest of the week went.

Liam, usually renowned for his upbeat attitude and sunny disposition, became introverted and cross.

With everyone.

Suddenly Louis’ endearing messiness was the cause of an internal anguish so deep it required a vicious lecture referencing the rather sorry state of affairs his first year uni halls had gotten into; followed with a promise to bury him alive in the snow if their room got anywhere closer to that state. Niall had looked on wide eyed, furiously picking up socks from his corner of the room.

Even Evil Dan, who Liam usually remained on diplomatic terms with for the sake of everybody else,
managed to poke the dragon – receiving an earful of abuse after an ill timed joke about his nose that left the entire kitchen on tenterhooks for the remainder of the evening.

Niall’s guitar playing was suddenly provoking, especially anything soft; a fact which bemused everyone as he was usually one of the first encouraging the Irishman to get up and play them something sappy.

Perrie and Louis were deemed too ‘generally loud’ on several occasions, an especially bizarre twist occurring when he told them off for playing Snap! too energetically when there was nobody else around to hear it.

“This has got to stop,” Louis had shaken his head to himself after the last incident, “this is just like when he was secretly pissed off at me for something I didn’t know I’d done when we were ten. Took me bloody ages to get it out of him as well.”

Perrie had looked up from the cards she was shuffling, “what was it?”

“Pardon?”

“What was it that you’d done…”

“Oh. I had stepped on his dog’s paw and hadn’t noticed. I’m sure he’ll sort himself out.”

Perrie snorted, “Sounds about right, Tommo. ‘nother game?”

“Thought you’d never ask. Don’t forget to be utterly silent now, won’t you?” he agreed, in mock regency tones.

“Spiffo!” conceded Perrie, merrily.

But sort himself out he did not.

Louis had been moving around quietly on his housekeeping shift one morning, and accidentally over heard a couple on their way down to breakfast. They were commenting on how serious the bartender seemed after reading all those glowing TripAdvisor reviews about him being cheery, open and chatty.

They were bemused.

And this was the last straw. Because, while it hurt him to hear strangers talking ill of his dearest friend, he couldn’t really fault them for it.

Liam was usually a sunny person.

That was why they were as close as they were.

Liam never seemed to get really pissed off with anyone. He might get exasperated, but he never raised his voice and he hardly ever had a proper go at anyone.

The crabby, bad tempered barman they had had this week was one Louis had seldom seen.

Which meant something was it up, it had to be.
Unfortunately, while this was the general conclusion, Sophia seemed to be the only one privy to the information of What.

The two of them had taken the last 4 evenings to vanishing off for a drink by themselves after service at some point, and she remained the only one who looked thoroughly unsurprised at every uncharacteristic outburst that took place.

Louis had tried to pair himself up with her for housekeeping duties for the past two days in an effort to find out what was Going On – but she was either on to him and crafty, or luck was simply not on his side – because he was consistently put with Perrie; who simply wasn’t interesting in talking any more about what she simply called ‘his mood’.

“Lou, you’re supposed to be his bloody best friend from childhood. If you’re this interested in what’s upsetting him, just fucking ask him already!” Perrie moaned.

She was wrestling with the duvet covers, Austrian Rolls never having become a forte of her’s.

Louis was in the small bathroom, door kicked open, elbow deep in the loo basin scrubbing away like Cinderella.

“Liam isn’t like a normal person. He doesn’t like talking about himself. Ever,” he grunted in response, scowling at a particularly persistent smudge of something grim near the rim.

Laughter flowed in from the other room.

“Mate, that is seriously telling. Plenty of people hate discussing themselves, even with their closest companions. Liam’s perfectly normal, he’s just at odds with you on that. That’s all.”

“Whatsoever, it means if I ask him outright he’ll just tell me he’s okay… Jesus Christ, what the fuck has someone been eating?! I can’t get this sodding shit off!”

“Yeah… sorry not sorry about your drawing the short straw there!”

“I need more bleach…” he lamented, turning on his heel to locate the cleaning bucket, “but seriously though. How do I trick it out of him?”

“Honestly, I don’t think you’ll have to. He’ll tell you when he wants to.”

“He’s definitely telling Sophia…” he went on mardily, coating the toilet bowl in another round of bleach.

“Yeah well. I’m sure he has good reason for that.”

“He’s a two faced dick?”

“Probably not that one, Tommo. Now for the love of god, shut the fuck up about Liam! I almost miss the days where all you talked about was Hazza…”

“Watch it!!” he snapped, immediately embarrassed.

Well, perhaps talking about it with Perrie wasn’t very useful anyway. And he knew he was right that Liam wouldn’t want to be confronted anyway. He was going to have to get Sophia alone and coerce her into talking about it, without her thinking she was breaking any confidences.

Altogether planning this kept him quiet for the rest of the housekeeping shift, worrying Pez slightly at what his mind had gotten up to with the time they hadn’t spend talking.
Luckily as things go, Liam was still in their bedroom when Louis finished his first shift of the day and trundled back to get changed.

Often Liam would get up around 10.30am, while they were in the midst of clearing breakfast and rushing through housekeeping, and head straight off up the mountain to fit in a few hours boarding before he started at the bar at 3 in the afternoon.

Not so, today.

“You alright there, lad?” he asked as he swung the door shut behind himself.

“Uh-huh.”

Liam was still in bed. Not entirely uncommon, but unusual if he wasn’t hungover or generally unwell. He had pulled the covers up quite high, and only the top of his head and ears were poking out.

“Erm… not boarding yet then, I see…” Louis twittered on, pulling his blue work t-shirt over his head, “urgh there’s flecks of something weird on here. Gross!” he added, almost chucking it on the floor before remembering the tidiness issue that had cropped up, “where’s the wash basket?” he instead inquired, tentatively.

Liam had commandeered a big cardboard box for the purpose, that had previously been home to a delivery of salmon.

“Under the ledge with the TV under the window.”

“Right,” Louis soldiered on, shuffling around all the beds and depositing the dirty top on the small pile within.

He glanced at his friend, but his eyes were still stubbornly shut.

Louis teetered back around the furniture, and grabbed his towel from the peg it hung on next to his bed.

“I’m going for a shower.”

“Okay.”

He sighed, nipped back into the corridor as quietly as he could and slammed right into Zayn – who appeared to be hovering outside their room with no purpose.

“Argh, Zayn, what the fuck?!” Louis exclaimed, reaching out to steady himself on his friends shoulder.

“Shit!” called out the loitering boy, stumbling backward slightly in turn with widening eyes, “I didn’t expect anybody to come out then.”

“Evidently,” replied Louis, drily, “what on earth are you doing standing outside the door like that?”

“Is Liam still in there…?” Zayn asked instead.
“Yeeees,” Louis slowly answered, “er, he’s still in bed.”

“He’s still sleeping?” Zayn, incredulous, went on.

“Well no. I don’t think so, not really. But he’s pretending to be. Do you have any idea what’s going on with him, by the way?”

Zayn shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, and his eyes drifted over his friend’s shoulder to settle on the doorway behind him.

“No,” he sounded deflated, “I don’t have a fucking clue. I don’t think he’s talking to me, but I have no idea why not.”

He looked miserable.

“Were you debating going in and speaking to him?”

“No.”

“Liar. Give it a bash.”

With that he patted Zee on the arm and sauntered off to the left and into the bathroom.

He popped Spotify back on, selecting an indie playlist he was quite fond of, and began to run the water – all the while contemplating what on earth could be causing Liam’s huff.

Maybe Zayn had done or said something rude that neither of them wanted to tell anyone about?

Truth be told, it was extremely relaxing standing under the hot water and bopping about to music. He fervently did not want to get out of the shower and reface angry-Liam in the bedroom.

It was the trouble with such close quarters, he sighed to himself as he finally forced the water off: there was simply to escaping all of the issues.

“I just wanted to see if you were alright!”

“I said I was FINE!!” an upset sounding voice bellowed down the hallway, causing Mr Tomlinson to jump slightly where he stood towel ing himself off in the shower room.

“Bollocks, you’re sulking about something!”

Louis’ eyes widened comically as he realised the raised voices belong to Liam and Zayn - two of the quietest member of the hotel team - obviously having an argument of sorts.

Feeling guilty for prompting Zee to confront their moody friend, he rushed through the end of this bathroom routine regretfully and hurried back towards the voices in a pair of Mister Men boxers – towel over shoulder.

The door was still open, hence how clearly he had been able to hear things from down the corridor. Zayn was standing just within the threshold, one hand gripping the door-frame, shaking slightly and red in the face.

Liam was still in bed, only now he was sitting up and had fixed a dark look upon the other. One hand had curled around the duvet covers in a fist, and the knuckles had turned white.
“Lads…?” Louis found himself interrupting, stupidly.

“Louis, can you please tell this interfering prick that I’m fine and to piss off out our room?” Liam burst out, in frigid tones.

“Urgh… Zayn, sorry I have no idea what is going on in here. But do you mind giving me a minute to get dressed?” he shrugged and tried to smile, waving a gesticulating hand in the region of his underpants.

“Oh, right. Yeah.”

And with that their raven haired friend spun on his heel and bolted into his own room, door firmly shutting behind him.

Liam immediately let out a loud sigh of relief, and fell backwards onto his pillows with an audible groan.

He looked more defeated than angry now that Zayn wasn’t actually in the room, and Louis began to sense an opportunity.

He turned his back on the beds, and leant down to start a pretend rummage in the lower half of his wardrobe.

“Don’t bite my head off here n’all here Li – but I think we can both agree that ‘fine’ is something you frankly are not quite at this moment.”

“Mmmmfgh,” murmured Liam in response.

Encouraged that he hadn’t snapped at him Louis carried on, albeit still facing the other way as he made up his mind on what clothes to pick.

“We’re known each other wayyyyy too long for this, Payno. Can we just drop the charade and talk about whatever the fuck is bothering you? I hate seeing you like this,” he forced the words out as quickly as coherency would allow before holding up a mint green t-shirt and a plaid shirt consideringly.

Silence followed for a portentous amount of time, but Liam finally let out a loud grumbly sound followed by a sulky, “Fine!”

Genuinely surprised at this response he whirled around to face Liam, “Excellent choice, lad. So. Where do you want to start?”

“With you putting your bloody clothes on? Its impossible to take you seriously while you’re standing there naked with Mr Bump looking me in the face.”

“Fair play,” Louis granted, “I’ll get dressed if you start talking?” he flourished his arm slightly and pointed at his chum.

“Okay….”

Liam seemed to pause awkwardly, unsure how to begin, so Louis focused deeply on buttoning his shirt up and tried not to seem over eager and off putting.

“I’ve…. I’ve been reassessing some things. About myself.”

“Okay….”
Liam cleared his throat, “Jesus this is so fucking difficult.”

Louis tried not to be offended his oldest and closest friend had just admitted how little he wanted to confide in him, instead choosing to focus on yanking up some jeans.

His demeanor must have exuded offended-ness however, because Liam quickly followed up with;

“No – not like that! This is so complicated. I just wanted to sort my head out before I spoke to you about it, of all people.”

“You’re starting to freak me out, Liam,” Louis admitted, finally finished and sitting down on his side of the bed with his legs crossed.

Liam was sitting up again, fiddling with a corner of the covers and looking scared.

“I was freaked out myself. Urgh, why is this so hard?!”

“Have you been talking to Sophia?” Louis found himself asking, with a blush. It was obvious he was jealous, but he had to know what had made Liam turn to her over him even if it upset him.

Suddenly it occurred to him maybe now he had met more people and started afresh, Liam didn’t think he needed him anymore?

Maybe he didn’t want to be mates now?!

His heart began to beat uncomfortably fast in his chest.

“Only because she guessed. She asked me about it ages ago, and I thought somebody new would be easier to talk to about it until I was sure. Well, I guess this week made me realize I am sure. I just didn’t want you to think I was … copying you, or not serious about it or something.”

“Pardon?”

None of these were things Louis had expected Liam to say. He felt a bit at sea, and began nervously picking at the skin on the side of his nails – a habit his mother was forever telling him off for.

“Right, okay. Here goes,“

Louis realised he was holding his breath, eyes searching Liam’s for any clue as to where on earth this conversation could be headed.

Liam dropped the duvet, took a deep breath, and opened his hands in a ‘well here we are’ gesture, before blurtling out, “I’m not straight.”

Li seemed to realise his friend was bamboozled though, because he smiled a little before going on.

“I’m not straight – I mean, I realised I don’t just like girls,”

The penny dropped and Louis felt his jaw drop in a most undignified manner.

Liam actually laughed a little here, although it still sounded a bit tight, “to be honest I’d thought so
for a while. At uni there was a guy in one of my tutorials…. who made me feel the way I’d felt about girls at school – but I thought I was just confused, you were gay and you’d described things I couldn’t relate to. I just thought I was a bit weird, and tried to forget about it.”

“Oh, Liam…”

But once started, Liam was not to be interrupted.

“I started looking stuff up online – to see what I liked, y’know? Bit of guy on guy porn, some erotica… and I realised I was quite into it. That confused me even more, you told me you’d always known – but I’d only ever cared about girls as we were growing up,” he looked down sadly, “I felt like a fraud or something. I couldn’t tell you, I thought you’d be offended or think I was developing a weird gay porn fetish and tell me off,”

Louis let out a loud and offended humph at this.

“I know, I know,” Liam quickly apologized, “I know its ridiculous. But I was freaked out. What was happening to me? I still liked girls, I still liked straight porn. I didn’t want to think about it, or deal with it, so I just decided to leave it.”

“Jesus, Li…”

“But then we came here. And I met him.”

Realising they were coming to the crux of what had forced Liam to actually address these feelings, Louis found himself once again holding his breath – as if the slightest disturbance might scare the burlier boy out of his confession.

“Zayn,” Liam finally breathed, after what felt like an eternity to Louis, “I met Zayn. And I knew that was it then. I couldn’t ignore it, god knows I tried. I thought I could just be his mate, a really good mate. But it was impossible. He was beautiful, and funny, and quirky, and potentially available because he liked men. And I couldn’t pretend I wasn’t interested – but I also didn’t know how to go about anything. I’d always been straight, everyone here met me as straight. We had our duo dynamic, you’re the loud flamboyant one and I’m the straight laced and old fashioned one. Would you be annoyed at me if I wanted a boyfriend too? And on top of that I was sure Zayn would never consider me like that anyway – I’d be so inexperienced compared to someone like you.”

He sniffed at the end, but true to form he held eye contact and managed a mildly defiant look at the same time.

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“Oh my god, Liaaaaam!!” Louis finally wailed, throwing himself forward over the mattress and launching himself into his friend’s arms, “this is wonderful!” he squeezed him as hard as he could whilst babbling, “all this time I thought you wanted to friend-dump me! And all it was is you liking a bit of old cock yourself! Thank fucking god! The relief!”

Liam started laughing properly, and returned the hugs firmly.

“Honestly though, Payne,” and here Louis pulled back a little to look his friend in the face again, “I’m so sorry you felt that way. I didn’t ever mean to give you the impression I had a monopoly on being not-straight! What a weird thought. This is brilliant actually! Now I don’t have to feel guilty
about dragging you to gay bars! We can go out on the pull together properly!” he could feel his eyes lighting up with excitement.

“I’m glad you’re seeing the positives,” Liam chuckled, ruffling the smaller boy’s hair.

“Zayn tho,” he went on to muse, “shit.”

“Yep.”

They pulled apart properly, and Louis shuffled back into his cross legged position.

“Okay. I get it. You guys were super chummy, I mistook it for your trying to replace me with him – sorry about that, by the way – but evidently now I see it was you trying to show him you wanted in his pants.”

“Well, more eloquently, yes. Also, you really do have a knack for thinking the world revolves around you don’t you?!” he was chortling as he said it, but Liam had a point.

Instead of looking from Liam’s perspective, he had simply thought from his own. As it happened, the actions in question had utterly nothing to do with him at all.

He flushed with shame.

“God Liam, I’m so sorry about that. You’re right. I didn’t think about what motives there might have been from your side at all, or I might have seen what was really going on. Forgive me?”

Louis, still rather boyish looking in many ways with his baby blue eyes and floppy fringe, managed to look like a wounded toddler in his contrition – a fact that never failed to soften even the hardest of hearts against him, when they really liked him underneath.

“That’s okay. You are a big drama queen, and I suppose you haven’t been quite yourself since we met Harry.”

“Excuse me?!” squeaked Mr Tomlinson.

“Since Harry came along. You’re wrestling with all these uncertain feelings; you fancy him but you don’t want to do anything about it. That makes you vulnerable, and I’m assuming more likely to assume your best mate is trying to dump you for a shiny new one.”

He rolled his eyes, “You’re forgiven. Obviously.”

Louis ran his hands over his face and through his hair, “this is mental. I can’t believe all this time we could have been having guy chat, and we weren’t! This is unbelievable. Which bloke was it by the way? Was it that Murray chap who liked fencing?”

“ Fucking hell, Tommo.”

“Am I right?”

Liam was turning fuchsia, but he nodded all the same, “How did you do that?”

“Well, you did used to mention him an awful lot for somebody you didn’t know all that well. If I’d known you swung both ways I would have assumed you fancied him right away! As it was, I just thought you were weirdly obsessed about being his mate.”

Liam put his hands over his face and whined, “God it was obvious this whole time anyway! I’m mortified.”
“You’ve never been super subtle,” Louis pointed out, “so. What do you want to do about Zee though?”

Liam lowered his hands again and shrugged.

“Nothing. Pray that he never, ever works it out?”

Louis narrowed his eyes, “This is the first guy that ever made you want to come forward about liking dudes as well as girls. And you’re happy to just pretend like you don’t care, and never let him know?”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“It is dramatic! You said he was different!”

Liam rolled his eyes, “He is.”

“Well you can’t like him that much, then. Simple.”

“Lou – I have literally never felt like this about anyone in my entire life. Not anyone I ever fancied back at school, not hot people in vaguely knew around the start of uni – not even Danielle, and we were going out for a whole year! I thought I loved her, but she never made me feel the way I do when I’m with him. It’s fucked up. I haven’t even known him that long. Its probably some weird fascination that needs to wear off before he gets a restraining order taken out!”

“Alright, steady on Rambo the Spoil-Sport. This is good-huge. We always talk about Danni as The One, like the benchmark for all future relationships. You didn’t get out your boxers for a week after she dumped you, and you called me up crying twice.”

“Yes, all-bloody-right – I can remember thanks,” Liam tersely acknowledged.

“Don’t you get it? We thought you’d been in love with her and it was the end of the world!”

“I fondly remember your drunkenly burning that wax effigy of her at Ruth’s bbq that summer…”

“I only did that to cheer you up.”

“And because you’d had two bottles of Cava.”

“Alright, don’t change the subject. You were gutted when all that shit went down – and now you’re saying Zaynie makes you feel a way that Danni never did? For real?”

He hoped Liam would look beyond the banter at this point; because this revelation ought to have been huge (granted Liam himself had had more time to come to terms with it all than poor Louis, who was processing it all at a mile a minute then and there on the bed).

“100%. I didn’t know this feeling existed before him.”

“What’s that then?”

Liam screwed his face up, “I can’t put it into words. I’m terrible at this stuff, Lou, you know that. Just trust me. I’ve had long enough to think about it. It hit me like a ton of bricks because I thought I knew what it meant to like somebody so much. But this was completely different. I must never have liked anyone else that much at all!” he looked slightly horrified.

There was a quiet moment while that settled in.
It was the answer Louis had been hoping for, in a way, because it meant he trusted 100% that Liam was in love with Zayn. Perhaps he wasn’t saying love himself, but the romantic in Louis wasn’t going to let that get in the way of his glorious internal monologue.

“Well that’s it then. You can’t just fucking ignore those sorts of feelings, pal. They just wont be repressed.”

Liam paled a little, “absolutely not.”

“I haven’t said anything!”

“NO, Louis!! You have to promise me not to say a word. To anybody!”

“What, even Sophia?” he griped, with a heavy frown.

“Well obviously it doesn’t matter if you speak to her. Just, please – let me deal with it? I just need to get over him and it’ll be fine. We can go back to being friendly in a normal way. Where he wont be scared off and weirded out.”

“He’s neither of those things, Li. He was just in the doorway trying to come in and make sure you were okay. If he was creeped out by you he would be giving this whole area a wide berth, not skulking around it when you’re hacked off.”

“He’s being polite. If he knew how mad about him I am he’d run a mile.”

This drew a cheeky smile from our young protagonist.

“Have you been having some dirty fantasies about our dark and mysterious new friend?” he asked, wagging his eye-brows suggestively.

Liam coloured at that, instantly telling Louis the answer to his question and drawing out a loud cackle.

“Oooooh, Payno. This is going to be such fun! If you won’t let me push you towards Zaynie, at least come into Innsbruck and go on the pull with me? We’ve been missing out on so many best friend bonding moments!”

“Not really… we go out together all the time to gay and straight bars. Both of us have hooked up with people while the others there. This is literally no different, don’t be weird about it.”

“It is different this time,” Louis insisted, “because now we can ogle the same people and make crude comments about what we’d like to do to them! Plus, wing-manning is much easier. Maybe.”

“I don’t think it makes the blindest bit of different, Lou. But I suppose now I can vocalize my internal thoughts on bloke’s bums now. What a relief,” and with that image in mind he creased up laughing.

“Eh, no. If you like men now you have to acknowledge my arse as the greatest one out there at any given time. It’s used to compliments, and I don’t care if we’re like family. You have to agree.”

“Only if you agree to touch my biceps in bars and loudly comment on how ripped I am?”

“It’s a deal,” Louis grinned, and the held up his hand for a high-5.

“I suppose I should get up now…”
“It is nearly 1pm.”

Liam peered around the room like a fog was lifting.

“It’s unusually clean in here. What’s been going on?”

“You’re fucking moods been going on, mate! Nialler and I have been too scared to move a hair out of place since you lost you’re rag… speaking of which, do I now correctly conclude the bad moon stems from Zayn’s ex arriving unannounced?”

“Bingo,” confirmed Liam, wrinkling his nose a little.

“If its any consolation, I really don’t think there’s anything to worry about there. Zayn would have mentioned him if he was worth mentioning.”

“Don’t.”

“No. This is all out in the open now! No more hiding,” and with that he jabbed Liam in the chest, “unless – are we telling people? Everyone else? Do you want to?”

“Don’t you fucking dare tell anyone about bloody Zayn!” babbled Liam wildly.

He actually sat forward and grabbed Louis by the fore arm quite roughly as he spoke.

“Ow, Payno, gerroff. Obviously I didn’t mean go around blurtling out how much you want to fuck Super Model Features next door there – though may I say, how predictable of you!” (here he stuck out his tongue and received a whack) “What I clearly MEANT was about being bi? Or pan, or queer, or however you want to name it. Basically, can we mention you’re also into blokes to the others?”

He was passionately wishing yes, because he genuinely felt this was something about himself Liam needed to come to terms with. Often comfort within ones self was entwined with being open with others as well as yourself, and just getting on with living your life as you want to – without worrying about hiding things, or what other people might be thinking.

He knew he had no right to push Liam to come out if he didn’t want to. And that he wouldn’t, if it came to it. But he really, really hoped it wouldn’t matter. Repressing things had already not worked out too well for such a usually open book, Louis was worried how much worse his friend’s emotional state might get if he continued to play those sorts of cards so close to the chest.

“Ah. Well, that’s different. It would be kind of nice to just get it out there. I don’t mind that. So long as Zayn is nothing to do with any of it. We’ll just tell people in Kaos, after a few. You sit next to me and punch anyone who acts rudely.”

Louis snorted, “this crowd? I think the worst you could get is an ‘I knew it’. But that’s awesome, Limo. I’m so happy you finally told me, even if I did have to wrestle it out of you like the last polo.”

“I do love polos,” Liam grinned, “much as I love you. Thanks for being as awesome as i deep down knew you would be really. I couldn’t imagine telling everyone else without you’re support. Seriously.”

The two boys looked at each other a trifle bashfully in the wake of this earnest declaration, before Liam finally stood up and trudged down the hall to have a wash.

Louis was left on the Austrian twin, which he promptly turned around and lay right down on after a
cursory pillow fluff.

So Liam liked boys, too.

And Zayn Mailk in particular.

It suddenly came to him he had been rather slow on the up-take here, and actually bolted upright shouting ‘AHAH!’ at top volume when it suddenly dawned on him this was what that chairlift conversation with Niall and Harry had really been about.

He felt blind as a bat, and embarrassed.

But this, he knew, couldn’t be blamed on self involvement or Harry.

He simply would never, ever have considered that Liam liked guys as well in a million years. No matter how he behaved, including dancing down stairs to greet him in drag or flirting with actual men in front of him – he would simply have found another explanation for it. How daft. All because he thought after sixteen odd years he would surely know everything about the other person by now. Well.

Now that he was thinking on it, he couldn’t help considering what a lovely couple his two friends together would be.

Liam would temper Zayn’s stronger moods, and Zayn would bring Liam out of his shell in area’s he felt uncertain. They’re also be really hot together, he admitted.

The next step, he quietly decided, was to watch Zayn like a hawk and try and work out what his feelings towards his best mate were.

All in all, he considered as he lay tracing the lines on the ceiling with his eyes, it had been quite an eventful morning.

And although he had initially planned to come back and head off for a ski as soon as possible, he found his eyes drooping where he lay. He managed to use the last of his energy to lean over and turn on some music (the Lumaneers latest album) before curling up on his side ‘just to rest his eyes for five minutes’.

When Liam returned 35 minutes later, rapped in a bathrobe, he found his best friend gently snoring away on top of the covers.

He smiled to himself, and gently folded his own side of covers over Louis so he wouldn’t be cold; before grabbing his snowboard gear and heading out the door.
Something Just Like This.

Chapter Summary

in which Things Come To a Head, our supernatural detectives earn some skills points, and our boys have an exhaustively dramatic night on the town!

Chapter Notes

I have named this chapter after one of my favourite songs at the minute - Something Just Like This, by the Chainsmokers. I've worked in into the chapter (:p) so i recommend you go give it a listen. It is literally Liam and Zayn here to me <3 :) 

also THINGS ARE FINALLY MOVING ALONG!

link: THIS is the Zayn i am describing right down to the outfit ---> https://aliceninetyfive.tumblr.com/post/160079306306

link: THIS is the Liam i am describing, also down to the outfit :) -----> https://aliceninetyfive.tumblr.com/post/160416030161/someonethatsfunny-liam-talking-about-tumblr

check em out!

ZAYN.

“So that went well then…” Harry joked, as Zayn dashed into their bedroom and forcefully closed the door behind himself.

“About as well as expected,” Zee agreed, toeing his trainers off and climbing into the bedframe next to his room mate.

Harry was lying down reading the Great Gatsby with a cup of tea, but he put the book down when he saw how downcast his companion was looking.

“He’ll come around you know. He can’t stay mad, he doesn’t really have a reason for it.”

“Mmmhmmm,” mumbled Zayn as got comfy and crossed his arms.

“Seriously, though. You could just tell him Ed isn’t important, and that you like him better. That’s clearly what this is all about.”

As he announced this unwelcome tit-bit, he helped himself to a large gulp of tea which went down
the wrong way – giving them a couple of moments amusement as Harry’s eyes streamed and he coughed and spluttered wheezily with Zee rubbing his back.

Thankfully after that the tone seemed to lighten.

“If you think Liam’s invited any confessionals, or attempts to sort things out after today you must be crazy!” he eventually answered as H blew his nose and wiped his eyes clear, “I’m just going to leave him alone from now on. It’s a clean break, he was never going to be interested anyway.”

“But…”

“But nothing. Haz. Liam’s behavior has been really hot and cold ever since he met me - so he can be a grumpy shit all he likes. I’m not going to let it affect me anymore.”

“I think you’re all talk.”

“I think you need to shut your mouth!” Zayn laughed, cosying down on their pile of duvets once again, “in actual fact don’t. Read to me. I’d much rather focus on Gatsby’s woes than my own!”

Which is how they spent the best part of the next two hours.

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True to the form of his life taking the guise of some sort of ridiculous Shakespearean comedy; just as Zayn decided he’d had enough of Liam: Liam himself seemed to snap out of whatever it was that was bothering him.

He quietly apologised over staff dinner for being a grumpy prat, and promised he’d sorted himself out.

Nobody had the balls to ask what had even bothered him in the first place, although by the unsurprised looks on both Louis and Sophia’s faces he guessed the were in the loop.

Somehow that still stung, even though he was fairly sure Liam was repressing romantic feelings for Sophia and already knew Louis was his life long best mate.

He supposed no matter how he looked at it, Liam being with anybody else was always going to make him sad. Especially when they were all women, with whom he could never compete due to his lack of boobs and the extra appendage between his legs.

Even Liam’s relationship with Louis was the cause of some torment – for he could not even aspire, in lieu of the impossibility of becoming Liam’s boyfriend, to become his closest friend.

The logic behind that, Harry would have told him anyway, was mental and flawed. Prolonged periods BFF’ing with his crush once he was dating somebody else was a form of personal flagellation than even artsy Zayn wasn’t interested in participating in – not really.

So he resigned himself to counting down the days until they parted ways, and trying to make the best of a bad lot.

Having Ed there had been exceptionally uncomfortable – not least because it was now quite clear that Ed had simply ended things because of the situation, not because he had actually wanted to. Back in November that would have been welcome news.
But a long time had passed since then, and Zayn was forced to admit since he had first seen Batboy giggling on the lower deck of their bus to Austria he hadn’t given Ed a second thought.

The disparity in the way they considered each other was glaringly obvious on the night Ed and his cousin Taylor came out to Kaos with them – to the discomfort of all included.

Louis had deemed the conversation around the table far, far too awkward to be a part of – and had gone off to stand chatting to the DJ at the edge of the dance floor without returning.

Niall and Josh had valiantly tried to over look the weirdness, or talk over any silences; usually helped by Taylor and the fact she was quite loud even of herself.

But the evening had been a wash-out really, and the cousins didn’t suggest coming out with them again. Probably because it was clear Zayn wasn’t interested. He felt guilty, although he reasonably knew he didn’t need to. Just like him and Liam, it was all bad luck.

So the end of the week came and went with a hurried good bye at 5am, followed by the heartiest breakfast Zayn had enjoyed since they’d got there.

“How hungry?” asked Niall, with some sarcasm, as he watched his friend load his plate with scrambled eggs, smoked salmon, continental meats and cheese, a croissant with jam, as well as two slices of rather giant water melon.

The Irishman was usually the one with the fullest plate, but he was side eying his quiffed chum’s with some interest.

“Zayn just loves my home cooking, don’t you darling?” Harry joked, bumping his hip against his roommate as he slid into the seat next door to him.

“Sure do, buttercup!” agreed Zayn, who swallowed and planted a big wet kiss on Hazza’s cheek.

Ostensibly it was for the food, but really he just wanted Harry to know how much he appreciated his friendship without having to actually discuss it.

He seemed to know though, because he looked a tad bashful as he tucked into his bacon and egg sandwich.

Half the fun was also taking in Louis’ somewhat jealous looking expression across the table.

Never let it be said these boys did not enjoy winding one another up.

“When you have quite finished, Messers Malik and Styles,” Lou began, clearing his throat rather pointedly, “have we decided on a course of action?”

“Action?” piped up Josh, with a confused note.

“About the sodding hotel!” Louis bawled.

“We were discussing it in Stube the other night,” Perrie leaned down the table to explain.

“I thought we were managing things quite well,” Nick – who had decided to join them for breakfast – quickly stated.

“Doing our washing in the Mooshaus, and moving around in groups of three everywhere?” Louis asked, incredulously.
“Yes? Well, we’ve all been fine haven’t we?”

“Nick – you have literally moved in with Peter up the road to avoid living in this place!” Louis accused, pointing his buttering knife across over the milk jug.

Nick turned a funny colour and spluttered over his orange juice.

“Is that true?!” demanded Josh, frowning heavily, “that’s not fair! Why should you get to leave?”

“Oh hardly,” muttered Nick, looking mutinous, “we just stay there more because he tends to finish later.”

“I notice he never wants to come in here!” Louis ploughed on, now using said knife to butter a roll, “despite the fact you have an en suite and a balcony!”

“Quite. Probably because of all the weird shit I keep telling him that goes on in here!” Nick finally snapped.

“He’s got a point, Nick…” Harry said softly.

There was a weird moment where nobody really knew who was winning or losing the argument before Nick finally sighed, and slumped down in his chair a bit.

“Fine. What was your grand plan, Tomlinson?”

Louis looked between Nick and Harry a minute searchingly, before moving on to reveal a couple of books he had taken out of the library in Innsbruck.

Zayn felt a sinking feeling as soon as they appeared.

Nothing good could come of having these to hand, of that he was certain. As sure as he was that since it was Louis coming up with it, Harry would stick loyally by him come what may.

And since Harry was his best mate, he was going to have to follow along too. Even though he had experienced the horrendous incident of the basement, and mostly slept at night by promising himself furiously every evening as he shut his eyes that he would never do anything ever again to put himself back in such a unguarded position. Supernaturally speaking, of course.

The plan, as best Zayn could understand it, seemed to involve ferreting out information, or some of these Watcher types the boys had came up against in the local section.

Louis and Harry came up with groups and locations for everyone.

Cher and Greg were to check out the disused rooms on the top floor where they were sleeping.

Josh and Sophia were curious, and actually put themselves forward to investigate the lower decks – hub of all the unpleasantness. Nobody fought them for it.

Perrie and Nick were going to visit the owner of the hotel above Kaos and make some enquiries regarding the local area. His family had been in the region for generations, apparently, so it was decided he might be a font of useful knowledge now they could tell him what they had already worked out.

That left the five boys – who were all, in varying degrees, reluctant to let one another out of their
sights.

“Hazza and I are obviously sticking together, since we began this whole enterprise. And also he speaks really good German,” Louis waffled.

“Fuck it, I’m following him too then!” Niall announced, without preamble.

“No!” cried Zayn, suddenly slightly seeing where this was going, “can we not just stick together as a group? I thought the only thing left to check out was that weird well.”

“A weird well?” Niall repeated, looking alarmed.

“Yes,” Louis said airily, “no need to be worked up I’m not suggesting you get down inside of it,” he rolled his eyes, “but we may as well make up the outdoors team. I’ll go tell Liam and you lot get ready. We’ll meet in the foyer in twenty minutes!”

“What exactly is the point of this expedition?” Niall asked as they slowly made their way back through the kitchens.

Harry screwed his face up, “It looks like the well was next to the witch’s cottage. And, you know, related to her magic somehow.”

He shoved the heavy door open, and Zayn followed them through wondering how many more times he could risk his life before he got home safely.

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“Are we all ready now?” Louis was asking, seriously, when all 5 were assembled in the reception area of the Elisabeth clad in various ensembles of wooly hats, ski pants and jackets, and faux fur lined snow boots.

Nods.

“Okay, lets go!” Harry instructed, holding open the glass doors with his mittens, “it’s a little bit of a walk from here so…”

He trailed off; and they didn’t trail on to the mountainside until some forty minutes later.

Louis was red in the face, and mutinous looking – not having realised the direction they were headed.

Him and Liam had actually walked ahead, heads bent together in deep conversation, most of the way; while Zayn, Harry and Niall had brought up the rear.

However there was no missing the scene once they came close.

The snow was still thick on the ground, but seemed less so here. And jarringly on the mountainside, like some hideous boil that had sprung up during ill-health, stood the well.

It consisted of a stone circle, about the width of a person top to toe, made out of stone. On top were two pillars of wood, fashioned into crosses, holding up a V-shaped, squat tiled roof – and covering a large wooden wheel attached to the bucket.
It was in a small clearing inside tightly bound fir trees, coated deep with bright, powdery snow. They stopped short, looking at it silently.

“So, I guess that must be it,” announced Louis.

He was looking down at his phone to check the map.

“Can you hear that?” asked Niall a second later, paling.

“What are you on about,” Liam answered, frowning, “I can’t hear anything.”

“That’s my point.”

Everyone looked around at everyone else, feeling a bit funny.

“It’s just the snow!” Harry blurted out, “snow muffles sound, for a start. Plus most of the animals likely to be around here making any noises will be deep in hibernation right now.”

“I thought that was just, like, bears and shit?” Niall argued, narrowing his eyes towards the clearing.

“Its everything that lives in the woods where it’s cold!” snapped Harry back, waving his arms about to indicate the forest, “Squirrels, probably. Hedgehogs. Fuck, I don’t know.”

Zayn, Louis and Liam all shared a laugh at this, although Niall merely folded his arms and announced he wasn’t sure he was going any further.

Zayn felt like that was the sensible course of action, which of course nobody else was going to listen to.

And because he was still trying to stay away from Liam, he sidled up next to Harry and tried not to notice the dark chocolate eyes settling on his from across their circle.

“What’s the master plan then, Tommo?”

“Go and have a look about? There’s bound to be some weird shit here.” With that Lou abruptly shut off his phone, and strode forwards – off the path and into the trees.

Harry followed immediately, without second thought, and Liam after that with only a quick glance towards the other two.

“What?”

“I don’t like the look of this, Zayn.”

“Aw, who does? But we’re better off sticking together than wandering about on our own – if I’ve learnt anything from all those movies I’ve seen!” he replied as encouragingly as he could.

So the five of them cautiously found themselves trucking about off the beating track, looking for clues of the supernatural.

Zayn felt like this might be one of the most ridiculous moments of his life, especially since he was repeating ‘please don’t find anything’ over and over in his head as he did so.

“Hi,” said a tentative voice along side him suddenly.

Jumping slightly, he turned to see Liam had walked up rather quietly behind him.
“Arg!”

“Sorry, didn’t think that one through. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” said Zayn shortly, adding, “and you?” in an effort to keep things civil.

His heart had started beating rather fast again as soon as it realised who he was standing near. It was so quiet he irrationally worried that Liam might actually be able to hear it.

“Ooooh. Um. You know. Looking forward to getting back to the hotel!” he shuffled his feet in what seemed to be a show of nerves.

“Haven’t seen much of you lately…”

Now why did he say that?

It was shamelessly provocative!

“Okay – that was stupid. Obviously I haven’t, because I was actively being an arsehole.”

At this point Zayn realised his poker face was, perhaps, not quite as good as he had thought it was.

“Well, if you’ve quite finished with that dickery now…” he mumbled, shrugging with one shoulder and laughing a little.

“I have,” Liam replied, rather earnestly, “I actually wanted to say sorry to you particularly,” he went on.

“Uh?”

This was new. Liam wanted to tell Zayn he was sorry personally, separately sort of? He felt his already uncomfortably fast moving heart pick up pace.

Of course, of all times for Batboy to allude to some sense of ‘Otherness’ between them – he really felt this dodgy clearing in the haunted woods should not have been it.

In the background, almost subconsciously, he became aware that the snow was falling thicker, and that somebody closer to the well was expressing some sort of concerned sentiment rather loudly.

But there was Liam Payne: standing before him wrapped in neon orange ski pants and a royal blue jacket – soulful brown eyes peeking out from under a grey knit hat with a bobble.

He looked fucking adorable, and it was increasingly difficult to pay attention to the voices of their friends in the background.

The serious boy in front of him still commanded 100% of his attention.

“I… eh… you deserve a personal apology. Because I was so horrible to you more than everybody else.”

Half of his brain was turning sludgy at the fact Liam felt the need to single him out for a one to one.

The other half was literally struck dumb with the fact Liam would pick such an inappropriate moment to declare something so sentimental.

“Thanks. I appreciate it. Did I do something to piss you off, like?” he found himself asking anyway.
“God no! That’s what… I mean, that was the point. You didn’t do anything. It was completely unreasonable. Mates again?”

With this Liam raised his eyebrows hopefully.

Zayn hoped with all his might he looked like he was both actually considering the options here, and somewhat unconcerned with the results either way.

What he actually looked like he probably would have preferred not to know.

Because despite his efforts to look cool and aloof; with his black jacket and pants (the only nod to colour being a slouchy, rainbow wool hat on his head) and the expensively weird looking ski goggles on his head – his face was still flushed with the cold; his nose red, and his eyes wide, young and searching looking.

“Guys, can we perhaps save the private moments for an actual private moment?”

They both jumped to see Louis had materialized by their side.

Which was saying something, because Louis was wearing a lime green jacket and resultantly tended to be hard to miss.

“Sorry,” Liam offered, shoulders drooping a bit.

“On that note, can you come over here a minute?”

With that, Louis led them to the edge of the well and pointed to a plaque the other two were squatting in front of.

“It can’t be…” Harry was muttering, a deep frown on his pale features.

“What’s going on?” Zayn asked, bewildered.

“It’s this dedication. It’s to the woman who used to live near here, but it can’t have been put up that long ago. Which is weird, because nobody was supposed to either talk about this or come out here anymore. Not for way longer than this.”

He gestured to the writing, in German.

Everyone looked at each other, eyebrows raised.

“Somebody still comes out here,” Niall added, voice sounding choked with alarm, “look.”

He pointed to the ground next to where he had been resting one of his hands to balance himself.

He explained there had been a weird lumpy feeling, and when he brushed the snow away he found a frozen old bouquet of flowers.

Zayn felt his stomach drop a little, and he leant down next to Niall to dust over more snow and poke at the once delicate but now rather dead gift.

Liam, who had been standing next to him, cocked his head to the side and seemed to be studying the other two – who were whispering lowly with their focus still fixed on the dedication.

“Li? Have you seen this?” Zayn asked, turning his head slightly.
“What are you guys talking about?” asked Liam instead, completely ignoring Zayn and Niall.

Humphing, Zayn stood up again and moved his attention to the other boys still crouched a bit to their side.

“I think we have our first Lead,” Louis announced, darkly.

“Look at the name on this.” Harry followed, in explanation.

The other three shuffled in a bit closer, as Harry scraped the last of the white stuff from the engraving.

In Erinnerung an Matilde Kowal, missverstanden und vor ihrer Zeit. Nicht vergessen.

Louis read it out loud when nobody said anything, finishing with, “does any of that sound familiar to anybody?”

His eyes were gleaming, and it was clear he thought he was onto something at last.

They all stood back up, and huddled close together.

Although there was no wind in the clearing, the eerie quiet still unsettled them all enough to stick in nearer proximity than would ordinarily have been usual.

“It says, ‘in memory of Matilde Kowal, misunderstood and ahead of their time. Do not forget’. Technically. Anyway, basically the sentiment is that they weren’t a bad guy and they aren’t forgotten.”

“So some lunatic thinks she was doing great things back in the day – so what?” Niall interrogated.

“Matilde is the German form of Matilda…” Harry carried on warily.

“And if you Anglicanise the Kowal you get… Cowell!” Louis exploded, eyes popping with implication.

Niall audibly gasped, and took an automatic step backwards away from the well.

Liam simply muttered, “shit!”

Of course the implications now were easily made.

Zayn found his brain racing a mile a minute into unwelcome territory. If the name of the stone was a Germanic form of Cowell: Simon had to be involved somehow.

The most likely conclusion he could think of, eyes boring into the unwelcome structure behind his friends, was that Simon was clearly a descendent of the witch. He had returned to the area to somehow set her free and right what he must feel to be a historical wrong.

It also meant that the entire time the staff had been complaining about the surreal goings on he must have known exactly what they were talking about; and that it was true.

Suddenly, Zayn felt it was a blessing indeed that they had stopped mentioning any of it in front of
their manager.

While there could be little doubt he was involved in some shady goings on surrounding the supernatural, it didn’t seem they had much to do with it. The hotel was simply a means to an end – a reason to be in the vicinity.

He probably didn’t want a bunch of English kids getting involved at all – which was why he kept telling them to leave it all alone, so angrily. Thankfully he probably now thought they had.

It seemed Liam was thinking the same way, because he suddenly burst out with, “Thank god Simon doesn’t know what we’re up to!”

“Quite,” said Louis gravely, “but this changes everything. He must be the root of everything going on,” he gave the well a forlorn look, “there’s not much point staying here now. The nerve centre must be back at the hotel. Or wherever Simon is.”

“Well we needed to come to find that out,” Harry pointed out, clearly wanting to reassure Louis that it hadn’t been a wasted trip.

“True. Shall we head back? This place is giving me the willies.”

And with that they gratefully turned and tramped back toward the main trail – and toward the comforting lights of the town.

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The snow was coming down thicker than ever, and Zayn was struggling to see his hand in front of his face.

Hastily, he tugged his boarding goggles down from his forehead and squinted forward as best he could.

“Alright there, Malik?” said a familiar Irish brogue.

“Nialler!” Zayn replied, “can you see a fucking thing?”

“Frankly, no,” was the Irish lad’s reply, emphasized as he stumbled and grabbed his slightly taller mate’s arm in the process.

“Fuck!” peeped Zee, his own hand automatically clamping over his blonde companion’s.

“This is ridiculous!” Louis’ loud voice was roaring somewhere in the fog ahead, “I can’t see a bleedin’ thing!”

“Lou…” H’s strained tones floated back along side it.

“Harry, this snow is bollocks! I can’t see the fucking path anymore.”

“Give me the phone…”

“You won’t be able to see it either!”
“Louis… please?”

Zayn and Niall exchanged meaningful expressions, before Zayn raised his voice to call, “what’s going on here?”

Their friends appeared to have came to a stand-still up ahead. Louis and Harry were bent over Louis’ phone, a mixture of fretfulness and confusion.

Liam had come to a stop also, but he didn’t appear to be paying attention to them at all. He was staring back up the road, his expression unreadable due to the wooly hat pulled low on his forehead; not to mention the giant ski goggles taking up half of his face.

Eventually they found themselves in a tight circle, standing in the midst of the path.

“The weathers closed in and we can’t see the way properly,” Harry filled them in. He had pushed his own goggles up off his eyes, and he looked extremely concerned.

“Why do you look like that? Are we lost already?” Niall, ever the worrier, immediately inquired.

“No! For god’s sake everyone,” groaned an enviously confident Louis, “it’s just impossible to see where the fuck we’re going at the moment. I just said I thought we should have a pause and wait for it to clear up a bit.”

“I think we should risk keeping going. Somebody left those flowers there, and I don’t want to meet them on their way back for another visit,” said Liam pointedly, finally breaking his silence.

It made Zayn wonder if he was actually looking at something behind them. This was about the worst thing he could imagine right now, short of avalanche or the Dirndl lady, so he fought with himself not to turn around or look over his shoulder.

“If we’re stopping then I’m not going far,” Harry went on stubbornly.

“H is right,” Zayn concurred, “I don’t think we should go wandering off aimlessly…”

“Look, the tree’s are really thick over there,” Niall waved to their right, “let’s just get underneath and dig a little dip for ourselves? We can sit tight, out of the direct snowfall, and keep our eyes on the road.”

“I like your thinking, Irish!” Louis announced, imperiously adding, “follow me!’ before marching in the direction Nialler had pointed.

“Careful! There’s a frozen stream over here too!” Harry stuttered, rushing to follow his love as quick as the thick snow would allow.

Niall didn’t wait for an invite, and took off with his head bowed.

“Aafter you?” Liam, who was still shooting nervous glances around the road, finally asked.

Zayn snorted, “Even finding the time to be a gentleman in the wilderness?” he shook his head, and trying not to think too much about it – put out a be-gloved hand in Liam’s direction.

A moment of agony ensued. Would Liam be miffed and unsettled? At least, he supposed, he could say he was just holding his arm out to indicate they should walk together.

But he needn’t have worried. Barely a couple of seconds later and Liam had clasped Zayn’s hand in his slightly bigger one, and began to lead him across the small frozen river and under the conifers.
Zayn’s stomach-butterflies dived and swooped; immune to scary wells or wilderness survival situations.

Just as he was turning his head to the side slightly, attempting to hide both his blush and his huge smile in the lip of his ski jacket, he felt a gentle squeeze of his hand.

When he looked over Liam was beaming at him.

If the weather wasn’t causing an ultimately relentless assault on his senses he thought he might have lost all of them completely. As it was, he grinned back, then ducked his head again.

Niall wolf whistled, and got a severe shushing from Harry.

“Sorry,” said Irish with a roll of his eyes, “just get under here you two.”

“Well this is cosy,” Louis announced five minutes later.

“Its not supposed to be the Ritz!” Harry groaned, “can we just settle down?”

“Sorry dad!” Zayn laughed, snuggling down in his hide-away further.

The simplest suggestion had seemed the best: dig down into the snow slightly, creating a sort of mini shelter. They could all huddle in, share warmth, and the compact dry snow at the top (which was excellent for shaping) made a good roof from the elements.

Louis had pushed himself down so he was almost on his back, arms tightly crossed and only his nose visible between goggles, hat and the top of his jacket.

Harry, who was still sitting somewhat straighter, was smushed against his side from shoulder to toe.

If Zayn didn’t know better he would have said the louder of the two was most definitely leaning into the younger boy.

Niall was in the middle, where he tended to wind up since their protective streak had came out in the wake of the claustrophobia discovery on New Years. He was cross legged, and clapping his hands together to keep them warm through his gloves.

Zayn was on his other side, trying not to enjoy himself too much because Liam had swapped their hand holding for putting his arm around Zayn and pulling him tight against him.

He was so excited by this that the oddity of their situation didn’t affect him as it should have, instead he distracted himself pushing his right leg up against Li’s left one and relishing the slight push back he felt every time he did it.

“Okay, we need to pass the time somehow,” Louis proclaimed.

Everybody groaned, though Harry’s sounded a little more loving than everybody else’s.

“Let’s tell stories! What’s the most embarrassing moment of everyone’s life?” he went on, the muff of his coat moving up and down as he spoke. He looked a bit like a robot.

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Some twenty minutes passed in this manner, sharing silly stories and gently ribbing one another.

It was surprisingly jolly, all things considered, right up to the point that a faint sort of whistling seemed to appear on the wind.

In unison the laughing and the chatting suddenly died down, as they all strained their ears to figure out what was going on.

“Somebody must be coming up the road???” Niall breathed, lowly.

“I know that whistle…” said Liam, who was frowning in deep concentration – although nobody could see because of the winter-wear.

They all looked at each other as the sound got closer, the tune becoming familiar to them all one by one.

And just as it looked like Louis might burst out with something inappropriate, a figure came into view – knocking the wind out of the lot of them.

“Thank Christ our footprints will have been filled in by now,” whispered Harry solemnly a moment later.

Of this sentiment there could be no refuting, as the dark silhouette of Simon Cowell had came into view through the trees and was slowly making it’s way up the path against the wind.

He cut a sinister figure in a black, double-breasted coat and a long grey scarf. He had a thick knit hat pulled down low on his forehead, and his hands stuffed into the front pockets of his jacket.

“He must be the one leaving the flowers!” Louis suddenly cried, the idea evidently just dawning on him.

Just as Harry had began to roll his eyes and mutter ‘obviously’ – Niall shot am alarmed arm out, hand over Louis mouth and his expression mutinous.

Back on the path Simon paused in his step, inclined his head slightly, and looked like he was concentrating very hard.

Zayn held his breath and barely dared to blink for fear of somehow indicating their presence.

“Hello?” Simon went on to call, head turning slowly from side to side. After a tense moment he seemed to satisfy himself he had just imagined Louis’ over enthusiastic realization and carried on up the path. He wasn’t carrying any flowers, but there seemed to be little doubt as to where he was going.

Zayn’s heart seemed to have flown into his mouth, and nobody seemed to want to move even after a couple of moments had passed since their boss had disappeared from sight.

“We can’t stay here all night…” Liam finally whispered urgently, “who knows how long he’s going to stay up there for? We need to get down before he’s on the return journey.”

“Get down? We have to follow him!” countered Louis, looking incredulous, “catch him in the act!”

“Catch him in the act of what?!” Niall questioned, horrified.
“Bad deeds, obviously!” Louis insisted.

“I’m sorry, but nothing on fucking earth would convince me to head back up there after him!” Zayn stated, “so – blizzard or no blizzard, I am going back down this mountain right now!”

With that he stood up, while making a groaning sort of resigned noise.

“Zayn’s right Lou,” Harry was gently saying, “we basically know the whole story now anyway. We have to go back down, talk to the others, and sort out a next move that doesn’t involve running around like headless chickens on mountain-sides.”

Zayn fully expected Louis to argue, like usual, but Harry seemed to have a grudging effect on him – and he merely grumbled and got to his feet with the rest of them.

Even Harry himself seemed taken aback at how quickly the Doncastrian changed his mind. He met Zayn’s eyes and made the slightest hint at a face, causing Zee to snort.

“Let’s get going then,” Louis whined, once again leading the way.

Zayn rolled his eyes and followed suit, wondering what the hell they were going to do with this new information anyway.

The snow was still quite fierce, but the fear of who was behind them – and potentially now following them down again – was greater than the mistrust of the visibility.

It was a mostly silent, single file, half hour where nobody talked much, but eventually the lights of Kühtai were finally in sight once again.

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The equal levels of surprise and incredulity they faced from their colleagues upon their return was pretty much as expected.

Dinner service was the first point of call, frustratingly. That meant toasty showers to warm up, shoving on unflattering uniforms; and worst of all – the team having to postpone their collective information sharing.

The hours between 5pm and 11pm went excruciatingly slowly.

Even Zayn, who was not the most enthusiastic about involving himself even more in the supernatural dramas of the Austrian village, felt it.

Although some of that may have had something to do with the fact he was trying to put brown eyes with crinkles out of his mind. Focusing on tasks tended to help with that, he had found in the past.

So he spent the service hissing to Louis at the side of the restaurant whenever they could; and training himself to glance less towards the bar behind them than he usually did.

“Finally!” shouted Louis, as the long evening of work petered out to the last and they made their way through the kitchens and into the flat.
“What about Liam?” Niall asked, bringing up the rear.

“We’ll fill him in at the end. Right now, I don’t think I can wait any longer. Team meeting, our room; now.”

It was somewhat akin to the pied-piper, the way the group marched in after him and took up various positions across the bedroom/living room.

Niall hopped onto his own bed to sit with his back against the wall, and Zayn plonked himself down next door to him; with the others piling onto the Austrian twin and the floor surrounding.

Louis, of course, was in the middle of his own bed – like some sort of ringmaster. It made Zayn grin wryly to himself – and realise, despite the drama, how happy he was that he had moved here and found all these crazy people.

“Now, can we all just run through what we found out today please!” Tommo was beginning, clapping his hands.

Perrie and Josh were quick to admit their hunt in the lower decks had been mostly fruitless – the laundry room had been locked tight, and the window blacked out from the inside. Otherwise the corridor was empty, and provided no clues whatsoever. They seemed pretty crestfallen.

Cher explained they had found an odd room on the top floor, a spare door in the middle of the corridor they had no idea about. It being their only lead they had given it a try and found it unlocked.

“What was in it then?” Sophia was asking, breathlessly.

“That’s the thing. It was like a police investigation room off the telly. Pictures with woolen lines pined all over them, a few maps of the same area, old photographs and lots of notebooks,” Cher explained.

“There was definitely a family tree in one of them. Notebooks that is,” Greg carried on, looking around at them from where he was sat on the floor, “though we couldn’t see anybody we knew on it.”

“We left it just as we found it though. We didn’t know who the stuff belonged to, so we legged it pretty quick and kept watch on the door for the rest of the day. Not a soul went in there. I don’t think we’ve ever seen anyone go in or out though…” Cher said, taking up the thread again with a worried look.

Zayn and Niall turned to one another on the bed and exchanged a Knowing Look.

“Well we came up with a big fat nothing,” Nick announced when it was clear the others had nothing more to share, “down at Kaos they mainly like to pretend that bloody well and everything to do with it don’t exist. Frankly, I’m sure they know more than they’re saying – but it’d probably take a major incident to get them to come forward and get involved. People want nothing to do with it. Oh, and their advice was to sit tight or leave.”

He made a sour face as he recounted the exchange.

“Well that’s bollocks, and let me tell you all why,” Louis said.

“Here we go,” muttered Niall in Zayn’s ear, and they stifled giggles.

Harry shot them a reproachful look from his position at Louis’ side, but Lou himself seemed unconcerned.
Naturally there was general shock, and then a loud rabble as everybody began to talk over one another at the same time – connecting the room Cher and Greg had found with the flowers, name and Simon sighting Louis was talking about.

“Fucking hell – here he’s been the whole time, right under our noses!” Perrie was roaring, looking thunderous.

“I can’t bloody believe this,” Josh cried, “how the hell are we supposed to sort this shit out? He’s literally our boss.”

“Yes, Josh, I had thought of that,” Louis snapped, eyes rolling, “but all things considered I think it’s pretty obvious.”

“You’re going to make us confront him, aren’t you?” sighed Zayn.

“We just need to go through his stuff, find out what he’s doing that’s stirring up all this madness and destroy whatever it is he’s using to do it. Then, I dunno, shove him down the well and go home?”

“Lou…” Harry interrupted, “that all seems a bit wild. We could just stay out of his way….”

“Keeping out his way totally helped Zee and Payno when they got locked in the basement didn’t it?” Louis replied, sarcastically.

This was an unwelcome reminder Zayn wasn’t keep to dwell on. But there was no denying that being oblivious hadn’t saved them.

“He’s probably inherited her powers. So we just have to find what he’s using to try and avenge her and put it out of his reach forever! Honestly, I don’t see what’s so difficult about this.”

He was looking round the bedroom earnestly.

“I guess that makes sense,” Josh nodded, “which I suppose means going up to that room upstairs and looking through the stuff properly?”

“You would be correct, young master Devine!” Lou nodded, clapping, “but I’m guessing this isn’t the time. We’ll need to wait until a time Simon leaves the hotel. It’s way too risky with him floating about. I don’t think even my heart could take it.”

Relief all round.

“Can we go out and get pissed now?” Nick asked.

“I guess so. Meeting adjourned!”

Queue the bathroom stampede.

Zayn and Harry made their way back to their own room, Sophia having been on the mark fastest to the shower.

“Hey, cheer up,” Zayn was saying as he shut the door behind himself and nudged Harry in the ribs, “we’ve got a little reprieve!”

“We’ll still have to go up there with him and rummage through that sodding room though.”
“Not tonight!” persevered Zayn, who was determined to remain cheerful, “just put it out your head and get drunk.”

“Alright Captain Cheerful,” Harry snorted, bending down to fiddle on the laptop, “lets watch some more Jeeves and Wooster while we wait for the bathroom to free up.”

“Sure.”

“Liam seems back to usual…”

Harry studiously did not turn around as he said this, seemingly very focused on selecting the best episode.

“Yep.”

“I still think you should just make a move on him and see what happens.”

“Thanks for that, Haz.”

Harry laughed cheerily, “You’re so determinedly bleak. I think you actually quite like the unrequited love look. You’d shit your pants if you actually thought you had to do something about your feelings with a real person.”

Zayn scowled over his shoulder from where he was fluffing some pillows, “Shut up.”

“That’s probably why you liked that Ed guy so much back home. You got some free shags, but you knew you would have to leave so it couldn’t become anything serious!”

He seemed to have found whatever episode it was he wanted, because with that Harry stood up and hopped over the wooden side and into the bed.

Grudgingly Zayn handed him a fluffy pillow, “I am the master of my own fate,” he quoted, with an unwilling smile.

“And the captain of your soul?” Harry continued, flopping onto his back.

“You know Invictus?!” cried Zayn, scandalized.

“I’m an artsy teenager Zee,” answered Harry dryly, “with a love of bowties and flowery shirts. If anyone outside of you was going to know classical poetry around here, surely it was going to be me?”

With an affectionate punch to the arm Zayn settled down next to his friend to watch the nineteenth century comedy and forget about the fourteenth century witch for a bit.

***

The following week saw a step-up in terms of action.

It was thought advisable to keep a wary eye on Simon at all times, which mean taking it in turns to inconspicuously follow him around the hotel. If he was to leave the time was to be noted, and somebody remain on watch around the doors to take note of when he came back.
After a couple of failed attempts which had everybody’s hearts in their mouths, Louis and Liam managed to sneak into the room and gather a fanfare of information which was enough to make sense of.

It was evident some sort of witchcraft had been passed on through the Cowell family for generations. They had originally been German Jews, hence the spelling Kowal – local to the Tyrolean region, who had moved on to Munich and eventually England after the attack on their ancestor. By the looks of the texts they had never quite given up their magical tendencies, with the off-shoot Simon belonged to seemingly being the last bastion keeping it alive in the current day and age.

That was simple enough to piece together, and aided by a diary of sorts it was mercifully straightforward to discover Simon’s motives. Wounded pride, resentment at being made to feel ‘different’, and a bit of an obsessive mother (is any horror cliché complete without one?) all seem to have came together to encourage a younger Simon to return to their part of the world and put the wrong to rights. The catalyst for Now seemed to be his mother’s recent death.

There were several incantations scribbled down that he seemed to be experimenting with, in the hopes of bringing somebody he referred to as ‘Mutter Gretchen’ back to life.

It didn’t take a genius to realise who that was.

Clue: it was not his actual mother, whose name had been Julie.

March 26th, the date of daylight saving’s time, seemed to be a focal point – giving the group a potential three week grace period in which to come up with a plan and successfully execute it.

To the relief of all concerned, Louis seemed a little at sea on what to do next – instead suggesting they all plan an evening to Innsbruck for a night out as a chance to celebrate their success so far, and let off some steam somewhere new.

It was probably the welcomest thing he had said in some time.

Which was how Zayn, Harry, Liam, Niall and Louis found themselves inside that gentle little Gasthaus on the banks of the river come a cool Tuesday night; blaring loud music and running in and out of each other’s rooms with hair products and wash-kits.

***

It was impossible for the entire staff to have a late start on Wednesday morning, so they had split in half with the boys (the most active in the whole adventure) taking the well-earned first night off to the city they could manage.

“I wish we were living down here, man,” Niall was saying with an arm wave, “this city is fucking beautiful.”

The five-some were wandering through the windy, warmly lit cobbled streets of Innsbruck’s Old Town looking for a bar to start in.
“That’s lovely Nialler, but to be honest all I care about right now is getting shit faced and dancing my socks off!” Louis declared.

“Are we going to that place you and Haz were at?” Liam cut in, sounding hopeful.

This caused Zayn’s head to hurt – because Liam was meant to be straight. So why was he so keen to visit a gay club? And if he wasn’t straight – did this mean he wanted to shag someone who was not Zayn that evening??

“Later on,” Louis agreed, breezily.

“How about here?” suggested Harry, pointing under the stone archways to Stiftskeller, “Ronni suggested it to me once.”

There was general agreement, and the lads walked one by one into a large stone beer hall; complete with large wooden barrels for tables and a slightly medieval feel.

“I’ll get the round in,” Liam immediately offered, “you guys grab a table.”

“Is everything all right with him?” asked Niall, squinting after their friend in the low lighting.

“What? Yes, of course,” Louis replied tersely, looking flustered.

Zayn frowned.

“He seems nervous about something.”

“Ni – for the love of the wee man! Li is acting totally normally.”

“Something’s going on…” Harry joined in, with a confused expression.

Zayn busied himself settling into one of the high stool-seats, and deliberately said nothing.

Whatever was going on with Liam, it was probably linked to the comment he had made outside about the club. This was something Zayn could not bare to consider: Liam, expressing a new found interest in men that were not him.

“Shut up, Harry!” went on Louis, looking guiltier by the second, his eyes darting around the table like a startled rabbit.

This only served to confirm Zayn’s worst fears, and he began to seriously regret deciding to come along at all.

He would never be able to hide his emotions if he saw Liam hook up with a guy, much less if he brought them back to the room next door and had to hear them banging.

He would have to come up with some sort of contingency plan.

“Everything alright, lads?”

Liam had reappeared with a tray of Stiegl’s, and had begun to disperse them around the table.

“They’re onto you, Li. Apparently you’re acting shifty.”

“Ah. Hold on.”
With that, Liam returned the tray to the bar before setting himself down at their barrel.

“Is everything alright?” Niall piped up, earnest eyes moving between Liam and Louis.

*Oh god, thought Zayn in horror, here is comes. The confession that we’re actually here to get Liam some cock tonight.*

It was difficult not to look miserable already.

“What? Yes! Nothings wrong,” Liam began, “you don’t need to be worried.”

Niall and Harry looked relived. Zayn, had he realised it, looked much as if he was sucking on a lemon.

Here Liam seemed to stall, so Louis put his arm around his shoulders and looked a little like a small dog daring anyone to threaten it’s owner.

All that was missing was a growl, and Zayn had the feeling that any negativity in response to what his best mate was about to say would be met with a verbal equivalent.

“Urghhh, this is really awkward. But fuck it!”

Louis squeezed his shoulders.

Zayn raised his eyebrows and attempted to settle his features into something more neutrally interested.

“I’ve been sort of confused about this for quite a while now – but basically, I realised I’m into guys as well as girls. Its not a big deal, I’m not going to try and jump into any of your pants don’t worry! Just…” he held his hands up, looking mortified.

“Just *don’t be weird about it,*” Louis finished off for him, glaring around the circle and daring anyone to say anything.

“Paynooooo!” Harry cried, eyes lighting up, “welcome to the team!” he jumped out of his seat and actually ran around to engulf Liam in a big bear-hug, “I’m so glad you felt you could tell us!”

Crickley eyed smiled in place, Liam’s gaze fell next on their blonde companion, who was looking rather superior.

“I knew it!” he shouted, “I fucking *knew* that was what you were going to say!” laughing, he leant over to ruffle Liam’s hair.

Zayn was acutely aware he was the only one now left not reacting. His lungs felt too big, his head was suddenly throbbing – what could he say? That he was so, so happy to hear Liam actually liked the idea of somebody without boobs in the bed with him. But would he mind considering him, Zayn, as that person for the long term foreseeable future? – possibly not.

With an aching heart, because that quip about not trying to get into any of their pants had sliced straight through him like an arrow, he arranged his face into a wide smile and an incredulous facial expression.

“Have you been corrupted by all this time spent around men of fine taste?” he asked, trying to make a joke of things.

Liam was looking at him as if this wasn’t the response he was looking for, but seemed to bounce
back quick enough.

Quick enough Zayn wasn’t sure the uncertain fall of his face had ever been there at all.

“I think I had began to see Lou had a point about all these fit men long before I set foot in Austria, actually,”

It sounded a little sharper than usual.

Internally Zayn recoiled from the conversation, feeling the dull ache of regret. He had only been joking, but Liam’s response had put him in his place. He wasn’t special. He hadn’t awakened anything in Liam at all. He had already known he was bisexual.

Zayn must have been an experiment, a means of checking something without pushing things too far. An opportunity to hop back if needs-be.

The realization filled him with a horror so sudden and overcoming he had to excuse himself to the bathroom for five minutes to come to terms with it.

The night didn’t really pick up from here, although it should have been a light hearted occasion- and certainly everybody else seemed to be enjoying it.

Louis was sentimentally proud of his best mate, and kept wrapping him up and hugs and planting loud kisses on his cheek.

Harry seemed genuinely thrilled to be initiating somebody into a new part of their life, and for one very long forty minute period began a very series conversation about sex techniques and being safe about them.

Both Louis and Niall looked horrified at the amount of detail, but poor Zayn was simply downcast. Was there no portion of the night that wouldn’t be a blistering reminder than Liam was going to get out there, make up for lost time, and sleep with loads of blokes that weren’t him?

The primary respite came when they finally left the confines of the old fashioned bar and hit up the club Hazza and Louis had been in before. It was loud, meaning he could get away with saying less (and all importantly hearing less), and the dance floor was already packed.

Call on Me by Eric Prydz was blaring, which had Louis and Liam shouting ‘Gran Canaria!’ at the tops of their voices and jumping up and down.

“You go dance,” Harry offered, “I’ll get the drinks. Just stay somewhere I can see you!”

This was all the encouragement Lou and Li needed, before dashing off to the swaying throng like they’d never been so excited.

“I’m going to the loo, can you get me a drink too?” Niall asked, before vanishing into the crowds.

“You holding up okay, old sport?” Harry inquired, false casual, as they took their spots in the long wait to be served.

Zayn glowered back from the corner of his eye.
“You sound pretentious when you try to talk like Gatsby,” he said instead of saying anything relevant.

“You’re the only person who doesn’t look thrilled to be here.”

“Thrilled to see Liam have his first hook up with another guy?” he arched an eyebrow, “sorry if that makes me feel like throwing up in my mouth.”

Harry’s face fell, “I thought you’d be excited he was into blokes? I was right all along,” he couldn’t help pointing out, “which means he is definitely into you. It’s the only way to-”

“It is not the only way to explain his behavior!” hissed Zayn savagely, “he led me on – basically – while he was working out if he would really like to be with another bloke! It’s a fucking joke. And he can piss right off.”

“Zee…”

“What?”

“I don’t think that’s it at all. Does that seem like something Liam would do? I don’t think he’d use anyone like that. He’s too sensitive himself. He just made that joke because of Niall and I,” he added, “I don’t think he was really thinking of you then.”

“Fuck off.”

“Suit yourself.”

With that they shuffled forward, and within fifteen minutes were back at the edge of the dance floor with Niall – holding a margarita, a lager, a mojito, a vodka and orange and a jack daniels.

“Look, shall we just shove people over and join them?” the Irish boy suggested, “I don’t think they’re coming over and I love this song!”

It was Something Like This by the Chainsmokers.

And so the night went on.

Periodic trips waiting at the bar.

Sloshed drinks on the dance floor as they jumped up and down, screamed along with the lyrics and swayed about with their arms over one another.

A mix of musical genres, a mix of tastes.

Castle on the Wall, I Would Do Anything For Love, Tumbling Dice, Turn Back Time, Sex is on Fire, All the Small Things, Feel So Close To You Right Now, Lose Yourself.

Single shots mutated into doubles, much like Zayn’s troubled vision. He realised after Harry’s pointed comments at the bar how unsubtle he must have been being.

That scared him. He didn’t make himself vulnerable for anyone. Especially not stupid Northern boys with wide smiles and misleading eye-crinkles. No, sir.

So he faked it. In some manner he truly was having fun.
The less pompous side of him loved the cheesy music, and because he had drunk so much his inhibitions were down he found he could actually stop worrying about looking stupid and just dance. Dancing was fun, actually, this inebriated.

Certainly he felt less stupid bouncing around with Harry in the middle of hundreds of people doing the same thing than he did at having thought he might have stood a chance with Liam.

Should Liam have not been there, or left early, Zayn’s night would probably have picked back up.

All the ingredients of a great night were there after all.

Sadly, things were destined to go down a more… farcical route.

It all began with Louis – as many Events do.

He and Liam had vanished for a notable time to the bathrooms, and matters had been compounded when Liam had eventually returned looked sheepish.

“Where’s Lou?” Harry had asked, immediately.

“Oh. Er. Um. He’s fine!” Liam had shouted back over the music, clearly pretending he had misheard and hoping for the best.

“No. Where is, not how is!” shot back Harry, who had began to look suspicious.

“Oh, alright fine,” Liam had grumbled reluctantly, “we got talking to some people by the loo. He’s over there.”

Liam pointed back across the dance floor to the bottom of some stairs.

Louis, unmissable in his cream trousers and braces, was leaning at the bottom; double vodka in one hand, eyes very much fixed on a tall, long haired chap in tight jeans and a striped shirt.

“Whose that guy?” was the inevitable next sentence out of Harry’s mouth.

Pissed as he was, the situation at hand had begun to dawn on Zayn. Louis was chatting someone up – Harry was bound to get mad. Even though he had no right to be, all things considered things were likely to get messy.

Perhaps I can take him home and get away from Liam doing the same thing, was what he had began to pray – when Harry had spun on his heel and stalked off in the opposite direction.

“Ah shit,” said Niall, turning after him but not moving, “I guess we’d better give him a moment.”

Zayn looked back over at Louis, and realised there was another guy – shorter, with fairer hair, stood with them. He was looking back at their group with curiosity.

Probably he was the strangers friend.

“I’m going to find H,” he announced, scrunching his face up, “wish me luck!”

As it happened, Harry was not difficult to find. He had simply got another drink and stood at the end of the bar glaring into it.
“Hanging in there?”

“Hi.”

Zayn ordered another margarita and put his arm around his friend without saying anything else.

He was drunk, and the room was swaying.

“You were right. It’s stupid. They don’t know we exist, not like that. Not really. What a pair of bastards.”

He lifted his glass and drank heavily.

Zayn noticed his eyes looked wet, like he’d been crying.

Oh, Harry, he thought.

What he said was, “come outside and smoke with me?”

So that was what they did.

The cool air cleared his head, and smoking calmed his frayed nerves. They told rueful stories of spurned love advances, shared embarrassing sexcapade memories and laughed at other drunk people. It was actually nice. Zayn began to forget about Liam, aside from as the abstract problem in the back of his mind – so he his guard had effectively came down by the time he saw it.

“It” being Liam, stumbling out the doors wrapped around some guy. In fact, not ‘some guy’ at all – his conscious coming to the shocking realization that it was the smaller bloke from the bottom of the steps earlier on.

Harry, who was waving a hand in front of his face and saying ‘Zayn? Are you okay?’, finally turned and clocked them as well. The small “Uh-oh…” he emitted being the proof of it.

Although they had simply had their arms around one another as they bounded down the steps, they wasted no time it locking mouths some seconds later; pasted together as tight as could possibly be imagined.

Even thought he had known this was a possible, if not probable, outcome of that evening – it still really fucking hurt.

“Zayn – Zayn are you alright?”

He screwed his eyes shut and blinked them open a couple of times as if trying to wipe the image in front of him from memory, then fixed his friend with an alarming looking smile.

“Zayn, you’re creeping me out. Let’s just go.”

Harry made to stand up, momentarily blocking his view of Liam and causing Zayn’s eyes to catch somebody else familiar leaping through the doors to the garden.

There was Louis – one brace trailing off his shoulder, t-shirt untucked from dancing with his arms waving wildly above his head, hair wilted with sweat; fringe jammed to one side, damp looking.

He was alone, and he looked worried.
His eyes settled on his best mate making out with the stranger, and widened slightly, before he started scanning the crowd of smokers and outside drinkers.

Eventually they came to land on the back of Harry’s head, and Zayn seated behind him: looking white as a sheet.

His own complexion ashen-ed, and his mouth opened in a large ‘O’.

Later it would be obvious Louis had came running outside purposefully to prevent Zayn or Harry from seeing what Liam was doing. In the moment, his behavior just seemed a trifle weird.

He seemed to come to a painful decision, and strided down the steps toward them pulling out a cigarette and determinedly not looking to his right where Liam was snogging the random with wanton enthusiasm.

“Hey lads!” it came out a bit croaky, most likely because of all the singing and screaming he had been doing inside.

“Lost someone?” asked Harry pointedly.

He clearly hadn’t forgotten what he had seen inside.

“I was looking for… well,”

“Liam?” offered Zayn, coldly, “I think he’s right behind you there. Stuck on that dude’s face.”

“Oh, yes, well…” said Louis, producing an awkward false laugh, “its been a tense week. Good to let off steam…” he shook his head and ran his fingers through his fringe, “anyway. We did partially come here so Liam could explore his interest in men y’know.”

He narrowed his eyes a little.

It was an abrupt change of tune. Defensive, and slightly challenging.

“Are you waiting for me to say something here? I’m not denying he’s a free agent, Lou.”

Harry let out an uncomfortable cough, and tried to shuffle out of his seat.

“Look – it doesn’t mean anything. He’s just never got to go out on the pull for guys before,” Louis went on, deflating a bit. He waved his cigarette about in front of him, drunkenly mesmerized by the smoke trail.

“I get it, believe me.”

Zayn found he was the only one still sitting, and suddenly lurched to his feet.

“Are we going back in?” Harry hopefully suggested, before frowning and asking, “where’s Niall?”

“We got talking to a group of guys… erm, inside. Thomas’ friends…” he waved vaguely over his shoulder without turning, “Ni’s inside with them. I think one of them has taken a fancy to him, actually,” he giggled.

“Everybody’s swinging both ways these days,” laughed Harry.

“I could do with swinging under somebody myself,” muttered Zayn, before storming back inside.
“Zayn! Zayn, wait for me!” shouted Louis, throwing his unfinished smoke away and bouncing back up the steps after him.

Unseen by the other two, Liam took this moment to pull back – eyes popping and shocked.

Harry, who was by now the only one remaining at the table because he was downing his drink, locked eyes with him and shrugged.

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“This is Erik!” Niall explained as the other three made room for themselves around the booth upstairs.

Zayn had resigned himself to the worst evening imaginable. The very least he could do was have a last drink to save face before running back to the hotel to cry into an unfamiliar pillow.

“Hallo Erik,” said Zayn, shaking his hand with a tight smile.

“Are you Louis’ boyfriend then?” Erik asked, looking between them as they made themselves comfortable next to one another.

Harry had stopped off in the loo.

“No…?”

Erik looked confused.

“It’s a long story!” shouted Louis above the music, blushing, “and stop playing around beau!”

He leant over and planted an entirely unexpected kiss on Zayn’s face before hissing in his ear, “I had to say something to get that guy off my back earlier. I didn’t want to pull him so I just flippantly said I had a boyfriend over the room. Then Liam came over and got fired into his mate, so naturally I had to say who I was dating. Telling them it was Harry would have been too loaded if we all started speaking. As we now appear to be doing. Fuck it, what a mess.”

“Understatement of the year,” sighed Zayn, “do we have to make out now as well? Because it think Harry might murder me in my sleep.”

“What? No! Just, like, hold my hand while he’s in the loo so they can see.”

Alright…”

“You’re not being convincing!”

“I’m embarrassed by your drunkeness, darling!” shot back Zayn, smiling genuinely at the stupidity of Louis’ lie.

It was a short lived reprieve however, because he was aware things could only get more complicated when Harry came back. The fact Louis had lied at ALL implied he was truly smitten with H. The fact he was too embarrassed to use Hazza as his excuse-boyfriend only cemented Zayn’s certainty on this.

But there was no way to communicate this to Harry right now.
He would return from the loo, already worried about Liam, and see Zayn and Louis cavorting like idiots. He may not think they were seriously into one another, but it would certainly hurt his feelings.

“Look – I’m going to go.” Zayn decided, tapping Lou on his shoulder.

“I thought you might…” he looked sad.

“It’s just too complicated.”

“Liam…?”

“No… What?? Pretending to be your boyfriend when I know it will upset Harry!”

“Yes, quite right. I’ll hold the fort here. Do I need to take you home?”

“As your faux boyfriend, I command you to stay and enjoy yourself!”

“This is why I love you.”

“I know.”

“Fuck you, Han Solo!” cried Lou, in mock offense, before dragging Zayn into a cheerio hug.

“Are you off?” asked Niall as he shucked his denim jacket over his shoulders.

“Yes. I’m done in. See you back at the hotel?”

“Are you okay?” Niall seemed to be attempting to communicate some sort of message with his drunk eyes.

“I’m alright Ni.”

With that he adjusted his shirt, waved to the table, and made off as quickly as he could towards the entrance way.

Mercifully he didn’t bump into either Harry (who may have tried to stop him) or Liam (who would have caused further upset) en route – and before he knew it he was dashing out and onto the road as quick as he could.

Tears began to prickle at his eyes as he walked, hunched against the chilly winds.

He pulled his cigarette packet out his pocket and meandered along the road. The club was near the central train station, but he needed to get back to the river to find their hotel.

Belatedly it occurred to him he should probably have paid better attention on their way out earlier.

“Um… it’s probably this way…” he sniffed to himself, furiously wiping tears off his face as fast as they would fall; lest somebody walk and notice he was weeping to himself.

That would truly have been the last shred of dignity gone.

Thankfully, any deities around must have taken pity on him – because he found his way to the banks of the Inn with more ease than he had initially expected.

That just left more time to consider the horrible situation he had found himself in, which did not help the wild attempts to stem the flow of tears.
Thomas probably never cries, he scolded himself as visions of Liam and the Austrian guy dancing mockingly behind his eyes.

“Zayn! Zaaaaayn!”

Good lord, what now?

The sound of feet slapping against stone echoed down the street, and for a fleeting moment Zayn worried he was about to be attacked by a very forthcoming mugger.

“ZAYN! For the love of god, will you please stop fucking walking!!!”

That caught his attention, and he turned around with some agitation. He was a million miles away in his own head, he hadn’t been paying attention as he walked down the road (so concerned had he been with locating the river), and in his drunken confusion he hadn’t immediately recognized the voice.

“Liam?” he squeaked.

And him it was. AKA Batboy. Or ‘that fucker’ as he was currently thinking of him.

Jacketless; in the cold, sprinting down the street (if in a somewhat wobbly fashion) and calling his name in his stupidly tight black Henley that showed off his stupidly appealing muscles.

Even now he was taken aback by how strongly he felt towards the younger boy jogging towards him in the dark. Belatedly he realised it had started to rain, the temperature having risen in the city.

It was raining, and Liam had came after him without a coat?

In a city surrounded by the Alps? What the fuck was he doing?

As we can all relate – never do we realise in these moments of self-doubt and loathing how much we may mean to another person. And that to them pursuing us through miserable weather, without the appropriate garments on, is but a small price to pay to parlay with us for a even little while.

“Liam, what the hell are you doing?” he asked, stiffly.

He was sick of pretending, and even though he knew he’d have to start again at it tomorrow; right now he was sad, and he was angry and he was jealous. And he was going to show it – consequences be damned!

At this point Liam had caught up with him, and had pulled himself up to a stop about a meter away. His chest was rising and falling from the exertion, and his cheeks were pink with cold.

“Following you.”

Zayn spluttered, “Jesus, didn’t Lou or Nialler explain that I just went home?”

“Why did you leave?” countered Liam, quietly.

“I’m tired.”

“That isn’t true.”

“Yes it is,” ploughed on Zayn forcefully.

“No, it isn’t. You’re never tired at this time. We go out way later than this all the time back in Kühtai
and you’re always one of the last men standing.”

The fact Liam had noticed this fact, often largely related to the fact Liam was always the latest to arrive because of his weird shifts, merely fuelled the fires of righteous indignation.

“Oh you know me so we well, Liam,” snarled Zayn, “I don’t think!”

“Are you mental? We’ve literally spent all our fucking time together since we got here! How could you think I don’t know you well?!”

Things were coming alarmingly close to some sort of Painful Reveal. Although he had got it under control before Liam had shown up, he felt tears welling up in his eyes again – and he seemed to be powerless to stop them spilling out and onto his cheeks in a show of pathetic betrayal.

“Fuck – shit – are you crying??”

“No! Yes! I don’t know!”

Liam made an aborted move that suggested he had intended to move forward and do something comforting before thinking better of it. Probably because he only has arms for that wanker now, went Zayn’s inner monologue – causing him to cry harder.

“Look. You’ve been really weird with me all night. And I didn’t expect this from you of all people – but do you have a problem with me being bi?” he looked like crying himself as he asked it.

How strange?

This was the last accusation Mr Malik had anticipated.

“Are you called me a homophobe?!” wailed Zayn, at the top of his lungs. This surely was insult to injury.

He wasn’t even sure it was possible for a comfortably gay teen to even be homophobic – the whole suggestion riled him up to the point he was seeing red, and he had balled his hands into white-knuckled fists.

“I’m asking if you have a PROBLEM with me liking MEN! Not accusing you of picketing Pride rallies with a ‘death to all fags’ sign Zayn!” howled Liam in return, his entire face darkening.

“I don’t have time for this,” announced Zayn primly, giving up on wiping the salty tears from his face as the rain went from mild to torrential, “I’m not wearing a water proof coat.”

“And I’m not wearing a coat at all.”

“Leave me alone, please.”

His voice came out small, weedy; not at all like the confident and indignant version of himself he had been but a second before. He actively started backing up onto the bridge, more reluctant than ever in his life to confess his feelings to somebody so insanely likely to reject them.

“Wait!”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” he hurried, “bye.”

And with that he spun on his heel and marched as quickly as he could towards the other side of the river.
He was wringing. The denim of his coat had soaked right through, and where he had left it unbuttoned at the front the rain had come through making his white t-shirt sheer. He plucked it murderously off his stomach, cursing to himself as he went.

“Zayn Javadd Malik, will you quit running the fuck away from me?!”

“Never!”

As he hit the middle of the bridge he heard splashing footsteps, then felt a hand clasp his elbow.

“You can’t avoid me forever,” hissed Liam in desperation, “please?”

Well, said the brain, it was Time.

With Liam being so dramatic and demanding there really was no other option. He would have to either think of the best lie of his life, or die trying. Realistically, he would probably be better of just telling the truth and watching his friendship with Liam dissolve into the gutter with the rainwater.

It had all been moving towards this moment anyway.

One day he’d look back and laugh. Hopefully.

“Alright Liam. I’m stopping.”

“Really?” he sounded surprised.

“I don’t have an issue with you being into men. I can promise you that.”

Now leave me alone and don’t ask anymore questions!

“Then tell me why you’re acting like this.”

“Its private!” one last plead.

Liam was looking anguished, unsure.

All Zayn had to do was hold out until he gave up and ran back to the club. The rain really was horrific, he was having to squint to even keep Liam in focus.

He had just began to think about how best to dry off his trainers when he got inside, when he heard Liam mutter “oh to hell with it”.

“To hell with what?” he couldn’t help but ask, warily.

He need not have worried.

Raising his eyes from where they had been wretchedly examining his soaking shoes, he saw Liam moving forward.

Very forward.

Right into his personal space forward.

There was only time to let out a tiny gasp, before Liam’s hands came up to cup his face and crash his lips into Zayn’s.
Time was surely standing still.

Had the world ceased to turn upon it's axis?

He couldn’t even close his eyes.

There was Batboy. Liam. Payno. Mr Payne. The handsome, sweet, slightly awkward boy he had lost his mind (if not his heart) to some four months previously. Attached to his face by the lips.

Suddenly fully awake to what was going on, he allowed himself to respond – albeit tentatively, and with one eye still open to check he wasn’t imagining things.

Thankfully that was all the encouragement Liam seemed to need.

Immediately dropping his left hand, he circled it around the smaller boy’s waist and drew them flush together.

Zayn could feel the rise and fall of Liam’s tightly clad, and very wet chest. He could also feel the way the remaining left hand snaked up and into his hair; fingers threading through the knots.

He settled for putting his own hands firmly on Liam’s waist until he knew what the fuck it was they were doing.

What seemed both too soon and at the end of an extremely long journey, Liam pulled back slightly – eyes searching every feature of Zayn’s dazed face.

“What was that for?” he breathed.

“Er- I was sort of hoping that was obvious?” answered Liam, with a grin.

“Enlighten me. I’m drunk.”

“I like you.”

“That’s nice. I like it when I get a new bike…” quipped Zayn.

“I like you as more than a friend, then. That’s why I know you so well, that’s why I’ve spent all my god damn time with you since I first set eyes on you, and that’s why your reaction tonight was so important to me – you fucking prat! I can’t stop thinking about you. I’ve never felt this way about anyone else. As soon as I knew you left it didn’t even occur to me not to follow you. I didn’t even tell that guy where I was going. Can you imagine! And you know what? I don’t give a shit about him. Or any other guy either. It was you I wanted to be pulling in that club. Its you I’ve wanted to go home with every fucking night in Kaos. And not as mates! I wanted to come home with you and sleep with you every single fucking night Zayn. So here it is. Alright – I kissed some guy tonight. You were rejecting me, as expected, because I was sure you didn’t like me. So I thought – fuck it, I came out tonight I may as well get some action. But then you got mad. And I thought, I hoped, that could mean I was in with a chance. Or you were upset by it for some other reason. Either way, I had to follow you to know. So now I’m asking. Do I have a chance, or are you just mad at me?”

It was clumsy as monologues go, but Liam had never claimed to be a Dickens. And Zayn didn’t want him to be.
Dear readers - I think we can all relate to these moments?

The stars align, and we discover that our dearest wish is actually within our grasp if we but reach out
to take it.

Fireworks began to go off in Zayn’s chest as he took in the magnitude of what Liam was telling him.

*Liam liked him liked-him.*

There he was – in the middle of the night, in the dark, on a flood lit stone bridge in the pouring rain.
In Austria. With the boy of his dreams chasing him home to declare how mad he was about him.

It was the stuff of 80s romcom legends.

It was cheesy, the sort of moment Harry was forever going on about when drunk and determined to
convince them that all romance wasn’t dead.

Despite all that. In spite of all that? Perhaps *because* of all that:

It was perfect.

“Zayn?”

He realised basking in the moment had caused him to pause for an inordinately long time given the
content of Liam’s speech.

“Are you sure about that?” he couldn’t bare it if Liam changed his mind in the morning and said he
was sorry.

“Trust me. I have never been surer of anything in my life. Well, this and the fact I can’t stand
spoons.”

“Come on then…” whispered Zayn, his cocky side coming through as he tipped his head to the side
and opened is arms wide either side of him, “prove it?”

Liam needed no more encouragement, launching himself forward and pushing Zayn up against the
side of the bridge.

“Are you gonna kiss me again?” inquired Zayn, shamelessly.

“If it’ll get you to shut up…” teased Liam, before ducking his head to find Zayn’s mouth all over
again.

How long they stood there for neither of them ever remembered – Zayn will tell you it was long
enough to catch a cold the next day.

Liam will tell you it wasn’t long enough, because Zayn was too eager to get him home and have his
wicked way ‘deflowering’ him.

When Mr Payne tells this story Mr Malik will go very red in the face at dinner parties, and often spit
out his wine in disgust.

This is usually the effect Mr Payne is going for when he does it.

What they will keep to themselves is the memory of the relentless downpour splashing all around them into the river and off of the cobbles in a beautiful crescendo.

Zayn will not tell you that when he tilted his head back in satisfaction that he could see the tips of snow capped mountains lined with trees, or the moon and hundreds of twinkling stars looking down on them.

Liam will not go into how difficult it was not to allow things to come to an unintentionally early fruition just making out with Zayn in that rainstorm.

But both of them will tell you that you don’t make memories like that in beige clubs, filled with competing bodies and the faint smell of sick.
once more unto the breach, dear friends.

Chapter Summary

In which 1/2 of our couples have finally got their shit together, but the others may have a ways to go... meanwhile, instead of working on their personal lives the group finally hits on the time to confront Simon and put a stop to whatever wot-ma-jiggery he is pulling up at that well in the forest....

Chapter Notes

Guys, i can only offer EXTREME apology for my lack of posting. I have been on a long holiday, and then moving cities and left my laptop somewhere else and basically had no time for creative fun - waaah! this has been a long time written actually, so its nice to finally post it.

I'm settled down again now, so i hope this will be finished swiftly and i can start another that i had an idea for :)

LOUIS.

As trips to the city go, this was not turning out to be the most positive Louis had ever experienced.

Things had got off to a misleading start. The Gasthaus was cozy and welcoming. They had adjacent rooms and a shared bathroom. Liam had put on a hip-hop playlist and they had got ready bopping about and singing loudly whilst shoving one another out the way of the mirror.

Even the walk had been fairly pleasant. Nialler had commented on what a beautiful city Innsbruck was, which had vaguely annoyed him because he mostly tried not to think about how much cooler living in the Tyrolean capital as opposed to the sticks would have been.

Arriving in Stiftskeller had been some sort of turning point. The guys had sensed something was up, and he had felt a tad guilty encouraging Liam to pop out with his news so suddenly and soberly in the evening. On the other hand- such a serious broadcast probably better deserved an audience that would both remember it in the morning, and appreciate the angst that preceded it’s coming.

Louis had adopted his age-old role as Protector of the pair, curling his arm around Liam during his confession. It did not strike him how odd it may have looked – the burlier boy ducking his head and blushing, face expressing how much he wished the conversation would just be over with. Discomfort embodied.

While there was the smaller framed of the two, thinner and shorter, but with a ferocious expression and narrowed eyes that suggested he wasn’t above a sharp comment or a well placed whollop when the need took him.
Thankfully, and ultimately as predicted, Liam had had nothing to worry about. He couldn’t have picked a more LGBTQIA friendly group to be divulging this news to, frankly.

Harry’s genuine thrill at discovering his friend had something else in common with him that he hadn’t known about was utterly endearing. Lou felt he could practically see the cogs turning in Hazza’s head as he went through all sorts of experiences he felt to be quintessential or important enough that he wanted to usher Liam into them as a figure of wisdom. Even if that wisdom was smallish in size, due to his relative youth. Still- he had been out the closest for some time. That probably counted for something.

Niall had seemed utterly unsurprised and also minimally interested. Being straight presenting himself, he was probably the least bothered. Not because he didn’t care, but because he himself wasn’t a frequenter of LGBT themed events. Essentially the nature of his relationship with Li was changeless – aside for the pronoun with which he might refer to his partner at a later date.

Zaynie was another matter altogether.

Louis had been particularly keen to see how Zayner reacted, because he needed to know if Liam was in with a chance there.

Unfortunately it was difficult to tell. Zayn’s face, which Louis had been intently focused on as Liam made his Big Reveal, had barely moved a muscle. Though it had to be said, he had a look of someone who had been long expecting some bad news and was finally receiving it.

If he was a thoroughly disinterested party in the matter of Liam Payne’s sexual preferences there could be no occasion for this – of that Louis was sure. It simply wouldn’t make sense, no matter which way you spun it.

Another option was that while un-attracted to Liam himself, Zayn had some other reason of his own to be displeased at his friend’s announcement. Louis couldn’t possibly guess what that could be, short of one of the girls secretly confiding in him that she fancied Liam. This was tenuous at best, as guesses go.

The final solution was by far and away the most likely- Zayn cared for reasons of his own. Probably that he was interested himself, but based on Liam’s reserved nature and the terrible jest about not trying to bed any of them; he believed himself not to be in with a chance.

This wouldn’t do. It was also frustratingly close to an ‘Important Discovery’, but miles away from actually knowing anything concrete.

Three rounds around the jolly little barrel later, and Louis was waiting at the bar to pay for his round. He had noted Liam on his way back from the bathroom’s and waved him over.

“So?” he asked, eyebrows raised and a concerned look shading his features, “is everything alright? Sorry I sort of sprung that on you – they were asking questions, I thought it was better you tackled it before they cornered you…..”

Liam snorted, before launching in for a tight hug, “You’re terrible, you are,” he muttered, before adding, “and thank you. I couldn’t possibly think how I’d have led into it naturally.”

“You’re welcome,” Louis replied, patting his friend’s back with relief.

“I can’t believe I was so worried. I think Harry wants to take me under his wing…”

“Yeeees – that conversation took a rather drastic turn,” exclaimed Louis, eyes wide with the memory
of Harry’s enthusiastic discussion on what he called ‘safe yet pleasurable sexual encounters’ recently in mind.

Liam burst out laughing, face contorting into one of those tight, crinkley eyed smiles his friends were so fond of.

“If there was anything I didn’t know when I got up this morning…”

“You sure as fuck know all about it now!” finished Lou, handing his Euros over to the bar tender.

“Why did you never go into all that before eh?” asked Liam playfully, punting his hip against his companion’s.

“Frankly, I’m not sure he needed to go into it now!” was Louis’ demure response, before he added, “Help me with these drinks?”

“Sure,” Liam leant forward and shuffled a group of glasses into a V in front of him, “shall we?”

And off they trotted – Louis’ underhand assessment of how well his friend was doing completed. He was glad there had been no mention of Zayn, because he couldn’t decide how their handsome friend was feeling; and he had been concerned Liam might have been upset or disappointed by this.

As it happened he just seemed happy to be finally free of the secret.

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The club was every bit as good as Louis had remembered, and the night had been filled with copious spirits and enthusiastic dancing.

Things had got a bit tense after Liam befriended a group of guys in the toilets – not something he usually did, but heyho Louis wasn’t about to abandon him to strangers.

It was just unlucky that his strong wing-manning had led to quite the wrong impression; both to the guys with whom they were speaking, and most likely with Harry who he knew would eventually see them.

This distressed him more than anything.

Even though he had already told the Austrians he had a boyfriend, he was positive Harry would mistakenly think he was chatting people up and trying to pull.

Eventually he had seen Liam kissing one of them out the corner of his eye, which would have given him a moment of brotherly pride if he hadn’t decided it was something Zayn probably shouldn’t see.

The longer the night went on the surer he was becoming that Mr Malik was holding some pretty strong feelings for his bestie – given he had taken to glaring ferociously at every gentleman that dared to look Liam’s way (let alone any that actually spoke with him, or danced up behind him) and ignored every possible advance somebody made at him personally.

In his drunken haze he was aware they were clearly both too shy to make the first move, certain of rejection. What he didn’t know was how to help – other than keeping any sight of his room mate necking a hot stranger hidden.
So, the night having worn on somewhat and his having entirely lost track of not only Liam but Harry and Zayn as well, Louis decided to detangle himself from the crowd at in the booth and go see what was going on.

He wandered around the seating areas, leant over railing to scrutinize the dance floor, and finally bombarded the toilets with top volume hollering of his friends’ names (which earned him some strange looks, and a couple of loud “fuck offs” from one of the locked cubicles).

Of course by this point dread was pooling in his tummy.

If he wasn’t finding any of them they must be in the same place.

And the gardens really were the only place left to look….

*Aw for Christ’s sake,* he thought as this dawned on him in the loo entrance-way – before taking off at the best version of a sprint somebody who is quite inebriated and in a packed building can manage.

“Would you get out my fucking way please?! Thaaaank you!” he found himself shouting, doing his best to ‘politely’ shove party-goers out of his way and fight over to the doors at the side.

The necessary indoor momentum turned out to be a little much once he finally hit the doors, and found himself propelled too quickly into the outdoors and down the stone steps.

“Well, there’s my Liam…” he muttered, coming to a stop with a bit of a wobble, eyes popping slightly at the sight of his chum wrapped around the dark stranger from the bathroom, “now… please…”

the thought trailed off when his eyes found the back of a curly head – and the pale, furious looking companion in front of him, “aw fuck.”

Later, Louis would describe it as one of those surreal drunken out of body moments – where the stars aligned in the worst thing he could have imagined going on in front of him: because of course.

There was nothing to do but brazen it out – if not for Liam’s sake, for the fact that Zayn’s eyes had narrowed in on him.

“Hey lads…” he struggled to tug out a cigarette as he walked towards the pair at the table.

Harry, who had been standing up, turned to face him – and promptly made an extreme grimace as soon as Zayn couldn’t see him.

He almost wanted to laugh. Poor Harry, he had probably been standing in an effort to get Zaynie to leave the scene of the crime already. He wasn’t sure how his appearance would help.

“Lost someone?” asked Harry, eyes straining towards Liam’s canoodling.

Louis found himself rambling in response out of loyalty to Liam. After all, he had just come to terms with his sexuality. He worked very hard all week. He deserved the chance to let off steam and have a frolic with a strange man, dammit!

Just…. He couldn’t help feeling Liam *wouldn’t* be interested in all that *at all* if he thought it would jeopardize his chances with Zayn Malik.

He waffled on, a bit defensively, unsure in his drunken haze if he was making things worse or not.
This resulted in Zayn’s storming back inside, and Louis guiltily tearing after him - finally catching his arm inside the door.

“Zayn, I know what’s going on here.”

Zayn, taking in this revelation, looked horrified.

“Liam doesn’t care about that bloke!” he found himself insisting, his hand clasped around his friend’s elbow, “if you weren’t so full of complicated arty darkness and self loathing you would see that.”

“Louis,” he began prudishly, “you seem to have got it into your head that I have a problem with Liam getting some action. I can’t possibly imagine where you would get that idea, but you can knock it right out the game this instant. I don’t give a shit, I’m just too drunk and feeling squiffy.”

“Squiffy at the sight of your plutonic mate sticking his tongue down a hot guy’s throat?”

At this Zayn yanked his arm free forcefully, and hissed, “Liam could fuck that guy on the terrace and I wouldn’t give a pissing shit, Louis. Now get out my way.”

Whatever else Zayn could have said, nothing would have persuaded him exactly how upset he was by Liam’s antics than exactly what he was doing and saying.

“Okay – I’m sorry. Er…”

A weird moment passed. Louis and Zayn had become pretty close over the course of the season, especially as they worked as a pair everyday during house keeping. He didn’t want to admit it, and given circumstances he could of course understand, but the fact Zayn still refused to confide in him was hurting his feelings a bit.

Not the time, Tomlinson, he told himself desperately, this is most definitely not about you, OR the time to worry Zayn doesn’t like you enough! Liam!!

“Oh shitting hell,” Zayn suddenly exclaimed, obviously seeing the spasm of pain on his friend’s face, “come here you stupid twat!” and with that he had pulled Louis into a tight (if exasperated) hug.

“Oumph!” exclaimed Louis, as he was pulled forward.

“Oh, you may, and I stress MAY, have a point here,” he hissed in Lou’s ear, “… about Liam. But we are not having this discussion tonight.”

Louis nodded, squeezing tighter, “it’ll be okay.”

Snort.

“It will, now take me to the bar and don’t mention this again for the rest of the night.”

“Your wish is my command.”

“That’ll be the day.”

“Oi.”

Of course Zayn didn’t last very long, probably scared off by the fact that Louis had used him as a pretend boyfriend in a complex move to get some other dude to back off.
The implications and possible repercussions between Harry and Liam were frankly no longer worth it, and he had to admit he was a tad relieved when Zayn decided to call it a night.

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“What do you think happened with Zayn and Liam?” Harry was asking, as the remaining trio traversed the rain-soaked cobbled streets back to the Gasthaus.

“Knowing those two? Absolutely nothing!” laughed Louis, kicking a stray stone alone in front of himself.

“I don’t know… remember, I saw Liam before he left,” Niall interrupted, “and he looked like a man on a mission.”

“He always looks like that where Zee’s involved,” pointed out Harry, who was stumbling off the kerb.

“Come here and walk with me!” Louis cried, noticing and grabbing his lanky companion by the hand, “you can’t be trusted on that terrible precipice.”

“I hope they aren’t arguing when we get back…” Harry went on, going along with Louis yanking him in towards the wall, “I’m too tired to negotiate.”

“I think Liam would have came back if Zayn had started an argument with him,” Niall said, turning onto the bridge outside their hotel, “so lets not assume the worst.”

“Bagsy not sitting with either of them if they’re in a bad mood on the bus tomorrow!” Louis shouted, giggling.

“Hey – the lights still on in one of our rooms…” Harry observed, pointing with his free hand up towards the top floor.

“So it is…” agreed Louis.

Niall turned and waggled his eyebrows at them suggestively.

“One of them could be sat with their laptop watching Netflix,” Harry suggested.

“Lets hope its nobody sat up crying on their bed…” muttered Louis ruefully, “come on then. Lets assess the situation!”

With that he sped up, pulling Hazza slightly behind him until he was parallel with Ni – whose hand he grabbed as well.

“Hey!”

“Come on!” was all the reply he got, and before he could protest any further the three of them had dashed across the deserted road in front of Gashaus Innsbruck, and ducked into the doorway out of the drizzle.

“Be quiet, its late,” Harry the Parent hissed as they began their ascent up the darkened stairway.
“Yes, alright Grandad,” murmured Niall good naturedly.

Louis didn’t say anything, because a moment later he tripped on the stair and fell heavily onto the landing.

“Ouch!”

Niall snorted with loud suppressed laughter.

“Guys…” H cautioned.

“S—sorry Harry,” Louis giggled.

“Come on, we’re nearly there.”

Harry sighed, and held out a disgruntled arm in the dark to help Louis up.

Not for the first time he thanked the gods he didn’t usually believe in for allowing Harry to become so distracted by the Liam and Zayn Fiasco than he had seemed to entirely forget that Louis had spent a portion of the evening in the company of random men.

“What are you stopping for, Niall?” Harry was asking in a cross voice, pulling him back from his internal monologue.

“I… can you hear that?”

Niall was perched on the penultimate step on the last floor, his left foot hovering above the landing and his right hand clutching the banister.

He had turned back to face them, frowning with intense concentration.

“I think you’ve had too much to drink, pal.” Louis laughed, keeping hold of Harry’s proffered hand and pulling them up to meet their Irish buddy further along.

Just at that moment Harry opened his mouth to speak, when a loud moan erupted from behind one of the closed doors.

All three froze to the spot, wide eyed and taking it in turns staring around at one another.

“Is somebody getting some action?” sniggered Lou.

“Not ‘somebody’,,” Niall corrected, eyes bulging as he made quotation marks in the air, “that’s one of our rooms! I’m sure of it.”

Louis pushed Ni to the left and hopped up onto the same step, before peering around the corner and down towards their room with the light under the door.

“Surely…not?” whispered Harry, voice shocked.

“I thought it could hear it on my way up,” Niall hissed back.

Another loud, appreciative sounding groan pierced the silence of the hall – giving them a jump.

“We need to get closer to check,” Louis instructed.

“Check? What on earth are we checking??” Niall asked.
“If its them! If our little Liam and Zaynie have finally got their shit together!”

“I’ve heard enough thanks. I’m going right to bed.”

“Well if its not them, then we can get into that room so I can pick up my over night stuff,” Louis insisted – causing Harry to agree. He’d left his toothbrush in that room.

Niall rolled his eyes, and crept off quieter than the others would have imagined towards the shut door at the end of the corridor.

“Oh, ah, ah –d-d-on’t stop! Ooooh Leeeeeeyuuuum!"

the exclamation of enjoyment caused Niall, now nearly directly outside the door, to jump about a mile in the air with the reflexes of a cat.

This caused Harry and Louis to laugh so much they were nearly doubled up, tears pricking their eyes, and holding their sides.

“Fucking hell, Zayn,” Louis huffed, struggling to sort himself out, “alright I think that’s quite enough evidence. Everybody into room 2. We’ll just have to put some music on and drown it out.”

“My headphones are in there too…” realised Harry, with horror.

“Ni has his laptop in this room though,” Lou replied, ushering his horrified looking mate through the door to the suite next door, “we’ll just pop something on that and go to sleep.”

It was a good thing he did too.

Louis popped ‘That Mitchell and Webb Look’ on – a sketch comedy show he was very fond of – and turned the volume up as high as he could without in turn disturbing the people on their other side.

Liam and Zayn and the bed next door remained somewhat audible, but it was the best they could do, and deep down (if slightly put out by the noise) they were all extremely happy that their friends had finally got together.

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The coach journey back to the Elisabeth was a hungover affair. Everybody had drank more than was good for them, and nobody had got very much sleep.

Liam and Zayn had spent the evening making up for lost time.

Niall, who had a great talent for blocking out nonsense he couldn’t be bothered with, had fallen asleep almost instantly on the sofa in the corner under a large sized towel.

Louis and Harry, who were tucked up in the double bed, were kept up somewhat longer; leaving them marginally zombified on the journey home.

Truth be told, he was feeling the worst he had in a while – and the windy roads of the Austrian Alps were doing nothing to help. Harry, who was by his side, had curled up against the window and was uttering occasional moans of misery.
Niall was taking up the two seats in front, and snoring softly; true to form.

But across the aisle, at the back, were an altogether glowing Liam and Zayn. If he had expected any form of sheepishness from Liam (and he had, Liam was a gentle and easily embarrassed sort of soul); he found none. If anything he looked like the cat who had got the cream from the moment he burst into the other room to wake everyone up in the morning to right now – eyes closed, hand clasped around his companion’s between them on the seats.

It was cool-looking, composed and ethereal Mr Malik that appeared to be over-come with bashfulness and blushes.

In fact, he had remained a faint rouge colour from the moment he had stumbled out the bathroom and right into Louis who was hanging around desperately outside it first thing that morning.

Right now he remained the only other boy wide awake, eyes moving regularly down to the joined hands at his hip with a little smile.

Louis sighed, and turned back to face forward with his own eyes shut. It was nice people were sorting things out.

It made a change.

(he resolutely did not think about the farce that was him and Harry here).

Sadly once they returned to the village it would be time to start work on whatever the hell they were going to do about Simon. It wasn’t a cheery thought, so he focused on not being sick and trying to get back to sleep.

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“It’s good about Zee and Payno, isn’t it?” Harry was rambling at the end of their dinner shift later that night.

He was mopping the floor around the sinks and the serving station, as Louis stood near by loading the tiny glass dishwasher.

“I’m still mystified as to how that evening turned out alright in the end,” Louis admitted, sinking down to his haunches to shove some large beer glasses into the back.

“I’m sure we’ll hear all about it eventually,” Harry chuckled, before adding, “I’m glad you approve. I thought you were against en season relationships?”

He was attempting levity, but Louis figured it was meant more pointedly than it sounded. He didn’t turn around, but carried on staring into the more forgiving face of the dishwasher.

“Well, obviously everything has exceptions.”

“Zayn was Liam’s exception?” Harry clarified, confused sounding.

“Clearly!”

“Clearly?”
Louis cleared his throat and stood up. He supposed he should have seen this coming. He put a hand on his hip and tried to look as unconcerned as he thought he deserved to feel.

“After Liam and I talked about how he felt I realised it was something special. That’s all.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, and he gave up the pretense of continuing mopping.

Louis cleared his throat again, uncomfortably, but was saved from moving the conversation forward by the appearance of Nick.

“Allright, guys?” he asked, moving through the automatic restaurant doors, “nearly finished?”

“Ah, Nick. Yeah, nearly,” Louis muttered, turning back to grab the empty tray he had brought the cups through on and shuffling back next door.

It was simply not the TIME for Harry to be needling him!

Having a miserable chat about why they would only wind up imploding and spoiling their friendship would serve no purpose, especially in the wake of Liam and Zayn’s blossoming romance.

It appeared Liam had asked Zayn to be his boyfriend first thing the following morning, assuring the older boy nothing about the previous evening was lightly taken or considered a mistake.

He had also promised to take Zayn out on a ‘proper’ date, just the 2 of them, later in the week to ‘woo’ him properly.

Zayn was now wandering around with a grin from ear to ear, and a slightly comic strut.

Liam was happier than Louis had barely ever seen him since they entered young adulthood, which was saying something.

Whatever he fobbed Harry off with, the fact Liam and Zayn’s feelings for one another seemed greater than a winter’s fling (and therefore all the more worth while pursuing) was a statement he would stand by.

Regardless of all this, they still had a corrupt manager to bring to justice!

So he sidled up to Zee, who was decorating breakfast glasses with elaborate napkin origami, and whispered, “planning committee tonight? You guys aren’t on your date are you?”

Zayn giggled. Actually giggled.

Louis rolled his eyes.

“No, that’s a couple of days away. But Li won’t be done on the bar till late, there’s a family who really like their drink floating about this week he can never get rid of.”

“Funny how you slip into the role of long term wifey right off the bat, Malik,” Lou found himself quipping with a wry smile.

Zayn blushed, realizing his statement revealed how much attention he had been paying to Liam all along.

“Anyway – that’s fine. I’m sure between us we’ll fill him in on anything he misses. But if we don’t get going on this we’ll be stuck in this disaster-hole forever!”
“Right you are,” Zayn sighed, “I’ll spread the word.”

And with that Louis nodded, and went off to pick up and distribute the cereal spoons.

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In the end Louis had insisted on going right to the edge of the village main street and hiding out in the somewhat pricier establishment of the Dorfstadl.

This was because it was by far the largest bar around, meaning they were least likely to be over heard. This was compounded by the fact they almost always had live music performs of some sort, and rowdy holidaying families.

The group made a bee-line for one of the largest tables around in the back corner by the Nail Game, set against large floor to ceiling windows offering a navy backdrop of afterhours alpine scenery.

“Okay, now that we’ve got the drinks in – shall we get down to business?” he felt like he was chairing a business meeting.

How absurd.

“Well while you lot were off partying in the Big City,” Nick began, seriously, “it was all go back here.”

“Simon spent the night in the mystery room up on the third floor,” Cher explained, lacing her fingers together on the wooden table-top.

“We know because he came out right as I was heading downstairs in the morning,” Greg went on, “I bumped into him on the landing – he looked a bit shocked to see me, but covered it up saying something generic about the importance of an early start.”

“He had a big manila folder under his arm too, don’t forget that part,” Cher added, chewing her lip.

“Gawd,” muttered Louis.

“And before anyone asks the obvious,” Josh interjected, one hand already lifting his beer toward his face, “I already looked inside it.”

Sophia, Perrie and Nick seemed to remain non-plussed, suggesting that they already knew this part.

Harry, meanwhile, exclaimed ‘holy shit!’ quite loudly; while Louis started in his chair, Zayn choked on his rum and Nick gasped.

“Well clearly somebody was going to have to find out what was in there at some point. I just got it over with when I saw him nip next outside to deal with some delivery men for twenty minutes.”

Josh shrugged.

“But how did you know he would take twenty minutes?” asked Harry, gobsmacked.

“I didn’t.”
“Jesus, mate,” muttered Zayn, still coughing slightly and patting his chest.

“Bloody hell, Josh!” cried Louis, spilling some of the white wine he had selected for a change as he put down his glass, “let’s not get reckless when we’re so close to the end, shall we?!”

Tine “Says you, tramping off into the forest and fannying about with old mystical wells,” answered his daring friend, rolling his eyes, “I knew fine it needed doing and I saw an opportunity. There’s also such a thing as over thinking things, Tommo.”

Louis shrugged with one shoulder, but carried on frowning.

“Anyway! There was a scaled down map of the local area, some black and white photocopied pictures of a cottage and a family in old fashioned clothing, and some writing in Latin.”

“Latin?” asked Nick, blankly.

Before anyone could go on, Josh reached into his back pocket and took out his phone.

“Just go through my pictures. I photographed the lot, I couldn’t exactly take it away with me.”

“Josh Devine – you utter fucking genius! Gimme that!” shouted Louis.

As quick as he could, Lou pulled up the pictures in question on the iPhone. The map was merely a scaled down version of the larger one tacked to the study wall, revealing nothing they didn’t already know.

The family shots, of which there were four, seemed to be different generations in the same place; judging by the resemblances but changing garmentry.

Finally he landed on the Latin.

Harry, who was squinting over his shoulder carefully, suddenly startled him with a top volume ‘ah-HA!’ – accentuated by his slapping his hand down on the table triumphantly.

“Hazza, what the hell are you doing?” asked Zayn lazily from over his glass.

“It isn’t all in Latin.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Louis’ dry voice rolled over the top of his wine glass, “and I suppose you’re going to tell us what it says in Deutsch?”

Harry grunted slightly before answering with, “well that is what we’re here for, is it not? Jesus, I’m just trying to bloody help.”

There was a tense moment where Zayn and Niall made wide-eyes at one another across the bench, Perrie cleared her throat awkwardly, and everyone else kept their eyes down.


A still lightly frowning Harry plucked Josh’s phone from Lou’s hand and squinted at his properly.

Everyone else held their breath. Louis took a large gulp of wine because he felt awkward after his exchange with Hazza.

“its notes,” Harry finally went on, “pertaining to the photographed people. They’re all family members, and in each picture there seems to be one singled out Heir Apparent whose job it was to
put to rights what went on here.”

“So what’s been stopping them? If it’s come down to Simon, obviously everyone that came before
him failed – right?” quizzed Nick.

“Right…” muttered Louis, in unusual agreement with their manager.

“I think…” Harry mused, cocking his head to one side, “… I think this is explaining what each
generation did wrong. Don’t forget – world and local events would have an impact on things.”

“Like getting ran out of the region to begin with?” Sophia offered.

Harry nodded vigorously, “to start with. Though they stayed on the continent at first… the plague
would appear! Transport would have been sparse and incredibly time consuming in the period, too.”

“Not to mention if you weren’t rich enough for a horse,” Niall added.

“True. They would have gone quite far at first, if I’m not mistaken, to outstrip the reputation that
would have preceded them in Tyrol. That would have made it probably impossible for the first
generation, anyway. Then the black death comes and forces them to keep moving to avoid it, or at
least avoid getting caught out for not getting it by supernatural means. Now they’re even further
away – eventually in England far-away,” Harry carried on, eyes shining, “and even as they settle in
their new home and try to plan the Great War comes; then the Second. It seems Simon’s grandfather
tried in 1915 but got caught and accused with Desertion. He was shot…. His uncle tried again in
1945 but was ultimately thwarted. This is him analyzing their actions, I suppose.”

Ultimately, the meeting did not clear up more than it muddied.

It was still simply unclear when Simon intended to Do Anything specific they could take action
against.

No-one in the village wanted to know anything about any of it, and it was getting tiring (not to
mention boring) having to worry about it all of the time.

The rest of the night in Dorfstadl mostly involved bickering.

Nick wanted them to leave it alone and stick it out until the season ended. It seemed like Cher and
Greg wouldn’t be totally adverse to this idea either.

Josh, Pez and Soph seemed keen to put a stop to what was going on, but increasingly impatient to do
so.

Louis himself pointed out that leaving it alone could cause no end of untold damage in the future – it
was in their power to stop somebody Evil doing something unwelcome. He felt they had a duty not
to turn their backs on it.

A feeling, somehow, that was shared between Liam, Harry, Niall and Zayn (again, in varying
degrees).

This left them waiting for Simon to slip up, watching him like a hawk, and feeling grumpy.

Luckily this did not last long.
Exactly three days after the aforementioned gathering of drinks, the shit hit the fan in every sense but a literal one.

Simon, who was never the most amenable of chaps, had become withdrawn and distant – shockingly too preoccupied to pay as much attention to criticizing his employees as usual.

This led to Louis sending round a Chinese whisper that events were getting closer.

Everybody was on tenterhooks, and functioning on what was essentially Red Alert. Simon was under constant surveillance, from morning to night (when Cher and Greg would keep their ears peeled on the strange study room he had forged next door to them). It was clear he was steeling himself up for something from his distracted and irritable demeanor.

Frankly much more suspense would have killed Louis. He found his own ability to focus slipping, and tasks that should have taken five minutes taking fifteen. Washing bathrooms had become a bloody battle of never-ending proportions (much like that book staring Valcor and the utterly terrifying wolf who aided the Nothing).

On the other hand, it had meant nothing untoward had come back up in conversation with Harry and him.

Much to the frustrations of Liam and Niall, who had accosted him two nights after the Dorfstadl as they curled up under their blankets for A Bit of A Chat.

It was clearly a planned ambush, and he rather wished they hadn’t waited until he was cozily underneath the covers and excited about nodding off.

“So, er, we know things are a bit hectic right now… with everything,” Liam opened, “but is everything okay – you know, with you and Harry?”

He was standing in front of the window, poised awkwardly with his towel in one hand and his jeans in the other.

Niall, who was already in bed, sat up a bit on his elbow and nodded along, “things seem a bit tense again.”

“Guys!” wailed Lou, pushing himself up into a sitting position.

“I know what you’re going to say, Tommo,” Liam interrupted, as he turned to stuff his trousers into the dresser, “so I think we can dispense with the formalities of lying and get right to the point!”

He sounded frankly cheerful, which made Louis crosser.

“Everybody knows Harry has the hots for you,” Niall went on, “lets not insult ourselves by pretending otherwise. And it seems pretty clear that you feel differently toward him than everybody else in this god-forsaken village…”

Louis hurrumphed.

“So why the fuck are you not doing anything about it?”
Leave it to Niall to get to the bare bones without preamble.

Flushing, he found himself shaking his head; lost for words.

“Lou – how long have we known one another?” Liam asked, sitting down on the edge of the Austrian twin in his boxers.

“For ever.”

“Forever. Right. I know you better than you know yourself half the time. And trust me when I say, you’re doing that weird self destructive behavior thing from year nine again.”

“I am not! Liam!”

The taller boy chuckled, and turned around to the confused Irishman in the bed behind them.

“When we were thirteen Louis had this wild crush on a guy in the year above who had recently came out. He was a bit weird, but he obviously quite liked Lou too because they worked on a school play together and hit it off. Only because Louis couldn’t possibly imagine this nice, if eccentric, slightly older guy, actually fancying him he started treating him like total shit as the year went on – until Adam decided he was actually a dick, and stopped talking to us.”

Niall had an all too familiar ‘well that sounds about right’ sort of expression on his face that was most unwelcome.

“Why are you bringing this up, Li?” he grumpily inquired.

“Isn’t it obvious?” asked Niall, raising his eyebrows.

“No, actually.” Said Louis stubbornly.

“You do know, actually, but I’ll spell it out all the same. This is exactly the same thing. You like-like Hazza, and he very clearly like-likes you too. But you’re too busy worrying about everything that could go wrong, and telling yourself he probably doesn’t like you very much anyway so it’s better to be a total shit to him. Actually, that if you did date him he would wind up flaking out and breaking up with you – so why not punish him for that before he even does it?? Self preservation, something I learned at the hands of the master…”

Here Liam gestured towards Louis with flourish, before yanking his own covers back and diving in.

“All we’re saying,” announced the Insightful Irishman, “is that maybe all the stuff you’re worried about won’t happen because Harry really likes you that much. Stop fucking it up.”

“Jeez, thanks for the fucking therapy session guys…”

And with that out went the light, and heads down onto pillows.

However, the comparison and the point had not been lost on Louis. Even though he was up horribly early, he couldn’t get his friends advice out of his head.

What if things could work out, and be really great, with Harry; instead of awful and heartbreaking? Was that worth taking a chance on?

“Stop thinking and go to sleep!” said Liam loudly ten minutes later, causing Louis to laugh out loud and mutter, “goodnight Limo,” just audibly enough for his best mate to catch.
So it was with indecision and Potential Optimism running through his head, that Louis realised their Moment Zero had occurred on the Thursday evening.

Simon had appeared his most distracted yet all day, forgetting to turn up to his morning shift; dropping a glass of coffee and smashing a cup in the bar area; as well as accidentally knocking Evil Dan the Chef into the cooker and burning his right hand.

It was a bit of a shit-show, and the group correctly began to conclude something was going to happen that night.

Luckily he was forced to work the same shift patterns as everybody else, and couldn’t leave the restaurant area until 11pm after service ended. Thankfully there seemed to be little chance of his slipping the net, as it were.

Convening in the kitchen during service, it was agreed they would all go back to their rooms and get ready into their snow-gear (presuming Simon would lead them back into the forest). They would then follow their manager, and somehow stop him for conducting weird dark magic and summoning the evil spirit of his dead relative (easy, right?)

It began smoothly. The shift ended, and the clear up was the most efficient anybody had yet managed. Simon barely noticed, and excused himself fairly quickly when it was clear the breakfast set up was mostly done. He didn’t have his customary drink in the bar, but instead dashed off up to his (not so secret room) on the third floor.

“Right, guys, this is it!” Louis hissed, spinning on his heel at the table he was popping breakfast spoons on.

Perrie, Sophia, and Zayn all stiffened at their own tasks and turned to face him.

It would be a lie not to note here how, even in the midst of the danger, Louis still relished being in the heart of it all.

“But I’ve still got two tables of napkins to do!” announced Zayn, lamely.

“Well, throw them down and get on with it Malik!” cried their Fearless Leader with relish, “the pieces are finally moving! We have to keep up!”

The following moments involved a lot of loud clattering, and admittedly the guests sitting at these tables in the morning might be a tad less impressed than usual with their set-up, but heyho!

Five minutes later they were tearing through the kitchens, where Louis paused to tell Cher and Greg to get the hell up the stairs now and message them when Simon was coming down.

“Jesus, is this really happening?” Josh was muttering.

“If it isn’t this is the most fucked up dream I’ve ever had,” Harry asserted. He was emptying out his mop-bucket at the back of the room, not that Louis was looking or anything.

“Devine, stop philosophizing and come and get ready!” Louis eventually cried, grabbing his chum’s elbow and yanking him along behind him and into their flat to general amusement.
“Do you think I need goggles?”

“Of course you need fucking goggles. How are you going to see in the snow without sodding goggles?”

“What about board boots?”

“Snow boots, you idiot! How on earth are you going to walk in snowboarding boots? Up hills?”

“Mountains!”

“Ahh, I think you’ll find they’re alps!”

“What sort of weapons is everyone taking?!”

“What?”

The flat was a hotbed of activity, as the group scurried around as hastily as possible yanking on thermal base-layers; ski socks; long sleeved t-shirts, snow jackets; hats; goggles and gloves.

Niall, who was in the slender hallway connecting all their bedrooms to pull his coat on, had shouted the last question as if he wondered what they wanted from the shops.

Perrie had popped into the doorway of the big room at the end, and was meeting his gaze with utter incredulity.

“Pez, we’re going up a hill in the dark to attack an angry avenging wizard. Why the hell would we not take weapons with us?”

She goldfish-ed at him a second with a confused expression, before Sophia popped up by her side.

“He has a point, Perrie. Even in Disney the heroes always have something to defend themselves with!”

“Louis – what exactly are you planning on having us do?”

Louis bounded out of his own bedroom frowning, as he was struggling to sort his scarf around all of the collars of the layers he had on, “what?”

“Are we going to kill Simon tonight – is that what your big plan is?”

“Holy shit, Perrie! No. We’ll just incapacitate him. Weapons are purely defensive only.”

He looked scandalized.

“Well you have been a bit manic about this. For a second there I thought we were going out to commit murder.”

She seemed relieved.

“Anything that can be used to knock someone out or generally incapacitate, guys,” Louis shouted, “okay? Things easy to carry, and difficult to wrestle away from us. Shit! That’s my phone – fuck, it’s okay it’s not them. Just my mum. Sorry.”

He glanced sheepishly around the tide of pale faces that had materialized in all the doorways at his accidental announcement.
However, another ten minutes later and Cher actually did text notice of Simon’s departure, in full ski gear, down the stairs.

“This is it guys… the game is afoot!”

“Fan of Sherlock?” whispered Zayn, with a quirked eyebrow, just as Niall asked, “how long have you been waiting to say that?”

“So sue me…” muttered Louis back, “the point is all stations are go!”

He found his gaze lingering last on Harry, who he noted was standing quite far away from him and tucked into Zayn’s side.

He wondered if Harry was upset about something, and confiding in his roommate about it. The thought pissed him off, even as he acknowledged that it had no right to, so he turned around and snuck up behind the door to leading to the hall way and pressed his ear up against it.

At first all he could hear was his heart hammering in his chest. He tried to persuade himself there was no reason to feel scared, that they were as well prepared for this bizarre activity as ever they could be; but his vital organs were not to be convinced.

And why was Harry keeping his distance?

That was very frustrating indeed. Although it was precisely what he wanted him to do in the first place.

A second later and the familiar sound of somebody hurrying down the stairs came through the door.

“That’s him…” Liam breathed.

“Wait for it…” Niall added.

“That’s the door- come on!” Louis groaned.

With that he yanked open the door, and bounded forward as enthusiastically as he could muster.

Naturally he was in the lead, since he had encouraged the whole thing along. Tucked into his right hand was the heaviest torch he could find (multi-purpose), and in the large pocket on his right leg by the knee he had tucked the Swiss army knife he had picked up on a camping holiday to France with Scouts when he was younger.

Right behind him was Josh, possibly the next most gung-ho of all our adventurers. His face was entirely hidden by a balaclava, which made him look quite scary given his bulky frame, and he was holding a pair of kitchen scissors (a precaution in case he was unable to punch his way out of trouble) in his left hand.

Niall was next, holding a hammer he had liberated from the DIY kit, followed by Liam (who had convinced Nick’s boyfriend to sneak in and cover his bar shift) holding hands with Mr Malik and making visible heart eyes at him through his snow goggles. Liam was also sporting his Swiss army knife (having procured it on the same Scouting trip as Louis all those years ago), Zayn some lighter fluid and his zippo to ignite it with. Behind them Perrie and Sophia were close together, one with a carving fork the other holding a rolling-pin. Bringing up the rear was Harry and Nick, much to Louis’ chagrin, and he had no idea what they had brought to defend themselves.

He had planned to ask Harry at least, feeling a high level of distress at the thought of his being left
defenseless, but the fact Harry was so wrapped up in Nick annoyed him beyond measure and good reason – so he swallowed his words and forced himself to forget about it for the time being.

**He’s headed left, up the village toward the road to the dam C/Gx** – read the most recent text from Cher and Greg, who were watching out from their bedroom balcony.

**On it. Thanx guyz! Wish us luck… X**

Although it may seem like they were getting an easy deal, it was clear someone had to stay behind. All sorts of things could go wrong, and having a couple of hands out of the thick of it could be an invaluable aid as the night progressed.

Not least because they now also had the highly unpleasant task of going to town on Simon’s rooms – photographing, confiscating and accumulating evidence of wrong doing to show to any authorities that got called in.

“Cher says we have to go left…” he whispered, silently locking his screen again and shoving it back in his pocket.

Nine pairs of eyes turned to follow the gently sloping road up into the darkness.

“Well, the road’s not gonna get any shorter looking at it lads!” Niall eventually barked, “shall we?”

And with that our valiant group began their unpleasant nightly trudge.

***

Since Simon was leaving footprints it was easy enough to know where to follow, and they quickly fell into a comfortable pace and hushed whispers.

“I notice you are here, and Harry is walking behind us with Nick,” Liam was muttering.

“Yes, I have got eyes thank you very much,” said Louis.

“I think after tonight, and all this is over and done with, you need to pull yourself together,” Liam advised.

“Says the happily loved up bastard?” snapped Lou back, “who spent half the season pining over somebody who blatantly want to snog his face off right back??”

The flippant use of the L word had his companions giggling, a byproduct that was aggravating in the extreme.

“Oh get the fuck over yourself, Tommo!” Zayn laughed, “nobody’s buying the heart of stone act, aside perhaps poor old Harry – who doesn’t know if he’s coming or going with regards to you.”

“You don’t get it, do you?”

Not for the first time he raised his eyes heavenwards and wondered how the hell people seemed to have such a hard time understanding him.

“It’s really quite simple,” he went on a trifle morosely, “Harry is going to piss off to Australia after
this. In case you hadn’t noticed, with few exceptions, he couldn’t be going any further!”

Zayn scrunched his mouth up at this, which gave Louis some hope he was following.

“He is also super hot, and weirdly funny, and adorable, and full of random knowledge that makes everyone want to talk to him all the time… there’s no way he’s going backpacking and not making half the people he meets fall in love with him! Meanwhile, his messages to me get less and less frequent and eventually one day there’s nothing - and after some horrible pining and lying to myself I finally see that he’s “in a relationship” on Facebook with someone impossibly handsome and successful and tanned.”

Zayn looked thoughtful, “Okay. I do kinda get it …”

Liam, however, looked utterly confused.

“Louis – why on earth would you not be in Oz with him?”

Louis, heartily flabbergasted at the notion of throwing himself at Harry like a desperate youngster, actually stopped walking for a moment and tripped up.

“Everything okay up front there?” called out Nick from the rear.

“Yes! Someone’s just got 2 left feet!” Zayn shouted back, grinning.

“Hush! Simon’ll hear us!” scolded Niall, who was showcasing an unexpected mothering streak.

“Go with him? ASK Harry if I can follow him to the southern hemisphere like a pathetic loser with no life?? Liam, I cannot honestly believe you would even suggest that. Do you not know me at all?”

“Are you genuinely this oblivious?”

“Aren’t we going interrailing?” said Louis, instead, sharply.

At this Zayn had the good nature to look awkward – while Liam seemed to squirm a little (well, the small bit of him visible through all the snow gear did anyway).

“Um, I’ve sort of been waiting most of the season for you to tell me you were going to go away with Haz…” he mumbled, “it just didn’t occur to me you wouldn’t get your shit together- and obviously once you were an item it would be totally natural to go to Australia with him. Erm. So, I asked Zayn to come with me instead. Ahem…” he trailed off at this point, looking mortified.

Louis scowled as hard as could be into the small snowflakes flying into his face. Unfortunately neither Liam, nor Zayn, could see him because most of his face was hidden right then behind Sloggi goggles and a slouchy beanie hat.

Great. Typical, really.

Here they were, supposed to be off having best friend adventures together for a year, and within the first few months Liam had announced a new sexual preference and bagged himself a serious relationship with one of the most handsome men any of them had ever seen. He was now also planning romantic summer trips with said man, leaving Louis to contemplate both if following Liam on his gap year had been such a wise idea after all, and how on earth he seemed to be more successful with men than him after considerably less time out there.

Although that being said, the danger of Liam running out on him for a hot man had never really been one of his mother’s warnings…
“Oh for fucks sake Liam!” he sighed, out loud.

“Fuck, I’m so sorry!” Zayn interjected, “I really thought you would be going to Australia too. I mean, Harry’s talked to me about how amazing it would be if you were there with him. I just assumed he had already asked you.”

“Wait – what?”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“No, not that bit! He talked to you about us being in Oz together? For real?”

“why would I make that up?” asked Zayn, haughtily.

“why the fuck would you not tell me that?!”

“Because he said he was going to himself!”

Liam’s head was swiveling between his boyfriend and his best mate at some speed, but what began as a concerned frown ended as a wide smile.

“Louis you idiot – you’ve done a pretty good job of fucking everything up, but I think there’s still some hope of Harry not totally rejecting you… IF we live to see the morning again!”

“There’s a lot of reasons to want to be alive to see dawn, Liam, but I suppose sorting things out with Styles back there might be one of them… he really said he imagined my going with him?”

Zayn rolled his eyes, “Yes you twat.”

“That doesn’t mean he wouldn’t get sick of me as soon as somebody better came along. I know what these hostels are like – full of fascinating people with really rich lives.”

“It amazes me how somebody so self-confident can be riddled with so much self doubt,” announced Zayn solemnly – causing Liam to snort a little.

The conversation was cut short here, however, as it seemed the foot prints had taken a turning off of the path and into the forest.

The nine seasonaires stood huddled together, eyes darting to the gap in the trees Simon must have disappeared into, and the empty path up ahead.

There were gigantic mountains on either side of them, still covered in a deep powdering of snow, and each reflecting the moonlight back down upon them.

The conifer branches were heavy with thick dustings of the white stuff, and the still air was occasionally broken (now that they had stopped chattering) by the soft ‘thump’ of it occasionally falling off.

“Once more into the breach?” Zayn muttered, eyeing up the nearest gap in the trees with resigned expectation.

“Quite. Guys, follow me.”

With that, Louis thrust himself forward and hoped for the best.
No-one was chattering now. The dark seemed to oppress inwards for either side, and the dense pairings of the conifers seemed to muffle sound of wind or animal.

Things were getting more dangerous, because new snow would struggle to reach the forest floor here. Their footprints would not be so well hidden, and they would not be able to hide at a moments notice.

All this was weighing heavily on Louis’ mind as they walked for a full quarter of an hour deeper under the branches.

Eventually they came to the edge of the clearing, visible at first from quite a distance; and also notable due to the amount of noise suddenly coming from it.

“What in the actual fuck is this?” Josh announced, sounding entirely confused.

A peculiar, bubbling sort of noise was ebbing their way like eddies in a river of sound. There was also a sort of crackling, and what sounded to Louis like a noise that was a trifle like some monks he once caught ummm-ing and aaahh-ing on a Cadfel special when watching television with his Grandma on a Saturday afternoon.

“And do we have a plan yet?” asked Nick, from the back.

Without announcement the 9 came to an unmentioned stand-still, and turned in on themselves as a circle.

Nick was pale, for some unexplained reason he hadn’t bothered with a scarf or a balaclava, and was eying him up expectantly.

Harry was, he noted, still by his side – looking equally distant and potentially grumpy. For fuck’s sake.

“Okay, we need to-”

But he was cut off by his complete distraction at Niall’s eyes morphing into dinner plates & fixating on a point somewhere behind him.

“Okay, Irish, I’m going to have to ask you to tell me why your face has gone like that,” he went on, “because you’re scaring me.”

Niall’s mouth opened, moved, and closed again with a snap.

Louis felt an intense desire never to turn around and see what had caused that.

“It’s Dirndl Lady,” Zayn’s soft voice suddenly exclaimed, “he’s seeing the woman from the basement.”

“Oh. Jolly good, then. That’s quite alright…!” rambled Louis in terror.

Forcing himself against the desire to run for the hills (or village, in this case) he slowly turned on his heels and caught sight of a blonde woman in pleats moving ethereally between the foliage some
distance away from themselves.

“She’s probably had the same idea as us, to be fair,” Liam said.

“So, do we just ignore her and carry on?” asked Perrie, frowning.

“Guys! She’s a fucking ghost! Her best attempt at thwarting Simon was locking Leemo and Zaynie in the fucking basement over night! We’re still the ones in charge here.”

“I don’t know about that…” suggested Harry, pointing back to the side – where the translucent woman was now coming out into the clearing.

“Oh bloody hell,” muttered Louis, “let’s get closer and see what she does.”

On closer inspection it was clear that the bubbling noise had been coming out of the well. It was frothing and squeaking something terrible the closer they got, emitting greenish vapors that smelt strongly of burnt hair and cheese that’s been left out in the sunshine.

Everyone felt their stomachs heave a little.

On the stone edge of the entrance to the well a large tome was resting, its thick and detailed pages turned open near the centre. Simon was standing over it, his snow clothes discarded in a pile by his feet: he was now stood in a tattered, dated looking white shirt and a decrepit looking pair of leathery old lederhosen.

His hair, which had not been cut since season began, was ruffling lightly in the faint breeze, his eyes were un-naturally black and gazing fixedly down at the writing in the book.

His mouth was moving, and after a second Louis began to realise the funny chanting wasn’t just in his head (a fitting soundtrack, perhaps, to a scene that was playing out much like something in a dodgy Sunday afternoon movie on channel 5) – it was Simon, reading out a spell and waving his arms about mysteriously.

He meant business, but what did the Dirndl woman mean to do?

“It has been a long time, my friend, since someone has forced me to come here.”

Well, that’s an odd introduction... pondered Louis, in his head, surely something more like ‘ahaha you villain’ would be more appropriate? Or just shove him in??

Simon, who had been in the midst of some sort of complicated arm movement, jumped slightly and dropped something.

“You!” he exclaimed, as if reading from a well versed script.

“Es ist ich,” conceded the ghost-lady, “wie Gehts?”

“I don’t have time for this!” bellowed Simon, and though his back was to them Louis felt quite sure his face would have been most alarming.

He rolled his eyes heavenward and prayed to the God he didn’t really believe in that they would all make it out of this alive, before floating his attention back to the drama at hand.

“Warum bist Sie hier?”
The figure of the woman was now fully in the clearing, some couple of metres away from the well.

“Wissen Sie!”

“Dein Verwandter?”

“Ja!” roared Simon, abandoning his chanting and turning to wholly give his attention to the first unwanted newcomer, “für meinen ERMORDETEN Ahnen!” he balled one hand up in a fist, and waved a pointing hand in the vague direction to his right, “weißt du, was hier wah? MACHST DU?! Ihre Hütte!”

A perplexed air hovered over our 9 adventuring seasonaires, until Harry shuffled his feet a moment and said in the lowest voice he had used yet, “Er – they’re talking about what he’s doing here,” he explained, “she asked why he’d come and he started banging on about the witch and how her cottage used to be over there.”

“Right…” said Niall, which really spoke for them all.

“Ich muss die Dinge richtig machen.”

“He wants to put things right…” went on Hazza, in a strangled sort of tone.

“Great, he thinks he’s doing something really noble…” muttered Josh, with an audible eye-roll, “can we just get this fucking over with? I didn’t come up here to hear his life story!”

“Just hold on, will you?” Louis finally said, turned around with a scowl, “we can’t just barge in there at the wrong moment! What the hell do you suppose we should do? He isn’t even doing anything right now!”

“Can’t we just rush over and push him down the well?” asked Sophia brightly, “we can leave him paddling in the water at the bottom until the police can come.”

“And he tells them he didn’t do anything and we just shoved our manager into a well in the middle of nowhere?” countered Nick, groaning, “we’ll all be sent to prison!”

“Nick has a point…”

“Thanks for that Hazza,” snarked Louis, “he does, at that.”

Behind them, nobody was pausing.

Simon had turned back to his book and resumed his creepy medieval chanting. His arm waving was more industrious than ever.

Well, I suppose this is our queue. Ghosts, about as useful as a scolding teacher, went Mr. Tomlinson’s internal monologue.

Just as he had began to turn back around to put forward a vote on the next-best course of action, he was faced with a sight so unexpected that he felt the wind had been kicked out of him.

The ghost woman had come further into the clearing while Simon was no longer paying attention to her, but she was morphing into something far less appealing looking than a medieval Germanic person.

It was somehow as if time was speeding up around her, causing whatever form she was taking to rapidly age and decay. Before their bulging eyes literal decades flew past – causing hair to grey and
thin, skin to sallow and sag, eyes to hood and lips to pinch. The woman he had moments previously thought rather pretty had morphed into someone’s nan-on-crack, and the sight was not an attractive one.

As she walked she took each braid and slowly unpleated it, leaving a wild grey frizz bushing out around her head like a mangled halo. Even her clothes had been affected, rotting and tearing away to resemble something obscene found in up-turned grave holes.

“Mmmphnffff…” said Niall, whose hand jumped out to snap around Louis’ wrist like a cuff.

“Oooookaaaaay…” said Liam, “wasn’t expecting that.”

His brevity seemed to break the atmosphere a little, and with a little giggle Louis found himself able to concentrate once again on the task at hand: sorting Simon out & going home!

“This isn’t right. There have been none before you because this was never meant to be,” warned the Creepy-Hag.

Simon flinched, the only sign he had looked away from the well (his back was still to them), but carried on with his leather bound book all the same.

“If you do this, you will open the gate to somewhere that should never be!”

“How is he not concerned about these warnings?” sighed Sophia, shaking her head slowly.

“I’ll see you there before long anyway,” Simon’s deep voice vowed, head snapping fully to the side now.

“I cannot allow you to raise from that well, that which has been put into the earth or she who is still paying for her sins.”

“Sins? SINS?!” howled Simon furiously, “she was HELPING people! Primitive religious minds, never UNDERSTANDING anything! Just looking at their books, and saying ‘oh this makes me uncomfortable- I suppose this must make it wrong’,” he was babbling quickly, hands shaking, moving toward the ghost and slightly away from the well.

Louis, like everyone else in the circle bar one, found his eyes following the movement in an almost trance.

“She broke the law.”

“And so will I, if I have to, to set a moral right.”

Louis found himself feeling distinctly uncomfortable at these notions of understanding and persecution.

Had he himself not came across religious individuals keen to tell him off for lifestyle choices? What a moment to come to a crisis, he lamented – but here Simon’s ancestor was actually (probably) helping people in her own way with unwanted pregnancies, or to fight off the cold. That was actually fairly decent. He was fighting the same arguments just to have sex with people and hold hands in public, a worthy fight if slightly more selfish in nature… jesus – was this old woman’s soul in Hell?? Were they stopping Simon doing the perfectly reasonable thing of moving his ancestors last remaining bits from a highly unpleasant place they should never have been??

Was this the time to be having such fucking mental thoughts??
He was saved – however – from having to go any further down that path by the unfortunate realization that the tome was gone, and that Josh was missing from the circle. Bollocks.
Too Good at Goodbyes.

Chapter Summary

in which there are evil Cowels, magical wells, ancient tomes, nine heroes, one concussion, two magical comas, some evocative latin, and an ancient hag.

Chapter Notes

so. near. the. eeeeend! :*(

ZAYN.

Zayn, like Louis, was staring transfixed at the exchange going down between the ghost-hag-person & the evil hotel manager. He expected every one of them was doing the same thing, so he nearly jumped a mile when he realised someone was tugging the side of his ski-jacket.

“Zee? Zee!”

“Mfft! What are you doing?” hissed Zayn, annoyed at being startled.

“Look,” breathed Perrie, the owner of the fingers pulling at his coat, before nodding off to the right.

Oh dear lord, was Zayn’s immediate response.

As I said at the end of the previous chapter, all but one of our nine were transfixed with this bizarre exchange.

All except Josh: who had been getting ever more restless to just DO something. And so, at first opportunity, had crept off and grabbed Simon’s giant spell-book. He was now attempting to creep back toward the safety of some ferns and general foliage at the edge of the forest. If Simon turned around now, surely the game would be up?

“Oh my god, Louis! Josh!” Zayn exclaimed, urgently tugging on his friend’s elbow.

Louis turned around with a disgruntled expression, only to catch sight of their colleague and groan just loudly enough to be audible. “What are we going to do?” asked Zayn.

Louis shrugged back, a worried look settling on his features as the realization rippled through the rest of their group.

“Where’s my book!” suddenly bellowed from within the clearing, causing eight heads to swivel toward Mr. Devine with deep frowns.

Just as Zayn was sure they were out of options, Louis stood up and strode forwards.
“Lou?!” wailed Harry, from somewhere behind him to the right.

“I think its about time we had a little talk, don’t you, Simon?” Louis was announcing imperiously, as he pushed snow covered ferns and foliage out of his way.

Liam, who he was standing closest to, groaned and clapped his hand over his face.

“We can’t leave him out there like that on his own!” cried Perrie, panicking. “what are we going to do?” at that second Josh finally made it back to their circle, so she added fiercely, “what the fuck were you playing at Devine?!”

He had the decency to look a little abashed, before stating that he saw an opportunity and decided to wing it.

“Well now look what’s happened,” thundered Harry in an murderous undertone, “Louis’ out there all exposed and vulnerable, and we’re stuck in this bush without the remotest idea what to do. Which better change fucking immediately, because he’ll be counting on us to back him up.”

“Of course,” Liam agreed, “he’s bought us some time, that’s all. I suggest Josh keeps hold of that god-forsaken thing as punishment for being an impetuous dick. Don’t let Simon lay his hands on it for love nor money, got it?”

Josh nodded sheepishly.

“I guess we see how the conversation goes for now. Any sign of Lou coming to harm and some of us will jump out for him,” Li continued, “I guess the vague plan is shove Simon down the well if we have to. Hopefully that bloody ghost woman will have some trick up her sleeve if we can just distract Cowell long enough.”

“And if things are looking really bleak, open that book,” Harry solemnly added, tapping the cover with his be-gloved-finger.

“What good will that do?” asked Nick, grumpily.

“You never know,” Liam said with a wry smile, “everybody ready? Protect Lou, shield the book from Cowell, and use the well if we have to. Lets go.”

Despite the fucked up situation they were in, Zayn couldn’t help but feel fondness toward Liam for taking charge in the absence of his friend. It was this he tried to concentrate on as they crawled closer to the edge of the forest, rather than the icy temperature meeting the chilling anticipation that was rattling around inside his chest.

“Tomlinson?!” Simon was incredulously announcing to no-one in particular, “what the hell are you doing here?!”

“You’ve spent all season shitting on us,” Louis was replying with faux light-heartedness, “so I think it’s about time the shoe was on the other foot. Don’t you think?”

Although he looked cool, by this point Zayn knew Louis well enough to detect the hint of a quiver in his voice and note the nervous set of his shoulders.

It felt horrible watching their friend out there alone, and in spite of his lack of desire to be involved with any paranormal goings on, he was dying to move out there to his mate’s side. He supposed this
was the ‘growing’ people had talked about on seasons – just, you know, it didn’t usually involve
standing up to evil sorcerers and ghosts.

“Give me my book back!” shouted Simon, apparently disinterested in how on earth one of his
employees had sprouted up as if from nowhere on the mountainside.

“No.”

“What did you say?”

“I said no.”

The grisly ghost had come to hover somewhat closer to Louis, so now it looked as if there were two
of them against one. Even if she was revolting looking, it warmed Zayn’s heart a trifle to see
someone up there with his mate.

As he was reflecting on this, and trying desperately to think of a way to be helpful when the time
came, he realised Harry and Josh were whispering feverishly behind him. Annoyingly they were just
out of earshot, and he wasn’t in a position to move.

“Liam,” he murmured, “do you have a more comprehensive plan than just well-shoving in that head
of yours?”

His boyfriend (he still imaged exclamation marks in his head every time he thought the word !!)
turned to look at him, goggles now pushed up a little on his forehead – giving him a full view of soft,
chocolate coloured eyes.

Liam squeezed his hand and tried to look positive, “I really think we just need to wing it, Zee.”

Zayn almost laughed – somehow, this was typical Them. Of course nobody had a clue what they
were doing.

Just at that moment, as he was staring lovingly into Liam’s eyes, he felt someone brushing past him,
unsteadying him on his feet and knocking him sideways slightly into Liam. It was Harry.

“Haz!” Sophia was exclaiming, at the same moment Perrie cried ‘no!’ and Nick wailed ‘Harry!’

“Oh, Simon, why how nice to see you here!” Harry was loudly shouting, “how are you doing?”

“Styles?”

By this point Simon was looking even more baffled, eyes darting between the two like a frustrated
animal.

“We know what happened to your ancestor. The European Witch-Hunts were a terrible time,” Harry
was going on, with a significant amount of arm gestures of his own, “and a lot of innocent people got
hurt. Of course,” here he paused a moment, “they weren’t always wrong. Were they?”

“What?” Simon still sounded distracted, probably looking around for his book Zayn realised. Which
was behind him, clasp tight in Josh Devine’s grip.

“Gretchen Kowall. I believe was more than a little old lady helping out girls who got ‘in trouble’
before they got married, or curing the common cold now and again.”

Zayn frowned, how on earth could Harry be knowing this?
“She was ahead of her time!” bawled Simon, spittle flying from his mouth, “a scientific genius!”

“She was playing with fire, and she can’t help you. I think, deep down, you know that to be true.”

*What the fuck is going on* was flashing over and over in Zayn’s mind like the neon lights of Leister Square. Looking around the remaining friends, he felt his confusion mirrored in their own faces. Sophia and Perrie was holding hands and looking pained. Liam’s face was almost unreadable, while Josh was holding the spell book so firmly his knuckles had gone white. Only Nick looked unsurprised, which in itself was also not a surprise.

“How would you know!!” roared Simon in response, abandoning all composure and adopting a thoroughly mad expression.

Bulging eyes, pallid sweaty skin; wringing his hands.

“I’ve been to the library. I’ve spoken with villagers. Gretchen was a bit of a pre-curser to Dr. Frankenstein – was she not? I mean, the idea had to come from somewhere. She was trying to reanimate the dead. *That* is why the villagers were scared of her. *That* was why they hung her.”

“Ah, those terribly religious times…” interjected Louis in a voice that sounded as if he was totally aware that this speech had been coming. Which Zayn was certain he had not been.

“She succeeded in extending LIFE! *Eternal life!* The end of disease and suffering and – and – and *needless goodbyes*!” Simon’s hands balled into fists at his sides.

“You miss your mum. Don’t you? But she wouldn’t have wanted this.”

“What the…” said Liam, under his breath.

Zayn racked his brains through all the chats they had had about Cowell and the weirdness until he became vaguely aware that the untimely death of Simon’s mother had been the catalyst for his starting all the trouble here.

“YOU LEAVE MY MUTTER OUT OF THIS!!!”

His face turned a livid shade of pink.

“I’m right and you know it. And if you raise Gretchen from the depths of Hell just to make her resurrect your mum – what the hell do you thinks going to happen next? Do you even think she’d do it?”

“We’ll live happily ever after!” he shouted, hoarsely, before charging forward.

“Shit!” cried Zayn, no longer caring to be quiet, springing out of his crouch at the exact same second as everyone else.

Well, perhaps not *everyone* else – because as he was trying to decide which direction to head in, a certain Irish someone darted past him in a blur, “Niall?!”

“Not today, buddy!” howled the Irishman, jumping in front of Harry before anyone was able to stop him. Being probably the fittest of the group he landed a rather firm punch to Simon’s jaw before jumping backwards again.

“OOOOW!” moaned Simon, clutching his face and swearing.

“Niall, what the fuck are you doing?” Louis was asking in a voice that was politely confused, and
entirely out of place for the occasion.

“What the fuck does it look like I’m doing, Tommo? Saving your shitting arses!”

“You’ll pay for that,” Simon villainously promised.

“We’ll see,” shrugged Niall, as Simon raised his right hand and shouted something weird in Latin. Niall dropped like a marionette whose strings had been cut, eliciting a gasp from everyone around.

“You see, I don’t need that book for everything.”

He was smirking.

Zayn felt a bit sick, and lurched forward slightly to grab a hold of a low hanging branch to steady himself.

As he did so Liam decided it was his turn, flanked by the girls, to come forward.

“You’ll pay for that, Cowell,” he was saying.

Oh for God’s sake, lamented Zayn in his head. Everyone was getting a bit gung-ho because of some highly predictable trash-talk from the enemy. But now more than half of them were out there trying to prove a point about honour without a single thought as to how to finish things off.

He turned around and tip-toed back toward Nick and Josh.

He was dimly aware of continued exchange back in the clearing, but he realised he couldn’t pay attention to it anymore. There was only fucking three of them left, and they had to make a plan right now as to how to end it.

“Right, this isn’t exactly how I envisioned this going,” he began, “but since everyone else has ran out there in a ridiculous dick-swinging contest it’s up to us to come up with a plan of some sorts.”

The others nodded.

Behind them blasting noises and swooshy noises and swearing noises alerted Zayn to the fact things were becoming increasingly confrontational. He prayed Liam could handle himself in the mêlée and pushed himself on with the task at hand.

“What are we going to do? I wasn’t expecting to come here and have a bloody fist fight,” Nick was asking.

“And this books fucking heavy,” Josh moaned, “I can’t do anything useful carting it about.”

“Well… maybe you won’t have to?” said Zayn, thoughtfully.

He eyed the book up skeptically, “flip it open a sec,” he instructed, “at the index?”

The parchment was old, stained, brown and crackly. Thankfully it was still perfectly legible.

“What are we looking for?” whispered Nick, eyes scanning the pages in front of them.

Josh looked up expectantly, but Zayn was busy squinting down at the page trying to make sense of it. He was looking for a few choice words in Latin – and cried, “ah ha!” rather carelessly when he found them.
There it was. It wasn’t exactly what he had been looking for, because in reality he hadn’t known what he was looking for. He just knew certain words, and the implications behind finding them in the index of a magical instruction manual. To find several of them all bunched together like this was something of a relief, especially when he flicked his eyes over the German instruction underneath.

*Induzierte Katatonie.*

“Guys. *This* is the game changer.”

He announced, stabbing his finger next to the short series of unfamiliar words.

Josh looked confused, but Nick seemed to be catching on.

“Ah!” he was announcing, before looking down and muttering, “seven-hundred-and-seventy-seven…”

He then leant over Josh and started flicking through the pages as quickly as he could without tearing them.

“What’s going on?” asked Josh, with a trace of annoyance.

“Isn’t it obvious?” answered Nick softly.

Josh continued to look bewildered so Zayn added, “well we’re obviously not going to over-power Simon by standing around making bold proclamations, are we?”

Josh shook his head.

“So we’ll just have to fight fire with fire. That’s an incapacitating spell, and if we use it successfully against him it should shut him down completely and stop all this bollocks. ‘k?’”

Now looking considerably more excited, Josh nodded along.

“here we go!” Nick announced, folding open the pages on the incantation Zayn had indicated, “what now?”

“Lay it down so we can all see,” suggested Zee, waving at the grass with his left arm.

Across the top was the name of the spell – PROTECTORIS.

There followed three stanzas of script, followed by an illustrated paragraph depicting a series of arm movements.

“I suppose you have to do both at the same time…” said Nick, thoughtfully.

“AGHGHRGHHH!”

Three heads shot up, and directed their startled gaze back towards the clearing. So wrapped up in their discovery had they been, that they had almost forgot there was a fight of sorts already breaking out behind them.

The noise seemed to have come from Liam, who was lying on the ground like a discarded toy.

Louis, who was several paces away to Liam’s left, had turned in horror and screamed ‘no’ at the
exact same moment Sophia dropped to his side; left hand cupping the side of his face.

“Zayn?” asked Nick in a wavering voice, “I’m sure he’ll be alright…”

It was as if a giant clock had appeared in the corner of Zayn’s vision, counting down to the moment they would all be Royally Fucked.

The sight of Liam lying in the snow like that made his eyes swim, and his heart stutter. A strong desire to run forward and grab Liam came over him, largely shake-off-able by the knowledge he was by far not strong enough to lug his muscly boyfriend’s dead-weight all the way back to the hotel.

“This is it.”

He turned back to the other two. Nick was watching him intently. Josh was gazing at the incantation.

“are we ready?”

“Nope, but when has that stopped us this season?” responded Nick, cheerfully.

“Amen to that,” said Josh as he rolled his eyes, “lets do this.”

If Zayn didn’t know better, he would have suspected they were both a little smug at being part of the trio with an Actual Plan coming to (hopefully, with any luck anyway) Save the Day.

A tiny part of him felt the same.

“I suppose, if I’m going to read this, the most important thing you can do is keep Cowall away from me. He’ll try and take the book off me, whatever happens that can’t happen. Its game over if it’s back in his possession tonight.”

Nick and Josh nodded solemnly.

“We need to move round the clearing slightly,” went on Zayn, pointing a bit, “so we can come out by the well. I need to lean on the edge of it like he was, so I can wave my hands about.”

“We’ll flank you,” Nick promised, “come on.”

They crept as carefully as they could in the busy undergrowth, but frankly the drama with everyone had proceeded to such loud proportions by this point there was hardly any need.

Sophia appeared to be simply howling profanities and creative threats. Pezza seemed to be tending to Liam as best she could – which mostly seemed to involve having put him in the recovery position. Harry was throwing snowballs, while Louis tried to keep him talking / distracted.

“We wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t locked some of us in cupboards and basements and sent rabid beasts after us on New Years Eve! We’d have been minding our own business!”

The crazy apparition woman was still there as well, although to Zayn’s discomfort she seemed to be moving around to the area he was aiming towards. Well, you can’t have everything.

“Erm, hello,” he whispered – since she seemed to be waiting.

“I see you are wiser than I gave you credit for,” she murmured, “you will need to be quick before he can interject.”

“Yes, I know. Will it,” he paused here, and gulped a little, “… will it work?”
“It will work. If it is done right.”

“Comforting.” Sighed Nick.

“You must try. I will help you all I can.”

“Thanks…” Zayn mumbled, “good luck guys?”
They attempted an awkward three-way hug, before pushing forward and out of the trees.

***

The snow was still falling here, Zayn noticed. Not quickly, but in slow and steady fat dollops. He fervently hoped they wouldn’t melt the old pages.

*Right, well, no point hanging about here all day,* he thought wryly to himself, and quietly clearing his throat he began.

Distantly he registered the others taking notice. He sensed rather than initially saw Nick and Josh take up positions a metre or so in front of him on either side. Simon threw in his ten cents with an angry howl, so Zayn focused his eyes on the text in front of him and prayed as hard as he could that he wouldn’t fuck everything up with bad pronunciation.

Clearing his throat, he began to read aloud as well as he could, “Nunc somnum! S-s-semper somnum!” shit, his voice was shaking, “Non excitare! Quod non est medium subtrahatur!” the arm movements were… well, wiggly. He worried he was doing them wrong, but it was hardly the time for self-doubt since stopping was impossible.

“Keep going!” urged Josh.

Zayn dared a glance upwards.

Simon had a hold of Niall’s left arm, and was dragging him away from the others. He looked unconscious, and the hammer he had taken with him was collecting snowfall on the ground.

Louis had his left foot and was attempting to pull him back, but there was no denying Simon was a bigger guy who clearly had the advantage of also being a complete mad-man on his side. He had stuffed the heavy torch into his right pocket, where it hung uselessly as he struggled to keep a grip of their Irish comrade.

Harry was looking right at him with his jaw dropped; apparently frozen on the spot.

Perrie was still desperately trying to revive Liam, who was remained comatose on the floor. She looked like she might be crying. A small part of his brain warned him that it wouldn’t be a good idea to dwell on that for too long. Sophia was waving her giant rolling pin about and shouting ‘come on then you bastard’ into the ether.

Whatever had happened, it would be useless to deny things were starting to fall apart.

“Everything going alright back there, Zaynie?”

He was broken from his distraction by Nick’s concerned voice.
Zayn nodded.

“Just cause – y’know – I don’t really have a clue what we’re doing here. Might be good to wind things down and all!”

The absurdity of the conversation, and the tone Nick was determinedly sticking to, made him laugh.

A real laugh – loud, and forceful enough to cause his eyes to crinkle behind his goggles in that way Payno was so fond of.

“My book! You little shits! Give me the book or your Irish friend here will be spending the rest of his days down that hole here!”

“ZAYN!” shouted Harry at the top of his voice, with no apparent follow up. He supposed it was meant as an encouragement.

*Best get on with it then,* he flustered, eyes realigning on the parchment in front of him.

*Nunc somnum! [jiggly right hand over left hand movement] Somnum sepiternum! [swooshy moves] Somnum aeternam! [huge shoving affair with both arms]”

At this point the Wrestle for Niall had become a reality in front of him. Simon continued to pull the blonde in the direction of the horrible well, while Louis and Sophia did their best to pull him back by either foot.

Josh’s head was swiveling side-to-side, and before he could stop him (hell, he couldn’t break the spell to anyway) Josh had charged off into the mix.

“Why can’t you just FUCK OFF!” he roared, side-slamming into their manager with enough force to knock them all off their feet.

“Urgh…” Louis groaned at his head collided with the frozen ground.

Unfortunately this caused his jacket to flap, allowing the torch to bounce out of pocket and within reach of the enemy.

A slow motion montage seemed to be occurring in front of Zayn’s eyes in what in reality was only a matter of seconds.

Josh rolled away from Simon, and scrambled to get back onto his feet.

Perrie was trying to move Liam’s lax from out of harm’s way.

Simon’s arm shot out, white fingers snapping like vices around the neck of the torch, as Louis – already groaning from contact with the ground – rolled onto his front and tried to push himself back up.

Harry saw it before anyone else; the raised arm, and the deliberate contact it preceded.

There wasn’t time to fully process the mess that was unfolding, Zayn simply shouted the final line as loudly as his hoarse voice would allow him in the hopes of ending it all.

*SOMNUS-NOX-MORTEM-PERPETUUM!!*

while swinging his left arm up in a huge arch and stabbing forward, palm open, with his right, in the specific direction of Simon’s face.
In the same moment he was in time to watch Harry shove Louis with all his might, and take the blow from the torch himself. The expression on the Doncastrian boy’s face was a twisted horror that made Zayn’s stomach drop.

His right arm was vibrating violently, and he realised even if he had wanted to he would never have been able to lower it.

It took a second to realise Simon seemed to be frozen in place, eyes boring back into him like smoking coals of an incredibly pissed off Georgian fire-place.

“Requiem aeternum finis esto,” whispered the ghost, who was floating very close to Zayn’s left side now with her her right hand held up as if she was taking a pinch of sugar.

In fact, to add horror to an already quite alarming situation, he realised the specter now actually had her other hand on him. On his right shoulder to be precise. Would the day never stop getting weirder?

His whole upper body was beginning to vibrate, not painfully but not exactly comfortably either.

“Do not let go, do you understand?” whispered the same voice that had tried to help them all those many moons ago in the basement of the Hotel Elisabeth back down the hill-side.

Somehow he just knew that meant keep looking and keep the palm raised, and the minute he realised this the harder both of them began to be. His arm was aching, wobbling fiercely, and a strange sort of warm tingly feeling had begun to take over.

His eyes, for their part, were watering something alarming. In the heat of the moment he was terrified he was going blind, the reality of the fact being that he had actually finally hit the last wall of mental defenses and collapsed; bursting into perfectly normal tears.

The toasty feeling swelled, the creepy cold feeling on the opposite shoulder enhanced, and Simon swayed on the spot before dropping like a very rigid stone; complete with eyes rolling back into his head and some slight foaming of the mouth.

***

It was quite the scene.

The moment Simon dropped the Dirndl-Lady returned to her young appearance and immediately let go of Zayn’s left shoulder.

Zayn himself, unmoved by the great feat he had just accomplished, stumbled forward with surprising energy to be at Liam’s side.

“He’s alive Zee,” Perrie kept repeating, rubbing him on his back as he clasped one of Liam’s hands and found himself crouched over wracked with sobs. Liam was alive. He could feel his chest moving with shallow breaths. He might be okay.

Around them, everybody else seemed to be coming back to their senses as well.

Josh and Sophia had ran into each others arms and started making out enthusiastically.
Nick had darted straight toward Harry, who was sprawled on the deck like a gangly squished spider. Louis, still ashen faced, was on his other side – gentle fingers prodding through the familiar curly mop to assess the damage.

Niall had come too as if from a restless sleep, since the figure conducting the magic keeping him unconscious was now himself flat out on the deck to his side. He noted his leg at a peculiar angle, and close to Simon’s hand, and snatched it back as if burned. He took a second, sitting with his legs pulled up to his chest and his arms around them, to take in the sight around him with popping eyes.

“What’s going on?” his Gaelic tones cried out, urgently.

“Zayn – Zayn saved us…” Perrie choked out, her own voice wobbly terribly, “he found something in that giant book?”

“It’s a s-s-sleeping spell,” stuttered Zee, blushing intensely, “it’s knocked him out.”

“Indefinitely,” said an ethereal tone, reminding them that Dirndl Woman was still lurking at hand, “you – what you have accomplished here today. This is good,” she went on, “peace will last here.”

“And what about… him?” asked Niall, warily.

“He will sleep forever. We cannot risk waking someone so … volatile. The well is the best place for him.”

“Um…. Right. So, like, you want us to push him in the well?”

“The clearing is good enough. I will see to it that no one ever again can find this space. And I will embalm him with a spell to make him sleep until he dies. Quite naturally, some time from now.”

“Well that sounds great to me,” piped up Nick, “to be honest so long as we never hear of him again I don’t give a shit. What I do care about is my friend here,” he gestured to Harry’s limp form, “what do we do about him?”

“There is nothing magical about his ailment,” answered the specter.

“So?”

“Get out of his clearing NOW, or never leave it again. I must get to work, my time here is now but very short.”

Nick looked ready to argue, but Niall – scrambling to his feet, apparently unharmed by whatever sorcery had incapacitated him – interrupted.

“Nick – I think we just need to grab these two and get the hell out of here. If this space becomes anywhere like where I spent the last 20 minutes, you don’t want to stick around and get stuck.”

Zayn, Josh and Perrie hauled up Liam, while Niall, Louis and Sophia grabbed Harry.

The walk down was going to be something else.

“Does anybody actually remember where we came into this fucking forest??!!” shouted Zayn, head turning from side to side in frustration.

Why did all the trees and foliage look all the fecking same now??

“I will light your way. And thank you again, we will not forget you.”
“Less of the ‘we’ business, thank you very much!” muttered Sophia, as a dim light began to glow through the trees.

“Well, so long forever but thanks for everything!” bellowed Niall at the top of his voice, before leading his team of Hazza-Carriers toward it at some pace.

“Hey, wait for us!” protested Zayn, who tripped slightly as he started to follow.

“Farewell…” the ghostly voice drifted after them.

Nobody turned around to wave.

***

If you ever asked any of them to recount the long march back down the mountains, you probably wouldn’t get a straight answer.

But make it down they did.

Cher and Greg, holed up in great anxiety, greeted them with a kitchen full of steaming pots of tea & coffee and covered the counters with all the food they could find.

Cake, scones, cream and jam, crisps, chicken broth, Milka chocolate, red wine, cold meats, cheese and Austrian lager cluttered every available inch of space – in a the homeliest, and most inviting, attempt to revive our poor heroes as ever they could have imagined.

Certainly they needed the energy and the warming up after the ordeal they had just lived through!

“What’s wrong with those two?” Cher had whispered in Perrie’s ear, as the two comatose boys were rushed through to the flat fireman’s life style.

Zayn overheard before the door shut behind them.

“What’s the protocol here guys?” Niall was asking in a low voice, from a point in the hallway where (with both doors open) he could survey both patients.

Somehow he seemed to have adopted full parental-mode, and it came a naturally enough that nobody thought to question it.

“We need to get them into hot baths or showers… increase their core temperatures…” Josh answered, “I suppose one of them can go upstairs to Cher and Greg’s room and get popped in their bath. We’ll run the other one here. Let them soak for forty minutes or so, while the waters still hot, then bundle them into toasty pajamas and wrap them up in duvets in bed.”

“Okaaaay, but what about the injuries? Doesn’t that just deal with the cold?” Zayn interrupted, in a thin voice.
He didn’t want to be a dick, but he felt that warm soaks and soft beds didn’t put battered skulls and magical ailments to rights all by themselves.

“Well Harry has concussion,” Josh explained, matter of factly, “so he shouldn’t really be asleep at all. If we can wake him up, we need to keep him up afterwards. I’d suggest a mild painkiller, we don’t want to thin his blood too much before we know the damage, and some sweet tea. Then just taking it easy in bed with a film or something until we can get him to a doctor in the morning.”

“And Liam?” asked Zayn, because so far he still didn’t really understand what had happened to his boyfriend.

“Liam isn’t concussed, he didn’t get hit on the head…” Josh shrugged, his face pinched.

“I told you,” Soph interjected, “Simon whispered something and he just felt like a ragdoll. I expected him to come out of it after Simon went out himself…”

His grip on the situation was rapidly coming apart by the seams, and Zayn wasn’t sure how to keep his thin grip left on reality together much longer. He had wept in the clearing, he had forcefully talked to Liam’s body on the march home (instructing him to come round this second), and now they were back and still nothing was as alright as it should have been.

Nick and Josh had ducked into his bedroom, where they partially undressed Harry before carrying him between themselves down the corridor and into the bathroom.

Sophia drifted back through to the other girls who were speaking in the kitchen.

Zayn, Niall and Louis were left standing in the bigger bedroom looking down at the unconscious frame of Liam.

It dawned on Zayn that Louis hadn’t spoken at all since they had left the clearing; and that while everyone else – while in shock, somewhat – was beginning to pick up, he still looked ashen and horrified.

“Well boys, we’ve got to figure this one out,” Niall announced, “our Liam’s in there somewhere. We just have to find a way to bring him back out again.”

He sounded reassuringly confidant.

They stood around another moment taking in that sentence before Louis sat down on the floor next to the bed and started to cry.
Won't Let the Sun Go Down on Me (1)

Chapter Summary

In which Louis addresses some long held issues with relationships, and they all realise all is not well with Payno.

moving things swiftly closer to the end of the tale!

LOUIS

This was emphatically not the heroes’ welcome he had been hoping to receive after Simon had finally been dealt with.

He supposed, distantly, it was a tad silly of him to have thought things would be that simple.

But, somehow, it was all still a bit too much.

He had barely been aware of his legs giving way beneath him, as he crumpled onto the floor and burst into tears.

Niall, still in full Dad-Mode, had dropped down onto his knees next to him and wrapped him up in a giant bear hug.

“Hey! Hey, its okay Tommo! We’ll sort everything out. It’s going to be fine!” he muttered over and over.

In the back of his mind, Louis felt aware that this was sort of embarrassing. Nobody else was wailing like a banshee and crumpled up on the floor like a used tissue.

But, whispered a little voice in his head, none of them were ultimately responsible. It was his fault. All his fault.

And even if they made it through, what if they were so cross with him that they didn’t want any more to do with him ever again??

Images and worries swirled through his mind like a bad 80s montage: worries that were thoroughly disagreeable (and, hopefully, preventable; add his brain as an ever hopeful afterthought).

Harry: the first time he set eyes on the curly haired boy sat around a table on plastic chairs (the way he folded his giant frame into such a small space); accidentally on purpose kicking Harry’s feet under the table in the Alte Stube repeatedly on night 5 of their first week; Harry coming out of the bathroom in only a towel and winking at him over Christmas time; Harry spraying him with water playfully during dinner service in the restaurant after New Years; doing the Saturday Night Dance to Whigfield in Dorfstadl and their trying drunkenly to teach the others; Harry shoving him into a toilet door in Kaos and sinking down to his knees…. The thought that all these little ‘moments’ he had
collected would perhaps come to an abrupt end now brought out a feeling akin to being wholloped in the stomach. Why on earth had he been so pig-headed all season? Why did he have to realise how good he had it when it was all too late? Why were the song lyrics, ‘I believe you don’t know what you’ve got until you say goodbye’ playing traitorously in his head without his wanting them to???

The secondary internal slide-show was all the more painful because it was rooted throughout his entire life.

Crinkly-eyed Liam, aged 6, earnestly trying to show him how to colour a picture of Santa Claus “within the lines”; eight year old Liam on holiday with him in the south of France trying to teach his sister Lottie to dive; Liam age 11 getting his 1st detention for swearing at a girl who called Louis a bad homophobic word in the playground long before Louis himself had ever verbalized his interest in boys to the general populace; Liam aged 14 dressing up as Rocky Horror with him to go Trick or Treating as a match to his Frank N Furter; Liam aged 16 sneaking into his first LGBTQIA club night with him on a holiday to Manchester during Pride; Liam aged 18 getting locked out of their apartment in Lanzarote and climbing up onto the roof to sleep with one shoe on and a dick drawn on his temple…

The memory of Liam sleeping had brought on a fresh wave of weeping that had, at first, startled both Niall and Zayn (who was sat on the edge of the bed looking sad and uncomfortable).

Now he had cried himself out, and was simply taking huge shuddering breaths as Josh came into the bedroom.

“Just to let you guys know, Hazza’s came round. He seems fine, but we should definitely get a doctor to check his head out tomorrow.”

He looked washed out, but relieved.

“He’s asking for you Zayn. Can you bring his iPod and some speakers through to the bathroom? I think he’d like you to sit with him and tell him all about whatever you did back up there…”

Zayn cleared his throat slightly, and slowly stood up. He looked torn, but wordlessly he gave Liam a kiss on the cheek before walking out the door.

“Tommo? Talk to me. You’re creeping me out.”

“Sorry Nialler. I’m okay now.” He patted his friends back, hoping to reassure him.

“Come and get some dinner with me?”

“I’ll catch you up.”

Once he was alone he fumbled in the pocket of his jacket for his cigarettes and made his way out onto the balcony. His red lighter was sitting on the table cheerfully; as if nothing dangerous at all had happened since he had last used it.
“You don’t know how lucky you’ve been back here, old girl,” he sighed picking it up.

The village was utterly dark, as were the mountains behind them. The stars twinkled innocently in the inky sky, unencumbered by light pollution from a city. It made him feel even smaller.

Taking a long drag, Louis wondered if he would lose his mind and get locked up forever if Liam died because of him.

As one cigarette finished he used it to light another, and focused his eyes on the smoke trail and the patterns it made in the frigid air.

Almost without his noticing the door creaked open.

“Louis?”

“Nick? Hi. Cigarette?”

“Don’t mind if I do. Can we speak for a minute?”

“Go ahead.”

He coughed, pausing to use the lighter and replace it delicately on the plastic, “I know we’ve never really got on - but I think you’ve misunderstood me. I’ve never fancied Harry for myself [here Louis gasped a little at the forthright statement] – he’s too young for me, for a start (he snorted here, self deprecatingly) – but he is a good friend. And a sweet guy. And I know how he feels about you.”

Suddenly, he turned to face Louis with a frown.

“Watching you fuck him around for weeks on end has been some of the most frustrating shit I’ve ever had to witness.”

“Why Nicolas, please, don’t hold back!” Somehow, despite knowing the conversation was a serious one, he couldn’t help from trying to make light of it.

“You were really brave tonight. You put yourself out there first, which was rather silly in a way. But you did it because you care, and because you trusted your friends. That says a lot. And I think that’s how Harry felt about you.”

Lou found himself inhaling funny and spluttering.

“I suppose the question now is, was he right to trust that you’d come through in the end? Harry took that blow for you. Its your move, now.”

With that he stubbed out the end of the Camel Light and pushed himself out of the other seat.

“Where are you going?”

“I need a coffee. I feel decidedly fucking peculiar,” replied Nick, breaking into a small laugh, “and how about you?”

“I think I’m going to hit the hay and hope I wake up and all of this was a dream.”

He frowned down at the end of his own cigarette, and realised his right leg was jigging.

“You don’t seem sleepy to me. And there’s a boy in a bath like a sink at the end of the corridor who’s asking why you haven’t been in to see the patient yet…”
“Oh?” he clarified, making to get up.

“Just follow the sounds of ‘Heroes’ by Bowie / Queen and you’re on the right track…” Nick flashed him a genuine smile, made to turn to go back inside, then twisted back again.

“You know – I think I was wrong about you. I’m sorry about that.”

He stuck his hand out.

Bewildered, Louis accepted, mumbling, “I think we were wrong about each other. I’m sorry too.” as quickly as his mounting embarrassment would allow him to.

Once they were actually over the threshold for the flat, Nick headed out the door without looking back and Louis found himself alone with his best mate.

“Liam. I’m going to fix this. Whatever it takes, I’ll get you back in action…” he said aloud, hoping nobody else could hear him.

Liam just lay there, unmoving, and Louis realised although someone (he hadn’t seen whom in his emotional turmoil) had taken his jacket off, Liam was still in his snow pants.

Well, he supposed once he was in bed nobody knew what to do with him.

“Guess I’ll sort you out before I go see Hazza,” he began, “we’ll get you all tucked in like sleepover times back in the day…” he murmured, trying to be positive.

What if there were no more nights staying up with Liam discussing boys, or jobs, or uni, or travels? What if the handsome, broody boy next door – who Liam had only just lost his heart to – was the last to claim it?

With these rather treacherous thoughts running through his brain, he got to work gently pulling down Liam’s damp snow-trousers. Underneath some wiser person had jammed three different bath towels, effectively preventing the actual duvet and mattress from getting soggy.

Louis praised them internally, as he deposited the outdoors-ware down on the ground. His friend was now lying in his black base layers, which Lou felt reluctant to remove. They were dry, and their whole purpose was to keep heat as close to the body as possible.

“Suppose I just pop some pajama trousers on over these, eh Limo?” he continued conversationally as he routed them out from under his friend’s pillows and tugged the pinky/purple tartan trousers up his limp legs.

For luck he next gently pulled Liam’s beloved old Batman t-shirt over his long sleeved top. Now he could be sleeping off a hangover, perfectly normally. Only he wasn’t.

*Shut up brain!* He thought to himself, LIAM IS GOING TO BE FINE!

“Everything okay in here?”

he turned sharply to find Zayn standing in the doorway.

“I was just getting him comfortable…”

“Good job. He looks cosy,” affirmed the raven haired boy, eyes settling on the t-shirt he had first
noticed all those days ago on the coach from Great Britain.

“Do you want to tuck him in?” asked Louis, earnestly.

“Do you mind?” Zayn turned pink.

“Zee, he’s your boyfriend. Please, go ahead.”

He started to move around the Austrian twinset to his own side of the room, when Zayn asked him if he wasn’t going to go see a certain curly-haired sud-monster in the bathroom.

“You know, I was just thinking that I might…” he said, trying out his first smile in several hours.

***

The door to the shower room was an inch ajar, and the merry sounds of David Bowie’s “Hereos” was drifting into the hallway.

Louis rolled his eyes fondly, thinking how typical Hazza it was to have picked a such a song out for the occasion.

“Harry?” he asked, knocking tentatively and sticking his head around the door, “Nick said you were asking after me…”

Despite everything everyone had said in the last 24 hours, he still couldn’t bring himself to trust that Harry did want to see him, or even that he still cared about him after getting bopped on the head by an evil sorcerer in his place.

“Lou!” exclaimed Hazza, sounding genuinely pleased, “I was waiting for you to drop in,” he smiled.

“How are you feeling?” Louis asked, as he shuffled into the small washroom and closed the door behind himself.

“Well, my head has definitely felt better – but those painkillers have helped quite a bit,” the boy in the bath conceded, “how about you?”

It was on the top of his tongue to reply ‘like shit’, but he realised compared to Harry’s concussion and Liam’s wot-ever-the-fuck-it-was – he was essentially unscathed.

“I’m alright,” was what came out instead.

Harry’s green eyes narrowed, and a crease appeared between his eyebrows.

“Alright? Louis, we just had the most mental evening known to man – and you’re just ‘alright’??” he looked scandalized.

“Well you know. I didn’t do much… well, much good anyway…”

He found himself unable to look Harry in the eye as he admitted this. Considering he had brought them all there in the first place, it felt doubly humiliating that he should have mostly just talked rubbish and pulled Niall’s leg a bit.

“You smacked your head off the frozen ground, you twat!” growled Harry, “has anyone even
looked at it?”

“Oh! No. I forgot about that.”

“Come here…”

Harry waved him down, so that he was kneeling beside the bath, as the younger boy softly padded his fingers over Louis’ head and through his hair.

“Jesus Lou, there’s matted blood in here!”

“Ahhh, it’s nothing. It’s fine now. I can’t even feel it.”

Why was Harry’s gaze so bloody penetrating?

“Honestly Haz, I’d forgotten all about it.”

Harry looked like he wanted to argue, but didn’t feel up to it.

Excellent. He’d gone in there to be conciliatory, and instead just riled Harry up again. Super.

God, it was roasting in there.

He became acutely aware of the fact he still had his own base layers on, as well as his ski pants and socks. Sweat was running down his back, and sticking his fringe to his forehead.

Sure you look great right now, Tommo, he thought to himself, as if Harry hasn’t got a bad enough impression of you this winter….

“You look like you’re wearing too many clothes.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yep,” Harry went on, “its obviously much too hot in here for snow gear. You’ll need to take all that off. Also, I hear nursing works far better when the nurses have their cocks out.”

Louis giggled.

Struggling to keep up with what was going on, and the emotional range he was speedily fluctuating between, it was all he could do not to faint on the spot from Harry’s flirtatious statement.

“I thought you were claiming me as another member of the wounded party?”

Harry winked, “well, if that isn’t how you want to play it… Ohhh, I’m so ill!” he pretended to swoon, “I think I might accidentally drown if someone doesn’t get in here with me and rub my shoulders!”

That got him – Louis snorted.

“You can even add more buuuuuubbles??” Harry added, as if he needed any more encouragement.

He waved a purple and gold sparkly bottle of Molton Brown bubble bath / shower gel at him invitingly.

Off came the ski pants, the thick socks, the red base layer and his black Strokes t-shirt: making an enthusiastically created discard pile.

“Great boxers, Lou. Again.”
“I know, right? Thanks.”

Moment of truth. He could keep his banana covered, cheery boxer shorts on. And with them maintain the barrier that had existed between them since they had met.

The underpants would say: ‘we are two friends, friends are not naked with one another casually’. And by association, they would be saying to Harry that their wearer wasn’t interested in something more than friends happening between them.

Or. Or, or, or, or, OR.

He could whip them down, jump into the bubbles, and give Harry a back massage. That would be saying ‘I am open to being more than your friend. Also, serious Things involving non-sexual nakedness which is what this is. Take from that what you will.’

Harry had shifted his gaze from Louis’ underpants to the bottle of bubble bath, his eyes settling as if he were reading the aroma description on the back.

Louis knew he wasn’t. He couldn’t be. He just couldn’t bear to be facing Louis if he turned him down again.

‘Everybody Wants to Rule the World’ by Tears For Fears came on the iPod.

How did I let myself come so close to fucking this all up? He thought to himself with a small smile.

The curly haired boy in the tub covered in bubbles had stolen the husk of his heart out from under him in week number one: he had never really stood a chance.

“Budge up then!” he said cheerfully.

Harry looked up hopefully.

Louis took his boxers off, and started to sing along as he swung his arse over the side of the miniature bath tub.

***

The next morning he felt himself rousing to the abrupt sounds of Nick’s loud voice.

“Mmmmfmb?” mumbled Louis, his face still buried between pillow and Harry’s curls.

“Sorry to do this to you guys, but we do still have guests here… erm, and I’m adoptive acting manager. Can you get up and help out? We sort of need all hands on deck…”

“I hate you,” groaned Harry, who had turned to prop himself up on his left shoulder and squint behind himself at the doorway.

“Bloody Dan has done a runner in the night. No idea if that’s linked to Simon or not, but he isn’t here and all his stuffs gone. Can you lead the kitchen team, Haz?”
“Are you saying how wonderful you find my cooking?” asked Harry, gleefully.

“Yes. Whatever. Shut up."

“See you in ten.”

Nick rolled his eyes good naturedly and backed out the little room.

Harry sat up and rubbed his eyes with a little contented sigh.

“So, this is where the enemy sleeps?” asked Louis, with a little laugh, still lying on his back. He lifted his arm to trace shapes on Harry’s back, “this bed is frightfully cosy. A chap could get used to this…”

“Don’t let Zayn know what we got up to on here, he’ll never forgive me,” snorted Harry in return as he flopped down onto his front again.

“After what we heard in Innsbruck, I don’t think Malik has a leg to stand on!” he laughed, prodding Harry in the side as he did so.

“I wonder where Dan could have gone?”

“Oh, who cares! That guy was an arsehole,” Louis snapped, pulling his arm back to cross them over his chest and scowl.

“You’re cute when you’re mad at someone who isn’t me,” teased Harry, leaning over to kiss the shorter boy’s nose.

“I’m—"

“Sorry – yes I know! It’s alright. You started making up for yourself quite nicely with the mint lube and the upside down performance last night though…” here Harry trailed off, as if picturing the scene in his head.

“Hey!” interjected Lou, batting him on the arm, “I’m being serious!”

“So am I, you fool. I’ve fancied you since our first night in this place, Louis. And you’ve been a grumpy, difficult git to me almost the entire time. And it hasn’t put me off yet. In faaaaact, I’m sure its your charmingly awkward nature that helped draw me in in the first place!” he looked pleased with his jesting.

“Be serious a moment. I’m so sorry about all that. It doesn’t matter that I’ve got my issues, none of that’s anything to do with you. I shouldn’t have acted the way I did. I feel like a fucking idiot.”

“Good, you deserve to!” Harry smiled, “but that’s all the apology I need. That, and the mint lube events on a regular occurrence…”

“That could be arranged. If… you know… you wanted to make things a bit more official. Or something. If you liked. Like, no pressure obviously. Ahem.”

Good god, what noises were coming out of him?

Was he actually attempting to ask Harry out?
Was this warbled embarrassment of a statement the most inviting declaration of ‘please be my boyfriend’ that he was capable of???

He fought the strong desire to cradle his face in his hands and groan.

“Offical-offical? Like Boyfriends official??” asked Harry, eyes huge and shining.

Louis tried to repress the thought that even after everything last night, Harry had still been utterly shocked that he might want him to be his official-sort-of-boyfriend.

He supposed whenever he felt the urge to be a total dick again out of habit he should remember that his behavior had led Harry to this conclusion; despite the fact he had been wild about him since the first day he had set eyes on him.

“Yes, official-official. Like – meeting my mum, come visit our house, introduce people to you as my handsome boyfriend with a weird thing about minty sexual encounters official.”

He hoped he was playing it cool.

“That, Louis Tomlinson, would be wonderful.”

“I hope you remember this date in a year’s time, when I will be expecting cards and a present!”

“There is no way in the world that I would forget today. Now stop being a sentimental twat and come help me fix breakfast for everyone and their dog!”

“I hate you.”

“But you’re still getting up. Excellent!”

He may have grumbled his way into his black trousers and ugly blue serving shirt, but he couldn’t hide the beaming smile for long.

***

The day did not continue on the high it had started on for long, because the general Liam worry was rather emotionally consuming. He found himself in until-now uncharted territory for him – almost excruciating happiness for himself, and unbearable concern for his best friend. They did not reconcile well, as everybody who worked with him that day went on to find out.

Luckily Zayn was in complete sympathy with him; and while they rattled their way through a
bustling and distractingly busy breakfast service – there was altogether more time for reflection and contemplation between mates as they moved on to their housekeeping duties.

“Ready to go?” Zayn’s quiet voice inquired, head popping through the sliver of space Louis had left between the door and the frame as he yanked one uniform off in place for the other.

“I guess…” he muttered in reply, smoothing the front of his blue t-shirt down and giving a last forlorn look at Liam – ostensibly still ‘sleeping’ on his side of the Austrian twin.

“Has he moved at all?”

“Not that I can tell,” said Louis as he yanked the flat door open to and made towards their stairway. How far they had come since Harry’s first fall down it.

“This is ridiculous, Lou. We can’t leave him like that, and it doesn’t look like he’s going to just wake the fuck up on his own.”

“No… it doesn’t, does it?” he sighed.

They had reached the notorious first floor cupboard.

Zayn seemed to be working on a very low powered autopilot, as he simply stood to the side looking earnestly at Louis with his very emotional seeming eyes and handsomely compelling face. He had a feeling he knew where this conversation was headed; why exactly Zayn had brought out the ‘Big Guns’ in terms of the puppy dog eyes and the beseeching appearance.

He did not want to think that things were really still that dire, so he resolutely stuck his hand out to grab another door handle and focused on the supplies he needed to fill their buckets up with.

“Lou?”

Just as he made contact with the plastic handle he felt a cool, slim fingered hand come down to cover it.

“Zayn…?”

“You know what we have to do.”

He squeezed his eyes shut momentarily, bracing himself for what was to come.

Might as well face it head on, he supposed. Zayn was hardly going to let this lie – he couldn’t have pretended for much longer himself if Liam didn’t wake up. But Zayn was in love with him. Zayn had only just got Liam to himself in the way he had hoped for. He wasn’t going to wait another 24 hours and see if he just woke up. He was going to go hell for leather into the sodding breach once again, and do whatever it took to get Liam back out of it with him.

He knew he would do the same for Harry, and a horrible sense of guilt washed over him.

He loved Liam. As far as his own mind was concerned, they were brothers. Payne was his family.

There was no question, not really.

“I’m scared,” he whispered, keeping his eyes still tight shut.

He didn’t want to see Zayn’s face. A split second existed in the pause where he felt his younger
companion’s hand twitch, and he felt sure Zayn was going to strike him or shout at him for his cowardice. Liam needed them. It wouldn’t be any less scary by delaying. And all that dramatic jazz, he tagged on to the end of his own thoughts – never allowing too much darkness to prevent a wry perception here or there.

Of course he needn’t have worried.

“Ooof, Zee! What’s that for?” he cried, suddenly knocked off balance with a face full of quiff and an armful of Zayn Malik.

“So am I,” Zayn whispered back, “frankly terrified. We’d be twats not to be. But Liam needs us. And I don’t think he’s going to get any better unless we actively go back out there and do something.”

“What if Dirndl Features isn’t there anymore?” Louis mumbled.

“She’ll be where she needs to be. If anyone can fix Liam, it’s her. She’s the only thing I can think of.”

“Today?”

“Today.”

After a swift pat of one another’s backs, the pair marched firmly into the store cupboard with a spring back in their step.

“You know you do smell as good as everyone keeps saying… how do you do that?”

Zayn smirked, shrugged his shoulders, and hummed to himself.

***

“Back? Back into that mother-fucking forest of death and doom?? Am I hearing you two right?”

Niall was standing in his underpants, blonde hair dripping down his forehead, after the conclusion of their morning shift. The red towel he had been rubbing his hair with was now hanging limply from his left hand. He looked a deflated sail.

It was definitely not the best way to end their first post-Simon shift, but Louis had to keep reminding himself that surely nobody thought they could really just leave Liam comatose and expect him to spring back into action one day as if nothing had happened???

“Nialler, we know it’s shitty. But we’ve got to help Liam. What if he stays like that forever?!” insisted Zayn, who was gesticulating all over the place with a thin sheen of sweat over his face.

It was obvious how much his boyfriend’s sickness was distressing him.

“Well- no. I mean, of course- but…”

“There is no other way,” said Louis firmly.

He looked around the room. They had decided against getting everyone involved again. Louis told
himself this was largely to do with the fact he couldn’t face that level of responsibility again – but they all knew really that the 5 of them were a group unto themselves.

Closer than everyone else. A little bit separate. And they wanted to tackle this final hurdle by themselves.

Zayn was awkwardly perched at the head of the bed on Louis’ side, cross legged and somber faced; absently stroking his boyfriend’s hair.

Liam was obviously still lying under the covers in his long-johns like a modern day sleeping beauty.

Niall was, as we have already established, just back from his shower and nowhere remotely near properly dressed.

Harry was sat with his back against the wall on Nialler’s bed, arms tight around the stuffed dog mascot they had found; head perched on top with an unreadable expression.

Louis himself was stood in front of the wardrobes, where a moment before he had been fishing about for something clean to wear. He was also still in his boxers. And somewhat red faced about what they were asking their closest friends to do.

“It’s the right call. It’s got to be. We can’t do nothing.”

Louis averted his attention back from the depth of the cupboard to look at Harry, who had just spoken for the first time in a while.

He was squeezing the teddy tighter than ever, and looking every bit the youngest member of their team. But his eye contact was firm and steady, and he still managed to look determined even while hugging a stuffed toy. He felt a huge surge of warmth once again for the curly haired human who he now {finally, better late then never} got to call his boyfriend.

Niall goldfished from left to right among them.

Zayn was already nodding encouragingly.

Louis could see his immaculate hair bobbing up and down out the corner of his right eye.

“Ni – this is Liam we’re talking about. He might be hurting.”

This very thought had been trying to push itself forward from the horrible, most darkest corners of Louis’ mind for the last 24 hours or so. It did not help in any way shape or form to hear it vocalized at last; that was for bloody sure.

But it was definitely a possibility. And it was the reason he was yanking on some more base layers, and heading back out into the forest instead of hopping on a chair lift and actually doing some effing skiing.

“Of course I’ll bloody come,” grumbled Niall, scrunching the previously mentioned red towel back up in his hands, “don’t fookin’ look at me like that! I just thought we might try and brainstorm a plan that didn’t involve wading into the lion’s dead this time, so to speak?!” he looked exasperated, rather than so-scared-he-might-run-for-the-hills, and Louis felt relieved. Protective Dad Niall had really come out in force in the last couple of days, and he had been worried he might try and put his foot down about things.

Of course, this was not taking into consideration Mr. Horan’s very real knowledge of his mates, dear
love of Liam (one of the first of the group to take him under his wing), or desire to do something more useful than get knocked unconscious after the first punch has been thrown.

“So it’s decided then?” Louis asked, as he yanked his head through a green coloured long sleeved under garment.

Niall and Harry nodded; leaving Nialler to join Louis at the wardrobes to rummage around for outer garments and Harry to lean his head back against the wall thoughtfully and huff out a tiny sigh of air.

Me too, Hazza, thought Louis fervently, me too.

***

As the four of them traipsed back up the by now all too familiar mountain path, Louis couldn’t help but ruminate a little on the whole experience here.

While everybody who had done it before talked about ‘growing’ as a person, he has basically written this off as silly bastard talk.

Only dicks went to live abroad and came home different people – he had assured his mum and his sisters of how he intended to return just as moody, flippant and down to earth as he left them.

His mum had laughed and shook her head in that knowledgeable way that pissed him right off, but he had to admit things were moving along differently to how he had envisioned.

Harry was the deciding factor, he knew.

Nobody less than Harry would have persuaded him to stop being a dick and give relationships another go in such a precarious circumstance. Nobody but Harry would likely have waited around and put up with his utter knobbish-ness either, he silently was also thinking. Did Hazza have the patience of a saint? How did he not get so fed up he decided Louis was a lot cause and got busy booking single one way tickets to Australia already?!

Louis felt sure that’s what he’d have done, if presented with himself. But then, how well do any of us really know ourselves at all?

“Penny for your thoughts?” a deep voice asked, out of the blue.

He turned to see Harry, who was walking to his left, looking at him with a small smile.

“Don’t worry. I was just contemplating what a fucking weird time we’ve had here, but how totally worth it it was to meet you and your absurdly sexy lanky-self,” quipped Louis back, with his most dazzling smile.

Harry beamed at him and held his hand out.

It never did get any easier trying to hold hands with thick, ski gloves on. But it didn’t stop anybody trying.

Niall and Zayn were walking somewhat in front, but as Louis looked up from their entwined hands he realised that they had came to a stop. They were back at the path that led towards the clearing. Fiddlesticks.
“Well here we are,” said Harry, somewhat pointlessly.

Zayn, Louis realised, had taken on a bit of a wild-eyed look about himself. He almost looked ill. Niall kept shooting him concerned glances, and Louis decided this was about all he could take of worries and disaster and not knowing what the hell was happening with his friends.

He knew Zayn was liable to do something stupid right now, considering he looked severely unwell or borderline unhinged. He supposed it was in everybody’s interests to take away the chance to take charge right now.

“Okay Zee – I know you’re dying to get back out there and save your man, okay. We all want Liam back to normal, safe and sound. But somehow I don’t think we’re going to achieve that by rancing into that wood and raving nonsense at the top of our lungs. Just a thought?”

Zayn had the decency to flush – giving Mr Tomlinson all the affirmation he needed that that was all Mr Malik’s plan was to begin with.

Niall coughed and held a hand up, “Look, it’s simple. Dirdle-breeches told us never to set foot in this place ever again less than 48 hours ago. Fuck knows what the consequences of doing so are, but perhaps trying to call her out first would be the best plan? Before we go wading back through there?” he waved energetically behind himself and raised his eyebrows.

“Excellent plan, Mr Horan!” announced Louis, relieved.

“Frau Dirndl!” shouted Harry, rather unexpectedly, right on the heels of his comment to Irish.

To both their shame, Louis and Niall jumped a good foot in the air each at the unanticipated bellow that came from their flatmate.

“Harold – what the hell?!” exclaimed Louis, half clutching his chest in the throws of a mock heart attack.

Niall simply said ‘well, shit’.

“Wir müssen mit Ihnen sprechen, bitte!” went on Harry, without regarding the others at all.

Zayn still looked a bit fevered, and perhaps already anticipated his room mate shouting like that, because he didn’t react at all – expect to scan the forest as closely as possible, and tap his right foot.

“Well, in the unlikely event that doesn’t work,” went on Louis, rolling his eyes.

But Harry cut him off, waving his arms at him a bit, then turning back to the trees.

A soft light was starting to emanate from amongst them, and Louis’ stomach felt itself drop down into his snow-boots.

“Why have you come?”

Niall gulped and took the lead, “Our friend! Our friend Liam, the one we had to carry away last time. He still hasn’t woken up.”

He was standing a little in front of everybody else, continuing the Dad routine.

Louis shuffled a little the side, and put a hand out onto Zayn’s arm.

“Not woke up?” repeated the ethereal woman in the Bavarian national dress.
“He’s in a coma or something! Can’t you fucking help?!”

Ah.

This was what he had been afraid of. While you could count on Harry to surprise you with things – like thinking to just call on the woman, instead of Louis’ plan to tramp about until they found her. Or Niall to take up the lead when he was scared for his mates (ah dad-Nialler, something no-one had anticipated at the beginning). But Zayn. Zayn could be counted on – much like Louis himself – to wait until the worst possible moment to burst out with something completely inappropriate and potentially disastrous; without giving any of it a second thought.

“Look, here,” Louis butt in, elbowing shouty-Zayn to the side for the moment, “our friend hasn’t woken up since that incident here. And it doesn’t look like he’s going to any time soon. Can you please help us, maybe? We don’t know what to do.”

At this point he stopped and gestured to Zayn, who had some kind of homicidal expression on his face by this point.

“This charming fellow loves that boy to death. Do it for him. After all- he did save all our skins back here last time….”

Dirndl-Face seemed to register that he had a point, and inclined her head slightly, “Simon is stronger than we would have liked him to get. He learned much from his Mutter. It is harder now to break his bonds with your world.”

She seemed to consider things a moment, before pulling a ring off the third finger of her right hand.

“Here. Take this.”

Before holding it out she seemed to recite something under her breath, causing the mental to glow bright and dull immediately.

“What was that?” inquired Niall, with a skeptical frown.

“Place this on the hand of your friend. I have done the rest.”

With that she seemed to scoot backwards, and out of sight once more.

“Guys – this is bullshit. Liam has big hands. This fucker isn’t going to fit anywhere on him!” Zayn had began the moment they were alone. Of course.

Niall was also looked profoundly dubious, he was also the one holding the item as he had been stood closest to her when the ghost held out her hand.

“She said some incantation, it’ll be fine,” Harry said bracingly.

Louis raised an eyebrow at him when the others weren’t looking- but didn’t say anything other than, “come on then. Lets get back.”

“And what if this shit doesn’t work??” insisted Zayn, pointing at Niall’s cupped hands, “what if Liam doesn’t wake up after we ram this on his pinky or whatever?? What then?”

“I don’t know!” shouted Louis back, “we’ll think of something. That’s our bloody Thing! Can we just agree to go back and try this first? We’re all trying to go in one direction here, Zayn, so quit being so negative. We’re going to save the day, you’re gong to live happily ever after with Liam, and
I’m going to get shitfaced tonight to get over this mess!”

With that he spun on his heel and marched off.
The Final Countdown.

Chapter Summary

mini-chapter to end it all :)

Chapter Notes

This is a tiny add on to actually finish this off, like 2 years later, because i hadn't realised i had left the end hanging like this and i felt awful!

lifes been busy, ive moved cities once again, and writing took a bit of a back seat. sorry! this reminder has rekindled my interest though, so hopefully a new story for 2019 will be on the cards :D

LOUIS CONT.

Somewhat predictably, the team march back to the Elisabeth felt like the longest walk of everyone’s relatively young life. It was also, in reality, a fairly short journey. After all, ski resorts are made to be skied or snowboarded around. Anything you can walk to can’t honestly be that far away.

But obviously anything short of instantaneous was Too Long today.

“It’s going to fit on the tip of his pinky, if nothing else,” Niall was wittering on, patting the left trouser pocket where he had deposited their treasure.

“Mmph,” said Zayn, not bothering to turn his head.

Thankfully the hotel was making its emergence on the horizon, and Louis felt his chest tighten almost in perceptively.

“Nearly there, Lou,” whispered Harry, “its almost all over.”

“We hope.”

“We hope,” Haz agreed, “and if it isn’t then we’ll keep going until it is.”

“Even if it means living in the Alpes for ever?”

“If that’s how long it takes to work out how to save Liam, then yes.”

“You’re an idiot,” sighed Louis, rolling his eyes, “but you’re my idiot.”

With that they reached the bottom of the steps, and bounded up (quite literally) as if their friend’s life depended on it.

“Where have you all been?!” asked Nick, frantically, from behind the bar.
A slightly dazed looking middle-aged couple were seated in front of him, nursing garish looking green cocktails, their eyes following the four-some as they came pounding into the lobby like a herd of buffalo.

“We had some lose ends to wrap up,” answered Harry, who probably realised no-one else was really listening, “I’ll explain later,’ he added kindly.

Louis barely registered Nick or the guests presence, and simply followed the disappearing shapes of Zayn and Niall as they honed in on the entrance to their flat.

“Guys, wait for me!” Harry was protesting, and Louis felt a trifle guilty for not holding the swinging door open for his boyfriend.

“Sorry!” he shouted over his shoulder, before coming to a giddy stop at the side of his own bed.

Liam was still lying mute, as quiet as they had left him.

Niall was pensively standing by the door to the balcony, wriggling his hand at his pocket.

Zayn was reverently lifting the washcloth they had left over Liam’s brow, and dabbing it gently back into the pan of cold water on his bedside cabinet.

“Its okay, Li,” he was muttering, “its almost over. We’ve got you.”

Harry burst into the room a second later, fumbled slightly over Niall’s discarded red towel from earlier on, and came to a staggered halt by Louis’ side.

“Here.” Niall was handing Zayn the Ring.

“Well, here’s hoping this ring is of better ilk than that one in the Lord of the Rings huh, Li?” said Zayn, in a strangled attempt at humour, as he lifted Liam’s lifeless right hand and began to slip the ring toward the pinky.

“Oh my goooood,” whispered Harry, from somewhere nearby.

“Urgh,” groaned Louis, the suspense causing him almost physical pain. This had to be one of the longest moments of his life.

Come to think of it, many of these ‘long moments’ seemed to have happened since moving to Austria? That was something for another time, he scolded himself as soon as he thought it, though under less stressful circumstances he felt it might have amused him.

Just as he was becoming willfully distracted by his own thoughts Liam gave an almighty gasp – like someone pulled out of the ocean recovering their consciousness – and sat up like a rocket heading out of a canon.

“Arghhh!!” followed the shout, loud and real and very definitely a conscious decision!

“LIAM??” shouted Zayn, as Niall cried “oh my!”, Harry jumped a foot in the air and Louis bellowed, “fuck me!”

“Guys??” gasped Liam, eyes wide as dinner plates, gawping around the room like he thought he was hallucinating, “oh my god is that really you?!”

Zayn immediately burst into tears and threw himself around Liam’s neck, patting his hair and his face and his arms, repeating ‘you’re okay’ and ‘you’re alive’ in a sort of unfortunate loop.
“Are you okay?” asked Niall, coming forward to sit in front of the interlocked Ziam pile on the bed.

Great heaving sobs were coming unashamedly from Zayn now, which broke the tense atmosphere a bit, giving the Irish boy, the curly haired dreamer and the snarky Northerner something to grim about. Liam still looked really bewildered.

“I’ve just been having some wild nightmares,” he explained, shaking his head, “that was bloody bizarre.”

“But you aren’t hurt?” Louis checked, himself moving forward to also drop onto the Austrian twin that had been their sanctuary for the last few months.

“Of course,” replied Liam, continuing to look thoroughly baffled, “why wouldn’t I be? I was just sleeping?”

“You’ve been conked out since the clearing, mate,” Harry said, joining the others on the matress and shuffling closer to Lou, “like passed out. We thought we’d lost you.”

“We had to go back and get this weird ring from that ghost lady,” Louis went on.

Liam looked horrified.

“Don’t worry, we’re all fine! It was fine! But we have no idea what happened to you.”

“Well. A few trips to the library would probably explain it,” said Harry, wryly, “I mean we probably know where the legend of Sleeping Beauty comes from now!”

Zayn, looking somewhat damper and more bedraggled and yet also extremely pleased, finally pulled himself free of embracing Liam and chuckled.

“That’s it, you’re my sleeping beauty now Payne!”

“You guys really went back for me?” Liam asked again, quieter now.

“Of course, you silly sod. We’re a team.” Niall said somberly.

“And I love you,” said Zayn.

“We’re stuck with each other for life now, chaps!” winked Harry.

Louis, who had only recently began to be more comfortable with declarations of intense sober emotion, felt himself tearing up ever so slightly.

“Group hug?” he suggested instead of chiming in.

“Group hug,” agreed Liam, “then a pint in Kaos?”

“Would we have it any other way?” replied Louis, winking cheekily, and thanking all gods in all their shapes and forms for giving his friend back.

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